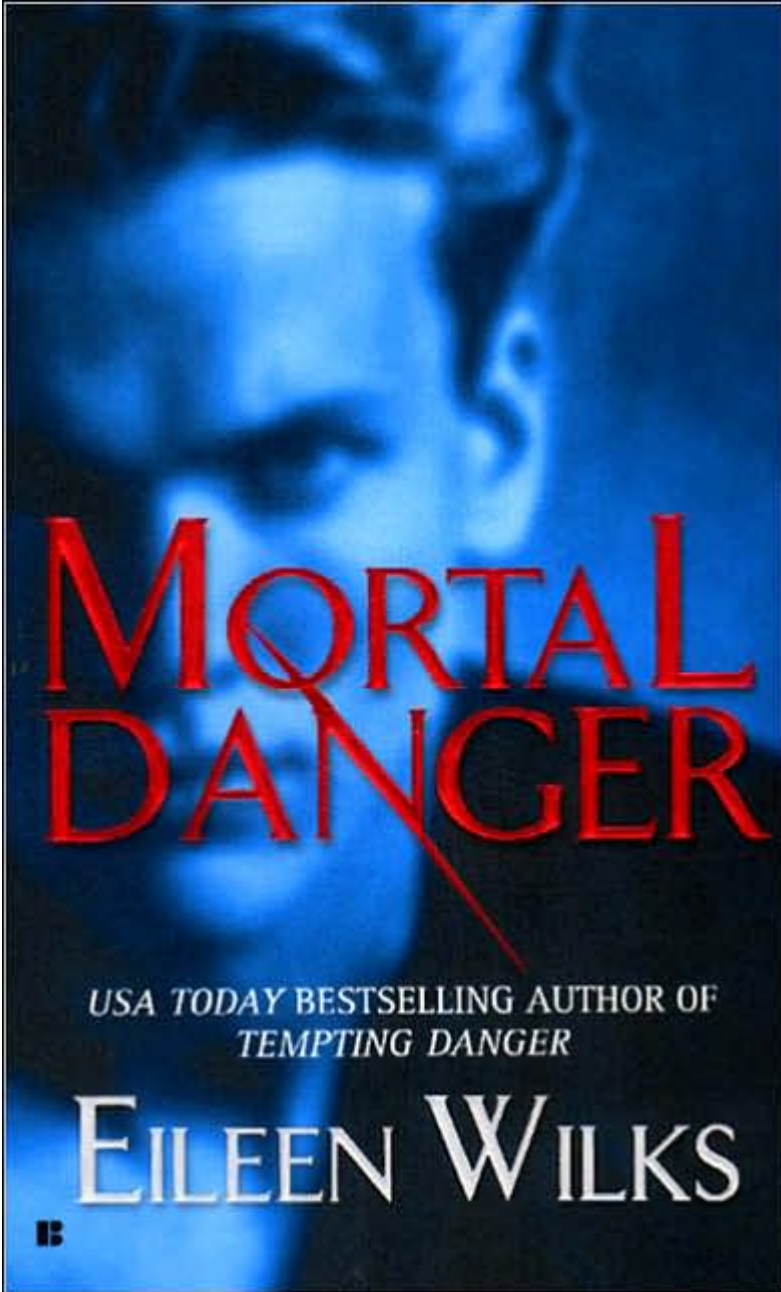

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Mortal Danger

By

Eileen Wilks

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“I’ve been anticipating this book ever since I read *Tempting Danger*, and I was certainly not disappointed. *Mortal Danger* grabs you on the first page and never lets go. Strong characters, believable world-building, and terrific storytelling make this a must-read for anyone who enjoys werewolves with their romance. I really, really loved this book.” —Patricia Briggs, national bestselling author of *Raven’s Strike*

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TEMPTING DANGER

MORTAL DANGER

MORTAL DANGER



EILEEN WILKS



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This book is dedicated to my editor, Cindy Hwang,

who is not only brilliant, efficient, compassionate,

and patient beyond the dreams of

over-deadline authors, but has

excellent taste in movies.

Thanks, Cindy. For everything.

PROLOGUE



The audience hall was vast, hot, and noisy, an echoing oven of a space hollowed out of the remains of an ancient volcano. Gan scurried across the stony floor as fast as its stubby legs would carry it, watching out for shadows. Sometimes the crevices shifted. What looked like a shadow one day might, on the next, send you plummeting. Or make you look foolish, which was almost as bad.

There was no roof. The walls climbed jaggedly up and up to the exposed sky at the rim of the caldera, black and empty. Gan's skin crawled at all that overhead emptiness, though it knew Xitil's pets wouldn't bother it. Not this time.

Courtiers of every ilk fought or chatted among the carved columns thrusting up from the floor—here a fourteen-foot granite phallus, there a set of gaping onyx jaws big enough to swallow an ox.

Not that half these idiots knew what an ox was, Gan thought with a sniff as it rounded a set of rosy labia formed from quartz. Gan did, though. It might be young, it might be small, but it knew more about the human realm than any of them.

Which was why it had been summoned. A shiver of mingled dread and anticipation fled down Gan's spine. Drawing the notice of the Most Feared was not safe.

But oh, it was apt to be interesting.

Gan was so busy mentally chortling over the possibilities that it trotted around a grasping stone talon a little too quickly—and dropped flat to the ground, its hearts hammering in terror.

A long snake of a tail, spiked and deadly, whizzed over its head.

Idiot! Gan screamed at itself silently. Acting like a two-year imp instead of a full demon—daydreaming in the hall! It had almost bumped into one of Xitil's Claws. You did *not* want to startle a Claw. Their reflexes were as swift as their wits were slow.

At least Gan had stopped short of real insult. It hadn't actually touched the Claw.

“What's this?” The high-pitched voice came from several feet above Gan's head. This Claw was female, or mostly, Gan decided. “A bug?”

Gan's field of view consisted of the dusty rock floor, but out of the corner of its eye it saw a scaly foot as long as one of its arms. The claws protruding from the four thick toes were thick and yellow and sharp.

Don't breathe yet, it told itself. The immediate danger was over, but Xitil's Claws were as touchy as they were stupid.

"Maybe." The second voice was raspier, possibly male, and came from the left of the first one. By cutting its eyes as far to the right as possible, Gan could just glimpse another pair of clawed feet. "Or some kind of parasite. Better step on it."

"Great One," Gan squeaked, "a thousand pardons. This one deserves to be squashed, yes, squashed flat for intruding upon you, but I beg you to withhold your foot. I am summoned."

"Summoned?" A clawed foot curled around Gan's ribs. Idly the Claw rolled Gan over on its back, and Gan stared up into the golden glow of the Claw's forward pair of eyes. "You think it's stupid enough to try to lie about that, Hrrol?"

"Looks stupid enough for almost anything. Better step on it."

"Oh, Great One, I am stupid indeed for having offended, yet not brainless enough to lie about the Most Feared. If I do not speak truth, punish me twice, thrice over—punish me endlessly—but for now, allow me to answer my summons." *You great, dumb doff! If I were stupid, I couldn't lie, could I? Not even just with words. And if Xitil's unhappy with me for being late, she'll be unhappy with you for having delayed me.*

"Won't be much left of it to punish if it's lying," the Claw on the left observed. "Better smash it now. Or at least remove that puny excuse for a tail."

Gan bristled. It was quite proud of its new tail—which maybe wasn't as long and prehensile as the Claw's, but was wonderfully strong and had lovely spikes along it.

"No," the first one said regretfully. "If Xitil has some use for this bug, she might wish it to keep its pathetic little lump of a tail. Later," she decided. "I will punish it later. What's your callname, bug?"

"I am called Gan, Great One." *May worms eat you.*

"You are a lucky bug, Gan, for I must bow to the whim of the Most Feared, who may prefer you whole. I release you."

"Thank you, Great One." Gan scrambled to its feet, bowing as it retreated. "May your claws grow ever longer and sharper, the better to rend your prey." *And may your prey not hurt itself laughing at your stupidity.*

Once out of range of the Claws, Gan paid better attention to its surroundings as it hurried to the hottest end of the hall. Here the rocks glowed dull red in their artful tumble around the entrance to the tunnel that led to Xitil's private chambers. No courtiers lingered at this end of the huge hall. If Xitil wished to see her subjects, she joined them. If she didn't, who would go to her uninvited?

Gan was invited. With dread and a chest-puffing sense of its own importance—not to mention very hot

feet— Gan crossed the threshold.

It immediately felt more comfortable. The ceiling of the rocky tunnel was irregular, but nowhere was it higher than twenty feet. There was only one sharp defensive twist in the tunnel, a mark of Xitil's confidence. No one had tried to depose her for a long, long time.

The tunnel narrowed at the end; few of her courtiers and none of her nobles could pass into her chambers upright. Gan could, though. It trotted toward the pinkish-purple light at the end of the tunnel, its brow wrinkled. Pink usually meant she was cheerful, or maybe horny. Purple, though...

Gan stepped from the hot, dry tunnel into steamy pink mist, as if the air itself were sweating in the heat Xitil craved and created. The floor here was polished obsidian, slippery and wet. And there facing it, lounging on the mounded pillows on her couch, was Xitil the Most Feared—rockshaper and tyrant, weathermaster and prince of hell. A paroxysm of awe and lust froze Gan in its tracks.

"Gan." Her voice rumbled through the mist, an audible caress. "Come here."

Shivering in fear and arousal, it obeyed.

Her immense, undulate form glistened in the directionless light, the flesh as rosy and damp as an aroused vulva. And dense, oh so deliciously dense to Gan's *üther* sense, each roll and fold of her packed with lives. Her foremost arms were bent to prop her up, the jewel-tipped claws partially retracted.

Xitil favored breasts lately. She'd grown six of them, and the upper pair were bare. The nipples were hard little nuggets framed by aureoles as red as her eyes—which crinkled with amusement.

"Gan," she whispered, "you haven't greeted my guest. Do so."

It jolted to a stop, eyes widening. Would it be punished? She'd told it to come to her, but... *obey, idiot*, Gan told itself. It tore its gaze away from Xitil, and its eyes widened as it at last noticed who—or what—stood to the left of Xitil's couch.

A. human. How odd. They did show up from time to time—many of the courts had private deals with one or more of the species—but why would Xitil want Gan to meet one?

No, it realized a second later. That was no human, whatever form she might be wearing. She'd done something to cloak her energies so Gan read little... but what it read made it shiver again.

The rumors were right. Xitil was entertaining a very strange ally.

Or potential meal? Surely even she wouldn't dare... but Gan had been told to greet the Most Feared's guest, not to speculate. It cleared its throat and bowed deeply. "Revered One, forgive me if, in the depths of my ignorance, I address you incorrectly."

The girl—for that was what she looked like, a brown-haired, brown-eyed human girl of perhaps fifteen years—smiled kindly at it. "Many from this cycle do not know Me. You are forgiven." She glanced at Xitil. "You are sure? This one looks rather..."

"Unprepossessing?" Xitil chuckled, a low rumble that made her breasts quiver. "It's young and weak and too curious for its own good, but you do not require a warrior. Gan has the skills you do need. It can cross unsummoned, and I can use it to pass instructions and information to your tool."

“Ah. And the other tool I requested?” the girl asked.

Xitil ran a claw idly along the great mound of her hip, parting the veils so the lush curls of her pubes peeked out. “That was predicated upon our original plan. You did not open the Gate. Nor have you been willing to honor my one personal request.”

Threat—challenge—*power* rippled through the air, power so vast Gan had no reference for it. In one quick, nauseous plunge, it fell into vertigo as gravity tugged, released, and clenched again around it. Its hearts stopped beating altogether.

As quickly as the storm had hit, it passed.

The girl laughed, a light, carefree sound. “Oh, look— we have frightened poor Gan. It would be a shame if we harmed it with our little testings, wouldn’t it? But really, Xitil, it is too bad of you to taunt me sexually. You know my feelings about that sort of thing.”

Oh. Oh! So *that’s* who She was...

Xitil shrugged and didn’t reply.

The girl who wasn’t a girl at all turned to study Gan. “I suppose such tools are not plentiful, and yet it’s so small. The size of a human child. No matter how its form is altered, it won’t present the appearance I need.”

“You think not?” Xitil’s eyes glowed, “Gan.”

Gan’s attention fixed entirely on its prince, for beneath the syllable of its callname reverberated a tug on its true-name.

“Grow.”

Gan scrunched its face unhappily and obeyed—a trifle slowly, perhaps, but she hadn’t said to hurry. It was twelve feet tall and very uncomfortable when Xitil spoke again.

“Stop.”

Gan obeyed that command gladly and then concentrated on holding itself steady while the nongirl studied it.

“Amazing,” she said at last. Her voice sounded distant;

Gan’s ears were too attenuated to catch sounds properly. “I had no idea you could disperse yourselves that way.” She cocked her head. “I can see through its hands.”

Xitil chuckled. “Poor Gan. It lacks the substance to expand greatly, but it will do for your purposes. Resume your usual size, Gan.”

Gan dropped back into its normal density with a sigh of relief.

“I have a job for you,” she told it. “How would you like to drink a little blood?”

“I would like that,” it answered honestly. “Whose?”

“A human’s. She will be brought here.”

Brought here? Gan’s eyes grew large. This, it realized, was why Xitil had allied with the one who looked like a brown-eyed girl. Part of the reason, anyway. Xitil’s games were never simple. Xitil’s guest would bring a human here for Gan to... to... Gan whispered, “You wish me to possess this human, Most Feared?”

Xitil smoothed her hair over one breast with a ruby-tipped claw. “There. I knew you couldn’t be entirely ignorant. You did eat old Mevroax, after all.”

“And—and the human will go back to its realm?” Gan’s senses were whirling. To be able to experience the human realm as a human—it would eat and drink and fuck as humans do, and see so much! So much more than it had ever been able to see or do before—

“She’d be of little use to me here. Of course she will be returned. But you will not be able to possess her immediately, Gan. She is a sensitive.”

Gan’s mouth opened. Just in time, it closed it again. The Most Feared must know some way to get behind a sensitive’s barriers, or she would not have brought Gan here. And it was never a good idea to question her.

“Very wise, Gan.” Fortunately, Xitil was amused rather than annoyed by Gan’s near gaffe. Whatever she planned to do with the human, it had put her in a high good humor. “Your unvoiced thoughts are quite correct, though. Normally breaching a sensitive would present a problem, but my guest will deal with that.”

Gan’s gaze swung back to the brown-eyed girl. It swallowed. Xitil had earned her title of Most Feared, yes. But this one...

The girl smiled at it sweetly. “Don’t fret, Gan. What I will use to open the human to your possession won’t harm you. Demons are not subject to guilt.”

Gan felt a wave of relief. That made sense. Humans, with their pesky, mysterious souls, were always vulnerable to guilt. Even sensitives could be reached that way. Not by demons, of course, but the gods specialized in souls and guilt and worship and such, didn’t they?

“You will be directed by another tool of mine,” the girl told it. “Xitil, with your permission...?”

Xitil didn’t reply, but the rocks near the girl groaned and parted, revealing another tunnel. A few minutes later, a human male stepped out. His face held the usual assortment of features—unremarkable, Gan thought, even for a human. He wore one of those suits that betokened status in the western nations of Earth and carried a black staff that matched him in height.

Gan sniffed. It was to take orders from this man? Why, he was no more prepossessing than Gan was. His energy was thin, not at all powerful.

The staff he held, however... Gan squinted at the length of wood, reading it more carefully. Huh. That was odd. The staff had power, but it read as empty rather than dense.

“Most High,” the man whispered, his attention fixed on the girlish avatar. His eyes glowed with what Gan supposed was worship. “How may I please you?”

She smiled at him. “This little one is called Gan. It will do your bidding when you return. Gan.” She turned to it, still smiling. “This is the Most Reverend Patrick Harlowe. When the time comes, he will assist you.”

Gan dared a question of the brown-haired girl, borrowing the mode of address the human had used. One could never be too courteous in dealing with such as She. “May this puny one ask who I will be drinking from, Most High?”

“Her name is Lily. Lily Yu.”

ONE



The Odyssey was large, crowded, and noisy. Built in the seventies, the circular restaurant with its glinting window-walls perched on a promontory by the ocean like a giant disco ball gone flat over the years.

Wedding guests filled two rooms and spilled out onto the patio, which provided a fine view of the sun going down over the western waves. In the main banquet room, music competed with the hum of conversation as couples young and old took to the dance floor. In the adjoining dining room, buffet tables were piled artfully with crackers and crudites, shrimp and smoked salmon, fruit and cheese, and bite-sized cookies. The remains of a towering wedding cake occupied a place of honor at a separate table.

Lily Yu wasn't watching the sunset or nibbling wedding cake. She was too busy trying to keep her second cousin, Freddie Chang, from stepping on her feet and wondering when she could leave.

Not for at least an hour, she decided. Not without paying a terrible price. Her mother would know if she snuck out early.

Freddie interrupted his monologue on the iniquities of the self-employment tax to say, “You could at least try to look like you're enjoying yourself.”

“Why?”

“Everyone is watching. Your mother. My mother. Everyone.”

“Does that mean you aren't going to try to grope me this time?”

His chin jutted in the mulish, self-righteous way that had made her spill lemonade in his lap when he was twelve. “You don't have to be crude. Just because a guy tries to be friendly—”

“Ow!” She stopped moving.

“I didn’t step on your foot.”

“No, you bumped my arm. The one in the sling,” she added pointedly.

He looked stricken. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I forgot. You shouldn’t be dancing.” He took her good elbow. “You need to sit down.”

Freddie’s habit of telling her what she needed was one of many reasons she avoided him whenever possible. It brought out the worst in her. She managed to clamp her lips together until they were off the dance floor. “Thanks for being understanding. I think I’ll go graze off the buffet.”

“All right. I’ll fix you a plate.”

“I can feed myself these days, you know.”

“You’ve only got one good arm.” He kept hold of it, too, steering her toward the dining room where the buffet was laid out.

Lily sighed. She didn’t want food. She wanted to get away from Freddie. From everyone, really, but that wasn’t possible, so she might as well suck it up and try to be pleasant.

“Mother tells me you’ve finally quit that job of yours,” he said as they reached the buffet table. “I’m relieved. So is Mother. I’m sorry it took being wounded for you to see that—”

“Wait a minute.” She jerked her arm out of his grip. “I didn’t quit the force because I got shot.”

“Whatever the reason, I’m glad you’ve come to your senses. Police work is dangerous and exposes you to, ah, the wrong sort of people.”

Like criminals, she supposed. Or maybe he meant other police officers. “I guess your mother didn’t have all the news. I’m still a cop. A fed, maybe, but still a cop.”

“A fed?” He looked deeply suspicious.

“FBI. You have heard of them?” She reached for a plate.

Freddie never noticed sarcasm. His frown was thoughtful, not offended, as he piled food she didn’t want on her plate. “I guess that’s an improvement. You’ll be dealing more with white-collar crime, not murderers and thugs.”

Lily’s lips twitched at the idea that FBI agents arrested a better class of criminal. She could have told him that she’d taken her only line-of-duty bullet after being recruited by the FBI, not before. She didn’t. He’d tell his mother, who’d tell Lily’s mother, who had jumped to the same conclusion—that Lily was in a safer job now.

No point in rocking that particular boat. She looked at the plate in her hand, which he’d piled with enough food for three people. “I hope this is for you. I’m allergic to shellfish.”

“Oh.” He glanced at the plate. “Forgot. Well, I can take it and get you another one.”

“Never mind.”

He didn't listen, of course. He just started filling another plate. “There's something I've been wanting to ask you.”

“Don't go there.”

He paused to frown at her. “I guess you think of yourself as taken right now. By, uh, that Turner fellow. The, uh...”

Pig eyes, she thought. Freddie had greedy little pig eyes. “Lupus. It's okay to come out and say it, you know. It isn't a bad word.”

“I was trying to be tactful. Tell me, is it true that they—”

“Yes. Absolutely.” She glanced around. Who could she use as an excuse to escape?

“You didn't let me finish!”

“Didn't I?” All, Beth was talking to one of Susan's doctor friends. Lily managed to catch her little sister's eye, but Beth just grinned, crossed her eyes, and then turned her back.

The rotten little rat fink. Beth always had been spoiled.

“I want you to know that I won't hold your liaison with Turner against you,” Freddie announced. “I'm a fair man. What's sauce for the goose and all that. And, uh, I'm aware that his kind... well, they exert a certain sexual compulsion. Though I was surprised to hear that you... but it's not your fault.”

Her gaze jerked back to him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your affair with Turner. Really, Lily, I shouldn't have to repeat myself. It's only polite to listen.”

“Oh, I'm listening. I just didn't think I'd heard right, since my personal life is none of your business.”

“We're cousins. And one day, when you've finished your youthful experimentation—”

“I'm twenty-eight, not eighteen.” She shook her head, exasperated. Once Freddie got an idea into his head, it took a sharp scalpel to get it out. “Read my lips. We are not going to get married. Not ever.”

His smile was patient. Tolerant. “Your mother wants it. So does mine.”

“My mother wants me to get married, period. You're the right gender; you're Chinese; you have a good business. That works for her, but she's already married. Give it up, Freddie. You don't want to marry me. You don't even like me.”

“Of course I do. I'm very fond of you. You're my cousin.”

He meant it, too. Or believed it, which was almost the same. She sighed. “I agree with your mother—you *do* need to get married. Soon. Just not to me.” She handed him her plate, patted his arm, and made her getaway while his hands were full.

Relatives could be the very devil sometimes.

She'd dance some more, she decided, heading for the other room. That wouldn't eliminate the possibility of nosy questions, not when so many people here felt entitled—obliged, even—to ask about her shoulder, her new lover, or her career change. But it limited their opportunities.

The DJ was playing "I Want You to Want Me," and the room was crowded. Lily stood at the edge of the dance floor tapping her foot, more in irritation than to keep time.

Freddie was not exactly the soul of insight, which made it all the more irritating that he'd put his finger on the truth. She was taken, all right. Taken over, it sometimes seemed.

Her gaze drifted across the crowded room, past cousins and strangers, acquaintances, family friends, and those newly related by marriage. It snagged on Aunt Mequi, who was dancing with Lily's father.

Mequi Leung was her mother's sister. They ran tall on that side of Lily's family, and Mequi was thin all over—thin body, thin face, and a thin smile that looked like a bandage slapped over something painful. Lily's own lips twitched. Aunt Mequi hated to look ridiculous, and Edward Yu's head barely topped his sister-in-law's shoulder.

He wouldn't be troubled by that, she knew. Her father possessed a marvelous capacity for ignoring things he considered unimportant. He was probably talking about option strike, vertical spread, and other esoterica of the broker's world.

Probably... but Lily couldn't know for sure. They were fifteen feet away. She couldn't hear them over the babble of other voices.

Three weeks ago, she would have been able to.

Relief mixed with a wisp of disappointment. For a while, the mate bond had made her hearing as acute as Rule's, but the effect had faded. She didn't know why it had happened in the first place, or why it had gone away. Inhumanly good hearing might have come in handy at times, but so much had changed in her life in such a short time. On the whole, she was glad one thing had reverted to normal.

Of course, it might come back.

Lily touched the small charm dangling from a gold chain around her throat. The *toltoi* was the outward emblem of all those changes, the token she'd been given when she formally accepted membership in Rule's clan. Her foot began tapping faster, losing the beat of the music altogether.

Rule thought the bond had responded to danger by blurring the lines between their separate abilities. Maybe he was right. At the time, he'd been able to draw on some of her own immunity to magic, and they had definitely been in danger. A nutty telepath had been trying to sacrifice them to her goddess.

But Rule's theory made the mate bond seem almost sentient, like some sort of psychic snake—now tightening its coils around the two of them, now loosening them. Most of all, it irritated Lily that she didn't *know*. There were entirely too many mysteries about this bond.

Maybe she'd find out soon. She had an appointment in three days to talk to the Nokolai *Rhej*—*Rhej* being a position or title. Rule said the woman was sort of a combination of priestess, historian, and bard.

Now that Lily was clan, she was supposed to get filled in on some of the history.

She hoped this Rhej person had some answers. She had a lot of questions.

As if the shifting sea of couples hid some arcane lode-stone, her gaze was drawn to one spot, near the curving wall of windows.

Rule was there.

She couldn't see him. Lily had inherited her father's lack of inches, and there were too many people between them. But she didn't have to see him to know precisely where he was. She always did, if he was close enough. . . within one hundred twenty-nine feet, to be exact. The effect became imprecise after that. Last week she'd made him test it.

That's how it was now, anyway. Three weeks ago she'd been unable to be that far away—literally unable. She'd nearly passed out when she put too much distance between them. Rule claimed that was normal for a newly mated pair.

He had some weird ideas of normal. But the bond had relaxed, just as he'd said it would. She wasn't sure how far their tether would stretch now, but she meant to find out. Soon.

The music ended, and some of the couples started to leave the floor. In the gap that opened up, Lily saw the man who'd recently moved into the center of her life. Or, according to Rule, had been shoved there by his Lady.

He'd been dancing with someone Lily didn't know. A member of the groom's family, probably, as the woman looked Chinese. She was about Lily's age, with very short hair and a sleek blue dress that set off her figure admirably.

Not a puke-green bridesmaid's dress. Lily grimaced. The mate bond made it impossible for Rule to stray, but his thoughts could still wander, couldn't they?

The woman's hand rested on Rule's arm. She was smiling in a way that was becoming all too familiar. Lily wondered if she looked like that, too, when Rule's head bent toward her the way he inclined it now, listening to his dance partner.

It was an elegant head. Its dark hair was too long for fashion, but it suited him. His face was narrow, the skin taut over cheeks that might have been sculpted by the wind. The angle of those cheekbones was mirrored by the dark slashes of his eyebrows.

He wore black, of course. He always wore black. The expensive suit covered a body that never failed to fascinate her. It seemed somehow more focused than other bodies. Watching him now, she had the fanciful thought that he attended to the world with all of him—listening with thighs and biceps as well as ears, observing with scalp and eyes and nape, with the soles of his feet and the backs of his knees.

The backs of his knees. . . she knew how his skin tasted there.

His head turned, and their eyes met.

Oh. She put a hand on her stomach. That didn't usually happen, not since the first time. But every once in a while she got this little jolt when their eyes met. Like being stroked by a feather, she thought. Startling

because she felt it in a place she had no name for. A place she hadn't known could be touched.

Why did it hit sometimes and not others? She grimaced. Mate bond mystery number three hundred seventy-six.

As if he'd read her mind, the corner of his mouth kicked up. Those rakish eyebrows lifted, asking a question. She made herself smile back and shook her head: *No, I don't need you right now. I'm fine.*

"Not like that, dummy," a voice said at her elbow. "Like this."

Lily turned. Beth was making kissy faces at Rule.

Rule grinned and blew Lily's little sister a kiss.

"See?" Beth turned to her. "You have a hunk like that hanging around, you don't scowl him away."

"That was a smile, not a scowl. *This* is a scowl."

Beth studied her. "By golly, you're right. The difference isn't as obvious as it ought to be, though. What's wrong?"

"It's such a pleasure to be asked that by someone I can tell to mind her own business."

"The rellies been giving you a hard time? Rhetorical question," she added, hooking an arm through Lily's. "Of course they are. You've confounded everyone's expectations again. C'mon. Let's see if there's anywhere to hide on the patio."

It was either go with Beth or be tugged wholly off balance. Lily went. "Grandmother's holding court out there."

"Right. The buffet, then," she said, shifting course. "I'm pretty sure I could cram in more chocolate."

"You think it's a good idea for the two of us to stand next to the food? Some people have weak stomachs."

Beth glanced down at her bridesmaid's dress, a match for Lily's. "And to think I always believed Susan liked me. It's not as if she needed help to outshine me. She's done that all my life."

"Maybe she's turned color-blind." Lily's shoulder had progressed from stiff to aching. She could use it as an excuse to leave, she supposed, but her mother and the aunts might start bringing her food again. And stay to tell her all the things she should be doing differently... again.

"That doesn't explain Mother," Beth said darkly.

"There is no explanation for Mother. I thought you knew that." Lily reminded herself that she didn't really need to have her arm free. She wouldn't need to draw on anyone at her big sister's wedding. Odds were slim for even a fist fight.

But it was a relief when they reached the buffet and Beth let go to zero in on the sweets. "No chocolate cookies left," she said sadly and reached for a cookie shaped like a pair of wedding bells. "How long did it take Freddie to pop the question this time?"

“He’s stopped proposing. He just talks about our marriage as if I’ve already agreed. You could have rescued me.”

“I hate to interrupt a tender moment. Speaking of which, why are you avoiding Rule?”

“You can be intensely annoying, you know that?”

Beth nodded and downed the other half of the cookie. “You don’t want to talk about your relationship with Tall, Dark, and Occasionally Furry. I get that. And I understand why you haven’t said much about him to Mother. Who would? But you’ve clammed up with me, too.”

Lily heard the hurt beneath the banter and gave up. “We had an argument, all right? Nothing major. I’m just not all that pleased with him at the moment.”

Beth gave her a worried glance.

“Not about other women,” Lily said impatiently. “If that was the problem, I wouldn’t call it a minor argument, would I? And I wouldn’t be making smiley faces at him.”

“Right.” Beth was relieved. “Of course you wouldn’t. Though I don’t understand why you—all right, all right, don’t get huffy. Hey, there’s some chocolate sauce left! Pass me one of those strawberries.”

Lily knew what Beth was thinking, and why. And maybe she ought to give her sister a better explanation than she had so far... but not now.

“So, you going to tell me what you two argued about?”

“No. Are you still dating the octopus?”

“If you mean Bill, he’s *so* last week. At least tell me if Rule is as incredible in bed as he looks like he would be.”

A grin stole out. “Better.”

Beth dipped her strawberry in chocolate while she thought that over, then shook her head. “Not possible, but trying to imagine it is exciting. Did you get those dark circles beneath your eyes because you keep skipping sleep in favor of hot monkey sex, then? Or is your shoulder keeping you awake? Or is something else going on?”

Lily jerked her good shoulder in a shrug. “Bad dreams. They’ll pass. Are you going to eat that or make love to it?”

Beth licked more of the chocolate off the strawberry. “The two are not mutually exclusive. Considering what happened to you, bad dreams aren’t surprising. *Not* that I know exactly what happened. I don’t suppose you want to talk about it?”

“I’m not much for talky-talky.”

“No kidding.” At last Beth popped the strawberry in her mouth.

With Beth's mouth temporarily occupied, Lily's attention slipped back to the argument she and Rule had tripped over last night. He wanted her to move in with him. He'd been patient, by his lights, but she wasn't ready. She needed time to adjust to all the changes in her life. And she needed to spend some of that time alone.

He didn't get that. Nettie had told her that individual lupi, like individual humans, fell in different places along the introvert-extrovert scale. But on the whole, they needed more touch, more contact, more sheer time spent with others than the average human. The wolf was a pack animal, after all.

Strawberry disposed of, Beth asked, "Since you won't do the talky-talky thing, have you been digging?"

"Waging war on weeds. I can't use a shovel with one arm." Rule had offered to dig a bed for her at Clanhome, but that would have changed everything. She did her gardening at Grandmother's because she didn't have any land of her own, but that didn't mean...

"Hey!" Beth's hand passed in front of Lily's face. "Where'd you go? You're pale as a ghost."

"That's appropriate," Lily muttered.

"What?"

She shook her head. "Never mind. I saw... I thought I saw someone I used to know." Someone who couldn't be here.

The woman Lily knew only as Helen didn't know

Lily's family, for one thing. For another, she was dead.

"I'm guessing it wasn't someone you liked."

"No." Lily stared in the direction the woman had gone, vanished now behind a cluster of chattering teens. She'd looked exactly like Helen: tiny build, long blond hair, baby face, eyes as cold and empty as a doll's.

There she was again, heading for the exit that led to the restrooms. Lily's heart began throwing itself against the wall of her chest as if desperately seeking escape.

It was crazy to think that she'd seen Helen. Crazy. And yet... "I'm going to freshen up," she told her sister, moving to follow a woman who couldn't exist.

Three weeks ago, Lily had killed her.

Nancy Chen obviously enjoyed dancing, and she was good at it. She was tall enough that her steps matched Rule's well, too. She smelled of tobacco, which he didn't care for, and baby powder, which he liked. She had a lively sense of humor.

All in all, Rule would have been enjoying their dance if only she'd stop trying to grope him. "Uh-uh." he said, moving her hand back to his waist. Again.

She grinned. "Can't blame me for trying. It's not as if that pretty thing you're dating would object."

“I think you don’t know Lily.”

“She can’t be such a fool she doesn’t know about your kind. More power to her, I say, for having the guts to take you on anyway. I hear you can give a lady quite a ride.” She slid him a coquettish glance... and slid her hand down again.

Torn between exasperation and amusement, he reclaimed the wandering hand. This time he kept a grip on it. “I suspect you’ve given quite a ride in your day, too,” he said dryly.

Nancy Chen was eighty-two years old, the great-aunt of the groom.

She laughed. “My day isn’t over. It just doesn’t come as often as it used to. Get it? Doesn’t *come*.” She laughed again, enjoying herself.

Rule enjoyed her, too, for the remainder of the dance, because he kept her hands pinned. Nancy didn’t expect him to take her propositions seriously—though he suspected that, given an ounce of encouragement, she’d have happily hunted up a closet for them to duck into. Mostly, though, she was getting a kick out of being outrageous.

Some women reacted that way. They went a little giddy over the chance to step outside the normal bonds of society with someone who lived outside them. He was used to that, as he was used to the whiff of fear-scent most people gave off when they met him. But both could be wearying.

He wanted Lily. And she was avoiding him.

Rule made his way around the edges of the banquet room, exerting all his tact to avoid dancing with yet another woman who wasn’t Lily. The air was ripe with scent—food, flowers, candles, humanity, and a faint note of ocean. But he didn’t pick up Lily’s scent, or the tug that would tell him where she was.

The directional aspect of the mate bond wasn’t as obvious for him as it was for her—another of the mysteries that so plagued her. When they’d discovered this during her little test last week, he’d suggested that she was simply more attuned to the immaterial than he was because of her Gift.

Lily had shaken her head in disgust. “That’s not an explanation. That’s substituting one question mark for another.”

A smile twitched at Rule’s mouth as he headed for the other room. His *nadia* did not approve of the inexplicable.

He wove through the crowd, looking for a small, slender woman with hair the color of night, skin like cream poured over apricots... and a dress the color of mold. His smile widened. Truer love hath no sister than to wear such a gown.

Still no Lily. Rule paused. She wasn’t happy with him right now. Tough. He wasn’t too happy with her, either. She had no business being back on full duty. She wasn’t healed yet, dammit, and why her superiors couldn’t see that, he couldn’t fathom. But she wouldn’t have—

“Rule.” The smooth, feminine voice was newly familiar. He turned to see Lily’s mother beckoning him.

Julia Yu was a tall, elegant woman with beautiful hands, very little chin, and Lily’s eyes set beneath

eyebrows plucked to crispness. She stood with two women about her age—one Anglo, one Chinese, both intensely curious about him and trying not to show it.

Rule repressed a sigh. He'd been glad of the chance this wedding offered to become acquainted with Lily's people. They were part of her, after all, and he was endlessly curious about her. Last night he'd met her parents at the rehearsal dinner, with mixed results. They'd both been very polite, but neither of them approved of him. Her father was reserving judgment, he thought. Her mother liked him, didn't want to, and wished he would go away.

It was Lily he wanted now, though. He was tired of the curiosity, the fear, the speculation. He might be used to being on exhibit, but it was different this time. Personal. *Look, everyone, see what followed Lily home. It walks and talks just like a real person.*

But after the briefest of introductions, Julia Yu excused herself to the others and took Rule aside. She'd tucked a frown between those crisp eyebrows. "Have you seen Lily?"

His own brows lifted in surprise. "I was just looking for her."

"Teh! I'm being silly." She shook her head. "It's Beth's fault, putting ideas in my head, and I've been so busy... you have no idea what it is to put on a wedding like this."

Worry bit down low in his stomach. He replied with automatic courtesies. "You've done a magnificent job. The wedding was beautiful, as is the reception. But what ideas did Beth put in your head?"

"Such a silly story! Of course she was imagining things. Beth is very imaginative." It was impossible to tell if she meant that as a compliment or criticism of her youngest daughter. The frown hadn't budged. "I paid it no heed at all."

"What kind of story?"

"She said she saw Lily go into the ladies' room and followed her. They haven't had much opportunity to talk lately, you know, so I suppose... but Lily wasn't there." Julia's lips pursed. "Beth swears Lily could not have left without her seeing, but that's nonsense."

It had to be. Didn't it?

Rule stood stock still for a moment. Lily wasn't far. He *knew* that. But he hadn't been able to find her, and the world wasn't as sane and orderly as it appeared. The realms were shifting.

And three weeks ago, Lily had pissed off a goddess.

"I'll find her." He turned away, moving quickly, propelled by an urgency he knew was foolish.

The last place she'd been seen was the ladies' room, so that's where he headed. The restrooms lay off the hall that connected the private dining rooms to the public part of the restaurant. A knot of unhappy women had collected outside the ladies' room. He picked up snatches of conversation.

"... anyone sent for the manager?"

"Is there another one?"

“Plenty of stalls, no need to lock the door.”

“... some kind of sadist, if you ask me!”

Someone had locked the door to the ladies’ room. Rule’s mouth went dry. He eased his way through the women, using his size, his smile, and, after a moment, their recognition to part them. “Excuse me, ladies. Pardon me. No, I’m not the manager, but if you’ll step aside...”

“Shannon,” one of them whispered to another, “You dummy! That’s the Nokolai prince!”

That silenced them for a moment. “I think I can fix this if you’ll... thank you,” he said as the last one moved away. An odd, faint odor hung in the air near the door. He bent closer to sniff, but he couldn’t identify it.

Lily was on the other side. He felt her nearness as a slow stir beneath his breastbone. Heart hammering, he rapped on the door. Hollow core.

“That won’t work!” one of the women snapped. “You think we haven’t tried knocking?”

The knob turned, but the door didn’t budge. Bolted on the other side, he judged.

“We tried opening it, too,” the woman said sarcastically.

Rule put his fist through the door.

Wood splintered. Someone shrieked. He reached through the hole he’d made and found the bolt. His blood made it slippery, but he gripped it hard and yanked. He shoved the door open.

Lily lay on her back by the sinks. She wasn’t moving.

TWO



“AND why,” Rule asked with strained patience, “Did you send the EMTs away?”

Lily sat in the middle of the restroom floor in a puddle of muddy green chiffon, petting the white tiles. In the hall by the door, a uniformed officer kept out the curious and the concerned while his partner took statements.

Rule sat on the floor, too—over against the wall, well away from Lily so he wouldn’t mess up the traces left by her attacker.

She frowned at the floor as if someone had written an unwelcome message there in invisible ink. “They wanted to take me to the hospital.”

He stared at the heart of his heart, the one woman in the world for him... the pigheaded, my-way-or-the-highway idiot who'd refused medical treatment. "Imagine that. What were they thinking?"

Her lips twitched. At last she looked away from the fascinating floor. "I'll go later. My sore head is evidence of a sort, but I really am okay. Unlike you, I didn't lose any blood—"

"You opened your wound."

"But it barely bled, and I'm already stuffed full of antibiotics. My sister checked me out."

"Yes, and said you probably had a concussion—"

"A *slight* concussion."

"—and should go to the emergency room and let them run tests."

"Which would confirm that my head hurts, after which they'd tell me to rest. I'm resting."

"You're conducting a bloody be-damned investigation!"

"I don't have much time before the S.O.C. crew gets here."

"You're speaking acronym again."

She rolled her eyes. "Scene-of-crime crew. I wanted to check things out before they show up. Or Karonski." She frowned at the floor one last time, and then held out her hand. "I've learned all I can. Help me up?"

He rose swiftly, crossed to her, and took her hand. With one gentle tug she was on her feet and in his arms. He nuzzled her hair. Her scent reached inside him, easing him away from anger.

Which left the fear standing alone. He drew a shaky breath. "Dammit, Lily. Your face is the color of sweaty gym socks."

"I'm so glad you told me that." But she leaned into him, letting him have the warmth and weight of her—the prickle of arousal and the comfort of connection. He knew she drew strength from the contact, too. She'd come that far in accepting the mate bond. She no longer denied them this out of fear her needs would swallow her.

But she wouldn't live with him. That, Rule promised himself, would change. After this attack, even Lily couldn't continue to insist on warping both of their lives to conform to some notion of autonomy.

"The uniform is staring at us," she muttered.

"Mmm." The uniform, as she put it, was not happy about having a lupus on the scene. The man's first impulse had been to arrest Rule on general principles. Dissuaded from that, he'd wanted to remove Rule from the crime scene.

Reasonable enough, from a cop's point of view, Rule supposed. But he wasn't leaving Lily. Eventually the officer had accepted that, though it was a toss-up whether it was Lily's newly minted federal badge,

her past status as a homicide cop, or Rule's simple refusal to leave that had prevailed.

He rubbed his cheek against her hair, trying to breathe her in. And paused. "You smell funny."

"Hey." She leaned away. "No more cracks about sweaty socks."

"Not that kind of funny." Rule bent, sniffing down her shoulder and along the sling that held her left arm, where the scent was strongest.

"Could you try to be a little less weird?"

"Picture me wagging my tail, and this will seem more natural." He inhaled deeply, trying to sort the odd scent from all the others. "I can't place it," he said, straightening. "Not in this form."

"Maybe you're smelling whatever left the traces I felt on the floor."

Lily was a touch sensitive, perhaps the rarest of the Gifts, and an unusually strong one. She couldn't be affected by magic, but she could feel it, even the slight traces left by the passage of supernatural beings. His eyebrows lifted. "What did you feel?"

"It was odd. Sort of... orange."

"Which tells me little."

"Doesn't tell me much, either." She shook her head. "Magic feels like a texture, not a color, yet this... I can't explain it. I've never felt anything like it before."

She looked troubled, but Rule felt relief. "It didn't feel like that damned staff, then."

Before she could respond, they were interrupted.

"Sorry, ma'am, you can't go in there."

That was the officer by the door. A familiar feminine voice replied with a stream of Chinese, followed by another familiar voice—Julia Yu. "I told you they wouldn't let you in. If they won't let her own mother in, they won't make an exception for her grandmother."

Lily sighed and pulled away. "Grandmother, don't curse the man for doing his duty."

"I curse who I curse. You will come out now."

The old woman standing on the other side of the burly officer was less than five feet tall. Her dress was red, ankle-length, and Oriental style. Black hair striped with silver was drawn up in a knot secured with twin enameled picks, and the ring on one finger held a cabochon ruby. Despite her years, she had a spine like a sapling, supple and erect, and the hauteur of a queen.

Rule couldn't look at Madame Li Lei Yu without thinking of a cat. She knew she was in charge, whatever the idiots around her might think. Right now, she was a cat who wanted a door opened. Immediately.

Lily gave Rule a wry glance and left the restroom. He followed.

At the west end of the hall another officer was talking with one of the women who'd complained about the locked restroom door. Food smells drifted in from the nearby kitchen, and the sounds of diners in the public part of the restaurant competed with the hum from the rooms occupied by the wedding party.

Here, under the suspicious eyes of the patrol cop, three women made a triangle, with the oldest and smallest of them at its apex. Julia Yu—the one in the middle— touched her daughter's shoulder, looking anxious. Lily gave her a reassuring smile and turned to her grandmother. "I'm here, as instructed."

"Ha! You do not fool me. You come because you are ready to come."

Two pairs of black eyes met—one wrapped in wrinkles, one surrounded by smooth young skin. The two women were almost of equal height. Alike in other ways, too, some of them visible. "You don't want me to neglect my duty," Lily said.

"Pert," her grandmother announced. "Always you are pert." She cupped Lily's cheek. The skin on the back of her hand was as fine and soft as tissue laid over the strict architecture of bone and tendon. Her nails were red and beautifully tended. "You are well, child?"

Lily smiled into that cupped hand. "Aside from the little guy hammering on my skull from the inside, yes."

"Then reassure your mother. She worries."

Julia Yu was indignant. "You were the one who insisted on coming to see for yourself that she was all right. You wouldn't take my word for it. Or Susan's, and she's a doctor."

Madame Yu ignored that, dropping her hand and turning to Rule. "You do not greet me."

"I but await my opportunity." He bent and kissed one whisper-soft cheek.

Her eyebrows shot up. "You flirt with your lover's grandmother?"

"I flirt with *you*, Madame. It is irresistible."

"Good. I like flattery when it is done well. Tell your peculiar friend I wish to see him."

"Ah... which peculiar friend would that be?"

She chuckled. "You have so many, eh? The beautiful one."

"She means Cullen," Lily said dryly.

Of course she did. Rule eyed the old woman, wondering if he wanted to know why she wished to see Cullen. Probably not, he decided. "I'll give you his phone number, but he doesn't always answer it."

"I dislike telephones. You tell him come see me when I return."

"Return?" Julia Yu frowned. "What are you talking about? You aren't going anywhere. You don't like to travel."

"Tomorrow I get on an airplane. I fly to China."

In the sudden silence, Rule looked at the faces of the three women. Julia Yu was shocked. Madame Yu was obviously enjoying her daughter-in-law's reaction. And Lily... her distress was plain, at least to him. It showed in her stillness, her lack of expression, the change in her scent.

He moved closer to her. "This wasn't a sudden decision," he told the old woman grimly. "You can't get a visa for China overnight."

"Can I not?" Her expression suggested he'd fallen from grace. She shrugged and spoke to her granddaughter. "For years, I have thought of such a trip. I am many years now in America. There are people and places in China I would see again before I die. Or they do."

"You've talked about a trip," Lily said, "but you never made plans. Why now?"

"I am an old woman. I am reminded of this recently."

The unexpected wryness in Grandmother's voice made Rule think she referred to the battle two weeks ago—one involving a number of armed Azá, himself, Cullen, Lily, a handful of FBI agents, several wolves... and one very large tiger.

Madame Li Lei Yu hadn't seemed like an old woman to him at the time.

Lily had herself back under control. "Li Quin will go with you?"

"She, too, has people and places to see. My gardens—" She broke off, turning as Rule did toward the east end of the hall.

Rule knew who was coming by the sound of the footsteps. A moment later the man appeared around the bend in the hall: Abel Karonski, sometime friend, full-time FBI agent, part of a special unit of the Magical Crimes Division. And witch. The satchel he carried wouldn't hold file folders or a change of clothes.

But the person with Abel wasn't his partner, Martin Croft. Instead the agent was accompanied by a long, lanky woman with a butch-crop of silvery blond hair, half a dozen earrings in each ear, a badly fitted gray suit, and deep-set eyes the color of old whiskey.

Most people wouldn't notice the eyes. Not at first. All they'd see were the tattoos.

"Cynna!" Rule exclaimed.

Her mouth tilted up between the indigo whorls looping from cheeks to chin. "Hey, Rule. Fancy meeting me here, huh?"

"YOU'VE added a few," Rule said, pulling out a chair.

After a brief confusion, Lily, Rule, Karonski, and the unexpected addition to their task force had adjourned to the restaurant's smallest private dining room. It held one table, six chairs, and a coffee pot.

"More than a few, but some of 'em don't show in polite company." The woman's grin rearranged the designs on her cheeks. "Damn, you look good. Haven't changed a bit. Maybe you'd like to check out

some of my new tattoos later.”

Lily sat in the chair Rule was holding. She supposed she’d better get used to women propositioning Rule. It was going to happen.

Karonski put down his satchel, pulled out one of the chairs, and sat. “Dammit, Cynna, I told you—”

“And I told you that was bullshit. Rule’s a lupus.”

“Ah, Cynna.” Rule’s smile held a definite tinge of regret. “As delightful as such a study would be, I must decline. I’m not available.”

The woman’s eyebrows went up. She looked at Lily, her expression hard to read behind all the tattoos. But she didn’t look friendly.

Lily decided her head hurt too much to figure out how to handle this blast from Rule’s past. She knew how she felt about it, though. Pissed. But who was she supposed to be angry with?

Karonski, maybe, for springing Cynna Weaver on her like this. She’d wondered if Weaver was here to execute an AG warrant—in effect, an order of execution signed by the U.S. attorney general. The FBI’s temporary director was pushing for one, though so far the attorney general wasn’t buying. No surprise there. The political fallout could be huge, since AG warrants had traditionally only been issued against nonhumans.

Like lupi.

But Karonski had assured her Weaver was part of the unit. She was here to help find Harlowe, not to kill him. Lily turned to him. “What exactly did you tell her about Rule and me?”

“That she’s to behave. Rule’s taken.” He looked around. “Didn’t someone say something about coffee?”

Lily would have smiled if her head hadn’t hurt so much. Karonski was an overfed white male with a severe wardrobe impairment, the stubbornness to outlast a jackass, and a firm belief in the power of caffeine. He was also her boss. “Sure. It’s right there. Get me a cup, too.”

He heaved a sigh and went after his version of life support.

Their little haven had originally been intended for the use of business types. With cops everywhere, the suits hadn’t thought this was a good time to discuss a merger or acquisition or whatever, so Karonski had commandeered the room and the coffee. While the four of them conferred, the S.O.C. team was going through their routine—they’d arrived on Karonski’s heels—and other local cops took the names and addresses of everyone in the restaurant.

This included the entire wedding party, much to her mother’s distress. Susan and her new husband had been allowed to leave—the only ones, so far, to receive permission. Lily’s parents were trying to soothe their guests, and Grandmother had summoned Li Quin to take her home. The local cops would try to stop her, of course, but Lily was putting her money on Grandmother.

It was weird, sitting on this side of the local-federal fence. “So Croft’s in Virginia already?” Lily referred to Karonski’s partner.

“On his way. It’s a major outbreak, the biggest in decades.”

“Any fatalities?”

“Two confirmed. The nasty little shits caused a major pileup on the interstate by riding a trucker’s windshield.” He brought two full mugs back to the table with him. Today’s suit was brown, wrinkled, and missing a button. His tie suggested he’d had something with ketchup for lunch. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Lily wrapped her hands around the steaming mug and took a sip. Caffeine had analgesic properties, right? It was bound to help.

“What about you?” Rule asked the agent. “You’re leaving, too?”

“I’ll be heading there as soon as I’ve got things lined out here.”

“I don’t know much about imps. They’ve always been rare on this coast. Were they summoned?”

“No one summons imps on purpose. They can’t be controlled. But a poorly executed spell can call them up instead of a demon, and most summoning spells suck. That’s one thing lost during the Purge that I hope we never rediscover.” Karonski took a sip of coffee, sighed with pleasure, and added, “More often, though, imps bleed through some weak place between the realms. We don’t know why. Not usually in such numbers, though.”

“Hell’s restless lately,” Cynna commented.

Lily looked at her. “You would know about that?”

“Not directly. I’m righteous these days. But I hear things.”

Lily knew that the section of the FBI’s Magical Crimes Division called the Unit was more flexible than the rest of the Bureau about any less-than-respectable skills its agents possessed. They had to be open-minded. The Unit couldn’t function without the Gifted—witness her own hasty recruitment. And over the years, the Gifted had found different paths for their talents, paths often cloaked in secrecy. The Purge had put an end to making such explorations openly.

But a Dizzy who worked for the FBI?

“All right,” Karonski said, “I’ve got a plane to catch, and Lily here has to go get her head examined—yes, that is an order,” he said directly to her. “So let’s make it quick. What happened?”

“I saw Helen.”

Karonski spilled his coffee. “You’re worrying me.”

“It wasn’t really Helen. I know that. But I’m not talking about a resemblance, either. This woman looked exactly like her—body, face, hair, everything was exactly the same.”

Karonski frowned. “A twin?”

“That was one possibility. Or she was an illusion. Or I was going nuts. I didn’t think I was crazy, but I

couldn't see any way to prove or disprove that right away. The other two possibilities meant she'd been planted to get my attention or Rule's. Since I knew it wasn't an illusion—"

"Wait a minute," Cynna said. "How could you know that?"

Lily raised her eyebrows at Karonski.

"Cynna just flew in. I hit the high points on the way here, but she doesn't know much more than she read in the papers after the big raid."

Okay, so Lily had to explain herself—something she wasn't used to doing. Until last month, she could have counted on the fingers of one hand the number of people who knew about her Gift. "I can be fooled, but not by magic. I'm a sensitive."

Cynna's lips pursed as if she'd bitten into something sour. "A sensitive."

"I never outed people." It was a refrain Lily had used a lot lately. Too often, sensitives had been used by witch hunters both official and otherwise to sniff out the Gifted or those of the Blood. Most of that was in the past... but not very far in the past. "It came in handy sometimes in my work, but I was with homicide, not the X-Squad. You going to have a problem working with me?"

"I can handle it. Think you can handle working with me?"

"Let's see." Lily held out her hand.

To her credit, Weaver didn't hesitate to offer a quick, businesslike shake. Then she cocked her head to one side. "So what did you pick up about me?"

"Not about you. I'm no empath. I read magic, not people." She took a moment to gather her impressions from the brief contact. "You've a strong Gift," she said at last. "And complex, like lots of fingerprints on top of each other. I haven't run across your brand of magic before."

Weaver showed her teeth in a smile. "There aren't many like me around."

Rule shifted in his chair. "Let's get back to this woman who looked like Helen. It wouldn't be hard for an uninvited guest to crash the party."

"No. But how did she know there was a party to crash?"

"That's rather my point. You suspected she'd been planted to get your attention. That meant they'd learned enough about you to get her here, at your sister's wedding. So naturally you followed her." His fingers drummed once. "Did it occur to you she might be bait?"

"Of course she was bait. That didn't mean I could ignore her. Harlowe's still missing. So's that damned staff. This Helen look-alike had to be connected to him, it, or both, and someone knew enough to send her to my sister's wedding. What was I supposed to do—let that link walk away?"

"You could have come to me for backup."

"If I'd hunted you up, I could have lost her."

“You lost her anyway.”

Because that was patently true, she didn’t argue. “Maybe I miscalled it, but I’m the only one who can’t be affected by that staff, and I didn’t want to take the chance. If it had been there…” She started to shake her head, winced, and turned to Karonski. “She went to the ladies’ room, I followed, and that’s the last I know. Something clobbered me as soon as I stepped inside.”

“And locked you in there,” Rule said. “Then vanished.”

Karonski’s forehead knitted. “What do you mean?”

“The restrooms are in the middle of the building. No windows. No way in or out except through that one door—and it was bolted on the inside.”

“Get real,” Cynna said. “A locked room mystery?”

Lily was tired, hurting, and—if she was honest with herself—scared. They’d struck at her in the midst of her family. How had they known where and when to find her? “Are those tattoos for show, or do you actually know something about magic?”

“I know enough to not buy into vanishing villains. Invisibility was impossible before the Purge. It sure hasn’t become possible now.”

“The bolt,” Lily snapped. “Whoever knocked me out didn’t have to disappear. She just had to spell the bolt into moving from the other side of the door.”

Cynna’s mouth opened—and closed. She grimaced. “My stupid. Sorry.”

Anger was not good for concussions. Even minor ones. The throbbing increased, bringing on a wave of nausea. Lily rode out the wave, then said, “We need to—hey!”

Rule had pulled her chair back from the table. “You’ve played macho cop long enough. We’ll be going now. Abel, good to see you again. Cynna, you, too.”

“Wait just one minute.” But when that gentle, inexorable hand propelled Lily to her feet, the room hit the spin cycle. She closed her eyes and waited for it to firm up again. “Okay, okay. I’ll even let you drive.”

“The ambulance crew is still here. I told them to wait.”

Her eyes snapped open so she could glare at him. He smiled and slid an arm around her waist.

“You’re going to the ER, Yu,” Karonski said. “Don’t be a baby about it.”

“I said I’d go.” Pride wouldn’t let her lean against Rule, but it was tempting. As much as she hated to admit it, determination had about run its limit in keeping her upright. “But this is not an emergency. I don’t need to tie up an ambulance.”

“They’re here. Might as well make use of them. Be sure your phone’s turned on, and I’ll let you know what Cynna and I find out before I leave.”

“You’re flying to Virginia tonight?” Lily tried to hide her distress. She was a very new FBI agent. She

might know how to conduct an investigation, but she didn't know FBI procedures and resources.

He grunted an affirmative. "I don't know how long we'll be gone. Imps aren't hard to deal with, but there's a lot of them and we have to figure out how they got loose. If there's a leak, I'll have to close it."

"You can do that?" Rule asked.

"Piece of cake." He grinned. "Pretty fancy cake, maybe. I might even need a little help. In the meantime, Lily and Cynna will be handling the hunt for Harlow and that staff. Lily, you've got authority to call on the local office as needed. Cynna, you have seniority—"

She snorted. "As if I cared about that shit."

"No, you're a damned loose cannon. Like I was about to say, you've got seniority, but you're not in charge. This is Yu's investigation. You're to assist."

She was leaning, dammit. Lily forced herself to straighten. "You call it my investigation, but you brought someone in without telling me."

"Blame Ruben. He had one of his notions yesterday. Says he thinks you'll need her soon."

Ruben Brooks was the head of the Unit. He was also an amazingly accurate precog. When he got hit by a notion, it paid to listen.

Lily turned her head to look at Ruben's latest notion—the woman whose body had been covered, inch by painful inch, with impossibly intricate patterns of power.

Or that was the idea, anyway. The Dizzies had been a big deal on the street about a decade ago, a quasi-religious group based on poorly understood African shamanistic practices. Most of them had been black, connected to gangs, and without enough of a Gift to cause much trouble—or to keep the movement going. It had pretty much died out when it became obvious the leaders couldn't deliver on their promises of power.

Beneath the inky tattoos, Cynna Weaver's skin was white. Lily assumed she was an exception in more than pigmentation. The Unit wouldn't have signed her up if she were as ineffective as other Dizzies. "So how are you going to assist the investigation?"

"I'm a Finder." She bared her teeth in a hunter's grin. "You get me something to work with, and I'll find that Harlowe bastard for you."

Shit. "That may be a problem. His house burned down two days ago."

THREE



CYNNA watched Rule hustle his pretty little cop out the door. He was so careful about her, and it was so unnecessary. That one was tougher than she looked.

She remembered when Rule had been all careful like that with another female who'd insisted she didn't need any man looking out for her.

Her mouth twisted wryly. Such a prickly little shit she'd been! Twenty going on twelve, street smart and cocky and scared of all the wrong things. But no matter how much she'd insisted she didn't want to be coddled, Rule had known better. And she'd eaten it up, hadn't she? Hoarded the memory of him, too, all these years. Rule's caring had fed the hungry child she'd been back then.

Well, she wasn't that hungry brat anymore. So maybe she was disappointed that he was taken. She'd get over it. She turned to Karonski. "So what the hell am I doing here? I can't find Harlowe without sorting his pattern, and I can't sort without something of his to sort from."

He shrugged. "Blame Ruben. He thinks it's a good idea for you to be around."

"And doesn't know why, I suppose."

"Does he ever?"

She shook her head. "Pretty big coincidence, Harlowe's house burning down right before I arrived. How'd it happen?"

"Someone doused the bushes with gasoline."

"Huh. Think the bad guys have a precog, too?"

"Maybe. Or else they were just being careful, and the timing really is coincidence." Karonski pushed back his chair and grabbed his mug. "Come on. Let's go hassle the locals. I'd like to run a diagnostic on that bolt and find out for sure if it was shifted magically."

She stood, too. "Nothing I like better than hassling a few cops."

"You *are* a cop."

"Weird, isn't it?"

Their little dining room opened onto the main dining room. The Odyssey's patrons were still being interviewed by the local cops; from snippets Cynna overheard as they made their way to the back, some were excited about their proximity to a crime, some worried, some angry. The poor waitresses and waiters were still trying to deliver food, but no one was much interested in the meal they'd come here for.

The place must do a lot of private party business, Cynna thought as they made their way through the crowded dining room. The public dining area occupied only about half of the donut. The rest was all private rooms.

The restrooms were in the center of the donut, off the hall that circled the kitchens at the center. A uniformed cop stopped them just inside that hall. Karonski's badge persuaded him they could be allowed to advance to the next sentry, a tired-looking woman in front of the ladies' room. The sound of a

hand-vac inside announced that the crime scene techs were still busy, and a quick exchange brought an estimate of fifteen minutes before they'd let the feds have the scene.

She and Abel moved down the hall a short distance to wait. Cynna leaned against the wall and crossed her arms. "That's a lot of hullabaloo for a simple knock on the head."

"Assault on a federal officer in connection with her investigation is a big deal. Try to remember that you're important now."

Cynna just shook her head. She didn't feel like a federal officer, for all that she'd been with the unit five years now. Most of her fellow agents would say she didn't act like one, either. "So who is this Helen Yu thought she saw?"

Karonski took a healthy swallow of his coffee. "She *was* a telepath. She's dead now."

Cynna's eyebrows shot up. "The one who wanted to open a gate to hell?"

"That's her."

Cynna considered what little she knew. The dead woman and Patrick Harlowe had belonged to the Church of the Redeemed, also known as the Azá. Some of those involved in the hell-raising scheme had been true believers; others had been magically bound to the cause with the help of a mysterious staff Helen had wielded. With it, she'd been able to control minds.

Which, of course, was impossible. Or so everyone had always said.

Three weeks ago the Azá, led by Helen and Harlowe, had taken Rule and Lily Yu captive. Somehow they'd managed to turn the tables on their captors, but Harlowe had gotten away. And the staff had vanished. "Seems like the staff should be our primary target."

"We know a fair amount about Harlowe, next to nothing about the staff. Hard to track a piece of wood." He sipped his coffee, watching the activity inside the rest-room. "Seabourne tried, right after the staff went missing. Couldn't do it."

"That's the one you told me about. The sorcerer."

Karonski chuckled. "Your skepticism's showing."

"Well, Jesus, Abel, there haven't been any sorcerers since the Purge! Not real ones, anyway. A few wannabes who know just enough to get in trouble."

"Seabourne's for real, though what he can do is limited."

She tipped her head to one side. "Sorcery's still illegal, last I heard."

He snorted. "And I know how that troubles your conscience."

"It's important to be flexible. Is this guy working for us?"

"Hey, sorcery's illegal. He can't work for us." Karon-ski grinned. "Call him a friend of a friend. Turner and Yu wouldn't have stopped Helen without him."

“It was the China doll who offed her, though, right?”

“Yep. And if you call her that to her face, I want to be there.” Karonski set his empty mug on the floor, pulled a mint from his pocket, unwrapped it, and popped it in his mouth. “So where do you know Turner from?”

“Oh, me and Rule go way back. All the way back to before you arrested me.” She grinned. “I was just a big bite of mean back then, all attitude and no sense.”

“And you’re different now in what way?”

“Smart-ass.” She shook her head. “Lord, but seeing him does bring back memories. I used to hang out at a place called Mole’s in Chicago. Wonder if it’s still around?”

“You met Turner there?”

She nodded. “We hooked up for a while.” Now, there was a nice, low-key way to refer to someone who changed your life. “What’s this deal about him being unavailable, anyway?”

“None of your business.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t make sense. Lupi don’t do the faithful bit.”

“Rule is. Leave it alone.”

He hadn’t been when she knew him. He’d made that clear up front, and she’d accepted it. In that respect he hadn’t seemed much different from the other men she knew, just more honest... but she hadn’t exactly hung with a stellar crowd back then.

That was thirteen years ago. Jesus. Hard to believe in some ways... and in others, it seemed like a couple lifetimes ago. He would have changed since she’d known him, but this one was a real one-eighty. Sexually open relationships were a moral must for lupi. Something to do with their religion, she thought.

How had the China doll gotten him to change his mind about something that really mattered to him? Not by playing the fragile femme. She might look the part to someone who wasn’t paying attention, but Rule paid attention. That was one of—

“Looks like they’re about finished,” Karonski said, picking up his satchel. “It’ll take me a while to get set up. You want to check it out your way while I set my wards?”

“Sure.” She straightened and followed him.

Karonski was Wiccan, and Wiccan spells were considered the gold standard. In certain carefully circumscribed situations, what he learned was admissible as evidence in court. But his methods did take a while. According to the authorities, Cynna’s spells were unreliable because the accuracy depended on the skill of the caster.

But she was one hell of a Finder. One hell of a lot faster than Karonski’s methods, too. Cynna had her head cleared and her energy focused on the serpent maze on her left arm by the time they reached the door to the rest-room. While Karonski got rid of the local representatives of officialdom, she started the

spell moving through the maze.

Finding was her Gift. She didn't need spells for that. But to be any good as a Finder, she had to be able to sort, to find the patterns of things and people. That's what most of the spells inscribed on her body were for—sorting the energy she detected so she could Find its source.

When Karonski gave her a nod, she stepped inside the restroom, turned, and held her hand over the bolt. Energy zipped from her hand to the bolt and bounced back, altered, to slither along the paths of her skin and burn a new design on her upper right thigh.

She dropped her hand, staring at the bolt. "Holy shit."

LILY sat on the examination table with her head pounding and her eyes closed. Her "room" was a curtained alcove that offered all the sketchy privacy of a hospital gown—an indignity she'd been spared so far, though it might have been more flattering than her bridesmaid's dress. Nearby a baby was crying the thin, monotonous wail of exhaustion. The air stank of disinfectant and less obvious odors.

Down the hall a woman was cursing some man. On the other side of the curtain a monitor beeped relentlessly. Lily turned her head. "What does it smell like in here to you?"

"Pain-Rule sat on the table with her. She'd temporarily abandoned her "don't lean" policy and was glad of the support of his arm and body.

Funny. The way she was snuggled up against him left her good arm pretty much useless, but that didn't make her uneasy. Was that the effect of the mate bond, making her feel safe whether she was or not? Or was she just too tired and sore to care? "And yet you insisted on bringing me here."

She felt his smile in the way his cheek moved against her hair. "Pushed you around while you were temporarily weakened."

"Damn right, you did." There were a few good things about his height, she decided. It put his shoulder at just the right level for her to rest her aching head.

Lily felt guilty over how much she appreciated her parents' absence. Her mother's hovering and need to take charge would have driven her crazy. She'd persuaded them that the trip to the ER was a formality, necessary for insurance purposes. Grandmother, as expected, had left by the time Rule hustled Lily off to the ER, but she wouldn't have been a problem anyway. Grandmother didn't do hospitals.

"Watch it," Lily said. "We aren't exactly private here."

Rule's hand had slid up her rib cage, and his thumb was stroking slowly along the underside of her breast. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I told you once before: you don't do innocent well." But there was no heat in her voice. Pleasure rose in drowsy waves, stirred by the movement of his thumb, by his simple nearness. Her eyelids drooped. "How can I feel like this when my head hurts?"

He bent and ran his tongue slowly around the curve of her ear. "I don't know. How are you feeling?"

"Distracted."

“Good.”

The woman down the hall was yelling about a suitcase now. Someone had stolen it, and they’d better give it back right now.

Lily sighed and straightened. “I hope Nettie gets here soon.”

Nettie was Dr. Two Horses, a trained shaman as well as a Harvard-educated physician. She was connected to Rule’s clan in some way. Nettie wasn’t a lupus herself, of course, because lupi were always male. But their children came in both sexes.

“You’re worrying me,” Rule said.

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t once complained about my calling her. After all the grief you gave me over my interfering ways with the ambulance crew, I’d expected at least a minor hissy fit.”

“I don’t like hospitals. I do like Nettie. I guess there are some perks to being involved with a prince. Nettie would be one.”

