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A Hidden Magic

TOP SHELF

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Chapter One

Paul MacAllister climbed back to his feet, careful of his balance in the dim, trash-strewn lot. He wiped a blob of thick, viscous trollkin-gunk off his forehead and grimaced at the sour stink. Trollkins usually weren't a serious problem for a Sentinel team, but they'd never run into fourteen of them before, and they'd taken a few hits.

"Anyone hurt besides Cal?" he called, trying to peer through the uneven light. Downtown San Jose was neither huge nor incredibly tall as cities went, but the buildings bordering three sides of the lot were each at least five stories tall, which was enough to keep most of the sodium-orange streetlights from penetrating, and to bounce his voice back in a way that made the spot between his shoulder blades itch.

A series of negatives came back to him. Manny, kneeling next to the elderly street lady who'd been the trollkins' target, called back. "She's pretty terrified, but she's not too badly hurt. I think they wrenched one of her shoulders, but she's got three layers of heavy coats and the bites just got wool."

That was one good thing about December; even in the Bay Area it got cold enough that the street people wrapped up as well as they could. It wasn't much armor, but it'd kept the lady from losing a few hunks of flesh before Aubrey had finished his spell and reduced the trollkins to splatters of goop.

Which was a bit more thorough than Aubrey usually got when it came to dealing with hostile fey; most of the time he was satisfied with banishing them back Underhill. But one of them had hurled a pipe that laid all six-feet-four of Cal out on the ground, draped across a pile of rubble that had probably given him a painful set of bruises on top of a concussion from the head injury. No one messed up a master mage's apprentice without getting it back, turbo-charged.

Manny had a shoulder under the lady's arm -- Paul assumed it was her good one -- and was helping her over toward the corner of the lot where her shopping cart full of belongings lay overturned. Manny would help her, then send her on her way. He'd driven an ambulance when he was younger, and Paul knew he wouldn't let the lady leave on her own if she really needed medical care. The street people tended to be fiercely independent, though; she likely wouldn't accept help unless the injury was crippling, which it didn't seem to be.

Everyone else seemed to be mostly in one piece, so Paul headed over to Cal and Aubrey and asked, "Are we clear? I'd really love to get home and into a hot shower."

Aubrey nodded without looking up from where his hands hovered over Cal's blood-darkened scalp. "Manny and I are fine. Cal's short a few brain cells right now, but we can hope this'll teach him how to dodge."

Cal took a swipe at Aubrey with one huge hand, but missed by so much it would've been funny if the guy hadn't been only half there and probably in some serious pain.

"I hope so too," Paul said. "He's too damn big to keep carrying him home."

"*One other time in th'last year!*" Cal protested, all mumbly and slurred.

Paul smirked and leaned down to whisper, "You'll remember the eight other times when you feel better."

"Stop that!" Aubrey pointed one finger at Paul like a gun and fired off a spark of magic; it was barely enough to sting, but Paul backed off and stifled a laugh, with both hands in the air in surrender.

"He's confused enough as it is," Aubrey scolded. "No more teasing until his head's stopped ringing."

"I promise, I promise," Paul said with a put-on grouch, before he turned serious again. "How long 'til we can get out of here? Or is it bad enough that he needs an ambulance?"

"I can take care of it, but I want to get him home."

Paul nodded just as Manny rejoined the group and said, "She's on her way." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and Paul could see the old woman pushing her cart down the sidewalk into the darkness. "She didn't want any help, and she's not badly hurt enough that I'd want to insist. A few bruises and--"

Manny cut himself off in mid-word. Paul saw his eyes go blank the way they always did when he was seeing something, and before Manny got a word out, Paul knew they were in trouble again.

When Manny blurted, "Salamanders," Paul froze for a terrified moment before he pulled his head back together and started giving orders while running logistics through his mind.

"Manny, give me the location, then you go back with Cal and take care of him. Aubrey, send them back to the restaurant, or your place, whichever you prefer, then you and I'll take care of this one."

Manny and Aubrey started to protest at once, but Paul waved them silent. "You're needed for medical right now more than anything else," he told Manny. He turned a hard look on Aubrey and said, "Manny will take care of Cal -- you can check on him later and give him whatever boost you want. But you know what salamanders can do to a neighborhood, and you also know you're the only one who can deal with them."

Cal broke in with, "Home. I can walk, it's less than a mile. You two go." Aubrey started to protest again, but Cal hauled himself to his feet and talked right over his master's protests. "No,

you don't have time. It'll take you ten minutes to set up a Port spell. Salamanders won't give you that much time. We'll be fine. I'll lean on Manny. Go."

Aubrey scowled, but nodded. He gave his much larger apprentice a hug and some quick, intense whispering that was probably a nag about taking care of himself, then stepped over to Paul.

Manny said, "Rosegarden, near the Rosicrucian, white house."

"Thanks," Paul said, and waved him off. With salamanders, he doubted he'd have much trouble finding the place once they were in the right neighborhood.

With Cal and Manny heading up the street, Aubrey cast a simple Don't-Look in front of himself and Paul, using both his forefingers to draw glowing gold lines which hung in the air, while chanting low, precise syllables. The pattern he drew formed the spell, while the vocalization gathered power and channeled it into the spell structure. When he was done, the scrolling network wrapped itself around them. They weren't actually invisible, but anyone without the magesight needed to spot the magic itself would feel a need to look elsewhere.

Paul got a secure grip on Aubrey with both arms, activated a spell of his own, and took off into the cold December air.

The Rosegarden neighborhood where the Rosicrucians had a museum complex was west and a little south of where they were downtown. Paul stayed low, flying through the streets a story or two up for as long as he could, then skimmed the rooftops. The Don't-Look would protect them to a point, but he didn't want to take any chances, especially since it was the first time in almost four years that they'd had two separate incursions from Underhill one right after the other. It was enough of a coincidence to make Paul suspect deliberate enemy action, and he didn't want to be a big, drifting target if it turned out there was something watching for them, aiming a painful spell.

Then there was the fact that his flying range was measured in foot-pounds. Best case scenario, it wasn't very far, and carrying even a skinny guy like Aubrey would cut his flight range almost in half. When he felt that dizzy-itchy feeling that meant he needed to find a perch within a few seconds, being a thousand feet up would qualify as Very Bad.

"You'll need to find the summoner while I'm banishing the salamanders and dealing with the fire," Aubrey yelled into Paul's ear. They were flying fast enough that the wind nearly blew his words away, even at a shout.

Paul nodded. "Any ideas?"

"Higher fey, or a human mage. If it's just a caster, they'll probably be a pile of charred bones by now."

Another nod, and Paul tried to remember the area. If a human mage was working on a Port spell, Paul wouldn't have much trouble finding him or her; the magic would shine like a searchlight. If the mage had summoned and run, he could be blocks away by the time they got there, or miles

with a car or bike or something. Most firebugs wanted to stick around and watch, though, which meant someplace safe but with a good view. With salamanders, Paul would want to be at least a block away, but then he wasn't crazy enough to summon them in the first place.

And there was always the chance that it wasn't just a firebug. If the salamanders were linked to the trollkins, whoever was behind it might have an actual plan, which meant they could be anywhere. Paul hoped that wherever they were, it wasn't somewhere prepping for a third attack.

Rosicrucian Park was just a couple of blocks away. Paul descended to almost ground level and swooped through the Egyptian architecture, barely clearing the supple papyrus fronds as he passed over the gardens. The heart of the Rosegarden area was on the far side of the Rosicrucian compound, and from what Manny had said, Paul was pretty sure the salamanders were in the neighborhood somewhere. Any smoke would be pretty much invisible in the dark, but he searched back and forth for the glow of flames, or of magic.

He'd just spotted a diffuse light in a tree, which didn't flicker like fire and didn't seem to be quite right for an electric light, either ornamental or security oriented, when Aubrey shouted, "There!"

Paul looked where Aubrey was pointing, off to the south. One of the neat, older houses had bright lights flickering at about half the windows. Rest time was over.

He swooped over and deposited Aubrey onto the house's driveway just as his balance vanished for a moment and his arms and legs itched. He settled down right behind Aubrey and was stable on his feet when the lifting sensation of flight vanished.

"Perfect timing," he said. "You good here?"

"Fine. Go." Aubrey was drawing in the air with both hands, his forefingers scribing blue and white lines in an interlaced, V-shaped pattern, while his thumbs, and occasionally a pinkie, added dots and fillips most other mages couldn't manage and would never try.

Paul turned and jogged off to the northwest where he'd seen the glowing tree.

The neighborhood was still quiet, the other houses dark. A couple had porch lights on, and a faint flicker through an upstairs window across the street had nothing magic about it; it was probably someone watching TV or playing a computer game. Soon enough the crackle of flames and smell of smoke would drag everyone out of bed.

Magesight showed Paul a pale glow up in a sturdy oak which must have been there long before any of the houses had been built. He hopped someone's backyard fence and crept closer across the scruffy lawn.

There was a treehouse up in the spreading branches, and a slender, man-shaped figure was perched on the platform, crafting magic in swirling handfuls. No human could manage that. Aubrey'd been right; it was one of the fey.

Most mages expected magical attacks and counters, so Paul announced his presence by grabbing a large river stone out of a planter and throwing it with plain muscle power at the fey. He aimed for the head, but the stone slammed into the elf's shoulder. Close enough. It disrupted whatever he'd been casting, probably another summoning, and the blowback from all the energy he'd been wielding slammed him against the low, wooden railing of the treehouse and over the edge.

Paul knew better than to assume an elf would land on his head; sure enough, the fey grabbed the edge of the platform and did a neat flip in mid-air, landing on his feet facing Paul in a swirl of spun-silk hair and lush velvet, already grabbing for more magic.

Paul distracted him with a grapefruit-sized fireball to the face, and the elf's magic fizzled again and staggered him. Paul leaped forward, pulling a long, sturdy screwdriver out of his jacket on the way. He stabbed the elf in the gut with its sharpened tip and drove in the foot-long shaft.

The elf shouted in pain and cursed Paul in an ancient language, then threw a glob of raw magical energy at him. It was crude and completely uncontrolled, but effective as a last-ditch defense, especially when you didn't care about style points. Paul spun around, blinded and yelling, and rubbed his hands hard across his burning eyes. He smelled the stink of burning hair and batted at his head, running his hands through it, trying to smother any flames and dislodge any sparks and generally swat out anything that might be burning, expecting the elf to launch another attack at him any second. Instead, he heard the hollow pop of air rushing into a newly empty space and knew the elf was gone. With any luck, he'd ducked back Underhill to tend his own wounds.

Cold iron still worked against the fey; even steel caused burning pain on contact; a wound made with it would be a long time healing and wouldn't respond to magical aid. That was one elf who'd be thinking twice before messing around in the mortal world for a while. With some luck, by the time he scraped up his courage to return, Paul would be long dead and gone and it'd be someone else's problem.

Paul blinked hard and looked around with both normal sight and magesight. Nothing was burning and the elf hadn't left any presents, but a light flicked on in one of the bedrooms. The home owners had finally woken up, and someone was likely to come poking around in the backyard soon. Paul didn't feel like running into either a cop or a scared resident waving a gun, so he dashed back to the fence, vaulted over, and jogged back toward the house where he'd left Aubrey.

The house -- which was indeed white, just as Manny'd said -- was in full flame. There were clusters of people, mostly in nightclothes and coats, standing around on the sidewalks and in front yards, shivering and pointing and talking. Paul could hear fire sirens in the distance, but Aubrey was nowhere near.

The fire was purely mundane now; all the magical flame had been drawn out of it. There was no sign of the salamander either, but the house was going to be a total loss. The only thing that would've drawn Aubrey away from something like that was another salamander nearby. Paul jogged on past the burning house, turning to gawk like everyone else, trying to blend in as well as he could.

That was never very well. No matter what else he did, he stood out in his leather jacket and several pounds of rings, chains, bracelets, charms and piercings. Neighbors turned to stare as he passed, and he wished he still had the Don't-Look on him. At least one person would give his description to the fire investigators as a Suspicious Stranger, but that couldn't be helped. At least there wouldn't be any evidence of accelerant, not with a salamander setting the fire, so hopefully it'd be written off as a weird accident and no one with a badge would circulate his description. That was always awkward.

He jogged another two blocks before he thought to turn his magesight down onto the pavement, but when he finally thought of it he had to laugh. A line of gold-glowing footprints ran up the sidewalk, across the street from where he was, but at least heading in the right direction. Without Manny, whose truesight could locate any of them and at least point a searcher in the right direction, they needed some other way of finding one another. Aubrey'd thought of that before heading off after whatever he'd been chasing.

Paul sped up, and the footsteps led him around a corner and another block down, to a small house of light stucco, with a carefully planted front yard full of roses and a wooden patio cover visible over the backyard fence. The wooden structure was consumed in fire, and the old-fashioned wooden shingles on the roof were trimmed in flame.

A tiny lizard made of shimmering air and light scuttled about on the roof, its long tongue flicking over the shingles and spreading magic-fed fire wherever it touched. Each clawed foot burned a footprint wherever the creature stepped. The elf who'd called it hadn't bothered to direct it into the house this time, which was lucky. The only reason the roof hadn't gone up completely yet was the rain the previous night; the wooden shingles were probably still full of moisture. Not enough to stop a salamander's fire, not even close, but it'd slowed it down long enough for Aubrey to find it.

Aubrey'd cast the same spell he'd been working on when Paul had last seen him -- the blue and white V-shaped pattern was complete and the open end of the V was tilted toward the salamander on the roof. Aubrey was drawing the magic out of the creature and all the flames immediately around it. When the salamander got weak enough, it'd flee back Underhill on its own, and without the magic, the salamander's fire was just ordinary flame, dousable with water.

Paul ran up the front walk of the house and pounded on the door, then rang the bell half a dozen times. "Hey!" he yelled. "Wake up! Fire!" Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed the garden hose from its coil next to the garage door and turned it on full blast, aiming it at the house. Taking care of the magic would still leave plenty of ordinary fire, and wetting down the house would help.

The front door opened, and someone came staggering out, yelling, "What the hell--!" in an angry rasp. Then he -- no, she, it was an older woman -- gasped out a curse and ducked back inside. Paul hoped she was calling 911; the patio cover was still burning merrily while he wetted down the house itself, and who knew where it'd spread in a few more minutes.

"Aubrey? Company coming."

"I'm aware, thank you." Aubrey scowled, and Paul saw the lines of the spell swell as he poured more power into it, trying to hurry the stubborn salamander along.

A minute or so later, the creature staggered, finally seeming to notice Aubrey. It looked right at him, drew its head back, and spat flame before popping back Under the Hill.

Paul, who was standing right next to Aubrey, yelped and instinctively turned the hose on the gout of flame while turning his head away. The stream of water hissed into steam right before the fire splattered across Aubrey and sprayed onto Paul.

"Fuckshitgoddammit!" Paul let go of the hose and dropped down to roll in the damp grass. That wouldn't help either, but it was reflex.

Aubrey yelled, "Stay still!" and Paul forced himself to freeze. He could smell hair burning again, and leather, and denim, with an added grassy note of... well, grass. Paul tried to count his heartbeats, but they were banging away like a drummer doing a flashy solo, and an enameled chain around his right wrist tingled in alarm, telling him that magic was being worked on him.

Right, I knew that, thanks, please hurry.

Finally, Aubrey called, "There, roll again!" and Paul rolled, squirming across the lawn, trying to put the fire out.

He felt hands smacking him on his shoulders and the back of his head, rubbing down his arms and then whacking him on the butt. Aubrey manhandled him over onto his back and smirked down at him. "There. Crispy around the edges, but not too bad."

Paul glared up at him and noticed that Aubrey's light brown curls were unsinged and his silk shirt was still pristine. Paul muttered, "Bastard," and climbed to his feet. He grabbed the hose and went back to working on the roof, which was nearly out now that it was just normal fire eating at the soaked wood. The old woman, fully dressed this time in slacks and a blouse, and babbling into a cell phone, came bustling out the door with a small dog on a leash clutched in her other hand.

"--the lanai is almost gone, but some man is wetting down the roof -- thank you so much! -- but tell them to hurry! It could catch the Goldmans' lanai, it goes right up next to mine, and they have a shingle roof too! I'm going to go wake them up right now, tell them to hurry!"

Paul sorted out all the "thems" and decided that a fire truck was on its way. Just as well. He wanted to go home, take a cool shower, and dip into his supply of burn ointment. The lady was still babbling and the dog was yapping and snarling at him and his bed was calling.

He heard the howl of a fire truck approaching and dropped the hose. With the pros on the way, his garden hose wouldn't make any real difference, and he didn't want to be caught up in

interviews and investigations. He had more important things to do, like try to figure out what the hell was going on, because multiple attacks like that *had* to have been coordinated for some purpose. Whatever that was, he needed to know, and he was sure he wasn't going to like the answer.

Chapter Two

Rory Ellison tried to look confident as he strode down the busy sidewalk, but he suspected that his repeated glancing down at the folded paper in his hand and then all around him, hunting for building numbers and street signs, probably made it pretty clear that he had no clue where he was. Being lost in unfamiliar surroundings was never good, and the cracked pavement and the occasional piece of broken furniture left out on the curbs clued him in that he wasn't exactly in the high-rent district. He wished he were back in his own neighborhood, where the Association ensured that everything was neat and tidy, with a spare orderliness which, while hideously boring, was at least familiar. Familiarity and a lack of clutter at least meant he was less likely to... see things.

A corner was coming up just a few buildings down. He kept his eyes firmly out of shadows, away from shop windows jammed with goods and advertisements and from chatting groups of people in outlandish (colorful, creative, interesting) clothes. His brain was too likely to twist such fertile material, inventing scowling monsters and smirking creatures. He knew they weren't real, knew and believed, really he did, but he'd been suffering from mild psychotic episodes -- *seeing* things, *hearing* things -- since childhood, and he'd never been able to fully convince himself to simply ignore them. He'd even gone so far a time or two as to produce bruises and cuts on himself when his fanciful hobgoblins had roughed him up.

He had medication, of course, although it wasn't terribly effective. None of the many meds he'd tried in all the years he'd been in treatment had worked very well, and most of the time he simply avoided environments which tended to over-stimulate his imagination. The current prescription had the added feature of enhancing his photosensitivity to the point where normal sunlight hurt his eyes and burned his skin. Which was why he'd skipped his dose that morning, since he knew he'd be walking outside in the sun, even if it was the weak sun of December in California.

The corner, finally. And a major one, or at least major enough to have a set of stoplights, so it would have a street sign, right? Rory looked around and finally saw a tilted, half-rusted sign by a gas station on the farthest corner. Of course. He squinted at it, trying to read the distorted lettering. Sixth and... St. John. Or maybe St. James? It looked like St. John, which meant he needed to turn right.

He'd set out nearly two hours earlier with a combination of Mapquest instructions, a bus map and a fair degree of confidence, but Mapquest wasn't that great when one relied on public transit. He'd gotten off the sixty-six at First and Santa Clara and headed east up Santa Clara, but a chunk of it right in his path was completely torn up that day and a huge guy wearing an orange plastic vest (and who was obviously a professional wrestler on weekends) had pointed him south at a detour that led through a shabby, old neighborhood. Rory was sure he needed to go north at some point, but he wasn't about to argue with the wrestler in the vest, so he turned south.

A few blocks later, turning around and going home was looking more and more attractive, and he probably would've done just that if he had any faith in his ability to actually *get* home from there.

His directions were vague from that point. He'd expected to keep going up Santa Clara, and his next landmark was a medical center, which had looked pretty large on the map. He'd figured there was no way he could miss it; any idiot could walk straight until they saw a huge, sprawling hospital or whatever, and then turn left, right? Except he was at least a block away from the medical center and surrounded by houses and old trees, and didn't know where to turn. He was pretty sure it was a street number somewhere up in the teens, but didn't know exactly how far.

Rory kept his feet moving out of fuzzy determination. He wanted to turn north, but he didn't know how far the construction on Santa Clara went, and he didn't want to have to backtrack again if he ran into more barriers. And he was sure that if he zig-zagged from one street to another, he'd end up turned around and even more lost than he was, so he kept going straight.

He'd walked what felt like a couple of miles since getting off the bus. The weather was cool, but the walking had warmed him up under his heavy pants and jacket, and he was hot and sweaty and tired. Looking forward, he could see that the street he was on curved to the right another block up, and there were trees past that. Maybe a park where he could rest? Not too far out of his way, since it was visible, and then he could turn left on whatever cross-street that was up there because he couldn't keep following the curving street south, in the completely wrong direction.

A step, and another step, and another, and on. The cross-street turned out to be Seventeenth, which was definitely far enough and might even be too far. But there *were* trees up ahead, a curving swath of them, just past a couple more houses. Rory kept going and stepped into the shade. A few more steps and he heard water, and there was an old iron bench up on the edge of the riverbank. A river ran right through the middle of the city.

Well, yes, he'd seen the Guadalupe River winding across the maps. Rory'd never actually *seen* it, though; he lived in south San Jose, where the river didn't go, and he'd never been in that part of downtown before.

It wasn't very big, as rivers went, but it was shady and peaceful, and the sound of the rushing water smoothed out the occasional traffic noises. Rory still had to get to the restaurant before Manny started to think he'd been stood up, but he could sit on a bench and watch the river for a couple of minutes and catch his breath. Maybe staring at the crude, laser-printed map some more, while not having to worry about watching where he was walking, would bring enlightenment.

He brushed dust and leaves off the bench with one hand, then settled down onto it and relaxed, his head tilted back and his eyes closed. Birds -- he could hear birds, too, along with the water. It was really a wonderful spot.

I should just find a phone and call Manny, Rory thought. He's probably waiting at the restaurant, but if I described this place, I'll bet he could figure out where the heck I am and give me directions. Or I could just tell him I can't make it today.

Although, if I flake out the first time he ever invited me anywhere, he'll probably just write me off. Although he really seemed enthused to have me meet his friends, and it sounds like they have

*a lot of fun. And what would I do, anyway, if he got angry or offended -- just never go back to the Grove? No way. Manny's place is the only indie bookstore within a couple of miles of home, and they have **all** the SF and fantasy, unlike the chain stores.*

*Of course, Dr. Curtis would say that's an excellent choice, that I **shouldn't** ever go there again. Reading all that fantasy and SF just feeds my imagination, and I don't need that. But I tried dumping it, for almost a year, and it didn't help at all. So if staying away from fantasy books doesn't help, then reading them doesn't hurt. And it's not like that's all I read, really.*

He really should call Manny, though.

Rory wished, not for the first time, that he had a cell phone. He'd resisted getting one, though, to the extent of losing the four his mother had bought for him. He loved his mother and he knew she loved him, but she tended to hover as much as he let her, and then a little more just because, and then a lot more whenever she got particularly worried about him. And unfortunately she worried about her "disturbed" son quite a lot. Whenever he had a cell phone, she called him every couple of hours and sometimes more often, just to check on him and make sure he was all right. He couldn't stand it, and he'd lost, destroyed or thrown away several hundred dollars' worth of electronics in his desperate need for some peace and independence.

The rushing of the water and the squawk-twitter of the birds were soothing, almost hypnotic. The breeze blowing across the small river was cool; it felt good on his overheated skin, and it smelled like green. It was a wonderful place to rest, but it was time to move. He opened his eyes and tried to stand up... and couldn't.

He tried again with no better luck. He was stuck to the bench.

"Damn! Aren't they supposed to put up signs when they paint?" Resigned to being a total mess, he put his hand down on the seat for leverage, but it didn't help. And then he couldn't move his hand. "What the--? It couldn't have dried that fast!"

Then he remembered he'd brushed leaves off the bench before sitting; it hadn't been wet then, or sticky with anything. He tugged at his hand, but it was stuck tight and pulling just hurt.

"Got a problem, sweet thing?" A screechy, smarmy-sounding voice squawked directly into his ear, and Rory whipped his head around while jerking as far away as he could. Hanging off the back of the bench and grinning at him with far too many teeth was a scrawny creature the size of a small middle-schooler, with scraggly hair and round, yellow eyes. The backwards baseball cap, multiple pendants, baggy basketball shirt, and shorts that dragged nearly to his ankles said "juvenile hoodlum," but the pitted, gray-green skin and the drooping points on the ears had Rory in a panicked freeze.

It's not real. It's not, I'm imagining it, it's not real and it can't hurt me unless I think it can unless I want it to it's not....

"Umm, this one smells tasty!" cooed another voice. Rory forced himself to look. It (she?) was a grayish purple and had the longest tongue he'd ever seen outside of a cartoon. Her hungry expression wasn't at all funny, though; it was pure menace, and the rough, pointed tongue-tip that rasped its way up his cheek burned like acid.

A pair of gray-orange hands appeared from behind him, one wrapping itself around his throat while the other slid around his forehead and braced. He couldn't move, and there were more of them, whatever they were, scooting and slithering around him, climbing up onto the bench and perching in his lap, hanging off his arms, rubbing and pinching and *tasting*. He couldn't move and his vision was blurring and darkening as they pressed in around him, tugging at his clothes, touching and licking any skin they uncovered. He couldn't move, and all he could do was open his mouth to scream, but a long, dripping tongue slid inside and he couldn't make a sound.

Paul shifted in his seat, resting one arm along the back of the booth, his long fingers tapping on the vinyl upholstery. He didn't look at his watch, but then he always knew what time it was anyway.

The corner booth at the back of Sun and Season, next to the empty fireplace, was currently almost full, with four men sprawled around the curving bench seat. On the short side of the table was an empty chair the guy they were waiting for -- a friend of Manny's, Robby or Rory or something like that -- might or might not take. It depended on whether Cal, who owned the restaurant and would be making breakfast for them, decided to use the outside seat (from which it was easier to bounce up and down) or to keep his spot on one end of the bench next to Aubrey.

It was starting to look like the logistics of seating one more person would be purely theoretical, though. If Manny's friend didn't show up pretty soon, Paul for one was going to suggest they just write him off and eat.

"You're sure he had the right address?" he asked, doing his best to keep the impatience out of his voice. Manny didn't always pay a lot of attention to the here and now, with the result that mundanities such as addresses occasionally got lost under the seat cushions of his life.

Manny glared and said, "Yeah, he had the right address. I checked it twice before giving it to him. He doesn't drive, remember? The bus probably broke down or something."

"Why don't you check up on him anyway? That way if he's halfway to Gilroy we can at least get some food."

"You're all heart, Paul. Really, you are." Manny leaned back into the padded seat and relaxed, letting his eyes drift half-closed, Seeking. Aubrey was sitting against the other wall next to Cal, and watched Manny closely while leaning up to whisper something into Cal's ear. Cal watched too, nodding. Paul was sure Aubrey was pointing out some obscure issue of magical theory that had no practical application at all, or at least which no normal spellslinger would be able to use in any practical way. Aubrey wasn't normal, though, and he was determined his apprentice

absorb every bit of knowledge, both theory and practice, which could be stuffed into his handsome head.

Paul, as team leader and chief strategist and tactician, was more interested in the practicalities.

Manny's gift was sight. Not just magesight, which allowed him to see magic and the creatures who lived in and upon it, but truesight as well, and the seeking that allowed truesight to be actually useful. He used the latter to look for his friend, searching for him through the magical ether, or however it worked. He'd described it as sniffing for proper colors, which made about as much sense to Paul as listening for a flavor, but gifts worked differently for everyone, and he'd long since learned not to worry about how others perceived, well, anything.

Paul sighed. He was a writer -- he needed a flexible job where he set his own hours, as did most members of his Sentinel team -- but he was never burdened with an excess of free time, not ever, and especially not over the last few days since the trollkins and salamanders, during which they'd been drawn out to handle an exhausting number of incidents. Manny'd insisted that this Rory person, a regular customer at the bookstore Manny owned, had at least magesight and needed the Magic 101 lecture, and probably some training. Moreso if he were gifted with anything else, which Manny was sure he was, although Manny hadn't been able to say what made him think so, or what his friend's gift might be. Paul was perfectly willing to assist, that being one of the things Sentinels were for, after all, but they'd been waiting around for almost half an hour now, and he wasn't happy.

"Got him -- fuck!" Manny jerked back into motion, scrambling out of the booth. He leaned to the center of the table where he could be heard by the rest of the team but not any of the other patrons around them, and whispered, "Goblins! By the river! Come on!"

Paul opened his mouth, then shut it again and just moved, Aubrey and Cal close behind him. They headed upstairs, walking as quickly as they could without startling every other restaurant patron with a sudden stampede. Manny described the spot he'd seen for Aubrey until the master mage nodded recognition and began drawing a Port spell. Manny grabbed his crowbar out of a handy trash can where it lived between missions, then stood with the rest of them and waited.

Paul always hated that part; within a few minutes, his jaw had started to ache from the tension of not badgering Aubrey to *hurry*, blast it.

Rory struggled instinctively at first, fighting the gripping fingers and burning tongues, but then he forced himself to relax. It's just an episode, he reminded himself. They're creations of a misfiring brain. They're not there, they're not real, they can't hurt you, relax....

He closed his eyes and let his muscles go slack, one set at a time as his doctor had taught him, while regulating his breathing. He pulled his awareness inward and focused on feeling the air rushing in through his nose and down to his lungs, filling them. He felt his heart beating,

focusing his perceptions down into his own body until each lub-dub sent out a shockwave he could feel shuddering through his entire torso.

Suddenly, a nasal voice screeched into his ear, "You can't hide from us!" and the creature straddling his lap sank her teeth into his shoulder. Rory screamed and jerked, trying to throw her off, but he could barely move between the skinny arms clutching at him and whatever it was that held him to the bench.

Nothing! There was nothing holding him but his own imaginings. He fought to relax and focus, but "nothing" yanked his head back by the hair and plunged her caustic tongue back into his throat, so deep he thought she'd taste the coffee he'd had on the way to the bus stop. He gagged, and his stomach tried to expel the irritant, but he couldn't move and she wouldn't stop and he tasted bile and couldn't help gagging and then it was much easier to relax because he felt himself fading and slowing and everything went fuzzy and smeary and then dark.

Chapter Three

Paul plunged through the hole in the air as soon as Aubrey stepped back and nodded. He took off from hardwood and landed on packed dirt, near a particular curving bank on the Guadalupe River downtown, less than a mile from the restaurant. Paul came out with a Don't-Look on him, which Cal had cast on the group while Aubrey worked on the Port. A quick look around spotted both the mob of goblins feeding at a bench a dozen yards away, and the fact that there was no one else nearby. Excellent -- he wouldn't have to waste time or energy distracting onlookers or hiding any fireworks.

He stepped clear, his focus now on the goblins, and the others immediately followed one by one. They formed up on Paul and ran toward the goblin mob, yelling and waving cold iron weapons, hoping to at least startle the things off their victim.

The goblins swarmed like starving hyenas around a corpse, which was an unfortunate mental image just then. He heard Manny call, "Alive, but fading!" the tension grating in his voice.

Paul pulled his screwdriver out of a pocket inside his jacket and moved forward with Cal right behind him. Aubrey was prepping a banishing spell, but they needed to get the vermin off of Manny's friend *now*, not two minutes from now, and cold iron would get their attention nicely.

Cal moved up next to him, his favorite physical weapons against the fey -- a pair of heavy wrenches -- already in hand. Manny, on his other side, had his crowbar in both hands; pure iron, it was particularly effective.

Paul descended on the gang of goblins, the other two flanking him, and a moment later they laid into the creatures, stabbing and bashing and yanking them off their victim.

Magic sprayed like blood wherever their weapons hit. The goblins screeched and cursed and turned on them in a furious pack. Teeth snapped, claws slashed and curses stung, but each swing or thrust of a cold iron weapon sent a goblin shrieking and scrambling out of range, away from the bench and the pale, limp body draped across it.

Manny and Cal herded the screaming, limping goblins away while Paul stowed his screwdriver and laid a hand on Rory's shoulder. He was still alive, although a glance at his wristwatch -- which did rather more than tell the time -- told Paul that he'd been drained down to the last wisps of magic, even for a mortal. Another minute or two and the goblins would have killed him as surely a pack of vampires draining his blood.

Paul heard Aubrey chanting and then the hollow BANG! of air rushing into the empty spaces where the goblins had been. Any number of things might happen next, but his team was more than competent, and he kept his attention on Manny's friend. One of Paul's many rings warmed

slightly, and the young man slumped forward into his arms, the charm that had trapped him on the bench dispelled.

Paul sat down on the bench, then shifted the unconscious man around so he was leaning back against Paul's shoulder, with one arm across his chest so the young man wouldn't fall over. A glance to the left showed Aubrey working on another port spell to get them out of there, with Cal standing over him, guarding his back.

Manny came trotting up, did a quick check of his friend's breathing and pulse with a few touches, then reached over and tilted Paul's wrist so Manny could read the face of his watch.

"Shit, that was close. If you'd been all sweet and patient and shit, he'd have been dead by the time we got here. I promise I'll never trash on you for being a crotchety old bastard again."

Paul gave him a mock glare from the vantage of his three-and-a-half years of decrepitude over Manny. "Not ever?"

Manny gave him a look and snorted. "I was gonna give you a few months, but for pushing your luck, you're down to two weeks."

"I'll take it," Paul shot back. "And I'll bet you can't keep it in for that long anyway."

"You're probably right, but I'll give it a shot."

"Close enough."

They kept a lookout in different directions while ragging back and forth. There was a slight chance the goblins would reappear to harry their retreat, just out of sheer malice if not vengeance at being driven from their meal. If they brought more powerful reinforcements, they could be a problem, but that was unlikely. Goblins were the street gangs of the fey, small and weak, but making up in numbers what they couldn't manage with individual strength, and it was rare that any of the greater fey allied with them. Paul wasn't really expecting anything, and sure enough, Aubrey got the Port up without anything else popping in to harass them.

Paul lifted Manny's friend up in a fireman's carry over one shoulder and hauled him through the Port. Magic tingled through his body as he traversed the hole in space, and then he was back in the restaurant. Paul strode through an arch to a service area, used back when the upstairs room had been a banquet room for rent, then on through to Cal's bare and mostly-unused apartment and into the bedroom. He set the guy down on the bed, then stepped away.

Aubrey took his place, and Manny, who'd stopped to grab a large canvas duffel, moved up to the opposite side of the bed.

Manny's friend looked to be in his early thirties. He was about Aubrey's height, five-nine or so, slender but wiry, with reddish blond hair and fair skin, and the kind of face that made you think he looked like a nice guy. Good enough looking but not gorgeous, not harsh, no scowl lines. An

average, decent guy, at least on the surface. Paul had met plenty of people (and other intelligent beings), though, who looked perfectly pleasant while watching for an opening to stab you in the liver or fry your head off.

Manny got a BP cuff on his friend's arm, then checked his other vitals, while Aubrey sat cross-legged on the bed and drew a glyph Paul could recognize in his sleep in the air over their patient. It was a diagnostic spell which checked him over magically the way Manny was checking physically. Paul had stared up at it glowing over his own head more often than he liked to think about.

He waited a couple of minutes, then asked, "Well?"

Manny, who'd been an EMT and driven an ambulance for half a dozen years before he quit and bought a bookstore, held up one hand and tilted it back and forth. "He's stable, but not in good shape. His vitals are low -- heart, respiration, BP, temperature, everything. They got almost everything."

Aubrey nodded, still not opening his eyes. Paul knew most of his attention, and the current center of his awareness, was somewhere inside Rory. "I stopped up some leaks, but I can't keep it up for long. He needs a transfer."

Paul nodded and sat next to Aubrey, who shifted to let him lie down. He settled onto the bed and got as comfortable as he could.

"Paul." Manny's voice was harsh, but it was an old argument.

"I have more *to spare* than any of you," he said, staring until Manny rolled his eyes and looked away.

Aubrey ignored the byplay, clearly knowing how it would end, and withdrew from their patient, then began a new spell. He chanted under his breath, his voice low but his pronunciation exact. Both hands gestured in the air between Rory and Paul, and magesight showed that he was drawing another pattern with his two index fingers.

A heavy gold chain that had been welded around Paul's throat years ago warmed slightly as he watched. The pattern was precise, although not symmetrical, composed of two continuous lines that formed the main structure of the spell. Occasionally a pinky would flash out, adding a dot or fillip; that, and the fact that Aubrey was ad-libbing, marked him as a master mage. Most mages memorized set spells, practicing over and over to coordinate the pattern and perfect the chant, and few could use two hands at once. Aubrey had a strong talent, which gave him an affinity for the flow and form of magic. He was older than he seemed by several generations, but even considering his true age, he had few peers.

The completed pattern flared and then settled into a steady glow. Aubrey sat back, breathing deeply while maintaining his concentration. Paul felt himself relaxing slowly, growing tired as

magic -- the basic life-force -- trickled from himself to the all-but-dead man on the bed. He shifted and settled and then slid into unconsciousness.

Rory came awake with a start and spasmed into a fetal position, curling protectively around his midsection as spikes of pain shot through his skull and memories of a dying nightmare danced through his mind.

He slowly realized that he was no longer in pain and relaxed slightly, uncurling enough to look around. The mattress of the bed he was on was unfamiliar, not as firm as his own, and he saw that was because he wasn't *on* his own bed. The spread beneath his cheek was a dark blue flannel, soft with years of use and washing, the stitches snagged here and there. His own bed was covered with a nearly new quilt, a hastily-stitched Asian knockoff of a traditional American patchwork pattern in harmonious prints his mother had bought for him at some bed and bath store.

He looked farther, trying to figure out where he was. He remembered... seeing things. He'd had another episode, and it'd been a bad one. Hasty, peering glances revealed nothing unusual -- or rather, nothing familiar but nothing impossible. No little creatures, no too-strange people, nothing conjured by his mind. A battered walnut nightstand, cluttered with books and a lamp and a coffee mug and a pile of change, all covered in a thin layer of dust, sat next to the bed on his side. Next to it, in the corner between it and the wall, was a pile of dirty laundry. Or at least crumpled laundry -- he'd had a roommate in college who'd dumped his clean clothes on the floor like that.

A closet with sliding doors took up most of the wall next to the bed, with a closed door in the far corner. Perfectly normal, all of it.

He turned over and then jerked back with a startled yelp.

There was a strange man on the bed with him!

On the bed, not *in* the bed -- calm down! He forced himself to relax and studied his bedmate. He'd never seen him before, he was sure. He was tall, taller than Rory himself, with soft, dark hair flopped over a broad forehead, but the face was angular and the nose was... unfortunate.

How he dressed didn't help -- the man wore enough jewelry to stock a flea market booth, with rings on every finger; six piercings in the ear Rory could see; multiple bracelets, including bangles, chains, and a charm bracelet; at least a dozen necklaces and pendants, one of which was what Rory could only think of as a "charm necklace," with little thingies attached to it every inch or so along its length; a mass of pins like the kind people traded at the Olympics arrayed along the lapels of his leather jacket; and a silver belt buckle the size of Rory's palm, inlaid with a soaring gull in lapis.

This guy is really a fashion emergency, Rory thought with a smirk. Not that I'm intensely hip or cool or anything, but jeez!

As soon as he thought it, he was instantly ashamed.

Whatever had happened earlier, it was bad, and this guy took care of me or helped or... something. I could've woken up lying in the dirt by the river in the middle of being mugged or something, but here I am on this guy's bed, safe and comfortable, and the first thing I do is think nasty thoughts about how he dresses. Nice show of appreciation.

Rory rolled over as carefully as he could, not wanting to wake up his bedmate. He found his shoes on the floor next to the bed and slipped them on. Standing up made the room spin, and he leaned against the wall until his balance returned, then headed for the door.

He stepped out of the room, watching over his shoulder to make sure the other man was still asleep, then turned around and stopped. The living room was as strange as the bedroom, but at least he knew one of the guys in it.

"Hey, Rory." Manny strode across the room and gave him a quick hug. "You probably feel pretty wrung-out, still. And hungry, I'll bet."

Now that he thought about it, Rory was suddenly starving; they'd planned to have breakfast together, and all he'd had earlier was coffee. The sharp, gnawing ache in his stomach demanded food, any food, right now. "Umm, yeah, I am actually. Is there anything...?" He felt himself blushing a bit and added, "I'm sorry, I know I'm being rude." He looked over Manny's shoulder at the other person in the room, a cute college-age guy sprawled on a comfortable looking corduroy sofa, and smiled as well as he could manage. It wasn't a very good job, but he hoped they'd give him points for the attempt.

