

Chapter One

CLOUDS the color of soiled wool and urine threaded past a gibbous moon. The atmosphere may have produced them but the city had tinted them.

For Fanule Perfidor, the city was too close. Lying just to the west, that packed jumble of flaking bricks, weathered clapboards, and belching chimneys was a gritty distraction. Fanule sensed the pulse of life there. When the mania seized him, as it had tonight, he craved the city's humid crush of bodies, the revelry that made them sweat and steam.

Wind slithered in from the sea and caught Fanule's cloak, turning it, he imagined, into a black sail fluttering on a sturdy mast. He was a ghost ship plying moonlit seas and portending doom. He was at the mercy of the wind yet he was one with the wind.

He was a freak of nature and a force of nature. Perfidor, the Dog King. The epithet and the image it conjured made him laugh aloud.

The air's agitation suited his mood. He strode rather than strolled down the boardwalk, his boot heels thudding with satisfying aggression on the planks. The crowd had thinned, but the remaining visitors made a wide berth around Fanule. Their aversion both amused and annoyed him. He considered sucking the light from the white globes atop the lampposts, just to see the silly humans' reactions.

No, no, no. Can't play. Must stay on task. Gods, look at that man's legs; they could bind a body better than tarred rope! And then... no, must stay on task. But where to start? Where, where, where?

Fanule's gaze darted along the overdone facades of the buildings he passed, all strung together like a lineup of gaudy, aging whores. Colorful pennants snapped above their roofs. How absurd to have elaborate cornices and quatrefoil windows, little gargoyles and square cupolas on structures so squat, so grayed by the hammering salt of sea spray. But, he supposed, fancy was the stuff of Hunzinger's Mechanical Circus, the permanent carnival that stretched along and beyond the boardwalk and included whatever attractions were tucked behind those fancy fronts.

Look at the signs; look past the blazing and burnt-out bulbs and read the signs.

With effort, Fanule slowed his steps and studied the painted words above each entry. *Poseidon's Playground. Royal Gardens.* He was aware of shadowed, lifeless eyes staring back at him from beneath some of the signs.

Ticket booths. Yes. Some were veiled with drapery on the inside, and placards that hung in front of the drapery read *Coming Soon*. Fanule approached an exhibit that appeared to be open.

A couple, exclaiming quietly, exited the building. A sigh of steam and hiss of hydraulics followed them through the door. Then, a stuttering metallic snap. The exhibit within had likely just begun or ended its cycle.

The couple glanced at Fanule. Startled, they looked again. He nodded a greeting as they hurried past him; then he turned his attention to the ticket booth.

A life-sized homachinus stared sightlessly through the glass. It could've been voice-activated. Alphonse Hunzinger had certainly been thorough in remaining true to his carnival's theme.

These booth tenders would do Fanule no good. Neither would fabricated fauna and flora. Only intelligent, living beings could answer his questions. If Hunzinger was indeed guilty of committing, or planning to commit, atrocities

against Mongrels, Fanule's only hope of uncovering those misdeeds was by talking to someone familiar with the Circus from the inside.

The music pouring from somewhere, everywhere, waffled as the wind caught it. Laughing, Fanule twirled. The gaslights atop iron posts and the electric lights outlining the buildings delineated his stage. As pedestrians cast him sidelong glances, he thought he heard a human voice, a robust voice, but the music had captured his attention now. He waltzed with an invisible partner—a man somewhat smaller than he, comely, graceful. When their dance was through, they would descend to the beach, shed their clothing, and dive into the dark sea....

Little by little, the coil that had sprung within him began to wind back on itself. Little by little, the energy released by the mania withdrew into his cells. Fanule's steps slowed.

Swaying slightly, he lapsed into dazed stillness. The cloak began to feel heavy on his shoulders. He was crossing the bridge—that was how he thought of his shifts from wild to mild—and there was always this moment when his mind paused in the middle to reorient itself. Slowly, he blinked. Then his mind crept forward, to the mild side. Being calm was good, it was very good. It led to the clarity that came with tranquility. But falling off the bridge was very bad. Beneath it lay a chasm, an echoing void.

Must visit Lizabetta soon. Must get more powder. Can't forget. Must write it on the walls.

"Labor no longer beneath the ponderous chains of lethargy! Shuck off your dyspeptic despair!"

Fanule turned his gaze to the man with the stentorian voice, the one who stood behind a framed counter on a low platform. A semicircle of onlookers had gathered in front of it.

Behind his platform, the row of facades bowed away

from the boardwalk to form a horseshoe-shaped cove. A wrought iron archway, its white paint pitted with rust and webbed with fine cracks, spanned the open end. Light bulbs on the ironwork formed the words *Cave of the Seers*.

Fanule didn't have to guess what this group of attractions was about. He knew, although their substance was easily enough inferred. Several years earlier, he'd heard the builders of the exhibits gabbling about them as he'd shopped for tools in the city. In each small "alcove" within the "cave" (for that's what the individual exhibits were called), life-sized automatons laid out fortune-telling cards, conjured spirits, and waved creaky hands over crystal balls. Through elaborate systems of mirrors, levers, pullwires, and voxboxes, hidden female workers helped the automatons come alive.

Fanule turned his attention back to the man whose little stage was centered beneath the lighted archway. The sight of him made Fanule smile. The man was dressed quite ridiculously in trousers and coat patterned in a large black and yellow plaid. A watch chain made a gleaming arc near the bottom of his green vest. His yellow cravat seemed to throttle his neck. Or perhaps his starched collar created the effect, for its corners pointed up at his chin.

In spite of his flashy suit and commanding voice, the pitchman was young and sweet-faced. Fanule liked the look of him, would've nibbled him like a peach if given half a chance.

A gust snatched at the young man's top hat, but he seemed accustomed to the wind's stealth. He quickly clamped a hand to the hat's black tower and kept it in place.

His pitch continued. Brandishing a wand in one hand and a corked bottle in the other, he extolled the miraculous healing properties of Dr. Bolt's Bloodroot Elixir. A signboard above his platform advertised the product in waves of scarlet lettering outlined in gilt.

Fanule drifted closer and stationed himself at the back of the small audience. He felt grounded now and fully capable of appreciating this tender cutlet with the wind-rouged cheeks and inviting, unstoppable mouth.

WILL MARCHMAN'S patter rarely faltered. He prided himself on keeping his wits about him. In spite of his relative youth and unassuming manner, he'd always managed to shout his message over the shrieks of train and factory whistles, over the tootling of fairground organs and the jeers of drunken ruffians. "*Discipline your mind*," his Uncle Penrose had often told him as they'd trundled in their horse-drawn showman's wagon from town to town. "*Then let your mind discipline your voice*."

Now, however, Will faltered.

An unusually tall man draped in a distinctive cloak had just stopped behind the score of people who stared up at Will. Thick, purplish-black hair curled over his collar and fluttered around the edges of his face—a severely handsome face, brutish and enthralling, that was softened by a bemused smile. As if those features weren't distracting enough, he had peculiar eyes and peculiar ears and an alarming mark at the base of his throat.

"It *should* be called 'nostrum remedium'," Will went on, "for the banal word *medicine* does not adequately describe this liquid's remarkable qualities! A gentleman I shall call Mr. K., beset by gout, neuralgia, and a chronic microbial infestation that resulted in weak blood and general malaise, enjoyed not only renewed vigor but renewed virility after taking Dr. Bolt's cure! As evidence, he fathered three children in rapid succession... when once he barely had the strength to rise from a chair!" Will leaned over his counter and added, with a suggestive leer and lift of the eyebrows, "He rose, all right—repeatedly, and quite energetically."

As Will paused to accommodate his listeners' laughter, he couldn't keep his gaze from sliding toward the tall man, whose expression hadn't changed. That mark where his neck joined his chest was actually a telling pair of numbers—40:60. Will had seen such marks before, but only in the city proper. Nobody with a ratio burned or tattooed into his skin had ever appeared within the confines of Hunzinger's Mechanical Circus.

The man was a Branded Mongrel.

And that explained his eyes. And that explained his ears. And it likely explained his height as well.

Will veered onto the distaff path and directed his persuasions at afflicted women. It was difficult to keep his eyes off the Mongrel, even as he gathered in coins and passed out bottles, assurances, and thanks to his customers.

Arms crossed over his chest, the stigmatized man silently maintained his place as Will's listeners began to disperse. Only after the last one had walked away did he move. He approached the platform.

"May I speak with you for a moment?" he asked in a deep, sonorous voice.

Will eased a hinged wood cover over his stock of Dr. Bolt's Bloodroot Elixir and secured it with a padlock. "Yes, I suppose so." He hesitated. The drumming of his heart belied his composure. He'd never before interacted with one of these creatures.

The Mongrel stepped closer to Will's platform. "You needn't come down if I make you uneasy."

"Well, you're tall enough so I can speak to you from here." Will knew he shouldn't have worried about seeming rude, but the possibility still bothered him. A good salesman cultivated courtesy as much as showmanship and dispensed both to all his customers equally. "What is it you wish to know?"

“Let me introduce myself.” The man handed Will a calling card like any other. It didn’t burst into flames or stain Will’s fingers with some noxious substance. “I’m Fanule Perfidor. And yes, I’m from Taintwell.”

That much was evident. Taintwell was where these creatures lived. It was a settlement attached to the city but, like a scab on a knee, not actually a part of the city.

“Will Marchman.” He didn’t offer his hand.

Neither did Perfidor. Mongrels weren’t allowed to touch the citizens of Purinton. “To begin with,” he said, “I’d like to know where you get that medicine you sell.”

“The laboratory of Dr. Bolt, of course.” Will slipped the card into a vest pocket. “Mr. Hunzinger himself made me aware of the product and even vouched for it. So I place my orders through his office and receive monthly shipments by rail. A Circus worker then brings the crates directly to me.”

Perfidor pursed his lips and nodded. “It seems to do quite astonishing things. Have you tried it yourself?”

Heat rose in Will’s face. “Well, I’m too young to need an elixir.” Truth be told, he could barely tolerate the smell of the stuff. The thought of tasting it made his throat constrict. “But it’s been well received by the public. Enthusiastically received, in fact. I have many testimonials.”

“Given to you personally, or provided by”—Perfidor lifted his gaze to the sign—“Dr. Bolt?”

“Both.” Will felt a little spellbound, as if he’d been listening to the strangely melodic rumbling of a volcano. “Why do you ask?”

Although shaded by dark brows, Perfidor’s eyes were impossibly backlit. Looking into them, one violet and one green and both vividly colored, was like looking into a glowing lilac bush. The wind ruffling his hair revealed ears that seemed oddly truncated at the top, resulting in straight lines rather than curves.

It shouldn't have been surprising. The Mongrel was forty percent human and sixty percent... something else.

"I should like to try some," Perfidor said. "That's why."

"But I've already locked up my stock."

Perfidor arched one coal-black eyebrow. "Can you not *unlock* it?"

Now that Will thought about it, he'd neglected to take his end-of-day inventory so he could tally the number of bottles he'd sold against the money he'd taken in. Hunzinger would want to see the figures. He took a keen personal interest in all the concessions at his carnival, even those run by independents.

"Well, yes, I...." Will let his voice trail off as he fumbled in another vest pocket for the strongbox key, then fumbled more in the portable strongbox for the padlock key. Once he'd lifted the display rack's cover, he pulled out a bottle for Perfidor and did a quick count of the ones remaining. He penciled the number in a small ledger before once again securing his stock.

Perfidor had enough sense to proffer payment before Will handed him the Bloodroot Elixir. Silver gleamed from his long fingers.

Will glanced at the coins. "That's too much, sir. One will do."

Perfidor smiled as he dropped a single coin into Will's left palm and took his purchase from Will's right hand. He slipped the bottle into an interior pocket of his cloak. "The second can be yours, and a third as well, if you agree to speak with me. In a more private location, of course. I need to ask questions of somebody familiar with the Circus." He motioned across the boardwalk. "We can go down to the bathing beach."

The request quickened Will's breathing. Not because it was posed as a bribe, but because Perfidor's presence was

becoming unsettling. He was both frightening and alluring. Very alluring. His cruel mouth and baritone voice and bewitching eyes, the broad shoulders supporting his cloak and the expanse of chest that stretched his gleaming white shirt, all bespoke a sensuality Will suspected was more drugging than any patent medicine.

Damn it all, but his appetite was growing. He hadn't had a fully satisfying encounter in weeks.

Will swallowed to moisten his suddenly dry throat. "I don't think that would be appropriate, sir." He deposited the coin in his strongbox, which he relocked and set on the shelf beneath his counter. He wouldn't leave the money or his ledger there, of course. Once the Mongrel had departed, he'd secret both on his person before heading for his living-wagon.

However, Perfidor didn't seem inclined to depart. "Why is conversing with someone inappropriate?" he asked. "I certainly have no intention of harming you. As I said, I'd be happy to compensate you for your time." After a beat, he muted his voice and added, "As well as your discretion."

Will licked his lips. "But you're... an individual with whom I shouldn't be consorting. We can conduct trade with your kind, but—"

"*My kind*," Perfidor said sourly. "You haven't peered behind too many closed doors, have you, Mr. Marchman? You haven't ventured down Skipskin Mews or Weeping Myrtle Close or into any of those forlorn little rooming houses along the Whitesbain Plank Road."

"No, I haven't." What on earth was he implying?

"Are you familiar with the Needles?"

"Yes, of course." It was Purinton's textile district, where long, bleak factories drew power from a mill stream.

"If you prefer female companionship," said Perfidor, "there's a knot of lanes around the Needles where you can

find it. And where ‘my kind’ can also find it. But if you prefer male companionship—”

Will’s nerves tightened. “What are you getting at?”

Perfidor didn’t explain. His smile crimped into a smirk. “In addition to Skipskin, there’s Hansom Row, where the hammer-strikes of carriage builders and blacksmiths ring. To men of a certain bent, it’s known as Handsome Row. Nearby public houses welcome the patronage of such men.” A rivulet of perspiration trickled from Perfidor’s temple to the corner of his mouth. The tip of his tongue lanced out and licked it away. “I know. I’ve been to many of these places many times. I’ve socialized with *your* kind many times. And in ways that might surprise you.”

Will stared. He felt the dampness collecting beneath his starched collar and cravat. Could Perfidor tell that *he* very much liked handsome men? That at this very moment, vaguely obscene images danced through his brain?

“What I’m getting at, Mr. Marchman, is that you’d best not make assumptions about who can be found in whose company until you’ve seen more of the world. Even *this* little world, this city you think shuns us. We’re quite welcome after nightfall if we go to the right places.”

“I... have no knowledge of such things.”

“That much is clear. And you likely don’t know there are Mongrels who actually live in the city. Many whose ratio exceeds sixty-forty have avoided the stigma because they easily pass as pure human.” Perfidor inched forward, tilted up his face, and sniffed. “You could be one yourself, Mr. Marchman.”

Although he knew precious little about his ancestry, Will jerkily shook his head.

Perfidor met his weak denial with another enigmatic smile. “It doesn’t matter. So will you go somewhere less public and speak with me?”

"I will not. Forgive me, sir, but I haven't the level of ease or experience you claim other Purintonians have with Taintwellians."

Sighing, Perfidor lowered his eyes for a moment, then glanced down the boardwalk in both directions. Very few strollers remained. As the evening wore on, most visitors congregated at the features lying south of the promenade: refreshment and cigar stands, amusement rides, the concert hall and dance pavilion, Wheel of Fortune Avenue.

"All right," said the Mongrel, looking at Will once more. "We'll talk here. You *do* have knowledge of Hunzinger's operation. Correct?"

"Some. I've barely been here a year."

"What do you know about the features that haven't yet opened?" Perfidor backed away by a foot or two, as if aware of Will's discomfiture.

"Not very much," Will said warily. "I've heard them referred to as the Demimen exhibits. I believe they're to begin operating at the beginning of next season."

"And do you know what they consist of?"

Will didn't like talking about the planned attractions. He found the concept of Demimen even more unnerving than he found Mongrels. Besides, he didn't think it was his place to divulge what he'd heard to a stranger, much less a Taintwellian. "I'm afraid I'm not in a position to discuss that. I mean, it's up to Mr. Hunzinger to dispense such information."

"I should've anticipated this," Perfidor muttered. Frowning, he lapsed into thought.

Will found himself increasingly fascinated by this man. And he *was* every inch a man, in spite of his unbalanced ratio.

"Can you at least tell me what Demimen *are*?" Perfidor asked. He waved vaguely in the direction of the Cave of the

Seers at Will's back. "Might they be like the constructs behind you? Mechanical figures?"

Nibbling at his lower lip, Will glanced over his shoulder. "Not... exactly. Only in part. They'll be alive."

"Alive." Perfidor made the word as flat and frigid and cloudy as the eyes of a frozen fish.

Will cleared his throat. "Yes." Had he said too much? Not that it mattered now. He couldn't *unsay* it. "I've heard they're all casualties of the Great War who suffered crippling or disfiguring injuries. And rather than live as beggars or wards of the state, they chose to be employed by Mr. Hunzinger. He's doing them a great service."

Perfidor narrowed his startling eyes. His face had gone hard. "Are you familiar with a man named Simon Bencross? Or other men like him?"

Will's heart missed a beat. He couldn't very well say *Oh yes, I'm quite familiar with Mr. Bencross. He introduced me to the joys of a particular kind of fellowship.*

"I've only heard the name," he said in a hurried half-voice. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to retire for the evening." He refused to make further eye contact with Perfidor. The Mongrel was simply too compelling for Will's own good.

Chapter Two

THE centerpiece of Alphonse Hunzinger's office, situated on the upper floor of his concert hall, was a gleaming mahogany desk with elaborate brass trim on all sides. Will couldn't see all its sides, but reason dictated that each would be decorated with the same scrolls and exotic figures that graced the front. The master of the desk stood behind it, his burlled knuckles resting on a leather top bordered in gilt.

"What's this I hear about that madman Fanule Perfidor skulking around my park last night?"

The ragtag assemblage of workers and foremen, all of whom were on the grounds during evening hours, exchanged bewildered glances.

"The Dog King?" asked Tom Terwilliker, who oversaw several concessions.

"None other," muttered Hunzinger.

Will immediately tensed. The glint of Hunzinger's small, dark eyes and the glower betrayed by the sag of his bountiful whiskers indicated extreme displeasure. He was a humorless man, quick to lay blame and even quicker to anger. How any living soul, Mrs. Hunzinger included, could tolerate his company was beyond Will's comprehension. Purinton's civic leaders seemed to like him well enough, though, so there must've been money passing into the Lord High Mayor's office from the Mechanical Circus. It certainly hadn't been Hunzinger's charm that had won over the city's bigwigs. In fact, other Circus workers sometimes remarked behind their hands that Mayor Pushbin himself was chummy with the man Will thought of as Hellzinger.

“Well?” The boss’s disapproval now had an impatient edge. “Did any of you see the mercurial Mongrel?”

Will hadn’t said a word about Perfidor’s appearance—why would he?—and wondered if some employee had seen Perfidor at his platform. His gaze shifted to the other people in the room, but nobody appeared to be implicating him with a pointed glance. Maybe he was safe. Maybe no one had witnessed the conversation. Although he’d done nothing untoward, Will had no desire to explain his contact with a creature so obviously scorned... and who had asked so many questions.

The gathered workers voiced their ignorance of Perfidor’s presence.

“Who said this individual was in the park?” asked a new employee named Cotton. He’d recently been hired to man the observation tower at the north end of the grounds.

Timothy Painter answered. “I did. A couple who stopped at the oyster bar said they’d seen a tall, peculiar-looking man on the boardwalk. When I inquired further, I could tell from their description it was Perfidor.” He half-smiled. “The man is quite distinctive.”

“He isn’t a man!” snapped Hunzinger.

Cotton again spoke up. “Pardon me, but I don’t understand the problem here. If he’s been properly stigmatized, we can’t keep him away. Branded Mongrels are allowed to move about the city as long as they—”

Hunzinger’s eyes flashed. “This is not the city, Mr. Cotton. Mongrels are turned away at our gate. In fact, they all know by now they’re not welcome here. Or *should* know. And considering Fanule Perfidor is now the Eminence of Taintwell”—he gave this phrase a snide edge—“he should know better than any of them.”

“He’s the what?” Cotton asked.

Hunzinger sighed and rubbed his forehead. Beneath his

fingers, liver-spotted skin crimped and puckered. “The Mongrels decided they wanted their own leader, so Mayor Pushbin allowed them a leader. They chose Perfidor and hung him with a title. Damned if I know what he does, the mad bastard, aside from raising hell and ravaging young villagers.”

Some of the men chuckled uneasily.

Will kept his silence. He knew very little about the Mongrels of Taintwell and nothing about the “Dog King.” It occurred to him that he might be able to curry favor with Hunzinger by recounting his meeting with Perfidor, but he balked at doing so.

Vaguely, he wondered why. Perhaps it had to do with his Uncle Penrose’s admonition, “Keep your nose clean,” which meant never tattling and never interfering in other people’s business. Or perhaps his reticence had to do with something else entirely.

“Listen, all of you,” Hunzinger said sternly. “Title or no title, Perfidor’s presence at the Mechanical Circus will not be tolerated. He’s unbalanced and quite dangerous when he’s on a roar.” Pausing dramatically, he leaned forward, still braced on his knuckles. “And he’s a light sucker. I cannot risk having him terrorize my guests or darken my concessions. On a whim alone, he could do both.” Hunzinger straightened. “From now on, should any of you spy Perfidor on these grounds, you’re to notify the Strongarm Force immediately. I cannot emphasize this enough. Pass the word among your coworkers. I don’t know how that creature gained access to my park, but he’ll not be able to wander around freely again.”

Will glanced at the four-faced chronometer attached to the office ceiling. Soon, the whistle of the first local train would shrill, the locomotive would squeal and huff as it stopped before Jubilation Depot, and the cars would disgorge the first visitors of the day. He had to get to his

sales stand.

Hunzinger, obviously aware of the time, freed his captive audience. Relief flooded through Will. Shuffling along, their footfalls whispering over the carpeting, every man on the evening crew trickled out of Hellzinger's sanctum sanctorum.

Will joined the stream. His mind spun around what he'd heard. *"The Dog King... Eminence of Taintwell... unbalanced... a light sucker."*

Perfidor hadn't seemed unbalanced. And what was a light sucker?

"Mr. Marchman."

Will's stomach shriveled as he stopped and turned. The other men flowed around him. "Yes?"

"Sales going well?" Hunzinger's bulk now filled the commodious leather chair behind his desk.

"Quite."

"I look forward to perusing your figures."

Will waited to be dismissed. Hunzinger lowered his eyes to a sprawl of papers on his desk and finally flicked his fingers in Will's direction. Trying not to sigh audibly, Will fled the office.

He crossed the large reception area, turned into a hallway, and, at its end, opened the door to the stairwell. Someone was thudding up the steps. Still jittery from his narrow escape, Will kept his eyes lowered as he began his descent.

Until that someone grabbed him by the upper arms and flattened him against the wall.

"Can't you spare a moment for a friend?"

Before the rough voice died in his ears, Will felt a smoky crush of lips against his mouth. He groaned softly and lifted his hands to the assailant's ribcage. It was sheathed in thick corduroy, still damp from the morning mist. He gripped the fabric as stubble scoured his chin, and his mouth eagerly

opened to the tongue that sought entry.

The body pressed more aggressively against him. Simon's body, broad and hard and smelling of soot and pinesap. Will's cock pulsed.

"You're not even struggling," Simon whispered against Will's mouth.

"No." Will had no desire to struggle. He wanted only to surrender. It had been so long....

A door creaked below them. Simon's lightning reflexes sent him two steps down, where he immediately fell into a casual stance. Will tried to compose himself and calm his breathing.

"So," Simon said, "if I can't get to your stand before you lock up your medicine for the night—"

A suited and mustachioed man in a derby passed up the stairs between them.

"I keep a small stock of elixir in my wagon," said Will, who'd grown used to their obscure telegraphy. They'd had to learn months ago how to communicate when other people were around.

"Would nine be too late to stop by?" asked Simon.

Although his cropped brown hair stuck out to every compass point, and his face was unshaven, and both his olive green vest and the coarse shirt beneath it were stained with dirt, Simon Bencross made Will weak in the knees.

"I suspect I'll still be up at nine," Will answered, unaware of his double entendre until Simon grinned.

Blushing, Will straightened his jacket and smiled. "I should get to my station now."

The man who'd interrupted them reached the second floor and exited the stairwell. As soon as its door closed, Will walked down two steps. Simon cupped his face and murmured, "You needn't dress for company." After delivering a quick kiss, he proceeded up the stairs.

Will blew out a sigh and tried surreptitiously to arrange his thickened cock within his trousers.

Now he was truly in turmoil... especially when he recalled that Perfidor had asked about Simon Bencross.

ONCE he'd reached his modest dwelling in Taintwell last night, Fanule had slept like the dead. He arose feeling sluggish but forced himself to draw a bath. Filling the oversized tin tub in a corner of the kitchen was so much easier with Ape Chiggeree's invention that Fanule silently thanked him. The sun-warmed gravitational water system was a minor but very welcome blessing in a generally accursed world.

Fanule first shaved with a gleaming straight razor before a tarnish-spotted mirror. Except for the sideburns that ran to the hinge of his jaw, he found hair on his face an irritant. Then he eased into the slant-backed tub and washed his hair.

It was a chore, like trying to draw his booted feet out of deep mud. Not good. Whenever a simple task seemed burdensome, or any movement became a supreme exercise of will, it meant he was descending into melancholy. Sometimes the descent was gradual; sometimes, precipitous.

He needed to see Lizabetta. If he took her herbal powder twice a day without fail, his moods became more stable. It was another blessing, a major one, and he'd neglected it for too long... in spite of the crazed reminders he'd scrawled on his parlor walls when he was flying and then scrubbed off when he was earthbound again.

Fanule closed his eyes and rested his head against the tub's rim as he ran a soapy sponge over his neck and chest and limbs, under his arms, between his legs. He suddenly realized how much he longed for the caress of a lover. When

he felt wanton, his hunger was insatiable. When he felt woeful, his hunger disappeared. Neither state led to satisfaction. It was only in the middle of the bridge, that place of balance, that his desire had the right degree of intensity.

Yes, he must see Lizabetta.

As he slowly scooped water over his body, he thought of Will Marchman, the peddler of another kind of potion. Was he a twor, a two-door, a lover of men? Fanule had sensed he was. Or maybe he'd only hoped.

In either case, the pitchman was young and lithe and pleasing to the sight, and he made for delectable fantasies.

Fanule smiled as he conjured an image of William's face—yes, William; that must be his name, and that's what it would be in Fanule's dreams. He again saw that expressive face tilted down at him. The rose-tinted porcelain skin, the short, straight nose above lips like pink cushions. And his wavy hair. Even that absurdly tall hat and a gloss of pomade hadn't concealed the waves in his hair. They'd rippled above his ears like sand on the seafloor. The color of his eyes, too, mirrored the sea. A warmer sea, a distant sea, where pale gray softened an aquamarine brightness. How large, his eyes, with their delicate feathering of lashes. And how perfectly his brows arched above them. Fanule felt like an immense, glowering goblin compared with the lovely Mr. Marchman.

Sighing, he looked at the bottle of Bloodroot Elixir on his kitchen table, where he'd set it last night. Sunlight slanting through a window glanced off the yellowish-brown glass. One side of the bottle was embossed with the product name. The other side bore a paper label with a line drawing of Dr. Bolt in the center. It was a predictable portrayal of a likely fictitious man—pouchy-eyed, heavily whiskered, and solemn. Fanule was unimpressed.

He'd only bought the stuff in an attempt to engage the

salesman in conversation, win him over, and lower his guard. The purchase was supposed to be an opening. Actually partaking of the tonic was out of the question, because Lizabetta had long ago warned Fanule not to resort to patent medicines. *"They'll slowly poison your body,"* she'd said, *"and addle your brain. Your money would be better spent on a bottle of fine wine. It would have the same effect without the danger."*

However, Sweet William had been wary of him. Of course he had. Not all humans were like the ones Fanule met in public houses and alleyways.

Once he was clean, dried off, and dressed, Fanule left his house via the rear door and went to a small barn that was a short walk away. As he approached the battered one-man transport he kept beside the horse stall, Cloudburst chuffed and nodded. The gelding was obviously hoping to go for a ride.

"I'm sorry, my man," Fanule said, stroking the horse's neck, "but you don't want to be where I'm going." Animals became skittish around Lizabetta's dwelling. It was understandable.

After he got enough heat going to enliven the OMT's small fire-tube boiler, Fanule folded himself into the vehicle's wooden shell and pattered west out of Taintwell on the rutted Old Post Road. He soon saw the knobby, copper-clad spire of the Truth and Justice Building many miles to the south. Verdigris patina made it a dull green spike thrust into a bloated yellow sky. Farther behind it, smokestacks coughed up fountains of gray particulates. Close to it, a hot-air balloon lowered from the sky, likely delivering a dignitary or doomed man.

For as long as Fanule could remember, Taintwellians had called the Truth and Justice Building "the Monkey's Claw" and City Hall "the Monkey's Jaw."

The T&J spire was even more ghastly and imposing

when it was lit up at night. Hunzinger's Circus and the buildings ringing Purinton's Civic Plaza were the only places in the province with electrical service. Somewhere beneath the cobblestones, in a barrel-vaulted belly of a space, a steam engine churned out enough power to rotate a magneto-dynamo. Fanule had once felt the machine's vibrations through soiled walls and floors.

The mere sight of that misnamed edifice gave Fanule a touch of nausea. He'd never be able to wash from his mind the images and sounds and smells of its sub-basement: the gray ceiling studded down the center with light bulbs ensnared in steel mesh (no, he'd never forget the light bulbs); the rows of cages against the walls; the cries that seemed to well up from a pooled stench of sweat... and worse.

At least Mongrels no longer had to endure branding. Years ago, a vampire named Marrowbone threatened to drain dry every citizen of Purinton if the practice wasn't stopped. In a rare instance of wisdom, civic leaders took his threat seriously. Marrowbone was known for his voracious appetite.

Now Mongrels were inked, although the original designation *branded* still remained. The process was only slightly less painful. Instruments were crude and usually filthy, and their operators ranged from careless to sadistic. A 35:65 named Ansoria Crocaw had bled out on a gurney in the hallway after her carotid artery had been punctured. Nobody had tried to save her. Fanule had been there, in a stinking cage beneath the flickering lights, awaiting his turn beneath the needle.

A prominent bump in the already bumpy road jounced aside Fanule's ugly memories. He stopped to make sure he hadn't hit some hapless animal. No more glances at the city. He proceeded to the southwest, looking now for the spider web that marked the overgrown path to Lizabetta's cottage. Vegetation thickened and greened as he went on, and the air became clearer. Impulsively, he stopped to gather a small bouquet of lupine. In another ten minutes, he spied the

immense web ahead on his right, stretched between two ash trees. Dew winked from its threads.

Fanule stopped briefly, wondering if he should walk or ride the rest of the way. A breeze stirred the delicate grid without harming it. Serving as a marker, the web had been there since Lizabetta had taken up residence at the end of this path.

Since Fanule still hadn't shaken off the heaviness he'd felt earlier, he decided to ride.

Lizabetta's was a secluded cottage squatting in the cool shadows of Barleymead Bluff. Its seine of ivy was a thick camouflage that made the house nearly impossible to see. But Fanule had been a regular visitor for over a decade, so he could've found the place with his eyes closed.

Long ago Lizabetta had lived in Purinton, at the edge of the Needles district, and worked in one of the mills while discreetly practicing her Craft out of a two-room flat. That was, of course, before her lover murdered and dismembered her as well as her cat.

Fanule first went to the hand pump and filled one of the many jars clustered around it. After he'd plunked the lupine stems into the water, he walked the remaining thirty feet to Lizabetta's front door and flattened his hand against the rough-hewn boards. He exerted no pressure. He was simply alerting Lizabetta to his presence. Creaking, the door immediately glided open. Glowing pools of lamplight shone in a dim, damp space crowded with dusty shelves and cupboards, books and bottles. A miniature distillery, like an artificial sea creature made up of crocks, tubes, and flasks, bubbled softly in one corner.

Lizabetta's torso, draped in a simple chemise with drawstring neckline and scalloped hem, sat serenely on her sofa, the folds of white linen stark against the cushions' port-colored velvet. Lickshank the cat must've been outdoors, hunting in the underbrush.

Like the soul, instinct apparently never died.

“Fan!” Lizabetta’s head, semi-translucent and wearing a happy smile, floated from a high shelf at the back of the room. It stopped just above a chair stationed at her central worktable. “Dearest Fan, how I’ve missed you!”

Fanule returned her smile as he took a seat at the opposite side of the table. “Hello, Betty.”

“Oh, you brought me flowers.” She sounded touched.

“I wouldn’t come empty-handed to the home of a witch.” The tabletop wasn’t even visible. Plant sprigs were scattered across papers awash with formulas and diagrams. Fanule eased aside a mortar and pestle and set down the jar. “At the very least, you could give me warts.” He was starting to feel playful. He was leveling again.

“I’ve never had a wart in my life,” Lizabetta said, exaggerating her indignation. “Or my death. So, have you come for more powder?”

“Yes, if you have any.”

“I had a feeling you’d run out. I’ve been concerned.” Lizabetta’s head turned to look at a longer table that stretched beneath a bank of cupboards. She directed the arm that lay on the table to open a door and lift out a stoneware jar. Gripped by the arm’s pale hand, the jar was delivered to Fanule.

“Thank you,” he said. “Do you require payment this time?” Lizabetta had no use for money, unless she needed kerosene for her lamps or materials for her work. She usually gave her products gratis to whomever she liked and trusted.

“No payment,” she said. “I have everything I need at present.”

As her left arm drifted back to its workstation, Fanule asked, “By the way, where are you keeping your legs these days?” She usually had them propped against a wall.

Lizabetta's head nodded toward the sofa. A pair of bare feet slid out from beneath it, toes wiggling. Fanule laughed.

"They've been getting in the way," Lizabetta said, "Although I don't need the poor things, except to deliver occasional messages, I'm still fond of them. I remember dancing..." Her voice trailed off wistfully.

Locals assumed it was powerful witchcraft that had allowed Lizabetta to cheat death, at least to the limited degree that she had. But their assumption was incorrect.

As her former lover, Louis Pandemain, had strangled the life out of her, Lizabetta had willed him to dispose of her corpse in Mummikin Bog. She'd long known that mysterious fen could rejoin a spirit with a body, albeit a poor semblance of the body, thus allowing that spirit to function in the world rather than making itself known merely through sporadic raps and footsteps.

