



**For Lily
Muri ga toureba douri hikkomu**

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Introduction

It's the end of the year already?

That was my first thought when I started putting together this e-book.

2003 was the Year of Landmarks That Whizzed Right On Past Me. My first hardcover novel, **Blade Dancer**, was released in August and sold out almost immediately. My first Christian adult fiction novel, **Going to the Chapel**, was published in the same month (as was my sixth romance, **The Kissing Blades**.) I sold and wrote more novels than I have in any other year since I turned pro. As I write this, I am nearly finished **Heat of the Moment**, which will be the ninth book I've written in 2003.

While all these important things were happening, I was, well, *writing*.

I'm not complaining. Any author who complains about having *too* much work should be smacked in the head a few times, then forced to re-read all the rejection letters he or she ever received as an aspiring writer. The latter would take me a good month.

You guys have stuck with me through it all, even when I up and disappeared for eight weeks back in September (I was writing three books at the same time.) I can't tell you how much your loyalty means to me. I can show a little well-deserved appreciation, though, so along with all the web site stories from 2003, I've included in this e-book two never-before-published short stories, **Defense Mechanism** and **The Widow**, and a sneak peek at **BioRescue** and **Into the Fire**, two of my new novels for 2004.

Although there will be some changes on my web site over the next year, I remain committed to providing free stories for my readers, so stop in when you can. I will always be writing for you.

Happy Holidays, and may 2004 be the Year of Excellent Things That Happen for all of us.

Sheila Kelly
December 2003

Back to Back

By S.L. Viehl

I woke up when they threw the body into my crawl.

He was alive, but roughed up – gashed, bleeding green blood, and his right arm was at a wrong angle to his shoulder – and despite that he landed on his knees and was back up in two seconds. He went for the door first and took a heavy jolt that sent him reeling back toward me.

“Don’t do that again,” I said, and sat up as he whipped around to face me. “Two stuns will set off an alarm, and then the guards will come in and kick your ass until you’re unconscious.”

He stepped out of the shadows, but they stuck to him. No, he was naturally dark – blue-skinned, a really pretty shade of sapphire. His eyes were completely white.

“Locega Jorenhai?” He had a low, deep voice, and used one of his six-fingered hands in a fluid motion. He was looking around, and his white eyeballs moved, implying he wasn’t blind.

“Sorry, no.” I plucked a piece of my bedding from the matted hair hanging in my eyes and palmed a chunk of stone in my other hand, just to be safe. Some of the new ones thought nothing of raping a female, and he was a lot bigger than me. “You speak stanTerran?”

His spooky eyes studied me, from my bare soles to the little dip in the middle of my nose. “Te-her-hran?”

“That’s right.” I spat on the floor of the crawl in emphasis. “Terran.”

He looked up at the crawl roof and muttered something under his breath. Something that sounded mean.

“I’m thrilled to meet you, too.” I scooted back down into my mound of dead grass and pointed to the one Gfrra had occupied until yesterday, when he’d taken one blow too many on the sands. I didn’t thinking I’d miss his snoring, but I did. “That pile is yours.”

Big Blue started pacing the length of the crawl, studying every crack in the stones. I curled up and tried to ignore him, but after an hour I sighed. He was heavy, and his footsteps pounded the stone. He’d be at it all night if I didn’t do something. I got up and got in his way.

He stopped and looked down at me. “Junia’arral tobereno?”

“Time for bed.” I pointed to his mound, then closed my eyes and tilted my head for a second. “Sleep.”

He made another quick gesture – sort of like the universal gesture for *screw you* – and went around me. I turned and smacked the base of his skull with my rock. He hit the dirt in stages – knees, hands, face – and didn’t move again.

I checked for a pulse – if I'd killed him, the guards would be pissed, so I'd have to make it look like he'd done himself – but he was still alive. Steady, heavy pulse, nice face, well-built body.

The guards especially loved breaking slaves like him, poor bastard.

I tucked my rock back in the little niche I'd dug out in the floor, dropped onto my grass bed and slept.

#

“Rise for the count. Rise!”

I dragged myself up in time to see centuron HekVar kick my new bedmate over onto his back. Big Blue continued the roll, got up on his feet and lunged at the Hsktskt.

I closed my eyes, but the sound of the zap he took still made me wince.

“Fool.” HekVar was not amused by such antics, and glared down at him as he writhed on the floor in agony. The wide scar on his brow wrinkled as he bent down and snapped Big Blue's arm back into its socket. “Gnat, why have you not instructed this one yet?”

I immediately assumed the position of response, dropping to my knees, bowing my head and holding my hands open and out.

“Forgive me, centuron. I don't speak his language.” I hoped it wouldn't get me zapped, not when I had warming to get through before breakfast.

“He likes to fight; he has been doing so since we removed him from the transport last night.” HekVar walked around Big Blue in a circle. “I will allow you translators.”

Great. Now I'd *have* to talk to him, and he was completely untrained. I changed position, clasping my hands behind my neck, and elevating my head an inch higher. It meant I needed direction.

“What do you not understand, Gnat?”

I'd never gotten a raw captive before. “Centuron, will I be held responsible for his infractions?”

He considered that. “Not for seven days.”

I only had a week to train him? It would be simpler to kill him. Touching my head and palms to the ground in the position of gratitude nearly made me choke, but I was a good slave, so that's what I did. “My thanks, centuron.”

We were counted and then hustled out of the crawl. My new bedmate didn't try to escape – the passages beneath the arena were narrow, featureless stone, so there was nowhere for him to go – until we hit the sands. Then he ran at an entry and discovered the inhibitor grids.

He landed at my feet again, totally dazed.

“Those are charged, too.” I held out my hand and helped him to his feet. He was big *and* heavy. HekVar had better get those translators for us soon, or this one wouldn't last the day. “Stay with me and do what I do.”

“Nua.” He slapped his chest and glared down at me. “Jalka Adan.”

“Jalka Adan?” I pointed at his chest as I repeated it, and he inclined his head. I nodded and tapped my own sternum. “Gnat.”

“Nyatuh?”

His palate was really too fluid for my lingo, but it was close enough. I copied his gesture and inclined my head. “Yes.” Then I saw the warmers coming out of the training hall and grabbed his arm. “This way.”

The warmers never wasted time but went right to work and attacked us with their padded weapons. We were supposed to dodge and evade. The Hsktskt considered it a good way to loosen tight slave muscle.

Jalka Adan didn't understand, and would have counter attacked the warmer who came at him, had I not rolled in front of him and shoved him back before whirling away from the padded pole end.

The warmer, an old slave named Yerv, snorted in disgust. “Why give you him?”

“Don't know.” I yelped as large blue hands grabbed me and Jalka tried to shove me behind him. “No, big guy, it's okay. Yerv, you rec his kind?”

“Jorenian,” Yerv told me as he went after a sluggish Tingalean. “They self term.”

Which meant they committed suicide. A lot of newcomers did, when they got to the crawls – not every species accepts enslavement, and

it was better than going crackbrain and killing everyone around them. As a couple of Emsalmalin warmers headed our way, I tugged at the Jorenian's arm. "Come on, move."

He glanced at me, then the spiny pair. "Fa klaree n'oal."

"You can Fah-clare-ree-no-all later. Come *on*." I yanked, and he finally followed me.

Warming continued for another ten minutes before a guard sounded the end chime and the warmers retreated back to the training hall. I prevented the Jorenian from getting whacked, but it wasn't easy – he kept digging his heels in and wanting to counter. By the end of the session, some of the guards had perked up and were watching us – not a good thing.

"Stupid Gnat," Yerv muttered as he passed by me. "He get you killed."

"Yeah, yeah." I hadn't had this much trouble since they'd stuck me with an Icthorii last cycle. The feeding horn sounded, and I looked up at the stern blue face. "Time to eat."

I showed him how to fall into line and shepherded him into the feeding hall. Since Gffra was gone, there was a space open at my table, and I pushed Jalka to kneel down beside me.

Distributor drones rolled up and down the aisles delivering food, which was allocated based on species and body weight. I showed the

Jorenian how to identify himself by using the DNA scanner, and watched the drone dole out a huge pile of assorted syn veg.

“Not a meat eater, huh?” I scanned and got my own small bowl of mixed protein stew.

Jalka gingerly sampled his fare and grimaced. “Gtak.”

“Yeah, this sucks, but it’s all you’ll get until after the bouts. Force it, you need the calories.” I made faces to go with the words, and he must have understood because he started eating.

We were only allotted ten minutes for feeding before the guards came to hustle us out to walk. We had to trot in pairs around a one km track for the next hour without stopping, but it was the one place we were allowed to speak to each other. We formed our usual information relay teams and I passed the word on about Gffra.

Kosper, the latest and smartest of the crawl bosses, fell in behind me and Jalka. “I see you scored raw meat,” he called to me. “Need any help?”

“Not yet.” I checked the guards to see if they were watching Jalka. They were. “Kos, you got anybody who speaks this guy’s lingo?”

“He’s Jorenian. I know some.”

“Good.” I let out a pent-up breath. “Tell him we’re getting translators, but until we do he needs to do what I do.” When Kos relayed that, Jalka almost turned around, then eyed me and said something back.

“He wants to know your name.”

I frowned. “Gnat”

Jalka shook his head and said something else to Kos.

The crawl boss frowned. “Something about kin – I think he wants your birth name.”

I didn’t remember the one I’d been given, but I’d heard one I liked once, from an old Terran merchant trader. He’d been beaten to death by the guards for trying to start a riot.

I looked at Jalka. “Mary.”

“Mah-ar-ee.” He made it sound pretty, then he said something else to Kos.

Kos chuckled. “Uh, he doesn’t want you to hit him in the head with the rock anymore.”

Fair enough. “Okay, but tell him that he has to sleep when I do.”

The scrubs horn sounded, and I guided my new bedmate to the cleanser corridor. He watched me pull off my tunic, then reluctantly did the same before following me under the sprayers. I rubbed my hands over my skin, sluicing off the sweat and dirt, then felt something pulpy touch my hip.

“Suck on someone else.” I shoved at the Edpriyin trying to attach itself to me.

“You taste like alloy.” The skinny blood eater gave me a lascivious grin. “But I like your new friend, Gnat. He looks hydrated.”

Jalka grabbed him by his emaciated throat. “F’tal et samballo neechal Mah-ar-ee.”

The Edpriyin’s four eyes about popped from their sockets before Kos and a couple others were able to pry him away from Jalka. Kos argued with my bedmate for a minute, then snorted and gestured to me. “Gnat, say *Ayral tebas tunirecas*.”

I repeated the words and watched Jalka’s expression change from enraged to only somewhat pissed off. I looked at the crawl boss. “What did that mean?”

“You shielded the blood eater. It’s the only way to keep him alive.” As guards entered the tube to see what the hold up was, Kos hustled us out to the dryers. “Gnat, you’d better ask HekVar to pair the Jorenian with me for the bouts today, or he’ll go after anyone who lands a blow on you.”

I was completely confused. “Why the hell would he do that?”

“Don’t know.” Kos waved a few tendrils. “I think he’s decided to adopt you or something.”

We donned fresh tunics before we were marched back to the arena. Heavy betting already filled the board displays, which meant we’d have a capacity crowd. As soon as I saw HekVar, I dropped and requested

attention. Since I hardly ever assumed the bitch position, he came over to me.

I thought of how to say it, and touched my forehead to the edge of his footgear. "Centuron, it is possible that the new Jorenian slave may serve longer if paired with Kos."

"Indeed." HekVar gestured for me to rise and follow him into an empty crawl. Once we were out of sight of the others, he hunkered down to my eye level. It was kind of a compliment. "Why do you ask this of me?"

I might get Jalka zapped to death for telling the truth, but the centuron was the only one who could switch pairings. "He tried to kill a blood eater in the cleansers for touching me. He doesn't seem to understand that I'm sword bait, same as him."

"Has he attempted to breed you?"

"No." It was odd that he hadn't made a demand for sex yet – that was the reason we were bedmates. "He might have some kind of taboo about Terrans."

"More likely he thinks you a child."

Why would that make a difference? "As you say, centuron."

"He can fight alone for now." HekVar tapped my cheek with one of his talons. "You will do well not to become attached to this one, Gnat."

I never got attached to any of them. "Yes, centuron."

There were three types of arena bouts – singles, in which one slave fought against another; pairs, which were two on two; and meleés, groups of slaves against guards, which were always bloodbaths. Most slaves fought singles in the beginning, for physical evaluation and to weed out the weaklings, and then were put in paired bouts after they proved themselves. Meleés should have been called executions, but the Hsktskt liked the slavers who paid to watch to think we always had a fighting chance.

We didn't, of course. No slave had ever killed a Hsktskt in the arena.

That afternoon I was paired with Paddala, a bad-tempered Trytinorn who hated bipeds like me. He had lousy peripheral vision, and nearly accidentally stomped on me as we entered the arena. Next to him, I really was gnat-sized.

I picked up the short sword one of the guards tossed down from the stands. Every slave was given the same size blade, as the Hsktskt thought that kept things even. I eyed the other blade thrown in for my partner. Considering his size, it was like throwing him a toothpick. “Are you going to use that?”

“Idiot Terran.” He reached down with his nasal appendage, grabbed me, and hoisted me onto his back. Then he picked up the weapon. “Keep quiet and watch my hindquarters.”

“Easy job, considering the size of your ass.” I watched the other team enter from the opposite side of the crawls. One was a snake-like Tingalean, the other a three-foot tall spider being. “Oh, no. Is that an Aksellan?”

“Yes.” Paddala trumpeted his displeasure. “What did you do, little one, spit on a guard?”

Both of our opponents were relatively new but effective fighters – probably because they each packed enough natural body poisons to wipe out the entire crowd. There was no way to spar with their kind, we had to knock them out or kill them immediately. That meant we had to be very fast and strong. The Trytinorn was strong, I was fast – but that was all we had going for us.

I heard alien laughter. Some slaver must have made a special request, thinking the match would be amusing.

The snake and spider were splitting up, each going to either side of the arena for a flanking attack. No more time to sit and cry over my bad luck. I grabbed Paddala’s shaggy neck fringe and leaned over. “Insult me, and do it loud.”

“What?” He didn’t get it.

“You blockheaded behemoth! Can’t you follow simple instructions?” I shouted, thumping the top of his skull with my fist. “All you’re good for is hauling waste!”

The low, hollow groan he gave wasn't from pain. "Shut up, pipsqueak, or I will use you to polish my tusks."

"Did I ask for your opinion, you stupid oversized piece of meat?" I watched our opponents, then added in a low tone, "Throw me so that I land between them, then pretend you've gone crazy."

"This had better work, or I won't have to pretend." Paddala's appendage curled around my waist, and he lifted me high over his skull.

"And don't try to help me," I murmured. I made a show of struggling and screamed, "You colossal idiot! Put me down!"

"Gladly, runt." He tossed me to the enemy.

He didn't throw me too hard, so I had to make it look like a bad landing. I hit the sand and rolled, dropping my sword as I shrieked and clutched at a non-existent injury to my arm. At the same time, Paddala started snorting and cursing and stomping around, waving his blade wildly.

The ploy diverted the Aksellan and the Tingalean, who turned to converge on me, the easiest kill. I continued the bogus act, howling and crawling across the sands away from Paddala. There were shouts from the stands and the crawls, so I must have looked pretty convincing.

That was the other thing I was good at – faking.

The guards didn't like us to rush the finale, but both the Tingalean and the Aksellan were naturally quick strikers, and they closed in fast. I measured the evaporating space between me and death, and when I

judged the time was right, I curled over and brought my knees up under me in a surrendering pose.

Not yet not yet not yet. I heard the Tingalean hiss, and I tensed.

Almost there. Almost.

Any slave who made a kill was given special privileges for three rotations after a bout, so both the snake and the spider jumped at me, eager to be the first to sink their blades and fangs into my hide. My death represented more food, warmth, and possibly an interval with a professional pleasure-giver.

Only I somersaulted out of the way.

The Aksellan tried to rear back, but the Tingalean followed his species' tendency to bite whatever moved on a killing strike. In self-defense, the spider bit back. They stabbed each other with their swords, then went down as their wounds and poisons went to work on each other.

I didn't like watching them die, but it had been them or me. I wondered when I would stop caring if it was me.

Paddala stomped over, picked me up and placed me on the curve of his brow. "Very clever, little one. I hope I'm never matched against you."

I covered my guilt by reaching down to pat his cheek. "If you are, I'll make it quick."

#

Making two kills entitled me to return to my crawl if I wanted, but I stayed. Jalka Adan would be fighting one-on-one, and I wanted to see what he was made of. I had a feeling HekVar wanted to pair us – some kind of Hsktskt inside joke, putting me with Big Blue, whose species probably hated Terrans.

The lizards had a weird sense of humor.

Jalka had watched enough bouts to enter the arena on guard, which was good – they matched him against a very tough Baduvarti male named Mengud with plated skin and half again Jalka's muscle mass. They started out circling each other, sizing up the assets and watching movement rhythms. My bedmate was paying close attention, not allowing the shouts from the stands to distract him.

Good, I thought, leaning against the view grid of the observation crawl. Keep those white eyeballs open, don't look away for a second.

Mengud didn't have much imagination – he just barreled his way through his bouts – but he was solid and it took a lot to hurt him. He came at Jalka first, head-on, testing the waters with sweeping cross-cut to the midsection. Jalka spun a second too late and caught the tip of the blade, then returned the favor with a lateral thrust. His eyes widened as he felt the jolt of the blade hitting and sliding off the Baduvarti's thick abdominal plating.

Numbskull. I grabbed the grid slats, wishing I could stab him myself.
Can't you see the thin spots on his chest?

By then they had crossed swords and dug their feet in, wrestling for control. Muscles bulged, sweat ran, and yet neither of them gave in. This bored the spectators, who started jeering, and a guard shouted out a warning that thankfully Mengud understood.

“Break!” he snarled into Jalka’s face before shoving him away. He followed through with a fist to the Jorenian’s jaw, but didn’t land the blow squarely and only made him stagger back. Mengud stooped and took a handful of sand, and flung it in his face before tackling him.

Shit. He wasn’t going to make it. “Come on,” I said under my breath, digging my fingers into the grid as I watched them roll, blades flashing.
“Come on, get up, *get up!*”

Mengud made a funny sound and went flying backward, and Jalka rose to his feet in a single fluid motion. Suddenly, he had claws, lots of long, sharp blue ones. Mengud saw them but he couldn’t get up, something was wrong with one of his legs. His sword had been knocked from his hand and was a good twenty yards away. He began crawling toward it, but from the expression on his flat face he knew the game was over.

The Jorenian looked up at the spectators, who were screaming for the kill. He shouted something in his lingo and flung down his blade.

“Jalka!” I tried to remember what he’d said during warm-ups. “Fa klaree n’oal! Now!”

He glanced my way, and for a second looked even more pissed-off. Then he went over to Mengud, and raised his claws. The Baduvarti dropped his head back, to make it easier. Jalka used a single strike to rip out his throat, and he was dead before he slumped over on the blood-soaked sand.

The spectators loved it.

As they cheered, the Jorenian he walked over to the grid and looked down at me. He showed me his hands, and the Baduvarti’s blood dripped from his claws. But it was his expression that made my chest hurt. He wasn’t angry or bitter or disgusted.

He was sad.

Jalka gestured back at Mengud’s body. “Thees sah-hucks, Mah-ar-ree.”

Yes, it did.

As the guards led him away and dragged Mengud off the sands, someone came up behind me. I heard the metallic clink of the uniform, but I didn’t bother to assume the position of response or even turn around.

Let them zap me.

“Gnat.” HekVar’s talons tugged my hand away from the grid. I was bleeding, too. “It is time to cleanse.”

#

I went through the sprayers and the dryers like a drone, then marched back with the other fighters to my crawl. Jalka never showed, so I assumed HekVar had decided to move him to another tier. It was for the best – Kos told me after scrubs that as I suspected, Jorenians weren't too fond of Terrans. And I had hated seeing that look on his blue face after the kill.

I used to look like, once. A long time ago.

I took the extra rations and rest intervals that were my privileges for winning, but I couldn't eat and I didn't want to sleep. When someone opened the door and threw something at me, I barely felt the sting.

"Mah-ar-ee?"

I opened my eyes and saw Jalka standing over me. He was wearing a wristcom and holding another one out to me. I took it, put it on my arm and activated it.

"The centuron with the scarred head gave these to me." He smiled a little. "We can speak and understand each other now."

"Yeah." And I had nothing to say. "Terrific."

"Your pardon, lady. I can see you are not well." He looked me over. "Were you injured in the arena?"

Only where it didn't show. "No, I'm fine." I sat up and curled an arm around my knees. "How about you?"

He touched his hip. "I received only a minor wound."

Which reminded me. "Do you want sex?"

He looked stunned, and checked his wristcom as if he thought it was malfunctioning. "What say you?"

"You know." I put my hand on his good hip and rubbed it. "That's why we're roomed together. Male to female."

He didn't say anything at first. Then he removed my hand. "I cannot share such intimacy with you."

"No problem." I wasn't insulted; plenty of slaves preferred their own kind or gender, and to tell the truth sex had always been kind of a chore. "I bet you have a lot of questions."

"I do." He crouched down by my pile of grass. "How long have you been here?"

That he wanted to know about me kind of threw me for a moment. "I don't know. We're not permitted to keep records or anything." I never thought about my first life and the raid that had ended it; surviving in my second life kept me busy. "I was taken when I was little." I frowned. "I'm not a child, you know. I think I'm almost fifteen."

"Indeed." He stared at the sword scars on my legs. There were a lot of them. "Why did they not leave you behind?"

The Hsktskt were pretty famous for leaving the children of the colonies they raided to starve in the ruins.

“One of the raiders kicked me out of the way, and I kicked back. He decided I would be good arena bait.” I let my lip curl on one side. “HekVar kept me off the sand and had me clean out crawls until I was old enough to fight.”

He looked at the ceiling for a moment. “What of your kin?”

“They were all killed when I was taken.” I sighed. “Look, we need to talk about what’s expected of you here. You have to follow the rules, or you won’t live very long.”

“I am not one to . . . follow rules.” He rose and held a six-fingered hand down to me. “We should go.”

I couldn’t stand up, I was laughing too hard. Finally I got myself under control. “Um, no. We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“If you haven’t noticed, Jorenian, this place is lousy with Hsktskt, and they don’t like their slaves trying to run away.” His expression didn’t change, and I rolled my eyes. “Okay, so you aren’t afraid of the lizards. Besides them, there are security monitors and alarm sensors all over the place. We stay here or we die.”

He hauled me to my feet. “We will die if we stay here.”

“I’ve done okay so far.” His gentle touch bothered me, and I pulled my hand from his. “You haven’t seen what happens when someone gets caught trying to escape.”

“They are punished?”

“They’re executed. Tied back to back and thrown to the guards in the arena.” I checked the door, but no one was listening in. “We could be punished just for talking about this, so drop it.”

“You’re afraid of death.” He folded his arms. “I am not.”

“Don’t let me keep you.” I gestured to the door. “Life is cheap around here, and there will be someone to replace you tomorrow.” There was always someone.

“You called to me in the arena.”

I shrugged. “I don’t like breaking in a new bedmate.”

“You do not wish to kill any more than I do.” He moved to tower over me, but like in the arena, he wasn’t angry. “I saw it in your eyes.”

“Shut up.” I pushed him away and started pacing. “I have six rotations to train you, Jorenian, then I’ll be punished for your mistakes. And if I have to take a zap or a beating because of you, I’ll strangle you in your sleep.”

“You will not.” He looked out at the darkening sky, then gave me that little smile again. “Very well. Tell me what to do, Mary.”

#

My bedmate listened to me that night, and in the days that followed did everything like I told him to do. Living as an arena slave wasn’t really all that difficult, but he didn’t like it. No one could tell from his expression or

attitude, which he kept under control, and he didn't talk much. I learned from Kos that when the tips of a Jorenian's claws extruded, it meant he was upset or angry.

Jalka went around flashing them most of the day.

Our privilege time came to an end, and we were both sent back to the arena. I was paired off as usual while Jalka continued to fight solo, but we both survived each day. Other than acting a little protective of me around other males during scrubs, he didn't show much emotion. I figured he was disconnecting from it, the way I had.

That came to a screeching halt when a new group of sword bait were brought in and turned out to be Terran-bashers.

There was always someone who had it in for me; after all, my kind had pushed the Allied League of Worlds into war with the Hsktskt. Even before that humans had been unpopular with other species – homeworld Terrans were rabid xenophobes who refused to let aliens breed with them or live on their planet. Although I'd never lived there, and could care less how pure someone's blood was, I'd still taken a lot of waste over the years on account of them. It was just another part of being an arena slave. Usually I ignored them and they got tired of baiting me.

Usually.

The bashers were a nasty bunch of T'Nilf bug warriors who had been captured while defending their colony against the Hsktskt. Seeing

that many huge red insectile beings come in together made everyone nervous – nobody likes a swarm.

They didn't cause any trouble, however, except for the fact that they zeroed in on me the first day.

Jalka and I had just gotten our rations when a half dozen of the buzzing T'Nilf came buzzing past, and a multi-jointed limb knocked my bowl of stew out of my hands and into the dirt.

“Cluumsygy Teeeraaan,” one of them said.

Jalka tensed, but I shook my head, picked up what was left in the bowl and went back to eating. The bugs moved on.

“That was deliberate,” he said, glaring at the T'Nilf as they took their places at another station. He looked around for guards before dumping a big portion of his syn veg into my bowl. “Take this.” Before I could jump on him for violating feeding rules, he added, “I have enough to share with you.”

“You need more food than me,” I snapped.

He turned the glare on me. “Do not make me feed it to you.”

The bashing continued. The bugs seemed to hover around me wherever I went. Jalka tried to watch out for them, but they were pretty cagey, and I ended up being “accidentally” tripped, shoved, and knocked aside on a daily basis. Once I fell during exercise and two of them stomped me by pretending to be unable to avoid me. When they couldn't make me

drop my rations, they started spitting some kind of vile-smelling green mucous in them as they passed by.

The guards would have zapped them if they'd seen them harassing me, but just my luck, every time it happened the centuron on duty seemed to be looking the other way. And Jalka only got angrier, every time it happened.

"You got problems," Kosper said to me on the track. I'd been shoved face-first into a warmer's pole earlier that morning, thanks to the bugs, and blood kept trickling from my swollen nose. Jalka had moved ahead, staying between me and the T'Nilf. "I've talked to them, and they pretty much want you dead."

"Good to know." I was more worried about Jalka; if he didn't get his temper under control he would get us both killed. "Any suggestions?"

"You need to take out the female; the others are male and subservient to her." He pointed to the largest T'Nilf, then hesitated. "I can bribe a slaver to make a request, get you on the sand with her."

Jalka overheard and dropped back. "It is too dangerous."

"I can't go on like this." I sized up the female. I'd never taken on one of her kind before, but I'd seen her fight. She was over-confident and her blade work was sloppy. But I didn't have any barter, and the crawl boss didn't intervene for free. "Can't afford a bribe, though, Kos."

My bedmate shook his head. "We will find another way."

“Paddala’s already paid for the guard,” Kos said, surprising me.
“Said to tell you it’s for the last bout.”

“Mary.” Jalka sounded grim. “No.”

I’d have to revise my bad opinion of Trytinorns. “Set it up, Kos.”

“You are not fighting that female,” Jalka insisted.

The crawl boss chuckled. “You got spine, Gnat. You got spine.” He nodded to Jalka and moved on.

“I need to go over some moves with you when we get back,” I said absently, already making plans in my head. “Can you teach me that rolling block you –”

A hand dropped on my shoulder, hard enough to make me jump.
“Why do you not listen to me?” Jalka demanded. “You cannot challenge her. She will divert your path.”

He really was upset. I felt a little warm inside, knowing that. “It’s the only way. If I don’t do something, they’ll kill me anyway.”

“I will speak with them.”

“Kos already tried, and he’s the crawl boss. Why would they listen to you?” I saw a guard approaching and lowered my voice. “Centuron. Drop it.”

When the guard pointed at us, we dropped into position. Only then did he approach and say, “HekVar orders you to report to quarters.”

I made the affirmative gesture and got up to leave the track. A hard claw shoved me forward, then something heavy hit my leg. I heard something distant snap. Pain shot up through my whole body. Hard hands grabbed at me, but my tunic ripped and I bounced against the centuron's chest plate before collapsing at his feet.

The pain was so bad that I barely saw the prod stick coming down to zap me. Then everything melted into a white-hot blur, and I burned away into darkness.

#

I woke up on the sands, with my right leg in a slate-and rope splint, which was bad – they only did that for broken bones. My arms were bound at the elbow to something behind me, which was worse. Then I felt the coils of rope around my waist, and the heat and muscle pressed against me, and knew it was the end.

Jalka and I were tied together, back to back.

I got my feet under me and tugged on the ropes. “What happened?”

Jalka groaned, but started lifting when I did. “I struck the guard who harmed you.”

My eyes popped open. The stands were filled with Hsktskt, all sitting quiet and watchful. There were no bets on the boards, and no slavers around, which meant this was official. “Did you kill him?”

“Yes.”

I closed my eyes briefly. They would take their time with us, then.

HekVar strode out on the sands, and stopped before me. Hsktskt don't show much emotion, but from the way his tongue flickered and his scar pulsed it was obvious he was outraged. He didn't hit me, though.

“You should have trained this one better, Gnat.”

“Yes, centuron.” I met his oversized yellow eyes, which were half-closed. I don't know why I said what I did next. “I'm going to miss you.”

He took hold of my tunic and jerked me close, then pressed something into my hand. “Die quickly.” He left the arena.

The small plas pouch was warm and filled with some kind of liquid, and had a pressure dart on one side, but I already knew what it was. Hsktskt took poison to avoid capture, but I'd never heard of them giving a suicide sac to a slave. Especially one who had gotten one of their own killed.

As compliments went, it was pretty major.

The T'Nilf female and one of her males were thrown out onto the sand, also tied back-to-back at the mid-limb joints. But instead of sending a detachment of guards in to hack us to bits, HekVar threw four short daggers out onto the sand.

Maybe he thought I wouldn't have the nerve to use the poison.

Jalka folded one of his hands over mine. "Pull up your legs. I will get the weapons."

I looked at the bugs, who were struggling to find their balance and get to the daggers. They had longer forelimbs, and neither of them had to deal with a broken leg. I tightened my fingers over the pouch. I could inject both of us, and we'd be dead in seconds. It would be painless.

And the hell of my second life would be over.

Over the rushing sound in my ears, I heard Jalka say, "Mary." His fingers entwined with mine. "Wherever the path takes us, I am with you."

I'd never had anyone care about me. I was a slave, sword bait, worthless now that I couldn't fight. I hadn't done this Jorenian any favors. Yet Jalka had protected me, watched over me. He'd even killed a Hsktskt for me.

Die quickly.

No. I wouldn't. Being with him was worth fighting for a few more minutes of life.

I lifted my legs, groaning as the ends of my broken bone shifted. Jalka pulled me over onto his back and went for the blades, and got two before the T'Nilf reached them. He backed away, still crouched over to keep me off the sand. All I could see were the silent Hsktskt watching us, waiting for blood to spill.

Jalka fighting while balancing me on his back gave the bugs a big advantage, but he didn't let them take it. Rather than continue to retreat, he attacked, and I felt him slashing at the female with both blades. I tried to keep my weight centered and coiled up my good leg, ready to kick at the bugs if they tried to attack from behind. I couldn't see exactly what Jalka was doing but I heard alloy clashing and felt his muscles shifting under my back. He should have been coiled like a neurotic Tingalean but his movements were graceful and fluid, almost like he was floating around the arena.

He took a hit, then a deep growl rumbled out of his chest and he lunged, jerking the ropes binding us hard. She must have countered his move because he dropped and rolled, ending up facedown in the sand with me on top, and the T'Nilf only a few feet away.

"Are you hurt?" I asked him.

"No." He spat out some sand. "Is she?"

I saw dark blood dribbling from the female's side. "Nice deep gash on the left torso. She's bleeding a lot."

He struggled to his feet. "I must do the same to the male."

The problem with that was, the female guarded the male just as fiercely as Jalka protected me. He went after her three times, but couldn't get past her guard. I realized he had lied to me when I saw green blood on the sands.

I had to do something, but all I had was the poison. I could do myself, but I couldn't bring myself to kill him. Then I clutched the little sac. "When she charges, turn around and let her at me."

"You wish to embrace the stars?" he sounded breathless.,

"I want to give her a little present." I pressed my hand against his. "Just trust me."

The female charged at us, and at the last possible second Jalka jerked around, facing me toward her. I deflected her sword thrust with a kick and pressed the sac against the open wound at her side. She staggered away, then swayed and buzzed.

"Back around them," I said to Jalka. "Get me to face the male."

He did as I asked. The male was distracted by the female's shuddering and was fooled by my feint. I emptied the rest of the sac into the side of his throat, then kicked him away.

They both went down, laboring for breath, then fell over and went into convulsions. It only lasted a minute, then they didn't move again.

"What did you do?"

"Poison." I let the empty sac fall from my fingers. The bugs would be the last beings I ever harmed, and I felt relieved, knowing that. I was tired of killing. My eyes started watering, and a strange, hitching sound came up out of my throat. "The guards will come in and do us now. I'm sorry, I know I should have used it on us."

Jalka said something, but it was lost in the explosion. We both were thrown into a wall, and the Hsktskt in the stands tumbled down around us. Blood streaked down my face, and I was pretty sure my other leg was now broken.

“I am . . . glad . . . you did . . . not.” He inched around to put me between the wall and him. “Don’t cry . . . Mary.” He went still.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but they didn’t want to cooperate. The last thing I saw were strange launches, flying over the open roof of the arena.

#

I was kind of in and out of it for a while after that. I was pretty banged up, and whoever had me let me sleep. I dreamed of the arena, and Jalka, only we prevailed together over every opponent we faced.

They were good dreams.

When I woke up, I still felt like I was asleep. They had put me in the cleanest place I’d ever seen in my life – some kind of medical facility, with tons of shiny equipment and Jorenian slaves dressed in brand new tunics. Not one of them wore yellow, so I wasn’t exactly sure they were slaves.

Someone had taken away my slave tunic, and dressed me in a plain white garment. It was softer than anything I’d ever touched. They’d also put two strange white things over my legs, from the ankles to above the

knees. They were hard and smooth, like some kind of body armor, but lightweight and strong – I couldn't bend my knees at all.

Maybe they were trying to hobble me.

The slaves called the female who took care of me Healer Anea. She looked a little like Jalka, but had darker blue skin, a purple streak in her black hair and was a bit shorter. She had the same white eyes, though, and every time she looked at me, I thought about him.

When Anea discovered I was awake, she brought me food and helped me eat. The food was clean and fresh and tasted wonderful. She made me put on a funny necklace that turned out to be translator, then through it said that I had to remain quiet and rest.

I had no problem doing that.

I waited for her to do something worse, but all she did over the next three days was bring me more food and keep me clean. She didn't want me to assume any position but to stay flat on my back.

None of her rules made sense, either. She'd say stuff like "Child, you must not sleep on the deck, you will aggravate your injuries" and "Do not hide food in your linens, little one, you may have as much as you like, whenever you like." She never zapped me or even raised her voice, except once when she helped me out of the thing she made me sleep on so I could take my first scrub. Then she looked at my body and got angry.

“Sorry.” I cringed, covering myself. Maybe they had some kind of taboo against nudity.

She called one of the females she called nurses over to help me and stomped out of the cleansing cubicle.

“Did I offend her?” I asked the nurse, but she insisted I’d done nothing.

Anea and her females kept better watch over me than the Hsktskt centurons, but they wouldn’t tell me anything about what had happened or where Jalka was. Every time I asked, they changed the subject or made an excuse of work and moved away from me.

I got tired of not knowing.

As soon as I felt strong enough, I slipped out of the soft thing they made me sleep on and snuck out of the medical place. It was worth getting zapped, just to see how pretty and clean the place was. I wandered down a long, circular corridor, wondering if there would be another arena waiting around the next corner. I didn’t care if I had to fight again, but I needed to know if Jalka was all right. Surely someone would tell me.

I heard two men speaking just ahead of me, and pressed myself against a wall panel.

“—arena slave,” a deep, stern voice said. “No education, no training whatsoever. Anea says the child has had most of her bones broken, and she is covered in scars.”

“She knew enough to stay alive in that place,” I heard Jalka say. “She earned her scars.”

His voice made me slump against the wall. He had survived, that was all I cared about. They could do whatever they wanted to me now.

A few seconds later Jalka crouched down in front of me. “Mary, what are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in medical, resting.”

“They won’t let me sleep on the floor.” I tried to smile, but my eyes were watering and I couldn’t see right. “I didn’t know you were alive. I’m glad you made it.”

“Your pardon. I should have come to you sooner.” He put one arm under my shoulders and the other under the strange things on my legs, then lifted me into his arms. To the other male, he said, “Inform my ClanMother that Mary will be in my quarters.”

The older man didn’t like that. “Anea will not be pleased.”

“She may come to examine her there.”

Jalka carried me down the corridor and into a funny kind of box with a sliding door. It moved up, then opened into another corridor.

“Where are we?” I asked as he carried me past some door panels.

“This is the *RainWing*, HouseClan Adan’s flag ship.” He stopped at one and punched the access panel.

A ship? “How did we get here? Who owns us?”

“My HouseClan came to retrieve me.” He smiled as the door opened and he carried me in. “No one owns you and I any more, Mary. We’re free.”

I didn’t believe him, until I saw the rooms he’d been given. One was big enough to sleep twenty slaves, and there were other rooms attached to that. He set me down on another padded thing, and put a pillow under my head and legs.

I watched him prepare two servers at an odd-looking food station. “Why did you bring me with you?”

“Why did you not choose an easy death in the arena?” he countered as he came over and gave me one of the servers. It was filled with a colored liquid that smelled sweet.

It was hard to tell the truth, but I figured I owed him that much. “I didn’t want to leave you.”

He smiled at me. “Nor I you.”

I recalled what he’d said to me in the arena. *Wherever the path takes us, I am with you.* He’d really meant that.

A little confused, I sipped the drink. The liquid was warm and so sweet it made my teeth ache – and I wanted to chug it down like water. “I don’t understand all this.”

“In time, you will.” He took my server and put it aside, then folded my hands in his. “Will you share your journey with me and my kin?”

I thought about it. “Can I sleep on the floor?”

“If that is your wish, yes.”

There were things I used to wish for, but I’d forgotten about them. Maybe now it would be all right to remember. “Okay.”

*For Mary, aka BarGnat, with love –
Keep fighting.
S.L. Viehl, December 2002*

Arcanum

By S.L. Viehl

I figured I got stuck with Ulundu IV mission because I was the only Terran on Staros Station, a non-academic, or someone wanted me dead. Maybe all of the above. The department chair of Artifact Recovery relayed the assignment the day before my team was scheduled to leave, probably thinking I'd be too stupid or too busy packing to give him grief about it.

He thought wrong.

“Chief Delancy!” The chief’s personal assistant, Tegel, a little Marpas with great big eyes, tried to get in my way. “You can’t go in there – Dr. Varoopik is in an important meeting – ”

“Meeting’s over.” I hit the access panel before Tegel could lock me out and strode in.

Varoopik looked up, sighed, then waved one of his branches at his three cronies. Like my boss, they were all elderly, root-bound Oklonda, and according to my students they got together every day to drink their weird saptea and swap stories about the good old days, before bipeds arrived and the plant forms ran everything on Staros. “Excuse me, gentlemen. It seems one of my investigators requires some attention.”

“What I require” –I parked myself in front of his desk– “is a transfer off this flying dirt box. *Today.*”

As his pals enabled their glidepots and rustled out of the office, my boss assembled his frills into an arrangement reflecting strained patience. “Really, Keasa, such dramatics. Calm down and take a seat.”

“I don’t want to calm down, and if I take a seat, you’ll be wearing it.” That dented his frills, and I threw out my arms. “Come on, Var, what the hell did I do to rate the City of the Dead? Forget to file a requisition properly? Step on somebody’s roots?”

“You’re the best field supervisor I have on staff right now.” When my expression didn’t change, he added, “And the most capable. And the most. . . mobile.”

“Uh-huh.” I rolled my hand, waiting for the rest of it.

His face sheath wrinkled. “Central sent down orders and every other investigator I asked threatened to quit before they’d take the assignment.”

“Gee, I wonder why. After all, Ulundu IV is just a big dead cold hunk of rock a jillion miles away from any other occupied world, and the only colonists who ever lived there vanished without a trace before recorded time, and half the salvagers, scientists and rock hounds who have gone into the ruins where they lived have also mysteriously disappeared, along with their crew, their equipment, and their ships. We won’t even talk about what happened to the ones who made it back.” I looked at the upper deck and took a steadying breath before I met Var’s eye stalks again. “It’s

not that, is it? I am *not* going to commit suicide just because Central has a stamen up their seedpods about some unrecovered hardware somebody left on that death trap.”

“It’s not just that.” He took out a datapad and handed it to me. “They’ve lost a passenger transport out there.”

I read the stats on the missing vessel. Four hundred transfers and their immediate families had been shipping out to some newly-established agri-colony when they experienced engine failure and sent a distress relay. Last known position, Ulundu IV. I dropped the pad on his desk. “I don’t do search and rescue. I teach students how to dig up old stuff without breaking it. Get someone else.”

“With all the military forces tied up in the war with the Hsktskt, Central was ordered to send in an investigative team,” Var said. “Resource management determined that our group was the next best alternative.”

“Why? We’re archeologists, we don’t handle living things!” I snapped.

“You don’t have to go near the ruins,” he assured me. “All you have to do is set down a few hundred clicks away and send in drones. Get some vid for the official report. That’s all.”

“Right. And how am I going to fit a team and survey drones and the remote equipment on a dinky little dig ship? And what about survivors? What, if I find them, I just strap them to the hull in envirosuits?”

“We’ve taken care of that.” He pressed a button on his console. “Tegel, would you signal Captain Andar for me?” To me, he said, “We’ve arranged commercial transport for you and your team.”

Another warning flare went off inside my skull – Staros barely had enough funding to keep the staff from collective malnutrition. “That’s nice – do I get hazard pay out of this, too?”

Before he could answer, Tegel’s voice came over the console. “Andar is standing by, Doctor.”

“Excellent, thank you.” My boss punched up the signal and transferred it to the wall screen. The image that coalesced was a little dark and indistinct, and the figure in the middle of it very fuzzy. “Captain, thank you for responding.”

“Are they ready to leave?” The Captain sounded about as happy as I felt, but it might have been the translator – it made his voice come across hissy.

“Not quite yet,” Var said. “My team leader, Chief Investigator Delancy, has some concerns about the Ulundu IV mission. I thought you and she could meet and discuss the details.”

“I am busy. Later, perhaps.” The vague image vanished.

That time I definitely heard stressed consonants. I eyed Varoopik.
“*What*, exactly, is Captain Andar?”

My boss tried not to shift his layers, but Oklonda were lousy at pretense. “He is a hybrid.”

“A hybrid what?”

“I am not sure.” Dignity straightened Var’s stalks. “He has scales.”

Scales meant he was cold-blooded, and likely reptilian. Reptiles didn’t hire out to ferry warm-bloods around unless it was to a slaver depot.
“Where’s his ship?”

“The *Silverfire* is in portdock, but you can’t –”

I didn’t hear the rest as I stomped out of his office.

#

The ship was big, scarred, and ugly. She looked like she had been a speedy freighter at one time, but someone had been busy retrofitting her with some heavy-duty additions, and they hadn’t bothered to make it look tidy. Captain Andar had an extensive weapons array with what appeared to be enough firepower to reduce Staros into a floating cloud of cosmic dust. He had also installed layers of buffered shields, at least three or four, and the configuration of his stardrive core allowed for emergency venting, ejection, and in-space replacement.

The *SilverFire* wasn’t a transport. It was a freaking battle cruiser.

“Halt.” A drone met me at the dock ramp. “You are not authorized to board.”

I popped its panel, yanked out its logic chip and watched it trundle off to talk to a support strut. “I’ll knock.”

I wasn’t armed, so it was pretty stupid going on board, but I had to see this deal for myself. My parents had been slaves for a few years, until some really pissed-off Jorenians had invaded and destroyed the Hsktskt depot where they were slated to be sold. Fortunate for me, as Mom had been hiding her pregnancy with me at the time and Hsktskt didn’t like kids. If there was one thing they’d taught me, it was how a slaver smelled.

The interior of the ship was no trappings, all function. Lots of gray and black alloy and efficient-looking consoles. The air felt warm but smelled sterile, like the inside of a newly-erected seedling shelter on a hot day back on Oklon. Aside from some minor engine hum below my feet, the place was quieter than an empty house of worship.

Metal started sliding somewhere behind me, and I glanced back in time to see the door at the end of the entry corridor close and a red security light flash on the control panel. The corridor lights dimmed, then winked out. I braced myself back against one wall, expecting some drone to pop out and start shooting at me.

“Identify yourself.” It sounded like a drone.

“I’m C.I. Delancy from Artifact Recovery. Enable the emitters and call your boss down here, will you?”

A big shadowy form moved in on me. “Are you afraid of the dark?” Now it didn’t sound like a drone. It sounded male and mean.

“Oh, yeah.” I folded my arms. “I’m terrified.”

The lights came back on, and I shrieked with terror. A great big fanged greenish-brown four-armed snake man holding some kind of alien cross bow leveled at my throat stood in front of me. I nearly did something really stupid before I clamped down on my emotions and took a long, deep breath.

He didn’t look too happy, either. The spotted skin on the sides of his bald scaly head was erect, and curved white fangs glittered from his top and bottom jaws. Body-wise he looked like a Terran from the ribs up, except for all the scales and the extra pair of arms between his shoulders and hips. Below the waist he was all snake, though – no legs, just a wide, long, powerful-looking tail lined with heavily-muscled segments that he contracted rhythmically to move along the deck.

“Are you afraid now?” he asked me.

“No, I always scream like that when I’m happy.” I glanced down at the short, spiky bolt he had ready to shoot through my neck and concentrated on not having hysterics. “Could you point that somewhere else, please?”

Slowly he lowered the weapon until it was aimed at my heart. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see your ship and talk to you. I’m Delancy. You’re Andar, right?” He nodded once, and I glanced around. “What’s a nice merc like you doing in a place like this?”

“Ex-mercenary.” He inspected me the way he would a tasty rare meat kabob. Which is probably what I looked like to him, minus the stick. “This team of yours – are they all Terran as well?”

“Just me.” I smiled. “Lucky you.”

“A matter of opinion, I think.” The stretched hood around his head slowly subsided, but the fangs stayed in place. He used one of his very humanoid-looking hands to gesture down the corridor. “Come this way.”

The captain escorted me to a big room that looked like some sort of command center, what with all the consoles and monitors showing various parts of the ship. Once inside, he stowed the crossbow and sent a signal to the helm saying he’d be tied up for a few minutes. He even lowered his hostility enough to offer me a beverage before slithering behind his desk and curling into a spiral-shaped piece of furniture built to accommodate the lower half of his body.

All of this was truly odd, but the real question mark was him – I had already guessed he was part Tingalean (the hood, scale color and double set of fangs were a dead giveaway) but his head was not the usual reptilian

triangular shape, and from the mid-torso up he really did look pretty Terran. Since reptilian species were a pain about who they bred with, and my kind stayed at the very bottom of their desirable mates list, his existence just didn't make sense.

"My nest mother was taken by the Garnotans," he told me, accurately reading my mind. "I believe my sire was Farradona."

So he was slave-born. That explained a lot, including the extra arms and the charming personality. Farradon's extreme surface conditions and heavy gravity had changed the humans who had settled there a couple hundred years ago, and some said the weird magnetic fields also made them more aggressive. Whatever the cause, their hostility toward aliens was even more pronounced than it had been on the Terran homeworld. If someone had force bred his mother to a Farradona male, it had been as some kind of joke or punishment.

And no one deserved that. "Sorry."

"They're long dead." He moved his shoulders in a very human shrug. "What do you want to know?"

"Why you took this job, for starters." I nodded toward a star chart on one monitor beside his console. "Ulundu IV is the most dangerous planet in this quadrant, possibly the galaxy. You know everyone who's gone there has either gone mad or disappeared."

He made a negligent gesture. “If you’re afraid, chief investigator, refuse the assignment.”

“I can’t, but I have no intentions of going within ten miles of the City of the Dead,” I told him. “How about you?”

“I provide transport, not salvage.”

“But you must have heard the rumors about it being one of the Founding Colonies.” I leaned forward. “Maybe you’re thinking of doing a little treasure hunting of your own, huh? Use us to hunt down whatever they left laying around or get us to dig it up, and then . . .” I lifted my brows, willing him to finish the thought.

He looked bored. “Kill you all and abandon your bodies there?”

Boy, he’d picked that up quicker than I liked. “You’re a merc. Wasn’t that generally the job description?”

“Ex-mercenary.” His fangs retracted a little. “It is a tempting prospect, but unfortunately” – he pulled open his tunic, and displayed the top of a white dermal brand shaped like a seven-headed snake sprawling over the center of his scaly chest – “I have made my vows to Tawwa.”

