



Loose Id

# FINDING UTOPIA

KZ Snow

*Utopia X 4:*  
*Finding Utopia*

*K. Z. Snow*



## **Utopia X 4: Finding Utopia**

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## Chapter One

Disgruntled, Jesse William Winfield leaned against the wall, his arms and legs crossed, and studied the enormous blue sphere that hung suspended in the middle of the windowless room. Its swirls and striations seemed to wind like eels through a depthless ocean. A hazy halo of light surrounded the sphere, but the space beyond that was inky dark.

Nothing held it up save for whatever forces informed it.

Jesse felt idiotic, scowling at the thing, but he couldn't help it. "Why are we stuck with your mystical ass?"

The inscrutable Celestine silently held its secrets. It seemed to be taunting him. Some oracle, he thought. Can't even answer a simple question unless naked men start rutting around it.

Tom LeCanteur entered the room. His saffron-colored robe draped his tall form with imperial elegance. "Rocks can't talk, Win."

"I'm Jesse today." He adjusted his robe. It was blue, same style as Tom's.

"You're Jesse *every* fucking day. I'm Tom every fucking day. Zee is Danny every fucking day. But only on our birth certificates. So ditch the attitude and get back into Win, Tole, and Zee mode. Or Aethiel, Maligar, and Thimien...which, I suppose, would be more appropriate for *this* part of our jobs." Tole pulled his robe closed. "What's up with you, anyway? And don't start calling me Tom."

"See what you just did?" Win sighed and looked at his toes, only the longest of which were visible beneath the robe's hem. "This isn't going to work, you know."

"What did I just do?" Tole held his arms out to the sides but quickly pulled them in when the front of his robe began to part. "What isn't going to work?"

Win nodded toward the Orb. "Consulting this damned thing now that we're all involved with other people. Building up the necessary energy to get it working. And you know what kind of energy I'm talking about." Win let his gaze move down the considerable length of Tole's body.

“No offense, man, but I really don't want to play stroke 'n' poke with you and Zee anymore. It was nice enough for a while, but now I don't want to suck anything that isn't either edible or attached to Pablo.”

Tole stared at him a moment before he wilted against the wall. “We should still be able to turn each other on if we worked at it. Hell, we're males. The mechanics never change, but—”

“Oh come on, Tole. *Any* man can turn you on. Skeep down the street can turn you on, for Christ's sake, and he's built like a twelve-year-old girl.”

“Will you let me finish?” Tole said. “Didn't you hear me say 'but'?”

At that moment, Zee came in. His robe was brown, and he too held it closed. Nobody greeted him.

Win muttered an apology to Tole. He knew he shouldn't be taking this out on his comrades. He shouldn't even be taking it out on the Celestine, although the thing was hardly an inert chunk of crystal. Inert chunks of crystal weren't self-illuminated. Inert chunks of crystal couldn't disgorge critical bits of information. He cast it another resentful glance.

“*But*,” Tole went on, “the two of you don't tweak me nearly as much as you used to. So I understand. Even if I got it up, I don't think I'd be able to get it off. And Skeep might be an actively hot little tease with a great ass, but even *he* wouldn't do it for me.”

“Because you're in love with Ridley,” Win said.

After a pause, Tole nodded.

Win quickly opened and closed his robe. “And that's why we're clutching these pieces of linen to our bodies like a group of self-conscious schoolgirls.”

Zee watched them. “Well, I guess *this* was inevitable.” He obviously didn't need an explanation. He also had a favored partner. “I think our angelic lineages are kicking in. Each of us has someone special in his life. So we can't interact like we used to, when all we cared about was Regenerie and each other.”

“And you wonder why I just want to be Jesse Winfield again.” Win sank to the floor and stretched out his legs. “We wouldn't have to worry about activating *this* damned thing”—he raised an arm, indicating the Celestine—“if we weren't the Triumvirate and didn't have the whole Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie to look after.”

Although he and his coleaders could never be ordinary men, just like *no* angel-demon-human hybrid could ever be an ordinary person, they could at least remain true to their hearts if they weren't the leaders of a major metroplex. Magical aids be damned, Win didn't want to couple with anybody but Pablo Creed. He might be attracted to other men now and then, as Pablo seemed to be, but his desire was never strong enough to prod him into following through. Moreover, his conscience wouldn't allow it. A quick shot wasn't worth jeopardizing the bond he'd formed with his lover.

Zee blew out a sigh and scrubbed his hands through his hair. Even *he* seemed at a loss.

"There has to be a way to generate revelation," Win said, "without this sex-magic crap. There *has* to be. The Powers of other metroplexes don't have Celestines. And they manage to take care of business."

"Not always," said Tole. "And not as effectively as *we've* been able to." He began a contemplative stroll around the Orb, its dull light clinging to his side. "Look at what happened in Villius. Look what happened in Xanandru."

"Tole's right. We're different," Zee said to Win. "You know we are. When we were profiled at the Academy, we all had the same realism-idealism ratio and visionary perspective. We were the only three EBs who did. That's one of the reasons we were put together. That's why we were assigned to the only prototype utopian metroplex in this hemisphere. And that's why we were given the Celestine. It's a rare resource. The Ulti wanted us to have every advantage, every opportunity to succeed."

Zee's reminders only flustered Win all the more. "Then let the Ulti tell us what the hell we're supposed to do! Tole wants Ridley and you want Sebastian and I want Pablo. Period. None of us is into this damned circle jerk anymore." He turned up his hands. "How are we supposed to build up enough energy to trip the Orb's switch if we have no desire for each other?"

"Sebastian understands," Zee murmured. "I could still participate without—"

"Bullshit," said Tole from the other side of the room.

The tone of his voice caught Win's attention. Win still wasn't quite used to the new Tole saying "bullshit," or any curse, without launching it like a projectile. Tole wasn't as snappish now. Hardly a social worker, but not the aloof, surly bastard he often used to be.

“Sebastian might understand,” Tole said to Zee, “but how do *you* feel? And how do Win and I feel? If the three of us can't do this in concert, we can't do it at all.” He moved toward them, his robe like a gold strip emerging from a field of sable.

The front door opened, bouncing off a wall in the entryway.

“Don't bother, baby,” Win called over his shoulder. He rose from the floor.

Looking perplexed, Pablo came into the room with his shirt undone. Win walked up to him, pulled the shirt closed, and gave Pablo's lips a firm kiss. He had a strong urge to keep going, but this clearly wasn't the time or place to indulge that urge.

“I thought we had to do a session with the C-Orb,” Pablo said. He frowned down at his shirtfront as Win redid its pop closures, and then he frowned into Win's face.

Win suddenly wanted his face held. He wanted to feel Pablo's hands splayed over his jaw and cheekbones as he stared into Pablo's eyes, the color of fresh moss in a patch of shade. He wanted to hear Pablo say, *I love you, Jesse*, just before they kissed again, heatedly, and tumbled into their bed.

He didn't want to be a damned Exceptional Being anymore. He wanted to be Jesse Winfield, an ordinary man who was happily looking forward to getting laid.

Supernatural status suddenly seemed vastly overrated.

Pablo's hand skimmed over his hair. “What's wrong?”

Win shook his head and smiled wanly. Deep within, he felt the peculiar stirring, like a spoon slowly mixing sugar into coffee, that signaled the emergence of his seraph genes. He often had that feeling when he was with Pablo. No shift was imminent, though. No gleaming white wings would erupt from his shoulder blades. Only a sudden onslaught of intense emotion could prompt transformation, whether it was angelic *or* demonic. But Win's love for Pablo was too entrenched, too familiar to spark a shift.

“I think we've reached the end of our group-sex days,” said Tole, laying a hand on Pablo's shoulder.

Pablo still looked confused. “You mean, even if Win and I concentrate on each other, like we've been doing, and you and Zee—” His voice died as he looked from Tole to Zee. “Damn, that's right. You two probably don't want to pair off anymore.”

“Not in *that* way,” said Tole.

“And I suppose Sebastian can't be enlisted—”

“First, because he's the leader of another metroplex,” said Zee. “And second, because he couldn't exactly be here at a moment's notice.”

Pablo glanced more uncertainly at Tole. “And Ridley can't participate—”

Tole looked down. “For obvious reasons.”

Win was tempted to make a smart remark about Ridley's vampirism, but he'd been learning when to keep his mouth shut. This was no time to be flip. Besides, he honestly had no clue whether *any* outsider, regardless of species, would be accepted or rejected by the Celestine. Or under what conditions. All Win knew for certain was that Pablo was 100 percent human, and he'd successfully been part of their work here many times.

Zee touched the sleek surface of the Orb. His expression conveyed his reverence. And his regret. This was a significant turning point for all of them. “Well, gentlemen, it appears we'll have to make a trip to the Academy. And we can't put it off.”

Their eyes all turned to the Celestine, that rare resource now rendered useless by the very terms of its use. Its serene glow told the men nothing—except how lost they'd be without it, and how vulnerable Regenerie had suddenly become.



## Chapter Two

Torchlight licked swatches of darkness off the cave walls and brought into relief the angularity of chipped rock. Peaks and pockets glistened with moisture. Here and there, flecks of minerals winked like bright, tiny eyes peering through tiny peepholes.

From a passageway to Ormegen's left came the muffled clangor of gnomes working in the mine. From a passageway to his right, a burst of female laughter.

Only the lighter skinned of the Dark Elves were visible as they moved through the clots of shadow in the central hall. Ormegen, the darkest of the Dark, knew he melded with unlit spaces—a solid bar of black heat within the damp coolness. Being at one with the Underearth was a distinction. That distinction, along with his physical stature, beauty, and shrewd ruthlessness, made Ormegen a leader.

He touched the silver studs near the tips of his ears to dab off any condensation, then lowered himself onto a ledge carved into a corner niche. After crossing his legs and hands, he absently scratched at his thigh. The points of two fingernails caught briefly on the weave of his tunic.

“You truly believe we can do this?” asked Gennil, looking up from the maps and blueprints spread across a wood table.

The other elves in the chamber were immediately attentive.

“I do,” said Ormegen. His gaze swept over the elder males involved in this strategy session. Nearly all seemed reassured by his confidence.

Gennil, however, doubtfully shook his head. Muted light slid over his dark green skin like water over wet paint. “But surely they have the most sophisticated defenses.”

“No doubt. But they also have an Undercity that's open to nonhumans.” Ormegen smiled. “They're very gracious that way. That's why select members of our gnomish workforce have been able to make extended visits to Regenerie.”

“So you're suggesting—”

“Cunning, combined with stealth strengthened by magic, trumps technology, Gennil.” Ormegen rose from his stony seat and glided forward. Even in his restlessness, he felt calm at his core and knew he looked that way—as placid as a subterranean pool. Doubt and anxiety did not inspire trust. “You need to have more faith in your own kind, brother, and less in a race of curs. We are strong and pure. They are freaks. Like all freaks, they have weaknesses.”

Gennil's face twisted with lingering skepticism.

Ormegen underscored his authority by saying, “Remember, I know whereof I speak.”

Other faces matched his smug smile. They knew Ormegen had once had a hybrid lover. They knew, because he'd often boasted of the hybrid's susceptibility to his charms. And why not? Conquests of any nature were a measure of power, a source of pride.

Only Isthwin, young and full of churning moods, did not share Ormegen's ill-willed cheer. Perhaps he was deluded enough to think he alone had enjoyed the leader's favors. But Isthwin was far from Ormegen's first plaything and would be far from the last.

Ormegen extended an arm to reach past another male. With his long, gracefully curved nails, he tilted up Isthwin's face and murmured, “You'll come with me when we're finished here.”

The defiance in Isthwin's petulant gaze gave way to grudging concession. The lines in that pretty, ocean-colored face melted away.

No tender, longing thoughts accompanied Ormegen's invitation. Instead, *I will work you as I would work any creature I could use to my advantage, my sweet-faced, sullen imp. I will work you in more ways than one.*

“Why haven't you considered taking Villius?” asked Cherwat. “It's ringed with mines. They would extend our underground empire considerably.”

“What makes you think I haven't considered it?” countered Ormegen. He pulled his hand back from Isthwin's dimpled chin but kept his fingers extended, gesturing for Isthwin to stand at his side. “Of course we'll take it. Eventually. Now, however, Villius is a work in progress. We'll let the current Powers complete that work—for why should *we* be bothered with it?—and then we'll invade.”

When the pretty elf was beside Ormegen, he idly stroked the youth's nicely rounded buttocks. His fingers curled to fit their swell; his thumbnail suggestively traced their division. He

felt a small, responsive shift of Isthwin's slender hips. How the youth would enjoy receiving instead of always giving! Ormegen might just indulge that desire, once he'd fueled it enough to entertain himself.

"For now," Ormegen said, abruptly withdrawing his hand, "we focus on Regenerie. It has an extensive, well-appointed Undercity where we could live in comfort. It has an Overcity brimming with wealth. Dispatching the curs and running the metroplex to our advantage should not be difficult. The citizenry seems to have little notion of how Regenerie is run. Or by whom." He glanced at Isthwin, who now hung his head as if he'd just suffered a rejection. "Eh, my sweet trinket?" Ormegen cupped the pretty elf's loose cock, heard him pull in a sharp breath. Ormegen's cock thickened in response.

Damn all standards of decorum, but he did love to feel arousal bite into his loins. Even when he presided over a crowd. Eager to have done with this meeting so he could seek his own satisfaction, he once again addressed the gathering of elder males. "So our first order of business is to get into that little sanctuary at Eighty-six Guardian Station and see what keys it holds to the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie."

"At night?" one of the males asked. "Inair?"

"Yes. Three of us. Our presence will never be detected." The prospect excited Ormegen. It had been a while since he'd moved among hostile forces inair. Effective invisibility was a challenge that required light, deft movements, and concentration.

"You're certain the Coven of Three and the Powers of Regenerie are one and the same?" asked Gennil.

"Not absolutely," Ormegen admitted. "But according to our gnomish informants, it's a good possibility. I *am* certain the men are hybrids. That was obvious enough to me when I bedded the tall one. It stands to reason his two cohorts would be hybrids. Even if they aren't the Powers, they surely know who and where the Powers are. Those three Alterationists have their fingers buried deeply in metroplex business. They're our best route to Regenerie's leaders. I'd stake my life on it."

The thought of them made him smile. What a delight it would be to see Tole again. And the other two, whom he'd glimpsed from afar. Lovely men, they were. And no doubt even lovelier as they slept.

Ormegen very much enjoyed the naked bodies of men in their prime.

“Rudon,” he said to an elf who was nearly as dark as himself, “you shall accompany me to Guardian. I'll choose the third member of our party by tomorrow, when we work out the details of our little reconnaissance mission. Depending on what we find and how it affects our strategy, we could launch the first phase of the takeover very shortly.”

Hand on chin, Ormegen paced away from the table as he considered the relative advantages of quick action and delayed action. Perhaps, he thought, they *should* move quickly. Once their incursion into the Coven's home was discovered, the entire metroplex could be on high alert.

“I've made my decision,” he announced as he walked back to the central table. “When my small party departs for Regenerie, all the horde's warriors will fly, fully armed, to the Wanderers Cave complex.” Ormegen used one of his fingernails to spear a point on a map. “Here, in the Interzone that lies between Regenerie and Villius. We'll meet all of you there when our 'inspection' is concluded. I should have enough information by then to determine how best to proceed. Now”—Ormegen returned his hand to Isthwin's buttocks—“I have other matters to attend to.”

He swept out of the central chamber, leading his pet down torch-lit passageways. Little of Bildezir was Onearth, and its multilevel warren of Underearth chambers and corridors was an engineering marvel in which the community took great pride. The ventilation system alone was worthy of any master builder in the most sophisticated metroplex, so Ormegen had precious little respect for the architecture and amenities so prized by other humanoids.

Regenerie would simply serve as a powerbase, a means by which the Dark Elves of Bildezir could acquire wealth and extend their influence. “Outcasts no more” had become Ormegen's rallying cry. There was no reason so majestic a race should be confined to so small and isolated a patch of ground, their civilization shunned.

Isthwin stopped just inside the entry to Ormegen's private suite. He stood motionless, head lowered, and awaited instructions.

“Disrobe,” Ormegen said curtly, brushing past him. He'd trained the youth well. “Then keep your eyes on me.”

Ormegen didn't bother leading his pet into the sleeping chamber. That would come later. At the moment he wanted quick gratification, enough to tide him over until he determined how best to use Isthwin tonight. Lust eroded Ormegen's patience.

Face expressionless, Isthwin shed his tunic and watched his master. His body was an assemblage of long, lean muscle beneath flawless skin. His cock, fast to thicken, already arched away from his softly furred groin.

The sight was maddening. Turning away, briefly, from this blood-heating vision, Ormegen glanced around his parlor. Elegant textiles softened his stone and wood furniture. He tried to determine if he should stand or sit or recline.

He would stand. Pivoting, he faced his boy. With a taunting smile, he played with his prick through the cloth of his tunic—fingering its considerable length, grasping it, pulling it—until a bulge formed beneath the fabric. Isthwin's lips parted as he stared at it. His cock grew. He knew he wasn't allowed to touch himself.

Arousal inhibited by restraint was a unique agony, and it was Ormegen's favorite spectator sport. He would keep playing with Isthwin's desire, honing it, until he felt sufficiently excited by it. So Ormegen parted a shoulder strap on his tunic and let the upper-right section of the garment fall open, revealing a portion of his torso. He stroked his bare skin, his long nails curling over his shoulder and then skating down his chest. The nail of his little finger scraped across his right nipple. He pulled in a sharp breath at the sting, and his eyes rolled upward beneath shuttering lids.

Isthwin's cock pulsed into stiffness. A tiny dome of liquid appeared at its tip. Ormegen would not taste it. He didn't pleasure his boys; they pleased him. In fact, he rarely serviced other males—such activity was a show of weakness—unless he sought to advance some private agenda.

Ormegen continued his leisurely disrobing, letting his tunic fall from his other shoulder. With one hand, he held the garment just below his waist. With the other, he continued to fondle his chest and abdomen as he looked into Isthwin's heavy-lidded eyes. The youth's rapid, shallow breathing attested to his hunger. Ormegen's hunger grew more insistent in response to it.

“Sit there,” he said gruffly, indicating the nearest chair.

Isthwin did so, his shaft rampant between his parted legs. Several steps brought Ormegen's shrouded, poling cock within striking distance of Isthwin's lips. They were soft, plush. The youth's tongue darted out to moisten them. His gleaming eyes moved restlessly between his master's chest and hips.

"If you perform well tonight," said Ormegen, raking his nails through the fine filaments of Isthwin's hair, "I shall take you with us to Regenerie. Would you like that?"

The boy nodded eagerly but didn't speak. Ormegen knew he'd never traveled far beyond the boundaries of Bildezir. Such an indulgence would strengthen the youth's allegiance to him... and to him alone. Suddenly, Ormegen wanted that slavish devotion. He wanted never to share this lovely creature, this turquoise prize.

Slipping a hand beneath his tunic and gripping his stony cock, Ormegen let his garment fall to the floor. "Now start earning that favor, my pet." He kicked his tunic aside and stood with his legs spread.

Even before Isthwin's lips touched his genitals, Ormegen's excitement sharpened. The young elf's slender frame belied his strength and agility, and they always proved a most pleasing adjunct to his sexual instincts.

Fluid as a serpent, Isthwin lowered himself off the chair and began gracefully slipping around and between Ormegen's parted legs. Again and again Ormegen hissed in a startled breath of pleasure as the youth's nails skated over the tender skin of his pubis and lower belly and crept within the cleft of his ass. Isthwin soon let his tongue accompany his fingers. Tightening it into a flexible peak, he licked along each gully between Ormegen's sac and thighs and inscribed a moist spiral around his stiff, straining cock.