"Don't worry about it, man," Manny said. "We understand -- you've just been through the wringer and you need to get fueled up. That's Aubrey on the couch. Let's get started filling you up and you can come be polite in a few."

Manny took his arm and tugged him through the living room toward a tiny kitchen-like area to one side. Manny shoved a bottle of Gatorade into his hand and said, "Drink it. All of it," before turning to rummage through the mini-fridge.

The Gatorade had come out of a partial case sitting on top of the fridge. It wasn't cold, but right then Rory didn't care. He was surprised to find himself with his head thrown back sucking up the last drops and wishing he had more. Manny took the empty bottle out of his hand and put a sandwich into it. Rory took a bite without even looking and discovered that it was roast beef on a wheat roll, with cheddar, lettuce, mayonnaise and mustard, which was amazingly like the kind of sandwich he made himself for lunch almost every day. He sent Manny a curious look and got a wink in return.

He found himself being steered back into the living room, sandwich in hand. Manny said, "Sit," and indicated the end of the couch opposite Aubrey. "I know you've got a lot of questions, so you eat and we'll talk." Rory nodded and sat, chewing on another bite of sandwich. Manny dragged a chair closer to the couch and sat, facing Rory.

"This is my friend Cal's place. It's up over the restaurant where you were going to meet us. He owns the restaurant and had to run back down and check on something. The other guy on the bed is Paul. He should be awake in... about an hour?" He glanced over at Aubrey, who nodded.

"I'm really sorry," Rory murmured, looking down at the half-eaten sandwich. "I never know when I'm going to have an attack -- an episode, I mean. I guess... you guys came looking for me? I must've been running later than I thought, but they tore up Santa Clara, and I couldn't follow the directions, so--"

"No, Rory," Manny said, interrupting him gently. "You didn't 'have' an attack. You *were* attacked. There were goblins swarming all over you. If we'd been a minute later you'd have been dead."

"How did you--? No." Rory shook his head. He could hear that he was raising his voice, but he couldn't stop, they *had* to understand. "No, see, I see things, I imagine things and my brain believes they're real. There's some kind of miswiring in my brain and sometimes my imagination gets hooked in directly to the areas that process sensory data and--"

"No, Rory. They're real. It's all real." Manny leaned forward and laid a comforting hand on Rory's knee, but he jerked away and jumped to his feet.

"It is *not* real, not any of it, and I don't appreciate you making fun of me!" Rory snarled. "I'm *psychotic!*"

"And you've been going to doctors since you were, what? Fifteen? Twelve?" A deep, penetrating voice came over Rory's shoulder and surrounded him, piercing to the heart of him, shredding all his defenses and laying him bare. He spun around and saw the man from the bed standing behind him, leaning in the doorway with his arms crossed. "And they've tried therapy and medication and none of it worked and you've been hiding from the world, trying not to 'stimulate' yourself too much, hoping it'll all just go away."

Rory stared, his mouth half open. The man was a homely mass of mismatched features while sleeping, but when he was awake, when he was... was properly inhabiting his face, it all flowed together into a strong, harsh presence. And that voice....

The man took a step forward and raised an eyebrow, looking down that patrician nose at him. "When I was young, the treatments favored by the religious fanatic my parents took me to were electric shock and ice water baths. I went into hypothermia four times that I can recall. None of that helped either. When Aubrey was young, they put him into manacles and chained him to a wall, and rich people paid money to come stare at him and poke him with sticks. Also an ineffective treatment, by the way."

Another step forward. "More? One of the goblins we pulled off you had purple-gray skin, rather bilious green eyes, a black denim miniskirt and a notch in her left ear. Another was grayish-brown and was wearing a chrome Volkswagen emblem as a pendant. A dirty orange one was wearing electric purple tights and platform sneakers -- sadly out of style -- and an oversize black T-shirt that said 'Tolkien Sucks.' Do you remember any of them?"

Rory could only stare, shaking his head. It was impossible -- there was no way anyone else could have known what the creatures he'd conjured up had looked like. It was just... it couldn't--

"I see you do. So unless you believe in telepathy and think I'm reading your mind, how do you explain that I saw the same things you did? And if you *do* believe in telepathy then why not in magic?" The deep voice softened. "We've all been in the same position, seeing things no one else saw. Manny's the only gifted person I know who completely avoided being tortured by some ignorant quack, and only because his parents thought he was lying to get attention. But we know how you feel -- you've been huddling in a safe and secure if somewhat boring nest, trying to hide from what you are and what you see. It doesn't work, though. You can't hide, because they'll come find you. Especially now that they have your scent, or your flavor rather, you can't just ignore them; they won't let you."

Rory was still shaking his head. His fists were clenched, and he realized that he'd dropped his sandwich at some point, but that didn't matter because these people, this man, was trying to convince him that all his delusions were *real*, that all the treatments and the meds and the exercises and everything had been for nothing and that he should just give up, surrender to his psychoses and... and he just couldn't! But how had he known? *How?* None of it made sense and he felt himself falling and he hit something warm and solid and strong arms came around him, holding him safe, and then there was nothing.

Chapter Four

Paul caught Rory and almost fell to the floor himself. Manny jumped up and grabbed them, taking most of Rory's weight so they could all get to the bedroom. Aubrey was already humming and tracing designs in the air above them, and the "I'm fine" which had automatically come to Paul's lips died unspoken. No sense lying to your doctor when he's a master mage with a good diagnostic spell.

"Why do all the cute guys faint at your feet?" Manny asked in a teasing voice, while easing Paul down onto the side of the bed.

"Must be why you've never done it," Paul observed, the retort coming out of habit more than intent. He relaxed back against the uncomfortable headboard and closed his eyes, willing the world to cease its spinning around him.

"Bastard. He's fine." Manny gave him a smack upside the head, luckily not hard enough to require revenge, then walked off toward the kitchen.

Aubrey, who still looked annoyingly neat even after the run-in with the goblins, studied both of them through the glowing pattern that hung in the air, frowning at something, then nodding at something else.

"More sleep'll be fine," said Aubrey, tilting his head toward Rory. "Especially now that he has some food and liquid and electrolytes in him, another nap is just what he needs. This one, though," he added, with a jerk of his head toward Paul, "needs food and liquid and electrolytes, *and* more sleep. Or rest, at least."

Manny came back, right on cue, with a sandwich and an open bottle of Gatorade. Paul found his hands full of consumables and both sets of eyes glaring down at him. He sighed as one greatly put-upon before taking a bite -- salami and provolone -- but he knew getting up had been foolish. Rory's moving around had roused him, however; one didn't last long in this world, or these worlds, by sleeping too soundly. The raised voices a few minutes later had drawn him onto his feet and out of the room.

He'd recognized Rory's near-hysterical confusion; they'd all gone through it to one extent or another, and getting through it, past it, was the most difficult phase of learning to cope with one's gifts. Simply believing in them, in a world where one knew, was absolutely *sure*, that they were fantasy, make-believe, fairy tales, required an immense and painfully difficult shift in one's world-view. There was more than one mage Paul had known in years past who was now in an institution because of an inability to take this first, most difficult hurdle.

He finished his Gatorade and had just set the bottle down on the floor next to the sofa when a faint ding-dong sounded in one ear. He was back on his feet and out of the bedroom before any of his keepers could think of protesting.

In the outer room beyond the living area, the small upstairs banquet room which hadn't seen a banquet in several years, there was a birdcage. Specifically, it was a large, Victorian-style parrot cage. Inside was a small, green parrot.

"Hey, Paul!" called the parrot in a grating, raucous voice. "Can I hang out with you guys for a while? It's gettin' scary down under!"

Paul sighed and forced himself to relax. The doorbell usually meant Azzy -- who called himself "Azriel" after the angel of death out of mild delusions of grandeur -- or occasionally another equally harmless visitor from Under the Hill, but once or twice something less amiable had come calling, which was why the ornate scrollwork around the base of the cage formed wards strong enough to contain a lesser demon. "Of course, Azzy. Why not?"

He opened the wire-frame door -- which could only be opened from the outside, unless of course whatever was inside had enough raw power to just tear through the wards -- and Azzy hopped up into the doorway and then down onto the polished hardwood table. As it passed beyond the reach of the illusion spell Cal had cast on the cage when he and Aubrey had first set it up, the parrot-seeming faded and Azzy's true form emerged, something of a cross between a lizard and a chipmunk, complete with dorsal stripes and perky ears. And scales.

"Thanks, man! Hey, you gonna finish that?"

Paul smirked at the pixie and handed it the rest of his sandwich.

The higher fey tried to maintain a certain dignity, which included a denial of the more common bodily functions, but pixies-- which came in a wide variety of shapes, including but definitely not restricted to the Barbie-doll-with-butterfly-wings so beloved of children's books -- loved to eat material food, even though it was magic they needed to survive.

It was rather like feeding a stray -- once you started, it was tough to stop. Folks who left a piece of bread and a bowl of milk out in the garden every night for generations thought they were the only ones who had fairies. Not quite. Actually, they were the ones who'd attracted the little freeloaders' attention, while everyone else sensibly ignored them.

Of course, they could come in handy, especially the talkative ones.

"Thanks, Paul! Hey, His Maj is in a real snit! There was goblin parts *flying*, ya know?" Azzy wolfed down his sandwich and took the glass of milk Manny handed him. "Thanks, Manny! You're a peach!" His eyes were locked onto the second sandwich Manny was pressing into Paul's hand, however.

"Don't even think it, moocher." Manny waved a hand in front of the pixie's face, breaking his line of sight. "Paul needs to eat, and he's going to finish the whole thing. Isn't he?"

The last question was said over his shoulder to Paul, who smirked, but nodded and took a bite. Listening was better than talking anyway, when one was dealing with pixies.

"Don't worry. Cal had a bunch of pastries left over from breakfast. Behave and I'll see how many I can snatch for you," Manny promised, while scritchng Azzy between the shoulder blades with one finger.

"Whoa! Love you too, man!" Azzy chugged his milk, despite the glass being nearly as big as he was, and went on babbling. "So the goblins are all stirred up, right, and they start beating up on the little guys and everyone else is laughing, except when His Maj is around 'cause then they're all hiding, and we're hiding too 'cause of the goblins, right, so I figured I'd bug out and come hang with you guys 'cause at least you're not ripping folks's arms off or anything and I was kinda hungry anyway so--"

Paul listened with half an ear, ready to start paying attention again if Azzy mentioned anything interesting or useful, but just then he was trying to work out what had King Pelamin in such a snit.

It was too much of a coincidence to think he'd punished the goblins -- even if Azzy was exaggerating and he hadn't actually killed them -- just for going after Rory. That was what goblins *did* in the mortal world. Neither did it make sense that he was quite that upset because they'd fallen afoul of a Sentinel team and been banished back down under; that happened fairly regularly after all. But something *was* strange about that particular attack, something that was gnawing at the corner of his mind. Something he should have noticed about it.

He glared down at his sandwich and took another bite. If he hadn't been out for so long and then running to catch up, he'd have had it. It was right there....

Cal came in lugging a huge cardboard carton, which he plopped down on the ten-round banquet table in the center of the room. "Hey, there's my favorite garbage disposal!" he said, grinning at Azzy. "All yours, Az. Go for it!"

Azzy gave an ecstatic buzz and leaped a good twenty body-lengths from where he was into the center of the carton; crumbs of pastry and globs of filling began to spew out of the box in a messy fountain.

Paul raised an eyebrow at Cal, who shrugged. "Adobe had an all-hands with free food this morning and no one told me. I had leftovers. The Food Bank won't take anything that's been opened, so I'd just be tossing it anyway."

"So you can serve it to your customers, but the charity won't accept it. Lovely. I'll keep that in mind."

Before Cal could retort, a pair of slender arms wrapped around his waist. "Good timing," said Aubrey. "There's something I want you to see."

Cal clamped his arms in place and turned his head to grab a kiss before following Aubrey, who was leading him back toward Cal's old bedroom. Given that the only person who could be occupying it just then was their guest, Paul figured he wasn't just dragging Cal off for a quick lay, so curiosity sent him trailing along behind.

Aubrey positioned Cal at the foot of the bed with his hands on Cal's shoulders, looking around him down at Rory. "Look," he whispered. "Tell me what you see."

Cal looked, with the slightly unfocused gaze Paul recognized as someone still learning to control their magesight, then whispered back, "He's back up to normal. That's fast. You only gave him half of Paul's, right?"

Aubrey nodded. "That's right. Keep looking. What else?"

Cal frowned and stared for nearly a minute. He noticed Paul standing in the doorway and studied him for a few seconds, then looked back at Rory, then back to Paul. "He's recovering faster than Paul is."

"That's right. What else?"

Wondering what Aubrey was getting at, Paul looked. The heavy gold chain at his throat warmed slightly, and he saw Rory's body surrounded in a pulsing, golden cloud. He looked harder and saw that Rory's magic was still replenishing itself. He focused until he could see each pulse and swirl. It was... slightly faster than his own, but--

"It's not slowing down!" Cal forgot to keep his voice down and Rory twitched, then shifted, then sank back into sleep.

Pieces began to fit together in Paul's mind. He looked up into Cal's bright, confused eyes and said, "He's a Blaze."

Rory woke up from one of his more creative dreams and looked around at... the room he remembered from his dream.

Wait, he thought, that doesn't make any sense. He closed his eyes hard, took a deep breath in and let it out, then opened them again.

Still there. He looked to his right, but that side of the bed was empty. This time. It was empty this time. Last time there'd been a man lying there, asleep. Only he'd woken up and he'd described the things Rory had seen during his last episode, as though he'd seen them too, but that was impossible. It *was* impossible, wasn't it? Of course it was. Except he *had*, unless Rory had imagined that, too.

That was it -- that whole last... however-long was a dream. That conversation with Manny and meeting those other guys and that whole... thing. That must be it.

Satisfied, or at least feeling a bit better, Rory sat up and swung his legs off the bed. The familiar bed, with the blue flannel spread, next to a walnut nightstand he'd swear he'd seen before. Down to the lamp, the books, the change, the dust. That one quarter with a peach on it, the Canadian dime with a sailboat.

Maybe he was still asleep? Or still caught up in an episode? Maybe he'd dreamed the earlier wake-up and his mind was confabulating to make it match what he saw now. Maybe--

"Rory?" Manny's head poked in through the door. Rory noticed that he was wearing the same dark blue T-shirt and faded gray jeans he'd been wearing before. "You feeling better?" Manny took a step into the room, the low tones of his voice echoing the concern in his face.

"Umm, yeah. Yes, I think so." Actually, Rory didn't think anything of the sort, but he wasn't ready to start blathering about his problems to someone who was only recently a friend. He stood up and followed Manny out to the living room, where... Aubrey? Aubrey, was sitting on the corduroy sofa just like before, but this time with another dark-haired man, a tall and muscular guy Rory didn't recognize. He didn't know if that was a good sign or not.

"Come sit with me," said Aubrey, scooting back and forcing the strange man to move down to the corner of the sofa. "This is Cal, by the way."

Cal said, "Hi," and gave him a grin and a wave. Aubrey patted the cushion next to him, and Rory stepped over and lowered himself carefully down. He wasn't sure he wanted to stay. In fact, he was pretty damn sure he just wanted to get out of there and go home, but he couldn't think of a way of saying so politely.

"Right there, face me," Aubrey murmured. He tugged Rory around until they were facing one another, then his eyes unfocused and he began to hum a strange melody while... drawing lines in the air with his fingers. Glowing lines of light, like the trails left when you waved a sparkler in the dark, only they *stayed*, Rory could see them.

He started to rise, but a firm hand on his shoulder stopped him, and Manny whispered, "It's all right. It won't hurt. He just wants to see how you're doing."

That made no sense whatsoever. Rory said, "I'm fine," and tried to stand up again, with no more success than before.

A deep, sardonic voice said, "Never try to lie to a master mage with a good diagnostic spell." Rory's head jerked up, and he saw the man from the bed, Paul, standing in a doorway across the room, arms crossed and one eyebrow raised.

Rory said, "But I..." and then trailed off, dangling between several impossible things he wanted to say. Mage? Spell? Lying? Well, all right, he *was* lying, but really he just wanted to get out, go home, and take his meds.

"Hey!" hollered a raucous voice. A little... something, that had been sitting on Paul's shoulder, bounced across the room like a turbo-charged grasshopper and landed in Rory's lap. "Oh, man, this is sweet! I could get high on just the *fumes!*" The little... thing, lizard-squirrel-stripey-thing, cuddled against Rory's middle and breathed in like a stoner with a bong.

"That's Azzy," said Manny. He reached over Rory's shoulder and scratched the... Azzy-thing on the top of his scaly head. "He's a pixie."

"Which means he has no manners, if you hadn't already figured that out for yourself," Paul added, as he crossed the room toward them.

Rory just sat, tense and shaking, staring at the stripey little thing that was sitting -- no, that *wasn't* sitting on his lap. He was still hallucinating, and the fact that others around him seemed to see and acknowledge it was just another symptom; his mind was confabulating, inventing details to support the initial delusion. He didn't care about manners anymore. He needed his meds, right away.

He shook off Manny's hand and stood up, spilling the imaginary pixie onto the floor. "I have to go home. I'm sorry but I have to leave. I need my medication."

Manny said, "Rory--" but Aubrey shook his head. He was staring at Rory through a pattern of glowing lines, which Rory was carefully not looking at.

"He's recovered," said Aubrey. "If he wants to go, there's no reason why he can't." He looked at Rory and said, "You can use some more rest and a good dinner, but you'll be fine."

"Umm, thanks." Rory turned away and headed for the bedroom. His arms were pressed tight against his sides and his head was ducked down between his shoulders. He felt like a turtle, but couldn't help it. He was close to panic and could only think of leaving, withdrawing, getting away. He felt like if he didn't keep himself pulled in, *pressed* inward, he'd fly apart.

He grabbed his shoes and sat on the bed to pull them on.

These people are crazy. Or at least really weird. Or maybe they're not, maybe it's all me, but I can't tell and I need to get home and get my meds and relax, take a nap, everything will be fine when I wake up and I should never have come out without taking my meds, that's what sunglasses are for and sunscreen and this was really stupid I can't believe I did that....

His increasingly hysterical rambling was cut off when Paul slipped into the room.

"I'd like to take you home," he said in that low, gentle voice that'd rocked Rory back earlier. In his dream.. "Manny would, but he has to get back to the store."

"Uhh, thanks, but--"

Paul cut him off again. "You were unconscious when you arrived," he reminded Rory. "Are you sure you could even *get* home from here? Or rather, how long would it take you? Come on, we'll take my car, and you can get home and take your pills and get comfortable."

"Umm, thanks." Rory winced and felt himself blushing. He's going to think you're some kind of idiot, he scolded himself. Say something coherent! "I really appreciate it. You're right, I don't know if I could make it by myself, I just have to go, I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Paul waved away his apologies. "If you're ready then we can go."

Rory nodded, and they headed out. He paused just long enough to say goodbye to Aubrey and Manny. Cal was back downstairs in the kitchen, Manny said, while he followed them down and through the restaurant -- a sort of retro-eclectic place with a lot of do-dads scattered around and warm, savory smells wafting out of the kitchen -- to the parking lot. There, he gave Rory a wave and Paul a hug and headed off to work in an old blue Volvo Rory remembered seeing parked in front of the Grove. He followed Paul to a mundane-looking silver Honda which didn't seem at all to fit his over-the-top image.

Paul caught his bemused stare while tossing a bulky canvas briefcase into the back seat, and gave him a wry smile in return. "The gas mileage is over the top and it wears like a tank. Some time when I win the lottery I'll consider something spectacular in red that gets gallons per mile instead of miles per gallon. Right now I prefer to keep the bills down."

Rory grinned back at him and slid into the passenger seat. "Makes sense. I'd probably get something like this if I had a car."

Paul nodded and pulled out of the parking lot. His next question was about the location of Rory's house rather than to ask him why he didn't have a car, a question Rory had answered so often -- here in California where the babies came home from the hospitals with tiny learners' permits clutched in their fists -- that he'd considered typing up his answer and carrying copies. Paul was either too polite to pry, or, more likely from what Rory recalled earlier, he'd simply figured out that someone on anti-psychotics that only worked when they felt like it wasn't the best person to have behind a wheel. Either way, he was grateful not to have to explain to yet another incredulous driver that no, he didn't drive, and yes, it was possible to get along perfectly well, even in California, without a car.

It was... restful. He felt himself relaxing slightly.

Which was, of course, when the scaly little squirrel-thing chose that moment to pop up out of the back seat and squawk, "Are we there yet?!"

Chapter Five

Paul thought, *Fuck*, just as Rory yelped and jerked away from Azzy, thumping against the door on the passenger side. Paul managed to stay calm, on the outside at least, and said, "There, now aren't you glad I'm the one driving?"

"What?! Uhh, yeah, I mean, but--" Rory stopped babbling through what appeared to be sheer force of will and settled back into the seat. He closed his eyes and took some deep breaths.

Azzy bounced out of the back seat and into Rory's lap. He snuggled down with an expression of bliss on his stubby face. "Aww, man, this is the life! Can I just live with you guys?"

Rory squeaked. Paul glanced over at him for a second and saw that he was sitting there stiff and trembling, all signs of relaxation gone, with his hands held out to either side of his knees, away from where the pixie was lolling in his lap.

Paul sighed. He thought about tossing Azzy into the back, but he knew he'd just hop back up with Rory within a few minutes at most, and probably a few seconds. Pixies had a notoriously short memory for things that didn't make sense to them, and staying away from a Blaze as hot as Rory wouldn't make any sense to him whatsoever. Instead he said, "Look at it this way -- when you get home and take your medication, you'll be able to tell when it starts working because Azzy will disappear."

Rory was silent for a moment, then said, "You're making fun of me." The low voice, sad but resigned, made Paul wince.

"No, I'm really not." He sighed again, then said, "I know there's nothing I can say that will convince you Azzy is real. Or the goblins that attacked you. Or the magic I know you saw at the restaurant. This is all too fantastic, and you already have an explanation that fits your view of the world much better than accepting the reality of what you see, so I'm not going to try to change your mind. But whether you accept the cause of it or not, the fact remains that you *are* in danger, and what I *can* do is stay with you and look out for you, at least for a while."

Privately, Paul hoped he'd be able to stay with Rory until he was able to acknowledge what was really going on. Trying to protect Rory from a distance would be awkward at best and not nearly as effective as doing so from nearby. He accelerated onto the Bayshore freeway heading south, then glanced over at his passenger, wishing for a moment that he were a telepath and could tell what Rory was thinking.

Rory seemed to be struggling with himself, a variety of expressions flashing across his face -- impatience, frustration, curiosity, resignation -- but then he asked, "Why don't you tell me what *you* think is happening?"

Paul shifted over to the fast lane while thinking of where to start. Finally he said, "Every living thing produces a certain amount of magical energy. Animals more than plants, and greater magical energy also goes with greater intelligence. Among humans, energy production varies, although there's an average that looks like a bell curve with its hump shifted to the left.

"Magical creatures, like goblins and pixies, feed on magical energy. They metabolize it to survive the way we use calories. They eat physical food for building and repairs -- the ones that have physical bodies, at least -- but they use magic as energy, to keep things running. Some are composed completely of magic and they don't eat real food at all.

"Magic is the spark of life, and without it nothing can live, even in the physical world where it's *only* the stuff of life and not used as energy." Paul looked quickly over at Rory, but he was just staring out the window, his face blank.

Paul continued, "There are predators and prey among the fey, and some of the predators, including goblins, prey on mortals. They don't actually eat you, like in the fairy tales; they consume your magic. Most mortals don't have very much, but we need what we have.

"You have more than most. In fact, you have a really amazing amount of magic. That's why you were swarmed. Your average person doesn't have enough magical energy to interest more than one goblin at a time, or maybe two if they're not very hungry. But you're what's called a Blaze -- you glow with magic, and now that they know about you, now that they have your scent, they'll be back. You're a banquet in one convenient package, and they'll always be drawn back."

Paul concentrated on the traffic for a while, casting an occasional glance at Rory but otherwise leaving him be. He was staring out the far window at the freeway wall and the cars going by, or rather, Paul suspected, he was wandering in his own thoughts and the window just happened to be where his eyes were pointing. By the time they turned down Rory's street and started scanning house numbers, Rory was still silent and staring, but Paul noticed he was idly stroking Azzy in his lap. Paul stifled a smirk and went back to hunting for Rory's place.

The car stopped, and Rory saw they were in front of his house, a neat, beige stucco with a clipped lawn, an olive tree and a patch of ivy, the same landscaping the developer had put in when the place was built. He realized he was petting the lizard-squirrel thing in his lap and jerked his hand away.

"Umm, thanks for the ride, I really appreciate it." Rory opened the door and got out, ignoring the lizard-squirrel thing when it fell off his vanishing lap into the gutter. It squeaked and sprang into the air like a superball to land on his shoulder. Rory yelped and jerked around, but since he was standing next to the car there was nowhere to go and he ended up bent over the top with a thump, his head in his arms.

He heard Paul say, "Azzy, get over here." The thing that wasn't really sitting on Rory's shoulder whined, and he felt tiny fingers digging into his ear and clinging to his hair. Paul said, "Right now, or I'll send you back downstairs."

Rory heard another whine right in his ear, then a plasticky crackling sound. He looked up in time to see the scaly little hallucination spring over the top of the car, land in Paul's arms, snag a half-unwrapped Milky Way bar out of Paul's hand and start scarfing. Paul looked up at him and said, "When dealing with pixies, it always helps to have bribes. Come on, that won't last long."

Rory tried one more time to shake his new friends -- no, *friend*, singular -- by saying, "Thanks for the ride, really," while walking quickly across the lawn and heading up toward his door. He heard Paul's door slam, then another door open and another slam a couple of seconds after, then footsteps following him up the driveway. Apparently the man wasn't good at taking hints.

He got to the front door and turned around, determined to stop hinting. Paul was coming up the walk with the canvas briefcase in one hand and the squirrel-lizard thing that wasn't really there sitting on his shoulder, licking the candy bar wrapper.

"So, I'll see you around, I'm sure. It was good meeting you." Rory managed a smile and held out his hand to shake.

Paul stopped and looked at him for a moment, head cocked to one side, then said, "All right, direct is good. We can do direct.

"The fact is that I don't believe you're safe, and I'm going to keep an eye on you, at least for a while. You can let me come in and we can be comfortable. I brought my laptop," and he held up the canvas case in illustration, "and plan to get some work done. You can do whatever you usually do, and we won't bother each other hardly at all. I'll try to keep Azzy from pestering you, but I'm not a miracle worker, and the best I can promise is a good effort." He turned and gave the creature on his shoulder a glare tinged with fondness, then looked back at Rory. "Or, if you refuse to let me in, I'll go back to my car and watch your place from there. It's not as safe, but I'll manage. I can even get some work done if I sit in the passenger side with the seat all the way back. Azzy's going to want to be with you, though, that's why he came, and I'm not going to be able to stop him without hurting him, which I won't do because he's harmless, so you'll be on your own with him. It's up to you, though."

Rory just stared at Paul. He'd never before had a guest who wouldn't leave. Just *wouldn't*, even when he'd made it as clear as he could that he wanted to be by himself.

Later. I'll figure this out later. I need my meds, and then I'll deal with the rest of it later. All the talk about him being in danger he discounted, dismissing it from his mind; that was all part of the illusions, the hallucinations spawned in his miswired brain, and Paul probably hadn't even said it, not really. He turned and fished his keys out of his pants pocket, opened the door and headed for the kitchen. He heard Paul's footsteps in the entry and then the door close and the deadbolt click into place.

He moved down the hall and through the family room to the kitchen where he kept his meds on the counter, next to a glass of water. One of these and two of the new ones and... that should do it, once they kicked in. He took a deep breath and let it out, leaning against the counter on his forearms with his eyes closed, trying to just relax for a moment.

Just relax and let it work, clear your mind, and when you open your eyes again the little squirrel-thing won't be there anymore. Hell, maybe even Paul'll be gone.

Right at the moment, that sounded very restful.

Much later that evening, Paul still wasn't gone. He not only wasn't gone, he'd somehow taken over the beige leather sofa in the living room, tapping away on his laptop while mumbling to himself about muddled females and clues dropping like anvils out of the sky. He'd pulled a creased and battered paperback dictionary out of his briefcase, and a small book on Georgian architecture, a slightly larger one, lavishly illustrated from what Rory could tell, about eighteenth and nineteenth century furniture, and two books of historical costume, plus stacks and packets and folders of photocopied pages from who-knew-what other references, all of which were scattered around on the sofa, the chrome and glass coffee table, and the Berber carpet under both of them.

Rory had agreed that Paul could stay "for a while." He really couldn't remember how that had happened, and he wasn't too sure what "a while" meant, either.

He'd handled the situation by ignoring it through the afternoon and evening, hiding out in his office -- also on the first floor, but on the other end of the house -- with his computer and his own work. Sorting through three-year-old corporate tax returns might not be the most exciting job, but it occupied his mind and let him work at home. He was even able to ignore the little squirrelizard thing, which had sniffed around his shelves and cupboards for a while and finally settled in for a nap on his printer, curled up in the depression where the paper came out on top.

When it came time to print, he wasn't sure whether he should ignore it or try to chase it away. He decided to save printing for morning.

Some time during the evening, Paul had ordered Chinese using the menu magnetted to Rory's fridge. He'd paid when the food arrived and cleaned up when they were done. Rory really couldn't complain about his guest's behavior, which just made him more annoyed over having nothing specific to be annoyed about.

It was after eleven, though, and Rory was ready to go to bed, but he wasn't sure what to do about his guest. Guest? Could you even call someone a guest when they hadn't been invited? On the other hand, Paul seemed concerned about his safety and was trying to help. On the third hand (Rory didn't have three hands but he kept going anyway) Paul was worried that goblins would come and get him, which wasn't exactly the sort of danger you should have to thank someone for protecting you from. Sort of like setting out traps for rabid Easter bunnies. But on the fourth

hand, *Paul* seemed serious about believing there was a danger, so he meant well even if he was crazy. It was actually kind of sweet.

Rory decided to stop at four hands. He called down the stairs, telling Paul to pick a spare room, that all the beds were made and there were towels in the hall bathroom, then went to bed. Maybe it'd all be better in the morning.

Except that it wasn't morning when Rory woke up. It was still dark out when a scratching from the balcony doors dragged him out of sleep. A masculine silhouette rippled on the sheer curtains against the backlight from the streetlamp outside, and a deep, resonant voice murmured, "Rory? Let me in, love."

Rory turned over and blinked at the clock-radio. Glowing red numbers said it was three-oh-eight in the morning. He rubbed sleep-gunk out of his eyes and looked back toward the balcony. The dark silhouette was still there.

"Rory? Wake up, love, and let me in."

It was... Paul's voice. Paul? But... Why was he out there? If he'd taken the room next to Rory's, there was a door onto the balcony from there, but why go outside when he could've just come down the hall? Especially if the door was locked, which Rory didn't remember it being, but if it were then why knock and call, why not just go around, why wake him up? And why come in at all at three in the morning?

He swung his legs over the edge of the mattress and pushed himself into a sitting position, his brain still booting up and not quite processing clearly yet.

"Rory, love? Let me in."

Love? What the--?

What Paul was saying finally registered, and Rory was suddenly very much awake. Or he thought he was. Maybe he was still asleep? Dreaming? He stood up and winced. No, the hardwood floor was too cold under his feet for this to be a dream, much less the, well, kind of dream it would have to be. Your subconscious didn't dream up cold floors when it was about to get you laid.

A mental image of sex with Paul, of having Paul come on to him, wanting him and making a move on him, flooded his mind and got his body awake and stirring. But he'd just met the man and hardly knew him; Rory blushed at the thought of having to face Paul -- the real Paul, not a dream version -- in the morning. Assuming he was dreaming.

He blinked a few more times and was pretty sure he was awake, and it suddenly hit him that someone was out on the balcony, on the second floor, lurking outside his bedroom in the middle

of the night. It'd be frightening if it were a stranger, but it couldn't be a stranger; that voice, deep and rich, was unmistakable. It was Paul, and if he'd wanted to commit theft or even murder, he'd had enough of a chance to do it without deliberately waking up his victim.

Maybe he thought a meeting on a dark balcony was romantic...?

Rory felt his cheeks heating again.

Where the hell did that come from? He's an attractive man, yes, at least when he's awake and his face is alive and aware and all right, his voice is to die for, he could probably make a fortune working phone sex, but--

Stop it! Shit, you just met the guy, you're turning into a slut!

His feet were still cold. He padded over to the French doors and opened one, noting absently that it wasn't locked.

"Umm, hi? What did you need, it's kind of... late...." His voice trailed off as he realized Paul was, well, naked. Magnificently naked. Umm, right. Definitely naked, wow. If that was him out in the cold, Rory would pay good money to see how he showed in a warm bed.

"Hmmm, need," his guest purred, each syllable caressing Rory's nerve endings. "Excellent choice of words. I need you. May I come in?"

Suddenly, Rory couldn't think of a single reason why Paul shouldn't come in, and all sorts of reasons why he should. Just running through those reasons in his mind had his heart beating faster, his breath coming quick and shallow, and sweat breaking out between his shoulder blades.

He reached out and grasped Paul's arm and tugged him inside. The long sheers billowed after them, following their movements toward the bed. Rory fell backward onto it and Paul's warm weight was on top of him, pressing him down into the yielding mattress, touching him everywhere at once. His pajama pants were gone somehow and naked skin touched from their mouths to their toes, pressing and shifting and rubbing. He opened his mouth to say, "Wait," but instead he fitted his lips to Paul's and sucked his tongue in.

Paul moaned into his mouth, a long, deep, resonant sound that vibrated through Rory down to his very soul. He felt a connection between them, strong and hot and electric. He was instantly hard and aching, faster than he could ever remember becoming so fully aroused before in his life, even as a teenager. He heard himself whining with need, felt his hips thrusting up into Paul's, his fingers clawing at Paul's shoulders, pulling him closer, tighter.

He felt a rock-hard cock press up against his entrance and was vaguely surprised at the lack of fear, hell, the lack of panic, because he knew that was wrong, knew he needed to be prepped, stretched, slowly and gently because it'd been a long time for him, hell it'd been years, way too long since last time and that had only been the once anyway so would it even matter, and they didn't have any lubrication or any condoms -- shit, condoms! -- but he couldn't make himself care

or worry or even think about it very hard -- hard! -- because the cock, that wonderful, hot, insistent, *hard* cock was forcing its way in and his nerves were singing, crackling with ecstatic joy and he was on the edge of coming, screaming with want, poised on the very edge, pouring his passion, his very soul, into his moaning partner and his bedroom door slammed open and Paul was standing there yelling, "Fuck!" and chanting something Rory couldn't make out and running toward the bed and Paul's hands were glowing which was really weird but not as weird as there being two of them at once because Paul was fucking Rory into the next world and dashing across the room while he did that was a really neat trick and--

Chapter Six

The thing writhing on the bed with Rory -- over him, around him, in him -- glowed with magic. Paul could see it, could practically *feel* it sucking energy out of him as it encouraged him in a crooning, caressing voice to surrender to it, to share his essence with it. Like all the higher fey, it fed solely on magic and it was gorging on Rory, on his glowing bounty. High on it, drunk on it, in a frenzy of feeding.

Damned incubus! Even as Paul's hands and voice focused on getting the thing away from Rory, shielding him, and banishing the demon, a slice of Paul's surface awareness took in the open glass door and the billowing curtain, the creature's obvious point of entrance, and he wondered how the hell it had persuaded Rory to let it in. He wouldn't have expected someone that skittish to open his bedroom door to *anyone* in the middle of the night, no matter how alluring or persuasive.

A moment later, the incubus raised its head and sneered at him.

Fucking hell!

Paul, staring himself in the face, lost his concentration for a vital second and staggered backward into the doorframe, his balance gone, the energy he'd been gathering to throw at the incubus blown back through his system. Damn it, focus! He blinked and shook his head, struggling to throw off the shock.

A breath later, he was reinvoking, resetting, stalking toward the bed, not rushing, not hurrying, everything in its time. He didn't worry about Rory's magic levels just then; he knew Rory had more than enough to hold out for a while, so he had time to do it right.

The incubus snarled a threat. When he ignored it, the demon cast a wave of lust at him, but that was its standard attack; he was braced for it and as ready as any man could be with a sudden rush of blood away from his brain and an instant hard-on. He cast a binding through gritted teeth, then grabbed the thing by the arms and physically hauled it off of Rory. It tried to overwhelm him with desire, render him helpless with need, but its choice of seemings backfired on it; Paul had never been all that stuck on himself and was able to ignore the sensual allure of the thing long enough to drag it off the bed and across the room, his purpose focused firmly on getting it away from Rory, out of reach. Without physical contact -- *intimate* physical contact -- it couldn't siphon off his magic.

Normally, his next move, given that Rory was in no immediate danger, would be to banish the demon back downstairs, Underhill. This time, though, he hesitated, questions and possibilities and what-ifs running through his mind. Or maybe limping through his mind, since most of his attention was still trying to drag itself southward.

The air reeked of sex, and a naked Rory was still writhing and arching helplessly, *desperately*, on the bed, his eyes trying to blink into focus and an adorably confused look on his face.

Where the hell had *that* come from?! Paul spun away from the bed and sucked in half a dozen deep breaths while staring at a print on the far wall next to the bathroom door, an insipid view of a flowering meadow. Focus, breathe, settle. The initial wave of lust might've come from the incubus, but the human body was more than happy to take over once it'd been jump-started, and it wasn't going to just shut down simply because the demon that had pressed the Start button was no longer in play.

Think! First priority? Rory. Always Rory, and getting him to accept what reality actually was, as opposed to what he desperately wanted to believe it had to be. Paul knew as sure as the sun would rise that if he banished the incubus before Rory had come back to his senses, that Rory would never believe such a thing had ever been there. Come to think of it, he'd most likely believe that Paul himself had come to him and pinned him to the bed! Like hell! The incubus wasn't going anywhere until Rory had had a good, long look at it.

And why it'd chosen to appear with Paul's seeming was a whole other issue. Not a question, unfortunately, because sex demons didn't make that sort of mistake. For some reason, Rory had trusted Paul enough to let him into his bedroom, and was sexually attracted to him -- whether he'd realized it consciously or not -- enough to give the demon something to work with, a handle to latch onto. That was... really interesting, but not something to be considered just yet. Not now. Priorities.

One last deep breath and he turned back around and recrossed the room, grabbing a terrycloth robe from where it was draped over a chair on his way. He coaxed Rory over onto his stomach and draped the robe over him, covering up smooth skin and lean muscle and all the other things Paul was very firmly *not* thinking about just then.

"Rory? Relax and look at me. Come on, that's it, sit up.... Breathe, just breathe, in and out, there you go, calm down, easy...."

It took a few minutes, but finally Rory was blinking up at him with some semblance of awareness in his eyes. And then, suddenly, he seemed *too* aware, if the bright red spots on his cheeks were anything to go by.

"It wasn't me," Paul said immediately. He kept his expression neutral and looked straight into Rory's eyes. Really pretty gray eyes. He banished that thought and continued, "I know you thought so, and it was intended to fool you, but it wasn't me. Come look."

Rory still had yet to speak, and judging by his expression, he was trying to figure out some way to vanish or hide or just fall down dead by sheer force of will and mortal embarrassment, but Paul ignored his discomfort and hauled him up and across to where the incubus lay in the middle of the floor, held still as a stone by the binding Paul had put on him.

"Look," he commanded. He knelt down next to the demon and tugged Rory's arm to force him to bend down. "Look at it."

Rory looked. And then stared. At the incubus, then at Paul, then back down at the incubus once more. His eyes were huge and round, and his lips were parted in shock. "It's... it's... you. It's... what is it?"

"It's an incubus," Paul replied. "A male sex demon. A female is a succubus -- you're more likely to have heard of those."

"A... a demon."

Rory was clearly still groggy, which Paul took as a good thing. At least he wasn't quite so firmly attached to his denial as he'd been before and most likely would be again later. It was a window of opportunity, and Paul was determined to take advantage of it.

"Yes, exactly. It knew that you would trust me, that you would be attracted to me." He spoke in a flat, neutral voice, purely matter-of-fact. "So it took my seeming and called to you. You asked it in. You had to; it can't enter without your consent. Usually an incubus doesn't come unless it's called, which is consent in and of itself, but--" Paul paused, thinking. An incubus didn't come unless it was called -- or sent. Rory hadn't called it, wouldn't have believed he could even if he'd wanted to and known how. So it must've been sent. By whom? He scowled down at the immobile thing on the floor and was doubly glad he hadn't banished it yet.

