



Darkside: Waking the Dead

By S.K.S. Perry

Being dead isn't nearly as much fun as it looks.

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Don't make me come looking for you.

Acknowledgements

For my wife, Pen--who else would put up with me?

For Ryan, who actually read (and liked) the first one, and Chantel, for not laughing (except where she was supposed to).

To Kelly Morisseau and Jenni Smith Gaynor—nag, nag, nag (but in a good way).

CHAPTER ONE

Don't you just hate it when people won't stay dead? I know that must make me sound like somewhat of a hypocrite, me being deceased and all, but at least I'm not one of those rotting, moldy corpse, fresh-from-the-grave-and-out-of-the-coffin, stumble-around-sucking-the-life-force-out-of-the-living type dead guys. Let's face it, zombies are a dime a dozen, and rock bottom of the social hierarchy, even among the Other Realm folk.

I, on the other hand, am an Eternal, one of only seven in existence. Of course you'd never know it to look at me. I'm just an average looking Joe, although I am pretty buff, and have minty fresh breath.

It's not like I'm a racist, either. Most of my friends are living-impaired. My girlfriend is a vampire-slash-faerie, and is possessed by the spirit of my dead fiancée--don't ask--and my dad and grandpa are both ghosts, and drop by occasionally to chat. Even my dog is dead, and is more of a nuisance than he was when he was alive. He just smells better now.

What was I talking about again? Oh yeah, things not staying dead.

It was a cold, clear November evening, and Leanne and I strolled down Princess Street, window-shopping. Neither of us really minded the cold much, but we bundled up in our coats and scarves anyway just to keep up appearances. There wasn't any snow yet, but then that's Kingston for you. It might be January before we saw snowfall, or there could be two feet of the stuff blanketing the city before morning.

We were looking for a wedding gift for Drat and Tirade. Believe me, that's not as easy as it sounds. I stopped in front of the window at Ikea. There was some kind of funky looking bed on display. At least I think it was a bed. Whatever it was, I'm sure it would have taken a team of NASA engineers to assemble it. Then again, given the kind of trouble they've been having lately they might have had a hard time, too.

I glanced over at Leanne for her opinion on the bed. She made a face and shook her head. My shoulders slumped in defeat--again. "What kind of wedding present *do* you give a troll chieftain and his bride to be?"

Leanne shrugged, and tucked a strand of her long, black hair back behind the mink earmuffs she didn't need. "The only thing I've ever seen Drat get all worked up over is food. That and a good fight. If we could come up with some way to feed him while he's fighting, I think he'd be in heaven."

I slipped my arm about Leanne's slender waist as we continued on down the street. "He's already got two of those beer hats," I told her.

"How about a small child?" Leanne suggested as we passed a day-care center. "Trolls consider them a delicacy."

She was kidding, of course. Not about trolls considering children a delicacy, but about offering one to Drat and Tirade. At least I'm pretty sure she was kidding. She is part vampire, after all.

A little old lady gave me a dirty look as she passed us by. I get that a lot when I'm with Leanne. She may be over a thousand years old, but she could pass for sixteen. She's got those huge, cobalt-blue eyes, and that porcelain-white skin, and full, pouty, crimson-red lips, even without lipstick. Leanne moves with the grace of a ballerina, and could probably get work as a cover model, if you could photograph her. She looks so helpless and vulnerable, but I've seen her toss Charlie on his ass. Charlie's an eight foot tall ogre,

and weighs over seven hundred pounds.

I, on the other hand, am thirty-two years old, but I could pass for twenty-six. Too young to be her dad, and too old to be her boyfriend. I suppose I could make myself look younger--I've gotten pretty good at manipulating my own appearance--but I'm used to my face. Other than bulking up a bit, and growing back some of that hair that abandoned me, I still look pretty much the same as the day I died. Short dark hair, brown eyes, high cheekbones, thick lips, and an unintentionally stern look that only lets up when I smile.

"Do you smell something?" Leanne asked suddenly.

I took a big sniff and immediately gave myself the equivalent of an ice-cream headache. I clutched at my right eye as Leanne laughed, snorting in a rather unlady-like manner. She was right, though. There was something in the air. Something foul and rancid. Leanne pointed across the street and down a few stores to the *Antique and Collectible Shoppe*. A crowd seemed to have gathered out front.

I heard the wail of police sirens in the distance. "What do you think? Should we go stick our noses in where they don't belong?" I asked.

She grinned impishly. "Race ya," she said, and was gone. She waved at me from in front of the antique shop.

Vampires is speedy little suckers. Not that I'm pokey or anything--a split second later I stood beside her. "What's going on?" I asked some kid with green hair and wearing a leather Queen's University jacket.

"Some big biker's tearing the place apart," he said. "Apparently he walked in and just started tossing stuff around. Didn't even talk to the owner or nothing."

"The smell's coming from inside," Leanne told me. "Like something crawled in there and died."

I could just make out the biker through the plate glass window. The guy was huge. They say black is slimming, but all that leather just made him look hefty. His back was turned to me so I couldn't get a good look at his face. Patches of his scalp showed through his greasy brown hair as if it had been torn out in clumps.

The owner of the shop was an older, balding gentleman in a gray tweed jacket, who kept shoving at his wire-rimmed glasses as he pleaded with the biker to stop. I got a really close look at him when the biker absently tossed the owner through the storefront window and out onto the sidewalk. I shielded Leanne with my body as the shattered glass rained down around us. The biker turned toward us, and put to rest all questions of where the smell was coming from.

"Zombie," Leanne said. "And a home-made one at that."

I don't know how long this guy had been dead, but it couldn't have been too long. There was still enough flesh on his face to sew his eyes and lips shut. I could make out the heavy black thread stitching together the pallid, rotting tissue. His mouth and eye sockets looked to have been stuffed with something too. Of course Leanne and I were the only ones in the crowd who saw him this way. You have to be Sensitive to see the Other Realm denizens as they really are.

"What do you mean by home-made?" I asked Leanne as a few of the onlookers helped the old man to his feet. Other than a few shallow cuts, he seemed to have come through the ordeal, and the window, in one piece.

"He's been raised by a necromancer," she said. "That's why his eyes and mouth are sewn shut, and why he's rotting like that. He was dead to start with."

It's a little known fact that vampires create about ninety percent of the zombies stalking the earth. It's kind of a vampiric practical joke. See, real vampirism is like demonic possession. When a vampire drains you just to the point of death, a demon is summoned to possess the flesh. However, if they turn you within the confines of a pentagram or some other warded place, the demon can't get in to animate the body, and sooner or later the flesh rots. The soul is trapped and can't escape either, and the corpse, because it still has a soul, doesn't die. Voila--instant zombie. Zombies are brain-dead, literally, and vampires use them as slave labor to do all the dirty work they can't manage when the sun is up.

This zombie was different. He was a true zombie in the classic mode. Someone had reanimated his corpse, and since he'd been dead to start with, he had no soul. Any hack vampire can create a walking corpse from a living being, but to fashion a true zombie took real power.

Two cop cars screeched to a halt on the street behind us. They didn't bother looking for parking, but blocked off the left lane. Princess Street is a one-way street, and four lanes at that, but that didn't stop curious drivers from backing up traffic as they slowed to see what was going on.

The first cop on the scene was the smaller of the two, maybe only five foot ten, but solidly built. The second cop was a real bruiser and stood at least six foot five.

"I want everyone out of here, now," the smaller cop ordered. He removed his sunglasses and glared at the crowd to show he meant business. "If you don't clear this sidewalk immediately you'll be charged with obstruction."

Someone in the crowd muttered and grumbled the usual nonsense about police harassment and how Canada was still a free country the last time they checked.

"Hey, hon. Why don't we watch from across the street before the shooting starts?" I said, just loud enough that the rest of the gathering could hear me.

That seemed to quiet most of the dissenters, and they joined Leanne and me as we made our way across the street to a relatively safe vantage point. I could still make out the sounds of glass breaking and furniture being smashed to kindling from where I stood.

The larger cop adjusted his Kevlar vest, then approached the broken plate glass window. "Okay, buddy. Don't make me come in after you. Come on out quietly with your hands behind your head and your fingers interlocked."

Neither officer had called for backup. I guess they thought they could handle the biker on their own without much trouble. They were wrong.

The big cop tried to side-step the heavy oak chest that rocketed through the window at him, but it caught him cleanly and drove him back ten feet until he slammed up against the police cruiser. That chest had to weigh at least a hundred pounds, empty, and the impact rocked the cruiser violently. The cop slumped to the ground, unconscious, and with a mass of broken ribs at the very least.

To his credit, the smaller cop kept his cool. He rushed to his comrade's side and checked for a pulse, all the while radioing for backup and an ambulance. Once he had confirmed that help was on the way, he drew his gun and cautiously approached the window. Another loud crash came from inside the shop.

"Lay down, flat on the floor with your hands behind your head. Now!" the cop shouted above the din.

A brass coat rack sailed through the window at the officer in reply. The smaller

cop was a little quicker than his partner, and managed to dodge the projectile. The coat rack embedded itself about two feet into the side panel of the cruiser, and set off the siren.

The biker stepped out through the broken window and dropped two and a half feet to the sidewalk. He held a cheap, East Indian-made broadsword in his right hand, and dragged it point first along the pavement. It was one of those ornamental, chrome-plated jobs, with a wire-wound grip and loose-fitting cross hilt that rattled when he swung it. He must have scrounged it from inside the store.

Poorly made or not, it still looked like a formidable weapon. At least the cop must have thought so, because he shouted a final warning, then fired. Several bystanders screamed and made a beeline for cover. The round caught the zombie in the chest, dead center, but didn't stop his advance. The officer fired three more shots, all within a few inches of the first.

"Nice grouping," the kid next to me commented.

"He must be wearing a vest or something," his buddy said. "He didn't yell or nothing."

"That's 'cause they sewed his mouth shut," Leanne whispered.

Translucent, sap-like fluid leaked from the zombie's wounds--probably embalming fluid--as he lurched forward. He raised the sword to strike as the cop scrambled back a few steps. The officer came up against the police cruiser, then scurried over the hood of the car. The sword tore through the metal fender of the cruiser until it punctured the left, front tire. The tire exploded with a loud bang and a hiss of rapidly escaping air, and the siren died.

Two more cruisers screamed to a halt opposite the first police cars, blocking off all four lanes of traffic now. The arriving officers deployed quickly and drew their weapons. One of the cops went to the trunk of the car and retrieved a shotgun.

The zombie yanked at the sword, trying to free it from where it had embedded itself in the car frame. He wrenched upwards on it, and the grip snapped off. The zombie stared at the broken grip in his hand for a moment--though how he managed to see anything with his eyes sewn shut was beyond me--then tossed it aside. He bent at the knees and grabbed at the car frame just under the driver's door, then heaved as he slowly came back to a standing position. The cruiser tilted up on its side, then rolled completely over as the zombie gave it a final shove. The car slid three feet on its hood and crashed into the cop car on the other side.

I'd hate to be the one filling out the paperwork on that report, not to mention the insurance claim.

"Do you think maybe we should help?" Leanne asked.

I shrugged, not certain if it was a good idea. I was still trying to keep a low profile after the incident at the street dance. The cops hadn't closed the books on that one, and I'd spent more than a few hours answering questions down at the station. I wasn't exactly their favorite person right now (although they did try to sell me tickets to the policemen's ball.) Duking it out with a zombie drew only slightly less attention than battling a forty-foot demon, in my opinion.

Two officers fired several more rounds into the biker. When that proved ineffectual, a third cop opened up with the shotgun. It was starting to get messy now. The zombie's features had taken on a ground hamburger-like appearance. The shotgun blast

had torn most of the skin away from the right side of its face. Even those who weren't Sensitive had to be seeing something creepy by now.

The biker pushed against the hood of a second cruiser and shoved the car back several feet and out of his way. The two cops who suddenly found themselves out in the open emptied their clips into him, then tried to escape when that proved futile. The zombie managed to grab hold of one of the fleeing officers, lifted the struggling cop overhead, and tossed him across the street and through the window of the store just behind us. We actually had to duck to avoid being hit.

"Who said pigs can't fly?" the Queen's student said as he straightened up.

I shook my head, and looked at Leanne.

"Zombie, two; cops, zero," she said, but what she really meant was that I should get my act in gear and help out.

I sighed. Somehow, this wasn't going to work out well for me. "Just how *do* you kill a zombie?" I asked.

"You take out their eyes," the Queen's student said, eavesdropping on our conversation.

"No, you idiot. That's demons," his friend answered. "You have to take off a zombie's head. Splatter his brains out."

"The kid's right," Leanne said. She grinned up at me. "What do they teach them in university nowadays, anyway?"

The officer with the shotgun pumped off three more rounds and blew the zombie's left arm off at the elbow. That really pissed it off. The cop went pale as the arm crawled along the ground toward him. He was so mesmerized by the sight that he didn't realize the zombie was upon him until it was too late. The zombie grabbed the officer by the throat with his good right hand and lifted. The cop dropped the shotgun and tore at the dead fingers with both hands as the zombie slowly tried to crush the life out of him.

An ornate rapier appeared in my right hand. I still don't know where the thing comes from, or where it goes to when I'm finished with it, but it's always there when I need it. I stood suddenly beside the zombie and the weakly struggling cop, and hacked the zombie's other arm off at the elbow. The same pale fluid that leaked from the bullet holes sprayed me from the raw stump as the officer fell to the ground, still straining as the dismembered limb tried to finish what it started. The cop succeeded in prying the fingers loose and tossed the arm aside. I stepped back and drove the rapier into the zombie's chest up to the hilt. Don't ask me why. I knew it wouldn't kill it. The zombie batted me with the stump of its left arm and I lost my grip on the sword as I fell to my knees.

He tried to stomp on me with those big biker boots of his while I was down, but I rolled to the side. I caught a glimpse of his severed arm, the fingers still clenching and unclenching, out of the corner of my eye, and grabbed it by the elbow. The zombie took another kick at me, but I sprang to my feet and beat him across the head with his own arm. That staggered him for a moment, and I rotated into a spinning wheel kick and caught him hard across the jaw with the heel of my left foot. Hey, no sense letting all that martial arts training go to waste.

The bones in his neck cracked loudly as the impact twisted his head around 180 degrees. The zombie swayed on his feet, head on backwards. He lurched about until he "faced" me again, and I jammed his severed arm at him so that the fingers grabbed him about the throat.

The cop I had rescued bent over and puked his guts out on the street. I could hardly blame him. The sight of the biker, looking like ground chuck from all the gunshot wounds, oozing embalming fluid as he stood in the street with his arms lopped off at the elbows, head on backwards, and slowly being strangled by his own severed limb, was enough to give anyone nightmares. Thank God I don't sleep any more, much less dream. From the odd splashing sounds behind me the cop wasn't the only one to toss his cookies.

I stepped around to the other side of the zombie and pulled my sword from his chest, then took a deep breath. Taking someone's head off isn't as easy as they make it out to be in the movies. And a rapier isn't exactly the ideal sword to do the job. Still, if you're strong enough, and fast enough, and the blade is sharp, it's manageable. Being an Eternal, I was more than up to the task.

I kicked the biker's feet out from under him and he went down to his knees. I grabbed him by the hair and forced him to bend over. It was a little disconcerting, because bent over, and with his head on backwards, he was still looking up at me. I was suddenly thankful that his eyes were sewn shut. I severed the head from the body in one clean stroke. It rolled a few feet until it thumped up against the hubcap of one of the police cars. The body toppled over, totally inanimate now. It didn't even twitch.

I sent the sword back to wherever it goes to just as the ambulance and an unmarked cop car arrived on the scene. The officer I'd rescued approached the body slowly, still uncertain, then kicked it to make sure it was dead. You know someone's world has been shaken when they have to kick a headless body for conformation of death.

A plain-clothes cop pushed his way through the gathering crowd and approached me. He was a stocky man with a barrel chest and broad shoulders, and about five feet ten inches tall. His light brown hair was cut short, little more than heavy razor stubble, and he wore one of those neatly trimmed beards--the kind that looks like he'd merely neglected to shave for a couple of days.

He wrapped his charcoal-black overcoat more tightly about him as the wind gusted suddenly. "James Decker," he said. "Why is it you always show up when the weird shit goes down?"

"Nice to see you too, Officer McMillan."

"That's Inspector," he said. He toed the headless corpse. "Don't even *think* about going anywhere."

I wasn't sure if he was talking to it, or me.

If the condition of the body bothered him, he didn't let on. He turned toward the two approaching constables. "Get the crowd back, and tape off this area," he ordered. "Get statements from anyone who saw anything, and I want the video tapes from the security cameras in those two stores across the street."

I looked to where he pointed, and sighed. The video cameras pointed out from the store windows adjacent to the street. I was royally screwed. I caught Leanne's eye and nodded towards the cameras. It only took her a second to figure out what I was trying to tell her, and she smiled and nodded.

Leanne would take care of the video evidence. That left only the eyewitness accounts, which are sketchy at best under normal circumstances. The cops weren't going to be happy. I found that when things got too strange, however, they tended to avoid questions where they knew they weren't going to like the answers. I was pretty sure I could ride this out.

Not that I was home free. I had the nagging suspicion that things were only going to get worse. Who had resurrected the biker? And what had he been looking for in the *Antique and Collectible Shoppe*? Somehow I doubted it was that perfect nick-knack to set off his family room. And of course the big question was, what did he plan to do with whatever it was he was looking for once he found it? Nothing good, I was sure.

I told you things weren't going to work out well for me, didn't I?

CHAPTER TWO

Police stations have always bothered me. No matter how commonplace they look out front--the nice receptionist, the brightly lit offices, the pictures of stern men in uniform--somewhere in the back there's this little room where they can lock you up and you can't get out. Given half the chance, I knew that that's exactly what they'd like to do with me. Lock me up in that barren little cell with the concrete slab for a bed and a surveillance camera in the ceiling. Like my dad used to say: "To a cop, there are only three kinds of people; cops, criminals, and potential criminals."

Officer--sorry--*Inspector* McMillan folded his overcoat over the back of his chair, leaned against the corner of the gray pressboard and aluminum desk, and motioned for me to sit. He towered over me, giving him the psychological advantage, so I leaned back in the chair, found a clear spot in all the clutter, and put my feet up on the desk. I knew a little about psychology myself.

He scowled, realizing he'd been one-upped. "I was talking to your mother the other day. She said you'd just lost your job."

"That was two months ago, Greg," I said.

He rubbed at the dark circles under his eyes, then pulled up another chair. "Where the hell does the time go?"

I got the impression he was thinking big picture here, and not just about the last couple of months. Greg had been my dad's partner, and by far the more ambitious of the two. He'd always said he'd make chief some day, but now, in his early fifties, that goal seemed unlikely.

"He looks like shit," Dad said, materializing just behind his ex-partner.

"At least *he's* not dead," Grandpa added. Both ghosts hovered a few inches above the floor in their dress blues. A female officer walked through Dad on her way to her desk and shivered involuntarily.

"Are you getting by okay?" Greg asked, oblivious to the spirits' presence. "You look good." He frowned again. "Real good."

Not much got by Greg. That's what made him such a great detective--noticing all the little things that just didn't quite fit. He could build a more accurate picture out of the pieces that were missing than most people could by staring at the completed puzzle.

"Lack of stress," I said. "You have no idea how relaxing being unemployed can be."

"Maybe I should give it a shot."

It sounded like wishful thinking to me, not that Greg would ever quit the force. He was one of those guys who'd always known what he wanted to be. I envied him that. I *still* don't know what I want to be when I grow up.

Grandpa sniffed the air. "Is that a cruller? No, wait. It's a honey glazed. Come on, boy. I think I see a donut with my name on it."

"Where are you going, you old fool?" Dad hollered after Grandpa had vanished. "You can't eat; you're dead. Hell, you had to gum the damn things when you were still alive." Dad shrugged apologetically, then he vanished too.

Greg leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and gave me his patented stern look. Playtime was over. "What happened out there tonight?"

I managed a pathetic attempt at the Mr. Spock single eyebrow raise. "You had

half a dozen cops out there, and you're asking me?"

Greg made a show of putting his feet up on the desk, too. To the casual observer, our little discussion may have looked like informal chitchat, but I knew better. This was an out-and-out interrogation. "Why is it I get the feeling you're the only one who really knows what went down?" he asked.

He was right, of course, and I intended to keep it that way. "Hey, I was just out window shopping with my girlfriend and got caught up in the excitement."

Greg picked up the manila folder off the corner of his desk. He flipped it open and thumbed through several pages. Knowing Greg, he'd already memorized all the pertinent details. He was just waiting me out, trying to make me antsy. He shuffled a couple of pages, then peered at me over top of the folder. "And seeing as how the perp had just shrugged off multiple gunshot wounds and kicked the shit out of half the guys on the force, even *with* his arm blown off, you figured you'd help out and decapitate him for us. That was mighty civic of you."

I stared back at him, and blinked a few times, realizing it was my turn to speak. Usually I'm pretty quick on my feet, but all I could think of this time was, "Leanne made me do it."

Greg grinned, in spite of himself.

"Was that a smile?" I asked.

His face went deadpan again.

I glanced quickly about the room at the other officers present. "Don't worry, I don't think anyone else saw it."

Greg dropped the open folder back on the desk. Several black-and-white crime scene photos fanned out in front of me. The top photo showed the biker's body lying prone on the pavement while a cop held a measuring tape to determine the distance of the corpse's various body parts from the torso.

"The victim was one Leon Perreli, a.k.a. Brutus," Greg said. "Until about three weeks ago he was an enforcer for The Machine out of Montreal. That is until a rival biker gang gunned him and his crew down in a drive-by out front of the Sex D'or strip club." Greg pulled open a desk drawer and fished around until he came up with one of the peppermint candies he was always sucking on. He offered me one, then popped one in his mouth when I declined. Once he was comfortable again, he said, "So what's Brutus doing wandering around downtown Kingston when he's supposed to be dead?"

"He got better?" I offered weakly.

"I tried to get a blood sample for the toxicology report, but all I got was this." He reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a finger-length opaque vial, and held it up to the fluorescent lighting, then set it on his desk beside the open report. "It's embalming fluid."

"Maybe he was a zombie," I said. I don't know if I told him that, hoping on the off-chance that he just might believe me, or knowing that it was so outrageous that he wouldn't.

Greg bit down hard on the peppermint. "This isn't the X-files. I'm not Mulder, and you're definitely not Scully. Our boy here may not be a zombie, but someone went to a hell of a lot of trouble to make it *look* like he was. That leaves me with two questions. Who did it, and why?"

"How about how?"

Greg grinned again. "All right, smart-ass. Three questions."

"I really wish I could help you, but like I said, we were just out shopping when it happened. All I did was pitch in when things got out of hand."

Greg suddenly looked smug. "Speaking of which."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I really should learn to keep my mouth shut.

"Eyewitnesses claim you appeared suddenly out of nowhere with a flaming sword in your hand. One old lady swore you were the archangel Azrael."

"I'm no angel," I said.

"Tell me about it."

I let that one pass. Greg had been the closest thing to a father figure I'd had after Dad died. I had been really pissed at Dad for getting himself killed, and had played out the whole "James Dean, Rebel Without a Cause" persona just to get even. I couldn't begin to tell you how many times Greg had intervened on my behalf after one of my minor scrapes with the wrong side of the law.

"Constable Ennis claims that once you hacked off Brutus' arm, it crawled after him," he said.

"Maybe it's time the force reinstated mandatory drug testing."

Greg grunted in assent. "Probably too much overtime," he muttered. "Pull a couple of double shifts and the sleep deprivation can make you see all sorts of things."

That's it, Greg. Latch on to the safe, plausible answer, I thought.

Greg rubbed at the dark circles under his eyes again. His face was thin and haggard, and the fluorescent lighting did nothing for his pale complexion. Dad was right-Greg did look like shit.

"Maybe you should get some sleep, yourself," I suggested.

He looked at me through bleary eyes, and sighed. "You're probably right. Besides, I get the feeling I'm not going to get any straight answers out of you tonight anyway."

I shrugged noncommittally.

"Your mom's worried about you," he finally said.

I could tell he was, too. He probably still saw me as the fifteen-year-old runt he had to come down to the station in the middle of the night to rescue because the cops had brought me in for mixing it up outside the teen dance or something. I wished I could tell him the truth, but half the time I wasn't sure I believed it myself. *Well, you see, Greg, it's like this. I'm an Eternal, and I have all these nifty powers that help me battle the Forces of Darkness. I hang out with a vampire, a troll, a shapeshifter, and oh yeah, don't forget the ogre.* Sure, that would go over just swell.

Instead, I said, "So what you're really trying to tell me is that you don't have anything to hold me on."

He scowled again and stood up, a dismissal if ever I saw one. "The sword, or swords, have apparently gone missing. Someone in the crowd probably made off with them in all the hubbub. The videotapes from the two surveillance cameras turned out to be blank. All I have are a lot of conflicting eyewitness reports, and a bunch of cops who refuse to put what they swear they saw down on paper." He popped another peppermint into his mouth and bit down hard. "Even the goddamn body has disappeared."

The goblins must have cleaned up. I still couldn't shake the image of them swarming up out of the sewers and tearing the dead ogre's body to shreds like a vicious

school of piranha. When they had finished, there'd been nothing left but a grease spot on the pavement. The Other Realm kept its secrets well.

"I'll tell Mom you were asking about her," I said.

Greg nodded, and I stood and turned to leave. When I was almost to the exit, he said, "James. Don't leave town."

"Sure, Greg," I said, and made my escape.

Leanne was waiting for me on the bench just across the street from the police station. She stood to greet me as I approached. "So, did they tie you up and beat you with a rubber hose?" she asked.

"Nope," I said.

"You want me to?"

I put my arm around her and kissed her forehead. "Maybe later." She looked positively disappointed.

Leanne held her right arm out parallel to the ground, her delicate hand clenched into a fist with the palm facing downward, and closed her eyes. I wasn't sure what she was up to, but a few moments later a brush of air and the flapping of wings announced the arrival of a large crow. It alighted on the perch she had provided and kept its beady black eyes fixed on me as she bent close and whispered something to it. The crow cawed once as it acknowledged its orders, then winged its way off into the night.

"What was that all about?" I asked Leanne.

She smiled sweetly up at me. "Just sending a message home to Josh and the gang to let them know we'll be home soon."

I shook my head, then fished my cell phone out of my pocket and waved it in front of her.

"What fun is that?" she said, as if actually *phoning* someone was the most absurd idea she'd ever heard. "Besides, if you don't use it, you lose it."

"I suppose," I said. We made our way to where I'd parked the Jeep. "But if you don't mind, I think I'll order out for pizza the old-fashioned way. The bird really freaks out the counter guy at Pizza Hut."

Leanne laughed. "None for me."

I held the door open for her, and waited until she'd done up her seatbelt before closing it, then walked around and climbed in the other side.

"I had a bite while I was waiting for you at the police station," she explained.

"Anyone I know?" I asked as the Jeep roared to life. Leanne was only part vampire, but she still needed blood to sustain her. She only took a little from her victims, though--a pint here or there never hurt anyone--and being as she was part Faerie as well, the experience was actually quite euphoric for her donors. That crap about how being bitten by a vampire is an almost orgasmic experience is just that--crap. Vampires live off the terror of their hosts as much as the plasma.

"No, just some horny college student," she said. She brushed her teeth with the tip of her index finger to erase the signs of telltale bloodstains.

"You *did* just bite him, right?"

She glanced at me as she patted at the corner of her mouth with a Kleenex. "Jealous?"

"Always," I said.

"You know I never bite below the belt." She gave me that impish grin of hers. "I save that just for you."

I don't know how it is that I can still blush. After all, I'm dead. I don't even really have blood unless I consciously decide to.

I speed-dialed the pizza place, grateful for the diversion. To be honest, I don't need to eat anymore; I just really like to. I ordered enough pizza for everyone back at the house. I even got one with anchovies on half for Alex--sweet girl, stinky breath.

"So what did you tell the cops?" Leanne asked once she finished fixing her face.

"The truth; that the biker was a zombie."

Leanne looked shocked for the briefest moment. Keeping the Other Realm hidden from the mundanes was almost like the Prime Directive. Then it dawned on her. "I suppose they didn't believe you."

"Go figure," I said.

I turned the Jeep down a side street to avoid the main thoroughfare. It was after eight o'clock now, and pitch dark out. Time for the creepy crawlies to come out and play. It's not that I was particularly afraid of them or anything--after all, what's the worse they could do? Kill me? It's just that the sight of the vampires, trolls, ogres, demons, and various other ghoulies mixing with an unsuspecting populace still gave me the creeps. I actually jumped out of the car once and yelled, "Run, man! Can't you see she's a succubus? She'll suck your soul right out of your body." The guy just looked at me, grinned, and said, "No woman's *that* good."

We made the outskirts of town without seeing anything out of the ordinary, and I turned off onto the county road that led to Leanne's place. Leanne lived in a real Herman Munster-looking manor, complete with a black, wrought iron topped stone gate, and that creepy looking tower with the freaky weathervane perched on top. I had my own place in the city, as did Josh and his family, but Leanne's place was the most strongly warded. We all stayed there during the few days surrounding the full moon. I pulled up the long cobblestone driveway and parked just in front of the main entrance.

Alex bounded out of the house to greet us and threw her arms about Leanne in a big hug. If anything, Alex had grown taller in the few months since I'd first met her. She looked more and more like her mother every day, with her smooth, chocolate-colored skin, impossibly long legs, and runway model figure. She'd even permed her shoulder length hair to look more like Sabrina. If it weren't for Alex's blue eyes, the two women could have been twin sisters, instead of mother and daughter.

Alex released Leanne and raced around the Jeep to hug me, too. The kid was just too hyper. Remember when we all had that kind of energy?

"I think your mom should cut you back on white sugar for a while," I said.

"Hey ya, Bumper. How's it going?" Bumper was the nickname my Grandpa had stuck me with, one that Alex seemed to find highly amusing.

I returned the hug. "Be nice or you won't get any pizza," I said.

She tilted her head down, smiled shyly, and in a voice oozing with sexual innuendo said, "I'll be good."

I think its voice number seven in the woman's handbook on How to Get What You Want. If only she'd use her powers for goodness, instead of evil.

"Now see what you've done," Leanne told Alex. "You've gone and got him all flustered."

I really do have to learn to do something about that blush reflex. I climbed the steps to the manor, and held the door open. “Allow me, ladies.” They both gave me a peck on the cheek as they stepped by me, and I closed the door behind us.

“Oh, by the way,” Alex said once we were all safely inside. “I met a dead girl in school today.”

CHAPTER THREE

I think my heart stopped in my chest at Alex's announcement. It's hard to be sure, because I've noticed that often it wasn't really beating in the first place. I half hoped Alex meant she *saw* a dead girl at school today, which is a rather grisly thing to wish for. But Alex is an Innocent, the physical embodiment of humanity's capacity for hope, and as such can see the world and the Other Realm folk for what they truly are. If Alex said met, she meant met.

"What do you mean by dead, sweetie?" Leanne asked with much more aplomb than I could muster.

Alex flopped onto the antique couch in the living room. The couch was one of those Queen Anne things, or some other long-dead royalty, and felt like it was padded with loose gravel, but she draped herself over it and looked comfortable the way only a teenager can. "I mean walking around dead," she said.

"Like me?" I asked hopefully.

"Uh-uh," she said, and started messing with her hair. She tied it up into that Gordian knot that women use. The kind where they twist and turn their hair until suddenly it's tied up nice and neat on top of their head, and no matter what you do you can't let it down again until they say the magic words and it all just falls apart. "She didn't have anything inside," she added once she'd finished.

I sat on the infinitesimal bit of cushion that Alex hadn't managed to occupy. "You mean she was hollow?"

Alex frowned in thought for a second. "She could have been--she kinda looked like she was--but that's not what I meant. It's like there wasn't anybody home in her head."

Leanne came over and Alex automatically sat up and made room for her. Alex turned about and Leanne fussed with the kid's hair. It has to be some kind of ritual, like when they all go to the bathroom together.

"It sounds like another zombie," Leanne said. "But why a young girl, and why send it to school?"

"Beats me," I said. "But I think Josh and I had better visit Meadowdale High tomorrow. I just hope Josh has a hall pass."

I seriously doubted that my run-in with the zombie tonight and Alex's mention of the dead girl was only a coincidence. The universe appears to have a strange sort of synchronicity as far as I'm concerned. If this wasn't a big neon sign demanding my attention, then I didn't know what was.

"Speak of the devil," Leanne said as Josh appeared at the top of the wide marble stairway that led up to the bedrooms and library.

He cradled a gargantuan book under his left arm, the kind so big it needs its own pedestal. His casual attire--a baggy grey sweater and old faded jeans with the knees torn out of them--suggested that he'd spent the day curled up with a good...tome...by the fireplace.

Josh's warm brown eyes sparkled with mischief. "Not the devil, just your friendly neighborhood shapeshifter." He navigated the stairs with the uncommon grace of his kind, then sat comfortably in the uncomfortable chair opposite us. I seem to be the only one who thinks the house is decorated in early Marquis de Sade.

“Your daughter was just telling us that she met a dead girl at school today,” Leanne informed him.

Josh closed his eyes and rubbed at his temple. “So when I asked you what you did at school today, and you said, ‘Nothing?’”

Alex shrugged. “It kinda slipped my mind until just now.”

Only an Innocent would find meeting the walking dead an inconsequential occurrence.

Leanne finished with Alex’s hair. It looked the same to me, but I knew enough to keep my mouth shut. “So who was this girl, and what did she do all day?” Leanne asked.

Alex picked up the silver hand-mirror from the end table and admired Leanne’s handiwork. For a vampire’s house, this place had a lot of mirrors. “She kinda just sat in on all the classes. She didn’t really pay attention, or take any notes or nothing.”

“So she blended in perfectly with the rest of the students,” I said.

“Yeah,” Alex agreed, the sarcasm lost on her. “Benny Liske kept hitting on her all day, but she wouldn’t have nothing to do with him. I caught a glimpse of her in the bathroom mirror at break. She was real pretty before she died.”

Except for the odd Sensitive, Darksiders only see the reality they can handle. The Other Realm folk hide their identities behind a glamour--a spell that alters their true appearance. Catching their reflection in a mirror kind of works in reverse for us. In it, we see the glamour the Other Realm folk present to the world at large.

I shifted uncomfortably on my sliver of cushion. “That still doesn’t explain why anyone would go to the bother of raising the dead just to send her...it...to school,” I said.

A loud crash came from the kitchen, followed by some very unladylike cursing. Something black and shadowy streaked by with a pastry bag clenched between its teeth. It tried unsuccessfully to hide its nebulous form behind the loveseat that was set kitty-corner to the fireplace.

Sabrina stormed out from the kitchen. The left half of her face was covered in flour so that she looked like something out of “The Phantom of the Opera,” and bits of cookie dough were spattered across the otherwise pristine white apron she wore. “Bear! You come back here with that this instant.”

I tried to hide a smile, but wasn’t fast enough.

“You’d better get a grip on that mutt macabre of yours, James, or man’s best friend or not I’ll confine him to the smallest pentagram I can find,” Sabrina scolded.

Bear had been my dog when I was a kid. He was part Great Dane, part Black Lab and part Irish Setter, which translated into a one hundred and eighty pound mass of black, furry hound. He died when I was sixteen, but now that I was dead too we’d become reacquainted. He’s this big shadowy beast, all teeth and glowing eyes. It’s kind of hard to get a good fix on him--your eyes sort of slide off him when you try to look at him directly so that you only catch the odd glimpse out of the corner of your eye. Josh told me that this is what dogs really look like, and that what we see is just a small, insignificant part of what they are. How did he put it again? Oh, yeah. Dead or alive, asleep or awake--it’s all the same to a dog.

“Bear, give it back,” I ordered.

Low growling came from behind the chair, more like doggy muttering than anything threatening.

“Bear,” I said more sternly.

He whined, then flashed past Sabrina and was gone. The pastry bag lay soggly at her feet.

“Great,” Sabrina grumbled. “Now it’s covered in ghost-dog ecto-slobber.” She bent down and carefully picked up the pastry bag using only her thumb and forefinger, and held it out from her body as she made her way back to the kitchen.

“I think I’ll skip dessert tonight,” I decided. Everyone nodded in silent agreement.

“So,” Josh brought us back to the matter at hand, “how do we go about checking out this teen zombie? I’m sure the school frowns on adults wandering the halls and stalking their students.”

“One of us will have to pose as a teenager,” Leanne suggested.

Suddenly everyone was looking at me. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

I could tell by their amused looks that they weren’t. I’m glad they all found it so comical--I certainly didn’t. I got that sinking feeling in my gut I have whenever I know I’m about to be shafted. “What about Leanne?” I suggested, grasping at straws. “She already looks the part.”

“Sorry, but I can’t handle the daylight,” Leanne said.

Funny, she didn’t look sorry.

“Hey, Bumper!” Alex’s eyes lit with excitement at a sudden moment of inspiration. “We could tell everyone you’re my cousin visiting from the States or something. Wendy Sharpe’s cousin was here last year from Georgia, and she got to go to all of Wendy’s classes with her for a week.”

“That settles it, then,” Josh said. “Tomorrow morning bright and early I’ll drive you and Alex to school. I’ll check in at the administrator’s office and we’ll set up your cover story with the principal.”

“Aw nuts!” I said, admitting defeat. Don’t get me wrong--I’ve got nothing against teenagers. I just didn’t want to be one. Not again. Besides, I hardly ever went to school back when I was *supposed* to be there. What made them think I wanted to go back now?

“I’ll bet you were a real hottie as a teen,” Leanne said, and winked suggestively.

“And I’ll bet you were a real pain in the neck.”

Leanne grinned, and showed her fangs.

“Right. Never mind.” I wished I could win just *one* argument.

Alex leaned towards me, her eyes all bright with excitement. “So...come on. Let’s see it. Morph or shift or whatever it is you do.”

“Go ahead, Studmuffin,” Leanne coaxed. “There’s no time like the present. Besides, I wouldn’t mind a little young stuff tonight.”

Young stuff. I was already several hundred years younger than she was. Damn cradle-robbing faerie-vampire-ghost woman.

“Oh, all right,” I said. “But only because it’s a necessary evil, and not because I know it’ll make Leanne all hot to jump my bones.” I don’t think even Alex fell for that one.

I closed my eyes and pictured myself as I was when I was sixteen. It’s interesting how the image conjured up all the corresponding emotions I’d felt at that time. It had been rough. School was okay. I’d been a pretty popular kid--one of the in-crowd--but psychologically I was a mess. Maybe it’s because I hadn’t grown much, so all those hormones had to go somewhere else and messed with my mind instead. Of course, having my dad die when I was fourteen hadn’t helped matters either. Whatever the reason, I’d

been a pretty rebellious kid. The other kids loved me for it. I wish I could have said the same for the adults.

“Wow,” I heard Alex say. “He *was* cute.”

I opened my eyes. “And what, I’m a pasty-faced troll now?”

Alex giggled. “Not *now*.” She held up the mirror for me.

My hair was long again; shoulder length, thick and wavy. My eyes were bright green, shining with hope and not dulled by a loss of innocence. All those little wrinkles were gone, the worry lines around the eyes and the frown that creased my forehead. I could still see the man I’d become, but my face had lost that...weariness. Maybe aging is more about the way we let the weight of our disappointments drag us down as we get older.

“Shouldn’t you have zits or something?” Josh asked. He grinned, seemingly as amused by the transformation as the women were. Or maybe he was just glad it wasn’t him.

“Screw that,” I said. “If I have to be a teenager again, I can do without all the angst.”

Just then the wailing started: a cacophony of screams and screeches, tortured souls, and maniacal laughter. Whatever evil was trying to enter the house was being held at bay by the powerful guardian spirits that warded Leanne’s home.

Josh went to the gun cabinet and retrieved a shotgun to defend against any mortal assailants the Other Realm might enlist. From now until dawn, Alex would have to be closely guarded.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Josh said. “I have a feeling Leanne’s going to want you to herself for a while.”

Leanne grabbed me by the hand and blew Josh a kiss as she led the way upstairs to the bedrooms. Suddenly I had the impression that, teenager or not, it was a good thing I was an Eternal.

“Don’t you kids stay up too late,” Josh called up after us. “Remember, James has school tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FOUR

I've always hated the first day of school. This one wasn't any different. To make matters worse, I couldn't help feeling a little bit perverted. I mean, here I am this thirty-two year old man, passing himself off as a teenager, and surrounded by all these young girls in schoolgirl uniforms. I just know I'm going to have to spend some time in extensive therapy over that one.

Meadowdale High was a Catholic school, not that Sabrina and Josh were Catholic or anything. It's just that with all the religious icons, and the nuns and whatnot, Alex was better protected against the Other Realm denizens here.

I sat with her on the bench outside the principal's office and fidgeted with my tie while Josh registered me for school. I was dressed in the required school attire: gray pants, white shirt, burgundy tie, and a gray blazer with burgundy trim. Oh yeah, and black, patent leather shoes. How sweet. I didn't know why *I* had to wear the stupid school uniform. After all, I was just visiting. But Leanne had insisted. I think maybe the wench has a few fantasies of her own.

The only thing that set me apart from the rest of the kids was my hair--theirs was cropped short while mine hung to my shoulders, the bangs spilling into my eyes.

"Hey, Samson. Get a haircut," one kid commented from his locker across the hall. Several others laughed.

Samson? Well, it *was* a Catholic school.

"Don't mind him," Alex consoled me. "That's Benny Liske. He thinks he's all that."

Benny looked like a throwback from the fifties. He had watery blue eyes and a cleft, square chin, and his dark hair was slicked back with some of that nancy-boy hair gel everybody's using nowadays. Instead of the school blazer, he wore a burgundy letterman's jacket, and stood at least six foot two and a hundred and ninety pounds at sixteen years old. What *are* we feeding these kids?

"Let me guess--Captain of the football team?"

Alex nodded. "And the rugby team."

I spied a gremlin going through the book bag at Benny's feet. Most gremlins all look alike; six inches tall, short stubby legs, knobby knees, large pointed ears and matching teeth, red glowing eyes, no nose, no clothes and no genitalia. And that green, scaly skin. I'd seen this particular gremlin before, however. The shock of red hair was a dead give away. I think the little creep was following me around. Anyway, it found what it was looking for--Benny's chemistry paper--and bounded off down the hall with it, cackling with glee. It's too bad Benny couldn't see the gremlin--it sure beat the old "The dog ate my homework" excuse.

Alex opened one of her notebooks and scribbled something in it. "Benny's the guy I told you about. The one who kept hitting on the dead girl, even though he's *supposed* to be going out with Karen Waters."

"Speaking of which, have you seen her yet? The dead girl, I mean, not Karen Waters." Back to the task at hand. I wasn't about to waste my time on the likes of Benny Liske. The sooner I could get this over with, the sooner I could go back to being my adult self.

Alex finished scribbling in her book and looked around. "Nope, not yet. But she's

in my second period physics class."

I winced. That meant at the very least I had to sit through two classes. "Second period, huh. What's first period?"

Alex grinned. "History. You should be good at that, having lived through so much of it and all. Or didn't they have school back when you were a kid?"

The uppity little brat. "Nope. We all just sat around listening to the tribal shaman. I got an A in Whacking Big Things With A Stick."

Her laugh was cut short as Benny approached, flanked by a couple of his cronies. Jocks--the letterman sweaters and a lack of a discernable neck were a dead give away.

Benny stopped in front of us and dropped his book bag at his feet. "Hey, Alex. Who's the loser?"

Alex stared up at Benny and stuck out her tongue, then said, "This is my cousin, James. He's visiting from Columbus, Ohio."

That's the cover story we'd come up with. It seemed a pretty safe bet. I mean, what are the odds anyone had ever been to Columbus, Ohio?

Benny looked me up and down. I don't think he was impressed with what he saw. Or maybe he was, which was all the more reason to put me in my place. "James what?"

"Decker," I said.

"Pecker, eh? Well you sure look like a big dick to me." His cronies laughed and elbowed each other good-naturedly.

I stared Benny straight in those watery blue eyes of his and said, "That's pretty witty, for a jock. It must be your turn to use the brain cell."

To his credit, he got it right away. I saw the muscles jump in his jaw as he clenched his teeth.

"We'll see how witty you are later, when you're not sitting in front of the principal's office." Benny grabbed up his book bag and stormed off with tweedle-dumb-and-dumber just as the door to the principal's office opened. I didn't even have time for a witty comeback, which was all right, because at the moment all I could think of was, "Oh, yeah?"

Josh came through the door followed by Principal Tanner--a bald-headed man in rumpled brown suit and a monocle in his left eye. I'm not kidding, it was an honest to goodness monocle. I kept looking around for Sgt. Schultz.

"James is a very well-behaved young man," Josh lied to the principal, "And I'm sure he'll find this a valuable learning experience."

Principal Tanner looked me up and down, fixating for a moment on my hair. "I'm sure it will be a learning experience for both of us."

I didn't like the sound of that. Luckily the bell rang just then.

Alex grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me to my feet. "Come on, we don't want to be late for class." She gave her dad a quick kiss on the cheek goodbye, and we made good our escape.

I could feel the principal's eyes drilling holes into the back of my head. Of course, the hole on the right was bigger, what with the monocle and all.

I trailed after Alex, turning right and left down several corridors draped with banners proclaiming "Go Tigers", and through numerous sets of double doors until I was hopelessly lost.

She stopped suddenly outside a door to one of the classrooms. "Medieval

History," she called out, and shoved me through the open doorway.

You'd have sworn I was the Elephant Man, the way the idle chatter stopped abruptly and all eyes focused on me. I fought the urge to check my fly, or to see if maybe there was toilet paper trailing from my shoe.

The teacher--one Ms. Gertrum, if the name scrawled in blue chalk on the upper left corner of the blackboard was accurate--got up from behind her battered wooden desk. Her shoulder-length, mousy brown hair almost matched the tan, polyester slacks and jacket she wore, and she was short and squat, and smelled like Ben Gay. She probably substituted as the girl's gym teacher.

Alex finally made an appearance. "This is my cousin, James, from Columbus, Ohio. He's going to be sitting in on my classes for the next couple of days while he's visiting."

Ms. Gertrum squinted at me from behind cat's eye glasses. "Why don't you tell the class a little bit about yourself, James?"

Alex hastily took her seat in the front row. (Mental note to self: talk with her about that later. What self-respecting kid purposely sits in the front row?)

Twenty-seven expectant faces, some chewing gum, or twirling their hair, doodling in their notebooks or staring longingly out the window, waited for me to speak those ever-important first words. The ones they'd mercilessly judge me by, and therefore determine my standing in the school hierarchy.

"Um...ah..."

"What do you do in Columbus for fun?" Ms. Gertrum prodded.

I sighed. "Drink, heavily."

Ms. Gertrum scowled as the class erupted in hooting and laughter.

I shrugged at her apologetically. "It takes the edge off the drugs," I added.

The teacher shook her head, and then took her seat behind the desk. "In that case, James, I hope you brought enough for everyone."

"Way to go, Ms. Gertrum," someone shouted from the back of the class.

Maybe I'd underestimated her.

She motioned for me to take a seat, then totally ignored me, secure in her authority the way only teachers and other dictators are. I took an empty desk just to the left of Alex as Ms. Gertrum shuffled some papers about.

"I've graded your history assignments from last week, and I have to say, I'm impressed. Your reports on religious beliefs in the seventeenth century were...well...entertaining, to say the least." She slowly made a circuit of the class, handing back the graded papers one by one.

She stopped in front of Alex's desk, towering over the girl with a frown of concern. "Your assignment was particularly enlightening, Miss Fay." Ms. Gertrum pushed at the bridge of her glasses as she read from Alex's paper. "Infiltration of the Catholic Church by Various Vampire Clans and Their Effect on Christianity."

She set the paper face up on Alex's desk, a big red "B" emblazoned across the front. "I'll let it pass, *this* time, Alex. But I've warned you before; this is Medieval History, not Creative Writing 101."

Alex blushed as the class broke into laughter.

"And if you *must* be a writer, try your hand at *real* literature, and stay away from all that fantasy schlock."

Ms. Gertrum turned to face me as she headed for the front of the class. I caught her eye for a brief moment, and transformed. I smiled at her, baring my fangs as my eyes glinted blood red in a visage seemingly made of cold, white marble. Hey, I'm not a vampire, but I do a passable imitation. I held the form only for an instant--just long enough to freak the poor woman out.

I think her legs went a little wobbly on her, as she stumbled a bit on her way to the front of the class. She took off her glasses and made a big show of cleaning the lenses, as if that would help. Fantasy schlock, indeed. I'll bet she wished she had some of those drugs I joked about right now.

The rest of the class was pretty uneventful, if not downright boring. Only a school could take something as exciting as Medieval Europe--what with the Crusades, the plagues, the Burning Times--and suck the life out of it. Of course, I have to admit I probably threw poor Ms. Gertrum off her stride a bit there with the vampire thing. She kept stealing glances at me periodically when she thought I wasn't looking.

The bell rang, marking the end of class. Ms. Gertrum tried to take her seat, but missed the chair completely and fell flat on her backside. I spied that same red-haired gremlin, laughing its ass off beside the downed teacher as a couple of students ran to see if she was all right.

Alex and I barely made it out into the hall when three girls cornered us up against the lockers that lined the hallways.

"Why don't you introduce us to your cousin?" a thin brunette asked Alex as students pressed by us on their way to their next class.

Alex grinned. "James, these are my best friends: Julie, Michelle, and Olie."

I'm sure the sight of these three girls kept half the teenage boys at Meadowdale locked in their bathrooms on a regular basis. Julie was lithe and compact, the athletic type, with a pageboy haircut, a sprinkle of freckles across her nose, and runner's legs. Michelle was a real Spanish beauty, tall and supermodel slender, with luxurious straight dark hair, warm brown eyes, and the longest legs I've ever seen--and I've seen my fair share. And Olie? Olie was jailbait through and through. An Audrey Hepburn face on a Pamela Anderson body--a mix of innocent ingénue and femme fatal in a skirt that was nowhere near regulation length.

"He's cute," Julie said, as if I wasn't there.

"Yeah, I'd do him," Olie added.

"Aw, look. He's blushing," Michelle said, and her nose crinkled up when she smiled. "Isn't that sweet?"

A girl shrieked suddenly from somewhere behind me, followed by the sound of laughter.

"What the fuck?" I heard. "Hey, put me down, you skank."

Thank God. A distraction, and just in the nick of time. I turned to see Benny Liske, his feet dangling two inches off the ground as the cheerleader from hell held him aloft by the throat with one hand. The zombie rummaged through her open locker with her free hand, probably looking for her books for the next class, as Benny struggled to escape.

Alex was right; she must have been pretty--once. But I think she'd been dead a long time. The corpse was desiccated, the dry, wrinkled skin shrink-wrapped to the skull, arms, and legs. Strands of long, blonde hair hung in wispy patches from her skull, and

gray bone poked through in places along her left forearm and right thigh. Her eyes and mouth were sewn shut, just like the biker zombie, and she smelled musty, like an old attic. I guess she was too dried out to rot. Only her clothes were new, as if she had just dressed in them this morning.

My guts twisted in fear suddenly, though it had nothing to do with the zombie. Olie had her hand on my ass.

"Serves him right," she said, whispering in my ear. "He thinks he's God's gift just 'cause his daddy owns the BMW dealership, and gave him a Z4 for his birthday."

Michelle put her arm around my waist. "Girlfriend's going all Xena Warrior Princess on that poor little white boy," she said. "And she's such a tiny little thing."

"PMS," Julie explained. "I once saw my mom body slam my dad when she was on her period."

Benny's face was starting to turn purple. Lucky for him, the zombie found her notebook just then and dropped him. She closed her locker and wandered off in the direction of her next class, totally ignoring Benny as he gasped for air on his knees. That's when he saw me.

"What are you looking at, Pecker?"

The girls backed away as Benny rushed me, grabbing my jacket by the lapels and shoving me up against the locker. Olie was about to intervene on my behalf when Alex held her back.

"Don't worry about James," Alex assured her. "He can take care of himself."

Poor Benny. I sympathized with the kid. I really did. He had an image to uphold, and getting roughed up in public by a little girl was going to tarnish that image something fierce. Pounding me into oblivion wouldn't exactly return that image to a glossy sheen, but it sure would make him feel better at the moment.

Personally, I don't beat up children. But I wasn't about to let him pound me just for ego's sake either. It just wasn't his day.

I figured I owed him a warning at least. "Don't touch me, Benny."

He slammed me into the locker with renewed force. "Or what, Pecker?"

My eyes went hard. "Or I'll touch you back."

Benny drove his fist into the locker a good three inches, right at the spot where my head *used* to be. I snaked my arm up and over his, then applied inwards and upwards pressure on his elbow with my own. The pressure against the joint forced him to his toes, and I pivoted, forcing him back up against the lockers. I kept him off balance, applying just enough pain to keep him from trying anything. Benny struggled futilely as I removed his belt, spun him about, and tied his hands behind his back with it. Then I pantsed him. Yeah, I know it's juvenile, but this *is* high school.

The girls squealed in delight. "I always thought he was more the boxers kind of guy," Alex said.

"Flowered bikinis. Who'd a thunk it," Olie commented as we left Benny Liske in the hallway with his pants around his ankles, and headed off to physics class.

Okay, so maybe school wasn't such a bad go after all.

"So what do we do about the dead girl?" Alex whispered as we walked to class.

I shrugged. "I guess we just keep an eye on her, see what she does, and where she goes." It wasn't a great plan, but it's all I had.

Physics class was taught by an old Vietnam War vet, or maybe it was World War Two; he looked old enough. Major Munn, they called him. He was a grizzled old coot, built like a Sherman tank and dressed in an impeccable navy blue suit. His gray hair was still regulation cut, and his square face had gone a bit jowly with age. The kids seemed to love him.

A banner done up in bright red letters ran along the top of the chalkboard proclaiming, "Every day's a Munn Day."

"Take a seat, Mr. Decker," he said as I entered his class. "Welcome to Major Munn's Monday Morning Matinee." He grinned a near toothless grin as the kids broke out into laughter. "Ha! You didn't know I knew about that, did you?"

Obviously the man had good Intel.

I sat across from Alex in the front of the class again. At least Julie, Michelle and Olie had sense enough to sit near the back. As a matter of fact, they even had desks near the window. So did the zombie, whose name turned out to be Joan McCall. That's the name she raised her hand to during roll call, anyway.

It was easy to keep an eye on her as Major Munn had turned down the lights and was running one of his infamous survival training films. She stared straight ahead, seemingly fascinated in water reclamation techniques while lost at sea.

The geeky looking kid that sat behind me passed me a note from Michelle just as an announcement came over the P.A. system and interrupted the movie.

"Will James Decker please report to the principal's office right away?"

I stood up and shrugged to a lot of "oohs" and "ahhs" from the student body.

"Don't worry, James. I'll come visit you in prison," Olie piped up from the back of the class.

Great. Let me try explaining that one to Leanne and Alison.

I finally found my way to the principals' office after braving a maze of hallways. When I got there, Benny Liske was sitting on the bench outside the office door.

The "learning experience" was about to begin. I only hoped Principal Tanner was a good student.

CHAPTER FIVE

Benny glared at me as I stepped through the door to the principal's outer office, but he didn't say anything. Maybe the kid had learned something, or maybe one of the other jocks had the brain cell now.

The principal's secretary was a blond bombshell in a tight fitting, powder blue a-line dress and heels. She looked up from her computer terminal as I came in and smiled. This was all just a little too much, what with that Colonel Klink-looking freak of a principal in the next room. I felt like I should be bribing her with chocolate and nylons.

"You can go right in, James," she said.

"Gee, thanks." I sauntered past her and through the inner door to Mr. Tanner's office.

Principal Tanner faced the picture window, his hands clasped at the small of his back as he looked out at the athletic field and watched the kids playing soccer. His office had one of those huge oak desks--the kind with enough room to have sex on and still not have to clear off the penholders or important papers. The walls were lined with pictures of past school principals, most of them looking almost as dried up as Joan McCall. His office smelled of Old Spice and Lemon Pledge, in that order.

I stood just behind the padded leather chair on this side of his desk and rested my hands on its high back. Principal Tanner turned to face me. "What am I going to do with you, James?"

"Nothing kinky, I hope, Sir," I said. "I'm sure that's illegal, even here in Canada."

Tanner's eye twitched--the good one, not the one with the monocle. "I'm glad you find this amusing, Mr. Decker, because I certainly don't."

I shrugged. "Sorry, Sir. I just assumed that anyone who wore a monocle *had* to have a sense of humour."

I heard laughter, cut suddenly short, in the outer office.

I was wrong about the sense of humour thing. Principal Tanner didn't find it quite so amusing. Did you know that when bald people get pissed, they're entire head goes purple?

"That's it, young man. I'm calling your father."

"Yeah, what do you want?" Dad said, materializing behind me dressed in a raggedy pair of gray boxers and a blue T-shirt with the sleeves cut off--his lounging attire. "Me and your Grandpa were just about to catch the Blue Jays on TV."

Thankfully, Tanner wasn't at all receptive to ghosts. He picked up the phone and started to dial. The man was so livid I could see his hand shaking as he held the receiver. So I decided to push him over the edge.

"What do you plan on telling him?" I asked. "That I hurt your grubby little feelings?"

The monocle popped out of his eye, and the good one started twitching like crazy. I thought he was going to have an embolism.

"Get out! Get off my school grounds and never come back!"

"Way to go, boy," Dad said just before he vanished. "Second period of the first day of school, and already you're expelled."

"Yep, that's a record even for me," I mumbled as I turned and left the principal's office. I grinned at the secretary as I left, who was biting her lip and dabbing at the tears

in her eyes with a Kleenex.

Benny Liske stared at me, mouth opened as I headed for the exit.

"Close your mouth, Benny," I said. "You're letting all the air out."

His mouth snapped shut with a click of teeth, and he scowled at me as I walked away. "Oh, yeah?"

I wiped the smirk off of my face as two dead bikers stepped through the main doors and into the foyer. Both men were huge, with long, scraggly beards that reached almost to the matching silver Harley Davidson belt buckles so big they probably doubled as protective armor. They dressed in black leather bike jackets over white T-shirts, and wore those neat leather gloves with the fingers cut off. I noticed one of the zombies was missing three fingers on his right hand. Maybe he'd forgotten to take the gloves off when he'd made the alterations.

Both zombies were obviously vampire-made, and couldn't have been more than a week into the rotting process. They still smelled pretty rancid, though. Vampire-made zombies continue to rot until there's nothing left of them, while the decay process is halted at the point in time of the resurrection for raised zombies. If a vampire's lucky he might get a few weeks use out of his minions before they're just so much rotten meat, whereas a raised zombie lasts pretty much indefinitely.

The zombie bikers stomped by me, ignoring me as if I wasn't there. They were obviously dead men on a mission, and I wasn't it. I couldn't for the life of me imagine what they could want at a Catholic high school. The antique shop made sense of a sort--but a school? Whatever it was they were up to, I intended to find out.

There was a phone booth in the foyer just around the corner from the principal's office. Nothing more than an alcove with a wooden sliding door in front of it for privacy, and a pay phone inside. The teenager gig had turned out to be more fun than I'd thought it would be, but these zombies were a job for the adult James Decker. I ducked into the phone booth and morphed back to my old self. I felt so retro Superman. I stepped out of the booth, wearing the deep blue, long-sleeved sweater and black cargo pants that the faerie smith Goibnu had made for me. The clothing was enchanted, stretching to fit whatever alterations I might make to my body, and acted as light armor as well. I pulled the pant legs down over the soft, leather boots to hide the row of heavy silver buckles.

The zombies were halfway down the hall by now and through the first set of doors. Classes were still in session, so the corridors were practically deserted. A nun stepped out from the teacher's lounge, dressed in the traditional black and white habit that you rarely ever see anymore. She took one look at the bikers and ducked back inside. I was kind of disappointed, actually. I'd always remembered nuns as being much tougher. Old Sister Mary-Margaret from my public school days would have rapped those zombies across their knuckles with that fifteen inch, wire-edged ruler she always carried, and had them on their knees reciting fifty Hail Marys--walking dead or no.

I tailed the zombies, who seemed to know exactly where they were going. Suddenly I had a pretty good idea too. They were headed straight for Major Munn's class. The problem was, I wasn't exactly certain who they were after. Both Alex *and* the zombie Joan were in that class. Alex is an Innocent. I had no illusions that the Armies of Darkness had given up on turning her just because I'd defeated the demon Aeshma. Still, I had a hunch that they weren't after her, but Joan. The question was, why?

I was also rather at a loss as to what to do about it. Granted, Joan had so far come

off as rather harmless--except for that altercation with Benny Liske, and he'd deserved it. But was I supposed to protect one zombie from another?

Then the thought occurred to me that whatever it was they were going to do, they were going to do it in a room full of kids. I decided to stage a pre-emptive strike.

"Hey!" I shouted from down the hall. The zombies stopped, and turned to look at me. Sunlight streamed in through the window from the stairwell behind them, backlighting them so that they appeared as two menacing, shadowy outlines. "Yeah, you--you ZZ Top looking freaks. Over here!"

