

Darkside

S.K.S. Perry



When you're dead, wishing you were
is kind of counter-productive.

Praise for DARKSIDE!*

It's smart, funny fantasy-serious fantasy that has the benefit of having a smart-ass protag who will make you laugh throughout the book. Darkside gave me, hands down, more giggles, chuckles, snorts, and belly laughs than any other book I've ever read.

[deannahoak](#)

"SKS Perry is one of the funniest guys I know. It's a hard trick to carry that over to fiction, but he succeeds wonderfully."

[barbarienne](#)

"Darkside is a clever, engaging blend of dark urban realism and fantasy adventure, with refreshing splashes of humor, wit, and sarcasm for good measure."

[wldhrsjen3](#)

Darkside was a romp! Much giggling ensued, drawing a few questionable looks. No matter, they didn't know what they were missing.

[fuzzyboo03](#)

Steve's fast-paced, tightly-woven tale of urban fantasy grabs you by the collar and takes you on a wild roller-coaster ride through the lands of the Fae and the streets of Kingston as you meet trolls, ogres and vampires, and find out that Death isn't all its cracked up to be. A highly entertaining page-turner that simply begs for a sequel.

[jackytar](#)

"I knew dropping him on his head as a baby would come back to haunt me."

Steve's Mum

"Steve read a book? I'm so proud. What? Wrote one? Get off'n my land, you dang-gummed liar!"

Steve's Dad

"Mom always liked me best. Neener neener."

Steve's Brother

"If he mentions that thing about me and my college roommate, I'll sue! You're not writing this down, are you?"

Steve's Sister

"And here I thought he spent all his time on the computer surfing internet porn."

Steve's Wife

**Blurbs have been edited to make the book sound better than it actually is.*

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Don't make me come looking for you.

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DARKSIDE

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CHAPTER ONE

All right, let me just start by saying that I don't drink or do drugs. Ever. I suppose nowadays that statement alone is enough to label me peculiar, or a liar, or both, but it's true. If you have any trouble getting your mind around that, then you might as well stop listening right now, because it only gets worse.

Is this thing on? The little needle's jumping around in the green, so I guess it is. Okay, where do I begin?

First off, I am *not* a vampire. I freaking hate vampires, always whining about how they'll never see another sunset. I've got a friend who's been blind since birth and he's never seen a goddamn thing, so don't whine to me about no freaking sunsets. And I'm not a shapeshifter either, though most of them aren't half-bad, just a little irresponsible. No, basically what I am is someone who was just too damn ornery--or stupid, depending on who you ask--to die. Have I lost you yet? Cool, then listen up.

Everything hit the fan about three weeks ago. I was just loading some groceries into my trunk after a little late-night shopping at the 7-11, when I heard this woman scream. I probably should have minded my own business, but I think you'll figure out that I rarely do if you listen to enough of this little tale. Besides, my mom just didn't bring me up that way.

Anyway, there was this white guy off to my left--a real white-trash-looking creep--and he was roughing up this preppie-looking black girl. The both of them were partially hidden behind a rusted-out black Ford Bronco. He had her pinned against it, and I could tell he was going to hit her--again.

I sauntered over to their side of the truck--well, it looked like a saunter, but I can move pretty quickly without it looking like I am--and caught the creep by the shoulder. The girl's eyes widened as I slammed him face-first up against the Ford, then yanked him back and sent him sprawling to the pavement. She seemed to be okay, just a little bruising on her cheek where he'd hit her, so I turned my attention back to the creep.

Now I'm not much to look at--I'm only about five foot seven--but I'm really broad shouldered, and my friends say I've got this evil-looking mug, especially when I'm pissed. Apparently I looked nasty enough that the creep figured he couldn't handle me without the .45 he whipped out from inside his vest. He scrambled away from me a bit until he figured it was safe enough to get to his feet, then covered me with the gun, holding it out at that ninety-degree angle that always looks so cool in the movies. It just proved to me that he didn't know what he was doing.

That should have scared me. There's nothing worse than a weapon in the hands of someone who doesn't know what they're doing, but think they do. People get shot that way. I did. The only thing worse than people like him is people like me. You know, someone who doesn't know enough to be scared and shut their

mouth when there's a gun pointed at their head.

The creep was tall and lanky, mostly bone, and wore faded denims, cowboy boots, a Marilyn Manson T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off, and the black leather vest. It looked like someone had tried to tattoo a rebel flag on his left deltoid with an Etch A Sketch. "Ya shoulda just minded yer own business, dude. Me and the piece were right in the middle 'a negotiations."

I looked over at the girl still huddled against the Ford. I don't know why, but I just knew she wasn't a working girl. There was this innocence about her--yeah, I know, it sounds cliché, but you had to see her to know what I'm talking about. I mean, some of these girls, they act all innocent--it's part of the allure--but this one wasn't faking it. I wasn't about to leave her to *this* creep.

"Listen you anorexic rat bastard, why don't you leave us alone and go get a sandwich or something? I'm sure there must be a KKKFC open somewhere."

He grinned then, all teeth and cheekbones, and that's when I noticed his eyes. The pupils were dilated, and I knew he was strung out on something. For a second there I was worried, but the puke didn't give me time to get really scared.

"Why don't you just fuckin' die," he said, and pulled the trigger.

It's funny. The girl screamed. I heard the bang, much louder than it should have been, almost like a howitzer. I saw the flash, and the smoke. I even saw the shell casing eject. I never saw the bullet. I'm not even sure I really felt it. All I remember is thinking, "That scrawny bastard shot me!"

The round caught me clean, dead center of the chest. The impact slammed me back into the Bronco. My head snapped forward so that my chin touched my breastbone, and I glared up at the shooter through hooded eyes. I staggered forward a step, then shook my head roughly from side to side. The creep stepped back, bumped a light post, and let go another wild shot that didn't come anywhere near me. All I wanted to do was get my hands around his scruffy neck. It never occurred to me that I was supposed to be dead. I reached out for him and he pumped off another couple of rounds, but by now he was totally unnerved and he threw the .45 at me and turned and hightailed it out of there.

I turned to the girl, but she'd passed out. Well, I could hardly blame her. I stepped over to the Bronco, leaned my back up against it, and slid down into a sitting position with my legs straight out in front of me. The front of my shirt was soaked with blood, but I undid the first couple of buttons and opened it up anyway. Call me a masochist. I'm not going to lie and say the hole was big enough to see through, but it *was* big, and there wasn't anywhere near enough blood.

Maybe it's just the shock, I thought. You know how sometimes they say you don't feel something right away because of the excitement and the stress and all. But who was I kidding--a hole that big? I tried to take my pulse. I do it all the time when I'm jogging, but this time? Zilch, zero, nada.

That's when I saw the troll. At least I think it was a troll; it could have been a gremlin, or a boggle, or even a goblin. I'm not really up on that sort of thing, but I'm learning.

"Hey pal, got a light?" he says. He was standing maybe three feet away from me--all eyes and teeth.

Now, what I was thinking was, *Holy fuck, a troll!* but what I said was, "Sure." I'm Canadian. We're polite, eh.

I fumbled in my jacket pocket for my lighter. I don't smoke, but it was a present from an old girlfriend, and you never know when one is going to come in handy. Like then, for instance.

He took the lighter and blinked at me with those enormous, forest-green eyes that took up the whole top two-thirds of his face, then pulled a fat, smelly cigar out of the patchwork jacket he wore. He crammed the cigar into this huge slit of a mouth that accounted for the last third of his mug, and puffed until he had the thing lit.

"Thanks," he said in a rough, gravelly voice that sounded like he'd smoked one too many stogies. He scratched at this absurd caricature of a nose--long, twisted, and pointy, like a carrot--with a four-fingered

claw. Actually it was three fingers and a thumb, and it was gray and scaly like the rest of him.

He nodded toward the still-unconscious girl. "I see you've bagged yourself an Innocent. You gonna eat her now or later?"

"Umm, later," I decided.

He nodded knowingly. Even though I was seated with my back against the Bronco, the top of his melon-shaped head was about even with mine. He took another drag off the cigar, twitched his pointed ears, and said, "Don't wait too long. When they look like that they don't stay Innocent for long."

I agreed. I mean, he ought to know, right?

"Well, gotta go," he said. He must have figured I wasn't going to offer him any. "Sun'll be up in three or four more hours. Gotta get myself under a bridge before then." With that he hobbled off, a kind of skip-hop with his two gnarled feet and then the knuckles of his right claw. "Just me and the homeless folks," he called back over his shoulder.

Maybe I *was* in shock. Let's face it, I was handling all this weird shit pretty well if I do say so myself--especially for a guy who doesn't do drugs. The girl stirred off to my left, and I figured, dead or not I'd better get my act together for her sake. I heard sirens off in the distance. The geek that worked the counter at the 7-11 must have heard the shots and called the cops. Great, just what I needed.

I got to my feet, took my jacket off, then my shirt. I balled the shirt up and wiped the blood--my blood--off the fender of the Bronco. It must have been spray from the exit wound. Next I wiped the blood from my chest, then tore a few strips from my shirt and wadded it into the little crater there. I scrambled over to my car, tossed the bloody clothing into the trunk, and slammed it shut. Luckily I had my gym bag in the backseat, and I found a heavy fleece sweater in the bag and pulled it on. By the time I got back to the girl she was just coming around. I made out flashing red and blue lights in the distance. The cops would be here any minute.

She moaned a bit and I helped her to sit up, but advised her against standing. "You okay?" I asked her.

"Yes, thank you, sir."

Innocent, and polite. "Please, call me James," I said, and she smiled hesitantly. "The cops are on their way. Everything's going to be fine."

She was young, a lot younger than I had first thought. Her body said twenties, but she couldn't have been more than sixteen or so. She was black, or is it African American now? Her skin was a light brown, and her dark hair was straight and shoulder length. She had great cheekbones; full, pouty lips; and big blue eyes that gave her this real exotic look. She wore khaki pants, Dockers shoes, and a red tank top, and with her long legs, tiny waist, and huge...well, like I mentioned before, her body said twenties.

"I thought he shot you, mister."

"Nah, he missed," I lied. She was confused, and had been banged up pretty good, so like most people she was more than willing to latch onto the first plausible explanation. The cop car squealed into the parking lot right about then.

We gave our statements to the police. The geek inside the 7-11 never stepped outside once; the cops had to go inside to talk to him.

Between Alex (the girl's name, short for Alexandria) and me, we gave a pretty fair description of the shooter. The cops retrieved the .45 from where it had slid underneath the Bronco, and assured us they'd be able to get a good set of prints off of it. A lowlife like that, they said, just had to be in the system.

We both agreed to do the police lineup thing if the need arose, or the sketch artist thing, and that seemed to make the cops real happy, so they took our names and offered Alex a ride home. I figured that would be the last I'd see of her. Boy was I wrong.

I got into my car, a red Jeep Grand Cherokee for those of you who are into descriptions, and sat there behind the wheel for a couple of minutes to try and make sense of everything. The cop came over and asked if I was okay, which I thought was kind of nice of her, but I said I was fine, started the Jeep, and drove home. I

only live a couple of blocks from the convenience store, which is why I had stopped there in the first place, and pulled into my driveway after a short jaunt.

I was just turning the key in the front door when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Still being jittery as hell, I spun quickly, but there was no one or nothing there. Normally I'd figure I was just imagining things, but after what I'd been through tonight I wasn't so sure. Suffice it to say I got into the house posthaste and locked the door behind me. Now that I think about it, though, I don't know why I was so worried. I was already dead; what else could happen to me?

I have a nice place: cathedral ceilings, walk-in closets, two fireplaces, four bedrooms, a Jacuzzi--but not a lot of furniture, mostly because there's not a lot of people. Just me. I hold down a midlevel management job and the pay's pretty good. I date occasionally, usually women my married friends set me up with, but never anything serious. Not since Alison. I know. It's not exactly where I saw myself either.

I went straight to the bathroom and stripped off my clothes, then dumped them in the hamper. That's right, guys, when you're the only one around you learn to pick up after yourself. I still leave the toilet seat up, though.

I stared into the vanity mirror over the sink. The crater was still there, midchest, raw, red, and gaping. I turned around. Sure enough, the exit wound was bigger. I decided what I really needed was a shower, so I covered the holes up with antiseptic bandages, not because I was worried about infection, but because I didn't want them filling up with water. I'd only been in the shower a couple of minutes when I heard him.

"Hey, Bumper. How's it going?"

I slid aside the glass doors. "Not bad, Grandpa. And you?" He looked pretty good in his tan polyester slacks, gray wool pullover, and black and brown suspenders--considering he'd been dead seven years now.

I know, most men would have been freaked enough to at least drop the soap (something heterosexual males are trained to avoid at all costs), but to tell you the truth, I was kind of enjoying all the weirdness. I mean, I've been waiting for shit like this to happen all my life. I blame it on all the episodes of *Twilight Zone* and the *Munsters* I watched as a kid.

Grandpa laughed that full, hearty belly laugh I remembered so fondly, and pushed up on the heavy, black-framed bifocals he was always misplacing. "You always were a cool one, Bumper."

Bumper had been his pet name for me, something he'd called me since I was a toddler, for obvious reasons.

"Why don't you come out here and give your old dead grandpa a hug."

I figured, what the hey, and wrapped the towel around myself, then stepped completely through him and smacked my head on the opposite wall.

Grandpa laughed again. "Sorry, Bumper, I keep forgetting I'm dead-dead, and not just dead, like you."

I found my blue terrycloth robe behind the bathroom door and put it on as I headed into the bedroom. "Now that you mention it, Grandpa, what the *hell* is going on here?"

He waited until I'd perched myself on the edge of my bed (a big old mahogany sleigh bed for you nosy types), then said, "You died tonight, Bumper. It just didn't take."

Apparently the look on my face told him he'd done a lousy job of clearing things up for me. "Look, when most people die they move on to this higher plane of existence. You know, go into the light and all that crap. Not only did you decide to stick around, but you refused to leave your body."

I lay back on the bed. All this stuff was giving me a headache. "If you've moved on, what are *you* doing here?" I asked him.

"I'm not here, actually. This is just a reflection of my life essence. In reality, I'm pretty much everywhere and nowhere all at the same time, except time is rather irrelevant."

I sat up again. "Thanks for clearing that up, Grandpa."

He tilted his head and looked at me in that funny way he used to. "It gets worse."

"You mean like the troll?"

That seemed to worry him a bit. "Saw one, did you? That's even sooner than I thought. Trolls, gremlins, vampires..." I guess I looked skeptical. "That's right, I said vampires. You're living in both realities now, Bumper. You're one of *them*." He actually made that dopey quotations sign with his fingers when he said "them."

"Couldn't they see me before?"

"Sure," he said. "But now they've actually taken notice of you. Which reminds me, you'd better get over there and look after that little girl you rescued tonight. She's an Innocent, and they *feed* on Innocents."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

Grandpa grinned then. "Protect her, Bumper. Now's your chance to be a cop, just like your old man and me." Grandpa neglected to mention that at least *he* got to retire. Dad had died on the job.

"So how long do I have to protect her for?"

"Who knows? Looking like that, they don't usually stay Innocent for long, though."

"So I heard," I told him as he started to fade out.

His voice seemed to come at me from someplace a long ways off. "Just so you know, Innocence has nothing to do with virginity. She could be one of those that stay Innocent all their lives."

That's comforting, I thought.

"Besides, what else have you got to do?" Grandpa asked. "You're going to be dead for a very long time."

I lay back on my bed and tried to get some rest then. You'd think with all the crap Grandpa had said, he'd have told me I'd never sleep again.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning being Friday and all, I realized I'd better get my ass to work. I had told Grandpa I'd think about protecting the girl, but how much trouble could one little girl get into overnight? Dead or not I still had bills to pay. I got out of bed (yeah, I know I said I couldn't sleep, but you've got to admit, I had a hell of a lot to think about and bed's as good a place to do it as any) and ripped the bandages off the wounds figuring I'd need fresh ones. Guess what? Yup, no wounds. Not even a scar. Just for the hell of it, I took my pulse. Still nada. *Well, you can't have everything*, I figured.

I took another shower--this time without the dead relatives to interrupt me--got dressed, made myself some toast, and headed for work. By the way, I was totally relieved to find out that I could still eat, 'cause I *really* like food. That's one thing I have to give the vampires; all that blood must get monotonous after a while, no matter how much you like it.

I got to work early, made it to my cubicle without bumping into anyone--as if anyone else would get to work early--and started going over yesterday's reports. The rest of the office sort of filed in slowly and I got away with a few mumbled "mornings" and "how's it goings." I guess it was about 9:20 when I saw the gremlin taking a leak in the coffeemaker. He shushed me, and seeing as I don't drink coffee anyway, I let it pass. If I had known what was going to happen next, I'd have helped him.

"Decker, could you come in here a minute?"

James Decker--that's my real name. What, you don't think I still went by Bumper, do you?

"Sure, Joe, be right there," I said, then tidied up the files I was working on and stepped into Joe Spence's office.

Joe was upper-middle management, and my boss. He was one of those fortyish balding guys with a bad comb-over, pasty face, and pear-shaped body. He kept a little treadmill in the corner of his office, but by the look of his paunch I'd say he used it as a conveyer belt to get the food from the door to his desk quicker.

"Have a seat, James," he said, so I did. I could tell by the way he kept glancing at the picture of his fat little wife and his pudgy little kids that this wasn't going to be pleasant. It was as if he was thinking, "Thank God it's him and not me!"

"You know how much we all think of you here, James. I mean, you're the highest-paid floor manager at the plant."

Oh-oh, I thought. *Here it comes*.

"Unfortunately, that's the problem. The company feels they can increase efficiency if Benny and Mack take over your responsibilities. I'm sorry, James, but you're being downsized."

The problem was I knew he meant it--that he was sorry. Physical appearance aside, Joe was a pretty decent guy.

"I managed to con them into six months wages as a sort of buyout package, and of course you'll get your severance pay, and..." Yadda, yadda, yadda.

I won't bore you with the details. Joe had done right by me, and I walked away a lot better off than the last couple of guys they shaft...downsized. I had until noon to clear out my desk; it didn't take that long. The gremlin mooned me on the way out.

I went down to the parking garage, climbed into the Jeep, and just started driving. I thought maybe I'd head to the park, but Dad had something else in mind.

"Why don't you drive by the school and check on Alex," he suggested. He sat in the passenger seat in his dress blues and medals, the same uniform we'd buried him in eighteen years ago. He'd been thirty-four when he died, two years older than I was now.

"She's probably pretty safe for the moment, it being daytime and with her surrounded by all those people, but it never hurts to stay on top of things." To hear him, you'd think kids talked to their murdered dads every other day.

Well, two could play that game. "Sure, Dad. Do you know what school she goes to?"

Dad grinned, and it was almost like looking in a mirror. Mom always said I took after him. We both had the same dark hair and brown eyes, the same high cheekbones and thick lips, and that same stern look that only let up when we smiled. Dad was a lot taller though--almost six foot two, but I was more muscular.

"Meadowdale High," he finally answered.

There was so much I wanted to say to him. After all, my dad had died when I was only fourteen, but all I could think of was, "I missed you, Dad."

"Me too, Bumper," he answered, but when I turned to look at him, he was gone.

I parked the Jeep on a side street just outside the school's fence and tried looking for anything suspicious, like trolls or gremlins or what have you. After about fifteen minutes I figured the only thing suspicious-looking was me. People tend to get a little antsy when you sit in your car outside the school grounds and watch the kids. I can't say as I blame them. I figured I'd better get out of there before I got myself into any more trouble--yeah, right--and headed for the library.

I suppose I should have been getting my resume together, but somehow in light of everything that had happened it just didn't seem all that important. Besides, with the buyout package the company had given me and what I had in my savings, I'd have enough to get by for a little over a year.

The library had its own fair share of gremlins. Strangely enough, they seemed to congregate mostly around the computer terminals and photocopy machines. Who'd a thunk it? I found a nice quiet corner (as opposed to those grungy, noisy corners in the rest of the library) and read up on everything I could find about ghouls and ghosties and things that go bump in the night. You know, a lot of the stuff was bang on. I found a picture of a troll that was a fair approximation of the one I'd seen the night before, and the gremlin that ran around the library rearranging the books could have posed for the print in "Baker's Guide to Supernatural Creatures." Six inches tall, short stubby legs, knobby knees, large pointed ears and matching teeth, red glowing eyes, no nose, no clothes, and no genitalia. And that green, scaly skin--yup, that was him all right. I tend to think of anything that ugly as him; call me a sexist if you want to.

After a few hours, I'd absorbed as much as I cared to--"absorbed" being the operative word. Being dead had done wonders for my memory. I found I could recite anything I'd read word for word. Hell, I almost wish I'd have died last week. Then maybe I'd have remembered what I did with Penny's phone number.

School would be letting out in about twenty minutes or so, and I figured I'd grab a Pepsi and head back over there. I was just leaving the library when this mouthy little brat yelled out, "Hey, nice floods buddy!" At first I wasn't sure what he was talking about. Then I looked down at my feet. Sure enough, my

pants didn't even make it down to my ankles. The brat rode off on his bicycle, and I got into my car. I wasn't sure what was going on--they'd fit well this morning--but I figured it could have been worse. My fly could have been down. That's when I noticed my shirtsleeves had shrunk also. At least that was easily taken care of; I rolled them up.

I got back to the school just as it was letting out for the afternoon. I could only hope that Alex didn't have a last period spare. I sat there watching the mass exodus and pretty much thinking that finding her in that crowd was hopeless. The school had several exits; if she had left by one on the other side of the building I'd miss her completely.

"You should have gone in earlier and gotten her class schedule," Dad said from the passenger seat.

"They'd never have given it to him, him being a stranger," Grandpa answered from the back. "Schools are a lot more careful these days."

Just seeing my dad and my grandpa together gave me a kind of warm fuzzy feeling, even if they were both dead. I have to admit, though, that I still wasn't used to having them just pop in and out like that.

"Well then, what do you suggest, Sherlock?" Dad said, and turned in his seat to face Grandpa.

"Don't take that tone with me, boy! I've been doing this kind of work since before you were in diapers."

"Yeah, well if I'd have lived longer you'd have been the one in diapers.

"There she is," I interrupted their little tirade.

"I don't know why I have to sit in the back. After all, I'm the oldest," Grandpa grumbled.

"But I've been dead the longest," Dad answered. That must have settled that, because they both faded out on me again.

I followed Alex home to an apartment building a few blocks from the school, then parked across the street between a Lexus and a Lincoln. It seemed like a nice place. As a matter of fact it looked downright pricey. It was only about ten stories, and the other side faced a park with a nice little duck pond, a playground, and a cobblestone jogging trail.

A doorman greeted her and even held the elevator while she helped an older woman with her groceries. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but Alex smiled and they all laughed as the elevator doors closed. It seemed she was well liked.

I sat in the Jeep for about twenty minutes wondering what to do next. So far I hadn't really seen anything she needed to be protected from--well, except for maybe the troll. I guessed the creepy crawlies would probably be a lot more plentiful at night. It was going on four o'clock. At this time of year it gets dark by about six thirty. If I was going to protect her, I'd have to come up with a better plan than this. I decided to call home and check my messages to relieve the monotony, and the answer just fell into my lap. Aside from several phone calls from my buds expressing their condolences at my losing my job--bad news sure travels fast--there was a call from Alex's mom and a number where I could reach her. I punched in the number, and she picked up after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mrs. Faye? This is James Decker."

"Oh, Mr. Decker. I'm so glad you called. I just wanted to thank you for what you did for Alex. It just makes me sick when I think of what might have happened if you hadn't have shown up when you did, and--"

"I'm just glad I could help. And please, call me James." I had to cut her off. I get embarrassed when they gush like that.

"That's very kind of you, James."

It was obvious the woman had class. I mean, "That's very kind of you?" I don't think I've ever heard anyone say that except for in the movies.

"I was wondering, if you're not too busy, if maybe you could drop by later tonight. Alex has a little

something she'd like to give you. It would really mean a lot to her...well, to both of us."

We made a date for six, which meant I'd only have a couple of hours to kill. She gave me directions to the place, and I assured her I'd have no trouble finding it. Oh yeah, she asked me to call her Sabrina. I assumed that was her name.

Grandpa dropped in to keep me company. "Looks like you'd better do some shopping soon, Bumper. Those clothes are getting kinda snug."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that." I started the Jeep and headed for the nearest Wal-Mart. (Hey, I'm unemployed now, remember?) My pants only reached down to about mid-calf, and the shirt was straining at the buttons.

"Sorry, Bumper, when you're dead-dead memory's one of the first things to go--simultaneous timelines and all that."

Apparently coherence was the second thing to go, because I wasn't following him at all.

"You're a spiritual being now, Bumper. The mind controls the flesh, and not the other way around like before. By the looks of you I'd say you have a pretty good self-image."

He was right. I'd never really seen myself as being short. I mean, I knew I was, but mentally I could look anyone in the eye. Apparently my physical self now more closely resembled my mental self.

It took me about forty-five minutes to pick out some new clothes: a couple pairs of black jeans, a few shirts with those military-style collars, a couple of T-shirts, and a sweater--mostly in earth tones and burgundies. I could have finished sooner, but Grandpa kept trying to help. I wasn't about to take fashion advice from a man who wears polyester pants with black and brown suspenders. This is the same guy that used to tell me that the FTL on his Fruit of the Looms stood for Faster Than Light, although why any guy would want to make that claim about anything he kept in his pants was beyond me.

Healthy self-image aside, I seemed to have stopped growing at about a little over five feet ten. It's funny, but when I looked in the mirror I didn't see the difference--but then I guess that's the whole point, isn't it?

I got back to the apartment at about five minutes to six, then decided to head on up. Grandpa had vanished again. As I crossed the street to the apartment building I saw a little flicker of movement in my peripheral vision. When I turned to look, there was no one there. It was getting monotonous.

The doorman gave me this queer look when I told him who I wanted, but he buzzed the apartment and got the go-ahead to send me on up. Something about the guy gave me the creeps. The hair at the nape of my neck actually stood on end until the elevator doors closed and I'd left him safely behind in the lobby.

Sabrina and Alex lived on the eighth floor and had a corner apartment near the back of the building. I found the door I was looking for and knocked. There was a wild shriek, and then a stampede, followed by the clatter of chain locks and deadbolts. The next thing I knew the door flew open wide and Alex was grabbing my hand and dragging me inside and shouting, "Mom, he's here!" at the top of her lungs.

The apartment looked more like a VIP suite at the Ritz, or the Hilton, or one of those other places where I couldn't even afford to stand in the lobby. It was very tastefully furnished. I think it's called "modern"--you know, where they take huge rooms and put hardly any furniture in them, and not because they can't afford to, either. There was a crackling fire blazing in the fireplace, and the far wall had to be at least eighty percent window and looked out over the park. A few tasteful paintings decorously graced the remaining walls, and the odd statuette perched atop stands made for just that purpose. Off to my left I saw a big-screen TV set--at least sixty inches. Finally, something I could relate to.

Alex led me over to the couch in front of the fireplace, where a bunch of her schoolbooks were heaped in disarray. I guess I'd interrupted her homework. No wonder she was so happy to see me.

Mrs. Faye--Sabrina--stepped into the room. While Alex was beautiful, Sabrina was more...well, just *more*. It was as if someone had taken Alex's youthful splendor--her exquisite cheekbones, her eyes, her lips,

her curves--and somehow refined them. Sabrina reminded me of those models in the glamor mags--not that I read those things--where they've gone and airbrushed out all the tiny imperfections, like zits and warts and stuff. She could have been Alex's older sister. Hell, she could have been Alex's younger sister. I stood as she came over to us and tried to keep my mouth shut, mostly so as my tongue wouldn't hang out.

"I'm so glad you made it, James. We really can't thank you enough." She extended her hand, and I took it and shook it lightly, not wanting to contaminate the dainty thing with my ungainly mitt. At least my palms weren't sweaty--just another advantage of being dead, I guess.

"Alex, honey, why don't you go and get Mr. Decker the present you made for him?"

Alex didn't say a word. She just raced from the room on those long, coltish legs of hers. The floors must have been kind of slippery, because by the sound of the thump I'd say she failed to negotiate the turn at the end of the hallway.

Sabrina took a seat on the couch, and I sat down next to her--not too close, mind you. She flashed her perfectly even white teeth in a smile, and said--as if it were something that came up in conversation everyday, "So, James, how long have you been dead?"

"Um, since last night," I told her, only momentarily taken aback. The way things were going for me lately, for all I knew I had the words "Walking Dead" tattooed on my forehead.

"That explains a lot," she went on, more serious now. "Your aura's all over the place. It would have settled down by now if you had died a while back."

I simply nodded as if I knew what she was talking about.

She smiled again. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have startled you like that, but I have to admit you handled it very well."

"I'm getting used to it," I said. "As a matter of fact I can't believe I'm taking this whole "dead" thing so calmly."

Sabrina leaned forward and put her hand on my knee to comfort me, which only made me all the more nervous. "Maybe you've become what you have because you're *not* the type of person who is easily thrown. I've always thought it was the shock of death that forced the spirit from the flesh. Besides, spiritual beings are naturally more at peace with themselves and the universe. Maybe it's because you *are* dead that you're taking it so calmly."

Well, that made about as much sense as anything else I'd heard so far. It still didn't explain how she had known I was dead, however.

"Are you dead, too?" I asked her. It would certainly explain why she looked so great. You know, the self-image thing and all.

"Nope, not me," she said, her smile a little more mischievous. "I'm a Sensitive. I have been ever since Alex was born. She's an Innocent, you know."

"So I've been told." The more I learned, the more confused I became. "You wouldn't happen to know where I could find a glossary on this stuff, would you? I seem to be the only one at the play without a program."

Sabrina laughed, but before she could answer Alex bounded around the corner with something clutched in her hands and stopped in front of us.

She seemed nervous, which was understandable, and glanced at her mother for moral support before she spoke. "I made this for you...for helping me the other night, Mr. Decker. I hope you like it." She held a tiny crystal in her hand, set in a silk cradle and suspended from a thin, silk necklace.

"It's beautiful," I told her, and her face lit up as I took it from her and slid the necklace over my head. The crystal settled just above my solar plexus.

"It's a double-terminated clear quartz crystal," Alex said, all businesslike now. I could tell by the way she said it that it was important. "Double-terminated crystals are believed to symbolize the balance of spirit

and matter, and we call clear quartz the mirror of the soul, because it reflects and radiates the divine inside us. After all, we're not human beings trying to be spiritual; we are spiritual beings trying to be human."

I looked over to Sabrina. "How old did you say she was?"

Sabrina laughed. "She understands a lot more than probably either of us. Innocents are like that. But she's still just a kid, and she needs to be protected."

"Listen up, Son. This is what you came here for," my dad said, popping in out of nowhere as usual and almost giving me a heart attack in the process.

"You must be James' father," Sabrina said.

"You can see him?" I asked her. Who knows? maybe I wasn't crazy after all.

"They both can, Bumper. She's a Sensitive, and the little one's an Innocent," Dad answered for them, then disappeared again. Both Sabrina and Alex tried valiantly to suppress giggles when Dad called me "Bumper." I vowed I'd get even with him for that later.

"He never stays around long," I told them.

"It's difficult for him," Sabrina explained. "He's been dead a long time. He's probably been reincarnated by now, and what you see is merely a reflection of the essence of your father."

"Now you sound like my grandpa."

"Is he dead too?"

"Yeah," I told her. "Just not as long. They were both cops."

Alex took a seat beside her mother, then looked up at me. "It was their idea that you protect me."

I nodded. I guess it wasn't until that moment that I really decided that I *was* going to protect her. Up until then I'd just been going with the flow--letting Dad and Grandpa lead me around by the nose, so to speak. At least protecting Alex gave me some sort of purpose or direction, and it seemed more worthwhile than anything I'd done while I was alive. The management job had always seemed rather pointless to me. It paid the bills, but I'd always felt like I was just spinning my wheels and not really accomplishing anything relevant. I wasn't really sure what an Innocent was yet, or even what the hell *I* was, but somehow the thought of watching out for Alex just felt right. Besides, these people knew what was what, which was more than I could say, and it's not like I had anything else to do.

The intercom buzzed, interrupting my train of thought, feeble as it was. "Sabrina?" It was the doorman. "We really should be heading for the safe house now. The moon will be up in another half-hour."

Sabrina walked over to the wall unit and flipped the call switch. "We'll be right down, Josh," she told him, then turned to me. "This apartment is normally secure. There are warding spells and protections built into the architecture, but even they're not enough during the three or four days surrounding the full moon." She walked to the hall closet and retrieved a couple of bags stowed there--Louis Vuitton if I wasn't mistaken. "Something about the increased gravitational pull weakening the barrier between the realms."

I simply nodded, filing another bit of information away for further reference. I found lately that the less I said, the more intelligent I seemed. I offered to take the bags from Sabrina, but she just smiled and shook her head, and handed the smaller one to Alex. "You should keep your hands free," she explained.

I blushed, feeling rather foolish. "I'm kind of new to this security thing."

"You'll learn," Alex piped in.

It was nice to know they had such confidence in me, misplaced though it might have been. I tried to redeem myself by being first through the door and checking out the hallway before I let them out of the apartment. It seemed like the sensible thing to do, and when I determined it was safe, I motioned for them to follow.

"Nice work, Bumper," Sabrina whispered as she locked the door.

I gritted my teeth and muttered, "There's a name that will inspire fear and respect in the hearts of my enemies."

CHAPTER THREE

We made it to the lobby without any further embarrassment to myself. The doorman, Josh, greeted Sabrina, and they spoke in hushed tones for a moment. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but he was obviously agitated and kept looking over at me as if I had just eaten barbecued baby for dinner.

"You make him nervous," Alex whispered to me. "Your kind make all of *them* nervous."

The feeling was mutual. Josh seemed fairly nondescript: six feet tall, about a hundred and seventy pounds, short brown hair, hazel eyes, medium complexion, maybe twenty-five years old. He was the kind of person you would forget about two minutes after bumping into him in a crowd, but there was something about him that set my spidey senses tingling.

There was no doubt that Sabrina was calling the shots. "Would you mind if we took your car?" she asked me.

"No problem," I told her. Josh was definitely uncomfortable with the idea, and I realized the man was actually *afraid* of me. That was something I could use. I tossed Josh the keys. "It's the red Jeep out front," I told him. He caught the keys and I waited for him to tell me where to shove them, but he didn't. Sabrina gave me one of those looks as Josh headed out to get the Jeep. All I could do was shrug.

It only took him a moment to start the Jeep, and I did the security thing again, checking out the front of the building before allowing the girls to exit. I wasn't really sure how much good I'd be if anything went down. I'd had some martial arts training--hell, who hasn't nowadays--but I was only a green belt in Jiu Jitsu. That's far enough along to be cocky, but not too dangerous. I knew all the moves and was pretty lethal...as long as you attacked me real slow.

"You much good behind the wheel?" I asked Josh.

"Yes, sir. I am."

"Good, then you drive." The guy still seemed a little shaken, but what could I do? I had the girls sit in the back with Alex directly behind me. That way if anyone tried to put a bullet in her it would have to go through me first. I guess I should have known that bullets would be the least of my worries, but remember, I was pretty new to this.

I didn't know where the safehouse was, but a few minutes of travel had us downtown and crawling from red light to red light. Things got pretty freaky then. The windows on the Jeep were tinted, but I was pretty sure *they* could still see in. Or maybe they could sense Alex, or smell her or something.

I'd always thought the downtown core was Twilight Zone enough, what with the hookers and junkies,

the skinheads, the punks, the glams, the goths--the usual inner-city populace. Believe me, you haven't seen anything till you've seen it through my eyes. Trolls and trollocs, goblins and gremlins, boggles and bogeymen and demons galore--I guess what I'm trying to say is, they kind of fit right in.

A hooker in a red knit crop top and black miniskirt approached the car in front of us. Nice legs, shame about her face. Her eyes glowed neon red in a mottled, mucus-lathered visage, and her mouth was jammed full of teeth, like a shark's, more cartilage and bile than bone and enamel.

I looked over at Josh, and he managed a weak grin. "Succubus," he told me. "Suck the life right out of you."

"Just like a real woman," I said. I swear he almost laughed then.

We moved ahead slowly and made it another few blocks when the rear tire blew out.

"Tell me you have a spare," Josh pleaded. Suddenly he didn't seem so afraid of me anymore. What was out there worried him more.

"No problem," I reassured him.

"The moon will be up in another few minutes or so. We don't want to be out here when that happens," Sabrina warned me.

I really didn't like the sound of that. I got out and went around to the back of the Jeep, opened the rear door, and dug out the spare from under the rug. Thank God for full-size spares. Josh joined me and set up the jack while I started to remove the lug nuts. I had most of them off when Josh cleared his throat.

"Sir, I think the jack's seized."

I tried to think of a smart-ass remark, but it was just too depressing. All I could think of was, "Call me James." Hey, if you're going to get sucked down into hell with someone you should at least be on a first-name basis.

I just about had the last lug nut off when a sudden chill forced an involuntary shiver. It seemed all the more relevant seeing as since I had died I hadn't really taken much notice of the weather. I looked up from the curb and saw it leaning up against the building not six feet from me. *Vampire*.

Forget all that romantic crap you've seen in the movies. Vampires are about as evil as they come. To be totally accurate, vampirism is really more like demonic possession. Demons don't have souls of their own, so they use human hosts. When a vampire turns someone, it brings its victim just to the point of death. That's when the body's hold on the soul is the weakest. The demon then takes possession, animating the human form, usurping the host's life and memories, and forcing the victim's soul into the background.

See, that's the worst part. The demon does all these unspeakable things with your body, and since you never really died in the first place, you're forced to witness it all. Most vampires start by torturing the host's friends and family, often raping siblings or parents. Like I said, evil. Take my word for it, kill a vampire and you're doing someone a big favour. Oh yeah, and they really do live off of human blood.

Don't ask me how I knew it was a vampire; I just knew. This one was male and dressed all in black--big surprise there--black jeans, black boots, a black Calvin Klein pullover, and a long, black leather jacket that reached down to his ankles. His skin was bone-white and looked like polished marble, and he had long copper-red hair tied back in a ponytail. An eerie, hellish green light played about his eyes.

As if that weren't bad enough, he had his posse with him. Something huge stood to his left, about three hundred pounds of grizzle and bone and warts, with two huge tusks jutting upward from its misshapen jaw, and gnarled, razor-sharp talons that reached down past its knees. A troll stood off to his right, and a gremlin squatted just in front of him.

"You take the vampire, sir. I'll take the ogre," Josh spoke from behind me.

Something about his voice struck me as strange, and I snuck a peek at him over my shoulder. Josh wasn't going to have as much trouble with the ogre as I had at first thought. He stood a good seven feet tall and weighed at least three hundred pounds himself, and looked something like a cross between a grizzly bear

and the wolfman, with claws and fangs that should make even the ogre think twice. He shrugged, as if he were embarrassed or something, and added, "The gremlin's not a problem, but don't underestimate the troll--they're tough as nails, and mean too."

The vampire lunged first. I suppose the thing was fast. If I had still been alive I doubt I would have even seen it move before it tore out my throat. But I wasn't alive anymore, and as I've said before, being dead definitely had its advantages. Everything slowed, almost as if time had congealed, and the vampire lurched at me in slow motion. Like I said, I'm lethal as long as you attack me real slow.

I stepped forward and to the left, and clotheslined the thing in midleap. His feet came up over his head, and he slammed into the pavement hard. I grabbed him by the throat and dragged him up against the building, but the troll hit me low from behind, raking its talons across the small of my back. I smashed my palm into the vamp's nose, then twisted its head around quickly and almost puked at the sound of the vertebrae snapping. The troll took another swipe at me, but this time I caught the clawed hand and wrenched upward, breaking its wrist. It howled, and I kicked it hard in the head--nothing fancy, almost a punt, really. The troll didn't touch down for twenty yards. I turned back to the vampire, but it had managed to crawl away down the alley. A broken neck won't kill a vamp, but it sure disables 'em for a while.

I turned to help Josh, but he didn't really need it. He was crouched over the ogre, one knee on its chest while he flayed at its eyes and throat. The ogre panicked, all thoughts of battle replaced by the primal need for survival. All it wanted now was to escape, and it bellowed and roared in an effort to screw up the strength to break free. Josh rolled to the side and allowed the beast to scramble to its feet. It shuffled off down the alley after its master. It wasn't mercy that had saved the creature; we just couldn't leave the corpse lying in the street, and we didn't have the time or the resources to bring it with us.

The troll had recovered by now and stumbled toward us. The gremlin shrieked and howled, leaping and hopping about in a frenzy as it goaded its brethren to attack, but the troll had had enough, and it too disappeared down the alley with the gremlin hot on its heels.

Josh approached me, licking the blood from his paws and smiling, or maybe he was just showing his teeth; it was hard to tell. "I'll lift the Jeep; you change the tire, James."

It sounded like a plan, and I sure as hell wasn't in the mood to argue with a seven-foot bear-wolf-man-whatever. Josh stuck a brown furry paw under the bumper and lifted, and the rear wheel easily cleared the pavement by a good six inches. I got the feeling he could have held the Jeep there all night, especially when he started picking his teeth with the claws on his other hand. I hated to see the kid make a spectacle of himself like that, so I quickly wheeled the flat off and replaced it with the spare. I tightened the lug nuts a bit, and Josh gently let the Jeep down; then I finished up and closed the back gate.

"We'd better get a move on before something else shows--something even nastier," Josh said. He looked like the old Josh again except where the blood had smeared on his hands and face. "Shapeshifter," he added, pointing a thumb at himself. That was all the explanation I needed, at least for now.

We got in, Josh pulled away from the curb, and we were on our way again. If Sabrina or Alex were freaked out by what had just happened, they didn't show it. I guess this kind of thing was commonplace for them.

"You did good, Bumper, though you should see what that sawed-off refugee from a Grimm's fairy tale did to your new shirt." Grandpa was back again.

"To hell with the shirt, Grandpa, I think the little creep carved out a kidney!"

"The back'll heal, but that shirt's toast."

Grandpa faded again just as we rounded a corner and pulled up in front of a set of wrought-iron gates. A long drive wound its way uphill to a gothic manor made of gray cut stone covered in patches of creeping ivy, and complete with towers and gargoyles and stained-glass windows.

"This is the safe house? If I've ever seen a place crawling with gollywoggles, that's it," I said.

Apparently I was thinking out loud again, because Sabrina and Alex broke into hysterics and Josh suddenly found something interesting out the driver's-side window, but I knew he was laughing at me.

"Wait till you see the owner," Alex piped in, but Sabrina shushed her.

"Quite, you'll spoil the surprise, dear."

I guess when you live your life with the constant threat of being devoured by the forces of darkness, you get your kicks where you can.

The gates swung inward, and Josh nudged the Jeep forward and proceeded slowly up the driveway to the main doors. The entrance to the manor was well lit, and I got out of the Jeep first to do the security thing again. A light breeze rustled through the hedges that surrounded the drive. There was a strange odor in the air, something unfamiliar and unpleasant, and it made me antsy--as if I weren't spooked enough already.

I scanned the area carefully but couldn't see anything that might present a danger, so I finally motioned for the girls to get out of the car. I helped Alex out, then Sabrina, and noticed that they seemed uneasy too, which really bothered me because they'd been pretty much unaffected by everything else so far. Josh climbed the rough marble steps to the door, wrinkling his nose at the foul odour. I can only guess that for a shapeshifter the smell had to be particularly raunchy.

He hadn't quite made it to the door when the lawn in front of us erupted in a geyser of dirt and rocks and putrid black fur. I hit the ground wrapped up in a tangle of oddly disjointed and twisted limbs, caught in the glare of several pairs of baleful yellow eyes, while mucus-encrusted fangs slashed at my arms, throat, and face.

Alex screamed, and Sabrina yelled out, "Goblins!" and then Josh was on top of me, a rampaging werebeast peeling the rancid creatures off.

"Get the girls inside," I hissed through clenched teeth as one of the evil-smelling beasts dug a furrow down my sternum with a hooked talon. "Now!" I shouted as Josh hesitated.

Josh howled in rage but spun quickly and scooped the women up against his massive chest and bolted for the door. Time slowed for me again, and I managed to tear one of the goblins from me and get to my feet. Even as quick as I was now, there were just too many of them. They swarmed me, bounding and leaping, rending and tearing like spindly apes gone berserk. I was fighting a losing battle, and I knew it. It was all I could do to stay on my feet, and I knew that if I went down again they'd tear me to shreds. They were doing a pretty good job of that now. I wasn't equipped to deal with these creatures. I had no claws or fangs, and hitting them didn't effect any real damage. They simply rolled with the blows and were right back at me.

I put my back up against the Jeep, cutting down on one avenue of attack, and desperately tried to keep them from my neck and face. Suddenly a goblin to my right squealed in pain and outrage as it was torn bodily from me by a mammoth, shadowy...um, shadow. I know that sounds pretty lame, but that's exactly what it was. It hunched over its victim and crushed the goblin's skull between massive jaws. It walked on all fours--or maybe it was sixes, since its form shifted continuously--and tore into the goblins like a whirlwind with ethereal teeth and claws that left misshapen bodies sprawled everywhere.

I had a little breathing room now and peeled two of the beasts from me, smashing them together and tossing them aside. The goblins apparently weren't up for a fair fight, because they scrambled away into the dark and vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

The shadow licked its paws and sat back on its haunches. At least that's how it seemed. It was difficult to get a good look at the thing. My eyes seemed to almost slide off of it, and I could only really make it out in my peripheral vision--brief glimpses of fierce red eyes and fangs amidst a phantom silhouette.

Josh joined me beside the Jeep; Alex and Sabrina were safely inside the house.

"Do you have a dog?" Josh asked.

"Nope, but I used to. He died about eighteen years ago," I told him while I tried to take inventory of all the cuts, gouges, furrows, and slashes. "Big dopey mutt named Bear. Part Great Dane, part Black Lab and Part

Irish Setter."

"I'd say that's him," he said, nodding toward the shadow. "That's what dogs *really* look like."

I looked more closely at the shadow, or at least tried to. "Bear?"

He kind of bounced a couple of times and did that little shuffle-step dogs do when they're excited.

Josh grinned at me. "You don't really think they sleep all the time, do you? Asleep or awake, dead or alive, it's all the same to a dog."

Bear howled--a long, drawn-out soulful sound--which believe me is a lot more eerie when they're in this form, with deep reverberations and booming echoes and an undercurrent of something wild and dangerous. Then he was gone.

"Where'd he go?"

"Who knows, but not far," Josh assured me. "They really are man's best friend, you know." Josh must have suddenly realized the shape I was in, because his face took on this concerned look and he said, "I think we'd better get you inside."

I nodded, but first retrieved the shopping bag with the rest of the new clothes I'd purchased. I was going to need them. I have to admit I really did look pretty bad. I don't think there was an inch of skin on my body that wasn't torn, tattered, or bruised, and my clothes were shredded. There wasn't much blood, though. I guess you really don't have much need for it when you're dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Josh helped me up the steps to the entrance, and the door swung open to admit us. You'd think I'd be used to anything right about now, that nothing much could surprise me after what I'd been through, but you'd be wrong. "It's all right," Josh said to me. "She's with us."

Sabrina and Alex stood just behind the woman who greeted us at the door. They seemed okay with it, so who was I to raise a stink?

"An Innocent, a Sensitive, a shapeshifter, a dead guy, and a vampire...we're quite the team, aren't we?"

"Don't forget the dog," Josh reminded me. I'd come to realize that Josh could be a real pain sometimes.

