

A World of Darkness® Novel

Pomegranates Full and Fine



don bassingthwaite

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PROLOGUE

The sun was just beginning to rise as Solomon stepped out of the long, black sedan. To the southeast, the skyscrapers of Toronto's downtown core were silhouettes against the rosy predawn sky. It was going to be another hot day. July was one of the worst months to be in Toronto. People complained about the winter, with its cold winds and slushy streets, but sticky, smoggy July was just as bad. Solomon slipped off the jacket he wore over his black T-shirt and tossed it back into the sedan. "Keep the motor running, David. We'll go home again as soon as I'm finished."

"I'll be waiting."

Solomon walked through the iron gates of one of the University of Toronto's many colleges. It was a pleasant building, now abandoned for the summer except for a few visiting scholars and a handful of graduate students. Several old trees grew in the college courtyard, and water splashed in broad fountains at the base of a bell tower. More water dripped from the body that two big men were hauling out of the pool. A third man, lean and hatchet-faced, watched them. Solomon walked over to him. "You're cutting it close, Arthurs," he said angrily. "I called you three hours ago." Just moments after he had received a telephone call himself,

a telephone call that had consisted of a single name.

"We just found him," Jubilee Arthurs said hastily. "We missed him the first time we were here looking. He was in a shadow under the water." Arthurs was in his late fifties, his hair gray, his clothing loose on an aging frame. Solomon was barely pushing thirty. His skin was tanned and his muscular body stretched his T-shirt tight. His hair was black and slicked back. He had the kind of look that spoke of days spent in the gym and nights spent at clubs. He knew it. He cultivated that look. Arthurs prodded the wet body with his toe rather than meet Solomon's dark eyes. "We would have left him in the fountain, but," he shrugged, "like you said, we're cutting it close."

Arthurs' bodyguards settled the wet body on the flagstones beside the fountain. Solomon knelt beside it, turning its head so that the face of the professor looked at him with clear, terror-haunted blue eyes. A third shining eye stared blindly at him from the professor's forehead: the head of the nail that had been hammered through his skull. There was little blood. As with the others, the nail had been driven in after he was dead. Solomon rose again and held out his left arm. Arthurs took his hand and kissed the tattooed chain that encircled the thick wrist. It was a strange tattoo, gleaming dully as though steel rather than ink had been embedded under the skin. Solomon caught Arthurs by the neck before he could move away. "Full obedience." He reached across his chest and pulled aside the collar of his T-shirt to reveal his left shoulder. He had another tattoo there, a rearing black beast. Sometimes people mistook it for a heraldic lion rampant. In fact, it was a mastiff.

Arthurs glanced up at him. This time it was Solomon who refused to make eye contact. He kept his eyes fixed forward, unnervingly distant. Arthurs bent his head and kissed Solomon's wrist again. "I pay homage to Shaftiel," he murmured obediently. He straightened a little and leaned forward to kiss the tattoo on Solomon's bared shoulder. "I pledge my soul and service to the Sentinel of the Ways, the Hungry Guardian Who Watches the Three Ages, the Hound of Thorns, the One Who Waits, the One Who Comes First." He stood straight and kissed Solomon's angry, unmoving lips. "I will obey his servant in this world. I am Bando."

He was calm. Too calm. Solomon didn't want him calm. He wanted him anxious, frightened.

And a mage, especially one of the demon-serving Nephandi, had the power to make almost anything he wanted happen. Solomon reached out with his will and just a touch of magick, seizing reality and bending it. For a moment, Arthurs' heart thundered in his chest. His face became slightly frantic. Whether the mercenary recognized magick at work or not, his body was responding to the cue of his racing heart. "You don't have any clues, do you, Arthurs?" Solomon asked coldly. "You're no closer to knowing why this is happening than when I first asked you to investigate. *And two more of our master's followers — two more of the High Circle — are dead!*"

Arthurs actually cringed before the lash of his voice. "I'm not a private eye, Solomon," he protested, "I'm an arms dealer. Can't you get—"

"You're a mercenary." Solomon turned away from Arthurs. The two big men, Arthurs' henchmen and

bodyguards, were watching them. They looked away hastily. Solomon swept his gaze around the dark windows of the college. "One of the best, so I've heard. Or you used to be. Now what's happened? You've been disgraced, Arthurs. You've messed up one too many times. You're getting old and clumsy. Even Pentex won't hire you anymore, not after that episode last winter with the Garou and the Wyrms-tainted bullets. It was an easy job, but it fell apart in your hands."

He glanced back to see what effect his words had had. Arthurs was red in the face. "How did you know about that?"

"You'd be surprised what I know about the people who join the Bandog, Arthurs, especially the people I bring into the High Circle. So many of them are desperate. So many of them seek Shaftiel's aid. I like to know why." Solomon smiled. "You can get access to contacts and resources that I can't. Find the killers who are preying on us, Arthurs, and Shaftiel will see that your fortunes rise again." His smile turned sharp. "Think of it as a last-chance contract."

Solomon turned back to the professor's body without looking at Arthurs again. He knew that the man would very likely be pale and swallowing hard, weighing the pact he had made in choosing to join the Bandog. It was, of course, far, far too late for him to back out now. Solomon gave him a little time to sweat, then squatted down beside the professor's body once more. "Do you have anything new to tell me? We're still looking at two murderers?"

"Umm..." Arthurs hesitated, trying to find words that wouldn't make him look like a fool. "Yes. And no — nothing new. Not as such." Solomon almost grinned

at the old man's desperation; he was at the end of a very frayed rope. "I've been in his office. All the usual signs, though: a new bottle of the victim's drink of choice open, three chairs moved and sat in, two glasses drunk from. And the cut link." He pulled something from his pocket and passed it to Solomon. A heavy link from a chain, one side cut through so the link could be separated from the rest of the chain. Solomon wrapped his hand around the link and squeezed tightly, feeling the cool metal against the skin of his palm. The nail, the cut link, the final drink, the mocking calls that told him who had just died — of it all, only the cut link made sense. The killers were severing the chain of the Bandog one link at a time.

"What about the people here? Did anyone see anything?"

"No, not as far as I can tell from their dreams." Arthurs coughed and added, "I'm keeping them asleep now so we won't be disturbed."

Arthurs' access to contacts and resources wasn't the only reason Solomon had elevated him to the High Circle of the Bandog. The mercenary had other useful talents. Not magick, but useful nonetheless. Now Solomon just gave him a dull stare. Arthurs shifted nervously. "But you didn't find anything else." Not a question. A statement of fact. Arthurs looked away. "Look again. Keep everyone here asleep until noon if you have to."

"What about the body?"

Solomon touched the professor's corpse. "We'll make it look like another suicide." He gestured at the body's head. "Pull out the nail. You remembered to bring something this time?"

Arthurs flushed, but produced a clawhead hammer and proceeded to wrench the nail out of the professor's forehead. It left a neat, round hole behind. "An accident would be more believable than a suicide," he suggested humbly. "Hardly anyone commits suicide by drowning themselves."

Solomon just glared at him. "An accident then." He pulled a small packet of herbs from his pocket, glancing at Arthurs' bodyguards as he did so. "How much do they know?" It was a vague question, but Solomon knew Arthurs would understand what he meant.

"Not enough for what you need." Arthurs gestured toward a door leading into the dark interior of the college. "You two take care of the office. Lose the extra glass and fix the chairs." The bodyguards nodded and disappeared. Arthurs turned back to Solomon. "All clear."

Setting the packet on a dry patch of ground, Solomon began to run his hands over the professor's wet body as though he were frisking him. Arthurs leaned in, watching closely. Solomon knew the mercenary was trying to catch the trick to what he was doing. He never would, of course. The young man concentrated on the body under his hands, his eyes narrow and distant. "Alcohol in his stomach, but hardly any in his blood. I'll have to increase that. High levels of adrenaline and epinephrine. Like the others. Bruising on the back of his head, neck and shoulders. Bruising along his belly as well. They forced his head under the water. The bruising on his belly is from the edge of the fountain." He would have to remove all of it — and the nail hole. He glanced at Arthurs. "If he had fallen into the pool and hit his head hard enough to knock

him out, how much damage would there..."

Solomon broke off suddenly and sucked in his breath. "What is it?" Arthurs asked.

"There are abrasions around his left wrist and hand. Like something was pulled off him." He clenched his teeth. "Why didn't you tell me they had taken his chain?"

"I didn't know!" Unconsciously, Arthurs twitched his left arm back. He wore a heavy, silvery chain bracelet, not unlike Solomon's tattoo. Solomon knew that some of the Bandog, like Arthurs and the professor, wore the seemingly innocent chains openly, flouting their secret worship of Shaftiel. The professor was the first of the victims who had done so. "Can you track the bracelet with magick?"

"No." Solomon pushed up the left sleeve of the professor's shirt. The skin of his wrist and the back of his hand was scratched. The scratches were slight and not very deep, the sort of abrasions that pulling off a chain bracelet might produce. Solomon picked up his packet of herbs and opened it. The herbs inside were coarsely crushed and had a peculiar smell. Some of the few people who had smelled the herbs said that the scent reminded them of old graveyards in Europe. Others said that the smell reminded them of a mortuary. There was truth in both statements. Some of the herbs had indeed come from plants commonly associated with Old World graveyards, and derivatives of others were used in embalming. Solomon also used them in the preparation of dead bodies — although hardly in the way that a mortician would. He had been planning to use them to erase the signs of struggle from the professor's body. Now he had a better idea.

He took a big pinch of herbs out of the packet and ground it fine between his thumb and forefinger, letting the fragrant powder settle into the palm of his other hand. Water squeezed out of the corpse's clothes turned the ground herbs into a thin, runny, gray-green paste. The paste he smeared across the corpse's hand and wrist, rubbing it gingerly into the dead skin. When he was finished, the skin had acquired a bit of the paste's gray-green color. "Do you have a knife?" he asked Arthurs. The mercenary shook his head. Solomon frowned. He would have to detach the hand himself. He stretched his thumb and forefinger around the professor's forearm, just above the stained skin, and concentrated, once again bending reality to his will.

The dead flesh under his grip began to decay.

The cold skin blackened, then liquefied. Solomon's thumb and finger sank into the muscles and tendons underneath. More flesh rotted away. Thumb and forefinger met. The last flesh sloughed off the bare bones, leaving a foul gap in the professor's forearm. Solomon pressed against the exposed radius bone, then the ulna, with the edge of his thumbnail. Each bone cracked neatly in turn. Maggots wriggled in the marrow. The professor's left hand came away in Solomon's grip. He stood and took a few steps toward the college gates, watching the scratches on the hand.

The leading edge of the scratches changed as he watched. The scratches were growing.

"Arthurs!" he snapped. The other man came to his feet. Solomon shoved the detached gray-green hand at him. "Take this. Use it to find the professor's chain."

Arthurs took the hand gingerly, but not squeamishly. "How? You said you couldn't track the chain."

"I can't. But when the killers took the chain, they took some skin with it. The scratches will guide you: they'll always point toward the skin on the chain, and they'll get deeper when you get close to it." He grinned, baring strong, white teeth. "If the scratches start bleeding, you're practically standing on top of the damn thing."

Arthurs nodded. "What if the killers dumped the bracelet somewhere?"

Solomon's smile disappeared. "Then it will still be closer to them than we've been yet, won't it?" He looked up at the sky. Dawn was only minutes away. "Get going. Do whatever's necessary to get these people. I want them, and the sooner, the better."

"What about the body?" asked Arthurs hesitantly. "We can't really pass it off as an accident with a missing hand."

"I'll take care of it. Now get going!" He pointed at the gates of the college.

Arthurs swallowed. "Yes, sir. But the professor's office? My men are still..."

"Call them."

"James!" Arthurs yelled quickly. "Jeffrey!" The two henchmen appeared almost instantly. "Are you done in there yet?"

"Just now."

Arthurs glanced at Solomon. The younger man returned his gaze steadily. Magick could be very subtle. Arthurs turned and headed for the gates. "Come on."

The henchmen followed him. Solomon waited until they were gone before drawing a deep breath and turning back to the professor's body. Damn Arthurs! Damn him for being the most incompetent, fuck-up

excuse for an investigator!

Unfortunately, there wasn't anyone better among the Bandog that he could use as easily. Certainly there was the police detective, but he would have needed to use the department's resources, and the last thing Solomon wanted was a rumor of murder even accidentally leaking to any other members of the Bandog. Until whoever was responsible for these murders was caught, the rest of the Bandog couldn't know the truth about what was happening. At least Arthurs intimately understood the need for secrecy and had contacts who also preferred to remain in the shadows.

Solomon seized the professor's body. Now that it was so conspicuously mutilated, there was no way he would be able to make the death look like an accident, much less a suicide. He would have to get rid of the corpse. Muscles straining, he lugged it over to the base of a tree, a stately old maple that stood nearby. He reached up and took a gold earring out of his ear. The shaft of the earring was needle-sharp; he jabbed it into his thumb and watched as bright red blood welled up. Solomon reached over the professor's body and smeared the blood down the bark of the maple. He shook a few more drops onto the body. Then he stood back.

The tree shivered, the body at its base shifting. There was a groaning, like thick branches in the wind, followed by a quiet whispering, like worms in the soil of a graveyard. The earth around the maple churned suddenly as the tree's roots — first the delicate, threadlike rootlets, then older and heavier roots — came up out of the ground, flailing hungrily. Solomon took another step back just to be safe.

But the roots found the body before they ever would have found him. They seized the corpse. Earth moved, the dirt sliding aside like water. The roots dragged the professor's body down to feed the tree. The sod filled back in as though it had never been disturbed. In only a few moments, the professor's last earthly remains had effectively vanished. Solomon turned away. He no longer had the respect for trees that his earliest teachers had tried to instill in him, but they still had their uses.

If only his magick could have uncovered the killers as easily as it could reshape or dispose of the victims' bodies. And he could hardly go for help to another of the scattered mages he knew lurked in Toronto. He would have been destroyed on sight as *barabbi* — a traitor to the mages of the conservative Traditions. Someone who had chosen to follow the dark paths to power.

And approaching another Nephandus mage would be the same as begging to be taken down in his moment of weakness.

Solomon walked out of the college, shutting the gates behind himself with a heavy clang. David, ever obedient, still had the car running. He opened the door for Solomon, then closed it after him and walked around to the driver's seat. He slid in behind the steering wheel, tall, blond, and impassive as the rising sun. Solomon looked out through the heavily tinted windows and drummed his fingers on the door panel. David glanced at him. "I saw Arthurs come out holding a hand."

"We may have a lead, David," Solomon told him shortly.

David nodded and put the car in gear, turning

tightly on the narrow street to point the car north and home. "A lead would be good," he commented. "The Bandog are getting restless."

Solomon jerked his head up. "How did they find out about the murders?"

"They haven't. But they've all seen enough by now to be suspicious when two of their number commit suicide." David turned a corner. "I overheard several of them talking before the last Rite. Some believe it was suicide, that Rooke and Harris just couldn't stand it anymore. They're beginning to look for signs of weakness in themselves. Others are wondering if there really might be something more going on than suicide."

"They're going to be wondering even more, then. The professor has just gone missing."

"Ah." David was silent, then added, "In any event, their commitment and belief are wavering. They're losing faith in Shaftiel."

Solomon snorted. It was far too late for any of the Bandog to turn away. Like Arthurs, they had all made pacts with him — and with Shaftiel. Most of them were fairly wealthy and influential, but certainly none of them could survive the aftermath of being connected to a demon-worshipping cult; the cult was young, but its members were well-established in their fields. At the same time, though, their willing commitment to, and belief in, Shaftiel's power made things much, much easier. They couldn't get away, but Solomon couldn't do much without them. He needed them. "Damn."

David stopped for a light. "Actually, I have a suggestion." Solomon glanced at him with curiosity. "The Bandog need to feel a closer connection with Shaftiel, and they need to be impressed." The light

turned green. They began to move again. "Conduct a summoning ritual."

"What?" Solomon sat bolt upright in his seat. "Are you crazy? I can't do that!" He sat back slowly. "I'm not powerful enough. It takes a lot to summon even a minor demon successfully."

"It wouldn't have to be a physical summoning. Let them hear their master's voice. Whispers through the keyhole of the door between worlds. You could do that." David glanced at Solomon and flashed him one of the rare smiles that lit his golden face. "And think. There's a lot of preparation involved in a summoning ritual — even a simple one. Let the Bandog help you with the preparations. Get them working together. Involve some of them, maybe the High Circle. Build up to a spectacle, something big, something that will really let the Bandog taste their power. When Shaftiel speaks to them, it will be even more impressive because they helped make it happen."

Solomon looked at David for a moment, then turned to watch the first rays of the sun strike the cool concrete and glass of Toronto. A summoning. A spectacle. It was possible. He smiled, half to David, half to himself. He liked the idea. It shone in his mind like the edge of a knife. Something to restore the Bandog's faith in Shaftiel, in him. Something that would bind them even more closely to the cult, and as much plain psychology as magick. A... sacrifice? Too small. It had to be big. Big enough that the Bandog would be able to see the power that the cult and Shaftiel could wield; but at the same time subtle. Solomon wasn't the only mage or even the only Nephandus in Toronto. And mages weren't even the only supernatural beings to haunt the

city's shadows. Whatever he did had to be subtle enough not to draw attention to the Bandog or himself. Not that all of the unseen forces of Toronto were unfriendly to Nephandi.

Just that they would view Shaftiel's cult as a threat to *their* power.

David stopped at a corner to wave a pedestrian across. The pedestrian gestured for David to go ahead. *No, no. After you. I insist.* A game played out in cold, sterile politeness, a game that could only happen in Toronto.

Solomon's smile flickered, growing into a hungry, calculating grin. A spectacle. Big, but subtle. One that would inextricably bind the Bandog to Shaftiel's service. Solomon slid down into his seat, his T-shirt rasping against the leather, and started to plan.

CHAPTER ONE

*Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy.*

The big man glimpsed her movement and turned away from the fallen bouncer. *So much for the element of surprise*, Tango thought to herself. She crouched, waiting for the man to make his move on her. He would attack her, she was sure of that. There was unthinking rage on his face, and when he caught sight of the Pan's logo on her staff T-shirt, he bellowed like a bull in a ring. He lunged at her, maybe a little faster than she had expected. She slipped to one side, avoiding his arms and jabbing out with a blow to his kidneys. The man turned quickly, however. The blow glanced away. He snapped an elbow back, striking her on the side of the head hard enough to make her skip aside warily. He turned again. Tango dodged his fists this time, although a third bouncer, coming to her aid, wasn't so lucky. He received a crack to the face that sent blood flying from a split lip.

Enough of this. Tango brought the big man around with a few more blows to his side and back. Light blows, though, just meant to get his attention. He pulled one hand back and brought it around in a fast, heavy swing... then crumpled with a gasp and a squeak as

Tango slipped in under his guard and kicked him hard in the testicles.

The watching men in the crowded nightclub drew in their breath in a collective wince.

Never go for the balls seemed to be one of the unspoken laws that connected men around the world. Maybe that was why they always seemed so surprised when a woman did it. The crowd was silent as Tango gestured for two more bouncers to carry the would-be troublemaker out of the club. The downed bouncer was getting up, with some assistance from the bouncer with the split lip. With the fight over, the crowd began to turn away, going back to the drinking and dancing that had brought them here. Jumping up on top of a table, Tango spotted the woman whose presence had started the fight. She pushed her way over to where she stood at the coat check. "Are you okay?" she asked over the club's pounding music.

"Yeah." The woman took her coat back from the attendant. "Messy break-up. Thank you."

"Where are the friends you were with?"

"They're staying. I..." She shrugged as she put on her coat, and for a moment Tango sensed something of the anxiety the woman was trying to hold back. "I think I'd better just go home."

Tango nodded and pulled half-a-dozen free passes out of her pocket. "Just as long as you come back again. I'm sorry you didn't have a better time."

A smile flickered across the woman's face. "Thanks." The smile vanished as she saw the bouncers walking her ex-boyfriend through the crowd. "I should go before he gets here."

"Just a second. Rick!" Tango grabbed the club's

largest bouncer, who was acting as doorman. "Make sure she gets into a cab without any trouble."

"Got it."

The woman smiled again. "Thank you."

"Catch your cab." She handed the woman over to Rick, then turned to the man the bouncers were bringing to the door. She stopped them and put a hand on the man's chest. "I don't ever want to see you in here again."

He tried to focus on her and more or less succeeded. "You're history, bitch!" he slurred. "I want you fired. I want to see the manager."

Tango looked up at him. He was massively built, easily six foot five and at least two hundred and forty pounds. She was what dressmakers so politely called "petite," and a foot shorter than him, even in her boots. The man still went pale in front of the smile she gave him. "I am the manager, asshole." She glanced at the bouncers. "Make sure he lands hard."

She turned away. Running Pan's, one of San Francisco's newest and hottest nightclubs, wasn't easy, but it had its satisfying moments. That was why she insisted on being head bouncer as well as manager — the occasional turn on security was a great way to release stress. Tango pulled her headset from around her neck, disentangling it from her long, brown hair, and settled it back over her ears. "All clear, Alan?" she asked, adjusting the microphone.

Sometimes one fight would touch off a flurry of fights, a chain reaction of violence sweeping through the club. Not tonight, though. "All clear," crackled the tinny voice of Pan's assistant manager in her ear. "And you've got a visitor."

"Business or personal?"

“Personal. He came in just as you were asking our burly guest to dance. He said he’d wait over by the main bar.”

“Thanks.”

Tango kept herself alert, wondering who her visitor could be. She didn’t have many friends, and the ones she did have seldom came to see her at work. At least Tango hoped it was a friend. She’d made a lot of enemies over the years — she knew it was a lot easier to piss her off than to please her, and she liked it that way. It meant that the friends she did have were good ones. And that her enemies were dangerous.

If the swirling hedonism of Pan’s could be said to have a center, then the main bar was it. It had always impressed Tango far beyond the immense video wall or the soaring platforms and catwalks that took patrons up into the club’s rafters and attracted most of the media’s attention. The main bar was a bright oval of brushed steel, somehow managing to transcend the suburban space-cadet feel that bare metal so often had. Instead, the bar was like a movie star: sensual, begging for a caress, yet at the same time cold, aloof, haughty and untouchable. An ice queen. Dancers moved in a gleaming, chromed steel cage raised up over the bar, just as untouchable.

People swarmed around the bar as if that icy glamor could rub off on them. Tango shoved her way through the crowd, craning her neck in an effort to spot anyone she recognized. “Alan,” she asked into the microphone, “did the person who was looking for me say he’d wait...”

Fingers dug into her ribs from behind.

Tango’s voice cut off instantly. On pure instinct she grabbed her assailant’s wrists and twisted hard. Not as hard as she might have, but hard enough to produce a

yelp of pain. She flung one captured hand away and spun her assailant around, twisting his arm up behind his back so tightly his fingers were brushing his neck — and his close-cropped, rusty-red hair. Tango blinked and cursed. “Riley?”

“Yes!” the trapped man hissed between clenched teeth. “Not very ticklish anymore, are you?”

“What’s happening out there?” Alan’s voice was sharp. “Tango? I’ve got bouncers heading toward you if you need help.”

Tango turned Riley loose. “Tell them to forget about it, Alan. I just found my friend, that’s all.” She hesitated, then added, “I’m off-duty. Buzz me if you need me.” She pulled off her headset, but left it hanging around her neck. “What are you doing here?”

Riley looked at her cautiously. “Do you greet all your friends like that, or just the ones you like?” He worked his shoulder gingerly as he bent down to pick up a ballcap from the floor. His hair was longer on top than on the sides and he wore an untucked shirt over a T-shirt and jeans. He looked about twenty, maybe ten years younger than her. In spite of his youth, though, his fox-red hair was already starting to thin. “Jesus, Tango, have you ever thought about switching to decaf?”

“You should have known better than to come up behind me.”

“Winnipeg six years ago should have taught me that.” Riley straightened his round wire-frame glasses. Looking around Pan’s, he added, “Nice. I could stand to work in a place like this. I’ve got a great apartment in a building that’s full of artists and musicians, but you know how artsy types are. Up at strange hours. Loud parties. Not that that’s all bad, but it must be nice to

be able to go home sometimes."

"Riley." Tango glared at the people who had turned to watch her initial conflict with him; they quickly looked away. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He grinned. "I heard you were working in Pan's, so I thought I'd check the place out while I was in San Francisco. You know we've heard about it all the way up in Toronto? There's this bar called Hopeful — they have a wall covered with club ads and the ads from Pan's...."

"I don't do the marketing."

"No," Riley added thoughtfully, "I don't suppose you do. You've never exactly been Miss Congeniality, have you?" Riley's eyes followed a knot of laughing people across the club. He inhaled deeply. "Damn." He turned to the bar and waved a bartender over. "Whiskey sour. Make it a double. You," he said to Tango, "are still just as nasty as you ever were. You know, I've never needed a picture to remind myself of you. All I have to do is go out and find a rock."

Tango's lips twitched.

Riley smirked.

Tango's dour face fell apart completely. "You doorknob!" She swatted playfully at Riley's bottom. This had become a game between the two. Each time they met — usually after a prolonged separation — Riley would try to make Tango laugh. Tango would resist as long as she could. That was usually about two minutes. The last time they had met, six years ago in Winnipeg, Riley had just looked at her and raised his eyebrows. She had broken down in seconds. Riley was one of her oldest friends. He might have looked twenty, but he was actually half again as old. And Tango was twice as old as that. "You're looking good. Except for

the hair.”

“That started about five years ago.” Riley flushed and adjusted his ballcap self-consciously. A bracelet around his wrist caught Tango’s eye. She grabbed his arm and took a closer look at it. It was heavy and silvery, with an intricate clasp worked in the shape of a dog’s head.

“Nice. When did you start wearing jewelry?”

“Call it a midlife crisis.”

“Twenty,” Tango said firmly, “is not midlife.”

Riley stuck his tongue out at her. “Spoken like a grump. You’re acting older every time I see you. If you’d stop hanging around with hu—”

Tango made a face as the bartender returned with Riley’s drink. Riley’s voice cut off instantly and he took the drink, pulling several crumpled bills out of his pocket to pay for it. Tango caught his hand.

“On the house,” she told the bartender. “Anything he wants, all night. Don’t take his money.”

“Spoilsport,” muttered Riley as the bartender nodded and moved away. He dropped the money.

A handful of leaves fluttered down on top of the bar.

Tango gave him a tired look. Riley groaned. “I’m a pooka. I can’t help it. You’ve been around humans too long, Tango. It’s not good for you. You’re getting...” he shuddered, “old.”

“It’s going to happen to you one day, Riley. It happens to all Kithain.”

“But if you’d spend more time with your own kind....”

Tango sighed. *Our own kind*. This was another game that Riley played with her, and it was one she enjoyed a lot less.

Once there had been faeries in the world. Noble

faeries and common faeries, highborn and low. The spirits of dreams and stories. There had been fabulous parades in the moonlight, and dancing under the stars. Humans had tried to creep into faerie courts and spy on the magnificence of the Kithain. Some had been lucky and gotten away to spread tales of wonder. Others had been caught, pixie-led and pinched black and blue as punishment. A few had caught the eye of Kithain kings and queens and been spirited away to the faerieland of Arcadia as cherished guests and pretty prizes. Once there had been faeries — and then the splendor of that age had fallen. Now Arcadia was far away. There were no parades now and very little dancing, at least not the kind that the ancient faeries would have recognized. The Kithain who had been left behind in this gray, dull world had mingled with humans in order to survive. Tango and Riley were their descendants. Changelings, like the faerie children substituted for human as pranks so long ago. The last remnants of the Kithain were few.

“Give it up, Riley,” Tango said wearily. “I’m not going back. I like humans.”

“So do I.”

“Only because you can play tricks on them so easily. There’s no way I’m going back to Kithain society, so don’t bother trying to talk me into it. Conversation over.” She gestured to the bartender. He brought her a club soda. Riley just rolled his eyes. Tango knew that if something didn’t have alcohol, caffeine, or at least sugar in it, he wouldn’t drink it. “So if you came to Pan’s to see me, what brought you to San Francisco?”

“An airplane.” Tango gave him a nasty glance, and he amended hastily, “I’m here on business. A trip for the duke of Toronto.”

“Worming our way into the duke’s black heart, are we?”

Riley looked pained. “I’ve lived in Toronto for ten years. I’m not exactly worming my way anywhere.”

“Is he as cold as they say?”

“Colder. If he were any more cold and stiff, he’d be a corpse. You wouldn’t think an Unseelie Kithain would be so rigid and tradition-bound.” Tango nodded. So much of the Kithain’s heritage had changed over years of just trying to survive, but some things stayed the same. The Kithain loved pageantry. They loved the show of court — and, of course, there would always be those who were willing to rule the Kithain courts as dukes, duchesses, kings and queens. And even among the nobles of the dark, unruly Unseelie courts, there were those who held on to the chains of tradition. Especially when tradition supported their positions. “I’ve been appointed his Jester for the year.”

“What happened to the last one?”

“He retired. It’s harder to make Duke Michael laugh than it is to make you laugh. But there is a good side to the job.” Riley smiled. “The Jester organizes the Highsummer Night party.”

Tango spluttered into her club soda. “Nobody organizes Highsummer parties!” Even at the darkest times, the Kithain had clung to their festivals as the tattered banners of their faded glory. Highsummer Night, July 17th, was the biggest Kithain festival of the year, a night of enchantment, feasting and pranks. A wild free-for-all revel. Tango had been to Carnival in Rio once. It was a slumber party compared to Highsummer Night.

“They do in Toronto. Everything is organized. It’s a

strange city. You'll see."

He grinned at her expectantly. It took Tango a moment to figure out the meaning behind that grin. "No."

"Please? Only for a visit? You'll have a blast. I'm here to get party favors from the Kithain court at Berkeley. They trade with a bunch of Cult of Ecstasy mages there. Do you know what the Cult of Ecstasy is?"

"I know more about mages than you do." Tango slammed her club soda down on the bar hard enough to make bubbles come fizzing out of the liquid. "But even if I wanted to visit a Kithain court again, I wouldn't do it during Highsummer. I *hate* Highsummer Night!"

"I can't believe that. It would do you good, Tango. I've seen grumps older than you frolicking like childlings...."

"No. Enough, Riley. I'm *not* going."

The finality in her voice made Riley turn to look at her. He was silent for a moment, then asked, "You're serious?"

"Why would you think I'd change my mind for a party? You know me." Tango spread her hands. "I haven't even set foot in a Kithain freehold in fifteen years!"

"And where has it gotten you? Older." Riley sipped slowly from his drink, then looked deep into the pale green liquid for a moment. "I was hoping you'd come for me." He sighed. "It's not every day that a pooka gets put in charge of something this big. Even so, do you think that anyone is really going to thank me for this? They'll all be too busy recovering from hangovers. I want someone there who's clearheaded enough to be

able to say ‘Good job, Riley.’” He looked at her again. “Please, Tango?”

“Don’t make puppy eyes at me,” she replied gruffly. “It’s not going to work. I don’t like Highsummer Night. You get drunk, you play a few pranks, then you find a human or another Kithain and screw like rabbits. And the next day everybody lies and says what a great time they had.”

“There’s more to Highsummer than that and you know it. Except for the pranks, you could be describing Pan’s. You seem to like it well enough.”

“I work here. I don’t get drunk myself, and the last thing I did like a rabbit was have salad for dinner.” Tango reached over the top of the bar and poured the rest of her club soda into a sink. “I’m sorry, Riley. Even if I wanted to, I can’t. I have responsibilities here to think about. I have to work.”

Riley’s face went hard. “You are turning into a grump,” he commented sourly. This time, Tango knew, he wasn’t joking. She felt a little flush creep into her face. “You wouldn’t have used work as an excuse six years ago.”

“Riley...”

“Don’t bother.” He drained his drink and set the empty glass down on the bar. He pulled a pen and a piece of paper out of his packet. Writing something on the paper, he thrust it at her. “I’m flying Air Canada. This is my flight number and the hotel where I’m staying. I’m flying out of San Francisco International tomorrow night at 9:30.” He looked into her eyes. “At least think about it, okay?” He took her hand and wrapped her fingers around the paper. “Give me a call. I’d really like to have you there.”

Tango pulled her hand back. Riley looked

disappointed, then sighed and walked away from her, disappearing into the crowd. For a moment, Tango considered calling him back. For a moment, she considered tearing up the paper and forgetting all about Toronto and his invitation. Instead, she slid Riley's paper into her pocket. She put her headset back in place and turned it on. "I'm on duty again, Alan. Anything to report?"

* * *

She looked at Riley's paper again a few hours later as she sat in her office. On the other side of the wall behind her, Pan's was closing up for the night. The staff was chasing the last few clubgoers out through the doors, cleaning up the dance floor and wiping down the bars. Another successful night at San Francisco's hottest club. Tango considered Riley's paper and wondered if Pan's couldn't manage without her for a week.

Highsummer Night was just a little more than a week away. And surely a weekend night flight to Toronto would still have seats available, even the day before. Taking time off work, in spite of what she had told Riley, wouldn't be a problem. Alan was good. She could leave the club in his hands. She drummed her fingers on the desk. Getting to Toronto wouldn't be a problem.

Going would.

Tango leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. She hadn't lied when she'd told Riley that she didn't like Highsummer Night. It was pointless, stupid, and childish. Like most Kithain celebrations, and like most Kithain themselves.

With the rare exception of Riley and a few other

friends scattered around the world, Tango really did not enjoy the company of Kithain. They were too absorbed in the games that they played, too caught up in the pursuit of dreams and elusive wonder. Kithain were trapped between two worlds: the real world, where they lived, died, and ate greasy hamburgers, and a dream world, where they could still live as their immortal faerie ancestors had, amid pomp, adventures and raucous feasts. Kithain who lived with their minds floating in that dream world might stay young longer, but in Tango's opinion they also tended to be the next best thing to useless in the real world.

Maybe she was turning into a grump, one of the bitter, stubborn and dull older Kithain. If she was, then the change had been building for the last fifteen years. There was a small mirror in her drawer. Tango felt almost guilty as she took it out and looked into it. No wrinkles yet. No sagging. No gray hairs. She looked like any thirty-year-old woman. She didn't look like a grump. She didn't feel like a grump — at least not most of the time. A Kithain really was only as young or old as she looked and felt. And Tango felt about thirty most of the time, still energetic, but with experiences that were starting to become a heavy load. Some days that load felt heavier than others.

Like today. Tango had played the Kithain games of wild youth once, hopping from freehold to freehold, from the real world to dreams and back again. She had been fifteen, in both appearance and reality, when she had gone through the Chrysalis, the period of awakening to her faerie legacy and the existence of Kithain. She'd looked only twenty when games had become sour for her, thirty years later. Tired and disillusioned, she had walked away from a freehold in...

she wasn't even sure where it had been now. Somewhere in Colorado, a freehold so lost in the Dreaming that it barely had a location in the real world. She had walked away, knowing that there must be more to the world than Kithain games. Two days later, she had been in Bangkok.

Traveling had done her good. She probably knew more about the other creatures and beings that shared the shadows of the world than most Kithain did. And she knew that she found most of them, and most humans, more interesting than most Kithain. She had met the owner of Pan's, a human playboy and mage named Aaron Barry, in Australia five years ago. They had become good friends, strong friends, almost instantly. But humans, mages or otherwise, weren't Kithain.

Tango worked a kenning, a tiny, simple enchantment that brought the fae seeming of people and things into focus for her. In the mirror, her reflection shifted. Her hair became wild and pale, her eyes dark and beady, her teeth crooked and her features rough, an exaggerated red sausage of a nose against apple cheeks. Her hands, holding the mirror, became tough and callused. Her arms and legs grew gnarled, and she became even shorter than she normally was. She grimaced at herself, almost sure that the mirror would break. This was her true face, the face of her kith or faerie race. Riley was a tricky pooka. Tango was a dour nocker.

But not even nockers were grim and grouchy all of the time. They were the descendants of earth faeries, the miners and smiths of the Kithain. In the modern age, their magic had also come to include machines, so much so that most nockers were more skilled with

machines than they were with other Kithain. Still, they had their social moments. Kithain blood called to Kithain blood. And in spite of the way she felt about Kithain, Tango was more social than most nockers — maybe because her magic was weak and any knack for machinery almost nonexistent. She liked being around people. Her own crooked nocker face was, aside from Riley's, the only Kithain face she had seen in a long time. Seeing a few more for just a short while wouldn't hurt her, would it? It would be nice to spend more time with Riley.

Thirty years of Kithain life had left her with a lot of dark memories. Riley's offer was waking some of the brighter ones.

A stirring in one corner of the office drew her attention away from the mirror. The shadows in that corner were momentarily alight with a glow that only her kenning allowed her to see. Tango smiled. That was another reason to accept Riley's invitation. The glow was Glamour, the energy of magic and wonder — and lifeblood to the Kithain. Tango rose and walked over to the struggling shimmer. She dipped her hand into it, letting it tingle like saltwater across her skin. Stories said that Glamour had been everywhere once. Now it was rare, and clung to the real world in only a few places, like Riley's apartment building, filled with the creative energies of artists and musicians, or Pan's, enchanted by Aaron with his human magick but attracting a thin kind of Glamour as a side effect. The Glamour around Kithain freeholds and courts was usually thick, however. Part of Tango craved that density of Glamour, cried out to be submersed in it. Just as part of her craved the company of other Kithain for

just a little while.

And she did have a few very fond memories of Highsummer Night.

Tango walked back to her desk and considered Riley's paper again. Maybe the pooka was right. Maybe it was time for her to go back to Kithain life, at least for a little while. It probably would do her good. She might even find that the years had taken away the disgust she felt for Kithain society and that she could stomach the company of other Kithain again.

If she didn't, at least Toronto had plenty of humans to hang around with.

She reached for the phone and dialed Riley's hotel. It was a good hotel; even at this early, early hour, there was a night clerk on duty. The giddy anticipation of Highsummer was already creeping up on her, and she briefly considered having the clerk ring Riley's room. She would enjoy waking him up. Instead, though, she just left a brief, anonymous message. *Let's tango in Toronto.* "He'll know what it means," she told the clerk.

* * *

Getting a ticket for the 9:30 flight to Toronto the next night was as easy as Tango had anticipated it would be. Riley had written down his seat number, and with a little smooth talking Tango even managed to get the seat beside his. There was no return call from Riley, but that was nothing unusual. Riley had never returned a call on time since she had known him. So Tango packed her bags, promised to call Alan with Riley's number in Toronto as soon as she had it, and drove herself to the airport. She would rent a car in Toronto. There were

very few lines at the airport. Not even the departure lounge was particularly crowded.

Which made it abundantly clear that there was no sign of Riley.

That wasn't especially unusual either. Riley was about as punctual as he was prompt in returning phone calls. To judge by the desire that he had expressed last night in Pan's to have her come to Toronto, though, she would have expected to see him waiting for her anxiously. But maybe not. Tango bought a cheap, trashy novel at a terminal convenience store and settled down to wait.

When preboarding was announced and Riley still had not appeared, she began to worry. Going to the desk, she caught the attention of one of the attendants. "I'm supposed to be traveling with someone. Can you tell me if he's checked in?"

"Certainly. His name?"

"Riley Stanton."

The attendant entered the name in his computer terminal, then shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"He hasn't checked in yet?"

"There isn't anyone by that name on this flight."

Tango bit her tongue. Riley could be traveling under a false name. The long-lived Kithain did that fairly frequently. She hesitated to ask any further questions in case he was. It could make things awkward for both of them, especially if Riley was carrying the kind of "party favors" that the mages of the Cult of Ecstasy usually made. "Thank you," she said politely. One of the other attendants called boarding for her row. Tango took out her boarding pass and got in line.

"Gate H," said the attendant mechanically.

Tango followed the other passengers almost numbly. There was late, and then there was Riley. And then there was *really* late. She could imagine him rushing through the airport as though he were a character in some travel comedy, the kind where tickets get left behind and overpacked luggage dumps clothing in the middle of the terminal. She hoped he made the flight. She had been looking forward to having a good talk with him during the trip. Once they got to Toronto, she was sure that she would lose him to his duties as organizer of the Highsummer party.

She found her seat, on the aisle, and stashed her carry-on in the overhead compartment. Just as she was settling into her seat, a tall woman with platinum-blond hair and an expensive jacket stopped in the aisle. "All right, Cheryl," she said to a small girl with her, "you have the window seat. If you need something, Mommy will be right behind you."

Tango glanced up. "I think there must be some mistake. I'm waiting for a friend." She touched the seat beside her. "This is his seat."

The woman glanced at the row numbers overhead, then at her daughter's boarding pass. "6A? No. It's ours." She flashed Tango a dazzling, perfect smile that spoke of long hours of adult orthodontics. "Excuse us."

"Yay!" squealed Cheryl, clambering around Tango.

"Wait!" Tango stood up. "Let's check with an attendant. There's been..."

"There's no mistake." The woman's mouth compressed into a hard line of displeasure. "I requested a seat reassignment when we checked in. This is the seat they gave my daughter."

Tango took a deep breath and resisted the urge to

give the woman reason to spend even more money on corrective dentistry. "If you don't mind," she said smoothly, "I'd just like to check that myself." She flagged down an attendant and explained the situation.

The attendant disappeared toward the front of the plane, then reappeared a minute later. "I'm sorry," she reported with a smile, "but the seat assignment is correct."

The platinum-blond woman gave Tango a smug smile and settled into her own seat. Tango choked back a snarl. What kind of parent brought a kid on a night flight anyway? "What happened to the person who had the seat before? Has he been bumped?"

"No. The seat was never sold. If you will take your seat, we're ready to start taxiing to the runway."

Tango blinked and sat down in surprise. And an unpleasant thought occurred to her. A thought that made her hands itch to be around Riley's scrawny throat and squeezing.

Pookas took immense delight in playing pranks — one reason they loved Highsummer Night so much. Riley hadn't played a serious prank on her in years. She had thought their friendship was past that.

"Hi!" Cheryl said brightly. "This is my first time flying at night." She shoved her skinny little arm under Tango's nose. There was a gaudy gold charm bracelet around her wrist. Cheryl indicated a charm shaped like a star. "Mommy bought me a new charm. See?"

One of the plastic covers on the armrests cracked under Tango's grip. Cheryl glanced at the broken plastic, then up at Tango's face. Tango didn't look back at her. She was concentrating on breathing slowly and steadily, smoothing out her black anger at Riley.

CHAPTER TWO

*Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?*

Matt walked down the steps of the fraternity house as if he belonged there, as if he were just another frat boy going out for the night. Miranda looked up at him. "Finished so soon?" she asked sarcastically.

"I hate summer," Matt complained. "Practically everyone's gone away. There can't be more than a handful of frat boys left in the city." He jerked a thumb at the dark bulk of the frat house behind him. "This is the third time this week I've had to come here."

Miranda shrugged. "Kidnap him. Keep him on ice."

"Yeah, sure. And what happens when he's gone? Do I just get another one?" Matt wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his varsity jacket, leaving a dark streak glistening on the blue leather. Miranda wasn't sure if he'd ever really played rugby, but Matt liked to cultivate a style he called "collegiate gone savage." The jacket was worn and stained, the jeans he wore with it torn. Matt seldom took the jacket off, even on the hottest of summer nights. "These boys have parents, Miri, who miss their babies when they're gone. And they have friends. Too many frat boys go missing or die suddenly, and it gets very hard for me." He grimaced. "You're

lucky. You can feed wherever you want to.”

“Cry me a river,” she replied. Matt glared at her angrily. Miranda returned his glare, meeting his gaze coolly and directly. For a moment, their wills clashed: Matt seeking dominance, Miranda denying him with the arrogance of experienced, rightful power. Finally, with a snarl and a flash of bared teeth, Matt looked away.

“Where are Tolly and Blue?” he asked in a hiss.

“Following someone.” Miranda led him to her car, a black sports model parked down the block, without saying anything else.

“Who?”

Miranda remained silent and inscrutable as she started the car and pulled away from the curb. She was more than aware of Matt in the seat beside her, fuming and waiting for her reply. She left him hanging for a few minutes longer. The car slid through the hot Toronto night, whispering from one pool of light below a streetlamp to the next. Like a shadow. Miranda was a shadow, too, tall and lean. Matt might affect a look that recalled the university student he had once been, but Miranda chose to embrace what she was now. She wore black. Black jeans, black, high-collared shirt. Her long, black hair was pulled back and tied at the nape of her neck with a knot of black velvet. A gothic cross cast in dull pewter hung around her neck, her only ornamentation. Her eyes were intense, dark, drowning pools in a strong face that still retained its café-au-lait skin tone even after years of death.

She was a vampire. Why pretend otherwise?

She had known Matt back in university — they had both been taken the same night, reborn into the world

of the Kindred in the same cemetery. Sometimes she wondered if he remembered her from then, when he was important and popular and she was nothing. Maybe that was why he always seemed so jealous of her now. Maybe it was because he would never be able to match her acceptance of the cruelty that their new existence demanded.

Miranda parked the car on Beverley Street, just south of Dundas. Matt glanced at her. "We're going down to Queen? Just the two of us?"

"Does that frighten you?"

Matt snorted and swung his door open. A small group of people was just walking past, heading south, laughing and discussing some art movie they had seen. Matt's door opened right in front of them, forcing the young man who was in the lead to come to a sudden halt or run into the vampire. The laughter stopped instantly. For a moment the young man stared at Matt, his expression neither angry nor frightened, but simply blank. Then he said, politely and automatically, "Excuse me," and stepped around the open door.

One of the young man's friends laughed again, a brittle laugh. The group sluggishly resumed its movement and continued on, down toward Queen Street. Matt sneered after them. "Too terrified to recognize danger."

"They aren't the only ones." Miranda got out of the car as well. "We'll go down to Queen Street as a pack."

Blue was waiting for them on a bench in the park across the street. The rest of the park was empty except for the few streetpeople who slept there, too desperate or too deranged to go elsewhere. "Tolly?" asked Miranda.

“Keeping an eye on our boy.” Blue rose to meet them. He was big, and the shirt he wore, flannel with the sleeves torn off, only emphasized it. If Matt hadn’t actually played rugby, Blue probably had, dragged into it because of his size and build. He still looked like the cop he had wanted to be: square-jawed, short-haired and grim. He seldom smiled. The fangs of other vampires might extend only when they were angry or hungry, but Blue’s were always visible. Miranda liked him, maybe because he was more like her than any other member of the pack. Not entirely like her, of course. Blue might have been a predator, but it was instinct that drove him. A vampire had to think, as well. “He went into Calais — no telling if he’s still there. He might have moved on. Tolly will stay with him.”

Miranda nodded. “So then we have to find Tolly. Matt?”

In the shadows, she could only make out the ghost of a smirk on his face. Miranda longed to wipe the smirk off his face. But she didn’t. They needed him, and he knew it. “Well?” she asked again.

“I can do it,” he said confidently. Almost cockily. Miranda refused to give him the response that he was looking for. She simply turned and walked into the darkness of the park, leading them south.

The park was old, once the grounds of an estate, later willed to the city. The trees were dark and twisted, the bushes thorny. An old iron fence still encircled it, and gates, though welded open, still guarded its entrances. The only concessions to the present were garbage baskets and, by the south gate, a wide asphalt pad with ugly concrete planters filled with tired

geraniums. Someone had scrawled political graffiti on the asphalt. In chalk, of course, not spray paint. This was Toronto, after all. Even the vandals had manners.

South of the park was Queen Street. Queen Street West, the heart of Toronto's club scene, Toronto's alternative scene, Toronto's hip, cool, epitome-of-style scene. The place to be seen. A dangerous place for the pack.

There were people here, many people, walking along the sidewalk, sitting on the patios of bars and cafés, clogging the narrow street with their cars. Miranda, Matt and Blue joined the crowds. Few people seemed to be going anywhere; most just wandered, alone or in groups. Miranda, in her black clothing, fit right in with them. Matt and Blue stood out only a little, no more than the occasional cluster of punks or handful of hammered university students. The crowd still parted around the vampires, though. Miranda almost wished they wouldn't. It was probably an unconscious reaction to the implicit threat of the vampires' presence, but it made them easier to spot. At least, though, it also made it a little easier to see.

Calais was a trendy clothing store, open late into the night, as so many of the stores on the street were. In the store's window, pale mannequins in dark clothes were covered with long veils of semi-transparent gauze. The gauze made it difficult to distinguish the fashions displayed underneath, the dark clothes and reflections in the glass blurring the distinction between the crowd outside and the silent mannequins in the window. The shrouded dead surrounded by restless spirits. That was probably the intention. Miranda stopped. "Tolly?" she

asked out loud, ignoring the people brushing past her.

There was no response. Blue went into the store and came out again a moment later. "He's gone." He looked at Matt.

Matt straightened his jacket. "Tell me who we're following, first."

Miranda was looking across the street. Another woman had stopped over there, staring at them, her face hostile. Then she was gone. Miranda frowned. She had been hoping that this would happen later rather than sooner. "They've seen us."

"We're following a Camarilla vampire," Blue told Matt. "We saw him feeding in a car while we were waiting for you."

"On St. George?" A cruel smile spread across Matt's face. There were two sects in vampire society; two competing ideologies that fought each other. The Camarilla, weak, bound by tradition and fear of human attention, was one. The Sabbat, strong, wild, free and unafraid, was the other. The Camarilla might rule the majority of the vampires in the world, but they hid behind a Masquerade, concealing themselves from mortal eyes by pretending that there were no such things as vampires. Denying their own existence. The Sabbat knew better. Mortals were nothing. Playthings, more than willing to deny the existence of vampires of their own accord. The vampires of the Sabbat had nothing to fear from them. The Sabbat ruled Toronto. A few lingering refugees from the Camarilla were... tolerated. Within strict limits. "That's out of bounds. Why didn't you stop him there?"

"We wanted to punish him here. In his own territory. But we'll be in trouble too if we don't find him before

the welcoming committee gets to us." Miranda turned back to her friends. "Find Tolly, Matt."

"Where was the last place you saw the kook?"

Blue growled and pointed to a half-shadowed doorway. Matt stepped into it and put his hands flat against one wall. Matt could sense things that humans and many other vampires couldn't, the only one in the pack with that particular ability. It was one of the few reasons that Miranda tolerated him. One of Tolly's abilities was to hide, so completely and sometimes so impossibly that only Matt could find him. The gifts that came with the Embrace were varied and strange, but always powerful.

Matt's hands were like huge white spiders creeping over the wall as he slowly felt for the psychic impressions that Tolly's presence would have left behind. Finally, he nodded and pointed. "This way," he said, leading them back the way they had come and around a corner. He paused, head slowly turning from side to side, searching for Tolly.

"Where is he?" demanded Miranda.

"I..." Matt's head snapped around. "I see him. Come on." Hurrying down the block, he stopped in front of a tall, iron lamppost, one of the kind erected by the city government in an effort to beautify parts of the city. Matt rapped on it, his knuckles ringing against the metal. "Tolly."

An arm, then a leg, sprouted out of the lamppost.

More accurately, they came around the side of the lamppost as Tolly stepped out from behind it — or beside it. Miranda suspected that whichever side of the lamppost she had been facing, Tolly would have seemed to come from behind it. He had taken on a shape very

much like that of the lamppost itself: tall, and almost cylindrically thin. His face, translucent pale skin framed by long, fine, blond hair, almost glowed with reflected light. The Embrace might bring strange and powerful abilities, but it could also bring madness, sometimes hand in hand; Tolly's body had a tendency to shift and reshape itself, reflecting the vampire's moods or surroundings. All totally unconsciously. Occasionally he would wander off and reappear with a new tattoo or a body piercing, as if his body's own unnatural abilities weren't enough to satisfy it. The artificial modifications lasted no longer than his own reshapings, healed, erased or plucked away by Tolly's wandering hands. Sometimes Tolly scarcely seemed aware that he still had a body and that he wasn't some disembodied spirit. It was eerie to watch him as his face and limbs distorted while he chatted or walked or sat, blissfully ignorant. His lack of control fascinated Miranda — almost as much as it disturbed her.

But Tolly could also be frighteningly competent in the midst of his madness. One impossibly thin arm, like the crossbar on the lamppost, came up and gestured toward a café. "He's in there."

"Good." Miranda walked toward the café. The others followed her, Tolly still as tall and thin as the lamppost, though he shrank down with every step he took. No one passing on the street seemed to notice. If they did, they were too polite to say anything. By the time the vampires entered the café, he was still tall and scrawny, but at least he looked human again.

The server behind the glass case of cakes and pies at the front of the café ignored them. No one stopped them as they made their way to a table in the back

corner of the restaurant. A man — another vampire — sat there, a cup of coffee untouched in front of him. He smiled at a pretty girl and whispered words that were as sweet as the cake she ate. Miranda dropped down beside him and caught the girl's eye. Her will was like candy floss. "Go home," Miranda commanded.

"Shit!" The Camarilla vampire started, his chair squealing on the floor as he pushed away from the table and tried to escape. Blue's big hands came down on his shoulders and held him in his seat. The girl stood without a word, picked up her purse, and left. Tolly sat down in her place and began playing with her cake.

"Keep quiet, Camarilla," whispered Miranda with a smile on her face. "There are a lot of nice, normal people here. You wouldn't want them to know what lurks in the shadows of their little paradise, would you?"

The vampire's eyes were wide with panic as he looked from Miranda with her smile to Tolly, mashing the cake into a brown goo with a fork, to Matt, casually standing with his back to the rest of the café and blocking the table from view. "You're Sabbath," he croaked. "You're not supposed to be here. The Settlement..."

"You're Camarilla, and the Settlement applies to you, too. It's time for a little geography lesson, I think. What's your name, Camarilla?"

"Listen." The vampire licked his lips nervously. "I know what this is about.... Earlier tonight, right?" He glanced around again, searching for sympathy. "I didn't know she was going to drive out of the Box. And I was hungry. It's not my fault." He reached out to Miranda.

Tolly grabbed the vampire's hand and slapped it down, palm up, on the tabletop. Then he drove his fork

through the undead flesh and into the wood of the table. Blue wrapped one hand around their captive's mouth, muffling his shriek of pain.

Miranda held up her hand. Her fingernails lengthened, growing into long talons. Shadows stretched and shifted around her, around the table, shrouding them in gloom, hiding what was about to happen from the humans in the café. The ability to grow claws was something she had learned from Blue, but the ability to manipulate shadows was her skill alone, a reflection of the darkness inside her. "What's your name?" she repeated.

Blue loosened his grip on the vampire's mouth, just enough so that he could speak. "Re—Reg."

"Reg," Miranda said calmly, as though she were speaking to a child, "when the Sabbat conquered Toronto, a few of your elders helped us in return for being allowed to remain in the city. Our leaders, in their infinite and only slightly questionable wisdom, agreed, and gave the surviving Camarilla a small territory, subject to a few conditions. Can you tell me what the most important of those conditions is, Reg?"

Reg nodded, red tears in his eyes. Even vampires could know terror. "Never to leave it," he whimpered.

"Very good." Miranda touched one talon to his pinned palm and swiftly drew it through his flesh, leaving a deep gash behind. "What is the eastern boundary of the Camarilla's territory?"

Reg's eyes went wide with pain, but he managed to gasp out, "University Avenue."

Miranda made a second gash at a right angle to the first. "The southern boundary?"

"King Street."

Slash. "The western?"

Reg choked before replying, "Bathurst Street." A vampire could heal most wounds quickly and cleanly. The wounds of Miranda's claws would heal slowly, though, and they would leave deep scars. Reg might even lose the use of his hand.

Miranda made a fourth cut, completing the square that gave the Camarilla's restricted territory in Toronto its nickname — the Box. "And the northern boundary?"

"Queen Street."

Surely the human patrons of the café weren't oblivious to the torture that was taking place in the shadows behind their backs. Reg's voice bubbled with agony, even though he held back the true expression of his pain. But no one intervened. No one came over to see what was happening. Sometimes, Miranda thought, it almost seemed that the people of Toronto knew what dark forces lived among them and ruled their city, but were simply too polite to stop them. Politeness and manners became a protective shield against fear.

There's nothing to see. Just ignore them and they'll go away.

Miranda looked into Reg's pain-filled eyes. "So if that's the Camarilla's territory, where would you say you were tonight?"

"In Sabbat..." Reg's words caught in his throat, and he almost gagged trying to get them out. "In Sabbat territory."

"Show me," Miranda said. She flicked the fork embedded in his palm. Reg's hand spasmed in answer to the vibrating metal. He clenched his teeth. Reaching across with his other hand, he traced a shaking trail

that ended just above the base of his second finger. Miranda nodded. Blue reached down and pulled Reg's free hand away. Miranda grasped the finger almost delicately between her talons.

There was no way to muffle Reg's scream this time.

The Sabbat pack left him clutching at his ruined hand, trying to drag the fork out of his bloody flesh, and walked out of the café. Miranda lifted her veil of shadows, exposing him to anyone who dared to look. But the human patrons ignored it all, deliberately oblivious. Perhaps one of the staff would phone the police, but Miranda suspected that none of what had happened here would even make the news.

There were more Camarilla vampires waiting for them on the street outside. Not many. Only three, maybe four. Trapped in the Box, the Camarilla vampires of Toronto were overcrowded, degenerate refugees hiding from the justice of their own sect. Miranda faced them down. "One of your own violated the Settlement," she announced coolly. "We came here to punish him, as is our right under the Settlement."

"Get out." It was the hostile woman Miranda had seen on Queen Street. "Get out and leave us alone."

Matt laughed. "We'll go when we're damn well ready."

"We'll go now." Miranda glared at Matt, and the other vampire subsided into sullen silence. She looked back at the Camarilla vampires. "Because we're done here. Punishment has been carried out." She turned and began walking back toward Queen Street. A gaunt vampire caught her arm.

"We won't forget this, Miranda."

She knew him. "You can remember for as long as

you want, DeWinter.” She brushed his arm away — he was weak. “There’s nothing you can do.”

* * *

“We’ll leave now. Hell, Miri, why didn’t you just bare your neck for them?”

Matt hadn’t stopped complaining since they had walked away from the Camarilla vampires. Now they were coming back up through the park and Miranda was doing her best to keep herself from silencing him by removing his tongue. *Let him get his rant out of his system, she thought to herself. Then I’ll crush him like the idiot that he is.* Freedom was important to the Sabbat, but so was a certain amount of intelligence. “Those Cammie assholes need to be taught a lesson,” Matt raved. “We’re Sabbat. We can go wherever we damn well feel like! Why’d we let those bastards stay in the first place?”

“They begged for their lives,” Blue replied. The big vampire scuffed his feet as he walked. “The Archbishop decided to let the Cammies keep them — for a price. Like killing a bear and turning it into a rug. They’re living trophies.”

“Maybe they’re starting to forget that they belong on the floor, then. We should get some of the other packs together and show the Cammies what being a vampire is really all about.”

That was enough. “We should leave them alone.” Miranda turned to look at Matt. Her voice was as warm as velvet, but it had all the strength of iron. “The Sabbat made a deal with them. The Box is theirs. As long as they respect the Settlement, we respect it, too.” She paused, giving him a disdainful glance. “Why do

you think they didn't attack us when we came out of the café? They could have surprised us and had the upper hand. They could have taken us, but they didn't."

Matt didn't seem particularly impressed. "They didn't fight us because they were afraid to let the humans see them. It's that stupid Masquerade of theirs that kept them back." He snorted. "If they had any brains at all, they'd forget trying to hide. Then I'd be worried."

Tolly giggled. "Like a cartoon character, Matt?" Miranda and the others just looked at him. He smiled. "You know. Frightened of a bearskin rug. *Groowwwwrr!*" The mad vampire's body ballooned up and he grabbed at Matt with suddenly stubby arms. Saliva dripped from exaggerated teeth.

Matt stumbled, startled. "Get out of my face, kook!" He slapped at Tolly. The blow landed with the smack of skin on modeling clay. Tolly blinked and collapsed back into his normal form, rubbing at his face. His jaw sagged ridiculously to one side. Matt snarled and drew his arm back again. Miranda grabbed it and pulled, twisting Matt around. She seized him by the front of his shirt and lifted him into the air.

"That is *enough*." Her words were a hiss, backed up by an angry glare and exposed fangs. Miranda shook Matt hard enough to snap his neck back and forth. "If I hear any more talk about violating the Settlement, I will take you before the Archbishop, and we'll see what he has to say." Matt paled. The Archbishop was the leader of the Sabbat in Toronto — and quite fond of his captive menagerie of vampires. In the past he had very casually killed vampires more powerful than Matt for even criticizing the Settlement. "And if you're that

unhappy with the way I handled the situation tonight,” Miranda continued with a smile, “maybe you’d like to take the matter up in a duel.” She threw him to the ground. “Right now. How about it?”

Matt stared up at her, anger burning in his face. He glanced at Blue. The big vampire refused to meet his gaze. Miranda waited. “Well?” she asked.

Matt looked down. “No,” he muttered. “You did the right thing.”

She could have demanded that he repeat the words, humiliating him further. She didn’t, however. Instead, Miranda simply nodded and turned her back on him, contemptuously daring him to try attacking her from behind. She knew that he wouldn’t. He and the rest of the pack would follow her. Blue might be bigger, Matt more devious, Tolly more... inhuman, but none of them could match her for simple, callous evil. She was a serpent and they knew it. They would follow her.

She was untouchable in her evil. She was Sabbat. Miranda walked confidently down the paths of the park, through the old gates, back onto Beverley Street — and froze.

There was a man sitting on the hood of her car, his feet resting idly on the bumper. He was dressed in black, just as she was: tailored black pants, polished black shoes, and a shirt of whisper-thin black silk that clung to his muscular body. The combination of that body and a face that should have been on an angel would have been enough to inspire mingled feelings of lust and envy in anyone who looked at him. He might almost have been a clubgoer who had wandered up from Queen West. Almost.

The pack was suddenly clustered around her, staring

at the man. Tolly smiled, his still-twisted jaw rendering the expression horrifically grotesque. Blue's own expression was dark. Matt's lips were drawn back in a happy snarl. All they saw was a mortal where one didn't belong. A lone mortal who had definitely picked the wrong car on which to rest. "Oh, yeah," murmured Matt, "I needed this." He glanced at Miranda. "May we teach *him* a lesson, Mother Miranda, or does the Sabbat have a treaty with the humans as well?"

Miranda considered the man for a moment longer, then smiled as well and nodded. Matt's snarl turned into a broad grin. "Tolly, get behind him. Blue, you're with me." Miranda noticed that he didn't attempt to include her in his plans, a deliberate snub. That was all right. "Hey, buddy," the arrogant vampire called out, "is that your car?"

"Yeah," the man lied casually. His gaze was vacant, the look of a man who had had too much to drink, the look of a man with his guard down. Matt strode into the street cockily. Blue hung back a little bit, perhaps a touch suspicious. Tolly... Tolly was already gone, faded into the shadows in the instant Miranda's attention had been off him. She caught the tiniest of flickers in her peripheral vision. It might have been Tolly crossing the street. The man patted the car's hood. "Beauty, isn't she?"

"Sure is." Matt and Blue came closer. "I have a friend who used to have one just like it." Writers and literary critics were always talking about the "legendary" vampire as a symbol for sex and sensuality. They were right. When he chose to, Matt could be irresistibly charming, radiating an exotic, predatory allure.

That allure worked almost visibly on the man. He

gave Matt a brainless grin. "Really? They're great cars. Tough, too." He bounced up and down on the hood a few times, setting the car rocking on its shocks.

A red flush of anger spread across Blue's face, and red light flashed in his eyes. Miranda caught the shifting of shadows as claws grew on his hands. "You..." the big vampire began in a growl, lurching forward. Matt threw an arm across his chest, holding him back.

"Never mind him. Seeing cars bouncing brings back bad memories from high school." Matt's voice dripped sweetness like a honeycomb. He stepped closer. "What's your name, buddy?" He grinned, his smile a sudden flash of white teeth.

The smile brought the man's attention to Matt's face. Simple animal instinct. They made eye contact. The man's gaze dulled instantly as Matt's will overpowered his mind.

"Lie back," Matt ordered him softly. The man slid down obediently so that his back pressed against the cool metal of the car's hood and he stared up into the hazy night sky. "Tolly," Miranda heard Matt call. Nothing happened. Matt called for Tolly again, then cursed the mad vampire. He walked closer to the car.

There was a quiet crunch that Miranda could hear from across the street. Matt just barely had time to glance down at his feet, at the scattered minefield of garlic cloves into which he had walked, before he froze, paralyzed. A look of confusion was locked onto his face. The man on the hood of the car snapped himself upright, flicking something, another clove of garlic, at Blue. Startled, the big vampire still tried to dodge, diving aside with unnatural speed. The man's aim was better, though, and his arm faster. Blue was paralyzed

before he hit the ground. His body didn't even change position as he fell.

Miranda walked up to the car and studied the garlic scattered on the ground. Just as writers were right about vampires' sex appeal, folklore had gotten some of the facts about vampires, like the dangers of stakes through the heart and exposure to sunlight, correct. On other matters, though, they had been very wrong. Crosses didn't do a thing, and garlic was no more than a pungent herb. Under normal circumstances. "Interesting choice. Even if Matt had noticed this, he would have thought you were no more than some kind of misinformed would-be hunter."

"That was the idea." Solomon climbed off the car. "You don't have to worry about it, by the way. The only danger now is that it will make your shoes smell bad."

She smiled at the mage. "I'm surprised Matt didn't see it, though."

"All of his attention was on me. He didn't have a chance to notice it." Miranda raised an eyebrow. She knew enough about magick to doubt any lucky coincidences that happened to Solomon. He just shrugged. "Believe what you want."