Tawwa was the ruling warrior deity of the Tingalean people, and to bear the mark meant sticking to the vows made within the Serpentosque on his mother’s homeworld – where they also branded the true believers who pledged themselves to protect all life. From what little I knew of the

culture, it was not something they did lightly. However, he was part Farradona, and anyone could burn a pretty picture onto their hide.

“You do not wish to take this assignment, do you?”

“No, but it’s not like I have a choice.” Actually, I knew I didn’t. I wasn’t Oklonda, I didn’t have tenure or a bunch of letters after my name like the rest of the C.I.s on staff. No question about it – if I said refused, Varoopik would pull my slot and send me packing.

He was watching me pretty close. “There is always a choice, Chief Delancy.”

“Thanks for the advice.” I checked my wristcom. “I’ll send my equipment over. My team and I will be assembled at the dock in twelve hours.”

He balanced on the lower part of his tail as he rose, adding another foot to his height. That let him loom over me, probably for effect. “Then I will see you in twelve hours.” Before I reached the door panel, he added, “Replace the logic chip in my guard drone on your way out, if you would.”

#

I prepped my gear and checked on the team of techs and grad students going with me, and then I spent a few hours pacing the floor in my private quarters. Even if we stayed well away from the City of the Dead, I was still courting death or madness, so I decided to contact my parents just before it was time to leave.

Dad answered the relay with a big grin. “Keasa! What a lovely surprise.” He was in the kitchen area cooking something, as usual. “How are you, baby?”

“Fine.” I tried to match his tone. “Mom around?”

“I haven’t seen her all day.” My father chuckled at the family inside joke, then added, “I think she’s seeding something in the hydroponics lab. Do you want me to get her?”

“I’ll catch her next relay.” Shit, I had really wanted to talk to her – she’d hung out with a few Tings in BioTech. On the other hand, she’d want to know why I was so interested in snakes all of a sudden. “How’s the Master of Disaster?”

“Your brother blew up the shed in the back yard last month, trying to stabilize that damned illegal fertilizer. Something about encapsulating it into indigestible pellets.” My father, who was an older male version of me in looks, rolled his dark eyes. “Honestly, I don’t know where he gets these ideas.”

“From Mom.” I wanted to laugh, but the knot in my chest made it tough. “Dad, I’m going on a remote assignment, and I just wanted to touch base before I left. I’ll probably be out of relay range for a few weeks.”

“Wonderful!” My father loved to hear about my work. “What are you hunting for this time? Is it a pre-League settlement?”

Ulundu IV was pre-everything. “Yeah. I don’t want to jinx things so I’ll fill you in when I get back, okay?”

Dad frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“Bad relay channel.” I forced a smile. “Hug Mom for me when she shows up, and tell the monster to give the chem set a rest. Love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.”

I terminated the signal and banged my head against the viddisplay. I should have told him, but he’d only worry. Mom would likely go ballistic if she found out I was being transported by a merc, and knowing her, she wouldn’t hesitate to jump in a ship and come after us.

I thought about my mother meeting Andar, and snickered. And he thought *he* was scary.

My door panel chimed, and I answered it to find two Qobarec students waiting outside, cases in their paws.

“Chief Delancy!” Like all their kind, they were twins and spoke in high-pitched tandem. “Have you seen the ship? The Captain’s a Tingalean ‘breed, and Rssu thinks he’s a mercenary.”

“*Ex*mercenary,” I muttered under my breath as I grabbed my cases. “Come on, boys, let’s get this show into space.”

The dock drone (which I had repaired when I'd left the day before) moved a few feet away as I approached the ramp. "Present identification," it said, its voice processor sounding a little squeaky.

"Relax, bolthead." I presented my ID chip and performed a quick headcount. Varoopik had assigned seven non-botanical life forms to my team – playing favorites, naturally – but they were a good mix of specialists with lots of experience. The female Omorr who was supervising the haulers loading the survey drones bounced over to report like a one-legged soldier.

"Berryldav of Hudeca, fourth-year cybertechnician," she introduced herself with a formal gesture of greeting. The beard of white gildrells around her mouth were undulating with dignified serenity. "It's a pleasure to serve with you, Chief Delancy."

I didn't make the mistake of asking her to call me Keasa, she would have considered the informality an insult. "Nice to meet you, Hudeca." Had she been in charge I would have tacked on a Lady to that, but it was the proper address for an Omorr subordinate. "Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes, Chief." She glanced up at the ship. "Captain Andar has requested we forego any pre-launch meetings and prepare for jaunt immediately."

“In a hurry, is he?” I didn’t like that, but the sooner we got out of here, the sooner we could come back. “All right, Hudeca, let’s get everyone inside and strapped in.”

#

The jaunt to Ulundu IV took a solid week, during which I went over standard surface procedures and had my team members check and recheck their equipment. Captain Andar and his crew stayed busy and away from us, which I liked – they may have all been ex-mercs, but their battle-scarred faces and tough attitudes still rattled me.

A day out from Ulundu IV, I gave a mini-lecture to the team on what we did know about the City of the Dead, mostly theory based on fragments from damaged ships’ databases and the ramblings of the brain-wipes who had actually survived a tour.

“This is the most complete survey map we have of the city, from an orbital survey performed two revolutions ago.” I put the photo scan up on a wall screen in the conference room Andar had allocated to us for our use. Digital enhancement didn’t improve the scan quality, which showed a maze of streets and stone structures forming patterns with no straight lines or sharp angles. “Based on what has been brought back, we know that the city was built from native cynagranite, which the degradation of the atmosphere has for the most part preserved.” I moved to the next image, which had been taken just inside the city’s outer walls. “A few

survivors claim that the city still retains artifacts from the former inhabitants, but nothing except a few pebbles has been recovered so far. The popular theory is that the inhabitants evacuated or abandoned the city very swiftly, possibly overnight, due to natural disaster.”

I clicked up the next image, which I knew would shock them. From the gasps, it did the job.

“This is a special long-term psychiatric ward on Oklon, where the survivors of the City of the Dead are still being treated for mind injuries received while on planet. Take a good look at them, ladies and gentlemen, because if you wander off, this will probably be you.”

“I thought the madness was just a myth,” someone muttered.

“That one clutching the stuffed toy and crying is Dr. Josan Haloo.” I waited for them to study the slack-mouthed, wet-faced Haloo, who prior to his visit to Ulundu IV had been one of the most brilliant scientists in the quadrant. “Physicians have tried every technique and treatment known to medical science to help these people, but to date, not one single survivor has recovered their sanity.”

Hudeca raised one of her three arms, and I nodded to her. “Chief Delancy, do they know what caused the brain damage?”

“No.” I left the image up and walked in front of it. “And I want you to remember something – these are the people who made it out alive. If the City of the Dead can do this to someone as intelligent and capable as

Haloo, think what it will do to your brain. Anyone who violates boundaries while we're on planet will be subjected to the harshest discipline I can come up with – and that will only be the beginning of your troubles. So don't even think about it.”

The team members exchanged a few glances but no one looked mulish. As I'd anticipated, seeing the wreck that had been Josan Haloo had done more to convince them that I ever could.

“Chief Delancy.” A drone trundled into the room. “Captain Andar requests your presence in command.”

“Hudeca, will you finish the presentation?” I handed over my data to her and followed the drone out into the corridor. “What does he want?”

“Unknown.” The drone led me to the room where Andar spent most of his time, and signaled over the com panel, “Chief Delancy to see you, Captain.”

I went in when the door opened, then stopped just inside. The Tingalean had a console full of pulse weapons and was checking the power cells on one. Not a sight I exactly wanted to see. “What's this? You get bored flying the ship?”

“We'll be landing in a few hours.” He nodded toward the weapons. “Distribute these among your team and make sure they know how to handle them. If they need practice, they can use one of the simulators on deck four.”

“No.”

He looked up, and the vertical black slits in his eyes contracted.

“This is not a request.”

“I don’t care what it is,” I told him. “You’re not passing these out to my kids.”

“They are of majority age.” He placed the weapon down carefully. “I thought you were concerned about their safety while on the surface.”

“They’re young, and they’re nervous. Giving them guns will only spook them more; they’ll end up shooting at each other in the middle of the night.” I studied his face. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“There is talk about this world.” He came around the desk and went to the viewer to look out at the stars. “I can’t spare any crew to accompany us to the surface, and I alone can’t safeguard your team properly.”

“You were hired to drive, not baby-sit.” I walked over to him. Close up, he looked a little less intimidating. “What kind of talk?”

“When people disappear, slavers are usually involved. This could be a trap.” He turned toward me, and his eye slits dilated. “I am pledged to protect life.”

Maybe he was everything he said he was. “Look, if you want to hand out some stunners, that’s fine, but I don’t want anyone packing anything lethal.”

“What about you?”

I thought about letting him in on my particular specialty, but Mom said it was better not to spring things on reptilian beings all at once – they were fairly twitchy, too. Besides, it was really none of his business. “I’ve got my own weapons, thanks.”

#

Ulundu IV had once been a very fertile, happy little planet, the fourth in a eleven-planet system around a fairly intense red star. From the soil samples brought back by a few survey drones (all damaged beyond repair) we knew that planet was a couple of billion years old, and that an ancient asteroid collision probably caused the original change in orbit, which was in turn the reason for the atmosphere and sea water burn-off.

In simple terms, something big had slammed into the planet, knocked it a little closer to the sun, and everything went up in flames and steam. It would have still been too hot for us to land on, had another big rock not hit it a few millennia later and knocked it back to its original orbit path.

It didn’t look like much from orbit – a golden sphere with vague surface striata left behind when the oceans evaporated – but there was a tiny dark oval of indeterminate color in the southern hemisphere, where the only signs of any preexisting civilization – aka the City of the Dead –

had been found. The striata and the location of the city made it look like a big, ugly mole on an old lady's chin.

Andar insisted on piloting the launch to the surface, which freed me to run a last minute gear check and deliver the final pep talk.

"When we get to the surface, I want everyone to pair off and stick together." I read off their work assignments. "While you're setting up camp, Hudeca and I will set up the drone launchers. I want everything by the book on this site – if you're not sure, ask first."

"Chief Delancy, should we set up an aid station?" our medic wanted to know.

"Let's see what the drones find first." I didn't expect to find any survivors, but there was no reason to tell them that. Hope was a good thing.

"Final approach in two minutes," Andar announced from the helm. "Get in your rigs."

The trip to the surface and the landing went smoothly, and we were able to unload the launch within the hour. Because the red sun had damaged but hadn't completely destroyed Ulundu IV's atmosphere before it was knocked back into its original orbit, the levels of oxygen were low but within tolerance ranges. We wore supplemental breathers until we got used to the thin air, but even with the O5 packs I made sure everyone took it easy.

Andar scouted the perimeter of the flat plane where we set up camp, and returned in time to watch me and Hudeca launch the first surface probe. “You waste little time, Delancy.”

“I don’t want to hang around here any longer than we have to.” I watched the probe’s return feed on the viddisplay and recalibrated the optic sensors. “Hudeca, what are you getting on thermal?”

“Green screen, no signatures detected.” The Omorr’s head frills spiked as she concentrated on her readouts. “No trace of the passenger vessel within fifty clicks, either.”

“They may be on the other side of the planet.” Unlikely, as the strongest concentration of oxygen was centered around the city, but the transport’s pilot may have been trying to avoid it. I set the vid to record. “Keep on monitor; let me know if you detect any signs of life.”

I helped the rest of the team set up the temporary shelters we’d be using, which took the remainder of the afternoon, then as the horizon darkened and the temperature dropped I enabled the emitters. The Qobarecs prepped a quick meal for everyone and we all gathered around the site envirocontroller to eat and rest. The silence of this world was so absolute that every sound we made seemed magnified a hundred times, so I started telling a funny story about a jaunt I’d made as an intern investigator to a dig on Deddele Minor, where I’d found my first pre-League artifact.

“After we entered the main vault, the linguist scanned the wall and turned this strange shade of yellow. I thought he was going regurgitate something, so I checked his transunit.” I sat back in my camp chair.

“What we thought would be reverent passages dedicated to the Deddelen goddess were actually quite graphic instructions.”

“Instructions for positions for prayer?” one of the students asked.

“No, these were more, um, basic.” I leaned over and used my finger to draw one of the symbols in the powdery amber soil. “Can anyone translate this one?”

Hudeca studied it. “That is not a position assumed by Deddelen during worship. It is to insure proper fertilization of a female.”

“Yep.” I grinned. “You see, we hadn’t discovered a temple. It was a breeding brothel.” Everyone erupted into their various forms of mirth. “You can imagine how thrilled my supervisor was – he’d invited the local religious dignitaries to come and have a look when we opened the vault. I never saw anyone shove priests out of an archaic structure so fast in my life.”

“On how many worlds have you worked, Chief?” the Gobarec asked.

I really had to think about it. “A couple of hundred. I started out doing planetary geothermal surveys with my parents, which is where I got interested in artifact recovery. Something to think about, if you’re considering specializing – you get to travel a lot, and you get a better

scope of what it must have been like for pre-League species.” I still missed hopping around and exploring different systems, but now that Mom and Dad were permanently settled, I didn’t feel like traveling alone.

“It must have been isolated and dull,” one of the other students said. “Imagine being stuck on one planet for your entire existence, never knowing any other culture. Light-speed transportation is the greatest development in galactic civilization.”

“Which led to inter-species slavery and warfare,” Andar said, putting an immediate damper on everyone’s spirits.

“Which we’re trying to overcome.” I stood up. “Let’s initiate the security grid and get some rest while we can. The drones will reach the city by sunrise.”

The team had already decided on their sleeping arrangements, which left me to pick who I wanted to bunk with for the night. I was tempted to squeeze in with some of the students, but site protocol made me head over to the Captain’s shelter. He followed me in without comment, and secured the shelter entry as I stripped off my outerwear and stretched out on my narrow cot.

“You deal well with young ones,” he said as he unfastened his flight jacket.

I pillowed my head on my arm and watched him strip down to his waist. "I like them; they're good kids." I covered a yawn. "I've set my wristcom with a pre-dawn alarm; don't let it scare you in the morning."

"I doubt I will sleep." He began to wrap his upper torso with thermals, reminding me that he needed extra insulation to be comfortable.

"Do you want me to get a temperature regulator?" I'd brought some of the portable envirocontrollers down from the ship. "I don't mind heat." In fact, I loved it.

He shook his head. "I prefer the natural alternative, but I have no wish to offend you."

It took a minute to process what he was saying, but I wasn't offended. "You won't fit in this cot," I warned him, "and I think I snore."

"We could push our cots together." He gave me a speculative look. "And I could wake you if you snore too loudly, Delancy."

"Okay." I got up and dragged his cot over and clamped the side frame to mine. "If we're going to be sleeping together, you might as well call me Keasa."

He inclined his head. "My given name is Sev."

It took another few minutes for us to lie down and find a mutually comfortable arrangement of limbs. Turned out that we both liked sleeping on our left sides, so I ended up with my back against his front, one of his arms draped over my waist, and his tail wrapped around my legs. His skin

felt stiff and cool against mine at first, then it grew softer and warmer as he absorbed and reflected my body heat.

“Yours is not a human name,” he said against my hair.

“No, it’s not.” I could just imagine what Mom would say if she knew I was bunking down with a crossbreed reptile. Lots of words my little brother wasn’t supposed to hear. “My mother is a xenobotanist.”

“She chose well.” Sev’s breath brushed the back of my neck as he tucked a piece of my hair under my head. “Pleasant dreams, Keasa.”

“You, too.” I closed my eyes and let myself settle into the heat and the dark.

#

The dream I had wasn’t pleasant at all – it was one of those slow, terrifying ones that creep up around you and smother you with fear. I knew it from the moment I emerged from mindless sleep into the hidden vault of the Deddelen breeding temple that it would be bad.

I was naked, cold, and the broken bodies of humanoids lay scattered like bloodied dolls all around me. Bugs were buzzing around the remains, which had been dead long enough to acquire a nice crop of maggots. I’d seen a lot of corpses in my time, but not until they’d been dried out for a few centuries. This was way too recent – I wanted to vomit, scream and run all at the same time.

It is time for you to come to me, Keasa.

Nothing like a scary omnipotent voice coming out of nowhere to add to the ambience of the tableau. I backed away from the bodies, but I couldn't see a way out. *Who are you?*

Another voice answered me. *Something is wrong.*

I woke up in a panic, tried to sit up and bumped heads with Sev Andar. He was still wrapped around me, but we were facing each other. "Huh?"

"Quiet." He lifted his head and flicked out his tongue a few times. Every muscle in his body tensed. "Something has happened. We are in another place."

I glanced over his shoulder. "Looks like the same shelter to me."

"It is not the shelter that has changed." He unwound his tail from my legs. "The air tastes different."

We got dressed as quickly and quietly as possible, then Andar handed me a pulse weapon. "Keep it," he said, when I would have protested. "I do not know what is out there waiting for us."

"Probably just Hudeca with breakfast." I had a weird feeling, though, so I tucked it in my belt as he opened the entry a few inches. "See anything?"

He stepped back, then grabbed my arm and pulled me over. I looked through the gap, and saw a weathered stone wall standing in the middle of

what had been our campsite. The wall stretched out in both directions, farther than I could see.

I backed away. "This is some kind of practical joke." And if it was, I was going to strangle the responsible party. Slowly.

"No, I do not believe it is." Sev nodded toward the view panel at the back of the shelter. I went and opened it, and yelped. On the other side of the shelter was an alley and two old structures with open doorways. "As I thought. We are inside the City of the Dead."

#

We tried signaling camp on our wristcoms, but they wouldn't transmit.

As I saw it, there was only one explanation for how our shelter ended up in the worst spot in the galaxy: "Someone moved us here during the night." I didn't feel drugged or crazy, though. "But why?"

"We must leave, now." Sev took a moment to shove a few more weapons in his jacket and belt before opening the entry. "Ready?"

I nodded, and followed him out.

There were no other shelters besides ours in the vicinity – maybe the rest of the team hadn't been brought here like us. The city sprawled around us, reminding me of the pretty, empty shell of a deadly sea creature. Everywhere there were fascinating structures, all hewn from the same amber stone, polished smooth and seamless by the passage of

countless centuries. There were no angles or corners; like the walls and streets of the city, everything was rounded. The pristine condition of the ruins struck me as odd – samples had been tested and accurately dated, so we knew the City of the Dead was at least a couple of million years old – yet the streets appeared clean and debris-free, as if a maintenance drone had swept them an hour ago.

“Do you smell it?” Sev asked me, his voice tight.

I breathed in, catching a trace of something unpleasant. My sense of smell was not as keen as his, though. “What is it? A dead body?”

He enabled his pulse weapon and approached one of the open doorways, then pressed himself against the wall before having a quick look inside. “Signs of occupation,” he told me.

I went over and had a look myself. The interior of the house was full furnished – rather simply but beautifully – and there was food and dishes sitting on a table. The food was spoiled, as if it had been sitting out for a few weeks, which explained the nasty odor. “There are no prep units, no emergency packs.”

He met my shocked gaze. “Why does that concern you?”

“This is a dead world – no water, no botanicals, no life forms. There’s no sign of the colonists, either.” I nodded toward the prepared meal. “So where did dinner come from?”

There was a small screech of metal behind us, and I turned and nearly shot one of our survey drones. “Damn it, you stupid bucket of bolts, announce yourself next time.”

“Hi, there. Would you like me to show you the way?” the drone asked politely. “I know the fastest route.”

The voice – not to mention the syntax – were totally wrong. “Someone’s reprogrammed it,” I said as I went to open its front access panel. It trundled out of reach. “Hold your position,” I snapped at it.

“I will not. You’ll just have to find it yourself, then.” It backed away and turned as if to go.

“Wait,” Sev called out. “We apologize.”

I stared at him. “We do? To a drone?”

The drone swiveled its torso around to face us. “I don’t want her fiddling with my components.”

I started to tell it where it could shove its components, but Sev nudged me and shook his head. “She will not,” he said to the drone.

“Would you show us to the outer retaining wall of the city?”

The drone buzzed for a moment as if thinking it over. “That’s thirty miles from here on foot, and there’s really nothing to see there. Besides, she’s waiting for you at the arc. Come along, now.”

I didn't want to follow the damn thing, especially to where *she* was waiting for us. At the same time, I didn't want to hang around waiting for *her* to trap us in some alley.

"What's the arc?" I asked the drone when I caught up to it.

"The central arcanum," it told me, still sounding a little miffed. "You know, she was very careful with you, and it isn't as if she invites outsiders in every day. You could show a little gratitude."

"Oh, we're very grateful," I said, playing along. "In fact, I plan to thank her personally. Who is she?"

It hummed for a minute, processing that. "She is *she*, of course."

"Of course." A glitter of light caught my eye, and I looked ahead to see a very different-looking dome-shaped structure of rounded, glassy black material set in the center of a waist-high amber stone maze. Unlike the rest of the city, this looked alien and brand-new. "Is that black dome this arc you were telling us about?"

"Aren't you insightful for a human?" The drone led us up to the entrance to the maze, then halted. "You may as well leave your weapons here."

I pointed my pulse pistol at its power cell. "I don't think so."

"They won't work inside the city unless she permits it."

I pulled the trigger, and nothing happened. "Shit." I glanced at Sev, who was staring at the black dome. "Yours?"

“I have already tested them. The cells are completely drained.” He began removing them and placed them on the top of the short wall.

I put mine alongside his before I stepped into the maze. The moment I did, everything around me vanished, and I was enveloped in complete darkness. “Hey!” I tried backing out and bumped into Sev. “What happened to the light?”

He turned and ran into a solid surface, judging by the thump and the grunt. “There is a wall here now.” His scales rasped over something. “No way out.”

Someone laughed nearby, and I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck. “Who’s in here? Show yourself!” I shouted.

A sweet smell drifted to my nose, and I felt something brush my cheek. When I swatted at it, it stung my palm, and I yelped. Sev hissed and grabbed me, hauling me back against him, but his arms sagged the same time the strength went out of my legs.

We fell together, and the last thing I felt was his tail winding around me in a protective embrace.

#

It is time for you to awaken, Keasa.

I didn’t want to open my eyes. Sev was holding me, and he felt big and warm and sleek against my body. Who would have guessed a snake ‘breed like him would turn out to be so cuddly?

You are well-suited. The omnipotent voice sounded amused.

“I know that’s not my mother,” I murmured, rubbing my cheek against Sev’s Tawwa brand. “She wouldn’t talk if she found us in bed together.”

Sev stroked my back with a lazy hand. “What would she do?” He sounded drowsy.

“Probably dismember you first, ask questions later.”

You’ll have time enough for this when we are through here, children. I have a problem for you to solve now.

I suddenly remembered the city, the drone, and the black dome, and opened my eyes. Sev and I were lying together on a simple mat on a stone floor, next to a huge black wall covered with intricate golden pictographs. We were both naked. Next to the wall stood a very large female Tingalean, also naked. As I watched her, trying to think of what to say, I felt Sev pull me closer.

“Welcome, human and first-hatched.”

He bared both sets of fangs. “You are not my nest mother.”

“No, I am not, but this visage is serves my purpose.” It gestured with two of its twelve abbreviated limblets. “Stand up, both of you.”

Slowly we got up from the mat. I felt shaky and light-headed, and if Sev hadn’t been holding onto me I probably would have fallen on my face. He was trembling a little, too.

“Who are you, and where are we?” I glanced down at myself. “And where are our clothes?”

“I am Dsa,” it told me. “You are three hundred meters below the surface of this planet, in my central repository. I removed your garments to see if you were carrying any other weapons. They fell apart. Why did you come here?”

“We’re trying to find a missing ship.” I didn’t know about Sev’s trousers, but my underwear was new, and certainly wouldn’t fall apart. “There were a lot of people on board.”

“You must mean the humanoids who invaded my city.” Dsa sighed rather dramatically. “They’re all dead. What else do you want?”

“Did you kill them?”

“They killed each other.” Dsa slithered down the wall and touched one of the pictographs, waited, then hissed and pressed another.

“Watch.”

Instantly the chamber went away, and we were back on the surface in the city. I saw humanoids dressed in envirosuits moving through the streets, their faces terrified, their weapons drawn and enabled. They were firing at something. I tried to grab one of them, but my hands passed through the colonist as if he were a ghost.

“These are merely stored images,” Dsa told me, slapping my face with the tip of her tail. The impact nearly knocked me on my butt. “You cannot touch them.”

“What are they shooting at?” Sev demanded.

“Each other. Their brain chemistry was altered by Sdu, the surface defense unit.” She turned, and the surface vanished, returning us back to the chamber. “As defense system administrator, I myself did not become aware of them until they were all dead, but that is generally the case.” She shook her head. “Poor Sdu. So overworked, so unappreciated.”

I didn’t like her attitude, or this killer Sdu thing, or the fact that she’d slapped me. “Why are we still alive?”

“You did not invade the city,” she said. “I was still disposing of the bodies from the last intrusion when you landed, so I deactivated Sdu and brought you here myself. Systems must be maintained. I require some explanation.”

“You need what?” I uttered a bitter laugh. “You’ve killed or driven crazy everyone who has set foot in this place – what don’t you understand?”

“Sdu does that, not I.” She moved to another pictograph and touched it. This time a vid screen appeared on the wall, showing a map of the city – and what appeared to be an even bigger structure beneath it. “There are two systems defending this arcanum – myself, and Sdu, which

constructed the city to resemble one of your abandoned settlements. When a living being enters it, their body heat activates Sdu's autosystems. Traps are baited to lure the intruders, and their brain chemistry is altered by the chemicals they absorb. This causes them to exterminate each other. If they do not take the bait, Sdu uses a sonic disruptor to broadcast a high-frequency stream throughout the city. The resulting brain damage prevents the intruders from entering my level."

"It fries their brains permanently, too." I thought of the food we had seen, waiting on the table, and the images she'd produced. Something was very wrong with this whole scenario, but I couldn't tell what or even why I felt that way. "What is the arcanum?"

"It is knowledge stored by my creators, those you call the Founding Race, here and on a thousand other worlds. The collected wisdom from a billion centuries of evolution." She smirked a little. "That is why your kind come here, is it not? To steal from my creators? Sdu cannot be conquered."

I tried to imagine how much knowledge could have been stored over a billion centuries – that was too many zeroes to grasp – and all by a prehistoric species fabled to have seeded a hundred thousand worlds with their DNA. That made Ulundu IV even more dangerous than anyone had ever imagined. "It's all here? In this chamber?"

"Here and in other places." She didn't seem too sure.

“But no one came here for this – they just wanted to see the city,” I told her. “Those colonists your surface unit killed were stranded here by accident.”

“They killed themselves, and I cannot differentiate.” She seemed pretty unconcerned.

“I thought you said you didn’t know they were here until they were all dead.”

She sighed. “Yes, well, had I known, I would not have differentiated.”

Sev rose up to his full height, and his head hood arched. “But you did with us.”

Dsa regarded him with amusement. “I brought you here, first-hatched, because you would not come otherwise. It is not my duty to herd witless intruders away from harm. Systems must be maintained. Your kind should have recognized the dangers on this planet long ago.”

“Yeah, well, now we know.” I stepped between her and Sev. “We’ll just go back to our camp, collect my team and take off.”

“You have seen the lower level,” she told me, still very blasé. “I cannot permit you to leave.”

Sev tried to push me out of the way, but I hit him in the abdominal plate with my elbow. “So what are you going to do with us?” I asked her.

She made a grand gesture. “I will allow you to dwell in the city. You may breed, if you like.”

“But the city will kill us,” I reminded her. “And there is no food or water on this planet.”

“I will see to your needs. Systems must be maintained.” She touched another spot on the wall, and a rounded hole appeared in the wall. “Go back to the city.”

Do not leave, Keasa, the omnipotent voice whispered inside my skull. **And you, Sev, press the fourth rectangle on the left.**

Sev’s eye slits narrowed as he met my gaze. He was hearing it too, because while Dsa was looking at me, he pressed something near him.

The door abruptly closed, and Dsa frowned and touched the same space on the wall again. Nothing happened.

“You have not maintained your systems,” Sev said, moving a little closer toward her. “Have you?”

“What do you know?” She slithered over and without warning slapped at him with the end of her tail. He blocked the blow with two of his arms, but one of her tail spikes gashed his hand. “You know nothing of me. I know these systems. I control them. I control everything. Systems must be maintained.”

That was what had been bugging me. She knew a hell of a lot about the surface, but had been pretty vague about things down here. And the way she acted, and kept repeating *systems must be maintained* – just like a bolthead with fried circuits.

“Um, Dsa?” I went to the wall, drawing her attention to me. “Tell me, what does this thing do?” I asked, pointing at a scroll-shaped pictograph.

Do not press it, the voice said behind my eyes. **That will remove the oxygen from the room.**

“It is a recording device,” Dsa told me.

“How about this one?” I pointed to another at random, trying not to look at Sev. From the corner of my eye I saw him moving into position.

Press the one three rows to the right of that, the voice told me. **But do not allow her to see you do it.**

“It measures some type of thermal fluctuations.” She made an impatient sound. “Why do you ask these questions?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I shuffled back a few steps, counting rows until I was even with a golden star shape that looked a little recessed. “For someone in charge, you don’t seem to know much.”

I rested a hand against the star, and then I did something that I rarely did in mixed company – I triggered a dermal change, which rendered me invisible.

That is the one, the voice confirmed.

Dsa’s head hood arched as she looked around for me. “Where are you? Where did you go?”

“Guess.” I pressed the star, then moved away. As I did, I altered my colors to match the surfaces around me.

“Keasa?” Sev looked confused, but he couldn’t see me either.

“It’s okay.” A bright light flooded the chamber, and I moved again, closer to Sev. “I think someone else is in charge now.”

Dsa shrieked as the light coalesced into a semi-transparent form. It was a beautiful humanoid male with dark hair and very light skin. It shimmered in the air like a holoimage, but the Tingalean female backed away from it as if it were a fully-armed Hsktskt.

“You are in need of repair,” the image said in a lovely, resonant voice. **“Terminate your autofunctions immediately.”**

“I will not,” she told him, sounding like a sulky child. “And you cannot make me.”

Sev moved then, so fast I barely had time to blink. A lunge, a whip of his tail, and Dsa hit the stone floor. In two separate pieces, with component wire spilling out of the torn ends of both. Her Tingalean exterior crackled and faded, revealing the drone beneath the projected outer hololayer.

Her eyeslits became two red optical processors. “I am not . . . finished . . . with . . .” Her lights dimmed, and she stopped moving and talking.

I changed back, resuming my Terran dermal colors.

The image hovered over her, looking sad. **“She served the city well, until a few centuries ago. By the time I realized she was malfunctioning, she had already seized control of the lower level domain.”** He glanced at me and Sev. **“I must apologize for my colleague’s activities.”**

“She’s the surface unit, isn’t she? Sdu. And you’re Dsa,” I guessed.

He nodded. **“We were designed to protect this arcanum, not to harm the beings who came here. We merely monitored them, and only altered the memories of those who found evidence of our creators. Regrettably, one of the visitors fired a weapon at Sdu, and the resulting damage led to her malfunction. She disabled me and took over control of the defense grid.”**

“So all the people who disappeared are dead.”

Dsa nodded. **“I am sorry, Keasa. You and Sev are the first beings I have been able to communicate with since Sdu’s malfunction. The rest she damaged or forced to kill each other from the moment they entered the city, before I could access their minds.”**

“Why didn’t she hurt us?”

“In all the centuries, you are the first two visitors who did not wish to enter the city. I believe she was curious as to why.” Dsa moved

to the wall. **“I will return you and Sev to your companions on the surface.”**

“And that is all?” Sev sounded as angry as I felt. “How will we know if you fix her? What if she begins killing again?”

It regarded us both for a moment. **“Sdu will remain offline, and there will be no more killing. I will allow your kind to enter and investigate the city above in safety. Should anyone try to enter the lower level, I will remove their memories.”**

“What about us?” I didn’t want my mind wiped. “Are you going to stir our brains, too?”

“You will not tell anyone.” Dsa smiled at me. **“There is work for you to do now.”**

His image increased to a painful brightness, then Sev and I were pulled into the light.

#

The pre-dawn alarm from my wristcom woke me from a deep, comfortable sleep.

I opened my eyes to see Sev watching me. We were back in our shelter, lying together, as if everything that had happened had been some kind of a bad dream. I felt my cheek throb and lifted a hand to touch it.

“That was real, wasn’t it?” I murmured, gingerly probing the fresh bruise. “Not a bad dream.”

“It was real.” He examined his gashed hand, which was still oozing a little purple blood. Then he gave me a slightly indignant look. “You told me that you were human.”

“I said I was Terran, and I am – three-quarters, anyway.” I grinned and stretched, allowing different colors to ripple through my skin. “My mother is half Kobecian.”

He admired my showing-off for a moment. “Now I understand your given name.”

“My little brother lucked out in the recessive genes department; he got my grandfather’s tail and the claws. I got grandmother’s name and the color-changing hide.” My smile faded as everything sank in. “All those poor people, Sev. My God. And we can’t tell anyone what happened.” I met his gaze. “We can’t, right?”

“Dsa was correct in assuming that I will not tell anyone. You?”

“Me, tell people that a berserk superdrone murdered everyone to protect a storage facility with a million centuries of knowledge on tap?” I shook my head. “Even if they didn’t throw me in the nearest psych ward, exposing the arcanum would be worse than anything Sdu’s had done. Besides, we have to . . .” I trailed off as an image formed behind my eyes. “Hey, are you seeing star charts in your head?”

He had the same faraway look in his eyes. “Yes, hundreds of them.”

This was not the only arcanum; there were many more. *Here and on a thousand other worlds*, Sdu had said. And Dsa’s last remark – **There is work for you to do now.**

As more of the implanted instructions popped in my head, everything became very clear. We hadn’t been brainwashed; what Dsa wanted us to do was a request, not a demand. The arcanum was much more than a repository of knowledge. It was hope for a distant time in the future, when our kind evolved enough and that incredible collection of wisdom gathered by the Founding Race could be safely passed along. In the meantime, it had to be protected, and as more and more worlds were colonized and explored, so did those living around near its many storage facilities.

The arcanum needed new guardians – guardians who could travel, who could be trusted – and who could not be accidentally reprogrammed. In return, the guardians would have access to what they guarded.

Full access.

“You know, I’ve been meaning to take some time off, do a little independent investigation.” I eyed Sev as he came to his own conclusions. “How about you?”

“I think I am glad that I am pledged to life, and that you are part reptilian,” he said, wrapping his tail around me again, “but will I have to meet your mother?”

Touch

by S.L. Viehl

“Why don’t blind people skydive?”

I turned in the darkness toward the voice, which was warm, male, and didn’t belong in my garden. “Because it scares the hell out of the dog.” I put down the pot of geraniums I was replanting. My security guard didn’t know it yet, but he was fired.

The stranger chuckled. “He doesn’t look like a real tough guy.”

“He’s meaner than he looks.” I stood and used a hand signal, and felt Mid drop out of defense into watch mode beside me. “Help you with something?”

“Coral Bay sent me over – I’m Thomas Jackson, your new physical therapist.”

Anyone might know what hospital I went to for treatments, and the security guard was new and oh, so fired. “Which doc and why?”

“Dr. Trovanni. Little guy, big gruff Italian voice. He said you’ve been having some back problems.” Thomas didn’t sound nervous, just a little concerned. “Would you like to call hospital to verify things?”

“That’s okay.” I held out my right hand to my new therapist. “Olivia Edgeway. Call me Livy.”

“I’m Tom.” He had a nice grip, firm but gentle, and very smooth palms. He was smiling, too, I could hear it in his voice. “May I say hello to your dog?”

“Sure, hold out the back of your hand to him. Tom, this is Midas. Mid, friend.” I felt Tom’s body heat as he bent over, and heard my dog sniff. His tail wagged three times before he went back into watcher stance. “Don’t let the lack of enthusiasm bother you; he’s a little protective.”

“As he should be. Beautiful animal – Labrador?”

“Golden retriever.”

“Ah. That explains the name.” Tom’s voice shifted higher as he straightened; I figured him to be about six-four. “Olivia – Livy – I’ve gone over your chart, but I’d like to hear your take on things before we get started.”

“No problem. Come on inside.” I tugged on Mid’s harness, and started in the direction of the back door of my kitchen. My dog moved ahead of me, then tugged to the right to remind me not to walk into the little bronze fountain. “Amazing place,” Tom said as he followed us in. “This was once a villa in France, wasn’t it?”

“Italy. My folks had it disassembled and shipped over, brick by brick. They were big on architecture.” For his benefit I flicked on the kitchen light, then released Mid and went to the fridge. My live-in housekeeper was off

for the week, sunning herself in Palm Springs, so I had hostess duty.

“Would you like some ice water?”

“Please.” The chair on the right side of my table creaked.

So far he hadn't made any of the mistakes most sighted people did, like trying to help me with the door or patting my dog, which was promising. I removed two glasses from the cabinets, filled them over the sink, and brought them to the table before I slowly sat down.

I was hot and stiff from working outside, so I took a drink before I went into why he'd been sent to me. “My arthritis started up when I was twenty, and it's aggressive. Over the last fifteen years, I've had both hips and my right shoulder replaced, and I'll need a new left elbow pretty soon. My back's the worst right now; I haven't been sleeping much. The doc thinks my back is tension.”

I heard him swallow some water before he asked, “When did you go blind?”

“Ten years ago, also thanks to the arthritis.” I'd nearly gone crazy, too, but he'd probably read about that, too. My dog heard the change in my tone and chuffed out some air. “Midas has been pretty decent as my replacement eyes, but I'm still adjusting.”

“You don't take pain killers.”

I shook my head. “Another handicap I don't need.”

“Smart. Your chart said you’re controlling your arthritis through diet. How’s that working for you, Livy?”

Sounded like he’d memorized my chart. “I feel like a big bunny sometimes, but it’s okay.” I was lying, it sucked. My parents’ restaurants made something like ten million cheeseburgers every year, and I couldn’t have a single one. “No sugar, flour, salt, meat or processed food – I live on rice and vegetables – but I haven’t had as much inflammation as when I was on the meds.”

“How do you feel about in-home therapy?”

I shrugged. Odd, but it was like he was stalling for time. Maybe he was more nervous than I was. “As long as you don’t tie me into a knot or steal any of the family silver, it’s fine with me. Can we get started?”

“Of course.” The smile was back in his voice, a little forced. “The best place to do this is an elevated flat surface, like this table or a bed, if you’re comfortable with that.”

“Table.” I wasn’t going to test Mid’s patience and bring him into my bedroom – my dog was used to being the only male allowed in there. I stood up. “I’ll go change. Should I strip to the underwear, or the skin?”

“A loose robe and skin would be best.” He picked up our glasses and carried them over to the counter. Glass chinked as it met Formica. “I’m going to lay out a mat on the table.”

I left him in the kitchen and had Mid guide me to my room. He didn't like me undressing and came over to sniff at my bare legs and whine.

After I slipped into my night robe I reached down to scratch him behind his right, rather lopsided ear. "Easy, boy. He's going to fix my back."

We went back to the kitchen. "Ready?"

"Just about." Tom came to me. "I'm going to lift you onto the table now, Olivia. Hands on your waist."

I nodded and released Mid's harness. Tom's hands on my bare skin still made me jerk a little, but he lifted me quickly and sat me on what felt like a foam rubber pad covered with terry cloth. Mid came over to the edge and licked my hand.

"If you'll stretch out on your stomach, we'll get started." There was the sound of cloth rubbing against skin. He was rolling up his sleeves. Some metal jingled in his pocket. "I'm going to work your muscles first, from your neck to your hips. If anything hurts, tell me."

I cradled my face against my folded arms and tried to relax as he began kneading my shoulders.

"You've got some tense muscles here, Livy," Tom said as he worked on me. "What's worrying you?"

"Nothing much." My last book had gone to auction, and no one had any idea that bestselling horror author Jason Black was actually the blind

crippled heir to the country's third-largest fast-food franchise. I kept it that way, too. Mid was terrific company, and I'd come to terms with everything else in my life. If I got a little bored now and then, it was tolerable. Not like I could go out and paint the town red or any other color. "I spend a lot of time on the computer."

He used his thumbs on either side of my neck, pressing in. "Got one with voice recognition?"

"Yeah. It even reads to me." I was getting a bit uncomfortable with the amount of pressure he was using. "That hurts, Tom. Can you move on?"

"It won't much longer." He planted an elbow in the middle of my back, pushed his fingers around to the front of my neck and increased the pressure. "Sorry, Olivia. You seem like a great lady."

I tried to yell, but his grip kept me from getting any air. The door opened and closed quickly. I heard Mid snarl, then whimper, then I didn't hear anything at all.

#

"Olivia."

Blind people don't have to open their eyes, but I did out of reflex. For a minute I was confused – there was no darkness, but light – bright buttery light that I hadn't seen since I was a kid. I lifted a hand up to my

face, but I couldn't see it. So the light was bullshit. "Where am I? What happened?"

"This is a deciding place." The voice was nice but distant, as if the speaker was far away. I couldn't tell if it was male or female. "A man attacked you. You're dying, Olivia."

If a tunnel and my dead parents suddenly appeared, I was going to freak. But why was I dying? Tom Jackson, the new therapist – I remembered him, vaguely. He'd grabbed my neck, knocked me out – but why? And what did I have to decide? "I'll just go back to sleep now."

"You're not asleep, Olivia. You're in a coma in a hospital. In a few hours the doctors will declare you brain dead and remove you from life support." The speaker didn't sound very sympathetic. "You have to decide whether you wish to live or die."

I wanted to live, but this had to be a trick question. "Will I be paralyzed or something? Will I be worse off than I was?"

"No. If you choose to live, your arthritis will be cured and your vision restored."

I laughed. "Hey, if you're God, you're really nice."

"I am not God." He, she, or it was miffed, though.

The light started to get hot, like the sun. "Then why the miracle healing?"

“You can do something in return for me.” Something moved in front of me – something big and dark and fuzzy. “It won’t hurt, Olivia. You’ll never hurt again.”

Being able to see anything was scary enough, but this sounded like soul-selling or something. “I don’t understand. I don’t know you. What do you want? Money?” I had piles, not-God could have some. Just not all of it.

“Decide now, before it’s too late for me to bring you back.”

I wanted to see Mid, and my house, and my geraniums. I wanted to watch the cops toss Tom Jackson’s ass in jail for the rest of his life. I wanted to see and not to hurt, period. “Okay, so fix me already.”

“Initiate injection sequence.”

Light filled my skull like yellow fire, and I found out not-God had lied.

#

The next time I opened my eyes, they worked.

I could see a man in a white lab coat, and equipment, and the bottom half of my bed. I could see my bare toes sticking up from the edge of the sheet. At first it was all blurry, but slowly everything sharpened into focus.

I spent what felt like an hour just looking at my toes. Someone had trimmed the nails, and there was a little scab across the third toe on my right foot. I had pretty feet. I didn’t know that.

The man came over and checked my eyes a couple of times with a light. That was when I found out I couldn't speak. I tried, but nothing came out and my mouth wouldn't move. He didn't speak, either, but wrote things down on some kind of handheld unit. He was tall, dark but average-looking, and had kind of small brown eyes.

I didn't care that I couldn't talk, but I wished I could have told him that he'd missed a spot on his jaw, shaving.

Something strange had happened to my body. I was in it, but it wasn't responding to me. At the same time, I didn't feel paralyzed. I could feel the brush of air conditioning against my face, and the weight of the sheets on my skin. All the nerves were working, and I felt better than I had in years – rested, full of energy, and no twinges of pain from my swollen joints. Even when I was a kid I hadn't felt this good.

Finally the man in the lab coat put down the handheld unit and left. I wanted to call him back so I could look at him some more.

"Good morning, Olivia." It was the voice from my not-God dream. Still couldn't tell if it was a man or woman. "Standard response."

"Good morning," I heard myself say – or my throat say, the words weren't mine, and neither was the idea. If they'd been my words, I'd have said something like, "Come here so I can kiss you, whatever you are."

"Enable vocal input. You can speak to me now, Olivia."

I took a deep breath, and tried. "Hi. I can see."

“Yes, I know.” That sounded a little sad this time. “I’ve restored your sight.”

I glanced up. There was a set of windows at the top of the room, and a man sitting behind the glass. He didn’t look happy. “How did you do it? What hospital is this?”

“You’re not in a hospital. This is my private lab.”

Somebody had written one hell of a referral. I grinned. “Thanks for giving me my eyes back, doc. This is just –” There simply weren’t words. “What’s your name?”

“I’m William Kennedy.”

I knew that name. “Wait a minute . . . you’re that guy on the Discovery Channel.” He’d sounded different on TV. “The mini-robot guy, right?”

“That’s me. Why don’t I come down and explain things?”

“I’m not going anywhere. Is that temporary, or permanent?” I was so happy I really didn’t care. Stick my ass in a wheelchair and cart me around – I could see. I could really see.

“Give me a second.” He stood up, reached for something, then moved away from the window in a jerky way. I saw why a minute later when he gimped into the room, using forearm-supported steel canes to brace his body. His trousers didn’t quite conceal the fact that both of his legs were oddly twisted from the mid-thigh down.

I wanted to see my dog. "Where's Midas?"

He hobbled over to the side of my bed, and eased himself into the chair there. "I need to tell you some things first."

I looked around. "He can come in here, right? I mean, I've never seen my own dog, and - "

"Olivia, Midas is dead."

All the air went out of my lungs. "What? How?"

"You were attacked in your home, and your security guard was killed. The intruder ransacked your house and took most of your valuables. He also strangled you and left you for dead. One of your neighbors noticed your gate had been left open, found the guard and then discovered you. She was able to get you breathing again, but there was massive brain damage."

I felt the wetness of tears running down my cheeks. "Mid?"

"It was very quick."

I tried to focus on the other things he'd said. "You said there was brain damage. I don't feel any stupider."

"You're not. I was able to heal it."

I knew enough about medicine to know that was pretty unlikely.

"How?"

"By injecting you with bioflex. They're self-replicating artificial cells which have replaced the ones destroyed by the oxygen deprivation. They

encode themselves from your own DNA. I also programmed them to remove the arthritis and restore your vision.”

He was serious. “Did Darth Vader show you how to do that, or Captain Kirk?”

His mouth curled on one side. “It will probably take some time for you to accept the idea. I’m rather astonished myself at the results.”

So this hadn’t been a sure thing. I felt like clubbing him over the head with one of his canes. “You used me as a guinea pig? What did my doctors have to say about this?”

“You were dying, Olivia. I had no choice.” He looked down at his twisted legs. “Jerry and I had to take you from the hospital.”

He’d stolen me – like some grave robber. Pre-grave robber. Maybe they were going to harvest my organs while I was still alive. Oh, hell, why had I read so many of Robin Cook’s novels? “Okay, we’ll get back to that. I’m grateful that I can see, but why can’t I move?”

He didn’t want to say it or look at me, but finally he lifted his head. His eyes were green as the grass I used to run across when I was five and could still see and run. “I haven’t programmed you to do that yet. Disable vocal input.”

And then I couldn’t speak again.

#

Dr. Frankenstein put me to sleep with another verbal command (I found out later that I was already programmed to respond to a bunch of those) and while I was out I guess he tinkered on me a little more. When I regained consciousness the second time, he kept my mouth disabled and put me to work. His assistant Jerry silently supervised me, watching as I went from getting in and out of my bed by myself to a fairly rigorous workout on a bunch of gym equipment he had set up in a room adjacent to mine. Kennedy issued commands from the control room, and Jerry kept watching me while I adjusted to being sighted and mobile.

I tried to fight the commands, of course. I tried every single time he ordered me to do something. Whatever Kennedy had put inside my head wouldn't allow me to twitch so much as an eyelash voluntarily. He either didn't want me to have free will at all, or figured I'd be so grateful for him fixing me that I'd go along with whatever he wanted.

I didn't know how to feel. On one hand, Kennedy had not only saved my life, but he'd given me back my sight and my mobility. On the other, he'd hijacked me from the hospital, injected me with God Knew What and now was playing with me like I was an oversized Walks-By-Herself Barbie.

I'd just finished my daily afternoon workout when Kennedy limped in and ordered me to accompany him to a room I'd never been in before. It was set up like a nice library, with comfy chairs, a fireplace, and thousands

of leather-bound books. He told me to sit across from him and then inspected me. “You’ve done very well, Olivia.”

I inspected him. He looked terrible, which made me a little happier.

“Disable motor functions. Enable vocal input.”

“About time.” My voice sounded raspy. “Why are you keeping me from talking?”

“I knew you’d be angry.” He set his canes to one side. “I know what I’m doing is wrong, but we don’t have a great deal of time.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“I need you to rescue someone. Access memory file Kennedy-seventeen-R-one.”

Information and images flooded into my mind. A little boy, a heavily guarded research facility. Billions of dollars, thousands of drugs made from microscopic robots that could repair a body from the inside out. An explosion. A dying woman. A gorgeous man with silver-blond hair and bright blue eyes.

My brain told me that the boy was Kennedy’s son Paul, and the woman was his wife, Lana. The woman – Lana – she’d been killed in an explosion at Kennedy’s research facility. She’d also been having an affair with the gorgeous guy, who had kidnapped her son.

I knew way too much about Lana. “That man is keeping Paul in your home, in Beverly Hills. You want me to go in and take Paul away from him. Who is he?”