Rule grimaced. He wasn’t fond of the press’s habit of calling him “the Nokolai prince.” He was heir or Lu Nuncio for his clan, but the position didn’t really equate with the human version of royalty. “Nettie isn’t treating you because of me. She’d have come for any clan member.”

“Oh. Right.” Lily sometimes forgot that she was clan now. So far, that particular change hadn’t had much effect on her life, though the adoption ceremony had been moving. “You know what’s weird?”

“All sorts of things lately. From your point of view, that would include me, the mate bond—”

She nudged him with her good shoulder. “Not you. I’m talking about the fact that I’m still alive.”

His arm tightened around her. “*Weird* isn’t the word I’d use.”

“I’m not complaining, but think about it. Someone went to a lot of trouble to get me alone. So what did they do when their plan worked? Bonked me on the head and left, locking the door behind them. Doesn’t make sense.”

“They must have been interrupted.”

“There was a bolt on the door, remember? And that’s another thing. Why was there a bolt on the door? I’ve seen bolts on restrooms in convenience stores or gas stations, but in a restaurant?”

“You think your Helen look-alike brought it with her?”

“Maybe.” She frowned. “I wish O’Brien had been running the S.O.C. team. I know he’d catch it if the bolt had been... what is it?”

He’d turned to the right, head up, but his body stayed loose. Whatever he’d sensed, it wasn’t a threat. “Nettie’s here.”

Had he heard Nettie or smelled her? Must be hearing, she decided. Rule wouldn't be able to pick out a single scent in the soup of the ER, not in this form... would he? "Good. She can tell you I'm okay, and we can go home."

A tall woman pushed back the curtain. Her skin was smooth and coppery; her hair was gray, frizzy, and abundant. The knot she'd made of it at her nape looked ready to unravel at any moment, and her wide mouth looked ready to smile. "You'll have to indulge me first. Professional pride insists that I poke at my patients before I agree with them."

Some of the tension eased from Lily's shoulders. "Hey, you're wearing a lab coat."

"It goes with the stethoscope. For some reason everyone wants to see my credentials if I show up in shorts and an athletic bra." Nettie, like most of the residents of Clan-home, generally wore as little as possible. She came up to the table. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Sore. Ready to leave."

"Mmm." Nettie asked a number of questions as she went through the usual medical rituals, checking Lily's chart and shining a light in her eyes. But not all of her examination methods were taught at Harvard.

"I sometimes wonder how anyone gets better in a hospital." She lit a smudging stick, let it burn a moment, and then waved out the flame. A wisp of smoke trailed up from the bundle of herbs. "The energy's always muddy as hell. Can you stand up for a minute?"

"Sure." Lily slipped off the table. Nettie chanted softly as she circled Lily, an eerie sound that did not go with her lab coat at all, using a large feather to waft the smoke toward Lily. The smoldering sage gave off a crisp, clean scent. By the time she'd made three circuits, Lily could have sworn her head didn't hurt as much. "Did you actually do something, or do I feel better because I think you did something?"

Nettie chuckled. "Does it matter? You can sit down again. I want to take a look at that shoulder. You said the wound opened?"

"Probably when I fell." Rule helped her unstick the tabs that held the sling together and slip her arm out. "Didn't bleed much. I'm sure it's okay."

True to her word, Nettie wasn't about to agree with her patient without doing her own poking and prodding. Lily was developing goose bumps, sitting there in her strapless bra with the bodice of her dress in her lap, when her cell phone rang.

Nettie grabbed Lily's good arm when she started to move. "Uh-uh. I'm not finished."

"I'll get it," Rule said. He retrieved her purse from the floor. "Yes?" He paused. "She's being examined right now... Dr. Two Horses. Why?"

Lily twitched. She wanted that phone. "Is that Karon-ski?"

Rule nodded, listening intently.

"Fight crime later," Nettie said. "Right now I've another mystery for you. There's something odd about your wound."

“What do you mean?”

“I’m picking up some kind of. . . *dissonance* is the best word I can think of. Something that doesn’t belong. You’re the sensitive. Touch it and see if you can tell me what I’m talking about.”

Lily shrugged her good shoulder. “All right, but magic doesn’t stick to me, so I don’t see what. . .” Her voice trailed off when she touched the skin next to her wound.

“You do feel something.”

“Yes.” Troubled, Lily skimmed her fingertips over the neat, round scab where a bullet had entered her body three weeks ago. She shouldn’t be able to feel anything, but she did. “Orange. It feels orange.”

“Sonofabitch.”

Rule’s low-voiced curse had Lily’s head swiveling, but he seemed to be responding to Karonski, not her. “What?” she demanded. “Did Karonski learn something?”

He shook his head, still listening. “All right,” he said reluctantly. “Though you’re wrong.” And he handed the phone to Nettie, not Lily.

“If that idiot thinks he has to get a doctor’s permission just to tell me what he found—”

“No.” Rule’s voice was hoarse. He looked at Nettie, at Lily, and then away. “That isn’t it.”

Nettie’s gaze flicked to Lily. She listened a moment, her expression professionally blank, and then said, “I can, yes. The ritual itself doesn’t take long, but the prep will take about an hour.”

Lily’s head throbbed in time with her suddenly accelerated heartbeat. “If someone doesn’t tell me what’s going on, I may explode.”

This time Rule looked at her and didn’t look away. “Cynna identified your assailant. Karonski confirmed it. You were attacked by a demon. He wants to be sure it isn’t still here. . . inside you.”

FOUR



THIS being a weekend, there was a live band at the Cactus Corral. Music ripped through the air and beat against the eardrums, a crashing wail of steel guitar and relentless rhythm. This was music as a battering ram, designed to smash into restraints, making customers eager for the slide into booze, the bump and jostle of bodies on the dance floor. In the pounding darkness, it was easy to dance with a stranger. Easy to forget a lost job or a lost wife, unpaid bills and unfinished dreams.

The only empty spot was at the bar next to a middle-aged man with a mustache the color of weak tea

and excellent teeth. He was trim but not athletic, looking rather like an accountant who was as tidy with his body as with his clients' money. Though he was a little older than most of the others, he didn't really stand out. Yet the space on his left remained empty despite the number of customers vying for the bartender's attention. And no one seemed to notice.

They didn't notice the squeaky voice that came from that open spot, either. "Did you see the breasts on that blonde?"

Patrick Harlowe heard the voice. He ignored it.

"Cantaloupes," that voice said dreamily. "Big and firm. Maybe you could get it up with her."

Damned little monster. Why didn't the music drown it out? He leaned across the scarred bar and shouted his drink order at the bartender.

"You had a little trouble with the last one, but this blonde could make a dead man rise. Get it? Make his cock rise." That was followed by a girlish giggle.

Patrick had barely heard his own voice over that miserable excuse for a band, but he heard every word from the creature at his side. "Shut up."

"Ha! You shut up. You'd better, or they'll think you're nuts, talking to yourself."

Patrick looked down. He saw a short, squat *something* with slick orange skin—lots of skin, because it was both hairless and naked. It stood on two legs shaped more like a beast's haunches than human limbs. The tail and the forward tilt it imparted made the creature vaguely resemble a stubby kangaroo. The arms were human enough, though, with five-fingered hands; the head was round with no visible ears and a wide slit of a mouth.

"Stinking hermaphrodite," Patrick muttered. "Why are you looking at breasts, anyway? Play with your own."

"I do. Doesn't mean I wouldn't like playing with hers." The little demon winked at the blond woman who was chatting with her friend a few feet away, oblivious.

Forget it, Patrick told himself. He might have to put up with the ugly little bugger for now, but it was temporary. So was hanging out in dives like this. Purely temporary.

That didn't mean he'd forgotten the chink bitch who'd caused all his problems. She'd get what she had coming. His lips curved up. Oh, yes, she'd pay, and he was the one who would deliver the bill. He'd been angry at first because he wasn't allowed to kill her, but this would be better. This way she'd be paying for a long time.

"Maybe you'd better stick to blondes. The brown-haired ones remind you of Her, huh?"

Patrick's mind went white. His heart kicked in his chest so quick and hard that his heartbeat swallowed everything else—thoughts, memories...

He wouldn't think about it. He didn't remember it very well, anyway. Didn't have to. *She* was in hell, and he was here. He was fine. "Stupid little shit. You don't know what you're talking about. She's Chinese—black hair, not brown."

“I’m not talking about that one. I meant—hey, watch it!”

Patrick had brushed that slick orange skin with the staff, sending just a trickle of power through it. He smiled. It was satisfying to see the little shit jump. “Whoops.”

“You’d better watch it with that thing! You fry me, you’re gonna be in big trouble!”

“I’ll be more careful,” Patrick assured it solemnly, letting the demon see how little he meant that. Time to remind the creature who was in charge. “You’ll be careful, too, won’t you?”

It rubbed its shoulder—which was smoking slightly— and grumbled under its breath.

Patrick turned away, feeling better, and noticed the way the man closest to him was looking at him. As if he was crazy.

Better fix that. He smiled and stroked his index finger along the staff. The man—a cowboy type whose mustard yellow shirt strained over a beer gut—relaxed and smiled back. He said something, but Patrick couldn’t hear it over the pounding music. Patrick shook his head, still smiling, and gestured at his ears.

Before Beer Belly could become a problem, the bartender slid Patrick’s drink to him. Patrick turned to him, his left hand grasping on the staff, his expression pleasant and friendly. “Thanks, asshole.”

The man blinked. He hadn’t heard the words, of course, in all this din. Just the tone, the melodious crawl of Patrick’s voice... augmented by the staff he couldn’t see.

None of these fools saw anything that mattered. Not the demon, not the staff, and only what Patrick allowed them to see of himself. Like right now. As the music crashed to a stop, the dazed bartender stammered, “On the house. Your drink’s on the house, man.”

“You recognized me.” Patrick gave that just a touch of chagrin. “I hope you won’t tell anyone I’m here. Sometimes I need to get away, you know? Relax with *real* people.”

“Hell, no, of course I won’t say anything. Wouldn’t blow your cover for the world, man.”

“Thanks.” Patrick turned his back on the man, wondering idly who he thought Patrick was. Someone powerful, of course. Someone the man privately revered, but who would a turd like that look up to?

Didn’t matter. It was easier to let them make up their own version of who he was. All he had to do was persuade them he was important, someone to admire and serve. He’d always been good at that. Now, with the staff backing him up, he was invincible.

“Invincible,” he murmured into his glass before taking a sip. He liked the sound of the word, the sheer truth of it. The bitch wouldn’t win, and he would be the one to take her down. Personally. His hand slid lovingly along the staff.

The band swung into another song—something about boot-stomping, with a heavy, driving rhythm. Patrick’s mouth tightened. He hated country music. Bunch of losers whining about their lousy lives, that’s all they were.

“So are you gonna fuck the blonde or just do her?”

This time Patrick was able to ignore the mouthy little twit. He continued to look over the crowd, searching for the right one. The staff wasn't picky. It would take whatever he fed it—and it needed feeding often. *She* had done something to it, changed it, while he was in... that place. With Her.

But that was part of the plan. All part of the plan, and it wasn't so bad, after all, though he'd been upset when he realized how often... but a good workman takes care of his tools. That's what his father always said, and what was the staff but a tool? *His* tool.

There. The girl in the red T-shirt and short black skirt. She was looking for some action tonight, wasn't she? Look how she smiled at that cowboy she was dancing with... he'd separate them easily enough. Patrick started for the edge of the dance floor so he could be in place when the current dance ended.

Maybe he'd outlaw country music once he was in charge. *Death to all who worship Kenny Chesney*, he thought, and chuckled.

The girl tossed her head and her hair flew out, a shimmering light brown halo alive with youth, motion, and light. And that, too, was temporary. Quite temporary.

FIVE



FORTY-FIVE minutes after learning she might be possessed, Lily was wearing underwear, a hospital gown, and the *toltoi* on its gold chain. She sat in a hospital bed with the head cranked up, the TV turned off, and a roomful of people.

For a while, it had looked like she'd be thrown out instead of admitted. She hadn't been sure which outcome to root for.

The hospital authorities were prepared to tolerate a certain degree of deviation from scientific methods. Native healers were in vogue—a number of Hollywood types had been singing the praises of shamanistic healing—and Nettie had a quietly powerful reputation among the medical community. But the prospect of a mini-exorcism held within their respectable walls had pushed them past their comfort level.

And that's what it would amount to. Nettie had explained that the best way to find out if Lily had a demon in her was to perform the preliminary steps of an exorcism.

That way they'd be ready to take things to the next level if the answer was yes.

So Nettie had requested a private room for “a more elaborate procedure, which requires privacy,” without specifying the nature of the procedure. No point in ruffling feathers if they didn't have to. Unfortunately, a nurse had overheard them discussing the situation. She'd tattled to the head of the ER, who'd called in the hospital's senior vice president.

Lily wasn't sure if the man was afraid that she might really be possessed and wreak havoc in his fiefdom,

or that the press would find out about a purported exorcism and the hospital would look foolish. She suspected the latter. A lot of people considered exorcism about as relevant as those old maps with sea monsters in the corners. Sure, demons existed, and every now and then some nutcase managed to summon one, but the gates to hell had been closed for centuries.

Possession? Get real.

Between Lily's badge, Nettie's professionalism, and Rule's name dropping—his clan retained a prestigious law firm—they'd prevailed over the bureaucracy. Just before Lily was moved to a regular room on the third floor, Karonski and Cynna Weaver had shown up. And Nettie had gone to the chapel to pray.

Prayer was a key component of the ritual, apparently. Lily wasn't sure how she felt about that. She frowned at the sheet in her lap. It wasn't as if she had anything against religion. But it was slippery stuff, wasn't it? One person believed this-and-such, another believed that-and-such, and before you knew it they were having a nice little war over their differences. She didn't like depending on something so hard to pin down.

"Is your shoulder hurting?" Rule asked.

He sat in a chair beside the bed, holding her left hand. Lily quickly dropped her other hand. She'd been rubbing her shoulder again, the way you'll pick at a scab or run your tongue over the place a tooth used to be. Not because it helps, but because something isn't right. "Not really."

"You aren't possessed."

He said it so calmly, as if he were completely certain. She grimaced. "I don't think I am, either. Magic can't get inside me, so how could a demon?" And yet she'd felt something around the wound. Something that shouldn't have been there.

"Probably it couldn't," Karonski said comfortably from where he sprawled in a chair by the window, digging into a bag of Fritos. The blinds were pulled up, letting the tattered darkness of a city night peer in. "We'll find out for sure soon."

Karonski was in shirtsleeves, having draped his jacket over the back of his chair. Maybe he'd been too warm. Or maybe he'd wanted to have quick access to the .357 in his shoulder holster in case Lily suddenly turned green and started ripping off people's arms.

Cynna paced. They could have snagged another chair for her, but she didn't want one. A restless sort, Lily supposed. Not comfortable with waiting.

She could relate. "I see why you can't take my word for my condition. But I'd know, right? If I were possessed, I'd be able to tell."

"Maybe." Karonski dug into the bottom of the bag, frowned, and came up with crumbs.

"I'd know," Rule said. His hand tightened on hers.

"Maybe," Karonski said again, and popped another chip in his mouth.

"I got the demon's scent from the door. If it was in Lily, I'd smell it on her."

“Yeah?” Cynna paused. “What does it smell like?”

“Cloves and car exhaust. Sort of.”

Karonski shook his head. “If your sniff test was reliable, Dr. Two Horses would have said so.”

Lily didn't think Rule had been talking just about scent, but they couldn't discuss the mate bond in front of Cynna. Would it alert Rule to an alien presence inside Lily? She didn't know. She didn't think he did, either.

She looked at Cynna. “No opinion?”

“Plenty of them, but not about possession.” She reached the closed door, turned, and kept moving. “I don't know much about that.”

“I thought Dizzies were into demonology.”

“Some are.” She paused by the window, frowning out at the darkness as if she disapproved of it. “But most of demonology is a matter of finding enough names for a demon to summon it and then control it if it shows up. Exorcism's a whole 'nother bag. That's a job for religion.”

Religion. The subject kept popping up lately. Most noticeably with the Church of the Redeemed, aka the Azá, and their former leader, the Most Reverend Patrick Harlowe. He'd tried to sacrifice Lily and Rule to the Azá's goddess. But there was Rule's mysterious Lady, too—the one he believed had Gifted the two of them with the mate bond. The one who, his legends said, had created the lupi a few millennia ago to defeat the Azá's goddess.

It was enough to make Lily's head pound. “I thought the Dizzies were a sort of religion. Ah—is it okay to call you that?” Belatedly she'd remembered that “Dizzies” was a mangling of the original Swahili.

Cynna shrugged. “That's what everyone called us. I'll admit I dabbled a bit in demonology in my young and stupid days. That's how I could recognize the traces left by your demon.”

“Not *my* demon.”

“Whatever. The point is, it's gone.” She scowled at Karonski in his chair by the window. “This whole rigmorole is so not necessary. I picked up two of the demon's names.”

Karonski crumpled up his chip bag and tossed it in the general direction of the trash. He missed. “Not enough to Find it, you said.”

“No, but I could sure enough tell if it was in the room with me!”

“I believe you, already. But there are procedures for this sort of thing.”

That was news to Lily. But she hadn't made her way halfway through the pile of reading she'd been given on FBI and MCD resources, regulations, and procedures. “And yet you delayed your flight.”

He looked at her, his eyes gentler than usual. “If I'd left, there wouldn't be a senior agent to oversee the procedure. Can't very well leave you in charge of a major investigation until you've been documented as

clean.”

Okay, that made sense. Lily drew a steadying breath. She wished Nettie would hurry up so they could get this over with.

“At least,” Rule said, “we can make a guess about what they were up to.”

She nodded. Her head was feeling better. At first she’d thought that was Nettie’s doing, but that was foolish. Magic—even the good stuff, like healing magic—couldn’t affect her, so it must be getting better on its own. ‘They sent a demon to possess me. That required privacy, so someone supplied a bolt for the door and the demon zapped it into place.’ The S.O.C. officers had confirmed that the bolt had been freshly installed.

“Makes sense,” Cynna said. “The woman you followed was the demon, form-changed to look like Helen. It knocked you out and did... whatever.”

Lily looked out the window. From fifty yards away two windows stared back, one lit, one dark. Like two great eyes frozen in mid-blink. What had the demon done while she was unconscious?

She didn’t feel different. There was no sense of an alien presence in her body or her mind, none of the struggle she’d seen in Karonski when he’d fought against the mental tampering inflicted by Helen and her staff.

And yet she’d felt something when she touched her shoulder. Something that shouldn’t have been possible. Lily’s fingers twitched in Rule’s grip as she thought of the odd, slick feel of her wound. Orangey.

She looked at Karonski. “You know what’s required for a demon to take possession?”

He was brushing crumbs off his shirt. “There are plenty of theories, most of ‘em contradictory. But because of an incident seven years ago, MCD regs for dealing with demons limit involvement to persons of faith. Doesn’t seem to matter what faith, so long as the agent has one.”

Seven years ago... it took a moment for Lily to place the reference, but the story had been sensational enough to stick. “You mean the shoot-out down in New Orleans? That FBI agent shot by his own team—he really was possessed?” Someone had leaked that to the press, but very few had bought it. Too outlandish.

“Oh, yeah. The powers-that-be didn’t want to alarm the public with the facts.”

“And this guy who was possessed wasn’t... um, a believer?”

“Catholic, but lapsed.” Karonski stretched out his legs and laced his fingers over his middle. “Way lapsed. My personal take is that he was more vulnerable than most because he’d lost his faith, but that’s just a guess.” He shrugged. “MCD policy is just a guess, too.”

“What *do* you know?” she asked, exasperated.

The door swung open. “Proximity is a factor,” Nettie said crisply. “The demon must be in close physical proximity to its victim. Possession doesn’t happen at a distance.”

“How did you do that?” Lily demanded. “Rule can hear me from two rooms away. You can’t.”

Rule smiled. “You were a little loud.”

And a little more rattled than she wanted to admit, dammit. Lily took a slow breath, reaching for calm. There was something different about Nettie. She was wearing the same lab coat and jeans. Her hair was braided instead of hanging down in a fuzzy cloud, but Lily had seen it that way before. So what...

“Another thing,” Karonski said. “Demons can get into animals, especially birds. I’ve been on a couple cases involving possessed birds.” He shrugged. “Don’t know why. Maybe birds are easy for them.”

“If you’ve dealt with possession before, why is Nettie doing this?” Lily glanced at Nettie. “No offense.”

Nettie just smiled.

Karonski shook his head. “I didn’t say I’ve performed an exorcism. I haven’t. When an animal’s involved, the procedure is different. Demons can’t hide themselves as well in animals as they do in humans, so we can confirm possession pretty easily. Then we kill the animal. That forces the demon out so we can kill or banish it.”

Oh. That was different, all right.

“Another thing,” Rule said. “They can’t possess cats. Or lupi.”

“Cats?” Lily couldn’t see behind the surfaces of his eyes. They were dark and glossy in the glare of the fluorescents, reflecting the overhead light and hiding everything else. But he looked tired. “You’ve been talking to Max.”

Nettie snorted. “I take Max’s pronouncements with a whole lick of salt, but the part about lupi is right.”

“Who’s Max?” Cynna asked.

“A friend,” Rule said.

“He owns Club Hell.” It was Nettie’s face, Lily decided. Or maybe just the eyes. They seemed to hold... more. Which was a silly thing to think. What did she mean, more? More what?

Nettie nodded at Cynna. “I need you to stand over by Abel, please.”

Karonski’s eyebrows shot up. “Lupi can’t be possessed?”

“No. The Lady made them that way.” Nettie approached Lily’s bed. “It’s time for the rest of you to be quiet.”

“This is a religious belief, then? One of your legends?”

Rule answered. “It’s fact, though I don’t expect you to believe that.”

“Talk later,” Nettie said, “or you’ll have to leave. Rule—”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Stand on the other side of the bed, then. Don’t touch her until we’re finished.” She took Rule’s place by Lily’s bed. “How are you doing?”

It seemed a genuine question, not mere courtesy. And her eyes, those huge, dark eyes... darker than Rule’s, they were, that deep, bottomless brown people sometimes call black. “I’m okay. I don’t know what to expect. Have you done this before?”

“I have, yes. Twice. Possession is as rare as true amnesia, so my experience is unusual. The first time was with a chicken.”

Lily grinned. “A possessed chicken. That’s... I don’t know. Like Bunnacula, who drains the juice from carrots. Just not scary.”

“The chicken had killed two dogs and attacked a child. The other time was an adult man. He—or rather, the demon in him—tried to kill me.”

That cut off any mirth.

“He couldn’t. It wasn’t allowed. I tell you this so you won’t worry. You and I will be protected.”

How? Or maybe she meant, by whom?

Nettie smiled as if she’d heard the unspoken question and found it amusing. She sat on the bed by Lily’s hip. Her eyes were so dark. Knowing. “This won’t be like a Catholic exorcism. My people don’t wrestle with a demon spiritually. We connect with our gods through the earth. Demons aren’t of our world, so we call on the powers of this realm to expel the intruder.”

Okay, that made sense. Sort of. “I don’t worship your gods.”

“You are of the earth, so you are theirs whether you acknowledge them or not. They do require your permission, however. You must willingly surrender to the ritual.”

Lily considered that. “I’m not much at surrender, but I want this to happen. Does intention count?”

“It does. I have your permission to continue?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, then. Be calm.” Nettie certainly was. Her eyes were so serene, yet vast. Vast enough to hold answers to questions Lily had always wondered about, and maybe some she’d never dreamed of asking. “We’re entirely safe. You can relax. Rest.”

“I’m not...” *Not nervous*, she was going to say, but it seemed rude to finish the sentence. Nettie had started chanting—low, quiet, a soothing repetition of words Lily didn’t know.

The sound made her sleepy. She fought it. She wanted to look for those answers, the ones hinted at in Nettie’s eyes... *the same kind of answers the stars are always trying to give us*, she thought, *when we look up and up at them*. So high above, speaking in gradual whispers about time, about their own flaming hearts and the endless cold that lies between...

“Wake up,” someone said softly. “Time to wake up, Lily.”

Everything had changed between one blink and the next. Nettie stood instead of sitting on the bed. Karonski was on his feet, too, shrugging into his jacket. Cynna wasn't even in the room.

Rule was where he had been, though. Beside her.

Lily scowled at Nettie. “I was asleep. You put me to sleep!”

Nettie smiled. “I put you *in* sleep, yes. With you out of the picture, I could find out if anyone else was home.”

“You're finished?”

“All done, and you're not possessed.”

Rule laid a hand on her arm. She turned to see him grinning at her. “The ritual proved to be a major anticlimax. Nettie chanted, you dozed off, she asked some questions, and no one answered.”

Lily was disgruntled. It didn't seem right. After all that tension and buildup, she hadn't even been around for... well, for whatever had happened.

Or hadn't happened, and that was what mattered. Lily caught herself before she could start rubbing her shoulder again. She reached for Rule's hand instead. “All right, then. Everyone clear out. I want to go home.”

SIX



One and a quarter million people worked, ate, slept, loved, and fought in San Diego's four-hundred-square-mile sprawl. It was never quiet, never fully dark in the city. Tonight, overcast had turned the sky into a dirty brown bowl that sealed in the city lights and shut out the night. Rule couldn't see the moon.

He still felt her, of course. The moon's deep, slow chimes sounded in his blood and bones, growing louder when she waxed toward full, as she was now. But he missed seeing her changing face. He missed the stars and the spangled depths of night. And he missed being four-footed. There'd been little opportunity to run the hills in his other form.

If he couldn't run on all four feet, he might as well find other ways to enjoy speed. The city's streets might not be empty, but at midnight they weren't congested. Rule considered that permission to ignore the speed limit.

He expected to be rebuked by his law-abiding passenger. But when he pulled onto 1-5 and brought the Mercedes up to a comfortable ninety miles an hour, Lily remained still and silent, her weapon in her lap.

She'd retrieved it from his trunk as soon as they reached his car. That hadn't surprised him. She'd be feeling the need for it tonight. And she'd be right.

But she wasn't asking questions. Questions were Lily's way of sorting the world into shapes she could deal with, and she'd been tossed some pretty odd curves in the past few hours.

Women were complicated creatures, he reminded himself. Any man who thought he had one figured out simply wasn't paying attention, and his *nadia* was more complex than most. The mate bond didn't deliver understanding along with the physical tie. That was up to the two of them. He'd be foolish to fret over her silence when he had so many more concrete dangers to worry about.

She was tired, after all. He wasn't, but he was still too churned up for sleep to sound remotely possible. Lily was probably craving it by now, though. An injured body needed sleep.

He thought of seeing her sprawled on the floor, unconscious, and anger burned through his blood, hot and vivid. He wanted to howl—and then tear out someone's throat.

“You trying to dig a new grip into that steering wheel?”

“Hmm? Oh.” He flexed his hands on the wheel, forcing them to relax. “How's your head?”

“Better.” She gave it a little shake. “A lot better. More than makes sense.”

“You may notice some improvement in your shoulder, too. Nettie left you in sleep for a while after the ritual was over.”

Now her head swiveled sharply. “What do you mean?”

“You know what ‘in sleep’ means.”

“More or less. It's a healing trance, magically induced. I know she said something about that, but I thought she was just using a term I was familiar with to describe something similar.”

“No, she meant just what she said. You were in sleep.”

“But I couldn't be! That's magic, and magic doesn't affect me.”

So that's what was bothering her. “Normally she wouldn't be able to put you in sleep, but for this she was backed by spiritual energies, not magic. Which may have given your healing an extra boost, by the way.”

“But that doesn't make sense! It's... I can *feel* Nettie's Gift when I touch her, so what she does is magic.”

“What does Nettie's Gift feel like?” he asked, curious.

She made a vague gesture, palm up. “Sort of like crumbly dirt or fern leaves—basic, earthy, intricate. The point is, she uses magic. Even if she gets it through prayer, it's still the same stuff.”

“Apparently not, since she was able to put you in sleep.”

She frowned at the glittering worm of taillights ahead. “At first I was thinking... wondering... what if my being a sensitive messed things up? She thought I was clean because no one answered, but maybe my Gift kept her ritual from working. But that doesn’t make sense, either, because she *did* put me in sleep. Only I don’t see how she could.”

He made a soft, wordless exclamation and reached for her hand. “You’re still worried about it. Lily, there’s no trace of the demonic in you.”

“I know. I know that, and yet I feel something. When I touch my shoulder, there’s still a trace of that orangey texture. The demon did something to me, and I don’t see how it could. I need to know that, and I need to know what it did.”

What could he say? He knew she wasn’t tainted, but his certainty was intuitive. She wanted rational.

He tried anyway. “Even if a demon could somehow get behind your shields, or whatever it is that makes you a sensitive—”

“One did.”

“Maybe. You don’t know what that orange feeling means. But even if being a sensitive didn’t protect you, the mate bond would. You’re touched by the Lady.”

At first she didn’t say anything. A quick glance told him she was frowning hard, as if he’d presented her with a delicate knot to unravel. “I realize you believe that,” she said at last. “But Karonski said people of faith were protected. I’m not of your faith, so your Lady’s protection wouldn’t extend to me.”

She was being so careful to sound respectful of his beliefs. It annoyed him. “The Lady is real, Lily. As real as her adversary—and I know you believe in Her existence.”

“The one we can’t name. Right. She’s real enough.” Lily’s fingers drummed an impatient tattoo on the crumpled chiffon covering her thigh. “Stipulating that your Lady is real doesn’t mean that what you believe about Her is fact.”

“We don’t claim to know everything about the Lady, but she’s spoken to the clans many times down through the centuries. We can be fairly confident we’ve got the basics right.”

“Hmm.”

She didn’t even ask. She assumed he was talking about some fuzzy business of prophets and faith where logic need not apply, and she didn’t bother to ask what he meant. “Don’t be so bloody dismissive of anything you didn’t read about in school.”

“There’s a difference between myth and documented history.”

“Our oral history isn’t myth. Whether you believe it or not, when the clans are in danger, the Lady speaks to us or gives us aid in other ways.” Maliciously he added, “She uses one of the Chosen.”

She swiveled to stare at him, horrified. “You are not saying what I think you’re saying.”

He smiled. It was not a nice smile.

At the *gens amplexi* two weeks ago, when Lily had been made officially Nokolai, she'd received a fervent welcome. So many of the clan had been eager to talk to the new Chosen. To touch her. She'd been baffled by the attention, and he hadn't explained. He'd been pretty sure she'd be appalled.

He'd been right.

She swallowed. "You mean they thought... they think... good God."

"They're hoping the Lady will help us through you."

"You told them different, didn't you?" It was more demand than question.

"What could I tell them? I don't know the Lady's purpose."

"Well, you can't possibly think I'm some kind of mouthpiece for your goddess, some prophet or... what's it called? Avatar."

"The Lady doesn't use avatars."

He could almost hear her teeth grinding. "Pick another word for it, then. Good God. I don't even have the language to discuss this. It's obvious I—hey! You missed the turnoff."

"No, I didn't."

For several long heartbeats she didn't respond. When she did, her voice was tight. "I'm not going to your apartment."

"They knew enough about you to get to you at your sister's wedding. They for damned sure know where you live."

"Rule—"

"For God's sake, Lily, be reasonable! You've got a decent lock on your door, but that won't stop someone from breaking that nice, big window in the living room and stepping inside. I can protect you from most things, but if that demon—"

"I haven't asked you to protect me. If you—"

"They tried and failed to possess you. Who's to say what they'll try next? If the Azá's goddess is behind this—and we'd better assume She is—She is not one to give up on revenge. Killing you would be the easiest of their options. Benedict sent a couple of his men to my place for extra security tonight, and that's where we're going."

"Fine. Great. But if you think I'm going to trail bodyguards around while conducting an investigation, you need a reality check. And I can't stay at your place tonight. If you'd just—"

"Dammit, Lily, this is not the time to argue about where we live! Or whether we're living together at all, or just getting together every night. Do you have any idea how strong demons are?" he demanded, swerving around a slow-moving van. "You're protected from a magical assault, but that doesn't help much if the demon decides to rip off your head."

“Would you slow down? Your reflexes may be super-sized, but the drivers you’re passing have to get by with plain old human response times. You could scare one of them off the road or into another car.”

He glanced at the speedometer. His lips tightened as he forced himself to ease off on the accelerator. He’d passed a hundred without noticing.

“You also need to turn around. And listen. I’ve been trying to tell you—”

“What? What kind of lame-ass reason could you possibly have to refuse to make yourself as safe as possible?”

“Dirty Harry.”

Rule swallowed what he’d been about to say and used his breath for cursing her cat—her blasted, be-damned, antisocial, wolf-hating beast of a cat they’d left outside

- because the infernal creature had been off doing stupid cat things when they left for the wedding.

But Lily had accepted responsibility for the animal, and you didn’t abandon a dependent when there was danger. Rule understood that, however little he liked it at the moment. The neighbor Lily occasionally asked to feed her cat was out of town. No one else had a key, and it was after midnight.

He ran out of ways to describe the beast shortly after they left the interstate.

“Feel better?” she asked dryly.

“No.” He began winding his way back toward her apartment. “Dogs make sense. They understand hierarchy and the need to cooperate. They come when you call them. A cat though—a cat will take your number and get back to you. Maybe. If he’s in a good mood.” Not that he’d ever seen Harry in a good mood. “Why couldn’t you have gotten a dog?”

“At what point do you think I had a choice? Now that I think about it, being claimed by a cat isn’t that different from the mate bond.”

“There’s no similarity at all.”

She just looked at him.

He took a deep breath, trying to get his temper under control. “We’ll feed Harry and take him back to my apartment.”

“You keep forgetting the asking thing.”

“So?” He was being unreasonable. That was all right. He didn’t *feel* reasonable.

She surprised him. He hadn’t expected her to pout—Lily wasn’t a pouter—but he did think he’d get an argument, maybe an explosion. Instead she sighed, unclicked her safety belt, and levered herself onto the console separating the seats.

Automatically he stretched an arm behind her, steadying her. “What in the—”

“Shut up, Rule.” She leaned against him.

It couldn't be comfortable for her, perching on the console that way. It wasn't as high as some, but if she'd been bigger than a bite she wouldn't have fit.

Her head was level with his. Normally that only happened when they were in bed. He could smell her hair— she'd recently switched to an apple-scented shampoo he liked—and the musky, indescribable scent that was Lily.

His arm relaxed around her. Her upper arm pressed against his, and the calf of her left leg rested along his right leg. She was warm. So warm.

What the hell. He'd give her suggestion a try and shut up.

For several blocks he drove one-handed, in silence and more slowly. His arm was no substitute for a seat belt.

Gradually his thoughts began to slow, too. He found a measure of silence, the inside sort. Like listening to the wind or letting the slow pulse of the earth seep up through his feet, this was a quiet that soothed even as it made him pay attention to things he'd wanted to ignore.

She was so warm and welcome against him, and he could lose her.

Nearby, a dog barked. A couple blocks away someone honked. He passed dark houses, closed businesses, an old Chevy with the bass blasting. There was the purr of the engine, the shush of tires on concrete, and the quiet susurration of her breathing.

Could she hear his breaths? He was never sure how much humans heard. In his other form, he'd have been able to pick out the beating of her heart, but his hearing wasn't that acute while two-legged.

Of course, in his other form, the sound and scent and feel of her wouldn't have affected him the way it was now. He was aware of his own pulse now, the sound of it in his ears, the heat and heaviness in his groin. Need brushed him with heavy wings that fluttered between desire and panic.

He could lose her.

When he turned onto the street that dead-ended at her apartment complex, she spoke quietly. “I'm scared for you, too.”

His hand tightened at her waist. “If you'd go to Clan-home—”

“I can't hunt down Harlowe if I'm locked up somewhere.”

“I know. I know, but that doesn't make this any easier.”

“What do you want me to tell you?”

That she'd quit her job, stay at Clanhome, let him make sure she was safe. That she'd... be someone other than who and what she was: the one for him. The only one, now and for the rest of his life. And a cop.

His instinct was to protect. So was hers. This was going to make their life together interesting. “Nothing,” he said. “There’s nothing you need to say. I’ll deal with it.”

He tried not to think about his brother. There was no point in going there, no point in remembering what Benedict’s Chosen had put him through. Lily was nothing like Claire, thank God. But she was human. So easily damaged. He couldn’t help remembering Benedict’s wild grief, the way it had ripped sanity from his brother like skin ripped from the body, leaving the insides exposed, bloody and dripping.

Gods, the sound of Benedict’s howl...

He hadn’t understood. He’d been very young, of course, when Claire died. But even as an adult he hadn’t grasped how deep his brother’s grief had cut, though he’d seen the effects of that wounding.

Now he’d had a glimpse. For an instant, one tiny slice of a second, when he’d seen Lily’s body on that bathroom floor...

“Don’t *do* that!”

“What?”

“Your eyes have gone all weird. Like you’re about to change or something.”

His breath hitched as he caught himself. Gods, yes, he’d been slipping, sliding toward the beast without noticing. Like some crazed adolescent, losing control through sheer, bloody inattention. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I can’t believe I... don’t worry. I’m not going to lose control.”

“Just don’t turn furry while you’re behind the wheel.” She brought her leg back over the console and slid back into her seat.

He missed her immediately. How absurd.

They’d reached her apartment complex—though that was too grand a name for the U-shaped, stucco huddle. It had begun life in the thirties as a cut-rate motel and hadn’t been improved by the Pepto Bismol paint job inflicted on it by some deranged manager. The exterior was well lit, at least—good from a security standpoint, if not aesthetically.

“How is it that you can always find a parking space?” she asked as he pulled into a spot directly in front of the exterior stairs that led to her unit.

“It’s not hard at this hour.” He climbed out.

The one advantage to Lily’s living quarters was the location—only two blocks from the ocean. The air was heavy with the sea’s complex perfume. Rule filled his lungs with it.

As usual, she got out without waiting for him to get her door, her unholstered automatic in her good hand. “That’s not it. You always... what?” she said crossly as his lips twitched. “What’s so funny?”

“Your weapon makes an interesting fashion accessory.”

She glanced at the gun in her hand, at her wreck of a dress, shrugged, and started for the stairs. Then

stopped. “All right, all right,” she told the huge gray beast twining around her ankles as he voiced his opinion of the late hour. “The food’s upstairs, Harry. If you want to eat, you have to let me move.”

“He was worried about you.”

“He was worried about his dinner. Hey!”

Rule had passed her, moving at an easy lope that was roughly as fast as a human could run. He had no intention of allowing her to go in first, but she was likely to argue about that, given a chance. “You’re rearguard tonight.”

Her voice followed him up the stairs. “Just get out of the way if there’s something in there that needs shooting.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” There was no sign of forced entry. And Harry, whose nose was keener than Rule’s at the moment, was impatient to go in, his tail twitching, obviously unalarmed. Rule put his key in the top lock, then the next one, and swung the door open.

A smell that didn’t belong had him dropping into a fighting crouch—then straightening as his brain caught up and identified it. “Bloody hell. What are you doing here?”

SEVEN



LILY’S heartbeat jumped when she saw Rule tense. She rushed up the last few stairs, weapon ready. Then he relaxed and asked someone what they were doing here.

“Good question,” she said, slowing to a walk. Dammit, she was too tired for yet another adrenaline cocktail. Her heart was still pounding, but she’d hit shaky soon enough. She just hoped she didn’t fall flat on her face. “There’s also who, how, and why, but I’m tempted to skip them in favor of ‘good night.’”

“I’ll do my best to get to ‘good night’ quickly.” Rule stepped inside, and Lily had one of her questions answered.

There was only one chair in her small, spare living room. Her unexpected visitor wasn’t using it. Instead, he sat on the floor pillow by the coffee table, playing with the air between his fingers. He wore a dark blue shirt, collarless and only half buttoned. His feet were bare, and his cinnamon-colored hair had gone too long without a trim. With his head bent, it concealed a face she knew to be heartbreakingly gorgeous.

Cullen looked up. “Hello, luv. That is one ugly dress. The blood yours?”

Lily sighed. “I know I locked the door, yet here you are. In my living room. Uninvited.”

“Ah, well, I thought you wouldn’t want me to wait out on the cold concrete, and I was sure I didn’t want me to. I’ve been here for...” His fingers paused. “Good Lord, it must be after midnight.” He looked her

up and down with brilliant blue eyes she wasn't entirely used to. Three weeks ago, his eye sockets had been scabbed-over hollows. "Looks like you've had quite an evening. Rough sex?"

She growled low in her throat and started for the kitchen. "Come on, Harry." And almost humiliated herself when Rule scooped her up in his arms, swallowing a startled shriek at the last second. "Don't do that when I'm armed."

"She's got a point," Cullen said.

Rule deposited her in the oversize armchair. "You can disarm now. I'll take care of Harry and then get rid of Cullen. And before you blow up at me," he added, dropping to crouch in front of her, "remember that I'm used to being yelled at for my high-handed behavior."

Cullen chuckled. "He means the Rho. The old man's healing, but it takes longer at his age. Makes him great fun to be around. He ripped Rule a new one last week for following Nettie's instructions about the Council meeting."

Rule had told her he had clan business to attend to last Thursday. He hadn't said it was a Council meeting. He didn't have to tell her everything, but she was clan now, wasn't she? Shouldn't he have told her?

She looked at the eyes holding steady on her own—dark eyes, not bright blue like his friend's, set in a face that was striking but imperfect. The nose was too narrow, a little too long. The lips were too thin, and the ears... Rule's left ear was set higher than his right.

Funny. She hadn't noticed that before.

She leaned over to place her weapon carefully on the floor beside the chair, then straightened so she could trace one imperfectly placed ear. Feelings tumbled through her like an acrobatic troupe—bouncing, rolling, piling up on top of each other in precarious balance. And she realized she was smiling. "I'd have to come up with something pretty impressive to compete with one of your father's rants. I don't think I'm up to it."

"You're impressive." He leaned in to give her a light kiss. "At all times."

"Very sweet," Cullen said. "And generally I'd enjoy watching your foreplay, but I did come here for a reason. I'd appreciate it if you could leave off the billing and cooing for a bit."

"I'm too tired to kill him," Lily said. "You do it."

"After I feed Harry," Rule said, straightening. "Who isn't much of a watch cat, apparently."

Cullen shook his head without looking up from the empty space between his hands. "Don't worry about Harry. I already fed him."

Sure enough, instead of glaring at them from the kitchen doorway, Harry sat by the coffee table, staring at Cullen.

"What did you feed him?" Lily asked. Harry was supposed to be on a diet, though the cat disagreed with his vet about the necessity.

“Ham. You had some in the fridge that he seemed to like. He ate enough of it, anyway, before going back out. I had a sandwich, too.” He paused to frown at the cat. “Stop that.”

Rule shook his head, bent, and scooped Lily up again so he could settle in the chair with her. It was a chair and a half, so there was room for both of them... as long as she sat with her legs draped across his lap.

That was the way he arranged her, at least. “We need to have a talk about this new habit you’ve acquired of moving me around to suit yourself.”

“I promise to let you move me around later.”

Her mind immediately offered an image of one possible arrangement of Rule’s long, beautiful body, and suddenly her body was a welcome place to be in spite of its aches.

He knew, of course. If nothing else, her scent would tell him. His lips turned up, but his eyes remained dark and serious as he tucked her hair behind her ear. “When you’ve rested, *nadia*,” he said softly.

She lifted her eyebrows. “We’ll see.” Then she looked at Cullen and sighed. “Get to the point. You claimed you had one.”

“Half a moment. Bloody interfering beast,” Cullen muttered, wiggling his little ringer as if he was tugging on something. “I used to have a cat as a familiar,” he added, as if that explained things. “They can’t resist putting in their two cents... there.”

“Cullen,” she said, exasperated, “what are you *doing*?”

He looked up. His quick grin took him from annoying nutcase to heartthrob. “I’ve been messing with some loose sorcéri while I waited for you. You’ve rather a lot drifting around, you know, considering there’s no node nearby. Perhaps the ocean... but you don’t want a theoretical discussion right now. Want to see?”

Without waiting for an answer, he tilted his hands outward, muttered something—and he was holding what looked for all the world like a tennis ball made of wiggly, glowing worms.

A second later it flickered and passed back to invisibility. Lily was impressed in spite of herself. “Those are sorcéri? I didn’t know you could make that stuff show up for us nonsorcerous types.”

“New trick.” He looked pleased with himself. “I haven’t figured out how to make it stable, so the usefulness is limited. Makes a pretty show, though, doesn’t it?”

Rule didn’t sound nearly as pleased. “I thought it was dangerous to deal with them directly instead of through a spell.”

“These are pretty weak. And I am pretty good. *Ciao*,” he said, and clapped his hands, apparently doing away with the energies he’d gathered. The cat turned his head as if watching something invisible drift into the corner by the coat closet.

“Cats see them, too?” Lily asked.

Cullen shrugged. “Some do. That’s why so many witches take cats for familiars.”

She chewed on that a moment. “And what you did just now—you changed something about the sorcéri, right? You did it to them, not to us.”

Cullen’s eyebrows went up. “You don’t usually ask stupid questions. Aside from how annoyed Rule would be with me if I did something to him magically without his consent, directly changing people is damned tricky. I confess I’m not up to it. Neither is anyone else in this realm, of course, unless we’re entertaining a faerie lord unaware. And you’re immune anyway, which brings us back to the stupid question part. What’s going on?”

“Lily was attacked by a demon,” Rule said flatly. “It may have left some sort of residue behind.”

Cullen went very still. Only his eyes moved, cutting to her.

“I’m not possessed,” she said, irritated. “Nettie checked me out. But it left something on me. It shouldn’t have been able to, but it did.”

“You’re all right?”

“Aside from being pestered in my own home when I just want to go to bed, yes.”

A smile spread over his face. “This is marvelous. Bloody marvelous.”

Lily let her head drop back on Rule’s shoulder. “How do I make him go away?”

“Sorry.” Cullen flowed to his feet, looking not at all sorry, and began to pace. Cullen was a dancer. An exotic dancer, actually, otherwise known as a male stripper, but however annoying he could be, he was a pleasure to watch in motion, the most innately graceful person Lily had ever seen. “You know what a selfish sod I am. It’s just that now you won’t be able to turn me down.”

“For what?”

Rule answered before Cullen could. “He wants to be part of the official hunt for Harlowe.”

She lifted her head and met Rule’s eyes. She’d guessed that Cullen might be doing some searching of his own. She’d wondered if Rule knew... and hadn’t asked. Apparently he had known and hadn’t told her.

Their relationship posed some tricky questions of loyalty for both of them. She looked at Cullen. “Why?”

“The staff, of course. I have to find and destroy it.”

A pang of pity held her silent. Cullen had suffered terribly after being taken prisoner by the mad Helen. Because he had some sort of sorcerous mental shield, Helen had been unable to use the staff to take over his mind—which she’d mightily resented.

His eyes had been put out. He’d been locked in a glass cage, taken out occasionally in shackles to be questioned. He’d been beaten and threatened repeatedly with death.

Lily didn’t blame Cullen for hating, but his hatred made him unreliable. Even if sorcery weren’t illegal, she couldn’t have used him. “I can’t do that. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not talking about anything official. Make me a consultant, like Rule. You need me.” He moved closer. “I can help you Find it.”

“I’ve a Finder on the team now.”

His eyebrows went up. “Assuming she’s any good—”

“Wait a minute. Why did you say ‘she’?”

“Playing the odds. Almost all Finders are female.” While she was still absorbing that, he went on persuasively, “Finders need something concrete to fix on, and you don’t have a piece of that abomination of a staff for her to handle, do you? So she’ll have to try for Harlowe, and he’s protected.”

“What do you mean?” she asked sharply.

“I’ve scried for him. He’s shielded in some way, most likely by the staff itself.”

If he was right, Cynna wasn’t going to be the case-breaker Lily had been hoping for. “If a Finder can’t locate him, how could you?”

His smile reminded her of Harry. Smug. “He isn’t shielded one hundred percent of the time, and unlike Finding, scrying isn’t tied to the moment.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“With scrying, the images come from elementals. Water’s past, earth’s present, air is future, and fire scrambles them all up. I scry with fire, which means fire elementals, which means I may get images from past, present, or future.” He paused. “Two days ago, I saw Harlowe in the flames. *Without* the staff.”

“Two days ago.” Anger hit with a punch of renewed energy. She swung her feet to the floor and sat up straight. “It took you long enough to mention it.”

“You’re pissed,” he observed. “But why am I obliged to keep you filled in, yet you don’t have to tell me anything? And don’t wave your badge at me. You can’t compel me to divulge information the law doesn’t recognize as valid.”

“I can,” Rule said evenly. “And will, if necessary. Lily was attacked tonight.”

For a long moment the two men looked at each other without speaking. Some kind of complex message seemed to pass between them. Finally Cullen smiled. “Happily, you won’t have to. Like I said, that’s why I’m here. It took me two days because I needed to do a spot of research to be sure of my conclusions. Turns out my initial impression was correct. I saw Harlowe in hell.”

Lily blinked. “I thought. . . when you said flames, I thought you meant your scrying flame. If he’s in hell, he’s beyond our reach.”

“Purge your mind of theological cartoons.” Cullen headed toward the door, where Harry waited, tail twitching.

“I did mean my scrying flame, not the brimstone sort. Hell isn’t a travel destination for dead sinners. At

least, this one isn't." He reached for the door. "I make no claims about the other sort."

This hell? The other sort? How many hells were there? Lily rubbed her temple. "Harry isn't supposed to go out this late."

"No?" Cullen quirked an eyebrow at the cat. "Sorry. Her door, her rules. At any rate, hell—or call it Dis, if you prefer," he said, coming back to sit on the coffee table beside her laptop. "That's what the natives call the place, according to a couple of my sources. I wonder whether they borrowed the name from Dante or inspired him? Anyway, Dis is the demon realm."

"And you say Harlowe is there?"

"Is, was, or will be, give or take a week or so. It ties in nicely with the demon attack, doesn't it?"

"It sure as hell..." Lily winced. That phrase was altogether too apt. "How could you tell where he was?"

"Demons, luv. I saw a couple of demons with him."

"We thought *She* might be there," Rule said. "It's the closest realm to ours, and we know She tried to open a gate to hell. Maybe She brought Harlowe to Her when that attempt failed."

Cullen's grin flashed. "Due to our brilliant heroics. I didn't get the idea Harlowe was Her devoted follower, though. More of an opportunist. It seems unlikely She'd exert herself much on his behalf. Could be he got his hands on the staff, and it reverted to Her when you"—he nodded at Lily—"killed Helen. He got taken along for the ride."

When you killed Helen... her hands gripping that blond head, pounding it against the cave's stony floor... The cold fingers of guilt or superstition crawled along Lily's insides, leaving a slimy trail in their wake. She shook her head. Dammit, she wasn't going to blame herself for doing what she'd had to do. "So you think Harlowe could have ended up in hell accidentally?"

"Could be." He waved a hand dismissively. "Which doesn't tell us much, and we're getting off track."

"And you're a single-track kind of guy?"

"I won't argue." He leaned forward. A shiny stone on a leather cord around his neck slipped out of his shirt.

"Is that a diamond?" Lily asked, surprised. Cullen wasn't exactly rolling in money. Rule said he spent almost everything on scraps of old spellbooks and such.

"Synthetic. Pretty thing, isn't it?" Cullen tucked it back inside his shirt, then stood and stretched, looking more like a cat than the part-time wolf he was. "I won't press you right now. It's late, you're tired, a bit battered—probably not sympathetic to my cause. But I leave you with this thought: How will you destroy the staff without me?"

"Ah." That was Rule. "So that's what you're thinking." He recited softly, "*Suits scipio scindidi—Id uri, uri, uri! In niger ignis incendi—Aduri vulnus ex mundus.*"

"Exactly. And I must say I'm pleased that you're familiar with the *Indomitus*—so many aren't in these degenerate days."

“You used to quote it at me when you were drunk.”

“I’ve always had a good memory,” Cullen said complacently.

“What in the world are the two of you talking about? Briefly, please.” Lily rubbed her temple and wondered when she’d be able to go to bed. “It sounded like some sort of poetry.”

“Bingo,” Cullen said. “The *Indomitus* is an epic poem, written in Latin—very old Latin, from before the clans finished mangling it into its current form. Not that we use it much today,” he added with evident disapproval. “English is taking its place as our common tongue, just as it is with humans.”

Rule spoke dryly. “I think Lily would prefer a translation to a linguistic debate. The events in the poem are part of the Great War,” he told her. “The part I quoted refers to the staff of Gelsuid, who was an avatar of the goddess we don’t name.”

“Something tells me you aren’t talking about World War I. Don’t explain,” she added hastily. “Clan legends later. Just tell me why you think that bit of old poetry has something to do with the staff we’re hunting now.”

Cullen shrugged. “It’s the same staff, of course.”

“Come on. You have no reason to think—”

“When we were in Helen’s tender hands, you saw her holding a long, black piece of wood. That wasn’t what I saw.”

He hadn’t had eyes at the time, but Lily knew he’d still “seen” the sorcéri. Apparently the staff had shown up on his sorcerous radar screen, too. “I’ll bite. What did you see?”

“A wound, a rent, a tear in the fabric of the world. The wooden staff you saw may be a new construct, but the underlying truth of the staff is a very, very old rip in reality. That’s why you need me—to close that hole. ‘Cauterize the wound,’ as the poem says.” He was quite cheerful about it. “I’m good with fire.”

“You are,” Rule acknowledged. “But the *Indomitus* says to burn the staff with ‘black fire.’ I’ve never seen you use that. I’m not sure what it is.”

“Mage fire. It’s a bit dangerous. I’d no call to mess with it before, but I’m learning.”

Considering that Cullen found it amusing to play with stray sorcéri in her living room, she didn’t want to know what he considered “a bit dangerous.”

“I hope you’re learning well away from populated areas.”

He gave her a reproachful look. “But of course. It doesn’t pay to alarm the neighbors with the occasional fire.”

She opened her mouth to mention a few other hazards associated with fire—and yawned instead. “Sorry. You’d think a threat to the fabric of reality would keep me awake.”

“To put it another way,” Rule said, “good night, Cullen.”

Cullen chuckled. “I can take a hint. I don’t always, but I can.” He came close enough to bend and drop a kiss on her cheek. “Get some sleep, luv. You can pester me with questions while I bedevil you with demands later.”

“Leave your phone turned on for once, and I will.”

“For you, I’ll keep it turned on.” He started for the door.

“Cullen...”

“Yes?” His eyebrows went up. “You’ve changed your mind? You’ll accede to my every wish?”

“What do you know about possession?”

“Not much. The religious honchos are bloody close-mouthed about it, always have been. Jealous of their turf, I imagine. Still, my knowledge, patchy though it may be, would be difficult to cover before Rule grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and tossed me out. Is there a more specific question you’d like to ask?”

Lily squirmed mentally, but got it said. “Why would faith be a protection?”

“Damned if I know.” He grinned. “Little joke there. I don’t know that faith *is* a protection.”

“Nettie believes it is. So does the FBI.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Is that so? Interesting... maybe *The Exorcist* got one thing right.” He turned his grin on Rule. “Remember when that came out? People thought it was for real. Bunch of idiots came crawling out of the woodwork, claiming to be experts. Lord, I remember this one ass on *Phil Donahue*—said he’d performed dozens of exorcisms. Dozens.” He chuckled.

Lily snorted. “You’re undercutting your credibility, Cullen. *The Exorcist* came out before I was born. You and Rule might have been out of diapers, but not by much.”

Cullen slid Rule an enigmatic glance. “Ah, you caught me. I do love to make myself sound important, but that was a bit obvious, wasn’t it?”

But he hadn’t been trying to sound important. He’d been chatting easily, conversationally, about something he expected Rule to remember—but that was absurd. Lily told herself she was being ridiculous, but the question came out anyway. “Just how old are you?”

“Persuaded you I’m a well-preserved centenarian, have I?” Cullen’s smile was teasing. “Or maybe just sixty or seventy. I ought to be in the record books. I doubt there’s another stripper my age still performing.”

Rule’s flat voice cut him off. “Don’t.”

Lily’s stomach did the elevator thing—as if she’d plunged down so suddenly that gravity hadn’t kept up.

Cullen sighed. “Didn’t mean to put my foot in your mouth.”

“I know. I’ve put off telling her, hoping for the right time . . . which this certainly isn’t, but I won’t lie to her about it. Or ask you to.”

Lily found her voice. “Lie about what?”

He touched her hair. “I’m sorry, *nadia*. I should have told you.”

Told her what? Not what he seemed to be saying. That was preposterous. She shoved to her feet. “You are not a hundred years old.”

A smile touched his lips—young, firm lips. “No. Nothing so extreme. But I am older than I look. Older than I’ve allowed you to believe.”

Her heart was pounding. “How old?”

“Fifty-four. Cullen is a bit older.”

“Fifty-nine next June.” Cullen’s grimace was frankly apologetic. “I hope you noticed that I didn’t lie to you. Quite.”

She looked at the tall, beautiful young man claiming to be older than her mother and shook her head. “No, that isn’t possible.”

Neither of them answered. Cullen looked apologetic. Rule was wearing his inscrutable face, the one she couldn’t read worth shit.

They meant it. She began to pace. “How could I never have heard about this? How could you have fooled everyone all this time?” How could he have fooled *her*?

Rule rose. He moved so smoothly. He couldn’t be fifty-four. “We’ve gone to some extremes to keep it secret. Until three years ago, it was still legal to shoot us on sight in five states. How much worse would it have been if humans knew we live twice as long as they do?”

Twice as long?

Lily’s heart was pounding too hard, too fast. Her head felt stuffed with cotton. She’d known Rule was older than he looked—which was about her age. Twenty-eight. His assurance suggested a man beyond the mixed insecurity and infallibility of youth. *Mid-thirties*, she thought. That’s what she’d guessed him to be the first time she saw him. “Your driver’s license says you’re thirty-five.”

“Well.” Cullen stood and headed for the door. “Never let it be said I’m not a sensitive guy, and I’m sensing that I’m not wanted right now.” He reached for the knob.

“Wait,” Rule said. “Can you set some kind of wards here? Otherwise we’ll have to crate up Harry and head to my apartment.”

“Sure, I could do something. Not true wards—they’d take too long—but a bit of ‘don’t see me’ might do the trick. Tidy little spell. Doesn’t use much power. Fuzzes the mind so people can’t quite locate the spot I tie it to. I don’t know if it works on demons, though.”

“I’d prefer to keep demons out.”

“I don’t know of anything that will do that,” Cullen said frankly. “Some believe holy symbols work, but I’m skeptical. In the old days... but we can’t work with what was, can we? In any event, you’ve got an alarm system in place. Cats hate demons. Harry’ll set up a howl if one comes near.”

Lily looked for her cat, but Harry had apparently tired of watching the corner. He was nowhere in sight.

“Your call,” Rule said quietly to her.

Her hands had made fists. She didn’t notice until the stinging in her palms grew too sharp. She forced herself to open them. “Here. They found me at my sister’s wedding. They must know where your apartment is.”

“Cullen?” Rule said.

“Will do. Do you have rosemary?”

“Will the dried stuff work?”

They didn’t need her. Lily picked up her weapon. “I’m going to take a shower.”

Cullen’s eyebrows went up. “Armed?”

“Your spells may not work on demons, but I’m betting my bullets will.”

EIGHT



In the bathroom Lily turned on the tap, stripped off her bridesmaid’s dress, wadded it up, and stuffed it in the trash. In spite of what she’d said to Cullen, her gun was on the bedside table, not in here with her. Her bathroom was too tiny for armed combat.

Panties and bra went on the floor as the tiny room filled with steam. She peeled off the gauze pad covering her wound.

Most of the damage didn’t show. The doctors thought she’d been hit by a ricochet—there’d been no scorching around the entry, and the bullet had lodged instead of ripping a second hole in her back on its way out. But it had tumbled inside her flesh, tearing up muscle and chipping bone.

All she saw was a depressed, puckered circle, still an angry red. A crescent-shaped scab at one edge marked where it had torn open when she fell. They told her the scar would fade in time. She hoped so. She’d known since she was ten that she could be damaged, permanently and irreversibly—and that scars didn’t have to stop her. But she was vain enough to dislike the way this one looked.

Rule thought the in-sleep thing might have speeded up healing on her shoulder as well as her head.

Gingerly, Lily touched the small, puckered circle.

Orange.

There were drugs that crosswired the brain so you tasted a color or smelled a sound. Synesthesia, that's what it was called. LSD, peyote, mescaline... even marijuana had been known to blur the lines between the senses. But she wasn't on drugs, and her regular senses weren't crossing things up. Just the extra sense that let her touch magic.

Maybe this was normal. Her Gift was rare. She'd never met another touch sensitive, and there was precious little about them in folklore. She didn't have much to go on except her own experience, and she'd never run across a demon before. Maybe she experienced the magic from other realms differently.

But why had it stuck to her?

Frowning, she adjusted the water temperature, stepped into the tub, and pulled the shower curtain closed.

God, but that felt good. For a moment the sheer animal pleasure of hot water blanked her mind. She wanted to sleep right here, standing up, with hot water pouring over her... and not have to face Rule.

That was just lame. Disgusted with herself, Lily squirted shampoo into her hand. She could use her left hand enough to do that, but she couldn't raise that arm over her head. Washing her hair one-handed was awkward, but she'd be damned if she'd go to bed with dried blood sticking the strands together.

Rule had been washing her hair for her since she got hurt.

Guilt twinged. So he was older than she'd thought. Lots of women dated older men. What was the big deal?

She closed her eyes and let the water stream over her. He was fifty-four, she was twenty-eight, so he was twenty-six years older than her. Twenty-six years was pretty much a lifetime to her. Not to him. That was the problem.

She got out of the shower, dried off, and told the mother-voice in her head nattering on about taking care of her skin to shut up. Then reached for the lotion anyway.

Did he still argue with the mother-voice in his head? Or maybe it was a father-voice, because he was a guy... but surely at fifty-four he'd have found his own voice to listen to.

Lily pulled on a T-shirt and panties, tugged a wide-toothed comb through her hair, and gave serious thought to going to bed without drying it. The prospect of a wet pillow dissuaded her, though. She got out the blow drier and plugged it in.

Had they had blow driers when he was growing up? He would have been born about 1950. Blow driers came along a lot later than that, didn't they?

He looked maybe thirty. It hurt to find out he wasn't. That he had let her believe an untruth. She'd thought they stood on roughly the same cultural ground, and they didn't. When she was a kid, she'd listened to disco. He'd listened to... what? The Beatles? Elvis? She'd grown up watching *Cagney and Lacey*, *Cheers*, *Happy Days*. Rule had grown up in *Happy Days*.

She clicked off the blow drier, wound the cord around it, and shoved it in a drawer. She started to get out a fresh gauze pad and the tape, frowned, and decided she didn't need a bandage. Nettie's religious version of magic seemed to have worked on her—which was disconcerting, but she'd work out the ramifications of that later.

Then she took a deep breath and opened the door.

Rule was in bed, propped up against a couple pillows on the right side—she always slept on the left—with the sheet pulled up over his legs and hips. Beneath the sheet he was naked. He thought pajamas were one of the silliest things ever invented.

He was watching her closely. His eyes made her think of water at night—full of mysteries and hints, revealing little.

She'd had it with mystery. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Before you became clan, I couldn't. After that... fear, I suppose. Ignoble, but accurate."

"You were afraid I'd be upset?"

"Aren't you?"

Upset wasn't the right word. *Confused, disoriented, achingly aware of all the differences between them ...*

"It isn't as if you haven't kept secrets, too. I've respected that."

"What are you talking about?"

"Grandmother."

She blinked. "But you know about her. I didn't tell you, but you saw her in action. Benedict even saw her Change."

His mouth turned down at one corner, a crooked not-smile. "I also know there aren't any, ah, were-beasts. Yet that's what she is. I haven't pressed you for an explanation."

"Bully for you. I don't have one."

"I wasn't asking you to explain."

She gritted her teeth. "You aren't listening. I didn't say I wouldn't explain. I can't, because I don't know. If there's anyone more secretive than your father, it's my grandmother."

He didn't say anything for a moment and then grimaced and rubbed his chest. "That does make my silence harder to explain."

"You're my mother's age. My father is only two years older than you are." A thought struck her. "You *do* age, don't you?"

His eyebrows lifted. “You’ve met my father, among others. Yes, we age. Just more slowly. Perhaps we heal the free radical damage scientists have begun touting as one cause of aging.”

Lupi healed everything from colds to STDs to bullets.

Why wouldn’t they be able to heal most of the damage that caused aging? “Copies,” she muttered.

“What?”

“I’ve read about it. By the time we’re seven or so, every cell in our bodies is a copy. By the time we’re seventy, our DNA is running copies of copies of copies, and things start to wear out. Maybe the same thing about you that messes up lab tests keeps your copies clearer than mine.”

“You do like things logical.”

“Why not? Magic is a system, right? Figure out the rules and you know where you stand.”

“You have more in common with Cullen than you’d like to think.”

No, she didn’t. “Is there anything else you haven’t gotten around to telling me? Anything important?”

Two slow beats of silence were enough of an answer. Her stomach hurt. “We haven’t been together long. I know that, but—”

“That isn’t it. I... hell.” He ran a hand over his hair. “I’m not supposed to tell you. It’s... it falls within the Rhej’s province.”

The priestess or historian she was supposed to talk to in a couple days. “So this a clan secret. A lupus secret. It isn’t just about you.”

He didn’t say anything. She turned away, padding over to her side of the bed. She could understand. She would probably have to keep secrets from him, too, sometimes. FBI secrets.

But they wouldn’t be about *her*. Dammit. Maybe it was childish, but she wanted Rule to tell her, not this woman she’d never met. She yanked back the covers.

“Lily.”

She scowled at him.

“I’m probably sterile.”

Her mouth opened. Closed. She swallowed. “You have a son.”

“A blessing. A miracle, perhaps. But I’m fifty-four years old, and Toby is my only child. Perhaps ‘all but sterile’ is more accurate.”

His face was closed up, not letting her see what it had cost him to tell her. “But... you can’t be sure. Unless you’ve been tested—”

“You aren’t thinking. Laboratory tests don’t yield useful results for one of the Blood.”

Of course. Of course she knew that. “Still, you’ve been with a lot of women, and not always hung around long enough to know if... you can’t be sure.”

“It’s given to us to know the moment our seed quickens.”

They knew? Lupi always knew if a woman got pregnant? Rule would know if she... Lily rubbed her chest. There didn’t seem to be enough air in her lungs.

She used birth control, of course. She’d started taking the pill as soon as she got her period, years before her first lover. Her mother had understood. Without, for once, the need for explanations or long discussion, her mother had known why Lily needed that protection.

She’d been eight when it happened, not yet fertile. She’d been abducted. Stuffed in a trunk and stolen... she and her best friend, Sarah. They’d played hookie and gone to the beach, where a nice, grandfatherly man grabbed them. Lily hadn’t been raped because the police found her in time.

In time for her. Not for Sarah. So Lily knew in her blood, bones, and sinew that a woman’s choices could be stolen, and she’d always made sure that choice—the decision to bear a child—rested with her.

Only now it didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“No.” She took a deep breath, shoving confusion aside for now. “Don’t apologize for what you can’t help. I can see...” She could see him again with his son, swinging Toby in the air, filled with a clear, unfettered joy. Little though she would have believed it a month ago, Rule was a man made for fatherhood. “I’m sorry for your loss.” The words she’d spoken to the families of victims seemed to fit.