So after Pandemain's jealous rage had played itself out, he'd loaded its results into a wagon and traveled to the dumping ground Lizabetta had suggested. He'd slid those results off a bloody tarpaulin and into Mummikin Bog. Then, after returning to Purinton, he'd gone to the dank, narrow alley behind his mistress's tenement, wrapped himself in the stained tarpaulin, and shot himself in the head. It had all happened many years ago.

Lizabetta had never told Fanule how she'd come by her knowledge of the bog's magical properties. In fact, she'd never told him where Mummikin was. But she *had* advised him, in the strongest terms, never to divulge the secret of her existence.

After a reflective moment, Lizabetta turned her attention back to Fanule. "Please, tell me how you've been. Has your condition been interfering terribly much with your life?"

He lowered his eyes to the jar of powder, a careful blend of chamomile, valerian, St. John's wort, and a half-dozen other substances he couldn't remember or Lizabetta

wouldn't reveal. "At times," he said.

At least melancholy, the onset of which he'd feared earlier that morning, hadn't fully seized him. If it had, Fanule knew he wouldn't be here. He would be curled up on his bed, as crippled and nearly insensate as a fly without wings. Instead, he felt only a mild depression of energy and mood, and even that was beginning to improve. This episode had been but a shallow dip into the void, not a plunge, and for that he was grateful.

"Have you been finding pleasant diversions, enjoyable companionship?" Lizabetta asked.

"At times," he said more quietly.

Lizabetta continued to study him. Fanule hadn't looked up, but he could feel her pale green eyes, thin as a mist, trained on his face.

"Are you lonely?" she asked with great tenderness.

Fanule's throat tightened. "At times," he whispered.

Lizabetta's head floated over to a box on a table beside the sofa. It was covered in countless mirrored tiles, all minute and all of different shapes. After her head lowered itself inside, the top of it gave the box's lid a gentle bump, and the lid fell into place.

A few moments passed. Lizabetta's head emerged, wafted over to the table, and stopped beside Fanule. She pulled herself together, arms and torso and neglected legs bobbing slowly through the air to regroup beneath her neck, and held Fanule to her bosom. The embrace was comforting in its way, although Lizabetta's reassembled body felt too much like cool, semisolid air. And too much like woman.

"Be aware of a man who plucks ribbons...."

Fanule couldn't quite make out the final phrase. It was either "from her hair" or "from the air." Lizabetta's voice was often thickened and slurred in a dazed way when she came out of the gazing box.

He didn't ask her to repeat herself. Lizabetta never repeated her pronouncements. She claimed that speaking them a second time would negate them, like writing a sentence and then erasing it.

"I wish *you* were a man," Fanule murmured.

"My darling Fan," said Lizabetta as she stroked his hair, "let's start by wishing I were *alive*."

Fanule felt a light touch through the cloth of his trousers. He glanced down. Lickshank's tail was twining around his calf. Apparently, the rest of the cat hadn't yet returned from the hunt.

Chapter Three

FANULE was only two miles from the outskirts of Taintwell when he heard a scream... or thought he did. He immediately stopped, forehead furrowed in concentration, and listened. The sounds of a scuffle—grunts, thuds, angry words—filtered through the dense, shadow-clotted woods that abutted the road on one side.

“Let me go! I’ve broken no law! I swear!”

Swift and silent, Fanule crept toward the ruckus. An aeropod outfitted with searchlight and aft-basket had landed in a small clearing. On the ground a canvas sack writhed, continually changing shape. A broad-shouldered man knelt over it.

“If you’d cooperate,” he muttered, “I wouldn’t have to keep you bagged.”

“Please, I beg you to believe me!”

Fanule recognized that voice, the one coming from the sack. It belonged to a 25:75 named Gort Woolcraft, a much-liked resident of Taintwell. Without another thought, Fanule dove at the muscular man and knocked him sideways to the ground.

Stunned, the man growled, “What the—” and immediately began fighting back.

The bastard was strong.

Fanule didn’t squander his breath on talk. He wanted to immobilize the kidnapper first. The man tried to throw him off but failed. He twisted beneath Fanule and tried to land a blow, but his fist merely shot past Fanule’s ear. When he grabbed a handful of hair, Fanule bit him. Howling out a

curse, the man attempted to use his legs to gain an advantage, but by then Fanule was incensed. With monumental effort, he pinned the man on his back.

“You,” he said in disgust when he got a good look at the bounty hunter’s face.

“I’m sorry. Have we met?” Simon Bencross studied Fanule. His gaze lowered and stalled briefly at the mark on Fanule’s neck.

Under other circumstances, the man’s wry, feigned courtesy might have been amusing, but Fanule was in no mood to appreciate wit. “You don’t need to know who I am.”

A corner of the hunter’s mouth lifted. “I believe I already do. Now, Mr. Perfidor, if you’d be kind enough to remove your rather large body from mine....”

“Why did you capture Gort Woolcraft? He wouldn’t harm a flea.”

“Is that you, Fan?” cried Gort, his pathetic voice muffled by the canvas.

Fanule turned his face and called out, “Yes. I’ll get you out of this.”

“For godssake, Perfidor, get off me.” The hunter’s smile widened. “Unless you intend to make love to me.”

Heat flashed through Fanule’s face. He sat up, his weight still resting on his adversary’s legs.

Stupid move.

Bencross sprang like a mousetrap. Pitching his upper body forward, he rammed his head into Fanule’s midsection. Fanule’s lungs emptied with one harsh expulsion of breath. He toppled to the ground as Bencross scrambled to his feet. But the hunter fell like timber when Fanule grabbed his ankle and tugged.

They were soon in the same position as before, but Fanule’s temperance had fled along with the air in his body. He stared into the hunter’s brown eyes... and sucked.

“What...?” Bentcross thrashed his head. “I can’t see!”

“Am I able to trust you now?” Fanule asked.

“Yes, yes, on my honor. Oh gods, my skull is splitting open!”

Fanule lowered his eyelids and stopped sucking. Then, dispassionately, he gazed at Bentcross. The man was actually quite handsome in a rough-and-tumble kind of way.

The bounty hunter blinked rapidly and stretched his eyelids. “You *are* a light sucker,” he gasped.

“How astute of you to notice.”

Fanule got up to free Gort from the canvas sack. The Mongrel was small, bald, and bug-eyed, but he was good natured and kindhearted in addition to being a fine cobbler. Taintwellians were very fond of him.

Once he was in the open air again, Gort grabbed Fanule’s hand and kissed it. “Oh thank you, Fan. Please let me know if you need anything. You’ll have it faster than Fober can fornicate.”

Fanule tossed his head back and laughed. Jusem Fober was Taintwell’s most notorious womanizer. “Please stay here a few minutes longer,” he said, putting a hand on Gort’s shoulder. “I’d like to resolve this. You’ll be free to go after that.”

Gort nodded. Bentcross was now sitting up, elbows on knees, head in hands.

“Let me see your catch-sheet,” Fanule said to him.

Bentcross angled him a resentful glance. “Fuck you.” His gaze moved up and down Fanule’s body. “Which might not be a bad idea if you had a blindfold on.”

Almost imperceptibly, Fanule’s skin felt tighter. A light spangle flared and faded in his groin. “Just get the damned paper, would you? I don’t like hurting people.”

“Not unless they want it, I suspect,” Bentcross mumbled through a smirk. He sauntered over to the aeropod, opened

its door, and reached inside. “Here. It’s the one on top.” He tossed a clipboard in Fanule’s direction, its layered papers fluttering.

Fanule scanned it.

Crime: categories 3, 14, 17 (see reverse).

Name: Unknown. Sex: M. Race: prob. BM.

The age, height, weight, and hair- and eye-color details were similar to Gort Woolcraft’s, but there were significant enough differences to make him an unlikely suspect.

Gort had righted his fallen bicycle and now clung to its handlebar grips. Bentcross, leaning against a tree, partook of a cigar he’d apparently pulled from his aeropod. Both men watched Fanule as he flipped the page over and read the back.

According to the account given to police, Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. C. Hightower of 643 Whitestone Way, Albasharle district, had returned from the theater one night to find a man vaguely matching Gort’s description ransacking their house. The burglar had stabbed Mr. Hightower in the lower back before fleeing with jewelry, coins, and other items of value.

“Is this paragraph taken verbatim from the original police report?” Fanule asked Bentcross.

“Yeah. They always are.”

“Did you bother reading it?”

Bentcross spat on the ground. “No. I never do.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t need to know the details of the crimes. I only need to know the details of the criminals.”

Fanule uttered a single, incredulous laugh. He approached the hunter and slapped the clipboard against his

chest. “You’re an ass, Bencross.”

“That’s entirely possible. But what’s your point?”

“There’s no mention in the report of the burglar being a Branded Mongrel. None. Don’t you think a detail like that would’ve leapt out at the victims?”

Bencross shrugged. “A man tends not to be too observant when there’s a shiv stuck in his ribs. Same holds true for a wife who has to look at it.”

“That’s immaterial,” Fanule countered, raising his voice. “There’s no mention of a Mongrel in the report”—he pointed at the clipboard, now clutched loosely in the hunter’s left hand—“but the wanted man’s race is given as Branded Mongrel. What’s more, if you’d bothered comparing the individual you caught with the information on your blasted catch-sheet, you would’ve realized you had the wrong man.”

Frowning, Bencross lifted the clipboard and began reading. His eyes repeatedly rose to look at Gort. After a few minutes, he sighed. “And you don’t believe your friend here would pull this kind of caper?” he asked Fanule.

“I don’t believe it’s even remotely possible. He’s a decent man.”

“You’re free to go,” Bencross grudgingly told Gort.

“Not just yet.” When the Mongrel halted, Fanule said to Bencross, “Don’t you think an apology is in order?”

Bencross gaped at both of them. “You must be joking.”

Fanule knew his cool, steady gaze smashed that assumption.

Looking flustered, Bencross addressed Gort. “I’m sorry, sir. Please forgive me. I’ll exercise more care in the future.”

With a nervous nod, the Mongrel led his bicycle through the woods.

Bencross raised and lowered his brows. “Little bugger didn’t look convinced.”

“Would *you* be?”

The hunter didn’t answer. When he seemed on the verge of boarding his craft, Fanule jogged over and grabbed his wrist. “Wait. I have a few more questions.”

Bentcross glanced from his wrist to Fanule’s face. “All right.”

Their eyes met for a beat. Fanule felt another small thrill of temptation. He cursed himself for finding this boor attractive.

“You think I’m shit, don’t you,” Bentcross said.

“More or less. It’s how I view anybody who profits from putting creatures under the Monkey’s Claw.”

Bentcross seemed familiar with the term. “Say that to me when I bring in a child killer... Eminence.”

His sneering tone came close to triggering more rage in Fanule, but reason prevailed. Mongrels bristled at blind scorn; why shouldn’t bounty hunters? They had their place in society—Purinton’s rozzers were too busy extorting money from local businesses and favors from prostitutes—so Bentcross had a right to his resentment.

“I only wish,” Fanule explained, “that you never snatched innocent souls, as you nearly did today.”

Bentcross curled in his lips and looked down at his feet. “Believe it or not, Mr. Perfidor, I wish that as well.” He gave a desultory kick to one dusty boot, heel against toe, then to the next.

Fanule cleared his throat. “Do you think the Lord High Mayor’s office and the Enforcement Agency are targeting Mongrels?”

The hunter rubbed his forehead and appeared to give the matter some thought. “I don’t know. There do seem to be more warrants per capita for Taintwell than for Purinton, and the EA *has* demonstrated a certain zeal in encouraging us to execute those warrants. I’ve always assumed it was

because your”—he glanced uneasily at Fanule before looking down again—“your citizenry is somewhat more... lawless.”

He was likely going to say *your kind* but thought better of it. “We probably are,” Fanule said. “But not in any way that justifies our wholesale imprisonment. Tell me, what happens when you turn in your captives?”

Bentcross finally met Fanule’s gaze. “First I prove it’s a legitimate grab. That means showing the intake sergeant my prisoner as well as the catch-sheet, so he can compare the two. Then I fill out a report—date, time, location, circumstances—then I get paid, sign out, and leave.”

“Has the intake sergeant ever released one of your captives, right then and there?”

“Once. But the wrongdoer had, let’s say, some important relatives.”

The revelation didn’t surprise Fanule, but it did vex him. Leniency for the well connected—how typical of Purintonian justice. “What happens to the prisoners?”

“The usual. Detention and trial. If they’re guilty, they go to a labor camp or Dunwood. The worst of the worst go to the ’Combs. The kids and petty offenders get marked and turned loose.”

Fanule had seen such marks, which were usually on the hands or forehead and even cruder than Mongrels’ tattoos. F for forger, P for pickpocket, that sort of thing. There’d even once been an S for “same-sex,” but the Enforcement Agency rarely bothered rounding up twors anymore. Not only was it difficult to prove people guilty of sins against nature, but the level of official indifference, or persecution, depended largely on which religion had currently captured the public’s imagination. Since the Sensorians were popular now, twors had some breathing room. Hell, Bentcross himself was open about his fondness for men.

Still, the EA kept a record of men and women who harbored “unnatural urges.” Such knowledge proved

valuable when they needed a reason to arrest a particular person or put heat on a defiant tavern-keeper. What's more, the religious tide could turn at any time. Humans were fickle creatures.

"There's nothing else?" Fanule asked. "No other possible fate?"

Bentcross pulled down his mouth and shrugged. "Death."

Fanule sensed he wasn't lying, wasn't hiding anything. "Thank you. I won't take up more of your time."

Bentcross hesitated, then extended his hand. Fanule tensed. The gesture was so foreign outside of Taintwell, and his initial contact with Bentcross had been so fraught with hostility, he instantly expected aggression.

"Well, now we've met," said the hunter, his mouth hinting at a smile.

Fanule clasped his hand. It felt cool, dry, and dirty. "The next time you apprehend somebody—"

"I know. And I will."

AT THE end of the day, jittery with anticipation, Will jogged from the boardwalk back to the Gutter. That was what Circus workers called the little plat allotted for their living space. Many employees resided in the city, but others preferred the cheaper and more conveniently located accommodations offered by Hunzinger.

Packed with caravans and campfires, the Gutter was at the far southwestern corner of the Mechanical Circus. To get there, Will had to cut past the Glass Palace at the foot of the boardwalk stairs, then either circle around Wheel of Fortune Avenue or cross it at two points, and then pass over the Grand Promenade that ran between the Sea Creature Carousel and the concert hall called the Strand.

Although crossing Wheel of Fortune Avenue in the morning saved Will some time and footsteps, the shortcut didn't have the same advantages at night. He should've kept that in mind. The Avenue, which ringed the Mermaid dance pavilion, was lined with booths that offered games of chance: shell games and card games, roulette and dice. Benny Zedd had once told Will that a man would have to be crazy to wager even a frag on one of these games because Hunzinger encouraged vigorous cheating by the booth tenders.

There must've been a good number of madmen in the world, for tonight the Avenue was swarming with visitors.

Will skipped and dodged and wove through the crowd. A single thought drove him: *Simon's coming; must hurry*. Off to his left, he heard the rickety rumble of the Rolling Surf Trackway and the half-delighted, half-terrified screams of its riders. That meant he was almost out of the torrent of gamblers. At one point, he thought he saw a pickpocket reaching toward a man's sack coat, but it was only a child grabbing for his father's hand. Thank goodness. The last boy who'd been caught lifting something at the Circus had been whisked away to the Truth and Justice Building. Will had seen him six weeks later on Black Keys Street in the city, an inflamed P carved into his forehead.

Sickening, to say the least. Although "Hellzinger" was himself a swindler of the highest order, he wouldn't tolerate thievery in others.

"Mr. Marchman!"

Silently cursing, Will turned at the sound of the female voice. Cringed a little, too. He'd just popped free of the bottleneck on Wheel of Fortune Avenue and was ready to sprint toward the Gutter.

Now, Daisy Purse hurried toward him, her right hand clutching her skirts to lift them, her left clamped to a ridiculously large, flamboyant hat. "Will," she said more intimately, in a melted-sugar tone, as she stopped in front of

him.

He smiled and tipped his hat. "Daisy. Pleasure to see you."

She was a pretty thing, or aspired to be, but in a way that made him think of a doll whose maker had a profane bent. Daisy worked occasionally at the pavilion, where she sold brief, overpriced dances, and more frequently at the concert hall, where she performed in the various entertainments offered there when the orchestra wasn't playing. It seemed she was able to set her own schedule.

Rumor had it she was Hunzinger's mistress, although Will could've sworn she quite fancied *him*. Of course, the feeling didn't flow both ways.

"I'm having a little soiree at my rooms in Cakeside this evening," she said breathlessly, her painted eyes fixed on Will's face, "and I'd *adore* it if you came. There'll only be a select few people from the Circus. Most of my friends live in the city. They're quite lively and interesting. We've been exploring the new Sensorian religion."

"I'm afraid I can't, Daisy."

She pulled a pout. "Big Mister won't be there, if that's what concerns you."

"No, that's not it. I just have a previous engagement, is all."

"I swear," Daisy said in exasperation, "one would think you were either a pauper or a prince, as much as you shy away from social intercourse." She leaned into Will, her ample bosom nudging his arm. "I hope you don't shy away from the *other* kind."

Will's face felt on fire. "I don't shy away from anything. I'm just... busy. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Oh Grenda, now I've frightened you away."

"No. No, really," Will said, inching around her and ready to resume his dash, "I must get back to my wagon. Thank

you for the invitation, though.” He fell into a slow jog before calling over his shoulder, “It was very kind of you.”

Finally, Will passed through the gate to the Gutter, which was walled on the two sides that faced the Circus and fenced on the two sides that didn’t. Once back at his wagon, he first made sure he had Simon’s favorite beverage on hand—Diller’s Rye and Ramsberry Whiskey. Yes, two bottles. He then shaved his face clean and plucked out the hair that had grown back around his nipples, which was the only hair his chest ever sprouted. Simon often crooned over Will’s “smoothness.” And indeed he must have liked it, for his cock certainly sprang to attention when they were together.

As he undressed, Will spotted Fanule Perfidor’s calling card on the floor. He’d pulled it out of his vest pocket and tossed it carelessly toward his two-seat table last night, but it must have skidded off.

Well, this won’t do, he thought, bending over to snatch it up. Sure enough, the title *Eminence of Taintwell* was centered just below Perfidor’s name. An image of the magisterial Mongrel flitted through his mind and set off a tiny burst of fireworks in his stomach.

No, this won’t do.

Will reached for his collar box, on a narrow wall shelf with a turned railing, and put the card inside.

Switching his thoughts to another track, he showered in one of the outdoor stalls. Loud conversation and laughter drifted from the central tent where most Gutter residents dined and drank and socialized, but Will wouldn’t be joining them tonight. He again thought of Simon as he scrubbed at himself, his sea sponge lathered by a lump of hand-milled soap. The air’s chill nipped at his skin and shrank his prick, but he wanted to be clean from head to heels.

“You needn’t dress for company.”

The echoing words gave Will another kind of shiver. He thought of Simon’s cock, thick as a piston, pounding into the

center of him. The exquisite fullness. The repeated flirtation with that demure gland, hiding behind its wall, waiting for just the right persuasion. It certainly appreciated persistence.

Distracted by his thoughts, Will started dressing, paused, stopped dressing. He smoothed lanolin cream scented with juniper over his upper arms and chest, his flat belly and round rear. Naked, he climbed up to his bed. In the style of gypsy caravans, the bed was at the end of the wagon opposite the door and sat atop a storage compartment.

All was ready. The wagon's short blue curtains were drawn. A candle burned on the small dining table between two squat glasses. A coldbox, concealed by a gaily patterned shawl that had once been his mother's, kept a block of ice solid; from this, Simon could knock off chips to put in his whiskey.

Outside, to the south of the grounds, the plant that produced electricity for Hunzinger's Circus made the earth tremble and the air buzz. Or maybe, Will thought, it was his own nerves vibrating. But the world certainly continued to turn beyond his cozy nest. Waves foamed into the shallows, music played, and the wind buffeted scores of voices, some close and some far. People ate, drank, kissed, quarreled, laughed, danced, gambled, spat, and pissed. At the moment, Will wasn't a part of it. Any of it. He was perched on a point of stasis, waiting for Simon to arrive.

Then he'd dive off that aloof point and back into life. When the concert was over and the dance pavilion closed, the second and last fireworks display of the night would begin. Will hoped they would coincide with his own finale. He expected it to be a ripsnorter.

Chapter Four

AFTER making a decoction of Lizabetta's coarse powder, Fanule drank the exact amount she specified and prepared to venture into the city. He felt good, better than he had in weeks or even months, and finding a man with whom to share his health would be the perfect ending to the day.

There were public houses in Taintwell, but Purinton offered more variety. Fanule freshened up and once more wedged himself into his OMT. Happily expectant, he steamed to the northeast, swerving on dirt roads, bouncing down cobblestone avenues, spitting up dirt and traffic-shredded trash in lanes where most respectable Purintonians feared to tread. Vapor plumed behind him.

He was in the City Center district, where tangled streets narrowed and widened without logic and seedy neighborhoods bled into and out of factory blocks. Purinton had grown out from this core.

Fanule turned right onto Black Keys. A building of chipped red brick where umbrellas were made faced a building of pitted concrete where typewriters were made. Morning would see vendors on the corners, hawking meat pies and music stands, meerscham pipes and jars of mastic gum. Boys would be selling newspapers. Religious fanatics would be handing out tracts. Now, though, the street was deserted. Nobody had much reason to be there. The throaty sound of the OMT's little engine bounced between the buildings.

A trolley, going in the other direction, rolled past Fanule. Two phaetons followed. As echoes of their movement clotted the street, Fanule made a left turn.

It brought him into a neighborhood crammed with leaning flats and squat, single dwellings that all seemed built of old pasteboard. Firelight from garbage burning in steel drums chewed holes in the darkness. Fetid smoke drifting over dirt yards partially obscured the adults who congregated on sagging porches while their children played in the roadway. A tinker trundled along the gutter, pushing a small, clanking cart. Tattered curtains fluttering out of an open window shook quarrelsome voices into the air. Two listlessly thrown rocks bounced off the shell of Fanule's vehicle.

Another left turn, onto a gaslit byway where small businesses reigned. Chandler and confectioner, tailor and milliner. A butcher. A chophouse. More drifting smoke and tumbling refuse, more foul smells tincturing the salty breath that occasionally blew in from the sea. Druggist and pawnbroker, bookseller and stationer. Two opium fiends lolling unfiendishly in a doorway, a man in a woman's dress bending over them. Smeared windows and frayed awnings and brightly painted doors vying for attention. Tent signs flattened on splintery plank sidewalks.

The wheels of the OMT clattered over a manhole cover, then spun through a slick of oily water. Fanule felt fortunate that he managed to keep his vehicle upright. He didn't want to be sprawled on *this* pavement.

After passing down Hell's Gullet—a grimy, clangorous string of streets lined with foundries and machine shops that operated round the clock—Fanule finally reached the alley that ran behind Skipskin Mews. He was headed for one end of it, could already see the silhouettes of men and women moving within pools of light outside the Boar Tusk Inn. The wind shifted, funneling down the narrow passageway. For a very unpleasant moment, the thick, rotten reek from a tannery several blocks to the west filled Fanule's vehicle. He cursed in disgust.

Suddenly a beggar dashed in front of the OMT, excelsior

trailing from his ankles. Fanule braked hard. The man must've been concealed by the teetering stacks of barrels, boxes, and crates that ran the length of the alley on both sides and made perfect bunkers for people as well as pests.

"Sir, sir," the man said desperately, clutching the open window of the OMT, "are you the one-winged, two-faced angel?"

Fanule stared at his earnest face and chuckled—a bemused, uncertain sound. "Maybe." He fished in his trouser pocket for a coin, then curled the man's fingers around it. "Go there," he said, pointing at the scarred rear door of a café. "Ask for their best meal."

Wide-eyed, the man nodded and backed away. Fanule followed the carpet made by the headlight of his vehicle. He tried not to look back.

It was always a relief to walk into the Boar's Tusk. Three similar taverns were on Skipskin, and Fanule would visit them all if he had to. He was determined to leave the city sated. A hotel in the middle of the block offered surprisingly clean rooms and indoor plumbing.

Men and women and men who looked like women greeted Fanule as soon as he walked through the door. A player piano tinkled cheerily at the far end of the room, five singing patrons clustered around it. A woman, sitting on a man's lap with her skirts hiked up, was probably exchanging a bit of hard for soft. Two men kissed passionately in a dim corner beyond the reach of the ceiling fixtures' wavering light.

As Fanule scanned the interior, one face suddenly leapt out at him. Robin Thornwood, a meticulously groomed, ginger-haired young man with short beard and mustache, stood near the tavern's side entrance. Although one would never guess from looking at him, Robin craved rough play with men of considerable endowment. Since Fanule could play rough and his size exceeded most men's expectations,

he and Robin had enjoyed many stimulating hours together.

Still exchanging greetings with other patrons, Fanule sidled toward him. “Robin,” he said, trying to make his voice seductive, trying to make it flow over his occasional partner like warm oil.

Thornwood was startled to see him. His mouth jumped into and out of a smile. “Fan. I was just about to leave.”

“Must you?”

For some reason, Robin glanced over his shoulder at a man who wasn’t at all the type he preferred. “Yes. I’m sorry. Will you... be here tomorrow night? Or somewhere else I can meet you?”

The other man, short and fair with a drooping mustache and pockmarked cheeks, kept sliding furtive glances at Fanule. His eyelids were heavy, with a bluish cast. He wasn’t grubby, but he had that air. No, not the kind of man Thornwood fancied. Not at all.

“Yes, I can be here,” Fanule said.

“Good.” Another tense smile.

The slightly-built stranger who’d been standing behind Robin slipped out the door.

“Good.” Another glance over his shoulder. “Tomorrow, then.” With that, Thornwood exited the Boar’s Tusk.

Fanule sighed. He turned, spotted an empty table, and made his way toward it. The lovers who’d been kissing when he’d walked in were still locked in an embrace.

Just the sight of those men filled Fanule with envy. He flung off his cloak, took a seat at the small, round table, and rested the sole of one boot on an empty chair. When his bottle of wine and glass arrived, for he always ordered the same refreshment, he poured and sipped.

He had dressed both for comfort and appeal, in a draped white shirt with no collar and modest pleating at the shoulders and cuffs. It was made of the softest cotton money

could buy, and he liked the way the fabric fell on his body... and felt against it. The buttons were open to the middle of his breastbone. Shameless, yes, but in certain parts of the city, modesty and temperance did not work to a person's advantage.

As proof of that, several men cast interested looks his way. For the time being, Fanule remained indifferent. Whetting other men's desires was integral to the process of whetting his own.

He glanced casually around the room, certain he could find an adequate substitute for Thornwood sooner or later.

"What a pleasant surprise."

Fanule abruptly turned his head to the right, toward the voice that had sounded close to his ear and the warm breath that smelled of rye and raspberry whiskey.

Smiling, Simon Bencross straightened. "Out for some fun, Mr. Perfidor?"

"One can only hope." Fanule's pulse accelerated.

"Mind if I keep you company?"

"No, I don't mind."

Bencross grabbed a chair from another table and swung it beside Fanule's. He straddled it, folding his arms over the bentwood backrest. His gaze moved over the exposed V of Fanule's chest, along his upraised leg, back to his face. Along the way, it made a stop at Fanule's hips.

"You're a fine-looking man," he said, his voice grveled around the edges. "I don't give a damn *what* your ratio is. I don't suppose other Pures care much either."

"Not around here, Mr. Bencross."

"Call me Simon." He drank from his tumbler of whiskey. "I'd like to hear you say it."

"Why?" The man was already tipsy, but that didn't entirely deter Fanule. The fact he was a bounty hunter did. At least for the time being.

"You heat my blood, Perfidor. You warmed it the first time I saw you, even though we were nowhere near each other. Tell me, do you take cock or give it?"

Fanule's prick twitched at the question. "Aren't you being rather presumptuous?"

"No. You're a twor. I'd stake my life on it. And you're anything but chaste." He suddenly reached over and boldly cupped Fanule's crotch. "By the gods," he whispered as Fanule struggled not to push into his hand, "that's quite the bag of tricks you have there. Care to dab it up with me, Fanule?" His voice was thickened with lust now, his eyelids heavy. "May I call you that? Or do you prefer Fan?"

"What I prefer, Simon, is that you—"

"Ah, the way you say it." Bencross closed his eyes and affected a look of rapture. "Let me hear you say my name while we're lying naked together, our cocks jousting...."

Fanule forced the man's hand away. "Simon—"

"Ahhh."

Fanule rolled up his eyes. "You can dispense with the melodrama now, Mr. Bencross."

The bounty hunter immediately came out of his near-swoon. He tossed back the rest of his whiskey. "If you share a bed with me. You are mightily gifted, Perfidor." He smiled. "But so am I. With our physical assets and bestial passions, we'd make a marvelous rutting pair."

What Bencross lacked in subtlety, he certainly made up for in virility. Fanule was sorely tempted. Had he been in the throes of mania, he would've leapt at the chance to bed this man.

But he had his wits about him tonight. He was determined to be more discriminating. "Frankly," he said, "I don't entirely trust you."

Bencross studied him, then made a face of resignation. "Yes, all right. I can see how you might find us less than

compatible.” Smiling, he added. “I don’t think our bodies would have such reservations, but I respect your position.”

Fanule relaxed his attitude a bit. “I just need to become more acquainted with you.”

The bounty hunter laughed. “I think, Perfidor, we would’ve fared much better if you’d never heard of me.” He slapped his thighs and got up. “Well, time to move on.”

He seemed a good-natured fellow and was certainly blessed with masculine appeal, but Fanule couldn’t help feeling guarded around him. He watched Bencross weave through the crowd, exchanging words and laughter and suggestive touches with men and women alike. After he’d taken drafts from three or four people’s glasses, a liberty nobody seemed to mind, a woman Fanule didn’t recognize pushed Bencross onto a chair and dropped onto his lap. She began kissing him fervidly. Their tongues visibly connected; their hands stirred through each other’s hair.

When they disengaged, Bencross feigned surprise at what hung from his fingers: a red ribbon, one of several the woman had wound through her elaborate helmet of lemon-colored curls.

Fanule leaned forward and stared at it. His forehead dipped. Still making silly faces, Bencross jumped from the chair and performed a brief, sinuous dance as he slowly waved the satin strip in front of his crotch and let it caress the buttons of his fly. A group of onlookers laughed and made salacious remarks.

“Be aware of a man who plucks ribbons....”

But aware for what reason? Lizabetta hadn’t specified that. Aware because he could be an enemy? Or an ally? Aware because he could be the perfect lover?

Fanule was stunned. And stymied.

Bencross finally made it to the front door. Pausing, he cast a look over his shoulder at Fanule and smiled ruefully.

The ribbon still dangled from his fingers like a disembodied wound. He pushed open the door and disappeared into the night.

The incident made it difficult for Fanule to concentrate, to sift through the crowd and winnow out the men with potential. Damn it all, but he couldn't go home without having found some relief. He was thirty-one. He was hale and hungry. More important, sex was a critical fulcrum in his life. Satisfaction helped him achieve balance.

At least that was what he'd come to believe.

Perhaps an hour later, as Fanule considered making a proposal to a man with a shock of golden hair and a knack for conversation, a new customer caught his attention. And gave him something of a jolt.

Will Marchman, looking irresolute and glum, walked in the door.

He was dressed normally this evening, in a nicely tailored black frockcoat, camel-colored trousers of simple worsted, a matching vest, and a shirt thinly striped in complementary shades of brown. He wore no hat and apparently had no oil in his hair, for it fell in soft waves from a side part and brushed the tops of his ears. The blue of his eyes shone through the room's pall of smoke.

Marchman was a tall, slender youth who carried himself with casual grace. Fanule had seen many older men of higher station try to achieve the bearing that came naturally to this humble salesman.

"Lovely," Fanule whispered to himself.

The image of Simon Bencross with that ribbon trapped between his fingers began to fade.

He watched as Marchman tried to overcome his indecision. All the tables were full, and the tavern's patrons, whether standing or sitting, were getting more boisterous. They hooted and hollered and hung on each other. The piano

played without pause. Cigars and pipes sent smoke wreathing around the gaslight fixtures. Beverages crossed the bar at a blinding pace.

Marchman was clearly unfamiliar with the Boar's Tusk—in fact, had admitted as much when Fanule spoke with him at the Circus—and looked very much like an overgrown orphan as he made his way to the bar. His diffidence was both touching and amusing. Sweet William had no chance of finding calmer waters anywhere else on Skipskin Mews; every other establishment would be as turbulent as this one.

Glass of foaming lager in hand, Marchman leaned against the bar near the taps. Fanule quietly chuckled at the look of nonchalance he affected, for it was betrayed by the restless shifting of his eyes. His gaze plowed through the room from end to end. Occasionally, it lingered on a particular face or body before faltering away when the owner of that face or body caught him staring.

No female received such looks from him. Yes, the delectable Mr. Marchman was definitely a twor.

During his eyes' next pass over the revelers, a narrow tunnel appeared between him and Fanule. They glimpsed one another. Fanule raised his glass. When he saw Will's uncertain half-smile, he motioned with his head for Will to come over. Probably grateful to see someone, anyone he recognized, the young snake oil salesman inched through the crowd.

"Mr. Perfidor," he said stiffly when he reached the table.

"Mr. Marchman." Smiling, Fanule nudged a chair out with his foot. "Please, join me."

Sweet William's gaze moved from Fanule's face to the chair. He was torn.

"I assure you," said Fanule, "no one here will give a single mouse dropping if we sit together."

Marchman nodded, although he still didn't seem convinced. "Thank you." He reluctantly took a seat.

"And please, call me Fan. At least while we're in *this* district."

The sound of shattering glass cut through the general cacophony. Marchman instinctively ducked. Laughing, Fanule turned up his hands. "As you can see, formality is hardly in order here. May I call you Will?"

The young man quickly swallowed a mouthful of beer. "Yes, all right."

Fanule motioned to a barmaid named Cosette to bring Will another drink. He used his hands to indicate a larger glass. "I had the impression you were unfamiliar with this part of the city."

"I am." Finally, Will managed a complete smile, albeit a small one. The alcohol must have been relaxing him. "Can't you tell?"