"So you're the new Eternal I've heard so much about." The vampire held out her hand to me and I shook it lightly--and yes, it was as cold as hell.

I smiled, but I doubt there was much humor in it. "Eternal,' eh? Well, it's a might catchier than 'dead guy.'"

She smiled too, and it looked even worse on her. "I'm Leanne. Why don't you come inside and we'll see about cleaning you up?" The way she said it made me glad I wasn't bleeding as badly as I should have been. I didn't like the way she eyed the little bit of blood that *was* evident.

She turned and led the four of us through the vestibule and deeper into the manor to the living room, a term that I suddenly found funny. I mean, living room? Anyway, the place looked just as you would imagine it should--lots of old, uncomfortable antique furniture, bookshelves, a huge fireplace, this humongous chandelier, and spooky portraits of pasty-faced noble types who'd been dead for centuries.

I took a seat on a rock-hard couch. Sabrina whispered something to Alex, who disappeared into another room for a moment only to return with a towel, a washcloth, and an old porcelain washbowl filled with warm water. Alex set the bowl down on a heavy oak coffee table just in front of me, and Leanne sat down next to it facing me not a foot away. Leanne soaked the washcloth in the warm water and slowly, carefully, began to wipe at the wounds on my face.

"Don't worry, I don't bite," she said, and smiled again.

You know, it's really hard to tell when a vampire is funning with you.

I hate to admit it, but there's something about vampires that both churn your insides and kick your hormones into overdrive, and you have to battle with yourself as to which reaction is going to get the better of

you. She was slim, of course--a strict diet of blood will do that--tall and lean, with long legs, slim hips, and an incredibly tiny waist, and her skin was china-white like all nightwalkers.

Leanne must have been turned when she was very young; she could have passed for sixteen if it weren't for her eyes--cobalt blue and brimming with ancient wisdom. She wore a long, navy blue wraparound skirt of fine silk and lace, a crisp white shirt with a delicate cameo at the throat, and a short bolero jacket of supple suede the same shade as the skirt. Her straight, raven-black hair was pinned back from her face and flowed to the small of her back.

She moved with the fluid grace of her kind, every gesture a meticulous performance that would have put a prima ballerina to shame. She made dressing my wounds seem sensual, and I almost felt embarrassed that we were doing it in front of the others.

I couldn't see my own face, of course, which had to be a good thing because if it looked anything like my arms and chest it would have freaked me out for sure. At least it didn't hurt.

"Why don't the rest of you go up to your rooms, and I'll finish taking care of Mr. Decker," Leanne told the others as she continued to gently dab at my wounds.

"That sounds like a great idea," Josh agreed, mostly for Alex's benefit. She *was* looking rather tired. "I think we've all had more than enough excitement for one night."

"Aw, Dad. Can't I stay here with Leanne and James?"

I guess I'm one of those people whose every emotion shows on their face, because Sabrina said, "I'm sorry, you didn't know we were married?"

"Nope, you had me fooled." I find that if you act nonchalant in these situations you don't come off looking quite so stupid. "It's not because he's white, either, it's just that--well you don't look old enough to be Alex's mom, but obviously you are so I just figured you carried your age well. But Josh, he *can't* be more than twenty five." Okay, so I slipped on the nonchalant thing a bit.

Josh grinned at me. "Actually, I'm forty. That's about eight in shapeshifter years."

Sabrina stared lovingly at her husband. "Yup, he's just a baby," she teased, and Josh blushed.

"I'll get Alex ready for bed," he said, and beat a hasty retreat with Alex in tow.

"I'll be up soon," his wife called after him, then turned to Leanne. "Maybe now that we have a little breathing room you could fill James in on the big picture. I think he's wandered around in the dark long enough now."

"Sure, as long as Mr. Decker doesn't mind. I don't think he's exactly comfortable with me yet," Leanne said.

"You *are* a vampire, you know." I winced as Leanne scrubbed at a nasty cut along my collarbone. Maybe I should have said it didn't hurt *much*.

"Just hear her out, James. You can trust her--we all do," Sabrina tried to reassure me. "I'll leave you two alone to work things out."

Sabrina did just that, and I sat staring straight ahead as Leanne began to work over my chest and arms now. It was too disconcerting looking her in the eyes.

"Leanne, that's an odd name for a vampire," I finally said.

"I wasn't *born* a vampire," she answered.

I decided I probably shouldn't have broken my rule about shutting my mouth so as to seem more intelligent, and kept quiet.

Leanne laughed suddenly, probably figuring out what I was up to. "You really are new, aren't you? A rookie Eternal--this should be fun."

"Well I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Where the hell were Dad and Grandpa when I needed them? They'd pop in and out to give me fashion advice, but when I was really in a jam they were nowhere to be found.

Leanne sighed, then stood and took a place next to me on the sofa. She looked extremely comfortable, and I wondered if maybe her end of the antique had all the padding. It was probably just one of those vampire things.

“Let’s start by fixing you up,” she suddenly decided. “You’re an Eternal now; a spiritual entity. You don’t really require that human form you’re lugging around. It’s just an anchor point, something that helps you maintain your sense of identity. After a few hundred years that won’t seem so important to you. You can look like anyone or anything you want to, *be* anyone or anything. And you can’t be killed, not in the normal sense, because your body is not who you are, it is simply what you wear.”

The crazy thing is, I think I followed her. I wasn’t sure if I believed her, but I followed her.

“All you have to do is imagine yourself as you’d like to be. Why don’t you start by imagining yourself without all of those holes in you.”

I shrugged, then closed my eyes because that’s what people always do in the movies when they concentrate, and built a mental picture of myself in my mind’s eye. While I was at it I gave myself a tan, dropped a few pounds, and bulked up a bit. I figured that if I could be anything I wanted to, I might as well be buff.

Leanne laughed. “Not bad. You’re a fast learner.”

I opened my eyes. Sure enough, the wounds were gone, and I was definitely a few shades darker than I had been. My stomach was taut and flat, with rippling abs; my biceps bulged; and my chest was broad and well-defined--nothing massive, more gymnast than bodybuilder.

I blushed at the amused look on Leanne’s face. She must have thought me vain or conceited or something, and I felt like someone who’d just been caught posing in the mirror.

She smiled, a genuine smile that touched even those icy blue eyes. “Hey, be all that you can be.”

I wasn’t doing very well here. I mean, I hadn’t said a word and I was still coming off pretty dopey. I decided to change tactics.

“What about you, what’s your story?” I asked her. “In all the research I did today, I don’t think I ever came across any mention of friendly vampires.”

“As far as I know, I’m the only one,” she replied. She leaned back a bit into the sofa and draped a dainty arm across the armrest. She could probably make tying her shoes look sexy. “The difference between myself and other vampires is that I am in control, not the demon.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“I have a very strong will to live. Perhaps, had it not been a vampire that claimed my life, I might have become an Eternal like you. As it was, the demon and I struggled for control, and I won.”

I noticed that her speech pattern slipped into a more polite, stricter form at times, probably a throwback to her native tongue. It seemed to happen when she was nervous or uncomfortable. I’d have to remember that.

“It does not give up easily, however. I must constantly battle it for supremacy, and sometimes when I tire it wins out and I give in to my baser instincts.” She leaned forward and took my hand in hers. Somehow it did not seem as cold as it had before; even her eyes seemed warmer. “I must confess I have not felt this at ease in ages. The demon is afraid of you, and retreats into the darkness of my mind, leaving me at peace and more able to be myself. I thank you for this small respite.”

She leaned forward and kissed me then, lightly on the lips and not so much as to be passionate, but definitely more than platonic. I found myself blushing again, my tactics having failed. She sat back against the sofa, and I could tell she was pleased with herself.

“Forgive me,” she said, but still with that amused look. “It has been a long time since I have felt so...human.”

“What about Alex, and Sabrina, and Josh?” I asked, trying to keep some semblance of dignity.

“Josh is a shapeshifter. Contrary to the tales, they are born shapeshifters and are not made so by the bite of some animal. Also, they can change at will, though the fullness of the moon increases their strength and stamina and brings out more of the wild nature of the beast within them. They can be good or evil, much the same as a mortal can be good or evil. Sabrina is a Sensitive, and has no special abilities other than that she is aware of both realms and their interaction, just as you now are. All mortals are Sensitives to one degree or another, but it is an atrophied skill in most. A traumatic experience often serves to amplify the ability, as was the case with Sabrina. Finally, Alex is an Innocent, a new soul fresh and clean from the wellspring of the universe. Untainted by evil or avarice, greed, lust, or envy; if allowed to mature she will be a powerful force for Light in the world, much as Buddha was, or Christ, or Mohamed. The forces of darkness will do everything in their power to prevent this, to feed off her soul and thus increase their own evil presence on this world.” Leanne looked very somber and serious now. “The last Innocent to remain pure was born a thousand years ago, and the Dark Ones claimed him. It is not by chance that you happened on Alex in the parking lot last night. It was synchronicity, the Universe taking care of itself and striving for balance, that brought you and Alex together. She needs our protection.”

There really wasn't anything to think about. I'd already given my word that I would help, and I wasn't about to go back on it now that I knew the stakes. I couldn't help but wonder what the world would have been like today if the last Innocent had been saved.

“Is there anyone else we can count on?”

“There are many who oppose the Darkness. Shapeshifters and trolls, trollocs, orcs, and ghosts--they are either good or evil as their disposition allows. To my knowledge there are only seven Eternals, and you are the only one to choose sides. The others remain...neutral.”

“I guess that makes us both a rare breed then,” I told her.

“Rare, yes,” she agreed, “but perhaps now, not so lonely.”

Okay, now I might not be the swiftest dog on the track, but even I clued into the fact that she was flirting with me.

Leanne burst into a fit of laughter. “Vampires are slightly telepathic, my dear Eternal, or perhaps merely empathic. Either way, I have a pretty good idea how you feel about me, even if you don't, and I'm *much* too old to play games.”

She leaned forward suddenly and kissed me. There was nothing platonic about it this time; that kiss would have raised the dead, and I ought to know. Dead or alive, I've never felt anything like it, and when she finished all I could think to say was, “Call me James.”

She laughed again, then stood with the grace only a vampire can accomplish and held out her hand to me. I took it, and she led me to a staircase that led up to the second floor where the bedrooms...

Testing, testing. Of all the times for the stupid battery to die. Oh, well...where was I?

Leanne had one of those huge four-poster beds, the kind with the velvet canopy and curtains that tied back, or closed for privacy. I knew it wasn't the privacy she was after, but the darkness they provided. Her bedroom was huge, about a hundred and forty square feet, and a skylight took up half the ceiling twenty feet above us. The canopy would protect her from the daylight that would stream in when the sun came up; it sure as hell beat sleeping in a coffin any day.

We lay in bed, her head nestled against my chest and her leg draped across mine. Her body felt almost warm against me now, and though still pale she had lost that china-white hue. Sorry, but I won't go into the details of our sexual exploits. That's just another thing my mom beat into me--a gentleman never tells. Besides, I take enough ribbing from Josh about it; he calls me a necrophiliac wannabe.

A piercing shriek rattled the skylight. It rose in volume, hundreds of voices screaming in tones an octave apart and undulating in pitch. Obscenities whispered in long-dead languages added an eerie

undercurrent to the tortured sound.

"They're trying to get in," Leanne told me, her eyes open now, "but the house is well protected against the damned." She tilted her head and smiled up at me. "I think they're pissed."

"How did Josh and I get in, or even you for that matter?" I asked her.

She looked surprised. "We are not damned. You and Josh fight to protect the Light, and I have my demon under control. The Universe does not damn you for what you are, but for what you do. Even a demon may fight for the Light if it so chooses, though none ever have."

I got out of bed and dressed in the good clothes I'd salvaged from the Jeep. Protected or not, if one of those things managed to get in I didn't want to be fighting it off naked. Leanne dressed as well, going to her wardrobe and slipping into some tight black leggings and a purple pullover sweater with a mock-turtle neck collar. If she was self-conscious about my watching her dress she never let on.

"That's better," she said after she had finished lacing up a pair of black, ankle-high boots. "*You* try fighting in a skirt sometime."

"No thanks, I don't have the legs for it."

Josh met us at the top of the stairs as we were leaving Leanne's bedroom.

"I see you two are getting along well. And Sabrina was worried you'd be at each other's throats," he said while managing that dopey grin of his.

Leanne stepped past me, slapping me on the ass as she did so. "He's so cute when he blushes," she told Josh.

"One word out of you and you're going over the rail," I threatened the shapeshifter. Josh looked unconcerned. It probably wouldn't have hurt him anyway; it was only a twenty-foot drop.

We descended to the main hall, and Josh stopped to retrieve a pump shotgun from a cabinet against the wall. "Lead will drop a troll, or an ogre, or a goblin," he explained when I looked at him funny. "Pretty much anything except for an Eternal, a vampire, or a shapeshifter--oh yeah, it doesn't work too well on demons either."

The shrieking stopped suddenly, and the three of us stood staring at each other stupidly for a moment. Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door.

Josh cocked an eyebrow. "I'll get it," he said, cradling the shotgun. He made his way to the door and pressed himself flat against it while he peeked through the narrow pane of glass that ran along the length of the frame.

"Damn," he swore.

"More goblins?" I asked him.

"Worse, Jehovah's Witnesses." He opened the door quickly, pumping a round into the chamber and hollered out, "All right, with the thumb and forefinger of your right hand, slowly place *The Watch Tower* on the ground." I thought he was just kidding around until I joined him at the door just in time to see two dark-suited figures hightailing it down the driveway. He turned to me and said, as seriously as I've ever seen him, "I love messing with their minds."

I rejoined Leanne in the living room while Josh offered to find me and him a glass of milk or something. "Why'd all the noise stop?" I wondered out loud.

Josh wandered back in and handed me a glass of ice-cold milk, and Leanne threw herself onto the couch and draped her legs over the armrest. "I don't know, but I can guarantee you it had nothing to do with those two at the door," she said. I thought for a minute there Josh was going to snort the milk out through his nose.

A sudden thought gave me the shivers. "I know this house is protected against ghouls and creepy crawlies and stuff, but what about human collaborators?"

I saw the panic in Josh's face then just as a loud *whump* followed by the crash of shattering glass

sounded from upstairs. The shrieking began again in earnest as the three of us raced up the stairs. Being the fastest I was first up, but I realized I had no idea what room Alex was in, and waited while Josh bolted past me. He hit the third door down the hall, fully transformed now and not bothering to try and open it in the conventional way as he tore it from its hinges.

There were seven intruders in the room all done up in black balaclavas and black combat sweaters and pants. They must have rappelled in from the roof through the ceiling-high windows. Two of them struggled with Alex, who screamed and twisted and bit and was putting up a valiant fight. The other five dropped to their knees in a wedge formation and pulled back the bolts on short, efficient-looking submachine guns--Uzis or MAC 10s or something--I never could tell the difference.

Josh pumped a couple of rounds into the man on point but quickly discarded the shotgun as he closed on the two who had Alex. He couldn't get those massive furry claws of his through the trigger guard. The other four guys held their ground and opened fire as their comrade was flipped sideways and back by the buckshot that flayed his chest open. Whoever they were, they were well trained. Maybe they really were Rangers or SEALs or something.

I finally realized that it wasn't time that slowed; it was just that I was that much faster now. I don't know how many rounds a second those machine guns can throw at you, but I could have counted each one as it buzzed toward me had I wanted to. I twisted my upper body and leaned to the right a bit, and several rounds blurred past where my head had been. Luckily for me they hadn't fired simultaneously, because I saw the next burst of rounds hot on the heels of the first, only these were about waist high.

It was time I went on the offensive, so I zigged suddenly to the left and then moved in. Leanne must have followed my lead, because she appeared behind me and a little to my right. I don't think she was as fast as I was, but she was damned close. I doubt it made any difference to the poor saps shooting at us. To them we must have vanished suddenly only to appear in their midst.

I stepped into the first guy on the left wing of the formation and hit him with a palm heel to the solar plexus. I tried not to hit him too hard, but it still lifted him and sent him hurtling against the back wall. He slammed into it hard and slumped unconscious to the floor. I told myself we'd need hostages later for information, but the truth was I was pretty squeamish about killing him--after all, he was human, and I'd never killed anyone before.

Leanne wasn't having the same crisis of conscience. She grabbed at the top of her man's head and twisted it to the side, almost doubling the poor bastard over backwards, then sunk gleaming white fangs into his throat and drank greedily. She *was* a vampire after all, and I supposed she had to feed sometime. She was chalk-white now, and her skin looked marble-hard. She had unleashed the demon.

I moved in and disabled the next man in line, slapping the gun out of his hand as he turned in slow-mo toward me. There really wasn't any challenge to this, and I saw no need to kill him, so I reached out and around and tapped him lightly at the base of the skull. He crumpled to the ground in a heap, and I grabbed him by the collar and slid him over beside his companion. I turned to help Josh then; I didn't want to see what Leanne would do to her next victim.

Josh hadn't been much kinder. One man lay in a heap on the floor in a pool of blood, and the other Josh had by the throat, holding the hapless soul several inches off the floor and slowly squeezing the life from him. I hesitated, wondering if I should interfere, when Alex saved me the trouble.

"Put him down, Dad."

Of all the things I've seen, for some reason that image sticks with me. Maybe it was the unreal contrast of it all: this seven-foot bearlike creature, all brown fur and claws and fangs dripping saliva, rippling with muscle, his eyes spitting hellfire as he glared malevolently at the one who dared stand in his way, and this beautiful young innocent, crystal blue eyes and milk chocolate skin, standing there barefoot in a silk Mickey Mouse print nightgown as her tiny hand restrained the behemoth before her.

It was obvious Josh was unhappy with the idea, but he tossed the man aside with a casual flick of the wrist. The man had no fight left in him and lay where he fell, gasping for air as he massaged at his battered throat.

I stared around me at the carnage of the room. Shattered glass littered the floor, bullet holes traced their way along the walls, and the bodies--let's not forget the bodies. Three commandos lay in spreading pools of blood, one with his chest caved in and two with their throats torn out. Leanne had not been careful. There had been no need to preserve these bodies; she had no intention of turning them. They had been food, no more, and she licked at the blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth. At that moment it was all I could do to remember that *we* were the ones who were fighting on the side of Light.

Alex looked around the room. "Where's mom?"

Josh howled and bolted from the room on all fours with the rest of us in pursuit. We'd been so intent on protecting Alex we'd forgotten that there was another mortal in the house. I followed Josh into the next room, arriving just in time to see the last two commandos rappelling out through another broken window. They must have entered both rooms at the same time--the noise from one attempt masking that of the other. The first commando had Sabrina, bound and gagged and over his shoulder, and the second covered their escape with a burst of machine-gun fire.

We raced for the window, but the shrieking started again. A pillar of scintillating energy sprang up in the center of the room where Alex stood, surrounding her in a maelstrom of wind and light. Luminescent wraiths circled the pillar, spiraling their way to the top and then down again.

"It's the guardian spell," Josh hollered above the roaring winds.

Something tried to reach a venom-tipped claw the size of a minivan in through the window, and several of the spectral wraiths attacked it, leaving deep bloody gashes in the filth-encrusted scales. Whatever it was squealed like a live lobster in a pot of boiling water and quickly withdrew the claw.

"It can't get in, but we can't get out either," Leanne hissed. She looked like hell--literally.

There was no way I was going to let them get away with Sabrina, and I moved toward the window. Josh's paw on my shoulder stopped me, and I turned and stared into his haunted eyes. Even in his fearsome animal incarnation, intelligence sparked behind those wild brown eyes--intelligence, and pain.

"You can't go out there," he growled low in his throat. "They'll tear you to shreds." Just to make sure I didn't do anything stupid, he proved it to me. He left the room for a moment, motioning for me to stay, then lumbered back in carrying the corpses of the two men we had killed. "We might as well let them clean up their own mess," he said, then tossed one of the bodies out through the window.

Something grabbed at the body in midair, halting its fall, and it hung suspended by an arm two stories above the ground. Something else snatched at a dangling leg, and the body flopped about like some mangled marionette as the unseen creatures played tug-of-war for the gruesome prize. There was a wet popping sound as the corpse's arm gave way, and it jerked about violently as whatever retained the leg shook it like a terrier does a rat. Gore sprayed what was left of the window, and Leanne turned Alex away from the sight of it, though I knew the thought of all that wasted blood was torture for the Vampire. I wish someone had turned me away from it, but I stood horrified and fascinated as something else wrenched the head from the corpse. Suddenly there was a frenzied feeding, as if the night was filled with schools of airborne piranha, and the body was stripped clean in an instant. I could hear something outside, crunching on the bones and sucking out the marrow even over the relentless shrieking.

Josh looked at me, unapologetic as he tossed the second corpse out into the night. "They won't kill her," he told me. "Not right away. They'll use Sabrina as bait to get Alex."

"Come on then," I answered. "We have some prisoners to question."

CHAPTER FIVE

The first man broke at just after midnight--the witching hour. He caved just about the same time the unholy shrieking stopped. I guess the creepy crawlies must have had a previous engagement. The poor SOB never really had a chance. Leanne handled the interrogation. We questioned our prisoners in the same room where they'd been taken, their comrades' blood still spattered in fresh puddles on the floor. I half have expected her to torture them, but it wasn't necessary.

Josh backed his prisoner into a corner where the terrified commando huddled in fear as the shapeshifter paced back and forth, growling and salivating and generally looking as fearsome as possible. Occasionally he would tower over his victim and bring his snout to within an inch or so of the horrified man's face, then sniff at him a few times and lick at the blood that trickled from the man's head wound as if testing to see if he was good to eat yet.

Leanne simply tied the second man to an antique, high-backed chair, and sat cross-legged before him, asking him questions in a calm, dispassionate voice. There was something unnerving about this tiny, fragile looking creature with her bloodred eyes and vertically slit pupils. Her black hair was swept back from that dead-white face, and her lips and teeth were still stained with the blood of her last meal. She would ask her question, and when the answer was not forthcoming she would smile, and then lean forward and drink from him. When she was finished she would ask her question again. He almost always answered.

It wasn't until later that I learned what had terrified him so much. It's not that he worried Leanne would kill him; he was afraid that she wouldn't. Like I said before, when a vampire drains you just to the point of death, a demon is summoned to possess the flesh. Leanne's house was guarded. A demon wouldn't be able to get in to animate the body, and sooner or later the flesh would rot. The soul, trapped in a rotting corpse, wouldn't be able to escape, and the corpse, because it still has a soul, wouldn't die. Voila--instant zombie. Believe me, zombies are rock bottom on the hierarchical scale of things.

Grandpa appeared beside me as I watched the interrogation. "Whatever happened to good cop, bad cop?"

"Hey, Grandpa. Where have you been?"

"Last week," he answered. The old coot still wasn't making any sense. "I see you've made some new friends."

"Yup, and believe it or not we're the good guys." I had to keep telling myself that as Leanne leaned in for another taste.

“She’s kinda cute,” Grandpa said. He studied me for a second, and I could tell he was worried. “She’s nothing like Alison, and Alex isn’t Sarah.”

“I know.”

“Good,” he said as he faded out again. “Still, I don’t think I’d bring her home to meet your mother.”

Leanne finished a few moments later and made her way over to me. I could tell it was a struggle for her. The demon had been let out to play, and it didn’t want to come in now. Every step she took in my direction was another measure of defeat for the creature, but the closer she came, the easier it was. By the time she stood before me, it cowered in the recesses of her mind once again. She put her arms around me and hugged me close to her, laying her head on my shoulder and shuddering as her body softened and her color returned. It had never occurred to me until that moment that hers was a gentle soul, and how horrifying it must be for her to watch the demon commit the atrocities it had in her name.

Josh left his man cowering in the corner and came over to join us. “You get what we need?” he asked.

Leanne nodded slightly, her head still resting on my shoulder.

“Good. Now what?” Josh was understandably impatient.

Leanne sighed and pulled away from me. “We let them go.” Josh started to protest, but she interrupted him. “There’s nothing more they can do for us, and we can’t kill them. Even if we could, what would we do with the bodies? We don’t have time to drag them out into the woods and dispose of them, and we’re not leaving them here. Besides, as James said, we’re supposed to be the good guys.” She must have heard me when I’d said that to Grandpa; I’d forgotten about her vampire hearing. I suppose she’d heard the crack about bringing her home to mom too.

Josh snarled, then morphed back to human form. “I need food,” he said and stomped off down the stairs. Shapeshifters burned off a hell of a lot of calories, especially ones as large as Josh.

The man in the chair was weak from loss of blood and watched listlessly as I untied him. I motioned for his friend to join us, but he wouldn’t come out of the corner; so I had to physically drag him over to his comrade. “Take your friend and get out of here,” I told him. “If I ever see either of you again, death will be the least of your worries.” I doubt I looked as scary as Leanne or Josh, but they got the message. I heard them stumble down the stairs, each one propping up the other, and a few moments later the front door slammed.

Leanne and I went in to check on Alex, who had finally fallen asleep sometime after the screeching had stopped. She lay diagonally across the bed and wrapped up in her comforter, and occasionally would flinch at whatever haunted her in her dreams. I guess being an Innocent doesn’t protect you from nightmares.

Leanne sat quietly at the corner of Alex’s bed and gently stroked the child’s face, pushing sweat-plastered strands of hair away from Alex’s eyes. It was hard to equate this gentle apparition before me now, looking little older herself than the child she cared for, with the depraved killer of only a short while ago. I put a hand to Leanne’s shoulder to comfort her. She looked up at me with such a saddened expression on her face that I knew it must be true that vampires couldn’t cry, or her eyes would have been filled with tears.

“I never had a child of my own,” she whispered, and continued to stroke Alex’s hair. The poor kid seemed to be sleeping more soundly now, and her breathing was deep and regular. “I was turned at sixteen,” Leanne continued, “and though many of my friends were wed and had babies of their own at my age, my father had not yet given his consent to any of the eligible men who came to call.”

I bent over and pressed my lips to her forehead, and she leaned against me while she continued to stroke Alex’s hair. I still had no real idea of Leanne’s age, but something told me she hadn’t been turned in the last hundred years or so. Her talk of arranged marriages dated her. It was obvious she was upper class, but the transformation made it difficult to discern her nationality. The Change leached any color from the skin, so her original pigmentation was unknown, though with her fine bone structure and those startling blue eyes I guessed she had to be Caucasian. While I admit I’m not the most knowledgeable man in the world, I couldn’t think offhand of any of the European countries that still practiced arranged marriages. Of course, I could have

been wrong.

Mom always told me you never asked a woman her age. I figured that went for vampire women too. Leanne would either tell me her story or not. Right at this moment finding out wasn't at the top of my list of priorities. Rescuing Sabrina was.

"We'd better go find Josh," I said. "Whatever it is we're going to do, we should do it now before they have a chance to prepare."

Leanne nodded and took my hand. It was obvious she didn't want to leave; the time spent with the sleeping child was probably about as close to normal as the vampire ever got. For a while Leanne could forget what she was and just be human.

We found Josh in the kitchen mangling the remains of some leftover turkey. I wasn't about to ask what a vampire was doing with all this food in the house. Maybe she kept it for guests.

"We just about ready?" Josh asked after he downed most of a quart of milk. Either he was incredibly thirsty, or that turkey was *really* dry.

"I've just got to get a few things together," Leanne said. "Then we can leave."

I hate being left out of the loop. I put my hand up. "Would someone mind telling the new guy what's going on?"

Leanne smiled and kissed me on the cheek. "They've taken Sabrina to Tae Con Ra in the other Realm. In two days, at the height of the full moon, they'll sacrifice her to the demon Aeshama during the Blood Moon ceremony. We're going after her."

"Sounds good to me," I said as she left the room to collect whatever it was she figured we needed.

"It shouldn't," Josh said. He looked positively grim, and that just wasn't Josh. "The other Realm, Land of the Faye, Summerland, the Twilight Zone--call it whatever you want--but it's their home ground. And Tae Con Ra is an ancient place of power."

"I didn't figure it was Celtic for Disney World."

Josh grinned in spite of himself. We sat there for a few moments in silence, neither of us really knowing what to say. "I guess I'd better pack some food for Alex," he said finally.

"You're not going to bring that little girl along?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Josh looked pained. "We have to. She can't stand by and let someone else die in her place. She can't sacrifice her mother. If she did, she wouldn't be an Innocent anymore."

You've got to hand it to them; the Dark side wasn't stupid. By taking Sabrina they had ensured that we would have to bring Alex to Tae Con Ra. I felt the way I did when I was a kid and my dad used to make me go outside and cut him a switch to whoop me with.

It was about then that Leanne showed up with a long, brown leather case. Both of the ends were tied off with bright blue silk cords. She'd also taken the time to change, and was dressed in tight-fitting black leathers.

"Wow," I said. "A vampire biker chick. Mom's gonna love you."

Leanne pointedly ignored me. "We all set?" she asked Josh.

"Yeah, just let me go get Alex."

It must have been murder on the guy. It was bad enough that the forces of evil (it always sounds so melodramatic when I say it like that) had made off with his wife, but now he had to shove his daughter into harm's way also.

"Just how do we get to the Other Realm anyway?" I asked Leanne once Josh had left the room.

She put her arms about my neck and kissed me sweetly for a moment, then smiled up at me. "We take the Jeep, of course."

"Of course." Dopey me.

The sun would be up in a little more than half an hour. It was a good thing for Leanne that the windows on the Jeep were tinted. They were dark, almost black, the way the cops hated, and she assured me they would protect her from the sun's harmful rays. Still, just to be sure, she slipped on a pair of supple, black leather gloves, and smeared SPF 45 sunblock over her face and neck. The stuff had the consistency of Lepage's glue--the white stuff--as if she wasn't white enough all ready. She kept a black balaclava and some dark, wraparound sunglasses by her side just in case.

Josh carried Alex out and laid her down on the back seat with a pillow and comforter. She fell back to sleep almost immediately. He opened up the back gate and tossed in a cooler of food and some travel packs, and an old beat-up hockey bag with the oddest assortment of bumps and bulges I'd ever seen. Josh glanced up and shrugged. "Small arms and ammo," he confided. "Always be prepared."

The three of us fit in the front without much problem. Josh drove, I sat next to the passenger door, and Leanne sat between us. She was the smallest, after all. Josh started the engine just as something big and shadowy alighted on the hood of the Jeep. The front end dipped slightly, then something pink washed my half of the windshield in slobber, and the shadow was gone again.

Josh hit the wipers and wiper fluid. "Dopey mutt," he mumbled.

A smile touched my lips as Bear vanished as quickly as he had appeared. I'd really missed the dumb hound.

"So, how *do* we get to Tae Con Ra?" I asked. "Just head out off the county road until we hit the Highway to Hell?"

"Actually, we head through the city," Leanne said seriously. "There's a shortcut through the alley just behind the McDonald's on Princess Street."

The drive was rather uneventful. A faint rose blush had already begun to tinge the eastern horizon as we left the manor. By the time we reached the city, proper dawn was full upon us. There wasn't much in the way of traffic at this time of the morning, human or otherwise. Even creepy crawlies need their sleep. Those that couldn't stand the full effects of sunlight were long gone, and the others were no doubt resting up someplace, or off to their mundane jobs in human guise.

Josh parked the Jeep in the small McDonald's parking lot and went to the back of the truck to retrieve our gear while Leanne awakened Alex. He tossed me the pack with the food and kept the one with the weapons for himself. Leanne donned the balaclava and dark glasses, and Alex daubed at what little skin still showed with the sunscreen.

"Is everybody set?" Leanne asked, and when one no one objected, added, "Then we're off." She retrieved her parcel, the one wrapped in blue, and led us to the dumpster at the back of the alley. "All right, you first, Josh. Then me and Alex. James can bring up the rear."

"This is the entrance to the Other Realm?" I scoffed.

Josh opened the lid to the Dumpster and leapt nimbly up to the ledge. He perched there a moment, grinning at me and rearranging his pack. "Hey, it's no Fairy Mound, but it'll do." With that he dropped down into the trash, and in a bright flash of white light, vanished.

I wrinkled my nose in disgust. "Does everything about the Other Realm have to smell bad?"

Leanne just shook her head, grasped the side of the Dumpster, and vaulted into the garbage, disappearing in a flash. Alex covered a yawn with the back of her hand. I was about to ask her if she needed a hand up when she pulled off this nice little scissor-kick and was up, over, and gone before I got the words out. Not one to be undone, I vaulted over the side and came down butt-first onto a pile of spaghetti and rotting lettuce. I stuck my hand into some brown, rancid oranges just seconds before the light flared, and I found myself seated on the grass on the side of a well-worn trail.

I looked up to see Josh trying to stifle his laughter, and I knew that if I could have seen beneath

Leanne's balaclava, the same battle would have been going on there, too. Alex, showing the sensitivity that young teens are so famous for nowadays, was rolling on the ground laughing her fool head off.

"I guess someone should have told the new guy there's a five-second reset before you can use the portal again," Leanne announced from behind the safety of the balaclava.

I climbed to my feet and tried to brush off as much of the mess as I could. "Yeah, well the joke's on you," I told them, trying to muster what little dignity I had left. "I'm taking point, which puts you folks downwind from me."

"Do you know where we're going?" Josh asked.

"No," I admitted. "Just point me in the right direction."

Josh pointed northwards, where the trail led off into deep forest. I took point, with Alex next--suddenly she didn't think the way I smelled was so funny anymore--and Leanne and Josh bringing up the rear.

The trail wound its way among some of the biggest trees I'd ever seen. I doubt that all of us arm in arm could have reached around the bole of a single one of them. They were deciduous, and their leafy canopy blotted out what little sun there was and colored the land in eerie twilight enough so that Leanne could safely remove her headdress. The forest floor to either side of the trail was covered in layer upon layer of dead leaves. Occasionally, a tangled root would snake its way along the surface for a while only to dive back beneath the moldy vegetation and lose itself once again. Flowers blossomed intermittently among the trees, some climbing the massive trunks, while others draped across fallen stumps and over crumbling rock formations. There wasn't an insect whine or bird cry to be heard.

I glanced back at the rest of my party, especially to the young girl that we escorted. "I get to be the Tin Man," I said.

Josh smiled. "I guess that makes me the Cowardly Lion."

Leanne scowled. "Don't even think it--Scarecrow indeed!"

Just then I caught a glimpse of shadow to our right, and Bear skidded to a halt a few yards away. I guess he didn't like the way I smelled either, because he vanished as quickly as he appeared.

"Nice to see you too, Toto," I mumbled.

After about an hour's march we finally came upon a stream, and I took the opportunity to wash--to much cheering and applauding, I might add. I scooped up a few handfuls of sand from the stream bottom and used it to grind away at the grunge on my pants as the rushing water bubbled about my knees.

Suddenly, I was assaulted by the sound of whispers on the wind, a choral of breathless voices, insistent in barely audible harmonies. Or was it simply a light breeze that rattled the trees, a sudden gust that rippled the water and low-lying grasses along the banks? I looked toward my little group and saw Josh arming himself from the bag he still carried. Leanne shook the blue velvet covering she had toted to reveal a couple of ornate rapiers, and tossed me one. I took the hint and got out of the water.

"Now what?" I grumbled.

"Faeries," Josh said.

"What, like Tinkerbell?" Somehow the thought of swatting at three-inch high winged bimbos seemed ludicrous to me.

"Not quite."

The whispering raged against the wind now. Water crashed upon the rocks in waves that sent spray arching into the air and settled in a fine mist about our group. Trees bowed before the onslaught as if paying their respects. Blossoms caught up in the maelstrom flitted about like multihued insects before they lightly touched down.

I saw the first ones then, an advance party of ten men marching two by five as they approached us along the path from the direction we had been heading. I assumed they were men, but they could have been

women, or...something else. They wore heavy black plate armor that fit like the carapace of some carrion insect. The armor gleamed with an oily sheen and had spikes and tiny blades fitted where they would do the most damage. The helms completely covered their heads, with deep eye sockets and curving horns so that they reminded me of those animal skulls you always see littered along the desert floor, except in black. The armor was inlaid with intricate bloodred designs and seemed to pulse with a life all its own. The soldiers did not wear the armor; it engulfed them, protecting them and feeding off of them in some sick symbiosis.

They were tall, all of them at least six feet, and carried lances at the port arms. Banners fixed to the ends of the lances hung limply, as if the advance party walked amidst the eye of a storm where the air was stagnant. They brought the darkness with them, the light about them dimming as they moved forward. Four mounted knights came into view, riding abreast and close behind the footmen. Their armor was lighter, and their helms removed; still, I couldn't help but feel that the plate and chainmail was parasitic. Their faces were slender and pale, with huge, dark, almond-shaped eyes; high cheekbones; and broad, high foreheads. A slim circlet of onyx metal, more a crown than a headband, kept manes of wavy black hair from their eyes, and exposed the tips of their pointed ears. Their horses were great muscled beasts, long and lanky, and I sensed a fierce intelligence about them.

Josh moved past the women to stand alongside me, and I glanced over at him. The muscles in his jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth, and he said, "We're in it deep now."

I grinned. "Yup, almost makes me wish I hadn't washed."

Josh looked annoyed. "Don't you take anything seriously?"

"Would you rather I ran off screaming, or cowered on the ground sobbing?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Well, maybe just once." He grinned then, but it was kind of a sickly thing. "Do you know how to use that thing?" he asked, pointing at the sword clutched in my right hand.

"Sure," I told him. "It looks just like a giant butter knife. I figure I'll press the bad guys up against a tree and then spread them real thin."

"Just ignore him, Josh," Leanne said from somewhere behind me. "It's just his way of dealing with stress."

I didn't have a comeback for that one. She was right.

We backed away from the stream, situating ourselves so that a couple of the larger trees were behind us. At least that would cut down on one avenue of attack. It was about then that one of the riders saw us. He raised his hand, calling the troops to a halt, then broke ranks and rode out of view for a moment. When he returned, he spoke briefly to the other riders.

"Can you make out what they're saying?" Leanne asked.

"I can hear them, if that's what you mean," I said. Apparently my hearing was even better than hers, vampire or no. "I can't understand a word of it, but it sure sounds pretty."

"It's High Sidhe, and don't let that lilting tone fool you. Rest assured, they are most likely deciding whether to question us first, or just kill us outright."

One of the riders bent low and took a lance from a footman. His horse reared, pawing the air as he sawed on its reins and shook the lance at us. Then he was charging us, the lance couched in the right stirrup as horse and rider bore down on us. Or should I say on me. I don't know how he decided who to take out first--maybe the big powwow with his friends was nothing more than eeny, meeny, miney, moe, but I stood there watching as the lance tip quickly grew larger and larger. He closed the distance with incredible swiftness, yet gave the impression of moving in slow motion. It was misleading, and the dark knight was almost on me when an explosion to my left jarred me back to my senses. I counted the lead buckshot as it burned past my shoulder toward the marauding rider. The shot drove through the breastplate of his armor and lifted him from the saddle as the horse reared and went over on its side, crushing its rider beneath it. The horse struggled to its feet and galloped back toward the other riders. The knight lay where he had fallen and didn't move.

"That'll teach 'em to bring a pointy stick to a gunfight," Josh said from behind me as I caught the acrid scent of gunpowder on the wind. He chambered another round into the shotgun.

The Sidhe seemed really agitated now as the riders paced their horses back and forth behind the foot soldiers. One of them barked an order, and the advance party planted their lances and drew swords. They moved forward slowly into wedge formation. The rider bellowed and pointed his sword in our direction, and the ground troops broke into a run, screaming like banshees, which they may very well have been. They were certainly trying to herald *our* deaths.

Josh pumped three rounds into them before they were too close for him to effectively use the shotgun. I heard fabric tear as Josh transformed, then slammed the butt of the weapon into a helmeted head.

One of the enemy came at me with sword raised high, and I sidestepped and slashed at his unprotected underarm. He staggered to a halt and dropped his weapon, and I kicked out at him, a front thrust kick that caught him in the breastplate and shoved him back into his comrades, buying me time to get back into position.

They tried to come in at us from Leanne's position, thinking it to be our weak spot; they were mistaken. She stepped forward in a blur of motion, and with a flick of her wrists neatly took a man's sword arm off at the elbow. The spray rained crimson droplets across the ivory white of her skin, and she used her fingers to streak it like war paint along her cheekbones.

Another foot soldier drove in at me, and I ducked low and put my shoulder into his stomach, then straightened, sending him up and over to slam heavily to the ground. I stomped him back to the earth as he struggled to get up, then spun the rapier and drove it down into his helmet and through his eye, pinning him. I withdrew the sword as he ceased struggling, and looked up to see the remaining three horsemen charging. I stepped forward, knowing there was no stopping them this time. I only hoped that I would die, that I could die, too. I couldn't bear to live knowing I had failed the others.

CHAPTER SIX

I wondered if being run through with a lance would hurt more than being shot with a .45. Probably would, right? I mean, a lance is a hell of a lot bigger around than a bullet, and a lot longer. Not to mention having the momentum of a ton and a half or more of horse and rider behind it at thirty or forty miles an hour.

I took a step forward, hoping to draw them toward me and away from the others. I watched the rise and fall of each lance, dipping in rhythm as the horses' hooves threw clods of earth and leaves up behind them in the mad rush to ride me down. The riders crouched forward, gripping tightly with their knees, pulling their elbows in close and gritting their teeth as they braced for impact. The Sidhe Lords' eyes narrowed in concentration, and I marveled at the perfect union of horse and rider intent on my destruction.

I raised my sword, determined to take at least one of them with me, when a hail of arrows rained down upon the riders. They punched through plate and mail, not deep enough to kill, but more than enough to break the charge. The stallion to the right galloped off toward the stream as the Sidhe astride it took an arrow through his left eye and toppled from the saddle. Another horse went down with two arrows embedded in its neck at one of the few places unprotected by armor. The third rider wheeled quickly and fled in retreat. There were only two remaining foot soldiers now, and they too fled toward their Lord as he busied himself snapping off the arrow shafts that were little more than a nuisance. He raged then, shaking his sword at us and screaming his frustrations in the language of the Sidhe; then he and the two foot soldiers retreated back down the path and out of sight.

I turned to check on Josh, Alex, and Leanne, and suddenly wondered if we were any better off. A semicircle of nine archers, each with arrows notched and bows drawn, had us pinned against the bole of the tree where we'd made our stand. They were Sidhe as well, but not like the others. These men were dressed in bright colors. Soft pastels in fine silks draped over gleaming armor in as many shades. I had the sense that this armor was also alive, but where the black armor seemed parasitic, this armor nurtured its host. The wind had died, and the air around us seemed charged with electricity. A light breeze carried with it the scent of apples and cherry blossoms, violets and vanilla.

I kept my sword pointed at the ground and held up my left hand in casual greeting. "Hi. How's it going?"

I heard Josh groan. "They're going to shoot us for sure," he mumbled.

The archer in the center of the group lowered his bow and motioned for the others to do so as well. He spoke a few words of command, and the rest moved off suddenly to retrieve arrows. He approached Leanne, stepping over the body of the Dark Sidhe she had dispatched. He stopped just in front of her, his huge almond-

shaped eyes unblinking as he drank in every detail of face and form. His eyes were a startling deep green, and Leanne fidgeted as he studied her. She clenched her fists, and the corners of her mouth twitched ever so slightly, as if she fought the urge to expose her fangs. Suddenly the Sidhe bowed low, then straightened and turned to address me.

"An interesting menagerie you have here." He smiled, showing even, white teeth. "A vampire, a shapeshifter, a mortal and...you?" His brow knotted in puzzlement as he studied me for a moment. "What are you?"

"I'm dead," I told him.

His eyes narrowed briefly as he considered what I'd said; then he simply nodded. "You are fortunate that we are the ones that came to your aide, and not a human company of archers, for they would surely have killed you, or left you to the Dark Sidhe."

There was something about him that rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe it was a sense of smug conceit. He was tall and slender, even under all the armor and robes, and his long, red hair was swept back from a face too pretty to be merely handsome. His lashes were long and curved, his lips full, and his skin lightly tanned, smooth and unblemished. He had a way of looking at you as if he were sizing you up and finding you wanting.

"We owe you," I said.

He smiled, more of a smirk really. "I know." He turned and held out an arm to Leanne. "Our camp is not far from here. You can freshen up, and perhaps we can find some new clothes for your friend." He glanced briefly at Josh, whose own clothes were in tatters from the transformation.

Leanne hesitated a moment, then took his arm. She shot me a warning glance over her shoulder, though I wasn't sure what she meant by it. Was she warning me to keep on my guard, or just to behave myself?

Josh put his arm around Alex, who had been untouched by the battle. She had paled a little, but otherwise seemed little the worse for wear. I wasn't sure what bothered me more, the fact that she seemed little affected by the ordeal, or that our new host had completely ignored her presence. It was as if she didn't exist for him.

The other archers had finished collecting their arrows, and they fell into line behind us. We veered off the path we'd been following for the better part of the morning, and hiked along the winding streambed instead. I noticed that Josh had retrieved the shotgun and had shoved a Beretta 9mm into the back of his pants. That one I recognized. It was just like the one dad had been shot with.

I kept the sword in my right hand, as I had no choice. Leanne hadn't provided me with a scabbard. The tip of the rapier was slick with blood. I knew that I should wipe it off on something, but there wasn't anything nearby and I wasn't about to use my clothes. There was enough blood on them already.

Maybe it was the sight of all that blood--blood that I had spilled--but I felt myself trembling, and my stomach had gone all queasy. I'd never killed anyone before, certainly not up close, and with a giant butcher knife. Butcher. The word called up images I did not want to remember: the sound a sword makes as it hacks through muscle to the bone; that meaty thunk followed by hot, spurting blood and terrified screaming; the coppery smell as someone's life essence splatters you; the sudden stench of fear; and the look on their face and in their eyes as they realize what you've done to them.

I hurried to the river and threw up, voiding what little food I'd eaten since last night. They waited for me, my friends with a look of concern, the Sidhe with one of disdain. I washed my face with fresh, clean water from the stream, then rinsed my mouth out. I felt better, but only a little, and rejoined our party as we resumed the march.

"Let's hope you never get used to it, Bumper," Dad said.

I nodded. "Hey, Dad. Where were you? We could have used you."

"To do what? Jump out and say 'Boo!'?"

He had a point.

"Keep an eye on these fellows," Dad said. "They're not as bad as the Dark Sidhe, but they're still faeries. They have a habit of toying with people for their own amusement." I wanted to ask Dad what he meant by that, but he had vanished again.

Alex came back and held my hand, and I felt better. She was handling this all much better than I was. I don't know, maybe she'd grown up with this sort of thing; maybe not. She looked up at me. "Everything will work out, you'll see."

I could see that she truly believed that. There was no doubt in her young mind, and I wished I had her optimism. I squeezed her hand, and we walked on in silence until we came to the Sidhe camp a few minutes later.

Brightly colored tents surrounded a blazing fire in the midst of a small clearing. Most of the tents fronted the river where it had broadened and formed a cozy beach. Tigers, bears, and wolves paced back and forth in wheeled cages evenly spaced throughout the encampment. Pennants flapped in the cool offshore breeze that carried the scent of meat turned on a spit over the open fire pit. Tables laden with fresh fruits, breads, and cheeses circled the pit. Sidhe couples lounged on pillows and carpets as they feasted, laughing and singing to the accompaniment of minstrels, or splashed playfully in the river.

Alex grinned up at me. "Lions and tigers and bears. Oh my!"

I laughed. It was the first really good feeling I'd had since the battle. "Speaking of which, has anyone seen Bear?"

Josh shook his head. "Dogs hate faeries. I doubt you'll see him around here." It occurred to me that dogs were usually pretty good judges of character.