“I’ve had time to grow accustomed. This is a blow for you. I don’t know how you feel about having children.”

She didn’t, either. “There wasn’t anyone on the horizon, so...” She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “I’ve put off thinking about it.” Now she didn’t know what to feel.

“You can still have children, if you choose.”

Her mouth tightened. “By someone else, you mean.”

“I understand that your upbringing tells you that would be wrong. My upbringing tells me it would be wrong to deprive you of such a fundamental joy as children out of a disinclination to share.”

“It’s more than upbringing.” She didn’t know how to explain to him why fidelity mattered, not when he saw it so differently. And... oh, God. She stiffened.

It falls within the Rhej’s province. That’s what he’d said about his secret. But what he’d told her wasn’t a lupi secret... not unless what was true of him was true of other lupi, too.

They weren’t completely sterile. That was obvious. But maybe the magic that healed them so very well messed with their fertility. Maybe that’s why lupi had raised sex and seduction to a fine art, why they considered jealousy immoral. They’d die out if they didn’t take every chance they could to try to make a

baby.

Rule's face didn't tell her anything. And for once she wasn't going to ask. He'd broken some kind of law or custom by telling her as much as he had. She could wait to hear the rest.

Somehow. It helped that she was falling-down tired. She sat down on her side. "I guess Cullen did his little spell."

"Yes. The effect should wear off in about ten hours, or when the front door is opened."

"Weird."

He handed her a pillow and didn't comment on the fact that she wasn't sleeping naked as she usually did. That decision wasn't about him. Maybe the bad guys wouldn't be ready for a second assault this quickly. Maybe Cullen's spell would work like a dream, and maybe the demon had gone back to hell or Dis or whatever she was supposed to call the place.

And maybe not. If she had to fight bad guys, human or otherwise, she didn't want to do it naked. She turned off the light and lay down... and heard his sigh as his arms came around her.

A sigh of relief. He hadn't been sure she'd want to sleep with him, even if sleeping was all she could manage tonight.

It hadn't occurred to her to do otherwise. And what that meant she had no idea and was too tied to care. Gravity pressed down, squeezing out thoughts and worries, leaving her blessedly limp.

She yawned hugely. Rule tugged the covers up as he settled on his side, curling around her. Automatically she snuggled closer... and it felt good, it felt right, in spite of everything she'd learned tonight.

And all she hadn't learned. So many questions...

A heavy weight landed at the foot of the bed, then curled up against one of her feet. She could feel Harry purring, an inaudible rasp as soothing in its way as the male arm draped over her waist. Her eyes drifted closed as another yawn hit.

All unplanned, a question slipped out. "What kind of music did you listen to as a kid?"

"Hmm?" He sounded sleepy.

"When you were a kid, what music did you listen to?"

"Oh. Bach, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky. Anything with strings. Jazz."

Lord. He couldn't be normal or predictable about anything, could he? Lily gave up and let sleep have her.

NINE



Every now and then the crowd roared, a many-throated beast always muttering, muttering, when it wasn't screaming at itself. Far below, the ballplayers stood out vivid and tiny in their white uniforms against the light-flooded green.

It all looked so tidy down there. Safe. But she was up here, in the midst of the crowd-beast. And she wasn't safe.

Lily's heart pounded and pounded. She darted between the tall adult figures, looking for the way back. She'd gotten lost from her mother and sisters when she went looking for Grandmother.

Mother was going to be so angry. Lily's stomach clenched unhappily. *Don't wander off*, she always said. *Don't talk to strangers, don't whine, sit still and be a good girl, and don't wander off.*

Being a good girl was very, very boring. But maybe better than being lost.

The crowd beast roared again, many of its parts leaping to their feet. Popcorn spewed, fists waved, and loudspeakers pumped music into the tinny air. Lily gulped and tried to get around a really fat man who smelled bad, like bourbon. Lily hated the smell of bourbon. It made her think of when Uncle Chen got mean and started yelling. Mostly he yelled at his sons, not her, but she still didn't like it.

Mother hadn't even noticed that Grandmother was missing. Lily had tried to tell her, but she hadn't listened. She never listened. So it was up to Lily to find Grandmother, wasn't it?

She had to be here somewhere. That's why they came to the stupid ball games—because Grandmother liked them. So she was here. Lily just had to find her and then everything would be okay.

Maybe the crowd-beast had swallowed her. Grandmother wasn't very big. Not as little as Lily, but not big like the other grown-ups, either.

No, Lily told herself. No, that was stupid. Nothing could eat Grandmother. If the crowd-beast tried, she'd just tell it to back off. And it would. Grandmother was little, but only in her body. She was very big otherwise.

So was her secret. They weren't supposed to talk about it, not ever, not even to each other. It wasn't the same as Lily's secret, except sort of, because they were both about magic. People didn't like magic, so good girls didn't do it. And if they couldn't *help* doing it, like Lily couldn't help knowing when she touched something that had magic on it, then they weren't supposed to tell anyone.

Lily sniffed. Grown-ups were always making stupid rules. Especially her mother. Her mother was stuffed with rules, and most of them were dumb. Right now Lily wished she had a great big magic, one that would make everyone else go away so she could find Grandmother.

Unease stirred inside her. Something wasn't right. This whole setup wasn't right. Why was she thinking about adults as grown-ups? She was...

Suddenly the crowd-beast swelled up tight around her, like she was a splinter it meant to squeeze out. It was hard to breathe. Lily shoved with arms and body against all those legs and big, suffocating bodies. She managed to pop out, a tender little grape squeezed from its skin, into a small, clear space.

She stood there panting, looking for Grandmother. Or Mother. Looking for someone, anyone, who could—

“Do you need help, little girl?” The hand, coming from behind to rest on Lily’s shoulder, made her jump. The voice, for all its friendly words, terrified her. It was high and sweet and cold, so cold... “Are you lost?”

The hand tightened, hurting-hard. Lily yelped and tried to wrench away, but another hand gripped her and slowly turned her around. Lily fought it. She didn’t want to see, didn’t want—

That face—that smiling, pretty woman’s face framed by soft blond hair, and those eyes, empty like a doll’s— Lily knew that face. Those eyes. “No!” she screamed. “No, you’re dead, I know you are. I made you dead!”

“I’m going to eat you,” the smiling woman said. “Then you’ll be dead, too. We’ll be together.”

“No!”

“Together forever...” She was bending down, bending close.

“No, no, no! Be dead. I want you dead all the way— dead, dead, dead!” As the woman’s hands dug in harder and her face came closer, Lily shut her eyes, wishing for the biggest magic ever, one that would kill the smiling woman forever.

And all of a sudden she was sitting on top of the other woman, who was on her back. She wasn’t little anymore. And she was pounding the woman’s head against the cold, stony floor, pounding it and pounding it. Blood and gray stuff leaked from the shattered skull she cupped in her two hands, and glistening white bone shards penetrated the hair. And that was wrong. That hadn’t happened before. But it was happening now, and the woman wasn’t smiling anymore, and her hair—it wasn’t blond like it was supposed to be. It was... it was...

Lily stopped, horror welling up in her.

The woman’s eyes blinked once. And it was her mother looking up at her, her mother’s skull in her hands, her mother’s black hair shiny with blood and sticky with brains.

“You killed me,” she said.

Lily woke trying to scream.

“Shh... there, Lily, there, honey. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Rule. It was Rule looking down at her, and Rule’s hand, warm and not hurting, on her right shoulder, while her bad shoulder throbbed as if Helen really had dug her fingers into it. She was an adult, not a child, and Helen was dead. Truly and forever dead.

Lily’s breath shuddered in her chest. “That was a bad one,” she whispered.

His voice was quiet, deep, the sheer masculinity of it soothing to her. “Maybe you should talk about it.”

She shook her head, unable to put words to the horror. What good would talk do? She just wanted the smothering guilt to go away. It never troubled her in the daylight hours. When she was awake, she knew she’d done what she had to do.

So why the nightmares?

Go away, she told the lingering taint from the dream. And burrowed into Rule.

“Careful—your shoulder—”

“It doesn’t matter.” And it didn’t, although it was throbbing like a bad tooth. But that meant nothing compared to the hard, physical reality of him. He closed himself around her, and his body was warm, warm enough to melt away fear and horror. She breathed in his scent and felt clean.

He was naked. She wasn’t, but her legs were bare and tangled with his. His thighs were firm, slightly rough with hair. . . a roughness she needed. Craved. She rubbed her thigh up along his and found that his body was responding to their closeness, too.

A delicate heat sent tendrils winding out along her veins, down her thighs to her toes, tingling, making her hum from the inside out. She went still, cherishing the sensation. Then she drew her hand along his side, cherishing him.

He didn’t ask her to put her desire into words. He didn’t ask if she was sure, or remind her of her shoulder, or say anything at all. For that she blessed the years of experience she’d earlier resented.

Instead, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. Slowly. With a carnality as obvious and delicate as the heat stirring in her belly.

Yes, she thought. *Yes*. This was what she needed. . . the quiet turning to the other in the middle of the night, the wordless meeting of lips, skin, breath. The trust, unfurling one pale petal at a time, that he would be there.

He rolled her onto her back and came over her, touching softly, kissing her shoulder, pushing her T-shirt aside to nibble along her ribs, tickling her belly button with his tongue. He tugged her panties down her legs and off. She ran her hands over him, marveling, trying to say with touch all that she knew of him and treasured. And all that she still wondered over.

There were no crashing cymbals this time, no rising delirium of lust. Her shoulder ached, and she was riding a wave of exhaustion as surely as she rode the swell of desire.

Yet when he slipped inside her, her breath broke. As he stroked, smooth and easy, she found a quiet joy in meeting him one slow thrust at a time. And as she surrendered to the physical tide that carried her gently through pleasure to its peak, she surrendered her compulsion to name these feelings, to tag them as lust or love or mate bond. There was only the mystery, wordless, full, breaking over her in a soundless rush.

She fell back to Earth without ever having left it and was there to hold him when his breath broke, nearly soundless, as he reached the crest of his own wave. And after, he lay on top of her still, both of them

smiling into the dark. She was asleep before ever he rolled off.

RULE stood in Lily's tub beneath the shower jets, yawning. Her apartment had its shortcomings, but did offer two boons: a windowless bedroom, easy to defend, and abundant hot water. This morning, hot water rated almost as high as defensible sleeping quarters.

After a night of sentry sleep, he'd woken early and completely. It had seemed best to leave the warmth of Lily's bed before he gave in to his body's urgings and woke her for another loving. She needed sleep. And she'd needed to sleep here, in her own space. He understood that. She'd had too many shocks yesterday.

Including those about him. Rule grimaced and grabbed the soap.

She'd turned to him, though. In the middle of the night, haunted by a nightmare she wouldn't discuss, she'd turned to him. Tension he hadn't noticed eased from his shoulders at the thought. The soapy scent mixed with steam, with the water's liquid massage, to pull him more fully into his senses. He closed his eyes and closed out thoughts, floating along the skin of the moment.

Another yawn took him. He shook his head. There had been a time when a single night of sentry sleep wouldn't have left him this drowsy. He was older now. Out of practice.

Out of training, Benedict would say.

Rule grinned as he worked up a lather, thinking of the older brother who'd trained him, along with so many other youngsters. Benedict wasn't easy on those he trained, but he never asked more of his cubs than they could give, and he had a knack for understanding each youngster's limits. Unlike some of the physically gifted, he didn't expect others to live up to his own standards.

Of course, that would have been unrealistic. Two-footed or four, Benedict was in a class of his own.

Those summers were years in the past, but Benedict's training stuck. His methods wouldn't suit human notions, but they weren't designed for humans, were they? Being woken out of a deep sleep by having a chunk ripped out of your shoulder by an enemy's teeth inspired a youngster to stay alert.

Grief pinched out his grin. He closed his eyes as memory arrived, sharp-clawed.

Mick.

For a moment he simply stood there, absorbing the pain, new and unblunted and tangled with so many other feelings. It had been Rule's other brother, Mick, whose teeth had ripped a chunk from his shoulder all those years ago. Mick was—*had* been—nearly Rule's age-mate, a rarity among his people. They'd met for the first time the summer Rule began formally training with Benedict.

There'd been rivalry between them, Rule thought, tilting his head back as the water washed away the soap. Of course there had been. But it had been friendly, not serious, back then.

Hadn't it? Did the lens of the present distort the past, or reveal it more clearly?

Let it be, Rule told himself, shutting off the water with a sharp twist of the faucet. Mick was dead. He'd died saving Rule's life—a hero's death. If he'd first endangered it, that was the mad Helen's doing,

not Mick's. With the power from that accursed staff, she'd tipped Rule's brother into a sort of madness.

But she couldn't have gotten to Mick if the seed hadn't been there, the seed of jealousy of a particularly nasty sort. The clans had a word for it: *fratriodi*. Brother-hate.

Lily's cell phone rang while Rule was brushing his teeth. He heard her curse, fumble for the phone, and then answer. And he heard her snap fully awake, a change as distinct as the flipping of a light switch. So he finished quickly, shut off the water, and opened the door.

It was just after six a.m. The moon had set and the sun hadn't yet made an appearance, so she'd switched on the bedside lamp. She sat on the bed in a pool of that yellowish light scribbling on the pad she kept close, wearing pale yellow panties and a short black T-shirt that left a strip of her back and belly bare.

He'd removed those panties when she woke from a nightmare. She must have scrambled into them when the phone rang.

She glanced at him, exchanged some more police jargon with the person at the other end and disconnected. "I've got to go."

"I know. I missed the first part, though. Who was it?"

She shoved her hair out of her face, frowning at him. "I wish you'd quit listening to both sides of my phone conversations."

He shrugged. Even if he could stop his ears from hearing so much, he wouldn't. "You don't work homicide anymore. Why were you called about a murder in Temecula?"

"Possible homicide," she corrected. Maybe her frown hadn't been directed at him. It lingered as she stared into some mental space, totting up facts he lacked. "The call was from the FBI district office," she said, pushing to her feet. "They were contacted by local authorities in Temecula about a suspicious death."

"Why call you?" he repeated.

"There's a connection to Harlowe. A witness. The body was discovered two hours ago," she added abruptly and headed for the bathroom.

He stepped aside to let her pass, thinking.

This was hardly the first sighting of someone who might be Patrick Harlowe. Ten days ago, Ruben Brooks had succeeded in getting him put on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, his photo and description sent to law enforcement agencies all over the nation. But the man was relentlessly average—Anglo, five-ten, brown hair and eyes, one hundred sixty pounds. No scars, no distinctive features other than an unusually mellow voice. The kind of man, Lily had said in disgust, you could meet at a party and forget two minutes later. Rule didn't know how many reports of possible sightings had come in; Lily had only mentioned those few that seemed promising.

It was the first one connected to a possible homicide, though. She'd want to get to the scene quickly. He needed to get dressed.

He glanced at the closed bathroom door. First things first. If he didn't make coffee, she'd probably stop for the convenience store version along the way.

Rule returned from the kitchen just as Lily was emerging from the bathroom. "Why is it only a possible homicide?" he asked.

She pulled off her T-shirt as she padded up to the tall chest facing the bed. Her shoulder was much improved, he thought. Until now he'd had to help her with things that went over her head.

"Cause of death hasn't been determined," she told him and opened the top drawer, made a disgusted noise, and closed it again. He'd seen her do that several times. She'd automatically open that drawer, forgetting she'd emptied it to make room for some of his things.

She opened the second drawer and plucked out a scrap of black silk. "This is definitely not mine. Why would anyone wear a thong?" She tossed it to him. "It's got to feel like a permanent wedgie."

He pulled on his underwear and watched her step into hers—carnation pink this morning. He loved watching her get dressed. It was fun to see her cover what he would uncover later, yes, but there was a quiet intimacy involved that he treasured even more.

She always put on her panties first, then her bra. She preferred to shower at night and seldom wore pantyhose. She bought toothpaste in tubes, pickles in bulk, and panties in every color. Her wound interfered with the run on the beach she was used to, but she adhered religiously to her therapy program. When it was time to leave, she'd slip on her shoulder harness before her shoes.

Small details, perhaps, but he was learning her. "Why do you wear a bra?"

She looked down at her chest and shook her head. "God only knows."

He chuckled and moved closer. "I meant that a thong offers me some support. Keeps my dangly bits from bouncing around."

Her glance skimmed his body, eyebrows lifting. No doubt she noticed that there was more looking up than dangling at the moment.

He placed his hand beneath one of her pretty breasts, covered now in stretchy white lace, and dragged his thumb across the tip. "I like everything about these, you know—the size, shape, texture... and the taste. Especially that."

Her nipple ripened, and her eyes went smoky. That didn't keep her from batting his hand away. "I have to go."

"*We* have to go, you mean." Resigned, he went to the closet—which was organized by color, season, and type of garment. She'd managed to find a few inches of hanging space for him, but his selection was limited. He took out a pair of black slacks. "You're not wearing a bandage."

"The in-sleep thing seems to have helped. My shoulder isn't back to normal, but it's better." She joined him at the closet and took out one of the black T-shirts. "No need for you to get out this early."

"Try again," he said dryly, fastening his slacks. "Even if I were okay with you going without me when we know you're a target—"

“You’re coming awfully close to the *allow* word.”

“Yet skirting it deftly, I believe. Temecula is an hour away, if the traffic is kind.”

“About sixty miles,” she agreed.

“The mate bond might stretch that far, but this isn’t a good time to test it.”

“Oh. Right.” She tossed her shirt on the bed, following it with a pair of tan slacks and a red jacket.

“Why don’t you make us some coffee? You’ll bitch if you have to drink convenience store stuff.”

“I already did.” Surely even a human nose could smell it brewing. He looked at her in sudden, sharp suspicion. “Why don’t you want me to go with you? What aren’t you telling me?”

She sighed. “I was hoping to keep you from going all alpha and protective on me, but I guess it’s a lost cause.”

“Good guess. Keep talking.”

“The witness was out with the deceased last night. He identified Harlowe as the one she’d left the club with.”

“He knows Harlowe?”

“He made the ID from a photo they showed him.”

“Then they already had some reason to think Harlowe was involved.”

“Oh, yeah.” Her eyes were as flat as her voice. “He wrote a little note on the victim’s stomach with a felt-tip pen and signed it.”

“What did it say?”

““This one’s for Yu.””

TEN



LILY was tired of being driven everywhere. It was hard to argue that she should get behind the wheel, though, even with the improvement in her shoulder. Rule was completely unimpaired. So she only grumbled a little about letting him drive.

No question he had a better ride than she did—a Mercedes convertible with buttery soft seats and a top-of-the-line sound system. She set her purse and laptop on the floorboard and put a mug of steaming

coffee in the beverage holder. “Swing by the Holiday Inn on Harbor,” she said, pulling her door closed. “The district office was going to call Weaver. We’ll be picking her up.”

He made a noncommittal sound and backed out of the parking space.

She glanced at him. “I don’t have a problem with her, you know.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“If I let myself get bent out of shape every time I run across one of your old lovers, I’d spend most of my time pretzeled.”

“My reputation far exceeds the reality, you know. I haven’t been with nearly as many women as the tabloids like to claim.”

“I don’t suppose that would be physically possible.” Lily’s finger tapped on her thigh. “I’m wondering if we should tell her about the mate bond.”

“What?” He gave her a quick frown. “No.”

“I know it’s supposed to be a big secret, but we’re asking her to operate without full information. That doesn’t feel right.”

“If it were up to me, I’d trust Cynna with that knowledge. But not even the Rho can decide to reveal some of the lore about our connection to the Lady. The Chosen are part of that lore.”

“You mean no one can tell, ever?”

“Not exactly.” He was silent a moment, frowning. “There’s too much you don’t know. You need to talk with the Rhej.”

“I’m supposed to in a few days, but we need to clear this up ASAP.”

“I’ll have to go to Clanhome. She doesn’t leave it, and she doesn’t care for telephones.”

“Sounds like Grandmother.”

Lily shifted uncomfortably. Was she expected to worship the Lady now that she was clan? Not likely to happen, but she didn’t want to get into that right now. “Tell me something. Weaver said you hadn’t changed. People say that sort of thing all the time, but I guess it’s pretty much true for you. How long ago did you know her?”

“Ten years. No, more like twelve.”

“So maybe Weaver’s more of a problem for you than for me. If she starts thinking about how little you’ve changed—”

“It’s going to come out.” He accelerated smoothly onto Harbor Drive. “Sooner or later, it will come out. Once enough of us stopped passing for human, it became inevitable that our longevity would be noticed. That’s one reason some lupi objected to going public.”

“How did it get settled that you would go public? Not by voting, I’m guessing.”

He gave her one of those hard-to-read glances. “No, we didn’t vote. The Rhos discussed, argued, formed alliances, and sometimes fought, but there was no consensus. Eventually my father decided to force the issue.”

She considered what she knew of Isen Turner. “He had a hand in the *Borden* decision?”

“That, too, but I was referring to *Carr v. Texas*!”

Lily’s eyebrows rose. Since its founding, the U.S. government had mostly ignored “the lupi problem,” leaving things up to the states to handle however they thought best. Until recently, the states had thought in terms of imprisonment, execution both formal and informal, even castration.

Carr v. the State of Texas had changed all that. The Supreme Court ruling had made lupi citizens when while in human form. Congress had promptly declared lycanthropy a public health hazard, ushering in more than a decade of forced registration and treatment. Now that, too, had been declared unconstitutional. Lupi’s four-footed status remained murky, but there was a bill pending about that. “Was Carr Nokolai?”

“You underestimate Isen.” His smile was tight. “William Carr was Etorri, one of our oldest and most revered clans. They have virtually no power. They’re too tiny. But they have great *du*. Honor,” he added, glancing at her. “Reputation, face, magic, history—*du* encompasses all that. Every lupus on the planet owes them, and will until the end of days.”

That sounded like quite a story, but it would have to wait. “And...?”

“Carr wasn’t just Etorri. He was Rho. At that time, virtually any other lupus who did what he did would have been killed by those opposed to mainstreaming. Not the Etorri Rho.”

“And this was somehow Isen’s doing?”

“Yes.”

That was all he offered, a flat “yes,” no explanation. Lily’s finger tapped faster. “The Carr decision took place, what—twelve years ago? More like fifteen,” she corrected herself. “A few years before you and Weaver were cozy. You would have been thirty-six or so.”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Were you already your father’s heir?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m trying to get things fixed in my mind, that’s all.”

His fingers flexed once on the steering wheel. “I was an adult fifteen years ago. You weren’t. That continues to bother you.”

“And that pisses you off.”

“I am not pissed.” He turned sharply into the drive that circled in front of the Holiday Inn.

She rolled her eyes. “Right. Do you see Weaver? She’s supposed to wait down front for us.”

“You’re always telling me what I am. I’m pissed, I’m promiscuous—”

“I never said that!”

“It lies behind your comments like the seven-eighths of an iceberg that’s submerged.”

“I haven’t called you promiscuous,” she insisted.

“You don’t have to call a black man a nigger to treat him like one.”

“Oh, now I’m a racist.”

“I didn’t say that. Just as you didn’t call me promiscuous.”

“What are we arguing about? Can you tell me that much? Just what is it we’re having this argument about?”

He stopped abruptly enough for her to lurch against her seatbelt. “I don’t know. Nothing. There’s Cynna.”

“Great. Good.” Lily stopped herself before she could blurt out something stupid like, “I guess *she* never called you promiscuous.” For one thing, it was probably true. For another, it would have sounded entirely too petty and jealous. Which she wasn’t. Not exactly.

But Rule had been promiscuous. Maybe not by his standards, whatever those might be, but by hers, he’d been quite the little honeybee, flitting from flower to flower... and he’d been flitting a lot longer than she’d realized. About twenty years longer.

His honeybee days were over, though. That’s what counted. Maybe that’s what had him on edge, too. Maybe trading every woman for one woman didn’t seem like such a great deal this morning. He hadn’t been given a choice, after all. The mate bond locked them both in this relationship, and however right it felt on the deepest level, there were all sorts of other levels that could play hell with happy-ever-after.

“Morning,” Cynna Weaver said, opening the back door on the driver’s side. She tossed in a scruffy black tote, slid inside, and glanced from one to the other of them. Her eyebrows lifted, rearranging the whorls on her forehead. “Whoa. You two arguing, or did someone die?”

Lily lifted her own eyebrows. “Kimberly Ann Curtis. Caucasian, brown and brown, five-seven, one-thirty. She turned twenty-two last March. Went by Kim.”

“Okay, don’t tell me. None of my business, I guess.” Cynna settled back against the seat. “I’ll admit the ‘someone died’ comment was stupid when we’re headed to a murder scene—”

“Possible homicide,” Lily corrected automatically.

“Whatever. It’s godawful early yet. Don’t expect clever from me for another couple hours.”

“I can wait,” Lily said dryly as Rule pulled away. “Fasten your seatbelt, please.” The other woman muttered something about “seatbelt enforcer” but complied, so

Lily ignored the comment. Chances were that Weaver had never responded to vehicular crashes. She wouldn’t know what a face looked like after impacting with a windshield. Or traveling through one.

“So what do we know about this possible homicide?”

“She was found about three-thirty this morning by Mike Sanderson, a coworker who says they dated sometimes but were not exclusive. Nonetheless, he was sufficiently bothered by it when she left the Cactus Corral last night with someone else that he went to her dwelling around three. He found her dead and called the police. No obvious signs of violence. No cause of death determined.”

“Huh.” Weaver unzipped her tote. “This Sanderson the one who ID’ed Harlowe? It was him she left with, right?”

“Right.” Lily frowned at the tote. “I thought you didn’t need any ingredients, that your spells were in your tattoos.”

“You thought right.” She took out a thermos. “Hot chocolate. Want some?”

“No, thanks. I’ve got coffee.” Which was probably cold now. Lily picked up her mug, taking a sip to check. Yep. Cold.

“Don’t know how anyone drinks that stuff.” Cynna took a slug of her chocolate, which did smell good. “I’m wondering why Rule’s driving. No offense, Rule—you’re great eye candy, but you’re a civilian. What are you along for?”

“Emergency sex,” he said blandly.

She exploded into laughter. “Yu, you’re getting some bennies I didn’t think the bureau offered. I’m jealous.”

Lily felt her cheeks heat and thanked God for thick skin. Blushing didn’t show. “He’s a civilian consultant.”

Cynna snorted. “Never heard it called that before. I thought maybe he was bodyguarding you, what with Harlowe leaving you love notes now.”

“That, too,” Rule said. “You know about the note?”

“Yeah, I heard. Yu—” She grimaced. “If there’s a way to say your last name so that it doesn’t sound like a pronoun, it’s beyond me.”

There were three ways to say her last name in Chinese, two of which were beyond Lily, much to Grandmother’s disgust. “I’m used to people having trouble with my surname.”

“Let’s use first names, then.” She delved into her tote again, this time coming up with a foam takeout container.

“Okay.” Though it wasn’t, not really, but that just made Lily determined to get over it. “You should

know that we acquired some new information last night.”

“After you left the ER?”

“Yes. Seabourne paid me a visit.”

“I have got to meet that dude. A sorcerer.” She shook her head and opened the container, which turned out to hold a bagel. “Hard to believe, but reality’s often a stretch. Some people find me hard to believe.”

“He thinks you’ll have trouble finding Harlowe, that the staff is shielding him.”

“Won’t know until I try, but I’m pretty good.” She took a big bite.

Lily tried not to stare longingly at Cynna’s bagel. She could have brought some food along... if she ever went to the store and bought stuff. “He also says he scried for Harlowe and found him in—ah, in hell.”

That sent Cynna’s eyebrows up. “No shit?”

“I don’t think Seabourne was making it up. But he doesn’t know if Harlowe is there now, was there recently, or will be there soon.”

“Fire scrying, huh? Well, that is interesting.” She licked a crumb off her thumb. “Ties right in with the demon who conked you on the head.”

“So it seems. I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.” She took another bite.

“In order to Find something, you have to establish a connection with it, right?”

“That’s how it works.”

“I want you to hunt for Harlowe, then, not the staff. I’ve got some concerns about you connecting with it. It’s... tainted.” Lily was getting better at reading the expression beneath the tattoos. Cynna obviously didn’t think much of Lily’s caution. “Have you ever encountered death magic?”

Cynna frowned. “No. Nasty stuff.”

Rule spoke. “The staff reeks of it.”

“Yeah? What does it smell like?”

“Putrefaction.”

Cynna made a face at her bagel. “You’re killing my appetite.”

Rule smiled. “You’ve grown more delicate. I can remember a time when it would take actual decay, not the mere mention of it, to have an effect.”

Cynna grinned at the back of his head. “I’ve always had healthy appetites. Remember that night on the roof?”

“Weaver,” Lily said, forgetting the first-name bit.

“Yeah?”

“Are you trying to annoy me, or is annoyance the usual by-product of your personality?”

The woman laughed. “Usual by-product, I guess. You two really do have an exclusive thing going?”

“We really do.”

“Hmm.” She looked at what was left of her bagel. For a moment there was no expression at all on that odd, striking face. “So what’s this Seabourne like?”

“He’s annoying, too. Also incredibly gorgeous.”

“I really do need to meet him.” She popped the last bite into her mouth, chewed, and then said, “You don’t have to worry about me getting ‘tainted’ if I do sort something connected to the staff. I’ve got all sorts of protection written in. When I sort, I take the patterns I

want to find on my skin. The energy doesn’t go any deeper.”

That sounded a little like what Lily experienced when she touched magic. She felt its texture, but the magic itself slid off her as if she were greased. Still, unlike her, Cynna didn’t remain entirely unaffected. “Your skin’s part of you. I don’t want you trying to find the staff.”

She shrugged. “Harlowe’s a better target, anyway.”

Was she agreeing or evading? Lily gave one last warning. “Karonski has good protection, too. Helen went right through it. She couldn’t get past Seabourne’s shields to his mind, but she was still able to use the staff against him. It caused excruciating pain.”

“You’re going somewhere with this.”

“She was also able to kill with it. She tried to use it on me that way. It had no effect.”

“Because you’re a sensitive. I get that.”

“I hope you also get that standard arrest procedures won’t work with Harlowe. I’m the only one the staff can’t affect, so when we do find him, I go in alone.”

Cynna snorted. “You may be immune to the staff, but there are plenty of other ways to get killed.”

“She’ll have backup,” Rule said grimly.

“Thirty feet away and out of sight.”

“That’s too far. Cullen said Helen had to be within fifteen feet to affect him.”

“Cullen’s a sorcerer. What’s safe for him may not be safe for others. Not that I’m convinced he knows the meaning of safety,” she added, thinking of what he’d said about experimenting with mage fire.

“Why are you so bloody careful about everyone’s safety but yours?”

“It’s my safety at stake, too! I need to know that the people backing me up aren’t being controlled by—”

“We’ve been over this. Harlowe can’t read minds, so he can’t take over minds.”

“We don’t know what all he can do. If you weren’t so stubbornly sure—”

“Time out!” Cynna sang. “If the two of you can’t play nice, you’ll have to go to your rooms.”

After a moment Rule said dryly, “Without our supper?”

“Only if you don’t tell me what you’re arguing about.”

Lily took a deep breath. “Right.” At least this time she knew what the argument was about. “The problem is that we’ve got more guesses than facts about what the staff can do.”

“From what you’ve said, it can kill, hurt like hell, or take over your mind.”

Rule spoke. “The first two, yes. Mind control— probably not, if it’s in Harlowe’s hands. Lily and I disagree about that,” he added. “I believe the staff augments the user’s natural Gift, if there is one. Helen was a telepath. Harlowe isn’t.”

“I’m not disputing that,” Lily said impatiently. “But Helen didn’t have a Gift that let her slice people up from a distance. That came purely from the staff. What else can it do that we don’t know about?”

“Maybe it has no limits and the president and most of Congress are already under Harlowe’s control. Lily, we can’t guard against every ‘maybe’ you can conjure up.”

“We’ll take what precautions seem reasonable. Thirty feet is reasonable.”

“To you.”

“I’m in charge.”

“We don’t get to vote? And here I thought you were so enamored of democracy.”

Lily tightened her lips on the hot response she wanted to make. They’d entertained Cynna enough with their squabbling.

How had they gotten so crosswise of each other so quickly after last night?

Those damned layers, she supposed. She yanked out a

CD at random and jammed it into the player. Then immediately turned down the volume.

She didn’t have time to brood over the tangled layers of her love life. She turned to Cynna Weaver and asked to be filled in on how the woman’s Gift worked. And did a pretty good job of not thinking about age differences, nightmares, or what had drawn Rule to the woman all those years ago.

ELEVEN



CYNNA hadn't expected to like Lily Yu. That was envy, of course, with a healthy dose of its kissing cousin, jealousy. But what could be more natural? She didn't fault herself for it. But somewhere along the line, a little worm of liking had surprised her by wiggling past all the other stuff.

Aside from that, though, she wasn't sure what to make of the woman. Lily seemed to know her business, but why had she brought Rule along? No doubt he could guard the hell out of her, but she wasn't exactly a fragile flower. Cynna couldn't see what he could contribute otherwise. The lupi weren't connected to the hunt for Harlowe... unless there was something she hadn't been told?

It wouldn't be the first time she'd been left out of the loop. All too often, people thought of her as a handy sort of freak, like the spinner in a board game—toss her down, spin her around, see which way she pointed. The way they saw it, she didn't need a brain to find stuff. So they assumed she didn't have one.

Rule knew better, but he was just naturally secretive as hell. Still, she didn't think he'd out-and-out lie to her.

She'd watch for a chance to catch him alone, she decided, and ask him why he was really along.

Temecula lay about halfway between San Diego and L.A. on 1-15. By the time they reached its fast-food and gas-station fringes, the sun had popped up over the horizon and Lily switched off the longhair music. She warned Cynna to be especially respectful of local authority.

Temecula, she said, used to be a small, sleepy town, but it had put on a real growth spurt in the past ten years. Like a gangly adolescent prone to tripping, it was jealous of its dignity. There was some rivalry between the newcomers and the oldtimers at the local cop shop. The ones who'd been around forever were outnumbered, but they had seniority and rank, and they didn't need outsiders telling them how to do things.

Kim had been doing okay for herself, Cynna thought as they pulled up near their goal. Up until someone killed her, that is. She'd lived in half of a little stucco duplex roofed with those red tiles Californians were crazy about. The yard was tiny but green. She counted four cops tramping around in it.

As soon as they parked and got out, one of those cops came over to tell them to move on. Lily showed him her badge. He wasn't impressed—said they'd have to wait until Detective Leung cleared them. He did manage to look apologetic when, in response to Lily's question, he told them the body had already been removed.

Lily looked furious.

So they waited. It felt good to be out of the car. Not that Cynna got carsick anymore—she had a dandy

little anti-nausea spell—but she hated riding in the backseat. She always felt cramped and left out.

The air had that slick, cool feel she associated more with spring than fall. But this part of the country didn't really do fall, much less winter. She'd come here straight from another job in Kansas City with no time to pick up more clothes. She wasn't dressed right for the climate.

Actually, she just plain wasn't dressed right, but that was nothing new. She'd never gotten the hang of dressing like a fibbie. Cynna sighed as she looked at the China doll. Cynna was wearing tan slacks, too, but they didn't look like Lily's, and her jacket was not nearly as fashionable as the other woman's trim little red thing. Lily didn't carry an old black gym bag around, either. No, she had a big, flat leather envelope of a purse slung over her shoulder.

She and Rule were talking nearby, too low for Cynna to make out the words. They weren't arguing, but they weren't happy, either. That cheered Cynna up some. Call her petty, but she liked knowing the woman wasn't perfect.

Finally someone came out of the victim's front door. He was Asian and not in uniform, so Cynna allowed herself to jump to the conclusion that he was the guy they were waiting for.

Detective Leung was a small man, not much taller than Lily, and dressed just as pretty—pressed white shirt, navy suit, and narrow tie. He didn't have much in the way of lines to give away his age, but his hair was more salt than pepper. By the time he reached them, it was obvious he didn't plan to roll out the welcome mat.

He said his name and rank and then he got a good look at Rule. He went from chilly to frigid. "What is *he* doing here? And her?"

"Her" meant Cynna. She gave him an eat-shit-and-die smile.

Lily was crisp. "He's consulting, she's MCD, same as me... if it's any of your business. Who ordered the body removed?"

"I did. The techs were finished with it."

"I asked that the body not be moved."

"We don't always get what we want, do we? Guess I didn't get the message." His smile was tight—like his underwear, Cynna suspected. Just as she suspected he'd gotten the message and ignored it.

Lily's finger started tapping on her thigh. "I'd like to see your shield, Detective."

His eyes narrowed, but he took it out, flashed it, and then started to put it back in his inside jacket pocket.

Lily just stood there with her hand out. He paused, trying to look like he wasn't pissed. Finally she handed it over.

She dug into one of the pockets in that oversize envelope and pulled out a snazzy little leather folder with a notepad inside. There she jotted down his shield number before giving it back to him. "We'll look at the scene first. Where will I find the body?"

“The hospital morgue. We aren’t a big city with a separate crime morgue. But, ah…” And here he started to feel a bit better. “I’m afraid I can’t let you onto the scene.”

Lily’s eyebrows went up. “I’m at a loss to understand why you think you have a choice.”

“Oh, I’ll cooperate. If your district office wants to send someone else, I’d be glad to cooperate. But I can’t very well let *you* onto the scene.” He was enjoying himself now. “Not when you’re implicated.”

For a long moment, Lily didn’t say a word. Cynna glanced at Rule, expecting him to say or do something. But he was just watching, wearing this little smile as if he expected to enjoy what came next.

“I’m sure it can be cleared up,” Leung said, riding a good smug now. “But that note links you to the crime. I can’t take any chance of the scene being… contaminated.” He made it sound like the three of them contaminated the air by breathing it. “If you object, you can always go downtown and talk to the chief.”

“You misunderstand,” she said evenly. “Title 28, United States Code, Section 533 authorizes the attorney general to appoint officials to investigate crimes against the United States.”

“What the hell does that—”

“Title 18, Chapter 51, Section 1111 makes it a federal crime to use magical means to commit murder. Chapter makes it a federal crime to conspire to commit an act of violence, including violence by magical means. I am the duly constituted official investigating a conspiracy to attempt the murder of multiple persons, including law enforcement personnel, by magical means. My authority comes from the attorney general and supercedes that of your chief of police. My chief suspect was seen with your victim. He left me a goddamned signed note about it on the body. Title 18, Chapter 55—”

“I’m not disputing jurisdiction,” he put in quickly. “I’m saying that you—”

“And I’m saying that you lack the authority to bar me from this scene. If you have concerns about my fitness or possible culpability in this crime, you may relate them to my superiors. Don’t bother the district office—they lack the authority to interfere, too. You’d better go right to the head of MCD. Ruben Brooks. He’s at FBI headquarters in Washington. Call him.” She produced a cell phone from another of her bag’s pockets and tossed it to him.

It spoke well for Leung’s reflexes that he caught it in spite of his deer-in-the-headlights look.

Lily just kept rolling. “The number for his direct line is on speed dial. Hit seven.”

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I don’t want—”

“If you’re not prepared to challenge my fitness, then I request and require your cooperation.” She turned and started for the duplex. The two closest uniformed cops were trying to look like they weren’t enjoying the exchange. Maybe Leung wasn’t popular with the rank-and-file.

Rule had caught his cue immediately and kept pace with her. Cynna dropped in behind.

“What was the victim wearing?” Lily asked without looking back.

“Nothing.” Leung hurried to catch up and grabbed Lily’s arm just as she reached the porch. “I’m not

letting that *were* in. He's no federal agent."

He hadn't, Cynna noticed, tried grabbing Rule. Good call.

"You," Lily said, her voice as cold as her eyes were hot, "had better let go of me right now. Unless you are planning to make an arrest?"

He dropped his hand, looking like he wanted to hit her with it. She looked back at him, her gaze steady as the bead of a sniper. Finally he looked away.

She stepped onto the porch. "Turner won't be going inside right away. But that's my call, not yours." She opened her purse and pulled out a wad of plastic, which she separated into gloves and booties.

Cynna glanced at Leung's feet. He hadn't bothered with the booties. Now that she thought of it, he hadn't been wearing gloves when he came out of the house, either.

"Where was the body found?" Lily asked, bending to pull the plastic over one shoe.

"Bedroom at the back. In bed, arranged neatly—her hands were folded over her heart." He gruded it, but Cynna figured he was telling himself he'd won one battle, with the exclusion of Rule from the scene.

"Any signs of sexual assault?"

He shook his head. "No resistance wounds, no visible tearing, and I didn't see any traces of semen."

"The guy who found her—he's a friend or a boyfriend?"

"He claims they weren't steady, just dated now and then. But it bugged him enough when she went home with someone else that he came by later. Says he wanted to be sure she was okay." His expression announced how little he believed that.

"Did he have a key, or was the door unlocked?"

"Open, he says. Ajar, not wide open."

It was open now, too. Cynna could see an ordinary living room through the doorway—beige sofa and carpet, a television. No evidence techs in sight. Now that she thought of it, she didn't hear their little vacuums, either. Surely they hadn't done the whole place already?

Lily gave Rule a nod. He must have known what that meant, because he stepped up to the door, crouched down, and put his face next to the knob.

"What the hell—!" Leung exclaimed.

She waved him to silence. Rule got a good sniff, then faced into the beige living room. He did this thing with his head, like a dog scenting the air. Then he looked at Lily over his shoulder. Cynna got his profile—gorgeous, but grim. "I don't get anything distinctive from the door," he said. "But in there..." He jerked his head toward the living room. "Death magic."

Lily turned to Leung. "This is my investigation now, and this place is sealed. No one goes in without my say-so."

“You can’t—”

“I just did.”

Lily had to get her phone back from Leung. While he put in a call to his chief to complain about her, she punched seven—and prayed she hadn’t just seriously exceeded her authority.

She glanced at her watch as the phone rang on the other end. Seven-thirty here meant eleven-thirty in D.C., so unless he was in a meeting. . .

“Hello, Lily,” he said.

Unless he was in a meeting, he answered this phone himself. Only members of the Unit had the number. “I’ve got a murder by magical means. Harlowe’s involved.”

“Go on.”

She filled him in, including her announcement about sealing the place. “So,” she finished, “am I in trouble for exceeding my authority? And if not, can I get someone here to confirm manner of death in a way the courts will accept? Karonski would be best, but if not him, another

Wiccan. And I could use some evidence techs. Leung screwed up the scene, no telling how many big, dirty cop feet have already trampled through, but we still need to try. And who handles the door-to-door?”

There followed one painful second of silence, broken by Ruben’s chuckle. “You seem to be dealing well with the loss of Karonski—whom you can’t have back yet, I’m afraid, so we’ll have to call in civilian experts. There’s a coven in Los Angeles whose testimony has held up well. I’ll send them down. Call the district office—no, I’ll do it. They’ll take over working the scene, but you’ll need to solicit the cooperation of local authorities for the door-to-door.”

“Yes, sir. Leung’s an idiot, however.” They would need a whole coven to do what Karonski normally did on his own? She had questions about that but filed them mentally for now. “He’s the type who’d screw up the investigation just to make me look bad. Ah, I’m afraid we got off on the wrong foot.”

“So I gathered,” Ruben said dryly. “Cope. You’ll take Weaver in to check out the scene?”

“Yes, sir. She’s getting her feet covered now.”

“Good. I have this feeling. . . well, keep her involved, just in case. Oh, about the staff. I’ve been asked to instruct you to preserve it for study, if at all possible.”

Lily opened her mouth to protest—and closed it again. He hadn’t actually told her not to destroy the staff, had he? Just that he’d been asked to tell her that. “Yes, sir,” she said carefully.

“Call me this evening to update, unless events dictate otherwise.”

She told him good-bye, disconnected, and put up her phone.

Cynna had been listening in with an interested expression on her face. Rule stood a little ways away, closer to Leung—probably eavesdropping on that conversation instead of hers.

Good. She knew what he'd think about any directive to preserve the staff instead of destroying it. She tended to agree with him, but needed to think it over.

“Come on,” she said to Cynna. “Let’s see what we can learn.”

Lily knew she was locking the barn door after the proverbial horse had scooted. Leung had already botched the scene. But she'd preserve what she could, which meant Rule stayed out for now. He hadn't given her a hard time about that, proving he could be reasonable when he wanted.

The living room was small, beige, and spotless. She stopped in the middle of it, looking around. Kim Curtis had been a tidy person. The carpet was recently vacuumed, the room itself as tidy as Lily's apartment, if not as sparsely furnished. The matching armchairs looked new. The couch was slip-covered in ivory matelassé, with two pale green pillows that precisely matched the chairs. A couple of prints hung on the walls—nice frames, conventional landscapes. The entertainment unit held a large television, an old VCR, a new CD/DVD player, and five cloth-covered boxes.

No glasses or plates in sight. If Curtis had offered Harlowe a drink, they hadn't had it in here.

Lily went to the entertainment unit and opened one of the boxes.

“What are you looking for?” Cynna asked from behind her.

“I don't know.” The boxes all held CDs and movies—tapes and DVDs. “She liked old musicals. And chick flicks.”

“She was doing okay for herself, wasn't she? She was just twenty-two, but she had her own place, decent stuff.”

“Yes.” She straightened. “Maybe some of this wasn't paid for yet, but she was doing okay.” Until she ran into Harlowe. Lily's jaw tightened. “Let's check out the bedroom.”

“It was a real treat, watching you take that little pissant apart.” Cynna said as she followed Lily down the hall. “Quite a lesson for me in respecting local authority.”

Lily winced. “Is it too late for ‘do as I say, not as I do’?”

Cynna chuckled. “Did you make up all that legal stuff you quoted at him?”

Lily stepped into the back bedroom and looked around. “I may have gotten some of the section numbers wrong. The gist was accurate.”

“That's just scary. You really know all that code?”

“Bits and pieces. I've been trying to get up to speed.” Kim hadn't done as much decorating in here. White walls, hand-me-down furniture that didn't match, but it wasn't an interesting mismatch, either. “I don't know if Karonski told you, but I haven't been with the Unit long. I used to work homicide.”

The unmade bed drooled white sheets and a faded pink-and-yellow comforter onto the floor. No blood,

but the body had voided itself in death, so it didn't smell great in here.

"Gah." Cynna's nose wrinkled. "I'm glad I'm not Rule."

"He doesn't react to smells the way we do," Lily said absently. No pictures on the walls, but above the bed were three wooden crosses. Handmade, she thought. Pretty things, really. "Most of the time, scent is information to him. Like if we see a pile of dog shit on the ground, no big deal. We get the message to step around it. Smells are mostly like that for him."

"If you say so."

There was a Bible on the bedside table. Lily frowned at it, trying to fit the signs of religious devotion with someone who picked up a stranger in a bar. Some religious types strayed from the straight and narrow on a regular basis, yet that didn't seem to fit this time. Why?

Because the devotional items were in here, she realized.

In Kim's personal space, not out in her living area. Her faith hadn't been for show, yet she'd picked up a stranger in a bar. She turned to Cynna. "From what you told me, you can't look for traces of Harlowe yet because you don't have his pattern, but you can look for bits that don't match with the victim's."

"I'll need to sort some of her things first, pick up her pattern. Then..." She glanced at the bed. "Then I'll see what I can pick out that isn't hers."

"Have at it. I'll check things in my own way." Lily had only touched death magic once. It hadn't been pleasant. She tugged off one glove, steeling herself.

Cynna was removing her gloves, too. "I was thinking that we might be able to estimate the strength of the staff."

"How's that?"

"What's your I.M.P.?"

Lily paused. "My what?"

"I.M.P. You know—Innate Magic Potential." When Lily looked at her blankly, she asked incredulously, "You *have* been tested, haven't you?"

"Oh. Right." She remembered Karonski saying something about it. "The test wouldn't work on me because it uses a spell to gauge the strength of the subject's Gift. The spell would slide right off."

"Shit. I guess that makes sense. Maybe there's some other way to estimate the strength of your Gift. It was strong enough to keep the staff from affecting you, so—"

"It doesn't work that way. I don't..." Lily's voice drifted off as she placed her palm on the pillow, right where an impression remained from Kim Curtis's head.

"Hey, you okay?"

"I'm fine." That came out automatically. It was almost true. "I just hate the feel of this stuff."

“Death magic, huh? What does it feel like?”

“Ground glass and rotting flesh.” Only worse. She didn’t have words to describe the corruption of it. She’d hoped she could tell if there was some difference, some change in the magic with someone else using the staff, but the sheer foulness overwhelmed everything else.

Lily shook her hand to rid herself of the lingering sensation and pulled her glove back on. “As I was saying, being a sensitive isn’t like other Gifts. I never used to think of it as a Gift at all. actually.”

“Why not?”

Lily struggled for a way to explain. “You’ve got some kind of shields, right?”

“Sure.” She looked around. “Um... I’m going to need to touch something of Kim’s.”

“We’ll tag whatever you handle. Try not to leave fingerprints on anything else.” She moved to the dresser, which held a mirror, jewelry box, and several bottles of perfume on a little tray. “Anyone with a Gift can learn to do spells, right?”

“Pretty much.” Cynna elbowed open the closet door. “Some are better at spellcraft than others. Most of us are only really good at a few types of spells, the ones related most closely to our Gift.” She sat on the floor and pulled out an athletic shoe, running her bare hand over it. “This will work.” she said with satisfaction.

Apparently shoes absorbed more than sweat from their wearers. Lily opened the jewelry box. Kim Curtis had liked earrings and bracelets. No necklaces, though. “So shields would be stronger or weaker depending on how strong your Gift is and how good you are at that type of spell.”

“Basically. There are ways to store power, but it helps to have a strong Gift.”

“Well, I can’t use magic,” Lily said flatly, closing the jewelry box. “And I don’t have shields. Being a sensitive is more like... like not being porous. Some substances won’t soak up water, no matter how much you pour over them. Magic can’t soak into me, no matter how much I’m hit with. Except...”

“Don’t stop now. If there’s an exception, I need to know about it.”

“Last night Nettie was able to put me in sleep. I’m told she used some sort of religious energy, not magic. But it was still a spell. I don’t see why it worked on me.”

Cynna shrugged. “Can’t help you much. I don’t know what the difference is, either.”

She put down the shoe and rose.

“I’ve got Kim’s pattern. I don’t know if I’ll be able to pick up enough of Harlowe’s to do any good, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“You *can* limit your scan to Harlowe, right? So you won’t get anything from the staff.”

“I don’t scan. I sort.”

“I’m not following you.”

“They’re two different operations. Scanning would be... oh, like looking for a red scarf you dropped on the floor. You’d see it from a distance. You wouldn’t have to touch it or pick it up. Sorting is more like looking for a silk scarf in a tangled pile of scarves. You’d have to touch the scarves to find the one you wanted and work it loose from the others.”

“Then be careful what you pick up.”

She flashed Lily a grin and moved up to the bed. Gradually all expression bled out of her face, leaving only focus. She held her left hand at her waist, palm out as if deflecting something, and extended her right arm, elbow locked and fingers together, pointing down at the bed.

Slowly her arm swung to the left. Nothing else moved. She might have been a statue with a single moving part—the slowly swinging arm, moving now to the right. If she still breathed, it didn’t show.

The arm hesitated and stopped. Gradually, her fingers spread out.

Her eyes rolled back in her head. As if every muscle in her body had simultaneously melted, she collapsed.

Lily leaped for her. She got there just before the woman’s head smacked into the bed frame, but not with any grace. Off balance, Lily ended up going down with Cynna sprawled half on top of her.

She managed to sit up, shifting so Cynna’s head rested on her thigh. She was checking her pulse when those whiskey-colored eyes blinked open and Cynna said, “Shit.”

“Are you okay? What happened?”

“Turns out the sorcerer was right. That staff does not want to be found.”

For a second Lily just stared at her. “You tried to find it. After everything I said—in defiance of a direct order—you tried to find the damned staff.”

Now she looked sheepish. “I, uh, figured you didn’t know what you were talking about.”

Lily stood. Cynna’s head hit the floor. “Hey!”

“Karonski was right when he called you a loose canon. How am I supposed to work with you when I can’t trust you?” She wanted to punch something. “Did you bother looking for Harlowe’s pattern at all?”

“Of course,” She had the nerve to sound indignant. “What I found—I assume it’s from Harlowe—was all tied up with the ugly stuff. Couldn’t sort it out.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“I wasn’t excusing myself. Just letting you know.” Gingerly Cynna got to her feet. “Whew. I feel as if I’m coming off a three-day drunk. Ah... I was wrong about one thing, so maybe you should, ah, check to see if... well, if something was done to me. It shouldn’t be possible,” she added hastily. “Not at a distance. But the impossible just keeps happening lately.”

Lily was mad enough to let her stew a while. It was only after a severe struggle with her less professional side that she managed to say curtly, “I touched your skin when I checked your pulse. No trace of death magic, so I’d say the staff didn’t do anything but knock you down.”

“I guess you couldn’t have missed it if there was just a teensy trace?”

“If death magic had a smell, it would be like that stuff they put in natural gas to make it smell bad—even the tiniest whiff and you know it’s there. If I touch death magic, I know it.”

“Good.” There was no mistaking the relief in Cynna’s voice. “Uh... there’s one more thing I need to tell you. It’s about Kim Curtis.”

“Yes?”

“She isn’t entirely gone.”

TWELVE



RULE felt sick. “You’re sure the residue you picked up isn’t a ghost?”

They were waiting for the FBI’s crime scene specialists to arrive. He and Cynna stood in one corner of the yard. Lily was on the porch, talking to the uniformed officer who’d been first on the scene. The rest of the police were gone. Leung had dismissed them in a temper fit when his chief told him to let the FBI have the scene.

At least the press hadn’t showed up. Yet.

Cynna shook her head. “I don’t know what I picked up, but with ghosts there’s always a direction, you know? This time there wasn’t.”

“What made you try to find a dead woman?”

“I always check,” she admitted. “When I’m called in, a lot of times someone has died violently. That’s a good way to throw up a ghost. So I do a Find on the victim to make sure. If there is one, we call in a specialist.”

He looked at her quizzically. “You’ve Found ghosts, then?”

“Sure. They’re not that unusual. Most times they aren’t strong enough to manifest, so no one knows they’re around.”

“And when there isn’t a ghost, you get... what?”

“Nothing. When people die, there shouldn’t be anything for me to Find. This time there was... well, not

all of her, but something of her. That's what a ghost feels like. Only this remnant wasn't tied to a place like a ghost would be. I don't know what it means."

"It means," Lily said grimly as she joined them, "that he didn't just kill her. He took her life—and fed it to the staff."

Cynna shook her head stubbornly. "I couldn't get a fix on the staff. How could I pick up on something inside it?"

"You connected with it, though. It knocked you on your ass. So where is it?"

"I couldn't tell, dammit! Something..." She stopped. Swallowed. "Something's blocking me."

"The staff, yes."

Cynna looked ill. Rule didn't feel too great himself. Was the remnant of Kim Curtis aware? Trapped, bodiless...

He turned to Lily. "Did you learn anything useful?"

"Maybe." There was strain around her eyes, a tightness he instinctively wanted to ease. "I heard a lot more about Mike Sanderson, the one who found her. I'm trying to get a handle on why she brought Harlowe home with her."

"You want to know if she was compelled?"

"I know you don't think the staff can do that, but this isn't adding up. She had these crosses on her bedroom wall and a Bible by her bed. And the boyfriend thinks she was a virgin."

Rule's eyebrows went up.

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Of course, just because a guy thinks a woman's pure as the driven snow doesn't make it so, but according to Sanderson, she believed in chastity until marriage. That put him off—he isn't religious himself—but he was hooked. He kept hanging around. That's what he was doing last night. He knew she loved to dance, so he went to the Cactus Corral to see if she was there, and sure enough." She shook her head. "He's messed up now because he didn't try to stop her when she left with Harlowe."

"He blames himself. That's natural."

"He knew something was wrong. She danced with Harlowe one time and then she left with him."

Cynna shrugged. "Maybe Sanderson didn't know her as well as he thought. Or maybe Harlowe gave her some roofies or K."

"Maybe. We'll see if anyone noticed her acting sleepy or drunk. But I don't think Harlowe slipped the reluctant boyfriend a date rape drug."

"What do you mean?"

"When Sanderson saw her leaving with a man she didn't know, he went up to them. He asked her what

was going on. And Harlowe just smiled at him and told him she'd be fine with him. And Sanderson completely bought it. That's what's eating him now. He thought it was just fine if she left with a stranger."

Rafe knew where she was heading. "This isn't the same as what Helen did to Abel. Harlowe didn't erase Sanderson's memories."

She hesitated, then said quietly, "It's more like what she did to your brother. Changed the way he thought about something."

His breath sucked in, quick and sharp. Memory's teeth only grew sharper when you turned your back on it. "Yes. She did do that."

"The effect seems to have worn off on Sanderson pretty quickly. A couple hours later he was here, checking up on Kim. He didn't buy the 'she'll be fine' bit for long."

Cynna looked skeptical. "You're drawing a lot of conclusions from very little evidence. Telepathy isn't the only explanation. For one thing, there are other Gifts."

Lily looked at her. "Such as?"

"Well, charisma. It's not as rare as telepathy, and if you put a good persuasion spell with a really strong Gift—"

"Shit, shit, shit!" Lily smacked her hand against her thigh. "I forgot. Karonski said something like that. That maybe Harlowe had a minor Gift of charisma."

"It's not in his report."

"It came up when we were talking. He was speculating, I think. I can't place the conversation, though. Can't get it in context."

That triggered Rule's memory. "After he and Croft had been tampered with, when we met them in their hotel room. He was describing their meeting. He said Harlowe might have a touch of a charisma Gift."

"It would explain a lot. Like why a devout young woman picked him up—"

"And why a man half in love with her didn't object."

"Whoa!" Cynna held up a hand. "I know I mentioned charisma as a possibility, but it would take one hell of a strong Gift plus an outstanding persuasion spell to alter people's normal behavior and morals that much. A touch of a Gift wouldn't cut it."

"The staff," Rule said grimly. "It changes the possibilities."

Cynna shook her head. "Did Sanderson say anything about Harlowe toting five feet of black wood? Did any of the witnesses? Doesn't seem like the sort of thing they'd let him bring into the club."

"He could have charmed them into allowing it."

"Or," Lily said quietly, "maybe he has a 'don't see me' on it."

“A what?” Cynna demanded.

“A spell that makes people not notice something.”

Cynna thought about it and shook her head again. “Demons can do that, go unseen. But that’s innate, like Rule’s Change. Spells that duplicate the innate abilities of those of the Blood just don’t exist. Too complex by far. It’s like the difference between manipulating DNA and creating it.”

“And yet Cullen cast a ‘don’t see me’ on my apartment last night.”

“I’m impressed... if it worked. But your apartment’s stationary. A moving object would be a whole ‘nother story. A ‘don’t see me’ on a five-foot-length of wood carried around a crowded bar? Nuh-uh. I’m not buying it.”

Rule and Lily exchanged glances. “I’ll call him,” she said, taking out her phone. “He said he’d answer if— damn.” A white, American-made sedan pulled up, with a white, American-made van right behind it. The two vehicles parked, bracketing Rule’s car. The men in the car wore gray suits.

Either the FBI or the IRS had arrived, and Rule didn’t think the deceased was being audited.

“Weaver—”

Cynna grimaced. “Make it Cynna, okay?”

“Right. I forgot. Try to get hold of Karonski. Find out if he remembers why he thought Harlowe might have a charisma Gift. I need to brief our associates, see what kind of equipment they brought. Rule—”

“I’ll call Cullen.”

“Thanks. Use mine. He’ll be more likely to pick up, since because he wants something from me.” She handed him her phone and headed for the newcomers.

Rule watched Lily as he punched in Cullen’s number. She’d told him once that a person her size either learned to move fast or got left behind. Not a bad metaphor for how she approached life in general, he thought. Her walk was brisk, efficient, utterly unself-conscious. And utterly female.

Then there was the way her hair swayed with her movement. He loved her hair. It was as black as a secret wish, shining in the clear light of the young sun, newly risen from its bed beyond the horizon...

“You’re really gone on her, aren’t you?” Cynna said.

Rule glanced at her sharply. As the phone rang on the other end, he thought of all he hadn’t told Lily. All he couldn’t tell her. She suspected he’d kept some things from her about Cullen’s search for the staff, and she was right. But that wasn’t the worst of his omissions.

He hadn’t lied to her last night. But when you slice truth too thin, you deceive.

The mate bond held them together, an inescapable gravity. But they had other ties—of affection, loyalty, duty. And sometimes gravity caused avalanches, mudslides, even earthquakes as opposing plates shifted, placing intolerable pressures on ground that wasn’t as solid as it seemed... “Yes,” he said at last. “I am.”

For once, Cynna's natural extravagance was dimmed enough to make a mask of the web of patterns over her face. "I see. Well, I need to get my phone. It's in your car, in my tote."

"Here." He gave her the keys, frowning as she walked away. After so many years, it shouldn't have mattered to Cynna that he wasn't available for fun and games. Apparently it did. He wasn't sure what to think about that, much less what to do.

Finally the ringing was cut off by Cullen's voice. "Changed your mind already, luv?"

"No," Rule said dryly. "I'm still of the same mind I was last night."

"Oh, it's you. If you're calling to pester me about the tracking spell—"

"I'm not, but I wouldn't mind knowing how it's working."

There was a moment's silence; then, grumpily: "It's not. Not properly, at least. I told you it was basically an earth spell, didn't I? Well, you wouldn't believe how many blasted churches source in part from earth—which would amaze their parishioners, I'm sure. The earth energy gets all tangled up with spiritual energies, which creates a bloody blast of interference every time you come within a few hundred feet. I *knew* that would happen, so I tried tying it to air, too, but air is chancy, and with all the pollution—"

"I get the idea." Three people had gotten out of the van. Lily broke away to talk to them. Cynna was talking on her phone. "You lost us."

"Twice," he admitted. "Picked you up again, but you were off the map for nearly a mile at one point."

"That's not good." Rule looked at his car, blocked now by two federal vehicles. He'd tucked the charm Cullen gave him last night under the driver's seat, where Lily was unlikely to see or touch it.

She was so bloody stubborn. Observant, too, unfortunately. Cullen's charm was supposed to allow her bodyguards to trail her, undetected—an excellent idea, if it could be made to work.

Rule slid his hand in the left pocket of his slacks and fingered the small gold button. It looked ordinary enough, though it was, in fact, truly gold—twenty karats, very soft and pure. "Perhaps we should test the panic button you gave me. If that doesn't work—"

"If you're not trying to insult me, then roll your tongue back up into your mouth so you don't keep stumbling over it. That thing is *simple*. Witches make them all the time. Now, if you didn't call to pester me about the tracking spell, what the hell do you want?"

"The answer to a question." Lily and the crime scene techs started for the house. Cynna had put away her phone and was following. Briefly he explained about Harlowe's victim and her reluctant boyfriend.

"You're right about one thing," Cullen said. "Helen could make people forget they'd seen the staff. Harlowe wouldn't be able to do that. At best, a charisma Gift might persuade them to lie about seeing him with it."

That could complicate things, Rule thought, when Lily talked to witnesses. "The boyfriend seems to have thrown off whatever effect Harlowe had on him pretty quickly."

"Charisma's a chancy Gift. Some are more susceptible to it than others, and if there's a lot of

dissonance, the effects don't last. If that's all you needed to know, I need to get back—"

"Not so fast. If Harlowe needed the staff to get the effects he did on his victim and the boyfriend, then he had it with him, but no one mentioned seeing it. A 'don't see me' spell would explain that, but I'm told that's impossible with a moving object."

Cullen snorted. "It would present more problems than I'm up to handling, that's for damned sure. I can't even get this blasted tracking spell to work right. I need to talk to that Finder of yours. She might have some spells I could use. Or bits of them, anyway, once I take them apart to see how they work."

"She'd like to meet you, too. But right now, I need to know if the staff could be made invisible."

"Not true invisibility, I wouldn't think. That alters the physical properties of an object, which requires not only enormous power, but—"

"Cullen."

"Right. No theory, no explanations, just an answer." Rule could almost hear his friend shrug. "The staff is Hers. I wouldn't want to guess what all She can do that I can't."

"She's limited in how she can operate in this realm."

"But we don't know what those limits are. except in a very general way. We know she can't operate directly in our realm—she has to use an agent. Nor can she spy on us—on lupi, I mean."

That was both lore and, according to Cullen, common sense. He claimed that the supposed omniscience of the gods—or Old Ones, as he preferred to call them—was basically one hell of a good farseeing spell. And farseeing spells didn't work well on those of the Blood. "Or on Lily, as long as she wears the Lady's emblem."

"According to the Rhej, yes, and I'm inclined to think she knows what she's talking about. But otherwise... we know damn little about the staff. Don't know that much about demons, either," he added thoughtfully. "Except for the lower sort that idiots sometimes summon. *She* seems to have made some kind of alliance with one of the demon lords, though. Hard to say what that means."

"You're not cheering me up."

"You'll feel cheerier once I've destroyed that bloody staff."

Rule's gut clenched. "I'm moving up the time for the next circle to tonight."

There was a heartbeat's silence. "Something's happened."

All sorts of things. "I'll explain tonight."

"It will have to be late, or between shows. I'm dancing."

"Between shows, then. The same place—make sure Max saves it for us. Tell the others to arrive singly, as before."

"What am I, your bloody secretary?"

“I can’t call,” Rule said quietly. “I could be overheard.”

“*Filius aper umbo*. All right. I’ll play secretary this once.”

Rule grinned in spite of himself. “You may be right, but I wouldn’t mention the possibility to the Rho.”

“We don’t chat often, so I doubt it will come up. Ciao.” Cullen disconnected.

Rule took a deep breath and did what he had to do, punching in a number he knew well. Why this felt like even more of a betrayal, he couldn’t say. But it did.

His father answered the way he always did. “Yes?”

“I need Benedict.”

“He won’t be happy. He just got back to his mountain.”

“It can’t be helped. I’m calling another circle.” Rule explained as briefly as possible. His father would know about the attack from Nettie, so it didn’t take long to fill in the rest.

“All right. What time, then, and where?”

“Have him check with me. I’m not sure where we’ll...” Rule’s voice drifted off. Something he’d heard, though hadn’t fully registered, had brought his senses on alert.

Lily. Speaking to someone inside. From this distance he couldn’t make out the words, but the tone... He started for the duplex. “I’m needed.”

“Go, then—*t’ei*us ven. Call me after the circle.” The Rho disconnected.

Rule reached the porch just as Lily came to stand in the doorway. Her quick glance his way told him little. “Baxter,” she called.

One of the suits Cynna was talking to looked up. “Yeah?”

“We’ve found something.”

Baxter started toward her, with Cynna right behind.

“What is it?” Rule asked. Lily looked at him and shook her head—and seeing her face clearly, he realized she wasn’t upset or shaken, as he’d thought. She was in a cold rage.

“What have you got?” Baxter asked when he joined them. The agent from the district office was sixtyish and fit, with most of his remaining hair concentrated in a pair of gingery eyebrows. He wore rimless glasses and reeked of tobacco smoke. He glanced at Rule, giving off a faint whiff of *seru*—just enough to tell Rule that, age and appearances to the contrary, Baxter considered himself the dominant male in most situations.

After that single glance, he ignored Rule. “What have you got?”

“Harlowe left us another little present in the DVD player.”

The bushy eyebrows lifted. “A bragger, is he?”