"Indeed. So, what brings you here?" Languidly, Fanule sipped more wine. "You looked rather morose when you walked in."

Will had rested one arm on the table. His expression again clouded as he stared at the movement of his fingers on the beer glass. "It's nothing, really. Someone was to meet me at my...." His gaze flickered up, then down, as color suffused his cheeks. "Well, it was a private meeting. Business related," he hastened to add. "But the other individual—"

"Never showed up," Fanule said quietly. "And you didn't want to spend the evening at home, either brooding or seething."

"Yes, that's it exactly." Will seemed grateful that his companion understood.

Fanule understood, all right. He could easily infer what kind of business required private meetings after nightfall. It was precisely such business that had brought him to the

Boar's Tusk.

With his understanding came a pang of sympathy for Will. "Try not to take it as a personal affront," he said. "There are many inconsiderate people in the world. It's impossible to gauge the quality of someone's character until you've known that person for a while."

"That's true. So true." Sunk in thought, Will took a drink and licked his lips. "I think sometimes we're just blinded by...."

He didn't seem to know how to finish, likely because he didn't want to reveal the nature of his disappointment. Fanule's heart again stitched for the young man. "Blinded by a pleasing appearance, perhaps, or empty declarations and false promises. Or our own needs and wishful thinking."

Slowly, Will nodded. "You seem to have considerable experience in the world."

"I do."

Their eyes met. It was obvious Will still hadn't grown accustomed to Fanule's, for his brows knit slightly. When Cosette delivered his fresh beer, he looked at her with a kind of dazed relief, as if she'd just broken a spell.

"Compliments of the Eminence," she said with a sly smile. She winked at Fanule.

The Eminence chuckled quietly.

"Oh, that's right," Will said. "You hold some leadership position in Taintwell."

Nerves crackling, Fanule straightened. "How did you find out? You didn't seem to know that when I approached you at the Circus."

He immediately feared his faith in Will Marchman had been misplaced, that the salesman had asked his friends at Hunzinger's Circus about the tall Mongrel with the purplish black hair. That fear intensified when Will began to fidget. He took a long swallow of beer and thanked Fanule for it. Was

he dodging the question?

Suddenly, Will brightened. "It was on the card you gave me. Don't you remember?"

"Ah yes, my card." Fanule wasn't entirely relieved. He still wondered why the question would distress Will if the answer was so simple. "Did you tell anybody you spoke to me? Did you ask anybody about me?"

"No, nobody. I wouldn't have dared." Will began to look troubled. "Mr. Perfidor—"

"Fan."

"I assume you know Branded Mongrels aren't allowed in the Mechanical Circus."

"That's why I asked for your discretion. And if you're wondering how I got in"—Fanule shrugged and smiled—"I'm afraid you'll have to keep wondering. But I assure you, my intention is to help, not harm." He reached out and gave a gentle tug to Will's chair. "Move closer, would you? It's getting difficult to converse in here."

Will's chair scraped across the wood floor as he repositioned it. Now, his shoulder nearly touched Fanule's. "Mr. Per... uh, Fan, why are you so keen on talking to somebody who works inside the Circus? Does it have to do only with the Demimen?"

"Primarily."

"But... why?"

Fanule cautioned himself against divulging anything further, regardless of how much Will Marchman appealed to him. Still, he couldn't deny he trusted this young man. Marchman seemed uniquely guileless. And he'd kept his mouth shut.

"I'm sorry. I can't say. But let me ask you this: How much do you know about Mr. Hunzinger?"

Will shrugged. "Next to nothing. I've heard he has a house by the sea in the Albasharle district. And a stout wife."

“You have no interaction?”

“Very little. In exchange for my setup at the Circus, I give him a percentage of my profits.” Will took another drink. The beer seemed to have a mollifying effect on him. “He’s rather gruff and arrogant. Used to having his way, I suspect. It isn’t surprising. He’s a wealthy man with power and influence.”

Although he was aware of Hunzinger’s status, the description chilled Fanule. It was a reminder of what he was up against. “What do other employees say?”

Will gave him a brief, baleful look. “Work diligently and don’t cross him.”

“And how might you cross him?”

“By not doing your job properly, or defying him, or asking too many questions.”

They sat in silence for some minutes as the tavern’s bawdiness boiled around them. Fanule wished that he and Will could touch, that he could simply rest a hand on Will’s trim thigh, or that the young man’s fingers would idly play with his hair and stroke his nape. He needed that.

When Will shifted in his chair, Fanule caught a pleasant whiff of scent—crisp, piquant. “You smell wonderful,” he murmured.

Will blushed. His eyelids lowered, and his lips parted as he breathed through his mouth. At that moment, Fanule made his choice. Damn, this young man tantalized him.

“I confess I do find you... very attractive,” Will murmured back.

It was a strained confession, the most sincere kind, and it went straight to Fanule’s neglected cock. “The feeling is mutual, William.”

“Nobody calls me William.”

“Then I shall.”

Will drank more. His gaze jumped to and from Fanule’s

face. "Is there anything...? Do you have any... strange characteristics?" He laughed self-consciously. "I know Mongrels are a mix of races, human and not, and no two Mongrels are exactly alike, but beyond that—"

"A few," Fanule said with a smile. "By your standards. But no scales or horns or sharp teeth. No extra or missing body parts."

"I saw your ears," Will said abruptly. Embarrassed by his bluntness, he blushed and looked down. "I'm so sorry. That was terribly rude of me."

Every time Will spoke, Fanule's lust seemed to alter, to broaden and deepen toward other, softer feelings. He was beginning to like Will Marchman. How rare—rare as finding a pearl in the belly of a rat—to have a pure human treat him with such delicate regard.

"They aren't the ears I was born with." Fanule smiled wanly. "Although you would've found those even more startling."

"What were they like?" Will asked with innocent curiosity.

The memory made Fanule's throat tighten. "Upswept and tapered, as elegant as wings. And more a part of me than anyone could ever know."

Staring in a new way, a peculiar way, as if he were both concerned and enrapt, Will reached up and carefully threaded his fingers through the hair at Fanule's temple, coaxing the hair aside.

"There's scar tissue," he said. "Something happened to you."

"Yes."

At that moment, Will's eyes were so achingly beautiful that Fanule almost forgot why they were trained on his face.

"I wish it hadn't," Will said.

Fanule felt powerless to do anything at that moment but

grasp both sides of Will's face and kiss him.

Chapter Five

WITHOUT a split second's resistance, Will's lips softened in acquiescence and then returned the pressure. A moan lightly vibrated against Fanule's mouth. For a dizzying moment, the kiss became more demanding. The tip of Will's tongue crossed the threshold of Fanule's lips. But as Fanule met it with his own tongue, and as their mouths widened to allow more interplay, Will pulled away.

Breathing heavily, he touched the back of his hand to his reddened lips. "Gods," he said in a voice weighted with desire.

The mere sound of it made Fanule's balls contract and cock expand. Damn what Lizabetta had said about ribbons. *More*, he kept thinking. *More, more, more.*

He dipped forward and sought the smooth, warm column of Will's neck, kissing it, nibbling at a tendon as he licked its cabled length. The scent and feel of Sweet William's skin, the sound of his groans, made for a more potent elixir than any in a bottle, any that was ground from root or seed. Fanule wanted to make every muscle in Will's body dance... then stiffen and go slack.

He slipped his fingers between Will's parted legs. Smoldering wood greeted them.

"Stop," Will whispered.

"I hope you mean just for the time being." Fanule put Will's hand on his own swollen cock.

Will gripped it. "Sweet lord of hell," he slurred. He abruptly withdrew his fingers. His gaze fell to Fanule's open shirt as he poured more beer down his throat. The glass

rocked a little as he unsteadily set it down.

“Let’s go to the Dandelion,” Fanule said against Will’s ear. He tenderly kissed its whorls and traced them with his tongue. “Let’s spend the night there.”

Will moved his head against Fanule’s mouth. “Where?”

“A hotel. Three doors from here. It’s very well kept.”

“I hope I can walk.”

Weakly, Fanule smiled.

ALTHOUGH the rooms were per-night rentals, Isabelle Balder, the proprietor who doubled as a madam, kept them spotless. “*No one wants to fuck in a fleabag*,” she’d once told Fanule.

At the moment, he would’ve fucked in a snake pit.

He and Will stood pressed together within the flickering glow from a single gas jet. Fanule’s hands smoothed over Will’s hair as they kissed—passionately now, without restraint—and Will’s hands kneaded the muscles of Fanule’s back.

A narrow wardrobe awaited their shed clothing. A clean bed large enough for a couple awaited their bodies. A washstand set with fresh water, soap, and towels awaited the results of their lovemaking. Beside the bed lay a vial of olive oil Fanule had pulled from an inner pocket of his cloak.

“Your skin smells like marigolds,” Fanule whispered as his hands lowered to undo all the buttons on Will’s clothing. He wanted to rip the pieces off... and would have, if he’d cared less about the man. He’d done it many times before.

“Juniper,” Will mumbled. He’d already opened Fanule’s shirt, pulled it free of his waistband, and pushed the fabric aside. His hands and mouth roamed feverishly over Fanule’s chest, stirring hair and tightening muscles. “You’re

magnificent,” he said before dropping to his knees.

Fanule rolled his head back and closed his eyes as Will opened the front of his trousers. His erect cock had been straining against the cloth, cinching buttons within buttonholes, and when the flap finally dropped, Will had some difficulty working the rigid organ out of its hiding place.

When it sprang free, Will made a throaty sound very much like a growl.

Fanule tensed further. A flush spread from his belly to his neck. He glanced down, wanting to see Will’s supple lips encircle his dense, long cock. When they closed over it and drew him in, when the first curl of wet tongue led to the first firm suck, some invisible hand squeezed Fanule’s lungs like bellows and forced out three harsh, clipped breaths that ended in a quavering moan. His excited nerves quivered from groin to stomach and thighs.

More deftly than Fanule could’ve dreamed, Will began to work him. Again, Fanule’s head lolled backward. Again, his eyelids lowered. Will’s tongue swirled. As one hand gripped and pumped, the other crept back to Fanule’s cobs, fingering then squeezing then tugging them. Fanule clutched Will’s hair. The sound that undulated up from his throat was a cry of acute pleasure more than pain, but pain was a component of the pleasure.

Reflexively, he thrust into Will’s mouth. The stimulation was too much to withstand. “No,” he gasped, abruptly withdrawing.

Will turned his dusky blue eyes up to Fanule’s face. His lips were slack and full.

“I’m too close to shooting,” Fanule said. “Please, let me fuck you.”

Will nodded eagerly. “Yes.”

They finished undressing, neither urgently nor lazily but

at a pace that allowed their arousal to level a bit. Holding Will in his arms, caressing the smooth sleekness of his body, Fanule gently lowered him to the bed and lay half on top of him.

“You’re beautiful, William.”

A demure smile whispered across Will’s mouth. The sight of him, from tousled hair to toes, sultry eyes to shins, clutched at Fanule. He pressed slow kisses around the topography of Will’s upper body as Will squirmed beneath him, mewling with excitement. A flush spread over the low mounds of his chest.

“So tender,” Fanule said after he’d laved and plucked at Will’s peaked nipples.

Grasping the back of Fanule’s head, Will arched up to him. “More, Fan.”

Fanule gave him more, would give him whatever he wanted. His hands began a slow descent down Will’s lean body. Like a collector stroking a rare sculpture, he savored its details: the long, clean line from shoulder to wrist with its subtle rises of muscle; the silken eddy of forearm hair; the tapering plane between chest and crotch, barely disrupted by the ribs’ buried ridges. Will was so firm. Everywhere, so firm and smooth.

Moving downward, curling his body to keep it on the bed, Fanule brushed his lips along the silken flow of hair from Will’s navel to crotch, where the hair spread and coarsened and that fresh scent of juniper became darkened by the heady smell of man. There was no concealing *that* scent, thank the gods. Fan wouldn’t want it washed or perfumed away.

He skimmed his fingertips and tongue up the pole of Will’s cock, its fine skin stretched taut. He slid the fingers of one hand down the gully between hip and thigh while the fingers of his other hand fondled the tender eggs within Will’s tight sac. Will kept making small, helpless sounds that

drove Fanule mad. He cautioned himself against getting too rough. This young man could easily, without trying, strip away all his restraint.

“Turn over,” he said. “Put the pillows beneath your belly.”

Will stared at Fanule’s rampant cock for a moment. “I’ll need a towel.” He stepped over to the nightstand to fetch one. After heaping the pillows, he spread the towel over the topmost and then lay down as he was told to do, slipping a hand beneath his body to position his own wood. After Fanule grabbed his vial of olive oil, he straddled Will’s legs.

The sight of his pale, prominently rounded ass rising from the sea of bedclothes sent sparks through Fanule’s groin. He’d never seen such a perfect bottom. A strange sound came from his own throat as he cupped and massaged those globes, digging into soft flesh to feel the defining muscle beneath. He folded himself over and worshipped Will’s ass with his mouth as well as his hands, kissing and sucking and biting, trailing his tongue along the cleft.

Lifting himself from this gift, even briefly, was difficult. Fanule opened the vial and drizzled oil onto his cock. After slicking its length, he let his glistening fingers return to the fissure between those round cheeks. Carefully, he probed it. He slid his fingers from tailbone to balls. Then he slid them inside the hidden entrance. Writhing, Will’s body rose up slightly, certainly to give him access to his hard jack, and the thought of it made Fanule ease apart those creamy cheeks and plunge his fingers as well as tongue into that tight, pink hole.

Thin cries came out of Will’s mouth with each breath. “Fuck me,” he soon said, his narrow hips bucking against his gripping hand and the pile of pillows beneath it. “Hurry, Fan.”

Bracing his arms and legs on either side of Will’s sweat-

misted body, Fanule buried his cock by careful inches. Will let out a wavering cry of pleasure. Fanule drew back and reentered, again and again, going a shade deeper each time... until Will gasped, "There."

And the rhythmic thrusting began.

Fanule's eyes rolled up behind his lids. Gods, how the snug heat destroyed him. Fucking always felt that way. His muscle fibers unwound and his bones disintegrated and every organ burst into sparks. It was exquisite. Excitement showered through him, hips to balls to legs. Heat rose through his ribcage.

Will shuddered as he sounded a kind of sighing wail. Fanule was ready to explode. He pulled his cock back and let the spasms of that entrance ring throttle it just below the head. And he shot.

The tide of pleasure, a forceful ebb and flow, made him shudder. His cock kept throbbing out milt. Vaguely, he heard Will catching his breath.

When the destruction was complete, Fanule's body began to rebuild itself again. Still feeling half-formless, he lifted himself off Will and fell onto his back. Will pulled the towel from beneath his hips, set the pillows back at the headboard, and got off the bed. With a dozy smile, Fanule watched him clean himself at the washstand.

"I hope this made up for your earlier disappointment."

"*More* than made up for it. Much more. You astonished me, Fan."

"How?"

"I thought... forgive me, but I'd always thought any Mongrel would be a beast in bed, quick and brutal and selfish."

"Why would you think that?"

Will shook his head as a look of contrition came over his features. "I don't know." He got back into bed and lay on his

side, facing his lover.

Fanule rolled to face Will. He drew a hand down the side of Will's face, then kissed him.

"That other man I was waiting for..." Will said. "He's human. Yet he never treated me the way you have." He lowered his eyes. "I've been a fool."

"Perhaps. But you're certainly not alone in that."

Will's gaze moved over Fanule's face, searching beneath it. "You're a very kind man."

"Not always."

"Still, I like you."

Fanule smiled. "I like you too, William." *Very much. Maybe too much, damn me.*

Will lightly swept Fanule's curling hair away from his temple, exposing his left ear. "Tell me what happened to you."

"It isn't a pleasant story."

"That doesn't matter. I'm tired of my ignorance. All that stupid fear that leads to stupid judgments."

Fanule supposed there was no better argument than that. And so he told Sweet William about that bitter day, over a decade earlier, when he and eight other Taintwellian youths had been taken to the sub-basement of the Truth and Justice Building and caged there, caged by the Monkey's Claw like so many soft-bellied, exotic insects.

"We all knew," he said, "that Purinton law required the typing and branding of us before we turned twenty. But some of us resisted, or our parents resisted, and when we didn't report on the assigned day, a special unit of the Strongarm Force searched us out and took us in."

"What do you mean by 'typing'?" Will asked, his expression grimly attentive.

"It's the process through which our ratios are

determined. We're photographed, our family histories are taken, blood is drawn and analyzed. That's what the AIA says, anyway."

"The AIA?"

"Alien Identification Agency. But I've no doubt the ratios they come up with are often arbitrary. Few of us have any clear notion of our lineages, and I can't imagine Purinton squandering its resources on determining exactly what races we are."

Fanule went on to tell Will about Marrowbone's threat, and the resulting change from branding to inking, and how the shy eighteen-year-old named Ansoria had suffered a torn artery at the hands of an AIA employee who was too disgruntled with his job or too contemptuous of Mongrels or simply too inept in handling the crude needles to mark the young woman without causing undue harm.

And then Fanule had to pause. Giving voice to his sordid memories made them too vivid. As if sensing his pain, Will soothingly touched Fanule's face. He said nothing. He didn't have to say anything. His fingertips were eloquent enough.

"I went a little mad," Fanule said in a monotone. "There was nothing the rest of us could do but watch her lie there. Maybe they'd put the gurney in the hall so we *could* watch her—the sick, vicious bastards. So I looked through the bars of my cage and sucked the light from the hallway. I focused on each glowing carbon rod and each pair of electrodes and drew in the light, drew it in so hard I shattered the bulbs."

He could still hear the popping of one after another; hear the hail of broken glass on walls and floors as the long, bleak corridor was steeped, segment by segment, in absolute darkness. The guards shouted and cursed and shuffled blindly. Some fell. And finally, with the arrival of men bearing lanterns, a voice boomed, "*It must be Perfidor's doing. Look! Look at his eyes glow!*"

“You’re a light sucker,” Will whispered.

Fanule didn’t respond. The answer was obvious enough. “And so they kept me in that barren cage in the sub-basement much longer than I needed to be there. It was only the beginning of my punishment. I remember my stomach cramping from hunger, my bones aching from the cold, damp hardness of the floor. When they finally brought me into the inking room, they at first took great care in marking me. But then the blindfold came, and the manacles and gag, and I knew I was in for much worse.”

“They cut off the tops of your ears.” Will’s voice sounded fuzzy and distant.

“Yes.” Fanule let the memory dissolve. He didn’t want to recount the act and its aftermath. He wanted to be back in this moment.

Will lifted himself on his arms. After gazing into Fanule’s face for a moment, he dipped to one side and pressed a lingering kiss to the cruelly angled top of Fanule’s left ear. He kissed Fanule on the lips, then coaxed his head to one side and delivered the same kind of kiss to Fanule’s right ear.

Tears welled in Fanule’s eyes. He squeezed them shut. No one, anywhere, had ever done that.

“I think you’re the most remarkable man I’ve ever met,” Will said softly.

And with those gestures and words, he entered Fanule’s heart.

Outside, thunder cracked, then fell away with a grumble.

“A storm,” Will said excitedly. He scrambled up from the bed and pulled aside the room’s yellowing lace curtains. “Do you like storms, Fan?”

Fanule smiled dreamily from his pillow. “Yes, I do.” He decided he liked the movements of his naked lover much

more. The elongation of his back as he lifted his arms. The shift of his smooth, lusciously rounded buttocks as he walked.

“So do I,” said Will. He stood before the window for a moment. He must’ve known his lover was admiring the view.

“Are you teasing me with that pretty ass, William? Because it’s doing the trick.”

Will was grinning when he turned. He came back to the bed and slipped under the quilt with a series of wiggles. He resumed his previous position: head on Fanule’s shoulder, left arm draped over Fanule’s chest, left leg bent over Fanule’s legs.

The rain came as Will drifted off to sleep. Fanule stared at the window. A big, puff-cheeked wind blew pellets of water diagonally from the northwest. The wind skipped around, spitting drops from every direction. They pattered against the panes and wept down the glass.

The downpour would make for a nasty ride home in the morning. Rivulets bearing flotillas of rubbish would run sluggishly down gutters and carve trenches into dirt roads. The city’s antiquated sewers were bound to choke on the flow and vomit up a good deal of the swill that had poured into them. Fanule wouldn’t be near the effluent pipes at the shore, but he knew they’d spread murky patches over the gray-green sea, along with the flotsam of civilized life.

He turned his face to the top of Will’s head and kissed it. *This* was civilized life. Come morning, it would be difficult to leave it behind.

Chapter Six

THEY arose at dawn so Will could begin his trek back to Hunzinger's Mechanical Circus, a good distance to the east of City Center. The day threatened more rain.

A cab wasn't an option. Cabbies were rarely out this early and rarely appeared, regardless of the time, in Purinton's most crime-ridden district. There'd recently been a collapse in one of the main Slipe tunnels, so shooting underground in a Slither Pod wasn't an option either. Will would have to take two trolleys, transferring from one line to the other at Bur Commons, and any cars overflowing with riders would pass him by. Small wonder he wanted to get an early start.

Fanule gave Will his address in Taintwell as well as his voxbox number, for they'd both expressed a strong interest in seeing each other again. Will didn't have a personal voxbox, he said, but he had access to the one provided for Gutter residents in the dining tent. He also had a cubbyhole in the mail bank, a tiered honeycomb of slots set up in a lean-to at the Gutter's western edge, not far from the railroad tracks.

"I don't expect you to venture into Taintwell," Fanule said, "considering your schedule and the problem with transportation. But you *would* be more than welcome there."

They stood facing one another as they awaited the Green Line trolley. Will was close to six feet tall, so he only needed to turn up his eyes a bit to speak with Fanule.

"May I come visit you at your wagon?" Fanule asked. "It seems the fences along the western and southern sides of the Gutter could easily be breached. And I swear I'd move

like a phantom.”

Will smiled, but his expression quickly sobered. He didn’t directly answer Fanule’s question. “I want to help you, Fan. Whatever it is you’re trying to learn about the Circus, I’ll help you however I can.”

The declaration stunned Fanule. “Thank you.”

Will’s mouth jumped into a smile. “You’re welcome.” Self-consciously, he lowered his eyes.

Fanule curled a hand over Will’s upper arm. “But please understand that I wouldn’t want you doing anything that could jeopardize your welfare. *Anything*. I mean that. Now, may I call on you?”

Will swallowed. “There’s something I didn’t tell you last night. Hunzinger found out you got into the Circus. Two visitors were talking about you at Timothy Painter’s oyster bar. They’d seen you on the boardwalk. Painter overheard them and told the boss, and the boss made it clear that any worker who sees you is to alert the Strongarm Force.” Finally, Will looked up. “So you might want to reconsider visiting me at my wagon.”

“Shit.” Fanule scratched at an eyebrow and considered. “I’ll stay away if you want me to. I won’t be offended, William.”

“I don’t want you to stay away. I just want you to stay out of trouble.”

As they looked at each other, Fanule sensed the strands of connection between them weaving tighter, strengthening.

The trolley came clanging up the street.

Fanule gave Will a light kiss. Smiling, he fondly touched Will’s mouth. “Leave it up to me.”

Will trotted up the trolley’s steps. He swung around to face Fanule and kept watching him as they receded from each other. He lifted a hand in farewell just before the trolley turned a corner.

Fanule walked back to the Dandelion, before which he'd parked his OMT last night while Will waited on the hotel's front steps. He got it fired up without much problem. Intending to retrace his route, he circled into the alley behind Skipskin. The same beggar he'd earlier encountered was sitting inside a crate like a battered statue recovered from the ocean floor, hugging himself against the damp chill of early morning. Newspaper edges stuck out from his collar and shirtsleeves. His threadbare clothing was wet.

Overcome with pity for him, Fanule stopped and got out of his vehicle.

The man's rheumy eyes rounded. Then his whole face lit up, a dirty sun in a solar system of trash. "Angel!"

"Here, take this." Fanule removed his cloak and draped it over the man's shoulders. "You need it more than I."

"And you need your second wing."

Fanule timorously touched the hair over one of his ears. "I need them both."

"No. Just the one. The other is merely injured. Having the second will help it heal."

"What about my faces?" asked Fanule, wondering why he was humoring this delusional creature.

"They join and part," said the sage in rags and newsprint. He shrugged. "It's your lot. But *we* see what lies beneath them."

"We?"

The man backed away as he bowed, his arms extended. "Thank 'e. Much obliged. Don't worry. We see; we see...."

THE Circus was particularly hectic this Saturday. The clearer the skies became, the more visitors swarmed the bathing beach, boardwalk, and ground-level attractions. By

mid-morning, Hunzinger's amusement park was a hive of activity.

From a dirigible that passed back and forth over the calm sea, acrobats posed and swung on dangling ropes. A wagon carrying the recently repaired calliope was stationed near the Glass Palace. When the small band within the gazebo wasn't playing, the calliope was. A juggler on a unicycle made his way up and down the boardwalk. Visitors of all ages queued up outside exhibits as they munched cheese, sweet biscuits, and candied fruit. People even roamed the waves of scrubby dunes that undulated toward the outskirts of the city.

Will had seen them gathering as he'd jogged toward his stand just minutes before the gates opened. Scavengers, street urchins, picnickers. They were likely too poor to enjoy Hunzinger's Mechanical Circus from inside, so they contented themselves with being near it. At least they could hear occasional strains of music, watch the arrival of trains at Jubilation Depot, glimpse the acrobats in the sky, the rise and fall of cars on the Rolling Surf Trackway.

Will could barely keep up with his trade as the noon hour approached. During the brief breaks he took between his demonstrations, he invariably had to haul more Bloodroot Elixir from the storage closet tucked between two alcoves in the Cave of the Seers. Soon his strongbox was heavy with coins, and there was a good possibility he'd run out of stock before day's end. Will had four crates of medicine stashed in the storage cabinet beneath his bed, but getting them to his sales platform would take too long and, in this crowd, be too much bother.

If the Circus was this busy on an ordinary Saturday, what would it be like next season when Hunzinger's new Demimen attractions opened? The old man had special festivities planned for that entire week. Barring the most inclement weather, this place would be bursting at the seams.

Will was moving about so much, he finally had to take off his jacket lest he melt into a puddle of plaid. He'd never before had so many customers. But once in a while, at the oddest moments, an image from his unexpected tryst with Fanule Perfidor would flash through his mind.

Amid all the wholesome hubbub of the Circus, the six hours he'd spent in City Center last night seemed like a dream. He'd eagerly given himself to a Mongrel. He'd started having tender feelings for that Mongrel. Fantastic as it all seemed, and even as Will handed out bottles of elixir beneath the bright sun that shone on Hunzinger's manufactured world, he thrilled at the thought of his dark, scarred lover.

"I want to help you, Fan. Whatever it is you're trying to learn about the Circus, I'll help you however I can."

Most surprising of all, he still wanted to. His determination hadn't waned by a sliver.

BY MONDAY, Fanule had managed to wipe away his dreaminess, sharpen his focus, and mentally gird himself for a very important confrontation.

As soon as he stepped through the door of that finely appointed office, his gaze fixed on the man who stiffly greeted him. "Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice."

Horace Pushbin, the Lord High Mayor of Purinton, was a foot shorter than Fanule and as big around as he was tall. With ill-concealed trepidation, he eyed the Eminence of Taintwell from head to foot. Perspiration glimmered in his rather conservative mustache, which didn't extend far beyond the line of his cherry-red lips.

"Well," he said, taking a seat behind his desk and slapping the chair arms as he did so, "it's simply a courtesy extended from one civic leader to another."

Fanule knew courtesy had nothing to do with his presence here. His call to Pushbin's office that morning had likely sent the mayor scurrying to consult his advisers. They'd certainly urged him to go ahead with the requested meeting. How else could they satisfy their curiosity? Government officials in Purinton would do everything in their power to figure out what Taintwellians were up to—even if it meant welcoming the Dog King into City Hall.

Besides, they probably feared the Eminence would darken their entire Civic Plaza if they denied him access to the Lord High Mayor.

"The reason I'm here," said Fanule, "has to do with the inordinate number of arrests of Branded Mongrels. I've been contacted by many Taintwellians who believe their neighbors and loved ones were convicted of crimes they didn't commit."

Pushbin laughed, although the pair of staccato sounds he uttered bore little resemblance to laughter. He spread his hands. "Surely you realize, Mr. Perfidor, that the vast majority of criminals swear they're innocent."

"In many of *these* cases," Fanule said calmly, "the evidence suggests they are."

"Perhaps you should forgo governance and practice law, Mr. Perfidor."

Perhaps I should blind you, pig. "I don't govern, so I can hardly give it up. And I'm afraid I don't have the stomach for practicing law." Fanule wondered if he'd taken enough of his medicine that morning or if Pushbin's smugness was getting under his skin. In either case, his nerves were beginning to tighten and hum. "By the way, I recently had an encounter with one of your bounty hunters. It only strengthened my conviction that—"

"Which one?" Pushbin snapped, sitting forward.

Fanule chided himself for not thinking before he spoke, another bad sign. He wasn't an admirer of Simon Bencross, but he didn't want the man to suffer just for having talked

with him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Purinton has so many hunters, it’s impossible to distinguish one from the other.” He opened the old leather envelope-portfolio he carried and pulled out a sheaf of papers. “Furthermore, Mr. Mayor, our citizens are thoroughly dissatisfied with your policy of limited access to court proceedings and to the jail, prison, and asylum.”

Pushbin looked disgruntled. “You know damned well we instituted the closed-court system with good reason. There were too many violent outbursts by members of the public. The same types of behavior forced us to ban visitors from Dunwood Gate and Cinder mound. Relatives fueled the inmates’ agitation and vice versa. The staff at each institution was overwhelmed.”

“Can money or influence buy visits, Mr. Mayor? Or buy amenities? Or early release?”

Stupidly, Pushbin blinked at Fanule. “What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m asking straightforward questions. And I expect forthright answers.”

Pushbin’s jowls quivered. “Every detainee, regardless of race or status, receives legal representation. And, if need be, a medical evaluation.”

“You didn’t answer my question, sir.” Fanule’s voice had gone flat.

Don’t lose control. You want to help your people, don’t you? You want to see William again, don’t you?

“I’m under no obligation to answer any of your questions, Mr. Perfidor.”

Fanule lowered his eyelids to avert a catastrophic turn. Two gray-uniformed Redboots flanked the office door at his back. There were more within shouting distance. If Fanule didn’t contain his growing frustration and anger, those guards would kill him without a second thought.

He fully closed his eyes for a moment, then looked

beneath his lashes at the papers he'd pulled from his portfolio.

Focus. You can reward yourself by seeing William again.

"Taintwellians," he said carefully, "are convinced they're being treated unfairly by Purinton's justice system. And they want more contact with their incarcerated loved ones than the letters they sporadically receive. Letters they're convinced were written by strangers—institution staff, most likely." When Fanule felt more in control of himself, he looked up as he lifted the papers to show to Pushbin. "I have a petition bearing 3,861 names. It calls for a thorough investigation into all aspects of—"

"Investigation by whom?" Pushbin asked with sneering disdain.

Fanule leaned forward and murmured, "Sir, I suggest you treat me and my mission with a bit more respect." After Pushbin, clearly discomfited, rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, Fanule sat back and continued. "An investigation by a committee solicited from a nearby province and also seated with two residents of Purinton and two residents of Taintwell. They would monitor court proceedings, visit institutions and speak with inmates, interview law enforcement officials as well as bounty hunters, and study all records relating to the arrest, detention, trial, and disposition of criminal suspects for the past year."

Pushbin seemed stymied. His initial impulse was probably to scoff, but after Fanule's subtle warning, he surely realized that wouldn't have been the most prudent reaction.

"Who mounted this"—he peevishly waved a hand at the papers—"petition drive?"

"I did. After listening for months to my neighbors' concerns and complaints, I realized we had to start somewhere to change the status quo."

Pushbin cleared his throat and rose from his chair. "I'll take it under advisement."

Fanule steadily held the mayor's gaze. "You do that. I expect to hear from you within a fortnight." He placed the petition in the center of Pushbin's desk. "By the way, might you know why Alphonse Hunzinger bans Mongrels from his Circus?"

Immediately, Pushbin's face reddened. "That's *his* business. The Mechanical Circus is a private enterprise. And it's been a boon to this city."

"Is this office or any division of Truth and Justice involved with Mr. Hunzinger's operation? In any way?"

"I must ask you to go now, Mr. Perfidor. I have other appointments."

TOO many people were queued up at the voxbox Will passed as he made his way back to the Gutter. Since he couldn't bear the thought of standing there, for his feet felt like oven bricks, he detoured to the courier station located near the food concessions. He'd considered going to the telegraph office in the train depot, but that would've taken considerably more time and overtaxed his tired feet.

It wasn't yet five o'clock, but he'd exhausted his supply of Bloodroot Elixir. The weekend's crowds had taken a toll on his stock.

"Do you carry messages as far as Taintwell?" he asked the teenaged boy behind the counter.

The young man, who was chewing tobacco, turned his head and spat. He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. "We'll carry 'em to the bottom of the sea if the money's good enough."

"I need this to get to Taintwell as soon as possible."

The young man turned to address a coworker toward

the back of the spacious booth. "Orv, you goin' up soon?"

"Yep," said Orv. "Bout ten minutes."

"We can aeropod it over there," the first boy told Will. "If you hurry."

There was a typewriter on the counter, as well as boxes of paper and envelopes, inkwells, and a pottery porcupine in which writing instruments were thrust. A rack of pretty postcards advertised "Hunzinger's Marvelous Mechanical Circus" through fanciful pictures and photographic views.

Will chose paper and pen and began to compose his message.

Dear Fan,

I trust your weekend went well. I have been busier than a fly in a bowl of sugar, as the Circus was overrun with people both Saturday and Sunday, and my trade remained brisk even today.

I have been thinking about you most fondly and would very much like to see you again. Would you care to meet me at my wagon this evening? It should not be difficult for you to enter the Gutter unnoticed. We could later go out for a moonlight swim. There are good enough sand beaches beyond the bounds of the Circus, as you may know.

My living wagon is easy to find. It is yellow with blue trim and a mollycroft roof. There are carved painted panels with nymphs and satyrs around the door. My name is on the doorplate. I'll keep one lamp lit.

I do hope I'm not being too forward. My warm thoughts of Friday night have spurred me to make this invitation, as I find you quite an enchanting man and would like to spend more time in your company.

Please come, Fan. My neighbors generally mind their own business.

