



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Diggers

Copyright © 2006 by Dallas Coleman

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

ISBN: 978-1-60370-019-1, 1-60370-019-6

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press electronic edition / May 2007

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

<http://www.torquerepress.com>

Diggers
By Dallas Coleman

Prologue

He touched the edge of hysteria with the tip of his tongue, moaning low as it burned, flamed, traveled in white-hot pulses along his nerves until it settled in the base of his cock and squeezed like a tiny fist. He heard the low laughter as he fucked the air, hips working like a dog's, desperate to find release, ease, something beyond the endless agony of need that kept him caged.

Not pleasure that held him, the need scraped upon his bones like a dull blade, the slide and tear ringing in his ears. This, this took desire and twisted it in and on itself over and over, thorns catching upon themselves until all that was love and honor became ripped and caught, blood flowing through shattered silk.

The stone against his back formed to him, clung to his skin, to the feathers matted and broken along his spine, the chains buried deep within its only imperfection. Rusted now, and weak, they were more a reminder than a bond. His hands caught and mitted by so much more than iron.

Fingers – or were they claws? They could be claws, curled and sharp, damp with the lingering essence of the thousands that came before him – tickled along his thighs, pushing up and up in the join where leg met hip, his arch unmistakable, the pain too dull to be agony, too sharp to be ignored. Then the agony, as bone mashed against joint, the ligaments screaming as they stretched.

Speranzo shifted, the tug in behind him devastating, and his head tossed, matted clumps of hair falling free like dull brass. The circle of men was eternal, the bloodied fingers, the constant chant, the patience in knowing that another would come until he fell, shattered at their feet, another trophy in the endless war and...

Something sparkled, shimmered in the sea of ebony. Quick and bright like a vision, a promise. Then it came again, and yet again, ringing within him like the tiny silver bells that dotted his mother's cloak, the veil in her long hair.

Everything within him jerked, eyes caught by the single shaft of light, sound made sight. Song made gem. Prayer made flesh. The promise therein. The carved crescent, pale as the moon, hanging in the fold of a robe. Brother.

Brother.

Grey eyes met his, patient, still, the righteous anger so deep the cave itself rang with the promise of it. Ringed with lashes dark as soot. Jaw carved from granite. Lips still, the line of magic broken. Fideo.

His own.

They had not left him for lost, not deserted him to endless night and eternal pain.

"Bastardi! Falsi! La luce! Avete introdotto la luce nella nerezza e non sono caduto! Volerò ancora!" His voice rang out against stone walls, the rush of air in his lungs enough to light a fire within him brighter than any pain. The power of his sudden will made the constant murmuring cease for a heartbeat, the power there failing, waning, just long enough for him to pull, the sound of his arm pulling loose from its socket ringing inside his head like a thunderclap.

He'd left silence behind, so very long ago.

Speranzo found his feet, shrieking his rage, his pain, his will, as his body trembled, fighting to stand upon things long broken. Once, long ago the flowers lifted from the snow and oaks bowed to beg a melody, a song. No longer. Pebbles fell from his skin, the song a perverse aria, a hymn to one who would rise again from the depths. His beauty dissolved, his honor brought low; all that remained was rage. The earth itself heaved, terrified that she might hold his poison within her black bosom and leech through to all the hated ones, the men who sought to bind him.

Pale claws reached for him, fingers like grub worms on his skin which fell away as Fideo's harmony joined with his, sharp and fierce.

"Blasphemer! The alarms, raise the alarms!" Small. Oh, how had he not seen how small they were, ants and scuttling beetles to be brushed aside by the force of his wings.

Fideo's arms opened to him, the dull black robe fluttering to the ground, wings black as pitch buffeting the air. "Speranzo."

His tears were flames, pouring down his cheeks and leaving nothing but screams in their wake. "Yes. You came."

"No matter your foolishness, I would never leave your light to fade." The scent of smoke was rich, sweet, familiar and right upon his tongue.

"They took me in our father's temple." For once he had followed his duty, gone to deliver food and honor to their father, gone to sing of the battles and the births and beg a boon for their lady sister, enslaved beneath the seas.

Fideo nodded. "I found it razed, the stones desecrated, salt sown into the soil."

He turned as a hand reached for him, tearing it from the arm that fed it and tossing it away. "Lost, then."

"Yes." Fideo lifted him up and up, past the earth and the soil, up into the light, holding

him when he shrieked and would have turned from it, hiding his wounds, his ugliness. "No. We will not hide; those who hide behind the sun must see what their disinterest has wrought. They will regret us, when we leave."

The rustle of wings surrounded them – hawks and ravens, vultures and seagulls, eagles and geese and tiny sparrows, the voices rising up and up, demanding honor for their fallen lord, their broken love.

"Leave?"

One hand, deadly and brutal, cupped his jaw, the touch softer than fallen petals. "I will not fight this war any longer. Together we will remove ourselves. Watch from beyond."

"And if they separate us?"

"They cannot."

"And all who seek us, brother?"

Eyes of ash stared into him, teeth like boulders bared. Free. Free and borne into the light upon wings of ravens. "All who come will die."

His agreement rang out, the clouds racing to hide the sun lest the furies leave scars in its smooth, shining face.

Chapter One

Honest to God, he was going to murder the little son of a bitch. Pick up a shovel, walk across the room and just swing it hard enough that Patrick's head went flying, stupid red curls picking up all the dust that was collected on the workroom floor.

Ten years Jacob had been happy, left alone up in his Wyoming mountains, spelunking and searching for artifacts and random gemstones, photographing and recording and going about doing his job, his life's work. His *calling*. He'd survived floods and blizzards, pissed off bears, lost tourists and territorial cowboys. He'd been blistered and frozen, hungry and sick as a dog. He'd loved every fucking minute of it.

Ten years.

And all it took was one phone call from the pretentious little fuck to have the rangers come up hunting him and drag his happy ass to Cheyenne to get on a plane headed for Phoenix. In August.

Fuck him raw.

He wasn't really sure why Dr. 'Gee-I-Sign-Your-Paychecks' Hoder wanted him down here besides just busting his balls. Of course, he probably would, had he been listening, but goddamn, he was just a man made of flesh and bone and God knew Hoder begged to be beaten soundly about the head and shoulders.

"...even listening to me? Goddamnit, Plant! Can't you get your head out of the altitude long enough to *function*?"

Of course, killing might be too good for the little fuck. "Why am I here, Hoder?"

"I've been telling you." Patrick sighed, stormed across the room toward a little laptop that was set up near a pile of what he'd bet were chicken bones, possibly guinea hens, something used in ritual, he'd bet, from the scattered markings on them.

"Is it AV club time already?" He couldn't control the jibe. Patrick and he had graduated together, Patrick taking the scholastic route while he headed straight for the action.

"Shut up and come here, Jacob." There was something in that voice, something a little odd, a little off. Something enough to make him curious and have him heading over to look at the little screen, tilting it to lose the glare. "Not too hard, the hinges are twitchy."

He waved Patrick off, frowning at what he thought he was seeing. No. No, it couldn't be. He squatted down, knees and new jeans creaking in harmony. The photo was blurred, fuzzy, but there was a stone wall, bones seemingly sunk into the rock. The bones themselves weren't the fascination, though. Caves had interred bodies from the beginning of the human age. No, what fascinated him was the structure.

"Are those..." He looked up into Patrick's face, got the nod. Wings. Those bone structures were huge wings that appeared to be fused on the bony scapulae. Insane. Obviously a hoax. Undoubtedly a hoax.

A well done hoax.

"These came in from an expedition in Sardinia. A series of caves were unearthed during some excavation of a nuraghe. They reached the bottom of the cavity and the stones literally crumbled away."

"Yeah?" Like it mattered. He didn't work overseas. Not his specialty. Not his problem.

"They spent three days down there, cataloging and recording while we negotiated with the Italian government. I received the downloads a week ago with the initial findings. Photos, measurements. The bones are old enough to have fused with the cave wall. There's no evidence the site's been tampered with."

"Okay? So?" He couldn't imagine yet, how they got the wings to merge so seamlessly; to build such a delicate structure spoke of amazing craftsmanship, patience. And if this find predated the Nuraghi? That meant four thousand year old craftsmanship.

Fascinating.

Still, not his find and no reason to pull him off his mountain, but fascinating nonetheless.

"They received the go-ahead from the government, started excavating with a Signore Carlo Monteverdi." The cursor clicked, and more images appeared. The nuraghe's exterior had been shot, the irregular elliptical shaped fascia common for the ancient Mediterranean towers, the stones resting against one another, providing the support for the massive structure. Jacob grinned, chewed on his bottom lip. He always thought they looked like tits, honestly. Weird little Sardinian tits. Another photo of the inner cavity showed the south facing entrance glowing with a yellow light, funneling the sun in and lighting the entire interior. All fairly typical of the stone mounds that had brought archaeologists to the Mediterranean for years. Then the images changed.

The cave below the floor-level of the nuraghe was damp, the stone near black, which given the white sands of Sardinia was...unusual to say the least. People started appearing in the photographs, a black-and-silver haired man with skin as leathered as his own, a handful of young eager faces that were the mark of grad students on assignment. Typical. Normal. Boring.

"Wait, go back." A familiar face caught his attention, a woman with blue eyes wreathed in heavy wrinkles, a blond and white braid as thick as his wrist and the finest digger's hands on earth for the last seventy years. "Annie. What the hell is Annie doing out there?"

"Dr. Key was leading the party. Sort of a last hurrah." Patrick's eyes wouldn't meet his, and he knew why. The asshole knew Annie had terminal lung cancer, knew the doctors had told her to take it easy, try to let the chemo work. Let her body try to recover from fifty years of those evil-smelling cigars she smoked. Knew there was no way she ought to be gallivanting around Italy in the heat and...

"Was?" Oh. Oh, that was why they'd called him down.

"Was." Patrick reached out, fingers squeezing his shoulder tight. "But that's not all. I need you to listen to me, Jacob."

"That's not all? Is she dead? Is it..."

Patrick's hand squeezed harder, steadying him, digging into his skin. "They're all gone, Plant. All of them. Dr. Key, Sheila Morgan, Rick Bay, Tony Underwood, Kathleen Harris, Carlo Monteverdi. The police found all but one person in the group, dismembered, torn to bits, scattered over the cave."

Jacob stood, the move sudden and sharp, sending his blood pressure down in a rush. There was no way. No way. "Who..."

Who did this? Who was left? What the Hell was going on?

"I don't know. I have five people dead, one missing. We have to go out there; we have to take care of this."

He shook his head, the room spinning a little, gray walls melding with gray tables. No. No, this wasn't fucking happening. "I'm not going. You send Annie's body home and I'll bury it. I'm not flying out there."

He'd sworn he'd stop going on wild goose chases ten years ago. He loved his mountains. His home. His life.

"Jacob, Caleb is missing." Patrick clicked the cursor again and there was another image of a long, long lean man with the darkest eyes on earth smiling back at him. He could see the ritual Polynesian tattoos crawling up the long neck from under the collar of the t-shirt. Jesus God. Ten years and the man hadn't changed a bit. Not a bit.

The images changed again, the shot of carnage more than he could fathom, more than he could understand until he saw Annie's hand, separated from her arm, the turquoise ring he'd given her for Mother's day five years ago on her index finger, the Mexican silver seeming to shine where it held the flat, oval stone, with two garnets on either side.

His ass hit the floor of the lab with a slap, so fast he didn't even realize he was falling.

"Shit. Someone get Dr. Key a glass of water! Now!" Patrick slapped his face a little, crouching down beside him. "You see? I have to have you along. I have to know what Caleb's capable of, how to find him."

Jacob's head just spun, the image of his mother's ring, his lover's smile whirling together, just like those optical illusions Annie used to amuse him with, a cage on one side, a robin on the other, spinning round and round until the bird was caught, trapped in the cage.

Sweet Jesus.

"Come on, Jacob. Come on. You have to stay with me now. We have to go. I have us booked on flights in the morning. Something important is at that site. Something important enough to murder for."

"I don't care about the site."

Patrick shrugged. Prick. "So, come find Caleb. With Annie gone, you're the foremost expert on cave dwellers. You have to come."

He looked down at his hands, saw how the blood was welling up from his palms where his nails dug in. Christ, Annie. What were you thinking? Why did you go? Why did you take Caleb?

Why didn't you tell me, Momma?

"Okay. Okay, Hoder." He nodded, growling low at the shaking kid bringing the water. "Fuck that. I want tequila. Now. Two glasses. Patrick and me? We're drinking to Annie tonight. To the best digger on earth."

The phone started ringing, startling Ben out of a sound sleep, a deep dream of rafting down the Shoshone, the sun almost blinding him, his braids whipping furiously around his face as he and Mac tumbled and bounced in the river, all of them paddling furiously to back away from the unseen drop before them. He'd been so far into it that he just blinked a second, trying to understand why they'd stopped moving

"Ben. Love. Get the fucking phone before I rip it from the fucking wall."

"Kiss my ass, Mac." He scrabbled for the phone, managing to hit talk before the answering machine picked up. "'lo?"

"Ben?" The voice on the other end of the line was scratchy, the line full of static and pops.

“Yeah. Yeah, who is it? We got a bad connection, man.” Ben sat up, tugged the quilts around his waist as he turned on the bedside lamp so he could find the pad and pencil he left there for notes.

“It’s Jacob. Jacob Key.” Ben blinked, almost dropped the pencil in pure shock. Jacob didn’t live where men had phones. Hell, Jacob Key didn’t live where there were other *men*.

“Jacob? Where are you? Is everything okay?”

“Phoenix. I. It’s Annie. Someone killed Annie.”

“Oh. Oh, Jacob.” He swung his legs out of the covers, headed over to pull on some sweats, intending to head to his office. Mac had to open the museum at nine and could probably use some sleep. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

His dogs Kono and Piah followed him so he sidetracked through the kitchen, letting them out and grabbing a glass of milk, jotting down the need for more on the grocery list hanging on the fridge alongside a sketch of an eagle that he’d rescued from Mac earlier in the week.

“I don’t know. Patrick got me down here. She was in Italy digging and something killed her, killed a bunch of them. Hell, Caleb’s missing. They killed her, Ben, ripped her hand off. I saw a picture...” The soft hitching breaths started, the drunken roll and sway of the words becoming sharper and closer to hysteria. He’d seen that hysteria once before, in Chicago during a conference that Dr. Hoder had insisted the man attend. Jacob’d done fine through the speeches, the key note speech. Then the banquet with its crush and windowless ballroom and open bar had happened. Jacob wasn’t a drinker, not that he shared that information.

It had been an auspicious meeting.

“Easy. Easy. Are you alone?” Ben let the huskies back in, Kono following him as he settled in his chair, grabbed his glasses and tried to focus. Lord, poor Jacob. Even with the complex relationship the man had had with his mother, they’d been almost passionately close – ready to murder each other in pure aggravation, but close. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Not enough.”

“I hear that.” He chuckled, booted up the computer and nudged Kono with his foot, warming his toes on the pup’s fuzzy belly. “So when did this all happen?”

“About a week ago, Hoder said. We’re flying to Italy in the morning. I have to find Caleb.”

“Caleb?” Ben frowned, trying to remember from all the things he knew about the tall digger, who the *hell* Caleb could... “Your ex? That Caleb?”

“That one.”

“But... what was he doing in Italy with Annie?” There were some breakups that were so big that you never had to meet the other party to know that the world almost ended.

“Digging, I guess. How the hell should I know? She always liked him better than she liked me anyway.”

The smell of coffee hit him, along with the soft light and hum from the television in the front room, Mac up and pottering, obviously curious.

“Bullshit. Annie loved you.” Ben sighed and started pacing, hand rubbing against the back of his neck. “Is there anything I can do?”

“I don’t know. Come to Phoenix and beat Patrick for me?”

“Phoenix is a bit of a drive from Casper, Jacob, especially if you’re leaving in the morning.” Hell, it was morning.

“Yeah. Yeah, I know. I just... Shit, I needed to hear a friendly voice and you’re the only asshole I know that doesn’t have a real job.”

“Fuck you, Key. I have a real job; I just get to do it from here.” He’d never started teaching, never even gone to work for a university, using his anthropology work and his contacts in the Ute community to write.

“Yeah, yeah. Had I known for a second that you were going to work with me for two years just to desert the cause? I’d’ve picked that pretty little blond guy from Boston.”

“Horseshit. One, you couldn’t have worked with a Yankee. Two, you would have worked with me just for the sex. And three? Well, I never said I was into it for the academia.”

“No. No, you didn’t. Damned Injun.” They both chuckled, that friendship hadn’t ever really faded. It was hard to dislike a man you only had to see one or two days a year. “How’s Sam?”

“Mac’s fine. Probably growling because I woke him up letting the dogs out.” It couldn’t be too bad, though. There was coffee.

“Tell that worthless Scot that I’m sorry. I just needed to talk to someone not Patrick.”

“That worthless Scot understands. He’s got a new shipment coming into the museum in the morning anyway. He wasn’t sleeping deep.”

“Then you’re not blowing him well enough.”

Ben hooted, smiled up at Mac as he appeared in the doorway, copper curls wild and rumpled. “Jacob says I’m not blowing you well enough, Mac.”

Mac snorted, gave over a two-fingered salute before handing him a cup of coffee. “Tell that tall Southern cunt that he’s just jealous that he’ll never feel it again.”

Jacob laughed again, then the sound faded. “I think I’m gonna pour my ass into bed, Ben. I’ll call you when I get landed over there, talk to the police.”

“Anything you need, Jacob. Just call.”

They did the traditional goodbye shit, then Ben hung up, sighed. “Somebody killed his mother and kidnapped a... friend.”

“No shit?” Mac blinked owlishly, sat on the edge of his desk, leaving a butt print on the light wood. “What the fuck happened?”

“They’re leaving for Italy tomorrow. He didn’t give me much detail. The man’s drunk off his ass.” He watched his email download, the little bell noises seeming to blend one into the other. Annie Key. Dead. Damn.

Mac’s thin fingers landed on his bare shoulder, the heat of them making his skin goosepimple up. “Love, come on. Bed. It’s late. Early. Whatever.”

“I won’t be able to sleep, Mac.”

Those bright eyes just danced, pink tongue sliding out to wet Mac’s lips. “Who said anything about sleeping, Ben?”

Oh. Oh, right. “Nobody. Nobody at all.”

“That’s right.” Mac’s hands were insistent, dragging him across the office and down the hallway, the wood floor cool on his bare feet, even though it was the dead of summer. “Old boyfriends call in the middle of the night, wake us up, love. I might have to be jealous.”

“Like you have a jealous bone in your body, Mac.” Hell, the man wasn’t entirely opposed to friends-with-benefits, so long as they were all there. He reached up, straightened a painting as they walked, fingers just brushing Mac’s signature.

“Shut up, love. I’m learning.” Those big hands landed on his ass, shoving down his sweats before goosing him good and hard, and they were both laughing as they landed on

the big bed. Mac felt solid behind him, taller and broader than he'd ever be, cock stiff and heated against his thigh.

"Mmm. What were we doing?" He pushed the quilts down and snuggled into the sheets, loving how they smelled, how they were still a little warm from his and Mac's body heat.

"Fucking, love. We were fucking. Touching. Looking to come good and hard before crashing for another hour. You *didn't* get enough rest, did you?" Mac's lips found the nape of his neck, pushing his heavy mass of hair to the side, teeth just threatening.

"I'm slow on the uptake, that's all." Ben chuckled through his moan, his skin starting to tingle.

One of Mac's hands slid around, slipped down his belly to cup his cock, thumb rubbing the heavy vein along the shaft, just like he needed. "Not that slow, love. This isn't slow."

"Uh-huh." Slow was good. He was a fan. Or quick. Whatever.

He got a bite, deep and bruising, up where no one could see. Up where he would feel it, all day. Up where his hair would brush it every time he moved his head. Ben arched, his ass rubbing Mac's hip, that long, thin prick and he could feel Mac's groan on that sensitive skin under Mac's lips.

Mac took one of his hands, fingers twining with his and holding on tight. Their rings clicked together, pinched the webbing of his fingers. He grinned, turned his head to see the gold and Columbian amber of his contrasting with the silver and turquoise of Mac's – they were a vanity, but something about the sight of them together just felt right.

And if anyone thought it was girly, they kept their mouths shut, didn't they?

Oh. The bite brought him right back, this one farther down, almost where his collar would be, Mac's lips wet and burning where they touched him.

"You're wandering."

"Not."

"Don't lie; you're hideously bad at it, for a writer." Mac shifted, slid, settled where that long cock was slipping against his crease.

"Was that a compliment?"

"Probably."

"Okay. Thank you." God, he loved laughing with his man. He truly did.

They started moving, rocking together with this natural rhythm that they always found together. The old bed started to sing in time with them, the headboard groaning as Mac pushed and he rolled, teeth and hands and hips dancing together just so and Ben got lost in it.

“Love when you’re like this, Ben. So hot. Just wanting me.” Sam’s mouth moved, slipped up an inch and then that tongue licked. The way the skin tingled, Ben’d bet there was already a bruise resting there, black and blue, ringed with teeth marks.

“Uh-huh. Don’t stop, Mac. Feels good.” Their fingers squeezed, Mac’s skin almost glowing pale against his.

“No intention of stopping, love. None at all.” The soft burr pushed him that much higher, made him need that much more.

“Good. Good. Right there.” Mac knew every fucking inch of him, through and through.

“Aye. Right there. Love.” That thumb worked him harder, the wet tip of Mac’s cock sliding and slicking him, teasing him with a promise for later, when they had time to play, to touch, to fuck good and hard. His hips rolled, eyes closing as he rode wave after wave of pleasure. “You wait. Tonight, we’ll play. Tonight I’ll slick you up, pull you down on my prick, love. Make you ride.”

Oh. Oh, shit. Shit, he was going to. To. Oh.

One more nip and he was coming, seed shooting from him and slicking Mac’s hand, his balls just aching with it, warmth flooding him and leaving him gasping and boneless against the sheets. It didn’t take long for Mac to follow, groaning, wet heat spraying against his ass, the small of his back.

Mac panted, lips brushing his shoulder, eyelashes tickling his skin. “Better, love?”

“Uh-huh.”

He felt Mac stretch, reach for one of the hand towels kept in the bedside table. Between the two of them, they cleaned up, got settled under the covers, the only real light the red LED numbers on the clock radio.

His cheek lay on Mac’s shoulder, Mac’s heart beating against his spine. His mind wandered over to Jacob – stuck in Italy with Dr. Hoder, mourning the hard, brilliant woman that had been Dr. Annie. God. Poor man.

“You want to talk about it, love?” Mac’s hands stroked his belly, soft and warm.

“I don’t know. I just. Jacob sounded so lost.”

“Aye, but losing a parent is hard, especially unexpectedly, yeah?”

“I guess.”

“Were they close?”

“Yes and no. Dr. Key was brilliant, fierce. All about her work.”

He felt Mac’s laugh. “You mean, like mother like son?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Ben grinned, relaxing. “But can you imagine? Being five and scraping your knee and taking it to someone like Jacob? Or suffering through acne? Coming out? Your first broken heart?”

His parents had been...parents.

“Oh, love. You’re just...you’ve got that odd, mystical, everything should be loving thing going on. Most people don’t. Not at all.”

“Are you saying I’m soft?”

Mac’s hand slipped down, cupped his cock. “Right now? Yeah, love.”

“Bitch.”

“Girl.”

“Asshole.”

“Yours.”

Ben nodded, grinned, Mac’s hand soothing him, bringing him closer and closer to sleep. “Yeah. And I’m keeping you.”

“Good man. Sleep, love. We’ll call Jacob together. Tomorrow.”

“Later today.”

“Whatever. Sleep.”

“Yes, boss.”

He got a chuckle, a squeeze, then Mac started snoring quietly, breath tickling his shoulder, so warm, so soft. Ben didn’t sleep, but he rested, watching the branches of the pine trees move outside the bedroom window.

Chapter Two

He could hear something – something distant, like the drums of the Arapaho in Wind River or the steady beat of a huge heart, thudding dull and steady under the earth. Jacob frowned, face turning this way and that, eyes wide and searching for a glimmer of light, something to let him know where he was. Why he was here? How he'd come to be here?

He stumbled forward, bare feet sliding on cold, slippery stone, toes trying to grip as his hands stretched out, hunting the wall, an opening, something.

The walls were clammy, slick and... he stopped, eyes closing instinctively, even though he couldn't see. The ridge here was created by water, dripping year after year. Another mark was a chisel, flat and narrow, the stuttering motions where the hammer fell distinctive. So a natural cave that someone had worked on, expanded. Okay. Very typical. Easy.

He knew caves.

Jacob reached up as high as he could, searching for either ceiling or cave mouth or the edge of the water table. Anything. He found a tiny lip, a ridge, just enough to dig his fingers into and hold on. His entire hand vibrated in time with the drumbeats, echoing through his arms, his shoulders. How odd... The sounds didn't quite have the percussive effect, but the beat was still there. A volcano, maybe? An earthquake?

"You always were curious." The whisper made him stop, still and suddenly chilled through.

He'd been sure he was alone. Hadn't he? Damn it.

"I know you can hear me."

Jacob swallowed, mouth suddenly dry as dust. He shouldn't be scared. Should he? Shit, he hated this crap. With his fucking luck Ben Walking Turtle had slipped him something and he was on his way to La-La Land. Man, spend a couple winters sharing a bunk and a man thinks he can just do anything at all.

"Stop it, Plant." The nickname made him stop, tilt his head. No one called him that anymore. Hell, there wasn't anyone around from grad school days to remember the little forest he'd had growing in a storage closet in the Anthropology building. No one but Patrick and God knew that pencil-necked geek wouldn't be caught dead in the field.

A shower of little stones, sharp-edged and wicked pointy, poured down on his hands, nicking and stinging. "Fuck!"

His voice echoed, almost seeming to get louder and louder as the sound waves bounced. He winced as more stones fell, shaken loose by his voice.

"Now, now, Plant. You know better. No talking in strange caves. What if someone finds you?" Jacob frowned, sucking the blood from the knuckle of his index finger. That didn't sound like Patrick.

"Patrick isn't here, Plant. For crying out loud. Pay *attention*!" The last word was a roar and Jacob tensed, waiting for the echo, the sound of falling rock. Neither happened. The silence just seemed to swallow Caleb's voice up.

Oh. Caleb. His Caleb.

"That's right, Plant. I knew you'd figure it out, you're a smart boy." He could hear something new now, something moving on the ledge above them. Something sliding over the slick stone.

His feet moved him away from that sound, refusing to stay, stumbling over the sharp debris on the ground, the pain enough to make him falter a bit.

"Yeah, you should've worn your boots. You taught me that, remember? My feet were a mass of blisters when we climbed that temple in Peru. You spread me out at the top and doctored them, cussing me the whole time. I think you were still cussing when you started sucking me off. God, you were a mouthy little fuck. Just like your mother – you never knew when to stop."

"Stop it." There was another smattering of stones as his back slapped against another wall, this stone sticky with something. His teeth shut with a click, catching the tip of his tongue, the copper flavor of blood sudden.

"Careful, Plant. You'll get yourself in trouble and that's not like you. Not like you at all." The voice came from the ledge. From up. Why wasn't Caleb helping him?

"I'm trying to, baby. You just don't listen worth a shit. You never have." The words hit him like a hammer-blow to the chest, driving him to his knees as he panted.

"Caleb." The low whisper made the walls shudder. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to find you before you get lost finding me."

"That doesn't make any sense." Finding Caleb? Was Caleb... Oh. Oh, God. Annie. Annie's hand. Annie's ring. Annie's ring on his bent and gnarled pinkie finger. He spun it, round and round, counting the stones. Five. One turquoise. Four garnets. Five stones.

"Caleb, what happened to Annie?"

"You need to focus, Plant. You need to look. You need to see."

See? There wasn't anything to see! Any way to see! "I can't see anything, Caleb. There's

no light."

No answer. Nothing. Nothing but the damned water slowly seeping into his jeans, making his legs shiver, threatening to ruin his Marlboros. Oh, fuck. Where there were smokes...

He scrabbled in his pockets, almost crying out when his fingers found the little disposable Bic. That was more like it. Hallelujah. He flicked the wheel, hooting as the flame lit the little round room, the ceiling climbing higher than the light did. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it and blew the smoke out of his nose, watching to see where the smoke was drawn, where the air came from.

Jacob might be stoned, lost and trapped, but he wasn't fucking stupid.

A soft breeze floated down, the smoke drawing up, sort of billowing in time with that constant beat. "No, baby. Stubborn, angry, grumpy, pigheaded – never stupid."

He blinked, walking over to the other wall. "Why are you hiding?"

Nothing. Damn it.

He couldn't climb and hold the light, the wall was too slick and the ridge too narrow. Fuck him. The lights bounced off the smooth walls, the orange and yellow seeming to almost dance. "Caleb? Are you up there?"

Quit playing games, you asshole. Still always teasing. Jacob knew Caleb had to be up there. Had to be.

He let the lighter go out, held it between his teeth as he reached up, got a finger hold. This would have been so much better had he been younger. Still, there was something to be said for experience and agility, wasn't there? Something good.

It felt like it took hours, to find the right spot and pull just right so that the stones didn't come down and the ledge held and so he could balance himself. Hours to get his shoulders and upper body settled, feet swinging as the edge of the ledge pushed into his belly. The air here gusted with that steady beat, strong enough to move him, push him back and forth, like the cave was breathing.

Jacob managed to get the lighter out of his mouth and into one hand. "Caleb?"

Nothing but that beating, that *sound*. Not a yes, no, screw off, nothing.

Stupid drugs.

He flicked the Bic, holding it for a long minute as he stared, not breathing not thinking. Just stared. When his fingertips started sizzling, he dropped the lighter, body falling back until he hit the floor with a dull thud.

"Plant? Plant? For fuck's sake! What are you doing?" Hoder was shaking him so his head bounced lightly on the wooden floor. "Christ, we've got a ton of work to do tomorrow and you go on muttering and flopping around like one of your landed fish." Patrick looked rumpled and pitiful, the neckline of the thin t-shirt torn where Jacob's fingers were tangled in it.

"I." He blinked, looked around the little room they'd arranged for the night. Simple. Quiet. Filled with the moonlight. Sardinia. Goddamn. "Sorry. Jet lag. I need a drink."

He stood, grabbed a shirt and pushed Patrick away when the little asshole would nag him about needing to sleep or be sober or whathaveyou. The bottle fit perfectly in his hand and the burn of whatever was in it started blurring the edges of the image that was burned into his brain.

It had been Caleb up there, bruised and bloodied, inked skin bound with filthy ropes, eyes like burned holes in a white sheet. That wasn't what he couldn't forget, though, that wasn't what was making his hands shudder.

It was the sight of the man behind Caleb, claws dug into Caleb's chest, body moving in a parody of fucking. The huge black wings buffeted Caleb's body, beating the air, and all the while, the man was smiling.

Smiling and enjoying himself.

Loving it.

Waiting for more.

Jesus.

He drank the whole bottle down, staring at the scarred and dusty table, the smudged circle where the bottle sat. The words written again and again in the dust.