It was all Ormegen could do not to clutch Isthwin's head and grind his hips against Isthwin's mouth...or shove his cock fully into it. But he'd learned from experience it was best to let the youth proceed in his own way. Isthwin had an uncanny natural ability to please.

Now, as if he could read his master's mind, the limber young elf knelt between Ormegen's legs, gripped the swell of his ass, and drew first one and then the other of Ormegen's balls into his hot mouth. Each received a firm suck, a nip to the skin, a swirl and press of Isthwin's tongue. Ormegen teetered on the brilliant blue threshold of pain...and nearly tipped over it as his server delivered a series of abrupt, hard sucks to those vulnerable eggs.

The muscles tightened in Ormegen's legs. He made a guttural sound, containing his protests, for the ache was still too exquisite to bring it to an end. But Isthwin read the sound; he could read all his master's reactions, no matter how subtle or restrained. The youth shifted backward, and his tongue crept in a zigzagging way along the sensitive, hidden track from front to rear.

Ormegen's head lolled. His senses had begun to spin and fragment. He wanted desperately to grip his cock—the pressure in his abdomen was rapidly becoming unbearable—but he refused either to show his weakness or to interrupt the perfectly orchestrated flow of Isthwin's ministrations.

The youth came forward. After cinching his plush lips around Ormegen's cockhead and lapping away its drops of moisture, he drew the shaft into his mouth in one smooth, dizzying motion.

Ormegen hummed a long note of satisfaction. He felt nothing but the muscular curl of Isthwin's tongue, the hard draw and release that had only to be repeated four or five times before it threatened to break his control. Isthwin's nails dug into the flesh and muscle of Ormegen's ass.

Ormegen trembled, then stiffened. “Make me feel it deep, lovely one. Deep.”

Isthwin's mouth delivered a long pull that seemed to drag Ormegen's cock down the young elf's throat. Ormegen drew a ragged breath as the suction tugged at the very center of him and sent tremors through his limbs.

Physical ecstasy was the only thing to which he would willingly surrender. With a roar, he slammed his rod into that sheath of damp heat, trading his seed for the only sensation that could bring him to his knees—and now did.

“Let me fuck you,” said Isthwin as they knelt facing each other.

Barely able to comprehend what he'd just heard, Ormegen slowly raised his heavy eyelids. “What did you say?” he whispered. His spine went rigid, and his tone went cold. “*What* did you say?”

“I ache with the need for release,” said Isthwin, meeting Ormegen's gaze. “Please do something for me.”

Ormegen lifted his hands. The curves of his rapier-sharp nails interlocked perfectly around the cylinder of Isthwin's neck. “If I hadn't become so spoiled by your talents, my pet, your blood

would soon be carpeting my floor.” Rather than closing his fingers, he shoved Isthwin backward. “Lie prone and lie quietly,” he said, “while I decide where *I* want to fuck *you*.”

Isthwin hesitated, then did as he was told. Was that resentment that had scudded across his face before he'd turned? No matter; he hadn't voiced it. The youth probably feared being excluded from the Regenerie mission as much as he feared physical reprisal.

As Ormegen rose, he let his wrath drain away. “Never,” he said, eyeing Isthwin's naked posterior, “ask me for anything. You will receive what I decide to give, if and when I decide to give it.”

He hoped Isthwin would hump the stony floor. The sight of *that* would get his cock hard again.



## Chapter Three

“Is the trip really necessary?” Pablo asked. He sat on the edge of the bed beside Win, who continued to brood. It bothered him to see his lover so glum.

They were already undressed, except for their underwear, and Pablo had expected to slide between the sheets and get wrapped up in a good snuggle. But Win had dropped onto the mattress instead of crawling beneath the covers, as if he needed to put his thoughts to rest before his body could relax.

He put a hand on Pablo's thigh, just above the knee. “Yeah, it's necessary. All three of us have partners we consider 'significant' to 'permanent.' That means we have to declare ourselves 'bonded.' Until now we were only bonded to each other, so to speak. Choosing mates changes the nature of our governance. Supposedly.” Win let out a long sigh. “It sure as hell changes how we'll use the Celestine. *If* we'll keep using it.”

“So it's only because you work with the C-Orb that you have to do this?” Nobody had bothered explaining to Pablo the ramifications of bonding. He didn't understand what all the fuss was about.

Win drew his thumb and forefinger over his eyes. “No, it isn't just about the Orb. The Powers of any metroplex have to make formal declarations once they're in committed relationships.” He huffed in disgust and shook his head. “What's worse, we have to be tested and counseled. I've heard that hetero couples are *really* put through the wringer. The Caretakers want to have some control over the EB gene pool.”

“But what's the reason for the tests in same-sex relationships?” Pablo jacked one leg onto the bed so he could fully face Win. Concern with a touch of fear immediately gripped him. “To see if your brain is addled, or if we're compatible, or...?” He shrugged. He couldn't fathom why a person in love needed to be examined.

Win smiled at him and touched the side of his face. “Hey, don't worry. We'll get this resolved.”

Pablo couldn't help but worry, and it wasn't exactly a new feeling. When he'd first met Win, their immediate attraction had been both startling and unsettling. Falling for one's employer was troubling enough. When that employer had two associates of equal stature, and all were the Powers of a major metroplex *and* angel-demon-human hybrids who could shift with little warning, an ordinary man would be crazy not to have second thoughts.

Still, Pablo had fallen fast and fallen hard. Now he couldn't imagine life *without* Win. Or Jesse. Or even Aethiel. Whether Win's role was that of magic-making Alterationist or very human boyfriend or supernatural powerhouse, he was the love of Pablo's life. Names and labels no longer mattered.

False sunlight faded beyond the suite's windows. Even the nylon pink of dusk had been incorporated into the illusion. The bedroom's stillness was broken only by the men's muted voices.

Pablo had come to think of his little apartment as his refuge, and the fact it was underground made it all the more cozy. He got plenty of fresh air and real sunshine when he ventured into the Overcity every day to do his job. The rest of the time he was content to be in the Undercity with Win. Especially when they were in this suite of rooms, alone together.

“Do most Powers pass these tests?” Pablo asked. He suddenly realized he couldn't keep his liaison job if the Caretakers, whoever or whatever *they* were, judged him unsuitable for Win. Even if he weren't let go, he couldn't bear living here any longer if he couldn't live here as Win's partner.

“I don't know,” Win said. “The results are confidential. And hybrids who run metroplexes aren't inclined to talk about their personal lives.” He tilted his head to look at Pablo. “You still sound worried.”

“I can't help it. What if we can't—” Pablo was going to say *stay together*, but the words stuck.

“We can,” Win said with a firm voice and gentle smile. “And we will.” He also turned, then glided a hand down Pablo's neck and shoulder. “Let me make you feel better.”

The touch sent a quiver through Pablo's body. "No. You're always doing that. It's my turn to make *you* feel better. Go sit against the headboard."

Win peeled off his briefs and did so, one leg raised and bent at the knee, the other extended. He spread his arms over the surrounding pillows. Pablo stripped too and knelt facing him. They smiled into each other's eyes.

"I already feel better," Win said, flattening a hand against Pablo's face.

Pablo held it in place, turned his head, kissed the palm. "I love you, Win. I just want to touch you."

Win's smile expanded, just enough to show he was pleased, just enough to say the feeling was mutual and Pablo could do all the touching he wanted. Win reached to his right and turned on the nightstand lamp. Its glow caught in his hair. Deep gold highlights crept out from the dark brown, as if drawn to the light.

Impossible not to start there, with Win's hair. Pablo felt it, his fingers working between the strands, his thumbs gliding over them. How often that satin had caressed his cheek and chest, the insides of his thighs.

With slow deliberation, he moved his fingers to Win's face. The smooth curvature of forehead, the even, dark stitchery of his brows. Win lowered his eyes. Pablo tenderly kissed each lid, then traced their lashes with the pads of his thumbs.

"You look like an angel," he whispered.

"Stop it."

"You do. At first I was so intimidated by that."

Win opened his eyes. "Now do you see how stupid you were being?"

"No." At moments like this, Pablo was still in awe of Win's beauty.

The knolls of Win's cheekbones were as smooth as eggshells but hardly as pallid. They bore a light, perennial blush that always deepened and spread when he and Pablo made love. Between them, his nose formed a low, straight ridge. Pablo followed its moderate length with his third finger, rounded its tip, and rested his finger briefly on the cushion of Win's lips. The skin around his mouth was sandier, duskier—more like stoneware than porcelain—but Pablo wouldn't have changed a single whisker.

“I love you, Aethiel.” Pablo leaned forward and fit his mouth to Win's. A perfect, natural joining.

Their lips simultaneously parted. Their tongues touched. Pablo drew Win's lower lip between his teeth. He glided his tongue over its silky swell, then brushed his upper lip over the lining. Win sucked at it. Once freed, Pablo drew the tip of his tongue down the center of Win's. Their mouths kept feeling and tasting each other, opening wider to let out harsher breaths.

“Tell me what you want.” Pablo's words floated into Win's throat on an exhalation.

“This. You.” Win's hands were moving too, fondling Pablo's upper arms and shoulders and chest, kneading the muscles, caressing the skin.

Pablo bracketed their kisses with one hand, then both hands. His fingers slipped between their moist, flexing lips and around their moist, twining tongues.

Pablo drew back, wishing in some muddled way that he had mouths on his hands and fingers around his mouth. A mutant built for loving. He almost laughed at the thought, but desire quashed the impulse. His cock was getting hard. Every time it bumped against Win's solid wood, it twitched and stiffened further.

His balls tightening, he made his way down the mounds of muscle on Win's chest and the bands of muscle sheathing his abdomen. He kissed and licked, leaving a faint glaze of saliva on salty skin and silky hair. Humid heat collected around their bodies.

As soon as Pablo pulled Win's cockhead into his mouth, Win squirmed away. “No,” he said. “I want you to fuck me. Make me come *that* way.”

Pablo's excitement flared at the thought. Twisting to the right, Win yanked open the nightstand drawer and tossed condoms and lube in Pablo's direction. He also pulled out a hand towel.

“How do you want it?” Pablo asked, sliding an eager hand over Win's left cheek and squeezing.

Turning to face the headboard, Win got onto his hands and knees. He hastily spread the towel on the pillows. “This way. The best way. You know what to do.”

Oh yeah, Pablo knew. Win had a favorite kind of climax, and Pablo knew exactly how to lead him there. Anticipation drove a droplet of precum from his cock.

After rolling on and slicking a condom, he knelt behind Win's gorgeous ass and began a slow massage of the entrance. Win's glutes contracted in response. He moaned a little, an "I like that" sound, and his pelvis made small, uncertain thrusts. Pablo reached around to grip the base of Win's cock. Win's hand was already smoothing along the dense shaft. He softly groaned.

"Take the first of it," he whispered.

The phrase was part of their bed language. Pablo gently swiped a finger over the tip of Win's cock. Precum slicked it. He brought the finger back to his mouth and eagerly sucked off the moisture. He reached between Win's legs and fondled his dense balls.

"No, don't," Win said, his legs reflexively tensing. "I won't be able to wait."

Pablo quit playing. Time to take care of his man.

With an easy poke, he slipped inside the constricted burrow of Win's ass. That first hot grip of its walls always forced the air from his lungs. He held on to Win's hips, his thumbs caressing the creamiest skin in all of Regenerie, and slowly let his crotch connect with round flesh. He was in, and the snug clutch made his eyelids flutter. After a little back and forth, just a hint of movement to stoke his own fire, Pablo drew back and began to get serious.

Over the past year and some months, he'd discovered just the right rhythm to achieve just the right result. Push forward slightly, just so far, and withdraw slightly. A delicate, oval sway of the hips in conjunction with the thrusts. Pablo had gotten the movement down so precisely, it could've matched the tick of seconds on a clock.

He loved pleasing Win as much as Win loved pleasing him. And if full-body prostate orgasms were Win's idea of heaven, that's what Pablo would give him.

"Damn," Win exhaled, his head dropping even farther between his shoulders. Those soft, shiny curls made a tangle of loose corkscrews around his face. His internal muscles tightened and relaxed in sync with Pablo's probing. Pablo's cock throbbed in response. The two of them kept rocking, slow and easy, and Pablo kept finding his mark.

"I love you, Jesse," he whispered.

Then Pablo felt as much as heard a fluttery sound of pleasure come up from the center of Win's rib cage. He'd been languidly stroking his own cock because he preferred that Pablo's fingers were free to grip his ass. Now Win's left hand went into a fast-jerk pump. His right elbow

bent, and he dropped to one forearm. Within seconds, his body stiffened. Cum spurted out of his cock in time to breathy whimpers.

Every one of Pablo's senses reacted to Win's climax. A unique fever prickled through his skin as the rhythmic spasms of Win's orgasm teased Pablo's ready cock. He pushed in and pulled out harder, stopping just inside the entrance, and he too began to come, the waves of pleasure short and sharp. His thighs, sheared of strength, began to tremble as he pulsed within and against Win's body.

Predictably, Win began to wilt as Pablo lost rigidity. As soon as Pablo pulled out, Win flopped onto his back, eyes closed and respiration loud. Sweat shone on his flushed chest and face. His handsome, ruddy cock, still wet at the tip, took a while to relax. Pablo leaned over it and delivered a single, light suck, making Win's hips jerk. Without opening his eyes, Win smiled and lazily lifted an arm. After a few misses, his hand lit on Pablo's short rug of hair.

"Perfect," he said. "Your dick was built to fit a man's ass, I swear."

"Only *your* ass." After removing his laden condom and shoving it into a special receptacle next to the bed, Pablo stretched out beside his lover and faced him. Win smelled like good fuck and sandalwood, the perfect blend to fall asleep inhaling.

Win rocked onto his side. He angled an arm around Pablo's shoulder and pulled him closer. "Damn, I adore you." His hand curled over Pablo's nape and the base of his skull, urging his head forward for a kiss. It was surprisingly fervid. When he spoke again, his lips were still close enough for Pablo to feel them form the words. "I sure as all heaven and hell adore you. I wish we could spend three solid days and nights just enjoying each other like this. Shit, I don't want to go on that trip."

"But you have to."

"I have to." Win disengaged himself long enough to wriggle under the covers. "I swear, if the Caretakers fuck with me, I'm going to relinquish my position. We'll live together somewhere else. Because you're the only person in the world who can make me give you up."

## Chapter Four

Win wasn't thrilled about using Speedwell's Sling to get to the Academy complex, which was, granted, well over three thousand kilometers from Regenerie. The device was barely out of the R&D stage and still top secret. But the three men wanted to get to their destination and back as quickly as possible, and the Sling was what they had to put their butts in to do so.

If a certain brilliant woman hadn't become disillusioned with her life in the Transport Metroplex of Venturus, and if she hadn't petitioned for residency in the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie, getting shot from point A to point B via Speedwell's Sling would not have been an option. But Patricia Burnside's petition had been granted—turning away geniuses was rarely advisable—and her brainchild had, of course, come with her.

Securing the Sling was quite a coup, actually. If one didn't mind surrendering one's travel plans to ley lines and vortices and intraplanetary wormholes.

“Shouldn't be bad,” said Zee as he stepped with Tole and Win into “the Mouth,” as Ms. Burnside called it. “We use the Tube all the time. This can't be much different.”

The Mouth was actually a round red pad encircled by a Formuglas wall veined with wires. Its suspended “roof” was a spiky mass of metallic glare too bright to look at. Even more unsettling, the whole apparatus crackled slightly, as if the Mouth were salivating.

“You relocate with Ridley now and then,” Zee reminded Tole. “Vampires move awfully fast.”

“The key phrase is *with Ridley*.” Tole didn't sound any happier than Win felt. “And that isn't a very comforting comparison, since my stomach usually ends up lodged in my esophagus and my brain feels like it's oozing out of my ears.”

Before Win could chide Tole for exaggerating, Ms. Burnside said to them, “Just stand still. Oh, and keep your eyes closed. There could be some light phenomena. But since you'll be at

your destination in little more than a heartbeat, you'll barely notice." She addressed one of her technicians. "Make sure the coordinates are exact. And I mean *zero* allowance."

"Shit," Win whispered.

"I'll be amazed if we don't end up on some goddamned Klingon emperor's molar," said Tole, the voracious reader. "I don't like the idea of traveling from one 'Mouth' to another."

Win squirmed within his EMR suit. "The fuck. You used to do it all the time."

"That was you," Tole said. "I traveled from one ass to another."

"You'll be glad to know, gentlemen, there's no such thing as a Klingon Empire," Ms. Burnside said over her control panel. "And there's no Mouth at the other end of the line. You'll just be standing on solid ground."

"We're idiots," Win murmured, unable to look at her.

Zee tugged at his crotch. "What are these suits for again?" He grimaced. "Damn, I hope we don't all have erectile dysfunction when we get back."

Win and Tole nearly choked on their snorted laughter. Ms. Burnside shook her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Empty Pocket  
My hand touches  
Air. Goes deeper.  
Still, nothing  
There. A crease  
In time, a wrinkle,  
A ragged tear  
Where a bright  
Coin once stared  
At me from*

Rather than start erasing, Pablo tossed his pencil aside. He rested his head in his hands and scratched it. Useless, trying to write a poem that had anything to do with Win. Prompted by different events and feelings, he'd probably started at least two or three poems a month since they'd met. How the hell any mature human being could write about love was beyond his comprehension. He found his own feelings inexpressible.



Pablo was at 86 Guardian Station, not next door in his private quarters. It was the appropriate place for him to be when his employers were gone. He'd had one visitor, an Alterationist, who didn't have much to say when she realized the Coven of Three was unavailable. He'd fielded calls from a few bigwigs, including the indispensable Reynolds, but the nature of their business had been routine. The two appointments Pablo had originally scheduled for today in the Overcity became videoconferences. That worked out just fine. Between these bits of business, he read an old printed book called *The Grapes of Wrath*. It made him glad to be living at this time, in this place.

Still, he missed Win.

It was an odd feeling, as if the core had been carved out of his world. It was an absurd feeling too, since Win had been away less than a day and they routinely spent most of their waking hours apart. Pablo knew he should be used to it. But he also knew there would be no conversation over the dinner table, no snuggling on the couch, no spooning in bed. That, and the lack of any phone call, made Win's absence seem absolute.

Pablo pushed up from the dining table, the only flat surface outside of Zee's room that was relatively free of clutter, and checked the time. A bit early for bed, but he could always read some more. He wondered for the fiftieth time, at least, how things were going at the mysterious Academy, that place on an island in a distant bay where metroplex Powers were groomed. Win had said he might not be able to call home, and Pablo should only call *there* in case of an emergency.

Ambling through the open area that took up the entire front of the house, dining area on one end and all-purpose parlor-slash-office on the other, Pablo turned his tired eyes from one littered table and worn easy chair to another. He smiled fondly as his fingers skimmed over the abundance of trash and treasure. All this stuff had been woven into his life as inextricably as Win, Tole, and Zee had been.

Watching a movie would be a way to kill time. Once he'd crossed the space, Pablo touched a button on the living-room wall. A screen slid up, revealing another screen. He vacantly scanned the list of stored films. Everything from interactives to holographics to experimentals, tame classics to wild porn. Still, nothing caught his eye, so he lowered the outer screen and headed for the hallway that led to the rear bedrooms.

After a detour to the bath, he went to Win's old room, where he'd spend the night. Win never slept there anymore. It was pretty much a storage space now, although most of Win's personal belongings were still stashed in the closet and the dressers. His worktable was here too, where he designed and assembled his fanciful mobiles.

Pablo didn't snoop around. It was tempting, but it would've been a violation of Win's privacy. Besides, sneakiness wasn't necessary. Win would be willing to show him anything he wanted to see. They kept no secrets from each other.