Our host, still arm in arm with Leanne, made to step out from the forest into the meadow where the camp was set up, but I grabbed Leanne by the shoulder and halted them in their tracks. They stared at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"Sunlight. Vampire," I pointed out. The meadow sat in full splendor of the noonday sun.

The Sidhe studied me for a moment with those huge, unblinking green eyes of his, obviously wondering just how stupid I was. Finally he said, "Lhiannan has nothing to fear here," and they stepped out into the sunlight. I guess he knew what he was talking about. After all, she didn't burst into flames or anything.

Josh and I looked at each other for a moment, and I mouthed, "Lhiannan?" but he just shrugged, apparently as in the dark as I was. I couldn't recall that any of us had introduced ourselves, and wondered that he knew her name, or a variation of it.

Our host, who hadn't bothered to give us *his* name either, led us past a couple of posted guards and into the encampment until we stood before the largest of the brightly colored tents. We were beginning to attract a small crowd, and several of the Sidhe formed a small semicircle about our group. An elegant blonde, looking like she'd just stepped off a fashion runway in a cream white haute couture gown that hugged her slender figure, sashayed up to our host.

"I see the hunting has been good, Luchtaine," she said, "though this is strange game you bring to our banquet."

Luchtaine smiled. "I admit it is not our usual fair, Badb, but from the way you eye yon shapeshifter, I think I've found something to please your palate."

The blonde winked at Josh. "He does look a rather tasty morsel," she answered, and the gathering burst into laughter as Josh blushed a deep red.

I stepped up closer to Leanne and whispered into her ear. "This is sexual innuendo, right? I mean, they're not going to eat us, are they?"

She elbowed me hard in the ribs, and I grunted in pain. "Just checking."

"I'm sure the Queen will wish to speak with you after all this time, Lhiannan," Luchtaine said. "I will seek an audience for you now. In the meantime, eat, rest, and make yourselves comfortable." He bowed low, then turned and entered the tent.

Badb already had her arm about Josh's shoulders and was leading him over to a mound of cushions. "Let's see about finding you something indecent to wear," I heard her coo at him as he glanced about nervously.

"I'm very flattered, miss, but I'm a happily married man," he began. Badb stopped and whispered something in his ear, and he blushed again. The look of panic on his face was priceless.

Dad appeared suddenly. "NO, Alex! Don't eat that!"

Leanne's hand shot out in a blur of motion and plucked a peach from Alex's hand just as she was about to bite into it. "Sorry, honey, but you can't eat the food here," she told the startled girl. "If you do, you can never leave."

Alex shrugged, and accepted an orange that Leanne retrieved from the knapsack she still carried. I guess the kid was used to strange, inexplicable rules like this, and just took them all in stride. Personally, I could see where that kind of attitude could come in handy when raising a teenage girl. "*Sorry honey, but you can't date boys until you're thirty-five or you'll turn into a warthog.*" Man, you could get away with murder!

I turned to thank Dad, but he'd vanished again. Leanne took a big bite out of the peach.

"I thought you said we couldn't eat the food here?" I asked her.

"Nope," she mumbled around a mouthful of peach. "I said Alex couldn't eat the food here; Alex is mortal. I'm safe. So are you, in case you were wondering."

I shrugged, and snagged a crisped, brown pheasant breast from a platter off the table in front of me. I hadn't really felt hungry since I died, but the smell and the taste of food still enticed me to eat. There didn't seem to be a knife or fork to be had, so I tore into the breast, savoring the tender, juicy meat that had been spiced and flavored to perfection.

"You might want to put that blade away, James," Leanne suggested. "Iron makes these people nervous."

I still held the rapier in my right hand. I stared at her helplessly for a moment, not knowing what to do with it.

Leanne waved a young servant girl over and whispered something into her ear. The girl nodded, then curtsied and ran off only to return a moment later with an ornate scabbard done in black leather. Several straps with tiny silver buckles ran horizontally along its length. I could tell they were just for show, but it was a nice effect. It lent the scabbard an air of strength, and insinuated that all the straps were necessary to keep such a deadly blade restrained. The girl handed me the gift and was off again in a flare of skirts and tangled red hair. The sword slid easily home, and Leanne helped me to belt it about my waist. Now that I had a hand free, I scooped Leanne up in my right arm and pulled her close for a kiss.

She tangled her fingers in my hair for a while, then stepped back and smiled. "Is that your pommel I feel, or are you just happy to see me?"

"Is it big and knobby?"

Her eyes glinted wickedly. "Why yes, it is."

"Then it's my pommel."

"Ahem." The sound of someone clearing their throat behind us interrupted any further witty discourse. "The Queen will see you now," Luchtaine announced dryly. From the look on his face, I'd say he disapproved of beautiful young women cavorting about with dead guys.

Leanne gave me a quick peck on the cheek and said, "This shouldn't take too long. Just try to stay out of trouble while I'm gone."

I gave her my best "who me?" look, but we both knew I wasn't fooling anybody. Luchtaine took her by the arm and escorted her into the main tent. I did a quick search for the rest of the gang. Poor Josh was still trying to disentangle himself from Badb's attentions, while Alex sat cross-legged across from some huge, hairy, wart-covered ogre--playing paddy whack. Alex didn't seem too concerned with her father's predicament, so I decided who was I to butt in.

I wandered off toward the lake and did the typical loner thing--I stood on the grassy shore and skipped rocks. I really sucked at it too. I was just about to try something easier, like throwing rocks at the swimmers off to my left, when I heard her behind me.

"You're looking good, James."

Suddenly I couldn't breathe. Everything inside me tied itself into tight, hard knots, and something hammered at my chest. I turned to face her. "I was wondering if I'd see you."

Alison smiled. "I couldn't stay away."

She looked just as I remembered her. I loved the laugh lines around her eyes. They were the only things about her that hinted she might not be sixteen. But then, I'd loved everything about her. Alison was petite, with big, brown doe eyes, full lips, and this mischievous grin that caught you off guard, surprising you with the fact that she was in no way as innocent as she let on. She had a way of staring at me through those blonde, tousled locks that left me helpless. My friends had teased me about being whipped, and they were right, but I had been happily, blissfully whipped. Alison had taught me long ago that the world was a wonderful place filled with magic. I guess I'd forgotten that. I had forgotten a lot of things since her death.

"What took you so long?" I asked her.

She moved closer, gliding across the long grass as only a ghost can. A nonexistent breeze played about her hair and ruffled the light blue cotton print dress that hugged her slim figure. The faintest hint of Eternity, her favorite perfume, scented the air.

"I've never left your side, James. You just weren't ready to see me."

"I'm not so sure I am now," I told her truthfully.

She looked sad all of a sudden. "I can go if you like?"

"No!" I all but shouted at her. "Please, stay a while." I took a deep breath to clear my head, but it really didn't help much. "You smell great," I told her.

Alison's eyes lit up the way they always used to when she teased me. "I didn't know ghosts smelled like much of *anything*."

I shrugged. "Dad smells like spray starch and old spice, and Grandpa...well, Grandpa always smells like someone just pulled his finger." She laughed, and I wanted to hold her so bad, but I knew she wasn't there. Not really. Alison looked wistful. Somehow, I got the feeling she was thinking the same thing about me. Who knows? Maybe I'm not really here either.

"I worry about you," she said. "You just cut yourself off from everything after...after I died."

"I really don't want to talk about this."

"I'm sorry about Sarah, too. I know she misses you."

I turned away from her and stared out across the water. Why was she dredging this up? "Kids are resilient. Besides, she has her father," I said. Even though they'd been divorced for five years, Alison's ex still got custody when she died. Boyfriends, even live-in boyfriends, don't have much in the way of rights where children are concerned.

"You can't just keep clamping down on your feelings, shutting everything away."

"*Yes I can!*" I hadn't meant to shout. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Alison, but I just couldn't deal with this. Not now. Maybe not ever. I turned back to her to tell her I was sorry, but she was already fading.

"Sooner or later, you have to live again," she whispered; then she was gone.

“Too late.”

I heard something whine to my left, an eerie, discordant sound. Bear pawed at my leg. He always knew when I was hurting. I tried to scratch behind his ears the way he liked, but I still had trouble focusing on him. He slobbered all over my hand, and then he was gone too. Nothing seemed real anymore, but then, nothing had for a long time. Not since the day the police had arrived at the door to tell me that Alison had lost control of her car and slammed into the streetlamp. She'd been pronounced dead at the scene.

I won't regale you with how I fell apart after Alison died. I've got the whole sad story on tape around here somewhere if you really want to be sadistic about it. Play it sometime while you're listening to country tunes or something.

One thing you can say about the Sidhe, they're real party people. I heard singing and laughter coming from the tents, and then several of the women rushed me. They swarmed across the meadow, all bright smiles and flowing hair, and ringed about me. The next thing I knew I was being dragged toward the camp with flowers in my hair and a wreath around my neck. They shoved me down onto some cushions, and some pretty little redhead vaulted into my lap and fed me passion fruit. Faerie women; they can be so coy.

Alex sat with her back to the ogre now, who was busy brushing her hair. The ogre glanced over at me and winked, then gave me the thumbs-up. I hoped it meant the same thing in ogre-ese that it did in English, and not, “As soon as no one's looking, the little girl's an appetizer.”

Josh seemed to be doing a fairly decent job of fending off Badb's advances. Well, at least he was half dressed, and it was the important half too. If Badb's hands roamed anywhere near as much as the redhead who had taken up residence in my lap, that was more of an accomplishment than you might think.

Several musicians walked amongst the troop, and a harpist in a brightly colored cloak sat cross-legged on a carpet at the entrance to the Queen's tent. He was older than the rest, probably the oldest person I'd seen since the Sidhe had taken us in. His long, dark hair was graying, and the lines of his face were deeply etched. There was something about his eyes, a sadness there that made him look even older. He smiled wistfully at me, then plucked a few notes and tilted his head to the side for a moment. He turned a peg on the harp, then, satisfied, began to play an energetic tune. It seemed familiar, as if it were an old favorite that I'd long ago forgotten, but I knew that I'd never heard it before.

The musicians, with the exception of the harpist, cavorted about the group, playing and dancing at the same time. Flutists and fiddlers stomped their feet and twirled about, while a bare-chested man hopped up onto the table and beat out the rhythm on a Celtic drum. The air was thick with music, an almost tangible substance, and I felt as if I could reach out and pluck a chord and hold it there in my hand. Harmonies and subharmonies intertwined, first one dominant, then another. I could have sung whatever I pleased, even off key, and it would have meshed perfectly. The drum roared in my ears, and my body throbbed to its cadence. The melody wrapped itself about me and filled me up until my being hummed in resonance.

I leapt to my feet, bringing the redhead with me, and spun her about as we joined in the revelry. The music was infectious, and we danced, sang, and laughed about the fire while the animals paced back and forth in their cages. I remembered Alison and smiled. The pain of her memory seemed distant now, almost unimaginable. The thought of her kindled a warmth of spirit within me, and a feeling of joy so intense that it was almost painful.

I staggered then, but the song swept me up again and pulled me along in its wake. I wanted to stop, to rest, but the music would not let go. It called to me, commanded me, forced itself upon me and ravished me with the promise of bliss and nirvana. Extreme pleasure and pain are but opposite sides of the same coin, and that coin tottered on its edge so that I laughed and cried, and couldn't tell the difference.

The cords in my neck stood out as I tried to scream. I arched my back and flung my arms out wide as I was pulled up onto my toes and stretched almost to the breaking point. I felt the agony of Alison's loss as if it

had just happened, as if I stood on the curb and watched as her car wrapped itself around the telephone pole. Ecstasy wrapped itself about anguish as I saw my mom, sneaking into my room at night when she thought I was asleep to kiss me goodnight. Then misery again as she accepted the folded flag at my dad's funeral. Elation when Michelle Sands agreed to go to the senior prom with me; grief as my grandfather lay wasting away in his sickbed. One by one the best and worst moments of my life engulfed my spirit, tearing at my soul so that the old wounds bled freely, then cleansing and healing my battered psyche.

Something burned like a white-hot flame in the pit of my stomach; or maybe it was the chill of bitter frostbite. It spread from there, snaking through my spine and diffusing outward to my fingertips and toes and to the top of my head. The flame fed upon the memories, both good and bad, building in intensity until I couldn't contain it any longer. A burst of blinding light radiated outward in ever widening concentric circles from where I stood. Wave after radiant wave issued forth from the nexus that I had become, and finally I found my voice and screamed myself raw.

The Sidhe caught by the blast were thrown to the ground. The shock wave buffeted the tents and trees, rattled the animal cages, and hurled tables about, spilling food and drink everywhere. It ceased suddenly as, spent, I collapsed in a heap to the grass. I watched weakly as the harpist, the only person apparently unaffected by what had happened, stood slowly and made his way to my side.

"I am the bard, Thomas the Rhymer," he said as he knelt beside me. "Feel better now?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Leanne rushed from the Queen's tent and shoved the bard out of the way. "What have you done now, Thomas?"

Thomas adjusted his cloak and seemed to blush a little. "I just put him in touch with his feelings. I had no idea that his feelings would touch back."

Leanne looked really miffed. "He's an Eternal, Thomas."

The bard raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That explains a lot, then."

I tried to sit up, but only managed to prop myself up on my elbows. "Thomas the Rhymer," I mumbled. "What kind of Sesame Street name is that?"

If Thomas was offended, it didn't show. "You never answered my question, son. How do you feel?"

I looked around at the Sidhe picking themselves up off the ground, righting tables and clearing the spilled food. Josh and Alex joined our little group, and stood staring down at me with obvious concern. How did I feel? I thought of Alison, and Dad, and Grandpa. It didn't hurt anymore. I could accept their loss now without the chill and heartache that usually accompanied my remembrance of them. Besides, now that I was dead too we could be one big happy family again. "Actually, I feel pretty good."

Josh shook his head. "That was quite the temper tantrum you threw."

He was more right than he knew. I had yelled and screamed and thrown things around until I had drained myself of all that negative energy, and now I felt better. Maybe a little weak, but better. "Could someone help me up?"

Josh and Leanne both grabbed a hand and pulled me to my feet. I swayed a little, but quickly found my equilibrium.

"If I had known you were an Eternal I might have been a little more gentle," Thomas said.

I noticed he said "might have," not "would have."

"You should have known better, Thomas. I thought wisdom came with age?" An enchantress stepped between Leanne and Thomas. And I don't mean that she was just drop-dead gorgeous either. She was a real enchantress--tall, slim, and regal. Willowy, with milky-white skin, sparkling blue eyes, and rosebud lips. Her hair was golden, and flowed about her face in loose spiral curls, playing about her shoulders and falling to the small of her back. A flimsy, green silk dress that should have been opaque but somehow wasn't hugged the contours of her body. Cherry blossoms fell at her feet seemingly from out of thin air, and two small sprites flitted about her head trailing sparkling dust. That's right--sprites. They were no more than two inches tall, and looked exactly like Tinkerbell from Peter Pan. At least I think they did; they never stayed still for more

than an instant so it was hard to get a good look at them.

Thomas looked suddenly sheepish. I got the feeling that he was a man not easily chastised, but this woman knocked him down a peg or two without even trying.

She held out her hand to me. "I'm Aine. Lhiannan has told me about you and your predicament, James. I think we can help."

Well, at least she didn't call me Bumper. I took her dainty hand and kissed it lightly, barely brushing it with my lips. The last thing I wanted to do was slobber on royalty.

Her eyes sparkled--honest--and she smiled at me. "You do that like a pro, James."

I smiled back. "I watched a lot of old Errol Flynn movies as a kid." I was pretty certain I lost her there, but she never let on. Now that's class.

I caught a glimpse of Leanne from the corner of my eye. Her skin had gone bone-white again, and her eyes seemed to burn with an inner malevolence. It suddenly dawned on me that she might be the jealous type. I dropped Aine's hand as if it were a radioactive isotope. Aine laughed lightly. *She* had known what she was doing, even if I hadn't. I was in big trouble now. Even Alex looked at me and shook her head. You know, when you're dead, wishing you were is kind of counterproductive.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Josh came to the rescue. "Exactly what kind of help are you offering?"

Aine gave Josh a look that was decidedly cold. Even the sprites paused to glare at him for a moment. I don't think she liked him interrupting her little game, and I instinctively sensed a rivalry between her and Leanne. By instinctively, I'm talking about the male instinct for self-preservation. Now it was Josh's turn to look uncomfortable. I made a mental note to make it up to him somehow. Maybe a nice T-bone or a flea collar. I wasn't exactly up on my shapeshifter gift-giving etiquette.

Aine turned her attention back to me, a smile once more softening her features. "We'll provide you with a guide, and weapons, of course."

"What about troops?" Leanne asked. Her tone was cold, but her coloring was better. I hoped that meant she was only pissed at Aine, and had let me off the hook.

Aine's tone seemed somewhat condescending as she answered Leanne. "I'll ask for volunteers, of course, but you know how it is. The Sidhe rarely concern themselves with what goes on in Darkside. It's really none of our affair."

"Darkside?" I asked Josh.

"It's what our people call your realm," he whispered. "And it's not exactly a flattering term, either."

"So you're just going to let them take another Innocent." Leanne stepped in close to Aine, forcing the Queen to take a step back. I could see real fear in the faerie woman's eyes. The sprites had retreated to hide behind their mistress.

"We are practically immortal," Aine tried to defend herself. "Why should we risk ourselves for these...humans?"

The commotion had attracted a crowd. Many of the Sidhe milled about, trying to look as if they weren't paying attention when it was obvious that they were. From the faint whispers of conversation that I overheard, it seemed the majority sided with their Queen.

"The Sidhe have gone to war over less," Leanne spat back. "Since when have the Faerie feared death? You know as well as I do why you don't want to get involved. You won't even look at her."

It was true. The Faerie had treated Alex as if she didn't exist. Even Luchtaine had ignored her when he'd saved us from the Dark Sidhe. Only the ogre had paid Alex any attention, and he had wandered over at the commotion and stood just behind her.

"How dare you!" Aine sputtered.

"No! How dare *you*." Leanne raged now with the demon barely under control. "The Sidhe go by many names, all save the one they never admit to. You are the Fallen. You've lost that spark of the divine, and you

can't stand to see what you've lost in *her*."

"And what of you, dear Lhiannan?"

I winced. I'd seen that look on a woman's face before. I'd heard that tone of voice, and knew that whatever Aine said next, it wouldn't be pretty.

"You were once one of us, before the demon took you. There is even less of the divine in you; how can you bear to look upon this child?"

"That's right, Cousin. I was of the Sidhe until you sent me as your envoy to the Korrigan, knowing full well he was a vampire. If you could give up one of your own so easily, how difficult could it be to sacrifice a human Innocent?"

Show of hands; am I the only one who hadn't seen this coming? No wonder I had trouble placing Leanne's nationality.

"I'll not force anyone to accompany you on your quest," Aine replied haughtily. If Leanne had been trying to shame the Queen into helping us, it hadn't worked. She seemed more self-righteous now than ever. "And I doubt any will be fool enough to volunteer."

"I'll go," a deep baritone boomed from behind us.

I turned to see the ogre standing there with a massive, gnarled hand on Alex's shoulder. He shrugged. "I like the little girl."

Alex patted his hand, and he jutted out his lower jaw and curled his upper lip, exposing two curved tusks and a row of jagged teeth. I think he was smiling.

"Good then. Charlie will join you. An ogre's as good as ten men," Aine said with a wave of her hand as she turned to leave.

"I'll go, too," Thomas said.

The Queen halted suddenly, one of those dramatic pauses where the head snaps up and the eyes widen in shock. She did it rather convincingly, actually. Aine turned slowly to face Thomas, still playing out the scene like a soap opera diva.

"I am a bard, after all," Thomas said gently. "This promises to be a heroic tale. It's only fitting that someone be there to record the deed. Who better than I?"

"No, Thomas." Aine's voice lacked the tone of command. She pleaded with him not to do this. "You're too old to go traipsing about on a fool's quest. Stay here, with me."

The bard shoved a lock of his graying hair from his eyes and settled the brightly colored cloak more comfortably about his shoulders. "I think I have stayed far too long already. It's time I rejoined my own people."

Aine made as if to say something, then hesitated, started again, and finally wheeled about and made her way into her tent in a swirl of cherry blossoms and agitated sprites.

Leanne put her arm about Thomas's shoulder. "Are you sure, old friend?"

The bard looked on the vampire with fondness. "I'm sure."

"That couldn't have been easy."

"Not for either of us," he answered, then wandered off and engaged another of the Sidhe in conversation.

"Is someone going to tell me what just happened?" I asked once he'd left.

Charlie the ogre growled suddenly. "You are the Eternal?"

I realized he hadn't really growled; he'd just cleared his throat. "Yep, that's me."

Charlie sat suddenly, crossing his legs, and Alex sat in his lap. "You do not know the story of Thomas the Rhymer?"

"Never heard of him."

The ogre raised a bushy eyebrow. "You are not like the other Eternals."

"It's my minty fresh breath." I like to keep people off balance, especially people who are ten feet tall and have little horns growing out of their collarbones.

Charlie raised his other eyebrow, but let the comment pass. "Back in the Before, when the realms of Summerland and Darkside were more closely joined, Thomas of Ercilduone lay plucking his lute among the trees.

"Sounds kinky," I interrupted. Ogres must have selective hearing, or incredible patience. Charlie continued with his tale as if he'd never heard.

"Queen Aine appeared before him riding a white horse, and Thomas became enamored of her. He played sweet and artful melodies to win her, and the Queen in turn was smitten. As she dismounted, Thomas made to kiss her. She warned him that if he did, he would be bound to her for seven years.

"Thomas did not hesitate, and afterward followed her to Summerland. The bard stayed among the Sidhe, and ate of a special apple that gave him the gift of prophecy. When his seven years were up he returned to his people. His poems sang with new eloquence, and his prophecies brought him renown, for he had learned to weave magic with his music and rhymes. He remained in Darkside until his seventy-eighth year, when two white deer called him home to the land of the Sidhe. Here he has remained until this day."

"Wow, he doesn't look a day over two hundred," I said.

"Time passes slowly here," Leanne said. I could tell she was still angry; her skin still had that polished marble quality. I wasn't certain if she was angry at Aine, at me, or at both of us. I decided to play it safe and focus her attention on someone else.

"If you don't mind my asking, what kind of name is Charlie for an ogre?"

Charlie harrumphed. "I suppose you were expecting something like Smash, or Crunch."

I bobbed my head up and down in agreement.

The ogre showed his teeth again. "You should meet my sister, Rosebud."

I tried not to laugh, but couldn't help myself. Charlie chortled--I never thought I'd get to use that word in a sentence, or harrumphed either, but that's what he did. Even Leanne cracked a smile.

"Aine promised us weapons," Josh said, ever the pragmatic one. "I think I'll see what I can dig up. Faerie weapons are *so* cool." He wandered off looking for toys.

Charlie started to braid Alex's hair. I don't know how he managed--he had fingers the size of bratwursts.

"My circle of friends has certainly become eccle...eckle...um, weird lately," I muttered. "All we need now are a couple of hobbits."

Leanne smiled and put her arm around my waist. I guess she'd decided to forgive me. "Don't be silly, dear. There's no such thing as hobbits."

I heard a bass chuckle from behind me and turned and glared at Charlie, but the ogre had that innocent look on his face. He wasn't fooling me though; I knew it wasn't Alex.

"There's still several hours until it's dark. We'll move out at night," Leanne said.

"Why at night?" I didn't relish the thought of a stroll through the land of creepy crawlies in the dark, and didn't see the logic in it.

"There's not much cover for the rest of the way. The land is rocky, and mostly open. Here, among my...among the faerie, I am protected by their magic, but once we leave this place, the sunlight..."

I kissed her forehead. "What the hell, it might even be romantic."

"The moon *is* almost full." Leanne nestled her head into my shoulder. "The way should be well lit. Besides, this is Summerland. Some of the most foul creatures hunt by day."

I spent most of the afternoon splashing around in the water with Leanne. She said it had been ages since she'd been to the beach. I didn't inquire as to how many ages. Hey, I was just recently out of the

doghouse. I did tease her about her attempts at sunbathing, though. It's not like she could actually tan or anything, but she liked the feeling of normalcy it gave her. Bear showed up, splashed around for a while, then did that dog thing where they shake themselves off all over you when you least expect it. By the way, even spirit dogs smell when they're wet.

Josh met me and Leanne toward dusk as we made our way back to the tents to eat. He was accompanied by a tall, wiry, blond male dressed mostly in black leather.

"James, this is Goibnu," Josh introduced me to his companion. "He's the smith here, and you gotta see what he did to my Beretta."

Goibnu was darker complexioned than most of the Sidhe, as if his time spent at the forge had fire-hardened him. His eyes were startling. They were such a pale blue as to be almost opaque, and I have to admit they really creeped me out. I held out my hand to the smith, but he ignored it. Some of the Sidhe were standoffish, but he seemed downright rude. Of course, if I had a name like Goibnu I'd probably be a little touchy myself.

Josh handed me the Beretta. "Go ahead, fire it."

The gun didn't look any different--it was a classic black metal Beretta with brown pistol grips and a fifteen-round mag--but it tingled when I held it in my hand. I pulled back the slide and chambered a round, then thumbed the safety off.

"Aim for that daisy over there," Josh suggested.

I gave him a look that hinted at what my odds were of hitting the target he'd selected. The daisy was about twenty yards away, and Josh had obviously never seen me shoot. I was lucky if I could hit the broadside of a barn, from the inside, on a good day.

I held the Beretta out and sighted along the short barrel, then squeezed the trigger. There was the barest whisper of sound, and then the daisy exploded in a rain of petals.

"Neat, eh?" Josh said. "It's so quiet. I've never even seen a silencer that good. But even better, it never runs out of ammo, and you can't miss."

"Cool, just like in the spaghetti westerns." I picked off three more daisies in rapid succession. I barely aimed; just point and shoot. The damn thing didn't even kick.

"It's an ugly little weapon," Goibnu finally spoke, his disdain evident. "Still, most of our races have a strong aversion to iron and lead, so it should be quite effective."

"He's modified the shotgun the same way, and he gave me these clothes," Josh added. "They act like light armor, and they stretch with me when I morph." He wore a deep blue, almost purple long-sleeved sweater. It was about medium weight, and tightly woven, and it tucked into black cargo pants that seemed like a cross between denim and leather. Soft leather boots came up to about midcalf, and had a row of heavy silver buckles running along the outer edge.

"I've designed the same type of clothing for you," the smith said. "The shapeshifter has told me that you've been rather unlucky with clothing so far."

"Thank you." Leanne curtsied to the smith. "We appreciate--"

"Queen's orders," Goibnu replied roughly. "I've left the rest of your clothing with Thomas. You can pick it up when you leave." He turned quickly and strode back toward his own tent.

"Nice fellow," I said.

Leanne sighed. "Not all of the Sidhe are as enamored with humans as I am. Goibnu treats Thomas the same way, and Thomas saved his life, twice."

"Well, I've never been one to stay where I'm not wanted," I decided. "It'll be dark soon. I say we eat, collect our gear, and move out."

"Sounds like a plan," Josh agreed. Leanne simply nodded.

We found Thomas arguing with another of the Sidhe in front of the food tables. The bard had a determined look on his face, and the muscles in his jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth. The Sidhe he argued with looked just as obstinate, however, and the two seemed to have reached a stalemate.

“What seems to be the problem, Thomas?” Leanne asked.

“There’s no problem,” the bard growled.

The second man rolled his eyes. He was downright skinny, in an undernourished-looking way, and his hair was silver. And I don’t mean gray either. He wore a light brown sweater and baggy brown pants, though I’m sure the pants would have been more form fitting if the man had any meat on his bones. There was a large pouch at his side, and he kept doing and undoing the clasp in frustration.

Leanne had an amused look on her face. She seemed to get a kick out of the Thomas’s petulant little boy act. She sighed, and turned to the second man. “Dianchecht?”

“The Queen has ordered me to rejuvenate him, but the stubborn old fool refuses.”

“Hmph,” Thomas snorted. “Why would she think this time would be any different?”

A look of unease flashed across Leanne’s pale face for a moment; then it was gone. “Maybe this time it’s for the best, Thomas. Things could get difficult, and there is more at stake here than your pride, or honor.”

Thomas glanced up at Leanne. I swear he looked hurt, as if he’d expected that Leanne would be the one person who would understand. Finally, he slumped his shoulders in defeat.

“What foul concoction do you have for me, Dianchecht? Although I swear it would probably be an improvement over your wife’s cooking.” Thomas winked at me, and I realized that the two were close friends. “It’s no wonder you’re so skinny, and you a master physician.”

Dianchecht winced and handed Thomas a vial of bright, cherry-red liquid. “Thank the gods I married her for her beauty.”

Thomas pulled the stopper on the vial, glanced at Leanne once more with some deep, hidden meaning, and downed the elixir. Nothing happened. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” The physician grinned wickedly. “I’ve just added a little geis to the incantation. Before it will work you have to stop by my tent and eat three of my wife’s strawberry tarts.”

Thomas blanched. “You are a cruel and heartless man.”

“Maybe next time you won’t give me such a hard time, you old goat.” This time it was Dianchecht who winked at me. “Besides, that’s three tarts *I* don’t have to eat.”

We followed Thomas to his tent, where he handed me the clothes Goibnu had made for me. There was a deep blue sweater, the same style as the one Josh wore, and another in burgundy. I quickly changed into the burgundy one, and a pair of black cargo pants, and pulled the pants down over the boots to hide the buckles. The boots were just a little too “Road Warrior” for my taste.

Thomas looked strangely at me when I asked Leanne to leave the tent while I changed, but what can I say--I’m bashful. I could tell there was something he wanted to say, but he held his tongue, and I didn’t know him well enough to draw it out of him. He tossed some belongings, including his harp and flute, into a travel pack that he slung over his shoulder, and we met Leanne and the others at Dianchecht’s tent.

The physician handed the bard three of the scariest-looking tarts I’d ever seen. The crusts were blackened in some spots, and uncooked in others. The filling looked like that mystery green Jell-O with bits of God-knows-what floating in it that they used to serve in the cafeteria in high school, and they smelled like toilet mints.

“At least they’re small,” I said.

If looks could kill, I’d be dead-dead right now.

Thomas choked down the first tart in one bite, or should I say swallow. He was smart enough not to chew--much. Still, his face went through some of the most amazing contortions, even after downing most of a mug of wine that Dianchecht quickly handed him. He looked warily at the second tart.

"I could hold your nose for you," I said. Strike two. I'd be dead-dead and burning in hell.

Thomas finished off the second tart, but this one was rubbery and he actually had to chew it several times. His face looked like a frog's underbelly--all white and slimy from perspiration.

"It could be worse," Josh said. "There could have been four tarts."

At least I'd have company in hell.

The bard managed to down the last tart, but in all honesty I think it put up a heroic struggle. As a matter of fact I was pretty sure it was going to come back up again, and wondered if that would still satisfy the geis. Thomas was tougher than he looked though, and managed to keep the beastie down.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash and an acrid puff of smoke. Thomas stood before us a new man. Or more accurately, a young man. I have to say I was kind of disappointed--not in the new Thomas, but in the transformation process. I was expecting more of a Lon Chaney, Jeckyll-and-Hyde facial convulsion, and all I got was a cheap sideshow magician's trick.

Thomas looked to be no older than twenty-five. His black hair had lost its gray, and his weathered face was now smooth and unlined. I think I even saw a few pimples. His steely gray eyes still reflected an intelligence and experience beyond his seeming years. He stood a little taller now, and more at ease as all the acquired aches and pains of old age faded away. Thomas was a handsome man, and well built, and I'm saying that as a man secure in his heterosexuality.

"Feel better now?" I asked him. Hey, turnabout is fair play.

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "You're not like the other Eternals, are you?"

"It's his minty fresh breath," Charlie said earnestly from behind me.

For a five hundred and twenty pound, ten-foot-tall ogre, Charlie moved pretty quietly when he wanted to. I turned slowly, trying to pretend his sudden appearance hadn't scared the bejeezus out of me.

Alex grinned down at me from her vantage point atop the ogre's shoulders. "Hey Bumper, what's up?"

"My blood pressure," I said. "Seeing as we're all here, and the sun's pretty much gone down, we might as well move out."

Josh slung the shotgun over his shoulder and picked up the backpack Leanne had been carrying with the food in it. He'd discarded most of the arsenal he'd brought from home. Now that he had the faerie weapons, I guess he considered the others redundant.

Dianchecht clasped Thomas's arm. "Be well, friend, and remember that you're always welcome here."

"Live well, friend." Thomas smiled. "And try to sneak some real food when your wife's not looking."

We left the faerie camp, the sound of music and revelry fading as the tent spires were lost to view. No one else saw us off. Not even Aine. I would have thought she would say goodbye to Thomas at least, but she never left her tent. Thomas remained quiet and withdrawn for the first hour of the journey.

The forest dwindled to the odd tree dotting gently rolling hills. Fireflies sparked across the landscape--or maybe they were sprites or pixies; I kept thinking of the mundane in a world that had proven to be anything but. Stars, brighter than I'd ever imagined they could be, filled the sky, and an autumn moon had risen in the east, orange and full and so big that it felt as if a few hours' march would take me to it. Even in the ensuing darkness I could make out daisies and lavender, and bluebells that glittered like neon against the deep green of the hillside. Being dead had done wonders for my night vision.

A flame danced suddenly across the hill to our right. I heard a child giggle, and someone whispered in my ear. *Come play*. Another flickered cheerfully over the crest of the next mound. *Play with us*.

All at once the hillside was alive with glittering light, like candles tossed about on the night air. The sound of children at play, laughing and screaming, reminded me of hide-and-seek, and red rover, and red light--green light. *Tag, you're it*.

"Aw nuts," I said. "I don't want to be it." I looked around for someone to tag.

Thomas grabbed me by the wrist. "Will-o-the-wisps," he said, as if that made any sense.

I looked down at his hand on my arm. "That was dumb. Now *you're* it." I laughed and broke away from him. Josh backed away from Leanne and Thomas, and Alex climbed down from Charlie's shoulders. The three of us circled the bard, and the vampire, and the ogre.

"Thomas is it," Josh taunted. "You'll never catch me."

Hide-and-peek, a small voice whispered. *Run, hide!*

Leanne looked worried, although I didn't know why. It's not like she was it or anything, and I was pretty sure she could outrun Thomas.

"Hide-and-peek!" Alex shouted, and the three of us broke and ran for cover.

I lost sight of Josh and Alex, but it didn't matter. They could find their own hiding spots. Someone laughed just in front of me, and a flame flickered near the crest of the next hill. *Follow me. Follow me.* I raced after the sputtering light. They lived around here--they must know all the good places to hide.

I heard music behind me and realized Thomas was singing and playing on his harp. The guy had been old for too long. We weren't playing Ring around the Rosy.

This way. This way.

The hill was steeper now, and I had to hurry to keep up. Somehow Thomas seemed to be getting louder. He was singing some dopey song about love lost or something. I guess it could have been worse--he could have been singing that dumb purple dinosaur song.

Dad and Alison appeared beside me. "James, stop!" Alison said. "You have to stop right now."

"Shhh. You'll give me away." I was getting kind of pissed. Dad I could understand, but Alison should know better. She used to be really good at this game.

Over here. Over here.

I sprinted toward the top of the hill. Just a little farther and they'd never find me. Another ten feet and...if I'd had a wiener dog when I was a kid, I'd have made it. Even dead, a one hundred and eighty pound mutt hitting you broadside is enough to take you off your feet, and then some. Bear hit me high about the shoulders and drove me into the ground. He wouldn't let me up, either, and I just knew Thomas was going to catch me, although I could still hear the fool singing.

As a matter of fact, that's about all I could hear. He was getting really loud now, and the song was one depressing number. Something about some woman who had to spend half of every year in the underworld just because she'd ate a few pomegranate seeds, and when she was gone, the whole world mourned for her. And I thought country music was depressing. The more I listened to the song, the less I felt like playing.

The flames flickered out suddenly, the laughter died, and everything made sense again. Well, at least as much sense as anything had since I'd died. Bear seemed to understand that I was all right now, and let me up. I got to my feet and brushed myself off. The grass in front of me seemed a lot darker than the rest of the hillside. That's when I realized that there was no grass in front of me. The rise of the hill ended in a steep ravine. Just a few more steps and I'd have gone over the edge. Seeing as I'm already dead, it probably would have only hurt like hell, but the will-o-the-wisps didn't know that.

"Thanks, buddy," I said to Bear. He did the doggy sidestep a couple of times, barked that ethereal bark of his, then vanished.

"You'd better rejoin the group, Son," Dad said. Alison was already gone. "They might need you."

I made my way back to the others as quickly as I could. I could still hear Thomas singing, and followed his voice back. Josh arrived a few moments before I did. If he looked half as embarrassed as I did, then I must have looked, um....twice as embarrassed. We waited for a few minutes, but Alex didn't show.

"Alex!" Josh shouted, but there was no answer.

Charlie looked stricken. I hate it when ogres look stricken.

"What's wrong, Charlie?"

"I don't smell her," he said.

"She couldn't have just vanished." Josh said. I knew he was panicked by the way parts of him morphed uncontrollably--fangs, ears, claws--first human, then beast again.

"I don't smell her," Charlie repeated.

"What do you smell, Charlie?"

The ogre looked first at me, then at Josh. "Trolls," he said. "I smell trolls."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Josh had held things together pretty well up until now, considering that the demon Aeshma had his wife and planned to sacrifice her tomorrow night. Maybe he had just put up a good front for Alex's sake. Now that Alex was gone too, he fell apart.

Friend or not, he was a scary sight when he shape-shifted. His red eyes glittered fiercely in the moonlight, and he threw his head back and howled. Bear would have been proud.

Josh gnashed his teeth, then shook his head from side to side. He sniffed at the air, caught the scent, and growled deep in his chest. "Got 'em." He set out at a quick jog, letting his nose...snout, lead him. He didn't bother to wait for us.

"We'd better follow him," Charlie said. "Besides, I think he's going in the right direction."

"It's not like we have a choice," Leanne said. "We have to get Alex back, even if it costs us Sabrina."

"It's not going to cost us anyone." Either I looked very determined, or no one felt like arguing. "We'll get Alex *and* rescue Sabrina. Then we'll all live happily ever after. Got it?"

Charlie slapped me on the back, rattling my teeth. "Got it."

The four of us set out after Josh. I suppose it would have been hard going running over hill and dale in the dark like that if any of us had been human. Leanne had a vampire's stamina; Charlie was ten feet tall, and probably walked faster than we could run; and I...well, as far as I know I was just breathing for show. I guess Thomas was the only real human among us, and being freshly rejuvenated, seemed to be rather enjoying himself.

"Just how much trouble are we actually in?" I asked as we crested another hill. I could still make out Josh just ahead of us.

"Trolls aren't evil," Thomas said. "At least not anymore than your average human."

Somehow, I didn't find that very reassuring.

"Unfortunately they don't think much of Darksiders as a species. They consider us food."

"Great," I said. "It's nice to know that I've evolved into a being that isn't considered one of the four basic food groups." I noticed Charlie sniffing at the wind as he ran. "So what *do* trolls smell like anyway?"

"Kind of earthy," the ogre said. "Like a clump of damp mud with bad gas."

"So *that's* what that was. No offense, Thomas, but I thought maybe those tarts just hadn't settled well."

"Is he always like this?" Thomas asked Leanne.

"No," she said. "He's usually worse."

I heard the enraged roar of some terrible beast, and realized it was Josh. He was out of view just over the next rise where a faint yellow glow lined the pinnacle. I put on a burst of speed and raced over the peak. A stone portal opened up into the side of the next mound, and two torches flickered at the entrance. Josh stood before the portal, an armored troll held aloft by the neck while two others grappled him about the waist.

"Grab 'is legs, ya mooks." The troll's gravelly voice was probably more raspy than usual as Josh throttled the struggling creature.

"I got 'em, boss, I got...oomph!"

I guess he didn't have him. Josh kned the second troll hard in the chest again. He grabbed the third troll by the neck and lifted him as well.

"Look out, boss. He's gonna bang yer heads toge...eeww, dat smarts."

It *was* a rather meaty thud. I could still hear the echo as I arrived at Josh's side.

"Aw, nuts! Dat's it. I quits," the last troll said as he realized reinforcements had arrived.

Josh backed the troll up against the portal. "Where's my daughter?"

"What? That little chocolate morsel?" The troll paled as it dawned on him that his description of the shapeshifter's daughter might not have been the most sympathetic. "Pester and da boyz took her down ta da Burrow just a couple of minutes ago."

Charlie lumbered up beside Josh and me.

"You hear that? Pester. Now *that's* a name," I said. The ogre just shook his head.

"Do ya minds if I has a smoke?" the troll asked when it appeared like we weren't about to kill him, at least not right away. Its leathery tail switched from side to side in obvious agitation. "It calms me nerves."

Josh lunged at the troll, shoved his face to within inches of the frightened creature, and snarled. The troll blinked its huge, saucer-shaped eyes as the shapeshifter's fetid breath assailed its crooked nose. With a howl of frustration, Josh wheeled away and paced back and forth in front of the entrance.

"Smoke 'em if ya got 'em," Leanne told the troll. She blushed as she realized what she'd said. "Vampires spend a lot of time watching the Late Late Show," she confessed.

The troll fumbled beneath the battered breastplate of its armor and came up with a cigarette. He stuck it in the corner of his wide, lipless slit of a mouth, and rooted about in his baggy brown trousers for some matches. Finally, he gave up and lit it on one of the torches that blazed at the entrance to the portal. He had to turn his head sideways to keep his long, pointed nose from catching fire.

"I gots to find me anudder line a work," he said after a long, slow drag.

"Then this is your lucky day," Josh growled, "Because you're our new tour guide." He picked up one of the long hafted spears the troll guards had dropped during the tussle.

The troll coughed up a lungful of smoke that caught him by surprise. "Dey'll kill me fer sure!"

"Then I guess it's just a matter of how soon you want to die," Josh said. He idly snapped the spear in two and picked at his teeth with the jagged end.

The troll blinked, twice. "Follow me, Bawana."

I looked to Thomas and Leanne, but no one seemed to have any better ideas. Charlie looked decidedly uncomfortable. The tunnel would be a tight fit for him.

The troll took another long puff, then flicked the burning ember of his cigarette at his two unconscious comrades. "Tanks fer nutt'n," he muttered, then led the way into the tunnel. Josh followed close behind, and we formed a line--me, Leanne, Thomas, and Charlie--in that order.

The tunnel was narrow, and we were forced to walk single file. The walls were rough-hewn, but cast a pale whitish glow as if coated with some sort of phosphorescent paint. It really messed with your depth perception as it didn't cast any shadows, and I constantly stumbled over the uneven tunnel floor.

"We can't just keep calling you troll. What's your name?" Thomas asked.

"Drat," the troll said. "It was me mudder's name."

I heard Charlie chuckling at the end of the line.

Drat seemed to be having an easier time of it than the rest of us. The tunnel had a rather steep downward slope, and the troll often resorted to resting the back of its gray scaly knuckles on the ground as it walked. Its arms were longer than its bowed, stubby little legs, so it shuffled along at an even keel, slope or no.

Josh smacked his forehead up against a stalactite, roared in pain, and shattered it with a powerful right cross. Drat coughed up ahead, probably choking on his laughter.

Poor Charlie practically had to crawl along the tunnel floor. "How much farther?" he asked after several minutes of travel.

"We's just about dere," Drat said. "Maybe anudder couple a minutes, den we'll be at da Burrow." He picked up the pace, and we had to scramble to keep up.

The glow in front of us seemed brighter now, and a light breeze ruffled my hair. I took it as a sign that we'd reached our destination. Apparently, so did Josh. He grabbed Drat by the buckles that secured the troll's breastplate in place, and lifted him from the ground.

"How humiliat'n," Drat said as Josh carried him beyond the tunnel exit and out into a gigantic cavern.

We stood on a rock promontory that jutted out from a cliff face for about twenty feet, and looked down over a valley another thousand feet below. The ceiling of the great cavern was another two hundred or so feet overhead, and glimmered with a soft, pale orange light that bathed the landscape in its warm glow. Monuments to great trolls of the past had been carved into the cavern walls, some reaching from floor to ceiling so that these colossal stone gods looked down on the valley. Massive marble steps inset with ancient runes led from the promontory down into the basin.

The Burrow spread out across the cavern floor. Stone towers several hundred feet in height reached toward the ceiling and interconnected with each other at various levels by a myriad of intricate archways and bridges. Apparently trolls had a real thing for bridges.

Smaller buildings, none more than a few stories high, dotted the landscape between the towers. All of the structures were either oval or hexagonal; there wasn't a square shape to be seen. Everything had been constructed of slate gray or white stone and inlaid with more of the trollish artwork. Flowering trees grew in abundance, and creeping ivy wound its way up most of the towers.

"Some burrow," I said in awe.

Charlie stood and stretched, just happy to be free of the confines of the tunnel. "Not quite the dirt mounds and hovels you expected, is it?"

I couldn't think of a witty comeback, and he was too big to hit, so I ignored him.

Josh gave Drat a rough shake. "Where are they keeping Alex?"

"Geez, I dunno. I'm just a tunnel guard, an a lousy one at dat."

Josh walked to the edge of the promontory and held the troll out over the precipice.

Drat's eyes widened to the point where they took up most of his face now, and his tail twitched from side to side. "Normally dey jus takes new food to da storehouse, but see'n as she's a Innocent an all, dey might a taken 'er right to da Chieftain's Hall."

"And where would that be?"

"Over dere, between dem two towers." Drat pointed to a short, circular building near the center of the Burrow.

"That white, three-story one?" I asked. I wanted to make sure I had the right one, as the troll's gnarled talon was shaking so badly he could have been pointing to any one of three buildings.

"Yep, dat's it."

Josh pulled the troll back from the ledge and set him down. "Take us there."

"Dere's a shock," Drat muttered as he led the way down the stone steps.

We all fell into line once again, and reached the cavern floor in about ten minutes. I kept thinking about what a bitch it was going to be to climb back up those stairs. A cobblestone road led from the bottom step into the Burrow proper, but we made for the tree line instead. The last thing we needed was to come upon a bunch of trolls who no doubt would take offense to our being there.

Josh had manhandled the three sentries without much difficulty, and seemed to have Drat under control, but make no mistake about it--trolls are tough little buggers. If he hadn't been so enraged I'm not sure Josh could have handled Drat and his comrades. Catching them off guard hadn't hurt any either.

I caught Leanne's eye as we made our way through the lightly wooded forest toward the first of the towers. She smiled and gave me a light peck on the cheek, but didn't say anything. She'd been positively quiet since leaving the Faerie encampment. Thomas hadn't exactly been a blabbermouth either. I wondered what history they shared. The look that had passed between them when Thomas had been forced to rejuvenate had spoken volumes, and being the nosy type I was itching to be let in on the secret. Unfortunately we had more pressing problems at the moment.

We came upon the first two towers. They were similar in architecture to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and rose about twenty-five stories into the air. At the base of each tower was a piazza, dotted by several fountains with statues of trolls on all fours with water shooting out of their butts.

"Nice," I said.

"Dem's Rump Towers," Drat said. "Rump's loaded. He's hoarded more gold den Rumpelstiltskin."

I noticed there weren't many trolls about. I saw maybe one or two wandering about high up in one of the towers, but none on the grounds.

"Most of us goes Topside when it gets dark," Drat told me when I asked him about it. "Da Burrow's nice and all, but it can get a little claustrophobic on ya after a time. Besides, Topside's where all the good eat'n is at."