“Tom Jackson, the man who tried to kill you. He doesn’t know my wife is dead. You’re going to take her place.”

“That’s great, but I don’t look a damn thing like your wife.”

“You’re the same height and weight. I can change the rest.”

Not without comprehensive plastic surgery, unless – “Have you done it already?” Of all the things I’d seen, my own face hadn’t been one of them.

“No.” He looked down at his twisted legs. “I wanted you to know why first, before I initiated the alteration program.”

“These Frankenstein cells can make me look like Lana?”

“They can make you look like anyone. I’ll show you. Enable motor functions, follow me.” He got up and limped to the door. I trailed after him like a good little robot, trying to decide what to do. I’d been trying to lunge at him since we’d started talking, but my body refused to cooperate. I had to play along until he gave me back control over my body.

“Kennedy, how come I know so much about Lana?”

He didn’t look at me. “I programmed her history into your memory. She was my wife, after all.” We were in front of the wall mirror across from my bed. “Watch now, Olivia.”

I forgot about Tom and Lana and the world as I stared at myself. I looked just like my Mom. Same lean, lanky body, same chestnut brown hair, same hazel eyes. I even had the same sprinkle of freckles on my nose. No one had ever told me that.

“Disable motor functions. Initiate alteration program one.”

I cried out yellow light exploded inside my head, and the image of myself/Mom began to change. My hair turned redder, my skin whiter. My eyes went from hazel to light blue. All of my freckles vanished. My face thinned and my cheekbones sharpened. I could barely see it, though. The pain got so bad I couldn't think.

“The alterations are done on the cellular level – the bioflex cells can modify tissue, bone, pigmentation, whatever is needed.” Kennedy leaned against the wall as my body became Lana's twin. “Genetically you're identical now. Even your teeth and fingerprints will match hers.” He frowned. “Why are you sweating?”

“It hurts, idiot,” I said through gritted teeth.

He looked shocked. “It's not supposed to–”

“You screwed up something.” The yellow light inside my skull was finally fading, and I could breathe again. “It feels like I'm on fire.”

“I'll have to make some adjustments. Later.” He hobbled over to me. “Olivia, my son is only five years old. Jackson will kill him and leave the country if Lana doesn't show up soon. He has enough money now.”

Which explained why he'd ripped me off – my folks had had a ton of Italian paintings hanging on the walls, all of them worth major cash. “Why don't you just call the police and have them go get your son?”

“Everyone believes I was killed in the explosion, and all the data about bioflex was destroyed. I need to keep it that way.” Kennedy finally looked at me. “Bring my son back to me, Olivia, and I will give you whatever you want.”

“I want this shit out of my brain. Can you do that?”

He shook his head. “You'll die.”

“Then I want control of my body back – total control. Now.” He didn't say anything. “You can't run me on remote control from a distance, right?” He nodded. “Then you have to trust me, Kennedy.”

“My son's life depends on you now.” He closed his eyes briefly.

“Enable autonomous function.”

I lifted my hand and touched my Lana-face, then turned and walked to him. He braced himself with his canes, expecting me to clock him, I supposed.

I pressed my lips to his cheek. “That's for saving my life.” Then I stepped back and slapped him as hard as I could. “And that's for everything else.”

#

I didn't try to run out on Kennedy, though I was tempted a few times. He went over every detail of the rescue with me. It was going to be a very quick, snatch-and-run type of deal. All I had to do was convince everyone that I was Lana until I could get the kid out safely.

Dressing up in Lana's clothes was a little bizarre, and I could see it was upsetting Kennedy, too. He told me how Jackson had met Lana at some society thing and had set out deliberately to seduce her. He started running into her at different places, usually when she was with Paul. The kid had loved Tom, of course. Tom was good at being lovable. Since Kennedy had been buried in research for years, Lana had been lonely, and responded to Tom's interest. They'd slipped into an affair, and then Tom had started making plans.

"She really loved him, you know," Kennedy told me as I pushed my feet into Lana's favorite red shoes. Jerry hovered by the door. "She came to the facility that night to tell him she was leaving him. Jackson didn't know she was there when he detonated the explosives. That's why he doesn't know that she was caught in the blast with me." Kennedy handed me a cute little purse. "We've gone over the layout of the house, is there anything else you need?"

I opened the purse and took out a pretty little silver .22. "What's this for?"

"I thought you might want some payback for Mid."

"I'm not killing anyone." I handed him the gun.

He took the gun. "I wish you'd change your mind."

"Sorry, you've changed enough on me already."

Kennedy had set up his lab in an anonymous office building just outside Beverly Hills, and his assistant Jerry walked me out to the car, which was a beautiful silver Mercedes.

That was when the first problem presented itself. "Uh, Jerry, I should mention that I can't drive. Blind girls aren't allowed to take driver's ed." He just climbed in behind the wheel. I got in the passenger side. "You don't talk much, do you, Jer?"

He shook his head and pulled out onto the road.

Kennedy had told me to gain access to the mansion, separate Paul from Tom and bring him back to the lab. He'd suggested I keep my story simple and tell Tom I had stayed away because I hadn't thought it was safe.

"And remember to call him Will," Kennedy had said. "He's been using my identity, and he hired a completely new house staff. They and everyone else believes he's me."

"But you don't look alike; wouldn't your family and friends notice that?"

He shook his head. "Lana and I didn't have any family or friends. Most of my employees were killed when Tom blew up the research center. Tom also studied my voice for awhile, he can imitate me perfectly now."

"And your son?"

"Paul is probably too terrified to say anything to anyone."

The Kennedy mansion was a nice one – almost as large as my own – and Tom dropped me off a block away.

"Wait for me by the back gate." I headed toward drive, stopped at the entry panel and pushed the call button. I pasted on a smile for the camera that zoomed in on my face. "Will? It's me. Open up, please."

The gates swung open, and a tall golden-haired man came running down the drive toward me. He stopped a few feet away. "Lana?"

"Yeah, it's me." I looked around him. "Where's Paul?"

"Inside." He walked up to me slowly, looking all over me. "Where have you been? Why didn't you call?" His voice sounded much different than I remembered – deeper, with an impatient clip to the words. He also seemed shorter than I remembered from when I was blind, which was weird. I usually could guess within an inch.

"I was scared to come home, I didn't know if it was safe." I nodded toward the house. "Let's go inside, please."

He put an arm around me and led me into the house, which was just as impressive on the inside. A little boy stood waiting in the entry hall, and when he saw me he ran forward and nearly knocked me over. “Mommy!”

I bent down to put my arms around Kennedy’s son. “Hi, darling.” That was what Lana had always called him. “Miss me?”

“Yes.” Paul wiggled out of my embrace, his light blue eyes wide. “Where did you go? Daddy’s lab blew up.” He frowned. “You sound funny, Mom.”

“I know, I have a sore throat.” I looked up at Tom, who was watching both of us with his bright blue eyes narrowed. Had he looked like that when he’d killed my dog? For a moment I wished I’d kept the gun Kennedy had offered me. “I’ve brought a present for you. It’s right outside, you want to come with me and get it?”

Paul grinned and grabbed my hand. “Is it a Pokemon game?”

“Better than a Pokemon game.” I glanced at Tom before I tacked on the final lie. “We’ll be right back.”

Just as I reached the back door, Tom came up behind me and put a hand on my neck. “Wait.”

I froze. His hand was warm and strong and it bugged me. “We’ll just be a minute, sweetheart.”

“You’re not my wife.” He swung me around. “Command override Gamma-Seven. Disable autonomous function.”

My body locked up, and my vision dimmed. Tom shouted for someone, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a big Asian man grab Paul and carry him away.

Tom came around and stood in front of me. "How did you get the bioflex? Who programmed you?"

The whole thing was blown, and now I was dead. I listened dully as my voice responded. "I don't know about the bioflex. William Kennedy programmed me."

"I'm William Kennedy, and I've never used a human. Enable vocal input. Who the hell are you and why are you here?"

"You can cut the act now, Tom." I looked down at his hands. He had long, slim hands with callused palms. The Tom Jackson who had rubbed my neck had had square hands with smooth palms. "Touch my face."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"Don't bother," I heard someone say behind me. Jerry came around me, and pointed a gun at the blond man. "The voice we covered, so where did we mess up?"

He had Tom Jackson's voice. "The hands. You don't have any calluses on yours."

He shook his head. "Should have thought of that. Olivia, meet the real William Kennedy. Will, this is Olivia Edgeway, your second

experimental success on a human.” Jerry smiled at me. “Sorry, Livy. You’re probably pretty confused now, huh?”

“Edgeway,” the blond man repeated. “You were kidnapped a few weeks ago, just after my ex-wife and my research disappeared.”

I ignored Blondie and focused on Tom’s little mean eyes. “I was never in a coma, was I? Or dying?”

“No. I just needed someone who had never seen any of us, and who had the same basic body type as Lana. The Italian paintings I stole from your villa didn’t hurt, either.

“If you’re William Kennedy,” I said to the blond man, “then who was the man who did this to me?”

Blondie ignored me. “You used the research you stole from me to do this?” Will sounded outraged as he glared at Tom. “The bioflex could have killed her – it’s unstable.”

“So am I. Still am.” Tom waved the gun. “We’re going to leave now. Enable the girl.”

“Command override Gamma-Ten. Enable autonomous function.” Will turned to Tom. “You have the bioflex. What else do you want?”

“Lana needs some repair work. We figured we’d take the boy as incentive, but you’ll do just as well.”

“You’re not taking him anywhere,” I said.

Tom cocked the pistol and turned it toward me. “Try and stop me.”

“Enable DM-one,” Will snapped out.

My left leg did a Rockette’s number and kicked the gun out of Tom’s hand a fraction of a second before it fired. Will lunged at him from the other side, knocking him to the floor. The big Asian guy and two other men rushed in and pinned Tom down. I held out a hand to help Will up from the floor.

“Thanks.” I rubbed my thigh. “Do I do magic tricks, too?”

“I don’t know.” He heaved out a breath. “But we’d better find out.”

#

The real Will Kennedy called the authorities and had them haul Tom Jackson away, and then he took me to a nice, normal hospital. He also personally supervised a barrage of tests showed that I was in perfect health, but kept everything under Lana Kennedy’s name, and didn’t tell anyone that my body was saturated with full-functioning bioflex cells.

“It’s for your own safety, Olivia,” Will said before I went in for the blood tests. “The government was extremely interested in my bioflex experiments, and if they learned what it’s done for you . . . “

I could just imagine. “Yeah, we’d better keep that part under wraps.”

The hard part was hearing the truth behind the story, which Will told me on the way to give a statement to the police.

“We tested a small amount on laboratory rats infected with cancer,” he said as he parked behind police headquarters. “Half of them died or

were severely injured by the nanocells, but the other half were cured. We extracted the bioflex cells from the survivors immediately after the cancer disappeared, so they wouldn't take over the rat's body. I'd been building a database of specific command structures for a human experiment, which included some military and intelligence applications, but I felt the risks were too great."

"That explains why I can drop kick a gun out of someone's hand in half a second." I wondered who the other guy at the lab had been. "This was all Lana and Tom's idea? No one else was involved?"

"I'm not sure. I suspected Lana and Tom were having an affair, and he must have talked her into stealing the data. They didn't know about the failure rate or that I was shutting down the experiment because it was too dangerous. I removed the failure data from the database to stall for time until I could think of a way to preserve our funding." He sighed. "So this is really all my fault."

"And you're sure you can't get this stuff out of me?"

"I'm afraid it's too late, Olivia. Your natural cells have been completely replaced."

"Will this kill me?"

He thought about that for a minute. "I don't know. You should be dead now."

Will and I gave our statements to the detective in charge of the case, who showed us a photo of a crippled man on canes into the interview room. "This man was arrested at the lab where Mrs. Kennedy was being kept. Either of you know him?"

Will shook his head.

"He was one of the men who abducted me," I said. We were sticking to the story that Lana Kennedy had been kidnapped, since I was still posing as her. "Who is he?"

"We don't know. We've got him as John Doe over at L.A. Medical now, but they don't think he's going to make it. The docs over there say something is eating up his bones." He gave me a sympathetic grimace. "Poor bastard is in a lot of pain, and raving mad." He put the photo back in the file. "Believe it or not, he says he's your wife, Dr. Kennedy."

#

Will and I went to the hospital, and stayed there until John Doe died shortly after midnight. The cause of death was advanced bone cancer. He had been in a coma when we'd arrived and never regained consciousness.

On the way back to his house, I broke the silence. "That man was your wife, wasn't he? Lana. She injected herself with the bioflex."

"I believe so. In order to sell the data, she would have had to pose as me. I'll know more after I get a copy of the autopsy."

I couldn't have written a plot this complicated. "I'm sorry, Will."

“Me, too.” He glanced at me. “What can I do to make this up to you, Olivia?”

So much had been done already; I just wanted to find a hole to crawl in and hide for a few decades. If I lived that long. “If you can’t get the bioflex out of me, can you change me back to the way I looked before?”

Will nodded and pulled up the drive to park in front of the door. “It’s going to be painful.”

“I know. I can deal with it.”

“Initiate restoration program one.” He held my hand as the yellow fire flared behind my eyes, and the world went away. Then I finished shifting into my old self, and checked my reflection in the rearview mirror.

Will smiled at me. “You have a nice face.”

“Thanks. I got it from my Mom.” I rubbed my cheek, then I heard barking and looked through the window. The dog running toward the car was big, golden, and had one lopsided ear on the right side. “Mid?”

“They found him at your house,” Will said. “Tom lied about a lot of things.”

I scrambled out of the car. My dog abandoned all of his training and jumped on me, knocking me on my butt. I wrapped my arms around his warm wriggling body and laughed as he licked my face.

Now that I had my guide back, maybe everything would be okay.

Fire and Ice
by S.L. Viehl

02/19/20

Press Release

Contact: CDC Media Relations
404-639-6832

CDC identifies source of PIC Syndrome

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) today released a global health advisory regarding the source of PIC (pregnancy-induced coma) syndrome, which has been directly attributed to combined exposure to WA Progestin and rP-18 vaccine.

"Pregnant women exposed to the water additive progestin must not receive retro-Polio vaccine," said Dr. Julian Walters, director of the CDC. "The combination of the two will induce PIC Syndrome, and result in an irreversible coma during the patient's third trimester. All women who have been exposed to WA Progestin and rP-18 are advised to seek medical attention immediately."

The use of WA Progestin in the United States of America was instituted in 2015, after the Supreme Court approved adding the hormone to the nation's water supply as an alternative to reinstating legal abortions (ref. Roe Vs. Wade) and to support the Welfare Reform Act. The population control method was quickly adopted by other nations around the globe and has proved completely successful in preventing 99.8% of unauthorized pregnancies.

rP-18 was developed in 2019 to combat the virulent retro-Polio virus, which has killed or crippled nearly ten million women and children since 2018.

CDC estimates that nearly 20 million patients worldwide are at risk for PIC syndrome. Presently the number of patients in U.S. PIC long-term care facilities exceeds 90,000. Studies show that nearly 84.3% of PIC coma patients experience brain death within twelve months after contracting the syndrome.

"Health care personnel must test for pregnancy prior to rP-18 inoculation," said Dr. Ralph Garbowski, acting director of CDC's healthcare quality promotion division. "This is absolutely imperative."

This advisory is intended to promote patient safety. For more information about PIC Syndrome, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/PIC>. For more information about the

CDC's commitment to world population control, see
<http://www.cdc.gov/ZeroBirthRate>

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) protects people's health and safety by preventing and controlling diseases and injuries; enhances health decisions by providing credible information on critical health issues; and promotes healthy living through strong partnerships with local, national and international organizations.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

WORLD POPULATION CONTROL INITIATIVE

June 14, 2020

Dear Bill,

I've asked my sister to give you this letter as soon as I'm hospitalized. My obstetrician performed an EEG this morning and I'm in the first stages of PIC. I know I should have been tested earlier, but I was hoping I would be one of the lucky ones. The doctor says I've only got a few weeks left.

Maybe they will find a cure for this terrible thing, but in case they don't, I want you to know that these last eight months have been the happiest of my life, and that I will always love you. I'm sorry I didn't have the courage to tell you in person. I wanted our remaining time together to be happy.

I'd like you to name our daughter Andra. Would you do that for me? And no matter what's wrong with her, love her as I would have. I'll be watching over you both from heaven. Take care of yourself and our baby, Bill.

Your devoted wife,

Melanie

**National Institutes of Health Report:
PIC Syndrome Causes Tri-Spectrum ABF in DB Infants**

Immunization is one of the most effective tools for protecting public health. Worldwide vaccination programs have resulted in the elimination of bioengineered diseases such as retro-Polio, Seoul Influenza and Lebonese Anthrax. Yet along with these benefits have come serious concerns about public safety, with particular emphasis on the some 100,000 children born to women infected with PIC Syndrome.

It is widely acknowledged that these children, now commonly referred to among the general population as "DB" or "Death Bed" infants, have ABF (altered brain function), attributed to genetic damage sustained from exposure to PIC while in utero. One issue currently under debate is whether or not all DB infants should be subjected to mandatory testing to classify these cerebral mutations, of which three distinct categories (DB-A, DB-B, and DB-C) have already been identified.

Researchers are concerned that if not addressed, the tri-spectrum disorders will result in serious genetic concerns within the next generation. Although scientists generally agree that all cases of DB result from prenatal exposure, symptoms typically do not emerge until the child's second year. In addition, there are concerns that the number of DB-C cases, as well as the classification of DB-C ABFs, are being deliberately concealed by some governments from world health organizations.

The CDC recognized the need for an independent group to carefully determine safety and other issues involved with DB infants, in order to give some guidance to themselves, health care providers, researchers, and a concerned public. The agency engaged the National Institutes of Health, which in turn appointed the DB Review Committee (DBRC), a 115-member body of health professionals with wide-ranging expertise in areas relevant to the problem. To preclude any real or perceived conflicts of interest, candidates were subject to strict selection criteria that excluded anyone with family members suffering from PIC Syndrome or DB births. The results of the committee's assessment of the issue are described in the report titled *Assessment of Genetic Alterations in DB Infants and Therapeutic Recommendations*.

The committee has reviewed the numerous research efforts on the DB dilemma. "The evidence favors rejection of a causal symptomatic treatment program for spectrum disorders," the DRC committee concludes in its report. "A consistent body of evidence indicates DB Infants should be separated from the common populace for further studies and research."

Moreover, the committee can find no proven counteragent to reverse the effects of DB-related genetic damage. Scientists have suggested some theories, but none have been demonstrated. Researchers have been unable to recreate

these conditions in animals, and legislature enacted to protect DB infants prohibits human experimentation. Other leading medical groups--the American Academy of Pediatrics, the World Health Organization, and British health authorities--have no conclusive treatment schedule.

Though the DB question might appear to be far from resolved, science is always in a state of advancement; a conclusion is only as good as the methods of the analysis. The epidemiological studies, traditional public health tools used to examine the risk factors for a disease on a population level, were at a disadvantage here because there is little variation in exposure to PIC Syndrome since the mothers of other DB children in other developed countries were vaccinated similarly. Furthermore, the difficulties in diagnosing and determining the exact onset of DB symptoms in children make it difficult to design appropriate studies and compare the results from those studies.

The committee acknowledges they could not rule out another possibility--that the children afflicted with DB are themselves concealing their symptoms, due to the nature of the tri-spectrum disorders and because existing epidemiological tools may not have enough precision to detect the occurrence of the disorder's effects.

The significance of this set of issues transcends the science alone. Infectious bioengineered diseases like retro-Polio, left unchecked, could cause considerable sickness and death. Public-health officials fear a repetition of the Lebanese Anthrax-vaccine history of 2004, when the combination of low numbers of anthrax cases and public concerns about the vaccine's safety caused immunization rates around the world to plummet, with sobering results. In Japan, for instance, vaccine coverage dropped from 80% to 10% in mid-12004 resulting in epidemic involving 1, 213,000 reported cases and over 410,000 deaths. "Similar disease outbreaks could easily occur, with devastating effects," says the committee, "were immunization rates to decline as a result of fears regarding rP-18 vaccine."

Still, "the responsibility of all governments to ensure the safety of the rP-18 vaccine is high, and to continue the cooperative efforts to control the global birth rate," the committee notes. The seriousness of tri-spectrum DB disorders requires rigorous consideration of all possible etiologies. And in any case, it adds, the level of concern in regard to the threat of DB children to general public safety is high and must be meaningfully addressed. This is especially important in that DB registration is now required by law in all 50 states for entry into school and day care, in part, to protect the health of others. These factors, the committee concludes, suggest the need for continued attention to this issue.

For More Information...

Copies of the **National Institutes of Health Report (PIC Syndrome Causes Tri-Spectrum ABF in DB Infants)** are available for sale from the National

Academy Press; call (800) 624-2426 or (202) 334-3133 (in the Washington metropolitan area), or visit the NIH home page at www.nih.edu.

Andra Grace Talan
Third Grade
Mr. Hallsey's Class

My Daddy

By Andra Talan

My Daddy is a dockworker on the river. Every day he loads and unloads things from big boats. He doesn't like it because he says it's a shit job but he can't get anything else. He lives with me and my Grandma in a trailer park. My Daddy's car was possessed last month because he didn't pay the bill so now we have to walk to the store. It hurts my Grandma's hip but she says not to fuss.

My Daddy comes home late at night. When he comes home he is always sad and angry and drunk. He hits me if I talk to him and one time he made my nose bleed. My Grandma says that's because my Mommy died when I was born and because I sometimes do bad things. My Grandma says I have to stay out of Daddy's way.

Sometimes my Daddy thinks about killing me because I killed my Mommy being born. Grandma filled out papers to make me go away to a new school. She says that there are special doctors at the school who will help me stop doing bad things and become a good girl. I don't want to be a good girl but I want to go away from my Daddy. So it's okay.

American Medical Association
DB Classifications

The following classifications have been defined and approved by the American Medical Association for use by all health care providers for their DB-enabled patients:

Psypher [DB Type A] – DB who demonstrates control over one or more of the following brain alterfunctions: Clairaudience, Clairvoyance, Divination [various forms], Precognition, Telekinesis, Telepathy.

Razer [DB Type B] – DB who demonstrates one or more psypher alterfunctions as well as TAC [Telepathic attack/control; see *mindburn*] ability; often not in control of abilities, sociopathic, and/or psychotic, considered highly unstable and extremely dangerous.

Shifter [DB Type C] – DB who demonstrates one or more psypher and or razer alterfunctions, as well as undetermined physical and mental abilities; still under investigation by AMA, reputed to be of Asian or European origins.

Additional Warning from the Surgeon General:

All health care providers are advised to alert local law enforcement when encountering any unregistered DB patient. For more information, contact your local or regional DB Registration Office.



**Prepared Remarks of Attorney General Jose Cabrera
Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing:
"PCD and Traditional Law Enforcement: Working Together to Protect
America"
September 28, 2045**

Good morning Chairman Tuttle, Senator Kennedy, and members of the Judiciary Committee. The United States of America is prepared to enter into the twenty-second century with unrelenting focus and unprecedented cooperation between traditional law enforcement and the newly-formed PCD or Psypher Control Division.

The resources of the United States government are dedicated to righting the wrongs against thousands of American victims of a new class of DB-enabled criminals. Over the last ten years, these so-called "Razers" have organized to spread havoc and domestic terrorism from the inner city to small towns across our great nation, and it is time we put an end to their activities and determination to destroy more innocent American lives.

As I testified eight months ago, America's defense - the defense of life and liberty - requires a new culture of prevention, nurtured by cooperation, built on coordination between traditional law enforcement and DB-enabled agents. The ignorance that has erected barriers to cooperation between government agencies, segregated law enforcement and intelligence gathering, and prohibited information sharing must be replaced systematically.

Our survival and success in this war on DB crime and domestic terrorism demands that we continuously adapt and improve our capabilities to protect Americans from a deranged and ruthless enemy. I will continue to seek the assistance of Congress as we build a culture of prevention and ensure the resources of our government can be dedicated to defending Americans.

Let me share three reasons why the United States will win this war and illustrate those points with some examples.

First, the Psypher Control Division and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have set new standards for cooperation and coordination. The FBI's domestic

intelligence operations have already been substantially strengthened by the support of Psypher liaison agents.

Today, the world's premier intelligence agencies, the CIA and FBI, are moving rapidly to exploit the intelligence opportunity provided by Psypher agents. The FBI and CIA are cooperating thoroughly to share information from PCD "mindsweeps", analyze that intelligence, and coordinate follow-up operations. Their respective case success rates, ladies and gentlemen, are now approaching 100%.

Second, the new PCD integrates intelligence and law enforcement capabilities to protect American lives. Agents are extensive trained to provide:

- DB intelligence sources;
- Covert mindsweep and mindscan surveillance;
- Deep undercover operations;
- Tracking and neutralization of Razer operatives; and
- Criminal subpoenas and search warrants

. . . with seamless law enforcement and intelligence cooperation.

The breadth and talent of the PCD team literally spans the globe – DB agents in forty countries are now actively employed to prevent domestic and international terrorism, integrate intelligence and law enforcement, and deliver results. Director Carter and FBI agents around the world have transformed their intelligence and counter-terrorism operations to integrate PCD and achieve this prevention mission. Their results make Americans safer and bring justice to the full network of DB criminal operatives, often in many ways the public does not see and we cannot disclose.

Third, the Justice Department is prosecuting DB criminals by integrating our law enforcement and intelligence capabilities as authorized under the Children of PIC Act. The Department recently indicted Lucian Jaegot and seven co-conspirators, several of whom were leaders of the New York City Razer Elite. The indictment details that Jaegot served as a liaison to an international coalition of Razer operatives called "Mindstorm." He was also identified as the senior conspirator in plot to smuggle European and Asian Razer terrorists into North America on behalf of Mindstorm. PCD agents were responsible not only for identifying and tracking Jaegot and his co-conspirators, but also for successfully apprehending and neutralizing them.

As I said, these are just a few examples. Today, Director Carter will be providing you with details regarding the fundamental reforms that will enable a swift and

successful integration of PCD agents into traditional law enforcement entities throughout our country.

Finally, I would like to point out that throughout this process, the Department of Justice has acted thoughtfully, carefully and within the framework of American freedom - the Constitution of the United States. Time and again, the actions in the war on DB crime and domestic terrorism have been subjected to thorough judicial review. And time and again, the Department has successfully defended legal challenges including:

- Detaining private citizens -- SUSTAINED
- Mental search and seizure of intelligence -- SUSTAINED
- Freezing assets of purported charities that fund DB criminals -- SUSTAINED

The President's powers to protect the American people are rooted in the Constitution and sustained in Court. The actions we take against the DB threat will always be rooted in the Constitution while accounting for the adapting and changing methods of our enemies.

As the President stated in a recent visit to the FBI, "There is no such thing as perfect security against a hidden network of undetectable, cold-blooded killers. Yet we're not going to wait until the worst dangers are upon us to fight back."

Our strategy and tactics are working: we are gathering and cultivating detailed intelligence on DB criminal activities in the U.S.; we are arresting and detaining potential DB threats; we are dismantling the DB criminal financial network; and we are building our long-term capacity to competently control these extremely dangerous individuals. With the help of PCD agents, we will win this war.

Thank you and I will be happy to take your questions.

DataMemo

From: Thomas Isivitch, PCD New Orleans

To: Andra Talan, PCD New Orleans

RE: (no subject)

Andy,

I told Bayless to send you on remote assignment to get you out of the city. We're moving in on Malak's outfit Friday night. Yeah, I know, you'll be pissed, but it's the way it has to work. One of Malak's burners flipped for me and from what he said, bad shit is coming down. Shit like what we had at the academy. I did a little future peek and I come out of this alive, so don't worry, babe. Will take more than this sick bastard to do me.

When you get back, you can kick my ass all over town. Promise.

Ice

27 Jan 51
Kelly's Pub
French Quarter
New Orleans

I went to Kelly's because they had real Irish whiskey, a bartender from Dublin named Sean and nobody fool enough to hit on me.

I sat in my favorite dark corner, drank whiskey steadily, and ignored the long row of faces at the bar. I'd already tagged the ten other patrons, one by one: *tourist—unemployed—lunch hour drunk—petty thief—depressed—career drunk—hustler—bad news—family man—crysrok addict.*

If I'd been on duty, I could have busted the petty thief. He was still carrying from the last job he pulled. Or the junkie, who was planning to jump the tourist as soon as the oblivious dolt went to the men's room.

I wasn't on duty anymore. I dropped my head against my palms. Someone else would have to deal with them. **Sean.**

The bartender came from behind the bar and thumped down a full glass of Bushmill's in front of me. "You needn't shout."

I glanced at his pale face. "Wimp."

"Bitch." Sean was small, scrawny and mean, but he kept the whiskey coming. Not without comment, though. That was part of the tab. "Half a fifth you've downed, Talan, and it's not even noon yet."

"Really." I sipped from the glass. "I'll have to pick up the pace."

“I watched your Da drink himself to death.” He swiped at the table with the damp rag he carried. “I’m not wanting to see his only child do the same.”

“Then get away from me.”

Sean went back to the bar, and I went back to my whiskey.

#

A text-only message came over my terminal: SHE’S AT KELLY’S.

The memories had already told me that was where she would likely be, but it was good to have confirmation. Kelly’s had become her second home. Tom had always worried she would go the way her old man had, so he kept her from drinking.

He thought he was protecting her, but he didn’t understand her needs. I did. Now that he was dead, I’d take care of them.

#

“Lieutenant.”

I lifted my face, saw it was Gibson, the personnel coordinator from my unit. Some taller guy with a ponytail and an earring – maybe his boyfriend – flanked him.

I always hated Gibson, the little prick. “Go away.” I reached for my glass and missed. Goddamn thing had grown feet or something.

“Is she drunk?” the Earring asked in a cold voice. Went right along with his stony face.

“Probably.” A soft, manicured hand grabbed my glass, kept it from spilling. “But she’s entitled.”

I always liked Gibson, the little prick. “You wanna drink?” Sean could bring a bottle; I could share. We could all have a drink, and I could tell them about Ice – my partner, my best friend, and the only guy I’d ever trusted with my secrets or let in my head. I could tell them how much I’d loved the stupid reckless son of a bitch.

I’d never told him. Might as well tell somebody.

He took the glass from my hand and held it out of reach.

“Lieutenant, it’s time to go.”

“No, it’s not.” I checked my wrist unit, but the digital display was dancing. “Sean doesn’t close until midnight. We got plenty of time.” I waved at the chairs. “Sit down, boys.”

“Your leave ran out a week ago.” The coordinator handed my whiskey to Earring and pulled me off the bar stool. “It’s time to report in now.”

“Time to find another pub.” I tried to find my feet, but someone had amputated my legs. Nope, apparently I was falling down drunk. Or about to fall down drunk. Hard to say, from the way the room was spinning.

“Didn’t that brain wipe Paulson put my papers in?”

“Your resignation bounced.” He steadied me and checked my eyes.
“You need to puke?”

“I did already.” I pushed off his hands. “Twice.” Something bugged me, and I looked at Earring again. He was dark, dark, dark – black hair, black eyes, black clothes. He took a cigarette from a crumpled pack and lit it, not even caring that anyone saw, like tobacco was still legal. The flame made me think of the morgue, and how they’d tried to haul me away from the gurney when they’d brought him in.

Shit, Talan, don't look . . . there was a pipe bomb . . . all they recovered were a few bone fragments . . .

I'd looked. I'd looked and I'd wept over the blackened bits of bones. It was the only time I had ever cried in my life.

Gibson cleared his throat. “Uh, this is Boone. He just transferred to our department.”

There was only one reason the coordinator had hauled a new transfer here to see me. “You gotta be kidding.”

He shrugged. “Chief’s orders.” He hesitated before he added, “He was under with Malak’s crew for awhile, before the last op.”

That sobered me up. / should have been on the last op. If I had been, Ice would be sitting next to me now, helping me empty the bottle. Instead, for the first time in eight years, my partner had ditched me. Told

our boss it was too dangerous and that numbskull data pusher Ball-less had believed him.

And now Ice was dead and I was alone again. Or would be, soon as I found someplace else to drink. I concentrated for a moment, clearing the effects of the alcohol from my brain, and then I headed for the exit.

“Talan,” Gibson called after me.

I stopped by the tourist and leaned in. “Get out of here before you get rolled, dimwit.” When the petty thief heard me, he got up in a hurry and threw some bills down by his half-finished beer. I grabbed him by the collar before he could rabbit, slammed him into the bar and cuffed him to the railing. “Sean, call the precinct and have them send a unit for this trash.” I let go of the thief and kept walking.

“Wait.” Boone caught up and made the tragic mistake of grabbing my arm. “I need to talk to you.”

“I don’t.” I turned around and took a shot at him. It wasn’t much; I was still somewhat inebriated. He didn’t go down, but he staggered back a few steps. Then his black eyes narrowed and he pretended to rub his jaw as the coordinator caught up with us.

I hadn’t hit him in the face, but I was too pissed off to stand around and wonder why he was putting on the act for Gibson. I kicked open the door and strode out into the cold rain.

#

I didn't know how I'd feel, seeing her.

Most female DB-As were small, pudgy and timid, but Andra Talan was tall, blond, and had a body that would make a sex drone short-circuit. She tried hiding it by wearing tailored leathers and shearing her hair close to her scalp, but that only added to the mix.

She may look like a goddess, one of the guys at the academy had told me, but I've been around condensers with more warmth. Try anything with her and she'll rip you to shreds – if you're fortunate.

She'd ripped me to shreds anyway, without even trying.

I didn't like seeing her drunk. Someone should have been with her, stayed with her. On her good days, Andy had never been much of a co-worker magnet, so she'd probably scared off the few who'd tried. Evidently the rest had thought she'd drink it out of her system. They never bothered to find out about her dad, or what he'd done to her.

I knew. I wanted to tell her, to make her understand – only I couldn't. Not yet. Not when she was like this.

"She's always had the tendency," Gibson told me. "Isivitch kept her straight; but now that he's gone . . ." he shook his head as he frisked the man cuffed to the bar and pulled some jewelry out of his pockets. "Sorry the reception wasn't better."

“Not a problem.” Even drunk she packed a hell of a punch, but at least she hadn’t picked up on me – and drunk or sober, I needed her.

“We should go after her.”

“Yeah.” Gibson looked at the thief and sighed. “Guess we should.”

#

On the way to Central, I bought some BAN from the in-cab vending unit and dry-swallowed them. Blood-alcohol neutralizers tasted only slightly better than dirt, but they cleaned out my veins fast, and were better than Insta-Detox gels, which always gave me nosebleeds.

The drone driver was rattling out the usual pre-programmed tourist crap. “On your left,” it told me, “you can see the ruins of the old Garden District, which was burned to the ground during the ’17 riots. On your right is the city’s main tour depot, which offers scenic cruises down the Mississippi —“

“—which is where I’m going to dump your junker ass if you don’t kill the audio.” BAN not only tasted like crap, but it gave me the mother of all headaches. Still, if I took any of the legal narcs to counteract that, Sean’s tox scanner would pick them up and he wouldn’t sell me so much as a glass of water for the next forty-eight hours. Soon as this was over, I was going back and kill me another bottle of whiskey.

Whiskey was all I had left now, and I planned to be faithful.

“Passenger request acknowledged,” the driver said politely. “Mute mode enabled.”

PCD was located in downtown New Orleans, in an ancient building someone had missed when they started building skyscrapers. The hovering structures cast perpetual shadows as they floated between the sun and the surface. Everyone in the department hated the gloomy view, but that was the price you paid for keeping your feet on the ground.

Someday, babe, Ice had promised me. We'll snag us an assignment to Acapulco PCD.

I'd laughed. And do what? Chase guys who swipe sun tan oil from the hotel guest shop?

That or bust the thong-snappers. He'd wagged his blond brows at me. *I sunburn too easy, so you can be the bait.*

I popped a credit chip in the back of the drone driver's cranial slot to pay for my ride, and then hauled myself out of the cab. Gibson and Boone followed me to the entry scanner, where the autodoor demanded I hand over my knife and stunner before it would grant me building access.

Which meant I'd been classified an internal hazard, and Gibson or someone up in ranks had been busy.

“Nice touch,” I said as I strode in. “How am I listed on the IH report?”

“Depressed and a threat to yourself.” Boone, who unlike Gibson had long legs, didn’t have to trot to keep up with me. “Soon as you clear level with the unit doc, they’ll reinstate you.”

I didn’t need this garbage, or him. At all. “Don’t bother. I’m done.”

#

My boys talked about Andra Talan. Not like they talked about all the bitches who hung on them, but like she was another street soldier, an equal. She had that kind of rep. She had the juice, too – some of them said she might be a dub.

My girl Jazz had been a dub. Not much of one, but she rated high enough to take touching me. She’d loved me, too, despite being used as a mindwhore most of her life, and in the end I’d almost killed her for it.

I didn’t know what Andra Talan was, but she wasn’t a dub. She was something else, something that had scared Tom more than the booze. He’d loved her in spite of it, but it had kept him from telling her.

Not knowing what it was, and seeing Jazz the way she was now, only made me want Andy more.

#

I checked the locator panel to find my boss, saw he was in the Chief’s office, and made a beeline for him. Gibson and Boone followed. I

ignored Gibson's sputter as I dodged the reception drone and used a maintenance code to open the door panel.

"Talan." My boss was already on his feet.

"I told Paulson, Ball-less. I even had him read it back to me." I yanked my badge chain from my neck and threw it at him. "So what part of *I-fucking-quit* don't you understand?"

Behind me, Gibson babbled something about job-related stress. Boone just watched me from the door.

My boss focused his usual pissant guard around his mind before he took a step toward me. "You're the best investigator we have. You can't resign."

"*Ice* was the best," I snarled at him. "And you fed him to the Razers."

"We don't know that they were responsible." Bayless straightened his jacket. "Anyone could have planted that bomb. If you really want to do something about Tom—"

"Shove it." I headed for the door.

"It's all right, Richard." The Chief's calm voice cut off my boss's blustering. "Before you leave, Lieutenant Talan, there's something you should know."

Like I couldn't read everything they were thinking, even with their guards. Bayless was steaming with his *she's drunk and crazy - smell it*

over here – Tom rated better while the Chief was has to be tonight – with Malak identified and in custody –

I whirled around, my eyes wide, my heart pounding. “You’re moving on Malak? Tonight?”

“Yes. We’re sending in two officers.”

Malak had run the Razers in New Orleans for the last three years. He’d been tagged for three dozen murders, including five cops and my partner. He’d never been seen or photoscanned, and every witness who had ever seen him had ended up brain-fried before the case could go to trial. And here the Chief had someone who not only knew what he looked like but knew where he was cribbing, and was ready to go in.

And he had enough guard up to keep me from getting anything else. “What do you want?”

My boss made a rude sound, but the Chief ignored him. “You, back on the job. In on the take-down tonight.”

“Fine.” I came at the desk. “Who rolled on him?”

“Your new partner.” The Chief nodded at the door. “Officer Boone ran an undercover op on Malak and his boys for the last six months. He got close to the inner circle.”

I turned on the new guy. I’d never done a mindsearch on another cop; we reserved that kind of thing for serious felons. But this was Malak,

and Malak had killed Ice. New Guy would just have to deal with it. “Brace yourself, this is going to hurt.”

“I wouldn’t.” He tapped the side of his head. “You won’t like the taste.”

By then I’d already gotten in, and saw what had been done to him. Boone had been razeburned, worse than anything I’d ever felt. Whoever had done him had not only destroyed most of his memory center but had wiped out whatever talent he’d once had. Touching his mind was like walking through an empty building after it had been torched.

“Jesus.” I recoiled. “So tell me where he is.”

“Boone will be going in with you,” the Chief said.

I blinked for a minute, not sure I’d registered the right words.

“You’re telling me to take down Malak with this brain-fry?”

“He can’t be read, and no one can hit him again.” A little red flared up under the Chief’s skin. “He’s been cleared by medical.”

“He should be in diapers and eating pureed squash.” I eyed my new partner. “So how come you’re not? You a plant, or gonzo?”

The insult made Gibson hiss in a breath. “Talan, please!”

“Before the burn, I rated a four-five,” Boone told me, not looking offended at all. “I can show you my performance reports, if you want.”

All psyphers were tested annually for talent, and graded by ability on a scale of one to twenty-five. I’d scored a 19/20 last year, but only

because I'd held myself back. Ice had rated a 22/23, probably just to annoy me.

With his low rating, the only way Boone could have been survived the kind of razing he'd endured was if someone had transplanted part of a new brain in his head – still illegal in the U.S. – or if he had been completely insane before the burn.

He wasn't giving off those vibes, though. He wasn't giving off any at all. "How come you're not crispy and drooling?"

"I don't know." He lifted his shoulders. "The docs are still working on the why part."

I wasn't hanging him around my neck just because he was special. "Your talent and memories are gone. You've got so much residual burn I can't even tag you. I don't need the grief."

"Unlike you, I can't be detected. I can still use a weapon." He cocked his head. "Malak will never see me coming."

Since I couldn't search his head, I studied his face. He wasn't much to look at – too dark, too edgy, too much damn hair – but he had spine. Plus he'd taken the worst hit a psypher could get and somehow still escaped becoming a veg for life. "All right."

Ball-less tossed my badge back to me. "Review the case files with him, then report to my office for briefing."

I didn't think Andy would give in, or maybe I was hoping she wouldn't. I didn't want her near Malak. But I needed her mind to get me back in, and close. All I had to do was keep her from seeing him.

If she did, she'd kill me.

#

"How'd you manage to get in with Malak and his crew?" I asked as I led Boone past my desk, past my boss's office and toward the back exit. Everyone in the department was wise and cleared a path.

"Being a 4/5 made it easy; I didn't attract much notice. I just kept my mouth shut and my head down." He glanced back at the herd gathering in our wake. "I take it we're not reviewing case files or reporting for the briefing."

"I memorized the case files. Bayless just wants to hear himself sound like a Captain." I signaled the motor pool to send up an unmarked unit, but my request was denied. "Oh, right, I'm depressed and a threat to myself." I glanced at him. "So what's your code?"

"718961ZWB."

I punched it in. "What's the Z stand for?"

"Zachariah."

A biblical name – they'd been frowned on since religions had been regulated, so someone hadn't liked him. "Your old man raise you?" He

nodded. "My condolences." His code worked, and an unmarked glidecar pulled up outside. "I'm calling you Boone."

"Everyone does. What do I call you?"

Grandma had called me Andra, Daddy preferred You Little Bitch, and Ice had stuck to Andy. Everyone else used Talan or ma'am.

"Lieutenant'll work." I took the driver's seat and enabled the manual controls. Once Boone was inside, I secured the doors. "Why'd you fake the jaw punch at Kelly's?"

"I didn't think you'd want Gibson to find out you're a . . ." he shrugged.

"What do you think I am? A dub?" I laughed. A dub was a DB with psypher and razer abilities – about as rare as a two-headed rabid dog, and just as sweet. "For the record, I'm not."

What I was, and what Ice had been, were much worse. We'd taught each other how to deal with it, all the way back in the academy.

"You do a great imitation, then." He took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Felt pretty hard, even through the burn."

I had given him a good mental blast, back at the bar. Had he picked it up, Gibson would have had me suspended from the force for mind-assault on a fellow officer. But the coordinator was a 1/2, which equaled pretty dense. No one knew about the tricks Ice and I had taught each other.

It had been a minor miracle, just finding each other the way we had.

Now I was stuck with an empty-headed cripple who couldn't back me up except with his Roscoe. I snatched the cigarette from his mouth, opened the window and pitched it outside. "Commit misdemeanors on your own time."

"You're no fun."

"Exactly." I nodded as I pulled out into traffic. "Remember that."

I drove through the city, back to the French Quarter, but I skipped Kelly's and went to my place. I needed my gear, a shower, and food – and time to decide what to do with New Guy.

#

With her spending all day drinking at Kelly's it was simple to gain access. She was careless and untidy; like me, she had better things to do than clean and polish. Her shampoo was unscented and her lingerie smelled of her skin.

I found the stash of illegal sleepers she took when the whiskey wouldn't shut off her brain. I liked that; it proved that she wasn't 100% cop, and that she was more her father's daughter than she wanted to admit.

In a few hours, I was going to own her.

#

Andy took me to her apartment and told me to wait while she got cleaned up. "I'll just be a minute." She nodded toward the tiny kitchen. "You can have whatever isn't growing mold."

Her place was still a dump, clothes everywhere, dirty dishes piled up in the sterilizer, old mail and newspapers spilled in a pile on a dusty side table. Sometime over the last couple of weeks she'd kicked in her viddisplay. I went into the kitchen, dialed up a pot of coffee, then restacked the sterilizer. As soon as her cleanser rattled off, I initiated the wash cycle.

There was a photostan of Andy in her graduate uniform nailed to the kitchen wall. She had a sour look on her face and her diploma crumpled in one fist. I didn't look at the face of the man standing next to her.

Still, seeing the photo was like a punch in the belly. *I have to tell her.* I tried to get from behind the burn, but it wouldn't budge. I didn't have enough juice yet. I could tell her, but without a seek, she'd never believe me.

She came out wearing a clean tshirt and jeans in her favorite color, dark green. "I don't need a maid, Boone."

"Don't get one." I picked up one of her bras and dangled it from my finger. "Would ruin the titillation factor."

A ghost of her old smile curved her mouth as she grabbed it from me. "Wouldn't want to do that." She went to the cabinet and took out a half-filled bottle. "Want a belt?"

"No, and neither do you." I took the bottle from her and replaced it. "I made coffee."

"I already killed my mother, Boone. Don't try to replace her."

"You didn't kill your mother."

"Shit, we all . . ." She paused and stared into my eyes. "When were you at the academy?"

"'39 to '43," I lied.

She didn't let up. "Have we crossed paths before?" I shook my head. "For a minute there, I thought . . ." She exhaled hard. "Never mind. Tell me about how I get to Malak."

"He's moved everything uptown," I poured her a cup of coffee and handed it to her. "They're using the cemeteries now."

She sipped and made a face. "We've never spotted any of them operating around there. Jumping tourists now and then, but nothing major."

"That's because they use the old drainage tunnels under the crypts." I poured my own cup and added two sugars. "They've been moving a lot of people in and out, too."

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I was peripheral; mainly a courier. I listened in when I could, but Malak has trained his people to stay shielded 24/7.” I watched her drag a comb through her short hair and felt my fingers itch. I’d always regretted not making a move on her when I’d had the mind and opportunity. Now I was glad I hadn’t. **“We need backup on this.”**

“I know.” She dumped the coffee into the disposal and grabbed her jacket. **“Let’s go for a ride.”**

#

Boone was quiet, which I was starting to like. Most pysphers liked to chatter. The shrinks figured it was compensation, trying to fit in with the rest of society. I’d never been big on small talk. Ice and I had barely said a word to each other – at least, not verbally.

That was something else I missed – not hearing Ice inside my head. Other than the annual med seeks the unit docs had to perform, he’d been the only guy I’d let in. His thoughts had been low and soothing, like a gentle hand – nothing like his crisp, snappy voice and hyper personality. He’d said the same about me.

You may talk and look like a biker chick, Andy, he told me once, but inside, you sound and feel like a fuzzy little pink-nosed kitten.

Yeah? I'd given his shoulder a friendly punch. Ever been clawed by one?

I parked outside the old junk shop and checked my gear. Since ballistic firearms had been outlawed in '46, law enforcement carried pain inductors, while PCD agents were issued temporary brain wave disruptors. I carried both, plus a couple of street knives. I was all for humanitarian treatment of suspects, but a little good, old-fashioned infliction of bodily harm came in handy sometimes.

"Are you armed?" I asked Boone.

"Yeah." He showed me his disruptor, parked in a shoulder holster, then produced a wicked-looking switchpick which could be concealed in his palm. The latter was used to puncture a lung, skewer a spine, or stop a heart in mid-beat. Convicts and low-rated Razers always carried them.

But Boone wasn't playing Razer anymore. "Why the shiv?"

"It grew on me. I like efficiency." He pocketed it and glanced at the front of the shop. "Why are we stopping here?"

"Roman Solange, aka The Rhymer. Small time fence, pushes hot chips and some light tech. He owes me." I climbed out of the car and did a proximity sweep. "He's got one man inside. Watch him, he's twitchy."

The counterman was an old, grizzly Cajun with weathered skin and thinning hair. He was clicking bets on ponies from his handheld, and didn't look up when we went in. "Wadda ya want?"

“Some poetry.”

His head snapped up. “He ain’t here.”

“Oh please.” I went down the hall. Behind me, I heard Boone murmur something and the counterman bluster.

Solange’s office was as clean and tidy as a professional accountant’s. The big black man dressed legit, too, with a pressed suit and pretty tie, but his convict tattos and overbuilt body spoiled the effect. “Lieutenant Talan.” Casually he blanked out his terminal screen. “What a nice surprise. Haven’t seen you in ages, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“Your nose is getting longer, Rhymer.” I sat on the edge of his desk. “Biz running smooth?”

“I take what I’m given.” He lifted his roofbeam shoulders. “It’s not much, but it’s a living.”

“Uh-huh.” He brought in more in a week than I made in a year. Which reminded me of what I needed. “Got a technofitter on your payroll?”