A neat pile of recently laundered clothes sat on the bed, along with VR goggles, a handheld computer, and some seemingly unrelated odds and ends probably intended for the mobiles. Pablo moved the clothing to a chair and the electronics to a dresser top. He carefully transferred the “building materials” to the worktable. Stripping down to his shorts and T-shirt, he left on his ear-ring phone as he crawled into the bed. Tomorrow was Friday, and tomorrow evening, he'd decided, he was going to get out and have some fun.

He spoke Lily's number.

She brightened as soon as she heard his voice. “Hey, cute Pro man, to what do I owe the honor?”

“How'd you like to hang out with me tomorrow evening?” Pablo asked with a smile. Her happiness at hearing his voice immediately buoyed his spirits.

“You're *kidding*.”

“Nope. I need a break, Lil. I haven't enjoyed any OC nightlife in a long time. Haven't seen the boys either.” Pablo meant his former coworkers, the brotherhood of givers or professional prostitutes to which he'd once belonged. He missed the gay and bi guys in particular, since he'd most often worked with them, and he'd been wondering how they were getting on.

“But how can you have a get-together,” Lily asked, “if your old buds will be working?”

“All it takes is a call to the right person to give them a night off.”

“Oh excuse me,” she said archly. “I didn't know you'd moved from Pro to Vip.”

Pablo realized he *had* sounded a little cocky and self-important. “I haven't,” he said, putting more humility in his tone. “I just have some connections now, that's all. Comes with the job.”

"I didn't mean to needle you, Pob. You know how proud I am of you."

"That means a lot to me, sweetie." She really was a wonderful friend, always had been.

"So how're things going?" she asked.

"Really well. Some bumps now and then, but they keep the job exciting."

"Speaking of exciting, how's that gorgeous boyfriend of yours?"

"Just as gorgeous," Pablo said with a wistful smile. He suddenly wished he had a picture of Win in front of him.

"I suppose there's no hope for me now."

"There's no hope for *anybody*," Pablo got off the bed, thinking he might be able to find a photo of Win. But no, that would mean poking around. He went back to the bed and lay down. "Hey, what color is your hair this week? I want to be able to recognize you."

"Black, of course," Lily said, taking mock umbrage. "I've never tried to be a white girl, you know."

"Come on. I don't believe for a minute you went natural."

Her pause gave her away. "Well, I have extensions."

Pablo covered his eyes. "Oh shit, I'm afraid to ask."

"Just a little neon worked in. That's all."

"Neon." He rolled his head on the pillow. "Guess you won't be too hard to spot, then."

"Shut up about it. Where are we going to meet?"

Pablo considered. "How about Jango's?"

"The club on Marigold?"

"Yeah, it's centrally located. Nice dance floors too."

"It can get pretty wild there, Pob." Lily sounded both hopeful and cautious, as if she felt obligated to make him reconsider. "I thought you didn't like all that craziness."

Pablo didn't, usually. But he knew his old coworkers wouldn't be happy in some stuffy lounge with a burbling waterfall and somnolent music. Besides... "Lily, I'm twenty-five years old, not fifty. I need a little break from suits with heads. It should be fun." He *craved* that break,

actually. As much as he liked and took pride in his job, sometimes it seemed to throttle the youthful vitality right out of him.

“Okay, babe. It's a go.” Lily sounded perkier. She was obviously looking forward to their night out. “How are you going to get the boys over there?”

Pablo knew the woman who ran the Givers Agency. He'd have her tell the guys to show up at the corner where the club was located. They'd think some high-profile client had requested an all-male orgy. It did happen. Then Pablo would show up, surprising them, and give them the good news.

“I'll take care of it,” he told Lily.

“You bringing Mr. Wonderful?” she asked.

Being reminded of Win gave Pablo a sudden twinge of guilt. He mentally clucked at himself. There was no reason to feel guilty. He was going out to meet some friends, not cruise for dick or get drunk and stupid. Or both.

“Mr. Wonderful's away on business,” Pablo said. “So it's a good time for me to get out.”

“Oh, so when the cat's away...?”

Another pang, as if he'd already done something wrong. “No, it's not like that at all.”

Lily chuckled. “Relax, babe, I was just kidding. Of all the men I've known, I voted you 'least likely to cheat' a long time ago.”

## Chapter Five

The office desk was so large, Win felt as if he were staring at Percival across a basketball court. The Caretaker's pink pate and fuzzy white horseshoe of hair didn't quite fit the illusion. Neither did the smell of this mammoth, old-fashioned piece of furniture; it was redolent of lemon oil.

His eyelids crinkled like crepe as he glanced from his computer screen to an open folder, where a thin sheaf of papers—recycled and biodegradable, of course, and printed with vegetable ink—had been shuffled out of alignment. One of Percy's age-spotted hands lay on top of them like a paperweight.

Win crossed his legs and linked his hands and awaited judgment. Tall, narrow windows admitted a spill of lowering sunlight. The office's color scheme was classy and soothing, or probably intended to be. Dusty rose and pearl gray, with touches of summer-rich green. Like the focal point of the room's decor, Percy both blended with and stood out from his space.

“Well,” he said, sliding his computer aside.

Win lifted his eyebrows. “Well. What fun this has been.”

A smirk cut into Percy's left cheek, rumpling it further. “You haven't changed too terribly much, Mr. Winfield.”

Win wasn't sure of his implication. “Except that I've grown up.”

“Still smart and sassy, though.”

Win smiled into his lap. The description made him feel like an overeducated stripper. He suddenly remembered some of his late-night exploits on the island's rocky shore. So maybe the stripper part wasn't too far off.

“By the way,” he said, “why don't you just call me Win? That's the name I've grown accustomed to.”

Percy inclined his head. “Do you still poke sticks at Mr. LeCanteur?”

“Tole,” Win said. “The poking is mutual.”

“Strange interpersonal dynamic, but it seems to work for you.”

Win uncrossed his legs and sat forward, the small chair tipping a bit with his shifted weight. “Why exactly were the three of us put together?”

Like an instance of equal and opposite reaction, Percy leaned back in his much-larger chair. “I was under the impression you knew. You *should* know. That was all explained before —”

“I want to hear it from you. I want to see if there are any discrepancies in the explanations.”

Percy rolled up his eyes. “No, you *haven't* changed,” he muttered. “Win, the three of you are like complementary strips of paint on a decorator's color wheel. You're good together because of your similarities *and* your differences.” Percy spread his hands. “That's all there is to it. Nothing nefarious, no hidden agenda. And don't ask to see your official assessments, because I can't show them to you.”

Win nodded. Yup, it was the same explanation he and his comrades had been given when they'd been assigned to Regenerie. No discrepancies there.

Percy tapped his forefingers on the chair's arms and continued to study Win. “There seems to be a lot sticking in your craw, my friend. You need to cough it out. Do you resent being here?” His fingers stilled. “Or do you resent being one of the Powers of a metroplex?”

Win pursed his lips and looked at the carpeting. He really didn't want to get into *that* snarl of issues. “Why weren't pure angels sent to run things?”

“Pure angels are too self-righteous. Besides, they're meant to work behind the scenes—on, let's say, a more cosmic level. Hybrids have the right mix of characteristics to govern a planet full of humans and Otherbeings. Next question.”

“How did Keryss slip through the system's cracks?”

“Everything happens for a reason, Win.”

“There's a grand design?”

Percy lifted his fingers and brows, a noncommittal gesture.

Win slumped forward, arms on thighs. He had a perverse impulse to keep drilling the Caretaker, to find some flaw in this supernaturally instituted new world order. It would justify his desire to be Jesse again. It would give him a reason to bail out if Pablo had been judged an unsuitable partner for him.

He turned his eyes up to Percival without raising his head. “Are you heterosexual?”

The Caretaker answered without a blink. “Yes. Next.”

Time for the deal breaker. Or one of them. The other would be the Celestine.

Win sat up straight. “What if I want to marry Pablo Creed?”

Percy shrugged. “So marry him.”

The response was so unequivocal and unexpected, Win's attitude skidded right into it and disintegrated. “Really?”

With an indulgent chuckle, Percy swayed forward and crossed his arms on his desk. “Yes, really. You, Tole, and Zee have found excellent partners—honorable men, all. None of you needs to entertain the notion of 'eloping' to find happiness.”

His word choice gave Win a pang of guilt. “You mean escaping.” He wondered if Percival had ESP.

“Whatever you want to call it.”

“So what did all of our tests and scans and profiles show?” He, Tole, and Zee had been separated as soon as they'd arrived, so he'd had no contact with them.

“Basically, that your feelings are genuine and deep and your choices were sound ones. They haven't clouded your judgment or interfered with your performance of your duties. And they've enriched your characters.”

“So Pablo being human and a former prostitute...?”

Percy pulled down his mouth and shook his head. “Doesn't matter a bit.”

Win had been so prepared to meet with resistance, he didn't know how to take acceptance. The declaration ordeal hadn't been much of an ordeal at all. “This has been way too easy.”

“I have no idea why you assumed it would be difficult.” Percy extended a hand to his keyboard and typed in some notation. “You worked yourself into a lather over nothing, Win. We're quite accommodating.”

“But the Academy must have *some* standards, or we wouldn't have had to show up here.”

“True.” Percy eased down the computer's screen. “There *are* creatures we don't want metroplex Powers bonding with. Specifically, those with a deficit of conscience or a surfeit of destructive behavior. But that's not the case here.”

“There has to be a catch,” Win said with lingering suspicion.

“The only restriction by which the three of you must abide is that you continue to live in close proximity to each other. Say, no farther than half a kilometer. Perhaps adjoining houses would be best. Or one large house with divided living quarters.”

“That means Zee couldn't live with Sebastian.”

“Not unless one of them relinquished his position. But I don't think that's going to happen. Oddly enough, Zee is more committed to his civic responsibilities than to living with Sebastian. He seems content with their current arrangement.”

“Why do you think it's odd?”

“Because, of the three of you, he's the one I would've pegged as the most sentimental. I always thought he'd be the first to fall in love, not the last. And Tole”—Percival burbled into laughter—“I doubted Tole was even *capable* of it.”

“Ridley passes muster, then?”

“Ridley Barron is a fine man. So he's considered an Otherbeing. So what?” Percy craned his neck toward Win and lowered his voice. “To be perfectly frank, I think the Ulti would have dogs, dolphins, and elephants serve as leaders, if it were possible. They're probably the most caring creatures on the planet, with the surest instincts.” Smiling, he leaned back and linked his fingers over his belly.

As pleasantly surprised as Win was, he couldn't rest easy. Not yet. Sex and the Celestine were the next order of business...and the next potential deal breaker.

“I assume you're aware of our problem with the Orb.”

“Mm-hm. Quite.” Percival pulled his computer closer and flipped it open. He tapped some keys, then read a moment before turning back to Win. “That was to be expected.”

Win felt his heartbeat in his throat. “Well? What's the solution?”

“You can still take advantage of the Orb.” Percy made it sound like a given.



“We sure as hell can't 'take advantage of it' like we used to!”

“And the Caretakers find that very commendable,” Percy said in a mollifying way. “Instinctive fidelity, or lack thereof, is one of the criteria by which we judge your commitment to your partners.”

“Then how the hell do we keep using the Celestine?”

Percy sighed, as if he were either impatient with Win's lack of common sense or fed up with Win's confrontational attitude. “Energy is energy,” he said. “The three of you merely have to use your imaginations to tap into another source.”

Win stared at him. It was that simple? A communal fistfight could activate the Celestine just as effectively as a communal fuck? That was what the Caretaker seemed to be implying. *Energy is energy.*

“Love is a good source,” Percy said with a wink. “A *great* one, in fact. So think of your partners after you circle the Orb and chant the Paregoria. If the thoughts heat you up as well as warm you—and I suspect you know what I mean—so much the better. The fact remains, you needn't get intimate with each other to take advantage of the Orb. Just make certain your energy isn't dissonant.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, make certain one of you isn't feeling infuriated or depressed while the other two are feeling blissful.” Smiling, Percy got up and strolled to one of the windows. He clasped his hands behind his back as he gazed at the bay.

Win kept watching him. Dusk was fast approaching. Flashes of light snapping off the water touched Percival's features. The bay seemed to be sending him coded messages.

“Why weren't we told this before?” Win asked.

After a moment, Percy turned. “There was no point. It might've even skewed your judgment when it came to finding appropriate partners. Tole, for example, after seeing you and Pablo happily joined, might've thought, 'Gee, maybe I care about that Dark Elf I've bedded. Maybe I should spend more time with him.' That would *not* have been a felicitous turn.” Percy slid three fingers along the windowsill at his back. He checked them, then brushed his hands. “You see, we don't want our Powers to feel pressured into finding mates. That's how bad

decisions are made.” He faced the bay once more. “Unless you have more questions, you're free to go.”

“Must we spend the night here?” Win asked.

Percy left his post at the window and slowly wandered around the room, his hands in his trouser pockets. “Yes. Just in case more questions arise. You can all leave in the morning.” He went to the door and stood beside it, waiting to see Win out.

Win realized how little he knew about Percival. The Caretakers were always addressed by their first names, which may or may not have been their birth names. They were likely Exceptional Beings of a fairly high order, but that was never confirmed. No details of their backgrounds or personal lives were ever divulged to Academy students, either current or former.

He rose and joined the Caretaker, who thanked him for his cooperation and shook his hand. Win wasn't ready to leave just yet.

“Percival, I may be out of line in asking this, but I'm curious. What's your lineage?”

Percy rested against the wall flanking the door. “You're not out of line. Just keep in mind you're bound by the same confidentiality code that applies to all EBs who've attained a certain stature.”

Win nodded. “Yes, I realize that.”

“I'm a Fallen One who eventually sought to reform himself. An extraordinary human female, now my wife, got me back on track. So, you see, I'm something of an expert on the redemptive power of love. And forgiveness.” Percy stood up and laid a hand on Win's back. “Never let a recalcitrant ego become your roadblock to happiness and fulfillment. That's probably the biggest danger EBs face. I know that from my own experience. And from my son's.”

“Who's your son?”

Tightening his lips, Percival lowered his eyes for a moment. He seemed to be debating with himself whether to answer. Either that or he was struggling to maintain his professional air.

He cleared his throat and looked up. “His EB name is Belius.”

Win's eyes widened. “You mean—”

“Yes. Andrew.”

## Chapter Six

“Damn, Pablo, you're looking really fine!” Thomas squeezed his upper arms and pulled him close for a hug. Their cheeks grazed—a welcome, familiar friction in spite of their winter-cooled skin. Lily let her arm slip out from under Pablo's as the men embraced.

“Thanks, man.”

Pablo felt good. Really good. And he hadn't even taken one of the two Elysoria capsules he'd stashed in his jacket pocket. Grinning, he eased away from Thomas and glanced at the other men. He'd only seen his former cronies in passing since he'd quit the Givers Agency, but they were still like brothers to him.

“So *that's* what moving up the ladder does to a person.” Artie stepped up to him next. Another hug, followed by a friendly clap on the side of Pablo's face. “Heard you got yourself a pretty boyfriend, you lucky bastard.”

“Yeah, and I'm crazy about him. Love the job too.”

Now it was Jon's turn. Another heartfelt greeting accompanied by a heartfelt embrace. “Still writing poetry?” Jon asked.

“When I have the chance.” The guys used to tease Pablo mercilessly about that particular passion of his life.

Jon surprised him by saying, “Good for you, man. I always wished I could express myself better.”

And then another, much bigger surprise.

Nicholas stepped up to Pablo, smiling shyly. “Hey, Pob. It's nice to see you again.”

Trying to pinpoint how Nicholas had changed, Pablo extended his hand. He didn't expect a hug. Although all these men worked as bi-givers, Nicholas had been doing it for the money, not because he was sexually unbiased. He'd always claimed to favor women.

“You look great,” Pablo said, studying him. Their hands remained clasped together.

“I'm glad you noticed. That means my work is showing.”

“Whatever kind of work you're talking about, hell yeah, it's showing.”

He'd always been a handsome guy, but last year he'd grown increasingly skinny and sulky and dull eyed, the result of too much substance abuse and too little sleep and some inner turmoil nobody had fully understood. Now, though, he was a knockout. The proverbial tall, dark, and handsome model-perfect male.

“I went into that program that was set up for givers,” Nic said. “Got clean. Learned a lot about myself. I feel like a different man.”

“You *look* like a different man,” Pablo said with admiration.

Lily tugged at Pablo's jacket. “Heading inside. It's freezing out here.”

“Okay, I'll be right behind you.”

Lily and the other three men filed into Jango's. Music, raised voices, and the sound of clinking glasses briefly billowed out the door.

Pablo turned back to Nicholas. “Did you get back together with Cherise?” Nic's girlfriend had dumped him when he'd become a giver. Everybody assumed that was one of the reasons for his downslide.

Nic shook his head. “No. Christ, no.” His smile changed, became more enigmatic. “That has to do with one of the things I learned about myself. And learned to accept.”

Gently, he pulled Pablo closer and kissed him on the mouth. It wasn't a peck. The kiss was firm and assured and got more of Pablo's attention than he wanted to give it. That wasn't the kiss of a man who didn't like getting cozy with other men. It even fueled Nic's breathing, which became more rapid and audible as his mouth moved against Pablo's and his warm, clipped exhalations rebounded from Pablo's cheek.

Shocked, Pablo pulled back. “Nic, what the hell? You're supposed to be straight!”

“I am?”

Pablo shook his head in disbelief. Nic continued to smile at him. Son of a bitch was *hot*. “I don't get it.”

“I do.” Nic shoved his hands in his coat pockets. “*Now* I do. I'm happy, Pablo. Between my parents and Cherise, my head was so fucking twisted around.”

“You mean, too twisted around to—”

“Admit certain things to myself. Yes.”

“Holy shit,” Pablo murmured. He'd heard a few anecdotes about homosexuals feeling pressured into living like heterosexuals—same-sex love was still frowned upon in certain sectors—but he'd never met anybody who'd actually succumbed to the pressure, especially in Regenerie. “You had us all fooled,” he told Nic.

“I had *myself* fooled,” Nic said. “Money was my rationalization for being a bi-giver, since they get the best pay. I'd convinced myself that I despised servicing naked, horny males but that I had to because they came with the territory. What straight guy likes sucking dick?”

“You?” Pablo asked uncertainly.

Nic laughed. “Exactly...which made me resent the job even more. Know what I mean?”

“I think so,” Pablo said. So, it appeared Nicholas had actually liked what he was doing, but he'd hated himself for liking it. How strange. And how sad.

“I'm strictly a gay giver now,” Nic said. “I could still probably go the other way, but my therapist and I decided that I needed to get women out of my 'sexual landscape' for a while, just to eliminate any lingering confusion.”

“Has it worked?”

Nic's musing smile broke into a grin. “Hell yeah. I'm getting great tips too. I'm even dating someone who doesn't mind what I do for a living.”

“A man?”

“A man.”

“Damn. I never would've guessed. But I'm really, really happy for you.”

“I knew you'd be. You always seemed to care.” Nic skimmed a thumb over Pablo's lips. “Sorry about the kiss. I just wanted to surprise you.”

Pablo hiked up his brows. “You succeeded.”

Nic's gaze was wistful, maybe too wistful. And too prolonged. Pablo had to look away. He didn't need messages like that. He shivered, then blamed it on the cold by clamping his arms to his sides.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go in and get warm and have some fun."

Nic reached for Pablo's arm as Pablo reached for the door handle. "Hey, I know you have a boyfriend."

Pablo refused to be self-conscious or equivocal about that fact of his life. He wouldn't even make light of it. He gave Nicholas a direct look. "Yes, I do. And I'm committed to him. Thoroughly."