We stayed to the wooded area surrounding the towers, and moved toward the center of the Burrow. Trolls were big on trees, and hadn't cleared them away like most human cities do. Of course trolls didn't need parking lots either.

The grass seemed manicured, as if someone had purposely planted a forest on a golf course, and the buildings were placed to complement the lay of the land. Aesthetically, it was beautiful. Strategically, it was a disaster. Even for an amateur like myself it was easy to move from building to building all the while staying within the cover of the forest.

It took us about an hour's march to reach the Chieftain's Hall. I peered over a low-lying bush at the entrance to the building. Stone steps led up to a set of double doors, in front of which two sentries stood guard. The sentries wore full plate armor with a light chain mail arrangement that covered their tails. They each held long hafted halberds, and stood roughly at attention, their bowed legs as straight as they could manage. Conical-shaped helmets sat atop melon-shaped heads, and their long, pointed ears stuck out like winged ornaments at either side of the helms.

"Okay, how do we take out the sentries without sounding the alarm?" I asked. There was about a fifty-foot clearing between us and the entrance.

Josh drew the Beretta that Goibnu had modified.

"Do we have to kill them?" I couldn't handle the thought of killing in cold blood. It was bad enough killing the Dark Sidhe--at least they had tried to kill me. But these two, they were just doing their job. I had a hard time seeing them as evil. After all, Drat seemed personable enough.

"Do you have any better ideas?" Josh seemed tired. He'd been in werebeast shape now for over an hour, and I knew how much energy that took. He raised the pistol when no one said anything, but Charlie reached out and pushed it down at the last moment.

Josh made to protest, but the ogre raised a cucumber-sized finger to its lips and said, "Shhh." Charlie

peeked around the bush for a last good look. He waited until both sentries had looked off to the side as they scanned their surroundings, then suddenly leaped over the bush and landed on the steps in front of the sentries in three quick strides. He slammed the two trolls together hard, then tossed the unconscious bodies over the low walls at either side and into the flowerbeds that ran along the steps. The rest of us were up and running before Charlie made it through the doors.

"Damn, I had no idea ogres could move that fast," I said as we took up positions just inside the corridor.

"It's something we like to keep a secret," Charlie said. "It never hurts to have people underestimate you."

I thought about the way most people assumed that crocodiles were slow, sluggish creatures on land, when in reality they could run at about thirty miles an hour or so. "Yep, I can see where that'd come in handy."

Luckily for us there were no sentries inside. The corridor ran around in a circle along the perimeter of the building, with doors evenly spaced along the inside walls.

Josh grabbed Drat by the scruff of the neck. "Which door? And no tricks; I'm not as kindhearted as Charlie and James."

"Tell me about it," Drat mumbled, but led us stealthily down the corridor to the third door in line. "Ya jus goes tru here, and den on ta da next room, and dat's da chief's chambers. If she's here, dat's where she'll be."

"After you," Josh said.

Drat sighed. "Well stake me in sunlight, sometimes ya just can't win fer lose'n." Drat pushed open the door. The antechamber was in total darkness.

"She's in there," Josh said. His ears morphed from beast to human and back again. "I can smell her."

"Me too," Charlie said.

"Me three." My own nose was pretty good now, when I knew what it was I was smelling.

Josh made to step through the door, but Thomas held him back. "My nose might not be as good as the three of you, but I smell a trap."

"What choice do I have?" Josh said. "I know she's in there. I can't just stay out here."

He had a point. "Let me go in first," I said. I'm already dead. What's the worst that can happen to me?"

"Dey can capture youse and torture youse fer all eternity."

Trolls really could be irritating little creatures.

Josh handed me the Beretta and readied the shotgun for himself. Leanne looked pale again, though I didn't know if it was because the demon had let loose, or she was just worried for me. Thomas drew a dagger from the scabbard at his side. For a musician, he looked pretty tough.

I gave Josh the nod, then dove through the door, tucked into a roll, and came to my feet. I thought I looked pretty cool, if I do say so myself. I glanced about the room for signs of a trap, but as far as I could tell I was alone. Even in the darkness I could see pretty well--you know, me being dead and all. I pulled my lighter from my pocket and lit one of the torches that lined the wall. It was well soaked and caught right away. I used the torch to light three more. Josh followed me in, and the rest of the gang was just behind him. We made our way toward the door at the far end of the room.

There was a sudden shimmer effect as close to forty trolls stepped out from the wall. Did you know that trolls could blend into their surroundings when standing up against rock or stone, kind of like a chameleon? Neither did I. Josh roared, but was halted in his tracks as several spears pricked at his chest.

"Don't even tink about it," Drat said, a smug look on his face.

"I should have let Josh drop you over the side of the stairway," I told the troll.

Drat lit up another cigarette, borrowed a spear from one of his comrades, and pricked Josh in the throat

with it. He took a long drag, then blew the smoke in the shapeshifter's face. "Change. Now," he ordered.

There was the sound of bones cracking, and joints popping, and then Josh seemed to melt in on himself until he stood before us looking human again. His new clothes still fit perfectly.

Have you ever watched those old, old jungle movies? The ones where the cannibals capture the good guys and then tie them hand and foot to poles and carry them like hanging meat? Well, it's just as humiliating as it looks. The trolls propped the shafts on their shoulders, and carried Josh, Thomas, Leanne and myself into the next room. Charlie was much too big to carry, so they settled for tying his hands behind his back, hobbling his feet and wrapping him in twenty or thirty turns of rope. They dragged him unceremoniously before us.

At least we'd been right. Alex was here, sitting at a heavy, round, oak table and playing poker with three other trolls. By the gold circlet that surrounded one of the troll's warty brow, I'd have to guess that he was the chieftain. A small fortune in gold and jewels sat before each of the trolls, but by far the largest pile was laid out before Alex. They were losing to her, and losing badly. I guess no one had ever told them not to play with their food.

Alex looked up from her hand as we were carried into the room. A slight frown creased her forehead as she saw her father and the rest of us trussed up and swaying from the poles the trolls set into stands made for just that purpose. I have to admit, it was quite an entrance.

"Hey, Alex," I said. "Don't worry. We're here to rescue you."

CHAPTER NINE

Troll dungeons aren't as bad as you might think. They're actually quite accommodating. We were placed in a cell on the ground floor of one of the low-rise buildings. It was clean and airy, with a large, barred window cut into the wall that looked out over a lovely meadow. Several feather mattresses were laid out in stone alcoves, and the toilet--a hole cut into the floor--even had a short, waist-high barrier around it for privacy. Of course knowing trolls, it could have been a stock pen and not a dungeon. I tried to convince the guard that free-range humans were better eating, but he ignored me.

The troll chieftain had been livid at seeing the way Thomas had been trussed up. Apparently bards are sacrosanct--you know--untouchable. Well, that's not exactly true either. You can touch them; you just can't abuse them. Thomas was untied after promising that he wouldn't try to escape, or aid us in our escape attempts. Come to think of it, that's probably the reason the cell was so nice. Thomas had insisted on being locked up with the rest of us.

"You are aware that the child is an Innocent?" Thomas had asked Rant, the chieftain.

"Of course.

"If you eat her, you'll have both sides out for your head. The Daemon won't take lightly to your having deprived them of the havoc they could wreak if they turned her, and the humans--well, they need all the help they can get.

Rant's bushy brows climbed his forehead in astonishment. "Eat her? Who said anything about eatin' her? I'm going ta *marry* her."

"Oh," Thomas said. "That's different."

If you think Thomas looked stunned, you should've seen Josh's face.

"Listen here, you sawed-off, wart-covered, garbage-eating, child-molesting little creep..." Parts of Josh morphed spasmodically, sprouting fur and talons, then reverted to normal. "If you think I'm going to let you marry my daughter..."

Rant stepped to within a pace of Josh, who was still bound and on his knees before the troll chieftain. "*Youse* I'm going ta eat," he said. "And I am *not* wart-covered."

I stared out through the bars and into the dungeon proper. Charlie had been shackled to the wall just across from us because he had been too big to fit through the door that led into our cell. Even so, he had to stand with his head bowed and his chin against his chest to keep from cracking his skull on the ceiling. He

looked pretty pathetic, and the glow from the charcoal brazier set in the middle of the room only cast his features in shadow and made him look all the more so. Alex was being kept in the bridal suite. Leanne assured us she was safe there; Rant wouldn't touch her until after they were officially married. Of course, then all bets were off.

The Blood Moon must be a real humdinger of a Summerland holiday, because Rant had set the wedding date to coincide with the celestial event. It certainly was a busy day for us. We had until nightfall to break out of jail, grab Alex *before* the nuptials, then hightail it to Tae Con Ra to use her as bait and rescue her mother. Don't you just hate it when you get invited to two good parties on the same day?

Josh paced back and forth in front of the window, then finally stopped in front of Thomas, who reclined on one of the bunks. "You can leave any time you like. Can't you do something to break us out of here?"

Thomas propped himself up on an elbow. He looked pained. "I can't. I promised."

Josh snarled and stormed back to the window. The snarl sounded worse when he was in human form--it was more contemptuous. He turned on me next. "What about you, Eternal?"

"What can I do?"

"You're a damned Eternal," he said. "What *can't* you do?"

Leanne approached the frustrated shapeshifter and put an arm about his shoulder. "He's new, Josh. He doesn't know what he can do. He doesn't believe yet."

Josh stared the vampire in the eyes, his face seemingly harder than even her own. "Then teach him."

Leanne shook her head. "There isn't time."

Josh shrugged Leanne away and went back to the window. We left him alone with his despair.

I went over to my own bunk and lay down, racking my brains for a way out. I mean, how hard could it be? The trolls didn't seem all that bright, and with my speed, and Leanne's for that matter, we should be able to overpower the few guards quite easily. All we had to do was get them to open the cell door. Unfortunately, that was the problem. Two guards stood at the bottom of the stone stairway that led up and out of the dungeon--even though we were on the ground floor there were still stairs that led up and out of the dungeon. Go figure.

The guards must have been deaf. I tried every trick I could think of to get them to open the cell. I had the knowledge of past masters to draw on--from the Three Stooges to the Dukes of Hazzard; nothing worked. The trolls must have seen the same shows.

Thomas and Leanne huddled together for a little while in conversation. The bard had to be even worse with women than I was, because he pissed her off in no time. Leanne stormed off in a huff and joined Josh at the window. Thomas came and sat on the corner of my bunk. He just sat there, staring at me. Finally I couldn't take it any longer.

"What?"

"Like it or not, you're the leader of this little group. They're all looking to you for a way out of this."

He was right, and I knew he was right, but I didn't have to like it. How in the hell did I get to be leader anyway? "I'm working on it," I said.

"Work faster." Thomas shrugged, then looked over to the window where Leanne comforted Josh.

"What's the story with you two?" I asked. Okay, maybe I was just being nosy, and maybe there were more pressing things for me to worry about than my girlfriend's old...associations, but my mind was revving in neutral right now. A little distraction couldn't hurt. Sometimes your mind works best on a problem when you don't force the issue.

Thomas cocked an eyebrow at me, then sighed. "We go back a long way, her and I."

"No. Really?"

He blushed.

“Come on, you’re a storyteller; tell me a story.” I could see that Thomas wondered if filling me in on his past with Leanne was a particularly bright idea. I’m sure he didn’t want to, but everyone else seemed to know. In the end, he probably told me out of a sense of fair play more than anything else.

“Like all stories, the tale of Thomas the Rhymer became distorted through the ages. It was Aine that brought me to Summerland, but the Sidhe are a...promiscuous race. I soon found my attentions divided between Aine and Lhiannan. It was Lhiannan who made me the bard that I am, who taught me the ways of power. She had the gift of inspiration, and whoever it was that she loved burned bright with it. As my talents and my fame grew, so too did my standing with the Sidhe. The Queen came to see me as more than just a dalliance, but as a status symbol. She became jealous of Lhiannan, and plotted to send her as envoy to the vampire lord. Vampires have no scruples, and he took Lhiannan her first night in his enclave. Perhaps it is because she is Faerie that the demon failed to win control.

Lhiannan escaped back to her people, but the change had taken its toll on her. It warped her power with its evil. Her passionate embrace still inspired, but it also fed. She found those that loved her soon withered and died, burning bright for only a short time before the light of their life was extinguished. Even here, in Summerland, her power slowly leached the life-force from her lovers. I found myself aged--as I was when you first met me.

Dianchecht had the power to rejuvenate me, but I refused in protest of what Aine had done to us. If Lhiannan and I could no longer be together, then Aine could only be with me if she accepted me as I was. The Faerie are a vain people. I was still a famed and renowned bard, but I was old, and the Sidhe love young, beautiful things. I was a constant reminder of Aine’s treachery.”

“I wondered why you raised such a stink about rejuvenating,” I said. Then, “Do you mean to tell me that anyone Leanne sleeps with ages prematurely?”

Thomas studied me carefully for a moment, then shook his head slowly. “Not everyone.”

“Meaning me.”

“You’re an Eternal,” Thomas said. “Your life-force is directly connected to the Universal Wellspring, and not just a splintered fragment that returns to the source when the flesh dies.”

“Huh?”

“Your life-force is limitless.”

I looked over to where Leanne was still trying to comfort Josh. “So as far as she’s concerned I’m a never-ending source of food.”

Thomas lowered his head and closed his eyes, as if he struggled with some sort of inner turmoil. Finally, he looked up at me. “Your mere presence--the proximity of you--frightens the demon back into the shadows of her mind. She can be with you, love you, and not kill you. You are the one person who can give her life a semblance of normalcy. Is it any wonder that she is drawn to you the way she is?”

I understood his conflict then. If he still had feelings for her, and I had no doubt that he did, he was shooting himself in the foot by telling me this. He knew that I could give her what she needed most, and what he never could. Still, it meant her interest in me had nothing to do with *who* I was, but rather *what* I was. The thought pissed me off.

“Normal? What’s normal?” I said. “Even if she weren’t a vampire--which she is--she’s still not human; she’s Faerie. Give me a break! I mean a Fairy Princess I can handle--maybe even a Fairy Godmother. But who the hell ever heard of a Fairy Vampire?”

Thomas smiled, and I heard laughter coming from over by the window. Leanne had this huge grin plastered on her face, and even Josh looked a little less morose. I keep forgetting that vampires and shapeshifters have finely tuned hearing. At least Leanne hadn’t taken offense at my outburst. For some reason that irritated me even more.

“I’ll admit, she *is* unique,” Thomas said. “But then, so are you. You are more suited to one another

than you know.”

I peered up at the bard. “Are you speaking just as some old fart giving advice, or is this some of that vaunted prophecy I keep hearing about?”

Thomas grinned. “Both. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference.”

I was about to reply with a witty rejoinder--honest--when the guards suddenly snapped to attention. I heard the door open at the top of the stairs. The intruder cast a tall, imposing shadow, all jagged points and wispy tendrils, along the far wall. The shadow slowly made its way down the stairs. Something scraped along the stairway, and the rhythmic tap of a cane or walking stick resounded like thunder with each shuffling step. I have to admit it was pretty eerie. The appearance of the four-foot troll was rather a letdown.

I guess for a troll he was an imposing figure. He was thinner and bonier than most, like a corpse too long in the grave, and his eyes were set back deeper into the sockets. His face was narrow and pinched; not the usual oval shape I’d grown accustomed to. Gray-white tufts of hair sprouted out from beneath the tall, dark conical hat he wore, and a scraggly gray goatee adorned his chin. He wore a too-long, purple robe trimmed in ermine that pooled in a bunch at his feet. The billowy sleeves only made his emaciated claws look even more skeletal. An oak staff, tall as he was, was clasped in his right hand, and topped off by some sort of crystal ball set in a four-pronged claw. The staff was inset with ivory runes, and purple haze filled the crystal, obscuring the shapes that wiggled and scurried beneath its surface.

He stopped in front of Charlie for a moment and stared the ogre in the eyes. Charlie returned the favor, and the two of them stood locked eyeball to eyeball for a couple of minutes. Finally, the troll smiled. Even for a troll, his teeth seemed sharper than usual. He walked on and stopped in front of the door to our cage. The guards stood at rapt attention, eyes forward, showing remarkable discipline for trolls, although it may have been that they would have rather looked anywhere than make eye contact with this particular troll.

He glanced around at our little group, then finally settled on me. “You. You are the Eternal?” His voice was dry, cold, and emotionless. At least he didn’t sound like a reject from Goodfellas like the rest of them.

“So I’m told,” I said.

He nodded. “I am Snit, Grande Mage and Advisor, and I have a proposition for you.”

I sat up a little straighter on my bunk. “I’m listening, but if it’s anything sexual…”

Snit’s eyes narrowed. “You are not like the other Eternals.”

“Wow, you can smell my breath from there? You *are* Grande.”

Snit had no idea what I was talking about of course, but I could hear Charlie chuckling.

“I will forgive your flippancy, as you know not with whom you are dealing. But I would tread more lightly were I you,” Snit hissed, then shook himself and quickly regained his composure.

This was fun. “Listen. I don’t care if you *are* the only troll who’s had the Emily Post diction course. And that fancy snow globe on a stick don’t impress me none, either. Just spit out what you have to say. If I like it, I’ll have my people call your people and we can do lunch or something.”

I thought Snit was going to have an embolism right then and there. He must have been collecting all his bad mojo together to fry me where I sat, because his eyes took on this green haze, and the crystal globe swirled in agitation. He relaxed suddenly, though, and smiled that crocodile smile of his.

“A valiant attempt. But you won’t get out of the cell that easily.”

Snit was definitely smarter than your average troll. At the least I was hoping he would have had the guards drag me from the cell for a good flogging or something. All I had to do was get that cell door open.

“I assume you are unmarried,” Snit said.

I sighed. “I told you; nothing sexual.”

“Rant has a daughter,” Snit continued. “We feel it would be advantageous if a merger between the trolls and the Eternals could be arranged.”

Thomas's eyebrows shot up, and he quickly excused himself and walked over to the window to join Josh and Leanne. It seemed they had all developed a sudden interest in something outside in the meadow.

"A merger?"

Snit nodded and smiled. "A...wedding, if you will."

I think it would be fair to say that Snit's proposal threw me even more than all the insanity I'd been through in the past few days.

"You want me to marry Rant's daughter?" I have to give the gang credit. They were *trying* not to laugh. They weren't the only ones with sensitive hearing, though. That's when I learned that Leanne snorted when she laughed. How unladylike is that?

"There will, of course, be compensation," Snit added. "It's not likely that Rant would eat the friends of his new son-in-law."

"He doesn't seem to have a problem eating his new father-in-law and *his* friends."

"That's different," Snit said, and left it at that. Apparently the difference was obvious to anyone with any sense as far as the troll was concerned. "He might even consider lending you troops in helping you free his fiancée's mother."

"It's a tempting offer," I lied, "but--"

"You should at least meet the girl," Leanne butted in.

If she weren't already dead, I'd have killed her. As it was I quickly scanned the cell for something to make a wooden stake out of. No luck.

"Certainly there is no harm in that," Snit acquiesced. "I will have her sent for." With that, he collected the folds of his robe and turned about, then climbed the stairway accompanied by the rhythmic tapping of his staff.

Leanne and Thomas fell into each other's arms and broke out laughing. Only Josh seemed somewhat sympathetic--at least he didn't laugh out loud.

"I wouldn't laugh either if I were you," I told Josh. "If this goes through, Alex will be my mother-in-law." That wiped the smile off his face, but it cracked Leanne and Thomas up. Even Charlie chuckled, but when I turned to glare at him he tried to hide it in a fit of coughing.

I threw myself back on my bunk and closed my eyes only for a moment. When I opened them again my three cellmates hovered over me.

"It *would* solve a lot of our problems," Thomas said.

"So would shooting myself in the head," I answered. Of course I was wrong about that. I'd just look bad in the wedding pictures. I stared at each one in turn as they grinned down at me like vultures over road kill. "You're not seriously suggesting that I marry a...a troll?"

They let me squirm for a second, then Thomas said, "No. Of course not. But if you pretend to go along with it, it might at least get us out of this cell."

You have no idea how relieved I was to hear him say that.

"I don't know." Josh grinned, a little of his old self shining through. "You don't know what you're missing. Troll babes can be pretty hot."

I laughed. "And I was worried what Mom would think when I brought Leanne home to meet her."

Leanne looked at me sidewise, a wicked glint in her eye. "I wouldn't stop worrying on that account yet, Bumper."

I wisely kept my mouth shut.

The guards snapped to attention again, a sure sign that Snit had returned with my bride to be. I guess I should have expected the unexpected. You'd think by now I would have learned.

Snit stopped just outside the cell with Rant at his left side and the chief's daughter on his right. "Mr. Decker, meet Tirade."

Tirade was absolutely stunning. She made Aine look awkward and Leanne clumsy. Flaming red hair hung in neat tangles to the small of her back. Emerald green eyes sparkled above a cute pixie nose and full, pouty lips; her skin was lightly tanned, smooth and unblemished. Her figure was the epitome of the female femme fatal, drawn by Disney and made flesh; Tinkerbell, or more aptly, Jessica Rabbit. Of course, she was only four feet tall.

Tirade studied me, her eyes traveling my body from head to toe, then turned to her father. "Ya wants me ta marry *dis*?"

I guess she put me in my place.

"But what's wrong with him, my dear?" Snit asked.

She looked back at me and shook her head. "Nice legs--shame about 'is face."

Josh, Leanne, and Thomas ran for the window. Poor Charlie had to bite his arm to keep from laughing out loud.

Rant looked embarrassed. "I know he's not what you'd call handsome, but..."

"Handsome!" Tirade stuttered. "Look at dat tiny little head. And dose beady eyes, like a dead sunfish dey is. And youse call *dat* a nose? How's he s'posed to pleasure 'is new bride wit a nose like dat?"

I don't know about you, but that was way more than I wanted to know about trolls.

"But Tirade, he's an *Eternal*. He can be anything you want him to be."

Tirade stamped her pretty little foot impatiently. "Some *Eternal*. He can't even break outta jail."

"He's new, dear. He's hasn't developed yet. You could train him."

That perked her up. Telling a new bride she's got a man she can train is like telling a Jehovah's Witness you're just dying to learn how to make Christ your personal savior.

"But he's so *tall*," she pouted.

"He doesn't have to be," Leanne piped up. "He can be as tall, or as short, as you like."

If I could have just fit her arm or leg through the bars of the window, I'm sure the sunlight would have done wonders for her disposition. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

She smiled sweetly at me. "How tall are you now?"

"About five foot ten," I guessed.

"And how tall were you when you died?"

"Five-seven." I saw her point. Once I learned to control my self-image on a conscious level, I could look pretty much any way I wanted to. The thought kind of creeped me out, and frankly I found the whole thing rather far-fetched. Which was probably why I couldn't do it yet.

"You mean he *wanted* ta be dat tall?" Tirade stared at me like I was a three-headed goat or something, which probably would have been an improvement in her books. Apparently I'd failed to live up to her low standards on all accounts. She stomped her foot again and crossed her arms. "I won't do it, an ya can't makes me!"

"Not even for yer dear old Da?" Rant pleaded. He smiled at his daughter, then picked at the bits of rotting meat stuck between his teeth with a gnarled claw. "If we had an *Eternal* wit us, we could kick Clan Crag's butt's right back to dem mountains dey's always bragg'n about."

"But Da, I already has a boyfriend."

"An I love 'im like he's me own," Rant said solemnly, "but yer a chieftain's daughter, and sometimes ya got to put yer own personal wants an' desires aside an do what's fer da good a da Clan."

Tears welled up in Tirade's almond-shaped eyes, but her father stood fast. "I won't do it," she cried, and ran sobbing up the stairs and from the dungeon.

"It's all settled then," Snit said. "The ceremony will take place at the Blood Moon ritual. It will be a double ceremony, after which we will provide you with a thousand troops to march on Tae Con Ra. The chieftain will want his new bride--and son-in-law--well protected."

Thomas moved from the window to the cell bars to stand before the Mage and the chieftain. “Begging your pardon, but by then it will be too late to rescue our friend.”

“Nonsense,” Snit said. “You will leave just before the reception--it appears there’s going to be a shortage of good food anyway--and will travel by the Hidden Ways. You will arrive in plenty of time to attempt a rescue.”

I tried desperately to think of a way out, but nothing came to mind. None of my friends came to my rescue either.

“We will come fer ya just before da ceremony,” Rant said as they made for the exit. He looked almost as glum as I felt. It seemed as though Snit was the only one happy with our little arrangement.

“But I need time to prepare,” I shouted at their retreating backs.

Snit turned on the stairs to face me. “We will come for you an hour before the ceremony. That should give you plenty of time to prepare.” He grinned evilly. “But none to escape. You’ll never make it to Tae Con Ra without us to take you through the Hidden Ways.”

I lay back on my bunk, unable to believe the mess I’d gotten myself into. Thomas sat at the corner again, trying to keep a straight face. At least someone was enjoying himself.

“It looks like you are to be wed, my friend. There’s only one thing that bothers me.”

“Only one? You’re just not thinking about it hard enough then.” He stared at me expectantly for a moment, until finally I asked, “Well, what is it?”

He grinned down at me. “Can I be your best man?”

CHAPTER TEN

My friends left me to my own thoughts for a while. I think they got the hint that I'd like to be alone after I punched Thomas in the eye. It was turning out to be a nice shiner too. I guess bards bruise easily.

Before long, however, Leanne came and sat with me. She brushed her dark hair out of her eyes, leaned over, and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "I'm sorry," she said. "Vampires can be a little sadistic at times, and the Faerie aren't much better."

"And you're a woman to boot," I added.

Leanne cuddled in closer and rested her head on my shoulder. "An evil combination if ever I saw one."

"I'm not really mad," I said, and sighed. "I'm just...exasperated. I can't believe I'm getting married, and to a troll no less."

"But I was right about her being hot, wasn't I?" Josh said as he joined us.

"Actually, yeah. How the hell did that happen?"

Leanne gently caressed my face with her delicate hands. "Trolls have been abducting women as brides for millennia, and only the most beautiful women at that. It's something in the genes, probably to do with the incompatibility of X or Y chromosomes, or that extra Z chromosome that trolls have, but a female child born of a troll male and a human female always appear human, although rather a lot shorter in stature. Or maybe it's just magic. No one knows for sure, but that's the way it works out."

"What about male children?" I asked.

"They can be either troll or human in appearance," Josh said. "And as you've no doubt guessed, there haven't really been any offspring attributed to Troll females and human males. Their women find us somewhat...hideous."

"You're taking this rather well all of a sudden," I said to Josh. "After all, your daughter is still marrying Rant."

"Relax, my ugly duckling," Leanne teased. "No one's marrying anyone. Thomas has seen it."

"So why am I the only one left in the dark?"

Josh grinned. "He was about to tell you, but you punched him in the eye. After that, he decided to let you stew for a while."

Thomas sat on the mattress closest to the window, strumming on a lute that he had pulled from his knapsack. I would have sworn that there was no way it would have fit into such a small pack, but nevertheless, there it was. "I'm not saying that you aren't going to marry Tirade," he said, "but the possibility

that the wedding will take place is weak.”

“What about Sabrina? How will that turn out?” I asked the bard, somewhat sorry now that I’d hit him. He shook his head. “There are too many events between now and then, too many variables, to make any sort of accurate predication. I can say that the possibility for success does exist, as does the possibility for failure.”

“Ha!” I scoffed. “Like that isn’t obvious.”

Thomas smiled, but it was a sad thing. Something in his eyes reminded me of how old he really was, regardless of his current physical appearance. “Not always. Sometimes the possibilities for success are nonexistent.”

I got up and went over to the bucket of water Rant had sent down, picked up the ladle, and took a long drink. Now that we were going to be kin, Rant had decided maybe he should treat us a little better. He’d also sent down a trencher of roasted meat, but no one would touch it. We had no idea *what* it was, never mind *who* it might have been.

“Can I really alter my size and appearance?” I asked.

Leanne nodded. “I keep telling you--you don’t even need that body you lug around. You’re pure spirit now. That’s the power of the Eternals. You can manipulate your matter any way you see fit, or exist as pure consciousness if you like.”

“Why did you drink the water?” Thomas asked. “Were you really thirsty?”

“No,” I admitted.

“You just did it out of force of habit. That’s the same reason you wear that form now: habit.”

I really was having trouble getting my head around all of this. I mean, I understood what they were saying--sort of--but I was just getting used to the idea that I was dead. Trying to believe that I was--what?--noncorporeal? That was another matter entirely.

“Everyone keeps saying I’m not like the other Eternals. Just what *are* they like?”

“Creepy,” Josh said without thinking, then blushed. “I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“There are only six Eternals; you’re the seventh, and the only new one in over a thousand years,” Thomas said. He absently plucked at a string while turning a peg on the lute. “They have forgotten what it is to be human, and seldom take human form. When they do, they appear...alien. It is as if the form no longer suits them.”

“If you’re trying to cheer me up, you’re doing a lousy job,” I said. The thought of becoming less and less human spooked me, and I planned to hold on to my humanity for as long as I could.

The guards snapped to attention again as the door at the top of the stairs suddenly swung open. They relaxed as Drat, stogie piping smoke from the corner of his mouth, bounded down the stairs.

“How’s it goin’, boyze?” Drat asked the guards. “I brought youse a little someting ta wet yer whistles.”

“Tanks boss,” the first guard said as he caught up the wineskin that Drat tossed him. He pulled at the cork with his teeth, spit it into his left hand, then held the bag up and squeezed, catching the red streaming fluid in his wide-open maw. When he drank his fill, he tossed the remainder to his companion.

“Dat hit da spot,” the second guard sighed, then handed the empty skin back to Drat. Both gaurds clenched their fists, then beat their left shoulder in salute and burped in unison.

“Nutten’s to good for my boyze,” Drat said as he threw his arms about the guards’ shoulders. They grinned at one another for a moment, then Drat slammed the guards’ heads together with a resounding crack and lowered them gently to the floor. “Nutten.”

He pulled his short axe from his belt and made his way to our cell. “I know I can’t kill ya, Eternal. But I can chop ya into itsy bitsy pieces and scatter ‘em across da land where no one will find dem. By da time youse figures out how ta rematerialize, me an Tirade will be safely married and long gone from dis here place.”

“Drat, you old dog!” I said. “You mean to tell me you and Tirade--”

"Don't youse even speak her name," the troll spat out, and took a few practice swings with the axe. "I'm putt'n a stop ta dis here wedd'n, one way or anudder."

"I wouldn't think of standing in the way of true love, Drat."

Drat looked suddenly confused. "Ya wouldn't?"

"Of course not. You two were meant for each other. Why, you should have seen the way she ran sobbing from the room when Snit insisted we marry."

"Snit!" Drat cleared his throat and spat the phlegm on the floor. "I should'a knowd that rock sucker was behind all dis."

"Besides," I said. "I already have a girlfriend."

Drat looked doubtful.

"It's true," Leanne said, approaching the bars. "He's mine." She placed her arm about my waist and leaned into me.

The troll squinted his eyes and looked back and forth between me and Leanne as he tried to determine the truth. "She ain't bad, I guess. Kinda pale, though. But wit a nose like dat you probably have trouble meet'n dames."

Thomas suddenly struck a bad chord, and Josh took to looking out the window again.

Rant paced back and forth in front of the cell now. "Dis is quite da predicament we're in. I don't feel right about murdalizing youse like I was goin ta, but I can't just let youse marry my Tirade neither."

"You could let us go," Leanne suggested.

"Dere is dat, but what's in it for me?"

Leanne smiled. "Tirade, of course. And the chance to foil Snit's plans."

The troll's eyes lit up. "Ya mean I gets da dame *and* I piss off 'ol Snit. I like it!"

"Of course, you'll have to help us free Alex, and lead us through the ways to Tae Con Ra," Thomas said as he lightly strummed the lute.

Drat thought about it for a moment. I could almost see the wheels turning and the gears grinding in that melon-shaped head of his. "I can't see as I has a choice. If I'm goin' ta piss dis many people off, I gotta do sometin' ta makes up for it. Me an a hundred a my men will take you to Tae Con Ra. I figure help'n an Eternal take on Aeshma ought ta be worth someting."

"That's right, Drat," I added. "And I promise, you help me, and I'll be in your debt. That's all Rant really wants anyway. I don't think he was too happy about marrying his daughter off to me in the first place. They both have their hearts set on you." Hey, a little ego stroking never hurts.

"Can ya blame 'em?" Drat said as he rifled through his fallen comrade's pockets for the keys to the cell. He came up with them in short order, plus a couple of extra cigars he stuffed into his pocket. The sound of that cell door squealing on its hinges as it swung open did more to liberate my soul than even Thomas' little trick back with the Faerie did.

Drat and I dragged the guards into the cell and locked them in--by the way, trolls are remarkably heavy for their size. He tossed me the keys and I liberated Charlie. There was no way that Drat could reach high enough to free the ogre; it had taken three of them standing on each other's shoulders just to chain him up in the first place, which is a rather hilarious story in itself. Remind me to tell you about it sometime.

Charlie shook out his arms, trying to get the blood flow circulating again. "Thanks. My fingers were getting numb--although it was almost worth it. You have no idea how entertaining you all were."

If it wasn't for the fact that he had four feet on me and about three hundred and fifty pounds, he'd have had an eye to match the one I gave Thomas. Leanne brought Charlie the bucket of water, and the ogre chugged it down in one gulp.

"I don't wanna be anywhere near when he has ta take a whiz," Drat said.

"Where are they keeping Alex?" Josh asked, getting straight to the point.

Drat gave Josh a look that seemed to imply the shapeshifter was somewhat lacking in mental faculties. "In da Bridal Tower, of course."

"Troll brides are usually spoils of war, and human captives are occasionally...somewhat reluctant," Thomas said as he somehow managed to store his three-foot lute into his two-foot knapsack. (I still don't know how he does that.) "The Bridal Tower is as much a prison as this dungeon was, albeit a much more comfortable one."

"And it's smack-dab in da middle of da Burrows," Drat said.

I looked over at Charlie, but the ogre knew what I was thinking.

"I'll stand out like a...um...ogre among trolls," he said. "I think it might be best if I were to provide a distraction."

That's why I like Charlie. He's always thinking. "What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"I'll make my way to the tunnel exit, giving you just enough time to reach the Bridal Tower. Then I'll raise a ruckus that should distract the guards for a while."

"I'll go with him," Thomas volunteered. "I can't be of much help to you anyway, as I've promised not to aid in your escape."

"Isn't creating a distraction helping us to escape?" I asked.

"Not at all," Thomas said with a straight face. "You're breaking *into* prison. At worst, it's helping Alex to escape, and I never promised I wouldn't do that."

"Ya promised ya wouldn't try to escape yerself, neither," Drat reminded him.

"I'm not *trying* to escape. I've *already* escaped, and with absolutely no effort on my part."

Leanne patted the troll on the head. "Bardic truth is often a matter of semantics."

"Ya," the troll agreed. "Bards is slipperier than lawyers."

If Thomas took offense, it didn't show. "We'll create a distraction for as long as we can, then meet you at Tae Con Ra."

I looked around at our little troop. My menagerie of friends just kept getting weirder and weirder. "Let's do it," I said. Charlie took the lead, climbing the stairs three at a time, followed by Thomas, Drat, Josh, Leanne, and myself.

"I thought you were just a tunnel guard?" Leanne asked Drat.

"Naw." The troll grinned, and lit up another stogie. "I'm da War Chief of da Tor Clan. I was just doin' my inspection tour when Cujo here showed up. I wasn't about to tell ya who I really was. Which reminds me. We'll have to stop off at da barracks on da way. I've got to handpick a hundred men ta take wit us."

We waited in the bushes just outside the barracks compound while Drat chose his men. I wasn't really worried about the troll betraying us. He could have finished us back at the dungeon if that's what he'd wanted. Right now we were the only chance he had of keeping both Tirade *and* his head. Besides, one thing about trolls, once they decide on a course of action, they're pretty much single-minded.

Drat emerged from the barracks about a half-hour later dressed in full battle gear, and not the cheap stuff he was wearing when we first met him, either. A black lacquered breastplate with bloodred engraving covered his torso, with matching jамbs and pauldrons (that's shin and shoulder pads for you uninitiated). A conical helmet covered his head, and an ornate but well-worn battle-axe was slung at his belt.

He carried a bag that he tossed to Josh. "Here ya go. I figured ya might want these. Tink of it as a peace offer'n."

Josh opened the bag to find all the weapons Goibnu had made for him. His face broke out into the first true smile I'd seen on him since we lost Alex. Some guys are just addicted to their toys.

"Thanks, Drat. You're a pal for life," he said.

Drat made a face. "Ya, well just don't go tell'n none a da boyze. I'd never live it down if dey found out

I was hang'n wit a man-mutt."

We made it to the Bridal Tower with very little difficulty. As before, we kept to the trees, taking full advantage of the abundant foliage. It was a little slower going, as it was about midafternoon topside, so there were a lot more trolls about than before. Josh and Leanne moved like old pros and took advantage of every shrub, bush, and fold in the land. I paid close attention and just did what they did.

The tower itself wasn't hard to find. As a matter of fact, it stood out like...well...like a big flowery penis. I guess trolls are big on symbolism. It was cut from rose-colored granite, and inlaid with floral patterns that looked like creeping ivy and spiraled its way from the ground floor to the penthouse. It's pretty hard to miss a big, pink building in the middle of all those white ones.

We wouldn't need Charlie to get us into this building, either. The front entrance had a whole mess of flowerbeds and shrubbery leading right up to the steps. I guess they really weren't too worried about someone breaking in. Just out. Drat strode up to the door, took a look inside, and gave us the all-clear. He staggered back a step when we arrived at the door.

"Are you guys freak'n fast or what? Dat man-mutt must a made dose fifty yards in tree seconds flat, and youse two just appeared as if by magic right beside me!"

"You're playing with the big boys now, you bowlegged little runt," Josh said.

Drat just shrugged his shoulders. Trolls are thick skinned--figuratively *and* literally.

I had to learn to stop thinking as a mortal. I had thought Charlie fast when he first charged the guards, but I realized that compared to Leanne and myself he was positively stagnant. Being dead should come with an instruction manual, or at least on-line tech support. I just hoped I could get my act together before I did something stupid and got someone hurt.

Drat scratched at his head, then his armpit. "Okay, all we got to do now is gets youse past da hall guards." He squinted at me and Leanne. "Youse two could probably just whiz by dem, but as fast as dat man-mutt is, they'd still see him."

Are there any of you listening to this that *haven't* figured out how we got past the guards yet? Yeah, I know it's not very original, but it worked in Star Wars, and storm troopers are only slightly brighter than trolls. (I suspect trolls are better shots, though.) I tried to convince Josh to shape change, and to howl like a wookiee, but he wouldn't go for it. Besides, in werebeast form the guards probably would have recognized him, but as a human? According to Drat, all Darksideers looked alike.

Drat tied Josh's hands in front of him. He was going to tie them behind Josh's back, but in case anything went wrong we wanted Josh to be able to defend himself. He slipped a noose around the shapeshifter's neck and walked him up to the hall guards positioned at the bottom of the circular stairwell that wound its way up through the center of the tower.

Drat stopped in front of the guards and lit up another cigar.

The guards snapped to attention, all five of them, and the head guard approached. "Hey, Chief. More food for da wedding feast?"

Drat took another drag from the stogie, then handed it to the guard who puffed contentedly on it. "Ya. It's not every day da Clan Chief gets married. Him *and* his daughter, ta boot."

The guard looked sympathetic. Everyone knew Drat and Tirade were an item. He made to hand back the cigar, but Drat motioned for him to keep it. The guard swelled with pride. Having the War Chief present you with one of his own personal cigars must have been a high honor. The rest of the troops looked on in admiration.

"Go on up, Chief. Dey's probably wait'n for ya."

"Tanks," Drat said, and led Josh by the leash up the wide marble stairway.

Leanne and I zipped by the guard and met Josh and Drat where they waited for us on the second floor. One of the guards did glance suddenly to his left as if he'd caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of

his eye. He shrugged after a moment, though, and joined the rest in trying to get a drag of the chief's stogie.

"It should be pretty clear sailing from here," Drat said. "Once ya gets past da hall guards security gets pretty lax."

Somehow I doubted it was going to be that easy. I hate it when I'm right.

I heard a loud hooting sound--the sound you hear in those old Viking movies where they call everyone to battle by blowing on that big, curved horn thingy.

"Dats da alarm," Drat said as he untied Josh. "Da bard and da Ogre must be creating dat distraction dey was talk'n about. Let's grab da girl and scam."

"Where would she be?" I asked.

"Da penthouse."

The towers were constructed of cylinders within cylinders. The stairway ran like a tube up through the center of the building. Landings opened onto a circular hallway that made up the middle cylinder. Doors led from the hallway to various rooms, comprising the outer cylinder, and a balcony ran around the outside of the building at each level.

It's a good thing I was dead, because the thought of racing up twenty flights of stairs when I was alive would've killed me. Of course, racing is a relative term. Drat's stubby little legs didn't handle stairs all that well, so staggered is probably a more apt description.

"It's too bad Dad or Grandpa weren't here. They could at least scout ahead for us," I said.

"You won't find any ghosts in the Burrow," Leanne said, easily keeping pace. "Trolls ward against them."

In a way I was kind of relieved to hear that. I hadn't heard from them, or Alison either, for quite a while now, and was afraid maybe they'd abandoned me. I'd just gotten used to having them around. With everything else that had happened to me lately, I could use the friendly, familiar faces--even if they were dead-dead. I missed that dumb hound, too. I suddenly realized that all my best friends, the people that I could really trust, were dead, or the undead, or worse. Life certainly can get strange if you don't stay on top of it.

We finally made it to the penthouse. We had to stop for a few minutes to give poor Drat a breather. He was puffing and panting like a woman in Lamaze class. All that smoking can really cut down on your endurance, even if you are a troll.

There were no guards outside the doors to the inner chambers. As Drat had mentioned, once inside security was pretty lax. The doors themselves looked solid though: heavy oak with intricate carving. Most of the scenes seemed to depict some sort of troll orgy, which I wasn't certain was really appropriate for a bridal suite. Then again, I've never been to a troll wedding. The carvings *were* pretty graphic. Let's just say I suddenly understood why Tirade was distressed at the size of my nose and leave it at that. The door, of course, was locked.

Drat sized me up. "You're da Eternal. Break it down."

I glanced at Leanne and Josh. "I can do that?"

Leanne shrugged. "And then some, *if* you're ready."

We could hear the sounds of signal horns in the distance. Charlie and Thomas were doing a great job with the distraction. The trolls were calling for reinforcements.

"If you're not ready now, you'd better *get* ready," Josh advised.

I rotated my shoulders a few times to loosen them up. "Okay, what do I do?"

"Place your hands on the door and imagine yourself *pushing* through to the other side," Leanne said. "Of course, that's just a guess. I'm not an Eternal."

"Seems as good a place to start as any," I said, and pressed my palms up against the double doors where they joined in the middle. I closed my eyes--I told you, it helps me concentrate--and imagined myself pushing *through* the doors. They creaked and groaned, and I turned red in the face (apparently I hold my

breath when I concentrate too) but otherwise nothing happened.

"Stop pushing with your muscles and push with your mind," Josh suggested. "And don't forget to breathe."

I looked at him as if to say, "What the hell does breathing have to do with anything?" and he shrugged and looked sheepish. We were all just guessing here.

I tried again, creating a clear mental image of myself pushing through the door--while remembering to breathe. Hey, you never know. Suddenly the resistance vanished. I opened my eyes and screamed in panic (a rather masculine scream, I'll have you know) as I saw my arms buried up to my elbows in the door. And I don't mean *through* the door, I mean *in* the door. They seemed to have passed through the wood without damaging the door itself, as if I'd become some kind of spectral wraith that could walk through walls. I could still feel my hands. I wiggled my fingers just to make sure.

"Um...guys? I think I'm stuck."

"I tink you're brain dead," Drat said.

I glared at the troll. "Oh yeah? Let me see *you* get your hands stuck halfway through a solid object."

Drat scratched his head, mulling that one over.

I heard a scream from inside the room; then a few seconds later a muffled voice called through the door. "James? Is that you?"

"Hey, Alex. Yeah, it's me." I can just imagine her shock at seeing a pair of arms half materialized through the door. "Don't worry, we'll have you out of there in no time."

"Um...okay."

For some reason she didn't sound overly confident. I couldn't for the life of me imagine why. I closed my eyes and concentrated again, this time on pulling my arms back through the door. I heard a small "pop" and stumbled backwards into Josh as the door released me.

I took a deep breath. "Let's try this again." This time as I pushed on the door, I pictured it crashing inward, splintering. The doors creaked and groaned for a moment; then Alex screamed as they exploded--torn completely from their hinges--and she dove out of the way.

"Dat's better," Drat said.

Josh rushed into the room and hugged Alex to him.

She laughed as he scooped her up in his arms and swung her about. She looked none the worse for wear.

I took Leanne's hand and led her into the room. "Why didn't you tell me I could do this before? I could have gotten us out of that dungeon without all that muss and fuss."

"Thomas counselled against it," she said guiltily. "He said we needed Drat's help if we were going to rescue Sabrina."

I put my arm about her waist. "Is that what you two were fighting about?"

She nodded, and snuggled in closer to me. "I didn't like the idea of keeping you in the dark and letting you worry like that, but he said it had to be that way to optimize the positive potential. I guess he was right. He usually is."

I could tell she still felt guilty. For purely selfish reasons that made me feel a little better.

Alex's prison was definitely nicer than ours. The interior walls were of white and pink marble. Leanne insisted it was rose, but that's just woman-speak for pink. White lace drapery softened the artificial sunlight that streamed in through the windows from the balcony. Plush cushions in pastel colors were strewn about the floor and surrounded low, teak coffee tables, and a small fishpond occupied the center of the room. Lush, green, potted plants added to the overall airy atmosphere.

"Nice," I commented.

Alex grinned. "You should see the bedroom, and the bathroom, and the den...especially the den."

They've got some of the most interesting books and..."

"And blah, blah, blah," Drat interrupted. "Don't youse tink we should be getting while da gettin's good?"

"Too late," a voice said from behind us. "I'm afraid I have to put a stop to this little escape attempt."

There's only one troll that articulate. "Yeah, Snit? You and what army?" I said as I turned to face him. He stood in the doorway flanked by about twenty guards.

"Oh. That army."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Drat grasped the haft of his battle-axe in both hands. "Snit, ya half-breed Darksider reject, I'm gonna smother ya in baby oil and stake ya out in da sun. And dat goes for da rest a youse bums, too."

The mage's upper lip curled in a sneer. While *he* obviously wasn't intimidated by Drat's threat, the guards behind him shuffled about nervously.

"You've interfered in my plans for the last time, Drip." Snit gestured his guards forward. "Take them. I want the chieftain's bride alive. The rest you may carve up as appetizers for the wedding feast."

"You forgot to do the evil laugh," I said. "You know...mwaa ha ha ha ha." It was a pretty fair demonstration, if I do say so myself.

"Da name's Drat. I'd remember it when da Maker asks youse who sent ya."

The guards moved out from behind Snit, slowly jockeying for position.

"Get Alex to safety," I whispered to Josh. "There's a bridge off the balcony that leads over to the next tower."

The shapeshifter hesitated, torn between his desire to stay and fight, and the need to get his daughter out of harm's way. It must have felt to him as though he was abandoning his friends, but in the end Alex's safety won out.