“You might say that.” She inhaled, visibly reaching for control. “He likes to take pictures, and Curtis wasn’t his first kill.”

Gan wasn’t happy. Earth hadn’t been as much fun as usual, not with it tied to *Her* tool. All Harlowe wanted to do was plan and kill, plan and kill. He wasn’t interested in fucking anymore, since he couldn’t do it.

And... well, all the killing was bothering it. It had hoped to see or *uth* a soul at the instant of death—that’s when one ought show up, wasn’t it? But that hadn’t happened. To all its senses, humans died so very dead.

Gan knew humans were different. Their rules were all tied up with them having souls, and what demon could make sense of that? They even got together in groups to agree on the rules sometimes—that was called *democracy*—and they got really worked up about owning things. They had lots and lots of rules about ownership, even more than about sex. They fought wars over it, but ownership had nothing to do with who could eat who because they didn’t eat each other. No, they ate dead things instead, and said *thou shalt not kill* but killed anyway.

But that was because they didn’t have to do what their rules said. As long as they didn’t get caught, they could break as many rules as they wanted, which was why Earth was usually such fun.

Not this time. It sighed and thumbed the remote again.

“Quit playing with that thing,” Harlowe said testily. “You’re distracting me.”

It looked at the man in the other bed in what was called a *motel room*. Motel rooms were very boring, but Harlowe was being hunted, so he had to hide out. Gan could understand that—it had to sneak around, too, because the humans would hunt it if they knew it was here. But that could be fun, too.

Not in a motel room. When they stayed at the other hiding place, with the Dozens, Gan had a pretty good time. It wasn’t allowed to show itself, but it could play tricks, watch the others talk and fight and fuck, that sort of thing. Sometimes it got to steal stuff. The gang thought very highly of stealing, though of course they didn’t know Gan was the one getting the money and guns. They thought Harlowe did everything.

But in a motel room, all it could do was watch TV. It sighed and pushed the channel change button again.

“Quit that,” Harlowe snapped.

Harlowe sure wasn’t any fun. The human wasn’t killing right now, so he was planning. He had papers spread out all over the bed. “I can’t find the fucking channel,” it explained.

“Which fucking channel? There’s a hundred of them!”

Gan brightened. “A hundred? That’s a lot of fucking.”

“Stupid little pervert. Not a hundred channels about fucking. A hundred fucking channels.”

Gan’s forehead wrinkled. “That doesn’t make sense.” One of the difficult things about Earth was that you couldn’t hear meanings here, only words.

But Harlowe had lost interest and was studying his papers once more, muttering to himself. “Needs to be half again as big...”

Gan went back to *channel surfing*—cute turn of phrase, that. Humans were very inventive with language because they got all their meaning from words.

Still no fucking, but there was shooting. Was it a war? Gan’s ears perked up. It was very curious about how humans conducted their wars. “... circle the wagons,” the TV person cried. “Hurry! They’re almost here!”

“... still, if I got rid of the desk,” Harlowe muttered, “the throne could go by the windows. What will I need with a desk, anyway?”

Gan tried to figure out what was happening on TV. Two groups of humans were shooting at each other. One group rode horses; the other didn’t. The bunch on horses yelled a lot and seemed to be winning. Some of them had guns; some had bows and arrows.

Then two more people on horses rode up, guns blazing. Many of the other horse people fell off, dead, and the rest scattered. Then the other group was happy.

“Can’t do it all overnight.” Harlowe sounded crisp, satisfied. “The Oval Office will do for a throne room initially. Later, I can have the Capitol Building remodeled.”

“Who was that masked man?” a TV woman asked one of the TV men.

The shooting was over, so Gan changed the channel. Things would get better soon, it reminded itself. Just last night Xitil had used Gan’s hand to write some instructions for Harlowe—instructions that came from *Her*.

Gan had done its part. It had brought Lily Yu to Dis and drunk a little blood—and oh my, but that had been good! Fizzy and powerful... but not powerful enough to let it possess her. Not without help from Her, only She couldn’t act directly. That would break the pact.

So She had to work through a tool. Once Harlowe did like he was supposed to do, Gan could get inside Lily Yu. Then it could have lots of fun.

But it wondered, as it watched a TV man cooking—that’s what humans did to dead things before eating them—if Xitil knew that her new associate’s tool was stark, staring crazy.

THIRTEEN





“THERE are three pictures he didn’t send us. Three victims he didn’t want us to know about.”

“We can’t be sure of that.”

Lily cast an impatient glance over her shoulder. Baxter sat at his desk, a scuffed and scarred relic from the fifties that looked out of place in the modern building that housed the FBI’s field office in San Diego. It held a jumble of file folders, a computer, five empty Dr. Pepper cans, and the one he’d just opened.

The man had a serious soda habit. “He killed on the twenty-fifth, the twenty-seventh, the twenty-ninth. No picture of a victim dated the thirty-first, but we’ve got one for the second and fourth of this month, then nothing on the sixth and eighth. Another victim on the tenth, and now Curtis on the twelfth. What does that say to you?”

“That we have a pattern. That doesn’t mean he killed on the missing dates. Something could have interfered with him on those days. Maybe he didn’t find the right type.”

“He does have a type.” She stopped in front of the murder board. There were seven prints pinned to it. Seven photos of women, all of them with light brown hair, all young, all naked. Five lay in beds, like Kim Curtis. One was in an alley, while one stared blindly up into the branches of a tree. None bore any marks of violence.

Seven tidy dead people, hands folded primly on their breasts.

“Why leave us pictures?” she asked. “Why make it easier for us to track him?”

“We haven’t found him yet,” Baxter pointed out. “But yeah, I know what you mean. He handed us a lot of information with those photos.”

They’d been taken by a digital camera, which meant the images had data attached. He’d made the disk at Kinko’s, for God’s sake. “We know what camera he used and when he took each of the pictures. We’ve got names and places of death for three of them now—damn Leung’s eyes.”

“I can’t blame him for not realizing the other vice in his territory was a homicide,” Baxter said. “You get a dead hooker, no signs of violence, you don’t say, ‘Hey, I’ll bet some dude with a magic staff sucked the life out of her.’”

“Once Curtis turned up in the same shape, arranged the same way, he knew he’d been wrong about Cynthia Porter. He held back on us until his chief leaned on him.”

“You’ll find that locals do that a lot.”

She exchanged glances with the older man. Baxter knew she’d been one of the locals until very recently. “I didn’t,” she said evenly.

He shrugged.

She and Baxter hadn’t exactly butted heads. MCD’s jurisdiction was clear, and Baxter had put several

people at her disposal without complaint. But he'd made it plain he thought her too young and inexperienced to have charge of an investigation of this size.

Lily tended to agree. She wanted Karonski back. She'd told Ruben that when she reported on the increased scope of the investigation. But the imp outbreak was getting worse. There's been a rash of fires, several accidents, and now a few fatalities. The governor of Virginia was talking about closing businesses, and the outbreak was being touted as the largest in a century. Ruben couldn't spare Karonski until they located and closed the leak.

They had made some progress. They had IDs now on three of the victims—one in Oceanside, another in Escondido, the third in Temecula, like Curtis. All three had been ruled death by natural causes and would have to be ritually examined. Lily felt a pang of sympathy for the coven from L.A. who'd been given that chore. They seemed competent, though—it had taken them about thirty minutes to confirm that Curtis had been killed by death magic.

Lily had spoken with the Temecula police chief and with three witnesses from the Cactus Corral, including the not-quite-boyfriend. She was waiting on another witness now—the bartender who'd apparently waited on Harlowe. It was his night off, and they hadn't tracked him down yet.

It was weird, hanging around waiting for others to turn up the witnesses and bring them to her. She was used to being out there hunting them herself, but someone had to coordinate the federal efforts with the local ones. Right now, that was her.

She'd be glad when Croft got here. "If he did have victims on the missing days"—and she believed in her gut that he had—"then he held back those photos for a reason. Why? Were there other victims we don't know about? The first one we have a picture of is from the twenty-fifth of last month."

"Eight days after you busted his operation with the Azá. Yeah, I'd like to know what he was doing for that week."

Maybe hiding out in hell. Lily hadn't mentioned that possibility to Baxter. Not only was it outlandish enough to make him doubt everything else she said, but it came from a source she couldn't reveal.

"We'll have another victim soon," Baxter was saying,

"if you're right about the staff and him having to feed it. I hope to God you're wrong, but I'm not counting on it."

She knew it. She knew it, and the certainty ate at her gut. "It keeps coming back to these pictures. Why take them? Why give them to us? Why did he want or need us to know so much?"

"He might not have known how much he was giving us. Lots of people aren't computer savvy. I'd never heard of that EXIT data before, myself."

"EXIF," Lily corrected absently, frowning at the map pinned to one end of the long bulletin board. They only had three vies identified so far, not enough to establish a definite pattern. But those three seemed to lead them north, away from San Diego. "Even if you didn't know the terminology, you'd have found out, wouldn't you? Before sharing your trophy photos with the FBI, you'd have made sure the images didn't give away more than you wanted them to."

Baxter smiled sourly. "Can't count on Harlowe being as bright as me."

“He’s bright enough.” Lily had spent enough hours learning about the man, getting to know him through the eyes of others, to be sure of that.

“The whizzes in profiling think he craves recognition. He was outwitting us, but that wasn’t enough. He had to be sure we knew how clever he was.”

“Maybe.” Lily drummed her fingers once on the desk. “No, dammit, it doesn’t fit. It just doesn’t fit with the man he was before—ambitious, amoral, but not a serial killer, and damn good at taking care of his own hide. Something’s changed, or we’re reading this wrong.”

The door opened. “Maybe he’s decided he’s invincible,” Rule said. He held a flat cardboard box that gave off wonderful aromas—pepperoni and pizza sauce. “That he can’t be caught or killed.”

“What the hell,” Baxter said. “You listening at the door?”

Lily frowned. Usually Rule took care not to make the humans around him uncomfortable. Maybe he was tired.

“I have good hearing.” Rule walked up to the desk and put down the carton. “It’s nearly eight o’clock, and I’m hungry. I thought you might like a couple of slices. I’m hoping,” he said, glancing at Lily, “to share the rest with my lady.”

My lady. Only Rule could say something like that and make it sound normal. “It would be handy if Harlowe cherished delusions of invincibility, but Cullen said that Helen was the one who took risks. Harlowe was more cautious.”

“That was when Helen held the staff. Harlowe has it now.”

“You think it changes the user’s personality?”

“I think we’ve got lots of guesses and very little knowledge. I also think it’s suppertime. There’s a break room down the hall where we could take however much of this Baxter can spare us.”

Baxter had already off-loaded three slices. “Go on, go on. The Bureau can survive without you for a few minutes.”

The break room was only four doors away and deserted at this hour. “Where’s Cynna?” Rule asked.

“There’s nothing for her to use to Find Harlowe, so she’s helping another team. Parental kidnapping. She was pretty sure she could Find the boy.” Lily ripped off a few paper towels to serve as both plates and napkins. “What was that ‘my lady’ bit about?”

Rule was feeding coins into the vending machine. He smiled at her over his shoulder. “Aren’t you?”

“It sounds...” Like the way he referred to his goddess, but Lily didn’t want to go there. “Medieval. As if you’re about to hop on your charger and go lance someone.”

“I’ll skip the charger. Horses don’t tolerate us well.” He brought two cans of soda to the table—Diet Coke for her, the straight stuff for himself. “Baxter’s unusually comfortable with my presence.”

“I explained that you’re a civilian consult.”

“It’s more than that. Usually there’s some sort of threat response, either fear or aggression or both. It’s a visceral thing, not under conscious control. He mostly ignores me. That’s rare.”

She could believe that. Rule was hard to overlook. “He’s got a touch of . . . well, otherness. It’s too faint for me to identify, but there’s something there. I’m guessing he’s got a witch, maybe even someone of the Blood, in his ancestry. That might make him more tolerant than most.” The smell was making her mouth water. She retrieved a slice and bit in.

“Perhaps.” He sat and removed a slice, the warm cheese stretching in a long string. “Your sister had a civil ceremony, not a religious one.”

She blinked. “Where did that come from?”

“Weren’t you thinking that ‘my lady’ sounds a lot like the Lady?”

“Have you picked up a telepathy Gift?”

“No, you make me work for whatever insights I can come up with. Is it specifically my beliefs that bother you, or religion in general?”

She resisted the urge to squirm in her chair. “I just think that sort of thing is private. It makes me uncomfortable when people wear their beliefs out in public.”

“Like underwear, you mean.”

She grinned. “Maybe.”

“I’m wondering if that’s a personal opinion or one your family shares.”

There were mushrooms on the pizza. Lily didn’t exactly hate mushrooms, but she didn’t exactly like them, either. She picked one off. “Family, I guess. The religious wars were mostly over by the time I was six, but we’re talking an armed truce with occasional skirmishes, not real peace.”

“They are of different faiths?”

“Mother’s a twice-a-year Christian—Easter and Christmas. My father was raised Buddhist, but I’m not sure how much it really matters to him. You’d think they could have compromised, since they aren’t especially devout, but . . .” She shrugged her good shoulder. Her pizza was getting cold, so she bit in.

“You would have gotten used to avoiding the whole subject, then, to avoid conflict in your family.” He nodded. “Did you stop thinking about it, too?”

Pretty much. Lily picked off more mushrooms, not looking up. “I went through the usual questioning period in my teens. You know—why are we here, what does it all mean, that sort of thing. It seemed like everyone had a different answer, and no way to back it up.”

“You wanted evidence. Proof.”

“What’s wrong with that? If we’re talking about stuff as important as the meaning of life, shouldn’t we

want to something concrete to hang our theories on?”

“Nothing wrong living in a fact-based reality. But science, as good as it is with how, isn’t equipped to deal with why.”

As far as she could tell, no one was much good at dealing with the why, but that didn’t stop them from thinking they’d locked truth up all nice and tidy. Lily frowned and took another bite, hoping he’d take the hint and drop the subject.

Rule laid his hand over hers. “I’m trying to understand you, not convert you.”

Okay. She said that with a little nod because her mouth was full. He wanted to know where she stood, faith-wise, because that sort of thing mattered to him.

It must matter to her, too, or it wouldn’t make her so uncomfortable.

That thought was disconcerting enough that she finished her slice in silence.

Rule seemed all right with that, not pushing for conversation while they ate. That was one of the great things about him, she thought. She wasn’t entertainment for him. He didn’t need her to make him laugh or bolster his ego or to figure him out so he wouldn’t have to. A lot of men who said they were looking for a relationship really wanted a combination sex buddy, therapist, and mirror.

Maybe he’d looked for those things, too, when he was younger.

A little bump of discomfort poked her, like being elbowed in the side when there was no one around. She didn’t like thinking about his age. *Tough*, she told herself. She might as well get over it. He wasn’t going to grow younger.

One of the things bugging her, she realized, was that there was just plain more of him that she knew nothing about. About twenty years’ worth. Maybe she should ask Cynna what he’d been like twelve years ago, when they were an item.

“What?” he said, wiping his hands on a paper towel.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were looking at me with big questions in your eyes.”

She had a suspicion Rule wouldn’t like her and Cynna comparing notes. “It’s nice, being able to sit together without feeling that I need to jump your bones.”

He grinned. “I’m crushed. But perhaps what you’re feeling mostly is exhaustion. You had a rough day yesterday, and not enough sleep.”

“I’m okay.” For another couple of hours, anyway. “And you know what I mean. The mate bond has eased off, hasn’t it? We can be farther apart now. A lot farther.” There’d been a time when she couldn’t let as much as a block separate them. “It feels good to be near you, but it’s more of a half-a-beer buzz, not the whole six-pack.”

“Did you chug six-packs in college? Somehow I can’t picture it.”

“I got drunk once. I didn’t like it.” Why people courted that complete loss of control she couldn’t fathom. “What about you?”

“It’s difficult for a lupus to get drunk. Our bodies regard alcohol as a toxin and clear it from our systems too quickly for us to become intoxicated.”

“That could be handy... unless you really want to be drunk.”

His grin flashed, quick and bright as a lightning stroke. “I did, yes, at that age. I wanted to see what it was like. I was as stupid as most boys, thinking ourselves adult once we pass a legal age marker.”

She had a hard time picturing Rule in college. Had he gone out for sports? Been studious or wild? Had he had friends? Human friends, she supposed she meant. People not in the clans. “Does your father have pictures from when you were young? A kid or a teenager, I mean. I’d like to see them.”

He tilted his head, surprised. “Henry has several albums. I’m sure he’d share them with you, if you asked.”

Henry? Who... oh. “Your father’s houseman or cook or whatever. He keeps the family pictures?”

“Henry has been part of my family for many years. He helped raised me.”

Rule hadn’t sprung from his father’s seed alone, but she couldn’t remember him ever referring to a second parent. That gaping absence warned her to go lightly. “You never mention your mother.”

“You might say that I’ve had many mothers. Our people make much of children.”

Okay, he wanted that door shut. She’d go along for now. This wasn’t the best time for such personal stuff, anyway. “I guess Nettie was one of those motherly...” Her voice drifted off as realization struck. “Or not. She, uh, must be your age, or close to it. You probably played together.”

“Ah... the gray hair is misleading. Nettie’s only forty-four.” He hesitated. “She’s my niece.”

“Your... niece?”

He nodded. “She was raised with her mother’s people but came to Clanhome to stay with Benedict most summers.”

Nettie looked older than Rule. She looked older than her own father. What did it do to families when half of them—the female half—aged so much faster than the others? “How old is Benedict?”

“Sixty-four.”

God. He did look older than Rule, but she’d have guessed him at about forty. Yet he had another eighty or more years ahead of him, while his daughter... “Damn,” she said softly. “He’ll watch her get old. And she’ll never see him as an old man.”

“It isn’t easy for one of us to have a daughter when he’s young.”

A sudden thought struck her. “Is that why you don’t marry—why lupi don’t believe in marriage? You

couldn't keep your secret from a wife. She'd age and you wouldn't, at least not as much. And she'd die. That would be hard."

Rule's face was all mask, no expression. "That's part of it."

"I'll get old and die before you will." There, she'd said it. Her heart beat unsteadily.

"Possibly."

Her eyebrows lifted. "If you live to twice the human lifespan, that's a hundred and fifty or more. I might get eighty-five or ninety years, if I stay healthy. So when I'm eighty and creaky, you'll be a lively one-oh-six."

"Sometimes a Chosen ages more like one of us. Not always. We don't know why."

He didn't know if he'd lose her while he still had years and years left. Not knowing... that could be as hard to handle as despair. She touched his hand.

He gripped hers suddenly, as if he knew her thoughts. As if he'd keep her young by force of will. After a moment his grip eased. He gave his head a little shake and released her hand. "I've enough to worry about in the present without tackling what-ifs that are years away. Most immediately, I'm afraid I've some clan business to take care of tonight."

"Okay. What's up?"

"The Rho has decided to call for an All-Clan." He began brushing the crumbs from the pizza into his palm and then dumped them in the box. "I'm needed to make some of the contacts."

"What's an All-Clan? Some kind of gathering of the clans?"

"Yes. It's held roughly every seven years. The last one was only two years ago, so we aren't due for one yet. But there are mechanisms for calling an All-Clan in an emergency. The Rho believes we're facing just that."

"Because of Her, you mean. The goddess. She has it in for lupi."

"That's right. We've already passed the word about Her, of course, but it's easy to disbelieve such a tale."

"So what does your father hope to accomplish? Does he think you'll be able to convince more of your people there's a real threat?"

"I never try to guess what Isen intends," Rule said dryly. "But one of his goals is certainly to persuade the doubters that the threat is real. That She is active in our realm again."

Lily frowned, tapping one finger against the table. Rule had said once that the lupi had been created to fight this goddess. Whether that was true or not, he believed it. So, apparently, did most lupi—even Cullen, who wasn't one to take much on faith. "What will it mean if the other clans believe you? What will they do?"

Rule hesitated, his dark eyes troubled. "*Thranga*," he said at last. "Perhaps."

“Well, now I understand completely. If you...”

Rule’s head turned, alerting her that he’d heard something. A second later she did, too—footsteps.

Baxter appeared in the doorway. “Hastings tracked down the bartender at his girlfriend’s place and is bringing him up. I told him we’d use my office. Might put the man more at ease than one of the interrogation rooms.” He eyed the pizza box. “Any leftovers?”

“Nope.” Lily pushed her chair back. “I’ll be right there.”

Baxter nodded and headed back down the hall. Lily took the empty pizza box to the trash can. They were out of time—again. There never seemed to be enough time for the questions that mattered.

Still, she could hit one of them. “What was your favorite TV show when you were a kid?”

“You ask the oddest things.”

“I watched *Sesame Street*. Was that on when you were little?”

“No, I was a Mouseketeer.”

“A Mouseketeer.” A grin spread across her face. “Really? Did you have the hat?”

“I don’t remember. No, I don’t think I did.” He came to her and put his hand on her good shoulder. “You’ll be here awhile longer, I take it.”

“Looks like. I tell you what. If it will make you feel better, I’ll call you when I’m ready to leave.” Lily was pleased with herself. Who said she couldn’t compromise?

The twist to his mouth didn’t look happy. “I expect my meeting to last awhile. I’m likely to be later than you will be.”

“Okay. If you need to take your car, I’ll get a ride.”

“I can’t leave unless you’ll accept another guard in my place.”

“Rule.” *Don’t overreact*, she told herself. Naturally he worried, with the way she’d been targeted. “I’m not claiming to be invulnerable, but I am a good shot. I can get myself home just fine.”

“A gun is little defense if you’re asleep when an attack comes.”

She glanced at the hall. Was that the elevator? “You sleep, too.”

“Sentry sleep is different.”

“What’s that? No, wait, I don’t have time for explanations. I need to get back.”

“Indulge me a moment first. I’ll keep this brief.” He took her face in his hands and bent to kiss her.

That was another great thing about him, she thought after he stepped back and she could think again.

When he kissed, he gave it his complete attention. Maybe she'd been wrong about that "half-a-beer" analogy. "Remind me to ask you about sentry sleep."

"All right. Benedict's waiting in the parking lot to give you a ride when you're ready."

"What?"

"He thought it best to wait for you outside the building so he didn't have to disarm. He agrees about the value of bullets where demons are concerned."

"That's gratifying, but—"

"You might call downstairs and let the guard know so he doesn't think Benedict is lurking outside so he can bomb the building or something." He turned to go.

"Wait! Wait a minute! I didn't say I'd let him play bodyguard."

"Play?" Rule paused in the doorway, smiling. "You say that, yet you've met my brother."

She stared at him, unamused.

He sighed. "Lily, the Rho uses bodyguards. It doesn't diminish him."

"The Rho agrees to use them. I didn't agree to a damned thing."

"But you aren't stupid, so you will. Besides, you'll need a ride home. Why not use Benedict? He's here."

"He's here because you arranged it. You didn't ask me." She heard voices in the hall—the bartender, complaining about having his night off interrupted, and one of the agents soothing him.

"You've been busy. I took the liberty of entering Benedict's cell phone number on your phone's speed dial—number twelve. If you'll let him know when you're ready to leave, he'll be ready."

Which meant he'd planned this hours and hours ago, when she'd handed him her phone to call Cullen. Then sprung it on her at the last minute. "Dammit, I have to go. But we are going to talk about this."

He smiled. "Of course. Until later, *nadia*."

FOURTEEN



AT eight o'clock on Saturday night, Club Hell was packed and noisy. Rule felt the vibration from the music in the soles of his feet, even back in the cubbyhole Cullen used for a dressing room. He had no idea how the human patrons of the place could hear each other out there.

Of course, that was one of the reasons he'd chosen Club Hell for the circle. They needed to come together on neutral ground, and the club had supplied that many times over the years for less formal meetings than the one tonight. No one could eavesdrop on them physically. "Max said the others are already here."

"I saw a few of them." Cullen wiped his face with a towel. He was sweaty and as naked as the law allowed, having just finished his performance. "Including Leidolf."

That name jolted Rule. Max hadn't mentioned that, damn him. "Who did they send?"

"Dear Randy."

Randall Frey, the other clan's Lu Nuncio. Rule's counterpart. That was good, a sign they were taking this seriously... but he wouldn't turn his back on the man.

"I don't put much stock in Leidolf's decision to participate," Cullen said, tossing the towel on the shelf that served as his dressing table. "They want to know what you're up to, that's all."

Leidolf and Nokolai had a long, unhappy history. Most recently it included an attack on Rule's father that had left him badly injured and one Nokolai dead... along with three members of Leidolf. "That's true of others as well. We knew that once we convinced a certain number to come, others would decide they couldn't afford to be left out. Leidolf did send the heir."

"Status." Cullen grabbed his jeans. "Can't let their representative be outranked by you."

"Perhaps." Rule leaned against the wall, fighting an urge to fling open the door. Cullen was annoyingly impervious to the usual lupus distaste for small, enclosed spaces. "How many agreed to come tonight? Max was in a lather about something when he let me in the back door. He didn't hang around long enough to give me a head count."

Cullen grinned and stepped into his jeans. "I can imagine. Poor Max. He likes to be in the middle of things almost as much as he likes to play it safe."

Rule's eyebrows lifted. "You know something I don't?"

"Five more are attending this circle than came to the first one, in spite of the short notice—and they include a bumper crop of Lu Nuncios. Ought to make for a lively meeting. I can almost smell the *seru* now."

"What's changed?"

"Etorri is here."

Etorri... the most honored of them all. In the long centuries since the Great War, the clan had nearly winked out of existence more than once. The single Etorri who'd survived that conflict had been altered in ways that set him and his descendents apart; the magic was too wild in them, diminishing fertility. Somehow the clan had persisted, though. Equally amazing, perhaps, was their persistent integrity. They lived up to their *du*.

Etorri. The clutch of pride-blinded, self-righteous fools who had expelled Cullen from their ranks for

practicing sorcery, dooming him to life as an outcast. . . if he lived. The clanless usually committed suicide or went insane.

For whatever reason, Cullen had done neither. Three weeks ago, his life as a lone wolf had ended when Nokolai claimed him with blood, earth, and fire. If Rule's feelings about the Etorri were mixed, Cullen's were volatile. "Who did they send?" he asked carefully.

"Who else?" Cullen's mouth twisted in what might have been meant for a smile. "My dear cousin. Oh, don't look so wary. No need to tiptoe around my tender feelings." Cullen yanked up his zipper and opened the door, not bothering with a shirt. Because he considered pants optional after a performance, that wasn't surprising. "I'll survive seeing Stephen again, and God knows he's too pure to be harmed by contact with us lesser beings."

"I'm glad you're not bitter."

Cullen gave a single bark of laughter.

Rule was glad to leave the closet-sized dressing room. The hall they entered wasn't a big improvement, though, being dim and narrow. One end opened onto the squalor Max called his office. They went the other way, into the scents and din of the club proper.

The cavernous room occupied both the basement and first floor of the building, with its upper reaches vanishing in the overhead gloom. Max took great delight in the decor. He'd borrowed from every hellish cliché he could find, creating a three-dimensional cartoon of the underworld complete with stony walls, fake fires, and a scent he insisted was brimstone.

Most of the club's patrons were human, of course. That lupi frequented the place made it a draw for thrill seekers, and for seekers of another sort. Several women tried to claim Rule's attention—some he knew, some he didn't. Several more tried to stop Cullen.

It must have been a good performance tonight. The two of them made their way between the tables, managing to get by with a smile, a word, a nod, looking for the ones who weren't human.

There, at the bar. Rule caught the man's eye and gave a small nod. Across the room, another man saw them and gave the woman beside him a kiss and then stood. A pair of men at a table with several women created vast disappointment by taking their leave. All around the room, one and two at a time, men who resembled each other mainly by their unusual fitness began drifting toward the back of the room, where a spiral staircase wound up into a shadowed loft, invisible from below.

Rule and Cullen reached the stairs first. Rule started up, with Cullen behind him.

"Did you have any trouble getting away?" Cullen asked.

"No." He hadn't even had to lie. Not that he'd told her the truth, but he hadn't spoken a direct lie.

"Even if the tracking spell doesn't work—and I may have fixed it—Benedict's got the panic button, right?"

"Yes."

"My, but you're in a monosyllabic mood all of a sudden. I suppose you're feeling all squirmy with guilt.

Bad habit, guilt.”

“Shut up, Cullen.”

“Right. You’re making too much of this, you know. Lily’s sensible. She’ll be upset, but once she thinks about it—”

“Are we talking about the same woman?” Rule demanded. “The one who won’t have bodyguards, so you have to invent a whole new spell so I can be sure she’s protected? The one I had to trick into letting Benedict stay with her while I’m gone? She was attacked by a bloody demon last night, but oh, no, she doesn’t need protection. That’s sensible?”

They’d reached the loft, an open, unfurnished stretch that ran the length of the back wall. All the pillows had been chased to the edges of the carpeted floor to make room. There were no lights; the only illumination came from below.

With a glance, Cullen changed that. Twelve black candles set in a wide circle suddenly sported flames. Then he looked at Rule. “Maybe she doesn’t like Benedict. I don’t, myself.”

Rule snorted.

Someone was coming up the stairs, making more noise than strictly necessary. That was courtesy. Rule took note and stuffed his regrets—and yes, dammit, his guilt—down where it wouldn’t intrude on tonight’s business.

Cullen took a white candle, still unlit, from a small tote and started for the head of the stairs. He stopped beside Rule and put a hand on his arm—a rare gesture. Lupi usually touched easily and often, but Cullen had spent most of his life apart. He’d stopped reaching out decades ago.

He spoke under the tongue now, so low that, even this close, Rule barely heard him. “*There’s no point in punishing yourself, you know. Lily will do a fine job of that when the time comes.*”

A smile ghosted across Rule’s face. “*The funny thing is, you mean that as a comfort.*”

Cullen’s answering smile was swift and fleeting. He turned just as the first of the others reached the top of the stairs—Ben Larson of Ansgar, the largest of the Scandinavian clans. Ben was a fine fighter, but he could be overly deliberate, seeking certainty when none existed.

He frowned at the sight of Cullen. Perhaps he’d hoped Rule would have switched gatekeepers. Tough. They were all going to have to adjust to changes. The realms were shifting, and *She* was active once again.

“A moment,” Cullen said to Ben. This time he waved his hand over the candle he held and murmured a few words to dance a flame onto the wick. That was theater, and Rule’s idea. He wanted the others to get used to Cullen but saw no point in rubbing their noses in just how different his friend really was. Some of the Gifted could summon fire through ritual. Cullen called it by mind alone.

He held the candle out to Rule first. “*Accipisne alios in pace ?* ”

“*Accipio in pace.*” Rule held his palm over the flame without quite touching it for a slow count of three—long enough to seal the pledge, briefly enough that by the time he left the burn would be healed.

Then he moved to the nearest black candle and sat tailor-fashion, the candle at his back.

Cullen held the white candle out to Ben. “*Accipiaris in pace.*”

“*Advenio in pace.*” Ben held his hand over the flame as Rule had done and then took his place within the circle of candles.

One by one the rest entered, held one hand to the flame, and pledged peace. Con McGuire of Cynir. Stephen Andros, the Etorri Lu Nuncio, with the oddly pale eyes typical of his lineage and hair the color of dust. Ito Tsegaye of Mendoyo. Randall Frey of Leidolf—a smiling villain, that one. Ybirra’s Javiero Mendoza, almost as dark-skinned as Ito. Rikard Demeny of Szós. The Kerberos heir, Jon Sebastian, who looked like an accountant and fought like a madman. Kyffin’s Sean Masters.

Altogether, fifteen of the twenty-two dominant clans were directly represented, eight by their Lu Nuncios. One of the heirs and two of the *nonheris* sons had crossed an ocean to attend the first circle. For this one, Stephen Andros had traveled almost as far—the Etorri lands were in northern Canada.

Rule tried not to resent the fact that it had taken Etorri’s lead to persuade many of them to attend. They were here. That’s what mattered.

Once everyone was seated, Cullen extinguished his candle and sat apart, near the wall. He was responsible for guarding the circle from intrusions both physical and magical. *She* couldn’t spy on them directly, but her agents might be able to.

Rule was responsible for what happened within the circle. No easy task, that. He began with silence, allowing them all a few moments to gather the inner stillness necessary for control.

Candles burned behind each man, leaving faces shadowed and laying their waxy scent heavily on the air. Music and voices washed up from below. And yes, beneath the heavy scent of the candles and the mingled personal scents of those present, Rule found more than a trace of *seru*.

Lu Nuncios were by definition dominant. Closing up so many together in a *pace* circle and getting them to listen, to cooperate, would be tricky. Outright violence was forbidden, as were challenges to later combat. But each of them would instinctively seek to dominate the others.

Including him, of course. Cullen was right. It should be a lively meeting. “*In pace convenio,*” he said formally. “Let us begin.”

“You can start with an explanation,” Rikard said. “Why is that one—” he jerked his head toward Cullen— “acting as gatekeeper?”

Rikard was the oldest of them, but age had never mellowed him. He remained fiery and prone to saying what others might leave unsaid out of caution or simple courtesy. “Because Nokolai’s Rhej doesn’t leave Clanhome. Because Cullen has the necessary skills. And because I chose him.”

One of the *nonheris* muttered something Rule ignored. Rikard snorted. “Obviously you chose him. But—”

Stephen Andros interrupted. “We waste time arguing about what we’ve already accepted by sitting in circle. Nokolai called the circle. Nokolai therefore has the right to choose the gatekeeper.”

Rule didn't thank him. That would be insult, implying that Stephen supported him—a subordinate position. But he met the Etorri heir's eyes for a moment in acknowledgment. Stephen Andros was built like a fullback, but he had the otherworldly eyes of a monk, a sage... or a sorcerer.

Rule had wondered if it was that taint of otherness in Cullen's heritage that had made the impossible possible. There had never been a lupus sorcerer; their innate magic was said to crowd out any other type. He'd never asked. Cullen didn't speak of his life as Etorri.

"I would know more about why I am here." That was Ito Tsegaye of Mendoyo—dark, thin, and very tall. His English was heavily accented, tuned to melodies distant and strange. The Mendoyo had lived apart from the other clans for centuries while Africa was cut off from the European world; more than their accents were strange to Rule.

"You're here to take information back to your clan— and, I hope, some of you are here to join the fight against Her. Something has changed, and the realms aren't as distant as before. She's able to reach into our world once more, and She intends to destroy us."

Randall of Leidolf smiled. "That She would destroy us if She could, I don't doubt. But the rest of it... we've only your word about that."

Rule looked at him impassively. It took all his control to keep his own *seru* from spiking at the insult. "Yes, you have my word. All of you have heard of what happened— how Her followers were defeated and Her staff disappeared. But some of you have heard it only second- or third-hand. Do you wish to hear it from me?"

They did, though it took some discussion to reach agreement. Lily, Rule thought with a small smile, would have wanted him to take a vote.

"You are amused?" Ito asked.

"A private thought. My Chosen finds some of our ways strange, and for a moment I saw things through her eyes." Reminding the others of Lily wouldn't hurt. The Lady had never gifted a Lu Nuncio with a Chosen—not, at least, since the times of legend.

"Your Chosen... some say she's a sensitive."

Rule looked at the man who'd spoken. Con was a friend, but more, he was of the same mind as Rule. They had to organize now, while Her power in their realm was still limited. "Yes, she is."

That raised eyebrows. "Uncanny," Rikard announced.

"Not since Magya of Etorri—"

"Coincidence. It doesn't mean—"

"A Lu Nuncio with a sensitive Chosen—coincidence?" Con snorted. "Sure, and the Lady's just having a little joke on us."

Ben flushed angrily. "So you're an expert on the Lady's intentions now?"

"I'm saying it isn't coincidence. We don't call our mates 'Chosen' because the Lady hands them out at

random.”

“Very true,” Randall said, “but we don’t want to jump to conclusions, either.” He turned to Rule, smiling his toothpaste ad smile. He was a handsome man, younger than Rule by a decade, with streaky blond hair, a pianist’s long fingers, and more wiggles than a snake. “You aren’t trying to make us think you’re starring in a rerun of Senn and Magya, are you?”

“Randall.” Rule smiled back gently. “I respect your character too much to try to make you think anything at all.”

That brought grins and a couple of chuckles. Rule took advantage of the moment to begin his tale. It wasn’t their way to shear a story of its personality, turning it into the kind of impersonal report Lily might submit, so this took a while.

There were a few glances at Randall when Rule spoke of the attack on his father—and later, more glances at Cullen, who’d played a heroic part at the end. And when he finished, the questions hit. The first few were easy, but inevitably someone asked about Lily.

“She’s still a cop, yes, but with the FBI now.”

“One of your federal police, you mean?” Ito asked.

“That’s right.” Rule took a deep breath. He couldn’t put this off any longer—it was, after all, why he’d called the circle. “She’s in charge of the hunt for the staff. That’s how I learned today that the government doesn’t intend to destroy it.”

That brought outcries even from those who weren’t wholly convinced the staff existed. Rule gave them a moment before continuing. “Lily has been told to preserve it for study. I don’t know who wants the bloody thing, and it doesn’t matter. We can’t let them have it.”

Even though “they” included Lily.

FIFTEEN



AT ten-fifty-seven, Lily took the elevator down with her eyes closed, leaning against the wall. She was beyond tired, into the lightheaded stage when giggles or tears are equally easily come by.

Probably she should have left earlier. Okay, definitely she should have, but they had so little time—maybe a day. Then Harlowe would kill again.

The good news was that Rule wasn’t around to nag. And the bad news... well, the bad news was that Rule wasn’t around. She’d grown used to curling up with him at night. She’d miss that, at least for the few seconds between getting horizontal and falling asleep.

She got her eyes open and her back straight before the elevator door opened. The building had decent security, a mix of the old and the new—an electronically operated door plus a guard with a sign-in sheet. He teased her about having a “real patient date.” She looked out the heavy glass doors and saw Benedict waiting.

It had been tempting to take a taxi home. Tempting, but stupid. If they made another try at her tonight, she’d lose precious seconds yawning. So she’d sucked it in and done the sensible thing, calling Benedict to let him know she was leaving. Just as she’d been told to do.

Her lips tightened. Rule thought she was being stubborn about needing protection. There was a pinch of that, she admitted as the guard hit the button that unlocked the door. But it was his high-handedness that infuriated her. He’d made a decision for her this morning and then waited all day to spring it on her.

She stepped out into air with barely enough snap to qualify as fall, air that smelled of concrete and car exhaust, yet it perked her up. It hadn’t been groomed and filtered and pimped into a consumable product. It was just air being air.

Or maybe it was stepping from safety into possible danger that quickened her heartbeat. Whatever. She took a second to breathe in, feeling more awake than she had in hours.

“We’re exposed here. It would be best to get to the car.”

She glanced to her right at more than six solid feet of annoyed male. “Hello, Benedict. I’m pretty good, thanks. How are you?”

The smile that touched his mouth looked like an uncommon visitor. “It’s good to see you again. Especially when you aren’t bleeding. Can we go to the car now?”

She sighed. “Sure. Where... wait a minute. That’s *my* car.”

“I drive a Jeep. No doors, no protection.”

“I suppose Rule gave you the keys.”

“You’re pissed.”

“Good guess. Not at you, though.” She fell into step beside him, feeling dwarfed. Rule was tall. - His brother was just plain big—six-four and two-forty, at a guess, and every inch hard enough to bruise yourself on.

They didn’t look alike. Benedict carried the human side of his ancestry on his skin—a coppery color that suggested native blood, as did his silver-shot black hair and dark eyes. He wore jeans with a black T-shirt and a denim jacket that hid his shoulder holster. And he was not, thank God, wearing the scabbard that sheathed the three feet of steel he favored at Clanhome. “What are you carrying?”

“This and that. Main weapon’s a Sig Sauer.”

“I use a Sig, too.”

“Good choice. I wanted to bring my SAW, but there was a chance someone would check out the car. I wouldn’t be much use to you if I got locked up.”

“SAW... Squad Automatic Weapon. You’re talking about a machine gun.”

He nodded. “Good stopping power.”

“I’ve more to be grateful for than I’d realized.”

They reached her Toyota. He claimed the driver’s side before she could, so Lily got in on the passenger side, frowning. “I could drive. My reflexes are almost as good as yours.” She took after Grandmother that way.

“Almost as good a Rule’s, maybe.” He started the car. “Not mine.”

She looked at him, wondering just how fast he was. Lily had seen him in action once, but he’d been a wolf at the time—one of several—and she’d been busy getting shot and shooting back. Aside from Rule, she hadn’t known which wolf was which. So she felt a certain professional curiosity about Benedict’s abilities. What would he be like in a fight in his human form?

Not that she wanted to find out tonight. She fastened her seatbelt. “Rule told me once you should have been Lu Nuncio. Not just because you’re older than him, either. He thinks you’re a better fighter.”

Benedict made a small, impatient sound. “I thought he’d outgrown that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am a better fighter. That doesn’t make me a better Lu Nuncio.”

“The Lu Nuncio defends the Rho and answers any formal challenges, right? Fighting’s a big part of the job description.”

“He’s also the heir. The one who will eventually be Rho. Rule will lead our people far better than I could.”

“So you don’t feel skipped over or slighted?”

He was silent for so long she wondered if she’d offended him. But when she glanced at him, he seemed to be thinking, though his eyes remained watchful, keeping track of the cars ahead, beside, and behind them. *Cop eyes*, she thought. It was odd to find them in someone who’d been on the other side of the law most of his life, until the law changed.

Finally, as he accelerated into the traffic on 1-15, he said, “You’re thinking about Mick. He wanted to be Rho. I never have. When our father named Rule heir, Mick was angry. I was relieved.”

It was Lily’s turn to fall silent. The twinned ribbons of taillights seemed to draw them along, just one more bead on a string. Her eyes grew heavy. She leaned her head against the headrest... then jerked it up again. She’d been close to drifting off.

I trust him, she thought, startled. Somewhere inside, she’d decided Benedict could be counted on to watch out for both of them. This wasn’t like her, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Unlike Rule—or most of the other people she knew, for that matter—Benedict didn’t have the radio on

or a CD playing. Maybe he was listening for danger as well as watching. So they drove on through the crowded city night in silence, with only the glow of the dash lights to smudge the interior darkness, leaving more to be guessed at than revealed.

Why had she asked about his feelings? No doubt he had the usual assortment, but he kept them so far out of sight she wasn't sure he knew any more about them than she did. He wasn't likely to open up to her.

Yet instinct prompted her to believe him. There was something reassuring about Benedict, something oddly peaceful. He seemed so at rest within himself.

Not her. Now that she'd stopped doing, stopped talking, the discomforts of a healing body spoke all too loudly. She shifted, trying to find the best way to rest her shoulder, and then shifted again. And her mind was anything but quiet.

Finally, she broke the silence. "I'd like to ask you something, but it might be rude by your standards."

"Our standards aren't that different from yours."

"Maybe it's just plain rude, then. It's... about your daughter."

He gave her a quick glance. "Rule told you."

"Just tonight, yeah. And last night I learned about the, ah... the age thing. I'm still trying to get it sorted out."

"Shook you up." It was a simple observation, lacking either sympathy or judgment. "What did you want to know about Nettie?"

"Was her mother your Chosen?"

"No." The hitch between that flat answer and his next words was brief, a fraction of a breath. "I met Claire when Nettie was twelve. We didn't have children together."

A dozen more questions pressed at Lily. She was pretty sure Benedict's Chosen had died, but she didn't know how or how long ago. She wanted to know what happened when one partner in a mate bond died. How did it affect the one who remained?

She wanted to know more personal things, too. Had he loved Claire? Had they been friends as well as lovers? What had been the limits of their bond? Had they ever had their abilities cross over the way she and Rule had?

Lily was used to asking deeply personal questions, often at a time when feelings were raw. But this wasn't an investigation, and Benedict's reserve went deep. "Thank you for telling me," she said at last.

There was a hint of amusement in his voice. "That was all you wanted to know?"

"No, but—"

Her cell phone rang. She reached into her bag and thumbed it on. "Yes?"

“Lily Yu?” said an unfamiliar male voice.

She frowned. Very few people had this number. “Who is this?”

He chuckled, a pleasantly masculine sound. “I suppose we haven’t spoken before. I’m Patrick Harlowe.”

Exhaustion evaporated in a white-hot rush. She sat up straight. “Thoughtful of you to call. I’ve been looking for you.”

“So I understand.” He had one of those rich voices that invested everything he said with significance and a hint of intimacy. Like a televangelist, she thought, or someone selling kitchen gadgets on a late-night infomercial. “Haven’t had much luck, have you?”

“Not so far.” *Keep him talking.* She’d play whatever game he had in mind and keep him talking. People always gave up more than they realized if you could keep them talking. “How’d you get this number, anyway?”

“The same way I’ve learned so many interesting things recently—from One who is almost omniscient. I imagine you’d find that handy, in your job,” he added. “Being able to watch or listen to anyone you wanted.”

“That I would. But ‘almost’ means that She isn’t omniscient, doesn’t it? She can’t watch lupi. Or me. And She can’t talk to you directly.” Could She? God, if the staff really had made Harlowe telepathic, able to get instructions and information directly from Her—

“Pretty sure of that, are you?” He might have been a favorite uncle indulging a pert niece. “But you’re correct in this case. She isn’t quite omniscient. As this call illustrates, however, we’ve found ways to work around those few limits She possesses. But the telephone is limiting, too, isn’t it? So much more pleasant to become acquainted in person.”

“You’d like to do lunch?” Lily kept her voice dry. “Gee, let me check my calendar.”

“Lunch won’t work for me.” There was laughter in his voice now. He was enjoying himself. “How about right now? It’s a bit late, but my schedule is so full these days.”

Lily glanced at Benedict. His face was wiped clean of everything but focus.

Of course. He was listening to Harlowe, too. “I’m free tonight. Where shall we meet?”

“You’ll have to come to me, I’m afraid. And I must insist that you don’t tell anyone. No one at all, Lily—other than your driver, of course.”

He knew someone was driving her? Lily looked at Benedict. She could still subvocalize, even if she couldn’t hear it anymore: “*Are we being followed?*”

He shook his head.

“That goes for your driver, too. No phone calls. If anyone finds out about our little rendezvous I’ll be hurt, and I’m afraid I don’t react well when my feelings are hurt. And I *will* know, Lily.” His voice dropped. “The One I serve may not be able to watch you directly, but She doesn’t have to. She can

observe the others—any and all the others—you might be tempted to call. Like your associates at the FBI, or the police... or even your family.”

Lily’s nape was suddenly clammy, as if someone had touched it with a cold, damp cloth. “So where do we meet?”

“I’ll give you directions in a moment. First, there’s someone here who’d like to speak with you.”

“Wait—”

But he’d passed the phone to someone else. Someone whose voice struck Lily dumb and blind with fear.

“Lily?” Beth Yu spoke in her usual quick, lighthearted way. “Patrick wanted me to reassure you that I’m all right.

I’m not sure why. Really, I don’t even know why he wanted to come here—this is *so* not my kind of place. But it’s all right, you know. Patrick said so. He’ll take care of me.“

The candles had burned halfway down. They’d discussed much and settled little, and it was almost time for Cullen to leave for his second performance.

Not that he had to dance anymore. Not for money, at least, and Rule had expected him to quit when the Rho put him on retainer for the clan—“like a damned lawyer,” Cullen had said. But he continued to do two shows a night, two days a week. He’d told Rule he was hanging on to the part-time gig because the extra money helped.

Perhaps he believed that. Rule didn’t. Cullen had never been much interested in money, seeing it mostly as a means to acquire the scraps of paper that were real treasure to him—bits of old spellbooks and such. No, Rule had to believe that dance gave Cullen something he needed.

At the moment, though, it was a confounded nuisance. “We’ll need to wind this up soon,” he said when he was able to get a word in. “Remember to be cautious about what you discuss after the circle is broken.” There would be a number of meetings after this one, he was sure—less formal, but maybe more meaningful.

“I still don’t know what you want.” Ben was cranky. “What is it you want us to do? It’s all very well to talk about doing battle with Her, but She’s not here.”

“Keep your eyes open,” Rule said promptly, “and your noses to the ground. See if what I’ve said about the realms shifting, bringing changes, matches with what your clan is experiencing. I told you about the banshee sighting in Texas, for example.”

“Possible sighting,” Javiero corrected. “But I checked into it, and the stories of the witnesses hold up.”

“What’s happening in your own territories?” Rule asked. “Send word back about anything you learn that’s unusual. Try to find out what others of the Blood might know or guess, too. You, Ben, might send word to the trolls, see if they’re aware of any changes.” Ben’s clan was based in Scandinavia, which possessed the only remaining troll population of any size.

“Trolls.” Ben snorted. “You ever tried talking to one? Might as well talk to a tree.”

“Speaking of talking to trees,” someone said, “I’ll volunteer to check with the dryads.”

That sally earned several grins and chuckles. Dryads were notoriously shy... and notoriously amorous, if you could overcome their timidity.

Ito shook his head. “I don’t know dryads or trolls, but I know trees. With trees, you don’t talk. You listen.”

There was a moment’s silence, all of them mildly embarrassed on Ito’s behalf. He was well liked, but not well understood.

“We’re getting off-track,” Randall said. “Asking us to look for abnormalities is like telling us to pay attention to the letter *s*. Once your attention is called to it, you see it everywhere. Of course people will find oddities if they’re looking for them.”

“The letter *s* is common. Oddities are, by definition, uncommon. I’m not asking for news of, say, your sister’s new hairstyle... however odd it may be.” There were grins and a couple of chuckles. “But if you hear rumors of creatures or those of the Blood who shouldn’t be in our realm, the rest of us need to know.”

“So who do we tell? You?” Randall’s upper lip lifted in scorn. “There’s a plan. You can use everything you hear to further ‘prove’ your case, increasing your chances of being named war-leader if the clans fall into line with your father’s megalomaniacal—”

“Best stop there.” Rule held himself very still. “As I haven’t spoken about your father’s habit of killing from ambush, so you—”

“You may all tell me, if you like,” Stephen said calmly.

“I’m willing to act as clearinghouse for such reports. Unless any of you doubt Etorri’s ability to remain impartial?”

Randall didn’t dare go that far, but he narrowed his eyes as his head swung toward Stephen. “You’re buying into this absurd theory about the realms shifting?”

“Please,” Ito said to the man beside him, “what is ‘buying into’?”

Randall answered without taking his eyes off Stephen. “Believe. Agree with. Think it’s more than cat box scrapings.”

Stephen was unmoved. “Etorri was already considering the possibility that the realms were shifting when we received the invitation to a pax circle.”

“Why?” Randall exploded. “For God’s sake, what proof do you have?”

“First, it accords with the prophecy—” That set everyone off. “What prophecy?”

“—Etorri loves all that mystical mumbo-jumbo—”

“If you’ve been sitting on a prophecy and haven’t told anyone—”

“And second,” Stephen said, “I have myself seen the Great Hunt in the northern forests.”

Dead silence. Into that silence, Cullen’s voice. “Rule.” Rule’s head swung, his nostrils flared. “What?”

“We have to break circle *now*. Benedict’s pushed the panic button.”

SIXTEEN



Rule felt the hair lifting all over his body, as if he were a conduit for lightning. The edges of everything turned sharp. So did his mind. He didn’t have to think about what to do—the necessary actions flowed, one from another, in crystal clarity.

“The circle is ended,” he said, flowing to his feet. “Lily is in danger, perhaps under attack. I’m leaving. Cullen—”

He was on his feet, too. “The map’s in my dressing room. So’s your phone. Benedict may be trying to call.”

Rule was already moving when one of the *nonheris* sons grabbed his arm. “Wait a minute.” Rule backhanded him and kept moving.

There was a brief scuffle—the man he’d knocked down was angry, but Rikard and Con held him back. “Idiot,” Rikard growled. “The man’s mate is in danger. You’re lucky he didn’t break your neck.”

Rule headed for the railing—the stairs would take too long—but Stephen was there. His lip lifted in a snarl.

“I’m not trying to stop you,” Stephen said in that damned calm voice. “I’m coming with you.”

“Come, then.” Rule gripped the railing, flung himself over, and dropped.

The others followed.

The patrons of Club Hell were treated to an unexpected show that night. One, two, three, four at a time, men dropped out of the darkness overhead, landing on tables or the floor—and moving unbelievably fast. Like a river hitting the rapids, they flowed around or over any obstacles. Those who landed on tables simply leaped over anyone who’d been sitting there and hit the ground running.

The Mercedes’s tires squealed slightly as Benedict swung into the turn. Lily’s tongue felt thick and clumsy, as if it were taking up too much space in her mouth. “We’re on Fifty-ninth now,” she told the man holding her sister hostage.

“Proceed to Barbara... I think that’s what it says. Beth, dear, can you read those tiny letters? I don’t know why they make maps so... yes? Oh, Bandera, not Barbara. Turn right on Bandera. Do try to hurry. You’ve only fifteen minutes left.”

“Continue to Bandera and turn right,” Lily repeated, looking at Benedict.

Harlowe knew someone was driving Lily. He didn’t know who, or that Benedict could hear everything he said. Or that Benedict wore a headset attached to his own phone. Lily had dialed Rule’s number for him so he could focus on driving.

Calling Rule was a calculated risk. Harlowe insisted on keeping her on the line, giving her a deadline, handing out directions one street at a time. They wouldn’t know they’d arrived until they got there, so Benedict wouldn’t know when to remove the headset. If Harlowe spotted it...

But they needed backup. Harlowe had Beth, and he was calling the shots—the time and place of their meeting were in his control, and he might not be in this alone.

Lily didn’t dare call for official backup, but Rule would be able to hear Benedict speak subvocally. And Harlowe wouldn’t.

If Rule ever answered his damned phone.

As if he were a magnet and she had a sliver of iron in her gut, she felt Rule’s direction—and, roughly, his distance from her. He wasn’t at Clanhome. Much closer. Somewhere in the city. She could have pointed toward him, but she couldn’t reach across that distance and make him pick up his phone.

“This is a lousy neighborhood,” she said, doing the one thing she could do: keeping Harlowe talking. “Come down in the world a bit, haven’t you?”

“Temporary quarters, purely temporary. You should see the plans I’ve drawn up. Perhaps I’ll show you before... Beth, don’t bother me now. Where was I? Oh, yes, my plans. You come first, dear Lily. If it weren’t for you I wouldn’t be here, would I? I can’t say I’m happy with you, not at all, but you’ll get what’s coming to you. And you’ll... not *now*, Beth.”

“So what are you planning?” she asked quickly, able to hear Beth’s upset voice in the background. *Beth, please, play it cool. Don’t make him angry.* “King of the world, maybe?”

“No, no.” He was all good humor again. “They’ll elect me. They’ll all love me, you see.”

Benedict tapped her arm. When she looked at him he tapped his headset and nodded.

Thank God. He’d finally reached Rule. “Funny,” she said. “I’m not feeling much love for you right now.”

“Yes, you’re different, aren’t you? That’s your bad luck. But don’t worry, dear—it’s temporary. Or perhaps I should say *you* are.” He chuckled over his little joke.

“You hold on to that thought, if it makes you feel better.” Their biggest advantage was that Harlowe—or maybe his goddess—didn’t seem to want Lily dead. He wanted to feed her to the staff or the demon or something, which took a lot more arranging than just killing her. This gave her a little maneuvering room.

Unless, of course, they were wrong about Harlowe's intentions.

"But you won't be a problem much longer. I'll take care of—now, now, didn't I tell you to leave her alone?"

The last was spoken to someone else. Lily heard a male voice, then Beth's, high-pitched and frightened.

"What's going on?" Lily demanded. "If you hurt her—"

"I do as I please. As long as I have her—"

"Alive and unharmed, or you'll make my job simple. I'll just kill you."

"Oh, but you can't. And even if you could, you wouldn't. You have to *arrest* me." He made it sound like the most amusing of impossibilities.

"I didn't arrest Helen."

That checked him briefly. "Well, well, you won't have the opportunity to kill me. But let's not be so grim. After all, your sister is alive and well. Not too happy at the moment, but that's her fault. She takes offense so easily."

Male laughter in the background. Lily's empty hand fisted, her nails digging in hard. "Maybe she finds you offensive."

"No, she's terribly in love with me. Although I—Beth, haven't I told you to be quiet?" Harlowe snapped.

Lily had to distract him. "Is this about vengeance, Harlowe? Is that why you want me—because I screwed up all your big plans?"

"I told Helen," he muttered. "I told her she was moving too quickly, but would she listen? And you... you think you're so clever, but it wasn't really your doing. It was Helen's stupidity that made things fall apart. Not that you're off the hook, oh, no, I'll—*what?*"

The voice she heard in the background this time was squeaky, high-pitched. "Oh, all right." Harlowe must have turned his head away. His voice was faint, the tone petulant. "Go ahead and tie her up, since she can't behave."

Lily heard her sister say his name—*Patrick*—clear and disbelieving. And the sound of a slap.

Then he was back, quite cheerful once more. "She'll learn. Perhaps I'll keep her. She is a pretty little thing, though not as loyal as she might be. She seems to think your safety is worth incurring my anger."

The staff might keep Beth hopelessly captivated, but it didn't change her basic nature or intelligence. She wouldn't understand what she was feeling... and had probably guessed by now that he'd used her to get to Lily.

Lily took a deep breath to steady her voice. "We're turning onto Bandera. Where next?"

RULE crouched down on the cool concrete of the parking lot beside Club Hell, his phone held to his ear. Cullen squatted beside him. They watched a moving dot of light on the map Cullen had unfolded as it crept along the line that represented Bandera Street.

So did the twelve men standing still and silent around them.

“All right,” Rule told Benedict. “We’ve got your location. There are eight Lu Nuncios and seven *nonheris* here, plus myself and Cullen. I’m going to brief them now.” A pause. “Yes. Call me back after you’ve reached them.”

He disconnected and looked around at the silent men surrounding him. “Are you here from curiosity, or to help?”

“Is the staff involved?” Javiero asked.

“It is. Harlowe has taken my *nadia*’s sister and is using her to bring Lily to him. He has the staff.”

“Then I’m in,” Javiero said flatly, followed by a chorus of agreements, some vocalized, some simply nods.

“Understand this, then: We hunt, and I lead.”

The single word *hunt* set the terms: instant obedience. No discussion, no questions. Rule was incapable of operating any other way at this point, and they understood that. Even Randall nodded reluctantly.

“Very well. Lily and Benedict are in her car. Benedict’s driving. He’d assigned her guards, but he doesn’t think they’ve been able to follow. He’s calling them now.” The guards had one of Cullen’s charmed maps, but they didn’t have Cullen to make it work when the signal got scrambled. “You can see from the map that Lily and Benedict are heading generally toward us at the moment. We don’t have their destination yet—Harlowe’s feeding her directions, keeping her on the phone. He claims he’s getting real-time information from *Her* and will know if Lily contacts anyone.”

That brought a few murmurs. Rikard scowled. “Is that possible?”

Cullen answered. “Possible? Yes. Likely?” He shrugged. “The legends make it clear She’s able to observe our world, though She’s blind to us.”

“But no one can communicate between realms. Not even Her. Unless She has another pet telepath. . . ?”

“unlikely.” Instinct and need flowed hot inside Rule, a gathering force as compelling as blood or tides. For the moment, though, urgency was balanced by a mind washed cool and clear, as if by moonlight. *Thank you, Lady.* “Harlowe knew when she left the FBI building. He knew someone was driving her, but not who. Either he has someone physically following her and reporting her movements through conventional means, or *She* is somehow feeding him information.” He paused to make his point. “Benedict says no one is following them. He would be difficult to fool.”

Some nodded, some frowned. No one disagreed.

Stephen said thoughtfully, “Harlowe doesn’t know that Benedict has contacted you, I take it. That suggests that his source of information is indeed our enemy. A human follower might see Benedict using his phone, but *She* wouldn’t know, as long as he spoke to one of us.”

Rule nodded absently, his attention on the map. He could feel Lily now—faintly, faintly, but her direction rested on the edges of his heightened senses like a feather just touching his skin. He'd never sensed her from this far away before—a Gift from the Lady, perhaps. He considered logistics.

“Why,” one of the younger ones asked, “are we still standing here?”

Cullen nodded at the map. “We’ll lose time if we take off in the wrong direction. Once she passes Garner Street, here—” he pointed at a line just ahead of the dot of light—“we’ll know which direction we take.”

Rule spoke. “We’ll have to take multiple vehicles. Most of you don’t know the city, so—”

His phone rang. He had it at his ear before it finished. “Yes.” He heard his brother’s voice, speaking too quietly for human ears, and answered, “They’ll come. Hunt rules, my lead, Etorri as second.”

After a few moments of listening, he rose smoothly. “Lily’s guards were unable to follow, so it’s up to us. She’s heard from Harlowe. They’ll be turning south on Garner. Toward us.” He gathered the others with his gaze. “We go.”

The neighborhood sucked.

It was late enough that many of the houses were dark, and some of the streetlights had been shot out. But there was no full dark in a city this size. The dirty purple sky reflected the city’s lights, providing a murky sort of illumination.

Lily knew how the area looked by day, anyway—the huddle of small houses slumping into decay, some vacant. The peeling paint and yards mostly dirt, with the occasional rusty car as lawn ornament. All too often, walls had been sprayed with graffiti in gang colors.

Cripps territory, back when she’d patrolled here for five memorable months. But the current graffiti told another story: the Dozens had taken over this turf.

They were a relatively new gang—part import, part home-grown. Many of their leaders were casualties of the brutal Central American wars that had raged for so long, teens and young adults who, as children, had witnessed atrocities up close and personal. A brother hacked to death. A mother gang-raped. A baby sister casually spitted by a soldier with a machete.

Children who had found their way to America, escaping with whichever relatives survived. Children who had grown up to commit atrocities.

As soon as Benedict made that last turn, she’d known they were about to arrive at Harlowe’s hidey-hole. She’d motioned urgently for him to get rid of the headset. He had, thank God, ended the call and hidden the headset without argument or hesitation.

“I’m guessing our escort just pulled out in front of us,” she told Harlowe now. “An old Chevy Impala, bright purple with orange flames on the sides. Lowrider. The driver and one passenger are Hispanic. The other one’s African American.”

“My, aren’t you politically correct?” Harlowe was in high good humor now that she’d all but delivered

herself into his hands. “You be sure to stay right behind Raul and his friends.”

“I take it we’re almost there.” The front-seat passenger was talking on a cell phone, no doubt reporting that they’d picked up Lily and Benedict.

“Perhaps.”

“I’m kicking myself for not thinking of the gangs earlier.” Let him revel in how he’d outwitted her. Let him preen and strut and think himself invincible. “Where better for you to hide out? They’d respond well to a charismatic leader.”

“The boys have been most helpful. They understand my message.”

Benedict touched her shoulder. She glanced at him. “Why don’t you tell me about that?”

“You want to hear my message?”

“Sure.” Benedict made a pulling motion with one hand. She subvocalized: “*Drag it out? Stall?*” He nodded, and she returned it. It was good to know they were on the same page.

Harlowe was making mistakes. He was relying too much on his not-quite-omniscient goddess. He wasn’t thinking straight, or he would have taken Her blind spot—the lupi—into account. Maybe he really did think he was invincible, as Rule had suggested earlier.

That didn’t make him less than deadly. But it gave them a chance. Rule was on his way—with others, she hoped. How far he had to travel, she couldn’t say, but she felt him more clearly all the time. “That is,” she went on out loud, “I’d like to know if there’s more to it than ‘stick with me and you’ll have all the money and women you want.’”

He chuckled. “Don’t underestimate the Dozens. They want guns and booze and drugs as well. What about you, Lily Yu? What do you want?”

“I want my sister turned loose, alive and unhurt.”

“So I assumed, or you wouldn’t be following Raul. But what about yourself? Aren’t you hoping to get out of this alive and unhurt, too?”

“I’m planning on it.”

“My own plans fell through recently,” he said, dreamy now. “I’ve made more, of course. Can’t keep a good man down. But you might express some regret for having interfered in my plans. In fact, I feel sure you will. I’m predicting that you will soon be very, very sorry you presumed so much.”

The Chevy stopped abruptly. Lily jolted as Benedict hit the brakes to keep from climbing up the other car’s bumper. The passenger in the back seat of the purple car turned around, smiling at them. He rested the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun on the back of the seat, aimed straight at Lily.

“Predicting the future’s an iffy business.” Maybe she’d been wrong about Harlowe’s goal. Maybe he’d brought her here because he wanted her killed where he could see it happen. “Even good precogs don’t get it right all the time.”

“We’ll see. Pull over to the curb,” he told her, almost purring. “Pull over and get out of the car. The boys will take you where you need to go.”

There was one empty spot at the curb directly in front of a rundown stucco house, pale and colorless in the dark. The windows were boarded up, but light snaked out through cracks. A late model pickup, modified beyond recognition, occupied most of the front yard.

She glanced at Benedict. He looked bored. They might have been paying a visit to some tedious relatives.

But he would know just how scared she was. He’d smell it on her. Dammit, dammit... Lily took a breath and rolled the dice, staking her life, Bern’s, and his on her best guess. “No.”

“What? What did you say?”

“Once I put myself in your hands, I’ve lost all bargaining power. Send my sister out. Then we’ll talk.”

Benedict gave her a small nod.

Harlowe’s laugh was less convincing than it had been. “You must be joking. Do as you’re told, or Beth will regret it, even if you don’t.”

“My walking into that house won’t make her safe. If you’ve got both of us, I’ve nothing left to bargain with.”

“What about your safety?” Harlowe’s voice lost its music as it rose. “Do you see the shotgun pointed at you? The others have guns, too. What makes you think you have a choice?”

“Shoot us, then.” Her heart beat so hard and fast she thought she’d be sick. “Tell them to blast away. Unless, of course, you think that might piss off your goddess.”

“She doesn’t control me. I’m in charge, you understand?”

“Yeah? So how come you keep killing the same woman over and over, Patrick? Do those brown-haired girls remind you of anyone?”

That tipped him over some edge. He cursed her—and Her. All women. While he ranted, Lily stole a glance at Benedict. “How long?” she whispered, meaning, *How long before we have backup?*

Looking sleepy, he spread both hands, closed them, and then spread the fingers of one hand again.

Fifteen minutes. Surely she could keep Harlowe from acting for fifteen minutes—though he was getting so wound up, she was afraid he’d have them shot to prove a point. She broke into his tirade. “Okay, okay, you’re in charge. The big kahoona. I got that. But you still need to deal. You want me, you’re going to have to deal.”

Silence, except for his breath hitting the mouthpiece in windy bursts. He was panting as if he’d been running. “I’m not sending your sister out,” he said at last. “That would be giving up my bargaining power, wouldn’t it? Perhaps you need to be convinced. Felix,” he said to someone else, “would you like to rape her for me? You can listen,” he told Lily. “You can hear her beg.”

Her hands went cold and numb. She flexed her hands, swallowed bile, and said, “We’ll pull up to the curb, but I’m not getting out until I see Beth.”

He giggled. “Tell you what—we’ll take off her clothes while you’re thinking things over.”

Fourteen more minutes. She had to keep him talking for fourteen more minutes. “Don’t know much about this hostage business, do you? You’re not giving up enough to make me think I’ve got a chance. If I decide it’s hopeless, I’m going to call in forty or fifty federal agents just to be sure you pay.”

“And what do you think will happen to your sister if you do that?”

“I don’t know. Will it be as bad as what happens to you if you don’t deliver me to your goddess?”

Another long moment of silence. “Perhaps we can deal.”

SEVENTEEN



BENEDICT ended the call with a single growled word: *Hurry*.