Nicholas nodded and bit at his lower lip. "I respect that more than you know. So don't think I'll be sniffing around you tonight. Okay? It's *because* I like you that I wouldn't do that."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Pablo smiled. He could hardly blame Nicholas for whatever attraction existed. Hell, at least he accepted himself now, and that acceptance had pulled him off the road to ruin. "I *am* flattered, though."

Nicholas pulled open the door. "Too bad that's not enough to lure you into—"

"*Nothing* would be enough," Pablo said conclusively.

\* \* \* \* \*

The drinks kept flowing.

Every time Pablo admonished himself to ease up, some other form of liquid oblivion appeared in front of him. He drank slower and danced more, trying to sweat out as much intoxicant as he could. Lily even coaxed him onto the "choose your own partner" stage, where Pablo danced with a 3-D projection of a naked man that kept docking with his ass and crotch. He got a kick out of it, though, and so did everybody else.

He danced mostly with his friends but did give a couple of polite strangers a try. The second, a blond and slender young man, turned out to be not so polite after all. The first warning was the hard ridge in his pants. As soon as he tried frothing against Pablo's crotch, Pablo left the kid stranded in the middle of the dance floor. The young guy simply started rubbing against some other guy's ass.

The lights weren't too bad at Jango's—not nearly as eyeball rattling as they were at some clubs—and the music was an adroit mix of volumes and tempos. The technolicks were pleasant too: shadow dancers that slid from walls to artistically designed waterfalls; an occasional, refreshing cloud of mist; tac-ribbons that floated from the ceiling like lethargic shooting stars and set off a pleasant tingle in the skin.

Pablo laughed a lot. Jon and Artie were great storytellers, a talent Pablo envied. Lily was her usual teasing, good-natured self, and her neon hair extensions seemed more flattering and less garish as the evening wore on. Nicholas remained true to his vow not to get flirty with Pablo, and they instead indulged in satisfying conversation.

One thing Pablo learned that made him swell with pride was how pleased his friends were with the revamping of the Givers Agency. Win, Tole, and Zee were responsible for that. Assigned Service was now optional instead of mandatory; Vips and Pros no longer had power over Regenerie's whores. In addition, givers could easily transfer to different posts in the Overcity. And they were no longer expected to work in bad weather. And they could leave the Agency for any reason at any time.

If Pablo hadn't applied for that job in the Undercity and impressed the Triumvirate, it was unlikely these changes would've been instituted. That achievement combined with the gift that was Win made the past fourteen months seem like a sojourn in heaven. Pablo couldn't imagine a better way to have spent his time.

After a while, he was aware of having drunk too much. How long a while, he didn't know. Several hours, maybe. His eyelids grew leaden, his legs became unsteady, and he had trouble concentrating on what people were saying. Even the tac-ribbons couldn't coax a response from his anesthetized body.

He'd had a wonderful time, but he was fading. He had to get home.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What happened to Isthwin?” Ormegen thundered. He strode around the largest of the Wanderers Caves, his voice echoing, as elves scurried from chamber to chamber. “He left with us. He was right on our heels. He should be here!”

“Perhaps he took a detour before returning,” said Rudon. “’Tis the first time he's been away from Bildezir since joining our horde.”

Halting, Ormegen glared at him. “A detour? Where? For what reason?”

No elf wanted to incur the leader's wrath, and this was reflected in Rudon's hesitation before answering. “Perhaps...perhaps he stopped to visit his kin in some other community.”

“*What* kin, you fool? He's an orphan! I found him myself, in the Frostlands surrounding the Erblinger clutch, and brought him to Bildezir.” Ormegen laughed, but his laughter carried no mirth. “In spite of where I found him, it's obvious Isthwin is *not* gnomish.”

“That, he is not.” Rudon spoke in a mild voice. He tentatively held Ormegen's gaze. “Sire, are you not aware of his ancestry?”

Rudon was a deepseer. He could determine such things. Ormegen's instincts were considerably more carnal. He was born and bred a warrior.

“I can infer his ancestry just by looking at him!” Ormegen seethed at the slightest implication of any shortcoming on his part. “He's Dark Elvish.”

“Not only,” Rudon murmured.

Ormegen stared at him with narrowed eyes. “Are you saying he's not pure?”

Rudon hesitated, surely aware he'd just signed Isthwin's death sentence. “He's not pure.”



## Chapter Seven

The darkness broke. Pablo's eyelids fluttered as somebody jostled him awake. "Hm? What?" he mumbled. Sluggishly, his brain got up to speed. He opened his eyes and let them focus on the figure standing over the bed.

*Win!* Pablo pushed himself to a sit. He smiled as best he could, but sleep still weighted every muscle in his body. "Hey, you're back."

"And you're fired."

Pablo froze as his smile collapsed. "Say what?" Staring at Win, he licked his lips. The inside of his mouth felt like a warehouse for wool blankets. His head throbbed faintly.

Win gripped his jaw and jerked his head to one side, then the other. He nearly tipped Pablo over when he pulled his hand away. Win's chin was quivering ever so slightly, as if an insect were twitching its fragile legs beneath his skin. But it was that scowl of contempt...

"What's going on?" Pablo whispered.

"More to the point," Win said snidely, "what went on last night? You smell like an alley in Xanandru."

"I met Lily and some guys I used to work with. We went to a club in the OC. I had a few drinks." Pablo gave his forehead a quick massage. "Maybe more than a few." He rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck.

"And then?"

Pablo shrugged. "And then I came home."

"With whom?"

"What are you talking about?" Pablo squeezed his eyes shut and reopened them. That unmistakable look of scorn was still on Win's face, and Pablo had no clue what had put it there.

“I'm talking about the smell of another man on your body. I'm talking about your reddened lips and the whisker burns on your face. And the scratches on your chest and thighs and probably on your goddamned ass. And this.” Win lifted a used hand towel off the floor and pitched it at Pablo's face. “And this, from my side of the bed.” He tossed something else, something small and light. It bounced off Pablo's sternum and landed between his legs. He lifted it to study it: a little silver hoop. An earring. “And last but not least,” Win said with searing bitterness, “this. I found it on the nightstand.”

Whatever he lobbed made Pablo flinch. It hit his chest with a gelatinous smack and tumbled to the floor. Pablo leaned over and stared between his feet.

A translucent red condom, knotted at one end. And loaded with freight at the other.

Pablo blinked at it. *Can't be*. Forehead furrowed, he bent over and gingerly lifted it with the tips of his thumb and forefinger. Distended by the weight of its deposit, the sheath swayed like a pendulum.

After gaping at it, thunderstruck, and waiting for a flash of realization that never came, Pablo turned his wide eyes to Win's face. He'd never seen it so hardened. The dangling rubber slipped from his fingers and hit the floor with a muffled plop. Win's gaze followed its quick descent, then rose again, cold and grim as clouded ice.

“Here's how I see it,” Win said. “You had one *hell* of a good time. You popped some E's, got liquored up, maybe ingested other shit. Then you brought some cowboy home, and either he fucked you or you fucked him. But somebody sure as hell fucked somebody or did *something* to rub off a wad. Because I seriously doubt one of our neighbors sneaked in here while you were gone just to blow white lava in *our bed*.”

Pablo winced. “There has to be an explanation.”

“I just gave you one.”

“No. A different explanation.”

“I'd love to hear it.”

Dismally, Pablo turned over the earring he still held between his fingers. It did look like something a man would wear. It definitely wasn't one of Lily's.

He realized he had no explanations, except for the towel. He'd beaten off the first night Win was gone and tossed the towel on the floor. After that, it was out of sight and out of mind, so he'd never thrown it in with the dirty laundry.

"I'm waiting." Win's voice hadn't gone back to normal. It was still flat...yet packed with consequences.

"I'm trying to think," Pablo said helplessly.

He again searched his memory, but a good part of it was alarmingly blank. In fact, he wasn't even sure how he'd gotten home last night. What was worse, there was always the thinnest thread of a possibility Win was right. Pablo had never handled alcohol very well. He'd gotten loose before when he'd been intoxicated.

Pablo thought of Nicholas—that shocking kiss, the longing in it. Had Nic been wearing an earring? Pablo didn't know; Nic's hair was kind of long.

"Don't look at me like that," he said to Win. "I know what you're thinking. I know the phrase that's running through your mind."

*Once a whore, always a whore.* That's what Win was thinking. Pablo was sure of it.

But no, it wasn't possible he'd brought someone home. He loved Win too much. He valued his job too much. All the booze and drugs in Regenerie couldn't make him want another man. Nicholas had kissed him, but Pablo hadn't invited it. He'd danced with some men. Both could explain the stubble burn on his face. But nothing had gotten out of hand.

Win finally spoke again, his voice lifeless. "I can't believe I thought about marrying you."

"Huh? Win—"

Pablo couldn't say anything more, because he had nothing more to say. It was as if a part of someone else's life had dropped into his while he slept. Still stunned, he clambered off the bed and nearly tripped on the tangled sheets. Once he got his footing, he lurched at the man who'd already turned away and taken two steps toward the door.

Pablo made a desperate grab for Win's arm, felt Win's whole body stiffen beneath his touch. "Please don't jump to conclusions," he said desperately. "Please. I'll get this figured out."

Win didn't look at him.

Pablo slid around to face Win and block the doorway. “You mean everything to me. Don't you know that?”

Win's gaze slanted to one side. “Before you leave, stop next door and see what happened to our home while you were having your drunken fuck.” The last two words were as sharp as splinters. “Then I want you gone.”

“What...?”

Win shouldered past Pablo, who couldn't seem to move. Soon, the building's side door opened and slammed shut.

Pablo shambled back to the bed and dropped onto it. Elbows resting on knees, he pressed his palms to his forehead and curled his fingers over his hair. His head buzzed. He fit the heels of his hands into his eye sockets and rubbed.

Trying to conjure a clear recollection was futile. At some point last night, before he'd left the Overcity, Pablo's brain had simply stopped registering what was going on.

His bleary gaze shifted to the nightstand, where Win had allegedly found the used skin. The other stuff there had come from his pockets, which he'd obviously had the presence of mind to empty before shucking off his clothing.

But what the hell had Win meant about something happening at 86?

Pablo mustered enough volition to walk to the bathroom. He had to clean himself up before he went anywhere. “*You smell like an alley in Xanandru.*” Shit, that was humiliating.

Guilt chewed at him for his self-indulgence, although he still couldn't believe he'd done anything to betray Win.

Before shaving and taking a shower, Pablo studied his face and body in the mirror. The skin around his mouth did appear a little chafed, although it was hard to be sure; a twelve-hour growth of whiskers shadowed his upper lip, jaw, and chin. He touched his mouth. It did feel slightly tender, as if he'd been kissed repeatedly and hard.

Most disturbing of all, there *were* light scratches on his torso and limbs. And yup, on his ass.

“What the hell?” he whispered, his heart sinking to his stomach.

Maybe Irinia, the cheetah shifter who fancied Win, had sneaked into the room last night...

“No.” Pablo shook his head. She'd know the difference between him and Win. And she sure as hell wouldn't have worn and filled a condom. And he sure as hell *couldn't* have worn and filled a condom if he was in a drunken stupor.

As confused as ever, he cleansed himself of his party-boy taint and got dressed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, as if his presence were no long welcome at 86 Guardian Station, Pablo quietly entered through the back door. He heard a tapestry of voices...and simultaneously pulled up short.

As soon as he set foot in the kitchen, he knew what Win had been talking about. Some of it, anyway. “*Stop next door and see what happened to our home while you were having your drunken fuck.*”

The place had been trashed.

Pablo's incredulous gaze moved from the kitchen to the dining area to what little he could see of the living room beyond. There'd always been stuff piled and scattered about, but a hidden logic had ruled the chaos. Sometime last night, that logic had been disassembled, shuffled through, and strewn around. Drawers and cabinet doors hung open. Piles of oddments on tables had been reduced to rubble. Pablo could only imagine what the men's bedrooms must look like, and the thought made him slightly nauseated.

Zee sat at the dining table, an array of portable computers in front of him. The Triumvirate had countless computers of different sizes for different purposes, but they were all part of the vast, intricate network that kept Regenerie running. Zee didn't even bother to look up when Pablo walked in.

It wasn't like Zee to ignore him. It wasn't like Zee to ignore anybody. Pablo stared at him in despair. He wondered if he should say something. He wondered if he should apologize.

*Am I really responsible for this?*

His guilt ballooned.

“Watch where you step,” someone called out to him.

Closing his mouth, Pablo blinked and looked in the direction of the voice. It belonged to Hildie Ketterman, a woman who often worked with Reynolds.

“We haven't done deefo in there yet.”

“What?” Pablo's lips barely moved. He felt numb. First that mind-bending confrontation with Win. Now this.

“Deep photography,” Hildie said. With one thumb, she keyed information into a palmer. “Maybe you should come in through the front door.”

“Is anything missing?” Pablo asked, trying to collect his senses. He didn't care who answered him.

“That you, Mr. Creed?” Reynolds's ginger-haired bulk swaggered up behind Hildie. “Go back to your place. I'll meet you there. We have enough people milling around in here.”

Woodenly, Pablo nodded. He cast a final look at the house's interior and saw Tole speaking with somebody—another investigator from the OC, probably—but he still didn't see Win.

Trying to control his turbulent feelings, Pablo exited the kitchen and returned to the adjacent building. The door to his apartment was only several paces from the back door of 86, yet nobody had vandalized *his* place last night.

Then again...

It was impossible not to wonder if that evidence of a stranger in his bed was somehow connected to the break-in. Pablo just couldn't imagine what the connection could be.

He didn't have to turn on any lamps. The Undercity's simulated sunlight burst through the windows of his suite—an appropriately sharp winter sunlight to match that in the Overcity. The gleam was, Pablo thought, like a Com trying to pass himself off as a Vip just by dressing the part. What UC residents called “the weather machine” always mimicked climatic conditions in the world above. It supposedly made the transition from down here to up there, or vice versa, easier on Regenerie's citizens.

Today it was cold in the subterranean neighborhoods. If real clouds in the real sky began disgorging snowflakes, the Undercity's precip generator would spit some out as well.

Restless and troubled, Pablo wandered to one of his actual windows. His rooms had a couple of virtual windows too. There wasn't much to see; his apartment was at the rear of the building. The walls of neighboring houses monopolized his views, although slices of the street were visible from two vantage points.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, took a deep breath, and let it out as he turned back to the apartment's interior. One of Win's mobiles dangled from the ceiling. Pablo made a point of not looking at it. He tried not to let *anything* trigger memories of the time they'd spent here together. Even the decorative and practical items he'd brought in himself—paintings and pillows and throws, vases and sculptures and wineglasses—could too easily remind him of Win.

After brewing some coffee and pouring himself a cup, Pablo sat at the small dining table. Good thing he didn't cry easily.

Reynolds blew in without knocking. He shook his arms and uttered, "*Brrr.*"

Pablo looked up.

"I don't know why those boys insist on playing 'let's pretend' with the atmosphere down here. They should just fuckin' keep it temperate."

*Those boys.* Win, Tole, and Zee. Sometimes Pablo was one of "those boys" too. Reynolds also referred to the Triumvirate as "the three of 'em."

A paltry excuse for a smile lifted the left side of Pablo's mouth. "Want some coffee?"

"Love some. Don't get up. My arms work."

In public, Reynolds was all solemn, stolid bureaucrat, although he was much more than a paper pusher. "Those boys" called him the Expediter. Pablo called him Sir Burly or His Burliness. To this day Pablo wasn't entirely sure what Reynolds did, but he was always summoned whenever something out of the ordinary happened or the Triumvirate had a special need that required prompt attention.

Looking like a general in a suit, Sir Burly joined Pablo. He slapped his beefy hands on the table as soon as he sat down.

"So, you were gone for a good portion of yesterday evening and passed out for the rest. Correct?" Reynolds's faded-cornflower gaze didn't leave Pablo's face, even as he sipped his coffee with a string of slurping sounds.

"*Passed out.*" Son of a bitch never did mince words. "More or less," Pablo answered, resigned to his ignominy.

"Hear anything unusual?"

"No. Nothing." The question gave Pablo a glimmer of hope. "How about the neighbors?"

“Larsen's been going up and down the street asking. So far, no luck.” After one more swallow, Reynolds finally set the coffee mug down. “Eighty-six was locked up tight when you left?”

“Yes. Of course. Did you ask Tole if any other safeguards were in place?” Pablo meant the supernatural ones. He didn't fully understand them and had never needed to. He just knew they existed.

“There weren't any others,” Reynolds said. “Those boys admitted they've been complacent lately. Things have been going smoothly in both cities. Hardly any crime. Plus, they figured that between you and the neighbors acting as deterrents, and the fact very few individuals know who they are, who'd bother targeting some crappy little Undercity shack?”

“Damn.” Pablo stared at the short expanse of tabletop between him and Reynolds. “So how'd the intruders get in? Door? Window?”

“Don't know yet. Nothing was forced. I'm hoping we'll find out more when we study the surveillance equipment. The camera and the Scavenger should give us plenty to go on.”

The Scavenger was a remarkable device. From its fixed position near the front door, it did hourly sweeps of 86 Guardian Station and read a random sampling of the biological bits scattered about the house—hair, skin cells, specks of urine on the toilet, molecules of moisture left by exhaled breaths. Creatures deposited parts of themselves, however microscopic, wherever they went. The Scavenger homed in on that detritus and transmitted its data to a central computer, which developed DNA profiles. Thus far every profile matched an individual who either belonged in the house or was invited in. Zee checked the database every week against the Triumvirate's visitor log.

Reynolds put his hands behind his head and leaned back into a stretch. “Everything in order *here*?”

Pablo nodded. “Yeah. I'm guessing whoever got into Eighty-six didn't realize this building was related to it.” No way would Pablo bring up Win's allegations that he'd brought somebody home with him for a roll in the sack.

“Okay,” said Reynolds. “Now give me the names of the people you were with last night.”

Pablo dropped his head back. “What? *They* didn't have anything to do with this!”

The Expediter was unmoved. “Why don't you let the department be the judge of that?”



“Because it doesn't need to be, that's why. I'm not going to let Regenerie's interrogators make me a pariah with my own friends.” That would be the icing on the rejection cake after Win's accusations—a bunch of goons, albeit neat and courteous goons, alienating Pablo's remaining acquaintances by trying to link them to a crime.

Reynolds screwed his mouth to the right and tapped on the table. “Well, Win thinks there's a possibility—”

“Of what?” Pablo snapped.

“He thinks you might've let it slip last night that your employers were out of town. Then one or two of your OC buddies made sure you got wasted, escorted you back here, and...took advantage of the situation.”

“No,” Pablo said emphatically. “They'd never do something like that.”

“They're givers, Mr. Creed.” Reynolds's tone was unusually gentle, as if he were imparting some painful truth. But he wasn't. What he'd just done was cross the line from inquiry into implication.

It tipped Pablo's mood. Indignation ripped through his pall of self-recrimination. “Kiss my ass, Reynolds. And Win can kiss my ass too. *I* used to be a giver. You think we're all felonious guttersnipes? Is that it?”

“No, Pablo. But those people, most of them, aren't exactly—”

“Since you're calling my friends 'those people,' it's time you got the fuck out of here.” Pablo grabbed the coffee mugs. “I'm no longer an employee of the high-and-mighty Triumvirate of Regenerie.”

Heaving a deep sigh, Reynolds didn't press the issue. He quietly rose and left.

Pablo dragged himself over to the long, wide, obscenely luxurious couch Win had bought just for them. He fell onto his back and draped an arm over his eyes. All thought spun away down some mental drain. Pablo felt bled out and hung up to flap in the wind. Before he started packing, he needed more sleep.

## Chapter Eight

No one woke Pablo this time. He fell into a deep slumber for just over an hour and woke on his own.