Yours truly,

Wm. Marchman

Will folded the note into an envelope and carefully wrote Perfidor's name and address on the outside. The price he paid for delivery was steep, but he'd made a good deal of money since Saturday morning and could think of no better way to spend it.

He got his receipt, then bought a grease-stained box of chicken, roasted corn, and apple pie from a nearby food vendor.

The phrase *please come, Fan* reverberated through his mind like an incantation.

Chapter Seven

PLEASE come, Fan. The humble plea sang through Fanule's heart.

Smiling, he hurried through the cool dimness of his house. The sun was just setting. As soon as he entered the kitchen, he lit a lamp. Before he washed up, he had to make a decoction of Lizabetta's powder. He wanted to feel his best when he met William.

"I have been thinking of you fondly...."

Fanule hummed a favorite tune from his youth as he prepared the medicine. Honey would have made the brew more palatable, but he had none on hand. With a slight grimace, he drank it all.

"So, *that's* why you're not rotting away in Cindermound Asylum."

Startled, Fanule spun around. A pale, elegant man with hair like floss—long and straight and pinkish-white—stepped from a shadowed corner of the room.

Fanule gaped at him. "What in all deities' names are you doing here?"

"Whatever I end up doing, my sweet, I doubt it will be in *any* deity's name." The vampire Marrowbone lazily regarded Fanule. "You've matured into a very striking man. I found you quite fetching at twenty-one, but now you're positively"—his long fingers moved through the air, tracing Fanule's form—"seething with animal magnetism." He pulled a slender cigarette from within his cloak, lit it, and slowly inhaled. "Sucked any light lately?" The question drifted out on a veil of smoke and a smirk.

Fanule chuckled and shook his head. “Why do I find it so difficult to dislike you?”

Marrowbone touched one fingertip to a fleck of tobacco on his lip. “Perhaps because I drained you for six months running... in a way that didn’t kill you.”

“Ah, but it did, Clancy. I suffered a small death at your hands time and time again.”

If it was possible for Marrowbone to exhibit affection, he did so at that moment, through his smile. “I don’t think *suffered* is the appropriate word, Fan.” He stepped over to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat.

The memories trickled back. They’d been lovers then, and shamelessly wanton. Fanule, his cropped ears finally healed, had gorged himself on physical pleasure. Compensation for his pain, he supposed. Marrowbone had been more than happy to keep feeding him that pleasure. Vampires had the most incredible stamina. Better yet, they didn’t drink from Mongrels because they had no way of knowing what kind of blood they’d be ingesting. Fanule never had to fear Marrowbone’s bite.

How strange to see him and remember. Clancy, still twenty-nine, was now two years younger than Fanule... yet far older.

“Why *are* you here?” Fanule repeated. He slid a saucer onto the table to catch the vampire’s cigarette ashes and sat across from him.

“Because I make a point of returning every ten years, just to see how the Mongrels of Taintwell are faring. Didn’t I ever tell you that? I’m quite fond of the lot of you.” Marrowbone made a flourish with one arm. “Outcasts all. I feel at home.”

“Have you found a place to stay?”

“Yes.” He didn’t elaborate. Marrowbone had always been secretive about his sleeping arrangements. “How have you

been, Fan? Thriving? Simply enjoying a degree of normalcy in your life?”

“That depends on the day.”

Marrowbone grew reflective. He tapped the edge of the saucer. “I’ve thought of you often. Please, tell me how the past decade has treated you.”

Fanule gave him a condensed version: how he’d wasted the money his mother had left him when she’d fled Taintwell; how, year by year, he’d grown increasingly tired of being dissolute and directionless; how he’d returned to the stonemason trade and simultaneously reconstructed his life. He received a small stipend for being a civil servant, and it had allowed him to forgo the construction projects that normally earned him a living.

“So the culmination of your efforts was election to a nonexistent office?” Marrowbone asked as he stubbed out his cigarette.

Fanule didn’t take offense. He was familiar enough with the vampire’s dry wit. “Maybe I’ve yet to see the culmination of my efforts. But the election was still an honor, Clancy.”

“Especially since it made you the *Eminence* of Taintwell,” Marrowbone said with a smile.

Fanule laughed. “I realize how silly it sounds. Actually, nobody knew *what* to call me, since I’m only the titular head of this settlement. I have no power and don’t want any.”

“So how did you get so august a designation?”

“A precocious little girl we call Tulip came up with it. After the public vote-count, when all sorts of titles were being bandied about, she piped up and said, ‘Mr. Perfidor is quite the tallest person here. That makes him an eminence.’ So the Eminence of Taintwell I became.”

Marrowbone chuckled quietly. “What is it you do, exactly?”

“Listen to complaints. Mediate disputes. Head

committees. I suppose that makes me the village's problem solver." Fanule told Marrowbone about the petition and what had led up to it.

Eyes lowered, the vampire listened without interrupting. His expression was somber.

"Your Purintonian overlords are taking liberties again," he said when Fanule was finished.

"Yes. And I have a feeling Alphonse Hunzinger is somehow involved in this little reign of terror. I believe he's pulling strings behind the scenes for his own benefit, but I haven't yet been able to prove it. Mongrels are no longer allowed on his grounds."

Brows knit, Marrowbone finally looked up. His eyes were midnight blue, much darker than most people expected because most people assumed he was an albino. He wasn't. White hair at an early age was simply a family trait.

"I never did trust that man," he said.

"Which reminds me..." Fanule glanced at his kitchen chronometer and immediately rose. "I have to meet somebody at the Circus. At its little caravan community, actually."

"Ah, the Gutter," Marrowbone said. "Yes, I've dined there. But you just told me—"

"When did I ever abide by others' rules, Clancy?" Fanule wanted to wash himself, but he didn't want to strip in front of Marrowbone. That might have conveyed the wrong message. "Will you be in Taintwell for a while?"

"Yes, I expect so. Why?"

"I'd like to visit with you more, but right now I need to clean up and be on my way."

"Go ahead and clean up," said Marrowbone with an indifferent lift of the hand. "I'll give you a ride to the Circus. You'll get there much faster." When Fanule hesitated, Marrowbone laughed. "Don't worry, Fan. I have no designs

on you. I've embraced celibacy. But if it would make you more comfortable, I'll wait in the parlor." He rose and left the kitchen.

Fanule let water flow into the kitchen's sink and quickly began to undress. "Why are you celibate?" he called out.

"For the same reason you're not. It's an indulgence."

Frowning, Fanule ran a damp, lightly soaped sponge over his body. An image of William again loomed in his mind. He scrubbed more vigorously. "An indulgence of what?"

"My vanity," answered Marrowbone. "I used to satisfy my vanity by offering myself. Now I do it by withholding the offer." He paused. "By the way, are you meeting a lover?"

Fanule rinsed and dried himself, combed his hair, and began to don his clothing. He ignored Marrowbone's question.

Soft laughter came from the parlor. "Well, it seems I have more of an answer than I expected. Not only are you going to see a lover, but he actually means something to you. And he's thoroughly human." After a pause, Marrowbone added, "Poor Fan."

WILL sat at his small dining table in a state of suspended animation. When three raps shattered the wagon's stillness, he leapt from his chair and nearly knocked down the lamp that shed a soft veil of light from its cast-iron wall bracket. He couldn't seem to contain his excitement, couldn't keep from flinging open the door.

"Thank you for the invitation." Fan stepped inside the wagon and closed the door at his back.

"You're welcome." Will was mesmerized by the sight of him. Fanule's collar-length hair looked like a swirling mass of storm clouds; his eyes, two shimmers of lightning.

Before Will could take another breath, their arms locked

around each other. They pulled close, clutching at clothing, pressing their bodies together from chests to hips. Fan held Will's face and kissed his mouth, his cheeks, his eyes. When their lips again met, they were hot and moist and open.

"Gods, I love your mouth," Fan murmured, pressing his fingertips to it.

Will's tongue danced against them. With a hissing intake of breath, Fan withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his tongue. This prolonged kiss was the most fevered they'd yet exchanged. Will got so hard so quickly, his trousers seemed ready to rip open.

He pushed Fan's workingman's jacket off his shoulders and down his arms. Without lifting his lips from Will's face and throat, Fan tossed the jacket toward a chair.

Three knocks sounded at the wagon's door just as Will began to rub his lover's ready cock. Breathing heavily, the men separated. Fan briefly cupped his crotch, as if trying to will away the noticeable ridge of his jack.

"Damn it," Will whispered. He ineptly smoothed his hair and tucked in his shirt as he moved toward the door.

When he cracked it open, a blizzard might as well have greeted him.

Simon Bencross stood there feigning humility, his head lowered, the broad brim of his hat clutched in his fingers. "I hope you don't mind I'm a few days late." He boldly flattened a hand on the door and pushed it open farther. When he looked up and spotted Fan, his jaw fell. In fact, his whole face seemed on the verge of dropping to the floor. "What the hell is *he* doing here?"

Stupefied, Will swiveled his head to glance at his invited guest.

"I could ask the same question," Fanule said. His gaze shifted from intruder to host. "But I think I know the answer." He grabbed his jacket from the chair. "I'd best be

going now.”

“Fan, don’t.” Will grasped his sleeve as he moved toward the door.

“Fan?” Simon echoed as he raised his brows. He blocked Fanule’s path. “Perfidor, what in the name of—”

Fanule glowered at him, shutting him up.

Will finally overcame his shock and stepped forward. “Mr. Bentcross, you’re no longer welcome here. Please leave.”

“But....” Simon pointed at Fanule. Then, slowly, he smiled. “I’ll be damned. The Dog King is fucking the pup.”

Fan cocked his arm with such speed and force, Will had no chance to intervene. His fist shot out and connected with Simon’s face. The blow sent Simon tumbling backward down the wagon’s steps... and into the arms of a willowy figure whose hair seemed spun from hoarfrost.

“Well,” said the stranger, supporting the stuporous Simon with ease, “few men have fallen for me quite as hard as this.” He lowered Simon to the ground.

To Will’s astonishment, Fan started laughing. He curled an arm around Will’s shoulders and kissed his temple. “It appears we’re drowning in old lovers tonight.” Then he addressed the man who knelt over Simon. “Clancy, either keep him occupied or take him far away, would you?”

“I’d be delighted,” said the wraithlike stranger.

Fanule closed the wagon’s door and turned to Will. “Bentcross was the one you were waiting for on Friday night?”

Flustered and ashamed, Will nodded. “We’ve... gotten together occasionally. *Very* occasionally. I never dreamed he’d show up tonight. I’m so sorry.”

“Do you have feelings for him?” Fan asked, more gently than Will felt he deserved.

“The only feelings we ever had for each other were in our—” Blushing, Will’s gaze flickered to and from Fanule’s

face. "I think you know what I mean."

Damn, he felt like a cretin, and for a half-dozen reasons: getting involved with Bencross in the first place; not telling Fan about him sooner; not telling Simon it was over and to stay away from him; wanting to beg Fan's forgiveness, which was a ridiculous impulse given the brevity of their acquaintance. And, finally, for behaving like an awkward, smitten boy afraid of speaking bluntly.

"I didn't handle this very well," he muttered, dropping into a chair.

Smiling, Fan sat across from Will and reached for his right hand, since his left now supported his chin. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You were under no obligation to tell me about your previous lovers. After all, I didn't tell you about mine. We haven't known each other long enough to have gotten that far."

Will suddenly remembered the man who was outside with the bounty hunter. He lifted his head from his hand. "So, who is that white-haired fellow? You obviously know each other. What's he doing here?"

"That's Clancy Marrowbone," Fan said. "Remember me telling you about him at the hotel?"

Will's eyes rounded. He nodded and swallowed. "Marrowbone's a—"

"Vampire, yes. We were lovers ten years ago. He's visiting Taintwell and happened to be waiting for me at my house this evening."

"But... why is he here, at the Circus? Did he follow you? Is he intent on winning you back?" The mere possibility made Will queasy.

"No, that's not it," Fan said, waving a hand to further dismiss the notion. "He actually brought me here. I would've arrived much later if he hadn't."

"He brought you here."

“Yes.”

Will tried to make sense of this. “Oh, does he own an aeropod? Did he land somewhere outside the fence?”

“No, he doesn’t need an aeropod.”

Puzzled, Will frowned. “Then how could he have brought you here faster than you could’ve brought yourself?”

Fan, who’d been running his fingertips over his forehead, let his hand fall to the tabletop with a thump. “William, have you no familiarity with vampires?”

“I.... No.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment. Fan’s almost matched in this light, although the green one remained a bit paler than the violet. His hair, gleaming black against the chifon yellow of the caravan’s walls, looked like a tempest of commas on a piece of parchment.

Will realized he shouldn’t be surprised this sensuously exotic man had once had a vampire as a lover. Their liaison conjured irresistible images. The most innocent was that Marrowbone’s hair must’ve looked stunning as it caught on Perfidor’s.

“William, you have nothing to fear,” Fan said. “Believe me. Please don’t be upset.” When Will didn’t respond, Fan leaned across the table. “*Are you upset?*”

“I’m not sure. But I did feel like a rare leg of lamb when your friend looked at me.”

Fan grinned. “Does that bother you?”

“No, of course not. It’s always been my fondest wish that someone view me as food.”

Laughter burst through Fan’s grin. His amusement was somehow reassuring. He grasped Will’s hand and smiled into his eyes. “Clancy wouldn’t dream of harming you. He knows you’re important to me. And neither of us has any interest in rekindling a fire that died so long ago.” He lowered his head and slowly pressed his lips to the back of Will’s hand. “I give

you my word.”

Will fluttered inside. “Can you trust him to let us have our privacy?”

“Completely.”

“And to keep Simon away?”

“Oh yes.”

Will got up, went to the door, and latched it. After he’d walked the short distance back to the table, he reached up to extinguish the kerosene lamp, then lowered himself onto Fan’s lap, facing him. He twined his arms around Fan’s head and buried his fingers in that melee of curls.

“Then fuck me,” he said against his lover’s mouth.

“Only after I suck you to the breaking point,” his lover responded.

“Agreed.” Hungrily, Will kissed him, eager to pick up where they’d left off. “I swear, that’s the sweetest deal I’ve ever struck.”

ONE or two hours before dawn, Fanule awoke to a loud noise. He tried very carefully to disengage himself from Will and straighten his bent limbs, but the size and confinement of the raised bed made movement difficult. After a series of subtle shifts, he was still contained by three walls, a ceiling, and his lover’s sleeping body.

It was a pleasant form of entrapment. After kissing the fragrant nape of Will’s neck, Fanule settled back in.

Bits of their post-lovemaking conversation drifted through his mind. He thought of Will’s past, how his happy childhood had been twice marred by tragedy: the loss of his younger sister to smallpox when he was only eight; the death of his parents six years later in a ferry explosion. After that blow, an eccentric but loving uncle had come to his rescue.

Will had traveled with and learned from him until the uncle had passed away three years ago.

Fanule could see how all these influences had shaped the man he'd come to care for.

He'd also confided in Will. About the father he'd never known, the mother who'd fled Taintwell following his brutal ear-cropping, the extremes of behavior that plagued him when he didn't take his special tonic.

It wasn't easy sharing this most consequential fact of his life. Fanule had done so with trepidation. He didn't want to frighten Will away, but withholding the information wouldn't have been fair. They were growing close, and that gave Will the right to know what stuff his lover was made of.

"My mother had a similar affliction," Will had said—the last response Fanule would've expected. "She'd bustle about like a woman possessed, then take to her bed for days on end, weeping."

The revelation had left Fanule thunderstruck. He'd never heard of anybody else laboring under this curse. He'd always supposed that if such people existed, they were locked away in places like Cinder mound.

"How did you and your father manage?" he'd asked.

"We just did," Will had answered, "because we worshipped her. We knew she didn't choose to be that way. When my mother was on an even keel, she was a joy to be with—bright and charming, caring and kind. So we were patient. We learned when to leave her alone and when to come to her aid."

"Was the effort worth it?"

"Yes, of course. Any effort that stems from love is worth it."

Fanule had had only one thought following this exchange. *Maybe I can dare to dream.*

He'd never believed intimacy beyond the physical was

possible for him. Even now, he found the prospect remote. But at least he'd been given a shred of hope.

With another upsurge of gratitude, he trailed the fingers of one hand down the smooth dips and rises of Will's back, leaned forward, and kissed a mole on his shoulder.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Stirring, Will mumbled unintelligibly.

A terrified wail cut through the Gutter. Within seconds, a thud made the caravan shudder. Bottles clinked in the storage cabinet beneath the bed. A muffled curse seeped through the floor.

Chapter Eight

“WHAT the...?” Startled awake, Will nearly tumbled to the rug. An arm tightened around his waist to keep him on the bed.

Yes... Fan’s arm, its black hair glimmering briefly in a cone of light that swept through the wagon from outside.

“Stay here,” Will said, leaping down from the mattress.

“You’re not going out there alone.”

Will turned. “Don’t leave the wagon, Fan. It’s too dangerous for you to be seen.” He scrambled into a pair of trousers and an undershirt, turned again, and quickly kissed the man who was on the verge of easing off the bed. “Damn it, stay here.”

After getting on his shoes—the Gutter was strewn with too much trash for a person to walk about barefooted—Will dashed outside.

The commotion had moved past his wagon toward the southeast. Lantern light bobbed through the darkness around a beam from an electric torch. Will tried listening to the distant voices but could only make out their tone. Low and tight. Angry, urgent, flustered.

His breath caught when two figures suddenly appeared in front of him.

Simon Bencross and Marrowbone.

Will jerked backward when he saw the vampire. “What are you two doing here?”

The men exchanged glances.

“I was sleeping under your wagon,” said Simon. His tone

soured. “Trying to get rid of the headache your friend gave me.”

“And I was simply waiting to see if your friend needed my assistance in getting home,” said Marrowbone. “I’ll be leaving shortly. Dawn is approaching.”

Will got the distinct impression more had been taking place beneath his wagon, but he let the matter go. At least this unlikely pair had kept to themselves. “What’s been happening out here?”

“Several men chasing someone, from what I could tell,” said Marrowbone.

A shot rang out. Although it was difficult to pinpoint the exact location of the sound, an abrupt chill lifted the hair on Will’s neck and arms. There’d never before been any violence worse than fisticuffs at the Circus.

He circled around his wagon to get a better vantage point. All he could see were other residents of the Gutter who’d been drawn outdoors by the ruckus. They stood huddled together in small, murmuring groups. Farther away, smudges of illumination appeared, disappeared, reappeared. The chase was still on.

A distant voice rose in frustration. Another joined it. One by one, the lights of the pursuers winked out.

“Perfidor,” Marrowbone whispered at Will’s back.

“Shit!” Will sprinted around his wagon to see where Fan might be but couldn’t spot him anywhere. “*Shit!*” He spun to look behind him as someone grasped his arm. It was Marrowbone, not Fan. “I told him to stay inside!” he said, straining to keep his voice muted, to keep his concern from shrieking through.

“He’ll be all right. It’s too dark for him to be seen. Once he’s off Circus property, there’s nothing Hunzinger’s men can do to him.”

“Yes there is.” *Because if they found him, it wouldn’t*

matter if he was inside or outside the fence. It wouldn't matter, because Hellzinger despises him. "You can move faster than I," Will said to the vampire. "You can do things I can't. Please see to it he's safe."

In a blink, Marrowbone was gone. The only sign of his presence as well as his departure was a pastel smear that swiped through the air before Will's eyes.

He stood there for a moment, catching his breath and listening to the noises wafting around him. None revealed much of anything. His neighbors still conversed quietly. Doors opened and closed. Footsteps whispered through the sand and occasionally sent up crunching sounds when they passed over broken glass or discarded bones.

No sign now of the pursuers. They might have exited the Gutter to search along the railroad tracks to the west or the beach to the east. Will's only hope was that Fan had stayed out of their way.

He shambled back to his wagon's front steps and sat near the top of the flight. Elbows set on knees, he shoved his hands into his hair.

"What a night it's been," said a male voice.

Will looked up.

"Where's Clancy?" Simon asked.

"Who?"

"Marrowbone."

"He left."

"Temporarily or permanently?"

"He didn't say. Do you know him?"

Bentcross hesitated. "Now I do."

Will uttered a weary laugh. Simon's disheveled clothing bore mute testimony to how *his* night had gone. "I don't think you can kill a vampire by impaling him with your cock, Simon."

“Why would I want to kill him?” Bencross smiled as he took a seat below Will. “Besides, I’m not certified to hunt and slay vampires. Fucking, however, requires no special training. Speaking of which, when did you and Perfidor get so cozy?”

“That’s none of your business.” One side of Will’s mouth lifted. “Didn’t Fan make that point forcefully enough?”

Simon rubbed his jaw. “I suppose I deserved what I got.” He sighed deeply and glanced around. “I’ve just about had my fill of this place for one day.”

“Why *do* you come here? I mean, aside from calling on people you want to bed.” The question had been bouncing around the back of Will’s mind. He hadn’t thought to ask before now. At first, Simon’s attention had flattered and excited him beyond the point of curiosity. Later, their trysts hadn’t included much conversation of any sort. “What business do you have with Hunzinger? You seem to visit his office fairly regularly.”

Simon shifted his jaw around, probably testing its soreness. “The old man contacts Pushbin, who contacts Herkel at T and J, who tells me I have an appointment.” He slid Will a guilt-tinged glance. “And those are appointments I keep.”

Will paid closer attention. “What do you discuss?”

“Sometimes the old man asks about individuals I’ve apprehended. Sometimes he asks about Branded Mongrels, like if I’ve noticed a connection between certain physical traits and certain kinds of behavior.”

“But... why?”

“He said my experience and insights help him train his own security force.” Simon shrugged. “I don’t give a Tersikan’s tail, as long as I’m compensated for my time.”

A feeling of unease rippled through Will. Too many dirty pieces were converging, like scraps of garbage collecting

around a sewer grate. He had to find out more. He had to help the Eminence of Taintwell—his modest, imperious, affectionate, troubled, and altogether beguiling friend and lover—find out more.

Because, Will was certain, something evil was afoot.

AFTER Fanule tore up his shirt to make a combination tourniquet and bandage for Twigby Hartshorn's gashed arm, he half buried the Mongrel in a weedy dune. They weren't able to speak—Hunzinger's men, even deprived of their lamps, continued to scour the area just beyond the Gutter—but it was clear something worse than an accident had befallen Twig. He quaked beneath Fanule's ministering hands, his wide eyes glazed with terror.

"Lie still and don't make a sound," Fanule whispered close to Twig's ear. "We'll get out of here when the Strongarms are gone."

Before he could burrow into the dune beside Twig, Marrowbone swept silently from the sky. He'd apparently had no trouble homing in on Fanule and Twigby, since his senses were immeasurably more acute than humans'.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked, the picture of preternatural serenity.

"Take Twig to Lizabetta's cottage and me, home. Thank you, Cl—"

Before Fanule could fully voice his gratitude, he felt the headless sensation that accompanied vampiric flight. Marrowbone had simply plucked him and Twigby from the sand and shot into the sky.

Dizzy and breathless, Fanule struggled to stay upright when he was again on solid ground. Very little time had passed. He blinked hard and approached Lizabetta's door. As soon as it opened to his touch, Marrowbone hastily carried

the wounded Mongrel to the sofa and laid him on his back.

“Tend to him, please,” Fanule said as Lizabetta’s head floated toward him. “I’ll be back soon.”

Before Fanule’s eyes had even had a chance to focus properly, he was airborne again. Marrowbone dumped him rather unceremoniously beside a hydrangea bush whose flowerheads nodded near his front stoop. Head reeling, Fanule stumbled to the door. He snatched up the newspaper that lay before it.

Light had begun to creep through a rent at the horizon. Poor Clancy must’ve been frantic to beat the dawn back to his secret sanctuary.

Exhausted, Fanule dropped into an overstuffed chair and let his throbbing head rest in his upraised hand. Outside, Cloudburst whinnied in his stall.

“Sorry, my man, you’ll have to wait for your other friend.”

The local girl Fanule had hired to ride and tend to Cloudburst would be there shortly. She adored the horse and gave him more doting attention than Fanule could.

He opened the paper that lay on his lap, but his tired eyes and spinning mind couldn’t seem to absorb the words. Instead, all the things he needed to do clamored for his attention. He must do more investigating, stay on top of Pushbin, spend time with William, socialize with Marrowbone, have a talk with Bencross, spend more time with William, question Twigby and get him to a place of safety, and spend still more time with William. And eat, bathe, take his medicine, and tend to the concerns and disputes of his fellow Taintwellians.

A mountain seemed to be sliding onto his shoulders.

As the sun rose and birds chirped, his spirits sank and sighed.

Fanule forced himself to read the newspaper. He also

needed to stay abreast of events in Purinton. The simplest, most sanitized article could carry significant meaning between its lines.

Only, he hadn't anticipated the brief notice tucked among the many crime reports on the second-to-the-last page, preceding the municipal announcements.

Murder. Male vagrant, name unknown,
approximate age 40 years, found shot to
death in City Center alley behind Skipskin
Mews.

It had happened on Saturday night. There were no suspects.

A sob balled in Fanule's throat.

"It'S me, William," Will said into the voxbox. "Please answer."

He stood in a booth near the arched entrance gate to the Mechanical Circus, now ablaze with lights. Visitors milled around at his back. He heard the rustle of women's skirts, the tread of countless feet, the barking of vendors against a monotonous backdrop of lighthearted music. Safer to talk here, Will figured, than in the Gutter's dining tent. No one noticed him here. He was part of the crowd.

"Please answer."

He imagined a tinny version of his voice squawking throughout Fan's house. Beyond that, he tried not to imagine anything.

He'd received no word from or about Fan since Marrowbone had gone in search of him some sixteen hours earlier. Or was it eighteen? Will hadn't taken note of the time, but it felt like an eternity since Fan had disappeared from his wagon and been swallowed up by the darkness.

"Fan, are you there?"

Will found ignorance unbearable. Any news was preferable to no news.

“Who is this?”

The unfamiliar voice jolted Will. “Who are *you*?”

“Oh, you’re the man I met last night. I recognize your voice. This is Marrowbone.”

“What... what’s going on? Did you find Fan? Is he all right?”

“Yes, I found him. And the Mongrel, too. Fan isn’t hurt but the other fellow is.”

What Mongrel? Will wondered. “So, where is he? Why didn’t he answer my call?”

Marrowbone hesitated. “Fan’s sleeping. A healer is looking after the injured man. I’m sorry, but I don’t believe I know your name.”

“Will. Fan calls me William. Why is he in bed so early?”

Another pause. “I’m afraid he’s having one of his low spells.”

Will squeezed his eyes shut. *No, oh no.* He knew what he had to do. “I’ll be there as quickly as possible.”

He was about to disconnect when Marrowbone said, “You might want to know this before you leave. He thinks somebody is out to kill him.”

Will bolted away from the vox booth. No matter if Fan’s belief was a specter born of his current mood or a solid fact, he couldn’t be alone. Fan had no family. His neighbors were probably unaware of his condition. Marrowbone would be of no help come daylight.

He can’t be alone.

As Will dashed past the concert hall, someone grabbed the back of his jacket. Arms flailing, he pitched forward to counter the pull and keep from falling.

“Come here.”

Now he was being yanked to one side. By Simon Bencross. The sound of Simon's voice, which didn't allow for protest, made Will go along with him. Simon's head turned this way and that as his suspicious gaze sifted through the surrounding river of people.

They ended up on a bench beneath a bower covered in rugosa roses and wintercreeper vines.

"It's raining shit," Simon said, thrusting a piece of paper at Will.

Will gave him a curious look before studying the flyer. As he did so, Simon kept talking.

"I just came from a meeting with the old man, the head of his security force, two muckamucks from the Enforcement Agency, and five other bounty hunters. The individual who was being chased last night—a Branded Mongrel, from the looks of it—apparently got away."

Will immediately recalled what Marrowbone had said: "*I found him. And the Mongrel, too. Fan isn't hurt but the other fellow is.*" The flyer made it clear that capture of this fugitive, a 15:85 named Twigby Hartshorn, was imperative. Whether he was brought in alive or dead didn't matter.

"What did he do?" Will asked, although his thoughts were trained on other questions.

"That's just it," Bencross said, jabbing a forefinger at the paper. "No crime is mentioned. Just 'escaped from custody'."

Will scanned the paper again. Simon was right. "How does this concern *me*?"

Simon leaned toward him to speak more confidentially. "Because of what *isn't* on that flyer. First, that Gutter residents are going to be questioned about what they saw, which means *you're* going to be questioned. Second, that two rather unusual men were in your company last night and also witnessed the chase, and you don't know if any of your

neighbors might've seen them. Third, that certain important persons would like the Eminence of Taintwell brought in for 'questioning'—although, oddly enough, they want as few people as possible to know about it and insist the Eminence be taken by surprise when he's alone."

Will stared at Bencross, anxiety plucking at his nerves. "Why do they want to question Fan?"

"I don't know. But I got the feeling they consider him more than a nuisance now."

"They want to be rid of him," Will said, his voice thin and brittle.

Simon's brows contracted. "I think so."

"Is there any kind of reward for bringing him in?"

The answer was written on Simon's troubled expression, in the way his tongue crept out and skated over his lips. "Yes. A large one."

"Are you going to hunt him?"

Simon shook his head. The movement was deliberate, emphatic. "No."

Will could tell he was being truthful. Never had Simon looked so grave. Sadness filled his eyes.

"Do these important persons know Clancy Marrowbone is back?" Will asked.

"I doubt it. Otherwise they certainly would've mentioned him." Simon smiled, and in a very uncharacteristic way—with a touch of fondness. "He's quite legendary, you know."

"So I've heard." Under the circumstances, the only thing about Marrowbone that mattered to Will was how effectively he could help protect Fan. "Did the men you met with seem to know I had... guests last night?"

"No. I'm sure they would've brought that up, too, if they'd been aware of it. In fact, you would've been pulled in for questioning well before now."

It made sense. “Thank you for the information. It was very thoughtful of you to share it with me. If there’s nothing else, I really must go now.” Will rose from the bench.

“Where?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you’re going someplace other than your wagon, I can take you there. My aeropod is in the south lot.”

Will hesitated, wondering if the bounty hunter was capable of using him as a pawn. He didn’t think so. Simon Bencross might’ve been many things, some of them none too admirable, but he did adhere to his own code of honor. And he had a face that concealed nothing.

“I have to go to my wagon first,” Will said. “Do you mind waiting?”

Simon got up. “Not if you don’t mind trusting me. And by the way”—he squeezed Will’s shoulder—“thank you for that.”

Chapter Nine

WILL sat on the edge of a bed in a shadowy room in a modest wood-and-rubblestone house in Taintwell. The head that lay on the pillow was distinctively recognizable, even in the waning light of a single, sputtering candle. Will leaned toward the spill of black curls, the stark jaw and cheekbones, the patrician nose.

“Fan, it’s me. Will.” He gently swept a drift of hair off Fan’s temple and kissed the damp skin. As he did so, he thought of the ravaged ear just an inch away from his lips.

Heavily, Fan opened his eyes. “William?”

“Yes.” Will smiled and resumed petting Fan’s hair. The candlelight occasionally drew out its purple highlights.

“Why are you here?”

“You invited me. Remember?”

Fan began to stir, a good sign. His hand rose and rested on Will’s thigh.

“I never thought you’d come to Taintwell.”

“I never did either. But now, I think I prefer it to the Circus.”

As if his body were hung with lead shot, Fan sat up and rested his head in his hands. “I’m afraid I’m in no condition to satisfy you.”

“I *am* satisfied. I’m not here because I expect to be pleased.”

Fan tilted his head to face Will. “Then why...?”

“Because I care about you. Isn’t that reason enough?”

Those spellbinding eyes continued to regard him. They

were duller than Will had ever seen them.

“Why do you care about me?” Fan asked. “There’s nothing to care about, William.”

“Oh, I beg to differ.”

And now, a telltale sheen. Tears were rising. “I’ve been no good to anybody, not even myself. For godssake, I can’t even look after my own horse. Yet so many people need help. So many. And I’ve been useless to them.” Fan’s breath hitched, and he pulled his fingers over his eyes. “An innocent man was killed because of me. A miserable wretch who thought I was an angel.”

Although Will had no idea what Fan was talking about, he gathered his broken lover into his arms. Fan clutched the sleeves of Will’s shirt like a drowning man. Face buried in Will’s shoulder, he crumbled beneath the weight of his mysterious grief.

“You’ll come out of this on the other side,” Will murmured into Fan’s hair. “And I’ll wait until you do. If you need my help when you start helping others, and I’ve no doubt you *will* help others, I’ll be there for that too. I promise you, Fan, I’ll aid you in any way I can.”

It was like comforting his mother again... yet far different and, perhaps, more meaningful. This was a connection Will had chosen and cultivated; it hadn’t been thrust on him. He refused to break that connection through cowardice and self-interest. Not just because he truly cared for Fanule Perfidor, but because something was wrong with Purinton. A canker was spreading. And it seemed to be rooted in Alphonse Hunzinger.

Fan withdrew and scrubbed his hands over his face. “I don’t know why I’m this way, William,” he said in a cracked voice. “I don’t understand it, so I’ve no idea how to alter it.” His hands fell to his lap.

Will lightly rubbed Fan’s left thigh. “You might never. You might have to accept that it’s part of who you are. And it

isn't as if you're under siege by this condition all the time, is it?"

"No. The mania comes and goes. The melancholy comes and goes. But I never know when to expect them."

"What's important, I think, is seeing beneath them and realizing they don't define you." Will leaned toward Fan and gently kissed the side of his face. He had a notion of what qualities *did* define this extraordinary man, but he wanted to discover more. The effort, he was sure, would be worth it.

Someone rapped softly on the bedroom door. "Who else is here?" Fan asked, lifting his head.

Will got off the bed. "Two of your friends, one old and one new. It's all right." He smiled over his shoulder as he opened the door. "I think we've got a dedicated little band of revolutionaries forming."

"Do we really?" said a sallow figure that could only be Marrowbone. He held a stoneware mug full of steaming liquid. "That's good to hear. I need a cause. Along with energetic coupling, it's the best antidote for ennui." He held the mug out to Will. "Get him to drink this. It should help."

"Clancy," Fan called from the bed, "is that you?"

The vampire peered past Will. "At your service, Eminence."

"Who else is here?"

"He's actually outside, waiting to be invited in."

"Well, who is it?"

Marrowbone's deceptively ordinary-looking mouth crawled into a smile.

"Take your medicine first. Now if you'll excuse me...." With a slight bow, Marrowbone turned and fluidly strolled away.