I must have hurt their grubby little feelings too, because they stopped what they were doing and shuffled towards me. The one on the left pulled out a set of brass knuckles and slipped them over the remaining fingers of his right hand. He may have only had two fingers left on that hand, but he still had all five knuckles.

Great. Now what? I couldn't exactly decapitate them smack dab in the middle of Meadowdale High. Try explaining *that* one to the police. Maybe I could lure them away somehow, I thought. So what do bikers like? Strippers and beer. Not much chance of finding either of those in a Catholic high school. Well, at least I hope not.

"You'd better leave," I heard someone say from behind me.

I glanced over my left shoulder and saw the nun who'd retreated back into the teacher's lounge earlier. She held her rosary clutched in her left hand, and held a heavy, silver cross out in front of her like a protective ward. Could she see the bikers for what they really were?

"I've called the cops. They'll be here any minute," she said.

More good news.

The zombies closed on me, and I ducked under a right cross from the one with the brass knuckles. I slipped around behind him and rabbit-punched him in the kidneys. He'd piss blood for a month after that--if zombies pissed, that is, or had blood.

I kicked out to the back of his knee and dropped him to the floor, then blocked a haymaker from his buddy. I locked the second zombie's arm up and delivered a wicked palm heel thrust to its nose. The damn zombie didn't have any cartilage left, so it was pretty ineffective. Its eyes didn't even water, seeing as he only had one to begin with.

The problem with arm locks is that they pretty much trap you to your opponent as well. The zombie's left hand shot out and grabbed me by the throat. He shoved me back into the wall, hard enough to crack the brick. The air *whoofed* out of my lungs just as the first zombie climbed to its feet and hammered me in the gut. I think its fist sunk deep enough into my stomach to touch backbone. Zombies aren't quick, but they're incredibly strong.

We'd raised enough of a ruckus that classroom doors had opened along the hallway, and faces peered out to see what was going on. The teachers at least had the presence of mind to keep the students in class. None of them offered to help me either, but I could hardly blame them for that.

The first zombie drew a meaty fist back to strike me again, just as the nun who'd called the cops broke a pointer over its head. Great, I thought, Granny Clampett to the rescue. Well, that's what she looked like, a tiny woman, all wiry and feisty with pent up energy, grey hair pulled back into a tight bun, and the wire-rimmed granny glasses on a mummified little face.

The zombie grabbed her by the shoulder, then drew its hand back quickly as if it

had just touched something red hot. Maybe nuns were like holy water, because the zombie's fingers were red and blistered.

I used the distraction, levering up on the arm the second zombie had entangled with mine, and brought my elbow down hard on the arm it was using to strangle me with. That broke its grip, and I punched it in the chest just above its solar plexus and heard the satisfying sound of its sternum cracking. Now it was the zombie's turn to whoof as two ribs gave way and popped out through its T-shirt, which may have been the only thing holding them in place, now that I think of it. The stench of rotting intestinal organs almost made me gag.

The nun held her crucifix out in front of her, waving it in the second zombie's face and forcing it away from me. It retreated from her, fleeing down the hall toward the stairwell.

I kned the first zombie hard in its dried up testicles and it finally let go of my other arm and staggered back a couple of steps. I punched it once in the head and it stumbled to the far side of the hall. I think it finally realized it was on its own, because it broke off the fight and shuffled down the hall after its partner. I was about to pursue it when the old nun turned and jammed the crucifix into my face.

"Be gone, spawn of Satan."

I grabbed the cross and shoved it away. "I ain't no spawn, Sister." I've notice when I get pissed my grammar goes all to pot.

She squinted at me for a moment. "Sorry, son. My mistake." I guess she had the Sight, but at her age it wasn't twenty-twenty anymore.

The zombies were gone by now. I probably should have followed them to see where they went, or at least make sure they didn't start trouble anywhere else, but I was more worried about Alex. And I still had the zombie Joan to keep an eye on.

The teachers kept admirable control over the students. Now that there was nothing to see, they hustled them away from the doors and back to their studies. Alex waved goodbye before Major Munn shuffled her back to her desk and closed the door. I decided that now was a good time to make good my escape. The two cops who appeared suddenly at the top of the stairs with their guns drawn had other plans.

"Back away from the nun, and face the wall with your hands over your head." Just my luck. Kingston's finest had managed to miss two slow-moving, rotting biker-zombies on their way in, but me they spot no problem.

Sister Mary Badass of Our Lady of Take No Prisoners stepped between the two cops and me. "What's your name officer?" she addressed the first cop in line.

The officer's gun wavered from where it was pointed at my head. I thought for a moment he was going to point it at the nun, but he decided against it. From my point of view that was a tactical mistake. She was *way* scarier than I was. "Um...Constable Edwards, ma'am."

She advanced on the constable, clutching the crucifix in her left hand and the broken pointer in her right. "Take those sunglasses off when you're talking to me, boy."

"Yes, ma'am," the officer complied.

"I called in a description of two large men in black leather with long flowing beards, wandering the school hallways." She stared the constable in the eyes. "Does this gentleman match that description?"

"No, ma'am." The officer blushed slightly now and lowered his gun while his

partner tried to hide a smile.

"What are *you* smirking at?"

"Nothing, ma'am," the second officer replied hastily.

The nun poked the first officer in the chest with the broken pointer. "I think twenty Hail Mary's in the school chapel should absolve you two of your sins, don't you?"

"Um...yes, ma'am."

"Well, off with you," she said after a brief uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, ma'am," the constables replied in unison. They holstered their weapons, and beat a hasty retreat.

"But I'm Jewish," I heard the second constable tell his partner as they rounded the corner on their way to the chapel.

"Shut up, Goldberg."

"Thanks," I told the nun once the police had left.

She pressed the end of the broken pointer into my sternum and backed me up against the wall, squinting at me through those wire-rimmed granny glasses she wore.

"So, what exactly are you?"

I guess I wasn't off the hook just yet. "One of the good guys," I told her.

"Hmph," she grunted, which apparently was nasty-old-nunspeak for "I suppose," because she lowered the pointer and backed away. "The name's Sister Juliet."

I cocked an eyebrow in surprise. The name just didn't fit the tough as rawhide old broa...um...elderly woman before me.

"What? You think I was always this old?"

I cracked a smile. "The thought had crossed my mind."

She smiled back. "Well, sometimes it feels like it." She turned and headed back toward the teacher's lounge, and motioned for me to follow her. "So, are you here for the dead girl, or the bright, shiny child?"

I trailed after her with my hands in my pockets. The bright shiny child could only be Alex. Her aura was such a brilliant white light that it hurt to look at it. Unfortunately, it was also a beacon for all the creepy crawlies that came looking for her. "Actually, both."

Sister Juliet stopped outside the teacher's lounge. "The dead girl lives at 21 Maple Drive with her father, who's very much alive. I followed her home one night. Maybe you should check it out."

"I'll do that," I said.

She nodded, then opened the door to the lounge. "And James? Don't come back here again." With that she stepped into the teacher's lounge and was gone.

I don't know how she knew my name. I don't recall giving it to her. And that last bit had definitely sounded like a warning. *Maybe she does have spooky nun powers*, I thought as I headed out to the parking lot. Not that it mattered. I had no intentions of returning.

I hadn't made it off the school grounds yet when my cell phone rang. "James, it's Sabrina. Alison's gone again."

CHAPTER SIX

Grief. The word doesn't do the emotion justice. That hollow, empty feeling, the numbness, the apathy, the agony, the unbearable loneliness, the guilt. One tiny word encompassing so many horrid sentiments. I've said there are two kinds of zombies, but I was wrong. There are three. There's also the kind we make of ourselves. The walking dead--living, breathing, eating, working, but dead inside. That's grief.

That scrawny bastard--the one that murdered me outside the 7-11--had done me a big favor. By killing me, he had brought me back to life. And in bringing Alison back to life, in a way, I had killed her.

I didn't bother calling a cab, or asking Sabrina or Josh to come pick me up. I simply thought of Leanne's living room and I was there. It wasn't like when I move at mach speed, either, which *appears* like teleportation to normal humans. As long as I've been there before, or have a clear image of the place in my mind, I can transport instantaneously. It's true teleportation, or magic; whatever.

I made sure to materialize so as not to startle anyone. At first I'd had fun with it, popping up behind Sabrina, Alex, or Leanne and scaring the bejeezus out of them. It kind of lost its allure after Sabrina accidentally stabbed me in the groin with the garden shears that time, though.

"Lucy, I'm home," I called out in my best Cuban accent from the empty living room.

"We're up here, in the library," Josh answered.

I climbed the wide marble stairway to the second floor, walked down the hall past the life-sized portraits of pasty-faced nobles, and entered Leanne's library. It was an enormous room with oak bookshelves that lined three walls and reached up to a vaulted stained glass dome. The fourth wall was set with floor to ceiling windows, and glass double doors that led out to a sweeping balcony overlooking the gardens, and finally the St. Lawrence River. Wrought iron stairs lead up to an upper tier with a second row of shelves. Sunlight streamed in through the windows and bathed the library in bright, rose-tinged light, filtered as it were through the stained glass dome in the ceiling.

An antique, cherry wood desk sat center of the library facing the window, with additional bookshelves ringed about it like Stonehenge monoliths. Josh and Sabrina sat at the desk, staring at the computer monitor perched atop it.

"No, there," Sabrina told her husband. "The black ten goes on the red jack."

I had to laugh as I joined them. "Here you are, surrounded by ancient tomes from lost Atlantis, Merlin's grimoires, and the Necronomicon, connected to the World Wide Web via satellite uplink by a top of the line, dual core, multiprocessor, dedicated computer--and you two are playing solitaire."

"And losing badly, I might add," Sabrina said, and stuck out her tongue.

The both of them were still in their pyjamas, Josh in loose fitting, plaid flannel pants with a drawstring at the waist, and Sabrina in a red silk ankle length nightgown. Josh was bare-chested, and Sabrina draped her manicured fingers lightly across his broad shoulders. They looked like models straight out of the Sear's catalogue, if not for the fact that the two of them had a terminal case of bed head.

Josh couldn't look me in the eye, because he knew that *I* knew what they'd been up to, and he was the bashful type. Obviously he and Sabrina had just had sex, otherwise

why would he be back in his pyjamas after he'd dressed this morning to drive Alex and I to school? Besides, I could smell it on them. Had they had sex right here in the library?

"How'd things go at school?" he asked.

I cleared the mental image of Josh and Sabrina naked on the desk. Suddenly I couldn't meet his eyes either, and I couldn't even *look* at Sabrina. "I got expelled," I said. "But I did get a name and address on the zombie kid."

Then I told them about the biker zombies, and Sister Juliet, all the while pretending to peruse one of the bookshelves in an effort to avoid eye contact with either of them.

"Do you think they were after Alex, or Joan?" Sabrina asked.

"It's just a hunch, but I think it was Joan." I thumbed through a few pages of the *De Vermis Mysteriis* before replacing it on the shelf. "I'm going to check out her place, just as soon as I find Alison."

Which brought us back to the matter at hand.

"She was gone by the time we...um...got up this morning," Josh said, and blushed.

Alison wouldn't have gone anywhere without telling anyone. Not during the few days surrounding the full moon. It was just too risky. Unless, of course, she'd gone off to do the one thing she was forbidden to do.

Sabrina found an elastic band on the table, and tied her hair back in a ponytail with it. "Sarah should be getting off for lunch in about another twenty minutes or so," she said when she'd finished. "You'll probably find Alison there."

I nodded, too disheartened to reply.

"Do you want us to go with you?" Sabrina asked. She knew how hard this was for me, too.

"That's all right," I said, forcing a smile. "You two go back to what you were doing."

Josh's ears morphed suddenly from human to brown pointed furry ones. He tended to lose control like that when he was flustered. Sabrina grinned and shifted herself suddenly to her husband's lap. She whispered something into his ear, and Josh's body broke out in patches of brown fur.

I turned to leave the two to their games, when Sabrina called after me. "James, the dead must give up the past."

"That's the problem," I said as I left. "Alison's not dead anymore."

I sat on the park bench across the street from the schoolyard, and watched Alison watch Sarah. Alison sat in my Grande Cherokee, parked opposite the playground just behind the lilac bushes on the other side of the school fence. From her vantage point she watched her daughter as Sarah played on the swings with a few of her classmates.

Death is easier on the dead than it is on the living. It is the living that grieve. The dead simply move on. Unless something, or someone, holds them back. Alison would have reincarnated long ago if not for me. She had failed to move on, because I could not.

Sarah had been young when Alison died--only six years old. Maybe it was because of her youth that she had learned to cope with her mother's death. Five years is an eternity for a child, almost half a lifetime. For me it seemed like yesterday. I had not only lost Alison, but Sarah. I had been her father for three years, but her grandparents, and her father--the one who'd abandoned her when she was three--had thought it best for

Sarah that I cut all ties with her. I quickly found that boyfriends, even live-in boyfriends, have little rights when it comes to custody.

And so, in my grief, I had bound Alison's spirit to me, and to the Earth. Except now she was back. She was alive again--or as close to alive as you can get. Her soul shared residence in Leanne's body. Alison, Leanne, and the vampire demon all in one neat little package. It was that age-old story: man's dead fiancé subdues psycho demon and takes up shared residence in fairy-vampire girlfriend's body.

Anyway, Alison was made flesh again, and with that returned the concerns of the flesh. In her case, that concern was Sarah. Alison wanted the one thing she couldn't have. She wanted her daughter back.

She couldn't exactly show up at school and say, "Hi, honey. It's Mommy, back from the dead." This was real life, not "The Young and the Restless." Dead people didn't just show up on your doorstep one day as good as new. Except for Alison. And me--but that's different.

Sarah squealed as she urged her friends to push her faster and higher on the swings. She'd grown into a real tomboy. Her coppery red hair was cut short, barely touching the collar of her yellow and black ski jacket. One knee of her blue jeans was torn out, even though they looked fairly new, and her boots looked like she'd gone stomping through the muck in them. She contrasted sharply with her friends, dressed as they were in colorful leg warmers, pink and white down-filled jackets, fuzzy mittens, pigtails, and Hello Kitty earmuffs.

I understood Alison's pain. I'd lived it.

I moved across the street to where Alison had parked and knocked on the passenger window. She turned slowly and looked at me, in too much grief to be startled. Bear whined from the front seat beside her. He'd really taken to Alison, perhaps because she seemed to be the only one that could really pet him. She scratched the dumb hound behind his ears, while I had trouble even focusing on him. It must be a ghost thing.

I opened the passenger door and got in, shoving Bear out of the way. He moved through the bucket seat and lay down in the back, but not before he ecto-slobbered all over my left ear. I held Alison's hand in mine as we sat quietly and watched Sarah until the school bell rang, marking the end of lunch hour.

Sarah waited until the swing was at the height of its arc, and then jumped. She got some really good air before she hit the grass, bending at the knees when she landed and tucking into a roll to absorb the shock. The kid was good, although I think she tore out the second knee in her jeans.

"She scares the hell out of me when she does that," Alison said as Sarah disappeared through the school doors and into the building.

"Like mother, like daughter," I told her. On our first date, Alison had taken me bungee jumping.

She laid her head on my shoulder and I held her close. Her blond hair tickled my nose, and still smelled strongly of the perm solution she and Sabrina had used on it yesterday. She was casually dressed in blue jeans, a cotton print shirt, and my oversized black leather jacket, but somehow managed to make it all look elegant. I brushed her cheek with my hand, and felt wetness there, but didn't say anything. What could I say?

"Are you mad at me?" she asked in her little girl voice.

"No, dear. I was just worried about you. You know how dangerous this is."

She reached passed me, popped open the glove compartment, and retrieved a Kleenex from the package she always kept there. "I was really careful she didn't see me." She dabbed at her eyes with the tissue, then blew her nose.

"I know," I said. "But we really should be getting back to the house." To be honest, I hadn't worried about Sarah seeing her mother, although that would have been cause enough for concern. I was more afraid that the creepy crawlies would get her.

It's not like any of us were in their good books. We'd defeated the madness demon Aeshma, taken out our fair share of minor demons, Dark Sidhe, vampires and what have you, and deprived them of the Innocent. Now there was this mess with the zombies. The forces of evil tend to be rather petty, and sinking their claws into Alison was like a two-for-one deal because they also got Leanne in the bargain.

Alison started the Jeep and we pulled away from the curb and out onto the street. *Maybe we should move*, I thought. Maybe if Alison couldn't see Sarah it would be easier on her. And though it would probably be for the best, the logistics of it just seemed overwhelming. Moving meant moving all of us: Alison, Leanne, Josh, Sabrina and Alex. After all, I was the Eternal. If I were to protect Alex, I had to be near her.

Alison stayed to the side streets until we made Gardner's Road, then followed it to Bath, then Days, and finally Front Road along the waterfront. It looked like she was going to take the scenic route home, past the Kingston Psychiatric Hospital, the Kingston Penitentiary, and then through town and across the bridge. I placed my hand on the stick shift and Alison covered it with hers. We often held hands like this as we drove, and I gave hers a light squeeze, just to let her know I was thinking about her.

I supposed I could just take Alison with me. After all, with my ability to teleport, I could be back in Kingston instantaneously should the need arise. But moving Alison automatically meant moving Leanne. How would she feel about that? When the two had first merged, they'd swapped personas at will, but now, only a few months later, Alison only appeared during the day, and Leanne at night. At first I thought maybe they weren't getting along, but they both assured me that wasn't the case.

It was that damned demon that shared their body. Between Alison and Leanne, they kept it on a pretty tight leash. Apparently controlling exactly when the two women could manifest was one of the very few ways it could get back at them. I told you demons could be petty.

We'd just climbed the hill past the Royal Military College and Old Fort Henry, through CFB Kingston and the city outskirts toward Leanne's place, when my cell phone rang. Bear barked from the back seat, a near subsonic, discordant sound that caused the fillings in my teeth to ache.

I flipped the phone open and hit send. "Hello?"

"James? It's Greg. We should talk."

I *knew* I should have let the answering service get it. Greg didn't sound happy, but then he rarely did when he was at work. It came with the job, a professional façade. In private, with his wife and daughter and a few close friends, he was as funny as hell.

"Okay," I said, "but I think it's a little late in life for you to suddenly get all touchy-feely."

"I'm following up on a disturbance at Meadowdale High this morning I think you can help me with," he answered, his voice deadpan.

Like I said, the man was good at correlating evidence between seemingly

unrelated events. "How so?"

"I have questions. You have answers."

"What if I told you I didn't know anything about it?"

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "We can talk at the station, or I could meet you at the marina downtown. How's two o'clock sound?"

"Fine," I said. "But you're buying the ice-cream."

The dial tone sounded in my ear. No goodbye, nothing.

"Who was that?" Alison asked, just to be polite.

"That was Greg. He wants me to play Jeopardy with him this afternoon."

Alison squeezed my hand as we pulled off the main road and headed toward the waterfront. Leanne's place actually looked almost inviting in the full light of day. It's the dark grey brick that gives it that creepy feel, especially when it's overcast, or at night. Nothing a good whitewash wouldn't cure. And that weathervane had to go.

We made it to the driveway when my cell phone rang again. Bear howled, then vanished. I guess he'd had enough. I glanced at Alison and raised an eyebrow in inquiry, but she just shrugged, leaving the decision as to whether I should answer it or not up to me. Some help she was. I thought about ignoring it, but I'm just not wired that way. What if it was Ed McMahon telling me I'd just won the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes or something?

I flipped the phone open and hit send. "Hello, Ed?"

"James? It's your mother."

Damn! "Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"Nothing much. I was just wondering what you were up to."

Mom isn't one of those meddlesome mothers, at least not usually. She never drops by unannounced, doesn't nag me about never calling her, and not once has she tried to set me up with one of her friend's daughters. I see her a few times a month, and that's just fine with her. *She's* got a life.

"Not much," I answered. Okay, so maybe the fact that my conversational skills are somewhat limited is the reason she rarely calls.

"I was thinking about having you over for dinner tonight, if that's okay? I'm making spaghetti."

"Sure, Mom, sounds great." I never pass up a chance at my mom's spaghetti.

"How's six o'clock sound?"

"No problem. What should I bring?"

"How about that new girlfriend of yours? Don't you think it's about time I met her?"

Damn again! I said mom wasn't meddlesome; I never said she wasn't nosey. "Um...sure, Mom, but I'll have to ask her."

Faery-vampire-ghost women have incredibly acute hearing. Alison's eyes lit up, and she nodded her head in an emphatic yes. I assumed that she was answering for Leanne.

"Great," Mom said. I could hear the smug satisfaction in her voice. "I'll see you both around six."

Six o'clock. It should be dark by then, and Leanne would be in control, so at least *that* didn't present a problem.

"Bye, Mom."

"Bye."

I glanced over at Alison, who grinned from ear to ear as we pulled into the drive. At least it had taken her mind off Sarah. Alison and my mom had gotten along fabulously, and Leanne had been bothering me for a while now to meet her. Obviously Alison was grinning for two.

I swore that the next time the cell phone rang I wasn't answering it, ever. It's cursed, I tell you. Cursed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sabrina threw her arms about Alison as soon as we walked through the door. "You okay, sweetie?"

Alison just nodded, and the two women held each other close for a moment.

"All right! A little girl-girl action," Drat said as he caught the ashes of his stogie in the palm of his clawed hand. "Youse two up for a treesome?"

"In your dreams, melon-head," Alison answered for both women.

I pushed past the girls in my enthusiasm to greet the troll. I hadn't seen much of him since our last adventure, and I'd really missed the sawed-off runt. Drat had a way of taking the edge off even the most serious situation. A good fight, some food, women and beer, and all was right with the world. To a troll, life was one big frat party.

"I wouldn't let Tirade hear you talk like that," I warned him, and shook his scaly hand in greeting.

He blinked those saucer-sized forest green eyes of his and scratched the end of his long, twisted nose. "I ain't married yet."

Charlie ducked under the doorframe and stepped out from the kitchen and into the living room with a small pork roast clutched in one hand. "Perhaps the lady will come to her senses," the ogre added, then sniffed at the roast before downing it in a single bite.

Drat grinned, showing all two hundred teeth. "Da broad knows a good ting when she sees it."

"When did you two get here?" I asked, shaking Charlie's hand after he'd wiped off the grease on his patchwork jacket.

"Right around lunchtime," Sabrina said, a touch of annoyance evident in her tone. She held out her hand for Drat's cigar. The troll pretended he didn't see her.

"We came to use the library," Charlie said defensively. "There's a lot of protocol to be observed for Drat's wedding, what with the trolls, Sidhe, shapeshifters, ogres, goblins, gremlins and such that will be in attendance. We wouldn't want to offend anyone. Leanne's library is the only one I know of where I can find the information I need."

Charlie's not exactly the type that comes to mind when you're thinking wedding planner. Like all ogres, he stood about eight feet tall and weighed in at over seven hundred pounds of grizzle, bone, and warts. He had two huge tusks jutting upwards from his misshapen jaw, and gnarled hands ending in razor sharp talons that reached down past his knees.

Ogres were real bookworms, however, and Charlie was worse than most.

"Well, if anyone can pull it off, you can," Alison said. Charlie went down on one knee as she threw her arms around the ogre in a big hug.

Josh made an appearance at the top of the stairs. "Wow, it looks like the gang's all here," he said. "Well, except for Thomas."

"He's probably still in bed," I said. "You know musicians."

Calling Thomas the Rhymer a musician was kind of like calling Einstein bright. Thomas was a bard, possibly even *the* bard. And after roughly a thousand years in the land of the Fay, Thomas was back in Darkside. He'd put together a band--a sort of alternative-reggae-salsa thing that had taken Kingston by storm--and seemed in no hurry to return to either the Sidhe *or* Queen Aine.

"Yeah, dose groupies can really wear youse out," Drat added as he and Charlie passed Josh on the stairs and headed for the library.

Josh joined Alison, Sabrina and me in the living room and we all took up chairs around the gas fireplace. Even though it was a bright, clear day out, it was still November, and Sabrina and Alison huddled in close to the fire.

"I've got a meeting with Inspector McMillan this afternoon," I said once we were all cozy. "Apparently he suspects that I was the one who tangled with the bikers at Alex's school today."

Josh and Sabrina looked concerned, but didn't say anything. I guess they trusted me enough to handle the situation. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

"Anyway, I think I'll drop by afterwards and see Thomas. I've got a hunch we might be needing his help on this zombie thing."

"Hey, who had sex in here?" Drat yelled down from upstairs. Trolls have an uncanny sense of smell, but a lousy sense of decorum.

Josh blushed, but did his best to ignore the interruption. He pulled his chair in closer to his wife and took her hand in his. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go with you when we stake out this zombie girl's place tonight," he said.

"Sure thing," I answered. When I'd first met Josh I'd mistaken him for the doorman at Sabrina's apartment, which was exactly what they'd wanted me to think. He looks fairly nondescript: six feet tall, about a hundred and seventy pounds, short brown hair, hazel eyes, medium complexion, maybe twenty-five years old--the kind of person you would forget about two minutes after bumping into him in a crowd. Perfect for surveillance work. Of course, he does tend to stand out a bit once he morphs.

Josh had turned out to be a real friend, the kind I'd been lacking most of my life. We could sit around and talk about women and football, motorcycles and the best way to kill a vamp, and how we could solve all the worlds problems if only we were made supreme dictator--you know, guy stuff.

Of course, on our last stakeout Josh had insisted on telling ghost stories all night. Believe me, shapeshifters know some pretty freaky ghost stories.

"It'll have to wait until later tonight, though," I added. "Leanne and I are having dinner at my mom's."

Sabrina grinned. "Now *that's* a stakeout I'd like to be in on."

All women are sadistic.

"You can take my place, if you like," I offered. Alison punched me in the arm. That's the problem with dating two women who share the same body; you double your chances of pissing either or both of them off at any given time.

"Why don't I just head over on my own and keep an eye on the zombie girl's place and you can meet me after dinner?" Josh suggested.

I agreed, and gave him the address Sister Juliet had provided. I looked down at my watch. Mickey's big hand was on the eight. That meant I had about twenty minutes before I had to meet Greg. Still time for a few questions.

"What's the story with Sister Juliet?" I asked.

Sabrina shrugged. "She's the reason we sent Alex to Meadowdale in the first place. She's got the Sight. Best of all, she's got a real hate on for evil, and vampires in particular."

"Yeah," I said, grinning. "But in a nun-like, turn-the other-cheek, Christian

forgiveness sort of way."

Josh snorted. Luckily he wasn't drinking milk. "Sister Juliet is definitely more the Old Testament type."

Sabrina shifted in her chair. Maybe I wasn't the only one who found Leanne's antique furniture uncomfortable. "Most people develop the Sight after experiencing some sort of trauma, either emotional or physical. In Sister Juliet's case a vampire happened upon her family's farm during a freak blizzard when she was six years old. She watched as he slowly bled her family dry, waiting for the blizzard to pass and the roads to clear. I don't know why he left her alone. Maybe it was because he got more nourishment feeding off her terror than her body.

"Anyway, once the blizzard let up, he left her there with the carcasses of her parents and her two older brothers and sister. Then the goblins came. I don't have to tell you what a sight that must have been for a six year old."

The image left me numb. Sometimes there are things I'd just rather not know.

"Well, she's made it plain that I'm not welcome in Dodge anymore," I said, finally.

Sabrina smiled. "That's just because she doesn't know what a loveable rogue you really are. Don't worry, I'll have a talk with her."

"I'm not worried. It's not like I plan on going back to school again." I got up to leave. If I wanted to make the appointment with Greg I'd better get going. I'd have to take the Jeep, too, just to keep up appearances.

I kissed Alison on the forehead, and she gave me a look that said be careful, I love you, and I'm all right, all in one glance. I grinned as I left my friends beside the cozy, warm fire and called back over my shoulder, "Besides, I'm pretty sure I can take her, spooky nun powers or not."

The ride into town was uneventful--even Bear opted to stay at home. The big hairy mutt hated the cold, the wuss. I found parking in the lot just across from the marina. Most of the boats were out of the water by now with the exception of the larger ships that still ran the dinner cruises, and of course the ferry to Wolfe Island. There was even one idiot wind-surfing.

A few hardy souls wrapped up in winter coats and scarves braved the park and sat at benches looking out over the water. The air was so cold it froze the hair in your nostrils together if you sniffed. The bright sunlight gave a hard edge to everything, and I felt like I could have shattered the entire vista with a quick tap of a hammer.

I walked up the street a ways until I came to the White Mountain Ice Cream shop. Maybe it was the sunny weather, or maybe it was because the ice cream, heck, even the cones, were homemade right there in front of you. Or maybe it's that Canadians love ice cream, and just because half the year is spent in winter it's no reason to do without. Whatever the reason, the place was busy, even in November. Greg was already inside waiting for me. He was always ten minutes early. I looked down at my watch and saw that I still had two minutes to spare.

The bell over the door jingled as I entered and Greg stood up to greet me. "What are you having?" he asked.

Apparently he had taken my remark about him buying the ice cream seriously, which was a good thing, because I'd meant it. "I'll have a small Fudge Brownie on a sugar cone," I told him.

Greg ordered a French Mint monstrosity in a waffle cone for himself. He paid for them, handed me mine, then nodded at the door. Whatever it was he wanted to talk about, he didn't want to say it in front of others. That was fine with me. Hell, I couldn't feel the cold anyway. Greg was still wearing his flimsy charcoal long coat--the one my dad had given him for his birthday way back when.

We walked across the street and down to the park and found an empty bench across from the water. The wind whipping in off the bay made it even colder. Greg had to be freezing, but he just sat there and ate his ice cream. The guy was old-school tough.

"Someone matching your description chased a couple of bikers out of Meadowdale High this morning," he said once he'd eaten his ice cream down to the cone.

I wiped my mouth clean with a napkin. "And you think it was me? I'm unemployed now remember? I don't even get up 'til the crack of noon."

Greg finished off his cone, then shoved his hands in his pockets. Tough or not, the cold was getting to him. "A couple of cops at the scene identified you from the picture I keep in my wallet." He gave me one of those penetrating stares, but I didn't flinch. I think it was because my eyelids were frozen open.

"Normally that would have been enough for me," he continued, "but the only eyewitness, a Sister Juliet, described the man as being six-two, two hundred pounds, blonde, and with bad teeth." Greg looked me up and down once as if to assure himself that I didn't fit the description.

I wisely kept my mouth shut. For some reason Sister Juliet had seen fit to cover for me. Or maybe her eyesight really was that bad.

"I don't want to call her a liar or anything. She *is* a nun after all, and when I found the officers they were reciting Hail Marys in the school confessional." Greg shook his head in disbelief.

"Anyway, the autopsy came back on that biker you killed last night. The M.E. puts Brutus' death at sometime in the last month. He had a real problem getting any sort of accurate fix, seeing as the body had been embalmed. And by the way, the Crown has decided not to press charges against you for his death, given the circumstances. The only charge that might stick is desecrating a corpse, and no one was too happy with that one."

I could almost see his mind working, sorting all the various pieces of the puzzle and trying to come up with a clear picture. Problem was, Greg was more a paint by numbers kind of guy, and this was abstract art. It was obvious he didn't have anything on me. At least nothing concrete. All he had were a few niggling clues, conflicting eyewitness reports, and a name that kept popping up in the middle of it all--mine.

"Well, thanks for the ice cream," I said, and stood up to leave. "Maybe tomorrow you can take me to the zoo."

Greg just stared at me for a moment. If I really *didn't* know what was going down, he had to know how insane it all sounded.

He laughed suddenly, and stood up too. "The only things you're liable to see in this weather are penguins and polar bears. I wish it would snow. At least then it might warm up some."

I looked at him then, and realized how old he'd gotten. He never would have admitted to being cold in the old days. I felt like a real heel all of a sudden. Greg wasn't just some cop I was trying to keep off my tail. The man was practically my dad. If there was anyone I wanted to tell the truth to, it would have been Greg. And here I was leading

him around by the nose, and freezing his ass off to boot. "Where are you parked?" I asked him. "I'll walk you to your car."

He cocked a suspicious eyebrow at me, but said, "Just behind the Howard Johnsons."

I nodded, and we started walking. "How's Maggie?" I asked him.

"She's good," he said. "She's off visiting Erin at the U of T this weekend, bringing her up extra blankets and stuff. Kid's just like her mother--no circulation."

I saw that red-haired gremlin on the street corner with its tongue stuck to a signpost and tried not to laugh. "So you're doing the bachelor thing. Cool." Another pang of guilt stabbed through me. I wanted to invite him over for dinner tomorrow, maybe catch the game on the big screen or something. But I couldn't. I had too many secrets, and Greg was too good a cop.

He unlocked the door to the big navy blue Crown Victoria the force provided for him, climbed in and started the car just as his cell phone rang. He powered down the window as he fished the phone out from his inside jacket pocket and hit send. "Hello? Good, and you?" There was a long pause while the person on the line babbled on for almost a minute. "Sounds great...see you then." He flipped off the phone and turned the heater up to full.

"Business?" I asked him.

"Not really." He reached over to the passenger seat, opened a manila folder, and rummaged through it until he came up with a black-and-white photo of a rectangular plate. The plate seemed to be metal, and was engraved with the image of a large figure holding a smaller human figure upside down and about to immerse the victim into some sort of vat. Greg waved it under my nose through the window. "Ring any bells?"

For once I could be completely honest with him. "Nope." I said I could be honest, not helpful.

Greg put the photo back into the envelope. "Someone broke into the home of a Mr. John Richards last night and made away with it. Mr. Richards couldn't tell us much about it either, other than that it had been in his family for generations. The thing's made out of solid gold."

I shrugged. "He should have kept it in a safe."

"That's just it," Greg said. "He did. A big floor model--must have weighed three or four hundred pounds. Whoever stole it tore the iron security grill off of the sliding glass doors at the back of the house, picked up the safe, and walked off with it. All they left behind were some pretty deep Harley-Davidson riding boot prints in the flowerbed just off of the patio."

I whistled in amazement. "Somebody's been eating their Wheaties."

"Somebody's been eating *everybody's* Wheaties," Greg agreed.

For once I didn't have to feign ignorance; I really was ignorant. Wait a minute--that doesn't sound right. Anyway, I stared at him in awkward silence for a moment, neither of us really having anything else to say. "Well, catch you later," I said finally.

Greg grinned. "Sooner than you might think. That was your mother on the phone. She just invited me to dinner tonight with you and your new girlfriend."

Damned cell phones are a curse, I tell you. I doubt Greg would have noticed if I'd gone suddenly pale, seeing as the cold had already turned my skin a light shade of blue. I forced a smile. "Great. Should be fun."

"I was thinking the same thing," he said, then rolled up the window and drove off.

Well, I suppose they all had to meet Leanne sooner or later, I thought as I crossed the street to the parking lot where I'd left the Jeep. I was just really hoping it would have been later. Much later--like when they were old and senile and we could visit them in the home.

Leanne and I had kept mostly to ourselves, with the exception of Josh, Sabrina and Alex. I hadn't really had any close friends at work; more like acquaintances. I guess losing your job is kind of like getting divorced. You just don't have as much in common with the friends you had while you were working with them, or couples you hung out with while you were married, and you tend to lose touch.

If we were going to have any semblance of a normal life, I was going to have to let a few people back in. Mom and Greg were as good a place to start as any.

I climbed into the Jeep and turned the key in the ignition. The starter turned over sluggishly, and I was just thinking that it wasn't *that* cold, when the Jeep exploded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The concussion from the blast tore my left leg off at the hip. The steering wheel wedged itself in my chest cavity and a hunk of shrapnel from the engine compartment sheared the top of my head off just above my eyes. The front end of the Jeep pitched up as the hood blew off and turned somersaults in the air, followed by the ensuing fireball which swept back through the cab and withered my flesh, melting it to the skeleton.

The pain was excruciating, a timeless instant that seemed to last forever as the fire crawled its way over the twisted wreck of my body. I tried to scream but the flames had blistered my tongue in my mouth and peeled my lips back from my teeth in a death's head grin. I thought that this must be hell, and then blissfully I felt nothing.

I hovered above the Jeep suddenly, insubstantial. And here I'd always thought my mind would be the *first* thing to go.

Bystanders flocked towards the commotion as the shock wave set off wailing car alarms. My vision was panoramic; each vista imprinted itself upon my consciousness simultaneously--before me and behind, to the left and right, above and below. I could smell the crowd--Old Spice, Channel No. 5, sweat, the musky scent of fear--each odor, each individual distinct.

And I heard them, all of them. The woman with the shopping bags muttering, "Oh my God," and the young girl wondering, "Was anyone in there?" or the guy with the bald spot and ponytail cursing because the Jeep's hood had come down on top of his brand new Passat. Served him right for buying foreign.

I realized suddenly that something, someone, was feeding. Feeding off the excitement and fear of the mob, lapping up the waves of emotion and drawing off energy from the combined aura. It had a dark, malignant presence, and it was coming from a Caddy with black tinted windows parked across the street. It had to be a vampire--probably the one responsible for planting the car bomb, although that didn't make sense. Why would a vampire try to kill me with a car bomb? And what the hell could I do about it now?

I was sentient, but had no shape or form. No wispy spirit or ethereal body. No ghostly specter dripping ectoplasm. Nothing. I wondered if maybe I was finally, truly dead. Maybe I was one of those disenfranchised spirits, the kind too pissed to just give up the ghost and go into the light. Wouldn't that suck big time. Hell, I can't even spell poleterg...poultreg...well, you get the picture. And it's not like I actually saw a light, which kind of worried me. What if I was destined for the not-so-bargain basement?

Smoke billowed out through the broken windows of the Jeep. It buckled in the middle suddenly and kicked up like a bronco as the gas tank exploded. The crowd shrank back, then pressed forward again, their fear of being hurt overridden by their fear of missing something. Greg's car screamed around the corner, the blue police light flashing on the dashboard, and squealed to a stop.

I read the horror on his face as he realized just whose car it was that had exploded. Felt his anguish wash over me as he ran for the flaming wreckage and struggled against those in the crowd that held him back.

I felt pain again. Not physical pain, but an emotional torrent that burned across my senses worse than the flames had ever done. The sense of loss overwhelmed me. Mom and Greg; Alison and Leanne; Sabrina, Josh and Alex; Charlie and Drat--I had

finally found those that I needed to make life worthwhile. Worth living. Worth looking forward to.

How could I do this to them? To Mom, who had already lost her husband. To Greg, who had lost his partner. To Alison, who had lost...everything. I wouldn't die. Not this time. This time I wanted to live.

And suddenly I *was* alive. Or at least as alive as I'd been since being shot dead in the parking lot at the 7-11. I stood behind Greg and watched the twisted ruin of my Jeep smolder now that most of the flammable material had burnt itself out.

"Damn," I swore. "I really loved that car."

Greg must have recognized my voice, because he turned suddenly and the next thing I knew he had his arms around me and was hugging me close.

To be honest I've never been comfortable with male displays of affection like that, but this time I let it pass--at least for a bit. "Greg, I think the other fellas are getting jealous."

Greg stepped quickly back, his face flushed with embarrassment and relief. "How about those Toronto Argonauts," he said, and we both burst out laughing.

I heard the warbling sirens of emergency vehicles in the distance come to answer the call. Greg must have heard them too, because he took a deep breath and suddenly he was all business. "All right, everyone back away," he addressed the crowd. "I want this lot cleared of spectators back to the street. Anyone who thinks they might have seen anything wait for me at the southeast corner and I'll take your statement. That's over there," he pointed out for the directionally impaired."

I watched the Caddy speed away. I wanted to go after it, but I doubt Greg would have appreciated me leaving the scene of the crime like that. And it's not like I could explain myself. I did manage to get the license plate number though--BLUD SUCR. A vamp with vanity plates. Figures.

The fire truck was the first vehicle to arrive. The Jeep was all but out by now and a couple of firefighters doused the rest with fire extinguishers. I peered into the front seat wondering if what was left of my body might still be there, but the Jeep was empty. That was a relief; at least I wouldn't have to explain how my evil twin had set off the explosion. It didn't explain what had actually happened to me though. Someday I'd have to get the number for the Powers That Be Help Desk and get them to send me the Eternal Game Guide they'd stiffed me on.

"Any idea who might want to kill you," Greg asked as the uniformed cops showed up and did a proper job of cordoning off the area.

The question caught me off guard, not because I hadn't thought about the answer, but because at the moment I was more concerned with taking inventory of my body--you know, making sure I had ten fingers and toes, and not all of them on the same foot. I was also grateful that my clothes seemed to have survived with me. Thank God I hadn't appeared behind Greg naked. That hug would have been *really* uncomfortable then.

"Nope," I said. "Everybody loves me."

Greg gave me a look as he poked through what was left of the Jeep's engine block with one of those neat pen-pointers.

"Well, most everybody," I added defensively.

"There's a few extra wires trailing off of what's left of the alternator. I'll have to get the E.O.D. guys to check it out, but I'd say it was the trigger for the bomb." He

straightened up and wiped the soot from the tip of his pointer before compacting it and putting it back in his pocket. "I wonder what set it off prematurely?" he asked, and looked at me as if I should know.

If I was smart I would have kept my mouth shut, but Greg's one of the few authority figures that can still make me nervous. Must be the whole substitute dad thing. "It's pretty cold and dry out today. Maybe static electricity?"

"Could be. Whatever it was, you were lucky. You can't begin to imagine what a car bomb like that'll do to you."

Ha! I think I have a pretty good idea. Aloud, I said, "Lucky? That's a forty thousand dollar car. I'm not even sure if my insurance covers bombings."

Greg walked me to his car and held the door open. "Get in. I'll drive you home and we can talk on the way."

I got in, as if I had a choice.

Greg called another detective over, a younger, heavyset man in a cheap brown suit and brown and yellow tie. I hope the guy wasn't an undercover officer. "I want the eyewitness reports and the E.O.D findings on my desk in an hour," Greg told him.

The detective nodded, pulled out a pad and pen, and headed over to the group that had gathered where instructed.

I winced as Greg started the car, something he noted. "I'm going to put a couple of uniformed officers outside your place."

I tried to object but Greg cut me off.

"Someone's trying to kill you. My guess is it's the Machine out to settle the score for Brutus' death." Greg reached into the ashtray and pulled out a peppermint, offered me one, and then popped it into his mouth when I refused. I could see his hands were shaking. Even the one on the wheel.

"You all right?" I asked him.

He grimaced. "I'll be fine. I just don't take kindly to folks trying to off the people I care about." The traffic light up ahead turned red and we stopped and waited for it to change. "Even the no-accounts like yourself."

"I'd hug you again, but I figure once a month is your limit," I said.

He started laughing, choked on the peppermint, and accidentally spit it out. He picked it off the dash, checked it for dirt, and then popped it back in his mouth.

We rode in silence for a bit as I considered how screwed up the world had become. I mean, it occurred to me that I must be well nigh indestructible now--after all I'd just survived a bomb blast. And here Greg could have choked to death on a mint.

And I should have been a lot more freaked, but I wasn't. Sure, getting ripped to shreds was unnerving, but the whole being disembodied thing had been a total trip. For that brief moment that I'd been incorporeal I'd felt connected to everything and everyone. And it had all made sense--life and death, pleasure and pain, agony and ecstasy. I'd felt a purpose to it all, a realization that it wasn't all for nothing. Of course I couldn't for the life of me remember what that purpose was *now*. Mostly I just felt happy. Really happy. Happy to be alive and to know that there were people who I loved that loved me back.

"So, did you notice anything out of the ordinary?" Greg asked.

"Nope. I stopped off at the Howard Johnson's to use the payphone. I didn't even hear the bomb go off from inside." Not a bad cover story, if I do say so myself.

"By the time I came out the Jeep was in flames and the crowd had gathered, and

you were standing there looking like Captain Kirk just after that Klingon bastard murdered his son."

Greg grinned at the analogy. He was the one who'd hooked me on Star Trek and all of its incarnations in the first place.

We arrived at my place and Greg pulled the car into the drive and turned off the ignition. "I'm going to check the place out, just to make sure it's safe," he said. "Whoever it was that blew up your car might have realized they've failed and could be waiting for you here."

I cocked an eyebrow in surprise as we got out of the car. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, you know. Besides, aren't you getting a little old for this?"

Greg was a bull of a man and as tough as they come, but he had to be at least fifty-five. And no matter how nasty he was I doubted he was a match for the things that might have been lying in wait for me.

"Maybe I am getting a little long in the tooth," he said as he drew his issue Glock from his shoulder holster, "but at least I'm armed."

I couldn't really argue with that. I handed Greg the keys and watched with more than a little trepidation as he put the key in the lock. I only hoped Charlie hadn't left one of his sized twenty-seven shoes in the hallway. I shuddered to even think about the kinds of things Drat might have left lying around.

Dad poked his head through the door suddenly and I almost had a heart attack. "Don't worry, son, the place is clean."

I shoved my hand through his face and pushed the door open. Dad got stuck materialized halfway through, and rode the door until he jarred himself loose and ended up in the closet.

I could barely hear his muffled voice through the mirrored sliding doors. "I suppose you think that was funny."

I managed to keep a straight face as Greg entered, gun down by his side, and did a quick search of the premises.

Dad popped up by my side while Greg was in the kitchen. "I figured he might pull something like this, so your Grandpa and I did a quick recce of the place. If there had been anything...um...incriminating, I'd have called Sabrina and had her clear the place."

"Good thinking, Dad," I said.

Greg wandered in from the kitchen with his gun holstered. Apparently there weren't any big bad bikers hiding in the fridge. "Who're you talking to?"

"Just mumbling to myself," I said as Dad vanished again. "It's been one of those days."

Greg nodded, then strode quickly to the window as we heard a car pull up outside. He shoved the curtain aside a fraction and peeked out, then relaxed. "The uniforms are here. There'll be a cruiser parked out there most of the night. You might want to bring them a cup of coffee occasionally."

I grinned, and walked him to the door. "Have you tasted my coffee? After a cup or two they'll probably shoot me themselves."

Greg pulled his coat a little more tightly about himself before heading back out into the cold. "You know, sooner or later you're going to have to tell me what's going on."

Tell him what? That zombies are on the rampage in the city of Kingston? Or that

a vampire just tried to blow me to kingdom come? "I'll see you at Mom's tonight," I said. I felt like a heel.

Greg kept a pretty tight rein on his emotions, but you didn't have to be the Dalai Lama to read the look of disappointment on his face. "Sure thing, kid," he said, and then he was gone.

I heard a tapping coming from the back of the house, as if something was rapping against glass. I headed for the sliding doors that led out to the deck and the Jacuzzi. Leanne's crow was there, hopping about and pecking at the door. Dad and Grandpa had probably filled everyone in on what had happened by now. Leanne was checking up on me, probably making sure that I still had all my fingers and toes, too--although I'm sure she has her own favorite list of my body parts. The crow tilted its head to one side as if to get a better look, then cawed once and was off in a flurry of feathers. I must have passed inspection.

"I'm surprised to see you here so soon after achieving transcendence."

I almost jumped out of my skin. (I'm not sure, but I think I really could do that if I tried hard enough.) I turned to greet Tam-Lien. "You know, you really shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

Tam-Lien smiled, a gesture than never touched her eyes. It's not that she didn't mean it; she just wasn't very good at it yet. Tam-Lin was an Eternal, same as me. Well, actually, she wasn't *anything* like me. She was at least a few thousand years old, and had forgotten what it was to be human a long time ago. She had a sudden desire to learn, however, and had decided that I would be her teacher.

When I'd first met her she hadn't even appeared human. She'd been this cosmic silhouette, a humanoid form cloaked in the stuff of galaxies, as if she wore the cosmos like a jumpsuit. Gradually she'd taken on more human characteristics until she now appeared life-like, but still a little wooden. Kind of like Keanu Reeves.

The last time I'd seen her she'd forced me to teach her about sex. You can imagine how that went. I don't even talk to the *guys* about sex. After several false starts about the birds and bees and where babies come from, I'd finally given up and rented *9 1/2 Weeks*. Sabrina and Leanne hadn't talked to me for days after that one. Hey, at least I hadn't rented *Debbie Does Dallas* the way Drat suggested.

"I didn't mean to scare you," she said.

I smiled. There was nothing scary about Tam-Lien. At least not unless you knew her for what she really was. She looked Asian, with straight black hair bobbed just above her shoulders, bangs cut straight across her forehead, and a delicate, heart-shaped face. Her eyes had a slight lilt to them, and were deep green, and she had a pixie nose and little bow-shaped lips over even white teeth. Of course, she might not have been Asian at all originally. Being an Eternal, she could look any way she liked.

Tam-Lien smoothed the wrinkles in the red silk strapless dress she was wearing. It accentuated her slight form, hugging the child-like contours of her body. She smelled faintly of peach. I could only hope for some poor fool's sake that she didn't have a date. Especially if she tried to put into practice what I'd taught her about sex.

"I'm fine," I told her, "but what do you mean about achieving transcendence?"

Tam-Lien sat on the black leather loveseat and sank awkwardly into its depths. She crossed her legs at the ankles, her back a little too stiff and straight to seem natural. I'm sure she would have been more comfortable seated on some of Leanne's furniture.

You know, that stuff she'd bought at the rummage sale after the Spanish Inquisition.

"I've told you that you don't require that body," Tam-Lien said. "In truth, it hinders your spirit and anchors you to this plane of reality. Without physical form, your spiritual self achieves a heightened state of consciousness and a more pure form of existence. Most beings are not so eager to return to the physical plane after achieving transcendence."

I shrugged. "I told you, I'm not like the other Eternals."

"Minty-fresh breath is but a small price to pay for cosmic awareness," Tam-Lien said in all seriousness.

I *tried* not to laugh, honest. I didn't have the heart to tell her that the whole "minty fresh breath" thing was just a smart-assed quip. "Maybe I'm just not done being human yet?" I said. "Leanne told me that eventually all souls reincarnate; that they voluntarily choose life on the physical plain again. Is this true?"

Tam-Lien nodded.

"Well, maybe I'm just skipping the middleman."

Tam-Lien's reply was interrupted by a knock at the door. She stood suddenly, then her form shimmered and she was gone.

That was rather abrupt, I thought as moved to answer the door.

Tam-Lien's voice came at me out of thin air. "Be warned. You're present form does not afford you much protection from the other Eternals. They are not all as benevolent as I."

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked, but there was no reply.

Isn't that just great. As if I didn't have enough to worry about with the vampires and zombies and demons and whatnot, now I had to worry about other Eternals. How much worse could things get?

I peered through the spy hole in the door to see one of Greg's officers standing there.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," the cop said when I opened the door. "The press is here, and they'd like a word with you."

I looked passed the officer to the several reporters gathered on my sidewalk, their mobile news vans parked along the street outside my house. Apparently things could get a *lot* worse.

CHAPTER NINE

The cops did a pretty good job of keeping the press away, all except for one overeager reporter who tried to sneak in the back way and tripped into the Jacuzzi. Did I mention how cold it was outside?

I spent an hour on the phone with my insurance company. It seems I was covered after all. The woman on the phone said they'd send an adjuster out right away, although it was a pretty safe bet the car was a write-off. Of course they wouldn't cover the cost of replacing my car--all I'd get was current market value. And as if that weren't bad enough:

"You realize, Mr. Decker, that we're going to have to cancel your policy after this."

I almost dropped the phone when she said that. "This is my first claim in fifteen years, and you're going to drop..."

"I'm sorry, sir, but someone *did* try to kill you. That makes you an unacceptable risk."

Funny, but she didn't sound sorry. "Hell, I could understand maybe if you were going to cancel my life insurance policy, but..."

"That reminds me, sir..."

Great, just great. Okay, so I didn't actually need life insurance anymore. And I could probably get a new car if I were willing to fork out another five to ten grand--not that I could drive it without insurance. Of course I don't really need to drive anywhere either; I can teleport. But it's not the same. I *like* driving. *Bear* likes driving. This was really going to piss him off.

I spent *another* twenty minutes on the phone assuring my mom I was all right. The news was all over the radio and the local TV station. The damn reporters had released my name even though the cops had withheld it. They'd probably tracked me by the license plate number on the Jeep.

By the time I got off the phone with mom it was almost five o'clock. Leanne would be at my place anytime now, and Greg had offered to pick us up at six and drive us all to dinner. By the way, Leanne doesn't drive either; no photo ID.

It was already dark outside. We were entering the third day after the full moon, and normally I'd have stayed at Leanne's place this last night, but my place is warded enough to keep away your average creepy crawly during the waning moon. Leanne had performed the rituals herself, burning candles and incense and sweeping the negative energy out from all the corners and behind the doors with a straw broom. Then she'd placed an effigy of my house (one of the hotels from Alex's Monopoly game) in the center of a pentagram inscribed with all sorts of funky runes, and chanted incantations over it. My place wasn't nearly as strongly warded as hers, but it would do.

I heard Leanne's cab pull up and rushed to the door to make sure the cops would let her in. I shouldn't have bothered. I couldn't imagine any man denying the vision that was Leanne.

She strolled up the sidewalk and past the slack-jawed officer, as sweet and as graceful as a cherry blossom drifting on a gentle wind. Her raven hair was pulled back from her alabaster skin into an intricate French braid that hung to the small of her back. Cobalt-blue eyes sparked like fireflies in the night, and a silver halo of light silhouetted her tiny form like an aurora around a winter's moon. She wore a long, black leather A-

line coat with a high collar and fur trim, and I could just make out the black, high-heeled dress boots on her feet, and hear the chime of tiny silver bells at her ankles. She was definitely more faery than vampire tonight.

I think the officer would have escorted her to the front door if she had been carrying an Uzi and wearing a placard that read: Death to Decker. Even the cab driver waited until she was in the house and the door was shut before he pulled away from the curb.

I clapped my hands twice and said, "I believe, I believe!"

Leanne grinned and pulled me to her for a long, lingering kiss. "I'm not Tinkerbell," she said when she'd finished.

"No kidding. I'm pretty sure Tink wasn't doing Peter Pan."

She laughed, or maybe it was the sound of the bells chiming at her feet. "I guess I should know better than to worry about you," she said as she ran her hands over my body, "but I still do."

I pulled her close to me and kissed her forehead. "I'm pretty hard to kill, you know."

Leanne snuggled in even closer. "I know, but I was afraid maybe you wouldn't come back." She looked up at me suddenly, and I realized that if she'd been human, she would have been crying. "They don't usually come back, you know. Not after...not after they change."

"That's what Tam-Lien said." I stroked her hair, playing with the plaits while being careful not to undo them. "But the truth is, this is my idea of heaven. This life, these friends, you. What could Transcendence offer me that could possibly compare with that?"

Leanne pulled my head down to her for another kiss. "Good answer," she said. She looked slyly up at me. "You know, we have about a half hour before Greg gets here."

I laughed, but it was more one of those "Fate, how could you be so cruel" laughs than one having to do with humor. "Greg's always early."

Leanne pouted, which didn't help matters any. "Come on, take your clothes off."

"Um...no."

She considered my answer for a moment. "Then take *half* your clothes off."

I laughed. "Which half?"

Leanne grinned mischievously. "The left half."

Is it any wonder I fell for her?

"Can we at least mess around a little?" she asked when she realized she wasn't about to get her way.

I smiled, and slowly unbuttoned her coat. She did a little pirouette as I removed it to better show off what she was wearing underneath, and I felt my...um...resolve harden. She wore a strapless, ankle-length evening dress, all sweet curves and long, slender legs in wine-colored lace over silk, so that she seemed both demure and wanton at the same time. A hint of cherries so faint that I might have imagined it scented the air about her.

I took her hand and led her to the couch, and Leanne sat on my lap and threw her arms around my neck. I cupped her delicate face in my hands as I kissed her gently. Her skin was never more than cool to the touch, which for some reason I found erotic. She could be downright icy at times, and was at her warmest just after feeding.

I pulled away from her as a sudden realization struck me. "You can't eat. How can

you have dinner at Mom's if you can't eat?"

She kissed me lightly on the nose. "Don't worry, I've got it covered. It's just a little glamour, actually. I'll only appear to eat, when in fact I'll really be feeding Bear under the table."

"Oh, he'll just hate that," I said. Heck, it's pretty much the same stunt I'd pulled as a kid, except without the magic. Bear would scarf down just about anything, except brussel sprouts--the traitor.

So, we messed around on the couch a bit when a knock at the door startled us. I practically shoved Leanne off me and onto the floor in my haste to rearrange my clothes.

Leanne burst out laughing. "I feel like the babysitter, and I just got caught making out with my boyfriend when the parents came home early."

I blushed as I did up the buttons Leanne had undone. "Tell you what, you wear one of those little schoolgirl outfits and we can play that next time."

Leanne ran her fingers through my hair to tidy it. "I think that Drat's been a bad influence on you." She spun me about when she figured I was presentable and shoved me towards the door. "Remind me to thank him later."

I composed myself as best I could and answered the door. Greg stood there dressed in his old black-leather high school football jacket, blue jeans, a green, heavy knit pullover sweater, and hiking boots. I couldn't see the bulge of his Glock under his jacket, but I'll bet you it was somewhere handy. Probably locked up in the trunk of his car or something.

Dinner at Mom's was usually pretty casual. I was wearing black jeans and a black fleece Tommy Boy sweater mom had bought me for Christmas last year, and a pair of brown casual shoes with leather laces. Leanne was way overdressed. I'm sure Mom would love her for it.

I stood aside and let Greg by.

His eyes widened in surprise at his first glimpse of Leanne. "So, James, are you going to introduce us or what?"

"You must be Greg," Leanne said as she stood and offered her hand. "I'm Leanne. James has told me so much about you."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage," Greg said, and pressed her hand to his lips.

"Wow, that was smooth," I said. "Have you been watching old Errol Flynn movies again?"

Greg scowled, but put his arm about Leanne as he led her to the door. "We'd better get going if we're going to be at your mother's before six." He picked up Leanne's coat where I'd dropped it on the floor and helped her on with it. "By the way, James, your fly's undone."

Damn! I may have been funnier, but I definitely had to give that round to Greg.

I grabbed my coat from the closet on the way by and locked the door behind me as I followed the two of them to Greg's waiting car. Greg nodded to the cops on duty, then walked around to the passenger's side and held the door open for Leanne.

He made his way back to the driver's side, then stopped me as I was about to climb in the back. "How old do you say she was again?"

I grinned at him and got in without answering.

"I'm twenty-eight," Leanne said as Greg sat behind the driver's wheel. You've

gotta love that enhanced vampire hearing.

Greg blushed. "It's just that you look so young. And you're definitely much too good for the likes of him," he said, and jerked a thumb in my direction.

"Great save," I said. "I'm surprised a man who can kiss ass like that hasn't made chief yet."

Leanne shook her head. "You two *are* friends, right?"

"Hell, ya," Greg said. He started the car, and we were off.

Something much larger than any dog feasted on road kill off to the side of the street. Its eyes glowed green in Greg's headlights as the high beams flashed off its glittering scales. A Model T passed us on the left. Some young spectral stud in a zoot suit waved at us from the running board before the car vanished into the ether. A winged monstrosity shadowed the car for a while, then peeled off and went in search of easier prey. Luckily, Greg saw none of this.

He and Leanne made small talk all the way to Mom's. She must have put a spell on him or something, and I mean a real spell, because generally Greg's conversational skill ranks right up there with those man-apes at the beginning of 2001: A Space Odyssey. As a matter of fact, he'd have been the one bashing the rest of them with the bone club, probably to shut them up.

Mom lived in a nice, quiet little neighborhood at the west end of town, in the same house I'd grown up in. It was a cozy, three-bedroom brick bungalow with an attached garage and a white picket fence--no kidding. Mom even had a vegetable garden out back she puttered around in, and the driveway was lined with flowering shrubs, although they were bare now with the onset of winter. The only thing the house was missing was the lawn jockey out front, or some garden gnomes.

When we arrived, Greg beat me to the punch and opened the door for Leanne. I think he was just trying to make me look bad. Mom was already waiting for us on the front stoop. The porch light was out, but I could see her silhouetted against the open doorway.

Greg held out his hand to Leanne but I slapped it away and put my arm about her waist. "Get your own girl," I told him, grinning.

Greg laughed. "Sorry, it must be the old paternal instinct kicking in. You sure you're twenty-eight?" he asked Leanne.

Leanne smiled sweetly. "At least."

Greg reached under the passenger's seat and retrieved his Gloch in its shoulder holster.

"Why in the world would you want to wear that to dinner?" I asked him.

"It brings out my eyes?"

There was no talking to him when he got like this, so I just ignored him and we headed for the front door.

Mom threw her arms around me before I made it past the first step of the porch. "You're sure you're all right? You weren't hurt?"

Mom was a small woman, just a little over five feet tall. She'd finally cut her auburn hair short last year, which I thought made her look older than her fifty years, not that I'd ever say that to her face. Laugh lines were deeply etched at the corners of her warm, brown eyes, and at the edges of her mouth. She seemed to be perpetually smiling and always cheerful, and dressed in bright, happy colors, like the warm yellow cashmere

sweater and plain, blue linen knee-length skirt she wore now.