Force rose in Rule like an imminent explosion, hollowing him until all that remained was purpose, tipping him away from the rationality of the human toward the power of the beast. He found a new balance. Thought remained, but altered; words no longer led, but existed as small chips of focus for the gathering storm.

Cullen was in the Mercedes’s back seat with his map spread out. Con was driving; Rule hadn’t wanted to split his attention. They’d made good time while they had four lanes, but construction had sent them on a two-lane detour. They were practically crawling now due to some fender bender up ahead.

They were close, though. Rule felt Lily clearly now, like a separate pulse. He felt the moon, too, with her different call. But that call now fed rather than cooled the tide surging within him.

Soon, he told the rage in his blood. *Very soon*. “Stop the car,” he told Con.

Con stopped the car. Rule hadn’t said to pull over first, so he didn’t. Three vehicles followed his, each riding the other’s tail much too close for safety, had the drivers been human. Because they weren’t, all three stopped immediately, as if they’d choreographed it.

Rule got out. So did those in the other cars—no questions, no debate.

Hunt rules.

“We’re out of time,” he told them, pitching his voice to be heard over the blaring horns of drivers behind them, speaking quickly because he couldn’t hold off the Change much longer. “Lily has reached or is about to reach Harlowe. He’s recruited a gang, a vicious bunch. I don’t know how many are involved.

They'll have guns." Rule stopped, his breathing ragged.

Just a few more minutes. "Cullen," he snapped, "stand back."

Map in hand, Cullen retreated several feet.

"We're very close," Rule continued. "Cars will only slow us now, so half of us go ahead, four-footed, at full speed. We'll approach from upwind—the humans won't scent us, but Benedict will. The sight of us will surprise them."

That brought a few grins. Very few humans had ever seen a lupus pack in full hunt. Those who had generally hadn't live to speak of it. "The other half stay with Cullen, led by Etorri. Stephen." He faced the other man. "Stay two-footed so you can give orders. Your job is to get Cullen close enough to destroy the staff. He can't Change or fight—he must retain all his power for the staff. Get him there quickly."

"Who goes with you?" Stephen asked quickly.

"Those nearest me, I ima—" But words shut off as the Change seized Rule. Earth stretched itself up inside him as if it would claw its way to the moon that called and called, using him as ladder.

As with birth or death, pain was part of the Change.

Sometimes it was a minor note in the song, like the ache of lungs and body during a race. Sometimes—when the Change had been held off too long, or took place away from Earth or at the dark of the moon—pain was a huge gong, belling its brassy note through every cell.

This time, the Change ripped him from human to wolf in a single, deafening blast.

One after another, those nearest him Changed, just as he'd expected. The sudden Change of an alpha leader sends a blast rippling out through the pack, dragging others along. As if reality were no more than a bubble waiting to be popped by some giant, mischievous finger, in eight places that bubble burst.

Clothing ripped. Horns ceased blaring as drivers stared, stunned. Somewhere a dog began to howl.

Seconds later, eight pairs of empty shoes stood where men had been. And eight huge wolves raced off into the night.

LILY'S breath felt harsh in her chest as she opened the car door. Her mind was a tight ball of focus.

Fourteen or fifteen young men—some in their teens, some in their early twenties—fanned out in a semi-circle in front of the concrete slab that served as a front porch. All were armed. She counted six rifles, two shotguns, and a wide array of handguns.

Barely visible behind them stood three people: Harlowe, Beth, and the gang member holding her motionless with one thick arm.

The darkness didn't hide everything. Harlowe's staff, for example. A dull black, it shouldn't have been visible, yet her eyes found it as easily as they picked out the man who gripped it. The gang member holding Beth was easy to spot, being more than a head taller than everyone else and built like a bull. Other than his size, only the pale do-rag and white T-shirt stood out clearly, but a fugitive glint of light

caught the barrel of the gun he rested against Beth's head.

And Beth. . . Beth was fully dressed. Lily swallowed. Her sister hadn't been raped, and Harlowe had agreed to let her go.

At least Lily could put down the damned phone now. With her door cracked but not fully open, she turned to Benedict. "Stay here. Harlowe wants me alive. He has no reason to spare you."

"Can't do much from in here."

"Can't do much out there, either. Not with twenty or thirty bullets in you."

He just smiled that barely there smile of his and reached for the handle of his door.

She grabbed his arm. "I can't stop you. You're too damned big. But don't make yourself into a liability. With that staff, Harlowe can make you like him, believe him, want to follow him. Don't trust your reactions. Leave him to me."

He gave her a level look and a slow nod. "Understood. But his charisma won't matter much if he doesn't smell right."

"What does that mean?"

"Are you coming?" Harlowe called. "Beth, maybe you'd better ask your sister to hurry."

Lily heard Beth's cry of pain and flung open her door. "Okay, okay. Here I am. Now let Beth go." That was the deal—she and Benedict would get out, expose themselves to his little army of gangbangers, and he'd turn Beth loose.

She didn't expect him to keep it. *How much longer? Five minutes? More? Less?*

Rule was close now. Close and coming their way.

"I don't think so." Harlowe moved forward, the staff in his hand making him look like he belonged in a Christmas pageant playing one of the shepherds. But this staff didn't have a crook at the top. It was simply a long length of wood the color of coal.

From behind the wall of gangbangers Beth cried out, "Lily, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault," she said, standing in front of her car with her hands held out slightly at her sides—*see, I'm not drawing a weapon. No need to shoot anyone.* "Harlowe's staff has you hocus-pocused. You can't help—" She stopped, staring. "What the hell is *that*?"

That was pale, about as tall as Harlowe's hip, and looked like a cross between a kangaroo and a really weird nightmare.

"Hey, she sees me!" It jiggled on those oversize haunches, excited, its voice squeaky-high. "She can see me!"

"Of course she sees you, you cretin," Harlowe muttered. "She's a sensitive."

“I thought that was just for spells, but she can really see me, even though I’m *dshatu*.”

“I can hear you, too,” Lily said.

“Who or what are you talking to?” Benedict asked very low.

She started. It’d moved up on her right side so silently she hadn’t known it was there. She answered softly. “The demon, I think. You can’t hear it?” It, he, she... those were definitely breasts high on the naked chest, but the genitals, though small, were the dangly sort.

“No. Neither can anyone else, I think.”

“Harlowe does.” She raised her voice. “Are you a demon? Did you knock me out?”

“Yes, and I can hardly wait to—”

Harlowe rapped the demon on the head with his staff. “Try to be a little less stupid. And now,” he said to Lily, “it’s time to let my boys have your weapons.”

She wrenched her attention away from the bizarre creature standing next to Harlowe. “Uh-uh. It’s time for you to tell Mr. Muscles there to let Beth go.”

Harlowe giggled. “Make me.”

“All right,” Benedict said.

She’d never seen anyone move so fast, not even Rule. She had the barest glimpse of something flashing out from his far hand—then a blow on her back knocked her to the ground.

Caught by surprise, she fell hard even as shots rang out, a rolling thunder that seemed to come from everywhere. She rolled onto her side, spitting out dirt, scrambling to get her weapon.

Screaming. More shots. The acrid bite of gunpowder in her nostrils and the feel of her gun in her hand.

And howling.

Huge, eerie, beautiful—howls bursting from the throats of enormous wolves. Two, three, half a dozen of them shot across the yard like streaks of moon-touched night in their mottled coats, straight at the gangbangers firing at them.

Those of the gang who remained, that is. Several were missing—fled or fallen, Lily couldn’t tell in the darkness and confusion. And it was hard to see past the strong, furry body that had landed, legs spread, in a crouch over her.

“Rule!” Dammit, he was playing shield. She shoved at his belly—that’s about all she could see—his belly, legs, and chest. “I can’t see to fire. I can’t see what happened to Beth.” Or Benedict—was he down?

Harlowe yelled, “No, no! Stop it! Stop!”

Rule didn’t budge. He faced out at the battle, growling.

Giving up, Lily flattened herself—prone position, arms out, weapon gripped in her right hand with her left to steady it.

The young giant was gone, but Beth wasn't free. Harlowe had her. She was fighting him, but she was so much smaller, untrained in any kind of combat. He pinned her with one arm. With the other, he used the staff. Where he pointed, agony followed.

He was indiscriminate. Wolves and men alike collapsed, screaming and writhing. Sometimes blood spattered. Sometimes it didn't. Harlowe kept yelling, "No, no" over and over, striking almost at random. And he was advancing toward Lily with that damned kangaroo-demon hopping along at his side.

She couldn't get a clear shot. "Beth, hold still!" she yelled over the screaming and gunshots.

"Grab her hand," Harlowe yelled. "Get her, grab her!"

"Get rid of the wolf! How'm I going to grab anything if he bites my hand off?"

"How?" It was a shriek. "It isn't working! He's supposed to love me, follow me—"

"You don't smell like a wolf, dummy! Careful—no, no!" The creature grabbed Harlowe's arm as he swung the staff toward Rule. "Don't hurt her body! I need that body! Get closer, get closer!"

The bizarre pair shifted, trying to come at her and Rule from the side. Rule shifted with them, his growl a steady thunder above Lily, and she squirmed around, trying desperately to get a bead on some critical part of Harlowe, terrified of hitting her sister.

A head shot. She'd have to try for a head shot. That should have been easy at this distance, but he kept moving and her own motion was limited by a damned stubborn hero of a wolf.

"Hurry!" the demon squealed. "The wolves are winning!"

"Shut up! And split up—he can't cover both of us!"

She wiggled to the right, tracking Harlowe as the demon went in the other direction. She bumped against Rule's leg, and there he was—*yes, hold still, you bastard, stay just like that*. She squeezed the trigger just as Harlowe darted aside again, damn him, damn him. Where—?

Faster than she could react, Rule spun—but the staff flashed down just as he whirled to face it.

It grazed his shoulder. His whole body spasmed and collapsed.

The world blanked out. There was only a sudden, vertiginous drop into terror and guilt. *My fault, it's my fault—first Beth, now Rule, hurt because of me...*

Then rage flooded in, giving her the strength to shove him off her upper body so she could twist around, bring up her weapon—but a hot, dry hand clamped around her wrist, stopping her as surely as if it were made of iron.

It felt orange. Orange, like her shoulder.

“I’ve got her! Hurry, hurry!”

Harlowe flung Beth away. She fell to the ground and didn’t move. Lily wrenched violently at her hand, but there was no budging the demon, so she tried to roll over, to get her weapon into her other hand, but her legs were still pinned by Rule’s heavy body. She couldn’t quite reach.

His face a mask of maniacal glee, Harlowe smacked the staff across her belly.

Foulness spurted over her like slime, breaking up into dozens of scrambling bits that hardened as they scuttled over her body, bits that clawed at her skin, ripping at her in ways indescribable while that hot orange hand held her and something pushed and pushed at her in a place nothing should have been able to reach—

She screamed.

A ball of black fire, eerie and terrible, erupted around Harlowe’s head like an obscene halo and fled down his arm to the staff.

Pain struck, a sharp, clean knife sundering her world, sending her spinning, spinning... into nothing.

EIGHTEEN



Weariness. Pain. Sounds...

“... except Rikard. Damned staff severed his neck. He was gone before he had a chance to heal.”

“Hellfire. He went out in style, though. He’d be glad of that. He’s the only other one?”

She knew the second voice, but memory was a slippery fish, freeing itself before she could claim it. She almost drifted away again, but the body’s pain insisted on dragging her back from that beckoning dimness.

It felt as if a burning brand rested just below her belly button, throbbing along with her heartbeat. But there are worse pains than the physical. Floating between here and not-here, she was aware of loss so huge that her mind skittered away, refusing to close around the thought.

“... got all the wounded away now, so I’ll be going. The cops will be here any minute. You’d better clear out, too.”

“And let her wake up to this?” The familiar voice was bitter.

“Her sister should wake up soon. She can...”

Her sister. Beth. Yes. She’d come to... to... all at once memory plopped in her lap, writhing and ugly.

And incomplete.

She had to know.

When she forced her eyes open it was still dark. Dark and fuzzy, as if she'd forgotten how to make her eyes focus. The air stank of gunpowder, blood, and charred meat. Her mind flashed back to fire—uncanny fire, black at the center, flickering into blue at the fringes. Black fire haloing Harlowe, speeding down his staff... which had rested on her belly.

She'd been burned, then. Burned by mage fire. Maybe she would have fried along with Harlowe if not for her Gift... which wasn't quite the complete protection she'd always believed.

The dimly seen shapes resolved. Overhead, sky too smoggy for stars, glowing with the city's reflected light. And kneeling next to her, though he was looking away... that was Cullen, she realized, naked from the waist up. He was listening to someone standing beside him.

"If you aren't leaving, you might as well make yourself useful," the other man said. She had a vague impression of even features, pale skin, and light-colored hair, but darkness hid the details. "Her burn needs tending."

"I'm no healer."

"You never did pay attention to anything that couldn't be done sorcerously. Cold water will cool it so the flesh doesn't continue to cook."

"You have any?"

Enough of that. She didn't need to hear about herself. Lily licked her lips and found her voice. "Rule?"

The other man slipped away into the darkness so quickly and silently she might have imagined him. Slowly Cullen looked down at her. His eyes were weary beyond words. "I'm sorry, Lily. He's gone."

* * *

WEARINESS. Pain. Sounds...

Sounds without meaning, a babble of words she didn't know. Awareness flickered. Nothing in that babble drew her... yet something did.

Anger. Beneath the babble, powering it, lay anger. Someone was having a major hissy fit.

It might have been a sense of danger that kept her from slipping back into unknowing. It might have been curiosity. Once she'd lingered beyond that first heartbeat, though, she knew something was wrong. She hurt, and that was part of it... as if a fiery brand lay across her stomach, she hurt from some wounding. But there was more to the wrongness than that. Worse.

She had to know...

Confusion, vast and powerful as pain, startled her eyes open.

She saw sky—sky the color of tarnished brass, glowing like the embers of a dying fire. Glowing all over, with no sign of the sun. Beneath her the ground was stony. Pebbles dug into the skin of her back and butt... the bare skin of her back and butt.

She was naked. That bothered her. She tried to think of what she should do about it, but her mind felt heavy, as if thoughts had weight and she lacked the strength to push and lift and arrange them. But she was lying naked on the ground beneath a brassy sky. That wasn't right, but... where was she supposed to be?

At least she wasn't cold. Neither cold nor hot, actually, except for her legs. They were very warm. Something heavy lay across her legs, warming them.

Oh...

An impulse stronger than pain or weakness moved her to stretch out one hand. She touched fur... fur that lifted slowly with a breath.

That was all right, then.

Her breath sighed out, her eyes closing once more.

DIZZINESS seized Lily, as if the world had tipped into some new, impossible angle. She stared up at Cullen's weary face, adrift.

No, she realized. The world wasn't askew. It was the gap that made it seem so—the gap between reality and what she'd been told. "No. He isn't."

"Lily..." Cullen's expression softened into something she'd never seen there before. Pity.

That irked her. "Not if you're using 'gone' as a euphemism for 'dead.' He isn't even that far away. Less than a mile." She'd tested the mate bond enough to be confident about the distance. "I can find him easily enough, though you might have to help me move."

He just shook his head, looking so wretched she didn't know if she should shake him or pat his hand. Her lips thinned, but she went on to her next question. "My sister. Harlowe knocked her down. Is she—"

"She's okay," he said quickly. "Knocked out, but Stephen said her breathing and heartbeat are fine, so she should come around soon. He moved her to the porch so she doesn't wake up next to what's left of Harlowe."

"Okay, that's good. Was Stephen the one you were... never mind." That could wait. They didn't have much time. "We need to find Rule."

He winced. "Lily—"

"Look, I don't know where he is, but he was hurt, not killed. Give me a hand. I need to sit up."

Cullen shook his head, bafflement mixing with his weariness. "No, you don't. You've been hurt."

“No kidding. But I lack authority when I’m flat on my back, and those sirens are getting close. You’re going to need all the official weight I can muster to keep from being arrested and executed for using sorcery to fry Harlowe.” And she had to find Rule.

He sighed. “Wait a minute. Let me try something. I don’t have much juice left, but…” He pulled out the little diamond he’d taken to wearing around his neck.

“What’s that for?”

“Think of it as a storage battery. Mage fire takes a lot of power, so I’ve been gathering it for a while.”

At her apartment… when he’d been playing with the sorcéri, had he really been tucking them away for later? “I thought the how-to for that sort of thing was lost during the Purge.”

“I’m fucking brilliant, aren’t I?” His voice was as light as his face was bleak. He held the little diamond in one hand, held the other over her stomach, muttered something, and then pointed away.

A small flame burst where he’d pointed and then died. And a wave of wonderful cold sucked much of the heat from her stomach.

“I moved the heat around. Instant chill on your tummy. Better?”

“Yes. Thanks. Now help me up.” She held out her hand.

Instead of taking it, he bent, slid an arm beneath her shoulders, and then lifted. It hurt, but the world didn’t wink out. Once she caught her breath she did a quick scan of the area.

They were alone except for the dead.

There were a lot of them, dimly seen heaps crumpled here and there all over the small yard. And one mound near her feet—that would be Harlowe, or what was left of him. She wasn’t eager for the police spots to reveal the details.

They’d be here soon. Sirens warbled their alarm from only blocks away. “Benedict?”

“Damned hero.” He shook his head. “Timed things a little too close.”

Something lurched in her chest. “He’s dead, then.”

“Hell, no. Full of holes, but he didn’t even have the decency to pass out. Made us go get his knife back before he’d let himself be taken away. If he makes it through the night he’ll be fine—though even he will take a while to heal.”

“The others…” Whoever they were, and she had plenty of questions about that. “They took him away in spite of his injuries?”

“Can’t leave anyone behind. Your compatriots would arrest them. The dead, though…” He hesitated. “Traditionally, they serve a final time by taking the blame for any dead humans. There are a number of them tonight.”

“Not Rule,” she said firmly. “You won’t be pinning anything on him. He’s not dead, and I can swear that he didn’t kill anyone. He was with me.”

“Lily.” He looked haggard. “The staff exploded, then vanished. Rule went with it.”

Two cop cars screeched around a corner, lights flashing, sirens howling.

“Argue with me later,” she said quickly. “Here’s the deal. Don’t answer questions from anyone but me. Lawyer up if you have to. I’ll say I think Harlowe burned himself up trying to kill me. I didn’t see you, after all, so I can’t testify about what you did or didn’t do. And magic’s dangerous stuff, right? Using the staff on a sensitive could have made it backfire on him.”

“It’s as good a story as any.” He sounded indifferent.

He’s grieving, she realized. He doesn’t believe me about Rule, and grief is making him numb to his own fate. “Cullen,” she said, and reached out to rest her hand on his bare arm... and froze.

Because it wasn’t there. The buzz, the hum, the indefinable texture of magic she should have felt the second she touched his skin... it was gone.

* * *

SHE came awake all at once, jolted by fear. In her mind there lingered the echo of an eerie howl. Something about that sound...

She didn’t hear it now, though—just the same angry, high-pitched babble as before. The same brassy sky glared down. No clouds, no sun. The same terrible pain throbbed on her stomach.

The weight on her legs was gone.

Her breath sucked in. Need gave her the strength to raise up on one elbow.

A huge wolf stood at her feet. He was beautiful—his coat black and silver, his proportions elegant. He was also angry, his lip lifted in a snarl that advertised the long, wicked teeth.

He was growling at the source of the babbling—a creature like nothing she could have imagined. It was a bright, greasy orange. And naked. And at least halfway male.

Aside from the small, soft genitals, the creature’s lower half resembled a kangaroo or a child’s toy dinosaur with its oversize haunches and spiked tail. Big feet. No belly button. The chest was muscular but decorated by a pair of very female breasts tipped by olive green nipples the size of half dollars. In contrast, the arms and shoulders looked almost human.

No hair. Neither around the genitals nor on the round head. A wide slit of a mouth crowded with teeth every bit as pointy as the wolf’s, but not as long. The eyes were large and heavily lashed, absurdly pretty in that face. They were set too far apart above a pair of sphincters that she supposed were nostrils.

It stood about three feet tall. The size of a child.

“What are you?” she asked.

It jumped, its eyes widening. Then it rolled those eyes in a disconcertingly human way. “Great. That’s just great. You didn’t understand a word I’ve said, did you?”

“Were those words?”

“You’re just lucky I know English,” it grumbled.

The wolf glanced at her and stopped growling. He backed up, careful to keep the creature in sight, until he stood beside her.

She didn’t like lying flat. She didn’t like being naked, either, but there didn’t seem to be an alternative at the moment.

Sitting up hurt,“ but she managed it. She pushed her hair out of her face and her fingers brushed something at her neck... a chain with a pendent. The feel of the pendent comforted her, both the shape and the faint buzz of magic from it. She clasped it in one hand and leaned against the wolf.

His fur wasn’t as soft as it looked, but it felt good against her skin. He seemed content to serve as her support, so she laid an arm on his back and rested more of her weight against him. The contact felt good. Right.

He made a whining sound, almost like a question.

The creature spoke. “I suppose you didn’t understand him, either.”

“I suppose you did?”

It raised both hands to its head as if it wanted to rip out the hair it didn’t have. “Could things be worse? Could it get any worse? I’m supposed to be *in* you, on Earth, but here I am, back in Dis—”

The ground rumbled. And *moved*.

Her fingers clenched in the wolf’s fur. Earthquake? Her heart pounded. For the first time she looked around.

Rock. That’s all she saw—big rocks, little rocks, pebbles. Orange, rust, gray, and yellow rocks. No trees, no grass, no weeds or water. Off in the distance she saw a single mountain, dull black and topped by what looked like a caldera. A dead volcano?

She hoped it was dead.

But she couldn’t see far. They were in a small cul-de-sac, a low point bounded by the rock humped up around them. Rock that might be dislodged if the earth twitched again.

She didn’t want to be here. She wasn’t sure where she needed to go, but this was the wrong place for her, wrong in every way. She needed to move, to get out of here... but just sitting up drained her.

How could she travel? Where could she go?

The creature groaned. “She is *so* pissed. We’ve got to get out of here. There’s a Zone real close. A Zone,” it repeated impatiently when she looked blank. “You know. Where the regions overlap.”

The wolf curled his lip in what looked more like scorn than temper.

“I know, I know. You don’t trust me, but you should. As far as Lily’s concerned, anyway—”

Lily?

“—because I can’t let anything happen to her. I’m tied to her, by Xitil’s great, glowing nipples! If she dies, I die! That stupid man was supposed to help me get into her, but I didn’t get all the way in because your stupid sorcerer messed up the staff and now I’m tied to a stupid sensitive who shouldn’t *be* here and Xitil is fighting it out with *Her* and—” its voice rose to a squeaky crescendo—“we’ve got to get out of here!”

The wolf turned his head to look directly at her with what she was sure was a question in his dark eyes.

“Don’t ask me,” she said in a voice dry as dust—dry as all the aching, empty places inside her. “I don’t know what to believe, what to do. I don’t know who you are, why we’re here, where ‘here’ is, or...” She tried to swallow past the dryness, but her words came out raspy. “Or who I am.”

The sky around the dull black cone of the volcano suddenly flared, shooting from dark brass to incandescent orange and gold—sunrise arriving with a bang. A second later, the ground shimmied beneath them, accompanied by a dull, distant rumble, like thunder below the ground.

“Remind me,” the creature whispered, “not to ever, ever ask if things could get worse.”

NINETEEN



Though the man was always with the wolf, just as the wolf remained with the man, the form did make a difference. Instinct was closer to Rule when he was four-footed, words more distant. Which might have been just as well. Being more deeply of the moment than the man, the beast felt little fear for the future.

Not that there wasn’t plenty in the present for alarm. Plenty that made him want to lift his nose and howl... but he’d already done that. The demon, damn its greasy orange hide, was right. It had been a stupid thing to do, but he couldn’t have stopped that howl if his life had depended on it.

Which, of course, it might. Worse—so might Lily’s. There was no saying who or what might have heard him. But in that first terrible second of discovery, wolf and man alike had lost control.

He’d tried to Change. And couldn’t.

Now the beast wanted to act. Food, water, shelter— those needs the beast understood. The man agreed, but where to find any of that in hell?

Rule reined in his sense of urgency. There were no immediate threats. If the volcano was erupting, it was distant enough not to pose an urgent danger. What was it Benedict used to say? There's a time to act, a time to plan the next action, and a time to gather facts so you can plan.

A puff of sadness ghosted through him at the thought of his brother, who might well be dead. The wolf, more immediate than the man, paid it little heed. If he and Lily survived and managed to return home, then it would be time to worry about Benedict's fate.

Rule lifted his nose. The air was dry, windless. It carried little scent, and most of that was alien, useless to him.

He looked at the other two. Lily was fingering the nearly healed wound on her shoulder, perhaps wondering where that earlier hurt had come from. Her brows were knit. Her eyes looked lost.

How much was gone? Her personal memories were missing, obviously, but she hadn't lost everything. She retained language and basic motor skills. Did she remember Earth, even if she'd forgotten her family? Did she know he had another form, even if she couldn't remember his face? Some part of her knew him. He was convinced of that. Hadn't she accepted his support earlier?

But he couldn't ask her. He couldn't hold her or tend her wound. He couldn't even speak her name. Rule wanted to lift his nose to that ugly sky and howl again, but that would be entirely stupid.

She was so alone now, bereft even of memory. Unable to offer a man's comfort, he went to her and touched her arm gently with his nose. And recoiled.

Mixed with her own beloved scent was a whiff of cloves and exhaust. The scent of the demon.

She turned to him, her expression abstract. "Something wrong?"

Terribly wrong. But he couldn't tell her. Tentatively he sniffed again. The demon scent was faint, but it came from her skin. Yet the demon was obviously separate from her, so she couldn't be possessed. Could she?

The demon had said something about being tied to her. That tie was what he smelled, he supposed... but he hadn't realized it meant some part of the creature was actually *in* her. Part of her.

She'd sensed his turmoil or felt the need to ease her own. She reached for him, running her fingers through the thick fur of his ruff, scratching lightly. Relief flowed through him. The comfort of the mate bond was unchanged by whatever tie she had with the demon.

He turned his head to look at it. The demon was jiggling from foot to foot, looking all around anxiously... very much all around, because its head had the range of motion of an owl's. When it saw that Rule was watching, it said, "You'll have to take charge. We've got to get moving, and she's missing too many marbles to know what to do."

Rule bared his teeth.

"Speak English," Lily said, "not babble."

He'd hardly noticed that the demon had reverted to that other language. Somehow he understood the

creature whether it spoke English or not... and it had seemed to understand him earlier.

Well, it was worth a try. He yipped at it.

“Ask questions later,” the thing said, jiggling. “When we’re in Akhanetton.”

Rule lowered his rump and sat, staring pointedly at the demon. Lily glanced from him to the demon. “I don’t think he’s going anywhere. What did he ask?”

“All right, all right. He wants to know why I understand him.” The demon rolled its eyes. “You people don’t know *anything*. Meanings are one of the Rules.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“Not to you,” the demon said morosely and plopped down on the ground. It sat rather like an ape or a gargoyle, though its thick tail caused it to tilt forward. The way its legs were jointed, they naturally splayed to the sides, with the knees pointed straight up—a position that put its genitals on prominent display.

“Then you’d better keep talking.”

It heaved a sigh. “In the earth realm, you’ve got your laws of nature, gravity, and all that. Here we’ve got the Rules. One of them is that meanings are clear no matter where you are, so everyone always knows what you mean even if they don’t know what you said. Unless you’re really clever, that is—good at hiding one meaning behind another. I’m good,” it added with simple pride. “Sometimes I can almost lie.”

“I just hear your words. I can’t tell what you mean. Or...” She looked at Rule, a small frown tucked between her eyebrows. “Or him.”

The demon huffed out a breath. “It doesn’t work with a sensitive. All sorts of things won’t work right with a sensitive. And you’re wearing Ishtar’s token. Nobody told me about that. You’d think someone would have mentioned...” Its eyes widened. “Maybe Xitil didn’t know! Maybe *She* didn’t tell her! Oh, oh, oh!” It bounced to its feet. “Xitil must be *so* pissed! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“And go where?” Lily demanded. “Where’s better than here? And who is Xitil?”

“Xitil’s the prince of this region. My prince. We need to cross to Akhanetton—that’s the closest region. It’s scary.” It shivered. “All that open sky... but there’s no telling what will happen here. Xitil’s fighting with *Her*.”

“With who?”

“I’m not going to say Her name. Any of her names. She’s a goddess. She might hear.”

Rule growled a question.

“Okay, so it’s Her avatar that’s here, not the goddess Herself. That won’t make much difference to us. Xitil won’t be minding the store with the fight taking all her attention. Up could become down, or it might rain ashes, or—oh, you don’t know anything, do you?” It looked hugely frustrated. “Dis is divided into regions. The regions, they aren’t just ruled by their princes—they’re *determined* by their rulers. Hot or cold, what grows or doesn’t, all the little rules are set by the prince, who’s *part* of all of it because she’s

eaten part of everyone. Do you see?"

"She's *eaten* part of everyone?" Lily said, revolted. "She ate part of you?"

"That's how it works! You people with your souls are used to death, so you kill too easy, but we preserve life."

"By eating each other alive?"

"Yes. Can we go now?"

"Not yet. You said my name is Lily."

It nodded. "Lily Yu."

"And his name? The wolf's?"

"He's called Rule Turner."

"Rule." She said it thoughtfully, as if searching for recognition, some snippet of memory. And looked disappointed. "I know him, though."

"Sure. You have sex with him a lot. Well, when he's not a wolf, you do. I don't know if you have sex when he's like this." It tipped its head to one side, eyes brightening—and penis beginning to harden. "I'd like to see that if you do."

Rule growled.

Lily ignored irrelevancies to focus on her questions. "What do you mean, 'when he's not a wolf?'"

"He's lupus. You're human. And I," it said, penis and expression drooping once more, "am in so much trouble. Neither of you is supposed to—yipes!"

Rule had heard it, too, and had spun to face the new threat before the demon stopped speaking.

Feet. Lots and lots of running feet, headed their way.

The demon bounded to a tall, nearly vertical rock face. "Get her over here!" it cried. "Get her flat against the rock, or they'll trample her!"

Some kind of stampede? Making up his mind quickly, Rule pushed at Lily with his nose.

"You want me to do like the creature says? I don't... what's that?"

Her ears must have picked it up now, too. Rule pushed at her urgently. Whatever was headed their way was coming fast.

She grimaced, but, by using his back to steady herself, managed to get to her feet.

He'd known she was hurt. Though he didn't remember those last moments on Earth, he'd smelled it when he awoke. But now he saw her wound clearly, and it worried him. Just below her navel was a puffy

blister shaped like a fat cigar, but bigger. The skin around it was bright red and weepy.

Second-degree burn, he thought, alarmed. Were there bacteria in hell?

Stupid question. She'd have brought some in on her skin, and he could only hope her system was able to fight them off. The pain would be fierce, the healing slow. She needed medical treatment, dammit. He couldn't supply so much as a bandage. He had no shirt to tear into strips.

Neither did she.

That was odd, now that he thought of it. Why hadn't her clothes arrived with her? The Lady's token had made the crossing, but not Lily's clothing.

He had no answers, and damn little help to give. He could only pace anxiously alongside her as she stumbled toward the overhang, then place himself between her and the demon when she sank to the ground, her back against the rock. He heard the pounding of her heart—too fast—and her quick, short breaths.

Seconds later, the wave hit.

TWENTY



THEY cascaded over the edges of the cul-de-sac so fast and in such numbers that Rule couldn't sort out what an individual creature looked like. He had an impression of endless gray bodies with too many legs, and a pungent smell like mushrooms and grapefruit. They hurtled to the floor of the cul-de-sac in the hundreds and kept running, pouring up the other side in a steady stream.

It seemed to go on and on but probably lasted ten minutes or less. As suddenly as the flood had started it was over, leaving a couple dozen bodies behind. Many had been trampled into bloody pulp—red blood, so maybe their metabolism was oxygen-based. A few still twitched.

The demon didn't move, so Rule didn't, either. Seconds later two huge shadows glided across the rocky ground. Rule looked up.

Pterodactyls? Giant birds? They were too quickly gone for him to pick up much detail, and his distance vision wasn't good in this form. They seemed to be trailing the stampeding creatures. Hunting them, maybe.

The demon heaved a great sigh and, after giving the sky a wary glance, wandered out into the open. Hoping that meant the coast was clear, Rule followed. He wanted to check out one of the creatures.

The body nearest him was almost intact. It looked rather like a roach without the carapace, only the size of a cat and with leathery gray skin. The six thin legs were hinged oddly, but were more animal than insect. He could see bone where the skin and sinew was missing. They ended in small, clawed feet. The

head was pure bug, however—small, flattened, with faceted eyes and serrated mandibles.

Revolting to look at, he decided, but they didn't smell half bad. In a pinch, they would do. For him, anyway. His body would throw off any toxins. He didn't know if Lily could safely eat them—or if she'd be willing to try, short of starvation.

He hoped with everything in him they wouldn't have to find out.

“Might as well get to it,” the demon said, resigned. It picked up one of the twitching creatures and bit its head off.

Lily made a choked sound. “You were saying something about how *we* kill too easily?”

It chewed and swallowed. “I didn't kill it. I ate it.”

“Why am I not seeing the distinction?”

“It isn't dead now. It would have been if I hadn't eaten it, but now it's part of me. You people eat dead things and keep the physical stuff. We eat live things and keep the life. Not that *hirug* would be my first choice.” It grimaced at the decapitated body it held and wrenched off one of the legs. “Stupid creatures. But they're here, and I'm going to need extra *ymu*.”

When it opened that wide slit of a mouth completely, it looked like the whole lower half of its face was hinged. It crunched down on the leg. “You should have told me you were too weak to travel.”

Lily sighed and leaned back against the rock. It couldn't have been comfortable, but the burn on her stomach probably made leaning forward worse. “Your little snack won't help me travel. Unless you're planning to carry me, and I'm not—”

“Carry you? That would be stupid. Better if I give you a little boost and make your wound go away.”

“You can't do that. You said I'm a sensitive, and that— that feels right. I can touch magic...” Her hand went to the Lady's talisman Rule had fastened around her throat when she became clan. “It can't touch me, though. Can't affect me.”

“How do you think you got here?” it snapped. “By train?”

Her head jerked as if she'd been slapped, her eyebrows flying up.

“We're tied,” it told her, impatient. “So I can affect you. I can't get inside you any more than I already am, but I'm partway there. I can give you... English doesn't have the words.”

“Find some,” she said tersely.

Its brow wrinkled. “Well, when I eat, I take *ymu* and *assig*. *Ymu* is the energy. *Assig* is the pattern, the memories and thinking. Not that *hirug* actually think, but you get the idea.”

Rule did, and he didn't like it. He moved between Lily and the demon.

“I'm not going to hurt her! I'm going to help her.”

Rule snarled.

“Wait.”

He looked at Lily, startled.

The small frown tucked between her eyebrows reminded him of her mother. “I don’t trust it, either, but he—it—she—” She stopped, frustrated. “What are you, anyway?”

“I’m called Gan. Your dumb language doesn’t have a word for he-and-she, so you can call me it. We don’t settle on a sex right away. Well, some demons never do, but most—”

“You’re... a demon.”

Gan rolled its eyes. “What did you think I was?”

“Then this place is...”

“Dis. Or hell, according to a lot of you people, but that’s a misunderstanding.”

Lily had already been pale. Now she looked shocky. When Gan started to speak Rule growled at it: *Shut up.*

She closed her eyes and then opened them as if she might be able to change what she saw that way. She looked at the stones, the bizarre sky, the dead and dying hirug, the demon. She drummed her fingers on her thigh. “Okay. You’re a demon and we’re in hell. How did we get here?”

“It was an accident. The sorcerer burned up the staff while I was trying to get into you.”

Judging by the look on her face, the explanation didn’t tell her much. She shook her head. “Never mind. We’ll go into that later. You seem to be right about one thing—this area isn’t safe.”

And some other part of hell might be? Rule made a noise in his throat, frustrated by his inability to speak. And not at all sure they should budge from this spot.

He didn’t know how they’d gotten here, but the staff had disappeared before when She called it to her. That times, Harlowe had been dragged along willy-nilly because he’d been holding it. Maybe that’s what had happened this time. The burn on Lily’s stomach suggested the staff had been touching her when it was hit with mage fire, and Rule had been touching her. So they’d been pulled into hell with it.

But what about the demon? Why would it have been pulled here? And where was the staff? If *She* had summoned it, wouldn’t Rule and Lily have ended up wherever She was, too?

He glanced at the volcano. Not that he was complaining about Her absence. The farther away they were from

Her, the better. But if they’d been dragged here by the staff, they should have ended up with it.

The other possibility was that the destruction of the staff had somehow opened a gate. Cullen had called the thing a rent in reality, so that wasn’t too far-fetched. If so, that gate might be their only way home.

But if Lily remembered the existence of gates, they weren't on her mind now. She had questions—that hadn't changed—and only one place to aim them. At the demon. “How do you do this whatever-it-is? And what will it do to me other than make me stronger?”

“I sort of get control of your body.”

Rule growled.

Gan frowned at him. “If you want to say something, you have to think the words. Just making sounds doesn't work.”

“I think I know what he meant,” Lily said. “You are not taking over any part of me.”

“I'm not talking about possession. If I could have done that, I would have. I was *trying*,” it added, aggrieved. “I mean that I have to take charge of your body temporarily. So I can make it take ymu.”

“This ymu is the energy you were talking about—that comes from living things?” She shook her head. “You're not stuffing me with death magic, either.”

It rolled its eyes. “Ymu is not death magic! When you eat dead things, is that death magic? Ymu is just energy. You people have all kinds of energy in your world— bombs and electricity and gasoline—only you can't eat those energies, right? Your body would have to change to take gasoline energy instead of dead animal energy.”

“Yes, but... I feel like you're pointing in one direction so I won't notice the card up your sleeve.”

Its forehead wrinkled. “Card?”

“Never mind. How would this ymu help me?”

Its forehead wrinkled even more. “You could say that ymu makes things want to be in their proper form.”

“Then a hirug's ymu would make my body want to be like a hirug.”

“No, no, no! Ymu is the energy. The pattern is from the assig—which you can't do anything with. I can.” It looked smug. “That's why I'm a demon. But you won't get any hirug assig and your body already knows its pattern, so I just have to get it to take the ymu and it will make itself strong and right again.”

She chewed on her lip a moment. “How would you do that?”

“You could suck me off—”

This time it was Lily who growled.

“Okay, okay, it doesn't have to be sex. But you have to take something of my body into you. This is still eating. I can't put ymu in air.”

“I have to *eat* part of you?”

“I'm not crazy about that, either, if you won't do sex, but...” It scowled, its brow wrinkling as if it was

thinking fiercely. “Spit. Spit should work. I can push lots of ymu into it, then push some in your mouth.”

Her face twisted in revulsion.

“What’s that thing you say? Get over it. Yeah. Get over it. If you’re picky about what you eat here, you starve. No McDonald’s on the corner. No corner. Get it? No corner.” It giggled, appreciating its own humor. “Before you can eat ymu, though, I have to tinker with your body. Make things more dense where they should be.”

“Dense?”

“You don’t have the words!” It rubbed its head with the hand not holding the dead hirug. Then it spat out a stream of what Lily called babble—and this time, Rule didn’t know what it meant, either.

Words mixed with images and sensory impressions. He heard “hydrocarbon.” Smelled blood. “Tender wheat” arrived with “liver” and the sound of water dripping. “Eggs” were part of an image of the glowing disc of the sun.

“See?” the demon finished in English. “He doesn’t understand, either. You have to already have the ideas, or you can’t get the meanings.”

She nodded slowly. “One more question. Can this be undone later?”

“Sure.” It looked at the hirug it still held and then tossed it to the ground. Apparently once something finished dying it became inedible. After another glance overhead, it began studying the remaining dead and dying hirug.

Lily rubbed her forehead. “I need to think about this.”

In the distance, the mountain rumbled, though there was no accompanying trembling in the ground this time.

“Think fast,” Gan said, bending to pick up another hirug.

Rule rubbed his head along Lily’s arm, making a low, grumbling sound. *This is a bad idea. Don’t do it.*

She ran a hand along his back. “You don’t like it, do you? I don’t, either. But what are my choices? I was barely able to make it out of the open before the hirug got here. *I hurt.* And I can’t travel like this.”

He poked her with his nose and pointedly sat down.

“You think we should stay put?”

For now, anyway. He nodded.

She shook her head. “I think we have to accept that the creature—the demon—that Gan knows how to survive here. And we don’t. If it’s giving it to me straight about needing to keep me alive, or it dies, too... what do you think?”

That he couldn’t answer with a simple yes or no. He couldn’t even write in the dirt. There wasn’t enough of it. Rule made a frustrated sound.

“Never mind.” She sank her fingers into his fur and scratched. “I don’t know why I keep feeling like you ought to be able to answer... anyway, I think Gan’s telling the truth about that part.” She looked at the sky, where the fiery glow near the volcano was fading. “I wonder if you know anything about that goddess Gan says is duking it out with its prince.”

Rule nodded again.

“You do, huh? I wish you could talk. She must be pretty tough if she can hold her own with a demon prince. You think she might help us?”

He shook his head vigorously.

“She’s one of the bad guys?”

He nodded.

“Then it doesn’t matter who wins the fight. Either one will be bad news for us.”

Dammit, she was right—more right than she knew. And he wasn’t thinking straight. If Her avatar survived the battle with the demon prince, She might come looking for Lily.

So yes, they might have to leave this spot, but not right this minute. Lily was letting the demon’s urgency rush her to a decision. Slowly Rule shook his head. *Slow down. Give me time to look for any remnants of the staff, or some trace of a hellgate. To look for food and water, find out if it’s possible for us to survive here.*

She tilted her head to one side. “I can’t tell if that means ‘no, we can’t stay,’ or ‘no, I don’t agree.’ I guess it doesn’t matter. It’s my decision.”

He shook his head sharply. She didn’t have enough information. She couldn’t even consult her own memories, or she’d realize that he’d be bound by what she chose. If she stayed or if she moved on, that’s what he would have to do, too.

But she wasn’t paying attention. She’d raised one hand and leaned her head into it, looking strained and weary. And uncomfortable.

He could help a little there, at least. He moved up beside her so she could lean on him. She gave him a small smile and did just that, laying an arm over his back and resting against him. For several moments neither of them moved.

What would he do if she decided to take the demon up on its offer?

There wasn’t much he could do, he realized. He might like the idea of attacking the demon, but it was their only guide in this world, however little he trusted it. And it claimed to be tied to Lily. He could try to interfere, not letting the demon approach, but that would do little other than make her angry. It wouldn’t persuade her to rethink her decision, and he couldn’t plant himself between them indefinitely.

“Damn,” she said at last, straightening. “I wish I had clothes.” She shook her head. “That’s stupid. It’s just stupid to be worrying about clothes right now, but I don’t like this. I don’t like being naked.”

It wasn't stupid at all. He was, for having paid no attention to her nudity. Just because he didn't react to her body in this form the way he did as a man... but why hadn't her clothes come with her? The Lady's token had. So had he.

Later. He'd worry about that later. Right now he had to get her some protection. She was all-over skin, and her skin damaged easily. At the very least she needed shoes. He turned his head and yipped at the demon.

It snorted. "You see a Wal-Mart nearby? Here, clothes are for decorating high-status types. You can't just run out and buy them."

Rule yipped again.

"Feet that can be hurt by walking on them!" Gan snorted. "Humans are weird. If walking hurts her feet, she'll heal them. Once I give her some ymu, that is." It smiled slyly. "I bet I could get her some clothes in Akhanetton."

"All right," Lily said.

Rule's head swung back toward her.

"My body," she told him. "My choice. And I think I have to try Gan's way. This isn't a good place to be weak."

Gan hummed approvingly. "That's good thinking. Your brain's working better than I thought." It had found another twitching hirug. This one was more lively—three of the legs still functioned well enough that it tried to get away, which seemed to cheer up Gan. It smiled before it bit the thing's head off, chewed, and swallowed.

Then it started toward them. "Okay, all you have to do is hold still."

Lily put up a hand, palm out. "Hold it. You're not touching me with that in your hands."

"What?" Gan glanced at the remains of the hirug. "Oh. You don't like blood and stuff? A lot of humans do. And weren't you some kind of cop?"

"I don't know. Was I?"

It slapped its forehead. "Right. Missing marbles. I forgot." It gave its attention to polishing off the hirug, tossed aside a few bits that weren't sufficiently lively, and then lumbered toward Lily.

Rule's hackles lifted. This was wrong. It *had* to be wrong, but he didn't know how to stop her.

Gan stopped a couple of feet away, eyeing him warily. "I don't trust you. Go somewhere else."

The demon didn't trust *him*? Rule's mouth wasn't shaped right for laughter, ironic or otherwise.

Lily shoved at him. "Move. The sooner we get this over with, the better."

Apparently Lily didn't need her memory to be cussedly determined on independence. Grudgingly, he moved away a few feet—close enough to be on top of the demon in one leap, if necessary. It might be

stronger than he was, but it was smaller and slower. If it hurt her...

Gan edged closer, staying as far away from Rule as it could. With Lily sitting, its head was roughly level with hers. It held out its hands. Its feet were large and flat, rather like a kangaroo's, but its hands were small. Child-size. Aside from the color, they looked quite human.

Lily stared at those small, orange hands, her face blank. Then she clasped them.

For several minutes nothing happened. Nothing he could see, anyway.

"You have to be still!" Gan said, frowning with that very wide mouth.

"I haven't moved."

"You're moving inside. Pushing back at me." It frowned harder. "Think about still things. Things that don't move at all. Think about them real hard."

She scowled and closed her eyes.

A few moments later, Gan leaned in close and opened its mouth over hers. She started to pull away, but it gripped her head and held her still. Rule stiffened, growling, but the kiss was over before he could be sure he should attack.

Gan stepped back, smiling.

Lily wasn't smiling. She swallowed. Swallowed again, as if she was having trouble keeping the demon spit down. Gradually her expression changed to puzzlement.

The redness around her burn was fading.

It went quickly then, faster by far than he could have healed that degree of damage. First the red, weepy skin turned creamy, then the blister-bubble began to shrink. Within five minutes, there was no sign she'd been burned. The wound on her shoulder was gone, too.

Was this, Rule wondered, how humans felt about his own ability to heal? Uneasy, unsettled, convinced that it wasn't supposed to be so easy? That such ease would have to be paid for at some point.

Lily touched her stomach and then rolled her shoulders as if testing the internal workings. Her eyebrows went up. "It worked. I feel..." She stretched out both arms. "I feel good."

"You ought to," Gan grumbled. "You've got enough ymu in you for a Claw. Let's go." It started toward the other side of their cul-de-sac.

Lily stood easily, with no wincing, no need to balance herself on his back. She looked at him, and there was nothing in her face for him to latch onto—no softness, no apology, no doubt. Maybe an acknowledgment: he hadn't wanted this, and she'd done it anyway.

He was, he realized, thoroughly pissed. He looked away.

Gan was already scrambling up a ravine. Lily followed, so Rule did, too.

He took the rear. The cul-de-sac wasn't deep, and the ravine the demon had chosen for an exit made for an easy climb. He followed her as she followed the demon, and his anger didn't dissipate.

That was unfair. He knew it, though the knowledge didn't release him from the anger. Lily was sundered from her self in a way he could scarcely imagine, lost in hell with a wolf and a demon, unable to recall her own name. In pain, afraid, and lacking memory, why should she take his wordless counsel?

But anger isn't always logical, and his welled up from the deep places inside. For he was sundered, too, from a large part of himself—from his clan, his family, his world, and his other form. And he might never get any of that back. He might never speak in words again, or see his father or brother, or be there to help his son through his first Change. He might never pick something up with a hand instead of a mouth.

And if he stayed in this form too long, he would forget what it was to use his hands. He would cease thinking in words. The man would fade, and there would be only the wolf.

The part of him that was wolf didn't fear as the man did. He missed his clan, but he enjoyed his four feet, and his mate was near. And when was the future ever more than a mist? Yet the wolf's pain went deep, too.

Where there should have been the long, slow song, the pull and call that shaped his soul, there was silence. And for that there was no comfort.

There is no moon in hell.

TWENTY-ONE



LILY started awake, her heart pounding, her eyes wide with terror.

Scent seeped in through the fear-fog, a mix of antiseptic, flowers, and body fluids that said *hospital*. With that understanding, reason woke, too, and began sorting the sensory impressions into sense.

The sound she'd heard, the noise that had sprung her from sleep so abruptly... she backed up mentally, replayed it, and decided someone had dropped something on the hard hospital floor outside her room.

She'd been dreaming. Wisps of the dream clung to her despite the harsh awakening... thick fur beneath her hand, fur warmed by a strong body. There'd been a sense of physical well-being, too, and a goal, a place she needed to reach. She had to walk to get there. That's what she'd been doing when she was jerked awake. Walking.

In the dream she hadn't been alone. Here, she was.

It was early. Gray light from the room's single window barely smudged the outlines of things, but she could see that the space was empty of threats. Empty entirely, with a flat, lifeless feel, less real to her than a stage set.

As empty as she was with something nameless and necessary drained out.

Lily closed her eyes, riding out the backlash of unused adrenaline, waiting for her heartbeat to steady. She found herself alone with the numbness growing like a cancerous vine out of the dead place inside her. The place where her Gift used to be.

Grandmother, you said this couldn't happen. That it wasn't possible for me to stop being a sensitive. Suddenly she wanted her grandmother, wanted her with the intensity of a child waking from a nightmare, crying out in the dark. She needed to be held. She needed someone who could explain what had happened to her, even if she couldn't fix it.

She wasn't going to get what she wanted. Lily opened her eyes for the second time on a day she didn't want to face.

Rule was missing.

Missing, she reminded herself. Not dead.

Gradually the room took on context, substance, becoming real once more as the light subtly brightened outside. Just as her dream had suggested, she had a goal. She had to find Rule. She didn't know how—where to look, how to find out, who might have the pieces she needed to make sense of his vanishing. But she'd take her dream's advice there, too. She'd take one step at a time.

Her first step, she realized, would be literal. She had to get out of bed.

The skin's two main jobs were keeping contaminants out and fluids in. Large burns compromised its ability to do both tasks, so they'd given her antibiotics and kept her overnight to get her fluids replenished.

The IV had done a damned fine job. She was awash.

Sitting up wasn't too bad in a bed that answered her commands, but twisting around to slide off the bed hurt.

So did standing, breathing... she'd just have to put up with it. She began inching toward the bathroom, trailing her IV stand.

Maybe the nasty sense of unreality she'd woken up with had been an aftereffect of the painkiller they'd given her last night. She'd needed it. By the time they moved her to this room her mind had been so fuzzed by pain and emotion that she couldn't have reasoned her way through tic-tac-toe.

No more drugs, though. She had a lot of thinking to do.

They probably wouldn't offer her anything stronger than ibuprofen, anyway. She'd be leaving soon. There was no reason to keep her any longer.

Lily did what she could to make herself ready to face the day. She used the facilities, the hospital's toothbrush, and the hairbrush from her purse. She washed her face and hands and gave the shower a longing glance.

Even if she hadn't been warned against it, though, she wouldn't have taken a shower yet. She didn't have anything clean to put on. She'd have to call someone... someone other than her mother.

Lily stared at the shiny white sink, the forgotten hairbrush clutched light in her hand. Words ran through her head, broken bits of actual dialogue tumbling around with all the things she might have said.

No doubt last night had been a take on every parent's nightmare—two children in the ER at the same time, both victims of violence. And her mother always handled anxiety by assigning blame, as if by fixing guilt she could fix the problem. So Lily supposed she was a fool for needing what Julia Yu was unable or unwilling to give... but understanding didn't stop the ache. Or the anger.

At first Lily had been too raw to comprehend her mother's tirade. So much of it was reruns, the same tired complaints about Lily's profession. Only so shrill. So full of blame. *Your fault*, her mother had said. *It's your fault*

your little sister is hurt, was nearly raped, nearly killed.

What about me? Lily had said, or maybe she'd just thought that. *I'm so sorry Beth got hurt, but I'm hurt, too. I did my best...*

When had her best ever been good enough? But her mother hadn't left it at that. *She's gone too far*, Lily thought. This time her mother had gone too far.

So had she. When Julia Yu had yoked Rule in with her daughter, needing more than one person to haul around the shitload of blame she was dumping—when she'd said it was just as well he was dead—Lily had slapped her.

Lily shook her head, throwing off thoughts that had nowhere to go but round and round. She put down the brush, shoved open the bathroom door—and her heartbeat went crazy.

The outer door had swung open at the same instant, leaving her and a dark-skinned man in baggy scrubs staring at each other in mutual surprise.

The doctor, she thought, feeling foolish as she took in the stethoscope and harried expression. She had to get over this business of jumping at every unexpected sound or sight.

Twenty minutes later she was back in bed scowling at the blank screen of the television. She'd pulled the tray-table in front of her. It held a steaming cup of coffee and the pen and pad from her purse.

They were keeping her another night “for observation.”

There was no reason for it. The doctor had hemmed and hawed his way around an explanation, citing trauma and the danger of shock. Lily wasn't buying. There'd been some danger of shock last night, but that was over. The IV was gone.

The bastard with the stethoscope had actually patted her hand and told her she was lucky. HMOs and insurance companies were forever kicking people out too soon, and here she was being invited to stay an extra day. She should take advantage of it and rest.

Ruben had told her to rest, too. Damn him.

A paranoid type might think someone wanted to keep her where he could find her. Someone official, with plenty of pull. Someone who just might prefer that she be declared insane.

Of course, a paranoid type might be kept for observation in case she started seeing little green men conspiring against her.

Lily had reported to Ruben twice last night. First she'd called him from the scene, giving him a rough sketch of events. She'd followed up with a more detailed account while waiting to be moved from the ER to this room.

Something had changed between the first time she spoke with him and the second. Something or someone had convinced him Rule was dead, not missing.

He'd made noises about the lupi removing the body, just as they'd spirited away their wounded. She'd insisted they wouldn't do that without telling her. That's when he'd told her to rest.

Cullen hadn't believed her, either. No one did. And they should have.

There was no body.

Last night she hadn't liked where her thoughts were taking her. She'd hoped that sleep would clear her mind enough to come up with an explanation that didn't involve conspiracies. But today she found herself heading in the same direction.

Lily sipped at the coffee and started organizing her thoughts on paper.

Sequence, she wrote. Under that she began listing last night's events. She put asterisks next to the parts she'd heard secondhand.

According to Cullen, Benedict had scented the other lupi. Knowing help was almost there, he'd timed his play to have the gang in a state of maximum confusion when the wolves showed up, howling. He'd gotten Lily out of the line of fire even as he'd taken care of the one holding Beth.

His knife had flown true. The gangbanger had died fast with several inches of steel in his throat—too fast to harm Beth. Then Benedict had opened fire on the rest of the gang.

There'd been twenty of them, it turned out. Twenty young men with weapons trained on him, ready to shoot. He'd killed seven and wounded five before their return fire took him down just as the pack arrived.

That had sent most of the remaining gang members running. Most of those who hadn't run were dead—but only one of them had been killed by the wolves. Harlowe had been foaming-at-the-mouth crazy by then, fixated on reaching Lily. He'd used the staff so erratically that he'd done as much damage to his own people as to the lupi.

The staff, Lily wrote.

One. Harlowe had been holding it when Cullen hit him with mage fire. He'd been toasted... but his body hadn't gone missing.

Two. It had been touching Lily. She'd been burned, but she hadn't vanished.

Three. It hadn't even been touching Rule, yet he was gone.

Why? And why was she the only one who saw that his death didn't explain anything?

'She frowned at her list of events. *Make it complete*, she told herself, and added: *Took patrol cop to Rule's location. He wasn't there.*

Lily couldn't blame the local cops for thinking she was nuts. She'd known where Rule was, been able to feel his location precisely—on the west side of the dilapidated house that had been the gang's headquarters. She'd talked one of them into helping her get there... and found nothing, no one, no sign of Rule.

Alternatives, she wrote. Under that went: (1) *The mate bond isn't working right* and (2) *The mate bond's working, but reality is screwed up*. She grimaced. Hard to see how she could prove or disprove either of those. Then she made herself write the last alternative: (3) *Rule's dead, and I'm delusional*.

But dammit, she felt him. Not nearby, no. He was at least ten miles away now, maybe more. But the sense of direction was as clear as it had ever been. If she was imagining this, then the mate bond had been a delusion all along.

She crossed out the last alternative.

Where did that leave her?

No one had seen him die. No one had seen his body carried away. Yet two groups, the lupi and the FBI, insisted that he was dead, not missing. One or both groups must have some compelling reason to want Rule declared dead, even if they suspected he was still alive.

That was where she hit a stumbling block. She couldn't come up with any scenario that would put Cullen in cahoots with the FBI... which left her either with two groups with different motives, or back at the delusional alternative. In which case she couldn't trust her perceptions or her logic and should meekly agree when they offered to tuck her away in a nice, safe place.

Fuck that.

Rule was alive. She was the only one who could find him, because no one else wanted to look.

How did she start looking?

With what she knew, of course. And she *knew* where he was—the direction, at least. She shoved back the table, bent and grabbed her purse from the floor, and pulled her city map out of the side pocket. She'd track him her way.

He'd moved, she realized, surprised. He was still moving... slowly, maybe at a walk. She made her best guess about the distance and noted her estimate of his location on the map. Every thirty minutes she'd check, she decided. And she wouldn't let herself wonder how she could find him, then bring him back, on her own.

Because it looked impossible, and if she let herself get bogged down in what was or wasn't possible,

she'd never take the next step.

Whatever the hell that was.

THE sky in this place didn't change. That was hard to get used to. She had no idea how long she'd been walking, but it felt like a long time. Her feet hurt.

Otherwise, though, she was in good shape physically. That ymu was strong stuff. She felt as if she could keep walking for days if she had to... whatever "days" might mean in a place with no sun.

They'd left the barren heights behind and were walking along a narrow valley. Oddly, it had grown cooler as they descended, cool enough that she was beginning to envy the wolf his fur. So far, though, walking kept her reasonably warm.

Things grew here.

Nothing green. No sun meant no chlorophyll, she supposed. The most common plant looked like a succulent grass—thick, fleshy stuff the color of lemons that grew in patches that didn't reach the top of her foot. The other plants were mostly stem or stalk and didn't grow much higher than the "grass."

There was one exception—a rusty red vine that grew in great, looping piles to form thickets that dotted the valley like nests of enormous, vegetative snakes. She hadn't seen the vine up close. Gan wouldn't go anywhere near those thickets.

Occasionally the sky flared behind the mountains on her left. The volcano was out of sight, but signs of the battle continued.

Ahead was the Zone. Not far now—maybe thirty minutes, and they'd be there.

From a distance it had looked like a huge gray wall stretched from one side of the valley's mouth to the other, blocking the narrow egress. As they drew closer, it had lost definition rather than gaining it, growing almost misty and somehow hard to see. Unless she forced herself to stare at it her gaze would slide away.

That wasn't a spell, she knew. She didn't react to spells. Something about the nature of the barrier was simply hard to focus on. Whatever it was made of, though, it wasn't solid. At the top it faded into the sky like a shadow cast upward.

On the other side was their goal: Akhanetton. There they'd be out of reach of Gan's prince and the goddess Gan wouldn't name.

The Rules behaved oddly in a zone, according to Gan. And that was about all the demon had told her about zones. All she knew about Akhanetton was that it was another region. When she asked questions, Gan hushed her and looked scared.

She was pretty sure the demon was faking some of its fear to avoid answering questions.

Gan was especially jumpy now that they were in the open, but she hadn't seen any threats. Mostly bugs. Hell was big on bugs. Most of them were small and acted like regular insects, flying or scurrying about on their buggy business with the fearlessness only the lack of a brain could impart. The few larger ones had

run away when the three of them came near.

More than bugs, though, more than plants, the valley had dust. Very fine dust in a funny color, sort of a dusky purple. Like desiccated twilight.

She remembered twilight. Also sunrise, the scent of the ocean, and the sound of a cat's purr. She had no idea how any of those sights and sounds related to her, but she remembered them now.

At first she hadn't had anything, not a single memory. But as she walked, from time to time a word would float in and make itself at home. Like when the whir of an insect's wings had made her think of a cat purring, and all of a sudden she had "cat" back—the size and shape of cats, their soft fur, and sharp claws. The way they moved, as if they owned whatever space they occupied.

She still couldn't relate to the name the demon said was hers, but maybe that, too, would return. Maybe at some point she'd know "Lily" again.

The dust, while kind to her feet, was hard on her nose and throat. It rose in puffs with every step. Her throat tickled, and she coughed.

"Shh," Gan said without looking back.

The demon led. She stayed a few paces behind, and the wolf roamed. She hadn't seen him for a while, yet she knew where he was.

That had come as a surprise. The first time he'd roved out of sight, casting around for dangers, she'd felt anxious until she realized she could sense him. Not his thoughts or feelings, nothing so specific, but she knew where he was.

He was on his way back to them now. The valley didn't offer much real cover, but between the few bushes and the dips and rises in the ground the wolf—Rule—managed to keep out of sight. He was silent, too, uncannily so. Even Gan couldn't hear him approach.

Rule could probably have survived here on his own, but he wouldn't desert her. Even though he was angry with her decision—and that had been obvious since they left the ravine—he'd stay with her. She knew that in a way she couldn't explain.

The demon would have done fine on its own, too. Not her. She wasn't a liability because of her wounds anymore. She was just useless.

Of course, if not for her the other two might have killed each other by now.

A great, dark shape melted up out of the ground in front of them. Gan yelped and jumped back and then shook its fist at the wolf. "Quit that!"

"Shh," Lily said.

Gan turned to glare at her.

The wolf—Rule—grinned. At least that's what his expression looked like to Lily. He rumbled at the demon.

“What did he say?”

Gan cast Rule a disparaging look. “Oh, the big puppy dog is tired and thirsty.”

Rule growled louder.

“Come on, Gan. What did he really say?”

“He found some water,” Gan said grudgingly. “He thinks we should take a break before crossing the Zone.”

“Good.” Yet she wasn’t truly thirsty. She wanted to wash the dust from her throat, but she didn’t actually need a drink. She wasn’t hungry, either, and that was weird, now that she thought about it. A by-product of the ymu?

What else had that stuff done to her that she hadn’t noticed? That maybe she wouldn’t notice because she lacked the reference of memory to tell her something had changed?

Rule gave her a questioning look. She nodded, and he trotted off. She followed.

Gan did, too, grumbling about the detour, but she suspected the demon was ready for a break as well and only objected because it was the wolf’s idea.

The ground here was easier to her feet than the rocks had been. The valley itself was monotonous, but the mountains on her right were rather pretty in their way. Vegetation softened and striated them into bands of color—yellow ochre, rust, and brown in shades from sand to coffee to grape.

Not much like the mountains on the other side of the valley.

She paused and looked back, trying to spot the place where they’d come down out of the rocks into this valley. Somewhere in that confusion of stone lay the ravine that was, in a sense, her birthplace. It held her first memories.

She couldn’t find it.

“What?” Gan whispered. “Do you see something?” The demon had stopped. The wolf had, too, and was looking at her over his shoulder. She shook her head, unable to put words to the feelings knotted up in her gut. It was too late to wonder if they’d be able to find their way back.

Forward was all she had. So she kept going.

TWENTY-TWO



The waterhole was literally that—a hole in the rock where water bubbled up in what was more a large

puddle than a pool. It was set in a depression like a small meteor crater. *Meteor*, she thought, surprised, as the word opened up an image of a starry sky. Space. The moon, and meteorite showers that looked like falling stars.

She paused, savoring space and falling stars. Gan made it to the little pond first and knelt, tipping forward on its short arms to dunk its head underwater. It came up sputtering and then bent and slurped at the water like a... well, a dog. Or a wolf.

She looked at Rule. He would have drunk his fill when he found the waterhole. Now he lay nearby, his eyes open but head drooping.

He's exhausted, she realized, and that troubled her. Had more time passed than she'd guessed? Or was something else affecting him? "How long have we been walking?" she asked abruptly.

Gan sat back on its haunches, having quenched whatever thirst a demon feels. "According to whose clock? Time's more erratic here than you're used to."

"Time doesn't change. That just... it doesn't make sense."

"It does here. Though..." Its forehead wrinkled. "Around you it might operate more the way you're used to. I'm not sure how things work around a sensitive."

A dozen questions tempted her with side roads, but she held to her course. "Take a guess about how long we've been walking based on, uh, your own clock."

"Oh, maybe one of your days. I told you the Zone wasn't far."

Then Rule's exhaustion made sense, she thought, relieved. He'd probably covered twice as much territory as she had, and it had been a long time since he slept. Maybe he'd been awake for a long time before they arrived here, too.

That was a disconcerting thought, stretching as it did into a past she couldn't claim. She felt jealous, she realized. Jealous of Rule, for possessing what she'd lost. Jealous even of herself... the self who didn't exist anymore, except in the memories of others.

Of course, if Rule had been awake a long time, so had she. "I'm not sleepy."

"You're still charged up with ymu. It lasts a lot longer than the kind of meals you're used to. Once it runs low, you might get sleepy. Or mean. Or hungry. Or you might just keel over."

Great. "You don't know?"

It shrugged. "The only humans I know about who've taken ymu were possessed. It's probably different if you don't have a demon in you."

But she was tied to one—the one currently blocking her way. She stepped around it so she could wash the dust from her throat.

Gan shoved her back.

"Hey!"

“You’ve got to *look* first. See that?”

Now that it was pointed out, she did. A small vine thrust out of a fissure in the stone right where she’d been about to step. Pale and leafless, it looked more like an albino worm than a plant. “So?”

Gan rolled its eyes. “So why do you think we’ve been avoiding those things?”

This was one of the snaky vines? “I don’t know. I asked, but you just hushed me.” She tipped her head, studying it. “The mature ones are a different color.”

“They’ve got a lot of blood in them.”

Oh. She bent to take a good look, wanting to be sure she’d recognize one if she saw it. “I don’t see any kind of mouth, but it’s got fine hairs. Or maybe they’re cilia.”

“Whatever you call them, they’re sticky. Real sticky. And they’re the eating part.”

“How? And why is it dangerous to me? It’s too little to eat anything but bugs.”

“You’d get away, yeah. But you’d have it stuck to you, and the sap would eat away your skin.”

She was very careful about approaching the water-hole after that. When she knelt she saw a number of flying insects skimming the water—pretty things the size of her palm, almost colorless but with iridescent wings. They lit on the surface and took off again, making little ripples.

She wasn’t crazy about drinking after them, so she just splashed her face. The water was cold, but her skin tingled with more than the chill. “It’s everywhere in this place, isn’t it?”

“What?” Gan plopped down on the bare rock next to the water, sitting in the tilted sprawl its tail necessitated.

“Magic. Not literally everywhere,” she corrected herself, looking for a spot with some of the dust for cushioning. Bare rock wasn’t as comfortable for her as it seemed to be for the demon. “But there are patches of it all over—the ground, the air, the water.” Sometimes as she walked she’d felt it drift by, like a breeze, only the air wasn’t moving. Just the magic.

That was different, wasn’t it? She felt sure she wasn’t used to having so much free magic floating around.

“You mean you can feel it? You’re not even trying and you feel it?”