Will carried the warm drink to the bed. Fan now sat with his legs angled over the side, his shoulders slumped.

“Who was he talking about?” Fan asked.

“You’ll find out if you leave this room.” Will sat beside him. “Right now, though, you’re to drink this.”

“I can’t bear the thought of that taste.”

“If this helps you, you must take it. Don’t act like a child.” Will lifted the mug and sniffed. It didn’t smell nearly as foul as Dr. Bolt’s elixir. “Here. I’m not leaving until you finish.”

The weak seed of a smile touched Fan’s lips. “Then I’ll never finish.” Still, he took the mug.

Another swell of feeling rolled through Will. This man wanted him there, and the wanting had nothing to do with his body. Not at the moment, anyway. No one since Uncle Penrose had sought his company for any reason other than sexual engagement or profit.

Slowly but surely, Fan drank his tonic.

“WHAT the hell is *he* doing here?” Fanule turned from the window. The sight of Simon Bencross tapping cigar ashes onto his hydrangea bush helped shake him out of his torpor.

“He gave me a ride,” Will said. “His aeropod is in the field behind your barn.”

“If *I* can trust him,” added Marrowbone, “surely *you* can.”

Fanule stared at the vampire, who sat with careless elegance in a corner of the sofa. He recalled the sounds that had come from beneath Will’s wagon last night, the mingled voices he’d heard when he’d slipped outside.

Well, well. There could be no stranger bedfellows than a hunter and his potential prey.

“I thought you’d embraced celibacy.”

Marrowbone lifted and dropped his fingers on the sofa

arm. "I'm apparently not immune to persuasion."

After an uncertain glance at the shutters, Fanule lowered his gaze to the floor. Hands on hips, he weighed the advantages and disadvantages of allowing Bencross into his home. True, the man didn't seem to be an irredeemable jackass. And he could provide some valuable information.

Fanule went to the door and opened it. Bencross turned.

"You're free to come in," Fanule said. "Just be aware you'll have to answer to me *and* Clancy if you betray us in any way."

Sheepishly, Bencross ground out his cigar and approached the stoop. "Facing twin barrels always makes me behave."

Once they were all inside, Fanule was suddenly struck by Will's quiet determination. He didn't have to get involved. Without shame, Fanule walked to the chair where Will sat and knelt at his feet. He took Will's hand and looked into his eyes.

"Thank you for coming here. It means more to me than I can say."

Will blushed and smiled. After returning his smile, Fanule turned and sat before the chair. He linked his arms around his upraised legs.

Bencross cleared his throat. "I think, gentlemen, we need to start putting pieces together. I'm getting some damned bad feelings about my job."

"Simon's right," said Marrowbone. "We all have insights and suspicions to bring to the table."

"Why don't you tell us what *you* think is going on?" Will said, touching Fanule's shoulder.

So Fanule told them. Maybe sharing his concerns with three other concerned men would invigorate his sense of purpose. Countless people depended on him. He couldn't

founder under the weight of this task.

He began with the historical evidence of Purintonian contempt for Branded Mongrels, something Marrowbone verified. The stories actually made Bencross wince. From all indications, this contempt had led to an escalation in disappearances and questionable arrests that coincided with other developments: courtroom and institutional secrecy; Hunzinger's planned opening of the Demimen exhibits; the banning of Mongrels from the Circus.

Fanule told his companions about the petition drive and his meeting with Pushbin. And then, with a spring of bitterness, he spoke of Twigby Hartshorn's injury and the beggar's murder.

He rose and grabbed the newspaper so he could show the item to the other three men.

"You'd given him your cloak?" Will asked as Fanule stood before him.

"Yes."

Apprehension crossed Will's face. "It's a unique piece of clothing. That purple satin braiding...." He handed the paper back to Fanule, who carried it to the sofa.

Frowning, Marrowbone scanned the few dreary lines. "How tall was the victim?"

"Maybe two inches shorter than I," Fanule said. "Bony, though."

"And his hair?"

"Dark. Matted but dark."

Marrowbone nodded. "The cloak would've concealed his emaciation. And if his back was turned to his assailant—"

"The shooter wouldn't have seen his face," Bencross said as he, too, read the notice. He took a seat beside his new lover.

Fanule resumed his previous position in front of Will's chair.

“Tell him,” Will abruptly said to Bencross. “Tell Fan what you told me about that meeting you were called to.”

Haltingly, Simon recounted the conference he’d attended in Hunzinger’s office. Marrowbone listened with narrowed eyes, his thumb and forefinger curled around his mouth. Fanule absorbed the story but didn’t react. His face felt like a mask, frozen into blankness.

He dimly realized this was how he always greeted the arrival of something inevitable. He’d been the same way in that endless fraction of a second before the shears had bitten into his ears—anaesthetized by a resignation to his fate, a resignation that had given him temporary respite from the terror that had preceded the act and the pain he knew would follow.

“Fan? Are you all right?”

It was Will, leaning over his shoulder, flattening a hand on his chest.

William. My second wing....

“Where are the ribbons?” Fan murmured, laying his hand over Will’s fingers.

Will’s head lowered. “I’m sorry. What did you say?” His hair brushed the side of Fanule’s face.

“Nothing.”

“I believe you’re safe in Taintwell,” Bencross told Fanule, “for what it’s worth. Purinton’s lawmen know this isn’t a friendly place for them.” He glanced uneasily at the windows. “I don’t feel too good here myself, considering I’ve picked up some of your citizens.”

Fanule didn’t bother trying to reassure him. Taintwellians hated bounty hunters, and with good reason. “Where do you suppose the search for me will be concentrated, then?”

“The places you’re known to frequent. So stay out of City Center. Stay off Whitesbain Plank Road. Stay away from

shops you usually patronize. Believe me, Perfidor, Pushbin's office and the EA have had a loose net around you since that incident in the Truth and Justice Building. The net tightened when you became the Eminence of Taintwell. I don't know what you did lately to irk both Hunzinger and Pushbin, but now they're intent on closing the net."

Will put both his hands on Fanule's shoulders. It seemed like a protective gesture as much as a comforting one.

Marrowbone sat forward and addressed Fanule. "So somebody obviously knew to look for you on Skipskin Mews."

"A good many people would know that. I'm there often enough."

"Focus on that night," said Bencross. "The night before you gave that beggar your cloak. Did anybody seem to be following or watching you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Looking at you strangely?"

A switch tripped in Fanule's memory. "Robin Thornwood."

The name visibly piqued Simon's interest. "What about him?"

"We spoke. He seemed uneasy. And I think he was with another fellow. Short, wiry. With muddy-yellow hair and whiskers."

"What did you and Thornwood talk about?"

Fanule balked at any revelation of his private life. He looked at his lap before again meeting Simon's curious gaze. "I... thought we could get together again."

Bencross stared at him in puzzlement, then groaned and looked away. "Oh, don't tell me...."

"What's the matter?"

"Robin Thornwood is nothing more than a worm with a

good barber. That's what the matter is." Simon blew out air and shook his head. "And to think I've had him."

"You have?"

"Yes. What of it? I'm hardly a member of an exclusive club."

"I'm all too aware of that," Fanule muttered.

Bentcross chuckled as he shook his head in disbelief. "I swear, Perfidor, you're as much a whore as I am."

"Just to keep the record straight," Fanule said, "no, I'm not."

"I don't stand a chance in *this* competition," Will mumbled at Fanule's back.

Impatiently, Marrowbone sighed. "I'll accept the honor of King Whore if it will keep the two of you from bickering." He obviously meant Simon and Fanule. "Now let's get on with it." He turned to look at Simon. "What exactly is suspect about this Thornwood character?"

"He's the most venal piece of shit I know," said Bentcross. "He'll do anything for some coin." Now Simon addressed Fanule. "So if the Enforcement Agency knows you're a twor and he's a twor—which they surely do, since they even have *my* proclivities on record—they probably paired Robin up with one of their scorpions and instructed him to take the scorp around, show him where he might be able to waylay the Dog King." Bentcross winked as he made a clicking sound with his tongue. "Big money for both of them if the scorp ever got to you, Perfidor. The people who set this up would prefer that route, believe me."

"Why is that?" Fanule asked in a grim monotone. He tried to ignore the sick flare of fear in his gut. *Don't let this push you off the bridge. Stand firm.*

"Because a random act of violence in a district known for its crime wouldn't lead to the kinds of questions that detention or disappearance would."

“Wait, Simon,” Will said. “What do you mean by a ‘scorpion?’”

It was Marrowbone who answered. “A scorpion is a hired assassin. One tailed me after I applied leverage to end Mongrel branding.”

“What came of it?” Fanule asked.

Marrowbone’s look turned sly. “Let’s just say I had a very large dinner one evening.”

“Did the man ever rise?” Fanule knew that in Marrowbone’s lexicon, a “large dinner” meant severe exsanguination. Depending on how Clancy had conducted the feed, his victim would’ve either died and then arisen transformed or died and stayed dead.

Marrowbone shrugged. “I don’t know what became of him. If he did revive, he avoided me. I like to imagine he laid low and went about grubbing for rodents and fish in another province. In any case, I never ran into him again.”

“So... why can’t you do the same thing again?” Will asked Marrowbone. “Threaten Purinton’s leaders. Threaten Hunzinger too, if he’s involved.”

“It wouldn’t be wise.”

Bentcross slid a glance at the vampire, who didn’t seem inclined to say anything further. So the bounty hunter explained his answer. “I assume he can’t resort to the same tactic because Purinton is better prepared now.”

“How?” asked Will.

“The EA has a Special Threats team,” Bentcross said. “They’re trained to hunt and snuff out ‘unusual enemies of the people’.” He again looked at Marrowbone. “Am I correct, Clancy?”

Simon’s tone amused Fanule nearly to the point of laughter. The brawny, swaggering bounty hunter had sounded as deferential as a doting young girl.

“That’s part of the reason,” said Marrowbone, folding his

hands in his lap. He didn't seem too troubled by it. "More to the point, I think I can better serve this investigation if no Purintonians know I'm around."

"But what about my neighbors?" Will said. "You spent hours at the Gutter last night. Many Circus employees have very keen senses and instincts, especially the sharks who work on Wheel of Fortune Avenue. They could've recognized you as a vampire. Or even recognized you as Clancy Marrowbone."

"I made certain none of your neighbors saw me," Marrowbone said calmly.

Fanule envied his laconic confidence. Immortality combined with superhuman powers certainly had its advantages, not the least of which was peace of mind.

"What about Taintwellians?" Will asked.

"They wouldn't betray me."

"No," Fanule said, "they wouldn't." As he got up from the floor, he realized he was still rising from the murky pit into which he'd plunged as dawn broke. The crippling sorrow and lethargy had, for the most part, released him, but their residue continued to stain his mood. "Anybody care for a glass of wine? I'm sorry I haven't been a very good host."

When both Marrowbone and Bencross expressed an interest in some refreshment, Will got up and said he'd help. He followed Fanule into the kitchen. Once they were beyond the other men's line of sight, they fell into an embrace that seemed as natural as walking. The joining of their mouths seemed the same.

The kiss was slow and savoring. Fanule gently cupped Will's face and surrendered to the sweet press of his lips, always so pillow-soft, always so welcoming. At that instant, kissing William was like balm for his spirit.

"I can stay with you if you'd like," Will said. "Hunzinger knows I'm waiting for a new shipment of elixir. I could

extend my absence if I sent him a message saying I had family business to attend to.”

“But you don’t have any family.” Fanule drank in the sight of Will’s face.

“He doesn’t know that. Besides, he should understand that I need to be away from the park once in a while. And I *am* an independent, after all. I’m not in Hunzinger’s employ.”

“You truly wouldn’t mind staying here?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all. I enjoy being with you. And time away from my sales platform will give me the freedom to help in whatever this mission is you’ve undertaken.”

Fanule slowly wagged his head.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked.

“I can’t believe my good fortune, that’s all.”

Will blushed. “We’ll see how good it is. I’m a fair salesman, Fan, but I seem to bumble like a boy through every other part of my life.”

Fanule’s hand fell to Will’s crotch and gave his not-so-buried treasure an appreciative squeeze. “Not every,” he said as Will abruptly drew in a breath. “Now, let’s fulfill our host duties. Then we’ll all work out some kind of plan.”

“*Our* host duties?”

“Yes. As long as you’re here, this is your home too.”

Will’s smile carried such obvious pleasure that Fanule was certain he wouldn’t regret his hospitality. He was still a bit daunted by the prospect of having a houseguest—Will was unused to Taintwell and to Fanule’s disordered disposition—but he was a remarkably resilient young man with a reservoir of fortitude he’d only begun to tap.

What’s more, Fanule was totally smitten by him.

Fanule opened a ventilated trapdoor in his kitchen floor. Beneath it, in a shallow, ceramic-lined pit, a small rack held nine bottles of wine. He plucked out the Lorique and lowered

the door. As he uncorked the bottle, Will gathered glasses from a cupboard.

“It’s lovely being able to move about a real house,” Will said as if speaking to himself.

The wistful sound of his voice touched Fanule, who suddenly realized Will’s only home for the past nine years had been a cramped caravan. He ran a hand down Will’s back. “Then move about as much as you want. Take a bath, dance through the parlor, roll around on the bed, recline on the kitchen table.”

Will laughed. “I might just do all those things. Maybe more.”

“And I might just watch.”

When their eyes met, the potent alchemy of their attraction turned the glance into a multifaceted promise. They would welcome and understand and enjoy and help each other. Not even the simplest things would be taken for granted.

No, Fanule would not regret his hospitality. At least, not as long as Will took joy in their companionship.

Then guilt began to nibble at his certainty. Was he being selfish? The Eminence of Taintwell had a price on his head. Consorting with him could put Will in jeopardy. And that would *not* bring Fanule joy.

They were about to return to the parlor when Marrowbone strolled into the room. “Simon’s grouching about the two of you delaying his refreshment with... well, I needn’t repeat *that* part.”

Fanule and Will smiled.

“You didn’t keep him entertained?” Fanule asked archly.

“That wouldn’t have been seemly, now would it?” Marrowbone’s gaze alit on the Bloodroot Elixir that still sat untouched on the table. He took three steps and lifted the bottle. “I’ve been curious about this since I first saw it.”

"That's the patent medicine I sell," Will told him.

"Ah. Small wonder it has such a prominent place in Fan's kitchen." Marrowbone held it before the lamp that burned on the table. He tilted the bottle this way and that. The liquid within looked more opaque than transparent, and it left a viscous coating on the glass as it rolled from side to side. "Do you mind if I open it?"

"No, go ahead." With some embarrassment, Fanule looked at Will. "I confess I bought it just to break the ice between us. I really can't risk taking other tonics while I'm taking the herbal compound."

"I understand," Will said.

Scowling, Bencross stomped in from the parlor. "I'd better not be missing out on some—" Craning his neck in Marrowbone's direction, he squinted at Dr. Bolt's bottled magic. "Did you bring that with you tonight?" he asked Will.

"No. Fan bought it from me last week."

"Awful-tasting stuff," Bencross said. "But I must say, it's increased my strength and vigor and sharpened my eyesight. I noticed the change within a few days."

Marrowbone uncorked the bottle. He began lifting it to his nose, then abruptly jerked his head back. Frowning, he more cautiously brought the bottle toward his face. He flinched again, his frown deepening.

"This isn't good," he whispered.

"What isn't?" Fan asked, walking up to him.

Creases had appeared on Marrowbone's face. His preternaturally smooth skin looked like cracked alabaster. "I should taste it, but I'm afraid it would make me ill." He turned his troubled gaze to Fanule. "Perhaps we should take this to Lizabetta, get her opinion."

"Her opinion of *what*, Clancy?" Fanule tried taking the bottle from his hand, but Marrowbone held it out of his reach.

“I’d rather not say just yet. You have to check on that Mongrel anyway, don’t you?”

“Yes, but... I don’t understand.” Marrowbone’s reaction was unnerving. Never had Fanule seen him upset.

“This isn’t good.”

Indeed it wasn’t.

Chapter Ten

IT WAS nearly three o'clock in the morning when Marrowbone took Fanule and the bottle of elixir to the healer's cottage. Bentcross had by then fallen asleep on the sofa; Will, on the chair. The men had made progress toward forming a plan, and it would require the risky involvement of each of them.

"You're not comfortable leaving your young man alone with Simon, are you," Marrowbone said. He and Fanule stood together beneath the night sky, preparing to fly to Lizabetta's hideaway.

"Not entirely." Fanule glanced at his darkened house. "Stupid of me. We're all adults, free to do as we choose. I have no claim on Will."

"In that case...." The vampire curled forward like a blade of grass. Long, cool fingers lay along Fanule's jaw. Lips only slightly warmer touched Fanule's lips.

Erotic images rustled through Fanule's mind. He wondered if Clancy had planted them there. He shivered slightly, remembering the glide of Marrowbone's hands over his forehead and into his hair, over his body, over his ass and cock. Clancy was amazingly skilled.

Then Fanule thought of Will.

Marrowbone smiled, revealing a glint of fangs in the moonlight. "I can feel the desire beneath your skin. I can taste it on your mouth." He stepped back. "But I know it isn't for me. Simon will have the same realization if he goes near your lover. Not to worry."

Fanule couldn't afford to worry. He had enough to be

concerned about. Still, truth be told, he felt as if he'd left a small part of himself behind when he'd walked out the door.

My second wing....

He couldn't think about that now. He couldn't lose himself to fancy while merciless reality demanded his attention.

When they arrived at the vine-covered cottage and its door creaked open, Lizabetta's head floated out before Fanule and Marrowbone had a chance to step inside.

She shushed the men as the door closed behind her. Moonlight seeped through her face, making it resemble a filmy oval of tissue bobbing on water. "I don't want to disturb Twigby." Then she smiled—a ripple in the tissue, an interplay of light and shadow. "Clancy, I didn't get a chance last night to welcome you back. How very nice to see you again."

"And you, Betty," said Marrowbone. "Isn't it lovely that we can both dispense with pointless courtesy when we meet? I needn't tell you how well you look or ask how you've been."

Lizabetta muted her laughter. "Nor I, you."

Fanule and Marrowbone sat on a battered wood bench just a few paces away from the door. "So, what can you tell me?" Fanule asked the healer.

Her face hovered before them. "The cut on his arm was rather deep but clean and precise. Perhaps *too* clean and precise. I cleansed and treated and wrapped it. When I changed the dressing this evening, the wound looked better. It hasn't begun to fester. I may not have to stitch it, just keep it tightly bound."

"Did he tell you anything?"

"Nothing that made much sense. He kept saying, 'They want to change us; they want to change us.' He was quite miserable and close to being delirious. I didn't bombard him with questions, just reassured him he was safe."

Sitting forward, his forearms on his thighs, Fanule idly tapped his fingers together as he thought. Finally, he looked up. "I'd like to talk to him, Betty. I hate rousing him, but I need to find out exactly what happened. And the sooner the better."

Her head swiveled to regard the door, and she sighed. "Well, he *has* been sleeping for hours, and he's eaten, and I'm more than happy to keep him here as long as he needs looking after."

"May I, then?"

"Yes, all right. Go in and wake him. Oh, and feel free to pour him some broth. It's in the pot on the hearth and should still be warm."

As Fanule stood up from the bench, Lizabetta's face rose to remain level with his. "Gently, Fan. I know he trusts you, but he's skittish. I'll stay out here with Clancy." Her gaze moved to the side to regard the vampire. "He can tell me what happened last night."

AWAKENED by Simon's infernal snoring, which sounded like the growls of a disgruntled bear rummaging through a pantry, Will got up from the overstuffed chair in Fan's parlor. He felt stiff and sandy-eyed. *I have to get more sleep*, he thought foggily. *I have to*.

Although reluctant to return to the Circus, he'd be leaving with Simon once the sun was up. Duty called, but duty had little to do with peddling Dr. Bolt's medicine. Instead, Will needed to find out, if he could, where the elixir came from. And he must try to learn more about the Demimen.

Forking his fingers through his hair, he shambled toward Fan's bedroom. A moonbeam slatted by one of the front shutters paved his way. It seemed presumptuous to

crawl into a bed that wasn't his, but he didn't think Fan would mind.

After undressing down to his undershirt and drawers, Will crawled with a purr of satisfaction onto the plush, feather-stuffed mattress. He pulled the thin summer blanket over his body. Fan seemed to be all around him, enfolding him. But it was only the specter of his scent—mossy, with a slight tang of sweat.

Will lazily ran a hand across the second pillow, the one on which Fan's head had rested. *Are we good for each other? Could we be happy together?* It didn't seem possible. Yet the impossibility of togetherness didn't seem possible, either.

Go back to sleep. You're thinking in riddles. It's too soon, anyway. You've only just become lovers.

Simon had stopped snoring. Crickets chorused behind the light nattering of wind through trees.

Could I work in Taintwell? Would I be accepted? Uncle Penrose always said I was never destined to lead a conventional life.

Will didn't lift his hand from Fan's pillow. He let it rest there.

Stop wondering. It's too soon to wonder at all....

THE diminutive figure on the sofa stirred and whimpered beneath Fanule's hand.

"Twig, it's me, Fan."

Two specks of brightness appeared as Twigby's eyes opened. "Am I home?"

"No, you're still in Betty's cottage. She'll be looking after you for a while. May I talk to you? Do you feel up to it?"

"Yes, of course." Clumsily, for his bandaged arm was in a sling, Twigby rose to a sitting position. The glow from the

waning hearth-fire licked across the left side of his face. He seemed to have aged twenty years. "My arm hurts."

Fanule helped the small man right himself. "I imagine it does. But you know Betty will get it mended. And keep you safe." Fan lifted a cup from the floor and guided it into Twigby's free hand. "Here's some broth."

"Thank you." The Mongrel sipped as he stared into the cottage's dancing shadows. "If only Pures were this kind." The tone of his boyish voice had curdled.

"Tell me what happened to you," Fan said, trying to be both cajoling and assertive. "I need to know. Things are going to change, Twig. I swear they are. But first I need as much information from as many Mongrels as possible about any bad experiences with city dwellers."

Twigby sipped at his broth. Just as Fanule began to wonder if the injured man was still too dazed to converse sensibly, Twigby spoke. "He stopped me on Whitesbain Plank Road. The hunter named Piggoty. I'd just delivered eggs and onions and goat cheese to the Norward Hotel, and he stopped me and said I'd done something wrong. I think it had to do with taxes. He said I was in arrears with my taxes. And he took me away."

"To the Monkey's Claw?" Fanule asked.

Twig nodded. "That's where it always starts, isn't it?" He glanced at Fanule, his gaze bearing a residue of fear and bitter resentment.

The chilling look was a spade made of ice, digging at Fanule's memories. "And from there...?"

"I was put in a cage. I don't know for how long. Hours. Then someone came and got me. He said there'd been a hearing, and to pay for the taxes I owed, I would have to work."

"Where? What kind of work?"

"I don't know. They never told me. They never even took

me to the hearing or told me how much I owed.”

Fanule rubbed his face to relax it, smooth away the creases that had formed.

“They just took me away,” Twig said.

Fanule abruptly dropped his hands and turned his head. “Where?”

“Beyond the city. Beyond the dunes. A plain building surrounded by other plain buildings. I’m sorry that I don’t remember much, Fan. They’d given me something to drink. It made me sleepy. And when we got there, to that new place that was nowhere, they put me in a small room and gave me a plate of food. But I saw the white powder on it, and I tried to eat around the powder. I didn’t trust it.”

Suddenly, Twigby’s face gathered. The cup in his hand began to quake. A thin sheet of broth slipped over the rim and cascaded over his whitening knuckles. As if taunting him, the crackling fire spit sparks.

Fanule carefully pulled the cup from Twig’s hand and set it back on the floor. He lifted the crocheted blanket that had bunched at Twig’s back and arranged it over his shoulders.

“Take your time,” he said softly. “Anything you can manage to tell me will help.”

Twig licked the back of his hand. “They took me to a different room, a horrible room,” he said, his voice stripped of what little vigor it had had. “Electric lights and two steel tables with porcelain tops, and a ghastly steel chair with projections for the legs and arms. And more steel tables covered with white cloths or with instruments, and men and women dressed in white.”

A knot had formed in Fanule’s throat. Unblinking, he stared at Twigby. *Don’t get sick*, he admonished himself. *Hold yourself together, stomach to brain.*

“There were machines, buzzing and thumping.” Twig’s

voice was barely above a whisper now. “And glass-fronted cabinets full of brass bits and pieces in dozens of shapes, odd shapes, and thin, coiled cables and spools of wire, and jointed parts; levers and pulleys; maybe miniature pumps. There were trays, too, on wheeled carts. Trays full of bolts and rivets, small gears and springs.” He gasped, and Fanule flinched. “So much whiteness and glare. So much, it seemed to make a sound all its own.”

“Did anybody say anything to you?”

Twigby’s eyes shifted in Fanule’s direction. “That they were going to change my body to help me work better. And I would get to work with other Mongrels, and I’d be strong and happy, well housed and well fed. ‘Better than starving and shivering in Dunwood,’ they said.”

“How—” Fanule reached down for the cup so he could take a drink. His throat felt packed with plaster of Paris. “How were they going to change you?”

Twigby became more agitated. “From the inside out!” he cried, lifting his swaddled arm. “Wouldn’t you say?”

Fanule went cold all over. “But... you must’ve gotten away somehow, before they... began their procedure.”

“Oh yes. They thought I was stupid, but I proved too clever for them. I hadn’t consumed their powder. So I saw the knife slice into my arm. *You’re a stinger, you fool*, I told myself.” Twigby’s voice rose. “And I knocked that knife out of the surgeon’s hand and stung everyone else in the room and fled down the corridor and kept stinging whoever I had to until I got to the railroad tracks. I climbed into the boxcar on the spur. *I’ll wait as long as I have to*, I thought, *just to be carried away from here*. But I didn’t have to wait long. Not even overnight. The car coupled with the train, and I was moving toward freedom. But the train didn’t go far. It stopped at the Circus, outside the Gutter, and men began searching the cars. So I stung them and I ran.”

Fanule’s mind raced to cobble together these pieces. He

glanced at Twigby's hands. Yes, that's right, he was a stinger. He could deliver paralyzing pain through the tips of his fingers, or maybe through his fingernails. Fanule couldn't remember which it was.

"Why didn't you sting the bounty hunter?" he asked. "Or anybody at the Monkey's Claw?"

"The hunter didn't hurt me," Twig said. "The officers didn't hurt me." He'd calmed a bit. Maybe telling his story had been a necessary purge. "I was distressed, but I didn't become terrified or outraged until I was taken to that horrid room."

Fanule nodded. "Yes, of course."

Some Mongrels had superhuman abilities, determined by lineage, and those abilities were only activated by intense emotion. Fanule was an exception to this general rule. He could suck light at will, although it required considerably more concentration when his mind was at ease.

"Can you think of anything else?" he asked. "Any other details?"

Twig idly stroked the lower portion of his injured arm. "Not at the moment." He gave Fanule an apologetic look. "I'm awfully tired, Fan. Maybe more will come to me when I'm feeling better."

Smiling, Fanule curled an arm around the Mongrel's narrow shoulders and gave him an encouraging hug. "I understand. You've already been a great help, Twig. Thank you."

"Will I be staying here?"

"Yes. For as long as you need to. The only folks who'll know where you are will be the ones you want to know."

Twigby was reciting a list of names when Lizabetta floated into the cottage. "Uh, Fan, I think my guest needs to rest now. You can always come back. I'll meet you outside after I see to Twig."

Her arms appeared in the air near the fireplace and gathered up more wood from an iron rack beside the hearth. Getting lost within the flames, those unburnable hands arranged the wood on the grate.

Fanule got up from the sofa. "I'll wait for you outside then." After giving Twigby a pat on the back, he left the cottage. His mind had become a clicking analysis machine.

Marrowbone rose from the ground, where he'd been reclining like a decadent phantom.

"Well?" he said.

"It's bad."

"I figured it would be. Did Betty tell you the rest?"

"She didn't tell me anything, except to suggest I leave."

Marrowbone brushed at his clothing and made a few desultory swipes through his long hair. Bits of leaves and bark fell to the ground. "I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but the situation is uglier than you think." With a swift, fluid turn, he snatched something off the bench behind him. It was the bottle of Dr. Bolt's elixir.

"Shit," Fanule whispered. He immediately thought of Will.

"It's going to hit your lover especially hard."

Fanule's stomach clenched. "That will give me even more incentive to do whatever needs to be done."

The door of the cottage opened. Lizabetta's head, little more than an indistinct bubble at first, took on more definition as it moved closer to her guests.

"Did you tell him?" she asked Marrowbone.

"I'm afraid I'm too droll to do it properly."

Lizabetta shifted her eyes to Fanule. "That... vile potion," she said, nodding toward the bottle Marrowbone still held, "isn't just the usual sludge of laudanum and grain alcohol and herbal flavoring. It isn't entirely plant-based."

Fanule sickened further. He dropped onto the bench and looked up at Marrowbone. "Is that why were you afraid it would make you ill, Clancy?"

"Yes."

"So the Bloodroot Elixir—"

Marrowbone slipped the bottle into his coat pocket. "Is all too aptly named."

The darkness rustled around them, thick with unseen life.

"You know I don't feed from Mongrels," the vampire added.

"I believe there are other bodily components as well," Lizabetta said. "I could detect their presence."

"Oh, gods." Fanule dropped his head to his hands. His worst fears had been realized. After a bleak, blank moment, he looked up at his companions. "But why?"

"I assume it has to do with Mongrels' physical assets," said Lizabetta. "And powers. That's the only explanation. Whoever devised this concoction must believe that if humans ingest a distillation of tissue and blood from superhumans, their bodies will be less vulnerable to various kinds of infirmity."

Her logic made Fanule grimace.

Purinton's attack on the unusual citizens of Taintwell was far worse than he'd imagined, and it appeared to be multipronged.

Chapter Eleven

THE tug was luxuriously slow and adroit, as if angel wings were stroking the core of him, coaxing, coaxing....

But toward what? Will wondered as he was pulled along. Excitement began to build, taking him over. He wasn't aware of himself. He was only aware of the feeling, deep and pervasive. And very persuasive.

He awoke abruptly to a room packed with darkness and a pelvis packed with exquisite pressure. He was lying on his right side on a very soft bed, and someone was sucking his cock. Uncontrollably, he groaned, his body bowing toward the source of its arousal.

And what a lovely source it was. Velvety smooth, warm, moist. Snug but not still. Anything but still. The tongue cradling his shaft occasionally released it, but only to inscribe a serpentine path along the underside ridge or to flick the tender rim of the crown. The lips cinching his shaft occasionally released it, but only to nibble and pluck along its length. Then a hand closed firmly around the girth of his wood. With a weak cry, Will thrust into it and into the caressing mouth behind it. Fingers moved over his taut sac. Soon, they crept farther back.

Awareness of his surroundings came suddenly. He was in Fan's bedroom, but Fan was gone. The only other person in the house was Simon Bencross.

Will tried to say *don't*—Simon was not his lover now; Simon had no right to do such things—but a low voice sounded before he could fully form the word.

"Gods, I need this. I need *you*."

Fan was back.

A finger slid into Will's body just as that marvelous mouth made a prolonged draw on his cock. The fever inside him broke with a throbbing rush of pleasure. His eyes closed as the breath shuddered out of him. The force of Fan's sucking and swallowing kept pace with the force of Will's climax. Simultaneously, by gentle degrees, they diminished.

"That was wonderful," Will whispered. His body felt like a jungle vine, limp and humid and entwined with everything near it—the bedclothes, his undershirt, his drawers. He removed his twisted clothing and tried to straighten the covers.

Fan caressed Will's flank, nuzzled his pubic hair, kissed his belly. As Will buried his fingers in Fan's hair, a sigh wafted across Will's skin.

"Come here," Will said, sliding to one side and patting the fat mattress. "Get undressed and lay beside me."

"Gladly." Fan, already undressed, eased onto the bed.

Will rolled toward him. The press of Fan's body, hard and strong beneath slightly damp skin, was provocatively sensual. Everything about him was that way. Everything about him persuaded Will to forfeit all caution, to give himself over to the unexpected passion that seemed to have taken over his life.

"William," Fan said as they lay face to face, "you must tell me something. And you must be completely forthright." Tentatively, he touched Will's cheek. "Do you secretly loathe me? Beneath all this heat that melts us together, might you harbor a cold contempt for me? For all Mongrels?"

"What?" Those anxious words could've come from the washstand, as much sense as they made to Will. He tried to read Fan's face but could only make out the glimmer of his eyes.

"I won't react badly if you confess to such feelings. I

certainly wouldn't hurt you. I swear on my honor, I couldn't bring myself to hurt you."

Will rose up on one elbow and peered at him. "Fan, what in the world...?"

"Maybe it's the nature of Pures to hate us. So how could I blame—"

Will laid two fingers against Fan's lips. "No," he whispered, beginning to realize what had caused this uncertainty. The deeper Fan dug into the dark side of Purintonian policy, the more it must seem to him that Mongrels were a shunned race, despised by all humans.

"No," Will repeated. He eased back down to the pillow. "I care for you more than I've ever cared for any man. Except perhaps my father and uncle." He removed his fingers and replaced them with his lips.

Fan covered the side of Will's face with one hand as he returned the kiss. Their lips parted reluctantly. Sighing, Fan rolled onto his back. "Then you might want to distance yourself from me. As much as I love having you here, I have to insist you stay away."

"I STILL can't believe he sent me away, Simon."

"It *would* be wise to wash your hands of him." Bencross lit a cigar. Concealed by his aeropod, he and Will spoke in the south lot of Hunzinger's Mechanical Circus. A sea breeze caught and stretched the fragrant cloud of smoke until it thinned.

Will vacantly watched it dissipate. His glance shifted to the rear fence of the Gutter. "Wouldn't it be equally wise for you to turn your back on Marrowbone?"

Simon spat shreds of tobacco from his tongue. "That's different."

"How is it different? He's a vampire with a target over

his heart. He's staying in Taintwell. He's acquainted with Fan, and he'll certainly be involved in whatever—"

"I'm not you," Simon snapped. "That's how it's different. In the name of all that's manly, Will, you're little more than a child." His attitude relaxed, and he smirked around the butt end of his cigar. "A damned appealing youth, granted, but a youth nonetheless. Sometimes when I see you dressed in those pantomime clothes, blustering away and waving a bottle through the air—"

Will shot him a warning look. "Don't speak of that." Simon's patronizing attitude would normally have been what irritated him, but that wasn't the case now. Will didn't want to be reminded of the so-called elixir he'd persuaded so many people to buy.