“That I do, but what’s it to you?”

“Can he boost and disable?”

His gold-etched front teeth flashed. “I wouldn’t know, never asked the man. Illegal technofits’ll get me thrown in the can.”

“Of course.” I leaned over and tapped a couple keys on his board. The screen he’d blanked out popped back into view – he was transferring

funds received from a local candy shop to an offshore account. “Nice chunk of change. Looks very laundered. Have you reported it to Income Regulation?”

“You sure know how to hurt a guy.” He sighed. “What you want, and when, and why?”

I told him everything but the why.

“Razer-tuned, safeties off?” He chuffed out some air. “You’re dreaming, little girl. That’s lethal stuff.”

“A fifteen-year audit would cost more.”

He considered that. “You know the kind of juice something like that takes? We’re not talking a bulb for Easy-Bake.”

I smiled. “Add it to your list of reasons not to mess with me.”

Solange made a face and lumbered to his feet. “Just don’t tell anyone where you got it. I don’t need them Razers in my shit.” He stopped and met my gaze. “Holy Hell, that’s something new. I just got me a flash on you.”

Romy had a rep as a bargain basement precog, but I’d thought it was hype. I lifted my brows. “And?”

“It’s not much, but it’s not nice.” He looked a little shaken. “You caught in the middle of fire and ice.”

#

Rhymer's text appeared on my terminal: DID MY PART. Now it was all downhill from there. I made a note to thank the poet personally.

#

Andy came out carrying a backpack and tossed it to me. I had to let go of the counterman to catch it, but by then he was pretty docile.

She eyed the trickle of blood running out of his swollen nose.

"Anything we should drop off at the station?"

"Not worth the fuel." I shouldered the pack strap. Whatever she'd gotten from Solange wasn't that heavy.

"Bastid punched me," the counterman whined, feeling his nose with tentative fingers. "For nothing." Then he went still and stared at Andy.

She stared back. "Better settle your tab with the bookie by Tuesday, or he'll put you in limb supports. Jersey Girl in the ninth is a sucker bet." She hesitated. "And quit belting your old lady around."

As the counterman sagged and held the sides of his head, I followed her out to the unit. "What's in the pack?"

"Insurance." She got in, then sat and rubbed the heels of her palms against her eyes. "Three months from now that old Cajun's woman is going to stick him while he sleeps. He'll choke to death on his own blood. She'll have enough bruises to sway the DA, though. They'll

give her five years for manslaughter, but she'll behave and be out in two."

"Why didn't you tell him that?"

She turned and looked at me. "Because if I had, he'd go home, get drunk and kill her, then take off into the swamp. He'll smuggle and drink and beat other women for another twenty-seven years."

"You can parallel." I'd never realized that.

"Not always." She started the engine. "Just with low-watts like him."

I should have asked her about me, about what my options might have been, back when I'd had some.

All my options were gone. I couldn't parallel, but I knew hers would either save me, or get me killed.

#

Boone said it would be better to wait until dark, when most of the Razers would leave the tunnels to work the streets. He also insisted I pick up some sandwiches and park outside the crypts where the glidecar wouldn't be noticed.

"No thanks," I said when he offered me one of the po'boys. "I do better on an empty stomach." Though I wished I'd taken a hit from the bottle before we'd left my place. "Who burned you?"

He looked out the window at the setting sun. "Malak, maybe."

"You blow your cover?"

"I don't know. Most of the details are gone." He eyed the transmitter. "Are you going to check in with Bayless?"

"So he can bitch? I'll pass." I switched on the unit terminal and punched up the schematic for the city's sewer system. "All right, tell me about his setup."

He tapped some keys and zoomed in on the drainage tunnels directly beneath us. "Malak uses these two as main entries," he said as he highlighted the corresponding spots, "His crew stays mainly in the old pumping station, here. That's also where they sleep and keep all their hardware and food stores."

"Where's Malak bunking?"

"I never got to see the room, but I saw him and his girl go into this control room" – he made a small circle on the screen with his finger—"and when I went in behind him, they were gone." He traced the line of retaining wall. "If he's got a private crib, it's probably behind here."

"Girlfriend?"

"Mid-rater named Jazz." A muscle twitched in his jaw. "She's domesticated, won't put up any fight."

"What about security and bodyguards?"

“Two in each tunnel, 7/8 raters or better. Minimum four in the pumping station. He doesn’t have any bodyguards and no one but the girlfriend gets within ten feet of him.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“His temper.” Boone shut off the terminal. “I saw him lose it once and wipe two of his best guys in a blink. He’s not stable.” He glanced at me. “All I need you to do is get me in past his men. He won’t know I’m coming.”

“He could shoot you in the head this time.” As the sky turned purple, I took out my stunner and checked the charge. “It might be better for everyone if you stayed in the car.”

“You need someone to watch your back, Andy.”

“Don’t call me that.” I put my stunner in my shoulder holster and grabbed the pack from the backseat. “Look, don’t get yourself shot, okay? I’ve lost enough partners this month.”

Boone led me to an old tomb. The statuette of a depressed angel sat on top of the square marble box, and in her hands was a little slab of stone chiseled with the name “Gervase.” The tomb appeared to be sealed, until he pressed the “e” on the name slab and something clicked. The front panel swung out like a door.

I peered inside, then shouldered the pack and unzipped one side pocket, where Rhymer had stuck the head band. Just in case. "How far in are the sentries?" I asked as I stepped inside.

"About halfway to the pumping station. Maybe two hundred yards." He led me past two dusty old coffins to a small, narrow set of stairs. He handed me a little hand emitter. "Sound carries in here, so be as quiet as you can."

"Yeah." I looked down into the darkness and felt something like a tickle in the back of my head. "Let's go."

#

I felt her from the moment she came into the tunnels. She had Rhymer's little surprise with her, and was planning to use it.

Andra would be mine the moment she did.

"Our guests have arrived." I said into the intercom to the planning room. "Go and get them."

#

As we went down into the dark, the light from our emitters solidified into bright beams. I kept mine down so it wouldn't act like headlights. The smell of rot and sewage filled my head as we made our way into the tunnel.

Rhymer's precog echoed in my head. *Won't be nice . . . fire and ice.*

I felt the minds of the two men ahead of us before I saw them, and stopped. "Boone, give me a hand." I tugged the band out of the pack and strapped it across my brow.

He shone his emitter on the pack. "What is that?"

"A wave amplifier. I can use it to generate a blanket field around us." And boost my own waves to knock out a whole roomful of minds, if need be.

He reacted like I'd just offered him a dose of flesh-eating herpes. "You can't use that in here."

"I'm not taking any chances with these freaks." I turned my back to him. "Switch the transmitter on for me."

He ripped open the pack instead and jerked the unit out. "This isn't a brain scrambler." He thrust it in front of my face. "Look at it."

"I saw him take it off the shelf, and . . ." I studied the unit, which was not what Solange had showed me, and then I yanked the band from my head. "Okay, so I didn't watch him pack it up, I don't know what it is, and when we're done here, Rhymer's a dead man."

"Someone tipped him off. Malak knows we're coming." Boone looked from one side of the tunnel to the other. "We have to get out of here, right now."

He'd distracted me, so I didn't feel them until a split second before they appeared. "Company."

#

Being helpless pissed me off, but all I could do was stand and watch as Andy slammed up her guards and projected at Malak's pair of goons. The biggest one reeled back, startled, while his buddy jumped at Andy. I lunged and knocked him to the tunnel floor before he could touch her. I figured she'd need a few seconds to disable the big one, but in a blink the one under me went limp and wide-eyed. Behind us, a heavy body fell with a thud.

"He's done." She helped me to my feet. "But he'll send more when they don't show up with us."

God, she'd gotten so strong. Or maybe I'd never known just how strong she was. "How many can you take on at the same time?"

"Four. Maybe five." She glanced at the small one, who was still staring at us. "I can't hold them for forever, Boone."

I took out my stunner and switchpick. "All I need is a minute alone with Malak."

"You're going to kill him." She wasn't asking, but I nodded to make it official. "You make sure you do, because wounded, he will take us both out."

Something inside me relaxed, another part of me tensed. "Don't worry. I'll get the job done."

#

Killing Malak would get both our asses dismissed, if not thrown in jail. I didn't care, and evidently, neither did Boone.

But I needed a reason from him, so as we trotted toward the pumping station, I asked for one. "Is it because you were burned?"

Boone glanced at me, surprised. "No."

"Then why do you want Malak dead?"

"He's killed enough people." He stopped, lifted a hand, and listened. "It's right around the corner," he said in a lower tone. "If you take point, I can slip around the back, get at him while you keep them busy."

I could sense at least five minds in close proximity, and two of them were almost as strong as I was. I did a quick precog and saw myself taking them down, but not without some trouble. "Make it quick."

I checked the perimeter before I went to the door and eased it open a crack. With my guards up, none of the six men in the room could sense me. I hoped. I tugged open the front of my jacket and tucked my weapons in my pockets before I sauntered in.

"Hey boys." I assumed an appropriate, vapid expression and glanced around. "Somebody order some company?"

"She's the cop." One of the Razers jumped to his feet and pulled a knife. "Where are Slice and Joey?"

“Taking a nap.” He was one of the strong ones, so I hit him as hard as I could. “Like you should.”

He fell over like a chopped tree, and the sound of his jaw smashing into the concrete made the others pause, long enough for me to tag the other highrate. Holding him would take too much of my focus, so I shut down his lungs until he passed out. By then the other four were on me.

#

He was sitting in front of a computer terminal inside the concealed room, which was soundproof – he couldn’t hear the commotion Andy was causing outside. He didn’t even look around when I came in. “What is it?”

I was staring at Jazz, who was slouched in a chair next to his desk. Her eyes weren’t blinking and saliva dribbled from the corner of her lips. “Why did you keep her body?”

“She’s still good in bed. Better, actually, now that I don’t have to listen to her mouth.” He turned around slowly, and his blond brows lifted. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“That’s what they keep telling me.” I tightened my grip around the pick.

#

Knowing Malak was only a few feet away gave me the extra juice I needed to deal with the last four thugs. That and a well-placed stun to the ribs of one and the groin of another.

I wiped the blood from my mouth as the last one went down holding his crotch and writhing. "Bet that hurts."

I went into the control room and found the door in the wall. I couldn't hear anything from the inside, so I slipped in with my guards up and reinforced.

A brain-fried girl sat propped up in a chair. Boone was on the floor, wrestling with another man. They had his weapon wedged between them and were fighting to stab each other in the neck with it.

I took aim, then saw the other man's face and froze. "Huh?"

Boone wrenched his head to the side. "Andy, get out of here."

A spontaneous precog hit me: *Me standing in front of Ice, my hands on his face, holding him. Boone, stabbing him from behind with his pick.*

I'd never been wrong about the future or Ice. I changed my target and fired, blasting Boone in the shoulder.

"Andy, thank God." Ice shoved Boone's partially-paralyzed body away from him and rolled to his feet. "They've been holding me hostage here for weeks."

I walked up to him slowly. It was Ice, the same short, stocky blond-haired man I'd been having nightmares about for weeks. Still I reached

out, my hand shaking, until my fingertips skimmed his gaunt cheek. He looked like shit but he felt real and warm and alive. Ice was alive.

I laughed, bit my lip, then threw myself into his arms. “Jesus. How? Jesus.”

His cold, dry lips pressed against my forehead, then my nose, then my right eyelid. “I don’t know, baby, but I am so glad to see you.”

“No.” Boone’s voice croaked on the word. I looked over Ice’s shoulder to see him crawling toward us. “Not him.”

I stepped back. “They brought in some burnt up bones and said it was you. They said that someone bombed your car.”

“You can see it wasn’t me.” He turned and kicked Boone hard in the side, making him curl up. “This cop, he works for Malak. Did you know that?”

“No, he never mentioned it.” I glanced at the girl. “And her?”

“Jazz, Malak’s bitch.” He kicked Boone again. “This asshole is the one who razed her.”

I crouched down next to him. “And here I thought he was harmless.”

Ice snorted. “He’s a shifter, Andy. He can make you think whatever he wants. We have to kill him, now, and get out of here.”

Boone’s hand touched mine. “Parallel it.”

I shouldn’t have listened to him, but there was no way Boone had razed Jazz. A 4/5 just didn’t have the juice. So I precogged, and saw

myself going out with Ice. Men jumped us, tore me away from him. Ice strapped Rhymer's toy to my head, and it boxed me inside my skull. He brought the drooling girl out. Ice reached into my mind . . .

I shifted away from that and precog into another timeline. In this one, I was standing with Ice in my mind, only he wasn't Ice, he was something horrible and old and Boone was coming up behind him . . .

"Oh, no." Ice sounded disgusted. "Andra, you bad girl – you weren't supposed to peek." Hard hands jerked me away from Boone and onto my feet. Whatever mind was behind his eyes was open to me, and completely alien. "Now you've gone and ruined it."

"You're not Tom Isivitch."

"Aren't you a bright girl?" He shoved me up against the nearest wall and pinned me there. "That's right, I'm not your partner. I just borrowed his body after I burned his brains out of it."

"You're Malak." In Ice's body. It wasn't possible. But he was in there, like a cancer.

He smiled with Ice's mouth. "You cops have always wanted to know what shifters can do." He was gathering himself and focusing, and the power rippled off him in cold waves. "Let me demonstrate."

I saw Boone getting to his feet, and clamped my hands on Ice's face. "Show me."

Malak's mind smashed into my head, through every one of my guards and into places no one had ever been. I didn't try to keep him out; I'd have had more luck sprouting wings and flying around the room. I invited him in, the way I would have Ice.

So here we are, baby. His presence was malignant and vile, as if something had poured pure filth into my brain. His mother hadn't just gotten PIC, she'd done chems and narcs while she'd carried him. It had crafted him into a monster before he'd taken his first breath. ***You owe me a mind.***

I didn't hurt your girlfriend.

I'm going to take you anyway. I'll put you inside her, and you'll be my little plaything until we wear out these bodies. He had shifted so many times that he couldn't remember the body he'd been born in. Shifting was what had driven him over the edge. ***Then we'll just go get us some new ones.***

Malak, did you do that to Ice?

He was too much trouble to bother with. All I needed were some of his memories and body.

You must have skipped our academy years. I locked my hands around his head. *Because you missed one really important thing.*

What?

Ice was a shifter. I sank myself into his head as Boone lifted the switch pick over Malak's neck. *And so am I.*

I held him for as long as it took Boone to stab him, then boxed his mind in with mine. For a second I wasn't sure if I could hold him, but something came around me and enveloped me, reinforcing me.

We could have ruled the world, baby. Lived and ruled it forever.

Thanks, but I'll hold out for my pension plan. I wrenched my mind away from his.

Malak clapped a hand to the back of his neck, coughed, and then grinned. "Got to taste you anyway. You're . . ." He crumpled to the floor and went still.

He wasn't Ice, but I still bent and checked for a pulse.

Boone dropped the bloody pick and met my gaze. "If you'll hold off on kicking my ass, I'll tell you everything."

I caught him before he fell, and supported his weight against me. "You should have said something before now, Tommy."

"You knew."

"Well, yeah. I can feel you now, and besides, who else would pull this kind of shit on me?" I wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

#

We couldn't go to the local hospital, so Andy took me back to her place and bandaged my shoulder there.

"You want to tell me what really happened to you?" she asked after she made me a cup of her lousy coffee. She took out a bottle of whiskey and a glass for herself.

"The operation was a set-up. Zach Boone tried to get me out at the last minute, but Malak was waiting." Before she could pour it, I held out my hand. "Don't, Andy."

"Guess I got into some bad habits while you were gone." She handed me the bottle, then sat down beside me. "So Boone was a real cop."

"Yeah." I looked down at my body - Boone's body - and wondered if I'd ever get used to it. "Good man, too."

I told her how I had tried to keep Malak away from Boone, and how Jazz had gotten between us and taken a bad proximity burn. How Malak had gone crazy then and razed Boone out before turning on me. She kept eyeing the whiskey, but didn't try to take the bottle.

"I stabbed him three times in the chest, but that wasn't enough." I adjusted the old scarf she'd used to make a sling for my arm. "Malak forced me out of my body and took it over. Somehow, I don't know how,

exactly, I shifted into Boone. I woke up a couple weeks later in Boone's body."

"How could you shift into a razed mind?"

"I don't know. Maybe because whatever was left of Boone wanted me to."

She rested her cheek against her hand. "So he left Boone for dead, not knowing you were in there."

I nodded.

"And Malak wanted me to reanimate his girlfriend, or whatever. God." She sighed. "I am not typing up the report on this one."

"There won't be a report." Gibson stepped into the kitchen, his weapon drawn. "You two are going back to the tunnels, where you're going to fix things the way they should be. Then I think you'll both be razed in the line of duty." When Andy focused, he pressed the gun against my head. "You so much as nudge my brain, Talan, and I'll blow a hole in his."

"I always thought Malak was a little too dumb to be running the show by himself." I looked at Andy and laced my fingers together. "But you got a lot smarter while I was out of commission, Gibson."

The coordinator smiled down at me. "Call me Jazz."

#

I'd just gotten Ice back, I wasn't giving him up a third time. Not to Malak's girlfriend. When I saw him twine his fingers together, I knew what he wanted me to do.

Ice and I hadn't merged minds since the one time we'd tried it at the academy, and that had been accidental. Even attacking Malak we'd be careful to keep ourselves on separate sides. But I was tired, and he was still recovering from the shift to Boone's body. The only way we could immobilize her was to merge into each other's heads, then attack as one cojoined mind. It also had to be timed perfectly, or the backlash would raze one of us.

I tapped out the count with my fingernail on the table. Three . . . two . . . one . . . *now*.

My partner's mind and mine met and entwined, like his fingers. Then we merged.

—Go for her central nervous down through the stem into the spine shut down the nerves watch her she's still got some juice—

Human minds – even DB minds – were never meant to do this, and the instinct to push Tom out was so strong I couldn't breathe. He not only saw and felt but became part of my mind, as much as if he'd been born inside me. I wasn't myself any longer, I was Andra/Tom.

The only reason we could do it was because we trusted each other without reservation. Or maybe it was the love we felt for each other, the

love we'd starved and neglected while we'd tried so hard to be good friends.

—we can control her body now lower the arm put the gun on the table she's fighting back slow her heartrate that's it not too much just make her lightheaded there she goes—

As soon as she started to sag, we separated. We caught her arms and lowered her to the floor.

"Okay." I sat down, my whole body trembling and covered in sweat. "I really never want to do that again with you for as long as I live."

"Amen." Ice was white-faced and his hands shook as he removed the power cell from Jazz's weapon and tossed it on the table. "So if you love me, you're just going to have to tell me with your mouth."

"There are other ways to do that, you know." I took the bottle and went over to the disposal unit, and started emptying it down the drain. No regrets this time. "All kinds of ways."

Abbadon

by S.L. Viehl

“There’s a cobweb up there,” Father Carlo murmured as he passed by me. I was on my hands and knees, scrubbing the old mosaic tile. “Be sure to take care of that before you leave today.”

Like one little cobweb was going to make the old place collapse.

I looked up at the saint statues carved in the low arch overhead and spotted the thin, dusty strand hanging from St. Paul’s receding chin. St. Luke’s church had been built to look just the ones my grandparents had left behind in Ireland, but the inside was pure Italian. Mama had said that was because the Vatican had paid to rebuild the church after the Chicago Fire of 1871. It was a heavy, gloomy place, with looming vaulted ceilings and walls of load-bearing brick covered with stucco and tons of gilded plaster. The fussy baroque Italian stuff collected a lot of dust but did nothing to cheer the place up. The two-story rectory behind the sanctuary had the same unyielding, grim atmosphere.

Maybe it was the scorched brick you could still see near the foundations, or the smell from the prayer candles, but the only warmth St. Luke’s seemed to offer was the promise of eternal hellfire for all of us sinners.

City tours often brought tourists by to walk through the sanctuary, which the guides said was a bastion of late-19th architecture. St. Paul and the thirteen other martyrs had been installed above the huge altar, one said, right after the flu epidemic that had killed so many people after World War I.

“Saints ward off evil,” my mother had told me, “and Lord knows in this neighborhood, that’s a full-time job.”

All I knew was, they were ugly and a bitch to keep clean. But then, who was I to judge things for their beauty? “I will, Father.” I’d need the dust mop with the long handle, which meant another trip into the basement.

I *really* didn’t like the basement.

I’d sort of inherited my job at St. Luke’s from my mother, who had spent years on her knees there praying for my affliction or my Father’s soul, and scouring away the heel marks of the faithful. Usually she assumed the position to scrub the floors — my problem was permanent and Mama felt certain that Dad had gone straight to hell. Still, sometimes she scraped up enough spare change to light a candle.

“Dear Lord, forgive my dear departed husband Francis Patrick Murphy for his sins and try not to let him aggravate you as much as he did me,” she’d say as she lit the wick and bowed her head. Or, more seriously, “My Nia’s a sweet girl, please take His mark away.”

The doctor at the free clinic had assured Mama that *His mark* was just a birth defect, and not because my Dad had been a good-for-nothing drunk and gambler. Mama never argued with the doctor; she said he was a Jew and of course those people were all screwed up about religion.

Before I found out otherwise, I didn't know how to feel about my affliction. I felt like I was a good person, and I hadn't killed anyone. I absolutely adored my little brother, so it couldn't be like a Caine thing. I'd never been as big on God as Mama was, though, so maybe He wanted to point that out to the rest of the world. Naturally I'd always assumed *His mark* meant *God's mark*.

The Jews weren't the only ones who were screwed up.

Mama cleaned the sanctuary at St. Luke's on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, and she took me and my brother with her on the weekends. It was only five blocks from our apartment, so we'd walk. As long as we were quiet, we were invisible; the priests only spoke to Mama if we made noise or if she missed something: "The children should not laugh so loudly, Mrs. Murphy" or "Remove that dripped wax from the candle stand by the Holy Mother's statue if you would."

Teag and I never liked St. Luke's. Aside from the dismal feel of the place, sometimes there were strange noises that came out of nowhere; bangs, rattling, and what sounded like whispering voices. Mama always said it was just the old pipes or the wind, but they gave my little brother

nightmares. Teag would wake up screaming about monsters under his bed – and always on the nights when we'd been at the church.

Mama told him his imagination was running wild, but I borrowed a pocket flashlight from our landlord Mr. Cipella and slipped it to Teag on the sly. “When you wake up, shine it under the bed,” I told him. “Monsters are allergic to light and they'll run.”

“What if the light doesn't work?” he asked me, his eyes wide.

“Call me, and I'll give them a great big kiss.” I made a hideous face – not a hard thing for me – and he giggled, bless him.

We were allowed to go anywhere we wanted at the church, except into the rectory, on the altar or down into the basement. The rectory was where the priests lived, the altar was sacred, and the basement was simply off-limits. Mama always went by herself with her to get the mops and buckets from downstairs, and she scolded us if we even got near the door.

“It's dark and dirty and no place for you to play,” she'd always tell us. Mama herself never stayed down there more than a minute. When she went there, I could hear her footsteps pounding on the stairs, like she was running up and down them.

We also went to St. Luke's on Sundays, but that was different. That was church going. I had to wear a dress and a long lace veil, and a pair of Mama's shiny black shoes that always pinched my toes. Teag had to wear

a little suit and tie and have his hair wet-combed. We sat all the way in the back with the other poor people, and stand and kneel and listen to the priests pray and talk about God and sinners and salvation. Most of it was pretty boring, but the choir sounded nice. I never got to be around many people, either, so I liked watching them through the lace of my veil.

I got caught once, when I was about ten.

An old lady came up to our pew after mass. "Your girl was staring at me, Fiona Murphy," she said, her voice all dried up and cranky. "You tell her to stop."

My mother put an arm around me. "She can look where she wants, Mrs. Reilly."

She pointed a bony finger at my face. "Marked her for his own, Abbadon has. I don't want her evil eye cast on me."

Mama stood up and folded her arms. "Then maybe you should be moving on."

Later at home I asked my mother who Abbadon was, but she wouldn't say. When I pestered her, she told me there were plenty of crotchety old ladies in the world who had nothing good to say to anyone, and to stop harping or she'd make me stay in my room for the day.

The old lady wasn't the only one who said things. The kids in our neighborhood would too, whenever I walked with Mama to church or the store. We lived on the other side of Washington Square in the row

houses behind the Newberry Library. The library and St. Luke's faced each other on opposite sides of open park everyone called "Bughouse Square." Mama said it was because in the old days people would gather there to hear soapbox prophets and libertarians, but now it was the exclusive territory of high school dropouts, hookers and drug dealers.

The O'Brien brothers – Ian and Avery – were the worst, and always did their very best to bug me.

"That's a pretty dress, Two-Tone." Ian was a scrawny red-headed boy with liver-colored freckles and beady brown eyes. "Why don't you give it to someone who'll look good in it?" He snatched at my skirt.

"Little snot." Mama smacked him in the head with her purse. "Keep your hands to yourself."

Ian's brother yanked him away, but looked back to yell, "Freak! Look at the freak! Free freak show!"

"You're such a prize, Avery O'Brien?" my mother shouted in return. "Go back to school; you'll get a bigger vocabulary!"

The most important priest at St. Luke's was Father Augustus Tower, who gave mass only on high holy days. He was going to be our next bishop, Mama said, and sure enough by the time I started taking my high school home courses, he went off to Italy. He came back a year later wearing a different dress (Mama said they were called cassocks but Teag called them dresses, which tickled me.) People started calling him "Bishop

Tower" and "Your Eminence" instead of Father Augustus. He brought back a couple of new Italian priests, though I don't know why. Neither of them would have anything to do with the parishioners.

"They're mean, too," Teag told me once after Sunday school. "Tommy Harliss gave Roy Kelly the finger in class and Father Carlo was walking by and saw and came in and beat Tommy's hand with a ruler. Until it bled and everything."

I told Mama that, and she said Teag could stay home from Sunday school with me from then on. Which was fine with my brother; he'd never thought it was fair that he had to go when I didn't.

That was about the same time when Mama stopped bringing us with her on her cleaning jobs. She said I was old enough to stay home and watch Teag by myself. She started feeling bad soon after that, would come home at the end of the day so pale and exhausted she could barely eat.

"That cut on your arm isn't healing, Mama," I said one night. She'd said she'd gotten it cleaning up some broken beer bottles after a party at one of the office buildings she worked. "Why don't I call the doctor?"

She covered the raw gash with her hand. "Don't fuss, Nia. I'm just getting older, takes me longer to heal."

Mama collapsed one morning, right in front of the stove, and threw up blood all over the floor. I rolled her on her side and made Teag call 911

while I kept her from choking on it. The paramedics let us ride with her in the ambulance to the hospital, but even after she stopped puking in the ER they said she had to stay. I had to take Teag home by myself. We went every night to see her, and on the third night a doctor came and said my mother had stomach cancer, the bad kind.

Mama never came home again.

Days stretched into weeks. Father George came every day, but he mostly stayed with Teag and watched cartoons with him in the waiting room. Bishop Tower came to see Mama twice, and both times she asked me to leave the room. When I came back the second time, she was crying. I wanted to yell at the bishop for upsetting Mama, but she smiled through her tears and said he'd given her absolution, and she was going to heaven.

"His Eminence says you can take my place, Nia," she added as she was drifting off. "You'll always have work."

I'd already taken over her cleaning jobs, working at night so people wouldn't have to see me. I didn't want to spend my life scrubbing floors at places like St. Luke's, but with my face no one else would hire me and we needed the money. "That's great, Mama, but you're not going anywhere."

"You'll be safe." She closed her eyes. "Just do the work, look after your brother, and say your prayers."

I'd said three rosaries on my knees every night since she'd gotten sick, but God hadn't paid any attention to me. Maybe I disgusted him too, or maybe he wasn't such a great God. My mother had worked all her life, had gone to church all her life, and had never hurt another person. And He was letting her die. "What's the use in praying, Mama?"

Her eyes opened wide, and her bony hand grabbed my wrist. "You'll pray and you'll be a good girl." Spit flew from her lips and her whole face turned red. "Swear to me you will, or the he'll have you. He won't just mark you this time – Abbadon will take your *soul*."

"Who is Abbadon?"

Her eyes went glassy. "Those whops will see to him. You just do as I say." A wet cough seized her, making her choke.

I didn't understand but I didn't want her throwing up blood again. "I'll pray, Mama. Every night. I promise." I felt like crying. "He won't get me."

"I know he won't." She stopped coughing and subsided, her fingers limp on my wrist. "You're my good girl."

Mama died three days later.

St. Luke's had a mass for her, conducted by the bishop himself, and that afternoon Father George presided over the funeral. He called Mama a good Catholic woman who had gone to her reward. We didn't have any family, but the other people who worked at St. Luke's came to pay their

last respects. Hardly anyone stared at me. Bishop Tower met me and Teag as we were walking from the cemetery.

“Your Eminence.”

“Fiona was a good woman, Niamh Murphy.” He said my name the old Irish way, Nee-uv, instead of Nia like Mama and Teag called me. He held out his hand. “Will you serve St. Luke’s as well as your mother did?”

Teag was only twelve; I’d just turned seventeen. I’d nearly finished my high school equivalency but people wouldn’t look at my GED when I went to job interviews. They’d look at my face. The only way the Family Services people would let me keep Teag was if I had steady work. I’d fry in hell with Daddy before I let them put him in some foster home.

“Yes, Your Eminence.” I bent over when he held out his hand, and pressed my lips to his ring. “Thank you.”

#

I went to St. Luke’s the following Wednesday evening. Our neighbor Mrs. Harris had agreed to baby sit on nights while I worked; our television was better than hers and she had no kids of her own so she liked fussing over my brother.

Even with Mrs. Harris bringing over popcorn balls and her homemade snicker doodles, Teag didn’t like me leaving him behind. “What if something bad happens to you? What if someone tries to jump you?”

I thought of Ian O'Brien and his brother, who were still hanging out with their thug friends at Bughouse Square. "I'm too poor to rob, little brother, and too ugly for anything else."

"Aw, Nia." Teag put his hand on my left cheek. "It's not so bad." He ran his finger down the uneven border of my affliction, which started on my forehead, went down the side of nose, over the middle of my mouth and chin and disappeared into the collar of my t-shirt. "You're pretty to me."

"Don't say that, I can't afford eyeglasses for you just yet." I kissed the end of his nose. "Be good and go to bed when Mrs. Harris says, okay?"

I left my hair in a ponytail when I rode my bike down to St. Luke's. Mama always had me wear my hair loose whenever we went out, but I was tired of hiding behind it. Like Teag said, it wasn't so bad – maybe if I stopped hiding people would get used to it.

When I passed Bughouse Square the O'Briens were at the corner, as usual.

Ian grabbed his crotch and grin at me. "Wanna pump on this?" he shouted.

"Why? Is your hand sore?" I yelled back.

I locked my bike at the rack in the parking lot of St. Luke's and met Father George in the church office. Father Rocca and Father Carlo were

there, too, although they just eyed me before going back to talking to each other in Italian.

Father George was a big teddy-bear kind of priest with lots of bushy white hair and a big nose that was always drinker-pink. I always went to Father George for confession because he gave the easiest penance. He waved me into the chair in front of his desk. "How are you and your brother getting along, Miss Murphy?"

"We're doing well, Father, thank you for asking." Teag was still having nightmares, this time about Mama, and I was tired from all the extra work, but I didn't want to burden him. He'd done enough, keeping watch with us at the hospital and taking care of the funeral.

"That's good. Things will get better in time, my dear." He sat back in his chair. "As you know it was Fiona's wish that you take over cleaning the sanctuary for us, and we're happy to offer you the job." He named a fairly decent weekly wage, enough to let me drop two of my other night jobs. "I don't think I have to go over the particulars; you've seen what your mother's done over the years."

Father Carlo came over and put something on the desk in front of me. "She has to wear this."

I picked up the material and unfolded it. It was a long black cotton scarf, the kind old ladies wore. "But Mama never—" I stopped and looked at Father George.

“The bishop receives visitors here sometimes.” Father George looked terribly embarrassed. “Likely he doesn’t want you to . . .startle anyone.”

“It won’t cover everything. For that I’ll need a grocery bag.”

“Don’t be fresh, girl.” Father Carlo looked like he wanted to beat me with a ruler. “Be glad you have the work.”

“That’s enough, Carlo.” Father George’s whole face was pink now. “I could speak to the bishop, Nia.”

“No, that’s okay.” Slowly I draped the scarf on my head and tied the ends under my chin. “I need to see the supply closet downstairs. Mama never let us go down there with her.”

Father George cleared his throat. “Of course. I’ll take you down and show you everything.”

The stairway to the basement was to the right of the altar, partially concealed by the life-sized statue of Blessed Mother. Automatically I genuflected in front of the altar before following Father George to the door. There was a new deadbolt on it, and he noticed my surprise as he took out a set of keys.

“The bishop has been storing some research in the basement,” he said as he unlocked the door and opened it, then took a key off his ring and handed it to me. “He’s asked us to keep it locked at all times.”

He turned on a light switch before we went down the stairs. The basement was dingy and cold, and the one bulb in the ceiling didn't push back the shadows much. It was also kind of empty, except for some old beat-up chairs, a big old wooden cabinet against one wall, and a metal tub in one corner. It smelled dank and a little moldy, like all basements did. There were three doors to the side, all of which were also locked with padlocks, and he opened the left, smallest one with the same key that he'd used on the door.

"The supplies you need are here." He tugged on a chain to light up the inside. "All we ask is that you keep it neat and remember to lock the door when you're finished for the day."

I took out the bucket, mop, scrub brush and cleaner that I needed, and then heard something bump. It sounded like it was coming from inside the wall. "What was that?"

"Mice, I'm afraid." He chuckled. "Even in the house of the Lord, we have our fair share."

I carried everything upstairs and remembered to lock the door behind me and Father George. He told me to let him know if I needed anything else, then went back to the office. All I had to do was fill the bucket at the big sink in the church kitchen before I got to work.

Cleaning the sanctuary took Mama at least three hours, but I was younger, stronger and faster, and finished it in two. After I squeezed out

the mop and emptied the bucket, I gathered up everything to take it back downstairs.

The padlocks kind of bothered me. The priests had never locked anything before, except the outside doors at night to keep the homeless drunks from sleeping in the pews. I'd never seen any sign of vandalism at the church either, but I had been spending a lot of time lately at the hospital.

I carried my stuff down to the cleaning closet and put it away. *What is there to steal, anyway? The cheap pine cleaner? The old bucket?*

Maybe there was something inside the big cabinet. It wasn't locked, so I before I went upstairs I gave into the urge to have a peek inside. It had four shelves at the top packed with dusty old books and three long drawers at the bottom – the bishop's research, maybe? I couldn't see any droppings. Cleaning it out might uncover the nest, but Father George had said not to bother with it.

I peered at the book spines, but they were written in another language – *Le Voyage d'Hiver – Quand Je Dors – Amour Immortel*. Evidently the bishop was studying something like French.

Mrs. Harris wanted to be home by midnight, so I didn't have time to poke around much. I closed the door and then jumped as something bumped inside the cleaning closet behind me. I backed away and hurried

up the stairs. Maybe I'd ask Father George if we could put down some traps.

#

Things got better over the next couple of weeks. Mrs. Harris said Teag was sleeping through the night instead of waking up crying for Mama three and four times, and I adjusted to the late hours and the heavy work. The bills were still pretty bad, but the doctor wrote off the money we owed him and the hospital let me pay what I could without sticking me with late charges. A social worker came once to check on me and my brother, looked at my face and muttered something about Medicare, then left. Family Services seemed to forget about us after that.

"Mama's an angel now, and she's watching over us," I promised my little brother. "Between her and me, everything will be fine."

Cleaning places at night wasn't a hard job. The only one I really hated was going to St. Luke's. I always had to pass by Bughouse Square and the O'Briens to get there, and even when I rode on the other side of the street Ian or his brother would yell something lewd at me. I hated the scarf and the way it made me feel – like I was a leper or something – plus the sounds in the basement never went away, and sometimes they were really loud. Father George had someone put out some traps in the cleaning closet but they stayed empty.

Father George was always nice to me, but the Italian priests watched me like I was going to steal the communion chalice. I don't know why. I'd never taken so much as a penny from the poor box, so they had no reason to suspect me. Maybe they just didn't like me.

Priests I'd never seen before started coming to the church at night. One of the Italians would meet them in front, and sometimes they'd walk through the church to go to the rectory. A few stared at me – the scarf really didn't cover a lot – and whispered things to whoever they were with.

Usually they spoke in Italian – *Quel bambino non dovrebbe essere qui. La ragazza è nessuno.* Once I heard one with a British accent say, *You're not thinking of trying again, are you?*

Mostly they ignored me. I wished other people would. One Saturday night Ian O'Brien actually ran into the street and chased after my bike, but I could pedal faster than he could run, so he didn't catch me.

"I'll get you next time!" he yelled out.

I was out of breath by the time I got to church and locked up my bike. Maybe I'd have a word with our landlord about the O'Briens; Mr. Cipella was big and mean enough to put a little scare into them. As I walked up to the sanctuary I saw a well-dressed woman standing outside the entrance, as if she was waiting for someone. I turned my face away as I went past her, but she spoke to me.

"Excuse me?"

I stopped and kept my head down. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for a friend of mine." She stepped closer, and I got a glimpse of her face. She was a very light-skinned black woman with long, curly dark hair and beautiful eyes. "His name is Gage Seran, and he was in this area around four months ago."

"I'm sorry, I don't know anyone by that name."

"Have you noticed, um, a lot of bugs inside the church?"

"No. I'm the cleaning lady, and I do my job. There aren't any bugs."

A little offended, I tried to go around her.

"I'm sorry – wait." She handed me a photo with a little card paper clipped to it. The photo was of a smiling blond man with light eyes. He was even prettier than she was – so gorgeous, in fact, that it almost hurt to look at the photo. "That's a picture of Gage. If you see him around here, tell him Vanessa Whitman is looking for him. He can reach me at that number after seven p.m. any day of the week."

"All right." I tucked them into my pocket and then dared another look at her, but she was gone.

#

I found the hole in the closet about two months after I'd been working at the church, and only then because I knocked down a bottle of wood polish getting some rags. When I bent down to pick it up, I saw a line

of ants crawling past my foot. They were coming from a fist-sized hole in the old baseboard.

Yuck, where's the bug spray. We didn't have any, so I balled up one of my cleaning rags and went to stuff it in the hole.

Light was shining through the hole from the other side.

Why would there be a light fixture behind a solid wall? I watched, and the light flickered, the way a candle did. I dropped the rag and saw a glimmer on the edge of the hole, and reached in. The floor on the other side was wet and cold and crawling with ants.

"Ugh." I jerked my hand away. "Ow!" The edge of the hole cut into the back of my hand. I stood up, saw I was bleeding, and muttered as I pressed a clean rag against the scratches.

easy

I didn't know where the whisper had come from, or even if it was real. Maybe I had imagined it – but it sounded like it was on the other side of the wall.

"Niamh Murphy?"

I shrieked when I saw Bishop Tower standing in the doorway, then sagged. "Father Augustus – I mean, Your Eminence." Automatically I hid my hurt hand behind my back. "You startled me."

"Are you through here?"

“Yes, Your Eminence.” I gathered up my supplies and walked out of the closet. Father George and the two Italian priests were waiting outside, and the two Italians had small black leather bags that looked like what doctors in old movies used to carry for house calls. Father Rocca’s face was shiny and unhappy, but Father Carlo only stared back at me with his usual glower.

The bishop gestured toward the stairs. “Please escort Miss Murphy back up to the sanctuary, George.”

The Italians stayed down in the basement, so it surprised me when Father George asked me to lock the door by the altar. “Shouldn’t I leave it open, so they can come back out?”

“No, they go out. . . some other door.” He gave me a wry look. “I’m dying to know what they’re doing down there, too, but the bishop hasn’t confided in me. Sometimes he can be a very private person.” When I went to fill the bucket, he caught my arm. “What have you done to your hand, child?”

“Oh, I scratched it on the edge of the bucket.” I didn’t know why I lied, exactly. “We’ve got an ant problem down there, Father – they’re in the supply closet.”

“I’ll have to call an exterminator. There’s a first aid kit in the church kitchen; be sure to bandage that hand before you start working.” He paused. “Nia, you haven’t noticed anything unusual lately, have you?”

I thought of the light coming through the mouse hole. “Like what, Father?”

“You know, any sounds or voices? Anyone calling to you in a strange language?”

I was going to tell him the truth, but something knotted inside me, and I heard myself lying again. “I’ve only heard pipes rattling whenever someone flushes upstairs.” I glanced at the door. “Why?”

“No, but I hear the strangest things sometimes.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I need to have my ears checked, I think.”

“Could there be some homeless people sneaking in down there to sleep? Through the other door?” That might explain the voice. Winos and bums would sleep anywhere dry.

Father George seemed to relax. “That could be it; the poor wretches are certainly resourceful. You be careful down there. Let me know if you see anyone sneaking in or out.”

He left me to scrub the floors, and for awhile, I did. Then I heard a sound I hadn’t heard before coming from the basement.

I got up and walked over. It was definitely coming from downstairs, and it sounded like chanting. I eased the door open wider and listened.

“ . . . aurem tuam ad preces nostras, quibus misericordiam tuam supplices deprecamur, ut animam famuli tui Abbadon . . . ”

Abbadon? I took a step onto the stairs, but the chanting stopped and there was a muffled cry.

Father Carlo appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He rushed up as I backed out. "Get out of here!" He slammed the door in my face.

#

I was mad, so I left my supplies outside the basement door and left. I felt more tired than usual when I got home, and went to bed as soon as I saw Mrs. Harris out. I couldn't sleep, though. I kept seeing the basement in my mind, hearing the strange chanting, then that single, stifled cry.

Light behind a wall. The sounds. The metal clanking. That voice. It didn't make sense to me. *Could there be someone living down there? Why would the bishop go down there with those Italians?*

My hand hurt. I'd doused it with peroxide and covered the scratches with some band-aids, but it still throbbed like a bad tooth. Finally near dawn I drifted off, but I didn't sleep well. I had a strange dream or a series of dreams that ran together, not like any I'd ever had before.

The first part was kind of silly – I dreamt I was locked in the supply closet. Bishop Tower was on the outside, banging on the door and shouting something. I was afraid to let him in . . . but he had the keys – he had locked me in, hadn't he? So why was he wanting me out of there?

Get out get out get out get out get out –

Then I wasn't in the closet anymore, but in some kind of museum. There were beautiful paintings in heavy frames on the wall, and gorgeous flowery carpet on the floor. The windows were ceiling to floor sized, with little square panes that had funny ripples in the glass. On the other side of one stood a man, his hands pressed to the glass. He wanted me to let him in, I could see that, so I went and tried to open the window. Instead, his hands came through the glass like a ghost's, and he pulled me through to the other side, like I was one, too.

You can feel me now.

I nodded – he wasn't speaking English but somehow I understood every word. I looked up into his beautiful face, but I couldn't see it too clearly – his eyes were covered by a shadow, like a blindfold. I got the sense that he needed me to do something. *What must I do?*

Find me. His hands framed my face. *And I will save us.* Blood trickled down his cheeks like tears.

Where are you?

I found myself back in the closet, alone, and terribly afraid. I looked down and saw the mouse hole I'd found growing larger. In a panic I bent and tried to stuff it with rags but something sucked them through. The hole stretched up and out until I could have walked through it.

I couldn't see what was on the other side, because of the light – light that now poured out over my face.

Like the sun . . . I never got outside much during the day, because of my face. *Feels so warm . . .*

The light was gold and red and lovely, and I could feel it, like the touch of a gentle hand. Like his hands on my face.

So nice. Nobody had ever touched me like that. I wanted to close my eyes and wallow in the sensation.

The light drew me, pulling me toward the hole, and even though I couldn't see there was nothing I wanted more than to step through it to the other side.

What does he want? He couldn't want me – I was ugly. And who was he? I could feel his presence growing stronger. *What do you want from me?*

True ben wall

It was his voice, low and soft, barely a whisper. His voice was sad and needy, like someone in terrible pain. I had to go to him, but . . .

Niamh a day wall

The light grew brighter and hotter, and it wasn't so nice anymore.

NIAMH May a pell dee sang ah voh tray sang.

It was going to suck me in and burn me up, like the fires of hell, and it was filling the room and my head until I was sure it would scorch the eyes out of my sockets –

NIAMH

I stumbled back, away from the light, and screamed.

“Nia?” Small hands were shaking me. “Nia, wake up!”

I opened my eyes and saw my little brother standing over me. I was sitting huddled in the corner of my bedroom, with my arms over my head. My nightgown was soaked with sweat and I was shaking so hard that my teeth chattered. “Teag?”

“Are you okay? You were yelling.” He crouched down and touched my face, which was wet. “You’re crying, what happened?”

“It was just . . . a nightmare.” I felt like I was going to fall to pieces, right there, but I couldn’t. I held out my arms and hugged my brother.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t.” He buried his face in my hair. “Was it Mama?”

“I don’t remember.” Yes, I did, and it scared the wits out of me. I’d never had a dream like that.

Teag insisted on making me breakfast, which included singed toast, runny eggs and tea so strong it was black. He hovered and looked so anxious that I ate every bit and emptied the tea pot.

“Do you want more? I can make more.”

God, I loved him so much. “I’ll be fine.”

“I almost forgot.” He ran out of the kitchen to his bedroom, and came back with the little pocket flashlight I’d given him. “You said

whenever I woke up from bad dreams I could turn this on and look under the bed, remember?"

I nodded.

He gave it to me. "You can use it now, Nia." Then he made a scared sound. "What happened to your hand?"

"Oh, I just scratched it." I glanced down.

No wonder he was scared. All of my band-aids were soaked through with fresh blood, which was now dripping onto the floor.

#

I would have quit St. Luke's after that nightmare, but Mr. Cipella came up the same day to tell me our rent was being raised.

"I held off while your Ma was sick," he said, looking at the rug instead of me, "but I can't no more. All the other tenants got the same increase, you understand."

As it was we'd have just scraped by. Now if I quit St. Luke's, we'd have to find another, cheaper place to live. That meant moving into the projects; and as bad as the neighborhood around Bughouse Square was, the projects were worse.

"Thanks for letting me know." I hesitated. Our landlord was a devout Catholic, so maybe he would know. "Mr. Cipella, do you know what the name Abbadon means?"

He peered at me. "Where did you hear that?"

“An old lady cursed me and said it once.” I lifted my shoulders. “I was just wondering . . . who is he?”

“He’s mentioned in Revelations.” He thought for a minute. “He lives in a bottomless pit that will be opened during the End Times.”

And Bishop Tower was praying to him? “So Abaddon is Satan?”

“No, he’s an angel, I think.” He went over to the little bookcase next to Mama’s armchair, took down our big family Bible, and began flipping through it. “Here it is.” He handed me the book.

And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months. And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon . . .

It sounded scary, all right. “What does it mean?”

“I don’t know, Nia. I never liked reading Revelations much myself.”
Mr. Cipella patted my shoulder awkwardly. “Maybe you should ask one of the priests at St. Luke’s.”

“Yeah.” I closed the bible. “Maybe I should.”

Before I went to St. Luke’s on Saturday night, I went through a box of my father’s things in the back of Mama’s closet and found the jack knife he used to carry. It only had a four inch blade, but it was sharp and small enough to fit in my pocket, and I could open it with my thumb. If there was some homeless bum living behind the wall, or if Ian O’Brien tried to grab me again, I could scare them with it. At the last moment I put Teag’s little flashlight in my pocket, too.

Ian and his gang were waiting at the corner of the square, and I had to stop my bike because the light was red and traffic was unusually heavy. Avery came over this time, but halted a foot away and held up his hands like he was surrendering.

“What do you want?”

“What happened?” He nodded toward the gauze I had wrapped around the scratches, which were still raw.

“I hurt it.” I kept my good hand on Daddy’s knife.

“Somebody bothering you?” When I lifted my brows, he turned a little red. “Besides us, I mean?”

“No.”

“You let me and Ian know, huh? If anyone bothers you. We’ll kick his ass.” He ducked his head and shuffled his feet. “Sorry about your Ma.”

I looked over his shoulder at Ian, who didn’t give me the usual leer but simply nodded. Evidently I was still a freak, but I was *their* freak. In a weird way, it made me feel nice.

“Thanks.” The light turned green, and I rode off.

I expected everything to be shadowy and scary but St. Luke’s was just the same. Nothing happened when I went downstairs – well, *ran* downstairs – to get my supplies. For once it was really quiet, too. I didn’t hear any bumps or clanks or anything. Father George didn’t even come out of the rectory until I was done dusting the old wooden pews.

“I thought I smelled the lovely scent of pine.” He inspected me. “You’re a little late tonight; is everything all right?”

“My bike had a flat tire.” Good thing I didn’t go to confession anymore, I’d have to say a ton of Our Fathers and Hail Marys for all the lies I’d told. “I’ll be finished soon.”

“Do you want me to drive you home, child? I can wait up for you.”

“No, I have my bike.” I could tell he was worried. “I’ll be fine, Father. Go to bed.”

“If you’re sure.” He gave me one last troubled look before he went over to blow out the blessings candles. “And if you would, remember to lock up before you leave.”