Drat rushed the mage as Snit held his staff out to the side and mumbled words of incantation. The energies in the crystal globe swirled chaotically as the light in the room dimmed. A guard rushed Drat, trying to intercept the War Chief before he could cut down the mage. The flat of Drat's axe head caught the guard just under the chin. Teeth shattered as the troll was thrown back into his comrades.

I sidestepped a spear thrust at me, ducked under it as it swung at my head, and kicked the troll holding it hard in the family jewels. I'm not really sure if trolls have family jewels, but if they did this troll would have to have his reappraised. After what I did to them, I'm certain they dropped considerably in value.

I could see Josh and Alex out on the bridge between the towers now. They seemed to be making good their escape. I was confident we could take out these trolls in short order. The only thing that had held us back the last time was our concern for Alex's safety.

Leanne held a troll aloft by the throat with one hand, while two more circled her. She threw her struggling captive into his companions, then picked up the oak coffee table and slammed it down hard over their heads as they struggled to their feet. The table splintered into fragments, and the trolls ceased struggling.

Drat swung the battle-axe, slashing sideways at Snit in an effort to hack the mage in half. Snit waved a

hand before him at the last moment--obviously a magical gesture--as Drat's axe bounced harmlessly off of a shimmering, blue transparent force-shield. The impact of axe against shield jarred Drat to the shoulders, and the troll cursed as his fingers went numb.

Have you ever wondered why in the movies the bad guys always seem to attack the good guys one at a time, giving them time to dispatch each villain in turn? Apparently the troll guards wondered the same thing. Five of them decided to rush me at once. Fortunately for me they were really slow, or rather I'm really fast.

Two of them collided with one another as I simply ceased to be where I was only a moment before. One I actually tripped, lunging to the right and extending my left leg so that he stumbled over it and into his buddies. I straightened up, did a one-eighty (that's man-speak for pirouette) and shoved the fourth troll into the other three. Lastly, I grabbed the fifth troll by his weapons belt and tossed him into the fray. To an outside observer, it must have looked like I simply disappeared, and the five trolls had rushed into each other and knocked themselves out. Being an Eternal allowed me to take the art of fighting to a whole new level. Kind of like "The Three Stooges" meets *The Matrix*.

Leanne had taken out another couple of trolls. Her vampire reflexes made her almost as fast as I was. I noted that she hadn't drunk from any of her victims this time. She told me later that troll blood tastes like ground chalk and iodine. I took her word for it, never having tasted troll blood--or ground chalk and iodine either, for that matter.

Snit's eyes sparked with electricity. A bolt of crackling energy leapt from the crystal and struck Drat in the chest, throwing the War Chief sprawling to the floor some ten feet away. Faint traces of electrical current flickered along Drat's breastplate.

The troll climbed slowly to his feet and shook his head roughly from side to side to clear it. "Try dat again. I dares ya," he said once his vision focused again.

"With pleasure," Snit replied. Another lightning bolt streaked toward Drat, who suddenly deflected the energy back at the mage with the head of his battle-axe. The wooden haft of the axe acted as an insulator, protecting the troll this time.

The bolt struck Snit's shield and splashed harmlessly off of it. Well, harmlessly as far as Snit was concerned. The residual energy fragmented and struck two more of his guards. The several remaining guards circled us warily now. There is one thing to be said for attacking one at a time: at least you don't get in one another's way.

I turned just in time to see a troll about to hit Leanne from behind. Either she wasn't paying attention, or she'd become overconfident. He'd picked up one of the splintered table legs from the ruined coffee table and was about to plunge it into her back.

I panicked, realizing the table leg was made of wood and could actually kill her. Suddenly I was standing between her and her attacker. It wasn't like before, either. I had no memory of crossing the space between where I had been and where I now stood. The suddenness of it stunned me for a moment, and I stood there stupidly as the troll drove the wooden stake into my chest.

As startled as I was, the troll was even more shocked. One moment he was about to drive a stake into a vampire's back, and the next he's nose to nose with a pissed-off Eternal. I looked down at the two feet of lumber sticking out of my chest, then slowly up at the troll. His eyes widened and he turned ashen-gray, which is pretty pale for a troll. I reached across with my right hand and slowly pulled the stake from my chest. It resisted for a moment, then finally let go with a nauseating, sucking sound. The troll turned and ran, but not out of fear--well okay, maybe a little out of fear. I heard him retching over the balcony, which I'm sure came as a pleasant surprise to anyone walking on the grounds below.

The shirt Goibnu had made for me held up under the assault. The stake hadn't penetrated it; merely driven the fabric into the chest wound. I pulled at the material until I had cleared the hole. Other than the small circular bloodstain there was no way to know that I'd been impaled. Unless of course I took my shirt off;

the huge gaping hole would be a dead giveaway. I wondered how long it would take *that* to heal.

I ducked as Leanne spun about, sensing someone behind her and not realizing it was me. I caught her fist just inches from my face, gave her a quick kiss on the lips, then spun her about just in time for her to drive her palm into some troll's nose. We turned just as another group of guards rushed through the doors.

"Time to beat a hasty retreat," I called out.

"Huh?" Drat grunted.

"Run away!" I hollered, and headed for the balcony. The guards scrambled after us, with Snit sedately bringing up the rear, as we made for the balcony, then the bridge.

The bridge was wide enough for maybe three or four trolls to walk abreast, and paved with well-worn cobblestone. I looked over the edge to the ground several hundred feet below. A knee-high, cut marble rail, maybe two feet high, was the only thing to keep someone from accidentally going over the side. Of course, if you're a four-foot troll then I suppose it was more than adequate. For Leanne and me it was just the perfect height to be shoved over. With luck we might land on one of the bridges that spanned the distance below us, only a measly hundred feet or so.

The guards began to crowd onto the bridge now, and I saw Snit ordering some of them back. If he was smart--which unfortunately seemed to be the case--he would send men down through the tower and up through the next one to cut off our escape route. Sure enough, I saw ten or twenty trolls cutting across the garden below us, heading for the next building. I could only hope that Josh and Alex had made good their escape. The horns in the distance had died out, which meant that Charlie and Thomas were long gone. I refused to think that they might have been recaptured, or worse.

A lightning bolt fragmented part of the rail just to my left, scorching the air with the smell of burnt ozone and cement dust. Drat pulled a throwing knife from his belt and hurled it at Snit. The knife flew straight and true for the mage's head, and bounced harmlessly from the shield.

The troll jumped up and down and stomped his feet. "I *hate* when dat happens," he raged.

We turned and made for the opposite end of the bridge, but halted again when we saw more soldiers coming from that direction. "Looks like this is where we make our stand," I said.

Leanne looked over the side. "Jump," she said.

I laughed, then realized she was serious.

"It's only a couple hundred feet down to the next bridge. The landing might be a little rough, but I know I can handle it." She said the next very slowly, to be certain I understood. "And so can you."

I looked over the side. Even if I did survive the fall, that bridge looked awful tiny from up here. With my luck, I'd miss it completely. Of course, there was still another bridge about three hundred feet below that one. "This is nuts," I said. "Even Butch and Sundance had water to land in."

Leanne grinned. "Yeah, but think of it this way: it doesn't *matter* whether you can swim or not." She arched an eyebrow at me as if in a dare, then stepped up and onto the rail. "Do you want to live forever? Oh wait, that's right...you will." She stepped off the ledge and called out on the way down, "Don't forget to take Drat with youuuu...."

I watched as she dropped, toes pointed and arms perpendicular to her side. It seemed to take forever. She tucked suddenly, did a couple of back somersaults, and hit the bridge feet first, landing on one foot and one knee. She looked up at us and bowed, one of those overexaggerated stage bows.

"Show-off," I whispered. I looked over at Drat. His eyes widened even larger than they already were, if that's possible.

"Uh-uh. No way," he insisted. "Just cause youse two are already dead, it don't mean I wants ta join da club."

"Would you rather let them kill you?" I said, pointing to the guards who advanced quickly now from either end of the bridge.

"Let me tink about it...yes!"

"Come on, Drat. It'll be fun. Kind of like bungee jumping without the bungee." I'm not sure if I was trying to convince him, or myself.

Another lightning bolt struck the ground at the troll's feet, pelting the armor at his shins with stone chips. A spear whistled through the air only inches from Drat's head. "Oh, all right already! But I'm warning ya, if youse kill me, I'm gonna haunt ya fer da rest a time."

I laughed. "Deal," I said, and swung the troll over my shoulder. I stepped up onto the ledge as several more spears struck the ground around us.

"Just ta let ya know," Drat muttered. "I plan on hollering all da way down."

"Really? Me too."

I took a deep breath to make sure I had enough screaming power to last, and stepped off the ledge. I seemed to be falling a lot faster than Leanne had, but I guess it's really relative. I know I'm already dead, and that the fall couldn't kill me, but I still bet it could hurt like hell. In case I hadn't mentioned it before, getting stabbed in the chest with the table leg didn't exactly tickle. I could only imagine what being splattered all over the cobblestones would feel like.

Drat and I harmonized all the way down. His gravelly bass perfectly accentuated my tenor...terror. I wasn't about to try anything fancy like Leanne had. I'd be perfectly happy landing on my feet. I'd be thrilled if my feet weren't driven up around my armpits somewhere.

The bridge rushed up at us, and I flexed my thighs and prepared for impact. I'm not sure how fast we were going when we hit, but I know the formula for acceleration has something to do with meters per second squared, which sounds a hell of a lot faster than miles an hour to me. I hit the bridge feet first, and concentrated on absorbing the shock through my legs. I knew I had to absorb most of it or the sudden stop would kill Drat whether he actually hit the pavement or not. My feet drove themselves a couple of inches into the cobblestone, and I bent at the knees. I must have done something right, because I didn't hear any bones shatter. Drat stopped screaming and let out a little "woof."

"Am I dead?"

I set the troll down on the ground. "I don't think so."

Drat pulled a cigar from his pocket. I had to light it for him because his hands were shaking so bad. "Good ting fer you," he said. "I bet I make a miserable ghost."

Leanne helped me extract my feet from the craters I'd left in the bridge. "Not bad," she said. "I gave it a nine point two, but the Russian judges were hard on the landing."

I hugged her to me, made sure Drat was all right--he still looked a little pale--and said, "We're not home free yet. I won't be happy until we're off of these towers and on the ground."

"We could always jump again," Leanne suggested.

"I'll race ya to da stairs," Drat said, and tottered off on wobbly legs.

We made a run for it, crashed through some poor woman's bridal suite, and hit the stairs. I could hear the sound of the guards a few floors above us as they scrambled to get to us. I grabbed up Drat again and tucked him under my arm. Trolls weren't meant for stairs, and we'd make a lot better time this way.

"How humiliatin'," he muttered.

We made the ground floor, where the five original guards waited. I set Drat down so we could better defend ourselves. Leanne and I could take these five out before they knew what hit them.

The head guard took a long drag off of the cigar Drat had given him, bowed low, and stepped out of the way. "Take care, Boss. Say hi to Tirade for me."

Drat gave the guard a knowing wink. "I'll be sure an do dat."

We sprinted for the exit. "I won't forget dis, Hassle," he called back over his shoulder. "Good man, dat Hassle. Dat's why dey put him on Babe Watch."

We cut across the grounds, through a garden and toward the second tower. Drat took the lead. We sped past an imposing monument to Rant, so tall it rivaled the surrounding trees. A piercing whistle halted us in our tracks, and I looked back toward the statue to see Josh and Alex.

"Hey, BUMPER. Can we come too?" Alex said once she'd removed her pinkies from the corner of her mouth.

I'd spank that girl if it didn't make me feel like a pervert. "Sure, Brat. Fall in."

"Great," Drat said. "All we have ta do now is make it to da Ways. My boyze are waiting dere fer us, and we should make it to Tae Con Ra in no time."

"Just what time is it?" I asked. It was hard to judge by the Burrow's artificial light. It always seemed about noontime.

"It's half past three," Josh said.

I frowned at the shapeshifter. "How could you possibly know that?"

"First off, we shapeshifters have an uncanny sense of time. Second, the glow from the cavern is cyclic, diminishing proportionately from noon until it evening, when it fades completely.

I nodded, impressed.

"And then there's this here Rolex Sabrina gave me for Christmas."

"Ha!" Drat snorted. "Eternals can be so gullible."

Leanne smiled and patted my hand. "It's okay, dear. You can punch him in the eye later."

That's when I learned I could still blush. "You know, I'm not as dumb as I seem," I said.

"If dat's yer story, den stick to it," Drat said.

"It's just that with all the magical, mystical goings-on lately, sometimes I forget about the simple, mundane things."

Josh patted me on the back in what felt like genuine sympathy. "It *does* take some getting used to."

We followed Drat as he changed direction and headed off toward the entrance to the Ways. The going was rougher this time. The Burrows seemed a hive of activity, with small groups of trolls patrolling everywhere. Drat knew the lay of the land like the back of his claw, though, and kept us well out of sight. We waded through streams, ducked under bridges, behind fallen trees, or simply hid in the shadows. Alex had a blast.

"Just what are the Ways?" I whispered as we lay low behind some shrubs and waited for a patrol to pass.

"It's a sort of interdimensional portal," Leanne said, brushing grass off of her shirt and generally tidying up. "Sort of like the way we came to Summerland."

I rolled my eyes. "Not another Dumpster?"

She laughed. "No, it's nothing like the Dumpster. It's sort of a pathway that runs along the ancient ley lines, the lines of power that crisscross the planet. Time and distance are irrelevant there. They twist and intertwine. If you know the route, you can cross vast distances in mere moments."

"And if you don't know the route?"

"Youse can get lost forever," Drat interrupted. "Lucky fer youse, I know da pathways."

"Only trolls, ogres, and dwarves seem to be able to make any sense of the Ways," Leanne said. "Maybe it's because they, more than any of us, are so closely tied to the earth."

"Don't worry, I'll get ya safely tru da Ways and to Tae Con Ra in plenty a time. Den we can kick some demon butt," the troll assured us. "I don't care if dose demons have two or tree butts either--I'll kick 'em all."

Leanne was suddenly serious. "We won't just be up against demons. All those who have aligned themselves with the Darkness will be there. There may even be trolls."

Drat shrugged and fingered the hilt of his axe. "As far as I'm concerned, if dey's *wit* demons, den dey might as well *be* demons." He looked around, making sure the way was clear. "Time ta go."

We traveled for another twenty minutes or so when Drat called another halt. The cavern wall rose up before us, the chiseled rock face covered in runes and relief not four hundred yards from where we stood. He loosed his battle-axe and pointed just off to the left.

Rant and Snit stood against a stone arch cut into the cliff. A couple of hundred trolls stood with them.

"Tell me that's not the entrance to the Ways," I said to Drat.

The troll looked glum. "I'd say we've been had."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"We could always double back," Josh said. "We'll just leave the way we came in and make it to Tae Con Ra overland."

Leanne shook her head. She'd gone chalk-white now, so I knew she was *really* pissed. "We would never make it in time.

Drat suddenly broke out in an ear-to-ear grin. (And him being a troll and all, I mean that literally.)

"What are you grinning about?" Alex asked him. She still seemed too nonchalant about everything for my satisfaction. It was unnatural. I found myself wishing the girl would just panic once in a while.

"Doze ain't *my* boyze." Drat looked around at the surrounding forest. "By da Maker, I trained 'em good."

One by one trolls stepped out from behind trees, under shrubs, and up from the tall grass. A hundred trolls in all: Drat's boyze. They formed up just behind us, and Drat turned to address them.

"We're outnumbered at least two, maybe tree ta one," Drat addressed them "If dere's anyone who wants to back out now, I won't hold a grudge."

"Ya probably won't live long enough ta hold a grudge, boss," someone from the back ranks hollered. The comment was followed by good-natured laughter, but no one stepped out of line.

Drat grinned, showing all two hundred of his jagged teeth. "Don't count on it." The troops beat their chests in salute. He turned to face me. "Are youse ready?"

I'm not a violent man by nature. I think it fair to say that I have an honest aversion to killing. I looked at our impromptu army, and then at our enemy awaiting us at the entrance to the Ways. There was no way we were going to accomplish this without bloodshed. I didn't know these people. I didn't know the enemy, and I didn't know these trolls lined up before us now. And I didn't want any of them to die.

My stomach went all queasy on me, and suddenly I was angry. Angry at Rant and Snit for making me do this. Angry at Josh and Leanne for getting me into this. And angry at myself, because I knew what I had to do. "All right. If it's a fight they want, then it's a fight they'll get."

"We'll make a troll out a youse yet," Drat bragged. He turned back to his men. "We'll battle our way to da entrance. We're not here ta bloody Rant's nose, but ta get to da Ways. All you boyze have ta do is keep 'em busy enough for us ta get in, den hold 'em off until we make it to Tae Con Ra. So nutt'n fancy. Got it?"

"WE GOT IT, BOSS!" our troops replied as one.

I thought Drat was going to tear up there for a moment. I have to admit I was rather touched by their

loyalty to their leader as well. "Dose guys would follow me anywhere," he said, then grinned. "Mostly outa curiosity."

A lightning bolt struck a tree near our position. It exploded in a rain of burning branches, leaving nothing but a charred stump. Snit had decided to bring the fight to us.

Drat raised his battle-axe. "*Kill da bastards!*" He broke into a run, the rest of his troops hot on his heels.

"Catchy battle cry," Josh said, then nodded toward the enemy. "Care to join me?"

"Go on, I'll give you a head start," I said. Josh nodded, and was off. I turned to Alex, and the four trolls Drat had left to guard her. "No matter what happens, I'll be back for you."

She threw her arms around me and gave me a big hug and a peck on the cheek. "Just watch out for Dad."

"Anything for you," I said. I kissed her forehead. "You realize you came *this* close to being "Alex, Queen of the Trolls?"

She giggled. "Yeah, but I would have had *the* coolest date at the prom."

Like I said, too nonchalant. I turned to Leanne. "Ready?"

Her eyes glowed a fierce red, and her veins showed translucent blue through her alabaster skin. The demon was just itching to get out. "Ready."

I hit the enemy while our troops were still a hundred yards back. I put my shoulder into them, driving them back into their comrades without slowing my momentum. Twenty or thirty trolls went down, or were tossed into the air, limbs flailing, only to lie gasping in a heap with broken ribs and fractured arms or legs.

Leanne hit their right flank a few seconds later, spinning, twisting, and striking out at every target. She stopped suddenly amidst the carnage she created, her alabaster skin and raven hair spattered with orange gore. Her eyes blazed like crimson fire now, and her lips and fangs were smeared with troll blood. She spat the foul-tasting stuff on the ground at their feet, and laughed. It was the first glimpse the enemy had had of their foe, and they panicked.

Many broke ranks and fled, trampling fallen comrades in their haste to escape. Others fell to their knees and begged for mercy. The hardier stock gripped their weapons more tightly and vowed vengeance.

Our troops collided with theirs, and the bloodshed began in earnest. Troll weapons are crude; they prefer the axe, the mace, and the morningstar to the more "refined" killing weapons. They battered one another, crushing skulls and shattering elbows and knees until the field was littered with the maimed crying out in anguish.

Individual skirmishes broke out now. Josh and Drat fought back to back. They made an effective team-Josh hit them high, and Drat hit them low. Leanne cut a swath through the trolls toward the entrance. She had slowed now so that she was at least visible most of the time. The enemy broke before her, more frightened of her than the rest of us combined.

I cleared a path about the entrance, making short work of the trolls set to guard it. Trolls have thick skulls, but a sharp blow to the top of the head still knocks them on their ass. Six trolls collapsed unconscious, as if they had suddenly fainted. I only hoped I hadn't hit any of them too hard. A crushed skull or bad concussion will kill a troll as surely as it will kill a human.

Leanne was suddenly at my side, her eyes burning bright. "Hold me," she said. "Drive It away, before I lose myself to It completely."

I held her in my arms as she trembled violently. The demon did not want to relinquish control and fought her for supremacy. I hugged her more tightly, and she gnawed at my shoulder, biting deeply into the skin there. Eventually the demon had to lose, though. My mere presence finally drove it back into the recesses of her mind. Her body relaxed so suddenly that I had to support her or she would have fallen.

Josh and Drat saw us at the entrance and fought their way to us. The shapeshifter was covered in

orange troll blood. A slight gash over his left eye bled down his face, but the clothing Goibnu had provided had done its job and protected him from the worst. A shallow cut ran along the length of Drat's right thigh. Other than that, the troll seemed none the worse for wear.

"Hold Leanne," I told Josh. "I'm going to get Alex." I handed her off to the shapeshifter and raced back to where we'd left the girl. I think I almost gave her guards heart failure, appearing as suddenly as I did.

"You ready to go?"

"Sure, Bumper. Just give me a second." She turned and gave each of her guards a big hug and kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for taking care of me, guys."

I never would have suspected trolls could blush.

I picked her up in my arms, and she hugged herself close to me.

"You can't move quite so fast with me, James," she told me. "The human body can't handle speed like that, not to mention the sudden stop."

"Okay, cutie. Just hold on tight."

It's a good thing she had mentioned that little tidbit. I wouldn't have thought of it. Superman never had that problem.

I kept my speed down to around eighty or ninety miles an hour. I'm just guessing here, of course. It's not like I have a speedometer embedded in my forehead or anything. The trolls saw us barreling down on them and cleared a path for us. None of them wanted to be standing in the way of anything moving that fast. I set Alex down beside her father.

Drat's Boyze had fought their way to the portal now. They formed a semicircle around us and defended our position.

"I think we've out-stayed our welcome," Josh said. "Time to leave."

I turned to the portal. The entrance was a solid jade pentagon, seven feet high and four feet wide, with rune-inscribed marble molding on all sides. Drat picked up an ornate mallet that hung from a peg beside the portal and struck the pentagon. A deep, resonating gong sounded. The jade seemed to shimmer for a moment, then was solid once more. He struck it again. This time the pentagon spatially distorted, expanding outward like a bubble, then inward, and finally snapping back to its rigid form. A slightly higher pitched note sounded, harmonizing with the first. Drat struck it a third time, sounding the last note in a primal chord, and the portal shimmered and shifted until finally it became translucent. I couldn't quite make out what was on the other side.

Drat stepped through the gateway. Once through I could just make out the silhouette of his form. Alex went next, then Josh. Leanne and I stepped through together. She still leaned on me for support. One by one those of our men that had managed to fight their way through appeared--sometimes singly, sometimes three or four at a time.

We stood on a narrow pathway of beaten earth. It stretched off into the distance as far as I could see. Everything save for the path was in total darkness, but the sky...

The sky sparkled and twinkled with more stars than I'd ever imagined, shining bright blue and white against the obsidian backdrop. Flashes of color--an aurora borealis in reds and greens and blues--washed across the stars at intermittent intervals. Meteors streaked across the canvas of the sky, blazing bright, then dying as suddenly.

"*Move out!*" Drat commanded, more to his troops than to us. Some of the enemy had managed to make their way through the portal now, bringing the battle to us. It would only be a matter of time before they established a defensible position there, and then Snit and Rant would join them. Drat took the lead; we followed. There were only fifty or sixty trolls with us now. The rest we'd abandoned on the other side, dead or dying.

I couldn't understand how someone could get lost in the Ways. There was only the one path--how hard

could it be? Then Drat stopped. We waited while he looked around for a moment, and suddenly the path shifted about forty-five degrees to the right. "This way," he said, and we were off again. The confusion must have been evident on my face.

"To you or me, there is only the one path," Leanne explained. "To the trolls there are many."

Drat had to take his time to ensure that we followed the correct trail. Snit and Rant were under no such handicap. All they had to do was keep us in sight. The enemy was gaining on us.

"I want ten of your men to join me in a rearguard action," I told Drat. "We'll hold them off until you're clear of the Ways, and meet up with you at Tae Con Ra."

"I'm coming with you," Leanne insisted.

I hugged her to me, and felt how her body still trembled. "I don't think you can handle it. It's too soon."

"Try and stop me." Her eyes blazed momentarily. Even that small act of defiance had brought the demon to the foreground.

I kissed her forehead. "They need you here. Alex needs you. She's all that matters." I stroked her hair, so soft and silky. "Get her to Tae Con Ra. I promise I'll be there. We'll rescue Sabrina and be home in time for pizza."

She pulled away, and brushed my hair back out of my eyes. "I hate pizza," she said, and smiled sadly.

"Then we're in real trouble. I'm such a lousy cook pizza's the only thing I know how to *order* without burning it."

"I don't eat, anyway."

"Yeah, yeah. You and every supermodel I know," Drat interrupted. He turned to me. "I got da boyze you wanted. Dey's ten a my best. Treat 'em good."

I clasped the troll on the shoulder. "You take care of mine, and I'll take care of yours."

Drat grinned. "Ya know, I'm starting ta tink maybe youse make a better friend den a snack."

I think that was a compliment. I could have been wrong though. Trolls really like their food. "*Move out!*" I called, and led Drat's men off toward the enemy at a slow jog.

"KILL DA BASTARDS!" I heard from behind me.

Lightning hit me when we were almost upon them. The energy sparked and crackled, spreading out through my chest and out along my arms and legs. I didn't feel a thing.

"You boys keep them busy," I said. "Snit's mine."

I bowled through the first four lines of the enemy, sending them reeling. I could see Snit near the back, goading the troops forward. Rant stood with him. For some reason the chieftain didn't look all that happy. I made a beeline for Snit, moving faster than the eye could see, and came up hard against his shield. Let me tell you, *that* hurt. It felt like I'd run full tilt into an oncoming Mac truck. I heard something pop and knew I'd dislocated a shoulder. Still, the maneuver wasn't a total loss.

I may not have penetrated Snit's shield, but the impact drove the mage back a good thirty feet and knocked him on his bony ass in a tangle of robes and gangly limbs. I picked myself up off the ground, popped my shoulder back into its socket, and advanced slowly this time. Rant stepped in front of me, a heavy two-handed mace clutched in his claws.

"You don't want to do this," I said.

"No shit! But I'm da chief here, and Eternal or no, I'm gonna take you out." He raised the mace high to strike.

I have to admit I admired him for his courage--but not enough to spare him any embarrassment. I took the mace from him and dropped it on his clawed toes. Trolls don't wear shoes, and it was a heavy mace. Rant hopped up and down cursing in pain, until I undid the belt about his waist and pulled his baggy pants down around his ankles. (By the way, Rant was a boxers kind of guy.) He tripped and fell flat on his face. I used his belt to hog-tie him. Have I mentioned I'm a big Three Stooges fan?

Snit climbed groggily to his feet, and leveled another blast at me that was as ineffectual as the first. To be honest, that kind of worried me. Was I that far removed from human already that I could shrug off being struck by lightning so easily?

The mage traced a faint outline in the air and mumbled more words of incantation, and suddenly a circle of fire sprang up all around me. The heat from the inferno was incredible, creating a vacuum that sucked the very air from my lungs. My clothes began to smolder as the circle slowly began to close in on me. To make matters worse, Rant's men had reached their leader and untied him. He looked pissed.

I concentrated on ignoring the flames, which is a lot harder than it sounds, especially when your hair starts to smoke. Have you ever tried *not* to think of something? I stepped through the blaze and out of the circle, and was pretty proud of myself until I noticed my boot was on fire. It's hard to look threatening when you're hopping about on one foot, swatting at the flames until they finally go out.

Snit stood there, the energies swirling madly about in that fancy snowglobe-on-a-stick of his, and grinning this malicious little grin. I wanted to shove his teeth down his throat--all two hundred of them. I stood beside him suddenly and caught him in the head with a spinning wheel kick; *guruma geri*, if I remember my Japanese correctly. Actually, I caught him just *beside* the head. That damn shield of his stopped me from actually connecting with his bony melon. Still, it knocked him to the ground and wiped that smirk off his face, so it wasn't a total loss.

Snit climbed slowly to his feet, and we stood eyeing each other not three feet apart. I tried to ignore the fact that Rant's men had by now ringed us in. I could still hear the clash of fighting as the ten men that I'd brought with me fought a running battle, harassing the enemy's front lines in an effort to slow them down.

"They say you can't kill an Eternal," Snit taunted as he traced another magical symbol in the air with his right hand. "That may be true, but I'm willing to bet I can make you *wish* you were dead."

The very air seemed to close in on me like some phantom boa constrictor, trapping my arms at my sides. My ribs ground together as they were forced inward, and I gasped in pain as one pierced my lungs.

"You should have let Rant have the Innocent. She would have kept him busy for a while, and out of my way." Snit closed his fist, and the invisible bands tightened once again, driving me to my knees. "You're an incredible source of power. Did you know that? You Eternals act as a focal point--one that I can draw on for my own use. Marrying you to Tirade would have ensured that you would be nearby, feeding me with your energies."

The mage kicked me hard in the ribs. "Oh well. You'll do just as well as my prisoner. Soon nothing and no one will be able to stop me. Once I rule all of the clans, we will look to Darkside--an unlimited source of food."

"Don't forget the women," Rant added. He grabbed Snit by the throat and one leg, and lifted the struggling mage over his head. "I never did like you much," he said and tossed him off of the path and into the darkness.

Snit fell away from us, as if sideways was suddenly down somehow, screaming and flailing his arms and legs until his shape had receded to the point where he was lost to view.

The pressure eased up, and my ribs sprang out to their normal position. That hurt almost as much as being crushed. I wiped at the small trickle of blood that ran from my nose, and Rant pointed to my ears. There was blood there, too. My shoulder throbbed where the tendons had stretched when it dislocated, but there was very little swelling. I had already started to heal. I knew that I could probably speed up the process even further--all I had to do was visualize--but I held off. In the back of my mind the thought that I could still feel pain made me feel human.

Rant motioned for his men to lower their weapons. "You," he ordered the troll nearest me. "Run up ta da front lines an stop da fighting dere." The troll sped off as fast as his bowed legs could carry him. "I should of knowed da mage was rotten. Nobody is dat helpful without dere being someting in it fer him," Rant

confessed. "Besides dat, he talked funny."

"That'll teach him to go on and on about his evil plan instead of just finishing me when he had the chance," I said. Snit would have made a good Bond villain.

Rant nodded in agreement. "I don't like being made a fool of--which reminds me." The chieftain tugged at the belt about his waist, tightening it.

"So that's why you tossed Snit off of the path," I said, trying to change the subject. "What exactly happened to him, anyway?"

"Nobody's exactly sure. Dere's millions of paths, but youse can only see one at a time. I suppose if he thought hard about see'n anudder path below him, eventually one would show up. Still, dere's no telling where it'd lead, and he'd be moving pretty fast. He'd hit dat new path mighty hard. I don't tink we'll have ta worry about dat half-breed Snit any time soon."

I agreed. So why wasn't I surprised when flames sprung up all about us suddenly? From a pinpoint of reference far off to the side of the path, Snit's shape grew rapidly in size as he approached. He screamed in rage, the sound louder and louder the nearer he came. The rat-bastard was levitating, the snowglobe-on-a-stick holding him aloft. Several trolls around me burst suddenly into flames and rolled about on the ground as their comrades tried to beat out the fire. Snit hovered just off the edge of the path now.

Enough was enough. I dove off the path, hitting the mage high and dragging him with me as we started to fall, um...sideways. Snit chanted louder until the staff supported both our weights. I grabbed the crystal, squeezing hard. Snit's eyes bugged out as if I squeezed him instead. I pressed harder until a hairline crack appeared. The energies swirled frantically as if excited at their imminent release. The mage panicked, clawing at me with his free hand. His talons dug a furrow down the left side of my face, but I ignored him and concentrated on the crystal. Another crack formed, then another, until it finally shattered, first imploding--then exploding in a fine mist of crushed crystal fragments.

Snit screamed--a raw, primal sound bereft of intelligence--as we began to fall. A deep purple fog crackling with electricity arched from what was left of the staff and wrapped itself about the troll. It entered him through his eyes and ears, and down through his mouth, choking off his strangled screams. Purplish veins pulsed iridescently just beneath his skin, covering Snit from head to toe. The fog seemed to eat at the mage from within. His body collapsed in on itself, the leathery skin shrunken tight to the skeletal frame until he looked like a desiccated mummy. His eye sockets smoldered as the orbs were burned out. He fell away from me--still flailing, still alive in this unholy condition--until I lost sight of him.

The wind whistled past as I hurtled toward--what? I couldn't make out any other path. Only the sky, that magnificent sky. I was an Eternal, for all the good that did me now. Suddenly eternity seemed like a very long time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I fell for quite a long time; just how long it was hard to be sure. I didn't have Josh's Rolex, and I never wore a watch myself. I'd always found them confining. I wondered how long I'd have to fall before the stars would seem more distant. At least I didn't seem to be picking up speed. Isn't there a maximum velocity that a falling body can reach? I'm not really up on my physics.

What I needed was a path--any path. If the damn trolls could see them, then why the hell couldn't I? After all, I *was* an Eternal. I didn't bother to close my eyes this time. What was there to distract me? I imagined the path: beaten earth, like hard-packed clay winding off into the distance; small tufts of grass sprouting here and there at random; rocks piled in almost artistic formations along its sides. Nothing. I fell, and fell, and fell.

Maybe I was going about this all wrong. I knew I could control my own mass; what made me think I had any control over...well...reality? Okay, so I couldn't create a path, but I didn't have to. All I had to do was *see* one that was already there. Hell, I could see trolls, vampires, ogres, and faeries. How tough could it be to see a damned path! I turned into the direction of the fall so at least I would be facing whatever it was that wasn't there. I searched for a path--not *the* path, but *a* path. I figured maybe that was my problem. I'd been trying to imagine the path *here*, when it was actually over *there* someplace. By trying to see any old path I hoped to increase my chances. Does this make any sense? Because I'll tell you it sure gave me a headache.

I peered ahead, trying to make out something, anything to latch onto--both physically and mentally. The overhead stars were the only points of reference that I had, and they seemed stationary. Falling sideways really messed with my sense of direction too.

Was that something I saw out of the corner of my eye? I turned to look, but there was nothing. Again, something flashed in my peripheral vision but vanished under direct observation. I remembered something my old sensei had told me. (Actually, he wasn't old. He was twenty-six, and could kick my ass at will. Now *there's* someone I'd like to meet up with again.) Some mystical mumbo jumbo about "viewing the mountain in the distance." The trick was not to look at any specific spot on your opponent, but to see all of him at once. Focused, but not focused. The guy could be as annoying as Yoda at times.

I looked ahead, let my mind wander, and my eyes...um...relax. I stopped worrying about seeing the path, and just worried about seeing. It's even trickier than it sounds, as you have a tendency to go cross-eyed. (Do that in martial arts class and your opponent thinks you're making fun of him and just smacks you one, and you can't see it coming because you're all cross-eyed. I speak from experience.)

The path winked into view just up ahead, then was gone again. I'd made the mistake of focusing on it when it materialized, and it hadn't held up under scrutiny. I tried again, but with the same results. Every time I caught a glimpse of it I couldn't help but look at it, and it would vanish.

"Okay, this time concentrate. Or don't concentrate. You know what I mean," I said. It's bad enough that I talk to myself, but I have a habit of arguing with me too.

I saw the path again but refused to look. As a matter of fact, I closed my eyes. I must have been moving really fast by now, because it hurt like the dickens a few seconds later when I slammed face-first into the hard-packed earth. I didn't even bother to open my eyes. I was afraid to see what a mess I'd become, so I just spent a few moments imagining myself whole, hale, and healthy. Once I felt it was safe, I climbed out of the depression I'd made in the path. Okay, so it was more than a depression. It was a good four or five feet deep, and man-shaped, with the arms outstretched overhead. I stood there looking down at the crater, and a thought suddenly dawned on me: Eternal or not, I was just *this* close to being an actual cartoon character.

The path looked the same as the one I'd traveled on with Drat and his boys. It wound off into the distance and out of sight with no visible destination. As far as I could tell I was only marginally better off than I was before.

I heard a loud "woof," and suddenly I was flat on my face again. Bear danced all about me, sticking his cold, wet, noncorporeal nose into my ear and slobbering all over the back of my neck. Why is it that the only thing that physically survives a dog after death is its slobber?

"All right, let me up, ya big dope."

He backed off long enough to let me get to my feet, then raced about in circles. It was hard enough focusing on him at the best of times. Now he was just making me woozy.

"I don't suppose you've got an extra Milkbone on you or something?" I was starting to get hungry, even *if* eating was just a force of habit. Bear snorted as if to say that even if he did have one my odds of getting it were slim to none. Man's best friend indeed.

"Thank God you found your way back," Alison said. "I was really worried about you." She looked stunning, as usual. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at her without a lump forming in my throat and my heart sinking to the pit of my stomach. That neat wind machine effect she had going for her now that she was dead didn't help matters any, either.

I wiped Bear's slobber from the back of my neck with my sleeve. "Hey, hon. What do you mean? Found my way back from where?"

She bent down to one knee and patted Bear's head. I guess she didn't have as much trouble focusing on him as I did. "When you left the path, you just ceased to exist. You were no longer bound by time or space."

"I thought ghosts weren't bound by time and space, either."

Dad popped in suddenly. He sat on one of the rock formations, cleaning his service revolver. "Even a ghost has to be somewhere, sometime. You weren't anywhere, at anytime."

"Is there like a handbook you guys get when you die? Because I didn't get my copy." I started walking toward the horizon. Sooner or later I had to find my way out of the Ways and to Tae Con Ra.

Alison drifted along beside me. "It's just that you're not dead-dead, James. And you're still thinking like a mortal. As ghosts we have no dependency on the physical plane of existence. We've tapped into a whole new level of reality; one where we take its rules for granted, the same way you take the rules of your world for granted. You accept that there is an up and a down, that you must move linearly through time, that mass takes up space. No one had to tell you these things. It is the same for us."

"Hey! Stop that, you mutt," I heard Grandpa holler.

I turned, and there was Bear, tugging on Grandpa's suspenders. He had them stretched out pretty far too, and he suddenly let go. I tried not to laugh as I heard a loud "thwack," and a lot of cursing from Grandpa.

Maybe Bear wasn't as dopey as we thought.

So, I was on the path; where was the exit? I picked a point on the horizon and raced there. For all I could tell I hadn't moved an inch. Oh, the path wound about in a slightly different route from where I'd started off, but it still meandered out for as far as I could see. I picked another spot and was there in a flash. Same result.

Alison blew me a kiss, then winked out. The others followed shortly. I think it was difficult for them to maintain a physical presence for any length of time. It was as if it took a lot of effort for them to remember who and what they once were. If they *had* been reincarnated by now, then they were truly only echoes of the people I knew.

I followed the path for about another hour, sometimes walking, sometimes moving at warp speed. As far as I could tell I still hadn't made any progress. It was getting monotonous.

"Must you always do things the hard way?"

I looked all about, startled, but couldn't see anybody. The voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. For a minute I thought maybe I was arguing with myself again.

"Why do you insist on moving through the physical plane when the metaphysical realm is more efficient?"

Suddenly I felt like I'd been taking the short bus to school all my life. "Huh?"

"Simply be where you wish to be."

The voice was odd--and not just because it talked like Mr. Spock either. It *sounded* like a woman's voice, but it was hard to be sure. It lacked intonation or emotion. Take a phone sex operator and record every word she says, but one at a time and out of context. Then string the words together to form sentences and that's pretty much what I heard.

"That's easy for you to say; you don't have a body."

"Neither do you."

It was a little unnerving arguing with a disembodied voice. It's one thing to talk to yourself, but it's an entirely different matter when someone starts answering. "I'll admit I'm no Mr. Olympia, but I *do* have a body."

The space a few feet in front of me warped, twisting into a spiral as it drew matter toward its center. A vague outline coalesced at the apex of the distortion until I could just make out a form in silhouette--a woman's form. It drew more energy onto itself until finally she stood before me. "Is this better?"

"Sort of." The shape was definitely female, but that's where the similarity ended. It was without real substance, yet three-dimensional--and pitch black, its ethereal form dotted with stars throughout as if she were made up of the stuff of the galaxies.

She held her hands out before her and studied them a moment, then studied me as well. Energy like bright flashes of colored light swirled about her again, and suddenly she stood before me in the flesh, so to speak. Well, at least parts of her. Her head, hands, and feet could have passed as human, but her torso still maintained its insubstantial form, as if she wore outer space like a jumpsuit.

"And now?" she asked.

"It'll do." Her face held no expression; it was as cold and emotionless as her voice. While even Leanne's marblelike appearance managed to seem somewhat natural, this creature could have passed as a mannequin or a figure in a wax museum--lifelike, but definitely not alive. She appeared Asian, with short, straight dark hair about shoulder length, and a delicate, heart-shaped face. Her eyes had a slight lilt to them, and were deep green. Do Asians have green eyes?

"You have a body because you believe you have a body," she said.

"And what good's a body when I've already lost my mind?" I mumbled. I held out my hand to her. "I'm James. James Decker. And you must be an Eternal."

She stared at my hand the same way you would if I suddenly held out a leg and wiggled my foot at you. "We know who you are."

Did she mean *we*, as in her and the other Eternals, or was this a royal *We*? I dropped my hand back down to my side.

"I am Tam-Lien."

I waited for more, hoping for some sort of history or background information, but that was it. Maybe "Tam-Lien" said it all; kind of like Madonna or Sting.

We stood there staring at each other for about a minute. "Well, it's nice of you to drop by and say hi and all, but I really must be going. You wouldn't happen to know the way out of here, would you?"

"No."

I found that hard to believe. "So you're stuck here too?"

"No."

This is what I had to look forward to? "Look, do you think you could blink or something? That blank stare is starting to get on my nerves."

Tam-Lien stared at me for a moment, obviously considering my request. Then she blinked--a long, slow, deliberated closing of both eyes. "Better?"

"No." Two could play this game.

That seemed to puzzle her. "Why not better?"

"Well to be honest, I've seen Disney animatrons that look more lifelike than you do."

She held her arms out to her side. "This is not acceptable?"

"It's not very...human," I told her.

"I am not human."

"But you were, once. Right?"

"As you were."

"I'm *still* human." That ticked me off. It shouldn't have; she was probably right. But the thought of becoming what she was unnerved me.

"You only think you are human."

"Close enough." I hoped that was true.

"Teach me?"

Okay, this was getting interesting. "Teach you what?"

She blinked again. It looked as phony as it had the first time. "To be human."

Bear appeared at my side suddenly and barked at her in that otherworldly way of his.

Tam-Lien's head swiveled to stare at him. "Dog," she said.

Teaching her to be human would be a real chore. "This is Bear," I told her.

Her head tilted to one side. "Not dog?"

I smiled. "Yes, he is a dog. His *name* is Bear."

"Bear," she said, and smiled. It looked really creepy. Kind of like Tammy Fay Baker.

"Don't do that until you get it right," I said, and the smile vanished from her face a little too quickly to be natural. "Why do you want to learn to be human?"

"Why do you help the mortals?"

Answering questions with questions. She may not have been human, but she was definitely a woman.

"They need my help, and they are my friends."

"Compassion. Sympathy. I have forgotten these. I wish to understand. To understand I must be human. You will teach?"

"Sure. Why not?" I said. "But first you have to tell me how to get out of here."

"I do not know where the exit is. I wish to be somewhere else, and I am." She vanished suddenly.

"You must wish to be somewhere else. Travel the metaphysical plane."

"I would, but I don't have a metaphysical plane ticket." She didn't answer, so I assumed she was gone. With Eternals, though, you never know for sure. I looked down at Bear, or tried to. "Well, she was a lot of help."

Bear barked again as if in agreement, and then he was gone too.

"Okay, just imagine where I want to be." I was back to talking to myself again. At least now no one was answering. "Now, where do I want to be?"

I pictured Leanne. I knew her face intimately, not in a stalker kind of way, but as an adult male in a healthy relationship. Nothing happened. I tried harder, all the while walking along the path. Hey, it couldn't hurt. I was still half hoping to see a large red arrow and a sign saying "This Way Out." Still nothing.

Maybe the problem was that Leanne wasn't a place, she was a person. If that was the case, then I was in real trouble. I had no idea where Tae Con Ra was, or what it looked like. I thought about traveling back to the original path, but then thought better of it. Drat and the gang would be long gone by now, as would Rant and his men. What difference did it make which path I was lost on? Besides, both paths looked the same to me. I doubted I could differentiate between the two of them enough to get an accurate mental picture.

I supposed I could go home, but that wouldn't help anyone. Sabrina would die, and probably Alex and the rest of them too. I refused to give up that easily. I thought about heading back to the Burrow. At least there would be other trolls there. Maybe one of them could lead me through the Ways to Tae Con Ra. I just hoped I wouldn't be too late. I'd just about decided on that course of action when I heard it.

It was faint at first, and I had to strain to be sure I wasn't imagining things. Nope. It was there all right. Music. I ran toward it (and we all know how quickly I can move when I want to.) It grew in intensity and volume until the sound of it hit me like a wave front and rolled over me. My body felt warm, the heat radiating from the center mass outward, and my hair stood on end as if electrified. The rhythm pulsed through me until my heart matched its cadence and my body swayed to the melody.

It was Thomas. It had to be. Only his music could do this to me, and I let it fill me up. It was wild and frenzied, raw and passionate, lethal and teasing; a warrior's swagger and a maiden's wanton dance all at once. I could smell the sweat and sweet perfume, the war paint and rouge. I tasted the grit of sand in my mouth, and felt the crush of eager lips upon mine. And then I saw it--sort of, kind of, almost, in a way. It was like a mental picture, but more...substantial, and I had trouble discerning if it was just my imagination, or a wavering image in front of me.

Leanne, Josh, Alex, and Charlie sat around a campfire in the middle of clearing while Thomas played. Bands of warriors huddled in small groups, an ethnic mix of trolls, humans, faeries, shapeshifters, and a few others that I couldn't put a name to. Several other musicians accompanied Thomas: a Celtic drum hammered out the rhythm; a flutist's haunting refrain countered Thomas's harp; frantic fiddling drove the cadence to a fevered pitch. The faerie, never ones to miss a good party, danced about wildly and enticed a few of the more daring humans and shapeshifters to join in. The trolls were too busy eating to bother with something as trivial as dancing. I latched on to the image like a lifeline, until it became more real for me than my present location.

Alex screamed when I appeared suddenly beside her, then stepped back and looked at me sternly. "Next time, stay with the rest of the class and don't let go of the rope."

Leanne threw her arms about me and gave me a big hug, and Thomas stopped playing and set the harp down between his knees.

"It's about time you showed up," he said. "We've got battle plans to make, and the moon will be at its zenith in four hours."

I looked to the eastern horizon. It hung there, all red and bloated and filling most of the skyline--the Blood Moon.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The clearing sat atop an escarpment that looked down upon an ancient, abandoned city--Tae Con Ra. There was something utterly alien about the structures there. It wasn't that they were in ruins, crumbled and crawling with moss and ivy. It wasn't the layout, an octagon pattern with streets spiraling in toward a central amphitheater, intersecting one another so that the city resembled a giant spider's web when viewed from above. It wasn't even in the construction material: heavy, quarried stone blocks and precision-cut crystal in rainbow hues.

Tall edifices, thin and sickly looking, jutted skyward like the outstretched arms of someone screaming for mercy. Derelict fountains pockmarked the city, the water stagnant and thick, like mucus. Crystal-cut monuments reflected back pale imitations of the surrounding landscape as if trapping the very soul of Tae Con Ra within their depths. It was a city of torment, of pain, of suffering and disease.

Leanne put her arm about my waist as we looked out over Tae Con Ra. "The city gives him strength," she said, and I knew she meant her demon. "Even you are not enough to drive him away this close to that foul place."

I hugged her closer to me, offering what little comfort I could, even if it was merely physical.

She smiled up at me. "Don't worry, I held him at bay long before I ever met you."