Looking chastened, Simon lowered his eyes. His amusement had fled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." He rolled his cigar between thumb and forefinger. "Imagine how *I* feel. I've actually drunk that stuff. Just the thought of it makes me want to retch." He grimaced and shivered. "Gods, how did everything get so ugly?"

"How did people get ugly?" Will kicked a stone and sent it skittering toward an OMT.

Before they'd left Taintwell, Fan had told them about Twigby Hartshorn's ordeal. And he'd told them about the composition of Dr. Bolt's elixir. Even Simon's cynicism had crumbled beneath the weight of those revelations.

Will couldn't bear the thought of having peddled that dreadful potion. His involvement in the scheme, innocent as that involvement was, made him ill. The scheme itself made him even sicker.

Hands in pockets, Will considered what he would do next. "Distance be damned," he muttered, more to himself than his companion. "I'll not flee like a little girl and pretend none of this is happening."

Simon took a long pull on his cigar and squinted against

the drift of smoke. “He’s only trying to protect you, you know.”

Will nodded. That much was clear. Fan wanted to shield him not just from physical peril but also from emotional distress. They’d been growing close, opening their hearts to one another. Were any harm to come to either of them, the other would suffer.

“It’s my guess Perfidor’s prepared to take some significant risks,” said Simon.

“He has to.”

“And *his* risks could put *you* in danger.”

Will said nothing. He was too preoccupied with his own thoughts.

“What will you do now? I imagine you’re not inclined to keep selling that... cannibal swill.”

Will gave him an acerbic glance that said, *Aren’t you perceptive.*

Simon’s mouth jumped into and out of a self-conscious smile. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looked at the sandy pebble- and trash-strewn ground, looked back at Will. “I don’t like the way you’re acting.”

“I didn’t realize I had to shape my behavior to suit you.”

Simon cleared his throat. “Maybe you’re *not* such a boy anymore.”

“Maybe,” Will said dourly, “the world has aged me.” He pulled his hands from his pockets. “Do you know of anybody on Whitesbain Plank Road who’d be willing to keep a caravan on his property? Just temporarily?”

Simon lifted his eyebrows but asked no questions. He considered a moment, then mentioned a few names. “I think Tarbender at 831 would be the best bet. He has plenty of land, a large barn, and knows how to keep his mouth shut. There’d be a price attached, of course.”

“Of course.” Will adjusted his jacket on his shoulders.

“Thank you. I have to go now.”

“But what—”

Heedless, Will strode toward the residents’ gate.

AFTER washing up and changing into his most comfortable clothing, Will first sought out a man he knew only as Worley the Wagoner and arranged to have his caravan moved to the property of a Mr. Tarbender at 831 Whitesbain Plank Road. He explained that he’d sold his two draft horses after arriving at the Circus, so Worley would have to use his own team.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to accompany you, but try to be underway by dawn,” Will said. He paid Worley and handed him an envelope. “Give this to Tarbender and assure him I won’t be there long. I must head to the northwest soon, for I have a desperately ill family member who needs tending to.”

That bit of business concluded, Will returned to his caravan. He knelt on the floor in front of his under-bed storage space and opened the carved wood doors. There sat four new crates of Bloodroot Elixir, likely delivered late last night or early that morning by a muscle-bound man named Harry Barrow. Since Will kept his strongbox well hidden, in a secret compartment behind the false rear wall of a cluttered cabinet, he rarely locked his caravan. Nothing else within was worth stealing. Therefore, Harry could make deliveries whether Will was there or not.

Although he recoiled from the sight of those crates, Will wrestled one out of the space and looked it over. His scrutiny verified a thought he’d had on the way back from Taintwell—that he’d never seen a full paper label on any crate he’d ever received. His address was always stenciled on the wood—Wm. Marchman, Caravan Park, HMC—but the usual labels the railroad insisted on, the ones that specified contents,

point of origin, and shipping date, had never been present. Why?

Now, he had his answer. They'd been torn off. The stripping had been hasty, too. Ragged sections of the labels remained wherever the adhesive kept paper clinging tenaciously to wood.

Will hauled one crate after another into the light and studied their exteriors. On one, a portion of the product name was visible; on another, the same along with a number. The third crate finally yielded what Will was looking for: an address, or part of an address.

Warehouse 4, Seagrass Lane.

It could be an address in Purinton, but it could just as easily be in another oceanside city or province. Will seemed to recall Hunzinger telling him that Dr. Bolt's laboratory was in Carrington. However, Carrington was an inland province. And the name *Seagrass Lane* sounded vaguely familiar to him.

Will arranged the crates the way they were and, donning a straw hat and tinted eyeglasses, struck out for the boardwalk.

THORNY WOOD, Fanule scrawled on his parlor wall. Hand still poised to write, he skipped backward and waited for inspiration. He bounded forward. *Betrayed by cock. Why? Must ask.* Chalk powder dusted the air.

Fanule dashed around the room, his gaze flitting over the fragments of inscription. They lunged to the right, as if about to attack enemy words in the kitchen. But there were no words on the kitchen walls.

The faded ghosts of older thoughts, not fully laid to rest by sponge and scrub brush, showed behind the stark white lines of their newly birthed cousins. Fanule tried not to be

distracted by them.

He drew a circle, made it a wheel, wrote HMC on the inner hub, P on the outer hub, slashed in spokes and assigned them names: *traitors, scorpions, hunters, jailers, mutilators*. Around the rim, *Mongrels* and *Dog King*.

Suddenly Fanule froze, staring at his work. He had no place for William. Not in the hub or on the spokes or around the rim. No place whatsoever.

"That's good," he muttered, nodding in approval, convincing himself. "It's for the best."

He outlined a wing and quickly decided it was useless alone. He felt his face getting wet as he shakily sketched another wing and wrote the letter *W* inside.

"No."

Because the body to which the wings were attached was in danger of being destroyed, which meant the wings could be destroyed.

Frantically, he tried erasing the second wing with the side of his hand. It wouldn't go away. He only hurt himself by trying to make it disappear. Stumbling backward, he fell into a chair. The chalk dropped from his burning hand.

"You can't stay," he said to the smudged outline. "Go benefit another." He swiped at his damp face. "You snagged no ribbons anyway."

SUN was always good for business. The Circus teemed. Today, a large crowd benefited Will as much as it benefited Hellzinger. As Will hurried unnoticed down the boardwalk, it occurred to him that the nickname he'd given his boss was far more apt than he ever could have imagined.

He found an exhibit that didn't appear to be drawing many people. More important, it was adjacent to one of the planned Demimen attractions. He approached the ticket

booth and glanced beneath the slightly raised hand of the homachinus within. There in the counter were two slots. When a coin was dropped in the one on the left, the mechanical hand lowered, pressing a button between the slots. As the hand rose, a ticket in the form of a metal tab emerged from the slot on the right.

Rather than use his employee pass, which, for all he knew, could track his movements throughout the Circus, Will gained his admission like any other visitor: he paid for a ticket.

When the lock on the building's door disengaged, he stepped into the small, dim lobby. The mingled odors of dust, machine oil, and damp, musty wood weighted the air. Three turnstiles set within a partial wall had their own corresponding slots. INSERT TICKET FIRMLY instructed a small sign above each one.

Will went up to the one in the middle and stuck his ticket into a tube that extended from the top of the turnstile. The metal tab briefly caught in place, a click sounded, and the tab rattled into some concealed receptacle. Will pushed through to the inner lobby.

It was spare. The only decorations, if they could be called that, were grainy photographs and gaudy posters that served to advertise other of the park's attractions. None of this was new to Will. He'd made a tour of the Mechanical Circus when he'd first contracted with Hunzinger to sell medicine here, and he'd subsequently revisited many of the exhibits. Their ingenuity intrigued him.

A full wall stood perhaps ten feet from the turnstiles. It had a door marked ENTER on the far left. The door on the right was an exit. Will went inside.

He didn't bother examining the dioramas that snicked and clattered behind a wall-to-wall glass pane. In one, fabricated bees bounced into and out of a cut-away hive tucked inside a cut-away tree trunk. In another, ants toiled

through a maze of tunnels below the fabricated grass. Three brightly painted butterflies, their wings beating, rose and fell on nearly invisible wires. A fanciful insect reared and lowered itself on one of the tree branches, apparently attacking some hapless prey, and between two leafy saplings, a bristly spider spun a web. Will knew that when the web was complete, the spider would reverse its course and the web would spool back into its fat, black body. Then it would start over and spin the same web again.

Clever as these mechanisms were, Will was more interested in finding a passage to the adjacent building. He eased aside the narrow, dark velvet curtain to the right of the display, then forced open the folding metal gate behind it. A push-button on the wall would send light spilling from the electric bulb in the ceiling; the button directly beneath it would stop the flow. Rather than turn the light on and then, perhaps, have to scramble to turn it off, Will reached for an electric torch that was clipped to the wall immediately to the left of the gate. He activated its beam and swept it through the room.

A bank of busy machinery—levers and gears, flywheels and pistons, and a score of other parts Will was unfamiliar with—worked to enliven the metal insects the public saw. From what Will had heard, Hunzinger was experimenting with small electrical motors to supplement and one day replace the steam power he still primarily relied upon.

No matter, though. The Circus was now anathema to Will. He would just as soon see it fall to ruin.

Creeping and feeling his way through the room, trying to steer clear of all obstacles both moving and stationary, Will finally found a door that could lead only to the closed exhibit. The string of buildings along the boardwalk all shared interior walls. They all had a sublevel, too, of which most visitors were unaware. Although stairs likely connected the boardwalk elevation of each exhibit to the lower rooms, Will didn't want to crawl around the floor in search of a

trapdoor. He especially didn't want to make the descent without knowing what awaited him in the ground-level rooms. Workers could be down there, and he'd have no way of explaining his intrusion.

So, after nudging aside some tools that lay on the floor, Will pressed an ear to the door he'd found. It was difficult to hear past the clatter of machinery at his back, but he couldn't detect any sounds on the other side of the wall. Carefully, he turned the knob. The door opened.

Chapter Twelve

FANULE opened his eyes to the waning light of afternoon. He was in a chair in his parlor and felt like a flaccid balloon. Whatever elemental stuff remained in him wasn't enough to buoy him. Hunger. Nebulous sorrow.

This is unacceptable, he thought as his bleary gaze roamed over the wall he faced. Disjointed script, crazed diagrams—all bore testimony to his irresponsibility.

Take control, Fanule, damn you. Take control.

He'd been lax about too many things. Overwhelmed by the crisis facing Taintwell and his growing intimacy with a purely human man, he'd been loosening his grip on the reins of his life.

No more.

He went to the kitchen—*one thing at a time, and first things first*—where he fixed a hearty meal and slowly ate it all. Then he brewed his medicine and drank it down. Clancy had made the last cup but made it too weak. That wasn't his fault; he'd only been trying to help.

Take control, you idiot.

At least that morning, early that morning, Fanule had been functioning well enough to bathe and to take Cloudburst for a ride. At least he'd had some hours of focus. Now, summoning the thoughts born of his earlier clarity, he trained his mind on how to proceed.

As he cleaned the parlor wall yet again, he tried to impose order on the chaos displayed there. His mania had spawned some useful insights, as it often did, but he had to cull them out. Carefully, as if he were paving a walkway with

flagstones or building a fireplace with bricks, he concentrated on choosing the right pieces and putting them in the right places. They all must fit together.

Fanule pondered his scribblings before scrubbing them away. The swirling sponge stilled when he came upon the references to his lover. His feelings for Will Marchman remained the one element in this structure that he couldn't control. All the tonic in the world was powerless to change that. All the clever stratagems anybody could devise and all the determination he could muster were useless. There was nothing Fanule could do but try to ensure that William remained safe.

THE structure destined to house one of Hunzinger's Demimen attractions was dark and mostly empty... except for what looked like a boxing ring in the middle of the floor. Even the omnipresent glass wall that kept curious visitors away from exhibits hadn't yet been installed.

Will's torch was rapidly dimming, so he directed its feeble beam over the ring. Several papers curled over the ropes. He lifted one and unrolled it. A lighting schematic, he thought, indicating placement of gas jets, a ceiling fixture, even footlights. There were diagrams full of lines, geometric forms, and distance measurements.

Will wasn't sure what he hoped to find, but this paper didn't do him much good. He lifted and unrolled the next batch. He thought he saw vaguely human figures on the topmost page, but the weak puddle of light coming from the lantern failed to make any details visible.

"Damn it all," Will whispered.

Muffled voices drifted up from the floor. People were obviously moving about on the sublevel directly below him.

On impulse, Will stuffed the papers he held in an inner

pocket of his jacket and moved back to the rear room of the Busy Bugs exhibit. He mouthed a curse when he heard a conversation among three people in the viewing room, then realized they likely wouldn't give a second thought to a fellow emerging from the machine room. His old straw hat and indigo drillich jacket befitted a workingman.

Just as Will returned the electric torch to its wall clip and got up the gumption to walk out, the voices faded and the exit door thumped closed. He quickly slipped out of the building and into the stream of boardwalk strollers.

He had to see Fan. To hell with this banishment that was supposed to be for his own good. Either he'd take the train to Taintwell or he'd ride to Whitesbain Plank Road tomorrow morning with Worley and get to Taintwell from there.

Just as Will rounded the corner of the Glass Palace, he spied Daisy Purse, a lavender parasol protecting her painted skin from the sun. She was talking and laughing with two other women. An idea struck Will, and he walked up to the group.

With a tip of the hat and a bow of the head, he humbly excused himself and asked to speak with Daisy. Her friends exchanged arch smiles, then sashayed away, whispering to each other.

Daisy seemed inordinately pleased that Will had approached her, and he hoped the reason for his approach wouldn't pique her indignation. If she *was* Hunzinger's mistress, and the evidence certainly pointed that way, he was about to take a big risk.

Daisy folded her parasol as she and Will sat on one of the many bower-shaded benches scattered throughout the Circus grounds. Will removed his hat and tinted glasses. Awkwardly, he tried exchanging pleasantries with Daisy, but she wasn't the kind of woman who had patience for small talk.

“Why aren’t you working?” she asked, eyeing Will’s coarse clothing.

“I ran out of elixir.” Taking a clue from Simon, Will surreptitiously scanned the crowd. He saw nobody he recognized. “But I may have to forgo selling for longer than a day. I have a family member who’s quite ill.”

Daisy curled a hand over Will’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yes, well, these things happen. They often can’t be anticipated.” Will sighed despondently. “I just hope to be here next season when the Circus’s new attractions open. I know there are always special festivities when Mr. Hunzinger adds something special to the park.”

Daisy dismissively flapped a hand. “Too crowded. Too... frenzied.” She daintily poked at her hair, as if the mere mention of so much activity had left her disheveled.

“I *am* curious about the Demimen exhibits,” Will said. “It sounds as if they’ll be unique. Groundbreaking, actually.”

Daisy’s entire demeanor changed. She lost her animation and, aside from lowering her eyelids, went still as a stone.

“Daisy?” Will leaned toward her. “Is something wrong?”

“I despise that whole concept,” she said tightly.

“Why? I hear it will benefit men crippled in the last war.”

Daisy uttered a single, astringent laugh.

“Won’t it?”

“It will only benefit veterans,” she said, “if they have something to gain from the misery of Branded Mongrels.”

Will’s heart jiggled. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

Indecisively, Daisy touched her hat, smoothed her dress, and repositioned her parasol. “I’d rather not think about the Demimen. The subject upsets me.” Composing

herself, she looked at Will. “Now what was it you wanted to speak to me about?”

Will knew he couldn’t press her further. He might’ve tried if they knew each other better, but they were only acquaintances. “Oh. I, uh, simply wanted to let you know I may be gone for a while. Maybe not, but in case I am, I didn’t want you to worry.” Will fidgeted. *Why would she worry, you fool? Just because she’d like to see what’s in your trousers?* “I don’t like... people to be unnecessarily concerned about me.”

Daisy blinked at him. “Well. That was kind of you.”

“I must go now,” Will said as he rose from the bench. “Unless there’s something *you* would like to talk about.”

He was hoping, of course, that the Demimen weighed so heavily on Daisy’s mind she would welcome the opportunity to unburden herself. And perhaps divulge more of Hunzinger’s dirty secrets. But, judging by the smile that touched her lips, she’d completely misinterpreted Will’s interest.

Her slender fingers reached out and skated down the back of his hand. “Why Mr. Marchman.... Might you, in your endearing, bashful way, be trying to coax a confession out of me?” That smile was still there, underscoring the suggestion in her wide, ingénue eyes.

Flushed and flustered, Will didn’t know how to disengage himself. “No,” he said abruptly. It was all he could do not to yank his hand away from her fingertips. “I don’t know what you mean. You needn’t confess anything to me, Daisy.”

“I will if you want me to.”

The imp of the perverse began to creep up on Will. He wondered how the persistent Daisy would react if he said, *I have a confession of my own. If you were Fanule Perfidor—yes, the Dog King—I would free my jack and brush it against your lips. And your lips would open to it, eagerly.*

“I’m afraid I don’t have time to hear confessions, Daisy,” Will said with a nervous laugh. “I do have to rush off now. I’m glad I saw you.” He smiled, bowed slightly, and strode away.

His mind spun with what he’d seen and heard since returning to the Circus. Feeling driven to do more—talk with his neighbors in the Gutter, perhaps, or find Harry Barrow and inquire further into the shipments of Dr. Bolt’s elixir—Will fell into a jog. Then, fearing he might draw attention to himself by running, he soon lapsed back into a brisk stroll.

He entered the Gutter and headed for his wagon, keeping a sharp eye on the residents who were out and about in case he saw Harry or anybody else he knew well enough to engage in conversation. Some employees who’d been with the Circus for a while seemed privy to a good deal of behind-the-scenes information.

Only... something was wrong. Will saw a semicircle of people up ahead, clustered around....

He ran toward the group, dodging children and laundry lines, fire pits and stumps for sitting. It was his caravan that had drawn the gawkers. His home. No smoke billowed into the sky, so it couldn’t have been on fire. So maybe a fight was going on near the foot of the steps, or somebody had dropped dead.

Heart thundering, Will pulled up short behind the loose perimeter of onlookers. His stomach seemed to plummet to the ground and splash cold water up through his veins.

“There he is now!” a woman shrilled.

Heads turned. Countless pairs of eyes bore through Will. His skin prickled as he stared at the open door of his caravan.

The two Strongarms who stood sentry at the foot of the steps swung into action. They walked forward and demanded the crowd disperse.

“Be on your way. There’s nothing to see here,” said one of them.

“Get back to your caravans and tend to your own business,” said the other.

Will stood rooted to the spot as his neighbors grudgingly trickled around him and shuffled away. His gaze was still glued to his violated wagon. He vaguely noticed the Strongarms moving toward him, could almost feel the grip of their hands on his wrists and shoulders.

Then they stopped, apparently in response to a raised, halting hand that had appeared in the doorway. Like a highwayman who’d taken possession of a coach, Alphonse Hunzinger appeared. With a brusque, dictatorial wave of the arm, he summoned Will inside.

Numbly, Will moved forward and mounted the steps. The Strongarms assumed their original positions. Before he even set foot inside, he could tell his wagon had been ransacked.

Hunzinger sat at his small table.

“What’s going on?” Will asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

His dismal, disbelieving gaze moved through the interior of his small home—over the gaping cabinets, their doors flung open and contents in disarray; over the mattress that was skewed out of alignment and the bedclothes heaped in a corner, as if they’d been thrown there; over the pretty shawl that was bunched toward the back of his coldbox.

Then Will noticed his collar box lying open on the table, just inches from Hunzinger’s beefy red hands, and he knew what was going on.

“Sit down,” Hunzinger said, his face and voice grim.

Will pulled out the second chair and sat.

“Where were you?”

“On the boardwalk.” Will forced himself to look at

Hunzinger, not the mess on the tabletop. “I wanted to check on my stand. I was just looking for Harry to have him bring more elixir up there when I saw”—Will swallowed to moisten his throat—“this.”

Hunzinger drummed his fingers on the table. “Where were you yesterday evening and through the night and into this morning?”

“I went into the city.” Will feigned embarrassment. It wasn’t difficult. The discomfiture he felt was quite real. “I met a woman, and we... had some fun.”

Hunzinger actually blushed. He cleared his throat. “I assume you’re aware of the incident that took place in the Caravan Park two nights ago.”

“Yes. The commotion woke me. I came outside, like many of my neighbors.”

“A few of those neighbors,” Hunzinger said, folding his hands on the table, “thought they saw strangers near your wagon.”

Will drew deeper from his reservoir of acting ability. “What kind of strangers? There were men, women, and children milling about and wandering all over the place.”

For the first time, Hunzinger’s smugness faltered. “We didn’t get very good descriptions of those unknown individuals, but three different people linked them to your wagon.”

Trying to look flabbergasted, Will put a hand to his forehead. “And that’s why my home was ripped apart? Because some drunken or half-asleep Gutter resident gossiped to another about ‘mysterious strangers’ near my wagon, and the gossip was spread to a third person, and then someone deemed it fact?”

Again, Hunzinger cleared his throat. Putting stock in the observations and speculations of Gutter residents didn’t suggest a very incisive or discerning mind—at least, that’s

how Hunzinger would see it—and Will hoped the Big Mister would be shamed enough to back off. But that didn't happen.

Instead, he plucked something from his vest pocket and lifted it between his index and middle fingers. He planted his elbow with a thud on the tabletop. "And how do you explain *this?*"

Fan's calling card.

As soon as he'd seen his collar box upended, Will had feared the card had been discovered. But he'd figured, or hoped, he'd be left alone if he could call into question the reason for this search.

He should've known things wouldn't go that smoothly. Especially now that Fan was a marked man.

"What is it?" Will asked, putting on a scowl of befuddlement.

Hunzinger repositioned the card so that he held its edges between his thumb and index finger. He thrust it in front of Will's face.

"Is that supposed to mean something?" Will asked in vexation.

"*Why* are you keeping Fanule Perfidor's card? When and how did you get it?"

"It must have been months ago. I'd forgotten I had it. I can't even recall what he looks like."

"Why is it in your possession, Mr. Marchman?"

Will shrugged. "He obviously gave it to me."

Hunzinger leaned forward and glared. "When? Where? Why?" The words, carried on a raised voice, seemed bitten off at their ends.

"I believe it was...." Will lowered his eyes and moved them back and forth, as if trying to recall. "Yes, shortly after I started selling here. A tall man approached my stand and asked if I had an exclusive contract with the Mechanical

Circus or if I was free to sell elsewhere as well. He said his village was organizing some kind of annual festival, or considering it, and he was looking for possible vendors. I told him I had no interest in selling elsewhere, that I was doing very well right here.”

“Taintwell has no ‘festivals’, Mr. Marchman.” Hunzinger’s voice had gone ominously low. He rose from the table.

“I told you, he might’ve said they were *considering* it.” Feeling increasingly frantic, Will watched the most terrifying man in his world walk to the door. “I paid so little attention, I can’t remember.”

Hunzinger stood in the doorway and looked outside. He seemed about to say something, probably to his small security contingent. But before he could speak, the partial silhouette of a figure appeared on the steps. It must’ve been one of the Strongarms.

The approach of evening sapped light from the rectangle of the open door. Will held his breath. He was trapped.

They’re going to take me....

Chapter Thirteen

FOR a change, Marrowbone didn't appear like a rapid formation of frost on a windowpane. He actually knocked on the front door.

"What's on your agenda for this evening?" he asked, flipping the still-lit butt of his cigarette into his mouth and swallowing it.

"I have to pay someone a visit."

"Is it related to your current mission?"

"Yes."

Fanule disengaged a part of his mind from the conversation and wondered if there was anything he'd forgotten to do. No. He simply needed to fire up his OMT. He glanced down at his neat, conservative clothing and felt satisfied it was appropriate for the district he'd be entering. He wondered if he should wear a hat.

"Who is it you'll be seeing?" Clancy asked, still standing on the stoop. Moths should've been flooding into the house by now, but insects seemed to avoid the vampire as much as most warm-blooded creatures did.

"A man named Robin Thornwood." Fanule slid all ten fingers through his hair and shook it out.

Clancy smiled as he watched. "You know, you're an incredibly handsome man."

Fanule's "thank you" was perfunctory. He was too preoccupied to appreciate compliments. "By the way, you needn't come with me."

"I'm not sure what you're hoping to accomplish," Clancy said, reaching out to straighten Fanule's collar, "but I'm

more than happy to terrorize anyone who consorts with scorpions.”

One side of Fanule’s mouth tilted up. “What makes you think I intend to terrorize Robin?”

“Why else would you bother to call on him?”

“To get some answers. And maybe make a point. For my own satisfaction.”

Marrowbone shrugged. “However you choose to explain your motives, Fan, they still dovetail quite nicely with mine.”

“I’d rather you didn’t dine there, Clancy. I don’t want to sink to his level.”

“You wouldn’t be. And I”—Marrowbone turned up his hands—“am what I am.”

ROBIN THORNWOOD lived in a drab rowhouse that looked like every other drab rowhouse in the Waxman district of Purinton. Although the cobblestone streets in the area were fairly clean, as befitted the managers, petty bureaucrats, and small-business owners who lived there, Waxman couldn’t escape the soiled canopy that blanketed most of the city. Gaslights blurred through a yellowish haze.

Fanule rapped sharply with the brass doorknocker as Marrowbone melded with the shadows on one side of the stoop. Robin should be home. He’d always averred quite haughtily that he didn’t visit public houses during the week, as if that nod to temperance made up for his energetic weekend rutting.

His conventionally pleasing face appeared as the door opened, and immediately took on a slack, sick look.

“Fan, what are you doing here?”

“I must talk to you.”

“You can’t. I mean, I’m afraid that’s not possible. I have

a ledger to balance by tomorrow morning. Sorry.” The door began to glide closed.

Fanule slammed his flattened hand against it, halting its progress. “Why did you look at me as if you’d seen a ghost, Robin?”

Eyes wide, Thornwood spasmodically shook his head.

Fanule stepped over the threshold. Robin stepped back. Once in the small foyer, Fanule closed the door at his back.

“Did you expect me to be dead by now? Instead of some poor, innocent, unfortunate wretch whose only misstep was making an alley his home?”

On the word *wretch*, Fanule gave Robin a hard shove. Robin stumbled backward, twisted to the side, and grasped at the frame of his parlor’s doorway. He couldn’t clutch it firmly enough to prevent his fall, only to break it. Gasping for breath, he landed on one knee, his head hanging.

“Get up.” Fanule lifted Thornwood by the front panel of his neatly pressed shirt and pushed him against the wall. A painting in a gilt frame rattled above his head.

“I gave you my body,” Fanule grated, his face just inches from Thornwood’s. “When intimacy is offered and accepted, a contract is born. Not for the people involved to love or even like one another—we cannot will affinities into being—but at least to respect the gift that’s been given.” He moved even closer. Lifting one leg, he massaged Robin’s genitals. With the tip of his tongue, he followed the line of Robin’s jaw. Then, like a passing mist, he touched his lips to the underside.

Fanule held Thornwood’s head in place and spoke within an inch of his trembling face. “Didn’t my gift please you, Robin?”

A whimpering moan came from that delicate, shaved throat.

“Answer me. Didn’t my gift please you?”

“Y-yes. It did.”

“I thought so.” Fanule eased back. He feathered touches over Robin’s pale, coppery eyebrows, his short nose, his modest and meticulously trimmed mustache and beard. “Remember when I bound you to that alder in Crooked Wood, and you begged me to touch your stiff prick?”

Eyes lowered, Robin nodded.

“So I knelt naked in front of you and brushed my hair against it, and my cheek; my shoulder and armpit and nipple. And if I stopped touching you, even for a few seconds, you begged me to start again. Do you remember?”

Robin’s answer came out on an exhalation. “Yes.”

“You emptied your balls on me that day. You anointed half my body with your holy cream.” Fanule paused and stepped back. “And now you’re aiding some withered, cold-blooded mercenary who wants to pump bullets into that body you anointed, *my* body. You want to destroy the gift I gave you.”

Thornwood squeezed his eyes shut. “Please, Fan....”

“What is it you’re begging for now? I’m really in no mood to shed my clothing.”

Thornwood sucked in a breath and released it on a mewl. “Don’t... take the light from my eyes.”

Fanule stared at his pinched face for a moment, at the tight, thin folds of his upper and lower lids. The irises locked behind them were watered blue, like silk buttons on a lady’s dress.

A white eruption of fury obliterated everything in the hall. Fanule grabbed Robin by the upper arms and flung him against the opposite wall. Robin slid to the floor. Fanule loomed over him.

“You worthless jackal! You hadn’t the slightest compunction about depriving me of life itself, yet you expect me to let you retain your sight?”

Doubled over, Thornwood sobbed into his hands. “Please forgive me. If you can’t, at least have mercy on me. I’m drowning in gambling debts. I was driven by desperation, Fan.”

“Save your simpering! A man is *dead* because of your fucking gambling debts!” It was all Fanule could do to keep from pummeling the figure on the floor. Sucking the light from his eyes would’ve been too kind. “I want to know the name of that scorpion and whoever set you up with him. Don’t think of telling me anything but the truth. If I find out you’ve lied to me—and rest assured I *will* find out—you’ll be visited in the dead of night by a certain debonair gentleman who’ll gladly fuck you while he sucks you. Only it won’t be your seed he’ll be drawing from your body.”

Still hunched over, Thornwood gulped air.

“Look at me!”

When that pallid, tear-streaked face finally turned up to him, Fanule’s stomach cramped. He himself wanted to weep. They’d been lovers, for godssake. They’d been lovers.

Fanule hadn’t been able to trust his parents to stand by him. He certainly hadn’t been able to trust the government of Purinton. Clancy was his friend, but Clancy disappeared for ten-year stretches. Within weeks or, at most, months, Marrowbone would leave again. The other residents of Taintwell had their own families and sweethearts to care about.

And now William was gone, *had* to be gone. Fanule suddenly felt very much alone.

“He goes by the name of Hackenslash,” Robin said listlessly. “An alias, I assume. I don’t know where he stays. He makes my flesh creep. It was Yankers at the Enforcement Agency who stuck me with that insect. ‘Show him the places Perfidor frequents,’ he told me. ‘And if you can, point Perfidor out to him. It would be better yet if you could arrange a tryst with the Dog King.’ Robin’s red-eyed gaze faltered up to

Fanule's face. "You see, they know we're both twors."

"Do they know we've been together?"

Thornwood shook his head. "I don't believe so. I certainly didn't tell them. No Pure will admit to closeness with a Branded Mongrel. All they know is that I've seen you about."

"Who ordered this strike?"

"Yankers only said you've been fomenting unrest since becoming the Eminence of Taintwell, and some important persons wanted you... quieted."

That much was apparent. Fanule needed information that wasn't. "Will your scorpion try scurrying into Taintwell to get at me?"

Thornwood again lowered his gaze. Perhaps he *was* capable of shame. "No. He's been warned to stay away from there. The authorities fear an attempted strike in Taintwell could go awry."

Fanule was empty of extreme emotion. His stomach-twisting disgust was gone. He'd spent all his despair. The rage had boiled away. He felt nothing now but scorn, as hard and flat and featureless as a roof slate.

Dispassionately, he regarded the dapper fellow who slouched at his feet. "You're a scientific wonder, Robin. You've managed to live without a heart or spine." Fanule turned toward the door.

"I'm sorry, Fan. I'm so sorry."

"Go to hell."

"I SAW the Strongarms standing at the steps," said the newcomer to Hunzinger. "Anything I can do to be of service?"

Expectantly, Will tensed. He knew that voice.

Hunzinger sighed. He tried to speak in a hushed

murmur, but Will could easily hear him. “Yes, I suppose you could. It would save us some work. Take this fellow to T and J. Tell them to hold him until I get in touch with them, which probably won’t be until morning. I haven’t decided where to go with this yet. Do you have your restraints with you?”

The answer was a metallic clank. Hunzinger stepped aside, and a sight that was lovelier than Fan himself graced Will’s eyes.

Simon Bencross entered the caravan.

He walked over to the table and urged Will up out of his chair. “You’re to come with me, sir.”

Will kept up his front. He protested. He struggled. Simon finally got him up and forced him to pivot. He clamped iron cuffs, heavy and cold and slick with condensation, onto Will’s wrists.

“Just cooperate,” Simon growled. “Things will go easier for you if you do.” He nudged Will toward the door and led him down the steps, which were still flanked by Hunzinger’s security men.

Will turned and called out, “Please lock my door when you leave.”

As they shambled through the Gutter, past curious faces peeking through cracked-open doors, Simon wore a cool, impassive expression and stared straight ahead. It wasn’t until he had Will strapped into the basket of his aeropod that he hissed, “What’ve you gotten yourself into now?”

“They found Fan’s calling card in my wagon.”

Simon’s scowl was ferocious. “Why did you keep his card, you fool? You know Mongrels aren’t allowed in this park. And you know the authorities want to burn Perfidor at the stake.”

“I didn’t anticipate anyone rifling through my collar

box,” Will said wryly. “Where are you taking me, anyway?”

“Where do you think I’m taking you?”

“I don’t know, Simon. I never could read your mind. The print is too small.”

AS ROUGH as the aeropod ride was, what with wind currents buffeting the craft and Simon dodging around spires and smokestacks, Will had never felt such relief in his life. Even crashing to the ground would’ve been preferable to being thrust under the Monkey’s Claw.

It wasn’t long before they moved into clearer air and the aeropod lowered from the sky. When it bumped to the ground, Will cried out in joy. Through a dense darkness that was utterly divorced from the hazy nighttime glow of the city, he saw the dim hulk of Fan’s barn.

Simon got out of the driver’s compartment and began freeing Will from his restraints. He grumbled the entire time.

“You realize I’m going to have to tell those vipers you escaped from custody. It’ll make me look like a bumbler. But at least they’ll think you’re loose in the city. I sure as hell hope you managed to convince Hunzinger you haven’t seen hide nor hair of Perfidor since he gave you that damned card.”

“I don’t know if I convinced him or not,” Will said, sitting up and rubbing his ankles and wrists. “What would they have done to me if you hadn’t come along?”

Simon blew out a breath and raised his eyebrows. “I think they would’ve held you for a few days, just to scare the mettle out of you, and then conducted a ‘proper’ interrogation.” Simon helped Will out of the basket. “I doubt they would’ve subjected you to the hard stuff, because I think Hunzinger still views you as an asset to the Circus, but it still wouldn’t have been a picnic. And if you’d tripped up at

all, in any way... well, that's when things would've *really* gotten nasty."