She probably would have stood there hugging me all night, but I finally managed to disentangle myself. "I'm fine, Ma. I wasn't anywhere near the car when it blew up."

That's when she saw Leanne. Her eyes lit up. "Oh, you didn't tell me Leanne had a daughter. And she's such a pretty thing, too."

Leanne smiled and took my mom's hand. "I'm Leanne," she said. "Trust me, I'm much older than I look."

Mom looked disappointed, but only for a moment. She'd probably mentally married Leanne and I off all ready, and thought she'd suddenly had a granddaughter thrown in to boot. Of course with a daughter-in-law as seemingly young as Leanne, grandchildren were still a possibility.

Mom held onto Leanne's hand and led her to the doorway, totally ignoring Greg and I now. "Well, come on in and eat everyone, before dinner gets cold."

Once we were all in, I busied myself taking everyone's coats while Mom and Leanne hid themselves away in the kitchen. They seemed to get along fabulously, because every now and then I heard hysterical fits of laughter from first one and then the other.

Greg cocked an eyebrow at me and nodded toward the kitchen. "That can't be good."

"She's probably showing Leanne naked baby pictures of me or something," I said.

"And complaining about how you never pick up your socks, or always leave the toilet seat up," Greg added, nibbling on some vegetables and dip mom had left out on the dining room table.

The women came out from the kitchen, Mom carrying a colander brimming with pasta, and Leanne holding a porcelain serving dish steaming with sweet tomato sauce and spicy meatballs. Mom dished out the pasta--fettuccini this time--only stopping at a nod from the recipient, while Leanne ladled on the meatballs and sauce. Once that was accomplished, Mom scooted back into the kitchen for a second only to return with piping hot garlic toast and melted mozzarella.

Mom sat at the head of the table, with Greg at the opposite end, and Leanne and I beside each other. Bear materialized under the table in front of Leanne, all shadow and drool. His timing was impeccable.

Mom looked expectantly at the rest of us. "Well, dig in."

That was Mom for you. No formality. Just come as you are and be welcome. We'd never been an overtly religious family--Mom had forced me to church until I was old enough to make my mind up about it for myself--and we didn't say grace before meals. Even the table was plainly set, with a neat white tablecloth, three place settings, and white candles in crystal holders. Mom dimmed the overhead lights and sat down to eat.

"Your mother was just showing me some old baby pictures of you," Leanne said, sneaking a meatball under the table to Bear. "You were so adorable."

"What do you mean, were?" I said, and gave Greg one of those told-you-so looks.

"So, Leanne, what do you do for a living?" Greg asked in his blunt, cop-like way.

Leanne pretended to finish chewing what she wasn't eating, then flashed him a smile. "I buy and sell antiques," she answered. "Although it's more of a hobby really. I live off a rather large inheritance."

"Are you parents still living, then?" Mom asked.

"Oh, yes. But they live abroad," Leanne said.

This was all news to me. I'd always known Leanne had money--she lived in a manor by the lake, after all. But I'd assumed her parents were long dead. I should have known better, if I'd really given it any thought. Her parents must have been Sidhe, and hence practically immortal. And of course, by living abroad, she must have meant Summerland.

We all concentrated on eating for a bit, then Leanne asked, "What about you, Mrs. Decker? Are you retired now?"

Oops. My bad. I'd never told Leanne much about my family life either.

Mom laughed. "Hell, no. And please, call me Alice." Mom dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin, then went on. "I'm Head Nurse at Kingston General. It's a teaching hospital, so I'm kept pretty busy with all the student nurses, not to mention doctors. And I'm heading up the big charity auction to raise funds for the new MRI."

"That's amazing," Leanne said, and slipped Bear a piece of garlic toast. "You know, I've got a few antique pieces I could probably donate to the charity."

Mom's eyes widened in surprise at the generosity. "You know, I used to think that no woman was good enough for my James." She eyed me suspiciously. "I think maybe I'll have to re-evaluate that assessment."

Greg laughed. "Seriously, though. We were a bit worried about James for a while." His face became somber suddenly, and he spoke softly. "You know about the loss of his fiancé?"

Leanne nodded.

"She was a wonderful woman," Mom said. "The kindest person you'd ever want to meet. I didn't think James would ever get over her." Mom's eyes misted. She'd loved Alison like a daughter. Her death had been hard on all of us.

Mom reached across the table and held Leanne's hand, then paid her the kindest compliment she knew. "If you don't mind my saying so, I think there's a lot of Alison in you."

"More than you know," I mumbled.

Leanne kicked me under the table. She looked like she was about to cry, but of course she couldn't.

The lights went out suddenly. The flickering candlelight cast everyone in ghastly shadows. Greg drew his gun from under his chair. I thought he was over reacting until something came crashing through the window. It stood up on a multitude of spindly legs, several eyes glowing in the dark, and launched itself at us. The muzzle of Greg's Glock flashed three times, when suddenly a wind came up and blew out the candles. That's when Mom screamed.

CHAPTER TEN

The spider goblin let out a squeal that could splinter steel and careened into the table, scrabbling its furry body atop it in a mass of oddly disjointed legs and flying dinnerware. It dripped phosphorescent green ichor onto the tablecloth from a wound where Greg must have hit it, and locked a number of red, baleful eyes on each of us. The thing must have weighed at least eighty pounds, most of it mandibles, maw, and inward pointing teeth.

"What the fuck is that?" Greg cursed, and fired off another round that missed completely.

I scrambled out of my chair. "I don't know, but I ain't stepping on it."

Mom screamed again and backed against the wall. Several pairs of arms--mottled black and red skin and leathery hands with gnarled talons--materialized through the hardwood paneling and up through the floor. They grasped her about the ankles and arms, holding her fast against the wall, and covered her mouth to muffle her screams.

I heard chanting from out on the lawn, a low moaning drone of agony, the wail of a starving child, the death rattle of the elderly. It got louder, more menacing, more powerful. The front door exploded inwards in a rain of glass shards and wooden shrapnel. A man stood framed in the doorway. Tall. Skeletal. Silver hair framed pallid flesh and dark sunken eyes. Thin lips over rows of needle sharp teeth, his mouth like a lamprey eel. Living armour like the carapace of some carrion beetle. A stench like rotting crayfish. Dark Sidhe. Several of his brethren stood behind him.

Leanne moved to help Mom. Daemon limbs blistered at her touch, her hands burning bright with faerie magic. Her own demon under control, she could again claim the birthright of the Sidhe, the Fallen who had once walked in the Light. Withered talons withdrew back through whatever portal had lent them egress. Free, my mother fell to the floor in a faint.

The spider goblin locked its eyes on Greg and attacked. Bear, lost in the shadows save for red flashing eyes and gleaming white teeth, hit it suddenly from the side. The goblin wrapped its spindly legs about the dog as they fell to the floor. Mandibles and teeth tried to rend the spectral hound, but he was only half in this world to begin with, and insubstantial when it suited him. Bear shredded the spider goblin, tearing into it and shaking it about like a dead rat until it ceased its infernal screeching and lay like a wet, pulpy mass against the wall.

"I'm definitely *not* cleaning that up," I said.

The Dark Sidhe moved into the room, the silver-haired one at the forefront while four others ranged on either side of him. He held out a broadsword--the blade black and oily and jagged edged, looking more like the spur torn from a mantis leg than anything forged--and pointed it at Greg.

"We come for him," he said, his voice a maddening whisper, an echo that came at us from all sides and out of synch. "Give him to us and we shall let you live."

Greg shot him right between the eyes. The silver-haired Sidhe pitched backwards and fell to the floor dead. The Fay are severely allergic to lead, especially when you tunnel it directly into their forehead like that.

"I think that's a no, fellas," I said as the remaining Sidhe closed up ranks.

They rushed us, blades drawn, four against two. Greg fired again but the round

bounced harmlessly off armor this time, and then it was too close quarters for gunplay. There wasn't a lot of room to maneuver in the dining room, which was more to our advantage than theirs. In cramped quarters they could only come at us one at a time.

The first Sidhe jabbed with his sword. I twisted slightly to avoid the thrust, grabbed his sword arm at the wrist, and then stepped inside his guard. I held the sword away from me as I shoved back on the Sidhe's breastplate and drove him like a battering ram into his companion. My hand tangled in the belts and buckles that held his armor in place and we spun about just as a third attacker swung at my head from off to my left. The Sidhe couldn't halt the swing in time and cleft the skull of his comrade.

"Gee, thanks," I said. "But I hope you don't expect me to return the favor."

Greg dodged back as the fourth Sidhe shattered the corner of the dining room table on his follow through. It flipped the remains of the table out of the way and swung again, narrowly missing as Greg shoved a chair between them. He was trying to keep himself between the Sidhe and the women, and couldn't fire the Glock for fear of hitting me. The maneuvering put him at a serious disadvantage; he had no idea he needn't have worried on either account. The Glock couldn't hurt me, and Leanne could take care of herself.

I dropped the Sidhe corpse and kicked back, catching the first Sidhe high in the forehead. The distance wasn't quite right, and he staggered back as I caught him a glancing blow. The second Sidhe stepped around the body of his comrade and I moved back to cover Greg and the women.

Bear hit the Sidhe that I'd kicked, seizing him about the throat and toppling him back out through the broken window and onto the front lawn. The Sidhe tried to scramble away from the phantom as if Bear were a Azrael Hound and the Wild Hunt was after him. He may have been right.

The Dark Sidhe herded Greg into a corner. Greg raised the Glock but the Fay batted it aside and grabbed the cop by the throat, raising him off the floor several inches. He held Greg up against the wall at arms length and drew back his sword, pommel first. Leanne appeared behind him suddenly and grasped the Fay under the chin, then cranked his head about abruptly. He dropped like a stone, his neck broken.

The last Sidhe must have realized his cause was lost, because he turned and ran, diving through the window to join his comrade on the front lawn. Bear was still worrying his victim, but the Sidhe had kept his armored arms in front of his face and the dog had done little damage. The second Sidhe swung his blade at the hound, but Bear was suddenly gone. The Dark Sidhe grabbed up his accomplice as two ethereal Fay horses pawed their way up from under the front lawn. They mounted, and rode off down the street, seemingly winking out of existence whenever they passed under the overhead glow of a streetlamp.

"You have to go after them," Leanne called out from behind me.

I turned to see her cradling Mom's head in her lap, while Greg massaged at his throat. I took a step towards them, but Leanne shook her head.

"Fear not. I'll attend to your mother, but you must follow the Slaugh to their lair if we are to learn the identity of our attacker. A being more powerful than they guides them, hence they would never have aligned themselves with the likes of goblin spawn and daemon."

Leanne's speech tends to go all formal when she's nervous, a throwback to her

early upbringing, no doubt.

Greg flicked the safety on the Glock. "Count me in. I have no idea what the hell just happened, but I'll be damned if take any crap from some Goth wannabes and their pet bug.

I looked to Leanne, and she nodded. "They were after him. He will be safest with you."

"Do you want to drive, or do you want me too?" I asked.

Greg pushed past me and headed for the door. "You drive; I'll shoot."

It would have been faster if I'd have gone after them on foot, but then Greg could never have followed. Not that I was keen on him getting tangled up in Other World business, although I supposed it was too late for that now. Still, the last thing he needed was a psych discharge from the Force after his involvement in a high-speed chase and all out firefight against opponents no one else could see.

Greg ran around to the back of the car and opened the trunk, then tossed me the keys. I revved the engine a couple of times, then slammed it into reverse as Greg climbed in cradling a shotgun and a box of shells. I cranked the wheel as we hit the street and stomped on the breaks. The front end of the car swung around until we were facing in the right direction and I shifted into drive and floored it. We hit the first intersection doing about sixty miles an hour. I pulled up on the handbrake and cranked the wheel, steering right as the car slid left. I let the brake off and hit the gas again and we were off. I could just make out the Dark Sidhe up ahead of us in the distance.

"I see you haven't forgotten what I taught you," Greg said as he chambered shells into the pump action shotgun.

I grinned. "Nope. Good thing you disconnected the ABBS system, though, or I'd have never made that corner." Damn cars are so computerized nowadays you just can't get a good controlled skid without disabling the HAL 2000. Greg's Crown Vic was cop-friendly though, and HAL was singing Daisy.

The Sidhe still had a pretty good lead. Faerie horses are fast--apparently almost as fast as a Crown Victoria. I saw the riders cut to the right suddenly and head off across a field towards a small copse of trees.

"Hang on," I said, and jumped the curb as soon as I found a relatively flat spot. The last thing we needed was to blow the tires. The Crown Vic has nice suspension, but it's not meant for four-wheeling. Luckily the ground was hard so we didn't get mired down. As a matter of fact we got some pretty good air a few times there.

Greg turned on the radio. "What's a car chase without cool theme music."

I grimaced and reached for the tuner. "Greg, that's Air Supply."

Greg slapped my hand away. "Back off. I have Barry Manilow on the original eight track tape and I'm not afraid to use it."

We caught something in our headlights, a small creature, maybe three feet high and covered in brown fur. It sat about a campfire roasting meat over the open flame and playing on a pan flute. Its eyes glowed cat-yellow in a child-like face, and its long, pointed ears twitched in surprise, eyes wide as the Crown Vic bore down on it. It dove out of the way just in time as we careened through the campfire, narrowly missing the creature. I caught a glimpse of it in the rear-view mirror giving us the furry finger and cursing up a storm.

"Did you see that?" Greg asked, craning his neck about to get a better glimpse of

it out of the rear window.

"Yeah," I said. "Don't worry, we'll get it on the way back."

"What the hell was it?"

"I think it was a Boggle, or a Boogie, or maybe a Boogun. I don't know; they all look alike to me."

Greg slid the action on the shotgun and chambered a round. "That's kinda racist, isn't it?"

I swerved hard right to avoid a smallish hill just in front of us that nevertheless would have driven the front end of the car into the ground like a lawn dart. "I suppose so," I said. "But they say the same thing about us, and worse."

Greg nodded, as if what I'd just said made perfect sense. He was quite a moment, then said, "James, what the fuck is going on?"

I tried hard to come up with some sort of convincing lie, but after racking my brains for a bit I figured what the hell, I may as well tell him the truth. "At the moment, we're in hot pursuit of a couple of Dark Sidhe. They're kind of like badass faeries, and for some reason they want you. That thing that attacked us in the house was a spider goblin, and the shadowy thingy that killed it was Bear. Or his ghost; or maybe just another manifestation of him. I'm still not quite clear on that one."

Greg reached for a mint in the ashtray, but from the look on his face I'd say he was wishing he kept something a lot stronger there. Like Valium.

"And Brutus really was a zombie, wasn't he?" Greg asked.

I nodded my head. I told you Greg was quick.

He popped a fresh clip in the Glock, chambered the round, and thumbed the safety off.

"Just like old times, eh Bruiser?" Dad said as he materialized in the back seat wearing his patrolman's uniform.

Greg screamed, and rather loudly.

"It's all right, Greg," I said, and swerved hard right, narrowly missing a tree stump. "It's just Dad's ghost." Oddly enough, the information seemed to do little to comfort him.

"Cut through that copse of trees to the right there," Dad said, pointing out the route with a spectral finger. "That should bring us out just ahead of them."

The Dark Sidhe had disappeared down a shadowed gully that led to a culvert emptying into a low-rental housing project. I aimed for the trees Dad had pointed out and squeezed the Crown Vic between two old maples, then swerved left around a poplar. A low hanging limb careened off the windshield and sent spidery cracks branching out from the point of impact, but the safety glass held. I cut the turn a little too close to an elm tree and sheared off the passenger side mirror. The car bottomed out, then leveled as we cleared the trees with a stretch of paved road just ahead of us. I gunned the Crown Vic and it jumped the curve, then raced off in the direction of the culvert.

Greg hadn't said a word since Dad had appeared, and his face had gone all white and clammy.

"You all right?" I asked him, concerned that he might have gone into shock. Seeing ghoulies and beasties and things that go bump in the night was one thing; seeing your murdered partner and best friend was quite another.

He looked at me, all wide-eyed and with a cold trickle of sweat tracing a path

down his temple to the corner of his mouth, and nodded.

"It wasn't your fault, Greg," Dad said.

Greg snarled. "No, you stupid bastard! It was yours. But *I* had to live with it."

I was never too clear on all the details of my dad's death. Only that there had been a botched jewelery store heist and Dad and Greg had caught the perp in the act. The scumbag had taken a hostage, and Greg had convinced the creep to let him take the hostage's place instead. In the end, the perp shot Dad point blank through the heart, and Greg shot the perp. The scumbag had lived, however, and was still doing time in the Kingston Pen.

"I did what I had to," Dad said. The muscle jumped along his jaw and I could tell he was clenching his teeth.

"Why didn't you just take the shot? Why'd you have to give up your gun?" Greg was almost pleading now. As if he could convince Dad that he'd been wrong and they could go back twenty years and change things.

"I couldn't take the shot without hitting you," Dad answered. "I had to get his gun off of you to give you the chance to take him down. Believe me, if I had of know the little creep was going to shoot me, I'd have thought of something else."

This was too much information. Much more than I needed to know or wanted to hear. I'd finally managed to put my past behind me, and I didn't need these two old farts dredging it all up again.

"I'm all happy-happy, joy-joy you guys are working things out," I said. "Maybe later we can all go on Oprah and talk about our feelings over lattes and a box of tissues, but right now we're in hot pursuit of a couple of Dark Sidhe that just tried to off some of my favorite people, so could we concentrate on the matter at hand?"

Dad shook his head. "The kid's been awfully touchy ever since he died," he confided to Greg.

Greg's eyes went wide. "He's dead too?"

Dad shrugged. "Well, sort of. He's not dead-dead."

"Oh," Greg said. Then, "Am I dead?"

The Dark Sidhe popped out of the culvert just ahead and hightailed it towards downtown Kingston. Their horse's hooves cracked like thunder against the hard pavement, and lightning flashed in the sky overhead.

"Not yet, but you're pushing it," I said through gritted teeth as I slid the car sideways onto Bath Road and gunned the engine, slowly closing the distance.

One of the Dark Sidhe wheeled his mount suddenly. I guess he figured this was as good a spot to make his stand as any. The horse bore down on us, snorting steam, blazing red eyes, and foam flecked mouth, literally chomping at the bit as the rider stood tall in the saddle and waived a morning star in circles over his head.

For those of you who may be uninitiated in the intricacies of medieval weaponry, a morning star is basically a big spiked metal ball on a chain attached to a handle. Not a lot of control there--it's not like you can set it on stun or anything. I bet it probably does, like, plus five damage in Dungeons And Dragons or something. Still, I was betting a Crown Vic at seventy miles an hour does at least plus twenty.

"Holy shit!" Greg shouted as the horse's hooves hit the hood of the car. The mourning star crashed into the windshield, punched a hole through the spot just in front of my head, and turned the rest of the glass into just so much flexible windscreen. The

Sidhe rode the horse up and over the car, the beast's war shod hooves caving the roof in down around us before it touched down behind us and wheeled for another charge.

"Are you actually going to use that shotgun, or are you just holding onto it for emotional support," I asked Greg as I smashed at the windshield with the palm of my hand until it came loose. It flipped up and over the hood of the car and shattered on the pavement behind us. I hoped it might take out the Sidhe, but he crouched low in the saddle and leapt over the splintering fragments.

Greg blushed, then bit down hard on the peppermint in his mouth and leaned out the passenger window with the shotgun. He fired and missed, but nailed a yellow deer-crossing sign at the side of the road.

"Nice shooting," Dad said. "I bet little tin deer everywhere are quaking in their booties right now."

Greg swore, pumped the action of the shotgun, and fired again. The buckshot bounced harmlessly off the war steed's armored chest plate. He pumped a third round into the chamber, but by then the Sidhe was too close behind the car for a clear shot.

I pulled up on the emergency brake and slid the car sideways into the oncoming path of the horse, but the Sidhe swerved right and then was around us and racing up the rode after his partner. I gunned the car and followed. Luckily there wasn't much traffic on Bath Road this time of night. As a matter of fact, I'd yet to see another car, and unless someone was headed to the penitentiary or the psychiatric hospital, chances are I wouldn't. Right about now I bet Greg was thinking that a nice padded cell and a hug-me jacket in the psych ward might not be such a bad go.

The Sidhe ran a red light and cut into the parking lot of the Kingston Center Mall. I followed them through the light, skidded the car sideways, and narrowly avoided side swiping one of the only other cars in the parking lot. The mall hadn't closed yet, but it might as well have.

The Sidhe rounded the corner of Sears and we raced after them. We slid around the corner and braked to a halt in a squeal of tires. The Sidhe had trapped themselves in the alley where transports off loaded their wares. They paced their mounts back and forth across the back wall of the narrow alley as I edged the Crown Vic slowly forward. We had them now.

"Something's not right," Greg said as he tossed his Glock in the backseat for Dad. Dad tried to catch it--reflex, I suppose--but of course the gun passed through him and bounced off the back seat and onto the floor. Greg shook his head. "Leanne said follow them to their lair. You telling me badass Dark Sidhe hang out at the mall?"

"So what are you trying to say?" Dad said as he pulled his old .38 from his holster, for all the good it would do him, or us.

We heard the throaty rumble of several engines then, the unmistakable growl that only a Harley Davidson makes.

"That it's a trap," Greg said, and gripped the shotgun more tightly.

I glanced back through the rear view window. Maybe I should have paid more attention to all those websites that kept popping up whenever I tried to surf the net. "Nuts," I said. "Biker sluts from hell."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There were eight of them in all. I pointed them out to Greg. "Vampire, vampire, zombie. Zombie, zombie, zombie, vampire...demon?" They were all dressed in biker-tramp leather. Or at least mostly dressed. Even though it was November they wore skimpy leather shorts, halter tops, or vests that showed way too much flesh--or desiccated muscle and bone in the case of the zombies. The vampire girls looked like someone's wet nightmare come true. The zombies...well, maybe if you were George Romero or John Carpenter.

Their bikes formed a semicircle behind us, cutting off our escape route. Yeah. Right. Five hundred pound motorcycle. Two thousand pound car. I slipped the Crown Vic into reverse just as the Sidhe's morning star came crashing down on the hood. The car coughed a couple of times, shuddered, and died. The creep must have cracked the engine block.

The lead vampire leaned her bike to the side, let the kickstand down, and slowly climbed off her hog. She was tall, blonde, and busty, with black leather chaps over a leather bikini, a black corset with red laces, and those thigh high stripper boots. Her skin was creamy white, flawless, her lips a perfect red bow, her eyes icy blue. She walked towards us, moving the way only vampires and the Sidhe can--seemingly in slow motion.

"Aren't there any ugly vampires?" Greg asked. He slid another shell into the shotgun as the other girls dismounted and stood beside their bikes.

I reached into the back seat and retrieved the Glock. "If you were going to turn someone you might have to spend the rest of eternity with, who would you pick?"

"Point taken."

He tried to protest when I handed him the Glock, but shut up when the sword appeared in my hand.

"Stay in the car," I told him. "Bullets won't hurt a vamp or a zombie. You have to take their heads, and believe me you're much too slow. They'd tear your throat out before you could blink." I started to open the car door, but his hand on my arm restrained me.

"First, I thought only a wooden stake through the heart killed a vampire? And second, what makes you so special?"

I kept an eye on the blonde, who'd stopped about eight feet behind the car and seemed to be waiting. The Dark Sidhe paced their horses at the end of the alley.

"You see any wood around here?" I asked Greg. I watched him scowl as he came to the same conclusion I had. He was right about it being a trap. The alley had been cleaned up. Usually there'd be wooden pallets and crates lying around in disarray, but the place was pristine.

"Secondly, I'm...well...I'm different now. I'll explain later, but let's just say I'm confident I'm up to the task."

Greg stared at me for a moment. I could see the cop in him struggling with the concept of just sitting back and doing nothing while I got out and kicked leather butt. Definitely not his usual *modus operandi*.

He let go of my arm. "There'd better *be* a later."

"There will." For both of us. I'd make sure of it. I opened the car door and climbed out. Leanne's bird cawed loudly from its perch along the rooftop at the end of the alley, and winged away.

The blonde vamp saw the sword in my hand and smiled. She was overconfident. I like it when people are overconfident. Well, unless they have reason to be.

"Apparently we underestimated you," she said. "You should be dead by now, and your friend captive."

I walked around to the rear of the car. "Sorry to spoil your plans. Why don't you and the rest of the Pink Ladies run along and make new ones?"

She licked her lips as her eyes traveled my body from head to toe. I think she wanted to eat me, and not in a good way. "You're not human, and you're not clan." Her nostrils flared and she scented the air. "Not a shapeshifter or a demon, either. Just what are you, Mr. Decker?"

Lightning flashed overhead, illuminating the panorama in the alley like a black and white still shot. "I'm top of the fucking food chain." Hey, when the Powers That Be see fit to provide you with special effects, you go with it.

Her eyes widened in surprise. She bit her lower lip seductively as she considered what I'd told her. She held her hands out to her side as she walked slowly to the rear of the car, put her foot up on rear bumper, then made a big show of adjusting the boot at her thigh.

Maybe she thought she could seduce me. Maybe what I'd told her had worried her and she was just playing for time. Or maybe all that leather was chaffing.

"So you're the new Eternal. That would explain a lot." The vamp leaned up against the alley wall. "Like why you didn't die during the explosion today." She reached into her corset, and removed a glass vial she'd hidden in her cleavage. "And why He sent the demon to lay the glamour about the alley so that no one would interrupt us.

I stepped closer, readying myself for whatever move she might make.

She snarled, and smashed the vial against the concrete. A red fog spread out from where the glass had shattered and covered the alley floor. "But most importantly, why He had us hide the pentagram the girls etched into the pavement earlier today."

I lunged at her and came up hard against something that burned like hellfire. The inferno scorched my bones to the marrow and made the heat from the explosion this morning feel like a couple of minutes in a tanning bed.

I pulled away, and the sensation stopped. There wasn't a mark on me.

"Hurts, doesn't it."

The last wisps of pink fog cleared. I looked down and saw I was standing within the confines of a small pentagram maybe five feet in diameter. The bitch had lured me right into the middle of it. I reached out a finger. As soon as it hit the border of the pentagram the inferno manifested again. Not just in my finger either, but my whole being.

The blonde walked around to the passenger side of the car while I stood helplessly by and watched. She leaned in close to the window just as Greg pulled the trigger on the shotgun. Humans just can't comprehend how fast a vampire really is. One minute she was standing directly in the line of fire, the next second she was standing slightly to the left and holding the shotgun.

Vampires just can't comprehend how sneaky Greg is. She stood there, gloating, while he emptied the Glock he'd kept just out of view into her. Not that it did any good. I think Greg knew that, too. There was just no way he was going down without a fight.

I tried to teleport out of the circle but the heat hit me twice as hard that way. I

tried breaking through the pavement. As soon as I hit dirt the spell took effect again. I even tried throwing bits of broken concrete at the vamp, but the chunks of pavement vaporized as they hit the barrier. I was helpless to do anything except rant and rave. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

The blonde stuck her index finger into one of the holes Greg had made in her corset. "Tsk, tsk, tsk." She held the tip of the shotgun barrel inches away from his face. A bead of sweat traced a path from Greg's forehead into his eyes. She teased him with death, her finger slowly pulling on the trigger.

"Just kidding," she said, and tossed the shotgun away. "It's your lucky day. For some reason He wants you alive."

The blonde opened the car door and waited for Greg to get out. He glared up at her for a while, but after a moment, complied. I guess he figured it was less demeaning to get out under his own power than to be manhandled out by a woman.

She put both arms about his neck and touched her forehead to his. "There now, that wasn't so bad, was it, Greggie?"

Greg stayed rigid. I'd say he was more pissed off than scared.

She grabbed his hair, pulled his head to the side, and bit into his neck. Greg screamed and struck out as she pressed her body up against his, grinding her hips into him as if she were a twenty dollar hooker and she was doing him right there in the alley. His arms flailed at her, but the attempts became feeble as she drank from him.

I screamed, too. I cursed up a storm and charged the invisible walls of my prison, only to be thrown back in burning agony every time. I should have left him back at Mom's. I shouldn't have been so cocky. *I* was the one who had been overconfident, and now he was going to pay for my conceit with his life. With his soul.

She pulled back and stepped away from Greg. He leaned up against the car for support. His left hand clutched at the wound on his neck to stem the flow of blood.

She smiled. His blood stained her teeth. "He said not to kill you. That doesn't mean the girls and I can't have a little taste now and then."

She snapped her fingers and two more of her girls came forward. They grabbed Greg by the arms and helped him out of the alley. He was groggy, and they practically carried him to the bikes. One of the girls lifted him and dumped him unceremoniously into a sidecar. She handcuffed his right hand to a helmet lock on the bike. At least they were fur-lined handcuffs.

I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the mess I'd made of everything. When I opened them, that little red-haired gremlin stood just outside the pentagram against the alley wall. He raised a scaly finger to his lips and shushed me, then held out his other hand to show me a small palm-full of sand. I had no idea what he planned to do with that, but he ducked under the car and out of sight as the blonde vamp approached.

"So, Mr. Decker, what are we going to do with you?"

I smiled sweetly at her. "Why don't you come in here and we'll get better acquainted?"

She paused a moment, as if considering my proposal. "Ummm...no."

"Then I guess a lap dance is out of the question?"

She locked those blue, soulless eyes on mine. "Maybe some other time."

Problem was, I think she was serious. I blushed. I hate when that happens.

"I'm afraid He has other plans for you right now, though. I'm not sure what they

are, and to be honest I'd rather not be here when He arrives."

"He, who?" I asked. You could almost feel her capitalizing the pronoun whenever she said it.

"Sorry, Sweetie," she said as she turned to leave. "He likes to make an entrance."

I watched her walk away. Greg sat pale and listless in the sidecar, all the fight drained out of him. I didn't know what they had in store for him, but there are worse things than death. I had a sudden terrible image of Greg as a vamp, or worse, a zombie.

As soon the vamp's back was turned the gremlin scampered out from under the car. It poured the sand from its hand carefully into the etched edge of the pentagram, breaking the line. His hand was pretty small; there was only enough sand to fill in a few inches. I poked my finger at the space where the line had been broken. Nothing. I reached my arm through. Still nothing. I stepped completely out of the pentagram.

The little shrimp had done it. I don't know why it had seen fit to help me. Maybe I'd become a source of amusement for it. Or maybe its predilection for messing with stuff that worked just got the better of it. For whatever reason, I swore I'd be eternally grateful to it. Heck, I'd even let it stick one of those big "kick me" signs on my back if it wanted to.

Bear suddenly appeared by my side. He growled in that rumbling, discordant echo of his. The vamp froze, then turned slowly.

"Where the hell have you been?" I asked the mutt.

A loose stone clattered to the ground from the rooftop. I looked up and saw Drat and Charlie perched on the edge. Charlie grabbed Drat up and dropped the fifteen or so feet to the alley floor. Not much of a drop for an eight-foot tall ogre.

He set Drat down, then straightened the patchwork jacket he wore. "Bear couldn't lock onto you while you were in the pentagram, so he had to tag along with us."

"Da freak'n mutt slobbered all over my good axe, too," Drat complained, and twirled the double-bladed weapon in question.

The rest of the blonde vamp's crew got off their bikes and formed a line at the end of the alley. One of the Dark Sidhe charged us from behind. The Sidhe swung his morning star overhead as rider and horse bore down on us.

Charlie turned and roared. His lower and upper tusks gnashed and spittle flew from his mouth. The Sidhe's mount pulled up short and pawed at the air at the sight of the enraged ogre. Charlie reached out and grabbed the Sidhe by his armored throat, then lifted him off his horse and dashed him against the wall. There was a sickening crunch, as if someone had just cracked a large walnut. Green ichor oozed from all the joints in the Sidhe's armor. Charlie let the body drop and turned to face the second Sidhe. I guess the Fay figured he'd had enough, because he opened a portal at the end of the alley and vanished through it in a shower of sparks and lightning. The portal closed once he was gone.

"How'd you guys find me?" I asked as we ranged out across the alley to face the biker chicks. I saw Greg in the sidecar, going through his pockets with his left hand. I think he was searching for his handcuff keys.

"Da bird told us," Drat said.

Leanne's crow. I'd never complain about her not using a cell phone again.

"Kill da bastards!" the troll shouted and stepped swinging into a dark-haired vamp. The axe bit into her hip, almost cleaving her in two. She went down to her knees

and Drat took her head off on the back-swing. The body erupted in a geyser of blood and flame as the headless corpse tried to crawl away. It made it to the alley wall before it stopped moving. By then it was nothing but a pile of fire-blackened bones and soot-covered jewelery.

A zombie stepped into the fray. It had been dead quite a while before being revived. Its face had that shrunken skull look, with that freaky looking grin they get when their lips shrivel up. Charlie punched it in the head. His ham-sized fist pretty much obliterated the dried up skull, and the body collapsed to the ground. Okay, so he didn't actually take its head off, but I guess it was close enough.

The demon that had cast the spell over the alley to hide our presence vanished in a cloud of sulphurous smoke. I guess he didn't like the odds. He would have liked them even less if he had stuck around for a few minutes more.

Bear launched himself at another zombie and bore it to the ground. Drat's axe sparked off the pavement as he beheaded it.

The troll wrinkled his long, pointed nose in disgust. "Waste a meat, dey is. All dried up like dat, dey taste like pemmican."

I gagged at the mental image, then crosscut with my sword, carving another zombie diagonally from left hip to right shoulder as it reached for me. I reversed my grip and cut down and left, and another headless zombie toppled to the ground.

The blonde vamp stood and watched as we cut down her henchmen. There was only her, a red-haired vamp, and one zombie left. She said something to the zombie and it shambled off toward the bike with the sidecar and Greg. Blondie must have thought that her and the other vamp could hold us off while the zombie made away with Greg.

I had other plans. "Charlie, you and Drat get Greg and get out of here. I'll take care of these two."

Greg had found his keys. He leapt out of the sidecar as the zombie got close and hammered her with a quick combination. Greg hits pretty hard, but he's no match for a zombie. She took the blows, grabbed him by his coat, and lifted him off his feet without even mussing the few strands of hair she had left.

The two vamps moved to intercept Charlie and Drat as they tried to come to Greg's aid. Fast as they were, I was even faster. I ran interference, blocking Blondie and her cohort as my friends slipped past.

I stood between the vamps and the bikes with my sword resting on my right shoulder. "You know, this alley has a dress code. No leather fetish gear unless you have a tie."

Blondie pulled a set of knives she'd hidden in her boots and faced me in a fighting stance. She held the blades angled down along her forearms. The redhead did likewise.

I frowned. That didn't look good. I knew enough about knife fighting to understand that only people who really knew what they were doing held knives that way.

Blondie threw a right cross, the knife along her forearm narrowly missing my jugular as I shifted to the left. The follow-up jab almost caught me in the chest. I managed to lean back at the last moment and got my sword up just in time to block a thrust at my spleen from the redhead.

I cut crosswise with my sword, more to give myself a little space and recover my balance than to inflict damage. Both vamps back-flipped away and out of range. Just as I was getting back into position Blondie feinted with a jab, then kicked to the outside of

my left knee. That brought my head down just low enough for her to plant a high-heeled boot upside my noggin in a spinning kick that twirled me around. I did this neat little tuck and role and came up facing them in a ready stance. It looked impressive, considering it was just a fancy way of retreating. I mean, damn, I was getting my butt kicked here!

I glanced over at the end of the alley. At least Charlie and Drat were doing better. The zombie was already down and out. Charlie had climbed on the bike. Even with his feet stretched out on the highway pegs, his knees were still practically up around his ears. Greg was back in the sidecar, with Drat seated just behind Charlie. The Harley roared to life and the trio rode off, hopefully to Leanne's safehouse. I can only imagine what kind of glamour was cast to hide their identities, but it couldn't have been too effective because the car that passed them almost drove into one of the parking signs as the driver cranked his head about to get a better look at the trio.

I looked at the two vamps. "Well, unless you two have another pentagram hidden around her somewhere, I'd say you've lost."

There was a sudden chill at my back. The alley got darker, as if something had just sucked up all the light.

Blondie shook her head. "Maybe I should have taken you up on that lap dance when I had the chance." Her and the redhead stepped back, then knelt on the ground and prostrated themselves, heads down and eyes closed.

I could feel a malignant presence behind me. Its aura was dark and sickly, and it spread out and smothered whatever it touched like congealed blood.

He was here.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I shivered as a chill ran down my spine and the hair stood up on the nape of my neck. Cliché, but true. Whoever or whatever stood behind me had set off every primal alarm. That couldn't be good. I stepped aside and turned to my left to get a good look at this new threat, not wanting to lose sight of the two vamps. Maybe my spidey senses were wrong and there was nothing there after all. No such luck.

It hovered behind me, as if the plane of existence that it occupied was slightly out of phase with ours, shifted to the left and up a couple of inches.

It was skeletal, the bones hard-edged, black and oily, like electroplated metal. They stood out in relief against the canvas of darkness that surrounded it. Ruby-red energy formed a haze about empty eye sockets and gilded the edges of its ribcage, arms and legs. Lightning traced a pattern along a parody of wings that spread out and back like wrought iron attached at the scapula. It sparked in a halo about the skull, like one of those neon plasma balls they sell at the novelty shops. A Celtic knot of bone, glimpsed only as shadow, or the suggestion of an outline, sheathed its spine, humerus and femur.

It sucked the warmth from my body, a bitter chill that had nothing to do with the weather, and set my teeth on edge. My hands shook, because I knew it wasn't going to just kill me; it was going to do worse. It could have been the Angel of Death. It certainly looked the part. Then again, looks could be deceiving. Aeshma had looked like Leonardo DiCaprio.

"Howdy," I said.

A skull has basically that one dopey expression, even one with smoldering red eyes, so I can't say as to what it thought of my greeting.

It swiveled its head to glare at the two vamps. "BE GONE." Its voice echoed in the distance, almost a whisper. It was hard to be sure exactly where it came from, or even that I'd heard it at all. The two vamps weren't taking any chances, however. They beat it out of there like vampire bats out of Hell.

"A ghoul of few words," I said. "I like that."

It hovered over to where the pentagram was etched into the pavement and kicked away the sand, closing the circle, then focused those smoldering red orbs on yours truly. "Time to die."

Those few words I could live without. "Time to die? Check your watch, Skeletor, it's only half past puberty."

Its wings flared out, and a bony hand grasped me by the throat. I never saw it coming; the damn wings were a distraction. The thing had a grip like an Ethiopian on a MacDonald's coupon. It squeezed, and crushed all the small bones in my neck. I hammered at its forearm as it shoved me toward the pentagram, but the bone wouldn't give. I tried one of those fancy wristlock thingies my sensei had taught me, but it was no good. It was just too strong. So I punched it in the face. Hard. That got its attention.

It dropped me, and I back-peddled a ways until I thought I had room to maneuver, thought being the operative word. I threw a couple of punches, tried some fancy kicks when that didn't work, heck, I even spit at it. It avoided my best stuff effortlessly.

"Listen, I hope I wasn't out of line about that Skeletor crack," I said.

It hit me in the solar plexus, the throat, the bridge of the nose, and then I *think* it kicked me in the head. I'd like to tell you exactly how it did all that, but it's not like I

actually saw much of it. It wasn't faster than I was, just better. Like Jackie Chan versus Jackie Gleason better. I spent more time healing the stuff it broke than offering a counter attack.

At least it didn't waste time blathering at me; no, "Join me and together we shall rule the world" nonsense, or trying to turn me to the dark side of the force.

Bear leapt for it, aiming high on its right side. It shifted its torso left slightly and the hound sailed past, his ethereal jaws clamping shut on empty air. I took advantage of the distraction and managed to kick it hard in its electroplated kneecap. That staggered it, and I drove my arm to the elbow up into its ribcage from below. It felt like someone had just hit me in the funny bone with a ball-peen hammer, twice.

The red haze about its eyes flared, and it screamed. I was rather proud of myself until it impaled me, driving the foot long blades that manifested at its elbows down through the fleshy hollows of my collarbone into my heart and lungs. Well, if I had a heart and lungs. It spread its arms wide, ripping the blades out through my chest, and I collapsed.

I was almost deafened by the roar of a shotgun in the small confines of the alley. Lead shot slammed into the side of the thing's head and rattled off it like hail off a tin pot. The concussive force jarred its head around and it went down on its knees and over. A skeletal arm shot out and broke its fall so that it narrowly avoided face-planting itself into the pavement. Its wings flared out, the neon corona about it pulsed brighter, and trace electrical current crackled madly along its metallic frame.

I healed myself and climbed unsteadily to my feet. "I think you just pissed it off," I told Josh.

Josh stood at the entrance to the alley in full were-form--somewhat of a cross between a man, a grizzly bear, and a wolf, over seven feet and three hundred pounds of fur, teeth, talons and muscle. He wore the maroon knit shirt, black leather pants, and silver buckled boots the Fay smith had made for him. His clothing was also enchanted; it stretched to fit in either were or human form, and doubled as protective armor.

He chambered another round into the shotgun. "This ought to make it downright cranky, then."

The shotgun kicked slightly as he fired again. The buckshot caught Skeletor along the right side of its ribcage and hurled the anorexic creep into the back end of Greg's Crown Vic, shattering the window. Josh advanced, chambering round after round. The creature wailed as lead shot tore rents in the corona that encompassed it, like stones through a paper shoji screen. It smashed the remains of the glass away and crawled through the car's rear window into the back seat.

Josh cursed. Bear howled. Police siren's warbled. Not good. The creature tore through the roof of the Crown Vic like it was an exotic dancer popping out of a giant birthday cake. But without the pasties. It seemed none the worse for all the buck shot Josh had just force-fed it. Its metallic wings snapped open with a sound of giant scissors shearing, and it levitated itself clear of the car.

Josh pumped the action on the shotgun, but whatever it was, it had had enough. It rocketed skyward, the funky energy source that surrounded it leaving a crimson vapor trail, then disappeared.

Josh propped the shotgun barrel over his right shoulder. "I was on my way to the stakeout when I got the call and figured you could use some help."

"You figured right." The sirens sounded closer now. "We'd better get out of here before the cops show," I said.

Josh nodded. He stooped to pick up the empty shotgun shell casings. "No sense leaving my fingerprints at the scene."

We headed out of the alley to the mall parking lot, where Josh had parked his car. Bear vanished again, probably chasing down ghost-ghoul-zombie rabbits or something. Josh hid the shotgun away in the trunk of his Beamer--spoiled rich brat--and I climbed in the passenger side. He settled himself behind the wheel, buckled up, and started the car. He never said a word until we were out on the street and halfway through the city headed for home.

Then, "James, what the hell was that?"

I shrugged. "Beats me, literally."

He cocked an eyebrow. "So I noticed."

Truth is that had us both more worried than we let on. I was pretty damn tough, the toughest thing out there that I'd met to date, actually. And this thing had beat me down like I was a crack ho and he was my pimp.

Maybe I couldn't die. I think the car bombing had proved that. But there was something bigger and badder than me out there, and it didn't play nice. And that meant I might not be able to protect the people that needed protecting. People like Leanne, Alex, Mom, Greg--everyone I cared about. Like I've said, there are things worse than death. I know. I'm an expert.

It started snowing on the way back to Leanne's. Big fluffy flakes that I knew would stay. Kingston looks beautiful after a snowfall. Clean. Pristine. The snow hangs heavy on the trees, like white, fluffy cotton candy. At times like that winter seems a more innocent season than spring. But it's deceptive, and it doesn't last.

I drew a smiley face on the fogged passenger side window, then turned to Josh. "Thanks for saving my butt back there."

Josh turned on the wipers; the snow was coming down that hard now. He grinned. "It's not your butt anymore, it's Leanne's, and if I let anything happen to it, she'll have mine."

I added a goatee to the smiley face. "I know the feeling. Sabrina would tear me a new one if I let anything happen to you."

"So it's simply a matter of mutual self-preservation."

I nodded, and we were silent the rest of the way home, secure in the knowledge that no matter what, our asses were covered.

Leanne had brought Mom back to her place. Greg was there, too. Leanne threw her arms around me as I walked in the door. Her body felt cool against mine, and even though we both knew I wasn't hurt, I was in no hurry to let her go.

I could see Greg over Leanne's shoulder, sitting hunched over on the antique couch. Dad and Grandpa haunted him, apparently trying to explain things, or cheer him up. Greg held his head in his hands, kept shaking it no. He had a bandage plastered against the side of his neck where he'd been bitten, and he looked pale and shaken. I don't think it was from the loss of blood either.

"How's he doing?"

Leanne kissed me on the forehead, then pulled back. "He's a tough one. He'll

manage."

"And Mom?"

She squeezed my hand and led me into the living room. "Who do you think bandaged Greg?" Leanne put her arm around my waist as Mom came into the room from the kitchen, and walked through Dad's ghost with a glass of white wine for Greg. "Stubborn. It must run in the family."

Mom hadn't seen Dad. She probably couldn't see Grandpa either, or Bear for that matter. I guess she wasn't a Sensitive no matter what she'd just been through, which was probably just as well. Mom and Dad, that was a whole lot of emotional baggage we really didn't need right now.

Greg looked up and heaved a sigh of relief as I entered the room. "Thank God you're all right." Some of the color leached back into his face. I should have known he'd be more worried about me than about what had just happened to him.

Mom ran over and threw her arms about me. "You're okay?" I nodded, and she stepped away from me, then slapped my face, hard.

"Oww! What'd you do that for?"

She stood with her hands on her hips and glared up at me. All five foot two inches of her. "Why didn't you tell me you were dead? I'm your mother; I have a right to know these things."

I glanced over at Leanne. She tried to look innocent, but I could see it in her eyes. She was laughing at me. If it wasn't for the fact that she was biting down on her lip...

"That's right, Leanne told me everything."

Oh, oh. Time to circle the wagons. "And you believed her?"

Mom had the hydraulic finger out now, and it stabbed me repeatedly in the chest. "When your home's invaded by a forty pound spider and a bunch of freaks that make Marilyn Manson look wholesome, suddenly a whole lot is possible. Besides, you don't spend 25 years as a nurse in a place as old as Kingston without seeing some freaky shit."

I stepped away from the finger. "Can we go back to where I'm okay?"

Mom tugged down on the bottom of her sweater, a sure sign she was still pissed. She squinted up at me, giving me the evil eye. "I'm not done with you yet, Jamie. You're just lucky there's people here that need my attention."

Josh perked up when Mom called me Jamie, but I glared him down.

Mom turned away. "Now, where'd that foul-mouthed Dennis-the-Menace-looking kid go? He said he was hungry."

Foul-mouthed kid? She must have meant Drat. All she could see was the glamour.

"Um, mom? Drat's a troll."

She dismissed me with a waive and headed back into the kitchen. "Whatever."

And as far as Mom was concerned, that was it. As long as I was okay--dead or no--everything was fine. People have a lot of ways of coping with the realization that the supernatural world exists. Mom's experiences as a nurse had exposed her to the idea that there was more to this world than meets the eye. I guess this just validated her suspicions. Kind of like finding proof positive that politicians are corrupt; it's not likely to shake your grip on reality much. Or maybe she just had some really good drugs in her purse. She was a nurse, after all.

Leanne joined Mom in the kitchen while I sat down beside Greg. I wondered if Leanne had told Mom about herself, and decided not to press my luck. Let's deal with

one crisis at a time.

"How's it going, Inspector?" I said.

He looked pretty haggard. The worry lines about his eyes were etched deeper than usual, and his normally trimmed razor stubble looked like it had gotten away from him in patches.

"How am I going to explain this hickey to Maggie?"

I laughed. "You could always tell her you cut yourself shaving. Of course, then you'd actually have to shave."

My advice didn't exactly cheer him up. I joke a lot; it's a defense mechanism, I guess. But it doesn't work for everyone. Greg needed reassurance right now. He was a by-the-book kind of guy, and he'd just found out all the really important information was scribbled in the margins--in crayon.

"Don't worry about the hickey," I said, serious now. "Vampire bites heal remarkably fast. It'll probably be gone by the time Maggie and Erin get back."

Greg rubbed at his eyes, then pinched the bridge of his nose. "I've got a wicked headache. What I really need is some aspirin, and a shower."

"Not a problem," I said. I caught Alex's eye as she wandered in from the kitchen--for some ungodly reason she enjoyed watching Drat eat--and waved her over. "You want to get Mr. McMillan some aspirin? I'm sure my mom has some on her. And then take him up to the guestroom--you know, the big one at the end of the hall with the ensuite and the Jacuzzi."

Alex smiled. "Sure, Jamie."

As if Bumper wasn't bad enough.

She held out her hand to help Greg up off the couch.

Greg snorted. "I'm not that old, Missy." His knees and ankles cracked as he got slowly to his feet. "Then again."

Alex laughed, then skipped back into the kitchen to find Mom and the aspirin.

Greg nodded after Alex. "So that's her? The Innocent?"

Leanne must've done a pretty good job of getting Greg up to speed. "Yep. She's the one that got me into this trouble in the first place."

"Isn't she a little old to be skipping?"

I shrugged. "She's probably just showing off."

Greg shook his head. "Remember when I had that kind of energy?"

I put my arm around the old man's shoulder. "Yep, no one could skip like you."

Greg grimaced. Something was still bothering him, and it wasn't the creaking joints or my bad jokes.

"Are you going to be all right?" I asked.

He touched his hand to the bandage at his neck. I've seen a lot of weird shit these past few months, but there's something I thought I'd never see; fear in Greg's eyes.

"Am I going to...turn?"

So that was it. "No, Greg. You're not going to turn. You have to exchange blood with a vamp to do that, and then only after they've pretty much drained you first."

He closed his eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath. When he opened his eyes the fear was gone, replaced by a hard, steely glint. The tough old bastard I knew and loved was back.

Alex bound back into the room with a glass of water and the aspirin Greg had

asked for. He took the pill, downed the water, and squared his shoulders. "You mentioned something about a Jacuzzi?"

Okay, tough, but pampered...er...spoiled, not diapered. He wasn't *that* old.

Alex put her arm through Greg's and led him up the stairs and to the guest room.

I made my way into the kitchen. Leanne's manor has a kitchen bigger than most two-car garages. It always smells like fresh baked bread and roasting meat. And flowers. There's a big stone hearth at one end I swear she could hang a cauldron in--and probably does--but the rest is pretty modern, with a huge convection oven and a side-by-side stainless-steel refrigerator freezer. There's a kitchen island in the center with a gas range, grill, microwave oven, and double sink.

Drat and Charlie were playing rock-paper-scissors over a turkey carcass on the counter to see who got the last drumstick. Josh sat at the kitchen table, polishing off what I'm sure started out as a foot-long hoagie. I could faintly make out Bear's red, glowing eyes under the table, ever vigilant for scraps that might fall on the floor.

Mom was up to her elbows in dishwater, while Leanne dried. I guess Leanne didn't have the heart to tell Mom that she had servants for that sort of thing. Or maybe she just didn't want to freak her out. Leanne's servants ran the gamut from sprites, to brownies, to pixies. Come to think of it, the help only worked when you weren't watching, so it's not like Mom would have seen anything anyway. Who knows, maybe the women were just bonding. It could have been worse; they could have gone shopping.

Sabrina came up from the wine cellar with a couple of bottles. Mom and Leanne finished the dishes as Sabrina poured for everyone. I sat beside Josh at the table, and the women joined us. Mom was still giving me the evil eye. Thankfully, Leanne sat between us.

"How's Greg?" Leanne asked.

"He's doing fine, now," I said. "Or as well as can be expected. Which reminds me, can you cast some sort of spell over him to put him to sleep for a while? There's things we have to do tonight, and if I know Greg he'll insist on coming with us."

"Who do I look like, Samantha Stevens?"

But she smiled and covered my hand with hers, so I knew she'd do it.

As much as we could have used Greg's help, the man needed to suck back and reload. Tough or not, his mind had to assimilate all that had happened. Greg had one sharp mind; I wanted to keep it that way.

I even toyed with the notion of having Leanne cast a spell on Mom so she wouldn't remember anything that had happened tonight. I was pretty sure we could have fixed up her place as good as new and she would have been none the wiser. But I'd made the decision tonight to let Mom into my life, and I was going to stand by it. Maybe I just needed the touch of normalcy my mother provided. Not that Mom was all that normal--which tells you how far out of whack my life had become.

I looked at my watch. I couldn't believe it was only eight-thirty. "We should get over and stake out Joan's house if we're going to do it. We can't drop everything just because I got my ass kicked."

Sabrina nodded. "Which reminds me. I think it's about time James learned how to fight."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I can fight," I said, and tried not to pout. Who were they kidding? I could kick *their* asses, and all at the same time.

Leanne patted my hand reassuringly and turned to address the others. "It won't be easy. Skatha hasn't taken on a new student since the Hound, and we all know how that turned out."

Sabrina sat on Josh's lap and put her arm about his shoulder. "I'm sure Skatha will make an exception, what with James being an Eternal and all."

I waved my hand in the air. "Hey, right here in the room. And I ain't training with no dog."

Bear barked from under the table. The unearthly pitch shattered Drat's wine glass just as he was about to take a sip. Drat scowled, then grabbed the bottle and took a swig.

"No offence, Buddy," I said, and Bear settled down.

Leanne shook her head in exasperation. "I'm referring to The Hound of Ulster."

Like that meant anything.

"CuChulainn of the Red Branch? The Irish folk hero? Tied himself upright to a tree so he could die on his feet?"

Drat finished off the wine bottle and looked around for another. "Nice kid. Bit of a temper. And none too bright." He found another bottle and chewed the lid off. "Ain't he da one what knocked up Skatha's sista?"

I scratched Bear behind the ears. "I told you, if it wasn't in a Classic Comic..."

Leanne rubbed at her temples.

I couldn't help thinking that if I could give even her a headache, maybe I *should* learn how to fight. You can only piss off so many people before one of them eventually takes a poke at you. And in all honesty I really wasn't all that great of a fighter. I was just faster and stronger than everyone else--until now.

A green belt in Ju Jitsu meant bugger all, really. Even a black belt just means you're proficient in all the moves. After all, anyone can throw a punch--maybe even a combination or two--but put that up against an opponent who can *apply* what they know and they'll kick your ass every time.

As my old sensei used to say: There's a lot more to martial arts than just kicking the other guy in the balls. You have to kick him in the balls *first*. I didn't even know if Skeletor *had* balls.

"So who's this Skatha?" I asked.

Charlie leaned back against the counter and picked away at a piece of turkey stuck between tooth and tusk with a fingernail. "The Lady of Shadows. She Who Strikes Fear. A great sword warrior and instructor, versed in the martial arts, blacksmithing, and prophecy."

Now *I* was getting the headache. "Just what I need, another bossy woman."

Leanne kissed me on the cheek. "Only I get to boss you around, hon. She's just going to beat you."

"Oh, that's okay, then."

Josh finished his hoagie and wiped at his mouth with a napkin. "So where do we find her?"

"The Isle of Skye," Charlie answered.

I had no idea where that was, but somehow I doubted if it was out in the middle of Lake Ontario somewhere. And I didn't think we had the time to go looking for it.

"It's nice and all that you folks want to sign me up for Karate class so the bullies will stop picking on me, but I think we have more important things to worry about. Like what's a zombie looking for in *Ye Olde Antique Shoppe*? And what are they doing traipsing about at Alex's school? Who blew up my Jeep with me in it? Why are the Biker Sluts from Hell after Greg? And who or what the hell was that thing that kicked the crap out of me?"

Did I miss anything?

"Perhaps I can be off help," Tam-Lien said as she appeared behind me.

I'd like to tell you that I didn't scream like a like a little girl at her sudden appearance, but I'd be lying.

Tam-Lien wore a navy pullover, white Capri pants and white dock shoes. It was the most casual looking I'd ever seen her, and the most human, too. She looked like some rich yuppie back from a day spent sailing, and not like the ages old being she actually was.

"The adversary you encountered tonight is another Eternal, perhaps the oldest of us all," she continued. "His first recorded appearance was in ancient Sumer, where he was know as the god, Enki, and later the great king Gilgamesh. He has been many men down through the ages: Hammurabi, Variachi, Alexander, Charlemagne."

"Great," I said. "A schizophrenic Eternal. When did he decide to go with the erector set-skeleton-from-hell look?"

Tam-Lien pulled up a chair and sat down, crossing her legs at the ankles all lady-like and proper. She certainly had come a long way since we'd first met back in the Ways. I wondered if she'd had sex yet, not that the thought was at all appropriate to the conversation at hand. Hey, I may be dead, but I'm not dead-dead.

"Azrael--his current name--is not schizophrenic. He does not *believe* he was Gilgamesh, or Charlemagne; he truly *was* Gilgamesh and Charlemagne. He took on his latest incarnation in the years shortly following the end of World War Two."

"Azrael; why does that name sound familiar?" I wondered.

"Azrael is one of the names given to the Angel of Death," Mom offered.

Charlie nodded in agreement. Mom had done a stint in the chronic care ward. I guess that's one of the things she'd know.

The Angel of Death. I knew it.

Josh shifted Sabrina on his lap. "So we know who's behind the attacks; the question is why?"

"And what are we going to do about it?" Sabrina added.

Damn that woman, she was always the one to ask the difficult questions.

Leanne stood up from the table. "I say it time to stop reacting, and take the offensive. James and Josh, you two go ahead and stake out the zombie girl's home. I'm not sure how she's involved in all this, but at least it's a concrete place to start."

I looked at Josh, he looked at me, and we shrugged. It made about as much sense as anything else, and Leanne and Sabrina always had been the brains of the outfit. The rest of us were just muscle, and we knew it.

"Good," Leanne said. "Secondly, the zombies we've met to date all seem to be resurrected bikers. The vampire's you guys met in the alley today were passing

themselves off as...um...exotic dancers."

Leanne normally wasn't squeamish when it came to sex, but I think having my mom there threw her. I have to admit I liked seeing her squirm for a change.

"Someone's going to have to reconnoiter the strip clubs and biker bars," she added.

I thought Drat was going to shake something loose, the way he jumped about waving his hand in the air. "Oh, Oh. Pick me. Pick me!"

Leanne's eyes narrowed as she stared the troll down, but she sighed and said, "All right, Drat, but take Charlie with you. Charlie, you make sure he behaves."

Charlie had that "you've got to be kidding" look on his face, but he jammed his hands in his jacket pockets and nodded nevertheless. Telling someone they had to make sure Drat behaved was like volunteering to be the drummer for Spinal Tap. You just knew it was going to turn out badly. Personally, I wondered how someone that looked like Denis the Menace was going to get into a strip club.

"Sabrina, you and Alex talk to Greg. See if you can find out why Azrael wants him. Mrs. Decker--Alice--I'm sure it's safe for you to go home now. I've already sent people to your place to repair the damage the Dark Sidhe caused tonight, but if you don't mind I'd prefer you stayed here. I'd...well, I'd rather not take any chances. And we really could use help holding down the fort."

Mom smiled. "I'd like that. Maybe it'll give us a chance to get to know each other a little better." She walked over to the table and frowned at Josh as she wiped at it with her dishtowel, cleaning up the crumbs he'd left. Apparently Leanne and Sabrina weren't the only bossy women in the house. Alex was the only reasonable one, but give her time; she's still young.

"I'll see if I can locate Skatha," Leanne said, and tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "Maybe Thomas knows where to find her."

I frowned at that, but if Leanne saw she didn't let on. Thomas and Leanne had had a thing, oh, five hundred years or so ago. I knew I shouldn't be jealous of an old flame, but we're talking Thomas the Rhymer here. Chicks always go for the musicians.

"Tam-Lien," Leanne began, but whatever task she'd had in mind to assign the Eternal would have to wait. Tam-Lien had vanished.

Everyone sat around in awkward silence for a moment. "Well, any questions?" Leanne finally asked.

Drat bit down on the neck of the wine bottle and ground the glass between double rows of teeth before swallowing. He pointed to the empty bottle on the table. "Yeah, are youse gonna finish dat?"

Leanne sighed. "Be my guest."

Josh and I sat outside the zombie Joan's house in Josh's Beamer. If you're going to stake out a place you might as well do it in style. Besides, I still hadn't had a chance to replace my Jeep yet, and knowing the insurance company it would be ages before they'd cut me a check.

Joan lived, sort of, in a run down bungalow with a rickety, white picket fence. Someone had broken away several of the wooden slats, and the fence to the left of the wood panel house looked about to fall over. The pastel blue siding was faded and peeling, and the lawn looked like it had been mowed the old-fashioned way--with a

scythe. Long tufts of grass jutted up out of the inch or so of snow that was still falling in wet, heavy flakes from the overcast sky. The only thing missing was a couple of old wrecks on the front lawn, although the rusted-out station wagon in the gravel driveway seemed a likely candidate.

We'd parked down the block a bit, just behind a bare lilac bush in the driveway of an abandoned six-plex. The Beamer was definitely conspicuous in this neighborhood, but we were well hidden; the newly fallen snow had done a bang-up job of covering our tracks. Our vantage point afforded us a clear view of the zombie's home, yet kept us out of site and well away from the one working streetlamp.