That may have been true, but she'd always been on her home turf. Now she was on his. Evil radiated from Tae Con Ra; another cliché, I know, but an accurate one.

The moon was halfway to its zenith now and cast the city in a murky, ocher light, like dried blood. Small campfires flickered pitifully throughout the city, like pustules on a carcass. Knots of men, trolls, vampires, and the Dark Sidhe who had aligned themselves with the daemon milled about, or brawled amongst themselves. Soon they would all make their way to the amphitheater at the center of Tae Con Ra for the Blood Moon ceremony. That's when we would make our move, following stealthily and taking up ambush positions around them.

Thick, dark clouds rushed by at an impossible rate, forming a vortex over the amphitheater like something out of a Spielberg movie. Bear suddenly howled from atop a rocky promontory above the escarpment.

"Thanks, pal. That's just what I needed."

Josh joined me and Leanne at the edge of the precipice. He carried the shotgun Goibnu had made slung across his back on a sling, and the pistol in a shoulder holster on his left side. "It's time to go," he said.

I looked off to the side at the entrance to the narrow pass that wound its way down to the city below. Suddenly I felt like Orpheus descending into the underworld. Josh looked even worse than I felt, if that was at all possible.

Thomas walked side by side with his old friend Dianchecht. I noticed the bard's black eye had vanished, no doubt the good doctor's handiwork. Dianchecht looked healthier than he had when I'd last seen him. It's amazing the effect one good meal can have on a man.

"You've learned much in the short time since you left our camp, Eternal," he said. "Although I'm sure our good friend Thomas here has had a hand in that."

"Yeah, he's been a fountain of information," I said. "Or should I say geyser? He spits it out in small doses, and usually at the most inopportune times."

Dianchecht slapped his friend on the back and chuckled good-naturedly. "Well, he *is* a bard after all."

"Now youse know why dey're untouchable," Drat said. He came up on us from the left, sharpening his battle-axe with a whetstone. "Dey'd get da snot kicked out of dem on a regular basis udderwise."

Charlie strode up with Alex on his shoulders. The ogre had volunteered to be her personal guard, and Josh had approved wholeheartedly. There are worse beings you could have looking out for your loved ones than an ogre. (I can't believe I said that.) It also left him free to concentrate on rescuing Sabrina. It was expected that I would be in the thick of things when the shooting--or clawing and biting--started. Josh had insisted on being right there with me. So had Leanne, and Drat.

Luchtaine arrived on horseback, sawed back on his mount's reins, and came to a stop just before us. He'd brought twenty of his archers with him, and another ten lancers. They were as close to a cavalry as we were likely to have. He looked down on us--in more ways than one--and raised an eyebrow. "Are we ready yet?"

I had the impression that he and his men weren't overly happy about being here. When I'd asked Thomas about it, he told me that Queen Aine had insisted. I'm sure the Sidhe were here more to make sure nothing happened to the bard, rather than out of any concern for the life of an Innocent, or the fate of the human race.

I turned slowly toward Luchtaine. Two curved, six-inch horns sprouted suddenly from my collarbones just at the shoulder. Twelve-inch, double-edged blades jutted out from the backs of my hands just at the knuckle line. My eyes smoldered, barely containing the white-hot energies that irradiated them. "I'm ready," I said, and my voice resonated with a godly echo. As suddenly I was normal again. That wiped the smug attitude off the Sidhe's face.

"Yes. I see. I'll start the troops moving," he said, somewhat subdued.

Drat's Boyze took up the vanguard. They chatted idly among themselves as they loosed their weapons in their sheaths or at their belts. Seventy had survived the previous battle, and had insisted on leading this little excursion. They had earned the right, and were in high spirits, having feasted, and now with another war to look forward to. Fighting and eating--it doesn't take much to keep a troll happy.

A line of ten shapeshifters fell in behind Drat's Boyze, then our impromptu cavalry, followed by Charlie and Alex. Rant had brought an additional two hundred troops. They would bring up the rearguard. Leanne, Josh, and I would act as scouts. Once the actual fighting started we'd be right there at the front lines.

Our ragtag army wound its way slowly down through the pass to the base of the escarpment. The air seemed sickly sweet as we approached the city. The cloying scent hung thickly about us and made the skin moist and clammy. It was as if the air were so thick with disease that the viruses had become a palpable thing.

"That was a neat little trick you pulled on Luchtaine," Leanne said out of the blue.

I shrugged. "I've been practicing." I held her hand in mine and squeezed it gently. I think I understood how she felt; constantly in fear that the demon would take her over. "I met another Eternal in the Ways," I told her.

Leanne's hand grasped mine a little more tightly. "Which one?"

"Tam-Lien."

"She's an old one," Leanne said. Then, "What did she want?"

"She wants me to teach her how to be human." I didn't know why the idea bothered me so much. It had nagged at the back of my mind since Tam-Lien had brought it up.

"You're worried that you might be losing your own humanity," Leanne said. "You're afraid of becoming like her."

I keep forgetting that vampires are slightly telepathic. "Josh was right," I said. "She was spooky."

Leanne shoved me up against the bole of a tree and kissed me hard. The intensity of it left me dazed. The passion expressed in such a sudden, simple act overwhelmed me, tugging at emotions I'd denied myself these last few years. She pulled back, pinning me there with her tiny hand against my chest. "If it's any consolation, I'm over a thousand years old and I think I'm still pretty human...for a Faerie Vampire."

I blinked. "Um...but...it's just that..." Sometimes I can be so articulate. This wasn't one of those times.

"Don't worry, rookie. I'll show you the ropes." She looked me up and down, grinning mischievously. "Besides, if your reaction to that kiss was any indication, you're still human."

I blushed, and wondered if she was speaking metaphorically when she'd offered to show me the ropes. With Leanne, you never knew.

Drat walked by, shaking his head. "I dunno how he rates such a hot dame, and him wit a nose like dat," he told Thomas.

Thomas put his hand on the troll's shoulder. "Remind me to fill you in on the mysteries of human physiology."

Drat scowled. "What are youse talking about?"

The bard grinned and bent low, whispering into the troll's pointy ear. Drat's eyes grew wider and wider, and he kept glancing back and forth from me to Thomas.

"No way!"

Thomas nodded.

"Dat's disgusting!" Drat announced, and stormed off.

Thomas winked at us, and Leanne and I broke out laughing.

She kissed me again, more tenderly this time. "Never lose that sense of humor, Eternal. It will do more to keep you human than anything else I can think of."

We joined hands again and caught up to Thomas. Drat walked ahead, glancing back at us occasionally and blushing deep green.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

Thomas grinned and pulled a small reed flute from his knapsack as we walked. "The truth." He played a few notes, something haunting and totally inappropriate, then sighed and stored the flute in his jacket pocket for easy access. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation earlier--about Tam-Lien."

"Uh-huh," I grunted. He took it as encouragement to continue.

"Do you think she'll help?"

"I doubt it. She couldn't understand why *I* was helping."

Thomas actually looked relieved. "That's pretty much what I expected...what I hoped for." He shrugged apologetically when he noticed the confused look on my face. "The future is full of huge, gaping holes whenever you Eternals become involved. There are so many possibilities that trying to choose the more likely ones becomes near impossible."

Leanne finished twisting her hair into a braid and knotted it at the end. "Meaning you're as in the dark about the future as the rest of us."

Thomas seemed almost embarrassed by the admission. "Premonition is a sense that I've become

dependent on, much as you depend on sight or hearing. It's disconcerting when it's suddenly taken away."

"You don't seem to have that problem when I'm around," I said.

Thomas grinned and patted me on the back. "Maybe that's because you're more human than you know, friend."

That was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in a long time.

Grandpa materialized in front of us. "The outskirts of the city are all clear," he said. "Most of the creepy crawlies are slithering down to the amphitheater for the big finale. I ain't seen so many freaks since that time you dragged me to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* when you were a kid."

I laughed. "You big fake. You bitched through the whole movie and all the way home. But who was the guy I caught doing the Time Warp up in the attic?"

Grandpa blushed, which looks kind of neat on a ghost. The red tinge colors their entire body inside and out. "Anyway, the going should be pretty easy until you're within about a mile of the amphitheater," he said, and vanished abruptly.

Using the ghosts as scouts had been Drat's idea. Not only were they ideally suited to the task, but it kept them out of the camp. Trolls have a real aversion to ghosts, and this seemed the best way to keep peace among the troops.

Leanne, Drat, Josh, and I broke away from the rest of the army as we came to the outskirts of the city. We entered the gates first while the troops were still about six hundred yards back. While ghosts made excellent scouts in one respect, they did have trouble maintaining a consistent frame of reference when it came to alternate timelines. Sure, Grandpa had scouted ahead, but for all we know he could have done it last week, or next. The only time you could be sure a ghost was on the same wavelength as you were was when they happened to be standing right there next to you.

We spread out across the wide cobblestone street that was the main thoroughfare. If we wanted to we could follow it all the way down to the amphitheatre. Sometimes the direct approach was best.

I took point, with Leanne just behind me and off to my left, and Josh behind her and to her left. Drat placed himself to my right, and parallel to Josh's position. The troll carried his battle-axe, resting it over his right shoulder, while Josh kept his shotgun crooked across his left arm. Leanne and I hadn't bothered with weapons.

The city seemed even more oppressive now that we were within its confines. The dilapidated buildings leaned in on us menacingly from either side of the street. Half-seen things flitted by open windows. A stale wind whistled through doorways and down back alleys so that the city seemed to breathe: an asthmatic wheeze, or the pitiful choking sigh of the elderly on their deathbed.

Bear shot by us suddenly and leapt through the window of a building just to our right. He was growling, that eerie subharmonic snarl of his that cut through you on so many different levels. Something screamed in terror. It sounded vaguely reptilian, or perhaps insectlike. The sounds of struggling stopped, and Bear bounded back through the window apparently unharmed, and quite pleased with himself. He vanished again before his paws touched the ground.

I looked back at Leanne. "Don't tell me. I don't even want to know," I said. My imagination had conjured up a pretty gruesome image all on its own. Unfortunately, in this place the reality was probably even worse.

Our army had just started to enter the gates to the city when the wind picked up suddenly. A small dust devil formed down the street, catching up dead leaves in its wake. It moved toward us, building in intensity. The funnel, stronger now, sucked up clumps of moldy earth and crumbled marble from the surrounding buildings. The additional matter lent it a solidity that only added to its fury. It grew quickly in size and strength until it towered above us, some thirty feet tall and drawing in everything in its wake. It pulsed, throbbing as if to some mercurial heartbeat within the tempest. The whirlwind drew bits of crystal dust to

itself from the fragmented pillars of a building to our right. The pale green and pink dust lent it form, and suddenly the wind died and it stood before us. Now I know why they call them dust devils.

It looked somewhat like a cross between a lizard and a lobster, with a little bit of bug thrown into the mix. The demon was vaguely humanoid in that it had a head, two arms, and two legs. A crown of horns jutted from the top of its skull, and its eyes were beady black pearls set deep back into the recesses of eight sockets that formed an inverted triangle in the middle of its forehead. The mouth was a vertical slit lined with hundreds of sliverlike teeth that angled inward. Food went in, but couldn't crawl back out. Two hooked mandibles looked like they'd be useful in tearing that food limb from limb. Heavy muscle rippled under thick, scaled skin that varied in hue from puke green to mucus yellow, while chitinous plates covered the body like living armor.

Grandpa appeared in front of me suddenly. "Oops," he said, then was gone again. I guess he'd somehow managed to miss this beastie during his little scouting mission.

Josh fired from the hip, and one of the creature's eyes exploded in a mist of blue-black gore. It staggered back a step and howled in pain and rage, sounding like a cross between a lion's roar and a ruptured steam fitting. The demon leaned forward suddenly, mandibles clicking, as it tried to get a better look at its tormentor.

"Oh, way to go, Josh. Now you've pissed it off," I said.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," he replied, and took out two more of its eyes.

It rushed us suddenly, moving about as quickly as you'd imagine a thirty-foot demon could. One moment it was there; the next it stood just in front of us. Josh let go a couple of blasts into the center mass, but the hard shell of its armor protected the creature. The demon backhanded the shapeshifter, hurtling Josh fifty or more feet and into the side of the nearest building.

Josh climbed groggily to his feet. Even for a shapeshifter that had to smart. He morphed, then pumped another round into the shotgun as the demon lumbered toward him.

I found a rock the size of a bowling ball and fired it at the beast, hitting it right between the eyes--well, between the top row of eyes and the middle row of eyes. The thing had a lot of eyes.

"Hey, Lobsterhead! Over here," I shouted, jumping up and down to get its attention. Luckily it wasn't too bright, and it ignored Josh in order to deal with its new tormentor.

"Try to scare it over toward those crystal rods," Leanne ordered as she headed for the objects in question. Apparently she had a plan.

"Scare it! With what--some melted butter and tartar sauce?"

"Youse hit him high, and I'll hit him low," Drat suggested.

Yeah. Right. Somehow the area around the kneecap just didn't seem to qualify as high to me.

The demon was even faster than I thought. Suddenly it had me about the waist. It held me effortlessly aloft before it in one of its taloned fists, while its mandibles snapped open and shut in anticipation.

Drat chopped at the demon's shin with his battleaxe, but barely marred the plate there. Josh shot out another of its eyes and it staggered back a few steps, but it still had several eyes to go. As a matter of fact, I think the first one Josh blasted was starting to regenerate.

I grabbed a mandible in each hand and shoved as the Demon brought me toward its waiting mouth. I could see Leanne out of the corner of my eye standing beside the crystal rods. "I'll be right there, honey," I shouted. She, at least, had a plan, and here I was not holding up my end.

I pushed harder on the mandibles, driving them past their normal range of motion. I heard something grind, and then the one in my left hand snapped off. The demon screamed again, and fountained that blue-black blood all over me. Talk about gross. It smelled like ink and dirty diapers--not that its breath was anything to brag about.

"Does the word Tic-Tac mean anything to you?" I said, then grunted as I jabbed the sharp end of the

mandible deep down into the exposed skin just between its shoulder and neck.

It hollered again--it certainly wasn't very articulate--then threw me up against the building where Leanne was waiting. Sometimes actions speak louder than words, I guess.

I hit one of the few still-standing pillars midway along its length, and at about forty miles an hour. The pillar caved in on itself, and the marble overhang came down on top of me. I lay buried under close to a thousand pounds of rock, battered, bruised and broken, and cursing at the top of my lungs. "Son of a bitch. You lobster-headed Sea World escapee. I'm going to make you wish you'd stayed home under the sea and watched *The Little Mermaid* with all your crab-assed friends." See, now *that's* articulate.

I imagined myself whole again, and the pain vanished abruptly. I shoved aside a chunk of rock the size of Dodge Dart. It's funny, but when I'm really pissed I don't worry about whether or not I can do things like that or not, or even how I do them. I just do.

Leanne was beside me now, pushing away stone debris almost as large. When I was free, she handed me one of the crystal poles. It was about twelve feet long and maybe five inches in diameter, and jagged at both ends. "Here, use this," she said.

I hefted the makeshift spear in my right hand. It had to weigh at least a couple of hundred pounds. "That's your big plan? Poke it with a sharp stick?"

Leanne shrugged. "Big monster. Big stick. Keep it simple, stupid."

The demon plodded over to where we stood atop a pile of rubble. It leaned forward and hissed at me, then threw its head back and roared.

I knew an insult when I heard one. "Oh yeah?" Well, they can't all be gems.

I hurled the spear at him, and it caught him square in the center of the chest. The crystal punched its way through the creature and protruded from the demon's back for about a foot.

It tried to scream again but choked up blood instead, *which* it managed to spit all over me in a final gesture. Did I mention the smell? The demon sunk to its knees, narrowly missing Drat in the fall as the troll scrambled to get out of the way. The wind came up again, this time feebly, and the creature disintegrated to dust that was carried off by the pitiful breeze that swept the street.

Josh staggered over to us with a little help from Drat as the rest of our army continued its advance. They had orders to stay back and let us handle anything that popped up until we reached the amphitheater, where we'd need them most. Of course, If "whatever popped up" managed to finish us off...

"Are all demons that big?" I asked.

Leanne shook her head. "Most of them are average-sized; about human norm."

"Thank God."

Josh angled his head from side to side, trying to work out the kinks in his neck. "Don't go thanking Him yet," he said. "Aeshma makes that one look like a toddler."

There are just some things I'd rather not know.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The moon approached its zenith. Drat held his thumb up to the sky and chewed on his tongue as he calculated. "I give it another hour before the ritual starts."

The street angled slightly downward as we approached the amphitheater. The entire city was concave, each of the major avenues like the spokes of a wheel that led toward the center. I wondered how it was that the amphitheater didn't flood when it rained, and said so.

"It never rains in Tae Con Ra," Leanne said. "No one knows why not."

"How long has the city been abandoned?"

"It's always been like this--at least as far back as written records go. It must have been alive at one time, I imagine." She stopped us for a moment while she sniffed at the air. I did likewise, but when neither of us caught scent of anything out of the usual, we continued on.

"Has it always been...evil?"

"Yes."

Maybe it was just me, but I got the impression that she knew a lot more about the history of Tae Con Ra than she wasn't telling me. Maybe that was a good thing. Like I said before, there are some things I'd just rather not know.

The air distorted in front of us, as if something had twisted reality just a bit, and Tam-Lien stood before me. She wore clothes now: a soft pink v-neck sweater with an embroidered T on the left side, a pair of stretchy black stirrup pants, and white canvas deck shoes. Her hair was done up in a bouffant-type do. Her face and mannerisms still seemed wooden.

"Better?" she asked.

"Better," I agreed. Well, it *was* better, but just barely. "Where did you get the clothes?"

"Television."

I shook my head to clear my thoughts--hey, it works for dogs. "You got your clothes from television?" I studied her carefully for a moment, then grinned. "Laverne and Shirley, right?"

"Yes. By observing popular female characters, and emulating them, I hope to become more human."

"Not bad, Tammy, but you might want to choose something a little more...current."

She tilted her head from side to side, the way Bear does when I've done something to confuse him. "Suggestions?"

I shrugged and looked to Leanne for help.

"Try daytime soap operas," she offered. "Those women are usually dressed to the nines."

Tam-Lien blinked very slowly again, the air distorted, and she was gone.

"You're welcome," I shouted after her. "And blink faster, damn it!"

I glanced at Leanne from the corner of my eye, a bit of a superior smirk on my face. "Daytime soap operas?"

"I just watch them to see what they're wearing."

"Yeah. Right. And I buy *Playboy* just for the articles."

Drat guffawed. "Hey, Leanne. Youse coulda suggested sometin' more classy--like *Baywatch*."

I laughed. "I didn't know trolls watched TV."

"Sure we do. Mostly wrestling, cooking shows, and roller derby, though."

It figured.

Dad and Alison appeared suddenly. "There's a gang of vampires headed this way," Alison said. "Seven of them." She glanced at Leanne and frowned, then vanished.

Did I detect a hint of jealousy there?

"They're coming from the west, and moving fast," Dad said. "ETA three minutes." Then he was gone too.

Drat turned and waved the rest of the army to a halt. Seven vampires could lay waste to half our troops without so much as a scratch to themselves. We had to strike first. As my sensei used to say, the best defense is to hit first, and from behind. Hey, he was Chinese and barely spoke English, so give him a break, okay?

I glanced around at my companions. "Anyone got any wooden stakes?"

Josh raced over to one of the lifeless trees that lined the avenue, picked up a fallen limb, and broke off several thick branches about a foot and a half long and two inches in diameter. The wood was dry and broke easily, leaving jagged edges just perfect for staking vamps. He handed several of the makeshift weapons to me and Leanne.

I gave Leanne the nod. "Let's do it."

We moved out at warp speed--well, okay...at *least* mach speed--and spotted the bloodsuckers about twenty seconds later. As fast as Leanne was, her speed was still no match for mine. I staked two of them before they even knew I was there.

Vampires must have really high blood pressure or something, because the stuff just spewed out. Why is it that every time I kill something evil it feels the need to bleed all over me? Those suckers die messy, too. None of that turning to dust crap and leaving a nice neat pile on the ground like you see on TV. There's a lot of hissing and screaming and thrashing about, and then they burst into flames. Let me tell you, the scent of charbroiled vampire isn't a pleasant one, either. When it's all over and done with, all that's left is a pile of gristly bones and melted lumps of jewelry.

Leanne managed to stake another vamp before they realized that something was amiss. Then things got rough. Vampires are *fast*. Of course I knew that, having seen Leanne in action, but I'd never had to fight her. I was faster, but not by much, and when you're outnumbered...well, I only hoped that they'd all been florists or dentists or something like that before they'd been turned, and didn't know martial arts. On second thought, skip the dentists too. Those guys are sadistic.

One vamp squared off with Leanne; the other three concentrated on me. I seriously doubted that the one directly in front of me had ever been a florist--more like a collector for a loan shark. He was at least six feet tall, bald, heavysset, and wore clothes that looked like something out of a bad seventies porno movie--as opposed to all of those Oscar-nominated porno flicks made today.

The second guy was wearing colors. Hell's Angels, if I wasn't mistaken. He was lean, scruffy looking, and had long, blond scraggly hair and tattoos all over his arms and the backs of his hands.

Contestant number three still wore his high school letterman's jacket for track and field. He looked

clean-cut, with short, impeccably styled hair, square, slightly cleft chin, and the latest in designer clothing. I bet he was a real ladykiller--literally.

I transferred two of the stakes to my left hand, and kept the third in my right. The biker lunged at me and I twisted to the side, narrowly avoiding a fist to the face. The greasy bastard was wearing brass knuckles too, the kind with the knife attached. I blocked an elbow to the temple--this from the big, bald guy--but went down to one knee as the track star kicked my left leg out from under me.

Baldy saw an advantage and stepped in. He reached for my hair, no doubt planning to grab it and hold my head steady while he drove his knee repeatedly into my face. Fortunately for me he was overeager, or stupid, or both, because he left his chest wide open. I thrust upward with the stake in my right hand, driving it up under his ribcage and into his heart. He collapsed on top of me writhing and screaming, and covering me in more blood, of course.

I shoved him off of me and rolled away just as he burst into flames. The preppy tried to kick me in the head as I rolled, but I jerked my noggin to the side just in time and he caught me in the shoulder instead. The biker stomped down, trying to drive his riding boot into my groin. I hooked his ankle with my right foot and shoved on his knee with my left. He went down, hard. I rolled to my left and got to my feet. The ground is no place to fight from when you're dealing with multiple attackers.

I transferred a second stake to my right hand and met college boy's rush head on. He dodged the stake, but I did a quick 360 around him, then stabbed backward with my left hand and drove the stake through just below his shoulders and into his heart. After a lot more screaming and gushing, he too finally burst into flames.

The biker stood just in front of me now in a fighting stance. His left hand and foot were forward, and his right hand was back, the combination knife and brass knuckles just out of reach. He beckoned me forward with his left hand, daring me to come and get it. I waited while he repeated the taunt again and tossed the stake at him underhand. It flew straight and true and struck him dead-center of the chest--blunt end forward.

"I don't suppose you'd like to let me try that again, would you?" I asked.

He lunged and I twisted, avoiding the jab. I didn't even see the reverse coming. I splashed blood all over his leather jacket as my jugular gushed. Finally, I was getting even.

I held my right hand to the wound, but it had already stopped bleeding. The vampire took a step back, obviously waiting for me to die. I realized then that he didn't know who or what I was.

I collapsed to the ground, holding myself up with my right hand and doing my best to give him that "No. This can't be happening to me" stare. I'm no master thespian, but the creep bought it anyway. He knelt down beside me and grabbed my hair to tilt my head back. The thought of all that blood going to waste must have made him thirsty.

I grinned up at him. "Sorry, Goldilocks, but I never exchange bodily fluids on the first date." I trapped the hand holding my hair with my own right hand, then sat back. His arm straightened out nicely, and I hammered it at the elbow with my left fist. The elbow popped, and I twisted to the right so that the vamp flipped and landed flat on his back in front of me. I stretched out with my left hand and grabbed the stake that I'd tossed at him, then pinned him to the ground with it. He gave me the same look I'd given him, except I knew *he* wasn't faking it.

I scrambled to my feet, looking to give Leanne a helping hand. She was gone. So was the other vamp. My heart sank into my stomach. The thought that Leanne might have been staked hit me like a freight train. I counted the skeletons, but there were only six. If she was dead, then she hadn't died here. She hadn't killed the other vamp, either. I raced in circles--looking for her, listening, and scenting the breeze for the faintest trace of her--all to no avail. It was as if they'd just casually walked off together.

I sped back to Josh and the others hoping she was with them.

"Did you take care of the vamps?" he asked.

I nodded. "Have you seen Leanne?"

Josh paled. "She's not with you?"

"No. I got into a bit of a scuffle with three of the creeps, and when I finished I...I couldn't find her."

He closed his eyes and took a shallow breath in through his mouth. "She's not...she didn't..."

"I don't think so," I said. "I didn't find her bones." Or even any real signs of a struggle. I didn't bother to mention that, though. I hated to think what it might mean.

I appeared suddenly beside Thomas, startling the bard so that he jumped and almost dropped the flute he was playing. "I can't find Leanne," I said.

He looked at me with those ancient eyes again. I just knew it was bad news. Suddenly it was as if the cop was standing in front of me again, telling me that Alison was dead. All that agony that I thought I'd finally put behind me welled up from whatever dark corner I'd consigned it to, fresh and raw and in my face.

"She's not...she couldn't be..."

"No," Thomas said. "She's not dead. Not yet."

I shoved the pain aside. It would only make me weak now, and I had to be strong. "Are there still...possibilities?"

He sighed, the countless years, each and every one, suddenly showing on his face. "A few," he said.

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding. "That's good enough for me." I knew I was being overly optimistic, but what choice did I have? "Luchtaine," I called out to the Sidhe. "Get these men moving. We're running out of time."

I left them there as they resumed the march, and rejoined Josh and Drat. My friends remained silent, either instinctively aware that I'd rather be left alone, or put off by the fact that sharp spikes and blades and stuff kept appearing and disappearing on my body.

The wind whispered through the abandoned buildings and alleyways as we made our way toward the center of Tae Con Ra. It wasn't the only thing that whispered. What I had first assumed to be merely the wind playing tricks assailed us as thousands of murmuring voices vied for attention. It was impossible to make out any one individual utterance, but the overall impression was vile, vulgar, and touched with insanity.

Josh glanced over at me and cupped his ears, but it was no use. "It's got a good beat and it's easy to dance to. I give it an eighty-five, Dick."

I half-smiled. I often forgot that Josh was actually older than I was. He didn't look old enough to be making references to "American Bandstand." "Soul Train" maybe; MTV definitely.

The vortex at the city center was stronger now. Flashes of forked lightning illuminated the thick heavy clouds that swarmed there, tingeing them bright orange at the edges. Black and orange--appropriate colors. Halloween colors. We were close now. Time to split up.

The amphitheater was circular and concave, dipping from street level to a depth of about three hundred yards at the base of it. Monolithic slabs, like Stonehenge, ringed the circumference of it like some pagan gateway. Lightning repeatedly struck the rods embedded there.

Drat's Boyze would hit the gate under covering fire from Luchtaine's archers. Once through, a general melee would break out. The Boyze would hold the gate, providing us with an avenue of escape, while Rant's trolls and the shapeshifters caused havoc among the spectators. Hopefully it would be distraction enough for Josh, Drat, and I to make it through the pandemonium and rescue Sabrina. I know it wasn't the best plan in the world, but it was all we had.

Our troops looked grim but determined as they loosed weapons and tightened straps, giving each other the once-over before going in to battle. I didn't want to think about how many of them we might lose today. Somewhere in the back of my mind the thought that we were sacrificing a hell of a lot of lives merely to save one seemed ludicrous. I shoved the thought into another corner where I hid the things I couldn't deal with. All that mattered now was rescuing Sabrina, finding Leanne, and getting the hell out of here.

"I'm going to do a quick recon," I said. "Hold here until I get back."

I didn't wait to see whether or not Josh complied, or even agreed with my order. I popped up just inside the gate, hidden from view by one of the monoliths, and looked down on the spectacle.

Once through the gate, stone steps led down past row upon row of flat, marble benches running in concentric rings about the amphitheater. Most of the seats were empty; there were maybe four or five hundred creatures in residence, which was still a couple of hundred more than we had. Demons sat staring in rapt attention at the moon that filled most of the sky now. They chanted, bass and baritone voices in a rhythmic singsong that alternately rose in pitch and volume and then dropped off almost to a whisper. Here and there I spied the occasional vampire. Vampires were solitary and untrusting creatures--thank God. We would have been in really big trouble if the vamps had shown up en masse.

A horde of trolls took up one whole row, and some things that were shadowy and hard to define mingled in among the masses, flitting here and there and never staying in one place for long. They kind of reminded me of Bear, except they were vaguely humanoid.

There were even a few shapeshifters in the crowd, and the Dark Sidhe, who sat off in a group and kept to themselves. I guess the Sidhe as a race are basically stuck up, no matter what their affiliation.

The floor at the bottom of the amphitheater seemed cut from a massive, ruby-red crystal about thirty feet in diameter, and reflected the moonlight back up through the bleachers as if washing the spectators in spectral blood. A small irregularly shaped slab, maybe eight feet long, rose up from the center of the dais. Tied to the slab was Sabrina.

From my vantage point she didn't look any the worse for wear. Her clothing was immaculate. She was wearing a low-cut little slip of a pale blue nightie--probably what she'd been wearing when she was abducted from Leanne's place. She didn't seem to be suffering from any scrapes or bruising; even her hair was unmussed. Her arms were stretched up over her head and tied there with a silk cord that ran through a ring at the top of the slab. A similar arrangement held her feet immobile. She seemed to be sleeping.

I didn't see Leanne anywhere.

I appeared in front of Josh. Only his quick reflexes saved him from shooting me. He let out a deep, relieved breath and lowered the shotgun to his side.

"A little jumpy, are we?" I asked.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Let's see how settled *your* nerves are next time you do that and I blow your fool head off."

"She's there." I told him. "And she looks okay."

His eyes narrowed. "Leanne?"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Sabrina."

He closed his eyes, and his breathing went shallow. I could feel him trembling. When he finally opened his eyes, there was such a look of determination in them that it bordered on insanity. At that moment, even I wouldn't have wanted to be the one standing between him and his wife.

"You ready?" I asked him.

"Yes."

"Drat?"

The troll looked toward the gate at the demon that guarded it, then back at his men. He grinned, both sets of teeth showing. "Let's kill da bastards."

I had to agree. "*Kill the bastards!*"

A roar of approval swept like a tidal wave through the troops, and Drat's Boyze rushed the gate under a hail of arrows. The battle had begun.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I materialized beside the slab holding Sabrina. She must have been drugged or something, because her eyes were closed and she didn't stir at my sudden appearance. For a split second I worried that she might be dead already, but the slow, steady rise and fall of her chest put that fear to rest. And no, I wasn't staring at her breasts.

I grabbed the silk cord that bound her hands over her head in my left hand. The leading edge of my right hand suddenly became razor-sharp, finely tempered steel, and I sliced through the cord with ease. I did the same for the one binding her feet. I was just thinking that this Eternal thing was really starting to grow on me when I heard a sound behind me.

"You didn't really think it would be *that* easy now, did you?"

I turned to confront Aeshma. He wasn't what I'd expected at all. He looked kind of like...um...Leonardo DiCaprio. Now all you women don't go getting hostile on me! I can't help it if that's how he looked. Besides, I didn't say it *was* Leonardo. I said it *sort* of looked like him.

"I thought you'd be bigger," I said.

"I am."

"And uglier."

He smiled that pretty boy smile. "I am." Aeshma straightened the lapel of his jacket--Armani, by the look of it. "I couldn't very well go about corrupting pretty young things looking like *this* now, could I."

For the briefest moment I saw his true nature--all bat wings and mottled skin like a frog's underbelly. His head resembled that of a goat--that is if you shaved it, lit it on fire, and allowed the pus to ooze and form open scabs. The horns were oversized and curled like a ram's, and the eyes were malevolent pits blazing with hellfire and damnation. Four wart-covered arms ended in razor-tipped talons, and the legs were shaggy, with cloven hooves like a satyr. And he was *huge*. He stood at least forty feet tall.

Aeshma smiled, a heartbreaker in an Armani suit once more. "You aren't the only one who can change your appearance to suit your needs, Eternal."

"Show-off," I muttered under my breath. If he heard me, he didn't let on.

I glanced upward toward the bleachers, hoping help would arrive soon. My stomach knotted as I realized I'd acted too quickly. The fighting hadn't reached that far yet. Drat's Boyze were probably still storming the gate. Several hundred demons, vampires, Dark Sidhe, trolls, and shadowy thingies grinned evilly down at us. The chanting grew in intensity.

"Oops." That's me. Mr. Understatement.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't we just make things easy on ourselves?" Aeshma said. He pulled out a slim, gold case from an inside pocket, flicked it open with his left hand, and retrieved a cigarette, then replaced the case. "I'll trade you the woman and the lives of all of your companions...for the Innocent." He held the cigarette between the first two fingers of his right hand, the way the French do, and puffed. It lit of its own accord.

"Or you could just let us all go, and I'll promise not to kill you," I said. "Heck, I won't even talk mean about you behind your back."

Aeshma sighed, then tilted his head back and blew smoke rings. The acrid wisps swirled before me in midair, then coalesced suddenly and took on form and substance. Snit stood between us suddenly, looking like he'd been mummified, and with his eyes burnt out of their sockets. Patches of gray, scaly skin had peeled away from his scalp, leaving his skull exposed to the bone in some places, and his once immaculate robes were in tatters. I don't know what hell Aeshma had managed to drag the mage back from, but wherever it was it hadn't done much to improve his usually sunny disposition. He cackled insanely and muttered curses under his breath, most having to do with various physical impossibilities concerning yours truly. A few actually made me blush.

"It's just as well, I suppose. I promised our friend here he could have the woman's eyes, after all."

I grabbed Sabrina about her waist with my left arm and tossed her over my shoulder. She moaned, but didn't wake up. I envied her. I wished *I* could sleep through this. I backed away from Snit and Aeshma, but there wasn't anywhere to go. I couldn't leave the way I'd come; traveling at that speed would kill Sabrina, and I really didn't have the teleporting thing down to an art yet. Besides, I had no idea what effect *that* would have on her either.

I heard a commotion behind me, and turned my head to see Drat's Boyze engage the demons at the top level of the amphitheater.

"Oh goody. Your friends are here," Aeshma said.

That wasn't exactly the reaction I was hoping to get from him.

Snit waved his hands about, twisting his fingers in a magical gesture that compressed the air about me. The pressure built slowly, threatening to crush me as the mage cackled.

"I've had just about enough of you," I said, and suddenly I held the sword that Leanne had given me way back when. I hadn't seen it since the trolls had confiscated it at our capture, and I don't know where it came from, but I wasn't about to ask questions. I'm not usually very happy with the answers anyway.

I slashed sideways as the troll stepped closer to gloat. His head leapt from his shoulders and rolled to a stop at Aeshma's feet. Snit's body swayed for a moment, then toppled over backward. There was one advantage to fighting mummified corpses; at least they didn't bleed all over you.

Aeshma kicked the head off to the side of the dais. He looked at me and shrugged almost apologetically. "That was rather anticlimactic, wasn't it?"

"Good dead help is hard to find these days," I said.

The fighting in the stands had turned into a knock-down, drag-out brawl. The trolls waded into the demons with axe and mace. The demons fought back fang and claw. Those shadowy things were like a nightmare come true. They enveloped their victims in their dark folds, only to leave lifeless husks with sightless eyes fixed in an expression of stark terror. The trolls were defenseless against them. The shadows seemed as insubstantial as their namesake.

The shapeshifters and the vampires pretty much negated each other, battling it out with neither faction making much headway. At least it stopped the vampires from indiscriminately slaughtering the trolls.

The same could be said of the Sidhe. They hammered away at each other with neither side effecting any damage. I guess when you're an almost immortal race you're not too apt to take unnecessary chances with

your life.

Aeshma shook his head in mock concern. "Things don't seem to be going too well for the A Team. Maybe it's time to call for backup." His eyes glinted wickedly. "Oh, that's right. You don't have any, do you?"

An ungodly scream split the air. Even Aeshma turned to see what it was. I smiled. Reinforcements had arrived.

Bear tore into the shadows like a wolf among sheep. And he'd brought friends with him. The shadows screeched as they died, screaming like terrified rabbits as the spectral dog pack hunted them down and shredded them. I saw several long, narrow shapes, low to the ground, drag one of the shadows down and rip it to pieces. I was confused at first, thinking they might have been snakes, then realized they were probably wiener dogs. Those little buggers were nasty; probably just getting even for all those years they were made fun of when they were alive. The trolls took heart at the dogs' appearance and lit into the demons with renewed vigor. The battle turned in our favor as the demons went on the defensive.

Josh bounded down the stairs toward us in werebeast form, tore the throat out of a demon on the way by as if it were an afterthought, and stopped beside me. I handed Sabrina over to him, and he hugged her to his furry chest.

"Get her out of here," I told him.

He didn't wait around to debate the order. He was off the dais and back into the bleachers in three steps. Several trolls and a couple of shapeshifters formed a guard around them as they fought their way up toward the exit.

I turned back to Aeshma. The demon didn't seem overly concerned at the turn of events. That worried me.

"I suppose we could battle it out or something," he said, "but it *does* seem rather pointless, considering."

I hate it when people make me look stupid. Still, it couldn't be helped. "Considering what?"

"I already have the girl." His face was suddenly a grotesque combination of teenage heartthrob and demon nightmare. "You don't think I was fool enough to commit all of my troops *here*, do you? Why else would the stands be half empty?"

I brought up a mental picture of Alex, and Charlie, and the fountain I'd left them by, and tried to teleport. Nothing.

"The woman was never the goal. It was the girl I wanted," Aeshma said, once more the dapper young gentleman. "By the way, don't try running, eith--" He winced as I flattened myself up against an invisible barrier that surrounded the dais. "Sorry, just another little spell to keep you out of the way until we get her safely away."

Invisible or not, running into a wall at a couple of thousand miles an hour doesn't tickle. "Just for that, I'm going to write nasty things about you on all the bathroom walls," I said.

Aeshma grinned. "Them's fight'n words."

I stood beside him suddenly, and drove three feet of steel through his stomach up to the hilt.

He looked down at the weapon, then up at me. "You know, if I were human, or even a run-of-the-mill demon, that could have ruined my whole day." He stepped back, pulling himself off of the sword.

I watched the weapon smoke as the demon's corrosive blood ate away at the blade. "I don't supposed you'd care to tell me exactly how one *does* go about killing a demon of your magnitude, would you?" Hey, it was worth a shot.

"Hmmm...no."

Well, at least he'd thought about it.

He checked his watch. "It's been nice chatting with you, but I've got places to go and people to torture. I'm afraid our time is up for today."

"You sound like my therapist," I said. I hoped my inane chitchat would keep him off guard. As long as he thought he had nothing to worry about, he might just get sloppy and reveal something I could use.

"Speaking of therapy," he said, and snapped his fingers.

I was fourteen years old. Mom wasn't home from work yet, so I'd scammed some cold pizza from the fridge and had the Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" blasting away on the good stereo in the living room. I wouldn't have even heard the knock at the door if Bear hadn't started barking. I turned the stereo down and answered the door.

"Hey, Greg. Where's Dad?" I said as I hid the slice of half-eaten pizza behind my back. Greg was Dad's partner. If he was here, then Dad must be on his way. The last thing I needed was for Dad to catch me eating pizza in the living room again.

Greg looked at me kind of funny. His eyes were all red--and not in that good, bloodshot-from-heavy-drinking kind of way either. "Is your mother home, Jamie?"

"She doesn't get home until five."

Greg looked down at his feet, then back up at me again. "Is it okay if I come in and wait?"

"You know it is," I said. I was really worried now. I didn't even mind that he'd called me Jamie. I let him in and looked outside to the cruiser sitting in the driveway. Dad wasn't in it.

My head started pounding, and the world seemed to constrict suddenly. I'd never experienced tunnel vision before, and I went all light-headed. "Where's Dad, Greg?"

Greg took me by the arm and led me over to the couch. I looked into his face, and wondered if mine was as pale. Bear sat at my feet with his head resting on his paws and looked up at me. It was the most subdued I'd ever seen him.

"I'm sorry, Jamie." Greg tried to look me in the eyes, but his kept tearing up and he turned away. "There was a shootout. Your dad...didn't make..." The words caught in his throat.

The pressure in my head was intense now, and the pizza threatened to come up. I still held the half-eaten piece in my left hand.

"He was a real hero, James...a real goddamn hero."

I was only vaguely aware that he swore, and less aware of anything he said after that. I'll never forget the look of utter grief on my mom's face when she walked through the door and saw us there on the couch...

I was seventeen, and had gone to a party at my friend Andrew's place. Well, he wasn't exactly a friend, but he was more than an acquaintance. We had a few classes together at school, occasionally ate lunch at the same table, and often sat around in the halls during our spare and talked about music and girls and stuff.

We never associated much outside of school, except for the one time he'd asked if I'd back him up in a fight just to make sure no one else jumped in on it and ganged up on him. I liked Andrew. I didn't like the other guy, so I agreed. I guess that little favor had put me in his good books, because when his parents left him home alone for the weekend, he'd invited me to the big blowout party he was having. Everyone else was going, so I figured what the hey.

Everyone was paired off in the living room, dancing, drinking, or making out. A couple of the guys were in the kitchen, trying to come up with new weird and wonderful drink concoctions. Taste was unimportant. The only criteria that counted was how fast it got you drunk, or made you puke.

The Bennett twins were playing caps with a couple of guys. I knew Andrew had a crush on one of the sisters, but I could never remember which one.

Sue Bennett looked up at me. She'd just lost again and downed her drink. She was so hammered her bottle caps weren't even coming close to her opponent's. "Hey, have you seen Andrew?" she shouted over the music. "He promised me some tequila."

I shrugged. "I think he's in the basement. I'll go check."

I walked past the kitchen to the narrow set of stairs leading to the basement. There weren't any lights on down there, but that didn't mean anything. Andrew could be a real solitary kind of guy sometimes. I only made it about halfway down the stairs when I spotted him. He was sitting on the coffee table with the butt of his dad's shotgun resting on the floor and the barrel nuzzled under his chin.

He must have seen me about the same time I saw him. For a brief moment, I saw the pain and hopelessness in his eyes, the feelings he'd kept locked up inside and hidden from the rest of us. There was a loud boom and his head spattered all over the ceiling. The body rocked back and lay flat out along the length of the table. His legs jerked spasmodically for a few seconds, then were still.

I know I should have been freaked out, but it just didn't look real. I'd seen worse at the movies. I suppose it was just that I refused to believe it had actually happened.

"What the hell was that?" Sue was at the top of the stairs.

"Stay up there," I told her. "You don't want to see this."

She tried to come down, but I met her halfway.

I saw Rob Stewart in the doorway. "It's Andrew," I told him. "You'd better call the cops."

Sue screamed hysterically, and tried to shove her way past me...

It was a few months after Andrew's suicide. I woke up to the light streaming through my bedroom window. "All right!" I said to myself. "The dopey mutt must have slept in."

Bear always slept on the foot of my bed. The dumb hound was bigger than I was, but if he lay sideways and I positioned my legs just right, we managed just fine. It was a good thing I didn't much like sleeping under the covers too, because he was a real blanket hog.

He usually woke me up bright and early for his morning bathroom break. He was getting on in years--he was twelve, which is ancient for a dog his size--and couldn't hold it all night long anymore.

I sat up in bed and sure enough, there he was all wrapped up in my blankets with the sunlight warm against his black fur. "Hey, buddy. Rise and shine."

He didn't move. I threw my pillow at him. Still nothing.

I think my own heart stopped beating as I realized that he'd died in his sleep. I went to the foot of the bed and hugged him to me. I was crying uncontrollably and rocking him back and forth when mom came into the room.

"No, buddy. Not you too...."

I looked in the mirror and tried to fix the knot in my tie for the fifth time. Luckily Alison would be home soon. She was a pro when it came to ties.

She'd called me at work during lunch that afternoon. "You'd better be ready by the time I get home. We're not missing the ballet...again!"

"I promise, we'll be there in plenty of time. We can even look at the art exhibition before the show," I said.

"That's what you said the last time." She didn't sound too convinced. I could hardly blame her, considering my track record.

"What should I wear?"

I heard her sigh, even over the phone. "How about the clothes I laid out for you on the bed this morning."

"That would work."

She laughed. "You just be ready this time!"

"Yes, dear." All our conversations ended with, "Yes, dear." I found life much easier that way.

I glanced at my watch. If she wanted to make dinner before the ballet, she'd better get here soon. She'd said she still had a few loose ends to tie up at work, but this was cutting it close. Not that it would kill me to miss the ballet.

I fought with the tie for a few more seconds when there was a knock at the door. I smiled. She probably had her hands full of groceries or something and couldn't get her key in the lock. I grabbed the rose that I'd bought for her off the table and ran to the front door. When I opened it, there were two police officers standing there.

"Mr. Hollinger?"

"No. I'm James Decker."

The officers looked confused for a moment. "Does Alison Hollinger live here?"

I dropped the rose. The pressure in my head threatened to crush the life out of me. I wished it would.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Decker. Alison was in--"

I slammed the door in their faces...

I was fourteen years old. Mom wasn't home from work yet so...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Something rocked my head to the left. The right side of my face stung.

"Hey youse. Snap out of it!" Drat slapped me again before I could stop him.

I looked up at the troll from where I sat on the dais with my back up against the slab Sabrina had been tied to. I shook my head to clear it. "Thanks, I needed that."

Drat grinned, lit up a cigar, and blew the smoke in my face. "Any time. As a matter of fact, ya sure ya couldn't use annuder smack right now?"

I pushed myself to my feet. "No. I think I'm okay."

The troll looked genuinely disappointed.

Drat's Boyze seemed to have control of the amphitheater. The dogs had taken care of the shadows, the Dark Sidhe had retreated, and most of the vampires were nothing but smoldering bones. The Blood Moon was at full zenith now.

"How long was I out?" I asked the troll.

"I dunno. Maybe ten minutes," he said. "Tings were pretty hectic for a while, and it took me a bit ta fight my way down here once I noticed youse."

Ten minutes lost. They'd all looked to me--the mighty Eternal--for leadership, and I'd gotten cocky, thinking myself invulnerable. Well, that bastard Aeshma had exposed the kinks in my armor. While my friends had been fighting and dying, I'd taken a macabre stroll down memory lane and lost myself to my own self-pity, reliving all those memories, over and over in a loop.

Just the way I had when I was alive, cutting myself off from everyone and everything rather than take the chance that I might lose someone else. Aeshma had simply allowed me to do the same thing now that I was dead, and I'd taken him up on his offer. If it hadn't been for Drat, I'd probably still be hiding.

Or worse. "Why didn't Aeshma possess me?" I asked. A demon with control over an Eternal--imagine that havoc.

Drat spat on the ruby floor. "Ya can't possess an Eternal. Dey's pure spirit. Dere ain't nutt'n dere ta possess."

I found that oddly comforting and disturbing at the same time. "I owe you one," I said.

Drat shifted the cigar from the right side of his mouth to the left. "Actually, two. But who's count'n."

If I ever got my hands on Aeshma, and I would, he wouldn't look so pretty anymore--no matter what guise he wore. He'd ripped open my id and played out my ego like some twisted version of "This is Your

Life.” Worse yet, he’d made me watch. But I wasn’t that person anymore. I couldn’t be. There were people counting on me. People I cared for.