Find me. Find me. Find me. Find me.

Jacob swallowed his sob and stood, the chair clattering over as his hand swiped through the dust, Annie's ring scarring the wood of the table. He kicked the bedpost on the way to tug on his shoes. "Up, Hoder. Daylight's threatening. We got shit to do."

There were few things Jacob truly loathed in the universe -- heat, officious little pricks, and being stuck in a museum when there was work to be done. He glared over at Patrick, the little man talking to who he figured was the head of the National Archeological Museum and some government official here in Cagliari, and started wandering. Hoder

knew he just wanted to get into the truck and head to the nuraghe and start processing things.

Hunt.

Look for Caleb, for answers, for reasons.

Hoder knew, but insisted he cool his fucking heels here while Hoder lubed the officials or greased the wheels or whatever.

Jacob walked, categorizing the different things he saw. Hellenic pottery and tiny bronze statues, tools and bits of woven cloth. A scattering of religious artifacts from the Nuragic Era – the influences of the water cult evident in many pieces. Annie had been fascinated by the holy wells, the belief in entering the water and passing through to the afterlife. There were the bulls' horns, the carefully etched waves, the mother symbols with heavy breasts and pudenda.

He stopped suddenly, eyes caught by a broken figure, a lean male, carved from obsidian, thin cheeks and sharp teeth carved from the stone. It was different – stone where the others were bronze, fierce where the others were distorted, the style seemed foreign, alien to the other pieces. It had a strange beauty, a classical shape. On one side of the face, though, deep grooves were carved in, marring the visage, distorting the empty eye. He walked to one side of the window, then the other, looking, staring. One shoulder looked cracked, broken, as if something had been torn from it.

Damn it. He needed to see better. The little lock in the back of the display didn't take but a second to jimmy – hell, his Italian sucked ass; it would take him a month to explain what he needed – and he got his soft gloves on, turning the obsidian figure around. On the back, right where two wings would grow were two smooth stumps. His fingers slid over the bumps, his eyes closing as he tried to feel whether the wings had been broken off or deliberately removed. Broken off would be the logical answer, but nothing about life was logical, not anymore. Not since Hoder had come to his little cabin in...

There. Tool marks. Right there. Removed then.

"Chi sono voi? Che cosa state facendo? Sicurezza!"

Oh. Damn. He wasn't sure what that meant, but nothing screamed by a woman in that tone of voice could possibly be good. Christ on a crutch. Little gal looked purely panicked, too, didn't she, looking at the figurine in his hand. Guess he shouldn't've popped the lock before saying his howdies...

"Look, lady. I'm not hurting it. I'm a digger – here with Dr. Hoder. You know him? Hoder? Patrick? Little pencil-necked asshole with too many degrees and no calluses on his hands? Any of this making sense?" She was sort of standing there, mouth opening and closing like a big-mouthed bass, so he kept talking. "I'm Jacob Key? Annie's son? She

came all the way out here to dig with you folks and she ended up in little pieces. Hell, maybe y'all ought to be screaming about murderers before you worry about me. I even put my gloves on."

Look at that vein throb. She was pissed. Man, Annie should be here. She *loved* a good fight and she didn't have problem one knocking the living shit out of another woman. Equal opportunity and all that happy horseshit.

"Chi sono voi?" She grabbed at the figurine and he pulled back. He wasn't done looking, right or not. Something about this little bit of stone caught him. "Bastardo!"

Man that sounded the same in any language, didn't it? "Look, I'm not gonna hurt it. I just need to study it."

She opened her mouth to holler again and he shook his head, bellowing at the top of his lung. "Hoder! Goddamnit! Hoder, get **down** here before this gal calls the police on me!"

Everyone sort of stopped and stared at him. Damn. Guess they'd never had to make themselves heard over a nice chasm. Museum had one hell of an echo...

The footsteps started before the echoes stopped, too. Pretty damned cool. He was going to have to remember that.

"Oh, for... Plant? Plant, what *are* you doing? Have you forgotten how to live among civilized people?" Patrick pattered over, followed by a little cadre of dark-haired folks, sputtering and stuttering out something in Italian. Probably apologizing for him. Asshole.

The crowd gathered around Hoder and the lady and the official-looking guys, so he could put his focus back where it belonged. A talisman, surely – some religious icon. The only thing that kept poking him was the bones in the photo back in Phoenix. Bones. Long, thin, human bones with a wing formation, grown right into the stone...

A long hand fell on his shoulder, startling him. Jacob managed a half-turn, fully expecting a uniformed officer ready to haul his happy ass to the clink. What he got was Guiseppe Conta – digger, anthropologist and all-around fun-lover staring down at him. "Jacob. In trouble again, yes? Tsk, tsk. I leave you in i montagne and what? You come home to cause fights in Italia?"

"Well, I'll be damned, buddy." He took a hug, clapping Guiseppe on the back. "No, I came because... I mean, you heard about our Miss Annie, right?"

Those dark eyes went soft and sad, just glittering. "Si. Si. I hear about your mamma. My heart, she ached so for you when I hear, that I tell my Maria to kiss me for luck and I come to help, si? To help her rest. You are like a brother, yes? La mia famiglia. I cannot leave this to you alone"

Jacob swallowed hard around the lump in his throat, just nodded. Last time they'd talked had been five years ago, sitting over a little campfire up in God's country, cooking rabbit and watching the smoke rise, laughing about the way the camprobber birds' feet sizzled and smoked on the rocks when they landed to steal bites. Guiseppe'd told him about little Maria and their children – five boys and three girls and another one on the way. Somehow he'd always imagined them all living in a villa, kids and dogs sprawling everywhere. Annie'd introduced them via mail, way back when he was an undergrad studying geology and Guiseppe was a newlywed and they hadn't started repopulating Tuscany yet. Hell, girl number two was named Ana.

Ana Gallena.

It hit him again, deep and low, like a sucker punch to the gut. He wanted to talk to her again, let her bitch about him being lonely and pissing the whole world off, one person at a time. Then he could call her a stubborn old bitch and offer to buy her vodka. Then they'd laugh and pull out a deck of cards and deal and she'd rob him blind, telling stories about myths and legends and people and digs the whole time, just fascinating him. God.

God, he missed her.

Guiseppe hummed, hand on his shoulder patting and jostling him. "Easy, Jacob. You need to sit, si? To rest?"

Worrywart. He was fine.

"Yeah. Yeah, buddy. I mean, no. No, I don't. I just... I don't know what she found, why anyone'd do anything like this to her, to them." Okay, maybe he wasn't exactly fine.

"Non lo so, but we will. We will discover." He was led a few steps away, led to an alcove with a single couch and pushed down. Guiseppe's long assed bod – and for him to think that was saying something – bent over him, hovering like a mother hen.

"Oh, for Chrissake. Sit down, man. I'm not going to freak."

He got a snort and a roll of eyes before Guiseppe sat, looked over at the figurine in his hands. "It is a... how do you say? Rare piece, yes?"

Jacob nodded, fingers still moving, sliding, fascinated by the lines. "It was categorized in with the bronze pieces. Surely they're not from the same era? This is obsidian, not bronze."

"No. But from the same spot. Three kilometers from Signora Annie's site. Among bones, Jacob. More bones than should have been there."

"Your dig?"

"No. Dottore Monteverde. Carlo." There was a portent to those words, a vague reverence.

"Si. Carlo! Why he had to die while you come to destroy his work? Why?" Man, that chick could *holler*.

"I'm not destroying a goddamn thing." His own temper, close to the surface as Annie's and twice as heated, flared to life and he stood, brandishing the little piece of obsidian like a club. "You tell me, why don't you? What was up with this dig that no one can tell me why Annie was here? Why she'd drag her ass out of Dallas to come half-way across the world instead of doing what the doctors said? Why did he bring Annie here to die?"

Guiseppe's hand took one arm, Hoder's the other, the little bitch backing down as he roared. Her eyes started shining with the sunlight pouring in from the huge lobby windows and suddenly Jacob looked at her, really saw that she'd been crying, that the hollows beneath her eyes were bruised and swollen. God, she was just a little bit of a thing, a tiny gal wearing solid black from head to toe, belly just beginning to show with the hint of a pregnancy... "Shit. Shit, I'm sorry."

He was an ass.

Her painted mouth opened and closed a few times, then she shook her head, slapped the tears from her eyes and lifted her chin, lips just a quivering. "No. No apology. I. You and I, we are in the same place. We have the same hurt, the same loss. I am Elena Monteverde."

Jacob was lost for a second, Guiseppe riding to his rescue. "Carlo Monteverde, si?"

"You're Dr. Monteverde's daughter?"

She laughed, the sound sad and more than a little lost. "His wife."

Oh, dear God. "Mrs. Monteverde. Oh, Jesus. I'm so sorry for yelling."

She reached out, patted his arm. "Yes. Well, both of us, we are yelling. We are angry. Dr. Annie, she was happy to be here, yes? She came with the others, so happy."

"Did you go out with them? Do you know what they were searching for?"

"More of those. More bones." Elena pointed to the obsidian piece in his hand. "Carlo, he find a skeleton before, and those. He tells me he need to find the other. He was mad to search, yes?"

"Notes. Photos. He had to leave notes, honey. I need to see them." He knew he was pushing, but couldn't let go of the piece in his hand, couldn't stop touching it. "Where was the other skeleton? Has it been moved? Did Annie know about it?"

Damn it. He needed more information. Needed to get into the field notes, assuming all of that wasn't destroyed.

She nodded, eyes filling again. "Si. Si. I will bring them. Tonight, yes? I must see the priest this day, make my peace."

"Of course, Signora. Whatever time you need. Dr. Key and I are going out to the site, to see what we can find there." Patrick, the little snake, just made him look like a fucking bastard. "Tonight, perhaps we could have dinner. See the notes."

"Si. Si." She leaned over, kissed Jacob's cheek. "I. If you would like assistance with your mamma, a place to stay. My Carlo respected her. My home is yours."

"Thank you, honey. I might take you up on that." Hell, anything'd be better than pacing the floor listening to Hoder's snoring. "Mrs. Monteverde? Was Annie staying at a hotel while she was here?"

He'd found out that Annie'd been here almost six weeks. Six fucking weeks and not a word to him. Ornery bitch. That was a long time for the University to pick up a hotel room and she wasn't up to sleeping outside on the ground anymore.

"No. No, Doctor Annie, she stays in the old wing with your brother." Elena shrugged. "We offer her the ritoccato – uh..."

"Remodel rooms."

She nodded, offered Guiseppe a wry smile. "Grazie. Remodel rooms, but Doctor Annie, she say that they want to see the old, that she belong there. She make Carlo laugh with her jokes."

Everything in Jacob had hiccupped at one word. "My brother?"

"Si. Caleb. He does not look like Doctor Annie as you do."

"No. No, I don't suppose he would." What was that bastard up to? What had Caleb *done*?

He could feel the rage bubbling back up, just the thought of that stealing, lying jackass talking to Annie, convincing her to take Caleb's side again.

Over and over.

No matter how many fucking lies the man told, Annie'd *always* believed him. Jacob had, too, for too goddamned long.

"...at my home, yes?"

He blinked over, looking, trying to catch the conversation. Luckily Guiseppe picked it up, nodding and jabbering at Elena in Italian, making her nod and snuffle. Hoder jerked him around, little short fuck's eyes just blazing. "What is *wrong* with you, Plant?"

"What? What do you think is wrong with me, Hoder? What part of *anything* that has happened in the last week has been right?" He didn't yell, but it was a close thing and only saved by him hissing and growling through his teeth. "You're fixin' to take me out where my momma's blood is leached into the fucking dirt and you want to know what's *wrong* with me?"

His hands landed on Patrick, the obsidian statuette caught between them as he shook Hoder good and hard. The stone cut into his palm, the flash of pain sharp and somehow satisfying.

"Zut-zut. Come. Jacob. Come with me, si? We will find the coffee and something for our bellies. Patrick, he will find a car. Come now, I have a note for you from Maria, si?"

Guiseppe pulled him away, dragging him from the museum and into the mid-day sunshine, the light seeming to bake into him, cleansing him, easing the rage and pain into something less... murderous.

"Yeah. Yeah, buddy. Coffee. Maybe a smoke. Christ, I'm tired. Bad dreams, you know?"

"Si. Si. You have the shock, the lag. It will heal. Come. Come with me now." Guiseppe kept him walking, hand on his elbow, chattering on until it seemed possible that Guiseppe was right. He might heal. Someday.

He wrapped the statue and slid it into his pocket. He'd look into the odd thing later. After he went to see where Annie died and to find Caleb.

Later.

"Sam? Sam, honey? There's a shipment in here for you?"

He looked up at Grace and grinned, dropping another bit of orange peel in the trash. Every other person in this infernal town masquerading as a city insisted on calling him Dr. MacDougal. Not Grace. Ben had told him once, perhaps before they even started dating, that Grace was from somewhere decidedly Southern and had been relocated fifty years ago when she followed a trucker up from the depths of Hell that was near the border. They'd raised a family and then, when Ron died, she'd dyed her hair a bright red, gone on a little bender, had a torrid affair with the sheriff and then stayed. To her, everybody was 'honey'.

Sam adored her with a particular passion.

"What type of shipment? I'm not expecting anything." He offered her a segment of orange and a napkin, careful not to drip on his sketches. Really, he had been hoping to have a quiet afternoon, perhaps escape to the studio and paint and leave the paperwork and bureaucracy of his paying job behind. Honestly, when his father had insisted he go to university and acquire skills for a Real Job, he hadn't expected it to *work*.

"It's good-sized. I had Mike leave it in the workroom. There was a customs form and everything."

Well, that was odd. They weren't a history museum, under any circumstance, and honestly, they weren't a large enough museum to warrant attention, regardless of their exhibits. Sam finished his snack and stood, brushed his palms off on his slacks and grinned. "Well, dearest. Shall we go see what we've been sent?"

"Absolutely." She led the way, her bright pink blouse almost enough to light the way without fluorescents. "I saw Ben at the grocery last night. He looks more and more like his mother everyday. Is he dancing at the Harvest Pow-Wow again?"

"I don't know, honestly. I suppose?" Really, they lived together, slept together, but between Ben's books and his studio time, the work Ben did at the reservation and his job, they had very different schedules. "He hasn't mentioned it, but I've been working."

"You both work too hard." She clucked and tsked as she pushed the door to the workroom open.

"Nonsense. We're simply not attached at the hip like..." Good Lord. That wasn't good sized; it was massive, easily seven by three by three. "Jesus. What is that?"

"Got me; I just signed for it." She bustled over to the little desk as Sam walked around the wooden box, looking for some invoicing, packaging information, something.

There was a sheaf of papers attached on the front in a little bag of plastic and he tore the plastic open, flipping through the sheets. Addressed to the museum, so it wasn't a bad delivery. Customs checked it. It was all legal. The last sheet was a piece of paper, torn from a little notebook. There was a round coffee stain on one corner and the writing wavered, the ink all blotchy.

"Junior.

I found this at 40° 00'N, 9° 00'E. You look at it. When you see it you'll call. Trust me. I need you on this one. I think there are more.

A."

Well, that was odd.

He put the papers aside and went for the little toolbox, the crowbar. He didn't know who Junior was, or why someone would think they worked here, but that didn't change the fact that someone sent his museum a big box or the fact that he desperately wanted to see what was inside.

Sam had to work at the first board – whoever had closed it had been mad with the hammer, the wood dimpled and dented around the nail. He heard Grace muttering to herself, shuffling through papers and making those sounds of someone who'd lost something and wasn't quite ready to admit it.

The first thing he saw under the board was wood shavings and what appeared to be little fetish statues. Now, honestly, if this turned out to be another set of knock-off Kachina dolls from Taiwan, he was going to be quite put out.

Not only that, he'd sic his own personal politically-active-and-proud-of-his-heritage Ute on them.

The second board came off easier and he got a whiff of something...odd. Not dust. Not quite. But not sand. He got a flash of chanting, of censers burning and smoking, swinging back and forth on long chains.

He'd spent too many hours as an altar boy.

"Oh, here. Finally. It came from..." Grace looked up as he got the next board off and gasped, looked down into the empty eye sockets of a skull. A black skull, the bones shining like glass. How weird. Really.

Not a skeleton. Not a dead thing. It couldn't be. Nothing alive left bones like that.

"It's not even dusty..." He reached out without thinking, fingers drawn to the cheekbone, the smooth line almost... Sam winced as the sculpture cut his fingertip, slicing deep enough that the blood welled up, the drop sliding into the eye socket and looking like some weird worm that had been eating. And eating.

"Sam. Sam, don't."

"Don't what? Bring me a bandage, would you?" He pushed the wood shavings away, letting them land on the ground in little pale lumps. Not Kachina dolls. Little fetishes to go with the main statue. White marble and black. Dozens of them, some whole, some broken – odd little winged men.

The statue was stuck in some stone – it almost looked purposeful, like the artist wanted to give it the feel of being trapped, caught, held forever. Fascinating.

Another drop of blood fell, splashing against the piece's ribcage, sending bright red spray

everywhere. "Damn. Grace, please. I need a towel, something."

Nothing. When the next drop splashed, he growled, turned away from the box. "Grace, whatever paperwork you've discovered, I'm sure it can... Grace?"

She was crumpled on the floor, just slid down the wall, eyes huge, entire body convulsing, jittering on the tile and now that he was still, he could hear it, hear her legs sliding on the paperwork that had fanned out.

The acrid scent of urine got him moving, heading over to lie her down. Deal with this. Cope.

"Oh, dear God." He fumbled for his phone, bloody fingers sliding over the keypad as he dialed 911. "I need an ambulance at the Butterfold Museum, please. Hurry." He clicked the phone shut, looking down into those wide, unblinking eyes. "Grace, dear, hold on, now. The doctor's coming. Help is coming."

She didn't answer, just swallowed convulsively, one hand opening and closing, slamming against the tile.

Chapter Three

Jacob stood at the lip of the nuraghe, looked down and down, past the curved walls and the round bottom to the hole below leading into Annie's caves. The sparse grass that grew along the edges in the white sands tickled his ankles as he switched from sandals to steel-toed boots. Only a goddamn fool went into an unfamiliar cave unprepared. Even if it was one of Annie's.

He chuckled at himself, shook his head. Annie's caves.

There was a ladder down there, just waiting and suddenly – okay, it wasn't sudden, not sudden at all – he didn't want to go down there, step on the ground that was saturated with blood. With his mother's blood.

Hoder came over, standing beside his arm looking completely uncomfortable in jeans. Fucking weirdo. "Look, Plant. All we have to do is protect the dig while the rescue team searches for Caleb again. That's it. If there was anyone else, but I need your expertise on this..."

"Shut up, Hoder." He really didn't need to hear the bullshit right now. There were other diggers; they all knew it, but as soon as the images of what Annie and Caleb had found got out, the other groups would be over this like white on rice. He had to be notified anyway, and he was in the field and kept it in the University's control.

Guiseppe came over, handed him a hardhat, a face mask with a filter. "They say la luz, they still work."

He turned the mask over and over in his hands. He hadn't considered that it would smell.

"Hoder, you stay up here with the radio. We'll call you if we need you."

"Now wait a fucking second, Plant. I'm not going to be ordered around like..." Look at the little fuck bluster.

"Like what? A pencil pusher who has spent more time in budget meetings than getting his hands dirty? Like a man who hasn't been on a real dig since that one unfortunate experience in Columbia, which, if I remember correctly involved me and Sandra Heggers carrying your sorry ass out of the jungle..." He turned on Hoder, getting right in the man's face, forcing them back away from the lip of the nuraghe. "Me and Guiseppe are more than capable of protecting Annie's find, Patrick, like it or not. You're here because you're the money. I'm here because you need me. Sit your skinny ass down and play diplomat with the nice rescue team and admire the motherfucking ocean and work on your tan. Guiseppe, you got my fucking kit and camera?"

"Si, Jacob."

"Cool. Get the fucking bulbs lit down there and let's go."

He threw the kit on his back and worked out the straps on his mask, then walked over to the guy everybody seemed to be answering to on the rescue team. "I'm Dr. Key. If you need anything, let me know."

He got a confused look, but an Amazon in bright yellow translated and then Mr. Tall, Dark and Italian muttered something back.

"He says it has been more than a week. He says we look for bodies now."

"Yeah, well. Caleb's a survivor." He didn't believe for a second that Caleb wasn't down there. Waiting.

Jacob just wasn't going to believe the evil little bastard wouldn't survive so that he could take out the last six years of frustration on Caleb with a shovel. Oh, now. There was a pleasant thought.

"Come, Jacob. We have light!" He nodded, headed back to the nuraghe and the ladder. Mask. Check. Hat. Check. Peppermint candy in the mouth. Check.

It seemed sort of anti-climactic, heading down the first ladder, then the second. It was dark, even with the lights, and the ground had that ever-present dampness that spoke much more to the sea level than any recent criminal activity.

They headed west, looking through two tiny, natural rooms, then took a sharp turn away from the sea. The cave floor tilted down, their boots slip-sliding on the dirt, both men fighting to not touch any part of the cave walls unnecessarily. After the mess with the murders were old news, gone and forgotten, this would still be a dig.

The tight passageway opened up into a room, the walls dark and shining with dampness. The spotlights were set up to highlight the find, and the visual was something else as Jacob stepped in. "Goddamn."

Would you look at that?

The skeleton had to be at least six and a half feet tall, the legs and arms disproportionately long, the bone structure oddly angled and sharpened. Maybe some sort of ritualistic artwork? A preparation of the dead where the bones were altered?

He moved closer, grabbing his camera and shooting frame after frame. He could almost hear her, hooting as they saw it, making the students set the lights up just so, dragging over her little chair to sit with Caleb, soft brushes working and cleaning the dust away, layer by layer.

That little chair was still sitting there; the green one he remembered had been exchanged

for navy blue, but they were always the same – light enough to carry, sturdy enough to plop down in.

Guiseppe was taking measurements, recording all of the basic information that they would need in case something was moved, ruined. Jacob could hear the rescue team, heading deeper and deeper into the caves, the acoustics of the place odd and echoing, distorting everything.

Jacob settled in Annie's chair, leaning back to get an idea of what this was, what the purpose was. How they managed the wing structure. There were what looked to be ferrous deposits in the stone, concentrated at the wrists and shoulders of the skeleton, with less obvious deposits at mid-thigh and knee. One of the scapula had been seriously fractured, and one hip bone. He'd bet his bottom dollar the poor fuck who'd been made into art after death had been in some serious hurt right before.

He leaned in, training his flashlight on the bones as he searched for tool marks, something. The bones were clean, remarkably clean, and showing craftsmanship unheard of. He reached out, intending to touch, needing to touch, to see if his skin could discover something his eyes couldn't.

"Junior! Don't."

Jacob jerked back, arms wheeling as he spun around on one chair leg, eyes searching the caves, just fucking rolling in his head. "Did you hear that?"

"Cosa? What? Hear what, Jacob?"

Fuck. He thought. Damn it. "Nothing. I just..."

Just thought he heard his dead mother's voice in a Sardinian fucking cave where she was dismembered while staring at a weird, misshapen winged skeleton thing. No biggie.

No biggie at all.

Fuck.

"So, the bones. How old?"

Jacob shrugged. "Let's assume Annie and Monteverde tested. Old enough for the bones to adhere to the stone. Pre-nuraghe. There aren't any visible tool marks here; whoever did this was talented."

"What makes the wings? Ulna?"

Jacob stood and got nose-to-nose with the joins of the 'wing' bones. Damn, that was some good fucking work. They looked real. The bony caps, the way they fit together. The

whole thing. “I don’t know, buddy. If I had to guess, I’d say whale boning, maybe? Some sort of cartilaginous fish? But how are these people going to get hold of something that size?”

He made a note to email Ben, get the man to search that amazing, full-of-trivia brain for ideas. The asshole ought to do some real work while in-between writing those weird-assed (but incredibly good reading, fucking bastard would have made a great lecturer) novels about prehistoric Wyoming.

“Non lo so. Not without knowing time. Maybe it washed up on the shore? Whales can do that.”

“Here?”

Guiseppe grabbed a small soft brush, started working more dust away from one of the pointed wingtips. “We will know more when we excavate, when the bone is looked under the microscope, si?”

Jacob nodded, eyes drawn to the curve of the shoulder blade, the left scapula shattered, the right one whole, but so thin. Too thin to support the mass of a fully grown man, honestly.

“Give me one of the brushes, buddy. I want to look close at this.” He took another round of photographs before setting to work.

Silence fell as they started working, brushes whispering on the stone, both so careful not to touch the find with bare hands, soil it with the oils on their fingers – Caleb and Monteverde and even Annie forgotten in the routine of what they did, what all good diggers did, who they were -- just lost in the story of the stone.

Well, maybe not so long forgotten. He slowly worked the dust away, trying to ignore the fact that some of this was dried blood. God, Caleb, what happened down here?

He knew that they’d been working at night. Annie and Caleb both were night owls and they would have only been polite for so long. But they were all here, the whole team, so did they have them here working nights? Did Annie go first, Caleb running? Leaving the rest of the team to get fucked?

No. No, Caleb was a fucking liar. A cheater. A pussy bastard who played all the goddamn games in the world. A complete dick and a piece of shit.

The man wasn’t a coward.

Hell, Jacob would even admit that Caleb wouldn’t have left Annie. Caleb had adored the ground his momma’d walked on and he’d always said Annie liked Caleb best. Jacob she tolerated because he was her son. Annie’d been the one to introduce them, Caleb a year

ahead in studies and about thirty years ahead in experience and politicking. Fuck, he'd thought Caleb was just the sexiest bastard walking.

How many fucking months had he and Caleb spent in school and after, head-to-head, working on one dig after another? They'd been to every shitty hole in Argentina, in Bucharest, in Chile. They'd been eaten alive by bugs, attacked by locals, and one memorable night fucked like mad on an Aztec altar. God, that had been something, the night sounds everywhere, the look of Caleb's inked skin on the stained stone, the full moon lighting everything up so that anyone who wanted to could see. He'd come so hard that his balls had ached for two days. Hell, his left knee still had scars from that little escapade. People thought rug burn was bad.

Shit. He'd have been better off having his heart removed still beating from his chest and thrown into a fire. That would have at least been interesting.

Probably would have hurt less, too, in the long run.

Jackass.

It was Guiseppe who noticed it first, the bits of gravel and rock rattling on the dirt floor, rolling and bouncing against each other. He reached down, shook Jacob's shoulder. "Jacob?"

It took a second before he got it, followed where Guiseppe was pointing, then Jacob frowned, knelt down to look. The scent down here was stronger, penetrating the mask, even, dull and coppery with a hint of decomposition, of something abstract like fear, which made no sense, or maybe it did, because...

"Lo abbiamo trovato! Lo abbiamo trovato! Fretta! Porti l'altri!" The cry brought his head up, attention torn away from the shaking earth.

"What? What did they say?" God, those footsteps echoed.

"They found someone. The team." Guiseppe looked a little stunned, head turning to stare at the corridor with the moving lights where the rescue team hurried and the ground, where the little bits of rock still leapt.

Jacob, though, he was just trying to keep from following those lights, not sure if he could believe that all that running meant somebody was still alive. "Caleb."

His Caleb. God. Just. God.

Guiseppe nodded. "We will hope."

Yeah, yeah. He would hope. Jacob needed to talk to the man. Find out what happened to Annie. Find out what the fuck they were doing here together. Find out why the fuck no

one had said anything to him. Find out... Another tremor seemed to shift the room, the gravel bouncing again. "Are they shaking the cave, buddy? Is it them getting Caleb out?"

"Non lo so, but she gets worse, si? The walls."

Sure enough, there were tiny fissures slowly growing, creeping their ways up the walls, the bones started to rattle, just a little. Oh, man.

"Shit. Shit, buddy. This ain't good. This ain't good at all."

"No." Guiseppe took a step back, Annie's chair toppling over onto one side. "Not good."

Jesus Christmas, it had been the longest day in the history of days. Between the phone call that started it three hours too early to the hysterical phone call that came in the afternoon, Mac's accent so strong he could barely understand it, Ben felt sort of like he'd been tied onto the back of a pickup and dragged over Hell's half acre.

Of course, he guessed he couldn't complain. He wasn't lying brain dead in a fucking ICU waiting to die.

"Come on, Mac. You can't just stay here. We need to get home, eat, rest." They'd been at the hospital for hours, watching nurses run in and out of the little light blue ICU room, watching one light after another come on. He couldn't help but wonder how they stayed sane, with the buzzing and beeping and everything. It never seemed to end; it just rose in intensity.

They'd done everything they could, from finding out who Grace's family doctor was for records to answering questions to fielding visitors to calling Grace's family. Henry had come almost immediately, still covered with hay dust and rye seed. His sister Lissa was due in at ten in the morning from Miami; Henry's cousin Rachel was going to pick her up so they didn't have to worry about it and why in the world was he even thinking about it?

Ben sighed, looking over toward the bed where Grace was lying, still and quiet, tanned skin surprisingly dark against the sheets. Hank held her hand and sobbed, the big man sitting beside his mother's bed with the priest, head bowed as they prayed. That would be why. Thinking was easier than watching. Doing was even easier than thinking.

Hell, it seemed like half the town had come and gone over the evening, just to see, to bring offers of help, wanting information. Wanting to know what happened. Even his Aunt Posey and Uncle Eazi had come up, whispering prayers and smelling of burnt sage and the faintest whiff of marijuana.

Ben sighed and shifted as Mac didn't even bother answering him, fingers drumming on the little, cheap table. He had made it to the hospital about ten minutes before Henry,

heart pounding at the sheer horror and guilt in Mac's voice. Poor Grace – they said her head must've been just killing her, to do the damage that they were seeing.

Killing her. Christ.

They didn't need to sit in this waiting room any more. God knew Sam looked like death walking, eyes bruised and haunted. An old scrub shirt in bright pink hung over the broad shoulders, whatever Sam'd worn to the museum too bloody to rescue. Hell, Mac's finger had been stitched up and bandaged in the ER downstairs before they'd even let Mac upstairs to sit. The damned thing had to be throbbing like nothing else.

They'd made Sam take his ring off, so Ben had it, sitting on top of his. It felt odd, like his finger was too heavy, like it was wrong.

"Mac? Sam? Please. It's one in the morning. Let me take you home. Feed you. Get you some real clothes."

Eyes the color of watered-down Windex stared over at him, surprised, like Sam'd forgotten he was even there. "It's what? Did we lock the museum?"

"Jose did, yeah. After he cleaned up the lion's share of the mess. Remember? He came by?"

"I. No, no, I didn't. I was thinking."

Ben fought his worry back and found a grin. "Well, that explains a lot, professor. Come on. There's nothing we can do here."

There wasn't anything anyone could do, really. Grace was gone, just the body left behind.

"I keep thinking I should have looked over sooner, should have paid better attention." Sam ran one hand through those curls, the coppery hair going every which way. "She never once said her head ached, though. She was in a fine humor, laughing, right up to the end."