“Of course. There’s nothing between my skin and everything else, and I’m a sensitive, remember?”

Gan snorted. “Better than you do, I bet. Unless you’ve found your missing marbles.”

Her fists clenched. “Not exactly crammed with tact, are you?”

Rule stood and came over to her, rubbing his head along her hip. She dropped a hand to his shoulder, and just like that she felt better. Easier, as if she’d been holding an immaterial fist clenched around some thought or fear for a long time and could finally relax.

“I’ve gotten a little of it back,” she said, speaking to him now. not the demon. “Nothing about me, but I remember... a place that isn’t like this.”

He made a low, rumbling sound. She looked to Gan for a translation.

“He says he’ll remember for you. Could you try to be quiet now? Or do you just have to attract an *erkint* or two?”

“I think,” she said, still talking to the wolf, “that Gan gets especially cautious about noise when it doesn’t want to answer questions.”

He nodded.

“I have a lot of questions, and you probably do, too. But maybe we’ll save them until we’ve rested.” Not that she was physically tired, though it would feel good to get off her feet. She was weary of questions, of the void inside her that gave back only silence. “I’ll grill Gan later. I need to sit, and you need some sleep.”

Rule hesitated but then agreed by moving to a spot slightly sheltered by the rise in the ground that made her think of the lip of a meteor crater. He lay down and looked at her. He had lovely eyes, warm and dark and capable of conveying quite a bit of meaning. Right now they seemed to offer an invitation.

She took him up on it, sitting down beside him. His body felt warm and furry and good. She stroked his back. “Go on, get some sleep. I’ll keep watch.”

Again he hesitated.

“Not used to letting someone else do the watching, are you? It’s true, I won’t be as good a sentry as you. I don’t have your senses. But I don’t need sleep right now, and you do.”

He sighed and laid his head on her thigh. Within moments, he was asleep.

This, too, felt good. He’d been angry with her earlier, she knew. He hadn’t wanted her to take the ymu, or for them to leave the ravine. But either he’d gotten over his anger, or he’d set it aside. He trusted her to keep watch while he slept, and that mattered. It mattered a lot.

If she hadn’t had him with her here... well, she did, so there was no point in chasing that particular question. But even thinking it brought such a surge of feeling... like one of those ocean waves she remembered, it rolled up inside her, getting bigger and bigger.

Also like the waves she remembered, this one was salty. Her eyes filmed over with tears. He was the one good thing she had. “I’m so glad about you,” she whispered—soft, soft, so she didn’t wake him. “I’m so damned glad about you.”

Gan giggled. She dashed a hand across her eyes and turned to it, angry—but the demon was paying no attention to her. It was preoccupied with the flying bugs with the shiny wings. Its hand shot out, closing around one of them.

She ought to appreciate Gan’s presence, too. True, the demon acted from self-interest, but it had healed her wounds.

Gan popped the bug in its mouth.

Its habits weren't exactly appealing, but she and the wolf would find it much harder to survive here without the demon's guidance.

It grabbed another bug. This one it fed to the snake vine. It giggled again as the bug's wings thrashed.

There was a reason she hadn't bonded with Gan. She looked away.

Sitting still was hard. She'd wanted to rest, but now that she was resting, she wanted to move. She'd thought that the restlessness would go away once they left that ravine behind, but she'd brought it along with her.

She'd brought another feeling with her, too. One that fed the restlessness, though she sensed it wasn't the cause. An achy, needy feeling.

She wanted sex.

Now that she was sitting still, the ache was obvious. But she'd felt it for some time without paying it much notice—ever since Gan gave her the ymu, she realized. She remembered the startling rush of strength and energy, as if her blood had gone from flat to fizzy in an instant.

Maybe she always felt this way when her body was healthy and rested. But weren't demons supposed to be oversexed? Maybe these feelings came from Gan—she was tied to it, after all. Or from the ymu.

She glanced at Gan again. No way was she going to ask.

Gan had said that she and Rule used to have sex “when he wasn't a wolf.” She frowned. It bothered her to think of him being different. Had he been a wolf a long time? What was he like when he wasn't a wolf?

She wished she could remember. Funny... she knew about sex, knew what her body wanted. She could imagine the way a man's hands would feel, but she couldn't remember being touched. She tried to call up a single, specific image—a face, a name, a place. And failed. What did her bed look like? Who had been it with her? Had she had many lovers? Or... another word arrived, but this one slammed into her mind with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Marriage. What if she was married?

She looked at the wolf whose head was heavy and warm on her thigh, her brow wrinkling at the thoughts pinging through her mind. She wasn't wearing a ring... but she'd arrived here without clothes, so the lack of a ring didn't mean much.

She didn't realize she'd reached for the little charm hung around her neck until her fingers closed around it. The faint, familiar buzz of its magic made her shoulders loosen. Her necklace had arrived with her. Surely a wedding ring would have, too.

The demon sighed, stretched its short legs and leaned back on its tail. “This is boring.”

Silence only mattered when the demon wasn't bored? She scowled at it. “What?” it said. “Aren't you bored just sitting there?”

It was like a child, she realized. A nasty little child who pulled the wings off flies—and fed them to carnivorous plants. But maybe demons didn't sleep, so Gan didn't realize it had to be quiet or it would wake up Rule. She shushed it.

Gan grimaced and pulled up a handful of the fleshy yellow grass.

She bet that once she started asking questions it would be hushing her and looking scared again. But they weren't budging until she knew more.

She'd rushed her decision, she admitted. Or allowed herself to be pushed into it, with pain arguing loudly on the side of the demon. She still thought she'd made the right choice, but she'd made it with very few facts. Before they crossed the Zone into the other region, she intended to get some answers.

She looked to her left at the murky barrier stretched across the mouth of the valley like a T-shirt that was fifty percent spandex, fifty percent mist.

Spandex. T-shirt. She smiled with pleasure as the words shifted all sorts of images and concepts into her mind. Gyms and working out. Department stores and malls. Socks and athletic shoes... and oh, but didn't she wish she had some of those right now!

Of course, she might as well wish for the whole mall so she could get a few other things, too. Panties, jeans, a shirt, a hairbrush... her hair must be a mess.

Her hair. She didn't know what it looked like. Or her face.

The surface of the water had been too ripply from the insects to give her back a reflection. She hadn't thought about it then. Now she needed to know.

The hand she raised trembled a little. She checked out her hair first. Not long, not short. Straight. Black, she saw when she pulled a strand in front of her face. And her face... she touched her cheeks, her chin, but didn't know how to assemble the messages from her fingertips into a picture. Were ears always this big? What about noses? Hers felt straight, but was it long or short? She didn't know how long a nose ought to feel. Or lips. Hers—

What was that?

She turned her head sharply and shook the wolf's shoulder. "Wake up. Quick. Gan, what are those?"

"What are... shit!" the demon cried even as the wolf lifted his head, shook it, and turned to see where she was pointing.

Four great, winged shapes were heading toward them, coming from the direction of the Zone.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Gan hopped from foot to foot, clutching its head as it looked around frantically. "I knew stopping here was a bad idea! I just knew it!"

The wolf was on his feet now, but he no more knew what to do than she did. There was no cover, nothing to shield them from overhead, and she lacked even the most rudimentary weapon... and those things were huge.

And coming fast. She could see them clearly now.

For a moment, awe outweighed everything else. Watching those four sinuous shapes the color of old copper winging straight at them, gliding across air with the sideways sway of a snake crossing sand, carried by wings whose tips would span a small house, all she could think was: *They exist. They really do exist.*

Dragons.

A cold nose poked her. “What—? Oh. Yes,” she said as the wolf flattened himself as much as possible against the rim of the small depression. “Yes, I see.”

There was nowhere to run, no way to defend themselves. Their only chance was to be hard to spot. She curled up against the rock.

She couldn't see the dragons anymore. The fear she hadn't felt a second ago struck. Her mouth went dry. Her heartbeat slammed into overdrive. She craned her head around, trying to spot them without moving. *This is how a rabbit feels, quivering in the grass while the eagle stoops, unable to see its death coming, but knowing. Knowing.*

She clenched her fingers in Rule's ruff. Maybe it was just coincidence that the dragons were flying this way. Maybe their vision was poor. Maybe...

The demon was still hopping in one place, halfway to hysterical. “They'll eat me! They're going to eat me, I know it!”

“Gan!” she called. “You're making yourself a target! Shut up and get down!”

It looked straight at her, its oddly lovely eyes wide with terror. “They'll eat me!” it shrilled. “I won't *be* anymore! You have a soul—you'll still be, but I won't! All of me will be gone!”

She stared at it, helpless. Should she tackle it, wrestle it to the ground? Could she? It was small, but so much heavier than it looked—

“No!” she screamed, grabbing at the wolf—too late.

He'd hurled himself up out of the depression. Had he lost his mind? Did he think he could fight them, or outrun them, or—no. Oh, no.

“He's nuts!” The demon stared after the wolf, too, as he raced away—not dodging, but running flat out—fast, so fast. Not running directly away from the dragons, either, but at an angle. “He can't outrun them!”

No, he couldn't. He was trying to draw them away. Offering himself as easy prey.

She was on her feet. She didn't remember standing up. She watched as one of the greatest creatures of legend peeled away from the others, folded its wings, and dove, plummeting straight at Rule like an arrow loosed from a giant's bow. She was still watching that terrible dive when two of the remaining three folded their wings and dove.

The one stooping on Rule struck, skimmed the ground, lifted.

Four long seconds later, a shadow dimmed the glow from the sky. Then the talons closed around her.

TWENTY-THREE



Cynna hated hospitals. So did everyone who didn't work in one, she supposed, and maybe some who did. Just the smell of this one made her want to turn around and head the other way.

But there were things she hated worse, so she stepped out of the elevator and scowled at the wall with arrows pointing this way and that, depending on which room number you wanted.

Okay, three-fourteen was to the left. She headed that way at a good clip, her tote tucked under one arm, the flowers she'd picked up at the grocery store gripped firmly in her other hand. She hadn't been raised within whiffing distance of any social graces, but she'd picked up a few along the way. When you visited someone in the hospital, you took flowers.

Cynna had never been one to dawdle, and with a good head of anger steaming her brain, she chugged past the nurse's station pretty quickly. A nurse with a bouncy pony-tail called out something about stopping. She ignored that.

Damned bureaucrats. She'd thought Ruben was different, but he'd caved, turned belly-up under the pressure. Well, she wasn't about to go along with it.

She was reaching for the door of three-fourteen when the nurse—persistent little shit—put a hand on her arm. “Miss! I've been trying to stop you. You can't go in there.”

Cynna turned around slowly. “Don't touch.”

It was the first good look the woman had gotten at Cynna's face. Her baby-blues opened wide.

There had been a time when Cynna enjoyed the stares—at least she wasn't invisible. There'd been a time when they annoyed her. These days she mostly didn't notice, but she was a little testy at the moment.

“What's the matter?” she asked. “Have I got dirt on my cheek? Is my lipstick smeared?”

“Uh...” The woman blinked. “You aren't wearing lipstick.”

“No shit.” Cynna grinned in a way she knew made people nervous. “So what're you staring at?”

Nurse Ponytail was made of stronger stuff than she looked. “Your tattoos. I shouldn't have. Excuse me for that, but you didn't stop. You can't go in there, miss. Visiting hours aren't for another two hours.”

“You're full of assumptions, aren't you, Miss Nurse? How do you know I don't have three or four husbands scattered around? Here. Hold this.” She thrust the flowers at the nurse so she could dig out her

badge. “Happy?”

Damned if the woman didn't take the badge and examine it before handing it back. “It looks legitimate. Did you clear this visit with the head nurse?”

“No.” Cynna stuffed her badge in her jacket pocket and took back the flowers. “Why don't you run along and tattle on me?” She turned away and shoved open the door. And stopped, letting her tote fall to the floor as she held her hands away from her sides.

The .38 aimed her way had an effect on her heart rate, too.

It was held by an aging Santa Claus in gold-rimmed glasses, a cheap sports jacket, and ugly black shoes. Cop shoes. Cop eyes, too, behind those glasses.

She relaxed a bit. “Guess I should have knocked first.”

“It's okay, T.J.,” Lily said from the bed. “She's MCD.”

“Knocking would be a good idea,” he said, sliding his weapon back into a shoulder holster that was in a lot better shape than his shoes. “People keep trying to kill Yu. Makes me edgy.”

“Understandable.”

“They might miss and hit me,” he explained.

She grinned and came farther into the room. It was typical hospital fare—semi-private, no window, two stiff, vinyl-covered chairs for visitors. No one was in the other bed. No flowers, Cynna noticed. Well, Lily hadn't been here long and would probably be turned loose soon.

If they didn't decide to lock her away somewhere else, that is. Someplace where she could be medicated and watched.

Lily didn't look bad. Pale, tired, and all-over tense, but otherwise okay. Not noticeably nutty... not grieving, either, from what Cynna could tell. But she had her face closed up tight, so Cynna might have been wrong about that.

Lily lifted a hand. “T.J., this is Agent Cynna Weaver. Cynna, this quivering mass of Jell-O is Detective Thomas James. I worked homicide with him.”

“Make it T.J.” He grinned, revealing a gold tooth and more charm than she'd expected from an old, fat white dude. “Only civilians call me Detective James.”

“Sure, if you call me Cynna. When I hear ‘Agent Weaver’ I start looking for some suit with a briefcase.”

“I hear you. Good to meet you, Cynna.” He glanced at Lily. “Guess I'll be heading out.”

“Uh... don't rush off on my account.” Cynna knew she sounded insincere, probably because she was. Some things couldn't be said with an outsider around, even if he was a cop.

“I was ready to leave. Yu here has already heard all my stories, and the strain of trying to look interested is wearing her out.”

“T.J.” Lily gave him a long, level look. “Thanks.”

He gave her a nod. “Still think you ought to come back, but I’ll admit we can’t offer you all the thrills you’re getting with the feds. Shot, burned... think you could arrange to be stabbed next time, just for a little variety?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said dryly.

Cynna moved aside to let him by. On impulse she asked, “Did the ponytail nurse give you a hard time about showing up before visiting hours?”

“You mean Sally?” There was a knowing look in his eyes. “Nah, Sally likes me. Cute little thing, isn’t she?”

She sighed. “Not my type.”

“Never know, these days,” he said vaguely. “Later.”

Cynna wasn’t sure what it was about her that gave people the idea she played on her own side of the fence, but this wasn’t the first time she’d run up against that notion. Not just from men, either. She’d been hit on plenty by the DC-types of her own sex.

After the door closed behind T.J., Cynna sighed. “Maybe I need to wear a button. Something discreet like, ‘No, I’m not lesbian.’”

The door opened again. “And I, for one, am pleased to hear it. Do you fool around?”

Cynna turned around. And fell in love.

“You must be Lily’s Finder,” said the most beautiful man in the world. “I’ve been wanting to meet you.”

“I am so shallow,” she muttered. Then, louder, “Listen, about fooling around... I’ve got some things to do first, but if you’d like to wait until after I’ve talked to Yu—to Lily, I mean—I’m up for a discussion of the subject.”

“Should I tell you who he is before you jump him?” Lily asked from the bed. “Or would that detract from the mystery?”

“I’ve got this theory that it’s classier to know a man’s name before you get naked together, so shoot.”

“Cullen Seabourne.”

Shit. She should have known he was too good to be true. “The sorcerer.” Her right hand was still full of flowers, so she used the left one to run a quick diagnostic, barely moving her fingers.

He noticed. It amused him. “Thank you. I’m afraid I haven’t rediscovered the trick to creating a full, mobile illusion, however. Nor am I running any charm spells.”

“He really does look like that.” Lily didn’t sound amused. More like weary. “As for charm, I haven’t noticed any.”

“Ouch.” He came farther into the room, and oh, man, but he did know how to move. He had one of those lean bodies, all muscle and grace, like a Siamese cat. And knew how to display it—tight black jeans, a snug T-shirt the same startling blue as his eyes. His hair was a spicy brown.

She was pretty sure there were horses that color—rich and reddish, not quite auburn. He wore it too long, but Cynna wasn’t complaining. And his face. . . God, what a face. She could have hung him on the wall and just looked at him all day. After they had sex, that is. Hot, sweaty sex for maybe five, six hours.

“Wait a minute,” she said, scowling at a sudden thought. “You aren’t gay, are you?”

His eyebrows lifted. “Didn’t Lily tell you? I’m lupus.”

And that, of course, was that. Lupi simply didn’t produce homosexuals. The so-called experts coughed up all sorts of reasons, but Cynna considered it an argument in favor of a genetic link for sexual orientation. “And I’m very glad to meet you. Cynna Weaver.” She held out her hand. . . and saw the flowers she was still clutching.

She turned to Lily. “Uh, these are for you.”

“Thank you. I’m afraid I don’t have a vase, but there should be a water pitcher around here somewhere.”

“That’ll do.” God, how lame. Why hadn’t she gotten a vase with the flowers? She looked around.

“Here.” The love of her life handed her an ugly plastic pitcher.

“Great. I’ll just fill this up with water.”

The bathroom was tiny. Cynna turned on the water, but not too high. She didn’t want to miss anything.

Lily said one word to Cullen—a name. “Benedict?”

“He’s hanging in there. Beth was treated and released, I understand. She’s okay?”

“As far as I know. Mother said. . .” Lily hesitated, as if she didn’t want to repeat whatever her mother had said. “Beth will be staying with her and my father for a few days.”

“What about you? Any change?”

Cynna returned, ugly plastic pitcher in hand, in time to see Lily shake her head.

The gorgeous Cullen didn’t even notice her, intent on Lily and his questions. “Did they find the *toltoi*?”

“No.”

“What’s a *toltoi*?” Cynna asked, setting the improvised vase on the hospital table by the bed.

Cullen answered absently. “A charm. Her necklace got broken during the fight.”

“Easy to see how that could happen.” Harder to see why Cullen was so tense about a missing bauble.

He was a sorcerer, though. Maybe he meant “charm” literally. “Change in what?”

“What do you mean?”

“You asked her if there was any change.”

He was surprised. “I wanted to know if she felt better.”

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head. “You’re good, but I’m not buying. I’m here because Lily is about to get dumped on, and I don’t like that. But I don’t like being kept in the dark, either. And that’s happened right from the start.”

The other two didn’t exchange telling glances, but their silence said plenty. Cullen broke it to ask, “Who’s about to dump on Lily?”

“Have you seen the headlines?”

“Some of them.”

“They aren’t exactly good PR for any of us.” The ones in the more respectable media ranged from “Gang Slaughtered in FBI Bust” to “Wolves on the Rampage?” Cynna’s favorite tabloid had the FBI signing a demonic pact to wipe out all gangs, with the lupi acting as the demons’ hit men. Talk radio was going with pretty much the same slant, only without the demonic middlemen.

“They were bound to be all over this one,” Lily said. “Fourteen people killed, the lupi implicated, the FBI definitely involved... have they picked up on the death magic angle?”

“The *Times* mentions it. References an anonymous source on the San Diego PD.”

Lily grimaced. “It’s a reporter’s wet dream, even if they don’t yet know just what went down.”

“They will soon,” Cynna said grimly. “The Big Dick has scheduled a press conference for six p.m. Eastern. Just in time for the evening news.” Dick Hayes was the FBI’s acting director while the real boss recuperated from open heart surgery. The nickname given him by the rank-and-file was not a token of fondness. “He’s going to throw you to the wolves.”

Lily’s sharp laugh surprised her. “No throwing required. I’m pretty much with the wolves already. Thanks for the warning, though.”

“I don’t think you get it. He’s going to give them your name and tell them you’re scheduled for psychiatric evaluation. They’ll be all over you. Plus, he’s got this idea you *faked* your Gift to get in the Unit. As if that...” She paused, frowning. “You aren’t upset.”

Lily shrugged one shoulder. “I’m not happy, but it was only a matter of time before the media got my name. It was my investigation. Besides, I’m an easy sacrifice, considering how short a time I’ve been with the Bureau. The psych evaluation is news,” she admitted. “But not a big surprise.”

“He ordered Ruben not to tell you.” Cynna simmered over that a moment. “I can’t believe Ruben agreed, but he did.”

“I don’t imagine he had much choice. He made sure I learned about it.”

Cynna felt suddenly foolish. “I guess he figured I’d tell you.”

“I guess he did.”

Cynna decided to sit down. The chair was as uncomfortable as it looked. “Hayes wants you to be surprised so you’ll look bad on camera.”

“I’ll have to talk to the press at some point, but maybe not yet. Maybe I should check out of here.” She looked at Cullen. “Isen called a couple of hours ago.”

“Oh?”

“He wants me to see the Rhej. Though it sounded more like he was passing on a summons from her.”

Cullen’s eyebrows lifted.

“Who or what is the Rhej?” Cynna asked.

“A holy woman. I wonder...” He shook his head, apparently unwilling to say more.

“He also wants me to come stay with him for a while. He was very gentle, very careful with me. Didn’t believe me for a minute about Rule.”

“You wouldn’t be bothered by reporters at Clanhome.”

“No.” She chewed on her lip. “I’m going to tell Cynna.”

“Lily—”

“About my Gift,” she said, turning to Cynna. “It’s gone.”

Cynna blinked. “Can’t be.”

“That’s conventional wisdom. It’s impossible to lose a Gift, right? But I can’t touch magic now.”

Cynna couldn’t think of anything to say. Losing her own Gift... she couldn’t get her mind around that. She was a Finder. She couldn’t imagine who she’d be if that were suddenly not true. “The staff?” she said hesitantly. “You think it somehow zapped your Gift?”

“It felt... when Harlowe used it on me...” Her face wasn’t closed anymore. More like haunted. “It felt as if something was clawing my skin off. I think it pried my Gift loose.”

“Shit.”

“Pretty much, yeah.” She didn’t say anything for a moment, looking down at the sheet drawn neatly over her legs. The head of the bed was raised, pillows propped behind her.

She looked so small in that bed. That shouldn’t come as a surprise—she was a little bitty thing, after all. But something about the woman had made Cynna forget there just wasn’t much of her, physically.

Lily looked up then and met her eyes. “Losing my Gift... that’s one reason they think I’m nuts.”

“Uh...”

“The way everyone sees it, either I really did lose my Gift and it sent me round the bend, or I’m blocking it as part of my denial.” She glanced at Cullen. “That’s what you think, isn’t it?”

“I’m keeping an open mind,” he said lightly.

Lily shook her head. “If you really thought there was a chance Rule was alive, you’d be looking for him.”

His expression flattened. “Where? Your former compatriots searched the area, didn’t they?”

“You’ve got ways of looking they lack.”

“I’m no Finder.”

“No,” she said. And looked at Cynna.

“I wondered when you’d think of that. Rule...” Saying his name made her throat unhappy. She swallowed. “Ruben told me you’re insisting that he’s alive. I want to know why.”

“If I tell you—”

“Lily,” Cullen’s voice was sharp. She ignored him. “If I tell you what you want to know, will you try to Find him?”

“I already have.”

TWENTY-FOUR



LILY’S head went light and dizzy. Big Dick’s planned press conference hadn’t come as a shock, but the whiff of hope hit her system like a double scotch on an empty stomach.

“Hey.” That was Cullen, standing by her bed with a hand on her shoulder. “It helps if you keep breathing.”

“Okay. I’m okay.” She waved him away and got herself back under control. “Where? Where is he?”

Cynna held up both hands. “I did that wrong. Sorry. What I mean is that I *tried*, not that I Found him. What I did Find doesn’t make sense. That’s why I need to know why you’re so sure he’s alive.”

Lily realized her nails were about to draw blood. She unclenched her fists. “All right. Then you’ll tell me what you Found.”

Cullen sighed. “As a clan member in good standing, this is where I’m supposed to threaten you with all manner of dire consequences.”

“What can they do—kick me out?” She shook her head. “Sorry. I know that’s a big deal for you, but it doesn’t mean as much to me.”

“Let me help.” As if she’d been still as long as she could, Cynna popped to her feet and began to pace. “I’ve got some of it figured out. I came up with three possible reasons for you to hold out on me. One, there’s some kind of national security deal involved that I’m not cleared for. Except you’d tell me if that were the case, right? Or Ruben would have told me before I got here.”

“That’s not it.”

“I didn’t think so. Reason two. The stuff you’ve kept to yourself is personally embarrassing. People do that all the time, and cops aren’t immune to the cover-up urge. But a good cop wouldn’t do it, and Ruben has pretty high standards for the Unit. Rule’s standards weren’t so shabby, either. So that leaves me with reason number three.” She glanced at Cullen. “Which you pretty much confirmed just now with that ‘clan member in good standing’ bit.”

He raised his eyebrows politely. “Did I?”

“I’m wondering if that was on purpose.”

Lily didn’t wonder. She wasn’t sure of his motives, but Cullen gave away very little by accident. “Go on.”

“It’s lupus secrets you’re keeping, isn’t it? And it has something to do with your relationship with Rule. Something that makes you think you’ve got the inside track on whether he’s dead or alive. Something that makes him, well, *yours*.”

Lily nodded slowly. She’d underestimated Cynna Weaver. “You’ve got most of it. Rule and I are mate bound.”

Cullen sighed and plopped down in one of the chairs, stretching out his legs and tilting his head back. “I wonder,” he asked the ceiling, “if I’ll be considered an accomplice for not stopping you?”

“You couldn’t have.”

“So what does mate bound mean, exactly?” Cynna asked.

“It’s rare, I understand.” And harder than she’d expected to put into words, especially with this woman she didn’t know well. . . whom Rule had once known very well. “Lupi see the bond in religious terms. They say their goddess—they call her the Lady—occasionally chooses a life mate for one of them. And, uh, it’s very physical. Sexual, but more than that. When it first hit, Rule and I couldn’t be separated by more than a couple hundred yards. It’s more relaxed now, thank God.”

“What do you mean, you couldn’t be separated?”

“If we put too much distance between us, we get dizzy. I’m told that if we get too far away we’d pass out, but we’ve never gone past the dizzy stage.”

Cynna's lips pursed. She glanced at Cullen.

"Don't look at me," he said to the ceiling. "I'm an innocent bystander."

Lily continued doggedly. "Rule says the separation thing never goes away completely, but I don't know what our limit is now. I haven't tested it lately, but..." She paused, tensing.

The mate bond was like background music, she thought. If the radio was always playing, she didn't notice unless she stopped and paid attention. But let someone change the station or the volume...

"What is it?" Cynna asked.

"He's moving again. Moving fast."

"What do you mean, again?" Cullen asked sharply.

"He's been moving for some time, but slowly. Now..." She tried to estimate. "He might be in a car or something, because he's going a lot faster."

Cynna frowned. "Can you guess at the distance? Are you likely to pass out or something?"

"I don't know. He's farther away now than he has been since the bond happened, and the farther away he is, the fuzzier my estimate of distance. Direction, though—I get that right every time."

Cynna nodded. "It sounds a lot like Finding."

"What do you mean?"

"The farther away my target is, the less I can say about the distance. There's a limit, too. For me it's between a hundred and a hundred fifty miles. Within that limit I get direction. Beyond it..." She shrugged.

"You don't just Find physical objects, though. You said you turned up ghosts sometimes."

"Yeah." Her eyebrows twitched together. "That's sort of what it was like when I tried Finding Rule."

"He is not a ghost. The mate bond ties me to his body, which is very much alive." Somewhere. "What, exactly, did you Find?"

"I went to the scene this morning after I talked to Ruben, and I did a Find. I, uh, already had Rule's pattern, from when I used to know him. It's better to have the current pattern, but I thought I had enough that I'd be able to tell if he was still around."

"And?" Lily thought she might jump up and shake the woman.

"What I got was fuzzy. Real fuzzy. I didn't think it was a ghost, but it's hard to be sure when I had such a poor fix. But there was a direction, so I followed it. Right where my Gift told me he was, though..." She spread both hands. "A gas station. Lots of cars. No sign of Rule."

Her heart was pounding. Cynna had gotten the same results she had—a clear fix on a specific spot, yet no sign of Rule. That proved she wasn't crazy and that the mate bond was working right, didn't it? "Has

that ever happened before?”

Cynna shook her head but then added, “Except with ghosts.”

“Ghosts don’t move around. Where was this gas station, and what time did you do the Find?”

“The corner of Middlebrook and Hessing. I got there about nine-thirty.”

Lily leaned over and pulled her table closer, took the city map off it, and passed it to Cullen.

He raised his eyebrows as he took it.

“Check my notes,” she said tersely. “I’ve been trying to track Rule. I had to guess at the distance, but the direction is right.”

He unfolded it, studied it a moment, and then passed it to Cynna without a word.

“Where... oh, yeah, I see it.” She looked at Lily. “Maybe you’re better at guessing distance than you thought. The line connecting your estimates runs pretty close to my gas station. The times fit, too.”

“Yes.” She looked at Cullen—who was back to studying the ceiling. “Rule’s people might expect me to be weird right now. I gather that the sudden breaking of the mate bond can have repercussions. But only if you start with the assumption that he’s dead. And I can’t see why you’ve done that.”

That was one hell of a fascinating ceiling.

She kept going. “There’s no body. The staff wasn’t even touching Rule when you crisped Harlowe, so why assume he’s dead? And now Cynna has confirmed that the mate bond is working. She and I both know where he is— only he isn’t there. I only see one possibility. He’s someplace that’s tied to Earth geographically, but isn’t Earth.”

“I’ve tried,” Cullen told the ceiling. “Haven’t I tried? But she’s determined, and maybe Isen is wrong. No, strike that—Isen is definitely wrong.” Abruptly he pushed to his feet. “Being Rho isn’t like being the pope, is it? No one granted him infallibility.”

“What are you talking about?”

He began pacing. There wasn’t much room for it. “Cast your mind back. I didn’t say Rule was dead. At the time you weren’t in any shape to consider nuances of speech, but what I said was that he was gone.”

“So you *don’t* think he’s dead.”

“He might be.” Cullen shook his head. “I don’t know. Isen wants me to lie to you about that, and I could. I’m an excellent liar, but my heart isn’t in it. And I’m not good at blind obedience. Lost the knack, I suppose, in all those years I was clanless...” Cullen stopped, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. “God, I’m tired.”

“Tough. Keep talking.”

He sighed. “You’re right. Right about all of it, I’m afraid.”

She closed her eyes. *Breathe*, she reminded herself. She did, and her muscles turned slippery, loosening up so suddenly it was a good thing she was propped up.

“So why would this Isen dude want you to lie about it?” Cynna demanded.

Cullen glanced at her. “Isen Turner. He’s Rule’s father and the Rho, the head of Nokolai... my clan. He wants to protect Lily.”

“To *protect* me?” That sent a charge through her that brought her upright again, all but vibrating with anger. “By trying to convince me Rule’s dead?”

“Think about it.” Cullen’s face could never be other than beautiful. Even when it had been butchered, the eyes gauged out, it had possessed a certain ravaged glory. But she’d never seen it look so naked—naked like an old, twisty tree. All bones, no softness.

He almost looked his age. “I spent a long time working out the possibilities last night. I’ll give them to you the way I gave them to the Rho. One, Rule is dead. Wait.” He held up his hand. “Hear me out.”

He resumed his pacing, a two-legged panther caged in a modern hospital room. “Mage fire burns in places—call them dimensions—you can’t see, and it burns very, very hot there. When my mage fire hit the staff, the hole in space that was its underlying reality imploded. It could have sucked Rule along somehow.”

“Sucked him... where?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” He reached the wall and turned. “Two. The staff was Hers. If She called it to Her the second the mage fire hit, she might have been able to recover part of it. I don’t know why Rule would have been dragged with the staff. As you said, it was touching you, not him, so I didn’t give this a very high probability. But it was just possible that the effect traveled along you without, ah, grabbing hold, because of your Gift. And Rule got taken instead.”

To *Her*. The Old One or goddess or whatever. Lily’s mouth was dry. “One problem with that. My Gift is gone.”

He nodded without pausing in his restless motion. “Exactly. So I thought Rule probably was dead, only you were so damned sure he wasn’t. I couldn’t overlook the chance that you were right. I tried scrying for him.”

“You didn’t tell me.” Anger burned still, but lower, retreating to a tight, sullen heat in her belly. “I take it you didn’t find anything.”

He grimaced. “I had to light the candle with a match. Didn’t have enough juice left to raise a fever, much less start a fire. It’s hard to get a salamander to notice a non-magical fire. I struck out.”

“I didn’t,” Cynna said.

He gave her an unfriendly look. “No. So I’ve had to rethink some of my assumptions.”

Lily drummed her fingers. “I don’t see what any of this has to do with lying to me to *protect* me.”

Cullen held out both hands, turning them palms up. “The way Isen saw it, either Rule was dead and you

were delusional, and feeding that delusion wouldn't be healthy. Or else he was alive and we'd have to find a way of going after him. Of course, I don't know how to do that, but assuming we made it past that little road block, it was apt to be a suicide mission, so—"

"Wait a minute. You sound as if you know where he is."

His eyebrows lifted. "I thought you'd figured that out."

You said you knew he was in the realm most analogous to ours, physically."

She wanted smack him. "I don't know what that means!"

His mouth flattened. "Hell, luv. He's in hell."

A thousand feet up Lily discovered that ymu might keep her from sleeping, but she still needed oxygen. Or maybe it was fear, pure and simple, that made her pass out.

She came to as they descended. This would have struck her as lousy timing if she hadn't been so surprised to still be alive—and so busy trying not to throw up. From the ground, the dragons' flight had been grace itself. Experienced up close and personal, the ride was jerky as the great wings sculled through the air, tilting first one way, then the other.

Mountains again. These were green and gold, dust and rock—and hurtling toward her with stomach-wrenching speed. It was hard to breathe. The dragon's talons felt like hot steel bands clamped around her middle, leaving her head, arms, and legs dangling. Her hands and feet were numb. Cold air rushed passed, filling her ears with its ocean noise, making her eyes water and her nose run.

Rule was close.

The heart-song of his nearness hummed inside her as they spiraled down and down, giving her one clear note to hold onto amid the cacophony of fear and pain. He hadn't died. The dragon hadn't eaten him.

It looked like they'd die together in about thirty seconds though, when they smashed into the side of the mountain. No, wait, there was a crevice—it looked too narrow for the dragons' wings, but they tilted madly and sailed through, leveling off over the ocean.

Oh, God, the ocean. It was the first familiar thing she'd seen, though the colors weren't right. Blue. She remembered blue, a shifting symphony of blues. This ocean shimmered through lichen colors—yellow ochre with bands of rust and dusty olive, reflecting the odd sky.

No beach. The water rolled right up to the rocky cliff face they flew along. Then the cliff fell back. They tilted, turning into a wide inlet.

More cliffs—rocks meeting ocean, then a thin strip of beach that widened—

They dove at it. As if the dragon had suddenly discovered gravity, they fell faster and faster. Her eyes watered madly from the rush of air. She couldn't see.

She wanted to touch Rule, just to touch him once more—

The dragon put on the brakes. Those huge wings pulled sharply forward, cupping the air.

Her body tried to keep going. The talons didn't let it. Too airless to scream, she blacked out again. Only for a moment, though, this time. She was dizzily conscious when, with the beach two stories beneath her, the bands around her middle opened and she fell—

About five feet, into soft, warm sand. She hit awkwardly, catching a glimpse of the long tail passing overhead before the creature powered itself up again with a windy flap of its wings.

She made it to her hands and knees and retched. With nothing in her stomach, the process was both brief and unproductive, but she missed seeing the second dragon drop its burden, only catching a glimpse of its long tail as it vanished upward again.

Dizzy and miserable, she sat back on her heels and looked around.

She was in a giant sandbox. End to end, it stretched about half the length of a football field. (*Football*, she thought. . . men in uniforms chasing a funny-shaped ball, fighting to possess it. . .) The sides were rocks—not masonry, for although they were fitted, they hadn't been shaped. She was twenty feet or so above the beach.

And twenty feet away, Rule was pushing to his feet.

“Rule!” She tried to stand, but pain shot through her left ankle and she plopped back down in the sand.

A moment later a furry head rubbed her arm.

She twisted and flung her arm over his back, wanting to bury her face in his fur. He yipped.

She pulled back. He was panting softly. “You're hurt.”

He touched his nose to his side.

The talons must have gripped too tight, or maybe he'd cracked something when the dragon dropped him. “Your ribs?”

He nodded and then touched her leg gently with one forepaw. The pad was rough and scratchy.

“I twisted my ankle when I landed. No biggie.” She ran a careful hand over his side. Nothing protruded, anyway. If there was internal damage. . .

A squeal brought her head up. She watched as another dragon finished its kamikaze run at the ground, dropping a small, noisy orange demon in the sand about fifteen feet away.

So Gan was alive, too. Her relief surprised her.

Of course, relief might be premature. Maybe the three of them were carryout.

To her left were tall, rocky bluffs riddled with crevices. Next to their sandbox was a broad hollow in the cliff face, like a skinny kid pulling in his stomach—too shallow to be called a cave, but deep enough that half the sand was in shadow. She had the uneasy suspicion that bowl-shaped concavity wasn't natural, that something had dug out the rock.

Below the sandbox was beach, wide here, but tapering into nonexistence about fifty feet in one direction, seventy in the other. At the end of the beach farthest from the mouth of the inlet, grass grew.

Beach grass, she thought. *Ammophila arenaria*.

A damp tongue licked her cheek. She turned, startled... and realized both her cheeks were wet, and the salty taste in her mouth wasn't just from the sea. "I know the name of it," she murmured, threading her fingers into the wolf's ruff. "I know the name of the grass here."

The ocean drew her. The water was the wrong color, but it smelled right. It was quiet here, the waves small. As she watched a wave slid up the sand in a delicate froth, lost interest, and retreated.

"The dragons have a nice sandbox." She ran a hand through the sand, letting it dribble between her fingers. It was grainy and loose. It would be hard to walk on and all but impossible to run across. It was also warm. Nearly skin temperature, she thought, which was odd. The air was cool.

"We could climb out," she said, studying the rocks. "The cliff is high but rough enough to supply plenty of hand-and footholds."

The wolf poked her shoulder and pointed up with his nose. She tilted her head and saw half a dozen shapes silhouetted against the dull sheen of the sky. Guards?

If so, climbing out wasn't an option. For the moment, though, they weren't threatened. She drew a shaky breath and wished for clean water to wash the foul taste from her mouth.

Rule lay down beside her. He touched her ankle with his nose and looked at her with a questioning lift around his eyes.

"It doesn't hurt much." But it did hurt. Maybe the ymu was wearing off. She looked at Gan.

The demon sat in a small, orange huddle, rocking itself back and forth, moaning.

"Are you hurt?" she called.

"I'm going to die, I'm going to die," it moaned.

She didn't see any blood. Maybe it was short on optimism.

"What now?" she asked, mostly of herself. Absently she sifted one hand through the sand while hunting for options. There weren't many. "I'm going to see what happens if I climb down to the beach. Just so we know."

Rule sighed and pushed to his feet.

"I don't need an escort. You're hurt. If you... what's this?" She dug her hand deeper and pulled up... something. It was hard and sort of sand-colored, larger than her two hands put together, but thin, with a slight curve. A fragment of something, she thought. The edges were sharp. Could it be used as a weapon?

She dusted off some of the sand and her breath sucked in.

Pale colors seemed to run through it in a way that changed every time she tipped it to a new angle, colors with the subtle sheen of an opal.

Gan squealed. “Put it back! Put it back! We’re all going to die!”

“What are you talking about?”

“You idiot! This is a dragon’s nest! We’re food for the babies! They hatch *hungry*!”

One of the rocks near the cliff blinked. And the earth moved.

Sand slipped and shifted as something beneath it rose, sending her rolling. She ended up on her back, both hands gripping futilely at sand as if she could hold it still, make it stop moving.

Up and up it rose—a head shaped like a snake’s, but the size of a Volkswagen and with a scarlet frill at the back of the skull. A head long and flat and covered with iridescent scales whose colors ran one into the other— steel, blush, twilight. A head on a neck that seemed to stretch up forever, a Loch Ness Monster of a neck, the muscles taut and visible beneath the shimmer of scales— dawn, dusk, the tarnish of old mirrors.

The dragon’s body humped up out of the sand like a football field-sized snake, sending sand slithering and flying, making her blink grit from her eyes. It was thickest in the middle between the pairs of legs, dwindling to a tail long enough to balance all that neck. It lay in a circle, the tail ending near the head, forming a living wall around them. Along its back rested the origami folds of its wings.

The dragon looked down at her out of eyes the size of platters, eyes that were all silver and black with no whites. Fear was a weight on her chest, a taste in her mouth, a clamor in her brain and the noise in her ears from a pulse gone wild. She knew only one clear thought: *That’s no baby.*

TWENTY-FIVE



Cynna frowned at Cullen. “I don’t buy it. Not as a sure thing, anyway. Too many assumptions.”

Cullen gave his eyebrows a little lift. God, the man even had gorgeous eyebrows. Life wasn’t fair. “Or else you don’t know everything I do. That seems possible.”

“Tie a knot in your ego for a minute, will you? Look at all the big, fat maybes you’ve stacked up. First we have to assume that hell actually is the closest physical analogue to Earth, but some say that’s Faerie.”

“They’re wrong.”

“I suppose you’ve checked that out personally?”

“No. I had it from ni‘ Aureni Aeith. I think you’ll agree he ought to know.”

“I might,” Lily said. “If you tell me who Nee-orenee-aith is.”

Cynna sighed. She could admit it when she was wrong. Not easily, but she could do it. “One of the lords of Faerie, if I’ve got the naming conventions right. You trust his information? I mean, the Fae are supposed to have a pretty playful attitude toward the truth.”

“In this case I do. There was a debt.”

“Okay. So, if Rule’s in hell, how the hell did he get there?”

“I covered that. *She*’s in hell, and—”

“Not established.”

Impatience flashed in those pretty blue eyes. “It’s an assumption, but backed by fact—things that happened before you showed up. Somehow Rule must have been dragged along when She retrieved what was left of the staff.”

She shook her head. “Too many maybes,” she repeated. “Why not go for the simpler explanation?”

Cullen was all polite disbelief. “And that would be?”

“Demon transfer.” She looked from one of them to the other. “Well, there was a demon, wasn’t there, trying its damndest to possess Lily? Not that anyone but her saw it, but—”

“I saw it,” Cullen said. “Not with regular vision, but it was there.”

“Okay, so that’s confirmed. Now, I don’t know why the demon would grab Rule when it had been targeting Lily, but it’s still a simpler explanation, isn’t it?”

“It might be,” Lily said, “if I had any idea what demon transfer meant.”

“Oh.” She glanced at Cullen, her eyes widening—then narrowing as she grinned. “You don’t know, either, do you? Ha. How about that. I know something the hotshot sorcerer doesn’t.”

He got even more polite. “Would you care to share your vast knowledge?”

“Put simply, demon transfer is when a demon takes something with it when it moves between realms.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Demons can’t move freely between the realms any more than we can. That’s why the hellgates were closed at the Purge—to keep the demons out. Seems to have worked.”

“Yes, but—”

“I haven’t noticed any demon hordes ravaging the countryside, have you?”

Cynna scowled. “Will you listen a minute? You may know all sorts of fancy spellcraft, but that’s not demonology. Demons vary a lot more than people do.”

“Six-year-olds who watch Saturday-morning cartoons know that much.”

“Maybe they don’t know that some demons can cross unsummoned and without a hellgate. Or maybe you should watch more Saturday-morning cartoons.”

“You know this for a fact?” Cullen snapped.

“I do. They can carry stuff with them, too.”

“Stuff?” Lily said. “Does that include people?”

Cynna grimaced. “I’d have to, ah, do a little research to find out for sure, but I think so.” Research she was not eager to attempt.

“What kind of research?”

Cullen waved a hand dismissively. “Your explanation requires a few big, fat maybes as well. Maybe this particular demon can cross unsummoned. Maybe demon transfer works on people as well as objects. Maybe it decided to take Rule along instead of Lily. Maybe—”

“The demon was here, so obviously it *did* cross. If you’d get your big, fat ego out of the way—”

“This isn’t about ego. We have to look at the facts, which you’re confusing with opinions. The demon—”

Lily spoke. “Shut. Up.”

Cynna turned to her, surprised.

The China doll looked like she was trying to stuff all sorts of messy emotions back down. “I don’t care who knows more than who, I don’t care who wins your little pissing contest, and I don’t want to waste time finding out.”

Shit. She was right. While Cynna made like the poor little misfit girl trying to get the cutest boy in class to notice her, Rule was trapped in hell. Maybe one of these days she’d grow up. “Sorry.”

Lily drew a deep breath and let it out. “It does make a difference how Rule ended up in hell. He’s either with what’s-her-name or he’s with the demon. But in the end, it doesn’t matter much. I might as well assume I’ll be dealing with a demon. There’s no way to plan for an encounter with Her.”

“Shit.” That came from Cullen. He looked like he was vibrating. “That’s what I was afraid of. What Isen was afraid of. That if you knew where Rule was you’d try to go after him.”

Lily looked at him as if he’d said something really stupid. She kept looking.

“All right. All right, I said!” He snapped that out as if she’d been arguing with him instead of just turning that flat, dark gaze on him. “I’ll help. I’m a double-damned idiot, but I’ll help you. For whatever good it will do,” he added gloomily. “I don’t know how to open a hellgate. I don’t know anyone who does.”

Cynna really, really didn’t want to say anything, but her mouth made a decision without consulting her brain. “I do.”

Cullen's head swung toward her. "Who?"

In for a penny... She sighed. "Two people, actually. One who does know, and one who might be able to figure it out. That's Abel. You know him," she said to Cullen. "Abel Karonski. He can close leaks, and wouldn't this be like doing the same thing in reverse? We don't need a great big gate."

His eyes narrowed as if he was totting things up mentally. Reluctantly he nodded. "It might work, if he's capable of creative thought. Spells don't reverse neatly."

"No duh."

Lily shook her head. "Karonski would be last-ditch. Aside from the fact that he's in Virginia, he's not going to agree. Opening a hellgate is illegal. Who's the other person?"

"No one I want to talk to, if I can avoid it. She, ah, probably wouldn't be happy about me tracking her down, and she might not help, anyway. And if she did, it would come with a price."

For a few minutes, none of them spoke. Lily had herself back under control. Cynna couldn't read a thing on that pretty face as she sat there, one finger tapping against her thigh. Finally she said, "I need to get out of here. I guess the things I was wearing are around somewhere."

"I think your chums collected them as evidence," Cullen said. "Evidence of what, I'm not sure, but they have a passion for plastic baggies."

She grimaced. "There's a gift shop downstairs, isn't there? Would you see if—"

"No need," Cynna said. "I've got that covered. Only where... oh, yeah." She went to the door, where she'd dropped her tote upon being introduced to the cop with the Santa Claus face and the big gun. She snatched it, unzipped it, and pulled out a wrinkled T-shirt and the pants to her second-best gi. "They won't fit," she said apologetically, "but they're better than nothing."

For the first time, Lily smiled. It wasn't much, but it was a smile. "You came prepared to bust me out."

"Pretty much. Oh, here. You'll need this to hold them up." She pulled out her belt. Unlike the rest of the outfit, it was neatly folded.

Lily took it, a small V between her brows. "A brown belt. Judo? With those long legs, you'd be good at it."

"Judo's mostly defense. I've been told I'm offensive." She grinned. "Tae kwon do. I don't practice enough."

"Brown's nothing to apologize for." She swung her legs to the side of the bed, managing to keep it modest in spite of the hospital gown's shortcomings.

Cynna was hit with a nasty, rotten suspicion. "You do judo, don't you?"

Lily nodded. She was so short her feet didn't quite reach the floor, so she had to slide off the bed.

"What belt?" Cynna asked that even though she was sure she wouldn't like the answer.

“Black. Second *dan*. I’ll be right back.” She headed for the tiny bathroom, the mismatched clothes over her arm. She moved slowly, as if she hurt, but Cynna was pretty sure an offer of help would get her snapped at.

Second *dan*—that was like second-degree black. Impressive as hell, dammit.

“Jealous, *shetanni rakibu*?” Cullen’s voice was lightly mocking.

Cold prickled up her spine, popping out in goose bumps on her arms. She wanted to rub them, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. “It’s been a while since I heard that.”

He nodded, satisfied. “Then you were a demon rider. I thought so.”

What exactly did he think? How much did he know about *shetanni rakibu*? She asked very casually, “So where did you hear that title? It’s not exactly common knowledge.”

“I read a lot. Is it a demon you’re hoping not to consult about opening a wee little hellgate?”

“Dumb question. Most of them wouldn’t know how, either, or they’d do it. Seen any demon hordes ravaging the countryside lately?”

He surprised her by grinning. “Touché. If you’re not consulting a demon about the gate, it must be someone in this realm. You know a master, don’t you?”

“Everyone knows there aren’t any real demon masters.”

“Everyone knows there aren’t any real sorcerers.”

“You talk too much.”

“It’s part of my charm.” He moved closer. “Are you going to help?”

She needed to say no. Lord, but she did not want to go looking for Jiri. She wasn’t crazy about crossing into hell, either. “You didn’t want to do it.”

He snorted. “I’m a selfish sonofabitch. What’s your excuse?”

“That the whole idea is nuts?”

“Consider that a drawback, do you?” He glanced at the closed bathroom door. “She’s going. With or without my help or yours, she’ll find a way to go after him.”

“Yeah.” Cynna didn’t think Lily was fooling herself about the odds. They just weren’t a big factor in her decision.

What would it be like to have someone matter that much? To matter that much to someone?

Rule didn’t matter to her that way. She’d had some hopes about him, yeah. She’d wanted to be with him again, and not just because of the mind-boggling sex. Lord, the things a lupus could do . . . but that hadn’t been all of it. She’d wanted him to see who and what she’d become. To approve. It made her

squirm to admit that, but it was true.

But Rule did matter. And she owed him.

Cullen moved closer. Close enough for her to see that he hadn't shaved that morning. Close enough to see the darker rims around his irises, and the way his pulse beat in the hollow of his throat. "Even aside from opening the hellgate, you know more about Dis and demons than I do. Our chances would be better with you along."

"That must have hurt, saying it out loud."

"I'm tough. I can take it." He ran his fingertips along the side of her neck. "What do you say?"

Her heart was pounding. He'd know it, too, dammit. "You offering me sex in exchange for tossing my career in the trash, maybe ending up in prison?"

He smiled into her eyes, and that was seduction more potent than the stroke of his fingers. "Think of it as a bonus. For both of us."

She stepped back. It was harder than it should have been. "Do I have 'idiot' stamped on my forehead?"

The bathroom door opened. Cynna glanced that way... and had to bite her lip.

"Did your mommy give you permission to play dress-up, little girl?" Cullen asked.

"Shut up, Cullen." Lily shuffled out.

Cynna's lips twitched. "Sorry. I should've stopped and picked up something in your size."

Lily flipped one hand, dismissing it. "Doesn't matter. Let's get me checked out."

"You could just leave." Cynna kind of liked the idea of smuggling her out.

"I need to get my prescription first. I don't have time to deal with an infection." She made it to the chair, lowered herself, and reached for the buzzer to call the nurse. Then she faced Cynna. "I need to make plans, and to do that, I need to know where you stand. The Bureau is not going to investigate Rule's disappearance. They aren't going to like it if we do."

"No duh." Cynna frowned. "It bugs me, though. Ruben made it sound certain-sure that Rule was dead, but he's not stupid. He had to realize that wasn't a sure thing. Well, when we tell him what we've figured out, he'll—"

"We won't be telling him."

"Huh? Wait a minute. Wait. I didn't agree to hold out on Ruben. I can see why you're suspicious, but you're wrong."

"You've worked for him a while."

"Long enough to be certain-sure he's righteous. Shit, if I had half his integrity I could count on a straight shot to heaven when the time comes."

“Ah... you believe in heaven?”

“Hey, I’m a good little Catholic girl now.” A stab of honesty made her add, “Or at least I’m Catholic. Which reminds me.” She reached for her tote again.

“Let’s say Ruben’s as straight as you think he is,” Lily said as Cynna bent and rummaged in her tote. “That doesn’t mean he can turn a blind eye to what I’m planning. Even if he were willing to do that, someone wants Rule declared dead and the case closed. Someone who can either persuade or order Ruben to go along.”

“Sure. The Big Dick. Oh, here it is.” Cynna grabbed the little paper sack and straightened.

Cullen nodded. “I see. The FBI has a master penis. That explains a lot.”

Cynna grinned. “He’d like to think so. Dick Hayes is the acting director. I don’t think he’s bent, exactly. He’s just an asshole. Here.” She came up to Lily, dug into the sack, and held out a little cross on a gold chain.

Lily flinched.

Cynna drew it back, her forehead wrinkling. “I take it you aren’t Christian.”

“It’s not that. I’m not sure what I am, but...” She blinked quickly, but Cynna had seen the sheen in her eyes. One hand went to her throat. “Rule’s necklace is missing. I... it may not turn up, but I’m not going to wear another one in its place. Not yet.”

“The *toltoi* isn’t just from Rule,” Cullen said in a low voice.

Lily gave a single nod and left her head down, her hair screening her face.

Better give her a minute, Cynna thought. The tied-down ones hated it when they came apart with someone watching. She turned to Cullen. “What about you? I’ve got an extra.” The one she’d gotten for Rule. “It’s been blessed and all.”

His eyebrows sketched skepticism. “Doesn’t the effectiveness of holy symbols depend on the faith of the wielder?”

“Partly, but not altogether. It makes a difference what kind of demon you’re dealing with. Some don’t respond to holy symbols at all. Ah... someone I know thinks it depends on what kind of pacts the demon’s lord has with the various Powers. Demons are big on deals.”

“Interesting theory.” Cullen accepted the necklace and dribbled it from one hand to the other, frowning as if he were considering some weighty question. “When did you...” His voice drifted off as the door opened.

It was the ponytail nurse, and she was not happy about a patient checking out against doctor’s orders. It was in-teresting to watch Lily handle her. She didn’t get angry. Ponytail and the hospital weren’t important enough to get angry over. She gave the facts: She was leaving. She wanted her prescription. They could bring her some papers to sign if they liked, but they had to do it quickly because she wasn’t waiting.

It was amazing how well not arguing worked. Cynna resolved to try it sometime.

When the nurse huffed out the door, Lily leveled that steady gaze on Cynna. “If you’re not going to Find this person yourself, I need the name.”

Some people had such a clear grasp of right and wrong. Cynna envied them. Finding the moral highroad out of a welter of possible paths was always a struggle for her. It would be wrong to lie to Ruben. She was sure of that. And opening a hellgate—pretty much everyone would tell her that was wrong.

But it was wrong to leave Rule in hell. It was wrong to turn her back, pretend she couldn’t do anything to help—and giving them Jiri’s name and description wouldn’t help. They’d never find her.

Another memory swam to the surface. The remembered voice was soft, male, and irritated. He’d been dying at the time. “*Stop talking of paying back. Is no back. Only now. Only on.*”

That settled her. Paying it on couldn’t mean turning away. “What the hell. I’m in.”

TWENTY-SIX



THE huge eyes blinked.

She came back to herself with a jolt, knowing time had passed. How much? She didn’t know. Seconds. A day.

Never mind. She scrambled to her feet, moving because she could. Because, whatever happened, she wanted to meet it on her feet. She put out a hand. Rule was there. Without having to look, she’d known that he’d come up beside her. She rested her hand on his back.

Had he been trapped by the dragon’s gaze, too?

The lupus didn’t look into my eyes. The demon knew better, but did it anyway.

The dragon hadn’t spoken. Those great jaws hadn’t opened or the mouth moved. The words had just appeared in her mind, sharp as glass—thoughts, but not her thoughts.

But that was impossible. She was a sensitive. Magic couldn’t—

Yet I can. I am dragon.

With those words came a sense of something beyond arrogance. Power, perhaps. A vast, knowing power.

Vocalize. Your thoughts are mush. Forcing them into the sort of speech you are accustomed to

gives them a small degree of clarity.

Her heart was trying to knock its way out of her chest. “Are we conversing, then?”

Rather than dining, you mean? Amusement, desert-dry, gusted through her mind. When I hunger, I hunt. I don't have dinner fetched.

“Why did you have us fetched?”

Utility. Politics. Curiosity. The great head lowered in a graceful arc.

She jumped back. Her bad ankle gave out, dumping her ingloriously on her butt. Rule didn't move, but his fur bristled. Gan squealed in terror.

But the movement didn't signal a change of mind about the dragon's dinner plans. It seemed to be settling in for a chat. It rested its head on its tail like a cat curling up for a nap, leaving the three of them entirely circled by dragon.

That long body gave off a lot of heat, she realized. That's why the sand was so warm. “That didn't really answer my question. Why did you bring us here?”

It has been many moons since I've seen a human. And never have I seen one linked to both a lupus and a demon. Most curious. How did you become half-souled?

“If you mean how did I lose my memory—I don't remember.”

Those eyes blinked again. *Ah. You didn't know.* Its gaze shifted to the quivering lump of demon fifteen feet away. *Your demon didn't tell you.*

“Not my demon,” she muttered. “A demon. Not mine.”

Rule's head swung toward her, as if she'd surprised him. Then he looked at Gan, growling.

“Don't listen to the dragon,” Gan said. Its attempt at bravado was cancelled by the way it crouched with both arms over its head, as if that would protect it from the dragon's jaws. “He doesn't know anything about it. Besides, he can lie. I can't. Who are you going to believe?”

She snorted. “You lie all the time.”

That annoyed it so much its arms fell away from its head. “No, I don't! I can't lie. Everyone knows what I mean even if I say something else. That's how it works.”

“You may not tell out-and-out whoppers, but you lie by misdirection. Not all that well, actually, because you've never learned to manage your face. Maybe demons aren't used to reading expressions for clues because you all pick up each other's meanings. By picking your words carefully, though, you can mean what you say and still be lying.”

Clever small bite. Demons prize the ability to deceive without lying. They do this by watching their words, as you say, and also by finding a self who means what they wish to say. This little one you call Gan doesn't have many selves, so it must rely primarily upon its choice of words.

She rubbed her temples. Not many selves?

Vocalize.

“Uh... what does ‘many selves’ mean?”

Demons consist of all the creatures they have eaten. Those eaten lose volition, not identity.

“So Gan isn’t one demon? It’s a whole bunch of them, but Gan’s the one in charge?”

Gan is mostly imps, bugs, and other nonsentients— though I do hear at least one surprisingly old demon inside it. Gan is also Gan. Demon identity is not what you are used to. The dragon turned his gaze on the little demon. You will now tell me why the human is half-souled.

Gan cowered. “Oh, Great One, mighty of wing and mind, how would this feeble one know? I’m a demon, and such a small, insignificant demon, barely more than an imp. What do I know about souls?”

You are right, small bite. The demon does not deceive well, though the din of its mind makes it difficult to sort through what passes for its thoughts. The dragon’s tail flicked out suddenly. It whizzed over Lily’s head and thudded into Gan, sending the demon tumbling. I have all your surface names and thirty-two of the deeper ones, Izhatipoibanolitofaidinbaravha—

“All right, all right! Don’t say it all!”

I can acquire the rest of your names if I choose. Or simply pull pieces of you off, but that would dirty my sand. Be truthful. What happened to the human ?

If demons had been able to cry, Gan would have been sniffing. “I just wanted to get away—when that mage fire hit the staff, it *hurt!* I can cross all by myself,” it added, puffing its chest a bit. “Hardly anyone can do that, but I can. But I was already tied to Lily Yu, so when I crossed, she came, too. And she’s tied to the wolf in some weird way, so he got dragged along, and... and everything went wrong.”

“You mean you did it?” she exclaimed. “You brought us here, not the staff?”

Gan heaved a windy sigh and nodded.

“Then you can take us back.”

“No, I can’t.”

Rule lowered his head, growling.

Gan scowled. “I tried! You think I’d rather be eaten by dragons than go back to Earth? Well, they didn’t eat us, but I thought they would, so I tried to cross. I tried and tried, but I couldn’t.”

Because Lily Yu did not come along completely. When you tried to possess her, you became partially lodged inside her. You brought that part with you, but left behind the named half. She is both here and there. The effect is rather as if you’d jammed something against a door. It won’t open for you.

Horror squeezed the air from her lungs. “I’m—I’m missing more than memories? Are you sure?”

The dragon flicked her a glance. The black-and-silver eyes were too removed, too dispassionate, for anything as personal as contempt or compassion. *I do not say what I am not sure of. I wonder if your other half is a ghost? Neither of your sundered selves will live long, of course, but it would be interesting to—*

Rule howled and launched himself at Gan.

Ah, but he was fast! By the time Lily got to her feet he'd already hit once, bounced away before the demon's roundhouse swing could connect, and was circling for another leap.

The dragon's tail smashed into him in mid-air.

Lily cried out and stumbled over to him. He wasn't moving.

Foolish. I had expected better. He seemed to have some sense.

"Shut up," she said fiercely, kneeling. His heart was beating, she discovered when she pressed her hand to the bottom of his rib cage. But his ribs had already been cracked or broken. The lashing tail could have staved them in, punctured a lung.

"I guess you don't care that I'm bleeding over here," Gan said grumpily.

No, she didn't. The demon was alive and talking, while Rule... wait, his eyelids twitched. Then they blinked open.

Her breath shuddered out. "Where are you hurt?"

Slowly, as if it hurt, he lifted his head. With his nose he indicated his left foreleg.

Not his gut or his chest, then. Not a punctured lung.

A minor concussion as well, he thinks. But the leg is more of a problem. You will need to set it.

Okay. She drew in a breath and ran her hand along the leg. He jerked. "I'm sorry." She'd learned what she needed to know, though. Her fingertips glistened red. "There's a bit of bone sticking out through the skin. It needs to be set, splinted." Without anesthetic. She didn't want to think about how much that would hurt. "I... I don't know how to do it."

She looked at her hands. They were shaking. But that made sense. She was dying. She had memories of only a couple of days of life, and she was dying.

Such drama. You aren't dying yet.

"You said—"

I was interrupted. You'll die of your condition eventually, but the demon is keeping you alive for now.

She looked at Gan.

It sat in the sand, scowling. A chunk of flesh and muscle was missing where its shoulder met its neck. The wound seemed to have already stopped bleeding, but its orange skin was heavily splashed with blood. Red blood, like hers.

Rule really had meant to kill Gan. “You’re keeping me alive?”

Its lower lip stuck out like a sulky child’s. “Why do you think I made you take ymu? He needs me, too.” Gan gave the dragon a wary glance. “To keep you alive. He probably plans to trade you to Xitil. If dragons aren’t eating demons, they’re trying to get more territory from us.”

“Is that what you wanted me for?” she asked the dragon. “To trade?”

Perhaps. The demon is correct about my desire to keep you alive. If your wolf had been thinking, he would have realized that. Why else would I suffer having a demon brought here ?

Rule lifted his head and looked straight at the dragon.

You would question me, wolf?

She couldn’t tell if the trace of emotion coating that thought was amusement or irritation. She knew what she felt, though. Frustration. Everyone could understand Rule except her. “What did he say? Or think, or... whatever.”

He wonders why I’m here at all. Why dragons are living with demons.

Gan snorted. “Living with us! Eating us, more like, when you can. Trying to get more territory the rest of the time.” It looked at Lily. “No one knows why the dragons left Earth. I was just an imp when some of them showed up here, but even imps heard about the battles. Dragons live by magic, see, but they can’t be affected by it. That was their big advantage. Well, they’re good fighters, too, but we outnumbered them thousands to one. But—”

But you did not unite to attack us, allowing us to prevail over the local lord and his court. Nor did you learn from this. When Xitil allowed Ishtar’s enemy to guest with her, the other lords should have banded together and destroyed them both. They never even considered it. This was folly of a monstrous degree.

“Big wars are wasteful,” Gan said. “Unpredictable. Xitil will destroy the avatar.”

I am unsurprised by your attitude.

Ishtar’s enemy? Hadn’t Gan used that name, too? Lily shook her head. “Look, all that is interesting, but the timing’s bad for history lessons. I need something straight to use for a splint, and something to fasten it with. Cloth, rope, leather... something I can tie around the leg and splint. And if you know anything about setting bones...” Her voice faltered. “I could use some help with that.” She had no reason to think the dragon would offer it.

That great head turned, focusing on Gan. *The demon’s kind are good with bodies.*

Gan sniffed. “I’m not going to help him. He tried to kill me.”

You will do as I wish, Izhatipoibanolit—

“Right, right. But do you mean you want the wolf’s leg fixed?” Gan was incredulous.

I do.

Gan heaved a huge, put-upon sigh and stood. “I can put his bone back in place, but it won’t stay. He’s no demon. He can’t heal that quick.”

“That’s what the splint is for.” Hope stirred, fragile and hard to trust. The dragon had broken Rule’s leg, but now wanted it to heal straight. She didn’t understand. Were dragons capable of compassion? “We have to stabilize the leg.”

The dragon tilted his head up. After a moment, one of the circling shapes overhead broke from the rest, diving for the land at the top of the cliff.

We are well supplied with bones. One of my line-kin will bring you an assortment to choose from for the splint. There are coverings in your cave. Tear strips from one, or have the demon do so. It has good teeth.

“Uh—my cave?”

The place you will stay. The entrance is near the grass at the eastern end of the beach. With that, he stood.

The dragon’s legs were short and thick in proportion to his body, bowed out like a lizard’s. His haunches were house-high, his shoulders slightly lower. *There is food in the cave. You won’t need it, but the lupus will. At the rear of the cave is a small freshwater spring.*

“I need food, too,” Gan said. “I can’t eat dead things.”

You’ll be fed. You’ll continue to feed the human. Drop to the ground now.

The dragon moved.

A creature so large should have seemed ponderous. He wasn’t. She had to flatten herself to avoid getting clipped by his tail when he started walking, but the wide-set legs carried him over the sand as agilely as one of his tiny kin.

“Wait!” Lily pushed to her feet. “Where are you going? When will you be back?”

The dragon flowed over the side of the sandbox, stepping down the twenty feet to the beach like a cat oozing off a couch.

“What’s your name?” she called.

He just kept moving.

“How did you know we were in that other region? How did you know I’m a sensitive before you brought us here? *Why* did you bring us here?”

The great beast was a several dozen yards down the beach now.

“Dammit, I’m vocalizing at you!”

He stopped, his wings partially unfurled. They were doubled, those wings, like a moth’s. Slowly the neck swung around until he was looking back at her. Faint, so faint she might have imagined it, she caught a wisp of amusement just before he straightened, rising up on his hind legs, the long body lifting up and up. The haunches bunched and he sprang for the sky like a cat leaping onto a windowsill.

Even from this distance, the wind from his wings stirred the sand, getting grit in her eyes. She was blinking them clean when she caught his last words: *Sam. I believe you may call me Sam.*

TWENTY-SEVEN



LILY needed clothes. Cynna’s belt had to be snug to keep the pants from falling off, and snug hurt. She also had to do something about Dirty Harry.

So after checking herself out, she sat in the back seat of Cullen’s old Bronco, fists clenched, trying not to think about what might be happening to Rule while she took care of her cat and her damned grooming. One of the officers had driven her car back to her place last night, and Rule’s car had been impounded.

For a few blocks she leaned her head back and shut out the sound of Cynna and Cullen arguing. She needed to see Beth, talk to her. She didn’t want to. Not when Beth was staying with their parents. But a phone call wasn’t enough, not for this. She needed to know how badly Beth had been scarred by last night.

God, she was tired. She closed her eyes, but there was no rest inside her. Not with everything humming like an overloaded power line.