"But wait, it knew? But I didn't.... I mean, I hadn't thought--" Rory cut himself off and turned away.

"Rory?" Paul kept his voice light and gentle. "I'm not offended. We all have desires we'd rather not share with the world. Sometimes we're not even fully aware of them. You're entitled to yours, and I have no reason to be angry." He studied Rory's stiff, shaking shoulders, wanted to reach out and touch him, but knew that'd be a really bad idea. This was a damned awkward situation and not at all Rory's fault; he didn't deserve to be ashamed.

"I'm sorry," Rory said quietly. "I... just... sorry."

"Don't. It's not your fault. This demon went rummaging around in your mind, and you have no reason to be sorry. You should be angry, if anything."

"I am! I mean, I am, really, it's just, it's so...."

"Strange, I know." Paul sighed. "It's real, Rory. It's right here in front of you. It's solid--" he punched the demon on the shoulder with a meaty *thud* for emphasis, "--and it's real and it fucked you with only the lamest kind of permission because it wanted to feed off your magic. It's a parasite, a predator. I said this afternoon that you'd attract predators, and although I didn't imagine something like this showing up so soon, this isn't going to stop. It's not going to stop,

Rory, and it will be much easier to protect you if you decide to believe that it's happening and that it's real."

Rory sank down to his knees next to Paul and reached out a trembling hand to the incubus. He brushed the dark brown hair off the creature's forehead, ran gentle fingers down its cheek. He seemed mesmerized by it, and for a moment Paul could almost feel that hand touching *him*, caressing *his* face. He took a deep breath and sat back on his heels, putting a few more inches between himself and Rory, disturbed, but willing to let Rory do whatever he needed to get him to acknowledge its reality.

Which was just as well, because right then Rory snarled at the thing, scrambled to his feet and acknowledged its reality by kicking it as hard as he could in the head.

Rory yelped at the pain shooting through his toes. He'd forgotten he was barefoot, and Paul -- well, the... the thing, the incubus -- had a skull like a boulder. He didn't care, though. The damn thing had as good as raped him, and the fact that he could remember *wanting* it, squirming and moaning in its arms, feeling electric ripples of pleasure singing along his nerves, just made it worse.

He finished rubbing his toes and stared out the window, trying to calm down, to relax, to forget. It was hard, though; his whole body still tingled with sex. He could feel Paul's weight pressing him into the bedding -- no, *not* Paul. Not Paul. The demon, the incubus. He looked back to the center of the room where the thing still lay on the floor with Paul kneeling next to it, like a brother helping his hurt twin. Although from the muttered curses coming from Paul's lips, maybe that comparison didn't go very far.

He wondered just how precise a duplicate the incubus was. The two faces were identical, and they seemed to be about the same height and general build, but was *everything* the same...? He gave Paul a look-over -- out of self-defense of course. If he was going to have demons coming into his bedroom, then knowing how to tell them apart from his friends would be valuable, right? He couldn't see a whole lot anyway; Paul had pulled on his jeans and his leather jacket before running in, and apparently -- Rory hoped! -- slept with all his jewelry. And although he hadn't taken the time to zip up, Rory rather resented the jacket. Not just for the fact that it hindered his comparison, but what if the thing had been ripping his throat out? An extra five seconds to grab a jacket and put it on could've seen him dead!

At least he hadn't fastened it up. From the strip of lightly furred skin that was visible, the incubus hadn't exaggerated *too* much. Nicely developed pecs led down to a flat, solid stomach. Paul obviously didn't spend hours in the gym, but he was in good shape, and under different circumstances Rory wouldn't have minded getting to know him a little better. All right, a lot better.

Rory felt his cheeks heating up again, and other portions of his anatomy were becoming interested once more too. He turned back to the window. Breeze -- he needed air, needed to cool

off. He went and stood in the open doorway, pushing the curtain aside. The neighborhood was dark and quiet. No cars cruised down the street, no cats prowled in the shrubberies, no night birds twittered on the eaves. No goblins lurked in the shadows, no ghosts wailed on the lawn, no skeletons danced down the sidewalks.

"I need my meds," he murmured. But it was just a habit, a reflex, and he knew it would make no difference. He'd taken his pills before bed and that was only a few hours ago; it wasn't even four yet, and he wasn't due for another dose of anything until eight.

This can't be happening, he thought. It's not real, I just dreamed it all.

Bullshit. He clenched his jaw and turned around, deliberately looking back into the room where Paul's demonic duplicate was still laid out on the floor.

It was real. It was really there, and his toe still ached to remind him that it was as solid as any other body.

Paul sat back on his heels and looked up at Rory. "Don't come any closer," he said. "I'm going to try to find out who sent this thing and then banish it, and you don't want to get caught up in the vortex."

"Umm. Sure." Rory sidled around the edge of the room and sat on the bed. Being near the covers reminded him that he was naked under the robe draped loosely around his shoulders, that he'd *been* naked for as long as Paul -- the real Paul -- had been there with him. He heard himself making an embarrassed yelp as he yanked the terrycloth together over his lap. He avoided Paul's eyes and searched around for his pajama bottoms. He finally spotted them draped over a lamp near the head of the bed. He decided to leave them there for now. He was fine with the robe, and he'd have to uncover to get them. Later. Later would work.

Luckily, Paul wasn't paying any attention to him at that moment or Rory might have had a hard time preventing himself from pulling the bedspread over his head in sheer embarrassment. Instead, Rory watched Paul stand up and position himself just past the thing's head, facing down its body.

"You can watch what I'm doing if you want," Paul said. "Relax as much as you can and look this way. Don't stare at anything, though -- just let your eyes unfocus as though you're looking past me, like looking *into* a mirror instead of at it."

Rory nodded and tried to relax. Key word being "tried." He wasn't feeling all that relaxed, though, and frankly didn't think anyone could legitimately fault him for it after the night he'd been through.

Paul seemed to read his mind, but was more likely reading the frustration on his face when he said, "Don't feel bad if you can't get it right off. You know you can do it -- you've seen magic before. Learning to use your magesight at will takes practice. With some work, it'll become instinctive and you'll be able to slide in and out of it without thinking."

Rory nodded once more, but Paul wasn't watching. He chanted a few words in a language Rory didn't understand, with his arms spread wide on either side of the thing's head.

Rory stared hard, stared into, stared past, stared through... but no matter what he tried, all he saw was Paul and the demon-thing. It reminded him of those magic pictures that'd been popular when he was a kid; he'd never been able to get *them* to work for him, either.

He turned away and slipped out of bed and headed over to his dresser. Paul was focused on whatever he was doing, and Rory wanted to get dressed. He was tired, and suddenly felt sore in a few places that hadn't been sore for a while. The whole last day or so was starting to feel like a weird dream and only glancing up at the two Pauls in the mirror over his dresser every few moments convinced him it wasn't. He pulled on briefs and a pair of sweats, then a T-shirt.

One last quick look in the mirror and-- And he saw something. Saw it. A network of fine, glowing orange lines was overlaid on the demon-thing, containing another glowing cloud, blue-green this time, that seemed to be trying to escape out of its skin. Both of them, both... magical things, whatever they were, pulsed and shifted, struggling with each other as Rory watched in fascination.

Paul conjured -- that was the only word -- a ball of something that glowed a dark blue and knelt to set it down on the demon-thing's chest. He pressed down with both hands, pushing hard, leaning on it with all his weight. Rory tried to imagine what it would look like if he couldn't see the magic and couldn't help grinning.

The demon-thing, the incubus, wasn't moving at all, not even blinking, but Rory got the impression that it was fighting whatever Paul was trying to do. As though on cue, Paul snarled, "Let *go* you fucking--!" and gave one last focused effort. The dark blue ball vanished in a blink into the demon's chest and Paul's hands smacked down onto it.

"Yes!" Paul slammed a triumphant fist down onto the demon's forehead and watched the dark blue glowing stuff soak into the blue-green stuff around the demon, then zip away along a narrow path that looked like a fine wire leading from the demon's body out the still-open balcony door, and then it was gone. A moment later, Paul sucked in a breath and started cursing. He climbed to his feet and met Rory's eyes in the mirror.

"Pelamin! It was sent by the king of the local Underhill enclave, if anything down there can be called local. It's just... never mind. Damn." He looked down at the still-immobile demon. "Hang on a second."

Rory turned around and sat back down on the bed. He watched while Paul chanted over the demon for a minute, then there was a sudden, hollow BANG! and the thing was gone, leaving only a Paul-shaped crushed spot in the carpet where it had lain.

"There, good riddance." Paul closed his eyes for a few seconds, then looked over at Rory. "I'm afraid this has just been cranked up a few notches. We're going to become very tired of each other before it's over."

The thought flashed through Rory's brain that it would take a *very* long time for him to get tired of having Paul around.

Chapter Seven

Paul always knew what time it was, which was why he knew it was way too early to be calling anyone. It wasn't an emergency, not quite, not yet, and although he didn't expect to be getting much more sleep that night, there was no reason to disturb anyone else. And for that matter, if he was going to be struggling with exhaustion, it'd be just as well if the others were fresh. Assuming they had to act, of course. He was pretty sure they would, but it was only a feeling. A hunch. A calculated guess based on experience.

Fuck it. He was worried.

He looked at Rory across the small kitchen table and tried to figure out how to explain.

Rory was taking this all pretty well, considering. Even when Azzy -- who'd alerted Paul to the intruder by zipping into the spare bedroom screeching that the "big guy" was going to rip his arms off -- had bounced into the bedroom and asked if the incubus was gone yet, Rory had just given him a bemused smile and wandered off to make coffee. Come to think of it, he was probably still in shock. Shit.

Paul sipped his coffee and considered. On the one hand, he wanted to feed Rory as much information as he could right then, while he was still flexible -- all right, be honest, *vulnerable* -- before Rory's more rational side was able to claw itself back up to the front of his brain and take over again. On the other hand, he had a feeling that when Rory finally came back into focus, he wouldn't remember very much of whatever conversation they might have anyway.

"I think," he finally said, "we'd be better off waiting until morning. Or later in the morning. We're both tired and probably not thinking as straight as usual. I have some ideas about what's going on that I want to run past the others. I'd prefer to think about it for a while and maybe do some research. You can sit in when we discuss it, and we'll answer any questions you might have then. Would that be all right with you?"

Rory looked at him for a few moments, eyes slightly unfocused. When Rory spoke it was to say, "You're oozing."

Paul raised an eyebrow but otherwise didn't react to the rather odd change of subject, for which he was rather proud of himself. "Oozing how?"

Rory frowned, still looking through Paul rather than directly at him. "There's this gold... stuff, oozing out of you. Sort of. It comes in little spurts like tiny volcanoes."

Paul's other eyebrow joined the first up near his hairline. "Yes. That's magic. I'm still replenishing from earlier. I'll reach my normal level soon and then it'll fade down to a

maintenance level; that's just barely a trickle, to replace what I use while being alive and all." He had to work hard to keep his voice even and casual. It'd been more than twelve hours since the transfer; he should be so close to full up at this point that his production should be barely detectable *now*. For Rory to be seeing it was startling, to say the least.

Rory just nodded and said, "It's pretty."

Paul found himself flushing. "Well, you should watch yourself some time. You're a lot brighter than I am. You're still replenishing, too, and you'll be much more spectacular by tomorrow. Why don't you go back to bed for now and we'll pick all this up in the morning?"

"All right." Rory swallowed the last of his coffee and got up, put the cup in the dishwasher and wandered off toward the stairs, Azzy scrambling after him unnoticed.

Well. That was easy enough.

Less than an hour later, though, Rory came wandering back down, trailed by his scaly little sidekick. He looked at Paul for a moment, then blushed and padded into the kitchen, and a minute later Paul heard the gurgle of the coffee maker. When Rory emerged with a full mug and a carafe, Paul held up his empty mug and it was carefully filled.

"Thank you. Can't sleep?"

Rory shook his head. "No. I'm tired, and I want to, but my thoughts are racing and my head won't shut up." He put the insulated carafe down on the coffee table, then set his own mug down on the side table and curled up in the armchair across from the sofa.

Azzy hopped up into his lap and made himself comfortable. Rory, who seemed to have resigned himself to the pixie's presence, reached down and scratched between his ears. Paul felt an irrational pang of envy for the little nuisance.

"Not surprising. Do you want to talk now? You were pretty out of it earlier." Paul kept his emotions in check and his eyes on his laptop screen and firmly *off* of Rory's smooth chest and the soft flannel of his pajama pants. He tapped twice on the touchpad and watched a new window bloom.

"I don't... no, I mean yes, but--" Rory cut himself off and sipped his coffee. "I don't know. It just... I remember what happened. I remember--"

A glance showed he was blushing, and Paul wanted to go over and hold him until he felt safe again.

"I remember what happened," Rory repeated. "But it seems like a dream. I mean, it doesn't *feel* like a dream, it feels like a memory, there are too many details and it's too... too real, too sequential, it makes too much sense. I mean, it *doesn't* make sense, how can a sex demon

invading your bedroom make sense, that's ridiculous, but you know what I mean? It wasn't fuzzy and disjointed like a dream would be, there was too much of it there, you know?"

Rory paused, and Paul nodded. "It cast a glamour on you so you weren't really in full control of yourself, but you were 'there' the entire time."

"Umm. Right." Rory looked into his coffee mug, then out the dark front window, then down at Azzy. He said, "It's just hard-- *difficult*, I mean difficult! Fuck." He closed his eyes and moaned and let his head flop backward onto the cushioned back of the chair.

Paul couldn't quite control a smirk. "No, I think 'hard' was an excellent word, in all of its senses. And no, I'm not making fun of you. Of myself, if anything. It's 'hard' for me too, you know."

Rory's head snapped back down, and he stared, his eyes wide and round.

Paul shrugged. "It's only fair to tell you. After all, I know you desire me, and you didn't exactly get a choice about whether to tell me or not. You're a cute guy, and there's no reason you should be surprised."

Rory shook his head. "Just the chances of you being gay, though, or bi or whatever...."

"Pretty good, actually. Not that anyone's ever done any DNA research on the subject, but so far as we can tell by counting heads, whatever it is that gives people magical gifts -- magesight at least, which is pretty much universal among those with any gifts at all -- seems to be on the same chromosome as whatever it is makes one attracted to one's own gender, and pretty close to it." Which wasn't even a lie, so far as it went. Of course, it was fairly misleading, but that was all right. He didn't know Rory anywhere near well enough to trust him with the truth. Paul's life was at stake, after all, to say nothing of the safety of his team.

"So... most people with magic are gay?" Rory asked. "Why hasn't it died out, then?"

"For the same reason homosexuality itself hasn't died out, I imagine. It must be recessive, yes? I'm just speculating, mind you. Biology was never my favorite subject."

Rory was staring at him with a sideways smile and a bemused expression on his face. "Ummm, all right. I guess. So. Ummm...." He met Paul's eyes for a moment, his gaze intent, as though searching for something, then looked away.

"So, nothing. I find you attractive, you find me attractive. Maybe something will happen and maybe it won't. We just met less than a day ago, and personally I've never been into random fucking. Pardon my bluntness. I'm not about to jump you, and I'll assume you're not planning to bash me with a frying pan and have your wicked way with me, either. And even if we were both up for some quick and pointless sex, we both have other things to worry about and issues which make the thought of both of us being distracted into obliviousness at the same time pretty damn scary."

Azzy, who'd been looking up at Rory, then over at Paul, then back up at Rory, etc., since the conversation had started, grinned and said, "Hey! If you two wanna fuck I'll keep watch for ya! Let ya know if anyone nasty comes around!"

Paul rolled his eyes and shared a look with Rory. "Thanks, but that won't be necessary just now. We'll let you know, okay?"

"Sure! Any time! Hey, is it breakfast time yet?" Azzy hopped from Rory's lap up onto his shoulder and gave him a hopeful look.

"Ummm." Rory looked at his watch, then glanced out the still-dark window. "I'm really not hungry yet. Paul?"

Paul shook his head.

Rory reached up to pat Azzy and said, "Well, maybe I can find you something to tide you over. Leftover chow mein, maybe?" He stood up and headed toward the kitchen, a happy pixie bouncing on his shoulder.

"You do know that the more you feed him the hungrier he gets," Paul commented to Rory's receding back.

"Pauuuuuuuuuul!" Azzy wailed, and scowled at him.

Rory just grinned over his shoulder and vanished in the direction of the refrigerator. Paul rolled his eyes and went back to his laptop, muttering, "He'll learn...."

Rory came out of the kitchen a few minutes later, minus one pixie. Happy sounds of munching and humming followed him out the arched doorway. Rory gave Paul a smile and said, "I'm going to try to go back to sleep before dawn. How about you?"

Paul shook his head. "No, I have a feeling I'm up for the day. You go ahead, and I'll keep an eye on things."

Rory nodded and said, "Good night," then headed for the stairs. Then he stopped. Paul watched him staring up the stairway at the darkened upper hall. He was leaning slightly away, and his shoulders were tensed. He took a step back, then looked over at Paul.

"I, ummm, I mean, I don't think...."

Paul thought he knew what the problem was, but he just stayed silent, letting Rory deal with it however he needed to.

"I think I'll just stay down here. Would that be all right?" Rory looked hesitant and a bit embarrassed.

Paul just nodded. "Of course."

Rory headed toward the armchair he'd been sitting in, then stopped, then started again, but when he got there, he just leaned over and took a beige and brown knitted afghan off the back of it. He wrapped it around himself then stepped around the coffee table. He glanced down at Paul, as though waiting for an objection, then settled into the far corner of the sofa, with only Paul's books between them. He said, "Good night," again, then curled up with his head pillowed on one bent arm, leaning against the back of the couch. Within minutes his breathing evened out into sleep.

Paul just watched him until the sun came up.

When Rory woke up the next morning, a good three hours later than usual, he was stretched out on the sofa with the afghan tucked around him. He sat up and blinked the sleep out of his eyes, then looked around. He didn't see Paul's laptop, although his books and papers and things were piled up on the coffee table. He didn't see Paul, either, but he heard a buzz of conversation coming from the direction of the kitchen.

Rory stood up, stretched, and raked his fingers through his hair while trying to focus -- his eyes, his thoughts, anything really. It didn't help much. Coffee. He needed coffee very badly. He plodded caffeine-ward and managed to make it past the dining table and chairs and through the narrow arch into the kitchen without staggering more than once or twice.

He registered Azzy squawking, "Rory!" and bouncing up onto his shoulder to lean against his head with one paw clinging to his hair, and that there were several people gathered around his kitchen table, and even that they'd greeted him as he appeared. He managed a wave and a grunt on his way to the coffee pot, which, by some glorious miracle, actually had hot coffee in it. He fixed a cup with just a dab of sugar and a huge blob of hazelnut creamer and downed half of it with a growing feeling of bliss. Finally, he blinked at the now-in-focus faces watching him from the far side of the kitchen area and managed to say, "Whoever made coffee has my eternal gratitude and a promissory note for my firstborn."

A bunch of people laughing at him would usually send him slinking away in painful shame, but for whatever reason, having *this* bunch of people laughing at something he said just made him smile wider and feel, well, like he was part of the group. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like that -- elementary school, maybe? Early elementary school. It was a good feeling, and he'd missed it.

He topped off his coffee and added more creamer and headed over to perch on one of the tall stools, leaning back against the breakfast bar so he could face the table. He looked curiously at the scattered books and papers and laptops -- plural, since two others were sitting on the table along with Paul's -- and asked, "What's going on?"

Three voices tried to answer him at once, then stopped. Cal and Aubrey looked at each other, then looked at Paul, who said, "We're trying to figure out what Pelamin's court is up to. There've been too many strange things going on lately, outside their usual incursions. Something's changed, and we need to know what it is."

Rory leaned over to peer at the screen of Aubrey's laptop, the only one Rory could see from his stool, and asked, "What, do the fairies have a web site?" He was joking, actually, but Paul nodded.

"Some of them do. The youngsters tend to get restless and bored with the ways and traditions of their elders. They have... humm, think of them as 'safe houses' on this side. They can't stay for long -- there's not enough magic to sustain them unless they start feeding on humans, which they know we won't tolerate -- but they pop over whenever they can and indulge in mortal society."

Rory blinked a couple of times and scanned the other men's faces, wondering for a moment if they were making a joke. No one was grinning, though. "So, what, do they do Renn Faire or something?"

Cal chuckled and shook his head. "Way too old-fashioned for this bunch. They're more like the human kids who are into all that gangsta crap just to piss off the old folks. The Elf kids get deep into human doings that they know'll tweak their parents. They go to Goth clubs or do country line dancing or play house with mortals. Drives old Pelamin and his bunch around the bend, but they can't stop 'em short of actually locking 'em up."

Rory tried to visualize a bunch of Elf children doing country line dancing and failed miserably. He decided he needed food and stood up, swallowing the last of his coffee. "I'm going to make breakfast. Is anyone else hungry?"

Paul and Aubrey, who had their heads together over Aubrey's laptop, looked up and nodded before going back to whatever they were discussing. Cal said, "I never turn down anyone who's willing to cook for *me*," and lifted his coffee mug in a smiling toast.

A search of the fridge produced ten eggs, a chunk of sharp cheddar and half a leftover steak. Good enough. He shredded the cheese, slivered the steak and beat the eggs for something omelette-ish. Just as he poured the whole mess into a large frying pan, he noticed that he was, well, sort of wearing a hat. An exploratory hand found what he should've expected -- Azzy, stretched out on his back, spread-eagled on top of Rory's head. Figured.

A few minutes later when he passed out loaded plates and forks, Paul and Aubrey were still at it.

"But it doesn't make *sense*," Paul was insisting. "Eight incursions in less than a month? That can't just be a coincidence, but--"

"Ridiculous!" Aubrey waved a hand at him, impatience clear in every sharp gesture. "Of course it could be coincidence. The time shear between here and Underhill makes it that much more likely, not less."

"This isn't Discworld," Paul argued, sounding pretty impatient himself. "Million-to-one long shots don't just pop up whenever they're convenient."

"Unlikely isn't the same as impossible," Aubrey shot back. "If it were, then we'd just call all of it impossible, and we don't, do we?"

"Close enough. You can fiddle with the odds all you want, but there has to be a pattern to it, something they're trying to accomplish. It's a ridiculous waste of energy otherwise."

"You still think you can understand the fey, and you can't," Aubrey insisted. "They're not us, they're not like us, they don't think like us. You're using mortal understanding to try to see patterns in what the fey are doing, and it's not going to work."

"You're the one who should be trying to figure it out, then," said Cal with a teasing smirk.

Aubrey scowled at Cal, then waved one hand at him, fingers twitching in something that almost looked like a pattern. Cal immediately yelped and jumped up, swatting at his backside.

"Disrespectful brat," Aubrey said, before taking another forkful of eggs.

It was funny to hear Aubrey, who couldn't have been more than twenty-two or so, or maybe a young-looking twenty-five, calling Cal -- who looked like he was in his mid-thirties -- a brat. That was worth a grin all by itself, even if Rory only understood every third word of the discussion. He figured Cal's comment must be some kind of in-joke between them; they were obviously lovers and that was the sort of thing lovers did, so far as Rory could tell. He'd never had a regular boyfriend himself, but couples in movies and on TV seemed to have pet names and running jokes and stuff all the time, so that was probably it.

Just as Rory had figured that out and gone back to shoveling in his breakfast, he saw Paul pull out his cell phone and check the screen. Then he snapped it shut and said, "We need to go, right now."

Chapter Eight

Paul said to Aubrey, "Vasona. Let's go for the lawn near the boat dock."

Aubrey just blinked, then got up and headed over toward the fireplace at the far end of the family room, where there was enough clear space for him to cast a Port.

"Finish whatever you can swallow in the next few minutes," Paul said, with a tap on Rory's shoulder. "Then go throw some clothes on. We're out of here as soon as the Port's up and Manny gets here. No more than ten minutes."

Rory was looking back and forth between Aubrey, who was drawing glowing lines in the air, Cal, who was piling dirty dishes together while swallowing the last of his omelet, and Paul, who was doing his best not to grab him by the arm and haul him upstairs and put clothes on him. He said, "Wait, what--?" then looked away and waved to cut off whatever he'd been planning to ask and started shoveling eggs into his mouth.

Paul just nodded and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. He knew they actually had plenty of time, or at any rate, they had to wait for things which couldn't be rushed. Nagging Aubrey to hurry wouldn't get the Port up any faster, but might result in something happening later that wasn't high on Paul's list of voluntary entertainment.

In just a couple of minutes, Rory's dish was empty, and he headed upstairs to change. Paul followed him, for no particular reason except that it was something to do besides stare at the back of Aubrey's head.

Rory shed his T-shirt before he got to the top of the stairs, and stepped out of his slippers and pajama bottoms a moment later. He rummaged around in his dresser while Paul stared out through the French doors at the street, waiting for Manny's car to appear from around the corner.

"So, why are we going to Vasona again?" Rory asked, his voice muffled through whatever shirt he was putting on behind Paul's back.

"Vasona's starting to eat Los Gatos. Manny saw it and texted me."

Paul heard a zip, and Rory asked, "Wait, how can a lake eat Los Gatos? Is it flooding?"

"We'll find out when we get there. Hurry up."

"But why do I have to go?" Rory asked. "I mean, I can't do anything, and I'm not even a very good swimmer--" Rory kept protesting, but he was putting on his shoes, so Paul kept his mouth shut and turned away to look out the window again.

"In case you've forgotten about last night, you're not safe alone. I'm not leaving you here by yourself, and until I figure out what the hell is going on at Vasona, I can't take a chance on leaving anyone to stay with you."

"But--"

Manny's Volvo pulled into the driveway, and Paul decided it was time to go no matter what.

"But wait--"

"You're not staying alone, which means you're coming with us. Tie your shoe and come on."

Manny beat them into the family room, but only just.

"Everyone ready?" Paul called, dragging Rory behind him by one wrist.

"Hey, Rory," called Manny with a grin. "Paul. Waiting on you two." He tilted his head at the Port glowing in mid-air in front of the fireplace. "Next stop, Vasona Park."

Aubrey nodded to Paul, who nodded back. Keeping a solid grip on Rory's wrist, he pulled his screwdriver out of its pocket inside his leather jacket and walked through the Port.

On the other side, Paul felt grass under his feet and a chilly wind blowing his hair around. They were near the lake, across the path from the boat dock, at one end of a large lawn covered with trees.

Lots of trees. Lots of really large trees.

It'd been at least fifteen years since Paul had been to the park, but he didn't remember a forest quite that dense before. What he remembered was a mostly-open lawn where people had been playing Frisbee and having picnics.

What he saw facing away from the lake was a forest primeval, thick and lush and growing moreso while he watched. Oak and willow and birch, almond and apricot and liquid amber, all flourished and bloomed and fruited in defiance of the chill season. Around the bases of the trees grew orange poppies and yellow mustard and blue lupines and the tiny native fuchsias, which had vanished from the area before Paul had been born. Birds twittered and squirrels rustled through the leaves.

It was a perfect forest, green and growing, curious and inviting. It called to him, urging him to come walk and explore.

He tore his attention away and focused on his magesight. The place was unnatural, obviously, and the only reason he could think of for anyone who had the power to produce it to go to the trouble was so it would act as a tranquil, refreshing spider web.

Paul felt a tug on his hand, and he pulled Rory away. He gripped him around the back of the neck and gave him a sharp shake. "Focus! Here, look at me. Focus on me." When he had Rory's wavering attention, he said, "Don't wander away. Stay with us, behind us. If it comes toward you, back away. Stay in the open."

"Comes *toward* me...?"

Paul could hear the "Are you insane?" tone in Rory's voice. He pointed down and said, "Look."

There was a sapling of some kind pushing its way through the concrete walk right next to Rory's sneaker. Its spindly trunk stretched up toward the overcast sky, and leaves unfurled and grew, tilted toward the slightly brighter chunk of cloud where the sun was. While they watched, the walk cracked and split between them, and another set of leaves pushed up into the air.

"Oh." Rory blinked and took a step back toward the lake.

"Right. Stay alert and keep back. But don't go to far -- stay within someone's sight at all times. One of *us*, not just anyone."

Manny came jogging up, gave Rory a quick smile, then said to Paul, "It's a fey lady, a courtier. I've seen her before, in the background, but I don't know her name."

"Only one? Hunting on her own, in a way designed to attract attention?" Paul scowled over Manny's shoulder and tried to figure out what the hell the point was. The fey were damn twisty; they didn't think like humans and would do the most outrageous things just for entertainment, but he had a hard time imagining even an elf finding the experience of growing a forest in the mortal world and then getting her butt kicked by a Sentinel team wonderfully fun. Why expend the energy?

"Where is she?" he asked.

Manny raised his hands and swept them across the growing forest. "I don't know. By some trees. There aren't any decent landmarks I can grab onto, and the Sight's just saying Vasona."

Paul nodded, frustrated but not surprised. Manny's gift only had so much granularity to it. "Fine, we do it the old fashioned way. Although... Cal!" He waited for Cal to jog up, then said, "Copy Manny, please. We need to track this elf down and kick her back downstairs as fast as we can, and two people who can see more than five feet in front of them should at least help."

Cal nodded and held out a hand to Manny, an eyebrow raised in a request for permission. He was polite about copying someone's gifts, even when it was an order; Aubrey was big on that sort of thing. Except when he wasn't, but that was Aubrey, and would probably be Cal in another decade or so.

Manny nodded, and Cal laid his hand around the bare skin of Manny's throat, left it there for a few seconds, then nodded and took a step back.

"All right, fan out. It's not very big yet, so if you spot her, just holler." Paul turned and grabbed Rory by the wrist. "You're with me. Stay behind me, but not too far behind."

Rory nodded and trotted up the path after Paul. A glance at his face told Paul that the guy had a dozen questions, but he was intelligent enough to sit on them for a while. Good -- he had the smarts to have some survival instincts and think beyond himself. He might actually stay alive for a while, despite broadcasting a "Come Eat!" beacon to every creature Underhill ever spawned.

Cal, Aubrey, and Manny set off into the woods across from the lake, spreading out at three different angles. Paul led Rory up the lakeside path, which curved left to follow a bend in the shoreline.

Paul kept going straight. There was a narrow strip of land between the lake and the street that'd been thick with trees even before the magical intervention. Beyond the street was a neighborhood with both houses and apartments, and lots of civilians to get in the way if the elven lady got hungry after all her work.

There was dirt under their feet and trees to dodge around all the way until they ran into the first house. Paul knew there'd been a street in there somewhere; they'd completely missed it. It must've been overgrown with trees, then, and the asphalt covered with... dirt? loam? fallen leaves? Something that'd fooled their feet as well as their eyes.

The house was completely quiet. In the silence of the woods, there was nothing -- no talk, no music, no children playing, no rumble or whine of appliances.

And no sign of the fey.

There was magic all around. The unnaturally growing trees and shrubs were oozing with it, but one of the high fey would've stood out like a torch in a swarm of fireflies.

He circled to the left, still keeping a good grip on Rory's wrist. Forest, forest, forest... then it thinned out into an open area. Sprouts and saplings grew and thickened, pushing through clear dirt and concrete and up around rows of trucks and vans -- two rows, parked nose-to-tail. There must be a street under there between them.

"It's a construction site," Rory said after a moment. "They're building new houses."

The irregular slabs of concrete snapped into perspective, and Paul nodded. "You're right. It must've been completely flat and clear here -- it slowed her down. In the park, she was just filling in spaces between existing trees."

"And the house back there, too," Rory agreed. "The neighborhoods down here have mature yards with plenty of trees and all."

Paul nodded, still scanning the area with his magesight. The new trees were a diffuse glow, only perceptible if he concentrated on them. A few birds and bugs and the occasional animal -- probably squirrels -- were soft spots of dim light. He picked up the brighter glows of people before he saw them physically, then once he'd noticed them, he became aware of them talking and shouting, angry tones and panicked tones and the frightened-reasoning tones of people trying to explain away things that don't fit their image of the world.

He circled around through the center of the block of construction, watching new trees push through fresh foundations and swelling blobs of shrubbery bury trucks. One of the trucks, a battered Chevrolet loaded with toolboxes and ladders, tried to pull out, a scowling man in plaid flannel at the wheel. The powerful engine knocked down a dozen saplings before it ran into a tangle of blackberry vines and hit its limit; the truck lurched to a stop and the wheels spun, churning newly laid loam off the asphalt surface of the street.

Up ahead he saw a clot of men in work clothes hacking at the new growth with hand saws and bolt cutters. Paul hauled Rory up to them and called, "You need to get out of here! The lake's been poisoned with nuclear waste! That's what's making everything grow like crazy!" He waved his hand at all the unfurling greenery. "It's all radioactive! You need to get out of here!"

Most of the workers cursed and jogged away, a few taking a step or two toward the lines of trucks, then cursing louder and trotting off on foot. Four of them looked at each other, though, then glared at Paul. One of them yelled back, "Nuclear waste from where? How do you know?"

Paul sighed. There were a few in every crowd -- no self-preservation at all. "I'm an investigative reporter," he said. He strode right up to them and made shooing motions with his free hand. "They hit a radioactive seam up at the cement plant back in May." His hand swooped up vaguely toward the northwest, where Hansen Permanente had a limestone quarry and cement plant in the hills. "The creek has been feeding radioactive waste water into the lake for months, and this is the result. If you ever plan on having children and don't want to die with your gut full of tumors, I suggest you get out of here until the hazmat people can get it cleaned up."

Two of the guys turned around and jogged off without saying a word, but the other two just looked at each other again. The one who'd spoken before said, "Aw, you're fulla shit. And what the fuck are you dressed as, anyway?"

Fine, he'd tried. Paul rolled his eyes elaborately and said, "Hey, your call. You want to stick around, feel free." He turned back toward the park and dragged Rory away.

"Wait!" Rory protested. Give him credit, he didn't dig in his heels, he followed along without physically balking, but he obviously wasn't happy. "You're going to leave them there? Just let them stay? Is it really radioactive? You can't just leave them!"

Paul pulled him out of earshot of the two belligerent men, which wasn't very far in the thickening forest cover, and said, "No, it's not radioactive, but it sounds good, doesn't it? Didn't you ever watch old B-movies on weekends?"

"But--"

"If you want to stick around and explain to them that it's magic, be my guest." Despite his words, Paul kept his grip on Rory's wrist. Rory obviously got the message, though, because he changed tactics.

"All right, so telling them it's magic wouldn't work. But I thought the elf lady was dangerous? You said the woods was a trap -- you can't just leave them there."

"I told them to leave. If they're too stupid to move, that's their problem, not mine." That silenced Rory, which should've been good. Paul looked over his shoulder, though, and saw Rory staring at him in shock. Paul sighed and said, "What, you thought I was some kind of superhero? That I'd taken some kind of oath to lay down my life to defend every man, woman, and child in the world?"

He pushed between a pair of young birch trees, brushing the tiny, fluttering seeds out of his face, and helped Rory step through. "Look," he continued, "our primary concern is keeping the fey out of the mortal world. We can't keep all of them out no matter what we do, so I focus on the dangerous ones and work on the rest as time allows. We also monitor human casters and mages as well as we can, and try to help the new ones who are just discovering their talents and gifts adjust and learn to keep things under control, and prevent the mature ones from blowing up anything besides themselves. If we run into humans in a dangerous path, we'll warn them off. I'm *not* going to take an hour off of tracking down and dealing with the source of all this just to strongarm a pair of idiots who don't have the brains to get to safety on their own when they've been warned and have functional legs."

"But what if they get killed?" Rory insisted. "Or, or what if the elf lady finds them?"

"She'll probably kill them if she catches them, yes," Paul agreed. "Again, not my problem. If we don't banish her soon, she could kill a lot more people before she's done. And despite whatever you might have learned from Star Trek, this *is* about counting numbers and the greater good, and a hundred lives *are* more important than two, especially when those two belong to brainless idiots too stupid to run away from danger when it's been pointed out to them. Now come on, she's got to be over here somewhere, and I'd rather find her before this forest gets too big for five people to search."

Paul turned away to continue on, but that time Rory *did* yank him back.

"No!" Rory spat, standing tall and glaring and pulling as far away as Paul's grip on his wrist would let him. "What about me, then? If that's how you feel then why are you dragging me around? Why didn't you just leave me on my own to get killed, since I'm obviously too stupid to know what's going on either?"

"Rory--!" Paul cut himself off and pushed his free hand through his hair. Bad timing, really bad timing. This was obviously important, but he had to get through it fast and get back to *work*, damn it. "Look, you're not stupid, you're just ignorant. There's a difference -- ignorant is fixable,

stupid isn't. There's a lot you don't know, and that's perfectly natural. You've had a lot of shocks the last day or so, you're confused and frightened and you don't know me at all, I get that. But you're smart enough to know what you don't know, and to do what you're told when someone who *does* know tells you. You're going along and you're learning and you're paying attention and you've been doing great, considering where you were a day ago. You're nothing like those two idiots, all right? You're not stupid and you're not expendable and you're definitely worth protecting and I'm going to take care of you. Now come *on*, all right?"

Paul waited half a moment to see if Rory was going to argue any more. He didn't -- he was perfectly silent and staring with his lips parted in shock. And... he was staring over Paul's shoulder. Fuck.

Chapter Nine

The most beautiful thing Rory had ever seen in his life had just glided out of the woods. The rippling green of the trees framed her perfectly, and the mossy ground had clearly been placed for the sole purpose of cushioning her delicate steps.

Rory had never been attracted to women; he'd known from when he was small that it was other boys who were fascinating. This wasn't sexual, though; it was awe-struck reverence of such pure perfection that she could only be a transcendent power, the archetype of beauty.

He needed to go to her, to kneel at her feet and beg to be allowed to worship her, or if he were unworthy of that, to at least look upon her slippers for a moment, touch the ground where she'd walked, imagine that he was breathing some of the same air which had passed her sublimely curved lips, to be permitted to listen to the soft swish of her flowing gown as she passed--

He'd actually taken a step toward her, or maybe more than one, when something smacked him in the face hard enough to knock him down on his ass.

Words swirled and darted back and forth over his head, but it took Rory a while to pull enough of his senses back together to be able to understand any of it. He finally blinked, then struggled to his knees and saw Paul's ass right in front of his face; Paul was standing between him and the lady. Rory could only see bits of her -- a fold of skirt on one side, a gracefully gesturing hand on the other -- around Paul's solid back and through an odd wavering ripple in the air.

"--disappointed, MacAllister. I thought you'd brought me a gift."

"Why would I gift more blood to a leech? The leech just gets fatter and hungrier."

The lady hissed in anger, and the hand Rory could see thrust out at Paul. Something bright white exploded in a curved pattern in front of him, as though it'd hit an invisible wall.

"Temper! You wouldn't want to burn down this lovely forest, would you? After going to all the trouble to create it?"

"I'll fill this entire valley with my woodland, MacAllister! You'll be the first of my herds, with a bell 'round your neck!"

Paul chuckled and said, "I have plenty of jewelry of my own, my lady, but I thank you for your so-generous offer!"

"You insolent monkey!" She threw a flash of something blood-red at Paul, but it splashed off the invisible wall just as the first one had.

"Monkey, am I?" Paul taunted. "Just who's winning this fight again...?"

"Blind as well as foolish! Your days are numbered, mortal!"

Paul laughed out loud. "That's what mortal *means*, lady. My days have been numbered since the moment I was born. Next time I'm visiting Under the Hill, I'll bring you a gift -- a dictionary."

The lady shrieked her fury. She was horrible and beautiful and terrifying, with an angry aura the color of a storm at sunset glowing around her. Rory lost his balance again, sprawling back down into the dirt, and landed with something solid under his ribs. When he fumbled for it with one hand, he found a ball.

It was a hard rubber ball, bright yellow, about the size of a baseball. Right, this was a neighborhood before the forest grew up and swallowed it. This was probably someone's yard, and the ball belonged to someone's kid, or maybe even their dog.

The elven lady was casting something at Paul, something an evil gray-green that oozed malevolence Rory could taste somehow on the back of his tongue. Paul crouched down with one arm over his face, but didn't give way; Rory was right behind him, and if Paul took a step backward he'd trip. And somehow Rory knew Paul wouldn't move sideways and expose him.