“Father?” I tried to think of how to ask. “Bishop Tower and the priests, the other night, were they praying down there?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned. “Perhaps they were. Why?”

“I thought I heard them say Abbadon – what does that mean?”

“It’s the name of a fallen angel. The destroyer from the pit, who comes to bring about the end of the world.”

“And they were praying to him?”

“Praying he’d skip Chicago, I imagine. These Italians priests.” He rolled his eyes. “Everything with them is such a drama. Do you know they insisted on blessing the church inside and out when they arrived? It was practically raining holy water around here for a solid week.” He smiled.

“Ah, well. The ways we worship our Lord are many and mysterious. I’ll let you get back to work. Good night, Nia.”

I chuckled. “Good night, Father.”

I thought about it as I finished the floor, but nothing made sense. When I was through I emptied the bucket and carried everything downstairs. Now the absence of sounds bothered me; the silence seemed to crawl over my skin – like ants.

“I’m not afraid,” I muttered under my breath as I opened the closet and turned on the light. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

I checked the mouse hole, but it was the same size it had been the other day, and there was no light or bugs coming out of it. Surely I'd imagined the light, just like the voice. I had to stop spooking myself.

I took the mop and crouched down by the small dark hole. "Okay, you ants." I stuck the end of the mop handle into the hole and banged it from side to side. "Go find somewhere else to - "

Something grabbed the handle and yanked it. I shrieked and let go, and fell back on my butt. The hole sucked in the handle until the mop end slammed into the wall.

EASY.

I crawled backward, scraping my palms on the concrete floor. "Who's in there? Who are you?"

The mop jerked, then went still.

"Go hifreann leat!" I yelled. Mama would have slapped me good for using the old curses, but I was scared. "Go dtachta an diabhal thú!"

Chan eil moran Gàidhlig agam.

I don't speak much Gaelic.

It wasn't a demon or an angel, it was a man. An ordinary man, talking on the other side of the wall. I sagged with relief.

Tá tú mall.

He was complaining because I was late tonight? I scrambled to my feet. "This is private property, mister. You come on out of there, right now."

He didn't say anything.

Mama had said there were still places in Ireland where people refused to speak anything but Gaelic. Maybe he'd come over on a boat. "Do you speak any English?"

Tha, beagan. A little. You can . . . help me?

"Are you stuck in there?"

Ba mhaith liom. Yes.

"I have to go get help. You stay there, all right?" That was a stupid thing to say. "I mean, just wait, I'll get Father George."

NON!

The mop head slammed into the hole again, and this time it went through, taking a square foot of wall with it.

Help me.

He sounded awful, like he was terrified. That scared me more than seeing the mop disappear.

"I can't get to you." And still I went to the wall, and crouched down to peer in. There seemed to be a room on the other side, but it was dark. "I can't even see you." I moved a piece of wall, and something dripped onto my hurt hand. It was dark, and wet, and it burned a little.

I stared at my hand as one of my scratches disappeared.

Help me now.

The dry wall was old, and thin enough that I could pull pieces away with my hands – and I found myself doing that, wrenching at the edges of the hole, trying to make them bigger. A strange urgency hammered inside my head. I suddenly knew I had to get him out, quickly and quietly, before they found me doing this.

Somehow our lives depended on it.

The hole was finally large enough for me to squeeze through. “Okay.” I got down on my hands and knees and poked my head through. The smell on the other side of the wall was awful – like someone had emptied a dumpster in the hidden room – but I worked my way in. My hands slipped on the wet floor and I went down. Something hard in my pocket bruised my thigh.

Teag’s flashlight. I pulled it out and switched it on.

The room was bigger than the entire basement on the other side. It looked like it had been walled off a long time ago, with all the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling and old mouse droppings everywhere. I stood up and swept the flashlight slowly around me. There was a rickety-looking table and two scarred up old chairs in front of a fireplace, which was overflowing with dead ash. On the table was a glass filled with red wine.

There was also, of all things, a brand new refrigerator sitting in one corner.

No sign of the man, though. "Where are you?"

Chains rattled behind me.

I turned around and pointed the flashlight toward the sound, and saw him. The flashlight nearly fell out of my fingers. "Oh dear God."

Gage Seran wasn't beautiful anymore.

They'd taken his clothes and stretched him out against one wall. At first I thought he was tied to the life-size cross – there were chains wrapped around his neck, waist and knees – until I saw the ends of the huge black nails piercing his wrists and one foot. He'd worked the other foot free, apparently, and had that right next to the hole. His thin body was spattered with dark paint.

No, not paint – old, dried blood.

Sometimes he can be a very private person.

The Italians and Bishop Tower had done this to him. There could be no other explanation, no one else came down here. But why? What possible reason could they have had to do this?

Help me.

When my light reached his face, he turned his head away, but not before I saw the heavy leather gag. How had he called to me through that

thing? I lowered the light as I walked to him. “How do I . . .” I was afraid to touch him, afraid I was going to be sick. “How do I get you off this?”

His looked at me again, and his eyes were two black holes in the shadows covering his face. Take chains away.

He wasn't speaking with his mouth. He couldn't. I was hearing him inside my head. But that wasn't possible. How could that be possible? Numb with shock, I looked at the bolts they had driven through his body. “Your hands and feet – “

Chains. Please.

I didn't want to touch them — they were caked with blood, too — but I had to help him. In fact, getting those chains off him was all I could think about. I started looking and found the ends of one hanging on hooks driven into the wall behind him. I unhooked it and began unwinding it from his waist. The links were cold and sticky, and so heavy I had to let the weight of the chain fall to the floor.

This close I could smell him; and his body had an odor like dead flowers. How long had he been kept in this room? Weeks? Months?

“Why didn't you yell out to me before?” Then I remembered the muffled cry – maybe he had. “Why did they do this to you?”

He didn't answer me. He had his head turned toward the hole I'd crawled through. Quick chains please.

I left the chain around his neck for last. Why it hadn't strangled him was beyond me, but at last I had it off him, and I flung it to the floor in disgust. "I'll find something to pry the nails out." I swung the flashlight around, hoping to see a hammer or tool. On the other side of the hole, a door slammed into a wall.

"Who's in there?"

It was Father Carlo's voice. Father Carlo, who must have known this man was down here and had kept it from Father George. Maybe he'd even nailed him to the cross. "We have to hide."

There was a jerking, tearing sound. *Ce n'est pas nécessaire*. One of the chairs flew across the room and lodged itself under a door I hadn't seen before.

When I turned back to the cross he was standing on the floor in front of it, and there were huge bloody holes in his wrists. The nails were still stuck in the cross.

I paid no attention to Father Carlo's shouting or the way the blocked door was shaking. I was staring at Gage. No man on earth could have withstood that kind of pain. "Who are you? *What* are you?"

He lifted his bloody hands and untied the gag. The smell of dead flowers changed and become lush and enticing, like walking through a florist's.

Gardenias. He smells like gardenias.

“Open this door at once!”

I could have stood there for the rest of my life, just to breathe in that beautiful smell. “Are you . . .Abbadon?”

Don't fear me.

I was moving to him then, and I couldn't stop my feet or make myself turn away.

Wood splintered. “No!” Father Carlo's voice seemed so far away. “Don't give him the blood! Don't let him touch you!”

Blood? Touch me? Why would he want to? I was ugly and he was so beautiful. I couldn't breathe; the smell of flowers was so strong I felt smothered by them. And the light, the light was attracting bugs from somewhere, because they were whizzing around my head, their wings making a low droning sound.

The flashlight dropped from my fingers and hit the floor.

Gage moved, his steps slow and hesitant, until he reached the table. He took the glass of wine and drained it. Then he went to the refrigerator, took something out, and drank from that before coming back to me. Absently I noticed he was moving a little better, a little faster.

Vous m'avez sauvé. His teeth flashed as he pulled off my scarf and touched his cold fingertips to my left cheek. He had a wonderful smile, but his teeth were odd. Maintenant je vous sauverai.

The light became gold and red and warm, and so intense that I had to close my eyes. Tears streaked down my face, and I felt the swarm of insects grow thicker. A door slammed open, and a man screamed. “NO!”

I couldn't see or breathe anymore but it didn't matter. His hands were cold on either side of my head but that didn't matter.

Nothing mattered.

#

There were dreams after that. Strange, terrifying dreams, where locust filled the air and an angel spread his black wings to block out the light that was burning my eyes. Father Carlo was there, and he hit me with something, so hard it knocked me away from the angel. I saw my own blood pouring down the front of my shirt and fell. I knew I was going to die there, on that filthy floor, but the angel was free, and would suffer no more pain.

Then there was darkness, and voices.

Seran—

Take her.

Mon Dieu, *what have they done?*

I do not know.

Vanessa –

I know I know I know. Shit.

A woman's hands ripped open my shirt, and I tried to push them away. *Leave me alone . . . I'm dying . . .*

My ass you are, babe.

And then there was only darkness.

#

My little brother's voice brought me out of the dark. Teag was talking to someone, and he sounded frightened.

"—going to be okay?"

"I think so, honey."

I was floating; I felt warm and comfortable and safe. Hearing the lady's voice didn't bother me. She had a nice voice. She would be nice to Teag.

Another male voice, deeper and accented, spoke. "She is waking."

"About time." Something touched my cheek. "Open your eyes, Nia, I need to check them."

I obeyed her, but the light shining in my face hurt, and I squeezed my eyelids shut again. "Sleep some more," I mumbled.

"You've been doing that for three days, don't you want to take a break?"

Three days? I tried to sit up but the lady held me down. "My brother

— "

“I’m right here, Nia.” He was sitting at the side of my hospital bed, grinning at me.

I took a moment to get my bearings. I was in a hospital room, hooked up to a bunch of equipment, and Vanessa Whitman stood right next to Teag. At the end of the bed was a tall, handsome man with white-streaked black hair. Automatically I turned the left side of my face into the pillow.

“Hey.” She put one of her pretty slim hands on my unmarked cheek. “We’ve already seen everything. Well, *I’ve* seen everything – I made Jack leave the room when I examined you.”

The thought of the man seeing me at all made me cringe. “It’s ugly.”

“What, your face?”

“My affliction.”

She nudged my chin up. “You don’t have an affliction, sweetheart. You have congenital, progressive ectasia of the superficial cutaneous vascular plexus.” She smiled. “Or in simpler terms, a great big port-wine stain birthmark.”

“Mrs. Reilly said it was the devil’s mark,” Teag said, trying to be helpful.

“Well, Mrs. Reilly was wrong, big guy.” Vanessa lightly skimmed her fingers over the purple and red half of my face. “I don’t see many of these,

and I've never seen one as extensive as your sister's, but they are treatable in some cases."

"The laser treatments were too expensive." I peeked over her shoulder at the man, but he didn't seem disgusted. That was a first.

"Your birthmark isn't disgusting, kiddo," she said, reading my mind. "It's kind of exotic, actually."

She was beautiful, she had no idea. "Exotic. Sure." I felt something around my neck and touched a big bandage. "What happened to me?"

Vanessa glanced at the man before she asked, "You don't remember?"

"No, I - "I thought of Gage Seran. "I found your friend. They had him in the basement, and he was . . ."

"I know. He's okay." She leaned over and patted my hand. "You got to him in time."

"In time for what? What were they doing to him?"

"Our friend was in trouble," the man told me, sounding very matter-of-fact about it. "You saved his life."

Again the doctor looked at him, and this time she seemed upset. "By the way, Nia, this is my boyfriend, Jack."

"Hi, Jack."

Vanessa chuckled. "He's good at that, too."

“Jacques-Sebastien Cyprien.” He gave me a small bow. “A pleasure to meet you, *mademoiselle*.”

I recalled the crucifix and his wounds. “Did you call the police? Father Carlo – Bishop Tower, did they do that to him?” It still didn’t seem possible.

Vanessa brought over a tray table with a jug of juice and a plate of toast and fruit. “You’re still very weak, and you need to eat and drink now. We’ll talk about this later.” Her gaze went to Teag, who was obviously hanging on every word.

“I can’t stay here.” I looked around. Mama hadn’t had a room as nice. “I don’t have any medical insurance and I can’t afford to pay for this.”

She smiled at me. “This is my private clinic. There won’t be any bills for you to pay. And while you’re recovering, Teagan will be staying at our home.”

“It’s really cool, Nia,” my brother said, his eyes bright with excitement. “Dr. Whitman has a pool and a big screen TV and she gave me my own room and there are oranges and grapes growing in her hothouse and you can just go in there and pick them whenever you want!”

“That’s really great, Teag, but we don’t know Dr. Whitman.” Or what she expected as repayment. “We can’t impose like this.”

“Your brother is a great kid,” she told me, “and he’s completely safe with us. My clinic is built on to our house; his room is right down the hall

from here. Any time you want to see him, you just let me or one of my staff know and we'll bring him to you."

I suddenly felt too tired to argue. "All right." As I relaxed back against the pillows, I saw the bag of red fluid attached to the pole next to my bed. "Blood?"

"We're giving you a refill; you lost quite a bit." Before I could ask how, she rested a finger against my lips. "Later you can ask me all the questions you want. Rest now and eat something if you can."

Teag went with the man, and Dr. Whitman checked my heart and blood pressure before excusing herself to make rounds. I couldn't eat much but I drank like I'd been in the desert for forty days and nights. By the time I emptied the jug, a nice black woman in a nurse's uniform came in.

"You want to try the bathroom, or a bed pan?" she asked me.

I wrinkled my nose. "Bathroom, please."

"Can't blame you, honey. I never could pee laying down myself." She chuckled as she helped me out of bed and showed me how to push the IV pole as I walked. Then she waited outside the little private bathroom while I emptied my bladder and washed at the sink.

I didn't like looking in the mirror but I wanted to see what was wrong with my neck. A huge gauze dressing covered the left side, and when I lifted up one taped edge I didn't see what I expected to. "Oh my God."

“You okay in there?” the nurse called through the door.

“Yes.” I pulled off the rest of the bandage, then I opened the door.

“Who did this?”

The nurse tried to take my arm. “Dr. Whitman will talk to you about that.”

“No, you talk to me.” I yanked aside the collar to show her the dinner-plate sized spot of white, unmarked skin. “Where did it go? How did she remove it?”

“She did not,” a man said from behind the door. “I did.”

#

Gage Seran was in a wheelchair, and he was wearing wrap-around sunglasses, but he looked much better than the last time I’d seen him.

“Hey.” I forgot about my neck and went to him. “Are you all right? Should you be up?”

The nurse murmured something about leaving us alone and slipped out of the room.

“I am well, thanks to you. And I am quite recovered.”

He was in a wheelchair, which didn’t make me feel better, but the rest of him look great. Better than great – perfect. “But you don’t have any bandages, or – “ I looked at his hands but there were no holes, no stitches, and no scars. “Or anything.” I backed away until my legs hit the

edge of the chair, then I sat down, fast. "I think I'm going to freak out a little now."

"Please, do not. I heal quickly." He wheeled over to me. "I need to talk to you. Cyprien has been teaching me more English, and from knowing you – I am speaking better?" I nodded. "Niamh, I was prisoner there for long time. I nearly died, but you, you saved me."

"I don't remember what happened." I wasn't sure I wanted to. "How did we get out of there? What happened to my neck?"

He reached out and touched my hand. It is easier if we speak this way, yes?

I can't – then I heard myself in my own head. I'm not psychic. I've never been psychic. How can this be happening? I tried to take my hand away. Is it you?

We have shared something; it connects us now. He urged me closer to him, until we were nearly bumping noses. Then he pressed his hand against my left breast, so that my hand was caught between my heart and his palm. Your mind is as beautiful as your soul.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Unlike my face.

Non, cherie, you are wondrous . . . He closed the small gap between our faces and brushed his mouth against mine. I'd never been kissed by anyone except Mama and Teag, so I didn't know what to do. I wanted to know, though – I wanted to kiss him back in the worst way.

He drew back. I must go soon. Gently he drew his fingertips down the ugly side of my face. When Vanessa explains what they did, do not hate me.

Hate you? How could I?

His mouth touched mine again. Do not hate me for what I am. I would never have hurt her –

“I leave you alone for a few minutes and look, you’ve already lured my cutest patient into your room.” Vanessa came in and smiled at me as I jerked back from Gage. “I’m seriously jealous.”

For once I knew what to say. “But you already have Jack.”

She grinned. “That I do, and he’s a handful.” She looked at Gage. “You, however, should not be pushing yourself around here just yet, pal.”

“I will return to my room. Thank you again, Niamh.” He smiled at me before he wheeled himself out.

“He kissed me.”

“So he is feeling better.” Vanessa seemed amused.

I stared at the door, still dumbfounded. “And he can talk inside my head.”

“That’s not all he can do, honey. You’d better get horizontal yourself now, you’re looking very pale.” She pulled back the covers for me, then sat down on the edge of the bed. “Why don’t you take a nap?”

“Why don’t you tell me what’s going on here?”

“I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

I tilted my head. “After finding your friend nailed to a cross? It’ll be a walk in the park.”

“Jack and Gage have been friends for a long time. Gage came over from Europe to visit us about four months ago, but there were some men following him. These men . . . hurt people who they think are evil. They grabbed Gage before he could get to us, took him to St. Luke’s and interrogated him.”

“They had him nailed to a cross, like Christ. I found him like that.”

“I know.”

I blinked. “But he should have bled to death – and now he doesn’t have any wounds. Or scars.”

“Gage has an extremely rare blood disease. He spontaneously heals. When they hammered those nails into him, his body immediately healed around them.”

A laugh burst out of me. “Oh, right.”

“It’s true.”

I wanted to slap her. “I’m not a doctor, but I’m not idiot, either. How did you do this? How did you heal him so fast?”

Vanessa sighed. “Look, Nia, you got caught in the middle of a horrendously bad situation. I can’t give you all the details, but we’re very

grateful to you for helping our friend. We would like to do the same for you and your brother.”

That hit my pride. “Teag and I are fine.”

“The men who tortured Gage will be looking for you. We have to get you and the boy someplace safe, you can’t stay in Chicago. Jack and I have a house on the beach in California; we thought you might like to stay there with us until you get back on your feet.”

“I can’t leave. Everyone we know, everything we have is here, and unless you live next to a circus, nobody will give me a job.” Which reminded me. “Gage said he took the mark from my neck – how is that possible?”

“You had a bad laceration there, and Gage got some of his blood on it carrying you out of the basement. The unique properties of his immune system removed part of your birthmark and helped the wound heal.”

I touched my neck and remembered the part in the dream when Father Carlo had hit me. “So do I have AIDs now or something?”

“No, honey, you’re fine. It didn’t affect you the same way it did . . . other people. And just for the record, he doesn’t have AIDs.”

“What kind of blood disease does he have?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, and you look like you’re ready to pass out.” She patted the bed. “Come on, hop in.”

I felt very tired all of a sudden, and climbed into bed like an old woman. I curled up on my side. "I don't understand any of this."

"I'm sorry, Nia, I wish I could tell you more." Vanessa stroked my hair with a gentle hand. "But you've put yourself in great danger already, and we need to protect you and your brother. It's one of those `what you don't know won't hurt you' situations. Just trust me a little longer, okay? We're the good guys."

"Okay." I closed my eyes.

#

Gage woke me up a few hours later – or at least, his thoughts did.

Cyprien and his woman are gone. Wait until the nurse finishes rounds, then slip down the stairs.

Darkness surrounded his thoughts like an angry fist, and each word seemed to slam into my head. He could have been standing next to me, yelling in my ear.

Gage?

I am well, Niamh. He sent something along with the thought, something wordless that was like being covered with a warm, soft blanket. He wanted me to sleep, or thought he could put me to sleep.

So I played along and closed my eyes. See you tomorrow?

Yes. Goodnight.

I kept my mind blank until I felt him leave, then I sat up. Gage was lying to me. He wasn't well, he wasn't going to see me tomorrow. He was going back to St. Luke's. He was ignoring Vanessa's orders; I flashed on his memory of her telling him he could not go after the Italians by himself.

He was going to get his silly French ass killed, was what he was doing.

I could feel Gage was outside the clinic now, but I couldn't see anything. He was doing weird stuff, smelling the air, kneeling on the ground, pressing his hands into the dirt.

Come to me.

He was calling something, something that would help him get in and get to them; something only he could control. The same way he had called me. I couldn't see what it was; he was still blocking that. I couldn't see anything through his eyes. But then, I'd been blind for a long time to a lot of things.

That cut on your arm isn't healing, Mama.

The band aids on my hand, all soaked through with blood.

You're not thinking of trying again, are you?

The glass of red wine on the table in the basement. The new refrigerator.

Don't give him the blood!

Gage, not bleeding, even with nails through his hands and feet.

When Vanessa explains what they did, do not hate me.

Gage, drinking the wine, drinking from that plastic bag in the fridge. A bag filled with dark red blood. Gage smiling at me, his teeth white and strong . . . and wrong.

I would never have hurt her.

The wine that wasn't wine.

Gage has an extremely rare blood disease.

A disease that healed.

It didn't affect you the same way it did . . . other people.

Other people like my mother.

And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon . . .

I got up and jerked the IV needle out of my arm, and winced at the sting. The soft cotton pajamas they'd given me were the only clothes I had only had to wear, and I'd have to go barefoot. Didn't matter, I thought as I edged past the nurse's station and into the stairwell.

The devil and all the demons in hell couldn't keep me away from St. Luke's tonight.

#

It took over an hour to walk from the private clinic to my old neighborhood, but it was after midnight, and there were hardly any people on the street. I didn't get lost, either; Gage's thoughts acted like a

compass so I simply followed them. Nobody stopped or spoke to me until I reached Bughouse Square.

“Hey, you sleepwalking, Two-Tone?” Ian O’Brien called out from the corner.

I looked over at the gang of boys, thought about it, and then crossed the street. A couple of them whistled when they saw how I was dressed but Avery used his elbow and told them to shut the hell up.

Ian took off his leather jacket – something I’d never seen him do – and draped it around me as he gave me the once-over. “Where have you been?”

“In the hospital.” I looked down the street. “One of the Italian priests over at St. Luke’s put me there. They had a man nailed to a cross in the basement, and I think they killed my mother.”

They should have laughed at me, but none of them did. They just gave each other these weird looks. Finally Ian said, “What are you gonna do about it, Nia?”

“I’m going to make them pay.” I scanned their faces. They were just boys, really, but they’d grown up on the streets. Nobody messed with them. “Feel like helping?”

Avery smiled. “Oh, yeah.”

I told them about Gage, and what I wanted them to do. When I was finished, they scattered. Only Ian lingered, waiting until the last boy had

gone before he touched my shoulder. "You should maybe wait here. We can get your friend out."

I pushed my arms through the sleeves of his jacket and zipped the front of it. "He doesn't know anyone but me. Got a blade I can borrow?" He pulled a jack knife from his pocket and handed it to me. I tucked it in the front pocket. "Thanks, Ian."

"No problem, Two-Tone. You can keep the knife" –he tugged at the zipper pull– "but I want the jacket back."

Walking up to the front entrance of the sanctuary took every ounce of courage I had. I'd put on a brave front for the boys, but inside I was terrified – if the priests could nail a man to a cross, they could do a lot worse to me.

They already did, I reminded myself. They took my mother away from me.

I felt Gage, who was waiting somewhere close by but not inside the church yet. He was focused on the men inside, the men he'd somehow summoned there.

Tower. Rocca. Carlo.

I slipped into the sanctuary, and saw all three men standing in front of the altar. I knew every nook and cranny of the church, so it was easy to stay in the shadows, unnoticed as I moved forward.

“We need the Chief Investigator from Rome to come at once,” Bishop Tower was saying. “If you explain things to His Holiness—”

“*Abba Patre* is not involved,” Father Carlo said. “Nor can he be, Augustus.”

“You don’t understand, they are organized now!” The bishop blotted his face with his sleeve. “They have created places of asylum; they have many allies – that female doctor is helping them—” he faltered as someone came in from the rectory.

It was Father George. “Your Eminence, I went down to the basement this afternoon. I’d like an explanation.”

“That is none of your concern, George.”

“It looks and smelling like you’ve been slaughtering animals. Then I find fifteen pints of blood in the refrigerator, and a used, man-sized crucifix. I’d say that concerns the police.” He gestured toward the basement.

“What in God’s name have you been doing down there, Augustus?”

The Bishop folded his arms. “I am ridding the world of demons.”

“*Nous ne sommes pas des démons.*” It was Gage, wearing Jack’s black trench coat. It was covered with locust. Their wings were fluttering, but they weren’t flying. They were . . . guiding him? “We have never been demons.”

Father Rocca's eyes rolled back in his head as he keeled over and hit the floor. Father Carlo grabbed his cross and held it out as he began babbling in Italian.

The bishop ran up behind the altar. "Leave this house of God!"

"I tried to leave before, but you said I had to stay. That I had to tell you our secrets." Gage sat down in the third pew and all of the locust jumped off him onto the floor. "I'm back. Don't you want to question me now?"

Something chirped by my foot, and I looked down to see thousands more locust covering the old tile floor. They went neatly around me as they hopped steadily toward the front of the church.

"We will kill you," Bishop Tower said, his voice shaking. "And the rest of them. We will purge this earth of your evil disease."

"My friend Dr. Whitman tells me my disease is not good or evil. It is simply a disease. She is a student of science." When one of the Italians made a move toward him, Gage lifted a hand, and the locust left the floor and began whizzing around in the air. "Regrettably, I am not."

Father Rocca came to, screamed, and jumped up, tearing at his black jacket as he tried to brush off the locust crawling on him. "Get them off! Get them off!" He pulled out a revolver and pointed it at Gage. "Call them back or I'll shoot - "

"You will not." Father George plucked the gun from his hand, opened the chamber, and shook out the bullets. They pinged as they hit the tile floor. "Not in my church. I'm calling the police."

"You fool." Father Carlo tried to punch Father George in the face, but the old priest dodged his fist. Gage murmured something, and the locust started swarming all over Father Carlo again. He danced around in circles, trying to slap them away. None of the bugs touched Father George as he strode out of the church.

I saw the other Italian follow Father George, but Avery and another boy appeared at the door of the rectory. They let Father George pass, but blocked Father Carlo from leaving. The Italian cursed them and ran to the other side of the church, but Ian and another boy stepped out and blocked that exit. Behind me, four boys now stood guarding the front entrance.

None of the locust, I noted, went near Ian or any of the other boys, either.

Ian came to stand next to the pew where Gage sat and regarded the cowering bishop with visible disgust. "Did they really nail you to a cross?"

"Oui."

"Man, that's cold. Here." He offered Gage his knife.

"Non, merci, mon ami." Gage turned his head as Father Carlo ran into the pew from the other side. Before the Italian could touch him, he

grabbed his arms, jerked him down, and snapped the priest's neck with a quick jerk. "I have no need of weapons." He pushed Father Carlo's body aside.

"No, you don't." Ian grinned and sauntered back to guard the side door.

Instead of attacking, Father Rocca came back and got down on his knees in the aisle by Gage's pew. "*Perdonilo, Abbadon.*" He was covered in bugs. "*Non ho desiderato danneggiarlo. Perdonilo per favore!*"

"What did you say, when I begged you to stop?" Gage reached down and plucked a locust from the end of Father Rocca's nose. "*Vaffanculo.*"

"Stop this." Tower came down from the altar. He had his hands behind his back, but from my angle I could see he was holding the communion chalice. "I am the one you want. That's why you're here, isn't it? I'm a Roman Catholic bishop, you think you can kill me?"

"I know I can." Gage didn't seem concerned – in fact, he wasn't even looking at Tower.

Suddenly I knew why he had been in the wheelchair.

"No." I started running toward the altar.

The door to the rectory opened, and Father George came in with Vanessa and Jack.

"Stop it!" Vanessa shouted as she ran toward the bishop. "Leave him alone!"

That diverted Gage's attention. "Vanessa?"

At the same time, Bishop Tower brought out the chalice and lifted it, as if preparing to smash Gage in the face with it.

I got there first, and threw myself in front of him – just in time to get a face full of something wet as the bishop threw the contents of the chalice at Gage.

I sputtered and choked, then realized what it was and regarded His Eminence. "Water? You were hoping to drown him?"

"More than that, *cherie*." Jack gently removed the empty chalice out of the bishop's hand and then threw it so hard it sailed clear across the sanctuary and smashed through one of the big stained glass windows.

"Niamh?" Gage reached out, and I caught his hand in mine. "What are you doing here? I put you to sleep."

"Getting a bath, and no, you didn't." He flinched as the water running down my arm touched his skin, and I let go of him as soon as I saw the blister form. "Water burns you?"

"The copper in holy water does. Gage, these bugs are grossing me out." Vanessa pushed the bishop back. "Have you had enough fun for one night?"

"No." Gage made a funny gesture, and the locust stopped swarming and settled back down to the floor. "But I suppose it will have to do."

The Bishop grabbed me and hauled me against him. “If you kill me, Rome will never stop hunting you.”

“Rome will never stop hunting us anyway.” Jack sighed. “We are finished here. Let go of the girl and we will all retreat to our neutral corners.”

Father Rocca began shouting incoherently and throwing prayer candles at Vanessa and Jack.

“Augustus!” Father George shouted. “Release that child at once!”

“I swore to her mother that she would be safe.” Tower pinned his arm against my neck, and when Jack stepped forward, tightened his choke hold. “She’ll be completely safe if she’s dead.”

The candles Father Rocca threw were starting little fires all around the interior of the church. The Italian priest laughed like a maniac.

“You killed her mother by making her drink my blood,” Gage said, rising to his feet. “Why?”

“We made a bargain.” He dragged me back with him toward the altar. “She wanted laser treatments for her daughter. We had to discover how you spread your filth. The legends said—” he stiffened, then his arm went limp and he fell to the floor with me. I looked up to see Father George putting the big cross back on the altar.

“Fiona Murphy was worth ten of him.” He helped me up before he turned to Vanessa. “We have to get out of here.”

The little fires had grown into large ones, and the church was starting to fill with smoke.

“That would be for the best. We’ll take Nia with us.”

He looked at me. “Is that you want, child?” I nodded, and he kissed my brow. “I’ll keep you in my prayers, then. God bless you and keep you safe.”

He lifted Bishop Tower onto his shoulder and carried him out. Through the smoke I saw Ian and Avery grab Father Rocca and push him through the side door. The locust had mysteriously vanished.

So had Gage.

#

California was warm and sunny, and Vanessa and Jack had a huge house right by the ocean. The first week we were there all Teag and I did was play on the beach. It was nice to pretend to be a carefree child again and not think about that night at St. Luke’s, or Gage, or why any of it had happened.

I wasn’t a child anymore, though.

I called Father George to let him know that we were safe, and he told me that St. Luke’s had burned to the ground, and that the fire had destroyed all of the evidence of what the bishop and the Italians had been doing in the secret basement room. Father Carlo’s death had been ruled as accidental.

“What will you do now, Father?”

“I’ve a church to rebuild, and a parish to watch over.” He sounded tired. “I’ve also reported what I know to the Cardinal. He’s had Bishop Tower and Father Rocca recalled to Rome.”

“So they got away with it.” It didn’t seem fair, that the other two men wouldn’t be punished for what they’d done to Gage.

“The Cardinal promised me there’d be an investigation, especially after I mentioned how inclined I’d be to tell the press about the incident if there wasn’t.” Father George sighed. “It’s not much but it’s the best I can do, Nia.”

“Thanks, Father.”

Vanessa came to my room with a pot of tea that night, as if she knew what I’d been thinking. She told me what I’d already suspected – that she and Jack were *vrykolakas*, victims of a disease that dated back to the Middle Ages. Like vampires, they lived off human blood, but they weren’t evil and they didn’t kill people anymore. Vanessa made the whole thing sound almost normal, like being a diabetic, until she got to the part about the special investigators who hunted, tortured, and killed the *vrykolakas*. Then, finally, she told me about Gage.

“The mutation gives all *vrykolakas* certain abilities, like spontaneous healing, telepathy, and increased physical strength. But there are a few cases where there have been other mutations, like Gage. Gage is special.”

“He can summon and control locusts with his mind.”

“Locusts or any insect, really.”

“Why didn’t he call them to help him get out of there?”

“They’d starved him for months; I think he was too weak. We’re not even sure how or why he can do it, but I’m working on it.” Vanessa grimaced. “Was working on it, I should say. He took off. He probably went back to France, not that I blame him after what he’s been through. There’s something else I should tell you.”

“He can tell me.” I went to the window. “He’s not in France, he’s close by.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can feel him. Maybe it’s another weird mutation.” I faced her. “If I tried to take his blood, it would kill me, right?” She made a see-saw gesture with her hand. “Why didn’t it kill you?”

“I had to go overseas for some volunteer work with refugees and they gave me some unusual inoculations. When Jack infected me, I had antibodies present in my blood that most people don’t.”

“And if I got the same shots, and developed the same antibodies?”

“I’d have to run a whole slew of tests, but theoretically . . . yeah, it might work.” She gave me a slow grin. “You interested in studying medicine, kid?”

"Maybe, when I'm a little older." I slipped on my shoes. "Okay if I take a walk on the beach? I won't be long."

"Sure." She got up and gave me a hug. "See if you can talk him into staying."

#

Gage was waiting for me on the seawall about a quarter mile from Vanessa and Jack's house. Moonlight glinted off his dark glasses as he turned in my direction. "I came to say *au revoir*."

"No, you didn't." I stopped in front of him. "You came to apologize for using me and killing my mother."

"That, too." One side of his mouth curled. "I see our connection remains strong."

Ever since the night of the fire, I could feel what he felt, hear his thoughts from a mile away. He'd put himself through hell over me. "You didn't kill my mother, Gage, and what you did to me wasn't so bad. Parts of it I really liked. Like the kissing." I glanced out at the Pacific ocean, which was beautiful but too damn cold to swim in at night. "I like being human, by the way."

"So did I."

"You should also know that I'm only seventeen."

"I'm five hundred and two."

Talk about falling for an older man. “Then there’s the whole issue of us both being permanently disfigured. I’m not getting involved with someone just out of pity, and neither should you.”

“I think you are . . . ” he halted. “What did you say?”

“We’re both pretty hideous. I’ve got this face, and you’ve got” – I reached up and took off his sunglasses – “no eyes.” The sockets had healed cleanly, but it hurt to see those two dark holes where his eyes should have been. “Who did it to you? Tower?”

“Carlo.”

“Good thing he’s dead, then. How are you getting around if you’re blind?”

“I have friends.” He lifted a hand, and hundreds of monarch butterflies fluttered up from the ground. They landed on his shoulders and sleeves. “They guide me.”

Like the locust had brought him to the church. I reached out and one of the butterflies fluttered over and landed on my finger. “You didn’t have to hide the fact that you’re blind now.”

“I did not want your pity.”

“Likewise.” The butterfly flew away from my hand as I slid his glasses back on for him. “So I think we should take this very slow.”

“Slow.” The butterflies fluttered away from him and flew off into the night.

“As in the opposite of fast.” I put my arms around his waist. “Don’t go back to France. Stay here and let Vanessa run her tests. You can meet my little brother, and take me out on a few dates, and kiss me some more. If you want to.”

“I want to.” He rested his hands on either side of my throat. “In the order you said?”

“No.” I lifted my chin. “Mix them up.” Just before he kissed me, I moved my head back. “And one more thing.”

“Mmmm?”

“No calling any cockroaches. Ever.”

“Very well.”

Red Branch

by S.L. Viehl

I didn't like waking up with a three hundred pound merc sitting on me and holding a knife to my throat. Even if I had foreseen it the night before.

"Got yer tension now, do we?" The weighty, smelly human tucked the edge of his blade a little higher up under my chin, scraping off some skin in the process. "Be gibbin us 'at web we bin wannin, eh?"

One of Ferboil Danu's men – they never bathed, and wore badly-cured skins of animals over their tunicas. This one appeared uniformly coated with dirt and sported the furs from a dozen snow rabbits. The poor things had probably smelled him approaching and expired on the spot.

Still, he *had* captured my attention, and I was in the mood to be charitable. "Get off, rot breath, and I'll let you live."

Blood ran down the sides of my neck as the blade bit deeper. "I gots the steel here, spinner."

He was too dumb to be a messenger, really, but Ferboil must have figured on me killing whoever he sent. "You have five seconds." I yawned. "Four."

He lifted up, angling the knife so that the point rested against my pulse vein. “Marsta Danu wans a web.”

“Three.” I glanced at the window. It was barely dawn. I might have to hunt down Ferboil just for waking me up before noon. “Two.”

“I said – ”

“Time’s up.” I spit in his eyes and slammed my cupped palms against his ears. At the same time, I hit his hand with my chin and drove my knee up into his groin. He screamed, fell back, and the knife slipped onto the bed.

The root I’d chewed before going to sleep lent a temporary acidity to my saliva, which had no effect on me but was quite corrosive to the merc’s human eyes. It also saved me from wasting my poisons on a moron. I kicked him to the floor, stretched, and then retrieved the knife. It was as filthy as my attacker, so I’d have to remember to clean my neck wound well. I tucked it in my armband and went to the fireplace to start brewing my morning tea.

“Whaddaya done?” the behemoth shrieked, clawing at his eyes with both hands. “Blinded me! Yer blinded me!”

Someone pounded at the door. “Spinner?”

It was Kerdup, the innkeeper. I sighed as I went over and saw that my latest victim had practically hacked the door latch to pieces getting in.

Humans. I tugged at the remnants. “Yes?”

Kerdup looked a bit like a nest weasel, minus the handsome parts. “What’s all this noise about, then?” He was about as shrill, too.

I drew the dirty knife, swiveled, and threw it. The shrieking became a thick, brief gurgle. I turned back to Kerdup. “What noise?”

He shook his head. “I run a clean place here. You’ll have to go.” He eyed the door. “And pay for the damages and the burial.”

“Fair enough.” I tossed him a kinspiece. “Have my ride saddled and ready in an hour.”

He bit the coin, then grinned at the taste of pure silver. “On second thought, missus, maybe we could work something out.” He looked at my hands. “I heard about your kind – ”

“Not interested. And I’ll take care of the body.” I slammed the ruined door in Kerdup’s face.

The merc’s blood had been sprayed over the bed and the floor, so I skirted around him and the mess and had my tea. It gave me time to clear my thoughts and focus on the job the Orb had given me.

Find the son of Tal, she’d said, when I’d returned from my last hunt. The jagged mark of her lineage glowed crimson against her black skin. Find him and bring him to me.

I had never tracked or taken a human before – but then, I didn’t really like them. Kerdup was right, they made too much noise. *Alive?*

The Orb had smiled. *Oh, yes.*

#

As I prepared for the final leg of my journey, I wondered again why I had been given this task. It seemed a case of severe overkill, to send me after a human, even if his father had offended the Orb. An offense that had sat unanswered for nigh on twenty years, in fact.

Tal Bronif was a legend among humans, for the usual ridiculous reasons. As part of some idiot warrior-test, his people had sent him into our territory to capture a spinner and bring her back alive. According to the humans' bards, Tal had lured three of my sisters from the Garnet itself, then had crippled and captured them. Stories circulated for years after that among the outer settlements. Some humans said the three died of their injuries, others said they were tortured to death. There were whispers that they were still alive, and were being forced to spin at Tal's will. The thought of a human prevailing over a spinner was what created all the excitement. That had never happened before.

None of it was true, which helped.

In reality three of my sisters had found Tal, bloodied and dying, and had dragged his body out of the Garne. Human blood made the ground stink for months. Along the way they were attacked by something genuinely dangerous – a pack of feral wasp cats – and repelled them only to succumb to the numbing venom. Tal's men had evidently come upon

the four of them on the edge of the forest and transported their unconscious bodies back to Bronif Keepe.

Two of the sisters had found their way back to the Garne within a few days, as soon as they had purged themselves of the venom. The pair had nearly died of the monotony, if anything, but they recalled enough threads on the wasp pack for my mother to use for tracking. She'd hunted and slaughtered the cats the following day. Only the third, Gesa, did not return. For two seasons we assumed her dead, until she walked in to the Garnet one morning and prostrated herself before the Orb.

Our Queen summoned Gesa into council with the eldest of the Branches. At the time I was too young to attend, but my mother spoke of it later, along with a promise to gut me herself if I ever did such a thing.

Gesa admitted that shame had kept her long separated from us. She had nearly died from the venom, but that wasn't the shameful part. During her recovery among the humans, she had gotten so bored that she had mated with Tal. If that wasn't disgusting enough, she had conceived and delivered a halfling. As it was mostly human and male, she left it behind with Tal.

It was a pink, and it squalled, she had told the council. *It could not hold its head still, or walk, or control its bladder or bowels. Then they told me it was a male.* She threw up her hands. *They wouldn't let me eat it. What else could I do?*

It was a delicious scandal – we spinners naturally use our stock males when we wish to reproduce – and there was some discussion of the state of Gesa’s mind balance. For the sisters, the thought of voluntary coitus with a human was, well, revolting.

My mother had warned me from the day I left the nesting caverns never to trifle with humans. *Kill them, eat them if you must, Akela, but never play with those diseased, mindless things.*

Gesa cleansed herself, made contrition and was forgiven by all of us. Any spinner can fall victim to bizarre impulses, particularly when surrounded by nothing but blank-brained humans. My own mother had slaughtered two or three villages one winter when early snow in the mountain passes had cut her off from the Garne. Butchering humans, she claimed, had been the only available form of exercise.

It was Gesa’s halfling that now seemed to concern the Orb, but she had not explained why. Since our Queen was pure Red Branch – the largest and deadliest of our kind, with enough strength and poisons to wipe out most of the sisterhood by herself – she didn’t have to. I was the first Black Branch tracker, sworn to obey and defend the Orb to the death. Even so, it wasn’t my place to question anything.

I wouldn’t have, had I been among my sisters. We all knew each other’s minds within the Garnet, and the Orb kept the threads in order. Only out here, away from the enclave of my kind, did my thoughts wander.

Why send me after a male?

Before I left the inn for Bronif Keepe, I took care of the merc's body. One of the advantages of being Black Branch was the variety of poisons my mouth and body glands produced. I coated the corpse with raze fluid from my abdominal glands, which quickly broke down the tissues and bones and reduced it to ash. All the innkeeper would have to do was sweep up the floor.

My ride was waiting for me when I stepped outside, and the humans passing by the inn gave her a wide berth. Like all darkmares, Neleh was lean, powerful, and had a vicious temper, so we got along perfectly. I mounted up and touched her sides with my boot heels, and she took off.

#

Summer heat rolled over the day, and Neleh needed watering, so I stopped at a pitiful-looking creek halfway to Bronif. I dismounted and checked the stream (Goddess knew humans dumped all manner of waste into their aquifers) before I clipped on her hobble, removed my saddle and let her drink. I crouched under the shade of a scraggly witheroak and used the interval to tighten my stirrup straps, which had stretched, and check my weapons.

I wore forty-two daggers of various sizes on four blade straps, two across my chest and one on each thigh. I had fashioned each myself, from

bloodwood resin and my own binding fluid. More than most trackers carried, but I like being prepared.

My poisons were lethal to anything that breathed, but I was still young, and my sacs emptied quickly. One reason I had been considering reproducing was that pregnancy would enlarge my glands; that and I wouldn't fully mature until I did. But breeding was such a dreary business – an entire year stuck in the nesting caverns, nursing and teaching my daughter to spin and hunt. I wasn't ready for that kind of commitment or drudgery.

You were an obnoxious youngling, my mother had told me often, always with a certain amount of annoyed pride. Goddess knows I nearly devoured you a dozen times.

The other reason was too many of our young were born with deformed minds, and had to be destroyed. I did not want to give birth only to be ordered to destroy my own daughter.

As I sharpened my palm blades, something intruded on my proximity sense. Neleh lifted her muzzle out of the water and sniffed the air. Her stubby ears flared, and she bared pointed teeth as she released a low, warning hiss.

I could smell them now, too. Humans. Many humans. *Oh, good. Something to kill.*

“Finish, you lazy nag, the road waits.” I made no sign of my discovery as I fastened my chest straps and went to her. Under her short-haired hide her muscles were tensed, her limbs trembling. They were moving in those idiot lines they affected – I smelled at least three dozen, strung out like half-baked kebabs – but the humans had brought something with them that terrified my darkmare.

Which meant it could probably kill her – and me. *Something that will give me a fight. Even better.*

I stepped on her hobble clip to release it while I pretended to stroke her muscular neck. She gave me a hard nip. “I’ve never ridden such an unpleasant bitch,” I murmured as I caught her jaw and slipped the halter from her head. “I will miss you.” I swatted her rump, and Neleh jumped the creek before galloping off toward Bronif.

They emerged from the trees as I watched her, but I kept my back to them a few more seconds so I could draw the daggers I wanted. Then I turned, and skimmed the hungry, dirty faces of the mercs until I reached the oldest and ugliest.

“Ferboil Danu.” I flicked a bit of leaf rot from my sleeve. “What a surprise.”

“Spinner.” He tugged at the edge of his tunic, evidently to draw attention to how purple it was and how many glittery gemstone bobbles hung from it. Human leaders coveted colored stones; wearing them made

them feel important or something. I liked them because the weight slowed them down. "Ain't yer gettin' our message?"

"A message? Let me think." I pretended to while I looked for what had spooked Neleh. "I slit the throat of the first little skink you sent before he could speak. The second annoyed my ride and got himself trampled before he could provide any details. The third muttered something about a web before I reduced him to a pile of ash." I regarded the three columns of mercs he'd brought with him. *Child's play*. "Do you have anyone who can talk a little faster?"

When a couple of the brave ones surged forward, cursing and wagging their little swords at me, Ferboil lifted a pudgy hand. "We respects and fears the spinners."

"Then why are you stinking up my air?"

"We be needin' yer talent, spinner." He tossed a little drawstring bag at me, but I stepped back and let it hit the ground. Golden weyrpieces spilled out of one end. Not many, but enough to make a couple of his own men lick their lips. "We be payin' handsomely for it."

"I don't work for humans." I couldn't see anything to concern me, but I smelled something odd now. Something like a spinner's sweat under extreme stress. *A sister who was wounded?* "Have you something else with which to bargain?" My neck sacs swelled, and my cribellum bulged under the laces of my vest.

Ferboil nodded toward the gold. “Tha’s it. What else yer want?”

My chelicerae extruded down over my lips. “Bring forth the sssissster.” It was hard to speak human with my fangs out and dripping poison. “Now.”

“We gots none.” He looked confused. “Tha’s why we came to yer.”

I opened my mind, seeking the thread of hers as I filled my lungs with the scent. No one, nothing in site. *Was she already dead?* I’d build her burial mound out of their bones if Ferboil had harmed one of mine.

I am not dead. I am here.

The voice was not that of a sister, nor did the glittering mind-thread lead me to one of my kind. It had come from something bigger and darker and not female at all. My mind rejected that at once – if it was not female, it could not spin.

You are like my mother. The thread grew rich with amusement.

Don’t kill too many of them.

For a moment I was so shocked to experience mindshare with one not my own but my own – that was the only way to put it – that wonder and fear nearly strangled me. The thread was so alien and yet so strong that it physically tugged me toward him, yet gave me nothing of the one who spun it – except that it was . . .

The thread snapped as one of Ferboil's oversized oafs blocked me path. "Yer can't - "

I seized him, sank my fangs into his face and let him drop. He was dead before he landed. Two more got in my way, and went down gargling around my blades.

Stop killing them or they will all attack you.

I whipped around, trying to snatch up the elusive thread. *SHOW YOURSELF.*

"She's smelling one o' her own," I heard Ferboil shout. "Hold her and find it!"

As battles went, it was unnecessary and messy. The unwise ones who tried to stop me all died, faster than they should have, but I was in a hurry. What summoned me was outside anything I had ever mindshared, and I had to get to it. Finally the humans maddened me to the point of recklessness.

I gathered my energy and tore open my vest. My cribellum splayed in half, shooting out multiple dark strands that I quickly wove into a wide oval in front and behind me.

Spinners rarely used killing webs against humans. Spinning them rendered us vulnerable until our bodies could produce more silk fluid, which took a day or two. Still, they knew what it was. Most of them backed away at once, but three couldn't stop in time or were too stupid to know

what my webs would do to them. They were caught, held, and screamed as acid droplets coating my silk burned into their soft flesh. Absently I repaired the holes as they fell away, smoldering and shrieking.

“This ain’t the finish,” Ferboil shouted at me as he and what was left of his men retreated. “Not by far, spinner!”

I hardly heard him. I was still seeking the one who had touched my mind, the one who was not female, who had done what was not possible.

Anything is possible, tracker, but come and see for yourself. Take care not to trip over the bodies.

As a Black Branch, my foresight was limited – I was more in tune with the physical world than those realms beyond it. Yet something inside me wanted to curl up and hide, for there was something coming that promised to change everything. There was no form to the vision, only a certainty that went down to my bones.

The spinner came into the narrowing slit of my vision, a gray-eyed, tall creature dressed in human garments.

The garments of a human *male*.

You cannot be. A chill chased the length of my backbone. *You are not female.*

He inclined his head. *I am not.*

He had their colored hair – his was black – and their pale skin. Yet beneath the humble garments, the contours of his body were that of a fully

mature spinner: four long, multi-jointed limbs, a treble-sectioned torso, the triangular clypeus groove on his brow. He smiled, and I saw the glint of cheliceran fangs in his mouth.