Will's skin rose into gooseflesh. He didn't ask for details. "Where would I have ended up?"

"I think, at worst, they would've given you an ultimatum: 'Either you help us snare Perfidor, or you take up permanent residence in one of our institutions.'"

They stood facing one another on the scraggly grass.

"I don't know how to thank you, Simon." Will briefly cupped his forearm and felt its tough sinews, even through the coarse druggel of his jacket. Not that long ago, Will realized with some wonder, those arms had excited him. Now they were simply part of a man who was fast becoming his friend.

"Just stay out of trouble, will you?" Bencross said.

"I can't promise that."

Simon muttered something unintelligible. "At least we got here. Now let's go see the men we most want to see."

The house was dark; it appeared nobody was there. Marrowbone wasn't around either, so the logical assumption was that he and Fan had gone someplace together.

They both appeared about twenty minutes later. Will and Simon rose simultaneously from the front stoop.

"William." Fan's exclamation was soft, and difficult to interpret. He'd stopped on the walkway and still hadn't come forward.

"You're hung with him now, Perfidor," said Simon.

Will lifted and dropped his arms. "I'm sorry, Fan. It was either here or the Truth and Justice Building."

Fan gaped at him. "What?"

"If you'd rather I didn't stay here, my wagon should be on Whitesbain Plank Road in the morning."

"If it isn't impounded," Simon added.

Fan leaned forward. “*What?*”

“May we please go inside?” Marrowbone said, gliding up to Bencross and whispering something that made them both smile.

Once they were all settled in Fan’s parlor, the two lamps he lit brought their faces into irregular relief. The bounty hunter and vampire looked dreamily pleased to be in each other’s company again. Their host looked troubled. Will assumed he himself looked apprehensive, because he certainly felt that way. He continued to stand just inside the door.

Fan stood with his hands on his hips and regarded Will from across the room.

“Don’t start chiding me,” Will said, pointing at him. “I have a good deal of information for you. And whatever else happened was beyond my con—”

The grin spreading across Fan’s face silenced Will. He glanced at Bencross and Marrowbone, seated together on the sofa, and they were smiling as well. At least Clancy kept his lips closed.

“What’s going on?” Will asked suspiciously.

Bencross laughed. “I think, lad, your lover is happy to see you.”

“Exultant, I would say,” Marrowbone drawled.

“Are you?” Will asked Fan.

“‘Exultant’ might be an overstatement.” Several long strides brought him face-to-face with Will. “Or maybe not.”

Their tight embrace came spontaneously. Will closed his eyes as he nestled his face in the crook of Fan’s neck.

“Distance won’t work,” Will murmured.

“Maybe not.”

“You need to trust me to take care of myself.”

Fan chuckled, the vibrations tapping against Will’s

chest. "That won't work either." He pulled back, smoothed a hand down the side of Will's face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Good. That's what matters. Now tell me what happened."

"You two sit here," said Marrowbone, getting to his feet. "Shall I bring everybody something to eat?"

"I've eaten," Fan said, "but Will and Simon could be hungry."

"Famished." Simon gave Marrowbone a suggestive glance as he, too, rose from the sofa.

"There's plenty of food in the cupboards and coldbox," Fan told them as they left the room. He turned back to Will and regarded his face for a moment.

Will thrust a hand into Fan's hair. When their mouths came together, he gripped those jet-and-amethyst curls with his other hand as well. *I don't want to be away from this man*, Will thought. *Not for long*.

The kiss steamed through him. Only with reluctance did he let it end. He glided his hands from Fan's head to his shoulders to his chest.

"Let's get comfortable," Fan said. He lifted Will's hands and kissed them, then moved toward the sofa.

As Will took off his jacket and laid it over the arm, he noticed the papers he'd earlier tucked into the inside pocket. "Shouldn't Clancy and Simon hear what I have to say?"

"Clancy will hear."

"How, if his knees are covering his ears?"

Fan laughed, a rich, infectious sound. "Clancy might just treat Bencross to a bit of mouth play. He doesn't like fussing with his trousers unless he has enough time, space, and privacy to thoroughly enjoy himself. And for a vampire, that enjoyment can go on for hours."

Will lowered his eyes and bit at his lower lip. Fan's allusion to his and Marrowbone's shared past poked at him in a very unpleasant way—the first time such a thing had happened—and he didn't know how to accommodate the feeling. "Do you miss it?" he asked.

Gently, Fan smiled. "I can't remember it clearly enough to miss it. Our affair is ten years old."

A question rose in Will's mind. As embarrassing as it was, curiosity drove him to voice it. "How can a vampire pleasure a man with his mouth? Isn't it... dangerous?"

Fan's smile broadened. "That depends entirely on his intentions."

Will felt heat rise in his face. Fan must've thought him laughably naïve. "You know what I mean," he muttered.

"Yes, the teeth. I can't speak about all vampires, obviously, although I understand there are breed variations. But I *do* know that Clancy Marrowbone can work wonders with his lips and tongue. A man's pride doesn't even need to pass his teeth."

Will couldn't possibly avoid imagining Clancy's wonder-working lips and tongue playing Fan's cock. His hips squirmed on the cushion. "Gods, Fan, why did we have to get on this subject?"

"Because you brought it up."

"I brought it up, all right." Will tried inconspicuously to push at his stiffness. His hand only made matters worse.

Fan leaned toward Will's ear. "Shall I ask Clancy to give you a demonstration? I know he wouldn't mind in the least." His tongue darted out and flicked over Will's ear. "And I'd love to watch."

Will's cock pulsed. "Oh gods," he said feebly. "We're beasts."

Chuckling, Fan sat back. "Agreed. But let's get back on track. It seems we have a great deal to tell each other."

“So you were just teasing me?” Will couldn’t determine if he was relieved or disappointed. He wanted to be the former but suspected he was the latter. *You don’t need a vampire’s mouth down there*, he told himself. *Fan’s is transporting enough.*

“Do you *feel* teased?” Fan asked archly.

Will’s prick twitched in response. “Gods,” he whispered. “I’m hopeless.”

Chapter Fourteen

THEY finally began exchanging their news. Fan recounted his visit with Robin Thornwood. Will told of scrutinizing the elixir crates, sneaking into the exhibit building, and talking with Daisy Purse. He described the confrontation at his wagon, a story that left Fan looking intensely displeased. Will was about to bring out the papers he'd filched when voices came from the kitchen.

First, Marrowbone's: "You must have needed that."

Then, Simon's: "I always need it."

Yes, thought Will, *we're all beasts*. Content with this fact of life, he smiled when the mismatched lovebirds entered the room.

"Here, eat," said Marrowbone as he handed Will a plate of pork, buttered bread, and apple slices. He, or somebody, had cut the meat into small chunks, perfect for lifting with the fingers.

Will was impressed. "Thank you. Have you ever worked in a kitchen, by any chance?"

"Bedroom, mostly." Marrowbone went to the chair where Simon now sat and sank to the floor. He leaned against his lover's sturdy legs.

"He was a valet," Fan explained to Will. "It was a saucy stable boy who turned him."

"Surely we have more important things to discuss," Marrowbone muttered.

"Yes, we do," said Fan. "Have any of you heard of Seagrass Lane?"

"I have." Simon's answer was abrupt, as if any talk of

Marrowbone's past made him uncomfortable.

"Is it in Purinton?" Will asked.

"Far northern edge. There used to be a fishing village along that road, but it fell to ruin years ago. Why do you want to know?"

"Will discovered that Dr. Bolt's abomination is shipped from there," Fan told Simon.

Between bites and swallows, Will explained how he'd made his discovery. Fan went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of cold milk. Gratefully, Will drank. He hadn't realized how empty his stomach was.

"So the best way for me to get there," Fan said, his brow creased in thought, "is to take Beavertail Drag east out of Taintwell, then follow the railroad tracks north. I should be able to recognize the spur from Twigby's description of the buildings. Or from the lights, since the compound certainly won't be steeped in darkness."

Will's chewing slowed as he listened.

"I could take you there," said Marrowbone, "assuming you're going after dark. And of course you'll have to go after dark. There'll be fewer staff on hand and less chance you'll be seen."

Slowly, Fan shook his head. "No. I think I'll hitch the cart to Cloudburst and ride there. If there's evidentiary material I have a chance to grab, I'm taking it."

"What about me?" Will asked, setting his plate and glass on the floor.

Fan looked at him. "What *about* you?"

"I'm going along, of course."

"Damn it, Will...."

"Damn it, nothing. You need someone to cover your back. And if we had a good enough camera with us, I could take photographs. My Uncle Penrose supplemented his sales income with photography."

"You can't take photographs in the dark," Simon pointed out. "And cameras are damned ungainly."

Fan sat forward. "No, Will might have something there. Ape Chiggeree's been working on a smaller camera that produces bursts of light. It uses power from the sun and warmth from the user's body. I'll have to check with him on the progress of his prototype." He turned to Will and put a hand on his leg. "That was a brilliant idea. We'll talk later about whether or not you come with me."

Will already knew the outcome of that talk: he'd be going along.

"Now you must look at what else I found," he said, reaching for his jacket. He pulled out the papers. "I snatched these from an exhibit building that's slated to house one of the Demimen attractions. I haven't had a chance to peruse them, so they might not reveal anything."

He handed the papers to Fan as Simon and Marrowbone got up and walked to the back of the sofa. They peered over Fan's shoulder. Will, too, leaned in to look.

The Pugilists was written at the top of the page. Below that centered phrase were shapes meticulously drawn in blue ink. Annotations and smaller drawings surrounded them.

They looked like anatomical illustrations. Here, a pair of arms; below them, a pair of arms laid open, as if in the process of dissection. Alongside these central pictures, nearly to the edges of the paper, an array of what looked like machine parts, from narrow pistons to bolts and rivets to lengths of fine cable. Lines extended from them to the arm drawings—lines, Will realized, that seemingly indicated placement.

The following page showed the same limbs with the machine parts inserted. Sometimes they seemed to replace muscles, nerves, and vessels; sometimes they seemed attached to existing anatomical structures.

Fan, his face increasingly drawn in horrified disbelief, slid aside one page after another. Depictions of hands. Then a mouth and jaw, front and profile views. Then a page of odd shapes—custom-made metal plates, from what Will could tell, in brass and nickel.

He stopped looking. The implications were too ghastly to contemplate.

“By all that’s hell-spawned...,” Simon murmured.

“Is this what you feared?” Will gently asked Fan.

“Yes. Only worse.” He continued sluggishly to flip through the pages.

“It helps explain why Mr. Hartshorn’s arm had been cut open,” said Marrowbone. He and Simon returned to their places.

Fan nodded. “It also helps explain how they get the staple ingredient of that odious potion.” After laying the pages aside, he propped his elbows on his knees and rubbed his forehead. Will stroked his back.

“It’s my guess,” said Marrowbone, “Hunzinger alit on the elixir and Demimen ideas at roughly the same time.”

“Just before the increase in arrest warrants.” Simon continued his idle stroking of Clancy’s hair, a hank of which lay across his knee like corn silk. He looked uncharacteristically somber. “Gods, I can’t believe I was duped into furthering this scheme!”

“Or helping Hunzinger profit from it,” Will murmured. The coins in his strongbox were nothing but filthy lucre now. He actually hoped they’d been confiscated during the search of his wagon.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Fan said to him. “You didn’t know what you were selling. You worked for your portion of that profit and earned it honestly.”

“It’s all the money I have in the world,” Will said miserably, “but now I can’t stand the thought of touching it.”

“Still,” said Marrowbone, “I can’t believe the vermin involved in this operation have already butchered a sufficient number of Mongrels to produce that much elixir. My guess is, most Brandeds who’ve been arrested are still sitting in institutions, where their blood is regularly drawn.”

“That’s logical,” said Will, determined to counter his guilt with action. “I’ve sold an awful lot of Dr. Bolt’s. Even if each bottle mostly contains alcohol, maybe with some cocaine and herbs thrown in, that still leaves a good deal of... other substance to account for.”

“So our residents who are sitting in Dunwood and Cinder mound and the ’Combs—”

“Are serving as a kind of reservoir,” said Marrowbone. “Probably while the overseers of this project determine which of them are suitable for reconstruction. I suspect fashioning a Demiman is a very delicate and time-consuming process.”

“And depending on what kind of exhibits Big Mister has in mind,” Simon added, “it could take even longer. Those diagrams looked mighty complicated.”

“Maybe no one’s been changed yet,” Fan murmured. He continued to sit forward, staring blankly at the rug, his hands hanging between his knees. “Maybe Twigby was to be the first.”

“We can go to Seagrass Lane tomorrow evening,” Will said to him. “That will give us all day to prepare.”

Fan regarded Will. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. He voiced no protest this time.

“I’ll have to leave before daybreak,” Simon informed them. “I’m already pushing my luck by tarrying here. I was supposed to have delivered Will to T and J by now.”

“I hope you don’t plan on following through,” Fan said acerbically.

“Of course not. But I *will* have to make an appearance to explain his absence. I’ll have to say he escaped from my

custody near Civic Center Plaza and I spent the night looking for him. Hunzinger said he wasn't going to call T and J until tomorrow morning anyway. So as of now, nobody there is expecting Will."

"That means Hunzinger doesn't know I'm missing," Will said.

"Not yet."

"And that means there's a good chance Worley can get my wagon out of Caravan Park at dawn. Hunzinger wouldn't be likely to impound it unless he considered me a fugitive. I mean, it's already been searched, so they probably just locked it up."

Fan sat up. "Did you say Worley?"

"Yes, Worley the Wagoner. That's how he's known at the Circus."

"What's his first name?"

"I'm not sure," Will said. "I might've heard it, but I can't remember."

"Could it be Emfel? And is he a thin young fellow who always wears odd-looking boots and wide gloves with the fingertips cut off?"

"Yes, that's the one. Do you know him?"

For the first time since their embrace, Fan smiled. "Worley's a Mongrel."

"What?"

Fan nodded. "He left Taintwell before he had to report for inking. Said he wanted to live in the city because the pay is better there. Most of us didn't think he'd make it. In fact, I figured he'd been arrested for not wearing a ratio and was languishing at Dunwood."

"But why would he be arrested if he can pass for human?" Simon asked.

"He *can't* pass for human. Not unless he's wearing those

gloves and boots.” Fan’s smile widened into a grin. “He has webbed hands and feet.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Will.

“Must be a hell of a swimmer,” Simon muttered.

Fan laughed. The sound lifted Will’s sunken spirits.

“The fact he’s a Mongrel should be good news,” said Marrowbone. “He can’t be an admirer of Alphonse Hunzinger, which means he isn’t likely to spout much information if he’s questioned.”

“He is very taciturn,” Will said, feeling more encouraged. “Keeps to himself, doesn’t gossip, doesn’t even fraternize with other workers.”

“Where on Whitesbain is he taking your caravan?” Fan asked. When Will told him, he said, “Good choice. Maybe I should call Mr. Tarbender at dawn and have Worley bring your wagon here.”

WHEN they all, except for Marrowbone, were too tired to talk any longer, Simon and Clancy left for whatever love nest they’d set up, and Fanule happily welcomed William into his bed. They fell asleep entwined; had fierce, joyful sex early the following morning. Being together seemed to revitalize them both.

Will fell soundly asleep afterward, but the sound of Bencross firing up his aeropod roused Fanule. He got outside just in time to see the machine billowing steam. It lifted off the ground, the blades of its rotor spinning into a blur as they chopped through the lightless air.

After brewing a cup of tonic, Fanule went back to the parlor, opened his voxbox, and gave Tarbender’s name and location to Taintwell’s connector. He didn’t have the number, but the woman who worked in the connection office could find it and patch him through.

Tarbender, a Mongrel farmer, was already awake. He and Fanule chatted for a bit, and then Fanule told him about the possible arrival of a living-wagon at his property. “When it gets there,” he said, “*if* it gets there, please have the driver proceed to my place. I’ll make sure he’s well compensated. Have him vox me if he has any questions.”

It was just after daybreak that Will awoke for the second time. As troubled as Fanule was by the hideous, organized assault on his people, he felt steeled with resolve. Marrowbone and Bencross had proved staunch allies, but it was Will’s presence—his warmth, his youthful pluckiness and resilience, the mere sight of him here—that provided the extra fuel to fire Fanule’s determination. He felt focused. He felt invincible.

Over breakfast, Will fretted about his wagon. “I hope I get it back,” he said. “It means a great deal to me.”

“You know you can stay here,” Fanule assured him. “You can stay as long as you like.”

Will reached for Fanule’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.” He smiled but still looked troubled. “That isn’t the point, though. That little caravan isn’t just a showman’s wagon. For nine years, it’s been the only home I’ve had. It represents my past. My mother’s shawl is in it. My father’s pipe. Their wedding rings and favorite books. Other small mementos. They’re important to me, Fan. And the whole wagon is saturated with my uncle’s presence. That’s important to me too.”

Fanule was moved beyond words. When he saw the sentiment in Will’s eyes, those eyes that reminded him of warm, turquoise seas, he felt a new surge of determination. “You’ll get it back,” he said fervidly. “One way or another, I promise you’ll get it back.”

As they bathed together, the promise became a reality. Rumbling and creaking, Will’s caravan, pulled by Worley’s team of well-cared-for draft horses, found a new place to

stay.

Fanule and Will bolted out of the tin tub, threw on their clothing, and rushed outside. Will's grin was brighter than the shining sun. After thanking Worley and clapping him on the back, he pulled a ring of keys from his pocket, climbed onto the hitch, and got the door open.

"Gods," Worley said with a smaller smile, "Fanule Perfidor." He removed one of his gloves and extended a webbed hand, which Fanule gladly grasped. "I almost fell over when Tarbender told me to bring the wagon here."

"Did you have any difficulty getting it out of the Circus?" Fanule asked.

"Not too much. Easing it out of the owner's space was a bit tricky, but several Gutter residents helped me. Once I got it on the main pathway, it was a straight shot to the gate."

His mention of other Gutter residents alarmed Fanule. "Those people who helped you," he said, "did they ask a lot of questions?"

"Not many. I just told them Mr. Marchman was frantic to get to an ill relative in another province. I said nothing about where I was taking the wagon."

"Good man," Fanule said with a smile. "Did any of Hunzinger's lackeys see you?"

Worley removed his other glove and shoved them both in his jacket pockets. "No, not a one. He and his staff don't show up until maybe eight o'clock, sometimes later."

"Do you think there'll be repercussions when you go back?" It was a possibility and a source of concern to Fanule, even though Worley had no knowledge of Will's motives.

Again, Worley smiled. "I'm not going back. I despise that place, and I'm sick of living a lie. Taintwell is my home. I figure I can eke out *some* kind of living around here. Besides, I've been thinking about someone since I left. I'd like to see

her again.”

Fanule was so delighted he could’ve grabbed Worley’s arms and swung into a dance. “Gods, Em, that’s wonderful to hear. Whoever the girl is, I hope she welcomes you with open arms.”

“So do I.” Worley went over to his team and began unhitching it.

“I imagine you’re curious about why Will Marchman and his wagon are here.”

Worley shrugged. “A little. I just assumed you’d come to be friends somehow. But really, it’s none of my business.”

“Where will you be staying?”

Worley nodded toward the horses. “I have everything I own in those saddlebags, including a tent. I think I’ll set up at the park until I find lodging. At least money isn’t a problem at the moment. I’ve been saving like a miser.” He crawled beneath Will’s wagon and disengaged its hinged front steps, which he’d obviously folded back and secured before moving the structure.

“Please, go feed and water your team,” Fanule said. “There’s a trough alongside the barn and some bales of alfalfa hay in a lean-to beside it.”

“Thank you. I’ll do that.”

“And if you’d like to know what’s been happening around here lately, I’d be glad to fill you in over breakfast.”

Worley cast a look over his shoulder. “I think I know what’s been going on. And I’m willing to bet it has everything to do with Hunzinger’s Mechanical Circus.” His expression grew more solemn. “That’s another reason I’m not going back.”

FANULE was happy to find out that Will’s optimistic

assumption had been correct. After yesterday's search of his wagon, and confident the young salesman was securely in a bounty hunter's custody, Hunzinger and his Strongarms had locked it up and walked away. If there *had* been plans to impound it, the conscientious Em Worley had foiled those plans.

All that was missing from Will's home were the crates of Dr. Bolt's elixir. For that, Will seemed profoundly grateful.

As Will straightened up the caravan's torn-up interior, Fanule paid a visit to Ape Chiggeree. Old Ape was enthusiastic about lending Fanule his Portable Flash Illumination Duo-Charge Camera, a name Fanule suggested he try to shorten since it was far more cumbersome than the invention itself.

"I'm thinking on it," Ape said, his silver hair gleaming in the steam- and dust-clouded confines of his cluttered workshop. Strange sounds nagged at the men from every corner—chugs and hisses, clicks and clacks. Fanule was afraid to move lest he break something or lose a finger.

Ape showed Fanule how to use the camera, then gave him a packet of photographic plates in a reinforced box. The box was small enough to fit in a jacket pocket.

"Choose your pictures wisely," said Ape. "Remember, you only have a limited number of plates. And exercise care in removing each one from the box and sliding it into the camera. If you push this button"—he pointed to one at the back of the unit—"the insertion slot will be illuminated for a couple of seconds."

Fanule nodded and thanked Ape. He now wished Will had come with him, since Will would serve as the photographer that night.

"Pamper the PFIDCC. It's my prototype, you know. But if it helps change the Monkey, it's being put to good use."

"That's what I'm hoping for," Fanule told him.

Back at home, he sat down with Will to demonstrate the camera and to work out that evening's spy mission to the warehouse cluster on Seagrass Lane. They'd wear dark clothing, snug, wide-brimmed hats, and kerchiefs around their necks. If need be, they could use the kerchiefs to cover their faces. They'd carry small lanterns. Will would have the camera and plates, and Fanule would bring a sack.

Fanule's horse, hitched to a small wagon, would be their transportation.

"If there are too many people around," Fanule said, "we'll have to leave. So the first thing we do is scan the area—see how many lights are on in the buildings, how much activity there is outside."

"We can't leave," Will countered. "We'll just have to be stealthy. Keep to the shadows. Look for darkened rooms. Whoever is there can't work all night."

"The night watchmen can. So we should probably bring lengths of twine and blindfolds, too. I can't disable them through light-sucking; the authorities would know I'd been there."

They tried to work out every detail and cover any contingency, although they knew there were bound to be situations they couldn't possibly foresee.

Around dinnertime, Bencross returned. The sound of his aeropod had made the conspirators tense. *How odd*, Fanule thought, *that just planning an illicit activity can make you think you've already been caught*. He and Will had to guard against such edginess. Being vigilant was necessary and desirable, but getting jumpy would impair their judgment.

Bencross looked a little hangdog, so Fanule poured him a glass of wine. The three men sat at the kitchen table.

"How did things go at the Truth and Justice Building?" Will asked.

Simon heaved a sigh. "I got fired." He took a drink and shrugged. "I was thinking of quitting anyway, since I've lost my taste for bounty hunting, but it's still unnerving to be out of a job."

"You'll find something else," Fanule said. "You must have other talents."

Bentcross gave him a weary but nevertheless impish half-smile.

Will rolled his eyes.

"Actually, I've become a decent aeropod mechanic. I know my way around other kinds of machinery too. Maybe I'll open a shop somewhere." Simon scrubbed at his short hair and heavily dropped his hands to the table. "I don't know. I have to reorient my thinking."

"Are they still looking for me?" Will asked.

"Just enough to placate the old man, I'm guessing. It seems Hunzinger was in a royal snit when he found out you'd slipped the hook *and* your caravan had been hauled away. But I got the impression you're considered a small fish, so any effort to find you won't be very vigorous or last very long." Simon chuckled and shook his head.

"What's so funny?" Will asked.

"While the sergeant was talking with Hunzinger over the vox, he asked if you might be with Perfidor. You know, because of Fan's card being in your wagon. The old man actually laughed. 'You couldn't find two people less suited for one another,' he said. 'Marchman isn't only a Pure; he's little more than a boy. And I don't think he's a twor, either. The Dog King would terrify him.'"

Fanule and Will looked at each other and grinned.

Chapter Fifteen

THEY set out well before nightfall so Fan could more easily guide his horse and wagon down the largely unused and overgrown Beavertail Drag. At least the weather was clear, and sunlight filtered where it could through the trees' dense crowns and overhanging branches.

Talk was minimal. Will asked questions. Fan answered them.

"Should we stay together or split up once we get there?"

"Stay together, I think."

"Is there a possibility Clancy will show up?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. He might even bring Simon with him."

Between these scraps of conversation, they had nothing to listen to but the monotonous thump of hooves, the jangle of tack, the stuttering creak of the cart's wheels. Birds chattered overhead. Small creatures rustled through the underbrush.

"Are we going to return this way?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Will's thoughts kept circling around the road called Seagrass Lane, at the end of which their destination lay. He thought he might've detoured onto it last year as he was making his way to Hunzinger's Mechanical Circus, although he couldn't remember why. Maybe he'd been lost and in need of directions, or hungry and desirous of a meal. Maybe he'd hoped to sell the remaining tonic he carried in his wagon. In any case, it was Simon's mention of that old fishing village that had piqued Will's memory. He distinctly recalled being

lured by the buildings he'd spied in the distance as he'd trundled along Foamwall Highway.

Seagrass Lane, yes. It was a road of packed dirt, pebbles, and clamshells overgrown with spindly weeds. Both sides were sparsely strewn with abandoned shanties and outhouses, the decrepit carcasses of boats, and the rotted remnants of nets, their strings dangling like dripping milk against the wheat-colored dunes.

Sand had swept over everything in deceptively graceful waves.

Seagrass Lane wasn't easily navigated by a team of horses pulling a showman's wagon. Given its desolation, there'd been no reason for Will to proceed. He'd finally turned around at a wide spot in the road where the rickety hulk of a general store leaned toward the west, its rusty tin signs clattering pitifully against decaying wood.

So he'd never made it past the stealthy shift and crawl of the dunes, never seen any newer buildings rising like arks from those dry waves. He wished now that he had.

Darkness had just begun to fall as horse and wagon came to the end of Beavertail Drag. Fan's timing had been perfect. When the railroad tracks appeared ahead, he hugged the tree line and followed the tracks to the north. As he'd predicted, their destination was easily recognizable. Fan swung a short distance into the woods, stopped, and tethered Cloudburst to a tree. The gelding would have plenty of lush, dewy greenery to munch on while he waited.

A soft glow bloomed from the other side of the rail bed, although no buildings were visible. The light could only be coming from the compound Twigby Hartshorn had been fortunate enough to escape and Will had been unfortunate enough to miss.

Fan and Will quietly walked the quarter mile to the railroad tracks, crossed the main line, then passed behind a lone boxcar sitting on the spur. And there, at the foot of a

low incline, was the compound at the end of Seagrass Lane. The sea itself lay roughly two miles to the east; the dilapidated general store, maybe half that distance.

Fan grabbed Will's arm. They sat on the embankment to reconnoiter.

Aside from a stable, four buildings—two on the right and two on the left—were all that made up this dreadful place. Low-burning gaslights, similar to the ones on Purinton's streets, were set at regular intervals before the two-story structures. Plank sidewalks ran around their perimeters and also connected each pair. Three of the buildings were clapboard. The fourth, built more sturdily of brick, had a chimney that sent a wide plume of smoke into the air. Will surmised it was a plant that generated electrical power via coal, since Hunzinger had a similar plant south of the Mechanical Circus.

The compound looked deserted. Wagons were parked here and there, but no people moved about and no night watchman's lantern washed light through the rooms of the so-called warehouses. All were dark. Will felt a spring of hope that luck was with them. It didn't matter if a man or two worked within the power plant. He and Fan didn't need to sneak in there.

Large white numbers, 1 through 4, were painted on the buildings' exterior walls. Will nudged Fan to get his attention. As he pointed to Building 4, he mimed tilting a bottle to his lips and drinking. It was there Dr. Bolt's Bloodroot Elixir originated.

Fan nodded in understanding, then pointed straight to the east. A small guardhouse, its interior flooded with light, stood beside what was obviously the main gate. Will could clearly make out the figure of the man within.

Fan turned his head and whispered against Will's ear. "We can only use our lanterns in the western rooms of the buildings, and we must stay away from the windows facing

the courtyard.”

The warmth of his lips and soft scratch of his whisker stubble set off a spangle of sparks in Will’s groin. He, too, turned his head and impulsively sealed his mouth to Fan’s. They gave in to the kiss for a brief, indulgent moment, their tongues darting out to meet, before the most astonishing words drifted inaudibly from Will’s throat: “I love you.”

Fan didn’t hear them, and Will was instantly relieved. He didn’t know what had possessed him.

He distracted himself by studying the guard, although it was impossible to make out the man’s age and build from this distance. He shouldn’t pose a problem, though. Will suspected he spent most of his shift either sleeping or keeping a semi-watchful eye on Seagrass Lane. It was, after all, the only approach to the compound. One would have to be riding a camel or driving a rare and costly, as well as loud, sand steamer to get there any other way.

Unless, of course, one didn’t mind jumping on and off freight trains or negotiating the neglected road through the woods on the other side of the tracks.

After Fan gave a nod to Warehouse 4, they scrambled down the embankment on their rumps and approached the door on the west side of the building—another blessing. If all four of these rectangular structures had a door on each side, Will and Fan could enter and exit with minimal risk of being spotted by the guard.

It was apparent Hunzinger had never expected uninvited visitors at this grisly extension of his Circus.

Fan had brought two skeleton keys, one of which came from Ape Chiggeree. Simon had slipped Fan the second key before they’d left Taintwell. If neither worked, they would have to climb in a window. Will checked his pockets for the camera and plates as Fan attempted to open the door lock. With a click that sent out an alarming echo and made Will’s heart leap, the lock disengaged.

A fetid odor that rivaled the tanneries' seemed to balloon out the door. It bore an unmistakable similarity, albeit in more concentrated form, to the smell that wafted from each bottle of Dr. Bolt's elixir. Grimacing, Fan and Will simultaneously lifted their kerchiefs over their noses, lit their lanterns, and began to prowl.

This building was indeed the brewing, bottling, and shipping center for Dr. Bolt's. Crates on pallets took up a portion of the ground floor. The rest was given over to tables and conveyor belts that seemed set up for labeling and boxing. Hunzinger probably imported his bottles from a special manufactory.

Will took only two photographs. The more incriminating part of the operation, he figured, was upstairs.

He was right. It was on the second floor that the stuff was blended and bottled. Although Will had to fight off gagging at the putrid smell, he tried to keep his wits about him and capture a couple of good images.

Hideous, imagining what was in those vats and copper boilers, what flowed through those ducts and pipes and funnels. The cartons stacked about in groups contained empty bottles and the elixir's more inoffensive ingredients, but there was nothing innocuous about the thick-walled vault cooled with blocks of ice. Will glanced at Fan and saw the skin around his eyes pucker when they pulled open the vault's door.

Will took a photograph of the dated bottles of Mongrel blood. Fan put one in the sack he'd brought, which already contained an empty bottle and a label.

They exited the building through the same door. Rather than cross the open courtyard, they crept along the railway embankment to the other side of the compound and entered Building 3.

It was full of rooms—examining rooms and operating rooms and recovery rooms, or so Will deduced—and many of

them were full of equipment. Medical and mechanical and even photographic equipment, and apparatus Will couldn't identify. There were shelves and cabinets lined with instruments that glinted when the dim lantern light touched them. And strange metal parts that glinted, too. There were sponges and bandages and splints, bottles of alcohol and chloroform and opiates.

The rooms were all fitted with electric light bulbs, which certainly suited their terrifying purposes.

"Thank goodness nobody's in these beds," Fan whispered in one of the rooms.

It must have been his greatest fear to find a Mongrel hacked to pieces and stitched or wired or bolted back together, custom-made plates forming a metal carapace over parts of his body. Will wondered how Hunzinger had planned on keeping his Demimen quiet. By cutting out their tongues? Capping their mouths or gluing them shut?

Will took more photographs in Building 3 than he'd intended. He only had two plates remaining when he and Fan exited through the east door and entered the west door of Building 1.

This and the power plant were the structures closest to the main gate. Will and Fan had to keep themselves oriented so they wouldn't carry lit lanterns into any rooms facing either the courtyard or the guardhouse. They poked about what appeared to be offices, with people's names and positions stenciled on the doors' frosted-glass panes, so they were likely in the administration building.

One office near the rear yielded the most incriminating evidence of all.

The entire south wall was lined with full-body photographs of naked Mongrels. Front shots and side shots and rear shots. Fan looked stricken when he saw them. "They've all gone missing or been arrested," he whispered as his gaze moved over the images. Each series of four was

divided in the middle by a piece of paper with typewritten notations. On the upper half were the Mongrel's name, gender, age, ratio, height, weight, and current place of incarceration. On the lower half, the most shocking bits of information. *Testing* read the top line; at the opposite margin, spaces labeled "Date Scheduled" and "Done." Then *Prep*, with the same corresponding spaces. Then *Operation*, with spaces for date, time, and room.

The final line on the page was perhaps the most dreadful: *Exhibit*.

Will stepped back and took his last two photographs.

He and Fan were about to leave the building—they couldn't rifle through desks and file cabinets without considerably brighter light—when Fan swept his lantern over a desk near the door. He lifted a piece of paper and read, his brow furrowing as he did so, then motioned for Will to join him.

*Need new trial subject without powers.
Superintendent contacted, 23rd
A.H. approval, 24th
EA notified, 24th*

His face sternly set, Fan slipped the note into his pocket. "Let's go," he murmured.

AFTER placing his canvas sack in the cart, Fan drew Will into his arms and held him close. "Thank you," he said, then kissed Will's hair.

Will closed his eyes. Puzzling words again burbled up in his mind: *I love you. I'd do most anything for you*. This time, he said nothing but "You're welcome, Fan." He knew his emotions were running high, and he must guard against misinterpreting them.

They lumbered back the way they'd come, their lanterns hanging on iron rods that extended from the wagon on either side of Cloudburst and helped both horse and driver see their way. The journey through the dark wood seemed to take forever. By the time they got back to Fan's house, they were exhausted. But the little wagon had to be unhitched, Cloudburst had to be put up for the night, Fan had to empty the canvas sack of the items he'd made off with, and Will had to find a safe, dark place for the camera and photographic plates. Ape Chiggeree would develop the pictures in the morning.