"Mac, that's a good thing, isn't it? That she was working and laughing, feeling good?" God, he wanted to reach out and smooth Mac's hair, but this wasn't the time or place. Not at all.

"I suppose." Mac winced, looked over at the poor bandaged hand. "Did they give me something for the pain, love?"

"Yes, but you have to eat. Come on. Up. We'll go have pancakes." Bacon. Something.

"All right. All right. Let me go in and tell Grace goodbye."

"Sure. I'll wait out here." There wasn't any sense in it, but if it made Sam feel better...

Hank stood and embraced Mac, the motion awkward and weird, but well-meant, and then Mac leaned down, kissed Grace's cheek, maybe whispered something to her, hand on her forehead.

Then, as he stood, alarms and sirens and shit started going off, doctors and nurses converging on the room like a plague of locusts. They pushed Hank and Mac and the Monsignor out, pulling curtains and bustling around like a nothing he'd ever seen. The priest sat Hank down, arms over the shaking shoulders and Ben went to Mac.

"Shit. What happened?"

Mac shook his head, face almost grey, ashen. "I don't know, Ben. I just hugged her and told her I'd... Something about how I'd see her soon, you know? And all that noise started."

"Damn. You. You look like you need to sit down."

"No. I need to go. I need to get out of here. I'm going to be ill, Ben. Please."

How someone went from blank stares to panic, Ben didn't know, but Sam managed it with the best of them. He watched the faces of the doctors, the way their pace seemed to slow. Either this crisis was over or she was slipping away. Either way, this was a time for the family. "Okay. Okay, come on. Let's go."

"Yes." Sam's free hand grabbed his arm, digging in hard enough to bruise him. "Now."

"Christ, when you make up your mind, you really make it up." They headed out to the corridor, the elevator. "You want doughnuts or IHOP?"

"I want eggs."

"IHOP it is." They turned a corner, the florescent lights and his own exhaustion making their shadows seem to loom on the pale walls. Hell, for a second, Sam's even looked like it had wings.

Great big wings.

Weird.

"Yeah. IHOP. I like their coffee."

Ben nodded, shook his head to clear it, and then hit the button for the elevator. Yeah. IHOP would help. IHOP and a nice long nap.

“Fuck.” Jacob watched Guiseppe shoot as much of the room as he could, the ground beneath their feet getting slick and wet, the already damp dirt going to mud in seconds, the scent of sea water sudden and strong. The bones started shifting, sliding some and that didn’t make *sense*, damn it. Those things were in the stone, not leaning against it.

He heard the rumble a heartbeat before he felt it, the sound deep and low, like a freight train in a tunnel, just barreling along. “Fuck, buddy.”

“Si. Si. Andiamo. Dobbiamo andare. Ora.” Man, he wasn’t exactly sure what Guiseppe just said, but he was pretty fucking sure it meant get a move on. The hand on his arm just sort of reinforced that.

Another tremor and Annie’s chair rolled again, one of her field journals plopping out into the mud and Jacob scrambled for it, tugging away from Guiseppe’s hand. He needed that.

He grabbed it up, searching through the little chair pockets for anything else, stuffing his own pockets with them without even looking.

The cries of the rescue team seemed to be everywhere, the Italian echoing and seeming more and more alien to him. The skeleton slumped to the ground, the skull sliding through the mud to land with a dull thud at Guiseppe’s feet. Guiseppe bent down, scooped the bone up, one hand held out to him. “Ora. Andiamo.”

“Yeah. Yeah, let’s hasta.” He slipped and slid, grabbing his fellow digger’s hand as the ground lurched, a sickening sucking sound coming from behind them. “Go. Gogogogogo.”

They hustled, pushing through corridors that seemed smaller and darker, almost fucking alive with the way the slick walls tugged at their bare arms, trying to pull them back. As the corridors got narrower and narrower, Jacob went first, pushing through mud that dripped from the cave ceiling, dropped into his hair, slid down his neck like a cold lover’s touch.

Fuck. Fuck. No thinking about dead things. No freaking out. God. Fuck. He was going to beat Caleb to death with the man’s own *tongue* when he got out of this. “Come on, buddy. We got to move.”

Guiseppe didn’t answer and Jacob turned around, trying to squint through the falling slime. “Guiseppe? Buddy? You back there?”

Goddamn motherfucker. They were almost to the fucking opening of the nuraghe. Just right there.

He stood a second, then he heard it, a scream just audible through the creaking and groaning of the cave walls. Oh, he so didn't fucking thing so.

"Who the fuck did I piss off up there, huh God? I mean, shit. If Annie did it, toast her ass a few centuries and give me a fucking break." Jacob turned and ran back, deeper into the earth, slogging through silt now, sinking down to mid-calf with every step. "Guiseppe! Goddamn it, where are you?"

He turned one corner, the electric lights snapping out, one after the other. Jacob stopped short, the flashing bulbs disorienting him, confusing him. He could just see Guiseppe, nearly buried in a mass of stone and mud, screams melted down into low groans and whimpers.

The skull was there, held tight in Guiseppe's hands, the bones digging into the man's flesh. Fuck. Fuck.

"Buddy. Come on. We gotta go." He started tugging at stones, the rising water making it easier, helping him free the man from the rocks. Guiseppe's cries turned to violent screams as the stones in his hands became slick with blood and water. Fuck. Fuck.

Just fuck.

"You hold on, buddy. You hear me? Your Maria's having a baby and needs your sorry ass. You get it? That baby needs to meet her daddy."

"I. I. He. A boy. A boy." The words trailed off into garbled Italian, Guiseppe's eyes rolling wild as fuck.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll believe it when I see it. Stay with me, now." He kept talking, trying not to fucking lose it as the water rose. "Can't you see it, though? A little digger like you? We'll take him fishing and shit, take him rafting."

"Si."

"That's right, buddy. You and me and all your boys, bringing home trout big enough to scare the girls. We'll even clean them so Maria don't get all pissy at us. You remember that time we went up to that lake in early October and that snow hit early, damn near froze our balls off? We managed though, didn't we? Set ourselves up right and tight until they found our happy asses. Maria was so fucking mad at you, remember? I could hear her screaming over the phone, cussing you in more languages than I knew existed."

They'd figured their way out of that, he'd figure this. Damn it. "Man, you got a death grip on that skull, don't you? Shit, you're a digger balls to bones. It's a calling, yeah? You, me, Caleb, Annie, Carlo – we all got it, all of us. Like a sickness, but better."

God, he wasn't even making sense anymore. Figured.

He got all but one leg free, that one trapped deep in the rock, the wet denim impossibly small where the leg was crushed. Wisps of blood just sort of floated up with the water, staining it. He took his belt off, wrapped it tight around Guiseppe's thigh until even those little hints of blood stopped, sort of at peace with the fact that he didn't even get a groan. Then he grabbed the scalpel, the bone saw out of his pack, wincing as mud just fell right on them. "Okay. Okay, God. Now you fucking listen. I gotta get him outta here and you already got your pound of flesh."

Or more. Hell, legs weighed a lot. Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. What was he *thinking*?

He laughed and the hysteria in his voice startled him, scared him badly. "Please, just don't let him wake up, 'kay? He's got babies and I won't fucking leave him to die."

Jacob wiped the blade off on his shirt, cut into the denim and prayed.

Chapter Four

Heat. Sex. Hunger. Food.

The scents of a world not long-dead fascinated him as he wandered through the night, nostrils flaring, blood thrumming through his veins. Hot.

He had not felt heat in so long.

The place interested his eyes, fascinated him with its colors, its shapes. Often in his long sleep Time and her daughters had whispered to him, muttered stories of monsters and demons, of stars which crashed to the ground and temples with spires that pierced the heart of their sister Sky. Still, memory was not eternal, even for them, and the weight of darkness blunted his eyes, his own hues.

This place rekindled them, violets crashing headlong into maroon, pale blues of eggshell walls slamming into the deep cherry of wood at the ground.

He passed an opening, staring out into the trees. The moon laughed at him, whispering pale secrets, his skin glowing near silver as the branches appeared the deepest ebony. The movement on the ground caught his eye, and he stopped, stared. The blanket of birds covering the earth, welcoming their lord, pleased him. Some fluttered, some hopped, some crouched down in flocks away from the hunters. Ravens and hawks, sparrows and owls – birds of the daylight and of the night – all appearing before him in the moonlight to welcome him.

His hand pressed against the window, the contact hissing and smoking, the shape of five long fingers etched into the glass so that his beloved brother might seek him, find him in this odd land. The flock outside took flight as if frightened, the beating of a thousand wings echoing within his heart, blood rushing as he crowed, his cry shaking the foundations of the earth itself. Yes. Yes, go and draw him out. Bid him come to his lost one.

He heard a soft sound from one of the rooms, a groan that was a waking question. Ah. Ah, yes. Hunger filled him, a deep-seated need for contact, for the low cries of pleasure intermixed with pain. His feet slapped upon the floor as he headed toward the sound, toward the scent of man resting within the sheets.

One of the beasts – the female, refusing to leave the pack – growled and snarled, teeth bared as he walked by her where she crouched beneath the bed. He leaned down, staring into blue eyes, hissing his warning. She should go, follow the male into the trees, lest she follow him into death.

She whined softly, but did not budge and he reached out, intending to slake his rage for a moment, ease his sudden and perpetual fury. A hand stopped him, tugged him close, dragging him into a soft bed, rumpled sheets, up against a soft, warm body.

So easy, to roll over in the sheets and reach for the living flesh there, hands trailing along the smooth skin, nails dragging and leaving welts. His lips found the curve of a shoulder, the taste there salty and somehow sweet.

"Mac... easy." The man pulled away, as if there was a choice in the matter, as if this feeding was somehow less predestined than every man that had fallen in millennia. Fools. He would have his vengeance.

He growled and bit down, scratched again, deeper this time, the scent of blood sudden and metallic as it welled up around his nails, within his lips. Yes. Skin spread for him, the blood black and viscous like the inside of a rat, the inside of carrion. It poured out upon the sheets, great torrents of pain and fluids, bathing him with heat as he writhed in pure ecstasy.

"Mac! You're going to hurt yourself! You're dreaming..."

Sam jerked, the dream falling away in a crash as his bound hand throbbed and burned. His heart felt like it was going to beat its way out of his chest. "Fucking hell."

"Yeah. Yeah, you were dreaming, huh? Walking and twisting and groaning. I've been trying to wake your ass forever." Ben tugged the curtains above the bed open, the light flooding in as Ben held his arm where he'd been tearing at the bandages. His belly stung, too, scratch marks running from nipples to navel.

"Jesus. I was. I dreamed I hurt you. That I was going to hurt the dogs. I didn't..." Of course he didn't.

"You didn't even move out of the bed, Mac. Kono! Piah! Come here, guys."

They came plodding in, side-by-side and looking a little reluctant, but both whole, both there.

"Man. I. What a dream." His finger throbbed, his head pounded, and unless he was completely mistaken, he was going to toss up.

"Yeah. Let me get you another pain pill, some water."

"No!" His voice shocked him, but he meant it. "Not yet. I'm not ready for another one."

"Okay. Okay. You want something to eat, then? Coffee and toast?" Ben sounded so eager to relax him, to ease him that he just nodded, fine. Toast. Whatever.

They both got up, slid into jeans and t-shirts, the dogs heading almost immediately toward the kitchen and the back door. "I'll open the windows if you'll let them out."

Ben's hair was mussed, the plait off-kilter as it was after a long night. "Sure, no problem."

He managed to get the bedroom windows opened, the one in the bathroom, in Ben's office. The ones in the living room were harder, almost too heavy to open with one hand and each needing a stick to hold them in place. By the third one he was cursing beneath his breath, bandaged hand sore and shaky as he yanked the pane up.

It was the dogs that caught his attention, drew his eyes outside. They were running around frantically, muzzles toward the sky, barking as if possessed. Sam looked up, gasped. Birds. Hundreds of them in the sky, the trees, on the power lines, just everywhere. Just sitting.

Staring.

Waiting.

Sam stood there, eyes wide, until Ben's voice sounded, announcing breakfast, startling him. His hand holding the window shifted, the palm suddenly sweaty, and the pane came crashing down, glass shattering, the floor littered with a thousand shards.

It took three cups of coffee, another Vicodin, and Ben cleaning the glass from the floor before Sam convinced himself the handprint he'd seen burned into the glass was simply a shadow.

"Plant. You have to get some sleep, man."

Jacob looked up from the hard little chair in the hallway of the hospital. Right in the middle of two doors in critical care with the doctors flowing in and out and muttering under their masks.

"Fuck off, Hoder. I'm not going anywhere." Shit, he'd just cut a man's leg off; he wasn't going to have a fucking *nap*.

No hurling. Shit. None. He was never eating fucking rare steak again. Never.

An earthquake. They were saying that's what happened. Just a freak fucking occurrence. A freak fucking occurrence that cost them a crime scene, a find, all the equipment, Guiseppe's leg. Shit.

The bottom of the nuraghe had filled with water by the end, the little rounded opening muddy and thick and gurgling. They'd lost two rescue team members to it. God knew if they'd ever find the bodies.

“Jacob. Key.” Patrick knelt down, the man just about as grey as Jacob’d ever seen him. Even Jacob could admit that the efficient fucker was handy in this sort of shit. The man just coped like nothing else. Jacob wouldn’t be surprised if there was a coffee machine built into the son of a bitch somewhere. He’d hate to see where the spigot came out of though. Ouch. “Man, you’re going to have a psychotic episode and you’re scaring the staff just sitting here. They’re in good hands, but you can’t just stay here. You need a nap, a shower, fresh clothes and probably a fifth of whiskey, but you don’t need to stay. Do you even know what day it is?”

“What?”

“How long have we been here? When was the last time you ate? Slept?”

“I...” Fuck, how the hell should he know? Hospitals were like bad LSD trips at best.

“That’s what I mean, Jacob. We’ve been here for all night and most of a day. You are covered in blood and mud and ocean water. Hell, Plant, you *stink*.”

Somehow that fucking tickled him, the officious little prick worrying about how he was stinking up the University hospital, bothering the brilliant dottori. It made him start laughing, deep, booming noises that had doctors and nurses coming out into the hallway, staring at him like he was going to snap.

One middle-aged guy came up to Hoder, tapped the man on the shirt and started talking, hands waving some, eyes looking over at him, over and over. Now Jacob’s Italian was shitty at best, but ‘sedativo’ was ‘knock the crazy fucker out’ in any language.

“No way. No fucking way. No drugs.”

“The doctor just thinks...”

“The doctor just thinks I’m going to run screaming up and down his pristine frigging hallways and ravish his nurses before offing myself in a rage. Tell him I’m sane and queer and not interested in any more blood today.”

“Signore, I... I do not think you are a danger, no. I think you have seen many bad things, si?”

“Oh, don’t confuse the issue by being logical, man.”

“We are only here to help.”

“I’ve heard that before, man. I’m not the one that needs help.” He didn’t need any fucking help. He needed... “How’s Dr. Paulsen? Dr. Conta? Can I see them?”

The doctor shook his head, somehow looking like a guy from a soap opera, even with blood-stained scrubs and tired fucking eyes. “No. No, they... they need rest, si? Dottore Conta will heal well. You stop the blood; you save his life, si? Il suo famiglia, they come now. Dottore Paulsen? He loses much. È stato bloccato... uh... trapped? Too long. His brain is in coma. We do our best job, but non lo so. I have... there has been no one so hurt that wakes that I know.”

“Let me see Caleb before I go. Please. Please, I need to see him.” He turned to Hoder, the closest to pleading that he’d been since the last time he’d seen Caleb. “Patrick. You know what he was to me. I’ve lost Annie. I want to see him.”

Patrick almost looked human there for a minute, then the man turned to the doctor and started doing his thing. Maybe diplomacy wasn’t completely fucking worthless.

Maybe.

“Okay, Plant. Five minutes. He looks bad though, so be ready. I was there when they pulled him out of the caves. He was... he wasn’t there, Jacob.” Human looked better than pity did.

“Five minutes. I just want to see him.” Say his piece, in case Caleb could fucking hear him. Say what he needed to.

“Five minutes and then you go, rest, or we admit you, too.”

“Sure, fine, whatever. Five minutes and I’ll go. Hoder, call Mrs. Monteverde? See if we’re staying there?”

“Sure, Plant. Go on. I’ll get us a car.”

Christ, he was tired down to the bone and he needed a fucking cigarette so bad he could taste it.

The door was pushed open for him, the doctor standing to one side, and it struck him, suddenly, how all hospital doors looked so... anonymous. Like morgue doors and apartment doors and...

Okay. Okay. Five minutes. Don’t waste it doing pointless shit like thinking.

There were certain times in a man’s life when all he could do was not lose it. When that was it – no puking, no tears, no screaming, no throwing shit in a rage. Jacob stood there, stared, eyes trying to make sense of something that didn’t work at the end of a bunch of days where nothing had been right.

Caleb looked like a person who’d been dead for days, skin a dull grey where the bruises and tats weren’t, cuts and bite marks covering every inch that the sheet didn’t hide.

Caleb's hair was shaved away in odd patches, wires and shit taped to his skull. One arm was already casted, tubes coming in and out of fucking everywhere, machines and shit beeping and whirring and keeping the brilliant motherfucker alive. "Oh, shit, Cal. What happened to y'all down there?"

He stumbled across the room, sitting down hard before he fell.

Chapter Five

12-December-2004

Carlo Monteverde – that's that old fuck who's married to a little bitty gal half his age. I can't decide whether to be pissed or admiring. God knows I haven't gotten any since... Man, if you can't remember, it's been too fucking long -- called today about a find. 30 m. outside a nuraghe in Sardinia. Go fucking figure. This one seems a little different, though. Sent pictures of odd little fetishistic dolls – look to be carved of obsidian – found around a series of bones with what look to be winged features in a tomb-type setting. Interesting, except why?

Looked at the nuragic villages, just to catch up. Old brain, old memory. Still feels good to be called like I haven't lost it. Most of the errata found are period – some copper, some bronze, even a hint of pottery -- but the bones themselves were either dyed or covered in black material.

Wing structures are sophisticated for the time-period in question.

Interesting.

I should call Christine in reference, have her pull things on winged prehistoric art...

7-January-2005

Stupid goddamn holidays slowing everything down. Carlo did send me a fetish and what looks to be a toe bone before he took off to celebrate and do his religious thing. Interesting findings. Made me wish Jacob'd wandered in to see. Fucking Hoder sent fruit cake.

Fruit cake.

I threw it out the window. Note to self – call the insurance company about damages to Sally Gerald's Honda.

Anyway, at first glance, it doesn't look like bone at all – the toe bone, not the fruit cake - and carbon dating puts the skeleton millennia before the nuraghi. Did they find the bones and use them as an idol? Is it just a random coincidence that they are there?

Going to date the fetish next, after I go for my next set of treatments. Need to send a note to Junior. Make sure it gets there before his birthday.

Damn. I should have forwarded him the fruitcake.

Nah. Shipping costs would have been a bitch.

9-January-2005

In fucking hospital. Bad reaction to chemo. Feel like hammered shit (which leads me to wonder why hammered shit is less attractive than intact shit. Is dung fouler when whacked with a ball peen hammer for fuck's sake? No. Dung is foul. Well, fresh dung is foul. Ancient dung is fun to tease undergrads with...). Am considering murdering vast amounts of medical staff. Resisting only because I believe the university would disapprove and refuse to fund my trip to Sardinia. Bastards.

Basic notes – this find is outside the territory of Dorgali, near a complex find with up to six interconnected nuraghe. There's something fascinating about the way those little towers look, stone nipples just dotting the land. Evidence of stores kept close to the find – Carlo noted that the stores (normal shit – barley, almonds, grapes – oh, blah. I'm going to puke up a lung) found nearest the find seem to have been abandoned intact. Sacrifices? Offerings? Poison?

Bad smell from the big skeleton?

God, I crack myself up.

10-January-2005

Evidence for the social and economic habits of nuragic villages is exiguous, but religion? Not so much. Did some looking at the wells at Vittoria-Serri and Abini-Teti, along with the spring of Sos Malavidos-Orani, read some of Carlo's work. These people were water cultists. Sacred spots full of bronze fetishes, jewelry. Even some imported stuff – which leads to another one of those arguments against using religion as import store, but hey, what do I know?

29-January-2005

Talked to Caleb Paulsen today. Junior'd shit a pink Twinkie.

Think I'll invite the boy out to look at these obsidian pieces. I love watching him pretend not to ask about Junior.

I'll even put him in Jacob's old room.

12-February-2005

Caleb came and went. Took the fetishes to Florida to compare with some Roman carvings. Will call.

24-April-2005

No more chemo. No more radiation. No more anything.

Jacob is just going to have to understand.

I can't do this anymore and I talked to Monteverde. They've found what seems to be a series of caves and tunnels beneath the level of the nuraghe. I want to go. Patrick says they'll fund a team.

I can't go with this fucking port in my chest. Junior should know. Should understand. Should know I can't.

I won't.

Not with one last dig to do.

25-April-2005

Got Paulsen. Trying to get hold of Junior.

Fucking A.

26-April-2005

Talked to J. Little fucker.

Didn't tell him about Sardinia.

Or Caleb.

Little shithead, yelling at me.

Bastard child.

Same fucking day, just later.

How dare he raise his voice to me like I'm some first year undergrad? Like these oncologists have one iota more experience or sense or education than I do? Like somehow an extra three years make the slightest bit of difference?

That's what? Three more visits from the little peabrain that's my son? Maybe four?

I should have listened to his father and found a hanger in Kenya.

Okay. I didn't mean that last part.

Mostly.

Jacob had to stop then, stop staring into the damp and streaked mess that was Annie's field notebook and just laugh. The sound was loud and shocking in the quiet room, but he couldn't have stopped it, pulled it deeper within him if he'd tried.

He could remember that fight. He'd come down to spend the week with Ben and Mac, wait out some weather, warm the fuck up some and he'd found out Annie was trying to get him. Contact him. Tell him she was going off her meds again and damned if he didn't piss her off bad enough that she'd not shared the vital shit.

She'd been such a stone cold bitch about some things. So fucking interfering. Hassling him about Caleb, about visiting, about chess and studies and freezing his nuts off and playing with those posers who were making up Native American culture as they went and...

God, he missed her.

Maria Conta was, without a shadow of a doubt, the scariest woman Jacob Key had ever seen.

Ever.

Especially when she was coming at him across a hospital room, pregnant, baby on one hip, three other little ones trailing behind her like a family of ducklings. God knew where the rest of the crew was. Hopefully not in the cafeteria, torturing people.

Fuck him.

“Bastardo! Avete tagliato il piedino del mio marito fuori!! Come sfida voi!”

Shit. That undoubtedly meant “I’m going to cut your balls off, you asshole.”

“Hey, Maria. How’s he doing?” Best to go for wide-eyed and innocent over guilty as all fuck. “I was pleased to hear they moved him out of intensive care.”

“You. I will. Bastardo!” She hauled off and socked him in the jaw, which he probably deserved, but still. Ow. She reached back to do it again and he shook his head, taking the baby from her and staring at her.

“Not in front of i bambini, Maria. You know I wouldn’t have done it, I didn’t have to.” He never wanted to fucking do anything like that ever again. Ever.

Those big black eyes filled with tears and he sighed. He hated it when a woman cried. Then Maria pushed into his arms, sobbing softly, sort of squeezing the little one between them and making it whine and bite. Lord.

Jacob patted her shoulder awkwardly, murmuring and trying not to dance as the little rugrat in his arm tried to gnaw through his chest. Christ. “Come on, come on now. He’s gonna be okay. He will. He’s alive, isn’t he?”

“He. He need to work. How he work with sola una gamba?”

“Well, shit, honey. They make really fine prosthetics now.” She looked at him, blinked. “You know, fake legs. I’ll keep him working, Maria. I promise.”

A digger wasn’t about his legs. A digger was about the need to figure shit out.

The older kiddos started fussing and rattling, all of them looking tired and hungry and worn. “Look, honey. Why don’t you take the kids and feed them, feed you? I’ll go sit with Guiseppe, let him hit me a couple times.”

That was a fucking hard offer to make, too, damn it. After all, how many times did a man go into the hospital room of the man whose leg he’d cut off? In a cave, for chrissake. Shit, if Annie was still alive, he’d kill her.

“I. You would? Mamma is here. To help. At hotel, si? I could wash.”

“Sure. Sure, darlin’ I’ll stay right here.” Jacob forced himself to meet her eyes again. “I swear, Maria, there wasn’t a choice. I swear to God. I couldn’t let him die in there in the dark.”

“No. No. You are friend to him. This. This thing is hard, si? But he live. I live. You live.”

“Yeah. Yeah, honey. He’s gonna get through this.”

She nodded, patted his arm and headed into Guiseppe’s room, the ducklings right behind in a neat little row. He could hear her talking, then Guiseppe’s rough, deep voice answering her.

Damn, he didn’t want to do this, didn’t want to go in there and see Guiseppe lying in the bed.

He did it, though, because Guiseppe was his friend and he wasn’t a fucking coward, goddamnit. Guiseppe looked pale, drawn, but compared to Cal, the man looked pretty fucking healthy. “Hey, buddy. How’re they treating you?”

“Buon. Buon.” Guiseppe reached out and squeezed the baby’s foot, tickling it, making it giggle. “Va, Maria. Lascilo parlare con lui.”

“Sì. Rinvierò.” Guiseppe’s forehead was kissed – first by Maria, then by the children, one after another.

Man, it was quiet after they left. Really. Shit. Jacob grabbed a chair, tugged it over to the bed and sat, hands on his knees, not having the slightest idea what to say. The silence stretched out and out until he couldn’t hardly bear it, then Guiseppe sighed and Jacob braced himself for the torrent of guilt.

“Grazie, Jacob. You save my life. I will never forget.”

Oh. Oh, sweet Jesus, thank you.

Jacob surprised himself by having to blink back sudden tears of pure fucking relief, hand reaching out to grab the one offered to him. “I couldn’t leave your ass down there to die, buddy. I couldn’t do that.”

“No. No, you would not desert me. I know.”

“If I could’ve done anything else, man. I swear to God, I would have. I didn’t. Fuck, I didn’t want to...”

“No. No, I did not want, but God, He gave us strength and now I see my babies again, I see the sunshine, the light, si?” Guiseppe squeezed his fingers, hard enough to make them

ache a little. “We will survive this time. We will sit together and drink beer and tell this as story in the bar.”

“You think?”

“Si. Lo so. It will be. Maria, she does not understand that I must go, si? I must dig. You understand.”

“I do. I so do, man.”

“Pearson? He is alive?”

Jacob shrugged. “Yeah, kinda? I mean, his body’s there, but he’s not talking, not waking up, not saying anything. The doctors aren’t being super informative, you know? I keep asking, they keep talking to Hoder. It’s hell not being able to understand the language.”

“Si. Si. He would not go now, si? He waits so long and is free.”

“Yeah, I hope so. Shit, man. What do you think happened to them down there?” He wanted to know that more than anything, wanted to know what happened to Annie, what had almost happened to them.

“Non lo so. I. I dream, Jacob. I dream of teeth and wing beating and beating, so anger, so mad. I cannot bear it.”

“They’re just dreams, buddy.” Just like his were. Just dreams.

“No. Not *just* anything. These dreams, they... they live, Jacob. They hunger.” The fingers wrapped around his squeezed again, pressing hard enough his bones creaked. “Hunger, Jacob.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay, buddy. Breathe.” He stood up, getting his hand free and smoothing the blankets that just sagged where Guiseppe’s leg ought to be. Fuck.

“I. Jacob.” The words faded into a jumbled Italian, Guiseppe not making a lick of sense.

“It’s cool, buddy. It’s cool. Let’s get the docs here to make with the medical magic.”

“My foot, it itches, Jacob. I feel.”

“Yeah. I know. Breathe.”

He pressed the call button, eyes drawn to the empty spot on the bed again and again.

The door to the museum opened without a sound, Sam slipping in to stand in the workroom and stare.

Black.

Lovely. Huge.

So fine.

The moonlight danced over each curve, each line. It made him ache, made his mouth water.

His find. His own.

Such perfect artwork, such beautiful lines.

His feet made surprisingly loud sounds against the ground as it drew him, his bandaged hand throbbing in time with his heart.

Sam groaned as he reached the box, the urge to reach in, cradle the bones to him, sudden and wrong and he pushed it away as ridiculous.

Silly.

Wrong.

No. No, he would not touch. He would look. See.

Admire.

Imagine the perfect form in flight, heading toward the sun, the entire world burning beneath its fury. Beneath its passion.

One finger traced the line of one sharp hip, the bandages snagging, snarling on the bone, leaving bits of cloth open, daring the blood to flow again.

A single drop worked itself free, landed on the bone with a dull plop and then became lost in the shadow, almost seeming to be devoured.

Devoured.

Sam looked up to the moon, eyes filling with tears. "Ben. Love. Help me."

"Did you know that cats can't taste sweets?"

"What?" Jacob looked over, head tilting as he tried to remember where he was and why his fucking head hurt. The campfire was crackling, so bright it burned his eyes, made the walls around him seem almost black.

"Pay attention, would you? Cats don't have receptors for sweet on their tongue. They can't taste sweetness." Caleb stared over at him, black eyes catching the flames and shining.

"Okay..." The man was a fucking fount of useless information, even if he was dumb enough to wear a white t-shirt at a dig.

"Can you imagine? Going your whole life without chocolate?"

"I don't like chocolate, Caleb."

"Oh. Well, what about honey? Can you imagine going your whole life without honey?"

Jacob tilted his head. "You wouldn't be without. It would still have a *taste*; it just wouldn't be sweet. Not only that, but if you never knew sweet, you couldn't miss it."

Caleb stared over at him, lips a thin line and Jacob fought his grin valiantly. Honest. "Jacob. I am *trying* to create a metaphor, here."

"That would be why you had to cheat in your freshman comp class and got your degree in Anthro, Cal."

"Don't be a bitch, baby."

Like he qualified as anybody's baby anymore. Shit. "I could make you call me Dr. Key."

"You could ask, but I won't do it. God, you look tired." Caleb was drawing in the dust, using one finger. Probably drawing something obscene. An ancient curse to make him bald. "I love your hair, asshole. I always have. I remember when it used to be long and I could wrap my fingers in it when..."

"Caleb. Enough." He wasn't going there. Not until he figured shit out. Maybe not until even after that.

He got a quick look, a shrug of those wide shoulders. "What, I'm supposed to pretend I don't miss you?"

"Jesus. I don't want to have this fucking conversation. What. Do. You. Want?" This was all Annie's fault. It had to be. He wasn't sure how, but he knew it had to be.

"I just wanted to talk."

"Don't. Don't go all hurt and pouty. This whole thing... why would you want to... Wait. Shit." He grabbed a stick, started poking the fire. Okay. Okay. Breathing. Keep with the breathing.

"Have you ever heard of the Safat?"

"The what?" God, look at the sparks.

"The Safat. Middle Eastern bird."

"I'm not an ornithologist." Desert birds. Christ.