So far the stakeout had been uneventful. There'd been little if no movement in the house. A single light shone through the Venetian blinds of the living room window, the only indication that anyone might actually be at home.

Josh chewed noisily on a piece of spiced beef jerky, and offered me some from the cooler at his feet. I wasn't hungry, but what the heck, why should he be the only one with stinky breath in the cramped confines of the car. They guy was constantly eating, but I suppose werebeasts burned up an incredible amount of calories. After all, he'd managed to keep his girlish figure.

Josh took a sip of his Big Gulp, then turned to me and said, "I still say pound for pound Scooby Doo would kick Bugs Bunny's fuzzy ass any day."

I almost snorted coke through my nose on that one. "Yeah, maybe in Bizzaro World. Bugs defies the laws of physics just for kicks, whereas Scooby won't even get off his pointy-eared butt unless there's a Scooby snack in it for him."

Josh looked sideways at me. "Dem's fight'n words."

I held up my hand as if to slap him. "Why I oughta."

He tried to poke me in the eyes with the two fingers of his right hand, but I got my hand up sideways in front of my face just in time for the block.

He frowned. "Wise guy, eh?"

"Nyuck, nyuck, nyuck."

Hey, I never said we were rocket scientists.

Just then the light went out in the living room window. The clock on Josh's CD player said 10:30. Whoever was home was probably just going to bed.

"Do zombies sleep?" I asked Josh.

"Zombies don't, but they're handlers do."

Handlers. Better than masters, I suppose. Even the Otherworld seemed to suffer from political correctness now.

I set my Pepsi down in the cup holder. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Josh grinned. "Yep, we'll give whoever's in there forty-five minutes to fall asleep, then I'll hum the 'Mission Impossible' theme music while you break in and take a look around."

That's why Josh and I get along so well. We're on the same wavelength. Sure, it's a distorted wavelength on a channel no one else gets...

We waited another fifteen minutes, discussing the merits of Curly versus Shemp, when a van rounded the corner and pulled up in front of Joan's house. The side door slid open, and four big dead bikers got out. I guess even zombie bikers are smart enough not to ride Harleys in the snow. Another one got out the passenger door, while the driver remained seated. The driver was a vamp; I could sense the sick, twisted aura even at this

distance. I couldn't blame him for staying put; I suppose it's hard to play the Big Bad driving a minivan.

I started to get out of the car, but Josh restrained me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Hold on a second," he said. "Something smells off."

I shrugged and sat back in my seat. I'd learned to trust Josh's nose, especially since it was all black and wet at the moment, with whiskers sticking out the sides. It kind of freaked me out when Josh semi-morphed like that.

The four zombies shuffled toward the house. They were the cheap, vampire-made variety--not like the two raised-from-the-dead models that erupted up from the front lawn in a spray of dirt, grass and snow.

Josh took another sip of his Big Gulp and settled back in his seat. "Ooh, this should be good. Now I wished I'd brought popcorn."

The two sentinel-zombies didn't look like bikers at all--more like muscle for the mob, or teamsters. At a guess I'd say they'd been dead since the seventies. They both wore dark, moldy suits, musty white shirts, and moth-eaten ties. Oh, and brand new fedoras. I guess even zombies have their priorities.

The biker zombies advanced on the mob zombies, and even though they outnumbered them two-to-one my odds were on the goodfellas. The resurrected undead are tough--and I don't mean dry and stringy, no matter what Drat says. Maybe it's the old "you get what you pay for" syndrome, but they have it all over cheap, vampire-made zombies. Also, it didn't hurt that these ones happened to be carrying machetes.

"I'd say our necromancer and Azrael have had somewhat of a falling out," Josh commented as the zombies attacked each other on the front lawn.

The fight lasted longer than it should have, only because zombies aren't the fastest moving minions the Otherworld has to offer. When it was all over, only one of the mob zombies was left standing, and it was missing an arm.

The vamp didn't seem happy at all. I guess it didn't like the idea of having to get out and get its hands dirty. Or maybe it had found an oldies station it liked and didn't want to be interrupted right in the middle of a good tune. Regardless, it looked even more pissed than usual when it stepped out of the van.

If we were going to get anything out of whoever was in that house, we were going to have to get to him first. "Time to move out," I told Josh.

"I just love it when you get all military on me," he said as he got out of the car. "Quick, tell me what time it is again?"

"Twenty-two forty-five."

"Hoo-ah!"

The vamp made short work of the zombie. I doubt the creature even saw it coming. Zombies may be strong, but vamps are fast. It picked up a machete, decapitated the zombie, and was headed for the porch before the thing's head had even hit the ground.

The vamp was dressed all in biker leathers, too, but not the authentic stuff. It wore the really expensive designer leathers the rich preppie wannabes wore--the lawyers and accountants playing bad-boy on the weekends. Its long, copper-red hair was tied back in a ponytail.

I knew this vamp; it was the one I'd met when I'd first been changed. The one who's neck I'd broken when the Jeep had gotten a flat on the way to Leanne's that first time.

I was waiting for it on the porch when it arrived. "Do you have an appointment?"

It's not often you get to see a startled look on a vamp's face. There's usually that sneer, or that hissy-face they make, but startled is rare. I liked startled.

It swung at me with the machete. Had I been mortal I'd have been just as dead as the zombie it had decapitated. Well, maybe more dead. Or...well, you know what I mean. I caught its hand at the wrist and used its arm as leverage to swing the vamp around and slam it up against the front door. I bent back on its wrist until its fingers opened and it dropped the machete.

"Tsk, ts. No appointment, no tie. We don't let just anyone in here, you know," I said as Josh joined us on the porch. I emphasized the point by slamming the vamp hard up against the door again.

The vamp made that hissy-face--how cliché--and then kneed me in the stones. My sensi was right; being first makes all the difference. It wrenched its arm free, and then put its shoulder into the door. The doorframe gave way in a shower of splintered wood and the door toppled over and into the house with the vamp on top of it.

A wave of pain and fire hit me as I tried to follow the vamp inside. I was thrown back into Josh and the two of us tumbled down the porch steps and onto the sidewalk. It was the same agony I'd experienced while confined to the pentacle in the alley. At least I forgot about my aching testicles.

"What the hell?" I swore as I picked myself up off Josh.

The vamp taunted me from the doorway. "It seems you're the one without an invitation, Eternal."

Josh rushed past me and up the steps in full werebeast form. "Damn it, James, he's right. This is someone's home. You have to be invited in."

Josh hit the vamp waist high and the two careened into the house amidst the crash of broken furniture. That's right, my friend engaged the enemy in a fight to the death while I stood by helplessly outside on the porch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Josh sailed past the door, followed by the sounds of splintered wood and shattered glass. At a guess, I'd say he took out the dining room hutch. I heard him howl, and a small end table soared by. There was the dull thud of wood on bone, and then the vampire cursed. I assumed it was the vampire because I'd never heard Josh use the phrase "pox-ridden whoreson" before.

Josh charged past the front door again just as a light went on in the rear of the house. A frail looking man in his early forties stood in the hall entrance to the living room. His dark hair was thinning, and he wore heavy, black-framed glasses that contrasted sharply with his pale, thin face. His pajamas had little horses and horseshoes on them, and he carried a crucifix in one hand and machete in the other. Taylor Gilliam looked like an accountant, or a bank teller--necromancer wouldn't have even made the top ten.

He backed up against the wall and clutched the crucifix to his chest as Josh and the vamp trashed his living room. Josh tackled the vamp and they both careened into the entertainment unit against the far wall, making kindling of it. Gilliam looked to the front door, probably hoping to make good his escape. That's when he saw me.

"Invite me in," I shouted.

He shook his head no. For all he knew I was just another vamp sent here to kill him.

I pushed towards the entrance but the hellfire hit me again and shoved me back. "You have to invite me in or I can't help you."

There was a meaty thud, and the sound of a body hitting the floor. I turned to see the vamp standing over Josh with a heavy, wrought iron candlestick holder. I couldn't tell if Josh was unconscious or dead. The vamp didn't seem to care. It dropped the weapon and advanced slowly on the occupant of the house.

Gilliam looked at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to invite me in, but then he whimpered and held the crucifix out in front of him. A cross will burn a vamp if you touch it to them, but they won't shrink from the sight of one like they do in the movies. The vamp was on him in an instant, batting the crucifix out of his hand and hoisting the doomed man above its head. The necromancer's spine snapped as the vamp bent him backwards almost in two, then threw the body to the floor.

Whatever binding prevented me from entering vanished. I can only assume that with the occupant dead, the house was no longer a home. I killed the vamp the same way it had killed the zombie in the yard. Its head hit the floor before it even knew it was dead...deader--damn, this gets confusing. Anyway, it had just enough time to make that hissy face at me before head and torso erupted in a geyser of flame. In a few moments all that was left of the vamp was a slag of charcoaled bones and a charred Rolex.

I ran over to where Josh was climbing groggily to his feet and rubbing at the goose egg on his forehead. He was in man form now--I don't think he can hold his animal shape when he's unconscious--and the bump was already discolored. I tried to check his eyes to see if the pupils were evenly dilated--to make sure he didn't have a concussion--but they glowed that weird cat-eye green, reflecting the light from the back room, and I couldn't make heads or tails of them.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I think so. I feel hung over, but without that pleasant vomit after taste." Josh sniffed, and made a face. Barbequed vampire is a pretty distinctive aroma. "The vamp's dead?"

I helped him the rest of the way to his feet; he still looked a little unsteady. "Yep. Unfortunately so is Gilliam." I indicated the broken body, the soles of his feet touching the back of his head.

"We'd better take a quick look around and then get the hell out of here," Josh said. "Someone might have heard the ruckus and called the cops."

"You check the back rooms; I'll check the basement," I said. Josh was still a little wobbly. The last thing I needed was for him to take a header down the stairs.

I found the door to the basement in the hallway, opened it, and flicked the light switch on as Josh made his way around the corpses to the back of the house.

The stairs were wooden, but sturdy, with a handrail, and plastic skid mats glued to each step for safety. The basement hadn't been finished. It was more of a cellar really, with wooden beams overhead, brick walls, and a dirt floor. As I climbed slowly down the steps I could make out a tool bench up against the far wall. Tools hung from a pegboard behind the bench: hammers, saws, drills, screwdrivers--nothing out of the ordinary. It wasn't until I reached the bottom of the stairs and could see around the furnace and hot water heater, that I saw the table, and the cauldron. The table was stainless steel--a morgue table--little more than waist high, with restraining straps. A black iron cauldron perched in a tripod at the head of the table. A small fire burned beneath it, nothing more than hot coals now. Gilliam had used a small rotary fan to blow the smoke from the fire into a ten-inch plastic hose connected to the dryer vent to keep the basement ventilated.

A twenty-pound bag of rock salt was propped up against the table, and a small sewing kit--an assortment of needles, threads, and thimbles--sat on the upper right corner. An oak cabinet stood to the right of the table. Its doors had swung open to reveal numerous jars, the contents of which I'm sure I'm better off not knowing. The lid of one of the jars had popped off, and red, clawed tentacles draped over the sides of it--we're not talking granny's preserves here. Well, at least not my granny. I'm no practitioner of the dark arts, but it certainly looked like a do-it-yourself zombie kit to me.

I caught the glint of something bright and shiny out of the corner of my eye. Lying beside the table just on the other side of a concrete structural support, were two gold plates. One was circular and engraved with what looked like a bull being hunted by several warriors. The second one looked familiar. I'd seen it in the photo Greg had shown me--a rectangular plate depicting a large figure holding a smaller human figure upside down and about to immerse the victim into some sort of vat. Apparently the biker zombies had stolen it from the Richards' place. Dollars to doughnuts--whatever that means--I'd bet the two plates were what the vamp had come to retrieve.

Well, there was no sense in letting them go to waste. I found an old Adidas bag hanging on a nail from the support beam, and checked it to make sure the bag was empty. It would be just my luck the necromancer would have kept his stash of deadly scorpions there. Well, it *could* happen. It's not like scorpions know how to work the zipper, right? So, I placed the plates inside. The dang things were heavy, too.

I did a quick scout of the rest of the basement, but I don't think I missed anything important. No bodies waiting to be resurrected, magic wishing mirrors, rings that made you invisible and were cursed by the essence of an ancient Dark Lord--you know, that

sort of thing.

I made my way back up the stairs and saw Josh standing at the end of the hallway, looking through the doorway into one of the bedrooms.

"I think I've got what we came for," I said. "Time to go."

Josh stood there, staring into the bedroom. I thought maybe the blow to the head might have been more serious than I'd at first thought, but once I got a look into that bedroom...

Joan Gilliam was laid out on a big white canopy bed, covered in frilly white lace and surrounded by stuffed animals. A pink comforter was pulled up to just above her waist. Hello Kitty pajamas barely concealed the sharp angles and hollows of dried flesh against brittle bone. Soft, vanilla scented candles cast flickering shadows about walls papered with photos. Here a family portrait--the doting father, a loving wife, and a beautiful, vibrant daughter posing on the lawn in front of a house much nicer than this one. There were the pictures of just the two of them--the father looking slightly haggard, and the daughter--with the wife inexplicably missing. Then came the photos in the hospital. The girl, surrounded by flowers, a Hello Kitty bandana covering her shaved head. And the newspaper clipping: Local Kiwanis Club Raises \$5000 for Joan's Struggle Against Leukemia.

Joan was truly dead now. The necromancer's--her father's--death had broken the spell that animated her. Had he seen the monstrosity he'd made of his daughter, or only the glamour his magic presented him with? Or had he seen her only through a father's eyes, with a magic all their own.

I knew what Josh must be thinking. What if Sabrina was gone, and it was his little girl taken from him? How far would he go to bring Alex back? To what hell could he descend; which demon would he bargain with?

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Let's go. There's nothing for anyone here, now."

Josh shivered, although it wasn't cold in the house. "The papers are going to have a field day with this," he said.

We turned and left the house. As we passed through the front door I heard scrabbling sounds from the basement, and from within the walls. Goblins, here to feast and clean away any trace of magic happenstance in a mundane world. They'd make short work of the zombies and the vamp; would they eat the necromancer too? It made me wonder how many missing persons cases could be accounted for by the death of Other World beings that passed themselves off as human. No matter, they wouldn't leave much for the reporters.

I threw the Adidas bag into the trunk of Josh's Beamer and we fled the scene before the cops showed up. The Beamer left unsightly tracks in the pristine snowfall that covered the road out to the highway. It didn't matter. Suddenly Kingston didn't seem so clean anymore.

We found a parking spot on Princess Street only about a block from the bar where Thomas was playing. I'd used Josh's cell phone to call the mansion, and Mom had answered. Greg was upstairs sleeping. I guess Leanne's spell had worked like...well, like a charm. Sabrina was in the study doing research. Mom and Alex were playing cards in the kitchen, but Alex still had school the next day, and Mom had pulled the early shift, so it was bedtime soon. None of the others had returned yet, which was why Greg and I had

decided to check up on Leanne and Thomas. And it had nothing to do with the fact that I was jealous, cause I wasn't. Honest.

There was a line-up outside the bar, which was surprising on a weeknight. That just goes to show you how well Thomas' band was doing. But then what would you expect from a bard? I could hear the muted sound of music coming from inside. It sounded--ordinary--and I couldn't see what the fuss was about until I realized that it *was* ordinary. It was canned music; the band must be on a break.

Josh and I walked to the front of the line. The rest of the throng that shivered out in the cold waiting to get in stared angrily at us. Band members often leave a list of names of friends and such at the door. I could only hope that Thomas had, and that our names were on it.

The bouncer was a shaved-headed behemoth in black jeans and a black T-shirt with the bar's logo on the front. He looked Josh and I up and down, not sure what to make of us. Maybe it was the fact that I looked a little older than most of the present clientele, or maybe it was just that Josh and I were wearing matching outfits at the moment. I mentally kicked myself for not changing out of Goibnu's enchanted clothing. That's the problem with letting your mental image of yourself control your appearance; you tend to shift into a kind of standard mode when your concentration slips.

Luckily our names *were* on the list, and the bouncer let us in. Come to think of it, Thomas had the gift of prophecy; maybe he'd foreseen our arrival.

As soon as we were through the door I ducked into the men's room. My clothes shimmered and became a pair of black cargo pants and a burgundy shirt with a Chinese collar and black frog buttons. Hey, just because I can conjure up clothes at will it doesn't mean I know how to dress myself.

The first time I'd done this I'd worried that the clothing wasn't really there, that it was all just a glamour and the Other Realm folk would see me as I actually was; naked. But I'd checked myself out in a mirror, and lo and behold--clothing. Now if I could just manifest a little style. Most of my clothes still looked like I bought them at Wal-Mart's.

I joined Josh, who was still waiting for me outside the men's room, and we entered the bar proper. The place was jammed, the press of bodies enough to make me wonder if the cantina at the entrance really sold nachos as advertised, or Soylent Green.

Thomas' music had done more than draw Kingston's youth to this place; it had brought the Sidhe as well. And the Sidhe, in turn, drew a crowd all their own. They were like royalty, super models, and movie stars all rolled into one. Tall, graceful, beautiful and charismatic; humans were drawn to them as if they were fame and fortune incarnate.

I saw several of the Faerie that I recognized from Queen Aine's court. Worse yet, they saw us.

Badb's eyes lit up when she saw Josh. She'd been all hot and heavy for him last time we'd been in Summerland. Apparently her ardor for him hadn't cooled. The crowd parted for her as she strolled with feline grace to where we stood by the bar. The dress she was almost wearing, two strips of red silk front and back held together by laces on either side, covered most of what decency required. Most being the operative word.

Badb brushed a spiral of long, blonde hair away from her azure blue eyes and bit her lower lip coyly. She draped her arms about Josh's neck and pressed herself tightly against him. "Miss me?"

"Not from that distance," I said.

Josh blushed, but Badb might not as well have heard me.

"I'm mmm....married," Josh said.

Badb tilted her head up to look the shapeshifter in the eyes. "Mortals," she said. "In a few short decades she'll be dead, and nothing you and I might do here tonight will matter to her one way or another."

That was definitely the wrong tact. Josh shoved her forcefully away and stormed off into the crowd.

Josh was a shapeshifter, a rather long-lived race by all accounts. Badb had hit a little too close to home. Maybe the sight of the zombie girl in her bedroom and the lengths her father had gone to keep her with him had acerbated the situation. Sabrina was human; Josh would outlive her at least four times over. Alex was of mixed blood, and an Innocent to boot. There was no telling how long she would live.

Badb shook her head wistfully. "Shapeshifters can be so touchy. It's the beast in them. Which is, of course, what makes them such fun in the first place." She caught the eye of a curly-haired, male-model-wannabe, blew me a kiss, and wandered over to the poor sap in search of easier prey.

I made out the top of Josh's head as he forced his way through the crowd toward the stage at the other end of the bar. I took a couple of elbows to the ribs as I pushed through after him. That trick the Sidhe had of parting the multitudes before them would have come in handy right now.

The stage lights came up and a hush fell over the crowd. The band was about to start their next set, which meant I'd have to wait to talk to Thomas. I looked around for Leanne but couldn't spot her. There weren't any empty tables, and no place to stand at the bar. The only empty space seemed to be on the dance floor, and I sure as hell wasn't going out there. It was just as well. Once the music started it wouldn't stay empty for long.

I caught sight of Josh again just as the first soft strains from Thomas' twelve-string Rickenbacker mesmerized the crowd. Back in Summerland the guitar had been a bardic harp. I guess it was just another glamour.

I glanced up on the stage and saw Thomas. He'd been old when I first met him, but the Sidhe healer Dianchecht had restored his youth. He looked no more than twenty-five now, but one glance in his steel gray eyes belied his true age. He kept his long, black hair in a ponytail with a pewter Celtic clasp, drawing it away from what I guess you'd call a noble face--all high cheekbones, thin lips and a strong chin. He still had that malnourished musician look that even the heavy knit, brightly patterned sweater done all in earth tones couldn't hide.

Thomas spotted me in the crowd and smiled, although how he could see anything with the banks of colored lights that focused on him from the front and sides of the stage was beyond me. The last time I'd seen light that bright my dead relatives were calling to me from it.

Josh approached from a smaller bar set up to the left of the stage and handed me a Coke that no doubt cost more than the double of whatever it was he was drinking. Probably scotch, cause he's one of those manly men.

"You okay," I asked him.

He took a sip of his drink and shrugged. "I guess so. Damn Sidhe have a way of getting under your skin, though."

I finally spotted Leanne. She was up on stage. With Thomas.

"They certainly do," I said.

Leanne raised a long, wooden flute to her lips and blew a sweet counterpoint that undercut the melody Thomas crafted. The Rickenbacker called; the flute answered. The rest of the band joined in--acoustic guitar, drums, fiddle, keyboards, bass--and added an undercurrent of emotion that washed over the crowd. Suddenly everyone was thirteen again, feeling that first blush of young love: angst, longing, joy, anticipation, frustration, the thrill, the edginess, the elation. Thomas' band held the crowd spellbound, literally--and he hadn't even started singing yet.

The music had a Celtic undertone to it, but the rhythm was definitely Latino--or maybe it was African. No wait, it had to be Hip-Hop, I think. All right, so I couldn't put my finger on it, but I swear even I could have danced to it. As a matter of fact it was hard not to.

"I've been here every night since he opened over a month ago and I don't think he's ever played the same song twice," I heard a woman behind me confide to her date.

"That was her gift to him," Josh said.

At first I thought he was mumbling, that he was as enthralled by the music as everyone else.

He turned to look at me. "Whoever it was that Leanne loved was bestowed with the gift of inspiration."

I nodded. She had loved Thomas, once. Back before the Korrigan had taken her, turned her, and twisted her power. Maybe she still loved him.

Josh closed his eyes and rocked to the music. "She loves you," he said as if he'd read my mind.

Because there's no one else, I thought. I was the only one that could be with her and not suffer the fate that Thomas had once suffered. To age prematurely as she fed from his life essence. Lhiannan Sidhe was a vampire in more ways than one.

Thomas started singing then, something profound I'm sure, but I wasn't really listening. Not that it mattered. His voice added a deeper, hidden layer, made the melody personal, and dredged up sentiments some of us keep buried, and for good reason.

For some of us first love wasn't so wonderful. It was a crush on a girl we were too shy to talk to, or even approach. We suffered silently as she sat across from us in English, Physics, History and French. Became a complete idiot whenever she was around. Watched her date all the wrong guys. And all your friends knew how you felt about her. Maybe she did, too. But she never let on, it never amounted to anything, and eventually she moved away.

I watched Leanne up on stage with Thomas, watching the girl I wanted with someone else. The music changed tempo. It was frantic now, the harmonies discordant, the lyrics bleak. I felt like I was in High School all over again.

Leanne was Faerie, and at least a thousand years old. It was entirely possible that she might live an eternity. She had no doubt had countless lovers; the Faerie were promiscuous as a race to say the least. Badb's play for Josh was downright coy by their standards. I'd been a complete idiot to think that she might want me, love me, stay with me.

The song wound down, the vibrato wail of the Rickenbacker pale now as the mournful call of the flute faded to oblivion.

I had no business here. How could I have possibly imagined that Leanne...That I...

I had to get out of there, now. "I'll catch up with you later," I told Josh, who nodded, but I'm not sure that he heard me. It didn't matter. I turned to leave and almost ran over Aine, Queen of the Seelie Court.

Aine was willowy, with long, golden hair, milky-white skin, sparkling blue eyes, and rosebud lips. Cherry blossoms fell at her feet seemingly from out of thin air.

She smiled down at me as two small Sprites flitted about her head trailing sparkling faerie dust. "An interesting spell the Bard has woven, wouldn't you say?"

I nodded, and took a step back. "Yeah, the crowd loves him."

Aine had been none too happy when Thomas had come to Darkside with us. She and Thomas had also been an item. The guy got around. Musicians; go figure.

She looked up and waived to Thomas. The bard saw the two of us together and seemed to pale a little just before the stage lights died and cloaked the band in darkness.

"The loss is almost palpable. It thickens the air like a fog; the energies intertwine and converge here, where you stand," Aine said.

The Sidhe are so damn cryptic. I'd save a fortune on Tylenol if they'd just come right out and say what they meant. "Are you trying to tell me that Thomas cast a spell on me?"

Aine's eyes narrowed. Dark or not, she could still see Thomas on stage, and so could I. He looked nervous.

"Of course not. Thomas has simply enchanted his music--a rather potent entrancement of heartbreak and despair. And you happen to be at the nexus of it."

I gritted my teeth. "That bastard." I'd thought he was my friend. Hell, he probably was. Maybe he'd just spent too much time among the Sidhe. And all's fair in love and war, even among us humans.

I cleared my throat, more to disguise the growl than anything else. "Thomas and I need to have a little chat. He may have information I need."

Aine cocked an eyebrow. It *was* a rather civilized response considering what he'd just tried to do to me.

"Then I'm going to kick his ass. Hard."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"You bastard!" Leanne slammed Thomas up against the dressing room wall again. His feet dangled a few inches off the stained, tile floor as she held him upright by the throat.

"That's what *I* said," I commented smugly.

"What gives you the right to fuck with my love life?" She punctuated the question by slamming him repeatedly into the wall as she enunciated each syllable. "I'm so mad I could bite you."

At least Thomas had the presence of mind to keep his mouth shut. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"When you're done, can I play with him a while?" I asked.

Leanne turned her head and glared at me, her eyes that spooky vampire-red they turn when she's on the brink of losing control.

"Um...never mind." I should have followed Thomas' lead and kept my mouth shut, but then he had several hundred years of experience dealing with women. Not that it seemed to be doing him a lot of good.

"If you ever...I'll...I ought to..." Leanne's arm shook, and it wasn't because she was tired of holding Thomas up, either. I could see the tendons in her hand twitch as she ached to choke the life out of the bard. She screamed suddenly, a terrible, raw cry of frustrated emotion--like a woman who just realized she'd missed the half-price sale at Holts-Renfrew--and threw Thomas across the room. He careened upside down up against the threadbare cushions of the dilapidated, polyester couch that was one of the few furnishings in the band's dressing room. Thomas lucked out; I don't think she realized the couch was there when she threw him.

I made a mental note never to piss Leanne off. I mean, hell, she wasn't even PMSing.

My own anger at Thomas had subsided somewhat. Seeing Leanne deal with him in this manner did more to soothe the fears Thomas' spell had dredged up than anything she could have said. Oh, I was still going to kick Thomas' ass, hard, but it could wait until later.

Leanne stormed out of the room, pushing past Aine who stepped out of the doorway just in time. There was no love lost between these two, either. It was Aine who had sent Leanne as her envoy to the Korrigan so long ago, knowing full well that the Vampire Lord would turn her at the first opportunity. And all as a ploy to get Thomas to herself. What? You didn't think we were all just one big happy family, did you?

Aine crossed the room and sat down beside Thomas, who had finally managed to seat himself properly on the couch. She put her arm about the bard's shoulder and brushed the hair out of his eyes with her free hand. Thomas laid his head against her...um...let's see, tits is too vulgar....bosom. Yeah, that's it; he laid his head against her bosom as she comforted him. The big baby.

I moved just in front of them and squatted down, putting my head just about eye level with Thomas. He looked even paler than usual, but like I said, Thomas had the gift of prophecy. If he foresaw what I had in mind for him...

"You're going to kick my ass. Hard," he said.

Damn, he was good.

"Later," I said. "Right now I need information." Thomas relaxed slightly as I described the photos Greg had shown me of the gold plate stolen from the Richards' place. He'd heard about the incident with the zombie on Princess Street earlier, of course, and about my car blowing up, and Leanne had filled him in on the attack at my mom's place, and my meeting with Azrael.

What?

Fine, Leanne had filled him in on how Azrael had *kicked my ass*. Satisfied?

All that was left was to tell him about the necromancer's death, and the plate we'd found there.

Thomas straitened up suddenly, but Aine didn't seem to mind. She seemed awfully interested in what I had to say, too.

"Do you have it with you?" she asked after I'd finished describing it to him.

"Sure, it's in the trunk of Josh's car," I told them.

Aine's eyes widened. "Bran's Cauldron," she said. "Someone is gathering the pieces of Bran's Cauldron."

Thomas frowned. No wonder he'd grown tired of her; she probably told the punch lines to all of his jokes, too. Luckily for him, I had no idea what they were talking about.

I led them outside to where we'd parked Josh's car. It took us a while to get there, too, because Thomas had to fight his way through the crowd of well-wishers and sycophants that clambered for his attention as we made our way out. I saw Josh and Leanne doing shooters at a corner table, and figured I'd leave well enough alone. By the way, vampires can't eat food, but for some reason they can drink alcohol. Go figure. I only hoped Leanne was a happy drunk.

I didn't have the keys to Josh's Beamer, but a little physical manipulation, and a lot of trial and error on my part, and my index finger did a passable imitation of a key. Passable enough to open the trunk, anyway. Aine backed away from the trunk as it popped open like it was a claymore mine aimed in her direction. Iron is deadly to the Sidhe. She quickly overcame her fear, however, as I unzipped the Adidas bag and showed them the plates.

"It's Bran's Cauldron, all right." Thomas said. I swear he would have crossed himself had he still been a Catholic. "Or at least the base plate and one of the sides."

And here I always thought cauldrons were big black kettle-like contraptions. Apparently I thought so with my outside voice, because Thomas answered me.

"Some cauldrons are built in pieces, like this one. Have you ever heard of the Gunderstrup Cauldron?"

He looked rather exasperated when I shook my head no. Personally I thought he was being rather snooty for a guy that was still going to get his ass kicked. Hard.

"The Gunderstrup Cauldron was found in a bog in 1891, near the hamlet of Gunderstrup in Northern Jutland. Sometime around the birth of Christ it was taken to pieces and apparently just left on the ground. It was originally made up of thirteen heavily decorated rectangular panels--eight external and five internal ones, and a plain bowl containing a fourteenth circular one. Anyway, it's a duplicate of Bran's Cauldron--Bran the Blessed--although the one found at Gunderstrup is purely ornamental, and made out of silver."

The only thing worse than a musician is a know-it-all musician.

"Thank you Mr. Peabody," I said. "Wait here while I set the co-ordinates on the

Wayback Machine."

I felt awash in satisfaction at the perplexed look on his face. Hey, I can come up with vague references that would stump Ben Stein. Um...like that one.

"The real cauldron, Bran's Cauldron, was lost to us almost two hundred years ago," Aine added.

It was obvious this Bran's Cauldron was something the two of them were almost in awe of. The way they talked about it, you'd think it was a holy relic or something.

Suddenly something Thomas had said struck me as odd, or at least more odd than usual. "You said the Gunderstrup Cauldron was purely ornamental. Just what does the real cauldron do?" I asked.

That smug look came over Thomas again. "It resurrects the dead, of course."

Mental note to self. Kick Thomas' ass. Hard.

I rounded up Josh and Leanne and we all headed back to the manor. Thomas still had a set to finish before the night was out, and told us he meet up with us in the morning. Aine stayed with Thomas. She'd refused to ride in the car, and positively wilted at the thought of being surrounded by all that metal, which was just as well because Leanne was pissed to the gills and insisted on belting out "Feelings" all the way home. It would have been a fitting revenge. Hell, after about the sixth chorus I had half a mind to send Leanne back to the Korrigan myself.

When we arrived at the manor Charlie and Drat were already waiting for us. It hadn't taken them long to track down the bar the vamps were hanging out in. Kingston really only has about three or four strip clubs. Hey, we're talking Kingston, Ontario here, not Vegas. Anyway, the two had managed to blend in well enough--apparently ogres and trolls aren't an uncommon site around the Nudie Bar scene--and after ascertaining that they had the right place they'd made a beeline for home. Well, not exactly a beeline. It seems ogres and trolls can hold their liquor only slightly better than faerie-vampire-ghost women can. The two had gotten the munchies and had stopped off for pizza, chicken, subs, *and* burgers on the way home. The location of the vamp's hideout would have to wait until morning, once the two had slept off their little binge.

I carried Leanne up to bed, undressed her, because I'm her boyfriend and it's allowed, and slid her under the covers. The warding spells were silent at the moment--I guess nothing evil was trying to get in--so I just sat at the foot of the bed for a while and watched her sleep. It wasn't fair that she should look so angelic, but then that was Leanne: one adorable mass of contradictions. And when the sun came up in the morning she would be Alison. I sat alone in the dark, grinning, and wondering if Alison would suffer the hangover Leanne had earned. If so, I'm sure she'd find a way to get even. Women were nasty that way.

It was a good three months now since I'd last slept, and I have to admit I rather missed it. There's something to be said for passing away a third of your life completely oblivious to what's going on around you. I think it's the French that call sleep "the little death", or maybe that's what they call an orgasm. Let's face it the French can be pretty weird. Anyway, that's what sleep had always been for me. Um, death, not an orgasm.

I never remembered my dreams. I'm sure I had them, but I never remembered them. So sleep for me had basically been a period of non-existence. Although that's not exactly true either, because there had always still been a sensation of awareness, of self.

And now apparently I'd never sleep again. Not the little death, nor the big one. You know, no matter how you say that it still sounds like you're talking about an orgasm.

I spent a couple of hours watching Leanne sleep. Gorgeous as she is, after a while it lost a little of its allure. I thought about going down to the kitchen for a snack, but that was just out of boredom. Luckily I couldn't gain weight anymore, either. Well, at least not unless I wanted to.

There was always TV--one of my all-time favorite pastimes, but Leanne only had basic cable, and what with this being Canada half the channels were off the air, and the rest were infomercials. I watched a newscast for a bit--something about a museum in Iraq being looted. Someone had stolen some dried up old bones they'd recovered in Umm al-Ajarib, a 5 km square ancient Sumerian burial site 400 km south of Baghdad. The bones were supposedly over five thousand years old. Yeah, I know, fascinating. I could always pop back to my place where I had satellite TV, but again--we're talking Canadian satellite TV.

I wandered the mansion for a bit until I came to the library. There was always the Internet. Maybe there was an un-dead chat room. I opened the double stained-glass doors to the library, but I guess Sabrina was having trouble sleeping too. She sat at the desk, in the dark. The reflected light from the plasma monitor washed the color from her face and cast the hollows in shadow, accentuating her bone structure so that she looked like one of the undead herself.

"Can't sleep?" I asked, stating the obvious.

Sabrina smiled a tired little smile and pulled the comforter she'd draped around herself a little tighter. The mansion could be downright drafty at night, and the plum-colored silk nightgown she wore wasn't designed for warmth. "Josh is restless tonight, kicking and thrashing about in his sleep. I figured I could either go fifteen rounds with him, or come down here and finish my research." She smiled up at me. "How about you? Busy keeping the world safe from the ravages of e-vil?"

"That's me," I said. "Wherever there is darkness, I'll be there....bumping into shit and tripping over the shoes in the hallway."

I crossed the library floor and rounded the desk to stand beside Sabrina. She had several web pages open. "Got anything yet?"

Sabrina nodded. "I did a Google search on the Gundestrup Cauldron. There's lots of information on it, or at least on what it looks like and where it was found. If it's a duplicate of Bran's Cauldron like Thomas says, then the two panels we have are the base plate, and one of the side plates. There are thirteen panels besides the base, eight external and five internal ones."

I sat on the corner of the desk. "So Azrael still needs twelve pieces before he has the complete set."

Sabrina shook her head. "Not necessarily. You're assuming the two panels Taylor Gilliam had are the only ones they've collected, but it's obvious he and Azrael had some sort of falling out." She tapped the keyboard, closing several of the web pages. "I think Gilliam intended to keep the panels. They gave him the power to bring back Joan. The more panels he collected, the greater semblance of life she had. It also explains the two different varieties of zombies: Azrael's cheap, vampire-made ones, and the ones Gilliam raised from the dead the old-fashioned way."

It made sense--to a point. "But if Azrael already has his own pieces of Bran's

Cauldron, why can't he raise his own dead?"

"Hey, it's just a theory." She leaned back more comfortably in her chair and yawned. "And a sleep-deprived one at that. Azrael, as powerful as he seems to be, may not be a necromancer. I mean, can *you* raise the dead?"

"Other than myself? Nope, I don't think so."

"And we still don't know exactly why Azrael would want to in the first place. Or who he might want to bring back. Bran's cauldron doesn't just create zombies. Legend has it that it truly brings the deceased back to life, albeit mute."

I raised an eyebrow at that one. "So he can bring 'em back, but they can't talk. Maybe he's trying to resurrect one of his old wives, just to get even."

Sabrina gave me that ha-ha-funny smile, the fake one you give when you don't really mean it.

"Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that we don't know exactly how many parts of the cauldron he already has, but here's an odd coincidence." She maximized one of the windows on the computer monitor.

"I did a little digging through John Richards' family history, the guy who had the safe with one of the panels in it stolen from his home the other night? It seems Mr. Richards' family dates back to Kingston's early years. Around 1834 to be exact. His great-great-great-great-great grandfather, a Captain William Richards, commanded a little steamer called the Enterprise between Perth, Bytown and Kingston. Before that Captain Richards was somewhat of a war hero. He joined the navy at the age of twelve, skirmished with pirates, slavers and the like in various seas, and survived through the naval battles of the war of 1812. Apparently without ever being seriously wounded."

"So you think he's the one that brought the cauldron to Kingston?"

Sabrina shrugged. "It makes sense. He's of Irish ancestry. Both his father and his mother were piked in their own house. He was saved only by the intervention of his nurse, who claimed him as her own child. And the fact that he survived all that warfare, in that day and age, relatively unscathed. I'm willing to bet Bran's Cauldron has pretty remarkable healing powers to boot. I mean, if it can bring you back from the dead, what's a little sword wound, or smallpox?"

"Sounds plausible enough," I said. It would certainly explain what Bram's Cauldron was doing in Kingston, Ontario. Captain Richard's could have acquired the cauldron on one of his travels. Hell, maybe it had been pirate booty. Or maybe his parents had been the original guardians of the cauldron all along. That bit about the nurse stepping in and saving his life sure sounded like faerie intervention to me.

"And finally there's this," Sabrina said, and clicked open another window on the monitor. "It seems Raymond Burke, the owner of Ye Old Antique Shoppe, is John Richards' brother-in-law."

I stood, and paced back and forth in front of the desk while I tried to digest the information Sabrina had just fed me. "That's why the biker zombie attacked his store. The Richards must have broken up the cauldron and passed the pieces off to the rest of the family. That's what Brutus was looking for when he busted up the place."

Sabrina nodded, and closed the remaining windows. "Only you showed up and killed him before he could find it."

"So odds are Azrael is still missing at least three panels before he has the complete cauldron--our two, and the one Raymond Burke has."

Sabrina nodded. "At least."

I grinned down at her. "If you weren't married to a three-hundred pound wolf-bear-man thing, and my best friend, I'd kiss you."

Sabrina stood, and adjusted the comforter across her shoulders. "You know what I love about you? I know it's the best friend part that's stopping you, not the three-hundred pound beast thing." She kissed me on the cheek as she left. "I'm off to bed. I figure if I have to I can always tie Josh down. He likes it when I do that."

Why is it that the women in this house can't exit a room without making me blush?

I decided I might as well have that snack after all, but when I got to the kitchen Drat had already beat me to it.

"Hey, youse. How's it hang'n?" Drat asked around a mouthful of spare ribs.

"Down and to the left," I told the troll, and opened the refrigerator to see if he'd left anything. There was a plate of leftover roast beast, already sliced into sandwich-sized slabs, so I grabbed it and a jar of mustard and closed the fridge door.

"How're the wedding plans coming?" I asked as I found a crusty bun. I managed to hack it in half with a bread knife that looked like the one Norman Bates had used to kill Janet Leigh with in the shower scene in *Psycho*.

Drat took another bite from the rack of ribs, his double row of teeth shredding the meat and bone alike. "Fugget aboutit," he said. "Tirade wants ta hire a country band so as we can all line-dance, but I says we go wit da more traditional polka band."

I finished constructing my sandwich, then put everything away. Okay, so I'm not usually this neat, but I kept picturing Leanne holding Thomas by the throat and slamming him into the wall. For all I knew, maybe she *was* PMSing. As an afterthought, I made sure to wipe up the breadcrumbs off the counter.

"You could always ask Thomas to play," I suggested.

Drat snorted. "Dat nancy-boy? He's lucky we'se even invitin him ta da weddin. Anyway, Charlie's see'n if maybe we'se could resurrect Dean Martin, or leastwise his ghost. Now *dat's* music should impress even da vamps *and* da man-mutts."

I agreed. Heck, I wouldn't mind seeing that myself. It sure beat polka music. And line dancing had to have been invented by some white boy with no rhythm. It always reminded me of military drill maneuvers.

Drat finally wandered off to bed. The sun would be coming up soon and a troll's internal clock is a hundred and eighty degrees out of phase with most humans in order to keep them out of the sun. Sleep all day, party all night. Just like frat boys.

So there I was, all by myself again. You'd think in a house full of vampires, ogres, trolls, shapeshifters and assorted creepy crawlies, there'd be someone to keep me company at night. Even Bear was off gallivanting somewhere. It's pretty bad when the only thing that goes bump in the night is me. I guess the dark just isn't as scary as it's all cracked up to be.

I made my way back up to Leanne's bedroom and opened the glass doors out onto the balcony, making sure to shut the curtains behind me. I thought I'd watch the sun come up over the St. Lawrence, but I didn't want to barbeque Leanne in the process. The new fallen snow that covered the back lawn, the gardens, and the trees was a nice touch. The storm had passed, and the sky was clearing. It was still windy, and the waves were

choppy on the river.

As far as sunrises go, it wasn't bad. I'd become quite a connoisseur of them lately though, so I wasn't as easily impressed as I'd once been. The sun was only a little ways above the horizon when Leanne screamed.

I threw open the door and slid through the curtains, making sure I didn't leak any sunlight into the room.

Leanne sat up in bed, staring at me wide-eyed. Leanne, not Alison. "She's gone, James. Alison's gone."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What do you say when you're girlfriend tells you that the other woman she's been sharing you with is gone? Leanne may have been faerie, as promiscuous as that race is, but sharing me with the spirit of my dead fiancé still had to be...difficult. On the other hand, Alison's spirit had kept Leanne's demon at bay. Without it Leanne was right back where she started--constantly on the brink of losing herself to evil. I had to walk a fine line between expressing my grief that I may have lost Alison, and hurting Leanne. Whatever I said next had to be delicately put.

"What do you mean, gone?"

Leanne pulled the blankets up to her chin, covering herself, as if for some reason she suddenly had the need to hide from me. "I can't hear her any more," she said softly. "There's still something there, but...oh, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's not...her."

At first I didn't understand. Not that Alison was gone--that seemed self-evident--but the way Leanne was acting. It took me a moment to realize she was crying.

Vampires can't cry, or at least they can't shed tears. Not even tears of blood like in the movies. I don't know; maybe they don't have tear ducts or something. Or maybe true vamps just don't understand the emotion. Leanne may have had a vampire's physiology, but she was still...well, not human. Faerie. And the Fay understood the emotion all too well. So Leanne cried.

I crossed the room to the bed, sat down beside her, and put my arms about her--blankets and all. "It's not your fault," I told her. I believed that, even if Leanne didn't.

Josh burst into the room shotgun in hand, with Charlie close on his heels. They must have heard Leanne scream. They saw her huddled in her blankets, and me with my arm around her, and looked perplexed. To all outward appearances nothing was wrong. Charlie dug a finger in his ear, and Josh started to blush. Realization dawned. They thought they'd interrupted us in the middle of sex; that Leanne had screamed in ecstasy. Hey, it could happen.

"Alison's gone," I told them.

"What do you mean, gone?" Josh asked.

See, it wasn't such a dumb response after all.

I stroked Leanne's hair as she leaned her head against my shoulder. "Leanne says Alison's soul isn't with her anymore."

Leanne sniffed. Apparently vampires can't cry but they can still get runny noses. "That's not exactly right. Something, some part of her, is still here, still holding the demon at bay. It's just not...well...there's no personality."

Charlie knelt at the foot of the bed, his head still towering above us. "Then the important question is: where did she go?"

"And why?" Josh added.

"And how do we get her back?" I said.

Charlie sat on the floor with his legs crossed. He propped his chin in the palm of his hand, elbow resting on his knee--something I recognized as his thinking position. "This fusion of Alison's soul in Leanne's body is without precedent. For all we know Alison has moved on of her own volition."

I started to object but Charlie interrupted. When an eight-foot ogre talks, you listen. "Alison should have moved on long ago, James. Your grief at her loss was the only

reason she remained on this mortal plane of existence. You no longer mourn her death."

I shook my head in disagreement. "What about Sarah? She has as strong a hold on Alison now as I ever had."

Alison wouldn't have just left. Not without saying goodbye.

Leanne held my hand, interlacing her fingers with mine. "No one is ever really gone, James. I think you know that now. Death is far from final, and while you might miss Alison's company, would you really mourn her passing the way you once did?"

I stood up and jammed my hands in my pockets. "Why are you all so willing to give up on her?" I said, and stared them all down. Even Charlie wouldn't make eye contact. "Besides, Leanne said there's still something of Alison here. Something's happened to her. Something bad. I just know it."

Leanne looked up into my eyes. I saw the pain in her face, although whether it was her own or mine reflected back I couldn't be sure. "Maybe you're right," she said.

I hated to see Leanne hurt, knowing that I was hurting her. I was being insensitive, and I knew it, but I couldn't help myself.

"As I mentioned, the event is unprecedented," Charlie said. "It would take someone with much more knowledge of the immortal soul than I possess to answer this riddle."

"So who's the expert?" I asked.

Josh looked up. "Sister Juliet. If anyone would know, she would."

"Just swell," I answered as I stormed from the room. "We're going to go ask a catholic nun why the soul of my dead fiancée has abandoned my faerie-slash-vampire lover. That should go over well."

Even though the sun was up, we had to keep all the kitchen blinds shut tight. Now that Leanne wasn't Alison during the day, she couldn't handle the sunlight.

Conversation over breakfast was subdued to say the least. Josh must have filled Sabrina, Mom and Alex in on what had happened, because they were uncharacteristically quiet as well. Maybe I was being overly defensive about it, or maybe I was just cranky because I hadn't slept in three months. And maybe I should have apologized. But I didn't.

Greg wandered into the kitchen and sniffed at the air. No doubt the smell of frying bacon and coffee perking had finally dragged him out of bed. He looked like he'd slept in his suit, which he had. At least the dark circles under his eyes were gone, and his face had lost that haggard appearance.

"You're looking better this morning, for a cranky old fat man, that is," I said.

Greg stuck his tongue out at me and sat down at the kitchen table. Mom carried a frying pan over from the stove and scraped some scrambled eggs onto his plate. He thanked her, and grabbed some bacon and a croissant from a platter on the table. "I can't believe I fell asleep so fast last night," he said. "I don't even remember going to bed."

"That's because you didn't," I told him. "You passed out on the couch and Charlie carried you upstairs and tucked you in." I didn't see the point in telling him that Leanne had cast a spell on him.

He forked some scrambled eggs into his mouth, followed by a bite from his croissant. "You should have woke me up for the stakeout."

"You needed the rest," I told him, and poured myself a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice.

"I'll have plenty of time to sleep when I'm dead," Greg muttered as Mom handed him a cup of coffee.

I raised an eyebrow at that. "Don't count on it."

Sabrina and Alex excused themselves from the table. Alex still had school today, and it was Sabrina's turn to drive her. She got the keys to the Beamer from Josh and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Give your father a kiss goodbye, then go grab your coat," she told Alex.

Alex did as she was told, then came around the table and gave me a hug too. "You looked like you needed one," she said.

I hugged her back. "Thanks, Sweetie, I did."

She tilted her head and whispered in my ear, "Tell Leanne you're sorry, you big oaf."

I chuckled as all the aggravation I felt suddenly melted away. "I will."

I keep forgetting that Alex is much more than just a sixteen-year-old girl. She's an Innocent, and the real reason I do what I do. There's so much strength in her, and such a joy for life. When the world was falling apart, and we had followed the demon Aeshma to the damned city of Tae Con Ra to rescue Sabrina before he could sacrifice her during the Blood Moon ritual, Alex had calmly informed me that everything would work out. And she'd been right.

"Is everything going to work out now?" I asked her.

Alex pulled her long, red wool coat on and began to do up the oblong black buttons. "Things always work out, Bumper. Sometimes they just don't work out the way you want them too."

That wasn't exactly the most comforting advice I'd ever heard.

She slipped her mittens on and followed Sabrina out of the kitchen. A few seconds later I heard the front door shut, and the Beamer pull away.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Greg asked.

I looked to the others seated around the table: Leanne, Josh, and Charlie. None of them spoke up, so they must have figured that in the mood I was in they were better off letting me make the decisions. That wouldn't do. Hey, I know my limitations. I may have been the toughest guy at the table, but I was by no means the brightest. I get my ass kicked at Jeopardy on a regular basis. I needed their input, which meant I was going to have to apologize. Death sucks.

I cleared my throat. "Before we decide on a plan of attack, I want to apologize for my behavior this morning..."

"You don't have to apologize," Leanne interrupted. "You're right, we did give up too easily."

She had this guilty look on her face, as if *she'd* done something wrong. I'd been a cad, and she felt guilty.

"Still, I..."

Leanne came around the table and sat down on my lap. "You're so sweet," she said, putting her arms around me. "But let me make something perfectly clear. I'm not jealous of Alison. I never was. I'm faerie; you have to remember that and stop trying to apply your human morality to me." She grabbed my chin, tilted my head up and looked deeply into my eyes. "If anything, you hurt my feelings this morning by insinuating that I might be happy she's gone, that now I would have you all to myself."

"I don't think I could be so understanding, were the situation reversed," I said.

Leanne smiled. "Of course not. You're a human male, and a young one at that. Love is still all about sex and ownership. But you're going to live a very long time--maybe forever--and eventually you'll grow out of it." She kissed my forehead. "Until then I'm more than willing to play things your way."

This apologizing thing wasn't all that bad. So far I'd barely said a word. I wanted to tell her that she was wrong. That I would love her and only her for the rest of time, but the argument kind of lost validity considering I was already sharing her with Alison. Or at least I had been.

"I'm a terrible boyfriend," I said.

Leanne got up to help my mom clear the table. "Yes, you are. You can make it up to me by doing the dishes."

All right, so I didn't get off scot-free.

Mom pulled Leanne to her in a big hug. "I don't know if it matters or not, but I just thought you should know that I really like you."

If Leanne could have blushed I'm sure she would have. I couldn't help but wonder how much sense our conversation had made to Mom, or Greg. They didn't know about Alison's ghost, or that her soul shared residence in Leanne's body. But when I thought back on what we'd said there was nothing overly incriminating in our conversation. They probably assumed we'd had a fight because I thought Leanne was jealous over a past relationship.

Perhaps that was just as well. Mom still couldn't see Charlie for what he was. All she saw was the glamour he presented, that of a big, pug-nosed college linebacker in a crew cut and a letterman's jacket.

And Greg? Knowing him he probably had it all figured out already, having deduced it like Sherlock Holmes from obscure and totally unrelated scraps of evidence.

Greg set his coffee mug down. "So what's on the agenda for today?"

Sometimes he has to repeat things for us slow folk.

"Drat and I trailed the Vamps to an exotic dance club on Division Street out by the highway," Charlie said as I filled the sink with hot, soapy water. "It would be a good idea to keep tabs on the place. We might get a heads-up on what they're planning."

Leanne has a double sink, and I sudsed the dishes up good before rinsing them off under a spray of hot water in the second sink and setting them in the dish rack. "That makes sense. The sun goes down around four-thirty; once Drat wakes up you two head over to the nudie bar and keep us informed as to what's what."

Charlie blushed. I guess the term nudie bar was a bit too literal for him. He was awfully squeamish when it came to sex and sexuality. "I would like to make it clear that I take no pleasure in watching human females cavort about in the nude," he sputtered.

"That's okay," Josh said. "Drat takes enough pleasure in it for the both of you."

Charlie shook his head. "Ogres are not attracted to human females. They're not horny enough."

He was referring to the horns that protruded from his collarbones and elbows, and no doubt other places on his body, but Greg cocked an eyebrow, and Mom covered her ears and muttered, "Too much information."

Charlie tried to sputter something in explanation, but finally gave up and left the room, declaring he was, "Headed to the library to do some research."

"I think Josh and I should pay a visit to Sister Juliet at the school," I said. "Apologies aside, it's important we find out what happened to Alison's soul, and whether it's connected to our run in with Azrael and Bram's Cauldron."

"Ha! I knew it was you causing a ruckus at the school yesterday," Greg said.

I stuck my tongue out at him. Hey, turnaround is fair play.

"We should wait until dark, when Leanne can come with us," Josh suggested. "Sister Juliet may have to examine her; after all Leanne was Alison's last known address, so to speak."

I glanced over at Leanne, who nodded. "It might be better to do this at her home, though, and away from the school."

I finished wiping down the last dish, and started putting them away in the cupboards. "Yeah. Last time I saw her she warned me not to go back to the school again. Although I don't imagine she'll love me all the more if I show up on her doorstep."

Greg got up from the table and wiped the crumbs from his clothing. "I have to get home and change, and call into work. There's a few things I need to check on back at the office, and somehow I'll have to explain what happened to my staff car. I'll probably be doing paperwork for the next month and a half. And I'd better give Maggie a call and see how she's doing up in T.O. or she'll never forgive me."

Leanne walked over to Greg and pulled at the bandages on his neck. "The puncture marks are almost gone. Lucky for you vamp bites heal fast," she told him, and gave him a big hug.

Greg looked over her shoulder at me. I could see he was a little uncomfortable. He was never a touchy-feely kind of guy at the best of times. "You have my cell phone number?" he asked, and I nodded. "Good."

He squeezed Leanne back and she broke the hug. "Nice to see you again, Alice," he said to my mom. She was sitting quietly in the corner watching her son do the dishes, and savoring every moment of it."

Mom smiled. "We'll have to do it again sometime--without the giant bugs and demons and stuff."

Greg winked at her. "It's a date. Now can someone point me to a phone so I can call a cab?"

"Just a sec. I'll walk you out," I said, and folded the dishcloth over the oven door handle. I walked Greg back into the living room and pointed out the phone on the end table.

Greg's face lit up in approval. Leanne's phone was one of those old Victorian era models: a white porcelain princess-style phone with a gold-inlaid handset and rotary dial.

"Everything about the woman's classy," he said. "I can't imagine what she sees in you."

I tried to think of a witty rejoinder as he dialed the number for the cab, but something cold and wet shoved itself into the palm of my hand. Bear's shadowy form pressed itself against my leg.

"Hey, Bud. I wondered where you'd popped off to," I said. I hadn't seen him since last night, but he had a habit of disappearing for days at a time even when he was alive. Now that he was dead I tended not to worry too much about him. "Out scaring the lives out of cats I bet."

Greg finished up on the phone and I walked him to the vestibule. I slid open the

drawer in the antique hallstand, found the Berretta Josh had left there for me, and handed it to Greg.

He patted the Glock in the shoulder holster under his suit jacket. "I've got old Betsy here. I'm good."

"Is yours a magical weapon that never misses and comes with a never-ending supply of silver-tipped rounds?"

He scratched his ear. "I don't think so. No."

"Then take the Berretta."

"Don't mind if I do." He placed the Berretta in the shoulder holster and the Glock in the waistband at the small of his back. "Backup," he said. Then, "I thought silver bullets were for werewolves?"

I shrugged. "Me too. Ya learn something new every day." I heard the cab pull up outside and opened the door for him. "At least it'll give you a fighting chance, but remember; vamps are *fast*. Shoot first and let the forensics specialist ask the questions later."

I watched him drive away and wondered again what I'd gotten him into. Not to mention Mom. Leanne had had strong warding spells placed over Mom's house, and Greg's too, just to be safe. The Sidhe shouldn't have been able to enter Mom's house like they had, not without being invited. Apparently a threshold is pretty powerful magick.

Leanne had questioned Mom at length about it. Turns out some "pale-looking fellow" had come to the door that day collecting money for a charitable organization to help locate runaway children. Mom had let him in while she wrote out a check. There's a valuable lesson in there. If you're going to support canvassers, do it from you doorstep. I guess that's good advice whether they're hell-spawned creatures bent on evil, or Jehovah's Witnesses. Well, okay. Especially if they're Jehovah's Witnesses.

Mom didn't have to be at work until ten. I figured we'd drive her in once Sabrina got back with the Beamer. I came to the realization that there was just no getting around it. We were going to have to replace my Jeep. I'm sure *someone* would insure me. I'd have to ask Leanne if she had any of that faerie gold I'd read about. The kind that vanished or eventually turned into acorns or something. Serve the damn insurance companies right.

Anyway, Mom was going to have to go home first and change into her uniform, and I'm sure she'd want to check out the place. Leanne's workmen were generally of the Other Realm variety so you had to keep an eye on them. Last thing Mom needed was a portal to Summerland where her doorway used to be.

I was about to head back into the kitchen when Josh, Mom, and Leanne joined me in the living room. Josh had that strange look on his face. The one he usually gets when something embarrassing is about to happen to yours truly.

"Grab your coat, Necro Man. The games afoot."

I sighed, then reached into the hall closet for my winter jacket. It's usually best to humour the delusional.

"Necro Man?"

Josh elbowed his way past me and into the closet to get his own coat. "Yeah. It's your new superhero name. I hope you like it, because I plan on using it a lot from now on."

"I guess it's better than Man Mutt," I said.

"Point taken." Man Mutt is the term trolls use when referring to the were-folk, and it isn't complimentary.

"So where are we going?" I asked. "And how are we going to get there?"

Josh wrapped a plaid, wool scarf around his neck and donned black leather gloves. "Well, how is by boat. And as for where, it's time for Karate class. Get ready to have your ass kicked by a girl." Josh grinned. "Hard."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Remember when I said I didn't think Skatha lived out in the middle of Lake Ontario somewhere? Well, I was wrong. She may not have lived on the Great Lake, but you could get to her place from there. Sort of. Kind of. Almost. In a way.

Josh led the way along the cobblestone sidewalk and down to the back of the manor. The trees were heavy with snow, but someone, or something, had shoveled the sidewalk. Probably sprites, or leprechauns, or...shovel-bogeys. Those poor leprechauns must have frozen their shillelagh off, as it was bitterly cold out this morning.

Anyway, down past the gardens and fountains and whatnot, hidden just behind the trees, was Leanne's boathouse. I never knew she had a boathouse. Of course, I never knew she had a boat. Josh produced one of those big old iron keys and undid the padlock that secured the chains wrapped about the handles to the boathouse door.

Inside was a thirty-foot boat. It could have been a sloop, or a skiff, or a tug for all I know, although I'm pretty sure tugs don't have sails, and this one did. Actually, it had a mast. I couldn't see the sail.

"Do you know how to drive this thing?" I asked.

Josh walked around the boat, untying ropes and coiling them up like he knew what he was doing. "Yep."

"Thank god," I said.

"Lucky for us, though, the Neverland has a 24 HP diesel engine. I wouldn't want to be up on deck in this cold for all the mocha frappe lattes in Starbucks."

I climbed aboard as Josh finished unhitching the boat (I'm sure there's a nautical term for it--demooring?) then exited the boathouse through the door we'd entered by. About a minute later the two ceiling-to-water doors that faced the bay swung open, flooding the boathouse with daylight.

"I think I left some hot chocolate mix in the galley last trip out," he said as he came aboard. "Why don't you whip us up a batch?"

"Aye aye, Skipper."

Turns out, the Neverland *was* a sloop. It said so on the brass plate just above the fire extinguisher. She was 34'7" from stem to stern, and made of mahogany and teak wood. The main cabin, entered from the cockpit down three steps, was roomy, and well lighted due to the numerous ports and hatches.

On the right was a full galley equipped with a 3-burner propane stove, an oven, a large icebox, and a stainless steel sink. There were also cupboards and drawers for dishes and utensils and stuff. Just forward of that was a sofa that doubled as a single birth. The left side was taken up by a quarter birth at the rear, with a U-shaped dinette table that doubled as a queen-sized bed up front.

Just forward of that, through a small hatch, was the head--that's bathroom for you landlubbers--with a shower and a vanity area. Immediately to the right of the head was a teak hanging locker and drawers, and forward of this a generous vee-berth. The whole interior was done in teak, with burgundy interior cushions. I thought it looked downright cozy.

Josh started up the diesel engine while I lit the propane burner on the stove. I found a small pot, filled it with water from the sink, and set it on the burner as Josh nudged the Neverland out of the boathouse and onto the St. Lawrence. I found the hot

chocolate mix, stirred it in, and then poured the mixture into mugs for the two of us. It wasn't Tim Horton's by a long shot, but it would do.

"The Neverland can cruise at about six knots on a calm day like this," Josh said as I handed him his hot chocolate. "It'll take us about an hour and a half to clear the river and make the lake. How long it'll take to find Skatha after that is anyone's guess."

"She's expecting us, right?" I asked. Leanne had mentioned that she was going to try and contact Skatha, but come to think of it I didn't recall her mentioning whether she had or not.

Josh shrugged. "Let's hope so. Skatha can be...unpleasant...at the best of times."