Miranda smiled again, then considered Matt, as stiff and still as a mannequin. She put her hand on his shoulder and shoved gently. Matt rocked. Miranda grinned, glancing at Solomon. "May I?"

Solomon grinned back and held up his left hand. Obediently, Miranda kissed the chain tattoo, then turned his hand over and ran her tongue over the pale skin on the inside of his wrist. Solomon shivered slightly. Miranda looked up at him, her smile lascivious. Solomon pushed one hand through her thick hair.

“Miri...”

“May I?” she asked again.

“Go ahead. He’s essentially unconscious right now.”

She gave Matt a strong push between his shoulders. The paralyzed vampire toppled forward onto the car hood. His face banged into the hood. A broken nose wouldn’t be much for him to heal, but it would be embarrassing. Miranda turned back to Solomon. “That felt good. Is there something I can do for you, O Master?”

“Don’t call me that.” He caught her hand and kissed her wrist in turn. “Save it for the Bandog rituals.”

Miranda twisted her hand around to grab him underneath the chin, lifting him up until he was standing on his tiptoes. She looked into his eyes and smiled. “Full obedience.” Solomon gave a little moan. She let him slide back down to the ground. He took her hand again and kissed it a second time.

“I pay homage to Miranda.” He stepped into her arms, head and knees bending so that he could kiss her breast. His head lingered there for a moment and she could feel his breath through her shirt. “I pledge my body in service to the Sentinel of my Ways, the Hungry Mistress Who Commands the Three Aches, my Lady of Thorns, the One Who Wills, the One Who Goes Before Me.” Solomon straightened again, but kept his eyes humbly downcast rather than meet her gaze. “I am your servant in this world.” He paused, waiting. Miranda parted her lips, exposing her fangs. With a shiver of anticipation, Solomon kissed her, then sent his tongue darting into her mouth to caress her fangs with hesitant eagerness.

The blasphemous mock-obedience had shocked her

the first time he had pronounced it, but she had grown used to it quickly. If Shaftiel's chief servant could mock his master in this way and get away with it, why shouldn't she accept it? Miranda let Solomon lick her deadly fangs for a moment longer, then pushed him away roughly. The mage sighed with a little pleasure at her rejection.

It was all just a game. They both knew and they both accepted it. Miranda had lost interest in sex as mortals practiced it when she had become a vampire, the pleasures of the flesh lost to the pleasures of blood. Solomon's touch was enjoyable, but her arousal could be deadly. That, Miranda knew, was what Solomon found so exciting. She was a creature who was far more powerful than he at such close quarters. He risked himself each time he approached her in this way, trusting her in his complete submission, knowing that any attempt to satisfy her would fail because of her very nature. Each time he failed, he became all the more penitent. The only way he could ever succeed would be to die.

It was a game that Miranda enjoyed as well. It forced her to balance her hunger against her self-control. She dominated not only Solomon, but also her own vampire instincts. She harnessed the beast within. There was no need to disguise her true nature when she had sex with Solomon, only to restrain it. Because the sex play was long and slow, the final blood-taking that came with Solomon's climax was much more intense than the typically frenzied feedings of the pack. There was no love in their sex, only desperate submission and hungry dominance. And if giving her body to Solomon gave her some measure of power over the leader of the

Bandog in return, well, that was a deal that she was willing to make. It was a cold relationship, but worth it.

Hadn't she joined the Bandog for the power that the demon Shaftiel promised?

"Why did you come here, Solomon?" she hissed. "The next Bandog ritual is in five days. Couldn't this have waited?" Her annoyance was only partially mock-aggression. The Sabbat was wild, but it had its rules. There were things that terrified even vampires, and demons were among those things. If the Sabbat inquisitors ever found out that she had become a demon-following infernalist, she would be destroyed out of hand. She had been very careful to keep the pack from finding out about the Bandog. Solomon's public appearance jeopardized all of that.

"No." Solomon caught her hand and kissed it one last time, then stood. All trace of his eager submission was gone. "This is business, Miranda. I want to hire you — or rather, the pack — to do a job for me. For the Bandog."

"For which?"

"Does it matter?" Solomon smiled.

Miranda raised one eyebrow and tilted her head to the side. "Possibly. You can't fool me, Solomon. I'm not one of the wealthy, middle-aged baby boomers you blackmailed into joining the Bandog."

"I didn't have to blackmail all of the Bandog," Solomon replied candidly. "You're not the only one who wants Shaftiel's favor. Even humans have problems that they want solutions for." He nodded at Matt, facedown on the hood of her car, the frat boy's stolen blood oozing from under his head. "He's getting to be quite a pain,

isn't he? I was watching you tonight."

Miranda suppressed a shiver of paranoia. One of the benefits of acting as Solomon's mistress was that she had learned some of what the mage was capable of doing with his magick. Once he knew a person, he could find and spy on them anywhere in the city. She put forward a strong front. "You promised me the power to deal with him."

"Be patient, Miranda. You won't have to wait too much longer." He reached out to stroke her thick, kinky hair. "The pack will be paid with money, but Shaftiel is calling on your pledge of servitude."

The words sent a thrill of anticipation through her. "What does he want?"

"Sacrifices. Sacrifices disguised as murder." Solomon put a finger against her lips before she could ask for more details. "There's nothing else I can tell you now, except that it's all for the greater glory of Shaftiel and the Bandog. The murders must be committed in a certain way. You're the perfect Bandog to commit them, but you'll need the pack to help you." He smiled again. "Don't worry. They don't have to know why you're doing this."

The vampire brushed his hand aside easily. "They probably won't even wonder why." Senseless violence came easily to the Sabbat, part of the disdain that they showed for humanity. Miranda narrowed her eyes and considered Solomon. "Does this have anything to do with the three Bandog who died recently?"

"You're as suspicious as the rest of the Bandog."

Miranda bared her teeth. "Like I said, Solomon, I'm no innocent."

"No," Solomon agreed, "you're not." He nodded. "It

does, but not in a way that I can explain to you now. I'll tell you everything at the same time I tell the other Bandog — at the ritual on Thursday night. For now..." He lifted his wrist to her lips. She kissed it obediently.

"Who dies and how?" she asked.

"I have specific targets, but not specific people. When I tell you, where I tell you. Tonight I want you to kill a man from a bar in the gay district. Tomorrow night, the same, and from the same bar. After that, I'll be in touch. Any man, any bar, it doesn't matter. Your choice."

"Or Matt's."

Solomon shrugged. "Or Matt's, but with your supervision. The body has to be found tomorrow. There must be no witnesses to tie you to the victim. And there can be no sign that vampires were involved."

"So we can't drink from him?" Miranda scowled. "I'll have trouble explaining that away to the pack."

"You won't have to. Like I said, I'm hiring them." He held out his hand. David stepped out of the shadows carrying a briefcase. His sudden appearance startled Miranda into growling. She didn't like the cold, blond man. He disturbed her. Solomon took no notice of her discomfort. He never had. Miranda had no illusions that she meant more to him than David did. "No drinking — no spilled blood at all if you can help it. I don't want anyone to suspect vampires."

"Who would?"

"Other vampires."

Miranda nodded slowly. He didn't want the Sabbath to interfere. "All right. But why use us at all, then? You could do this yourself." She gestured. "A little

magick...”

“Magick doesn’t work that way so easily. Vampires are much better at killing than I am, and I know I can trust you.” He took her hand again and touched her fingertips to his lips. “Besides which, I thought you might enjoy it.”

Her fingers tensed. Solomon pressed her sharp fingernails against his upper lip, reveling in the brief spark of pain. Miranda’s fingers relaxed again and she pressed back for a second longer before withdrawing her hand. “Wake the others. I want to go through this again in front of them. I don’t want them wondering why they were knocked out and I wasn’t.”

“That should be obvious. They were the ones who were stupid enough to attack a mage. Not all of us humans are as helpless as we look.” Solomon smiled, a vicious expression that blossomed like a slash across his handsome face. He released the magick holding the rest of the pack. The vampires stirred. Matt yelped at the pain from his broken nose.

Miranda’s smile matched Solomon’s.

CHAPTER THREE

*"Oh," cried Lizzie, "Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men."*

Tango opened the door of the bar called Hopeful. It was noon, and the place was just opening. The interior was surprisingly bright at this time of day: there were big windows at the front, facing out onto the street, and a slanting skylight in the back. The skylight was shaded with heavy cotton blinds to keep out the strong noon sun, but enough light came through to cast hazy illumination across the bar. Hopeful was well-kept. So many bars depended on the shadows to make them look good.

True to Riley's words, one wall was covered with posters from nightclubs around the world. Risqué ads for Pan's were featured prominently.

Her plane had gotten into Toronto so late that there hadn't been any point in trying to get things done right away. She had caught the first shuttle bus she saw to a hotel near the airport and checked in there. In the morning, she had rented a car and driven into the city. Even late in the morning, traffic was heavy, and trying to find a place to park downtown had been hell. Literally. She had eventually found one on the second-to-lowest level of an underground garage, though she

had practically had to sell her soul to pay for it. At least the parking attendant had been as polite as any other person she had talked to in Toronto. Once she found Riley's place, she would turn the car back in and walk. Or take the subway. Anything but drive again. Until she found Riley, however, she did not feel like dragging her luggage around with her.

It would have been convenient if Riley had been listed in the phone book, but of course he wasn't. Tango had tried every alias she had ever heard him use and had come up with a blank on every one. With no address and no phone number, the pooka's mention of Hopeful was the only lead she had to go on. Though there was an alternative. An unpleasant alternative.

She could find the Toronto court of the Kithain. If Riley was indeed the court Jester, then someone there would know where he lived. Tango had heard enough gossip about the Toronto court to know where they were generally to be found. A district called Yorkville, up north of the downtown core. But Tango didn't want to seek the help of the court just yet. Her initial anticipatory enthusiasm for the renewed company of other Kithain had long since waned. She wasn't sure that she really even wanted to stay in Toronto at all now. She would find Riley or wait for him to come back, take her revenge, and go home to San Francisco. She didn't feel in the mood to put up with the games of the Kithain court. And if she went to the court for help, she would have to admit that Riley had tricked her into coming to Toronto. No doubt that would amuse the Kithain to no end.

If she could get the answers she needed here, from humans instead of Kithain, things would be immensely simpler.

Hopeful was still mostly empty at this hour. There was a small cluster of men, looking tired and talking quietly, around one end of the bar. Tango walked up to the other end. She raised her hand to signal the bartender, then thought better of it. He looked as tired and quiet as his patrons. Instead, she waited patiently. It was only a moment before he noticed her and came over. "Sorry about that. What can I get you?"

"Club soda." The bartender nodded and started to pour her a glass. "And I'm looking for someone. He may be a regular here."

Club soda splashed across the counter as the bartender's hand shook. Some of the other men looked up. The bartender grabbed a cloth and hastily mopped up the spilled liquid. "Jack Elliott?" he murmured without looking up at Tango.

"No." Tango glanced briefly at the men at the far end of the bar. Most of them were already turning away. One continued to glare at her, until another put his hand on the angry man's shoulder and whispered something to him. The man's hostility collapsed and he looked away with tears in his eyes. Tango heard an uncomfortable cough, as if someone were trying to suppress a sob.

"Oh. Sorry." The bartender put her club soda down in front of her. He looked at it for a moment, then grabbed a wedge of lemon and stuck it on the side of the glass. "Sorry," he said again.

"It's okay." Tango picked up the lemon and squeezed its juice into the soda. "His name's Riley — at least that's probably the name he'd give."

The bartender nodded understandingly. "Lots of guys don't feel comfortable using their full names around here. What does he look like?"

“Scrawny. Short red hair, thinning on top. Glasses. Kind of geeky. Probably wears ballcaps a lot.”

“Yeah.” The bartender swiped his cloth across the counter again. “I know him. He comes in from time to time. Drinks whiskey sours, but he’s not exactly what I’d call a regular.”

Tango smiled. “Do you know where I can find him?”

“Sorry.”

“How about one of the other guys? Do you think they would? Was there anybody he came in with regularly?”

“A good-looking blond guy. Very quiet, didn’t drink.” The bartender glanced over his shoulder. “One of the guys might know your friend, but this isn’t a good time to ask.” He dropped a pen and a napkin on the bartop and shoved them toward her. “Leave your number. I’ll ask them. If they know or he comes in, I’ll give you a call.”

“I don’t have a number right now. I’m just visiting town. How about if I just come back in later? My name’s Tango. I saw a noteboard by the door — can I leave a message there asking people who know him to talk to you?”

“Sure. I’m Todd. If you’re going to put something up, I think I can get you some better paper.” He rummaged around and came up with an old, electric-blue flyer. “Use the back of this.” As he watched her write out a description of Riley, he asked hesitantly, “Do you mind if I ask why you’re looking for him?”

“I was supposed to meet him, but I haven’t been able to get in touch with him.” It was mostly the truth.

Todd sucked on his lower lip. “When was the last time you talked to him?”

“A couple of days ago,” Tango lied. She looked up.

“Why?”

“Just concerned.” Todd paused and added, “I don’t want to get you worried, but one of our regulars — Jack — was found murdered in a park this morning. If your friend is missing...”

Riley might have been murdered as well. Todd’s concern for a stranger was touching. “I don’t think so.” She put down the pen and looked over her message. “I’m sorry about Jack.”

“Thanks. I hope you find your friend, Tango. I’ll keep an eye open for him.”

There were tacks on the noteboard. Tango put up her message and sighed. No luck at Hopeful. She left the bar and went back out to the street. The air was hot and muggy, the white light of full sunshine blinding. She pulled a pair of sunglasses out of her pocket and slid them on. “Excuse me,” she said to a woman walking past. The woman paused briefly, looking at her with a distant, polite gaze as though the exchange was distasteful. “How do I get to Yorkville?”

* * *

At the end of the 1960s, Yorkville had been the center of Toronto’s drug culture. Hippies, students, radicals, and drug dealers had gathered there. They’d philosophized. They’d protested. They’d hung out. Under cover of darkness, in the smoky havens of coffeehouses and behind the walls of once-elegant homes turned into flophouses, they’d left reality behind. Drugs had circulated freely — or almost freely. Somebody had to be making a profit somewhere. That somebody had been the Unseelie Kithain of Toronto. At least so went the rumors that Tango had heard. The

court had ridden the drugs of the psychedelic counterculture to power in Toronto; a brief power that had lasted only until the good citizens of the city had had enough. The police had moved in and cleared the hippies out of Yorkville.

That brief power had been enough, though. The Unseelie were still in Yorkville. Tango walked along the street that had given the district its name, and felt the presence of other Kithain brush against her nerves. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there, congregating somewhere just out of sight. After fifteen years, the feeling was an unfamiliar thrill.

Yorkville, like the hippies, students and radicals of the sixties, had aged. It had acquired money and influence. Now it was one of the trendiest parts of Toronto. The once-filthy flophouses had been restored, if not to their original elegance, then at least to a kind of acceptable modishness. No one lived there, of course. Instead, the buildings housed fashionable restaurants, stylish clubs and expensive shops. The only signs of protest were the second- and third-floor offices of special interest lobby groups, their names posted on engraved brass plaques. Where hippies had hung out, there were sidewalk patios. More patios clustered on rooftops and balconies. Alleys between the buildings had been renamed "lanes" and "mews" and boasted tasteful street signs. In their shadowed depths lurked more shops. Everyone wanted a place in Yorkville.

Tango turned down one of the mews and crossed over to another street, letting her instincts guide her toward the other Kithain. Kennings, like so much other magic, didn't come easily to her. In her youth, she had known Kithain whose talents in kenning were so strong

that they could sense the tiniest drop of old faerie blood in humans, or feel the lost remnants of dancing circles buried under the asphalt of parking lots. Of course, those had also been the first Kithain to sink into depression, sick and dying, poisoned by the mundane Banality that sought to erase the last remnants of enchantment from the world.

Sometimes it was good not to be too sensitive.

She turned again, walked another half-block, and stopped. She cursed. The other Kithain felt farther away now than they had before. Tango resisted the urge to think that such a thing was impossible. Nothing, or almost nothing, was impossible around Kithain, and especially around the concentrated Glamour of a Kithain freehold. It was entirely possible that the feelings she had been chasing were like echoes, ricocheting around Yorkville before fading away.

She sat down on a bench, letting the flood of humans that crowded Yorkville wash past her. Teenagers in fashionable clothes bought with their parents' money. Students from the university a few blocks away. Thirty- and forty-somethings in business suits and dresses, in spite of the heat. Hip tourists in summer clothes, laughing and chatting brightly, bumping into people. Locals walking in little pockets of polite isolation, never touching anybody, apologizing to the tourists who bumped into them. Tango watched them as the tingling feelings of Kithain presence waxed and waned. She took a deep breath. She was thinking like a human... or an old grump. The court was hidden with Kithain magic. She wasn't going to be able to find it or even another Kithain simply by looking.

Tango stood up, closed her eyes, and spun around

three times. Then, trying to ignore the stares of the tourists, she apologized to the businessman she'd bumped, and went into a gourmet ice-cream store. When she came out again, a cup of ginger ice cream in hand, a Kithain was parking his car outside the store. Tango stared, then closed her eyes with a quiet groan.

The Kithain was tall, lean and young — maybe twenty-one or twenty-two. He wore a white T-shirt that set off his deep tan to perfection and clung to the flat muscles of his torso as his sun-faded jeans clung to his legs. His face, sharp and sculpted, was without flaw. A diamond stud flashed in his ear. His hair was like Rumpelstiltskin's straw under the sun. He was driving a vintage white Mustang convertible. Even without kenning him, Tango knew that his fae seeming would be as handsome and perfect as his human seeming. He was a sidhe, one of the aristocracy of the Kithain, very likely one of the nobles of Duke Michael's court. As arrogant as a unicorn with a poker up its butt, and twice as proud.

A sidhe was the last kind of Kithain Tango would have wanted to meet. It had been inevitable that she would encounter one at court — Duke Michael was a sidhe himself — but she had been hoping to meet some other lowborn Kithain first. A gossipy eshu. A hedonistic satyr. Even a crude, vicious redcap. Anyone but a sidhe. In this case, unfortunately, she didn't have any choice. Taking a last bite of the ice cream, she dropped the cup into a trash can and approached the sidhe just as he was turning around. He saw her before she could speak, and flashed her a smile that would have sent a human woman's heart into pounding delirium. "Hello...."

She cut his sidhe charm off curtly. "I'm looking for a pooka named Riley, Jester to Duke Michael's court. Where can I find him?"

The bright smile didn't falter. "Riley or Duke Michael?"

"Riley."

"You're not from Toronto, are you?"

What was your first clue? sprang immediately to Tango's tongue, but she bit the words back. If she was going to get the sidhe's help, it would be better not to antagonize him. "No. I'm not. Riley's an old friend of mine. He invited me here for Highsummer...."

This time the sidhe cut her off. "Do you know where he is?"

The demand grated against her nerves. "If I did, would I be asking you?" Tango snapped back.

The sidhe's smile vanished into a hard line, like high clouds scudding across the sun. "Come with me." He walked off without even a backward glance, taking her obedience for granted. Tango watched him go, wishing that she had any choice but to follow him. Except she didn't. She couldn't risk trying to find another Kithain and then failing. Cursing, she ran after him.

The sidhe led her down the very mews she had passed through before, but this time walking the other way, south to north. Halfway along, he turned sharply to the left, disappearing into the recessed entrance of a trendy sushi shop with carefully crafted plastic imitations of its creations in the window. When she reached the entrance, Tango turned as well and went in. There was no sign of the sidhe in the sushi shop. Flustered, apologizing to the maitre d' and silently cursing the sidhe, she stepped outside again.

“Down here, sister.”

The voice was old and rough. She glanced down. A deep shadow resolved itself into a narrow doorway at a right angle to the door to the sushi shop. Two steps led down, and then the passage turned sharply and more steep stairs led into darkness. Standing in the corner of the turn was an old woman so gnarled, and dressed in clothes so dark and wrinkled, that she blended in with the stones and mortar of the wall. Another nocker, as ancient a Kithain as Tango had ever seen. The old nocker spoke again. “You following Dex, sister?”

“The sidhe?” Tango stepped down into the shadowy passage. There was a dim light at the bottom of the steep stairs, and she could hear music. The smell of cigarette smoke mixed with the damp odor of the stone.

“Like a piece of the sun, isn’t he? If I were younger...” The other nocker pumped her hips. “Whumpfh! He wouldn’t know what hit him.”

“I presume this is Duke Michael’s court?”

“Such as it is, yes.” A twisted hand emerged from the dark clothes. Tango shook it. “I’m Ruby, the duke’s gatekeeper. You better get down there. Dex doesn’t like having to wait.”

“Thanks.” Tango started down the steps, then glanced back up. The duke’s gatekeeper had already faded back into the wall. “Ruby, I’m looking for Riley. Is he here?”

“You’re a friend of Riley’s?” Ruby’s voice was startled. “Sweet almighty, sister! Hurry and get down there before the duke gets angry!”

Abruptly, Tango was at the base of the stairs, as if the step she had been standing on had suddenly become the bottom one. A black-painted door with one small

window of grimy glass opened and the sidhe, Dex, glared at her. "Where were you?"

Tango glared back. "You took the corner too fast and lost me." She pushed past him into Duke Michael's court.

Nothing, as she had observed back in San Francisco, was quite the way it used to be in Kithain society. Once the Unseelie tradition had been not merely a rejection of the values of the Seelie, but a dark reflection of it as well. Where the Seelie Kithain had been all golden pomp and pageantry in brightly lit fairytale halls, the Unseelie had been disorder and abandon... in shadowy fairytale halls. No more. Duke Michael's court was disorder and abandon in a shadowy pool hall.

The only light came from lamps over the three pool tables that filled the big room, and from a pass-through window into a snackbar. There were maybe a dozen Kithain present, playing pool, watching the others play pool, or just talking in the dark corners. The ceiling was low enough that Dex could have easily placed his palm against it — at one end of the hall, a massive troll brushed the ceiling with his head. The floor was cheap black-and-white tile, and the grubby walls were decorated with old travel posters for such exotic destinations as Chicago and Atlanta. A portable stereo blasted out some British rock group that Tango only recognized because the DJ at Pan's refused to play them. There was a haze of smoke in the air.

And yet the place was filled with Glamour that sent ripples of excitement singing through every part of Tango's body. So much Glamour that a kenning settled over her spontaneously, the magic of the court calling to her Kithain soul.

The hall was still dark, but now it was the great hall of a dusky palace, with an arched ceiling that soared up into shadows. Tapestries hung on the walls in place of posters. The floor was marble. The smoke was heavy, sweet incense. The pass-through to the snackbar was a passage into a shining banqueting hall. The Kithain were fabulous courtiers in rich costumes bearing the duke's crest. A few things were essentially the same, though enhanced by the Glamour. The music, for example, was still British rock, but it seemed to emanate from a phantom chamber quartet. The pool tables were still pool tables, except that one, down at the end of the room where the troll stood, was raised up on a dais. Two sidhe played there. One was dressed in rich black velvet embroidered in silver thread, with a black half-cape caught around his neck with a silver chain. His face and build were identical to Dex's, although his skin was pale instead of tanned, he wore a pearl-drop earring instead of a diamond stud, and his hair was the blond of white gold. The other sidhe wore unrelieved black. He was as handsome as his opponent, but his hair was as black as his clothing, and he wore no ornamentation at all. He was also somewhat older, perhaps Tango's age. There was something odd about his face; his eyes were strangely shadowed, it seemed. He bent over the table and lined up a shot.

Tango couldn't see what the shot was, but she heard the clack of pool balls striking each other, followed by soft thuds as they dropped into pockets. Dex's twin winced. "Shit."

That one very mundane syllable broke the spell that the Glamour wove over the court. The pool hall snapped back to everyday reality. Tapestries were

posters, marble was cheap tile. The Kithain at the head table were dressed in normal clothes. The black-haired sidhe wore dark pants and a black silk shirt. Dex's twin wore patched black jeans, motorcycle boots and a black T-shirt — with a pearl in his ear. He took a deep, frustrated drag on a cigarette as his opponent rapidly cleared the table. "Good game, Your Grace."

Duke Michael shook his head. "Don't flatter me, Sinister," he said flatly, "I missed pockets I should have made easily."

A Kithain with the wiry hair and swarthy face of a satyr stepped up and whispered in the duke's ear. The duke looked toward the door and nodded. "Dexter," he called. "Come forward."

Riley's description had been right, Tango decided. Duke Michael might have been Unseelie, but his rigid demeanor carried all of the traditions of the Kithain. Including the arrogance of the sidhe. Dex brought her up to stand across the pool table from the duke. "Your Grace, she is looking for Riley. She says she is a friend of his and that he invited her to the Highsummer Party."

"Dexter." The duke's voice was quiet, pitched just so that only those gathered around the table could hear it. "Does *she* have a name?"

Dex flushed. The sidhe that the duke had called Sinister snickered. Tango took a swift, confident step away from Dex. "I'm Tango." The duke raised one eyebrow. Tango realized suddenly what it was that seemed odd about his face. His left eye was dark and shadowed, but his right was absolutely black. Not bruised. The eyeball itself was truly black, and cold. An artificial sphere of enameled metal. It was a rare thing

to see a sidhe disfigured. “Your Grace,” she added, as smoothly as possible. The words almost caught in her throat, partly out of her dislike for the sidhe and their overbearing titles, partly out of shameful, disgusting pleasure at the duke’s disfigurement.

Duke Michael gave her a calm nod. “Do you know where Riley is, Tango?”

Briefly, Tango considered lying to him. *He didn’t meet me at the airport here, Your Grace. He told me to meet him at his apartment, Your Grace, but didn’t give me the address. In San Francisco, Your Grace.* Anything to avoid embarrassing herself with the true story in front of the court — and the sidhe. Then she looked at that scar again, and at the way Duke Michael was holding his pool cue. A normal person would hold it casually. Lightly. Duke Michael held his like a king would hold a scepter. No less than Dex, Duke Michael expected obedience. And a sidhe didn’t get to be a Kithain duke on expectations and polite questions alone. Tango wondered where he had gotten that scar. It was hard to swallow her pride, but she forced herself to do it. “Not really, Your Grace. I was expecting to find him here in Toronto, but he might still be in San Francisco.”

Sinister and Dexter, as well as the satyr at the duke’s elbow, stirred uneasily. Duke Michael frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“He wasn’t on the flight that he told me he was going to take....” Tango grimaced. That wasn’t going to make much sense. She started the whole story from the beginning. As she talked, the duke’s face grew sharper and sharper with anger. At one point, when she mentioned Riley’s errand to the Cult of Ecstasy mages in Berkeley for “party favors,” she saw his hands clench

convulsively. When she finished, she glanced up at him. His lips were pressed together in a thin white line. The court was quiet. She licked her lips and asked cautiously, "I take it that you don't know where he is either, then?"

"No." The duke's voice was furious. He drew a tight breath and bellowed, "Epp!"

"Coming!" A heavy, gray-haired woman hustled out of the snack bar. She was a boggan, a Kithain descended from the old faeries who had lived as servants and guardians in human houses. She had a pencil tucked behind one ear and a notebook shaggy with loose papers in one hand. By the time she reached the head pool table, she was winded. "Yes, Your Grace?"

"What flight was Riley due to return on, and what was his seat number?"

Epp opened her notebook and rifled through the pages. "Air Canada flight 2800, seat 6A. Departing San Francisco 9:30 P.M. Pacific time, arriving Toronto..."

"Are you sure?" demanded the duke. "Did he have the ticket?"

"Oh, yes." Epp flipped through her book again. "He picked it up from the travel agency on..."

"Thank you." The duke put his hands down on the edge of the pool table and rested his weight on them, looking down at the green baize of the tabletop.

Tango frowned, suddenly worried. This didn't feel like a prank. The duke had been expecting Riley back last night, too. Todd's warning returned like an echo. That made her even more nervous. Riley hadn't been in Toronto last night, of course, but that didn't mean something couldn't have happened to him in San Francisco. And there was the matter of his ticket. Riley

had bought a ticket. Something had wiped that purchase from the airline's records. She took a step toward Duke Michael. "Your Grace..."

The duke's head came up. There was hot anger smoldering in his eyes. "That pooka bastard. I'm not sure whether I should look for him or not!" Tango stopped. He glanced at her, then waved his hand sharply. "You may leave, Tango. Take her out, Dexter."

"No." Tango shrugged off the blond sidhe's hand. "What's happened to Riley? Why won't you look for him?"

"You want to know?" Duke Michael clenched his teeth. "All right. Riley was correct when he told you that he is organizing the Highsummer Night party for my court." He gestured to Epp. "I assigned Epp to be his aide. She has helped my Jesters organize Highsummer parties for the last twenty years. This year, Riley decided that he wanted to do something a little different. He asked my permission to go to Montreal and buy enchanted drugs from a group of Cult of Ecstasy mages there. I refused." The duke looked around the court, his angry glare sweeping over his pool-hall courtiers. "Am I a tyrant?" he demanded.

The Kithain were silent. "No, Your Grace," Dexter answered for them.

"Do I rule fairly?"

"Very fairly, Your Grace," said Sinister.

"Do I fulfill all of the obligations that your oaths of loyalty place upon me as your liege?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the satyr beside him replied. "In the best manner of the fae and your House."

"And if I choose to issue certain decrees, Lucas?"

The satyr coughed. "That is your place as our liege,

by the oaths we have sworn." Tango held her tongue. Sidhe oaths of loyalty left a bad taste in her mouth, though many other Kithain swore them happily.

The duke slapped his pool cue down onto the tabletop like a schoolmistress slapping a ruler against a desk. "And what was the first decree I made after I became your liege?"

"No Kithain of your court and no Kithain entering your domain," the court droned in unison, "shall have dealings with mages."

"Yes." The duke turned back to Tango again. He was pale with anger, making his black metal eye seem even blacker. Shiny scar tissue cutting through one eyebrow and onto his cheekbone caught the light. She could make a good guess at how the duke had lost his eye. "Riley," he continued, clear enunciation making his voice harsh, "thought he could talk me into releasing him from that restriction this one time. He was wrong, but he went away quietly. Several days later, he came back with another proposal. He had found a source in San Francisco for tailor-made, *completely mundane* drugs that would do what he wanted. I'm not against drugs, Tango; my court's influence was built on them. I believed him and let him go to San Francisco."

Where he went to another group of Cultists. Tango grimaced. It was exactly like Riley. He might have gotten away with it, too. "So he broke your decree. Why won't you try to find out what happened to him?"

"He disobeyed me!" Duke Michael rapped the butt of his pool cue on the tiled floor. The sound snapped through the still air of the dark hall. "He disobeyed a direct, very simple command. *Stay away from mages.*" He glared at his courtiers and servants. "Dexter?"

Sinister? Epp? Lucas?" He glanced at the troll. "Slocombe? Is that unreasonable?"

Not even the troll answered him this time, but he didn't wait for a response. "I'm more than tempted to let Riley be. Whatever has happened to him, he probably deserves. Except..." He broke off his words and angrily began to dig balls out of the pockets of the pool table, racking up for a new game. None of the Kithain of his court moved.

Tango took the balls out of the pocket closest to her and handed them to him. "Except," she said, completing his thoughts, "that you have given him the honor of organizing Highsummer Night, and an honor like that can't be taken away lightly."

"Oh, it can be taken away!" The duke's eyes flashed in the light of the lamp above the table. His voice dropped down to a cutting whisper. "But Highsummer Night is only a week away. There is a great deal still to be done. Riley wasted a lot of time. That's why Dexter brought you to me when you asked about Riley. When Riley didn't return on schedule..." He bared his teeth. "Let's just say he had stern words coming his way even before you told me about the mages in San Francisco. I think you see my dilemma, Tango. The most fitting punishment for Riley is to leave him in the middle of whatever trouble he is in — at the risk of losing everything that has already been planned for Highsummer Night. But if I find Riley in order to salvage Highsummer Night, I compromise my own authority."

The duke lifted the rack away from the balls on the pool table and passed it to the satyr. Walking around to the end of the table and settling his cue across his

hand, he lined up for the break.

Tango turned away with disgust. She could catch the next flight back to San Francisco. She couldn't have cared less if Duke Michael's Highsummer Party came crashing down around him. All she wanted now was to find Riley — and to get away from the sidhe. "Thank you for your time, Your Grace."

Epp flung out an arm to stop her. "I have a suggestion, Your Grace."

The duke's break was clean and smooth, but that didn't seem to improve his mood. "What?"

"Tango has told us that she is the manager of a nightclub. Presumably she knows something about organizing parties. Also, as Riley's invited guest, she could be made to stand in for him. Make her your Jester and let her organize Highsummer."

Duke Michael straightened up again without shooting and regarded her from across the table. "That's an excellent idea, Epp."

Tango blinked. "Hold on a minute!" she protested. "I can't stay here. Riley could be in real trouble! I have to look for him. Can't Epp organize your party? Didn't you say she's been doing it for twenty years? She must be good at it by now."

"Only my Jester can organize my party. Epp's a boggan — the spark of a good party just isn't in her nature." Tango caught a fleeting look of frustration as it crossed Epp's face. Boggans were generally very dull, stolid homebodies. She could see the duke's point, but to throw it into Epp's face was... was exactly like something a sidhe would do.

"Then hire a human," Tango suggested angrily. "There are places that specialize in planning parties."

Dex snorted. So did the satyr. The duke's smile was deprecating. "Humans? What could they understand about Kithain? How could they create a suitable party for Highsummer Night?" He came around to stand in front of the pool table. "Besides, some of the plans are already in place. You should be able to work from what Riley left."

"I told you that I can't stay! Somebody has to find out if Riley's in trouble!"

"Somebody else." Duke Michael's smile vanished. "That will be half of his punishment — to suffer the consequences of his disobedience. The other half will be the shame that a friend was forced to work in his place."

He spun the pool cue in his hands, a flashy move that made the cue shimmer with Glamour. If he had held it like a scepter before, now he held a real scepter, a narrow rod of gold and onyx. The duke himself became taller and even more handsome as Glamour suffused him as well, drawing the mortal seeming away from his true Sidhe form. Tango's breath hissed between her teeth. "You can't do this!"

"I can. I am lord here." Duke Michael held the rod over her head. Glamour seethed in the air. Sidhe knew powerful cantrips of command. Duke Michael could indeed compel her to stay! "Before this court, I take..."

With Dexter on one side of her, Epp on the other, Tango could only throw herself backward, away from the duke. One heel lashed out, catching Dex on the back of the calf as he turned to grab at her. The blond sidhe howled in pain, leg suddenly numbed. Tango sprinted toward the door, dodging the other startled Kithain.

A pool cue thrust between her legs stopped her and

sent her tumbling across the floor. "I don't think," suggested Sinister, as he grabbed her arms from behind, "that you should refuse the duke." He pulled her to her feet.

The sidhe was tall, with muscles on his arms that probably took a daily workout to maintain. But if sidhe magic dealt with command, nocker magic dealt with the things of the earth. Tango's own skills with cantrips were about as developed as her skill in kenning. Still, what she could do with her limited magic, she could do very well. She spat twice on the floor, an invocation, and drew on the Glamour that pooled in Duke Michael's court. It rushed up through her legs and all through her body like electric adrenaline, like the spirit of the earth coursing along her limbs. Tango's small size belied what her magic could do.

She shook off Sinister's grasp as though it were the grasp of a child. She could have broken his bones if she had wanted to. A squeeze of her hand around his wrist would have rendered his hand useless. Instead, she shoved him away from her, one push sending him sprawling.

Sinister rolled with the push and came up with a narrow grin on his face. Eyes sharp, he reached to his side and pulled a key on a bright, silvery chain from where it had been tucked between his belt and his waistband. The Kithain around him stepped quickly away.

With a flare of Glamour, Sinister's key grew into a shining sword.

Tango reacted without really thinking. Swords such as Sinister's were like dreams woven out of the Glamour. They couldn't kill, but they could harm, and Tango was in no mood to be stopped by a sidhe. On one finger of

her gnarled, nocker hand, she wore a silver ring with a simple cruciform design engraved into it. She folded her hand around it and, abruptly, was holding a deadly knife.

There was no Glamour involved in the transformation. Sinister's eyes became as narrow as his grin. Several courtiers hissed in alarm. The knife was no Kithain weapon. It could kill.

But that wasn't what Tango intended. She didn't even want to hurt Sinister if she could help it. She just wanted out. She backed toward the door — or tried to. Sinister began to circle her, forcing her away from the door. Her chances of escape, Tango decided, were definitely shrinking. Sinister's sword flicked out. She caught it awkwardly with her knife. Sinister was left-handed and that gave him an advantage as well. She feinted, then tried to slip under his guard. She was willing to cause the sidhe an injury if she had to.

She didn't get the chance. Two huge, callused hands grabbed her from behind. "Enough," said a rumbling voice. Tango struggled, but couldn't break free. Her nocker magic might have made her strong, but she had forgotten about Slocombe, the troll who had stood near the duke, and trolls were naturally stronger than her magic could ever make her. Sinister plucked the knife from her grasp. In his hand, it became a ring again. He strode back to the front of the court and showed it to the duke.

The black-haired sidhe snarled in anger. "Mage work! You've had dealings with mages!"

Tango struggled as the troll carried her before the angry Kithain lord. "So what if I have? I'm not one of your subjects!"

"But you're in my domain!" Duke Michael dropped the ring. It fell to the tile with the chiming clatter of a much larger object on marble, then rolled away. The duke touched his rod directly to her head this time. "You are my Jester," he said sharply, his courtly words gone. Tango felt a tingle as Glamour moved in the rod, an enchantment that bound her as a servant of the court. She ground her teeth. "You have the responsibility of planning the Highsummer Night party for this court until Riley returns to resume his duties. Obey me in all things." He held the rod to her head a moment longer as he leaned forward to whisper, "And don't make me angry again."

The sidhe enchantment prompted her to respond. "I am your servant, Your Grace," she spat unwillingly. Had Riley had to go through this, or was the magical treatment reserved only for the duke's reluctant recruits to the court? She forced her anger back. It was too late for rage now. The loathing she felt for the duke, for the other sidhe of the court, for other Kithain in general, subsided to a churning like dull knives in her heart and soul.

Mercifully, it seemed that there was nothing else she was required to say. The duke lifted the rod away. "Epp," he ordered, "give Tango your key to Riley's apartment. Sinister, take her there. If I wish to see her again before Highsummer Night, I will summon her."

Tango choked back a sour laugh. She had come to the court hoping to find Riley's apartment. At least she was finally going there.

CHAPTER FOUR

*Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us.*

Sinister rode a motorcycle, a sleek, shining black beast of a machine. The sun was just beginning to set by the time they left the Unseelie court's pool hall and returned up the narrow stairs; Ruby gave Tango a sympathetic look as they passed by her. The motorcycle waited for them like a shadow behind the hall. Sinister had a helmet for himself, but when Tango asked him for a second, he just shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"Maybe I want to. What's the fine for riding without a helmet in Toronto?"

"No one will bother us. If they do..." He shrugged. "They're only humans. What are they going to do to us?"

Tango wrinkled her nose in angry frustration. "I'm more concerned with ending up smeared across the pavement."

"I haven't wiped out yet."

"That's good to know." Tango watched Sinister slide across the seat of the motorcycle with a whisper of denim on leather, then settled herself behind him. "Where is Riley's apartment? I have a rental car and

luggage in a parking garage downtown.”

“You won’t have too far to go to get it. Riley’s apartment is on Jarvis.” He took out his key on its silvery keychain and started the motorcycle. The machine came to life with a velvet growl. Tango tapped his shoulder before he could put on his helmet.

“What do you do if you need your sword while the bike is running?”

Sinister grinned as he dropped his helmet into place. Reaching forward, he tugged on the keychain. It became the hilt of a sword in his hand. He drew several inches of shining steel out of the motorcycle’s ignition as a knight might have drawn a sword from a scabbard on a horse’s saddle. The bike kept running. He shoved the steel back again. The hilt became a keychain. “Oh,” he added, “here.” He held out his hand. A plain band of silver rested on his palm. Tango’s ring.

“Thanks,” she said grudgingly. She took the ring and slipped it onto her finger. For a moment, she considered Sinister’s back.

“I wouldn’t,” the dark sidhe advised her. “Remember who’s driving.” He flipped up the motorcycle’s kickstand with his heel and pulled out onto the street.

The character of Yorkville had changed as the sun went down. After dark, the area regained some of its youth. Most of the older tourists had gone, along with the men and women in business clothes. The crowds were now composed mainly of younger people in expensive, tasteful outfits. The air was still hot, but a cooler night breeze was beginning to blow. Small lights had come on above the sidewalk and rooftop patios. For the first time, Tango noticed the little clubs and trendy bars that nestled among the shops and restaurants.

Buskers had appeared on the sidewalks and in the shadows: a man playing blues trumpet, two girls with flutes, and, almost out of place, a smattering of women sitting behind folding tables with candles, crystal balls and decks of colorful cards. Fortune-tellers? *Why not?* Tango realized. Young people were as obsessed with the future as their elders.

Sinister turned onto Yonge, Toronto's main street, with its mix of vibrant energy, colorful lights, and depressing, sleazy desperation. High-tech electronics and expensive club-fashion stores existed cheek-to-cheek with sex shops and discount stores. There were no buskers here. Tango watched streetpeople panhandling for spare change from pedestrians who walked past as if they saw and heard nothing at all. One man stood on the busy corner of Yonge and Bloor, drifting back and forth to catch the people crossing either street. They just walked around him. At a theater a little farther down Yonge, moviegoers lined up obediently behind a sign reading "Ticketholders," coldly staring down anyone who tried to butt into the line. A theater attendant had nothing to do but keep begging streetpeople from bothering the waiting patrons.

People didn't linger on Yonge Street as they did in Yorkville. The only people laughing and talking here were small knots of people on their way to somewhere else. Sinister turned onto a cross-street at a corner where, even after dark, a hot-dog cart competed with a vendor of knock-off souvenir T-shirts to attract the attention of passersby. There was another hot-dog cart on the next corner when they stopped for a red light. Tango could see Hopeful a couple of blocks down past the cart's greasy umbrella. The light changed, and

Sinister revved the motorcycle, cutting across the intersection almost before the last pedestrians had cleared the crosswalk. An angry couple yelled after him.

As it turned out, Riley's apartment was only a couple of blocks away from Hopeful. Sinister pulled up in front of an old, yellow-brick apartment building on a wide street. The building looked as if it might have been built in the twenties. It was only five stories tall, with wrought-iron balconies facing out onto the street from the front apartments. Gray stone made a decorative pattern on the corners of the building and on the sills of windows that were small by contemporary standards. White-painted pillars stood beside the doors — a touch of ostentation. The building was one of a pair, identical except for thick ivy that climbed the bricks beside Riley's door. An alley led between them. There was an arch over the mouth of the alley, joining the two buildings with a thin bridge of white stone as ostentatious as the pillars. The carved face of a cherub grinned out of a wreath of laurels at the center of the arch. Once it might have been a landlord's pride, but decades of harsh weather and encrusted dirt had blurred its features. Instead of being comforting, the angel's smile looked vaguely disreputable.

"Tango." Sinister pulled off his helmet. "I want you to know I don't have any hard feelings about you trying to fight me tonight. I know you'd rather be looking for Riley than stuck here. But the duke is the duke, and I'm a knight of his court. I have a duty to him." He grinned, the smile stretching across his handsome side face. "We should duel sometime. I bet it would have been a good fight."

Good until you got hurt, Tango thought. The side

would probably treat any fight as if it were a game. A fight for the fun of fighting. Tango didn't fight for fun, and she didn't enjoy the fighting that she was forced into. She had left that behind a long time ago. "Thanks, Sinister."

"Call me Sin." Tango raised her eyebrows and he shook his head. "That's not a come-on. It's just my name, like Dexter is Dex. Duke Michael is the only one who uses our full names."

"Hung up on the full formalities, is he?" asked Tango a little bitterly. The anger and violation she had felt in the court were mostly gone, vanished into old pain.

Sin sighed and shifted forward so that Tango could get off the motorcycle. "You've heard that a Kithain lord's domain comes to reflect his personality? It works the other way around, too. A lord reflects his domain. Any Kithain who took over the rulership of Toronto would eventually start to act like Duke Michael does. That's one of the reasons he's been duke as long as he has — who would want that kind of personality?"

"So what was Michael like before he became duke? Did he take on Toronto's personality, or did Toronto take on his?"

"Both. Like attracts like." Sin put on his helmet again. "Riley's apartment is 3D. Good luck, Tango."

He revved the motorcycle and drove off, merging with the traffic that streamed down the street.

"Thanks a lot," Tango muttered to herself. She turned to the door of the building and fumbled with the keys that Epp had given her. The boggan had slid them off a ring so full of keys that she probably could have unlocked half the doors in the city. One key was for the front door, she had told Tango, two others were

for locks on Riley's apartment. A fourth was for the cabinet where he was supposed to be keeping the papers and files related to Highsummer Night. From the way Epp had rolled her eyes, Tango guessed that there must have been more than a little antagonism between the pooka and the boggan.

The cabinet key was clearly smaller than the lock on the front door, but she had to try all three of the other keys before getting the right one. Inside, the apartment building looked just as old as it had from outside. Cooking odors — curry, garlic, cabbage, beans — drifted out of apartments. As she climbed the stairs up to the third floor, she also caught the sounds of a saxophone and a violin, each playing radically different melodies. The scent of oil paints from apartment 3C teased her nostrils. Tango remembered what Riley had said about the artists and musicians in his building; if she had worked a kenning, she probably could have felt the faint Glamour that their dreams and acts of creation generated. She unlocked Riley's door and opened it.

Light spilled from the hallway into an apartment that had been ransacked.

"Oh, shit," breathed Tango. Without taking her eyes from the narrow path of illumination that spread out from the door, she felt along the wall for a light switch. She found one and flicked it on. The disaster in the apartment made her wish she hadn't. Books and papers were everywhere. Everything was out of order. Through a door, she could see Riley's bedroom. The sheets had been pulled off the bed and clothing was exploding out of half-opened drawers. Odds and ends of clothing were strewn throughout the living room as well. "Oh shit, Riley. What have you gotten yourself..."

“Don’t worry.” Epp swept into the apartment and closed the door behind her. “It always looks like this.” Almost compulsively, she began to tidy up, sorting through papers and stacking books.

Tango took another look at the apartment. Epp was right. This wasn’t the mess of a ransacking. The bed was simply unmade. Books had been dropped in piles, papers in disheveled heaps. There were dirty dishes scattered around, one with a dried-up piece of pizza on it. Souvenirs and knickknacks were placed in the oddest places, but they were upright. The clothing strewn around the living room lay not so much as if it had been thrown about, but simply as if someone had walked around the room, undressing as they went, leaving clothing where it fell. Epp uncovered a glossy magazine with its centerfold flopping out, and flushed. A newspaper settled back over the offending photograph. Epp moved on.

“I told him a hundred times that if I had the chance, I was going to clean this place from top to bottom.” The boggan looked around and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. “I may need a backhoe.” Tango glared at her.

“Why did you suggest to the duke that I could organize the Highsummer party?” she demanded. “I have to get back to San Francisco and look for Riley!”

Epp paused. “That’s what I came here to talk to you about. You don’t have to worry about the party — I’ll take care of it. In fact, I insist.”

Tango stared at the fat Kithain in disbelief. “You *want* to organize the party? Why did you have to bring my name up in front of the duke, then?”

“You heard him yourself.” Epp picked up a desk

calendar and returned it to a clear space on top of a table, flipping it open to the correct date. "He wouldn't accept me organizing the party directly. So I have to do it through a Jester. Except even the duke's Jesters have ideas about what should happen at the party, so I have to obey them." She drew a deep, satisfied breath. "But after twenty years, I finally get the chance to do Highsummer my way!" She glanced around the room. "At least I won't have to try and sort out Riley's half-baked plans."

A horrible thought struck Tango and her hand clenched around her ring. "Did you have something to do with Riley disappearing?"

Epp looked shocked. "Oh, no. But when opportunity presents itself, you have to seize it."

"Am I glad to hear you say that." Tango shoved aside some paperback novels and sat down wearily on the couch. "You go ahead and run the party. I couldn't care less about it. First thing tomorrow, I'm catching a flight back to San Francisco."

"No! You can't!" Tango looked up at her sharply. The boggan was still standing where she had been a moment ago. Her fingers were worrying at a bit of frayed, knotted ribbon as if it were a security blanket. There was desperation on her face. "You have to stay here. If you leave..." Epp swallowed hard. Tango hoped that she wasn't going to start crying. Boggans did that too easily sometimes. "The Jester has to be the one to organize the party, at least in name. If the Jester is in San Francisco, how can she be organizing the party?"

Tango was shocked at the other woman's cruel ambition. "Epp, I have to find Riley! Screw the duke and what he wants. He gets his party, isn't that

enough?"

"He'd find out," Epp replied agitatedly. "You have to stay, Tango."

"Like hell I do."

The boggan's dour mouth crooked savagely. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this, but if you won't stay on your own accord..." She loosened the knot in her worry ribbon. "I put a *geasa* on you, Tango. You shall not leave the bounds of Toronto until the sun rises after Highsummer Night!"

Glamour crackled through the air like lightning just about to strike. Tango started upright, then lunged for the boggan. "No!" This was no idle threat! A *geasa* was the strongest of Kithain curses. Tango snatched at the ribbon, but it was too late. The magic had been released. Tango was left holding an old silk ribbon that fell to shreds in her hands. She stared at Epp. "You..."

The gray-haired Kithain faced her calmly. "That ribbon was in my family for a hundred years. Once there were four *geasa* tied up in it. Riley stole the second-to-last for some ridiculous reason." She straightened up fiercely. "I was willing to sacrifice the ribbon to keep my chance at Highsummer. I think even you should be able to recognize how serious that means I am."

Tango snarled and wrenched at the remains of the ribbon. The ancient fabric parted with barely a whisper. "Damn you." She flung the broken ribbon to the floor and stalked after Epp. Epp backed up a step, but maintained her calm voice. As if she were talking to a child. "What are you going to do, Tango? Harm me, and the duke will be very angry with you. The *geasa* will still keep you in Toronto, and the duke will hunt you down."

"Then I'll take you to the duke right now!" Tango growled. "You can't do this to me."

"If you go to the duke, you'll have to tell him that you were planning to leave Toronto and look for Riley. That won't make him happy. You'll be confessing to disobeying him." Epp smiled. "I might even be rewarded for reminding you of your duty to the court."

Tango's anger hissed between her teeth. "That duty was forced on me."

"That wouldn't matter to the duke. Don't think anyone else will help you either. They won't risk offending him. Duke Michael takes the punishments he hands down very seriously."

"Get out." Tango grabbed Epp, spinning her around and twisting her arms up behind her back until the other woman squealed. "I don't want to see you again. You've got your damned party. Now get the hell out and leave me alone!" Epp's notebook was sitting on the table. Tango snatched it up as she marched Epp to the door, pulled the door open and literally threw Epp out of the apartment. The old Kithain stumbled into the wall of the corridor outside with an audible thud. Tango hurled the boggan's notebook after her. Loose papers settled around Epp like falling snow. Red with outrage, she turned on Tango.

The nocker slammed the door in Epp's face and locked it. The action gave her some satisfaction, but not enough. Part of her screamed for revenge. For a moment Tango was tempted to open the door again, just long enough to give Epp the beating she deserved. She stopped herself, though, and took a deep breath. Slapping Epp around wasn't going to help. It wouldn't make her feel any better, and it wasn't going to change

anything. Wearily, Tango put her back to the door and slid slowly down to the floor. She could hear the soft rustle and mutter from the corridor as Epp picked up her notebook and papers and left. Tango crossed her arms on her knees, put her head down, and sighed.

Trapped in Toronto. Riley was missing, and there was nothing — *nothing* — she could do to look for him! She wished that this were just one of Riley's pranks, that he would pop from somewhere, laughing like a fox. She wished that she hadn't listened to a word he had said in Pan's. Now she remembered why she had avoided Kithain society for the last fifteen years!

For just a moment, her anger surged as it hadn't in a decade and a half. Murderously mad with fury, Tango grabbed the nearest solid object, a book of erotic short stories, and hurled it angrily across the room.

The book struck a cushion sitting on an endtable beside the couch, sending it toppling to the floor. With it went a glass, a T-shirt, a pair of underwear and, almost, a streamlined black box with a flashing red light. The box skittered to the edge of the table, dragged along by the underwear tangled in its cord, then stopped just before it would have gone over.

Riley's answering machine, buried in the clutter.

Tango stared at the flashing light as she reined in her temper. Two blinks. Two messages. Then, idly, she got up, righted the machine, and hit the playback button. Obediently, the machine rewound its miniature tape, clicked, clicked again, and began to play.

"Mr. Stanton, this is the Lost and Found at Pearson International Airport, Terminal Two. We're holding your bags from Air Canada flight 2800 from San Francisco. Thank you for tagging your luggage. You can

pick your bags up during our normal daily office hours, six o'clock A.M. to midnight. If you require any help, our phone number is..."

Tango missed the number, but she could always replay the message. The airline had Riley's bags? But that meant that he had checked them. And he could only have done that if he'd had a ticket — which Epp had confirmed, but the airline itself had denied on the night of the flight. Had Riley disappeared in the middle of the airport itself?

Beep, went the answering machine.

"Epp."

The voice caught her attention because of its softness. Whoever had left the message had been whispering into the telephone. The voice was vaguely familiar. It was a feminine voice, juvenile, and very, very frightened. "Epp, I know you're going to get this eventually. I just hope it's not too late. This is the only number I can think of right now." The voice paused again. Tango could hear other voices in the background, muffled and indistinct. "There's a secret compartment under the bottom shelf of the party cabinet. Inside is a yellow file. Take it to the duke. Make sure he reads the papers inside it."

The voice was very familiar. Tango concentrated. She didn't know any woman with a voice that sounded like that. It was a strange voice, the speech patterns too old for the very young-sounding tone. What was it that was familiar?

The tone came to her first. Cheryl. The little girl on the plane.

And then the speech patterns, slow to come because they were so unexpected. "Riley?" she gasped.

The voice on the machine continued without stopping. "Don't worry about me. No time to tell you what happened. I'm in Toronto. But there was supposed to be a friend on the plane with me. Her name is Tango. I don't know what happ—"

There was an enormous splintering of wood in the background. "The yellow file!" Riley hissed into the receiver desperately. People were shouting. The phone clicked, the sound of someone trying desperately to hang up, and then beeped rapidly as new numbers were pressed before the previous connection had cleared. She knew what Riley was trying to do: dial a new telephone number before someone else could press redial and find out where he had called. Someone screamed. Tango didn't think that it was Riley, but she couldn't be sure. Finally Riley managed to hang up. The message ended in a second, forlorn beep. The machine clicked and began to rewind the tape with a quiet hum.

Tango's finger hovered anxiously over the playback button, waiting for the rewinding to finish. It seemed to take forever. The party cabinet, the one Epp had complained about when she'd handed over the keys. Her eyes darted around the room. But there was no cabinet! No. Wait.

She had been expecting a filing cabinet. There wasn't one. But there was a squat, battered sideboard against one wall. A cabinet, of sorts. And it would have shelves where a filing cabinet wouldn't. The answering machine clicked and she stabbed the button a second time, then dashed to the cabinet as the Lost and Found office delivered its message. Hands shaking, she dug out the little cabinet key and put it into the lock. She dropped it once, losing a second scrambling for it. The

answering machine beeped and Riley's oddly transformed voice whispered, "Epp."

The key spun loose in the lock. The cabinet door swung open easily. Something was wrong. The lock was broken.

"... under the bottom shelf..."

The cabinet had papers and books stuffed into it. Tango pulled out the ones covering the bottom shelf and pushed them away from her. She ran her fingers over the dark wood. In the shadows at the back of the shelf, she found a thin gap, barely big enough for her to work her finger into. A panel of wood shifted slightly. She yanked up just as wood splintered on the answering machine. "The yellow file!" hissed Riley. Tango threw the panel aside and felt in the darkness of the hidden compartment. Her heart froze.

Empty.

People shouted and screamed. The telephone clicked and beeped. The message ended.

In the kitchen, Tango found a flashlight. She examined the compartment in the cabinet closely. There was nothing there. Either Riley had been lying about the mysterious yellow file — and she couldn't believe that — or her first instincts had been right. The apartment had been ransacked.

Maybe not ransacked, but at least searched thoroughly. And so professionally that, amid the clutter of Riley's life, only he might have noticed if a paper were out of place. Except that the searcher or searchers had broken the lock on the cabinet door. Tango went back over to the couch and sat down heavily. Riley had been kidnapped. Sometime after he had checked his bags in San Francisco, and by someone with the skills

to erase him completely from the airline's records. And she might have been sitting next to him for the entire flight to Toronto — if the strange juxtaposition of Riley's voice and Cheryl's meant what she thought it did.

The ransacking had to have happened some time before today, before Riley had returned to Toronto, or else the answering machine would surely have been erased. Probably the ransacking had happened while Riley was in San Francisco. The searchers must have taken their time, and that meant they would have known that Riley wasn't about to return any time soon.

What was Riley involved with?

At least being trapped in Toronto by Epp's *geasa* didn't seem like such a liability anymore. Tango leaned her head back against the cushions of the couch and listened to the message one more time. If the searchers had found the yellow file, there didn't seem to be any point in her searching the rest of the apartment for clues as to what was going on. The searchers would likely have already found anything that there was to find.

Except maybe for Riley's bags at the airport, checked before he vanished and still unclaimed. No one would have searched the bags, then returned them to the baggage claim. Six to midnight hours, the Lost and Found office's message had said. Tango glanced at her watch. She would have to retrieve her car and drive out to the airport, but Lost and Found would still be open. It wouldn't be hard to convince them to hand over the bags. Tango ran for the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

*Curious Laura chose to linger
Wondering at each merchant man.*

“That one,” urged Tolly. “What about him?”

Matt turned his head ever so slightly to look around at the men in the bar. His gaze settled on two at a pinball machine. “The one playing?”

“The one to his right. Redhead.” Tolly’s tongue ran around his mouth like a moray eel lunging out of a coral reef. The mad vampire’s face was sharp and eager tonight. Last night’s activities had agreed with him — in more ways than one. His body had been pierced in virtually every imaginable place, bright metal loops, balls, bars and spindles. His entire share of Solomon’s money had gone to pay for the extensive, expensive piercings. Blue had rolled his eyes when he had seen the effect. Matt had laughed out loud. Miranda had walked around Tolly, considering his decorated body from every angle. There was a beautiful, painful intensity to the piercings, a kind of art. Sooner or later, he would tire of the piercings and pull them out, letting the wounds heal over, but for now the effect was a work of inspired genius. She felt sorry for the piercing artist. After Tolly’s visit, he or she would probably never be quite the same again. The vampire’s madness had an

eerie way of infecting the mortals he came in contact with. Tolly gestured, metal flashing in the skin between his thumb and forefinger. "There."

Matt slapped the other vampire's hand down, but nodded. "I like him. Good-looking. Big. Strong. Should put up a hell of a fight." He glanced at Miranda. "How about it?"

Miranda shook her head. "He's with a friend."

"Who?"

"The guy playing pinball."

Matt snorted. "The guy playing pinball is not his friend. Redhead is trying to pick him up."

"Same principle. He'd remember if Redhead went home with someone else." Miranda studied the red-haired man a moment longer, then added, "And Redhead's too big. Things might get out of hand."

"Not much." Blue leaned forward, his chair creaking under him. "Picky-picky. You've been finding excuses all night. There must be someone in here who's good enough for you."

"Yeah," Matt agreed. "Just choose one, Miri."

Miranda fixed him with a slow, steady glare. "Don't be hasty. You've already annoyed Solomon once."

Matt flushed. Miranda turned away.

Last night, after he had released the other vampires from the magickal paralysis, Solomon had treated Matt like something he had scraped off the bottom of his shoe. Of course, no mention was made of Miranda's role in toppling Matt so painfully. Solomon had pretended that it was Matt's own fault, his body overbalancing as the magick captured him. Whenever possible, the mage had stared pointedly at Matt's broken nose, crooked until the vampire could find a mirror and fix it. All of

his conversation and negotiation had been conducted with Miranda. She had also pointedly ignored Matt, bargaining with Solomon as though there really was something to bargain about. There wasn't, of course. She would do anything for the Bandog — and Solomon. Even so, Solomon's payment to the vampires had been substantial, more than enough to offset the short-term inconvenience of being unable to feed on their victims.

And yet Matt had still tried to taunt Solomon, desperate to reassert his wounded pride. "If you knew as much as you claimed about the Sabbat," he had sneered arrogantly, "you'd know that you can't negotiate with just one of us. A Sabbat pack has no leader."

Solomon had responded in tones so frosty that Miranda waited for ice to form. "If you knew as much about yourself as you believe you do, you'd realize how wrong you are."

That had left Matt with his mouth shut tight. The pack had taken Solomon's money and gone to Hopeful to select their first victim: a gay man, alone, maybe a little bit drunk. It had been simple enough. A combination of Tolly and Blue's abilities to hide and her own power to manipulate shadows had ensured that the pack would be unnoticed, or at least unremarked-upon. Matt had approached the victim, using his talents of persuasion and hypnotic control to lure him away from the bar.

They had left the man's body in a park, laid out under a tree as though in resting state — Tolly's idea. The mad vampire had also placed pennies over the dead man's swollen eyelids. The hardest part of the process had been resisting the call of the man's blood. But they had. Beaten and battered, there was no sign that he had

been killed by vampires. Ordinary humans could have killed him.

Tonight they would take their second victim. Solomon would contact them tomorrow night and tell them where to hunt for a third. Hunting in Hopeful was more difficult this time, though. The gays of Toronto were in mourning over the loss of one of their own. They knew that Hopeful was the last place he had been seen alive, and many had come here for an impromptu wake. For a few, like Redhead, it seemed as though nothing was wrong. Life went on. They were untouched by death. But even the ones like Redhead would be more wary now. A gay man had been murdered. Would it happen again?

"What about one of the bartenders?" suggested Blue. "They're getting hit on all the time. Nobody would notice one more."

"They may be getting hit on, but they're not accepting," Matt pointed out. "Now that old guy in the corner..."

"Wait." Miranda's eyes narrowed as she thought. "We don't have to pretend to pick someone up. We could just grab a bartender when he leaves."

"But that won't be for at least a couple more hours!"

"We have time."

Tolly looked around for the old man Matt had mentioned, his neck twisting inhumanly far. "I like him, too. Besides, the bartenders wouldn't be leaving alone."

Miranda grimaced. "Tolly, you've liked everyone you've seen in here. If you were doing the choosing, we would have to slaughter the entire bar." The mad vampire's eyes lit up with a hungry delight. "No," said Miranda firmly. She stood. "We take a bartender."

There were two bartenders working tonight, one blond with a rainbow of pride rings on a choker around his neck, one brunette in a leather vest. Miranda chose the blonde. He gave her a friendly, quirky smile as she walked up to the bar. "What can I get you?"

She smiled back. Solomon had told her once that her entire face changed when she smiled, that it almost came back to life. "What have you got on tap?"

The bartender named four or five beers, some she remembered from her university days, some she had never gotten around to trying. She never would now. One of the beers had the ironic name of "Old Nick's Red." Miranda ordered four pints of it. "It's busy in here tonight."

"Nobody wants to mourn John alone." He gestured with his head as he poured the beer. A sort of makeshift shrine had been set up at one end of the bar, a photograph of the man the pack had killed, with flowers, a basket for donations, and a petition urging the government to crack down on hate crimes. Impulsively, Miranda dropped a ten-dollar bill in the basket and signed the petition. That earned her another smile from the bartender.

"Thanks." He set down the first two pints. "Do you want me to bring these to your table?"

"No, it's okay. What time do you get off tonight?"

The bartender laughed. "If you mean what time does the bar close, we stop serving booze at one o'clock, but I have to stay around until two or three. If you mean what time could you talk me into going out with you," he looked away from the beer tap just long enough to flash her a glance, "I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree."

"I don't think so." She caught his gaze and held it. "You look really tired. You should leave early tonight. Go home. Get some rest."

"That... might be a good idea." The bartender's eyes became unfocused as her will laid itself over his. "It's been a long day."

Miranda nodded, maintaining eye contact. She had him. "It has. I bet by one-thirty this place will be so quiet, one bartender could look after it all."

"Yeah," the bartender replied distantly. Then he twitched and yelped, his attention going back to the tap as beer spilled over the edge of the full pint glass and foam went dripping down his hand. "Shit." He grabbed a towel and wiped the sides and bottom of the glass.

"Sorry," Miranda murmured, "I was distracting you."

"No," the bartender said, as if they had been doing nothing more than flirting, "it was my fault." He put the glass down and started filling a fourth. "That's eighteen dollars."

Miranda dug out a twenty and a couple of crumpled twos. "Keep the change." A nice tip. He might as well feel good while he had some time left.

"Thanks." He looked up at her again, then his glance flickered to the side, to a second woman who had just come up to the bar. A short woman with long, brown hair. "Hey, Tango."

"Hi, Todd. Have you heard anything about Riley or his friend?"

"Sorry."

"Damn." The woman sounded frustrated and depressed. "Do you have Toby on tap?"

"Sure do."

"Give me a pint."

The bartender nodded. He finished pouring Miranda's last pint and passed it to her. "There you go. Do you need a tray?"

"No, thanks." Miranda gathered the four glasses carefully between her hands. With a last sideways look at the short woman, she started back to the pack's table.

Tango. A strange name, but one she had seen somewhere before. She tried to remember where. It came back to her. A notice on the message board by Hopeful's door. She turned her head to look for it, but the bright blue paper was gone. Someone had torn it down. There hadn't been much on it anyway: Tango looking for a man named Riley, Riley's description, leave a message with Todd at the bar. Not that Tango was likely to have much luck finding her friend. Missing-persons rates were always high in cities held by the Sabbat. Police success rates in solving missing-persons cases were usually very low.