Fan dropped onto the sofa and briefly covered his face with his hands. Will sat beside him. When Fan lowered his hands, the left immediately found Will's right and grasped it. He gave Will a weary smile, laden with more affection and gratitude than Will could ignore. More feelings stirred. He couldn't seem to quash them.

Before he could move closer to his lover, Clancy Marrowbone glided into the room.

"I'm surprised you didn't join us," Fan said to him.

"Ah, but I did. You simply didn't notice me." With his usual laconic air, Marrowbone folded himself into a chair. "I was only there in the event you needed help, but you appear to have done quite well without me."

"Where's Simon?" Will asked.

"At our place, asleep. He's feeling glum. You'd think the poor man had been castrated instead of having lost a rather odious job."

"It's all he's done for years," said Will. "I think he defined himself through that odious job."

"Redefinition is a part of life, Will," said Marrowbone.

"Where *is* 'your place', anyway?" Fan asked the vampire.

"In addition to my sleeping ground—and of course I won't tell you where *that* is—I also have a room at the

Graybanks' boardinghouse. They're quite fond of me, you know, since I spared their twins the ordeal of branding. I needed a room for entertaining guests, so I got one there." Marrowbone cocked his head. "As it turns out, Simon has been my only guest."

"You're fond of him, aren't you," Fan said gently.

Marrowbone blushed. Incredulous, Will stared at him. For whatever reason, Will didn't think any vampire, but Marrowbone in particular, *could* blush.

Clancy sighed. "I can't, for the long life of me, begin to explain why."

Fan gave Will an amused glance and took his hand. "Now it's time for us to retire to *our* place."

"You mean...?" Will pointed over his shoulder at the bedroom. He'd expected to sleep in his caravan, for he hadn't been invited here. In fact, he'd been told to stay away.

Fan chuckled softly. "I swear, your humility can be as maddening as other people's vanity."

THE following ten days were, for Fanule, a time of revelations and realizations. Being the Eminence of Taintwell meant more than having an honorary title and a position that came with little responsibility. Being the lover of Will Marchman meant more than having an appealing young man at hand for the sake of physical pleasure. And being a Mongrel or a Pure meant nothing.

Old definitions disintegrated and new ones took shape as Fanule plotted a course toward Taintwell's, and his own, future.

Redefinition is a part of life.

He organized evidence: recorded on paper his own experiences and observations; took statements from William and Simon to supplement the stack of statements he already

had from Taintwell's residents, including Twigby Hartshorn; gathered together the physical proof of abuse, either actual or planned—the photographs and bottles, diagrams and notes. William helped him with everything, including the conduct of his own life.

"You must stop now and eat," he would say in his mild but firm way, or "It's time to take your tonic," or "A short nap won't set us back." They exchanged touches whenever they were near each other—gave fingers a quick squeeze, delivered an appreciative rub to a rear end, lightly caressed back or arm or thigh. Each touch was a connective charge, and their lovemaking, whether impromptu or expected, revitalized Fanule.

He drew up a list of demands based on his recent discoveries as well as Taintwellians' longstanding and ongoing complaints. He contacted Mr. and Mrs. Stitch, proprietors of a large hotel at the southern end of Whitesbain Plank Road, to arrange for use of their meadow. He "fed the grapevine" in Taintwell by asking Ape Chiggeree and several other prominent citizens to spread the word about an event he was planning. It wouldn't have been prudent to put a notice in the newspaper. Anybody could read *The Well*, but not anybody could become privy to news that was murmured from neighbor to neighbor. Taintwellians kept the fruits of their grapevine within their community.

Finally, Fanule sent letters to the Lord High Mayor of Purinton and Mr. Alphonse Hunzinger, inviting them to a meeting "on neutral ground."

Our small conference will take place outdoors, he wrote, just after nightfall in the meadow across from the highly reputable White Inn on Whitesbain Plank Road. Here, beneath the shelter of an open-air tent at a location that is neither in Purinton nor in Taintwell, none of us will feel at a disadvantage. Our ease should allow us to engage in civilized discourse. I have proposals you might find of interest. Feel free to draw up and present your own.

I urge you both to attend. Our accommodations will be simple but sufficient. Be aware, however, that any show of strength or implication thereof, either on the ground or in the air, will result in the abortion of this meeting and leave me with no choice but to resolve certain matters as I see fit. Your refusal to appear will yield the same consequence.

You have nothing to fear from me. It is not my intent to harm anyone. I seek only to foster a happy coexistence between the city of Purinton and the village of Taintwell. Be assured I speak for all my constituents, who wish for nothing more than peaceable and respectful intercourse with their Purintonian neighbors.

*Yours in trust,
Fanule Perfidor
Eminence of Taintwell*

Will helped Fanule with the letter's composition.

Of course, the Eminence hadn't been completely forthright about the purpose or circumstances of this meeting. Honesty would've been self-defeating. What's more, neither Pushbin nor Hunzinger deserved honorable treatment. It was true Fanule had no intention of harming anybody, but he fully intended to come with his own show of force. He just wouldn't reveal it unless he had no other choice.

"I'm counting on them to be intrigued enough to show up," he told Will.

"I think they'll be intrigued, all right," Will answered, "but you might also want to count on them circumventing your conditions. I can't imagine Pushbin or Hunzinger coming to meet you without some kind of backup. They don't trust you, Fan. They know you're a light sucker. So don't be surprised if they either insist on being allowed a security detail or they sneak one onto the site. I'll wager they won't

show up without protection.”

Will made sense, and it turned out he was right. Pushbin contacted Fanule by voxbox just hours after receiving his letter. He and Mr. Hunzinger were considering the offer, he said, but were concerned about “not being allowed any bodyguards.”

“I’ll be there by myself,” Fanule responded. “You’ll be able to see that I’m alone when you arrive. The point of meeting in a meadow is that there’s no place for would-be attackers to hide.”

Pushbin seemed somewhat reassured when he learned Fanule would be alone, but the mayor still haggled with him. They finally agreed that each of them could be accompanied by no more than two men, including the drivers of their vehicles. Fanule insisted those extra men remain a certain distance away from the conference tent. And so they haggled about the appropriate distance.

In the end, though, Pushbin agreed to the meeting. In the end, Fanule still didn’t trust him or Hunzinger.

There was one last detail to attend to. After debating with himself for days and consulting with Marrowbone about enlisting the aid of Simon Bencross, Fanule approached the disenfranchised bounty hunter.

“Have you ever worked with explosives, or incendiary devices?” Fanule asked one day as Simon pattered with his aeropod behind Fanule’s house.

“Twice. Why?”

“How would you feel about destroying some buildings after making certain no people were in them? I know of three Taintwellians who’d be willing and able to help.”

“Sounds like fun,” Simon replied.

Fanule was ready to battle the dragon.

Chapter Sixteen

THREE lamps burned on the large round table Fanule had borrowed from the White Inn, and only three chairs were set around it. The canopy that covered the meeting area was large enough to allow for comfortable movement around the table. Veils of mosquito netting served as walls.

Fanule arrived at the site first. He'd put the materials for his presentation in a wood box, and this he set on the ground beside his chair. Then he went back to his horse and wagon and waited for his guests to arrive.

Around mid-afternoon, the inn's proprietors had called Fanule and told him a group of men had shown up in the meadow. Mr. Stitch had hurried outside to see what they were up to, but it seemed all they were doing was examining the lay of the land. They walked along, sweeping their feet through the grasses and wildflowers, and peered at the surrounding distant woods and farm fields. Then they looked beneath the canopy, where there was little to see. And then they departed.

Fanule assured the innkeepers there was nothing to be concerned about. Pushbin and Hunzinger were obviously being overly cautious. "That's what I figured," said Mrs. Stitch. "It's always the most untrustworthy people who are the least trusting of others."

Hunzinger and Pushbin arrived in two separate but equally ostentatious steamers. Each man sat beside his driver and had a third person stationed in the rear seat. Fanule had driven his own conveyance, the small, horse-drawn wagon, and *his* men had both ridden in the back. Now, though, they both sat on the driver's bench as Fanule

stood beside Cloudburst.

The steamers were parked roughly fifty yards to the south of the tent, on the Purinton side of the meadow. The cart stood roughly fifty yards to the north of the tent, on the Taintwell side of the meadow. In spite of the distance that separated the two groups of attendees, they seemed to be facing off like knights at a jousting tournament.

Fanule glanced up at Will, perhaps for inspiration and a final infusion of strength, and Will gave him a smile of encouragement. Then he glanced at Clancy Marrowbone, just to make sure the vampire's distinctive hair wasn't visible beneath the hood of his cloak, but Marrowbone didn't acknowledge his look. The vampire's gaze was trained on Fanule's adversaries.

The three principals simultaneously approached the tent, their footfalls rustling through the grass.

Fanule, who got there first, pulled aside the mosquito netting and stepped up to his seat at the table. He remained standing. This would be, he realized, the first time he'd come face-to-face with Alphonse Hunzinger.

Pushbin, looking edgy and defensive, entered the tent first. Fanule acknowledged him with a nod. The mayor cleared his throat as his gaze skittered around the table. Fanule waited for the larger bulk of Hunzinger to slip between the veils. And when it did—when that fleshy, whiskered face appeared, scowling through the lamplight, and those eyes, as charmless as plugs of tobacco, fixed on Fanule's face—palpable hatred filled the tent. It came from two sources and virtually gushed across the table.

Hunzinger seemed grudgingly impressed by Fanule's appearance and stature. There'd been an almost imperceptible lift to his heavy brows and a tic betrayed by his facial hair when the two of them finally stood facing one another. "There's no preparing for standing beside you and seeing you up close," Will had once told him, and this had

indeed been borne out by Fanule's experience with other people.

Using his height to his advantage, Fanule stood ramrod straight, his arms crossed over his chest, and gazed at Hunzinger from beneath slightly lowered eyelids. "Permit me to introduce myself," he said coolly. "I am Fanule Perfidor, the Eminence of Taintwell." He smiled, with even less warmth. "The Dog King."

"I know who you are," Hunzinger muttered. "Why are we here?"

Fanule lowered his arms. "Let's take a seat—shall we?—and I'll explain." He pulled out his chair.

The other two men reluctantly did the same.

"Mr. Pushbin," Fanule said, refusing to address him as *mayor*, "I'd brought you a petition and asked that you respond to it within a fortnight. But I've heard nothing, either from you or from anybody in your office."

"We're very busy," Pushbin said peevishly. "The issues facing Purinton take precedence over the grumblings of disaffected Mongrels."

Fanule's pot of hatred again began to simmer. "We're merely 'disaffected', you say."

"For the most part."

"Would you also say that being the target of a hired assassin is good cause for disaffection?"

Pushbin's eyes shifted around. "I don't know what—"

"And I beg to differ," Fanule said, leaning forward and skewering the mayor with his gaze. "You know *exactly* what. You know all about the nutless weasel named Robin Thornwood and the scorpion called Hackenslash."

The flickering lamplight seemed to lap all the color and firmness out of Pushbin's face.

"What does any of this have to do with me?" Hunzinger snapped. "I'm merely a businessman." He'd tried to sound

indignant at being put-upon, like an innocent man unfairly stained with guilt through association, but there was tension in his voice.

“I’m getting to that,” Fanule said.

He began drawing items from the box at his feet. As he put each one on the table, he explained the progression of events that had led to an unavoidable conclusion: a conspiracy against Mongrels was afoot, and it involved City Hall, every agency within the Truth and Justice Building, and Hunzinger’s Mechanical Circus.

His guests couldn’t dispute the seamless logic that resulted from fitting together the personal accounts and physical evidence. Although Hunzinger was outraged by some of Fanule’s materials, for it was clear they’d been acquired through trespassing, snooping, and theft, he had no defense for the existence of those damning materials.

At one point, when Hunzinger seemed to reach the height of his impotent fury, he rose from the table and pulled aside the cascade of netting. Fanule thought he might be leaving, but he merely stared into the darkness and drew deep breaths. After ten seconds, he resumed his seat.

He might have calmed his temper, but he hadn’t conceded defeat. That much was evident from his bearing. “Why should we take you seriously?” he asked. “We know most Mongrels have no special powers. They’re simply... freaks of nature. And we know Taintwell has no organized government, much less any kind of militia.”

As Fanule considered his answer, he noticed that Pushbin had grown distinctly more ill at ease. His gaze swerved over his shoulder, although there was nothing to see, then to Hunzinger’s face, then over his other shoulder. It was just as Fanule realized something must be going on, something he was unaware of, that he heard movement in the grass—a soft, steady whisper of displaced blades and stems.

Fanule bolted from his chair just as he heard Will shout, “Fan, get down!” He immediately dropped to the ground.

For countless moments, chaos reigned. A gunshot tore through the night, a man uttered a strangled cry of shock and terror, Pushbin and Hunzinger tried to duck beneath the table, Will rushed into the tent and immediately dove for Fanule, asking if he was hurt, and Clancy Marrowbone’s voice sounded from somewhere above.

“You can get up now, Fan,” he said, placid as a pigeon.

With Will still touching his back and gripping his arm, Fanule rose to his feet. Pushbin and Hunzinger struggled up from beneath the table. The mayor, his eyes like saucers, stumbled backward and clumsily fell into his chair. Hunzinger’s hand flew to his throat as a startled sound came from his mouth.

Petrified, they stared at the figure in the middle of the table.

“Hello,” said Marrowbone. “As you gentlemen know, I’m not the Eminence of anything, unless it’s a room full of rather short people.” He licked his lips in a leisurely way. “Or lifeless bodies.”

“You always did know how to make an entrance, Clancy,” Fanule said as he resumed his seat.

Marrowbone, who’d been kneeling on all fours, lackadaisically fell back on his haunches. Blood streaked the lower half of his face. He held a pistol in his left hand.

His gaze slid over Pushbin and Hunzinger, dousing them with contempt. “You silly, overfed, overconfident cockroaches. You stupid, stupid bugs. What were you thinking? When are you going to learn that attempting to cause harm to innocent people will only get you into trouble?” Clancy lifted the pistol and regarded it as his awe-inspiring tongue swept over his lips, savoring the blood that still clung there.

Pushbin's shoulders bounced as his cheeks puffed out. He clamped a hand over his mouth.

"If that disgusts you," said Will, "try drinking some Dr. Bolt's Bloodroot Elixir."

Hunzinger glared at him. "You *have* been diddling Perfidor, you miserable, traitorous little twor. How did you get away from Bencross?"

Will's face melted into a cherubic smile. "Maybe I've been diddling him, too."

Fanule chuckled. He wanted to grab Will and kiss him. Even Clancy grinned.

Hunzinger and then Pushbin began to get up. Marrowbone lazily waved the pistol in front of their faces. "I suggest you both sit down and remain seated until Mr. Perfidor dismisses you." His forehead creased. "Do you truly have no idea how fast I can move? Your scorpion just found out. Would you also like a demonstration?" He swiped two fingers past a corner of his mouth and sucked them clean.

"Clancy," Fanule said, resuming his seat, "please take a moment to clean up. You might want to turn your back while you do it." He knew the vampire routinely carried a large handkerchief and two flasks with him—one filled with spirits of alcohol, the other with water—as well as a sprig of wintergreen or mint. He was very fastidious.

Marrowbone placed the pistol between Fanule and Will. He leapt from the table as nimbly as a praying mantis and stood facing the meadow. "You might want to look to the west," he said to the men at his back.

The four men in the tent turned their heads toward the White Inn, which sat directly across Whitesbain Plank Road. Its lights were no longer visible. Instead, hundreds of dark silhouettes packed the area between conference tent and highway. More figures trickled around the tent until the temporary shelter was encircled.

“Who are *they*?” Pushbin breathed out.

“The people you and Mr. Hunzinger must answer to,” Fanule said.

Feeding the grapevine had worked marvelously well. The Branded Mongrels of Taintwell had been more than happy to congregate at the White Inn and the outbuildings behind it. They were supposed to wait for a signal from the Eminence before flowing into the meadow, but the ruckus caused by Marrowbone’s surprise attack on the creeping scorpion had apparently drawn them outside.

“I told you something like this would happen,” Hunzinger growled at Pushbin.

“If you’re so prescient,” Fanule said caustically, “why didn’t you tell *me* a scorpion would be riding with the mayor?”

Hunzinger didn’t answer. Pushbin winced. They both pulled their arms against their bodies and curled their shoulders in, as if trying to contract themselves into unnoticeable specks.

Fanule could see what their plan had been: have the scorpion slither through the grass and up to the tent after one of them summoned him. The man would pop up at the gap Hunzinger had left in the wall of netting, point his gun at the Eminence, and fire. If the scorp was swift and agile, as most of them certainly were, Fanule would’ve had precious little time to react.

Hunzinger and Pushbin would undoubtedly have gathered up all of Fanule’s evidence and beat a hasty retreat. They would’ve said the shooter was some crazed stranger who came out of nowhere. Later, the Enforcement Agency might’ve even claimed they’d captured him and discovered he was an escapee from the Cinderhound Asylum.

“We Mongrels have been easy targets until now,” Fanule said to his guests. “First, because we’ve had no champions in Purinton, thanks to the demonization that’s gone on for

countless years. Second, because most Mongrels have no special powers with which to defend themselves.”

Will, who stood behind Fanule, asked in surprise, “Then why draw their blood to put in a tonic?”

“Because of other characteristics. Like longevity, sharp senses, sexual endurance, athletic prowess. Mongrels possess quite an array, depending on lineage.”

Hunzinger, his face expressionless, turned down his eyes.

Fanule slid one last piece of paper across the table. “The petition I gave you, Mr. Pushbin, is no longer a petition. It’s now a list of demands. Here’s an addendum. There will be no compromises.”

“You can’t coerce us,” Pushbin muttered.

Fanule arched one eyebrow. “No?”

His gaze shifted from Pushbin’s florid face to the tongue of flame clinging to a lamp wick. The flame elongated for a moment, stretching toward him, leaving a smear of black soot on the chimney. Then, in a blink, the light was gone. Hunzinger and Pushbin drew back in their chairs as the mayor made an abrupt sound that stuck in his throat. They could obviously see the flare of illumination in Fanule’s eyes.

“I assure you, gentlemen, many Mongrels *do* have special powers. You just don’t know who those Mongrels are. Or what they can do. We have among us an air spinner, animal caller, fog weaver, rearranger, and earth shaker. There are others as well. Like that stinger who got away from you.” He paused, then motioned to his left. “Oh, and let us not forget Mr. Marrowbone, who has quite a few acquaintances. It would be in your best interest not to underestimate what we’re capable of doing.”

Pushbin chewed on something that wasn’t there. “So you’re saying if these ‘demands’—he gave the newly introduced paper a petulant flick with his fingertips—“aren’t

met, you'll unleash those creatures on all of Purinton?"

"No. Those *creatures*," Fanule said, "myself included, would only be unleashed against specific targets. And only as a last resort. Another part of our plan is to contact newspapers throughout this and other provinces and expose the sordid underbelly of Purinton."

Marrowbone, the blood washed from his skin, turned to face the gathering. "Seems to me," he said, "the Lord High Mayor and his staff have little recourse but to resign, and Mr. Hunzinger has little choice but to sell his circus and retire to a distant land."

"That sounds like a good start," Will said, curling a hand over Fanule's shoulder.

Fanule covered Will's hand with his own.

Pushbin opened then closed his mouth. He glumly perused the list of demands. Hunzinger looked deflated. His gaze moved continuously over the restless, shadowy figures outside the tent, as if their stares and muted chatter and occasional bursts of laughter meant they were plotting his doom.

Fanule didn't tell his neighbors they could go home now. He wanted the effect of their presence to settle deep within the suited and bejeweled men at the table.

Suddenly, Pushbin looked from the page to Fanule. "You want to raze the Truth and Justice Building?"

"Yes." At that moment, he felt William tenderly stroke the hair over his ears. "A team of Taintwellians will handle the demolition."

"But—"

"No compromise," Fanule said frigidly.

The crowd in the meadow sent up a collective, questioning murmur. Light pulsed into the sky in the northeast, past Granite Point Lighthouse. Shortly thereafter, faint rumblings came from the same direction.

The stark realization that a deathblow had been struck drained the last vestiges of smugness from Alphonse Hunzinger's face.

"It's too bad," Fanule said quietly, "that the dunes won't reclaim Civic Center Plaza the way they'll be reclaiming Seagrass Lane."

Epilogue

THE day would have been perfect, Will thought, if only the city of Purinton hadn't been wheezing away and smirching the sky to the west. So when he and Fan reached the top of the observation tower, the wind ruffling their hair and clothing as if in playful welcome, he immediately faced the sea. In spite of the omnipresent haze, the sun still managed to carve diamond points into the waves.

He glanced to the immediate south, but only briefly. The Marvelous Mechanical Circus was speckled like an anthill with moving figures. It looked cleaner somehow, although it really wasn't much different... except for no longer bearing Alphonse Hunzinger's name. The Big Mister had taken his big money and departed for warmer climes.

Fan's arms came around Will's waist as he stood at the railing. He nuzzled and kissed Will's neck, and a shiver ran down Will's arms and legs. He rubbed his head against Fan's, relishing the catch of their hair. Gulls wheeled like shards of ivory against a sky that was much bluer to the east than it was to the west.

"Do you think anything will change for long?" Will asked. He'd found it difficult to slough off *all* his pessimism. The exodus of one clutch of amoral people didn't mean there weren't more, salivating to take their places.

"Oh, I suspect the workings of City Hall won't change too much," Fan said, the side of his face still resting against Will's hair. "There'll still be corruption, laziness, incompetence. But as long as the politicians and their lackeys stop treating Mongrels and twors like offal, we've triumphed. I'm happy with that."

He was. Will had been able to tell. Fan had seemed strong and serene since the meeting in the meadow. He still took Lizabetta's powder, of course. Even a major victory couldn't alter that aspect of his being, any more than it could restore his once-beautiful ears. But there now seemed to be stillness at his center, an anchored contentment that couldn't be disrupted by temporary episodes of mania or melancholy.

Will had known for a while that his love for Fan certainly couldn't be disrupted. Or ignored. That's what now comprised *his* center.

"Think you'll accept the new owners' invitation to sell here again?" Fan asked.

"Only if they accept my terms," Will said. "I choose the product, I get a larger cut of the take, and I only sell when I want to."

Fan snickered against the nape of Will's neck and, with his lips, pulled at the straggling hair that needed trimming. "Should I expect your new sense of power to show up in our bedroom?" He tightened his grip on Will's waist and more languorously kissed his neck, his warm lips pressing and lingering. "Would you like to have your way with me, William? Would you like me to submit to your desires?"

The proposition was so arousing, it lightened Will's head and weighted his genitals. He turned to face Fan, his cock rapidly hardening. "You want me to take control?"

"Occasionally, yes."

"Gods."

Their mouths teased one another—a quick flex of lips, a touch of tongues.

"Right now," Will said breathlessly, "what I want more than anything is for you to fuck me while I stand at this railing and imagine taking *you*." He pushed his stiffness against Fan's.

“You sorely tempt me, William.”

“Good. Because I need you to do something. And the sooner, the better.”

Fan massaged Will’s cock with his own. “Would waiting be agony?”

“You know it would.” If this kept up, Will would soon mess himself and his underclothes. But the friction of their contact was so exquisite, he couldn’t bring himself to back away. “I suppose... we’d be inviting arrest... if other visitors... came up here and saw us.”

Fan kept rocking against him, coaxing him. “I suppose we would, since Clancy isn’t here to spirit us away.” He lightly grasped Will’s arms and led him away from the platform’s railing. “I have an idea.” Gripping the right edge of his cloak, Fan lifted his hand to Will’s left shoulder. The spill of dark cloth now served as a curtain. “Free both our cocks. Squeeze them together and pump them. No one will see.”

The idea alone put Will on the edge of climax. His hands quaked as he fumbled to undo the flap of his trousers. Once he’d loosed his own rigid prick, his fingers tripped over Fan’s fingers as Fan continued to undo his own buttons. Will could feel the rod beneath them. He butted his own bare rod against the ridge. When the flap finally fell, his hand worked with Fan’s to pull out that hot length of flesh and seal it against his own.

Accompanied by the voices of a man and woman, footsteps shuddered up the tower’s zigzagging flights of stairs.

“Don’t stop,” Fan whispered.

Will couldn’t stop if his life depended on it. Feeling Fan’s stiff cock nestled against his made him mindless with excitement. Legs trembling beneath him, he held their jacks together, root to crown, and firmly began stroking. The platform trembled beneath his feet.

He and Fan had company.

Will couldn't suppress the thin, quavering *ahh* that came from his mouth with each exhalation. Fan had often said the sound drove him mad with lust. Recalling that confession only made Will whimper more.

What must that couple be thinking?

"It's all right, lad," Fan said, cupping the back of Will's downturned head with his free hand. "She isn't the only girl in the world. You'll find another."

"No... I won't. Ahh... ahh...."

"Don't grieve so. Tears will only make your eyes burn."

Will licked his lips as he watched a droplet appear at the hole of his cock, then a droplet appear at the hole of Fan's. He swiped a finger over both and lifted the moisture to his mouth. The fingers of his other hand moved over the sleek plumpness of the nestled heads, gently pinching each apex, then fondling the sensitive skin below each brim. Fan let out a sharp breath as his hips pitched forward. Will resumed pumping.

Gulls swooped and screeched over the tower, as if trying to draw attention to this illicit activity.

"Billy, please... stop crying." Fan's strained words ended in a low moan.

Climax gripped Will, the thrill of it sapping the strength from his muscles. His whole body trembled. Two seconds later, cream began to spurt out of Fan's cock. Their essence mingled as it coated their crowns and dribbled down Will's fisted hand.

The couple who'd been on the platform with them began to descend, their soft, wondering voices trailing behind them.

Fan rested his head against Will's. They snickered between labored breaths.

"We're beasts," Will said. "Shameless."

"And the seagulls knew it, fucking judgmental birds."

Still laughing, they pulled handkerchiefs from their pockets, swabbed at each other's cock, and made themselves presentable once more. When they straightened, they kissed.

"By the way," Fan said as he looked into Will's eyes, "there's something I neglected to tell you when we were on Seagrass Lane."

Will gave him a bewildered look. That disturbing adventure was weeks in the past. Why resurrect it now?

"I should've said something as we sat on the embankment."

"Said what?"

"I love you too, William. Very much." Tenderly, Fan smiled.

Will remembered then—the whispered declaration that had come from his own lips, so unexpectedly that it had startled him. "You heard me."

"I heard you."

"I meant it," Will said. "I think I was afraid to mean it, but I meant it."

"I know."

They were about to step into each other's arms when Will noticed something drifting from the sky. A gull dove past the platform, circled out to sea, then turned back toward the dunes. Reflexively, Will snatched at what was falling.

"Look, Fan," he said with a delighted laugh. "Poor thing must've been carrying these to a nest. Or thought they were food." Will held up two ribbons, one blue and one violet.

Fan stared at them. His wide eyes turned up to Will's face. Slowly, his mouth stretched into the most dazzling smile Will had ever seen. He grabbed Will and held him close.

Will chuckled, bemused. "They're only ribbons, Fan."

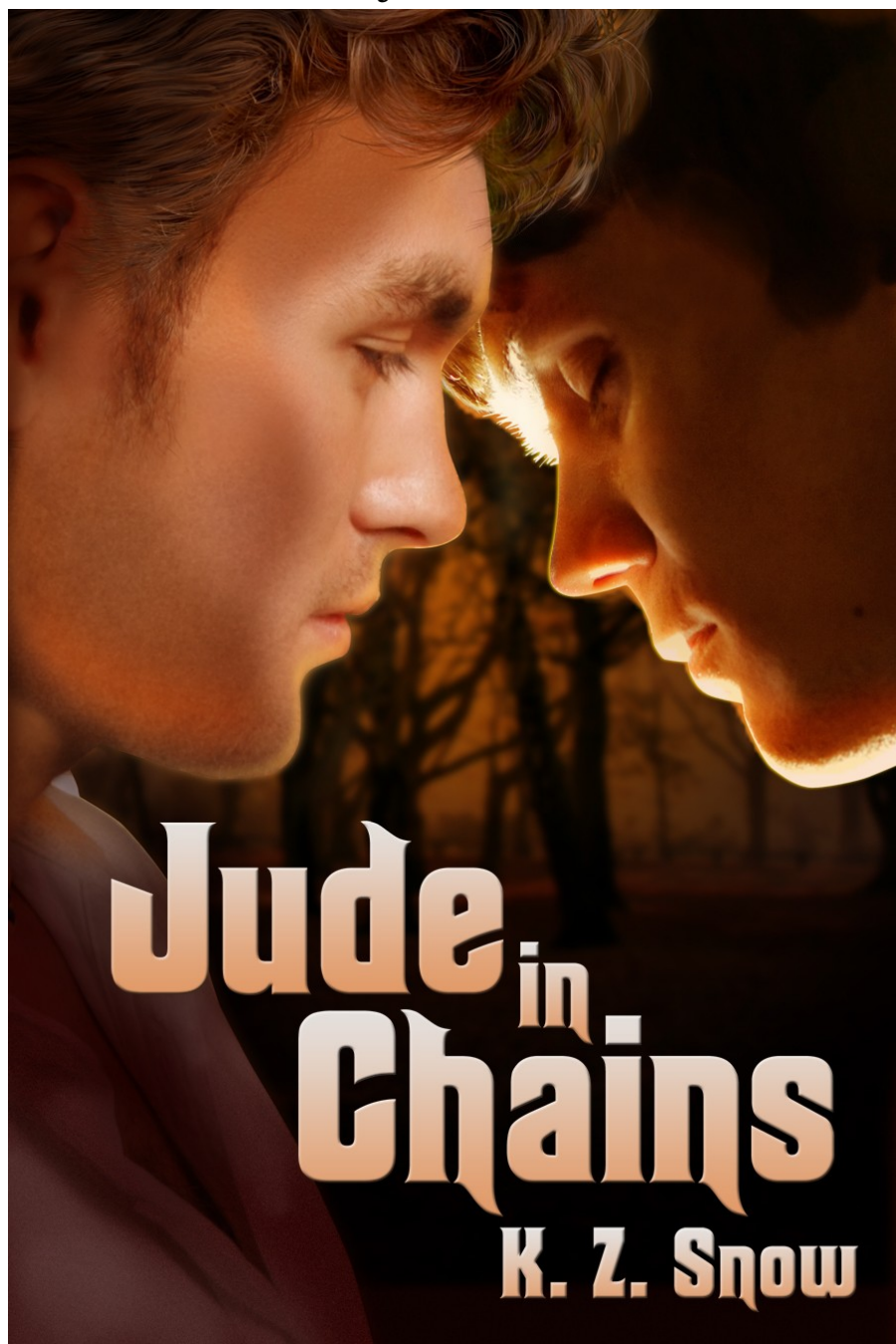
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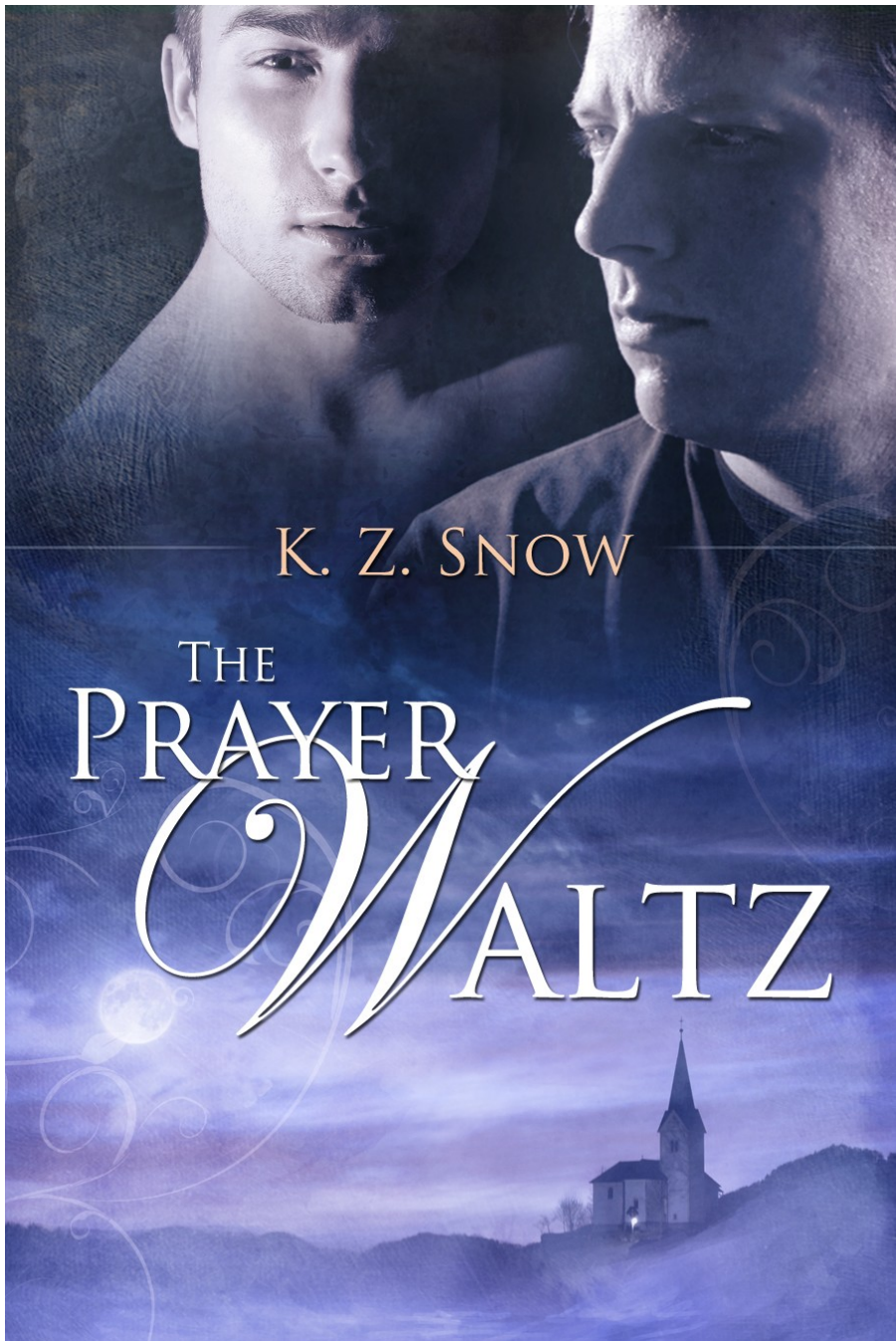
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