Paul was taunting her, fending off whatever magical attacks she was throwing at him, but not attacking her back at all with anything but sarcasm and jeering. It was pretty clear to Rory that he was drawing her attention for some reason. Maybe he was trying to give Rory a chance to sneak away?

Rory scowled at the thought. Paul might think he was some ignorant dork, whimpering in confusion while magic flew around him, but he wasn't about to crawl off into a corner and hide. Even if he kind of wanted to. Even if that sounded like a really smart idea. But he wasn't completely helpless, and he wasn't going to cower behind a tree somewhere.

The ball was still clutched in his hand, and it gave him an idea. Maybe all Paul needed was an opening, someone to distract her for *him* for just a second or two. That much Rory was pretty sure he could manage.

Keeping low, in case that would help at all, Rory crawled sideways just a couple of feet, enough to get Paul's broad back out of his way. Then he eased up onto his knees, aimed for her nose, and pitched his best fastball.

It'd been a long time since Little League, and he missed her nose, but the ball thwacked hard into her forehead and the result was just as good. The elf lady screamed and clutched both her hands to her head.

Paul didn't seem to do anything, but there was a hollow clapping sound and the lady vanished.

Before Rory could climb back to his feet, Manny came bolting out of the bushes and yanked him up into a hug. "Hah! Great one! You beaned her good! She won't forget that one in a hurry!"

Rory grinned and hugged Manny back, and felt someone else smacking him in the shoulder. Cal was there too, and between him and Manny they slapped his back and ruffled his hair.

"Thanks!" Rory grinned at Manny, then rubbed his shoulder. "Umm, what happened? I mean, did I do that? Are elves allergic to rubber or something?"

Everyone laughed at that, which Rory had kind of expected because it *was* sort of weird. Of course, pretty much everything that'd happened to him over the last day or so had been weird, so who knew?

Manny said, "No, you just startled her good. Great timing -- Aubrey was about to banish her anyway, and that smack in the face made sure she wouldn't sense it coming at the last second and block it. Elves are tough to banish if they know it's happening. Paul had her distracted, but that last touch was awesome!"

Rory laughed and rubbed his eyes with both hands; now that it was over, he felt like he was coming down off a high or something. "Just lucky that we ran into her, I guess."

"Hardly luck." Aubrey came over, with Paul following. "She was drawn to you. Elves consume magic -- it's what they live on, they don't eat physical food at all -- and you have a big, neon 'EATS' sign flashing over your head."

That was... well, yes, it was essentially what Paul had said, only stated much more bluntly. Rory couldn't think of anything to say in response.

Paul stepped up and gave him a quick looking-over, then pulled a twig out of his hair -- slowly, gently, so it didn't hurt at all. He turned away and said, "Well, I doubt we'll be seeing that particular lady around here again any time this century. Let's get back. Azzy's probably cleaned up breakfast, and I for one didn't get much to eat this morning."

Wait, leaving already? Rory trailed after and asked, "Aren't we going to put things back?"

Aubrey fell into step next to him and gave him a teasing grin. "If you feel like staying to cut down all the new trees, you're welcome to it. I'll watch."

"He is *not* getting more than ten feet away from me," Paul called over his shoulder. "Maybe twenty at the outside, depending on the size of his bathroom and how modest he is. And since I'm leaving, so is Rory."

"Bossy jerk," Rory muttered, although Aubrey's snicker told him he'd been overheard. Out loud he said, "Can't you banish them, like you did with the lady?"

"Doesn't work that way." Aubrey gestured around at all the new growth and said, "The trees are real trees -- they're not illusions or constructs. They're not even fey trees transported to the mortal world. She actually grew real trees, so they're just like any other tree. I could destroy them by

magic, but that'd be... well, destructive." He gave Rory a rueful smile and a shrug. "It'd also take a lot of energy I'd rather not waste on something harmless. We'll let the locals worry about what to do with them."

"Harmless?" Rory pointed at a house a few yards away. A sturdy young oak had pried a section of its roof off, and ivy had broken through two windows.

"Currently harmless," Aubrey insisted. "They were destructive only while she kept their growth accelerated. Right now they're growing normally, so they're not dangerous anymore."

Rory scowled while they walked past the wrecked house. It sounded logical when Aubrey explained it, but it didn't feel right. It seemed they should be *helping* somehow; there were people left with serious problems caused by a magical attack, and that was what this group was there to help with, wasn't it? But all Paul could think of was food.

They stopped while still in the woods but out of sight of any people or houses. Aubrey drew a huge arch in the air with one finger and then got to work adding more glowing squiggles and shapes and lines and whatever all it took to turn it into a magical gate thingy. Cal stopped a few paces away and drew a smaller shape on one of the trees, slower and more carefully. It only took him about twenty seconds to finish, then he chanted a string of syllables Rory didn't understand, and the glowing pattern grew, stretching out to the right and left until it wrapped around the clearing they were standing in.

"It's an area effect Don't-Look," said Paul, right into Rory's ear. Rory managed not to jump and was pretty proud of himself for that.

"This is a public place with a lot of people around," Paul went on. "With the trees and all, we could have a frightened or angry crowd come thundering through at any time, so Cal's making sure that if anyone comes by, they won't notice us."

Rory nodded, but didn't answer. He wasn't sure he wanted to say anything to Paul just then, so he walked away, over to where Cal was watching Aubrey and asked, quietly, "How does the Don't-Look thing work?" He didn't really expect to understand the answer, but he wanted an excuse to focus on someone else and keep his back to Paul.

Cal pointed out different kinds of lines and squiggles in the distorted magic-shape and explained how it was all organized. He said something about invisibility, but not really, which didn't make a lot of sense; Rory nodded in appropriate places anyway.

That took long enough that Cal was just wrapping up when Aubrey said, "All right, let's go." They all filed through the hole in the air, and then they were back in Rory's family room, warm and normal and smelling of omelet, as though they'd never left.

Manny said, "I need to get back to the store. Later, all!"

Rory followed him to the entry way and opened the door for him. Manny gave Rory a quick hug and whispered, "You be careful. Aubrey wasn't kidding -- you're prime rib, and you have no idea how to defend yourself yet. Stay near Paul, and he'll take care of you."

All Rory could think was to say, "I will," then Manny waved and headed out.

The thought of needing to be taken care of pissed him off, though. He was a grown man and should be able to take care of himself, except Manny was right, he *didn't* have any idea how to fend off magical monsters or angry elves.

Rory heard Paul's footsteps behind him and then felt a sudden absence of tension in the house. He knew that meant the magical gate thing was gone, without knowing how he knew. It just made a sort of weird sense deep in his brain.

He hadn't heard Paul walk away; obviously the man was waiting for him to say something, do something, but Rory was suddenly tired. Not tired like needing sleep, but just *tired* of everything. A quiet murmur of voices filtered out of the kitchen area, Aubrey and Cal talking about who knew what, and Paul's presence behind him pressed in on him, full of some sort of expectation, wanting something from him that he couldn't figure out.

Without turning around or saying a word, Rory went upstairs to where it was quiet and empty. He could breathe easier where there were no people, no sounds, only the scent of the lemon cleaner Christa used when she came every Monday to polish and scrub and vacuum.

The hall upstairs was a squared off U-shape around the stairs. Rory turned to the left, past one of the guest bedrooms and up one arm of the U, into the bedroom he used as a library. Christa wasn't allowed in there, and it had a relaxed, cluttered feel.

Tall bookshelves lined most of the wall space, with shorter bookcases under the window. A big, leather recliner sat right in the middle, with small tables on either side -- one for books and the other for a plate or a mug. A reading lamp on a tall, flexible arm curved over the back of the chair.

His mother didn't like it; she thought the cluster of furniture right in the middle of the room looked ridiculous. Rory didn't give a damn; it worked for him and he liked it. He usually gave in to her nagging and considered the occasional compromise to be a win for his team, but he'd stood his ground with the library.

Rory flopped down into the chair and stared out the window. It overlooked the backyard, but from the chair all he could see was the sky, some neighboring roofs, and a few trees.

It could've been more than a few trees if that elf woman had decided to start in *his* neighborhood instead of way over in Los Gatos. He might've had trees growing up through his own house, wrecking everything. He could've lost his library.

Paul's indifference to the disaster that'd happened to the people who lived around Vasona had shocked Rory. Not that what'd happened had been Paul's fault or anything like that. And it would definitely have been a lot worse if they hadn't been there to take care of that elf lady and send her back to wherever she was supposed to be. But just leaving everything and walking away once she was gone -- oh well, nothing we can do, let's go find something to eat -- like he didn't even care?

Rory was disappointed and felt kind of stupid because of it. It wasn't like he actually knew the guy after all. He'd only met Paul, what, about twenty-six hours ago?

Someone knocked on the doorframe, and Rory felt an instant thrill of anticipation at the thought of telling Paul get the hell out. When he shifted around in his seat to look, though, it was Cal peering in from the hall.

"Oh. Hi."

Cal grinned at him and stepped into the room. "You didn't take your pills this morning," he said, waving the plastic bottle in one hand and holding out a glass of water in the other. "In case you just forgot with all the craziness."

Rory stared at the pill bottle, then studied Cal's face. Cal didn't seem to be making fun of him, but it was hard to imagine he could be serious either. "Do you think I need them?"

Cal shrugged and set the bottle and glass down on one of the tables next to Rory's chair. "I'm not a doctor," he said. "I don't know, maybe you *do* see things that aren't there." He glanced around the room, then lowered himself down to the carpet and sat cross-legged. "I'm pretty sure you see a lot of things that *are* there, though, even if your doctor wouldn't believe it."

"I don't know anymore." Rory scowled out the window. "I was kind of going along with it for a while. I mean, that... thing. Last night." He felt his cheeks heating and was pretty sure Cal could see him blushing. Great. "If my meds work at all then they should've been working then, but it was there. There were two of them."

"Two? Wait, two incubuses?"

Rory shook his head. "No, two of Paul. I mean, that's how...." It hit him what he was saying and he trailed off, looking away. Not that pretending Cal wasn't there would make Rory any less of an idiot, but still.

"Ah. Umm, okay. Paul didn't mention that part of it." Cal paused, then added, "I won't mention it to anyone else, either."

"Right, thanks." Rory made himself look back down at Cal. Still no making-fun, at least not that he could see. That was good. "It's just, I *saw*, you know? There were two of them. I kicked one of them in the head and almost broke a toe."

Cal laughed and said, "On the incubus, I hope?"

Rory had to grin at that. "Yeah. At least I think so. Or maybe I kicked the wrong one -- that might be why Paul's been such a jerk today."

"Oh?" Cal looked a question up at him, then got an *Aha!* expression and leaned back on his hands. "Okay, I know what you mean. He's always like that with newbies, though. Especially with you, he's probably extra uptight. You're going to have fey paving a highway here to your house, looking to feed, *and* you're completely untrained. Heck, we don't even know if you have any talents besides the Blaze. Usually when we find a new talent, we have time to get them oriented, bring them in slowly, see what they can do, give them some lessons and get them up to speed before they ever run into one of the higher fey, much less become a blip on their magical radar. You're doing it all backwards, you know? Paul probably figures if he lets you out of his sight for five minutes you'll get eaten and it'll be his fault for not protecting you well enough. That'd make *anyone* grumpy, you know?"

"But I was *fine* before!" Rory flopped back into his chair and stared at the ceiling. Cal had completely misunderstood what Rory was angry about, but yeah, the babysitting routine was pretty annoying too. "How come I never ran into anything like this until I started off to meet all of *you*?"

Cal snickered. "Just lucky?"

"Wow, you're a big help."

"No, I mean it. You must've been lucky before, and it's not even that strange. I mean, there are six billion people in the world, right? I don't know how many fey there are, as in numbers, but there's nowhere near that many, by a couple of orders of magnitude. The lesser fey, like Azzy, pop in and out pretty often. They sip some magic, scarf some chow, cause some mischief, and then wander off and hardly even remember where they've been or what they've done. Unless they find someone who's dumb enough to make a habit of feeding them." He paused for a second with a too-blank, innocent expression on his face.

"People like you?"

"What can I say?" Cal asked with a grin. "He's a pesty little nuisance, but I like him. But see, pixies, they can get all the magic they really need just hanging out Under the Hill. The only reason they come upstairs is looking for food. They can find fruit and bread and stuff downstairs, but the fey never got a handle on junk food, and the pixies love it."

"I don't know, he seems to like *my* magic just fine." Rory remembered something from earlier and added, "But you're right -- Paul got him off me with a candy bar once."

"Exactly. He loves hanging out with you for the magic, but really good junk food will always win. Same with all the other 'little guys' -- they're in it for the chow. You must've seen other things like him, right? That's how you ended up seeing a shrink and all."

Rory nodded slowly. "Yeah. I mean...." He frowned, trying to re-sort everything in his mind, all the things he'd known were delusions, looking at them again through a new lens. "I guess they were. I've never seen anything exactly like Azzy before, but yeah, weird stuff, creatures, tiny people, things that moved by themselves. I could hear them, too, and feel them if they touched me. I got scratches and bruises sometimes...." He trailed off, sorting and reclassifying memories.

Cal nodded again. "The fey aren't always friendly. Usually not, in fact. Azzy's cute and all, but you have to remember he's greedy as hell and out for himself. He likes you because you feed him. If you didn't, then he'd ignore you, might even hurt you as a joke if he was bored. He's not vicious, but he doesn't really get how anything else besides himself counts for anything, has feelings or can be hurt. He's like... like a really young kid -- they think they're the center of the universe, and nothing counts unless it relates to them."

Rory nodded. "Humans who don't outgrow that are sociopaths."

"Right, exactly," Cal agreed. "With the fey, it's pretty much how they all are, at least toward mortals. How dangerous one is depends on how dangerous it *can* be and how lazy it is. Azzy'd have to work pretty hard to do any serious damage, and he's pretty lazy, so he comes across as cute and fun and friendly, in an obnoxious sort of way. If he were the size of the goblins who attacked you by the river, though, he'd be just like them. Go ahead and have fun with him, but always remember that he's not your friend."

Rory said, "Oh," and wondered how many more times he was going to have to turn what he thought he knew inside-out.

Chapter Ten

Cal came down about twenty minutes after he'd gone upstairs with Rory's pills. Paul asked, "Did he take one?"

"Not while I was there."

"Well, that's something. Did he want lunch?"

"Nope. I asked right before I came down. He said he's not hungry." Cal slid back into his seat next to Aubrey and started rubbing his shoulders while peering at whatever his master was doing on his laptop.

No pill. That could be good or bad. Paul didn't know Rory well enough to have any real idea whether he was likely to be depressed, angry, or just sulking. He decided to leave him alone for a while; they certainly had enough other work to do.

He finished making a pile of sandwiches and brought the whole cutting board over to the table along with a handful of paper towels. He grabbed two ham and cheeses for himself, then sat down and picked up his pencil with one hand and a sandwich with the other.

Paul took a bite and doodled a line of circles on his sketch pad. He thought better in writing, whether banging out words or scribbling diagrams, and he was fiddling with symbols that afternoon, trying to work out what the hell was going on.

The top page of his pad currently had a patch of little triangle-trees, surrounded by eight groups of stick figures with fangs (representing the various clots of creatures they'd had to deal with in the last eleven days), and a pointy-eared stick figure representing an elf named Willowen, who was just as geeky about magic as Aubrey was and a dedicated blogger besides, with "BRB" in a word balloon next to it. He stared at the doodles and tried to figure out what could make more fey -- both high and low -- come *to* the mortal world, but also make Willowen in particular *leave* it.

He was still trying to work it out when Aubrey closed his laptop, declared that the rest of Willowen's blog could wait, and dragged Cal off to set protections around the house. Having had them cast a cleanse-and-ward the previous day wouldn't have prevented the incubus from coming in -- anyone or anything Rory as the head of the household bid enter could enter -- but Aubrey agreed with Paul that visitations from the fey were likely to get more common rather than less, and there were plenty of things that would come slithering in on their own if they could.

Aubrey and Cal left almost four hours later. Cal called "Bye!" up the stairs on their way out and got a faint "G'bye" back.

Well, good. At least Rory was still alive.

Paul was still at the kitchen table, surrounded by torn-out newsprint pages, some crumpled and some not, when he noticed it was almost seven in the evening.

The sun had set over an hour earlier, and he'd gone over and flipped on the hanging lamp without really thinking about the time. Once he *had* noticed, though, his stomach started griping at him. It was definitely dinner time and then some.

Sandwiches twice in a row didn't jazz him, and Azzy had taken care of all the leftover Chinese, so Paul sorted through the delivery menus. There, Round Table was reliable, if unspectacular, and the creases and smudges hinted that Rory liked it enough to order from it pretty often.

He walked over to the bottom of the stairs and considered just yelling, then changed his mind. The menu was a decent excuse to actually go up and see how Rory was doing, make sure he was all right, hadn't slit his wrists or anything, so Paul headed upstairs and poked around.

Rory wasn't in his room, and the master bath door stood open. The upstairs hall bathroom was empty as well, and both spare bedrooms. He found his quarry in the fourth room, farthest from Rory's bedroom, a library packed with about as many books as could be fit into it without double-shelving.

At first he almost missed his quarry in there, too, but then he saw a white-socked foot dangling over the far edge of a huge recliner that was facing mostly away from the door. Paul stepped into the room and around the chair and found Rory curled up in it, staring at the dark-mirrored window with a neglected book in his lap.

Paul waved the menu so it crackled before asking, "Hungry?" in a low voice, but Rory still startled hard enough to drop his book. Paul pretended to ignore Rory's embarrassed fluster and continued, "I was thinking about ordering pizza. What do you like on yours?"

"Umm, I thought you left."

"No, Aubrey and Cal had to go, but I stayed. I wouldn't leave you alone. I told you that."

"Umm. How do I know...? I mean...." Rory trailed off and glanced away, then looked right back at Paul as though he were afraid *not* to look at him. "How do I know you're actually you? I mean, this sounds really stupid, but--"

"No, you're right." Paul cut him off with a waving hand and scowled down at the beige carpet for a moment. "After last night I should've thought of that. I know I'm me, but I doubt you'll take my word for it, and I'm not sure how I can prove it. It's not like you know my mother's name or my birthday or my social security number, to make sure *I* know the right answer."

"You could just leave," Rory suggested, a bit too eagerly to suit Paul. "If you came back with Manny tomorrow--"

Paul interrupted him, saying, "I told you, I'm not going to leave you alone. I'd come back and find your dry-sucked corpse or just an empty house. I'm staying, so get used to it." He stepped over to an empty patch of carpet in front of a bookcase, crossed his feet and lowered himself down to the floor. "I don't suppose you have any ideas of how I could convince you I'm me?"

Rory studied him for a long, silent minute, then said, "Tell me why I was mad at you today."

Paul stared back and asked, "Which time?"

"It's the same reason for both, so it doesn't matter."

Paul blinked at that one. The way he remembered it, it was two separate arguments about two separate things.

"The first time, you were upset because I wouldn't stop to haul those two idiots bodily out of harm's way. The second time, you were upset because we didn't stay to... I'm not even sure. Help cut down all the trees?"

Rory scowled and looked away. "You're Paul."

He didn't make it sound like a compliment, and Paul thought about following up on that, but what the hell. If Rory thought they could fix every little thing by casting a spell, then he probably wouldn't be willing to listen to reason any more than he had earlier that day. Paul decided to just drop it and let him absorb it over however long it took while he watched how things worked in the real world. Arguing about it wouldn't help anything.

"You never answered my question," he said instead. He waved the Round Table menu again. "What do you like on your pizza?"

"Umm, sausage and double mushrooms," said Rory. Paul could see his expressions change as he switched mental gears from philosophy to food. "And deep dish, if that's okay with you?"

"Sounds good." Paul wasn't usually that fond of mushrooms, especially the pizza-shrivelled kind, but he didn't hate them either and was willing to go along rather than start another argument over pizza toppings. "They're usually, what, about forty-five minutes or so?"

Rory nodded. "About. Maybe less in the middle of the week."

"Great. Much longer and I might start drinking your ketchup or something." Paul gave him an exaggerated look of horror and got a faint smile back.

He pulled his phone out of an inside pocket of his jacket and dialed the number on the menu. The woman on the other end promised him their pizza would be there in forty minutes, and then all they had to do was wait.

Paul put his phone back into its pocket and thought about going back downstairs. There was a chunk of novel on his laptop that had to be ready to go in just over four weeks, besides the puzzle of what the hell was up with the fey. Instead, he settled back against the bookcase and said, "So, tell me about yourself."

Rory cocked his head and frowned. "Like what?"

"I don't know, anything. Maybe I'll need to figure out whether you're you some time. Tell me a few things that a shape-changing demon isn't likely to know or be able to find out."

He got a snorting laugh for that one, then Rory said, "My mother's name is Elizabeth and she lives in Sunnyvale. My father's name is Nathan, but he and mom got divorced about twelve years ago and I haven't seen him in almost as long. No brothers or sisters." He paused, then added, "That I know of. I guess Dad could've remarried and had another kid in the last dozen years."

"Or several," Paul agreed. He made a mental note to look up Rory's dad and find out about the sibling thing; magic ran in families, and they didn't need any more baby mages running around without supervision. Later -- after all the current mess was handled.

"Who knows?" Rory looked away and set his book down on one of the side tables by his chair, the one on the far side. Paul saw that the near one had an empty glass and a pill bottle on it. He reminded himself that the empty glass didn't mean Rory had necessarily taken his meds; he'd been upstairs for hours and might've just gotten thirsty.

Not that it really mattered whether he'd taken his pill, in any practical sense. If Azzy came back, or anything else showed up, Rory would see it whether he was medicated or not. If he stopped taking them, though, it might mean he was really starting to believe in the magical part of the world, deep down at the gut level, and that'd be a good step in the right direction.

"So, what about you?" Rory asked, breaking into Paul's musing.

"Me? Well, nothing really special. My parents live up in Berkeley, Lisa and Rob. I have a sister named Holly who has three kids -- Megan, Petey, and Amanda."

"Older or younger?"

"Holly? Older, by two years. Enough for her to have bossed me around when we were kids; we kind of hated each other for a while, but we got over it once we didn't have to live together anymore."

Rory thought about that for a while, frowning down at the carpet, then asked, "Pets?"

Paul shook his head. "I had a dog for a few years. I always wanted one as a kid, but Holly's allergic. So when I moved out, I got one, a beagle mix named Chessy." He felt his jaw clenching at the memory and paused to take a breath, then said, "A troll stepped on her. I couldn't do

anything. The troll was across the yard, and she charged at it, barking. I don't think it even noticed her."

They were both silent for a few seconds, then Rory swallowed hard and said, "I'm sorry."

Paul nodded once. It hurt to think about Chessy, it always did, but it was worth it to explain to Rory. "She didn't know any better than to charge a troll. She was trying to help. She was always insanely brave -- she'd barrel out at the biggest, meanest dogs if they got near her yard."

Rory looked at him, studying his face as though he were trying to see what was underneath it. Then he said, "Family, pets -- what about your friends?"

"You know all my friends."

Rory nodded, as though he'd expected that answer. Paul wasn't sure what that was about, but going by his closed, thoughtful expression, it seemed to mean something to Rory. Paul just hoped it was something useful.

Paul asked about the book Rory was reading, and favorite authors and stories and series kept them occupied for a while. Rory was re-reading -- for the third time, he said -- Bujold's Chalion series. Paul admitted he hadn't read those, although he liked her Vorkosigan books. In the F&SF section of the bookstore, he preferred the SF.

"So, where else do you hang out, then?" Rory asked.

"Hmm?"

"In the bookstore." Rory waved a hand around the room, indicating different sections.

"Oh. Well, I like mysteries, although I've never written one. The whole puzzle-and-clues-and-red-herrings thing makes my brain hurt. I like figuring them out as I read, but trying to make one up gets me all tangled."

"You write?"

Paul nodded. "I'm not a bestseller or anything, but it's the perfect job for setting your own hours. I've never contracted for more than two books a year, and usually just one. It lets me dash off to save the world from ravaging fey whenever I need to and still pay most of the bills."

"What do you write, then? Science fiction?"

"No, actually. That's another area I have a tough time with." Paul gave him a wry smile and shrugged. "Hard SF is my favorite, but I don't know enough to write it. I mean, I could fake it, and a lot of people do, but the kind I'd want to write is the kind where you really need to have a PhD in something solid, or a houseful of scientific books, all of which you've read and understood. No, I write paranormal romances."

"Romances?" Rory cracked up, giggling into one hand spread across his face. "Mister Tough Leather Guy writes *romances*?"

"I'll have you know that romances make up more than half the mass market paperback sales," Paul said, his voice calm and even. He had plenty of practice defending his chosen genre from snickering guys. "We've got more than half the pie -- the other genres fight over what's left. I need to make a living, and writing about people combating evil wizards and hunting demons and falling in love in Georgian England sells very well, thank you. Besides, I *like* romances. People fighting to be with the people they love, and everything works out in the end."

"Not at all like real life."

"Not always," Paul agreed. "Sometimes, though. Watch Aubrey and Cal some time -- they're disgustingly devoted." He smirked, and Rory grinned back.

"I guess. It's funny, though, with Cal so much older, but Aubrey's the one bossing him around all the time."

Paul had to laugh again and shook his head. "No, completely wrong. Don't just go by what you see -- Aubrey's a lot older than he looks. A couple of centuries older, in fact."

It was Rory's turn to laugh, but Paul just waited him out. After a few seconds, Rory seemed to catch on that it wasn't a joke and stopped to stare. "No, seriously?"

"Seriously. And no, before you ask, all mages don't live to be ridiculously old. Aubrey made a deal when he was younger -- about as young as he looks -- and the whole non-aging thing was a side-effect."

"A deal? Like, deal-with-the-devil kind of deal?" Rory looked like he wasn't sure whether he should be laughing or shocked or what -- his eyes were wide and staring, but one corner of his mouth was twitching like he was ready to laugh.

"There's no devil the way you're probably thinking -- or if there is, it doesn't operate here on the mortal plane, so I'm not worrying about it either way. Not a devil, but a demon who likes particularly nasty and layered jokes. If you want the whole story, catch Aubrey some time when he's not busy with anything else. He doesn't mind telling it, especially if someone's in a position to make it a cautionary tale."

"Me?" Rory shook his head. "I'd never make a deal with a demon! And I don't have anything to deal with anyway."

"You have quite a lot to deal with -- you have more power than anyone I know, including Aubrey. There are plenty who'd just take you and siphon it off, but there are advantages to having you give it up freely or even cooperate in a project."

"So, wait, I could just give it away if I wanted? Could I give it to someone and just be normal again? Do you want it? You can have it!" Rory was sitting up on the edge of the chair seat, looking excited like he'd just seen the answer to all his problems. Paul hated to stifle all that optimism, but he had to shake his head.

"No, that's not how it works. Or rather, I suppose it could solve one of your problems, but nothing will make it *all* go away. You could give away your power, yes, but you'd still have your magesight. You'd still see magic, spells being cast, pixies and goblins -- that's part of you and you can't get away from it."

"Oh." Rory deflated, and Paul wished for a moment that he could reach over and pat him on the shoulder. Then he said, "But still, if I didn't have all this power then no one would be after me, right? I could still live like a normal person, just ignore all the magic stuff; none of them would be interested in me then, right?"

"No more so than any other normal person," Paul agreed. "It's still not something I'd recommend. You have no idea what to do with what you've got, what it's good for, what good you could do with it. And you have no idea what it'd be like without it -- giving up your power is crippling."

"But--"

"It's not a decision you can make right now," Paul said, interrupting. "No ethical mage would take your power, even as a gift, when you had no idea what you were doing. And an *unethical* mage or any other creature that tried to take it would have to go through me first. So don't even think it. I know you hate having me around, but you won't be rid of me that easily." He shot a smirk at Rory, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

"I'm not trying to get rid of you! I mean, it's just... been weird. You know?" Rory closed his eyes and leaned back into his chair. Despite the clear trying-to-relax pose, Paul could see a muscle twitching in Rory's jaw, and his hands were clenched, nails scratching at his trousers.

"Rory...." Paul trailed off, not knowing what to say. He stood up and laid a hand on Rory's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I know it's hard." He paused, but Rory didn't say anything, or move. He finally said, "I'll call you when the pizza comes," and left.

Chapter Eleven

They ate pizza while watching a Star Trek movie -- the fourth one, Rory's favorite. Everyone else liked *Wrath of Khan* best, and Rory liked that one too, but *Voyage Home* was more fun, full of great little bits. By the time Kirk told everyone to "remember where we parked," Rory'd relaxed enough to snicker like he always did. He could almost forget all the crazy stuff that'd been happening and just pretend that Paul was a good friend who'd come over for pizza and a movie.

Just as Spock was swimming with George and Gracie, though, the doorbell rang.

Rory stared at Paul, all the fun draining out of him, and everything that'd been relaxed twisted back up into tight knots of stress. Paul nodded and held up his hand, indicating Rory should stay in the family room, then moved on silent sock-feet through the doorway where he vanished into the hall.

Once he was out of sight, Rory couldn't stand not being able to see him, so he hopped up out of his chair, dropped his paper plate with one and a half pieces of pizza onto the side table, and hurried after him.

Paul turned away from the door and whispered, "It's a woman. Do you know her?"

Before Rory could move up to look through the peephole, though, there was a rapid knock-knock-knock on the door and a too-familiar voice called, "Rory? I know you're there; the lights are on."

Rory squeezed his eyes closed and took a deep breath, then let it out. "It's my mother," he murmured.

"Rory?" Her voice was louder now and higher pitched. She was getting stressed, and that was never good for anyone near her. "Leroy, open up right now!" Then barely a second later he heard the scrape-rattle of a key in the lock.

He grabbed the doorknob and pulled it open. "Mom, hi! I'm sorry -- I didn't expect you."

"Baby!" She swooped in and smothered him in a perfumed hug. "Are you all right? You know I get worried when you don't answer!"

"Mom...." Rory was used to his mother, but he was painfully aware of Paul standing behind him. "You hardly gave me thirty seconds. What if I'd been in the bathroom?"

She leaned back and looked up at him, worry radiating off her as she studied his face, stared into his eyes. "You know I worry," she said.

"Yes, Mom. I do know that." He managed to get it out in a neutral tone, when resigned sarcasm was pounding to escape, but his mother knew him and smacked one small hand against his shoulder anyway.

Then she looked past him, and he could tell when she spotted Paul. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, and she drew herself up and stepped around him to give Paul a hard stare.

"Mrs. Ellison," Paul said, his voice quiet and respectful. "It's good to meet you. I'm Paul MacAllister." He stepped forward and held out his hand to her.

Rory's mother stared at Paul -- Rory could only imagine what she thought of the jewelry, the piercings, the black leather jacket -- but after a long moment her own manners kicked in and she extended her own hand for a brief clasp.

"And who are you?" she asked, direct as always.

Rory winced and said, "Mom--" but Paul just smiled and said, "I'm a friend of Rory's."

"And how did you two meet?"

"We both know Manny Oliveira," Paul said, giving no sign of being anywhere near as annoyed or offended as Rory was sure he should be. "Do you know Manny? He owns a bookstore not too far from here."

Rory's mother opened her mouth again, and Rory jumped in with, "Are you hungry? We've got pizza. Come on, I'll get you a paper plate." He herded her toward the family room, past Paul, who grinned at him once she'd gone by, then followed the both of them. Out of sight of Rory's mother, Paul reached out and squeezed Rory's shoulder for a second while they walked.

Rory ducked into the pantry after another paper plate and a handful of napkins, feeling both grateful and resentful. Grateful because it did help to know that Paul wasn't offended and to get that gesture of encouragement from him. Annoyed because Paul knew somehow that Rory needed encouragement in dealing with his own mother -- because he'd obviously figured it out in about five seconds. That was something Rory would rather have kept to himself, thanks anyway.

He came out with the paper stuff just as Paul was looking up from the open fridge and calling, "Mrs. Ellison? Would you like something to drink? We've got coffee -- leaded -- Pepsi, orange juice and milk. Or we have some tea bags left over from the Chinese last night, I could--"

"Rory knows what I like." It was a blunt statement, with absolutely no graciousness about it. Rory felt his cheeks heating up. He did that way too much around Paul and needed to stop. He made himself a mental note -- learn to stop blushing like a girl ASAP.

Paul just nodded, refilled his mug from the last of what was in the coffee pot and added sugar -- just half a spoonful. While Paul was fiddling with his coffee, Rory got a tall glass out of the

cupboard, along with a canister of the powdered iced tea mix his mother liked. Paul held up the empty pot and mouthed "More?"

Rory shook his head and said quietly, "Not unless you want more."

Paul shook his head and flipped the machine off, rinsing out the pot while Rory made his mother's iced tea. Rory took the paper plate, napkins and tea into the family room end of the space, to where his mother was sitting in the center of the couch.

It was a pathetically obvious move, but Rory still had to stifle a sigh. She usually sat in the stuffed armchair, which faced the couch at an angle. From that vantage point, she could keep an eye on Rory while watching TV or whatever they were doing. The view of the screen from the chair wasn't very good, but she seemed to think that the view of Rory on the couch was more important. Sitting on the couch, and in the middle rather than on one end, forced Paul to take the chair while Rory shared the couch with his mother.

Paul showed no sign of minding; he picked up his paper plate, loaded two more pieces of pizza on top of the one already there, and took the plate and his mug over to the chair, settling in with a half smile. The movie was still playing, and he glanced over at it while taking a bite.

"Here, Mom." Rory put two pieces of pizza on a plate and handed it to her, along with a napkin.

His own pizza looked unappetizing, and his coffee mug was empty. Just as well; he'd be up all night if he had any more.

Of course, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, given what'd happened the previous night. Shit, was it *just* the previous night? It seemed like so much had happened since then, like it had to have been longer.

They sat and ate pizza and pretended to watch the movie. At least Rory was pretending, and he was pretty sure his mother was. He couldn't quite tell about Paul, who was eating his pizza with enthusiasm and was smiling at the right places in the film. By the time the food was all gone, Rory's mother seemed to be settled in and ready to stay indefinitely, and Rory was trying to figure out what to do, because if she was determined to outwait Paul then they were all going to be there for a very long time, and it wasn't going to be fun for anyone.

Rory had about ten percent of his attention on his mother, who was ignoring Paul and asking questions about what Rory had been doing, whether he'd been eating properly -- with a glance down at the pizza box -- and whether he'd like to come over for dinner more often, when his next doctor appointment was, and didn't he want her to come and drive him rather than taking the bus, all the usual. The rest of his brain was trying to figure out how to let Paul know to pretend to leave and park around the block for twenty minutes or so while Rory got rid of his mother. The best option he'd come up with was to go into the kitchen to make more coffee, scribble a note on the pad he used for groceries, and drop it into Paul's lap while filling his mug.

It probably would've worked, too, despite being incredibly sixth grade, but just as the *Enterprise* crew was beaming the whales into their special tank, Azzy popped into existence right in Rory's lap, on top of his luckily empty paper plate.

Rory jerked back and blurted "Azzy!" just as Azzy squawked, "Hey, Rory! Can I hang out with you for a while? His Maj is really ticked off an' I'm afraid someone'll rip my arms off if I stick around downstairs!"

That was it -- his mother would see the scaly little chipmunk-lizard thing in his lap, the talking, scaly little chipmunk-lizard thing, and if she didn't faint or have a heart attack, she'd demand explanations that Rory had no idea how to give.

She was staring at him with that look of shock/anger/pain/resentment he was so used to, and said, "Rory? What is it, darling? What are you seeing? Have you taken your medication tonight?" She reached over and took his hand; she always tried her best to be comforting, he had to admit that.

Rory just looked at her with no idea what to do or how to answer, then Paul hopped up and strode over to the couch. He said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Ellison, that was my fault. I was making a face, sort of an in-joke, and Rory was trying hard not to react but couldn't quite manage it. I guess it *was* kind of 'assy.'" He leaned over, looped an arm around Rory's neck and lowered his voice to say, "That was stupid, and I apologize," then he gave Rory a quick kiss on the lips while scooping Azzy out of Rory's lap with his other hand.

He nuzzled Rory's neck, on the side opposite where his mother was sitting, and whispered, "She can't see him," before straightening up and moving back to his chair, with a firm grip on the squirming pixie.

All Rory could do was sit there, still feeling the press of Paul's lips against his and on the skin of his throat, the puff of warm breath against his ear. Those sensations filled his entire span of attention and awareness and banished all thought of his mother sitting next to him. When he remembered her, when he saw her hands moving and finally heard the offended drone of whatever it was she was saying, his only wish was that he really could do magic because he'd wave his hands and send her home with no memory that she ever had a son.

And then he felt immediately guilty, but that didn't make the desire go away.

A glance across the room showed that Paul had produced a Milky Way bar from somewhere, probably one of the however-many pockets he had inside his jacket, and had given it to Azzy to keep him settled. From what Rory remembered, it wouldn't work for more than a minute max, but it bought some time and at least gave Rory a chance to focus and to steel himself not to react if Azzy came bouncing back once he was done with his candy.

Rory's mother was still hissing admonitions at him. Paul had one arm propped on the arm of his chair, partially shielding Azzy from her gaze. Or more to the point, partially shielding the sight of a candy bar floating a few inches above his lap and vanishing a bite at a time with no one and nothing actually eating it.

That wouldn't last either, though, and Rory decided he didn't want to have to deal with the whole mother-pixie thing.

"It was nice seeing you, Mom," he said, interrupting some sort of rant about proper respect and public displays and being taken advantage of, "but I didn't really expect any more company tonight and it's pretty obvious you're not really enjoying the visit. How about if we go have lunch or something next week?"

He stood up and held out his hand to help her to her feet. When she just stared up at him, he gave her a bit more encouragement by taking her hand and pulling her to her feet, then steered her toward the front door.

"Rory? Are you all right? This isn't like you, and I'm worried. I don't feel comfortable leaving you alone here." And she really did look worried. That was the problem -- Rory knew she did care for him and she did worry. If it were just some selfish need she had to boss someone around and run their life, he could've written her off emotionally, probably would've moved out of state to get away from her and visited once a year at Christmas. But she did love him, and she meant well, he knew that absolutely. It made it hard to actively cross her, and usually he just went along because it made her happy, and yes, because it was easier than resisting. But the situation had changed and that wouldn't work just now.

"I'm fine, really. I feel better than I have in a long time." Which was definitely true. For the first time since he'd hit puberty, he didn't feel like some sort of insane freak.

She stopped dead right there in the hall, just half a dozen steps from the front door, and looked up at him, her palms cupping his cheeks so she could look into his eyes. "You know you're not always the best judge of that. If it feels *too* different it's probably not a good thing. You know that, Rory."

Actually, he *didn't* know that anymore, but he had no idea how to explain it to his mother, or whether he'd ever be able to. So he said, "Something too good to be real probably isn't -- I do know that," because that was true in a general way and vague enough that she'd probably misinterpret it as agreement.

"Good," she said. "And promise me you'll be cautious about this Paul."

"Mom--"

"You just met him, and you can't possibly know him very well. You have to admit he dresses to get attention, and people like that usually have problems."

"I have problems of my own, remember? I'm not going to discard someone just because they're not perfect."

"There are degrees, though. Remember Mark? He was a perfectly nice person and didn't need to show off with leather and piercings."

"He also lost my phone number as soon as I told him I'm psychotic." Yes, Rory definitely remembered that one.

"So what? Now you're taking whatever comes along because you think no one better will want to be with you?"

"That's not what I said." Rory felt his jaw clenching with the struggle not to snap at his mother. "You're the one who brought up Mark, I just explained why he wasn't a great choice, despite the lack of leather and piercings. Look, I know Paul can take some getting used to, especially for someone of your generation." Her eyes narrowed at that, but Rory barged on. "But he's a nice guy, and he's perfectly normal when you get to know him." Aside from the spell-casting and all, but let's just avoid that part of it.

She glared up at him, her lips pursed and her eyes shadowed. She finally said, "Well, just promise me you'll be careful," and Rory knew she was still worried, but had decided to leave it alone, at least temporarily. He'd take that.

"I will, Mom. I'm always careful." He hugged her and kissed her cheek, then walked her outside to the driveway. "Be careful on the way home."

"I'll try not to wrap the car around any trees."

"Good." He grinned and waved, then watched while she drove away, until she disappeared around the corner.

He rubbed his arms against the chill and looked around the neighborhood. The twisted olive tree growing out of a big patch of ivy in front of the house could hide tiny spies or creatures just waiting a chance to take a bite out of him. The row of bushes between his yard and the neighbor's was only waist high, but held uneven shadows. The front door was an invitation to safety; Rory hurried inside and locked up, then went back into the light and comfort of the family room, where Paul was.