There was something odd about the woman herself as well. There was an intensity about her, the odor of her body and her blood transcending smell and becoming an almost tangible energy in spite of her obvious exhaustion. An energy that made Miranda think a hand run through Tango's hair would create the snap and crackle of static electricity. An energy that made her own undead veins hum and vibrate. She set the beers down on the pack's table. "The bartender is going to leave at one-thirty. We'll go out a bit earlier, wait, and follow him home."

Blue looked at the beer with faint amusement. "What are we supposed to do with these?"

"Pretend you're having a good time. It's called Old

Nick's Red."

"Cool!" Tolly picked up his beer and chugged it back in one very long swallow, then smacked his lips. "Disappointing." He belched thunderously.

Matt shivered with disgust. "Try to make it to the bathroom before that comes back up." He raised an eyebrow as Miranda took her glass and turned back to the bar. "And where are you going?"

"I haven't fed yet tonight."

"That little number that just came in?" Matt nodded. "Not my cup of tea, but probably the only person in this place that you'd stand a good chance with."

"Thank you, Matt." She took his beer and shoved it over to Tolly. "Here," she said sweetly, "I don't think Matt's going to want this. Why don't you have another?"

She walked away from the table before she could witness the effects of Tolly's drinking. It wouldn't be pretty.

Tango had moved away from the bar and stood at a counter, caught between a bunch of rowdy pretty boys and a pair of big, muscular men who were necking as if they were vampires themselves. The other woman was staring blankly at a television monitor mounted up near the ceiling. There was some kind of soft porn video playing, but Tango didn't seem to be seeing it at all. Miranda caught the eye of one of the muscle men and dismissed him with a quick flick of her head. He pulled his partner away to another part of the bar. Miranda stepped in and took their spot next to Tango. For a few minutes she just stood there, pretending to sip her beer and watching the monitor silently.

"You know," she said finally, "I just don't understand what they see in this stuff."

Tango blinked. "Sorry?"

"I don't understand what they see in this stuff." Miranda gestured toward the monitor. "It's just mindless and repetitive. It's the same thing, over and over again."

"So's baseball." Tango took a swallow of her beer, a black, tarry liquid with a thick head. "And you could see that," she added, as the scene on the monitor changed to show a well-built man rubbing his crotch, "at a baseball game, too."

Miranda laughed, half a put-on, half real appreciation of Tango's joke. She held out her hand. "I'm Miranda."

"Tango."

"I know. I heard..." she fumbled for the bartender's name, "Todd talking to you. And I saw your message when I came in tonight."

Tango looked at her sharply for the first time. "Do you come here often? I'm looking for a friend: red hair, glasses, geeky..."

"Named Riley. No, sorry. I saw the notice, but that's it. I hope you find him."

"Too bad somebody pulled the notice down." Tango frowned as she took another drink.

The short woman almost sounded paranoid. "Maybe they know him," suggested Miranda.

"But they didn't go to Todd." Tango sighed.

Miranda took the opportunity to move a little closer to Tango, enjoying the thrill of the hunt. "You're not from Toronto, are you?"

"No." Tango put her glass down. Miranda waited for her to say something else, then prompted her gently.

"Where are you from?"

"Alberta originally. Red Deer. Most recently, though, San Francisco."

"Nice city." Miranda tried to dredge up long-ago memories of a trip there with her old high school band. "I love the trolley cars."

"Cable cars," Tango corrected. "It is a nice place. Very different from Toronto."

Miranda put her glass to her mouth, letting a little beer wash past her lips then back out. The taste was nauseating. "So what brings you here?"

"Oh, holidays. And looking for Riley, now." She laughed quietly and bitterly. "I just can't seem to get away from this city."

"Toronto has that effect on some people."

That made Tango snort with sour amusement. She picked up her glass again and raised it in a toast. "Then here's to Toronto the Good!" She tossed back the last few mouthfuls of beer.

Miranda smiled. Tango was going to be easy prey. The smell of the small woman tickled Miranda's nostrils. Tango's skin was quite pale, and she could imagine the rich blood that flowed just beneath it. She forced herself to stop thinking about that before the lust for blood overcame her in the middle of the bar. "Let me buy you another," she offered.

"I don't think so."

"Come on. You look like you need it."

Tango sighed. "Give it up." She looked straight ahead, staring at the monitor again. "Believe me, I wouldn't agree with you."

"What do you mean?" Miranda fought to keep suspicion off her face.

Still staring ahead, Tango brought two fingers up to her mouth, crooked them, and wiggled them in front of her canines. Fangs. Miranda's own mouth closed sharply. Tango nodded. "You wouldn't like me. My blood does all kinds of nasty things to vampires. Hallucinations, especially."

Miranda hissed. The other woman was no more human than she was! The odd energy that clung to her should have told the vampire that. She took a step back, wondering how long it would take for the rest of the pack to reach her if she needed them. "What are you?"

"Stop that." Tango didn't even turn. "I'm not going to put a stake through your heart, if that's what you're afraid of. I'm a Kithain." Miranda tried to place the term, but couldn't. Tango snorted, a little bit contemptuously. "A changeling. Are you Camarilla or Sabbat?"

Miranda bit back a snarl. "Sabbat. How did you know?"

"I've been around. Vampires aren't that hard to spot close up if you know what to look for. For starters, you're not actually breathing, and you're not really drinking your beer. And the two guys who were here disappeared awfully conveniently for you to move in." She paused, then said, "If you promise not to try and hypnotize me, or whatever it is you do, I'll turn around."

"Why should I?" Miranda growled.

"Mostly because I'd like to talk to you. And it's not easy to do that when I can't look at you."

Miranda glanced toward the back of the bar where Tolly, Matt and Blue sat. They were out of sight, hidden by an outthrust wall and an intervening pillar. "All

right, I promise.”

“Thank you.” Tango turned around and looked up at her. The changeling was several inches shorter than she was. Miranda looked her over appraisingly. Aside from the strange smell of energy that she had, there was nothing to distinguish her from a normal human. Miranda wondered what Matt would sense around the small woman. She had heard fragmentary stories about changelings and what happened to vampires who drank their blood. Most went mad. Some died in lunatic raving. A few... a few ended up doing things that were simply impossible. One vampire had supposedly ended up wandering around in broad daylight, drunk on changeling blood and firmly believing that it was nighttime. The strange thing was that he had survived. He had walked a full day in sunlight and come back to his wits at dusk with no worse damage than a suntan.

Tango withstood her scrutiny for several minutes before asking sarcastically, “Haven’t you ever seen a Kithain before?”

“No,” Miranda admitted. “You’re the first.”

“Really?” She seemed mildly surprised. “There’s a whole court of Kithain in Toronto.”

Miranda blinked. “Where?” She could hardly believe it when Tango said Yorkville. “Our pack goes through there all the time.”

“We’re sort of like vampires. You have to know what you’re looking for. So...” Tango considered Miranda with equal scrutiny. “Did you have anything to do with this murder last night?”

“No,” Miranda lied coolly, suddenly mistrusting the changeling. “You’ve heard the reports, haven’t you? He was beaten to death. Would a vampire do that?”

Tango was silent for a moment. "I suppose not. It just seems like an odd coincidence for you to be here...."

"One of my pack is gay. He likes to hang out in Hopeful." Part truth, part lie. Matt preferred to hang out around the frat boys that he fed on.

"Does he?" Desperation showed in Tango's face. "Did he see my notice when you came in? Does he know Riley or a blond guy he might have been with here?"

"I don't think so." Another lie, of course, since Matt didn't really know Hopeful. In fact, he had laughed at the notice. Tango's mouth twisted in disappointment. Miranda almost felt sorry for her. "Who is Riley?"

"A friend. Another Kithain. A pooka, if that means anything to you. He's got himself mixed up in something and vanished." She looked into the bottom of her empty glass. "He's been kidnapped."

"Oh. I'm sorry." A smaller lie, but still a lie. Kidnapping and vanished people were commonplace among the Sabbat. Miranda supposed that she had become used to the idea. She had been kidnapped the night she was made into a vampire; she was probably still on a missing-persons list buried somewhere in a police file. "I hope you find him. Any clues?"

"Maybe." Tango rapped her glass against the top of the counter. The overwhelming frustration that had been on her face when she first entered Hopeful returned. "I just can't get to them."

"Police records? Computer files?"

"The airport." Tango bared her teeth angrily. "Did you know that the fucking Toronto airport is not in Toronto?" She lifted her glass and hurled it against the nearest wall. "It's not in Toronto!" she screamed.

Hopeful was suddenly silent. Everyone turned to

stare at Tango as she stood white-faced and rigid, glaring at the broken glass. Miranda stared at it for a moment as well, fighting down the instinct to respond to violence with violence. She put her hand on Tango's arm. "Let's go outside."

"No," Tango hissed through clenched teeth. "I'm staying here. I'm fine."

Miranda smiled at the bar staff who were coming to investigate. "It's okay," she told them. "We're leaving. Right, Tango?" The Kithain didn't respond. "Right?" asked Miranda again.

The changeling took a deep breath. "No," she said with icy control. "I'm fine." She pulled away.

Miranda grabbed for her. "I really think it's time to go."

"No." Abruptly, Tango spit twice onto the stained floor of the bar. The energy around her changed, as though suddenly condensing into her body. Her arm under Miranda's hand seemed to shift. It felt tougher, harder, tight bands of muscle moving under leathery skin. Tango pushed Miranda away with a strength that surprised the taller woman for a moment. Tango wasn't the only one who was stronger than she looked, however. Miranda fought back with vampire strength, trying to force the changeling to turn around. If she could, all she would have to do would be to look into her eyes and the fight would be over. They would be out of the bar in moments. But Tango was fast as well as strong. Miranda tried to grab for her twice and missed. She wondered what it all looked like to the humans in Hopeful. Just two women struggling?

Then Tango made a mistake, driving her elbow back into Miranda's abdomen, a move that would have

knocked the air out of a human and left her on the floor, gasping for breath. It didn't bother Miranda in the slightest, but she feigned weakness, letting her grip on the changeling go slack. Tango started to pull away... and Miranda slid around her, got one hand under her chin, and forced her face up. Tango had beautiful, sharp brown eyes. "Outside!" Miranda ordered her. "Go outside!"

Tango's will was fiercely strong. Miranda's was stronger. The changeling's eyes didn't go distant the way that the bartender's had, but her body obeyed Miranda's commands. Tango turned and walked out of Hopeful. The bar staff stood aside to let her pass. Miranda went after her. "Sorry," she apologized to the staff.

"Glasses are cheap," said Todd. "Make sure she gets home all right."

Tango was waiting for Miranda on the steps of the bar. She was outside, but that was as far as Miranda's orders had taken her. "You promised not to do that!" she growled roughly.

"I'm sorry, but you didn't leave me much choice. Did you want to make a scene — or more of a scene?"

"I've never known Sabbat vampires to turn away from making a scene before."

Miranda paused. Why had she stopped Tango from causing a disturbance? It would have been nothing to the pack. The others would probably have enjoyed it, in fact. Except, she decided, that a fight would have compromised the secrecy that Solomon wanted. A brawl would probably have meant a call to the police and the pack's faces linked to Hopeful. Yes, that was it. Solomon would be pleased with her foresight. She faced down Tango's angry glare. "The Sabbat knows

when not to fight.” Miranda walked down the steps to the sidewalk, motioning Tango after her. “Come on.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

Miranda looked back up at the changeling stubbornly rooted by the door. “You can’t go back inside. Unless you want to stay where you are now, you have to come down sooner or later.” She sat down on the steps of the restaurant, now closed, next door. “What’s the big deal about the airport? It’s only in Mississauga. You can get a taxi there.”

“You don’t understand.” Tango was tense for a moment longer, then her head fell forward and her shoulders slumped. She came down the steps of the bar and seated herself beside Miranda. “I can’t leave Toronto. I’ve been cursed.”

“Mississauga and the airport are just on the other side of a highway from Toronto. It’s practically part of Toronto. The boundaries aren’t even marked.” Miranda frowned. Some vampires of the Sabbat dabbled in ritual, and, of course, she had seen Solomon’s human magick at work, but she had never heard of a curse that could be so finely tuned.

“This is Kithain magic. It doesn’t have to make sense — it’s part of our nature.” Tango pushed her hands through her hair. “Every time I try to get to the airport, I start to choke. I can’t breathe.” She rubbed her neck. “It’s like somebody is strangling me. I can drive past the airport, I can see the signs telling me which terminal to go to, but if I turn off the highway and onto the airport grounds, I feel like I’m going to die. Same if I try to get a taxi — and I have. From the other side of the highway. Driver looked at me like I was crazy when I told him to turn around.”

“Can’t you just get the curse removed? Aren’t there ways to do that?”

Tango shook her head. “The short story? No. I can’t. If I try to, I’m in trouble with the duke of Toronto.”

“The duke of Toronto?”

“The Kithain duke. You vampires really are insular, aren’t you? Do you ever pay attention to anything that goes on outside your own dark afterlife?”

“If it’s important.” Miranda looked out along the street. It was quiet and still a little muggy. Occasionally a car would drive past, its headlights blinding, or a knot of people would come out of a bar, breaking up like an amoeba to go their separate ways. “I bet I know more about Toronto than you do.”

“I bet I know more about the world and the way it works. Which is more important?”

“Since you’re stuck here?” Miranda turned her head to regard Tango again. “I’d say Toronto. Like knowing that if you’re cursed to stay in Toronto, you’re lucky to make it as far as the edge of Mississauga. That’s the border of Metro Toronto. The city of Toronto ends about halfway there.”

Tango was silent. After a moment, she said, “I’m sorry, Miranda. I shouldn’t have said that.” She sighed. “Kithain aren’t much better. I think I managed to piss off every one of them here before I found out what kind of trouble Riley was in. And humans.... Well, it’s just not the same. Most of them haven’t got a clue about what the world’s like. It’s nice to have someone who I can talk to and know they’ll at least understand.” She stuck out her hand. “Thanks for getting me out of there. I’m a little too edgy for my own good right now.”

“No problem.” Miranda shook the proffered hand.

The changeling's gratitude felt as warm as her touch. Miranda found herself smiling. "So what exactly is it that you need at the airport?"

"Riley's luggage. It's at the Lost and Found. He... well, let's just say that basically he disappeared after checking his bags at the airport in San Francisco. He may have been on the airplane with me, transformed into a little girl."

Miranda's eyebrows rose. "That's..." *Impossible?* The word came to her tongue easily, but since her own change into a vampire, she knew that very little was truly impossible. Tolly distorted his body totally unconsciously. Blue knew vampires who could take on the shapes of bats and wolves, and even clouds of mist. Solomon sometimes spoke of learning to shapechange. And there were the Garou, werewolves, for whom shapeshifting was a part of their very identity. "That's strange. I didn't think it was... easy to transform one person into another."

"It's not. I've heard of it being done. But not so quickly — it took weeks of sculpting the person's body and rearranging their entire mind. It must have happened to Riley in the space of about an hour or less." Tango fiddled with a ring on her finger. "I still don't know who did this to him. They searched his apartment already and stole the information that might have identified them. There might be something in his luggage. If I could get to it."

"I could..." Miranda bit off her words. What was she doing? Tango had started out as prey — she should stay that way, or maybe become a distant contact, someone to be exploited when the need arose. She should not become a friend! Miranda was a vampire of the Sabbat.

She chose her allies by what they could do for her, not what she could do for them! "I could get it for you," she said gruffly, "for a price."

Tango looked at her. "Could you? I don't have any money on me."

"For a favor. You'll owe me." A favor owed by a changeling would be good. "I have my own car. Where is the Lost and Found?"

"Terminal two. They're open until midnight." Tango's eyes were alive with hope. "It's too late now, but first thing tomorrow night? Would you?"

"If nothing comes up that I have to do with the pack."

Tango's smile was dazzling and ecstatic. "Thank you, Miranda!" She grabbed the vampire and pulled her into a hug. "Oh god, thank you!" She let her go and stood up. "The luggage is for Riley Stanton, flight 2800 from San Francisco. The person who called about the bags didn't say what you'd need to pick them up. If you need a letter or something, I can..."

Miranda smirked back. "Getting them to give me the luggage won't be a problem. Trust me."

"I don't suppose it would be a problem, would it?" She dug a card out of her pocket. "This is the address of Riley's apartment and his phone number. I'm staying there. Bring the bags by as soon as you can. Miranda, you don't know how much this means."

"Oh, I do. And don't think that I won't collect." Miranda allowed her smirk to soften a bit, relaxing into a smile. "Go home, Tango. I'll see you tomorrow night."

Tango shook her hand then, pulled her up into another hug. "Thank you, Miranda." The changeling let her go and walked away down the street. Miranda

watched her walk into the shadows, then turned to go back into Hopeful.

Tolly stood at the top of the steps to the bar, watching her.

Miranda stared at him for a moment, surprised and angry. "Where did you come from?" she spat.

"E bafroom," Tolly mumbled in response. "I forrowe' you ou'."

There was something odd about his face, about the way he was holding his mouth — odder than usual, anyway. Miranda looked at him with narrowed eyes. "What have you done to your mouth, Tolly?"

The mad vampire grinned broadly and let his tongue loll out. He had driven a thin spike of metal through it, one of the few pieces of his anatomy that had not been pierced before. Miranda thought she recognized the spike. It had been pushed through the skin just under his chin before. Miranda curled her lips in disgust. "How much did you hear?"

"You're going 'o 'e airpor' 'o ge' bags for 'e 'an..." Tolly stumbled over the word. Miranda saw a little trickle of blood as the spike poked against the roof of his mouth. "...for 'e 'an-gring...."

She cut him off, barely able to understand what he was saying. "All right. Enough." She climbed up the stairs and gave him a hard glance. "You didn't hear anything."

"I..."

"Don't talk. It's disgusting." She caught his face between her thumb and forefinger, pinching it. "You didn't hear anything. You saw me feed on the woman from the bar, then send her away. That's it. Understand?" He nodded. "Good."

Miranda went back into the bar. Fortunately, even if Tolly did say something about Tango, neither of the others would be able to understand what he was saying anyway. She didn't want Matt and Blue to know about the changeling. Tango was her secret, her ally. Her... friend? Miranda clenched her teeth. Whatever Tango was, she was a welcome change from other vampires!

Matt and Blue were still sitting at their table. Wet rings on the table showed that they had at least moved their glasses of beer around, even if they hadn't actually drunk any. "Well?" asked Matt. "Did you feed well?"

"Well enough."

"What was the commotion?"

"I was playing with my food."

Blue snorted, then glanced at Tolly. "And you took your time. Did you make it to the bathroom?"

Tolly rocked his hand back and forth. "Yeah an' no. Ra'ies room." He patted his face with an effeminate, fluttering motion. "Pow'ere' my 'ose."

"What?" Blue looked at the mad vampire sharply. "What the hell have you...?"

"He pierced his tongue." Miranda almost smiled as Tolly stuck his tongue out and made Matt flinch in disgust. "What have you two been doing?"

"Waiting for you." Blue tapped his wrist and the big, heavy watch he wore. "It's almost one-thirty. Are we going to leave before your bartender or what?"

Todd. Tango knew him. Miranda hesitated. If the pack killed Todd, Tango would be suspicious. But the pack had to kill tonight and satisfy Solomon's commands. For the first time in several years, Miranda found herself reluctant to kill a human. She made her decision and stood. "He's off. We'll go to another bar

and find someone else.”

“What?” Matt’s jaw dropped. “After all the time you took deciding here? What’s the matter with him, all of a sudden? Has he recently acquired a friend? Is he suddenly too big for us to handle?”

Miranda glared back at him. “No. I just changed my mind. Fair enough?”

“No, it isn’t.” Matt rose to his feet as well. “We had him picked out, we had this planned, and you just decide to change your mind? The Sabbath isn’t an autocracy, Miri.”

“Are you challenging me, Matt?” hissed Miranda. “Do you want to lead the pack? You’re welcome to try and take it from me.”

Matt bared his fangs in a snarl. “Maybe I am. Maybe...”

Blue reached over and grabbed Matt’s coat, yanking him back into his seat. “Not here!” He looked around. “I don’t think anybody saw that.” The big vampire glanced up at Miranda. “We’re not challenging you, Miri—”

“Speak for yourself,” Matt muttered. Blue gave him a deadly stare, then turned back to Miranda.

“We’re not challenging you, but Matt’s right. We had this planned. It’s a good plan. We should stick with it. Unless you can give us a good reason for dropping it.”

She couldn’t, Miranda knew. She had no good reason except for wanting to hide their involvement in the murders from Tango. She closed her eyes, releasing her anger. She had no choice. “All right.” Miranda opened her eyes again. “The pack has spoken. We take the bartender.”

“Good.” Matt bounced up from his seat again, eager for the kill. Miranda found herself wanting to kill *him*. “Time check, Blue?”

“One-twenty-five.”

“Lots of time.” Matt led them out of Hopeful. Miranda walked last.

She spared Todd a glance as they passed the bar. He caught her eye and smiled at her. She looked away and hoped that Tango never found out. She had tried.

CHAPTER SIX

*Backwards up the mossy glen
Turned and trooped the goblin men*

The sudden blare of the television brought Tango snapping out of a deep sleep, her eyes wide and her silver knife already in hand. Stunned by the abrupt awakening, she watched the perky hostess on the screen of the small set atop Riley's dresser for almost a minute before the time imprinted itself on her brain. Eight o'clock. Riley used his television for an alarm clock. Tango groaned. Her eyelids drooped back down. She'd seen a remote control around somewhere as she'd tumbled into bed late last night. She groped for it amidst the litter of Riley's dirty clothes.

"...all coming up in the next half-hour," chattered the television hostess brightly. "But now here's Oliver with this morning's news."

The shot changed to a casually dressed man with a bank of cluttered desks behind him and a serious, deeply concerned look on his face. "Thanks, Jennifer. There's been..."

The man disappeared into silent oblivion as Tango found the remote and clicked it at the television. She let her knife vanish and collapsed back down onto the mattress. Riley got up at eight o'clock. She couldn't

believe it. Tango closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep. She, at least, was still willing to sleep until noon. Usually that was a function of the hours she kept working at Pan's. Kithain tended to be a little more energetic than the average human, but even they needed and enjoyed sleep. Today, especially, Tango had sleep to catch up on. The stress of Riley's disappearance, of the visit to Duke Michael's court, of Epp's *geasa*, of her own abortive attempts to reach the airport... of the entire wearying and maddeningly frustrating previous day, had left her utterly drained.

There was no hurry for her to get up. There would be precious little she could do until the sun went down and Miranda could bring her Riley's bags from the airport. She might as well sleep. Tango pulled a sheet over her head and buried her face in a pillow. She was glad that she had met Miranda last night. It had been a fortunate meeting. What she had told the vampire was true — it made an enormous difference for her just to be able to talk to someone, anyone, who could understand what was happening, someone who understood what hid in the world's darkness. It didn't hurt to have Miranda as an ally, either. She didn't think any of the Kithain of Toronto would be particularly sympathetic toward her or Riley, even if she were inclined to seek out their company. She had considered going to Ruby, the old gatekeeper, but that would have brought her back to Duke Michael's doorstep. And that was the last place she wanted to go, right now.

Tango turned her head and screwed her eyes tightly shut, trying to find unconsciousness again. So what was she going to do until Miranda came? The usual tourist attractions came to mind, but they hardly seemed

appropriate. Tango couldn't bear the thought of wandering mindlessly through some museum exhibit or art gallery. She disliked shopping. Maybe she could find a gym and lose a few hours working out. The idea of slamming weights around was satisfyingly physical. Swimming, a run around the city. She almost wished Miranda hadn't ordered her out of Hopeful last night. She missed the release of her nightly shift at Pan's.

She peered out from the sheets at the clock on Riley's bedside table. Eight-oh-eight. Tango closed her eyes again and waited as long as she could, then looked at the clock again. Eight-thirteen. She groaned and pushed herself up. She wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep. Her mind was awake and demanding that her body follow its example.

A long, hot shower helped. Riley's bathroom was as disorganized as the rest of his apartment. The bathtub was cluttered with a profusion of half-used shampoos, conditioners and specialty soaps, each discarded as Riley's attention was caught by something new. Tango washed with a rough mud soap and lathered her hair with a shampoo that smelled of coconuts, then wrapped herself in one of Riley's robes and walked barefoot into the living room. The VCR under the big television in the living room read eight-thirty. Tango turned on the TV. The same hostess as before came on, passing the spotlight to the same anchorman for another round of news. Tango went into the kitchen to look for coffee.

"Murder our top story this morning," said the anchorman, "as Toronto's gay community deals with another violent death." Tango paused, coffee canister in hand. "Our cameras were at the scene on Gloucester Street shortly after the police arrived."

Tango ducked back out into the living room in time to see flashing lights against a dawn-lit sky. Ambulances and police cars were parked in front of a big old Victorian brick house that looked as though it had been converted into apartments. People dressed in shorts and T-shirts, sweatpants, housecoats and all kinds of other clothing stood and watched as ambulance attendants brought a black bodybag on a stretcher out through the front door. "Dead is twenty-six-year-old Todd Hyde, a bartender at a popular Church Street bar. Police aren't saying much, but there is widespread speculation that the killing is related to the beating death yesterday of John Elliott. Unconfirmed sources say that Hyde was beaten, and that there are other similarities in the circumstances of the two deaths. A news conference has been scheduled for eleven o'clock. We'll have more for you on our noon report."

The picture changed to scenes of destruction in some foreign city, but Tango was no longer listening. She sat down on the couch, still holding the coffee canister, and stared at the screen. Todd was dead. Tango slid down onto her knees and scrambled over to the television. She flipped through the channels rapidly, hoping to catch another segment about the murder on some other newscast. There was nothing. All of the local stations had led with the story, while the American stations had no mention of it at all. The national news service covered it briefly, showing footage picked up from the first station but not speculating on the facts behind the death. Tango watched again as Todd's plastic-shrouded corpse was brought out and placed in a waiting ambulance.

And she was ashamed that her first thought wasn't

about the blond-haired man who had tried to help her. It was about Miranda.

The vampire had lied to her. She had said that she and her pack weren't involved with the first murder at Hopeful, but here was a second murder on a night the vampires had been there! Miranda had...

No. Tango ground her teeth. She was jumping to conclusions. Just because vampires preyed on humans didn't mean that vampires were involved every time a human died violently. The news said Todd had been beaten to death. As Miranda had pointed out, it was very unlikely that a vampire would *beat* someone to death. Tango took a deep breath. There was bound to be blood loss in any murder committed by a vampire. If that was true, it would come out later, at the news conference or in an autopsy. In the meantime, she would trust Miranda. She had no choice anyway. She needed the vampire to bring her Riley's bags.

Riley.

Tango sat back. Both the murdered men and Riley were connected with Hopeful. Could whoever had kidnapped Riley be responsible for the murders as well? She rocked back and forth. If they were... she remembered her notice, torn down from Hopeful's message board. If they were, her inquiries had led them to Todd. But why? The mysterious kidnappers had to know where she was, had to know that someone, at least, was staying in Riley's apartment. Why hadn't they come for her instead?

She tried to persuade herself that it was a coincidence, like the vampires being at Hopeful. There was no need to invoke mysterious figures and the dark forces of the world. Human hatred could be enough to

lead someone to murder. The murders could just be gay-bashing, someone lashing out at homosexuals. *Just* gay-bashing. Tango felt disgusted at herself for thinking it, but she almost hoped that that was all it was.

She reached out and turned off the television. She considered the canister of coffee sitting on the couch. Coffee would taste good right now, but she really didn't need the jittery high of caffeine. She needed something to do. Working out wasn't a possibility anymore. She didn't want to just put in time waiting. She needed to feel like she was doing *something*.

* * *

Something ended up being the task she had believed impossible last night: sifting through Riley's belongings for some clue about what was going on. The task still seemed impossible, but now Tango was desperate. She at least had to make the attempt. There was the slim chance that the kidnappers had missed something in the chaos of the apartment.

Of course, they had known what to look for. She didn't.

Tango started her search with the cabinet where the yellow file had been hidden. For the most part, the old sideboard contained nothing more than unsorted papers and a few large pieces of dusty dinnerware relegated to the top shelf. The papers were largely articles and comic strips cut out of newspapers. Occasionally there was an entire newspaper. The clippings were often surprisingly old. One reported the first launch of the American space shuttle. Others focused on the fashion trends of the early eighties, or on advances in computer

technology. One stack the thickness of a telephone book covered four seasons of the Winter Olympics. Tango wanted to scream in frustration. There didn't seem to be any pattern to what Riley had kept. She tried invoking a kenning and looking over each piece of paper closely. Riley might have used *Glamour* to disguise something of true importance. But he hadn't. Each newspaper clipping was exactly what it appeared to be. Tango swept her gaze around the apartment, searching for anything else that might radiate the *Glamour* of enchantment. There was nothing.

With a sigh, she pushed the papers back into the cabinet and slowly began to sift through the rest of the apartment's contents. Somewhere along the way, her search turned into a half-hearted attempt at cleaning and organizing. Epp, Tango reflected bitterly, would have been proud of her. She couldn't help tidying up. She had to try and make some sense of Riley's belongings. Books went into one pile, loose papers into another, discarded clothes into a third. Dishes went into the kitchen to join an already precarious pile in and beside the sink. Odds and ends — a paperweight, a little brass bowl, a blown-glass sculpture she had once given Riley — stayed where they were. As soon as Tango had an open space cleared, she began to fill it up again with objects and papers that struck her as suspicious. Or at least potentially suspicious. There was no way of being sure. The pile became awkwardly large very quickly.

It felt strange to be going through Riley's things. Some of what she found astounded her, or surprised her, or simply embarrassed her. She had done this sort of thing before, of course, but that had been when close friends had died. And there had always been other

people with her to share in the searching and in the mourning.

For all she knew, Riley could be dead already.

She refused to let herself think that. Tango looked at the big, old-fashioned dictionary in her hands, then over at the clock on the VCR. Eleven-thirty. She had been at this for over two hours. The police would have held their news conference on Todd's murder. She put the dictionary down on top of a stack of old magazines. This was pointless. She wasn't going to find anything. With a sigh, she sat down on the couch. The air in the apartment had become hot and sticky, a reflection of the weather outside. Either the air conditioning wasn't working, or the building was too old to have it. Her shifting and sorting had created a haze of dust in the still air. Dust clung to her sweaty skin as well, and settled in her hair. Another shower would be good, she decided. Another shower, and then she could watch the noon news report. In fact, if it wasn't for the news, she might have been tempted to spend the rest of the day under the relaxing comfort of falling water. She could almost empty her mind of all thoughts, forgetting about Riley and about Todd. Almost, but not quite.

When she came out of the bathroom, Epp was waiting for her.

Tango stared at the gray-haired Kithain seated patiently on the couch. It took her a moment longer to register that the apartment was absolutely, spotlessly clean. Two big bags and a blue recycling box full of papers waited beside the door. Old human fairy stories told about the ability of boggans to accomplish fantastic tasks — particularly household chores — incredibly quickly when no one was watching them. The stories

weren't exaggerating. Tango growled and advanced on Epp, already letting Glamour fill her and change her into her nocker seeming. "What the hell did I tell you last night?" she hissed. "And how did you get in here?"

"I have my ways," the boggan replied calmly. Tango suspected that Epp's ways involved a set of duplicate keys. She seized the front of Epp's dress and hauled her to her feet. Tango's knife appeared in her other hand. She wouldn't actually harm the other Kithain, but Epp didn't have to know that.

"Get out."

Epp eyed the knife with a calm that just barely disguised a deep, deep terror. "I'm afraid I can't. I have orders from the duke. His Jester must take a direct hand in planning the Highsummer Party."

"Really?" asked Tango with angry skepticism. "Why?" She twisted the knife so that light flashed menacingly from its edge. Epp shuddered.

"You're the only one authorized to use the charge card," she said, a little reluctantly. Epp pointed at her purse and her ever-present notebook, still sitting on the couch. "In there. It looks like a gold card."

Tango didn't release her. "A *credit card*? A Kithain credit card?"

"Humans don't let us just take things. We still have to pretend to pay for what we need, and large amounts of cash suddenly turning into leaves in a store's register is very conspicuous." Epp looked bitter. "Up until now, the duke had authorized me to use it as well. I even had my own card. But since Riley's card is missing with him, Duke Michael has had it canceled, and told me to give mine to you." She glared at Tango. "I don't like this either. Put me down and we'll get going."

"The only place I want to see you going is out the door." Tango dropped Epp, then reached for the boggan's purse. It was fat and black, very matronly, but as neat as Tango would have expected any of Epp's possessions to be. The account card was in her wallet, a shining piece of plastic that looked more like real gold than any actual gold card Tango had ever seen. She could feel the Glamour in it and looked at it again, this time using a kenning. The card was still just a card, except that instead of a magnetic strip, there was a fat, pulsing leech clinging to the back. "Lovely." She shoved the purse at Epp, but kept the card. "Do without it," she said nastily.

"What?"

"I'm not in the mood to go shopping. You must have money of your own. Use it. I'm not doing you any favors."

Epp drew a hissing breath. "Come with me," she threatened, "or I'll tell the duke you were going to leave Toronto."

"Do it!" Tango snapped back sharply. "Then, when the duke has punished me, we'll see if the next Jester is willing to let you push them around so easily. Or," she added, "maybe I could start organizing the party myself."

"You wouldn't!" Epp gasped.

Tango felt like she was in high school, arguing over who was going to plan the senior prom. But it was her only leverage against Epp, and she was going to run it into the ground even if it meant she actually had to wear a prom dress. She gave Epp a steady stare and said, "I would."

There wasn't a trace of bluff in her voice, and Epp

knew it. The boggan became very quiet. Tango sat down on the couch. It was time for the noon-hour news. She looked for the remote control. It wasn't where she had left it; Epp had put it on top of the television. Tango walked over, picked it up and turned on the television, then went back to the couch.

"Tango..." Epp began.

Tango cut her off in a voice that would tolerate no contradiction. "After the news." Let the older Kithain stew.

The news came on with a flourish of dramatic music. The noon anchor wore the same expression of concern that the morning anchor had, the same somber expression that news anchors everywhere wore. "Good afternoon. Police held a news conference this morning, giving out details about last night's murder of bartender Todd Hyde."

The camera cut to a scene of a heavysset man wearing a jacket and tie. The harsh lights of conflicting television cameras gave him an odd, depthless look, wiping away the shadows that might have given him character. He was clearly reading from a prepared statement. "The deceased was found at 6:30 A.M. by a building superintendent responding to complaints from a resident on the lower floor about water seeping through the bathroom ceiling. Upon entering the deceased's apartment, he discovered the body and the police were summoned." The spokesman looked up for a moment, perhaps trying to give the illusion of spontaneity to his words, but the flat tone of his voice spoiled the attempt. "The seepage of water was caused by an overflowing bathtub, but the body was found in the bedroom. Preliminary examination suggests that the

deceased was beaten to death. His body was then straightened, his arms crossed over his chest, and pennies placed on his eyelids. An autopsy is currently underway.” His eyes went back to his script. “The investigation is being conducted by the homicide squad. Todd Hyde was last seen leaving work at Hopeful, a Church Street bar, at one-thirty last night. If you have any information, please call...”

Someone out of the shot called out, “So this is related to the Elliott murder? Do you have any leads?” The police spokesman looked startled, as if he hadn’t expected any questions.

“We can’t comment on that at this time.”

Tango clenched her jaw. She had been hoping for something more. The same footage she had seen at eight-thirty was played again as the anchor recapped the death in terms slightly more graphic and speculative, then added, “Reaction in Metro’s gay community has been swift.”

A new scene. Tango recognized the interior of Hopeful and the little shrine commemorating John Elliott. Now Todd’s picture had joined his customer’s. A man was speaking, his appearance as different from the police spokesman’s as possible: his head was shaved, he had multiple earrings, and he wore a T-shirt printed with a vivid pink triangle. “The police are doing nothing! Bashing is on the rise and the police aren’t taking it seriously. John’s and Todd’s deaths are hate crimes. Some lunatic is out there *preying* on homosexuals, *murdering* us, and what are the police doing? What are the straights doing? They’re shaking their heads and saying ‘Oh, it was probably their own fault.’ Well, we’re not going to let Toronto ignore this.”

The camera came back to the anchor. "No plans for memorial services yet, but we'll let you know when announcements are made. In other news..." Tango turned off the television, punching savagely at the button on the remote.

Epp cleared her throat. "Tango?"

Tango didn't turn around. "Take the *geasa* off me."

"I can't. You'll go back to San Francisco."

"I won't." Tango sighed. As long as she had Miranda to help her, she didn't need to leave the city — although she wished she didn't have to wait to get Riley's bags. She would have liked to have them now. "All right, but let's make this perfectly clear." She shifted to look at Epp. "I do not want to be involved in this damn party. I have other things to worry about."

"Are you still looking for Riley? The duke..."

"The duke can go screw himself. You plan the party, Epp. When you need something paid for, let me know. I'll pay for it. Better yet, save the payments up. I'll do them all at once. I don't want to see you, I don't want to hear from you unless it's absolutely necessary. Understand?"

"Yes." Epp hesitated, then added, "What about today? I have appointments scheduled. I have a whole list of places to visit. I may need the card to pay for things."

Tango put her hands over her eyes and rested her head against the back of the couch. She wasn't doing anything else anyway. "Okay. Let me get dressed. We can take my car."

"Actually, we can't. The duke told Dex to help me — or rather, us. We'll take his car when he gets back."

"Gets back from where?" Tango asked tightly, head still back.

"Taking your car back to the rental agency." Epp seemed pleased with herself. "I decided you wouldn't really need it, so I gave him the keys while you were in the shower. He should be back anytime. By the way, you were charged extra for parking overnight." Tango heard a rustle of paper. "You're lucky you didn't get towed. Parking is such a hassle in Toronto."

Tango was glad her hands were over her eyes. Otherwise they would almost certainly have been around Epp's neck.

* * *

Dex, it turned out, was much more like Sin than Tango would have suspected from her brief encounter with him yesterday. Away from the duke's court, he smiled and laughed a lot. He was as unfailingly polite as any of the humans Tango had met in Toronto, but it was the politeness of *noblesse oblige* rather than a cold, defensive politeness. Aside from the air of nobility that he sometimes wore like a cologne, Dex was also much less like a *sidhe* than Tango would have expected. Occasionally, he could be as downright adolescent and immature as a university student at a beer blast. He was a golden boy out of some American nostalgia movie, the perfect counterpart to Sin's dark rebel. Neither of them were what the ancient faeries would have expected in a faerie knight.

At a bakery, they waited while Epp discussed a massive order with the manager. This was the third

bakery they had been to so far. Epp was being very demanding, very brisk and businesslike. She had a recipe for bread like none Tango had ever seen before. Tango had never been much of a cook, but she suspected that Epp's recipe would produce a loaf not unlike an egg bread, rich and golden and filled with fruit and nuts. It might almost have been a dessert bread, but Epp insisted that it would be part of the main course for an enormous feast. The first two bakeries had looked over the list of ingredients and the almost arcane directions for the baking, and replied that they could make something similar from a variation of one of their stock recipes. Epp had been adamant that the bread be produced according to her recipe. Tango was sure that the staff of the bakeries must have been snickering at her demands almost before the trio of Kithain had left.

At least the third bakery seemed to be somewhat more receptive to Epp's stringent wishes, and the boggan had come down to talking prices with the manager. Tango groaned as Epp tried to haggle him down. It wasn't as though there was any need to save money. The duke's card had an apparently inexhaustible limit. Tango had felt guilty every time she paid for something with it, hoping that the fake credit wouldn't somehow reflect back on the storeowners. The little credit card machines always approved the card, however, so presumably the credit was being swallowed by some giant credit corporation. "Why does she bother?" she complained out loud to Dex.

The golden sidhe put down a bag of croissants and shrugged. "Part of her nature. You know the joke about the sidhe, the redcap and the boggan who found flies in their beer?"

“Like the human joke about the Englishman, the Irishman and the Scotsman?” Tango yawned. “Englishman covers the beer with a napkin and sets it aside, Irishman flicks the fly out and keeps drinking, Scotsman picks the fly out very carefully and yells ‘spit it out, you little bugger, spit it out!’”

“Basically. Except the redcap eats the fly.” Dex smiled at a saleswoman behind the bakery counter. She blushed and smiled back. “I think this is some kind of ancestral recipe of Epp’s. Something that has been passed down for centuries. I heard her mention once that it’s the original recipe for Cornish saffron buns, given to a Cornish housewife by a faerie queen in exchange for mending her shadow. She’s been saving it for a really special occasion. I hope it’s worth it.”

Tango made a grimace of disgust. “So do I. I had something once that an old Scottish slugh claimed was heather ale made according to an ancient Pictish recipe. It could have taken paint off the wall. Ancient recipes don’t always work out too well.”

“Maybe they need more Glamour to turn out right. Like there was in the old days.”

“Maybe.” Tango considered a basket full of brightly decorated gingerbread men and women. Her stomach snarled at her and she made her decision. “I’d like the one with the yellow skirt, please,” she told the woman behind the counter. “Do you want one, Dex?”

“The one with red hair,” he said lasciviously. The woman behind the counter, a redhead, blushed again and gave him two: a gingerbread woman with red icing hair and a gingerbread man with yellow. When Tango tried to pay for three, the server would only take payment for the two that had been ordered. Tango

rolled her eyes as they stepped outside to eat the cookies.

“Does anyone from your court ever pay humans for anything?”

“Not if we can help it,” Dex grinned. “If they want to give us things for free, well...”

“I can see why Riley liked it here so much. He’d fit right in.” Tango broke a leg off her cookie and popped it in her mouth. She chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then added, “Did... I mean, do you know Riley, Dex? What can you tell me about him?”

Dex paused. “You know that the duke has forbidden anyone to look for him, don’t you?”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t ask what you thought of him, does it?”

“I guess not. He was a pretty okay guy. I mean, he was a pooka. He lived for pranks. About the only real contact I had with him was through the court after he became the duke’s Jester.”

“Was there anybody that he really pissed off? Anyone who might want revenge on him?”

“Lots of people. Most of the court. Probably a lot of humans, too, not that they would have realized what was going on.” He bit the head off one of his cookies.

“How about a mage?” Tango thought of the little girl’s voice on the answering machine.

Dex almost choked. “A mage? Not even Riley would have gone against the duke’s orders to stay away from them!”

“But he did, remember?”

“Yeah, okay. In San Francisco.” He shook his head. “I don’t think Riley would have tried doing that here. Besides, there are hardly any mages in Toronto. I’ve

heard of one or two, maybe three.”

“What Tradition?” Tango asked eagerly. Some mages were more likely than others to have the ability to transform a person as Riley had apparently been transformed. “Verbena? Akashic Brotherhood?” She groped for a name from the Technocracy, the enemies of the mages. “Progenitors?” Dex just gave her a blank look. She sighed. And she had complained to Miranda about vampires being insular! “All right, how about telling me where I can find them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t play court games with me, Dex. This thing of the duke’s about mages can’t have completely fried your brain.”

“I really don’t know, Tango! I’ve never paid that much attention. All I’ve heard is that they’re dogooders, not the kind of people who would go out for revenge.”

“Damn.” Tango angrily bit the last piece of her cookie in half. “How about anyone he hung out with? A blond man, maybe?”

Dex shrugged again. “Never saw him with anyone outside court. Of course, I didn’t see him much outside of court at all.”

Tango frowned. “So you don’t know anything about this blond guy?”

“Nothing. Sorry.” Dex brushed crumbs off his fingers.

A knock on the window from the inside of the store brought the conversation to an end; Epp stood on the other side of the glass, her fingers miming a small rectangle. It was time to pay. Tango took her time savoring the last bite of her gingerbread, making the

boggan wait. When she was ready, she went in, shook the bakery manager's hand and put down the account card, ignoring Epp's hostile glares. "Where to next?" she asked sweetly as the bakery's credit-card machine coughed up another approval for the phony card. In addition to the three bakeries, they had also stopped at two florists, an interior design supply house, a graphic design firm and a gourmet caterer whose services Epp had eventually rejected. It was getting very late in the afternoon, and most stores would be closing soon.

"A chocolate shop in College Park," replied Epp frostily. "And you'll be happy to know that it's on your way home. We'll drop you off after we're finished there."

"Thanks ever so much."

Their route took them down Bay Street, a wide avenue between the steel-and-glass temples of business. For all of the street's width, however, their progress became slower and slower as they neared their destination. "Rush hour?" asked Tango from the rear seat of Dex's Mustang.

"It's not usually this bad on Bay." Dex was frowning at the traffic in the oncoming lanes. It was heavy, but moving fairly quickly. "Something must be happening. Maybe an accident. People are rubbernecking and slowing things down."

They discovered the source of the trouble as they stopped for a red light at the last intersection before the lot where Dex would park. A mass of people clogged the cross-street, College Street, just past the intersection. Police on horses kept watch over them, while a white-gloved cop stood in the intersection and directed traffic coming along College onto Bay instead. Dex's was the first car idling at the intersection, so they

had a good view of the crowd. Tango stood up to see over the turning traffic. There were a lot of pink triangles visible in that crowd, and a lot of angry faces. People held hand-painted signs with slogans like "Action Now!", "End bashing!", and "Justice for John and Todd!" "What's down there?" she asked Dex.

"Police headquarters." He had taken off his sunglasses and was looking as well. "We don't usually get demonstrations like this in Toronto. It looks like it could get ugly."

Epp glanced away from the demonstration with distaste. "Sex belongs in the bedroom," she said sanctimoniously.

Dex snorted. "When was the last time..."

"Hold on." Tango grabbed Dex's shoulder and pointed. "Something's happening."

A young man with a megaphone had jumped on someone's shoulders and was swaying above the crowd. Tango recognized the activist from Hopeful whom she had seen on the news. "Queen's Park!" he bellowed. "Queen's Park! The government has to listen to us!" He put his fist in the air and began to chant, "We're here! We're queer! We're..." The crowd took up his chant and slowly began to turn. The mounted police officers glanced at each other. One of the horses shifted nervously. Its rider reined it in.

Tango glanced at Dex. "Queen's Park?"

"Ontario legislature. Big, old, pinkish stone building we passed a couple of times today." He pointed off to the right. "Straight down there about two blocks."

"They'll be going right past us." Tango slid down into her seat.

"Nothing to worry about." Dex put his sunglasses

back on. "If the cops are smart and things don't get out of hand, they'll go by and we can get going again. Pity the poor souls down College where they'll be marching. They're going to be completely trapped."

By now, the crowd had turned almost fully and the front lines — formerly the quiet hangers-on at the back of the crowd — found themselves face to face with the mounted officers. There was a tense moment as the demonstrators and the police stared each other down, then the line of horses opened up, pulling back to either side. The demonstrators began to pour through into the intersection.

Tango didn't catch what happened next. There was a sudden commotion on the far side of the intersection, near the horse that had shied nervously before. Abruptly, people were shouting and placards were being waved threateningly. The mounted officer was trying to control his horse, but it fought him and reared up. Tango thought she saw a hoof flash out and strike someone.

The shouts of the crowd became screams of anger. More people continued to pour into the intersection, the press of the crowd carrying them forward. Everyone was yelling. Other mounted officers tried to move in; Tango heard the one closest to them start to shout into his radio before a demonstrator jumped up and tried to pull it out of his hand. The officer pushed him down. Ten more demonstrators howled in outrage and rushed forward.

Dex was suddenly sitting bolt upright. "Oh, shit."

Tango glanced over her shoulder. "The northbound lanes," she said quickly. Dex glanced back as well and nodded; smoothly turning the steering wheel to escape

back the way they had come. Unfortunately, the two cars immediately behind them had exactly the same idea and their drivers were less cautious than Dex. They jerked out almost simultaneously and far too fast. With a blaring of horns and squealing of brakes, one rammed the other. One of the horns continued to wail, adding to the noise of crowd. A second later, a surge in the fighting blocked any chance of going around the accident. Dex stopped, the nose of his Mustang half-turned into the intersection and the raging crowd.

A red-faced demonstrator slapped his hands down on the hood of the Mustang with a bang. "Hets!" he screamed. "Hatemonsters! End bashing now! End bashing now!"

More demonstrators joined him, slapping the car and chanting, shouting in Tango's face. Demonstrators began to surround other cars as well, filling the air with angry yells and the pounding of hands on metal. Tango tried to remain calm, looking for a way out. There was no reasoning with people in this state. Epp was cringing away from them, holding up her notebook like a shield. "Get away!" she shrieked. Glamour filled her, bringing a flush to her fat cheeks, and she worked a desperate cantrip. "Get away from me!" A few of the protesters obeyed meekly, moving away from the car, but there were always more willing to take their place. Epp curled up in her seat, shrieking in fright. Dex...

Dex was white-faced and thin-lipped, sunglasses hiding his eyes. Glamour filled him as well, but it was the noble Glamour of the sidhe, as cold and arrogant as Tango had ever seen it. Grimly, he revved the Mustang's engine, pushing the roar of the car against the shouts of the crowd. Tango realized what he was

thinking. She leaned forward and yelled in his ear, "Dex! No!"

The first red-faced demonstrator took the roar of the engine as a challenge instead of a warning. Still shouting "End bashing now!" he climbed up onto the hood.

Dex's tightly pressed lips parted ever so slightly. "Get... off... of my.. car," he growled.

"Dex!" screamed Tango.

The demonstrator lifted a foot to stomp on the hood. "End bashing..."

Dex slammed the Mustang into gear and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

Demonstrators' screams of anger turned into screams of shock and terror as the Mustang plowed through them. Some got out of the way or jumped back. Some — too close, too tightly held by the bodies around them, or simply too angry to know better — had skin torn as projections on the car caught them, or bones broken as the tires ran them down. Tango felt several horrible bumps as people were knocked to the ground and run over. The red-faced demonstrator yelled as the initial acceleration pitched him forward, a yell that ended in a sickening crunch as his cheek struck the top of the windshield. He rolled down and off the car.

Dex drove across a corner of the intersection and onto the now-empty section of College Street beyond the riot, heedless of whom he struck. A mounted police officer pulled her horse out of the car's path just in time. Tango stared back at the riot in shock. "You might have killed people back there!"

"Humans," said Dex with angry dismissal. "They're nothing."

"Yeah, well, I bet that cop got a pretty good look at your license plate!" Tango spat, fuming with rage. "Did you ever hear of paint chip analysis?"

Dex laughed, a short, arrogant bark. "She won't remember us. None of them will. There will be so many conflicting descriptions of us and so many contradictory lab reports that they'd have to bring in every car in the city!" He glanced at Tango in the rearview mirror. "Forget about it."

Tango's mouth twisted and her stomach knotted in disgust. "Take me home."

"What about the chocolate?" whined Epp.

"Get it another day! Take me home!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

*One began to weave a crown
Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown
(Men sell not such in any town)*

Miranda reached out of the car window and slapped the button on the ticket machine. It spat a little bar-coded chit at her. The gate ahead of her rose, and she drove into the airport parking lot, cruising up and down the lanes looking for an empty space like a desperate man looking for a hooker.

It had been easy to leave without the rest of the pack. She had simply risen with the setting sun, dressed, picked up her keys and walked out the door of the house that the pack shared. The others hadn't yet stirred from their resting places. If they had been up, Miranda had been ready with a story that she was going hunting without them tonight, that she wanted to feed alone. It was the same story she used when she had to attend a ceremony of the Bandog or when Solomon wanted to meet with her. It could also easily have been the truth. It was often very disturbing to feed around Tolly, and Blue was like an animal. Matt's feeding habits were closest to what she preferred when she had the luxury to indulge them: slow and intense, the pleasure of feeding prolonged. What she would have done to Tango

if the woman had not been a changeling. Fortunately, Matt's very specialized tastes in frat boys meant that the two vampires had never had to feed together. Miranda was profoundly grateful for that. She had enough trouble putting up with Matt at the best of times. Feeding with him would have been almost as sickening as feeding with Tolly.

She found a parking space and pulled into it, beating out a station wagon full of a harried-looking mother and three screaming children. The woman glared at her angrily, face tinted orange under the lights of the lot, but kept going. Miranda ignored her. She reached forward to switch off the radio, but paused as the news came on.

The pack's murder of the bartender last night and the protest that had broken out into a small riot downtown were at the top of the news. She had heard the stories before during the drive out to the airport. Nothing had changed. An autopsy had shown conclusively that Todd Hyde had died from internal bleeding, the result of a severe, prolonged beating that had left him with multiple broken bones and massive damage to his internal organs. Police were denying any leads in what the media had started to call the penny murders, but there had been arrests and numerous injuries in the wake of the riot protesting "police inaction" in the deaths. Three police officers and twenty-five protesters had been treated and released or were still in the hospital with serious injuries, partly the result of violence during the riot, partly the result of a car ramming through the riot. One protester was in critical condition in the intensive care ward. Ironically, it seemed that the devastation wrought by

the car had hastened the break-up of the riot. Police were searching for the car and its driver, but just as in the murder cases, they had no leads. Gays were already calling for a public inquest and planning more demonstrations.

Miranda turned off the radio and sat in the shadows of the car for a moment as a plane thundered into the air overhead. She had heard news stories before that she knew could ultimately be traced back to the Sabbat. A couple had been events in which her pack had been involved. When she had listened to those stories, however, all that she had felt was a sense of elation, the same feeling average humans got when they appeared on television. A feeling of "look — there we are in the back!" Certainly that had been her reaction, and the rest of the pack's, when Blue had turned on the television yesterday evening so they could watch the report on the first murder. But tonight, for the first time, she wasn't feeling that elation.

She was wondering about the consequences of the murders. They had inspired a riot. People had cared about the dead men, and they were angry at their deaths.

She wondered if Tango had heard about the second murder and the riot. The changeling must have. Miranda wondered what her reaction had been.

The roar of another plane taking off brought her back to attention. Miranda put the parking chit up on the dashboard and got out of the car, heading toward the terminal building. There was a covered pedestrian overpass across the taxi drop-off zone. The woman in the station wagon must have found a spot closer to the terminal, because she and her children were walking

into the stairwell of the overpass just ahead of Miranda. The woman let the door slam shut behind, right in Miranda's face. For someone from Toronto, it was a sharp gesture and a deliberate insult. It was savage, angry Sabbath instinct for Miranda to send dark, frightening shadows flitting after the family, crowding them in the empty, echoing stairwell. The vampire thought about snatching one of the woman's children away from her. But she stopped herself, banishing the shadows.

The woman was tired. She had let the door close — was that so terrible a thing that Miranda would kill a child in revenge? Who was the family meeting at the airport? A father? Grandparents? Miranda followed the family out of the overpass and into the bright and crowded terminal. The crowds swallowed them up. She let them go, cursing the attack of conscience.

It was Tango's fault. She thrust all thoughts of the changeling from her mind.

It took her a little while to find the Lost and Found office in the maze of the terminal. A bored-looking man stood at the counter, idling flipping through a magazine. He barely glanced up as Miranda approached, but kept turning pages until she had stopped in front of him. "Can I help you?" he asked in a voice that implied he would have preferred to do anything but.

"I'm here to pick up some unclaimed bags."

"Name?"

"Riley Stanton."

The attendant finally looked directly at her. He snorted, and a sort of smile smeared itself across his lips. "You're not him?"

"No." Miranda gave him a condescending glance.

"I'm not. How observant of you." She pulled Tango's paper out of her pocket and handed it to him. "I'm a friend. This is the flight number he was on. Apparently his name and address are on the bags."

The attendant glanced at the paper, then passed it back to her. "Sorry."

"What?"

"Only the owner can pick up unclaimed baggage. And he has to have proper ID."

"Well, the owner can't make it out to the airport. He asked me to get his luggage for him." Miranda set her mouth in a hard line and gave the attendant a dark look. "Give me the bags."

"I can't. If Mr. Stanton wants to call and make arrangements to pick up the bags at a convenient time, he can do that. Or if he can provide identification at the Air Canada office downtown, we can send them in and he can pick them up there." The attendant's eyes drifted back down to his magazine. "But we can't give unclaimed baggage to anyone but the owner. It's policy."

This time, Miranda didn't even try to control her anger. Shadows fell across the man's magazine. He looked up again. Miranda caught his eye. "Let me inside," she hissed.

Her will bored into his. He didn't have a chance. "There's a staff entrance around the corner," he stuttered.

"Go unlock it for me."

The attendant disappeared. Miranda stalked around to the door, her anger a red haze in her vision. The attendant was standing just inside the door, holding it open for her. "I..."

She didn't let him finish his sentence. She hadn't

fed yet tonight and she hadn't fed last night either. She was hungry and she was angry, a bad combination for vampires. The Lost and Found office was quiet, and the corner by the door was secluded. Miranda pushed the attendant back against the wall and forced his head to one side. Her fangs descended, and she bit into his neck. He gasped. Once.

The blood was good. Miranda drank her fill, leaving the man weak and pale, but alive. This time when she tilted his head back, he barely had the strength to resist. His eyes were wide. "Your waking mind will forget me," Miranda ordered him, "but I'll come back in your nightmares again and again." The man shuddered.

Miranda found Riley's bags, a battered leather overnight bag and a big heavy suitcase, and went back out the staff entrance. Some of her anger must have lingered around her, because the crowd parted for her, stepping out of her way and pulling children aside. In the pedestrian overpass, the shadows thickened with her passage. And after she had put the bags in the trunk of her car and pulled up to the parking lot's exit booth, even the parking attendant sat up and treated her politely, taking the chit she held out as if half-expecting her to seize him and drag him into the car. Warily, he kept one eye on her as he slid the ticket through a cash machine.

The machine beeped and churned out a merry little electronic tune. The parking attendant blinked. "Congratulations, miss," he said to her nervously over the noise of the car radio. "You win."

Miranda looked at him with blank disinterest. "Free parking?"

"A cellular phone." He pointed to a poster taped up

on the window of his booth. *Random customers will win free* cellular phone courtesy of...* Miranda's eye skipped to the bottom of the page, where a counterpart to the asterisk highlighted the phrase **Activation and subscription fees extra.*

She glanced back up at the attendant. He was holding out a brightly colored box with a stylized telephone on the lid. "I'd rather have the free parking."

The attendant swallowed. She let her cold gaze stay on him for a few more chilling seconds, and he blanched. "Enjoy your phone," he said quickly, shoving it through her window. "Thanks for parking with us." He stepped back and slapped at a button to raise the exit gate. Miranda pushed the box into the passenger seat and drove away.

Ten minutes later, the box began to ring.

The car skidded into another lane of traffic as Miranda snapped her head around to look at it in surprise. All around, horns honked in protest and brake lights flashed on. Miranda turned her attention back to the road. In its box, the cellular phone continued to ring. Miranda did her best to ignore it.

"Hey, hey!" laughed the radio DJ as a song ended. "Well, you know, we don't usually take requests here on the Ricky Bent show, but this was such a classic I had to do it — especially when I found out we actually had it in our collection! From Solomon to Miri, here are the Harmonic Dialtones with *Baby Answer My Call.*"

This time the car shot across two lanes of traffic amid horns like a chorus and brake lights like fireworks as Miranda hastily pulled over to the shoulder and grabbed for the phone box. Vampire talons split the

heavy packing tape that sealed the box, then Miranda was wrenching out blocks of foam packing. The ringing phone was wrapped in a thick layer of plastic. Miranda tore it off and unfolded the phone, fumbling for the connect button.

"It took you long enough," said Solomon sarcastically.

Miranda sat back in her seat. "Sorry," she replied into the mouthpiece, "but I wasn't really expecting someone to call me on a phone that hadn't been activated yet. Let me guess: it wasn't just luck that got me the phone."

"Mages make their own luck. You won't have to pay an activation fee either. I decided it was time you went cellular. I got tired of having to use magick to locate you when you weren't at home." Solomon paused. "Where are you now?"

"On the 427 above the Queensway." Miranda glanced over her shoulder to check the traffic, then, cradling the phone between her head and shoulder, pulled back onto the road. She shifted the phone back into her hand and drove while she talked. "Heading back into Toronto."

"What the hell were you doing out at the airport?"

"Feeding," Miranda said simply. She wasn't sure that she wanted Solomon to know about Tango any more than she wanted the pack to know. But if Solomon had used his magick to locate her out at the airport, there was the possibility that he had seen her collect Riley's bags as well. She hoped he hadn't.

"Feeding?" he asked incredulously. "At the airport?"

She relaxed a bit. Maybe he hadn't been watching her. "You know those urban myths about kids

disappearing at airports?" she lied.

Solomon chuckled. "You're evil, Miri."

"You didn't give me a cellular phone just to make small talk, did you? What do you want?"

"Come out to my house right away."

"How right away? Is this for the Bando or...?"

"Neither. It's about the pack's next job. Assignment number three."

Miranda frowned at the phone. She had to get the bags to Tango — she had promised them to her first thing tonight and she had been hoping that she might have a little time to talk to the changeling. She couldn't very well tell Solomon that she had an errand to run. "Should I bring the pack? I'll drop by and pick them up."

"You don't have to. David has already gotten them. That's how I found out you were somewhere else." Miranda cursed silently as he talked. "How long is it going to take you to get here? Twenty minutes from where you are, then ten through the city to my place?"

"That sounds about right." It sounded too right, actually. At a normal driving speed, it would take her almost exactly that long to get to Solomon's home. Miranda cursed again.

"I'll see you in half an hour then."

"All right. Wait! Solomon!" Miranda searched for a pen or pencil in the car. "What's my phone number?" He gave it to her, laughing. She gritted her teeth against the sound and scrawled the number on the lid of the phone box. "Thanks."

She hung up and tossed the phone back into the box. Half an hour left her no time to get the bags to Tango. The changeling would have to wait. She would

see her after she went to Solomon's. Except that... Miranda slapped her hands against the rim of the steering wheel. Except that after the meeting with Solomon, the pack would be with her again. She would have to get rid of them before she could see Tango. And what if Solomon wanted them to commit another penny murder tonight? Her stomach curdled. She had to give the bags to Tango before going to Solomon. It would only take a few extra minutes. Solomon wouldn't notice. She could make the time. Miranda pushed the accelerator down and the car flew forward, surging along the highway.

* * *

Tango paced back and forth through the living room of Riley's apartment. Some mindless sitcom was playing on the television, the canned laughter of the soundtrack cackling out on cue. She had been waiting anxiously for Miranda to appear since the sun went down. For the first hour, she had been able to persuade herself that she was just being ridiculous, that Miranda couldn't possibly have had time yet to get out to the airport and back. She had actually even managed to sit still long enough to watch two sitcoms and a fragment of a third. Then the anxiety that she had been putting off all day had finally begun to sink in and she had lost interest in the bawdy humor of the television. She kept it on now for the sound only; the silence when the set was off just seemed to make things worse.

Where was Miranda? Had she been able to get to the airport? Did she have Riley's bags? What would be in them?

The sitcom ended and the news came on. More repeated footage of Todd's body being removed from his apartment, but now also scenes from the demonstration that afternoon. Tango had seen them already as well, played out on the early evening news: a home video of a protest turned angry, of demonstrators shrieking at police officers and grabbing for them, of officers pushing back and sometimes striking out. More video of the aftermath of the riot, the flashing lights of squad cars and ambulances, the people that Dex had run down crying and screaming, all of it jolting and jumping as the owner of the video camera fled from the scene to avoid arrest. Tango steeled herself and watched it all over again, choking back her anger at Dex.

When the sidhe had stopped to let her off at Riley's apartment, he had gotten out of the car to inspect the damage inflicted by the protesters. The long smears of blood decorating the sides of the car like racing stripes would, he had decided, wash off easily. A couple of shallow dents on the hood, however, had sent him into a silent rage. Tango had walked away in disgust. Even from inside the building, climbing grimly up the old stairs, she had heard the roar of Dex's Mustang pulling away. It had reminded her of the roar of some ravening animal.

The news was almost over before the intercom that connected to the front door of the building finally buzzed. Tango was on it almost instantly. "Hello?"

"It's Miranda." The old intercom distorted the vampire's voice. "I have the bags."

"Come up." Tango pressed the button that would unlock the front door, then ran out and down the stairs to meet her.

Miranda looked pleased to see her there. "I can't stay," she said hurriedly. She passed her the bags. "Here."

"Miranda, what..."

"I can't explain. I've got to run." She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a torn piece of cardboard. "Give me a call," she added, thrusting the cardboard into an outside pocket on one of the bags.

Then she was gone, back down the stairs and out of the front door. Tango, staggered by the whirlwind of her arrival and departure, struggled back up the stairs under the awkward bulk of Riley's luggage. The bags weren't too heavy for her, just clumsily big. Once she was in the apartment again, she set the bags down in the center of the floor and laid Miranda's phone number by the telephone. For a moment, she contemplated the luggage that had been causing her such tension all day. The little luggage locks were still attached to the zippers. Hopefully that meant the bags hadn't been opened since Riley had checked them in San Francisco. Tango knelt down before the suitcase. She didn't have a key, but a faint thread of Glamour made her fingers strong enough to snap the feeble metal with a twist. She unzipped the suitcase and flipped back the lid.

She had heard a dry rattling inside the suitcase as she'd carried it up the stairs. Now she knew what had caused it. There were eight packages of crayons lying on top of the clothes in the suitcase, the kind of big packs that contained ninety-six crayons each. Tango frowned in confusion. Crayons? She lifted a box out. It was still shrink-wrapped. What would Riley have wanted with crayons? Could it have something to do with the reason for his kidnapping? Certainly nothing

else about the disappearance made any sense. She worked a kenning, trying to sense Glamour on the boxes.