Josh's estimate turned out to be on the money. An hour and a half later, with Simcoe Island behind us in the distance, he cut the motor and we just drifted. No sense in wasting diesel fuel going nowhere. There were heavy, grey clouds on the northern horizon that would soon bring overcast skies, warmer weather, and in all likelihood, more snow. I only hoped we were safely back on dry land before it arrived. Not that I doubted Josh's sailing ability, but I didn't relish the thought of trying to find Kingston again in a snowstorm using only a compass for direction. Okay, so I did doubt Josh's sailing ability.

As it turns out, the warmer weather arrived before the cloud cover, along with the fog. It didn't happen gradually, but all of a sudden, over the space of maybe five minutes.

"I doubt this fog is natural," Josh said, and dumped the remains of his now cold hot chocolate over the side. "Let's just hope it's Skatha's doing, and not some evil sea hag, or a haunted frigate crewed by the vengeful dead."

"You're just making that up," I said.

Josh sat back against the cushions in the cockpit and cocked an eyebrow in a "we'll see" attitude. Maybe he was having me on; maybe he wasn't. I sure as hell wouldn't want to play poker with the man.

We drifted about in the fog for a few minutes when a clear patch opened up ahead. "Man the oars! Ramming speed!" Josh ordered. "Oh, all right, I'll start the engine," he grumbled when I made no move to comply.

Hey, even I know a sloop doesn't have oars. It doesn't, right?

Josh steered us through the break in the fog towards an island that appeared in the distance.

"How do you know that's the right one?" I asked.

"I don't, but it's not on the charts so it's as good a place to start as any."

The closer we got, the more I became convinced he was right. I didn't remember any islands in Lake Ontario with snow capped mountains on them. I'm not talking those lame-assed Ontario mountains, either, but the majestic British Columbian Rockies variety. And I was positive none of islands had a leather clad, flame-haired warrior woman madly brandishing a Scottish claymore on their shores either. Well, at least not on the Canadian side.

Josh pulled the Neverland up against a dock that jutted out from the white sandy beach, and I jumped out and tied us off. It was still grey and overcast, but the temperature had risen considerably. It felt more like early fall now than winter, and the air smelled of seaweed, driftwood and salt spray.

Skatha met us at the beach before we'd even left the dock. It didn't really come as any surprise that she was faerie. She could have been sixteen, or thirty, her face smooth, her figure lithe and athletic. Only her eyes and her manner hinted that she might have

been older.

She was dressed all in black leather and red lace, tight, and form fitting, with leather pants, knee-high boots, and a leather jacket over a lace shirt. The leather was trimmed in lace at cuffs, sleeves and lapels, and was embossed with red Celtic designs throughout.

Skatha stood unsmiling, legs straddled, left hand on hip, and the claymore resting on her right shoulder as we approached her from the dock. "So you're the Eternal," she said in a thick Scottish brogue.

I looked her in the eyes--they were the brightest green I've ever seen--and her stare unnerved me, as if she had sized me up and casually decided on the most quick and efficient way to kill me. In a way it was refreshing; she was the first of the Fay women I'd met that wanted to do me in, rather than just do me.

"I'm James Decker," I answered.

"You move like a pregnant mountain goat," she said without malice. It was a simple observation, direct and to the point.

"You mean as in carefully and sure-footed?" I asked.

She moved past me to Josh, ignoring the comment. "You are his sword-brother?"

Josh looked as uncomfortable under her stare as I felt. His voice cracked, as if he'd just now hit puberty. "Yes, I am."

She turned and strode back towards the shore and a beaten dirt path that led off into the woods. Not knowing what else to do, we followed. The path wound its way through the forest and along the side of a steep hill. The footing was treacherous; one slip would have sent us tumbling down the rocky hillside. I managed to traverse the slope without too much difficulty, although I'm pretty sure I saw a pregnant goat up ahead of us slip and fall.

After a few minutes walk, we came to a ravine. A narrow wooden bridge spanned the forty-foot gap. It must have been magically constructed; there were no support cables, bracings, or even handrails, yet it looked solid. I peered down over the edge to where a raging river cut its way along the ravine floor two or three hundred yards below. A herd of strange looking animals--a cross between a hippo and rhino, with massive jaws and horns everywhere--wallowed in a shallow pool near the bank of the river.

Skatha stopped us at the bridge. "Before I agree to train you, you must cross the Bridge of Leaps." She looked at Josh. "Both of you."

His eyes widened. "What? Why me?"

Skatha shrugged. "I've not had a student in almost twelve hundred years. It's easier to train two than one." She smiled at Josh. "Besides, I'll need someone to demonstrate on."

Josh paled. "Swell."

I tried to reassure him. "How hard can it be? All we have to do is cross the bridge without falling off and plummeting a thousand feet into a herd of fierce hipponoceros...es. Hipponoceri? Anyway, the bridge is a good three feet wide."

"You go first, then," Josh said. Funny, but he didn't *seem* reassured.

"Werechicken," I taunted, and stepped to the foot of the bridge. I glanced at Skatha, who tapped her foot impatiently.

Why is it everyone's in such an all-fired hurry to get me killed? Sure, it's not permanent, but it still hurts like the dickens.

I slowly extended my right foot and set it lightly on the first wooden plank. The bridge tilted violently as the near side dropped and the far end rose like a giant seesaw. I caught myself at the last moment and scrambled back from the edge, saved only by my goat-like reflexes.

Skatha shook her head. "Why do you ken they call it the Bridge of Leaps?"

"Oh, sure, it's obvious *now*," I answered. I studied the bridge more carefully. The only way to cross would be to jump for the pivot point at the halfway mark, and then leap again for the other side. If you didn't hit the bridge dead centre, it would swing down and drop you to the waiting beasts below. Not that I was overly worried about them; the fall would probably kill me. "You know, you could have warned me."

Skatha frowned. "What kind of test would that be?"

I gauged the distance to the centre of the bridge and prepared myself mentally for the feat. I can't imagine how any mere mortal had managed it; even with a running start it was at least twenty feet to the middle, and another twenty after that to the other side. I don't think even an Olympic triple-jumper could've managed it, but maybe I'm wrong.

I glanced over at Josh. "If I die you can have all my stuff," I said.

"You can't die," he pointed out.

"Oh, yeah. Sucks to be you, then." I bent at the knees, pumping my arms to build up momentum, and jumped. I experienced that moment of panic just as my feet left the ground--the one that said there's no turning back now, and then I hit the mid-point hard so that the entire bridge rattled and swayed. It didn't tip, however, and then I was up, over, and on the other side.

Skatha looked downright disappointed. She turned to face Josh. "Your turn."

I was worried for him. Josh was in pretty good shape, but still. He shifted to werebeast form, and suddenly I wasn't quite so worried anymore. Concerned, but not worried. I sometimes forget Josh isn't exactly a mere mortal either.

"Here goes everything," he snarled, and ran at the bridge. I saw the massive muscles in his quads bunch as he hit the edge, and then he was sailing through the air. He landed maybe an inch or two past the halfway mark and the far side of the bridge dropped away suddenly as it tilted madly. He was airborne again before it had a chance to pitch him into the ravine, and he hit the ground in front of me. And kept on coming. Next thing I knew I was lying on the ground with three hundred pounds of shapeshifter lying on top of me.

"Get off me, you overgrown hairy shag rug." I tried to squirm out from under him and got a nose-full of werebeast armpit hair for my troubles. "And try using deodorant, or Carpet Fresh or something next time."

Josh scrambled to his feet and I followed suit. He had his back to Skatha as he shifted back to human form. "I don't suppose she missed all that," he said.

I tilted my head to get an unobstructed view around Josh. "Judging from the way she's banging her head against that tree? I'd say no."

Skatha appeared beside us suddenly. There was still birch bark embedded in the red welts in her forehead.

"Hey, you never said anything about teleportation." I said.

"I merely instructed you to *cross* the Bridge of Leaps. I *dinna* say *how*," she said, and stalked off down another pathway. Josh and I set off after her.

"So that's it. You'll train us now?" I asked once I'd caught up to her. She had one

of those long, woodsman's strides, and I found myself rushing to keep up.

"In the old days you would have risked the Dragon's Lair, but some laddie from Hollywood came snooping round and offered Draco a part in a moving picture. They had to get that fine Scots actor to do a voice-over, though. The real Draco lisped like a nancy-boy."

She shrugged almost apologetically. "We should be at the training hall in about a half an hour."

"How long do you think it will take you to teach us to fight?" Josh asked.

Skatha stopped in her tracks suddenly and turned so that I almost ran into her. Josh wasn't so quick and he rammed me, shoving me forward so that I knocked Skatha off her feet. Or would have, if she hadn't side-stepped at the last moment, stuck out her foot, and tripped me.

She knelt down beside me as I turned over and spit out grass. The dirt I decided to chew on for a while. "Well, normally I'd say a year, but with the two of you..."

"A year! I haven't got a year to spend playing Remo Williams. There's shit happening *now*."

Skatha shrugged, and offered me a hand up. "Time has no meaning here."

I took her hand warily, figuring she was just lulling me into a sense of false security. I half expected to end up in a flying toehold at any moment. "Okay, just to clarify things; Does that mean time doesn't pass here, or do you just have a limited vocabulary?"

Skatha looked sympathetically at Josh. "I understand now why he must learn to fight," she said, and strode off down the path once more.

True to her word, we arrived at the training hall in about a half an hour. Several buildings were nestled on the shore of a wide lake, with the mountains we'd seen from the boat as a backdrop. The training building was little more than a long hall of rough-hewn timbers built on a stone and mortar foundation. A thatched roof covered heavy oak support beams and pillars, with all four sides of the hall open to the elements. Straw-filled mats covered the floor, and weapons of all sorts hung from pegs driven into the support pillars. It looked like something of a cross between a Viking long hall and a Japanese dojo.

Skatha led us up stone-cut steps into the training hall. A--throne, for lack of a better word--sat upon a dais at one end, with a small charcoal brazier beside it, presumably for warmth. She stopped at the edge of the dais and turned to face us.

"You will undergo many tests and trials during your stay here, but I promise you, Eternal, that when you leave there will be none that can match you."

"How will I know when I'm ready?" I asked.

It seemed like an honest enough question. Little did I know then that Satellite TV had only recently been introduced to the Isle of Skye.

Skatha produced a small stone from a pouch at her side. "When you can snatch the pebble from my hand, it will be time for you to leave."

She had to be kidding. "Okay, sure," I said. "But could you make it some spare change instead. That way I can at least grab a coffee on the way out."

She frowned for a moment. "Done," she agreed.

Oh well, at least she didn't mention anything about passing her the Hibachi with my bare forearms.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"No, no! You're telegraphing it," Skatha complained from the sidelines. I could see that punch coming from a mile away."

"I couldn't," Josh said, picking himself up off the straw mat.

"You canna just spin into a man like that. Anyone with faster reflexes would've knocked you on your kister." Skatha moved to stand between Josh and I. "Spinning moves are grand, but only if you set them up first--like so."

Josh took up his fighting stance and backed away as Skatha jabbed twice with her left hand. She threw a right cross that almost connected, and used the momentum of the strike to twist her upper body, building up the torque necessary for the spin. Her leg whipped around and the heel of her foot stopped inches short of Josh's temple.

"The jab distracts the man. If you hit him with the cross, all well and good, but if not it sets up the spinning kick. Understand."

I nodded.

"Try it again," she said, and then rapped Josh on the top of the head with a knotted walking stick she'd taken to carrying lately. "And you, Boy, don't always move back. A quick step to the right or left is more effective. It puts you into a better position, and renders your opponent's kick useless."

Josh nodded also, and I allowed him to wipe the sweat from his eyes before we continued. I should have hit him then, when he was distracted, but I didn't. Skatha certainly would have approved. "In a fight to the death, there's no such thing as honor," she would say. "There's nothing fair about dying."

We fought on for a while, putting into practice what she'd taught us, or trying to. Every now and then she'd stop and correct us on some minor point that apparently made all the difference: keep your elbows tucked in, point your big toe, stick your tongue out to the right, not the left--important stuff like that there. In all honesty it *had* made a difference.

We'd been on the Isle of Skye now for three months, training. Practicing with weapons, without weapons, with one hand tied behind our backs, from our knees, blindfolded, and all the above combined. Josh had shown drastic improvement. I'll bet he could have taken me as I was when I first arrived, Eternal or no. Not now, though. Josh wasn't the only one who'd improved, although you'd never know it to hear Skatha talk.

She sat on the throne next to the brazier. Hickory scented smoke wisped from her long, ornately carved pipe. "I've seen drunken, one-legged dwarves with better balance than you."

I blocked Josh's kick. "Oh yeah? How many?"

"Two, and one of them was blind ta boot."

I sidestepped a second kick and hit Josh simultaneously with a palm-heel strike to the solar plexus and a ridge-hand to the forehead. His momentum carried his legs up into the air and he fell heavily to the floor with the wind knocked out of him.

I gave him a hand up as he rubbed at the sore spot on his chest. He flashed a crooked smile. "That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

"Bah," Skatha snorted. "That which doesn't kill you wasn't applied properly in the first place. Think on that while you're having lunch."

Josh brightened. We'd learned not to take meals for granted, which was

particularly hard on Josh, because...well, he has to eat. A lot. I don't, so forcing us to miss the odd meal was a rather ineffective training incentive where I was concerned. I'd pointed this out to Skatha, but she wasn't buying it. Truth is, I felt all the worse knowing Josh was the only one being punished for any lack of effort or skill on my part, a fact of which I'm sure Skatha was well aware. Guilt can be a real motivator, at least in my case.

It's not as if I didn't feel guilty enough already. Here I was merrily playing Qui Chang Kane and for all I knew Alison was dead--really dead, of the no coming back variety. And while I knew back in Darkside time had come to a standstill, three months had passed as far as I was concerned. Three months of not knowing what had happened to her. Of not doing anything to help, with no idea of where to even begin. Three months of living with the thought of losing her all over again nagging at me every minute of every day. What good would my newfound martial arts prowess do her? What did they expect me to do, kick Death's ass?

Maybe it was a good thing I didn't have to eat. I hadn't enjoyed food much lately anyway. Not that Skatha didn't put on a good spread.

Josh and I made our way to the dining hall where servants had set out platters of ham, roast beef, mutton, fresh bread, and hard cheese. There were a couple of pitchers of mead (fermented honey and water; who knew?) for Josh, who was apparently the only one who drank the stuff. Personally, I would have killed for a Diet Pepsi.

And in case you're wondering, mutton is the meat from a sheep a year old or older, as opposed to lamb, I guess. One of the serving girls told me.

Speaking of which, for someone who hadn't had a student in ages, Skatha had a hell of a lot of servants. Skatha was of the Fay, and probably Fay royalty at that. No doubt she had people to draw her bath, dress her, brush her hair and fetch her slippers. Her servants performed their tasks meticulously, never spoke unless they were spoken to, and never looked you in the eye. They would have fit right in at Martha Stewart's place. Personally, I found their attitude a little too Stepford Wives for my taste, but still...I mean, the last time I went through the drive-through at Wendy's the girl flipped me the bird for asking for extra ketchup. There's got to be a happy medium in there somewhere.

Josh had piled various slabs of meat onto a flat wooden plate, broken off half a loaf of crusty bread and a chunk of cheese, and carried it and a pint of mead over to a table beside the big open hearth at the north end of the dining hall. He sat at the bench and speared a slice of mutton with his dagger, then chewed around the edges of the meat.

Skatha didn't believe in proper eating utensils. As far as she was concerned if you couldn't kill someone with it, you didn't need it--although I had no doubt she could probably disarm a crack S.W.A.T team with a nothing but a napkin ring or a tea cozy. I had this mental image of her garroting Miss Manners with a limp linguine noodle while the woman was still debating which fork to use.

I grabbed some cheese and bread and joined Josh by the hearth. "How're you holding up?" I asked.

Josh finished chewing, then washed the mutton down with some mead. "Not bad. I really miss Sabrina and Alex though."

I nodded. "I don't know why they call it homesickness. After all, it's not the place you miss, but the people. Heck, I even miss Drat."

Josh grinned. "Did he tell you that Danny Devito is going to be at the wedding?"

"No. Really?"

"Yeah. Apparently he's Drat's cousin on his father's side or something."

I almost snorted cheese through my nose at that one. "Danny Devito is a troll?"

Josh rolled his eyes. "Well, duh."

Okay, so maybe it was rather obvious in hindsight.

Josh took another sip of mead. "Actually, he's only half troll, I think, which is why he can stand the sunlight."

I chewed on that, and a crust of bread, in silence for a bit while Josh attacked his lunch. If food were the enemy, Josh could have defeated an army single-handed--as long as that hand held a fork.

Alison had been the same way. For a little slip of a thing, the woman could eat like a horse. She ate more, and more often, than I ever had. And God forbid she should miss a meal, you'd think she was on PMS or something. And she never gained an ounce. The evil wench didn't believe in exercise, either. Then again, she never sat still, even at home. If she wasn't cleaning something, she was re-arranging it, or rebuilding it. And she was always going somewhere, and dragging me along.

"Hey, James, I said are you okay?"

I blinked, and looked up at Josh. His empty platter sat on the table in front of him and he had this concerned look on his face. I guess I must have fazed out for a bit.

"Yeah, I'm good."

Apparently the answer didn't satisfy him, because he just sat there staring at me, waiting for more.

"I just..."

I've never been a touchy feely kind of guy. I know people say that sharing your problems with a friend can be therapeutic, that it makes you feel better, but I never saw the point. Pouring my heart out to a three hundred dollar an hour shrink had never done a thing for me. She couldn't bring my father back, or Alison, or convince me that ensuring the plant met its production schedule made a wit of difference in the grand scheme of things. She certainly couldn't make me smarter, better looking, or rich. The only difference as far as I could see was that now both of us knew how I felt, and she had a couple grand of my money. Okay, so maybe *she* felt better.

But this was Josh. I'd been through Hell with the man. Well, maybe not Hell, but Summerland, and the Burrows, and the Ways, and Tae Con Ra. We'd fought demons, vampires, trolls, goblins--he'd even kicked Skeletor's bony metal ass for me. And he was here, now, missing his wife and daughter and getting beat up by a girl on a daily basis just so as I could learn how to fight. I owed the man.

I sighed, mostly to clear the stale air out of my lungs. "I'm going nuts worrying about Alison. I can't freak'n concentrate. I know what I'm doing is important, it's just...it's just not *as* important. At least not to me."

I got up, too agitated to sit still now. Josh didn't say a word; he just tracked me as I paced back in forth in front of him.

"How would you feel if you were working at your desk one day, and your boss came in and told you that the hospital had just called and said that Alex had been in a terrible car accident? They hadn't really given him any details, but being he's such a nice guy and all, he's decided you can leave for the day--as soon as you've finished mastering Quantum Mechanics."

Josh rubbed at his eyes. He looked tired. And he'd lost weight, regardless of how

much he ate. I know he'd asked for it, but suddenly I felt like a heel for burdening him with my whining.

I stopped pacing as he stood slowly, and I heard his sternum crack as he pulled his shoulders back into a stretch. The bones in his neck cracked as he twisted his head right, then left. Finally, he put a hand on my shoulder and looked down into my eyes.

"I guess it would drive me nuts, too. I could only take comfort in knowing that at least Alex was in some sort of medical stasis field, and I had Stephan Hawkings helping me with the Quantum Mechanics."

He was right, of course. And so was I--talking about my problems hadn't really helped any. But it had driven home what a good friend Josh was.

I grinned up at him. "Wow, I don't think I've ever seen anybody limber up before giving advice before. Do you need a cool down period now? Maybe some Gatorade?"

Josh belched loudly. "Nah, I'm good."

"Me too," I said, and almost meant it. I put my arm about his shoulder and walked him back out to the training hall.

Skatha awaited us, tapping her foot impatiently. "It warms my heart to see two such good friends as you," she said. Then she beat us up, both of us, at the same time.

I'd like to say the months flew by, but I'd be lying. They dragged on, digging in their heels like a kid whose parents were trying to get him to leave Chuck E. Cheese's. Not that we weren't kept busy.

The days were full, starting with a ten-mile run at the crack of dawn, and then a brisk two-mile swim across what had to be a glacier-fed lake. Personally I didn't really feel the cold, but it was a good thing for Josh that Sabrina wasn't around, because the guy suffered from major shrinkage after our swim. To call him a Wolf *man* would be giving him the benefit of the doubt.

After breakfast, we practiced forms, at first concentrating on the strict, memorized movements, and later progressing to free-style *kata*.

Then it was instruction--lessons in hand-to-hand, weapons, tactics, and even dance. Skatha said the dance lessons were to develop rhythm and coordination, but personally, I think the witch was lonely. Either that or she really enjoyed watching Josh and I make complete idiots of ourselves. Okay, so it was the latter.

Watching Skatha dance was a lesson in restraint in and of itself. Josh and I had been without...um...female companionship for a while now, and I don't think I've properly conveyed just how incredibly sexy our teacher was. She had Audrey Hepburn's eyes and Angelina Jolie's lips, and her silky red hair was scented with heather. Her skin was velvet soft, and her breath smelled faintly of caramel. Skatha had the long, shapely legs of a dancer, or a gymnast, with narrow hips, a tiny waist, and breasts so full and perfectly shaped that you'd swear they were fake. And for all her power and speed she moved like a ballerina. And did I mention the form-fitting black leather and red lace? You should have seen the relief on Josh's face when we found out that pole dancing was an actual highland dance.

Where was I again? Oh, yeah. Once the lessons were done, we sparred, sometimes just Josh and I, sometimes the three of us. At the end of six months, I actually managed to hit Skatha--once. At the end of seven, I could hit her occasionally, and by the tenth month I was scoring virtually at will. Of course hitting her was one thing; besting

her was another matter entirely.

Once we finished sparring, and if Skatha felt we were worthy, it was time for lunch. After lunch we sparred some more, followed by meditation and breath control techniques. I must admit I had a somewhat unfair advantage when it came to mastering breath control, seeing as I didn't really have to breathe. Although it sometimes made counting my breaths irksome.

Skatha usually disappeared for an hour or so while Josh and I meditated. It gave us a needed respite from her constant scrutiny, and gave her a chance to catch up on *Oprah*, and *The Bold and The Beautiful*. And don't believe any of that crap about how TV violence has little or no effect on aggressive behavior. Josh and I got our asses kicked hard the day Skatha found out Brittany was Tony's love child.

Once we were calm and at one with the universe, Skatha taught us how to make weapons, or how to use just about anything you could find as a weapon. By the time she was done with us I could have kicked ass with a sofa cushion, or a chocolate chip cookie. God forbid I should get my hands on something sharp and pointy.

It was just after lunch, in the eleventh month. We were in the training hall, and Josh was over in the corner splashing water in his left eye. I'd hit him with a wine cork I'd found lying on the floor while we were sparring. I guess it stung like the dickens, because he was whining to Skatha about how he could really use some Tiger Balm or some ginseng or something. Personally, I think he was just stalling for time. I mean, it wasn't like it was a *sharp* cork or anything.

Skatha gently pressed a cold, damp cloth to the welt under Josh's eye. I was surprised at such a show of tenderness from her. A few months back Josh accidentally ran me through with a javelin while we were sparring, and Skatha told me to "walk it off." True, I wasn't in any real danger--I mean, who else can "walk off" a sucking chest wound--but still.

"The eye is clear," she told Josh as she tilted her head up to get a better look. "The wound is superficial, though it is a shame to mar such a comely face."

I don't know how he does it. I know the Fay are promiscuous as a rule, but they seem to be drawn to Josh like priests to an altar boy. Skatha pressed nearer to him on the pretence of closer scrutiny, her lips mere inches from his.

She had one hand in his hair now as she dabbed at his eye with the cold compress in the other. "You are one of the best students I've ever had," she said softly in her lilting Irish brogue. "Even Cuchulain attempted the Bridge of Leaps three times 'ere he succeeded. Him I trained him in the arts of love as well as war." She pressed herself even closer.

Josh simply did what any hot-blooded werebeast would do. He blushed, took a step back, and fell down the stairs that lead up into the hall.

Skatha laughed, and winked at me. "Were he not of the Wolf, I might be offended," she said, and stepped over Josh on her way back to her rooms, leaving us to our meditation practice.

I descended the stairs and helped Josh to his feet. "What did she mean by that?"

Josh brushed the dirt and straw from his clothing. His face was still flush with color. "I'm a half-breed; part wolf, part bear. Wolves mate for life."

"And bears?"

Josh grinned. "Bears will do anything that moves."

"I'd say your wolf is dominant, then." I followed Josh back into the dojo and we sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Yeah, that and my highly developed survival instinct. Sabrina would kill me, martial arts training or no."

We'd been meditating for about twenty minutes when Skatha arrived. It was just as well; Josh was having a hell of a time concentrating.

"You're done for the day," she announced. "I'm throwing a banquet at the manor tonight, and need time to prepare. I've announced a grand re-opening. Everyone who's anyone will be here trying to curry my favor and convince me to accept their mewling offspring as apprentices."

She glanced sternly at the two of us. "If I were you, I'd take the opportunity to relax and unwind."

An obvious order if ever I heard one.

Skatha turned on her heel and left Josh and I to our own devices.

A party. I've never been a real party animal, but after months of nothing but fighting and training, I realized I was really looking forward to it.

Josh looked a little distressed, however.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Dining, dancing, music, entertainment; if there's one thing the faerie know how to do, it's throw a shindig."

"Just promise me one thing," he said, solemnly. "Don't tell Skatha about the bears."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

One of the guys who worked at my old plant used to be a recruit instructor for the army. He told me that even after the months of strict discipline, constant pressure, sleep deprivation and hard work the recruits were put through, most of them didn't want to leave after graduation. They'd formed a sense of camaraderie with their platoon mates, and a sense of accomplishment. Oddly enough, often the harshest squad commander was the one the recruits spoke of the most fondly.

It's amazing what you can get used to. Truth be told, I think I was going to miss Skatha when my time here was done. Not enough to want to stay, but still.

I'd become so accustomed to the strict routine of training, eating, and studying that I had no idea what to do with my free time now that I had some. At first, I went up to my room and read through a treatise entitled *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield for Urban Combat Operations*. You know, light reading.

Josh used the downtime to catch up on his sleep.

One thing you had to give Skatha, she hadn't skimmed on accommodations. Josh and I had been given our own rooms, or suit of rooms, rather. A colossal oak canopy bed with heavy red drapery drawn all around it dominated my bedroom. An oak-mantled fireplace provided ample warmth, and thick, intricately woven wool tapestries covered the walls and floor to keep the chill out. My quarters connected to Josh's through a private library stocked to the ceiling with shelves of leather bound books and scrolls containing esoteric information on all manner of warfare. Each bedroom had a private drawing room where we could entertain guests, if we had any, I suppose.

As nice as my living quarters were, after twenty minutes of reading I'd had about enough. Besides, Josh was snoring like a wildebeest. Skye was a big island, and so far I'd only seen the view from our running trail. I decided to go exploring.

The kitchen was a bustle of activity, and everyone scurried about in a near state of panic in preparation for the ball. No one noticed as I pilfered a couple of lemon tarts and wrapped them in a bundle for later. Not because I was hungry, but because, hey, they're lemon tarts. I snuck out through the kitchen entrance and followed a path that led out into the woods.

If I wasn't sure I was in Summerland before, the forest was proof positive. I've seen redwoods, and they had nothing on the trees here. The average bole had to be at least twenty-five feet in circumference and ninety feet high, with broad branches wide enough to run along if one were inclined to brave the heights. A verdant canopy of leaves obscured the view of the sky, and the ground was carpeted with dead foliage, twigs, and fallen trees on and under a thick cloak of mosses, lichens, and grasses. Toadstools, mushrooms, and fungi littered the forest floor, and craggy rocks, like islands in a sea of green, jutted up through the thriving plant life.

The air was still, and had that damp, earthy smell, and I breathed it in as I followed the path that wound its serpentine way through the forest. I had no idea where I was going, but I never got lost. I prefer to think of it as exploring alternate routes. For all I knew I was headed to Grandma's House, and me without my basket of goodies. And if the Big Bad Wolf thought he was getting one of my lemon tarts, he had another thing coming.

I was twenty minutes into my sojourn when I crested a hill and saw him in the

clearing, by a ford in the river. The trees had thinned out somewhat, and sunlight punched through the forest canopy and struck his fiery red hair like a spotlight. He wore a kilt, with long folds of tartan wool draped over his shoulder and chest, and had tied himself upright to a pillar of rock with his battle sash. A raven perched on his shoulder, and seemingly whispered in his ear. Lesser spears of illumination lanced the jumble of rocks about him, casting shadows over the skeletal remains of the fallen warriors at his feet.

He must have heard me from across the field, because he turned his head slowly and glared at me out of his sole remaining eye. "If you're here for battle, come and be done with it, ya great bloody wanker. I've not got all bleed'n day."

There's something about the rhythm and cadence of the Irish language that adds that extra oomph to an insult, or a compliment for that matter. Although with the Irish sometimes they were one and the same. Still, it was difficult to take his threats seriously, what with him tied to the rock and all.

I approached him slowly, although it's not like he was going to startle and run off. Even tied to a rock and in his present sad state there was something dangerous about him. Okay, so the corpse-strewn field was a non-too subtle hint.

Many of the dead had suffered blunt trauma to the head judging by the jagged rents in the skulls that stared up from the grass. Javelins pinned others to the ground, thrust skyward through cloth-tattered ribcages. Mummified hands clutched rusted swords, and broken bits of shield and disjointed bone were scattered about.

The closer I got, the worse he looked. His face, arms, and legs were badly battered and bruised, as if the Jai Alai team had used him for target practice. Dried blood matted his hair, and clotted bits of gore splattered his face and torso. A length of intestine hung out of a festering rent in his stomach where someone had tried to disembowel him.

"It's no use try'n ta sneak up on me, ya nancy-boy. Get over here and be done with it."

I circled around and approached him from the front. That's when I saw the bone-spear. It was maybe three feet long, and the tip looked razor sharp, with a wicked array of barbs and hooks that would shred your innards when withdrawn. Not that it would be a basket of giggles if he stabbed you with it in the first place.

"I'm not here to fight you," I said when I stood no more than a few feet in front of him. The Raven cocked its head, as if it considered what I'd said. Maybe it was doing the thinking for the both of them. "Besides, you don't exactly look up for it."

The warrior looked insulted "What, this? It's just a wee scratch."

I tried not to laugh. This was no time to be distracted by a bit from Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The bird whispered something in his ear again, and he frowned.

"If you're not here ta fight, you'd best be running along, then," he said. He cocked his head at the dead that littered the field. "They'll be back for more soon enough."

I glanced about at the skeletal remains of his vanquished foes. They looked pretty dead to me. Of course, that meant nothing. Especially here.

"Why don't you let me get you down from there," I said. I eyed the bit of intestine doubtfully. "I'll see if I can find someone to treat that scratch of yours, before it gets infected, or turns into haggis or something."

"What, are you daft, man?" He gripped the blood-slicked bone-spear more tightly in his hand, and glared at me with his one good eye. "I am Cuchulain of the Red Branch,

and none of those Connacht bastards shall pass by the Plain of Muirthemne whilst I still stand."

Cuchulain. I'd heard that name before. Sabrina had mentioned it when she'd first suggested that I come to learn at Skatha's feet. He'd been a student of hers, too, and her lover. But there was something else. Damn, I really should dig out my Classic Comics collection someday.

"Aren't you dead?" I asked him.

"Aye, Laddie. That I am, dead these many years. What's your point?"

What was my point?

"If you're dead, what are you still doing here?"

He closed his eye and his head drooped on his chest. For a moment I thought maybe he was finally dead-dead, that maybe all he'd needed was a reminder.

His head snapped up suddenly, and a corona of scintillating light shimmered about him. "You should know, more than most, that death is not always the release we long for. There are those of us for which a single lifetime is not sufficient punishment."

What could he have done that was so terrible as to warrant this?

"I murdered my best friend, and my son," he said, as if he'd heard me. "Spilled their guts with this very weapon, the *Gae Bolga*--a gift from Skatha herself." He swung the bone spear once or twice, perhaps to toss it aside, but it was as if he could not let it go.

The light about him faded. "I know you train with the witch. Beware her gifts, and her prophecies. Never forget that she is Fae; there are no words for good and evil in their ancient tongue, and they make sport of toying with us mere mortals."

The raven whispered something in his ear again. He nodded. "Yer right, of course. Not mortal either, is he."

The ground beside the pillar he was secured to cracked. A rift opened in the earth as something burrowed its way up from underneath. A great equine head broke through. Creased and dented armor covered mangy gray hair and exposed skull. Forelocks scrambled for purchase as the ragged remains of a horse, half its ribs showing, heaved itself forth from the grave in a spray of grass and dirt. And if you think wet dog smells bad, give dead horse a try sometime. Come to think of it, dead horse smelled vaguely like what I used to feed wet dog.

Cuchulain stared upon the nightmare with obvious affection. "Come to stand by your master, as always, eh Grey? You I would release from this cursed hell if I could."

The horse pawed at the grass and shook its great head. He obviously didn't think much of the idea.

"I count myself blessed to have had such a friend in life. To have such in death is a boon beyond all measure of my worth."

He nodded towards the tree line. "I see you also inspire such friendship."

I looked back toward the trees, but saw nothing.

"There is a great, black dog that follows at your heels. A part of him is here, with you always, even when you can't see him."

I smiled. "Bear. He pops in on me every now and then, but I don't have much time for him here, and there's not a lot of food for him to scrounge."

Cuchulain smiled. "He is a true and faithful friend. Dogs don't much like it here in Summerland." He sighed. "I can't say as I do."

Sabrina had referred to Cuchulain as "The Hound." Must be an inside joke.

I could see the ground shifting all about us now, like maggots crawling under the Earth's skin.

The raven spread its wings and cawed, then took to the air and circled the battlefield.

Cuchulain took a few practice swings with the bone spear. "You'd best be going, lad. There's nothing for you here. But mind my word about Skatha and the Sidhe. T'was the witch who imposed the geis that proved my end: that I should never refuse a meal, and that I should never eat the meat of a dog."

Several of the deceased had reconstituted themselves, digging their way free of the earth to stand in a ragged line before Cuchulain.

"Aye, it dinna take a genius to connive a way around that, and weaken me 'ere this, my last battle. The Sidhe go by many names, but 'tis not for nothing they are called The Fallen; all they do comes with a price."

One of the corpses stepped forward and cracked its jawbone back into alignment as more and more of the un-dead unearthed themselves.

Cuchulain pointed the *Gae Bolga* at the warrior that stood to the front of its comrades. "Back for another go, eh Sean? I tell you what; I'm in a good mood. You pick which arm you want hacked off today."

I didn't stay around to watch the fun. I returned the way I'd come as a mass of bodies rushed the stone pillar, obscuring my view of the hero. His laughter, punctuated by the clash of bone on metal as it echoed in the forest about me, seemed forced, as if he were determined to make the best of his death come hell or high water. Both of which were a distinct possibility.

I don't know why the dead didn't simply walk around him and through the field. Lashed to the pillar as he was he would have been powerless to stop them. It was probably just another of the Stupid Rules, like the one that said I couldn't enter a home unless I was invited, or that I could be trapped by a bunch of scribbled chalk drawings. And yes, I had noticed that most of the rules that applied to vampires and demons applied to me as well. And it worried me.

Almost as much as what Cuchulain had said. Everything the Sidhe did came with a price. So what did they want of me? What would Skatha's training cost, and how did she plan to collect? I'm not easily intimidated, and tough as she was, she couldn't kill me. I think.

But there were The Rules, and they bound me as surely as had Cuchulain's geis. For all I knew I had already walked headlong into their trap.

It was only another twenty minutes back along the way I'd come before I saw the towers of Skatha's keep cresting the treetops, but it was already turning dark. Time was wonky here, unless you stayed put.

A tousle haired serving girl not much older than Alex grabbed my elbow as I entered the great hall and rushed me toward my rooms. "The guests have already started to arrive and you're not even dressed yet. And you've the smell of travel about you."

I grinned, recognizing wench-speak for "you stink" when I heard it. Although why I should smell bad was beyond me. It's not like I could sweat, not unless I consciously wanted to, and why would I?

"The Mistress has laid out appropriate attire for you, but there's no time for a

proper bath." She looked down at the floor, shyly. "I will have to sponge you clean as best I can, and the water will be cold."

Not bloody likely. The cold water I could stand, but I wasn't about to let a minor give me a sponge bath. I know people who've gone to jail for less back in Darkside. Well, not personally, but...

"I'll...um...attend to myself," I told her as we approached the door to my rooms.

She smiled, and curtsied as she made to leave. "Very well, James," she said, and was gone in a swirl of skirts.

When we'd first arrived the servants had been more formal, calling Josh and I "My Lord", which we both found rather pretentious, not to mention irritating. We'd finally convinced them to call us by our first names. Now, every time they did so, they grinned as if they were getting away with something.

It was only later that I learned that telling someone your true name here gave them power over you. If the servants had abused that trust, though, I was unaware. It was just another of the Stupid Rules to file away for reference.

My clothes were laid out on the bed when I entered my room. Well, they weren't *my* clothes. They were Sidhe by design: a royal blue silk shirt with a Chinese collar and frog buttons tucked into supple black leathers with brocaded blue Celtic patterns; a matching leather jacket with sliver buckles, and a long leather jacket that went over that and flared out like a cape when I moved; knee high boots with buckles to match the jacket; my rapier in its scabbard to top it off. Dress leathers. I have to admit I liked it.

It only took me a moment to dress, after first imaging myself clean--minty fresh breath and all. I admired myself in the full-length mirror and decided I cut a rather dashing figure. Sort of a cross between Arragorn and Neo, only not as good looking, or tall, or...screw it.

Josh was pacing in the hallway outside my door as I left my room. He cut a rather dashing figure himself, dressed as I was but in muted browns instead of black. And he had another of Gnoibu's enchanted handguns in a shoulder holster that matched his sword belt.

"Been waiting long?" I asked.

Josh shook his head no. "I would have been ready sooner, but one of the servants kept trying to give me a sponge bath."

Ha! No hot water my ass. I keep forgetting the servants here are Sidhe. The girl could have been sixteen hundred rather than sixteen.

Josh cocked his head toward the master stairway that led to the Great Hall. "Well, shall we?"

"We shall," I said, and led the way.

A herald dressed in embroidered blue silks halted us at the top of the stairs before we could descend. He tapped a long, ornate staff twice upon the marble, and sang out, "Introducing Joshua Ezekiel Shadow's Paw Faye of King's Town, and the Eternal, James Decker."

I grinned knowingly at Josh. "Shadow's Paw, eh?" That should put a stop to the Bumper wisecracks for a while.

We turned to make our entrance, and saw the guests. The room was crowded with Sidhe. Both Light and Dark, but it was the Vampires that caught my attention.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The first words that came to mind were: "Go back, it's a trap." Oddly enough the same advice I'd given to Drat when he told me he was getting married. They're all purpose words.

At a glance, I'd say the racial makeup was a third Light Sidhe, a third Dark, and a third Vampire.

And Josh and I.

I suppose one might consider the Light Sidhe friendly, the way one might consider opposing divorce lawyers friendly. It didn't help that a third of the guests considered us food. I felt like a Hot Fudge Brownie at a Jennie Craig meeting.

The Great Hall had been laid out like one of those classy nightclubs from the forties and fifties: the Cotton Club, Ciro's, or the Mocombo. Fifty circular tables were set out for the dinner guests, complete with red linen tablecloths, tapered white candles, rose-patterned china, crystal glasses, and monogrammed silk napkins. Waiters in tuxedos carried trays of food past glittering champagne fountains and shimmering ice sculptures. Cigarette girls in fishnet stockings smiled sweetly and offered up your carcinogen of choice.

Josh and I made our way down the stairs as the music started up again. An orchestra played in the balcony that overlooked the hall just above the hardwood dance floor. Thirty musicians attired in tuxes and tails were crowded into four tiers. Other than the bandleader--some Lon Chaney-Phantom-of-the-opera looking freak--the rest of the musicians could have passed for normal. Nothing a few hours under a sunlamp wouldn't cure. Come to think of it, I guess that *is* normal for most musicians.

A spotlight struck a platinum blonde in a red silk number in the musician's balcony. She stood behind an old-fashioned ribbon microphone--one of those big square jobs suspended by springs on a stand--as the band played the intro to *Someone to Watch Over Me*.

She started in on the opening refrain, caressing the microphone like a lover, her voice melancholy. If there's one thing the Sidhe are suited for, it's torch songs.

The women dressed in a rainbow collage of flowing silk, satin, and chiffon dresses appropriate to the period, and accessorized with elbow length gloves, wraps, and stoles. Each was adorned with bright, glittering jewelery--diamond earrings, sapphire necklaces, ruby pendants and bracelets--that complimented the colors and textures they wore. Stiletto heels and ample cleavage distracted the eye from hidden daggers and concealed blades.

Only the men looked out of place, dressed in variations of what Josh and I wore, though in silks, fine linens, and even richer materials I'd never heard of. Probably no one had. And only the Sidhe had the talent to make functional ceremonial weapons. Jewel encrusted swords and daggers sheathed in brocaded scabbards were slung from ornate sword belts, or tucked into glittering sashes and high-topped boots. And those were the weapons I could see.

Josh reached for his shoulder holster, released the catch, and flicked the safety off on the Glock 18C. Talk about inspiring confidence.

This shindig made Red Carpet night at the Oscars look like a ho-down on Hee Haw. I scanned the room, looking for Skatha, but our hostess was nowhere to be found.

The headwaiter met us at the bottom of the stairs. "If you would be so kind as to follow me to your table, Sirs."

I looked to Josh, who shrugged with a "what the hell" attitude, and we trailed after the Maitre d' to a table near the front, just off the dance floor.

Once we were seated he caught the attention of a servant who stood by the kitchen door, snapped his fingers, and pointed to our table. "Your waiter will be with you shortly," he said, then turned on his heel and was gone.

Shortly was an understatement. Our waiter appeared at our side as if by magic, which it very well may have been. He recited the specials for the evening, and though I hadn't heard of half of what he recommended, I recognized seafood when I heard it. I swear he sneered when I opted for filet minion, a baked potato, and asparagus spears. Josh chose the lamb, roast potatoes, and zucchini, and a bottle of Chateauneuf de Pape, or Crystale, or...Old Ripple--something expensive enough to meet the approval of the snooty waiter.

I ordered a Diet Pepsi, in a can. The waiter stood with poised pen for a moment, certain that I was joking, then sneered again and stormed off when he realized I wasn't. He returned a few minutes later, popped the cork on the champagne, and ran through the rig amoral of letting Josh sniff the cork and do a taste test. He poured a glass for Josh, then pulled a can of Diet Pepsi from the ice bucket.

"Would you like me to pop the top?"

"No thanks, Sport. I can manage." I never call anyone Sport, but it seemed in keeping with the theme.

The waiter looked down his nose at me. "I'm sure you can, Sir," he said, and went back to the kitchen.

I grinned at Josh. "I'm not sure, but I think he just insulted me."

"No tip for him," Josh said as he swirled the champagne about in his glass before taking another sip.

I fidgeted about in my seat as I tried to adjust my sword belt and scabbard. Modern chairs weren't designed with them in mind, and the damn rapier kept poking me in the side, or bumping up against the underside of the table.

Josh refilled his glass. "It's too bad the girls aren't here. Sabrina would love this."

"I'm sure General Custer thought the same thing just before everything went to hell at Little Big Horn," I said, but I don't think Josh heard me. He stared off into space, lost in his thoughts of home and family until the waiter arrived with our food.

That seemed to cheer him up, or at least bring him back to the here and now.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" the waiter asked. He stared pointedly at me. "Possibly some ketchup?"

Josh almost snorted champagne through his nose. I swear the waiter nearly cracked a smile at that.

"I'm good," I told him, and he nodded and was gone.

The food was done to perfection, and we enjoyed our meal thoroughly as we watched the dancers out on the dance floor. The band played some faster tunes--*Chattanooga Choo Choo*, *In The Mood*, and a few more I didn't recognize, and let me tell you, them Vampires can *dance*. Kind of like Soul-less Train. Not that the Sidhe were rhythmically handicapped, but there was something more exotic about the way the Vamps moved. They were more celebratory, and sexual, and not in a vulgar way. It was

as if the Vampires just *enjoyed* themselves more. There's always this underlying air of sadness in everything the Sidhe do.

"This is incredible," I said around a mouthful of steak.

Josh nodded. "There's nothing like Sidhe food."

I had to agree, but that's not what I meant. "The food's great, but I'm talking about all *this*," I said, waving my fork about to indicate the hall, the dancers, and the band.

Josh dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a silk napkin, and poured himself another glass of champagne. "The faerie are really big on theme parties. I guess the whole medieval feast thing can get kind of boring after a thousand years." He nodded towards the dancers out on the floor. "Just be happy it's not Disco Night."

I laughed. "Hey, you ain't seen nothing until you've seen me strut my stuff under the disco ball in a white suit and platform shoes."

"Um...pass."

I thought the mental picture may have actually put Josh off his food, but one look at the desert menu proved me wrong.

The last strains of music faded as the blonde finished her song. Before the band could start up again, the herald tapped his staff and sang out, "Introducing...the Korrigan."

Just the one name, like Madonna, or Prince.

All eyes turned at the interruption as the Korrigan paused--for dramatic effect, I suppose--then proceeded down the stairs with retinue in tow. The band segued into *Blue Turning Grey Over You*.

How appropriate, I thought. Who says the faerie don't have a sense of humour. Then I remembered what they had played when Josh and I entered.

The Korrigan waived the Maitre d' off, glanced about the room, and proceeded directly to our table with three of his thugs close on his heels.

I tried to take him all in at once: seven feet and three hundred and eighty pounds of muscle; red, scaly skin, like a lizard; a crown of finger-length, bone white horns; yellow eyes with no iris; a bony ridge about occipital sockets and cheekbones that made his face seem even more sunken; a wide mouth filled with jagged, yellowing teeth; prominent incisors--both upper and lower; a tight, sleeveless black scale mail shirt; black leather pants and heavy black boots, both with bone buckles; a heavy bone scimitar slung across his back so that the leather-wound grip was accessible at the right shoulder.

The Korrigan. The Vampire Lord. The one who had turned Leanne.

A henchman stood to either side of him, and one guarded his back. They were more traditional looking vampires: pale skin, long dark hair, and slender frames, dressed in black leathers.

The Korrigan bowed, no more than a slight nod of the head, but the intention was clear. I read somewhere that the more important the personage, the less exaggerated the bow. Obviously the Korrigan thought a lot of himself.

"Mr. Decker." His voice was deep, and resonant, and not lizard-like at all. No sibilant hissing or flicking of the tongue.

I didn't bother to stand, even though I'm sure protocol required it. "What can I do for you?" My tone indicated that what I *would* do for him was nothing I'm sure he'd be interested in, unless he had a sudden urge to die-die.

"I was hoping we could conduct a minor business transaction. You have

something I want, that I'm willing to pay quite generously for." He spoke with an accent I couldn't quite place, and sounded like the John Rhys Davies character in *Raiders of the Lost Arc*.

"You are in possession of the Lhiannan-Sidhe. I want it back."

It, not her. I'm sure Leanne would be thrilled to learn I owned her. Here I'd always thought it was the other way around.

Josh stopped chewing, a forkful of Tiramisu halfway between his mouth and the plate. He stared, waiting for all Hell to break loose.

"I'm afraid I can't help you. She's not mine to bargain with."

The Korrigan looked perplexed. "She's given herself to you, has she not? You *have* bedded her?"

I gave him my best warning smile. "I'd like to tell you, but I pinky-swore." Hey, a gentleman never kisses and tells. Well, at least I had no intention of telling *him*.

He smiled and sneered at the same time, the way Tim Curry does. "I see. Perhaps you are unaware of the nature of the Lhiannan-Sidhe. Once she has given herself to a man, she can have no other until she has drained his life, or he himself provides her with an alternative victim."

Holy I Dream Of Jeannie, Batman! The wench really *was* mine. I glanced at Josh, who nodded in affirmation.

Had she known this all along? Of course she had. But she'd given herself to me the first night we met. What the hell was she thinking? I mean, sure, she could feed from me without killing me, but I'm a freaking Eternal for crying out loud. Until death do us part just wasn't going to happen for her.

The Korrigan awaited my answer, all but tapping his toe and checking his fingernails.

"Sorry. No deal."

He shrugged. "No matter. Eventually you will tire of her, and I will make my offer again." He turned and walked away. "I can be patient, for now."

The largest of his retinue stepped forward. "They call me The Hammer," he said in a thick Russian accent.

I stood and held out my hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Hammer. And just who are these other tools?"

I heard Josh choking on his Tiramisu as the other two vamps curled their upper lips and showed their fangs. I think that's vamp-talk for, "Oh, yeah?"

The Hammer ignored my hand. "They say that an Eternal cannot die. But trust me, I will make you wish you were dead."

I smiled back. I didn't show my fangs, but I think they got the message. "Fuck with me, and I'll stake your whole clan." I put my hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. "I will eradicate your bloodline. That's a promise."

He tensed at that, his body rigid, though I couldn't be sure whether in fear or anger. He turned on his heel suddenly and he and his comrades stormed away. I made to follow, to have at him, but Josh's hand on my arm restrained me. I sat down, seething, knowing Josh was right but still wanting a go at the bastard. I stared across the room to where the Korrigan sat at his table and wondered if I hacked off his arm or leg, if it would grow back like a real lizard. I was certainly game to try, purely in the interests of science, of course. He even had his back turned, so I knew Skatha would approve.

"Eat your dessert before it melts," Josh said. He still held my arm with one hand, but resumed shoveling Tiramisu into his face.

"Cheesecake doesn't melt," I told him.

"*Human* cheesecake doesn't melt," he corrected.

I cocked an eyebrow, intrigued now, and I relaxed and dug into the strawberry cheesecake I'd ordered. It was good--really good, but still...

Josh grinned, chocolate cake and cream staining his teeth.

The bastard was pulling my leg. But it *had* taken my mind of the Korrigan.

The herald tapped his fancy walking stick again. "Announcing the Lady of Shadows, She Who Strikes Fear, the Lady of the Isle of Skye, our hostess...Queen Skatha."

The room went quiet, and everyone stood. Skatha appeared at the top of the stairs in a slinky, emerald-green silk gown. Spaghetti straps left her shoulders bare, while the cowl neck and low scoop back tastefully showed enough skin to be flirtatious. The gown was ankle length, with an elegant fish tale hemline. Matching elbow-length gloves adorned her bejeweled hands, and a diamond encrusted choker circled her regal neck. Her fiery red hair was piled atop her head in neat disarray and held with ornately painted Chinese chopsticks.

Everyone took their seats again as Skatha slowly descended the stairs to the strains of *I Had Myself a Good Man*. She barely made it halfway down before a crowd of sycophants pressed about her. She handled the mob like a movie star at a press junket, smiling and stopping to chat occasionally as she moved through them to arrive finally at our table. We stood as Skatha approached, because our moms raised us right. I suppose we should have bowed or something, her being a queen and all, but it didn't seem natural considering we'd been training with her for almost a year now. Besides, she wasn't *our* queen.

She held out a hand to Josh. "Care to dance?"

"My pleasure," he said, but his ash gray complexion and tight smile belied his words. I'm not sure what he was more worried about: the fact that he was dancing with a Sidhe war goddess who just happened to have the hots for him--and have I mentioned just how incredibly sexy Skatha is?--or the thought that I was probably going to steal the rest of his dessert while he was gone. Probably the former.

Josh and Skatha looked pretty damn good together out there on the dance floor. They waltzed, not the turn-round-in-circles-while-you-grope-each-other kind of waltz either, but a proper waltz, with his hand on the small of her back, his other hand holding hers, performing proper dance steps while maintaining at least a two inch space between them. They glided around the dance floor, twirling and box-stepping with the best of them. Josh never even stepped on her feet once.

The band upped the tempo with *Jump, Jive An' Wail*. I had no idea Josh could jive. Apparently Summerland folk, when they're not shape-shifting or haunting someone or otherwise scaring the bejesus out of people, spend all their spare time taking dance lessons. At least all the exertion put some color back into his face.

They finished their dance and Skatha led Josh back to our table as the band started in on *Sing, Sing, Sing*. And yes, I had eaten the rest of his Tiramisu. I stood as they approached, and Skatha held her hand out to me. "Your turn."

I laughed a self-deprecating laugh. "Sorry, I can't dance. At least not that way."

Skatha smiled, her eyes brighter than the diamonds she wore. "Who said anything about dancing?"

I took her hand warily as she led me out onto the hardwood floor. If she didn't want to dance with me, what did she have in mind? I kept expecting a sudden attack, the application of the flying toe hold maybe. I almost had a heart attack when she reached for the chopsticks in her hair, but she only adjusted them and continued to the center of dance floor. Once there, she raised her hand over her head, the lights dimmed, and a hush descended upon the room. Once all eyes were upon her, she began.

"My friends, the time for heroes has come again. And so I present to you, The Eternal, James Decker. Who amongst you will test your metal against this student and complete his right of passage?"

The crowd was still for a moment, and then the Korrigan and his thugs rose from the table. "We will."

It figured.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I should have known there was a reason Skatha had given me these fancy fighting duds. It also explained why none of the rest of the men at the party had dressed in theme. Although maybe that's sexist; I'm sure several of the women would have liked a go at me too. Still, somehow it just didn't seem fair. I mean, all Josh had to do was foxtrot. Mom always liked him best.

The Korrigan stepped out onto the dance floor, his posse ranged out about him. For a behemoth he seemed awfully light on his feet. I wasn't about to underestimate him, either. Sure, I was an Eternal, and I'd trained with Skatha, but he probably had a couple of thousand years experience to say the least. And he was *big*. No doubt Mr. Hammer and his compatriots were no slouch either.

Josh tried to come to my aid, but Skatha waved him down. A dozen or so of the Sidhe ringed about him suddenly to make sure he behaved. He didn't look happy about it though. On reflection maybe I shouldn't have finished his Tiramisu after all.

Skatha stepped onto a dais that rose up out of the floor until she towered some ten feet above us. It provided her with the best vantage point, and no doubt kept us from splashing blood all over her pretty party dress. Women are practical that way.

I looked up at the band. "How about some theme music?"

The Lon Chaney wannabe nodded, tapped his baton a couple times, and the band broke into *Zoot Suit Riot*. Not bad. I half expected *I Fall to Pieces*.

"No beheading, and no staking," Skatha instructed from the dais.

So I couldn't kill them. That was only fair, I suppose, since they couldn't kill me.

The Hammer rushed me in slow motion. At least that's what it looked like to me. His long coat flared out behind him and his hair streamed back from his face. I heard the thud of the bass drum from the orchestra in the balcony, and a long, warbling sustained note from the horn section. The Hammer took another long stride, drawing his bone-sword, and closed the distance. Everyone else in the hall seemed frozen in place. The Hammer was almost within reach now. I stepped to the right and held my forearm out at shoulder level. It caught the Hammer just across the shoulders and his head snapped back as his feet flew up into the air. He sailed past, parallel to the ground, his eyes wide with shock as he crashed into a row of tables at the end of the dance floor. Shattered bits of dinnerware drifted to the floor, and crystalline water droplets fanned out as if in zero gee from upended glasses that tumbled slowly end for end as the thud of the bass drum sounded again.

I felt a prick at the center of my back. One of the Tools had pressed the point of his sword to it while I'd been distracted. I twisted right, and the sword scraped harmlessly along the buckle of my sword belt. He over-extended himself at the sudden and unexpected lack of resistance, and I leaned back and stuck my foot out. He obliged me by tripping over it. I'm sure he would have tucked into a nice roll--he seemed capable enough--if I hadn't pulled back on his arm to steal his bone-sword at the last moment. He drove his face into the hardwood floor, chewing up splinters with those fancy fangs of his.

The note the horn section had held for so long gradually pitched up as another bass thud sounded. I tucked the stolen sword under my right arm just as the last Tool rushed me from behind. The look of shock as he impaled himself to the hilt was a lot

more satisfying than the usual hissy-face, and I stepped away before he coughed up blood all over my fancy new fighting duds. I let him keep the blade as a souvenir.

I thought it awfully sporting of them that they'd attacked me one at a time, then realized they really hadn't. Time had slowed to the point that even a fraction of a second's difference in their arrival had allowed me to deal with them each individually.

The bass drum sounded again, along with the crack of the snare as the trumpet warbled to a higher pitch still.

The Korrigan drew his heavy bone-sword, and stood not ten feet in front of me. Suddenly he was gone, as if the shadows had converged on him and swallowed him up. Something drew my attention upwards. I'd like to call it my spidey-sense, but I'm sure Marvel would sue. Still, it amounted to the same thing. There was something dangerous overhead, I was certain.

Sure enough, I caught a flash of white and leaned back just as the Korrigan's bone-sword cleaved the spot where my head used to be. I didn't get clear enough, however, and all three hundred and fifty pounds of man-demon dropped on me from above. I felt my right shoulder dislocate, and a few ribs snapped as he drove me to the floor. So much for not underestimating him.

A red, scaly forearm pressed against my windpipe from behind and he used the back of his clawed hand to tilt my head up and left. I saw the sword flash in front of my face again and caught his wrist before he could draw it across my exposed neck. Skatha had said I couldn't behead him. She hadn't said anything about him not beheading me.

I grabbed the pinkie on the hand he was trying to choke me with and bent it back hard against its normal range of motion. The Korrigan grunted in my ear at the pain, and I splayed his arms out in front of him, shoved my shoulder into the back of his arm at the elbow, and pushed off with my feet. He had no choice but to let go and roll off of me, or get his arm broken. He let go. We both scrambled to our feet and faced off again.

I heard a buzzing from the balcony above us, and realized it was the long, drawn out sound of the letter "Z" as the singer tried to force out the word "Zoot."

The Hammer approached slowly from my left side and I broke his neck with a quick twist of his head. It wouldn't kill him, but it would take him a few days to heal, and even a Vamp can't fight with his head all floppy and useless and half on backwards like that.

The Korrigan leaped at me. He seemed to move almost as fast as I could. I blocked the triple kick with three quick movements and stepped aside to avoid the elbow he brought down to crush my collarbone. I reversed direction and hit him with a solid palm-heel strike to the solar plexus. There was a sharp crack as his sternum shattered and he sailed twenty feet to careen into a timber support pillar. Bits of plaster and splinters rained down on the dance floor as the pillar fractured, buckling over on itself.

The Korrigan stood slowly, pulled his arms back, and stretched out his chest. There was more snapping and popping as the bones realigned themselves. Apparently he could heal almost as fast as I could, too.

This was taking too long, at least from my perspective. I doubt if five seconds had passed in real time.

The Tool I'd run through with his sword staggered at me, sword still protruding from his chest. I grabbed the hilt and slashed sideways with it, cutting through his spinal chord and almost severing him in two. He must not have fed recently, because there was

next to no blood where he collapsed to the floor. He glared useless threats at me as his legs kicked spasmodically.

The last Tool regained his feet, his mouth a ruin of broken teeth, shredded lips, and splinters. He screamed in mindless rage and rushed me--mind you at about two miles an hour. I have to admit it still looked pretty cool, but then fetching the mail looks cool if you do it in slow motion. I broke his neck like I had the Hammer's; there was no sense in drawing this out.

The Korrigan was at me again, his bone-sword a blur of motion. I avoided the worst, ducking, dodging and sidestepping his relentless attack. The tip of the sword nicked me above the eye and blood trickled down obscuring my vision. I caught the Korrigan with a front thrust kick that shoved him back several feet and gave me a little time to wipe the blood away. I concentrated on healing the cut above my eye. Nothing happened. I tried again, but the flow remained a constant trickle.

The Korrigan grinned, showing way too many teeth. That's when I noticed the hieroglyphics carved into the blade.

"Nice sword. Where'd you get it?" I asked.

"Hell."

Figures. Not that I believed him. He was probably just saying that to scare me, which it did. Still, I doubted he got it at Toys 'R Us.

"I don't know if it'll kill you, but it'll sure carve you up, and once you're mangled enough that you revert to pure spirit, I can capture you in this." The Korrigan held up a talisman that looked like some sort of dream catcher with a red quartz crystal in the center.

I remembered the ruby floor Aeshma had used to trap me at Tae Con Ra, and of course the pentagram that Azrael had used. Obviously the Korrigan thought it would work. Why else would he have agreed to this test unless he thought he could best me? And what about Leanne?

Perhaps you are unaware of the nature of the Lhiannan-Sidhe. Once she has given herself to a man, she can have no other until she has drained his life, or he himself provides her with an alternative victim.

He'd neglected to mention a third alternative. If he killed or captured me, did she become his?

"Haven't you ever read the Evil Overlord's Guidebook," I said. "Your not supposed to reveal your nefarious plan to the hero."

I still held the bone-sword I had taken from one of the Tools, but closer examination revealed it to be plain and unadorned. There was no sign of the hieroglyphs that marked the Korrigan's weapon.

"Who says you're the hero," The Korrigan said, and wrapped himself in shadows again.