The first thing he did was call Lily. She would know if he'd left Jango's with or without somebody. But she didn't pick up. Pablo left a message for her to call him.

Immediately afterward he stripped the bed. The linens along with that supposedly incriminating towel and the clothing he'd worn last night went into the wash-and-dry. He grabbed his things off the nightstand—wallet, a few drink tokens, and a small box of Likkers, a product that served as a breath freshener as well as a hangover preventive—but he left the unopened two-pack of Elysoria behind. It was his way of proving he *hadn't* been gulping pills—a weak refutation of one of Win's assumptions, but a refutation nonetheless.

He put the silver earring in his pocket.

Moving around his apartment like an automaton, Pablo gathered clothing and toiletries and other essentials. He threw them onto the bare mattress, where his old backpack and a newer piece of luggage waited to be filled.

Pausing at his desk, he ran a finger over the writing instrument Win had gotten him for his twenty-fifth birthday. It was called a fountain pen. Pablo had no idea where Win had found the pen or the bottle of ink meant to be used with it. He'd probably had them specially made. The accompanying notebook was obviously handmade. Each leaf was a different kind of paper, its color and texture uniquely beautiful.

Wrenching his attention away from these gifts, Pablo brusquely grabbed up his cheap, mass-produced writing materials.

He refused to think about what he'd be leaving behind. They were, after all, only things. Whatever meaning he'd assigned them, he could take back. Or so he told himself. People were a different matter, though. It was much more difficult stripping people of their meaning in one's

life. So Pablo tried to concentrate on the negative meaning rather than the positive, on Win's accusations and implications. He tried to nurture his resentment.

It didn't sit well.

The knot of pain in his gut kept growing and tightening. Love resisted being reshaped into anything other than what it was.

A couple of knocks at the door made Pablo utter a curse. He was tempted not to answer. Staying on task was imperative if he had any hope of making a clean break from this place. But whoever was out there didn't seem to care about his privacy or his mental state or his intentions. The door eased open.

Win walked in.

The sight of him nearly shattered Pablo's resolve. After a cursory glance that he hoped betrayed none of his roiling feelings, he headed back to the bedroom.

"Stop for a minute," Win called out. "Please."

Face set to reflect his determination, Pablo kept moving. He haphazardly jammed things into his suitcase. Phrases rolled through his mind to bolster his sense of purpose. "*Brought some cowboy home...your drunken fuck...there's a possibility one of your OC buddies...*"

Win clutched the back of Pablo's shirt and yanked it. "Stop, for Christ's sake."

Pablo wanted to whirl around and punch him. Or hold him and break into tears. Instead, without looking at Win, he went into the living room and sat on a recliner. He fixed his gaze on a corner of the coffee table and tried to ignore the thumping of his heart.

He glanced up when Win, head lowered, entered the room. Win sat on the couch and hunched forward. His gaze moved up to Pablo's face.

"I can't turn you out," he said quietly.

Pablo couldn't maintain eye contact with Win. An occasional, swift glance was all he could manage.

"Tole and Zee just chewed my ass about it," Win said. "They think I'm being unreasonable. Even vindictive. Maybe I am." He shrugged. "I don't know. There's so much going on, I can't seem to think straight."

Nodding, Pablo raked his teeth over the right half of his lower lip.

“Don't you have anything so say?” Win asked.

“Not at the moment, no.” Pablo actually had a million things to say, but none of them seemed quite appropriate. He wasn't even sure how he felt about Win's change of heart; he didn't know what had prompted it.

“So anyway”—Win cleared his throat—“you can stay for a while. I know you don't have another place to live. I know you don't have another job. We at least owe it to you to—”

So *that's* what accounted for Win's softening. Pablo met the explanation with an upsurge of rage that made his jaw clench. His gaze flew to Win's face. “Don't you *dare* fucking pity me, you son of a bitch. I may not remember everything that happened last night, but I'm sure as hell going to find out. In the meantime, I'll be *damned* if I'm going to suffer your knee-jerk judgments and then...then some simpering, bleeding-heart concern that other people had to leech out of your conscience.” He bolted up from the chair.

Win, who looked stupefied, also stood up. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Pablo strode into the bedroom. His whole body trembled. It felt like a sack full of snakes that was tearing at the seams. Blinded by grief and fury and the same indignation Reynolds's statements had sparked, he snatched up the backpack he'd brought with him that first, hopeful day of his stay. After holding it to his chest for a moment, as if it were some precious memento that brought him solace, he set it back down.

Win grasped his arm; Pablo jerked it free. Some wayward impulse made him snatch a bottle of massage oil off the mattress and pitch it at a wall. “I can take care of myself,” he said in a fierce, low voice. “Christ knows I've done it before. I won't have a problem finding a place to live, and I won't have a problem finding a job. I'll get my old one back.”

Finally turning, Pablo willed himself to look at Win without seeing him. “You know why I'm sure of that? Because I was *good* at that job. I was one sizzling, sought-after commodity. I knew how to please. And I *still* know.” He swallowed, just so he could keep going, just so he could utter the most painful phrase of all. “Once a whore, always a whore. Right?”

Win flinched. His reaction was enough to pull the veil from Pablo's eyes. He saw shallow pools of tears, a face that looked awash in misery.

After a fleeting moment of vicious satisfaction, Pablo wanted to throw up. He knew he'd gone too far. And he knew he'd rot from self-loathing if he *had* betrayed this beautiful man's trust.

Picking up the bottle Pablo had hurled, Win limply tossed it back on the bed and walked out of the room.

Pablo closed his eyes and fought to calm his breathing.

One way or another, he was going to get to the bottom of this mess and make things right with the only man he knew he would ever love.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Let's hope nobody got in *here*," Zee said, unlocking the door to the workroom.

Win followed. He felt like dead, hollow wood.

Tole kept eyeing him. "I still say Zee and I should talk to Pablo. I know he's a stubborn little prick, but—"

"No." Win moved past him to join Zee. He couldn't abide their sympathy or suggestions, much less their interference. "Besides, he's already gone."

Zee, too, looked concerned. "You sure?"

"Of course I am. I could feel...I could feel his presence...receding." A bleak sense of loss assailed him.

"Fuck," Tole muttered. "This is just so wrong. I think we should try to find him."

"Please let it go," Win whispered.

He closed his eyes as the fibers in his body again contracted. He felt like shit in every aspect of his being. For hours he'd been straining to prevent a shift. What made the threat so unsettling was the ambiguous nature of its source. Win couldn't tell if an angel or demon wanted to emerge. But he did know if both surfaced simultaneously, it could kill him.

As Tole and Zee circled the C-Orb to examine it for signs of tampering, Win silently recited the incantation that would keep the demon Sitri's traits suppressed. It helped...to a point. His anger and bitterness ebbed, but as they did, sorrow washed through him. He wanted to cover his face in case he broke down.

The crumbling never came. While Win's angelic sensibilities chipped away at his composure, the man in him demanded it stay intact. He was mostly human, after all. And adult human males didn't weep over their disillusionments.

"What the fuck?" Tole exclaimed.

Zee hurried to the other side of the Orb. Glad for the distraction, Win joined his comrades.

Tole pointed at the Celestine. "What do you make of that?"

Win and Zee stared at the spot. On or just beneath the Orb's surface, an anomaly had appeared—a dark, elongated blot that looked like a patch of mildew. Win stretched his eyelids, stepped back, and looked again.

The shape briefly defined itself. Like an optical illusion, details came sensibly together then dissolved into a filmy ghost obscured by the Orb's intricate markings.

"It's a figure," Win said with wonder. "Humanoid, but not human. The face is the most obvious part." He again tried to focus on it.

Zee nodded. "I wonder if the Orb is trying to tell us something."

"I wonder," Tole said more balefully, "if it registered the image of someone who was peering at it."

"That's it," Win said. "That accounts for the proportions." Any convex reflective surface would distort an object that way—exaggerate its closest points and diminish features that were farther away.

"This isn't good," Zee murmured, shaking his head.

"It isn't good times ten," said Tole. His frown had deepened. "That's a fucking Dark Elf."

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that he had money, Pablo could stay in a hotel rather than impose on one of his friends. He lackadaisically pulled some things out of his bags and again tried calling Lily. Same result—no answer. It was Saturday, so she could either be at the restaurant where she worked or on a daylong date. Like so much of what happened last night, Lily's talk of her weekend plans had slipped into that black hole of alcoholic excess. Pablo couldn't remember what she'd said... or even if she'd mentioned her plans at all.

Never again, he promised himself. Never fucking again.

Tonight, at least he'd know where to find Artie, Thomas, Jon, and Nic. He'd called the Givers Hotline to find out where they'd be stationed.

How strange it would be, Pablo thought, to reenter the world of Regenerie's professional prostitutes.

*That*, he remembered well.

## Chapter Nine

“We have to try,” Zee said.

They were all back in the workroom, dressed now in their simple ceremonial robes.

*Have to try.* Variations of that phrase had been rolling through Win's mind for hours. While he'd checked his unused bedroom to see if anything important was missing. While he'd picked his way through two computers, looking for evidence of unauthorized entry. While he'd helped Tole and Zee put the house back in some kind of order. *Have to try.* He reminded himself he'd functioned well enough before Pablo Creed came along; he could do it again.

Only problem was, he didn't believe that. Some of Percival's words kept hammering at him.

*“Recalcitrant ego...roadblock to happiness and fulfillment....Andrew.”*

Jesus, Andrew.

True to his oath of confidentiality, Win hadn't even told Zee and Tole about the personal bits of information Percy had imparted. They'd been shockers.

Zee's ear-ring sent out a faint, vibratory hum. “Yes,” he said abruptly, then fell silent.

Win redirected his attention to Zee. Normally they'd never bring any telephonic device into the workroom. Summoning insight via the Celestine required unbroken concentration. But things were different today. If Reynolds had information to pass along, they needed to receive it without delay.

“No,” Zee said, “it seems they couldn't detect the safes in our rooms.” Zee paused, listening. “Yeah, we've noticed some computer glitches, but we haven't been able to determine the cause.” Frowning, he nodded. “You're sure?” He put a finger behind his ear, pressing the small button against the juncture of his skull and auditory canal. “Okay, thanks. That gives us *something* to go on.”



The conversation seemed to be over.

“Reynolds?” Tole asked.

“Yeah, with the Scavenger findings.” Zee looked troubled.

“And?” Win asked.

“It was an elvish incursion, all right.” Zee glanced pointedly at Tole. “Dark Elves.”

“God damn it,” Tole whispered. His gaze moved to the Orb, where the imprinted image had nearly faded away.

“That explains a lot,” Zee said. “How they got in without breaking in. How they managed to move through Guardian Station without being seen. Their magic is powerful. And the ability to become invisible—”

“Inair,” Tole said. “That's what they call it—'working inair.' Fuckers can be stealthy as hell.”

“You should know,” Win muttered. The derisive tone wasn't intentional, but his temperament had become so curdled in the past twelve hours, its sourness was bound to leak out now and then.

“I hope you're not going to blame *me*,” Tole shot back, “just because I had that little dalliance with Ormegen a few years back.”

“No one's blaming anybody,” Zee said before Win had a chance to provoke Tole even more.

Win had no comeback, though. Zee's mild reassurance had slapped it away. *I'm* blaming somebody, he thought; I've been throwing blame around like fucking confetti.

*“The redemptive power of love. And forgiveness.”*

He looked down, felt the other men's eyes on him.

“It's a good thing Pablo *wasn't* spending the night at our place,” Zee said. “He could've been attacked. Or kidnapped. Or even killed.”

The possibilities nearly made Win physically ill. He didn't think he could keep accommodating so many cutting, conflicting feelings. At that moment, all he wanted to do was curl up in a dark place and not feel anything. But that wasn't an option.

So he found strength the only way he knew how—by again letting his despair morph into resentment. “That doesn't justify what Pablo did,” he said, biting out the words. He gave Tole and Zee a truculent look. “He didn't know Dark Elves were headed for our place when he—”

“For fuck's sake,” Tole broke in, “you never gave the man a chance to come up with an explanation! You don't know what happened any more than we do!”

“I know a goddamned used condom doesn't materialize out of thin air!” Win shot back. He turned away from the men, his hands linked behind his head, and drew sharp breaths. *Get over it!*

“Oh Jesus,” Zee sighed. “This is absurd. I should call Pablo right now.”

Win spun to face Zee. “Don't. Not yet. He won't answer, anyway, when he sees where the call is coming from. He's angry.” Before Win's psyche could sneak back behind its shield, he let a disturbing truth slip out. “I didn't...I maybe didn't handle this very well.”

“No shit,” Tole muttered.

Win lurched toward him and shoved him against the wall, then stabbed a forefinger at Tole's face. “Shut up.”

Tole slowly raised one hand, curled it around Win's wrist, and lowered his arm. “All right,” he said quietly. Then, with tender care, he put his arms around Win and drew him into a hug. “All right.”

Win slumped against his chest. Tole cupped the back of his head.

“I don't know what's happening, Tom,” Win mumbled into Tole's robe. He gripped the back of it and struggled to control himself.

“Been there,” Tole said, his face resting against Win's hair.

It felt good to be held. For the first time that day, Win relaxed a little.

Zee walked up to them and put a hand on each man's shoulder. “Come on. We can't put this off. If those elves are up to no good, and they most likely are, we need to find out and prepare ourselves. Because if we don't, we're not going to know what's hitting us until it's too late.”

Win eased away from Tole and wearily sank to the floor, where he sat cross-legged. “First,” he said, “maybe Tole should tell us what he knows about Ormegen and what Ormegen knows about him. I mean, if we can safely presume the invaders came from Bildezir.”

“I believe we can,” said Zee. He lowered himself to his haunches.

Tole followed suit. “I think so too. Other DE hordes are too far from Regenerie. It's possible they've never even heard of this metroplex. Ormegen once said he was curious about them, but they were too distant to bother with.”

Zee nodded in agreement. “Simple process of elimination makes Bildezir elves the perpetrators.”

As he listened to his comrades, Win realized it was imperative that he put his personal issues aside. The Triumvirate faced a crisis that could have terrifying consequences for the entire metroplex. Protecting Regenerie was their responsibility, and that meant a third of it rested on *his* shoulders.

He also realized how much he loved these men, how grateful he was for their presence. Still, there was one space, one echoing void, they couldn't fill.

*Let it go. At least for now.*

“Ormegen and I know next to nothing about each other,” Tole said. “He knows I'm a hybrid, which was more or less a lucky guess on his part. He knows I live in Regenerie's Undercity as an Alterationist. All *I* know is that he lives in Bildezir and holds some high rank within the horde—I could tell by the number of studs in his ears—so he's obviously an elder. Other than that”—Tole shrugged and began to look self-conscious—“I know he's got an impressive body and the stamina to put it to good use. Hell of a tongue too.” His gaze drifted off, and he sighed.

Win smiled, another first for the day.

“Well”—Zee slapped his thighs—“it's possible the Bildezirians have contacts here. That could explain why they targeted our house. We know there's been speculation about us, especially in the Undercity. Ormegen's horde may have caught wind of that. Maybe they decided to do a little snooping just to find out if we *are* the leaders of Regenerie.”

“But we've only had Light Elves stay in the UC,” Win pointed out. “And only rarely.”

“It isn't always easy to tell the difference,” said Tole. “I've met a couple who've made me wonder. Besides, if they're inair, nobody's going to know they're around at all.”

Zee rose and straightened his robe. “We have to gain more insight into this situation. That's all there is to it. Find out exactly what they're up to and how we can defend ourselves. We've never had to deal with a Dark Elf horde before. Those bastards are ruthless.”

Win looked up at him. “I don't think we'll be able to activate the Orb.”

Tole stood and extended a hand to Win. His kind demeanor was still in place. Maybe he was this solicitous with Ridley, but he usually wasn't that way around here. “Don't write it off until we've tried,” he said. He pulled Win to his feet.

“You can come to me if you'd like,” Zee told Win. “I wouldn't mind. Just imagine... whatever.” A blush colored his cheeks.

He was going to say, *Just imagine I'm Pablo*.

Win knew it wasn't going to work, but he had to try.

\* \* \* \* \*

Regenerie's already-clean Overcity looked even cleaner with its dusting of snow. Sugary crystals sparkled on the sills of shop windows and on the benches that sat before them. Not a trace on the streets or sidewalks, though, for the underground Heat Web had melted it away.

Pablo called Lily again as he walked to the corner of Sixteenth and Heath. The guys he was with last night would be stationed there.

In spite of his relative youth and good build, Pablo knew he looked every inch the Pro tonight—short hair, clean-shaven face, sleek all-weather coat, and matching Redhand gloves. He hoped his former coworkers wouldn't resent him for it; he wasn't trying to show off. Besides, the look would soon go the way of his liaison position, enviable salary, and trophy boyfriend—down the toilet.

Lily picked up this time. Pablo backed against a storefront. He'd never gotten used to walking the streets while carrying on a conversation with somebody who wasn't there.

“I've been trying to call you all day,” he said, hoping he didn't sound short-tempered. Lily had no obligation to wait for his calls.

“I told you last night I had to work this weekend,” she said.

“That's one of the reasons I've been calling—the fact I can't remember *what* you told me.” Pablo smiled and lifted a hand as Frank Dallman of the Metro Board strolled by with his wife. He waited until they were out of earshot and then, just to be safe, sidled into a doorway. “Lily, my memory of last night is—”

“Fuzzy? Spotty? Nonexistent?”

“Let's say it's impaired.”

Lily chortled. “I'm not surprised. You had a good time, though. Didn't make *too* much of a fool of yourself.”

Pablo's face fell. He didn't see the humor. “Don't give me any shit, okay? I feel bad enough. Just help me out. Tell me how I got home.”

“Nic and I escorted you. Your door wasn't even locked, Pob.”

“I never lock it.” He almost added, *There's no need to*, but the irony in that would've been too much like dousing his wounds with salt. “So...you dumped me off and left? Together?” Oh Christ, how he hoped Nicholas hadn't shared his bed last night.

“We hardly 'dumped' you. We got you in the door.”

“Together? And then left together?”

“Pablo, what's with you? We didn't play boy-and-girl sandwich, if that's what you're worried about.” Her tone became confidential. “I think Nic was *hoping* for an invitation, though.”

“But he didn't get one.”

“Damn, you really *were* out of it. No, he didn't get one. In fact, I think you were babbling about missing Win and having to sleep alone again.”

Pablo closed his eyes and shook his head. Wonderful. He was whining about sleeping alone to a guy who would've been happy to keep him company. That was enough of an invitation.

“Nic wouldn't have taken advantage of you, Pob,” Lily said quietly, “even if I hadn't been there. He respects you.”

Pablo lowered his head and sighed. “You're right. Shit.”

“Why shit? Did you *want* him to?”

“No! No, it's just that...” *It's just that I still have no explanation for the earring or the scratches or that fucking knotted condom.* “Something weird went on when I got back, and I can't account for it.” Pablo resumed walking toward the corner where he might find some answers. It was his last, best hope.

## Chapter Ten

The Coven of Three circled the Celestine, their left palms extended toward it, and chanted the Paregoria. Win could perform this part of the ritual with ease. It had become second nature to him. The age-old chant had a way of emptying his mind of everything save the arcane words he'd learned by rote. The words' hypnotic rhythm drove his measured footsteps, which were perfectly synchronized with Tole's and Zee's.

As always, it was impossible to judge how much time went by before the Orb began its rotation and sent out its multioctave hum. As the men continued their march, the turning became spinning. Soon, the Orb began its slow, silent fragmentation. Shards as thin and luminous as dragonfly wings began sliding through a room that no longer existed.

Gravity freed the men. They floated up from the floor, their robes falling away. At this point the generation of energy began, an adrenaline-charged psychic flow that became a conduit between living mind and oracle. The Celestine would begin to dispense its wisdom once the men's excitement peaked—an invisible key unlocking an invisible door.