What she sensed made her heart sink in disappointment. She unwrapped the box in her hand and opened it, dumping the contents onto the floor. They weren't crayons now that the box was open, but joints of some kind, wrapped up in twists of brightly colored paper. The magickal drugs that Riley had purchased from the Cult of Ecstasy, disguised by Glamour so they could be smuggled across the border. There was no clue here to his kidnapping. All the drugs told her was that he had at least completed his errand to the Cult while he was in San Francisco.

Tango scooped the joints back into the crayon box and set it, along with the other seven boxes, to one side. She turned her attention to the other contents of the suitcase.

* * *

Solomon lived in a discreet old house on top of the bluffs that overlooked downtown Toronto. The house was classically elegant, tucked in among the trees and winding streets that sheltered other expensive homes. Clean red brick, trim that always seemed freshly painted, a cobblestone drive, grounds that were twice as large as most modern building lots — the house would have commanded a very hefty price on the real estate market. Miranda wasn't sure exactly how Solomon had acquired the house, but she doubted if he had purchased it outright. There were too many other ways to acquire property. Much of the wealth that

Solomon enjoyed came from members of the Bandog, members who were willing to curry favor with money just as she curried favor with sex. Miranda didn't inquire too closely about the house.

Nothing about the neat exterior of the house so much as hinted at what went on inside. If those private activities were revealed, though, property values in the neighborhood would probably plummet.

Miranda pulled into the drive, past tall, ornamental iron gates that were open to receive her, and parked by the side of the house. There was a side door to the house and she almost used it before remembering that this was supposed to be her first visit here. The pack might become suspicious if she came into the house that way. She went around to the front of the house and across the wide verandah. David must have been watching for her, because he opened the front door even as she was reaching to turn the old-fashioned doorbell. She almost grimaced at his eerie alertness. "I'm Miranda," she said, as though he were a complete stranger. "Solomon is expecting me. I think my friends are already here."

"Yes." David's face betrayed no more recognition than her own. Not that it ever did. "If you will follow me, Solomon will see you immediately." He turned smoothly, leading her into the dark interior of the house.

She heard the rest of the pack before she saw them. Matt was lecturing Tolly on good behavior. When David led her into the Victorian-style parlor where the pack was waiting, she saw why. They all had wineglasses filled with blood, a courtesy that Solomon frequently extended to her when she visited. Tolly had been using his to paint his face, turning it into a mask of red swirls.

He simply smiled back at Matt's lectures. At least he had removed most of the piercings from yesterday, although Miranda saw that he had kept the silver shaft that transfixes his tongue. Blue was very wisely staying out of the discussion. Miranda stopped beside him. "How long have you been here?"

He looked up. "Twenty-five minutes, maybe a bit longer. Where did you slip off to tonight?"

"Feeding," she said shortly.

David cleared his throat discreetly. "This way." He indicated a heavy, dark wood door that Miranda knew led into Solomon's study. Blue rose while Miranda snapped for Matt and Tolly. But David shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I meant only Miranda. She is the one Solomon wishes to see."

Matt flushed. "Why did you bring the rest of us here, then?"

"He will speak with you all after he has spoken with Miranda." David regarded Matt coolly. "I don't question his decisions."

And neither should you was the clear implication. Blue permitted himself a tight grin at Matt's discomfort. Tolly snickered. Miranda didn't even look at Matt. She simply followed David as he walked over and knocked on the door, then opened it just enough to permit her entrance. The door closed behind her with the muffled thud of solid wood.

"You're late." Solomon was seated behind his desk, a simple, graceful construction of glass and black metal. In stark contrast to the rest of the house, his study was decorated in a very contemporary style. The glass-and-metal desk, matching shelves, black metal-frame chairs. A powerful desktop computer. The curtains on the

window, dark and heavy in the rest of the house, had been replaced by blinds. The windows themselves had also been replaced with seamless panes and sleek frames. Solomon's study faced out into the dark tangle of a ravine. Lights from other houses were barely visible, their brilliance masked by the thick leaves.

"By ten minutes. You didn't give me much time. I got caught in traffic." Miranda crossed the room and leaned across the desk to kiss Solomon's chain tattoo. His hand lingered on her face, but she dropped down into one of the chairs facing the desk. "Thanks for the phone, by the way."

"Where is it now?"

"In the car."

"I want you to carry it with you all the time. I want to be able to reach you if I need to." He smiled and sat forward. He was wearing a crisp white shirt, and the fabric rustled when he moved. "You're doing a perfect job, Miri."

Miranda nodded modestly. "Thank you. So what's our next assignment?" She almost crossed her fingers, hoping that it wouldn't be another gay man from Hopeful. Tango hadn't said anything to her about Todd's murder in the brief moments she had seen her. Maybe she didn't suspect the vampires' involvement. If a third man connected with Hopeful died, though.... "We can't go back to Hopeful again. Nobody has remembered our faces yet, but they will if we keep going there."

Solomon shook his head. "I don't want to you to go back to Hopeful. Go out to the west end of the city tonight. Find a prostitute. Kill her the same way you did the others — I like the touch of laying the body

out. And the pennies. Sinister.”

“I’ll tell Tolly you approve.” Miranda couldn’t help wrinkling her nose in distaste. “I don’t know if he’ll be happy or if he’ll even notice, but I’ll tell him.”

“Just as long as you keep doing it. It’s becoming a signature. Make sure the body is found again. Leave it in High Park, somewhere visible.” He folded his hands on top of his desk. “Tomorrow night, I want you to do something completely different. Keep the beating and laying out the same, but choose someone solid and respectable. Middle-class, white-bread, you know. Kill them early in the evening instead of late at night.”

Miranda looked at him for a moment, puzzled. “Why?” she asked finally. “Why are you doing this, Solomon? It doesn’t make sense.”

Solomon smiled again and rolled his head backward, gazing up at the ceiling. “I told you not to ask, Miri.” He got up and came around the desk to stand beside her. He offered her his hand, pulling her up out of the chair. “You’ll spoil the surprise. Don’t worry, it’s all planned out.” He slid his arms around her fondly.

“I need to know some of the plan, then.” She looked down into his eyes. He was just slightly shorter than she was. “There could be trouble with the pack if I don’t have something to tell them. Tolly doesn’t care what’s going on and Blue will take orders, but Matt questions everything I do.”

“Trust me. You’re not the only Bandog working on this, you know.” He touched her hair. “Why do you think the police aren’t doing more? Why do you think the media is playing on the worst aspects of the murders?”

Miranda gave him a narrow glance. “Bandog?”

“High Circle.” He put a finger over her lips as she opened her mouth. “You’re not going to ask me who, are you? You know I won’t tell you that.”

She pulled her head away from his finger. “Why gays, then a hooker, then white-bread middle-class? There’s no pattern there.”

“You don’t see a pattern because you know what’s coming next. Think what the average person has heard on TV or the radio, or read in the newspaper. Two gay men are murdered....”

“Someone is killing gays.”

“And the riot today helped shape that impression.” He nodded in reply to Miranda’s silent, narrow glance. “There are some gay activists among the Bandog — radicals, some professionals, a student.” He grinned. “It was only supposed to be a protest. The violence was an accident. But it didn’t hurt.” Solomon’s hands slid down along Miranda’s sides to her hips. “Now, if the next murder victim is a prostitute, what will the public think?”

Miranda thought, trying to ignore the sensation of Solomon’s hands moving over her. “Sex? The penny murders are all sex-related?”

“Right. Everyone *knows* that gays are promiscuous, don’t they? And prostitutes... well.” Solomon looked into her face. “It’s all sex, isn’t it?” Slowly he sank down to his knees in front of her. Miranda caught him by his arms and pulled him back up.

“Not now!” she hissed. “The pack’s in the next room!”

“So? They don’t have to know.”

“They can’t find out.”

“They’ll think we’ve just been talking.” Solomon

started to caress her again. "I need you, Miranda. After last night... I was thinking about you all day."

The vampire gritted her teeth. She didn't want to do this. She didn't feel like it tonight. But Solomon could be as difficult as Matt or Tolly, and she had far fewer ways of controlling him. If she wanted to know all of what the mage was up to, she would have to play along with his desires. She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, they were smoldering with a red hunger. "Tell me the rest of your plan," she told him, "and we'll see." She touched his neck with one fingernail, drawing it along his skin so that it left a long, red scratch in its wake. She stopped with her fingernail at the hollow of Solomon's throat. She could feel Solomon's pulse quickening as lust and fear twined themselves together in his heart.

He drew a sharp breath and closed his eyes. "People start to think, 'These people are dead because they tried to have sex with the wrong person. It's their own fault.' Somebody starts spouting psychobabble about repressed sexuality or something. It all becomes sex, sex, sex. But people think they're safe because they don't do that kind of thing." He smiled again, slowly and without opening his eyes. "Then we hit them with a murder that couldn't possibly be related to sex."

"Suddenly everyone is a potential victim," guessed Miranda.

"Exactly. They're going to be scared." He seized Miranda's hand and guided it down to the first button on his shirt. He hooked her finger around the button. Miranda knew this game. She tugged on the button sharply, breaking the threads and sending it spinning off into the shadows of the room. Her hand moved

down to the next button.

"What next?" she asked Solomon.

"We destroy every refuge of security that they have." Miranda pulled off another button. Solomon's shirt gaped open over his chest and he gave a little groan. "I want you to kill a couple, a group." Another button. "Get to someone behind an alarm system and kill them. Kill a big, tough security guard." Two more buttons. His shirt hung open completely. Solomon opened his eyes. "The only thing Toronto is going to have left to cling to is its oh-so-polite manners. Cold, perfect Toronto." He caressed Miranda's back. "Then I'm going to take that away, too."

Miranda slid his shirt off his shoulders. She looked at him with the strong, commanding gaze that he wanted from her. "How? Why?"

"I can't tell you. Not yet." One of his hands slid up under the shirt she was wearing, caressing smooth flesh that was warm with stolen blood. "Please don't ask again. The next Bandog ceremony. I'll tell everyone then. I promise."

She let the question go, accepting his answer and falling into the pattern of his sex. A reward for his answers. Both of his hands were under her shirt now, lifting it up and over her head. Solomon's hands caressed her breasts through the silky fabric of her brassiere, then that was gone as well, the clasp released by a single deft touch to the small of her back. Solomon kissed the nipples one at a time, his tongue drifting gently, teasingly, across and around them. Miranda let her head fall back as her hands forced Solomon's pants and underwear down until they slipped over his buttocks and slithered into a pool of black fabric around

his ankles. Then she drew him up, drew his mouth to hers, and they kissed, Miranda's arms tight around his naked body, Solomon's lips working with a frantic desire.

Miranda found that she couldn't match that desire. This might just have been a game, but tonight Miranda didn't feel like she was a player in a game so much as she was an actor in a play. A play that had been running for far too long. She went through the movements of sex mechanically. Her mind was elsewhere. What had Tango found in Riley's bags? Was there anything there that would help lead them... her to him? Miranda berated herself mentally. The changeling's concern for Riley was contagious. Tango was doing whatever she could to find her friend. Miranda was having sex with a Nephandus mage and plotting the murders of unsuspecting strangers. Suddenly, she wanted this to be over.

Solomon finally moved away from her mouth. He ran his fingertips across her body, then glanced up at the lights in the room. Obedient to his magick, they went out. The moon had risen outside and shone in through the window. Solomon stood before her in the moonlight, silver-blue rays casting shadows in the hollows of his muscles and tinting his tanned skin with the pallor of death. Miranda looked at his nude, sculpted body, waiting passively for her touch, then shed her own pants and stepped forward. Shadows slid at her whim, making her larger and more intimidating, at the same time wiping out the relief of Solomon's muscles. He became flat and featureless, a thin, weak boy. Miranda settled into a chair, her legs apart in the moonlight. Solomon knelt down between them,

worshipping her with his mouth while his hands jerked at his hard cock and aching testicles. Miranda put her hands on the back of his head, forcing him into those places that she remembered from the days when this was real sex, and tried to find some passion within herself.

All she could think of was Tango and her search for Riley. Her grip on Solomon's head tightened.

Solomon groaned and shifted, fighting against her strength and struggling to breathe. She let him lift his face for a moment, then pressed him back. Her fingers, she realized, were sticky and warm with his blood. She had broken his skin with her fingernails. Miranda brought her red-stained fingers to her mouth and licked them.

There was passion in the blood. Maybe not true passion, maybe just the hunger of the Beast within, but it was enough. The blood she had taken from the attendant at the airport was like an appetizer. Pleasure and sensation came back to her with the taste of blood. She pushed Solomon away and then joined him on the moonlit floor. "Now," she growled. She pulled him toward her. Obediently, the mage positioned himself over her body and slid his cock into her. It felt good, but her hunger demanded more. As Solomon thrust in and out, his legs and buttocks straining, Miranda toyed with his nipples, pinching and rubbing them. Her hands strayed across his back, scratching along his spine and teasing into the crack of his laboring ass. Solomon moaned, his eyes flickering with pleasure and his mouth sagging open. Miranda wrenched his head down and kissed him savagely, tongue striking between her fangs. Solomon's thrusting grew spastic, animal instinct taking

over and driving his body.

Miranda chose her moment. She tilted his head back, plunging her fangs into his neck and savoring the hot, delicious blood that rose to meet her mouth. A gush of salty blood with each beat of his heart. One gush to spread warmth through her body. A second to bring her to the edge of ecstasy. A third to pitch her over the edge. A fourth to bring her short flight to an end. A fifth... oh, for a fifth.... She drew her head away, licking the wounds to close them, and pushed back the Beast. It wasn't enough. It could never be enough.

Empty, she held Solomon as he gasped and cried out, sweaty and trembling, in the wake of orgasm.

* * *

Reluctantly, Tango hung up the telephone. She had let it ring and ring, but Miranda had not answered. She wondered where the vampire was. Too bad. She would have liked to talk to her. Tango looked at the contents of Riley's bags, spread out across the floor of the apartment.

Most of the stuff in Riley's bags had been the things that any man would take on a short trip: a shaving kit, toothpaste and a toothbrush, a comb, some hair gel, aftershave, spare shoes, changes of shirts, socks, underwear, and pants. A book to read. A bathing suit. A roadmap of the San Francisco Bay Area. A bit of jewelry, his silver chain bracelet with the dog-head clasp casually tucked into the toe of one shoe. The rest, like the crayon boxes full of drugs, souvenir T-shirts from Pan's and Club DV8, and a postcard with the

words *Thinking of you* printed above a sunset photograph of San Francisco's Coit Tower, were more typically Riley.

Out of both bags, however, had come only three things that were remotely suspicious. One was the post card. There was no writing on the back of it and no address. It had simply been purchased and packed, and while it was amusing, Tango would have been surprised if Riley had bought it for humor alone. He would not have bought it for the photograph. Riley didn't take photographs when he traveled and he didn't collect photographs, claiming that his memory was better and more vivid than any still picture. That left the conclusion hinted at by the card's lettering. Riley had bought the card for someone. The blond man from Hopeful? She still had no idea who the blond man was!

The other suspicious items led even more rapidly to dead ends than the post card. The first was a slip of paper that Riley had been using as a bookmark; there was an address on it. The second was the map, or rather, several circled locations on the map. Most of the circles marked locations she could identify, such as Pan's, Riley's hotel, and several tourist attractions. A circle across the Bay puzzled and excited her... until she realized that it was the location of the Cult of Ecstasy chantry house in Berkeley. Shortly on the heels of that realization came the discovery that the address on the bookmark was likewise that of the chantry house.

She sighed and stood up, turning out the lights in the living room. There was nothing in Riley's bags that could help her find him. Nothing at all. That left her another avenue of exploration, one that she had been

hoping to avoid because it had appeared unlikely to work out. Now it seemed her next best hope. If the little girl she had sat beside on the airplane from San Francisco had indeed been Riley transformed, who had been playing the girl's mother?

CHAPTER EIGHT

*She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore*

The streets and alleys of Yorkville were just beginning to fill with men and women in business suits, some out "doing lunch," some just enjoying the sunshine outside of their offices, all of them talking about last night's penny murder. A prostitute this time. Tango had found herself with conflicting feelings when she had heard that on the morning news. She had known prostitutes and she felt bad for the murdered woman, but at the same time, she couldn't help feeling relieved that it wasn't another man from Hopeful. And that it wasn't Riley's body that had been discovered. She hoped she could find him before that happened. Tango stepped out of the alley and peered down into the dark stairway that led to Duke Michael's court. "Ruby?" she asked.

"Here to see the duke?" Ruby's voice echoed in the stairway. The old nocker appeared a moment later. Tango hadn't actually seen her appear the first time she had visited the court; Ruby had simply been waiting in the shadows. This time, Tango watched as a bulge formed in the wet bricks of the wall, then pulled away, becoming Ruby. "You just missed him. He's gone out."

"I know. I saw him leave." Tango walked down into the stairwell and rapped on the wall where Ruby had emerged. It was as solid as brick and mortar had ever been. "That's an interesting trick."

"I can teach it to you if you like. I've always been close to the bones of Mother Earth."

Tango shook her head. "I've got about as much talent for working with stone as a sidhe." She smiled. "Actually, I came to see you."

Ruby raised one eyebrow up into her wrinkled forehead. "We may both be nockers, Tango, but I'm still the duke's Gatekeeper. Sweet talk isn't going to get you anywhere."

"I don't want in. I need help."

"What kind of help?" Ruby grinned. "If you want to get rid of Epp, there's nothing I can do for you. I've wanted to take her down a peg or two myself for years, but she's too close to the duke."

Tango shook her head and sat down on the stairs. "I'm trying my best just to ignore her. No, I need..." she gestured vaguely, then sighed and looked up at the other nocker. "I need contacts, Ruby. There are things I have to do and I don't know enough about Toronto to get them done. I'm trying to find Ril—"

"Sister, don't you go telling me secrets." Ruby sat down beside her. "Like I said, I'm the Gatekeeper. I owe my allegiance to the duke. If I were to hear that somebody, even another nocker, was going against his commands, I would be duty-bound to report it." She glanced at Tango out of the corner of her eye. "Now say someone were to ask me questions without saying what they were going to do with the answers, well, then, maybe I might be able to help them." Her face grew

soft. "Some of us think the duke should be doing more to find out what happened to Riley — an oath of allegiance puts some responsibilities on the lord, too. You're not the only one who's worried."

Tango smiled again. She had hoped when she came back into Yorkville that she would be able to find something of an ally in Ruby. The old Gatekeeper had struck her as a decent, friendly person. And Tango desperately needed someone else to turn to for help — Miranda was, of course, utterly unreachable during the day, deep in the daylight sleep of vampires. Waiting for her to wake would have wasted the whole day. Tango didn't have that kind of luxury. "I need to get in touch with someone who could hack into a commercial computer system. Do you know anybody?"

Ruby whistled. "You know something? How bad is it?"

"Pretty bad, I think, but all I've got is a thin lead. Maybe not even that." She looked at Ruby hopefully. "Any Kithain in the court into computers? A good mortal who won't ask many questions?" She considered asking if there were any Virtual Adepts, the young, computer-wielding mages, in Toronto, but suspected that the nocker would be as ignorant of mages as Dex had been.

Ruby just shook her head sadly. "Sorry, sister. Don't know many humans who are into that, and there isn't a Kithain in the city who could do it — even if you could talk one into defying the duke's ban on helping Riley. We had a kid who was a whiz with computers. He pulled up roots and took off for Vancouver a couple of years ago. Couldn't stand Toronto anymore."

"I can understand that." Tango got to her feet.

"I'm sorry, Tango."

"It's okay, Ruby." Tango sighed again. "That was just the easy plan, and easy never works. Where can I find a really quiet pay phone?"

"Try the sushi bar. Hardly anybody goes in there anymore. Sushi isn't trendy enough for Yorkville these days, I guess."

"Thanks." Tango walked up out of the dark stairwell and back into the light. Her hand was on the handle of the sushi shop's door when she thought of something else. Leaning back, she asked Ruby, "Who else is concerned about Riley?"

"Lucas, the duke's Steward." Ruby's disembodied voice came out of the darkness. She had already vanished back into the bricks. "A couple of eshu. One of the slugh. Sin and Dex."

Tango blinked. "Really?"

"Don't underestimate them. They have to toe the line because of their position as knights, but they're good guys, especially Sin. Dex..." Ruby paused. "I heard you were with him yesterday afternoon. Don't think badly of him. He has a temper."

"And not much of a use for humans?" Tango had met a lot of Unseelie Kithain who felt that way.

"No. But he'd die to protect another Kithain. If any of us can help you, we'll try."

Tango let go of the door and stepped back down into the stairwell. "Then why am I doing all the work?"

Ruby was silent for a moment. When she replied, her voice seemed to come from all around. "Because you can go back to San Francisco if the duke gets angry at you."

Tango suppressed a bitter twist of a grin and climbed

out of the stairwell again, pulling open the door of the sushi shop. A wave of odor greeted her: fish, sharp vinegar, bitter seaweed. There were a couple of tourists lingering in the restaurant, but the sushi chef and the maitre d' were talking by the bar. The maitre d' snapped to attention and started over as she entered. Tango shook her head. "I just need to use the pay phone." His disappointment was so obvious that Tango felt guilty. "I'll pick up something on the way out," she promised. "Where's the phone?"

He pointed down a hall toward the back of the restaurant. The phone jutted from the wall between the restaurant's washrooms. From the ladies' room came the loud rush of a toilet flushing. Tango grimaced. Not an ideal location for what she wanted to do, but good enough.

She lifted the receiver of the telephone and dropped a quarter in the slot. Pulling a piece of paper out of her pocket, she dialed the number that she had looked up and written down earlier that day. The phone rang once or twice before a voice mail system picked it up. "*Air Canada, bonjour. Welcome to Air Canada. Pour obtenir service en français, composez une.* For service in English..." Tango didn't bother listening to the message, but simply pressed two for English service, then the sequence of buttons that would get her to the department she wanted. She had spent ten minutes navigating the voice mail system that morning in preparation for this. She waited as the phone rang and rang before a real person finally answered it. "Air Canada customer relations. How may I help you?"

"Good afternoon," Tango answered briskly. "I'm calling from the Ministry of Health. I'd like to speak

to someone who can provide me with a passenger list for one of your recent flights, please.”

* * *

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you have the package yet. We’re still waiting for the request form to come through on the fax.” The receptionist pointed to a blue vinyl-covered chair beside a tired potted plant. “If you want to have a seat....”

“Look, I have three other deliveries to make on this run and Mrs. Stanton at the Ministry said to get this thing as fast as I could. Do we really have to wait for a form?” Tango shifted a bicycle helmet in her hands. The duke’s magic account card and a whirlwind visit to a department store had gotten her the helmet, a backpack, bike shorts, an olive drab T-shirt, and a wide enough assortment of children’s stickers to plaster across the helmet and pack. Add her own sunglasses, hair tied back in a ponytail, some talcum powder to dim the glossy newness of the tight shorts, a fast jog around the block to work up a sweat, and an expression of fierce attitude, and Tango was a bicycle courier. Or at least close enough to one to get away with it if no one looked at her too closely. Her own clothes were balled up in the backpack.

“I’m afraid so.” The receptionist smiled pleasantly. “It’s company policy. I could have faxed this to the Ministry of Health easily enough — Mrs. Stanton didn’t have to send you.”

“Yeah, well, you know how it is. Mrs. Stanton’s brother-in-law runs the company and she likes to send us as much business as she can.” Tango gave the

receptionist a broad, open grin. "Everybody wants a piece of the government money." The receptionist didn't seem particularly amused, but Tango kept her grin strong. "Come on," she pleaded. "Maybe something's holding up the fax. Should I have to wait on it? Can't you just give me the package?" She pointed at a thick manila envelope on the receptionist's desk. "Is that it?"

The receptionist moved her hand to cover the package. "No."

Tango took a deep breath. She wished she had Miranda's ability to control people's minds now! It would make getting the passenger list for Riley's flight away from the receptionist much easier. "No, it isn't the package' or 'no, it is the package but you can't have it'?"

"It's the package but I can't let you take it yet."

A man came walking along the corridor behind the receptionist's desk, a cup of coffee in his hands. He glanced up toward the commotion at the desk, then turned into an office. There was a nameplate beside the office door: E. Spielberg. Tango hesitated for a moment. One of her reasons for coming here as a bicycle courier was to avoid dealing with the same person she had talked to on the telephone as "Mrs. Stanton." But on the other hand, she also knew that the fax the receptionist was waiting for was never going to come, and she needed that passenger list. She crossed her fingers and hoped Mr. Spielberg wouldn't recognize her voice. "Look," she told the woman loudly, pitching her voice to carry, "the Ministry of Health wants this pronto. I don't know what was stirring up the chaos over at their office, but if this package is *that*

important....”

That got the man's attention. He popped back out of his office, coffee still in hand. “What's the problem, Pat?”

“We're still waiting on that form from Mrs. Stanton at the Ministry of Health, Mr. Spielberg. Everything else is ready to go.”

“Don't worry about the form. I'll authorize the request.” Mr. Spielberg picked up the package from her desk and passed it to Tango. “Get this over to Mrs. Stanton right away.”

“Yes, sir.” Tango pulled an artificially battered receipt book from a pocket of her backpack, scribbled in it, then tore out a receipt and handed it to Mr. Spielberg. “Thanks.” She smiled at him, then at the receptionist, as she shoved the package into her backpack. *Suckers*, she thought on the way out.

She rode the elevator back down to the lobby of the office building. In the lobby, she winked at the young security guard she had flirted with to get into the Air Canada offices. There was a coffee shop in a row of small stores on the way out of the building, and she stopped for a large coffee to go. Under the shade of some modern, stainless steel sculpture in a parkette outside, she settled down and ripped open Mr. Spielberg's package. There was a note inside from Mr. Spielberg to the nonexistent Mrs. Stanton: “Hope this helps. Air Canada is happy to work with you in tracking down the source of these illnesses. Elliott Spielberg.” It was a charming attempt at damage control. Tango snickered.

The obstinate bureaucracy of the receptionist had been the hardest part of getting her hands on a passenger list for flight 2800 from San Francisco to

Toronto. All Mrs. Stanton had had to tell Mr. Spielberg was that the Ministry of Health had received three reports of people on that flight having come down with food poisoning and that Air Canada's cooperation in helping to contact the other passengers would be most appreciated, and he had fallen all over himself agreeing to have a list printed out immediately. He had even offered to have it couriered over to the Ministry offices at the airline's expense, but Mrs. Stanton had insisted on sending a courier to collect it. It had all gone very smoothly, although Tango had had to stare down a tourist who'd wanted to use the bathroom in the sushi restaurant. A flushing toilet in a government office would have sounded very suspicious, even to Mr. Spielberg.

Tango took a sip of her coffee and leafed through the pages. Everything that Mrs. Stanton had requested seemed to be there: names, phone numbers, street addresses, all neatly alphabetized. Tango frowned and took a closer look at the list, then snarled in frustration. There were no seat assignments, and she didn't know the mysterious woman's name!

"Damn!" she muttered, throwing the list to the ground. "Damn, damn, damn!" It would probably be trickier this time, but she might be able to make another call to Mr. Spielberg as Mrs. Stanton and convince him that she needed the seat assignments as well. To track the cases of food poisoning by position in the airplane cabin, maybe. She'd have to come up with some other way of getting the list, though. Having the same courier show up twice might be a bit much.

Unless...

She grabbed the list and flipped through it. She

didn't know the woman's name, but she knew the name of the "little girl" who had been Riley. Cheryl. It wasn't much to go on. Still, how many Cheryls could there have been on the flight? And if the woman with Cheryl had been pretending to be her mother, chances seemed good that she would be listed under the same last name.

Tango made a complete pass through the list, then came back to two listings under H. Cheryl Hunter... and Atlanta Hunter. The name fit the platinum blond woman perfectly. Apartment 210, 608 Milverton Street, East York, Ontario. Tango had purchased a map of Metro Toronto along with her courier disguise. She dug it out of her backpack and checked to see that East York was part of the city. It was. She could go there without worrying about Epp's *geasa*. She breathed a sigh of partial relief. Now all that she had to do was hope that the address was real and not a fake.

She glanced at her watch. Quarter to three. The better part of six hours until sunset. If this woman had helped kidnap Riley, Tango didn't want to try to go after her alone. And in spite of Ruby's assurances, she didn't quite trust Dex or Sin to help her. After dark, she would try to get in touch with Miranda again. Hopefully, the vampire would be willing to accompany her on a visit to Atlanta Hunter's apartment.

* * *

Tango was waiting just where she had said she would be, near the entrance to the subway station. Miranda glanced at the dashboard clock as she pulled up to the curb. Half an hour late. At least she didn't have to honk the horn to get the changeling's attention — Tango saw

her right away and came over. Miranda reached across and pushed the door open for her. "Sorry I'm late," she apologized. "The play was longer than we expected."

Another lie, but when Tango had called her just after the sun went down, Miranda hadn't exactly been able to say, "Why don't I meet you later, after my pack has gone out and beaten someone to death?" Instead, she had invented something about a long-planned evening at an alternative theater, and tickets to a version of Hamlet written from Ophelia's point of view, a favorite of Tolly's. Which, of course, had necessitated a fast description of the pack. It was all only a partial fabrication. There really was such a play, and Tolly loved it. Unfortunately, it had run last year, and then only for a brief time. The lead actress had vanished mysteriously, about the same time Tolly had gone missing for a few days. The mad vampire had come back with flowers in his hair, wet clothes, and a well-fed grin on his face.

Tango had accepted her explanation, though, suggesting that they meet after the show. She had been very clear that this wasn't a social engagement. It was serious, a potential link in finding Riley, and possibly dangerous. She would owe Miranda another favor, she had said; Miranda had rather hastily agreed in a way that she hoped didn't sound too greedy. In fact, she had forgotten that she was supposed to be charging the changeling for her services. The urgent concern that Tango expressed whenever she talked about Riley made Miranda feel even worse for being late.

It had taken longer to find a suitable victim than she had thought it would. Solomon's plan to terrify Toronto was already working. Even early in the evening,

and in spite of the apparent connection to sex, people were starting to move around in groups. Maybe they were guilty of a lot more than they seemed. Miranda watched Tango fasten her seatbelt and added, "You know, you really shouldn't be waiting around on your own with these murders going on." Maybe the comment would help erase any connections Tango had drawn between the vampires and the dead men from Hopeful.

Tango snorted. "I wouldn't mind meeting whoever is committing them. We'll see what happens if they try to pick on me." There was anger in her voice. "You heard about last night?"

"Yes." Miranda turned the car back onto the road. "Where to?"

"Left here, straight for two blocks, then right. We'll drive past the apartment first — I think we should be able to see if there are any lights on. Hopefully no one is home. There's a parking lot a couple of blocks away. We'll park there and walk back."

"You make it sound like this is a break-in," Miranda observed.

"It is." Tango glanced at her. "That doesn't bother you, does it?"

Miranda kept her expression neutral, suppressing a grin at the irony of the changeling's question. "No."

"Good. I've known vampires who were willing to kill if they had to while they were hunting, but who were very sensitive about doing anything else that might disturb humans." A snort escaped from Miranda, and Tango glanced at her again. "What?"

Bitter irony, thought Miranda. "They must have been Camarilla, trying to cling to their humanity," she said instead. She spun the car around a corner. "The Sabbat

knows that humanity has no place in a vampire's existence."

Tango didn't reply, just looked out the window at the quiet houses moving past. Miranda bit her tongue. Poor choice of words. She drove in silence, two blocks straight and a turn to the right. She slowed down. "Which building?" she asked finally.

"That one." Tango peered at a medium-sized apartment building that gleamed white in the darkness. Window boxes, large potted plants and colorful windsocks were visible on many of the balconies. "Lights are off."

Miranda drove on. "That could mean she's home but asleep."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

The parking lot was mostly empty. They parked and walked back to the building. "How are we going to get in?" Miranda gestured at a small bag that Tango carried with her. "You have something useful in there?"

"Yes. Maybe." Tango shook the bag, and its contents rattled metallically. "I got a whole bunch of stuff out of Riley's apartment. Whether we can use it or not is another question. I was actually hoping we'd find someone like a security guard or a resident around the lobby that we could get over to the door and you could hypnotize into letting us into the building."

"I should be able to do that. Then what? Pick the lock on the apartment door?"

Tango shrugged. "We'll see when we get there. Riley had lockpicks — this sort of thing is bread and cheese for pookas. I used to be pretty good at picking locks, but I haven't done it for...." She took a breath and blew it out again. "Maybe since the early seventies."

Miranda blinked. "How old are you, Tango?"

"Almost sixty. There are things Kithain can do to slow down their aging." Tango looked closely at Miranda. The inspection made Miranda uncomfortable. "You?"

"I became a vampire six years ago."

"That's longer than most Sabbat vampires last, isn't it?"

"I try not to do anything stupid."

They reached the apartment building. They were fortunate: a couple was just coming back from walking their dog. It took almost no effort at all for Miranda to convince them to hold the door open for the two women. They rode the elevator up one floor rather than draw attention to themselves by looking for the stairs. Apartment 210 was at the far end of the hall. Tango knocked briskly, waited, then knocked again. There was no answer. Quickly, she took a flat case from her bag and drew two thin metal tools out of the case. "Cover me," she hissed. Miranda shifted to stand between her and the rest of the hall in case someone came out of their apartment. Tango cursed quietly; the light in the hall was poorly placed, and her shadow fell across the lock. She couldn't see what she was doing. She started a little bit when Miranda brushed the shadow aside. "Handy talent."

"So's being able to pick locks. Hurry up."

It took Tango a few minutes and a good deal of muttered cursing to spring the lock. The door opened and they stepped quickly into the dark apartment, quietly shutting the door behind them. Tango brought two small flashlights out of her bag of tricks and offered one to Miranda. The vampire shook her head. "I don't

need it. I can see in the dark. How did you know this was the right apartment from outside?"

"I pretended to be interested in renting an apartment earlier today and got a tour of the building. Another floor, but apartment 10 is always in the same place on all the floors."

"All right." Miranda looked around. "Who lives here and what are we looking for?"

Tango snapped on her flashlight. "Her name is Atlanta Hunter. We're looking for anything that might have to do with Riley or with a little girl named Cheryl, maybe her daughter. Anything related to San Francisco would probably be good, too. Be as neat as you can."

That turned out to be difficult. Every time Miranda moved and replaced something, it felt as though she had shifted it by a mile. Atlanta Hunter's apartment was already orderly, clean — and excruciatingly pretentious. The walls of the living room were painted a very light, earthy tan shade. All of the furniture was pale, unstained wood. The upholstery and rugs had coordinating Southwestern patterns. There was Native American art on the walls and Native American artifacts on shelves and in the corners, but the kind of art and artifacts selected more for their aesthetic qualities than their character. Miranda glanced into the kitchen. It was all chrome and white tile. She went back into the living room and started going through the cabinets and shelves. Atlanta had all of the right CDs, all of the classic movies. She had a state-of-the-art video and stereo system tucked away where it wouldn't interfere with the look of the room. There were no books. The woman's life seemed frighteningly organized. Down on the bottom shelf of a corner

cabinet, however, were a number of photo albums. Miranda pulled one out and started leafing through it.

All of the pictures were standard tourist destinations, mostly from North America, a few from around the world. There were very seldom any people in the photos, except maybe as crowds on a New York street or other tourists snapping pictures of the Saint Louis Arch. Strangely, there were also a number of pictures of very plain rural landscapes, suburban developments and anonymous small towns mixed in with the international destinations. Many of the pictures had dates written or stamped on them. Some went back fifteen to sixteen years. Miranda took the rightmost and presumably newest album out of the cabinet and flipped to the back of it. There were half-a-dozen blank pages, but the most recent pictures, dated only the week before, were of the Golden Gate Bridge, Ghiradelli Square and cable cars. San Francisco.

It was a link of the sort that Tango wanted. She would have to show the pictures to the changeling. For now, however, Miranda started to put the photo album back. The other albums fell over with a noisy thump. Wincing, Miranda straightened them, then tried again. This time, however, the album jammed against something at the back of the cabinet, as if something else had fallen over. Miranda looked back into the shadows. There was another album there, small but thick. She reached in and fished it out. It was the sort of album where only one picture fit on each page and new pages were added when necessary — a brag book. It was covered in a pretty floral fabric that was completely at odds with the rest of the apartment. At least the pictures in the small album had people in

them, although they were always the same two people. A platinum blond woman and a little girl. The scenes in the photographs were the same as those in the other album, one photograph per destination. Then Miranda noticed something else.

The photographs were dated, just as the others had been. To judge by last week's date, the latest photo was from San Francisco, although it had been taken in an undistinguished airport lounge. But the other photos covered the same range as the scenery photos. Fifteen to sixteen years. And across that range, the fashions changed, the mother's hairstyle changed, she became almost indistinguishably older... but the girl's face and hairstyle never altered. They were always the same.

"Tango!" she hissed. There was no response. She looked up. The changeling was somewhere else in the apartment. Hurriedly, Miranda replaced the larger photo albums, then went looking for Tango. She met her in the hallway that led to the back of the apartment.

"Did you find something?"

Miranda simply handed her the small album. Tango's face grew confused. "What the hell...?"

"I don't know. I couldn't find anything else in the living room. What about you?"

"Nothing." Tango looked up. "There's nothing in the master bedroom, and no sign that a little girl ever lived here at all. But the second bedroom is locked." She tapped the album. "At least now we know we have the right apartment. This is the woman from the plane. And this is Cheryl."

"What do you think is in the second bedroom?"

Tango snapped the album shut and pulled her lockpicks out again. "I'm going to find out."

The lock on the bedroom door was far better than Miranda would have expected, a key-locking deadbolt that would have been more suitable on a front door than a bedroom door. She held the flashlight for Tango while the changeling probed the lock's inner workings. It gave her a chance to look around the back of the apartment. The bathroom was done in dark green tile and polished brass, so clean it looked like it was barely used. The master bedroom was Mediterranean blue, perfect, but without character. Pretentious and orderly, just like the rest of the apartment.

"Got it." Tango stood and opened the door.

It was like looking into another world.

The second bedroom was also decorated in blue, but a soft, powdery, pastel blue. The bed was white with a blue canopy and a thick comforter. A few favored stuffed animals resided on the fluffy pillows, but more crowded the shelves of a bookcase, the seat of a rocking chair and the top of a dresser. There were posters of horses on one wall and a few books scattered around. Behind the door was a growth chart. A table in one corner was topped with fashion dolls and doll-sized furniture. The drapes on the window were a cascade of lacy fabric. On a low vanity dresser were laid out the toys of playing grown-up: brushes, barrettes, a jewelry box, lipgloss, old compacts of blush and eyeshadow, empty adult perfume bottles, a half-full bottle of a candy-sweet girl's perfume. A coatrack beside the vanity held a big, floppy straw hat, a grand boa, and other clothes for dress-up. There was none of the pretension of the rest of the apartment here, only the feel of a room created by a mother to spoil a precious child.

Except that there was no child. The room was

pristine, the bed unwrinkled, the deep pile of the powder-blue carpet showing the criss-cross tracks of a vacuum cleaner, unmarked by a human foot. If Atlanta Hunter cleaned this room, she vacuumed the floor as though she were painting it, backing up toward the door. Miranda felt as though she were walking into a shrine as she stepped across the threshold.

“Maybe Cheryl lives with her father?” she suggested.

“No. I don’t think there is a Cheryl.” Tango walked into the room and went to the closet, opening it. The clothes that were inside were all brand new, perfectly arranged. She opened a dresser drawer and lifted out a shirt still creased from the store. “Maybe there was, once.”

“But the pictures? The new clothes?”

“I don’t understand it.” She looked around. “This is the sort of room I would have loved to have as a little girl.”

“Changelings start out as children?”

“Of course. What did you think happened?”

“I thought you were just sort of...” Miranda shrugged, embarrassed now that she had even mentioned it. In spite of what she had said at Hopeful the other night, she was jealous of Tango’s knowledge of the world. She felt a little bit ignorant every time she was with her. Her only real experience with other supernatural creatures was limited to Tango herself and to Solomon — and she didn’t dare tell the one about the other. “Eternal. Like characters from fairy tales.”

“Maybe real faeries are, but Kithain are born and grow up just like humans. We only stop being human when we realize who we really are. Something like a vampire being Embraced.” Tango touched a set of

ceramic wind chimes shaped like prancing unicorns. "What about you?"

"What do you mean? Vampires are Embraced, like you said."

"No." Tango smiled and shook her head. "I mean, isn't this the kind of room you would have liked?"

"I... I don't know." It was such a human thing to ask. She hadn't really thought about her childhood in a long time. Miranda opened the jewelry box on the vanity. A miniature ballerina popped up and began to pivot to the tinkling sounds of a music box. Tango glanced at the jewelry box, then looked again and came over. She pointed at a piece of the child's jewelry inside.

"That's the charm bracelet that Cheryl... Riley was wearing on the plane."

Miranda picked it up. "Cute." Little gold charms dripped off the bracelet, and there were more in the box. Mostly souvenir charms from the cities and monuments captured in the photo albums.

"Let me see it." Tango reached for the bracelet. Miranda dropped it into her hand.

The changeling gasped suddenly and let the bracelet go. Miranda snatched it out of the air as it fell. She stared at Tango. "What?"

Tango was holding her hand as if she had been shocked. "The bracelet is magical. Enchanted somehow."

"How do you know?" Miranda fingered the delicate metal. The bracelet seemed perfectly ordinary to her.

"Changelings can sense things like that sometimes. Especially when the magic is very strong." She blinked and shook her head. "But it's not enchanted with Glamour, and it doesn't feel like a mage's human

magick. There's something... evil about it. Not the bracelet itself, just the enchantment." She took a breath. "The bracelet feels almost like it's alive."

One charm dangled apart from the others, a flat tag engraved *Cheryl*. Miranda rubbed it between her fingers. "You say Riley was wearing this?" Tango nodded. Miranda licked her lips. "Maybe I've been hanging around Tolly too long, but if magic transformed Riley into Cheryl, what better way to do it than with a charm bracelet?"

Tango's breath hissed between her teeth. "That would be a very cheap, sick pun, but you might be right." Abruptly, she held out her arm. "Put it on me."

"Are you crazy?" Miranda pulled the bracelet away. "We don't know what it could do to you!"

"If I'm right, I'll turn into Cheryl." Tango grimaced. "I don't like it either, but this could be the only way for us to know what they did to Riley."

"But will you turn back again when the bracelet is off?"

Tango looked into Miranda's eyes. "Cross your fingers and hope." She pushed her wrist forward again.

Miranda swallowed. If Tango was determined to go through with this, she would help her. Quickly she fastened the charm bracelet around the changeling's fine wrist. Tango's eyes went wide with pain and her breath caught harshly in her throat. And then Miranda was holding the hand of a sweet-faced little girl wearing Tango's clothing.

The transformation was virtually instantaneous. Miranda was stunned for a moment by the speed of it. One moment Tango was herself, and the next moment she was Cheryl, the girl from the photographs. Except

that both she and Tango had forgotten to think of one thing: suddenly there was an eight-year-old girl in the dark room, her hand being held by a tall woman whose features were lit eerily by a flashlight. Cheryl screamed in terror, hurling the flashlight away.

Frantically, Miranda fumbled open the clasp on the bracelet and clamped a hand over the girl's mouth. "Quiet!" she whispered, rocking back and forth. "Quiet! It's all right." She looked down at the figure in her arms. It was still that of a little girl. "Oh, shit."

"Mmph," mumbled the figure. It shoved at Miranda's hand. "It's Tango." Her voice was normal, but the rest of her wasn't. She looked down at herself. "My god."

"You're not turning back!"

"I am, but slowly. Maybe the time the transformation lasts after the bracelet is off is related to how long the bracelet is on — the last time I heard from Riley, he had Cheryl's voice, but his own memories. I got my own voice back right away." She hissed. Miranda felt the changeling's body shifting in her arms, growing larger and filling out. Tango was becoming herself again.

"It hurts?"

"In more ways than one." Tango carefully picked up the bracelet, not trying to put it on, but holding it as if it were almost too hot to touch. "We were right, Miranda. It was the bracelet... and the bracelet is alive... and there was a girl named Cheryl once." Tango's voice was filled with rage. "All of these charms are parts of Cheryl's life. Someone trapped her spirit in this bracelet!"

Miranda was stunned. "Who?"

Tango shook her head. "I don't know. But it happened a long time ago."

“The first pictures of Atlanta and Cheryl are from sixteen years ago.” Miranda growled. “If they’re all like Riley, people transformed.... Could that be what Riley got mixed up in?”

“No. I don’t think so. Maybe.” Tango stared at the bracelet, then said bitterly, “We still don’t know what happened to Riley. They got the bracelet on him at the airport, brought him onto the airplane, and sat him right in his own seat! But someone canceled his ticket — no, they wiped any record of his ticket off the system. *Who could have done that?*”

She was shaking, though whether from frustration, anger, anguish or just the effort of controlling her emotions, Miranda couldn’t tell. The vampire gave the changeling a tight hug. Tango hugged her back for a moment. The contact made Miranda feel better as well. How long had it been, she wondered, since she had been held? Not embraced in the course of feeding, not caressed by Solomon, but simply held? Six years? As long as since she had thought about her childhood. She closed her eyes and savored the sensation. It felt good. When Tango finally pulled away, Miranda found herself reluctant to let the changeling go. “Now what?” she asked.

“We search the room.” Tango retrieved her flashlight. “With any luck, there’s something in here that we can use.”

There was, and they found it under the ruffled skirt of the bed. Another photo album with a third set of pictures. These pictures, though, didn’t show scenery, or Atlanta and Cheryl. They showed other people, men, women and children — not posed, but simply candid or covert shots. The photographs were dated, and each

corresponded to a photograph in the other small album. The last photograph was a picture of Riley, taken as he was getting out of a cab. Miranda hissed as the significance of the album dawned on her. "Tango! She kidnaps people, then uses the bracelet to transform them into Cheryl!"

Tango nodded grimly. "She could take them with her on planes or anywhere else and no one would be the wiser. Like some kind of magical bounty hunter. But why Riley?" She brushed her fingers over his photo. "Bounty hunters don't snatch people for no reason. Somebody wanted Riley. This photo was taken just outside San Francisco International." She brought out the other album and turned to the final picture of Atlanta and Cheryl. The two pictures had been taken twenty-five minutes apart. "Atlanta couldn't have gotten the bracelet on Riley by herself. He would have fought back."

"Then she had help, unless she's a lot more than she seems. Someone to alter the record of ticket sales, too." Miranda glanced at Tango. "Why the bedroom, then?"

"I don't know." Tango tapped her chin with the butt of the flashlight. "Cover maybe? Somewhere for 'Cheryl' to stay." She frowned. "This kind of magic wouldn't be cheap. Except for knowing that whoever is behind this had the clout and contacts to hire a really good bounty hunter, we're still no closer to finding out where Riley is now." Tango closed the photo album and set it aside. "I wonder what happened to the other people Atlanta kidnapped."

Miranda was silent. She knew what the Sabbath did to the humans that they kidnapped. They became a

feast for the vampires. The idea was suddenly unsettling to her.

In the silence, she heard the sound of laughter — a man and a woman — and a dull click as the lock on the apartment door opened.

CHAPTER NINE

*Laura kept watch in vain
In sullen silence of exceeding pain.
She never again caught the goblin cry*

Tango fumbled with the switch on the flashlight, flicking it off just before the front door opened and the lights in the apartment came on. Nothing she had found in the master bedroom would seem to indicate that Atlanta Hunter was in any kind of relationship. Tango didn't know who the man was. She didn't care. She wanted Atlanta now as badly as someone had wanted Riley a few days ago. Creeping over to the door of the bedroom, Miranda just behind her, Tango peered around the corner and down toward the living room.

She could just see Atlanta and the man who was with her. He seemed to be about the same age as the woman, with short hair that was just starting to turn gray at the temples. Atlanta looked just as she had on the airplane, cool and arrogant. The man had his arms around her and was kissing her throat fiercely. Atlanta's head was thrown back. "Get rid of the man," Tango whispered to Miranda. "But be careful of Atlanta. She might be dangerous. I'll take care of her. On my signal...." She raised her hand, waiting until the man and the woman were once again kissing face to face.

Her hand came down.

Miranda slipped past her, sliding down the hallway as smoothly and silently as a steel ball on an oiled track. Shadows slid with her, shrouding her movements. Tango felt like an elephant in her wake. Though she moved stealthily as well, she could only envy the vampire's predatory grace. They were practically on top of Atlanta and the man before Atlanta happened to glance up. With a muffled yelp of surprise, she tried to push the man away.

Then Miranda had her hand on his shoulder and was tearing him around. His face, wrenched away from Atlanta's, looked into Miranda's with shock... until he met her gaze. His eyes glazed over almost instantly. Miranda propelled him toward the door. "Get out," she said. "You never came in here. Atlanta said goodbye to you at the door." The man went with her meekly.

Atlanta's eyes narrowed as she glanced from Tango to Miranda. Tango reached for her, trying to grab her arms and twist them behind her. Atlanta was just a fraction of a second faster, though. She leaped for the door. One hand dipped into her purse, coming up with a hand-sized black cylinder. Miranda turned to look at her, startled.

Tango tackled the blond woman, wrapping her arms around Atlanta's legs and bringing her crashing to the floor. The black cylinder went skittering across the floor. Pepper spray. "Shut the door!" Tango hissed at Miranda. The vampire shoved the man out into the hall, pointing him toward the elevator, then quickly swung the door shut and threw the lock. There was a chain on the door, and she fastened that as well. Tango dragged her way up Atlanta's struggling body, one

outstretched arm clamped over the other woman's mouth. Atlanta twisted like an animal, but remained astonishingly calm, fighting intelligently. She heaved at Tango, trying to dislodge her, but couldn't. Tango got a grip on Atlanta's shoulders and slammed her back against the floor, stunning her momentarily. "Where's Riley?" she demanded. She clenched her hand and brought her knife into existence, holding the blade where Atlanta could see it very clearly. "I'm going to take my hand away now. Don't scream. Just answer my questions."

She lifted her hand enough to let Atlanta speak, but kept it close enough to slap back down quickly. The blond woman looked at her defiantly. "Who are you?"

"Where's Riley?"

"What are you talking about?" Atlanta didn't seem at all frightened or intimidated. She glared at Tango and then at Miranda. "I don't know either of you. If you want money, take my purse."

"We don't want money. We're looking for someone. A red-haired man named Riley. What do you know about him?"

Atlanta looked back up at her. "Nothing. Am I supposed to?"

Tango hesitated. There were changelings who could tell instantly when someone was lying, and a few others who could make any lie told in their presence come out of the speaker's mouth as a belch or a living toad. Unfortunately, all Tango had to go on was experience and instinct. And all of her experience and instincts told her that Atlanta was telling the truth. She really didn't recognize Tango and she didn't know who Riley was. "I was on the airplane from San Francisco. I sat

next to your daughter, Cheryl. You were in the seat behind her.”

“My daughter,” Atlanta said woodenly, “died sixteen years ago.” She studied Tango’s face, then nodded slowly. “I recognize you now. You were on the flight. I don’t remember who was beside you.”

“There was a little girl there. She came on board with you. About eight years old. Blond.” Tango clenched her jaw. Atlanta had to be lying — and if she was, she was very good at it. Unless there was more magic involved here. Tango worked a kenning and examined the woman under her. Nothing. No Glamour. No hint of human magick. “Cheryl showed me her charm bracelet,” Tango added, searching for a response.

She got one. Atlanta was silent for a moment, then she rolled her head to one side, looking away. “Get out!” she spat, emotion in her voice for the first time. “Get out! I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but it isn’t funny.”

Tango ground her teeth in frustration. This was ridiculous. She couldn’t have been wrong, could she? Atlanta was the woman from the plane. The photograph albums showed her and her supposedly dead daughter — and Riley. She had the foul charm bracelet! Tango’s hand itched to slap Atlanta across the face. She was very tempted to give in to her anger. She pushed it back.

Miranda put a hand on her shoulder. “Wait. Let me try.” She crouched down and reached out with both hands, turning Atlanta’s head back to look at her. She stared into the blond woman’s eyes. “Answer our questions.”

Atlanta wrenched her head away. “Go to hell,” she

spat miserably. Miranda frowned up at Tango. She reached for Atlanta's head again, seizing it almost roughly when Atlanta tried to shake her off a second time, and applying enough strength that the woman was forced to turn or else have her neck injured. Miranda's dark eyes gazed deep into Atlanta's. The blond woman went pale, her lips pressing together. Miranda forced her will upon her. Atlanta's eyes went wide. The muscles of her body went limp. With a sense of triumph, Tango started to slide off her.

"Don't," hissed Miranda.

Tango resumed her hold on the unresisting Atlanta. "Why?"

"Something's wrong. I can't get a grip on her mind." Miranda's eyes went narrow. "I've felt this with Tolly sometimes. I told you he's crazy? It's almost impossible to keep a firm hold on a crazy mind. She..."

Abruptly, Atlanta's chest heaved under Tango as the blond woman took a deep breath and then blinked. Miranda growled, her fangs bared in surprised annoyance. Atlanta stared at her. "What were you doing to me?" she asked in an awestruck voice. "What are you?"

Miranda ignored her and glanced at Tango. "She's as crazy as Tolly," she said bluntly. "I can't touch her."

Tango looked down at Atlanta. The woman was losing her composure now, her mouth open and her eyes wide as she stared at Miranda. Maybe... maybe Atlanta was telling the truth. Maybe she didn't know anything about Riley, or the magic in the charm bracelet. Tango licked her lips as she thought. Maybe, if she really was insane, somebody or something was using her madness. "Atlanta," she asked gently, "why do you still have a

bedroom for Cheryl? Why do you still buy her clothes?"

Atlanta's mouth closed with an audible snap. Her face and her whole body started to shake. She looked up at Tango for a fraction of a second, then squeezed her eyes shut. "You went into Cheryl's room," she said accusingly, as though the act were one of deep sacrilege.

"You don't think Cheryl is really dead, do you, Atlanta?" Atlanta shook her head, starting to sob. Tango nodded to herself, then said quietly, "Get the photo albums, Miranda."

"Why?"

"Because I think we've been going about this the wrong way. Someone is manipulating her." She looked down at Atlanta with pity. The woman's icy control had been a mask hiding her sad delusions. "We're not going to be able to force her to tell us anything, but we might be able to make her remember."

Miranda nodded and rose to fetch the photo albums. Atlanta sniffled and opened eyes that were already turning red. "Can I have a tissue?" she asked softly, wretchedly. "Please? In my purse?" Tango reached for the bag.

The leather writhed under her touch, as though the purse were alive. She snatched her hand away with a yelp. It only took her a second to recognize that the movement was just some kind of illusion, but it was a second of distraction.

Atlanta jerked her arm up and brought it around in a hard shove, sending the Kithain rocking backward. The same move brought her sliding out from under the smaller woman. "Miranda!" Tango barked sharply, grabbing at Atlanta's legs. The blond woman kicked her in the jaw as she tried to scramble away, but Tango had

her again. Atlanta twisted around, one arm coming back in a weak, desperate attempt at a blow. Tango reached to block it.

It wasn't a blow. Atlanta had the canister of pepper spray in her hand. A stream of the fiery irritant splashed against Tango's arm, then twitched to the side and hit her face and eyes.

The pain was excruciating, like choking on red-hot barbed wire. She couldn't see. She couldn't breathe. Instinct brought her hands up to scrub at her face, but her other muscles were convulsing uncontrollably. Atlanta kicked free of her. "Miranda!" Tango tried to yell again, but there was no air in her lungs. She tried to force herself beyond the pain, making her chest work and sucking oxygen down her tortured throat. It seemed almost impossible.

She felt, rather than heard, the vampire sweep past her, but the sound of bodies slamming against the door was unmistakable. Atlanta cried out; Miranda was hissing with seething rage. There was a struggle and then a loud, wet snap. Atlanta's cries became muffled shrieks of pain. "Try anything else," snarled Miranda savagely, "and I'll break the other one." Cloth tore and then Atlanta's cries became even more muffled. Someone — clearly Atlanta — fell heavily to the floor, probably pushed, squealing in pain at the impact. Hands helped Tango to her feet. Miranda. "Are you all right?"

"Stupid," Tango gasped. Or tried to. The effort sent her into a spasm of gagging. She was fortunate Atlanta hadn't had a gun. Tears ran down her burning cheeks as her eyes tried to flush away the vile spray. Every breath was a struggle. Miranda had to hold her upright. The vampire's grip on her shifted suddenly and she was

lifted up into the air. Miranda was carrying her somewhere. After a moment, she sat her down on the floor, propping her against something. Tango heard the loud hum of a fan, then water running. The kitchen. Miranda gently pulled her head backward.

"Easy," she said. "I've got water. I'm going to flush your eyes." A gentle trickle of coolness ran onto Tango's upturned face. She tried to force her eyes wide to let the water run over them, but the swollen lids would hardly obey her. The water helped though, reducing the pain and making thinking a bit easier. She pushed Miranda away a little bit, and concentrated, summoning up a spark of Glamour. It was like putting cool ointment on burns. Tango let the Glamour spread through her, then fumbled for a chain she wore around her neck. Inside a tiny crystal vial, worn like a pendant on the necklace, was a little sprig of heather. She popped the vial free of its setting and tilted the heather into the palm of her hand. The instant the sprig was in contact with her skin, she worked a healing cantrip. The touch of the Glamour turned fiery hot for a moment, burning away the effects of the pepper spray. She still felt weak, sore and nauseated, but the worst was past.

"Air," she croaked, and then, "Atlanta."

"Which?" asked Miranda. "Don't worry. Atlanta's not going anywhere."

"No. Fumes from the pepper spray. Check her." Pepper spray wasn't meant to be used indoors. The fumes might not bother Miranda's undead body, but Atlanta.... She opened her eyes for a moment, but the light felt too bright and she closed them again.

Miranda disappeared, but a moment later, Tango heard her curse and heave Atlanta up. The blond

woman was retching and gasping. A window slid open, letting fresh night air into the apartment. Tango heard Miranda's tread, heavy under Atlanta's weight, pass the kitchen. "I'll be right back," Miranda called. "I'm taking her to the bedroom. The spray will be less strong there."

Tango drew another deep, painful breath and pushed herself to her feet. She didn't want to wait for Miranda's help. Her foot kicked a glass, the one Miranda had used to bathe her eyes, away across the floor. Eyes still closed, Tango felt for the sink, dropped her vial and the heather on the countertop, then groped around looking for any kind of soap. Her hand closed on a bottle of dishwashing liquid. Turning on the water, she poured soap in her hands and blindly washed the remains of the pepper spray from her face and arms.

"Tango?" Miranda came back into the kitchen. "What happened?"

"She was lying." Tango awkwardly slipped the heather back into the vial and returned the vial to her necklace. One hand on the counter for support, she stumbled angrily toward the door from the kitchen into the hallway. "She might be crazy, but she still knows what she's doing. She lied about Riley. She waited until I went soft, then made her move."

Atlanta was curled up in a choking ball on the floor of Cheryl's bedroom. There was a draft coming from the window in here as well. Tango put her hands under Atlanta's arms and dragged her to her feet, shoving her toward the window and fresh air. Atlanta shrieked in pain and fell against the windowsill. "Careful," Miranda warned Tango. "I broke her kneecap."

Tango froze in the middle of her rage. "You broke her knee?"

"It could have been worse," the vampire said defensively. "I thought you would want her alive."

"Thank you for that." She saw a smudge of movement as Miranda turned away and felt bad. At least the vampire seemed ashamed of herself. It really could have been worse. She could have lost control completely. "I'm sorry, Miranda. I mean it. Thank you."

Miranda shrugged and replied awkwardly, "I want to help you."

Tango looked at the other woman for a moment, then murmured again, "Thank you. Now let's see what we can find out before someone comes to see if something's wrong." She pulled Atlanta away from the window, easing her to the floor and crouching beside her. "What do you know about Riley, Atlanta?"

"Go to hell!" the blond woman wheezed. She struggled out of Tango's grip to sit up on her own.

"I don't care about what else you've done. I just..."

Atlanta spat at her, or at least toward her. Her mouth still trembling from the effects of the pepper spray, all she managed to do was spray saliva into the air. Most of it landed on herself. Tango heard Miranda growl. The vampire reached between the two other women and grasped Atlanta's uninjured knee lightly. Atlanta choked suddenly.

Miranda nodded. Atlanta knew what could happen if she didn't cooperate. "Where did you get the charm bracelet, Atlanta?" The blond woman didn't answer and Miranda tightened her grasp slightly. Not enough, Tango knew, to harm Atlanta again, but certainly enough to frighten her into submission.

"I made a deal with a man from Pentex!" she gasped.

Tango almost jerked away. Miranda looked at her

questioningly. Tango shook her head — the vampire probably hadn't heard of the malevolent corporation, and it would take longer than they had to explain it. She knew only a little bit about it herself. Enough to know that it dabbled in dark spirit magic, magic that might have created the enchantment she could feel on the charm bracelet. "Why?" she asked Atlanta softly.

"So I could have Cheryl back for a little while. Just for a little while." She started to shake again, but this time her emotion was real, not feigned. She looked down at the floor, rubbing her hand across the powder blue of the rug. "But they always took her away from me and I would have to find her again. At least they told me where to find her."

"Atlanta." Tango tried to make her voice soothing. She had been at least partly right. Someone was using Atlanta. But if Pentex had Riley.... "Do you know why Pentex had you kidnap the people they did?"

Atlanta's expression was abruptly cold again, as cold as if her deal with Pentex were nothing more than a business arrangement. "Of course not!" she snapped. "They didn't trust me that much. I was just their courier. They told me where to go, whom to put the bracelet on. They took care of the details and then let me enjoy my illusions for a few days."

"She is crazy," muttered Miranda.

"Get fucked, leech!" Atlanta snarled. She slapped Miranda's hand away.

Tango grabbed Atlanta's wrists. "What happened to the people Pentex had you kidnap? What happened after..." Her mouth twisted in disgust. "What happened after you turned them into Cheryl?"

Atlanta groaned, her icy strength fading as suddenly

as it had appeared. "Pentex took Cheryl away. That's all I know. I never asked."

"Who took her away? Who contacted you when they wanted someone else kidnapped?"

"Different men. Different almost every time." Her head lolled back and she started to shake again.

Damn! "What about the last time?" Tango demanded. "What about the red-haired man in San Francisco? How did Pentex contact you?" She shook the other woman. "How did Pentex contact you, Atlanta?"

"It wasn't Pentex. Just a man. He tried to make me think it was Pentex, but it wasn't." Atlanta reached up and wiped at her swollen eyes. "After sixteen years, I know Pentex. The man used to work for Pentex — I remember him from before — but this time was different."

"How was it different, Atlanta?" They were close now, Tango could feel it.

Atlanta looked at the tears shining on her hand. "He tried to hire me. For money. And he wouldn't let me keep Cheryl at all. He made me give her up right away. Pentex never did that. The man sent a limo to pick us up at the airport, and it took us to his house." She glanced at Tango. "I know the address."

Tango found herself holding her breath. "What is it?"

"Do you think that Cheryl is still there?"

Her voice was desperate. The question made no sense; Atlanta should have known that Riley could no longer be Cheryl if the charm bracelet was here in her apartment. She was sliding deeper into madness under the pressure of the questioning. Tango hesitated. "Yes," she said finally. She took Atlanta's hands. "And we

want to get her for you.”

“I know the man’s name, too.”

“What is it? What’s the address?”

Atlanta’s gaze fixed on something gleaming against the blue of the carpet. “Is that Cheryl’s bracelet?” she asked dreamily.

Miranda snatched the charm bracelet up and passed it to Tango. Tango pressed it into Atlanta’s hands. “Tell us where she is,” she urged.

“The house is at the end of Hillock Street, overlooking a park.” She ran the gold chain and its little charms through her fingers. “The man’s name is Jubilee Arthurs.”

Tango pulled away sharply, so sharply that she lost her balance and fell backward with a thump. Miranda glanced at her. “I know him.” Tango’s lips knotted into a thin, ironic smile. “I know him, Miranda.”

“What? How?”

She waved her hand. “From a long, long time ago. He’s a mercenary — at least he was when I knew him. Atlanta,” she asked, turning back to the blond woman, “did Jubi—”

There was a blissful smile on Atlanta’s face. She was fastening the charm bracelet around her own wrist. Tango cursed, grabbing for it. She was a moment too late.

“Cheryl,” Atlanta whispered happily. Her body shifted, like a Kithain shifting between human and faerie seeming. Two forms in the same space. For a moment, Atlanta and Cheryl coexisted, radiant expressions lighting their faces. Then... “No!” they screamed in unison, Atlanta in horrified anguish, Cheryl in terrible fright. The child buried her face in

her hands. The woman lashed out at something. And they vanished. The charm bracelet fell to the rug.

Tango and Miranda were silent for several minutes. Then Miranda reached out and touched the spot where the woman — and her daughter — had been, moments before. "What happened?"

"I don't know." Tango shook her head slowly. "Magic works in a lot of strange ways. I wouldn't touch that bracelet." Part of her felt sorry for Atlanta, but only a part. Pentex couldn't have been kind to the people she had delivered to them using the charm bracelet. Atlanta's end seemed fitting. And they had a good, solid lead on Riley now. Jubilee Arthurs. But not tonight. Tango's stomach twisted. She didn't think she could stand to see him tonight. Not after this. She stood up. "Miranda."

"What?"

"Will you come with me to see Jubilee Arthurs tomorrow night?" Miranda looked up, hesitating. Tango smiled. "Please? I could use your help."

Miranda's hesitancy lasted only a moment longer. "All right," she agreed. She glanced back at the charm bracelet lying on the floor. "What's Pentex?"