Chapter Twelve

Of course, once Rory's mother was gone, Paul thought of half a dozen different ways he could've handled the Azzy thing without having to cross the room and plant a kiss on her son while she sat right there next to him. His spur-of-the-moment tactics were usually better than that, but he'd had some kind of brain block -- once that particular idea had popped into his head, it was like there wasn't any room for anything better. Or anything else, period.

Which wasn't to say that he'd *mind*ed kissing Rory. At all.

That wasn't the point, though. The poor guy's eyes had been the size of coffee mugs, and he'd been frozen to the couch. His reaction had helped Paul discipline himself to keeping it short, when what he'd suddenly wanted was to linger a while. He'd had to deliberately glance over into Mrs. Ellison's face -- which had been pretty tense and flushed for a second there -- to get his brain back to the immediate situation, scoop up Azzy and back off.

Paul stayed in the comfortable armchair, stroking Azzy while keeping a firm grip and pondering all the extra complications his life didn't need just then, until he heard the front door close and Rory came back into the family room.

He walked through the doorway and stopped, looking like he expected to be beaten up or bawled out or something. Paul made a mental note that Rory tended to take responsibility for things that weren't his fault. Or at least he expected to be blamed for things that weren't his fault, which wasn't quite the same thing.

Azzy wriggled out of Paul's hands and boinged across the room to Rory with a happy squawk. Rory caught Azzy on reflex, then sat down with the pixie cuddled in his lap. "I'm sorry about all that," he said, while looking down and scratching Azzy behind the ears.

"Don't worry about it," Paul said. Rory still wasn't looking at him, and Paul tried to project comfort, or at least reassurance. "I'm well aware that I don't make a great first impression, especially to nice people your mom's age. She probably thinks I'm cooking up drugs in my bathtub or something."

Rory laughed at that, which had been the point of saying it.

Rory said, "She thinks--" and then he stopped. He stared into space for a few moments, then started again, saying, "She thinks a lot of weird things, and I couldn't really explain anything." He rubbed Azzy's belly for a minute, then asked, "Will I ever be able to?"

"That's ultimately up to you," Paul said. "There's no rule against it, if that's what you're asking. There's no Grand Council that'll come swooping in to defenestrate anyone who hints at the possibility that magic is real to anyone who's not magesighted. Even the Sentinels don't have a

higher organization in charge of everything. I wish we did," he added with a smirk. "Maybe I could hit someone up for a paycheck."

Rory looked up at that and shared a grin with Paul. "Super heroing doesn't pay?"

"Not a cent." Paul heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes at the injustice of it all. "That's why Batman was independently wealthy and why Spiderman always had a hard time paying the bills. But the point is that it's up to individuals what to say, and usually we decide that 'as little as possible' is the best way to go. After all, who'll believe us? The whole reason you've been chained to a psychiatrist for most of your life was that you can see things other people can't. Where would you be now if you'd tried to insist that no, it was all real? If you hadn't gone along with your diagnosis and been cooperative?"

"Umm, yeah." Rory grimaced and his head hunched down between his shoulders. "I'd probably be locked up somewhere for my own good."

"Exactly," Paul agreed. "And we'd probably never have found you, which would've been a shame."

"Simpler, though." Rory still wasn't meeting his eyes.

Paul sighed and looked away, toward the TV where the credits were rolling. "I'm really sorry about all... this." He waved one hand to indicate the world in general, with a pointed glance at Azzy, who was still sprawled in Rory's lap. "I know it seems like it was all simpler before, but that would've been true only so long as you weren't noticed, which could've happened at any time. The incubus needed an invitation to come in after you, but there are plenty of other things that can just pop right in, like Azzy does. No matter how good the security was on your rubber room, there'd always have been a chance that something large and aggressive could've wandered through and noticed that you're a ten-course meal just sitting there with a fork stuck in you."

Rory frowned, like he was thinking about that and trying to make it fit his image of how the world worked. "I've been seeing magical whatever's for most of my life, though," he said. "That's the whole point, right?"

"Well, yes, but...." Paul trailed off and frowned for a moment. It really wasn't that simple, but he didn't want to go into power and influence and hierarchies and politics. Finally, he said, "Look, different fey are different. Some are dangerous, some are just curious, some have their own goals and purposes that I sure can't figure out, and so long as they don't cause any trouble, I don't worry about it much. Most of the fey you'll run into upstairs -- here in the mortal world -- aren't actually dangerous unless you corner them or get in the way of... whatever it is they're trying to do."

"So it's really *not* all that scary." Rory looked up at him, finally, face tilted up and almost smiling. Hopeful.

Paul hated to squash that hope. "For most people, no. But someone with your level of magic is going to attract the more dangerous ones."

"But I'm twenty-eight!" Rory protested. "If there really were all these ravenous man-eating whatever's prowling around, I should be dead by now."

"If you'd been walking around like that all your life, you're right." Paul shifted in his chair and pushed one hand through his hair, trying to figure out how to explain without burying Rory in more info than he could absorb in one gulp. "You didn't start with that much, though. Whenever you first started seeing things, you probably didn't have much more magic than anyone else. The difference being a Blaze makes, aside from your incredible recovery rate after being snacked on, is that your total capacity grows too. Not a whole lot, just a bit at a time. It adds up, though. It's like compound interest on a savings account -- even just a few percent is going to add up to something after twenty years." If he started *using* his magic, it'd grow faster, but that was irrelevant to his current point, so Paul filed it to mention later.

"I guess." Rory frowned and looked down again, staring at the empty pizza box. "It's not like I've had a sudden growth spurt or anything, though, right? So shouldn't someone have noticed before? Word gotten around?"

Paul smirked and said, "Hey, Azzy? How many other pixies have you told about Rory?"

Azzy rolled over in Rory's lap and raised his head to look at Paul. "What? You're nuts, right? I blab and they'd be here in a freakin' swarm! They can find their *own* Rory!"

"See?" Paul raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "The smaller fey are selfish and secretive. They're not strong enough to fend off the bigger, meaner ones, so they know better than to spread the word. And the bigger, meaner ones -- the ones who could really hurt you or kill you -- are the ones *we* go after."

Azzy nodded and grinned, showing a whole lot of teeth. "Little guy's got a shot up here," he squawked. "Don't have to worry about the big guys rippin' your arms off just 'cause they're in a bad mood."

"You definitely look better with your arms attached," Rory agreed with a grin and a pet.

"Damn right," said Azzy. "The goblins was blabbin' about how good you tasted, though, and how they were gonna come back for more, so I wanna soak up what I can before they do. That's how come I came back so fast." He stretched and rolled over onto his belly again, squirming so whatever spot he wanted rubbed was under Rory's fingers.

Rory's fingers stopped moving, though. He sat up straight and stared across at Paul, who scowled back. Fuck.

Contingencies, options, and incipient plans surged through Paul's brain for about eight seconds, then he pushed all the crap away and focused back on the there and then and Rory. It wasn't like

he hadn't expected it, and in fact it was still only a secondary problem; King Pelamin had sent the incubus, so Rory already had all the enemies he needed. A random goblin gang was just a detail.

All right, an annoying detail. It made the problem bigger, but not actually different.

The house was warded; Aubrey'd seen to that. And Paul hadn't planned on leaving Rory on his own any time soon, so that wasn't new either. They needed to figure out what the hell Pelamin was up to and persuade him that it was in his best interests to leave Rory alone, which they'd planned to do anyway. That'd leave them with random appearances by goblins, trolls, wights, boggles, and cetera.

Fuck squared.

One problem at a time. First they needed to get Pelamin to call off the artillery, then they could worry about the snipers.

Hey, maybe we could ask his majesty nicely to put Rory off-limits to members of his court...?

Sure, he thought. And maybe he'll send us home with a nice fruit basket, too.

While Paul was trying to bring up some sort of brilliant flash of inspiration, Rory cleaned up the napkins and glasses, and put the pizza box up on the counter next to the trash can, then asked, "Feel like another movie?"

Paul said, "Sure," because watching a movie was better than spinning his wheels. Rory put in another DVD, then sat back on one end of the couch and patted the cushion next to him.

"You really can't see from there," he pointed out, clicking through menu items without meeting Paul's gaze. He was blushing again, and it was cute, but he was right; the angle between the arm chair and the TV was like seventy-five degrees, so Paul got up and moved back to the couch.

Not that he minded sitting closer to Rory. Which was yet another reason to wish all this other crap would just drop into a pit or something, because he really couldn't let himself get distracted. Not *too* distracted.

Rory'd picked *Blade*, and Paul had to smirk at how appropriate it was, or at least how well it slotted into how Paul -- and probably Rory, too -- wished they could attack their multiple fey problems. It'd be handy to have someone like Blade around, super strong and fast and kick-ass, and awesome with a sword. Steel was mostly iron, so that sword would work just as well on fey as it did on vampires. Kind of flamboyant, but a good don't-look could cover that....

The reality, unfortunately, was himself and his team. Not quite as flashy -- or as hot, Paul had to admit, eyeing Wesley Snipes -- but they got the job done.

By the time the movie was over, Rory had gone nearly boneless, slumping slowly down against the back of the couch until he was curled up sideways with his head propped on his folded arms, and Paul wasn't sure how he was able to either see the TV or not sprain something in his neck.

The credits finished rolling, and the DVD flicked back to the main menu. Paul looked over at Rory, who had custody of the remote, and saw that his eyes were closed.

He slipped the remote off of Rory's lap and out from under Azzy, and shut everything down. He debated just leaving Rory right there, but didn't think Rory's neck or any other part of his spine would thank him in the morning. Besides, Paul had already spent one night on the living room couch and didn't feel like spending the second night on the family room couch. Taking a sleeping tour around someone's couches, recliners, ottomans, chaise lounges and other assorted furniture wasn't on Paul's list of favorite things to do, especially when there were perfectly good beds upstairs.

Paul put the remote on the side table and looked down at Rory. When he was asleep, it became immediately obvious just how much stress he carried around while he was awake. Tiny lines around his eyes and mouth had smoothed out, and the whole shape of his face -- the curve of his cheeks, the angle of his jaw -- settled into a more serene line. He looked younger, more his actual age. Paul had assumed they were about the same age, mid-thirties, when they'd first met.

In the dim light, Rory's red-blond hair had dulled down to light brown. Paul indulged himself by brushing his fingertips through it, just once, lightly, before giving Rory's shoulder a gentle shake. "Rory? Come on, let's get you to bed."

Rory said, "Whah? Huh..." and blinked and squinted around the room. Paul could tell exactly when he woke up completely, when his face solidified with wary tension once more.

"No, I'm fine." Still curled up, Rory rubbed one eye with the heel of his hand, then shook his head. "I just need an afghan or something and I'll be fine right here."

"You really want to sleep on a couch two nights in a row?" Paul shook his head and gave Rory's arm a tug. "Because I sure don't, and I don't want to leave you down here alone. Come on, right up the stairs and we'll dump you into bed."

"No!" Rory snapped, jerking his arm away. Then he looked away and curled up even tighter. "I'm sorry, no, I don't want to. I just... I don't."

Paul frowned down at him for a few seconds, then got a thought. Oh. Right.

"Is it the incubus?" He didn't wait for an answer; it was obvious once he thought of it. "That was pretty weird, and it'd shake up anyone. But it's not likely to come back."

Rory tilted his head just enough to glare up at Paul. "'Not likely?' Wow, that's reassuring."

Paul had to work hard not to grin at that. "Well, it's not impossible, but incubuses aren't usually that persistent. We kicked him out pretty thoroughly, so he'll probably just go find someone easier."

"But you said someone sent him." Rory was giving him a suspicious glare and still didn't sound convinced. "So it's not like it's up to him. Maybe he'll be sent back to try again."

"That's not like Pelamin, though." Paul shifted a little and poked Rory in the ribs. "He's not a forgiving kind of guy. He's more likely to give the incubus to the trolls to play with to remind him not to fail again. Or rather, to remind everyone else watching that failing Pelamin isn't a great idea. He'll try something else next time."

Rory groaned and buried his face in his arms again. "You're not helping."

That time Paul had to laugh. "I know, I'm sorry." He reached over and ruffled Rory's hair and got a blind, flailing swat in return. "Look, I'm not going to lie to you, all right? Yes, you're in danger. I've been saying that all along, and it's true. But I'm not going to leave you alone, and I'm not going to let anything hurt you. Be careful, yes. But working yourself into an ulcer or a heart attack won't help either."

"I know!" Rory snapped. He jumped up and stalked over to the sliding glass door, and stood there staring out into the night-dark yard with his arms wrapped around his middle. "I know that. I know I'm being stupid and I should be able to get over it and sleep in my own damn bedroom without freaking out. I know that, okay? I'm sure you're used to having monsters stalking after you and trying to suck out your life force or whatever, but I'm still trying to learn to live with that and it'll probably take a while. I'm not even sure I believe it yet, which just makes me feel even stupider. I'm sorry I'm not all brave like you, but I can't exactly push a button and change."

That hit Paul like a slap. He grimaced at his own gluteal haberdashery and stood up, walked over to stand behind Rory, but didn't touch him. He had an impulse to put his arms around him but was pretty sure that wouldn't be welcome at the moment.

"You're not a coward," Paul said, trying to project matter-of-fact calm. "I've never thought that. You're in an insane situation, in a world that's turned inside-out and dangerous in the last couple of days, and you're coping as well as anyone could."

"'Insane' is maybe not the best word to use right now," Rory said in a flat voice.

Aaand another one. Paul squeezed his eyes closed and made a mental note to have someone smack him a good one some time soon. Or maybe Rory'd do it for him if they kept talking much longer.

Paul would be the first to admit he wasn't good at this stuff, being tactful and comforting and whatever all else. Something to hit, or zap, or something to organize, decisions to make and orders to give -- that he was good at. Talking to people, though, people who were in trouble or hurt or having a hard time, that he always seemed to screw up. He didn't worry about it much,

not usually, but he felt kind of responsible for Rory -- not that the mess around Rory was Paul's *fault* or anything, but it'd happened on his watch -- and he wanted to be able to fix things for him.

Short of staying with him and keeping alert, though, there wasn't much Paul could really do. And the hunched shoulders, the ducked head, the stiff spine -- he didn't know what to do about any of that either, what to say that would help.

So what he said instead was, "Come on up with me. The bed in the other room is big enough for two. I promise to be a gentleman, and we can both get some sleep."

Rory's shoulders stiffened even more for a breath, two, then relaxed. He nodded.

They turned off the lights and made sure all the doors were locked, then went upstairs together.

Paul faced the closet while getting undressed, holding to his promise of good behavior. He laid out his shirt, a gray Henley, where it could get some air, and did the same with his socks. Two days in a row was about his limit, tense situation or no; he needed to get back to his place the next day some time, stuff a few things into a duffel. Or maybe just take Rory there for a while? His condo had more established wards on it than Rory's house; it'd actually be safer if he could persuade him to come for an extended visit.

Something to think about later, maybe feel Rory out, see what he thought.

He set his leather jacket down at the foot of the bed on his side where he could grab it easily. He wanted every bit of protection he could get if something came up, and while he hadn't lied to Rory -- it *was* unlikely the incubus would come back -- Murphy had a habit of following Paul around with an evil grin on his face. All Paul could do in response was stay ready.

The bed shifted, the blankets flapped, and the pillow made a "puff" sound. Paul unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, but left them on -- fumbling for your pants with something nasty flinging firebolts at you wasn't fun, as he knew from personal experience. He wore his jeans loose enough to be sort of comfortable to sleep in, which meant they were also easy to move in.

Not that sleeping mostly dressed was optimal, but it beat getting fried stark naked.

Paul slipped into bed, careful to stay on his half. He didn't fall asleep immediately and hadn't really expected to. The sounds of Rory's breathing, along with occasional shifts and twitches, made it clear that Rory was having a hard time as well, despite having drifted off during the movie earlier. Eventually the rhythm of his breaths evened out. His falling asleep helped Paul relax, and he was finally able to doze.

He came fully awake again an unknown time later, alerted by a quiet scraping at the window. It was right over the head of the bed, and Paul couldn't look out to see what was there without moving enough to wake Rory, and he didn't want to do that unless it turned out to be necessary. Instead he waited, and listened.

There was a light, bone-level humming sound, and the wards around the window glowed dimly, not fully triggered, but alert. More scraping and a frustrated hiss came from outside, then the wards flashed, visible only to magesight. He heard an angry keening, muffled by the glass, then a long stretch of nothing.

Whatever it had been was gone, and Rory was still asleep. Paul lay silent and alert for a while longer, but the proof that the wards would at least wake him up helped him relax, and eventually he dropped off.

Chapter Thirteen

The Grove was a small bookstore in a suburban shopping center on the corner of two busy streets in south San Jose. Like most such places, the one big store was a supermarket; there was also a drug store, a liquor store, a laundromat, and a number of "specialty" stores, of which the bookstore was one. The narrow front of The Grove was all glass, and the shelves were particleboard painted in a variety of glaring reds, oranges and yellows. Some of the shelves were visibly bowed under their load of books.

The counter ran in a right-angled bend around one corner next to the door, blocking off a rectangular area. A curtained doorway at the back of the store led to a dim, cluttered stockroom full of old signs, extra shelves, a few boxes with seasonal decorations, and cartons of books. Crammed into one end were two folding chairs, a card table and an old drip coffee machine, which Rory knew made passable if not great coffee.

The wall on the counter side of the store had a mural painted on it, a forest in a dozen shades of green, with a stream running across one corner. Animals and other creatures peeked out from between the leaves and branches, over the tops of bushes, around from behind trunks, and up out of the water. It was the only thing in the store reflecting the place's name, but Rory thought it was enough. He loved looking at it, finding new details he'd never noticed before. Sometimes he suspected that the painter came back at night and added things.

Manny, who owned the place, kept it stocked with science fiction, fantasy and horror, new and used both, and most of his business came from students of the high school catty-corner across the intersection. Since it was mid-morning, the place was empty.

The counter was stacked with books -- used books people had brought in for trade. Rory, who'd been dumped onto the walk in front of the shop right at its ten-thirty opening time and told not to budge from the place until Paul came back to pick him up, was sitting at the counter with a rubber stamp, putting the Grove's address, phone number and web site into the front cover of every book. Manny, sitting between him and the register, was pricing.

Rory was telling Manny about the previous night, and the night before that, and the day in between, at least the parts Manny hadn't been there for. Rory was confused and annoyed and feeling stupid, which he hated. Manny was a friend, and Rory knew he wouldn't blab anything Rory told him. And Manny knew Paul, which could only help, because despite having spent the last couple of days with him pretty much solid, Rory didn't feel like he knew Paul at all.

"So, did anything happen?" Manny asked, throwing a teasing grin at Rory.

"No! I told you, he said he'd be a gentleman and he was. And so was I. So...." Rory shrugged. In a way, he sort of regretted not taking a chance, at least trying, because even if he was kind of a jerk, Paul was the hottest guy he'd ever been in bed with. Which wasn't *necessarily* saying much,

'cause it wasn't like Rory had extensive experience or had to strain his brain to remember all four guys he'd ever fooled around with, but yeah, Paul definitely stood out.

"Figures," said Manny. "I was just yanking your chain, you know? I'd have fallen on the floor or something if you'd tried to tell me anything fun happened."

Rory eyerolled, but had to admit Manny wasn't really wrong.

Manny went on scribbling prices and said, "Paul's kinda sexy if you like the serious type, but he's got that whole, 'The World Is My Responsibility' thing going on. I'll bet he thinks it'd be, like, sexual harassment or something if he made a move on you while he was looking out for you."

"Maybe I wouldn't mind being sexually harassed," Rory muttered. He kept stamping books as a sort of camouflage, in an attempt to keep from being really obvious about being annoyed about it.

Manny cracked up and said, "I hear you, yeah."

Rory gave him a quick glance and asked, "Did you ever...?" letting it trail off, because asking right out seemed sort of rude.

"Me and Paul? No way!" Manny laughed again. "I like him a lot, and love him like a brother, but he is *way* too anal. If we tried to get together we'd, like, kill each other or something."

"I didn't mean like hearts and flowers or anything," Rory protested. "I meant just, like, you know -- one-time sex or something."

"Oh, I know. Yeah, no. I don't know, I just never really thought about it, or not much at least, once I got to know him. I mean, a guy's gonna *think*, right? But no, it could end up weird, and we've got to work together and all."

Another thought popped into Rory's head, and he asked, "So, if you and he aren't together, is there anyone else? I mean, anyone steady?"

"*Steady?*" And Manny was cracking up again. Rory heard paper being crunched up right before something light bounced off the side of his head. He jerked, and the inked stamp landed half on a book cover and half on the countertop, diagonal and blurry.

"What the fuck, man?" Manny went on. "Are we back in, like, high school?"

"Well pardon me for not being all hip or whatever," Rory snapped back. "I just... you know I'm not, like, really social or anything. I don't know how anything works, and now I don't know what the damn world is even like." He dropped the stamp and sat back in his chair, his head tilted up to stare at the ceiling.

"Hey, don't worry about it, man." A warm hand clasped his shoulder. "I know it's weird. Trust me, I know. But you'll be all right -- we'll watch out for you."

"Great. So I get a whole pack of babysitters instead of just one. Shit." Rory stood up and stalked out of range of Manny's too-comforting hand. He thought Manny might get up and follow him, but a customer came in a few seconds later, jangling the string of bells hanging from the crash bar on the door. Rory slipped into the back and made a pot of coffee; he could use the caffeine after the late night and early morning, and it gave him a reason to be out of sight for a few minutes.

He'd woken up that morning with an awareness of another body, big and warm and weighing down the mattress. Some time during the night, one of Rory's hands had slipped down underneath the small of Paul's back. Rory had felt a pulse of panic flash through him and slid the hand out slowly and carefully. He hoped as hard as he could that Paul hadn't woken up at any time to find Rory groping him in his sleep because that'd be a reason to just up and die of embarrassment if anything was.

Paul had gotten up not too long after and hustled Rory through showering, dressing and grabbing something to eat. Paul himself had passed on a shower, saying he had to go to his place for clothes anyway and he'd get one there. Rory'd thought for about half a second about suggesting that Paul not bother himself about coming back, but that was just a spinal reflex or something; he still wasn't a hundred percent convinced that all the weird stuff that'd happened to him was real and not an episode or a hallucination or a tangled memory or, hell, just a dream, but at the same time he was still spooked enough that he didn't want to be in the house by himself. Once they were in the car, Paul had told Rory he had a few things to do and that Manny would look out for him for a while. He'd dropped Rory off, ordered him to stay put, then promised to be back before dinner time and headed off.

On the one hand, Rory was still mad at him about the previous day in the park and was happy enough to have some time out from under his hovering protection. On the other hand, the world had gone all twisted, and Paul had become a kind of an anchor. Rory was annoyed with himself about that. If he was going to latch onto anyone, it should've been Manny; they'd been friends for almost a year, and actually he was Rory's *only* good friend.

Manny was comfortable and good to hang out with, but Rory had caught himself glancing past him out the window through the morning, looking for Paul's silver Honda.

Rory waited while the coffee dripped and wondered why his life was so screwed up.

Well, he knew the answer to that, or at least one of the answers. Being diagnosed psychotic had really started him on the path to suckdom. It'd shaped his whole life and twisted his relationship with his mother.

And what was really messed up, unless Manny and Paul and the others were completely lying to him for some reason, was that it'd all been for nothing. He'd thought he was being a good, cooperative patient, accepting the limitations of his condition and following all his doctor's

orders. He'd wanted to be a good son and cause as little trouble and worry as he could for his mother, who'd lost her husband because her son was a "psycho" and who spent so much time and effort trying to take care of him. The argument that'd led to his moving into the Santa Teresa house, one of her rentals, had been the worst argument they'd ever had, the only time he'd ever really stood up to her about anything important, and at that it'd ended in a compromise. He'd wanted to get an apartment completely on his own. Moving into a house a twenty minute drive from her place, but which she owned and to which she had a key, was where the argument had finally died down. Mostly.

He'd thought he was doing everything right, doing the best he could. Finding out that everything he'd believed had been wrong, that all the caution and cooperation and compromise that was his entire life had been for nothing--

What the hell did you do? Scream? Cuss? Break things? Sit down on the floor and go insane for real?

("You're not insane, Rory," Dr. Curtis had explained to him years ago. "That's a word lawyers use, and you don't qualify for the legal definition." The "not yet" was understood by both of them. The "maybe never" too, although that could change if Rory ever, say, thought he saw a monster attacking him and hurt it in what he thought was self-defense and it turned out to be some innocent person, an old lady, a kid. But that wouldn't happen -- he knew that now, right?)

A chipped mug of coffee was cooling in his hands when Manny poked his head through the curtain. "You made a pot, great. Thanks, man." He grabbed his own mug from the rack and filled it, added sugar and a blob of a fancy cinnamon flavored creamer he kept in the tiny fridge under the table.

They drank in silence for a minute. Or at least Manny drank while Rory stared down into his cup and tried to figure out what he should've done differently to make life less crazy. Finally, Manny said, "So? What's up? Your gears are grinding so hard I can hear 'em out here."

"Why?" Rory demanded. He knew he was whining, was being unreasonable, but it'd been a lousy couple of days and he couldn't keep it stuffed down inside anymore. "Why is all this happening to me?"

"There's no why, dude. It just is. You deal best you can." Manny shrugged, but Rory couldn't accept his fatalism.

"There has to be a why -- something I did wrong, something I missed or screwed up. If I'd just had the balls to stand up to Dr. Curtis and my mother, or the brains to keep my stupid mouth shut in the first place. If I'd gone to school in Chicago like I wanted to -- you know I wanted to study history? The University of Chicago's one of the best places, and they accepted me, but Mom didn't want me moving away, going someplace where she couldn't keep an eye on me. And I just let her decide for me like a good little boy. If I'd gone away to college, then somewhere else to settle down and work -- maybe moved a few more times -- doesn't everyone move all over the

country these days, getting better jobs or whatever? Then all the monsters wouldn't have found me and I could've been normal, if I'd just had some backbone."

"Maybe," Manny admitted. "But if you'd made all these different decisions, done all this different stuff, then you'd be a different person. Maybe better, but maybe not. And maybe the fey would've found you sooner. And maybe you'd have been someplace that didn't have a Sentinel team. It's not like there are thousands of us all over."

"But it's all maybe," Rory protested. "Maybe it would've worked out and maybe not, but I know that right now sucks."

"But you wouldn't be you," Manny repeated. "Things might be kind of whacked right now, but I sort of like you how you are. Even when you're all confused and frustrated and whining like a baby," and there he poked Rory in the arm, "you're still a decent guy. Maybe I wouldn't have liked you if you were someone else."

"I'm still me, though," Rory insisted. "I just want to be me without all the crazy."

"We're all where we are because of what's in us and what's around us, what we've done and the choices we've made. You think when I was six I wanted to own a bookstore?"

That was kind of a weird tangent, but it made Rory pause anyway. He'd never really thought about it, but now that he did, he couldn't imagine Manny anywhere else. "No idea," he said. "What'd you want to do when you were six?"

"I wanted to be Rudy Galindo, dude." Manny gave him a grin that was half joshing and half challenge. "I watched him skating on TV in the national championships, sitting in the living room with my mom and my sister -- he was so cool and so awesome, the only brown guy there, and he won, him and Kristi. Dude went to my junior high, you know? Fifteen years earlier, but still. When you're six, that feels like a sign or something."

Manny swirled his coffee and took a sip, looking away like maybe he was sort of embarrassed. Rory nodded and said, "I used to watch skating sometimes, when I noticed it was on. Elvis Stojko was pretty hot and looked like he could kick butt on anybody. And who was that French guy who always took his shirt off?"

"Philippe Candeloro. He's mostly producing now, but he did some fun stuff."

Rory nodded. "I've liked watching, but I've never been skating. Maybe you could teach me some time?"

"I never been skating either."

Rory looked up in time to see Manny give a too-casual shrug. "It's expensive. Even just going to a rink to mess around by yourself, you gotta pay to get in, right? And if you want lessons, that costs, and a coach. Music, costumes, good skates, decent choreography -- fucking expensive

sport." He looked up and stabbed his stirrer-stick in the air a couple of times in Rory's direction. Manny was glaring hard, but Rory knew the glare wasn't for him, not really.

"There's a reason all the people you see in the Olympics from those tiny countries with no money are runners," he went on, with a thread of bitterness in his voice. "All the dudes from Africa or around the Caribbean? They're all runners, 'cause all you need is a pair of shoes. Not even that, just to practice. Skating, the kids fighting for medals at Nationals, even here in America, their parents are either rich and could do whatever, or they hocked their house or something to keep their kid on the ice, and even those folks *had* a house to hock. You don't see lots of people from the poor countries skating. Or poor people from the rich countries."

Rory'd never really thought about it from that angle before, and thinking about it made him kind of uncomfortable. He knew that if he'd ever actually wanted to skate, or do any other sport that took money, his mom could've given that to him. "But there's a way, right?" he said, feeling hesitant, but wanting to get it. He knew Manny had a point to make, and that it somehow connected back with what they'd been talking about before. "If you really wanted to? I remember Todd Eldredge wasn't rich or anything. And Rudy wasn't either, right?"

"Their families weren't rich, but it still took money. Todd had his whole town doing bake sales and stuff for him. Rudy's family worked their asses off to keep him skating. Lotsa sacrifices, you know? Lots of skaters' families sacrificed to keep a kid on the ice. You hear about brothers and sisters kind of left on the sidelines 'cause there's only enough for the one, remember?"

Yeah, he remembered hearing about that sort of thing now and then, during the color commentaries on various Olympic broadcasts. Rory nodded and kept stirring.

"There you go. That's what it comes down to -- is the family willing to give everything to this one kid? Are your family and your friends and your town willing to support you? Sometimes yes, usually no. Me, my family wasn't about to give a dollar to let me do some faggy-ass sport. And then when I started seeing stuff a few years later, they thought it was just whiny Manuel still mad he hadn't got his way and looking for attention." He shrugged and took a sip. "Just as well, you know? If they'd believed me, I'd have spent my life with doctors and drugs."

Like I did, Rory thought. He felt a little stung by Manny's casual statement, but it was true. And the thought that Manny's family had just ignored a kid of theirs who by any "normal" standards should've been getting medical care? He couldn't even think of a word for it that wouldn't insult Manny's family, so all he did was wince and stare down into his coffee again.

"But the point is, see, here I am." Manny waved a hand around the dusty back room with all the clutter of retail, and jerked his head toward the curtain and the store beyond it, and the rest of the world beyond that. "If I'd started skating when I was six or whatever, I wouldn't be here now. I probably wouldn't have ever met Paul, or Cal and Aubrey. I wouldn't have met *you*, so you wouldn't have met the other guys. Someone would've found you dead in an alley somewhere, and it would've been all, 'Oh, man, look! Dead dude! Major suck!' and that would've been it."

Rory winced again, but nodded understanding. "And same if I'd been different, if I'd moved somewhere else or gone away to college or never had all this--" he waved one hand up and down between his head and his chest, not sure where all the magic stuff inside him was located but knowing it was in there somewhere, "--in the first place."

Manny nodded and said, "Right. Different isn't always better."

Rory drained his mug and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "But what if it *had* been better? Don't you, like, ever wish you could've skated?"

"Sure, sometimes." Manny shrugged and took a slug of coffee. "But that doesn't mean it would've been better. It would've been cool to be able to try, but most skaters don't do shit, you know? It might've been that my family saved up and sacrificed and spent all that money and I washed out at Regionals or something. Or maybe I'd've made it to Nationals or the Olympics or something and then had a meltdown, spent the week playing human Zamboni in front of all the cameras and wishing I'd never even *seen* figure skating. That would've sucked big time, and it was a lot more likely than me being a champion like Rudy."

Rory wanted to protest that trying was always better than not, but he wasn't exactly the poster child for *carpe diem* himself.

And he knew what Manny meant, without the guy whacking him over the head with a hammer. Well, a *bigger* hammer.

Sure, he might've made different choices himself, but they wouldn't have necessarily led him somewhere he'd prefer to be. Rory had a hard time imagining how things could be *worse*, and he could imagine a whole lot of scenarios where things were better, honestly, but he had to admit there were probably a lot of possibilities he *couldn't* imagine -- he'd had a rough lesson in that recently.

The thought of having had a chance to try was still something that stung -- except for one thing, although it was just a whispering idea lurking around the back of his brain, something he didn't even want to acknowledge, not right out. And that was that he wouldn't have met Paul.

The man was annoying and arrogant and bossy enough that Rory wanted to slug him sometimes, but he was calm and strong and protective -- at least with people he knew. He was handsome and sexy in a harsh, rough-cut sort of way, and that deep, resonant voice was enough to get a guy's cock twitching all by itself. Rory had to admit that counted too.

He didn't want to be attracted to Paul -- it would've been so much easier if he could just like him well enough, maybe be friends, or even leave it at being annoyed by his attitude and just tolerate him -- but he couldn't help it. And in a twisted way, that was the best reason he could think of to keep going with life as it was instead of wishing he were living somewhere else a thousand miles away.

Chapter Fourteen

With damp hair, a fresh shirt and underwear, and a duffle with more of same packed and tossed into the back seat, Paul was feeling more human. He could've gone back to pick up Rory, but there were other things he could do more easily alone, so instead of heading south toward Manny's bookstore, he headed west, back toward Los Gatos.

He wanted to check on the fairy wood by the lake. He didn't expect the lady they'd driven off to try again, at least not so soon; they'd stomped her well enough that she wouldn't be back without some significant reinforcements, and that'd take time to organize. Of course, time was pretty wonky Under the Hill, but still, Paul had something tugging at his gut and it didn't feel like upcoming combat.

It was more a need to keep an eye on a new environment, a new place. The Los Gatos town bigshots might decide to cut it all down, or they might decide to thin it out some and keep most of it (less the trees growing up through the houses and streets), but no matter what they decided to do, it wasn't going to happen any time in the next three hours, or three days, or possibly even in the next three weeks. No city government acted that quickly, especially when something was weird but not (so far as they knew) dangerous. They'd talk and discuss, commission studies, try to figure out exactly what'd happened and why, and do their best to find someone to blame. They'd hold press conferences and interviews and go on local talk shows and assure all the voters that they were doing everything possible to deal with the situation. They'd hold hearings and hold a vote and then argue over the results. And eventually they'd get around to actually doing something about the trees.

But a fairy wood was magical. It was created from magic, grown of magic, and it was going to have a glow about it for a while. Any number of things might be attracted to it, and he wanted to make sure there was nothing there that was going to be making off with the neighborhood cats, or dogs, or children.

Paul had no way of knowing ahead of time what he'd run into, though, and speculating about specifics based on zero data would be more likely to set him up for a nasty surprise than give him any insight, so he set that aside for the duration of the trip. Instead, he let his thoughts drift back to the situation with Rory.

Whom he could have swung out to pick up before heading out to the lake, but instead had left with Manny. Just temporarily. They were friends, and they'd both be glad to have some time to hang out.

No, that wasn't the only reason; he was honest enough with himself to admit that.

Yes, he was attracted. And it wasn't just a physical attraction, although there was plenty of that. Rory was smart, picking up on new concepts quickly, even while he was fighting his own sense of what should be.

He wasn't greedy for the power he'd discovered, either. Plenty of other youngsters had tried to dive right into learning to manipulate their new-discovered magical gifts, imagining all sorts of power and wealth was suddenly within reach. Paul was used to having to spend at least the next eight to twelve months, and sometimes several years, convincing a baby mage that no, that wasn't how it worked. Rory apparently hadn't even considered yet that he *could* learn spellcasting, much less started making a list of all the things he planned to magic up for himself.

And despite being in very real danger, and finally realizing it, Rory hadn't tried to deny it or hide from it or demand constant protection. He was afraid, yes, as any sane person would be, but he had courage in the face of his fear.

Paul didn't admire people who were "fearless." They tended to be either blindingly stupid, or so testosterone-poisoned -- whether male or female -- that it worked out to the same thing. Real courage came from being terrified but finding the will to overcome the fear and act anyway. Rory was afraid -- anyone could see that, especially after the incubus incident -- but he went on with his life despite it, minor things like being twitchy about his bedroom aside. Paul had no doubt he'd get over that soon enough.

Of course, facing a lifetime of what you thought were hallucinations and untrustworthy senses, knowing that you might find yourself locked up for your own good or that of the public at some point, wasn't exactly a situation conducive to calm and security. Rory was probably used to living with stress and fear, and he'd done pretty well for himself considering.

He had a lot to learn before he could be really self-sufficient, but there was a lot to admire there too. It wasn't really surprising that Paul felt an attraction. He could tell himself that, could get it on an intellectual level. His gut was still trying to back off, was babbling that it was too dangerous for him to get really close to anyone, but that was bullshit, and once he'd examined it and labeled it, his brain could trash it. Or at least resist it.

It was drama queen crap -- his mother was right, he *had* read too many comic books when he was a kid. But he wasn't Superman, and Rory definitely wasn't Lois Lane -- a villain magnet and constantly in peril, a cheap plot device on legs. Rory'd need someone to watch out for him for a while, sure, but he *could* learn to defend himself and then he'd be fine. He might even be a good team member eventually, if he had any interest. They could certainly use a Blaze when things were tight and the tanks started to run dry.

The rest of it was just his brainless gut responses flailing around, wanting attention of one kind or another. Fear, drama, incipient panic, gooshy romance -- it was all crap. He just hadn't gotten laid in way too long.

He turned off Bascom onto Blossom Hill Road and headed up to the lake. He cruised by and saw the expected barriers and yellow tape, then found a place to park a few blocks away and walked back.

One of the pins on his jacket was a pewter eye, closed in perpetual blindness. He brushed a finger across it when he was within a block of the park, and from then on he had to be careful not to run into anyone on the sidewalk because no one else would be swerving to miss *him*.

Walking past the one bored cop wasn't a problem. Paul stayed on the grass so his footsteps would be muffled, and the young man in uniform -- who must have pissed off someone royally to get stuck guarding trees -- didn't notice the footprint-shaped depressions working their way across the lawn past him.

A clot of academic types, by their ages probably a couple of professors and their entourage of grad students, were spread throughout the overgrown building site taking scientific measurements of various kinds and shouting back and forth to one another with great enthusiasm, but they were too involved in their exploring and theorizing to notice footprints either. Paul headed deeper into the grove, toward the back of the park where the Elven lady had centered her efforts.

It was quieter there than it should have been. The new growth -- trees and bushes and vines and moss -- would be muffling a lot of sound, sure, but not that much. There were cars rumbling by less than a hundred yards away, Paul knew, but he couldn't hear them. The air smelled cool and green, and sweet with flowers that were out of season in December even in California.

Paul stopped in a tiny dell, surrounded by birch trees that appeared to be at least a century old, and brought his magesight up.

Nothing.

Or... no. Not quite nothing. There were no large concentrations -- no invisible gremlins or camouflaged unicorns, no grandfather trees or firebirds' nests. But the entire place had a soft, magical aura about it. As he'd expected, it held the magic of its birth.

He chose a spot out of any obvious pathways, in case the academic contingent decided to migrate in his direction, and sat down cross-legged in the grass. If anything was hiding there, it wouldn't show itself while a mortal was clomping around, so he focused on quiet, pulling his awareness inward until he could feel his heartbeat sending steady, strong shockwaves through his body. His breathing slowed and his senses settled down to quiet receptiveness, and he waited.

After some unnoticed amount of time had passed, a tiny girl the size of his index finger fluttered by on dragonfly wings. She hovered in front of his face for a moment, then gave a chiming giggle and moved off behind a stand of pansies. Paul let her go without trying to speak with her; she was a pixie like *Azzy*, and his chances of getting any useful information out of a pixie he didn't know, versus the much greater chances of getting random babble or a series of practical jokes, weren't worth the gamble.

After another interval, a little man-shaped collection of trash came stumping out from behind one of the birches. Boggles were infinitely adaptable, and that particular one was made up of twigs and leaves, a couple of popsicle sticks and a soda can, some candy wrappers, a dirty old paper

napkin with a fast food logo on it, and what looked like a strip of fur from a dead and half-rotted squirrel.