Tole and Zee, obviously imagining Ridley and Sebastian, began fondling themselves. But Win had nobody to imagine. His throat and ribs and stomach tightened.

Nobody to imagine...except a faceless male enjoying Pablo's body. An impassioned crush of lips against his receptive mouth...a drag of fingers across his chest and along his flank and over his ass, the nails scoring his flesh...a stiff, red-sheathed cock coaxed into release.

Love betrayed. The death of trust. Loss, waste. Emptiness.

If this was what love was about, Win wanted nothing to do with it.

The Orb's sections, just beginning their lightning-fast shifts, stalled in midair. Occult choreography turned to chaos as an ugly, stuttering drone filled the air.

Tole muttered, “What the—” just as the Orb haltingly reassembled itself, the room rematerialized, and the men tumbled to the floor. Their robes were back on their bodies but were all askew.

Righting himself into a sitting position, Win drew up his knees. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. The Celestine responded to his pathetic apology with a slight wobble, a few paltry pulses of light. Win lowered his head, then buried his face in his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“He’s in bad shape,” Zee murmured, sounding far, far away.

“I can’t do it,” Win said. “I can’t even try.”

Even more distant than Zee’s voice was the ringing of the bell and pounding on the door at 86 Guardian Station.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Pablo approached Sixteenth and Heath, a giver named Billy slipped into the backseat of a car with a man and woman in the front. He hadn’t been at the get-together last night because he’d already had something lined up with a regular client.

*Ménage time.* Pablo smiled wanly, remembering. Maybe it was the woman’s birthday, and her man was giving her the gift of fantasy fulfillment. Maybe the man was bi or seriously curious, and the gift was for him. Pablo knew from experience there were all sorts of possible scenarios. The clients might even pick up a female giver at another post and really mix things up.

He strolled toward the men who lingered on the sidewalk as Billy was whisked away to his well-paying tryst. All stations now had small but nicely appointed buildings, or waysides, in which givers could seek shelter from bad weather. No more standing outside in high winds, rain or hail, snow or sleet. Clients could either enter the buildings to examine their choices or electronically summon the givers to curbside. Most did the latter.

“Pablo, hey! Can’t get enough of us? Or are you doing some moonlighting?” Grinning, Thomas sauntered up to him as the other men watched. The ones who knew Pablo smiled. The two strangers, probably new employees, boldly regarded him.

He exchanged handshakes with his pals and then with the “freshies,” to whom Thomas introduced him. Their youth gave Pablo another flash of recollection. He’d once harbored the same uncertain bravado he read in their postures. *Yeah, I’m sexy...I think.* Like rookies



acknowledging they hadn't yet earned their way into the veterans' club, they returned to the shelter while Pablo's friends remained on the sidewalk.

"So what brings you here?" Nicholas asked, watching Pablo a little too closely. "Or were you just in the neighborhood?"

"I doubt he needs to get laid," Jon said, chuckling.

"Actually, I need to ask you guys a few things about last night." Pablo glanced at Artie, who'd been looking everywhere but at him. Something was up. "Does this earring belong to any of you?" He removed a glove, pulled the piece from his coat pocket, and held it out for examination.

The men studied it. Either with a shake of the head or a *nope*, they all answered in the negative.

Replacing the earring, Pablo turned to Nicholas. "Mind if I talk to you alone for a minute?"

Nic shrugged. "No, I don't mind."

"I'll be right back," Pablo said to the others. He wasn't quite finished with them yet.

He led Nic a little farther down the sidewalk to a storefront bench, so they'd have some privacy. The last thing he needed was any ribbing about his overindulgence at Jango's. He sat down. Nicholas hesitated, then sat beside him.

"Well?" Nic pulled his overcoat more snugly around his body.

The coat, Pablo noticed, was cashmere. Nicholas must be making hefty tips. And that meant he was very, very good at what he did. Pablo pushed the thought aside.

"Lily told me that the two of you got me home last night."

Nic smiled. "You don't remember?"

"Obviously not." Pablo cleared his throat. There was no diplomatic way of asking his next question. "Did you, uh...happen to come back to my place after you'd parted ways with Lily?"

Hunched against the cold, Nicholas regarded Pablo with a confused look. "No. Why would I? You were ready to pass out."

"So nothing happened between us? Nothing at all?"

By small degrees, Nic's demeanor began to change. He peered down the street, where one of the new guys, a slender blond, was standing beside the cracked-open driver's door of a car

with dark windows. Judging by the look on the rookie's face, the person within was fingering his genitals. Within a few seconds, the blond boy circled to the passenger side and got in. He'd obviously passed muster.

Nicholas turned away from the scene and lowered his head. A long exhalation sent a cloud of vapor toward his lap. Finally, he faced Pablo. "All right, I'm not going to lie. I copped a few feels when Lily wasn't looking. Okay? Rubbed your ass—Christ, you've got a nice ass. Test grabbed your package. *That* was a lost cause."

Pablo ignored the minor insult. "Were your hands over or under my clothes?"

"Over, of course. Shit, man, having Lily there was like being with a damned duenna." Nic slid him a glance paired with a wince, as if his confession shamed him. "What I *really* wanted to do was strip you, lay you down, and feel you up. Didn't matter what condition you were in. I could've stroked one off on your belly in a heartbeat."

Pablo didn't want to hear about it, but his cock didn't seem to mind. In fact, it listened quite attentively. As soon as he thought of Win, it went deaf.

"The only reason I can admit it," Nic said, "is that I *didn't* go any further. I swear, Pablo. Fantasize about it, yeah, but not creep back to your place and do it. I have too much regard for you."

Pablo's face felt warm. He'd never had a friend who'd wanted him like this. Hating himself for being so suspicious, he nevertheless asked, "What color condoms do you carry?"

Nic frowned at him. "Clear and black. Why?"

"Never transparent red?"

"Pablo, what are you—" Nic's frown changed from defensive to thoughtful. He again glanced toward the Givers Station, where the three veterans still stood on the sidewalk. "Artie!" he called out. "Come here a minute."

Artie shuffled over, hands in coat pockets. Wind ruffled his raggedly chopped, platinum hair. "What?"

"That little joke item you had last night—what'd you end up doing with it?"

Scarlet patches, deeper than the redness imparted by the cold, appeared on Artie's cheekbones. One side of his mouth curled toward a self-conscious smile. He tried to draw it back.

Baffled, Pablo looked between the two men.

"Artie uses reds," Nic said, disapproval in his tone. "And he doesn't just put them on his dick."

Pablo's mouth opened. He didn't realize it had until he felt the air's frosty bite on his palate. "What are you talking about?"

"If you have something to tell Pablo," Nic said to Artie, "now's the time to tell him."

Artie's smile broke through, both impish and anxious. "And risk an ass kicking? Are you crazy?"

Pablo bolted up from the bench. Artie's smile fell nearly to his waist as he awkwardly skipped backward. He put up his hands. "Hey, it was all in good fun."

Batting the guy's arms away, Pablo grabbed the front of his coat. "*What* was?"

"I didn't actually schmeez in it, for Christ's sake! That was thickened coconut milk!"

Pablo gaped at him. "You mean...*you* put that thing in—"

"Your jacket pocket. Yeah. Shit, Pob, it was just a harmless prank."

"*Harmless?* When you know I've got a partner at home?" Pablo jerked him forward, shoved him back.

Thomas and Jon jogged over. "What's going on?" Jon asked.

"Artie's 'tropical guilt' gag didn't go over so well," Nic drawled.

"I don't fucking believe this." Torn between outrage and giddy relief, Pablo pointed at all four men. "You owe me. Don't forget it either."

"Wait a minute," Thomas said, coming toward him, "the rest of us didn't—"

"You didn't stop this moron"—now Pablo pointed exclusively at Artie—"or take that damned thing out of my pocket or at least clue me in. *That's* what you didn't do." Hand to forehead, he rolled his head back. "Fucking coconut milk."

"Sorry, man," said Artie. He sounded humble.

"You *still* owe me," Pablo shot back.

Jon, studying the pavement, was trying to suppress a smirk.

Pablo took a few steps forward and leaned toward him. “You *better* suck in that smile, asshole, or I’ll knock it off your face.”

Jon turned up his eyes. “Jesus, Pablo—”

“Jesus, nothing. The mood I’m in right now, I’m just itching to fuck somebody up.”

“I think that’s pretty self-evident.” Nicholas rose from the bench as another vehicle pulled up to the Givers Station. He adjusted his overcoat to square it perfectly with his shoulders. “Come on, gentlemen. We won’t do much business if we look like corned beef hash.”

With a slight smile, he briefly laid a hand on Pablo’s back and murmured, “We’ll make it up to you. I promise. Hope you didn’t get into too much trouble over that stupid thing.”

Pablo didn’t answer.

As soon as the givers had arrayed themselves before the new customer, Pablo turned away and gave in to his relief. He started snickering. *Coconut milk*.

He had to get back to Guardian Station and talk to Win. Although he still couldn’t account for the earring and the scratches on his body, they seemed incidental compared with that little red cum balloon. In fact, they’d lost all their incriminating meaning. Or most of it.

Without returning to his hotel, Pablo headed for the nearest sub entrance. He hoped that damned condom was still in the bin where he’d tossed it. If not, he’d drag Artie by the short hairs to 86 Guardian Station and let *him* explain the joke that went awry.

## Chapter Eleven

The gnome who stood in front of 86 Guardian Station seemed taken aback that the Coven had approached from outside the building, not opened its door from within. He stared up at the much taller men and shifted apprehensively from one small, booted foot to the other.

Win didn't want to bother with whatever had brought the creature to their door. But he couldn't go inside and leave Tole and Zee to deal with it. He'd already let them down today.

"I be Merwic," the visitor said in that pinched, nasal voice characteristic of most gnomish breeds. "You be the Coven working for the Powers?" When Zee nodded, he continued. "You mighten wanna go to Mythmir." He dolefully wagged his head. "Unhappy place, sirs."

"What *are* you talking about?" Tole asked peevishly. He and Zee also seemed deflated by their dismal failure with the Celestine.

The gnome's beady eyes took in one end of the street and then the other. Nobody was out on the sidewalks, but he still said, "Mighten be unwise to speak here."

The men exchanged wondering glances. Then Zee raised his eyebrows and sighed. "Well, I suppose we'd better look into it."

"We beg no devices, sirs," said the gnome.

Win plucked the ear-ring from Zee's head, ducked inside 86, and laid the button on the nearest table. Mythmir Station had been designed for nature paranormals, and they had a strong aversion to modern technology. The other guests and residents of the Undercity—the vampires at Sang, the weres and shifters at Animen, the Alterationists or magicians at Guardian, and the seers at Vizo—all found the products of the new age quite useful, but most nature paranormals regarded them with scorn.

Mythmir Station was the next sub stop to the west of Guardian. Rather than ride the train, the Coven of Three told Merwic they would travel there in a different conveyance. He, of course, could return on the nonmotorized scooter he'd ridden to Guardian.

The gnome took off with surprising speed.

“Little shit's in a hurry.” Tole stared at the receding figure. “Wonder why.”

“We'd better take the enclosed three-wheeler,” Zee said. “Every time somebody sees us moving around together, rumors start.”

Tole agreed. Win didn't particularly care. The failed session with the Celestine had made him realize how crippled he felt by Pablo's absence, how little good he could do for anybody right now, himself included. As much as he despised feeling shorn of incentive, he didn't know how to restore it. Only time would heal him. That was all he had left to believe in.

The men made their way to Guardian's platform. Stretching beyond it in both directions, a narrow strip of pavement ran parallel to the curving train tracks and allowed for pedestrian as well as small-vehicle travel between stations. Merwic, racing along, had already disappeared into the tunnel.

The three-wheeled car was parked at one end of the platform, where several other free modes of transportation were arrayed—two scooters and two pedal-powered bicycles. Any resident could use them. Tole muttered curses as he struggled to fold his long frame into the back of the ultracompact car, and he ended up sitting with his knees practically muffling his ears.

“I suppose it's pointless trying to figure out how many creatures are staying at Mythmir right now,” Win said dully.

Damn, he hated being in this condition. His body felt drained of vigor; his mind was befogged with guilt and regret. He ached from missing Pablo. The “have to try” refrain had become so feeble, he couldn't seem to revive it.

Then he felt Tole's hand on the slope of his neck, thumb caressing its tendons, fingers gently squeezing the topmost muscles of his shoulder. Such shows of compassion were still startling and touching. Tole's love for Ridley must have reshaped his inner being more than Win had realized.

Was it like this for all hybrids? Win wondered. Were they all so wretchedly vulnerable to the power of love?

“There isn't much point in trying to figure it out,” said Zee. His statement gave Win a jolt at first, as if he were responding to Win's thoughts. “Last week's estimate probably doesn't mean much, considering how quickly those creatures come and go and how secretive they are.”

Win couldn't even remember last week's estimate, but what Zee had said was true. Many OBs slipped in and out of the Undercity without notice.

Merwic was nowhere in sight when the Coven reached Mythmir's platform, but the downsized scooter he'd ridden was parked with the station's other free rides. This vantage point afforded no glimpse of Mythmir's expansive interior. The Otherbeings who occasionally stayed here were clannish and wary creatures who valued seclusion. No matter how well the station mimicked the woods and fields, cliffs and caves and streams of the interzones, it was still tucked within a major metroplex and hardly an isolated, natural wilderness. Both the Overcity *and* Undercity of Regenerie were clean, hospitable places, but different creatures had different notions of “utopian” existence.

Right after they'd parked their modest vehicle and passed through Mythmir's high privacy gates, a train sped by. Its rattle and rumble filled the tunnel and made the floor vibrate.

Win felt a pull that was both psychic and physical. It made him spin toward the tracks. He couldn't see them, but he could feel...

“Pablo.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They weren't there. Pablo got no response to his knocks and rings. He finally pressed his thumb to the small ID pad set above the door's locking mechanism. Only he, the Triumvirate, and Reynolds could get in that way. When the lock disengaged, he was surprised and relieved that Win hadn't deleted his authorization.

A single lamp cast a globe of soft light between the living and dining areas. The house was somewhat back in order.

“Win?” Pablo called out. “Tole? Zee?”

The men might have gone to bed—they'd had a hectic, stressful day—but no one answered Pablo's call. Besides, he could sense their absence. Supernaturals had a strong spiritual signature, as Win had once told him. More sensitive humans could tell when an angel or demon was around, just as they could detect the presence of ghosts.

“Shit,” Pablo whispered. Maybe the Coven was in the Overcity, dealing with some aspect of the break-in investigation. It was a little late for meetings, but that meant nothing in this case. The vandalism of 86 Guardian Station was hardly routine business.

He didn't know whether to wait there or in his apartment, even though the suite next door wasn't technically his anymore. Calling Win was out of the question; the men were obviously busy.

As Pablo left the house and stood outside on the narrow, shadowed sidewalk, someone emerged from an equally humble dwelling just down the street. It used to belong to an Alterationist named Hal, but the old magic maker had passed away five months ago and left the house and its contents to his young apprentice.

That's who had just come out—Skeep. He was a cute guy, recently turned twenty-one, with ever-changing hair and a truly delectable little ass. Pablo suspected Tole had had him at least once.

As soon as Skeep spotted Pablo, he waved and jogged over, loose pants threatening to slip off his narrow hips. "Glad I caught you," he said, tightening the drawstring around his waist. "Are the guys awake? I need to talk to them about something. You too, for that matter."

"They're not here," Pablo said.

Skeep blew air between his lips and idly scratched at his rib cage. His hair, midnight blue this week, bobbed from his head like stretched-out springs. Distant stars seemed to twinkle within the strands. Skeep loved decorating his hair, which was second only to his butt in pride-and-glory status.

"Why don't you come with me," he said, "so I can get *this* part out of the way."

Pablo walked with him to the house numbered 93, although he had no idea what Skeep was talking about. At least the diversion gave him something to do while he waited for the Coven to return.

As usual, wavering candlelight lit the interior of Skeep's place. The scent of exotic incense seemed woven through everything in it. A more pungent herbal undertone occasionally came through.

"Wait here a minute," Skeep said as soon as the door closed at their backs.

Pablo would never get used to that, how the door always closed on its own. If any dwelling in Guardian Station epitomized Alterationist magic, this one did. A sizable chunk of onyx sat on a table before the sofa. Bottles and vials of who-knows-what were scattered among mortar bowls



and braziers. Chalked symbols—arcane formulas, perhaps—paraded across the walls like line-dancing wraiths.

Pablo shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Since he hadn't been invited to sit down, he remained in the small foyer. Skeep soon reentered the parlor, one arm extended behind him, his hand clasping another hand. He was leading someone. Someone who couldn't have been human, since people didn't come in turquoise.

“You don't have to stand there,” Skeep said to Pablo. “Come on in.”

Pablo moved into the parlor's flickering glow.

At first he couldn't tell the gender of Skeep's strange companion, but the slight bulge beneath the creature's tunic gave him away as he drifted closer. He was astonishingly beautiful—as beautiful as Win, but in a more ethereal, less sensual way. His long limbs were firm and graceful; his mint-colored hair, like strands of the finest spun glass. Quicksilver eyes stared anxiously at Pablo.

Suddenly he glided forward and lowered himself to one knee at Pablo's feet. “I beg your forgiveness, sir. I only intended to plead for sanctuary. But the look of you, the feel of you, lit a fire in me. I've never been allowed to have what I want. I've never even been allowed to ask. The deprivation—”

Flabbergasted, Pablo glanced at Skeep.

He shrugged. “Issy's been fretting over 'the fur-headed man next to the red house.' He obviously thinks he owes you an apology for something.” With a knowing smirk, Skeep languidly rubbed his chin. “I'm guessing it has something to do with you lighting that fire in him.”

Pablo looked at the pretty creature, who had pointed ears. “Who *are* you? *What* are you?”

The Otherbeing lowered his head. “I am Isthwin, a mongrel.”

Stepping over to them, Skeep bent at the waist and curled a hand behind the young male's upper arm. “Come on, Issy. You don't need to beg. Pablo's a nice guy. So are you.” Skeep's bright gaze skipped up to Pablo's face. He added in a theatrical whisper, “He's also the best lay I've ever had. A damned firecracker.”

The creature stood, but his eyes remained deferentially lowered.

“Excuse me,” said Pablo, “but what's your name again?”

“Isthwin.”

“Kind of a tongue twister, especially with that elvish accent,” remarked Skeep. “That's why I call him Issy.” He ran an admiring hand down his new friend's back.

Isthwin met the gesture with a shy glance and fond smile. “Jeremy,” he said, ostensibly to Pablo, “took me in. He's been...very kind to me.”

Reacting to Pablo's deepening look of bewilderment, Skeep spoke up. “I'm Jeremy. That's my birth name. It's more appropriate when I'm, you know, getting cozy with someone.”

Pablo really didn't want to hear about Skeep's love life. He lifted his hands and dropped them to his waist. “Okay, let me try to make some sense out of this. Issy, are you an elf?”

The youth nodded. “Light and Dark. But I'm also fae. And human.” When he turned his eyes to Pablo's face, they were large and dismal. “A mongrel. My kind is not welcome within the horde.”

“Is that why you feel you need sanctuary?”

“I've been giving him sanctuary,” Skeep said, running his hands over his own rounded rear.

Pablo sighed and rolled his eyes. Skeep was probably the most notorious bottom in the entire Undercity. “Now please explain why you apologized to me,” he said to the elf. “I'm a little unclear about that part.”

“Last night—”

That was all it took. Two words. Pablo glanced at the youth's hands and saw his long, curved nails with their sharp points. He scanned Issy's peaked ears and saw a small, empty hole just below the right one's tip.