She was scared. All the way down scared. Not so much of dying, though she wasn’t in denial about that.

Death was a strong possibility, but she knew how to keep going in the face of that sort of risk. As a cop, she’d usually had backup going into a dangerous situation. Barring that, she’d had training to fall back on. You identified your goal, made your plans, and did the best you could. Fear was normal, just one more factor to account for.

What was grinding at her wasn’t as clean as the fear of death. The shaky feeling came from the fear that she wasn’t enough. She didn’t know enough, couldn’t be enough or do enough to get Rule back. Her Gift was gone. She wasn’t sure there was enough of her left to do what had to be done.

Maybe, even with her Gift, there wouldn’t have been enough. What they were planning—or, so far, failing to plan—was nuts. One lupus sorcerer, one female Finder, and one damaged former homicide cop were going up against who knew how many demons on their home ground. How do you plan for that?

One step at a time, she told herself. If she couldn't tell if she was going in the right direction, tough. She still had to take that next step.

Up front, Cynna snorted. "You don't know what you're talking about. There's no technical difference between opening a big gate and opening a little one. It's just a matter of power."

They should have taken Cynna's rental. The Bronco's engine knocked so badly she wondered if Cullen kept it running with sorcery. But Cullen had insisted on driving, and Cynna wouldn't let him behind the wheel of her vehicle. Even one only temporarily hers.

"I don't imagine you've ever heard of McCallum's Theorem." Cullen sounded like an adult talking to a sweet but slow child.

"He's got a theory about hellgates?"

"No, it concerns the difference between relevance and resonance, but it suggests that—"

"There's only one kind of relevance that matters with gates. Now, if we were talking about voodoo—"

"Pretend you're more interested in figuring this out than one-upping me," Cullen said. "You won't embarrass yourself so much."

Lily wondered if she was going to have to kill them both, or if taping their mouths shut would be enough. "Bickering is one way of dealing with tension, but it isn't doing much for mine. Since neither one of you knows how to open a gate, can we talk about something more to the point? Make some plans?"

"Believe it or not," Cullen said, "our discussion is very much to the point. In a roundabout way."

"Sure. Right. Now I understand."

"We're trying to settle what kind of gate to open," Cynna said. "Single-relevance or multi-relevance. Only there isn't such a thing as a multi-relevance gate, so you're right. We're wasting time."

Cullen hissed. That's what it sounded like—a cat's hiss. "Lady save me from small-minded hedge witches. Just because you've never heard of something doesn't mean it's impossible."

Lily tried once more to get them back on track. "Because you don't know how to open a gate anyway, the discussion is moot."

Cullen was impatient. "We know the general principles behind it."

"Right," Cynna said. "That's like saying we don't know how to build a television, but we know the general idea behind how one works. Cullen thinks that once we get our TV we should tinker with it. I think that would be too dangerous. We've got no reason to think his idea is even possible."

"It's possible," Cullen insisted. "McCallum's Theorem—"

"Hold off on the theorem talk a minute," Lily said.

"What kind of risks are we talking about if you tinker with the spell? What advantages?"

“Ritual. Magic on this level requires a ritual, not just a spell.”

“Whatever. Risks and advantages, Cullen.”

“The major risk is that the ritual won’t work. We don’t get a gate. In which case we can back up and try again with the unaltered ritual.”

“Maybe,” Cynna said dryly. “If we all survive. We’re talking about a major ritual here, involving forces we don’t understand. There’s no sure way to predict the outcome.”

Lily frowned. “That’s a big risk.”

“And the advantage,” Cullen said, “is that if it works we’d have full control of the gate and who and what passes through it.”

She was silent a moment. Cynna and Cullen had needled each other about all the demons who weren’t ravaging the countryside, but if they opened a gate they couldn’t control... “That’s a big advantage. Big enough to outweigh the risks—if this multi-relevance thing is possible.”

He switched lanes with typical split-second timing. “Let’s go back to the basics. You know gates are magical constructs, right? Located on or very near a node.”

“Got that. The Azá were trying to open theirs right on top of a node. They needed the power from it.”

“In part, yes. But nodes are also the places of greatest congruence. Think of them as spots where the realms almost touch. Now, magically speaking, congruence is one of the five fields of relevance. It’s spatial. There’s also physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.”

Lily shook her head. “I’m getting dizzy already. I thought spiritual stuff and magic were different. That’s how Nettie was able to do some healing on me—because she wasn’t using straight magic.”

“Depends on who you talk to. Theories abound.”

“Such as?”

“My early training was Wiccan. They consider spirit one of the five types of power—earth, air, fire, water, spirit. Chinese practitioners work with five energies, too, though they substitute metal for spirit and see the spiritual as entirely separate. So do many Protestant faiths. Catholicism is hopelessly muddled on the subject. Most shamans say there is a difference between spirit and magic but just smile mysteriously if you ask what it is.”

“Like Nettie.”

“Exactly. Houngans and mambos—”

“Who?”

“Male and female voodoo priests. Their magic is spirit-based, so naturally they don’t distinguish between magic and spirit. And Buddhists...” He shrugged and added in a singsong, “Spiritual, nonspiritual—no difference. Duality is illusion.”

Cynna chuckled. “I used to know someone who would have said just that.”

Lily drummed her fingers on her thigh. “They can’t all be right. What do sorcerers say?”

“Mostly we ignore the question. Spiritualism has that good and evil thing going on. Confuses things.”

“And sorcerers hate to be confused,” Cynna said. “They can’t see spiritual stuff, so they treat it the way ungifted humans treat magic—as if it isn’t real. And if it is, it shouldn’t be.”

Cullen gave a quick laugh. “Biased, but not completely inaccurate. Of course, the *Msaidizi* were faith based.”

“The what?” Lily asked.

“Dizzies.”

Oh. “What does this have to do with a hellgate?”

“The gates are magical constructs, like I said, but they were closed using a combination of spiritual and magical energies. To reopen a gate, we’d need spiritual energy as well as magic.”

“That’s what the Azá were doing, wasn’t it? They believed in their goddess, and that belief was part of what

She needed to get that gate open. “That plus a little bonus from death magic.

“Exactly. We can’t supply a large faith-based community, so even if we knew how, we couldn’t reopen a gate.”

“But you’re planning to open one.”

“Open, not reopen. We’ll have to build a new gate. Cynna and I have been arguing about how to, ah, tether it. She thinks congruence is the only criteria. I agree it’s essential—we don’t want to step out into thin air or the middle of a mountain, so the two spaces have to be congruent. But I think that with a small gate, other relevancies can be used, too.”

Cynna spoke. “He means you.”

“What?” She shook her head. “That’s a joke, right?”

“Nope.” Cullen slowed. They’d reached her apartment complex. “Five fields of relevance, remember? Spatial, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The more fields we use, the more stable the gate and the greater our control.”

“Theoretically,” Cynna added darkly.

Cullen ignored that. “The mate bond gives us two more fields to use—physical and emotional.”

“I . . . see. Sort of. Because Rule’s there and I’m here, the mate bond is already sort of a gate. But once I’m there, too, that won’t be true.”

“That’s why you need me,” Cullen said cheerfully, pulling into the space next to Lily’s car. “To figure out the hard parts. If I get it right, the gate will close behind us as soon as we cross. It will open again when you want it to, and nothing will be able to pass through it without your permission.”

Whew. Lily ran a hand through her hair. “What happens if I’m killed?”

“Try to avoid that.” He shut off the engine and opened his door. “It’s a damned good way of keeping the other side from making use of our gate, though, isn’t it?”

“Theoretically.” She pushed her door open, too, and got out. The burn throbbed, protesting the pressure from the belt. She eyed the stairs to her apartment grimly and started forward. “You’ve convinced me it’s worth a try, though.”

‘i knew you’d see sense.’ She heard the click-click from the car’s lock behind her. “If it’s any consolation, I couldn’t do it if you still had your Gift.”

She acknowledged that with a nod. She wasn’t ready to look on the bright side.

“If you were still Gifted, it might not have been a good idea for you to cross,” Cynna added, coming around the car. “Considering what they say about sensitives in hell.”

“What do they—hey!”

Cullen had swung her up into his arms. “Who says I’m not a thoughtful and considerate guy? You don’t need to climb those stairs. All right,” he added to Cynna as he headed for the stairs. “I’ll bite. What *do* they say about sensitives in hell?”

“‘Feendly armies in foul affray dide fighte,’” she recited, “‘for who wolde holde the sixewitte hral. Bihood thes brutall beistis, who wolde their yvel powers incresen—and drinken of hir precious herte blood!’ Here, give me your keys. I’ll go ahead and open the door.”

Lily dug them out of the side pocket of her purse. “I don’t know what you said, but I didn’t hear anything about sensitives.”

“*Sixewitte* was the medieval term.” Cullen started up the stairs behind Cynna. “The five senses were the five *wittes*. The way they saw it, sensitives had a sixth sense. *Sixewitte*.”

“Ah... if I caught the gist, that’s whose ‘precious herte blood’ the feendly hordes planned to drink.”

“You got it,” Cynna said, sticking Lily’s key in the lock. “Feendly hordes being demons. Supposedly they get some special power from the blood of a sensitive.”

Cullen reached the landing. He wasn’t even breathing hard. Pretty good for someone pushing sixty. “I’ve never heard that verse. What’s it from?”

“‘The Furiel Pyne of Helle.’ It’s pretty obscure. Fourteenth century, and it might be pure fiction, but the monk who—oh. Good grief. What are you doing here?”

FIVE minutes later, Lily sat in her one and only chair petting Dirty Harry, who had his motor going full-blast. The cat had claimed her lap when the man who’d been keeping him company stood up.

“I’d offer you a sandwich, but Harry and I ate the last of your ham,” Abel Karonski said from her kitchen, where he was refilling his coffee cup. “Anyone want some coffee?”

“Why does everyone feel entitled to break into my place?” Lily asked the ceiling. “Sure, I’ll take a cup, since it’s my coffee and all.”

Karonski rejoined them, carrying two steaming mugs and looking around vaguely as if her place might have sprouted another chair in his absence. His gaze paused on Cullen. “Seaborne,” he said with a nod. “We met at your, ah, adoption ceremony. When you joined Nokolai, I mean.”

Cullen was wearing his inscrutable face. “I remember.”

“At the risk of repeating myself,” Cynna said, “what are you doing here?” She was silting on one of the floor cushions by Lily’s big, square coffee table, the only other seating in the pocket-size living room. Cullen occupied the other cushion.

“I’m not really here. Think of me as a figment of your overheated imaginations.”

“Nothing personal, Abel, but you’ve never figured high in my overheated imagination. Here.” Cynna scooted off her cushion onto the floor. “Sit down and give those old bones a rest.”

“Mouthy. Always mouthy. I’m only ten years older than you.” He handed Lily a mug that read, *Don’t Make Me Release the Flying Monkeys!* “You’re not looking so great.”

“Neither are you.” The pouches under his eyes were looking more like duffel bags.

“Tired, that’s all. We found the leak, and it’s big. The biggest I’ve seen. I’ve called a Gathering to close it.”

“A Gathering?”

“Multiple covens,” Cullen said. “Anywhere from three to a dozen. That’s a major working you’re talking about.”

“It’s a major leak.” He lowered himself awkwardly onto the cushion and then scowled at Lily. “I don’t know why you don’t own chairs. Everyone owns chairs.”

“My figments have never complained about the seating before,” she commented. “Or helped themselves to my ham. Maybe you’ll explain why I’m imagining you’re here.”

“Officially I’m still in North Carolina. I’ll be flying back as soon as we’ve talked.” He sipped. “Good coffee.”

“Rule’s picky about coffee. He buys some fancy blend and grinds it fresh.”

The silence that followed reeked of everything he didn’t say. At last he sighed. “I’m sorry about Rule, Lily. Damned sorry.”

She didn’t respond. Just waited.

His eyebrows lifted, “You aren’t going to insist that he isn’t dead?”

“I’m pretty sure you know that. Just like I know you didn’t fly twenty-five hundred miles to offer me your sympathy.”

“No.” He took another sip, heaved another sigh, and put the mug on the coffee table. “I’m here to tell you some things Ruben didn’t want to go into over the phone. Also to be sure you aren’t planning to do something stupid.”

Lily kept her face stony. “Ruben’s private line is as secure as any in the nation.”

“So it is. I’m going to give you some background you aren’t cleared for. Heavy duty stuff with lots of *tops* stamped in front of *secret*.” He looked at Cullen. “I figure you see the advantage in continuing to fly under the official radar.”

Cullen smiled pleasantly. “Just as you see the advantage in letting me hover there. Don’t worry. I’m not going to run to the tabloids with the story.”

“You won’t tell anyone, or discuss it with anyone except those in this room. And you’ll all be damned careful how you discuss it at all. You’ll see why.” He paused. “In the past year, two U.S. Congressmen and the under secretary of a major department have reported being contacted by a demon.”

“What?” Lily’s coffee jiggled, spilling a couple of drops on Harry. He gave her an indignant look and jumped down. “That. . . is certainly not what I was expecting.” Demons didn’t just dial up Congressmen and offer them deals. For one thing, they couldn’t. . . or so everyone thought. “There hasn’t been a confirmed case of demonic tampering with government in. . . well, not since Hitler.”

Karonski nodded. “And that was a freak occurrence, the result of conditions unlikely to be duplicated in a thousand years. You can see why they’re keeping the investigation quiet.”

“They, not we?” Her eyebrows rose. “Who’s investigating?”

“The Secret Service. They’ve needed some expert help, so Ruben’s made a few of us in the Unit available to them on an informal basis. But it’s their investigation, not ours.”

“Are we talking about one demon?” Cynna asked. “Or more?”

He gave her a nod. “Good question. We’d like to know if we’re looking at a widespread change in the relationship between the realms, which is what contact by multiple demons would suggest. Unfortunately, I can’t tell you. The descriptions we’ve got don’t match, but demons have a nasty habit of changing their body size and shape, so that isn’t conclusive.”

Cullen slid him an unreadable look. “And what does this have to do with Lily?”

“Think about it. If one appointee and three elected officials report unsolicited demonic contact, there’s a damned good chance that others were contacted, too. And haven’t reported it.”

“Shit.”

“The ones who reported it were taking a risk,” Lily said slowly. “Supposedly demons can’t initiate contact themselves, right? They have to be summoned. The Congressmen must have wondered if anyone

would believe that it wasn't any of their doing."

Karonski gave her a nod. "They showed courage, all right. We're betting that others were contacted who didn't take the deal but didn't report it, either. Some would be afraid. Some probably persuaded themselves it never happened. Denial is a powerful force. But human nature being what it is, we have to assume there are people in powerful positions in the government who took the demon up on its offer."

"What kind of offer?" she asked.

"The usual. Fame, wealth, power. The power to do good can be a strong temptation for even the best of us."

Cynna shook her head. "Those pacts leave traces. It's not that hard to find out if someone has been sipping demon blood."

"Oh, yech," Lily said. "Is that how the pacts are sealed?"

"Blood is both the seal and the way power is transferred," Karonski said. "And yes, we can detect it. But it's not feasible to run blood tests on every member of Congress, their staffs and families, all the Secretaries and Under Secretaries, maybe a few dozen judges and—"

"Okay, okay," Cynna said. "But what is the Secret Service *doing* then? How do they investigate if they can't run tests?"

For a long moment Karonski didn't say anything.

"We'd hoped to bring in a sensitive," he said at last. "Someone who could tell who was clean with a single handshake."

Lily closed her eyes. *Shit, shit, shit...*

Cullen's voice was hard. "You also didn't fly twenty-five hundred miles to make Lily feel even worse about the loss of her Gift, I'm assuming."

Lily spoke without opening her eyes. "He's warning us. He thinks the acting director of the FBI may have been corrupted. That's why Ruben didn't say anything over the phone. Why Karonski is officially still in Virginia... and probably why the Secret Service is investigating, not us."

Karonski spread his hands. "We've got no evidence. None. No reason to think Hayes was contacted, except..."

"One of Ruben's feelings," she finished for him.

"Yeah." He picked up his coffee and took a drink. "Which was strengthened when Hayes put pressure on Ruben to close the investigation and declare Rule dead."

"I'm not getting the connection," Cynna said.

"You should. If Hayes is corrupted—" Karonski interrupted himself. "That's a big if, of course. He might have done one of his damned cost-benefit analyses and decided it was cheaper to write off Rule. He could be clean himself but getting pressure from others who aren't. But if he is corrupted, he didn't

make the decision. The demon did.”

Lily’s head hurt. She rubbed her temples. “And this hypothetical demon doesn’t want anyone looking for Rule?”

“Either the demon... or the demon’s master.”

Cynna made a small sound.

Karonski looked at her, sympathy softening his eyes. “That makes the most sense, doesn’t it? More than assuming the rules have changed. A true master could put a demon in contact with ordinary humans.”

“You haven’t brought me in on it.” Her voice was tight, her eyes turbulent. “I’m the one person who could Find her, and you haven’t brought me in.”

“Ruben wanted to. The Secret Service refused.”

She looked away and then nodded.

“Which brings me to the other reason I’m here.” He drained the last of his coffee and put the empty mug on the table. “Just in case any of you are thinking of doing something colossally dumb, like crossing into hell without official sanction, you should know that the Secret Service’s chief suspect is Jiri Asmahani... Cynna’s old teacher. This isn’t a good time to renew that acquaintance.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. Karonski stood, told them all he’d see them later, and then paused in front of Lily. She didn’t get up. Or speak. He stood in front of her for a long moment, looking tired and sad and like he wanted to say something. But in the end he shook his head, bent and patted her shoulder, and left.

He took about every last drop of hope with him.

Take the next step, she’d been telling herself. What did you do when you ran out of steps?

Even if she’d been willing to endanger an investigation into the demonic control of highly placed national officials, there was a chance Cynna’s old teacher was behind the official ban on looking for Rule. She wasn’t likely to change her mind just because Cynna said pretty please.

Karonski wasn’t going to help them open a hellgate. Cullen didn’t know how.

God, she was tired. She closed her eyes and thought about keeping them closed. Just not opening them ever again. She heard Cullen push to his feet and start pacing, muttering to himself. It sounded like Latin.

“Cynna,” she asked without opening her eyes. “Is there any chance you could summon the demon who took Rule? Force it to take us to him, or bring him back?”

“No.” She sounded miserable. “I don’t have enough of its names.”

“Okay.” Cullen took a deep breath, let it out. “We’ve run out of other options.”

That startled her eyes open. “Other options? As in, you have one I don’t know about?”

“You know about it. Sort of.” He stopped in front of her. “It’s a long shot, but the only shot we’ve got left. You said the Rhej wanted to talk to you.”

Baffled, she nodded.

“That’s what you should do, then. Go talk to the Rhej.”

TWENTY-EIGHT



CULLEN wouldn’t explain. He wouldn’t tell her why talking to the clan’s historian or priestess or whatever might help. He wouldn’t even tell her the woman’s name. It was customary, he said, for the Rhej to choose who would receive her name, and she was never referred to outside her presence by anything but her title.

He had the jitters. He kept pacing, but when she asked why the idea of talking to the Rhej made him nervous he raised his brows, astonished, and told her he was a jumpy fellow. He’d thought she knew that.

So she took a shower.

She was careful. Getting her burn infected wouldn’t help her or Rule or anyone, so she kept her bandages dry. But she *needed* the shower. She craved water, the feel and sound of it, and the notion, however foolish, that she could wash away some portion of last night.

She used Rule’s shampoo. Standing there with her hair lathered and the water beating on her feet, she suddenly understood why she’d needed this shower.

The sobs hit fast, and they hit hard. She put her back to the side of the shower stall and slid down until she was sitting on the hard tiles, head back, hands hanging limp between her knees, suds dripping on her shoulders. And wept.

No one, not even Cullen, would be able to hear her. She couldn’t hear herself. It was safe to let go, let the pain and helplessness wash up through her in huge, terrible waves.

The weeping ended more gradually than it had begun. She was still leaking slightly when she stood and carefully rinsed her hair. She washed her face and underarms, looked at her razor, shook her head, and shut off the water without shaving.

She wasn’t sure she felt any better, but maybe giving in to tears now would keep them from sneaking up on her later.

The mirror was fogged. She didn’t bother to clean it, combing her hair out quickly. It could dry on its own this time. In the bedroom, she pulled on her bra and a pair of bikini panties and then grabbed a plain silk sheath she seldom wore. Her burn would be happier now, with nothing touching it. She folded up

Cynna's things and took a breath.

Time to pull herself back together. Or fake it. She opened the door.

Cullen had stopped pacing. He stood at the window, frowning out the parking lot.

"Where's Cynna?" she asked.

"Went to pick up some lunch for us. Harry left with her. At least he went out. I doubt he's headed for Sub Express." He turned. His frown deepened. He started toward her.

Lunch. She'd eat, of course. However little she wanted to. "I don't suppose you've thought of anything else to try."

"No." He stopped, standing a little too close. "You've been crying."

"Shit. Couldn't you at least pretend to be tactful? I know it isn't your strong point, but at your age you should have some grasp of the basics."

"Crying's okay. I hear it reduces stress." He reached up and took one wet strand of hair between his fingers, rubbing it with his thumb. "There are other ways to de-stress."

"Tell me you didn't mean that the way it sounds."

His mouth kicked up at one side in a smile that didn't touch his eyes. "I'm making you an offer you're free to refuse."

She jerked her head away and stepped back. "God. I can't believe this. Rule's missing and you're—"

"Offering to help you feel better for a little while. No permanent cure, but physical ease benefits the mind, too."

"Is sex on demand your notion of comfort?"

"Yes."

She'd been sarcastic. He was serious.

"Rule wouldn't object, you know, or feel hurt. Not under the circumstances."

"I would."

He shrugged. "Okay. I'll admit I don't get the guilt thing. I assume that's what's put that look on your face? Rather as if you'd stepped in a pile of dog doo, which I must say is not the usual reaction. If you change your mind—"

"I won't."

"—just let me know. But if you think sex would make things worse for you, then we won't go there."

"Good."

“I’m not lusting after you, you know. Except in a general way, because you do have—”

“We aren’t going there, remember?”

“Right.” He turned back to the window. “Have you reached a decision?”

For a second she thought he was still talking about having sex, which was stupid. He’d rattled her. “How do I go about setting up a meeting with the Rhej?”

“You show up at her lair. She said she wants to talk to you, so she’ll probably be there.”

He was looking out the window, so she couldn’t see his expression. And his voice sounded normal—lightly mocking, though it wasn’t obvious whether the mockery was directed out or toward himself. Yet still she had the sense that he was... not sad, exactly. Lost.

Rule had been his friend, perhaps his only real friend, for many years. Years when he’d been clanless, leaving him alone in a way no human could fully grasp.

Had he thought having sex with her would make him feel closer to Rule?

Yech, she thought and tried to push the idea away. But it clung the way a good hunch will, and gradually the disgust melted, leaving her a little disoriented. And hurting for him. “Cynna might not mind the idea of comfort sex.”

He smiled at her over his shoulder, his eyes blue and sharp and somehow knowing. As if he’d guessed everything she’d been thinking... and maybe a few things she hadn’t quite wrapped her mind around yet. “There’s a notion. She’s annoying, but she smells good.”

Lily blinked. At times she almost forgot Cullen was lupus. He was odd in so many ways that had little to do with his wolfish part. “I hope you won’t put it to her quite that way.”

“I speak fairly good western human when I have to, but I don’t think Cynna would require that.”

“In other words, you’ll say what women expect, but you won’t mean it.”

He was amused. “I think of it as an imprecise translation. I don’t lie. I don’t have to.”

No, he probably had more women making him offers than he could properly attend to. “That,” she said after a moment, “is deeply annoying.”

“It’s all in your point of view. I find it convenient.” His head turned. “Lunch is heading up the stairs.”

“Already?” Funny. A few minutes ago she’d had no interest in food. She’d have eaten, just as she’d take care of her burn, because it was necessary. Now... it was weird, but she was hungry. Actually hungry. “I’ll get the pickles. No one ever puts on enough pickles.”

She had a next step again. And if the Rhej couldn’t help, she’d think of something else. Lily headed for the kitchen, thinking about steps and friendship and what kind of ammo would be most likely to stop a demon.

CLAN HOME. It rested in the mountains outside the city, sprawling over nearly two thousand acres. They weren't regal, these mountains, like their grander cousins to the north, nor garbed in towering pines. The slopes were steep but not terribly high; valleys were mostly narrow, cut by small, seasonal streams. This was chaparral country, with scrub oak, juniper, sage, and here and there the tough, ugly mountain mahogany tangled together on the rocky slopes.

It was cooler up here, downright nippy compared to sea level. The air smelled of dust and sage. At least that's what Lily smelled. She didn't know how much more the werewolf in front of her was smelling.

"So," Cynna said, "is this Rhej person a bit of a loner? She lives up here away from everyone else."

They were following a narrow path up one of those scrub-covered slopes. Cullen led; Cynna brought up the rear.

"Lots of people prefer to live slightly apart," he said. "They enjoy the contact with the wild. It doesn't make them loners."

Apart in this case meant away from the commons—a loose cluster of homes and small businesses along the only real road in Clanhome. The Rhej's home was less distant than some, being only a couple of miles away from the end of the gravel road.

But there was a great deal she didn't know about Nokolai and Clanhome. She'd only been here three times. Once when she was investigating a murder—the investigation that brought her and Rule together. The second time she'd come to take part in her *gens amplexi*, the ceremony when she was formally adopted into Nokolai. On her third trip here a little over a week ago, she'd just visited, trying to get to know some of the people she was now bound to.

"You holding up okay?" Cullen asked as they straggled up the last, steepest part of the path. "

"I'm fine." Utterly spent, actually, which was mortifying but not unexpected. A wounded body turned tyrant, insisting on channeling everything into healing. But her burn wasn't hurting too badly. Looser clothing helped. "Why didn't I meet the Rhej at the *gens amplexi*?"

Cullen stopped, though they weren't at the top of the mountain. Maybe they didn't have to go all the way up. He glanced over his shoulder at her, a small smile on his mouth. "You did. You just didn't know it."

"More secrets," she muttered. "Your bunch is too damned fond of secrets." She was breathing hard as she came up beside him.

The ground leveled out here, forming a small clearing. Not a natural clearing, though everything Lily saw was native and looked like it had just happened to sprout where it was. Bracken fern and spleenwort snuggled up beneath a small pinyon pine. Mock parsley and wild celery grew in a tangle with yarrow and some species of aster that still clung to a few small, bright blue blooms. But many of the plants she saw wouldn't have grown on this west-facing slope naturally. Someone had planted them—after digging out the oak and juniper.

A huge job, that, without earth-moving equipment. Maybe she'd had lupus muscles to help.

The house was set smack up against the mountain, a tiny adobe building almost the color of the dirt

behind it, but with a shiny metal roof. As Lily's attention left the plants for the house, the front door opened. An old woman swept out a scatter of dust.

Lily stared. She recognized her, all right, though they hadn't spoken at the ceremony or the celebration that had followed. The woman stood maybe five feet high, which was enough to make her stick in Lily's memory. She was Anglo, over sixty, and fat—the roly-poly, happy-grandmother kind of fat. Her hair was white and straight and short. It looked like she cut it herself, maybe with hedge trimmers. Her eyes had once been blue.

Now they were milky. She was blind.

Those sightless eyes aimed right at them. “Well, come in,” she said. “You didn't hike up here to watch me sweep my floor.” And she turned around and went back inside.

Lily gave Cullen a hard look. “Secrets,” she muttered, and headed for the little house.

Inside it was a single square room, its symmetry disturbed only by two bumped-out sections with doors that she guessed were the bathroom and a large closet. To her left was the kitchen area—open shelving above the single wooden counter with a tiny electric stove and a refrigerator straight out of the fifties. To her right was a round table and four wooden chairs. The bed, a double, was at the back, between the bumped-out portions. Two battered trunks lined up along one wall. Along the opposite wall was a cushy green recliner, a top-of-the-line stereo, and three large baskets. A gray tabby slept in the recliner.

No rugs. White plastered walls, dark wood floor... and an altar. Set smack in the center of the room, the rough-hewn stone held three white candle stubs, a scattering of sage, and a small silver saucer. Chiseled into the front of it was a symbol much like Lily's missing *toltoi*.

The Rhej stood at her stove with her back to the door. She wore jeans, an old flannel shirt, white socks, and no shoes. “You'll have tea,” she informed them. “I made cookies, too. They're on the table.”

“We didn't come here for cookies,” Cullen said.

The old woman clucked her tongue. “Still angry, eh? It wasn't me said you were no Etorri all those years ago. Though as it turned out the Etorri Rhej was right, wasn't she? It just took Nokolai a while to realize you were ours.”

“Ah...” Lily glanced from Cullen to their hostess. “Obviously you and Cullen know each other. He hasn't bothered to introduce us, so I will. The woman with me is Cynna Weaver, and I'm Lily Yu.”

“I know that, child.” She turned her head to smile at them. The smile fell away, wiped out by pure startlement.

Then she laughed. “Oh. Oh, my. I'm not half as clever as I'd like to think. Well, this will be interesting. You're Cynna?” She spoke to Cynna as directly as if she could see her.

Cynna agreed to that.

“You'll stay. Cullen, go run. It's been too long since you've Changed. Go enjoy your four feet instead of your brain for a while.”

Cullen didn't look happy, but to Lily's surprise, he obeyed, giving the Rhej a single, stiff nod and leaving.

Nodding at someone who couldn't see? But then, Lily didn't understand how anyone could garden without sight. Unless... "Do you see the way Cullen does?" she blurted. "Second sight, or whatever it's called?"

She snorted. "I'm no sorcerer, and that is not what 'second sight' means. Sit down, sit down." She nodded at the table, already set with cups and saucers and dainty china plates. A larger plate held a dozen or more chocolate chip cookies.

Slowly Lily complied. Cynna sat, too, looking as clueless as Lily felt. The three cups had dried herbs in their bottoms. Cynna picked hers up and sniffed at it. "Are you a precog? You seem to have been expecting us."

"I wasn't expecting *your* She shook her head. "Lady help me, I sure wasn't expecting you. I've spoken to Isen, of course, about last night, and the Lady said Lily would come. I figured Cullen would be bringing her."

"You talk to your goddess?" Cynna asked.

"Talk, argue... now and then I even listen. But the Lady is just the Lady. She's not into the god business anymore." She turned, teapot in hand, and waddled over to the table.

Lily didn't want to talk about goddesses, even if they weren't in the god business anymore. "You've created a beautiful garden." Though she couldn't see how. How did the woman know what seedlings to yank, which plant was which? How could she enjoy her garden when she couldn't see it?

The white eyebrows lifted. "Realized it wasn't wild growth, did you? Not many would."

"I like gardening, and I'm interested in native plants."

"Rule mentioned that you enjoy grubbing in the dirt." She found one cup with her fingers and then poured steaming water over the herbs in it, releasing their pungent scents. Rosemary, Lily thought, among others.

"The cookies are just those refrigerator things, but they're pretty good. Help yourselves. You probably won't like the tea, but drink it anyway. It's good for you." She located another cup and poured.

She found things by touch, Lily realized. She found people by... "You're an empath. A physical empath, I'd guess, because you aren't tuning into the plants' emotions. It's their physical state you sense." The Gift itself wasn't rare, but was usually considered one of the weak Gifts. The old woman obviously had a triple dose of it—which was probably why she lived apart. "You don't see me, but you feel me so clearly it's almost the same."

"Not the same," she said. "Better in some ways, not as good in others." She filled the last cup with water. "That'll need to steep a few minutes." She turned and padded back to the stove to deposit the teapot. "You going to tell me what you want?"

"You asked me to come."

"I know that. I may be eighty, but my memory's good." She chuckled as she came back to the table and pulled out a chair. "Damned good."

Lily looked at her dubiously. “Eighty?”

“Clan females don’t age as slow as the males, but we do weather well.”

“Ah...” Lily darted a glance at Cynna. “Are we going to talk about big, hairy secrets now?”

“That’s why you’re here. I’ll tell you some of my big, hairy secrets, and you’ll tell me yours. You’re wondering why I’m letting Cynna listen in. I’ll explain later.” She bent over the steaming cup, sniffed, and nodded. “Good batch. It’ll taste nasty, but it’ll work. Drink up.”

Cynna looked dubious. “What’s in it?”

“Rosemary, rue, chamomile, a few others. All properly harvested.” She “looked” at Lily. “It’ll be good for Cynna and me, too, but it’s mostly for you. Opens you up to the spell I’ll add to help your body mend. Not that I’m a healer, but I’ve picked up a thing or two over the years. You’ll need to sleep after.”

Spells would work on her now. Lily’s hands fisted in her lap.

The old woman leaned over and patted her arm. “I won’t tell you it’ll get better. It won’t stop being a loss and a grief just because times passes. I went blind more than thirty years ago, and I still miss the sight of dew on the grass. Or a smile.” She formed one of her own. “Lord, but I’d love to see a smile again. But the hurt changes over time, if you let it.”

Lily started to nod and caught herself. “Okay.” She took a breath and let it out. “I’m not here to talk about the loss of my Gift, though.”

“You want to go after Rule.”

She jerked slightly. “You *are* a precog. Or else Isen—”

“Isen’s trying to keep you from doing that, yes. While hoping to do it himself or send some of his people, if he can come up with a way. He’s a man and a father, not just the Rho. But you’re Rule’s Chosen. Of course you want to go after him.” She picked up her teacup. “Drink your tea, child. I’ve a good deal to tell you, and I won’t start until you’ve emptied the cup.”

Was there something in the tea other than healing herbs? Lily picked it up, sniffed dubiously, and glanced at Cynna... who was holding her hand over her own cup, her face wearing that focused look.

After a second she shrugged, picked up her cup, and took a sip. “Oh, ugh. You weren’t kidding about the taste. Rat turds.”

“Not in this batch.” The old woman downed her own tea in three big swallows, grimaced and then belched gently. “Before you tell me what you want from me, you need to know what a Rhej is. I’m the memory.” She reached for a cookie. “You haven’t drunk your tea.”

If that’s what it took to get her to talk... Lily tried to emulate the old woman. It took her five swallows, and she wasn’t sure she’d keep the last one down. “The clan historian, you mean.”

“I mean what I said. Eat.” She pushed the cookies toward Lily, who took one and bit. “They get rid of

the aftertaste.” She finished her own cookie and dusted her hands. “You’re thinking I memorize a bunch of songs and stories so I can pass on our oral history as it was passed on to me. You’re half right. I do pass on what was passed to me, and I know and teach a lot of songs and stories. But I check their accuracy against the original sources.”

“Ah... dead sources?”

She chuckled. “I’m no medium. The Etorri Rhej, now—but that’s another story. A Rhej is always Gifted, though. There has to be a channel, but it doesn’t seem to matter much what the Gift is. Speaking of Gifts... you guessed mine. I know yours was taken from you. What about you?” she said to Cynna abruptly. “You’re Gifted, but I don’t know what it is.”

Cynna blinked. “I’m a Finder.”

The white eyebrows lifted. “Interesting. As I was saying, a Rhej has to be Gifted so there’ll be a channel, a way to receive what’s been passed down. I hold memories going back more than five thousand years. Mostly Nokolai,” she added casually, reaching for another cookie. “But some of the older memories are too important to trust to a single Rhej, so we all hold ‘em.”

“Five thousand years,” Lily said blankly. “Five thousand *years*?”

“Give or take a few centuries.” Her smile was a tad grim. “Makes for restless nights sometimes.”

Cynna leaned forward. “Do they feel like your memories? I mean, is it all just crammed in there together, so that what someone experienced a thousand years ago is like what you lived through last year?”

The Rhej nodded. “Good question, but tricky to answer. You might think of the passed—that’s how we refer to what’s been passed to us—as computer files, being as how that’s what your generation’s used to. I like suitcases better, myself, but to each her own. If I need to check the details of a particular memory I open a suitcase, take out the one I want, and try it on. Once it’s on, though... it isn’t memory anymore. I’m there.”

Either the woman was sincerely nuts, Lily decided, or she was sincerely... well, something completely outside Lily’s experience. This was no put-on. She found herself tugged toward belief, maybe because she needed to believe. To think she’d found someone who could help.

But Cullen was the opposite of gullible, and he’d brought them here, to this woman. “You’re saying that you experience what someone thousands of years dead lived through. You don’t remember it. You experience it.”

“That’s right. But once we’ve finished our apprenticeships, we don’t open our suitcases often. We remember what’s in them well enough for most things.”

The sort of memories that would be saved wouldn’t be pleasant, would they? They’d be from the big moments—the life-and-death struggles of the clan, not a baby’s first steps or the beauty of a sunrise on a particular morning. Lily could see why the Rhej didn’t open her “suitcases” often.

“I’d planned to tell you all of this anyway,” the old woman said. “Along with a great deal more, including some of those songs and stories. You’re Nokolai now. You need to know your clan. But you won’t have time for that now. So.” She slapped her palm on the table. “Time to spill your secrets. Tell me what you know or have guessed about Rule’s disappearance.”

It didn't take long. Lily knew how to boil a report down and present it dispassionately. She left out what Karonski had told them, of course, simply saying they'd had a lead on a possible source for opening a hellgate, but it hadn't panned out.

"So Rule's in the demon realm." The Rhej's voice was heavy. She was silent a moment. "It was Cullen's idea, I take it. To come to me."

"Yes. We need to open a gate, and we don't know how. Can you help us?"

She shook her head, but it looked more like "let me think" than a refusal, so Lily held her tongue. For several moments the old woman frowned at her thoughts.

"You've brought me a hard one," she said at last. "Normally I'd refuse and then grieve. There are things we're not allowed to reveal. That's another reason Cullen isn't fond of us," she added. "We know things that we won't tell him. Drives him crazy."

Lily smiled faintly. "It would."

"But now..." Her frown deepened. "I've been Rhej for forty-two years. I was apprenticed for twelve years before that. When I say I listen to the Lady, I'm not talking about hearing voices. If I get a feeling, a certain kind of feeling, I know it's from her. Oh, when it's clan business, I still use Tell-Me-Three-Times to confirm my feeling. That's how we're trained—check and double-check, using different rituals. But most of us only hear the Lady's voice once in our lives. It's enough." She gave a short nod.

"Do you have one of those feelings now?"

She snorted. "Got better than that. There's one time we don't use Tell-Me-Three-Times. If the Lady ups and speaks, well, that's it. Can't mistake her voice for anyone or anything else, not if you've ever heard it. And we all have, that once. Well, she woke me up last night. Three o'clock in the damned morning, and for the second time in my life I heard her voice."

Lily's heart was pounding. "What did she say?"

"Bring him back."

She closed her eyes, so dizzy with relief she swayed. "Then you'll do it."

"I'll do what I can. It may not be enough. The sort of memories you need... they were split hundreds of years ago. Too dangerous to rest just with one person. None of us holds the entire spell to open a gate."

"Then what?" she demanded. "What do we do? Will the other Rhejes help?"

"They should. When the Lady speaks... but you'd better hope she's been shaking some other shoulders. The ban's been round for a long time, and we all remember why it was put in place. This is going to take time. Some of the others..." Her head turned toward the wall with the recliner. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Cullen. If you just have to hear what's going on; come on in."

A few seconds later a lean wolf trotted in the front door. He was smaller than Rule's wolf-form—his shoulders would hit below her waist—and his coat was a pale silver, not the black-and-silver of Rule's

fur. And the sight of him hurt her heart.

Cynna made a small sound. Lily looked at her. “Knowing about it and seeing it are two different things, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.” Cynna’s eyes never left the wolf, who came up to the table and fixed the Rhej with a pair of disconcertingly bright blue eyes.

“I guess you heard the most of it,” the old woman said.

Cullen-wolf nodded.

“This is not going to be easy.” She contemplated things for a moment and then pushed her chair back. “Or quick, so I’d best get started. You can take me to Isen’s house. I’ll use his phone. Someone bring the cookies. Isen’s fond of chocolate chip.” She stood. “I’m Hannah, by the way.”

Cullen yipped and then pointed with his nose at Cynna.

“Wondering about that, are you? Why I let her learn so much?” Suddenly the old woman grinned and her face lit up, bright as a mischievous child. “I did say I’d explain. After all, she’s not clan yet.”

“Ah...” Cynna looked taken aback. “What do you mean, *yet*?”

Hannah’s grin widened. “Just what it sounds like. You’ll have to become Nokolai sooner or later. You’re the next Rhej.”

TWENTY-NINE



RULE woke from his first true, deep sleep in hell with a hard ache in his leg; the scents of earth, water, and smoke in his nostrils; and a clear head. He lay quietly, eyes closed, savoring the relief.

Most of his memories of the period immediately following the demon’s bone-setting were a blur of pain punctuated by fitful sleep. Lily had woken him periodically, coaxing him to drink from her cupped hands. Sometimes he’d woken on his own. She’d always been near.

He did recall how he’d gotten to the cave. Lily had called down a dragon.

The agony of having his bone set had left him too weak and dizzy to stand. She’d been determined to get him in the cave, where there was water, since they lacked any kind of bowl or pot. The demon was strong enough to handle Rule’s weight, but too small to manage his bulk. Lily had gotten one of the “coverings” the dragon had mentioned, a thick braided mat she could use as a stretcher. But there had been no way to lower him from the sandbox to the beach.

He’d tried to tell her to wait until he’d healed enough to do it on his own. Maybe his meaning lost

something in the translation, or maybe she was just stubborn. She'd called for help.

One of the coppery-brown dragons had descended. Rule remembered the way Lily had ordered it to be careful of his ribs and gentle when it set him down. He remembered the miserable jerk of the takeoff, too, with the talons wrapped around his middle, but the flight had been brief. And the dragon had sent him down gently as ordered, right on the mat Lily had waiting outside the cave. Gan had dragged him in.

He'd been glad of the water, he admitted now. But his bladder was about to burst.

How long had he been sleeping?

Rule was familiar with injury and its aftermath. Lupi played hard, trained hard, and often fought hard, and their bodies cleansed themselves of pain killers and as efficiently as they disposed of alcohol and other toxins. So pain was no stranger. He knew to ride it, not fight it. But he'd never been cut off from the sweet song of the moon or away from Earth's rhythms.

He hadn't been sure he would heal.

Lupi drew from both earth and moon magic. The Change was wrought by their interplay, when the moon's call set the earth dancing in his blood and bones. Here there was no moon, and this earth wasn't Earth. Yet it was enough like his earth, it seemed. His sense of time was distorted, but he thought no more than a day or two had passed—a little slow, but close enough to his normal rate of healing.

His hunger fit that estimate. It had been much too long since he'd eaten.

He took a moment more to assess his situation. His head didn't hurt at all, so the concussion was healed. His ribs... well, he'd find out in a moment. Scents told him that Lily was near but not right beside him. He smelled demon and dragon, too, but more faintly—neither were present now. Good. But the smoke... what was that from?

He opened his eyes.

The cave was a single chamber about twenty feet deep, fairly regular, with a sandy floor. It was dim where he lay near the rear, but he saw well enough. The rough ceiling was less than five feet overhead—enough head room for him in this form, but Lily must have had to stoop to tend him.

The fire was near the cave's mouth. So was Lily. She was feeding it sticks. She was clothed, he noted with surprise. She'd wrapped a length of red fabric around her torso like a sarong. More of the dragon's coverings, he supposed. Like the one beneath him, the braided mat Gan had dragged him in here on.

Time to find out what shape he was in. Awkwardly he clambered to his feet, holding the splinted leg carefully.

Shit. That hurt. Just his leg, though. The ribs were tender, but not painful. Good. They'd be fully healed in another day or so. His leg would take longer. That had been a bad break. A week? Maybe a little more...

"What do you think you're doing?" Lily made a bee-line for him. "You don't need to be standing, for God's sake. Lie down. Whatever you need, I'll get it."

He looked at her wryly and started for the mouth of the cave, clumsy but determined. Some things she

couldn't do for him.

“Rule. You're not listening.” She kept pace beside him, looking worried. “You do understand me, don't you?”

He nodded.

“Well, then, why... oh.” She nodded. “Right. Uh, I've been using the grassy area for a privy, but that's too far for you. I guess... what's wrong?”

He'd paused in the mouth of the cave. Surely it had been lighter before. He looked up at the sky, where two dragons soared, high above. It was definitely darker than it had been. He looked at her.

“The light's fading,” she agreed. “Looks like night does fall in hell, after all. Or in parts of it. Gan says there's no natural night and day here, but light and darkness get tugged around by the different demon lords. Xitil keeps her realm light most of the time, but the lord of the realm over there”—she waved out at the ocean—“goes for a more regular light-dark cycle. The dragons can't regulate their territory the way the demon lords do, so it trends along with its neighbors. This close to the ocean, we're in for bouts of darkness. That's one reason I wanted the fire.”

He glanced over at it, nodded, and resumed his slow progress.

She kept pace beside him. “I sent Gan for some firewood. There wasn't much on the beach to burn. I hope it gets back soon—I'm almost out of sticks.” She grinned. “At first Gan said starting a fire was easy, that demons can all do small magics like that. But he—it—took forever to get this one going. It blames the dragons, of course.”

He glanced at her.

“Apparently they have sort of a dampening effect on magic. Gan says they soak it up.”

The demon had said earlier that dragons were immune to magic. Apparently they weren't immune in the way Lily was, though, with it bouncing off them. They simply absorbed it.

That is, if the stupid little shit was telling the truth, or even knew what was true. Where was the demon, anyway? Rule looked up and down the beach. No sign of it—and that bright orange skin did stand out.

Well, he was far enough from the cave now. He'd have to squat and pee like a girl, though. He didn't think he could balance on two legs.

As soon as he started, his attentive nurse discovered a sudden need to attend to something in the cave.

He hobbled back. It was awkward as hell. He promised himself that the next time he saw a three-legged dog hopping around he'd have a better appreciation for the skill involved.

If he ever saw a dog again. Or anything else of Earth.

Lily was messing with the fire. She looked up, her expression almost shy. “Are you hungry? There's some fruit. A little meat, too... well, dead animals, really. There's two of them. There were three, but I tried to skin one and made a mess of it. I've been sharpening one of the bones the dragons brought when we splinted your leg,” she added, “but it's not much of a knife.”

He could smell the game—at least a day dead, but not spoiled. It would do. He gave her a nod and started for the back of the cave.

“No, I’ll get it.” She stood. “You’ve been rambling around enough.”

He decided not to object, partly because that short walk had left him stupidly winded, partly because of the look on her face.

Happiness. He hadn’t seen that in her eyes since her sister’s wedding.

He lay down near the fire. The flames were small and gave off little heat, but a welter of emotions. Fire was a comfort for humans, bane to most beasts. He was uneasily aware of how little he enjoyed the flames. Surely the man hadn’t slipped so far away in such a short time?

And yet he’d attacked without thought. When he learned what the demon had done, that his mate was dying because of it, there had been only the killing rage, the need to feel the demon’s life bleed away beneath his teeth.

If the dragon hadn’t stopped him, he would have been responsible for Lily’s death.

He held no anger for the dragon over his injury. He’d earned his broken leg. It scraped against his raw places now for Lily to look so happy at the chance to do him a service, when he deserved it so little.

She needed the demon now. Needed it far more than she did him. And however ugly that thought was, he’d better get used to it. He had to get along with Gan somehow, or he’d make things harder for her.

But what, he wondered with a blind sort of agony, had happened to the part of her left behind? What became of such a strange remnant? *Lady*, he thought, and stopped, unsure what to ask. *Lady, she is yours. Care for her. All of her.*

Lilly brought back two creatures that looked like a cross between a rat and a naked jackrabbit. Nothing he’d seen here had fur. She glanced from the limp bodies to the fire. “I could cook them. Or try to.”

He shook his head. Even in this form he enjoyed his meat cooked when it wasn’t a fresh kill, but he was too hungry to wait.

Before he could take the game from her hand, though, he heard something approaching. He bristled to warn Lily. A few seconds later, he heard Gan muttering under its breath. A surge of loathing flattened his ears.

“Rule? What is it?”

The demon came into view. “This better be enough wood,” it grumbled. It was carrying several branches under one arm. “I had to climb to the top to get it.”

Lily frowned at Rule. “It’s just Gan. You aren’t going to attack it again, are you?”

It was harder than it should have been to remember the reasons he couldn’t. The wolf wanted to, badly. And the man didn’t disagree, but knew better.

His tail twitched in disgust, partly at himself. He took the two rat-rabbits from Lily's hand. He'd eat them outside. Less of a mess—and he wouldn't have to smell the demon while he ate.

He passed Gan on the threshold.

"Hey, look who's awake," it said. "It's old dark, mute, and crippled. Going to have a picnic, fur-face?"

Rule ignored it, carrying his meal several paces away and lying down. He glanced up. The sky was much darker now, more gray than copper, and the air had that near-shimmer of approaching twilight. And there were more dragons overhead than before—three, five... six now, and wasn't that another one headed this way?

Either they wanted extra guards at night, or the dragons were protection as well as jailers. Night often brought new dangers, and they didn't want Lily killed.

On that one point, he and the dragons agreed. He bit into a rat-rabbit and grimaced. Good thing he wasn't a picky eater.

"How far away do you think you were?" Lily asked the demon.

"How do I know?"

"Guess. I want to know the limits of this bond."

That jolted Rule. It echoed so precisely the way she'd reacted to the mate bond—test it, learn the parameters.

"Maybe three kilometers." There was a clatter as Gan dropped its load.

"Did you go to the limit of the bond?"

"I said I would, didn't I? It was like walking into a Zone that doesn't want you there. Everything turned thick and I couldn't breathe, so I backed up."

"I didn't feel anything." Lily crouched to feed one of the smaller branches into the fire. "Break a couple more in half, would you? They're too big."

"Of course you didn't feel anything." Gan cracked a three-inch thick branch over its knee. "I'm the one partly inside you, not the other way around."

The bond between Lily and the demon wasn't exactly like the mate bond, then. That didn't make Rule feel any better.

Rule finished off the first rat-rabbit methodically, glancing overhead every so often. The dragons were gathering along the top of the cliff. Odd. He'd stay out here a while, he decided. Keep watch.

"How did the dragons react to you climbing the cliff?" she asked.

"One of them kept track of me, but from a distance. They know I can't go far. You'll keep your end of our deal now, right?"

Rule stiffened, looking back at the cave. Lily had made a deal with the demon?

Lily had her fire going nicely now. She sat beside it. “Of course. One load of firewood equals five rounds of *I Spy*”

Gan grinned, showing its pointy teeth. “I get to go first.” It plopped down on the dirt floor, stubby legs extended, and leaned back on its tail as it looked around, its gaze landing on Rule outside. “I spy something furry and stupid.”

“Your turn will be over fast if you play that way,” Lily said. “And you’re supposed to use colors, remember?”

Rule shook his head and finished eating to the sound of “I spy something gray” and Lily’s guesses. With the light nearly gone, almost everything in the cave was some shade of gray, so the game was likely to last a while.

How could she stand to be around the creature? She was playing kids games with it, for God’s sake. If he...

A low, mournful sound drew his gaze up.

There were seven dragons now. Seven dragons lined up along the top of the cliff, silhouetted against the darkening sky, their long necks stretched up.

Again the sound came... longer, deeper. Haunting. A little like a didgeridu, he thought. And the dragons were making it.

He’d thought them mute. Not dumb, no—they had mindspeech, possibly true telepathy. But not once had he heard any of them make a sound, not a grunt or a cough, until now. Now, when they sang to the gathering dusk.

Inside the cave, Lily looked up. “What’s that?”

Rule yipped: *Come out. Come out and hear this.* Another dragon had joined the first, and another.

“It’s just the dragons,” Gan said. “And it’s still my turn.”

“In a minute.” Lily stood.

“We aren’t finished!” Gan cried.

“Hush. I’ll finish later. I want to hear this.” She came out to stand beside Rule, looking up, as he was.

The dragons’ long necks were their instruments. Lungs accustomed to charging those big bodies with enough oxygen to sustain flight powered their song, and they wrapped their voices together in harmonies like nothing he’d ever imagined—eerie, wordless, haunting.

He glanced at Lily. Everything he felt was on her face—awe, grief, a poignancy as vast as the growing darkness. She met his gaze and then sat beside him, their bodies touching. And for a timeless period, Rule forgot everything he’d lost, everything he stood to lose, in the glory of dragonsong.

It was full dark when it ended. Not pitch black; more like new-moon dark, Rule thought, once he could think again. Lily was leaning against him.

He turned to look at her, aching to put his arms around her. But even if he'd had the right-shaped mouth to speak, he didn't have words for what he'd just experienced.

Her face was damp. She met his eyes... and yawned. "Oh," she said, startled, and did it again. "I thought... but I'm sleepy. Really sleepy."

Everything inside Rule smiled. He'd worried about her sleeplessness. Her body might no longer want sleep, but the human mind needed to dream. He nudged her with his nose.

She gave a little laugh. "I guess I'd better get inside. I feel like I've been up for days... I have been, haven't I? But this hit so suddenly..." This time she yawned like she was going to crack her jaw.

He nudged her again. She smiled, pushed his muzzle away, and stood, blinking. "Straight to bed, I think." She looked a little unsteady as she headed for the cave.

Gan was inside, sulking, playing some game with a few small pieces of bones. "Are you finally going to finish our game?"

"Sorry, Gan. I'm not going to be able to stay awake long..." Another yawn. "Long enough. I'll give you an extra round tomorrow to make up for waiting," she promised, heading for the back of the cave, wobbling a little.

"Shit." Gan stared after her. "It gets dark, and she conks out."

Rule thought the darkness was coincidence, but maybe not. He followed her.

Moments after lying down on the mat where he'd slept, she was asleep. He sat beside her for a while, listening to Gan mutter. The demon seemed to be trying to levitate the bones. It wasn't having much luck.

He was, he realized, extremely thirsty. But nature called. He went outside to take care of that and then returned to drink from the small basin filled by the spring. He was getting better at the three-legged bit, he thought. But bending to drink was a bitch.

He emptied the basin and was waiting for it to refill when he noticed an odd scent. Curious, he followed his nose to a boulder. Dragon-scent, he realized. Faint enough that he hadn't picked up on it from a distance. And not just any dragon—this smelled of the one he thought of as Old Black. The one who'd told Lily to call him Sam.

He looked up at the ceiling, puzzled. That huge beast couldn't have fit back here. His tail, maybe... Rule checked the ground around the spring and the boulder. Only the boulder held the scent.

He'd moved it, Rule realize. The dragon had moved the boulder. To hide something? Something like—a way out? Excited, Rule yipped.

"Go chase your tail," Gan said, staring at its bone fragments. "I'm busy." One of the pieces lifted about an inch at one end but then fell. "Stupid fucker!" Gan cried. "Those dragons have eaten all the stupid magic here!"

Rule studied the boulder. He could have moved it himself, if he had hands. As it was... he sighed and hobbled to the front of the cave. He growled softly.

“Go away,” Gan muttered, resting its chin in its hands “I’m not moving any stupid rocks for you.”

Rule drew in the dirt with his paw—two horizontal lines crossed by two vertical lines. He put an X in one square and growled again.

Gan sat up straighten Its expression was funny, as if it was trying not to look happy. “Tic-tac-toe? Well... it’s not as good as *I Spy*, but you can’t talk, can you? Okay, I guess I could do it. For twenty games, and you let me win every one.”

Rule stared. The demon thought that would be fun? Knowing Rule was letting it win, it would still enjoy playing? He growled.

“Okay, okay. Ten games, but I win them all.”

Why not? Rule nodded and then added a growl that meant: *If you can do it. You don’t get anything for failing.*

“Ha. Of course I can do it.” The little demon waddled to the back of the cave, and Rule showed it what he wanted moved. Gan and the boulder were the same height. It studied the rock for a moment—then, as Rule watched in amazement, it grew smaller.

After a second he caught on. The demon had redistributed its mass to make itself almost as inert as the boulder. It spread its newly shortened legs, pressed its tail into the ground, and began pushing.

The boulder rolled. And behind it... darkness. Stale air.

A tunnel.

Dread rose in Rule. He had a horror of small, closed spaces. If he went in there and Gan pushed the boulder back...

“I get to go first,” Gan said, expanding back to its normal size. “I’m exes, you’re boos.”

As promised, Rule let Gan win the first two games, making it so easy he didn’t see how the demon could get any pleasure from it. But Gan crowed over both staged victories as if it had won the sweepstakes.

Rule sighed and put a pawprint in one of the squares.

Gan studied the nine squares as intently as if there was some chance it could lose. And yawned. Its eyes widened. “Shit! Was that a yawn?”

Rule nodded.

“Demons don’t sleep.” Gan scowled. “I am not sleepy. I’m not going to start falling unconscious every so often like some stupid...” It yawned again. “Shit, shit, shit! She’s making me sleepy! I’ve never felt this before. I don’t like it.” It looked like a sulky—and very ugly—child defying bedtime as it glared at Lily’s sleeping figure. “This is all her fault.”

Rule stood, growling.

“I’m not going to hurt her, stupid. Sit down. You still owe me eight games.”

The demon was asleep before they finished the fourth game. Once Rule was sure it was sleeping soundly, he hobbled to the back of the cave. He stared into the tunnel for a long moment. It might be a dead end. But Rule didn’t think dragons rolled boulders around for fun. The tunnel had been blocked for a reason.

Even if Gan pushed the boulder back, he told himself, he’d just have to bark. Lily would hear him and make the demon let him out. He could mark his route by scent. He wouldn’t get lost. The lack of light wouldn’t be a problem.

The tightness of the space would. And these rocks were mostly limestone. Good for forming caves, but also prone to shifting. To collapse.

He did not want to go in there.

He looked over his shoulder at Lily, sleeping for the first time in God knew how long. Gan thought the dragons meant to trade Lily to a demon lord. The big dragon hadn’t denied it. If they had a chance of escape... he had no choice, really.

But he was shaking as he eased himself down onto his belly, his bad leg pushed in front of him, and inched under a mountain of stone.

THIRTY



ONE week later, Lily was at the airport, waiting for Cullen. Originally, Cynna had been supposed to pick him up, but she was upstate, looking for a missing child in one of the state parks. Lily could hardly argue for Cynna to ignore the needs of a lost child, but the other woman’s absence made Lily feel as if her plan was unraveling.

Or maybe it was just her that was unraveling.

Cullen had flown to New Orleans yesterday. He called the trip research, though he’d refused to tell her what he hoped to accomplish—“you being an officer of the law and all, luv,” he’d said with an irritating grin.

An officer of the law who was conspiring to open a portal to hell. She hitched her purse higher on her shoulder, scanning the faces of the disembarking passengers. She didn’t have much room to criticize his methods.

It had been a long week.

Before Cynna left, she'd located three small nodes within a few miles of the spot both she and Lily felt Rule to be. He'd stopped moving around so much, which helped.

His current location corresponded to a point about two miles out to sea. Not so cool. That spot might be high and dry in Dis. She hoped so. But she was taking an inflatable raft, just in case.

Assuming they were able to cross, that is. There was a whole lot of nothing going on with the Rhejes. Hannah kept saying it took time to be sure of the Lady's will, but Rule might not have time. They didn't know... oh, there was Cullen. At last.

He had a carryon slung over one shoulder and his other arm slung over the shoulders of a dark-haired woman—fortyish, Caucasian, shapely, wearing a business suit that had probably started out crisp. Lily's lips tightened.

He saw Lily, turned to give the woman a murmured word and a kiss, and left her sighing.

"What kind of research were you doing in New Orleans, anyway?" she asked as soon as he reached her.

"Chill," he said. "Lorene and I were seatmates on the flight. I got what I went after." He patted his bag, looking smug.

"And what was that, exactly?" She started down the concourse.

He ignored her question and asked his own. "Where's Cynna?"

She told him, watching his face for signs of disappointment or relief. Despite all the sparks, he and Cynna hadn't fallen into bed together at the first opportunity. They probably couldn't stop arguing long enough, Lily thought.

"Anything else happen while I was gone? The scary old bats still conferring?"

"Hannah says they're doing the Tell-Me-Three-Times, checking out the Lady's will through rituals. But how long can that take? It's been seven days." The days weren't the worst, of course. It was the nights that made her crazy. She wasn't sleeping well. "They're trying to convince themselves the Lady doesn't want what she said she wanted. 'Bring him back.' That's what she told Hannah. How much clearer could she be?"

He gave a hard-to-read glance. "You beginning to accept that the Lady is real, are you?"

She shrugged impatiently. "Maybe. They think she is, so why won't they listen to Hannah?"

"Sweetheart, those women make the pope look like a screaming revolutionary. They aren't going to like any decision that wanders a hair outside tradition." He shrugged. "I guess when you carry that much of the past around inside you, you can't help getting hung up on the status quo."

"Yeah, well, if the status gets any more quo, we'll be moving backward."

"Is Hannah still convinced that Cynna's her replacement?" he asked as he got on the escalator.

"Yeah." She followed him. "And Cynna's getting annoyed. I don't blame her. Hannah keeps instructing

her.”

Cullen let out a laugh. Two women riding the up escalator stared at him, practically drooling. “I’d like to see that.”

“You probably will. When Cynna objects, Hannah just smiles and says Cynna is Lady-touched, and she’ll come around when it’s time. As if Cynna could change religions just like that.”

“It isn’t a religion.”

“What?” She stepped off the escalator after him.

“Serving the Lady. There’s a spiritual aspect, or can be, but it isn’t a religion. Cynna could go right on being a Catholic if she wants.”

“You might not see a conflict, but I suspect the Church would.” She frowned at him. “You sound like you want her to do it. To apprentice herself to Hannah.”

He hesitated and then said slowly, “Hannah’s eighty. That’s old for a human, even one clan-born. There’s been a buzz for years about her lack of an apprentice. She had one once. She was lulled in the accident that blinded Hannah. That was more than thirty years ago.” He looked at Lily. “Nokolai has to have a Rhej.”

She was absurdly disappointed. She’d wanted him to share her anger, dammit. “That’s not Cynna’s problem. Anyway, I thought you didn’t like the Rhejes.”

Cullen stopped. He let his bag slip to the floor.

“What?” She looked around, barely resisting the urge to reach for her weapon. “What is it?”

“You.” He moved behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

She jolted and turned to face him. “Are you crazy? What are you doing?”

“I’m going to give you a massage.” He moved behind her again. “You’re wound so tight you’re likely to plug someone for bumping into you. If you won’t accept sex,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders again and kneading, “you’ll have to make do with a back rub.”

“Here?” But she didn’t move. His fingers dug in just right, relaxing muscles she hadn’t realized were so tight.

“Here. Where there are lots and lots of people around, and you won’t worry about where I’m going to put my hands next. This is a strictly asexual massage.”

She didn’t think Cullen could do asexual if his life depended on it. But he wasn’t trying to seduce her, she admitted. And... it felt good. His thumbs made circles on her neck, and it was like he’d poured warm oil along her muscles. Everything loosened.

“Damn, you’re tight. I mean that in a strictly asexual way,” he added. “Because I have no way of knowing—”

“Shut up, Cullen.” But she smiled in spite of herself.

“Have you been working out? That’s not as much fun as sex, but it can dissipate the tension.”

“Sure. With an M16.”

“Ah, I sense Benedict’s strong hand. He’s too banged up to train you himself, though.”

“Jeff’s put me and Cynna through our paces.”

She’d gone to Benedict for tactical advice and firepower. Nokolai possessed a weapons cache that horrified the law enforcement officer in her, but was coming in damned handy now. She and Cynna would carry M16s; Cullen got Benedict’s machine gun. He’d also carry the rocket launcher, and they’d each have grenades.

Benedict had helped with her lists, too.

They couldn’t know how big their gate would be until Cullen had a chance to evaluate the ritual, maybe not until he worked it. Mass wasn’t an issue, he’d told her, but size mattered. She didn’t pretend to understand that, but she and Benedict had worked up lists of supplies and weapons based on various possibilities.

What should they take if it was just her, Cullen, and Cynna? If they could take either two extra people or one person and the rocket launcher, which should they leave out? Or if—oh, that’s right. She hadn’t told Cullen about that possibility. “He wanted me to ask Max to join us.”

“Max?” His fingers paused. He chuckled. “I’d like to have seen his face when you invited him to go to hell.”

“I didn’t get to see it yet myself. He wasn’t at the club.”

Max was the owner of Club Hell, where Cullen danced. He was small, bad-tempered, foul-mouthed, and a gnome. Though no one was supposed to know the last bit.

“Why Max, anyway?” He began knuckling her spine. “He’s no good with weapons.”

“He can fight, though, and he’s smaller than any of the lupi. Plus Benedict says gnomes are immune to demon magic. The compulsion type, at least.”

Cullen made a scoffing noise. “Rumor. Tall tales.”

“I don’t think Benedict makes tactical judgments based on rumor. Will you ask him?”

“Sure. He’ll turn me down, but I’ll ask.” He gave her shoulders a last squeeze. “Better?”

It was. She rolled her shoulders and nodded. “Thanks.”

“I’m just looking after myself, you know.” He picked up his bag.

“How’s that?” she fell back into step beside him.

“You stay stretched this tight and you’re going to screw up and get us all killed. Can’t run things by committee once we cross, you know. You’ll be in charge.”

Uneasy and unsure why, she shook her head. “I’m the least knowledgeable of us. You or Cynna should be captain, or head wolf, or whatever you want to call it.”

“Boss bitch?” He grinned at her scowl. “No, it needs to be you. Cynna’s not used to running the show, and I’m not alpha enough.”

She snorted. “Oh, yeah, I’ve noticed how submissive you are.”

“I do like to be on top, but I try to be flexible. There are all sorts of other lovely positions. For example—”

“Cullen.”

He flashed her a grin. “Right. Alpha isn’t really a synonym for bossy, you know. I could handle that just fine. A true alpha... funny. I never tried to put it into words before, but I know I’m not one.”

They’d reached the automatic doors leading outside. She went through first. “So is a true alpha different from a plain old alpha?”

“Yes,” he said definitely. “What you mean by alpha isn’t what a lupus means. You think of it as machismo— someone who dominates others. We mean someone who can’t be dominated. A subtle but real difference. Bullies need to dominate, but can be cowed if you’re tougher than they are.”

She nodded, squinting against the sun. Where—? Oh, yeah. “I’m parked in Section C. So what’s the rest of it?” she asked as they wove between the parked cabs waiting for a fare. “Because you’ve got the ‘don’t even try to dominate me’ thing down pat, I’d say.”

“Glad you noticed. The rest of it...” He shook his head, falling silent as they started across the parking area.

Lily let the subject drop. Why was she uncomfortable about being in charge after they crossed? It wasn’t just her lack of knowledge. It was... guilt, she realized, feeling a little sick. She wasn’t sure she should be trusted with their lives. She’d proven she was willing to risk them by roping them into doing this.

There was the way she was healing, too. Or not healing. The burn was better, but she still got so damned tired. She’d been taking naps in the middle of the day, for God’s sake. That wasn’t normal. If she couldn’t—

“Rule has it.”

“It?” He’d startled her. “What it?”

“The alpha thing. The part I don’t have. So does Benedict. Mick didn’t.”

The brother who died. “I didn’t really know Mick. He was already under Helen’s control when we met, so I never had a chance to know the real person.”

“The real Mick wasn’t the sonofabitch you met, but he was no angel, either. He wanted to be Lu Nuncio. Helen didn’t plant that desire. She just used it. Which way?” he asked as they reached Section C.

“Down here.” She was almost sure this was the right aisle.