Boggles were only slightly more intelligent than pixies, but they were uniformly hostile toward mortals. One alone wouldn't dare try to do him harm, but neither would it be willing to give him the slightest help, and he'd probably have ended up the target of its pranks for... well, however long it took the boggle to get bored. Paul watched it shuffle past, glad the spell in his pin hid him from the creature.

A few moments after the boggle vanished into the undergrowth, a small but strong voice from somewhere to Paul's right said, "So? What are you lurking about here for, mortal? This isn't your place, you know!"

Paul searched the ground past his knee, and after some squinting, he finally noticed a homely little woman all in brown. She was about as tall as his forearm was long, and was of some indeterminate middle-age in appearance, which meant absolutely nothing. He gave her a slow nod, projecting respect as well as he could while sitting cross-legged on the ground, and said, "I wouldn't think of trying to claim it. I'm responsible for this part of the mortal realm, however, and I need to know whether anything which dwells here might be dangerous."

"Dangerous? Pish." The little woman rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Nothing dangerous in this place. Oh, possibly to the foolish, but you've sense enough to still your mortal jitters and watch for the way of things, so I imagine you'll do well enough."

"Thank you, Lady," Paul said, keeping his voice solemn and doing his best not to grin. "But I have to be mindful of other mortals, as well, folk who are perhaps not so gifted with sense."

"Well, who cares about them? There are plenty of those and no one will miss a few."

"They have families and friends who would," Paul countered.

"Well, *I* wouldn't miss them, so they'll have to look out for themselves."

"Fair enough," he admitted. "If you don't mind my asking, though, what *do* you care about, here in this place? I wouldn't have expected to see one of the clever-handed here in the mortal realm, not in these times." He'd finally convinced himself that she was indeed a gnome, one of the artificers of the fey. Part mage and part crafter-engineer, they usually kept to their workshops deep Under the Hill, and he'd only seen one once before, quite a few years past.

"This is a new place," she replied, indicating the wood around them with quick swoops of her hands. "There might be business opportunities here -- resources, customers, a chance to be first in a new land."

"So you're scouting the territory, then."

"Just so," she agreed.

"Are the pixies and boggles likely to be able to afford your wares, then?"

Her laugh was deep and penetrating, as though from a much larger creature. "They've neither the brains to appreciate nor the gold to trade. This place is just born, and they're but the foundation."

"So there'll be others, with both brains and gold. Soon?"

"Soon for me? Surely. Soon for you, mortal? How would I know? If you hold fast to your wisdom of still watching, perhaps you may see."

"Perhaps I will. I thank you, Lady."

She nodded to him, then turned around twice and vanished without a word of leave-taking.

A while later, having seen nothing and no one else he cared to speak with, Paul left the way he'd come and drove back to the bookstore while trying to figure out just what the hell was going on.

Was there something nearby which made the area valuable to the gnomes? Some mineral, or the conditions to grow some herb they needed to make... something?

Or something valuable to the elves, maybe? So an elf created the wood, the gnomes did their business, made whatever it was they could make there that the elves wanted? Then presumably had the place to use for their own purposes, since the gnomes were all about what benefited them, as much as they could honorably get, by their own sort of honor.

It was possible that the gnome had simply wandered in to explore a new area, as the pixie and boggle must have, but that left the elves with no reason to create the forest in the first place. The higher fey couldn't stay in the mortal world for any significant length of time without either feeding on mortals' magic or going back Underhill to find prey they could feed upon freely, without having to fight for it. Or at least without having to fight Sentinels for it. Any elves preying upon mortals would be noticed and dealt with soon enough; whatever the forest was good for, it wasn't something the elves could use themselves. At least not permanently.

A vacation resort? Elven timeshares?

Paul smirked to himself while pulling off 85 into heavy traffic. Of course -- south San Jose, four-something in the afternoon, therefore traffic. And long traffic lights.

Even if the elves did want a place to just visit periodically, it wouldn't last, and the fey woman who'd created the forest had to have known that. Assuming the city didn't cut most of it down -- which was pretty much guaranteed they would -- it was in the heart of an area densely populated with mortals, and there was no way over or under the Hill that the fey would be allowed to keep that sort of an enclave. Even if there'd been no local Sentinel team, a concentration of magic and fey folk that strong would attract attention before it could put down any serious roots, and sooner or later, however much of a fight it took, the fey would have been driven out.

The elven lady had to have known that. The gnome lady had to have known that. So why waste power attempting to establish a foothold one couldn't *hold*? Why make plans to establish a permanent business -- the only possibility which would hold any attraction whatsoever for the gnomes -- in a place where you wouldn't be allowed to stay?

It made no sense at all, which told Paul he was missing something.

Chapter Fifteen

Paul blew into the bookstore at almost five, had a brief conversation with Manny about keeping an eye on the fairy wood and letting him know if anything interesting showed up, then collected Rory like a package and swept him off again.

"Do you like Italian? Let's get some dinner before heading home."

"Umm, sure." Rory felt kind of annoyed at being stashed all day like an inconvenient child, then hauled off in a blink on someone else's timetable, and had been trying to figure out how to complain about it without being rude or starting an argument or something, but he did like Italian, so he just nodded and decided to keep going along for a while. He hadn't been out to dinner with anyone else since taking his mom out for Mother's Day, come to think of it.

They drove downtown without saying much. Rory looked out the window at the tiny clusters of Christmas lights appearing here and there in the evening dim, what he could see, anyway, from the parts of the freeway that weren't surrounded by sound walls. When they got off the freeway into downtown proper, it was full dark and looked more Christmasy, with lights and garlands hanging from street lamps, and decorations in the park.

"So, where'd all the stories about elves helping Santa make toys come from?" Rory asked.

Paul obviously caught the relevance without a blink and said, "Some folk tales are just that -- they're not all based on reality."

"Does that mean I don't have to worry about vampires or werewolves or mummies or anything like that?" Rory teased.

"No, you probably don't have to worry about them." Paul shot him a grin that teased right back. "There are a few vampires around, although I've never met one. They keep a low profile for obvious reasons. They can't go Underhill, so they have to make the best of it upstairs. They're effectively immortal, and throwing that away just to be flashy is stupid. The ones who survive aren't stupid."

"Umm, you're kidding, right?"

"Nope. There's a werewolf pack in the Santa Cruz hills, too, near Ben Lomond. They help keep the deer and coyotes down in the area, and run an organic farm when they're not running through the woods in fur."

"Okay, this is just...." Rory trailed off, unable to even figure out what he thought.

"I know." The tease was gone from Paul's voice, and Rory felt a hand squeeze his shoulder for a second.

"At least tell me there aren't any mummies walking around."

"There aren't any mummies walking around."

Rory glared at him. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. That one's just in the movies."

"Well, that's something," Rory muttered.

Paul turned onto a steep, downward-sloping driveway and pushed the button on a garage door opener clipped to the visor. They drove down into a parking garage beneath what'd looked like an apartment building.

"Where are we?"

"This is my place," Paul said. He pulled into a parking spot about halfway back and added, "I'll give you the fifty-cent tour later, but Alessandro's is a ten minute walk from here. No reason to pay for parking when home is this close."

That made sense. Although Rory was curious about what Paul's apartment looked like. From the way he dressed, Rory sort of expected it to be messy, with a few pieces of old furniture and a bunch of hard-rock posters on the walls, and probably a stash of pot somewhere.

"Can I watch you cook drugs in your bathtub?" he asked, keeping his voice light and innocent. He didn't quite flutter his eyelashes, but the thought was there.

Paul laughed and said, "Sure. You can tell your mom all about it."

When they got outside, it was chilly, but not really cold, especially since they were walking. Rory'd grabbed a windbreaker when they'd left his place in the morning, not really expecting to be out after dark, but the exercise kept him from shivering, and within a few minutes they were waiting for seats in the warm and fragrant restaurant.

The padded benches in the waiting area were all taken, so they ended up propping up a chunk of wall. Rory noticed Paul's gaze sweeping around the room. He didn't look unusually tense or anything, and he didn't bother wandering around to see past the barriers and obstructions and milling clusters of people. Probably just habit?

Weirdly enough, Rory got that. He knew exactly what it was like to be constantly watching for monsters, looking out for the things that didn't belong, the ones you caught a bare twitch of out of the corner of your eye. Except Paul *wanted* to see them, knew they were real.

Or were they?

Right there in the middle of a crowd, in a busy Italian restaurant full of bodies and voices and the smells of fennel seed and garlic and tomatoes, the idea that there were actually goblins creeping around right outside seemed crazy. Rory still wasn't sure whether he believed, despite what he'd seen. After all, he'd been seeing things most of his life and had been assured by the best, most highly educated and officially certified authorities that they were hallucinations. He knew why they happened and had strategies for preventing them, and for coping when he saw them anyway. He had medications that reduced the frequency of his episodes, even if nothing had ever actually stopped them.

At least, he *thought* they reduced the frequency. How would he know, really? If they *weren't* just periodic misfirings in his brain, if it really was a matter of catching sight of something that usually stayed hidden, then it wasn't like they'd be on any kind of schedule, right? So if he started a new medication and they went away for a while, was there actually any causality there?

Except the alternative was that there really *were* elves and pixies and goblins (and vampires and werewolves) in the world. Which one was more likely?

"What are you thinking about?" Paul asked quietly.

Rory searched his eyes for a moment, then told the truth. "I'm wondering whether you're actually crazy too, and are trying to pull me down into it."

Paul nodded once. "You'll probably be wondering that for a while. You'll flip back and forth, believing us for a while, then deciding we're all insane, then believing again."

Rory nodded back; that was exactly what'd been happening, and he was both annoyed and relieved that Paul immediately got it.

"All I ask is that you give me the benefit of the doubt if I start shouting orders and shoving you around," Paul continued. "The only time I'll do that is when I absolutely believe something's happening where you could be hurt or killed. Question all you like most of the time, but if we seem to be sharing the same delusions, just go with it, all right?"

"All right," Rory echoed.

"Good." Paul seemed to relax slightly, tension leaving his face and shoulders. "There's something going on Underhill, and we can't figure out what it is. Too much has been happening, too close together. It can't be a coincidence; there has to be some sort of a purpose behind it all. Pelamin -- assuming he's the one ultimately behind whatever's going on -- has been running into a brick wall with our names on it, which means he'll either give up or push harder. I'm planning for the push, which means it's going to get more dangerous before it gets less."

Rory glanced around them from face to face, feeling a sudden panic at the thought that someone might be listening to them, but Paul just smirked.

"What? I'm a writer. I can talk about my new book in public if I want to."

"But--"

"People believe what they want to believe," Paul said. "Think of everything you've seen and heard and felt and been nearly killed by, and you're still doubting. Belief is hard enough for you. For someone who's never experienced anything like that, belief is impossible. If anyone does overhear us, they'll snicker to themselves about the geeks, assume that we're fantasy fans or D&D players or whatever. They'll go home secure in their own superior grasp of reality and that'll be that. So if you have any questions, now's as good a time as any to ask."

"Umm." Rory tried to think of something, but given the opportunity, everything seemed to all mush together. "Umm, what's Underhill? What is it, where is it, what do you mean by that?"

"Under the Hill is where the fey live. Fairyland, beyond the fields we know. Although you can't get there just by walking anymore; the influence of magic is much less than it was a few centuries ago, before the Industrial Revolution spread cold iron through the world. Think of it as a parallel dimension; that's close enough. It takes magic to travel back and forth. Aubrey can cast a Port to Underhill, if he has an mental image of where he's going."

"And Pelamin is the king of Fairyland?"

"He's the king of the enclave we deal with most often," Paul corrected. "Underhill is hard to define. It doesn't map the way the mortal world does -- the geometry is different. Unstable. Space and time don't behave the way we think they should. There's a lot of amorphous whatever there; it takes conscious intention to shape it into something coherent. Pelamin and his court have carved out their own kingdom, their home range, and from what I understand it's sort of stable, mostly, at least as much as they want it to be. And other alliances of higher fey have their own places."

"So they build whatever they want? By magic?"

"Sort of, yes. I think."

"You don't know for sure, though?"

Paul shook his head. "I've only been there a couple of times, and I had other things to focus on while I was visiting. It's not generally a welcoming place for mortals."

Two couples who'd been sitting on a long bench next to them for a while, talking and laughing and making a lot of noise, stood up at the host's call and moved off to get their table. Rory's stomach griped at him, and he hoped their turn would be soon.

Paul watched the lucky strangers walk away, then said, "Backing up a tangent, some of the fey can go back and forth on their own, if they feel like expending the power, although most don't bother anymore. There used to be a lot more magic in the world and millions of superstitious mortals to play with, but now there's not as much profit here for them."

"There used to be permanent Portals, although well hidden, and a mortal usually needed some sort of magical pass-key to get through, whether an object or a phrase to say or whatever. Now the only way back and forth is sheer magic."

"That's... huh. I guess that's good, right? I mean, I liked fairy tales as much as anyone when I was a kid, but most people who wandered into a fairy kingdom or whatever seemed to get out only because they were incredibly lucky or brilliant or something like that."

Paul nodded. "Or incredibly *good*, always doing the right thing, but trust me, those stories were all made up by parents who wanted their kids' behavior to improve. If the fey decide to keep you, they're not going to change their minds and let you go just because you're good and kind."

Rory grinned and asked, "How about the opposite? If you're all nasty and make yourself a big enough pain in the butt, will they toss you out then?"

"No. They'll likely just eat you and be done with it."

Rory drew back, swallowing hard.

"Remember the goblins? They wanted your magic. It's the basic life force -- if they take too much, you die." Paul glanced around, then leaned forward and said, "Some of the higher fey have more impulse control. Goblins tend to live in the moment, and they'll happily kill a golden goose to enjoy the meat and not even think about the eggs. An elf would be more likely to chain you to a wall and feed regularly, letting you recover in between, like cultivating a crop."

"What, like a fast-food dispenser?" Rory was struggling to get his mind around the idea because it was just too weird.

"Trust me, you're *not* McDonald's. You're prime rib right now, and if you keep growing your output, before long you'll be filet mignon with chocolate mousse for dessert."

"So I'm a filet mignon dispenser? You know, you could probably make some money on that, if you could get it to work." Rory knew the joke was stupid, but the whole situation was ridiculous and a dumb joke was the only response he could come up with.

Paul seemed to understand that Rory was hitting his limit. At least, Paul gave him a sympathetic look and changed the subject, and a few minutes later they were called for their table.

Paul picked up the check, but let Rory leave a tip on the table. Al's was a place you went to for the food, not the service, and they'd gotten one of the snotty servers. Paul'd had to snap at him a couple of times, but he'd noticed Rory leaving a generous tip anyway.

It wasn't worth arguing over, so Paul let it go and they headed out into the chilly night. They'd spent the last hour and change talking about regular things -- mundane things. Paul had found that they both watched all three CSI shows, but Paul watched *Numb3rs* and Rory watched *Merlin*. Both of them had all five seasons of the American *Queer as Folk* on DVD, but only Paul had the British version. Rory liked cooking shows, while Paul liked History International. And they'd spent a good fifteen minutes arguing over whether *Star Trek: Enterprise* had rocked or sucked, with Paul sneering and Rory waving metaphorical pompoms.

Despite that particular lapse in judgment, Paul had found himself growing more comfortable with Rory, just hanging out and bullshitting about whatever. Even the *Enterprise* argument had been fun, and neither of them had gotten *too* wrapped up in it.

On the way home, he started planning strategy. He wanted Rory to sleep at his apartment that night, and hoped to eventually coax him to just stay there for a while, at least until they had a handle on what Pelamin was up to. Paul didn't want to leave Rory on his own until he was sure Rory had a decent grip on the reality of magic and how to deal with a new set of dangers. Or for that matter, until Paul had a handle on Rory and what-all he could do. He was obviously a Blaze, and he had magesight, but he might have another talent or three, and they needed to find out before Rory tripped over something on his own. He might well sneeze and burn his house down, which would be ironic, but not in an entertaining way.

Until they had that squared away, Paul wanted to keep Rory close by, and the best place for that was Paul's apartment, with its deep-set wards and alarms. The trick was going to be persuading Rory of that.

Maybe he could bribe Rory with a British QAF marathon?

Strategizing was interrupted, though, when Rory suddenly stopped. Paul stopped in mid-step and did an automatic visual scan for anything that might be dangerous or startling or just weird, but nothing pinged. It was as quiet as downtown ever was in the early evening, dark but peaceful, with a few people walking and some cars going by. He looked at Rory, then followed his gaze to a woman across the street walking a dog on a leash. It looked like some kind of bulldog mix.

"I can get a dog." Rory turned a beaming smile on him, then started walking again.

Paul's stomach twisted; he kept up automatically while trying to figure out how to respond other than a plain "no," or even a "No!" which was his gut-level answer.

"We had a dog, a poodle named Tyler, when I was a kid, but after he died my doctor said it might not be a good idea to get another pet, because if I had an episode and saw him as something else, I might hurt him. I've always been afraid of that, but if all the weird stuff is real and I don't actually hallucinate or anything, then I can get a dog! I love dogs and I've always wanted to get a puppy. I know it's really gay, but they're so cute, baby goldens or maybe another poodle--"

"Rory." Paul just had to interrupt the happy babbling. He put an arm around Rory's shoulders and squeezed, hoping it would communicate understanding and... whatever, positive things and all, but he couldn't just let Rory keep blathering on, and incidentally wanted to make sure Rory didn't get angry and take off.

"What?"

"It's really not a good idea."

"What? Why?" Rory stopped again, and Paul stopped with him.

"Because pets are vulnerable, and they make *you* vulnerable."

"What? Vulnerable how? I mean--"

Paul cut him off, saying, "Because if a troll comes stomping across your backyard, the thing to do is run out the front door and keep going. If your dog is in your backyard, though, you're more likely to run the wrong way to try to save it. And when that doesn't work, then you're still in your backyard with a troll and a dead dog. Your dog is still dead, but you're more likely to get killed too. Even if you don't, you're still left grieving over the pet, whose flattened corpse you have to clean up later. It's just better not to have to deal with it."

He started walking again, his arm still around Rory's shoulders. Rory slipped an arm around Paul's waist as they walked, squeezed hard, and said, "I'm sorry. I forgot about Chessy."

"It's all right. It was a long time ago. Just don't get a dog." After a few seconds' awkward pause, Paul smirked and added, "If you really want a pet, just keep feeding Azzy. He'll stick around, and he's smart enough to vanish if anything dangerous shows up."

Rory snorted out a laugh. "I'll think about it."

Chapter Sixteen

"No, I'd rather go home." Rory crossed his arms and did his best to glare. He didn't have much practice, but figured he did well enough to get the point across.

"It's safer here," Paul argued. "The wards are stronger, and anything that comes after you will be looking there, not here." He had those lines in his forehead that showed up when he was trying to be patient and reasonable but actually wanted to start snapping out orders. And wasn't it funny how Rory'd figured that out about him in such a short time?

"So, what, I'm supposed to just move in with you? Permanently? So you can babysit me forever?" Part of Rory thought that sounded like a way cool idea, but he told that part to sit down and shut up and let his larger head do the thinking for a while.

"It wouldn't be forever. Look, there's something going on, I told you that. If the attempts on you are connected with that, then as soon as we figure out what the hell it is and take care of it, that'll be the end of it." Rory opened his mouth, but Paul bulled on with, "And if it's not connected, then it'll still be only until you can learn to defend yourself, and until we can get some deeper wards on your place and teach you to maintain them yourself."

"So, what, I need to learn to do magic? Well enough to fend off another incubus or something? How long does that usually take?"

Paul glared, then looked away.

"How long? Years? Am I supposed to camp out on your couch all that time?"

Paul leaned back against one wall with a thud. A framed Star Wars poster -- one of the original Hildebrandt pieces -- vibrated at the impact.

The apartment was nice, a two-bedroom with a balcony. The fifty-cent tour Paul had offered when they arrived had traversed the living room, which was relatively neat-ish; a kitchen with no dishes in the sink; an office that looked like someone had backed up a truck and dumped several tons of papers, books and magazines into it, leaving mainly a narrow clear path in the carpet from the door to the computer; and a bedroom with a king size bed, which Rory'd glanced at and then deliberately looked away from. The place was about what you'd expect for a single guy who was old enough to have gotten over the whole Early Dorm Room thing, but wasn't really a neat freak. It definitely wasn't all fashion-chic decorated, like a stereotypical gay man's apartment on TV. Rory's place was actually closer to the supposed gay ideal, but that was his mother's doing, not his.

There hadn't been any drugs in the bathtub, either, and Rory'd teased Paul about it. They'd actually been talking and joking, and Rory'd been having a good time and hoping to maybe take it a step further, until Paul had waved the DVDs for the British Queer as Folk series and

suggested they stay and marathon through the season. Rory'd pointed out that they could take the DVDs to his place, and it'd all gone downhill from there.

"Look," Paul said, "it won't be for years. Or months. Maybe a few weeks? I don't know, but I do know that you're in danger *now*."

"So I'm supposed to hide with you for weeks? Which might slip into months, since you don't know?" Rory shook his head. "Look, I'm not stupid. I'm not going to object if you want to come back with me. That's why you packed a bag, right? Or was that just camouflage?"

"Not... completely." Paul pushed a hand through his hair, then took a couple of steps toward Rory, looking into his eyes like he was trying to do the Jedi mind trick. Heck, for all Rory knew, he *could*. "It's just safer here. What's the difference where we are, if you don't mind my looking out for you?"

"The difference is that I don't want to hide. I don't...." Rory trailed off, trying to figure out how to say it in words, one at a time. "I'm more comfortable at home, I don't want to intrude here, I want to be in my own place, and I don't want to let an incubus chase me out."

"But--"

"If it were going to be just a few days, or even a week or two, that'd be different," Rory continued, raising his voice until Paul shut up again. "But this doesn't sound like a quick fix sort of thing. So, what, are you asking me to move in with you?"

And just said like that, right out, the question had so much baggage Rory expected a bellhop to knock on the door any second.

"There's no reason to get all dramatic about it," Paul said. He threw his hands in the air and paced over to the window, then back, stopping right in front of Rory. "This just isn't that big a deal, and I don't get why we're even having this argument."

"Because you're a stubborn jerk who can't see anything from anyone else's point of view but your own?"

Paul's jaw clenched, then he took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. "All right, I know this is all confusing, and that you're afraid. I get that. That's why I'm trying to help."

That man! Rory wanted to bang his head against a wall, but the every square inch of wall space was covered in either framed posters or bookcases. "You get that I'm afraid, but you don't get that I don't want to give in to it! You keep trying to get me to run over and hide under your coat like a five-year-old, but I'm not and I won't. I might not be a tough, cold demon-killer like you, but I'm not a crying little boy, either."

Paul started to say something, then stopped, then rubbed the side of his face with one hand. Finally, he said, "You're one of the bravest people I know, and that's saying a lot."

They just stared at one another for a few moments, then Rory said, "All right, how about this, then. If you need to watch out for me for the next however many weeks or months or whatever, then fine, I can accept that. But why does it have to be here? If one of us has to move in with the other, why don't you move in with me for a while? You have one bedroom -- I'm *not* counting your office -- and I have five. Or three, not counting *my* office or the library. I have two stories, I have a family room *and* a living room, I have a backyard; you can stay close enough to watch out for invading demons or whatever, but there's enough space that we can stay out of each other's way. If I tried to move in here, we'd be murdering each other within a week. You can have your bedroom, and if it's going to be a long time, I could shovel out one of the others, stick stuff in the fourth bedroom or in the garage or wherever, and you could have an office so you don't have to have your things spread out all over the place downstairs." He thought of something else and looked away for a moment, then added, "You could even bring guys home some time and we could stay out of each other's way."

Paul just stared for a few seconds, then scowled. "The wards aren't strong enough. It takes time and maintenance--"

"So upgrade them, or... whatever. You'll be there every day. You can do whatever you need to do."

"I just..." Paul trailed off, then backed up a step and sat down on the upholstered arm of the couch. "I just don't want to have to scrape your flattened corpse out of the lawn."

Rory stood there looking at him, sorting out in his mind all the different implications of that statement. He'd be willing to bet it said more than Paul had meant it to.

All the impatience and annoyance had left him. Perched sideways on the rounded arm of the couch, with one elbow propped on the back to support his slumping spine, Paul just looked tired.

"That's good," Rory said, his voice quiet. He took a couple of steps forward and brushed one hand over Paul's wind-messed hair. "I don't want you to have to. I don't want to get killed. I don't want to be your puppy. I don't want to be one more stupid, helpless mundane for you to be responsible for."

Paul looked up with a pained scowl and straightened. He reached up with his free hand and took Rory's outstretched wrist in a tight clasp. He didn't move it away, didn't reject the touch, the petting, just held it still. "You're not stupid," he said. "Ignorance is a different thing all together. It's fixable. Stupidity isn't. I wouldn't be bothering if I thought you were stupid."

The "ignorance" thing just made Rory angry all over again, but he made himself stop and breathe and think about it. All right, the distinction Paul was making was valid. "Ignorant" felt insulting, but the basic meaning was just that there were things you didn't know. Rory was definitely ignorant about all this magic stuff, even with all the questions he'd asked and all the things he'd been told and seen and had explained, probably half of which he'd forgotten because his brain couldn't absorb it fast enough. And yes, that was fixable, although it'd take time.

"So we'll fix it." Rory shifted his weight forward, just a little closer. "And we'll compromise, both of us. We'll go back to my place tonight -- I don't have anything to change into anyway. I'll pack some underwear and T-shirts, and after tonight, we'll spend the next few nights here, while we spend the days over there while you upgrade my wards or whatever it is. And when you've set your alarms and strung your barbed wire, we'll both move in there, where it'll be just as safe as here and where we can live together for a while without committing murder."

Paul sighed and scowled and glared, but Rory knew he'd given in, and deliberately didn't smile while Paul said, "I can't do it alone. We'll need help."

"That's fine. You call whoever you want, and we'll have a work party or whatever. I'll provide the meals or buy the pizza or whatever we decide to do -- it'll be like moving. It'll *be* moving, once you're done with all the magical force fields."

An annoyed sounding grunt answered him, but Rory could tell that the answer was still yes, so Paul could grunt and gripe all he wanted.

"Fine," Paul said, echoing Rory just a few seconds earlier. "But you have to promise me you won't let yourself get stepped on."

Rory grinned and leaned the rest of the way, until he was curled over Paul, and his free arm -- the one Paul wasn't still hanging on to -- was wrapped around Paul's shoulders. "I promise," he said. His words were muffled in Paul's thick, messy hair, but a sigh told him he'd been heard.

"I'll hold you to that."

The first response that popped into Rory's head was, *Hold me to whatever you want*. But that was way too cheesy, so he just said "Fine" one more time, and that was that.

Later that evening, while they sat on Rory's couch watching *Queer as Folk*, Paul reflected that he'd lost the battle but signed an acceptable peace treaty.

Thinking about it rationally, he knew that while it was possible Pelamin would send something that could penetrate the wards currently on the house, it wasn't likely. The fey had a particular way of thinking and acting and reacting, even without taking into account the variable time shear between the mortal world and Underhill. There might well not be any further incursion for days or weeks, no matter how much or little subjective time Pelamin took to make his next move. Or something might've come poking around earlier that day while the place was empty; either one was acceptable.

The more immediate danger was sitting right next to him, with a knee pressed against Paul's and a hand steadying the huge bowl of popcorn balanced between Paul's left thigh and Rory's right,

which of course meant that the edge of Rory's hand was resting on Paul's thigh and he hadn't been able to ignore it through the three episodes they'd watched, hot sex or no.

In fact, the hot sex on the screen had made things worse, if anything.

That was a temporary issue, though, and would resolve itself if he could just tough it out. Luckily, the wards would let him know if anything was trying to get in, and he'd have to be supremely distracted to miss that alert. The real issue was his growing fondness for Rory, when he'd promised himself not to become attached to any more small, helpless things.

Which sounded incredibly insulting -- and he'd never say it in so many words to Rory himself -- but for all Rory's wonderful qualities and that damned annoying streak of courage he'd been showing, the fact of the matter was that to any passing fey, Rory was a wonderfully enticing filet mignon with no defenses whatsoever. Most of the fey who spent any significant time in the mortal world were the smaller ones, and they were relatively harmless unless one set out to deliberately provoke them. Rather like *Azzy*, or like the gnome lady he'd met in the park.

Anything larger, however, or anything nasty that worked in packs like the goblins, would eat Rory for lunch, literally, whether immediately on site or after having dragged him away, maybe Underhill, to a lair where they could save him for later, or for several meals.

Whatever happened, there'd be absolutely nothing Rory himself could do about it, which meant he needed to be looked after twenty-four-seven, and any slip was likely to result in his death.

Paul had already slipped enough that his gut clenched at the thought. He knew better than to let himself get attached, but knowing wasn't always enough.

The bowl shifted against his thigh. Rory was fishing around in it for anything worth eating. All that was left was crumbs, though; he put it down on the floor and gave it a shove in *Azzy's* direction, the pixie having predictably shown up again once company and junk food had appeared.

Azzy, predictably enough, took a flying leap and landed in the middle of the bowl, tipping it over and spraying buttery-salty popcorn bits all over the rug.

The look on Rory's face was entertaining, but Paul had to restrain him from bouncing up to do... whatever it was he planned on doing. "Don't worry about it," he said. He pressed Rory back down into the cushions with one hand on his stomach. "*Azzy'll* take care of it."

"But there's grease all over the rug!"

"*Azzy'll* take care of it," Paul repeated with a smirk. "Have some faith."

Rory gave him a dark look, clearly communicating that his faith had better not be misplaced, then huffed out a sigh and settled back onto the couch. He crossed his arms over Paul's hand, trapping it against his stomach.

With anyone else Paul had known under similar circumstances, he'd have assumed the grab with both arms, along with the fingers intertwining with his own a minute later, meant that he'd be getting laid that night. In fact, most guys he'd been this close to would've dragged him off or shoved him down into the cushions if he'd been dense enough not to have picked up on the clear signals.

Rory was different, though, and Paul wasn't sure what he wanted. Hell, Paul wasn't sure at that point what he himself wanted. Sex? Sure, he could use some tension releasing exercise; it'd been a while in general, and having Rory in particular within arm's reach had gotten increasingly distracting. Having passed him off to Manny for most of that day hadn't helped much.

He had the feeling, though, that recreational sex, or even mutual tension-relief assistance, wasn't something Rory was into. He might be wrong -- Paul was definitely willing to admit that he wasn't at all sure what was going on behind those pretty gray eyes more than a third of the time. All right, maybe a quarter.

Which, of course, just made him that much more interesting. Annoying too, absolutely. But the interesting outweighed the annoying, and the annoying was more like a spice, a pinch of pepper in the sauce--

"Paul?"

"Huh?" Paul jolted out of what he realized was a completely idiotic brain-babble and said, "Umm, sorry?"

"I said, do you want to keep going? This is a good place to stop, and I'm getting kind of tired. We could finish tomorrow?"

"Sure, good idea." Paul nodded a bit more vigorously than usual and focused his attention on the time. After midnight; they'd definitely been sitting there a while.

Rory shut off the TV and DVD player and turned off the lights. Paul made a circuit of the downstairs, making sure doors were locked, windows were closed and had dowels in their tracks, and that all the wards were set. The latter was just paranoia, but Paul had a strong attachment to paranoia, especially when he knew for a fact that someone was out to get him. Or out to get someone close to him -- same difference.

Paul followed Rory up the stairs, then paused a couple of steps from the top when Rory stopped. He stood right there at the very top of the staircase, facing slightly right, looking through the door into his darkened bedroom.

After a good ten seconds of silence, Paul was about to suggest that they sleep together again when Rory made a sharp huffing noise and strode into his room.

He flipped on the light and looked around, then took another step in. Then another. One more and he was close enough to the nightstand to turn on the lamp there.

Paul followed him in without saying anything, just stepped around him and checked the wards on the windows, did the same on the small window in the master bathroom. When he was done, Rory was standing in the same place, staring at the bed.

A deep breath that lifted his shoulders for a moment, then he turned around and gave Paul a stiff smile. "G'night."

Paul said, "Night," then did a circuit of the rest of the second floor -- windows, wards, anything that might look out of place. Everything was fine.

He noticed that Rory had left his bedroom door open, so Paul did the same. It felt like sharing space, even though they were in different rooms. Sharing air, keeping the path open for any sounds, any signals.

Paul kicked off his shoes and peeled off his socks. He unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, but left them on. He took off his leather jacket, pulled the black Henley off over his head and tossed it over a chair.

Usually when he was expecting an unfriendly visit, he'd put the jacket back on and sleep in it. It wasn't the most comfortable thing he'd ever worn, but it was worn-in and soft and he'd slept in it often enough that he was used to it.

He ran his fingers over the supple leather, then scowled and muttered, "Fuck it." He laid the jacket on the foot of the bed, within easy reach, and crawled under the covers in just his jeans. Paranoia was only healthy up to a point.

Chapter Seventeen

Rory lay curled up in bed for a long time that night. Sometimes his eyes were closed, when he was pretending to try to sleep. Sometimes he stared at the shadows, struggling to see into the darkness, to spot anything that might be lurking. The usual neighborhood sounds -- cars going by, dogs barking, cats yowling, the wind shivering the leaves -- kept his muscles tense and his ears straining.

He knew the chances of the incubus trying again were low to non-existent, but he couldn't convince his gut of that, and he was tense with the anticipation of hearing that low voice calling his name once more.

Through it all, his brain babbled at him non-stop. Racing thoughts were a familiar symptom, and he had relaxation and meditation techniques for breaking the gush of words swirling through his mind, but that night he just let it all flow. It was all real; his worries weren't based on imagination or hallucination, and pushing it away seemed kind of ridiculous, like another kind of hiding.

Or maybe that was just an excuse, but at any rate, Rory spent way too much time that night taking out all his worries and fears and examining them in detail.

*Magic, goblins, incubuses -- incubi? Sex and lies and power and lists of things to keep track of -- what's real and what's not and what can hurt you and what **would** hurt you and what could but probably won't, except I don't know what might or might not set something off, even Azzzy really....*

It was all overwhelming and most of the time he just tried to ignore it, to deal with what was in front of him, with what needed attention right then and there. And for the last couple of days that'd been mostly Paul, which was its own kettle of weasels because the man was an infuriating ball of tangled up contradictions. Attractive, yes, but that was the least of it. That just made things more confusing, made it harder for Rory to think with his larger head. Past that, there were times when he wanted to whack Paul with a baseball bat, try to jar loose a few crumbs of compassion or sensitivity or even make him give a damn about anyone outside his own little group.

Except what he did was all *for* everyone else, because the people in his group seemed like they could take care of themselves no problem, so why bother chasing away the monsters that were miles away? Obviously he did care, or cared about *something* -- maybe it was just the broken rules that pissed him off?

Or maybe they were under orders? Paul had said they weren't paid, but there might still be some sort of organization, with people assigned to different places to protect their territories from the monsters.

He had to grin at the thought of Paul having a boss. Whoever it was probably went through a lot of antacids.

That image was funny enough to derail his train of thought, and it gave him something to imagine in his dreams when he slept. The dream had just turned kind of hot when a loud, liquid SMACK! jolted Rory out of sleep.

The darkness pressed in around him, and his ears strained while he struggled to listen, to figure out what was going on without moving. He was completely awake, which was weird, because usually it took a while to get all his neurons firing when he first woke up, but his heart slammed in his chest, and he could feel the rushing energy of fear-adrenaline.

A slurping noise from right over his head sent him bolting out of the bed. He was across the room in less than a second and slammed into the far wall with his back pressed flat against it, staring at a splotch-shaped thing splashed against his window. It was moving.

He'd just become aware of a strange, vibrating, humming feeling in his bones when Paul came slamming into the room, half-dressed like he'd been the other night. He snarled something that came out low and garbled, but just from the tone it sounded like cussing. Paul crawled right up onto the bed, approaching the window head-on with both hands held out before him, palms parallel to the glass. The mattress sank under his knees, and his progress was awkward but steady.

Rory sucked in a deep breath, then another. Paul would take care of it, whatever it was splattered against the outside of the window like a snail crawling up the side of an aquarium, except it wasn't even close to a snail. It looked like a giant amoeba made of snot, and it oozed pseudopods around the edges of the glass. Rory was pretty sure it was trying to find a way in, and he was very glad that it was December and the window was closed.

Paul had his hands flat on the glass, and it looked like he was pushing as hard as he could. The window flexed back and forth, and the aluminum frame groaned in complaint.

"Rory!" Paul shouted, without looking around. "Can you see the wards? The glow around the window? Or even in the glass?"

"No, I-- wait, yes!" The weird vibration he'd felt before was like a chord struck in his bones. It shifted to a clearer pitch -- which sounded stupid, but that was the only way Rory could think of to describe the feeling -- and suddenly the windows glowed green.

"Get over here!"

"What? No!"

"Get over here, *now!* This fucker is strong and I need you!"

"I don't know what to do!"

"Just get the fuck *over* here!"

Rory scrambled onto the bed and crawled up behind Paul. He kept his eyes down, focused on the spread, then the rumpled covers, then Paul's dark jeans, anything to avoid looking at the huge blob of live snot that really *was* trying to get him.

"Kneel behind me, with your hands on my shoulders."

Rory straddled Paul's legs -- having absolutely no problem keeping his mind away from any sexy thoughts because, hey, huge blob of live snot -- and put his hands on Paul's shoulders. Or at least, on the supple leather of Paul's jacket. "Would it be better to get rid of the jacket? I can help?"

"No!"

Rory jerked his hands off it, startled by Paul's shotgun blast of a denial.

"Rory...." Paul muttered something Rory couldn't make out, then said, "No time to be nice, all right? Just grab my shoulders, now, and hold on."

Hands to shoulders, check.

"Now, focus on the wards on the window. The glowing energy, it's like a flowing orange river--"

"Green," Rory said. He interrupted, because it seemed like the kind of thing that might be important.

"All right, you see it in green, fine, whatever."

Or maybe not.

"Focus on the way it flows. It's moving, can you see that?"

"Umm...." Rory squinted at the window, trying really hard not to look at the blob of snot oozing - - it was the size of a basketball at least! -- oozing across the window, leaving slime trails like a huge snail only goopier.

The glow blinked out for a moment and he started panicking, but Paul said, "Relax, don't try to force it, just look past it, through it...."

Another deep breath, along with Paul's advice, and the green glow was there again. "All right, I see it."

"Good, excellent. Now, push it in the direction it's flowing. Don't take your hands off my shoulders -- push my shoulders with your hands while you're pushing the glowing energy with your mind."

"How?" Rory had no clue what he was supposed to do and felt like he was about to melt down right there and then the snot-monster would get in and eat him and he'd die of gross right there on his own bed.

"Don't worry about how, just imagine you're doing it. Come on, push for me!"

Rory clamped his mouth shut and pushed. He gripped Paul's shoulders through the heavy leather and pushed him toward the window, while glaring at the rippling green glow-stuff in and around the glass. Move, move, move....

And it did. Or rather, it was already moving, but it started moving faster, and the glow got brighter.

"There, good! Keep going!"

The praise made it easier, in some weird, don't-think-about-it way. The window brightened until it was hard to look at and Rory had to peer at it through squinted eyes. The snot monster's movements were jerkier, and it sucked more of itself into the center mass, withdrawing the pseudopod things. Rory watched it gather itself and hoped it was getting ready to leave.

No such luck. Instead, it spread out until it was the size of a platter, then withdrew into a bowl shape with the rim on the window and most of its mass down at the "bottom" of the bowl, a good arm's reach (not that Rory would actually stick his arm out there, even if the window weren't in the way) and then slammed itself into the glass.

The whole pane shattered into shards with a loud crash and then the crunchy patter of falling bits, while the shield flared like an electric lime-green sun for just a second or so. There was a sudden bubbling hiss that went on and on, and when Rory could open his eyes again, frantically blinking the tears away, his window frame was covered with dried-on smears, like from a really rotten, brown scrambled egg, and the snot monster was gone.

A few seconds later, before Rory had even had a chance to figure out what had happened or integrate it into his quickly-changing mental manual of How The World Works, or even notice that he was getting gooseflesh from the cold wind blowing in the window, Paul shifted around and crawled carefully off the bed, then took Rory by the hands and guided him to the floor.

"Careful, there's glass there -- step on top of my feet or you'll get cut."

"But you'll--"

"I'm already cut -- it doesn't matter. Come on, a step at a time away from the bed."

Rory let Paul maneuver him into the middle of the room where there wasn't much glass, then insisted on walking by himself. He looked over his shoulder and felt his stomach twist. "My mother is going to have a cardiac."