Son of a bitch. Skeep wasn't the only resident of Guardian Station who'd recently had an elf in his bed.

“I've never been happy there, so I couldn't go back with them. I couldn't,” Isthwin said, his words rushed and ringing with desperation. “As they flew down the corridor of houses, I slipped into the one beside the red house we'd been in—”

Pablo lurched forward and grabbed the elf's arms. “Stop!”

The creature shrank back, his gleaming eyes widening with fear.

"I'm sorry. It's all right." Pablo released his grip. He ran a hand over his face. "You were in the red house last night?"

"Yes. With Ormegen and Rudon. I swear to you, sir, I found nothing and stole nothing. What they were doing sickened me. I only made a pretense of prying."

"Well, piss in my eye," Skeep said. "No wonder that metro detective was going around asking questions this morning. Great. I just went from harboring a refugee to harboring a fugitive from justice."

Trying to arrange his thoughts and questions, Pablo licked his lips, strode to the right, strode to the left. He finally stopped in front of Isthwin. "Where did you come from?"

"Bildezir."

"Why were you at the red house last night?"

Isthwin hesitated. "I want sanctuary," he said more assertively. Obstinacy set his lovely features. "And immunity from punishment."

Pablo didn't have the power to grant sanctuary *or* to keep Isthwin from being prosecuted. Only the Triumvirate could do those things. Fuck it, he thought. "All right. But in return, you have to divulge everything you know about last night's raid. Don't lie. Here in Regenerie, we know how to read lies." *Yeah, if only...*

First, though, Pablo had to get the one thing out of the way that kept chewing at him. "Before you tell me about your activities at the red house, explain how you ended up in my bed."

Skeep coughed. "I assume Win wasn't around."

"Be quiet," Pablo snapped.

Skeep put a hand over his mouth and sank onto the sofa.

"I told you," said Isthwin, "I entered your house as they flew away. First I slid beneath the front door. There was only a strange room with a large, crystalline orb. It's a stone you humans call celestite, I believe. Only it's more than a mere stone. Then I heard sounds coming from the other side of the wall. At first I thought it was a bear. Or a boar. I couldn't be sure."

As Pablo frowned at the animal references, Skeep snorted in amusement. "I think you were snoring, Mr. Creed."

Skeep was probably right. Pablo always snored when he'd had too much to drink.

"It *was* you," said Isthwin, "breathing in an unnatural way. I discovered that when I moved around the building and slipped beneath the rear door. I'm so very sorry, sir. But when I saw you lying unclothed on your bed, I was so...I was so moved by the sight of your body, I couldn't help wanting to feel it."

Skeep nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, that's understandable."

"Skeep, why don't you lose yourself for a while?" Pablo said irritably.

"Hey, I'm the one who took him in and kept him occupied. The least you can do is let me listen." Smiling, Skeep crossed his legs and flung an arm over the back of the sofa. He'd made it clear he wasn't going anywhere.

Although Pablo was irked and more than a little embarrassed, he wasn't going to press the issue. "Then keep the comments to a minimum." He turned back to the elf.

Apparently encouraged by "Jeremy's" understanding, Isthwin forged ahead. "So I crept onto the bed and held myself close against you and rubbed my face against your face and pressed my lips against your lips. And I let my hands and tongue roam over you, the hard, smooth warmth of you. You felt so strong, even as you slept." The youth again began imploring Pablo. "Oh please forgive me! I know my attention wasn't invited, but my craving had become unbearable!"

Pablo's face felt like a furnace. "Did you, uh...get to the point of...?" He made a vague gesture.

Isthwin clearly had no idea what Pablo was getting at.

Skeep, however, sniggered into his fist. "Issy, I think he wants to know if you blew juice."

"Oh Jesus," Pablo groaned.

"Well, isn't that what—"

"Let's just drop it," Pablo said.

Isthwin still looked mystified. Pablo didn't know how elves referred to ejaculation, but he suspected the idiom had something to do with seed. Not that it mattered. Perverse curiosity rather than necessity had made him broach the subject.

"Did your body penetrate Pablo's?" Skeep blithely asked the elf.

Isthwin was clearly appalled by the implication. “No,” he breathed out. “I would never take a creature while he slept!”

“You would’ve known if he had,” Skeep told Pablo. “Believe me. Issy can fuck like—”

Pablo held up his hand. “Save it,” he said, and turned back to Isthwin. “Do you wear an ear ornament?” He fished around in his pocket, prepared to withdraw the earring, but decided it might be wise to hang on to it for a while.

The elf self-consciously touched the empty hole. “Yes. A nickel-and-silver circlet. Until I’m deemed worthy of the purer nugget. But I must have lost it”—his gaze flickered up to Pablo —“in your bed.”

“You did. I can’t return it to you just yet, but I will. Seems you’ll be in the Undercity for a while.”

The elf nodded eagerly. “It would please me very much, sir.”

“You’ll likely be given shelter at Mythmir Station.”

Looking terror-stricken, the elf this time dropped to both knees and grasped Pablo’s hands. “No. Please, not there. He’ll find me there. If he doesn’t kill me for fleeing, he’ll kill me for being a mongrel. I know Rudon knows I’m not pure Dark. I know it’s only a matter of time before he tells Ormegen.”

Pablo urged Isthwin to his feet, gently steered him to the couch, and set him down beside Skeep.

The elf’s gaze wouldn’t release Pablo. “Please, sir, let me stay with Jeremy.”

Skeep, exhibiting a surprising degree of affection, protectively wrapped an arm around Isthwin’s shoulders. “I’d be happy to have him as a guest. As long as it doesn’t get me into trouble.”

The arrangement would do for now, Pablo figured. If the youth truly was in danger—and he fervently believed he was—Guardian Station was a good place for him to be. Pablo didn’t want the demise of *any* creature on his conscience. Skeep was a shrewd-enough little bugger and a good-enough magician to keep the elf from engaging in any mischief.

He glanced around the messy parlor, grabbed the most portable chair, and set it front of the couch. “You can stay with Jeremy,” he said, leaning forward. “Now tell me what interest the Dark Elves have in the red house.”

## Chapter Twelve

Lured by the harmless-looking gnome, they'd fallen into a trap. Fallen right the hell into it. Merwic, probably a worker in one of Bildezir's mines, had been sent to Guardian Station precisely because he *wouldn't* arouse the Coven's suspicion. Of all the Otherbeings who had ever turned up in Regenerie's Undercity, gnomes were far and away the most guileless, and the most harmless.

It was all so obvious now. Unfortunately, now was too late. Because there they stood—Win, Tole, and Zee—within Mythmir Station, staring helplessly at their worst nightmare. Fleeing wasn't an option. They had to see this through.

“We have *really* been dropping the fucking ball lately,” Tole muttered.

“Christ I'm sorry,” Win said.

“It isn't your fault,” Zee told him.

*But it is.* Win sank further into guilt-saturated despair. He'd jumped to conclusions about Pablo and run him off without a fair hearing. Now he knew Pablo was nearby, in fact was probably at Guardian Station retrieving the rest of his things. Even worse, far worse, he'd been dysfunctional in the workroom and prevented the activation of the C-Orb. And that obviously meant he'd put Tole, Zee, and the entire Metroplex of Regenerie in danger.

The men stood together and gazed over the man-made landscape of Mythmir—the artfully fabricated brooks and cliffs, the carefully planted trees and meadows. The subterranean refuge was glazed now with artificial moonlight. There were all manner of dwellings here, to accommodate a wide variety of nature paranormals. Some liked living in small cottages; others, in the hollowed-out trunks of trees. Some preferred hillside caves; others, caverns and tunnels sunk into the earth.

The whole idyllic place was now tainted by an infestation of Dark Elves. Their myriad skin tones and the precise details of individuals' features were difficult to make out in the gloom.

Judging by their builds, though, the creatures were male. Each and every one of them. And that meant an entire horde hadn't relocated for the purpose of escaping some threat and seeking a safe haven. This was an orchestrated invasion.

The figures stood stock-still. Unblinking eyes the color of mercury, countless pairs of eyes, were trained on the Triumvirate of Regenerie. The size of the horde was impossible to judge, but it had clearly taken over Mythmir Station and was capable of taking over the entire Undercity.

Given the power of their magic and the fluidity of their moral code, they were capable of taking over the entire metropolplex.

With a soughing sound, the ground opened within the large semicircle of warriors. A figure rose up, an obsidian monolith that seemed disgorged by the earth's crust. All those silvery eyes turned to it.

To *him*.

Ormegen, the tallest and strongest and cruelest of them all.

He sauntered forward and stopped within striking distance of Tole. "Hello, my hybrid lover." His voice was deep and as smooth as the blackest oil. "Have you missed me?"

Win angled a glance at his comrade. Tole, bless him, remained utterly impassive. Nary a single tic of a single facial muscle.

"No," he said.

Almost imperceptibly, Ormegen's smirk wavered. "You've found a superior playmate?"

Tole wisely didn't answer. He wasn't only protecting himself from Ormegen's wrath; he was obviously protecting Ridley.

"Why are you here?" Zee asked the elf. "What is it you want?"

Ormegen folded his hands behind his back. His gaze, lustful and covetous, rolled over Zee from head to foot. Then it abruptly shifted to Win. And intensified.

One of Ormegen's slender hands came forward, its sickle-shaped fingernails both elegant and ghastly, and cupped the side of Win's face. Win felt the tips of the nails rest against his scalp like stingers, but they didn't drive in.

"The nature of my wants has just been modified," Ormegen said, his voice and eyelids lowering as he took in Win's face. "I'd at first wanted to know if you were the Triumvirate of



Regenerie and how we might come to some...accord regarding control of this metroplex.” His smile broadened. “Now I realize I also want to enjoy certain things Regenerie has to offer.” His long-nailed fingers curled through Win's hair and tugged at it. “*You* are extraordinarily beautiful. I should like to see that perfect face distorted by passion, that succulent mouth—”

“Get away from me,” Win said in a cold, dead voice. Storm clouds filled his head. He could barely focus on Ormegen. The elf's words agitated his spirit just as the elf's hands stirred his hair.

“You know—don't you?—that we've battled demons before.” Ormegen's voice had modulated toward a growl. He was obviously warning them all against shifting. “Our magic is quite effective against demons. What a delight it is to see them suffer.” His nails drew across Win's scalp as his fingers knotted within Win's hair. Win felt a burn. Wet, sticky warmth spread across the back of his head.

His whole body began to tremble. Spasms racked his muscles. The bones throughout his torso seemed to crack apart and struggle to re-fuse, but in a different arrangement.

“I think, gentlemen,” said Ormegen with chilling geniality, “we should settle in for a nice talk. Perhaps in one of the chambers far beneath Mythmir's lush green grass.”

Win's head fell back. A wail spiraled out of his throat.

“Aethiel!” Thimien cried out as Maligar muttered something about inevitability.

All words fell away to distant murmurs as the change came.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Do you think the horde is at Mythmir now?” Pablo asked Isthwin. He tried not to let panic overtake him. He had to keep a clear head.

Isthwin glanced uncertainly at Skeep, whom he'd obviously come to trust.

“Answer him,” Skeep said.

“Perhaps, but not the entire horde,” the elf told Pablo. “Only the mature males would be there. The warriors. Ormegen had spoken of moving his army swiftly and in darkness.”

“Fuck. *Fuck!*” Pablo paced around Skeep's parlor. He had to find out for sure. If the Coven wasn't aware of the invasion, *somebody* had to take action. If the Coven did know, they could be at Mythmir right now...and in peril.

“What's the best way to combat this army?” he asked Isthwin. He didn't know shit about Dark Elves, except that Tole had once briefly had one as a fuck buddy.

“Only with magic that's stronger than theirs,” Isthwin said. “But I don't know what that is.”

Pablo cast an imploring look at Skeep.

The young magician shrugged and shook his head. “I don't know either. Hal might've been able to come up with something, but he's not much help in *his* condition.”

*Dead.* Yeah, that was true. Pablo chewed a fingernail.

“We could try contacting him through one of the psychic mediums at Vizo,” Skeep said.

Pablo waved the suggestion aside. “No. No, that would take too much time and maybe not yield any results.” He could only come up with one even remotely viable option, and it was the one the Triumvirate would've resorted to. “Both of you have to come down the street with me,” he said. “Right now. Don't ask any questions either. Just do what I tell you to do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Don't go near him! Don't provoke him!” Ormegen shouted to his troops. “We'll...we'll have to wait this out. That's all we need do. Hybrids can only remain in nonhuman form for so long. He'll shift back soon enough.”

By all the past elders in the millennia-long history of the Draag Knev, he hadn't anticipated this. Demonic shift, yes. Ormegen knew the three hybrids would be enraged by his takeover of Mythmir and his obvious intention to make further incursions. He knew an eruption of negative emotion—fierce anger, jealousy, hatred—could draw out the wicked beasts that usually lay dormant in the human bodies of these supernaturals. And Ormegen had been well prepared for such transformations.

But not for this one.

He'd never devised a method, either physical or magical, for battling angels.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once Skeep had dug up a ceremonial robe that vaguely matched the hazel of his eyes and another that matched the silver of Isthwin's, Pablo led the unlikely couple back to the Triumvirate's workroom. He explained how they should circle the Orb, how they should empty

their minds of everything but the sound of his chanting. He told them if they started floating off the ground, they should ignore his presence and feel free to become sexually engaged.

Pablo knew the Paregoria by heart, although he didn't understand its measured flow of syllables. That shouldn't matter, though; the Triumvirate didn't understand the words either.

Trying to activate the Celestine without Win, Tole, and Zee was a dicey proposition for more reasons than one. The absence of the usual principals might keep it inert. For all Pablo knew, something catastrophic could happen. Maybe the Orb would punish the intruders somehow or smash through the wall and go spinning down the street. Maybe it would explode. Or disappear. Worse yet, Pablo was violating the secrecy that cloaked the oracle—it was the Triumvirate's most essential leadership tool, one of immeasurable value—and that breach, however well intentioned, could have serious repercussions.

He just didn't know what else to do.

Skeep and Isthwin stared at the Orb once they were locked inside the workroom with Pablo. They asked no questions.

Isthwin said quietly, “It hears with many ears and sees with many eyes, but it always speaks with one voice.”

Skeep nodded, his expression solemn. A maturity beyond his years seemed to have cloaked him.

Of course, Pablo thought. They're both familiar with magic, and they respect it. Maybe, just maybe, this will work.

Grateful for their savvy, which far surpassed his, he tried to turn hope into belief. That too was a key to magic's efficacy.

Just before the march and incantation began, Pablo realized he didn't know precisely what to ask the Celestine, or how, or when. He sent out a mental plea. *You must know about the situation with the Dark Elves. Just tell me the most appropriate thing for me to do. Forgive me for not following proper procedure, but I'm desperate.*

Pablo directed every iota of his attention onto the chant and his need for guidance. Skeep and Isthwin must have been focused too, because the Orb went through all the sounds and movements that meant its mystical switch had been tripped. The three participants became weightless; the room became its own cosmos; Isthwin and Skeep became entwined.

Their naked bodies were lithe and slender. Lovely, thought Pablo with a smile. A sliver of turquoise and a shaving of pearl. How beautifully they complemented one another, especially when they pressed together for a kiss.

Pablo kept watching. The men's joining stirred him. He thought of Win.

The scene became even more enchanting. Isthwin spiraled around Skeep as fluidly as a radiant tropical fish around a swimmer. The elf extended his tongue, twice as long as the average human's, and let it feather over Skeep's body as he traced graceful helices around his new lover. Skeep began to chortle in delight. Issy's supple tongue swept over his chest and belly and pert, firm ass, then slipped between those creamy cheeks. Skeep's laughter stretched into soft moans. The moans sounded more throttled when Issy's tongue twined around his stiff cock and pulled.

Pablo stroked his own cock as memories of making love with Win overlapped the coupling taking place before him. He thought of the times he'd teased Win. Bound him to a kitchen chair, naked, while he, also naked, had gone about cleaning the apartment. Or traced the most sensitive parts of Win's body with his cockhead while they were in the shower. Or told Win, at Win's urging, what he and his former clients had done with and to each other.

Their excitement had twisted tight and deep within them—as it now did with Pablo as he remembered, and as Skeep and Isthwin gave his vivid memories a brilliant edge.

Love fused with and fueled his arousal. He closed his eyes...and saw Win, only Win, that matchless face lowering to his face. He felt the gentle compression of their lips and felt the demanding crushes that sanded stubble over stubble. More memories welled up and took on sensory details. Whispered words and raspy breaths and cries of pleasure. The smell of soap and sweat and sugared raspberries. His cock swelled within his grasp...or inside Win's mouth, those plush lips cinched around it, tongue flicking and sliding and pulling.

Underlying their most intensely passionate moments, always, was the incomparable joy they took in simply being together.

*I love you.*

Pablo whimpered and came, keen pleasure quaking through him. Win's release spun off his. They murmured each other's name as their climaxes waned and their fingers intertwined and they fell into their depthless, inviolable peace.

*“Aethiel is at Mythmir Station. Go there. Face him and bid him farewell. Forever.”*

Pablo caught his breath. He felt disoriented. “But I don't want to bid him farewell.”

“*You must.*”

“No, I can't.” They never said such things after they made love.

“*Go to Mythmir, be deterred by nothing, and tell Aethiel-Win good-bye. For salvation's sake, tell him good-bye.*”

## Chapter Thirteen

When he arrived at Mythmir Station's platform, Pablo nearly flung aside the electric scooter he'd ridden. Nobody was around. He charged toward the entrance, not knowing what to expect. He only knew that the Triumvirate had implicit and unshakable faith in their oracle. And that meant he must, without question, do what the Celestine had told him to do.

*"For salvation's sake."*

When Tole and Zee stepped from behind a partial wall, behind which was the door to a large utility room, Pablo's heart nearly flew from his mouth.

"What's going on?" he asked. It looked like they'd been concealing themselves. "Where's Win?"

Zee put a forefinger to his lips, indicating the need to speak quietly. "You can't enter the station. It isn't safe. The place is crawling with Dark Elves. We were only able to slip out because something...distracted them. Do you have a phone on you?"

Pablo pulled his cell out of his pocket. He'd been too preoccupied to remember that electronic devices were unwelcome at Mythmir. "I need to talk to Win," he said as Zee took the phone. "Where is he?"

"Still inside. But you can't see him. He's..." Zee's gaze slid to Tole.

"Negotiating," Tole said. "So either stay here or return to Guardian. If you go in there, those creatures will snap you up in a blink. They'll take you hostage and use you for their entertainment. And that would just be the start."

Tole's explanation for Win's absence didn't make sense. Win wouldn't be involved in negotiations without his coleaders. "What've they done to him?" Pablo asked, staring into Tole's face, trying to read his expression. "What've they fucking *done* to him, Tole?"

*"Shh.* They haven't done anything to him. They *can't* do anything. But neither can you."

“Bullshit.”

Before Tole or Zee could stop him, Pablo lurched away from them and sprinted into Mythmir. He didn't get far before he froze in his tracks. The pandemonium he'd expected didn't greet him. No horde of Dark Elves descended on him. Only one thing filled his sight.

His gaze moved up...and up.

“My God,” he whispered.

An impossibly white vision towered over the dim landscape. A vision with Win's face. Pablo stared up at it. Yes, that was definitely Win's face...even though its details were blurred as if it were behind a piece of glass smeared thinly with gel, and even though it emitted a soft glow. That face was even more exquisite than usual, but it had the kind of beauty—serene, beatific—that inspired awe rather than lust. Win's head was lowered, and his eyes were closed. There was a soul-deep sorrow in his stillness.