Cullen followed. “Mick convinced himself he’d be better for Nokolai than Rule, but his ambition was really all about what he wanted. Or what he didn’t want. He hated the idea of submitting to his younger brother. Isen knew it. That’s why he didn’t name Mick heir.

“Isen’s got it,” he went on, seeming to speak to himself as much as her. “He’s a ruthless bastard, but he’s ruthless on behalf of the clan. Or sometimes for the good of all lupi, everywhere. A true alpha instinctively thinks of the clan first. I don’t. I can,” he added, with a twitch of a smile. “But it’s an effort. With Rule, it’s automatic.”

Yes, it was. Lily’s throat tightened. She nodded, concentrating on not letting her eyes fill. “Here’s my car,” she said unnecessarily, clicking her remote.

“You’ve got it, too.”

“Me?” She shook her head. “The boss bitch part, maybe. But I don’t have the clan-first instinct. Half the time I forget I am clan.”

“That’s not what I mean. If you’re in charge, you’ll think of the group after we cross, not just what you want or need. You won’t be able to stop yourself. Just like right now,” he said, opening the door and tossing in his bag. “You’re wanting to confess. You’re afraid you might be willing to spend me to save Rule.”

She stared. “And you think that qualifies me to lead?”

He smiled and patted her cheek. “You’re proving my point, luv.” He climbed in and shut the door.

Baffled, she shook her head and went around to her side.

They were in the midst of heavy traffic on I-5 before he spoke again. “I didn’t tell you what I went to New Orleans for.”

“I noticed,” she said dryly.

“I needed to confirm something about Dis I’d read in several references. Not good references, mind you. The only grimoires they didn’t burn during the Purge were all but worthless—fiction mixed with fantasy and peppered with a few stray facts, probably by accident. I can’t tell you how much nonsense got passed on from one medieval dabbler to another. One asshole would make up something to sound important, and half a dozen others dutifully recorded it.”

“Actually, you have told me.” Many times.

“Have I?” He glanced at her and then ahead. “That’s why I needed to double-check this. The text I wanted is far more reliable than most. It, ah, wasn’t available. But I was able to buy a photocopy of the pertinent pages. Cost a pretty penny just for that,” he added. “Isen covered it, though.”

“I take it this—” Her cell phone rang. “Pass me my phone, would you?”

He dug it out of her purse and handed it to her.

“Yes?” As she listened, her heart began to pound. “Yes. All right. Tell Cynna—no, I’ll call her myself. Do you know when they... wait, let me get a pen.”

But Cullen beat her to it. She repeated the information aloud, and he jotted down the flight numbers.

“Got it,” she said. “We’ll pick up the one from Canada. As Isen to send someone for the other one, so we can... Right. Later.”

She disconnected and gave Cullen a tight grin. “You heard?”

His eyes sparked with the same excitement she felt. “The scary old bats are coming.”

“Two of them are. Hannah says these are the two who matter. They’ve got the other pieces of the ritual. They’ve agreed to share those memories after they arrive, but they have to be present for the ritual.”

It was going to happen. They were going to make it happen. “I’m heading for Club Hell. The first one will arrive in three hours. We can talk to Max and then come back to the airport for her.”

“He’s not going to agree.”

“We have to try. Here.” She handed him her phone. “See if you can reach Cynna. We need to know when she can return.”

A few minutes later she breathed a sigh of relief when Cullen reported his brief conversation with Cynna. She Found the boy—still alive, thank God—and was at the Sacramento airport now, on standby for a flight back.

Her insides humming, Lily started going over her mental lists. What hadn’t she done? What hadn’t she thought of?

“Lily.”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t finish telling you what I learned in New Orleans.”

“Oh. Right.” It must be important. “What was it, then?”

“There’s no moon in Dis.”

She waited a beat. When he didn’t explain, she said, “And that means—?”

“Rule went there as a wolf. He won’t have been able to Change.”

She nodded, frowning, still not understanding why he was grave.

“Don’t you know anything about us yet? By now he may not be thinking as a man, but as a wolf. He’ll still know us, but he might not understand what we tell him.” His breath gusted out. “He’ll follow you,

though. You're his mate, so he'll go through the gate with you."

That wasn't great, but still didn't seem enough to make the bones stand out so sharply in Cullen's too-beautiful face. "What's the rest of it?"

"If he's been in wolf-form too long, he'll have lost the man altogether. He won't be able to Change back."

Her mouth went dry. "It's only been a week. A week and part of a day."

"Here, yes. I've told you that time doesn't pass in other realms at the same rate as it does here. In Dis it's erratic. For Rule, a day may have passed. Or a week... or a month. A month," he said gently, "would be too long."

She opened her mouth to argue. She needed to argue. What he said was just stupid. Time didn't behave that way, jumping around all over the place. But when she looked at his grim expression, doubt hit, stealing her certainty and too much of her hope.

So she looked straight ahead. After a moment she repeated her mantra. "He's alive, though. Rule is still alive." This time she could add to it: "And we're going after him."

THIRTY-ONE



AFTER her first sleep in hell, Lily had woken up hungry. Very hungry.

Gan had woken up female.

The demon was less upset at having exchanged one set of genitals for another than at the prospect of suffering periodic bouts of unconsciousness. It—she—had shrugged and said fucking was fucking, and while cocks were great, didn't human females have multiple orgasms? And could Lily tell her how that worked?

Lily had slept twice more since then, each time waking with a terrible craving for ymu. Each time, Gan slept when she did and woke complaining. For each of her sleeps, Rule had slept four or five times. How many days did that make? She didn't know; she'd stopped thinking in those terms. But the light had faded three times now, dissolving slowly into darkness as if someone had the sky on a dimmer switch.

When it did, the dragons sang. And she and Rule sat together and listened. Those were the best times she'd known, when it was just her, Rule, the gathering darkness, and the unearthly beauty of dragonsong.

The light was beginning to fade again, and she was watching from her favorite spot, a flat rock that stuck out over the water. From here she had a view of the open ocean outside their inlet. An illusory freedom, maybe. But it soothed her.

Gan was with her, digging idly in the sand next to the rock. Rule wasn't.

She glanced overhead. It wouldn't be dark for some time. The dimming took a while. But she was worried. "The dragons haven't assembled yet for their song."

"Bunch of noise," Gan muttered.

The demon seemed to have no sense of what music was, much less any appreciation for it. It... she... had casually mentioned after the last dragonsong that the dragons put a lot of stock in their noisemaking. They called their leaders the Singers.

It was the first Lily had heard that the dragons had leaders. They didn't have anything as formal as a government, a king, or a council, but apparently these Singers had enough authority to negotiate pacts with their demonic neighbors. Gan hadn't known much more than that, though.

She looked at the other end of beach, at the grasses that marked the entrance to their cave. Worry put a pleat in her brow. Rule was in the tunnels again. He hated them. She'd seen him emerge shaking, but he kept going back.

"What?" she said distractedly. She hadn't heard half the demon's chatter.

"I asked what you think you're going to do with your stick. Poke a dragon, maybe? That'll scare them."

"Maybe." She went back to sharpening her spear, fashioned from the femur of a very large animal. Not much of a weapon, but it was all she had. "Or maybe I'll just poke rude little demons with it."

"No, you won't. You'd feel guilty." Gan looked smug. "Humans feel guilty about hurting things."

"Some do. Some don't."

"Well, you would. You're that kind. Besides, you like me."

Lily looked up, amused. "I do?"

"Sure. You won't let the wolf hurt me. He may have stopped trying to kill me, but he still wants to hurt me."

Lily's smile fell away. Twice since her last sleep she'd had to stop Rule from attacking the demon. Gan reveled in baiting him, true, but Rule had been able to ignore the demon's taunts before.

Something had changed, and it worried her.

"And it's not that you're afraid I won't feed you. I'd have to do that no matter how pissed I was, because I can't let you die. Besides," she added, "The dragon told me to keep feeding you. You know that. So you stopped the wolf because you like me."

"And you like me, too, of course."

"I'm a demon! I don't..." She frowned. "No, of course I don't. I've never liked anyone. It's like eating dead things. Demons don't do that."

“Demons don’t sleep, either.”

Gan scowled.

She shouldn’t tease Gan. She might have to ask her for a favor. Lily looked down the beach again. This was Rule’s first excursion without the splint. Over her objections, he’d chewed off the bindings after waking from his last sleep. And he’d been gone a long time, longer than usual.

She couldn’t go looking for him. It was dead dark in those cramped passages, and she couldn’t find her way by scent the way he did. The demon’s sense of smell wasn’t that keen, either, but Gan had an unerring sense of direction, or so she claimed. If Rule didn’t show up soon, she’d have to bargain with Gan to...

A dark shape limped out of the cave. Her breath gusted out in relief.

The demon flung her piece of bone away. “It’s boring here. I can’t believe how long it’s taking Xitil to finish off her guest.”

“Maybe she already has. Would you know?”

“No, but they would.” She waved up at the sky, where two of the smaller dragons circled—their guards and occasional waiters, making their breathtaking dives to drop food on the beach.

Living food. Gan ate hers that way. Rule chased and killed his.

She wished she could remember eating. She remembered all sorts of food—ice cream and rice, fried chicken and pickles. But she had no memory of how those things tasted.

“Have they been talking to you?” Lily asked. “They won’t mindspeak me.” Sam did, when he visited. He was curious about how Earth had changed in the years since his kind left. He and Rule had traded questions.

That is, they had at first. Not so much now. She looked at the dark, four-legged figure headed toward them.

“No,” Gan said, “but things would be happening if Xitil had finished her fight. They wouldn’t... hey, look who’s here. Fur-face. Find any good escape routes lately?”

Rule didn’t even look at the demon before jumping up on the rock to settle beside Lily. She breathed a sigh of relief. He was controlling himself. “You’re limping.”

He couldn’t shrug, of course, but gave his shoulders a roll that had the same meaning.

He’d obviously understood her. Maybe she’d been imagining things. “Gan thinks it won’t be long before Xitil finishes her battle with the goddess.”

Rule gave the demon a glance and growled.

“What?” Gan snapped. “Think in words when you growl, stupid, or I don’t get any meaning.”

Rule yawned, showing how little he thought of the demon’s opinion, then gave a few yips.

Gan snorted. “Dumb question. Xitil wouldn’t eat a goddess.”

Lily frowned. “But the goddess isn’t really here, right? Xitil’s fighting Her avatar.”

“That’s almost the same thing. Eating an avatar would be worse than eating a human. She’d go nuts.”

Lily nodded. Demons ate almost anything except humans. By eating the flesh they consumed something of the person, and they couldn’t absorb a human’s substance properly. Gan thought it was the soul that drove them mad, but she was just guessing. Demons no more knew what a soul was than humans did.

But demons could drink human blood. It was the usual route to possession, as well as a potent delicacy or drug. And they wanted Lily’s. The blood of a sensitive had some sort of special power here in hell.

Lily had questioned Gan enough to have some idea of what happened to her back on Earth. Gan had knocked her out and brought her to hell to sample her blood because it was more potent here. But then it had returned her to Earth. Blood alone wasn’t enough to get past a sensitive’s natural defenses. The demon had needed the goddess’s help to finish the business. Lily wasn’t clear about the details, but the goddess had invested some of Her power in a staff, and someone on Earth had used it to help Gan possess her. It had almost worked.

Rule growled a question at the demon.

Gan rolled her eyes. “I’ve told you and told you. I don’t know why the goddess wanted me to possess Lily. You think we sat down and chatted about Her plans over tea?”

“You’re still convinced that we’re part of a deal between the dragons and Xitil, though,” Lily said. “Sam keeps dodging that question.”

“He hasn’t denied it. And he could.” Gan sighed wistfully. “Because he can lie and all. But what else would he want us for? Well, he doesn’t really want *us*, but he needs me to feed you. I’m the only one who can do that, because of our bond.” She smiled, pleased with her own importance. “And so far the wolf hasn’t pissed him off enough to get himself killed, I guess.”

“Why not admit it, though?” Lily asked. “Sam doesn’t have anything to lose.”

Rule growled something.

“What did he say?”

Gan shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Gan—”

“I don’t know! He doesn’t trust the dragon. That’s all I picked up.”

Forehead furrowed, she stroked Rule’s head. Maybe Gan was just getting tired of translating and was pretending not to understand. “What do you think?” she asked him softly. *Understand me. Please, please, understand me.* “Will Sam hand us over to Xitil?”

He looked at her with what she could swear was puzzlement. But then his eyes cleared and he yipped.

“He said there’s a lot of demons,” Gan said. “Not many dragons.”

“Their position is precarious, you mean.”

He nodded.

Okay. It was okay. He’d understood and responded. “What we really need to know is why my blood would be so valuable to Xitil.” They’d asked Gan about that several times. The demon insisted she didn’t know why the blood of a sensitive was important, just that it was. “What am I? One heck of a good bonbon, or does my blood have a practical value?”

“You’re more than a treat,” Gan assured her. “You don’t have to worry about that. No one will kill you because then you wouldn’t make more blood. But Sam *can’t* be planning to keep you. The others will hear about you, and sooner or later they’ll try to grab you so Xitil doesn’t get you. The dragons won’t want that kind of trouble.”

Lily was startled. “Are you talking about fighting? War?”

“No, no. Wars are for grabbing territory and giving the nobles a chance to gobble up the other guy’s fighters. No one wants war with the dragons because they don’t just eat, they kill, so the princes aren’t going to... hey, look!” She jumped to her feet. “Mealtime!”

Lily looked up. One of their guards was diving at the beach the way they did when they delivered food, but its talons were empty. “That’s no food run. Maybe they’re playing tag. The second one’s chasing the first one. Or is—what?”

Rule had pushed her, hard, with his nose. He whined and shoved at her again, urgently.

He thought they were being attacked. Her pulse rate jumped. Maybe the dragon diving at them was relieving the boredom of guard duty by playing scare-the-human. But if he wasn’t...

They needed to get under something, quick. She jumped down. So did Rule.

No way could they make it to the cave. She sprinted for the cliff, Rule racing alongside her, Gan huffing a few paces behind. The dragons couldn’t grab them from above if they were up against that wall of rock. She flattened her back against it, her heart pounding, her mouth dry, her brain silly with fear. She didn’t want to look.

Stupid, she jeered at herself. *Think you can close your eyes and the bad dragon will go away?* She made herself look up and caught a glimpse of scarlet near the head of the pursuing dragon. There was only one of their guards with a frill that color, the same crimson as Sam’s.

It was smaller than the one it chased, she realized. Younger?

Then the two collided.

Her breath caught. This was no game, but battle, real and bloody. The two grappled in mid-air, a confusion of flapping wings, snaky necks, and lashing tails. She couldn’t see what was happening, who was winning. Then one broke away—the one who’d pursued, she realized, spotting the scarlet frill. Its wings worked desperately to carry it higher—for one wing was damaged. And pursuer had become

pursued.

The smaller one tried to dodge, but its attacker caught up with it, seizing one great wing and shredding it viciously. The injured dragon fought free, but it was clumsy now, lumbering through the air. Its attacker closed again.

Slowly at first, then faster, the injured dragon fell, the long body tumbling, tangling with wings that no longer caught air. She caught glimpses of that scarlet frill as it plummeted. Her stomach clenched sickly. It hit up the beach near their cave, and she felt the impact in the soles of her feet.

The winner circled once, then dove again. Toward them.

“Oh, shit,” she whispered. Maybe she’d poke a dragon with her big stick, after all.

“There’s another one!” Gan piped. “Coming from behind the mountains!”

She squinted, trying to make out details. The sky had darkened enough that it was hard to see the dragons clearly against it, but— “It’s Sam!”

Then the high, black shape folded his wings tight to his body and dropped, stooping like a giant hawk after a lesser bird. Aimed like an arrow at the dragon who had just killed.

It must have seen or sensed him, for it twisted, beating its wings frantically—but too late. Seconds later, Sam struck.

Dragons didn’t all die silently. This one screamed as its back broke, a bass howl that ended in a great splay of blood as Sam slashed its throat open, both of them still dropping.

That body had little distance to fall. While Sam’s wings beat hard, fighting to keep him from finishing his plummet, his victim made a huge splash some twenty feet from shore.

Go, that cool mental voice said as his wings prevailed and Sam began to climb. Don’t gawk. Get to the caves your lupus has been so determinedly exploring.

“What’s happening?” Lily cried.

The others will be here shortly, in case their tool failed. As it did. Satisfaction coated that thought. I do not tolerate betrayal.

Rule shoved at Lily. She staggered a few steps, then stopped. “What others? Why are they coming here?”

Sam was still climbing, but slowly, circling his way up. *The Singers. The fools dispute my possession of you. They come to kill you.*

“No!” Gan cried. “They can’t kill her! That would be stupid! They need her!”

They have finally understood the folly of allowing a sensitive to fall into Xitil’s hands. There will be no more negotiations.

“But the Singers—you were holding me for them!” Lily said. “They’re your leaders—”

Not my leaders. I took you and held you because I wished to. They wished to believe it was on their behalf. I allowed this until I learned that they planned to kill you without asking my permission. Go now.

Rule shoved her, hard. She gave in and started down the beach at a trot, but called, “What changed? Why do the demons want my blood?”

You will ask questions of Death itself when it stoops for you! Remain underground until I summon you. It may be many sleeps before it is safe to emerge. The Singers will abandon their pique with me soon enough and cease challenging my possession of you. Xitil is coming. She has eaten god-flesh and is quite mad.

“Oh, no,” Gan whispered. “Oh no, oh no, oh no...”

Mad or not, Sam’s chill thoughts continued, growing distant as he rose, she has too much power now to easily defeat. The others will need me.

Who are you ? Lily thought, stopping at the mouth of the cave in spite of the insistent press of Rule’s body. She knew that once inside, the dragon’s mindspeech would be cut off by the earth. What are you ? Not a Singer...

Not one of the little Singers, he agreed, the mental voice faint. A Great Singer. Perhaps the last of the Great Singers...

THIRTY-TWO



The next day dawned cool and misty. Lily was sweating beneath her leather jacket anyway. Maybe it was the pack on her back, or the weight of the M-16 slung over her shoulder. Or maybe she was freaking, funkyed-out, bone-deep scared.

“They’re taking forever,” Cynna muttered, shifting from foot to foot.

Lily nodded. This was probably when she should say-something heartening, but she was fresh out of heartening.

She wished Grandmother was here. Sharp and strong that wish rose in her, foolish as it was. Grandmother couldn’t have gone with them. She couldn’t have done anything but wait. But still, Lily wished she was here.

They’d assembled their odd crew on a low bluff near the ocean forty miles north of the city. It was private property, part of an estate, but the Rho had somehow arranged for them to be allowed on the grounds. Bribery, probably. It was the closest node to Rule—or where Rule would be, if he’d been on Earth.

Three women and a part-time male stripper held hands in a circle atop the node. Behind each of them stood a tall black candle, unlit. Dead center in the circle was Hannah's stone altar. It held a silver bowl filled with water.

Lily hadn't been offered the names of the other two Rhejes. The youngest one, the Etorri Rhej, was a slim, ordinary-looking woman about Lily's age, with dirty blond hair and pale blue eyes. Cullen stood between her and the Mondoyo Rhej, a tall black woman with sleepy eyes who looked to be on the high side of forty. She'd arrived a scant few hours ago, having flown in from somewhere in northern Africa. Then there was Hannah—old, fat, sightless, and very much in charge.

Maiden, Mother, and Crone, Lily thought, looking at the three women. Weird. Hannah had said the Lady's workings often fell out that way, even when, as now, her human agents didn't plan it so.

The air was still and moist with ocean smells. Lily and Cynna waited on the ocean side of the node beneath a twisted oak, its trunk leaning perpetually away from the absent wind. On the other side of the node were twenty armed lupi, as many trained Nokolai as Benedict could call upon this quickly. If something did manage to get through the gate despite Cullen's precautions, it would be blasted.

On the other side of the armed lupi, Nettie waited beside a modified SUV that would serve as an ambulance if necessary. With luck, none of them would need Nettie's services, but Lily wasn't about to rely on luck.

Only Lily, Cullen, and Cynna were crossing. The gate would be too small, the power too little, to allow more to pass through. And, of course, they had to take a small enough party that there would be room for one more on their return.

Max could have come. He was small enough to ride through the gate piggyback, but when they finally tracked him down he'd cursed a lot, told them they were idiots, and kicked them out of the club. Max didn't deal well with grief, Cullen said. Lily wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a joke.

Lily stared at the circle, willing them to hurry. So far, all they'd done was hold hands. All that she could see, anyway.

“It is easy to go down into hell,” Cynna murmured. “Night and day, the gates of dark Death stand wide...’ Guess old Virgil had that wrong, didn't he?”

“What?” Lily's turned to stare at the taller woman. “Virgil? Uh—is that poetry?”

Cynna shrugged the shoulder that didn't hold the strap of an M16. “I like old poetry.”

For an ex-Dizzy, Cynna knew the oddest things.

“*Mir acculum,*” Hannah said suddenly. “*A dondredis mir requiem.*”

“*A dondredis mir requiem,*” the tall black woman repeated. The other woman and Cullen echoed the phrase in turn, then they joined voices in a quiet chant.

At last something was happening. This first part of the ritual required all four of them—grooming the energy, Cullen called it. The second stage would be up to him, however. That's when Lily...

“Is that a taxi cab?” Cynna asked incredulously.

It was. The cab bumped up the dirt road that led here from the highway, stopping in a flurry of dust where the ruts stopped on the other side of the armed Nokolai. Unable to see clearly past the men, Lily headed that way. Cynna fell into step beside her.

Cullen and the women continued chanting, oblivious. Just as Lily reached the guards, the back door of the taxi swung open. Four feet of bad-tempered ugly climbed out.

Cynna stopped. “What is *that*?”

“That,” Lily said, feeling her mouth stretch in a wholly unexpected grin, “is what you’ll be carrying through instead of your backpack.”

Max possessed ugliness the way a few rare souls possess beauty, an ugliness that fascinated. His nose stretched toward his mouth like a cartoon witch’s, as if it had melted, then reformed in mid-drip. He had no hair, not much in the way of chin or lips, and skin the color of mushrooms. He was skinny, with knobby joints and arms too long for his body.

Today he wore camouflage and army boots. God only knew where he’d gotten the outfit.

One of the lupi moved to intercept him. Lily gestured at him to let Max through.

Max was muttering under his breath as he stomped up to Lily. “I can’t believe I’m here. I can’t believe I’m this stupid. Well?” he demanded, coming to a stop. “What are you staring at?”

“A very welcome sight,” she said softly. “Max, this is Cynna.”

The tips of his ears turned red. He scowled and looked Cynna up and down. “Nice boobs. Too big, but they’re shaped good.”

Cynna shook her head and loosened the straps on her pack. “I hope you’re worth giving up half our supplies.”

“Lily,” Cullen said.

She looked over Max’s head at him.

He stood alone now, holding a silver athame—a ceremonial knife—in one hand. The three women sat in the grass a few feet away, still chanting softly. The candles were burning.

She took a deep breath and touched the canvas cases hung from her belt that carried extra clips. Show time.

Lily’s part in the ritual was passive. From this point on she wasn’t to speak, not until she crossed. He would tie the gate to her, as he’d suggested—he’d won that argument—but she need only stand there and let him do it.

That, and bleed a bit.

Lily walked over to him and felt nothing—not a trace, not a whisper of magic, though it must be thick in

the air. She closed her mind to that loss and held out her left hand.

He murmured something, the words soft and foreign. Then he took her hand in his, palm up, and ran the blade of his athame across the heel of her palm. It burned. Blood welled up quickly, and Cullen murmured more words. Then he turned her hand palm down and shook it, sprinkling the earth with her blood as he called out one word three times.

Vertigo seized her, a twisting, scraping otherness that slid inside, settling in her gut and turning her senses crazy. The world spun, and she staggered. Cullen's arm came around her waist, steadying her.

Gradually the world steadied, but the sense of otherness remained. She felt as if some bizarre geometry had been planted in her middle and was busily making itself at home.

She straightened and gave Cullen a nod.

He stepped back. Using the tip of his bloody knife, he began tracing the doorway that would surround the altar. Light followed the athame like the afterglow from a sparkler as he slit the fabric between the realms, and when he finished the air shimmered. It was like looking through heat waves.

Lily put a hand on her stomach. The shimmer somehow matched the shifting geometry in her gut. It wasn't painful, but it wasn't pleasant, either. She looked over her shoulder.

At her glance, Cynna bent her knees and Max climbed aboard. She'd have to duck to get through, but they'd fit. Cullen tucked his athame in his belt and slipped on the harness that held the rocket launcher, a huge tube almost as tall as he was. He picked up his machine gun and took his place at the rear.

They'd go through single-file. Lily gave them all a nod, unslung her M-16, and walked toward the shimmering air. Four paces, duck as she stepped over the alter—and into hell.

Where a battle already raged.

* * *

A small fire smoldered in the center of the rocky chamber Rule had led them to. It was a Swiss-cheese sort of a space, the walls holed in several places, with fissures in the ceiling. Some of the smoke from the fire escaped through those overhead cracks, but the fire still made the room smoky without providing much light.

Better than no light at all, though. Lily hugged her knees. Thank goodness Gan had been able to bring a load of firewood. She was small enough that she hadn't had to crawl the way Lily had in the worst of the passages. Things could be worse.

Who was she kidding? She hated this. Hated it. But not as much as Rule did.

How had he done it? How had he made himself keep coming back to these tunnels, over and over, hunting a way out? She'd known it took a toll on him, but she hadn't understood, not really. Not until she followed him into a darkness so heavy it had seemed to press the air from her lungs.

She had no idea how long it had taken them to reach this chamber, where the air was good and the

ceiling was higher than her outstretched hands. Probably not the hours it had seemed. They'd trended more up than down, though. Were they anywhere near the top of the cliff where the dragons gathered to sing?

Gan spoke suddenly, her voice high and scratchy. "Xitil's called Earth-Mover, you know."

"Does that mean what it sounds like?"

Gan nodded miserably. "She could bring it all down on us. It'd be easy for her."

"Good thing she wants me alive, then."

"But she's nuts," Gan whispered.

Rule lifted his head and snarled.

"I'm pretty sure that means 'shut up,'" Lily said. "Besides, didn't you say dragons damped magic or sucked it up or something?"

"Demon magic, yeah, but Xitil's got goddess stuff in her now! Who knows what that could do? She might be able to—"

"Shut up, Gan."

The demon swallowed and, for a wonder, fell silent.

Rule laid his head on his paws again, and Lily went back to passing the time the only way she could, by playing her memory game. Where was she?

Oh, yeah. Water beds. That had sprung to mind earlier, when she'd been sitting by the ocean. Before things went all to hell.

Waterbeds sounded wonderful. Imagine a bed filled with water... how soft would that be? You had to pump the water in... Pumps, yes, she remembered pumps. Though the one she saw in her mind's eye wasn't for water, but for air. For filling up bicycle tires.

Had she ridden a bicycle? She felt a touch of excitement. It made sense that she'd remember the kind of pump she knew best, didn't it? She couldn't picture a pump for a waterbed at all. Maybe she'd never had a waterbed, but she had owned a bicycle.

What kind of bicycle? There were racers and...

Rule's head shot up. He almost quivered with sudden tension.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He got to his feet and paced a few steps, looking at the rock overhead, making a whining sound. He looked at her and then at the rocky ceiling. Then he shook his head hard, as if trying to clear it, and whined softly.

"What is it? Gan, what does he mean?"

“Nothing.” Gan looked disgusted. “He’s not making any sense.”

“Rule?” Scared for more than one reason now, she went to kneel beside him. “Are you all right?”

He whined again, louder and longer, and then looked at the demon.

“He wants you to tell me!” she cried. “Try. Try hard.”

Gan rolled her eyes. “It’s nonsense. Something about you being out there and in here, too.”

Rule yipped. Then he took her wrist between his teeth gently and tugged as he took a step away.

He wanted her to come with him. She drew a shaky breath and stood. “All right. Are you coming, Gan?”

Rule immediately trotted into one of the black, black holes. That one was a little roomier than some, at least. Though it probably wouldn’t stay that way.

“Follow that idiot? He’s lost it. You’d better stay here.”

She just shook her head and, heart pounding, followed Rule into the darkness.

THEY wouldn’t have survived their first five minutes in hell if the terrain where they came out had matched Earth’s. They’d left a flat, low bluff. They came out into low, craggy mountains. Mountains where creatures were busy killing each other, while overhead, legend battled with nightmare.

“I’m running low on ammo,” Cynna called. “I have to reload.”

“I’ve got you covered,” Lily said. She was hunkered down behind a rocky outcrop. They had no cover overhead, but the aerial battle was a mile behind them now. Just as well. Not only was it dangerous, it was distracting. She’d never thought dragons existed, and to see them flying, fighting... she’d remember that always. And have nightmares about what they fought.

If she lived long enough to dream, that is.

Their progress had been halted in this rough pass between two low peaks. *Trapped* might be the word to describe their situation.

Crossing itself had been easy. The shimmer in the air had sort of shimmered through her as she stepped through the gate. Then she’d been elsewhere... a dark, nighttime elsewhere, with four man-sized demons standing fifteen feet away, staring at her in obvious shock.

That’s what had saved her. That, and the training Benedict had insisted on. Two of the demons had recovered from their surprise fast enough to jump at her even as she swung her weapon at them.

She could testify that bullets did, indeed, work on demons. Especially when sprayed by a semi-automatic rifle. She’d gotten those two. Cynna, coming through right after her, had killed the other two.

After wiping out the small patrol or skirmishers or whatever the hell the first demons had been, they'd been able to advance steadily. Gradually the eerie, blank sky had grown lighter, until now it was about as bright as a stormy day. The visibility had still been lousy, though, when they first reached the pass. Cullen's nose had saved them.

There were more demons holding the pass than there had been in the first group. A lot more. A few were man-shaped, but most were four-legged, built like giant economy-size hyenas, but with small arms growing out of their chests. They had jaws that put Rule's to shame, teeth in rows like a shark's, and glowing red eyes.

She'd killed four of the red-eyes. It had taken Cullen's machine gun, though, to stop the big demon, the one who'd looked like a troll on steroids. He'd just kept coming and coming...

She shook her head, throwing off that memory. Later she could have nightmares about it. Right now she badly needed a plan.

The demons were hanging back for the moment, safe on the other side of the pass. The only way forward was single-file through a gap between two enormous boulders.

They had grenades but no way to get close enough to throw one. The same was true with the rocket launcher. They needed a line of sight to use it. Cullen couldn't throw fire at them. There was an odd dampening of magic here that both frustrated and intrigued him; nothing he or Cynna had learned about hell mentioned it. He could still call fire, but couldn't send it—his ability to affect anything with magic fizzled out above five feet from his body.

They didn't know how many demons were left. The red-eyes hadn't given up and wandered off, though. They liked to yell out ideas about what they'd do once they got their teeth on the humans. And she could understand them. Even though they weren't speaking anything she recognized as a language, she understood every nauseating detail.

Cullen was on her right, huddled behind the same rocky outcrop. Cynna was several yards off to her left and slightly ahead. She'd made it to a tall, sheered-off bit of mountain and was crouched behind a boulder.

Lily had known the general direction they had to go, but in this rough terrain there was no such thing as a straight route. Max had found the pass. He claimed he had an instinct for that sort of thing, and she supposed he must. But he'd disappeared after the fighting started.

She was trying not to think about that.

"I'm good to go," Cynna called.

"Right!" Lily barely resisted the urge to say, *Go where?* They were pinned down, unable to get past the red-eyed crowd. So far they'd been able to hold the demons back, but—

"Fire in the hole!" a voice called from above and up ahead.

Max? What—

Grenades were one hell of a lot louder in person than on a movie screen. Max threw three of them. Even after all the rocks stopped falling, Lily couldn't hear a thing.

Cullen rose to a crouch. She could see his lips moving. Nothing. She pointed at her ears and shook her head. He motioned ahead, patted his chest, and started forward.

Hard to command the troops when you can't hear them. But he wasn't stupid enough to march up to the demons if he didn't have a good reason to... ah. She heard Max herself now, faintly at first. Then louder.

“Got ‘em all, the bloody boogers! Crash, smash, took ‘em all out, rained those rocks down on them!”

He was jumping up and down on top of one of the enormous boulders. How in the world had he gotten up there?

Cullen called up to him. “I thought you didn't like guns?”

“Hate ‘em! But I love explosions. Boom, crash, smash ‘em all down!”

“It was a lovely boom,” Cullen said politely. “But are you quite sure you got all of them?”

“Am I stupid? Do I dance around up here if there are some left? There's a couple legs sticking up out of the rubble that are still twitching, but you can shoot ‘em as you go by. But, uh...” He stopped jumping. “The pass isn't exactly stable. More rocks came down than I expected. Maybe we should hurry.”

Good idea. Lily rose, wary still. Cynna joined her. “Lily, I hate to say this, but if the pass is unstable... are we going to be able to get back if we cross it?”

Lily wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. They'd been a trifle busy since it grew light enough to see their back trail. Lily wasn't surprised Cynna hadn't had a chance to check it out. “Look back,” she said quietly.

“What do you... oh. Oh, hell.”

They'd climbed quite a bit. Rocky slopes spread out behind them. And beyond those slopes—beginning to climb them—were demons. Uncountable numbers of demons. And toward the front of that mass, one very large demon. House-size, maybe... if you lived in a three-story house.

They were too far away for Lily to make out exactly what that one, enormous demon looked like, but she could see enough to be glad she couldn't see more.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” Cynna whispered. “Even if we turned back this second...”

“There's no going back,” Cullen said grimly as he rejoined them. “They're already too close to the place we crossed. But the gate's with Lily. She can open it anywhere.”

“But...” Cynna glanced at Lily and then set her shoulders. “Right. You've got the inflatable raft. If there's ocean on the other side of the gate, we'll be okay.”

Lily felt sick. “You had the raft,” she said quietly. “That's what was in the backpack I had you leave behind.”

Cynna's mouth opened. Closed. She looked ahead, where the dust still hadn't settled from Max's grenades. “Well, the annoying little shit just saved our asses, so I guess you made the right decision. But I

sure hope you can come up with a Plan B.”

So did Lily. “Come on. Let’s take the annoying little shit’s advice and hurry.” She started walking, going the only direction she could—forward, one step at a time.

THIRTY-THREE



THE widest part of the pass was filled with rabble and body parts. Lily tried not to look. Immediately beyond that it narrowed again and they skidded down a steep slope for about twenty feet. The land leveled abruptly, then, as they rounded a low shoulder of mountain, it opened up.

She stepped out onto a giant-size ledge maybe twelve blocks long and half a block wide. There was grass here, the first she’d seen. Otherwise it was flat, featureless. Beyond it the ground simply ended. Beyond that was the sea.

The ocean didn’t look right, reflecting that ugly sky, but it smelled right. Lily paused, letting the breeze fill some of the empty places inside.

But she couldn’t pause long. Rule was *close*. Only where—?

Her small troop spread out behind her, looking around as she was. “Where do we go from here?” Cullen asked.

“Maybe one of us should watch the pass,” Cynna said. “Try to hold it.”

“Ha! You volunteering?” Max shook his head. “Better if we get rid of it. Boom!” He rubbed his hands together, grinning.

“No,” Lily said abruptly. “No, we can’t go throwing grenades at the mountain. Rule is…” She started moving, scanning the blocks of stone that cradled the oversize ledge. “He’s there. He’s inside it.”

The others followed. “Inside?” Cynna said dubiously.

“A cave or something.” She was moving faster now, her heart pounding. He was so close, so horribly close. They hadn’t brought earth-moving equipment, she thought, halfway to ‘hysterical. They’d never once contemplated what they’d need to remove a few feet of rock. “But he’s moving.”

“Toward us?”

“No.” That came out quick and frustrated. “That way.” She gestured at the far end of the ledge, where a tumble of rock blocked them. And started running, as if her feet alone could bridge that last distance, carry her to him in spite of the rock between.

“Max,” Cullen said, keeping pace beside her.

“What?” The gnome was huffing slightly as he ran.

“You’re supposed to have an instinctive feel for rock. How do we get in, or get him out?”

“I’m working on it.”

Lily barely heard them. *Here, he’s here—*

And at the far end of the ledge, a huge, dark wolf stepped out from a crevice in the jumble of stone.

Maybe she cried his name. Maybe she just screamed it in her head. Her feet moved without her telling them to. She was running, stumbling over the rough ground—and then someone stepped out behind Rule.

She stepped out. Wearing a dark blue sarong and her token. Rule’s necklace, the missing necklace.

Lily stopped dead. She reached out one hand—not to touch, but to push the impossible away. She looked into her own eyes from twenty feet away, saw her own face go pale, and heard herself say softly, “My lost parts. All my lost parts. You have them.”

Then her knees buckled.

She didn’t faint. Quite. But the next thing she knew was a rough, wet tongue on her face. “Rule.” She touched his muzzle, his shoulder, ran her hand over his ribs. “Rule.”

“This is beyond weird.”

That was Cynna. Lily turned her head slowly, hoping not to see... but *she* still stood there, her face blank. A face not exactly like the one Lily had seen in the mirror a million times, because it wasn’t reversed.

“Holy shit.” That was a high, squeaky voice, vaguely familiar. And yet another person—creature—stepped out from that crevice. “There’s two of you!”

A demon. The same small, orange-skinned demon who’d tried to possess her—the one who’d conspired with Harlowe, who’d grabbed her while Harlowe hit her with the staff.

Lily grabbed her weapon on her way back up.

Cynna and Cullen already had theirs aimed. But the other Lily moved fast, too. She stepped in front of the demon. “No! She’s—this is Gan. She won’t hurt you.” She looked at Lily, then at the others, and licked her lips—a nervous gesture Lily had been trying for years to break herself of. “You’d like an explanation.”

Cullen answered for all of them, without lowering his machine gun. “That would be good. Be sure to include what the hell you are.”

“You know her!” Gan piped up. “She’s Lily Yu!” Then, more subdued: “Of course, I guess the other one is, too.”

The second Lily sighed. “This may take a while.”

Lily glanced back at the pass. “Better make it the *Reader’s Digest* version. We don’t have much time. There’s a war headed this way.”

* * *

SHE felt more lost than ever. She’d followed Rule through darkness to find herself—her other self, the one that possessed everything she’d lost. The self who knew Rule in his other form. Knew him as a man.

She tried to keep her story short and coherent, but she was distracted by the sight of her face, her body, sitting on Rule’s other side. That woman wasn’t her. Maybe they’d started out as one person, but they weren’t the same, not anymore.

They were sitting in a rough circle, all of them except the little one—Max—who’d taken a guard position in the rocks where he could watch the pass. At least the others had stopped pointing their guns at her... once Rule insisted. He’d gone up to the man—Cullen—and pawed at the muzzle of his machine gun, growling.

Gan had translated that time with no problem: *Put it down, you ass.*

They were all silent for a long moment when she finished. Finally, the other woman asked quietly, “How long do you think you’ve been here?”

“I don’t know. We don’t have regular days and nights here. After a while I didn’t think about it that way anymore.” She glanced at Rule. “He’s slept about twenty times, I think. I don’t know if that means it’s been twenty days.”

“Twenty.” The other woman didn’t sound happy. She kept stroking Rule, touching him. Lily wanted to push that intruding hand away, but... she swallowed. Rule wanted that touch. She could tell. He wanted both of them with him. To him, they were both Lily.

It was the other one who knew him from before, though. Who remembered whatever they’d shared on Earth. All he’d shared with her was... hell.

“We’ve got a problem,” the other Lily said.

Cullen barked out a laugh. “Never let it be said you don’t use understatement, luv.”

“I’m talking about the gate. We’ve got too many people to go back through it.”

“A gate.” Her heartbeat picked up. Of course. They had to get here, didn’t they? They hadn’t all been dragged here by some realm-hopping demon, the way she had been. “You have a way back. We can go back.”

“We have a small gate,” Cullen said. “And, as Lily—one of you Lily’s—pointed out, that’s a problem. We planned this pretty tightly. If...” He stopped abruptly, looking up.

She looked up, too. And stood. “It’s Sam!” That huge, winged shape could be no one else.

The others sprang to their feet, too. Cullen swung the long, hollow tube on his back around and onto his shoulder.

Do you shoot at everything you see ?

That rocked them. Cullen recovered first. “Around here it seems like a good idea.”

There are better targets. Sam began a slow, spiraling descent.

“Don’t shoot at him. Sam’s on our side... sort of.” He’d saved her life, anyway, and killed one of his own kind to do it. She suspected that was mostly because of the insult of another dragon daring to dispose of his property, but still...

This is most curious. You seem to have connected with the missing half of your soul, but it is embodied.

“I noticed that,” she said dryly.

The little demon didn’t do that. I wonder... He was close now, the wind from his wings stirring her hair. Yet you are the one with Ishtar’s token.

Cullen stared. “You know about the Lady’s token?”

I know a great deal that you short-lives will never dream of. As gracefully as dandelion fluff, that great body drifted to the ground near the cliff’s edge. The head swung around to look at them.

“Don’t look at his eyes,” Cullen said quickly.

An informed short-life. Sam was amused. *And... how interesting. You’re a sorcerer of sorts.*

“Of sorts?” Cullen said indignantly.

And one of you has a gate. No, I misspoke. One of you is a gate. That is unusual. He settled his wings about him more comfortably. *And useful. I wish to make a deal.*

“Deal quick,” the little one called down from his vantage point in the rocks. “They’re coming. First wave should be here in fifteen minutes—and that’s one fucking big demon coming along about thirty minutes behind it.”

Yes. Xitil comes.

LILY couldn’t stop glancing at her other self. Her, yet not her. The part with her Gift. The self who’d been with Rule all this time. You’d think she’d feel a tug, a sense of longing, something.

She wanted to knock the bitch’s hand away from him.

Lily swallowed. Not now. She couldn’t figure out how she could be bitterly jealous of herself—her other self—right now. Somehow she had to get them all out of here. “We’ll have to hold the gate open longer.”

Cullen shook his head. “Can’t, luv. We’re too far from a node for me to pull any energy, and there’s precious little loose sorcéri around.”

“The dragons soak it up,” the other Lily said. “That’s what Gan says, anyway.”

Lily looked at the little demon, huddled unhappily against one of the larger rocks. It didn’t say anything. It hardly seemed aware of them at all, tuned in to some private fear. “Plan B, then. Cullen, you’ll carry, ah, the other Lily piggyback, and Max can ride Rule through.”

There are two problems with that. First, you’ll fall a great distance. The land is much higher here than in the earth realm.

She jumped. It was entirely too weird, having the dragon’s thoughts just show up in her head. And how did he know what this area was like on Earth? “There will be ocean below us,” she said tersely.

A long way below you. The main problem, however, is that your gate won’t open.

“It will open.” She just had to bleed again and say the word Cullen had taught her.

The dragon’s gaze swung toward Cullen. *What happens, sorcerer, when you tie a spell to an object, and another object identical to the first is nearby?*

Cullen scowled. “They aren’t identical. Well...” He looked from her to the other Lily. “Not entirely. They’ve had different experiences. They’ve... diverged.”

They are one soul. I believe your gate won’t open. The dragon’s long tail twitched at the end. But do try it and see for yourself. Unless, perhaps, you know how to check it without opening it?

Lily pushed impatiently to her feet. Where was Max? “Max! Come down. We’re going to get out of here.”

The other Lily spoke suddenly. “What do you want, Sam? What deal are you offering?”

I can make the gate bigger. Much bigger. I can hold it open as long as is needed and fly you out. And I know how to solve the problem with the gate.

There was a second’s silence, then the other one—the Lily wearing blue—cried, “No! No, there has to be another way!”

Cullen glanced at her and then back at the dragon. “Dragons *are* magic, but can’t work it.”

Most do not. I, however, am a Great Singer. I know more about gates than you’ve yet dreamed, sorcerer.

“Except how to open one, it seems. Or you wouldn’t be talking about a deal. What do you want in return?”

The great tail lashed in obvious irritation. *Is it not obvious? I wish to leave. I wish to take those of my kind who still live and leave Dis.* Something like a mental sigh whispered along the edges of Lily’s mind. *We are losing.*

“This is what you’ve wanted all along, isn’t it?” the other Lily demanded suddenly. “This is why you captured us. You wanted to leave hell. Only I don’t see how you knew they’d come for us.”

I didn’t. I had... another way in mind.

Cullen shook his head. “I’m sorry for your people. But a gate large enough for you to fly through can’t be tied to a person. It would destroy her.”

For the first time the little demon spoke, its voice wobbly. “But you’re a Great Singer. You said they couldn’t win without you. How come you aren’t winning?”

In her madness, Xitil has been quite clever. She—or the One she ate—made an alliance with the one you know as Tegelgor, lord of the realm to the south. In return for a large number of his lower demons, she has abandoned her region to him. She enters our land with every demon, every imp, every creature from her realm. We cannot fight such numbers.

“Tegelgor!” the demon squeaked. “Abandoned it? No, even crazy she wouldn’t... *all* her demons? I didn’t... I wasn’t called to her. I felt a tug, but not a summons. She’s got all my names. If she wanted me—”

You, too, have diverged, little demon.

What did that mean? Never mind. They were running out of time. “Where’s Max, dammit?”

“Wait a minute, Lily.” Cullen walked up to her. “I hate to admit it, but the dragon is right about one thing. I should check.”

“How?”

He made a graceful gesture with one hand, murmuring something in that liquid language he’d used before, and frowned. Then he turned to the other one, the other her, and repeated it. He lost all of the color in his face. “Hell. The gate’s jumping between the two of you. Oscillating.”

“Then if we both do it—if we stand together and cut our palms—”

He was shaking his head. “When it’s in her, it’s stuck in the closed position. She’s got your... she’s a sensitive.

You’re the only one who can open the gate, but when it’s in her, you can’t open it. Your—her—Gift won’t let you.”

“But if she’s close enough to being me for the gate to jump between us, why wouldn’t my Gift know me?” she cried. “It *is* me.”

Because, as the sorcerer said, you have diverged. A spell, even one wrought by ritual, is a crude working compared to your Gift, Lily Yu. Your Gift recognizes differences between you that the gate cannot.

Her Gift didn’t recognize her? She rubbed her forehead. “I’m out of ideas, here.”

Then accept some of mine. I will do my best to shield you from—

He broke off in mid-thought. With unbelievable speed for so large a creature, he sprang for the sky. The wind from his wings knocked her down, so in that first second she didn't see what he was springing at.

Then she wished she hadn't.

It was long and red, the color of blood that's not quite dry. It had way too many short legs on the back two-thirds of its wormlike body, every one tipped in claws. And though its body was smaller than the dragon's, its wings were every bit as large, veined like a bat's.

The front third of its body was jaws, laws rimmed with teeth like the red-eyes', and when it opened those jaws and screamed, she saw all the way down its gullet.

It had the advantage on the dragon, swooping down at him from above, those jaws gaping. Sam flew straight at it. At the last second, he twisted. His jaws closed on one of those enormous wings and he twisted his neck, shredding the membrane. His wings beat hard, and he started to pull away.

Rule howled. Lily spun around even as he raced past her—raced to where the other Lily was even now turning, staring up at one of the red-eyes perched on a ledge above her, jaw gaping in evil imitation of the fanged worm battling the dragon overhead.

It leaped. And collided with Rule in mid-air.

They fell in a snarling, slashing tangle. Lily raised her weapon, but there was no chance to get a shot in without hitting Rule. She moved closer. Blood sprayed out, spattering her.

Rule's blood. Oh, God, his side—

“Get back!” Cynna shouted.

“You can't shoot! You'll kill him!”

“I'm not using a gun! Move, dammit!”

She looked over her shoulder—and moved quickly away.

Cynna stood just behind her with one arm straight up, the other straight out, pointed at the rolling mass of wolf and demon. Her lips were moving, but Lily couldn't hear her over the snarls and howls. And there was a bloody light streaming from her hand.

It didn't travel like light. The ugly red glow crossed the space between her and the battling animals sluggishly—too slow, too slow! Rule was down—he wasn't moving. Lily pulled her weapon to her shoulder again—

And the light hit. The demon stiffened and fell down dead.

“Sonofabitch,” came Cynna's shocked voice. “It worked.”

Lily raced to Rule.

So did Lily.

Blood covered his side, so much blood she couldn't see how bad it was. But it was bad. She knew it. His breathing was labored, his eyes closed. She looked up. A shock went through her as she met her own eyes.

"Leave now," the one in blue said. "You have to go right away and take him where he can heal. To a—a hospital." She said the word as if it was new to her. "He'll die here."

"The gate—"

"Sam told me how to fix it."

All at once she knew. Without knowing how, she knew what the other woman meant. Her mouth went dry. "There has to be another way."

"Funny." Her lips quirked up, but her eyes shone with tears. "That's what I said." She reached up and ripped the chain with its dangling charm from her neck. "There isn't, though. You're the gate."

Slowly—knowing what she was doing, what she was accepting—Lily held out her hand.

And Lily dropped the *toltoi* into it. "Tell him..." She looked down and caressed Rule's head. "Tell him how glad I was about him. How very glad."

Lily's fingers closed around the necklace. She could only nod as her throat closed up.

And the other one—the other her—sprang to her feet. She tugged at the top of her sarong, and it came open. "Bind him with this. He's bleeding badly." She tossed it to Lily—and started running. Naked, barefoot, she ran full out.

For the cliff. Straight for the edge of the cliff.

It was the little demon who understood first. "No!" it howled, and started after her, short legs pumping. "No, Lily Yu! Lily Yu, I do like you! I do! Don't—"

She leaped.

Lily felt the air rushing past, air heavy with the scent of ocean. No, she was standing, standing on her feet, tears streaming down—down and down she fell, too far, so far from Rule—

A hammer smashed her, smashed her everywhere at once. And she died.

THIRTY-FOUR



And blinked her eyes open.

It was Cullen's face she saw first. His arm supported her. "God," he whispered. "Lady above. Why? Why did she... and you. Are you—"

"Not... all right, no." Her tongue was thick. She swallowed. "The gate will work now."

Now would be good. They are in the pass, waiting for their lord to reach it and widen it. Xitil has grown somewhat stout recently. The dragon settled to the ground near the cliff's edge, but he didn't fully furl his wings.

Then came another voice, small, uncertain—Gan, standing at the edge of the cliff. "I'm alive. She died, and I'm alive. That's not right, is it?" Then, even more softly, "I did like her. I did."

Lily sat up. The *toltoi* was still clutched tight in her hand. She hadn't lost it when she... fainted. "Sam, we accept your deal. And I agree. Now is good."

Cynna finished tying the blue cloth around Rule's wounds. "Has anyone seen Max?"

Max turned out to be lying on the ground not far from the ledge the red-eye had leaped from. He was unconscious, but alive—the red-eye had probably thought it killed him when it flung him from the rocks. But gnomes are notoriously difficult to kill.

Two dragons landed. Each took off with a rider and a patient. First Cullen, who held Rule in front of him, his blood soaking the indigo cloth that had been Lily's sarong. Then Cynna, balancing Max's unconscious body in front of her. Then...

"You have to take me!" Gan came running up. "I'll die. Xitil will kill me slow. She'll pull out my eyeballs and—" The demon stopped dead in front of her, eyes wide. "You—you're..." She looked down at her chest, rubbed it, and looked up at Lily again. "You're Lily Yu," she whispered. "I feel it. The bond. Only it's not the same."

She nodded. "Somehow I am. I'm... both. Yes," she said suddenly. "I'll take you. God help me, if even death isn't enough to get rid of you, what good would it do to leave you behind?"

She and Gan climbed on Sam's neck, settling behind his head. The frill that looked so delicate would serve as a windbreak of sorts and give her something to grip. This would be very different, she thought, from dangling from the talons—and then the thought wisped away, and the memory that went with it.

That kept happening. She wasn't equally both. One of her had died... or mostly died.

But her Gift was back. Sam's magic thrummed against her skin when she climbed onto his neck, powerful and ancient. It should have been totally alien, nothing she'd ever felt before, yet... that must be one of the other's memories, she decided, holding tight to the bony frill.

They're here. With one huge leap, Sam plunged off the cliff, stopping her heart—but he spread his wings. Instead of falling and falling, they soared.

Much smoother to ride here instead of in the talons.

Dragons circled in the air around them. A dozen? Two?

“How many of your kind are there, Sam?” she asked.

Twenty-three remain in Dis. The demons killed ten. Once... once we were a great deal more than that, but now we are now only twenty-three.

For the first time, real emotion came through with the mental voice. Sorrow, deep and untouchable—and old, very old.

Now, Lily Yu. Open your gate, and I will sing it wide.

She pulled a small pen knife from her pocket. No fancy ritual blades were needed this time. She grimaced and stroked the edge over the scab on her left palm, and she spoke the word of opening.

Those weird geometries shifted, coming awake inside her. The air shimmered in its small rectangle, hovering there, hundreds of feet over the ocean—and the dragon began his song.

Low and deep, the bass so strong she felt it much as she heard it, he sang. Like night had been given a voice, all that was dark and hidden thrummed through her—the cold between the stars and the stars themselves. The space inside her answered—growing, pushing out hard through her, a tumbled vertigo of space, so vast, too vast. The space inside her was bigger than the space outside, and that was impossible, it—

The song changed. Suddenly Sam was in it with her—in his song and in her head, but in her belly, too, where the geometries swelled ever larger, more complex, less real. But Sam’s voice swam between her and the madness of inverted space, and Rule’s necklace was in her pocket, and death was not quite the absolute she’d always thought.

Her hands held tight to Sam’s frill as the first dragon folded its wings and arrowed into the shimmering air. And disappeared.

Rule had crossed. And Cullen. The one bearing Cynna and Max went next, as Sam sang. He sang still while the other dragons aimed themselves into the shimmer, one after another, and still he sang, coating the mad space inside her until all had crossed.

Then, at last, still singing, Sam aimed himself at that shimmer. He dove for it, and she rippled along with it...

And they were flying over another ocean, this one inky dark, with moonlight fracturing in silver glints on its waves. The moon—nearly full, and the stars—oh God, how she’d missed them!

Quickly, she said the other word Cullen had taught her. The space inside her popped like a soap bubble, and she was alone in her insides once more.

Mostly.

THERE is no inconspicuous way to land a dragon.

Sam did his best. He gathered his—flock? What do you call a swarm of dragons?—and took them to the bluff Lily and the others had set out from. But they were miles out to sea. Before they reached the shore, some bright soul had scrambled two Air Force fighter jets to pursue them.

They didn't fire, but it made for a tense welcome home.

They had to land one at a time. The bluff wasn't big enough for two dragons to land at once. The one bearing Cullen and Rule went first. As soon as he was down, Cullen passed Rule to one of the lupi—a brave soul, to come running up the way he had—calling out instructions as he jumped from his perch.

Lily couldn't hear him, of course, from so high up, but Sam relayed the gist of it. Cullen's first orders had most of the lupi holstering their weapons. The next brought Nettie running. The last one had someone fumbling for a cell phone so Cullen could call the Air Force and ask them not to fire on the nice dragons.

Sam seemed amused by that.

Cullen was talking on the phone when the second dragon landed, and Cynna and Max climbed down.

Apparently, Max had regained consciousness while several hundred feet in the air. It hadn't exactly sweetened his temper.

Then it was her turn. And Gan's.

What in the world was she going to do with a tame demon? She sure hoped Gan was tame...

Send her to the gnomes. They'll understand her, since they are descended from demons themselves. When a demon catches a soul—

“What?” Gan cried. “What did you say about a soul?”

Lily could have sworn Sam laughed, quietly, in his mind.

They swooped down and down. She had to close her eyes as the ground rushed at them. It was too much like...

Lily Yu.

“What?” she shouted over the wind, as if that would make him hear her better.

Say hello to your grandmother for me.

Her grandmother? How did he... but they hit the ground then—not hard, but firmly. And all she could think about was getting to Rule. “We'll talk later,” she said, swinging her leg over and sliding down. Gan plopped down beside her, and then stood there, scowling around at everyone. “I've got questions.”

Why does that not surprise me? Duck.

With no more warning than that, Sam launched himself back into the sky.

Lily looked around quickly, spotted a Nokolai man she knew slightly, grabbed Gan, and thrust her toward him. “Keep an eye on her. She's mostly a demon, but not entirely. Don't shoot her unless you absolutely can't avoid it.”

She took off running.

They'd loaded Rule on a stretcher and were carrying him toward Nettie's SUV. She reached him just as they opened the back of the vehicle and stopped, staring.

He was a man again. He'd Changed and was a man again. He was also naked and bloody, with a blood-soaked length of fabric that had once been blue wadded up against the deepest wound.

Of course, she thought. He had to try. The moon is nearly full and he had to see if he would be able to Change at all—but what a risk, with him so weak from his wounds!

She missed his fur, the lovely fur she's stroked so often... Lily blinked, disoriented, and the memory wisp fled.

He opened his eyes. "Lily?"

"Here," she said, coming up to take his hand. "I'm right here. We're back. We made it back." All the way back. He'd Changed. He hadn't lost himself to the wolf.

"I need to put him in sleep," Nettie said firmly. "And this time, he's going to the hospital. He's lost a lot of blood, and I am not performing surgery in the back of this SUV."

"No, he'll go to the hospital." That's what she'd asked. Get Rule back, get him to the hospital...

"In a minute, Nettie," Rule said. His voice sounded wonderful. Not like he was dying, not at all. He searched her eyes. "I had the strangest dream. A terrible dream. I thought it was real. There were two of you, and one... one died."

He'd been unconscious. She'd been sure he was unconscious. "It wasn't a dream, but it wasn't entirely true, either."

"You're..."

"Both. I think."

"Enough," Nettie said, and laid her hand on his forehead.

Slowly his expression eased, his eyes drooping. "Yes," he murmured. "That's right. You're Lily."

His hand relaxed, releasing hers, as he slipped into the healing sleep that was Nettie's Gift. Finally, the knots of tension in her shoulders began to relax.

Maybe it was just that simple. "Yeah," she whispered. "I am, aren't I?"

EPILOGUE



“At least think about it.” Rule’s throat was tight with frustration.

“No.” Isen was blunt, as usual. “Not unless you give me some powerful reason to reconsider. Which you haven’t.”

Oh, but he had. Isen just wouldn’t listen. Rule sat on the edge of his damned hospital bed and fought the urge to howl... though maybe he shouldn’t suppress that particular urge. Maybe his father would believe him then. “The Lu Nuncio must have control.” The words came out clipped. “I don’t.”

Isen waved that away. “It’s temporary.”

“I Changed!” The words burst out. “Here in the damned hospital, when the moon went full I Changed. I couldn’t stop it.”

“Hurt like hell, too, I imagine. Good thing you warned Glen ahead of time.”

Glen was one of the guards keeping reporters out of Rule’s room. Last night he’d had to keep the doctors and nurses out, too, until Rule mustered the will to Change back.

It had taken him a good half hour, and the ache to stay wolf, to feel and smell the world more fully, remained. “That makes it all right, I suppose,” Rule said bitterly. “I can’t control the Change anymore, but as long as I warn someone—”

“Son.”

It was a rare word to hear from his father. Rule stilled.

Isen put his hand on Rule’s shoulder. “This is pride speaking. Impatience. Your wolf is stronger than he used to be. So? You’ll learn a new balance. It will take time, but I’ve no doubt you’ll be able to do it. You’ve never disappointed me, not as a father or as a Rho.”

Rule had never understood why his father had named him Lu Nuncio instead of Benedict. He understood even less now. He didn’t know what to say.

Words didn’t come as easily as they used to.

Isen squeezed Rule’s shoulder once, then released it. “You’ll have help. I hear some of that help coming now.”

So did Rule. He turned his head, a smile starting.

The door opened. “How much of that welcome is for me, and how much for the fact that I’m busting you out of here?” Lily asked. But she was smiling, too, and she came to him without waiting for an answer.

As easily as breathing, his hand found hers.

Isen chuckled. “You two don’t need me cluttering up the place. I’ll see you at Clanhome,” he told Rule. “We’ve a lot to do to get ready for the All-Clan.”

“After Nettie releases him for light work, you mean,” Lily said.

Isen waved that away. “He’s one of the fastest healers in the clans. Nettie won’t keep him in bed long—if you don’t wear him out once you’ve got him home.” He chuckled at Lily’s expression and headed for the door.

But there he paused, looking back at her. “I don’t know if I said it, but I’m damned glad to have my heir returned to me. You and Cullen and that other woman did that. I won’t thank you. You didn’t do it for me, but you should know you have Nokolai’s gratitude. And mine. To have my son back. . .” His eyes sheened with sudden tears. He didn’t blink them away, and he looked straight at Rule. “There are no words for that. No words.”

Rule was too stunned to answer before the door closed behind his father. Slowly, the tightness in his throat eased.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one having trouble with words.

“You ready?” Lily asked. “We decided to sneak you out through the kitchen.”

“We?” He slid off the bed carefully. Various parts twinged, but those little hurts were drowned out by the protest put out by his side. He put a hand on the bandages there. The demon had ripped him up pretty thoroughly. Nettie had patched things while he was in sleep, but the patched bits hadn’t finished growing together yet.

“Here.” Lily pushed forward the wheelchair that had been delivered earlier. “The kitchen was Nettie’s idea. Getting you away without the bloodsuckers of the press finding out has been a joint project. Your father will let them corner him in the lobby, where he’s ostensibly waiting for you. He’ll keep them busy while we escape.”

Rule scowled at the wheelchair. “I don’t need that.”

“Humor me. If it was up to me, you’d stay in the hospital another couple days.”

“If it was up to me,” he started—then stopped, remembering.

He’d argued about remaining in the hospital once Nettie released him from sleep after the surgery. “She wanted you here,” Lily had said, her face tense. “I promised her.”

“Promised who?” he’d demanded.

“Myself. My other self.”

The one he’d attacked a demon to save. . . the one who had then died to save him. Rule knew that in his gut, though Lily—this Lily, who both was and wasn’t the one he’d known in hell—hadn’t said so. She’d thrown herself away so they could open the gate, but she hadn’t done it for the others. She’d done it for him.

This Lily smiled at him crookedly now. “I’m going to use it, you know,” she said lightly. “Every chance I get. I’ll guilt you right into behaving. Have a seat.” She jiggled the wheelchair.

He sat.

But she didn't move right away. Instead he heard her suck in a breath and let it out slowly. "Not that you have anything to feel guilty about. You weren't even conscious. I was the one who let her do it."

Rule couldn't turn. His side wouldn't let him. But he could reach back and cover one of her hands with his. He knew she was carrying a lot of guilt. He didn't understand why, but he'd seen it on her face too often in the last three days.

She started the chair moving. "Did I tell you what Max said about Gan's tail?"

For now, the little demon was staying with Max, who'd accepted his houseguest quite cheerfully after she asked what he knew about multiple orgasms, Gan was supposed to be regrowing her body into a more human form, but so far had refused to give up her tail. "Do I want to know?"

"Probably not. It has to do with what she does with it during sex."

"You'd better tell me, then, or my imagination will drive me into a fever."

She chuckled. As she wheeled him to the staff elevator and they rode down, they talked comfortably enough.

Nettie met them in the basement. "Ready to tour the kitchen?"

Their elaborate maneuvers to avoid the press weren't just for Rule's sake. The reporters had been hounding Lily, making such pests of themselves that she'd given up, packed some clothes and her cat, and moved to Clanhome temporarily.

They weren't after her because she'd been to hell and back. They didn't know about that. Someone at the top of the bureaucratic food chain didn't want the public worrying about hellgates, and the FBI didn't want to lose its only sensitive. They needed Lily too much to prosecute her.

The realms were shifting. Sam had confirmed that when the two of them were trading questions. Earth was drawing closer to both Dis and Faerie, and the modern world was in for a bumpy ride. Lily's boss at the FBI realized this, and had persuaded at least one other person of the truth—the one at the very, very top of the governmental food chain.

So the reporters weren't interested in tales about hell. They wanted to know about the dragons... who'd disappeared.

Hard to see how the Air Force could lose twenty-three enormous beasts who, however powerful and beautiful their flight, couldn't outrace a jet. But they had.

Rule dozed most of the way to Clanhome. This tendency to nap at the drop of a hat was annoying, but normal at this stage of healing. He made it inside his father's house on his own two legs, however.

Two legs, not four. That ought to feel a lot more normal than it did.

But it pleased him that Lily had chosen to stay with his father. It was another step toward moving in with him permanently. He still wanted that, though not with the urgency he'd felt before. The fear behind that urgency was gone.

One Lily had risked everything to come after him. The other had died for him. How could he doubt her now?

He let her tuck him up in bed, then patted it. “Sit.”

“I should—”

“Probably sleep. You haven’t been doing enough of that, I think.” When she didn’t answer he said gently, “Bad dreams?”

She nodded and, slowly, sat beside him. “Some. I almost lost you. I did lose you, but she didn’t. And then she did.”

“She?”

“She, I . . .” She managed a wry smile. “The demons have a point. Souls are confusing.”

“It’s not easy, being two-natured. It will take time to accustom yourself to it.”

“Two-natured?” She was startled.

“It’s something like that for you, isn’t it? My wolf . . .” He touched his chest. “It’s me, yet it isn’t. Just as when I was the wolf, the man both was and wasn’t me. The body matters.”

“Yes! Yes, it does. We’re one soul, but the memories aren’t . . . it doesn’t come out even. She—that part of me—doesn’t get to have a turn at a body when the moon’s full, like your wolf does. Only sometimes she peeks out of my eyes. On the way to the hospital I saw a bicycle and my eyes filled. I was so amazed by that bicycle, and by the memory of my old Schwinn. Then . . .” She shrugged. “It was gone. I had tears on my face, and I didn’t know why.”

“The memory game,” he murmured. “I’ll tell you about it, if you like.”

She was silent a moment, looking down at her fingers picking nervously at the comforter she’d tucked around him. “Now I’m doubly jealous. Of you, for knowing her. Of her, for having you when I didn’t. And if you think that sounds nuts”—she gave a short laugh—“I won’t argue.”

“Jealousy isn’t rational. I was jealous of Gan.”

“Yes, I . . .” Slowly the tension in her face softened into a smile. “I know. I remember.” She rubbed her chest as if easing the memory physically into place. “I wish I understood. Even Sam didn’t know the other me had a body. How could that happen?”

Rule thought he knew: the Lady. Somehow she’d preserved Lily’s sundered self in two bodies—one with the *toltoi*, the other without.

Toward the end of his time in hell, Rule had been mostly instinct. The Lady had reached him through those instincts, prodding him, sending him again and again into those underground passages. When the time came, he’d been ready to lead them to the place the Lady needed them to be.

But not so she could bring Rule back to Earth, as the others believed. It was Lily that Lady had needed rescued, Lily she had some purpose for. He was sure of that, sure in the same way he’d known he had to

keep searching out those dark passages.

He was equally sure Lily wouldn't want to hear that. "Would you do something for me?"

"Yes."

Just that. Just *yes*. "Lie with me awhile. I'm not proposing to disturb Nettie's handiwork," he added quickly, seeing refusal on her face. "I just... I want to hold you. For so long I couldn't."

"Oh..." she said, her eyes closing. "Oh, I've wanted that."

And a few moments later, with her curled into him, her hair tickling his jaw, her body reminding him of pleasures he couldn't seek yet, and her scent filling him, he did the other thing he'd wanted so much to do while he was wolf. "I love you."

She went still. After a moment she said quietly, "I love you, too. And I..." She put her palm on his chest and a smile bloomed on her face. "I am so glad about. So very glad."

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