"I'll tell you about it on the way home, or tomorrow night. For now... let's just say that Atlanta made a deal with the devil." Tango started toward the door. "Let's go."

There was no response. She glanced back. Miranda was still staring at the charm bracelet, as though fascinated by the fate of its owner. Tango smiled again, softly. She remembered when she had first learned about all of the varieties of darkness that lurked in the world; the familiar strangeness of her life in Kithain society

had suddenly seemed so insignificant. Miranda would be going through the same thing now. Tango went back over and drew the vampire to her feet. "Come on."

* * *

Let's just say that Atlanta made a deal with the devil. Tango's words had been innocent, of course, but they struck a little too close to home. Her words, Atlanta's eerie... disappearance? death? They reminded Miranda too much of her own deal with Solomon, and through him with Shaftiel. She had always thought that she had nothing to worry about. She was one of the High Circle, the chosen few. She had made a pact, power in exchange for service. There was nothing for her to be frightened of. She was strong. She was in control. She was a vampire, the ultimate predator, beyond human morality, beyond good and evil, beyond weakness.

Just keep telling yourself that, something small inside her said, and maybe what happened to Atlanta will never happen to you.

"Should we have tried to wipe off our fingerprints?" she asked belatedly as Tango shut the apartment door behind them. Usually the Sabbat didn't worry about trivial matters like fingerprints. What could humans do to them?

"No. There's too much other evidence that people were in the apartment." Tango locked the door with keys taken from Atlanta's purse, then stuffed the keys back under the door. "Between what we did tonight and the pictures in Atlanta's photo albums, an investigator is going to go nuts on this case. I'm not even sure how long it will be before someone comes looking for

Atlanta. She didn't strike me as the type to have many friends. Who knows — Pentex might be the next ones to discover her absence, and I doubt if they'll go to the police."

Miranda was silent as they rode the elevator down to the lobby and walked away from the building. She was silent the whole way back downtown as well, letting Tango ramble on about Pentex without really listening to what she was saying. Her mind was still back in the apartment with Atlanta's bracelet and the lingering smell of pepper spray. If she only knew what exactly had happened to the woman, she might feel better. But Atlanta was simply gone. Would that be what happened to her someday? Miranda clenched her hands around the rim of the steering wheel.

They pulled up in front of Riley's apartment building. "Ten o'clock?" Tango asked.

"What?" Miranda blinked. "Sorry? Ten o'clock what?"

"Pick me up tomorrow night at ten. We'll stake out Jubilee's house. Is that all right?"

Tomorrow night. Miranda had almost forgotten about that. What was she going to tell the pack this time? More importantly, how was she going to juggle both Tango's stakeout and Solomon's planned penny murder? When she had agreed to accompany Tango, she had been expecting a meeting partway through the night — like tonight. But a stakeout could take all night. She opened her mouth, ready to make some excuse that would release her from the agreement.

No excuse came out. Instead, she looked at Tango, the changeling's face still puffy and red from Atlanta's pepper spray. "Ten o'clock is fine," she said.

"I'll see you then. Wear something dark." Tango looked her over and grinned. "Although I don't think that will be a problem for you." She opened the door and started to get out of the car, then paused. "Thanks for coming tonight, Miranda."

"It's okay."

"No. Really. If you hadn't been there, Atlanta would have gotten away — or maybe killed me. I wouldn't have found out anything about Riley." She leaned over and pulled Miranda into a hug. "Thanks. I owe you."

"Don't worry about it." Miranda surprised herself with the words, but she meant them. "Really."

Tango pulled away. "Since when did you stop keeping a balance sheet of favors owed?"

"I can do things just because I want to, can't I?"

Tango smiled at her. "Thank you again." She got out of the car. "Ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock." Tango shut the door and Miranda pulled back out onto the street, watching in the rearview mirror while Tango walked into the apartment building. Then she slammed her hands against the steering wheel.

What the hell was she doing? Sabbat vampires weren't supposed to make friends outside of the Sabbat! Miranda sighed in angry frustration. Of course, they weren't supposed to get involved with demon cults either, and that hadn't stopped her. So why was her growing friendship with Tango bothering her?

The car seemed twice as quiet now without the changeling's voice to fill the silence. Miranda switched on the radio, but the music just seemed inane. She turned it off again and rolled down the window, driving home to the sounds of the city. Toronto was quiet at

night, but it was still louder than the emptiness in the car.

The pack lived in a house just a little bit south of Toronto's "Little India" district. They had simply moved in one night, killing off the back-to-nature refugees from the sixties who had lived there. The neighbors hadn't said a thing and continued very wisely to leave the vampires alone — with the exception of one old immigrant Indian woman who lived next door and made signs against evil whenever she saw one of them. Her family always hustled her hastily away. They thought that she was going senile. Miranda knew that Tolly was toying with the woman's mind. Miranda parked her car, ignored the old woman even now peering sleeplessly down from her window, and went inside.

Matt and Blue were watching a movie stolen from a video store, the sound turned up so loud that it echoed through the house. The pack had quite a collection of pilfered movies, mostly a mix of gory horror and adolescent comedy, selections chosen by Tolly and Blue. Matt preferred more sophisticated psychological thrillers, but he didn't turn up his nose at slasher movies either. The vampires had a tendency to critique the villains' technique. Humans yelled at the victims on the screen, berating them for going off alone or hiding where the villains could trap them; Matt, Blue and Tolly yelled at the villains, telling them where the victims were hiding or how best to torture the ones that they inevitably caught.

"Ooo," groaned Matt as fake blood splattered walls on the television screen. "No! Never with a power saw!"

Miranda grabbed the remote from the cushions of

the couch and reduced the volume of the television to a level that she could talk over without screaming. "Where's Tolly?"

"Upstairs." Blue pointed overhead. Matt glanced at her, sniffing.

"You smell like you fell into a vat of salsa or something. Feeding go well tonight?" he asked sarcastically.

The smell of pepper spray lingering on her clothes was hardly the smell of salsa. Miranda gave Matt an impassive, unamused glare. "No," she said curtly, "feeding did not go well."

He shrugged and turned back to the movie. "Should have gone out with us. Blue and Tolly did Portuguese. I just watched, of course." He glanced up again brightly. "I don't suppose you'd want to drive me over to the university for a late night frat snack?"

"No." Miranda hesitated, then added, "You're on your own tomorrow night, too." Now was as good a time to make her excuses as any.

Her announcement brought both Matt's and Blue's eyes to her. "Again?" Blue inquired suspiciously.

"Yes — again."

The two vampires on the couch looked at each other, then back at her. "You've been doing that an awful lot lately," observed Matt.

Miranda stared back at him coolly, imperiously. "Maybe I have. And if I have, it's no business of yours, is it?"

"If it would affect the pack, it's all of our business." His eyes narrowed. "Is it that woman you picked up in Hopeful the other night? We haven't seen much of you since...."

"No." Miranda made her tone strong, but not too quick. A flat denial, not an invitation to query her some more. "Who I'm feeding from is none of your concern. Understood?" Matt gave her a sullen look. A little too sullen. Her arm lashed forward, grabbing Matt's hair and yanking his head back. Her fangs could have been in his throat. "Understood?" she hissed.

"Understood," Matt spat. Miranda glanced at Blue. The big vampire hadn't moved, but he nodded.

"Good." She let Matt go.

He rubbed at the back of his head. "What about the penny murder?" he asked sourly. "Or had you forgotten that?"

"I didn't forget." Miranda turned to go upstairs. "I just can't make it. You know the drill though, same as the other times. Do it yourself."

Matt's eyes came to life. "You mean it? Who's the target?"

Solomon's instructions were to kill a couple tomorrow night, destroying people's belief that they could be safe as long as they weren't alone. "A couple," she repeated for Matt and Blue, although she didn't tell them the reason for Solomon's choice. They didn't need to know that. She chose a location arbitrarily. "Take them from Yonge Street. And not too late." There were a fair number of people on Yonge Street until quite late at night. If the pack snatched their victims from a busy street, it would frighten people even more.

"All right!" Blue gave her a bloodthirsty grin, fangs shining in the flickering light of the television set.

The sight of those fangs in Blue's big, square, police-officer face sent a sudden chill across Miranda's back. She'd seen them almost every night for years, but

suddenly... their inhuman presence suddenly disturbed her. She climbed up the stairs and out of sight before she permitted herself to grimace. Was that what she looked like to Tango? She walked down the hallway to the bedroom she had claimed.

Tolly was in her room. Trying on her clothes.

She glared at him silently. Tolly didn't even have the wit to look embarrassed. Grinning maniacally, he mimicked her, not just in posture and expression, but also in form, his frame shifting in height and shape to match hers. It was like staring into a demented funhouse mirror. Clothing had been pulled out of the closet and thrown across the bed in a heap. The mad vampire had found makeup somewhere and smeared it across his face. Miranda stalked into the room. Tolly stalked forward to meet her, an identical scowl on his face. "Tolly..." she said warningly.

He said the word at almost exactly the same time, then grinned. His tongue was still pierced, but at least now it was with a smaller barbell that permitted him to talk normally. "Whoops," he added, "forgot something." His chest filled out abruptly, a sharp and bony imitation of Miranda's breasts.

Miranda kicked him sharply in the balls.

Tolly's eyes rolled back and his body folded up. "Ow," he squeaked.

"Strip," Miranda ordered him. She grabbed his ear. "Strip, or you're going to have to grow back body parts."

"Okay! Sheesh." Tolly began to pull off the clothes. "A guy can't have a bit of fun?"

"You want fun, go watch movies with Matt and Blue." She choked and pinched Tolly's ear until he yelped. He was wearing a pair of her panties. Hastily,

he slipped them off. Miranda dragged him to the door. His ear stretched in her grasp. She ignored his tricks and shoved him out. "I don't ever want you in here again!"

She slammed the door in his face and turned to survey the room, furious with Tolly for disturbing her things. Furious with Matt for challenging her. Furious with Blue for no particular reason. She snatched up the clothes that Tolly had been wearing and hurled them at the closet. Something fluttered to the ground as the clothes flew. The piece of paper Tango had given her with her address.

Miranda stared at it for a moment. The pants Tolly had been wearing were the pants she had worn yesterday. That paper had been in the pocket of the pants. Except then it had been folded up. It was unfolded now, and it wouldn't have fallen out of the pocket on its own.

Tolly had seen Tango's address. What would he make of it? Maybe nothing. After all, it was only an address. From downstairs, she heard Matt and Blue roar in laughter, either in response to something in the movie or in response to Tolly's abrupt, naked appearance. At least she hoped they were laughing at one of those two things. Miranda snatched up the paper and tore it into tiny bits. She opened the window and threw the fragments out into the night, watching them spiral to the ground. A movement in a window of the house next door drew her attention — the old Indian woman was watching her. Their eyes met.

The old woman brought up a crude, homemade protective symbol and shook it at her fiercely. Miranda pulled her drapes shut and turned away.

CHAPTER TEN

*Tender Lizzie could not bear
To watch her sister's cankerous care*

Hillock, it turned out, was a short dead-end street in Scarborough, the easternmost part of Metro Toronto. The houses in the neighborhood were modest, single-family homes built in the seventies. The shrubs around them were heavy and mature, the lawns old and patchy. The plastic siding on many of the houses was tired from years of built-up grime. Drapes and blinds were tightly closed over lighted windows. No one was out; the only other vehicle on the sidestreets was a pizza-delivery car. Miranda turned onto Hillock.

The headlights of her car flashed against the windows of the house at the end of the street almost instantly. Hillock seemed even quieter than the streets around it. Jubilee Arthurs' house seemed even more tired than the other houses. The siding was a grubby white, the roof a faded blue dotted with the black of missing shingles. Tall old trees behind the house intimidated it into submission.

There were lights on in the house and a nondescript, battered beige car was parked in the driveway. Tango whistled. "Jubilee's standard of living has come down since I knew him." She pointed across the street to

another driveway. "Pull in there, then back out and turn around."

"I could just do a U-turn at the end of the street." Miranda had picked the changeling up promptly at ten o'clock. Both of them had already located Hillock on maps of the city, so there had been no need to waste time figuring out where they were going. They had come straight out.

Tango shook her head. "I don't want to get that close." Miranda shrugged and obeyed her, pulling into the other driveway. Tango caught her arm briefly. "Go fairly slow. I want a chance to get a good look at Jubilee's house."

Miranda executed the turn as slowly as she could without making it seem unnatural. "Got your look?"

"Yes. Let's find someplace to park. Away from Hillock."

Last night they had parked away from Atlanta Hunter's apartment building so the car wouldn't be associated with any reports of breaking and entering (or, now, of Atlanta's disappearance). Tonight they parked away from Hillock Street and Jubilee Arthur's house simply because there was nowhere on Hillock to park. Jubilee had apparently chosen his location shrewdly and deliberately. The street was so quiet that any strange parked car, especially one with people sitting inside, would be instantly recognizable as out of place. The house also commanded a view of the street's entire abbreviated length. Between that view and the positioning of the surrounding houses, it would have been difficult for even a person on foot to approach the house unseen.

They managed it, however. They parked a block

away and Tango led Miranda through back yards — over fences and hedges — to the house next door to Arthurs'. They ended up crouched behind thin bushes growing alongside the rusty chainlink fence around Arthurs' yard. Two floodlights lit the patchy grass inside the fence. No one would be able to lurk there without being spotted. "What now?" Miranda asked Tango.

The changeling was silent for a moment. "If they've lit the back yard," she wondered aloud, "why are the sides of the house still dark?"

"So the neighbors don't complain?" The houses on either side of Arthurs' were set at an angle around the end of Hillock Street. The back yard lights wouldn't bother them; side lights would shine into their windows.

Tango snickered shortly, then pointed toward the dark eaves of Arthurs' house. "You can see in the dark, right? Are there any lights up there that are turned off right now?"

Miranda looked. "Yes. Another pair of floodlights."

"They're probably on motion sensors. If anyone tries to sneak up, the lights will come on. There's probably another pair on the other side." She bit her lip, thinking. "I want a place where we can watch the front of Jubilee's house without being seen."

Miranda glanced toward the front of Arthurs' house, then across to the front corner of the house they were hiding beside. It was dark — no one was home. She slipped back to the wall of the house and around to the very front. She gestured for Tango to join her. "What about here?" she whispered as the changeling came over. Because of the angle of the house, they had a good view of Arthurs' front door and window. Shrubs would

provide a basic screen. But Tango wrinkled her nose and waved at the street.

“Anyone driving up the street would see us. What if these people come home? And all Arthurs has to do is look out of his window at the right angle and he’s got a pretty good chance at spotting us, too.”

“No, no, and no. Not if we’re careful.” Shadows shifted at Miranda’s unspoken command, enhancing the concealing darkness of the bushes and adding depth to the women’s hiding place. It wasn’t as effective as Tolly’s ability to simply disappear, but it would work. She smiled at Tango. The changeling nodded.

“Good enough.” Tango settled down into the shadows. “Now we wait. I want to watch and try to get some idea of who is in that house before we go in.” She hesitated, then added, “One last thing. Try not to think too much about Jubilee. He’ll know something is up.”

“What?” Miranda blinked in surprise. “How?”

Tango gestured for her to keep her voice down. “He’s got... well, let’s say ‘gifts’ is a good way to describe them. I’m not sure whether it’s natural or if he acquired the talent somewhere, but Jubilee is a low-grade psychic. Not enough to be able to read your mind, but enough to give him an edge as a mercenary. One thing he does really well is know when somebody nearby is focusing their attention on him. Sort of like a sixth sense.”

“So why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

“Because it’s harder not to think about somebody if you know you’re not supposed to be thinking about them. But if you didn’t know, you would have thought of him for sure. As long as we were moving, you wouldn’t have had time. If we’re going to be in one spot with nothing to do for a while, though....” Tango

shrugged. "I figured this would be as good a time to mention it as any."

"Last night you said you knew him." Miranda looked at the changeling in the darkness. "How?"

Tango sighed. "I met him about twenty-eight years ago. At a survival camp in northern Idaho — one of those Cold War things where a bunch of wannabe soldiers got together and learned how to survive a nuclear attack and a Soviet invasion. Arthurs had been hired as one of the instructors."

"What were you doing there?"

"A bunch of Kithain had gotten together and decided to give these guys the scare of their lives. A Soviet strike force was going to hit their camp. We all thought that it would be pretty funny." Tango frowned. "I was posing as an instructor, too, a specialist in hand-to-hand combat. I looked about eighteen then, so I made up some story about how my parents had been good American missionaries killed in some communist Third World country, and how I was raised by my ex-Marine grandfather in Texas after they died." Miranda gave her a critical look. Tango nodded. "Dumb. But they bought it and started to respect me, especially after I dusted a couple of big teamsters from New Jersey. Everyone treated me like an adopted daughter — except for Jubilee. He didn't believe the story for a second, especially since he had some idea about what the world was really like and why a young woman might be a lot stronger than she looked. I managed to convince him that I wanted to be a mercenary, and he sort of took me under his wing. So to speak."

Miranda's eyebrows rose. "You had an affair?"

Tango shifted. "He taught me... things. It wasn't just an affair."

"What happened?" Miranda asked curiously, both fascinated and repulsed by the idea that Tango had had a relationship with the man they were stalking.

"The Kithain attacked the camp. We went our separate ways. By the way, don't call me by name around him."

"Why?"

"I changed my name a few years after we met. He knows another one." The words were bitter and she turned away to watch Arthurs' house. "That's enough about Jubilee. Don't think about him anymore if you can. It helps to talk about something else, or sing songs in your head. I like 'Good King Wenceslas.'"

Miranda grimaced. She had dredged up something that Tango didn't want to remember. She tried the changeling's trick, concentrating on the lyrics of "Good King Wenceslas." She still kept one eye on Tango, but the other woman just watched Arthurs' house impassively. After Good King Wenceslas had looked out on the Feast of Stephen three or four times, Miranda switched over to "The Twelve Days of Christmas." For a while, she actually managed to lose herself in the song, forgetting not only Jubilee Arthurs, but also Tango's silence. Christmas carols were out of place on a warm summer night, though. Sometime in the middle of the tenth day of Christmas, her mind began to wander.

The rest of the pack would be out hunting by now, probably over to the university first so that Matt could indulge himself, then somewhere less fussy for Blue and

Tolly. After they had all fed, they would go to Yonge Street and find the victims for Solomon's next murder. Part of Miranda, the wild side that the Sabbat's Creation Rites had awoken, wanted to be with them. Running the streets. Hunting in the city's neon glow. Drinking rich, hot blood from the veins of a struggling...

"Miranda!" Tango hissed. "You're growling."

Miranda drew herself relentlessly back to the shadows on Hillock Street. "Sorry." She felt her mouth. Her fangs had descended while she had been lost in her hungry reverie. Miranda almost cursed. It was one thing not to think about Jubilee Arthurs, and another to sink into her vampire instincts. "Sorry," she said again, "I haven't fed tonight." She felt awkward mentioning feeding around Miranda. It was like discussing sex with an angel. "Maybe we could talk?"

Tango turned back to Arthurs' house. "You know there was another penny murder last night?" she asked over her shoulder.

Miranda's mouth went dry. This was the last subject she wanted to talk to Tango about! "Really?" she replied as calmly as she could. "Another hooker? Another gay?"

"A woman out walking her dog. Older woman — the news tonight said her first grandchild had just been born a couple of days ago." Tango's voice was tight with anger. "Apparently the police had to throw out all of the theories they were working on. They're trying to find a connection between the killings, some kind of pattern."

Maximum terror, Miranda thought to herself. *That's all. There is no real pattern.* She hadn't known about the woman's grandchild. She wished that she didn't now. "What are the police doing?" she asked quickly. "Do

they have any suspects?"

"None that they're talking about. They've formed a task force, but people want more. There was another protest outside police headquarters today. People say the police have descriptions of the suspects but deliberately aren't releasing the information."

Solomon had said that she wasn't the only Bandog working on the penny murders. She knew that there had been no witnesses to see the pack at work. Any rumored descriptions could only be false, spread by Bandog among the media or the protesters — or the police themselves. "Who are people blaming the murders on?"

"It depends who you ask." Tango gestured without taking her eyes off the house. "They had a montage on the news. Street gangs and drug addicts are popular. A few people are still clinging to some sort of sex-based theory. White supremacists and neo-nazis. Somebody came up with the suggestion of a devil-worshipping cult." That suggestion made Miranda jerk, but Tango, intent on Arthurs' house, didn't notice. "Everybody is scared, everybody is angry. They don't know why this is happening. They don't understand it."

"I don't," Miranda agreed.

Tango glanced back at her suddenly. "Really? I was going to ask you what you thought of it all."

Miranda kept her face still. *Oh, shit.* Had Tango guessed? "Why?"

"You're Sabbat. Aren't you supposed to be the ultimate evil?"

She hadn't guessed! Miranda felt like cheering, but she held her voice. "Vampires hunt because we have to if we want to survive," she said, trying to keep her

answer short and incontestable. She wanted this conversation to end as quickly as possible. Preferably without Tango finding out about her role in the murders.

“But why do you kill? Why does the Sabbat take such delight in destroying humans?”

Miranda fumbled for a reply. “It’s an expression of our freedom,” she said finally, falling back on the propaganda that the Sabbat fed to every new vampire it recruited. “The Camarilla forces its vampires to be discreet, to hide from humans. But vampires shouldn’t fear humans. We’re better than them. Fear and death are *our* weapons. We are no longer human; we shouldn’t try to act as humans.”

The words sounded as hollow to her as they must have sounded to Tango. The changeling was expressionless. Miranda faced her in silence. Finally, she looked down at the ground. “Vampires kill because sometimes we lose control of the beast inside us. The Sabbat recognizes what the Camarilla won’t: that we can gain power from letting the Beast loose. But most Sabbat vampires kill because sometimes it’s just easier to let the Beast go.”

“What do you think, Miranda?” asked Tango softly.

What did she think? Three days ago, she had been content to serve Solomon and the Bandog, willing to venture into territory that even the Sabbat viewed with fear and loathing. Something had changed since she’d met Tango. She had begun by trying to hide the changeling from the pack and from Solomon, but now she was hiding her own activities from Tango. She was feeling a discomfort that she hadn’t felt in years. Was she really questioning her own morality, or just trying

to give Tango the answers that she wanted to hear? Why? Why to either possibility? "I think," she said, "that it can be very hard to take control of the Beast and accept it as a part of ourselves." She looked up. Tango was watching her very closely.

"There are changelings I'd like to hear say that," she said. "What about the penny murders?"

Suddenly the words were in Miranda's mouth, ready to be spoken. *I killed them, Tango. I was told to kill them, and I went out, and I did it. For power. In service to an evil beyond the Beast, an evil that isn't part of me. But Shaftiel wasn't the one who had beaten a new grandmother to death last night, was he?*

It was one thing to talk about accepting actions, and another thing to do it. What would Tango say? What would she do? Miranda liked the changeling. She didn't want to drive her away. Better to let the Bandog remain a gnawing secret than an open wound. Her stomach as low as a shamed, slinky dog, Miranda said solemnly, "Humans have beasts, too. Who knows what their beasts can drive them to do, or why?"

* * *

The sound of a door opening and closing brought Tango's head up instantly, tearing her away from Miranda's words. Jubilee's house. But the front door was still shut. "Back door!" she hissed at Miranda. "Can you hide me while I move?" The vampire nodded. Tango rose and slipped around to where she could see the back of Jubilee's house. Shadows slipped with her. Miranda followed close behind. A big man had come out of Jubilee's back door and was having a quiet smoke under

the floodlights. He looked alert. When something flapped suddenly out of the trees, his eyes sought and found it. Tango didn't miss the twitch that his hand made toward the handgun tucked into the back of his waistband. She bit her lips, thinking quickly. She wanted to find out what was going on inside the house. Now was her chance. "How far away can you manipulate shadows, Miranda? Can you make them move on the far side of the yard?"

"Yes."

"Good. Use them to get the big guy's attention. Follow as soon as I've got him down." Tango called up her knife and tried to guess at the end-range of the motion sensors on the lights at the side of the house. She chose her route. At the last moment, she spit twice on the grassy earth, summoning her strength. "Do it."

Shadows shifted suddenly in the darkness beyond the house, as though someone were moving furtively behind the bushes next door. The big man looked up. The shadows shifted again. This time his cigarette dropped to the ground and his gun came out.

Tango was already over the rusting fence and into Jubilee's back yard before the weapon had cleared the man's waistband. By the time he had registered her charge, she was hurling herself at his back, knocking him forward with her weight. He slammed into the ground. Tango grabbed the gun away before it could fire. The point of her knife came to rest just below the base of the big man's skull, his first gasp for breath sending it pricking into his skin. He was a smart boy — he knew what that pricking meant. One sudden word or movement and he could be paralyzed, maybe dead. No one moved in the dark windows that faced the back

yard. No one would rescue him.

"Who's inside?" Tango hissed quickly as Miranda came across the fence. "Any traps? Security?" She pushed down lightly on the knife as a reminder to talk quickly and truthfully.

"James. Big guy like me. Living room. Jubilee. Thin guy. Front bedroom. No security inside."

Tango found that hard to believe. It certainly wasn't like Jubilee. But the man under her was sweating nervously. He was telling the truth. She looked up at Miranda. "Can you make him forget us?"

"It would take too long." The vampire crouched in front of the man, motioned for Tango to get off, then quickly rolled him over and locked her eyes on his. "Sleep," she ordered sharply.

The man's eyes slid shut. He went limp. Not a perfect solution, but one that would keep him out of their way. Tango dropped his gun beside him and grabbed at his pockets, looking for keys. She found them, a few keys on a plain ring. Stepping up to the door, she chose the one that looked most likely to fit the lock. "All right," she murmured to Miranda. "Once we're inside, be ready for anything. You go to the living room and take out the other big guy. Do it fast. I'll get Arthurs." She tested the door carefully. It was already unlocked. With a fast glance at Miranda, she threw it open and surged smoothly inside.

Half a flight of stairs up to the kitchen — empty except for cold Chinese takeout on a worn dinette set. Miranda went straight on through into an unfurnished room, then paused. The blue glow and tinny sound of an old television came from around a corner.

Tango left the vampire behind. She was already

moving down a short hallway, flat against the wall, low to the ground. A closet on the left. Two doors on the right, dark. The front bedroom would be the door on the left at the end of the hall. It was open. Light was pouring out, but the light from the kitchen was behind her. She cursed silently. Her shadow would fall across the doorway. If Jubilee was waiting, he would see it. Tango returned her knife to its ring form, gathering herself a few feet from the doorway, tensing. Her shadow was clear ahead of her, bigger than life.

She leaped forward, diving low across the floor and rolling through the doorway.

A tremendous, echoing gunshot split the air over her, right where a tall person's chest would have been. She came to her feet, knife back in her hand. She lunged forward without really looking at the man she was grabbing, seeing only the smoking revolver in his hand as it tracked her. She slashed out at his belly with the knife, forcing him to weave back. Her other hand grabbed the arm holding the gun. She shoved it upward, away from her, and *squeezed*. The man shrieked in agony as bones grated against each other. His finger slipped from the trigger and the gun, already half-cocked, went off with a second roar and a flare of bilious green fire. Big chunks of plaster rained down from the ceiling. Some of them came down on Tango. Her opponent used the moment to grab her knife hand and attempt to kick her in the stomach. Tango twisted to the side, pulling him with her, then ducked and let him slide right over her shoulders. His gun dropped out of his grasp. Tango was behind him now, pulling his arm up behind his back sharply and shoving him down onto his knees.

"Don't make this difficult for me, Jubilee!" she

whispered in his ear.

The man stiffened. "Shiv?"

The name sent a cold shiver across her skin. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken it. "Good guess." There was a mirror on a cheap, old dresser against the far wall of the room. Tango twisted Jubilee around to face it so that he could see her reflection — and so that she could get a good look at his. She wasn't sure who gasped first, her or him.

Tango supposed that she shouldn't have been surprised. Jubilee was no Kithain. He was only human, and humans aged. But Atlanta had said that he had been working for Pentex, and Tango knew that the malevolent corporation had ways of extending the youth of its favored employees. She had assumed that Jubilee would have worked his way onto that exclusive list. But apparently he hadn't. Every one of the twenty-eight years since she had last seen him showed in his face and body. His skin seemed thin, his hatchet-face like a blade that had been sharpened too many times. The pallor of his face as he stared at her still-youthful reflection didn't enhance his appearance either. He was wearing only an undershirt and his pants; a shirt was hung over a chair back, just taken off in preparation for sleep.

Miranda appeared in the doorway before either of them could say anything more. The vampire's eyes were bright, and her fangs were fully extended. Long talons sprang from her fingers. There was blood smeared across her face. Tango didn't think she wanted to know what kind of fight the man in the living room had put up, or what condition he was in now. "T—" Tango frowned at her and she choked off the name. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Tango looked up at the hole that Jubilee's revolver had blown in the ceiling, then down at the gun as it lay on the floor. "Nice toy," she commented to him. "Gift from Pentex?"

"How did you know?"

No pleasantries. No "It's been a long time, how are you?" from either of them. Tango hadn't really expected any small talk, though. "We paid a visit to Atlanta Hunter last night. She said you had been working for them until recently."

"She was right." Jubilee's eyes narrowed. Tango knew he was no fool. She had spoken to Atlanta Hunter and then come looking for him. He could work out why. "This is about a changeling named Riley, isn't it? Some friend of yours." Tango nodded grimly. Jubilee grimaced. "So. I thought I had taken care of everything. How did you make the connection? The phone call he made?" Jubilee gestured with his head toward the door of his bedroom. Tango noticed for the first time that the lock and frame were shattered, as though the door had been kicked open. "I tried to redial, but he had managed to clear the circuits with another number. All I got was a pizza delivery service."

"He called..." His apartment and left a message. Tango almost said the words, but she stopped herself. If she told Jubilee that, he would know where she was staying. And one of the lessons that he had taught her himself was that you didn't give your opponents any advantage. "I was supposed to be flying with him. Then I got his message here in Toronto. Atlanta sat her 'daughter' next to me on the plane. I put the voices together, got the passenger list from the airline and found Atlanta." Jubilee gritted his teeth. "How did you

delete Riley from the passenger list?"

"The same way I had him smuggled back. I hired someone. A computer jockey to manipulate the airline's ticket system. I might not work for Pentex anymore, but I still have my contacts." He grimaced. "Could you let me stand up?"

"No." She almost shuddered at how easily the old callousness came back to her.

He twisted his head around to look up at her. "Shiv, I think you've noticed that I'm not as young as I used to be. You might not have gotten too old, but I have. I can't kneel like this for very long. My knees have gotten bad."

Tango was aware of Miranda standing next to her. A vampire and a changeling against one unarmed man. One old unarmed man. She reached out with her foot and kicked Jubilee's revolver under the bed, then lifted him to his feet. His knees popped as he stood. "Thank you," he said gratefully.

Miranda's eyebrows rode high on her forehead. "This has to be the most civil interrogation I've ever seen."

"Jubilee and I just speak the same language, that's all. I know what he's capable of. He knows what I'm capable of." *At least*, Tango thought, *I hope he does*. It had been a long time for both of them — she was reminded of that every time she looked at Jubilee. Maybe it had been too long. She smiled, a wide, sinister grin that exposed her teeth, and met Jubilee's gaze in the mirror. "An interrogation would be a waste of time, wouldn't it?"

A fine sheen of sweat broke out on Jubilee's forehead. He did remember, although that didn't make her feel any better. His voice was still steady, however,

as though absolutely nothing was wrong. "It would. What do you want to know, Shiv? I'm sure we can discuss this rationally."

There was just the faintest hint of fear and loathing in his words. Oh, he did remember. Tango flushed, glancing at Miranda to see if she had noticed. Their eyes met. Tango managed to turn her glance into a wink instead of looking away. Miranda smiled back, her face still bloody, although her fangs had retracted now. She began to look around the room. Tango gave a silent sigh of relief and turned her attention back to Jubilee. "Where's Riley?"

"I don't know."

Tango's jaw tightened. So did her grasp on Jubilee's arm. "I don't believe you."

"You should." Jubilee's voice hissed painfully from between his teeth. "I was told where to take him. When I got him there, I handed him over to the person who hired me. I was hired, Shiv, just like I hired Atlanta."

"So who hired you?"

"I can't tell you that."

"What do you mean *can't*?" Tango bent his arm a little more sharply, putting Jubilee's shoulder at an angle so extreme that just a little more force could dislocate his arm.

Jubilee's eyes grew wide suddenly and his face went pale. "Shiv!"

"Don't make me go against what I just told my friend. I don't want to have to interrogate you. I don't think you want me to either." She eased up a bit on Jubilee's shoulder. "Who hired you, why did they want Riley, and where did you take him?" Jubilee was silent. Tango's guts twisted. Was the man going to answer her

or not? She meant what she said. She didn't want to interrogate him. She really didn't want to. She couldn't, in fact. If Jubilee realized that, he could call her bluff. She blustered onward. "I notice your choice of living quarters has come down a bit. Slipping, Jubilee? What happened? Who would hire a has-been mercenary?"

Jubilee let out a long, slow breath and went limp, giving up the illusion of physical resistance. His arm suddenly seemed like a stick of wood in Tango's grasp. "What happened? I got old. I made mistakes. I'm still alive, which probably counts for something. Do you remember back in Idaho — one of the first lessons I taught you about being a mercenary?"

She flushed a bit and forced herself not to look at Miranda. She hadn't wanted the other woman to know that those were the kinds of lesson Jubilee had given her. "Yes." Part of her did remember that time, and fondly. She didn't relent, however. "You said that the past is the past."

"I also told you that employers don't just pay for skills. A mercenary's reputation comes from reliability and honor. Always do what you're paid to do. If you can't, you should give back the money."

"Is that why you're living in a place like this? You had to give refunds one too many times?" She was being deliberately unkind. She knew the importance that Jubilee had placed on his reputation twenty-eight years ago, and she didn't imagine he had changed that much since.

Jubilee's head came up again, looking into the mirror. "Partly," he said. His face was struggling for calm. He was afraid, and only Tango knew he had no reason to be. Her own heart was sinking. She knew

what he was going to say next. "My employer wants his name and purposes kept a secret, and he paid for that. I can't tell you who he is or why he kidnapped your friend."

Desperation descended on her like famine. Suddenly they were both struggling to control their emotions, Jubilee trying to give the impression that he wasn't afraid, Tango trying to create the illusion that he should be. "How much did he pay you?" she asked casually. Duke Michael's enchanted charge card was in her pocket. She hoped it was as limitless as it appeared to be. "I can top it."

"I'm not getting paid in money this time." Jubilee was defiant. For the first time, he twisted his head around to look at her out of the corner of his own eyes instead of in the mirror. "You can interrogate me if you like, but as you said, you know what I'm capable of."

Tango just stared back at him. Desperate. Frustrated. "Damn you." She started to let his arm drop.

Another pair of hands grabbed hers. Miranda took Jubilee away from her. "Let me try." Her fangs were exposed again and she was licking at the dried blood on her lips. She stroked one talon under Jubilee's stubborn chin, provoking an instinctive tremor. The act was a little overdone, but it was effective. Open fright was showing through on Jubilee's face. "I think I can make him talk whether he wants to or not."

The mad laughter of relief almost bubbled out of Tango's throat. Yes! Oh, yes! Miranda could do it! She doubted that even Jubilee's principles could stand up to the vampire's will, and, unlike Atlanta, there wasn't even the faintest hint of madness around him. Tango released her hold on Jubilee, pushing him into

Miranda's arms. "It won't be easy," she cautioned her.

"Even better." Miranda turned Jubilee around, her undead strength defying resistance. The shadows falling across her face turned her eyes into dark, consuming hollows. Jubilee kept his eyes fixed on her mouth. He knew what he was dealing with.

Tango reached up and pulled her old lover's head back, tilting his face up, just as she had seen Miranda tilt Atlanta's face. Jubilee's gaze met Miranda's.

The vampire's eyes went wide. She froze. Tango's breath caught in her throat. "Miranda?"

* * *

Shiv asked you something, murmured Arthurs in her mind. You should reply before she gets suspicious.

Miranda forced her throat to work. "He's tough," she said. She had the vague impression of the changeling nodding and saying something about pulling away if she had to. She nodded abstractly, not taking her eyes away from Arthurs'. When she had pushed her will against his, she had been expecting to encounter a frightened mind. She hadn't. Arthurs had been putting on as much of a show as she had.

Which isn't to say that I'm not grateful to find an ally, he commented. *Shiv is very afraid that she may have to hurt me. She won't do it, but she does have several advantages over me. If I were to try and escape on my own, she could catch me easily.* Miranda had the eerie impression that someone was walking around her mind, examining it from all sides. The unexpected loss of control frightened her. Tango had said that Arthurs was a low-grade psychic!

When she knew me, I was. But that was twenty-eight years ago. She's changed her name, I've learned some new tricks. He savored "Tango," rolling it around in Miranda's mind. Nice. It suits her. His mental voice paused. So what did you have planned for me? Or did you have any plan at all?

No, Miranda confessed, half to herself, half to Arthurs' presence. When she had suggested using her powers on the mercenary, she had actually been more frightened than he and Tango put together.

She had seen the chain bracelet sitting on a nighttable beside Arthurs' bed, even if Tango hadn't. A Bandog chain. Even before she had seen the chain, she had thought that Arthurs' face seemed familiar. Now she knew where from, and the chain was in her pocket. But all she had wanted to do when she'd suggested hypnotizing the mercenary was to keep him from talking. Beyond that...

Such strategy, Arthurs said sarcastically. I thought I recognized you when you came in as well. You didn't have to worry — I meant what I told her. I wouldn't have betrayed Solomon.

So Solomon had had Riley kidnapped! Miranda saw Arthurs' face wince even as the thought came to her. He had realized his mistake as well.

All right. You know. Solomon had me kidnap Riley. He enchanted a dead man's hand so it would lead me to him. His eyes grew sharp instead of frightened. What are you going to do with the information?

She was going to tell Tango. She was going to tell Tango who hired Arthurs, and where to find him. She was going to... no. If she told Tango about Solomon's involvement, the changeling would inevitably find out

about her role in the murders. Miranda almost bit her lip in horrified frustration. She couldn't tell Tango what she knew!

Unless Arthurs was the one who told Tango about Solomon.

And then what do you think he will say when she confronts him? Hmmm? Don't you think it would be so much easier if the connection to the Bandog came to an end here? Arthurs' voice was seductive, but compelling at the same time. He was right. If Tango kept following the trail that led from Atlanta to Arthurs, she would inevitably encounter the Bandog. And Miranda didn't want that to happen.

No, Arthurs urged, you don't. And a few simple lies are all it will take. Some misdirection. No one will get hurt.

He presented his plan to her in a burst of information. It was simple. It would benefit both of them. It couldn't fail.

Miranda agreed.

Excellent, murmured Arthurs. Now...

Miranda stopped him. She tried to frame a direct question — words, not random thoughts for Arthurs to pull out of her head. It was difficult. Concepts kept getting mixed in with the words, layers of meaning wrapping together. *Is Riley (Tango) all right (angry with me)? Is he (she) still alive (going to be upset)?* Miranda flushed at the conflicting thoughts.

Arthurs laughed silently. *You don't know Shiv at all.* Miranda glared at him, her will scrabbling against the impenetrable barrier of his mind. She captured at least part of his attention, because suddenly he stopped laughing. *You really want an answer?*

Yes.

I don't know.

Why did Solomon have him kidnapped? Arthurs didn't reply. Miranda tried again. Why did Solomon...

Follow the plan, Miranda. And remember that Tango is watching.

Arthurs pushed her out of his mind.

* * *

Miranda seemed to be taking an awfully long time to seize control of Jubilee's will, but Tango knew that that was only a feeling. It had been only a minute, maybe a touch longer. She was being impatient. But they were so close now! Miranda and Jubilee were still, eyes locked onto eyes. Tango wondered if she should check on Miranda again. *No. Patience, she told herself, patience.*

And then Jubilee drew a slow, rasping breath. Miranda gritted her teeth. "I've got him," she said.

"Who hired him?"

Miranda relayed the question. Jubilee replied unwillingly, the information almost having to force its way out of his mouth. "A streetgang leader named Indigo."

A gang leader? "Why?"

"Because I needed the money."

Tango clenched her teeth. "No. Why did Indigo want Riley kidnapped?"

"He wanted revenge. Riley murdered a member of his gang."

Tango froze. "Riley?" She glanced at Miranda. "Could he be lying?"

The vampire shook her head slowly. "Not under my control."

"But Riley wouldn't do something like that." Riley was a prankster, not a killer. But... maybe he had killed a man. Maybe he was a killer. Tango tensed unconsciously. You could never tell, could you? You never knew. She looked back at Jubilee. "Ask him if he knows more."

Miranda did ask — and Jubilee did know more. Indigo ran guns for Pentex, distributing them to other gangs and punks on the streets. Someone Riley was close to had been killed by one of Indigo's guns. Riley had been looking for revenge as well. When Indigo couldn't capture the changeling himself, he had turned to Jubilee. Jubilee had traced Riley to San Francisco, hired Atlanta Hunter to bring him back, held him here until the effects of her bracelet had worn off, then handed the captive changeling over to Indigo. Indigo's base of operations was a warehouse at the end of Towns Road off Kipling Avenue.

Tango was sitting on the edge of Jubilee's bed by the time he had finished. She just stared at the mercenary. "Why?" she murmured.

"Is that a question?" asked Miranda wearily. "If it is, what more do you want to know? Isn't this enough?"

"No. I mean, no, it isn't a question. Do you know where Towns Road is?"

Miranda shook her head. "No again. But Kipling is on the other side of the city. If you want to go check it out, I can do to Jubilee what I did to the man in the back yard and put him to sleep. That would keep him out of the way."

"If this warehouse is that far away, I think I'd want to have Jubilee with me in case something went wrong."

Miranda seemed startled. "It wouldn't be a problem for me to put him under. He'd be safe here. And what could go wrong? He's told us everything."

Tango just shook her head. "It's not that I doubt your abilities. It's just that... I know how slippery Jubilee can be. He might have found a way around your control. Something about this just isn't right." Tango drew her knees up to her chin, sitting with her feet on the bed. "Why did all of this happen? Why didn't Riley tell me something was wrong when he was in San Francisco?" She put her head down on her knees. And what did it have to do with the yellow file he'd mentioned in his frantic message?

Her head snapped back up. "The yellow file!" she spat excitedly. "Ask Jubilee about the yellow file!"

Miranda blinked. "What yellow file?"

"Someone broke into Riley's apartment while he was in San Francisco and searched it. They stole a yellow file out of a hidden compartment. Riley left a message later saying to take that file to the duke." Tango jumped up. "Ask him about it. Was he the one who broke into the apartment?"

"Jubilee?" asked Miranda. "Did you break into Riley's apartment?" The mercenary nodded slowly. Miranda glanced at Tango.

"The file," she prompted her eagerly.

"What was in the file?"

Jubilee was silent. "Ask him again!" Tango ordered. "Ask him what happened to it!"

Miranda licked her lips. "Jubilee, what was in the file? What did you do with it?"

"The file..." Jubilee said slowly. Then his voice quickened with certainty. "The file had details of Indigo's gunrunning operation. And some other notes." Tango leaned forward. "I gave it to Indigo."

"Damn it!" cursed Tango. She clenched her hands into fists.

"But I made a copy first."

Tango stared at him. So did Miranda. "Where is the copy, Jubilee?" the vampire asked.

"In the basement. In a box marked 'Books.'"

"Stay with him, Miranda." Tango scrambled to her feet.

"Wait! I can..."

But Tango was already out the door and down the hall, running through the kitchen. When they had come in the back door of the house, they had come up a half-flight of stairs. There had been stairs leading down from the back door as well. Tango paused at the top of them. There were light switches beside the door. She flicked at them until the lights in the basement went on.

The basement wasn't much to look at, just a hard concrete floor and bare, unfinished walls. In one corner, however, was a small pile of boxes. Tango went over to them. There were actually three or four labeled 'Books.' She opened the first and dumped it out. Just books and nothing more than books. She reached for a second box.

Behind her, the stairs creaked. She whirled around, knife at the ready. It was Miranda. "I told you to stay with Jubilee!"

"I put him to sleep. There's nothing he can do." The vampire walked all of the way down to stand at the bottom of the steps. "What do you think you're going

to find in the file?"

"I don't know, but get back upstairs! I don't trust Jubil—"

From outside came the sound of a car engine roaring to life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Till Laura dwindling
Seemed knocking at Death's door:
Then Lizzie weighed no more*

Tango ran for the stairs. Miranda tried to act clumsy, to get in her way and slow her down, but the changeling pushed right past her, shoving her effortlessly to one side. She yanked open the back door and charged outside, around the corner of the house. Miranda ran after her.

Arthurs was already out of the driveway and driving down Hillock Street in reverse, not taking the time to turn around. Tango was pursuing him grimly, moving faster than a human could. She might even be able to catch him when he paused to change gears. If he didn't shoot her first. "Tango!" Miranda yelled. "Watch out!"

She was almost too late. Streetlights flashed on the barrel of Arthurs' revolver as he stuck his arm out the car window and fired blindly. The gunshot was loud, the eerie flare of green flame that the revolver produced shockingly bright. It was hard to say what happened first: Tango throwing herself aside in reaction, or a chunk of asphalt a couple of feet from her exploding into black splinters. Arthurs reached the end of the street, brought the car to a screaming halt, threw it into

first, then took off again with a squeal of tires. Tango was back on her feet, but there was no way she was going to be able to catch him now. She stopped at the end of Hillock and stared after the receding car. Jubilee must have been long out of sight by the time the changeling began walking back down the street. Lights were starting to come on in other houses along the street as people reacted to the gunshot. Hastily, Miranda wrapped a cloak of shadows around Tango as soon as she was close enough. With luck, anyone looking out their windows now would see only a vague figure.

But Tango was walking slowly. Miranda shrank back into the shadows of Arthurs' house — such shadows as there were, of course. All of the activity had brought on the lights connected to the motion detectors. The house might as well have been on fire. If the gunshots hadn't attracted the notice of the neighbors, the bright lights would. Miranda hoped that the cool, polite uninvolvedness of Toronto would be enough to keep people from calling the police. She wasn't going to count on it, though. The atmosphere was different out here in the suburbs. People weren't quite so willing to look the other way, and the arrival of the police would make things difficult. "Move it, Tango," she muttered to herself.

The changeling took her time, walking with her face emotionlessly blank. "What happened?" she asked flatly as she walked up the driveway.

"I don't know," Miranda lied. But she did. She had let Arthurs go. She hadn't even tried to put him to sleep after he had improvised the bit about the copies in the basement. She had simply let him retrieve his gun and run while she went downstairs after Tango. What else

could she have done? Arthurs' plan had been to escape while the women were gone. If Tango had taken the mercenary with them out to the warehouse on Towns Road, he wouldn't have had any chance to get away. And because the warehouse, and the story about Riley and Indigo and everything else, was a lie, too, Tango would have questioned Arthurs again. And this time she would have found out about the Bandog. "I put him under. Do you think he could have resisted my control somehow — because he's psychic?"

"Wouldn't you have known?"

Miranda almost bit her tongue, but managed to say smoothly, "I don't know. I've never tried to control a psychic before." She caught Tango's arm. "We should leave before the police come. We were lucky at Atlanta's. We won't be lucky twice."

Tango shook her hand off and turned to look at her. The other woman's expression wasn't as blank as Miranda had thought. It was merely still, like the calm eye of a hurricane. Deep rage smoldered just beneath Tango's skin. "Get the man from the back yard and bring him inside."

"Tango..."

"Do it!" Tango spat. "If Arthurs fooled you into thinking he was asleep, he probably lied about this Indigo guy as well. He knew something. Maybe his men know it, too." She turned again and walked on. "We're not leaving until I've got something. I'm too close to getting some answers about Riley." Miranda caught the flash of metal in Tango's hand. Her knife. The changeling was trembling.

No. What if Arthurs' men did know something? Miranda doubted they were going to be able to resist

interrogation — hers or Tango's — the way that Arthurs had. She grabbed Tango to stop her....

And found herself flying suddenly through the air to slam hard into the ground. Tango was crouching over her, knife high. Her teeth were bared in a ferocious grimace. "Don't try that again. And don't try to hypnotize me, because the first thing I'll go for will be your eyes."

Miranda froze, more out of shock than anything else. "Tango?" For a moment, the changeling looked more like the inhuman creature that she was than the small woman she seemed to be. Wild, primal. Her eyes were burning. Breath was whistling sharply between her teeth. Her muscles were straining.

For the first time since her Embrace, Miranda felt really, truly afraid for her life. Her body was cold with a fright that went beyond the chill of natural death.

"Tango?" she asked again, this time in a whisper. Tango blinked, staring down at her, realizing what she was doing. "Are you all right?"

The changeling stayed where she was for a moment longer, ready to strike. Then, slowly, her knife-hand came down, falling to her side. She closed her eyes. "Get me out of here, Miranda." She slipped off the vampire. "Get me out of here before I kill somebody."

Miranda didn't need a second invitation. Instinct prompted her to ask about Arthurs' men, one asleep in the backyard, one wounded inside, and what the police would say when they finally arrived, but she restrained herself. There were hundreds of unsolved crimes in Toronto, thanks to the Sabbat. One more would make no difference. And if Tango was suddenly willing to forego questioning Arthurs' men, Miranda wasn't about

to remind her of them. This time it was she who led Tango through back yards away from the house on Hillock Street, moving as quickly and quietly as possible, using the deepest of shadows to shroud their escape.

They were practically back to the car before Miranda realized that she had done it — she had kept Tango from finding out about the Bandog, and Solomon's role in kidnapping Riley. Her secret was safe, at least for now.

She should have been happy.

* * *

Tango leaned her head against the cool glass of the car window. Jubilee was gone, and with him her best chance of finding Riley. Now that the mercenary knew she was looking for him, he would hide, and that would make finding him again very difficult. Maybe impossible. There were still his henchmen, of course. If they knew anything, even the faintest scrap of a clue, it could help her track Jubilee down. But she wasn't sure if she wanted to question them. She was afraid to. Afraid of what she might do.

After all these years, it was happening again. She was losing control.

Her anger had almost overcome her several times in the last few days. At Duke Michael's court when she had first arrived in Toronto. In Hopeful, the night she had met Miranda. In Atlanta Hunter's apartment. She had restrained herself then, though; restrained herself or been restrained by Miranda. Tonight had been much worse. She didn't remember taking the vampire down.

She barely remembered hissing that terrible threat at her. She remembered all too well what she had been willing to do to Jubilee's henchmen, however.

Instead of a breaking-and-entering situation, the police would have been investigating a double murder. She had seen a couple of police cruisers, lights flashing and sirens wailing, racing toward Hillock Street as Miranda drove calmly out of the neighborhood. Someone, it seemed, had called the police very quickly.

The frustration of the search for Riley was taking its toll on her.

The character of the buildings that flashed past the window began to change from the neatly spaced homes of the suburbs to the tight-packed buildings of the city. They left Scarborough behind and returned to Toronto proper. They were driving between the old towers of the downtown core before Miranda spoke to her. "What now?"

What now, indeed? Tango closed her eyes. It was late. She was tired, she was frustrated. She should go back to Riley's apartment and sleep. Tomorrow she would decide what to do next in her search for the pooka. Tonight, though... tonight she couldn't face the thought of going back to that apartment, knowing that she had failed. Knowing what was lurking so close to the surface of her soul. She would have to go back eventually, but she needed to wind down first. Somewhere with people. Somewhere she could relax and let herself drift. She opened her eyes again and turned to Miranda. The vampire was looking at her as well, the light of passing streetlamps washing in waves over her face.

"Can we go somewhere for a drink?" Tango asked

her. She winced a bit as she realized her mistake and added hastily, "I mean, somewhere I can get a drink and you can..."

"I fed a little from the man at Jubilee's house. I'm all right. I'd enjoy going out." Miranda hesitated. "But not back to Hopeful."

"No. You're right." Tango didn't feel like going to Hopeful either. After Todd's murder and after the riot she had witnessed on College Street, she didn't want to go back to Hopeful again. "Pick somewhere else."

Miranda glanced at the dashboard clock. "It's almost too late to make last call in most places. Do you have a problem with after-hours clubs?"

"No." Tango sat back. "Did I tell you that I manage a big nightclub in San Francisco?"

"No."

"Have you ever heard of Pan's?"

"Not really."

Tango smiled. "That's good. I'm tired of people who have."

Miranda smiled as well. "I hope you like this place then. It's called Club Haze. I've been there before with the pack. Hunting. It will be nice to go casually."

They drove up to just north of the downtown core and parked in a lot where the attendant, chatting on a telephone, virtually ignored them. Club Haze was down the street, just a door, an awning, and a flight of stairs going up. There was no sign. By day, it would have been practically invisible. By night, with the door open, colored light and music drifting out, and a tough-looking doorman controlling the flow of patrons, it was hard to miss. The doorman eyed Tango's and Miranda's clothes critically as they approached. Neither was

dressed in what could really be called club fashion, except that they were wearing black. Miranda just caught the man's gaze, however, and he let them past without even asking for cover.

The club was much more impressive inside: cool, dark, and decorated in a kind of industrial minimalist style. The tables had brushed steel tops that reminded Tango of the main bar at Pan's. The music was good. There was a smallish, slightly sunken dance floor with cold blue and white lights. Cigarette smoke was a thick cloud in the air. It wasn't clear whether it was the smoke or the glare of harsh light on bare metal that gave rise to the club's name. Club Haze's only drawback was that it was in Yorkville. The very eastern end of Yorkville, admittedly, almost on the corner of Yonge Street, but still in Yorkville. And the last thing Tango wanted right now was to run into another Kithain.

"Miranda..." she began, but the vampire was already sitting down at a table overlooking the dance floor. She had pulled a chair out for Tango. The nocker bit back her words and sat. A waitress came over and took their orders. Tango ordered a pint of Toby. To her surprise, Miranda ordered the same thing. She gave the vampire a questioning glance. Miranda shrugged.

"You can have mine once you've finished yours."

"Thanks."

The music in the club was at a good level, loud enough to dance to, but not so loud that conversation was impossible. Even so, Tango was silent, watching the dance floor and waiting for her beer to come. Miranda was silent, too. When the beer finally came, Miranda reached into her pocket. Tango stopped her. "Let me."

"At least let me pay for mine."

"No. You're not going to drink it, are you? Besides, I owe you for what I... said earlier."

That ended Miranda's objections. Her mouth closed. Tango paid for the beer, and the waitress went away. The two women fell into silence again, but only for a moment this time. Tango took a sip of her beer and said, "I really am sorry."

Miranda shook her head. "That's okay. I don't blame you. You thought you had a lead and it died. You must be under a lot of pressure."

"More than you know." She stared into the dark depths of her beer.

"What? You mean that curse you told me about? The one that keeps you from leaving Toronto?"

"No." Tango flushed. She shouldn't have said anything. "There's more than that." She reached out and took Miranda's hand. "Thank you for helping me, Miranda. I know you said that you didn't look on this as a matter of favors anymore, but if there's ever anything I can do for you, just let me know."

"It's all right." The vampire smiled, almost guiltily it seemed at first, then broadly and happily. She gripped Tango's hand in return. "You're welc—"

"Tango!"

Suddenly, Sin was dropping down into a crouch beside their table. Miranda started, hissing. Tango had to force herself to remain still and not react violently to the dark-haired sidhe's sudden appearance. It would have been too easy to call up her knife. Sin was smiling. Tango took a deep breath to calm herself. "What do you want, Sin?" she asked him sourly.

The unfriendliness in her tone went over his head completely. "Nothing. I'm here on a date." He waved

at a woman sitting at a table a little ways away. She waved back and smiled. "I think I may be able to work an epiphany out of her."

"Good for you."

Sin's smile faded this time. He considered her and Miranda. "I was talking to Ruby today. She said you had been by and that you were still looking for Riley. Any luck?"

"Not really, no."

Sin pushed himself to his feet. "Ooo-kay. How are plans for Highsummer going?"

"Ask Epp." Tango gave him a thin smile. "Shouldn't you be going? I wouldn't want your date to get cold." Sin's jaw tightened in anger. He walked away without saying another word. Tango turned back to Miranda. "Let's go."

"What? Why?" The vampire looked confused. "He was another changeling, wasn't he?"

"He's a sidhe." Tango sighed. "I'm sorry, Miranda. I just don't want to be around other Kithain right now."

Miranda arched her eyebrows. "Well, you aren't. I don't think he's going to come near you for a long time. What did he mean by 'plans for Highsummer,' and who is Epp?"

"Can I tell you another time, Miranda?"

"Can't you tell me now? Please?" She caught Tango's arm and asked insistently, "Does it involve Riley? Shouldn't I know about it?"

Tango looked around. Sin and his date had moved away. She couldn't see them anymore. Out of sight, out of mind, she supposed. Maybe she could stand to stay at Club Haze as long as he wasn't around her. She glanced at Miranda hesitantly. "I guess you should." She

picked up her beer again and began to tell the vampire the whole story about Riley, Duke Michael and Epp. By the time she was finished, she had started on Miranda's beer, and the vampire was gazing grimly off into space.

"I don't think," Miranda said, "that I would like Epp very much."

"That's the way boggans tend to be. They're the original anal retentives. There used to be a rumor that Freud either knew a boggan or was one himself. Sidhe are — sidhe. How else do you describe them?" Tango sipped at the beer disconsolately. She had hoped that telling the whole story to another person would make her feel better, but it hadn't. She felt worse than before, much more aware of how hopeless the situation was. Riley had been missing for four days now, and if someone like Jubilee Arthurs was involved in his disappearance, chances were good that Riley was dead by now. Even if he was, though, she had to know more, and it didn't seem likely that she would.

At least telling the story to Miranda had given her a chance to get a grip on her emotions again. She felt calmer now. Even if the situation was hopeless, she was in control of herself once more.

"If I had been you..." Miranda shook her head. "I probably would have torn Epp apart. Duke Michael, too." Tango jerked suddenly, choking on a mouthful of beer. Miranda blinked and grimaced. "Sorry."

"No." Tango gasped for air. "That's okay." Maybe she wasn't quite as in-control as she thought.

"I guess it's just what a vampire would have done."

"Possibly."

"I mean, we can be pretty vicious sometimes."

Miranda glanced toward the dance floor. "Vampires have done some terrible things."

Tango was aware of Miranda watching her out of the corner of her eye, as if she were testing Tango's reactions and waiting for some kind of response. What did she want, assurances that Tango didn't find her means of existence repulsive? The changeling almost laughed. Instead, she took another careful swallow of beer and steered the subject in another direction. "I remember one of the first vampires I ever met. It was in France, at an old chateau in the north. Her name was Elyse. She'd been dead for more than three hundred years, but she was still one of the most human..." Tango smiled, searching for another word. "She was a good person. She used to dream of going back to Versailles — she'd lived there during the reign of Louis XIV."

Miranda looked at her directly for a moment. "She must have been Camarilla."

"I didn't ask. Does it matter? She didn't apologize for what she had done." Tango almost bit her tongue as she realized that the conversation had come back to Miranda's topic, and that she had brought it there herself. Her smile twisted bitterly. "It was her nature. Like it's a boggan's nature to be nosy, or a sidhe's nature to be arrogant, or a nocker's nature to tinker with machines."

"I've never seen you tinkering with any machines."

Tango couldn't hold back a short, barking laugh. No, control didn't come back so easily. "Well, nature isn't everything, is it?" *Does that answer your question?* she thought. *Does that satisfy you?* She watched Miranda turn back to the dance floor. The vampire was silent. So was Tango. She had emptied most of the second glass

of beer before either of them spoke again.

"Tango," Miranda asked suddenly, "Sin said that he might be able to work an 'epiphany' out of his date. What's an epiphany?"

Tango stared into the last of her beer. "Kithain need something we call 'Glamour' in order to keep our faerie half alive. One way to get Glamour is from mortals. Sometimes they generate it when they create or imagine something. When a Kithain absorbs that Glamour, it's called an epiphany. It's like..." she shrugged. "It's like you're one with the universe. It's like an orgasm that just goes on and on. It's transcendent."

"Sort of the way feeding feels to a vampire?" Miranda sounded distant.

"I guess so. Why?" Tango glanced up and followed Miranda's gaze toward the dance floor. The vampire didn't answer, but she didn't have to.

Sin and his date were dancing. Or rather, Sin's date was dancing. Sin was practically standing still on the dance floor, just watching her move to the music. There was an expression of rapture on the woman's face. She wasn't just dancing to the music, she was dancing *with* the music. A few people on the dance floor were looking at her, but she wasn't looking at them. If she was dancing for anyone, it might have been for Sin. Mostly, however, she was dancing for herself. The music, the act of dancing, had carried her away, transporting her to some other state of being. Glamour shone inside her and Sin was basking in its glow, his face alight, lost in wonder. Miranda couldn't see the Glamour, of course, but she must have been able to see the bliss in the faces of both Sin and the dancing woman.

Tango's stomach twisted. "That's an epiphany," she confirmed, and turned away.

"Then it is like feeding. Like feeding slowly from a willing partner. Both the vampire and the vessel enjoy it." Miranda seemed almost as caught in the magic of the Glamour as Sin or his date.

"Maybe. I wouldn't know." Miranda glanced at her questioningly. Tango stood. "Can we go now?"

"Is something wrong?"

Tango didn't answer, but just walked out of the club. It was raining lightly, thin drops falling out of the darkness. Miranda caught her just outside. "Tell me what's wrong. Is it something to do with Riley?"

"No." Tango began to walk toward the lot where they had left Miranda's car. "Not really."

"Is it something to do with me?"

Miranda sounded frightened. Tango laughed, the harsh sound horrible and alien. "No."

"Is it... is it something to do with Sin? With his epiphany? Tell me." Miranda's hand came down on Tango's shoulder.

The changeling froze instantly. Her knife was in her hand before she thought about it. Slowly, the blade came up to rest gently against Miranda's hand. "Didn't I tell you not to touch me? Didn't you ever learn not to put your hand on the stove to see if it was hot?" The vampire didn't move. Tango looked up at the dead void of the cloud-covered sky. She sighed. "Oh, Miranda. Do you really want to know?"

Miranda hesitated. "Yes," she said finally.

"All right." Tango banished her knife and turned to look up at the vampire. They were standing in the middle of the sidewalk. Behind them was the darkened

front of a restaurant. Across the street was a firehall. The music from Club Haze whispered like a lonely phantom. "In the early seventies, Kithain fought what we call the Accordance War. Centuries ago, Arcadia — the home of the Kithain — was cut off from Earth. Most of the world's Glamour was cut off with it. Noble fae, like the sidhe, were mostly able to escape to Arcadia. Common fae, nockers, pookas, boggans and the rest, were trapped on Earth. To survive, we merged with humans and became changelings. Our society and traditions changed. All of the nonsense about kings and dukes and courts fell away, because everybody was just too busy trying to survive. Then something changed. Faeries from Arcadia started coming to Earth again. The sidhe came back." Her eyes were hard. "They saw us as peasants. Thralls. Servants. Nothing but commoners. They wanted us to bow down to them because their ancestors had ruled ours centuries ago."

"Like ancient vampires waking?"

Tango nodded sharply. "A little bit, yes. The commoners resisted the sidhe. The sidhe killed our leaders in a massacre we call the Night of Iron Knives. The struggle turned into the Accordance War."

"Who won?"

"Nobody. The sidhe learned to respect the commoners and the commoners learned to respect the sidhe. More or less." Tango took a deep breath. "I fought in the War. My name was still Shiv then. I took what I learned from Jubilee and I fought the sidhe." She spread her hands. "I don't have much magic, Miranda. I don't have the nocker talent for working with machines. I don't even have the nocker dourness: I like being around people. What magic I have is in my strength

and my speed. But I'm good with what I've got, and I was then, too. And I *hated* the sidhe. I managed to get myself assigned to an elite unit — of assassins.”

She waited for some reaction from Miranda, just as the vampire had earlier tried to prompt a reaction from her. And as before, nothing happened. The vampire was silent, looking down at her with dark eyes. Tango nodded again. “Killing probably doesn't bother you at all, does it? It didn't bother me either. Not then. I was still young. The War was like a kind of game and I got lost in it. That's why Jubilee was afraid of me. I was vicious, unstoppable. I even scared redcaps. Do you know why?”

Miranda shook her head slowly. Tango grinned at her. “Because it became my epiphany.”

The words came out as a horrible whisper. Sibilant, frightening. Mad. They echoed up out of a deep abyss, dark and terrible. There were three ways in which a Kithain could gather Glamour. Ravaging was the rape of a human's creative imagination, wrenching Glamour from them. The Reverie was what Sin had done tonight, guiding and inspiring a human to create, then reaping the Glamour that flowed from her. But the third means of gathering Glamour, Rapture, came out of a Kithain herself, out of the creativity of her own human aspect. Some Kithain could never do it. Some found it simple. Tango had been one of the latter. She had found Rapture in the art of death. She could still remember what it was like: the plotting, the stalking, the final rush, the plunge of the knife....

“Tango?”

Tango snarled, dragging herself away from the temptation of that abyss. She wasn't that person

anymore. "Take me home, Miranda." She turned and began walking toward the parking lot again.

"But what happened?" Miranda walked beside her — but more than an arm's length away.

"I gave it up. I stopped."

"Why?"

Tango had to laugh. This time, it almost felt good. "Only a vampire could ask that question." They turned into the parking lot. "Because not long before the end of the War, we found out that young sidhe were being hidden in upstate New York. My unit was sent to kill them."

Miranda froze. "And you refused?"

"I accepted. I killed five sidhe on that mission."