"No, baby. She's a myth. A giant bird that flies and lays her eggs in the clouds. The babies never even reach the earth."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing. It doesn't have anything to do with anything, but the Devil's in the details."

God, Caleb made him want to scream. "Why does everything have to be a fucking riddle?"

Caleb sighed, looked over at him, the sparks leaving black-edged holes in that grey shirt. "I don't know. I don't know, but you have to work it out. You have to find me, okay?"

"Find you? You're right here."

"You know the legend says that only the egg shells of the Safat reach the ground. Any man who takes them goes mad." Something, some wetness was creeping along the shoulders, the sides of Caleb's shirt.

"So what? Don't eat eggs?"

"Don't be dense, asshole. Not this time. It isn't always about you. It isn't always about what you need." Caleb groaned, head shaking, finger moving more and more desperately in the dirt. "Baby, please. Pay attention. You've been a digger your whole life. Find me."

"But we *did*." The stick in his hand caught flame and he dropped it, blinking as the feathers began to burn, the huge wing shriveling and turning to ash. "Jesus."

"This is a whole other myth, baby." Caleb stood, stared at him with eyes of pure flame, hands shaking, something dark and viscous dripping from the tips of his fingers. "Jacob. Jacob, please. You have to gather the egg shells before the madness spreads. It's already

followed you home. Annie wouldn't listen."

Jacob groaned, shook his head and raged. No. No, this was enough and he was dreaming.

Dreaming.

Damnit.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're dreaming. You are always dreaming, that's why you hide away in those fucking mountains instead of dealing, instead of being a human being and making mistakes!" Caleb stormed over to him, staring into him and somehow it fucking hurt, those eyes. Really hurt deep down. Then when those fingers landed on his shoulders, claws dug in bone-deep and he screamed, hands scrabbling along that thin back to pull Caleb off. "You don't get to hide, baby. You don't get to make it all a bad dream."

When his fingers slid through blood to hit exposed bone, it was more than he could take, each muscle in his body going tight as he jerked awake in self-defense.

Every inch of him ached. He'd said that before – in Machu Pichu, in Guatamala City. Hell, in New Jersey when those teenagers jumped him on the way to his hotel from a conference on forensic archeology and beat the living shit out of him.

He'd said it a lot.

He hadn't meant it until this time.

Jacob shifted, ass sliding on the leather chair, hand falling from the big-assed desk to slap against his thigh, setting it to burning and tingling. Annie's papers were scattered everywhere, mixed in with Caleb's and he was just beginning to figure out a timeline, figure out what they thought they were doing.

It had been Caleb that found the second set of bones; Caleb that had called in even more people from the states. Shit.

Jacob rubbed his eyes, stared down at the masses of loose pages, in one pile after another. There was one big ugly yellow notebook filled with drawings, sketches that Caleb had made of the finds, the bones, positions of everything. He pulled it over, trying to correlate some of Annie's notes with it and as he lifted it, his eyes caught sight of a piece of paper with birds drawn all over it. Flocks of them. Flying. It made him shudder, sent a dread through him he couldn't fathom and one of the pages slid through the skin of his finger, slicing the tip.

"Fuck." He jerked and the notebook went one way, his chair the other as he shoved his finger in his mouth. Damn it.

He bent down, picked up the notebook from where it had landed, one loose piece of paper

fluttering out. A shipping receipt. To Casper. To the Harrison Museum.

From Annie.

From only a few weeks ago.

He shook his head, frowned and picked up the phone to call Ben before he headed back to the hospital for his vigil.

Birds. Wings. Egg shells.

What the fuck did you do, Annie?

The phone rang as they left for the hospital – their third visit in as many days -- and Ben just let it ring this time, just locked the door behind him and headed to the Bronco with Mac. Whoever it was – well-wisher, worry-wart, or reporter – could just wait. His lover looked haggard, raw and bruised, paler than Ben had ever seen him. Well, maybe not ever. This morning before dawn had been... Something. "Are you sure you're up to going back there? We don't have to."

He got a look that was almost cold, almost nasty and the urge to be hurt was sudden and sharp, very real. Cold as ice. "Don't mother me, love. I hate that."

"Don't be an ass to me, Mac. It's not my favorite thing either. You want to manage the stick shift by yourself with the sore hand or do you want to act like I'm not the one you're pissed at?" Christ, he didn't sign up for long-term abuse here.

Unhappy eyes met his, looked at him, and Ben couldn't understand why he saw fear there. Then Mac's arms wrapped around him in a hard hug, squeezing him almost too tight. "Don't be that way, Benny. I'm just headachy and this bleeding finger hurts so that it's enough to drive a man mad."

"You said you cut it on a statue? You think it could be infected? God knows what bacteria could be on something..."

"The way my luck's been lately? I've probably got some dread disease only found in one part of the world." He got a half-hearted wink, a nudge of a shoulder. "It'll be okay, love. It will. Now let's go."

Mac grabbed those damned sunglasses and threw them on, shoulders hunched as they slid in, buckled up, key in the ignition.

Normal shit.

Lalala.

Except it wasn't normal, was it? They weren't heading to have breakfast or to go hiking or up to see his folks. They weren't going to drop Mac off at the museum so that he could have the Bronco to go buy plants for the front yard or a mister for the little crop in the basement and dog food for the beasts.

God, he hated hospitals.

They parked in the visitor's area, nodding at an older couple who had an armful of flowers and stuffed animals and baby toys. The last few days, people-watching had been enough to base a Ph. D. on. A novel. Both.

Just the differences in people – the ones that were scared, hopeful, welcoming new life, bringing broken people to be fixed, finding out they were broken themselves. It was all fascinating and eerie and somehow wonderful.

Then there were the people like them. The ones there just watching people's bodies figure out what their minds had already. That it was over.

They didn't talk on the walk up to the building; what were they supposed to say?

They didn't even make it all the way to the front, Sam nudging his elbow, shifting him enough to miss the door, heading to the little smoker's area. Lissa was sitting out near the little concrete fountain, smoking, looking enough like Grace to be shocking, brassy red curls just flaming in the sunlight. "Lissa?"

Blood-shot eyes glanced up and her lips twitched. "It's over. It was over about three-four hours ago."

He felt Sam shudder, both of them sitting down, the splash of the water behind them constant.

"Did she ever wake up, Lissa?" Sam's head was down, brow wrinkled in that way that Ben knew meant he didn't want to cry.

"No, man. She didn't. She convulsed a couple more times, her mouth opening and closing like she was trying to talk or something, but it was all just electrical shit. Impulses, you know? It wasn't real."

"I'm sorry, Lissa. She was a wonderful woman."

Lissa nodded, took another deep drag, blew the smoke out of her nose. "You're the first person who I've told that didn't call her a lady."

Sam snorted. "Lissa, lovely. I adored your mother, she was my right hand, but she wasn't

a lady, by any definition."

They all laughed then, the sound sending the pigeons that had landed – flocked really, nasty things – around Sam's feet back into the air, cooing and rustling and flapping.

"Can I go up and see her?"

Lissa looked over at Sam, shrugged. "Henry's dealing with everything. Third floor. Talk to him. I... I can't do this right now. I just need to smoke."

"Yeah. Yeah, I hear you, Liss. Ben, you want to stay down here?"

Ben started to nod and hope he didn't look too grateful. He'd adored Grace, but this wasn't about him. Then he caught the look on Sam's face. Hurt and lost and vaguely ill, like somebody had sucker punched the man in his sleep. "No. No, I'll come up with you, see if Henry needs any help."

"Fine."

Ben started to stand up, offer Sam a hand, when Henry walked out, brim of that hat shadowing the round face. "Hey."

"Hello, Henry. I'm sorry. If there's anything I can do..." It was funny, how helpless this made everyone sound. It made him want to call his father, sit and hear the old stories, those pat tales of the world and the moon. How there was a reason for everything. A pattern.

All that garbage the scientist in him tried to pooh-pooh and the child in him needed to believe.

"You look like you're thinking deep thoughts." Lissa offered him a cigarette and he shook his head.

"No, just daydreaming. It's been a long few days, which I'm sure you know all about."

"Yeah. Yeah, I mean, it's not real yet. None of it is real yet."

Ben nodded. She'd been happy, working, alive just... "I hear you."

Sam came over, shooing the pigeons away with his feet. The man's jeans were too long, the bottom seams walked through. "Henry needs to take Lissa to the funeral home. Let's go."

"Okay. Okay, Mac." He offered Lissa a hug, shook Henry's hand. "If you need us..."

"Monday, probably. We'll probably need some help organizing stuff for the funeral on

Monday. This weekend's going to be for family."

Right. "Of course. You're in our thoughts."

"Yeah. Bye. Liss. Come on." Henry's cheeks were red, fiery almost, the man's lips tight like he was pissed.

"Are you..." Well, hell. Of course the man wasn't all right. Shit.

"Yeah. Lissa. Now."

Sam took his arm, started walking them at a brisk pace down the pavement, feet hitting the ground hard enough to slap. Those fingers almost hurt, the way they squeezed him. He kept up, almost running alongside. "You want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Is Henry okay?"

"No."

"Mac, you're hurting me." This was getting ridiculous. They were parked on the edge of the lot, the trees shading everything, making it look almost private, almost secluded.

"Don't fucking whine, Ben. I need to get out of here." Mac looked up into the trees and Ben caught himself following that line of sight. Christ, look at the grackles. There had to be a hundred of them. And sparrows. And finches.

"I'm not whining. What is wrong with you?"

"What do you think? Or have you not noticed the last few days?"

Oh, asshole. "No, I've been sitting on my ass, eating bon-bons and wondering at the glory of the world."

"Well, at least you aren't straining yourself."

He stared a second. "Excuse me?"

Mac stared at him, and with the sunglasses on, Mac looked like a stranger, like someone he'd never seen before, never fucked, never eaten with. "Mac?"

He got no response, not so much as a twitch.

"What did Henry say to you?"

Those thin lips twitched. "Just something about the insurance, about needing paperwork. Wanting to know if something I did set Grace off."

Oh, shit. "He's just hurting; he doesn't think you did anything."

"I yelled at her to get me a bandage."

"Yelling and bleeding might cause you to pass out, Mac. Not the innocent bystander." Good old Catholic guilt. It welled up every time there was a crack in the dam.

"Don't be snide. The woman's fucking dead."

"You need a beer." And a joint and possibly about a week-long nap.

"I need you to leave me the fuck alone."

"I'm not the bad guy here, Mac. I haven't done dick to you." Ben was sliding from worried and sensitive to genuinely pissed off. Yeah, it sucked. Grace was dead, but that didn't give his asshole lover the open option to make his life miserable. "Is it custom in Scotland, to pick fights with your family when a friend dies so everyone can be as wrecked as you are?"

Sam flipped him off, turned toward the car with a sound almost like a growl. Ben shook his head, reached out and laid one hand on Sam's back. "Come on, now..."

Jesus fuck. Hot. Sam was burning alive.

"Don't fucking touch me!" Sam turned, slapped his hand away and went to cuff Ben in the jaw. The blow was solid, cushioned by the bandages and by the fact that it had to hurt like a bitch, tapping him with that sore hand.

It didn't take much, two good hard blows to clean Sam's clock, leave the man sitting and dazed on the parking lot, heaving a little. "You fucking call me when you've got your head put on straight, asshole."

Into the fucking car. Out of the fucking parking spot. Down the road. When he got about a quarter-mile away, he called the hospital, told them they had a guy that needed help in the parking lot; that the man was feverish, delusional.

He left out the bit where Sam was crazy as a frigging bedbug.

Ben resisted the urge to drive home and set Sam's dresser on fire. That would scare the dogs. He drove for the better part of two hours, then found a pancake house and headed in with the newspaper and settled at the counter. "Coffee and water, please. BLT. Fries. Apple pie, if you still have it."

"Sure, honey. Be right up."

He settled in, scanning the paper, not really reading, just letting his eyes move over the pattern of black ink on newsprint, letting it relax him, settle him. The coffee was black and strong enough to put hair on his chest, the crossword was enough of a challenge to hold his attention for a good long while as he scribbled with his favorite pen and rolled his and Mac's rings together, round and round.

"Walking Turtle. Man, how's it going?" Rick Pecina settled beside him, grin as wide as it had been since they were kids together, that amazing ski-slope nose damn near casting its own shadow.

"I been better, Rick. How's the business going, Frijole?"

"Oh, you know how it is. The sun's shining and the contractors are building, so us electricians are rolling in dough with no time to spend it as God intended." Rick ordered coffee, long, long, long legs stretching out under the counter. "You still writing scary books?"

"More suspense than scary, but yeah."

"Your dad still making flies, man? I'm needing to buy a few."

"You still pretending you know how to fish?" They laughed and starting bullshitting, Frijole nagging about his girly hair, him pointing out that Rick'd never get some if the man kept getting smaller.

Finally the conversation turned to what Ben knew it would turn to. Casper wasn't that big a town and Grace wasn't one to be easily forgotten. "So, 'fess up. I hear that your Scot and Miss Grace had a fight."

"What?" His fork actually hit the plate hard enough he looked to see if he chipped it.

"Well, I didn't say it was true. Just that that's what's being said. That they took Grace out all covered in blood, that Sam's cut up, that she got worse every time he talked to her, like she was trying to get away from him."

"Oh, bullshit. Sam cut himself down to the bone on a statue and Grace had a stroke." Well, that sounded... lame.

"What, just at the same time?" Rick looked confused.

"Yeah. Just at the same time." Okay. Okay, truth was stranger than fiction. Just because he wouldn't be able to sell that plot line to an editor didn't mean it couldn't happen. Coincidences happened all the time.

"Man. Is Sam okay?"

"He's still in shock, I think. He's at the doctor's right now, getting his finger checked on."
At what point did sanitizing the story become lying?

His phone rang, saving him from that particular line of thought. Sam. Christ. "Hey."

"Hello. They're releasing me."

"Yeah?" Asshole.

"Yeah. Come get me, love? I can't drive like this. They say it's infected pretty bad..."

"I'll be there in a second." He hung up without a goodbye, found a grin for Rick. "Speak of the devil."

"Yeah. You going to get him?"

"Yeah, he can't drive. You have a good weekend, man."

A ten on the counter and he was gone, telling himself that Sam was sick, emotional, and God knew what people were saying. Telling himself to be calm. Cool. Collected.

Reasonable.

See him do reasonable.

He pulled up to the front doors of the ER and unlocked Mac's door. The man sat there in a wheelchair, fresh bandages on one hand, a bag of pills just sitting there. The orderly helping looked about as happy to be at the hospital as Sam did. He watched as Sam hauled himself into the Bronco, so tired, so ready to just... "Hey."

"Hey." The door shut and they started moving. "Will it help if I apologize?"

"It couldn't hurt."

"I'm sorry. Things are just... I don't know. Fucked. I had a bad fever, does that count for anything?" The sunglasses were back in Sam's front pocket, one arm of them bent from their tussle.

"It can, if that's all you got."

"You pack one amazing punch, love. Remind me to practice before I pick another fight."

"Why on earth would I do that?" He pulled into the gas station. Man, he'd done some driving. "Do you want to go up to the cabin for the weekend?"

"What? No. I need to go back to the museum. There's a box there I need to deal with." A box. Not work. Not life. Not Grace's things. A box. Jesus Christ, Ben was going to kill him.

"The box can wait, Mac. It's waited for three days. We need to rest." Recover. Heal.

"I don't have time. The museum needs to be open again." That look came back on Sam's face, that distant, foreign look.

"Bullshit." Ben shook his head, turned to meet Sam's eyes full-on. "Museums are all about old things, finished things. Things that'll wait. Please, Mac. We'll get sandwich stuff, I'll pack us an overnight bag and grab the dogs. Just for the weekend. They won't need us until Monday. You're not feeling well enough to work anyway."

They could go, let the pups chase birds and squirrels, stretch out on the big old sofa and read, cook burgers and wander out far enough they didn't get cell reception. Make love. Laugh. Just be quiet for a while. Just be for a while.

Sam opened his mouth to argue and Ben shook his head, refusing to let it go this time. "Please, Sam."

He didn't want to fight about this. Not again. He would though. He'd had enough of the bullshit.

He felt the sigh, the acquiescence before he heard it. "Okay, love. You take me to the museum, let me deal with phone calls, information, things for an hour. You get us ready and pick me up. We'll go be bums together for a couple of days."

"Thank you." He nodded, squeezed Sam's knee. "Thank you."

They needed this. The two of them.

"Is he any better?" Jacob stood at the end of Caleb's bed, one hand on the thin ankle, rubbing and squeezing, hoping to feel some response, some reaction. Christ, the man looked like a corpse, all pale and still, cheeks hallowed.

Hoder looked up from the laptop, head shaking. Good lord, the man had a little red beard. Like an elf. Weird. "No. No change. Did you find Walking Turtle?"

"No. Ben didn't answer and MacDougal said the museum hadn't received anything yet." Sammy had sounded... strange. Flat. Cold as ice and unhappy as Hell. Of course, with the Grace thing, Jacob figured it made sense. Still.

“I’ve got a call into the shipping company. They say the box was delivered.”

“Well, apparently the secretary passed away there suddenly, so things are in disarray.” Stop pushing, Hoder. He wasn’t in the mood. Really.

“Key, the box is seven feet long. You don’t misplace a seven-foot-long box, even in Wyoming.”

“You might if you were dead.” His hand tightened a little, fingers pushing on Caleb’s skin. Goddamn. Pushy little fuck.

One thin eyebrow arched. “No. No. I don’t believe I would. Dead or not.”

“Was that a joke? Jesus Christ, did someone surgically implant a sense of humor in there?” They actually shared a smile, a real one, then they both started laughing. Man, the world was coming to an end if he was thinking Patrick could actually be useful.

“Yeah, well, I had an extra hour to two and we’re paying these men anyway…” Patrick shook his head, went back to typing on the laptop. “I’ve been doing some research and I think the two sites were originally one. It appears that a series of geologic events happened and the first find had been deeper within the earth originally. The soil samples are heavier with mineral deposits and the minutiae we found is all much older than other findings in that level.”

“Well, it makes sense. Have we found pictures from the original find yet? I’d love to see if the original object is the same type, same size.”

“Signora Monteverde is looking for them. She’s sure the negatives are in Carlo’s office.” Patrick looked a little uncomfortable, and yeah, he got that. Neither wanted to push the poor little swollen thing too much. Hell, him and Patrick were already sleeping at her house, eating her food. Now they were nagging her about digging through her dead husband’s shit.

Jacob nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I hear you. How about the police? They still considering Caleb a suspect?”

“No. The doctors say some of his injuries happened before the attack, that he’d been without food or water at least a day or two longer and uh…” Patrick typed a little more. “The last recorded email from Caleb was two days before the last one from anyone else. I got access to one of the grad students and they mention that Caleb was acting erratic in the caves, right before he disappeared. Some sort of hallucinogen?”

“Maybe? I didn’t get any effects.” He looked down at Caleb’s foot, fingers rubbing the sole. The toes twitched, foot shifting, just a little in his grasp. “Maybe something in the camp water? The food?”

“That’s all long gone now.”

“Yeah.” He touched again, tickled, fingers dragging along that long foot, wanting another movement. Jacob almost hollered when he got it. “He’s moving, Hoder.”

“Good lord. Really? Should I fetch a doctor?” Hoder snapped the laptop shut, eyes wide.

“No. I don’t think? Maybe it’s just reflexes?” He touched Caleb’s sole again. “Come on, Cal. You in there? Can you hear me?” Oh, shit. Shit. Look. The toes wiggled. “Yeah. That’s it. Just like that. Come on, Cal. Come back.”

Patrick stood, came over beside him. “I’ll get the doctor.”

“No, wait. Just... Look, there it is again.” The doctors would just make them leave, whether or not it was something. “Caleb. Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?”

The heart monitor seemed to speed a little and Jacob could swear, swear those long black eyelashes fluttered. “Did you see that?”

“I think so.” Patrick leaned in, frowning. “Dr. Pearson. Caleb. It’s Dr. Hoder. Dr. Key is here...”

The heart monitor beeps started speeding up, Caleb’s toes squeezing tight. “No, Hoder. Jacob’s here. Plant. Annie’s... gone.”

“Right. No, Dr. Annie. Jacob. Jacob and I are both here and we’d like you to wake up. We’d like to talk to you.”

He snorted, shook his head. “If you wake up, Cal? I’ll get you a Coke. Icy cold. Bubbly. In a frosted fucking glass.” Oh, shit. That was a twitch. Yes. Fuck, yes. “That’s it, Cal. Come on, now. Coke and a bath – a long hot one. You know you want it. I need to see your eyes, Cal.”

God, he did. He needed to.

“Come on, asshole. Remember how you used to wake up for me in Austin? In that little apartment off the Drag? We could hear the music from the ballet company, smell the bread from that little bakery. We made a pact, whoever got the other one to laugh first had to get dressed, run down to the bakery for scones and coffee. You remember? You got stuck going five mornings out of seven. Hell, one time you went twenty six days in a row. I think I might have laughed just to keep you from pouting.” Jacob chuckled, stepped around the side of the bed, fingers sliding on Caleb’s arms. “Or in Monterey? Do you remember Monterey? The merry-go-rounds? Petting the manta ray? Come on, Cal. You come back. You can’t have that where you are.”

“Uhn... Ba...”

“That’s right. It’s me. Come on. Wake the fuck up and fight with me, Cal. Make me listen to you.”

“Ba...”

“I’m here. Goddamnit. I’m right here. Finding you. You fucking wake up.” Caleb’s mouth opened and closed, fingers starting to shift on the sheets.

“Go, Patrick. Now. Get the fucking doctors. He’s coming back to us.”

He could hear Plant in his head, always in his head, muttering and bitching and going on and on and on. He fucking hurt, bastard. He didn’t want to...

“...on, Cal. I’m right here.”

Shit. Shit. Plant. Here. Really right here.

Wherever the fuck here was.

He fought to open his eyes, but the light was too much, too painful to bear, just a pure white blaze that ate into his head. “Hurts...”

“What hurts, Cal? The light? After that fucking cave I don’t doubt it. Hold on, I’ll turn them off and shut the curtains.”

He sat there, listened to Plant drone on and on, just floating, his own brain jabbering in concentric circles, almost like it was trying to eat itself. God. God, years he’d been trying to get Plant to talk to him. Listen to him. One mistake. One bad fight and too much to drink and a willing student and his life had been quite effectively fucked.

It happened, right? People fucked up. People fucked around. Then you apologized and felt like shit and begged to be taken back and went to therapy and...

Oh. Dark. Better.

Every muscle eased up. Muscles he didn’t even know were tight. God. Where the hell was he? Hospital?

Miami?

Why would Jacob be in Miami? Why would he be in the hospital? Did he smell garlic?

“There. You look less like you’re going to blow chunks now.” Jacob’s hand brushed over his forehead, the touch warm as anything and just right.

“Baby.” Man, for all his brain was working, his mouth was dead-center in monosyllable land. Christ.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m here. You’ve had a shit few days. Thought I was going to lose you.”

That had to be good, didn’t it? That Jacob still cared? That Jacob thought he was worth losing? Goddamnit, he was so tired of mooning over that big burly blond son of a bitch. Sorry, Annie, but he is and you...

Annie.

He frowned, trying to remember why the thought of Annie would cause that pang in his chest. He’d gone to see her, slept in Jacob’s old room with the Texas Rangers posters and the Playgirls still hidden in a sweater box under the bed after twenty years. He visited with her. Laughed with her. Held her hand for chemo.

Listened to her taunt him with Plant.

Looked at her samples of...

Of...

Something. She was always studying something. Bitch. Evil, wonderful bitch. She’d known – she’d? past tense? No. Why? – that he hadn’t meant to fuck up so bad. Hell, Annie thought monogamy was stupid. Always had.

Thought Plant was a dreamer.

The man was. A dreamer, not stupid. Shit, his Plant had one of those wicked sharp brains hidden behind six feet of spackle and faux-redneck and aw-shucks. Only the very, very dense fell for it.

Well, the very dense and the remarkably unastute.

Like Robin. Caleb should have known from the get-go. Robin. Robin the tall. Robin the painfully lovely. Robin, the vapid dancer with more flexibility than sense and not two brain cells to rub together to spark off a thought, but could suck cock like a dream, Robin.

Who the *fuck* dated somebody named Robin? Besides Batman, anyway...

“Cal? Come on, now. Stay with us. You want something to drink, maybe? Hoder’s gone back to the Monteverdes’, but I can pigeon enough Italian to get you something...”

Italian? Monte-who-de? Christ. He was deeply fucked.

Mmm. Deep fucking.

Not now, he didn't think, at least not until he could remember how to open his eyes and such, but he had Plant close enough now, down out of those goddamned mountains and where he could talk. Seduce. Tie the man and impale himself on Jacob's cock until Jacob agreed to try again. Whatever. He was easy.

And Jacob was talking. And talking. And still talking. Which was weird as hell because Jacob only used that many words when he was yelling and even weirder because – barring a few words that slipped through and tried to become something Caleb could understand – all Caleb was getting was this weird, musical rise and fall of voice.

It was kind of like listening to that dreamy chick. Uh. Enya. Which would be cool if she didn't make his teeth itch, which she did. Whiny broad.

Those hands touched him, his face, his neck. Warm. Careful.

“...filthy. Should wash you...”

Washing worked. He was a fan. He didn't feel filthy. He felt sore. Parts of him stiff, other parts swathed in bandages.

“Wh... what?” What happened? Why was he here? Where was here?

Had he asked that already?

“...hurt, Cal... cave... Annie.” He was touched lightly on the nose. “...listening to me?”

Hell, of course he was listening. It wasn't his fault Jacob wasn't making any fucking sense.

There weren't any caves in Miami.

Of course, that didn't matter, did it? Not right that second with Jacob's hand on him. Whatever happened, whatever he'd done, it had been worth it. To get Jacob back.

To bring them together. Anything. Anything at all.

Something inside him went tight, hard at that thought, at the words in his head that didn't sound like his voice, like his thoughts. That sound was Insanity. Yeah. Insanity with a capital fucking letter and his own thoughts started spinning, the easy random floating trying to braid itself in something he didn't want to know, something he couldn't remember, couldn't have in him.

He could feel his mouth opening and closing, an unidentifiable emotion that was born somewhere between terror and victory rushing through him in an uncontrollable wave. His eyes snapped open, meeting Jacob's for a half-second before he saw it. Standing there. In the shadow. Standing right there.

Burning.

Wings.

Teeth and pure fury.

Waiting to strike.

His Jacob. His. No. No.

"Baby."

"Yeah, Cal? I'm here. What is it? Love? Are you hurting? You want me to get the doctor?"

It smiled. Smiled. Teeth white and so sharp that the light slid off of them. Hungry. Oh, God. No. No, not his Jacob.

Christ. Christ. Jacob. Plant. Love. Can't you *see* it? Can't you see?

"B...baby..."

"What? What is it?"

"Run."

Chapter Six

Two days at Ben's family's damned little cabin and it was still raining. No. Not raining. Pouring. Slamming against the old roof and rattling the ancient windows in their panes.

Fat heavy drops that sounded thick and viscous, odd and swollen on the windows. The image had come to him that the raindrops were pregnant somehow, filled with stinging worms that would crawl along your skin, eating and biting. Digging in.

Sick.

Maybe he was losing his mind.

He pulled out another sheet of paper and a thin stick of charcoal and started working it, the dark crumbs breaking off under his fingers like smoke. Smoke.

His finger was throbbing, aching, driving him crazy and it was all he could do not to rip the bandages off, tear at the stitches and let whatever was inside him pour out. Spill. Let it free.

Cool hands landed on his shoulders, made him jump, jerk, spin around in the creaky old chair. "Fuck!"

He went down and the dogs came in, both huskies snarling and barking, standing beside Ben like...

Like they were scared.

Scared of him.

"Are you okay?" Hands reached for him and he slapped them away, growling.

"Of course I'm no' okay, you bleeding git! What the fuck is *wrong* with you? Couldn't you see I was busy?"

Ben stepped back, hands held up in a defensive position and he'd be a monkey's uncle if Piah didn't snarl at him, teeth bared, light blue eyes burning with fury. Sam stopped, looked at her.

Well, that was odd.

Ben put one hand on her head, petting and soothing. "Hey. Hey, he's okay. It's okay, honey. Sit down."

Piah growled low, snapping at the air, Kono coming to stand beside her, his threatening

rumble joining hers. He blinked and Ben just stared, looking confused as anything. Then those black eyes lifted to him. "Christ, say something to them, Mac."

"Oh. Right." He shook his head, shook it off. "Guys. Pups. Relax. It's me." He held his hand out, offering it over, trying not to think about how those teeth would feel sinking into his skin.

They both seemed to ease, Kono pushing against Ben's leg, Piah's lips covering her teeth again; neither pair of those blue eyes ever left him for a second. He took a step forward, and Piah's hackles rose, warning clear.

"I'm going to put them in the guest room. Maybe your bandages are bothering them."

"Maybe." Maybe the fucking beasts had just gone bleeding mad.

Ben started with Kono, having to drag the huge dog along, the heavy claws scraping on the wood floor, whining low. Piah watched Sam as he sat, hand cradled in his lap. Little bitch, threatening him.

Her head tilted as if she could hear him, as if she knew.

As if she could hear him.

He leaned forward, staring her down. *I'm going to tear your throat out, leave you twitching and dying on the ground and let the vultures have you.*

A deep, furious growl vibrated out of the bitch, fur standing on end, the challenge clear. Strong.

The wind blew again, the rain slamming against the panes, distracting him. It was going to get in, if they weren't careful.

"Don't make it worse, Mac. She's stressed out. Piah. Beauty. Come on." Ben reached for the collar, tugging her away, clucking and muttering.

Ben loved those animals more than him. Always had.

The bitterness in that thought shocked him and left him queasy. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Ben came wandering back in, "I got them each a bone." His lover was damp, naked except for an old pair of jeans. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. I'd just finished my shower, thought I'd see if you wanted to share a pot of coffee."

That uncomfortable, distant tone in Ben's voice was his fault. He'd done that. Fuck.

Sam let his eyes drag along Ben's body, let himself look for a second. So funny, how easy it was to forget how very lovely Ben was, how that skin was the color of a perfect cup of tea, how those eyes looked pure black.

The end of Ben's braid left a wet spot on the waistband of the jeans, the water wicking away. Beautiful. Uncomfortable. Unnerved. It excited him somehow.

Ben tilted his head, blinked, looked like he was waiting for something. "What?"

"I asked if you wanted some coffee."

"No." No, he didn't, not at all. Not even a little. That's not what he wanted. Not at all.

"Oh. Okay." Ben watched him, let him look his fill. He remembered the blasted convention he'd met the man at, the way those eyes had snapped and sparked as they fought over the scientific validity of the Flores hobbits. He'd called Ben an overzealous dreamer with too much time to play author. Ben had called him a bad-tempered, stodgy, foreign, hidebound bastard.

It had been love at first sight.

Sort of.

At least it had been arousal at first sight. If it had taken a few days to blossom into love, no one had been counting. They'd been too busy twisting themselves up in the sheets of a squeaky king-sized bed.