Yet our males did not spin, or roam freely, or think. They were soft, fat, mindless things made for mounting and eating, kept in the nesting caverns. I dropped my webs to get a better look at him.

Closer. I will not harm you.

I circled him, this spinner/male thing, trying to understand. *How is it that you are?*

I am Jalon, the child of Tal and Gesa. He tugged open his tunica to show me his human chest. In the center of it was a spinner's cribellum, upon which was an uneven jagged mark as red as blood. *I am human and spinner.*

The son of Tal was not just a halfling male who could spin, and mindshare. He was a Red Branch.

Jalon was a *Queen*.

#

Instinct drove me to my knees to empty my sacs onto the ground, as I would have in the presence of the Orb. No sister swelled with poison around our Queen unless she wanted to die an unpleasant death. Yet this was not the Orb but a complete paradox. A male who thought. A spinner wrapped in human flesh.

A *second* Red Branch.

Purging myself so quickly was foolish; I knew I would black out from the shock of it. But I wanted oblivion, I wanted darkness to fill my eyes and obliterate the sight of him.

This is why the Orb sent me, my errant curiosity whispered inside my head just before I lost consciousness. *To bring this thing back her.*

I woke in twilight to find myself comfortably arranged by a modest fire. Neleh had returned and stood a few feet away, snuffling as she fed on the carcass of some small dead animal she had caught and brought back.

Worthless nag. I felt pleased that she had returned on her own; darkmares were not know for their loyalty. *You must have a death wish.* Which reminded me of him, the impossible one, and I sat up to look for him.

Jalon was sitting down by the water, casting stones at it, watching them skim the surface with little hops before they sank with a final plunk. His actions had no meaning but one did not question a Red Branch.

I rose but I did not approach him. With a Queen, one waited until one was invited.

"Of course you can come over here," he said without looking at me, his voice mild and very human-sounding. "I have said I will not harm you."

I should have prostrated myself; I should have spouted honorifics in the manner of the Green Branch preeners who cared for the needs of the

Orb. But flattery was not my gift; I couldn't recall a single aria of praise. And how did one praise a male spinner, a male who was Queen? *I vow I will not mate with you or eat you, oh Deadliest One Who Should Not Exist?*

He threw another stone. "That would be nice – not eating me, I mean."

Nice. Dear Goddess, he could read every thought in my head – just as she could. Had I any doubt of what he was, it vanished forever. I walked down to the water and lowered myself to sit a few feet from him.

"You are feeling better?"

I nodded, and then I shook my head and stared at the stunted stream.

"Do you still wish to kill me?"

"No." He should have known I could not do that. Perhaps he had suffered some sort of brain illness – he had been around humans long enough to drive any spinner completely insane. To cover my confusion, I said, "I am frightened. I do not know what to do." He was a Queen; he would have to tell me.

Jalon tossed another flat stone at the water. "She sent you to capture me, to bring me to the Garne, didn't she? Your Queen. She has been plotting it for months."

"You feel the Orb?" None of the sisters could do that.

“Every day, every night.” He reached out and picked up my hand. My black flesh was harder and shinier than his, my fingers longer and thinner. “I felt you as soon as you entered the town. I heard your yawn when that fool merc cut you.” His fingers tightened for a moment before he released me. “I came down from Bronif today to meet you.”

I eyed the faint outlines of his neck sacs under his human skin; like the Orb he had two more than I did and the smallest was five times the size of mine. I did not doubt their contents; he bore the mark. I might be able to move faster, but a single nip from him would end me – and I could not fight back.

He had tracked me – a Queen, tracking like a common Black Branch. Nothing stirred the Orb from the Medius unless it would provide her some personal pleasure. “Why do I still breathe?”

“I must risk everything to have everything, I suppose.” He rested his forehead against his knees.

Loneliness radiated from him, something no spinner had to endure and no Queen would have tolerated – or revealed. I was muddled all over again. “The Orb said to bring you alive.” Perhaps he missed his mother. “You dam also awaits.”

“She did not want me.”

“Gesa would not have left you behind if you had shown your color.”

At his blank look, I gestured toward his chest. “The mark of the Red Branch.”

“Ah.” He rubbed a hand against his tunic. “That did not appear until the middle of my boyhood.”

I understood now why the Orb had sent me to track him. His awareness of her meant her awareness of him. She would never tolerate the existence of a second Queen, even one who evidently had been hiding away from her.

But why had he come to me?

“I was not hiding, and I wanted to meet you.” He rose to his feet and offered me his hand. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

He nodded in the direction of Bronif Keepe. “To see the parent who did not abandon me.”

#

Bronif Keepe appeared well tended, prosperous and largely deserted, except for some guards walking the battlements and flanking the great door in the wall surrounding the ugly structure. The human predilection for houses of stone block always reminded me of snails curling up in their shells. Surely protection for their flimsy bodies was the only reason they dwelled in the cold, ugly things.

“There is my father,” Jalon said as we entered the great hall, nodding toward an old man sitting close to a fire.

Tal Bronif was nothing like the stuff of his legends. He was little and wrinkled, and barely able to rise from his divan. Still, he did so as soon as he saw me.

“My son.” He had a weak, whiny voice. “You should have slain her.”

“There was no reason to do so, Father.” Jalon actually bowed to the dried up elderly man. “Akela, may I present my sire, Tal Bronif, leader of the western territories. Father, this is Akela, spinner and tracker of the Black Branch.”

I would not bow to a human, particularly one who wanted me dead. “Greetings, Queen’s sire.”

Filmy eyes widened. “What did you call me?”

Before I could respond Jalon said, “It is a long story, father.”

“I cannot believe you brought her here.” Tal sat back down and rested his face against his gnarled hands. “She will return and tell them of you. She will bring back an army.”

“An army, to take this tiny little place?” He was as conceited and stupid as Gesa had said, and yet he had sired a Queen on her – or had he? I glanced at Jalon. “Exalted One, are you sure *this* is your sire?”

“I’m quite certain.” Jalon went over and pressed his mouth to the top of the old man’s bald head, but for some reason didn’t bite him. “You

must allow me to handle this, Father.” He turned to me. “Akela, we must speak privately. Will you come with me?”

He was asking? “Of course.”

The chamber he took me to was sparsely furnished but clean. “A pleasant room. You treat your servants well.”

“This is my chamber.” He removed his cloak and hung it on a hook.

The Orb would have slaughtered anyone who presumed to give her such humble accommodations, but Jalon seemed quite unconcerned. I hovered just inside the door, waiting for orders.

He pushed a metal hook with a pot attached to it over the hearth fire. “I am not going to tell you what to do, Akela.”

“I am Black Branch.” When he said nothing, I realized he had no declaration of my loyalty, and went down on one knee and offered my finest blade. “I am yours to command, The Jalon. You speak, I obey. You do not speak, I wait to obey. My life is yours.” I had pledged as much to her, which put me squarely in the center of this wretched mess.

He took the blade. “*The Jalon?*”

“It is proper address for a Queen.” Who should never have been permitted to draw air, and yet he seemed completely unconcerned by his dilemma. Why? I would have to go carefully; perhaps my declaration was not enough. I rose to my feet. *What would a Green say?* “Oh Exalted One, have these humans prevented you from taking your place among us?”

“No, and stop calling me Exalted One.” He set aside my knife, and then used a cloth to remove the pot from the hook and began preparing some sort of beverage in a pottery cup. Like a servant. Automatically I went to take the pot from him, then went still as he handed me the cup.

I took it and held it. “Forgive me, but I do not understand.”

“I am well-acquainted with the feeling myself.” He gestured toward the cup. “Drink.”

I looked down into the cup and surreptitiously sniffed. No poison, only herbs. “I wish to understand, Oh – I mean, if The Jalon would be so gracious as to bestow understanding upon me” – I remembered the drink and quickly sipped from it – “I would better be able to serve – “

“My name is Jalon. Just Jalon.” He picked up my knife and went to sit on a little bench next to the fire. “And you don’t serve me.”

“But I do.” I did not mean to contradict him, but did he doubt me? “The – Jalon, I am sworn to protect and defend the Red Branch with my life.”

“Ballocks.” He made a chopping gesture, and I braced myself for a blow. “Stop that, I’m not going to strike you. I order you to stop treating me like her. Treat me as you would any other human.”

“I cannot.” I grimaced. “You’ve seen what I do to them.”

“True.” He thought for a moment. “Very well – then I order you to speak to me and treat me as you would another of your kind.”

That I could do. "Have you brain fever, to be inviting me to regard you as equal?"

He uttered a short, human laugh. "We are not equals, no."

"Do you not recognize my thread?" Surely not, he had shared my mind more thoroughly than the Queen ever had. "I am the first and best of the Black Branch. The Orb only sends me when she wants no mistakes made."

His smile faded. "So you are accomplished at what you do."

My jaw sagged a little. "I am *Death*, Jalon. Had you not shown me your thread or your mark, I would have gutted you, then come here and wiped the life from this fortress." And in regard to the latter, perhaps I still would. I set the cup aside. "Why do you not know these things?"

"I only know what she thinks and now, what you think." Before that shock sank in, he added another. "Until last summer I couldn't feel any of you. I have always lived here, with my father and his people. They are the only family I know."

A Red Branch who had no knowledge of our kind. The strength went out of my legs, and I sat down on the floor. "Jalon, you are *not* human, nor are you merely a spinner. You are a Queen."

"Queens are female."

"I know, I mean, I don't know. There has never been a male Red Branch, or more than one Queen at a time." I was tempted to draw a

dagger and stab myself now, to save myself from being torn between the Orb and this odd sibling of hers. Yet my instinct to protect spoke for me instead. “Do you even know how to fight as a spinner?”

He shook his head. “I have only trained in the human ways of battle.”

“Oh Bitch Goddess, that you would do this to me.” I thumped my head back against the stone wall a couple of times.

“What will she do, when you take me to her?”

I stopped trying to crack my skull open. “The Orb will challenge you in front of the sisterhood. She will fight you, not in human ways. And she will win.”

He nodded. “What happens if I lose?”

“If? When, Jalon. When. She will hang you to be bled.” Everything inside me wanted to come up through my mouth. “It takes a spinner days to die that way.”

“I bleed faster than that, I think.” He tested the edge of my blade with his fingertip and watched blood well in the small cut. “So you think I would be spared much suffering if I ended it now?”

He was worse than a youngling; full grown, utterly lethal and yet wholly unaware of his power – and proposing to take his own life in front of me, when I had been bred to keep him alive.

“I could strangle your dam for not teaching you.” I might just do that when I returned to the Garne.

He licked the blood from his finger. "Teach me what?"

"How to fight in spinner ways." I gestured toward his neck sacs.

"How to use your poisons and your webs. Had she fulfilled her duties, you would at least have a chance."

"You could teach me."

My eyes bulged for a moment. "Me? I could, but . . ." The Orb had told me to bring him back, not train him in our ways. She had not forbidden me to train him, either.

"Never mind. It would serve no purpose anyway."

"There is no never mind, Jalon. You command. I obey." I rose and went to him, and seized the hand in which he held my blade. I guided the tip to my throat and stared down the edge, down into his strange gray eyes. "If you do not believe me, open my veins now and spare me this, I beg you."

"Which of us will you serve, Akela, when we reach the Garne?"

I had to speak honestly. "Whoever survives."

"Very well." He slowly drew back the blade. "Teach me."

#

Jalon did not know how to fight a spinner, but he knew how to purge. I watched as he filled a wooden bucket with a nearly continuous stream of poison from his hollow chelicerae. A manservant appeared to take away the deadly stuff, yet did not seem perturbed by it.

“Does he not know one drop can finish him?”

“Yes. It is a daily task for me,” he told me as he carefully rinsed and wiped his mouth. “Our soldiers use it to tip their arrows.”

“No wonder your sire has triumphed over the western territories. He has been cheating.” I inspected his garments. “You can wear the trousers, but remove your tunica and footwear. You should shave your head before we leave for the Garne, too.”

“Why?” He touched the long, thick black mass. “I like my hair.”

“She can use it to pull off your head.”

“Hmmm. I don’t like it that much.”

He led me down to the lists, where his father’s men practiced their silly sword play. Several were there play fighting but retreated the moment they saw us, and the looks they gave Jalon made me draw my daggers.

“What is wrong?”

I eyed the one closest, selecting what part of him to hack off. “They show no respect.”

“You can’t stab a man for disliking me.” He saw my expression and sighed. “All right, you can, but I order you not to.”

“Then we will need disposables.”

“Disposables?”

“People you don’t need.” Which seemed to be everyone in this place. “So you can practice the techniques I teach you.”

“My people are not disposable.” He pointed to a straw-stuffed form hanging from a rope. “We will use those.”

“I will need to spin.” I eyed the structures around us. “I need some ropes as anchors.”

“For what?”

“A web. Spinners do not fight each other on the ground.”

Three days later, the grounds of the lists were covered with bits of smoldering straw and sacking, and every soldier in the fortress had gathered to watch us from beneath. Jalon and I circled each other on the web I had spun between the guard tower and the hall. Both of us were soaked in sweat, his torso covered in bruises and my body armor dented by bite marks in a dozen places.

For a full-grown youngling, he learned very fast.

“Feel the strand,” I muttered as I doubled back from the center of the weave. “What am I going to do?”

“Feint right, then turn and trip me.” He avoided the move as he said it and reversed, catching my arms from behind. “I have you, spinner.”

I dropped and rolled between his legs, then fastened him in a rib-cracking hold. “You had me.” I held him with some difficulty, for he had twice my bulk and had picked up the evasive moves I had taught him on the

first day. "If she gets you in such a hold, she will bite you here." I pressed my mouth to the side of his neck. "So how do you counter?"

He tried to break my hold, but my hands were locked. "I do not know."

"Kick back and up, drive your heel into her crotch and both of your elbows into her cribellum. That will drives the air from the lungs and make her close her thighs in reflex." I felt a twinge of foresight, a single thought thread: *He will never fight the Orb* – and it made my voice turn harsh.

"Why are you reluctant to counter-attack? This is your life you defend."

"I – " he thought for a moment. "I can't do that to a woman."

"I keep telling you, we're not women. Now, she will not release you, but for a few seconds she will be distracted. That is when you knock her to the ground, like this." I deliberately pulled both of us from the web and fell to the ground. Even braced for the weight of him, he nearly knocked the breath out of me. "This breaks the hold." I showed him what to do with his arms. "Now, you pin me." When he did, I nodded. "Well done."

Instead of rising, he remained on top of me and held me there. "Do you believe I have a chance against her?"

I thought of the few times I had seen the Orb fight. Foreseeing it was impossible, all I could envision was Jalon refusing to fight – and he was no coward. "You are quick to learn, but she has much experience. Truly, I cannot say."

He gave me an odd look. "Perhaps I will surprise you."

Someone shouted something from the front gate, drawing the attention of the guardsmen watching us. When Jalon would have turned his head to see what it was, I caught his chin. "Use the thread, not your eyes."

He concentrated, and I felt that same, odd stream of thought brush past my mind and reach for whatever was approaching Bronif Keepe. "Men from the south. Mercenaries. Like those at the creek – the ones who seek you, Akela."

"Ah, some disposables." I followed his strand to the perimeter beyond the wall. Ferboil had grown tired of waiting for me to emerge, apparently. "How many do you sense?"

"Two hundred sixteen men." He frowned. "And one woman."

Dispatching them would serve as a nice finishing exercise. "Armed with?"

"Swords, spears, war hammers." He looked at me. "Nets?"

"He thinks to catch me like a fish. What is the female for, bait?" I prodded his arm. "Come, we will deal with them."

"We will not attack them, Akela." He pushed himself up and dusted off his trousers.

"They come here to attack me. I don't wish to send them home disappointed."

“There are other ways.” He motioned to a guard, who brought a tunic and some form-fitted metal plates. Jalon pulled on the garment and strapped the metal to the front and back of his upper torso.

“That blocks your cribellum,” I pointed out.

“It is customary for men of position to wear armor for protection.”

I barely avoided making a rude sound. “You are not a man, and I protect you.”

“Indulge me this once.”

We went to the front gates, where I saw Ferboil Danu and his reinforcements, all mounted and heavily armed, lined up in siege formation. Ferboil had done me the favor of distinguishing himself from his hirelings by wearing new armor studded with gemstones.

“The glittery one is the leader, Danu.”

“I recognize his strand.” At my glance, Jalon smiled. “Yes, Akela, even humans have their own threads.”

“Threads, no. Lint, perhaps.” I stepped outside the gate, placing myself in front of Jalon, and regarded the assembled troops. “Easy to collect, hard to brush off.”

“Spinner.” Ferboil urged his mount forward. “This be yer last chance.”

“Or what? You’ll butcher everyone and burn this place to the ground?” I folded my arms. “Danu, I’d be more likely to *help* you do that. Choose another threat, please.”

He straightened in his saddle. “That’s yer final answer?”

“That was my final answer a week ago. Now I’m getting annoyed.” I let my fangs extrude. “And hungry.”

“Why do you persist in pursuing her?” Jalon asked. “What is it that you want?”

“He wants killing,” I muttered.

“A web.” Ferboil jabbed his finger toward me. “A web only her kind can spin.”

“Surely there are easier weapons to obtain, Chieftain.”

“Not for warrin’.” He gestured, and some men brought forth a litter and set it down beside his mount. “For healin’.”

The barest brush of a delicate thought thread made me approach the litter. I ignored the swords the carriers drew and peered inside. A young human female with a grossly swollen belly lay inside, her skin leached of color, her stick-thin limbs twitching. The linens swaddling her lower body bore pinkish wet stains.

None of that would have concerned me, had I not seen the scars on her cheek. Twin marks, made by two short, curved fangs.

She opened her sunken eyes and met mine. “Help me.”

If she could speak, she still had a chance. I tore back the linens, saw another scar on her belly, and slid my hand between her thighs. One of the guards reached in to stop me, and I used my free arm to shove him away.

As soon as I felt her maidenhead I drew back and turned to Danu. "How long has she been in the throes?"

"Sevenday now."

"You dolt, why did you not say before?" I pushed the curtains aside and climbed in to straddle her shins. "Her name."

"Lalassa, my daughter."

"Lalassa, look at me." I placed my hands on her belly and felt the position of the mass within. "Have you shown any bright red blood?" She shook her head as Jalon appeared at the side of the litter. "She is very near the time. I cannot do this out here, we must take her inside."

One of his guards peered in. "We have a midwife here, she can deliver her."

I shook my head. "She doesn't carry a human child."

#

I had never done this, nor had I ever expected to for anyone but myself – we took care of our own needs. Anger made me snap out my orders to the servants as I prepared the young female for her ordeal. Ferboil and Jalon insisted on being in the room.

“How did this happen to her?” I heard Jalon ask the Chieftain.

“She snuck out to pick berries, never came back. My men found her cocooned to a tree threeday later.” He removed his ornamented helm.

“Never guessed more ‘til she swelled.”

“Akela?”

I ignored them and touched the girl’s cheek. “Open your eyes, child. Yes, I know it hurts, but look at me.”

“Eating me,” Lalassa whispered. “Inside.”

“No.” Not yet, anyway. I tore open my tunic. “I want you to keeping look at me, look at my eyes. I have pretty eyes, do I not?” I kept my tone soothing as I pulled back the linens to bare her belly. “Pretty and dark and deep.”

She fell under the gazespell almost at once. “Like the night.”

“Yes, like the night. I want you to go there now, into the quiet, into the night.” I braced myself and centered my mind. “It is safe there. Safe and soft and warm, is it not?”

“So soft . . .” Awareness left her eyes as she stared past me at nothing in particular.

“Goddess keep her there.” I placed my hands against her bulging abdomen to check the undulating mass inside before I glanced at the men watching us. “Jalon, I need that blood and flesh, placed in a secure chamber. Danu, you should leave.”

Jalon left to check on the servants. Ferboil shook his head. "She be my only child."

"Then do not interfere, or I will bury you together with her."
Lalassa's body convulsed under me. "It is time."

I had already chewed the roots I needed to alter my sac fluid, and their bitter taste was strong in my throat as I spun a cradle web of tiny strands and anchored it to the canopy above the bed. Once it was secure, I wove a tight cable, coated it with birthing fluid, and then attached it to my palms.

Carefully I applied it to the lower half of Lalassa's belly, and watched the flesh part. I went slowly, for if I misjudged the depth I might sever her body in half. Distantly I heard Ferboil retching as my fluid cauterized the opened flesh on either side, preventing bleeding. Finally I had penetrated down to the inner cavity, where the swollen pink mass of her uterus rippled and flexed.

What was inside wanted out.

I tossed aside the cable and spun a much shorter one, then used it to open the uterus. A tiny blue hand reached out, blindly seeking, and as soon as the aperture was wide enough, I cast aside the second strand and reached it with my own hand.

The babe emerged intact, bright blue and physically perfect, its fangs bared as it looked into my face. It made no sound, but battered my mind with the intensity of its first worded thought.

Hungry.

I lifted it into the cradle web and spun holding strands to keep it from escaping, and then returned my attention to the girl's gaping abdomen. I thinned the holding strand and stitched together Lalassa's uterus and abdomen before I checked her eyes. The gazespell kept her far away from what had happened to her body, but I could not keep her there much longer or she might never return.

Hungry hungry hungry

Patience, little one. I bent down, sank my fangs into Lalassa's shoulder, and let the paralyzing fluid from my nasal sacs flow into her body.

"What are you doing?" Danu cried.

"Sparing her pain. Lalassa, look at me." I coaxed her back to the real world with my voice and my mind. "You will not be able to move for several hours. This will give your body time to heal." Or die an easy death, if her body rejected my repairs.

The dazed girl focused on my face. "Alive?"

"Yes." I gathered the squirming infant's cradle web and held it close to my chest. "Jalon?"

He was there, waiting. "It's in the next room."

I carried the youngling into the adjoining chamber, where two servants stood waiting over a freshly-slaughtered carcass of a young calf.

“They have to go.”

“Why?”

“She may attack them first.” The little blue didn’t seem insane, but it was so hard to tell these days.

Jalon sent the servants away and secured the door, while I snapped the holding strands to release my new little sister.

The infant spinner shook off the web and regarded me with her bright blue eyes. *Hungry*. She inspected me, then Jalon, then the carcass. *Mine?*

Her mental discipline impressed me – the young who were not born insane still remained essentially mindless until a few days after birth. *Yes, child*. Watching her take her first lunge and sink her tiny fangs into the carcass nearly made me wish for one of my own again.

“Why does she not attack us?”

“A spinner always recognizes the mind of another.”

“And Lalassa?”

“She is young, and strong. She may live.” Not wishing to disturb the youngling, I moved away. “A blue will be most welcome in the Garne; we do not have many story tellers.”

“How did this happen? Did a spinner rape her?”

“Lalassa was not raped. As it happens, she is still a virgin. She was used as a vessel by a Garne spider. It does not happen often anymore.” I leaned back against the wall. “There are so few of them left in the forest.”

“A spider did this to her?”

I told him of the giant Garne spiders, which had once dominated the forests thousands of years ago, and how they used the bodies of their prey as vessels to incubate their younglings. “No one knows when the first human female was taken, but the results were different. Our story spinners say that one youngling emerged from that female, having consumed the rest in the womb, and its form was different – larger, with only four long limbs, an altered torso, and human-like features. It had taken some of itself from its vessel.”

He seemed very absorbed by what I said. “So a spinner is a half-human Garne spider. That explains much.”

“Perhaps. No one knows for certain.” I shrugged. “When enough were born, they gathered and formed the Sisterhood.” The little blue had already devoured a quarter of the carcass, and she paused to digest it and clean herself. “The human female was fortunate. Most spinners born thusly eat their way out of the womb.”

“It was kind of you to help Lalassa.”

I nodded toward the youngling. “I was saving our sister. Had you not provided adequate food, I would have allowed her to devour the girl.”

He gave me one of his mysterious smiles. "As you say."

#

There was no more time to remain at Bronif Keepe and teach Jalon spinner ways; the birth of the blue made it imperative for us to leave at once for the Garne. I placed the little one in a sling web and carried her on my back, which did not please Neleh but then very little did anyway. Since Danu's daughter was still recovering, Tal Bronif permitted him and his troops to remain at the keepe.

Both men were waiting for us at the gates, and Danu offered me a packet of jewels. "For saving my daughter."

"I have ample reward," I said, adjusting the sling. "Save them for Lalassa." I turned to the old man, and watched as Jalon dismounted and embraced his sire. Their bewildering affection for each other prompted me to make a farewell remark. "I will send word of the outcome, old one."

"Take good care, my son." Tal kissed him, then frowned at me. "You keep him alive, spinner, or I will hunt you down and kill you myself."

I nodded. "Perhaps you are his true sire."

The journey to the Garne would have taken me only a fortnight on my own; having Jalon and the youngling as companions slowed my pace. That and I was reluctant to reach our destination. The closer we came, the larger the knot of dread in my belly swelled.

As was our custom, the blue chose a name for herself a few days into the trip. I released her from the sling to hunt with us, and she brought down small game on her own without much difficulty. After she dragged a spotted hare back into camp on night, she dropped the carcass by the fire and came to me. *I know who I am now.*

Do you? Recalling my own moment of name pride as a youngling, I dropped down on one knee. *Tell me, sister.*

I am Kabla, the-unexpected-one.

Jalon joined us and caught the thread. *A beautiful name .*

Kabla preened for a moment before she returned to the business of eating her kill. Jalon handed me a cup of the tea he insisted on brewing, and I sat with him to watch her.

He seemed to admire her greatly. "She is incredible, isn't she? So nimble and bright."

I sipped the herbal drink, which was starting to grow on me. "She is efficient and disciplined; a worthy candidate for the Garne."

"Candidate?"

"The Orb decides if she joins us or dies." I felt the strong thread of his disapproval. "Those are decisions you will make, if you prevail."

"She does not deserve to die."

"More and more spinners are born wrongly of late. Many are insane; they never attain mindshare and will kill anything and anyone." I

thought of the younglings I had been ordered to dispatch, and projected those memories to Jalon. “The Queen decides in order to protect all life, not just the sisterhood.”

“So you slaughter your own as well as humans.” He didn’t sound too happy about it.

I finished the tea. “It is what I do.”

“I wonder why she did not simply order you to kill me.”

“I can’t do that, not to a Red Branch.” I met his gaze. “Even if I could, she would not permit it.”

“Why?”

“Killing a Queen is a Queen’s pleasure alone.”

#

We reached the edge of the Garne a week later, and as soon as we touched spinner ground, I felt the Orb’s thread reaching out to us.

“She knows we’re here.” As I told Jalon that, I kept my mind carefully blank. “She is not pleased.”

“By me, you, or Kabla?”

“All three, I think.” I met the gathering, curious strands of my sisters and accepted their greetings, while I felt Kabla grow very still against my back. *Do not be frightened, small sister.*

So many. She was more excited than scared. *And only three like me.*

The Blue Branch is thin now. You will be much admired. If she was permitted to live. I felt a surge of frustration at the thought of losing Kabla at the Orb's whim. She was a delightful youngling who could bring much to the Garne.

"A tree," Jalon murmured.

We were surrounded by trees. "What about them?"

"That one." He nodded toward the Garnet. "I did not know you lived in a tree."

"It is the oldest living thing in the forest." I regarded the giant bloodwood that the Sisterhood had occupied for centuries. It was five times the size of Bronif Keepe, with a massive central trunk which supported the fourteen main branches of the sisters. Beneath its twisted roots were the dying and nesting caverns where we brought life from ourselves and returned our lives to the Garnet when we were done. Through his eyes, it must have seemed intimidating, but I only saw my home. I pointed. "I live there, at the top, with the other blacks."

"Now I understand why you call yourselves branches."

It is unexpected. Kabla peeked over my shoulder and clutched at me, her excitement streaking through her thought-thread. *Like me.*

"Yes." The Orb's thread wove around me, tugging, and I dismounted. "Leave your weapons and your ride here, Jalon. One of the browns will attend to them." I hobbled Neleh and began removing my blade straps.

The Sisterhood had assembled in the Medius around the Queen's throne. The Orb sat waiting, every inch a Queen in her finest ceremonial robe, a flowing river of silver and black spun by the artisans of the White Branch. My skin siblings, the other Black Branches, flanked the Queen on all sides.

All minds were blank of anything save recognition of me and loyalty to the Queen.

"Stay here." I placed the little blue in Jalon's arms before I approached the Orb. Some ten feet from the hem of her robe, I dropped to the ground and prostrated myself. "Oh Exalted One, live forever."

I felt a sensation of being torn in half inside; the Orb pulling at me from one side, and my thread still anchored to Jalon on the other. I could not fully give myself to her or him, and that was something I had never experienced before. My vision doubled as both of them drew harder, and then Jalon abruptly released me.

"You are late returning to us, Akela." With a distinct note of satisfaction, the Queen wrapped her thread around me and used it to urge me to my feet. "I feared for your life."

"There were complications, my Queen." I didn't have to point out the little blue or relate the tale of delivering Lalassa, she was already plucking the memories from my head. "I apologize for causing you unnecessary distress."

“Take the youngling to the nesting cavern; I will judge her later,” the Orb ordered one of her Green Branch attendants. She raised her dark face and eyed Jalon. “Son of Tal, approach me.”

Jalon did not hand Kabla to the attendant as he came to stand at my side. He did not prostrate himself or make any sign of respect, either. Had he forgotten everything I had told him, the ninny? “You are not what I expected.”

“I disappoint you?” The Orb rose from her throne, and shrugged out of her robe. Beneath it she wore the solid red body shroud of a fighting Queen. Her thread tightened and grew so hot I thought my flesh would smoke.

I placed a hand on his forearm. *Jalon, do not taunt her.*

Be at ease, Black Branch. “No, but your thoughts of yourself led me to expect differently,” he told her. “Something more . . . omnipotent.”

The Orb’s fangs appeared for a moment before she forcibly retracted them. “No sister would dare speak to me thus. You are indeed of the Red Branch, brother.”

He inclined his head.

“You know why you are here, so I see no need for further delay.” She gestured toward the vaulted space above us, where an intricate battle web had been constructed. “Shall we?”

I could not bear the thought of her killing him. I did not know why, and I could feel her outrage slamming into me, but everything inside me told me to protect him. I jerked my mind from the Orb's hold. *Take the little one and go. I will keep them occupied for as long as I can.*

He smiled and handed Kabla to me. "No, Akela. I'm not going to fight her."

Kabla bounced against me, excited all over again for some odd reason. *I am not the only unexpected one, elder sister.*

The Orb strode to him and tore open the front of his tunica with a single swipe of her hand. "You bear the mark of our Branch. I have felt you in my mind. There is only one Queen."

"I will not fight you because I am not a Queen." He seized her hands, and something poured out of him, something terrifying and dangerous and beyond anything I had ever experienced from mindshare. ***I am a King.***

Every sister within the Garnet cried out in pain as they were forced down to the ground. Only Kabla and I remained untouched by whatever Jalon was doing. In amazement, I watched the Orb slowly drop to her knees.

I understand now, Jalon's powerful thoughts rayed out like strands spun from the sun itself. ***I had to come here to be sure.***

How is it that you can do this? The Orb writhed under the mindhold with which he held her.

Human vessels allowed you evolve from the Garne spiders. A human sire created me. We need them.

You're insane!

No, elder sister. I am the first of my kind. He released the Orb, who fell flat on her face. *You can go on despising humans, and killing them, but your own inbreeding and ignorance are destroying you.* He glanced around the Garnet. *If you wish to see the spinners survive, then come with me. I will teach you how to live among humans, and how to take human mates. It is the only chance you have.*

I did not know what to do, or think, when he came to me. *Why did you not tell me? Why did you shield the power of your mind from me?*

You thought as they did. I did not hope for more until you saved Lalassa. He touched my cheek. *It was vanity, too. I did not want you because of some inbred loyalty.*

He wanted me?

I have long waited to find a suitable mate. However, I can't allow you to kill humans for sport anymore. Nor will I ever be soft or mindless.

I suppose you won't let me devour you after we mate.

No. He laughed. *But I won't devour you, either.*

That seemed fair. I saw the Orb staring at me, felt the now-familiar weight of Kabla as she scrambled from my hands to perch on my shoulder. I felt the reeling minds of my sisters, unwilling to accept what he had shown them. Part of me balked against it as well – live among humans? Mate with them? Could we spinners ever learn to do that?

The humans are just as reluctant, but we must try.

I studied the prostrate forms of my sisters. *Most of them will not come. They are afraid of what you say.* Indeed, so was I – but there was truth in everything he had said.

That, and real hope.

“I know. But in time, perhaps, they will conquer their fear.” He held out his hand. “Come, Akela. Let us go home now.”

Throw

by S.L. Viehl

“They will tear you to pieces,” Ravyt told me.

“Undoubtedly.” I finished packing the last of my garments in my carryall and slung it over my shoulder before facing him. He had grown so old this year, waiting for this day to come. “One less mouth for you to feed.”

He sniffed. “You have cared for yourself since you could walk.”

I could do many things most of my kind could not, thanks to him. He had found me during his last military campaign in the outlands, in a cave where he had taken temporary shelter from a storm. I had been a starving infant, he had told me, curled up next to my mother’s dead body. He had raised and educated me as he would have his own daughter.

“I’m told I had an excellent wet nurse.” I studied his expression, which was close to tears. “There is no other way.”

“I dislike sending you to your death.” He came to me, and hung an amulet around my neck. It was the Ravelin symbol of protection through faith, an odd talisman for an old soldier to carry, but one I had never seen him without. “This, I believe, has saved my skin more times than I can number.” Hope hung on his words with a desperate grip.

When my mark first appeared, he had summoned healers and mages, and even an exorcist from the city. The wisest of the freeborn had poked and prodded and read me a hundred different ways, but in the end they had all agreed on the same thing.

Somehow I had been Called.

There was no hiding it, either. Marks could and did appear at any spot on the body, but mine had emerged on my face, where it could not be concealed from anyone.

I did not need his talisman, and I had no faith or hope, but I would not shame him by refusing it or howling my despair. I would go with the dignity he had taught me. "Thank you for the gift."

Ravyt cradled my face between his hands as if I offered no threat. "I will miss you." He pressed his mouth to the mark on my brow.

"And I you." I stepped away from his hands and walked out of his dwelling. No one came to watch or bid me farewell – they would hide until I had gone, and only then come out to make the signs of protection and breathe easier.

They had been my friends, my coworkers, and my family. If I returned, they would kill me.

It took only a few minutes to run across the lawns to the edge of the property. It had once been much bigger; Ravyt's long absences had caused many crops failures, which had in turn gnawed away at his family's

lands. These past ten years we had fought to hold on to the remaining acres, and now they flourished.

I looked at the stone wall which ringed the land. Someone, Galo perhaps, had taken the great bar down and left the gates open for me.

Ravyt had purchased Galo as a companion for me, but he had proven to be a loyal and dedicated worker. Last winter we had spoken of mating, and I had been pleased by the prospect. We decided to ask Ravyt for permission to breed in the spring.

Galo had not spoken to or come near me since I had showed him the silver mark on my brow.

I passed through the gates and became a fugitive.

#

No one knew who built the Throw, or when. It was terribly ancient. Some said the Gods themselves had raised its massive, impenetrable walls. Others blamed the first summoned from the primal generation of freeborn. A few whispered idiotic heresy about demons and unnatural forces. The place had existed from the time before memory, so no one really knew.

There was no means with which to find out, either. No one was allowed inside, except for The Called, the Afflicted, or those who escorted or guarded them. There were no exceptions, and the few who were permitted in never spoke of what they saw within its walls.

Most did not care what happened inside the Throw. It served a purpose.

The Throw couldn't be seen from the limits of town, or from most of the lowland farm ranges, but everyone knew where it was. An ancient forest had been leveled to build it, and while a few more had alternately grown and burned around it, nothing alive touched its walls willingly.

"It is not cursed," Ravyt had explained to all of us when we were wide-eyed, ignorant younglings. He had been only a common soldier, but he had seen a great many things. "But you must never stray near its walls. You have no protection against those within."

"Are the Called not freeborn, master?" one of the littlest asked.

He grimaced. "They were."

"What do they do to those who are taken?" another, bolder child asked. "Those who are Afflicted?"

No one spoke of the Afflicted. It was bad luck even to say the word. Yet Ravyt was a traveled veteran and braver than most. "The Called release their spirits, child."

We were children. As we grew, everyone else said things like *butcher* and *mutilate* and *devour them*.

I had never gone deep into the forest, but my nose seemed to know the way.

I didn't hurry to my death, so the journey took me until twilight. I disdained the road for the ripening tialac fields, where the cool white husks brushed against my body like soothing fingers.

Once I stopped to pluck a fat little geesshrew nibbling on a top-heavy stalk, but when I raised it to my lips the feel of it squirming between my paws turned my stomach. I dropped it on the ground and it scurried away.

I did not want animal flesh. The crescent-shaped indentation above my eyes burned. Had not wanted it for more than a cycle.

A vibration rolled under my feet, and I crouched to touch the soil. Wagon wheels, straining under a heavy burden. I was downwind of it, and the air carried to me the smells of anger, madness, and disease.

The Afflicted.

None spoke of them but we all knew from where they had come. They were the worst of Ravelin, culled from the dungeons and asylums and sick houses within the Great City far to the west, and sent to the Throw. Some called them the Hopeless.

Men. Women. The mark on my brow pulsed and the thing inside me twisted. *Mine.*

I waited until the wagon had passed and was upwind of me before I continued on. It would not do to lose control, not out here in the open. I was a deliberate fugitive, but I was not a mindless killer.

Not yet.

I left the fields and made my way into the forest, which was a labyrinth of kamlan and enipak trees. Nothing alive came near me, and a good many of the forest's small creatures scurried out of my path. The larger had gone some time before; like the wagon they had smelled me coming.

That was the worst of it – the way in which my own scent had changed. I had always kept myself clean, but try as I might I could not remove the new, deeper odor from my body. It had disturbed the household to no end, especially Galo.

As I came within sight of the soaring walls, I pulled on my black cloak and hood. I did not care for the traditional garb of the Called, but it would get me past the guards at the archway.

There were two of them, armed so heavily and so alert that they might have been viewed as paranoid, any place outside the Throw. Here they were likely dressed down a bit.

“Hold,” one of them called as I approached. I stopped. “State your business.”

I had never said it myself. The words spilled from me like a curse and a confession. “I am Called.”

At that, both guards drew short swords and daggers.

“Where is your escort?” the second one demanded.

I didn't answer. Silence generally made more of an impression than an invented story.

"Are you ready to Answer?" the first one asked, his voice tight.

I nodded.

"Open the gate." When the second one opened his mouth to say something, the first cuffed him with a heavy fist. "Open it!" To me he said, "Go. Quickly."

They separated as I approached, drawing back and holding out their blades. Their fear was wise, but their weapons were pitiful. That part of me that had awoken in the spring looked upon them in interest. People of any kind had been unbearably interesting of late.

But they were only two, and the thing inside me wanted more. That wagonload of Afflicted would be nice. For a beginning.

The bailey of the Throw was very much like a small town, with merchants and open-air stalls and stands offering food, drink and other pleasures. A tent brothel advertised its business with portrait banners flapping from its side poles. Yet there were no smiling faces, and everyone wore the charmed robes of the Protected.

When they saw me walking alone, they drew back on either side, forming a gauntlet that led to yet another gate. Many drew daggers or talismans. No one spoke to or looked directly at me.

I went to the second gate, which was unguarded. For a moment I thought it would not permit me entry, and drew my own blade. If I could not get in, I would end my life here.

Slowly the gates swung in, revealing the dark hall behind them.

I crossed the third and final threshold into the Throw, and the gates closed behind me.

#

Four torches burned high above my head, casting flickering shadows upon the deeper dark around me. The sand beneath my feet was soft and pure, newly-strewn. There was no light ahead. I felt the weight of unseen eyes, watching, but heard no greeting, no warning, no sound at all. There was only lack of light and the lingering scent of death.

I stopped a few feet inside the gate, and wrapped my paw around Ravyt's amulet, willing it to give me strength to endure this. "I am Called."

"Come forward." The voice was male, old, devoid of emotion.

Unlike most, once out of the light my eyes adjusted to the dark quickly, and I could see the shapes and things it had concealed. There were perhaps fifty of them, black robed and hooded, standing in a perfect half-circle. In their center were three more figures, also cloaked, but they commanded my attention. Why I could not say; my brow felt ready to split open and everything I had suppressed for so long was finally, fully awakened.

When I stood within a yard of the three, the circle closed around me, and the candles they held burst into flame.

One of the three pulled back his hood. "I am Jasar, Eldest of the Throw." He had the strong face, smooth skin and whitened hair of one who had once enjoyed considerable influence. A noble at least, perhaps one of royal blood. It was said they were Called just as frequently as commoners. There was something in his deep-set eyes that reminded me of Ravyt. He breathed in deeply before giving me a hard stare. "You are not freeborn."

"No." I let my cloak drop to the ground, let them see my white-and black striped fur, my heavy claws, my feline eyes.

All those Called were Raveloc, the one true people of our world. Each and every one of them had been born into their freedom. Though many tried to resist the Call, because it meant the end of whatever station in life they enjoyed, all eventually came to the Throw.

I was Namulcat, the child of a once feral species captured, gentled and force bred by the Raveloc to serve them. My kind had been enslaved by theirs for almost as long as the Throw had been standing.

No slavebond 'cat had been Called. Ever.

No one spoke or moved. I understood. I had felt the same shock when the crescent-shaped silver mark appeared on the black fur of my brow.

Murmurs swept around the circle.

"If your master thinks to deceive us with a false mark, it will be at the cost of your life," Jasar told me. His mark gleamed on the side of his jaw.

"And his."

"The mark is real. Ravyt is innocent of deception." I shrugged. "I am dead anyway."

"Oh, yes." The one standing next to Jasar threw off her cloak. She was younger, beautiful, smiling – a former courtesan, I would wager – and vibrant with barely-leashed power. Her silver crescent was nestled at the base of her throat. "You are, beast."

When she moved forward, Jasar lifted his hand and made her halt. "No, Kallam." He turned to the third beside him. "Haro."

The third pushed back his hood, revealing the unlovely hardened face and knotted braids of a warrior. He did not look at me, and his light eyes gave nothing away. Then I realized that they took in nothing, either.

He did not look at me because he had been blinded.

Despite his disability he moved forward without hesitation. When he raised one of his huge hands – the back of the right bore his mark – I braced myself for a killing blow, but all he did was rest his fingertips against my mark and frown.

He took his hand away and turned to face Jasar. "It is not false. She speaks the truth."

More murmurs, louder this time. The Eldest brought his hands together, and the sharp sound silenced them.

Haro turned back to me. "Your name?"

"Yana." Ravyt had told me that it meant *gift* in the old tongue.

"Indeed." The side of his mouth curled before he resumed his place beside Jasar.

"This cannot be so," Kallam said. "She is a thing, an animal. She does not even possess a soul."

I met her angry gaze. Courtesans often bought my kind for their more perverse patrons' use. Few survived long.

"The mark is genuine." The Elder regarded me for a moment. "It is not our place to question the Call, no matter who – or what – Answers."

I gripped Ravyt's amulet so hard that the chain snapped. There was nothing more to be said or done. I could feel that as surely as I felt the last of my will crumble, allowing the thing inside me to come forth. It bunched in my muscles and rippled under my pelt, turning and reveling in its new freedom. Then it worked its change over my form, the change I had so long suppressed, transforming me from what I was into what I had to become.

Now they will kill me. I went down on all fours, digging my lengthening claws into the sand. *Or I will kill them.*

"She Answers," I heard Haro say, his voice low and different.

More light, dazzling my changed eyes for a moment. Now I could see the faces above, where those who Ravyt said paid to watch sat behind immense woven lattices of thorn vine. Beneath them were short platforms manned by guards who were even more heavily armored than the ones at the gates. And finally, between the guards, the Afflicted sent to be released.

Cloaks dropped, as did the bodies around me. Smooth Raveloc skin disappeared under fur of a dozen colors. Blunt teeth elongated and sharpened. Fingers shrank back as talons stretched out.

The guards began tossing the Afflicted over the platform. They fell screaming all around me, their bodies hitting the sand before they scrambled to their feet and tried to escape the circle. When the last had been Thrown, the guards retreated through the platform doors and barred them shut.

Like the other deathcats around me, I lifted my head and roared.

#

When I next came to awareness, I was being carried by Haro into a rest chamber. I felt small wounds and bruises scattered over the entire length of my body, and my jaw ached, but otherwise I was unharmed. Which made no sense.

Why did they let me live?

He halted by a large bed and lowered me onto clean linens. "How do you feel?"

How did he know I was awake if he could not see my eyes?
"Confused. Why do I still breathe?"

"You Answered." He straightened, but slowly, as if very weary. "You are one of us now."

The words that came from me were not what Ravyt believed or had taught me, but words of law. "It is as Kallam said. I am not a person. I do not have a soul."

"Apparently Kallam is wrong, and you are, and you do." He pointed to the one window in the room. "Sleep while the sun is up. I will come for you later, and we can talk then." He took something from his pocket and placed it in my hand. Ravyt's amulet. "You dropped this."

I slept, but badly. To protect the household, my master had drugged and chained me every night in the cellars since my mark had appeared. As a result I found little comfort on the bed, and in the end I crawled beneath it and slept on the stone floor.

I woke to darkness, and crawled out. The other door in the room led to a small privy. There was soap, a basin of water, towels and a waste slew, but no vanity glass, I noted. Perhaps the Called were superstitious. After I relieved myself, I cleaned my wounds and fur, and watched the water in the basin turn dark red.

How many had died under my claws?

I repaired the chain to Ravyt's amulet and placed it around my neck. I could not remember much of what had happened. A shrieking woman with orange hair beneath me. Biting her throat. Flashes of more screams, flesh, thrashing bodies, and curses, but they blurred together and made my head throb.

"Yana?"

I emerged to find Haro standing on the threshold of the chamber. "I am here."

"I brought you some food." He carried in a tray with strange things on it – green and golden vegetables, a bowl of red broth, a goblet of blue wine.

No meat or flesh of any kind – but I did not want that, either. "I am not hungry."

"You should eat." When I didn't reply, he added, "We do not Answer tonight. It will be a week or more before the next Throw."

"Why can't I remember what happened last night?"

"It was your first. In time, you will recall more." He put the tray down on a side table. "You must have many questions."

"Yes."

"Come with me." He led me out of the chamber, into the corridor and down to another room, far larger than mine. Books filled its walls and

many chairs and divans offered comfort. "This is our library. Can you read?"

"Some."

"Good, then you can make use of it. I can't." He gave me a wry look. "I don't think I would even if my eyes still worked; I was never much of a scholar. Here." He sat down and motioned for me to do the same.

Ravyt had never denied me such comforts, but I was well aware that in most households slavebond were not permitted to use furniture.

"The floor will do well, thank you." I sat in front of his feet and took a moment to study his face again. Fire had blinded him; he had faint scars around both eyes. A torch-mace blow to the face, perhaps. "How is it you move and do the things you do when you cannot see?"

"I have memorized the number of steps it takes to travel anywhere within the Throw. And, like all those Called, I have a very good sense of smell and proximity." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You are troubled by more than my lack of sight."

I was troubled by everything. "Last night, on the sands – how many did I take?"

"Three." He thought for a moment. "No, I think four."

I had killed four people. I felt as if my heart would shrivel from the shame of it, but I forced myself to face what I had done. "It was quick? I did not make them suffer?"

He frowned. "No more than is customary."

"And their bodies? What was done with them?"

"Nothing."

I imagined heaps of torn flesh and bone left on the sands. Bile rose in my throat. "Did I . . . devour them?"

"Gods, no, Yana." He seemed stunned. "We are not cannibals. We do not even eat animal flesh."

"But we killed them. All of them."

"No, we released them."

"I saw them Thrown. They were cast onto the sands after we changed." I did not ever want to remember what I had done. "We took their lives. We killed them."

He shook his head. "I can explain."

"Explain what? Those who are Called become deathcats, and deathcats kill the Afflicted. It is what has always been done." I looked away. "What I will always do."

He rose to his feet. "It is better if I show you."

"Show me what?"

"Just come."

#

Haro took me through a smaller passage and through a door to the outer courtyard. There were beautiful gardens here that I had not noticed

when I arrived. People in strange garb walked among the flowers. They seemed odd – their movements slow, their faces drowsy.

When one crossed our path, Haro held out his hand. “A word with you, friend?”

The man’s plain face turned toward us, and he smiled. “Yes?”

“Do you remember where you came from?”

His brow furrowed. “I was in an asylum for a long time. They said I would not get better.”

“You will now.” Haro put a hand to his shoulder. “Do you recall what happened to you last night?”

He nodded. “I was Thrown.”

I inspected him. He was small, thin, frail. “He survived?” I could have snapped his spine with a single blow of my paw.

“They all did.” Haro nodded to the man, who smiled again before he wandered off. “All of the people Thrown last night are right here.”

I spotted a female with orange hair, and walked up to her. “Your name, woman?”

“Teesa.” She had no marks on her, and yet I remembered sinking my claws into her shoulders, and my teeth into her neck. She lifted her hand and touched the fur on my arm. “You have very pretty stripes.” She gave me a vague smile and wandered away.