* * *

Tango's voice was flat. Not casual, but not repentant either. It was simply flat. Miranda stared at the changeling, shocked by her uncaring tone. Tango glanced back at her. She must have guessed at her thoughts. "I cried the tears a long time ago, Miranda. There's nothing left now." The changeling was beside the car, waiting for her. Miranda fumbled with the keys, too stunned to say anything.

Tango was more like her than she had realized. Than she could have guessed. A killer. Miranda's hands were shaking as she tried to fit the key into the lock on the car door. All of this time she had been trying to conceal her evil from Tango, trying to live up to the changeling's model. Only to discover that Tango was as evil as she was — or at least had been as evil. It frightened her, frightened her and made her feel cold.

Tango had hidden her evil, but she was no better than any vampire that Miranda had known.

The revelation left her with a terrible feeling inside, as if she were suddenly falling through darkness without any point of reference. She got the door open and slid into the car, reaching across to unlock and open the other door for Tango. "What happened?" she asked thickly as Tango got in.

Tango stared straight ahead through the windshield. "Our real targets — the children — had escaped. But I killed three sidhe knights and two old women who had been willing to sacrifice themselves to get the children away from us. When I came out of the epiphany, the rest of my unit was still stalking through the sidhe freehold. There was blood on my hands. I had chased one of the knights out into the garden. I had wounded her badly, and I thought she was trying to get away. She wasn't." Tango closed her eyes for a moment. "I found out later that she practiced Rapture, too, but her art was growing things. The gardens of the freehold belonged to her. She wanted to die there." The changeling opened her eyes again. They were as flat and empty as her voice. "She didn't. I brought her down and stabbed her in the back just before she reached them. Then I looked up and saw the gardens." She glanced at Miranda. "Drive," she suggested.

Miranda nodded and started the car. When they left the parking lot, she turned toward Jarvis Street and Riley's apartment. It seemed as appropriate a place to go as any. They could have just driven around, but suddenly Miranda wanted... no, needed a destination.

Tango kept talking. "There was a full moon that night. The gardens were beautiful. More beautiful than

anything I'd ever seen before or have ever seen since. The flowers were bursting with Glamour. There was wonder in the air and magic in the dew on the ground. The gardens drew me in. I just wandered in them for hours. Everything was fresh, everything was alive — everything except the sidhe who had created the gardens. She was dead, and her blood was mixing with the other blood under my fingernails. And the gardens were starting to die as well. No one else could have done with them what she had. The plants might live, but the Glamour would slowly fade away. I started to wonder about the other sidhe I had killed. What had I taken out of the world?" She leaned back against the headrest. "Just before dawn I picked a rosebud. It smelled so sweet, and the Glamour in it... that's when I cried, Miranda. I walked away from that garden and my unit. I left behind Shiv's life. I swore that I would never kill again. Nobody ever knew what happened to the assassin that even the redcaps were afraid of. Everything was in chaos because of the War, so it was easy to reintroduce myself. I created a new identity. I tried to be like I was before the War, before I had met Jubilee. Just another young Kithain enjoying the world."

She laughed bitterly and Miranda glanced at her. She was looking out the window at a group of young people coming out of a club, happy and clowning around. "It didn't work. I had done too much. I couldn't go back. All of the skills, all of the rage, all of those moments of epiphany. The Rapture of death. I had to fight them. Every moment of life with the Kithain became a hell. When the others wanted to play a prank on a bunch of humans, I thought twice about it. What

would it be like for the humans? Any epiphany brought back memories of Rapture.” Tango touched her chest. “I couldn’t get rid of it all, so I buried it. Buried it under layers of control, and promised myself that I would never touch it again. I tried to play the games of the Kithain for as long as I could, trying to forget. But it wouldn’t go away. So I did. I left the Kithain behind, except for a few special friends like Riley that I saw from time to time. I kept the darkness under control. Sometimes I did even manage to forget about it. I could be strong when I had to be, and violent, but it was always on my terms.”

“Until now,” Miranda murmured.

“Until now. I might have been all right being around Kithain again if Riley had been here. I might have been all right trying to find Riley if the other Kithain weren’t around. But together — and with Jubilee involved — it’s too much. It’s all coming back. Everything is eating away at my control, and I know that I’m going to lose it. I’m afraid of what might happen when I do.” She sighed. “You know, the sidhe still hunt for Shiv. I’m still wanted. And there are commoner extremists who idolize me.”

Miranda turned onto Jarvis. This sounded like the Tango she was familiar with, the one whom she wanted as her friend. But underneath was Shiv. Dark, cruel, reveling in her evil. Too much like Miranda herself. “Why are you telling me this, Tango?” she breathed.

“Because you wanted to know.” They came to a stop in front of Riley’s apartment and Tango turned to look at her. “And because I had to tell someone.” She smiled, weak and weary, but triumphant. Like a warrior who had fought the battle of a lifetime and survived. “I’ve

never told anyone this before, Miranda. Not even Riley.”

Except you had to tell me, didn't you? Miranda's guts felt like they had been turned inside out. *Oh, Tango.* She felt like stepping into the shadows and disappearing. But Tango was watching her, and she knew that the changeling was waiting for a reaction, the same sort of reaction that Miranda had sought from her earlier. Acceptance of what she was. Hesitantly, she patted Tango's shoulder comfortingly. "It's okay, Tango." She wiped a finger across her own lips. "It's a secret."

The changeling smiled. She put her hand over Miranda's. "I knew I could trust you, Miranda."

Miranda wasn't sure what triggered the sudden plummet of her heart down into her belly: the terrible irony of Tango's words or the sudden, startling appearance of Tolly as he swarmed over the hood of the car and plastered his face against the glass of the windshield. Tango shouted and brought her knife into her hand. Miranda almost screamed herself.

Matt opened the door beside her and leaned down to leer in her face. "Hellloooo, baby."

She hissed at him in anger, her fangs already visible, claws sprouting unconsciously from her fingertips. "What are you doing here, Matt?"

"Us? We just ended up here after our hunt over on Yonge Street tonight and our prey... decided to go for a little run on the way." He grinned. "However, I might ask you the same question."

The hunt on Yonge. Tonight's penny murder. Here? But they should have committed the murder hours ago. Had they been waiting for her? Miranda forced her sudden terror away. "None of your business."

Blue had squatted down beside the passenger window. Tango was watching him carefully. Miranda noticed that she still had her knife ready. "This is your pack, I take it?" the changeling asked.

"Yes. Matt, Tolly, Blue — Tango."

Matt narrowed his eyes as he examined the changeling with his supernatural senses. "Interesting. What is she?"

"That's none of your business either." Tango pushed her door open, forcing Blue back out of the way. "I'll see you, Miranda."

"Wait a minute." If the pack had committed Solomon's murder here, the body — bodies because it was supposed to be a double murder tonight — could be anywhere around. Maybe in Riley's apartment. How had they known? The paper from her pocket, she realized. The one with Tango's address. Tolly *had* read it last night when he was in her room. And he had seen Miranda with Tango that first night at Hopeful. Whatever Tango had just told her, Miranda was still sure that she didn't want the changeling to know the truth about the penny murders. Miranda got out of the car as well, shoving Matt to one side and grabbing Tolly angrily. The mad vampire came away from the windshield with a sound like a suction cup. "Where are they?" she hissed quietly.

"Abl-abl-abl," he jabbered. His stretched lips flapped grotesquely. Miranda threw him aside with a snarl.

"Um, Miranda," said Tango, "why don't I just give you a call tomorrow?" She was looking down at the ground by the alley between the two halves of Riley's apartment building. Miranda almost choked. There were dark, bloody footprints on the sidewalk, smearing

in the light drizzle of the rain. The pack's footprints, and they led back into the alley. "This is obviously a pack thing."

Tolly grinned, his face snapping back to its normal shape, and went scampering into the shadows of the alley like some giant feral cat. Tango turned to look after him.

"No!"

Miranda started around the car, but Matt caught her shoulder. "She's not going to be able to call you without this, is she?" He slapped the cellular phone into her hand and smiled. "We had a talk with Solomon tonight. He's not very pleased with you — for leaving the phone behind, among other things."

Miranda let the phone slip out of her hand and fall to the ground. She wrenched herself away from Matt and leaped toward Tango. But the changeling was already peering down the dark alley. She froze. Miranda slowed and stopped. Tolly was crouching on some trash cans like a thin, demented angel on a graveyard memorial. Laid out beneath him were the night's victims, a man and a woman, their broken arms crossed over their battered chests, bright copper laid on their bruised eyes.

"It's you," Tango whispered in a gravelly voice. "You're the ones committing the penny murders."

"Tango." Miranda reached for her, but stopped. What would happen if she touched the changeling now? Tango's hand was wrapped tight around the handle of her knife. Her shoulders were tense. She spat into the blood on the ground. Once. Twice. Miranda let her hands drop. "I..."

"Don't say you didn't know." Tango spun around to

face her. Her features were twisted savagely. "That's why you had to come late to Atlanta's. That's why you were at Hopeful. You killed Todd! You killed all of them!"

"I..."

"Why?" Tango howled. "Why? I told you the murders disgusted me, and you didn't say anything." She sliced out with her knife. Miranda jumped back. "I told you everything, and you told me nothing!"

"Tango, we had to do it!" Miranda crouched, backing away, frightened. *I'm going to lose it*, Tango had said. *I'm afraid of what might happen when I do*. Now she had lost control — and Miranda was afraid. "We had to!"

"Had to? No. Had to would mean you fed from them. But you didn't, did you? You didn't feed from them. You beat them to death! You didn't *have* to do it."

"You didn't have to kill sidhe, did you?" Miranda shouted in her own defense.

She said the words without thinking. It was utterly the wrong thing to say. She regretted it instantly. Tango's eyes went narrow. She hurled herself at the vampire. In a second, Miranda was fighting for her life, meeting the changeling with claws and fangs. But Tango was fast. She stepped in and dodged out, slashing with her knife. She forced Miranda back. The pack was whooping and yelling in the background. A long cut burned across Miranda's forearm as she tried to block a blow. She slipped down to one knee.

The pack was silent suddenly. Tango brought her knife up.

Miranda summoned the shadows desperately. Darkness swooped in, black as the pit of her soul. Tango screamed — the shadows wouldn't stop her. She still

knew where Miranda was. Or rather, she knew where Miranda had been. Miranda threw herself to one side. The changeling's knife swept down without meeting resistance, putting Tango off balance. Miranda scrambled to her feet and fled, her heart suddenly hollow.

Tango's rage followed her into the night.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*At twilight, halted by the brook:
And for the first time in her life
Began to listen and look.*

The bright sunlight of midafternoon came streaming down on Tango's face. She groaned, first flinging an arm across her face in an effort to block it out, then rolling over and burying her face in the pillows of Riley's bed. Trying to go back to sleep. The stresses of the morning and the night before had exhausted her.

After Miranda had run away, Tango, still riding the wave of her anger, had turned to the other vampires and advanced on them. The vampire in the leather jacket — Matt — had taken one look at her, then called the others off. A smart move. The pack had piled quickly into Miranda's car and gotten it going, either through the luck of Miranda's keys in the ignition or a quick hotwire. Tango had been left behind on the curb, screaming her anger at them. She had thrown Miranda's fallen cellular phone after them, hurling it hard enough to send it crashing through the rear window of the car. And then she had sat down on the curb, head in her unsteady hands, and slowly pushed back her terrible rage.

She felt betrayed. Miranda had lied to her. Tango

had thought that she could trust the vampire. She had seemed so different from other vampires that Tango had known. Eager. Vulnerable. That Miranda had been part of the penny murders the whole time sickened her. That she had thrown the secret of Tango's own past back in her teeth disgusted her even more.

Her anger and lust for the vampire's death had felt good.

Tango shivered. It was almost as it had been in those first years after she had stopped being Shiv. She wanted the Rapture so badly it almost seemed like her need was trying to take control of her body. She locked the Rapture away once more, reminding herself of her promise. She wouldn't kill again. *Ah, her soul whispered, but wouldn't it be nice, too?* Those dark desires seethed beneath her skin.

She had walked over to the mouth of the alley, forcing herself to look at the couple that the vampires had murdered. They were beaten to death, their facial features virtually unrecognizable. That was death. Ugly. Not transcendent. Not beautiful. There was no Glamour in it. *Because it wasn't done right.* Tango had gritted her teeth and looked up at the apartment windows that faced into the alley. They were dark. No one was stirring. Could everyone really have slept through the murders and the fight? If they hadn't, could they really have been ignoring them so coldly? She had gone inside to call the police from Riley's apartment, then back outside to wait for them and to keep watch over the murder scene.

It had taken the arrival of the cruisers and ambulances to bring the apartment building to life. The police had strung yellow plastic tape everywhere,

dropping the big rolls over their nightsticks so they could unwind them more easily. Officers had started going door-to-door inside. Detectives had sat Tango down inside a van and she had told them her story — or at least the story that she'd figured out while she was waiting for them to arrive.

She had been out with friends. They had dropped her off farther up the block. She had been walking into the building when she had seen the bloody footprints on the ground and heard arguing from the alley. She had seen a woman and three men. And the bodies. She had hidden until they were gone, the woman running away and the men driving off. Then she had called the police.

It was a simple story, and plausible. There were no heroic confrontations, no claims to have seen the murder itself. No mention that the murderers were vampires, of course. Tango was pleased with the story. She had debated whether she should tell the police anything at all or just phone in the murder as an anonymous report. In the end, she had gone with the story, if for no other reason than that it gave her a chance for some revenge on the vampires. Now the police would have accurate descriptions of the murderers, and even if they didn't catch the vampires — Tango sincerely doubted that they would — the descriptions would make things very difficult for Miranda and her pack.

The detectives believed her completely. They had taken her down to the division offices as soon as the story was out of her mouth. She had repeated it again and again, for every conceivable purpose, staying as close to the original story as possible. When all of the

detectives and investigators working on the case seemed satisfied, she gave an official statement. When all the forms had been signed and oaths sworn, she had sat down with a police artist to create composite pictures on a computer. Miranda had been too easy to describe. Tango was surprised and a little disgusted that she could remember so many details of the other woman's face. Matt and Blue were more difficult. Tolly was the hardest of all because his face had seemed so inhuman. All she could really remember was long blond hair and a pierced tongue. The police artist had seemed satisfied anyway. "You've given us more than anyone else so far."

"Anyone else? There have been other witnesses?"

"Just a few people who saw strangers with the victims or in the area." The artist had smiled. "You didn't hear any of that from me, though. The detectives warned you not to talk about this with anybody, right?" Tango had nodded. "Don't forget that."

Tango had almost laughed. Who was she going to tell? And why should she? The truth was far stranger than anything the police could have believed.

It had been almost noon by the time the police had finished with her and said she could leave. They had had to let her out through the entrance to the division's underground parking garage; the street in front of the division offices was a mass of protesters. Not just gay activists this time, but a cross-section of Toronto's population. Word of the double murder was out, and people were more frightened and nervous than ever. So were the police. The young constable who had escorted her out of the division advised her not to hang around the area too long.

"Expecting another riot?"

He had nodded and brushed a hand through his close-cropped hair. "Not even the veterans can remember seeing things this bad. If we don't get a major breakthrough on this soon...." He exhaled loudly. "I was in the crowds when the Jays won the World Series the first time. That was friendly. If the murders keep up for another couple of days, I think we could be seeing something on the same scale, but not friendly at all."

Tango had taken his advice, not out of concern for her safety, but out of sheer exhaustion. There had been a small crowd of thrillseekers outside the apartment, gawking at the yellow tape, when she had gotten back. Inside, she had flicked on the noon-hour news for just a moment as she undressed and showered. One television station had been carrying a live feed of the restless crowd outside of the division offices. The newscaster had been making the same predictions for the future that the constable had. Another channel was showing scenes of the alley outside Riley's building as the murder victims were taken away, the newscaster reporting that the police were allegedly interviewing a witness. Tango herself, of course. The gray-haired commentator on a third station had been sanctimoniously lamenting the loss of decency, morals and manners in Toronto the Good. Disgusted, Tango had switched him off in the middle of his diatribe, walked into the bedroom, pulled down the shades, and fallen into bed.

The sun was warm on her back, but she *had* pulled down the shades.

She came back to full alertness instantly. Someone had been in the apartment. Someone *was* in the apartment. Tango could hear them moving around. She

could also smell coffee, eggs and bacon. Pulling on the first pieces of clothing that her hands encountered, she slipped out of bed and over to the door of the bedroom. From there she could see into the kitchen. And she could see the plump, older Kithain who was bustling around between the cupboards and the stove.

“Epp!” she snarled loudly.

The boggan jumped, then tried desperately to recover her composure. “Good afternoon, Tango.” She reached for a pot of coffee. “I don’t suppose you’ve had anything to eat today, have you?” The pot shook in her unsteady hand.

Tango stalked into the kitchen, striving to keep the worst part of her anger at bay. The kitchen was spotless. Every surface, from sink to counter to floor, gleamed brightly. Colorful flowers were arranged in an old wine bottle. There was toast in the toaster, an omelette in a frying pan, and bacon keeping warm in the oven. On the table, a single perfect orange shone in a ray of sunlight like some rogue advertisement for Florida. There was a place set at the table, as well. Epp picked up a mug and poured steaming coffee into it. She offered the mug to Tango.

Tango’s gut reaction was to slap the mug out of her hand. She took a deep breath, however, forcing her anger away, and accepted the coffee brusquely instead. She glared at the other Kithain. “How many times do I have to tell you to stay away?”

“I’m sorry,” Epp said meekly. Tango blinked and looked at her in surprise. She hardly sounded like the same person. “But if you’d check your answering machine a little more often, you would have gotten my message saying that I was coming over this afternoon.

You have to pay for some more things for Highsummer Night. You didn't seem particularly fond of Dex last time, so I arranged to borrow a car and leave him to his own business. Now, why don't you just sit down and eat before your breakfast gets cold, hmm?" She had pulled out a chair and slipped the omelette expertly onto a plate before the nocker could even blink again.

Tango looked at the boggan suspiciously. "What do you want, Epp?"

"Me?" Epp paused in the middle of taking a plate of crisp bacon out of the oven. "I wanted to try and make amends for getting off on the wrong foot. Two strips or three?" She considered Tango's tense form, then decided, "Four. Healthy girl like you..."

"Epp, you want something. I can't believe that you would be making me breakfast — or lunch, or brunch, or whatever this is — if you didn't." She didn't mention that the thought of poison had crossed her mind; she didn't think that even Epp held that much of a grudge against her.

Toast popped up and Epp added it to the table as well, along with a little white bowl of butter. "Try this. I make it myself. Butter-making is a lost art."

"Epp..." Tango threatened quietly.

Epp bit her lip nervously. "Will you at least promise to listen to me?"

"I'll promise not to throw you out of the apartment right now!" Epp looked forlornly at the meal she had prepared. Tango growled and sat down at the table. "All right." She picked up a fork and cut into the omelette. Melted cheese and bright peppers burst out. Tango barely noticed. "What do you want? I'm not in a good mood."

"It's not what I want. It's what Duke Michael wants. He's asked for a report on the state of preparations for Highsummer."

"So give it to him."

"I can't!" Epp wailed. "You don't understand the etiquette of his court. The Jester is supposed to be organizing the party, so the Jester has to give the report." Tango snorted. Epp practically collapsed into the chair across the table from her. "Please!" she begged. "You have to do this for me. I'm so close. Highsummer is only two days away!"

Was it really? Had she been in Toronto for five days already? Tango ate some of the omelette idly, almost mechanically. It had been five days. Only five days, in spite of all that had happened. Five days over which Miranda had built up her trust before betraying her. Tango gritted her teeth. Her anger was still too close to the surface. She didn't want to go to court and face Duke Michael and the rest of the sidhe like this. Or at all. But... Tango looked speculatively at Epp. The boggan was smoothing the surface of her homemade butter with a knife, nervously molding it into a perfect plane, then whipping it up and starting again. Tango had another opportunity to do something that might help find Riley. Not much of an opportunity, but something. She would be an idiot to let it slip past her. "I want you to do something for me in return," she said.

Epp looked up with desperate gratitude. "I'll even remove the curse if you want!"

Tango had to laugh. The boggan's curse was the least of her worries, unless Riley was now outside of Metro Toronto. She hoped he wasn't. "You must have some kind of contact network, don't you?" Epp looked blank.

Tango tried rephrasing her words. "A grapevine? A rumor mill?"

"I have a few friends."

"How much do they see? Beyond the usual neighborhood gossip stuff, that is." Tango took the butterknife from Epp's hand and spread some butter on a piece of cooling toast. "I want to find someone."

Epp's eyes went narrow. "Not Riley?"

Tango sighed. "No, not Riley, so you won't be going against any of the duke's orders." Not directly at least. If Epp's contacts — and maybe the contacts of any other Kithain she could get the boggan to involve — could locate Jubilee, however, Tango had some more questions to ask her former friend. She bit into her toast savagely. She might even be willing to let herself use some of the old skills she had neglected for so long....

No. She wasn't going to do that. The toast, suddenly dry, stuck in her throat, and she reached for her coffee to wash it down. She needed to stay calm, particularly if she was going to walk into the duke's court. It had been bad enough the last time she was there, but with her old anger so near the surface, it was sure to be even more stressful. And this time, she had to stay calm. For Riley's sake. Eyes on her plate, temper under tight control, she described Jubilee and what she remembered of his habits. Anything that might help locate him. When she was finished, she glanced up at Epp. "Well?" she asked.

Epp seemed upset. "It would take time. I couldn't do it all today, and the duke wants his report."

Tango's face twisted in annoyance. "You don't have to get results today, just as long as you promise to do it. If you do that, I'll do your report."

"And make the payments I need?"

"And make the payments," Tango sighed. She might find Riley yet. Epp beamed happily.

"I..." she began.

A police car roared past on the street outside, siren blaring. Another followed close behind it. Tango just caught the flashing of the second car's lights as she glanced up. Her stomach knotted suddenly. What was happening in the city now? "Wait," she told Epp. "I want you to ask your friends about someone else. A woman. A vampire."

Epp made an expression of distaste. "Most of my friends wouldn't know a vampire if one bit them. You're asking for quite a bit."

"So are you. Tell your friends that she's an ordinary woman."

Epp hesitated, then nodded. "All right. I promise."

Tango swilled down the last of her coffee. "I'll get dressed. We'll make the payments, then go give the duke his report." She smiled, mostly to herself. If she could find Jubilee, she might be able to find Riley. If she could find Miranda, she might be able to put a stop to the vampires' murderous spree.

* * *

With the setting of the sun, Miranda opened her eyes. She could feel dried blood on her face — the remains of the red tears she had been crying when the sun had risen and sent her into the oblivion of sleep. She had held the tears back as she ran through the streets of Toronto last night, only letting them flow freely when she had reached the safety of her

hiding place.

Years ago, she had felt like the University of Toronto was the best place in the world. She had been happy there. She had felt safe, cuddled in the arms of academia. The Sabbat had snatched her early in the evening from a broad, well-lit path within sight of a fairly busy street and several university residences. The illusion of safety had shattered along with her mortal life. The Sabbat had taken half a dozen of them from the campus that night: her as she walked, Blue as he left the gym, Tolly as he practiced in the faculty of music building, Matt and two others as they reeled back, drunk, from a pub. Matt's two friends hadn't survived the Sabbat's Creation Rites. There was no safety anywhere, she knew now. It was the same lesson that Solomon was teaching Toronto. There was no safety from the shadows.

But there was still something about the university that called out to Miranda. When she had fled from Tango and the pack, she had gone back to the university, to the big research library. All of the lower doors and windows were locked tight at night and connected to an alarm system, of course, but that was nothing to her. Unnatural strength had carried her up the rough surface of the building's exterior to office windows on the sixth floor. There were no alarms here. She had shattered a window casually and slipped inside. Then she had climbed up into the dark, windowless depths of the book stacks. In an obscure, dusty corner, she had wrapped the shadows around herself, cried tears of blood, and waited for sunrise.

For a moment after she first woke, the still, dark air felt so much like the grave of the Creation Rites that

Miranda instinctively lashed out, trying to dig for the surface and freedom. Those vampires who dug their way out of their own graves were judged fit to become Sabbat. The lack of resistance to her claws brought her all the way back to herself, however. Flustered, she shrank back into the shadows for a moment, looking around to see if anyone had seen her.

There didn't seem to be anyone nearby. The lights were still on, however; the library was still open. At least she wouldn't have to break any windows to get out tonight. She could just walk away. There were bound to be students around somewhere, though, and staff at the checkout desk by the doors. She would have to clean her face before she could leave. Luckily, there was a bathroom only one floor up, and she had to duck back to avoid being seen by students only once.

Miranda scrubbed at her face with cold water and cheap, pink liquid soap that smelled like faded roses and felt like slime. She scrubbed until the only pink that stained the water in the sink came from the soap. Her black clothes were gray with clinging dust. She brushed at herself futilely, then decided that no one would notice. Only she would know where the gray dust had come from. She rode an elevator calmly down to the ground floor, then walked out of the library.

It was another hot night, and early enough that there should have been people on the streets. There was almost no one, however. The people who were out walked quickly, heads up, hands gripping books and bags tightly, nervously alert. Everyone else must have been inside, afraid of the penny murderer. Miranda bit her tongue. Tonight the pack was supposed to kill someone who had stayed indoors, supposedly safe behind a

security system.

It was also the night for the Bandog ritual, she realized, the one at which Solomon would keep his promise to tell her and the rest of the Bandog the true purpose behind the murders. The reason why he was terrifying Toronto.

Miranda wasn't sure she could face that ritual. She wasn't sure she could face the Bandog or Solomon. Or the rest of the pack. Or Tango. Definitely not Tango. Her head ached whenever she thought about the changeling. Tango had shocked and disappointed her with the revelations about her dark past, but hadn't she shocked and disappointed Tango more? Or wouldn't she have, had Tango found out everything? As it was, Tango only knew that Miranda was one of the murderers she so despised. She didn't know that Miranda had also betrayed her to Jubilee Arthurs, or that she was intimately connected with the man who had ordered Riley kidnapped. A lot of the ache in her head, Miranda realized, was her own disappointment with herself.

She closed her eyes and wavered on her feet. She should feed. Blood would wash away the doubts, or at least blot them out. An image of the changeling called Sin and the woman he had danced with last night came back to Miranda suddenly. They had looked so enraptured... and Tango had looked so terribly, frighteningly like them when she had talked about enjoying her former life as an assassin. Miranda shuddered, walking down the block and trying to forget the flicker of hungry joy that had crossed the changeling's face. She should feed.

There was a young woman walking alone in the early evening on a broad, well-lit path within sight of a fairly

busy street and several university residences.

Miranda walked toward her. The vampire's head was raised, ready to strike, predatory. All she had to do was glance into the woman's eyes and the woman would follow her willingly, would let her drink willingly. Might even die willingly. It would be good. Miranda was hungry. She had fed only a little last night, a fast, brief drink from the veins of the man at Jubilee Arthurs' house. She would be able to take her time with the young woman, feeding slowly. She remembered Sin and the dancing woman.

She remembered the assassin's shadow that had crossed Tango's face last night, not once, but twice. Outside Club Haze when she had confessed to her past. And outside Riley's apartment when the changeling had seen the pack's victims, then turned on Miranda.

Did she look like that now?

The young woman was ten feet from Miranda and they were approaching each other rapidly. It would be simple. She had nothing to fear. Wasn't she Sabbat, the ultimate predator, the ultimate evil? Wasn't she an infernalist, feared even by the Sabbat for what she was willing to do for power?

Miranda readied herself. One glance. They were almost facing each other. She could almost taste the sweet richness of the other woman's blood. She pushed herself deeper into the warm, red memories of past feedings. Last night, outside Jubilee Arthurs' house, Miranda had been embarrassed by those memories, afraid of exposing her inhumanity to Tango. Now she wallowed in them, reveling in her inhumanity. It was her strength.

She glanced at the other woman.

Tango had finally seen her inhumanity. She had attacked it.

The other woman froze. Miranda decided not to take her anywhere. She would feed here, on the path where she had herself first encountered the Sabbat.

Tango could not accept her own inhumanity — she had enjoyed killing once, too. Who was she to judge Miranda?

Miranda swept the woman's hair back from her neck. Smooth skin shone in the lamplight, the woman's rapid pulse making the shadow under her jaw quiver and wink. Miranda's fangs descended.

Inhuman. This was the vampire's nature. To feed from the cattle of humanity.

She bit down into the woman's neck. Hot blood filled her mouth, filled her body, filled her soul with a hard, greedy pleasure. Miranda gnawed at the woman's throat, desperate for more. The blood erased all doubts of her nature. The woman in her embrace shuddered. A vampire was inhuman. It existed to feed.

But what had Tango pointed out? The murders that the pack had committed for Solomon were beatings. None of the victims had been bitten. None of the vampires had fed. What nature was there in that? The blood in her mouth tasted suddenly stale.

What was Tango rejecting in Miranda? She had always known that Miranda was a vampire. She had always known what that meant. Killing to survive. Tango had pushed away her ability to kill because she didn't have to kill. But she had accepted that she could kill. She simply chose not to. She had recognized her inhumanity — and controlled it.

Miranda rushed eagerly into its arms.

She could feel the heartbeat of the nameless human woman whom she held. It was growing weaker. The woman would die if she kept feeding. Miranda had her blood. Did she have to take her life?

Miranda pushed the woman away, licking her wounds to seal them. She left her lying on the path and walked away, back toward the street at the path's end. She was about halfway there when a black sedan stopped at the curb. David got out and walked briskly around to open the passenger-side rear door. Solomon gestured to her from the back seat. She went to him.

"Miranda." Solomon wore only a T-shirt and shorts tonight, very different from his typically fashionable clothing. He would change later for the Bandog ritual, but even so it looked as though he had dressed quickly. Miranda slid in to sit next to him. David shut the car door behind her. Solomon just looked at her, then produced a white handkerchief and wiped her victim's blood from her face. "Miranda, where have you been going with this changeling woman?"

How did Solomon know about Tango? Matt had said something about talking to the mage the night before, Miranda remembered abruptly. The pack must have told Solomon. She felt detached from herself, sated by the feeding, wearied by her own confusion. Only part of her was here in the sedan with Solomon. Another part was still on the path with the unconscious woman. A third part, she realized, was wondering if it wasn't too late to find Tango again, confess everything and beg her for forgiveness. It would mean betraying the Bandog, but what part of herself had she not already betrayed at Solomon's command?

"Miranda?" Solomon asked her again.

She gave him a false smile. "Tango's a pawn," she lied, the same lie she had told to herself once. "Someone to be manipulated when I have the need."

"I see." The car swayed ever so slightly as David pulled back out into the street. They turned a corner. A set of iron gates, with a fountain bubbling in the courtyard behind them, were framed momentarily in the window over Solomon's shoulder. He smiled back at her and held out his wrist for her to kiss his chain tattoo. She did, although this time she didn't turn his arm over to lick at his inner wrist. It hardly seemed necessary, though. Solomon had already seized her left hand and begun kissing his way up her arm. Miranda allowed him to do so. Cool detachment came easily to her tonight — detached because her mind was already distant, cool because she wished that she were somewhere else. Anywhere else. With Tango.

The sensation of Solomon's lips brought a little sharpness back to her mind, however. Perhaps she could persuade Solomon to tell her why he had had Riley kidnapped. That information might make Tango a little more willing to listen to her. "Solomon..."

The Nephandus sighed and twisted down so that he lay with his head in her lap. "You didn't answer me, Miranda. Where have you been going with Tango?"

"Out." She brushed her hand through Solomon's hair, raking her fingernails lightly along his skin in the way that she knew he liked. "Things she liked to do. We went to a movie. We broke into a museum."

"Did you go to the airport for her?"

Miranda kept her hand moving, sliding from Solomon's hair to his chest. "No. I went to the airport to feed. I told you that."

"Were you with Tango last night?"

"I took her hunting with me."

"When you should have been hunting for the Bandog?" Solomon looked up at her and smiled. "Don't worry. The murders were still carried out. Matt is good." He brought a hand, the one not holding the bloody handkerchief, up to caress a strand of her hair. "I looked for you tonight. You weren't with the pack. You weren't in the apartment where the changeling woman is staying. I finally found you in a library." His fingers slipped free of her hair. She slid a hand under his shirt to brush his smooth, muscular chest. Solomon's eyes closed dreamily. "Matt said you ran from her. Why?"

Miranda could feel her fangs descending again, but out of fear, not hunger, this time. Why so many questions? Was Solomon jealous? "I was..."

"You were frightened of her? You, the fierce vampire? The strong vampire?" He caught the hand that was down his shirt and pushed her nails into his skin. Five droplets of blood stained the thin fabric of his T-shirt. Solomon held her nails in his flesh for a heartbeat, then released her, reaching up to touch her firmly closed lips. He pressed against the skin over her fangs. Miranda sat like a statue.

How could he have guessed at that?

"I'm right, aren't I?" he asked. "You were afraid that Tango might find out what a beast you are."

And how had he known that Tango was a changeling? Matt had known something was odd about Tango, but neither Tango nor Miranda had mentioned changelings. A tremor traveled down Miranda's spine as Solomon's finger trailed from her lips to her breast, then farther down. *Jubilee Arthurs*, she realized too late.

Solomon's head turned to nuzzle her crotch through her black pants as she hesitated. The mercenary must have gone straight to Solomon and told him everything. In combination with what the pack must have told him... Solomon knew it all.

Miranda looked down at the squirming mage in her lap, blood on his shirt, one hand caressing his own crotch as he worried at hers. He was playing games with her, just as he played games with Toronto, using the penny murders like moves in a chess match. It was too much. She wanted to know what had happened to Riley. Tango might forgive her then. The changeling played no games. Miranda glanced at the back of David's head, then at the rearview mirror. Her eyes met his in the reflection. He was watching them. No matter. She had observed once that when she was so intimately close to Solomon, there was nothing, not even his own magick, that could react quickly enough to prevent anything she chose to do to him.

She gripped his head, bending it back so his neck was exposed, and folded her torso like a contortionist. His pulse hammered under her fingers, but it wasn't fangs that would be her weapon. She brought her gaze to bear against Solomon's, her will as strong as her fingers and ready for any resistance. Forceful eyes stared into startled eyes. Miranda's will licked out, as soft a caress as if she had been licking his wrist with her tongue....

Solomon's hand, the one that held the bloodied handkerchief, clenched once. Convulsively. Something popped. The stink of garlic tickled Miranda's nose for a fraction of a second — then a raging fire seemed to sweep through every vein and

capillary in her undead body.

She couldn't help shrieking out loud and writhing in agony. She had been wrong about how quickly the mage could react! Solomon pushed himself away from her and sat up. His face was cold with anger. Slowly, he opened the handkerchief to reveal the clove of garlic he had hidden inside it. The crushed clove was red with the same stolen blood that burned in her body. "I was only going to paralyze you as I did Matt and the others that time, but you lied to me, Miranda," he said thinly. "And you were going to try to force your will on me." He seized her hair and yanked her helpless head back viciously. The fire of his magick abated a bit. "Never mistake submission for weakness. Where's Tango?"

The control that she had imagined she had over the mage had all been an illusion. She had never had any control, any power. "I... don't know."

"You must," Solomon snarled. "She hasn't been at Riley Stanton's apartment all night, and I can't use my magick to find someone I don't know!" He considered her face. "I don't have time to keep this up all night. I have a ritual to conduct. Tell me."

"I don't know!"

Solomon snarled. "I suppose that makes a certain sense, since you did run away from her last night like some kind of frightened rat. Do you know where she could have gone?"

"No!" Solomon looked at her narrowly, then kneaded the handkerchief a little more. The burning in her blood redoubled in intensity. Miranda howled and curled up into a little ball. "Solomon..." she pleaded.

"You've been replaced, Miranda. In my favor as well

as in the Bandog.”

Miranda could only stay huddled in agony until she felt the car come to a stop. David got out and opened the door for Solomon. Then he reached into the car and dragged her out as well.

They were parked behind Solomon’s mansion. Three figures were silhouetted by a yard light beside the mansion’s back door. They came forward. Matt, Miranda realized with pain-filled clarity, and Blue, and a third, tall and thin... not Tolly, though. Jubilee Arthurs. The mercenary approached Solomon, but Solomon shoved him away with a muttered curse. Instead, the mage went to Matt. The glance that passed between them told Miranda who had replaced her. She knew that Matt would be reveling in his newfound “power.” Jubilee glared at Solomon’s back, then came over and went through Miranda’s pockets, looking for his Bandog chain. Weak, Miranda spat at him and tried to struggle, but Jubilee just held her down. He found the chain.

“Traitor!” she hissed at him.

“Me? Be careful with that word, Miranda.” He stood smugly and walked away.

“Has Tolly come yet?” Solomon was asking Matt. Matt shook his head and Solomon cursed quietly. Miranda almost felt like smiling: the powerful mage apparently had as much trouble locating the mad vampire as any of them did. Perhaps some stray thread of that brief, rebellious thought reached Solomon, because he glanced back at her. He gestured at her shortly, as though she were little more than furniture. “Pick her up. I’ll show you where to put her.” He smiled briefly in a way that Miranda had never seen before:

cold, certain, ambitious, almost demonic. Inhuman. Matt and Blue moved to obey his command without questioning it in the slightest. A smile did flicker across Matt's face as he lifted her shoulder — a smile of anticipation as inhuman as Solomon's.

The Nephandus mage led the way into the house. David held the back door open so the procession could pass through. When he looked down at the helpless vampire, his expression was absolutely neutral. It was almost eerie to watch the ceilings of Solomon's house pass above her. Miranda wasn't sure she had ever really noticed their detailed plasterwork before. The old white relief designs were oddly beautiful. Solomon finally stopped by the door that led into his study. He toyed with a trailing lock of Miranda's hair, just as he had in the car. "I'll see you after the Bandog ritual. I'll have questions for you." He glanced at the vampires carrying her. "Make sure she's willing — and able — to answer them. Then go do tonight's penny murders. Three victims, scattered across the city. Do it as quickly as you can, so that the times of death are close together. And find Tolly. I want all three of you back here for the ritual."

* * *

Duke Michael had accused her of lying.

It wasn't the fact that the arrogant sidhe lord had done so — after all, she *had* been lying when she made her report on the progress of plans for the Highsummer party. But Epp had coached her well as they drove around Toronto prior to attending the duke at his court. So well that at times Tango had wanted to strangle the

fat Kithain. She had taken deep breaths, reminding herself that she needed Epp's help now, and then she had committed the boggan's elaborate plans to heart, from sunset serenade to midnight feast to sunrise fireworks display. Tango had stood before the duke, recited Epp's plans, claimed them dutifully as her own... and the duke had seen right through the ruse.

Tango could have handled that. She could have protested. She could have held back her frustration with the sidhe lord's high-handed ways. Except that Duke Michael hadn't even given her an opportunity to protest or defend her actions. He had simply accused her, then carried out her sentence: she was to be reminded of the role of a Jester. She would amuse the court until the moon rose. Once again his pool cue had been transformed into a rod of office.

And Tango had found herself twittering like a schoolgirl, telling off-color jokes and tumbling acrobatically around the court.

It was humiliating.

Only a few of the Kithain, she had noticed, did not laugh. Among them were Epp and Sin, Epp looking shocked, Sin looking blackly grim. Dex had laughed uproariously, trading slaps to the back with Duke Michael. Tango also noticed that Epp wasn't punished. All of the blame fell on her. When control over her own limbs and voice had returned to her, she had barely been able to contain her killing anger. She had stumbled out of the court, up the narrow stairway — even Ruby dared not confront her, not even to provide voiceless sympathy — and onto the streets of Yorkville. The moon had been just above the horizon, a fat silver blade in the hot night sky. She had walked back to

Riley's apartment, almost hoping that someone would pick a fight with her.

Now she leaned her head against Riley's door and sighed wearily. She only hoped that Epp had had more success tonight than she'd had. She turned the key in the lock, swinging open the door.

The lights in the apartment were on. Tolly, Miranda's mad vampire, was sitting precisely in the middle of the couch and staring expectantly at the door, his hands folded in his lap, his knees pressed together.

Tango froze for three heartbeats, scanning the room. There was no sign of Miranda or the rest of the Sabbat pack. Her hand clenched on a fourth heartbeat, and her knife appeared in her grip. On the fifth heartbeat, she stalked toward Tolly, slowly, carefully, holding back with a cool resolve the desire to kill. There were ways to disable even vampires without killing them. If she had had a sharp piece of wood, she would have been more than willing to immobilize him with a stake through the heart. Such a staking wasn't fatal, just paralyzing. She spat twice, slowly, and let Glamour fill her, invigorating energy lending her the speed and strength that those ways would require.

Tolly watched her come. He did nothing. He didn't move. He didn't even blink. Tango stopped a little more than a pace from him. The vampire's silent stillness was eerie. "What—" she began, but Tolly cut her off.

"I didn't mean for it to happen this way." Tolly's face jumped in a sudden tic, but the rest of his body remained perfectly still. "I didn't."

Tango's eyes narrowed. "You didn't mean for what to happen this way, Tolly?" His words were as calm as his body, and sincere. Tango kept her knife up, however,

ready for anything.

“All of this. Miranda scared, you angry. I’m sorry. But you had to know the connection.”

A reply rose to Tango’s lips — *I think I would have been happier not knowing, thanks* — but she held it back. It was better that she had found out what Miranda was holding back from her. It was. “Apology accepted.” She stood to the side, offering Tolly a clear path to the door. “Get out.”

The vampire didn’t move.

Tango waited for a moment, struggling with her temper. Finally she hissed again, “Get out!”

“I can’t!” Tolly’s voice cracked with sorrow-filled frustration.

“I’ll carry you out if I have to.”

Tolly looked as if he were about to cry. “No. You can’t.”

“I can.” She took a step toward him.

“No, no, no!” Tolly’s hands, fingers still knotted together, snapped up to keep her back. As if they had been holding down his legs, one knee shot up crookedly. “You can’t!”

Tango shifted her grip on her knife. “Oh? And why not?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Tolly’s face fell, literally drooping. Tango made a sound that was halfway between a sigh and growl. Tolly’s sagging mouth twisted. “It’s not my fault. That’s why I made sure you saw what the pack was doing, isn’t it?”

“You tell me.”

Tolly screamed, a thin wailing sound, and grabbed for her. She hadn’t been expecting that. He didn’t move from the couch, but suddenly long, thin hands at the

end of long, bony arms were seizing her shoulders. "I can't!"

"I can't kick you out, but you can't tell me why not?" Tango snarled. She wanted the mad vampire out. If she had to play his guessing game to get rid of him, she would. Tolly nodded sharply and ecstatically. "And you can't tell me why you made sure I knew that the pack was committing the penny murders?" Tolly nodded again. Tango grimaced. "All right. *Why* can't you tell me?"

"I promised!" Tolly crowed triumphantly. He jumped up from the couch and rushed along his own arms to embrace her. For a frightened moment Tango tensed, ready to stab him, but there was no malice in his actions. "I promised, I promised, I promised, I promised, I..."

Tango steered him toward the door. "Who?" she asked kindly, keeping him talking. "Who did you promise? Miranda?"

"No. She doesn't know. The pack doesn't know. Miranda thought that no one knew about her, but we did! And," he added proudly, "I kept it a secret, just like I was supposed to."

"We?" Tolly switched a lock of his long blond hair against her face. "Stop that!" They were almost at the door. Tolly flicked his hair at her again. She batted it aside. "Do that again and..."

"You're not paying attention!" Tolly tried to tug away, but Tango kept a firm hold on him. His arm simply stretched as he retreated back into the apartment. His movements were jerky suddenly, and his face all sharp angles. "Listen to me! A promise isn't always a good thing!"

Tango ground her teeth. "Stop this! Just leave!"

"Ken me!"

That Tolly knew about kenning should have told her something immediately, but frustration and stress had dulled her wits. Tango worked the kenning irritably and looked at him. She froze.

Glamour glistened like dew on the vampire's skin. The Glamour of a Kithain enchantment. The same kind of enchantment that clung to her, a *geasa*. Tolly's mysterious promise had been magically enforced. By Epp?

No.

Tolly's hair flicking in her face. *A promise isn't always a good thing.*

"You know Riley," Tango breathed. "Riley stole Epp's ribbon and used it to put a *geasa* on you. You were the blond nondrinker in Hopeful!" A vampire. Of course. Why hadn't she thought of it before? She released her grip on Tolly's arm. The limb slithered back to its owner like a retracting cord. "Do you know where he is?"

"Yes!" the mad vampire howled in relief. "And I couldn't tell you!" He collapsed down onto his knees. One hand fumbled in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a carefully folded piece of blue paper. He shoved it at her. Tango unfolded it. Her note from Hopeful. "I pulled it down so I would remember," he babbled. "It's so hard to do anything without him. Miranda was a connection I could use. I hoped if you knew about her, you'd figure it out. But you didn't. And you're angry at her now. I'm so sorry. She didn't want you to know. But I had to show you!"

"Tolly," Tango asked soothingly, kneeling down beside him, "can you tell me where Riley is?" Her head

was light, dizzy with anticipation. The thought crossed her mind that this could be some kind of trick. Some madness of Tolly's. She couldn't stand that possibility, though. Just the idea made her feel a little mad herself.

Tolly shook his head. "No. But I think Miranda's in the same place by now." He seized her hand and climbed to his feet. "We have to hurry."

"Why?" Rescuing Riley was going to mean rescuing Miranda? In spite of Tolly's confession, she was still very angry at the other woman.

"Because you're the only one who can get Riley out, and I think tonight's going to be our only chance to get you in." Tolly sat her on the couch and ran his fingers over her face. His touch felt... odd. Tango grabbed his hand.

"How? Where? Can't you tell me more?"

"I can only tell things to a person who already knows them. Riley made me promise too well." He pushed her hand away and touched his fingers to her face again. "I'm sorry, Tango, but this is going to hurt like hell."

He dug his thumbs in on either side of the bridge of her nose and pushed, stretching her cheekbones apart.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*They answered grinning:
"Our feast is but beginning..."*

Dr. Ian Tanner pulled his luxurious BMW up to the curb. From the shadows of the bushes nearby, Tango watched him closely. He was arriving exactly at eleven-thirty, just as Tolly had said that he would. Fashionably late, but for what? Tolly's explanations of what was going to happen tonight were so incomplete that they were almost useless. She knew what to do next, though. As Tanner got out of his car and shut the door, she stepped out of hiding. The movement caught Tanner's eye. He glanced around at her. And froze.

It wasn't every day that a man met himself on a shadowy street.

Tango walked forward as smoothly as she could. Tanner was a fairly tall man, and it was difficult learning to move at such a height. Fortunately, it was a bit like walking on stilts, and she could do that easily enough. Still, her arms felt so long that she half-expected her knuckles to brush the ground. And her chest felt very strange.

Tolly's ability to reshape living flesh wasn't limited to his own body.

Dr. Tanner's eyes grew wide as he watched her

approach. Tango tried to ignore the faint whispering that she could hear. When she looked over Tanner's shoulder, she could almost make out Tolly's vague form behind him. The mad vampire was murmuring into the doctor's ear, quiet words that would drive the other man mad as well. At least for a little while. It was a talent that, Tolly had said, was not quite as easily directed as Miranda's ability to control minds with just a glance, but it got the job done.

Slowly, Tanner began to nod. His hands moved almost of their own accord, stripping off the dark business jacket he wore, then his other clothes. Miranda changed into them, leaving the clothes that she wore, ragged jeans and a shirt taken from Riley's closet, for him to put on. Tanner's clothes were a reasonably good fit. Tolly had gotten the basic body dimensions almost right. He had spent the most time reshaping her face and hands, and, rushing in order to surprise Tanner at his eleven-thirty arrival, very little time reshaping the rest of her body. Her shoulders were broader than normal, her chest flatter and broader as well, her waist bigger. Everything else — arms and legs that were the right length but unnaturally thin, musculature that was all wrong for the build, a certain lack of bulging flesh in the crotch — would be hidden by Tanner's suit. All she had to do was stay out of bright lights and avoid talking to people if at all possible. Tolly had altered her throat just enough to give her a deep, gruff voice that might or might not have been Tanner's; the differences could be explained as a sore throat, but Tango didn't want to push the disguise. The greatest danger would be in the personal knowledge of background and acquaintances that she so conspicuously lacked. Every

time she talked, she would run the risk of exposing herself as an impostor.

With a few final, whispered instructions, Tolly pointed Tanner down the road and let him go. The man moved like a sleepwalker, but he had a happy smile on his face. "He thinks that all of his worries have been taken on by a clone," Tolly said. "He's off to find the sunny side of the street."

"How long will it last?" Tango pulled on Tanner's shoes. They were too big. Tolly hadn't thought to reshape her feet. She decided that the pain of blisters would be better than the pain of more reshaping to correct the problem. She would have to go through the agony of having Tolly stretch and mold her flesh and bones again when he returned her to her own form. She didn't want to endure that torture any more than was necessary.

"A day or two." Tolly's body was in constant motion, though his face stayed calm. Tango had come to realize what kind of concentration it must have taken for him to remain as still and focused as he had been when she'd discovered him. He looked her over and gave her a quick, jerking nod of approval. "Perfect. Here." He handed her something he had taken from Tanner's wrist.

A silver chain with an ornate clasp in the shape of a dog's head. Tango's breath whistled between her teeth. "Riley had one of these in his luggage."

Tolly took it back and fastened it around her left wrist. "Ask him about it later." Tango nodded. They had a plan — of sorts. Riley's *geasa*, probably intended to keep the vampire from letting any sensitive information slip, was far more of a hindrance than a help. Tolly

couldn't tell her anything useful. All of her attempts to work out what would be going on tonight, what kind of danger Riley was in, or why Tango was the only one who could rescue him, had failed. Tango could guess at the kind of frustration Tolly had been going through since Riley had been kidnapped. She had, at least, managed to get some rudimentary information out of Tolly. There were ways to work around most *geasa*. Their plan, such as it was, consisted of Tango, disguised as Tanner, slipping away when she had the chance and going "past the stairs, under the stairs, and down." Tolly had apparently studied Tanner closely at some time in the past and he knew the house, but when Tango asked why the vampire hadn't taken Tanner's form himself to look for Riley, Tolly just gave a disturbing grimace. "I can't touch Riley now," was all he would say.

"Why not?" she had asked in return. "What am I supposed to do that you can't?"

Tolly had said nothing more, but insisted that she would know what to do when she found Riley.

It wasn't especially helpful, but it was a plan.

"Ready?" the vampire asked her.

"Ready."

"Good. This sanity was killing me." His face split in a wide grin, suddenly as chaotic as the rest of his body. He lurched away up the street, in the opposite direction from that in which he had sent Tanner. As they had agreed, Tango followed about thirty feet behind him.

There were quite a number of fairly expensive cars parked along the curb here. One of the disadvantages of Tanner's fashionably tardy arrival was that he had been forced to park at the end of the queue of cars. The

grand old house that Tolly finally walked up to was the center of the parking jam; cars filled the driveway, then spilled out through ornamental iron gates and along the street. Tango tried not to look like she was staring at the handsome house as she followed Tolly up the walk. She had guessed that the person or people who had hired Jubilee must have been reasonably wealthy. It appeared that she had been right.

The windows of the first floor were lit up, and she could see the dark shapes of a crowd of people moving inside. Presumably they were the owners of these cars. It puzzled her. What were Riley — and Tolly — mixed up in? Sinister cocktail parties?

Ahead of her on the walk, Tolly stopped, bending sharply double to sniff at the blooms in a bed of flowers. His expression was blissfully happy.

Tango forced herself to keep walking, though her heart was suddenly pounding in her chest. Tolly had been supposed to reach the door first so that she would have a chance to watch him go in. Now... she swallowed. It was, she supposed, a miracle that they had gotten this far. She passed the mad vampire and walked up the steps onto the verandah of the old house. There was an old-fashioned doorbell in the center of the door, the kind that you turned to ring. She did so. The door was opened by a handsome blond man with an emotionless face. His body filled the doorway. He looked at her, waiting.

Was there a password? She hoped not. Some kind of invitation she needed to produce? Tango cursed Tolly silently. The only thing she could think of was the chain bracelet. She held up her left wrist in a vague gesture, one that she could turn into a brush at her hair

if she was wrong. The sleeve of her jacket fell back just enough to allow the bracelet to glint in the light that fell over the blond man's shoulder.

The man stepped aside, ushering her in. Tango walked past him with a silent sigh of relief.

A wide staircase with heavy banisters of dark wood soared up almost in front of her. A shadowy hallway ran beside it, leading back into the depths of the house. *Past the stairs*, she thought. But there was a sprinkling of people standing in the foyer of the big house, and more packing a parlor off to the left. She wasn't going to be able to slip off unobserved. The blond man gestured her politely in the direction of the parlor. "Good evening, Dr. Tanner. You'll find the usual refreshments laid out."

"Thank you." She noticed that a few of the people in the foyer glanced away or muttered behind her back as she passed. Apparently Dr. Tanner was not especially popular. That could be good.

The parlor was a large, pleasant room decorated in a very Victorian style. A fleet of tall glasses full of champagne and a battalion of shorter goblets filled with red wine waited on a table by the door. Tango took a glass of champagne, hoping that Tanner wasn't a nondrinker. Standing casually, one hand in her pocket in that way that men stood, she surveyed the other people in the parlor.

There were both men and women present in the gathering, more men than women but not by much. Most of the people were like Tanner: middle-aged, with hair just starting to go gray and faces just beginning to wrinkle. A few had a desperately young look to them, a look of fortunes spent on moisturizers, hair-coloring

and facelifts, trying to recover lost youth. Some people in the crowd were older, while others, a very few, were much younger, in their early twenties. One and all, however, were dressed in dark, conservative suits and dresses, as though the style were some kind of uniform. All of the guests were also wearing the dog-clasped chain bracelets. Aside from the bracelets, Tango might have felt that she was indeed at a polite cocktail party or a fundraising event. Instead, the gathering had the air of a secret society.

She also recognized some of the people. One of the detectives who had taken her statement on last night's penny murders. A bald young man who looked teasingly familiar but whom she couldn't quite place, until she remembered the activist who had urged the protesters on College Street into their clash with the police; he looked very different without all of his earrings. A gray-haired television commentator. Matt and Blue, handsome in dark suits, sipping from glasses of a red liquid that Tango doubted was wine. They might have been humans. The two vampires were largely being left alone, as though they were new members to this club — Tango noticed that they seemed to be the only ones in the room not wearing chains. She would have to avoid Matt. Last night he had noticed that there was something unusual about her, though he hadn't known enough to be able to recognize her as Kithain. He might recognize her oddity again tonight. She turned to wander over toward another part of the parlor... and caught a glimpse of Jubilee Arthurs as he politely declined a canapé.

The words to "Good King Wenceslas" instantly snapped into her mind. The psychic mercenary could

penetrate even her shapeshifted disguise easily. She had to avoid him. She turned back toward the end of the room where Matt and Blue stood. At least Matt might not recognize her, even if he did notice something unusual.

Tolly saved her by choosing that moment finally to make his entrance. He was loud, he was obnoxious, and he was dressed entirely inappropriately. Heads all over the parlor and in the foyer turned to look at the mad vampire. Matt and Blue ran for the door to take charge of him, apologizing profusely to the doorman and dragging Tolly off past the stairs somewhere. In the direction she was supposed to be going, if she could get away from the party. She took the opportunity to move down into the part of the parlor that Matt and Blue had vacated.

"Tanner!" someone hissed. Tango almost grimaced. Apparently Dr. Tanner wasn't quite as universally unpopular as she'd hoped. She turned in the direction of the voice. A short, heavy man in a double-breasted suit waved her over. "You're looking good. Lost weight?"

It was the sort of thing someone would say if they hadn't seen Tanner in some time. Tango felt a little more confident. "Yes. I was sick for a while." She tapped her throat. "Still got a bit of the bug lingering."

"I've heard that doctors in children's hospitals tend to get sick more frequently than usual."

"It's true," Tango lied. She glanced at the group the short man had been standing with. They were clustered around the young gay activist. "What's the topic?"

"Mouse knows something, but he's not saying anything directly. Just a lot of hints that Solomon might be behind the penny murders and that that's going to

be the big announcement tonight. Mouse claims he was involved in that riot on Monday." The short man shuddered. "I almost hope Solomon is behind the murders. At least that way we're safe, eh?"

"Absolutely." Tango took a sip of her champagne. Solomon sounded like the person in charge. If he was, then he was probably the person who had ordered Jubilee to kidnap Riley. And the presence of Miranda's pack at the party certainly made sense if Solomon was somehow involved with the penny murders. Although in that case, it seemed odd for Matt, Blue and Tolly to be new members to this society, while Miranda was in danger.

The short man dragged Tango over to a tray of canapés, away from Mouse and his adoring groupies. "Listen, Ian. Some of us are thinking that Solomon might be elevating tonight. We've got those new members—" he rolled his eyes "—and if Solomon's doing an initiation, there's a pretty good chance he'll take the opportunity to fill the four empty places in the High Circle." The short man passed her a canapé, dark meaty paste on a little triangle of pale bread.

"That makes sense." The short man nodded enthusiastically and popped his canapé into his mouth, chewing noisily. Tango considered hers for a moment longer, then took a more cautious bite.

Tango had eaten a lot of exotic foods in her travels around the world, and she had found that most meats had a very distinctive flavor. Some she liked, some she didn't. Cat, no matter how daintily prepared, fell into the latter category. She kept her face calm and forced herself to swallow. The other half of the canapé slipped discreetly into the pocket of Dr. Tanner's jacket. She

couldn't, however, keep herself from drinking the last of her champagne in one mouth-clearing gulp. The short man ate another. She wondered if he knew what they were. "These are different from last time, aren't they?" she asked him casually.

He licked his lips and considered it. "Maybe a little more garlic." He pointed at some square snacks on the tray. "Try the rat. It's very good tonight."

He knew. Tango felt a little ill. "Thanks, but I had some pretty greasy Chinese tonight. I don't think anything else is going to improve the way it's sitting."

Matt and Blue reappeared, Tolly tightly hemmed in between them and dressed in a rather ill-fitting suit. His hands and wrists dangled almost an inch below the cuffs of the jacket, although it was hard to tell whether that was the jacket's fault or his. The other vampires had found their packmate a glass of blood. "I said I want a straw!" Tolly yelped peevishly.

Polite Toronto manners asserting themselves, the guests at the party ignored him this time, though the short man rolled his eyes again. "The other two aren't bad, but I don't know how *that* one managed to get in." He sipped his champagne. "They put me in mind of that Delara girl. You know, the tall Hispanic one with the incredible hair." He stretched up, looking around. "I haven't seen her yet tonight."

Miranda? It must be. "Neither have I," Tango said truthfully.

The short man shrugged. "Anyway, I just want you to know that we're rooting for you to be elevated. We think you deserve it."

"Thanks."

"And if you happen to get Solomon's attention

anytime, maybe you could, you know, put in a word or two for us. Especially me — in light of that thing with the abuse charges, and all.”

Tango looked at the short man carefully. There was a greedy light in his eyes. “Of course,” Tango said with a smile. “We can’t forget our friends, can we?” She wanted to shove his obsequious face into the canapé tray. What kind of secret society was this?

A single deep chime rang from somewhere upstairs. It was a strong, echoing sound, like iron gates swinging closed. Instantly, everyone in the parlor set down their glasses, dropped their conversations, and turned to file out into the hallway. Tango tensed. She might be able to hide in the parlor and then sneak down the hall past the stairs and look for Riley. There was another door out of the parlor... no, Jubilee was coming from that direction. There were no other good hiding places. She cursed and went with the crowd.

Out in the foyer, the blond doorman had produced a large wheeled cart like a tea trolley. As the guests left the parlor, he handed them each a full-face mask. Most people received a mask that was solid black, featureless except for eyeholes and a mouth slit. Some people, however, received a decorated mask bright with swirling golden symbols. Tango wondered if these might be the people who belonged to the High Circle that the short man had mentioned. She received a plain black mask, but among those receiving painted masks were the detective, the activist, the commentator and, Tango noticed, Jubilee Arthurs. The vampires received no masks. Fitting the masks to their faces, the guests walked up the broad sweep of the big staircase.

Tango jockeyed to get into the middle ranks of the crowd. Whatever was going to happen, that seemed like

the safest place to be. If she were in the front, she would have no way of knowing how to act; if she were in the back, she would be a straggler. Unfortunately, it did mean that she lost sight of Jubilee and the vampires. The stairs came to a landing, then turned and went up another flight to a broad, square-beamed doorway. The crowd was silent. As the guests passed through the door, each raised their left wrist to their lips, kissed the chain bracelet, then walked on, arm held high. Tango did the same.

On the far side of the door, she almost stopped. She definitely hesitated, because someone behind her bumped into her. Hastily she resumed walking, but continued to look around with surreptitious awe.

The entire upstairs of the big house had been gutted. There were no interior walls and no ceiling overhead, just empty space all the way up to the rafters under the roof. Every surface had been painted coal black. The light that came up the stairs and through the door behind her was the only illumination. It didn't penetrate far. When the doors were shut and the light choked off, it would be like floating in a void. Something shifted in the shadows by a wall. For a moment, Tango thought it was one of the guests. Something shifted again, and she saw the ghostly shape of some huge animal. Heart pounding, she froze, waiting for the thing to lunge at her.

Then a masked guest passed between her and the apparition. The thing lost its depth, and she realized it was a bas-relief carved in the wood of the wall, the shadows of cultists passing through the door seeming to make it move. Her perception of the relief as an animal was correct, however. It was the image of a huge, heavy-jawed, broad-chested dog. The image marched

along all of the walls that she could see in the dim light.

In the center of the huge room was a two-tiered platform. The guests in gold-painted masks were stepping up onto the first tier and turning inward to face the second, empty tier. The other guests were arranging themselves in a broad circle around the platform. The most sought-after places seemed to be in the half-circle that lay between the platform and the doorway. Tango spotted the short man again, standing in that part of the circle, and squeezed in next to him. He scarcely acknowledged her presence. All of his attention was on the platform.

The doors slammed shut as the last guest found a place in the circle. The room plunged into darkness so absolute that Tango wasn't even sure her eyes were still open. It stayed dark for what seemed like ages, but couldn't have been more than a minute. There was the deep chime of iron gates again, and, suddenly, intense white light exploded out of the very air. Tango hissed in shock, blinking her eyes rapidly, trying to regain her vision. When she had, the room was lit normally, though still dimly, once more. Black candles guttered high up amid the rafters. There was a man standing on the second tier of the platform. She was willing to bet that this was the short man's Solomon.

The only thing that he had in common with the guests was the color of his clothes. The man wore black. The similarities ended there. Where the guests were, as she had observed, largely middle-aged, the man was young. Young and very handsome — he wore no mask. His skin was tanned. He wore tailored black pants and a black vest, buttoned up but without a shirt underneath. His arms and chest rippled with muscles.

Earrings shone in one ear, and a gold chain gleamed around his neck. There was a dark tattoo on one exposed shoulder: a dog like those on the walls, but rearing back. Power and charm radiated from him. Tango suspected that to many of those gathered in the circle, he seemed the living symbol of everything that they wanted to be or possibly to possess. Tango saw more, however: subtle clues that experience organized into a larger whole. Solomon was a mage; the blinding white light, possibly his aura of charm and power, was a manifestation of his human magick. She cursed silently.

Solomon waited a moment, probably until all of the people in the circle had recovered from the light of his appearance, then he raised his left arm into the air. There was a chain bracelet around his left wrist as well, although it seemed strangely tight and flat. Almost like a tattoo, Tango thought, though tattoos didn't glint like metal. He brought his arm down in a dramatic sweep to kiss the chain. The people in the lower circles imitated him, touching the bracelets to the mouths of their masks. Solomon raised his arm again and led the assembly in a litany. After the first line, Tango stopped speaking behind her mask, frightened horror settling into her.

I pay homage to Shaftiel.

*I pledge my soul and service to the Sentinel of the Ways,
The Hungry Guardian Who Watches the Three Ages,
The Hound of Thorns,
The One Who Waits, the One Who Comes First.
I will obey his servant in this world. I am Bandog.*

A mage, Tango knew, had to be careful with his magick. Human magick was a manipulation of reality. If people who did not share the mage's vision of reality witnessed his use of magick, there could be horrible repercussions as normal reality snapped back against the mage and the paradox of his magick. So mages practiced magick subtly. If they wished to use magick openly, they made sure that they were alone, surrounded by other mages... or surrounded by acolytes who, if they didn't understand the workings of magick, at least understood the possibility of its existence. Sometimes those clusterings of acolytes could turn into cults.

Especially when the leading mage was one of the unholy, demon-serving Nephandi.

She — and Riley, and Tolly — had become involved with a demon-cult. Miranda and Jubilee belonged to it.

Up on the platform, Solomon lowered his hand. "There are those who wish to join the Bandog. Shall we admit them to Shaftiel's service?"

"Admit them," murmured the cultists in response. Tango did her best to speak along with them. Her mask might conceal her mouth, but not her silence. As long as she didn't have to recite an oath pledging her eternal servitude to some unknown entity, she felt relatively safe. "Let them pledge their souls to the Great Hound."

Solomon nodded and clapped his hands once. A baying, like hunting dogs, filled the air. Tango recognized magick at work, but the effect was no less impressive because of that. The doors at the end of the room split open again. Tolly, Matt and Blue came running in. Close behind them was a figure as different from the cultists as Solomon. It was another man,

wearing black pants similar to Solomon's but with his broad chest completely bare. Around his neck was a studded dog collar. He wore a mask as well, but it was sculpted in the shape of a snarling, heavy-jawed dog head. Blond hair showed behind the mask. The doorman. He carried a short whip, and with it, he lashed the vampires forward. The circle of cultists parted to let them through. The vampires paused in a clear space between the outer circle and the platform. The dog-masked doorman took up a station just behind them. Solomon looked down.