Sam stepped forward, reached out to slide his fingers over Ben's stomach, trace the muscles, the skin naturally smooth. The charcoal left patterns behind, like ghosts. "I want something else."

Those full lips curled into a smile, the tension in Ben's body beginning to ease. "Oh? You want some water?"

"No." He really wasn't in the mood for games, or for idle chatter honestly, so he leaned in, took Ben's lips, and stopped the next teasing question with a kiss. Ben opened for him, lips cool and soft, warming quickly, tongue sliding out to caress him.

Better.

The kiss went on and on, neither of them hurrying. Ben's fingers slid against his arm, above the bandages wrapped around his hand, the touch almost too light to feel. He shivered, stepped right into Ben's space. "I won't break."

"I know. I just."

"Shh." He took another kiss, walked them back toward the sofa, focusing on getting Ben to move, to relax, to give up this stress nonsense about the dogs and his hand and Grace and breathe. They managed without stumbling over dog toys or furniture or the odd tilting floor plank and by the time they stopped Ben was moaning, humming into his lips and beginning to move against him.

It was almost enough to make him forget about the rain.

He managed to strip off his t-shirt before they landed on the ancient sofa. Ben groaned, ended up straddling his thighs and he spread, pushing Ben's legs apart as wide as the jeans would let them go. "Unzip your jeans."

"Pushy. What about foreplay?"

He snorted, rolled his eyes. "I snapped at you and was a bitch. This is make-up sex. Foreplay comes later in that."

Ben chuckled, nipped his bottom lip. "Oh, good to know. You let me know when the rules change."

Ben unbuttoned his fly, Ben unzipping for him, that thick cock pushing out for him, slapping against his belly.

"I simply know what I want, love." Sam breathed in, let the scent of musk and soap and man fill him, ease him. "Mine next."

"Already there."

His workout pants were more of an untie-and-tug than an unbutton-and-unzip, but the results were the same, his prick bare to the air, free to slide against Ben's. Mmm. That would be more than suitable, just so. His hands landed on Ben's hips, the sore one reminding him it was there as he tried to move Ben exactly where he needed.

Damnit.

"Ben, up."

"Up where?"

"Shift up a little, now. Oh. Oh, God. There."

Ben's still-damp braid slid over between them, the contrast between the cold hair and the hot cock making Sam buck and gasp.

"Here, Mac?"

"Uh-huh. Less talking. More moving."

"Yeah." Ben nodded, heard him and started moving for him, all that fine skin sliding and rubbing against him. Oh, so much finer than talking.

He let his head fall back, watching Ben shift and rub and twist. Those dark nipples were tight and hard, the perfect accompaniment to the tight belly, the shiny dark hair in a thin line over Ben's cock. He reached down, slid his hand along the shaft, the silken skin seeming to warm for his touch, the tip swelling and a perfect clear drop forming at the tip.

If he was younger or had more vertebrae, he could lean down, lick that drop away. Instead he gathered it on his fingers, spread it around in a lazy circle.

"What... what are you looking at?" Ben moaned, a deep vibrating sound sliding between them.

"You. You're a fine man."

"Remember." Ben leaned forward, forehead against his, eyes near black. "Less talking, more touching."

"Oh, yes. I do seem to remember that..."

They chuckled together, shifting as they found the perfect rhythm, as their lips met. Ben framed his face, thumbs stroking over his cheekbones, drawing his focus in and in until all he knew was them and heat and yes. Just so.

Just like that.

His Ben.

Hell.

His eyes rolled and he shot, thighs aching as they went tight. Oh.

Ben wasn't far behind, pushing into his hand, painting his fingers with heat. His hurt finger throbbed a little where it was curled around Ben's ass, encouraging the little random motions as Ben rode the aftershocks.

They settled in, warm and quiet and a tad sticky. Ben's heartbeat slowed, breath soft on his throat. One hand slid over his chest in lazy patterns, the gentle touch almost tickling.

"Is your hand any better, Mac?"

“Itches. Fucking hate infections. I’m supposed to take it back in Monday.”

“Okay. You’ll have to show me the statue that you cut it on. It sounds fascinating.”

“Yeah.” No. No, that was a terrible idea. “Maybe after the funeral, huh?”

“Yeah. We need to send flowers.”

“She liked yellow roses.” God, she did. She would sing and sing that fucking “Yellow Rose of Texas” at the top of her lungs, driving him out of the place so she could turn off the classical station and play something with more twang.

“I’ll take care of it Monday, then I’ll come see your find.”

The rain hit the window as they rested, the plop-plop-plop sounds catching his attention. He squinted as he stared, sure that he saw something moving on the glass.

No. No, it couldn’t be.

Sam stared, looking at their reflections in the window, just barely visible. Ben’s dark hair against his shoulder, back bare and marked with black from his fingers, shoulder blades seeming to protrude. Something behind them moved and he stiffened, frowned. Tall, thin, impossibly thin. Right there. Right there behind them and heading toward the window.

“Mac?”

“Yeah, love.” If he turned his head, it would know he’d seen it.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. The finger’s just maddening.” Not to mention the man heading for the window.

“You want a pain pill?” Ben levered himself up, padded across the room without even *seeing* the man. Fuck. Okay. Okay. Some antibiotics caused hallucinations, some infections did. Maybe that was it. “Water or coffee?”

“Soda. Please.” No water. Not from the tap. What if the worms got in?

Ben walked right through the guy this time and the figure, image, whatever, seemed to explode with a hiss and a puff of smoke. Sam rubbed his eyes, staring as Ben stopped before him, glass of soda and a couple of pills in hand. Didn’t even see it. Except. Oh.

Ben leaned forward to give him the pills and Sam saw it, painted in dark charcoal on Ben’s skin. Oh, God. His hand shook, the stitched flesh feeling swollen and stretched.

"You want to just come to bed, Mac?"

He stood up, moving away from Ben, from the windows, headed toward the table where his papers were. Hallucinations. That's all. Stupid fucking meds. The walls. "Not yet. I. I'm busy, love." Busy. Drawing. Go away before the worms get you.

"Oh. Okay." Ben stood, pushed his heavy, slick hair over one shoulder, not meeting his eyes. "I'll see you in the morning, then. I'm going to see how the pups are doing."

"Sure. Sleep well." He knew that look on Ben's face was supposed to be hurt, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. He knew he should, but that *shape*.

He stared at Ben's retreating back, then at the table. The designs slid and swirled on the paper, matching the image on his lover, wings.

Wings.

"Run."

It took a second to understand what Cal meant, that the man was actually *saying* things and not just making noises. That's it. Talk to me.

Wait.

Run? Shit.

"You're just remembering. It's okay. You're safe, whatever the fuck happened to y'all down there, it's over. You're safe."

What the fuck had happened; what had they seen down there? And why the *fuck* hadn't it happened to Cal?

Cal was looking at something. Really staring over his shoulder with those dark eyes so wide they almost looked like they'd split at the corners and it made him stop, stare. No fucking way that could just be a memory. No fucking way. That was bone-deep crazy.

"What? What do you see? What is it?" Wait. Shit. For a second, he thought... No. No, fucking way. But.

He could have almost swear that he saw something, something moving in the back of Caleb's eyes. Jacob spun around, eyes wide, searching the empty room, the curtained windows, the stupid fucking equipment and shit. No nurse, no doctor, nothing. "What the fuck's the matter?"

Caleb's mouth opened and closed, like a landed fish, just over and over, eyes fastened on something. "Run. Run. Run."

"From *what*? Cal, there's nothing here." So why didn't he want to turn around? Why didn't he want to turn his back on the empty room? Fuck. Why the hell was he covered in goose bumps?

What the fuck was that *noise*? Did they have helicopters landing on the building?

Come on. Come on, Jacob. Fucking *deal*. You are too old to be scared of shadows.

He turned back to Caleb, pushing the man back on the bed, Cal's skin the same color as the sheets and cold to the touch, clammy. Like dead flesh. He searched for the damned little clicky call-the-nurse thing. "Cal. Cal, come on. Breathe, man."

Cal jerked, legs drawing up, into his chest, the bandages and shit sort of creaking. Something. Something was. Jacob frowned, tried to stretch Cal out. "Shit, Cal. Stop it, you're scaring me."

Wings. He heard wings. Something brushed his shoulder – something hard and sharp and foreign -- and he jerked around, eyes feeling like they were going to pop out of his head.

Shit. Shit, what was...

"**Run!**" The bed creaked, the metal headboard slamming against the wall with a crack, and he spun, watching as Caleb's body lifted right off the bed, legs and arms jittering like electricity was jolting through the limbs, head just snapping on his neck. Oh. Oh, Christ. No.

Jacob hit the door running, "Help! I need help! He's convulsing!"

Foaming at the mouth.

Fuck.

He slammed into somebody who was turning the corner. "Help!"

Hands grabbed him, shook him good and hard. "Plant. Christ. What's wrong?"

"Fuck. Let me fucking go. Hoder. Caleb. He's convulsing." He stopped long enough to breathe, to look at the doctors and nurses running in and out of Cal's room like a swarm of ants. "He'd been talking to me. Trying to. He had. And then something happened."

"What? What happened?"

“I don’t know. It was like he saw something. Heard something. I don’t know.” Cal got scared, maybe? That’s what he’d bet, just from watching those dark eyes go wide and black and...

Who the fuck was he kidding? He’d gotten scared just from seeing Cal’s eyes. Caleb was in full-fledged terror.

“Maybe he remembered what had happened. That’s got to be a huge trauma. Don’t freak out on me here, Plant. You have to hold it together.” Oh, don’t fucking be logical, asshole. Jacob had had enough of being strong and sure and shit. He’d cut a man’s leg off, lost Annie, almost got killed in a cave in. He was *tired* of coping. “What on earth happened to you, Plant?”

“Huh?”

“Your shoulder. Did Caleb hurt you?”

“What, no. No. He isn’t even coherent.” His shoulder ached, burned suddenly and he reached up, frowning as his fingers came away wet, sticky. Red. Goddamn.

“You’re bleeding.” Hoder frowned and leaned in, sort of... dabbing at him with a handkerchief. Fuck, that burned. “Really bleeding.”

Man, the handkerchief was. Wet.

“I...” His mouth opened and closed, knees buckling.

“Shit!” Hoder helped him to the floor, the tile fucking cold, even through his jeans and shoved his head between his knees. “Breathe, man. Don’t faint on me.”

“Real. Real men don’t faint.” Asshole.

“Oh, excuse me. Would you prefer swoon? Pass out? How about woozy?”

“Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, little prick.”

“Well, one, my genitalia is perfectly adequate for my race and size and two, no thanks. I may be the only heterosexual male left alive.”

He chuckled, head swimming. “Nah, you ass. Guiseppe’s straight as an arrow.”

“Good to know. I’ll make sure to slap him on the back and offer to buy him a whiskey after he gets out of here along with the rest of us. Assuming, of course, his wife doesn’t do as she’s been threatening and cut all of our testicles off and use them in some esoteric Italian curse. Or possibly a stew. Her accent is incredibly thick when she’s screaming.”

“Yeah. I’ve noticed a lot of the women around here have been doing that.”

“Yes, well. They do have the dubious pleasure of your company.” Hoder sighed. “I need to go check on Caleb. You sit right there. Don’t move. We’ll get you some help in a minute.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll sit.” It grated against him to do it, but he did. He sat. He watched. He waited for someone to come out and tell him Caleb was going to be okay.

Tell him that he needed some rest and had a panic attack and that it was all going to be okay. That he ought to go to a quiet hotel and take a long bath.

Let it go for a few hours.

Something.

Anything.

They would come. Right now Jacob needed to fucking believe that.

"I have to get you to the doctor, Mac. Please."

"No!"

Ben ducked the blow clumsily, his head still ringing from the first few hits, Mac's eyes wild, feverish, no longer even vaguely familiar to him. Ben'd waited as long as he dared to insist, to go from reasonable to physical. Whatever paranoia Mac was fighting had something to do with the rain, but the road was going to be a wash-out, sure as shit, and they had to get out of here. He didn't have time to play games with the stubborn bastard anymore and Mac was getting in the truck.

Now.

He'd woken up early this morning to find Mac rocking and chanting, drawing scattered image after image, the paper just flying as he finished one and started another. Nothing he said seemed to penetrate that veil of madness, nothing seemed to move Mac at all. Mac's skin was odd and clammy, almost like the blood had stopped, stilled in Mac's veins everywhere except that sore hand.

He was going to get Mac to a hospital or at least somewhere he could get to a phone. Now. Damn it.

Mac was taller than him, but he was stronger, broader, eminently less civilized, and he just tackled the man, sending Sam to the floor with a thud and started shaking, knocking

the wind right out of the stubborn bastard, leaving his lover quiet and dazed, at least for a minute.

Okay. Okay. Good.

"I can't believe you made me fucking beat you up. That's completely unreasonable, Mac. Honestly. Piah, I'll get Uncle to come over and take you over to them. The back door's open." Ben stood and scooped Mac up, grunting low at the weight and headed for the door at a run. He'd get Mac in the Bronco and they'd go. Find out what was destroying his partner.

Sam came to when the first raindrop hit them, kicking and squalling like the water was acid, like the pain was unbearable. Ben stumbled, but only for a second, then kept running and pushing and sliding in the mud, heading the few more steps to the car.

He threw Sam in, shoving the skinny ass over as he slid behind the wheel, started the engine. "Just sit down, Mac. You're out of the fucking rain, okay? I'm going to get you some help."

Sam convulsed, shaking and dragging long fingers along his skin, almost scraping the flesh away. "Worms. Worms. Worms. Inside me. Inside me. **Inside.**"

"There aren't any goddamned bugs." He slammed the transmission into reverse, started down the drive, wheels spinning, the wipers slapping against the windshield. Please, let the road hold.

Sam's screams escalated, the panic in them louder and longer, sharp and near hysteria. Ben considered stopping, gagging Sam with a pair of sweat socks so he could think, could focus, but that would involve, not only stopping, but finding a pair of socks. Somehow he didn't think an oil-soaked rag from the toolbox was hygienic.

Might shut Sam up, though...

"Mac. I swear, you have to shut up. I have to drive. If I miss a turn, I'll flip this bitch and kill us both." He took a corner too fast, fish-tailing wildly as the wheels spun, spraying mud everywhere. He turned into the skid, groaning and trying desperately to compensate. Finally he got them stopped, headlights shining helplessly into the forest. The road was gone, only a hint of where it had been left, the mixture of clouds and rain and mud making his visibility almost nil.

"Bugs. Birds eat bugs. Birds." The words just kept coming in a weird, random chant that ate into his brain like a little man with a jackhammer.

"I mean it, Sam. I'm going to get you healed up and then I'm going to beat you to death with a hammer."

Okay. Okay. Let's go, before they lost any more light. He backed up, rocking nice and easy until he found what he figured was road and started heading down again. The way got a little easier, the water letting them slip-slide one agonizing inch at a time. The trees slapped against the Bronco, almost sounding like they were trying to get inside, get at them and Ben stopped that line of thought straight away because he'd end up as crazy as Sam sounded.

"There's worms in the water, Benny. Worms."

"I swear by all I hold sacred, Sam. You're sick. There's just rain. That's it." Please, whatever creepy-crawling weird fucking germ was eating that wonderful brain, please just stop. "Please, man. Just close your eyes and breathe. I'll get you help. I will. It'll be okay."

Sam started rocking, slamming his head against the seat back over and over again, the sound rhythmic and strangely familiar and surprisingly loud. "Sam, stop it."

Thwack. Thwack.

"Stop it."

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

"You're going to break the fucking seat, man." Or your head. Or my brain. Or something.

The banging got louder, a sort of thrumming that just filled the cab, driving him into something real close to a panicked fury.

"Stop it! I mean it! Fucking **stop it!**"

The sudden silence surprised him, shocked him enough that he took his eyes off the road, looked over at Sam and saw.

Something.

Eyes.

Teeth.

Wings.

Something.

Wetiko.

No.

Oh. He blinked and sort of forgot to breathe, slammed on the brakes as he tried to figure out what kind of beast had gotten into the Bronco with them, what it was doing in the passenger's seat. Where Mac had gone.

Where. Shit. Shit.

The back tires slid off the road, spinning and sliding, dragging them both back and down an embankment. The Bronco spun and the headlights lit the trees up for a second before they slammed into them.

His head hit the steering wheel with a crack, the lights fading, the distant sounds of that thrumming filling his head as he fell.

Wetiko.

Father. Father, please.

The stench hit Patrick in the hallway, the smell of rotting flesh enough to make him gag, to send him reeling back for a step or two. Only Plant, sitting pale and bloody on the floor, kept him from turning around and simply walking away.

Nothing alive could smell like that. Nothing.

Guiseppe's wife stepped out from the doorway, her swollen belly preceding her by miles. He met her dark eyes, shook his head. "Rinvii alla vostra stanza. Ora." Now, lady. Get back in there with your husband.

He could feel Plant's eyes on him, watching, judging, just like Annie Key had, always finding him failing. Finding him too young. Too dependent. Too querulous. Weak. They knew he was weak and no matter how successful he was, they still saw.

Suddenly he was twenty years younger, wearing hand-me-down slacks and a button down shirt his mother had found him in Goodwill, the tie that had been his grandfather's tight enough around his neck to make him lightheaded and gaspy. He'd been invited to a party, a real department party with Dr. Key and Dr. Martinus and...

And Plant had been there, stoned and wearing a t-shirt and jeans, draped over another undergrad's arm and laughing. Stealing the eyes of everyone at the party, including his mother's.

Patrick had hated the man on sight for being everything he wasn't. Bastard.

The low growl built up inside him, the urge to rip off his tie and head over to where Plant

sat sprawled on the floor sudden and strong. It would feel so good, to wrap that tie around and around and pull the ends, watch those blue eyes bug out and the man's tongue poke through those charmed lips and shut the man up.

Make Plant quit proving to the world that he was less, was lame, was...

His fingers were actually working his tie off when he figured out what he was doing.

What on earth...

Oh, now. Goodness. Patrick had given up berating himself and fantasizing about murdering Jacob Key as a hobby years ago, when he'd discovered the wonders of golf and politics and Plant had become a hermit. This was quite insane.

Quite.

"Everything okay, Hoder?"

"Just fine. Things are busy in there. Sit." See him. See him control himself. See him not growl.

"Make sure Cal's okay, man. He was convulsing."

"I heard you the first time. Just. Sit. Down."

"I am sitting, asshole."

It really wouldn't be difficult to do it. Right now. No one was watching...

Taking a deep breath, Patrick pushed through the door to Caleb's room, the doctor and nurses milling like ants, the commands slapped out in Italian. He stayed well out of the way, hugging the wall and waiting for a sign that something was happening, that Caleb was settling. That someone else smelled the death that hung in the air.

That what he thought he saw, he didn't see.

Didn't even begin to see.

He was a logical man. Had been since birth. There was no magic, no Santa Claus, no love at first sight. No heaven, no angels, no miracles.

No demons.

Those were apparitions invented by the frightened and ignorant.

Still, he could see it, couldn't he? See the tall winged creature with eyes the color of the

sky staring down at Caleb, claws pressing into the man's skull, squeezing, the skin bubbling up around the sharp fingertips like heated plastic. It – he – it was nude, bare, covered in scarred skin as pale as milk, the shadows falling around it the palest blue.

"I..." The single word was all it took to catch the creature's attention, those eyes flashing up at him, pinning him against the wall. Perhaps the smell was hallucinogenic. Or perhaps there was no smell. Perhaps he was having a stroke. It happened to men under a lot of stress, pressure. It happened.

A hospital was a good place for it to happen.

Sardinia instead of Phoenix was perhaps not as fortuitous, but he couldn't have everything.

Patrick backed up as the creature stepped forward, the doctors and nurses seeming to let the beast pass without comment, one man reaching out to steady an IV pole that was knocked by one folded wing, another woman catching a tray of tubes and needles as they were shoved from a rolling table. As soon as the beast released Caleb's head, the convulsions stopped, Caleb's stilling, landing with a dull thump on the tangled sheets.

The scent of dead flesh grew stronger and Patrick gagged.

Madness.

"You aren't real."

His fingers were slippery, slick as they slid on the cold metal doorknob for the bathroom. Not real.

The creature had eyebrows – silvery and pale and somehow glittering, the arch like one the character on the front of a fantasy novel would have.

Not real.

He fancied that he could feel the thing's breath – which wasn't possible because there were no such things as monsters – wet and fetid, on his cheek, his temple. Patrick wrenched the bathroom door open, intent on trapping himself inside and pulling the emergency cord. That would alert the staff.

Alert the staff that he was in a hospital and somehow very ill.

The door closed with a thud and a click, the lock button pushing in easily, the scent here clean and hygienic and...

"It isn't a dream." He knew that voice. Knew it, with its Eastern accent and the odd mixture of sympathy and sarcasm Caleb couldn't avoid. "It saw you."

"Be quiet. Where are you? I saw you in the bed."

"It doesn't matter now, Patrick. I'm sorry. It saw you, just like it saw Jacob. I could save Jacob, for now." The lights seemed to dim. Patrick stumbled away from the doorknob where it turned.

"What? Why? Save Jacob?"

"I'm sorry, Patrick. I am. He's so hungry..."

Madness. Pure madness. "Where are you?"

His voice echoed, the fear and panic surprising him. Scaring him.

Caleb's face appeared beside his in the mirror, eyes sad, still, the heat of another body sudden and surprising. "I'm right here, Patrick. I'll help you."

Chapter Seven

The mustangs were screaming, hooves slamming into the dirt, sending clods of mud flying into the air to mingle with the drops that poured from the sky. They circled like mad things, the big stallion coming close enough to the house that they could smell its musk, see the yellow lines that separated the bared teeth. Daniel looked over at his brother, tongue sliding over the end of his cigarette, the rolled paper moving back and forth for him. Vic looked back, eyes white as the clouds, long given up to seeing within instead of without.

The sound of Vic sucking his teeth was as familiar as the rattle of his own breath in his chest. "Someone's coming."

Daniel nodded, shifting in the cane chair as his hair caught between his back and the chair back. The camp robbers were perched on the trees, wings heavy with the rain. They'd been gathering all night and into the day. A warning, he thought. "Something, maybe."

Something that didn't belong on the land of the people. Something foreign.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Vic scratched one skinny arm, yellow nails dragging on the leathered skin. The tracks left behind looked to him like the patterns on the wood floors, scuff marks left from old chairs, old boots, years of dogs and puppies and children. "Do we have everything we need?"

"If we don't, we don't need it." They'd sent the women to the base of the mountain two days ago -- Hattie and Frieda and Jeanie and little Danielle all bundled in the old truck.

Vic had been walking in the night, sightless eyes leading him toward the moon, toward the sky. The ground was telling tales of trouble that even he could hear.

What worried him were not the stories that he heard. It was the name that kept bubbling from Vic's lips, that he heard whispered in his sleep.

Dua'.

Dua'.

Benjamin.

Daniel sighed again, foot rubbing the dog panting at his feet. His son lived in the modern world, but trusted in the old ways. Trusted in the paths their ancestors walked. That trust would not fail him.

"He will come, dawi'. His feet will lead him from the edge of darkness." Those white eyes stared right into him, through him.

"Yes, babi'." In this, as in all things, Daniel acquiesced to his older brother, his center. His babi'. "He will come home."

Daniel watched the horses tear around, the colors blurring together into a mass of tan and black and red.

Come home, dua', son. We wait.

Jacob heard the screaming like it was coming from a dream, distant and foggy, fuzzy. Echoing like he was spelunking, searching for treasure.

His shoulder throbbed in time with the sounds, odd enough that it distracted him. Damn, the floor in this place was butt-ugly. Sort of like Annie's house in that back bathroom. Tile that used to be white or wanted to be white, but was streaked and old, not starting to crack, not yet, but soon. Soon they would...

"Junior?"

Jacob frowned, head tilting at the sight of Annie's hand, the turquoise ring he'd given her on her ring finger instead of in his ditty bag, the nails bitten to the quick. She was wearing a chambray shirt, the cuff rolled up twice, so she could see her watch and oh, God. He could smell her -- menthol and talcum powder and coffee. Oh, God. Home. He was home. "Annie?"

"Yeah. Yeah, you're in trouble, Junior. Big trouble. You and Caleb both."

“What did I do?” He felt like he was six again, sitting in her office, the broken bits of pottery all around him from where he’d tripped. Why couldn’t he lift his head?

A familiar caress stroked the back of his neck and suddenly it didn’t matter. He could see the edge of her chair -- one leg chewed on by Farley when the Saint Bernard was still teething. His initials were carved there, tiny and almost invisible on the bottom drawer of her desk where she hid the good chocolate and a flask of scotch. “Fuck, honey. Believe it or not? For once? You didn’t do it. I did. I fucked up, Junior, and the shit is hitting the fan.”

“What do I have to do, Annie? What’s going on?” When did she retile the floor in here?

“Do you remember your chemistry, Junior?”

Jacob blinked, frowned and slid a little further down the wall, shoulder on fucking fire. “Dr. Berrgren? Annie, what am I doing here?”

“Yeah, son. Chemistry. Pay attention. What’s table salt made of?”

“Uh. Uh. Sodium and chloride.”

God, her laugh was something. It meant he’d hit it, even if he didn’t know what it was, yet. “Good man. And what do we know about sodium?”

“It... it’s dangerous. It burns, reacts in water.” Burns. Inside. Like acid.

“Right. And chlorine is a poisonous gas. But what happens when they’re together?”

“They’re just salt.”

“Exactly.” The word was said with such determination and satisfaction that Jacob seriously considered growling. He fucking *hated* object lessons.

“What the fuck are you going on about, Annie? I mean, shit. I’m sitting here and...”

Another scream pierced his fog and he blinked, the desk wavering, a line of something red and thick sliding down Annie’s wrist, under her watchband.

“You don’t have time, Junior. I’m sorry, but you don’t.”

The ring slid off her finger as the flesh withered, seemed to melt away into something soft and grey and spongy. He watched it bounce, heard it clacking and tinkling on the tile. The silver left a mar on the white. “Oh, fuck.”

“Yeah. Yeah, exactly.” Bubbly. Her voice was bubbly, like she was speaking through suet. Oh, sweet Christ. “Wake up, now, Junior. You’re in trouble. You and Caleb.”

“Trouble.” His fingers wrapped around the ring, squeezing tight and relishing the pressure on his palm, the dull, familiar, reasonable pain. “Me and Cal...”

His eyes flew upon as another sound reached him, doctors and nurses pouring out of Caleb’s room, gagging and wide-eyed.

Oh. Fuck. Oh, fuck no.

He grabbed one little lady as she rushed by, covered in blood. “What happened? What the fuck?”

She twisted, slick and slimy in his hands. “È guasto. Così tanto anima. L'anima è dappertutto. L'anima!”

Blood. Blood.

“Cal!”

He shoved her away and went flying, heart pounding in his chest.

They were in trouble.

The clock clicked over to 2:12 when he finished dressing in his hiking boots and jeans, flannel shirt so carefully shrugged on over his t-shirt. He had his compass, his knife, his talisman tied about his throat. He'd cleaned the worst of the blood away, gagging as he closed a flap of skin on his forehead with superglue, wrapped two broken fingers. He stared a moment out into the woods, eyes automatically seeing the path that lead deeper into Walking Turtle land.

The path into the darkness.

Ben could hear Sam, what used to be Sam, singing something in an increasingly wild voice, a song about flying, he thought, but it could be a song about killing. So easily. Something had changed. Something that he didn't understand.

He slipped out of the bedroom, stood in the hallway and forced himself to look, to see. The walls were covered in art now, terrible images of wings and teeth, of blood and rage. Great gouts of blood and mud were now part of the artwork, of the constant creation. The insanity. Pure insanity. He wasn't sure when Sam had moved from the pieces of paper to the walls, the floors, but it had happened sometime yesterday while he was... out.

He wasn't sure how Sam had gotten them back. How Sam could have. Where the Bronco was. Anything.

Piah whined, nudged his hand with her nose, blue eyes looking like ice. He understood. He felt it. "You should have run, Piah. You should have gone."

Ben slipped out of the window into the fog, the dogs following him easily, one then the other. He wasn't sure why he bothered sneaking out, though. Sam wouldn't have noticed if he'd walked out the front door, screaming and bleeding.

Except that maybe Sam would have noticed and that worried him. Scared him. Scared him almost as badly as the thought that it wasn't Sam in there. That whatever it was had Sam's body on like an ill-fitting coat.

The lamp was still on in the living room, the light pouring out and making the mist seemed to glow with jaundice, lighting the endless eyes of the flocks of birds that littered the trees, the ground, where the Bronco had been. Everything. Ravens and goshawks, owls and vultures, tiny finches and mourning doves -- they all just gathered, settled, so still, so quiet. Watching and waiting. Staring.

The birds had started to gather at full dark, fluttering down to settle, and that's when he'd decided he needed to go now, when he began to believe that he hadn't just been hallucinating before.

So much of what was wrong with them could be fever, could be infection. The birds were a sign. An omen.

A warning.

Piah and Kono knew where they were going, knew the way to Father and Uncle and the little group of houses five miles away through the dark forests and the mud. He had to believe this land would not hurt him; this land was the land of his people and knew him, knew his blood. Knew his heartbeat and could not allow evil to grow unchecked.

Evil.

His Sam.

How could he... How could he began to think that about his Sam?

Ben stopped, leaning against a tree and retching violently, bile pouring from him in bitter waves. He couldn't just leave Sam there, leave the man to whatever had him, whatever had taken him.

He had to go back, had to. Ben turned, starting back toward the cabin when Piah stopped him, teeth bared, the low snarl a definite warning. "Piah."

Kono pushed against his legs, shoving him away, the action clear, sure. Not going back.

"I can't leave..."

A voice sounded, the tone barely recognizable as Dr. Sam MacDougal. "...eat your bones, leave you in pieces upon the ground for the worms to eat. Eat. Eat. Eat."

It took every bit of courage he had, every ounce of faith in the ancestors that had come before him to lift his head. When he did, he squinted, staring into the fog, unable to believe that he could see the image of Sam dancing nude, spinning and splashing through the mud, the birds unmoving and staring as if they were hypnotized. Stuffed. Dead.

That odd, dull thumping began again, Sam's gyrations growing more and more desperate, hips jerking in a parody of fucking. The leaves and needles on the trees began to move as if the wind blew, as if something huge was fanning Sam.

Piah and Kono howled, and Sam stopped, seemed to stare into the fog, right at him. "Love. Love."

Yes. He didn't speak aloud, but he stepped forward, tears blurring his sight.

"Benny. Benny, please." Pain. That voice *hurt*, but he knew it. Knew that it was his Sam. "Benny, listen. Listen to me. It's here. Run!"

"I can't."

"You have to. He'll..." Sam's head snapped up, a torrent of vile words bubbling up out of him, something that didn't even register in Ben's ears as words. The birds took flight, the sound of wings sudden and sharp, squawks and calls growing louder and louder until the mountain rang with it.

The splash of blood from his nose hit his chest, wetting his t-shirt, with one black drop, then another, then more. Piah and Kono barked, cried, their coats beginning to shine with the blood leaking from their ears, their muzzles.