I walked to the edge of the ruby floor and waved my arms about looking for the invisible wall. Not only was the barrier gone, but I managed to make myself look pretty stupid in the process, if the expression on Drat’s face was any indication.

"Get everyone back to the fountain," I told Drat, then vanished.

Our troops looked like a farm combine had rolled over them. Bodies lay in broken, tangled masses with limbs twisted at sickening angles. The air was thick with the smell of blood: the chalky scent of troll blood, and the acrid reek of demon. Rant's men had given as good as they got. Demon corpses lay alongside troll, some still in the throes of death.

The decrepit buildings crowded the street, awash in the Blood Moon's eerie red luminance. The cries of the wounded carried on the wind and echoed throughout the dead city, while the voices of the damned whispered in ghostly harmony.

A massive body lay prone on the ground near the center of the street. "Charlie!" I was at his side in an instant. The ogre lay on his back, one leg canted off at an unnatural angle and his head cranked too far to the right. He had at least thirty arrows in him, and a mammoth spear embedded in his chest. There were too many wounds to count, and much too much blood.

A vampire tried to crawl away. One of the Sidhe staked it, and it screamed as it burst into flames. It was obvious that Charlie had lacked the wood to kill it, but he'd managed to tear it apart pretty good. Several other vampires seemed to be in the same state. The Sidhe made sport of riding them down and laughing as the burning bodies writhed on the ends of their lances.

Thomas knelt at Charlie's side, with Dianchecht to his right. The bard had seen his fair share of fighting. His clothes were torn and bloody, and the left side of his face was scarred by three claw marks that ran from the corner of his eye, down his face and neck, and disappeared into the folds of his shirt. Apparently demons don't hold bards as sacrosanct.

Dianchecht busied himself by carefully withdrawing the arrows from Charlie's body, then wiping at the wounds with a cloth he continuously soaked with amber liquid from a vial from his pouch. He mumbled something I couldn't make out--a singsong drone that reminded me of Tibetan chants I'd heard on PBS.

I tried to shut out the sounds of the wounded crying for help. There was nothing I could do for them. There was nothing I could do for Charlie. There was nothing I could do. "I don't mean to be callous," I said in a low voice. "But there are others here who could use your help."

Dianchecht waved me off as if afraid I would break his concentration.

"Give me a hand with this spear," Thomas said, grabbing it at the base of the shaft nearest the wound.

"I can prepare the body," I said. Thomas glanced up at me with a puzzled look on his face. "It's the least I can do," I whispered.

The bard cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "He still has his head, James. Now are you going to help me or not?" He gave a tug on the spear, but it held fast.

I grabbed the spear and pulled. I must have unconsciously amplified my strength because it came out easily. Thomas was caught off guard at the sudden release of tension and stumbled back, falling flat on his ass.

I looked down at the ogre. I knew he was damn ugly--all warts, bone and gristle--but at that moment he didn't seem ugly at all. His had been the gentlest soul I'd met since my own death. "Do we have to take his head?"

Thomas looked up at me in shock. "What are you talking about? You *want* him dead?"

I stared at the bard. I thought that if I stared long enough maybe he'd actually make sense. "He's

already dead."

Thomas grinned suddenly as it dawned on him just how ignorant I was. "Dianchecht can bring him back." I must have shaken my head in disbelief, because the bard nodded in affirmation. "As long as the victim has his head, Dianchecht can bring him back from the dead. Haven't you read *any* of the faerie folklore?"

"If it didn't come out as a Classic Comic edition, then I probably missed it." I suddenly felt light-headed, and sat down on the ground beside Thomas. "You mean he's going to be all right?"

Dianchecht glared at us. "He will be if you two keep your mouths shut and let me concentrate."

There was a commotion behind us, and I looked to see Josh and Sabrina making their way over to us. Drat hobbled along just behind them, stopping occasionally to comfort a wounded comrade, or administer a death blow to a demon. I got up and walked toward the trio. Thomas accompanied me. There was nothing more he could do for Charlie, and we were only distracting Dianchecht.

Sabrina still looked groggy, as if she wasn't certain where she was. Josh supported her with an arm about her waist. The night air was a bit chilly, and Josh had given up his sweater to his wife. It covered her like a blanket and came down to her knees.

"How's she doing?" I asked Josh. I peeled off my own sweater and handed it to the shapeshifter. He was about to protest when I materialized myself a new, clean one and nipped that argument in the bud.

"She's fine," he said as he shrugged on the sweater. "They kept her drugged pretty much from the beginning. She doesn't really remember any of it."

I looked down at my feet, unable to meet their eyes. "You know about Alex?"

Sabrina reached out and cupped my chin, lifting my eyes to hers. They were red from crying. "It's not your fault."

I think she even believed that. I wished I could.

"Aeshma outmaneuvered all of us," Josh said. He couldn't look me in the eyes, either. His own guilt was eating him up inside. "We were so caught up in the whole Blood Moon Ritual we forgot what the real goal was--Alex. I should have known better. I...I should have stayed with her."

I guess there was more than enough guilt to go around.

"D'ere ain't no use sit'n around whining about what's done," Drat interrupted. "Da question is, what do we do now?"

Leave it to a troll to cut through all the bullshit and get right to the heart of the matter.

"Aeshma is a Madness Demon who specializes in inducing rage, vengeance, and lust. He'll want to take Alex somewhere safe where he can work on her," Thomas said. "He has to corrupt her--make her willingly do something evil, or repulsive. Anything to taint her soul. That'll take time."

Alex was a good kid. I couldn't imagine her ever willingly doing something evil. Then I remembered what Aeshma had done to me. "Where's safe?" I asked.

Drat snorted. "Somewhere where little girls go miss'n all da time, only to turn up violated by da so-called *good* people. Respectable businessmen will'n ta pay for a little young stuff. Daddies who just can't seem ta keep dere hands ta demselves. Da family priest or da trusted schoolteacher, or dat nice Mr. Smith down da block."

"Home," Josh said.

Drat shook his head in disgust. "And youse wonder why we calls it Darkside."

"He'll take her back to Kingston," Sabrina said. "He'll use the familiar surroundings--try to fool her with things she knows and feels safe with."

In a way I felt relieved. Kingston was my home turf. It evened the odds a little.

"Hey, boss! Over here," one of the trolls called out. "Ya better come quick."

Drat hobbled over to the other side of the fountain with Thomas and me at his heels. Several trolls

huddled around the broken body of the clan chieftain. Rant looked bad. Real bad. Half his ribcage was exposed on his left side, and several feet of intestine had spilled out onto the cobblestone. Orange blood frothed from his lips. More welled up from a puncture wound in his chest.

"Dianchecht can fix him up, right?" I asked Thomas.

The bard shook his head slowly. "Trolls don't have souls. They're earth elementals. Death is final for them."

Drat knelt down beside his chief and took the mortally wounded troll's hand in his own. "Hey, Chief. Youse don't look so good."

Rant turned his head and coughed up more blood, then grinned through orange-stained teeth. "Ya, well I'm dying. What's yer excuse?" His eyes closed slowly. For a moment we thought he had passed on, but they opened again. "Dat was some fight, eh boyze?"

"A real humdinger," Drat assured him. "Legendary. Dey'll stick yer ugly mug up on da Burrow's Wall fer sure. Just what I needs...yer fifty-foot puss look'n down on me for da rest a my days."

The thought seemed to please Rant. He grinned from ear to ear. If I didn't know better I'd say he was almost happy he was dying. He squeezed Drat's hand. "Take da ring, boy."

Drat hung his head, eyes downcast. "I can't."

Rant scowled. "If not youse, den who else?"

Drat reluctantly looked the dying chief in the eyes.

"Dere's no one else but youse," Rant said softly. His eyes began to close again, and he fought to keep them open. "Take care of Tirade," he said as he lost the battle.

All about us the trolls began to chant. A low, droning, monotone song of despair and futility echoed through the streets of Tae Con Rae as the clan mourned the passing of their chieftain.

Drat gently held his dead lord's clawed hand and carefully removed the heavy silver-and-gold ring. He solemnly placed it on one of his own gnarled fingers. The troll took a deep breath, then looked up at me. "I'll get some of da boyze together and we'll meets you in Darkside tomorrow night. We'se gots to get da wounded back to da Burrow before da sun comes up."

I nodded. It seemed that Drat's acceptance of the ring was all the ceremony there was to his ascension to clan chief. "What about the dead?" I asked.

A look of fierce pride came over him as he straightened up. "The sun'll take care of dem. It'll be a fitt'n monument ta what happened here today." He moved off with the rest of his men to help the wounded prepare for their journey.

"Sunlight turns trolls to stone," Thomas said. "These streets will be littered with their effigies."

"I knew that." I must have read it in a comic book somewhere.

Something howled. It made even Bear's otherworldly yowl sound positively uplifting.

"That would be Charlie," Thomas said with a wink.

"He doesn't sound too happy," I said.

Thomas shrugged. "They usually don't."

We turned toward the ogre, only to find him on his feet and struggling with several trolls. He backhanded Dianchecht and sent the physician sprawling, then grabbed for the spear that had only recently been embedded in his chest. He seemed unsteady on his feet, clutched at his head as if to stop the world from spinning, then collapsed backward, almost squashing two of the trolls.

I was at his side in an instant. I put my hand to his chest to stop him from getting up again. He struggled against it, but weakly.

"It's okay, Charlie. Everything's all right."

He lay still and squeezed his eyes shut as huge tears rolled down his leathery face, past the pointed, tufted ears, and splashed on the ground. "I couldn't stop them," he sobbed. "They took her, and I couldn't stop

them."

Sabrina sat beside him, then threw her arms around his neck and lay her head across his chest. She was crying uncontrollably now too, as if everything that had happened suddenly hit her all at once. "You gave your life for her. You died for her," she wept.

"And I will again, if I have to," the ogre moaned.

Josh sat down beside Charlie and his wife. His eyes were glassy, but he refused to cry. "We'll get her back. You know we'll get her back." It wasn't a question.

Charlie opened his eyes. One massive hand gently stroked Sabrina's hair, while the other one reached out for Josh. The ogre and the shapeshifter clasped hands. "I promise, nothing will ever take her from you again," Charlie said.

I have to admit my own eyes misted up there for a bit. Too many conflicting emotions, I guess. On the one hand, I felt the despair and sorrow the others were going through, but on the other I was elated that Charlie was alive. It's not every day that someone comes back from the dead. Well, at least I don't *think* it is.

I stood and turned toward Thomas, who was helping Dianchecht to his feet.

"I'm getting too old for this," the physician said.

Thomas grunted. "Just take some of that potion you gave me...and three of your wife's tarts."

"Ha!" Dianchecht snorted. "I'd rather wither and die."

Thomas clasped his friend on the back. "I can't say as I blame you."

"I'd better go find Luchtaine and the others," Dianchecht decided suddenly. "The pansy probably wet himself during the battle, and will need an ointment to heal the rash." He wandered off in search of the Sidhe warriors, muttering something about why medicine had to taste bad to be good.

"We'd better get the gang together," I said. "It's a long trip back to Darkside."

"Maybe not," Thomas answered. "I'm sure Drat will lend us a guide to lead us home through the Ways. That should cut the trip down to a few hours."

Sabrina and Josh helped Charlie to his feet. The ogre was still a little unsteady.

"I'm curious," Josh said. "What does it feel like to come back from the dead?"

Charlie thought about it for a moment. "Kind of like bungee jumping," he answered finally. "There's this quick feeling of acceleration as you hurtle toward...something, and just before you smack into it, something snaps you back and you wake up all woozy."

I must have been staring, because I obviously made Charlie uncomfortable. "What?" he said defensively.

I grinned. "When did *you* ever go bungee jumping?"

Charlie blushed. "I tried it once, when I was younger...and a lot lighter. I was only about three hundred pounds then."

"Well, at least you wouldn't have to worry about accidents," Josh teased. "Even the ground would get out of the way if it saw your ugly mug rushing up at it."

Charlie blushed again, and Sabrina smacked her husband.

So everybody had had a good cry, and now it was business as usual. Thomas pulled me aside from the others. He looked serious, or more serious than usual. "There's something you should know," he said.

I said nothing. He looked uncomfortable. It was almost as awkward as the time in college when my roommate told me he was gay. Almost.

Thomas took a deep breath--never a good sign--and said, "The fighting here was bad. That's obvious, I know, but it was worse than it should have been. They knew our location, our numbers, our strategy."

I looked away from him. I didn't want to hear what he had to say. I saw Drat helping a wounded troll to a litter. The trooper's leg had been amputated just below the right knee. Looking away had been a bad move.

"Leanne led the attack," he said.

I stared him in the eye. "It wasn't her."

Thomas nodded. "No, I suppose it wasn't." He pressed his fingers to the claw marks on his face. "The demon is in total control now."

I shut my eyes and tried to think, or tried not to think. "She did this to you?"

"Yes," the bard answered. "She's also the one who killed Charlie."

I opened my eyes again. Thomas took a step back. I must have looked like I'd been possessed by a demon of my own, or maybe I just looked as inhuman as the rest of the Eternals. "What do you see, Bard?"

Thomas shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"What do you see?" I insisted.

This time it was his turn to close his eyes. "I see her death, at your hands," he said after a long pause.

I turned my back on him. "It'll never happen."

"Then Aeshma *will* win."

I can't tell you what was running through my mind right then. Everything was jumbled. The wounds were still too fresh: Dad's death, Andrew's, Bear's, and Allison's. That had been Aeshma's doing too.

"Meet me at my place," I said. I vanished, leaving Thomas standing there alone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I sat in the Jacuzzi on the deck at the back of my house and looked out through the smoky glass. I'd pulled the doors shut for privacy. The last thing I needed was old Mrs. Angeline staring at me through her binoculars the way she usually did. With everything that had happened to me lately, the old broad might get more of a view than she'd bargained for.

Not of me! I meant she might see a troll or something. Although I *did* look pretty good, if I do say so myself. I was muscular, lean, and tanned. Heck, I could probably even give myself a huge...ego...if I wanted to. My appearance was more than just healthy self-image now. I had conscious control over how I looked, right down to the clothes I was wearing--or wasn't wearing, as was the case at the moment.

I hunkered down and let the hot, steamy water burble up around my ears. I wasn't physically tired--I probably never would be again--but mentally exhausted. There's nothing like lazing around in a Jacuzzi to relax you. I couldn't sleep anymore, so this was probably as good as it would ever get. I reached for my drink, took a long cool sip, closed my eyes, and then held the ice-cold glass against my forehead. I liked the contrast between heat and cold.

"Hey, James."

The voice startled me, and I splashed half of my drink across my face.

"Oops. Sorry." Alison giggled. She floated a couple of inches above the water, smiling down at me.

"I'm going to have to put a bell around your neck," I said. "You almost gave me a heart attack." I wiped at my face with the towel I kept off to the side.

"I just dropped by to see how you're doing."

"Because you worry about me."

She smiled again, and I caught my breath. Alison had always had that effect on me, more so than any beautiful woman I've known. Leanne and Sabrina wore beauty, practiced it, bent it to their will and used it to their advantage. Alison's beauty was an intrinsic part of her--her appearance, her manner, her personality--and it shone through in everything about her.

"I always worry about you," she admitted. She lowered herself into the water and sat on the padded ledge that ran around the edge of the Jacuzzi. Of course she stayed perfectly dry, even the blue print dress. It was a little disconcerting. "You're so sad. I can't just leave you."

I thought about what she had said. "Do you mean you haven't reincarnated?"

She nodded, and her hair fell down over her eyes. "I love you just as much as you love me, you know."

"Would you have left?"

Not in a million years. She knew that. We sat in silence for a while, taking comfort in each other's company the way we used to, when she hit me with it.

"Do you love Leanne?"

At least she didn't ask me if I thought she looked fat in that dress. I considered my answer carefully, more because I wanted to be honest with Alison than out of any sense of self-preservation. "I've only known Leanne for a few days. Do I love her? I don't know. I do care very deeply for her, though."

Alison looked hurt by my reply. She glanced up at me, and her eyes misted. "You can't kill her, James."

I suddenly understood that it was my predicament that caused her pain, not the fact that I might have cared deeply for someone other than her. I told you she was beautiful.

She brushed her hair back from her face again. "I heard what Thomas told you. I know you, James. I know what you've been through, and I've watched what it's done to you day after day. If you kill her...if you kill Leanne, you *will* lose your humanity. It will numb you inside more than being an Eternal ever could." She reached out to touch my face. I would have given everything at the moment just to feel her soft caress.

"Don't go depressing the boy. He's got enough to worry about without you getting him all riled up," Grandpa said as he suddenly appeared beside Alison.

"Hey, Grandpa. Nice duds," I said, brushing aside the conversation with Alison. Thomas was wrong. He'd as much as admitted that close proximity to an Eternal limited his ability to predict the future. Somehow I'd rescue Leanne, and Alex. The only person I had to worry about killing was Aeshma, and I was certain I'd be able to live with myself once I did. And no, I wasn't in denial.

Grandpa grinned and hitched up the yellow hip waders he wore over his brown corduroys. "Your grandma gave me these just before I died. I never had the chance to use them until now."

That's Grandpa. He never threw anything away. Not even in death.

"What are you doing interrupting those two?" Dad scolded Grandpa as he materialized on the other side of Alison. "Can't you see the two of them were having a moment?"

The Jacuzzi was getting crowded. The four of us gave a whole new meaning to the term "Dead Pool."

Grandpa was about to reply when he was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. "I'll get it," he said.

"No! Just wait here." That's just what I needed--my dead grandpa in his canary-yellow hip waders scaring the bejeezus out of the pizza delivery boy.

I climbed out of the water and threw my blue bathrobe on, then walked to the front door and peered through the peephole. It was Thomas, Charlie, and Drat. I opened the door. Josh and Sabrina stood just behind them. "Come on in before someone sees you." I should have ordered more pizza.

Thomas and Drat entered, and we waited while Charlie ducked through, turning sideways to fit through the doorway. Josh and Sabrina crowded in after him.

"Don't worry," Sabrina said. "Humans can't see them for what they really are." She pointed to the floor-length mirror that covered the double doors to the vestibule closet.

Thomas looked like Thomas, mostly. His patchwork cloak and the rest of his odd assortment of clothes had been replaced by faded, torn denims, a light gray turtleneck, and worn-out sneakers. His bag containing his harp and other paraphernalia suddenly became a beaten-up guitar case plastered with stickers and other graffiti.

Charlie was still huge, but not ogre huge. He stood about six foot five and looked like a linebacker--a clean-cut, college linebacker complete with football jacket and flattop haircut.

Drat looked like Dennis the Menace, right down to the tousled hair, freckles, and button nose. Even his battle-axe had been replaced by a slingshot. The cigar was a little out of character, though.

I glanced back and forth between my friends in front of me and their alter egos in the mirror. "That's

amazing!"

Thomas grinned. "It is, isn't it?" He glanced at his image and fingered the hoop earring in his left ear. I noticed the mirror image seemed to lag behind the real Thomas as if there were a one-second delay or something. "It's called a glamor," Thomas said. "Darksiders can't handle reality, so they're provided with an image they can deal with."

Drat looked like he was having trouble dealing with the image of his virtual self. "Ack! Lookit dat nose. It's a good ting Tirade ain't here to see dis." He shuddered and looked away. The troll eyed me up and down for a second, then said, "Did youse know yer all wet?"

"I was out back in the Jacuzzi with Dad, Grandpa, and Alison."

The troll's bushy eyebrows shot up. "Jacuzzi?" He rushed past me to the back of the house. "All right everybody, Drat's here. All youse dead people outta da pool."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. If there's one thing I can say it's that life certainly is a lot more interesting when you're dead. "You guys hungry?" I asked.

Charlie rubbed his stomach. "Always."

"I'd better order more pizza, then," I said. I took another look at Charlie's image in the mirror. "Lots more pizza--and beer."

We all sat around the fireplace: Charlie, Thomas, Drat, Josh, Sabrina, and myself. Alison, Dad, and Grandpa popped in and out of view at will. Even Bear shimmered on the floor just in front of the blazing fire. He never seemed to be in the exact same spot from one moment to the next. The dumb mutt even snored.

It was just after four in the morning, and everyone looked tired except for me and the other dead folks. Josh in particular looked like he was about to crash. He'd been up and on the go for at least two days now, and the stress was taking its toll. He lay stretched out on the black leather sectional couch with his head in his wife's lap as she massaged his temples. He fought to stay awake, but I could see it was a losing battle.

Drat sat at the other end of the couch with his feet curled up under him. He puffed contentedly on a stogie, taking care to butt the ashes in the ashtray I'd provided just for him. Normally I didn't allow smoking in the house, but he *had* saved my hide twice, something he kept reminding me of.

Thomas sat cross-legged in the recliner to the left of the fireplace and softly strummed his harp. If you closed your eyes and listened carefully you could almost hear the strains of a spectral flute, the wail of ghostly bagpipes, and the thunder of Celtic drums in accompaniment.

Charlie sat on the floor by the big-screen TV watching Rocky and Bullwinkle. He drank happily from a pitcher of beer he was using as a mug. I wondered how much beer an ogre would have to drink before he got drunk. A lot more than I had on hand, apparently.

"Aeshma will try to corrupt Alex in as public a place as possible," Thomas said. "He'll use the energy he draws from the others--those more malleable--to strengthen his influence over her."

"He likes crowds," Drat said. "People'll do stuff dey normally wouldn't do on dere own when dere in a crowd."

"So we're looking at what--a football game or a nightclub?" Sabrina suggested.

"The big street dance," I said. Their blank stares made it obvious they didn't know what I was talking about. "I saw the posters when we were heading out to Leanne's that first night. The bars along Princess Street are holding a street dance tonight. Some big-name band is playing it, and two or three local bands are opening."

"That's perfect," Thomas said. "A big crowd, alcohol, and loud music. That's where he'll take her."

"Then that's where we'll be waiting for him," Josh said, stifling back a yawn.

"In the meantime, I suggest the rest of you get some sleep," I said. "There's a couple of spare rooms off the main hall over there, and another one in the basement." I looked over at Drat. Even his enormous eyes

were starting to droop. "I suggest you take the one in the basement," I told him. "It faces west, and is a lot darker than the others so you shouldn't have to worry about sunlight."

"Tanks," he said, hopped down from the chair, and grabbed a couple of slices of cold pizza on the way by. Trolls are even bigger gluttons than ogres, believe it or not.

"Charlie, you might as well just stretch out on the sectional here. It's the biggest thing I've got." I eyed the ogre's ten-foot frame. "I'll get you some blankets, or a tarp or something."

I finally got everyone squared away and was about to go sit out on the deck when someone started snoring. It was loud enough to wake the dead, or at least those of us that weren't already awake. I was sure it would be Charlie, or maybe even Drat. It turned out to be Sabrina. I guess nobody's perfect.

"Hey, James," Drat called up from the basement. "If youse kill dat thunder-lizard for me, we'll call it even."

I stuffed some blankets under the door to Sabrina's bedroom, muffling the sound, then walked out onto the deck and made myself comfortable on the lounge chair. It was quiet--too late in the year for insects, and too early in the morning for traffic. As I sat there with my head back staring up at the stars, the night seemed much the same as any other in the past couple of years. I often had trouble sleeping, and would come out onto the deck and sit, or soak in the Jacuzzi, and think. I could almost let myself believe that all the insanity of the last few days had been nothing more than a dream. The sun would come up and I would shower, dress, and drive to work just as I always had. But it wasn't a dream. All I had to do was look over my shoulder into the living room at Charlie asleep on the couch. It's pretty hard to ignore a ten-foot ogre when his big smelly feet are hanging over the end of your sectional, hairy toes and all.

It's funny. I hadn't had much to live for when I was alive: a few friends, though none that I'd call close; a job I could care less about; no real hobbies or outside interests. Now that I was dead I had good friends, people to care about, and work that mattered. Talk about your late bloomers. If I could just hold it all together. I closed my eyes and thought about Alex, Alison, and Leanne until the first hint of sunrise tinted the horizon pink and the stars retreated with the night.

"Why do you suffer so?"

I opened my eyes. Tam-Lien stood silhouetted against the sunrise dressed in a shimmering blue strapless evening gown. Her hair was neatly arranged and held in place with beautiful little butterfly hairclips. Diamond studs, at least a half-carat each, adorned her ears. A gold herringbone necklace set them off. She still looked wooden, as if a department store mannequin stood before me--though one of those expensive Rodeo Drive mannequins, mind you.

"Life is suffering," I answered.

"Ahh. Buddha."

"Actually, Homer Simpson, though I'm sure he probably stole it from that Buddha guy."

She blinked, a real honest-to-goodness blink this time. "You are worried that the Innocent and the vampire will die, yet you know that death is not the end of things; it is merely transitional."

I shrugged. I suppose what she said was true. Still. "People like to hold on to what they have," I said. "We like the familiar. It's comforting. I know Alison, Dad, Grandpa, and even Bear are still around, but they're not alive. I would give anything to hold Alison again, or to just pet Bear and scratch him behind his ears the way he likes."

"You are still tied to the physical," Tam-Lien said.

"We are a physical people," I said. "That's one of the things that defines us. It's not enough to see, hear and smell something. We don't really believe in it unless we can touch it too. Maybe that's why so many of us define ourselves by our possessions. We're not real without them."

"It is something to consider," Tam-Lien decided.

"Yeah, well I'm glad you bought it, because I really don't have a clue what I'm talking about. I do

know that if I don't stop Aeshma a lot of people will suffer, not just Alex. I don't like to see people suffer, even if it is only transitional."

"So you suffer with them?"

"Yeah, I suppose so." I rubbed my temples. The woman was giving me a headache.

She blinked again, but more slowly this time. I think maybe I was giving her a headache, too.

"Becoming human again is even more difficult than I had at first anticipated."

"I like the clothes, by the way," I said.

She smiled that quick, fake smile again.

"You're still not very lifelike though."

Tam-Lien's eyes narrowed slightly. I guessed she was frowning. "How do I become more lifelike?"

I sat up a little straighter on the lounge chair. "I'll tell you what, I'll help you if you help me."

She thought about it for a moment, meaning she blinked twice, and slowly. "Done," she said. "We shall share information."

Now we were getting somewhere. "Okay, first off I'm guessing you're just taking on human appearance. You don't breathe, or sweat, or blush or anything. To be more lifelike you have to be human inside as well as out. That means at least lungs, and a heart and circulatory system."

She nodded. "Done."

The change was remarkable. She didn't look wooden anymore; she just acted that way. Now that she had proper skin tone Tam-Lien was actually quite beautiful. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and her lips had lost that hard edge. Of course being an Eternal she could look any way she wanted. She could have been a real pig-dog while she was alive.

"Much better," I said. "Now it's your turn."

She tried to say something, but it came out as more of a squeak than anything else.

"You have to breathe," I told her. "Breathe out as you're speaking. It forces air through your vocal cords--you do have vocal cords, don't you?"

Tam-Lien nodded, took a deep breath, and tried again. "Aeshma is a...madness demon," she said. "But everything he...does is illusionary. We...as Eternals...can actually manipulate our...matter...whereas he only...appears to." She was having a little trouble getting the rhythm of breathing and speaking down, but she'd get better with practice. "It is much like...the glamor spell that clouds...the Darksiders' eyes against the true appearance of the...Summerland folk."

I guess she figured class was over for today, because she vanished.

"Thanks, I think," I called after her. I'm not sure if her little tidbit of information would do me any good, but then again, it might. If Aeshma was all smoke and mirrors, then all I had to do was find the man behind the curtain. Then again, the man behind the curtain was even scarier than the great and powerful Oz.

I spent a little while in my den, surfing the net to see what I could find on demons and Aeshma in particular. To be honest, I really suck when it comes to the Internet. It seems no matter what I look for I always end up getting the porn sites. After a few hours I wasn't any closer to getting the information I wanted. BikerChicksfromHell.com just didn't have what I needed.

I popped down to McDonald's to pick up my car while the rest of the gang slept. We'd need it to get around in. While the Ways could take you anywhere you wanted to go, you could only access them from Summerland. Once in Darkside you had to use one of the regular portals to take you back, and they only transported you to predetermined locations that were often miles from where you actually wanted to be. That's why we had to trek overland to get to Tae Con Ra once appearing in Summerland, while the gang had pretty much materialized on my front doorstep on the return trip.

While at McDonald's I had breakfast and read the paper. According to the headlines things weren't much rosier in Darkside than when I'd left. I still wasn't overly clear on the big picture, but what I did know

was that if Aeshma managed to corrupt Alex, or even kill her, things would get much worse.

There was an insert in the local paper about the street dance--a nice little map of the layout. I thought it might come in handy, so I folded it up and jammed it in my pocket. Bear popped up beside me in the passenger seat on the way home. He always did love going for rides in the car. He stuck his head out the window, even though it was still rolled up, and let the breeze whip his ears back. He scared the shit out of some poor cab driver.

When I got home again everyone was still asleep. The first of my houseguests didn't wake up until the crack of noon. I heard someone stumbling around in the kitchen and found Charlie rummaging through the fridge.

"That little runt Drat ate all the pizza," he grumbled.

"What do ogres usually eat for breakfast?" I asked him.

"Oatmeal, and lots of it."

All I had was those little individual packets of instant oatmeal. I found them in the cupboard and handed them to Charlie. He held up one of the little pouches, eyeing it rather dubiously.

"There's more in there than you think," I said. "Make three or four of them, or nine or ten."

Drat was the next one up, then Sabrina, and finally Josh an hour or so later. By the time everyone was up, showered, and fed, it was after two o'clock. I have no idea how Charlie managed the shower. I stopped him when he started to go into just how flexible he was. There's such a thing as too much information.

We all sat around the coffee table in the living room, where I'd spread out the map of the street dance. I'd highlighted certain sections, like the beer tents, the different stages--including the main stage--and the surrounding bars. Even though Alex was only sixteen, she had no trouble passing for twenty, so we couldn't count out the possibility that she might be indoors. The bars tended to play a little fast and loose with the rules when it came to checking for IDs at functions like this, especially when it came to pretty girls.

"I suggest we split up into teams," I said. "Josh, you and Sabrina take the bars, Thomas and Charlie can scout out the beer tents, and Drat and I will work the crowds near whatever band happens to be playing." There were no objections, just a bunch of heads nodding, so I went on. "I'm going to leave shortly and scout ahead. Even though nothing officially starts until seven o'clock, there's still a lot of activities planned throughout the day. The place will be crawling with buskers and sidewalk merchants. I think there's even a little carnival set up in the parking lot by the A&P."

"We'll come too," Josh said. He held his wife's hands in his, and squeezed them gently. "We'd rather be looking for Alex than just sitting around here doing nothing."

"Same here," Thomas added. Charlie nodded in agreement. Drat looked glum. The troll would have to wait until after the sun went down before he could join in the search.

Something had been nagging me all night long. Never one to avoid the stupid questions, I asked, "Just how will Aeshma corrupt Alex? I mean, she seems like a pretty good kid. What exactly could he do to get her to willingly commit an evil act?"

Josh and Sabrina lowered their eyes, and Thomas kind of hemmed and hawed. Obviously there was something else they were keeping from me.

"What? He makes her smoke a cigarette? Drink a beer? Pick her nose in public?"

Thomas set his harp down beside the chair and sat forward. "It takes a little more corruption than that to taint an Innocent," he said.

"That's the problem," Josh said, still refusing to look up. "I can't imagine Alex doing anything really evil either, and if Aeshma can't corrupt her, he'll kill her."

"Or worse," Sabrina whispered.

"You still don't understand Alex's nature," Thomas said. "She's an Innocent. In her case, that means she is the embodiment of Hope. Haven't you wondered why she was always so upbeat?"

"I just figured she was one of those 'Up With People' kind of kids," I lied. In truth, I had always found it a little creepy.

"The last Innocent corrupted was the embodiment of Compassion," Josh said.

That explained a lot. "So if Aeshma corrupts her, humanity will be without hope?"

"For at least a thousand years," Thomas answered. "Individuals can still experience hope, but as a race..."

"And what if he kills her?"

Josh took a deep, shuddering breath. "He won't kill her. He'll have the mob do it." He held his wife close as she began to sob softly against his shoulder.

"If he kills her, another Innocent will take her place," Thomas continued. "If humanity kills her, he can possess her body and keep her soul trapped for all eternity. Mankind will be forever without hope unless we can exorcise the demon and kill it--and Aeshma is a very powerful demon."

I finally felt like I had all the pieces of the puzzle, except of course the most important one. Who the hell came up with all these dopey rules?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kingston is a university town, a college town, or a military town, depending on how you look at it. It hosts Queen's University, the Royal Military College, St. Lawrence College, and Canadian Forces Base Kingston--not to mention several penitentiaries. No matter how you slice it, it's a young person's town, and today they were out in full force. Well, except for the inmates.

It was still near the start of the school year, and the students hadn't blown their entire budget yet. Give them a couple of months and you'd see several of them huddled around a single beer with four straws, but for now they had money to burn.

It was unseasonably warm for the end of October. The sun, though pale, hung suspended in a cloudless sky. You could get away with leaving your jacket at home, though the temperature would certainly dip as night fell. The trees still had most of their foliage, all bright yellows, oranges, and reds, and the odd gust of wind blew errant leaves through the streets to add color to the drab gray pavement.

Kingston was one of the few places that could get away with holding an event like this on a Monday, but as I said, it was a young person's town. Thanksgiving was a couple of weeks past, and everyone had recuperated from the holiday and was just looking for an excuse to party. Princess Street had been closed off with neon-orange police barricades at the intersection of Division at one end, and Barrie Street at the other. Instead of cars, vendor's stalls occupied the parking spaces that lined both sides, hawking everything from Goth jewelery to cotton candy. Most of the restaurants had taken advantage of the nice weather and set up sidewalk cafes. A large white banner strung across the street proclaimed this the "Hub of Kingston Nightlife." It was a perfect day. If they only knew.

I spotted a gremlin with a tuft of red hair at one of the cafes, squatting on a table where some young stud was trying to impress several of the ladies. Just as Loverboy tilted his plastic mug back for a drink, the gremlin gave it an extra little nudge and Romeo dribbled beer all down his shirt. I'll bet you they're the same little creeps responsible for splashing water all over your pants when you wash your hands in the men's room, too.

I sensed movement at my feet and looked down to see a second gremlin in the process of tying my shoelaces together. When he realized he'd been caught, he grinned, stuck out his tongue, and vanished in a puff of smoke that smelled like sulfur and rotten eggs, just like the stink bombs I used to make back in high school.

As I knelt down to retie my laces, I couldn't help but notice that there seemed to be a lot of Other

Realm denizens about. Not just gremlins either, but succubuses (or is it succubi?), shapeshifters, faerie--both dark and light--ogres, and just about anything else that could stand the light of day. I took it as a sign of encouragement. They were all here for something; I just hoped that something was Alex.

I mean, what if Aeshma didn't bring Alex here at all? He could have taken her anywhere in two worlds. Why here? The rest of the gang seemed convinced that this was the place, and they understood these whacked-out rules better than I did. Thomas kept spouting some nonsense about synchronicity. I hoped he knew what he was talking about.

Alison appeared beside me. "What I wouldn't give for some of that cotton candy."

I smiled. "Maybe Bear will share some of his with you. He's stolen at least two bags of the stuff already that I know of."

Alison had always loved carnivals, and couldn't get enough cotton candy or caramel apples. Sometimes I wondered how she had managed to stay so slim.

"It's not fair," she pouted. "Why do dead dogs still get to eat, but dead girlfriends don't?"

"They do seem to have all the fun." I glanced over at the few rides set up in the A&P parking lot. Bear had taken up residence on the Scrambler, and was shoved up against the corner of the seat as the ride spun him about. The wind whipped his ears back and sprayed his spectral slobber over the couple in the seat behind him. Hey, at least he hadn't thrown up.

"Have you seen Josh and Sabrina?" I asked Alison.

"Yep. And Charlie and Thomas too. No one's seen Alex yet."

"Well, it'll be dark soon. The next band comes on at seven. They're a reggae group, which usually attracts a pretty big crowd," I said.

"You'll find her. Don't worry," Alison said, then blew me a kiss and was gone.

To be honest, I was hoping I'd find Alex before it got dark. That's when the really creepy things came out to play. And speaking of creepy, Drat would be here soon. I'd left him cab money, but it worried me to leave him alone at my place. What if he got hungry and decided to snack on the paperboy or something? Thomas said that trolls rarely actually eat humans, and then it's usually only war captives, or the sick and elderly. I guess they figure they're doing us a big favor by culling the herd. Still, I wouldn't want to have to explain to the police why old Mrs. Angeline went missing. I'm pretty sure natural selection isn't a valid legal defense.

I wandered up and down the street for a while, waiting for the sun to set. There's a New Age/Occult shop on the right-hand side of Princess, so I decided to check it out. I asked the young girl in the tie-dyed T-shirt and wraparound print skirt at the counter if they had anything for repelling madness demons, like Demon Away, or Evil Be Gone--you know, something in an aerosol spray. She said no.

By the time I left the store the sun had sunk far enough in the west that Princess Street was totally engulfed in shadow. It wasn't night, but it was dark enough for the creepy crawlies to make an appearance. I spotted a vampire just up the street, peering around the corner from an alleyway. Vampires seem to be pretty high up in the chain of command. If anyone knew anything about Alex's whereabouts, it would be a vamp. I decided to investigate.

The vampire must have realized he'd been spotted, because he disappeared back into the alley. I made my way slowly up the street, on the lookout for anything else suspicious--other than the ghosts, gremlins, faerie, and whatnot.

I stood in the center of the street and looked down the alley. A few doorways led off into the buildings on either side, a metal fire escape hung from the second and third floors of the building on the left, and three Dumpsters lined the right side. The alley was a dead end, literally. The vamp leaned nonchalantly up against the doorjamb set into the gray-painted brick wall at the far end. He was obviously waiting for me, and I wasn't about to disappoint him.

He must have been an ancient vampire. He didn't bother with the niceties of trying to look human. Even odds his clothes were the ones he'd been buried in. They were rotting and mildewed, with wide lapels, white lace, and a cummerbund. I made my way slowly toward him. He straightened up and tugged on the bottom of his waistcoat to settle it, then smoothed down his tie--one of those old fashioned floppy bow ties.

"Don't bother to make yourself pretty just for little ol' me," I said.

I guess I should have been paying attention instead of being a smart-ass. The shotgun he pulled out from under his coat caught me completely off guard. Who the hell ever heard of a vampire using a shotgun? He pumped off two rounds of buckshot--I know they were buckshot because I saw the pellets racing for my head and barely stepped out of the way in time--then he rushed me. It was pretty clever of him, actually. While I was dodging the shotgun blasts, he had time to close with me.

The faint flash of a knife blade arched toward my neck, and I barely got my hands up in time to block it. I caught the blow just at his wrist and shoved the blade to the side. It was one of those big, curved head-hunter cleavers, and it looked really nasty, so I decided to hold onto it. I gave a tug on his arm as I stepped back a pace and to the left, pulling him forward and off balance, then stepped in again quickly. He stumbled, and I twisted his wrist back and across in the direction of his fall. The knife caught the vamp across the throat while he still held it, and he basically beheaded himself. I stepped back as he burst into flames, surprised that the maneuver had worked so well. Believe it or not, a cop had shown me that one.

"You have to stop making it look so easy, James," Leanne said from behind me. "It's all rather anticlimactic the way you do it."

I bent down and retrieved the knife as I turned to look at her. I was going to need it. She stood there with four other vampires and an ogre, blocking the exit.

It may have worn her form, but this wasn't Leanne. They say that the eyes are the mirrors to the soul. Hers were black holes, drawing you in to oblivion and reflecting nothing back. She grinned, or showed her fangs. "What's wrong, stud-muffin? Aren't you glad to see me?"

I spun the knife in my hand. Kill a vamp and you're doing someone a big favor. I think I mentioned that earlier. Somehow it didn't seem so cut and dried now. If I killed the demon, I'd lose Leanne. It's like that old joke--the operation was a success, but the patient died. I didn't know if I could do it.

Alison's words came back to haunt me. *If you kill her...if you kill Leanne, you will lose your humanity. It will numb you inside more than being an Eternal ever could.* There had to be an alternative. As my old sensei used to say, there's more than one way to skin a cat. Of course, then he'd go on to list several. He could be really strange sometimes.

I noted that Leanne stayed back behind the others, as if trying to maintain her distance. The demon may have become dominant, but it was still afraid of me, and Leanne was strong-willed. Strong enough that she might be able to win back control if I could stay close to her.

"Of course I'm glad to see you, hon. Why don't you come here and give me a big, sloppy kiss?"

She tilted her head to the side as if considering my proposal. "Maybe after you're dead."

"I don't think I can wait that long. I *am* an Eternal, you know."

"True. Killing you may prove difficult, if not impossible. I guess we'll just have to settle for confining you." She nodded to the other vamps and the ogre, who began to inch slowly forward. "Did you know that the same spells for confining demons work on Eternals? I wonder why that is?"

Leanne kicked some old boxes out of the way. A neat pentagram about five feet in diameter was traced out in black and red chalk on the ground where the boxes had been. Some sort of occult hieroglyphics marked the pentagram--probably ancient symbols for "This End Up" or "Kilroy was here."

"Look, guys, normally I'd just love to stay here and play vampire Twister with you," I said. "But I've got places to go and demons to kill."

"Don't worry. This won't take long," Leanne told me. "Take his head," she commanded.

The first vamp lunged at me and I sidestepped. The knife flashed, and his head leapt from his shoulders. The body staggered forward a few steps before pitching face-first into the pavement and bursting into flames. Well, if he'd had a face it would have been face-first.

"Sorry, pal. No head for you today."

The second vamp rushed me, and I grabbed his shoulder and spun him into the alley wall. I slammed him up hard against it, then staked him with a wooden spike that suddenly extended about a foot out from the palm of my left hand. I stepped back and caught an overeager vamp with another spike that jutted out from my elbow. I was getting pretty good at this matter transformation thing. I didn't even have to think very hard about it anymore. The last vamp tried to backpedal suddenly, but he couldn't get out of range in time. I spun quickly, extending my arm out to its full length as I rotated, and the knife took his head cleanly.

I held my hands up over my head. "Time," I called. Hey, I must have set some kind of record. I mean, four vamps in about eight seconds?

The ogre slammed into me, driving my body a good three inches into the brick wall behind me. That'll teach me to get cocky. He grabbed me around the throat and my right thigh, picked me up over his head, and tossed me fifteen feet into the Dumpsters on the other side of the alley. My back caught the metal corner just at my spine, and I heard bone crack. Then he was on me again. I keep forgetting just how quick ogres really are.

He grabbed me by my right foot and dragged me toward the pentagram. I couldn't feel anything from my waist on down--that is until my foot touched the circle. Needles and pins spiked my leg, the sensation climbing higher and higher and coursing through the rest of my body. I didn't know if the pentagram really could confine me, but I sure as hell wasn't willing to find out. I concentrated on healing myself until the feeling returned to my legs, which only made the pain more intense as the ogre dragged me farther into the circle.

I kicked hard for his kneecap, and the creep howled in pain as I connected. He swung me up against the wall, bashing my head so that I saw stars. At least I wasn't in the circle anymore. He grabbed a handful of my shirt, not to mention skin and hair, and lifted me so that my feet dangled a good four feet off the ground. I was still too groggy to put up much of a fight, and I knew he was just seconds from tossing me entirely into the circle, when Bear hamstringed him.

He flashed by, all nebulous shadow and blazing red eyes, and tore the ogre's tendons out just behind the knee. The ogre howled as the leg buckled under him, while Bear hunched over a few feet distant and hacked and coughed and puked up cotton candy. I guess even ghost dogs don't know when to quit, and the combination of cotton candy, carnival ride, and ogre's blood was just a bit too much for the poor hound.

The ogre still held me by the shirt, so I punched him hard in his big, bulbous nose. It rocked his head back, but not before he bled all over me, of course. I hit him again, this time breaking off a tusk and shattering my knuckles in the process. He finally let go of me, and I hopped around for a moment trying to shake off the pain of my broken hand until I managed to heal it. To hell with being taller and better looking, I had to come up with a way to make my body tougher. I flexed my hand, making sure the bones had knit properly, then kicked the ogre hard in the chest. He sailed back about six feet and came down smack dab in the middle of the pentagram. Unfortunately, he wasn't a demon, so it had absolutely no effect on him. He tried to climb to his feet, but of course his left leg was useless now. I decided to wait for him to crawl to me. There was no way I was going anywhere near that circle.

I coughed up blood suddenly as about three feet of aluminum pole suddenly burst through the center of my chest. I'd forgotten all about Leanne. I can't tell you how painful it was having an aluminum pole three inches in diameter shoved through your chest. There was this strange sensation of cold from *inside* my body, and the wind whistled through the hollow tube.

Leanne shoved me forward toward the circle, using the pole as leverage. The ogre was waiting there

for me, ready to drag me in. Bear growled and launched himself at Leanne, but she caught him with a backhand in midleap that sent him tumbling. He came up hard against a set of cement steps and yelped once before fading out. I dug my feet in, trying to slow the forward momentum, but Leanne angled the pole higher so that I was barely on my tiptoes. The ogre reached out for me, his hairy knuckles only inches from my face.

It was time to get creative. I imagined myself standing *behind* Leanne, and suddenly I was. She staggered forward as the resistance to her efforts to drive me into the circle suddenly vanished, and only regained her balance after driving the pole several inches into the ogre's forehead. Even an ogre's skull isn't that thick, and he collapsed twitching to the pavement in the throes of death.

I grabbed Leanne by the shoulder and spun her toward the wall, but she did that neat thing, running a few steps up the side of the building and then doing a back flip over my head to land behind me; she really was a nimble little minx. She pushed me into the wall, but I hooked her elbow and spun her back up against it, then slammed her head against the brick. That stunned her for a moment, and she slid to a seated position on the pavement.

I looked around and spotted a couple of three-foot-long cement reinforcing rods on the ground beside me. I scooped them up in my left hand, then grabbed Leanne by the throat and lifted her to a standing position against the wall. She was still groggy, but screamed nonetheless as I drove one of the rods through her right shoulder and into the building, pinning her there. She screamed a second time as I repeated the procedure on her left shoulder, then bent the ends of the rods down so she couldn't pull herself off of them. At least she didn't hiss at me and bare her fangs like vamps always did in the movies. That just looks *so* dumb.

Bear appeared at my side again. The poor mutt still looked woozy, and I was touched that he'd come back in that weakened condition to try and help me.

"It's okay, bud. I've got it under control now."

He sat down and rested his head on his paws, then whined a little and vanished again.

I heard a commotion behind me, and a stench filled my nostrils. I knew that smell. Goblins. I turned as they crawled up from out of the sewer grates, all disjointed, gangly limbs, black matted fur, baleful yellow eyes, and teeth--lots of teeth. They watched me warily as they scrambled for the smoldering vampire remains and the ogre carcass. The goblins swarmed over the bodies, tearing them to pieces amidst the sickening crunch of bone and rending of flesh, and dragged the grisly morsels back down into the sewers with them. In less than a minute there was nothing left to show that anything had died in the alley. Talk about covering your tracks.

Leanne glared at me with those black, empty eyes, then grinned. "So, stud-muffin, are you going to stake me or what?"

All right, maybe I didn't have it under control. I had her pinned to the wall like some rare butterfly; now what was I supposed to do with her?

"Where's Alex?" I demanded.

She laughed. "Probably having more fun than she's ever had in her life. A little wine, a few drops of Ecstasy, and the boys will take turns seeing she has a good time."