Demons only have the power of illusion, which meant he was still here, somewhere. A dry, musty scent, like a terrarium left in the heat too long, came to me from the left.

The bone-sword nicked out from the shadows and narrowly missed my jugular. The Korrigan lunged forward and I parried with my stolen weapon. The swords clattered off one another, dull thwacking sounds that belied the ring of true steel as we parried, riposted, and performed all those other nifty fencing terms whose names elude me.

Hey, I don't know what that fancy fork is called for eating escargot either, but it doesn't mean I don't know how to use it.

The Korrigan overextended himself, and my blade slipped passed his guard and into his belly. He grunted at the shock and stepped back, pulling himself off of my weapon. He healed himself, and then was back at me. A wild slash narrowly missed taking the top of my head off. My return swing missed by a mile, but forced him back a step. I swung up from the hip, forcing his sword high, and kicked out at his knee. It shattered, and he fell on his good knee to the floor. I heard the bones cracking as they knitted themselves together, and he placed a hand on the floor to help himself stand.

How long could I go on like this, with him healing every wound I dealt out? Sooner or later the slow accumulation of my own wounds would hinder me, and I would make a fatal mistake. And he would win. He'd capture my soul, and claim Leanne.

"Screw this," I said. My blade arced down and took his head off at the shoulders. It rolled a few feet on the hardwood floor, and his eyes stared up at me in shock. The body toppled forward, and I drove the bone-sword down through the creature's heart and pinned the torso to the floor.

Maybe it was because he was the vampire lord, but he didn't burst into flames like all the other vamps had. He died like the movie vamps did, slowly turning to dust as he decayed in layers until there was nothing left of him save for his head. For some reason it remained intact, although the eyes had glazed over now that he was truly dead.

There was an outraged gasp from the crowd as time returned to normal. The vampires glared at me and fingered the hilts of their weapons, but no one made a move.

"Riot!" the singer sang from the balcony. It took me a moment to realize it was part of the song I'd requested, and not a statement of what was about to occur. Although I could be wrong.

"Screw you, too," I yelled, and the Vamps took a step back, even though they all stood a good ten feet away.

I was tired of playing by the Stupid Rules. The game had been uneven from the beginning. The Korrigan had had nothing to lose, whereas I had risked who-knows-what kind of torment trapped in that fancy dream catcher, and, more importantly, Leanne's freedom. No more being dragged around by the nose. No more Mr. Nice Guy. It was time everybody started playing by *my* rules.

Skatha's dais sunk to floor level. She approached me, taking the time to push the Korrigan's head aside with the tip of her Feragamos. She picked up the vampire lord's bone-sword and the dream catcher from where they had fallen to the floor, and handed them to me.

"You might want to put these somewhere, for safe keeping," she said.

I nodded, and took them from her. She glanced around at the mess I'd made. The Korrigan's retinue still lay where they'd fallen, and were being helped off the floor by others of their kind. Someone even retrieved the Korrigan's head, wrapped it gently in red silk, and placed it in a bag of the same color and material.

The vampires slowly dispersed, leaving through the exits to gilded horse-drawn carriages that awaited them outside.

"Looks like the party's over," I said.

Skatha absently twirled a ringlet of her hair. "Nah, we've just booted the low life. What's a party without a good fight or two?"

Josh joined us where we stood on the dance floor. We exchanged a look that said it all. Basically:

"Are you all right?"

"Yep."

"What now?"

"Who knows?"

So we just stood there, waiting.

Skatha's servants appeared with mops and buckets and cleaned up what little blood there had been. Someone roped off the area around the cracked pillar, and several Sidhe were already up and dancing now that the vamps had left.

We stood before Skatha like naughty schoolboys before the school principal. I shrugged, as if to say, "What now?"

"I wouldn't worry too much about the clans exacting their revenge," Skatha said. "They'll be too busy fighting over who will be the next Korrigan. I'd say you did well."

I stared at her with my mouth open, for a moment. Attractive, I admit, but it does nothing for the appearance of intelligence.

"I cheated," I said.

Skatha tsked. "What is the first thing I taught you about the rules of combat?"

"There is no Fight Club?"

Josh smiled. "There are no rules."

Skatha held out her hand. In it was about a dollar fifty in spare change.

"Time for you to leave."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Skatha didn't actually make us snatch the spare change from her hand, but Josh did grab an espresso on the way out. There was a gilded carriage waiting for us at the door. Our old clothes were already packed and on board.

Skatha raised her hand to my face, and I flinched and blocked to the outside. She laughed at me, and I stood there grinning sheepishly as she stepped in close and touched her hand to my cheek.

"You could beat me if you really wanted to," she said. "Every time, for at least the last month or so."

I stared into her eyes. "I know."

She kissed my forehead, and stepped back. "Good. False humility is a waste of time."

She held her hand out to Josh, who didn't flinch, but the effort showed in his eyes. She didn't cup his cheek, however, but tangled her hand in his hair and tripped him back against the carriage. She kissed him, hard and fierce. Josh only struggled for a moment.

Skatha stepped back and straightened the lines of her evening gown. She locked eyes with Josh, whose nose had suddenly sprouted whiskers. "*You* are welcome to return for extra training any time you like."

Josh stammered for a reply, but gave up and turned to enter the carriage. He bumped into the doorframe, then hit his head before finally retreating to the safety of its darkened interior.

"What about me?" I asked.

She cocked an eyebrow. "Call first."

I laughed as I stepped up into the carriage. A footman closed the door, and I leaned out the curtained window.

"There's one last thing," I said. "What do I owe you for this?" The thought had been bothering me ever since my chance encounter with Cuchulain. "*The Sidhe go by many names, but 'tis not for nothing they are called The Fallen; all they do comes with a price.*"

Skatha approached the window. A sickly red glow swirled in a halo about her head, the light dull in some places, and bright in others, like spilled blood on the verge of congealing. "Someday I will come to you requesting a favor. You will grant me this favor." The light faded.

Great. I'd just made a deal with Donna Corlioni.

"I won't kill for you," I told her.

She smiled that wicked little smile I knew so well. It's the same one she'd wore when she'd kicked me in the groin, and stabbed me in the eye, and...well, you get the picture.

"I can do my own killing," she said. "Besides, that wasn't a request, you dolt, it was the Light of Prophecy, the Imbas Forasnai."

"Gesundheit."

Skatha smiled ruefully and shook her head. "Be grateful for your training. You're going to need it." She rapped twice on the side of the carriage, the driver gave a shake on the reins, and we were off.

Josh sank back into the luxurious leather cushions. He'd regained his composure

somewhat, but I did notice that he sneaked a peak through the curtains to watch Skatha as we pulled away. He may as well not have bothered, as Skatha had turned and entered the keep as soon as we'd started moving.

Josh did a rather sickly imitation of someone smiling. "I hope that second sight of Skatha's is good for getting around and reading and stuff, because if Sabrina ever finds out Skatha put the moves on me, she'll scratch her eyes out."

"Don't worry, Josh. What happens in Skye, stays in Skye," I said, and winked.

I don't think it reassured him much. He kept twisting his wedding band around and around on his finger. "Besides," I said, "What I'm really worried about is how we're going to get this carriage over the Bridge of Leaps?"

Apparently the goat path we'd used to get to Skatha's place wasn't the only route to and from the beach. The carriage followed a winding cobblestone road around the hills. I saw bright, flickering lights in the fields to our right, and remember our last encounter with the Will 'O the Wisps. I fought the urge to stick my fingers in my ears and sing so as not to fall under their spell again, but knowing what they were was protection enough.

Eyes glittered in the darkness, but not always in pairs. I saw single, baleful yellow eyes, and groups of three, and once a set of eight in a triangular layout. Maybe it was one of those goblin-spiders, or maybe it was a pack of smart-assed wolves that had formed a pyramid just to screw with my head. Wolves are wily that way.

Whatever it was that was out there, it left us alone, which was just as well. The freaky stuff that leaked over into Darkside was bad enough. I didn't even want to think about the things that might be waiting for someone in the twilight of Summerland.

The carriage came to a stop, then rocked on its springs as the driver climbed down to open the door for us. I don't know if we were supposed to tip him or what, but the carriage driver climbed back aboard, clucked at the horses, and was gone. I didn't have any money on me anyway. Hell, I didn't even have pockets.

The Neverland floated serenely, moored to the dock where we'd left her. Josh rushed past me in a hurry to get onboard. I heard him priming the engine as I untied the sloop from its mooring. He was in an obvious hurry to get home, which suited me just fine. The engine rumbled to life and Josh took the wheel as we pulled away in reverse. Once we were far enough out he swung us around and we headed off into the night.

The moon was bright in the clear, starlit sky, and reflected off the lake, but I still couldn't see the lights of the city from where we were.

"How can you tell where we're going?" I asked.

Josh turned the wheel a quarter turned to the right, then pointed up to the night sky. "See that star there, the bright one? That's the North Star."

"Wow, sailing by the stars, how Amish of you."

He shrugged. "Well, I could if I had to, I suppose. But right now it's shedding just enough light so as I can see the auto compass there, and the GPS."

The bastard got me again. "I'll make the hot chocolate," I said.

"Use the new-fangled propane stove," Josh suggested. "Rubbing two sticks together will take forever, and Leanne will kill you if you bust up her good chairs for kindling."

Sometimes all you can do to save your dignity is walk away.

The cold hit us while I was in the galley pouring the hot chocolate into mugs. We must have passed over into Darkside, because it was daylight all of a sudden, and winter. I handed Josh his mug as I came up on deck and took a look around. The Isle of Skye was gone, and I could make out Kingston in the distance.

Josh pointed to the GPS. "Look at the time."

I did. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, an hour later than when we'd left. Same day, same year.

I grinned up at Josh. "They've done it, Ebenezer. The spirits have done it all in one night."

"Yeah, how Bill and Ted of them," Josh said, and blew on his hot chocolate to cool it. He took a sip, and burned his tongue anyway. Served him right.

The overcast skies that were headed our way back when we'd set out a year ago hung low over the city now. By the time we pulled the Neverland back into the dockhouse at Leanne's it had started snowing again. I told Josh I'd tie the boat off, and he said thanks, and was gone. I knew how badly he wanted to see Sabrina, and besides, I could teleport. I still beat him to the house.

Sabrina was in the kitchen, having just returned from dropping Alex off at school. Josh came crashing through the front door, darted through the living room, and barreled into the kitchen. He scooped Sabrina up in his arms and hugged her so tight I thought the woman's eyes would pop. He finally let her down after she pounded on his back a few times to let him know she couldn't breath.

"You two back already?" Sabrina asked once she'd regained her composure.

Josh scowled, the expression replacing the ear-to-ear grin he'd worn just a moment ago. "Already? We've been gone a year."

Sabrina crossed her arms on her chest and stared up at her husband. "A year, eh. Did you bring me a present?"

Josh looked worried all of a sudden. "Well, no."

"And what are you wearing?"

"Skatha gave them to me," Josh said, the way a child does when they get caught with something they know they shouldn't have. "James got some, too," he blurted out in a last ditch effort at self-preservation.

"I'm not married to James," Sabrina replied coolly, but the jealous façade began to crack, and the hint of a smile touched her lips.

Josh realized he'd been had. "Ah, screw it," he said, and grabbed her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

Sabrina squealed, and pounded her tiny fists on his broad back as he headed for the marble stairs. "Where do you think you're taking me, you big brute?"

"To bed, wench."

"Oh. Why didn't you say so in the first place?" she said, and ceased struggling. "We'll be back in three," she called to me over his shoulder.

"Make it six," Josh corrected. "After all, I've been gone a year. We may do it twice."

The door to their upstairs bedroom slammed shut, cutting off whatever comments his wife may have made.

Someone screamed. There was a blur of color at the top of the stairs as something passed by too fast for the naked eye to catch, knocking the paintings off kilter. My time

sense had just began to slow as I prepared for battle when suddenly Leanne was in my arms.

She pressed herself in close to me and kissed me all about the face as she held my head in her hands. "You're back. I missed you so much; I thought you'd never get back."

I was confused, not that I didn't love the attention. "But I was only gone an hour."

"An hour, and a year," she murmured between kisses. "An eternity."

She pulled away, hesitantly, running her hands over my body as if to refamiliarize herself with it. "The Sidhe sense the flow of time differently. I know you were only gone from Darkside for an hour, but I felt the pain of separation, the longing that the time passed in Summerland brought with it." She shrugged. "It's a Fae thing."

I pulled her to me, and kissed her the same way she had kissed me.

"So, are your hands registered as lethal weapons now?" Leanne asked once I let her up for air.

"You bet. I could kill you with a rolled up newspaper now, or at least make sure you don't pee on the carpet again," I said, then tossed her over my shoulder the way Josh had handled Sabrina. "I learned this from a good friend of mine. I think you're going to like it."

Leanne slipped down, wrapped her legs about my waist, and nuzzled my ear. "It damned well better take longer than three minutes."

I kissed her again as I walked up the stairs with her wrapped around me. "All right, all right. I'll try for six, but no promises."

It was considerably more than six minutes later when the four of us met downstairs in the kitchen again. How much more is classified. I'd tell you, but then I'd have to...um...deny it, and blame it on someone else. Hey, I'm Canadian, eh.

Josh was already eating when Leanne and I arrived. He'd changed back into comfortable blue jeans and a burgundy pullover sweater with a mock turtleneck collar. I'd changed my clothes as well, sending Skatha's outfit back to wherever stuff goes when I send it away. As much as I loved the attire she'd gifted us with, it did tend to stand out some.

Mom was gone--Sabrina had driven her to work after she'd dropped Alex off at school--and Drat and Charlie had already headed off to the strip club. I mentioned that the club probably didn't open for another hour or two, but apparently Drat had mentioned something about getting good seats, called a cab, and dragged Charlie off with him. They'd bundled Drat up in a snowsuit and balaclava to protect him from the sunlight until he could get inside again.

There really wasn't anything for us to do until nightfall, by which time Sister Juliet would finish at the school and hopefully head straight home. Sabrina decided it would be best to give the nun a little time to have dinner and relax before we showed up on her doorstep. She'd called Sister Juliet, who had agreed to meet with her and Josh after the evening meal, but hadn't mentioned that Leanne and I would be accompanying them.

I already knew that I was persona non grata as far as the nun was concerned, and doubted that Leanne would be any more welcome given her history with vampires. But if anyone could tell us what had happened to Alison's soul, it was Sister Juliet. I was bound and determined that she would help us, even if I had to let her wrap my knuckles with a wire edged ruler until kingdom come.

Once Josh had finished eating we retired to the living room and sat around the fireplace. Bear shimmered in front of the blaze, popping in and out of existence sporadically. Even though he was dead, and not really, physically there, I swore I could still smell singed dog hair. I didn't have the heart to move him, though, as I hadn't seen much of him in Summerland, and fed him scraps of Josh's leftovers whenever the mutt appeared.

I sat at the end of the couch closest to the fire. Leanne stretched out along its length and laid her head in my lap as I massaged her neck. We often sat this way, and I would rub her neck and shoulders, even though I'm pretty sure she didn't really need it. I just liked to touch her, and she seemed to enjoy the attention.

Josh and Sabrina sat across from us in the loveseat. Josh had one leg stretched out along the cushions, and sat with his arms around his wife. For big, bad tough guys we were awfully touchy feely. I think the both of us were going to have to turn in our memberships to the He-man Woman Haters club.

Dad and Grandpa dropped in now and then as Josh and I regaled the girls with our exploits under Skatha's tutelage.

"I'd like to meet this Skatha," Grandpa said. "She reminds me of Sergeant Woodrow, my old Platoon Commander back in World War Two. The meanest, toughest S.O.B. I ever had the misfortune to serve under. Saved my life twice."

Grandpa had served in the army back before he'd joined the force.

"I'll bet your Sgt Woodrow didn't look half as good in heels and a push up bra," I said.

Grandpa rocked back on his heels as he pulled on his suspenders. "Oh, I don't know. As I recall, Bob Hope hit on him during a USO show," he said, then vanished.

We chatted like this on and off for about an hour. At times we just sat quietly by the fire. It's a pretty nice feeling, being warm and content with people you love and care about. It was a feeling I could learn to get used to. As happy as I was though, there were still things nagging at my conscience. Like Alison. I knew there was nothing I could do about her at the moment, but on some level I still felt like I was betraying her as I sat here warm and happy with Leanne.

And I knew I had to tell Leanne about the Korrigan. I just didn't know how she'd take it. This was the creature that had turned her, after all. Even though Leanne was Sidhe, vamps owed an allegiance to their sire. There was some sort of bond between them. Would she be grateful that I'd killed him, or pissed that I'd robbed her of her vengeance? Maybe she'd break down when she learned that her sire was dead. There was only one way to know for sure how she'd react.

"There's something I have to tell you," I said during a lull in conversation.

She turned over on her back and looked up at me. She didn't say anything, but waited for me to continue.

I ran a finger over her lips and lost myself in her eyes for a moment. I had to close my own to break her spell, or I'd never tell her.

"The Korrigan's dead," I said finally. "I killed him."

Leanne took my finger and held it to her lips as she kissed the tip.

"I know," she said. "At least, I knew he was dead. I felt it when it happened. I hadn't known you were the one who killed him until just now." She moved my hand,

pressing my palm close to her cheek. "Thank you."

The tension drained out of me at those words, and I caressed her face.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

I told her of Skatha's final test, and how I'd passed.

Leanne smiled, and shook her head slightly. "Skatha owed me; I guess that makes us even."

I realized just then exactly how out of my league I was. "Skatha used me to pay her debt to you, thereby putting me in her debt at the same time."

"Just tell me you didn't sleep with her," Leanne said.

"Er...no," I stammered, and blushed.

Leanne smiled, and nibbled at the palm of my hand. "I didn't think so, but Skatha's had a thing for her students in the past. And she can be very convincing."

I saw Josh blush, and whiskers sprouted from his nose, but luckily Sabrina had her back to him.

"Trust me, one kick-ass, leather clad Sidhe babe is more than I can handle," I said.

"Tell me about it," she said, and stuck her tongue out at me.

I was about to defend myself when the phone rang. "I'll get it," I said, and stood quickly enough that Leanne shrieked as she was dumped unceremoniously to the floor.

Greg was on the line when I picked up the receiver, and he didn't sound happy. "Something's happened I think you should know about. The St. Mary's Cemetery's been desecrated. Someone dug up one of the coffins and removed the body."

I really didn't need Greg to tell me who's body had gone missing. It all made some kind of sick sense now. Alison was interred at St. Mary's.

Or at least, she had been.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I hung up the phone, told the others briefly what had happened, and teleported to Alison's gravesite. It didn't take any concentration on my part to imagine the place in my mind's eye; I'd been there too many times.

Alison was buried in the family plot. Her parents had money, so it was a nice piece of land. There was room for her mom and dad, and Sarah, maybe even enough for Sarah's husband--when and if she ever married--and Alison's ex. There was no room there for me, though. Not that I'd ever need it.

The police had come and gone already, so I ducked under the police tape. The small, rose-marble headstone was knocked off kilter and the left corner chipped off. The casket looked like it had been ripped from the ground, as if something big had burrowed beneath it and just shoved it up through six feet of rocks and dirt. It jutted up from a mound of detritus at a forty-five degree angle, with maybe only a foot of it left buried. There was a fist-sized hole in the lid where someone had punched through it, and then ripped the rest off its hinges. The body was gone.

I'd have to talk with the grounds keeper later, or a funeral director, or...someone. I had no idea who to call to clean up. I'd have to get a new casket regardless. If we ever found the body.

Alison's mom and dad had been the executors of her will, but I'd covered all the funeral expenses. Her ex had been pissed when he'd learned that Alison had left everything to Sarah, in trust for when she turned eighteen. He hadn't paid a cent towards the cost of interring her, and her parents had been only too happy to let me foot the bill. I hadn't minded; it was the last thing I ever did for her.

The cops had trampled around the crime scene, but the area inside the tape was pretty pristine. I was no detective, but even I could make out the deep impressions a set of Harley Davidson riding boots had made. The cops had made a plaster mould of one of the prints. The little dabs of plaster around it were a dead giveaway. No doubt these prints would match the ones taken outside the Richards' place, the ones the zombies had made when they'd stolen the safe with the plate from Bram's Cauldron locked away inside.

My guts twisted, and I clenched my jaw so hard I'd have cracked a few teeth if I'd still been human. I didn't need to see Sister Juliet to learn what had happened to Leanne. I knew why Leanne no longer shared that part of Alison's soul, and why the zombies had stolen Alison's corpse. They were going to make a zombie of her. Maybe they already had.

Greg dropped his bag of mints, scattering a half a dozen of them across his desk, and tried to draw his Beretta. He clutched at his chest with his free hand. "Son of..."

"Fine, upstanding woman," I finished for him.

"Whom I know taught you better than to sneak up on a tired old man," he grumbled as he collected the runaway mints.

Okay, so maybe materializing behind him suddenly as he worked at his desk wasn't such a good idea. At least he hadn't shot me--yet. I sat on the one clean corner of his desk as he leaned back in his chair, and raised an eyebrow at the avalanche of paperwork. Actually, I raised both eyebrows--I never could manage the Mr. Spock single eyebrow raise--but Greg got the point none-the-less.

"This ain't the movies. Real cops have to fill out paperwork when they trash their car, or fire their weapon." He sighed, heavily. "Lots and lots of paperwork."

"Wow," I said. "By the time you finish all that, you'll barely have any time left to run out and shoot anyone else."

"I think that's the point."

"And speaking of cars, who insures the cops? I mean, you guys get shot at all the time and *you're* still insured. But someone plants one little bomb in my car..."

Greg ignored my rant, and signed his name to another sheaf of papers. He had to press down hard with the pen to make sure his signature was legible through the six or seven carbon copies.

He shook out his hand to relieve the writer's cramp. "I've got to get me one of those rubber stamps," he said. "Or a Bic lighter."

He rummaged through his IN basket for a moment and pulled out a manila folder from somewhere in the middle of the heap. The folder held photos of the desecration at the cemetery, and the results of the plaster casts they'd taken off the boot prints. As I suspected, they matched those taken outside the Richards' place.

"Sorry there's not more," Greg said. "There weren't any fingerprints, tire tracks or eyewitness reports. Nothing that might clue us in as to where we might find the perp."

I tossed the folder back on the pile. The police evidence wasn't of any use at all.

"What I'd really like to know is why would someone dig up Alison's body in the first place?" Greg asked. "I'm assuming you've been in...contact...with her ghost."

I almost fell off the corner of his desk. "You should have your own TV show," I said, once I'd recovered. "Mediums are for pussies; this fall it's Greg McMillan staring in Extra Large," I announced in my best Don Pardo. "Quick, what number am I thinking of?"

"I'm not psychic." Greg shrugged, and leaned back in his chair. "You mentioned at breakfast this morning that you were going to see Sister Juliet to help find out what had happened to Alison's soul, and then something to the effect that Leanne had been Alison's last known address. Besides, odds are if your Dad and Grandpa are haunting me, then Alison's haunting you."

The man was just too good at his job, which was probably why he'd never make Chief. Call me cynical if you want to. Go ahead, I can't hear you anyway.

So I told Greg everything. And I mean *everything*. Everything about what I was and how I got this way; about demons and vampires, faeries and shapeshifters, trolls and goblins; about the Blood Moon ritual and what went down at the street dance a couple of months ago; about Leanne and Alison and Dad and Grandpa and Bear, about who and what Charlie, Drat, Thomas, Josh, Sabrina, and especially Alex were; about Azrael and zombies and Taylor and Joan Gilliam; and about Bran's Cauldron.

It took about twenty minutes. Greg asked for clarification on a few points, and popped mints throughout, but never questioned my sanity once. I can't say he was too certain about his own by the end of the tale, however. It didn't help that Dad or Grandpa would pop in and out whenever their name was mentioned. Or the fact that now he could actually see the red-haired gremlin that was busy changing the radio frequencies on all the handheld radios.

"That explains a lot," was all he said once I'd finished. I had the feeling he was referring to more than just this present case, or what had happened to him in the last two

days. Greg had been a cop in Kingston for over thirty years now; I'm sure he'd seen his own share of freaky shit.

Greg stood up, adjusted his shoulder holster, and reached for the charcoal duster he'd draped over the back of his chair. "My guess is Azrael stole Alison's soul and dug up her body just to keep you distracted."

I chewed the inside of my cheek for a moment as I mulled that one over. "I never thought of that. I figured the bastard was just getting back at me for what happened in the alley back at the mall."

Greg shrugged on the duster. "Walk me to my car."

I followed him out the office as he headed for the parking garage and his new ride.

"I suppose Azrael could be out for revenge, but I doubt it," Greg said. He wasn't really talking to me now. I think it was more a stream of consciousness thing. "Whatever it is he's doing, he's gone to great lengths to make sure you're out of the way. Even the attack at your Mom's house wasn't really about me; it was about you. He lured you into that alley to trap you in a pentagram, and failed. Now he's hoping he can keep you busy enough with this mess with Alison that you'll stay out of his hair."

I jammed my hands in my pockets as we descended several concrete steps to a gray painted hallway that lead to the back of the building. "He doesn't have any hair," I said.

Greg's brow furrowed in concentration. "But he doesn't want you gone, either," he said, ignoring me. "He wants to control you. I think he needs you; whatever he's planning, you're a part of it."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. Call it a hunch."

I nodded. Greg had already proven the accuracy of his hunches. I was more than willing to concede the point.

"And I don't think you have to worry about running into Alison any time soon," Greg said.

"Another hunch?"

Greg popped another mint into his mouth. "From what you've told me, Azrael needs a necromancer to create a real zombie, and his is dead. I'm hoping necromancers are rather hard to come by."

The last was phrased as a question--one I didn't know the answer to. I shrugged, and Greg went on, "Even given that he's found himself a new one, we don't know how many pieces of the Cauldron he actually has. He may not have enough to do the trick."

"Gilliam managed it with only three pieces," I said.

Greg nodded. "But one of those was the base. Again I'm guessing here, but I'll bet it's one of the more powerful pieces."

"I hope you're right," I said. God, I hoped he was right. The last thing I needed was to come up against a zombie version of Alison. I felt soul-sick just thinking about it.

"Speaking of Gilliam," Greg said, "Someone from the school called when his daughter didn't show up for class, and no one could reach them at home. We sent officers to his place. They found the door broken in and signs of a struggle. They also found Joan Gilliam's daughter, or her corpse. The forensics guys dug up a couple dozen animal corpses--dogs, cats, raccoons and such--buried in the back yard. I'm guessing he

sacrificed them in some kind of ritual to resurrect the dead. None of the bodies had a mark on them, though."

We arrived at Greg's new ride, a Crown Victoria that looked exactly like his last one, right down to the Tim Horton's cup holder set between the driver and passenger seats.

"No wonder cops don't worry about car insurance," I said. "You just clone new ones."

"I wish," Greg said as he opened the door and adjusted the seat back before climbing in. "It would save on the paperwork."

I winced as he started the car. I was a might touchy ever since my own blew up, but the Crown Vic purred like a fat, happy cat.

"Keep your cell phone on," Greg said. "Let me know what your friends turn up at the strip club, and how things go with Sister Juliet. I've got a couple of cases I'm working on right now, but if I turn over anything I think might be up your alley, I'll give you a holler."

I nodded, and he powered up the window and backed out of the parking garage. I teleported back to my place before I thought to check for security cameras. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure there were cameras in the squad room, too. Hopefully no one would have to review the tapes anytime soon. I'd hate to think of all those tax dollars going to waste in order to replace a perfectly good surveillance system.

I wanted to check my phone messages, which was why I'd gone home instead of back to the manor. Even though I'd given my insurance agent my cell number, I still hadn't heard anything from them in a couple of days. Sure enough, the message light on my phone was blinking when I got home.

There were three messages waiting, all from my insurance company. The first message told me that they'd cover me for a rental car for up to two weeks. They'd neglected to mention how I was supposed to rent a car after they'd cancelled my insurance, though. The second message told me they'd be depositing twenty-two grand in my account by tomorrow. Apparently that was the blue book value of my Grand Cherokee, not even half the cost of a new one, and about five to ten grand short of a used one. And the third message was my agent, wondering if I'd received the first two messages.

I wondered if maybe I should just bank the money and skip on the new car. It's not like I couldn't use the cash, although my savings were holding out pretty well. It's amazing how much you can cut down on your expenses when you don't have to eat, or buy clothes. Still, Eternal or not, as a red blooded Canadian male I felt emasculated without my own car. I guess the subliminal advertising had sunk in after all those years parked in front of the TV.

I went searching for my recent copy of Auto Trader. I finally located it on the top shelf of a closet in the spare bedroom, along with my rapier, and the clothes Goibnu and Skatha had given me. So *that's* where stuff went to whenever I disappeared it. It made me wonder if everything I materialized actually existed somewhere. I had this mental image of some poor guy running around naked at the office every time I manifested a change of clothes for myself, and then made a mental note *never* to manifest underwear again.

I spent about twenty minutes thumbing through the Auto Trader, but my heart

wasn't in it. I wanted my old car back, damn it! The radio presets were tuned to all my favorite stations, the speakers were balanced the way I liked them, the little plush Tigger that Sarah had given me for my birthday hung from the rear-view mirror, and the seat cushions had molded themselves to fit my...unique proportions perfectly. If I ever got my hands on the vamp that blew up my car I was going to stake him, cut off his head, grind up his bones, mix the powder with holy water, and spread the paste on garlic cloves wrapped around a crucifix, raised under a solarium built on consecrated grounds. Let's see the bastard come back from that.

I heard my cell phone ringing, and tried to remember where I'd left my jacket. I followed the warbling strains of "Ode to Joy" into the kitchen where I found my coat draped over the bar stool at the end of the kitchen island. I flipped it open and answered on the fourth ring, just before the message service kicked in.

"Hey, Bumper, it's Alex."

No duh. The only other person that still called me Bumper was Grandpa, and I let him get away with it because he's dead. Alex gets away with it because she's cute.

"What's up, Sweetie?"

There was a pause on the other end, and mumbling, as if she'd covered the phone with her hand while she spoke to someone else. Then, "Olie and Julie and Michelle and I are at the food court in the mall. I think something's following us."

Something. Not someone.

I checked my watch. It was just after noon. They must have driven to the mall for lunch, which meant crowds. I'd have to be careful where I materialized.

"I'll be right there, Sweetie. Just stay where you are."

I heard more muffled voices, then, "Okay, James, but don't tell your dad, okay? The last thing I need is for him to tell my dad. You know my parents; they're paranoid enough as it is."

Don't tell my dad? Why would I tell my dad? Then it dawned on me. As far as Alex's friends were concerned, I *was* my dad. She didn't want me showing up as me, she wanted me showing up as the younger version of myself.

I sighed. "All right, Alex, I'll be there as soon as I wash the Oxy 5 off my face."

"Thanks, Bumper," she said, and the phone went dead.

I closed my eyes and concentrated. When I opened them my bangs obstructed my view. Yep, I was sixteen again. Maybe Alex had something, here. Whatever was after her wouldn't be expecting me, at least not the younger me.

I retrieved the overcoat Skatha had given me from the closet. It would come in handy for hiding a sword, if I needed one. Folks tend to get a might skittish when you cavort about the mall waving a rapier in their faces. And, hey, this is Canada; at least carrying around a three-foot pig sticker here means you're still better armed than the average Joe.

Now the only question was where to materialize. There was a washroom near the food court, but odds are it was busy this time of day, and the last thing I wanted to do was appear in a stall occupied by a guy with his pants down around his ankles.

Maybe I should try the bookstore--what self-respecting kid would be looking for a book on their lunch hour? And any kid that was probably didn't have any friends anyway, so who would they tell? As long as I stayed away from the magazine racks I should be okay.

I pictured the fantasy section in my mind--no one ever went there--and *voila*, there I was. No, not the French section, the fantasy section. I was right; the only other person in the store was some middle-aged pervert trying to peer through the plastic shrink-wrap at the nudie mags. I snuck out of the bookstore and into the food court with no one the wiser.

Trying to pick Alex and her friends out of the rest of the crowd wasn't going to be as easy as I'd hoped. The food court at the Kingston Center wasn't exactly huge, but there were at least three High Schools in the area and the kids swarmed the mall at lunch. The uniforms didn't help either; half the girls were wearing catholic schoolgirl uniforms, catholic or not. Damn that Brittany Spears. The rest of the girls seemed to be wearing fashion inspired by a freak dryer accident--a half a pair of jeans, half a sweater, and high-heeled Frankenstein booties. Damn that Brittany Spears.

The KFC outlet bombarded me with the scent of eleven secret herbs and spices, and my mouth watered like Pavlov's dog. I swear if they could bottle that smell as an air freshener they'd make a fortune. A&W tried to compete, but their greasy burgers didn't stand a chance, not that I have anything against a good greasy burger. Did I mention I was hungry?

I scanned the food court, trying to pick the girls out of the crowd--and read the menu at Made in Japan, when I was overcome by a sense of foreboding. I glanced to my right; sure enough, Olie had her hand on my ass again.

Michele accosted me from the left, putting her arm around my shoulder. "Hey, James, nice coat. What did you do, mug a vampire?"

I was about to answer, "No, a faerie," but realized I'd probably come off sounding like some kind of gay basher.

Alex and Julie got up from a table not four feet away from me. Okay, so maybe I'd been distracted by the food.

"I think I saw a coat like that at the Catarauqui Town Center," Julie said. She had a strawberry ice-cream cone, and made a show of licking it while she made eyes at me. That pervert in the bookstore didn't know what he was missing.

"Yeah, that's it," I lied, and moved Olie's hand from my ass.

Alex grinned from ear to ear, obviously amused at my predicament. She didn't seem at all worried about whatever she'd sensed following her, but that's Alex. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Of course, I hadn't seen the girls either. If they had been vamps or demons or something they'd have torn me to shreds.

"So, Alex, what's giving you the heebie jeebies?" I asked.

"That," she said, and pointed to the toy store just to the left of the food court.

It looked pretty normal to me: a wide open entrance to the left, a storefront window with a bunch of stuffed animals on display, and the name of the store overhead in colorful cartoon letters. No vamps or zombies or Dark Sidhe. Nothing.

At least not until a three foot tall Big Bird in the window pointed at me with one of the three fingers on its yellow-gloved hand and mimed the throat-slitting motion.

"There's something you don't see every day," Michele said. She didn't seem overly worried, but then hey--we're talking muppets here.

I nodded. "One of these things is definitely not like the other."

I'm not even going to try and describe the obscene gesture the Cookie Monster made.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Alex pointed out a plush purple dinosaur, and--Daffy Duck--guarding the main entrance to the right of the bookstore that led into the food court. Daffy was armed. Sure, it was a little plastic musket, but I wasn't taking any chances.

Some little kid toddled over to play, but Daffy growled at him and the kid ran sobbing to his mother. I didn't even know Daffy *had* teeth.

"Thath dethpicable," I said.

Something red and furry stalked out of the bookstore and into the center of the hall not ten feet from us, blocking our escape by that route. Or it would have if it had been more than a foot high.

"Ooh, Tickle Me Elmo," Julie said.

I pushed the girls behind me. "I'll handle this."

Elmo stood with his spindly little bowlegs in a gunfighter's stance. I ran at him and kicked him hard, like a place kicker trying for a thirty-yard field goal. He giggled insanely as he sailed up and over the People's Jewellery kiosk and landed in the fountain.

"I've always wanted to do that," I said.

Something landed on my back and wrapped its gray, stuffed arm around my neck. "Of course you realize this mean war," it said.

It dealt me a sharp blow to the back of the head with a plastic carrot that staggered me. These things might have been small, but they were *strong*. I reached around and grabbed Bugs by his plush little neck. "Did you just whack me with a carrot?"

Bugs took a bite out of the plastic vegetable in question. His teeth looked razor sharp. "Eh, what's up, Doc?"

"Say your pwayers, Wabbit," I said, and punched Bugs in the nose.

A heavy-set woman wearing way too much perfume walked by carrying a little blond, freckle faced girl in her arms. They both scowled at me.

"What?" I said, and then caught my reflection in a mirror panel on the wall beside me. To all intents and purposes it looked like I was punching out a stuffed Bugs Bunny doll. In the mirror he didn't look any more animated...er...lifelike than usual. Damn glamour.

I shoved Bugs into one of those talking trash receptacles just as I heard a rustling to my left. The doorway to the toy store was jammed with stuffed animals. Stuffed animals with teeth, and claws. They crawled over each other as they tried to get out. Others--store mascots or promotional items, stepped out from shops all along the length of the mall. I noticed there weren't any real animals--no teddy bears, plush puppies or kitties or whatnot--just characters. Disney and Warner Brothers, Hanna Barbara and Sesame Street. Maybe they were easier to animate since most already had distinct personalities. Thank God there were no Cabbage Patch Kids, though. Those things freaked me out.

Not even a glamour could hide what was happening now. There were too many toys roaming the mall. No one seemed to know what to make of these lifelike playthings. Shoppers glanced nervously about, looking for hidden puppeteers or someone with a remote control. I guess it was only natural to refuse to believe that they had come to life.

"This is the worst promotional advertising idea I've ever seen," a dark-haired woman in a power suit told her friend. "Even worse than that episode of WKRP in

Cincinnati, when Les Nesman tossed live turkeys out of the helicopter for Thanksgiving because he thought they could fly."

A woman screamed when she caught Animal looking up her skirt, and made for the exit. The toys let her go, and a crowd followed suit. Alive or not, this was just plain creepy. Shopping could wait.

I gathered up the girls and we headed for the exit, but of course the toys had other ideas. They moved en masse to block our escape. I didn't think it would be that easy.

Alex seemed unfazed, but her friends were getting nervous now. They didn't know what Alex was. They certainly didn't know what was going on, and to be honest, neither did I. What was the point of all this? I had no doubt that the toys could hurt us; they had preternatural strength, for beginners. But why? Killing Alex didn't help the Powers of Darkness. Only corrupting her soul would serve their needs.

The only people left in the food court now besides us were the people that worked there, and they stayed hidden safely behind their counters. Several shop owners had lowered their security grills, and peered warily through the metal grates like inmates at the Kingston Pen. I guess that made us the guards, trapped on the cellblock just before the riot broke out.

The Hamster Dance blared over the mall's sound system as the toys advanced on us.

"This is starting to get creepy," Olie said.

Starting? Where'd she live, anyway? 1313 Mockingbird Lane?

Alex chewed on her lower lip, which is probably the most worried I'd ever seen her. "So what's the big plan, James?" she asked.

Good question. They might be small, and fuzzy, but no doubt a swarm of them could do considerable damage, like locusts, or piranha.

"I'd love to get my hands on a flame thrower right about now," I said.

Michelle looked aghast. I guess she was a tad squeamish at the thought of torching Tweetie, Sylvester and the gang. "That's just plain evil," she said.

I shrugged. "I have chocolate and strawberry evil, if you prefer."

She stuck her tongue out at me. Go figure.

"Do you have a better idea?" I asked.

Michelle glanced around the food court for a moment, and a smug look came over her face. "Actually, I do."

She sauntered over to the Pita Pit and said something to an older woman that worked behind the counter. The woman seemed agitated, and fidgeted with the black hair net that covered her graying hair as Michelle spoke.

"This is no time to be thinking about food," I shouted. And then, "I'll take a Chicken Caesar Pita with cheese."

Michelle reached into the small black clutch purse at her hip and gave the woman a Toonie. The woman nodded, then handed Michelle something in return. It didn't look like food. It definitely didn't look like a Chicken Caesar Pita.

Michelle returned with several small packets of salt, and three fat pieces of colored chalk that the woman at the Pita Pit had used to write out the daily specials.

"Oh, I get it," Olie said as Michelle handed her a piece of chalk, and then another to Julie. Olie knelt down and drew some strange symbol on the floor.

"This is no time to play Hop Scotch," I said. "And I get to go first."

Michelle ignored me, and handed the packets of salt to Alex. "Make as big a circle as you can around us with this," she said.

Alex took the packets and tore open the first one, then handed me a couple. "Well, they *are* witches," she said in answer to my look of confusion.

Now she tells me. "Catholic witches?"

"My *dad's* catholic," Michelle said as she drew a large, five pointed star in the middle of the floor.

"And my mom," Olie said, and added strange hieroglyphs at the star's points.

Julie traced a red chalk outline about an inch in from the salt circle Alex was making. "Don't look at me; my parents are Scientologists."

The Tasmanian devil poked a toe across the line of salt, testing the barrier as if he were testing a swimming pool to see if it were warm enough to go in. His toe burst into flames, and he went spinning off, a twirling vortex of arms and legs cursing in...Tasmanian, until he came to rest in the mall's fountain. Taz sighed in audible relief as steam from the doused flame swirled about him.

Olie had finished adding hieroglyphs to the star's apexes, and drew new symbols between the inner and outer circles we had created.

I was a little antsy about the whole business, to tell you the truth. Me and pentagrams don't seem to get along all that well, and I mentioned as much to Alex.

"This is a protective circle," she said. "It's for keeping stuff out, not in. You should be just fine."

When the girls had finished, the three witches joined hands and moved to the center of the pentagram.

"Is that it?" I asked.

Olie shrugged. "Just about. Candles would have been nice, or a broom to sweep out the negative energies, but this will have to do." She started chanting something in Latin, and the others joined in. Whatever it is that they said, they said it three times. "That should do it," Olie said when they'd finished.

A bell tolled. A great big freaking bell, and it tolled for me. The sound was so intense it pressed hard at my eardrums and pushed me off balance so that I went down on one knee to keep from falling over.

"Are you all right?" Alex asked. She looked a little worried now, which made me feel better and worse at the same time.

"Did anyone else hear a death knell?" I asked. No one said anything. "Great, then it's just me again." I climbed back to my feet. One should never fight evil from one's knees.

I saw things differently now. The toys had us ringed in, several hundred of them pressing close to the protective circle the girls had created, but not daring to cross. Gray, smoking tendrils snaked out from each of them, trailing back through the mall and up through the skylight at its center like some sort of perverted umbilical cord. Whatever was controlling the toys was up there, on the roof and in broad daylight.

That hardly seemed fair. I mean, what kind of self-respecting evil operated in the light of day? Evil was supposed to lurk in the dark; that's how you knew it was evil.

"I have to get to the roof," I told the girls. "The puppet master is up there somewhere. Is it safe to leave the circle?"

"I doubt it," Olie answered. "The toys will tear you to pieces."

The Count stood on the condiment table about ten feet from us and pointed at each one of us in turn. "One, two, three, four, five! Five dismembered corpses," he said, confirming what Olie had just said in his forced Transylvanian accent.

"I meant is it safe for you?" I corrected her. I needed to know that the protective spell would hold if I broke the circle.

Olie looked at the other two girls, who nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, it's safe."

"All right, wait here. I'll be back," I promised in my best Swartzenagian accent.

I took a flying leap over the crowd of toys, doing a nice front somersault just to show off, and landed just behind their line. I turned back to make sure the girls were okay, but the toys still seemed unable to enter the circle. Olie, Julie and Michelle gave me a polite golf clap in honor of the spectacle I'd made of myself.

The skylight was maybe a couple of hundred feet down the hall. The light that normally filtered down through it was choked off by the mass of gray, smoking chords that clogged the opening. I took a couple of steps toward it when a little Martian wearing one of those roman centurion brush-top helmets stepped in front of me.

He pointed his little plastic ray gun at me. "You have made me very angry--very angry indeed! Brace yourself for immediate disintegration."

He squeezed the trigger, and the gun screeched as lights flickered on and off around its muzzle, but nothing else happened. Marvin looked perplexed, and stared down the barrel of the weapon. "Where's the kaboom? There was supposed to be an earth shattering kaboom."

He squeezed the trigger again, and disintegrated, leaving nothing but the helmet and a pair of red tennis shoes that waddled off back to the toy store. "Oh, Well. Back to the drawing board."

The magic the puppet master had used to animate the toys seemed to have worked against him. Their personalities, while making them more life-like, also forced the toys to perform true to character.

I reached the skylight without further incident, and at first tried to climb the puppet master's strings, but the smoking tendrils were insubstantial. My hands passed through them as if they were, well, smoke. The skylight itself was pyramid shaped, and made of glass. There were no doors or windows or other openings through it to the roof, and I couldn't teleport up, as I couldn't see anything through the mass of cords. And its not like I'd ever been up there before, which meant the only way up was through the glass.

I ripped one of the hinged doors off the garbage bin next to a bench under the skylight, and held it over my head. No sense using my noggin to batter through the glass. I held my breath as I jumped, not wanting to inhale any of the sickly smoke that clogged the skylight. All it took was one good leap, and I crashed through the overhead windowpane to the roof as jagged shards of glass rained down on the leather furniture below.

I don't know what I expected to see once I made the rooftop. Maybe a giant gray-haired Geppetto complete with bushy moustache and wire-rimmed glasses, or Andre Toulon. I certainly wasn't expecting a pale-skinned, white-haired nude woman with furling black bat wings. Sure, I know what you're thinking. I should have seen it coming.

At least she wasn't out in broad daylight, but knelt in the shadows of an industrial air-conditioning unit. And she wasn't entirely nude. She wore black metal pasties, shaped

like little demon skulls and linked together by a chain that partially covered her breasts. Black threads, like garters, wrapped themselves around her hips, and held up sheer black stockings patterned with little black hearts. Bits of curved bone, like sharp, pointed mandibles, pierced her skin in a row from her throat down to her belly button, which had a black metal ring through it. She held her arms up over her head, palms outward, and her nails were long and sharp, like needles at the tips of her fingers. Her eyes were flat black, like the tar that covered the rooftop. A dark energy emanated from them, a stygian aura that encompassed her, and was the source of the smoky tendrils that animated the toys.

At a guess I'd say minor demon, or maybe a cross between a succubus and a vamp, or all three. I'm sure Drat would have done her. And maybe Thomas; he *is* a musician, after all.

My rapier materialized in my hand, and she lowered her arms. The dark aura about her subsided, and the tendrils dissipated like so much smoke on the wind. I imagined the toys down below, suddenly still, or tipping over without a semblance of life to lend them balance.

"I take it you're the Eternal they warned me about," she said. Her voice was warm and childlike, and reminded me of Melanie Griffith. Her brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Somehow I thought you'd be older."

I'd forgotten I still had the appearance of youth I'd taken on to placate Alex and her friends. "I am," I answered. "You'd be surprised what a good moisturizing regime can do for your skin. That and staying out of the sun."

She smiled, and I saw a telltale trickle of blood at the corner of her lips. She must have sacrificed something, or someone, to perform the magicks that she had. Spells required a lot of power.

She stood, and stepped out of the shadows and into the light. I guess the sun wasn't as much a skin care problem for her as I'd hoped it would be. "Do you have the time?" she asked.

I checked my watch. What the hell; what could it hurt? "Twelve-fifty," I said.

"That should be sufficient," she answered. "Azrael only required that I distract you for a half hour or so."

I took a practice swing with the rapier. "Distract me from what?" I can guarantee my voice was nowhere near as warm and fuzzy as hers sounded.

She shrugged, and the bat wings readjusted themselves at the movement. "In all honesty I have no idea," she answered. "And I'd tell you if I knew. I simply did it because I owed him a favor." She licked at the blood on her lips. "I owe him nothing now, and I have no quarrel with you."

The darkness rushed forth from her eyes once more, enveloping her body until she was nothing more than a shadow of herself, so to speak. Then the blackness collapsed in on itself and she was gone.

So it had been nothing but a distraction after all. But to what purpose? I rushed back to the girls, jumping down through the broken skylight and almost gashing my leg open on a shard of glass that protruded up from the leather couch below. Alex and the others were still within the confines of the pentagram. The toys lay all about, toppled over and in disarray.

"It's all right. You can come out now," I said.

Julie hesitantly reached out with her toe, much the way Taz had done, suspecting

a trap. Nothing happened, and the girls reluctantly left the circle.

Alex threw her arms around me in a big hug. "Thanks, James," she said, and soon the others followed suit.

If I really were seventeen, I'd have been in heaven right about then. As it was, I felt dirty. And guilty. Sheesh, you'd think *I* was the catholic.

"Are you guys going to be okay?" I asked when the hug fest was over. "You can make it back to school okay?"

Olie and Michelle made a face, but they all agreed that getting back to school would be no problem--once I faked them a note as to why they were late for class. I left out the bit about the killer toys.

I saw the girls safely to their car--Olie's parents had spoiled her with one of those cute little VW Bugs for her birthday--and waved as they drove away. Once they were out of sight, I teleported back to my place.

Suddenly I understood the reason for the distraction. The heat from the fire near melted the skin from my bones before I could teleport out to my front lawn. Luckily the crowd that had gathered was too intent on watching my home go up in flames to notice someone appearing suddenly in their midst. I spent a couple of moments healing myself as I watched what was left of my old life reduced to soot and ashes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

There were two fire trucks at the front of the house, connected to a hydrant that luckily was only just across the street. It may as well have been a gas pump for all the good it did. The firefighters sprayed the house down, as well as the homes on either side of mine, but only managed to contain the blaze. In less than an hour all that was left of my home was a gaping hole in the ground and some fire-blackened brick where the basement used to be. Even the brick siding had collapsed into the cellar, as if everything had been sucked into a black hole by the sump pump. Not a stick of wood or patch of plaster remained.

The fire chief, dressed in the customary canary-yellow slicker, slogged across the muddy, water-soaked lawn that even now had begun to freeze up. He stopped in front of me, and pushed back the brim of his hat.

"Are you James Decker?" he asked.

I nodded. Luckily I'd had the presence of mind to age myself appropriately earlier.

"Sorry we couldn't save the place," he said. "To tell you the truth, I've been a fireman for thirty years and I ain't never seen a fire come up that fast or burn that hot before." He spat on the ground, and then looked at me askance. "Did you keep any chemicals in the basement?"

"Nothing," I said. No doubt he suspected arson.

He studied my face for a moment, and shrugged. "The Fire Marshal's gonna have to conduct an arson investigation but I'll tell you right now, he won't find nothing." He spat on the ground again, as if what he had to say left a bad taste in his mouth. "There ain't nothing left to investigate, and I mean *nothing*. No accelerant, not even a bit of structure left to determine a splash pattern or point of origin."

Of course not. Magic wouldn't leave mundane evidence. Some dragon had probably torched my place, or a fire elemental, or a hoard of gremlins with magnifying glasses.

"I didn't burn my house down," I told him. "It's all I had left."

He watched as the rest of his crew rolled up hoses and stored the fire axes they'd never had a chance to use on the trucks. "You insured?" he asked.

"Yeah." That's one insurance policy my company hadn't gotten around to canceling. "But everything that really mattered was in there." Pictures, mementos, memories; all I had left of the people I'd loved and lost, all gone. It was as if Azrael were trying to cut me off from my past. From what made me human.

The fire chief nodded. "That more than anything ought to exonerate you. People tend to remove personal belongings before they torch their own place." He shook his head again as he wandered back to the truck. I could hear him muttering to himself as he climbed aboard. "Still, even the *appliances* are gone, and I know I saw the stove through that window there before the wall collapsed."

There were cops on the scene, too, but not Greg. I guess he was busy elsewhere, and no doubt had realized that there was no need to panic as far as I was concerned, seeing as I was already dead.

The cops took statements from the neighbors, mostly to the effect that they hadn't seen me around the last couple of days. Lately I'd been teleporting in and out, so no one had seen me coming or going. I told Officer Janveau that I'd been staying at my

girlfriend's house, and that I'd just dropped by to check my mail and messages when I saw the house in flames. I gave her Leanne's number in case she needed to get in touch with me. I'd dropped my cell phone on the couch when I'd rushed to save Alex, so it had been destroyed in the fire, too.

Officer Janveau told me she'd have to check my alibi, but I knew Leanne would cover for me. Luckily Janveau didn't ask *how* I'd arrived; I didn't have a car, and there would be no record of a taxi dropping me off. There were several cars parked along the street at the moment, mostly voyeurs who had stopped to watch the spectacle. Janveau must have assumed that one of the vehicles was mine.

A few of my neighbors offered me their condolences--the divorcee down the street even offered me a place to stay, but I assured them I was all right and eventually they wandered off back to their lives.

I kicked through the ashes once everyone had gone. Even the deck and the Jacuzzi had seemingly evaporated. The acrid scent of charcoal stung my nose, and the sickly sweet taste of soot and cinders cloyed at the back of my throat. Something shiny to my left caught my attention, and I dug at it with the toe of my boot, kicking it free of the wreckage. It was the rapier Leanne had given me. I bent down and unearthed it, and found the clothes Goibnu and Skatha had gifted me with as well--all the stuff that vanished to the closet whenever I was done with it. The closet was gone, but the clothes and the sword had survived. They were all of faerie make, and immune to the magic that had destroyed my mundane home. Of course I'm just guessing here.

The sword was soot-blackened, but wiped clean in an instant. The clothes didn't even smell of fire. I concentrated, and they were gone again. I have no idea where they went to now that the closet was just a memory, but I'm sure I'd come across them again eventually.

I decided to walk for a bit. Leanne's place was a good ten miles from my house--or what used to be my house--not that I'd planned on walking the whole distance. I could always teleport once I got bored, or run really fast. It's not like I'd get tired or cold or anything. I just needed time to collect my thoughts. After a few minutes of walking, I realized I really didn't have much of a collection at all. Just the one thought going round and round in my head.

Everything I was just three short months ago had ceased to exist. My job and the friends and acquaintances that entailed, all that I owned: my car, my house, my furniture, my clothes--all my possessions. All gone. Anything that had ties to my previous existence had gone up in smoke, literally. The only ties to my past were the ghosts that haunted me: my dad and grandpa, Bear and Alison, although I couldn't even be sure of her anymore. All I had left of the old me were my mom, and Greg, and even they saw me through new eyes now.

I guess maybe I was the only one who refused to see how I had changed. And maybe that was the problem. Why was I worried about my car, and my house, and those shysters at the insurance company? Did I even need a car, or a house? What possessions did I require? Okay, maybe some clothes so I didn't have to run around butt naked, but that's it. I didn't have to eat or sleep.

Death had transformed me in more ways than one. And Azrael had finished the job. Maybe he'd done me a favor. Not that I still wasn't going to kick his bony metal ass when I saw him. Because hey, even the Queer Eye for the Straight Guy gang wouldn't

give you a makeover unless you asked for it. It's nice to be asked.

I'd made it out to Highway 2 by now, the old Queen's Highway. It was only a single lane, but it was paved; calling it a highway was kind of like calling Celine Dion voluptuous, but we Canadians have delusions of grandeur.

It started to snow, those big, white wet flakes that stick as soon as they land. Soon there were a couple of inches on the ground that made walking difficult. I was still kind of mopey, thinking that the new fallen snow would cover the charred remains of my home, whitewashing everything so that even in disaster everything looked pristine, when the car hit me.

He was moving pretty fast--way to fast for the road conditions--and the front end of the car caved in around me, crushing my pelvis and then flipping me up and over the hood. I slammed into a tree, broke my arm and dislocated my shoulder, and mangled my face pretty badly against the rough bark before thudding wetly to the ground. The left side of my skull was crushed, my jaw dislocated, and I think I swallowed several teeth. The blood made them go down easier. I can't even begin to imagine the internal damage.

I don't know why I didn't transcend the way I had when the Jeep had blown up. Maybe I wasn't damaged enough, or dead enough. It sure freaking hurt, though, and I wasted no time in healing my injuries. I got to me feet and checked myself over. So far so good. Even the jacket Skatha had given me was undamaged, although there was a large bloody rent in the mundane shirt I was wearing. There was blood all over the tree I'd hit, and crimson drops stained the snow around me, but I cleaned up my face when I healed myself. Except for the tear in my shirt, you'd never know I'd been in an accident.

The guy that hit me got out of his car, swearing and cursing up a storm. He looked to be about forty, with salt and pepper hair, a pale, jowly face, and a nose like he'd lost one too many dodge ball games the hard way. He threw one end of his expensive red scarf over the shoulder of his full-length, black cashmere overcoat, and proceeded straight to the front of his precious Chrysler 300 to check on the damage. The 300 is a big car, but I'd still managed to shove the shiny grill back in between the shattered double headlights about a foot and a half. How inconsiderate of me.

Apparently that's what he thought, too, because he stormed towards me. "What kind of idiot walks down the side of the road in the snow? Look what you've done to my car. The fucking thing's only three weeks old."

"No, really," I said. "Calm down. I'm all right, honest." I've always been a big fan of sarcasm.

"You have no idea who you're dealing with, asshole?" He sneered. "I'm going to sue you for everything you have."

He flipped a cell phone out his pocket and dialed a tow truck. Not an ambulance. Not 911. A tow truck. He hadn't even bothered to ask me how I was. For some reason this pissed me off. A lot.

I walked to the back of the Chrysler, grabbed it by the bumper and lifted. The back wheels came off the ground.

The guy that hit me flipped his cell phone shut. "Hey, what do you think you're doing? Stop that, right now."

He may have been rich and powerful, but he obviously wasn't very bright. I stared him in the eyes as I pressed the back of the car to up to my shoulders. "Or what?" I asked him.

"I'm...I'm calling the police," he stammered, and dug in his pocket for his cell phone again.

I had the car practically balancing on its damaged front end now, and got a hand under the frame as I walked myself towards the front. Metal screeched as I dug my fingers into the underside of the car and lifted, until I held the Chrysler over my head.

"Go right ahead," I said. "You obviously have no idea who *you're* dealing with, asshole." What were the police going to do about it, arrest me? I'd like to see them try. I'd wipe their entire force off the face of the planet without even breaking a sweat.

The guy that hit me stared, eyes wide in shock as his mouth opened and closed without uttering an intelligible sound. He held his cell phone open in his hand, but without a number dialed in. It was one of those picture phones; if he'd been smart he'd have snapped a shot. At least then he would have had something to show his insurance company. And here I thought I had problems with *my* policy.

A savage smile touched my lips. The car's windows exploded outwards like bright, jagged bits of crystal shrapnel as I bent the Chrysler almost in half. The doors popped open as the metal buckled and screeched in protest as the front and rear tires near touched.

I dropped the car down to chest height and spun it like an Olympic discus thrower, releasing the Chrysler at the height of its arc. It tumbled end for end as it sailed through the air and took out several small trees before slamming up hard against a rocky hillside.

Those damn tree huggers can just kiss my ass too.

The guy who hit me at least had the sense to be scared now, as well he should be. I stalked towards him, and he pissed himself.

I grabbed him by the collar of his expensive coat and lifted. He hung limply, suspended like a rag doll in a sack. "You're not such a big man all of a sudden, eh?" The prick was probably a CEO of some big insurance company or bank or Enron or something. "How's it feel to have someone toy with your fucking life? I could snuff you right now and no one would probably give a damn. I doubt anyone would miss you."

He shook his head no, his eyes pleading as a whimper escaped him.

If I had been human still, this bastard would have killed me, and doubtless thought nothing of it. A hit and run, most likely. Or he'd have found some way to blame me, saying I jumped out in front of his car. What was I to him? Nothing. As far as he was concerned, I wasn't human. Just some animal he'd hit on the side of the road.

I thought about killing him then, really killing him. Squeezing his neck until the bones ground beneath my fingers and he choked on his own blood, unable to breathe.

I could. I could do it, and get away with it. Even if they caught me, what could they do? They couldn't arrest me; there weren't enough police in the world to take me down. And even if somehow they did manage to catch me, what jail could hold me?

I heard a car approach from behind. Instead of passing us, it pulled slowly to a stop. I turned my head, expecting the police, or a tow truck. It was Josh.

He turned his Beamer off, got out of the car, and walked slowly over to where we stood. He looked at me, at the twisted wreckage of the Chrysler off into the woods, at the man I held suspended with one hand, and then back at me. He jammed his hands into the pockets of the black leather bomber jacket he wore. "What's up?" he said.

The guy I was holding tried to protest, or plead for help, but I squeezed the material around his throat a little tighter and that shut him up. Steam rose from the urine

stain on his pants.

I glared at Josh. "I'm..." I began. "I was just..." I blinked. I was just what? Murdering someone?

I let the guy go, and he dropped to his knees. I guess his legs buckled. The stench of vomit and red wine wafted up from the maroon-stained snow.

The guy wasn't a vamp, or a zombie, or Dark Sidhe, or any of the other myriad class of creepy crawly I'd come up against lately. As far as I know he wasn't even evil. He was just a drunken asshole. And I had decided to kill him.

So what did that make me?

I've always believed myself to be a good man. No, I don't go to church; hell, I still haven't managed to convince myself there *is* a God. But I've always felt that it was more important to do the right thing, to do good, simply for the sake of doing good, and not for the promise of reward or punishment in the afterlife. How can you call yourself honest and law abiding if you're only honest and law abiding because you have no choice? If you only follow the rules, be they man or God's, because you're afraid of getting caught? A good man does the right thing even when no one is watching.

That old saying about absolute power corrupting absolutely came to mind. I was no better than the guy who hit me, casually dismissing his life because I *could*. Because even if someone was watching, there was nothing they could do about it.