Run.

Run.

He turned as Kono and Piah nipped his heels, got him moving the direction he didn't want to go. He needed Father and Uncle to come, to see this. To help him. To help Sam.

They moved quickly, the dogs as eager to leave the madness behind as he was to find Father and return.

It couldn't have Sam. Whatever it was. Whatever demon had been unearthed from...

Ben stumbled, frowned, the walk leaving him dizzy and unsettled. Unearthed. Unearthed. He. Something.

He whispered a soft prayer of protection, prayed for the spirits to watch over his lover's body until the dawn. When the sun rose, he would return with help. With his people.

Jacob slipped in the back door of Signora Monteverde's villa, pulling Cal by the armpits, Cal's naked heels dragging in the dust, leaving marks.

Trails.

Christ.

Just Christ. His hands were shaking so bad he couldn't fucking hold on and goddamnit, he had to hold it together. Had to.

"Cal. Shit. You gotta wake up, man. I gotta get us on a plane out of here. There's something... something wrong here."

He dumped Cal on the bed, still wrapped in the filthy blankets from the hospital, and started rummaging, stuffing papers into a valise – all of Annie's notes, Cal's passport (thank you, God), Patrick's...

Okay. Okay. No thinking. Just get your shit together, buddy.

"Cal, man. Come on. I swear to God, I'll dunk you in ice water if you don't come to. I can't get us out of here with you all loony and shit. You got any clothes in here? Something to cover the bruises? Shit, man. We gotta go. *We gotta.*"

Cal didn't even fucking move and Jacob growled, pulled the blanket off the man and tossed it. "I'll let you freeze, man. I will. You can pass out on the plane."

Plane. Right.

The sun wouldn't be up for two hours, so he had time. He did. Jacob tugged the laptop over across the table, started hunting flights. Sardinia to Rome. Rome to Boston. Boston to Denver. Denver to Casper. Or wait... La Guardia to Dallas, Dallas to Austin...

Shit. Home-home or Annie's? Or Cal's? He could go to Miami. He could. Shit, he couldn't take Caleb to Ben and Mac's and just show...

Casper. Papers went flying everywhere as he searched for a little yellow slip of paper that

he'd seen earlier. Fuck. Where did it. Damn it. Oh. There.

A receipt for the museum from a week before Annie's death.

Annie mailed something to Casper. To Mac. To him. From here.

He started typing, started looking for the fastest way to get from here to there, today. The ticket prices were enough to make his chest hurt, but Patrick could fucking explain the expense to the university.

The thought of Patrick made him stop short, fingers hovering over the keys. Oh, sweet Jesus. Just the memory of the scent, the blood, made him gag, made him shove back from the desk and stumble into the little guest bathroom, heaving until nothing came up but yellow bile.

"Dottore Key?" A cool rag pressed against the back of his neck, a glass of water sat on the sink. Elena sure walked quiet for a pregnant lady. She settled on the edge of the tub, black robe wrapped tight around her, looking about as pale as she could against the bright blue tile. "The hospital, they called. They say you took Dottore Paulsen from them. They say... They say that my Carlo's murderer was there. That you may have seen him?"

Those big, dark eyes were full of tears and a terrified hope and he wanted more than anything to nod, to say yes, I saw a man. He didn't though. He hadn't seen. "It wasn't Caleb. He was unconscious, passed out, convulsing, surrounded by doctors."

Fuck, his mouth tasted terrible.

"No. No, Caleb is a good friend. I. They say. They say there is accident?" She had thin, thin fingers, delicate and pale on the edge of the robe, folding and smoothing and folding again.

"Yeah. Yeah, honey. Hoder's. Well he's. Fuck. Dead. Just like the others." Dead. Torn to bits and hanging from the hook on the back of the bathroom door with his neck tie, eyes and tongue bulging, entire body looking like a wild animal had gotten to it. In a hospital. In a hospital bathroom right next to an entire room filled with doctors and nurses, remaining fingers still twitching.

Twitching.

Shit.

Patrick.

Jacob thought he'd never fucking close his eyes again without seeing those eyes staring at him, dead and dull and empty. Shit.

He leaned over again, stomach clenching and tight, trying to expel something that wasn't there. The rag was removed, rewetted, replaced. It felt pretty fucking good, actually.

"And your friend? With the hurt leg? He is..."

Guiseppe. Maria. Shit, he was losing it. "I don't know. I think so? I'll call her. Get her to move him. I have to get Caleb on a plane."

"A... a plane? You. He needs a doctor, yes? A hospital?" Oh, don't start fussing at me, honey. I've had a really, really shitty couple of days.

"No. I gotta get Caleb away from here. I gotta get him to Wyoming and find out what Annie mailed."

"Mailed?" Elena's head tilted, dark hair tumbling down. "The package that Doctor Paulsen was angry about, si? The other skeleton."

"Yeah, yeah, I figure. Another piece of art, right?"

"A black skeleton. A black giant with broken wings."

"Broken..."

She nodded. "Si. Signora Annie said to Carlo, my son, he will see this and come. It... it did not arrive?"

"Oh, I bet it did."

He heard a low moan from the other room and stood, swaying a second before heading in, Caleb thrashing in the sheets, casted arm clanging against the bed frame. "Cal. Shit, man. Come on. Wake up. Elena, honey, get me that rag."

"Baby. Baby, we gotta. I."

"Shh. Hush now. We're gonna. I gotta get us ready to go. Gotta buy the tickets. You want to come home with me, man? Want to go see the mountains again?" Come on, man. Wake up. Fight with me. Talk to me.

Cal eased, eyelids blinking, eyes trying to focus on him. "The mountains."

"Yeah. Big. Rocky. Snowy, except not because, hello, late summer. What else was in the box Annie mailed me?"

Elena came with the rag and Jacob started wiping, hoping the chill and wet would keep Cal awake.

Cal shivered, brows drawing together. "Fetishes. Lots of fetishes. And bones. Carlo and I wanted her to leave them here, but she is so *stubborn*, baby."

"Yeah. Yeah, she is." Was. Whatever. Christ, he needed a smoke.

"We're going to go?"

"Yeah. Shit, yeah. I don't... I don't know if it'll help, but I'm not leaving you here." Not with some weird-assed, psycho-killer crap hanging around. He dragged Caleb up to a sitting position, propped the man up. Elena was fluttering, refusing to look at Cal, refusing to come close enough to touch. Goddamn, girl, he's harmless. Can't you see he's harmless? Surely the man was harmless. He had fucking spots shaved into his head. "Elena, do you have any soup or something? Something he can sip?"

"Si. Si. I. The hospital. He should be in the hospital, si?"

"Honey, I'm sorry. I know you're scared and I know this is your place and there's the baby and all and I swear to God I'll get us out of here, but you have to cooperate a little."

"I. I." The Italian started up again, stammering and short and guttural and if he never heard another Italian fretting it would be too fucking soon.

"Easy, now. Breathe." He grabbed her shoulders, shook her just a little bit. "Don't freak out on me." Poor little lady; widowed and pregnant and all, looking all haunted and shit.

"I don't. I don't freak." Jacob was pretty sure she didn't even know what he meant. It didn't matter; she was breathing, not crying. Coping. Go her.

"Good girl. That's right. You don't. Do you think there's something in there for Caleb to eat? It doesn't have to be much. Just something to sit on his stomach."

"Si. Si. Something. I can do that." She scrambled away, still refusing to glance at Cal, the look on her face painfully grateful as she escaped.

Jacob sighed, reached out to steady Cal as the man teetered a little. "You just sit a minute. I have to buy our tickets. Can you do that?"

Cal nodded, sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, baby. I. What the fuck is going on?"

"I was sorta hoping you could tell me. Although, after tonight in the hospital, I was thinking you'd never tell me anything ever again." He headed for the desk, for his wallet.

"Like you would be disappointed."

"Don't start, asshole. I'm tired." God, maybe Cal could go back to incoherent again.

"Yeah. Yeah, I hear you there." Cal slumped a little, looking a little green around the gills. "What *happened* to me?"

"You don't remember?" Fuck. Fuck, he could use a goddamn break somewhere.

"Not much. Just that I hurt like I'd been beaten."

"Well, looks like you had been." He got the tickets, the printer whirring. "You don't remember what happened to Carlo? Annie? All of them?"

"All of who, baby? What's wrong with Annie? Did she get hurt?"

"She got dead, Cal. Her, Carlo, the grad monkeys. Hoder, now. You're the only one that's not. The *only* one." The words left his mouth before he thought about whether they were smart to say, whether Cal was strong enough to hear them. Well, hell. He didn't fucking have time to babysit the poor hedgehog-looking man. Not right now. Cal was just going to have to buck up and drive on and...

Yeah.

"You... you mean. I. But. But Hoder was. And Annie. She. I. It can't."

"It can." There was a long, heavy silence, broken only by the click and whir of the printer, then Jacob looked over, meeting Cal's eyes and nodding once. "The only one, Cal. No bullshit."

"No."

"I haven't ever lied to you, asshole. That's your job. They're all dead and I have to get your happy ass out of here before one of us is next."

The door opened, Elena carrying a tray with juice and a bowl and Jacob stood, took it, finding a smile for her. "Thanks, honey. We'll be out of your hair in two hours. Tops."

"You..."

"I found us flights out of here. Back to the States. Why don't you get some rest and I'll get Caleb fed and cleaned and dressed and all." See him, see him cope.

"You must. You must take care. I... I dream of my Carlo, Jacob. He tells me this madness will spread like a fire."

"No. No, it won't. Whatever it is, whoever it is. It's going to stop." He wouldn't live his life like this. He wouldn't let Cal do it.

Elena's hands were cool, dry on his hot cheeks as she kissed his forehead. "Take care, dottore, si? Take care of you."

"I will, honey. Go back to bed. When you wake up, this'll be over."

It was a lie; they both knew it, but for now, it worked. Sometimes, a man had to take what he could get. The rest of the time, he just made it up as he went along.

Pain had never poured itself into pleasure before, but now he was beginning to discover that it could, in pure self-defense. The constant raw throb throughout him was all Sam knew, all he could use to anchor himself into a skin that no longer seemed to fit. He could feel it, sliding through his veins, bulging in his muscles and forcing the fibers within to stretch and tug, to pull.

Pull.

Stretch.

His hand was gone. Lost to a drawn-up series of talons that curled and throbbed, the skin new and pale, raw and delicate, the touch of the air itself burning like acid. His own skin had cracked and stretched, fallen away like an ill-fitting glove when the sun had risen, lit the sky to pink. It had fallen on the mud with a dull plop and the ravens had swooped down and grabbed it, tearing it to bits and gulping the flesh down with satisfied cries. He'd blinked as it happened, feeling nothing more than a distant ache, like the flesh had been something foreign.

Something that was not his own.

It -- Samuel couldn't call it a he, couldn't even begin to -- watched him endlessly, within and without, every motion he made, every breath he fought for studied and weighed, the world getting smaller and smaller. Tighter. Ben was in his thoughts -- they comforted him, the memories of his lover laughing, of long lazy baths and entire weekends spent in the sun, in the mountains. In the bed. Loving him. Touching him.

Sam sobbed and crawled across the floor, dragging himself with the hand that still belonged to him, the skin of his hips breaking open as his bones met wood and tore. The pile of clothing on the floor still smelled of soap and home and peace. Love.

Ben.

Caleb knew without a shadow of a doubt that they wouldn't get through customs, that there was no chance. No way in hell. Not even a smidgen of an inkling of a chance that

they'd get through.

Jacob had told him to shut the fuck up, pay attention and just do as he was told.

It was eerie how much like Annie the man had become, really.

He watched Jacob as the man talked and blustered about his poor wounded colleague and flashed ID. Jacob didn't even know he was a good-looking man, never even considered it and it still made him smile. Annie had been like that -- blustery and strong, handsome and completely unaware of her own charisma, growling at the hint of anyone interested in something other than her vicious, steel trap of a mind.

Caleb couldn't really believe that evil, wonderful, brilliant bitch was dead.

Jacob ran one hand through his hair, the blond poofing up and going crazy. One booted foot tapped the ground, over and over, as Jacob fought to rein that temper in.

He almost wanted to see it explode. Almost wanted to see that grand fury just let loose and watch the fallout.

He wanted to get the fuck out of Italy first.

If he stopped for too long -- breathed easy for too long -- it started to creep up on him. Images. Sounds. Ideas. Nightmares. He wasn't ready to know, not yet.

Let him get to Jacob's mountain. Let him get on solid ground where the sea wasn't so close and the... thing that wanted him wasn't so close.

Please. Just let them on the plane and after, after he would remember.

A cool cloth covered his forehead, the temperature shocking, making Ben shudder. He pulled away from the touch and felt strong hands wrap around his upper arm, hold him to the bed. "More of the drink, now, dawi'."

"Yes, babi'." The liquid was hot, bitter and Ben gagged, fighting the hands that held him, his skin crawling like a thousand bugs were beneath it. Something landed hard on his mouth, another hand stroking his throat like he was a puppy fighting against taking a pill. He swallowed though, groaning and struggling, the heat burning all the way down his esophagus.

"Yes. Yes, dua'. You must purge it from within you before we go to fight." The words seemed to echo all around him, repeated again and again, his father's voice a chant where it joined with his Uncle Vic's.

Dua'. Dua'.

Son. Heart of my heart. Your mother's joy. Benjamin.

The fire rushed through him, fed by the tears in his father's voice. Everything within him was burned away -- faces and memories, fears and hopes, dreams -- none of them could resist the flame, all of them fell under the weight of the will of the people.

His people.

Ben screamed, tearing at his eyes and face, his eardrums threatening to pop as his father's screams echoed endlessly, demanding that he be emptied of all he was.

When the crackle of the flame died back, what Ben saw was acres of ash, the only sound silence.

Okay.

Okay.

Through customs. Through security. On the fucking plane. Off the fucking ground. In the fucking air.

Caleb had one pillow behind the poor shaved head – which was still less weird than the white bits of scalp showing in the black hair, no matter how much Cal bitched -- and one under the casted arm and a blanket and a pair of headphones and a little glass of orange juice and the air flow thing turned just so and Jacob was going to kill the man if he said one more word.

One. More. Word.

"Baby?"

"My name is Jacob."

"Does this mean we haven't made up, baby?"

Jesus fucking Christ on a popsicle stick. "Caleb. Go to sleep."

"No, my name's Caleb."

"Yes, jackass. I know. What do you want?"

"I want to crawl down in the seat and unzip your..."

Oh, for fuck's sake. "You so much as move and I'll beat you. You're ill."

"I'm not dead."

"You could have been. Go to sleep."

"I'm not tired." Irritating, aggravating, loud son of a bitch. He grabbed Caleb's good hand as it traveled toward his crotch, putting it quite firmly on Caleb's skinny-assed leg and holding it there. Be good.

"I am. You should be." Count to fifty, Jacob. One, two, don't hit him. Three, four, five, if you smother him with a pillow, someone will notice. Six, seven, eight, nin...

"I'm not. I have sixteen hours to convince you that you need me before the plane lands. I'm hurt and confused, not stupid. I'm not sleeping through this opportunity, baby. Not a chance."

The sorry son of a bitch was just grinning at him. Good lord. He reached up, hit the attendant button and grabbed his wallet.

Maybe if he got drunk now, he'd be sober by Boston.

Daniel stared down at his son, the fever burning through the strong man and leaving him weak. For the first time in sixty-three years, he began to doubt Vic's medicine, Vic's assurance that this was the way to walk. Twenty hours had passed since they began this walk, took the first step along this path. Twenty excruciating hours since he began to kill his son.

Ben's hair had come free from the braid hours ago, the convulsions and the sweat making it slick and lank, heavy as if he'd slicked it with bear grease. There seemed to be no fat left on the strong frame, the fever burning everything away, leaving a grey-tinged empty skin behind.

This was no formal ceremony, no reaching back to the old ways so that they might relive their glory and their lives. This was not the sweat lodge. Not the dances. Not even their own spirit quest, the visions weighing down and seeming more real than anything. This was his son, his dua' that lay, still and pale, but for the dark red upon his cheeks. This was his own boy, who he loved more than all others, that was dying.

His women would never forgive them. Ever.

One strong hand landed on his arm with a slap, Vic's empty eyes fierce upon him. "No, dawi'. No doubt. He is strong. He is your own. He is a warrior. He will survive and be cleansed. Be ready to fight."

Cleansed? Fight? There was nothing left within, no pain, no fury, no strength, no need, no love. His dua' was an empty shell, spirit flown fast away from the poison, hidden within the spirit world. "He looks lost."

"He is lost. All he knows is ash and shadows. He wanders, calls for us, for his lover, for his life. You and I, we must bring him home now, together." Those hands squeezed again, gripping his arm and digging in, forcing him to remain focused, aware. "Together, we will do this thing, dawi'. Together in this as in all things."

The portent weighed between them like a cloud.

"Yes, babi'. Together." Something in Daniel eased, the weight of Vic's words making him woozy. Yes. Yes, home. Now.

Cheryl made sure the pops were filled in the cart, the coffee percolating like mad. God, her feet hurt. She had this flight to Denver, then down to Dallas before she could get some rest.

Still, Dallas was home and she'd be in Tony's arms instead of in a hotel room, so that was worth the long day. Hell, yes.

"Cher. Man, did you see those two guys in 32A and B?"

She shook her head. "They fighting?"

"One of them is, for something. The bald man just keeps talking and talking. The big guy keeps ignoring him. I think the big one's going to deck the other one, which given the shape the bald guy's in? Wouldn't surprise me at all." Dana's eyes were huge, black hair meticulously straightened, every fucking inch of the girl perfect.

Cheryl hated her with a purple passion. She'd never been that young.

Ever.

"Well, I'll wander back there. Test the waters. If we have to, we can move the quiet one up to First Class. There's a couple empties." Of course, with her luck that would make Mr. Chatty Cathy decide that she was his new best friend. Just what she needed. "You get the coffeepot ready and I'll be back."

She heard the little bitch's sigh and couldn't help her smile as she moved through First Class, touching and nodding, getting one a pillow, the other a newspaper. She patted a baby's head and nodded to an elderly woman who was knitting what was either a sweater for her pet octopus or a penis cozy for a very, very lucky man.

Cheryl saw the two in the back before she got there; one was talking, the other one's eyes closed, lips held tight. Lord. That man was fine. And fixin' to explode. The other guy wasn't half bad, sorta scattered and skinny and dark and bald for her tastes, but not someone you'd throw from the bed for eating crackers.

She was almost there when she heard, "...fucked around and I've been sorry for years. Been trying to apologize to your stubborn ass for so long, baby. Now you're not even going to talk to me?"

Oh. Oh, good lord. No wonder the blond looked so good. The prettiest ones were always gay. She kept right on walking, checking the bathroom and sort of eavesdropping.

"Look. I'll get off in Denver and change my flight, go back home to Miami. You go back to your mountains and we'll both live out our miserable fucking lives wishing we were still together."

Oh, now. That was lame. Cute and desperate, but lame.

She sort of hoped it worked.

"Cal?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"We're getting on the plane to Casper if I have to tie you up to take you on board. You are coming home with me. Period."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. Now shut up and let me sleep before I lose what's left of my mother-fucking mind and tear out your tongue and beat you to death with it."

"That would be a waste of a good tongue, baby."

"Yeah, I know." Then there was a sudden silence, a soft sigh.

Cheryl swallowed her giggles, shook her head. Then headed back up the aisle. "Y'all need anything?"

The bald guy – Cal – was all flushed and grinning and just dazed looking as he stretched his casted arm. Christ, that man needed a sandwich or three. “No. No, thank you. We’re just fine.”

Yeah, she bet they were. “Good deal. The cart’ll be by in a few.”

Bright blue eyes just cracked open, twinkling at her, kind of. “If you give him anything with caffeine, honey, I will hold you personally responsible. They won’t let me smoke in here; I can’t cope.”

“I hear you, sir. Y’all have a nice flight.”

Her heels clicked on the aisle, Dana glaring over, wanting her to hurry up. Cheryl slowed down, making it last.

Just one more hour to Denver. Then she was Dallas bound.

The plane hit turbulence about thirty minutes from landing in Denver, the rocking and shaking enough to send the attendants scrambling, from the young brunette to the tired-looking blue-eyed blonde who winced as she slammed into the emergency seat beside them, long legs sprawling in a weird Sharon-Stone-Basic-Instinct parody.

"Storms."

Well, duh. Caleb looked over past Jacob, who was sound asleep, fingers wrapped around his wrist and holding on tight, and arched an eyebrow. "Yeah."

The captain came on the intercom, the deep and calm voice announcing that they were going to climb, to try and get above the worst of it. No worries. Deep and calm. Well, go them.

"Where are y'all heading?"

"Eventually? Casper, Wyoming. Right now, I'd settle for Denver."

She laughed and Caleb couldn't help but notice that the sound was breathy and a little stressed out. Huh. Bad storm. "Were you on vacation?"

Vacation. Right. Let's see. Well, last thing he remembered before the hospital was the ground shaking and this weird noise echoing in the cave. Annie's hand on his arm, squeezing. Then there were scary winged demon things that he hallucinated in the hospital, his arm was broken and he had the dubious pleasure of having a pregnant broad and an archaeologist come after his head with a pair of dog clippers before shoving him into itchy sweat clothes and putting him on a sixteen hour flight. Nope. No vacation. "No.

We were working an archaeological dig in Sardinia. Normal stuff. Dead bodies. Cave ins. Carbon dating. Kidnappings and lots of pasta."

"Oh."

So he was a little cynical. Just a touch.

Jacob's hand squeezed his a little, reminding him that Jacob was right there, listening even in his sleep.

The plane jerked again, soft little panicked cries sounding down the length of the plane. Funny how those noises always made him think of roller coasters next to the beach. Caleb sighed, rubbed the back of his neck, the bones creaking. "Sorry. I'm just a little nervous. It's been a long, long few weeks."

"No problem. I can understand that. I mean, just the flight from overseas is enough to wear a person to the bone." Blonde-and-tired smoothed the front of her uniform. "So you're both professors?"

"You know it." Well, they were both Ph.D.'s. Jacob didn't have a professorial bone in that beautiful fucking body. He looked out the window, the rain crashing onto the plane like little lemming water elementals – which was an either incredibly cool metaphor or a nasty remnant from his D&D playing days in high school, if he thought about it.

"That's very cool. I dated a professor once."

Oh, good lord. "Yeah? Let me guess. English." They were always English professors. The little fucks just couldn't keep it in their pants.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Years and years of faculty mixers." He looked back over at her, winked. She winked back, the fading light making her eyelashes look huge and pointed. Women did that shit on purpose?

"So, what did you find in the ground? Jewels and stuff?"

"Bones. We found bones."

"Oh? Like people bones?"

"No. No, that's not what they were." No. Not human.

"So, what kind of bones were they?"

Now that was the question, wasn't it? What kind of bones? He was having the hardest

time remembering anything about them, whether they had been cleaned by tools or animals, whether they had been fossilized or simply and unexplainably well-preserved.

A chill slid down his spine, like a piece of ice, and he had to fight the urge to wrap his arms around his waist.

"Are you okay, professor? You look pale."

He felt pale. He could feel things pushing at the back of his mind, things he wasn't ready to think about now. Not right now. God, right now he just wanted on the ground and in a bed for a few thousand hours. Maybe a bed that was within crawling distance of a hot tub.

Oh, hot tub. Him and Jacob and water and heat. Hell, he didn't even need sex; he just wanted something that felt good. He watched the water slam against the window, the clouds below them glowing with lightning.

"It looks like worms."

"What?" He frowned, looked closer at the streaks on the window, the water droplets chasing each other. No. They didn't look like...

"Worms. I hate worms, you know? They slide and slither and are so nasty against your skin. It must have been hell, being underground with all the worms."

"I'm not claustrophobic. I like caves." He hadn't liked this cave, hadn't liked the thing in the darkness that seemed to push inside him, live beneath his skin. Rage. It was like rage come to life.

The plane jumped again, hard enough that his tray table popped open, slapped against his lap.

"Did you know that there are worms that tunnel through the soil, burrow into the skin and then travel to your heart?"

"Well, earthworms are good for the soil, I think." Earthworms. There hadn't been any, in the cave, in either cave. No bugs. No nematodes. No plant life. How could that be? How did that happen? How did anything make the soil that dead?

"Yes. The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out..." Okay. Okay, that was fucking creepy...

"Is everything alright?" It was getting dark. Again. God he was tired. "I mean, with the plane?"

"I think everything will work out just fine, Caleb, I really do."

"Oh, good. I..." Wait. How did she know his name?

She chuckled and the sound sent his head spinning around, turning to look, to stare. The stewardess stared over, dark, dark eyes piercing him, smile growing so wide it seemed to stretch her cheeks out of proportion, make her look like a blowup doll. God. Oh, God.

"It is good. It will be. It will be very good. You shouldn't worry."

Worry. Except it came out as war-r-r-r-r-r-r-ry, the tongue that lapped at the stretched pink lips a deep dark black like a giraffe's or a chow dog's.

"I. I think I need to use the restroom."

"The captain has on the fasten seatbelt sign, Caleb." Her teeth were dull, but long. Really long, the sound of her tongue scraping across them like sandpaper on stone. "Besides, you don't really want to leave him here alone with me, do you?"

"What?" He could hear something on the window outside, scraping and skittering at the glass, trying to fight its way in.

"Your lover. You know, the one you fucked around on with a little grad student and then tried to lie about it, even after he caught you on your knees?"

Caleb shook his head, reached back without looking and slammed the window shade down. "You're fucking crazy, lady."

"Am I? Then just crawl over him, Caleb. Leave him right here and I'll slice him, throat to cock, lick the blood away and fill this bitch's belly with his innards."

Fury. Fury made flesh.

"What... what?"

She lifted her skirt, just yanked it up over thighs that were bulging and spread, and exposed her cock, full and black and throbbing, obscene drops sliding down the shaft. Worms. They looked like worms.

God, help him.

He tugged Jacob's arm, pulling them away from the sight, from the hallucination. It had to be. Had to be. He was ill, tired, had been through so...

"Stop it, Caleb." Its voice seemed to echo and Caleb wanted to look around, see if anyone else noticed, but he didn't because he was afraid what would happen if he looked away. "There's no helping you. No helping any of you."

"Leave him alone."

"I am going to make him suffer before I kill him."

"I won't let you."

"You have no choices." One of her hands reached out, long sharp fingernails dripping with polish, a pen knife in her hand. "Jacob, sweet man, I need you to help me convince Caleb of something."

"Mmhmm..."

"No. No, Jacob. Baby. You have to." Find him. Jacob needed to find him. Jacob had found him because he'd been lost. Because he'd been safe when the storm hit. Safe. Safe in the eye of the storm and he'd seen Annie's eyes, Jesus help him, he had. He'd watched her die and she'd been laughing, the sound half hysteria and half relief.

"Take the knife, Jacob."

"No. Baby, you need to wake up. Please." He'd fallen back when the earth had shifted, fallen into a hidden room, the grain and salt pouring out, pouring over him. It had been so fucking *dark*.

Jacob took the little knife, holding it tight in his fist like a little boy holding a crayon or a candle.

"Prove my point for me, Jacob. Do it. He doesn't believe."

Jacob nodded and Caleb grabbed Jacob's wrist with his good hand, holding it down, holding it still. "Don't hurt me, baby. Please. Please, wake up now. Come on."

Jacob's eyes opened, stared at him. "Cal, I won't hurt you. I won't."

Then the strong arm shook him off, the knife plunging into one of those blue eyes, the knife vibrating as it stuck there, fluid and blood leaking out like tears.

"No!" Caleb scrambled back, feet up in the chair as he just slid out of the seatbelt, hands slamming against the attendant call button over and over. "Help! Help! She's crazy. She's... Jacob. Oh, God. Help us!"

"There is no help for you, Caleb. You should have fallen with the rest of them." She reached out, pulled the pen knife out with a dull, wet plopping sound. "Tsk tsk. Bad passengers, making a nasty mess to clean up and getting out of your seat belts. The airline won't be happy with you."

"Jacob. Baby. I'll get you to a hospital, I promise. I swear. Oh, fuck. Just stay calm, okay? Just be calm." His heart was fucking pounding in his chest, fighting like mad to get out and if it was anyone else – anyone – he'd be in that little bathroom puking his guts out because he could smell blood and he was going to have to look into Jacob's face and pretend that he didn't want to scream and scream and tear at his face and. Oh God.

Hands landed on his shoulders, shaking good and hard and he let out a little scream, eyes rolling in his head.

"Cal. Cal, goddamnit. Wake the fuck up. You're dreaming. We're on the ground and if you freak out and we miss our connection, I'll fucking beat you to death, I swear to God."

He gasped, forced himself to look up, look into Jacob's eyes. Oh, God. Yes. Yes, his baby's bright eyes. Whole. Intact. Bloodshot, but whole. Glaring at him. Seeing him.

Thank God.

He nodded, swallowed the bile that was climbing up in his throat. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Off. Off the plane. Off."

"Yeah, yeah. Come on." Jacob kept staring at him, watching him close.

They had to wait for everybody to get out, the storms still just battering the plane, rocking it on its wheels. Jacob was muttering, checking his watch, bouncing a little on his toes. "God, I hate this part."

"Yeah." It was better than the part that came before. Better than the dreams.

They got their carry-ons – Jacob's filled with paperwork, his with random shit that Jacob had yanked from the desk in Dr. Monteverde's study – and headed up the aisle, Jacob pushing the people in front of him, just enough to keep everyone moving.

Caleb did just fine, just fine until they passed the attendants at the door. He could just see the little dark-haired one still sitting in her little seat, head tilted at an unnatural angle, the tiniest line of blood escaping from the corner of her mouth. The blonde smiled at him, the look in her eyes vacant and empty. "Goodbye, now. Goodbye."

A black feather flew out the door alongside him, the white calamus streaked with red.

Oh. Oh, God. He stopped still, swallowing hard, unable to fucking move.

"Cal? Cal, you coming?"

He could hear the wings fluttering behind him.

Wings.

Beating.

"Yeah, baby. Hey, how far is Casper?"

"Three hundred miles."

"Good. We're renting a car and driving it."

"What?"

"I'm not getting in another motherfucking plane, baby."

Jacob arched an eyebrow, then those eyes landed at the feather at his feet, went wide.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Okay. Come on. Move."

Yeah. Yeah.

Run.

Chapter Seven

He felt weak as a kitten as Da and Uncle Vic walked him into the bathroom, helped him into the tub, the hot water seeming almost to reach up and welcome him in.

Oh.

Oh, good.

His hair was washed as if he was a child, his father's hands cradling his head, so careful to keep his face out of the water, the soap out of his eyes. Uncle Vic was praying, the words unintelligible, but getting stronger, more sure as the sweat and nightmare was washed from his skin.

Three times the bathtub was drained, three times refilled. Each time Ben was washed and rinsed, prayed over. Cleansed.

The final time, Uncle Vic brought him a cup of orange juice, the taste bright and eye-watering, hitting his empty stomach with a splash and making him laugh with the simple beauty of it.