"Why does she even have to know?" Paul asked, sounding completely unfazed. "We can have it fixed tomorrow and there you go. Unless she shows up while the window guy is working, there's no reason to tell her."

That... sounded way too easy. "I'm, umm, not very good at lying to Mom."

"So don't. Just don't mention it. If she doesn't ask, 'So, son, have any monsters shattered your bedroom window lately?' there's no reason to bring it up."

"I guess. I mean, yeah, that'd work."

Paul gave him a smirk and asked, "What, did you break a window with a baseball or something as a kid?"

"No! I mean, no, I never broke anything. I just-- right. Whatever, it'll work out. I'm tired and I'm kind of freaked out and I don't care about Mom right now." Rory glanced over his shoulder once more, then cocked his head at Paul. "What the heck *was* that thing anyway?"

"A nebranikker."

"A what?" Rory wasn't even sure he'd heard right. Whatever it was, he didn't remember anything like it showing up in fairy tales.

"It's from the Old English," Paul said with a perfectly straight face, "much mangled through the last millennium or so. It essentially translates to 'watery snot monster.'"

Rory couldn't help it; he started giggling. "That's it. I'm still asleep."

Paul took his arm again and tugged him toward the door. "Fine, stay asleep while I get you into bed."

Rory didn't have the energy to argue, and didn't want to anyway. He let Paul steer him down the hall, and they ended up in the spare room together, just like the previous night. It was like the universe was conspiring to get them into bed together.

That was the last thought he had before falling back to sleep.

The first thought he had when he woke up was that it was really weird that he'd been able to get to sleep that fast, because, you know, snot monster -- watery snot monster -- breaking his window trying to get at him.

At some point, though, it seemed like his brain had just said, fine, enough, whatever -- we'll deal with all this stuff later -- and zonked on him. Which was fine with Rory, because lying awake the whole night all tense and afraid wasn't his favorite activity.

Paul's side of the bed was empty again; the man seemed to have an internal alarm clock, or maybe a huge inner buzz of energy that wouldn't let him sleep in, no matter what had happened the night before.

The sky outside the window was blue and clear, and the trees were swaying. Cold and windy, but not raining. Rory went back to his (very cold) room and pulled on a pair of jeans, a cotton sweater, and a pair of socks, then headed downstairs in search of coffee.

His kitchen was full of people and laptops again; it was like a replay of the other morning, after the incubus thing. There was coffee in the pot, too, just like before, and enough scrambled eggs and bacon in a covered pan on the stove to make himself a decent plate.

Rory decided that he was fine with having his place invaded periodically so long as the invaders made coffee. He fixed himself a mug and settled down with it and the plate between Paul and Cal, with Azzy in his lap, content to shovel in food and listen to the others for a while.

Aubrey was saying, "But Willowen hasn't updated his blog in almost four days. He's *never* gone that long before, and I can't imagine anyone persuading him to stay offline for that amount of time. He has to be either hiding or incarcerated somewhere Underhill."

Paul shook his head while waving half a strip of bacon in the air and said, "Unless someone offered him a puzzle he couldn't resist. For something sufficiently twisty to engage him, I imagine he'd agree to give up the internet for a while, at least while it had him absorbed."

Aubrey scowled at his screen, then shrugged. "Maybe."

Cal poked him in the arm and teased, "Definitely. You're two of a kind, you and Willowen. You'd have died of starvation a dozen times over if I didn't pull you out of your working daze and stuff food down you periodically."

Aubrey glared at him, then twiddled a glowing orange pattern in the air with one hand and released it at Cal, who immediately grew a pair of donkey's ears.

Cal seemed undismayed and just commented, "He only does that when he knows I'm right."

"Disrespectful brat," Aubrey muttered. "Just for that, you can remove it yourself."

Cal groaned theatrically, but Rory didn't think he was really getting the full effect of the supposed punishment.

Aubrey ignored him and looked across at Rory. "So, have you thought about what you want to do with all that power you're carrying around? You really should learn to control it -- it can get away from you if you don't. You look like a nice, *respectful* young man who'd appreciate it when others go out of their way for him. I could teach you a few things about casting if you like."

Rory paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. He really *hadn't* thought about it, about learning to actually *do* magic himself, but now that he had he'd really rather have Paul teach him. Just because he knew Paul a bit better and didn't want to impose on someone who was still mostly a stranger, and besides, Aubrey already had a student and was probably just kidding to tease Cal anyway. He glanced over at Paul, trying not to hope for anything in particular.

Whatever else Paul could do, though, he obviously wasn't a mind reader, because he just raised an eyebrow and said, "Better take him up on it while you can. He's the best Master Mage on the mortal side, and a good teacher -- even got *Cal* pulling rabbits out of hats, after a few months of lectures and beatings."

"Hey!"

Paul ducked, and a blob of scrambled eggs flew past his ear. Rory felt Azzy leap, and the pixie snagged the eggs out of the air with his wide-open mouth, then ricocheted off the window and landed back in Rory's lap.

"Could've used Azzy yesterday," Cal commented, as though he hadn't been the one flinging food. "Had these three kids who started a food-fight, and we were *still* scraping potato out of the paneling this morning."

"You're stalling," said Aubrey pointedly. "And you've still got ass's ears. I'll grant you they're appropriate, but still, I gave you an assignment."

"Yes, O Master," Cal intoned, bowing as well as he could from his chair before taking another bite of eggs.

"I could give you a muzzle to match and then maybe you'd be more motivated," Aubrey pondered, idly drawing patterns in the air with the tines of his fork.

Rory watched in fascination -- they glowed in four colors, one for each tine, and hovered in the air for only a few seconds before fading.

"So, what do you say? Are you interested?"

It took Rory a moment to realize that Aubrey was talking to him once more. He looked at Paul for a second, but got only an encouraging nod. "Umm, can I think about it for a bit?" he asked. "I haven't really considered it at all and never thought I'd, I mean...." He trailed off awkwardly, then said, "I'm going to go get the paper and the mail. I'll be back in a few minutes." He stood up and dumped his plate in the sink, where Azzy immediately hopped down to scarf his leftovers, stopped at the hall closet to shove his feet into sneakers, and headed outside.

The paper was up on the porch, and he tossed it in the door. The mailbox was down at the curb, though. He thought about grabbing a jacket, then shrugged. He'd only be out for a minute, and it wasn't *that* cold anyway.

He'd just fished two bills, three credit card offers, and a catalog out of the box when a huge, furry hand clamped itself over his face. He dropped the mail and tried to jerk away, but whatever had him was too strong. He felt asphalt under his feet and then grass again when he was hauled across the street and into another front yard. Then his stomach twisted and he felt a falling sensation and everything changed.

Chapter Eighteen

Paul was poring over the last month's worth of a local online gossip column, trying to see if any of the other younger fey had dropped out of sight recently. He was also trying to ignore Cal's muttering -- he'd finally settled down to getting rid of the ass's ears, but wasn't having a lot of luck. He'd managed to shrink them down to around horse-size once, before they'd turned bright orange and multiplied. He'd had four growing out of each side of his head for the last ten minutes, and whenever he managed to get rid of one, another sprouted, in a different color. The effect was rather cheerful at that point, although Cal failed to see the humor.

Cal also failed to notice that Aubrey was diddling with him from behind his back. The Master Mage was ostensibly scanning through more of Willowen's blog, trying to figure out just what he'd been working on at the time he'd vanished, and so far as Paul could tell he *was* working on that and taking extensive notes. But he was also keeping an eye on Cal and quietly thwarting him at every magical turn.

Paul saw no reason to enlighten Cal; it was clear that the whole point of this lesson was that a mage who grew preoccupied to the point of not noticing magic being worked in his vicinity, much less upon his person, was fated to die young and in an unpleasantly creative manner. Paul had seen it happen in the past and didn't want to see it happen to Cal, so he blocked out his fumbling and swearing as well as he could and focused on his own task.

"Azy, go away." Aubrey scooped the pixie up out of his lap and pitched it over his shoulder. Azy bounced off a wall, managed to land back on the kitchen table and settled down next to Aubrey's laptop, creeping an inch or so closer every few seconds.

"Why don't you go play with Rory?" asked Paul. Come to think of it, it was unusual for Azy to be away from Rory unless he'd found something to eat elsewhere.

"Rory ain't here," said Azy, with a sad shrug. "Aubrey doesn't smell as good as Rory, but he's next best so I'm staying here, and besides there's Cal too, he's kinda fun to watch."

"What do you mean Rory's not here?" Paul's head snapped up, and he was suddenly aware that Rory had been gone far too long for someone who'd just stepped out for the mail.

"Not here like gone. A coupla big guys grabbed him when he went out, and no way was I following 'cause I don't want 'em ta rip my arms off."

"Fucking hell!" Paul bolted outside and scanned the street, but it was empty. A scattering trail of mail led from the box by the curb in the direction the wind was blowing. He ignored it and followed a dimming trail of magical residue across the street to a spot just a few meters too far away from his wards for any alarms to have been triggered, even by a magical working of that magnitude -- there was a splashed shadow of magic in the characteristic half-circle shape that marked where a Portal had been opened. And through the trail and across the straight-line

threshold of the Portal was the fine, gold thread of Rory's magic, jerky and twisted in the way that only a struggle caused, up to the edge and cut off.

"Fuck!" *Why didn't I go with him? All this trouble to guard him and an attack last night and I let him go outside by **himself**? Stupid ass!*

"Trolls," said Aubrey, his voice low and calm.

Paul spun around and saw Aubrey studying the results of a spell he'd woven along the length of the trail across the street. He noticed Cal on the other side and a yard down collecting envelopes, sans ass's ears, doubtless due to Aubrey. In the middle of panic and self-recrimination, he wondered if Aubrey would put them back some time later and make Cal take up where he'd left off. Knowing Aubrey, probably so.

"At least we have a better idea of what he's after."

Paul looked back at Aubrey, noticed that he'd banished the spell that had sensed the trolls and was now working on the Portal site. "We do?"

"Of course." This spell was much more complicated, requiring both hands and multiple colors, but Aubrey was able to carry on a conversation without losing his place. "Why would anyone want Rory? He needs a power source, obviously."

"There are a lot more reasons to want Rory than just his power," snarled Paul.

Aubrey shot him an amused glance. "You're right. He's a sweet boy. I meant someone who doesn't know him, however. For Pelamin, the only obvious attractant is Rory's magic, which means he's planning either something overwhelming Underhill or a foray into this world. Even with Rory, he'd never be able to overpower any of the other enclaves, much less go up against the Unseelie -- not unless he had a lot of other firepower lined up as well, with Rory being the last big gun that pushed an invasion over into the realm of the barely possible. My bet is he wants to establish a base here, which means he needs a well-stocked larder. He could grab enough humans to attract a lot of unwelcome attention, or he could find himself a Blaze. Ergo, Rory."

"And I handed him right over with a damn ribbon around his neck!"

"Perhaps," said Aubrey, his voice still maddeningly calm, "but you're not the only one who was there. I didn't think anything of it either, although if I'd noticed coming in that the mailbox wasn't up on the porch where it belongs, I might've squawked it. But I didn't and you didn't and ripping yourself up over it isn't going to help. I'll have a destination in a few minutes, so why don't you go figure out what we're going to do and what we need to do it?"

Paul spun around on his heel and strode back to the house without another word. He'd long ago learned to see past Aubrey's pretty-twink looks and pay attention to the elderly mage who gave good advice.

"--so Willowen was probably working on compiling power differentials between Underhill and the mortal world, which makes sense if you think about it. He was never interested in mortal culture as such, so why else maintain rooms here? I should've seen it before if I'd had any reason to consider his situation on that level. But whatever amount of progress he's made, it'd clearly be useful if Pelamin is planning on establishing a beachhead here, so--"

Paul had to force himself to listen to Aubrey when his attention was fighting to stay on Manny. Manny, who was reclining on the sofa with his eyes closed while he tried to seek out Rory's location. If Manny could find him, Aubrey could get an image out of his mind, with some effort, and use that to cast a Port. It'd make things a lot easier, and just then "fast" was exactly what they needed, but it probably wasn't going to work. Manny'd been at it for almost twenty minutes already, and it was clear that whoever had Rory had an impenetrable Obscure spell on him.

Manny would seek all afternoon, but if he were going to get anything at all, he'd have gotten it already. This wasn't getting them anywhere. Much as it killed him to call it off, Paul said, "Manny, stop."

"Hmm?" Manny looked up and opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, but it's like he doesn't exist."

"I know," Paul replied, trying to put at least a scrap of reassurance in his voice. It wasn't Manny's fault this wasn't working. "It was always a long shot -- Pelamin would have to be a complete idiot to snatch him and then leave him out in the open for anyone to find. I know you can't find Pelamin--"

Manny shook his head before Paul even finished his sentence. Pelamin was the most powerful high fey in the enclave, and any Seeker who tried to find him would be instantly detected. Depending upon the king's mood, he might be merely smacked hard as he was tossed out of the royal mind, or he might find himself a drooling wreck with a brain turned to cottage cheese. Manny wouldn't do it even if Paul asked it of him, and Paul wasn't stupid enough to ask.

"--but could you try Willowen? If we're right and he's working for Pelamin on this, he might be nearby."

"Sure," said Manny. "Although he might detect it. It depends how preoccupied he is."

"This *is* Willowen we're talking about," Aubrey commented sardonically. "I don't think we need to worry too much about that."

"True." Manny smiled in agreement before settling back once more.

Paul hoped like hell this would work, because he didn't have any other ideas. Aubrey's earlier tracing of the Portal Rory had been taken through had resulted in a location out in the wildlands,

the chaotic territory Under the Hill between enclaves. Picking up a trail from there would be damn near impossible, and given they'd already thwarted at least one attempt to kidnap Rory -- two if the goblins had actually had an assignment besides gorging themselves on him -- it was likely the place was booby trapped with all sorts of nasties. He'd take them there if he had to, but would much prefer an alternative. So far as Pelamin knew, *they* didn't know about Willowen, so there was no reason to have him either obscured or planted as bait. Paul hoped.

"Got him!"

Yes! Paul managed not to yell it out loud, but it was definitely echoing around in his skull.

Aubrey drew a quick sigil that would let him take the image out of Manny's mind -- relatively simple, since Manny would be cooperating.

Once Aubrey had his image and started casting the Port, Paul touched Cal on the shoulder and murmured, "Copy Manny? In case?"

Cal nodded and went over to hold a hand out to Manny, whispering something, probably a quick request for permission. Cal was a Mimic, which let him copy talents from other people. He didn't get the knowledge or experience with it, so having him copy Aubrey to boost his casting ability wouldn't do him much good, but seeking and truesight were pretty straightforward, and Cal had used them both before.

Once Cal had copied him, Manny came to sit next to Paul and described the space he'd seen Willowen in. It'd looked like a study or workroom, and there was no one else with him. He might be off in a corner of Pelamin's palace, but then again he might not be; if not, they'd have to port again to get to wherever Rory was. Assuming Willowen knew. Assuming he'd tell them.

Later. He'd worry about that when the time came, when they had some idea of what kind of mood Willowen was in. You never knew with the fey, and Willowen was a bit odd even for an elf. Willowen knew Aubrey, and the two of them got along well enough -- their magical geekiness transcending species, apparently -- but that didn't necessarily mean he'd be all eager to help them.

Finding out that Willowen wasn't right there wherever Rory was, though, confirmed that Paul had made the right choice in having a backup seeker/seer. If anything happened to Manny, they could be stalled out right there without a backup. They could get home, since Aubrey knew any number of places Upstairs well enough to take them to if the balloon went up. Holding off attackers for ten minutes while he built a Port wasn't fun, but they'd done it before and come out with only repairable injuries. Getting someplace else Downstairs, though, depended on having a clear image of it; having two people able to find that image made Paul feel better.

Of course, if they lost Aubrey, they were screwed. He tried not to think about that, because there was nothing they could do to back up their only transport. The Portal spell was beyond Cal's abilities and probably would be for years, and... well, there you go.

Enough. They were as prepared as they were going to be, and worrying beyond that point would just get him twisted up inside. It was time to focus outward, on what was happening, rather than inward on what might happen.

"Done," Aubrey called. "Let's go before something takes it down."

Perfect timing. Paul patted his jacket where his screwdriver was stowed, and they all headed out to get Rory back.

Rory stared unblinking at the beautiful, frescoed ceiling, oblivious to its exquisitely painted scenes and figures. King Pelamin's palace was a wonderland of lush nature and fairy craftsmanship; in the weeks since he'd been dragged there, literally kicking and screaming, Rory had become numb to it.

The two monsters that had captured him at the mailbox had hauled him through a bewildering, ever-changing landscape. They'd gone slowly, dawdling and stopping often along the way. Their filthy hands were always on him, rubbing and scratching and clutching, and the longer he was with them the more exhausted he'd felt. One had tried to take a bite out of his shoulder, but the other had knocked it away with a heavy clout and a roar of anger. He hadn't understood their bellowing, but the one that'd hit the other had said "Pelamin" at least twice; Rory had assumed the elf-king wanted him in one piece and more or less healthy.

By the time they'd reached their destination, Rory had been in no condition to notice nor to care about much of anything. The two monsters had picked him up, one by an arm and the other by a leg, and had carried him the last however far it had been, bounding along and roaring every now and then, apparently just for the fun of it. Rory had retained only enough consciousness to realize that they'd been draining him -- consuming his magic. When they'd dumped him down at the foot of their king's throne, the ruler had hissed his anger and barked dire-sounding orders. Rory had heard the two monsters bellowing again -- and not in fun this time -- just before he'd passed out.

That had been weeks ago. Maybe months -- the light Underhill was a perpetual dim twilight, and days passed only in the sense that meals and sleeping periods came and went. Both were irregular, though, or at least seemed so. There might be a ball or a hunt that went on for days, followed by a series of meals in quick succession, consumed hurriedly between other entertainments, and then a never-ending festival.

The event going on right then was a banquet, and Rory wondered dully if it would ever end. King Pelamin's banquet tables were equipped with golden shackles at each corner, and Rory had found himself to be the featured course at the royal table whenever the king dined. Contrary to the illustrations in books of fairy tales, Elves didn't dine upon nectar and dew and ambrosia or whatever-all they were supposed to eat. Elves consumed magic, which, as he'd been told before but hadn't quite believed, made Rory a gourmet delight.

Only the most favored of courtiers and allies were allowed to gather at the royal table; lesser guests had to satisfy themselves with other "dishes," humans or lower fey who were carried in and fastened down and drunk dry. They started out wailing and thrashing, then grew ever-more quiet and still until they finally went limp. Servants took them away and brought in the next "course," a new person or being to be drained of magic.

Rory himself lasted much longer than any of the other humans brought in for Pelamin's feasts. And he'd *been* lasting longer and longer as time went on. The king had been happy to explain to him that the more his magic was drawn off, the more would replenish. By draining him to near-death over and over, they were growing his magic, cultivating him like a fertile field to provide an ever-richer harvest of the power they craved.

And, apparently, needed. The king grew impatient as time passed, even as he exclaimed with glee at the new heights to which Rory's magic swelled, the nearly blinding glow -- the Blaze -- that even Rory could see all the time now.

If nothing else, he'd perfected his ability to sense magic. There was magic everywhere there -- carved into the walls and paved into the floors and painted into the ceilings. The furnishings and the decor and the fey themselves shone with magic in a swirl of colors that made the physical part of the world fade to obscurity.

Just as Rory's memories of home had faded into vague flashes, like scenes from a barely-recalled dream. Just as Rory's hopes of being rescued had faded into an apathetic miasma of depression. It had been so long. He was sure -- he *knew* -- that Paul would have come after him, would have tried to find him, to get him back. But as time passed, he'd become equally convinced that the attempt had failed. It must have. It had been so long.

They were dead. It was the only explanation.

Rory spent his nights shackled to one corner of King Pelamin's enormous bed, manacles of silver around his wrists. Not for the reason he'd initially feared -- the higher fey had no desire for congress with mortals. The look on Pelamin's face when Rory had tried to scramble away from him that first night suggested that he'd sooner mate with an ape or a troll, right before he'd kicked Rory off the mattress. Rory had slept on the floor ever since, secured to the royal bed only to prevent anyone's stealing him away.

Pelamin wasn't worried that he'd run. Where would he go? Without the proper spell and the ability to cast it, he was trapped Underhill, and without the king's iron discipline protecting him, he'd have been drained dry by the first creatures he encountered, his shriveled husk discarded.

Times when he was left alone in the perpetual dim, Rory began to play with his magic. He remembered Paul telling him he should just pretend he was making the power flow and how it'd worked after some fumbling. There on the floor next to Pelamin's bed, where he was left whenever he wasn't wanted for something, he pretended he was making a ball of light on the

floor in front of him. It took a lot of pretending, but he could eventually see the glow. It was like a tiny yellow sun the size of his fingertip. It wasn't much, but it was something, and it helped distract him when the depression seemed overwhelming -- something he could accomplish and control, however small.

Sometimes, when other entertainments lulled, the courtiers amused themselves with Rory. They dressed him in spider-silk and gilded leather, silver and gold and gems. They painted his face, cooing over how "cunning" and "adorable" he was. And one fairy with a giggle like distant chimes had worked a spell to grow his hair out long, down to his knees, so they could braid it with glittering ornaments. When they were finished, however many hours later, he was always exhausted; even with the king's command protecting him, they couldn't help feeding from him, a small sip with each light touch, a tiny taste with each delicate hand that brushed across his hair.

And in the end, he was a caricature of all of them. The clothing and jewels and decorations had been brought forth from the cast-aside wardrobes of the fey lords as they'd dressed him up, but through it all they'd been laughing, and when they were finished, they brought him round to anyone who hadn't been in on the fun so they could see him too, and they all laughed merrily.

One delicate lady had conjured a mirror, that Rory might see himself. He'd hardly recognized the image -- it was beautiful, in an otherworldly, completely alien way. But to the jesting, giggling crowd about him, he was no more than a crude poppet, like a chimp in human clothing.

To Pelamin, he was a weapon to be used until he finally wore out. To these others, he was a pet, to be played with until they grew bored with him. And then what? Chained to the king's bed, like a dog tied up in the back yard, brought out only when there were scraps to lick up?

He slumped down onto the floor, the smooth marble cool against his cheek, and thought about being dead. At least he'd be with Paul, whose face he could no longer bring to mind. Only Paul's voice, that deep, velvet voice remained in his memory. He thought, *Help me*, but there was no power behind it, no true desire, not even enough energy to make it a wish. He lay on the floor while the fairy court sang and danced around him, and contemplated oblivion.

Chapter Nineteen

Two minutes later, Paul and Cal burst through Aubrey's Port into an oak paneled study. They dodged right and left, bracketing the gash in space and scanning the room for any waiting enemies while the others came through. There were none of the hostile fey -- no trolls, no boggles, not even a gang of goblins. Only Willowen sat at the desk under the window, his chair swiveled around so he could watch them with his usual curious expression as they tumbled out onto his rug in a variety of martial stances.

"If you tell me what you're looking for," he said, "I can probably help you find it if it's here. Or if you're just visiting, I can manage some tea."

Paul relaxed slightly and walked over to bow to their host. "My apologies for bursting in uninvited and unannounced," he said. "Our errand is rather urgent, however."

"I imagine it must be. If you'll entertain me for a while, I'll help you with it."

Somehow, Paul didn't think Willowen quite comprehended the definition of the word "urgent," although he had to admit that was a common failing among the immortals, even the young ones. They needed his cooperation, however, so Paul forced his desperation into grumbling submission and said, "Thank you."

Aubrey approached and settled into a carved wooden chair next to Willowen's desk. He propped his head up on one elbow on the tabletop and asked, "How's your project going? You were looking into the power gradient between Underhill and Upstairs, yes?"

That was definitely *not* the first thing Paul would have asked about, but he restrained himself to merely a clenched jaw and stayed silent. Willowen knew and liked Aubrey, as much as he liked anyone. They thought alike, as much as a human and an immortal ever could, and Paul had chosen Aubrey to question Willowen. Paul wasn't going to second-guess Aubrey, no matter how much he might want to.

"Oh, that." Willowen made an impatient throwing-away motion with his hand and shook his head. "I finished that up ages ago. It was boring anyway -- just data collection. Any idiot with a pen and a scroll and a walnut-sized brain in its head could've done it."

"Ahh. Too bad you had to waste your time with it." Aubrey's tone was sympathetic. "Why bother, then?"

Willowen rolled his eyes. "His Puffed-Up Majesty, of course. He has an idea in his head about setting up a colony or something Outside. It won't work, of course, but why should he listen to *me*? He should appoint a courtier to do his thinking for him, except they're all as short-sighted as he is. Can't see beyond the next banquet, the next war, the next hunt."

"Why wouldn't it work?" Aubrey asked. "He has a Blaze, doesn't he?"

Willowen rolled his eyes and reached over to knock on Aubrey's forehead with his fist. "Hello? Anyone home?" he asked, his voice high-pitched with sarcasm. "Where should I start? First, his Clueless Majesty is quite pleased with the way his cultivated field is bearing, but can't quite comprehend that the reason his Blaze is churning out so much power is because he's *here*. He's in the perfect environment for producing magic, but once he's back in that wasteland you all live in, he'll taper off back down to something reasonable. He'll still be brighter than he was, yes, but nowhere near where he is now, and Pelamin is basing his plans on how bright his glowing little pet is *now*. Stupid."

"Quite," agreed Aubrey. "So he's not going to have anywhere near as much power as he thinks he is."

"Not even close. And the longer his army or whatever it is remains in the mortal realm, the less power his Blaze will be able to give him.

"But it gets even better, because second," he continued, with a sardonically gleeful twinkle in his eyes, "I discovered another interesting effect that no one's ever noticed before. Or at least, that no one's ever recorded." He paused and beamed, and Aubrey looked suitably impressed. Paul did his best to copy him, as did Cal and Manny, who were leaning against the walls and trying not to look either bored or tense.

"I don't think anyone's ever spent as much time Outside as I did while working on his Dim Majesty's fruitless project, not continuously," Willowen went on. "I was monitoring my own needs, thought I might as well while I was there and it might give me some interesting data, and discovered that the offset drain is geometric, not arithmetic. It takes about seven weeks to start climbing noticeably, but once it does, it picks up very quickly."

Aubrey sat back in his chair and frowned. "So the link starts to degrade after that point? Or-- the degradation is constant, but the rate.... And putting those two factors together means it won't work, not on any kind of long-term basis."

"Exactly!" Willowen grinned at Aubrey, as though they shared a delightful joke. "See, even a mortal can comprehend it! The whole thing is doomed from the start. So if that's what you're here about then you might as well go home and get comfortable. Or you can stay here if you like -- we can watch his Buffoonish Majesty's plans fall into shreds around him and have a good laugh."

"Thank you, but I'm afraid that's not convenient," Aubrey said calmly. "After all, if he has seven weeks or more before things really go downhill, that's more than enough time for him to cause a lot of mess and bother, and we really can't allow that."

"I suppose not," Willowen replied with a shrug. "It should only be about... a dozen weeks, perhaps fifteen, before his situation gets dire and he's forced to retreat back Under the Hill. You all can keep him contained for that long, I'm sure, and then it'll be over."

"I beg your pardon," Paul interjected, his impatience finally having reached its limit. "But once more for the non-geniuses among us?"

Willowen gave him a wide smile, as susceptible to flattery as anyone else and more than most. "Briefly, he's going to run out of power."

"I gathered as much, thank you." Paul turned to Aubrey and raised an eyebrow.

"That's essentially it," said Aubrey, with a frown. "We knew that the fey need to draw -- to 'eat' -- more magic while they're Outside, to make up for what they're not getting from the ambient magic Underhill. The higher fey can't survive on the ambient, but it *is* a significant portion of their power. Back home they don't get that and need to turn predatory to make up the difference. We knew that.

"However, it sounds like they do get *some* of that power through their link with Underhill. We never sat down and measured exactly how much they need versus how much they consume when they're topside -- we just assumed they were getting all their magic from what they 'ate.' But apparently they do get a certain amount of power through their connection to Underhill, *and* that connection degrades. Slowly at first, which is why no one noticed before, but then more quickly, like this." He pointed with one finger and drew a glowing yellow curve in the air, shallow at first and then steeper until it was nearly vertical, like half a hyperbola. He glanced over his shoulder at Willowen, who nodded.

"Also," Aubrey continued, "the longer they stay, the more magic they'll need to consume. That makes a sort of sense, like the way you need more water in the desert because the dry air causes more to evaporate through your skin, and Outside is rather like a magical desert..." Aubrey's eyes glazed over while he was thinking, then he blinked a couple of times and got back to the subject. "At any rate, the increase is tiny at first, but after seven weeks it'll become noticeable. Some time after that, even Rory won't make a difference." He looked slightly sick while he said that.

"Well, that's good, isn't it? It means we have one less thing to worry about -- we know this invasion or whatever won't succeed, so we just have to hold it off for a while, as Willowen said." Paul was feeling rather relieved, at least about this particular chunk of their problem, and the fact that Aubrey didn't look relieved at all was making him nervous. Clearly he was missing something.

"That's true, so far as it goes, but put it all together and add in what you know about Pelamin," Aubrey said sharply. "Willowen *said* Pelamin isn't listening to anything that contradicts his own view of how things are likely to go. He's going to bull on ahead as though victory were within his grasp. He's not likely to listen later until his subjects and allies are either collapsing around him or deserting in droves."

"Yes, he'll keep going until someone whacks him in the head with the truth," Paul agreed. "We can use that to our advantage. His allies might well listen to reason and be persuaded to abandon him sooner, especially once the rations get short."

"Paul, you're not thinking! He's going to push on, full bore, until he physically *can't* anymore. And when is that going to happen?"

"That'll happen when Rory can no longer supplement whomever they catch to feed on," Paul retorted. He was still missing something and impatience was growing into anger. He glared at Aubrey and added, "If you have a point, I wish you'd get to it."

"My point is that Pelamin's not likely to say, 'Ahh, I see Rory is feeling a bit woozy -- I'll just call off this nasty war, since clearly I miscalculated.' He's going to keep going, full speed ahead, feeding his ever-more-ravenous army off of Rory until the boy is sucked dry and drops dead. Is that enough of a point for you?"

Paul just stared, feeling like a dunce for not seeing it. Willowen's enthusiastic nodding didn't help any.

A delegation of some sort of water creature bowed low before Pelamin's throne and backed out of his presence, chorusing a bubbling phrase of leave-taking as they went. Rory watched them through dull eyes. He'd overloaded on monsters and fairies and magic long since, and was too depressed to care much anymore about what was going on around him.

He was chained to one side of the throne, the cold marble grating into his knees as though the bone rested directly on the floor, hot pain shooting through his numbing legs and up into his spine after hours (days?) kneeling while one creature after another after another stepped forward to pay homage to the king, each one brushing a delicate hand through Rory's hair or over his hunched shoulder. Pelamin granted a taste of Rory's glowing bounty to each one who joined his cause.

A delicate lady with dragonfly wings, just shoulder-high on Rory's kneeling form, came forward surrounded by a varied swarm of tiny flying creatures. Each one was different -- from a teddy bear with bat wings to a chubby little pony with sparrow wings to a striped snake with butterfly wings to a purple Barbie-doll with fly wings to a lizard with a rooster's fleshy red crest and bright parrot wings.

Pixies. They were pixies, just like Azzy.

Rory was struck with a sudden painful homesickness. Which was stupid, because he'd only known Azzy for a few days when the trolls had snatched him, but Azzy was so much a part of Paul in Rory's mind; they'd both moved into his house and settled down as though they'd been there for years.

The pixies suddenly laughed and hummed and squealed with glee and engulfed Rory in an amorphous mass of ruffling feathers and tiny, tickling fingers. The lady -- who for all her small size was a giant among the pixies and must be their queen or whatever they had -- waved a sparkly wand through the swarm and said, "Enough!" in a silvery voice. They swooped away like a flock of birds parting before a hawk's dive and then coalesced around her once more.

Rory blinked at them, ignoring the ritual words passing between Pelamin and the pixie lady while he struggled to focus his eyes on the buzzing, fluttering throng. Something was off in the swirling fair of winged fey, a flaw in the pattern, as though a soldier on drill had turned the wrong way. He peered into the swarm, squinting and searching, and finally spotted a stripey little squirrel-lizard hovering in one spot and waving frantically. He whispered, "Azzy," and the pixie beamed at him.

The pixie lady curtsied low before Pelamin and stepped forward to claim her share, her tiny fingers caressing Rory's cheek. She smiled at him, then backed away and led her followers out. Azzy waved one last time, then vanished along with the rest of his kind.

Much later, after an entertainment consisting of a variety of creatures dancing before Pelamin's throne, singly and in groups and bands and swarms, and after the courtiers had finally given up on persuading Rory to dance for them, he found himself left alone, still kneeling beside the throne, but at least free of the pinching and poking and pouting. Luckily, elves had an incredibly short attention span when they were bored, and Rory had decided to be as boring as possible. It took a minimum of exertion and usually resulted in the playfully cruel elves letting him be.

He'd just dropped into an uncomfortable doze when something small and scaly bumped against his spine and said, "Hey, Rory! Hiya! Got anything to eat?"

"Azzy?" Rory whispered. "No, sorry." He was fed enough to stay reasonably healthy, but not enough to keep extra stuffed in his pockets. When he had pockets.

"Bummer. His Maj is too fancy to have real food for the visitor types. 'Cept you. You're not a visitor, though, right? You live here now. But the parties are just magic-sucking and hey, I like that just fine you know, but I could really use a Milky Way right now."

Rory couldn't help a wan smile. "Sorry. Even I don't get Milky Ways here."

"Sucks," muttered Azzy. "I had a lot more fun hangin' out with you and the guys. Cal's a peach! You know he gave me a whole box of pastries once? That was a long time ago though and I haven't had a pastry in like forever!"

Rory made a sympathetic noise, then asked, "Azzy? Do you know what happened to Cal? And Paul and the others?" Part of him didn't want to hear the details, but at the same time he felt a strong need to know, if only so he could stop imagining awful things.

"Sure. When I told 'em the big guys'd dragged you away, they swarmed outta there like a pack of goblins caught raiding a dragon's hoard. I stuck around and finished up all the breakfast scraps and then wandered back downstairs, 'cause it was boring with nobody around."

Well, that wasn't very helpful. Rory gritted his teeth against the pain in his stiff body and tried to shift around so he could look behind him and actually see Azzy. When he moved, though, the pixie bounced up and tapped his shoulder, nudging him back around to face out into the room. "Don't look at me! If anybody knows I'm sneaking seconds they'll come and rip my arms off!"

"Sorry," said Rory. He settled back down with a pained hiss and leaned up against the throne with his eyes closed. "Do you know what *happened* to them, though? That was a long time ago when I was taken. They left to come find me, right? What happened next?"

"I dunno. I didn't follow 'cause I ain't that dumb. I came back and buzzed around by the spring for a while -- we played a great trick on one of the ogres, pretended we was gonna fly away with one of his sheep and dropped it on his head when he came runnin' after us!" Azzy let out a screechy laugh, and Rory could feel the pixie vibrating against his back. "Ogres are really strong, but they're stupid and slow. You can play the same trick on 'em a million times and they'll always fall for it."

"That's a good trick," said Rory, his voice low and patient. "Did you hear anything, though? After you got back? Any news?"

"About what?"

"About Paul and Manny and the others?"

"Oh! Nope. Didn't hear nothing. We was just playing with the ogres and buzzing around and stuff and then we got the summons from Carienne to come to court with her and pay respects to his Maj and she said if we didn't behave she'd *let* the trolls rip our arms off and our wings too and doesn't that suck 'cause it takes wings like forever to grow back and walking sucks when it's all you can do so we came here and waited in line and *that* was boring except when we pulled all the hounds' tails at the same time, that was lotsa fun to watch 'cause it took the huntsmen like forever to get 'em all calmed down again and ready to go in and they couldn't even prove we did it so that was good and then we came in with Carienne and I saw you and waved and you said hi. It's great to see you again, too, 'cause I missed hangin' out with you."

Rory did his best to digest Azzy's stream of babble about his recent activities. He wondered idly how the pixie'd managed to say all that without taking a breath, but the important thing was that he'd had no news of Paul. He'd hoped that if there'd been a... a battle or something, there'd have been news or gossip or some kind of word going around. Apparently there wasn't, though. He wondered whether that meant no one here knew they'd come after him -- he remembered seeing some horrible-looking things on his way to court, monstrous animals and plants with reaching vines and the half-decomposed corpse of something he couldn't even try to identify sticking out of a patch of what looked like ordinary mud, rotted and swarming with scavenger insects.

Maybe they'd never even made it to Pelamin's... castle? City? To court, at least. By the time the trolls had arrived with him, he'd been too groggy to really notice his surroundings. Maybe they'd died somewhere else and no one would ever know what'd happened to them.

Or maybe they *had* made it and there'd been a fight or an ambush or something, but they'd been so thoroughly and easily overwhelmed that no one here thought it was even worth talking about. Like flies caught in the bug zapper -- who talked about that? You just went on with your party or barbecue and ignored the dead bugs until it was time to sweep them off the patio.

He felt Azzy cuddling up against his hip. He knew the pixie was absolutely selfish and only liked him because he was a Blaze. But still, it was someone familiar, someone he could at least pretend was a friend. Sort of like having a talking teddy bear; they were great friends if you were willing to pretend.

"Hey, Rory? You sure you don't got a Milky Way?"

"No, Azzy. Sorry."

"How about a Snickers? Those are good too, you know?"

"I know. Sorry, no candy. If I did, I'd share it with you."

"You're a peach, Rory!"

"Thanks, Azzy."

Chapter Twenty

Willowen opened a Door for them into a library near Pelamin's throne room by the simple expedient of waving his hand at a clear spot. Most of the higher fey had that talent; it took power, but not a lot of focused effort, and Paul bitterly envied the ability.

Willowen assured them the library was usually empty, and would certainly be during that day's entertainment. The king was gathering his forces and making ready to launch his attack on the surface world, and the invasion was preceded by a grand banquet to reinforce in the minds of Pelamin's allies just how rich and powerful he was, and how generous to those he favored.

When they arrived in the library, Aubrey had to be dragged through and out of it, with Paul on one arm and Cal on the other. Paul granted his point about how valuable the information in that room was likely to be, but while hauling him out into the corridor, Paul pointed out that finding anything of immediate use was likely to take days if not months or years, and that they didn't have anything like that kind of time.

Aubrey conceded the point, but not without a last longing glance over his shoulder.

They started off, following the route Willowen had traced in the air when he'd scribbled a basic map for them in glowing light. The fey'd been willing to help them just to put a bee up Pelamin's ass -- no love lost there, that was certain. He was probably watching them just for the entertainment value, assuming his attention hadn't wandered.

Their only chance to get Rory away from the king was to challenge Pelamin's right to hold him. There weren't many rules governing the behavior of the fey toward mortals beyond Might (or Stealth) Makes Right, but there were customs and proprieties, and a long-standing custom was that someone close to a kidnapped or beguiled mortal could challenge for him or her. It usually meant performing some sort of task or passing a test, but Paul was confident in his ability to weasel his way out of that sort of situation once the boundaries were set. The only possible stumbling block was that the "someone close" was usually a spouse or lover or sibling. Paul was hoping that having spent a couple of nights at Rory's house and exchanged acknowledgements of mutual attraction would be enough. If not, he'd improvise.

Once in the palace, Paul found that they probably wouldn't have needed a map anyway; the hum of noise filtering down the corridor very clearly from the direction in which they were headed led the way. When King Pelamin threw a party, he went all out, and silvery strains of music blended with conversation and tinkling laughter, making it clear that there was a large group ahead.

There was also a smaller group ahead, however -- they rounded a corner and found themselves face to face with a dozen boggles.

One of the ragged little mannikins goggled up at them with uneven eyes, then said, "Allies?" in a squeaky voice, which sounded remarkably like two sticks of wood rubbing together. One of the other boggles squeaked out, "No! Mortals! Enemies!" and that was the end of that conversation.

The gang of boggles screeched in delight and swarmed up Cal's legs. Whether they chose him because he was one of the nearest of the group or whether they'd gone for the largest intruder out of bravado, Paul didn't know, but whatever their reason, they'd made a mistake.