I thought if I twisted one of the rods a little it might hurt bad enough to wipe that smirk off her face, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It had taken everything I had to drive the rods into her in the first place. I knew this wasn't Leanne; not really. But she was in there. She could see and hear everything that the vamp did with her body. Maybe she could even feel what it did with her body too. Maybe she felt it when I hit her, or pinned her to the wall.

Just for a moment, I saw a spark of life in her eyes. "Kill me," she said. "I can't control it any longer. Kill me." Then her eyes were lifeless, black orbs again.

"Why don't you just let me down from here?" the vamp said. "I can be *very* appreciative."

The suggestive tone sickened me. I stepped back away from her and tried to breathe. Everything felt

suddenly numb. Leanne wasn't coming back. I knew what I had to do, and to do it I had to cut myself off emotionally. I pulled my arm back, and the stake grew out from the palm of my hand again.

The vamp sneered. "Why don't you take that and shove it up your--"

"No!" Alison materialized between me and Leanne, and I staggered back a step in shock.

I felt disoriented. For a moment it had seemed as if I were about to kill *her*.

"You can't do it, James. I can't let you do it."

There were tears in her eyes, and I made to wipe them away, but my fingers only brushed the emptiness before me. "There's no other way," I said.

She smiled sadly. "There's always another way." She turned away from me, and toward Leanne.

Thomas rushed into the alley from the street with Charlie close on his heels. "Stop her! She doesn't know what she's doing."

I grabbed for her, but of course came up with empty air. Alison stepped into Leanne. The vampire shuddered for a moment; then her entire body went slack. She would have fallen if not for the metal rods pinning her to the wall.

Thomas stopped at my side, still panting from the exertion of sprinting. "She's not strong enough. The demon will kill her."

"She's already dead," I answered as Charlie arrived a moment later.

Thomas shook his head. "Even you should realize by now that there are many different levels to being dead." He glanced over at Leanne. Her eyes had rolled back so that only the whites showed now, and her mouth hung open. "Alison hasn't reincarnated. If the demon kills her now, it's final. The soul you know as Alison will cease to exist, and her energy will return to the Universal Wellspring."

Charlie spoke up from just behind us, and placed his hand on my shoulder. "If Alison fails, you will lose them both."

Leanne's head jerked upright suddenly as she screamed. Her body convulsed, then pushed out from the wall and strained against the bent ends of the reinforcing rods. Her form rippled before my eyes, and suddenly the demon struggled there. It looked vaguely like the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, except more bony and with better muscle tone. It was a mottled gray-green in color, with a pale yellow stomach and chest, and its eyes were golden with red, vertically slit pupils.

A hurricanelike wind had picked up in the alley, and tossed broken glass, paper, wood, and other bits of debris about in a frenzy. Lightning flashed overhead, though there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

The demon croaked like a two-hundred-pound bullfrog and thrashed against the restraining bolts, jolting them a couple of inches out from the wall. It shimmered again, and Alison struggled before me. Her blonde, tousled locks whipped about her face as if alive, and she gnashed her teeth and screamed as she pulled the rods out another few inches. I threw my arms about her and pushed her back up against the wall, and she wailed in agony.

"Stay close!" Thomas shouted against the gale-force wind. "It might give them a fighting chance."

I hugged her to me as she bit and clawed at my neck and back, ignoring the pain and concentrating on healing the damage she inflicted. Suddenly I held Leanne again, as determined to tear me to shreds as if she were the demon. Charlie grabbed at her hands and held them out to her sides up against the wall to stop her from flaying the skin from my back. As strong as he was, he struggled with the petite woman and she broke his grip several times. I closed my eyes as I felt the hard, bony ridges of the demon against me. I pushed against its forehead, trying to keep it from my neck or it would have torn my throat out. Debris struck me; jagged shards of glass bit into my face, and broken splinters of wood impaled me from behind as if the demon directed them. It struggled against me, but I could feel its efforts weakening. I opened my eyes again as it morphed between the three souls inhabiting Leanne's body. It screamed once more, a final wail in demon form, and suddenly I held Alison in my arms as the wind died down and the lightning storm subsided.

She stared at me with those warm, brown eyes of hers, and suddenly her lips were on mine and she kissed me hungrily. Charlie released her arms and she threw them about my neck, and then I was kissing Leanne. I disentangled myself and stepped back a pace.

"What's wrong?" Leanne asked. She looked pale, but not the bone-white color of the vampire.

"I just don't want to end up kissing the demon," I said.

Leanne grinned, the mischievous grin I'd come to know and love. "He's still in here with us. I'm sure I could call him forth if you'd like."

"No, that's quite all right," I assured her. Then, "What do you mean, with us?"

Alison smiled at me in Leanne's place now. "We're both in here. Well, actually, all three of us. Leanne couldn't control the demon on her own, so I helped."

I frowned, getting lost in the complexity of it all. "Does that mean you're not a ghost anymore?"

She nodded. "That's right. Three souls, one body, though I don't think you'll have to worry about seeing the demon again. We've got him on a pretty tight leash."

Thomas shook his head. I think for once he was as confused as I was. "It's kind of like a combination possession/reincarnation. I can't say as I've ever heard of it before."

Leanne took control again. "Separately, both Alison and I were lost, but together..."

"I have two girlfriends for the price of one," I said.

Leanne scowled. "Maybe. *If* you get us down from here."

I heard Charlie chuckle behind me. "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes for all the money in the world," he told Thomas.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Leanne gritted her teeth and inhaled sharply as I straightened out the metal rods, then pulled her off of them. She never screamed once. I had to hold her up to keep her from falling, though.

She winced as she rotated her shoulders. "Give it a day and we'll be as good as new."

By "we" I guessed she meant her and Alison. At least she didn't refer to herself in the third person like all those jocks on TV, or that senator.

Leanne pulled away, then stepped around me and approached Charlie. She held a hand out to touch his face, and he took it gently and pressed it to his cheek. She looked so utterly grief-stricken. I could tell that she was crying, though of course there were no tears. Vampires can't cry.

"We should get out of here," I said, trying to break the awkward silence. "I'm surprised we didn't attract a crowd with all the ruckus we caused."

Thomas dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand. "I cast a small spell at the entrance to the alley so that it looked like a solid wall. No one saw anything."

I was impressed. "I didn't know you could do that."

He shrugged it off. "I'm a man of many talents."

"And modest too." I turned back to Leanne, but she was Alison now. "You've got to quit doing that. It's freaking me out."

Alison laughed. "Just wait till we get you in bed."

Charlie thought that was just hilarious, or maybe it was the fact that I blushed such a deep red. It seemed to me that the only thing that ever really tickled the ogre's funny bone was my embarrassment.

"I'm not *really* standing here," Alison said. "It's still Leanne's body. This is just a glamor."

"But it's a good one," Thomas added. "Not even I can see through it."

Something caught my attention, and I shushed everyone and tried to focus. I spotted someone around the corner, just a brief glimpse of white flesh and dark hair. I pressed myself flat up against the alley wall and shuffled sideways along its length until I made the end, then reached quickly around and grabbed the vamp by his shirt, dragging him into the alley. I threw him hard up against the far wall and he slumped to the ground, unconscious.

"They don't make vampires like they used to," I said, surprised at how easily he'd gone down.

Alison had this bemused look on her face. "James, that was a mime."

I looked closely at the man crumpled against the alley wall. White face paint, black-and-white striped shirt, black pants and suspenders. Oops. "A mime, eh? He should have said something."

Thomas walked over and checked the poor guy out. "He'll be all right," the bard said. "He probably never even saw what hit him. I suggest we get out of here before he comes to, though."

I was already way ahead of him. I stepped out of the alley with my arm around Alison. I can't begin to tell you how strange that felt. How many people get a second chance like this? To lose someone they love to something as final as death, only to find out that it may not be so final after all. And of course there was still Leanne. After all this time alone, to finally find someone I could care for again. Now I had both of them, and apparently they were going to share me. I felt like writing a letter to *Penthouse*.

Alison stopped and bought some cotton candy from a vendor. The look on her face was pure bliss as the pink floss melted in her mouth. She finished about half the bag when suddenly Leanne made an appearance.

"Sorry, but I just have to try some of this. I haven't eaten anything in several hundred years." She tore off a wad, stuffed it in her mouth, and choked on it. "At least I can taste it when Alison eats," she said, but she still sounded disappointed.

A shadow streaked by and snatched the cotton candy out of Leanne's hand. I shook my head and grinned. Some dogs never learn.

"I hate to intrude," Thomas said to Leanne, "but you wouldn't happen to know what Aeshma was planning, or where he was keeping Alex, would you?"

I didn't believe him for a minute; I think he was quite happy to intrude. I hadn't forgotten that he still had feelings for Leanne.

Leanne bit her lower lip for a second. "Sorry, but I don't," she said finally. "He never let me in on his plans--other than to set up the ambush for James."

Thomas sighed. "That's what I figured. He didn't want to take the chance that James might still turn you."

"I guess it's back to patrolling," I said, and turned toward the main stage where the reggae band was just about to start up.

"Hey youse guys. Wait fer me!"

I turned around and looked up the street. Drat shuffled up to us with a mug of beer clutched in both hands. He was wearing one of those idiotic Viking helms complete with curved horns that half the college boys were sporting. Only Drat's was real.

The troll eyed Leanne, then said, "I take it da vampire chick's on our team again?"

"I am," Leanne said.

Drat shrugged. "So, what'd I miss?"

"James mugged a mime," Charlie said as he stopped at the beer tent.

Drat finished off his mug, then wiped the foam from around his mouth. "Remind me ta give him a medal next time he's in da Burrows."

I wondered how the troll had managed to buy beer. After all, to the Darksiders he only looked to be about eight or nine years old. I figured maybe it was some magic troll trick or something; then I saw him reach up and swipe one off the counter. It may not have been as impressive as magic, but it worked.

"Hey, Monkey Boy. Where's the guy with the organ?" shouted some college boy sitting at one of the wooden folding tables under the beer tent.

I turned to see whom he was hassling, but I already had a pretty good idea. An RMC Officer Cadet stood off to my right, trying to buy beer. He was dressed in his cadet uniform, complete with the little black cape and pillbox hat. He ignored the jibe--it's not like it was original or anything--paid for his drink, and joined several of his friends who were listening to the reggae band. There'd always been somewhat of a rivalry between Kingston's civilian students and its military population, and the Officer Cadets made easy targets. They had to wear those dopey uniforms everywhere, at least in their first year, and stood out like a sore

thumb.

I did a pretty thorough scan of the beer tent, and though I saw a number of what had to be underage girls, none of them were Alex. I did notice a bunch of skinheads sitting near the back of the tent. They kept a close eye on a group of Vietnamese students across the street at one of the sidewalk cafes.

A cop strolled up to a group of twenty or so young francophones--that's French-Canadians for you foreigners--and asked them to keep it down. Even though it was still early it was getting pretty drunk out, and they were singing French folk songs at the top of their lungs. The cop's plea had little effect on them, and he wasn't about to make an issue of it. He walked away shaking his head in frustration as the group laughed and sang even more loudly than before. A gang of Queen's students sitting nearby didn't seem overly impressed, if the dirty looks they gave the French chorus were anything to go by.

"Is it just me, or is the tension getting pretty thick here?" I asked.

"It's not just you," Leanne said. "The question is, is it the normal run-of-the-mill tension, or does Aeshma have a hand in it?"

We wandered around for a while, stopping at the beer tents and checking out the crowds that were starting to form now that it was getting dark. Every now and then Leanne and I, or Alison and I--the whole split-personality thing was giving me a headache--would run across Drat, Thomas and Charlie, or Josh and Sabrina. As yet no one had spotted Alex.

The reggae band finished, and after a ten-minute spiel by one of the local radio jocks, we were treated to canned music for a while. Everyone was dancing in the streets. There was a mosh pit up by the stage where a bunch of slam-dancing Goths careened off one another. One of them walked by me and Alison on his way to the Port-a-potty. He gave me one of those somber, Goth glares, and I broke out laughing. I'm sorry, but there's little about some scrawny white dude in black leather, hair extensions, and mascara that intimidates me. I don't think my laughing at him did much to bolster his ego, either.

Alison patted my arm. "Now, now, dear. Don't make fun of the scary people."

I smiled, then caught sight of one of the Dark Sidhe. He was hanging with a bunch of the skinheads, and seemed to be leading the conversation. That wiped the smile off my face.

"There's trouble," I said, pointing him out to Alison. I surveyed the crowds, picking out more of the Summerland folk mingling with the Darksiders. A vampire had worked his way in with the francophones, and a couple of ogres were chatting up a group of military guys from the Signals Regiment. Alison directed my attention to where several demons had mixed in with a crowd of drunken young Queen's students. I spotted three more vampires slam dancing with the Goths.

Leanne took Alison's place again. "This doesn't necessarily mean anything," she said. "Even if it weren't for Aeshma, chances are these demons and vampires and such would be here anyway. What *is* significant is that they seem to be trying to stir up trouble. Usually they keep a low profile, and lure their victims somewhere secluded to prey on them."

"Yeah, well normal or not, I've got a bad feeling about it."

The lights on the street suddenly died, throwing the party into darkness. Several women screamed at the abrupt change; then the nervous laughter and catcalls started.

I heard voices. The same tormented whispers that haunted Tae Con Ra--sick, malignant muttering, the words indecipherable, the evil intent clear. It seemed to come from all around us. A chill breeze wound its way down the street. The crowd fidgeted, nervous and uneasy.

I glanced up at the rooftops, and frowned. "If those voices are demonic, why are they coming from those speakers?" Leanne looked up, and I pointed out a long row of speakers lining both sides of the street.

A driving rhythm split the night air, the techno-rock beat of hammer striking anvil at ninety beats per minute. The bass line filled in the gaps, a pounding, repetitive pattern of heavy machinery and automated precision. Strobe lights flashed, sporadically illuminating the world in harsh, black-and-white still shots, as if

capturing time in fragments but washing the life out of it. The music was infectious. Adrenaline surged, testosterone flared, and pulses synchronized. The crowd began to dance.

Two red spotlights struck the stage from opposite sides, illuminating the drummer as he pounded out the cadence on an electronic kit. He was shirtless, showing off his lean, sinewy form under the severe light. His head was shaved, and he hunched over the drums, his chin tucked into his chest as he glared out at the audience through fierce, green glowing eyes. It wasn't a special effect. Vampire.

Another spotlight speared the stage to his left. The bass player perched atop a column of speakers, down on one knee and head thrown back as if in supplication to the orange, bloated moon above him. He was a full-blown werewolf, all black fur and fangs, and he howled at the moon. The crowd howled back.

A staccato guitar riff cut through the pulsing bass line like a chainsaw just as a fourth spotlight illuminated the demon at the right of the stage. He violently raked the strings, battering his instrument like an abusive husband. The guitar wailed in response. He wore heavy black plate armor, borrowed from the Dark Sidhe by the look of it, and his face could have almost passed for human if it weren't for the reptilian scales and crown of short, curved horns. He spat fire into the air, and unfurled a pair of great, black bat wings. The crowd screamed in pleasure.

Cloying smoke bellowed forth from compressors hidden beneath the stage and at intervals along the street. Soon the crowd was enveloped by the artificial, low-lying fog. The strobe lights flashed like lightning from the rooftops, while pale blue ground-level floodlights pulsed rhythmically, lending the wispy fingers that wrapped themselves about the dancers an eerie pseudo-life of their own.

"Hail the Dark Prince." The voice would have done James Earl Jones proud. "Worship at the altars of Balberith and Sonneillon."

"Whatever happened to the good old days when you had to play rock music backwards to hear the satanic messages?" I asked.

I saw Thomas moving through the crowd toward us. "This is not good," he shouted over the din of the music.

"You think?" I replied. "Just where did you go to bard school, anyway? Because this prophecy thing of yours doesn't seem all that hard, and being a bard sounds like a pretty sweet deal if you ask me."

Thomas ignored the sarcasm--he probably learned that in bard school--and said, "This music has power. It's malignant, and alive."

"Not only that. It sucks. I say we go find the Big Giant Plug and pull it."

The bard nodded. "The sooner the better."

We shoved our way through the crowd toward the stage. I could see lines of power cables and mike cords taped in neat bundles that traversed up a set of makeshift wooden steps attached stage right. I followed the power bundles back from the stage to the parking lot, where they disappeared down a manhole cover. A temporary canvas tent, just big enough to stand up in, covered the hole like a small shed. The mike cables wound their way along the curb encased in plastic tubing and ended at the sound board set up under another small tent near the back of the street another hundred feet behind us.

"I'll take the manhole and try to kill the power," I shouted at Leanne and Thomas. "You two head back there to that tent. If I don't shut the power down in five minutes, then kill the sound at the board."

Leanne nodded, and gave me a quick kiss before I left. "Be careful," she warned.

At least that's what I think she said; the music was pretty loud. It was either that, or, "Pee rare fuel." I'm guessing it was the former.

It took me a few minutes to clear the street and make it to the parking lot. I couldn't just race at mach speed through an innocent crowd, so I had to be diplomatic. I only kicked four or five of them, honest. The parking lot may not have been as crowded as the street, but it was by no means empty. The carnival had shut down, and spectators had set up lawn chairs, or sat in their cars to catch the band. I was navigating through

this new obstacle course toward the manhole cover when Tam-Lien suddenly appeared before me wearing this killer black vinyl number and thigh-high boots. I shudder to think what TV show she was watching to come up with *that* one.

"I want to learn about sex," she said.

"I'm sorry, I don't have time for you right now." Thank *God* I didn't have time for her!

"Make time."

She may not have been human, but she was becoming more and more like a real woman everyday.

"Listen, I'm kind of busy saving the world here. When I'm through, then maybe we can sit down and talk about the birds and the bees."

"I know about birds and bees. I want to know about sex."

I pushed her aside. "We'll talk about whatever you want. Later."

She frowned. I doubt she was used to being defied. "Save the world quickly. I'm becoming impatient," she said. Then, "You are still doing things the hard way," and was gone again.

I finally made it to the tent covering the manhole, and some big, slack-jawed moron stepped in front of me.

"Where do you think you're going, pal?"

"I'm not your pal," I snarled as my eyes glowed red and I sprouted horns and fangs and claws and little spikes all over.

The guy paled, then scrambled out of the way. Way out of the way--about three or four blocks at least. I like to think it was the little beanie hat with the propeller on top that scared him off.

The bundled cables were a good five inches thick and trailed off down into the manhole. Pale yellow light shone up through the opening, no doubt from a temporary incandescent bulb. I peered down into the sewer and saw about twenty rungs of a ladder that led down to moss-covered water. The cable wound its way down the hole, around a corner, and out of sight. I couldn't help but remember the goblins that had scuttled up from the sewers to feast on the corpses in the alley. I steeled myself, and was just about to climb down through the manhole when suddenly it struck me.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid." Leanne's sword appeared in my hand, and I hacked through the cable. The lights flickered on the first swing, the sound died on the second, and when I completely severed the bundle on the third, everything went dark and quiet. To think, I'd actually been going to climb down there.

There were catcalls from the crowd. Shouts of "Way to go," and "Someone forgot to pay the electric bill." People got jostled about in the darkness. Then it got ugly. I don't know who threw the first punch, or why, but fighting broke out at one of the sidewalk cafés. That's when the music started up again.

"What the...?" I held one end of the severed cable in my hand as the strobe lights flashed and the fighting spilled out into the street. The dancers danced, oblivious to the melee until it swept over them and sucked them in.

I dropped the cable and stepped over to where the mike cords ran along the gutter. I hacked my way through with the sword in two swings. It didn't make any difference. There might have been an alternate source of power, but the mike cables running back to the soundboard didn't have backups. This had to be magic.

I worked my way through the crowd back to where Leanne and Thomas were. Leanne pointed to where she had severed the cables leading into the small tent and shrugged.

The cops tried to break up the fighting, but there weren't enough of them. I saw demons and Dark Sidhe in the crowd, egging on the combatants. Thomas grabbed my shoulder excitedly and pointed off toward the mosh pit. I sighted along his finger until I saw Alex. She was dressed up in skin-tight red leather, the skirt too short, the top too small, and the heels too high. She danced frantically, careening off the other dancers and spinning about erratically.

I called Leanne to me. "We've got to get Alex out of here, now. Get Josh and the others and bring them back here."

Leanne nodded, and disappeared into the crowd to find our friends.

A fifth spotlight struck center stage. The singer stepped forward into the light. A glittering silver-gray body suit covered his lithe physique like metallic scales. It was sleeveless, accentuating the sinewy musculature of his arms. Celtic tattoos wound themselves about his wrists, and just below the deltoids. His blond hair was cut in a flattop, giving his head a machined, triangular shape. The face was male-model perfect--high cheekbones, large, expressive eyes, thick, sensual lips--and covered in black Sanskrit characters. He sang, and the crowd went mad. The dancers became frenzied, and the brawlers reckless.

I couldn't make out the words. I don't think it mattered. I felt as if I was only hearing the smallest part of it; as if his voice carried across frequencies I couldn't hear, only feel. My body thrummed with power, and the hair actually stood up on the nape of my neck.

I watched as the dancers in the mosh pit picked Alex up and passed her over their heads from one side to the other and back. She seemed totally unaware of what was happening. All she wanted to do was dance.

"We're in big trouble," I shouted to Thomas above the roar of the music. I pointed to the singer, the only human-looking member of the band. "I know he doesn't look the same, and I don't know how I know it, but that's Aeshma."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Someone threw a chair through a storefront window. The fighting was getting out of hand, and the cops had sent for reinforcements. They tried to kill the music, but so far weren't any more successful than I'd been.

Josh ducked under a right cross, spun the skinhead around, and tossed him into a gang of army guys. Charlie moved up beside the shapeshifter. The two of them cleared a path through the combatants for Sabrina, with Drat covering the rear. They fought their way clear of the melee and joined us by the soundboard.

I pointed Alex out to the rest of the gang. Josh had to hold Sabrina up. I thought she was going to faint on us there for a minute. Josh got that kick-ass-determined look again.

"Josh, I want you, Charlie, and Drat to take Sabrina and get Alex the hell out of here," I ordered. "Someplace safe. Someplace warded. Leanne, you and Thomas work on killing this music. I'll handle Aeshma."

I know you're probably wondering why I just didn't appear on stage and kill Aeshma, or rush through the crowd and grab Alex. Believe me, the thought had occurred to me. The problem was, I couldn't just speed through the crowd without hurting, and maybe killing, a bunch of innocents. Somehow I didn't think whoever had made up all these dopey rules would condone out-and-out murder. And as far as the cops were concerned, well, they tend to get pissed when you murder someone in plain sight of an entire crowd. Besides, even with Aeshma dead, his minions could still kill Alex. It might not be the outcome they'd hoped for, but it still wasn't one I could live with. I had to wait for Aeshma to show his hand, then take him down. Of course, he wasn't going to make it easy for me.

I staggered forward suddenly as an arrowhead punched its way out through my chest. I looked down at it stupidly for a moment, then turned and glanced up to the rooftop, where a Sidhe archer was busy notching another arrow. He released, and I leapt in front of Thomas and took an arrow meant for him through my left lung.

Josh snarled and pulled his pistol from behind his back where he had tucked it under his shirt. He fired off a quick shot, and the Sidhe's head snapped back. The archer staggered a couple of steps, arms flailing, then collapsed. I looked around to see if anyone had heard the gunshot, but the music had masked it.

I grunted as Thomas reached behind me and snapped off both feathered shafts, then placed a hand on my chest and drew the front half of the arrows the rest of the way through. You have no idea what an icky feeling that is. The sensation resonates throughout your whole body. It's like chewing on tinfoil when you have fillings.

Something bright flashed in my peripheral vision like the light that leaks into a darkened room when a door is opened and closed. I turned the flash. Alex had stopped dancing and stood still among the Goths. She looked about--wide-eyed, lost, and moving woodenly as the frantic need to dance lost its grip on her. There was something about her demeanor that nagged at me, but Aeshma's minions didn't give me time to dwell on it.

The band struck a powerful chord just as four vamps stepped out of the swirling artificial fog. They looked cyber-punk, all done up in black leather and neoprene, with long black jackets, knee-high jackboots, and retro shades. The blue light shone up at them through the mist and cast hard shadows across their pale features. *It must be nice to have your own special effects team and theme music*, I thought. It sure as hell impressed me. Now if they could only learn to walk in slow motion.

I grabbed an arrow out of Thomas's hand and staked the first vamp in line, but he twisted suddenly and I missed his heart. It pissed him off something fierce, though. He snarled, and caught me with a spinning back fist, then rotated through with a spinning heel kick that pummeled me to the ground. If I had been human it would have broken my neck.

Where the hell did all these people learn martial arts, anyway? When I was a kid the martial arts were a mystical thing you only saw at the movies occasionally. Nowadays everyone and their dog seemed to be the next Bruce Lee.

I struggled to my hands and knees, prepared to retaliate. Josh shot the bastard. There's still something to be said for a good old-fashioned Beretta--especially a magical Beretta. The vampire dropped to his knees with a bullet hole between the eyes. It didn't kill him, but it sure held him steady for a bit. This time I didn't miss with the arrow. The vamp burst into flames, the crowd still oblivious as to what had just happened.

"Thanks," I shouted over the din at Josh. "Now go get Alex."

Josh saluted with the Beretta; then he and the rest of his gang were off and shoving their way through the crowd.

The three remaining vamps pushed back the folds of their longcoats and retrieved katanas. Two could play that game. I materialized the two rapiers Leanne had brought at the beginning of our little adventure, and handed her one. I had no idea where the swords came from, or where they went to when I finished with them, but I sure as hell wasn't about to complain.

"All right, boys. Let's play Highlander." I was worried there wouldn't be enough room to maneuver, but I tell you, nothing moves a crowd like a bunch of maniacs wildly waving giant pig-stickers about.

I stepped in between the first two vamps. I know, strategically it's a bad move--but the third vamp shifted position to box me in, which was what I was hoping for. The idiot turned his back on Leanne; how rude. His body burst into flames even before his head hit the ground.

The vamp to my right lunged forward with the point of his blade. I lashed out at it with my own, then twisted at the last second, directing his sword into the chest of his comrade behind me. You should have seen the looks on their faces. My own sword flicked out and took the first vamp's head; then I spun and took the second vamp as he was trying to pull himself free of his buddy's weapon. They both lit up like roman candles. No one bled on me--which was nice for a change.

"There can be only one!" I shouted, and Leanne stepped up and put her arm about my waist. "Okay, two--tops."

I looked about, expecting to see some sort of panicked mob reaction, or at least cops rushing us. Nothing. The crowd had gone back to dancing. It was almost as if we didn't exist for them. Or maybe they had forgotten us.

"What gives?" I asked.

Leanne looked as perplexed as I was. "It must be the music. It's clouding their perception, like some sort of mass glamor."

There was a pyrotechnic explosion from the stage as the flash pots went off. Flames licked at the columns of amplifiers along either side and in pools across the flooring, but nothing burned. A group of hooded druids wound their way slowly out from behind the backdrop dragging three heavy, wooden Y-shaped crucifixes. A half-naked man wearing little more than a loincloth was lashed to the one on the left. His wrists were bound by coarse, braided rope to the upright arms of the cross. A demon hung from the crucifix on the right, his mottled, waxy flesh almost translucent over his rail-thin frame as if he suffered from starvation. The central cross reached twenty feet into the air, dwarfing the others. As yet it was unoccupied.

Aeshma was on his knees at the front of the stage singing something about the Chosen One as the druids stepped down into the audience. They cast about as if searching for someone. The Goths threw themselves at the druids, but all were turned away. The music coursed through their veins now, driving the dancers like slaves before a whip. It cajoled, excited, threatened, and they reveled in it. The fighting spread like an oil slick through the crowd.

Josh's party was only about fifty feet from Alex's position when a line of Dark Sidhe stepped in their way. I'm no lip reader, but Josh's "Fuck you" was unmistakable. The shapeshifter dropped four of them with the Beretta. The Sidhe are severely allergic to lead, especially when it's so forcibly ingested.

Sabrina stayed close behind Josh. She was no fighter. As a matter of fact, she seemed to be having a hard time warding off the music's influence herself. Charlie and Drat circled her protectively.

One of the Dark Sidhe tried to lance Charlie, who tore the spear from its grasp and shish-kebabbed two of them, driving it through the first Sidhe and into the chest of a second. The ogre wasn't fooling around. I saw another of the Faerie topple over as Drat cut his legs out from under him with his battle-axe. I doubt the Sidhe even saw the troll; his melon head didn't come up past the layer of fog. Several more Dark Sidhe stepped in to take the place of their fallen comrades. They brought their own ogre with them, and a few vampires just for good measure.

"We'd better get in there," I said to Leanne. "I'll help even the odds, but then I want a crack at Aeshma. Thomas, kill that music before I..." I looked around, but the bard was nowhere to be seen. "Now where the hell did he run off to?"

Leanne didn't know either. He must have slipped away while we were beheading the vamps. We didn't have time to worry about him. Besides, Thomas could take care of himself.

We were shoving our way through the dancers when some big army ape took a swing at Leanne. The guy was huge--he must have stood at least six foot stupid. Leanne grabbed him by the collar and the seat of his pants and used him as a human shield as we pushed through the rest of the crowd. Josh, Charlie, and Drat were having a hard go of it when we arrived. Leanne tossed the battered soldier aside, and we waded into the fray.

I cut into the ogre with a vengeance. I still remembered the beating I'd taken from the one in the alley. I guess I had a score to settle. This poor slob didn't last two seconds, but he did bleed on me. I could just make out Alex over his corpse. She stood there like a zombie while the Goths careened all about her.

The song shifted up a key suddenly as the druids bowed before Alex. The crowd went wild, picking her up over their heads and passing her to the front of the stage, where Aeshma waited for her. The druids surrounded her, then led her back to the central crucifix. Aeshma raised his hand palm upward in a slow, deliberate stage gesture. Alex was levitated gently, her head thrown back and arms out to her sides. Two druids rose with her and bound her hands to the cross, then slowly returned to the ground.

Josh went berserk. He tore into the Sidhe with fang and claw, fully changed now and his magical weapons forgotten. Charlie wasn't much better. He had vowed nothing would ever take Alex from Josh and Sabrina again, and was hell-bent on keeping that vow.

I looked about for Thomas, but the bard was still nowhere to be seen. How long was this damn song anyway? It made "Stairway to Heaven" sound like a jingle. The stage was still about twenty feet away, with

the enemy force trying to butcher us, a bunch of vampire wannabes dancing madly between it and me, and the crowd entranced and oblivious to it all. Enough was enough.

“Go go gadget legs!” All right, so I watch way too much television. I leapt high over the crowd, and even did a neat little forward flip before landing on the stage in front of Aeshma and drawing my sword. I felt so Luke Skywalker, except for the fact that Aeshma wasn’t my father. No, don’t even go there.

I don’t know if the crowd thought it was part of the show, or were still entranced by the music, but they howled and screamed in approval.

Aeshma grinned. “What do you think you’re going to do with that?”

He had a point. It’s not like it had worked so well the last time. I slashed up from the hip in a quick draw-cut that scythed cleanly through his neck from right to left. Call me an optimist. He clutched at his throat and staggered a few steps, eyes wide in shock, then laughed. The rat-bastard had been faking it; there wasn’t a mark on him. Well, at least one of us was having fun.

Aeshma conjured up a burning sword. He must have been as fast as I was, because the next thing I knew it was buried up to the cross-hilt in my chest.

“I know, it’s a little too Old Testament for my tastes, but the audience expects it,” he said. The crowd danced on, oblivious to what occurred on stage. Aeshma’s band didn’t miss a beat in all the ruckus.

I lurched back a step and coughed up smoke. Believe me, having a burning broadsword rammed through you is another one of those things you don’t want to experience. The sword came out with a bit of tugging--it caught on a rib--and I drove it point first into the stage. This was getting us nowhere.

“It looks like it’s time for another trip down memory lane for you,” the demon said, and snapped his fingers.

I was fourteen years old. Mom wasn’t home from work yet so...

“Not bloody likely!” I yelled. Suddenly I was back on stage with Aeshma. “Been there, done that, seen the therapist.”

The problem with living in the past is that you tend to dwell on the bad stuff, or remember the good stuff better than it actually was. Either you don’t move forward because you’re afraid of being hurt again, or because you just know it will never be as good as it once was.

My eyes had been closed to the world around me long before they were opened to the Other Realm. I had denied the existence of both realities, buried myself in my past, and missed out on my present. Josh, Sabrina, Alex, Leanne, Thomas, Drat, Alison, Dad Grandpa, and Bear--friends and loved ones both present and past. I’d come to realize living is about what we do now, not what we did then. Aeshma couldn’t trap me in the past again, because I didn’t live there anymore. Everything I want, everyone I need, was here. Now.

Aeshma blinked, surprised that I’d broken his spell.

He looked positively stunned when the thunder of Celtic drums assaulted the crowd. It overwhelmed the heavy, industrial techno-beat, turning it in to something more primitive, utterly changing the character of the music. A rhythm guitar backed up the lead, its simple refrain undermining the song’s dark intent. It inspired hope now rather than hatred, camaraderie instead of conflict. The crowd faltered. The dancers looked almost euphoric, reveling in the celebration of youth now instead of the *danse macabre*. The fighting became sporadic.

Thomas stood on the roof of a police van parked across the street near the rear of the crowd. He cradled a vintage twelve-string Rickenbacker in his hands, fingers caressing the frets as the fog curled up around him. I guess he’d decided to go high tech, although the damn guitar didn’t seem to be plugged into anything, not even an amplifier. And don’t ask me where the drums were coming from, either. He hadn’t been able to kill the music, so this was the next best thing.

Aeshma flickered before me like a bad video edit. Thomas's music seemed to be messing with the demon's reality. One moment he was this neo-punk Nancy-boy; the next a forty-foot goat-headed monstrosity.

Tam-Lien had said something about Aeshma not really being able to manipulate matter; that his power was illusion. If that was true, then the Nancy-boy was a fake, and the demon visaged his true appearance. That meant that when I tried to decapitate him, all I'd truly done was swing at the empty air between the demon's straddled legs, so...

I waited for the goat-thing to make an appearance again and slashed sideways at his right knee. Hey, he was forty feet tall--that's all I could reach. Aeshma bellowed. This time I could tell he wasn't faking it. The music stuttered like a record skipping. I swung the sword hard, cutting deeply into the demon's calf. He screamed--a half-roar, half-bleat of pain and frustration--and went down on one knee.

The music skipped another beat. Here and there throughout the crowd the fighting and dancing came to a standstill. The revelers slowly awakened. The cops took advantage of the lull and hauled off some of the worst of the brawlers.

I prepared to strike again, but Aeshma caught me with a brutal backhanded wallop that hurled me end for end into the speaker cabinets. He seemed to regain a semblance of control as his demon form became a somewhat blurry version of the human visage he wore. Or maybe it only looked blurry to me; he *had* hit me pretty hard. I climbed to my feet and tried to decide which of the two fuzzy Nancy-boys to attack. That's when Thomas began to sing.

*Open your eyes. It's time to stop dreaming.
Truth is harsh in the dead of night,
How can you sleep, when the world is screaming?
Wake to the Dying of the Light.*

Now I can't say for certain what all that gibberish meant--I was always more of a Dr. Suess kind of rhymer myself--but it sure had one hell of an effect on Aeshma, not to mention the crowd.

The demon's form solidified--all forty glorious feet of him, still down on one knee in the center of the stage. The crowd screamed in panic, somehow suddenly aware of what was actually going on around it. Sheesh, you'd swear they'd never seen demons, vampires, werewolves, and trolls before by the way they carried on. Even the Goths trampled each other in their panic--the posers!

Charlie cleared a path toward the stage through the stampeding mob, which was only too happy to make a wide detour around the ogre. Come to think of it, I'm sure the sight of Josh, Leanne, and Drat stained a few shorts too. Josh ripped out the throat of another of the Dark Sidhe, spraying blood all over a preppie couple frozen in place at the horror around them. One of the Sidhe drew back his sword to run the couple through. Drat vaulted over the shapeshifter's back and brought his battle-axe down hard, splitting the Sidhe's skull.

"Tha...thank yo..you," the male said. He didn't even have the presence of mind to wipe the blood that covered his wire-rimmed glasses.

"No problem," Drat answered, then eyed the fellow's date up and down. "How much do youse want for da girl?" the troll asked, and winked. The poor fellow paled, the girl screamed, and Drat howled in laughter as the preppies finally found the courage to skedaddle.

The goblins spewed forth from the sewers and began to...tidy up, which only added to the panic. The music cut cleanly through the terrified screaming like the score from a bad slasher flick, while the damn strobe lights and smoke machine still ran full tilt. Talk about surreal.

Leanne joined me on stage suddenly as several druids pulled automatic weapons out from under their robes. "I'll take the three on the left, you take the four on the right," she said.

I stepped right as a hail of machine-pistol fire tore up the stage where I'd been standing; then I moved in and slapped the weapon from the druid's grasp. I grabbed him by the folds of his robes as one of the other three panicked at seeing how fast I moved and let loose with a Mac 10 or an Uzi or something. His comrade was still in the line of fire. The rounds tore into the druid, almost shredding him. I tossed the lifeless body at the three left standing. They went down in a tangled heap, and I was on them in an instant. I tore strips from their robes and bound their hands and feet with the makeshift restraints.

I probably should have killed them, but I couldn't bring myself to. In my eyes they were worse than the vampires and Sidhe and all the other races that had sided with Aeshma. These people were traitors--human. But cops don't take kindly to murder. Killing a human would bring down too much heat.

Aeshma roared and punched a hole the size of a wagon wheel through the stage. Smoke billowed up through the opening and curled around the demon as he tried to struggle to his feet again.

"Not so fast," I said, and launched myself at him. I vaulted off Aeshma's bent knee, which brought me up level with the demon's chest, and drove my sword up to the hilt through his sternum.

Aeshma toppled backward and slammed into the stage with a resounding *whump*. I tucked and rolled, coming to my feet just on the other side of him. He rolled to his side and managed to fight his way to a standing position. Just my luck, the damn demon's heart wasn't where it was supposed to be. Or maybe he didn't even have one. Either way, he wasn't dead yet, like he should have been.

Josh, Drat, and Charlie hit the stage with Sabrina close behind. Leanne finished off the last of the druids. It hadn't mattered to her that the enemy was human. Leanne's skin was the alabaster white of the vampire, her eyes burned bloodred, but there was something different about her this time. She didn't revel in the kill now, but did so as an act of necessity. She used the demon's abilities without relinquishing control. Alison had given her that strength.

Sabrina rushed to Alex, who stared about dully as if not comprehending her situation. The crucifix was too tall, and Sabrina reached for her daughter but came up short. "Get over here and help me," she shouted to Josh and Charlie.

Aeshma pulled the sword from his chest and tossed it at me. His image flickered suddenly, and he was standing in front of Alex. There was something hinky about Aeshma; he looked a little fuzzy around the edges. Josh drew his pistol and fired twice at the demon, but the rounds passed clean through and put out a floodlight mounted on the roof behind us. Aeshma was up to his old tricks again; he was nothing but an apparition without form or substance. He turned and spit fire in an arc that fell like napalm over the fleeing crowd.

Two or three of the local cops panicked and opened up on the demon. Too late, I realized what he was up to. I dove in front of Alex, but not before a half a dozen slugs passed through the illusion that was Aeshma and into the Innocent's body. Alex's head slumped forward as her sightless eyes stared down into those of her mother and father.

The music died.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I stood stunned as several more rounds tore into my body. I screamed--a raw, throat-tearing, rage-driven shriek. A wave of compressed air hit the officers who were still firing blindly at the demon. It hurtled them bodily from their feet and through the plate-glass window behind them. I don't know how badly I hurt them. I didn't care.

Aeshma's form flared for a moment, and then he was standing off to the left of the stage. The musicians had vanished. Sabrina was the first to recover. She grabbed Josh's pistol from where he'd tucked it at the small of his back and ran at the demon, firing madly. I don't know if the weapon would have normally hurt him, but it had little effect now.

Aeshma's form lost cohesion. Flesh and blood dissolved into an oily black smoke that reached out its tendrils toward Alex. They wrapped themselves about the dead girl, then entered the body through the eyes and mouth. Alex's corpse jerked spasmodically for a moment; then she raised her head. Her eyes were red, every part of them, and she grinned maniacally and tugged at the ropes binding her hands to the cross. They parted easily, and she dropped lithely to the floor, landing softly even though it was some fourteen feet down.

Josh staggered away from the abomination that was his daughter. He threw his head back and wailed at the moon, a cry wrought with both grief and rage that sent chills down my spine. Sabrina turned and aimed the pistol at Alex, but couldn't pull the trigger. She dropped the gun to her side as if without the strength to hold it up. Her face was ashen, and she swayed unsteadily on her feet until Charlie picked her up and cradled her in his arms like a small child. Drat clambered up onto the stage and joined Leanne by my side as Aeshma looked out at us through Alex's eyes.

The demon ran its hands indecently over its new body. "I think I'm going to like it here," Alex said, and licked her lips suggestively. She took a step toward me, then clutched at her head suddenly and fell to her knees. "Then again, maybe not."

Alex's flesh began to ripple as if something squiggly crawled about beneath her skin. Whatever it was, it sure as hell looked painful. I looked to Leanne and the others for an explanation, but they seemed as in the dark as I was. The demon tried to scream, but nothing came. It reached out to me with one hand, as if it knew it was dying and was determined to take me with it. Suddenly its eyes widened. "Oh, fu--" Alex's flesh rippled convulsively one last time, and became Tam-Lien.

"Perhaps now we can talk about sex?" she asked.

I blinked--several times. No one else acted any more intelligently though, so I didn't feel too bad.

"What happened?" Okay, so it wasn't the most brilliant question. I held out my hand and helped her to her feet.

"Aeshma is gone," Tam-Lien answered. She straightened out the short leather skirt Alex had been wearing.

"Gone where?"

"It is not possible for a demon to possess an Eternal; therefore he no longer exists."

I shook my head quickly from side to side to clear it, but it only made me dizzy. Hey, it works for Bear. "Alex isn't an Eternal," I said stupidly.

Tam-Lien tilted her head to the side as if trying to decide exactly how dense I was. "I traded places with Alex."

My thought process was still a bit muddled, but finally it hit me. "The bright flash of light!" The one I'd caught from the corner of my eye just before the Sidhe archer had nailed me from the rooftop. Tam-Lien had opened a portal and traded places with Alex. See--I'm not so stupid after all.

Tam-Lien nodded. "We are not so uncaring toward the humans as you might think. The Eternals would not stand idle while the demons claimed another Innocent. This course of action had been decided on from the beginning." Tam-Lien smiled. She was getting better at it too; it actually looked genuine. "Thomas is not the only one with the gift of prophecy."

Speak of the devil, and he makes an appearance. Thomas climbed up onto the stage.

"So we went through all *this* for nothing." I wondered if one Eternal could kill another.

"No," Thomas answered for her. "You set the necessary events in motion that made this outcome possible. Aeshma had to believe the struggle was real--and that he was actually possessing Alex's body."

"Besides," Tam-Lien added, "you *do* insist on doing things the hard way."

Charlie put Sabrina down, and she ran to Josh.

"Where's Alex? Where's our daughter?" the shapeshifter pleaded. He was as lost by the recent revelations as I was, and had just now realized that Alex might still be alive.

Tam-Lien turned toward Josh and his wife. "She is safe at your home. The dog and the two ghosts watch over her."

I'd *wondered* where those three had got to.

Sabrina buried her head in Josh's shoulder and sobbed quietly. The shapeshifter squeezed his eyes tightly shut, but the tears came nevertheless. Charlie was blubbering like an idiot. Even Drat looked all misty-eyed, and his big, honking eyes take a lot of misting.

"You still have the keys to the Jeep," I told Josh. "Why don't you all head home and check on Alex? I'll meet you there."

Josh nodded, and slowly guided his wife down the stairs and into the deserted streets. Charlie looked at me for a moment, then shrugged and followed with Thomas close on his heels.

Leanne kissed me on the cheek. "See you there," she said, then followed the rest of the crew.

"Hey, wait up!" Drat called, and scrambled after them. "Do youse tink we could stop for pizza on da way?"

I turned back toward Tam-Lien. She *looked* normal enough, just awkward. Maybe it was because she stood too straight, or moved so deliberately. "Was this the reason why you wanted to learn to be human?"

"Yes. I would have never convinced Aeshma that I was Alex otherwise." She looked me up and down for a moment, studying me. "I have found that I *enjoy* being human." She said the word "enjoy" as if it were a concept she had been unfamiliar with until recently. "Can we talk about sex now?"

To be honest, I was relieved that she still wanted to learn to be human. It gave me hope for my own humanity.

I sighed. "Do you mind if I check on Alex first?"

"No."

I hoped she meant, "No, I don't mind." I have no idea what the etiquette is when suddenly transporting from one location to another, so I waved goodbye like a big doofus and then materialized just outside Alex's apartment.

I took a deep breath, then knocked on the door. There was a mad scampering sound, like nails on tile, and Bear stuck his head through the wall and barked in that dead-dog way of his. A second later I heard the sound of the bolt being drawn back, and Alex opened the door. She stood there dressed in her Mickey Mouse nightie.

"Hey, Bumper. Come on in. We were just playing Monopoly."

Like I said, *way* too nonchalant.

She threw her arms about me suddenly in a big hug, and whispered in my ear. "Thank you. I told you everything would turn out." Then she turned and scampered back into the apartment. I closed the door behind me as she sat down in the middle of the floor, where Dad and Grandpa played Monopoly. The two ghosts were arguing over the rules.

Alex looked up at me and grinned. "They fought over who got to be the thimble, too--until Bear ate it."

I laughed. Leave it to Bear to keep peace in the family.

The rest of the gang arrived about ten minutes later. It was a tearful reunion to say the least. Leanne was Alison now, and she sat on the couch beside me holding my hand as we watched Josh and Sabrina hover about their daughter while they all played Monopoly. Drat cheated shamelessly.

Thomas came and sat beside me and Alison. "You did good work, for a rookie," he said.

Up until that moment I was feeling pretty down, and suddenly understood why. "Actually, all I did was stumble around and screw up. If it weren't for Tam-Lien, Aeshma would have won."

Thomas smiled. "We can't all be generals," he said. "Sometimes we're just soldiers--pawns in the greater scheme of things. You were one *hell* of a pawn. It couldn't have worked without you."

I can't say as that made me feel a whole lot better. "So you knew all about this from the beginning."

Thomas's eyes opened wide in shock. "Not a chance. I told you, when you Eternals are about, the future becomes decidedly unclear. Too many variables." He shrugged. "I was just as big a pawn as you were."

Now *that* made me feel better.

I turned to look at Alex when suddenly a brilliant white light radiated from her, so bright that I had to turn away. In an instant it was gone.

"What the hell was that?"

"Alex is an Innocent," Thomas said, "and when they look like that they don't stay innocent for long."

I finally understood what they meant by that. The kid was a beacon to any dark creepy crawlie. I slumped back into the couch with Alison's head on my shoulder. Suddenly, eternity felt like forever.

So, that's it. You can believe my little tale or not. I just had to get it all down while it was still clear in my head. Alison convinced me to make these tapes. She said they could be of historical importance someday. Thomas is already writing the ballad, but there's not a lot of call for those these days in Darkside. But then you never know. Wait long enough and anything comes back in style. Look at disco.

Anyway, I have to go and have *the* talk with Tam-Lien. Josh has threatened to bring along a video camera for that one. So, until next time, be well, live well.

End

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