His father, his Da, smiled at him, nodded. "You have returned."

Ben opened his mouth to speak, but nothing escaped, not a single sound. Uncle Vic covered his throat with one hand, head shaking. "The spirits demand their boon. They always do. When you need it, it will serve you. Until then, they hold your voice."

His voice? He met his father's eyes, confused, but his Da sighed. "Come, Dua'. You must dress. A war awaits us."

A war? What war? He stood on legs that became stronger and stronger by the minute, water dripping from the ends of his hair. He was handed an old towel, a pair of jeans and was helped from the tub. Piaah came in, nuzzling and chuffing at him, complaining and chastising him for scaring her and Kono, for sleeping so long. For leaving them with Da and Uncle Vic who kept trying to feed them frozen squirrel meat.

He chuckled and knelt, face hiding in her ruff. Oh, Piaah. I'm sorry.

Her tongue licked his ear, his cheek, nuzzling him for a long moment before she stepped away and led him from the bathroom. Uncle Vic and Da were getting dressed – jeans and boots, heavy shirts, both of them talking softly enough that he only heard the rumbling. On the little bureau were the pots of grease paint – reds and blues and blacks and pure white

Paint?

We're getting painted up?

He tilted his head, heading for the bureau when he saw two rings sitting on the dark wood. Silver and gold. Amber and turquoise. Promises. Promises between two... Ben caught sight of himself in the huge silver mirror. He stepped forward with a frown, hand reaching out to touch the glass, assure himself it was there, was real. White. His hair was white as ash. Ben spun around and fell to his knees with a crash, the pale emptiness and peace leaving him in a rush.

Mac.

His Mac. His laughing red-headed lover. His artist. His own.

Oh, he'd left Mac behind. His mouth opened and closed, throat squeezing as he fought to form words, to make the other men understand, hear him.

His Mac was alone in that house. Or worse, not alone, not alone at all. Just trapped.

He threw back his head, howling out his loss and rage, the sound trapped within his throat and filling him, staining him.

The dogs both barreled over, Piah's muzzle at his throat, Kono heavy at his back, leaning into him, the deep growl and groan offered up in place of his own.

Vic stood, walked to him, staring down at him with empty eyes. "You cannot fight this; you must accept. The spirits bless you, they cleanse you. They have a price. They all demand sacrifice, bawi'. You are not the first to be forced upon this path."

He shook his head, confused. He took no path. He knew no path.

"You have simply forgotten, Dua'. You do not remember when Vic took his walk, when the mountain threatened to come down around us, the land corrupted by those who would use it. You were small, when the spirits took their price." His father stood, dark eyes sorrowful, so tall, so young compared to his uncle.

Vic nodded, hand on his Da's arm. "All of our children were young, then. Our people walk the same road and all roads lead to the land. The land of the people. We must prepare. It awaits us. We cannot allow evil to grow upon the earth, to take root. We must pluck it out and render it to ash."

One leather-tanned hand reached for him and Ben grabbed for it, his father helping him to his feet. "I would not have you do this alone, Dua'. You will not be alone."

Vic walked behind him, hands working beads and stones and feathers and leather into his braid, the ancient words burrowing into his spine and settling there, setting the memories of his ancestors free.

He could hear Mac's happy, raucous laughter, deep within him, vibrating in his bones, a promise of love and joy and connection that he treasured. He heard 'love', as if the emotion could be a sound, could be something so base. Beneath that, he heard sobs and cries, pleas to run, to help, to forgive.

Ben would forgive his laughing lover anything.

Anything.

"We will not let the evil take his spirit, Dua'. We will set your man free." His father held his eyes, refusing to allow him even this moment of peace, of worry. Yes. They would, no matter the agony that caused him.

The flocks birds outside his Da's home began to squall, to scream and flutter and bash themselves against the single-paned windows, the din making all three men stop and stare as the glass rattled.

The dogs snarled, paws landing on the windowsills while they howled back, teeth bared and sharp, ferocious. The noise stopped, as if the birds were shocked. Surprised.

Piah snorted and tossed her head, then padded across the room and took his hand in her mouth, teeth careful against his skin. They would go, but they would not be alone.

He would never be alone again.

Ben went to the dresser, slipped the rings upon his finger, the metal warming quickly, amber and turquoise resting together.

War. They went to war.

Jacob felt like he'd been beaten and the time change liked to kill him, but he managed. He did. Hell, he more than managed. He did fine.

Fine, like Cal's ass coming up out of the water, especially when the sun was just coming up, Lord. He'd woken up to that once or twice, and felt like his heart was going to stop in his chest with a thud.

The water from the lake sort of poured down, sliding from too-long hair and made the long line of Cal's tanned back just sparkle and shine. So fucking pretty. He could imagine Cal as a selkie like that, especially when the happy laughter started, the birds in the trees taking flight.

Lord, lord. That water had been crisp and clear, cold enough to make your balls draw up and hunt for home inside your body. Caleb'd loved it, though, drove in and shot through the water like he'd been meant for it.

Of course, Jacob'd been more than happy to warm that skinny ass right up after, spread Caleb out and whisper perverse shit over Cal's skin, lick the beaded drops of water right off. Beautiful bastard. From that laughing mouth to the tight, slick ass. God, yes.

Just perfectly fucking fine.

They were fine.

Just fine as frog hair, Jacob soaking up the memories, right up until he heard Caleb's panicked cry, felt the steering wheel wrenched hard to the right and his eyes fucking flew open. The semi horn was loud enough that it literally rocked the rented Escalade on its axles, the tires slip-sliding like all shit on the wet roads. Only years of experience, Cal's free hand on the steering wheel, anti-lock brakes and damn fool luck kept them from being the Road Kill Café's lunch special. "What? I. Jesus. Fuck!"

Oh. Oh, for fuck's sake. Goddamn.

Cal's eyes looked huge, like black holes burned clear through the snow. "Baby, you were sleeping. Shit."

"Sorry. Sorry. You were, too, asshole." When all else failed, go on the offensive. Christ, he was going to have a heart attack, the way it was pounding and throbbing. Hell, Caleb'd been snoring. Loud. Mouth open and head thrown back and shit. That's what had lulled his happy ass to sleep in the first place.

"Shithead. I? Am not driving. I can sleep if I want to!" Right. Sure. Like him falling asleep was *his* fault.

"No, you can't, asshole."

Caleb turned around, eyes flashing and looking huge with no dark hair to take away from them. "Why the fuck not?"

"Because someone has to keep me awake, dickhead." Jacob had to admit, fighting with Cal was still the most fun a man could have with clothes on.

"God, baby. I can't trust you to stay awake for ten minutes?" Cal squinted at the clock, clothes all rumpled and mussed. "I mean, two hours? We almost there?"

"Another hour and a half, with this weather, assuming I can stay awake and not get us killed or have a heart attack or something!"

“What, you can’t manage that at your age?” Cal was grinning like a big-assed fool. Jacob considered leaning over and popping him in the mouth.

“Not after having to fly across the goddamned world and back to find your skinny ass. If you and Annie hadn’t gone on this damn fool errand I would be home.”

“Oh, fuck off, baby. Nobody asked you to come.”

“What?” Oh, now. That was horseshit. “You sure as fucking did. *Come find me, baby. Come find me.* Over and over in my fucking head. I fucking love you, you sorry excuse of a human being. I couldn’t have ignored your ass. I never could. Why do you think I stayed away so long?”

“What?” Jacob sort of shut his mouth with a snap, hands tightening on the steering wheel hard enough it creaked. He hated driving in the rain. “What did you say, Jacob?”

“You fucking heard me.” He wasn’t saying it again.

“Yeah and I want to hear it again.” Pushy bastard.

“People in Hell want ice water.”

“You heard me, when I was missing?”

“Yeah. Sort of. It was more like dreaming. And I ain’t crazy.” Ain’t. God. He was tired. He passed a little Corolla, flipping the broad off as she honked.

“No. No, you’re not crazy. Annie did. Annie dreamed. Carlo, too. Over and over. It was making them crazed. They couldn’t sleep.”

“Were they dreaming about you? If they were, it wasn’t any wonder they couldn’t sleep.”

Cal popped his arm good and hard, making it sting. “No. Nightmares. She had terrible nightmares. I felt so sorry for her; it was like something was under her skin. Something crawling around her brain. So, you still love me?”

“Shut up, dickhead.” God damn it.

“I mean, that works out well for me, because I want your fine ass back, but I need to hear you say it.”

Jackass prick. He’d said he’d take Cal home, hadn’t he? He’d said it in the plane. “Fuck off, asshole. You want girly protestations of eternal fucking romance, find an English professor.”

“Eh. English professors are sluts. I have a thing for diggers. They have great hands. Let’s stop and get pancakes.”

“What?” The subject changed any faster and he’d get whiplash. The man didn’t eat for God knew how long and suddenly he was a fucking bottomless pit?

“You are tired, aren’t you?” Cal shook his head, shit-eating grin still in place. “Breakfast. You know – pancakes, eggs, bacon. Coffee. Milk. Juice. The good stuff.”

“We don’t have time, Cal.”

One hand landed on his leg, squeezing just a little, the hand on him shaking kind of more than a little. “Then we’ll skip the milk and eat fast. Please.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay, Cal.” Okay. No freaking out. We’re too close for that shit. Too close to lose it now.

They could grab pancakes. Bacon, too. Breakfast of champions.

He swallowed and put his blinker on, looking into the grey mist for an off-ramp.

Wetiko.

The word filled the air, murmured once, then repeating, echoing. Growing.

Wetiko.

Eater of souls. Defiler of the land. They lived for death and pain, drawn from the blood of men.

Wetiko.

Here in the land of the people.

Wetiko. Wetiko. Wetiko.

The unsteady murmuring, the worry, the anxiety that flavored the air with bile, combined with Vic’s chanting and the way the storm door chain clanked and clattered as it hit the aluminum base, were combining to drive him mad. The dogs watched every move anyone made, the rain poured down, and all the idle words filled the air and slid on his nerves like a grater.

Daniel shivered as another bird – this one a mourning dove - slammed against the windowpane, body cracking against the glass and sliding to land with a plop in the mud

atop the others that had to be piling up. The attacks were becoming more frequent – he'd had to shore up the bathroom window and the storm door had been swinging on its hinges for more than an hour. They knew. Somehow, they knew.

He only prayed that the wetiko could not see what the birds saw, could not see the way the people came. Hank and George. Little River and old JB. The Ok'an twins, as alike as if they were the same man, the same spirit so big it formed two bodies. They came slowly, on horses and four-wheelers and ancient Jeeps, on foot, spattered with mud, in pickup trucks with tires sunk axle-deep in the slime, the truck beds filled with supplies.

Their little house would burst with so many family come to fight.

Part of him wanted to go to Vic, shake his brother and demand answers, demand to know what had brought this here, why the birds from the skies threw themselves against the house, why the rain came and came and made him scared that the house itself would slide from its foundation and go toppling down the side of the mountain and...

Daniel stopped, breathed deep. He was no boy, no child to run to his oldest brother for answers when the monsters beneath the bedsprings growled and rattled. He was a father, a grandfather, a man of his people and he would face it with his kin.

The door opened, closed again, Opal Tallfeather coming with a pot of stew, her sons carrying bows wrapped in horse blankets, Sister Tallfeather killing birds with a slingshot, one after another as they attacked.

Daniel put the knives in a pale sheet that Vic had blessed, the bone handles clicking and rattling against each other. That went into the pack, along with matches and whiskey, ammunition.

They had to kill it. Daniel knew this; he understood this. Still. They had shared a pipe with the lover of his son. They had shared stories, laughter.

Ben was wandering, hands filled with dusty baby food jars filled with grey, dried herbs from the workshop. It unnerved him, his laughing chattering son made this grey, silent warrior, white hair and gaunt cheeks painted with red grease.

Opal stopped, stared at Ben, her proud tears spilling, raining upon the ground. He growled, Piah's deep voice joining his own. "Old woman, we have enough rain outside. Save your tears."

The rifles were ready.

They drove over the river, the water churning and rolling, Jacob's lips tight, knuckles white against the steering wheel. The dull, constant throb inside Caleb's head had

become audible to him an hour ago, and every mile simply made it louder, harder to ignore.

Made the distant, raw memories try to float up to the surface, try to show themselves.

Okay, okay. Focus. Stuff. They were here to...

Wait, why the fuck were they in fucking Wyoming? "Where to first, baby?"

"Ben's. He's not answering his cell. No one's answering at the house, either. We'll start there." Jacob was chewing on his bottom lip, teeth working it until it was bloody.

Okay. So. Ben's. "Do you have a place here?"

"In town? No. I stay at Ben's when I have to. I have a trailer in the mountains. I only come to town when I have to."

"For beer and pantyhose?"

"No, to check my mail and get ammunition and answer my university email. I can buy beer at the bait house."

Caleb almost chuckled, rubbed his forehead where the throbbing kept getting worse. "And your so-important camping nylons?"

Jacob flipped him off, turning into a neighborhood, the standing water spraying on either side of the SUV. "Oh, I just steal those off old ladies' clotheslines."

"Redneck."

"Fuck you, smart ass. Why don't you go back to sleep?"

Right, sleep. "You ever fuck this Ben guy?"

"What?" The truck slipped on the road, Jacob correcting quickly, sitting up straight. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you and Ben had fucked. This isn't brain surgery, baby."

"We are in the middle of the weirdest shit that's ever happened in a long history of shit and you want to know about my sex life?"

"Yeah." Look, if big assed scary Italian bird-demon ghost-things were going to rip their heads off and snack on their brains during a rainstorm in fucking Wyoming he wanted to know whether Ben and Jacob had bumped uglies.

Jacob's eyes were fucking scary, all wide and shocked like that. "You've lost your mind."

"Okay. I can buy that. Hell, so far, everyone *sane* I knew has died. Did you fuck him?"

"He's in a committed relationship."

"Bully for him. What about before?" They were heading into a part of town his mother would call 'quaint' and that he would call 'gee, we aren't doctors or lawyers, are we?'

"What does it matter, Cal?"

He thought on that a minute. What did it matter? Why should he care? "It just does. Answer the question."

"Yeah. Sort of. Nothing serious."

Ah, as in yes to handjobs and blowjobs, no to anything else. Good to know. "'kay."

Some of the little houses were cute, really.

Jacob pulled in front of a little house with a good sized yard, the sudden quiet as the engine cut loud-loud. "Why did you want to know?"

"Is this it?"

Jacob nodded, staring at him like he had two heads. "I mean it, Cal..."

"I do too, baby. Let's go see if they're home." He opened the door and nodded. "Let's get this show on the road."

A man needed to know who to feed to the scary Italian demon bird monster first, should the opportunity arise, after all.

Itch.

Itch.

Inside him, like a million worms, eating eating eating and wriggling, driving deeper into his flesh, around his bones and scraping them clean with hungry, hungry mouths and eating. Eating. More and more and he tore hunks of himself away, the constant burn and buzz frenetic and wild.

Itch.

Itch.

The clack when he moved – slithered, crawled, crab-walked, anything, anything was better than sitting and staring blankly at the walls while the thing within him moved - was maddening, something hard and bare striking the wooden floor.

Click. Clack. Smack. Paddywhack, give a dog a bone. This old man came rolling home.

Home. Brother. Home. Ben. Bones.

Fucking dogs. Fucking Ben. Deserting him. He was *sick*, damn it. Hurt.

"They're coming, honey."

Sam blinked, smacked his head against the floorboards once, twice. Hearing things. Hearing voices. Grace was gone. That's why they were here.

"No, honey. Hearing friends." Grace. His Grace. Come for him. She was wearing pink. Pale pink. She hated pink and her feet were bare, nails painted a dull red.

Long toenails.

Talons.

"That's right. You have to be ready for them. They won't come alone. They want to hurt you."

Hurt. He knew about hurt. He did. He knew bone-deep.

"When Ben comes, he won't be your lover. He left you. Left you here to hurt, yes?"

No. His Ben loved...

"Bullshit. Where is he? Where is he if he loved you? He's never loved you. He used you, all these years, to support him and his stupid little books, his evil fucking dogs, his nasty friends."

No. No. His...

"He brought that man into your house, didn't he? That man he would go up into the mountains and suck off. You let him in your house, to sleep under your roof, Mac. You did that."

No, Ben said that hadn't happened in years. That it was all water under the bridge.

"And you believed him? If you could've gotten some from that bastard you would have.

You're a man. Tell the truth."

No. He wouldn't have. Mightn't have. He loved. God, his shoulders hurt.

"It will all be over soon. All be better. They're coming for you, but you'll be reborn, renewed." One hand reached for him, the worms and maggots behind the tissue-paper thin skin roiling and writhing. "Soon. Soon. You'll be ready, honey. Believe me. We'll be ready."

Whimpering, Sam scrambled away, skin and clothes dragging away from that hand, that moving hand. The skin began to crack, to peel back, the insects pouring from Grace onto the floor.

Plop. Plop. Plopplopplop.

"Oh, it itches, honey. Deep inside. Can't you feel it?"

As the last bit of light left, her fingers wrapped around his wrist – his not-wrist, the scaly, bony flesh that had been his wrist - holding on tight and squeezing. He howled and pulled away, tearing the fabric away from the windows and screaming out his rage.

Only soft laughter and the flutter of a thousand wings healed him.

They hadn't been at the house.

Not Sam, not Ben, not the dogs. No one. Not the truck. Nothing. Damn it.

Jacob had a key and let them in, hunting idly through Ben's desk for a clue, a note, the goddamned cell phone, something. The answer machine was filled with more than a dozen phone calls that were at first worried, then angry, then heading back into worry. Something about a funeral, about plans, about deadlines and bills and about the museum and when it was going to reopen and why wasn't there a sign and what the fuck was going on and didn't anyone care?

Interesting.

Disturbing.

Odd.

Really odd.

"Baby." He heard Cal's voice and went running through the little house, back toward Sam's studio. He stopped so fast his boot heels actually squeaked.

Lord.

Drawings. Hundreds of them – of the site. The bones. The wings. Over and over in charcoal on every available surface, one on top of the other. The figures were fucking, fighting, flying, moving. Killing. Eating.

Caleb made an odd little sound, then hit the floor, eyes rolled back up, foam on the parted lips. Jacob sort of stood and stared, blinking down at the mass of legs and arms, just trying to fucking find something to make sense of all of it.

When that didn't show any signs of even *beginning* to work, he picked Cal's skinny ass up and hit the door and started to run, stopping only long enough to grab the spare keys from the ring and pray the museum keys were on it.

He propped Cal in the back, tying a seat belt around the thin waist, just in case of sudden stops, random floods or curious policeman "In case you didn't know? This is not a sexy look for you, man. Not not. No more foaming."

Annie? You better be playing this right, getting me all caught up in this mess and leaving me to clean it all up.

He headed across town at breakneck speed, trusting in his memory to get him there and in the fact that it was early enough in the frigging morning to keep the police out of his hair.

The museum was right where he'd left it, the front door blocked by a goddamn ton of sopping wet flowers and letters and crosses and shit, all bedraggled and dying and just sort of... becoming compost. "What the hell?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. Delivery door. He could do that. The less people watching him break into his former-fuckbuddy's permanent partner's museum, the better.

Really.

He backed up and parked. "I'm going inside, Cal. You sit tight."

Cal sort of grunted and shifted, mouth moving like the man was trying to talk. Oh, goody. Talking. He really didn't have time for this bullshit right now. "Cal. You. Sit. Tight."

Good man. Stay. Christ.

It was just his luck that the goddamn place was wired with an alarm, so he spent a bit trying to pick which key went in which hole in which order that wouldn't have any of the town's illustrious men in blue coming to poke him with blunt objects and remind him he was still wanted for possession in Natrona County.

The museum felt still as fuck – not terribly unusual, Jacob guessed, but still. It was unnerving. He passed through the storage, the break room, all the little familiar rooms that were just like he remembered them from the last time he was there.

“God, Sammy. Ben. What did Annie get us all into?” He shook his head, the sound of his voice echoing and ringing through the air, louder than his boots hitting the floor.

The work room door was wide open and Jacob frowned at the sudden, unexpected, acrid scent of urine. His frown deepened as he reached for the door, stopping before he wrapped his fingers around the stained knob. What the hell? He bent close, looking at the streaks. Blood.

Jesus. What happened in here, guys? Blood streaked the door and, unless he was losing his mind, dark drops were dropped on the floor all the way down the hallway.

He stepped into the room, avoiding the stains on the floor, looking only at the box on the worktable. Annie’s box.

Annie’s fucking box.

Big and wooden and innocuous and God, he didn’t want to see. He didn’t want to know. He walked right up to it though, didn’t he? Walked right up with his chin held high like he wasn’t scared, not even a little.

See him. See him be macho. See him lo...

God, look at it. Just look. The workmanship was stunning, beautiful.

The bones were black, shiny. Perfect and huge and seeming as if the artwork was glistening, wet where it was cradled in wood shavings. This one only had one wing, though, one small, malformed wing. Like. Like.

He pulled the little statue out of his pocket where it had been living for days, almost forgotten, but not quite. Not really. Not.

Okay. This one was broken. All the obsidian statues from the other site had been broken. And this one had pale stone – granite maybe? Jacob picked one of the alabaster fetishes up, comparing it to the one he’d carried with him for so many days. Same features, same eyes, same build, except the alabaster ones were pristine, perfect barring their age. The black one had a wing broken off. Not uncarved. Not forgotten. Removed. Torn away. Face marred.

On purpose.

His hands shook from squeezing the fetishes, fingers digging into the stone, stone cutting into his flesh.

Look at it.

Look at it shine.

Something rattled at the window, and the alabaster statue dropped, one wing cracking, skittering off along the floor. Goddamn it. Birds. Birds were throwing themselves at the glass, wings fluttering and feet scratching furiously.

Fuck. How weird.

“Y’all stop it. Shoo. Shit. There’s nothing in here. Nothing.” He waved his arms, jumping up and down a little, just trying to get the damned things to go away. Fucking pigeons. Rats with wings.

The glass in the window started to rattle some, and Jacob thought maybe he saw a crack appearing in the glass, the dim, dim light making it hard to see. “Jesus. There’s nothing in here to eat. Go *on*.”

The fucking things didn’t stop coming, more of them hitting the window like they were sick or something. Like they were mad.

He closed the heavy wooden blinds, hoping that would hide whatever weirdness the damn things thought they were seeing. Oh, damn. That took it from dim to dark. Shit.

Jacob inched his way over toward the door; there’d be a light switch there, for sure. Get things lit up. His footsteps echoed oddly in the room, almost like it was made of stone instead of ceramic tile and no matter how many steps he took, his waving hands didn’t hit desk or table or box or wall.

Fuck.

“Cal? Shit, Cal? Can you hear me?”

Something behind him rattled, shifted and he spun, pain lighting bright red behind his eyes as he slammed into something.

The beat of distant wings filled the air, the scent of smoke and blood overlying everything.

Chapter Eight

A dull red light seemed to fill the room along with wave upon wave of stifling heat, the stench of burning flesh and feathers acrid and sharp. Burning. Burning.

Okay. There was enough rain outside for Noah to build the frigging arc. It was not burning.

There were no stone walls. There were no pits of burning coals. He was not in motherfucking Sardinia back in that fucking cave.

Not.

Jacob squeezed his eyes tight together and pinched himself good and hard, the sting making his legs jerk. Okay. Not asleep. Good to know.

Fuck.

He opened his eyes and looked around. Stone walls. Coals. Red light. Chanting. Still not sleeping.

Okay. Okay. He'd hit his head. He was fucking losing his mind.

He scooted back into the shadows as best he could, hands coming up from the floor of the cave encrusted with something crystalline and sparkly, sharp-edged. One touch of his tongue and he recognized it. Salt? They salted the ground?

His back met the wall, and he drew his long legs under his chin. This was the most detailed fucking hallucination in the history of hallucinating. He could see so much. He could see rooms, painstakingly hewn from the stone walls, filled with bags of grain, with straw, with what seemed like hundreds of tiny idols. He could see row upon row of robed men, swaying on their knees, chanting and moaning. He could see Mediterranean faces streaked with sweat and blood, many of them with empty sockets where their eyes were supposed to be. He saw burned hands lifted to the sky, fingers just bones and blisters. On the walls was a... A man? A monster?

Something. Something with claws instead of hands. Something so tall and perfectly formed that it couldn't be alive, couldn't be real. Nature didn't participate in perfection.

Something with burning eyes and a face so beautiful, so perfect and empty and knowing and built with pure fury that he almost screamed with it as the sight etched itself inside him, made him want to tear his own eyes out of their sockets. He dropped his gaze, fighting for breath as he looked at the impossibly pale skin criss-crossed by heavy iron chains, snow-white wings beating constantly, fanning the coals strewn everywhere into tiny, licking flames.

The rhythmic chanting was unintelligible, growing in volume until it was battering at Jacob's ears. The bound man-monster opened its maw, screaming in response, fierce cries, caws and trills, sounds that echoed like flock upon flock of birds battering against the stone walls, like the world's fucking scariest Hitchcock movie times a thousand.

The sea of men moved, shifted as if the sound itself threw them backward. The crowd rippled and Jacob saw the man in the rear push forward, toppling the row of men in the front holding their ears, causing them to fall forward upon the coals, one after another. Oh, God. Cooking. They were fucking sizzling like creepy assed, priestly **bacon** and oh, fuck. This was a bad fucking trip.

Bad trip.

Then something began to happen. Something that caused the bird-like cries to stop, the chanting and screaming to fade into a dull roar that Jacob could ignore. Something began to move through the back of the crowd, a small group of men dressed in red instead of black. The sea of men parted for them, that bubble of red in the black the focus of everything. There were four of them, bald and sure, eyes black as pitch, smiling.

Smiling.

Which only really wiggled him out when they stepped *on* the priest-bacon-bodies to get to the thing chained to the wall. Because, shit, that was...

Fuck.

The chanting resumed with a passion, grew louder, faster, the four red-robed men joining in. They sort of danced, the look half-crazed and wild, the motions something that were buried deep in the subconscious of civilized men, something that only came out in the dying and insane. The broken. God. Jacob stared, fascinated, at the bare scalps shining in the dull light, the sweat pouring over the dark skin, the way scarlet robes became dark. The color of drying blood. One man dared to reach out, slap one bloodied hand against the creature's milky chest, the sound sharp.

Something black and large plopped on the ground before the bound creature, the chanting and speaking and thrumming just coming to a stop.

A wing.

A black, bloody wing.

The creature howled, one clawed hand jerking away from the wall and going straight through the closest person to him. The white wings fanned harder, the little flames becoming huge, becoming an inferno.

Fratello! Fratello!

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

Jacob reached up, tearing at his face, his eyes, his ears. He couldn't. It was too... He just.

"Now. Now, breathe." Fingers wrapped around his wrists, stopping him, holding on.

"Jacob. Son. No. Don't touch it, Junior."

"Momma."

"That's right. It's only a dream, okay? You know this. You are a child of logic, of learning." It felt real. Her fingers. They felt real.

"Even though you call me a redneck." The heat started to fade, the screaming becoming distant, like Annie'd found the remote and turned down the volume of the TV.

"Knee-jerk self-defense reaction to too many metaphysics seminars when I let that little bitch grad student babysit you for an independent study. I told her they'd warp you."

He chuckled, nodded, his cheeks wet. "What's going on here?"

"You were buying into this whole thing too much. You can't get caught up in old memories, Junior. That's one of his tricks."

"You're an old memory, Annie."

"I will be, but right now? I'm a brand new memory. Shit, I might not even be a ghost yet, Junior."

He stopped, kept his eyes closed tight. "I don't believe in ghosts, Annie."

"Good. I don't either and I have no intention of becoming one, but I can't..." Her fingers stroked his skin, drawing his hands away from his face. "I can't make you pay for mistakes that I made. I didn't... I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"Didn't know what we did. Didn't know it would involve you, Junior."

"You don't do guilt worth a damn."

"Shut up and listen."

"Don't tell me what to do, goddamnit, Momma." She was always telling him what to do, always treating him like he was. Cold. Goddamn, it was cold.

"Jacob Alexander Key. I am fucking in limbo because I don't want your happy ass caught up in this. You don't even believe I'm friggin' here and that you're arguing with your subconscious. Just listen to me. Don't touch it. Don't let it in." God, he could smell her. He could smell her powder and her soap and those damned cigarettes.

"Why did you send it to me here?" Why did you get me all involved?

"Because I thought you would come if you saw it. Because I didn't believe. Tell me you won't touch it."

"Didn't believe in what?"

"Just don't touch the bones. Listen to your mother for once in your goddamned life."

"Okay. Okay. I won't touch. Didn't believe in what, Annie?"

"You promise?"

"Yes. I promise. Answer me."

His eyes opened when she didn't answer and he spun around, a mixture of fury and a near overwhelming sorrow washing over him, the pain still too fresh to bear. "Momma! God *damn* it. Didn't believe in what? Don't play games with me, Annie! I don't understand. I don't understand what you need me to do!"

The lights came on in a flood of white and bright and he ducked his head, the skull, the giant skull staring at him, teeth close enough to bite deep. The alabaster fetishes were all about, scattered, broken, everywhere. Like snow.

Like salt.

His fingers wrapped around one and he started bashing the stone against the skull, pounding and pounding, first one and then another. The sounds as the little fetishes crashed against the bones made him scream, made him wail. "I can't *do* this alone!"

"Easy. Easy now, stud." Warm hands landed on his shoulders, easing him down so his head was between his legs, Caleb's foot kicking the skeleton away as if it was just trash. Just old bones. "You're not, baby. You're not alone. We're not."

He sobbed, head against Caleb's knee. "Promise."

"I swear."

It would never stop raining. The earth would mourn endlessly, the trees bow under the wet weight, the sun hidden away. This was the final night of life as he knew it.

The thought was foolish and fueled by his own pain instead of what he knew to be true, but Ben could not believe he was the only one to have it, not with his Da staring up into the black clouds, thick braids heavy and wet.

His feet landed upon the wet leaves, his boots making no sound, the path familiar as his own skin. He had run these paths as a boy, hidden in them as a young man. Fought and hunted, learned and slept on them. Made love on them. Now those thoughts seemed as if they were ghostly memories, impossible nostalgia, false thoughts planted by dreams and stories told by one old man after another.

His own home seemed impossibly far away.

They had smoked and fed and then started out together, almost a tribe's worth of men, each with their own magics, following the trails, the birds watching and waiting. They had slowly left one behind and then another. The land told them where to stay, where to defend. What to burn in case the evil moved. In the end there would be only three of them.

Only three to face what awaited them.

To face Mac.

The thought sent a pang through him, the cry inside that fought to escape growing that much bigger and feeling as if it filled his chest.

Uncle Vic's hand landed on his arm, grounding him as the trees began to thin, the stench of death and filth growing around them like the hundreds of tiny bird carcasses littering the ground, the larger avians staring down at them with black empty eyes. The bodies moved and jittered with the maggots and worms sliding in and under the feathered skin, the empty eye sockets, the shattered wings. This place was no longer home. No longer a living place.