Aubrey side-stepped to get a better angle, his hands flashing. An angry red cloud swirled around his flailing apprentice, and the boggles clinging to Cal squawked and tumbled off. All but two dissolved into their component parts as the whirling cloud sucked up the magic that kept them animate. The other two tried to dart off, but Manny bashed one with his crowbar and the cold iron disrupted what little life force it had left. Paul took care of the last with a pointed finger and a chanted word.

Cal shuddered, brushing frantically at his legs. "Damn, that itches!" he coughed, shuddering and twitching while trying to rub the feeling of the creatures' piercing fingers and slashing teeth off of himself.

"We'll check for disease later," Aubrey said. "They're filthy buggers, but they're not likely to have anything that'll kill you any time soon. They probably sent up an alarm, though, so we need to keep going."

Paul nodded, and they started off again at a jog.

Two more turns and they came upon a beautifully braided marble arch hung with a curtain of crystal beads in every imaginable shade of blue. Paul spared a thought for how much it reminded him of the tacky beaded curtains one found in fake metaphysical shops before he burst through it, one hand glowing with a prepped Flash-Bang spell.

Music and acrobatic dancers, along with the blinding and deafening flash, helped distract the throng long enough for Paul to reach the front of the room and bellow, "Pelamin, I challenge your right to hold this mortal!" He sensed the others forming up around him, even as the noise level exploded and then died away to whispers, but all his attention was on the fey king and... Rory?

That *had* to be Rory there, kneeling beside the throne, but he'd changed so much Paul hardly recognized him -- likely *wouldn't* have recognized him if a very familiar pixie weren't perched on his shoulder, grinning and waving wildly.

He forced himself to look away from the thin, drooping figure in bright silk velvet, a river of red-blond hair spilling across the floor, and focus his attention on the furious immortal glowering from the throne.

"You have no right to challenge," Pelamin sneered. "You are no one to him."

"We have shared a bed," Paul retorted. He was bullshitting and knew it, and he had to keep up an aggressive, confident front if this was going to work. "We've declared our attraction, each to the other. And I've come here from the surface world to fetch him back from you, defeating your creatures and proving my devotion." He supposed a dozen boggles constituted "creatures" if one were already stretching. And sneaking in through the back door should gain him *more* brownie points, not fewer.

Pelamin glared down at him. "You've only come because somehow you learned of my plans for your world. You would be here anyway, whether I had this boy or not, whether you were sworn companions or whether you'd never met him before. You would do anything, say anything, to thwart me!"

Damn it. Paul could sense the milling, shifting crowd of beings gathered in a half circle around them. He could see those to either side and hear the ones behind him. He couldn't fight his way past them all, not with the team, not with every Sentinel team on the continent. He *had* to think of something, some way to make Pelamin *let* them go. The lover's claim wasn't going to work because they weren't lovers, were barely even friends, and while Paul would like to be more and he was pretty sure Rory would like that too, potential didn't count. Pelamin was right, he *was* primarily there to....

Except he wasn't.

Paul cocked his head and projected self-assurance as hard as he could. "I don't *need* to thwart you," he said, matching Pelamin's sneer, "because you've thwarted yourself. Your plan cannot work and does not concern me. I've come only for *him*." He swept out his arm and pointed to Rory in a deliberately dramatic gesture.

"Lying mortal!" Pelamin shouted. "You know that if you take him your world is safe from me. You can say whatever you like, but your plan will not work!"

"I am *not* lying! Your own advisors told you the invasion is doomed, but you refused to listen!" The silence behind Paul was suddenly thick and heavy, and he spun around to face the crowd of fey while still addressing Pelamin. "Why is Willowen not here? He was instrumental in your preparations -- surely he deserves to celebrate with the rest of your allies? Or are you afraid of what he might say to them? Are you afraid that they might hear the truth and abandon you to pursue your foolish plan alone?"

"Silence!"

Pelamin's command was predictable, but also predictable was its uselessness. It was too late -- the murmur rippling through the crowd was colored with a mixture of fear and suspicion.

The king realized it too, and his face flushed with anger. He bellowed, "Meddling fool!" and paralyzed Paul with a gesture, then began another, doubtless nastier spell.

Rory suddenly sat up, and Paul could see him noticing what was going on around him for the first time. He spotted his rescuers, and his eyes widened. All Paul could do was stand there and wait for whatever messy death King Pelamin had planned, and muse that the last thing he ever heard was going to be a cheesy villain cliché. At least the last thing he *saw* would be Rory, looking at him as though Paul were the only real, true thing in his world. That was something.

Rory had been sure he was dreaming.

It felt like he'd dozed off again and was imagining that Paul and Manny and Cal and Aubrey had come for him, that they were going to get him away from King Pelamin and take him home. It was something he'd dreamed before, and he'd been sure he was dreaming it again until the king had lashed out with a quick spell and suddenly they were all frozen.

He'd never dreamed *that* before, and combined with Azzy bouncing up and down on his shoulder and squeaking, "Cal! Hey!" it snapped everything back into focus, alive and awake and solidly in the present.

Before he had a chance to get his mental balance, he saw out of the corner of his eye that Pelamin was drawing his hand back. The king snarled, "Die, you pestilential ape!" and went to throw-- something.

Rory lunged for his arm yelling "No!" and in an action too quick to have any thought behind it, he made a light.

If his little lights before had been nightlights, this was a flare, a searchlight, a magnesium bomb. Sheer, glaring WHITE burned into Rory's brain. He heard Pelamin scream in pained anger. Something solid impacted his face and threw him to the limit of his chains. That wasn't very far, and his flaring cheek and jaw were joined by a pair of wrenched wrists.

Rory curled into a ball, expecting further punishment, but in the moment it took Pelamin to bat Rory out of his way, a quiet, imposing figure glided out of the silent crowd and said, "Hold."

It was an archon of fire, the greatest of the fire elementals. Its kind ruled the fire creatures, if they had a ruler at all. Rory remembered this one -- or one like it, since they were all only vaguely human-shaped, a deep, glowing orange and shimmering as though throwing off an unthinkable heat -- coming up to Pelamin earlier to pledge its support.

"If this mortal is lying as you say, then it will harm nothing to grant a few moments for questioning."

There was no petition in the hollow-sounding voice. When Rory had first heard one of the creatures speak, he'd unconsciously expected it to hiss and crackle like fire. Instead it had a depth and resonance to its tone, as though it were speaking from very far away and yet filling the entire space with sound.

Rory struggled back to his knees, hampered by his throbbing pains and shackled wrists. He clung to one arm of Pelamin's throne and watched the king draw himself up, stiff and straight. Pelamin was king of the fey in this enclave, but the other creatures were only allies, and the elemental archons in particular made no pretense of subordinacy.

"You may ask him whatever you like, of course," the king said, then gestured toward Paul with one hand. Rory could see the anger showing in his whitened knuckles and the stiffness at the corners of his lips, but Pelamin was controlling himself very well and no one else was near enough to notice.

The elemental rotated in place until it faced Paul's immobile form. "Speak," was all it said.

Paul swayed once with returning movement, then bowed gravely and said, "I know only what I have been told by one of Pelamin's chief advisors. Willowen is a mage of great learning, known and respected by many here. He studied the problem of sustaining a move into the mortal world and told his king that such was impossible, that even a Blaze would not feed his own, much less his allies, for more than a few weeks -- the blink of an eye in an immortal's life. This being the case, such an invasion would be futile, since the fey would be unable to remain and inhabit whatever territory they managed to conquer.

"I would, of course, be doing whatever I could to stop this if I thought it had a chance of succeeding. As it is, however, I know that we will win in the end, no matter what we do, even if we did nothing. But the Blaze who was taken captive by King Pelamin is dear to me, and I would have him back."

The hall fell silent, and not even hearing that he was "dear" to Paul was enough to let Rory move, much less speak. All attention was on the glowing archon. When it finally replied, it said, "It speaks as much truth as a mortal ever will."

Pelamin paused just long enough to be sure the elemental would say no more, then retorted, "It speaks only what it believes. It is mistaken or deluded. They are fireflies, glowing brightly, but only for a season and incapable of understanding anything beyond their own living and dying."

Another pause, then the elemental said, "Perhaps. Summon your Willowen and we will hear what he has learned."

There was a barely perceptible pause before Pelamin said, "If you wish."

A long, silently patient waiting went by while the king sent a mental summons. Rory spent it staring at Paul, re-learning his face and trying to wrap his heart around the very concept that he was no longer the only mortal there, that he wasn't alone, that there were people -- real human people -- who were there and cared about him and wanted him as a person, not just for a sometimes-amusing pet or a piece of equipment that was valuable for what it could do.

Seeing them there brought up memories of home, of the other world. Rory hadn't even thought about it in... what, weeks? Months, maybe? It must be spring by now.

He wondered if he'd missed the hills turning green and blooming with huge, colored swaths from the wildflowers. Most of the year the hills around the Santa Clara Valley were a soft brown, but for a week or two every spring, right after the heavy rain, they turned green and then bloomed yellow with mustard and orange with poppies and white and lavender from wildflowers he'd never learned the names of. He decided to do that if he ever got home again, to learn the names of all the little flowers that grew in the hills and lots and orchards.

Then a magical door opened and an elf stepped through.

Rory had only seen Willowen once or twice, but even if he'd never met him, it would've been obvious who it was. Aside from the plain (for a fey) clothing and undisguised annoyance, there was only one person the multitude of beings here was waiting for. When he appeared, the crowd shifted in a minute ripple, as though everyone had leaned forward slightly to better see and hear.

"Thou hast summoned me, and lo, I have hastened hither in my eagerness to obey thy smallest wish." Willowen faced the king's throne and performed a low, sweeping bow, one hand to his breast and the other flourished off to the side. It was ludicrous done by someone with plain silk trousers, narrow sleeves, no over-robe or cape at all and a single long braid flopping over one shoulder. That and his fancified words turned the greeting into a sarcastic mockery, and Pelamin's eyes narrowed in fury. If Willowen weren't so useful, the king would have banished him long ago, possibly to the dungeons to be tormented for all eternity.

Rory knew that because he'd heard Pelamin say so more than once.

But he *was* useful, despite his disrespectful attitude, and that must've been what kept Pelamin from blasting him right there. Rory could tell by the intent look on his face that Pelamin was speaking silently with Willowen, and when a moment later he said, "The archon would hear your thoughts about our grand invasion," Rory imagined Willowen was being given some strict instructions about what to say.

Willowen cocked his head at the king, then turned and surveyed the crowd of beings hanging on his every word. He looked over at the humans standing a few paces away, then turned to the fire archon and bowed once more, with considerably more respect than he'd shown his own ruler.

"Of course," he said. "As I told his Majesty, it was a perfectly good plan on the face of it, and it would have worked if anyone had bothered to survey the territory in any methodical fashion. But of course no one's done that in all the millennia we've been popping back and forth, so--"

Willowen's explanation took a sharp turn into magical technicalities Rory couldn't understand, and his attention was drawn away -- drawn toward Pelamin, who was flushed with anger and stiff with tension. That obviously wasn't what Willowen had been instructed to say, and it was just as obvious there was nothing Pelamin could do about it right then, in front of all his allies.

His plans were disintegrating in front of his eyes and he was powerless to stop it, and all the anger and frustration were building up with nowhere to go.

Before Willowen was finished, individuals and groups were already beginning to slip away and vanish from the back of the crowd. It was obvious that Willowen's word that the grand plan wouldn't work was enough to make a lot of Pelamin's army rethink their allegiance. Besides, most of them probably understood all the arcane babble that was passing right over Rory's head.

Willowen was saying, "--which is exactly what I told his majesty. I can only imagine he received contrary intelligence from some doubtless impeccable source that caused him to go on with his plan against my advice."

Every face in the room turned toward the king in expectation. He glared back. "I proceeded on my own authority, which is all that is required within my demesne. I have never felt the effect Willowen speaks of, and even if it exists, I have a Blaze!" He reached down and grasped Rory's upper arm, hauling him up to display him before the crowd. His eyes shone and he radiated power and charisma. "All of our histories and legends sing of the power of a Blaze!" he shouted. "We will be invincible! None shall stand before us, and the mortal world shall be ours!"

A stunned silence filled the grand hall, broken when Willowen commented dryly, "Well, there you go. His Majesty is unable to count beyond 'One, two, three, much.' He needs 'much' power and the Blaze has 'much' power, therefore all will be well."

The tension broke, and nervous laughter rippled around the room while more of the gathered crowd glided, faded, and popped out of sight. Rory heard a snarl from Pelamin, and the hand gripping his arm tightened hard enough to make him cry out and struggle.

Paul stepped forward and shouted over the growing din, "I claim that man! You've no right to him, and now you've no need of him. Give him to us, and we will leave you to your affairs." His deep voice filled the room. Rory could feel it surrounding him, and for a second he was sure everything would be all right.

Pelamin glared down at Paul, having found a target for his fury. "Verminous mortal!" He dropped Rory like trash, then gestured and pointed, and something putrid and dripping flew at Paul, who side-stepped, then clapped both hands together and spread them, drawing a glowing orange shield around himself. The king threw another spell, this one a rain of blue sparks. Paul ignored it, allowing the deadly shower to pelt against his shield while he hurled an attack of his own, gripping one wrist and then flinging a handful of fizzing snow back at Pelamin.

The king brushed it off and fired back a bolt that boomed like thunder. It knocked Paul onto his back and destroyed his shield, but he struggled up onto one knee and cast another, this time only a curve facing the angry fey, glowing gold. He held it, clearly reinforcing it through four more castings while Pelamin tried to pound him into pulp or fry him where he stood, then he called out, "Trade!" and spread his arms to either side. "This is useless -- you cannot destroy me, even here in your own hall. But I grow impatient and would have this done with. I'll bargain with you for the man."

The audience -- now reduced to mainly Pelamin's own court plus a few others who'd remained for the entertainment -- perked up in interest.

"What have one such as you to trade?" Pelamin sneered.

Paul managed to look down his nose at the king. "Something you might well value even above a Blaze." He took a step forward, his arms still spread. "My power, willingly and permanently given to augment your own. I will surrender it to you freely if you swear you will then allow myself, my companions, and the Blaze to return unmolested to our world."

Chapter Twenty-One

Every being that breathed sucked in a breath at his offer, and Pelamin's eyes widened above a pleased and predatory smile. Paul could only imagine his glee at the thought of augmenting his power with that of the Great and Dread Sentinel MacAllister; he concentrated hard on keeping a smirk off his face. On the floor beside the king's throne, Rory's eyes widened, and he lurched to one side slightly, as though he'd tried to stand but been unable. No surprise there -- he looked like he'd lost a good thirty pounds and his eyes were sunken and his hands shaking.

That was for later, though. Paul forced his attention back to Pelamin. This would only work if he could get through it quickly -- make the deal, get Rory and get out, fast. Pelamin tilted his head and went to speak, but before he could reply, Aubrey stepped forward next to Paul.

"Remnant," he called, his voice firm and loud. "Such a bargain requires you to leave him a remnant of his power, that his life may be sustained. It is tradition."

Paul shot a quick glare out of the corner of his eye. Aubrey was too prone to taking care at every step, to stopping up every possible leak. Right then they needed speed, not caution.

"I know our traditions, mortal!" Pelamin spat. Although the angry look he shot at Aubrey suggested he'd intended to overlook them in this case, and maybe the old fart had been right after all.

The king looked back at Paul and said, "Very well. I agree. It will be worth it to be rid of your interference for once and all, and apparently easier than killing you. Come, then -- let us finish this so that you may remove your foul presence from my home."

"Gladly," Paul said. That's right, he thought. Let's do this, right now, you're angry and want to boot us out soonest.... He stepped forward and held out his hand. Pelamin bowed his head so Paul could press his palm to the king's forehead, then the fey reached out and laid his own palm on Paul's chest above his heart.

The last thing Paul was aware of before the transfer began was Rory's voice whispering, "Paul, don't do this!" It was too late, though, too late for anything. Too late to change his mind, even if he'd wanted to. Too late to reassure Rory, even if he could've done so with Pelamin right there. Too late to think of any other way out that would save all of them.

And then the world contracted until it contained only Paul and the elf king, and Paul could feel his essence shrinking. Colors exploded before his eyes, bright and brilliant and fading and darkening as the very substance of his self was sucked out and torn away, drained down to nothing. Down to *almost* nothing, not quite nothing, until only a bare remnant was left, the tiny puddle of energy Pelamin was obliged to leave him so that his life could continue.

It was barely life, though, and nothing else. When Pelamin pulled away, Paul could scarcely see or hear, couldn't move, couldn't stand; only someone's (Cal's?) lunging grab kept the back of Paul's skull from cracking on the marble floor.

He was tugged and turned and pulled, and then he was moving, with a supporting shoulder under his arm, being hauled along like a life-size rag doll.

He managed to gasp out, "Rory!" and Cal said, "Manny's got him," without slowing down. Paul squinted and saw that Aubrey was working on casting a Port, his hands moving faster than Paul had ever seen before, insanely fast for such a complex spell, but they needed to get *out*, right *now*, and sensible caution would ruin everything.

Of course, the good guys never got a break, at least not until the *very* end, and apparently that wasn't it. Aubrey was nowhere near done when Pelamin shouted, "False mortal!" A moment later the half-done spell blinked and vanished. Damn.

Paul knew exactly what the king was whining about and he wasn't interested and didn't have the energy to pay attention anyway. He closed his eyes and let himself sag in Cal's grasp, trusting Cal's grip to keep him from flopping to the floor. He heard shouts and accusations echoing back and forth and then felt something rummaging through his mind like a giant hand rooting around in a drawer for a working pen. It didn't find one and eventually withdrew.

A deep, resonant voice said, "It gave true. You have all but a remnant." A higher and much angrier voice shouted something like "Impossible!" right before everything twisted and the next thing he saw was the familiar corduroy sofa at Cal's place. The sight of the sofa suggested relaxation, which sounded like such an awesome idea that he let go and slipped into unconsciousness, still dangling in Cal's hands.

Suddenly being teleported back to the apartment over the restaurant was enough of a shock, but then Paul went limp and Rory's heart slammed in panic. He lunged forward, or tried to, but Manny's hold on him steered him away.

"Hang on," Manny said. He moved Rory over to a battered armchair and sat him down. "Sit right there and I'll get you something to eat. You look like they tried to suck you dry -- you need to replace a lot of, well, everything."

"What happened to Paul?!" Rory couldn't help leaning forward while Aubrey and Cal sat Paul down in the center of the sofa and Aubrey went to work on him. Rory's hair, still knee-length, slid into his face, and he shoved it back with an impatient hand.

"He's mostly dead," said Willowen, who was suddenly standing in the doorway leading to the outer banquet room. "But only mostly. *I* wouldn't want to live like that, myself, but he chose it, and it *did* get you all out of there in one piece. One very *small* piece, in his case, but still."

Everyone but Paul jumped when Willowen appeared, and everyone but Paul and Aubrey twisted around to stare at him. Willowen just shrugged and said, "I followed the backwash when the archon moved you all. I certainly couldn't stay *there* any longer, and following you seemed as good an option as any. You all owe me anyway, so you won't mind if I stay for a while." He said it as a plain statement of fact, without the questioning tone anyone else would've used.

Manny said, "Fine, whatever. Cal, how about if you check the bounds, make sure we're secure again? I doubt they'd have *ever* kept an elemental archon out, but let's make sure he didn't tear any holes when he shoved us through?"

Cal scowled at Willowen, then got a nod of permission from Aubrey. He moved over to a window and started humming, moving his hands over an intricate network of glowing lines Rory could see embedded in the outer walls. Aubrey ignored the tense drama behind him and kept his focus on Paul, while Manny moved off to the tiny kitchen area.

He called, "Heads up!" and a bottle of Gatorade came flying through the air at Rory. He barely managed to catch it without either dropping it or letting it crash into any breakable portions of his anatomy, like his head. He opened it automatically and sipped, then gulped until it was empty, his eyes on the sofa the entire time.

"He'll get used to it," Willowen commented, peering over Aubrey's shoulder at Paul's limp body. "I knew someone who did the same thing once, gave all his power to his sister so she could win a duel. It's all about budgeting and learning where your new boundaries are. I read something online once about spoons which explains it surprisingly well."

Rory blinked at him, trying to figure out what the hell he was talking about. Spoons? Everyone else was ignoring him, though, so Rory did too. He stood and dropped the empty bottle down on the chair, then edged over behind the sofa, careful not to step on any of the piles of books and CDs stashed between it and the entertainment center, and leaned over, right next to Paul but out of Aubrey's way.

His hair fell in his face again. He hated it, but he could find some scissors later; for the time being he grabbed it in a hank and started braiding. "How's he doing?" he asked while his hands worked. He kept his voice low out of habit -- it was what one did when someone was very sick.

Aubrey shrugged. "Willowen's essentially right. There's nothing actually *wrong* with him -- he just traded most of his life force for our escape."

"For me," Rory whispered.

"For *all* of us." Aubrey gave him a sharp look. "This isn't your fault, so don't start whining about it. He doesn't need that -- if you go all emo on him, then when he wakes up enough to notice he'll feel responsible and try to help and he doesn't have the energy."

"But I do," Rory said. "I mean, I have plenty of energy -- a lot more than before, even. Why can't you just do that transfusion thing you did before?"

"Because he doesn't have any place to put it." Aubrey sighed and sat back. Cal, who'd apparently finished whatever checking he'd been doing, reached across and squeezed his hand. Aubrey gave him a tired smile in return before looking back up at Rory. "Think of it like this -- everyone has a container to hold their power. If you have a big bucket, then you can hold a lot. If you have a tea cup, then you can only hold a little. Most people have tea cups. Cal has a keg. I have a fifty-five gallon drum. You...." He paused for a moment, looking. "You have an Olympic-size pool."

"And I have a thimble," Paul whispered, his voice weak and breathy. "A very small thimble, made for a little girl's doll."

Paul bore up under the fussing, then brushed everyone away and levered himself into a sitting position. It took a lot longer than he liked, but he managed without help and that was the important thing.

He didn't actually hurt anywhere. He hadn't been injured, just... diminished. He was tired, but he supposed that was to be normal from then on so he'd have to get used to it.

What he really wanted was a good, long nap -- a real sleep, as opposed to the few minutes of passed-out unconsciousness he'd had. It'd be interesting, to say nothing of useful, to find out exactly how he felt when he was refreshed, fed and as energetic as he was ever going to get.

First, though, he was going to have to get everyone calmed down because there was no way *anyone* was going to be sleeping with all the babbling going on.

"It's not as bad as you think," he said. His voice was thready and weak, but he was determined to ignore it. "I can't move very well, but I still have as much magical ability as I ever had. Next time Pelamin's minions come over to play, they're going to get a surprise if they expect me to be out of the picture."

He spotted Manny approaching with a huge sandwich and a determined look. Paul pointed a finger and the sandwich vanished, appearing instantaneously in his lap, paper plate and all. He tried to hand it over his shoulder to Rory, but could only lift it part way before his arms began to tremble with fatigue. Rory grabbed for it, and a long, red-blond braid slithered down into Paul's lap.

"Well, *that* was remarkable." Willowen moved directly in front of Paul and went down on one knee so he could get a good look.

Paul jerked back, startled. How the hell had he missed the presence of a fey in the room? He cursed himself for that slip. His attention had shrunk along with his energy, down to his very immediate surroundings unless he deliberately focused on something farther away. He'd have to remember to do that.

Willowen was casting something. No one else looked concerned, so Paul shifted to magesight and deciphered a scrying type spell, similar to the diagnostic Aubrey used so often, but tweaked to trace Paul's magical circuitry, more or less. His first instinct was to protest, but he kept his mouth shut and let it happen. Willowen wasn't exactly Pelamin's favorite person just then, and with a bit of thought, it was obvious why he was there.

The fey's eyes widened, and then he laughed. "Why, you devious little monkey! You haven't a scrap of magical talent!"

Paul raised an eyebrow and smirked. "I never said I did. I offered Pelamin what I had. It's not my problem if he didn't examine the goods before he accepted delivery."

"But... wait, I mean--? What?" Rory looked adorably confused.

Paul leaned back for a better look at him, which also allowed him to rest his head fully on the very comfortable sofa. "I have no natural magic," he explained. "I have the usual, what everyone has just because they're alive, but I don't have the talent to use it, and so I never had very much." Before Rory could ask the next obvious question, Paul said, "I'm a mechanic." He raised one hand and wiggled his fingers so his rings flashed. "I'm not naturally inclined to be a fashion emergency, but every bit of the hardware does something useful."

He closed his eyes for a moment and idly began to stroke Rory's braid. It coiled like a satin ribbon in his lap, soft and smooth.

"My great-aunt Wilma was a collector, as were her mother and great-aunt before her and for however much farther back," he continued. "Her daughter Alice was killed by a flight of sylphs and her son had neither interest in magic nor talent for it, and barely any belief, either, despite the fact that half our family has it and we've been Sentinels since the Restoration. I've always had a head for tactics, so when she retired she passed the collection on to me and I took the job."

"So Pelamin's bane and the thorn in his side is an ordinary mortal, one of the sheep." Willowen was close to crowing, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "How perfect. He'll never live it down. It's a pity you're retiring -- I'd have loved to have seen his face when he heard you were still out there banishing his vassals."

"Who said I was retiring?" Paul asked, smirk firmly in place. "I'm pretty sure I never mentioned it."

"But you can't," said Rory, his voice flat with suppressed distress. "You can hardly sit up. How can you go out with the others and fight fey?"

Paul stroked Rory's braid and gave it a light tug, as close as he could manage to "playful" at that point. "I've been thinking maybe I'll get myself one of those motorized scooters. What do you think?"

"I think you're insane," Rory retorted, "but then no one ever pays any attention to what I think."

Two firm hands came down on Paul's shoulders and rubbed gently, thumbs brushing the back of his neck. He felt a warm flow, and the world brightened and sharpened. He took a deep breath, and his eyelids sank slowly closed, then snapped open. He covered Rory's hands with his own and squeezed, hard.

It wasn't supposed to work like that. He'd traded not only his power but his capacity to *hold* power, to *contain* power. No matter how strong Rory was -- and to magesight his Blaze was blinding -- the best he should be able to do was fill Paul's reserves up, top him off. Any excess should just overflow. It might feel pleasant, up to a point, but it shouldn't actually replenish him beyond his new capacity.

But with Rory touching him, he felt good, really *good*, and that was wrong. No, not wrong, wrong implied bad and it was anything but bad. It was inexplicable, though. It wasn't supposed to work that way.

And even if Rory were able to refill him, it should take a lot longer than the few seconds that had passed. Paul wasn't about to protest, but it was damn strange.

He squeezed Rory's hands again, then gently pushed them away. As soon as the contact broke, a wave of fatigue swamped him and he sank back into the cushions of the sofa.

"Paul?"

Rory's hand was back, only one, and the touch was tentative, just a light pass through his hair, but it was enough. Paul blinked and sat up straight once more. He gripped Rory's wrist firmly, then stood.

Immediately he was surrounded by worried faces, protesting voices and steadying hands. He shook them all off -- with one hand only -- then cocked his head at Aubrey.

"Well?" he asked Aubrey, secretly reveling in his renewed energy and taking advantage of having his old... well, everything back. Stance, voice, attention, thought -- energy to spare for them all. "Any ideas?"

Aubrey opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head slowly. "Frankly, no," he answered. His eyes were unfocused, and Paul could imagine his mind zipping through a maze of interlocking paths, negotiating turns and intersections and dead ends, searching for the answer that would fit. "I can think of a few things it's *almost* like, but nothing that matches all the variables."

"Don't be obtuse," Willowen interjected. He sounded put-upon at having to deal with the dense mortals and disappointed with Aubrey in particular. "It's the lover's vow tying them together. He declared it before witnesses." He waved one hand at Paul as though it pained him to be forced to point out the obvious.

"He--?" Aubrey blinked. "But wait, that was just-- I mean, he didn't mean it. You didn't mean it, did you?" His gaze shifted from Willowen to Paul to Rory and back to Paul.

Paul concentrated on keeping a neutral expression and shrugged. "I was hardly going to chance telling a blatant lie in front of *that* crowd."

Everyone was staring, and Paul was fairly sure it wasn't just because he was standing up. He looked at Rory and suddenly knew what was important.

"Everyone out."

More staring.

"Out! Go wrap napkins or something. Cal, I'm sure you can keep everyone occupied downstairs if you concentrate?"

Cal grinned and threw Paul a mocking salute. "Sure, boss. Come on -- first two down to the dining room get to set tables, everyone else is prepping veggies."

The horde turned and thundered down the stairs amid protests of work to do and errands to run and a dog who'd be wanting his dinner, Willowen trailing behind without bothering to give an excuse. Thirty seconds later the place was quiet, which was what Paul had actually wanted. More importantly, he and Rory were alone.

"There, now that the mob is gone, you and I need to talk."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Paul waited for Rory to nod, then tugged him down onto the sofa. Once they were settled, Paul took his hand away; he didn't want to keep siphoning power or whatever he was doing when he didn't have to.

As soon as Paul slumped back into the cushions, Rory looked startled, then scooted over. "Don't be stupid," he fussed. "I'm right here, and there's no reason for you to feel like a wrung-out rag when you don't have to." He took Paul's hand back and wrapped it in both of his own; Paul immediately felt normal again.

"Fine, for now," he said, shifting sideways so he could look at Rory straight on. "But that's part of the problem. You shouldn't feel like you have to stick around and keep me going. We've only known each other for a few days. Sure, we get along and we're attracted and all, but we don't owe each other anything, *you* don't owe *me* anything, and I don't want you to think I'm going to expect you to stay glued to my side playing battery pack--"

Rory shut him up with a kiss.

It was a pretty good kiss, actually, and the extra spark was certainly welcome to someone who'd fully expected to live out the rest of his life in a state of advanced exhaustion. It went on for a minute or so before Rory pulled back and cupped Paul's face in his hands.

"We were only *together* for a few days," he said, his voice low and intense, "but I thought of you every day while I was there. I hoped for days and waited for weeks, and for months I thought you were dead. When you didn't come after me for so long, I was sure you *had* to be dead, and all I had was fading memories and regrets."

Before Paul could even begin to process what that meant beyond thinking, Wait, *months?* he was being kissed senseless, the first one apparently having been just a warm-up. Rory's hands shoved his jacket off his shoulders, then burrowed under his shirt.

Paul's forebrain was sputtering protests, insisting that there were still things to talk about, to work out, to straighten out. His hindbrain, which was enjoying what Rory was doing way too much to stop for anything as trivial as talking, coshed it over the head and locked it in a closet.

He shrugged all the way out of his leather, then raised his arms and let Rory tug his shirt off. Rory's green velvet jacket had tiny hooks up the front and ribbons laced down the forearms; by the time they got him out of it, they were both alternately swearing and laughing. The jacket vanished behind the couch, followed by Paul's boots and jeans, Rory's suede britches and gilded shoes, and Paul's socks and underwear.

The only thing he approved of about elven clothing was that they didn't wear briefs. Or maybe whoever'd loaned Rory the clothes hadn't wanted to share underwear with a mortal? Damn convenient, whichever it was.

They finished stripping each other, then settled down to the more long-term business of kissing and touching. Paul stretched out, coaxing Rory down with him until they were both horizontal, pressed skin-to-skin from shoulders to feet. Rory's body felt so slender against his, slight and delicate, like there was hardly anything to him.

Paul ran his hands up and down Rory's torso, and without even looking he could tell that there *was* hardly anything to him. He'd noticed before that Rory'd lost weight, and a lot of it. It was even more obvious to his fingertips, tracing along washboard ribs and sharp hip bones and the deep indent of his belly.

Later. One more thing for Pelamin to pay for later. In the shorter term, he made a mental note to take a leaf from Manny's book and start feeding Rory sandwiches as soon as he had a couple of free hands.

The reminder of how long Rory'd been Under the Hill, though, from within his own frame of reference, and how badly he'd been cared for while he was there, made Paul that much more determined to take care of him now that he had him back.

Cal's corduroy couch was comfortable, but he was pretty sure Rory had more than a little making out in mind, and Paul wasn't about to let their first time be on a couch. Rory deserved better, and luckily there was a better alternative nearby. He stood up and lifted Rory onto his feet, pulled him close for a quick kiss, then steered him into the bedroom.

"Wait, on Cal's bed?" Rory protested, still laughing. "That's rude!"

"Cal hasn't slept here regularly since he moved in with Aubrey," Paul countered. He laid Rory out on the flannel spread and settled himself on top, one knee pressing between Rory's thighs. "I'm surprised the bed even has sheets."

"Well, that's all right, then, if he doesn't actually sleep here anymore." Rory pulled Paul's head down for another deep kiss, then stopped again. "Umm, wait, just how thoroughly did he move out?" he asked, sounding suddenly apprehensive. He glanced over at the night table.

Huh? Oh!

Paul scooted over, leaving one ankle crossed over one of Rory's, and fumbled the drawer open. Cal hadn't moved very thoroughly at all, it looked like, judging by the jumbled collection of junk inside, so....

"Hah!" He tossed a tube of lube and then a box of condoms down next to Rory, who cheered, "My hero!"

"Brat!" Paul shifted back on top of him, pinned him down and tickled him. Or tried to -- no matter where his fingers went up and down Rory's sides -- his skinny, ribby sides, and yes, Pelamin was definitely going to pay for that -- Rory kept smiling up at Paul, perfectly serene.

"There's got to be some kind of a rule against not being ticklish," Paul grouched. Rory just snickered.

Paul gave up on the tickling attempts and replaced his hands with his lips and tongue. A short while later, Rory was making a completely different set of noises while two of Paul's fingers slid in and out of him, rubbing across his sweet spot with each pass. Paul mapped out Rory's thighs, belly, and chest with kisses and nips and little teasing puffs of air while loosening him up; if Rory wasn't ticklish, he was sensitive enough in other ways to make up for it. Paul discovered that a hard suck on a nipple could get a high-pitched squeal out of him, and that, in Paul's mind, was better than a tickle any day.

By the time he pushed slowly inside and felt Rory's sweet body tightening down on his swollen cock, Rory was babbling a combination of pleas and threats. Paul pulled almost all the way out, then gave a smooth thrust back inside, groaning at the slick pressure that sent fizzing heat deep into his balls.

Rory's legs wrapped around his hips and urged him on, pulling him closer. Paul smelled sex and sweat and something spicy that was probably left over from the elves, and Rory underneath it all -- a sweet tang that had become stealthily familiar over the last few days in Rory's house and in Rory's presence and in Rory's bed.

Paul hunched down on his elbows and swooped in for a deep, devouring kiss, then shifted his weight onto one arm while the other reached down and gave Rory a squeeze. Rory groaned into Paul's mouth and thrust up with his hips, so Paul stroked faster, watching his lover's gray eyes go dark and misty. Paul thrust harder and jacked Rory to a shuddering climax before he let himself go.

A rushing wave of pleasure rolled over him and poured out of his body into Rory. Paul's awareness of his self, his physical being and his magical essence both, swelled to encompass both of them, and he could feel it there, inside his lover, taking root.

Taking root.

Oh, holy fuck, no.

Post-orgasm lassitude vanished, and Paul pulled out, careful to hang onto the condom as he withdrew. There was a visible split near the end.

Groaning, he rolled off Rory, fumbling for the box. He scanned the sides for the-- fucking hell.

The condoms were over two years out of date. Apparently Cal really had left them behind when he'd moved in with his master.

Paul flopped over onto his back with his arms crossed over his face. If this was Pelamin's idea of a joke, Paul was going to *dig* down to Underhill with his bare hands, reach down his Fucking Majesty's throat, yank out his intestines and strangle him with them. *Then* he was going to--

"Paul?" Rory's hand brushed gently across his belly and up his ribs. "Are you all right? What's wrong? Did we break it?"

Rory's final question brought a hysterical laugh surging up into Paul's throat, but then he realized something and froze. He parted his arms and looked over at Rory.

He hadn't even noticed when he'd rolled off, but there'd been no sudden draining of energy and no sudden surge of it returning when Rory'd touched him again. He'd been so focused on that other, awful possibility -- which made him shudder just to think about -- that he hadn't had any attention left for anything else.

He took Rory's hand and planted a kiss on the palm, then set it down onto the flannel spread and stood up. He took a couple of steps, then turned around with a huge grin.

"Nothing!" he said. "There's nothing at all wrong. I thought there was, but I was wrong, it wasn't that, it was this and this is great!"

"What did you think--?"

"You don't want to know," Paul interrupted. "Honestly, you don't, so don't even ask. But look, you're not glued to my side anymore!" He laughed and reached down, hauled Rory to his feet, then enveloped him in a hug and a kiss.

Rory kissed him back, then grinned up at him. "I didn't really mind the idea so much, you know. But you're all right now?"

"It looks like it. I felt something moving from me to you, a connection being made, right there at the end. If this thing started when I made the declaration in front of Pelamin's little gathering, I guess it makes just as much sense that it could've been strengthened by a more physical declaration."

Rory laughed. "Well, we'll have to renew that 'declaration' regularly so it doesn't wear out."

"I vote yes to that." Paul kissed him again, squeezing hard around Rory's waist and lifting him off his feet, just because he could. Rory gave a muffled laugh and backed away once Paul set him down.

"Enough! For now, anyway. I haven't had a hot shower in months, and magical cleaning spells are *not* the same. I see a bathroom through there -- go get our clothes and I'll get the water running."

"Yes, Master!" Paul snarked. He ducked a smack, then strode out to the living area--

--and as soon as he passed through the doorway, all his energy vanished and he collapsed face-down on the floor with a loud thump.

Rory came running, and Paul's energy surged again.

"What happened? Are you all right? Was it just temporary?" Rory levered him over face-up and wrapped both arms around his shoulders, touching as much skin as he could manage.

"God damn fucking elves..." It had to be Pelamin's fault, somehow, just because anything else would be fucking unfair and would deprive Paul of anyone who deserved revenge. He'd have to make sure to think of something good; he could add it to what he already owed Pelamin for Rory.

Paul rubbed his aching nose, then shook his head. "It's working now, but it wasn't before. Whatever the connection is, it looks like we have to be in the same room."

"Oh." Rory looked down at him, startled, then shrugged and hugged him again. "That's... weird. Umm, what happens when we're outside? Or in a really big room? Or a long, twisty corridor -- would that count as one room? If we're in the same 'room' but can't see each other...?"

"We'll have to do some tests and figure all that out. I should've known it was too good to be true. Murphy loves messing with me way too much for it to've been that easy."

Rory gave him another hug and pressed a kiss into his hair. "Well, it's still better than what you had five minutes ago, right?"

"I know, I know, you're right -- it's more than I expected when we got back," Paul agreed.

Heavy footsteps came pounding up the stairs, and Cal's voice called, "Guys? You all right? What happened?"

Rory yelped and ducked down behind Paul, who turned to shield him with his back as well as he could. It wouldn't kill Cal to see Paul's naked ass, and it seemed Rory was a lot shyer than he was.

"We're fine," he called. "Just experimenting, and I ended up on the floor. Everything's intact."

Paul looked over his shoulder and saw Cal's head sticking in through the service area archway. He gave them a huge grin, and Paul saw his shoulders shaking in silent hilarity.

"Just be careful about how you 'experiment,' okay? Bringing an ambulance crew up here would be damn disruptive, and it's almost lunch time."

"Your concern for our health and well-being is overwhelming."

Cal just winked and turned away.

Paul yelled, "Hey, Cal!"

Cal stopped and looked back. "What now?"

"Your damn condoms expired two years ago!"

Paul barely heard Rory's embarrassed yelp over Cal's retreating laughter.

"What?" Paul asked, grinning down at Rory, who had his face buried in Paul's chest. The back of his neck was flushed, and he was adorable. "I'm pretty sure he noticed we're naked, and that he therefore had a good idea what we've been doing."

"Unlike some people, he was polite enough to pretend he hadn't noticed!"

Paul snorted and shook his head. "You didn't see that smirk on his face. He wasn't pretending anything."

"You still didn't have to just say it right out like that! It's not like it's going to matter -- we'll be at my place or your place or *someplace* else next time. He could let his condoms fossilize for all the difference it makes," Rory muttered.

Paul stifled a laugh, but made sure his voice sounded at least a little contrite when he said, "True, I didn't think of that." He stood and helped Rory to his feet. "Now, about that shower?" They grabbed their clothes and headed back into the bathroom. Paul made sure he stayed close to Rory this time, brushing his hip with one hand while they passed through the doorway. There, that worked just fine.

We'll figure out how to manage, Paul thought. One step at a time.