I looked at Josh, and then quickly looked away, glancing down at my feet. I could see the tightness around his eyes, and the tight, forced smile he wore for my benefit. Josh was afraid. Afraid of me. And, knowing Josh, probably afraid *for* me.

For the first time since dying I suddenly felt physically sick, as if I were going to toss my cookies in the snow beside the guy at my feet. The guy who groveled in the slush, his arms wrapped around his knees as he rocked back and forth, sobbing.

I didn't know what to do. What to say to make things right; right for the guy at my feet, or for Josh.

So I left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I bought a Pepsi from the girl that worked behind the counter of the refreshment shack on the beach. Usually I prefer Diet Pepsi, but Mexico still sells Pepsi in the old ten ounce bottles like I used to get when I was a kid. It just tastes better that way, trust me. In my humble opinion, the biggest mistake they ever made was in opting for the plastic bottles. Maybe I was just feeling nostalgic.

I found a reclining chair in the sand not twenty feet from the ocean, and propped the back of it up so I could watch everyone frolicking in the white-capped waves that crashed against the shore as I sipped my drink. Oh, all right, I was bikini watching.

Alison had brought me to this all-inclusive resort at Playa de Carmen on the Mexican Riviera a few years back, just before the accident. The holiday had probably been one of the happiest times of my life, and the most peaceful. I'd had no trouble picturing the resort in my mind when teleporting. Eventually someone on the hotel staff would notice that I wasn't wearing one of their little orange plastic wristbands that allowed admittance and ask me to leave, but until then I planned to just relax and soak up some rays while admiring the view.

November was nice here, sunny, about twenty five degrees Celsius, and dry, with a light breeze skipping in off the ocean. The sand was clean, and there were no annoying insects crawling or buzzing about. I heard peals of laughter from couples enjoying the surf, and children giggled somewhere in the periphery of the rhythmic sound of the ocean. Everything smelled like coconut, lemon, and oranges.

I'm probably the only person I know that can actually, physically go to their Happy Place.

I hiked my knee-length burgundy and black Bermuda shorts up higher on my thighs to better tan my legs, even though it wasn't really necessary. I could be as dark or as light as I wanted. Hell, I could be plaid if it struck my fancy. But something about the act of tanning made me feel normal. Human. I needed that right now.

Bear popped up beside me, licked my hand, stole a slice of orange from the table of some family having a picnic a few feet away, and vanished. Somehow having my ghost-dog visit did little to make me feel normal. I mean, what kind of dog eats oranges?

It was probably five or six o'clock back home--I couldn't recall if Playa Del Carmen and Kingston were in different time zones or not--still, no doubt it was dark. I should get back, see what Charlie and Drat had found out, and talk to Sister Juliet. I should probably tell someone about what had happened at the mall, although hopefully Alex would have told Josh and Sabrina. Then again, she hadn't mentioned seeing a zombie at school, so who knew. I should be finding out what had happened to Alison.

I shouldn't have trashed that guy's car. I definitely shouldn't have threatened to kill him.

I saw that red-haired gremlin with a bottle of Hawaiian Tropic. He painted the outline of a penis on a woman's belly, poking out of the top of her bikini bottoms. That would certainly leave an interesting tan after twenty minutes in the sun.

I closed my eyes. The sun was still bright behind my lids. The heat made my skin tingle, and I felt light-headed. My body radiated warmth in waves, until I felt as if I were evaporating, as if the heat could disassemble me, and I would drift upwards to the clouds, and disseminate. Maybe cease to exist. That wouldn't be so bad, would it?

But of course that was impossible. I was an Eternal now. I wouldn't die. Couldn't die, no matter who or what I became. How old was Tam Lien? A few thousand years at least. And Azrael? Somewhere between ten and twenty thousand years, if the stories were true. I could hardly blame him for wanting to squash me like a bug. I'd almost done the same to the guy who hit me, and I'd only been an Eternal for a few months.

"You done feeling sorry for yourself yet?"

I opened my eyes and Dad was standing there, blocking my sun--or at least he would have been if it didn't shine straight through him. His belly hung over those black cut-off shorts he'd always worn to the beach: the cops/donut thing isn't just a rumor, trust me. His face and arms were walnut brown--hell, he could have passed for native, but the rest of him was pasty white. Dad had spent years on the beat in his short-sleeved blues patrolling the streets during the summer, and had developed a wicked case of farmer's tan.

"I'm just resting, Dad," I told him.

Dad sat on the edge of the recliner to my right. "Not for nothing, but the prick deserved what he got."

I closed my eyes again. "I almost killed him, Dad. I'd have murdered him if Josh hadn't come along."

"He'd have murdered you if you weren't an Eternal," Dad said.

I sat up straighter and looked out over the ocean. It was obvious I wasn't going to find peace here. "Is that how the courts would have seen it?"

Dad shrugged. "Nowadays? The courts probably would have fined your corpse for getting blood all over the tree you hit, or charged you for compacting cars without a permit."

The gremlin must have liked the coconut scent of Hawaiian Tropic, because he accidentally inhaled half the bottle when he made the mistake of sniffing and squeezing the bottle at the same time. He sneezed hard, spackling the back of the guy tanning next to him.

"I remember back when I was still on the job," Dad said. "There was this guy. We'd been to his house several times on a domestic disturbance complaint. He'd rough up his wife when he got to drinking, but she wouldn't lay charges. This was back in the days when the cops needed a complaint to take action. Well, this one time we showed up, and I guess he hadn't stopped with the wife. He had a little four year old daughter, and the side of her face was all bruised, and he'd knocked out a couple of her teeth. The creep pulled a knife on me, and I pulled my piece.

"I remember thinking 'I could just off this guy and no one would do a thing about it. Why not do everyone a favor, save the courts some money, and pull the trigger?' Greg would have backed me; that's just the way it was. I came this close," he said, squinting at the inch of space between his thumb and forefinger.

"Face it," Dad said, "It wasn't the fact that you almost killed the guy that has you bummed. It's that you could have, with complete immunity." Dad stood up and adjusted his shorts. "You don't have to be an Eternal to suffer that particular dilemma. I was just a street cop."

"So why didn't you shoot him?" I asked.

Dad was quiet for a while, and I thought for a moment he wasn't going to answer. "Greg stopped me."

The same way Josh had stopped me.

"We all have our moments of weakness," Dad said. "Even the best of us. Luckily, we have friends who keep us in line. I like to think we chose them because they're better than we are."

I knew I should be getting back. There were people counting on me, and I had things to do. I had...friends.

"Just another half hour," I told Dad.

Dad smiled down at me. I could have sworn the sun formed a halo behind his head. "Hey, everyone needs a break now and then."

I lay back in the chair and closed my eyes again as I listened to the ocean. "And Dad? No one says bummed anymore."

"They did back when I died," he said, and was gone.

It *was* dark by the time I got home. Or to Leanne's place. Whatever. It hadn't stopped snowing yet either, and had in fact turned into a full-blown blizzard. The plows hadn't made it out this way, even though Leanne lived in a rich neighborhood. I appeared on her front doorstep and rang the bell. For some reason it suddenly felt inappropriate for me to just materialize inside her home. I guess I didn't want to take anything for granted.

I heard someone approach the door, and it swung open suddenly. Leanne tackled me, bowling me over and landing atop me in about three feet of snow so that I sunk below the surface with her legs straddling my hips.

She bent down and brushed the snow from my face, then kissed me. It was a nice kiss, all warm and wet and hungry.

"It had a good beat and it's easy to dance to; I'd give in an eighty-five, Dick," I said when she came up for air.

Leanne frowned in mock consternation. "Oh, sorry. I thought you were the paperboy."

I shoved her sideways and rolled over on top of her. Her skin was almost as white as the snow that framed her face, which made her cobalt eye seem even bigger and brighter, her lips redder.

"That would explain the door-to-door service even way out here in the boonies," I said.

"You should see what I have to do to get pizza delivery."

I kissed her, probably not as well as she had kissed me, but it wasn't for lack of trying. She didn't complain, and when I was finished I got up and held out my hand to her. She took me up on my offer to help her up even though she didn't really need it. The wench could probably bench press a Buick.

She put her arm around my waist as we walked into the house. "Do you know you smell like coconut?" she asked as she brushed the snow off me in the vestibule.

"So what you're telling me is that I smell like a big, hairy nut," I answered as I returned the favor.

She grinned. "If you shoved a little pink umbrella up your--"

I covered her mouth with my hand. "Too much information," I said, and kissed her forehead.

She moved my hand, and kissed me proper, then just held me close for a bit. "Are you okay?" she asked in a small, quiet voice.

I loved the feel of her arms around me, her body pressed close to mine, her faint scent of lilacs.

"Yeah, I think so," I told her, and meant it.

She hugged me even tighter. "I love you, you know."

I felt an ache well up in my chest, and my throat tightened. The world seemed to revolve around the two of us, and I held on to her as if she were all that propped me up. Leanne and I had been together for three or four months now. We'd been...intimate from day one. This was the first time she'd ever said she loved me.

When Alison had died, I knew that I would never love anyone ever again. She had been so special. So breathtakingly beautiful. So bright and warm, and playful, kind and giving. And she had loved me so damn much. When she had been torn from me, when the cold reality that she was gone had pierced my soul like a thousand icy shards and left me empty and numb, I was convinced that I would never find that kind of love again.

But I was wrong. "I love you, too."

"Of course you do, Dear."

I smiled. "How long have you known?"

"A couple of months now. You're rather slow for an Eternal. Good thing you're cute."

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I turned to see Josh, Sabrina, and Alex seated on Leanne's Marquis de Sade sofa.

Josh sniffed in mock sentimentality. "What a nice Hallmark moment. Quick, someone hand me a tissue."

Sabrina had her hands over Alex's eyes. "You know, this house does have seven bedrooms."

"Ewww," Alex protested, but she tried to peer between her mother's fingers as she said it.

"There's no time for that," I said. "We have nun's to question, souls to rescue, and zombie butts to kick."

Josh grinned. "To the bat poles!" he said. "No, wait, the batmobile is in the shop. We'll have to take the Beamer."

He fished the keys out of his pocket and Leanne and I stepped aside as he headed outside to warm up the car and pull it around front. There would be five of us, but the Beamer was roomy. Alex called shotgun, which meant I'd have to sit in the back sandwiched between Leanne and Sabrina. Life is hard.

There was still something bothering me, a guilty thought that nagged at me, and even though I'd have much rather put the whole incident behind me and pretend it never happened, I had to ask. "What happened to the guy whose car I trashed?" I finally asked as the girls were bundling up in coats and hats and scarves and mittens.

Sabrina winked, and said, "Josh drove him to a bar in town, and told him if he were smart, he'd go in, have a couple of drinks, and then come out and report his car stolen. Let the cops try to figure out what happened to it. What with all the new snowfall, all they'd find is his crumpled up heap halfway into the woods, and no tracks leading in."

Then she slapped me in the face with a cold, soggy mitten. "And next time you go doing something stupid, don't go running off and leave us all sick with worry about you. If poor Leanne weren't dead all ready you'd have broke her heart."

I looked at Leanne, who pressed her lips together and nodded. "What she said."

I felt so miserable for having put them through this, but suddenly they were all hugging me. Forgiveness can be a great balm to the psyche. How could I have been so...ungrateful. Oh, poor little Eternal, wallowing in self-pity. It must be horrible having all those neat powers. To have great friends who love and care for you. I was such an idiot.

"I'm such an idiot," I said.

Alex kissed me on the cheek. "Yeah, it's a good thing you're cute."

I was starting to sense a theme here.

Josh honked the horn, letting us know he was ready, and we all piled out of the manor and into the toasty-warm car. It was about twenty minutes to Sister Juliet's place, but Sabrina told us she'd be expecting us. Even Leanne.

I guess the girls had decided it might not be a good idea to surprise the old nun, given her hatred of vampires. Better to be up front. Sister Juliet had been wary at first but had finally agreed to a meeting, which said a lot about the trust and regard she held for Sabrina. Of course, Sister Juliet had the Sight; she knew what Alex was. No doubt that had tipped the scales in our favor as well.

We had to pass by the accident scene on the way to Sister Juliet's. I'd have to drive by it every time I went to Leanne's. I suppose I could avoid it by teleporting, but decided that maybe I needed this reminder of what I could become if I weren't careful. A tow truck must have taken the wreckage away. The blizzard covered all evidence that anything had ever happened there. That was just fine by me.

A horse drawn sleigh blocked the way ahead; the man at the reins wore a top hat and coat, and the woman had one of those mink muffs and Russian Cossack hats. They'd have backed up traffic for miles had they not been ghosts. We drove through them, which was kind of freaky.

Sister Juliet lived in an apartment above one of those high-priced lady's clothing stores on Princess Street. The storm had kept most people at home, so at least there was parking right out front. A glass door opened onto a set of narrow wooden stairs that led up to the second story flat. Sabrina knocked on the wood paneled door as we all crowded in behind her in the hallway. The sound of shuffling came from somewhere deep inside the apartment and halted just behind the door.

"If this were a movie this would be the part where I shoot her through the peephole," I said.

I let out an involuntary "woof" as Sabrina elbowed me hard in the ribs.

Sister Juliet opened the door. She still looked like Granny Clampet, with her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun and the antique, wire-rimmed glasses. Of course Sister Juliet was more colorful than Granny, in a white knit sweater over a light blue flower-print dress.

"Nice dress," I said. "Kinda flashy for a nun, isn't it?"

Leanne stomped on my foot, but Sister Juliet only shook her head.

"Leave him be," she said. "Blunt stupidity is a refreshing change from the reverential deference I'm usually afforded."

I glanced at Josh. "I'm not sure, but I think I've just been insulted by a nun."

Sister Juliet's face lit up when she saw Alex. "Hey, Sweetie, come here and give me a hug."

Alex shouldered her way through us and threw her arms around the old woman. "I

brought you some of that saltwater toffee you like," she said.

Josh nudged me in the ribs. "I bet *you* never thought to bring an old nun candy."

"I thought it was against the rules to feed them," I said. "Live and learn."

Sabrina and Josh stepped forward and hugged Sister Juliet. Josh even kissed her on the cheek, the big suck-up. When they were done the nun stepped aside and let them into her apartment. Leanne and I stood out in the hall. Sister Juliet hadn't invited us in yet, and we couldn't cross the threshold.

The nun squinted at me. "I still don't know what you are, but Sabrina vouches for you, and I can't sense the stench of evil on you."

"It's my new Fright Guard antiperspirant. One shot and I'm good for the whole day."

Sister Juliet sighed. "I've half a mind to leave you out in the hallway, regardless." She relented, though, and beckoned me in. The old woman must have had some pretty powerful wards, because I still felt an odd tingle as I passed over the threshold.

Now it was Leanne's turn.

"I thought you said she was a vampire?" Sister Juliet asked Sabrina.

Sabrina looked nervous. I think she was the only real catholic among us, excluding the nun, of course. "She is, sort of," she answered.

Sister Juliet adjusted her glasses and peered more closely at Leanne as she stood in the dim hallway lighting. "Now I see," she said, frowning. "You're not a vampire, but you're not human, either."

You could almost see the cogs spinning round in her head. She nodded in understanding. "You're one of the Fallen, but you've been turned. The demon resides within you, but it's shackled in the deep recesses of your being. A small, dark blot on your...soul?" The nun looked really confused now. "You have a soul. You're not supposed to have a soul."

"That's why we're here," I said quietly. "Her soul belongs to my dead fiancée, Alison. She possessed Leanne in order to keep the demon at bay."

Sister Juliet raised her right eyebrow in surprise. How come everyone can do the Mr. Spock eyebrow raise but me?

"You want me to expel the demon?" she asked, and clasped the tiny silver crucifix she wore on a gold chain about her neck. "I don't do exorcisms."

"No," I said. "We want you to find out what happened to Alison. Her spirit disappeared some time late last night, and her grave has been unearthed."

Sister Juliet stared long and hard at Leanne as she held the crucifix in one hand, and worried at a rosary in the other. Finally she said, "The Fallen are indifferent at best--neither good nor evil. The demon is inarguably malevolent, but under control. The soul you carry with you is pure." The nun stepped aside. "Come inside, Child, and we'll see what we can do."

Leanne bowed her head and stepped across the threshold. She shivered violently as she did so; the wards had obviously affected her even more strongly than they had me. Leanne smiled at Sister Juliet once inside. "You know I could be your Great Grandmother many times over."

The nun smiled back. "And here you still look young enough to put over my knee."

"I do it all the time," I said.

Alex and Sabrina frowned at me.

"Well, I *do*," I muttered to Josh. Luckily by this time everyone else was ignoring me.

Sister Juliet's apartment wasn't exactly what I'd expect from a nun. I guess I expected that little dingy room with the single, metal frame bed and a rickety old night table they always showed in the movies. Maybe a couple of crosses and a statuette of the Virgin Mary.

Sister Juliet's apartment was spacious, light and airy, with floor to ceiling windows looking out on a balcony with wrought iron rails over Princess Street. The main room was about twenty by twenty, with warm, maple hardwood floors, and matching bookshelves that lined the back wall. A wide, plush white sofa and a maple wood coffee table and matching end tables faced the windows. There were little knick-knacks--African masks, native carvings, and East Indian artifacts--on shelves and stands throughout the apartment. An Aztec pattern in burnt orange, sunset yellow, and sandy brown bordered the ceiling, and made the room seem even larger than it already was. A painting of the last supper hung over a crackling gas fireplace, and a door to one side of the mantel led off into the kitchen. I assumed the closed door on the other side was a bedroom.

"Wow, a nun must make more than I thought," I whispered to Josh. "Maybe she's on the take. You know, a dirty nun."

Josh leaned his head close to mine. "Yeah, for twenty bucks she'll look the other way if she catches you buying condoms, or finds out that you ate meat on a Friday, or..."

Sabrina smacked us both in the back of the head.

Sister Juliet took Leanne by the hand and sat her down center of the sofa. The rest of the women folk sort of piled in around her, so Josh and I sat on the floor, facing them across the coffee table.

"You did right to bring her here to me," the nun told Sabrina. "Though the soul is not Leanne's, it has become an integral part of her."

Sister Juliet paused, and looked us each in the eye. I shivered when she looked my way, knowing that she saw more than my outward appearance, but something far deeper.

"Spooky nun powers," I muttered.

"I don't know what you're involved in, or if I want to know," Sister Juliet said, ignoring me, "but this is deadly serious. Both women, Leanne and Alison, are in grave danger, and make no mistake about it. She did not leave of her own violation. Alison has been kidnapped."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"So now what," I wondered aloud. "Do we all form a circle and hold hands, break out the Ouija Board, call the Psychic Friends Hotline?"

"Nothing quite so dramatic," Sister Juliet answered. "I think I understand what has happened to Alison's soul." She stood and walked to the bookshelves at the back of her apartment, and ran her finger over several volumes before drawing out two of them. She brought them back and laid them out on the coffee table.

Sister Juliet opened the first volume and skipped through several pages. "You mentioned that your fiancée's grave has been unearthed? I'm assuming the body has been taken."

I nodded.

"Would this have anything to do with the walking dead you battled at the school yesterday?"

"Probably," I answered.

"That's what we're afraid of," Sabrina said. "That they've taken Alison's soul in order to turn her into a zombie."

Sister Juliet found the page she was looking for, and looked over the tops of her glasses at me. "I'd say that fear is well founded." She turned the book to face me. "Vodun, commonly called Voodoo."

"Oh, crap," Josh and I said simultaneously.

The nun ran her fingers down one of the pages, skimming the contents. "Followers of Vodun believe that each person has a soul which is composed of two parts: a gros bon ange or 'big guardian angel', and a ti bon ange or 'little guardian angel'. The gros bon ange might be considered cosmic energy, or life force. That is the part that still resides within Leanne." Sister Juliet glanced around the room to see if we were still following her. Satisfied, she went on. "The ti bon ange makes up the other half of a person's soul, and is the accumulation of a person's knowledge and experience, their source of personality."

"So you're saying that someone stole a part of Alison's soul," I said.

Sister Juliet nodded. "It's possible. I really don't think there's any precedence for it in Catholic belief, though. We tend to see the soul as complete, without parts."

"Don't these beliefs contradict your own faith then, Sister," Alex asked, sounding much more mature than her sixteen years. It was the Innocent aspect of her nature.

Sister Juliet sighed as she opened the next volume. "I've been around a long time, Child. I still have faith in God, and believe in His divine mercy, but I've also decided that there is more diversity to the world than our teachings would have us believe. How else can I explain you, or your friend there," she said, nodding in my direction, "who are so bright that I can't bear to even peak at you with the Sight." She smiled at Josh. "Or your father, who holds the beast within himself, and still his soul is pure." She took Leanne's hand and held it in her own. "Or this creature before us, one of the Fallen, who even before she was gifted with a friend's soul, overcame the demon that possessed her."

I gritted my teeth. "So they've taken Alison's ti bon ange to animate her corpse?"

"Maybe," the nun answered. She took a moment to read what was written on the page in front of her, then said, "Vodun practitioners also believe in something called the n'âme, or spirit of the flesh. Ghosts, like Alison, still possess the gros bon ange and the ti

bon ange, but not the n'âme. It dissipates when the body dies. This n'âme is what animates the zombie, which is why they have no will or personality of their own. Normally the bokor, an evil practitioner of Vodun, requires a sacrifice in order to obtain a n'âme to animate a zombie. The longer someone's been dead, the more n'âme it takes to resurrect the corpse."

"That would explain all the dead animals they found buried at the Gilliam's place," I said.

Leanne pulled her hand away from Sister Juliet and set it in her lap. Obviously something still wasn't sitting well with her. "So if all they need is the n'âme, why steal Alison's ti bon ange?" she asked.

"Bokor often trap the gros bon ange or ti bon ange, and store it in a bottle or jar where they can draw upon their energy. But there may be a more sinister purpose."

"More sinister than keeping your soul in a jar as some sort of spiritual Eveready battery?" Josh asked.

Sister Juliet removed her glasses and took a moment to clean them against the hem of her skirt. I knew a delaying tactic when I saw one.

"Imagine being resurrected as a long dead, rotting corpse, with all your memories and personality intact--a slave to someone else's will. If the bokor were to fuse Alison's ti bon ange to her reanimated body..."

The temperature dropped in the room suddenly so that my breath fogged the air. The fire went out in the fireplace, the lights in the overhead chandelier flickered, and the bulbs popped and rained glass down around us. Fog rolled across the hardwood floor as frost raced up the walls in streams, like crystalline ivy. I turned to face the window as I stood, waiting for the attack to begin, when I felt someone tugging at my sleeve. It was Alex.

"Stop, James. It's all right," she said.

I glanced over at her, and for a moment her light blinded me so that I had to shield my eyes. "Stop what?" I asked.

She smiled, and I hugged her as she came to me. She shivered convulsively against my chest. I saw my hand, so cold on Alex's shoulder, like blue marble, and I understood.

I had done this. In my rage I had sucked all the warmth out of the room and caused a current surge that had burned out the lights. I don't know how I'd done it, but I had. I pushed Alex away from me, afraid that I might suck all the heat out of her body too, and leave her nothing but a frozen corpse. I concentrated for a moment, until my color returned, and my body temperature approached something a little more normal.

Sister Juliet found a remote for the fire place--there was enough light spilling in from the street through the windows of her apartment that even an old nun could still make out objects on the coffee table--and lit the fire again after a few tries. I heard the furnace kick in, and soon the fog dissipated. A slight sheen of moisture replaced the frost on the walls. Sister Juliet found a few beeswax candles and lit them.

"We have to find this bokor, and stop him," I said.

Josh hugged Alex to him and tried to rub some circulation back into her arms and hands. "That's exactly what Azrael wants," he said. "It's just a distraction to keep us from interfering with his real plans."

Sister Juliet raised an eyebrow at the name, but said nothing.

Sabrina squinted in the flickering candlelight as she finished reading a passage in Sister Juliet's book. "As distractions go it's a pretty good one. I don't see as we have a choice," she said.

"I'm not about to sacrifice Alison's soul, or Leanne," I said. "I don't care if the whole world goes to Hell in the meantime."

"Then I suggest you hurry," Sister Juliet said. "I for one do not relish the idea of dwelling in Damnation until saving the world works its way to the top of your to-do list."

"So where do we start?" Alex asked.

"By locating Alison's ti bon ange," Sister Juliet said wearily as she plopped down on her sofa and propped her feet up on the coffee table.

I was pacing back and forth in front of the window now. "And just how do you propose we do that?"

The old nun closed her eyes and leaned her head back. I think I was giving her a headache. I seem to have that effect on people. "A scrying spell would do nicely, I suppose."

We all stared at her expectantly.

She opened her eyes. Her spooky nun powers probably alerted her to the fact that she was the center of attention--kind of like a Spidey-sense. "Hey, I'm a nun. What you need is a witch," she said.

I stopped pacing, and Alex smiled at me. "I think I know just where to find one. Or three."

"There's something else you should know," Sister Juliet said. "If they have infused Alison's zombie with her ti bon ange, there's only one way to save her. You have to kill her." The nun's features softened as she looked me in the eyes, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the younger, compassionate woman she had once been. "And this time it's permanent. There's no coming back."

Alex called Julie from her cell phone once we were back in the Beamer. Julie agreed to contact the other girls and meet us at the food court in the Cataraqui Town Center. For some reason the girls didn't want to go back to the Kingston Center; go figure.

"You never mentioned that your friends were witches before," Sabrina said.

Alex shrugged. "I guess it slipped my mind."

Josh rolled his eyes, and Sabrina took a deep breath.

"Just how much do they know about you, and all of us?" she asked her daughter.

Alex opened the mirror on the back of the sun visor and checked her makeup, then reached in her purse for her lip-liner. "They know I'm different, but not why. Olie says I'm a nexus of power, whatever that means." She looked at her mother's reflection in the mirror. "After today, they must know something's up with James, too."

We passed the rest of the ride to the mall in silence. Leanne rested her head on my shoulder, and I held her hands in my lap. The storm had pretty much passed, and the ploughs had cleared the main roads at least. We made good time and found parking close to the mall's entrance. We commandeered a big table in the food court, and bought Alex a pogo and a Coke as we waited for the witches to arrive.

Sabrina called Charlie. Leanne had given the ogre a cell phone to keep in touch, though he rarely initiated a call. He had trouble dialing, what with those bratwurst-sized

fingers of his. Charlie picked up after the third ring, just before the voicemail took over, but had nothing to report. Things were starting to pick up now that it was dark, he said over the blaring rock music playing in the background. The place was filling up with vamps now that the evening shift had come on--both patrons and staff. Sabrina hung up just as I heard Drat's gravely voice pleading with Charlie to loan him a few more dollars for another lap dance.

Julie, Olie, and Michelle arrived about ten minutes after we did. Julie had borrowed her dad's Lincoln Navigator and picked up the others, so snow hadn't been a problem. The girls already knew Josh and Sabrina, and Sabrina introduced Leanne to them as my girlfriend. Well, as James' girlfriend, actually. I doubt they equated my current appearance with the younger version of myself. As a matter of fact, they did a classic double take when they saw me.

"You never mentioned James had an older brother," Michelle whispered to Alex as the four teenagers formed a group huddle.

I hadn't changed my appearance, which meant I looked about twenty-six years old or so. No doubt they'd have freaked if I told them I was really thirty-two. I'm sure they would have freaked had they known I could hear everything they were saying. Of course, so could Josh--and Leanne.

"Yeah, he's hot," Olie said. "I'd do him."

I wondered what Leanne thought about Olie's declaration, but mostly I was grateful I wasn't Olie's dad. Eternal or not, a daughter like that could prematurely age a guy.

"That's not James' older brother," Alex said. "That's James."

Michelle's eyes widened. The other girls looked skeptical. "This is going to take a lot more mojo than we have. I mean, we're pretty powerful witches, but I don't think even we can fix *that*," Michelle said.

"James' age isn't the problem," Alex corrected her. "To be honest, this is what he *normally* looks like."

The witches snuck a quick peek at me over their shoulders, and then faced Alex again. "No way," they said in unison.

Alex nodded. "Way. James is an Eternal."

"What's an Eternal?" Julie asked.

"Well, for one thing he can look like whatever he wants."

I don't know if it was wise or not to let the girls in on what I was, but Alex had taken the decision out of our hands. Personally I would have opted for a little more discretion, but Alex was the Innocent. I'd come to realize that she had a tendency to naturally do what was right in a given situation. I say right, mind you, not sensible.

"You mean like Odo on Deep Space Nine?" Julie asked. The others glanced at her in disapproval, but she only shrugged. "Hey, my little brother's a geek. What can I say?"

Alex frowned. "Something like that, I suppose, only James is a lot more powerful. And he can't die. And he's my bodyguard."

"Cool!" Olie said.

Michelle wasn't as easily impressed. She was obviously the cynic, and quite possibly the brains, of the group. "And what are you?" she asked.

Alex smiled. "Cute?"

"Oh sure," I muttered to Leanne. "My secrets are fair game, but hers she keeps to

herself."

"Woman's prerogative," Leanne said, as if that explained it all.

Michelle studied her friend, possibly waiting for Alex to elaborate. When it became obvious that Alex had no intention of doing so, she asked, "So what do you need us to do?"

Alex broke the huddle and included the rest of us in the conversation. "We need you to perform a scrying spell. We have to find someone; Alison, a friend of ours."

"Oh, that's easy," Olie said. "All we need is something that belongs to the person you're looking for. Something personal is better, and it doesn't have to be much: a few strands of hair or a fingernail clipping."

"And you'll need a compass," Julie added.

Everything that I'd had of Alison had burned when my house went up. There was only one place I could think of that I might find some of Alison's hair.

"There's got to be somewhere in this mall we can get a cheap compass," I said. "You guys find one, and I'll go get some of Alison's hair."

I vanished, and appeared beside Alison's grave. The coffin was covered in snow. No one had come to remove it yet. I removed the damaged lid, almost afraid of what I might find there, but the inside was relatively clean--just a few stains and some dirt. And a few strands of hair. I collected several and then got the hell out of there.

Olie just about jumped out of her skin when I reappeared, and the other two girls crossed themselves even though, if I recall correctly, neither of them was Catholic.

"You get used to it," Leanne told the witches. She looked to be about the same age they were, and apparently had bonded with them in the short time I was gone. Or maybe Leanne was just lulling them into a false sense of security.

I approached, and handed Michelle the strands of Alison's hair. She took them and carefully positioned them on a red satin scarf she placed on the table. "Where'd you get these?" she asked.

"You don't want to know."

I bought a Coke and shared it with Sabrina as we sat at another table a short distance from the girls. Alex and the witches included Leanne in their huddle this time, and they whispered and laughed and giggled while we waited for Josh to get back with the compass. I thought discretion the better part of valor and didn't listen in, although I had to wonder what they thought of Leanne and I as a couple. I don't think Alex had let them in on Leanne's true nature, or the fact that she was a lot older than she looked. Obviously Olie didn't have a problem with the apparent age difference.

"Why is it that I feel like a chaperone all of a sudden?" I asked Sabrina.

Josh descended the escalator to the food court before she had a chance to answer. He retrieved one of those black survival compasses from a small shopping bag he carried with him, and we all huddled around as he placed it in Michelle's outstretched hand.

"This ought to do," she said, and placed the compass on the scarf with the strands of Alison's hair. Olie and Julie joined her, and they all chanted as she folded the contents into the scarf using a complex pattern that would make an origami master scream in frustration. When she finished the scarf formed a small hexagonal shape about two inches in diameter and a half-inch thick--which was odd because the compass was much larger than that originally.

Michelle cupped the scarf in the palms of her hands. "Nothing up my sleeve," she

said in her best Bullwinkle. "Presto!" She opened her hands and the scarf and hairs were gone. The compass sat there, looking as it originally had.

The needle spun around a couple of times, then pointed directly at Leanne.

"Crap," I said. It must have locked on to that portion of Alison's soul that Leanne still retained.

Michelle chewed on the corner of her lip. "I don't get it. I'm positive we did it right. It should have pointed the way to Alison."

"It did," Sabrina said, obviously coming to the same conclusion that I had. "Leanne was possessed by Alison's spirit, and there's still a part of her soul locked up inside of her. That must be what the compass is homing in on. Is there any way to block Leanne's signal, so to speak?"

Julie jammed her hands in her coat pockets and looked down at the floor. "You never told us Alison was dead," she said quietly.

"Does that matter?" Alex asked.

Olie put her arm around Julie's shoulder. "Not really, but she had a bad experience trying to contact the dead once, so she's a little skittish about it."

"The dead generally like to be left alone," Michelle added. "They can get downright nasty when you bother them."

Sabrina reached out lightly and touched Julie's face, raising her chin to look the teen in the eyes. "That's not the case here. Someone's kidnapped a part of Alison's soul and is going to use it to create a zombie. We're just trying to find her, to help her before it's too late."

Julie nodded, and blinked away tears. Whatever experience she'd had must have been dreadful, and I felt like a heel for not comforting her, but we just didn't have the time.

Michelle handed the compass to me. "Hold this, while we form a barrier around Leanne. It should lock on to Alison then."

The three witches held hands as they ringed about Leanne, and began chanting again. I'm not even sure if they were speaking Latin--it's sounded suspiciously like Avril Lavigne's latest--but it did the trick. The compass spun about crazily several times, then locked on, pointing off to the northeast.

At least I didn't turn the place into a deep freeze this time. The overhead lights flickered and went out, but didn't explode. There were a few startled screams, then catcalling and whistling from some of the rowdier patrons in the food court.

Josh had his hand on my arm. "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"I think we're too late," I said. "I think they've already reanimated her, and I'm pretty sure I know where she is, or at least where she's headed."

"Oh, crap," Josh said. I saw the muscles in his jaw jump as he clenched his teeth in frustration.

Alison was a zombie, but she was more than just a walking corpse. They'd infused the dead flesh with her personality, so the zombie *was* Alison. And she was up to her old tricks again. She was going to the one place she knew she was forbidden to go. She was going to see her daughter, Sarah.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Even though Alison's ex, Randy, had been granted official custody, Sarah lived with her grandparents in a little suburb north of Highway 401, across from the drive-in theatre. Randy was a long-haul trucker and was constantly on the road, not that he would have had anything to do with Sarah regardless. He'd lost interest in his daughter once he'd learned he couldn't get his paws on her trust fund, and had been only too happy to let Alison's parents take on the responsibility of raising her. He'd missed her birthday the last three years running, and had shown up drunk every Christmas.

All right, so maybe I'm biased. It's obvious that I don't like the guy, but I don't think my personal feelings have colored my perceptions. About the nicest thing I have to say about him is that he doesn't strangle kittens--that I know of--and I can't for the life of me figure out what Alison saw in him in the first place. It must have been the bad boy thing.

I appeared on the street in front of Sarah's place, a nice little three bedroom split level with a knee-high evergreen hedge lining the driveway. A burgundy minivan was parked out front, and the light was on over the front door, so I guessed that Sarah and her grandparents were home. The living room blinds were drawn, but light from the flickering TV screen filtered through and cast the shrubs outside the window in a phosphorescent glow.

It would take Leanne and the others a good twenty minutes or so before they arrived. I couldn't very well stand out in the snow in front of the house waiting for Alison without attracting unwanted attention, so I leaned up against the old maple tree on their front lawn and camouflaged myself. My coat and pants were dark enough to blend in with the tree trunk, so I simply changed my skin and hair color to a mottled dark brown and black. Under cover of darkness it appeared as if I had virtually become part of the tree. Rambo had nothing on me.

A chain link fence on the other side of the street ran around the perimeter of the drive-in. Alison's old bedroom had a window that opened out onto a little balcony. You could see the drive-in screen from there, and Alison and Sarah and I used to sit up and watch the movies for free in the summer. I'd bring an old ghetto blaster up--you could tune it to the FM frequency the drive-in used--and we'd munch popcorn and guzzle sodas as we sat out on lawn chairs and wrapped ourselves in comforters until Sarah fell asleep.

I looked out across the snow-covered field, past the rows of posts that still lined the lot despite the fact that they hadn't hung speakers from them in years. I could see clearly in the darkness--probably some sort of light amplification, although I bet I could see in the infra red if I really wanted to--and watched the tree line at the other end of the lot maybe a quarter mile away. I stood there for ten minutes before I saw her, shambling out of the woods and across the grounds.

The blue silk dress Alison had been buried in was tattered, and she'd lost a shoe trudging through the knee-deep snow. Her flesh looked waxy and mottled gray, and seemed shrink-wrapped to her bones. She still had most of her hair, though it was damp and matted from the snow, and hung in clumps.

I knew I should meet her out there on the lot before she got too close. I certainly didn't want her showing up on Sarah's doorstep in this condition. I didn't want *anyone* to see her like this. But I couldn't bring myself to move.

I heard Sarah giggle inside the house. There was no way I could let that little girl see her mother in the state she was in. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to move, across the street and up over the fence. Alison saw me when I was still about ten yards away, and stumbled, as if she fought the compulsion that drove her. Her head was canted to the left at an unnatural angle--I think her neck was broken--and her eyes and lips had been sewn shut. Even so, the expression on her face was one of horror as she ambled towards me, her left arm held out in front of her as if she were feeling her way through the dark.

Her head lolled to the front as she traversed an uneven patch of ground, then tilted to the right so that she might see me better. She tried to speak, but her lungs had rotted away, her vocal chords dried up, and her tongue shriveled in her mouth. Thread tugged at her lips as they curled away from her teeth. Her jaw moved, the tendons creaking, but there were no words. Even with her eyes sewn shut, I could read the pleading in her face, and I knew what she wanted of me.

Stop me.

Kill me.

Please.

I had thought she was here to see Sarah, drawn to watch her daughter as she had when she had possessed Leanne, but somehow I knew it was more than that now. She'd been ordered here. Azrael or his necromancer had commanded her to kill Sarah. Alison pushed past me as the compulsion urged her forward. I had to stop her. I had to...

I moved around in front of her again, blocking her path. She reached out and grabbed me by the throat, and would have crushed my windpipe if I hadn't been made of sterner stuff as she lifted me off the ground. She moaned as the wind whistled through a perforation in her chest cavity, and up and out through a rent in her esophagus.

The rapier appeared in my hand as I looked down at my love, and I knew what I had to do. It wasn't her; not really. This putrid simulacrum that wore the remnants of the dress I'd bought my Alison for Mother's Day, this thing, wasn't her. It couldn't be. It was simply her prison, I told myself, and only I could set her free.

"I love you," I said. "Until eternity, and then some."

And then I killed her.

I don't know how long I knelt there in the snow and held vigil over Alison's headless cadaver. I was suddenly aware of Leanne's hand on my shoulder. Josh, Sabrina, and Alex ringed about us, their heads bowed and hands clasped in front of them in prayer. Dad and Grandpa shimmered in the background, and Bear lay at my side with his head resting on his paws.

I had jammed my rapier point first into the snow before me. The full moon reflected its silvery light off the polished blade, and I saw my own image mirrored there, looking wan and solemn, surrounded by my friends. It was a bleak tableau, and reminded me of the illustrated Nine of Swords I'd seen on an old woman's tarot deck. She'd read my fortune for me at a flea market a few years back--suffering, desolation, death of a loved one, misery--the card seemed more than appropriate now.

The wind kicked up a snow-devil that swirled about Alison's corpse. It fed on itself, drawing in snow and ice crystals until it formed a six-foot whirling dervish. It tugged on Alison's head and body, drawing them into the maelstrom until the corpse

stood upright amidst the tornado's funnel. The moon was almost directly overhead now, and a silvery beam of light struck the whirlwind and sparkled off crystalline snowflakes like an ethereal disco ball.

Alison held out her arms to me, whole and beautiful and radiant once more as moonlight whirled about her and the wind whipped at her shimmering hair. She smiled at me. "Time to go," Alison said. "I can't stay any longer."

I climbed to my feet, using my sword as a crutch to help me up. Her image wavered, flickered in and out of view, as if she fought the pull from the Other Side. I tried to move forward, to take her hand, but the wind forced me back. I gave up, finally, realizing that it was futile, that she was truly leaving this time. That there was nothing more I could do. "Will I see you again?" I asked.

"You and I have loved each other through many lifetimes," she answered. "And you're going to be around for a very long time. I'll be back; trust me."

I bowed my head as tears formed in my eyes, freezing as the tracks ran down my cheeks. I brushed them away, looked up at her, and tried to smile for her sake. "If it's at all possible, try to come back as a woman, will you?"

She laughed, which started me to crying again. "I'll see what I can do."

"I love you," I whispered.

"Until Eternity, and then some," she said as she slowly faded away, and then was gone.

The dervish dissipated, whipping us with wind and snow as the beam of moonlight winked out. I pulled the sword from the snow and sent it back where it belonged as the wind died down, and looked about me. There was no sign of Alison's body.

Bear howled until Alex knelt beside him and wrapped her arms about his great, shaggy neck. He whined, and licked her face.

Leanne held my hand. "She's finally at peace," she said.

I felt cold. I hadn't felt cold since the day I died. I hugged Leanne close to me, ran my fingers through her hair, and breathed in the scent of her. Even out here in the cold of winter she smelled like lilacs.

"At least I got to say goodbye this time," I said.

Leanne brushed frozen tears from my face, and then kissed my forehead. "Even more importantly, so did she," she answered.

Alison had died so suddenly, killed instantly when her car had struck the concrete streetlight. Nothing kept a spirit earthbound like unfinished business.

I put my arm around Leanne's waist and turned towards the others--Sabrina and Josh, Dad and Grandpa. The two ghosts were uncharacteristically silent.

"I suppose you two will be leaving soon as well," I said.

Grandpa shook his head. "Nope. Alison was a spirit; we're just ghosts. We're not really here in the first place, so you're stuck with us."

Well, that made sense. I looked to Leanne for clarification, but it was Sabrina that answered.

"Ghost's are just echoes of a person's life essence. They don't have a soul because they've already moved on. It's kind of like capturing someone on video--the actor may be long dead, but their image lives on. Ghosts are just more interactive." She nodded at the two ghosts. "Your father and grandfather have probably already reincarnated."

I guess it kind of made sense. Alison had been a spirit. Her life essence--her soul--had been trapped on this plane of existence. I had kept her here.

"What about Alison's ghost, then?" I asked. Maybe I hadn't lost her after all. Not completely. There was still...

Sabrina touched her gloved hand to my cheek. I saw now that she'd been crying too. The glove was damp where she'd wiped away the tears. "I'm sorry, James. It doesn't work that way. Spirit or ghost, one or the other. It's a Rule."

The Stupid Rules. I should have known better.

I covered Sabrina's hand with my own, brought it to my lips, and kissed it. Then she had her arms around me, and Josh and Alex joined us in a group hug. We huddled together like that for a bit, our breath frosting the air, until the thought struck me that maybe the others were just doing it for warmth. Leanne and I were immune to the elements, but it was damn cold outside.

"Let's get you folks back to the warm car," I said. "Besides, we have business to attend to."

"Are you sure?" Josh asked. "Cause I could stand around out here for at least another three, maybe four minutes if you like."

Was I sure? Hell, no. I would have liked nothing better than to retreat back to my happy place. But there was only one thing I could think of that could keep me warmer than a Mexican beach right now. Revenge.

"I'm sure," I said.

The ghosts, and Bear--I realized he wasn't a real ghost now, or a spirit, but something else entirely--vanished as the rest of us made our way back to the Beamer.

The warbling tones of the William Tell Overture sounded as Josh's cell phone went off. He fished it out of his pocket and flipped it open. His eyes widened in surprise at the number displayed.

"Hello? Yeah, he's here. Do you want to talk to him?"

I assumed by the lengthy, muffled dialogue the answer was no. Josh frowned. Whatever it was, it obviously wasn't good news. He flipped the phone closed--no goodbyes or nothing--so the caller had to be male.

"That was Greg," Josh explained. "Remember Raymond Burke, the guy that owns Ye Old Antique Shoppe? Someone broke into his home earlier this evening and made off with an antique gold plate."

"Son of a bitch," Sabrina cursed, then blushed once she realized she'd done it out loud. She stifled Alex's smirk at her outburst with a stern look, then said, "Chances are that except for the two plates we have, Azrael is now the proud owner of the rest of the Bran's Cauldron."

"Which explains where he got the power to resurrect Alison even without his necromancer," I said. I shuddered at the memory of her standing before me, gray bone jutting through rents in rotting flesh, her head tumbling from her shoulders as my sword flashed in a brutal arc.

Everyone was silent as Josh used his remote to unlock the Beamer's doors as we approached. He had left the car running, and it was toasty warm as we climbed inside.

"Where to?" Josh asked once we were all buckled up.

"I think I'd like to kill Azrael now," I said. The pronouncement was greeted with silence.

Josh shifted the Beamer into drive and turned the car around, pulling into Sarah's driveway, and then backing out. Alison's dad looked out through the curtains as we drove away.

"He's an Eternal. You can't kill him," Josh finally said.

I shrugged. "Maybe it's just that no one's tried hard enough."

"I suppose we could trap him," Sabrina said, after a while.

I stared out through the window at the fast food joints that lined Division Street as we headed back into the city. "Whatever. I'm just tired of waiting around to see what he's going to do next, or trying to figure out what he's up to. I figure if we kill him, or trap him, that ought to put a stop to his nefarious plans. It really won't matter what he was up to after that."

"And he has to pay for what he's done," Leanne added. I had my arm about her, and she nestled her head into my shoulder. I could see myself in the rear-view mirror--minus Leanne's reflection.

"I don't care if Alison is in a better place now or not," she said. "It wasn't her decision to go. He took that choice from her, and as far as I'm concerned that's the same as murder."

Josh pulled to a stop at a red light. "So, where to now?" he repeated after a moment.

"Well, first off I suggest we drop you three off at the strip club before Alex and I head home," Sabrina said. "I really don't think the nudie bar is the place for an impressionable young catholic schoolgirl," she added, cutting off her daughter's objections.

"We obviously haven't been going to the same strip clubs," I said, "but sure." So far the strip club was the only concrete lead we had. It was as good a place to start as any.

"Those weren't *real* catholic schoolgirls, you know," Leanne said.

"Yeah, right. Next thing you'll be telling me all that money I forked over wasn't really going towards their private school tuition."

I yelped as Leanne bit my earlobe. "Just for that, I hope they card you." Hey, what are the odds the wench would have photo identification?

Leanne squirmed a bit and accidentally elbowed me in the temple as she reached into her pants pocket and produced her driver's license. The photo looked like a cover model shot, too--not one of those deer-in-the-headlights snaps everyone else gets.

"How'd you manage that?" I asked.

"There's this Sidhe artist who's into what he likes to call his realism phase. He does all the Otherworld licenses, passport photos and credentials, and not just for those of us that can't be photographed, either. If you're a troll, or an ogre, say, he matches the glamour to your actual appearance. All you have to do is pose for him. It takes a while though, which is why most don't bother."

I examined the license carefully. It looked authentic, and even though I knew the photo was hand-drawn, it was still, well, photo quality. I handed the license back to Leanne, who managed to shove it back into her pocket without assaulting me this time.

Leanne tucked her head back into my shoulder, and we drove the rest of the way to the club in silence. I suppose I could have teleported there and met the others when they arrived, but right now I craved the normalcy of being sandwiched between my girlfriend and my girl friend. Although if Sabrina was hoping to cuddle up for body

warmth she was shit out of luck. A Vamp and an Eternal can dissipate heat faster than a MacDonald's french-fry, and I felt Sabrina shiver beside me despite the heater in the Beamer's valiant attempt at climate control. I upped my core temperature a notch, and after a minute or two Sabrina stopped shivering and Leanne snuggled in even closer, sucking up heat like a lizard on a warm rock.

I heard Alex snoring softly in the passenger seat, and lay my head back against the seat rest and closed my eyes. There's one good thing about never sleeping; no one can accuse you of snoring, although I'd have given anything at that moment to be able to just sleep. To sink into that dark oblivion--the dreamless state that sleep had always been for me. I wondered if Alex, as an Innocent, dreamed, and if so what manner of dreams she had. Maybe I'd ask her when this was all over. For now, I contented myself with the meditation techniques Skatha had taught me, and emptied my mind. Trust me, it's a lot easier to concentrate on your breathing, when you actually stop if you don't.

Sabrina nudged my shoulder, and I became aware of my surroundings again as Josh pulled up to the curb outside the strip club. Josh kissed Sabrina as she slid into the driver's seat, adjusting it forward.

"You have your cell phone?" she asked him. "Be safe," she added when he nodded.

Alex was still sound asleep, so he blew his daughter a kiss as he closed the car door. Sabrina pulled away, and Josh watched them go, blowing on his fingers to keep them warm until the Beamer turned the corner and was lost to sight. He joined Leanne and I where we waited by the entrance, and brought up the rear as we entered. I went in first, in case there was something ugly waiting for us inside. There was.

Drat was on stage with one of the peelers, and he had his shirt off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The stripper--a catholic schoolgirl, by the way--had her leg up on Drat's shoulder while she played with the nipple clamps she'd attached to the troll's scaly chest. Drat was manacled to a pole with a set of furry handcuffs, but was obviously a willing hostage.

"Told you," I said to Leanne, nodding at the dancer on stage.

Leanne stuck her tongue out at me as the doorman carded her, and I left her with Josh and sat in the empty seat beside Charlie, right up front of the stage in gynecology row. The ogre buried his face in his hands and shook his head in disbelief, or disgust. It was hard to tell, and either reaction would have been appropriate. He looked up as I sat beside him.

"What's Drat doing up on stage?" I asked.

"It was his turn," Charlie answered, blushing.

I noticed the bright pink lipstick that traveled down the ogre's face and neck and disappeared down beneath his shirt.

"Drat made me do it," Charlie protested weakly.

"Nice place," Leanne said as she and Josh joined us.

To be honest, it wasn't bad as far as nudie bars go. The hardwood stage was set dead center of the room, and had not one, not two, but *three* poles for the girls to play with. Now that's class.

Heavy, wine-colored drapes covered the windows to keep out the light and underage prying eyes. It was pretty dark, even for a bar, with the exception of the odd black light, and the several colored spotlights that washed over the stage.

There were washrooms to the right of the bar, and a door to the left that I assumed led to a change room for the dancers. A DJ in a booth at the back spun actual vinyl records, played over a pretty decent sound system, with mammoth speakers around the stage and in the upper corners of the room.

The dancers doubled as waitresses. You could order a beer or a table dance without leaving the comfort of your chair. Booths lined the walls for those who liked their privacy, and I saw one guy getting a lap dance, which I thought was illegal in Kingston. Half the dancers were vamps or sucubi though, and required intimate contact to do their dirty work. Oh, and here's a tip: if you're going to get a lap dance from a vamp, try drinking Screwdrivers instead of beer. You're going to need the orange juice to help offset the blood loss.

I offered Leanne my chair, but she raised an eyebrow at me and snorted indignantly.

"Right, never mind," I said. Peelers have a habit of hitting on any woman brazen enough to sit up next to the stage. Or to even enter the bar, for that matter.

The dancer finished her set, and Drat joined us to the sound of raucous cheering and applause. At least he had his shirt back on. Come to think of it, maybe that's what they were cheering.

"Dis place is great," he said. "Although if I has ta sit troo 'Lady In Red' one more time I tink I'm gonna spew."

"I don't suppose you guys have actually found out anything useful while you've been here?" I asked.

Charlie stared at his feet in embarrassment. Drat blinked those enormous troll

eyes of his at me, and probably wondered exactly how the question was even relevant.

"There's no sign of Azrael, if that's what you mean," Charlie mumbled, "but the Cadillac with the BLUD SUCR vanity plates you described after your car bombing is parked out back. One of the dancers told Drat the car belongs to the proprietor, who has been upstairs in his office since before noon. He usually makes an appearance around ten o'clock, so he should be down any time now."

I surveyed the bar again. The stairs that led up to the second floor must be through the same door that led to the dancers' dressing room. The answers I wanted were through there.

"I'm done waiting," I said. I had a score to settle with the owner, even if the vamp that ran the place didn't know anything about Azrael and his operation. He'd blown up my Jeep. Odds are he'd torched my house, too. "I think I'll just wander upstairs and say hi."

Charlie stood to join me but I restrained him with a hand on his shoulder. "You guys keep an eye on things down here. This shouldn't take long."

I can't exactly say that the troops were one hundred percent behind me on my proposed plan of action. Not if the looks they traded were any indication.

Even Leanne hesitated, but after a moment kissed my cheek. "Remember, shoot first and ask questions later is just an expression. We need good intel."

The look of concern on her face made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. "I love it when you get all G.I. Jane on me," I said.

She frowned. "Just be careful. It could be a trap you know."

"I'm counting on it," I said, and headed for the dressing room.

No one tried to stop me as I pushed open the door. There was only one occupant, a human girl in a half state of dress who simply raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything as I headed for the darkened stairs at the back of the room. I climbed the steep, narrow set of stairs to the second floor landing. There was a door at the top--an old, dilapidated looking thing covered in graffiti scratched deeply into its painted green surface.

I suppose it was locked. It's hard to tell when you don't bother turning the handle. The doorframe split as the hinges gave way and the lock popped in a spray of woodchips. The door slid across the dimly lit room, still horizontal, and slammed into a white marble desk, then toppled over with a resounding *whump* as it crashed to the floor.

Two vamps rushed me, one from either side. I'd describe them for you, but to be honest I staked them so quickly I didn't really have time to note their particulars. I'm sure their charred remains didn't do them justice. My hands transformed from oak stakes back to flesh and blood as I approached the vamp that sat wide-eyed behind the desk.

He looked like Euro trash, almost asexual and slightly built, with the kind of frame that actually looked good in the three-piece charcoal suit, blue shirt and black silk tie he wore. He was too pretty, like most vamps, with impeccably styled, blond hair that he no doubt had the barber touch up on a daily basis, and a faint trace of eyeliner to accentuate the blue eyes that matched his shirt. His delicate, bejeweled hands looked like they'd never done anything more strenuous than hold a champagne flute.

He regained his composure quickly, pressed a button on the intercom on his desk, and said, "I'll have to get back to you. I have company."

Even his voice was asexual, and he spoke with an accent I couldn't place. It sounded vaguely French, with Jamaican undertones.

He crossed his legs at the ankles and folded his hands in his lap. His nose

wrinkled at the stench from the smoldering remains of his former henchman before he asked, "What can I do for you, Mr. Decker?"

Well, that was certainly civil. I suppose I could do no less than act the same. "You could answer a few questions for me, before I kill you."

His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Well, seeing as you asked nicely and all. What would you like to know?"

"Where can I find Azrael?"

He took a moment to examine his manicured fingernails. "That depends. Where have you looked?"

I made a show of cracking my knuckles. Limbering up before the kill, so to speak.

The vamp frowned, although I think his displeasure had more to do with the crassness of cracking my knuckles rather than with the threat the action implied. "Azrael is an Eternal, like yourself. He could be anywhere. Or anyone, for that matter."

I punched down hard at the marble desktop. The desk cracked, split in two, and collapsed inwards in a "V" as all the office paraphernalia tumbled towards the center. I reached for the vamp, who wheeled his chair back up against the windowsill.

"I *can* tell you what he's planning however," he said as he brushed the stone chips from his lapels.

The vamp had obviously never read number seventeen of *The Top 100 Things I'd Do If I Ever Became An Evil Overlord*. I nodded for him to continue.

"Azrael's minions are scouring the city collecting engraved plates, all pieces of an ancient and powerful cauldron," he said.

"Yeah, yeah. He's looking for Bran's Cauldron. Tell me something I don't know."

The vamp's eyes narrowed slightly as he realized that maybe I wasn't quite as dumb as I looked. "While you were busy dealing with poor, sweet Alison's unfortunate transformation, some dastardly villain broke into your manor and made off with the plates you and your friends recovered. The phone call you so rudely interrupted was to inform me of that very same fact."

Azrael must have sent human operatives after the cauldron. The manor's wards would have kept out any of the Other Realm. We were so intent on guarding Alex, it never occurred to us that the manor might need protecting when she wasn't there.

I blew on my knuckles to clear the marble dust, and stepped forward to throttle the bastard, but halted as the vamp shrieked in sudden agony. The chords in his neck stood out, and he threw his head back and convulsed in an apparent seizure. His eyes turned crimson as the blood vessels burst, and the flesh about his face and head began to split and tear. Ruby light streamed from the fissures as the air thickened and the room went cold. The vamp halted me with an outstretched palm as it frantically tore away layers of flesh from the black metal of its skull with its free hand. His screams were cut short as he was engulfed in flames.

Azrael stood and shook loose the charred folds of skin and smoldering remnants of the vamp's tattered clothing, and unfurled the great, black metal wings. At a guess, he'd materialized inside the vamp--same time, same space--killing his minion in what was a demonstrably excruciating way to die, even for the undead. Apparently Azrael *had* read *The Top 100 Things I'd Do If I Ever Became An Evil Overlord*.

The vamp had blown up my car, and burned down my house. He may have even had a hand in turning Alison into a zombie. I suppose justice had been done, but I wasn't

looking for justice. I was looking for vengeance.

"Hey, no fair. It was my turn to kill him." I dove across the wreck of the desk at Azrael and tackled him about his skeletal metal waist. We careened through the window and shattered the frame and the surrounding brick and mortar. I rode him two stories to the pavement below, cracking it on impact as jagged bits of glass, wood and stone rained down about us. At least I landed on top, not that the bony bastard cushioned my fall any. My hand tingled as I grabbed him around the throat, the swirling energies that surrounded his erector-set frame numbing my arm to the elbow. I drove my fist through the metal skull into the pavement beneath it.

Azrael rammed a metal hand into my solar plexus and my chest caved in as I was hurtled into the alley wall and dislodged several shattered bricks in the process.

I pried myself loose from the wall and healed my chest as Azrael climbed to his feet and the fist-sized crater in his forehead closed up.

"Skatha has trained you well," he said in that resonant timber of his that still somehow sounded as if projected from a long ways off.

I cracked my shoulder back into place. "Yeah, well you can forget about lopping off my hand, cause there ain't no way you're going to pass yourself off as my father."

The incongruity of the statement must have stunned him for a moment, because I managed to get in close enough to take his right eye out with a glass shard from the broken window. Actually, I drove the glass into the ruby haze surrounding the eye socket where the eye would have been had he actually had one, but the socket went dark, so I think that counts. It would have counted more if he'd screamed or something, rather than backhand me into the alley wall again, which is what he did.

He held out a hand to stop me as I prepared to rush him, again. "Fool, this is getting us nowhere."

I hesitated. He was right, but what else could I do? If I were smart or clever I would have set a trap for him. Maybe a hidden pentacle like the one he'd set for me. I could have used the parts of the cauldron we'd recovered as bait. In one of those *d'oh* moments I realised I should have stored them within the confines of a pentacle in the first place. Then I could have guarded it to make sure that Azrael would have had to come for them himself, and not just send some mundane henchman who might be unaffected by the pentacle's magics. Of course the point was moot now. Azrael had the cauldron, and he was going to use it.

"You could just surrender," I suggested. "We'll have you committed to Arkham Asylum, and you can just hang out all day in your bathrobe and fuzzy pink bunny slippers. We'll all come visit you on Sundays, honest. "

Electric sparks traced a path along metal vanes of Azrael's flared wings. "I think not," he said.

Oh, well, it was worth a shot.

Charlie and Josh appeared in what was left of the upstairs window. Drat stood between Charlie's straddled legs. Josh dropped two stories down from the window and landed lightly on the pavement. Charlie followed, and made considerably more noise as he landed, but then he weighed a lot more. They took up positions on either side of me, Josh at my left and Charlie at my right.

Drat looked dubiously down at the pavement. "Hold up, youse guys. Don't go lay'n no beat'n on him without me," he said, and disappeared from view as he scrambled

for the stairs.

I took an involuntary step back as Azrael flared his wings. Black feathers sprouted along the metal struts. Something dark and oily snaked its way up his legs, wrapped them in layers, and twisted upwards to cover his arms and torso. It oozed tar-like over the metal sheen of Azrael's skull, coating the skeletal structure like sentient modeling clay. Invisible hands fleshed out the face, pushing out an aquiline nose and pressing clay into sharp cheekbones and thick lips, then extruding strands of dark, wavy shoulder length hair from the skull. Next long, flat muscles covered the frame, then flowed into clothing: a black sports jacket, charcoal turtleneck and pants, and black shoes.

Azrael appeared a lot more human than Tam-Lien had her first up at bat. Well, except for the big black bird wings. He looked to be of middle-eastern descent, but with dark, Asian cast eyes. He sported a gold earring in his left ear, and neatly groomed razor stubble.

Great. It was bad enough getting pummeled by the angel of death, but now I was going to get my ass kicked by some fancy schmancy rent boy.

I caught a flicker of movement from the corner of my eye, but it was only Drat and Leanne entering the alley. Drat swung his double bladed axe about to limber up his shoulders as he walked. Leanne looked more pale than usual, which meant she had allowed her demon room to play.

"I just got off the phone with Sabrina," Leanne said as she and Drat took up positions at my right hand side. "Someone ransacked the house while we were all out. The plates are gone."

"I know," I said.