Piah growled, bared her teeth at a goshawk, fearless and territorial. The hawk didn't back down; instead it flared its wings and screamed, the sound awakening the valley. The sudden flutter of wings was answered by the roar of his Da's rifle, the bird falling to the ground with a plop, the wings driving the carcass to flop and careen along the dirt after the brain was gone.

Hundreds of heads turned to them, sharp beaks opening to squawk, and his heart raced, just pounded in his chest, the rush of fear almost surprising. The dogs snarled, hackles raised and Da cocked his rifle, the stock braced on his shoulder as he took aim at another.

“Dua’. The cabin. Run.”

His mouth opened to argue, but he couldn’t. There was nothing but silence. So he nodded, grabbed Uncle Vic’s arm and started pulling, boots slipping in the gore and mud. The attack started as they began to move, the air coming alive with wings and feathers and talons. Tiny claws tore at his skin and Ben furiously tore them away, heedless of the sounds of the tiny bodies crunching beneath his boots. One gunshot after another sounded, the barks of the dogs growing from a warning to a furious desperation.

He dragged Uncle Vic straight into a murder of crows, the black birds cawing, throwing themselves into the air, claws outstretched. Vic swung their spare rifle, the barrel connecting with a wet crack as two birds fell. He had a knife in his free hand, kept pushing toward the cabin, blade slashing at birds and air as he tugged his uncle along. The wind picked up, the pine branches slapping against them, trying to keep them out of the clearing proper.

One sharp-needed branch caught his jaw and Ben stumbled forward, gasping as claws sank into his hair and gained purchase, the talons burying themselves in his scalp, wings buffeting his head and face, stinging and burning. He lost his hold on Vic, reaching up instinctively to grab the crow, tear it off his head, keep the fucking thing away from his eyes. The thing was wet, slick, feathers coming off in his hands. He could hear Vic screaming, hear the sound of more shots and more barking and the constant cawing of the fucking birds.

His fingers grabbed a wing and wrapped around, squeezing hard enough that bones crushed as he pulled. He could feel the skin tearing away from his head, feel the blood begin to drip even as he bashed the bird against a tree trunk, again and again.

Vic’s hands were on his legs and he turned, tearing the birds away from his uncle, the feathered bodies flying. No more. No. This land would not hold this evil. They would not allow it to take root.

No more.

Vic started moving, blasting the rifle again and again into the next flock of birds. There was something beating, beating loud enough to hear over the wings and the cries, over the gunshots and the terrifying sounds of the dogs. It wasn’t until he broke through the trees and reached the clearing that he saw two people, banging on the door of the cabin, covered with mud, the bodies of magpies and camp robbers and a dozen song birds littering the ground.

Mac? Please. Please help them.

He and Vic stumbled forward, the gunshots staying behind in the trees.

The rain poured down, soaking the mud from the men, clearing the faces of one enough that Ben got a dull shock of recognition. Jacob.

Jacob.

There was someone he didn't know – someone tall, bald and painfully thin – hollering and beating the bird carcasses into the earth with a casted arm and a tire iron as Jacob pounded on the cabin door.

“Ben! Ben, are you okay? Ben, you motherfucker! Let me in! You have to help me! You have to tell me what happened!”

The door swung open, the entire frame of the house just shuddering with the force of it. Jacob dropped his hand, took a deep breath. “It's about fucking time. Are y'all oka...”

Whatever was at the door made a noise and the stranger turned and swung the casted hand, connecting at the base of Jacob's skull with a dull crack, the big blond slumping to the ground without a sound.

The war, it seemed, was on.

Chapter Nine

Caleb stood there for a heartbeat or two, staring at the tire iron in his hand, his shoulder thrumming from the blow, broken arm screaming. Jacob's body was slumped in the mud, a thin trickle of blood slipping out of the open lips. Fuck him raw. "You can't have him, you piece of shit. I won't let you."

The door had swung open and the... thing had reached for Jacob, almost grabbed him. Caleb hadn't even thought, he'd simply swung, knocking Jacob to the ground and putting himself in the line of fire. Which, in hindsight, was dumb as fuck, but shit, thinking on his feet wasn't his strong suit. He really preferred a plan.

Anyway. Jacob was going to be fine. And if he wasn't, well... better dead by his hand than... eaten by...

That thing.

The laughter that sounded from the doorway reminded him of the bubbling of burned oatmeal, wet and thick and perverse. The fucking birds answered with a cacophony of cries and he kicked another feathery body out of the way, the crow rolling away. "Don't laugh at me."

He had had enough. Really.

His fingers wrapped tighter around the tire iron and he lifted his eyes, came face-to-face with...

Well, fuck.

It wasn't the beautiful, perfect face that threatened his dreams, that haunted him. This... this thing that peered through the cracked and bleeding shell that had been human at some point, but not anymore. Nowhere near. It was scaly and monstrous, the slips of skin dangling off like so many bits of torn cloth. Naked and raw, the sight was too much to comprehend, too much to understand. Too obscene. One wing fluttered randomly, bare of feathers and atrophied and malformed on a frame too small to hold it. This was...

There was...

One thigh was still mostly whole, a fleur-de-lis inked over the straining muscles. A tattoo. A tattoo.

Oh, God.

It had been a man. Really. A person. A man.

Once.

It had been a man.

It smiled at him, the expression lascivious, obscene, black tongue sliding out to scrape along scraps of skin. "Fratello."

"No." He rejected the word, his brain snapping away from it violently. No, he wasn't. It wasn't inside him. He hadn't let it out. He hadn't let it free.

"Si." One clawed hand reached out for him, the curved talons skittering across his chest and tearing his shirt effortlessly as he stood there like a rabbit caught by a snake. His teeth sank into his bottom lip, remembering the look on Patrick's face when Patrick took his own tie, hung himself while staring in the mirror, staring with those huge eyes. How could he remember that? How could he know? "Si, fratello."

See? You're guilty. No. No, Patrick saved himself. Caleb could only save Jacob. He panted, shook his head. They hadn't set it free.

"It's not in me." It didn't get me. It wanted me.

It had touched him, scared him, but his hands. His hands were covered in salt. Salt and ash and... "The monks won't let him out, too."

That laughter came again, falling out into the air like raw meat, but it gave him strength to step back, pull away. "No. He's not **in** me. He's in the ground. They still have him, trapped in the ground! Forever."

Wave after wave of memory hit him. Annie screaming, clawing her eyes out before Carlo turned against her, the flash of the axe dulled with the splash of blood. The growls and cries of people turning to bare gurgles. The thud of flesh upon sand. Wings battering at him, as he tried to hide under the rotted grain, the piles of blessed salt. The way the creature screamed when he fought, the feel of teeth on his shoulder, sinking in deep as he was tugged deeper and deeper into the darkness.

"His bones are still in the **ground!**"

The near-black eyes of the monster flared, that clawed hand slashing through air. It was a slow-motion moment as the sharp, black curved talons glanced off his cast, tearing open a gash before they bounced off and split his chest, his belly, flaying his skin open and exposing muscle as a roar shook the earth itself. "Non! Fratello!"

Meat.

His insides looked like meat.

The fierce burn surprised him more than the lack of pain, the blood pouring down over

Jacob like the beginnings of a bath. His Jacob. His love.

Goddamn Annie and her weird ways of matchmaking. They'd have been better off if she'd gotten them both gay cruise tickets. He reached down and grabbed skin, sinking to his knees with a dull thump.

He was really fucking tired, man. Bone-deep.

Jacob moaned, shifted as his knee caught the big muscle in Jacob's thigh. Alive. Oh, good. Caleb was a fan. The claws landed on his shoulders, the pain making him cry out. For you, baby. I couldn't let it have you. He leaned forward, groaned. "Baby. Baby, you gotta run."

"Cal..." Jacob jerked, eyes rolling furiously. "My fucking head."

"Yeah. Run. Yell at me later." Really, a man couldn't have a fucking moment of panic when his lover was face-to-face with a demon?

"You're... Cal... Oh, God."

"Run, baby. Please." Another shake and his head rolled, the pain inside him rolling and arcing, the world graying out in turns.

"The bones. Annie tried to tell me." Cal decided that Jacob was either talking to himself or something, not that it mattered because the goddamned crusty, skin-wearing, psychopathic demon from hell lifted him up by the bones in his shoulders, shook him hard enough that he rattled.

He felt Jacob move, heard the angry roar as the filthy fuck holding him missed grabbing Jacob with one arm. Caleb swayed, dangled like a fish on a hook as he shook his head. He was still holding his skin closed, fingers stained near black. "No. No, you fucking hear me? You don't get what you want! He's trapped in the fucking ground, you motherfucking *bastardo*. And he'll never *never* be free!"

Caleb smiled at the furious roar, lifted his face up to meet eyes that burned.

"And you can't have Jacob either, you piece of shit."

Jacob hit the ground running, boots slip-sliding through the mud and muck as he scrambled for the fucking hatch on the SUV. The bones. Annie had told him. She'd taken the bones out and set the fucking thing free. Shit, if it hadn't been for Cal, they'd've set two free.

Two of them.

Shit.

He grabbed the wooden box and tugged, grunting as the splinters dug into his fingers, tearing deep. “Come on, come on, you *bitch*.”

The bones rattled and shook inside, the rough wood catching the carpet and dragging.

Come on.

He heard Cal’s soft sob and he growled, put his back into it.

Come *on*, you piece of shit.

Ben’s eyes refused to see, so he looked away, just ran toward the cabin where he had left Mac behind, where the wetiko had a man and was shaking him like a dog with a squirrel.

Monster.

Cannibal.

Murderer.

Liar.

Wearer of false skin.

Bastard.

His knife burned in his hand like a flame. The mud hindered him not at all, the land encouraging him, pushing him closer and closer to the beast he hunted.

It was easy – surprisingly easy to leap up behind the beast, sink his blade into the gnarled back down to the blood groove and yank it free again, the dark blood flowing down in rivulets.

The stranger was thrown aside, landing in the yard, in the rain. Ben didn’t spare a look, only raising his arm to strike again and again, the blade landing once in the beast’s wing, once in the muscled arm. As he yanked the blade free again, the wetiko turned to face him, the monster wearing Mac’s torn skin like a mask.

Monster.

Murderer.

Wetiko.

His voice screamed inside him.

The wetiko didn't pull away, stepped close and bent close, unafraid. He heard his Da's cry from miles away as he went still and stiff, the rain caught still in the sky. Those eyes stared at him, the black going a pure, familiar green, so full of hurt, of pain. "Ben. Love. Why did you let it have me?"

His knife clattered to the ground.

Jacob heard something thump to the ground across the yard and when he saw it was Cal, pale and bloody, rain just pouring off the still form, his knees buckled.

No. No, God. Not now.

He turned, the box rattling to the ground, fetishes tumbling into the mud, crunching beneath his feet as he turned, heading across the yard.

"Cal. No. Cal. I'm coming, man. Don't you fucking die."

He slipped on one of the statues, feeling almost like someone pushed him, an impossibly heavy weight landing on the center of his back and shoving him deep into the mud.

"Junior! Don't fuck up now! Not now."

"He's *dying*, Momma!"

"Then he's dying. The bones, Jacob. Jacob, *please*, we're running out of time!"

He sobbed, fighting her viciously, the mud sour in his mouth as he struggled. "I can't. Momma. I love him, you evil *bitch*! I'll hate you if you make me let him die! I'll fucking hate you forever, you hear me?"

"I know, son." It was the truth in her voice, the guilt and the sorrow, mixed with a steely determination, that broke him, let him know she would get her way. "Destroy them, burn them and put that fucking thing back in the goddamned ground."

"I fucking hate you, Annie. I swear I do."

"I know." The weight on his back lightened and he got a none-too-gentle shove. "Do what you're told."

Mac took his hand, led him into the cabin away from all the noise, the barking, the screaming and shut the door behind them. Gloomy and dark, he couldn't focus on anything, he didn't want to, he had Mac's eyes.

So green.

"There. That's better, right love? Now we can talk without all the interruptions." So reasonable; he'd fallen in love with that smile, just tumbled over with a crash. In three beers, he'd been in the palm of Mac's hand, literally and figuratively.

"You had me worried, Ben, when you left me like that. You took the dogs, everything. Things could have gone very wrong without you here to help me, to make things right."

He opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out, not even a whoosh of breath.

"I'll forgive you, love. I will. You'll tell me you're sorry and then I'll kiss you and everything will be as it's supposed to be, right? Before this little incident occurred. Before that bitch Grace interfered with things while I was working."

Bitch? Grace? But Mac loved Grace. Had loved her. He opened his mouth wider, arching his throat, trying to force sounds out.

Mac frowned a little. "What's wrong? Don't you have anything to say? Aren't you sorry for leaving me? For letting me hurt?"

Was he? Yes. Yes, but...

He'd had no choice. Mac had been sick. So sick. He'd needed his people, medicine.

His Mac had... A bright pain exploded in his left arm, and he looked down, four perfect claws buried deep in the flesh, blood trickling down to stain their rings. Claws.

Claws.

Monsters had claws, Ben. Monsters. Not Mac. Those claws couldn't wear Mac's ring. Think, now.

"Pay attention, Benjamin. I hate when you wander. Always fucking living in the stories in your brain. Never living with me. I'm ready, love. Ready for you to be with me now."

Ben shook his head and Mac shook him in return, lights flashing behind his eyes. "Fucking listen to me!"

The door crashed in, the pale light shining into the house and Ben could see again. See the floors streaked with blood and filth. See the drawings, the curses splattered on the

walls. See Jacob, hands bloodied as a pile of old, black bones were poured out onto the floor, a gas can red and dull in the half-light.

See the monster that wore Mac's face.

The piece of shit, crazy motherfucker demon bastard roared, pushed the man on the sofa aside and began shuffling toward him, toward the bones, grunting and salivating. "Mmmmine!"

Jacob threw the nasty, slimy things everywhere, gas splashing, the smell making him gag. "Come get them, you lousy *fuck!*"

Gonna burn the whole fucking thing to the goddamn ground, you asshole. Gonna make you pay. Gonna make you all fucking pay!

He stamped down on one of the remaining little fetishes, loving the way the thing screamed as the stone shattered. His fury was so much stronger than his fear that he hooted as the monster started lurching across the room, dragging its broken, malformed, ugly goddamned legs. "Did that hurt your feelings, you fuck? Good. I want you to fucking *suffer!*"

Then he stepped on another, and another, doing this insane little boogie as he worked, emptying the gas can out and praying to God the fucking Zippo worked. He got it out of his jeans' pocket, spun the wheel and damn near cried when it didn't spark.

Then he didn't have time to cry, because that thing was on him, hand slapping into his wrist, his fingers going numb and nerveless as the lighter fell to the ground.

Oh, God. Annie. Annie, help me. It... it's got me.

Then all he felt were claws tearing into him as he was lifted and thrown, the crash of his body breaking wood and glass the last thing he felt before the world went black.

Not his Mac.

Ben forced himself to move, to crawl across the floor, one arm torn free from its socket, the burn in his chest sharp and deep.

Wetiko.

Not his Mac.

Not his Mac.

His fingers slipped and slid in the mixture of gasoline and mud, shit and blood and bone, but he held on, crawling and sliding like a baby. He watched, focusing on the way the wetiko crouched, the way it gathered up the bones and held them close. Cradled.

Loved.

Cherished.

Not his Mac.

The end table with the little drawer was toppled over right there, wood cracked and ruined, right behind the beast. Emergency candles. Matches. Lighters. All there.

Waiting for a storm.

The wetiko was rocking, holding the bones and singing something, some song that he felt he should know, but couldn't quite remember. The burn in his chest became a blaze as he convulsed, a splash of copper staining his mouth, the floor.

Come on, Ben. Five more feet. Let it be over. He coughed, the act blessedly silent as more blood dripped from his mouth, pain shooting through his chest. Five feet.

Five feet.

It seemed to take hours, days, his one good hand dragging his body, his chest screaming out in agony. It didn't, it couldn't have because the wetiko never stopped, never turned, settling amongst the piles of bone. Finally though, his fingers found the pull to the drawer, working the damned thing back on its track, easing it open, the long-tipped barbecue lighter clattering out onto the floor. When the monster's head rose, his heart stopped and Ben lunged.

He grabbed for it as the wetiko roared, the bones clattering as they were kicked and moved. So fucking strong. So much anger. It caught him, lifted and shook him so he couldn't work the lighter, couldn't do it and they would all be lost. The monsters would win. All of this fighting was for nothing. Was a waste. Was... The...

Something deep within him cracked as the strong arms closed around him and squeezed, something spiked with pain like he'd never imagined and then eased, his throat seeming to open, his breath given sound again.

Ben threw his head back, crying out to his lover, praying there was enough inside him left to hear.

“Mac!” The creature stopped, stared at him and he pushed the safety with his thumb, but his fingers weren’t working, weren’t strong. Couldn’t. “Mac, are you there? Mac! Sammy! Mac, I need you!”

His voice seemed huge, the desperation making it soar, making it echo through him and he felt it, felt the shudder that rocked through the beast, the huge head shaking back and forth, blood splashing him in hot droplets.

“Mac. Please.”

Those black eyes were suddenly familiar, green, the horror and pain in them huge. “Oh. Love...”

Yes. Yes. Mac. Love. Please. “Help me. Help me end this.”

“Oh, God, Ben. I’m sorry. I can’t stop him. I didn’t mean to.” Ben nodded; he knew. He knew. It was time. One clawed hand landed over his, the talons clicking on their rings, the trigger, once, twice. “I’m so sorry.”

The spark was beautiful, the color of the sun at dawn, and Ben pressed closer to his lover, sandwiching it between them.

Any words of forgiveness were lost in the rush of light, the flames driving them both into the belly of the sun.

Outside, Daniel fell to his knees as the cabin went up as if made of dry tinder, even with the rain. No.

He dove for the cabin, his only focus on saving his boy, getting his son out of the fire. His boy. Strong fingers wrapped around his ankle and tugged, dragging him to the ground. Vic’s scratched and torn face was streaked with tears, the blood running like rivers. “He is gone. He saved us.”

No.

The white eyes caught the reflection of the fire, the smoke.

No.

His hands curled into the mud, then he began to beat at the ground, fists falling as the flames licked at the sky, threatening the clouds themselves. His howl of loss echoed through the trees, joined first by Piah and Kono, then by the people.

His Dua’. His own.

His boy.

No.

Oh, Jesus Christ.

Jacob groaned, trying to move his head, open his goddamned eyes. Shit. Ow. Just. Oh, man. Ow.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Okay.

Okay.

Think.

Come on, man.

Think.

Think. Damn. Okay. Shit, he hurt.

He was fucking wet, too.

Jacob managed to get one eye open, stare at his hand that was lying there in the black mud next to his face. Okay. Okay. Fingers were good. Now, if they were still attached to his body somehow, he ought to be able to move them, right?

It took a little more concentration than was exactly comfortable, but his index finger shifted, flicked cold mud onto his nose.

Well, go him. One hand still attached. This was progress. Fuck.

The rain had stopped, the mud around his face wasn't splashing him any more, the standing water didn't get any higher. The plop-plop of the water didn't hide the sounds of howling and crackling and snapping and...

Loss.

Loss.

Shit.

"Caleb..." He managed to get his head lifted, managed to hold back the urge to retch and just looked around until he got his fucking bearings. Shit. Shit, he'd failed. He didn't do it. He had to get Caleb out of here and figure out what the hell to do next. How to fucking kill it.

After he got Caleb.

Every fucking bone in his body screamed as he pushed up out of the mud onto hands and one knee, starting to crawl toward the still body of his lover in the grass, one of Ben's people bending over him. "Caleb."

He fell twice before he reached them, his left leg mangled and twisted behind him, but he fought the sparkles and growing gray fog that kept creeping up on him, trying to convince him to sit a bit and just chill the fuck out.

There wasn't time. There wasn't time anymore.

It was Vic – Ben's ancient old and incredibly creepy Uncle Vic -- with Caleb, the empty eyes wet and the tanned-leather cheeks scratched and torn, wet with blood and tears. Caleb was white as a ghost and too-fucking still, face bruised and smeared with mud. Someone had torn the shirt from him, wrapped the terrible wounds on the lean chest and belly. The blood still seeped out, running out in little trails over Cal's belly, some of them looking like they followed the pattern of the ink, some trying to make new marks, new stains. No. No, Caleb. You wake up. "Is he?"

"The man lives, for now." Another howl sounded from the other side of the yard, the old man seeming to bow under the weight of the noise as they both looked over at Daniel, head thrown back as he mourned. "Ben. Ben does not."

"Ben?" He frowned, shook his head and looked over to the cabin as the roof caved in, the flames literally licking at the sky. On fire. The cabin was. But he'd seen the lighter fall. He'd heard it. He *knew* he had. "But... Vic. I didn't. The lighter fell, Vic. The lighter *fell*."

Had Ben been in there? He... There'd been a man. An old man. Not Ben. Surely not Ben.

"The wetiko had to be destroyed."

"W...wetiko. No. No, Vic. It wasn't from here. Annie, my mother. She sent it here. To me. Has it come out? Is it burning?"

"It ate souls. It was wetiko." The old man swayed, empty eyes seeming to stare into the flames. "He killed it for his people, for his man."

"His... Sammy." Jacob shuddered and turned to one side, finally giving up the ghost and retching as the vision of that skin hanging from the beast came to him. Sammy's skin. Oh, God. Ben had loved the man so much. Enough to fight for him.

Enough to die for him.

And Annie had sent it here. To Sam. To Ben. For him.

His fault.

"He saved his Samuel. They walk together again."

"What about the others, though? What happens to them?" The old man just stared, either refusing or unable to answer. Jacob groaned and shook his head, fingers reaching for Cal's. "We have to get him out of here."

Something in the cabin crashed and shattered, one wall caving in. The ash flew up into the air in a massive rush, the black smoke caught and spinning in odd shapes and...

The smoke and flames seemed to coalesce for a moment, forming into a huge winged beast, the flames beating at the sky as if taking flight, the waves of heat sudden, making his skin tight, making even Caleb shift to try and avoid that terrible fire. Each feather dripped gobs of pure fire, the coals and sparks raining down, smashing to smolder in the mud. The eyes, though, they stared out, scalding the earth like condensed suns.

It was at once the most horrible and most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

The creature threw back its head and screamed, the sound loud enough to silence the world, to make his bones rattle and his ears throb. It was going to fly. Oh, God. No. No, please. Not now. Tell him they hadn't set it *free*.

One huge flap of wings, then another. The flaming beast began to move, to rise above the cabin, talons coming into view. That's when he saw hands – dozens of hands, maybe hundreds -- reaching up and pulling the beast back into the rubble, into the lost cabin, into the earth. Ben's hands. Sam's hands. Patrick's. Dark hands, pale hands. So many hands.

Annie's hands.

Trapping it. Burning it. Burying it.

A deep sound tore from him – part pride, part joy, part sorrow – and he heard it echoing and answered, Ben's father watching, seeing this, the same as him. Their people. Saving them. Saving them all.

"B...baby." The deep voice was scared, filled with agony. "You. Tell me it's dead."

"It's dead, Cal. Cal, c'mon. I have to get you into town. To a hospital. Something." Somehow. Shit.

"You both must go. Daniel. Dawi'. We must go."

Daniel looked up, face ravaged with pure agony that made him ashamed, made him look away. "I will not leave him here!"

"He is gone. He has left us." Vic stood, headed over to the grieving man, held him. Jacob looked at Cal, who looked right back.

"Baby. Y...you tell me the blind guy's driving us down the fucking mountain and I'm leaving you. For real."

Jacob blinked, then started to laugh, head resting on Caleb's hip. One hand touched his hair, stroking the wet, matted mass from his face as the rain began to fall again, Cal going still and cold under his cheek.

If his laughter turned to tears and stayed there until Ben's people began to arrive, Cal was too far gone to mention.

Chapter Ten

Jacob sat at the desk, kind of rocking, kind of staring, casted leg propped on the top, the plaster scraping just a little as he moved. God, there were so many books. So much paper. So much shit. He hadn't even begun the process of sorting. Looking.

Trying to get his fucking life back in order.

Like he could do that now.

Jacob undid the top buttons of his dress shirt, let his head fall back as he stared at the mural Annie had had painted on the ceiling thirty some odd years ago. Gods and goddesses, devils and angels, serpents and doves – she'd loved it, the aeons of mythology right up there were she could stare at it. Think. Ponder.

Just like he was doing.

He'd finally buried her. So many funerals – Sam and Ben, Hoder, Carlos, Grace – so many and he didn't think he'd ever be done with them. God, Daniel's eyes would haunt him forever, the soft howls of Kono and Piah the music at the quiet ceremony, two matching urns sitting side by side, connected at the handle. Annie would have loved it. She would have recorded every minute and spent days after researching the burial rituals of the Ute and how they changed over time. Her memorial service had been held in the labyrinth at Trinity Methodist, one of her best friends officiating, dozens of people standing to tell about Dr. Key and how they loved her.

The old bitch wouldn't have believed it, how many people came. She should have showed up, just to see. Jacob had waited, watched, hoping for a sign that she was paying attention. He hadn't heard her, though, not a bit. Not since that last time, that last fight where he'd told her he hated her.

They were always fucking parting on bad terms.

Jacob closed his eyes, breathing deep. She was everywhere in this goddamn little house -- smoke sunk into the floorboards and that damned sandalwood powder pressed into the walls. She'd lived here, on and off, for forty years. Lord. Rocked in this chair, the one she and a pair of fraternity boys had stolen from the Union. Burned ten thousand frozen pizzas in that shitty little avocado-green oven. Read more books than he'd see in a lifetime.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat, fingers clenching into fists. It was time for the goddamn closure, time for the healing and getting on and shit. It was time, but his soul just wouldn't get to it.

"Baby?" Cal stood at the door, already changed into a t-shirt and shorts, staring down at him. Jacob hated the careful way Cal held himself now, like the slightest motion hurt, like

the bones and muscles belonged to someone else. He hated the way the new scars marred the tattoos. Hated the dark fuzz that was growing out all over Cal's head. Hated the fucking lime green cast that went from shoulder to fingertips, now. Hated the dull, distant look that showed up in Cal's eyes every now and again, the fear when the old house creaked or the sky outside clouded or a bird flew overhead. Still, they were lucky.

Everyone kept telling them that.

They were alive. They were lucky. So many people weren't.

"Jacob? You gonna make it?"

He looked up at the mural, eyes following a branch of the Tree of Life, knowing that the blossom at the end of it was a perpetual bud, never blooming. "I sure as shit hope so, darlin'."

"Yeah. The flowers will be here in the morning. I told the man to take all the cut flowers to nursing homes and shit."

"Okay." He got himself situated so he could put his leg down without slamming it into the ground. That fucking cast was heavy.

"The university called. They want to know if you're going back to the mountains..."

"Cal, let it go. I don't want to talk about it right now." He knew Caleb was beginning to worry, was beginning to wonder what they were up to, whether they were a couple or just two old men trying to recover. Whether they were in separate beds because his leg was casted or because this was all just a weird-assed situation or what.

He just couldn't think about those mountains yet. Not yet. Soon. In the spring, maybe.

Maybe.

Hell, he had boxes of things from the museum, from Ben's house, all stacked in the third bedroom here, waiting for him.

Waiting for someone to go through the ten thousand things inside, the artifacts, the papers, the books, the stories.

That could be a lifetime's worth of work.

"Okay." Cal turned, heading back out the door, dark hair looking like some weird-assed fungus growing on the pale scalp, the nape of Cal's neck white as a bedsheet. Fuck, the man looked old. As old as he felt.

“Wait. C’mere.” He held his arms open and waited, held Cal’s gaze when the dark eyes met his.

“You... I don’t want to hurt your leg.”

“Now, Cal. You don’t weigh anything. I... I need to, ‘kay?” Quit talking and come *here*.

“Okay, baby.” Cal really didn’t weigh anything, but it sure felt good, the warmth on his leg, against his belly.

Jacob wrapped his arms around Cal, holding on, fingers trailing up and down the too-thin spine. “I miss her, you know? Especially being here.”

Cal nodded, cheek against his forehead. “I know. We could leave. I have a sublet in Miami...”

“No. This is as good a place as any for a home base for us, isn’t it? You always loved Austin. You can write from here, teach. Whatever.” Once upon a time, they’d talked about getting old here. Together.

He felt Cal still, not even breathing for a second. Then the man sort of went boneless, pushing against him with a soft little sound. “I. Yeah. Yeah, Jacob. I could stay here with you.”

“Good.”

They sat there for a while, fingers touching, relearning. Then Caleb dipped his head and their lips met, tongues touching slow and gentle. The world didn’t turn on end, but there was some good love there. Something right. Jacob figured that was good enough for now.

He didn’t need anymore fireworks for a while.

“You want to get something more comfortable on? We could go get pizza, something that’s not re-warmed casserole.”

“Yeah. Yeah, something meaty and greasy, huh?” He patted Cal’s ass. “Can you find me some of those cut up jeans? I’ll meet you in the bedroom. We really need to clean out drawers so we can put our clothes up.”

“Yeah. We’ve got time, baby. We’ve got plenty of time.”

He nodded and watched Caleb leave and then started the laborious process of standing up. It took a little, but he managed, standing and stretching, Annie’s office just like home, still.

He slid her ring off his finger, looked at it a long minute, remembering the look on her face when he'd given it to her, the honest pleasure there. The love. He turned it, watching the sunlight catch deep in the garnets, making them glow. Then he opened the little wooden carved box on the desk, the silver and gold rings inside twisted and blackened, the amber cracked, the turquoise gone dark. Annie's ring fit in there too, somewhere quiet and safe, somewhere to be remembered.

Then Jacob stood and clomped over to the doorway, stopping at the softest brush of air to his cheek. "I never hated you, Momma. I did what you asked. Ben and Sam and Cal and me, we fixed it."

"I know, Junior. I saw."

Jacob held his breath a minute, holding the smoke and powder and dust smell of her inside him.

Then he went to go have supper with his lover.

Epilogue

She walked down to the Nuraghe, slow and careful, the little wooden box in her hands. The site was marked off with tape, the police still considered it a crime scene, but she had promised Sr. Caleb that she would come down. Return the ashes to their home.

The ladder led down and down into wet darkness and Elena couldn't see crawling down, taking her and her huge belly down there where her Carlo's blood stained the walls, where the sea was taking over the land.

She closed her eyes and prayed for peace and for the lost souls and for her baby, the sand and grass tickling her ankles as she held the box out and simply let it go. Let it fall.

Let the ashes crash into the water with a dull splash, her tears adding salt to salt.

Elena didn't watch long. Didn't stay to see if the box floated or sank. She simply turned and crawled over the tape, heading back for her car.

As she left the shadow of the Nuraghe, her baby moved inside her, the sensation like fluttering wings against her womb.

A frisson of fear caught her up, her fingers on her belly as the child rolled again and again.

Wings.

Elena thought, perhaps she felt the earth tremble beneath her feet, but she did not stay to know. Her car was close. Close enough to run for.

Just close enough.

End.