"You have sought out the Bandog. For what reason?"

Matt looked back at the Nephandus mage boldly. "We seek to serve Shaftiel," he replied in a practiced voice.

"For what reason?"

"For his glory, for his return. For all of the reasons that a dog serves its master."

"A dog must be obedient." Solomon stepped gracefully down from the high tier of the platform to the lower, and then onto the floor. "Do you know how to show obedience?" He lifted his left arm. Now that he was closer, Tango could see that the glittering chain on his wrist really was a tattoo of some kind. Matt took Solomon's hand and kissed the chain. For a moment, Tango thought that she saw a mischievous smile flicker on the vampire's face and that he tried to turn Solomon's hand to kiss his inner wrist. Solomon resisted however, and said sternly. "That is obedience. But you do not know full obedience."

The doorman snapped his whip suddenly across Matt's back. The vampire gritted his teeth against the pain. "This is the first kiss of obedience," Solomon told

him. The mage pressed Matt's head back to his wrist. "Recite: *I pay homage to Shafrael.*"

"I pay homage to Shafrael."

The whip cracked against his back again. Solomon moved Matt's head to kiss the tattooed dog on his shoulder. "This is the second kiss of obedience. Recite: *I pledge my soul and service to the Sentinel of the Ways, the Hungry Guardian Who Watches the Three Ages, the Hound of Thorns, the One Who Waits, the One Who Comes First.*" Matt did. The whip cracked a third time and Solomon lifted Matt's head so that the vampire kissed the mage on the lips. "This is the third kiss of obedience. Recite: *I will obey his servant in this world. I am Bandog.*"

"I will obey his servant in this world. I am Bandog."

Solomon released him and turned to Blue. "Do you know how to show obedience?"

The whippings and the lesson were repeated again, then a third time with Tolly. Tango wasn't sure the mad vampire would go along with the ceremony, but he did. He almost seemed to enjoy the whipping. When all three vampires had been taught full obedience, Solomon returned to the platform. He looked down on the vampires again. "Obedient Bandog, know then the secrets of Shafrael and the mysteries of obedience." He gestured.

The cultists of the High Circle swiveled around. They had not moved throughout the whippings, but had remained staring up at the platform Solomon had vacated. Now they looked out across the room, at the outer circle, but not at the three unmasked vampires. Their words were almost like a chant.

"The Sentinel of the Ways," they intoned, "crouches

at the gates between the worlds. The Hungry Guardian Who Watches the Three Ages sees the glory that was, the patience that is, and the glory that will be again. The Hound of Thorns brings the chaos, misery and suffering that precedes his own dark masters — he is the One Who Waits and the One Who Comes First. We serve the Great Hound who is the servant of greater powers still.” The High Circle turned back toward Solomon. The mage picked up several dark items and held them aloft.

“The Bandog,” he said in a voice that rang off the black walls, “wear masks because Shaftiel’s servants are anonymous in his sight.” Disdainfully, he tossed three black masks down to the vampires, as if he were tossing large bones to small puppies. “The Bandog wear chains, to remind us of our servitude to the Great Hound, and of the Great Hound’s servitude to his masters.” Three glittering chains snaked through the air to the floor. “Don your masks and chains, Bandog, and take your place in the circle.” When they had, Solomon raised his left arm again and kissed his own. The entire outer circle of cultists followed suit.

But not the High Circle. As if by some prearranged signal, they cried out in unison, “The ranks of the Bandog are ever complete, but there are gaps in the strength of the High Circle. We should be sixteen, as the sixteen teeth of the Great Hound, but we are only eleven!”

Solomon nodded. “Death has taken four of the Great Hound’s teeth. Foul betrayal, this very night, has weakened the Great Hound further.” A quiet murmur ran around the outer circle at the mention of betrayal. Tango could imagine that traitors would be dealt with

harshly in a demon-cult. Her own breath came sharply. The short man had commented that he hadn't seen Miranda tonight. Tolly had said that the vampire was in danger. Could she be the traitor? Why would she betray her cult? "But we are fortunate," Solomon was continuing, "that there are those worthy of elevation to the High Circle. The teeth of the Great Hound will be strong once more." The mage stepped down to the lower tier of the platform again, but this time no farther. "Ian Tanner, come forward and be elevated."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat.*

Tango froze for a moment. No. Why her? Why now? She didn't know what she was supposed to do! Had Tolly known this was going to happen to Tanner? She swallowed. Every eye was on her. She had no choice. She paced forward, praying that no one — Jubilee, Matt or Solomon — would notice anything wrong with Dr. Tanner. At the edge of the platform, Solomon stepped back, giving her room to climb up. Hoping that was indeed what was expected, she did. He held out his wrist. She took it and kissed the tattooed chain. It was cool and eerily metallic under her lips, not like flesh at all. "I pay homage to Shaftiel," she said, the words almost making her gag. She hoped she wasn't swearing away her soul. She moved up to kiss Solomon's shoulder. At least that was real, warm flesh, slightly spicy to her nose. "I pledge my soul and service to the Sentinel of the Ways, the Hungry Guardian Who Watches the Three Ages, the Hound of Thorns, the One Who Waits, the One Who Comes First." She kissed him on the lips, realizing with a start that Solomon was slightly shorter than Tanner. It was a novelty to bend down to kiss

someone. "I will obey his servant in this world. I am Bandog."

"Not necessary..." Solomon murmured, his lips moving against hers. Tango's heart thundered in panic. "...but good." He pushed her back a bit and reached up to trace a finger across her mask. She felt the subtle warping of reality that was human magick at work. Tango suspected that her mask now had the gold symbols of the High Circle inscribed across it. "Learn the secret of the High Circle, Ian Tanner," Solomon said aloud. He drew Tango closer to him. She found herself staring straight past his left ear, across the platform, and toward Jubilee Arthurs. The mercenary was watching her, but with no more curiosity in his eyes than might have been there for any new elevation. Tango concentrated on her breathing. "The Great Hound's chain has been loosed," Solomon whispered, his breath hot on her ear. "Take your place in the High Circle."

Numbly, Tango did so, stepping between the activist and an older woman around to the side of the platform. All she thought about as Solomon continued the elevations was her breathing. In and out, in and out, and she might just get away with this. No one seemed to pay any attention to her, however. They had eyes only for the new members of the High Circle, eager to see whom Solomon would call. The second elevation, a Janice Rothman, received a nod of approval from the older woman to Tango's right. The third, fourth and fifth elevations, however, caused a stir. In quick succession, Solomon called on Matthew Barrett, Anders Dahl and Adam Tolliver.

Matt, Blue and Tolly joined the High Circle, gold

symbols gleaming on their newly acquired masks. Tolly giggled quietly. Many of the Bandog did not seem pleased that their newly initiated members should be elevated so quickly. Solomon ignored them, however, and returned to the upper tier of the platform. He looked down at the cultists, slowly turning so that his gaze swept around the entire gathering.

“Bandog!” he called out. “Shaftiel has a message for you!”

The murmur of the cultists in the outer circle behind Tango fell silent instantly. All Tango could see was Solomon’s impassioned face. “It’s a message that he wishes to deliver in his own voice, a message of inspiration. I know many of you are worried or frightened by the deaths that have struck the High Circle and by the murders that haunt Toronto. It isn’t your place to be worried or frightened — because you are Bandog. And because the deaths, and the murders, and the chaos all take place at Shaftiel’s command.” Solomon’s eyes shone darkly. “Shaftiel sought to deliver his message through a mouth of the High Circle, but none of the four hosts he sought for his voice would do. His power burned out their minds and they died. So he approached me, as he approached me in the beginning. And he spoke to me, telling me the conditions under which the Bandog might hear his voice safely.”

Solomon paused. The black room was so utterly silent that Tango wondered if Solomon wasn’t using some incredibly subtle magick to enhance his words. “Bandog, we are not strong enough to summon the Great Hound into this world in all of his power. We will not be strong enough to do so for many years. We

must be patient, as the Great Hound is patient. But now, thanks to Shaftiel, we may summon his voice and hear his words. He has told me how. With the aid of the High Circle, that rite has already begun." He smiled. "Listen, for these were the instructions that Shaftiel delivered to me:

"Make me a home, Solomon. Let chaos and misery reign and let terror walk the streets. Make me a sacrifice of sixteen lives over eight days, and let horror such that all will tremble and a city live in fear flow from your sacrifices. On the eighth night, make the last sacrifice in a place of traveling and, if there is chaos to my liking in the streets, the Great Hound will howl to the Bandog in their own world, from the mouth of one of their own." Solomon grinned like an animal.

"Tonight is the sixth night. Six sacrifices have been rendered to Shaftiel. Toronto wakes to fear and falls asleep with terror as a bedfellow. Chaos grows, and breeds more chaos. Tomorrow morning, Toronto shall find three more sacrifices rendered. The sixteenth life, the one that will summon the Great Hound's voice, will be that of the traitor, Miranda Delara."

The Bandog were silent for a moment longer — then burst into enthusiastic applause, as some other group their age might have at the theater or the symphony. Solomon nodded his appreciation.

Behind her mask, Tango went pale with rage and horror. *This* was why Miranda and her pack had beaten innocent people to death? Had Riley been trying to prevent it? Was that why Solomon had kidnapped him? Her hands clenched in anger. She still wore her knife-ring, although on her smallest finger now. It was tempting to act now and kill the evil at its source. She

could destroy the mage who would order the deaths of innocents....

It was too much like her old life.

She forced her hands flat and pushed away all thoughts of murder. If she did that, she would be no better than Solomon or Miranda. There were too many Bandog around. Even if she did manage to kill the mage, she might not get out. She certainly wouldn't be able to rescue Riley. Or Miranda.

Tango shook her head, prompting a fleeting glance from the young activist beside her. She ignored him. Why should she rescue Miranda? The vampire had lied to her. She was Bandog. She had very likely, Tango realized, helped Jubilee escape last night. She might have been working to muddy Riley's trail from the beginning. Tango owed her nothing. In spite of Tolly's wishes, she would not rescue Miranda.

But why had Solomon just named her a traitor? Why were the other vampires being made Bandog, if one of the pack had betrayed the cult?

Solomon was speaking again. "The High Circle has been my instrument in this, the first part of the rite, but all of the Bandog must participate now. You who have sought favor from Shaftiel, promising soul and service to the Great Hound, must fulfill that promise. There are still three lives to be taken before the final sacrifice is made."

Tango's breath caught in shock. Solomon, of course, noticed nothing at all.

"Tomorrow, Bandog, you shall rest. Tomorrow night, when the sacrifices are made, you will know it. On the next day, the day of the summoning, you will act. Rouse your families, rouse your friends. Use any means at your

disposal. Toronto must be angry, Bandog! It must be frightened! It must wake from its cold, mannered sleep and realize the horror in its midst! There must be chaos in the streets for the rite to succeed. At sunset, come to the place of traveling.” The ferocious, cruel grin came back. “We will conduct the last part of the rite in a place of traveling that is like Toronto itself — a place that is cool, mannered and unchanging, but that for one night the Bandog shall transform. We will conduct the rite in Union Station. At midnight the final sacrifice will be made and we shall bring the voice of the Great Hound into our world.”

Abruptly, Solomon slashed his hand through the air as if he were holding an invisible knife — and plunging it into the sacrifice of Miranda’s undead body. But the gesture was more than just drama. Tango could feel a pressure pushing against her mind, urging her personally toward the chaos that Solomon planned for Toronto. More human magick. She resisted, long years of controlling her own inner chaos coming into play. The Bandog, however, did not resist so easily. Instead of bursting into polite applause, this time they screamed wildly, raised their arms, shook their fists and stomped their feet. Playing along with them made Tango feel ill.

At the front of the platform, one of the High Circle cultists abruptly turned to face the outer circle and held out his arms. The outer circle cultists yelled with excitement. The High Circle cultist to the left of the first was raising his hands, and then the next, and the next. The motion was traveling around the circle away from Tango. She couldn’t see quite what was happening, but the yells of the outer circle grew louder and louder. The young activist turned. Tango turned.

Blood began to run from her outstretched hands as if she had washed in it.

She shuddered violently, remembering that last night of her old life. The sidhe's gardens. The Bandog just shrieked for more.

"Tonight's ritual," Solomon shouted over the din, "shall not end here! Carry it home with you and return with it in two days' time to Union Station. Live the ritual for two days! You are Bandog!"

"We are Bandog!"

Tango could no longer see Solomon, but she could see the excitement of the Bandog reflected in their jittery bodies. They were waiting for something. From behind and above her, Solomon said, "Then go." The doors out of the chamber swung open. "Touch the bloodied hands of the High Circle, remember that you share in their deeds, and go for tonight."

The High Circle stepped down from the platform onto the floor. The other Bandog rushed toward them, grasping at their hands, smearing the blood on their own fingers and palms. Tango saw the short man fighting to get to her and receive the gory blessing from the person he thought was Ian Tanner. Tango ignored him. In the frenzy, no one was going out the door. No one would be downstairs. She would be exposed for a moment, but this was her chance to find Riley.

And her chance to get away from the horror of the black room.

She moved as quickly as she dared. Threading her way through the eager Bandog wasn't unlike threading her way through a crowd at Pan's, though at Pan's her staff T-shirt told people to get out of her way. Here, her High Circle mask drew people toward her. Deftly, she

turned them toward other members of the High Circle. No one followed her down the stairs. The noise from above carried to the first floor, but there was no other sound in the house. Pulling off her mask and wiping her bloody hands on Ian Tanner's jacket, she turned into the hall past the stairs.

Under the stairs and down, Tolly had said. The basement, obviously. She watched for a door or more stairs as she moved, hoping that whatever entrance there was hadn't been concealed by Solomon's magick. The only door under the stairs opened into a closet. Tango moved on, but there was nothing else. The hall ended in the kitchen of the old house, well past the stairs and at the back of the house. There was a door, probably a pantry, beside the entrance to the hall, but it wasn't under the stairs. Unless... Tango flung the door open. The broad pantry was empty of food, but there was another door at its far end. And she could smell the damp air of a deep basement. She stepped into the pantry, closed the kitchen door behind her and opened the basement door. Worn steps led down into darkness, lit by bare lightbulbs. Tango descended.

Either the original foundation of the house had been unusually deep or the basement floor had been dug down. Tango suspected the latter. The dark old beams of the ceiling were well over her head. The floor was packed black dirt. Tango could see why. There was a tree growing in the basement.

It wasn't a particularly large tree, though its uppermost branches spread out flat against the ceiling and its trunk was surprisingly broad. It was gnarled and grayish, from its bark to its leaves. A strange, sunny glow came from its far side, casting bright rays that

must, to judge by the sharpness of the division between light and shadow, have been magical. Or more likely *magickal*, some effect of Solomon's human magick. Tango wondered what kind of mage Solomon had been before he became a Nephandus. The Verbena Tradition of witch-mages venerated trees, though to trap one so unnaturally below the ground would have been like blasphemy to them. Perhaps Solomon was Verbena *barabbi*, a traitor to his Tradition. The time Tango spent wondering was very brief, however.

Lying halfway between the tree and the stairs was Miranda.

Tango stared at her in shock. The vampire was pale and withered, as if virtually all of the stolen blood that flowed in her veins had been taken out again. Wounds and bite marks covered her arms and neck; the bite marks bore the clear signs of fangs. Solomon didn't have fangs, of course, but Tango wondered where Matt and Blue had obtained the blood that they had sipped in the parlor. The smell of burning flesh hung faintly in the still air. Miranda's right hand was charred and twisted — fire, or maybe the sunny light from the far side of the tree. Her face was frozen in agony, her eyes dead. A rough stake, fashioned from a broken branch of the tree, ran through her chest and pinned her to the ground.

Tango walked up to the vampire slowly and knelt to run her hand along the gray shaft of the stake. Sickly gray-green leaves still clung to it. A stake through the heart didn't kill a vampire. It only paralyzed her. Miranda was helpless, but she had been kept alive. For Solomon's sacrifice, presumably. Something had happened tonight. Something serious enough that

Miranda had had some kind of falling-out with the Bandog. Accompanying the Kithain in attacking Jubilee perhaps? Solomon must have found out about that. If Jubilee had kidnapped Riley for the Bandog, Miranda would have been turning against the cult and Solomon just by aiding Tango. And hadn't Matt said something last night about Solomon being angry with her?

Tolly had been right. Miranda was in serious trouble.

But should Tango rescue her? The vampire had killed innocent people at Solomon's command, for the Bandog, for a demon. Didn't she deserve what she got? Did she? The nocker looked down at the pathetic form of the woman who had helped her. Tango made a decision.

She wrenched the crude stake out of the ground and slid it from Miranda's ruined chest. For a long moment, the vampire didn't move. Tango wondered if the vampire really was dead, in spite of Solomon's talk of sacrificing her. Then Miranda's lips slid back from her teeth. Her fangs were huge against her shriveled gums. Her mouth worked weakly. Her eyes came back to life. They fixed hungrily on Tango. "Blood." The single word was like a cobweb blown on a mere draft of air.

Miranda needed blood to heal her wounds. Tango didn't dare offer the vampire any of hers. The Kithain blood might drive her mad. "No, Miranda. It's me, Tango." She showed her the knife-ring. "Tango. Tolly disguised me. You can't drink from me. Wait."

"Blood."

Tango wasn't sure if the vampire had understood her. She forced herself to turn away from the vampire, as people on the street turned away from the homeless and

hungry. She walked around the tree to investigate the golden light.

Riley was propped up against the tree's trunk, his head turned to one side and nodding onto his chest. His eyes were closed, his breathing steady, his face calm. He was dressed almost exactly as he had been when she had met him in Pan's. Magickal sunlight covered him like a blanket and inspired the leaves over his head to lively green instead of insipid gray. Apples hung from the branches. Riley might have been napping in an orchard instead of magickally imprisoned in a Nephandus mage's cellar.

Tango hesitated for a moment, then reached for him.

A dry, stick-like grasp caught her arm, stopping her by its presence rather than its weight or strength. "No," husked Miranda. There were marks and scratches across the dirt of the floor. The vampire had dragged herself after Tango. There was a brief lucidity in her eyes, pushing past the brightness of unthinking hunger. She had understood. "Burns." She gestured feebly with her blackened hand.

"Not me, Miranda. I'm not a vampire." But the magickal sunlight would explain why Tolly knew where Riley was trapped, but couldn't rescue him. Full exposure to the light would have destroyed a vampire utterly. Miranda's hand must have been forced into it by whoever had tortured her.

The vampire's warning did, however, make Tango hesitate. There was no telling what Solomon's strange sunlight might do to her. It could put her to sleep, as it apparently had Riley. It could, in spite of her living condition, burn her as it had Miranda; it might be that anything entering the light was burned, while Riley

slept undisturbed. She turned to go back and fetch the broken branch that had staked Miranda.

Miranda's dry weight was still clinging to her. Lucid thought was gone again. One arm still on Tango's arm, the other around the Kithain's waist, the vampire stared hungrily at the jacket she wore. Her mouth stretched open like a snake's and her tongue came flickering out to lick at the fabric. Tango could feel its papery pressure. Miranda's head moved closer, jaws wide, fangs ready.

The blood that Solomon had conjured during the Bandog ritual. Tango had wiped her hands on the jacket. Miranda sensed the drying blood, her instincts drawing her to it. There wasn't enough in the fabric to sustain her by any means, but there was enough to whet her hunger. Enough to break what control she had.

Tango shoved her away. It was more difficult than she had expected. The starving vampire was much stronger than her skeletal, wounded body suggested. Miranda hissed, lunging at her again. Tango whirled off the jacket and pushed it at her. Miranda snatched it out of the air. Her mouth fastened on the bloody stains from Tango's fingers, sucking desperately at the dry cloth. Tango backed away from her. She didn't dare turn her back on the vampire again, in case she attacked her. That could be dangerous for both of them. Tango's blood would render Miranda helpless at the very least. And while Tango had never been bitten by a vampire, she had seen the effects of their bite on humans — the pleasure was said to be so intense that only the strongest wills could continue to fight against it. Her will was strong, but she didn't want to risk slipping into that ecstasy. Miranda would drain her dry in an instant.

The vampire's hunger would also spoil their escape.

The back door in the kitchen had seemed the most likely route of quick retreat. Out the door, around the house through the shadowy yard, down the street to Tanner's car, and then back into the city, back to a bolthole that Tolly had arranged for her. Somewhere, he said, where she and Miranda and Riley would be safe from location by Solomon's magick. Of course, that plan had been built on the expectation that either Miranda or Riley would be able to walk on their own. In a pinch, Tango's nocker strength, coupled with the size of Tanner's body, might have enabled her to carry both of them. There was no way, however, that she would be able to carry even Riley if she had to contend with a vicious, struggling vampire.

There was only one solution that Tango could see, and it wasn't an option she liked. She had to try it, though. Backing rapidly up the basement stairs, she prayed that Miranda wouldn't abandon the bloody jacket for a few more moments. She shut the basement door behind her and slipped back toward the front of the house. Luck was with her; a number of the Bandog were still lingering in the foyer and parlor. There was no sign of either Solomon or the blond doorman. Tango spotted the short man who had curried her favor before the ceremony. She caught him by the shoulder. "I put in that word to Solomon for you. He wants to see you."

"Now?" the short man squeaked.

"Now." Tango almost dragged him back along the hall to the kitchen and into the pantry. She hated herself for doing this. Even more, though, she loathed the fact that a part of her was eagerly anticipating what would happen next. The short man looked around him with confusion.

"Where's Solomon?"

"Downstairs," Tango lied grimly. She opened the basement door. The stairs were darker than they had been before. The lightbulbs had been smashed. The only light was the dim glow of the magickal sunlight. She ushered the short man down the stairs, making sure that she stayed several feet back from him.

Miranda dropped out from among the ceiling beams like a thin, shadowy stroke of lightning. Her fangs were in the short man's throat before he could make a sound. Or at least before he could make a sound of terror. His last breath was an ecstatic gasp. Then the only noise in the gloom of the basement was Miranda's frenzied slurping. Tango tried not to watch, but there was no way she could escape that primal, blissful sound. When it finally stopped, she turned and asked, "Miranda?"

The vampire's eyes were coals in the shadows. "Thank you." Her voice was deeper than normal, but it was stronger. "Is that really you, Tango?"

"Yes. Tolly..." The story was too long to explain now. "Was he enough?" she asked instead. She felt sick. Sick and dirty.

"No. But he was a start." Miranda rose. "I'll be all right for a while. Tango, I'm..."

Tango cut her off. "Later. We have to get Riley out, too. Before anyone misses Tanner or..." She gestured at the drained corpse. Her tongue felt thick in her mouth. "Did you know about Riley?"

"No."

Tango wasn't really sure whether to believe her or not. "Do you know anything about the light he's in?" She found the stake. Something embedded in its broad end cut into her palm as she picked it up. Fragments of

glass. This must have been what Miranda used to break the lightbulbs.

“Only that it burns like sunlight.”

“Let’s hope that’s all.” She poked the wood into the sunlight. Nothing happened. *Good*. She threw it off into the darkness. “All right. I’m going to try and wake him up, but I’ll keep my legs out of the light if I can. If I fall asleep or anything, haul me out. Okay?”

Miranda’s glowing eyes bobbed as she nodded. Tango knelt down and reached slowly into the magickal glow. It was warm on her skin, just like real sunlight. She pulled herself forward. When her head entered the light, she realized that it smelled just like sunlight, too. Sweet, green and muzzy. Her mind felt heavy. The light was putting her to sleep, making her fight to keep her eyes open. She forced her hand to reach out and grab Riley’s shoulder. She shook it hard. “Riley?”

He didn’t stir.

“Riley!” she said again, this time yelling as loudly as she dared. She slapped him.

The pooka groaned sharply. His eyelids twitched. Tango slapped him a second time. This time, his head jerked and his eyes opened. His gaze was vague, like that of anyone who has been woken suddenly from a deep sleep. He tried to focus on her, but couldn’t. His eyes drifted closed again.

It was enough. Tango grabbed a handful of his shirt and began pulling him back toward the shadows. She felt Miranda dragging at her ankles. Taking a more secure grip on Riley’s shoulders, she let the vampire do the work. Reentering the darkness was like plunging into ice water. She was alert again instantly, though Riley remained asleep. Who knew how long he had

been under Solomon's enchantment? Tango started to shake him again, trying to wake him up. Miranda grabbed her wrists.

"Later?" she suggested.

Tango nodded. Taking a deep breath, she drew Glamour into her muscles and stood with Riley's lanky form cradled in her arms. Miranda went up the stairs first. She paused before opening the pantry door. "Now what?"

"Back door. Around the side of the house to the street. I have a car."

The vampire nodded and opened the door. The sounds of the Bandog drifted back from the parlor and foyer. Miranda crossed the floor silently, Tango a little less so. Miranda eased open the back door — and then they were slipping into the night and around the house.

Where they encountered a problem. Bandog were standing around on the verandah of the house as guests leaving any party might do on a pleasant summer night. If the two women tried to cross the front lawn, they were sure to be seen. Tango pointed across the broad side yard of Solomon's property toward thick bushes and trees. "What's that?"

"A ravine. But there's a fence," Miranda whispered back. "I know a better way. Follow me." She started off. A cloak of shadows covered her, making her almost invisible in the night, probably entirely invisible to those who stood by the light of the door.

Tango didn't follow. Miranda looked back at her. Tango regarded the vampire suspiciously. Was she sure that Miranda wasn't just going to betray her again? She didn't have much choice if she wanted to get out of here. She paced swiftly after the vampire, stepping into

the concealing darkness of her shadows. Miranda looked away without saying anything.

They hugged the edges of the yard, staying close to the deep natural shadows of the ravine. Tango held her breath, half-certain that they were going to be noticed at any minute. But there were no shouts of alarm. They stepped out of the yard and around the corner onto the sidewalk. There were no Bandog on the street, and they were hidden from Solomon's house. Tango let out her breath.

Miranda collapsed.

"Shit!" Tango spat. She squatted down as best as she could, balancing Riley carefully. "Miranda?"

"Too much," the vampire wheezed. "Shadows take blood to control. I need to rest. Need more blood."

Tango chewed her lip, glancing up the sidewalk toward Solomon's house and down toward Tanner's car. Bandog might appear from the direction of the house any time. The car was about half a block away. She looked at Miranda. "Are you going to try and attack me again?"

Miranda managed to shake her head. "No. Not that hungry. But I need... I need blood soon."

"Tomorrow, maybe? Could you make it to tomorrow? We're going to a hiding place and Tolly said to stay there until he comes tomorrow."

Miranda didn't respond.

Cursing quietly, Tango jogged as quickly as she could down the block to Tanner's car. She propped Riley up against the car as she dug in Tanner's pockets for the key. She found it and shoved Riley into the backseat. Then she went back for Miranda. The vampire might have been a gangly puppet for all of the strength in her

limbs. Her right hand still felt rough and flaky where it had been burned. The skin of her strong face was likewise rough with scabs from the wounds that had marred it. Only her hair seemed anything like it had been the last time Tango had seen Miranda healthy — thick, heavy and luxurious. The mustiness of Solomon's basement clung to her. Tango sat her carefully in the passenger seat of the car. It was hard to get her body to stay upright long enough to get the door closed. Finally Tango just left the door open, went around to the driver's side of the car, climbed in, and reached across the vampire's still form to pull the door shut. Miranda's head fell forward onto the back of Tango's neck as she did so.

For a second, Tango froze. Slowly, she reached up and tilted Miranda's head back again.

Ian Tanner's car started smoothly and pulled away from the curb like a ghost. As she drove back downtown to Tolly's safehouse, pressing the envelope of the speed limit the whole way, Tango realized something that had been lost on her amid the horror of discovering the Bandog's plans and the thrill of finding Riley again.

Solomon's rite of summoning, and the accompanying chaos, would happen in two days. On Highsummer Night.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Lizzie uttered not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in*

Miranda knew she was awake because she was dreaming.

She had heard that some vampires dreamed while they were asleep during the day. For her, though, sleep was darkness. A descent into bleak, black nothingness. She was oblivious to the passage of time between dawn and dusk. To be sure, she had occasionally woken during the day, but it was always full waking, her instincts sensing something amiss and bringing her instantly to bloodthirsty alertness. Sometimes, however, in the period of twilight after the sun was below the horizon and before full night had developed, her mind would stir before her body. And Miranda would dream.

This dream went on far longer than normal — or at least so it seemed. There was a peculiar timelessness to it.

She lay in a shadowy bower, on a bed of soft, dark cushions. Someone stroked her hair. Half-glimpsed through the leafy branches above, the moon stood still in a star-laced sky. There was fruit in the branches, a curious, shifting mixture of apples (which she hated),

pears (she had found a worm inside one once), and peaches (her favorite fruit). Miranda held a piece of fruit in her hand, a piece big enough to fill her palm, but still as light as if it were half-hollow. Lazily, she raised it to her lips (perhaps several times) and bit into it with strong, white teeth. Blood flowed from the broken skin. The flesh of the fruit was woody, the skin tough and dry. The juice was ecstasy.

Somewhere, a dog howled. Something snuffled around outside the bower. She ate her way deeper into the wretched, delectable fruit. Once the blood touched her lips, the hard flesh that contained it seemed to melt away.

“Miranda.”

She tried to ignore the voice, and continued to lick and suck at the fruit in her hand. The voice was insistent, however. She turned her head. Solomon knelt beside her, naked in the shadows. The moonlight lingered on his smooth skin and strong body, caressing his sculpted face. His tattoos were gone. He held fruit in his arms, cradled against his chest and neck. Miranda took another. As she did, Solomon came with it, his warm, living touch sliding up her bare arm and across her breasts and stomach. She was naked as well, although the shadows were her clothing. She ignored Solomon. The exquisite fruit in her hands was so ripe with blood that the red juice welled up from the deep bruises left by the slight pressure of her fingers. Abruptly, Solomon was between her legs, down on his knees in the position that excited him so much, desperately trying to awaken Miranda's flesh. But the only pleasure Miranda knew was what came from the fruit... or would have, if she could just eat enough of

the fruit. The ultimate fulfillment of pleasure resisted all of her attempts to reach it, though. No matter how hard she sucked at the fruit, no matter how hard she squeezed at the fruit, the complete satisfaction eluded her. It was like striving toward climax, but never quite achieving it.

Spilled blood drenched her face and arms and breasts. Someone was still stroking her hair. Something was still padding around the bower, its flickering shape sometimes visible beyond the drooping branches.

Solomon was hurting her. The fruit he had held tumbled from his arms. With each of his thrusts, more fruit dropped in a rain of black leaves from the bower above. The sweet blood of the fruit fell on her body, though, so she endured the pain, letting him use her as she grabbed at the fallen fruit.

It was dry. It was sour. It was bitter. It was cloying. It burst into decay against her mouth.

Miranda just grabbed desperately for more.

Hands in the shadows captured her arms.

For a moment, she remembered the horror of the Sabbat's Creation Rites. Limbs trapped by the heavy darkness of grave soil. Eerie, smooth, hard surfaces that were too warm to be rocks, too regular and dry to be buried wood. Black dirt in her mouth and nose and eyes and ears. She struggled, but the unseen hands held onto her arms. She thrashed wildly, panicking. Solomon clung to her, even his caresses causing her pain now. Her flailing arms drew Blue and Matt out of the shadows. The other vampires lapped at the blood that covered her, drinking it in and growing fat on it.

They started biting her, sucking at her body as she had sucked at the fruit. Matt looked up from her breast

and smiled venomously. Blood was a mask on his face, his fangs gleaming through it.

Groaning, Solomon thrust another fruit toward her face. It was the largest and plumpest she had seen yet, bursting with blood. Her head strained to reach it, mouth wide, fangs eager.

The hands stroking her hair paused. The thing outside the bower stopped as well, and she saw what it was. David in his dog-head mask, waiting. The leaves shifted. No, it was a huge mastiff. Shaftiel. Waiting for her.

Matt raised the long, gray, misshapen stake, just as he had before, and held it over her heart. One heavy thrust was all it would take. A drop of blood fell from the fruit in Solomon's hand, landing on her chin. Miranda felt her tongue go questing helplessly after it.

The soothing touch of the hands left her head. The distant moon looked down through the long branches of the bower. Miranda screamed in horror, in desperation, in need, in utter loneliness. Tears tore down her cheeks. She threw herself frantically toward the moon, reaching for it with one free arm... impaling herself on the stake that Matt held.

Blood pattered like taunting raindrops onto her face from Solomon's fruit. The raindrops mixed with her red, inhuman tears.

* * *

"Miranda?"

It was a man's voice, rough and not at first familiar. Miranda's eyes snapped open. For a moment — just a moment — she thought she was still dreaming.

The ceiling of the room where she lay was as close as the branches of the bower had been in her dream. It was slanted as well, tilting down toward one wall. She lay against that wall, a thin pile of blankets cushioning her from the bare old boards of the floor. There was one window, set against the far wall and covered with old-fashioned shutters. The blue stain of moonlight fell through the gaps in the shutters. The room was mostly shrouded in shadows. *An attic?* An electric lantern stood on a rickety chair, its shade tilted to shed light away from Miranda. In that pool of light, about as far away from the vampire as they could get, were two men. One lay on an old mattress, asleep or unconscious, while the other, tall and older, twisted around to look at her.

Her first, dream-fevered thought was that Solomon had sent the Bandog for her, that that weasel Tanner had tracked her down. Then her rescue from the basement of Solomon's mansion came back to her. Tango, her flesh shaped by Tolly's strange powers. If Miranda hadn't known the mad vampire so well, she would never have believed the changeling's hasty explanation.

If her need for rescue last night hadn't been so desperate, she still might not have believed it.

It was a little difficult to accept that the big man crouched in the shadows was Tango. There were clues, however. The way he... she held herself. The strange shape of the body under the shirt. The silver ring that had gleamed in the darkness of Solomon's basement.

Something else came back to her as well. If Tango had rescued her from Solomon's basement, if she did look like Tanner, then that meant that she knew about the Bandog. *Tolly*, Miranda thought. *It must have been*

Tolly. But that didn't matter. Tango knew.

The bottom dropped out of Miranda's heart, and she wished Matt's stake had been there to fill the hole, driving her down again into senseless oblivion. She wanted to run, she wanted to shrink back into the shadows out of shame, but she was too weak to do anything. Tango chose that moment to tip the shade on the little lamp up so that light poured across Miranda's body. The vampire winced, not from the sudden brightness but from the exposure that the light brought.

"So," said Tango in Tanner's rough voice, "you're awake. Finally."

"Yes." She waited, dreading Tango's next words.

"You look like hell."

Tango wasn't going to mention the Bandog, Miranda realized abruptly. In a way, she wished that the changeling would just confront her about the cult. It would be so much easier and so much faster. She felt as though she were trapped in purgatory, ready to fall at the slightest transgression, but with no guarantee of forgiveness if she were without sin. But she could play the denial game, too. If Tango wasn't going to mention the Bandog, then she certainly wouldn't. "I need blood. More than..."

She cut herself off. *More than the man last night could have given me alone.* Miranda had vaguely recognized the short man as a Bandog. How much had it cost Tango to lead him to his death? Miranda had drunk his blood, but Tango had killed him, hadn't she? Mention the short man and she mentioned the Bandog. "More than I've had recently." She managed to prop herself up on one elbow. "Tolly did a good job. You never know what

his type are capable of, do you?"

"No."

"You know he has to change you back again?"

"Yes." Tango turned back to the man on the mattress. "He said he would come tonight as soon as he could."

"Where are we?"

"A safehouse. Somewhere downtown. You'd know where, I'm sure, but it's all just streets to me. Somewhere So— somewhere safe."

So Tango was having as much trouble avoiding the forbidden topic of the Bandog as she was herself. *Somewhere Solomon...* Last night, Miranda remembered, Tango had said they were going somewhere safe from location by Solomon's magick. Miranda wasn't sure how that was possible. She took a closer look at the man on the mattress: tall, gangly, thinning red hair. The man from under Solomon's eerie apple tree. There was something else familiar about him as well, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it. "Riley?" she asked. "Is he asleep?"

Tango nodded sharply. "Yes," she replied shortly. "He has been all day. Ever since we... got here."

"What time is it?"

"Just past midnight."

The sun had gone down hours ago. Miranda had been dreaming that long? Severe wounds could drive a vampire into the years- and sometimes decades-long sleep of torpor. She should be thankful that that hadn't happened. Matt and Blue's torture had been terrible. She couldn't remember everything that she had told them, but apparently it had been what they'd wanted to hear. Or maybe they had just tortured her for the

fun of it. Matt had taken particular delight in forcing her hand into the sunlight. The hand was still stiff and largely immobile. It would take a lot of blood to heal fully.

"I need to hunt," she said again. Not that it would be much of a hunt. She would simply keep to the shadows and wait for eye contact. Then she would call the victim to her. No elegance, no style, just survival. She rolled over onto her side — slowly. It seemed to take five minutes just to complete that simple action. Tango watched wordlessly. Miranda got both arms under her body and pushed herself upright. She was trembling when the feat was accomplished.

"Tolly," Tango said with a roughness that was not caused by her altered throat, "said not to go outside until he got here."

It was a petty revenge. Miranda glared at the changeling. Tango wouldn't meet her gaze. It was probably the sensible thing to do, but it was also a snub. Miranda forced herself all the way to her feet, just to spite Tango. She had to cling to the wall to stay upright. Tango just watched her. Miranda gave her a grim smile of triumph.

"Just remember that you can't drink my blood or Riley's," the changeling said.

"How could I forget?" Miranda walked along the wall to the window. There was no glass in the frame and night air, still hot, breezed through the slats of the shutters. She pushed against them. They were nailed shut, but the nails were rusty and the wood of the frame old. When she threw her rather insubstantial weight against them, they squealed. She did it again. The nails pulled free.

The moonlight turned shadows into dark, thin tissue paper. The window looked west across old rooftops and warehouses, a landscape of slanting shingles, brick walls and pale gray wood. She couldn't see the street, and she didn't really recognize the area, but she could hear music close by. Something loud, with a bluesy edge to it. Where there was music, there would be people. Where there were people, there would be blood. Miranda found herself sniffing at the breeze, as if it might carry the scent of blood on it and the smell alone might sustain her. Tolly had said they couldn't leave this place? She wouldn't normally believe the mad vampire, but she remembered how Solomon had found her last night. If he hadn't come for her again, maybe there was something to Tolly's claim. What could shield them from the Nephandus' magick? She wasn't sure. She was silent for a long time. Just out of the corner of her eye, she could see Tango, still crouching beside Riley, still watching her.

"So," Miranda asked her eventually, "if we can't go outside, how did you spend the day?"

Tango hesitated for a long minute before answering. "Sleeping. And hoping maybe Tolly would come back early." She looked down at the floor, then up again. "Where are they tonight, Miranda?" she asked hoarsely. "Who are they killing?"

The changeling had broken first. The veils of secrecy that had hid the Bandog were tearing and falling. Miranda bit her lip. "I don't know, Tango."

"You must!"

She shook her head. "I don't. Everything has changed. I don't even know why Solomon wanted us... me to commit the murders." It was hard to say, but it

was true. Until last night, the pack had only been hirelings. She had been the only one who knew about the Bandog. Solomon had come to her. "He wanted to terrify the city. I'm sure he had a deeper purpose, but I don't know what it is."

"I do." Tango's face was bleak. She rose to her feet. "Three people are dying out there tonight as sacrifices to your demon."

"My demon?" Miranda gasped. "Shaftiel isn't 'my demon'!"

"You are Bandog," Tango spat mockingly, "aren't you? Aren't you 'his vampire'?"

Miranda turned her back to the window and looked at Tango. "Not anymore. How much did you see last night, Tango?"

The changeling told her. She told her about Tolly's visit and his connection to Riley; she told her about the ritual, about the pack's initiation, about the elevations. She told her about Solomon's plans, including the final sacrifice of Miranda herself. When she was through, she leaned back against a wall and waited for Miranda's reaction.

The story left Miranda speechless. How could Solomon do this? "That's monstrous!"

Tango snorted bitterly. "Coming from you, that should be a compliment."

If she could have flushed then, Miranda would have. "I'm not like that, Tango."

"No? Then why did you beat six innocent people to death at Solomon's command? Would you have kept going? Would you have killed all sixteen for him?"

Four, Miranda corrected her silently. *I only killed four*. Only four. For a moment, she felt as mad as Tolly.

She was a vampire. A vampire of the Sabbat. She answered to no one. Humans were her playthings and her sustenance. But she had killed four people in cold blood. And she did have to answer for it — to herself, if not to Tango. She pushed those thoughts back. “I didn’t,” she said weakly, “know that he was going to try and summon Shaftiel.”

“Shaftiel’s voice,” Tango corrected her. “If you didn’t know that, why were you doing it?”

“For Solomon. He... Shaftiel... they promised me power.” Miranda slumped against the windowsill. “The power to control the pack. The power to rise in the Sabbat.”

“Why?”

This time, Miranda snorted. “You’re a loner. You wouldn’t understand. Power in the Sabbat comes from being able to enforce your will. When you don’t have power, you’re cannon-fodder. The Sabbat creates vampires as shock troops. Newborn Sabbat vampires aren’t expected to last a week. Even someone like me, six years old as a vampire, could still be ordered into a suicide situation by the Archbishop. With power comes safety. I would have done anything to reach a position of safety.” She sighed. “I found out about the Bandog while I was hunting away from the pack. An old man called on Shaftiel to save him.”

“Did it work?”

“Only insofar as I stopped because I was curious. The old man led me to Solomon. I learned more about the Bandog and decided to join. Solomon was overjoyed to have a vampire in his little kennel.” Her mouth twisted. “I still haven’t seen any of the power he promised me. And I even made myself his lover.”

Tango blinked in surprise. "I didn't think that sex was possible — for a vampire."

"Sex is possible. It's just empty." She shrugged, trying to belittle what she had done with the Nephandus. "There was contact. I fed. Solomon enjoyed himself. It was the ultimate submission for him. He craved it, as though being Shaftiel's servant somehow weren't enough."

"So you prostituted yourself for Solomon. You killed for him, and you prostituted yourself for him."

The words were like a knife. Miranda looked down, ashamed. "You haven't asked me why Solomon named me a traitor."

Tango refused to respond. Instead, she turned back to the sleeping man. "You don't know anything about Riley, do you?"

"I knew that Jubilee Arthurs kidnapped him on Solomon's orders." Tango stiffened and Miranda winced. "I'm sorry, Tango. Jubilee resisted me when I tried to dominate his mind. He's a full telepath now. I let him get away because I didn't want you to find out about the Bandog. And my connection with the penny murders." Miranda waited. Again Tango refused to acknowledge her confession.

"Do you know why Solomon had him kidnapped?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you know what Solomon did to him? It's been almost twenty-four hours since I took him out from under that damn tree, and he's still asleep."

"No."

"Damn it!" snapped Tango frantically. "Don't you know *anything*, Miranda?" The changeling was on her

feet again suddenly, grabbing at Miranda and pushing her back against the wall. "You lied to me, you murdered, you whored, and you don't know anything about Solomon or what he was doing?"

"No!" She was too weak to push back.

"Why did Riley have a Bandog bracelet? I found one in his luggage."

That was why the sleeping changeling looked familiar. Miranda's mouth felt dry suddenly. Tango wasn't going to like this. "I think... I think he was a Bandog, Tango. Another member of the High Circle."

Tango let go of her. "No."

"I'm not sure. I kept my distance from the other members. But why else would he have had a chain?"

"I had hoped there would be another reason. I've been trying to think of one all day." Tango looked down at Riley. "Solomon said there were five people missing from the High Circle last night. You, the traitor. Riley, I guess."

"Two of the High Circle committed suicide recently," Miranda told her. "A third vanished just last week. Solomon never talked about it."

"Last night he said that Shaftiel killed four Bandog while trying to deliver his message."

"But Riley's not dead."

"No." Tango considered her friend. "I wonder why Solomon enchanted him, then." She glanced at Miranda. The vampire knew what Tango wanted to know, but she could only shake her head. Solomon hadn't told her anything. She hadn't pursued anything beyond her own dreams of power.

She just wished Tango would ask her what she had been doing in the basement, tortured by Matt and Blue

at Solomon's orders. She could tell her that. Then let the changeling make her judgments.

But Tango didn't ask anything else. She just sank down beside Riley once more. Miranda hissed softly in anguished frustration.

A creak brought her head, along with Tango's, up again. Weight shifted against stairs. There was the sound of a latch opening, and a trapdoor popped open in the shadows. Tango's knife was in her hand instantly, and the changeling dashed forward. Her arm went around the throat of a young woman coming up through the trapdoor. "Don't make a sound. Who are you?"

"I'm here for Miranda."

The girl's voice was wooden, as if she were speaking words someone else had placed in her mouth. Miranda fumbled for the lamp and tilted it so that its light flooded across the two figures at the trapdoor. The girl was dressed all in black, her face pale and her hair artfully braided. Her eyes were distant.

"Who sent you?" Tango demanded. "Why?"

"I'm here for Miranda."

"Well, you can't have her!"

"Tango," Miranda hissed, "let her go."

"What? We don't know—"

"She's not here to fetch me." Miranda put down the lamp and staggered forward. Without the support of the wall, it was difficult to stay upright. "She's here *for* me." Puzzled, Tango released her hold. The girl climbed all the way up out of the trapdoor and walked toward Miranda. When she was directly in front of the vampire, she pulled down the neck of her shirt and bent her head back.

Miranda fell on her desperately. The girl's blood was

ever-so-slightly tainted with old drugs and new alcohol, but it was otherwise as pure and rich as any Miranda had tasted. The girl had the sweetness of a vegetarian. Or perhaps it was just Miranda's hunger that made the blood seem so sweet. She could feel the girl's pulse in her mouth, growing slowly weaker as her blood made the vampire stronger. But Miranda could also feel Tango's gaze on her.

Very deliberately, she pushed the girl away. She had taken enough to make herself mostly well again, enough to leave the girl paler than normal and weak — but alive. Miranda looked into her dark eyes. "Who sent you?" she asked. Her will pushed out.

"I don't know," the girl answered. It was the truth, Miranda realized. The girl had no idea why she had come here. The memory had been wiped from her mind, or else hidden so well that she might never remember it.

"Miranda?" Tango asked.

"She was sent by a vampire, Tango. A vampire sent her to me so I could feed." Miranda lifted the girl and laid her on the pile of blankets that had been her own bed. It felt wonderful to be strong again. "Did you see anyone when you came?"

"No. Tolly just gave me instructions to come here. All the doors were unlocked. As if we were expected."

Miranda frowned. "I want to know who our host or hostess is, then." She started toward the trapdoor. Tango stopped her.

"We're not supposed to go outside."

"I'm not going out, just downstairs." She stepped around the changeling. The stairs beyond the trapdoor were steep and dark. There was another door at the

bottom. Miranda pulled it open.

A tall, gaunt vampire swept in, pulling the door shut and dragging her swiftly back up the stairs. "Didn't Tolly tell you not to leave this room? Didn't he?" Surprised, Miranda had only the briefest impressions of the other vampire until they were back in the attic room and he was slamming the trapdoor shut. Then he turned to face her.

"DeWinter?"

"You're very lucky to have Tolly for a friend, Miranda." The Camarilla vampire frowned at her. "But can't you follow the simplest of instructions?"

Tango stepped forward. "Tolly said not to go outside."

DeWinter paced around the room like a big, dark bird. "He should have said not to go outside this room. The idiot." He stopped by the window and pulled the shutters closed.

Miranda pushed past him to throw the shutters wide again. She leaned out as far as she could, searching for some landmark. "We're in the Box?" she gasped.

"Get back inside." DeWinter hauled her in again, then pulled the shutters closed with such force that the rusty nails sank back into the dry wood. "People think this building only has three floors. You'll destroy everything if anyone sees you."

"We're in the Box," Miranda muttered again, half-afraid. "Who knows we're here?"

DeWinter shook his head. "Myself and Tolly. Possibly the hot-dog vendors — you can never tell how much they know. None of the others."

"What's the Box?" Tango asked.

"The last remnants of the Camarilla in Toronto,

milady." DeWinter swept himself in a graceful, flourishing, mocking bow. "Sabbat are forbidden to enter, just as we are forbidden to leave."

Miranda ground her teeth. "If the other Camarilla catch me here, they'll destroy me."

"There's not much chance that they'll find you," DeWinter said confidently. "If I can conceal you from Solomon, I can conceal you from Swan and the others."

Tango looked from one vampire to the other. "If Sabbat can't enter the Box and Camarilla can't leave it — and if the Camarilla and the Sabbat are enemies — how do you know Tolly?"

"There is no 'can't,' just 'forbidden.' There are ways through and across every boundary. Tolly is my student. I tutor him in the arts of concealment. In a way, he is also my colleague. Along with Riley." He nodded at the sleeping changeling.

Surprise crossed Miranda and Tango's faces at the same moment. "What do you mean?" Miranda demanded.

"O brave new world that has such creatures in't." He patted Miranda's cheek. "Some of us try to see through the petty squabbles that separate the shadows, Miranda. All of the dark beings of our world share some common enemies — like the Nephandi. It may not be easy for us to work together, but it can be done."

"What do you know about the Bandog and Solomon, then?"

"Very little." DeWinter shrugged. "Tolly and Riley were operating on their own. Ours is a very loose alliance. Tolly contacted me for help early yesterday evening. His powers aren't capable of concealing a group of people while he's somewhere else."

"Do you know where Tolly is now, then?" asked Tango eagerly. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No," DeWinter admitted. "And I can't change you back to your own shape, so don't ask. Only Tolly can do that." He squatted down beside Riley. "What's wrong with him?"

"Solomon has him under some kind of human magick," Miranda explained. "It's keeping him asleep."

"Hmm. Can't be affecting his mind — Riley's too slippery for that." DeWinter lifted one of the changeling's hands to his mouth.

Tango grabbed the gaunt vampire's arm. "No!"

He grinned. "Easy. Kithain blood can't do anything to me that I'm not already halfway to myself." He slipped one of Riley's fingers between his lips and nipped gently. A tiny dribble of blood escaped from the corner of his mouth. For a moment, he looked like a human connoisseur judging a fine wine; then he spat the blood out and laid Riley's hand back down. "Just as I thought. There's something in his blood. Like what you'd find in a sleeping human, but a thousand times as strong. Solomon's magick has probably jumped up his body's production of the hormones and chemicals associated with sleep. How long has he been this way?"

"Maybe four or five days."

DeWinter made a face. "It's going to take a long time for him to wake up on his own, then."

"How long?" Tango asked worriedly.

"Weeks, probably."

"Maybe a hospital?" suggested Miranda.

"No," Tango said. "A doctor would probably just explain this as a coma and hook Riley up to monitors and ventilators." Miranda watched her bite her lip. "I

think I might have a way to wake him up, but it won't be easy, and it will put us in danger from the Kithain court."

DeWinter raised an eyebrow. "What are you thinking of? You could just wait, you know. I'm sure he'll come out of it sooner or later."

"We need him sooner, I think," Miranda replied. "Solomon's going to summon a demon's voice."

DeWinter's other eyebrow went up. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Well, he's going to try it." Tango looked at DeWinter. "He's going to manipulate the city into riots as part of the rite. The penny murders are his sacrifices to the demon. There are going to be three more tonight, then another four tomorrow along with the riots. Is there anything you can do to help us?"

"No."

"What?" spat Miranda.

"No," DeWinter repeated firmly. "The group that Riley, Tolly and I belong to is secret. We're a network of contacts more than allies. We can help in small ways, but nothing major. There are other, bigger, badder groups out there that would break us up as soon as they knew anything about our existence. Tolly and Riley are on their own."

Miranda glared at him angrily. "You have to—"

"No. I don't have to do anything." He met her gaze fearlessly. "And don't try anything. I can still let the Camarilla have you. I'm only hiding you because of Tolly and Riley."

"Fine." She turned back to Tango. "What's your plan?"

"The same cantrip I used to burn off the effects of

Atlanta's pepper spray." The changeling hesitated, thinking. "I might be able to use it on Riley. Maybe. I'm not very good at working my magic on other Kithain."

"It can't hurt to try, can it?"

"No. Except that I can't do it here. I need Glamour, and the only place I know where there's free Glamour that I can access is at the Kithain court in Yorkville." Tango wrinkled her nose. "And unfortunately, neither I nor Riley are especially popular there right now."

Miranda licked her lips. "Is there any way you can do what Sin did? Create an epiphany? In a human, I mean," she added hastily as Tango's lips pressed together in anger. "Not by... the other way."

"No. Creating a Reverie takes time. And we don't have time." Tango held out Tanner's long, masculine arm. "I'd rather we didn't even have to wait for Tolly to change me back, but we're not going to have any chance at getting into the court if I look like this."

"You wouldn't be able to get in anyway," DeWinter reminded her. "Without Tolly to hide you, Solomon's magick will locate you almost as soon as you leave my protection."

Tango nodded. "At least the court will hide us while we're there. I doubt if Solomon's magick could pinpoint it." She ground her teeth. "Where is Tolly?"

As if in answer to her question, the door at the bottom of the stairs slammed shut and, a heartbeat later, the trapdoor flew open. Tolly thrust his body through the hole. He looked like a nightmare.

His teeth were as long as his fangs were normally, his fangs as long as his fingers. His face was pinched and thin. His hair was wild. His eyes were bleeding —

not crying the bloody tears of vampires, but actually bleeding. Painful bony spurs stuck through his skin at all of his joints. His body looked emaciated under his clothes. His arms were like long, thin tree branches caught in a high wind. His hands were broken and covered in blood. He slapped them against the walls as he spun around the room, leaving gory streaks and distorted handprints behind. Occasionally, he would slam his head against the walls as well.

"Tolly!" DeWinter yelled.

"No!" screamed the mad vampire. "No! No! No!" He punched at the wall. Miranda could hear the bones in his already shattered hand pop some more. "I don't want to do this anymore! I hate it!" He flung himself at DeWinter. "They made me do it!" His head wobbled back and forth, deforming as if battered by unseen blows. "And *they* begged me not to!" He dropped hard to his knees, crawling between Miranda and Tango to reach Riley. Both his hands and knees made smears of blood on the floor. "Let me go, Riley!" he begged the sleeping changeling. "Let me go and we can stop this. You don't know how bad it is now. It's worse than we imagined!" He grabbed at Riley.

DeWinter caught him instead and dragged him to his feet. "Tolly!" he commanded, "Look at me!" He caught the other vampire's head, forcing his face around. "Look at me!" He might as well have been trying to turn a squid. Tolly's body kept squirming and his head kept changing shape. Miranda reached out to help, grabbing the mad vampire's chest. DeWinter managed to catch Tolly's gaze. "Calm down," he said soothingly. "You have to calm down. Everything is all right."

Slowly, Tolly's spastic movements eased and his body began take on its normal shape. Miranda glanced at Tango. The changeling was watching the spectacle with a mingled expression of shock, disgust and awe. DeWinter let Tolly's head go. Miranda released his chest. Tolly dropped down to lie on the floor. "Are you all right?" DeWinter asked him.

"Now, yes," Tolly said tightly. He glanced at Riley, then Miranda, then Tango. "You got him out," he said to her. "You got both of them out. Thank you."

"I got Riley away from Solomon." The changeling was watching Tolly carefully, as though she were expecting the name to prompt a reaction in him. It didn't. "You have to put me back the way I was. Then we can try and wake him up."

Tolly just gestured with his hands. They were still gnarled and misshapen. With a hiss, Tango dropped down beside him. "This is going to hurt," she said, a little ironically.

"Fine by me," Tolly gasped between gritted teeth. Still, he yelped when she grasped his hand and sharply, forcefully straightened out a broken finger. "I deserve it."

Miranda squatted down. "What did you do tonight, Tolly? Who did you kill?"

A red tear came to Tolly's eye. The scratches across his face that had poured blood before were healed now. "Children. Three children. Then we fed from their babysitter in the garden. *Al fresco*." A mad little giggle bubbled between his lips.

Tango caught her breath. Miranda glanced up at her, but the changeling had all of her attention fixed on Tolly's hands, straightening his bones as quickly as she could.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you*

Tango led them through the gray darkness of early-morning Yorkville, Tolly following her closely, Miranda behind him. Miranda cradled Riley in her arms. Tango had been reluctant to trust him to her, but Miranda had pointed out that it would be easiest for her to carry his sleeping body. Riley's tall form would be awkward for the changeling, now returned to her normal shape, to carry. Tolly would need all of his concentration to conceal them from Solomon's questing magick. Miranda was the obvious choice to act as porter. Tango had finally agreed.

And all of that conversation had, of course, followed hard on Tango's misgivings about Miranda accompanying them at all.

The vampire shifted Riley's body around. Tango's distrust hurt her. She had tried her best to explain why she had done what she had. She regretted it all now, but she couldn't take any of it back, could she? She could only apologize and try to atone. But Tango refused to listen to anything she said.

Fine. If Miranda had to prove all over again that

she could be trusted, she would do it.

Something scuttled through the shadows. Miranda snapped her head around to stare after it. *Just a raccoon*. All the same, she wished they had DeWinter with them. Tolly had taken the gaunt Camarilla vampire aside before they had left the hidden attic and asked him to help them. DeWinter had flatly refused. None of Tolly's subsequent pleading and tantrums had moved him at all. The best he could promise was to keep watch on Solomon's activities if they failed to stop the Nephandus.

Tango turned into a little alley lined with shops, then, halfway up, turned again, so sharply that the vampires behind her stumbled. The changeling paused in the entrance to a little sushi shop, peering down into the darkness of a steep, narrow stairwell. "Ruby?" she hissed. "Are you here?"

"I never leave." Miranda, watching the shadows intently, saw an old woman, even smaller than Tango, step out of the brick wall. It was almost like seeing Tolly step out of one of his hiding places, but, at the same time, even more strangely unnerving. Ruby actually seemed to draw her substance from the bricks. The other changeling had her eyes on the vampires from the moment she emerged, as if she had been watching them even before she had eyes with which to watch. Her gaze was openly suspicious, though it lightened briefly when she recognized Riley. "What do you want, Tango?"

"I need to get into the court. I need Glamour to wake Riley."

"There's no one here right now. Everyone's gone home except for me and Marshall the night watchman."

"I don't need anyone else. Please, Ruby? It's

important. Really important.” Tango took a step down.

Miranda didn't quite catch what happened, but it was as if Tango had stepped onto an escalator going the wrong way. Abruptly, she was back at the top of the steps. “I'm still Gatekeeper, Tango,” Ruby said. “I have a duty.” She nodded at Riley. “What's wrong with him?”

“He's caught in a mage's magick.”

Ruby sucked in her breath. “One of the ones he visited in San Francisco?”

“No. One right here in Toronto.”

“Duke Michael won't like that at all. If he knew, he'd probably forbid you even to try waking Riley up.” Her old eyes sparkled. “I'm glad I'm not Duke Michael.”

A broad grin split Tango's face. “Thanks, Ruby.”

“Not so fast.” She pointed toward the vampires. “What about them? The duke might not have any particular quarrel with the leeches, but I don't think he'd want them in the court.”

“They're my...” She paused. *My friends?* Miranda thought hopefully. “My allies,” Tango finished. Ruby considered them for a moment longer, then stepped aside.

“All right. You're on your own with Marshall, though. I don't have any pull with him. But be careful — he's a redcap.”

“Thanks. I have a plan.”

Tango took them down the stairs. Miranda had to walk carefully; the old steps were worn. She didn't want to drop Riley if she missed her footing and fell. As they reached the door at the bottom, it unlocked suddenly. Miranda glanced back up at Ruby. The old changeling flashed her a smile as she disappeared back into the wall. Tango, meanwhile, was boldly throwing open the

door. "I claim sanctuary for myself and my allies in this freehold!" she shouted firmly.

Miranda barely had time to recognize that the changeling court was — contrary to anything she might have expected — nothing more than a dingy pool hall, before a hard, thin, lash of a man stepped in front of them. "What? Who are you?" He saw Miranda and Tolly, and spat. "Get out."

"I've claimed sanctuary," Tango said. "They're my allies. They stay." She paced forward, confronting the night watchman. "I'm Tango. The duke's Jester? And I imagine you know Riley?"

Marshall's eyes narrowed. "I know Riley. The duke isn't too happy with either of you right now."

"I don't think he's banned me from court yet, has he?" Tango asked sweetly. She gestured for Miranda and Tolly to come in, and for Miranda to lay Riley down.

"Well, he isn't here," Marshall pointed out. "And I've never heard of claiming sanctuary in a freehold."

"Fifth tenet of the Escheat — the Right of Safe Haven. Learn your Kithain laws."

Marshall sneered. "The Right to Safe Haven maintains the safety of the freehold. It doesn't mean lawless Kithain can just wander in in the middle of the night." He hefted a pool cue as though it were a spear. Tango watched it as warily as though it really were. "Get..."

Abruptly, Tango ducked forward and grabbed the cue out of the night watchman's hands. When she dropped it, the tip hit the floor... Miranda blinked. The tip hit the floor with the clatter of falling metal?

As if it *were* a spearhead, and the floor were something harder than linoleum.

Tango had Marshall down on the dirty floor. Her knife was in her hand and hovering near his face. "See this?" she hissed. "This is real. I put this through you, and you stay dead."

"Sixth tenet," snarled Marshall. "The Right to Life. You can't kill another Kithain. Learn the laws yourself!"

Miranda saw Tango's hand waver for just a second. Marshall's words would have reminded her of what she had once been and done. Miranda's jaw tightened in sympathy. But then Tango's hand became steady again. She brought the knife down to prick Marshall's cheek. "If I do kill you, you're dead. Do you really want to put that to the test?" She held the knife down for a moment longer, then took it away and pulled Marshall to his feet. She thrust him toward the door. "Go find Duke Michael and ask him about sanctuary and the Right to Safe Haven. I'll be waiting here when you get back." Marshall reeled out into the dark stairwell, then spun around angrily. Tango slammed the door in his face and locked it.

"Is there such a thing as claiming sanctuary?" Miranda asked quietly, setting Riley down on top of one of the pool tables in the long room.

Tango nodded. "Yes and no. Under the fifth tenet, Kithain are supposed to be admitted to any freehold where they seek refuge. But it's not guaranteed or enforced, and freeholds turn away refugees all the time."

"Why?"

"Out of fear that they'll do what I'm going to do — steal Glamour." She glanced at Tolly. "Take a break. Solomon can't get to us here." The mad vampire relaxed with a grateful sigh. His hands started fiddling with a rack of pool balls, clacking them together, and he

giggled. Tango winced, turning her attention back to Riley. She reached for her necklace and took the sprig of heather out of its vial. "I'm not sure this is going to work, or how long it will take," she murmured to Miranda. "It is going to take all of my concentration, though. Try to keep Tolly quiet."

That would be tricky enough, but Miranda had another concern. "What do we do if this Duke Michael comes back before you finish?"

"Bluff. Stall. Whatever you can do. Just be careful if anyone points anything at you." She nudged Marshall's fallen pool cue with a toe. "This really was a spear in Marshall's hands. A Kithain chimeric weapon created out of Glamour."

"A spear can't hurt me," Miranda reminded her.

"Maybe not, but an ordinary pool cue through the heart would, and you wouldn't know the difference until too late." The words were delivered coolly, like a warning in battle rather than advice to a friend.

Tango leaned over Riley and set the sprig of heather on his chest. She pressed her hands to his head, then slowly began to knead his scalp as if she were giving him a massage. Her fingers moved down to his jaw. Her eyes closed in concentration. Miranda turned away.

The entire pool hall... the entire changeling court, rather, had the same feel to it that Miranda had first noticed around Tango when the other woman had walked into Hopeful. Energetic. Dynamic. Electrical. As if the room were vibrating at a frequency so high that it only appeared to be motionless. Miranda had sensed something similar around Sin when they had seen him at Club Haze. The invisible, tingling energy in the court was much stronger than it had been around

either changeling, however. Like riverwater to seawater. It was Glamour, she supposed, forever hidden from her. Miranda felt sure that there was more to the court than she could see. Only the shallowest of perceptions came to her now. The metallic clatter of the dropped pool cue, for example. The way her footsteps echoed, as though the pool hall were far larger than it looked. A sense of dark grandeur. Tango's world was invisible to her, and almost incomprehensible.

Miranda had been watching Tolly whirl around the room for several minutes before she realized that he was waltzing between the pool tables, moving in perfect time, as if to unheard music. Could the mad vampire see and hear things of the Glamour? Could he enter Tango's world? It hardly seemed fair. "Tolly," she asked softly, "what are you dancing to?"

Tolly snorted. "Nothing, silly." He swept her up as he moved past, bringing her into his slow, rocking dance. "The orchestra's gone home for the night."

* * *

Glamour flooded through Tango like sunlight flooding through a prism. In the rich environment of the court, she had no trouble drawing it to her. The Glamour illuminated her entire being. The problem came when she tried to redirect it into Riley. It fractured — just as sunlight passing through a prism broke into a rainbow. She couldn't focus the Glamour outside of her body, even though the atmosphere of the court should have made it easier. She could have used her cantrip on herself easily, but nothing she did seemed to carry the magic to Riley. She growled softly in

frustration and moved her hands down to the pooka's arms. "Work," she muttered. "Work, damn you."

The Glamour just dripped away from him. Again. She tried brushing the heather across his face as she drew on the Glamour, pouring the radiant energy through the sprig. Nothing.

Tango felt like pounding her hands on the table in frustration. Why had she even hoped that this might succeed? It had never worked in the past. In the forty-five years since she had gone through the Chrysalis, she had never found a way to use her magic on anyone but herself. Why should it work now? But it should have been possible! She should have been able to do it. She had to find a way to make the cantrip work this time!