Azrael studied the group that confronted him. His gaze lingered on Leanne. "You are familiar to me. I know you, do I not?" He sounded human now, warm and masculine and slightly melodic.

Leanne's complexion turned bone-white, and the little muscle in her jaw jumped the way it did whenever she clenched her teeth. "Not this incarnation."

Azrael nodded his head slightly. "I see, one of the Fallen."

Azrael turned his attention back to me. "Good friends are important. It makes eternity bearable--for a while." His eyes smoldered with their previous ruby haze for a moment. "It would be a shame to lose them here in this alley."

Them's fight'n words. I closed the distance between us, my rapier flashed, and his head rolled from his shoulders. The body went limp and collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut. Hey, beheading works on Highlander.

Azrael's corpse seemed to shimmer for a moment, as if he'd gone out of focus. When it stopped he was whole again, sans wings. He climbed to his feet, and rotated his head to the left and right, probably checking for serviceability.

I shrugged. "Just checking."

He clenched his fists until his knuckles were white. And then he relaxed. I thought I was in big trouble then, but he took a deep breath, and this anguished look crossed his face.

"If you could kill me, I would have let you already," he said. He sighed, and slid his hands into his pants pockets. "It was I who brought civilization to the world of man. I who banished the demons to their realm, and separated Darkside and Summerland so that man might have dominion over this world. I know the answer to the mystery of the

Sphinx. I walked with the Christ and listened to his teachings. I beheld the fall of Rome, and carried the accumulated knowledge of the ancients through the Dark Ages to herald the Age of Enlightenment. I have been the continuity of mankind, but I am weary. You owe me.

"What the hell is he talking about?" I whispered to Josh.

Josh shrugged.

"And who talks like dat? *I have been da continuity of mankind, but I am weary,*" Drat muttered in a fair imitation of Azrael's voice.

Whatever it was he was planning, it was almost as if he was asking us our permission. Or maybe our understanding. Somehow I doubted he'd give up his plans if we said no. Our forgiveness then.

"At midnight tonight I shall set my remains in Bran's Cauldron and effect my resurrection," Azrael answered. "I will be truly alive--truly human--again."

"Why would you want to do that?" Drat asked.

I thought I understood. "So that he can kill himself, of course. Real death, no coming back." How tired of life would I be after a millennium or ten?

Azrael bowed his head. "Is the price of my death so unreasonable after all I have done?"

I'm not sure if the question was directed at us; it sounded more like self-reflection. He raised his head and looked me in the eyes, saw the doubt reflected there, and nodded. Azrael looked up, then suddenly rocketed skyward and disappeared into the clouds.

"How's he do that?" I wondered. I certainly couldn't fly. And trust me, I'd tried and had the bruises to prove it. Or would have if I hadn't healed them.

Drat twirled the axe in his hands. "Hell, if I'd know'd dat's what he'd planned I'd have helped him and saved him all dis fuss."

I can't say as I disagreed with the troll, but Charlie looked stricken.

"I don't think you're seeing the big picture here," the ogre explained. "The cauldron demands life in return for the life it grants. The longer someone's been dead, the more sacrifices it requires for resurrection. How many lives do you think it will take to raise a man who has been dead for tens of thousands of years?"

I shrugged. "Two, maybe three, tops."

Charlie scratched at his ear for a moment. "By my rough calculation, his rebirth will suck the life out of every living thing within a ten-mile radius. Birds, bees, cat's, rats, the people of the city of Kingston--some one hundred thousand souls--will be nothing but smoldering, empty husks when he has finished."

That was one grim big picture.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It was a few minutes after ten by my watch. All hell would break loose at midnight unless we could find out where Azrael planned to throw his little soiree. Leanne was on the phone calling us a cab, but I stopped her.

"No time for that," I said.

There was a Chevy Avalanche in the parking lot big enough to carry the five of us comfortably if Charlie sat in the box. And it was a 4X4 to boot. I morphed my finger into an all purpose key and slid it into the lock, then let it expand until it tripped all the tumblers. It worked like a charm, and the same trick on the ignition had us up and running. It was a little chilly with the rear cargo compartment opened up for Charlie, but I cranked the Avalanche's heater to full and that seemed to do the trick. I headed us into the city with no clear destination in mind.

"Where to?" I asked.

"We have to find Thomas," Leanne answered after a moment, breaking the silence.

She seemed hesitant, no doubt assuming correctly that Thomas wasn't exactly my favorite person right about now. I still hadn't forgotten--or forgiven--what he'd tried to pull at the bar last night.

Leanne put her hand on mine where it rested on the stick shift between us, the same way Alison used to. She still carried a part of Alison somewhere deep within herself. Some of it was bound to bleed through. I couldn't decide whether that was comforting or not.

"If anyone knows the ins and outs of this resurrection hocus pocus, it would be Thomas," Leanne said.

I saw Josh nod in the rear-view mirror.

I tried hard not to grit my teeth. "All right. Thomas' band should be on break by the time we get there."

The light turned red as we approached the intersection of Division and Princess Street, and we had to stop even though there wasn't another car for as far as I could see. The streets were deserted, more so than the recent storm would account for. The Otherworld denizens had made themselves scarce, at least the ones that held some semblance to the living. The Vamps were safe, assuming that Azrael's little stunt wouldn't affect the dead.

"We should call Sabrina and tell her to grab Alex and get out of town," I suggested. "And Mom and Greg, too."

"The manor should be safe," Leanne said. "It's pretty heavily warded, and outside the ten mile radius."

Charlie shoved his head into the cab from behind us. "We don't know where Azrael will be performing the ritual," he said. "I assume somewhere near the city center, where the heaviest concentration of people are, but ten miles is just a rough estimate."

I don't even want to know the formula he used to come up with that approximation, or how he decided on his variables, but I'd trust Charlie's rough estimate over anyone else's certainty any day. No one spent more time in the manor's library than Charlie did. Well, maybe Josh and Sabrina, but they were having sex and I don't think that counts.

"Once we have a handle on where Azrael is throwing this shindig, I want the four you out of here as well," I said. "I want you gone no later than eleven thirty. Take the Ways if you have to, and go to Summerland or something."

No one said anything: they knew better than to argue with me. Of course their silence in no way meant compliance--a fact of which I was well aware--but I'd deal with that when the time came.

The light changed and I turned the corner onto Princess Street. We wouldn't have to worry about finding Thomas; he was waiting for us outside the club. The gift of foresight comes in handy, occasionally.

I had half a mind to make him sit in the back with Charlie, but Josh opened his door for the bard and then scooted over to make room.

"Hurry up and get in," I said. "The truck's hot and I don't know how long it'll take before it's reported stolen."

Thomas handed Josh a guitar case, then climbed in and shut the door. "About twenty minutes or so," he said as he pulled the thick lapels of the patchwork coat he wore tight to keep the cold at bay.

Like I said, the gift of foresight comes in handy. Now that I was around though, it was next to useless. Eternals have a habit of mucking with the continuum, apparently, and rendering Thomas' gift unreliable.

"Where to?" I asked. It seemed to be the question of the day.

Thomas shrugged, or maybe he shivered. There wasn't a lot of meat on his bones to keep him warm. "West," he said.

I slammed on the breaks to make the next right. The rear end of the truck swung about ninety degrees as if I'd planned it that way. "West? That's the best you can do? West?" I turned left at the next street, then right again onto Ontario Street, headed west.

"It's just a feeling," Thomas said, "but it's getting stronger now that we're actually headed that way."

"About what I'd expect from a bargain basement Merlin," I muttered.

It was all quiet from the backseat for a bit. "Sorry about Alison," Thomas said finally.

The bastard.

"Yeah," I said, and followed Princess Street onto Bath Road. So Thomas and I were good.

You ladies probably think I'm some unfeeling bastard, all cold and distant, but the guys understand. Thomas had basically apologized for the other night--and I'd forgiven him. We'd said as much, only in man speak.

Yeah, sometimes I need a translator too.

Thomas didn't say much after that, which was unusual for him. Maybe he'd figured, apology or no, he was better off not pressing his luck. Then again, we were all pretty quiet. Still, the fact that the one guy among us who could see the future looked downright dismal didn't bode well.

"Pull over," Thomas said as we approached the Frontenac Mall. "We're getting close."

A short causeway crossed the Little Cataraqui Creek just in front of us. The mall was just ahead and to our right. Off in the distance, on the left, was the Collins Bay Penitentiary, a medium security prison the inmates called Disneyland or the Magic Castle

because of its tall, red towers.

"Please tell me he's not in there," I said, and nodded at the prison.

We all breathed a sigh of relief when the bard shook his head.

"Maybe he's in da women's prison," Drat suggested hopefully.

The troll's face fell when I told him that I didn't think Kingston had a women's prison anymore.

Thomas wiped the fog from the passenger window with the sleeve of his coat and peered out into the darkness. "If I had to guess, and I do, I'd say he's over there."

To call the Little Cataraqui Creek a creek is a disservice. I'd have called it a river, but apparently there's already a Cataraqui River. So instead of coming up with something original--like Decker's River, say-- they just up and called it a creek. The reason this is even relevant is that smack dab in the middle of the Little Cataraqui Creek is a good-sized island. And on that island, in the middle of a copse of trees, was a fire. Or at least the glow from a fire; it was a little hard to make out at this distance. Still, seeing as it was in the midst of a wildlife conservation area I'm pretty sure that whatever it was it wasn't supposed to be there.

"I don't remember there ever being trees on that island before," I said. All the more reason to suspect it as Azrael's hideout.

"There probably wasn't," Leanne said.

"So what? Now he can grow trees, too?" I certainly couldn't, but then I still hadn't found my Eternal Pocket Handbook. "I suppose he was the Jolly Green Giant once upon a time."

"More than likely he had someone grow them for him," Thomas said. "A wood nymph, maybe."

Drat took that moment to break wind, loudly. I was just glad it wasn't Charlie.

"Just great," I muttered as we all vacated the truck. "Azrael's friends have the power to command nature, and all mine can do is pass gas."

Bear appeared suddenly, but then caught wind of Drat's...wind, whined, and vanished. I can't say as I blamed him.

The Little Cataraqui had frozen over, and a harsh wind blew across the surrounding marsh and cleared the thick ice of snow. In the dark, the island looked like a bunker surrounded by open plain, with a ring of trees inland from the island at least twenty feet. As far as defensible positions go it looked pretty formidable, which sucked for us.

"Any idea what might be waiting for us out there?" I asked.

Josh shrugged. "Azrael?"

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks, Hannibal." I noticed my hands were turning blue and jammed them into my pants pockets. "I guess I'll just have to do a recce."

Turning myself into pure spirit would have been handy about now, if only I knew how. It would have been nice to let my consciousness drift out to the island and take a look around, not to mention the clarity of thought that seemed to go with it. Of course I had only that one time to go by--back when Azrael had blown up my Jeep with me in it. I had no intention of letting Josh and the others torch me just to see if I could duplicate the experience. And for all I know Azrael could detect my presence even so. I'd just have to settle for the next best thing.

It didn't even take much concentration any more. A quick thought and my

appearance changed to suit my whim. In this case that meant camouflage along the lines of a Siberian tiger. My skin had gone white, patterned with broken black stripes. I removed my clothes except for the black boxer-briefs because, hey, I'm shy. I blocked out the feel of the chill air on my skin. It had to be easily below freezing, as Thomas broke out in shivers just looking at me.

"You folks wait here while I take a quick look around," I said. "The truck's probably aired out by now. Why don't you wait inside and stay warm?"

"Because I'm coming with," Leanne said.

Josh stepped up. "Me too. I didn't spend a year getting my ass kicked by Skatha so I could hole up in a truck with Windy the Wonder Troll when the action went down."

"Sorry folks, but I'm the only one with the fancy camo..." I began.

"I'm pale enough to pass muster," Leanne interrupted. She unzipped her jacket and fumbled with the buttons of her sweater.

Drat's eyes widened, and a stream of drool froze at the corner of his mouth. "If she's go'in nekkid, I'm definitely coming wif youse."

Thomas was the only one who hadn't volunteered, even with the promise of seeing Leanne naked.

I grabbed the lapels of Leanne's jacket and pulled them closed. "No one's going nekkid...well...except me, sort of. But that's not the point."

I kissed Leanne on the tip of her nose, but she wasn't having any of it, and crossed her arms at me.

"Reconnaissance means sending someone in to take a look around--maybe see if it's safe for everyone else. If *everyone* goes, it kind of defeats the purpose now, doesn't it?"

Leanne chewed on her lower lip, trying to work around the logic I knew she agreed with, but didn't like none-the-less.

"So why does it have to be you?" Josh asked.

"Because I'm the most expendable," I said. "Or at least the hardest to expend. Besides, what's there to worry about? I've been in tons of fights, and I've only been killed once. Okay, twice...but the car bombing doesn't count."

No one said anything for a while, but I could tell by the sullen looks on their faces that they didn't like it much.

Leanne kissed me, a long, lingering kiss that would have kept me warm even without my special abilities. Then she turned without a word and climbed into the back of the truck as the others got inside. I slipped across the road and down the embankment in the cover of darkness as Leanne stood watch from the truck bed.

Maybe she knew that I was lying, that I had no intention of coming back for them. I'd been with her long enough now that she could probably read me like a book. Whatever else Leanne was, she was all woman.

Maybe the others knew it too. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that I had to stop Azrael, because there was no way my friends were going to just run off and leave me like I'd ordered them too.

And if I failed they would all die, with the possible exception of Leanne. She wasn't a vamp; not really. She was faerie, too, and I had no idea if they were immune to the magic of Bran's Cauldron or not. Maybe it's power would burn all that was good out of her, leaving only a soulless husk for the demon to occupy so that she would become a

true vampire in every sense of the word. Maybe not. All I had to do was beat Azrael, and none of it would matter.

Believe it or not, I had a plan. I still had the enchanted bone sword I'd taken from the Korrgan, and the dream catcher thingy. Hopefully I could cut him up enough to make him transcend, and trap him. All I had to do was get past whatever he had waiting for me.

I was about halfway to the island and so far so good. For something that was ground zero for so much potential death and destruction, it was pretty unassuming. I'd half expected one of those creepy cloud vortex thingies like they have in all the Spielberg movies, with flashing lightning and stuff, but nothing.

Bear popped in out of nowhere and rolled around in the snow making ghost dog snow angels. Dad and Grandpa appeared in front of me.

"You don't have to do this, Bumper. It's not your responsibility," Grandpa said. I could see the lights from the city through him as he faded in and out. "Just grab your friends and hightail it for the hills."

"You know I can't do that."

Grandpa sighed. "Yeah."

Dad pulled his old navy-blue greatcoat more tightly about himself. He had always had a low tolerance to cold when he was alive. "There's something hinky about that island, as if it's neither here nor there," he said. "I can barely see it, as if it doesn't exist. It stinks of Summerland."

"I figured as much," I said, but I was talking to myself. The ghosts had vanished again.

I stayed low and slowly closed the distance, using clumps of thrushes and reeds that poked through the frozen creek's surface as cover. The outer ring of trees that lined the island glowed pale white in the distance, and I imagined they must be birch until I was close enough to see my mistake. They weren't trees at all.

Emaciated carcasses hung crucified from Y-shaped crosses, their calcified remains backlit by the orange glow of the firelight that escaped the wooded grove at their center. They might have been ogres were it not for the shape of their mummified heads, lacking the heavy bone and tusks typical of Charlie's race. Giants, then, each at least ten feet tall, their faces frozen in the agony of their last moments. There was no doubt they'd been long dead. It's a pity they didn't stay that way.

I felt something tug at me, like a frigid wind coursing through my body as I drew close. The giant nearest me swiveled its massive head to stare down at me, and shrieked. It might have been its death cry, a high-pitched howl of anger and despair that grated on the ears and nerves like nails on a chalkboard. It sure beat the traditional alarm klaxon all to hell for grabbing your attention.

"Hey, Lurch, a simple 'You rang?' would have sufficed." I pressed my finger to my lips in a shushing motion, but of course it was too late. It tore its hands free from the cruciform, as if the unholy uproar weren't bad enough.

"No, no, don't get up. I'll just show myself in," I said as it dropped to the ground.

So much for reconnaissance; Lurch was making enough racket to raise the dead. Or not. Its friends hadn't shown any signs of life yet. Maybe Lurch was just a proximity alarm.

I saw the interior light come on in the Avalanche. My friends had heard Lurch's cry all the way back on the causeway. If I didn't do something fast, they'd be out here

with me. Lurch took the opportunity my distraction afforded to try to pummel me into the ground. I sidestepped as a colossal bone fist like porous concrete left a divot two-foot deep in the frozen sand.

"No fair, I wasn't looking," I said as I back peddled. "Whatever happened to 'fee fi foe fum...er... yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.'" I never could keep my fairy tales straight.

Lurch straightened up to take another swing at me, and I took a running leap at it--one of those two-footed WWF flying drop kicks. I'm sure Skatha would have been proud of the technique, if nothing else. It was like kicking the CN Tower. The impact jarred me to my teeth, and I fell flat on my back in front of him. "The Russian judges are going to deduct points for that one for sure."

I rolled out of the way as Lurch stomped down at my head, and came to my feet. "Look, it's cousin It!" I said, and pointed towards the water.

He looked.

I lunged forward, grabbed a hold of a few of the more prominent bones that jutted out from Lurch's backbone, and heaved. Lurch couldn't have weighed as much as the Chrysler 300--he was all skin and bones. Well, bones anyway.

"Come on in, Bambi, the water's stiff," I said, and pitched Lurch out onto the ice. Apparently bone on ice is slippery as hell, because he scuttled about like a newborn fawn trying to get his footing.

I did one of those nice somersaulting vaults and came down only a few feet from him. I added blades to the bottoms of my feet and skated circles around Lurch, showing off with my hands clasped at the small of my back. "Some fun, huh Bambi!"

Lurch let out a strangled exclamation of surprise, kind of like the sound Scooby Doo makes when confused.

I have no idea how high I can jump, but I gave it a good go. I figure I peaked at about thirty feet. And yes, I could see my house from there. It was right about then I realized that you pick up a lot more speed on the way down than on the way up, and even if you are practically indestructible it's still scary as shit. I find swearing at times like this helps.

I drove my left knee and right fist into the ice as I hit with all the velocity a thirty-foot drop adds to the mix. The ice cracked but good, shattering in a twenty-foot radius like plate glass dropped from on high. I scrambled onto a four-foot square section that managed to support me without sinking more than a couple of inches. Lurch wasn't so lucky. There weren't any chunks of ice near enough or large enough to support the giant, and he sunk out of sight faster than Leonardo DiCaprio when Kate Winslet peeled his frozen hands off the door in Titanic. He struggled to the surface for a moment and tried to scream as he went under a second time, but most of his face had been washed away like powdered soap dissolving in water. The creek bubbled and foamed for a bit, then calmed down as small ice flows bobbed gently on the surface.

I turned toward the causeway where Leanne watched me from the back of the Avalanche, and waved to let her know I was okay. She waved back, but no one came out after me, which is what I had hoped for. The ice flow I currently rode was becoming more unstable every second, so I skipped across several broken sheets until I was on solid footing again. I came ashore at the same spot I'd previously visited with the hope that Lurch *had* only been a proximity alarm. I didn't want to risk setting off another one.

The firelight was coming from the southern point of the island, maybe a few

hundred yards away through the trees. The cauldron was in there somewhere, and so was Azrael. I couldn't help thinking that there was no way that whoever was in there hadn't heard Lurch, but so far no one had shown up to see what had set him off. Can you say trap?

A quick glance at my watch told me it was a quarter to eleven. Time was running out. The rest of the sentinels stayed silent as I crossed the frozen ground and crept slowly toward the tree line. I still couldn't see anyone, so I took a step into the woods. Sometimes just knowing a trap is a trap is enough to avoid one.

And sometimes it isn't. I was three steps in when my skin felt suddenly crawly, as if I'd just walked through a fine mist laced with itching powder. I tried to take a step back, but came up hard against an invisible wall. I screamed as my nerve endings caught fire and the marrow in my bones boiled until I was thrown forward and clear. The pain was gone as suddenly as it appeared, and I stood shakily and brushed the snow from my camouflaged skin.

I realized the nature of the trap now, as I remembered where I'd felt that pain before, back when Azrael had lured me into the alley outside the mall. I could see the fine trace of red powder that ran along the perimeter where the woods began, and made out a few hieroglyphs carved into smooth faced rocks spaced out along the beachhead.

The whole damn island was a pentagram, and I was trapped inside it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Shadows moved in about the trees, maybe twenty or thirty of them advancing in a semicircle. The air smelled of pine needles and brimstone, as if someone had tried to disinfect Hell. I heard chanting from the high ground to the south where the flickering glow of orange light emanated from. I'd assumed it was a fire, but I could be wrong. I'd know for sure soon enough.

I stood my ground until a posse...herd...flock? of vamps halted about five yards away in a ring about me. I should have known the vamps would be in on this. I couldn't imagine what might be in it for them, but then I guess to a vamp the opportunity to reign a little death and destruction was probably enough. No matter what else a vamp is, it's still a demon.

"Good, you made it," I said. "Here's the plan: I figure if we all gang up on him we ought to be able to kick Azrael's ass but good."

Their leader stepped forward into a splash of orange light. He was dressed in dark leathers and seemed to be molting, or shedding, or whatever it is a lizard does. Strips of dry skin hung in tatters from his face, and gleaming red scales sprouted over patches of new, clean epidermis. A new Korrigan had clawed its way up from the ranks of the vampire clans, but the transformation was incomplete.

"Actually, we were thinking of ganging up on *you*, and kicking *your* ass," it said.

The camo skin wasn't much use now, and there was no sense fighting half-naked, so I manifested the clothes Skatha had given me--or tried to. Nothing. The Korrigan's bones sword and dream catcher trap thingy wouldn't come either. The damn barrier they'd set up around the island must have blocked them, too. So much for Plan A.

"Yeah, but I'm offering a better dental plan," I said. Meaning I might not knock out all their teeth. "I can even help with that complexion problem of yours. I have an industrial strength tub of Oxy 5 and a good luffa sponge at home."

The Korrigan shrugged his shoulders and gave the big spiked club he was sporting a few practice swings. "Sorry."

I crossed my arms, and tapped my foot impatiently. "All right, but none of that attacking me one at a time crap. I'm in a hurry."

The vamps rushed me, and I disarmed the first, taking his katana and guiding him gently into a tree. Okay, maybe not so gently. I spun once. The katana flashed in the moonlight, the blade tinged by the orange glow that emanated from the woods. Five bodies dropped to their knees and pitched forward, then promptly burst into flames as their heads rolled to a stop about the decapitated remains. The vamps realized their mistake and retreated a few paces--well, except for the charred ones that smoldered in a circle at my feet. I guess the learning experience was lost on them.

A tall blond vamp dressed in army combats lunged at me, trying to skewer me through the left eye with the katana he carried. I shifted my weight back and to the right and it slid harmlessly past. Harmless to me, at least. The vamp standing behind me took the blade through his throat so I imagine he wasn't as happy at the outcome. My own blade came down and took the blond vamp's hands off at the wrists. He stared stupidly at the stumps as another vamp shoved him out of the way in its haste to get at me. It tried for a flying tackle about my waist and I went down on one knee, bent forward, and tucked the hilt of my sword into my armpit, blade up. The katana split the vamp from

sternum to belly as it sailed overhead. I flicked the blood from the blade as I stood and, barely moving my feet, turned about, sword held out to keep the now wary vampires at bay.

I know what you're thinking: After all that training with Skatha, you expected more Matrix-style theatrics. A lot of jumping and leaping and such. I thought it was pretty cool too--until Skatha shot me six times with a semi-automatic while I was still in mid leap. Trust me; short, precise movements are the way to go.

The new Korrigan believed in leading from the rear. He didn't seem overly concerned that so far he'd failed to kill me, or at least overpower me. Then again, he really didn't have to do either. All he had to do was delay me long enough for Azrael to complete the ritual, and who knew how long that would take? Midnight was one of those in-between times the Otherworld seemed so fond of, when magic was at its most potent. And it was only a few minutes away.

The vampires I'd maimed crawled off into the bushes to regenerate. I imagine it takes a while to grow back a set of hands or a few yards of intestines. The one that took the sword through the throat was game, though. I took a few steps forward. My attackers moved with me. I had to cover more ground, and quickly.

"All right," I said. "Running battle it is," and darted forward.

The vampire directly in front of me went eyes-wide and tripped over a root in his hurry to get out of the way, but the enemy to the sides and rear closed in quickly. Time slowed as I ran for the south end of the island. I wove a defensive pattern about me with my sword, inflicting damage where I could. I spun, ducked, side-stepped, and once--only once, mind you--even leapt and tumbled through the air as I forced my way through enemy resistance. I was right about the orange glow; it was from a fire. I could see it through the trees now, as I got closer.

The dense grove had kept all but a light dusting of snow off the ground, and I sprinted along a moss-laden trail towards a clearing that opened up in front of me. Azrael stood in the center of the hollow looking more or less human in the same charcoal turtleneck and pants he had worn outside the strip club. He'd lost the sports jacket, and the wings.

Bran's Cauldron sat fully assembled over the smoldering orange coals of a fire pit in front of him. It glowed from within, yet the outer surface appeared cool, untarnished, and free of soot, as if the fire had no effect on it. Something bubbled inside, and steamy red wisps drifted up towards the starry night sky and tainted the moon's corona a sickly ochre color. Azrael bent over the cauldron and inhaled the fumes. Maybe I'd been wrong about him. Maybe this was just some freaky Otherworld Avon party and he'd invited all his friends over for a steam facial.

Maybe not.

I ducked under a branch and grabbed at another on the way by, then let it go so that it sprang back and smacked the vampire directly behind me hard in the face and knocked him off his feet. I made it to the tree line and vaulted into the clearing. Straw-like grass covered the ground here, and my boot heels dug themselves into the rich, musty soil. I glanced back into the woods, but the vampires had halted at the hollow's perimeter. They stood about looking all brooding and menacing--all except for the one I'd whapped in the face with the branch. He was still pulling pine needles out of his teeth.

"Son of a...border collie!"

I'd been herded. That's why Lurch had been the only one of his amigos to wake up

when I'd intruded. He had guarded the one path through the woods that led directly to this clearing. But why would Azrael *want* me here?

He stared at me across the fire's glow. The reflected light accentuated all the hollows of his face, the way it had when I was a kid and Grandpa would tell me ghost stories, holding a flashlight up under his chin. Azrael began to chant, and the ground at his feet churned as something dug its way up from underneath. Rancid demons unearthed themselves to stand at his side as he summoned them one after another, commanding them in ancient Sumerian, or Hittite, or...aw hell, it could have been Portuguese for all I know. I'm pretty confident it wasn't French though, as I never once heard him summon a Jacques, or Pierre.

Seven of them stood by his side, all mottled skin, horns, hooves, and slaverling jaws, mixing and matching human, goat, bat, and insect parts. Sort of like a Mister Potato Head for Eddie Munster.

I heard a ruckus behind me and a headless vamp stumbled out into the hollow and burst into flames. Drat pushed his way through the thick underbrush and into the clearing. He swung his axe a couple of times to fling the blood and gore clear.

"Heya, Boss. We've got tired a wait'n."

My heart sank. If Drat was here, the rest of the crew couldn't be far behind.

Sure enough, Josh stepped into the open next. "Charlie insisted on playing both Country *and* Western on the radio. I'd rather take my chances out here with the vamps."

Charlie pushed aside a large tree and made his way into the hollow carrying a bloodied log over his left shoulder. "Country singers are the troubadours of the common man," he said. "Wouldn't you agree, Thomas?"

Thomas the Rhymer--bard, seer, mage, alchemist, and all around Mr. Know-it-all--shook the bloody drops off of the long, thin rapier he carried as he entered the clearing. Everyone watched him expectantly for his opinion. He shrugged. "Country sucks."

Greg escorted Leanne arm in arm as she stepped daintily around the smoldering ruin of the last vamp Charlie had smashed into paste. She took my hand in hers, and leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Sorry we're late."

I frowned at Greg. "How'd *you* find us?"

Greg blew the smoke from the end of the Berretta I'd given him. It must increase accuracy, or cut down on drag or something, because everybody's always doing that. Or maybe it's just because it makes that cool noise.

"We got a call at the station from some old battle...concerned citizen about a fire in the trees out on the island here," he said. "I was pretty sure this island didn't *have* trees, and seeing as it's centrally located as to Kingston's population density, and given what Azrael had in mind, I deduced that in all likelihood this must be the place."

That was deductive reasoning worthy of Sherlock Holmes, and I said as much.

Greg shrugged. "That, and Leanne called and told me were you were."

At least he hadn't brought Mom.

My friends formed a line to either side of me, facing off against Azrael and his demons across the hollow. I held Leanne's hand, and gave it a light squeeze.

"Now that we're all here, we can begin," Azrael said. That didn't sound good.

"Okay, we'll go first," I said. "Red rover, red rover--we call...um...that big warty guy with the horns and goat feet over."

Azrael smiled. If I didn't know better I'd say it was genuine. "If there were any other way," he said, and shrugged. "I had hoped you would have come alone."

Me too, I thought, but said, "You know how it is when you're popular. Everyone wants to hang with you, talk to you, sell your private sex tapes on E Bay."

The demons at Azrael's side began to chant, or sing: some eerie, apocalyptic sounding opera crap made all the worse by the fact that their voices carried across several alternate planes of existence. It grated on the nerves and made me sick to my stomach, and I would have done anything to make it stop. Sort of like a Yanni concert.

Azrael turned to retrieve a bundle the size of a rifle case, wrapped in gold embroidered linen, from a small alter set just behind the cauldron. He carefully unwound the silver cord that coiled about the bundle, and pulled the folds of cloth aside to reveal a set of muddy gray, petrified bones. His bones. He held them at arms length over the cauldron as rosy strands of mist reached out to clutch at the skeletal remains.

Azrael's not the problem, I thought. *It's that damn cauldron. All you have to do is destroy Bran's Cauldron and it's all over.*

Greg had the same idea. The Beretta's staccato report was nearly lost amidst the demons' chanting as he fired several rounds at the cauldron. The rounds splattered ineffectively against the burnished glow of its exterior, and melted into slag, sliding harmlessly into the burning coals at its base.

I caught Azrael's eye, then. Just for a moment. And I understood.

I expected apathy. I thought he was simply tired of life, run out of new experiences like some spoiled trust fund brat, so bored that death was the only challenge left him. But that wasn't it at all. He *hurt*. There was such a sense of loss. Such agony. He had watched everything he had ever loved or cared for die. Sometimes quickly--life snatched away like an afterthought; at other times lingering, rotting slowly and welcome when it finally came. Friends, companions, heroes--all forgotten.. Beloved cities buried, their names ancient history, and even the books that recorded their greatness nothing but dust. Until only he remained. I could *see* the history in his eyes, read the pleading there. Was it any wonder that he was--insane?

I tried to move forward, but hesitated as I stared into my own future--and flinched. It was all the time Azrael needed. The mist pulled at the bones he held out to it. He closed his eyes, and let the cauldron have the last of his earthly remains.

Azrael's face contorted in sudden agony. His hands, fingers curled in tight as if someone had cut the tendons, clutched at his chest. He gasped for air, choked, tried to scream, and failed. And then he was gone, his image nothing but a fine outline in mist that dissipated in the wind until there was nothing left of him.

The cauldron grew agitated. Red, wispy, ethereal tentacles reached out, seeking, grasping. It was hungry. It would feed. One of the tentacles struck the first demon in line, protruding from its chest like an umbilical cord. The demon screamed as a spider web of red, bulging veins crisscrossed its torso, wormed their way across its neck and face, and spread down its trunk to cover its legs and feet. It jerked spasmodically, limbs rigid as its very life force was drawn slowly back through the lucent tube to feed the cauldron. Bran's Cauldron overflowed. A mist, like tiny droplets of blood, spread out to cover the ground and leached the golden straw of color until it was withered, brown and rotting. The cauldron spawned other seekers that struck the remaining demons with the same result.

The vamps in the woods backed away, slowly at first, then bolting in haste at the realization that if the demons weren't safe, maybe they weren't either. The tentacles seemed to sense motion, and shot out after the fleeing vamps. They screamed and went rigid as one after another the seekers seized their prey. The mist spread out into the trees. Pine needles went brown and dry, the branches calcifying as death spread down through the trunks into the roots.

It all happened very quickly; maybe twenty seconds had passed since Azrael had sacrificed himself to the cauldron. I was too late. I had failed. Bran's Cauldron would feed on the life force of the Greater Kingston Area--some 100,000 men, women, children--while I did what? Watch?

The cauldron, nowhere near sated, spawned more of the seekers. They waived like rows of cilia, as if living beings sent out ripples of life energy--sound waves that only they could detect. They bent in our direction, sensing our essence from across the clearing. One shot out toward us and I moved to intercept it, the threat to my friends overcoming the paralysis that gripped me. But for once I was too slow.

It struck Josh in the chest. His spine arched in protest at the pain, and he went rigid like the others, his skin pale.

Another shot out after Leanne, but Thomas jumped in the way, shouting out some ancient battle cry, or curse, and it took him instead.

I saw Leanne scream--I don't think I heard it. It was as if all sound had been dulled and muted by the horror of it all. Maybe it was just too much to take in at once. Maybe your brain can only process so much, and sound was the first of the senses to go. Or maybe I just didn't *want* to hear it.

More of the tentacles struck out at us. Leanne stepped forward, and flared into light so white and brilliant that I had to cover my eyes. And suddenly I knew what everyone had meant when they had called her Fallen. I could almost make out her form in the center of the blinding corona of light. Light that radiated from deep within her, encompassed her, wrapped around her and protected her. She was wraith-like now; insubstantial, wavering between this reality and some other. I swear I saw wings, or what could have been wings. And there was music. Music so beautiful that it *hurt*. Music that made me want to laugh and scream at the same time, and I clasped my hands to my ears but it wouldn't stop. Because I couldn't keep it out. Because it came from somewhere inside me.

The seekers were confused, as if her spirit was so bright that all the other sparks of life were washed out, fading into the background. Then they struck her--one, two, three of them. Then more. So many more. The light began to dim, to shrink in on itself. The music faltered.

And still the cauldron hungered. The tentacles struck out. I stepped in front of them and they passed straight through me as if I were a ghost. As if I were already dead, and had nothing to offer. They found Drat, and Thomas; Greg and Charlie. My friends dropped their useless weapons to the dying earth as Bran's Cauldron slowly sucked the life from them.

Maybe I could still destroy it and end all this. I charged it, but it was like trying to break through the magic boundaries of a pentagram. Energy burned through me, so excruciating that it immobilized me. Still, I tried again. And again. And again. It threw me back every time, and seemed to gain strength by my repeated efforts.

It spawned more of the seekers, sending them out across the island and over the frozen water towards the inhabitants of the city.

All I could do was stand and watch.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The demons flared into light--yellowed, tarnished light befitting their greater fall from grace--as they too regained their true form this near their end. The one nearest the cauldron began to flicker, like a fluorescent light with a faulty ballast. Leanne's light began to wane, too, and I panicked and stepped through the faltering corona in my desperation to save her.

The light burned, and my clothing smoldered with the heat. I ignored it, and wrapped my arms around her. Her skin felt molten hot, or ice cold--the extreme edge of one state or the other, where it's impossible to tell the difference. I didn't know whether this was a natural condition of the form she had taken, or something the cauldron had done to her. I remembered what I'd heard back in the bible classes my mother had forced on me when I was young: that Man was not meant to gaze upon the true form of the Angels, or the glory of that sight would destroy him. And the Fallen *were* Angels, no matter what form they might have taken since their ruin. Still, I wasn't exactly human either.

The first demon the cauldron had taken suddenly sputtered out. His light extinguished, he was gray and pallid, rigid, like pictures I'd seen of the molds of those buried in ash when Pompeii erupted. Bits of charcoal began to flake off as a strong breeze eroded the demon's form, until finally there was nothing left but a rapidly dissipating cloud of ash on the wind.

I tried to pull at the tendrils that had attached themselves to Leanne, like leaches, or eels writhing as they slowly bled her dry of life, but my hands passed through them as if they were made of smoke. My skin erupted in blisters and boils, and still I held on to her until I burst into flames and had to let go for fear of doing Leanne even more harm. I staggered away from her and fell to my knees, not bothering to extinguish the torch I had become, or even to dull the pain. I screamed, awash in physical agony, but brutalized by the knowledge that everything I loved was dying in front of me. That I was helpless.

And that I would live. I would always live, haunted by the death of my friends through all eternity. These friends and any others I might make. I understood Azrael now, why he did what he did, even as I hated him for it. After thousands of years he had found an out, and it didn't matter to him who might pay the price for his freedom. What difference did it make to him that they would die? He only granted them what he begged for himself.

But he *knew* what he was doing to me. *That* was the anguish I had seen in his eyes. Not for himself, or his pitiful history, but for the fact that he now condemned me to that same fate.

"I had hoped you would come alone." I remembered his words as the flames melted my flesh and charred my bones. I toppled onto my face into the rotting straw.

Had he wanted to spare me his fate? Who knows how long Leanne would have lived, or Drat, or Charlie. Or even Thomas and Josh. Shapeshifters lived far longer than normal men, and Thomas was already, what? Six or seven hundred years old or so?

But Greg, and Mom. How long would it have been before I'd lost *them*, before they haunted me like Dad and Grandpa? I rolled over onto my back and stared up at Greg through the red mist that roiled out from the cauldron. He had gone gray now, even the veins in his face that the tendrils manifested had begun to fade. Thomas collapsed to the

ground. He began to jerk spasmodically as the cauldron sucked the last reserves of life from him.

The flames licked along the entire length of my body. The pain had subsided, even though I'd done nothing to quell it. Maybe my nerve endings were gone, or maybe the brain can only handle so much suffering before it shuts down. I lay there as the last vestiges of my physical self burned away, like some vamp I'd staked, until suddenly I was free.

I hovered above my charred remains, as insubstantial as I had been after the car bombing. Nothing but pure consciousness, an awareness of self, and of everything around me. Every sound, every scent, every taste, every emotion--every living thing that screamed as it died. I felt it all as I hovered above the hollow, looking down upon my friends, the cauldron, and the tableau that played itself out before me as if I were some wealthy patron enjoying a night at the opera from my private box. How difficult would it be to simply flip through the program, and read the various scene descriptions, or skip to back and see how it all turned out?

But I didn't have to. Somehow I knew that everything would work itself out. Okay, maybe not this particular scene, but the Grand Finale. The one at the end of It All. Everything made sense now, and I understood why things had to happen the way they did, and what my part in it all was.

Bits of information floated to the surface of my awareness like balloons suddenly cut loose. Something Alex had said back when I'd first met her: "*We are not human beings trying to be spiritual, we are spiritual beings trying to be human.*"

I could see the barrier the pentagram had set about the island, like some giant soap bubble made of nothing. It was the null of creation, what existed before, and I understood now why it was such a potent impediment. To the being the ward was set for, nothing existed beyond the Pentagram. You couldn't break free, because there was nowhere to go.

I became aware of something trying to claw its way out of the cauldron below. A bony hand, wrapped in raw, red flesh, grasped the lip as a partially reconstituted Azrael pulled himself up out of the sewage he stewed in. His head and shoulders clear of the cauldron, he dragged himself up with hands that looked like they'd been through a grinder, and tipped over and out to fall soggily to the dead grass. His body looked worse than mine must have before the transcendence, like he'd been flayed alive. Azrael's head looked like he'd been scalped, and his eye sockets were empty, and dripped foul mucus onto his cheeks. His heart beat through the thin membrane of flesh that barely covered the ribs and sternum of his chest. A dozen or so of the seekers had attached themselves to him at intervals all along his body, and trailed up and back into the cauldron. Azrael pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, and wobbled there like a macabre marionette.

While the cauldron sucked the life from its victims, it fed Azrael. His body gradually fleshed out, regenerating internal organs, growing muscle and sinew, hair and skin. And still the cauldron had not been satiated. The seekers began to divide and branch, like ivy, spreading out in search of more food.

"*Your life-force is directly connected to the Universal Wellspring,*" Thomas had told me, back when I'd first met him, "*and not just a splintered fragment that returns to the source when the flesh dies. Your life-force is limitless.*"

If the cauldron was hungry, then I would feed it. I'd give the bastard indigestion.

I took physical form, but only in the sense that my consciousness could actually

be said to be somewhere, sometime. Like a ball of sentient energy.

The cauldron had taken no notice of me while I'd been in human form, kind of like that commercial where they wrap steak in saran wrap so the tiger couldn't smell it. But now that the wrapping was off, so to speak, it was all "Hello Kitty." I had the cauldron's full attention. Several seekers swiveled in my direction, my life force a siren's call they couldn't resist.

"Here I am, boys, eat me!" Hey, even non-corporeal beings can have a sense of humor.

Hundreds of seekers struck out at me, like barracuda at something sparkly they saw in the water. I felt nothing as they attached themselves to the perimeter of the ball of energy I had become. Hot white light radiated down along their length and back into the cauldron, overpowering the translucent, sickly red color they had once been. They began to smolder and crackle with energy, like high tension power cables whose insulation had broken down. Several shriveled as if burned out from the inside--the cauldron began to draw seekers back unto itself, reeling them in and diverting them from less rich energy sources to handle the overload. I sensed it as they first broke contact from those hapless souls in the city, then drew further and further back until they released the vamps on the island, the demons in the hollow, and finally my friends.

Leanne and the others slumped to the ground, where Thomas already lay, unmoving. I could still sense the faint spark of life in the others, but Thomas...

Azrael was fully regenerated now. He stood in front of the cauldron, looking much the way he had when this all began, although a little less...perfect. His skin was blemished in spots, his hair not as full as I remembered it, his eyes not as bright. He had a bit of a paunch, and was a good deal shorter. Now, no longer an Eternal, I imagine this was a truer representation of his former human self.

Bran's Cauldron began to shut down. It had done its job, and siphoned off all the energy it had required. The seekers that leached off me lost cohesiveness, their ethereal forms dissolving on the wind.

I hovered over my friends, and reached out tendrils of my own, pumping more of the limitless life energy I accessed through these lifelines like a transfusion until they were replenished. I stretched out my awareness, blanketing the city to see if there were others in need, but the cauldron had barely had time to touch them before I had intervened. A minute or two more, perhaps, and the weaker would have died, but I could sense no one that required my assistance. The demons and vamps I left to their own fate. They wouldn't perish, but they were greatly weakened. I had no problem with that.

There was only one thing left for me to do. I had transcended, becoming a being of pure spirit, but I didn't belong here. Not like this. This form was not meant for the mortal world. When someone dies, their soul is called forth from their body and drawn towards the Light, a beacon which guides them to a higher plane of existence where they are transformed. But that transformation is meant to prepare them for life in the next world, not this one. There's no coming back after the Change--or at least there's not supposed to be.

But I was an Eternal. One of a select few who managed the Change without taking the journey to a higher plane. All I had to do was decide--up, or down?

I watched my friends as they climbed slowly to their feet. Leanne looked more or less like she had before her transformation now, although luminous for the moment, as if

she had trouble containing her inner light, her true self. The demon that had once shared residence in her body was gone, burned out by her transformation. I could still see that tiny spark of Alison's soul within her though. I guess Leanne was even more of an aberration than I was. I mean, an Angel with a soul? Wasn't that what the War in Heaven had been all about in the first place?

Josh and Greg looked none the worse for wear. As a matter of fact, they had never looked better. The energy I'd infused them with had done wonders for them, even smoothing out the wrinkles around Greg's eyes, and the worry lines in his forehead. I'd probably taken at least ten years off his appearance. Even Drat looked healthier. His scales fairly gleamed in the moonlight. Of course, I can only suppose that that's healthy for a troll.

But Thomas. Leanne stifled a cry, biting the back of her hand as she rushed to his side where he lay on the dead grass. The others joined her, standing around Thomas as Greg knelt to check for a pulse, and sadly shook his head no. Thomas had lived an artificially long life for a human, a life that had been extended once again by Dianecht's potion. In the end, his life force had been the weakest of all, and quickly depleted. I knew I couldn't bring him back, even with the cauldron. It was as if his soul had been restrained, forcefully bound to this world by the preternatural life span Thomas had endured. Now, free at last, it had wasted no time in moving on. It was no longer bound to this plane of existence. There would be no coming back for Thomas the Rhymer.

He had had the gift of foresight. Thomas had been waiting for us outside the club, when he couldn't have known we were coming. He had been unusually quiet, for Thomas anyway, on the trip here. I couldn't help but wonder if he had known he would die here, and come anyway. I believe that even the few moments he had given Leanne when he had jumped in front of that first seeker had saved her life, that she would have been the next to die after the demon. Leave it to the arrogant bastard to die a hero. As if there weren't enough myths and legends about him already.

I would miss him.

I said that I had a decision to make--up or down--but in truth, I lied. Transcendence had given me the power to see that much. But there *is* free will in the universe, and had I chosen to move on someone would have come along to take my place. Eventually. I guess you can say the universe is self-correcting.

I knew what my role was in all that was to come, and it began down there, with my friends. Even now they were looking around for me. I could feel the despair building in Leanne, first at Thomas' loss, and then at the thought that she had lost me too. It was like a spark that ignited the feeling in the others as well. It's a good thing that Azrael wished to die, because at that moment my friends were only too happy to oblige him.

Personally, I couldn't feel any animosity towards him. Throughout myth and legend immortality has generally been bestowed on mortals as a curse: Longinus, the Wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchmen...Barnibus Collins. The universe had decreed that Azrael was to die here, or better yet, saw fit to grant him this favor. I guess you can say that in this case, free will and destiny were in accord.

If I've been a little vague in my description of what I saw and how I felt when I'd transcended, you'll have to forgive me. Once I took human form again--well, not much of it made sense anymore, and I forgot most of what did.

I stood behind Greg, and said, "Boo!"

I figured Greg was old, and slow, so I should be relatively safe messing with him, but apparently my rejuvenating him had done wonders for his reflexes. He spun around much faster than a man his age ought to, and punched me in the face. I careened backward and fell flat on my ass. It was almost worth the look of shock on Greg's face when he'd realized what he'd done. Almost. He held out a hand to help me up, but by then the rest of them were all over me.

I barely made it to my feet when Leanne threw herself into my arms. I held her tightly, even though she was uncomfortably warm, and glowed in the dark. Kind of like my very own, sexy nightlight. She was Sidhe once again, right down to the slightly pointed ears.

"What's the big idea, sneaking up on me like that?" Greg asked. "I ought to punch you again, you jerk." He may have sounded gruff, but he was smiling from ear to ear.

"Once is quite enough, old man," I said over Leanne's shoulder. She still hadn't let me go yet.

Josh kept running his hands over his body, checking to see if anything was broken, or missing, I suppose.

"Give it up, Man-mutt, you're still ugly," Drat told him as he retrieved his axe from where he'd dropped it.

Josh grabbed the troll and raised him to eye level, then kissed him on the forehead. "Not you, you're bea-u-ti-ful," he said, then dropped the outraged Drat. If you ask me, Josh was just a little *too* happy to be alive. Then again, he had a lot to live for, what with Alex and Sabrina and all.

"Great, now I need to get disinfected!" Drat grumbled, wiping at his scaly forehead.

I looked over to where Azrael stood, waiting. He still had little red circle marks on his body where the seekers had been attached, the same kind of marks you might leave if you'd been touching him with ten-foot poles. If he was self-conscious about being naked, he didn't let on. Not that he had anything to be self-conscious about. I mean, the guy was hung, and I say that in a completely heterosexual, skirt chasing, he-man kind of way. Did I mention it was cold out, too? Anyway, he still hadn't said a word yet, but then I remembered, he couldn't. The cauldron brought the dead back to life, but robbed them of the power of speech. Azrael looked at me, raised his eyebrows, and shrugged.

"So what are we going to do about him?" Leanne asked, her arm still about my waist.

I didn't have to think long or hard on my answer. "Give him what he wants."

Greg chewed his lip. "I'm not saying this as a cop," he said, once he'd had a moment to mull over my answer, "Cause God knows if there's anyone in need of killing, it's him. But you're not a murderer, boy. I don't think you have it in you."

I tilted my head to the left to crack the bones in my neck, and rotated my shoulders around to loosen them up. "Don't count on it," I said. "Movies and video games have desensitized me to violence."

Greg frowned, apparently not convinced by my words of bravado. Okay, so maybe he was right. Sure, I'd kill all manner of things lately, but mostly because they'd been trying to kill me first. And most of them had been dead to start with. Azrael was human now. I'd never killed a human. Especially not a naked man who was doing nothing more at the moment than standing there, blinking at me.

"I'll do it," Drat offered, and grinned, showing both sets of teeth as he took a few practice swings with his axe.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," I said. Drat kicked at a clump of dirt, obviously miffed that I was spoiling all his fun.

I walked over to where Thomas lay in repose. Now that he was dead, the glamour that hid his identity from the mortal world had faded. He was dressed once again in the brightly colored cloak he'd worn when I first met him, and his harp was at his side. Leanne had crossed his arms over his chest, and closed his eyes, so that he reminded me of a relief sculpture of some medieval lord or knight, like you seen on the tombs in Westminster Abbey.

"There's just one more thing you have to do for us, friend," I said, and pulled Thomas' knife from the scabbard at his belt. I felt it only fitting that the bard's weapon be the one to end Azrael's existence.

I walked over to the former Eternal, who didn't so much as flinch as I approached him with Thomas' knife. As a matter of fact he smiled at me. I handed him the blade, hilt first.

Azrael knelt in front of Bran's Cauldron. The glow from the fire burnished his skin a coppery red as he raised the knife two handed above his head, and looked to the heavens. I'd read somewhere that the Japanese samurai (as opposed to all those Norwegian samurai) originally chose seppuku as a method of self destruction because it was one of the most painful ways to die. It takes a lot of courage to slowly and ritually disembowel yourself. I guess Azrael was through with courage, though, or maybe he was just in a hurry. He muttered something in ancient Sumerian which sounded oddly enough like, *"Nice night for a party, isn't it?"* and plunged the knife into his chest, slipping the blade expertly up under the third rib and into his heart.

He died instantly. Azrael's body disintegrated into nothingness before he even had a chance to slump forward. Not even the bones were left. Maybe it was his death at his own hands that undid the magic of Bran's Cauldron, or maybe any death would have brought about the same results. Either way, I was impressed.

"See, that's the way to die. No muss, no fuss," I said as the others watched in silence. Not like those damn vamps, always kicking and screaming, spraying blood everywhere and bursting into flames.

Okay, maybe I could have been a little more respectful. After all, if even half of Azrael's claims were true he'd been a dozen or so of the most important names in human history. But he had also been responsible for the loss of my Alison, and now Thomas--who wasn't exactly a slouch in the history making department either. As far as I was concerned, he'd gotten off easy.

"What are we going to do with Thomas' body?" Greg asked, all cop once again. "We can't just leave it here."

I'd thought about burying him here on the island, but it seemed a rather lackluster final resting place. Leanne seemed to agree. She brushed her hair back from her eyes as the glow about her gradually faded. "We'll have to take him with us," she said. "The Sidhe will want to honor his remains."

Josh nodded, then bent over the bard and wrapped Thomas' cloak about the corpse like a funeral shroud. He morphed into werebeast form and slung the body easily over his shoulder. "I'll take it back to the truck," he said. It, as if not calling the body Thomas

somehow made it easier to deal with. "Once we get it back to the manor we can arrange for a proper funeral. I just hope we don't get pulled over on the way."

"Not a problem," Greg answered. "I'll run interference."

I nodded to Josh, and he and Greg headed off along the path through the woods. Drat followed, solemn for once, carrying the bard's harp.

"What about the cauldron?" Leanne asked before snuggling in close again.

The fire had died down, diminishing the cauldron's burnished glow. Even the contents had mysteriously evaporated. It looked harmless now, but I knew better. "I'll meet you back at the manor," I said. "Once I've taken the cauldron someplace for safekeeping."

"Don't be long?" she murmured against my chest, then tilted her head up for a kiss before I reluctantly released her from my embrace.

"Would you mind breaking the Pentagram on your way out?" I called out after her as she disappeared down the path. After everything that had happened, the last thing I needed was to be trapped on this damn island.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

My ears popped when Leanne disabled the barrier, as if the entire island suddenly depressurised. The vamps and demons had long since slunk off into the night. Weakened, they had no fight left in them to dispute my ownership of the cauldron.

Maybe it was residual foresight left over from the transcendence, but I didn't need to master the *Imbas Forasnai*--the Light of Prophecy--to foresee Skatha's appearance only a moment later. "What took you so long?" I asked.

She was dressed in her leathers and lace, her claymore sheathed at her side, and smelled of heather and caramel. "I told you I would come to you asking a favor," she said. "That time is now."

I thought back to the image of a long dead hero, lashed to a tree with his entrails hanging out, and his eternal struggle to hold a pass that no one had cared about for centuries. "I'll give you the cauldron--for safe keeping--on one condition," I said.

She fingered the hilt of her sword, and raised her chin defiantly. "I could take it from you."

I moved to within reach of her, and smiled. "No, you couldn't." Bear chose that moment to appear behind me, and growl.

She tried to stare me down, then grinned and backed off. "No, I suppose not," she said, eyeing the dog. She took a deep breath. "Name your terms."

I tipped the cauldron over, and kicked sand onto the fire. "There will be no more sacrifices to this thing," I said. Skatha made to interrupt, but I stopped her with a glare. "I'll bring Cuchulain back for you. His soul has suffered enough, and I have a feeling the world is going to need men like him soon. Whether he decides to live or not is up to him." If I didn't know better I'd swear she blinked back tears. "He may not stay with you even if he does chose life," I added quietly.

Skatha lowered her eyes. She may have loved him, but she had been the cause of his death, and his torment. Cuchulain might not be inclined to spark up a romance with her once alive again. Of course, he'd have to let her know by sign language...

"To be honest, I'm hoping he'll take up the task of cauldron guardian. After all, he held that ford for several centuries, dead or no," I said.

Skatha nodded.

"After Cuchulain, though, it's over," I added. "I don't want to hear that you've gone and dug up King Arthur, or Charlemagne, or...Jim Morrison." Hey, he *was* the Lizard King, after all.

Skatha looked me in the eye again. "Done," she said, and held her hand out. Maybe I was supposed to kiss her ring or something, but I took her hand in mine, and we shook on it. At least I didn't spit on my palm first, because--gross.

So, I resurrected Cuchulain.

He agreed to guard the cauldron for me--on the condition that I revive his horse, Grey, too. With Cuchulain alive again, the spell at the ford was broken. The rest of the dead moved on, no longer bound to the dead hero's fate. I'd say he and Skatha managed to patch things up too, if the state of nakedness I left them in was anything to judge by. Let me tell you, I couldn't teleport out of there fast enough once the clothes started flying.

Thomas the Rhymer was laid to rest a few days later, at dusk. More accurately, the Sidhe cremated his body on one of those floating funeral barges. It lit up the horizon

for hours as it slowly drifted out to sea. The turnout was impressive. The trolls were there, and the ogres, shapeshifters, brownies, pixies, sprites, and a whole passel of other races I didn't know or recognize. Kings and queens, chieftains and warlords, heads of state, bards, and the common rank and file--all showed up to pay their respects. There was even a dragon or two. The Sidhe then proceeded to mourn his passing with a drunken orgy. We didn't stay for that part.

Greg was all set to handle the investigation into Thomas' disappearance, but it turned out it wasn't necessary. No one even noticed him missing. Apparently Thomas had quit his job at the club the night we picked him up, and told everyone he was moving back home to Ireland. The bar had been paying him in cash under the table, and he'd spent most of his nights with the *groupie du jour*. I doubt he even had a place of his own.

Of course, neither did I.

I lay in Leanne's bed with the wench snuggled in close beside me. Her head rested on my shoulder, and her left leg was draped across mine as if she were trying to pin me to the bed. Trust me, I had no intention of trying to escape. She still smelled like lilacs--we'd save a fortune on air freshener--and her body was toasty warm against mine. Even her feet.

The morning sun flooded the room in pale rose light through wide-open drapes. Leanne couldn't get enough of the sun, now that she could stand the daylight again. It was a good thing for her I never sleep, because if she had expected me to wake up at dawn with her every morning back when I was mortal, I'd have...well, pouted and whined a lot, at the very least.

We had the manor to ourselves. Now that the full moon had passed and things were relatively safe, Josh, Sabrina and Alex had gone home. Charlie and Drat had retired to the Burrows to finish planning the wedding. We still hadn't bought Drat's wedding present, and I said as much to Leanne.

She ran her fingernails across my bare chest. "Maybe we can find something for them in Victoria," she said.

"Victoria?"

"Yeah, British Columbia. I thought maybe we'd close up the manor and move there for a while. I have a nice place on the ocean, facing the mountains." She nibbled on my neck a little--I guess old habits die hard--and said, "I *am* a trooping faerie after all."

Twice a year all the upper crust Sidhe would pack up and move from their summer residence to their winter home, and vice versa--hence the term trooping faerie. I'd read that the first of November was moving day for the Seelie court. I guess we were late. "Time to troop, then," I said, and kissed her.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she said, seemingly relieved. Had she actually thought I might not go with her? "You'll come in handy when I need someone to carry all the heavy stuff."

"Not to mention take the lids of the pickle jars at the new place," I added.

What the hell, it wasn't like there was anything keeping me in Kingston now. My house was gone. So was Allison. Sarah was safer with her grandparents. Safer without me. And I could pop home anytime I needed to and see Mom, or Greg.

"What about Alex?" I asked. Even if I could pop back in an instant, I wasn't too sure it was a good idea for me to be so far away from her. She still needed my protection.

"Oh, they're coming with," Leanne said. "Josh and Sabrina are pulling her out of

school and enrolling her at a private school on the island. The staff there are--how do I put it--more our kind of people?"

"You mean Summerland folk?"

I felt Leanne's head nod against my shoulder. "They can better keep an eye on her, and teach her the things she'll need to know to if she's to live in both worlds."

"I'm surprised Alex didn't raise a stink," I said. "When I was sixteen, I'd have been pissed as hell if my parents had told me we were leaving my home and friends and moving half way across the country."

Leanne rolled to her side, and propped herself up on her elbow, resting her head on her palm. "She was, at first. Until she found out that Olie, Michelle and Julie were moving to Victoria as well. The girls' parents are all military, and oddly enough they've all been posted to CFB Esquimalt. And, as chance would have it, they're all going to be going to the same school. Something about scholarships."

I don't know if it was fey magic or fey money that arranged for all the girls to be together. I suppose either would do the trick. More than likely it was a combination of both. The Sidhe had bought people in high places, and the military was no exception.

"That's an awful lot of bother to go through just to keep one little girl happy," I said.

"Well, she *is* an Innocent," Leanne said. "But it's not just for her. Those three witches are more powerful than they know. They need proper training that they're not going to get here in Kingston. It's no coincidence that the four of them all happened to go to the same school together, or that they're friends, any more than it is that you came along when you did. Don't you think it odd that you're the first new Eternal to come along in ages, just as Azrael is the first Eternal to die?"

I cupped my hands behind my head and stared up at the fresco ceiling. "No, not odd." As I've mentioned before, the universe seems to have an odd sense of synchronicity as far as I'm concerned.

I'll never know if Azrael had planned it this way all along. If he'd known that the Eternals were capable of powering Bran's Cauldron, why didn't he just ask me? I'd have helped him die without all the fuss.

"I'd hoped you would come alone."

He *had* been expecting me. Why would he want me there unless he'd suspected I could do my Duracell imitation? Maybe he hadn't known whether or not I would survive. Maybe he never wanted me there at all, and hoped that I wouldn't come. That I wouldn't endanger my friends. Maybe he'd planned to sacrifice the city all along, and I'd just stumbled into his way. I guess I'll never know for sure.

In the end he'd found the peace he was looking for, and maybe bought me some as well. I didn't have to end up like him, suffering throughout eternity as everything I love died. He'd found a way out for all of us. Or I had. We had. As long as there was one Eternal to power the cauldron, we didn't have to live forever. We could choose death.

And there would always be another Eternal. I'd seen that when I transcended. One dies, another takes their place. Just call me Buffy.

"So when do we move?" I asked.

Leanne extended her arms over her head, pointed her toes, and arched her back, yawning as she stretched. "The movers should be here by seven," she said when she'd finished.

"So, you were going with or without me?" I have to admit, the idea that she would have just up and left me like that stung.

"Um...no," she said, smiling, and rolled back over to kiss me.

I'm an idiot. Apparently a very predictable idiot. An idiot that had to start packing for the move to Victoria in a couple of hours. I had no idea how we were going to get there. Maybe we'd fly, or take the train. I'd always wanted to take the train, especially up through the mountains.

After all we'd been through these past few months, maybe this move was just what I needed. I hear Victoria is one of the best-kept secrets in Canada. Mild, temperate weather, no real winter, and not half the rain Vancouver gets. I mean, how bad could it be?

Leanne rolled out of bed, wrapped the blue silk robe she kept draped over the headboard around her, and tied the sash at her waist. "By the way, did I mention that Victoria is the most haunted city in Canada?"

The End