“There were a hundred Thrown last night, and there are a hundred here,” Haro said as he joined me. “But you can count them, if you like.”

“What did we do to them?” I turned and seized his arm. “They act as if nothing has happened. They *look* as if nothing has happened.”

“They are healing. It takes some days to recover, and when they are well their minds will retain no memory of this.” He eased my claws out of his sleeve. “Jasar says it is the shock of being Thrown.”

I pressed my paws to my skull. “I do not understand. What, exactly, did I do to these people?”

Haro sniffed the air before he looked at two guards who had entered the garden. Between them they held a struggling prisoner. “Guards. Bring him to the gallery.”

#

Haro did not permit me to join him on the sand, but made me go up into the gallery.

“You can’t be near when I Answer. It will trigger the same in you.” He gave me a stern look. “And you must never Answer alone.”

“But you will be alone.”

“I was Called twenty years ago, and I have other talents. You are but a novice.” He nodded toward the thorn lattice. “Go, sit, observe.”

I found a place to sit just above the platform where the guards waited with the Afflicted man. Haro removed his cloak and spent several

moments in silence, then looked up at me. His blind eyes cleared and turned black.

I closed my eyes.

“Watch me, Yana.” His voice went rough and deep, becoming more like a growl. “Do not look away.”

When Haro went down on his hands and knees, the guard cast the Afflicted onto the sand and then left the Throw. The demented man uttered a horrifying scream and scrambled up, dashing himself against the walls, trying to get away from Haro.

By then Haro had turned into a huge, growling, black deathcat, and padded toward the Afflicted. He halted a foot away, and when he lifted his head the rumbling sound he made turned into an ear-shattering roar.

The Afflicted slowly turned around to face him. Something was terribly wrong – his body shook all over, and there was a yellow glow coming from his eyes.

“Afflicter,” Haro said, the words barely comprehensible. “Come forth.”

The malevolent yellow light shot out of the man’s eyes, pooling in the air until it enveloped him in a glowing mass. Slowly the mass solidified and changed the man into something I had never seen.

Whatever it was, it was not of our world.

It had kept the man's head and legs, but turned his arms into huge pinchers, and filled his mouth with nightmarish teeth. Its changed torso was covered with sucking mouths.

"You are all alone, deathcat," it said, its voice as sickening as its form as it moved forward.

"So are you, demon." Haro sprang at it, avoiding its immense snapping appendages and knocking it to the sand.

I curled my paw around my amulet and held my breath as they fought. The demon was ferocious, and bit with its teeth while trying to snap off Haro's head with its pinchers. Haro slashed into it with his talons and teeth, eventually catching hold and ripping out its throat. It sank back onto the sand, gurgling out curses, and then its glow faded and the man's body returned to what it had been before, and still.

Only when the thing had gone did I take my paw from the amulet, and discovered that I had held it so tightly that I was cut and bleeding.

Haro backed away and sat on his haunches. "Yana." His voice sounded more like a man's now, and I could see his fur thinning. "Join me now."

I went to him. The man who lay on the sand was pale and covered in sweat, but unharmed. Haro was not so fortunate – he had a number of gashes and as he rose to his feet he flexed right arm as if it were sore.

“I did not kill him,” he told me as my gaze returned to the man. “I released him, and killed the demon that has possessed him. Just as you released the four people Thrown to you last night.”

I had done what he had? It did not seem possible. I watched as two black-robed Called appeared and carried the unconscious man out.

Haro picked up his own cloak and eased it over his bad arm. “Now do you understand?”

“You are hurt.”

“I will heal.” He noticed the blood on my paw and lifted it. “As you do.”

The cuts across my pads were not as deep as I had thought – *no, they were closing*. I stared. “How?”

“One of the gifts of the Call,” he told me. “We are very difficult to kill.”

I had a thousand questions, but I asked the most important ones. “Why is this not known? Why does everyone fear the Called? Why do they think we are killers?”

“We are – we are demon killers.” He managed to shrug into the cloak, and sighed. “The reasons our ancestors built the Throw are not known to us, but I suspect they were only being sensible. The Called are dangerous and unpredictable when we are in deathcat form. Also, only we can summon demons from the Afflicted. Perhaps with certain magics, that sort of power could be manipulated.”

“So we are isolated and feared instead.”

“Yes, and we encourage that as much as possible.” Haro grinned at me. “We are not completely isolated, you know. We cannot speak of what happens here, but we are given leave to visit our families and friends during the winter months, when the sun does not set.”

No darkness meant we could not change form. “What of the guards, and the people outside in the bailey? What of those who pay to watch? Do you enchant them so they cannot speak of this?”

He burst out laughing. “The guards never watch us at our work, nor do the people in the bailey, who serve the guards as well as escorts and other visitors. As for our audience, they do not pay. They are all Called.”

I thought of the faces I had seen. “There were hundreds of them.” I looked around. The Throw was large, but not enough to accommodate so many. “Where do you live?”

Haro pointed down at the sand. “Beneath, in our own city.” He held out his good hand. “It is time you see where you will live, too. Come.”

#

The underground city of the Called was even older than the Throw, a labyrinth of crystal caverns and hidden lakes and beautiful stone dwellings. I was given my own rooms and many comforts that I had never enjoyed, even living under Ravyt’s indulgent care.

Haro, who had been appointed my mentor during my novice period, introduced me to many of the Called in the weeks that passed, and we Answered and fought together. There were some who, like Kallam, disliked me for what I was, but most welcomed me to their ranks.

The Elders were consulted, but no one could understand why a Namulcat had been Called. I was the first.

The more I Answered, the more I remembered. When I changed, I discovered that I became one of the largest deathcats among the Called, and as such I was pitted against the worst of the demons. What Haro had fought in front of me paled in comparison to them, but I had other advantages. Many of the Called often had to be taught what were but instincts for me.

When I did not Answer, I watched others fight on the sands. There was much to be learned about the many demons that inhabited the Afflicted and how to prevail over them. It also helped me learn to control myself and not Answer, which was the hardest task for any of the Called.

I absorbed everything. I would not have chosen this life for myself, but indeed it seemed as if I was born to this.

The explanation I had sought for so long came to me, one night after a battle. As I limped off the sands, I thought of the old man and how many battles he must have endured, and then I knew. I clutched Ravyt's amulet in my sore paw, and sent a silent prayer of thanks – my first – to his Gods.

My novice period lasted only a month before Jasar decided to grant me full status, and did so in a solemn ceremony on the sands of the Throw before the Afflicted were brought in. This time, however, Haro led me from the enclosure and out into the gardens.

“Don’t you want to Answer?” I knew he enjoyed fighting demons as much as I did – and not only because the change temporarily restored his sight.

“Not tonight.” He nodded toward a solitary figure waiting by the center fountain. “He has written every day since you came to us, demanding your body. I don’t know how he did it, but somehow he got in here today.”

Ravyt appeared terribly thin, and when I drew close did not lift his head. “I am not leaving without her. She will be buried on my lands.”

“I think I would find that very uncomfortable.” I dropped down in front of him. This time he was weeping. “Don’t cry.”

“Yana.” His hands trembled as he cradled my face. “You’re alive.” He looked all over me. “How?”

In time I would ask him how he came to be with my mother, and why he had never told me. For now it was enough to see him and be with him.

“I am my Father’s daughter.”

A Diversity of Houses

by S.L. Viehl

“They will arrive today,” Sorel Irea said as he watched his ClanSister unload the last bale from the conveyor. “We have never welcomed visitors from HouseClan Giran before.”

“We have. You are too young to remember it.” Natala Irea cut open the baling ties and divided the dried yiborra into three portions before distributing it among the last of the empty feeders. The smell of the feed grass added a touch of sweetness to the air. “It is a cause for much celebration. Our ClanFather must be pleased.”

Her ClanBrother’s young face lit up with happiness. “He is, I think. He never stops smiling.”

Visitors meant the entire HouseClan would assemble and celebrate, to make a proper welcome and to present opportunities for strengthening ties between the Houses through commerce and trade agreements.

Unlike the Irea, the Giran were known as a wealthy and powerful HouseClan, with vast land holdings, many ships and much influence with the Jorenian Ruling Council. The diversity of their Houses might even lead to some Choices being made.

Natala discarded the baling ties and wiped some sweat from her brow. “Why are you not up at the pavilion, helping with the preparations?”

“I was sent to fetch more milk from the dairy.” Sorel hesitated before asking, “Will you not attend tonight?”

The calves shuffled over to the silver-white mounds of grass with more enthusiasm than they had last week; soon they could be released with the rest of the herd. She was pleased with them, though annoyed with Sorel. “You know the answer to that.”

Her ClanBrother made a face and dug his boot toe in the dirt. “It does not have to be so.”

She switched off the conveyor unit and went to the corner pen. Green-Eye, the name she had given to a sickly runt driven out of the herd by his sire, lay curled in one corner of the pen. Like all t'lerue, he was square-bodied and short-necked; his head shaped like a crude, five-pointed star. There was hardly any fat layer beneath his gray-green hide, however, and his joints protruded sharply. His eyes did not match in color, one brown, one green, and his sireline mark – three red ovals around and above his left green eye – made the oddity more pronounced. The contrast would likely fade as he matured.

If he matured. She had been hand-feeding him since she'd found the underdeveloped calf wedged under a water trough, but he had shown little interest in anything. Her ClanFather would order me to cull him soon.

You cannot change the path, Natala, Ylo Irea often said when she was young. Not so much to remind her of her duty than to reconcile her with the reason for it.

She took a bottle of newborn formula from the warming rack and went into the pen, and carefully lowered herself next to the listless calf. She had scrubbed and kept him clean so he did not stink of waste as he had when she'd found him. Still, if he did not get up and stand on his own soon, ground sores would start eating into his hide.

"Drink." When Green-Eye would not take the artificial nipple in his mouth, she pushed it in and began squeezing the sides of the bottle gently to encourage his suckling. "Stubborn little one."

Sorel leaned over the gate to watch. "You would know."

"I am not little." Indeed, she towered over Sorel, and stood several inches taller than the eldest of their ClanSiblings. After these many years in the yards, she was also much stronger. "Nor am I stubborn."

"What say you prove my claim wrong and attend the Welcoming tonight?" He tried to smile and make his gestures casual when she looked up at him. "It will be . . . enjoyable. We hardly ever have visitors and we want you there."

Natala never entered the pavilion unless summoned, and no summons would be sent this day. Her ClanBrother knew this.

"I have great affection for you, Sorel." And she did, for despite the gap between their ages, her youngest ClanBrother had always gifted her freely with the same. "That is why I ask you say no more, and leave me now."

"I could speak with our ClanMother." He gave her a hopeful glance. "You know how she favors me."

Natala squeezed the bottle too hard. Green-Eye gave a weak jerk before he regurgitated the excess formula all over her trousers. She used the hem of her tunic to clear his nostrils, and then cradled his head in her lap. "You must not do that."

His hope became a pout. "She can be made to see reason."

"While you cannot."

"It is not fair!"

"You think it fair to see me summoned before a visiting HouseClan? That your concept of justice will convince our ClanMother to present me to the Giran as potential kin?" She snorted. "I must speak with your tutors."

"You know what I say." He ducked his head. "There is nothing wrong with you."

"And yet you cannot look upon me when you say that." She stroked the calf's brow before she rose and left the pen. "Truly, Sorel, think you our visitors will afford me the same courtesy?"

“You do not know what will happen. You never come to see anyone.”
He caught her arm and tugged on it. “You are Irea.”

“While you are no longer a child. Please stop behaving like one.”
She removed his grip. “Go now. I have work to do.”

Natala kept working, changing the calves' soiled bedding for fresh until she heard Sorel pick up his milk cans and leave through the side entrance. Then she stopped and walked slowly back to her room. At the pavilion she had comfortable quarters with many amenities, like all the ClanDaughters of Ylo Irea were afforded. They had stood empty since her tenth year, when it had been determined that no more could be done for her.

There is nothing wrong with you.

Sorel's words had wounded her, as such kindly-meant things did, and she went to the mirror panel she had placed on the wall beside her sleeping platform. She looked in the glass for a long time, until the sight of her own features calmed her.

You cannot change the path.

Natala had no intention of attending the Welcoming, where she would never be made welcome. Sorel did not understand, but she had made peace with her lot when she was even younger than him. She would stay here, in this small but quiet corner she had made for herself, where she could curl up and be left alone.

Never would she give her sire reason to drive her away.

#

“No one will welcome you unless you remove that scowl from your face,” Qedalea Giran advised his ClanLeader.

Tavo Giran did not look up from the stock reports he was studying. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“It would not divert your path to enjoy yourself for once,” the young warrior said. “I should warn you that I have been given strict orders to see you do more here than inspect and purchase stock animals.”

“Then I would say your mission is doomed to failure, ClanCousin.” He advanced to the next page of data.

“What is it you find so fascinating?” Qedalea leaned over to inspect Tavo’s datapad display. “Irea sirelines, of course. Why did I not guess it?”

The edge of his stern mouth curled. “Perhaps because all you can think about is parading nubile young women in front of my nose.”

“Never – I? Coerce our ClanLeader to Choose?” Qedalea thumped his chest with an indignant fist. “I am sworn to protect and serve, not to procure.”

Tavo raised a dark brow. “What say you should I request such a selection of females?”

His young ClanCousin dropped his fist. “How many do you wish to see, and when, and where?”

“As I suspected.” He nodded. “My ClanUncle has been busy.”

“He has been driving me to madness.” Qedalea sighed. “My days would be far more serene – and quieter – would you but Choose.”

So would mine. Tavo glanced through the transport view panel and saw a glimmer of white in the distance to the north.

The Irea were one of the more remote HouseClans, with lands located in the farthest northern regions of Joren’s smallest continent. Only three other HouseClans occupied the landmass, and they were all far to the south. In addition to this, few Irea traveled outside their territory as well, and thus the HouseClan had remained mostly cut off from the bulk of Jorenian society. Some claimed it was their location that kept them distant, but others thought the Irea a House of isolationists.

“They say there are no females in the twenty-eight territories that can compare to Irea women,” Qedalea told him. “I have seen one myself among the Zamlon and their beauty was not exaggerated. She was stunning.”

“I would advise you not judge the women of a House by one face.” To the east, a dark blur moved slowly across a wide silvery pasture. It appeared to be too large to be anything but the Irea’s main herd.

“They are said to be very clever as well,” his ClanCousin added in a hopeful manner. “And fertile – an Irea woman would give you many young ones, and make you a fine family.”

To replace the one I lost. Tavo needed air and space around him, and he needed it now. “Driver, stop.” He tucked placed his datapad in his journey pack.

Qedalea followed his gaze. “Oh, no. You cannot go and chase through the grass after those creatures. It will be night soon.”

“I want time to make a proper selection, they do not run away, and I am not afraid of the dark.” Tavo often camped out overnight in the fields, and as it was summer in this region he would not require special gear. “I think I will sleep under the stars.”

“ClanLeader, you cannot. We are expected *tonight*.”

The men seated behind them – ten of Giran’s highest-ranked warriors, who had accompanied their ClanLeader as escort for the long journey – made sounds of respectful agreement.

“Cattle are the reason I agreed to make this journey,” Tavo said, and clapped the younger Giran on the shoulder. “I will view the herd now, while you and the others will go on ahead. Think of it as giving us both time to properly inspect likely candidates.”

“I *am* assigned to you as bodyguard.” Qedalea folded his arms. “I cannot do that unless I have your body present to *guard*.”

“You hate cattle, and I am giving you an order. Tell the Irea that business delays me.” When the transport came to a halt, he climbed out

and hoisted his pack over his shoulder. "I will see you at the pavilion in the morning."

Tavo turned and walked toward the eastern pasture, hoping his ClanCousin and their escort would not follow. At last the transport continued toward the Irea pavilion, and some of the tension that had plagued him since leaving his own territory and crossing the sea began to ease. Likely Qedalea's efforts to secure a bondmate for Tavo would satisfy many among the Giran. Certainly they would Qedalea's ClanFather, who for weeks had been dropping adages about leadership like small stones on Tavo's skull.

A ClanLeader must be an example to the House.

Qedalea was right; he should Choose someone on this journey. The diversity of their Houses was promising; it was always considered good luck to Choose from a HouseClan located far from one's own. Being one of the few ClanLeaders on Joren who had not taken a bondmate had proved to be a continual annoyance for himself and something of an embarrassment to his kin. It would make everyone's life more pleasant.

Everyone's but his own.

Tavo knew he was long past the age of Choice, but he couldn't help resenting the constant pressure to take a bondmate. He felt he had enough to attend to, trying to manage the HouseClan's extensive holdings and govern his kin after the abrupt loss of his ClanParents, the former

Giran ClanLeaders, and his older ClanBrother, Niro. He was literally learning to lead day by day.

It was Niro who had been groomed for this, not him. Tavo would have been content to serve his ClanBrother by managing the HouseClan stock – and would be doing so right now, had not a senseless transport collision wiped out his entire family.

Death was celebrated on Joren, but Tavo had been incapable of venerating the loss of the three people he had honored most. Especially Niro, who had been the best of ClanBrothers. For a time Tavo had even considered joining them in death, until his kin had stunned him by electing him as their new ClanLeader. From that moment on his life had become an endless procession of duty and formality, decisions and politics.

Now they would have me add a bondmate and ClanChildren to my responsibilities when I can barely cope with what I have.

Tavo noticed as he drew near that the t'lerue herd was much larger than he had originally estimated; even with darkness falling he could see well over ten thousand head. They appeared healthier and sturdier than any herd he had ever seen, justifying the admiration for the Irea sirelines which had been spreading for many years. It would seem this HouseClan's stock manager had a breeding program far superior to his own.

Perhaps I should consult with him as to which of the ClanDaughters Irea to Choose, he thought as he came to the outer fringe of the herd.

One of the larger males shuffled over to sniff at his tunic, and he stroked an admiring hand across the space between the placid creature's blunt, short horns. *At least with that advice I could expect to sire healthy ClanChildren on her.*

Such heresy amused Tavo, but it would have scandalized his kin and insulted the Irea, who also had the reputation as one of the more proper and formal Houses of Joren. If he voiced those thoughts, they would create an instant rift between the Giran and the Irea, and such things had to be avoided.

Tavo could not do what he wanted, Choose when he wanted, or speak as he wanted. No ClanLeader could.

"Perhaps I may settle for purchasing you," he told the big male, who eyed him with placid curiosity. Tavo took out his datapad and made note of the sireline mark as well as the ID tattooed on the inside of the animal's right ear, "If not a ClanChild, then I can breed some stronger calves next season."

Although Joren had advanced to a highly developed, technological society, the t'lerue remained an important commodity. While Jorenians did not consume animal flesh, t'lerue milk was a staple part of their diet and contained vital nutrients which could not be synthesized. T'lerue manure was even more valuable, and considered to be the finest natural crop fertilizer within the quadrant. The animals served as a cultural

foundation as well, for it was the t'lerue that had convinced the ancient Jorenians to abandon their nomadic ways and become tribal herders.

A plaintive sound of distress drew Tavo's attention away from the t'lerue, but the sun had set and darkness swallowed the source. As he moved around the herd toward it, he noticed some of the outside animals growing restless. Very little disturbed t'lerue, so he drew two blades from his belt and held them ready.

His eyes adjusted to the lack of light, and he saw the shapes of two yearlings on the ground, struggling as though held by a great weight. Two cloaked figures stood over them, apparently readying to lift one.

"Hold!" he shouted.

One of the pair produced a pulse rifle and fired into the herd, sending a surge of frightened animals toward Tavo, who leapt on the back of a female to keep from getting trampled. After coiling one hand in animal's shaggy neck fringe for control, he used the other to throw a knife at the one who had fired. His blade sank into the arm of the intruder, who dropped the rifle.

The female bucked under him, frightened by the field rover which came to a screeching halt behind him.

Ssssissss.

Something invisible hit Tavo with such force that it drove him backward and over the animal's haunches to hit the ground. The herd was

moving away from him so he didn't end up under her hooves, but as he landed the edge of one of his blades bit into his left side.

"Stop!" a woman shouted

Tavo swore as he rolled and pushed himself to his knees in time to see a tall female with unbound hair attack the two intruders. Air whistled as she wielded the herding staff in her hands like a sword, striking both with hard, rapid blows. The uninjured of the pair drew a pulse pistol and fired at her. She used her staff to vault out of the way, but it gave the intruders an opportunity to skirt behind the now-receding herd and use it as a shield while they ran away. Before she could catch up to them, they climbed into a surface glider and took off, leaving her on the ground.

She watched their craft until it was out of range, and only then lowered the end of her staff to the ground. "Houseless scum," he heard her say.

"Lady." He clamped a hand to the gash in his side and made his way toward her, but he was dizzy and his steps dragged. "Are you harmed?"

"No, but you are. Come." She put a strong arm around him and led him back to her field rover. "I regret that I did not arrive in time to provide proper aid."

"I make no complaint." He scanned the surrounding fields. "Have you no security grid?" Such a sensor web suspended above the field would have picked up the intruders' craft as soon as it landed.

“We hope to afford one next year,” she said, reminding him of the disparity between their Houses. “For now I keep sensor pylons around the field perimeter, but they are widely spaced. They must have found a blank spot.”

He grimaced. “I tripped them, then.”

“I am happy you did.” When he stumbled again, she tightened her arm around him. “To whom do I owe thanks for defending my stock, Warrior?”

Tavo began to answer her, and then hesitated. It was too dark for him to see much of her face, so he assumed the same was true for her. He had not put on his over tunic with all the ceremonial frittory befitting his status. For a time he could enjoy some anonymity.

“One who does the same for the Giran, Lady.” Fortunately the exchange of full names between members of different Houses was traditionally reserved until formal introductions could be conducted before kin.

“I wondered why you were out here. Only a stockman would forego the pleasures of Welcoming to inspect a herd.” She helped him sit in the passenger’s seat before she eased her arm away. “You are bleeding all over me, ClanSon Giran.” She tossed her staff in the back of the rover. “I will take you to our healer.”

“No.” He could not arrive bloody and wounded before the Irea or his own men; their instinctive reactions might lead to open aggression or worse. Carefully he probed the wound. “I would not . . . shame my kin by appearing thus.” It would be awkward but he might be able to suture it himself, or with her aid. “Have you a med kit?”

“Yes, I use it for the stock and my own injuries. But I am no healer of men.”

Relief made him sit back. “I trust you to see to my wound, ClanDaughter Irea.”

“It is your hide.” She went around to the other side and started the engine.

As she drove back toward the low cluster of buildings set away from the pavilion, they discussed the incident and then herd. To keep his mind off his wound and his body from slipping into the darkness fringing his vision, Tavo asked her a number of questions about the Irea breeding program, to which she provided such detailed answers that it was clear that she was the stock manager. Unusual, to be sure – few women took interest in cattle breeding – but she seemed to have a natural affinity and affection for the work.

“You should invest in a security grid as soon as possible; your herd is too great a temptation to thieves,” Tavo said. “Irea sirelines will soon outshine all others.”

“I must tell the Lno buyer that the next time he signals me,” she said, her voice rich with amusement. “He would have me believe my animals teetering on the brink of disease and death.”

“Lno has told me the same, several times. He should alter his predictions occasionally.” He noted the glint around her wrist. “You wear a wristcom – why?” The translation/location devices were virtually unnecessary unless one regularly dealt with offworlders.

“It is a convenience.” Some of the friendliness left her voice. “Often I go out and spend many several days in our outlands, checking the fences. If I am ever injured, I can use it to signal for help.”

He would have questioned why she did the work alone, but they had reached HouseClan Irea’s stockyards. The compound was as impressive as the herd, expansive and well-maintained, with large barns for milking, breeding, isolation and culling. His companion parked the rover outside the smallest, which he assumed would be like his own for isolation of sick or orphaned animals.

No one came out to greet them, which also bothered him. They should have been surrounded by her kin. As she helped him out of the seat, his thoughts were replaced by more urgent ones.

“Are you strong enough to drag me inside?” Tavo asked as the ground tilted beneath his feet.

“I believe so.”

“Your pardon, lady, for I think now you must.” He sank down into darkness.

#

Natala caught and supported the Giran’s heavy, unconscious form until she could lay him gently on the ground, then she ran into the barn. He was too large and heavy for her to carry, and dragging him, while possible, would only aggravate his wound. The grav-lift she used to transport calves from the field was her only other option.

No, you could signal a healer, a cold, inner voice that sounded remarkably like Hunetku’s said as Natala rolled the unconscious male onto the lift’s pallet. *That would be the proper manner of dealing with a visitor.*

Yet all she wanted was a little more time with him, so that she could tend his wound and ask him more about the pair who had attacked him. Indeed, they had been so busy talking about the herd that she had practically forgotten about the intruders.

“Lights on,” she said as she brought him inside, and the envirocontrol panel illuminated the dark interior of the barn.

This was the third time in a cycle her sensor pylons had been triggered, but the only time she had ever caught up with the intruders, thanks to the stockman. If the Giran had seen and could describe their faces, she might be able to identify and track them.

That is not the only reason.

She brought him inside to her room and hoisted him up and over onto her sleeping platform before retrieving her med kit and a pair of shears. Rarely did she get this close to a man when he could not look at her, so it was a pleasant novelty. Particularly as he was not averting his eyes or chattering polite nonsense to cover his discomfort.

Thank the Mother you are but a lowly cattle worker, she thought. *Hunetku would never forgive me for treating some high-ranked dignitary like this.*

As Natala cut off his tunic, she admired the strong, tough lines of his upper torso. The Giran had a typical stockman's build, with heavily muscled arms and a deep, broad chest. His skin was a dark, even blue but marred by wide angular scars on both forearms. Marks left behind from young t'lerue hooves, she knew, because they were identical to her own.

"I shall have to show you my holding pen," she murmured. She had designed and built the holding area to immobilize new calves while tattooing them with stock numbers. "That should save some of your pretty hide in the future."

The wound was long but not dangerously deep, and she irrigated and disinfected it thoroughly before sealing it with the suture laser from her med kit. Their healer might have made a neater job of it, but this was a man accustomed to regular injuries and their resulting scars. It would have to do.

Natala studied his face as she washed the dark green blood from his skin and infused him with a mild analgesic she used occasionally for her own pains. He wore his thick black hair shorter than most men, in the style of a ClanLeader, but that was likely more for convenience. Working with the stock and equipment required her to bind up her hair or risk having it pulled out. Beneath his ear was his Giran ClanSymbol, which appeared as two small interlocking circles, unlike her Irea mark, which was shaped like a miniature jagged claw. He was not at all handsome, and many would say such an angular countenance made him appear remote, even intimidating. Yet it was not the strength of his features as much as the shadows beneath his eyes and a premature purple streak in his black hair made her heart constrict.

She dared to sift her fingertips through the purple strands that only came with age or great suffering. *You are too young for this, ClanSon Giran. What have you endured, I wonder.*

Natala took her hand away and deactivated the interior lights. Since he occupied her only sleeping place, she sat on the floor beside the platform and rested her back and head against the wall. All of the excitement left her feeling drained, and she drifted into a light doze.

Sometime later his voice woke her. "Lady?" A large hand reached over the side.

She caught it with her own. "I am here, Warrior."

“Ah.” He sounded drowsy as he laced his fingers through hers. “It seems I owe you a bed as well as my life.”

She smiled. “If you have a spare security grid, I will take it in trade.”

“I must remember to bring one with me upon my next visit.” His voice grew serious. “I would ask your pardon. It was not my intention to place such a burden upon you.”

“No pardon is required.” She had to get up and turn on the light now, but she did not regret it. For a time he had spoken with her easily and freely, and she would have that happy memory to keep. “I will signal your kin at the pavilion.”

“That can wait until morning,” the Giran said when she stood and tried to release his hand. He tugged her toward him. “Come and sleep.”

All Jorenian women were taught proper behavior – even Natala. She knew it was not seemly to lie with a man unless he was Chosen or a bondmate. Yet she was tired and uncomfortable from sitting on the cold dirt floor, and he sounded exhausted. Sure no harm would come of sleeping side by side.

“As you wish.” Cautiously she stretched out beside him, uneasy and more than a little stiff. It was one thing to touch and smell and see an unconscious, wounded man, quite another to do the same when his eyes were open and mere inches from her face. She would have to rise before first light or–

“You are chilled.” The Giran put an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

His limbs and torso pressed against her own, as well as the places where his bare skin touched hers, produced very strange sensations. He smelled of safira and his own body heat, an intoxicating combination.

So this is why it is unseemly. Natala let herself imagine for a moment sharing this closeness and contact with a man each day and night until life ended. It was unbearably bitter, but she found herself relaxing against him. If she could never have this for her life, then she would have for these few hours.

“I can almost hear your thoughts, Lady,” the Giran murmured.

Mother, I hope not. “The two who attacked my herd – did you see their faces, Warrior?” she asked.

His hand came up and shifted her so that his chest pillowed the left side of her head. “I regret I did not. You?”

She was distracted by the sound of his heart beating just under her cheek. “Ah, no. I only saw them from behind.”

“The weapon they used to knock me from back of the t’lerue was unknown to me. They may be offworlders.” His fingers brushed a tendril of hair back from her temple. “Even as talented as you are with a staff, you should not have pursued them alone.”

“There was no one else to accompany me,” she said. “All were attending the Welcoming.”

“Why were you not?”

“I am not one for celebrations.” That, at least, was true.

“Neither am I.” He turned his head and pressed his mouth to a spot just above her right brow. “Sleep well, Lady.”

Natala closed her eyes tightly. “And you, Warrior.”

#

Tavo had not slept so soundly since before the accident that had taken his blood-kin from him, and when he woke he did so with a smile and full memory of the past night’s events. *Gedalea will never believe any of this, while I will never hear the end of it.*

Sunshine filled the humble little room, and he rolled on his side so that he could at last gaze upon the face of the Irea female who had saved his life.

In the space where a woman should have been lay only a folded tunic.

Tavo sat up, ignoring the flash of pain from his side, and looked around him. “ClanDaughter Irea?”

No one answered. He was alone.

As he rose he pulled on the tunic, which was old but clean and neatly mended. His footgear, he saw, she had placed at the base of the platform,

along with his pack. He could still smell her on his skin – her scent was like new l'seevala blossoms – but there was no other sign that she had even been in the room.

Why did she leave me?

Tavo walked out into the barn, where several young calves eyed him as he passed their pens, and out into the stockyards, but saw no one. It was barely dawn. He turned until he saw the Irea pavilion, and headed in that direction.

Had she recognized him? Had she gone to inform the other Giran of his presence? He increased his pace and crossed the distance with long strides. *Was she angry with him?* He did not care for the fact that she had left him. She should have remained, she should have woken him. *There will be much to explain.*

Qedalea and some of the other Giran were walking out of the grand front entrance of the pavilion as Tavo approached, and they saluted him as usual.

“We were about to go in search of you,” his ClanCousin informed him with a grin. “Did you enjoy your night under the stars?”

“In some ways.” Tavo scanned the faces of his men, which were open and unconcerned. “Did no one bring word of me this morning?”

“No one yet knows you are here.” Qedalea peered at him and lost his smile. “Something is wrong. You are favoring your left side.”

Tavo informed them of what had happened, and the easy expressions instantly evaporated from every face. “We are visitors here; you are to say nothing of this to the Irea.”

Qedalea already had his hand curled around his blade hilt. “No one attacks our kin and takes the coward’s path,” he said, his tone as lethal as the dark blue claws that had emerged from the tips of his fingers.

“We will track them later,” he said. “I would pay my respects now and be properly introduced to the woman who saved my life.”

Slowly his ClanCousin nodded. “As you say, ClanLeader.” His gaze drifted down to Tavo’s tunic and some of the killing rage left his face.

“Perhaps a change of garments first?”

The men escorted him through the pavilion to their guest quarters, where Tavo took care to cleanse and prepare himself properly. As the men discussed how they would track the intruders, he inspected his garments and adjusted his best tunic. He knew himself to be too large and sharp-featured to be considered appealing to a young female, but he suspected his savior was somewhat more mature. Which made him wonder why she had not Chosen – surely a female with her strength, charm and talent would be pursued by every male within five HouseClan territories.

What if she has Chosen?

Tavo dismissed the alarming idea at once – no woman who had Chosen would have slept at his side as she had. Nor would any Chosen of hers allow her to occupy a room away from the pavilion. He had a suspicion that she spent much of her time in the stockyards, perhaps even slept there, which also disturbed him. It was not natural to dwell apart from kin.

He walked out to where his kin waited. “After introductions are made,” he told Qedalea, “I will ask for the female so that she and I may discuss the Irea breeding program. Remember, you and the men are to say nothing about the attack. This is her business, and I will not intrude upon it without her permission.”

By the time they emerged from the guest quarters, word had spread through the pavilion and the Irea had assembled in their central receiving room, which had been prepared in banquet style for a large communal meal. Qedalea and his men escorted Tavo to the head table, where a tall, stately couple stood waiting to receive him.

“ClanLeader Tavo Giran,” the older man said as he made the formal gesture of greeting between Houses. “I welcome you to HouseClan Irea.”

“ClanLeader Ylo Irea,” Tavo said, returning the gesture and adding one of gratitude. “Your kindness is greatly appreciated. I regret the delay that prevented me from attending last night.”

Tavo was introduced to Hunetku Irea, Ylo's bondmate, and to their four sons and two daughters. He was then presented to the HouseClan with the traditional ceremony before he and his men were invited to share morning bread at the ClanLeader's table.

By then Tavo felt impatient, but waited until all the customary remarks had been exchanged before venturing to ask for the female. "As I journeyed to your House, I could not help but notice your fine herd of t'lerue in the eastern pasture. I would not be the first to be envious of such fine animals, I imagine."

"We are quite proud of our stock," Ylo said as he broke the end of a golden, intricately braided loaf before passing it to his bondmate. "I understand that you wish to increase the diversity of your sirelines."

He nodded. "I would also like to improve our breeding program. Could your stock manager join us? I would appreciate a personal introduction."

The loaf fell from Hunetku's hand and clattered onto her plate, and everyone at the table gave Tavo horrified looks.

#

Natala drove the field rover as far as the border between the Irea and Zamlon territories, which were divided by a long stretch of inhibitor poles. The poles produced sensor-activated bioelectric fences, mainly to keep strays on Irea property as the Zamlon grazed their herds much

farther to the south. She shut off the engine and sat staring at her hands, which were clenched so tightly on the steering controls that her knuckles bulged.

“It was an idyllic interlude, and now it is over,” she told herself. “Over and done with. Forget him.”

Natala took her staff and climbed out of the rover, to start walking the line of poles. At last count no animals were missing, but it was her duty to check the borders and maintain the costly equipment. Usually she did so in the field rover, but today she decided to inspect this portion on foot. She had to do something physical, to stop thinking about the Giran.

She had not slept, of course. His kiss to her brow had made that impossible; it had burned into her head like a brand applied for hours. *It must have amused the Mother to have him touch his lips to that particular spot on my face.* Rising and leaving him just before dawn had been a cowardly thing, but after that kiss she could not allow the Giran to wake and look upon her in the light.

“He will never feel disgust or shame for his kindness to me,” she muttered as she crouched to adjust a loosened sensor port at the base of one pole. “In time, he will forget me.” Movement behind her rise and turn.

The cloaked figure standing a few feet away raised an odd block-shaped device.

Ssssissss.

Natala was thrown back into the space between the poles, which triggered the sensors to produce the energy fence. Pain crackled over her as she bounced off the fence and back toward the intruder. She had enough sense use the staff still in her hand to knock the device away before she hit the ground. As she heard their intruder scrambling for the weapon, she pressed a button she had never before used on her wristcom and then tucked her hand under her body to protect it.

Ssssissss.

#

“You do have a stock manager, do you not?” Tavo asked Ylo. His voice sounded overly loud, but that was due to the utter silence that had fallen over the central receiving room.

The ClanLeader nodded slowly. “Our stock manager is” he groped for words.

“Not one for celebrations, I imagine.” Tavo kept his expression and voice mild as he sipped from his server of jaspkerry. “Few cattle breeders are.”

“Indeed.” Ylo smiled his relief.

“Then perhaps you would permit me to visit your stockyards,” he suggested, “so that I may speak to your manager in surroundings less formal.”

“No!” Hunetku Irea gave her bondmate a hard look before adding, “Forgive me, ClanLeader Giran, but such matters are best delegated to those whose time is not as valuable as your own.”

“I will have full details of our breeding program provided for your stock manager,” Ylo added quickly.

Why were they so eager to keep him from meeting with the stock manager, when they had fallen over themselves to afford him every other possible courtesy?

“Before I was elected as ClanLeader Giran, I managed the HouseClan’s stock.” Tavo caught Qedalea’s warning glance and realized his own tone had become quite chilled. He forced a smile. “Alas, as I have not yet selected or trained a replacement manager, there is no one to whom I can delegate such tasks. I fear it must be me.”

Before Ylo could respond, his ClanSon Sorel jumped from his seat and clapped a hand around his own forearm. “ClanFather – Natala signals. She is in danger.”

The boy’s ClanSiblings also looked anxiously at each other and Ylo.

Tavo spotted the flashing display on the wristcom the boy wore, and politely rose to his feet. “May the Giran be of service in this matter, ClanLeader Irea?”

Hunetku muttered something, and made a terse gesture at her son while Ylo said to Tavo, “Your offer is appreciated, ClanLeader, but my own men will—”

“ClanFather!” Sorel’s young voice snapped, whip-sharp. He turned to Tavo. “Natala is my ClanSister as well as our stock manager,” he said in a rush.

“Sorel!” Hunetku appeared ready to faint.

The boy ignored his ClanMother. “She would not signal unless her life was threatened. We must go to her now.”

“I see.” Fury welled inside Tavo as his claws emerged and he met Ylo’s gaze. “Then it appears that her absence here was not, as you said, by choice.”

The dull dark color of shame appeared in the older man’s face. “Little in Natala’s life is.” He sounded old and tired.

His bondmate rose. “This is nonsense. Natala is in no danger. Sorel, turn off that device and sit down.”

“Do you have a reading on her location?” Tavo asked the boy.

Hunetku’s hands fluttered in near-incomprehensible gestures as she produced a strained laugh. “ClanLeader Giran, do not trouble yourself. We will send our own men to attend to this.”

“She is near the border.” Sorel came around the table to show Tavo the coordinates. His ClanBrothers were already heading for the doors.

“We have surface craft, but not as fast as yours.”

Tavo nodded. “We will take mine.”

“Ylo!” Hunetku became shrill. “Do something!”

“ClanLeader, we appreciate your aid,” the older man said, “but this matter is Irea business.”

Tavo’s vision dimmed for a moment.

“Unfortunately, it has become mine as well. Your ClanDaughter Natala saved my life last night.” He shocked everyone by using his claws to pull open his tunic to reveal his wound. “I would return the favor.”

Ylo’s bondmate gaped at him. “You saw her? You saw and you said nothing?”

Tavo did not respond to her nonsense, but nodded to Qedalea, who like the Giran men stood ready. To Ylo he said, “We will bring back your ClanDaughter.”

The ClanLeader nodded and sank back into his chair.

#

Natala had not expected to open her eyes again, but when she did she found herself in a peculiar position – upright, spread-eagled, and unable to move. A hum of energy pressed in around her, and she looked through the tangle of hair hanging over her face until she spotted a

projection device on the ground in front of her. Four bright streams of energy had her pinned; apparently between two p'nepel trees, from the feel of the spiky bark biting into her wrists and ankles.

A pair of alien males stood a short distance away to her left, arguing with each other. They were of average size, vaguely humanoid but she did not recognize their species or language. Two Maneo t'lerue yearlings, a male and a female, lay to the right. Both had pressure darts in their haunches, and both were dead.

Offworld thief breeders. Her claws slowly emerged and buried themselves in the p'nepel bark. *They must have attempted to tranquilize them for transport.* Anyone could access the planetary database and learn that most sedative compounds were fatal to t'lerue, yet this pair had not even bothered. Although the animals were not hers, the waste of life disgusted her.

That these two might have diverted the path of the Giran last night, however, enraged her.

One of the thieves noticed her watching them and strode over to her. He jerked her head up by her hair and peered in her face.

"Habartallanekkatan." He switched on a wristcom to translate his speech and pointed to the carcasses. "We gave them neuroparalyzer. Why did they die?"

“Because you are idiots.” She strained and twisted against the energy bonds. “You cannot take t’lerue offplanet. They never survive the drugs or the transport.”

He took out the square device that had knocked her unconscious. “That is a lie, invented to protect your livestock. Give me the truth.”

She could not get at him like this. She needed to be free and on the ground. *Perhaps they are as ignorant of Jorenian women as they are of t’lerue.*

“Don’t hurt me again.” As she curled her claws into her palms to hide them, she produced what she hoped was a convincingly fearful expression. “Release me and I will show you what you must do.”

The alien glanced at his companion, and then bent down to switch off the device on the ground. Natala fell forward and landed on her hands and knees.

“Get up and—”

She sprang at him, slashing at his face and throat with her claws. They fell together, but she flipped him under her and straddled him. The pleasure of hearing him scream and feeling his flesh part under her hands made her want to linger and enjoy the work, but she had the other to disable first.

Ssssissss.

The blow was a glancing one, and still Natala was thrown off the thief and into one of the carcasses. She rolled over it and flattened herself behind the dead yearling just in time.

Ssssissss.

The heavy carcass lifted as it was propelled back, and landed on her left arm, snapping a bone in her forearm. As she struggled to work herself free of the dead weight, the second alien came to stand over her and leveled the device at her head.

Natala went still, and found the words she wanted to be her last. "Walk within beauty, ClanSon Giran."

"Who is Giran?" the alien demanded.

Someone loomed up behind him. "I am."

#

Tavo was the first to spot the two aliens and what they had done to Natala Irea. "There, to the west," he told Sorel. "Drop down and land behind that hill. We cannot take the chance of firing on them from the air."

He was the first out of the craft as well, and when Qedalea tried to move in front of him he jerked his ClanCousin back. His bodyguard started to protest until he saw Tavo's eyes and subsided.

They moved forward silently; Tavo flanked by Qedalea and Sorel and followed by his men and Sorel's ClanBrothers. As they approached, one

of the aliens went to Natala, who hung unmoving between two trees. When the alien aimed the force-device at the helpless woman, Tavo raised his pulse rifle and targeted the back of the alien's head. He only lowered it when the alien released Natala from the projection field.

Fool, Tavo thought as he handed Qedalea his rifle. "Stay here." To Sorel he said, "They are mine."

The boy's eyes narrowed, and for a moment Tavo glimpsed the man he would be. "We have your back. Take them."

Tavo ran, but before he had crossed half the distance Natala had taken down one of the aliens. He changed direction and came up behind the other just as the alien had pinned Natala beside a dead yearling.

At such close range the force-device would blow her head apart. Tavo's mind cleared of everything except getting to the alien before he could divert Natala's path.

"Walk within beauty, ClanSon Giran," he heard her say.

Tavo slowed his pace and made his footsteps soundless as he came up behind the thief.

"Who is Giran?" the alien demanded.

"I am." As the thief whirled around, he knocked the force-device away with one hand, and buried six claws of the other in the alien's abdomen. Tradition held that an enemy be allowed to defend himself, but he was taking no chances. "I declare you my ClanKill."

Tavo had served Joren in more than one conflict. He had killed many enemies with blades and pulse fire during those service years, but he had never used his bare hands to rip open the body of another. ClanKill was reserved for those who threatened or harmed kin, and as he held down the screaming male and did the work, he finally understood why. The deep, instinctive killing rage enveloped his reason, and if anyone had tried to stop him at that moment, he would have ripped them apart as well.

Only when Tavo was covered with the blood of both men did the rage fade. He went to where Natala lay, her arm pinned beneath the carcass. He went down on his knees and lifted the side of the heavy yearling, easing her arm out from under. She made no sound, but from the odd angle of her forearm he could see that it was broken.

“We meet again, ClanDaughter Irea,” he said, gently cradling her arm against her breast.

“You do not fight fair, ClanSon Giran,” she murmured. “I like that very much.” When he tried to brush back the snarl of long black hair covering her face, she caught his wrist and turned her head away. “Do not look at me. Please.”

Had they done something to her face? Tavo wanted to tear them to pieces all over again. “I have thought of little else since last night.” He felt her cringe under his touch. “Lady?”

She drew in a deep breath, then swept her hair away and turned to face him.

Natala Irea had the same elegant bone structure and refined features he had seen among the other Irea women, as well as the elliptical, tilted white-within-white eyes. Her lips and brows were smooth and balanced, and her skin was the clear blue of the summer twilight. Clear and flawless blue, except for the large and livid purple oval that enveloped her left eye, and the two smaller matching circles above her left brow.

There was no mistaking the pattern – it was a t'lerue sireline mark.

Someone made a sound, and Tavo dragged his gaze up to see his men standing around them. All were staring at Natala's face. No one seemed to know what to say.

"Natala!" The boy flung himself down beside her. "Your arm – is it bad?"

"I do not think so, Sorel." She met Tavo's gaze. "I thank you for my life, Warrior."

"No thanks are required, Lady." Tavo lifted her into his arms and glanced at Qedalea. "Bring the bodies."

#

The Irea healer set Natala's broken arm and suggested she stay overnight in the HouseClan infirmary, but she refused. All she wanted was

her quiet corner in the isolation barn, where there were no strange eyes to stare at her, and no faces that would turn away from the sight.

Her ClanMother, however, stood waiting outside the infirmary.

“Natala.” Hunetku’s eyes took in the cast on her ClanDaughter’s arm before moving up to her ruined face. “I was informed of your injury. You are well?”

“It was a clean break.” She kept her voice and expression blank.

“That is fortunate.” Her brows arched. “A pity that your actions resulted in this. Perhaps it will teach you to remember proper protocol in the future.”

She stiffened. “Yes, I will endeavor to remember to behave with more decorum when we are next attacked by intruders.”

“You have no regard for the disgrace you have brought down upon this House, do you?” Hunetku made a slashing gesture of contempt.

“Return to the yards and stay there.”

“At once, ClanMother.” She turned, but saw a group of men entering the corridor and changed direction. She heard one of them calling her name but kept walking. Only when one of the Giran’s kin caught up with her did she halt.

He was younger than the Giran and quite handsome, and smiled easily at her. “ClanDaughter Irea, I am Qedalea Giran. May I speak with you?”

“Your pardon, Warrior, but I am needed in the yards.”

He frowned and stared at her arm. “Surely not.”

“I am quite well.” She hesitated. “I wish to thank you and your men for providing aid to our House. Please extend my gratitude to your kin.” She made the formal accompanying gesture as best she could with one hand, and then walked away.

“Lady – wait,” he called after her. “Our ClanLeader wishes to see you.”

Such a meeting would send Hunetku into hysterics. Natala was almost tempted, then she thought of the shame it would cause her ClanFather. *I cannot do that to him.* “I regret I am unable to attend him.” She kept going, until a trio of Giran males blocked her path.

Qedalea came to her side. “I fear he was most insistent about it.”

“Was he.” She looked over his shoulder and saw her ClanMother a few yards away. Hunetka appeared prepared to explode. “ClanSon Giran,” she said, keeping her voice low, “I am in your debt, but I have no desire to meet your ClanLeader. Such an introduction would only cause discomfort and embarrassment for both Houses. Now, please tell your kin to get out of my way, or I will move them myself.”

A different smile spread across the young warrior’s face. “As you say, Lady.” He nodded to the men, who stepped aside.

Natala went unhindered from the pavilion to the stock yards, but only when she was inside the isolation barn did she relax her guard.

“Mother of all Houses, let that be the last of it.”

She went to check on the calves, which were hungry but otherwise well. Only Green-Eye refused to rise or feed, and with a sigh she brought another bottle into the pen.

“I am not going to leave you alone, you know,” she told him as he refused to take the formula. “You may as well resign yourself to life.”

“My thoughts exactly,” a deep voice said.

Natala’s eyes flashed up to see the Giran stock manager standing just outside the pen. “What are you doing here?” she blurted, before she remembered her manners and averted her face. “Your pardon. I am very grateful for the aid which you provided today.”

“It was little more than what you did for me last night.” He opened the gate and came in to have a look at the calf. “Does he not thrive?”

Natala shook her head. “His dam did not survive his birth, and his sire drove him off before he could bond with another.” *Why does he not go?* She dared a glance at him. “Have you had any such in your herd?”

“A few.” He looked around. “Keep you any hides here?”

“There is a bundle in the storage bin there.” Natala nodded toward the stack of t’lerue hides she salvaged from culled animals and sold to sheathmakers in the south.

The Giran retrieved one and brought it back to the pen. "Drape yourself with the hide and offer him the bottle again."

Natala did as he instructed. Green-Eye lifted his head and, after much snuffling, latched on to the bottle and began suckling.

She forgot herself and grinned openly at the Giran, who stood by the gate watching. "It worked – how?"

"The stubborn ones usually respond to the scent of the hide – wearing it, you smell like a t'lerue instead of a Jorenian."

Her smile faded. "A garment to match my face, then."

He didn't say anything for some time. Then, "How long have you had the mark?"

#

Tavo had not meant to ask her in such a blunt fashion, but she seemed to take no offense.