Even more astonishing, three pairs of large, glistening wings adorned his new form. One pair bracketed his face; another enfolded his body from rib cage to feet; the third and broadest pair spread out beneath Mythmir's carefully engineered nighttime sky.

Win must have transformed into a seraph. He'd told Pablo that seraphim were part of his supernatural ancestry.

Pablo didn't know if this development had a bearing on the Celestine's instructions. Should he bother saying good-bye to this being? Would it even hear him? Or should he wait until Win shifted back?

*“Do it now. You must do it now.”*

Taking a couple of steps forward, he stared into that otherworldly face. “Win...Aethiel, it's me, Pablo. I just...came to say good-bye.”

The angel's head lowered farther. With an echoing rustle, the smallest pair of wings began slowly to close over his face.

Without a doubt, this was the hardest thing Pablo had ever had to do in his life. He felt like a liar, a traitor. He swallowed hard to keep his voice going. “I love you, Jesse, but—”

A sudden, silent explosion of light filled Mythmir, blotting out all its features. Pablo faltered backward, then stopped. How strange, he thought vaguely, that he wasn't frightened. Stranger still that he could notice the light without being blinded by its brilliance.

He heard Tole and Zee yelling his name, frantically, and one of them exclaiming, “He sparked the shine!”

A keening chorus of high-pitched voices rose up through the effulgence. Hands scrabbled at Pablo, gripping his arms, yanking at his shirt. He stumbled farther back toward Mythmir's entrance, turned, and felt himself being hustled away.

Then he was on the platform. He was out of Mythmir, with Tole and Zee shoving him.

“Here,” one of them said. “It's closest.”

Pablo blinked a few times, saw a male symbol on a flat surface. Still urging him along, Tole and Zee shouldered open a restroom door. Once inside, the three men bumbled down to the cool tiles of the floor.

Pablo opened his mouth to ask questions just as the shrilling sound increased. A flock of manic birds seemed to be swarming the platform outside. Less than a couple of meters away from the seated men, the restroom door bounced against its jamb. Pablo's ears popped. The air had a suctioning quality, and it seemed to affect Tole and Zee as well.

Then the screaming receded down the train tunnel and died.

“That was the elf horde,” Zee said, “fleeing en masse. It must've been the light that drove them away. I'll bet it even penetrated underground.”

“Wow,” Tole exhaled. He stretched his jaw to clear his ears and then looked at Pablo. “What did you do?”

Pablo was still stunned. By all of it. “I only did what the Celestine told me to do—come here and say good-bye to Win.”

The other men looked stupefied. “How did you get a message from the Orb?” Zee asked.

Numbly, Pablo rose from the floor without answering. *That message. Good-bye. Why that? Because the Celestine knew...?*

A frigid chill balled in Pablo's stomach as he thought of Win's simply not being there, not being *anywhere*. The appearance of the seraph hadn't been particularly worrying—Pablo had



seen all three hybrids go through partial or full shifts and come out of them—but that sudden, intense luminosity was as ominous as the flare of light following a nuclear detonation.

It could've meant Win had etherealized, that he'd been sacrificed for the greater good. Maybe that was why the Celestine had sent Pablo here to say good-bye. The Celestine was an oracle, after all. It knew the outcome of Win's visit to Mythmir, knew Pablo would never see him again.

Pablo couldn't get around that conclusion. Or its implications. Win's humor and compassion and sweet love—gone forever. His smiles and laughter, his kisses and cock delight, those indigo-bunting blue eyes and that fragrant mass of sparrow-colored hair—all evaporated into the clouds. Along with every shred of happiness in Pablo's life.

He grabbed the handle of the restroom door. If that glare still held sway over Mythmir, Win's spirit was surely within it. And Pablo had so much more to say.

Tole reached past him and held the door closed. “No. Stay here for now.”

“I have to go out there,” Pablo said. “I have more to tell Win.”

“You'll have plenty of time to tell him later.”

“But...” Frowning, Pablo regarded Tole, who sounded far too nonchalant for someone who'd just lost a dear friend. “How can I tell him later? Win's *gone*, Tole! The Celestine knew it was going to happen! Why else would it have sent me here to say good-bye to him?”

Tole started chuckling. “Pablo, relax. Win is still around. Trust me.”

Zee was on his feet now too and smiling. “He went angelic for the same reason Tole did after Ridley took off. For more reasons, actually. We've pretty much been expecting it. Only it wasn't a *full* manifestation until you went in there.”

“Going full seraph is some serious shit,” Tole added. “Seraphim are heavy hitters in the supernatural realm. Changing into one is damned wrenching for a hybrid, so a complete shift is rare.”

Pablo looked from one man to the other. “Win's going to be all right?”

“He's going to be all right,” Tole said gently. He rubbed Pablo's back.

“Then why did the Celestine...?”

"I assume the oracle instructed you to say good-bye to Win because that made him think he was losing you forever," Zee said. "And it was *that* level of grief that pushed him into the final stage of manifestation."

"You mean, the burst of light?" Pablo asked.

"We call it 'the shine,'" Tole said. "It's a seraphic trait. The Orb knew it would send the Dark Elves shrieking into the night like a bunch of little girls, since they're subterranean creatures. That level of light is like physical and mental torture to them. Problem is, we don't have the technology to simulate that degree of intensity without blowing Regenerie's whole energy grid. Seems the Orb knew that too."

Pablo expelled his anxiety on a breath. His shoulders sagged. "Fuck."

"What?" Tole said with a laugh. "You thought Win was vaporized or something?"

Pablo nodded. "That he had to be sacrificed to save the metroplex."

"No," Zee said soothingly. "The Ulti would never intentionally 'sacrifice' any creature, much less an innocent one."

"I didn't mean what I said to Win," Pablo told them. "I haven't rejected him. I at least have to tell him that before anything else happens."

He wouldn't be talked out of it. No matter what state Win was in, Pablo had to tell him the truth, negate that farewell. He pulled open the restroom door.

Win stood there, gazing straight into Pablo's eyes. He not only looked exhausted, he seemed to have aged twenty years.

"You didn't mean it?" he asked in a voice drained of vitality yet full of hope.

"No. Of course not." Pablo held Win's face, reveling in those entirely human features he'd come to adore. "I love you too much. Don't you know that? Nothing, nobody, could turn me away from you. Not even your own assholery."

Win's smile was weak, but it was still Win's smile. "I'm so sorry, Pablo. Please forgive me..."

His eyes drifted shut as his knees buckled. Then his body went boneless. As he crumpled, Pablo caught him beneath the arms and held on.

He'd never again let go.

## Chapter Fourteen

Pablo hadn't set foot outside his apartment since returning from Mythmir Station, but passing the time wasn't difficult. He showered and then unpacked his bags once they'd been sent back from the Overcity hotel room. He did some cooking. But mostly he lay or sat beside Win, who was stretched out and narcotized on their bed. Sleep periodically crept up on Pablo too, but he never dozed for more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a time.

Although Win was still and unresponsive, Pablo talked to him. He told Win about Isthwin and Skeep and the Celestine, and what he'd found out from his giver friends. He reminisced about his and Win's time together—the things that had made them laugh until they cried, the challenges that had tested them, the lovemaking that had dizzied them with its power. It didn't matter if Win couldn't hear him. The monologue was a way of both mending and paying homage to their relationship.

Today the visitors to Pablo's apartment weren't unwelcome. So when he again heard the door open, he rose from the chair beside the bed and quietly padded through the living room. It was Tole this time.

They spoke in lowered voices and moved no farther into the suite.

"I take it he's still out," Tole said.

Pablo nodded and glanced toward the bedroom. "I made dinner for us, but even *that* didn't wake him. He usually parks himself at the table as soon as he smells food." It had always pleased Pablo that Win liked his cooking.

"Then he'll probably devour it when he wakes up."

"Is this normal?" Pablo asked with a trace of concern. "It's been over twelve hours. I keep checking to make sure he's still breathing."

"Yeah, it's to be expected," Tole said. "Zee called the Academy and talked to a Caretaker named Yaron, who's versed in transmogrification, which means he's familiar with EB shifting

issues. Different manifestations have different effects on us. Good thing the really strenuous shifts are few and far between.” Tole peered toward the bedroom. “How's his temperature?”

“Back to normal. I've been wiping him down with damp cloths and dribbling cool water over his lips. He's been licking it off and swallowing.”

Tole looked pleased. “You've been a good nurse. Yaron said if Win's taken care of by the person he loves most, he'll wake up looking and feeling like a new man.”

*The person he loves most.* It suddenly felt like an incomparable honor. “So what have you guys been up to?”

Tole crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “Reynolds came by.” He cocked his head toward the house next door. “Zee's with him now. We've been going over intelligence reports on the Bildezirian elves—community and character profiles, magical abilities.”

“Think you can protect Regenerie from future invasions?”

“I'm sure of it. We just have to come up with the most effective method. And that should be easy, once Win has recovered and we can all work with the Celestine again.”

Tole's mention of the Orb reminded Pablo of the liberties he'd taken. “Hey, I'm really sorry about bringing Skeep and Isthwin into the workroom,” he said. “I know it was reckless of me, since no one's supposed to know about the Orb, but I had to—”

“Don't worry about it. You did just the right thing.” Tole stood up from the wall, as if he were about to leave. “Skeep's a natural magician, so he understands ritual, and it helped to have Isthwin there too. Not just because of the sexual element, but because he's part Dark Elf *and* dislikes how things are run in Bildezir.” Tole smiled. “Besides, they don't remember a thing about it.”

Pablo's brows drew together. He didn't understand. “Did you and Zee do some kind of... memory erasure on them?”

“We were going to, but I think the C beat us to it. Seems the oracle has its own built-in safeguards. It's as if the damned thing knows how to take care of itself.”

The good news made Pablo sigh in relief. He still had no idea how much Isthwin could be trusted or if Skeep was capable of being discreet. “You going to let Issy stay with Skeep?” he asked.

“I think so,” said Tole. “They're pretty fond of each other, and from all indications, Isthwin's a decent creature. He seems to have more than enough Light Elf, Seelie fae, and human in him to counteract those Dark genes. Probably knows some big-balls magic too. That kind of shit always comes in handy.” Tole sidled toward the door. “You're starting to look a little preoccupied, my man. I guess you want to get back to your vigil.”

“Guess I do,” Pablo said. “I don't like leaving him alone too long.”

“The only time Win was really alone,” Tole said, clapping him on the arm, “was when you were gone. And that reminds me—I have to return Ridley's call. We haven't gotten together in a few days.”

Just before Tole stepped outside, he turned back to Pablo. His expression grew thoughtful. “You know, I think you and Ridley and Sebastian have been the keys to fulfilling the original vision.”

“Vision of what?” Pablo asked. Tole was reflective, and it caught Pablo's attention. This demon-heavy hybrid was almost always more reactive than reflective.

“Regenerie,” Tole said, “and the nature of our roles in governing it. I don't think Win and Zee and I grasped the full implication of 'utopian' until the three of you entered our lives.” He chuffed and shook his head in wonderment. “I'd never realized how deficient our understanding of that concept was.”

After a final, musing smile, he headed back to 86 without any further explanation, although one wasn't really necessary. Instinctively Pablo understood. He realized that was why, since his appearance at Mythmir Station, he'd sensed such a calm, confident optimism in Tole and Zee. They were convinced they'd found the missing element in their formula for successful leadership.

Now Pablo needed to sense that same conviction in Win.

The smell of spaghetti wafted from the kitchenette. Pablo's stomach sent up a mournful growl. Since leaving the OC yesterday, he'd only drunk a small bottle of Compleat and eaten a peach and a handful of nuts.

After detouring to the kitchen, he heaped a plate with spaghetti and spooned some of his homemade sauce over the top. He could eat while he watched over Win. Settling back into the bedside chair, Pablo forked a modest ball of pasta into his mouth, chewed and savored and

swallowed, then wiped his mouth. Those mundane movements made him realize another hunger was tormenting him.

He hadn't had a satisfying sexual release in days.

The sight of Win lying there like an offering, lips slightly parted and cheeks flushed with sleep, was unbearably tempting. Rising from the chair, Pablo set down his plate. He delicately lifted the comforter and pulled it to the foot of the bed. Win lay naked with his legs parted, one knee bent more than the other. His soft cock reclined on its own comfortable mat.

Shameful, Pablo thought, that he could so lecherously ogle this wrung-out, helpless man. But that shame wasn't enough to quiet his hormones.

After shedding his clothing, Pablo carefully climbed onto the mattress beside Win's hips and set his plate between Win's splayed legs. He pulled a clean length of spaghetti from the mound on his plate and laid it down the middle of Win's dick. Leaning over, he slowly sucked the pasta into his mouth. Watching the noodle slide along that fine pinkish skin made a hum of pleasure rise in his throat.

*Angel-hair pasta. How apt.*

He extracted two more pieces, gently lifted Win's cock, twined the pasta around it...and almost started giggling. *Bound by spaghetti.* Not as erotic as leather or ropes, but a lot easier on sensitive body parts. More laughter clogged Pablo's throat. *Don't wake him now, idiot. Not while you're wrapping his package in noodles.*

It required some deft sucking to coax the gummy strands into unwinding. Little by little, they slithered in a spiral path around Win's cock and into Pablo's mouth. A muted purr came from Win. He turned his head on the pillow and licked his lips. His cock wasn't quite so drowsy anymore.

Pablo's stomach grumbled. It obviously didn't understand what its master was doing...or why he was doing it. Pablo ignored that particular summons to answer another one. A much stronger appetite needed to be sated.

He wound a few more threads of spaghetti just beneath the crown of Win's cock. With the tips of two fingers, he scooped up some sauce and spread it over both the turtleneck of pasta and the head poised above it. His mouth descended. Damned if he wasn't salivating.

Grasping the base of Win's thickening shaft, Pablo used his lips and tongue and, more daintily, his teeth to get this portion into his mouth. The mattress shifted beneath him. He glanced toward the head of the bed, heard another moan, and saw Win's hands move sluggishly over his chest.

A flush rose in Pablo's face, as if he'd been caught in some perverse act. He froze.

"Why are you stopping?" Win murmured. His eyes were still closed. "Keep eating. Be a pig about it if you want to."

Pablo grinned. Win was awake and back to his old self and getting provocatively more rigid by the second. Happy and horny and hard, Pablo didn't need further encouragement. He slid the plate of food to the juncture of Win's thighs.

"It does need some meatballs," Pablo said.

Win responded with a lazy chuckle as his hips arched up. "Help yourself."

Pablo made his own banquet. Soon, sauce was smeared over the lower half of his face and noodles were stuck to his hands and draped over Win's crotch. Pablo sucked and lapped, nuzzled and pumped, as he fell into an urgent rhythm punctuated by Win's groans. The sheets were a mess, but Pablo couldn't have cared less.

It was so right, having that hot, thick pillar in his mouth again, curling his tongue around its sleek curvature, feeling its raised pattern of veins against the lining of his lips. Finally he worked the head as he cupped Win's balls and fingered his perineal track. That was when Win let out the clipped exclamations that meant he was about to come...and come hard.

The pulsations were startling in their strength. One shot of cum after another hit Pablo's soft palate and the back of his tongue. He swallowed eagerly as he stroked himself, his excitement sharpening as his cock swelled and stiffened in his hand.

"Move up here," Win said, breathing hard. His long orgasm began to wane.

Pablo waited until the throbbing dwindled to erratic palpitations and cum no longer creamed his tongue. He was about to shoot too, but he scrabbled toward Win's face. He barely had time to position his legs on either side of Win's torso so that he knelt over his lover.

All Win had to do was open his eyes, wet his parted lips, and touch his fingers to Pablo's gripping hand. A few more firm strokes and that hot ball of heat in Pablo's groin shattered into sparks as he let go. Overcoming those delicious little convulsions of his limbs, he angled his

hard-on down just enough to frost Win's mouth. The sight of it made his legs weak. As pleasure thrummed through his muscles and nerves and stripped away his control, he nearly dropped onto Win's rib cage.

"We haven't kissed in a while," Win whispered.

And Pablo did drop down then, gratefully stretching himself out on his lover's warm, recumbent body, bracketing Win's head with his forearms, pressing his lips to Win's soft, cum-dappled mouth.

Win held Pablo's face and curled his legs over Pablo's. The kisses became more ardent. When their lips weren't sealed together, words slipped out. Apologies, declarations of love, confessions of need. Things that could never be said often or sincerely enough.

"I heard everything you told me," Win murmured against Pablo's ear. "Either that or I dreamt it."

Pablo boosted himself onto his forearms and smiled into Win's face. "You didn't dream it, and I didn't make it up."

"Even the part about the coconut milk?"

"Even that. Givers are crazier than a lot of OBs."

"No kidding. And then you got fondled by an elf. Ouch."

Pablo's smile stretched into a grin. "It beats getting mauled by a cheetah shifter in heat." He dipped his head down and kissed Win again. God *damn* he could lose himself between those lips.

Win touched Pablo's face. "Seems I have a lot of ass to kick."

"You're not going to kick anybody's ass. Fuck one, maybe."

"No 'maybe' about it." Win's free hand glided down Pablo's back. "Speaking of which, how far did that elf go with you?"

"Not *that* far," Pablo said as Win's fingertips grazed the slope of his butt.

Win rolled his head on the pillow as he laughed through his nose. "Incredible, the shit you get yourself into." He snickered more, pinching his thumb and forefinger over his eyes. "Oh, sweetheart...I don't know why I want so much to marry you."



Every part of Pablo's body and mind stalled out. "You don't?" he asked, vaguely aware of the question's stupidity.

Win's expression sobered. "Actually I do." He petted Pablo's hair. "Question is, could you stand being married to *me*?"

Dumbfounded, Pablo slid off Win's body and sat against the headboard.

Win also sat up. He took Pablo's hand. "*Could* you?"

"Are you asking...?"

"Yes, I'm asking. Not very well, granted, but damn, I do want to marry you. I realize it would only be symbolic, since neither of us belongs to a church or owns any property to speak of and we obviously won't be having kids."

Pablo shot him an indignant look. "How can you say that?"

Win pulled back a little. "Because neither one of us has eggs or a uterus. And we already have a metroplex to raise."

"Not that."

"Then what?"

"That it would only be symbolic, that the union wouldn't be real in every way."

"That's not what I—"

Pablo abruptly mounted Win's lap and gave him a challenging stare. "I don't want symbolism. I want the real thing. A joining that can't be—"

*That can't be denied by anybody who thinks I'm not good enough for you. Because you're one of the Powers of Regenerie. Because you're so ineffably beautiful, everybody wants a piece of you. Because you can work magic and heal wounds with kisses and turn into a shining angel. Because you inspire respect and lust and awe, and I only inspire envy.*

Win put a hand over Pablo's mouth, as if Pablo's thoughts were pouring out of it. "A joining that can't be doubted or torn asunder by anybody, including and especially ourselves. We'll make a joyful solemn vow, before every individual who matters to us, that we will always live with and through and for each other, and love no other, and be forever true. Body, mind, heart, and soul, I am yours, Pablo Creed, and I want to declare that as fervently to the world as

I'm declaring it to you." Win lowered his hand. "I'm sorry, but that's as real as I can make it. Is that good enough for you?"

All the love poems Pablo hadn't been able to write, Win had just spoken. Effortlessly. Not a single word needed to be erased or replaced. Not a single phrase sounded contrived.

"Yes. And I want it. More than anything." Finally, Pablo let his fears drain away. They felt like something physical, something sloppy and unpleasant.

Win kissed them off his face. "Let me tell you something about the 'utopian' part of Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie."

Now Pablo put his hand over Win's mouth. "You don't have to. I already know."

 THE END 

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K. Z. Snow is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a gleaming troll of a Wurlitzer jukebox (“good night, Irene”). Nine years of higher education, resulting in 2-1/2 English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

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She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. The Dells, where her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.