"Since the winter of my ninth year." She trailed her fingers back and forth along Green-Eye's silky hide. "Even as a child I spent most of my time in the yards. Nothing made me happier than to help with the stock, and our manager at the time indulged me. I think he believed in time I would lose interest and take up a more feminine pursuit, like weaving or garment-making."

He studied her. She wore simple, comfortable garb that suited her long-limbed, muscular body, but no adornments. Her hair she left loose, he

suspected, so that she could better conceal the mark. "I cannot picture you at a loom."

"Neither could I, much to my ClanMother's despair." She stared past him, as if toward the pavilion that lay beyond. "It was a disagreement with her over my behavior that made me slip out very late one night. I could not sleep, and I was angry and distracted. I think that is why I did not sound an alarm when I saw the craft land near the herd. I rushed out into the field." She wiped a dribble of formula from the side of Green-Eye's mouth. "There were eight of them, but I was not afraid. My sire was ClanLeader and I believed all I had to do was inform them of that and order them off our land."

A child, alone with eight thieves. Tavo muttered some vile. "Who were they?"

"I never saw their faces. They never spoke, and the fists they used on me were gloved. They laughed, though, when one of them produced the infuser and injected me with the chemical marker."

The compound used for the marking of t'lerue was a powerful one, which permanently altered the color of tissue on the cellular level. It was developed to do so to prevent anyone from altering or falsifying sireline marks. However, the alteration process took several hours to complete, during which time it could be neutralized. "Why were you not given the counteragent?"

She ducked her head. "They left me bound and gagged in the culling barn. Because stock had been stolen and no one realized I was gone, I was not missed at first. My kin found me late the following night, and by then the damage was irreversible."

At least her kin had not done this to her as some form of archaic punishment. He could not have left her here when he returned to the Giran, had that been the case. "Why did the raiders mark you thus?"

Natala's shoulders moved. "Perhaps they thought it amusing, or a way to show scorn for our House. They were never caught, so I have no answer." She held up the empty bottle and smiled at him. "Your ruse worked, Warrior."

Tavo knew in that moment that it made no difference how the Irea treated Natala. He could not leave her behind; he could never leave her again. In truth it was an odd moment to discover that she was his, and he was hers, but he accepted it without hesitation. That was the way of Choice.

He held out his hand to her and helped her to her feet. "You should not be working with a broken arm."

"I ran away from the pavilion again, I fear." At his inquiring glance she added, "I was told that your ClanLeader wished to see me. I thought it better to avoid the encounter and thus bring no more shame to my kin."

Tell her who you are now, and declare yourself to her. He followed her to the cleansing unit. “Your kin have no reason to feel ashamed of you.”

“They *are* ashamed of me.” She began to wash her hands. “They have always been thus.”

She said it with such acquiescence that for a moment he could not speak. “Mother, why?”

“Is my face not reason enough?” She glanced at him, puzzled. “Irea women are renowned for their beauty. That is a matter of great pride to my kin.”

Beauty? He could not think of a woman who could compare to her. “How could your kin not take pride in you? You were a child, defending the House.”

“Now I am woman, marked like a herd animal.” She dried her hands. “That is what people see, what shames my kin.”

“My eyes must not function properly, then.” He wanted to pull her into his arms, but settled for resting his hands on her shoulders. “What I see is that you are strong and clever and kind. And I see this” –he traced the oval surrounding her eye– “as a mark of your courage. It makes you beautiful in ways other women can never be.”

Natala went still under his hands. “Do not say such things.”

“Why should I not?” He moved closer. “They are true.”

“It will be difficult enough to forget you now, Warrior.” Pain laced every word she whispered. “Do not make it impossible for me.”

“Lady, I fear I must.” He bent his head, and touched his mouth to each mark. “I would be a constant presence in your thoughts.” He cradled her face with his hands. “As you are in mine.”

A man cleared his throat, and Tavo reluctantly released her and turned. His ClanCousin stood just behind them, and when Natala saw him her cheeks darkened.

Impatience made Tavo snap, “What is it?”

Qedalea’s gaze shifted from Natala’s face. “Forgive my intrusion, but you are needed at the pavilion . . . ClanCousin.”

#

Tavo wanted to send his own men to bring Natala to the pavilion that night, but Qedalea persuaded him that diplomacy might work more to his advantage than brute force.

“You never think to exercise the power and privilege of rank, ClanCousin,” the younger Giran reminded him. “Rules are made to be manipulated.”

He dragged a hand through his hair. “I cannot remember them all.”

“Which is why I have memorized them for you. Protocol requires that a visiting ClanLeader be introduced to his counterpart’s blood-kin. *All* his blood-kin.”

Tavo met his ClanCousin's gaze. "Natala has not been formally presented to me."

"Precisely." Qedalea straightened the line of his tunic. "I will go now and remind ClanLeader Irea of this oversight."

He made an impatient gesture. "He will only make another excuse to keep her away."

"Ah, but should he do so, I will remind him that you killed for her." The younger Giran grinned. "He cannot prevent her from acknowledging such an honor before her kin."

Despite his ClanCousin's machinations on his behalf, Tavo was uncomfortable with the entire matter. Natala still did not know he was the Giran ClanLeader; he had not found the opportunity to tell her earlier, in the barn. At the time reassuring her that she was beautiful in his eyes had been more important than driving her away with the truth of his rank.

It still is, he thought as he dressed for the presentation. Instead of resorting to his finest ceremonial garments, he selected a simple tunic and trousers, hoping that would make her feel more at ease. *She has suffered enough for ten lifetimes.*

Qedalea reported success as he and the Giran escorted Tavo to the elaborate feast the Irea had prepared to celebrate his ClanKill on their behalf. As was custom, the bodies of the two alien intruders were hung by their own intestines outside the pavilion, in ritual ClanSign to all of what

could be expected by those who intended harm to the Irea. Tavo stepped outside to admire the presentation of the corpses, and found Sorel serving as the ceremonial guard.

“ClanLeader Giran,” the boy said, giving him a respectful salute.

“ClanSon Irea.” He eyed the swaying bodies, which had been displayed with great care and attention to detail. Most offworlders were said to find the ClanSign custom distasteful, but none had ever complained to a Jorenian about it. “Is this your work?”

“Mine and my ClanBrothers.” Satisfaction gleamed in the boy’s eyes.

Tavo smiled. “Well done, Warrior.”

Sorel’s jaw sagged for a moment – the honorific was reserved for adult men – and then he remembered his dignity and made a gesture of gratitude. “All Irea are grateful for your aid, ClanLeader Giran.”

Tavo returned inside, and went with his men to the ceremonial banquet hall, where they were received with somewhat subdued pleasure. Hunetku was conspicuously absent, and it was left to Ylo to make the proper ceremonial remarks. As he spoke, the ClanLeader watched the open door at the back of the hall.

She will attend, Tavo told himself as he did the same. *She will attend or I will go and get her myself*. He relaxed when he saw a cloaked figure carrying a staff appear in the entrance.

"I have not had the opportunity to introduce you to the blood-kin for whom you provided aid," Ylo said, and raised his hand. "My ClanDaughter, come forth."

To her credit, Natala only hesitated a moment when she drew close enough to see Tavo's face. She continued forward and a few feet from the ClanLeader's table, moved her staff to a horizontal position and sank to her knees. "ClanLeader Giran," she said, "my life is yours."

"Rise, Natala Irea." He moved forward as she stood, until only a small space separated them. She would not lift her head or remove her cloak. "I would look upon the face of the ClanDaughter of this House," he said, very gently.

Natala pulled back the hood of her cloak and glared at him. Murmurs swept around the hall as most of the Irea stared then averted their eyes.

She was angry; her hand trembled so that she could not hold her staff motionless. "Are you satisfied now?"

"ClanLeader Irea," Tavo said, never looking away from Natala's face, "has your ClanDaughter Chosen?"

Behind him, the older man made a choking sound before he replied, "No. She has not."

"I am glad to know it," he said, ignoring the sounds of shock her kin made, "as I would make her my Choice."

“You cannot.” The outrage faded from Natala’s expression, replaced by a sadness that turned her skin chalky and made the purple marks stand out even more. “You *must* not.”

“I honor you, Natala Irea.” He lifted a hand to touch her face.

She turned and ran from the hall.

Tavo followed and caught up with her before she left the pavilion.

“Natala!”

She whirled around, holding her staff like a weapon, her face wet with tears. “I have satisfied protocol. You will not look upon me or touch me again.”

“That is unlikely.” He couldn’t understand why she was weeping.

“Natala, you honor me as I honor you. I can feel it, here.” He pressed his hand to his heart before he reached for her again.

“I feel nothing.” She jabbed at him with her staff and backed out of reach. “Go back to the pavilion.”

She was lying, but why? “Why do you deny me?”

Natala produced a short, bitter laugh. “You ask me that, *ClanLeader* Giran?”

“I should have told you that first night. I . . . I wanted you to feel at ease, to know me for myself instead of for the title given me.” He made a gesture of regret. “What is done cannot be changed. Come back to the pavilion with me. If you wish time before we Choose, I will wait for you.”

“Wait for me.” Her gaze shifted like a trapped animal’s, then she swung the staff and struck him across the face with a blow so hard it made him stagger backward.

He didn’t understand why she had done it until his men swarmed around him with weapons drawn. “Hold.”

“Are you blind?” she shouted at his men. “I harmed your ClanLeader!”

“I will survive.” Tavo wiped the blood from his mouth. “I shield you, Natala Irea.” When she swung at him a second time, he caught the staff and wrestled it away from her. “Is this is your intention, then?” Furious now, he tossed the staff to Qedalea. “To goad my men to divert your path simply so that you may avoid our bond?”

“There will be no bond between us!”

“It already exists.” He saw the truth of what he felt, reflected in her terrified eyes. It calmed him as nothing else could have. “You know we have but to Choose.”

Natala looked at the impassive faces of the Giran man, then at Tavo. “You would disgrace your kin in this fashion?”

“You will be honored by HouseClan Giran as my Chosen.”

“She will bring you nothing but ridicule and humiliation,” Hunetku said from where she stood watching them from one of the upper balconies. When Tavo glanced up at her, she retreated into her apartment.

“There, you have it from the lips of my own ClanMother.” Natala met Tavo’s gaze. “I will not Choose you.” She stalked away toward the yards.

Qedalea came to stand beside Tavo and watch her go. “She seems serious, ClanCousin.”

“I will persuade her.” Tavo rubbed his sore jaw. “If I can first keep her from diverting my path, or you from diverting hers, and somewhere between silence that ClanMother of hers.”

“Is gagging a ClanLeader’s bondmate considered an insult to the House?” his ClanCousin asked. “If not I will be glad to do it.”

“This is no time for humor.” Tavo made a gesture of frustration and scanned the faces of his men. “What say you of ClanDaughter Irea? Do you find her an object of shame or pity?”

The men all gave rather forceful, negative replies. Qedalead added his own with, “I have great hopes that she will teach me how to fight with a staff like that.”

Tavo felt a little better, knowing his kin shared his sentiments. “Now, how to convince her that we do not care what color her face is.”

“You told me not to judge the women of a House by one face.” His ClanCousin placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “It is a pity she judges her face by one House.”

Tavo smiled slowly. “Qedalea, you are brilliant.”

Natala spent a restless night pacing the length of the isolation barn. Toward dawn, she packed her meager belongings and prepared for a journey. To where, she knew not, but as long as it was far from Tavo Giran she would be content. If she left at first light, she could avoid more unpleasant scenes. Perhaps the Zamlon or the Maneo would hire her to work their herd.

Her arm still throbbed as miserably as her head.

“Natala.” Sorel came into the barn, and for a moment she considered concealing herself until he went away. But the temptation to bid her ClanBrother farewell was too overwhelming, and she slung her pack over her shoulder before stepping out to greet him.

“Sorel.” She embraced him. “Your ClanSign was magnificent. It was an honor to see it.”

“I am delighted that it pleased you.” His eyes moved to her pack. “You are not going away from us.”

“I must. The Giran – the ClanLeader Giran,” she corrected herself, “is not thinking clearly. It must be the ClanKill that has unbalanced him. When I am gone he will come back to his senses.”

“The man is not demented for wishing to Choose you,” her ClanBrother informed her. “I rather think more of him for it.”

She shook her head. “Then you are equally unbalanced, and will doubtless benefit from my absence as well.”

“Oh, Natala, do not go like this.” Fear colored his voice. “If you do I think I will never see you again.”

“I must.” She bent to touch her brow to his in a gesture of rare affection. “You will always be in my heart, Sorel. You are the finest of ClanBrothers, and the best of friends. Remember me.”

They both looked up as Hunetku Irea stepped into the barn. Their ClanMother appeared both unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the surroundings, but she had never actually entered the yards before this day. “Natala, your ClanFather and I would speak to you.”

They had all suffered enough pain and humiliation. It was within Natala’s power to put an end to it, now. “I regret that I do not have time to attend you, Lady. I am taking a journey.”

A familiar, imperious expression replaced Hunetku’s uncertainty. “You will attend us, nevertheless.” To Sorel she said, “Escort your ClanSister to the pavilion.”

Natala could have walked off into the fields; neither Hunetku nor Sorel were strong enough to stop her. It was her ClanBrother’s pleading eyes that convinced her to accompany him.

Hunetku led them not to Ylo’s private chamber, but to the ceremonial hall. Though it was still not dawn, there her entire HouseClan stood assembled. There also stood her ClanFather and Tavo Giran, along with the Giran men. Everyone was in full ceremonial robes. That was not

what shook her so completely that she nearly collapsed. It was seeing the ClanLeader Giran and his men, and the three livid purple ovals that marred each Giran face.

Tavo and his men had injected themselves with sireline chemical marker.

“Come forth, ClanDaughter Irea.”

Natala could not blink, much less walk, but Sorel took her hand and guided her to the front of the hall.

There Tavo stepped up to her, and Sorel joined her hand with the Giran’s. “I would not give her back her staff right away,” her ClanBrother murmured to Tavo before moving away.

“Are you displeased?” Tavo asked her.

“Displeased? Mother of all Houses . . . how could you?” She looked down the row of discolored faces. “How could you do such a thing to yourselves?”

“To honor the one who saved the life of our ClanLeader,” Qedalea said, speaking for the men. With a mischievous grin, he touched his face and added, “I thought mine came out particularly well, don’t you?”

Natala was speechless.

“I have signaled our HouseClan and told them of you,” Tavo told her. “They thought it a marvelous notion and have agreed to do the same.” He

smiled. "I only hope we have enough of the chemical on hand; we have many kin."

"This is madness." Natala turned to her ClanFather. "You must summon the healer. This can still be reversed."

"I offered, several times," Ylo told her, looking almost as dumbfounded as she felt. "They refuse."

She seized Tavo's arm. "You cannot disfigure an entire HouseClan on my behalf. Let the healer attend you. Signal your kin and tell them to stop." When he did not reply, she went down on her knees before him. "Tavo, do not do this, I *beg* you."

"It is done, my heart." Gently he raised her up. "For one alone, this may have seemed a disfigurement." He touched the oval that surrounded his eye, and then hers. "For my House, it now becomes a symbol of courage. For me, devotion. I honor you, Natala Irea. I will for all of my days. So shall my kin, whether you say the words you hold in your heart, or not."

Every pair of eyes in the hall was upon her; no one seemed to breathe.

"You do not fight fair, Warrior." She touched the new marks on his face. "Did I tell you that I like that about you?"

He inclined his head. "Might be there something more you wish to tell me?"

“As it happens, yes, there is.” Natala pressed her cheek against his palm before she brought his hand down to rest over her heart. “Tavo Giran, I Choose you.”

Defense Mechanism

By S.L. Viehl

I try to stay out of places like Dottie's New Age Store and Herborium, but the store had just opened on the corner across from my office. It seemed rude not to drop in and introduce myself, and warn the new owner about the rash of robberies we'd been having in the area.

I didn't like people, though – especially strangers. I was a lone wolf type, and I liked it. Bad enough I had to deal with pet owners.

My receptionist had already checked out the place, of course. Mindy's two favorite hobbies were men and shopping.

"She's got like the neatest stuff, Jude. I bought some way cool incense and a set of personal power stones guaranteed to center my chakras." Her bright blue eyes turned dreamy. "Plus she stocks every album Yanni ever recorded."

"Be still my heart." After listening to Yanni on the office stereo for two years, I wanted to watch him die, slowly, after an extended period of torture involving his tongue and his genitals. Which I also wanted to watch. "Mrs. Bettles, Coco is still overweight but otherwise she's fine." I handed the shivering Cocker Spaniel over to her anxious owner. "You really must stop feeding her snacks between meals."

“But that would be cruel.” Mrs. Bettles, who had no children and compensated by treating Coco like one, kissed her dog on the mouth. “My sweet baby wuvs her ice cream, doesn’t she?”

I don’t approve of kissing dogs – you never know where people’s mouths have been. “If you want Coco to live a long life, you must keep her weight under control.” My tone was harsh, but Coco was Mrs. Bettles’ fifth dog in ten years. I was really tired of watching her stuff them to death.

Easy, I told myself. You can’t rip the woman’s throat out for spoiling her pets.

“We’ll just get some of that low-fat yoghurt next time, won’t we, baby? Yes we will.” Mrs. Bettles continued cooing to her beloved pet as she left the office.

On the other hand, if I did, Coco might live longer. “She should get a job at a clinic for anorexics.” I handed Mindy the stack of charts I’d finished. “So what’s this Dottie like?” With that name and business, it wasn’t hard to guess.

“She’s kind of old but super nice. Reminded me of my Grandma Louise.” She frowned. “I didn’t like her stockguy, though. He needs a major attitude adjustment.”

“Oh?” That was unusual – Mindy had never met a man she didn’t like.

“I started to go in this room in the back – I thought Dottie might have an aromatherapy section like Serenity Bed and Bath does, you know? – and this humongous guy gets in my face.”

I didn't like hearing that. Mindy was only seventeen and her folks lived two hundred miles away, so I tended to be a little protective of her. “What did he do?”

“Oh, he didn't yell at me or anything. He was polite and stuff, it's just. . .the way he looked at me. Like Mr. Donatti's pit bull did after he attacked that mailman, you know? Scary eyes.” She shuddered. “Gave me a serious case of the creeps.”

I looked at the appointment schedule, which was clear until 3:00 pm. “I think I'll go over before lunch and say hello.” And see just how rabid this Creepy Stockguy was.

“Check out the CD racks,” she said as I grabbed my purse from under the counter. “There's lots of that Celtic music you like.”

As I crossed the street, I inspected the front window of the store. It mirrored my own, but instead of bags of special formula pet food and travel carriers it contained an artful display of crystals and books and jewelry. Some of it was pretty, but it was all pretty useless junk. Why people spent their hard-earned cash on it was beyond me.

A couple of hollow-sounded bells chimed as I entered the store. I could smell patchouli and sage, and heard a mournful vocal harmony by Clannad humming from a pair of strategically-placed speakers.

The store had a nice airy arrangement of tables and shelves, and the wide variety of stock ran the gauntlet of alternative religions from ancient Native American relics to the latest personal empowerment stuff. There was no one in the store or behind the front counter, but I heard voices drifting from the door at the back. "Hello?"

An elderly woman appeared in the doorway and smiled at me as she approached. She was dressed in a plain dark blue caftan that minimized her extra pounds and maximized her short silver curls and beautiful skin. In her hands she carried carrying a pretty gold and blue teapot decorated with Chinese characters. "Come in, welcome." She gave me the once-over as she set the teapot down on the counter. "You must be the vet from across the street."

"Judith Parish." Although I hated touching people, I held out my hand.

"Dorothea Killian. Everyone calls me Dottie." Despite her frail appearance she had a nice, steady grip. "I'm afraid I haven't any pets, doctor, so I won't be able to give you any new business."

"That's okay, I don't have any chakrahs that need centering." I smiled to remove the sting. "And call me Jude."

“Aha.” Her cheeks bunched and two dimples appeared. “A non-believer.”

“More like a severely lapsed Catholic.” I scanned the store. The incense made it hard to smell anything else. “You did a nice job setting up. How many employees do you have?”

“Just me and my grandson at the moment.” She glanced toward the back door. “Charles is a little shy around people, so he takes care of the stock and I tend to the customers.”

Before I could comment on Charles Killian’s personal charisma (or lack thereof) the door bells chimed and a reed-thin man in dirty clothes strode in. He looked from right to left before he settled his wide-eyed gaze on us. “I need something fast.”

Dottie started toward him. “What are you looking for?”

I froze as the man pulled out a knife. “Money.” He was sweating, pale and shivering, all the signs of an addict in need of a fix. He jerked the blade sideways. “Open the register and take out the cash.” I took a step forward, and he turned to me. “You come here.”

I went to him, and he pressed the edge of the knife to my throat. “Gimme what you got in your purse.” He smelled horrible, like he’d slept in an open sewer.

Don’t cut me, was all I could think. Please don’t cut me.

I took my wallet from my purse and handed it to him. He made me walk to the door, where he flipped the hanging sign from OPEN to CLOSED, then yanked down the window shade so no one on the street could see inside.

Dottie didn't panic, but went immediately to the register and rang a no-sale to open the cash drawer. She withdrew a modest stack of bills and placed them on the counter.

The junkie forced me to walk with him to the counter, where he snatched up the money and fanned with his thumb. Then he looked inside my wallet, which only had a twenty and my driver's license in it. "Where's the rest?" he asked Dottie.

"That's all there is."

"She just opened the store yesterday," I said, trying to breathe through my mouth. He pressed the knife in harder until blood trickled down my neck. I heard a low, strange sound and closed my eyes for a moment. *God, no. No.*

"It ain't enough. You gotta have more than this," he demanded.

"Where's the safe?"

"I don't have one," Dottie said. She wasn't looking at him but at the back door of the store. "We've given you everything." Her eyes widened as another, louder growl came from behind me. "Please, just leave now."

"What the hell is that?" The junkie turned his head, then screamed.

Something knocked me away from the robber and sent me sprawling face-first on the floor. As I went down, something stabbed my side. I crawled for cover and curled into a ball, fighting the fiery pain inside my abdomen. The junkie staggered my way, crashing into things and knocking them over. He tripped over me, then scrambled to his hands and knees and crawled behind a bookcase.

Dottie crouched next to me. "Judith, you're hurt." She reached out.

The junkie screamed again.

"Don't touch me," I gasped, rolling away. "Lock yourself in the back room, quickly." When she didn't move, I nearly shrieked, "Dottie, please, just do it!"

The last thing I saw was a shadow loom up behind the old woman.

#

I woke up in strange bedroom with a large naked man in bed with me. Not something I'd ever done before, so just absorbing the situation kept me silent and still for a few minutes.

I had no idea where I was, or who he was.

He wasn't handsome or even remotely attractive – his face was all bony angles and edges – but he had neatly trimmed brown hair and he smelled cleaned. The only reason I knew he was naked was because I was, and his arm had me pressed right up against him.

I wasn't completely naked, though, someone had bandaged my abdomen with a neat square of gauze and put a big bandaid on the cut on my neck. Slowly I inched back away from him and tried to slip out from underneath his arm.

His eyes opened, and I saw they were a funny, orange-brown color. "Good morning."

Morning? It was morning? I glanced at the window, but the blinds were closed. The door on the other side of the room opened, and Dottie came in with a tray.

"I brought you two some tea," she said to the man as she set the tray down next to the bed. "It's nearly eight o'clock, dear." She smiled at me. "Good morning, Judith. I hope you're feeling better."

"Where am I?" I looked at Naked Guy. "Who are you?"

"This is my grandson, Charles. We decided to bring you home with us last night, so you could recuperate." Still beaming, Dottie went back out.

I had a terrible feeling I'd done the unforgiveable, but I had to be sure. "Where are my clothes?"

"You tore them to pieces." Charles reached across me to pour two cups of tea, and handed me one.

I suddenly recalled the junkie. "What else did I tear up?"

“The man who was going to kill you and my grandmother. Well, I did, and you helped.” He sipped from his cup, then added in a mild way, “Then we . . . celebrated.”

There was no way he could have helped me, unless – I pulled down the cover to expose his body. He had a scar on his left pectoral muscle, an old, deep scar from a terrible animal bite.

It was exactly like the scar on my right arm. Then I realized I wasn’t hungry – and I was usually starving in the morning. “Exactly how did we celebrate?”

“We ate him.”

“Terrific.” I put the tea aside, rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. “You’re a were.”

“So are you. Have you brought others over?”

I glanced at him. “No. I don’t bring anyone over. And when I have to change, I usually leave town first and spend the weekend in the mountains.” Where I hunted deer and rabbit and the occasional skunk. Clean-up when I got home from the mountains was always fun.

He nodded as if approving and went back to sipping his tea.

“I wouldn’t have changed if he hadn’t cut me.” I covered my eyes. A human drawing my blood always triggered the change, it was the oldest of were defense mechanisms. “God I *hate* this.”

Charles set aside his cup and put an arm around me. “No, don’t huddle away from me. After what happened yesterday, I’m your blood brother.” I stared at him. “In the non-familial, sharing-a-human-kill sense of the term.”

I’d never been around another were for very long – we tended to be pretty territorial. “So will you and your grandmother close the shop, or do I have to move my office somewhere else?” I had prior claim, but he looked a lot bigger and stronger than me.

“Neither. We’re not hunting here, so we can share the territory.” He trailed his fingertips across my cheek. “And, possibly, in time, other things.”

He wasn’t handsome, and he did have scary eyes. But I had the feeling I’d just given up my lone wolf status for good. I peered up at him. “Tell me you don’t believe in all that new age crap.”

His grandmother’s dimples appeared in his lean cheeks. “I don’t believe in all that new age crap.”

I snuggled against him, feeling better than I had in years. “This might just work out, then.”

The Widow

By S.L. Viehl

The last woman on Earth had to quit smoking.

Victoriana certainly had plenty of second-hand around to breathe in; oily black smoke drifted in through the broken window as if drawn by the thinner, whiter smoke. Her last cigarette had reduced itself to a curl of undisturbed ash on the edge of the mantel. She'd put it there deliberately, right next to her second-to-the-last-one which she'd watched burn down there an hour ago. Her hair was sticky and her hands filthy, but she wouldn't wash. Couldn't wash.

If only they hadn't taken all the towels and ashtrays.

A shower would have been nice, but she didn't want to smoke. Only last week she'd give Joshua her word that she would quit. *You remember what a total bitch I am when I go through nicotine withdrawal, darling. This summer, while I'm at Club Med. No one lights up there unless they're smoking clove, and that gives me a rash. I promise.*

Now he would never know that she had.

The air cleaner behind the sofa whirred and hummed incessantly as it polluted itself to save her lungs. The business-like drone of it masked the steady crunching sounds from outside. Victoriana couldn't hear them, not

if she stared very hard at the portrait of the dead man she clutched in her thin hands. Not if she prayed.

Our Father . . . Our Father Who . . . something something Heaven . . .

But what sort of God allowed destruction on such an epic scale to happen, without warning? Why should she pray to a Higher Power when He'd done nothing to stop this endless nightmare? And how could she offer up the Lord's Prayer when she couldn't remember the words? It wasn't her fault. She'd only been to church four times, and only then to watch one of her Jewish friends marry someone selected specifically to piss off their orthodox parents.

Rachel Steinbergen and Patrick O'Kelley, and Rachel converting six months before the ceremony. She recalled their nuptials. And Old Man Steinbergen had cried like a baby.

It had never been like that with her and Joshua, though. They'd been blissful atheists, united in their refusal to invest any hope in an afterlife. Live for the day, that had been their motto. The money they'd saved on Christmas and Hanukah presents had been pretty decent, too.

"You are the twilight of my soul." She whispered to keep the words just between them. She didn't know what that meant, exactly, but it sounded appropriate. They had lived for the day, and now the day was gone, and so was he, along with most of the other life on the planet.

“Never again. Never again.” Unless Patrick had survived the invasion – Rachel had told her that he was a wild man in bed.

The thing in the next room must have heard her despite her whispering, for the door to her chamber slid open and it came in. It was one of the many who had destroyed her world and now held her prisoner in the ruins. It had to squeeze a little to get through the narrow entrance [she strongly suspected that whatever world it had come from had nothing like Club Med] then it tromped in like a small elephant. No pachyderm on the planet had ever sported such a garish array of scales and teeth and too-large eyes, of course. In fact, an elephant would have been completely mortified by the comparison, but there were none of them left anymore, either.

So many had come to Earth. So many. So hungry.

“Still sullen over the death of your mate?” Cha Rlee’s wide lips made smacking sounds as it carefully pronounced each word. Learning the now-useless language of its prey helped it pass the time while it waited for the mother ship to arrive, so it practiced English on her hourly. Also, it liked talking to her. “I told you I would get you another one.” It looked out where its companions were snacking on the last of the intact bodies. “Okay, maybe a dog. We didn’t like the taste of those.”

“You don’t understand.” She carefully set down Joshua’s portrait on the remains of the dresser they had once shared. She had bickered with

him about using the top drawer for her monogrammed panties and Peds, something she now bitterly regretted. She could have made room for him; given him half the drawer. Such a small, simple thing. "I don't want another man. Or a dog. I want my husband."

The alien invader rubbed a spiny tentacle around the wide, toothy maw at the center of its jointed abdomen. "I could regurgitate what I haven't digested, I suppose, but I doubt you'll want that."

"No." Victoriana guessed he was trying to be kind, but *really*. "Joshua is gone forever."

Vic-whatever-her-name-was was starting to remind Cha Rlee of its mother, the travel agent of all its guilt trips. When it came time for it to develop sex organs, it was definitely going for a penis. "In a few hours, anyway."

"Monster." She said it without heat, but didn't know why. To cover her bemusement, she took the cigarette from the mantle and drew in one last lungful of smoke before dropping it to the scarred floor and grinding it out with her heel. If they hadn't torn down the drugstore yet, maybe she'd walk down and get the patch. They had the clear ones now, no one would ever know.

Tears filled her eyes as she remembered that there was no one left to see. She blinked them back, determined if nothing else to preserve this coat of mascara.

“You should quit doing that, you know.” It studied the flattened butt for a moment. “Truly a disgusting habit. Plus we don’t allow it on the ship.”

Noise from the sudden destruction of something large, the health club around the corner perhaps, teased her ears. The rumbling, tumbling sound vibrated through the once polished, now deeply gouged hardwood floor that Joshua had insisted she wax every week. She, in turn, had hired Maria, to placate him and preserve her nails. Maria had had no English, which had been a pain, and no green card, which had made her extremely affordable. Yet the ruined planks of gleaming oak, her perfect French manicure and the collapse of *The Tight Body Factory* could not equal the state of her shattered life.

Who would wax the floor? Who would do her nails? Who would keep her ass from sagging to the back of her knees? All, all gone.

“I know that I must do many things myself now.” She didn’t feel brave, but she could act it – her manicure was still intact. There were those Sally Hansen do-it-yourself kits. She could put in some ceramic tile. Loose sweat pants concealed a lot.

“Hello.” A sticky tendril waved an inch from her nose. “Alien to Earth lady.”

“I’m listening.” No, she wasn’t. It had nothing to say that she wanted to hear.

“You’re not like having a panic attack, are you?”

“No. I’m just a little sad, is all.” She let her gaze drift to the cluster of stunted visulets at the base of Cha Rlee’s broadest segment. She lifted her chin, secretly rejoicing in the fact that he couldn’t do the same unless he stood on his head and bent over backward. “When do you plan to devour me? Next week? Next month? Tell me the truth.”

“Oh, I didn’t explain things to you, did I?” It covered its abdomouth with a feeler and smothered a tiny belch. “I’m keeping you as a pet. I’m going to take you home, put you in a little domicile on my property, and call you Trixie.”

She lifted her chin a little higher. “My name is Victoriana Elizabeth Jungorsiak.” She said it proudly, the way she had after she and Joshua had exchanged their vows under the redwoods in Eureka. It was her name, they would never take it from her. Never. No matter what horror she was subjected to. Even if they pried off her nail tips, one by one.

“That is precisely why I’m calling you Trixie.” Cha Rlee made wet sounds as it oozed up beside her and slid a tentacle around the base of her throat. It liked fondling her, though it wished she had a bit more fur. It had really wanted one of the cute little domesticated felines that had been running around the planet, but its commander had a thing for cat nuggets, so they hadn’t lasted long. “Why are you so sad? He died the moment he encountered my digestive juices. It was very quick.” And tasty, but it wouldn’t tell her that. It had some tact.

She drew in a quick breath that rasped against her raw throat. Those were the memories she did not want to preserve forever in her heart. Especially the moment when the alien had tried to spit out Joshua's new trainers and the laces had become caught between its teeth. *The dangling, the swaying . . .* That had been too horrible for words. *Away with that.* "But not painless."

"No, but then being eaten rarely is."

They shared the silence until something else large and made of concrete and glass collapsed, closer this time.

Victoriana dared to lift a hand and touched the slimy part of it that held her. It felt a little like the calamari she and Joshua had shared on their third date, minus the marinara sauce.

Maybe that's why they came to eat us. Because they had cousins here, cousins we served up every night with our Chardonnays and our Sauvignon Blancs . . . Oh, God, Rachel never told me how to make her Oysters Marseilles, damn her for being such a recipe snob . . .

"Monster," she repeated, almost with a queer sort of affection. She had certainly been very fond of that calamari. "We would have given you anything you wished. You and your kind. Anything, anything."

"I'm sure you would have, if we had bothered to ask," Cha Rlee said, and sighed. "Ah, look, Trixie—"

"Victoriana Elizabeth Jungorsiak," she reminded it.

“Whatever. The reason I and my kind came down to this planet was because your mate Joshua signaled us. You remember that, don’t you?”

“Really?” A fond smile curved her lips. Joshua had been so proud of his transmitter, and how he had built it entirely out of parts from Radio Shack. His boyish obsession with contacting beings from outer space had been one of the first things she’d loved about him. That and his utter loyalty to the Young Democrats.

“Uh-huh. Something like that is pretty irresistible, you know. It’s like you seeing an ad on television for a Big Mac. We simply couldn’t help ourselves. Granted, we should have checked to see if you were intelligent, but we’ve been out on the intergalactic trade routes for months and we were starving, you know? And yes, the invasion was messy, and we did wipe out the native population – except you, because of that last minute viral serum lethal to my kind with which your husband injected you seconds before I ate him – but we’re full now, and we’d like to make amends, such as they are.” It stroked her hair, smearing it with residual slime before releasing her. “You’ll have a very nice little human-house on my estate back on Condiloma, I promise, and I’ll put up an energy fence so you won’t have to be tethered. And, as you will be the sole surviving human, I’m sure we’ll study you and discover all sorts of noble things about your kind and be very sorry we did this right around the time you die of a mysterious bacterial infection or a broken heart or something like that.”

It offered so little. Far too little, but she could be polite. "I don't want to leave my home." She picked up the portrait again. "I must dwell in my memories from now on. You must go without me."

"Leave you here? By yourself?" Cha Rlee made an exasperated sound by flapping its abdomouth. "Isn't that pushing the martyr bit a little far?"

"You know I have to stay behind," she told it, caressing the frame around her husband's smiling face with tender fingers. "By abandoning me to live out a solitary life on the ruins of my world, I will then have the time to reflect on the value of my short but meaningful life with Joshua before you came and ate him. I can curse him for daring to send that intergalactic signal that brought down the invasion, but love him for his infinite curiosity about the universe. After I lose a great deal of weight and stop washing my hair, I'll find a way to build a beautiful shrine to him and to the endurance of love and the human spirit. Something tasteful, maybe out of the rubble you've left behind. Once I have finished that, I will doubtless collapse and die at the base of it, in an appropriately wretched pose, which other aliens will see when they come to tour the wreck you've made of Earth. Everyone will feel very sorry about this tragedy. One of the tourists will definitely weep. Then a scientist will mention the possibility of reviving me through cloning a DNA sample before he's vetoed by a

particularly spiritual companion who takes me and buries me in the shrine.”

“Dear me. That sounds uber-depressing.” It heaved its version of a sigh. “Not much of a choice either way, eh, Trix old girl?”

She nodded. She knew. She was the Widow of Earth.

“Very well. Shout for me in a desperate but determined voice if you change your mind.” Cha Rlee gave her a final caress with its tentacle before it oozed out of the room.

She didn't watch it go. Looking at the photo of Joshua required her full attention again. If she grabbed another cigarette – she'd hidden a pack in the SpongeBob cookie jar in the kitchen, hadn't she? – and looked at the picture hard enough, she would be safe. She wouldn't hear the ghosts of those devoured screaming silently outside her broken window. She wouldn't notice the tiny chip on the edge of her left ring-fingernail.

Build a shrine to Joshua. *My ass I will.*

She wouldn't pray. She'd chant, but she wouldn't pray.

Sally Hansen, Sally Hansen, Sally Hansen.

Sneak Peek

Into the Fire by Jessica Hall

To be released March 2004 by Onyx Books

Their witness had seated herself at the conference table inside the interview room. It felt a little stuffy, so Terri opened a window before asking Sable if she wanted anything to drink.

“May I have some water, please?” Her voice sounded raspy and strained, but that might have been from the smoke.

As Terri got a cup from the cooler and filled it, she kept an eye on her partner. J. D.’s usual method with witnesses was to sit down, put them at ease, and charm all the details out of them. He was good at it, too. Her partner never had a problem making anyone feel as if they could tell him anything. She’d probably told him way too much about herself over the years.

Not this time, though. J. D. didn’t open the interview by consoling the victim, didn’t establish rapport, didn’t do anything the way he usually did. He didn’t even sit down, but slowly walked the length of the room, watching Sable with the single-minded intensity of a starved junkyard dog presented with a wounded rabbit.

Or a rejected lover, looking for a little revenge.

It didn't make sense to Terri. Sable Duchesne was a very pretty woman, but hardly J. D.'s type. He stuck to high-maintenance Garden District debutantes who never wore white after Labor Day and had their names plastered all over the society pages. Lately he'd been spending a lot of time with one particularly obnoxious Creole debutante, Moriah Navarre, and if his mama had her way, he would be married to her as soon as possible.

Marc LeClare's death would definitely upset J. D.'s father, and possibly put Elizabet Gamble's wedding plans on the back burner. That worked for Terri – any excuse to keep from shopping for a dress was okay by her, and she'd never been too crazy about the idea of J. D. marrying The Deb.

"Here you go." She handed Sable the water, and noticed the wounds on her palms again when she accepted the cup. "You sure you don't remember how you got those splinters, Ms. Duchesne?"

Sable examined her hands. "I think I tried to get out through a window."

As Terri sat down, J. D. came to stand over Sable, not touching her but getting a little too close. The witness ignored him completely.

Terri cleared her throat and gave her partner a direct look. *Get on with it*, she mouthed.

"Are you living in New Orleans now?" he asked.

Sable drank some of the water before she answered. "No."

He circled around her chair, as if trying to draw her attention to him.

"Why were you at that warehouse this morning?"

"I was looking at it as office space." She stared down at the cup. "I think I should speak to an attorney."

"You'll speak to me now," J. D. told her.

After a minute of silence, Terri decided to give her a gentle prod.

"Ms. Duchesne, you're not being charged with anything. We only want to know what happened."

Sable's shoulders hunched. "I don't remember much." She sounded scared and defensive.

Now J. D. will play her. Terri had seen him soothe any number of other, shaken witnesses, reassuring them while coaxing the information from them.

J. D. clamped one hand on the back of Sable's chair and grabbed the hair at the back of her head. "Who hit you?"

"J. D." Alarmed, Terri got to her feet.

He didn't pull Sable's hair, but pushed it out of the way and examined her scalp. There was a large swollen knot under her hair. "Did you see who did this?"

Dark red hair flew as Sable jerked her head to one side, away from his touch. "No. I didn't see anyone."

“Bullshit.” He jerked her chair around so that she was facing him.

“What happened in that warehouse? Who hit you? *Answer me.*”

“I don’t know.” Sable turned her head to look at Terri, anger glittering in her eyes. “You said I could make a phone call. I want to make it now, please.”

“J. D.,” Terri repeated, with a warning note this time. “You can make your call in a minute, Ms. Duchesne.”

Her partner used his hand to grab Sable’s jaw and turn her face back toward his. “Where did all this blood come from? How did you know Marc LeClare? Why were you there? Who set the fire? Did you see who hit you?”

They were almost close enough to be kissing, Terri thought, but J. D.’s voice hovered just below a shout.

“I *don’t* remember.” Sable had her hands folded in her lap, so tightly that all her tendons stood out like cables ready to snap. “Get your hands off me.”

Terri suppressed a sigh. “I think we need a break. J. D.?”

He ignored her and clamped his other hand around the base of Sable’s throat. “*Vous me répondez!*”

“*Je ne peux pas vous aider,*” she hissed back. “*Laissez-moi seule.*”

Terri knew a lot more about Sable Duchesne then, and it only added to the problem. Since her partner wasn't hearing a word she said, she went around the table and kicked him in the shin. "Hey. Back off."

He straightened and let his hands fall away. Under his jacket, the muscles in his arms and shoulders bunched. "I'm not going to hurt her."

"I don't care." She pointed to the door. "Take a walk, cool off. Do a few laps around the building. *Now.*"

J. D. gave Sable one last look, then left.

Terri's partner simply didn't lose his temper. Ever. Seeing it happen scared her, enough to make her drop her own guard for a moment.

"What is it with you two?"

Sable averted her dark brown eyes, but not before Terri saw a suspicious shimmer. "Nothing."

Terri swore under her breath. "Here." She found a box of tissues, and put it down on the table. "You'd better pull yourself together, lady. That dead man was going to be our next governor. You are in for a full course of trouble, and J. D. is only the appetizer."

Sable lifted her chin. "I'm not afraid of J. D."

"Yeah?" Slipping easily into the patois of her youth, Terri added, "You think again. This ain't no chinka-chinka dance, *chère.*" She nodded as their witness gave her a shocked look. "That's right. You ain't on the

bayou listening to no Dutch nightingales now. This for real bad – you think about that, eh?”

When Terri stepped outside the interview room, she found J. D. leaning against the wall, staring at the ceiling tiles. How did a wealthy Creole society son like him get involved with a backwater Cajun girl? Terri wasn't sure she wanted to know. “Want to take a shot at me now?”

J. D. thrust his hands in his pockets. “Maybe.”

Anger wasn't something she was used to feeling around her partner. She trusted J. D. with her life, and she wasn't about to let him screw up his. “I'm glad you're getting a laugh out of this, because I'm not.”

“You're crowding me.”

“Gee, I'm all broken up about that. Maybe you forgot, we don't do the bad cop/worse cop routine, and she's not even a damn suspect.” She shoved at his shoulder. “What were you thinking, putting your hands on her?”

He muttered something vile under his breath. “She won't talk to me in front of you. Give me five minutes alone with her. I'll get the answers.”

Her jaw sagged. “Do I really look *that* stupid to you? You want to blow this whole case because you got a hard-on for her?”

“It's not that and you know it.” J. D. looked up at the ceiling, then back at her. “Christ, Ter, I know her. She's just scared.”

“Really. That woman is a witness – the only witness so far – to a felony arson, and maybe a murder. The DA isn’t going to put up with her little amnesia act for a second. Not even if she was your *wife*.” Then it hit Terri, and she smacked her palm on her forehead. “That’s it, isn’t it? You and her?”

“It was a long time ago.” J. D.’s gaze never wavered. “I need time alone with her. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“Shit.” Terri rubbed her eyes. In the five years they’d worked together, J. D. had never asked her to bend the rules. The fact he wanted to now only made things worse. But he was her partner. “All right, I’m going to get some forms and bring her a phone. You’ve got ten minutes to kiss and make up with your sweetheart.” When he would have gone back into the room, she grabbed his sleeve. “And when I get back, I’m dusting her for prints, so keep your hands in your pockets.”

He nodded and went in. Terri walked down the corridor, glancing back once to see him closing the blinds.

J. D. Gamble in love with a Cajun girl. His mama must have had a stroke. Well, at least things can't get any worse. Terri saw J. D.'s girlfriend standing at her desk, and groaned. Oh yes, they can.

“Into the Fire” by Jessica Hall will be released in March 2004.

BioRescue by S.L. Viehl

To be released September 2004 by Ace Science Fiction

Jadaira went still as a distress pulse she had not heard since her childhood screamed through the water column. Onkar met her wide, disbelieving eyes and released her at once. The pulse meant the pod was being attacked, and there was only one thing on the planet that did that.

Mogshrike.

Dair swam back to Onkar and without another word took off with him toward the URD.

Why are they attacking? From the shrieking pulses being sent out Dair knew it was more than one, but still she hoped she was wrong. *They never come in this far, even in the winter cycle.* Then she saw the twin massive fifty-foot forms cutting their way through the darting, frantic pod. *Duo, there are two of them.*

No. There are three. Onkar caught her and made her circle to a halt. *By the dome.*

A third 'shrike, the largest, was battering the exposed transparent wall with its head. Its open mouth resembled a cave, lined with thousands of teeth, each one as big as Dair's head.

Two were highly unlikely, but there had never been a report of three 'shrikes attacking simultaneously. Given the nature of the vicious, solitary

creatures, they commanded huge areas of territory out in the deep water and gave each other a wide berth. Yet here were three, in the same space. Not attacking each other, not drawn by some catastrophe that had bloodied the water so as to drive them to madness, but apparently cooperatively hunting together. In water too shallow and warm, according to Teresa, for their primitive circulatory systems to tolerate.

We have to draw them off. Frantically she scanned the other 'Zangians, but the biggest males were busy protecting the females and pups and darting around the third behemoth attacking the dome. The 'shrikes would never abandon so many to come after her and Onkar. Teresa might be able to signal topside for help, but it would take too long for the submersibles to reach them.

There's no blood in the water yet. Onkar bumped into her, and when he had her attention, showed her the gleaming sharp curve of his fin hook. *After I lead them off, get the mouth-breathers to shore.*

Only in the worst circumstances did a male cut into his own hide with his hook and use the bleeding wound to lure 'shrikes away. It was considered the bravest – and stupidest – thing a 'Zangian male could do.

You can't spill enough blood by yourself and still get away from them. Dair brought his fin hook down to the soft flesh on the inside of her thigh.

He resisted, but the scent of his seminal glands heated the water around them. *I'm not risking you.*

Breeding instincts were still muddling his thoughts. Which, she realized, she could use. He would come after her. They could lure them to the breeding caverns at the edge of the sublittoral zone, where she and Onkar could take refuge and wait them out.

Don't you want to catch me anymore? She forcibly dragged the end of his hook across her inner thigh, creating a thin, deep gash. *Come on.* As her blood welled out into the current, she moved back a few meters. *Come and get me.*

As soon as she saw him gash his own thigh, Dair darted away, diving down deep until she entered the strongest, widest current within the column flowing toward the URD. The channel would give her an extra boost of speed, but it would also take her very close to where the two 'shrikes were among the pod.

She knew they had picked up the scent of their blood when the sound of the big one ramming the dome ceased, and the two shadows went still. Blood was like an aphrodisiac to the enormous killers; it drove them insane with feeding lust. It was said that they would pursue even the tiniest aquatic for miles while it bled into the water.

Which was exactly what she was counting on.

'Zangians streamed past them as Dair and Onkar approached the two hovering, now almost motionless, outside the dome. The third had turned and was also giving its full attention to the taste of the water. A

few hundred yards from the 'skrikes, she pulled away from Onkar and swam around them to the right while he did the same on the left.

Being so close to the only predators her kind feared made Dair sick, but no one had ever become fond of mogshrikes. They weren't just the largest aquatic on the planet; they had been designed by evolution to inspire instant terror. Their bodies were the color of old silt with short, spiny black denticles covering every centimeter of their hide. Hundreds of mvrey clung to their bloated underbellies and backs, far away from the 'shrikes' cavernous mouths. The eight fins on their bodies were tipped with pointed plating that was even sharper than their serrated teeth, and the two elongated, segmented claspers extruding from their bellies were filled with a paralyzing toxin, which they whipped through large schools of fish to stun several hundred at the same time.

If she or Onkar caught even the tip of one clasper, they would be rendered helpless within seconds.

'Shrike couldn't swim backward, so as she passed them they had to turn to follow the scent of her blood. She streaked past Onkar and glanced back over her shoulder to see the third rejoining its two companions. *They're taking the bait.*

Despite their size, mogshrikes could swim as fast as a 'Zangian, and within seconds the three had eliminated half the distance between them.

Onkar was coming up quickly behind her. *Hurry.*

If they didn't reach the breeding caverns before the 'shrikes caught up to them, they were both dead.

Dair's muscles burned as she poured every ounce of energy into her pace. Swimming this fast blurred the light and colors around her and she could no longer navigate by sight. She pulsed out a stream of sound and used the echoes that bounced off solid objects as directional signals. Swiftly she located the large network of rock formations and caverns that formed a wide, labyrinthine network at the end of the coastal pod's territory, and altered her direction toward one end of it.

Dair couldn't look back, but she could feel one of the 'shrikes snapping at her wake. She altered her approach, drawing closer to Onkar so that they left a trail of mingled blood behind them. A final pulse confirmed that she was only a few yards from an entrance to the caves, and as the ominous sound of gnashing teeth drew closer, she plummeted downward, hurtling herself toward that small gap in the rock.

"BioRescue" by S.L. Viehl will be released in September 2004.