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Miranda push Tolly away. The other woman sent the mad vampire to squat in a far corner, then came over to her. "Is it not...?"

"No," Tango said harshly. "It's not."

"Oh." Miranda turned away again. She stopped and glanced back. "Is there anything I can do?"

Tango clenched her teeth. "No. It's not a problem you'd understand."

The vampire just looked at her. "Try me," she said, as if it were a challenge. "What's your problem?"

"Forget it! There's nothing you can do."

"Do you want to wake Riley up or not?"

Tango didn't reply right away. She looked down at Riley. They had to wake him, or they would never find out all of what was going on. She and Miranda could only guess at part of the larger picture. Tolly knew something, but couldn't tell them. Everything else that they needed to know was locked up in Riley's sleeping

mind. "All right," she snapped grudgingly at Miranda. "My magic won't work on him. I've tried, and I can't do it!"

"Why won't it work?" asked Miranda calmly.

"Because I can't affect other Kithain. I don't know why. It just doesn't work." She glared up at the vampire. "And before you ask, I've tried every trick I've ever heard of to get it to work. The connection just isn't there. I thought I could do it this time, with so much riding on being successful, but I can't."

Miranda was silent as she thought. "But you can affect your own body?"

"Easily."

"What if..." Miranda drummed her fingers on the pool table. "What if you thought Riley's body was yours?"

Tango stared at the vampire. "What? How?"

"I could hypnotize you. You've seen stage-mesmerists make people act like they're somebody else? If you thought you were Riley — sort of like an out-of-body experience — maybe you could make the Glamour flow. A really deep trance might be enough to make the connection. It would be tricky. I've never actually done anything quite like it before."

Tango considered the idea skeptically. "What would it involve?"

"A deep trance, a lot of suggestion." Miranda shifted a bit. "And you would have to trust me enough to let me do it."

Tango barely bit back a snarl. "Forget it."

There was a fist-sized knot of guilt in her stomach when she said it.

"Why not?" demanded Miranda. "It's our best chance."

"You might mess with my head while you're doing it."

Why should she? Why would she want to do that to you now? Are you afraid she's going to turn you over to Solomon?

Miranda's face was a frozen mask. The vampire's dark eyes looked down at her. Her lips were pressed tightly together. A human might have been breathing hard, nostrils flaring, but Miranda's face didn't move at all. Then, suddenly, she lashed out so fast that her hand seemed to blur, and slapped Tango across the face. "Damn it!" she screamed. "I don't want to mess with your head! Do you think I enjoyed hiding the penny murders from you? Do you think I was playing games when I let Jubilee get away? *I hated it!*"

"Then why did you do it?" Tango screamed back at her.

"Because I didn't want you to find out about me! I liked you and I didn't want you to start hating me. You were the first person in a long time that I didn't have to play power games with. And you treated me like a person instead of a creature. I liked that."

Doesn't that make sense? asked the guilt in the pit of Tango's stomach. It rippled larger, and brought a flush of shame to Tango's face.

Miranda wasn't finished. "Remember what you said to me that first night at Hopeful? It's nice to have someone you can talk to and know they'll understand? Do you think you're the only one who feels that way?"

Tango swallowed. "I..."

"Do you know why Solomon named me a traitor to the Bandog? Because I was trying to protect you. Because I was with you instead of committing another

murder. Because I rejected him.” The other woman stood straight, her arms stiff at her sides, her hands clenched. “I’m tired of power games. I’m sick of killing. I want to do what you did, Tango. I want to walk away from it all. Why can’t you forgive me?”

Tango stared at her. In her anger, Miranda’s fangs had emerged. She looked so inhuman. *Say it*, whispered the voice inside her. *Admit it*.

“Because,” Tango whispered, “you remind me too much of myself. You make me remember what I used to be like. You make me remember how easy it was.” She reached up and pressed Miranda’s lips closed, hiding the fangs. “Please don’t.” She looked straight into the vampire’s eyes. “Hypnotize me. Let’s do it.”

“Tango...”

“Do it!” She felt better, but still incomplete. “Hurry.”

Miranda looked like she was about to say something more, but stopped. Gently, she lifted Tango up to sit on the edge of the pool table. Then she caught her gaze again. Abruptly, Tango found herself falling into Miranda’s eyes. It was like diving into a warm swimming pool at night. The sensation was comforting, embracing. She didn’t fight it. Instead, she dove deeper into the shadows. Miranda was speaking to her, the vampire’s voice a distant, eerie murmur of command, encouraging her to remember everything that she knew about Riley, all of the experiences that they had shared. Obediently, Tango remembered. The recent evening in Pan’s. Winnipeg six years ago. Boston before that. A wild road trip in the early eighties. The first time they met, 1978 in Montreal. Things she’d thought she had forgotten: postcards, Christmas gifts, telephone calls.

“Now,” instructed Miranda’s ghostly whale-song of a voice, “imagine all of that from Riley’s point of view.”

The imagining came easily. Riley’s end of the telephone calls. Riley writing postcards. Riley laughing uproariously as he steered the car off the road and they went jolting across rough desert in the wilds of New Mexico, with her grabbing at his arm and yelling at him.

“Become Riley,” Miranda said. “You are Riley. You are...”

* * *

Riley was barely aware of how strange it seemed to have a vampire tell him to open his eyes and look down at his own body. When she told him to reach out and purify his own blood, he did it — even though he had never been able to do any such thing before. His magic changed the shape of things. It wasn’t healing magic. But Glamour moved through his body and then into his other body, a sweet ripple of light. His other body stirred. The vampire watched the other body carefully, telling him to keep it up. He broke in two the sprig of heather he held and shifted his hands, putting one on his other body’s chest and one over its forehead. Heart and brain. His other body stretched.

“Just a little longer,” hissed the vampire. Riley concentrated, the ripple of Glamour becoming a rush.

His other body opened its eyes. “Tango?” he asked himself.

The vampire smiled. She turned Riley’s head back to look into her deep, dark eyes. “Tango. Come back.” Riley blinked.

* * *

Tango's smile matched, and maybe even outshone, Miranda's. "It worked!" She threw her arms around the other woman. "Thank you, Miranda!" She turned to smile at the bemused pooka, sitting up and looking around. "Hello, Riley!"

"Hurray!" Tolly came bounding across the room like a big, friendly dog, and grabbed Riley tightly. "You're back!"

Riley hugged the mad vampire in return, then looked around the empty court and back to Tango. "What happened?"

"Solomon kidnapped you...."

"I know that." Riley shuddered. "The last thing I remember was having my mind rooted through like it was a garbage can."

Miranda raised her eyebrow. "I didn't know Solomon could do that."

"Mages are always full of—" Riley really looked at the vampire for the first time. "You!" He scrambled away.

"Riley!" Tango grabbed him. "It's all right. She's on our side. She's left the Bandog."

The pooka glared at Miranda. "Really?"

Tolly didn't give her a chance to reply. He twisted Riley around roughly, dragging him away from her. "Take the *geasa* off me, Riley," he begged. "Please! Take it off before I go nuts!"

"All right, you're released!" Tolly collapsed across Riley's lap with a vast sigh. Riley looked around. "What the hell's been happening?" His eyes went narrow. "What day is it?"

"The night before Highsummer."

"Shit!" Riley pushed Tolly off him and scrambled

down from the table. "Solomon was bragging to me. He's going to..."

Tango stopped him. "Easy. We know what Solomon is planning."

"How much?"

"Pretty much everything, we think." Tango sat him back down again. "Take it slow. You've been asleep for five days."

"Well, then I'm good and rested." He got to his feet again and caught Tolly's lolling head. "How much do they know about the other stuff?"

"Nothing. I couldn't tell them anything, remember?" Red tears started to drip from Tolly's eyes. "But if you know about the murders, guess who Solomon chose to do his dirty work."

"No." Riley glanced at Miranda.

She nodded. "Our pack." Tango was surprised to hear a faint quaver in her voice. "Solomon came to me, then pretended to hire the pack."

"No." Riley stroked Tolly's blond hair. "I'm sorry, Tolly."

Tolly twisted around to grab at Riley and cry into his chest. "And I couldn't *tell* anyone!" Riley kept stroking his head comfortingly. He looked at Tango.

"So," she asked him slowly, "why did Solomon kidnap you?"

"You didn't get the yellow folder? Everything was in there. I thought they might get me sometime, so I wrote it all down, everything I had on Solomon. There was a Bandog bracelet with it, too — one that Tolly took from someone."

She shook her head. "Jubilee... one of the Bandog searched your apartment while you were in San

Francisco and cleaned it out. I got your message to Epp, but the file was already gone. So was the bracelet." She didn't mention that the first Bandog bracelet she'd seen had been his. The one he had been wearing at Pan's, the one she'd discovered later in his suitcase.

"Damn. How did you find me, then?"

"It's a long story, and I don't think we have time for it. The duke is probably on his way here."

The door to the stairway outside unlocked suddenly. "No," said Duke Michael as he walked into the court. Dex, Sin and Marshall slipped in around him. All three sidhe held naked swords. The redcap had a club. "He's already here." Behind the duke, Slocombe, the troll Tango had seen on her earlier visits to court, squeezed through the doorway.

Tango drew her breath in a hiss. "Your Grace, I've claimed sanctuary for myself and my allies under the Right of Safe Haven. Marshall must have told you that."

"He has," replied the duke. His voice was calm, but there was a dangerous edge to it. "But the Right of Safe Haven applies only to Kithain — not to vampires. And for you and Riley to claim Safe Haven in my own court..." His smile was as sharp as the light that gleamed off the blade of his sword. "A criminal might as well seek sanctuary in a court of law." With a swift gesture, he sent his knights and the night watchman to surround them.

Miranda stepped forward quickly. "Wait! There's something you have to..."

Duke Michael cut her off with a flick of his sword through the air. "You have no voice in this court, vampire!" Tango felt a flare of Glamour and, abruptly, Miranda was silent. The other woman looked shocked.

Tango glanced at Riley. The pooka grimaced and pried himself out of Tolly's grasp.

"Your Grace," he said humbly. He dropped down on one knee before the duke, playing the role of the penitent courtier with perfect ease. "These vampires have risked their existence for us. We four bring news of a grave peril, a peril that kept me from my duties as your Jester." He looked up. "Will you at least hear our news before you pass judgment?"

If Tango had been the duke, she would have run Riley through on the spot. Dex was making motions that suggested he would have done likewise, while Sin grimaced broadly. Riley's act, however, was designed to appeal to Duke Michael and his sense of tradition. And it worked. The duke nodded.

Riley launched into a masterful account of the Bandog and their worship of Shaftiel. His words brought to life the eerie atmosphere of the ritual chamber in Solomon's house. He described Solomon's plans to create chaos in Toronto and summon Shaftiel's voice. He very neatly glossed over the matter of how he and Tolly had come to be involved in the whole matter, instead focusing on his kidnapping and imprisonment, and on his rescue by Tango and Miranda. It was an incredibly good story for someone who had only heard the bare essence of Solomon's plans — Tango suspected that if Riley had known the full events of the last few days and the facts of the penny murders, his story would have been even better.

When he had finished, she was in awe. Even Dex and Sin seemed spellbound. And the duke was nodding calmly. "So one of the Nephandi intends to speak to his dark master, and his plans menace

Toronto," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"And you have been kidnapped by this Nephandus. You and Tango have done battle with him."

"Not combat, your Grace, no. But we have met him face to face, and we oppose him."

Duke Michael's sword descended ever so slowly to rest on Riley's shoulder, right beside his neck. "But a Nephandus is a type of mage isn't it, Riley?" His voice was suddenly cold and lethal. "You have had dealings with a mage?"

Tango blinked in outraged shock. "We didn't have 'dealings' with Solomon! He kidnapped Riley. He's ordered humans murdered. He wants to create riots and summon a demon!"

The duke glanced at her only briefly, then looked back down at Riley. "You are both bound to the rules of my court by your oaths. Dealings are dealings!" He tapped Riley with his sword. "You still have to answer for your actions in going to mages in San Francisco against my express orders." He nodded again as Riley blanched. "Yes. I know about that. Tango told me. You forget that things still happen while we sleep."

"What about the humans?" demanded Tango. "You can't just..."

The duke turned his one-eyed gaze on her. "I have had enough of your shouting!" he snapped. "You have fought in my court, you have disobeyed me at every turn, you have resisted my judgments." His sword came up to point at her. "It is not the place of a common nocker to question a sidhe! Humans are not my concern. Maintaining the order of my court and ruling the Kithain of Toronto is." His sword described an arc

down to the floor. "Kneel and be silent!"

Tango watched the glittering point of the duke's sword and felt the Glamour around her. All of the Glamour of the court... all those years of denying herself an epiphany. Duke Michael was everything she hated about sidhe. Her fingers itched. Her palms felt tight. A single clench of her hand and her ring would become a knife. Three steps. One to carry her close to the duke, too close for him to use his sword. A second to catch and pin his sword arm in case he tried to anyway. A third to thrust her knife through his heart. She could hear her breathing. She had been so close to losing control of herself in the last week. It would be so easy to slip back into Shiv's ways, to teach the arrogant sidhe what was really important. So what if the five other Kithain discovered that the infamous assassin of the Accordance War was in their midst? Dex and Sin would have to die, but Riley, Marshall and the troll... they might be allowed to live. She was tired of resisting.

The Glamour poured into her like water through a crumbling dam. She didn't have to spit to summon her strength this time. Her hand started to clench.

Someone caught it and held it open, forcing her fingers apart, preventing her from making the gesture that would summon her knife. Miranda, vampire strength straining against nocker strength. Tango turned to glare at her. Miranda caught her gaze. Her voice silenced by the duke's magic, the vampire couldn't command her, but her will could still wash into Tango's mind. Tango felt numb suddenly. A hazy grayness overwhelmed her. Miranda forced her to her knees, then fell herself. Tolly scrambled down as well, so that they were all kneeling before the duke.

The sidhe lord smiled grimly. “Even the vampires have some manners, then. Tango, do you admit that you had dealings with a mage?”

The numbness of Miranda’s will bolstering her own helped. Tango sucked in a deep lungful of air, then another. The rage that burned in her began to ebb — a bit. “Yes,” she snarled. “I had dealings with a mage. But if your rules prevent a Kithain from trying to stop a Nephandus, then the rules need to be changed.”

“But they are still my rules,” Duke Michael reminded her. “And there is nothing you can do to change that.”

“No.” Riley looked up suddenly, then stood. “There is. Your Grace, I challenge you to a duel. A fior, trial by combat. If you win, we submit to your justice.”

Duke Michael turned to the pooka. Tango caught her breath. Fior was an ancient faerie tradition, the ordeal of truth. Trial by combat was just one form of fior, and one that was seldom invoked. The results of the duel would be binding — she just hoped Riley knew what he was doing. “If you win?” the duke asked him.

“You will do everything in your power to help us stop Solomon. Tango and I go free.” He pointed at Miranda and Tolly. “In addition, sanctuary is to be granted to these vampires until the fior is decided, and after, if I win. And you will give the one back her voice.”

Duke Michael narrowed his eyes. “The vampires are intruders here. I don’t owe them anything.”

Riley returned his gaze. “No, you’re right. You don’t. But it would be pretty damn cheap to deny them.”

The duke was silent for a moment. He glanced at the other sidhe, at the troll, and at Marshall. They all regarded him blankly. It was the lord’s decision to make. Finally, Duke Michael snorted. “Very well. Your demand

for fior is accepted. The stakes will be as we have said. The vampires are granted sanctuary, and the female, the return of her voice.”

“The weapons?” asked Riley.

Wordlessly, the duke sheathed his sword and reached for two pool cues hanging on the wall. “Choose,” he said, presenting them to Riley. “Eight-ball. A pure game. No Glamour permitted.” He nodded for the troll to rack up a set of balls on one of the tables. His smile was predatory. Tango’s heart sank. She had seen the duke play.

“Fine.” Riley examined one of the cues, then the other. He chose the first. “Would you like to use the high table?”

The duke’s eyebrows rose. “All right.” The troll moved the pool balls up to the table at the front of the room, the one at which Tango had first seen the duke playing. “How many games do you want to play, Riley? Two of three? Three of five? Five of seven?”

“Seven of twelve.” Riley chalked up the tip of his cue, then blew the excess chalk off in a little puff of blue dust. His lips twitched, then burst into a wide, confident grin. “And you might want to close the court to spectators beyond the ones who are already here. Do you really want everyone to see you lose?”

Duke Michael frowned. Tango bit her tongue, partly to keep herself from laughing. Riley must have known that the duke would chose pool as the fior combat, and that meant he felt he had a good chance at winning. But the other reason she bit her tongue was because she recognized the grin on Riley’s face and his tactic of offering such self-assured advice.

He wasn't absolutely positive that he could win.

The duke gestured for Marshall to go up to Ruby. "Tell her not to let anyone in." Then he waved his cue toward the pool table. "Break," he told Riley.

* * *

If Miranda closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that the two changelings were dueling with swords rather than pool cues. The swift clash of ball against ball was the strike of one blade against another. The drawing back and darting forward of the cues made the sound of steel slashing the air. Thrust. Parry. Feint. Lunge. Clash. Ring. Clatter. Then the soft dropping of balls into pockets — or blood to the floor from wounds.

Riley and the changeling duke paced around the table, circling each other. Each chose his shots with care, striking strategically, seldom missing his targets. When one did miss, he hissed in pain. The two men were sweating as if they fought a strenuous duel as well. The duke had stripped off a black silk shirt, and played in a tank top. Tango held Riley's outer shirt. The pooka wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Clap your hands if you believe in faeries." Every few shots he would turn his baseball cap around, wearing it forward, then backward, then forward again. He glared at the duke hotly, flashing him that mad, confident smile whenever the duke glared back. For his part, Duke Michael looked as fierce as a howling blizzard. He didn't smile at all.

At first, both duelists had played with supreme confidence: Riley flamboyantly, Duke Michael with the

precision of a surgeon. Riley had won the first game. Duke Michael the next. Riley the next after that, then the duke again. Then Riley had won two in a row. Duke Michael had rallied to win the next two. Riley's smile had turned tight. Suddenly, all of the showiness was gone and they were playing hard, serious pool, back and forth against the green baize.

The spectators sat atop other tables, or leaned against the wall. The big man Tango said was a troll crouched in one corner like a huge, ugly statue. The handsome twins, Dex and Sin, stood against opposite walls, eyes alert, obviously watching Riley to be sure he didn't cheat. Whiplike Marshall kept watch at the door, presumably to ensure that the duke's prisoners didn't try to escape. Tolly sprawled across a pool table, fidgeting nervously, his body deforming and distorting so rapidly it was uncomfortable to watch him. He had been playing with billiard balls, stretching his fingers wide and wedging balls between each of them — until one of the balls had dropped like thunder to the floor. Riley had missed a shot. The changeling had whirled around and given Tolly such a harsh snarl that the mad vampire had put all of the balls down instantly and silently, and had not touched them again. Riley managed to win the game.

Miranda herself sat next to Tango. The two women were quiet. Miranda couldn't think of anything to say and Tango.... Miranda glanced sideways at the changeling. Tango had been avoiding even looking at her since the long duel had begun. Miranda looked down at her feet, cursing silently. She thought she had made a breakthrough when Tango had let herself be hypnotized, but there was still a distance between them.

An uncomfortable distance. Maybe Tango was ashamed of what she had almost done tonight. Miranda had seen her hands clenching in anger and understood instantly what it meant. She hoped that her intervention had helped, and not just angered Tango further. Right now the changeling was grim-faced as she watched the duel. At least Miranda hoped she was grim-faced because of the duel. It was impossible to guess what she thought about anything else.

Riley lost another game. And another. The pooka just kept grinning at Duke Michael, but Miranda grimaced. And then yawned.

She sat upright with a start. Tango's head snapped around to look at her. "What?"

"The sun's coming up," Miranda murmured. She could feel the dull weariness of daytime creeping over her. She looked around for Tolly. He was already asleep, lying curled up underneath one of the pool tables.

"There are no windows here," Tango pointed out. "You'll be fine."

Miranda shook her head. "That's not what I'm worried about." She had slept days in places that were at much greater risk of exposure to deadly sunlight than the deep Kithain court. "What happens if Riley loses?"

"He and I will be punished. At worst exiled — which isn't such a bad thing."

"No. To me and Tolly." Miranda shuddered. "Our sanctuary here only lasts until the end of the game."

Tango was silent for a moment. "If he loses," she said finally.

Riley's smile wavered for a moment as one of his shots slapped the bumpers on either side of a pocket; the ball rolled back out into the center of the table.

Miranda closed her eyes, listening as the duke played the table. His last shot missed. Riley won the game — narrowly. Six games to six.

She heard Tango shifting, settling down onto the floor. The changeling reached up and touched Miranda's knee. "Miranda." The vampire opened her eyes. Tango was sitting on the floor. She was holding out someone's jacket, left behind in the changeling pool hall and now folded up into a pillow. She pushed it at Miranda. "Lie down."

Miranda was too sleepy to protest. She took the folded jacket and stretched out on the pool table. The makeshift pillow smelled of tobacco smoke and, strangely, marigolds. Through half-closed eyes, she saw Duke Michael line up his shot. He missed. The sidhe's hair was wild, his tank top untucked and damp with sweat. Even his false eye seemed dull with exhaustion, but he grinned. The only shot left open to Riley now was difficult. Very difficult. Miranda forced her eyes to stay open, to watch the shot her life depended on. If Riley lost, she and Tolly would be thrown out of the court and into the sun. Riley's smile was strained as he bent down. In spite of her best efforts, Miranda's eyes drifted away from the pooka and the sidhe, settling down on Tango. The nocker was watching the game intently, but she glanced up to meet Miranda's gaze and give her an apprehensive grin. Miranda reached one hand over the edge of the table. Tango took it and squeezed it nervously as she looked back to the game.

Riley's cue snapped forward.

Miranda's eyes slid shut, the irresistible force of the rising sun tugging her eyelids down. She heard two soft impacts — like a mortally wounded man falling to his

knees. Then...

The wounded man collapsed and died with the sound of a single billiard ball falling into a pocket. Tango shouted something and pulled away from her. Miranda couldn't understand what she was saying, but she sounded excited. The duke was choking out something as well, something formal and not very happy. Something about yielding.

Miranda slipped into safe, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*"Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men."*

The sky lay over Toronto like a dirty quilt, stifling all movement. In some places, a hot sky is clear and sharp, the cruel blue of a flame. In Toronto, a hot sky is soiled, smudged dark with pollution on the horizons, hazy with pale humidity at its heavenly apex. A hot sky is almost white. The sun is a gateway into an unforgiving furnace. Trees wilt, cool green fading in the heat reflected from the buildings, the sidewalks and the streets. Even the shadows burn, their edges fraying and drifting apart in the heat.

The wind was dead. Breathing was a labor. The air hit Tango's lungs with all of the weight of a lead pipe. July 17th, she had heard on the radio when she first emerged from the Kithain court into the white light of noon, was shaping up to be the hottest day of the year so far. It had already surpassed a fifty-two-year record for the day, and forecasters were expecting the temperature to rise even higher as the afternoon progressed. By three o'clock, it had set a new all-time record.

Toronto mourned the victims of last night's penny

murders. Parents returning from a night out had found their three children beaten to death in their own home. The story screamed from every newspaper box and blared from every television and radio news report. It seethed in the mind of every person in the city. Protesters had begun gathering early: at police headquarters, at the division offices that housed the taskforce investigating the murders, at Queen's Park, at Toronto city hall. The number of protesters, like the temperature, rose as the day progressed. People moved from demonstration to demonstration, shouting their outrage, seeking a target for their anger — and their fear.

The police hadn't done enough. The police hadn't acted quickly enough. The police were holding back evidence that could stop the murderers. The politicians had cut back the police budget too far for them to be effective. The politicians coddled criminals. Soft laws encouraged an increase in violent crime.

The eyes of the media only seemed to make things worse. Local stations carried regular newsflashes and special reports monitoring the situation. The coverage brought more people flooding into the downtown core, some to join the protests, many just to watch. Crowds of spectators gathered around the edges of the demonstrations just as crowds will gather to watch a building go up in flames. A lot of people tried to drive into the core; at four o'clock, two major routes were as clogged as they would have been on a weekday at rush hour. Downtown parking lots were full. Cars were just cruising the streets, horns honking as if this were a party. When people started passing out from the heat, there was no way to get them to a hospital. The streets

were jammed.

A middle-aged couple had driven through Yorkville several times in a car equipped with loudspeakers that blared a fundamentalist message of repentance and renunciation of sin, "for the millennium is near!"

The police were out in full force. Foot officers walked the streets. Mounted officers watched over every demonstration. Cruisers stood on every corner. There were barricades around police headquarters. None of the news reports had shown live pictures of police in riot gear yet, but stock video of police donning helmets, protective vests and shields flashed across television screens frequently. Monday's riot on College Street and the Thursday morning protest outside of the taskforce offices received heavy airplay as well.

Just after five o'clock, Tango, Dex, Sin and Slocombe walked heavily down the stairs and into Duke Michael's court. Riley looked up at them. The air in the pool hall was as hot and sticky as the air outside, in spite of the court's underground location. The only sign here of the chaos building aboveground was a large-screen TV that was tuned to one television station's constant news reports. Kithain watched it in between rounds of pool, just as humans might watch a baseball game while they played pool in a bar. Riley's return to the court and the presence of two sleeping vampires were attracting much more attention. Most Kithain, however, were simply too caught up in anticipation of the coming Highsummer Night party to worry about anything else, big or small.

Riley had decided that it would be better if they kept the news of Solomon's plot very quiet. It made things simpler. There was less to explain to the other Kithain

— and less exposure of the duke's defeat in the duel. The duke was angry, of course, but the terms of the fior bound him to keep his bargain with Riley. That the pooka was trying to spare him any further embarrassment, he acknowledged only grudgingly.

Riley didn't ask Tango and the others anything. Tango knew that their return — particularly their uninjured return — was answer enough for him. Still, she frowned sourly at her friend. "Solomon's gone," she said simply. "The house was empty." She slapped her hand against the side of a pool table in frustration. "Damn."

"You didn't expect him to make it easy, did you, Tango?"

"No." Tango sighed. "I suppose not." Solomon's house had been the first target of their efforts. If they were going to try to prevent the Bandog summoning rite, and the final sacrifices that would accompany it, they had a limited number of options. The first had, of course, been to surprise Solomon well before the rite began. A few Kithain had oracular abilities. Riley had enlisted the aid of one of them, but after repeated attempts, the Kithain had been unable to locate any sign of Solomon in the city. He had either left or was being hidden from magical detection just as DeWinter had hidden them last night. Tango had taken Dex, Sin, and Slocombe to the Nephandus' home just to be sure that he wasn't there. He hadn't been. In fact, the house was absolutely vacant, as if Solomon had been able to eradicate all trace of himself over the last thirty-six hours. The huge, gutted emptiness of the Bandog worship hall on the second floor had been filled in, broken back down into separate rooms, probably

through the power of Solomon's magick. Even the eerie gray tree in the basement was gone. Dex had almost started to snicker in disbelief at her story, except that Sin caught his brother's arm and pointed up into a shadowy corner of the basement. Hanging from a socket in the darkness was a shattered light. There was a second in another dark corner. The bulbs Miranda had shattered the night of her rescue. Dex's mouth had become a quiet line.

"What's next?" Tango asked Riley. "Union Station?" They might be able to deny Solomon the use of Toronto's big, central railway terminus as the site for his summoning of Shaftiel.

Riley nodded. "If we can. I'm not even sure how Solomon intends to use it. There are people around the station all night. It's a busy place."

Sin caught the pooka's arm and drew his attention to the big-screen television. "I think that's your answer."

The television showed a big pile of burning rubbish along a railroad track. Firefighters were dousing the blaze. "This video just in," said the news anchor. "Vandals dumped garbage onto the GO train tracks outside Union Station, then set it on fire. This is the first act of deliberate vandalism we've seen today, a sign of increasing tension in the mobs downtown." The scene switched back to the television studio, and the news anchor turned to a commentator. "Obviously we're looking at trouble here, Dwight. What do you think police reaction is going to be?"

"Oliver, I think the smart move would be to prevent any more people from getting into the downtown core. Shut down the subways, redirect traffic — close Union Station and let trains idle outside the city until this

blows over, if necessary.”

“Isn’t that a little extreme?”

“I don’t think Toronto’s ever faced a potential powder keg like this before, Oliver...”

Riley scowled and turned away from the TV. “Solomon’s magick at work?”

“More likely Bandog following orders,” Tango reminded him. She had filled him in on the whole story of what had gone on while he was Solomon’s sleeping prisoner. All except her personal revelations to Miranda, of course. “Magick isn’t the only way to get things done. Could he have Bandog close down the station?”

“Tango...”

She clenched her teeth. Unlike her, Riley wasn’t saying anything about what was going on, about why or how he had become involved with the Bandog. It was frustrating. She pulled him aside, away from the other Kithain. “I need to know, Riley. Is Solomon capable of having Union Station shut down?”

“Yes,” Riley admitted reluctantly. “That, and a lot more.”

Tango frowned. She had seen police, activists and the media represented at the Bandog ritual. Who else had been there whom she hadn’t recognized? “How deep does his influence go?”

“Right to the bottom. Toronto municipal government. Metro regional government. Queen’s Park. Business — there’s a baseball game tonight and it’s still going ahead. There’s a Bandog in power there, refusing to cancel the game.” Riley shook his head. “When people get out of that, the situation downtown is just going to get worse. Why do you think Solomon wanted

Miranda in the Bandog? Beyond sex.” Tango shrugged. “He wanted a foothold in the Sabbat. The Bandog are everywhere, Miranda.”

“Even in the Kithain court?” Tango guessed. Riley nodded.

“That’s why Solomon let me in. Nobody gets into the Bandog unless he wants them there. And if people he wants aren’t interested in the Bandog, he’ll use blackmail to get them anyway. Shaftiel has a small cult, but it’s more powerful than it looks.”

“Do we have any allies? DeWinter said the network you belong to can’t help. There must be someone else. Mages?” She grimaced. “The Sabbat?”

Riley snorted. “Would you want the Sabbat as allies? And the mages in Toronto are too busy keeping their heads low. We’re it. We and Miranda and Tolly and the court.” He bit his tongue as a cheer went up from the other Kithain at the latest announcement on the television. Police had finally moved in on a demonstration and broken it up — with only a minimum of scuffling. “At least as many as we can drag away from Highsummer. They want their party.”

“We might have a riot right here if you suggest canceling Highsummer. We have a few Kithain we can count on.” Tango didn’t really trust the sidhe, but there didn’t seem to be much choice.

“Not enough.” He sighed. “I don’t like the idea of going up against a mage openly, even with two vampires and half-a-dozen Kithain. We know Solomon is going to be at Union Station after sunset to perform the summoning rite. At least that means Miranda and Tolly will be awake to help us, but Solomon knows we know where he’s going to be. He’ll be expecting us, and he’ll

have all of the Bandog to back him up.” He groaned out loud and rubbed a hand across his face. “Why did he have to pick Highsummer?”

Tango stared at the big television. A line of mounted police trooped across it, horses’ hooves clattering. Protesters got out of their way. An idea glimmered in her mind. A faint, distant idea. Desperate. They were going about this the wrong way. Just as she had been unable to find the Kithain court until she stopped thinking like a human, they weren’t going to find a way to stop Solomon until they thought like Kithain. “What if we use Highsummer to our advantage?”

“What?” Riley’s head came up.

“You’re still the duke’s Jester, aren’t you? Or I am — it doesn’t matter.” She smiled. “The court wants a party? Let’s give it one.”

Riley stared at her. “You’re nuts. What about Solomon? What about Shaftiel? We have to stop the summoning.”

“But there’s more to the summoning rite than just Solomon and the Bandog, isn’t there?”

* * *

The city seemed to grow a little less tense after the sun slipped below the horizon. The air cooled off marginally, although concrete still radiated the day’s heat. The evening breeze that usually blew off the lake was absent. Everything was briefly still. Like a predator before it leaps at its prey, Toronto was taking a deep breath in anticipation of the night to come.

Miranda wondered if maybe the early evening calm was the result of the Bandog leaving off their mischief-

making and going to join Solomon in preparation for the rite that would summon Shaftiel's voice.

There had been no dreams tonight. Miranda came instantly to full alertness, half-expecting to be surrounded by irate changelings ready to throw her out of the court. Instead, the only changeling in the pool hall was Tango, quietly waiting for her and Tolly to wake. Miranda had nodded to her, then they had both waited in silence for Tolly to stir. Eventually, Miranda had slapped him awake. Tango had explained the day's events as they left the court and walked out into Yorkville. Much to Miranda's surprise, Tango had suggested that the vampires hunt.

It hadn't taken much more encouragement to send Tolly bounding off in search of dinner. Yorkville was fairly crowded tonight, but it was a different crowd from normal. Instead of trendsetters and yuppies, the people in the streets were younger and more restless. There were still some yuppies, of course, but they were in the minority. Most of the people in Yorkville tonight were overflow from the mobs that had been circulating through the city all day. As the brief calm of twilight passed and the darkness grew heavier, they would gravitate over to Yonge Street and down into the heart of Toronto.

Miranda turned to Tango. "This is the second time you've encouraged me to feed. That Bandog, and now this."

Tango's face was calm. "It's instinct for you to feed, isn't it? It's your nature to drink blood. I never questioned that, Miranda. I never held it against you." She smiled suddenly. "Go hunt. I'll be waiting here when you get back. Then we'll go join the court for

Highsummer.”

“Now? Your party is going ahead in the middle of this?”

“Exactly,” Tango said mysteriously. “Feed well — we’re going to have a busy night.”

Miranda walked away into the crowd, puzzled. She found a suitable victim, a heavysset woman with glasses, fairly quickly. Her blood was good, but the vampire was careful to leave her strong enough to walk on her own. Hunting was easy tonight. There was no need to be greedy with one victim, and every reason for her to leave them alive. Even if Tango never found out that she had killed while hunting tonight, Miranda would know herself. She didn’t want to keep anything else from Tango.

She drank from a second victim, then a third. The blood almost made her feel bloated, but if Tango was right, she might well be hungry again by the end of the night. And it was much more difficult for her to control herself when she was hungry. Just the sight and smell of blood was enough to send some hungry vampires into feeding frenzies. Miranda returned to the place where she had left Tango. The changeling was still there, along with Tolly. Miranda suspected that the mad vampire had not been quite as discriminating in his feeding as she had. “Where to now?” she asked Tango.

The changeling produced three envelopes and passed one to each of the vampires, keeping the last for herself. “Don’t lose these,” she cautioned. The envelopes were thick, stiff paper, and sealed with bright blue wax. The vampires’ names were written on the outside in beautiful, flowing script. Miranda broke her envelope open. Inside was an elaborate invitation,

printed on paper that scratched pleasantly against the envelope as Miranda slipped it out.

You are invited to attend the Highsummer Festivities of the Kithain of Toronto, in the twenty-eighth year of rule by His Grace, Duke Michael O'Donoghue of House Eiluned. Let merriment reign! Scrawled at the bottom were the words *By special permission, Riley Stanton, Jstr.*

"Vampires," Tango pointed out, "aren't usually invited to Highsummer."

She led them back to the court and then a couple of blocks farther to a towering luxury hotel. A flash of their invitations to a security guard got them inside and escorted up to a broad rooftop terrace. The guard left them there and departed hastily, as if paid to ignore, or unwilling to witness, what was going on. Miranda could only stare in amazement. There had been a startling range of contrast between the few changelings she had seen up until now: Tango, Riley, Dex and Sin, Marshall the redcap, Duke Michael, the troll. But there were easily three dozen people — presumably all changelings — on the terrace, old and very young, dressed formally and dressed very casually, astonishingly beautiful and horribly ugly. Tall, short, fat, thin. A few were as bizarrely deformed as Tolly at his maddest. For a moment, she had the same sense here that she had had in the pool hall. There was more to the party than she was seeing. For a moment, she even thought she saw through the human appearances and glimpsed the true forms of the changelings. Then that sensation was gone, and she was looking at an eccentric mix of humans again. Except that if she looked closely, she could still see a few things that weren't quite right.

Most of the crowd held delicate flutes of champagne,

but a few changelings had flutes filled with bright green concoctions or foamy, golden beer. One, surrounded by cheering colleagues, raised his glass and drank... and drank... and drank until he should have emptied the little flute four or five times over. A chafing dish was opened to reveal tempting, pastry-wrapped hors d'oeuvres, then closed, and opened again a moment later to reveal cocktail weenies. A matronly woman with a nose as flat as a duck's bill started to sit down. Her chair *walked* out from under her. Deftly and without even looking, she shifted her well-padded fanny and pinned the errant chair. She didn't miss a beat of her conversation.

The grand, harmonious strains of Handel's Water Music were being played by a brass quartet consisting of two deer, a caribou and a moose. All four wore tuxedos.

"Tango?" Miranda asked.

The nocker looked and laughed. "Epp must be having a cow," she snickered. "She wanted this to be perfect, but you can't stop the pranks on Highsummer. Don't worry, Miranda. They're humans underneath. It's only an illusion."

"It would have to be," agreed Tolly sagely. "Real ruminants wouldn't be able to work the valves. Where's Riley?"

They found him sandwiched between Dex and a thin Arabian woman, an eshu, Tango said, draped in billowing white linen. The pooka excused himself and came over to them. "All set?"

"All set," replied Tango with a nod. "Sin hasn't reported anything?"

"Not yet." Riley gritted his teeth. "Things probably

won't come down for a while — maybe not until the ballgame gets out. I hate waiting.”

“What are we waiting for? Shouldn't we be trying to stop Solomon?” Miranda urged them.

Tango glanced at Riley. The pooka nodded. “We're going to, Miranda,” Tango told her quietly, “but we have to do it on the sly. A direct attack would be too risky, and we'd never get all of the Kithain to go along with it.”

“So what then? What are we going to do?”

“Solomon needs to fulfill two conditions to summon Shaftiel, right? He needs to conduct the summoning rite, and he needs to create chaos.” Tango licked her lips. “We're going to use the court to break up the protests in the streets. They'll think it's part of the Highsummer party. No chaos, no summoning — we hope.”

Miranda felt doubt hit her in the pit of the stomach. “You hope?”

“We're not absolutely sure it's going to work. We could end up just creating more chaos.” Riley grimaced. “But whatever happens, we're going to have Solomon's attention.” He nodded at her, then at Tango. “That's why you two are going to disrupt the summoning rite directly while he's distracted. While the court hits the streets, you're going to sneak into Union Station.”

She blinked. It might work. Solomon would be hard-pressed to try to compensate for both attacks at once. “Why just the two of us?” she asked. “And won't Solomon be able to use his magick to detect us?”

“The court should provide a distraction. Hopefully he won't look for you specifically. In any case, he'll also have the summoning rite to worry about. Just the two

of you because I have to play shepherd to the court. Dex, Sin, Slocombe and Marshall are going to be my sheepdogs. You and Tango have worked together — at least a little. She knows about mages, you know about the Bandog. You're both sneaky. You should be able to mess Solomon up good."

"All we're waiting for," added Tango, "is the riots to start. That's what Sin is watching for."

Miranda looked at the other woman in shock. "Can't the court prevent them from starting? Wouldn't that work as well?"

Riley shook his head apologetically. "Unfortunately, no. What we're going to do will work best under conditions of chaos as well. We need riots as much as Solomon does — at least to start with. People are going to see some pretty strange things tonight."

"We don't want humans to know about Kithain any more than you would want them to know about vampires," Tango explained. "If we wait until the riots have started, people are going to be more willing to dismiss what they see as figments of their imagination." She sighed. "I wish we could prevent the riots altogether, too, Miranda. But we'll act as soon as they start, and maybe we can keep the worst to a minimum."

"Umm," muttered Riley. "Actually, there's just one problem, Tango."

The nocker glanced at him. "What?"

"We're going to need to bring Epp on board."

Miranda saw anger flash in Tango's eyes. "You haven't told her yet?" the changeling demanded.

"She's not too happy that I'm back. She's been avoiding me. Every time I try to get close to her, she slips away or steers somebody into my path." He smiled

hopefully. "Could you talk to her? You came to an understanding, didn't you?"

"Of a sort," growled Tango. "I'd go along with her plans for the party if she helped me out. I'd say that deal is pretty much off now."

"If we don't tell her what we're doing and get her to go along with it, everyone will know something is up. We'll lose control of the court!"

"You were supposed to be the one to tell her!"

A palm-sized cellular phone in Riley's pocket chose that moment to go off. The pooka snatched it out and flipped it open. "Yeah?" He listened. "Okay. Ten minutes, outside the court." He signaled Dex. The golden sidhe nodded and began circulating through the party. "See you then." Riley hung up and put the phone back in his pocket. "That was Sin," he said grimly. "The cops moved in on some protesters and the protesters fought back. And the Jays won seven to three. The riots have started. We're on." He pointed at Tango. "Find Epp now. I have to help get people back down to the court. Tolly," he added, gesturing to the mad vampire, "you're with me."

Tango sighed in frustration. Miranda glanced at her. "What now?"

"We find Epp before someone else does."

They found the boggan frantically loading fresh hors d'oeuvres into the chafing dish, too intent on her task to notice their approach. When Tango's shadow fell across the table in front of her, though, she started and looked up. She looked down again without so much as a twitch of her mouth. "So," she said flatly, "I see you found the vampire you were looking for, Tango."

Miranda glanced at Tango, but the small woman just

shook her head. "I think you know that I found Riley, too."

"Oh, yes." Epp straightened up and slammed the cover on the chafing dish down with a clang. "I noticed. I also noticed that the duke isn't saying anything to him. There's a rumor that Riley managed to work some kind of enchantment on His Grace. And by the way, I asked about that man you were looking for. Nothing." She peeked inside the chafing dish and swore. It was full of cocktail weenies again. Tango reached over and pushed the lid closed.

"Epp, forget about it. The party's over."

"What?" The plump Kithain looked around. The other Kithain of the court were moving toward the elevators, herded by Riley, Dex and Marshall. "No! Not yet!" Her eyes fixed on the pooka for a moment, then flicked over to Tango. "What are you doing?" she spat. She seemed on the verge of tears. "Everything is planned. You can't do this to me!"

"Epp!" Tango caught her by the arms. "We need your help now."

"You can't have it!"

"I could make her agree," Miranda whispered in Tango's ear. It would be the fastest, easiest solution.

"No. I want to have her agree on her own terms." Tango turned back to Epp. "We don't want to spoil Highsummer, Epp. We know you worked a lot on this party — look at how much fun everybody had here."

"But the quartet. The champagne." The boggan gestured weakly at the chafing dish. "The hors d'oeuvres."

"It's Highsummer, Epp. What did you expect?" Tango smiled reassuringly. "But we need the court for

something right now. It's important, and we can only do it if you help us." Briefly, she described the Bandog and Solomon's plot. "We can stop him, Epp. The humans..."

"Oh, bugger the damn humans!" Abruptly, Epp broke down. A sob wrenched its way out of her. "What about Highsummer? What about my plans? I've waited twenty years for this, and I'm not likely to get another chance."

Tango grimaced in frustration. "Riley and I don't want any credit, Epp. Nobody has to know that all of this wasn't your idea. We don't want people to know about Solomon. We *want* you to claim this as your idea. Kithain are going to enjoy it." She smiled again. "We'll put in a good word for you with the duke. You did all of this," she swept her arm around the now almost-empty terrace, "on your own. And you've got the rest of the night planned. That will have to impress him."

"If the rest of the night comes off the way I planned," Epp pointed out miserably. "I have a feast planned for midnight. Is anyone going to eat it?"

"We might be late, but we'll be there," Tango promised. "Heirloom-recipe Cornish saffron buns, right?"

Epp nodded slowly. "Yes."

"We'll be there. But you'll have to make sure everything waits for us." She paused. "How about it?"

Epp sniffled. "I'm not sure." She glanced at Miranda. The vampire almost growled in frustration. She caught Epp's eye.

"It's a good deal," she told her directly, backing up the suggestion with a bit of willpower. Tango scowled at her, but the trick worked. Epp nodded, slowly at first,

then quickly and firmly.

"All right." Tango patted her on the shoulder. "Clean up here and we'll see you at the feast." She swept Miranda over to the elevators. "I asked you not to do that."

"I just gave her a nudge. Otherwise we would have been there all night." Miranda glanced at the nocker as the doors closed. "How are you planning to break up the riots anyway? Glamour?"

"Sort of." Tango smiled. "We're going to have an old-fashioned trooping. A Faerie Ride."

* * *

Yorkville had been deserted by humans, but the street in front of the Kithain court was filled with horses. Miranda gawked at them as Tango led her through the crush of animals and Kithain. "They're beautiful." One of the horses whickered as they passed and shook its long mane. A richly decorated bridle jingled. "Where did they come from?"

They broke into the center of the crowd and Tango pointed at Riley. The pooka was running his hands along the sleek fenders of Dex's white car as if trying to sense something invisible. He nodded to himself, then picked up a spool of bright green thread, snapped off a length with his teeth, and tied the thread around the car's antenna. A look of concentration passed over his face... and abruptly the sidhe's car was a stunning white stallion. Miranda looked dazed. "Magic? Glamour?"

Tango smiled and waved to Ruby, mounted on a shaggy pony. "Riley can use Glamour to transform

objects. Usually he only uses it for small things, like leaves into money. This is a stretch for him.”

“Then all of these horses are cars?” Miranda turned around, staring. “There’s a horse for every changeling?”

“No. Some changelings will walk.” She gestured toward Slocombe and Marshall. “Trolls are too big to ride, and redcaps... well, horses don’t like redcaps. Redcaps tend to eat them. Not all of the horses will be cars, though. Some are probably bicycles. Some might be stools, or brooms, or big sticks. The original object just has to be similar to a horse.”

“That doesn’t make much sense.” Miranda frowned. “I mean, a car or a bicycle maybe, but...”

“It makes faerie sense. Children play horse with brooms all the time, don’t they? A stick can be a horse, too. And a stool has four legs like a horse. Look there — at Duke Michael.”

The duke sat majestically astride a massive horse with heavy, hairy legs, an immensely broad chest and deep-green eyes. A working horse, the type of charger that would have carried fully armored knights into battle. “A... pool table?”

“Probably.” Tango caught Riley’s arm. “Epp’s agreed to go along with this — for a price.”

“Anything,” wheezed the pooka. He looked quite pale and tired. His glasses kept sliding down his nose. Tango looked at him with concern.

“Are you sure you can do this?”

Riley nodded. “I’m almost finished. Just a couple more.” He looked up at the duke. “I think even he is going to enjoy this.”

“Let’s hope so. For Epp’s sake.” Tango told him about

the deal they had made with the boggan. He nodded again.

"I can live with that. Listen, you don't mind doubling up, do you?" Riley took a deep breath. "I don't want to do another horse if I don't have to."

Tango shook her head. "No, I don't mind. Miranda?" The vampire shook her head as well.

"Good. Your horse is over there. Tolly has her. Help Dex and Sin with the torches and censers. We'll go shortly." He rubbed his hands together and blew on them as the Arabian eshu presented him with a single, long-stemmed red rose. The pooka frowned. "You don't make things easy, do you, Saeeda?"

Dex and Sin were crouched on an open patch of pavement. Sin was heaping hot coals into a number of brass censers. Dex sat between a pile of long-handled paraffin torches, the kind normally stuck in the ground for outdoor parties, and a much smaller pile of crayon boxes picked up from Riley's apartment earlier that day. The sidhe was unwrapping the head of each torch and sticking into it two or three of the magickal joints that the pooka had obtained from the Cult of Ecstasy in San Francisco. When they were ready to go, Sin would put the remaining joints in the censers. Dex looked up as Miranda and Tango approached. "I don't like working with human magick," he grumbled.

"Don't be a baby," Tango warned him. "There's nothing wrong with it. Where's our horse?"

"Over there." He pointed with a torch at a tall, sleek black mare. The horse had bright, intelligent eyes and wore a bridle and saddle decorated with silver. Tolly stood beside it, holding its reins and gleefully

whispering in its ear. The horse was ignoring him.

Tango smiled. "You gave up your motorcycle for us, Sin?"

The black-haired sidhe shook his head. "No. That's your car, Miranda." The vampire blinked.

"Mount up!" bellowed the duke over the noise of the court and their newly made horses. Hastily Dex finished the torch he was working on, and Sin prepared the censers. The two sidhe, along with Slocombe, Marshall and Riley, quickly distributed them among the other Kithain. Dex mounted his white stallion, Sin a black stallion. Tango and Miranda scrambled up onto their black mare.

Tango looked down at Riley. "What about you?"

He smiled and waved for Tolly. The mad vampire stepped up to him, then knelt down so Riley could climb across his shoulders as if ready for a piggyback ride. Tolly straightened, but not all of the way. He remained slightly hunched. His arms grew until both his feet and his fingertips were resting on the ground. His face shifted as well, becoming thin and long. His lips pulled back from his fangs. Riley turned his nightmare mount so that they stood beside Duke Michael and his massive horse. The pooka reached up and lit the torch that the duke held. The flame from that torch was passed around until torchlight lit the entire fantastic procession.

Duke Michael waved his torch. "The Kithain ride!"

And then they were off, cantering down the streets of Yorkville like something out of another age. They turned a corner onto Avenue Road, one of Toronto's larger streets. Most roads were closed now as the police tried to choke off the riots. The few cars that were out

stopped, and their drivers watched the spectacle in amazement. Two dozen mounted riders, another dozen attendants on foot, all in solemn procession as though Avenue Road were a wide country lane. Torchlight and smoke from the censers lent an otherworldly quality to the Faerie Ride. Tango felt Glamour flow briefly. She couldn't identify its source, but a ripple passed through the procession. Abruptly, it was as if someone had worked a far-reaching kenning over the entire court. The Kithain were visible to the world in all of their wondrous-glory. The sidhe were magnificent nobles, the redcaps and trolls fierce and foul footmen. Riley wore fabulous motley, Ruby the duke's livery. Saeeda, the eshu, wore billows of silk instead of linen. Dex and Sin wore the armor of faerie knights — as, Tango realized with a start, did she. Where the sidhe's armor was bright, though, hers was dead black.

She turned to see if Miranda, riding behind her, had changed at all. The vampire hadn't, but she blinked in shock when she saw Tango's face. The nocker grimaced. "Yes. This is what I look like to other Kithain. Ugly, isn't it?"

Miranda shook her head. "No, not really."

"Barrier!" called the duke. The procession moved into a trot, then to a gallop. Ahead of them, the police had put barricades across the intersection of Bloor Street and Avenue Road. The officers manning the barricades were as stunned by the sight of the Ride as the motorists had been. They simply watched as the Kithain thundered closer and closer — then they threw themselves to the ground as the wave of horses launched into the air and leaped over the barrier in their path. Hooves clashed against the ground all

around them. The unmounted trolls and redcaps swarmed over the barricades. The officers were left in the wake of the Ride, bemused looks on their faces, smoke writhing around them. The Kithain continued on around Queen's Park, then down College Street to Bay.

At the intersection of College and Bay, they met the first large crowds of humans. The barricades had been toppled. Police were trying to hold back protesters shouting slogans in memory of the first riot that had occurred here almost a week ago. The shouts died out as the Kithain rode into the intersection. The mob stood still for a moment, then parted to let the wondrous parade pass through. Smoke from the procession kissed the faces of protesters and police alike. The magick of the Cult of Ecstasy's drugs, coupled with the wonder of the Faerie Ride, began to take effect almost instantly. A calm descended on the intersection. Not perfect calm, because the smoke couldn't reach that far, but where the procession passed, there was more calm than chaos. In its wake, the riots started to dissolve. A few humans, perhaps more sensitive than the others, perhaps with a little fae blood unsuspected in their veins, fell in with the Ride. Tango and Miranda found themselves riding next to a mounted police officer with a look of wild entrancement upon his face.

The Ride turned south onto Bay. Their route had been carefully planned out ahead of time. The procession of Kithain would make several passes along various parts of Yonge and its surrounding sidestreets. At midnight, the Ride would sweep down on Union Station. Tango and Miranda, however, would leave them now and make their way to Union Station well

before then — underground. In yet another belated attempt to curb the number of people getting into the downtown area, city officials had shut down the subway system. The empty tunnels would take the nocker and the vampire right into Union Station. They would enter through one of the stations on Yonge Street.

Tango urged their horse forward to ride next to Riley and Tolly for a moment. “We’re ready.”

“Good luck.” Riley gestured to the duke. The Ride turned onto a sidestreet. Away from the procession, the Glamour that had surrounded them faded. Tango’s armor disappeared. She and Miranda continued a little farther on Bay, then turned onto Dundas Street. There was an entrance to the subway at Yonge and Dundas, and rioters should have been fairly few on Dundas.

They weren’t.

The east end of the street, all around the intersection with Yonge, was a mass of people. Tango reined the horse in. “Shit.”

“Do we have any other options?” asked Miranda. “Can we head for another entrance?”

“Not easily. These are the only outdoor entrances in the area.” Tango bit her lip. “We could fight our way through. We’ve got the horse — it should help get us in.”

Miranda nodded. “Do it.”

Tango took a deep breath and kicked her heels into the horse’s side. “Yaw!” she urged it. “Go!”

The charge took them deep into the crowd as people scattered to get out of the horse’s way. Unfortunately, the opening that created went in the wrong direction and closed up quickly behind them. They ended up in the middle of the intersection, surrounded by the riot.

And by people who, already frightened and angry, were not happy at having been charged. The crowd boiled toward them. Somebody grabbed at Tango's boot. She kicked out instinctively, Glamour surging inside her. She both felt and heard her foot make impact. Her leg was released. Someone else made another grab. Then the horse was rearing up under her, spooked by the noise and commotion of the riot. Tango fought the mare, trying to calm her.

With a snarl, Miranda lashed out at the rioters. Talons sprouted from her fingers, slashing into cloth and flesh. Her fangs were bared. Under the neon glow of the lights on Yonge Street, she must have seemed like a demon herself. The crowd fell back. She twisted around, menacing the rioters on the other side of them. They fell back as well, shock and fright on their faces. "Move!" Miranda howled at Tango. "Get us to the subway!" She pointed to the sign and stairs that marked a subway entrance. That gesture alone was sufficient to start people moving out of their way. Tango walked the horse forward, Miranda hissing and spitting at the people around them.

They reached the entrance. Tango turned the horse so that it blocked anyone from following them, then they slipped off its back and down the stairs. The mare started moving away the instant they had dismounted, but the press of the crowd prevented it from getting far. "What will happen to it?" Miranda asked.

"It'll turn back into your car at sunrise. That's the way Riley's magic works." Tango contemplated the heavy metal doors that sealed the subway station. This was going to be the hard part of getting into the subway. She flexed her fingers, spat twice, and got a grip on the

edge of one door. "Ready?" she asked Miranda as she called Glamour into her muscles again.

Miranda got a grip on the door as well. "Ready. On three? One... two... three!"

Kithain and vampire strength combined ripped the door away. The stale air of the subway drifted up.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her
knocked at her heart,
Met the fire smouldering there
And overbore its lesser flame*

The subway tunnel sloped downhill all the way to Union Station, the closest stop to the lake. The only illumination came from the far-apart maintenance lights and down from the streets above through ventilation shafts. Miranda depended on her ability to see in the dark. Tango held Miranda's hand and depended on the vampire to keep her from stumbling in the deepest shadows. They walked without speaking. When they passed one of the ventilation shafts, they could sometimes hear the sounds of the riots going on overhead.

There were two subway stations between Dundas and Union Station. They moved through them quickly and stealthily, alert for security guards or cameras. After the second station, the tunnel curved sharply, turning ninety degrees before it reached Union Station. The darkness was at its thickest in that curve. There were no maintenance lights and no ventilation shafts. Tango was completely blind. Miranda held the changeling's hand tightly. The warmth of her living grasp felt good.

“Tango,” she asked abruptly, “what are you going to do after this is over?”

“Assuming we win?” Miranda could see her smile in the darkness. “I suppose I’ll go back to San Francisco.”

“Ah.”

Tango was silent for a minute. “And you?” she asked quietly.

“I’m not sure.” Miranda shrugged, trying to make the gesture seem casual. “The pack has pretty much fallen apart. I could join a new pack, I suppose, but there would be a lot of awkward questions. The Sabbat punishes demon worship with destruction. I’m not sure I could go back to the Sabbat’s way of life anyway.” She snorted bitterly. “Maybe the Camarilla would take me. I’m starting to feel like I’d fit right in with them.”

“It’s hard to walk away from a life,” observed Tango.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Miranda pointed out. “I’ve done it before — a little more literally, of course. It was easier then. I just fell into the role of a vampire. Big, bad, dress in black.”

“Vampires don’t have to be like that. I told you about Elyse.”

Miranda nodded. “I know. It’s just that I used to look down on Blue and Matt — and Tolly — for not really accepting what they were. Now I’m the one having regrets.”

“Miranda,” Tango said softly, “you might have the body of a vampire, but you don’t have to have the soul of one as well. I know you’re strong. You can do this. I can help you.” The smile returned to her face, thin and a little hesitant. “Come back with me to San Francisco. I’ve got friends there. And I understand the vampires are pretty relaxed.”

"I don't think I want to be around vampires for a while. You understand."

"Too well." Tango's smile became devilish. "How about a job, then? I have a hard time finding bartenders who don't take nips on the side."

Miranda choked back a laugh. "I'd be looking for a different kind of nip!"

"Just not at work."

"Not even on my breaks?"

Tango choked as well and stopped. Her free hand felt for Miranda's mouth, silencing her. "Enough!" she murmured with a smirk. "Solomon may have posted lookouts on the subway platforms. Loud noises will carry a long way down here." Miranda nodded and the changeling took her hand away. "Even if Solomon doesn't suspect—"

The first attack came out of the shadows without any warning at all. Tango would have seen nothing at all, or maybe a vague figure. Miranda had only the briefest impression of a big, blond man appearing out of nowhere to slash at her with taloned fingers. She thrust herself aside and the talons raked across her shoulder. The figure vanished again. Miranda came back to her feet, talons sprouting from her own fingers, fangs descending in her mouth. Tango had her knife ready.

"What...?"

"Blue!" spat Miranda. The big vampire could see in the dark as well as she could, and he had something of Tolly's ability to vanish from sight. Where was Matt, then? Probably safely in the light where he could see. She cursed herself. She should have guessed that if Solomon suspected any kind of attack out of the

tunnels, he would have posted the vampires there! Matt had probably heard their quiet whispers with his heightened senses and sent Blue to investigate.

The second attack came from almost in front of her. Blue was suddenly there, as if he had just been waiting for her to look at him. His arm was already lashing forward with deadly speed. Miranda blocked it desperately. Blue's other arm came in low. Miranda let go of Tango's hand to snatch at Blue's wrist.

It was barely a thought for her to crush the man's bones. Blue vanished with a shocked and angry howl. Miranda grabbed for Tango's hand again, afraid that the big vampire might try to separate them. Blue's blood was wet in their grasp. Tango hissed.

"It's his," Miranda said quickly.

"He's attacking you because he knows I can't see in the dark. You're the danger right now." Tango tugged her forward, toward the light.

"Matt's there!"

"Better the devil you can see than the one you can't. Blue's just going to keep picking at us."

"Not if he can't see us either," Miranda murmured grimly. She drew on the shadows, spinning them out as thick as she could, darker and darker until even she was blind. She found Tango's lips in the darkness and pressed a finger to them. *Quiet. Wait.* She had taken away Blue's advantage, but at the cost of their own. They were all equal in the shadows. If they could just reach the subway platforms of Union Station alive, they'd both be able to see. It would be Matt and Blue against her and Tango, but at least the changeling would be able to fight there. After a moment, Miranda drew Tango forward silently. She walked carefully,

always feeling for each railway tie with her feet, then stepping on it at right angles. She hoped Tango had the sense to do the same thing.

It was a tedious, nerve-wracking way to move, but somewhere off to one side was the electrified third rail. If they stayed on a straight line down the middle of the tracks, they should be safe.

Blue was somewhere in the darkness as well. If they bumped into him, they wouldn't have any choice but to fight. If they were lucky, Blue would have already retreated back to wait with Matt in the light and to heal his shattered wrist. Miranda wasn't counting on that, though.

Neither, apparently, was Tango. She tugged on Miranda's arm, stopping her, then crouched down to the ground. Miranda wasn't sure what the changeling was doing, but she crouched along with her. Tango felt along the ground. Whatever she was looking for, she found it. Her arm came up. She threw something back into the shadows behind them, just hard enough to make a quiet skittering. A skittering that might lure Blue away from them. They waited breathlessly. Tango tossed something else into the darkness, a little farther away this time.

A moment later, they heard a third faint sound from that direction. A footfall. It had worked. The two women rose. They had barely taken two silent steps toward the unseen platform when a sudden flash shot through the darkness and a high-pitched, short-lived whine broke the silence. Something large fell heavily. The stench of ozone and burned flesh brushed against Miranda's nostrils.

Blue had found the third rail.

Shocked breath whispered from Tango's mouth. "I didn't mean for *that* to happen!" she murmured. The changeling sounded aghast. Miranda could feel her half-turn back to where the big vampire would be. She stopped her.

"Well, it did." She felt stunned herself, but it was a lucky break for them. She dispelled the blinding shadows. Blue's body lay about thirty feet away, smoke drifting from him, his face locked in a horrible, exaggerated snarl. It was impossible to be sure if he was alive or dead. Miranda pulled Tango silently onward, more quickly. If Matt was waiting on the subway platform, he would have heard the sound of Blue's encounter with the third rail. If he was smart, he would have gone to warn Solomon.

Miranda knew Matt better than that, though. His pride wouldn't let him admit to Solomon that he had failed. He would stay. But he would know now that they were coming, and he would be alert. Blinding shadows wouldn't blot out his other senses.

Tango's hand squeezed down suddenly on hers, and the changeling shuddered. Miranda glanced back at her. "What is it?" she asked in concern.

"Nothing." Tango shook her head. Her jaw was tightly clenched as if she were trying to avoid being sick. "Keep going."

"No. Something's wrong. Tell me." Miranda's eyes narrowed. "Is it...?"

"Shiv," Tango choked. "This is all too much like it used to be. The stalking, the..." she shuddered again, "the kill. I thought I could handle it."

"Riley doesn't know, does he?" Tango shook her head. Miranda grimaced. "How were you going to stop

Solomon, then?"

"Knock him out. Disrupt the summoning. That's what matters." Tango pushed a hand through her hair. "I wasn't expecting that we would have to deal with Matt and Blue, too."

"Blue wasn't your fault. It was an accident."

"And how are we going to deal with Matt?"

Miranda stomped on the railway tie under her feet. The black wood was too heavy and chemical-soaked to chop easily against the grain, but it might be possible, she thought, to split off a long, tough splinter.

* * *

Miranda slid along the inner wall of the tunnel between the northbound and southbound tracks, edging closer and closer to the platforms of Union Station. There was no sign of Matt. She slipped a little closer, watching for him intently. Still nothing. Another step...

"Don't move." Matt stepped out of a thin, shadowy gap between two big concrete pillars. There was a pistol in his hand. Miranda looked at it contemptuously. Matt shook his head. "It might not kill you, Miri, but it would hurt like hell." He glanced back up the way she had come. "Where's the changeling?"

"You saw the flash?"

"Yeah."

"That was her."

Matt raised one eyebrow skeptically. "Then where's Blue?"

"He pushed her onto the third rail." Miranda bared her fangs. "I killed him."

"Bullshit. I would have heard something."

“He died fast.”

That spooked Matt, though he tried hard not to show it. His hand shook slightly, however, as he gestured for her to step away from the wall and back out onto the tracks. “Solomon wondered if someone might try sneaking in this way. He’s going to be happy to have you again.” The other vampire leered at her.

“He’s playing a game with you, Matt.”

Matt laughed. “I know! You think I didn’t learn from what happened to you? As long as I keep Solomon happy, I’m sitting pretty.”

“How long do you think that will last? He’s going to get tired of you.”

“I don’t think so. Didn’t I always say I was better than you, Miranda? I meant better in every way—”

His voice cut off suddenly as Tango lunged through the gap behind him, from the other set of tracks, and stabbed him in the back. Matt’s face twisted. He jerked half-around to sneer at her — her and the broken wooden splinter in her hand. The vampire wore his leather jacket for more than ornamentation, it seemed. Matt favored her with a sneer as he grabbed at her with his free hand. “Stupid bitch!”

“Dumb bastard,” Miranda snarled at him. Deftly, she stepped up close to him, flipped back the front of his jacket — and thrust a second stake through his chest from the front. Propelled by her strength, the wood pierced his heart. Matt shuddered once. The pistol dropped out of his grip. For a moment, his weight hung off the stake in Miranda’s grasp, then she let the stake go. Matt crumpled to the ground.

Tango climbed through the gap to join her. “Good work.” She heaved Matt’s inert body into the gap,

tucking his arms and legs in until he might have been mistaken for a bundle of rags. He would remain there until someone found him and pulled out the stake. Miranda pitied the poor person who did that.

They left the tunnels and scrambled onto the platform. There were more big metal doors in place at the top of the stairs leading up into Union Station, but Matt and Blue had left them open. Tango and Miranda slipped through. They paused at the base of another set of stairs. Chanting drifted down to them. Miranda recognized some of the words. It was a full obedience being chanted in a round. The effect was eerie.

"Well?" she asked Tango. "Now what?"

Tango frowned. "Something's not right. The summoning is still going on." She glanced at her watch. "It's eleven-thirty."

"Do you think Tolly and Riley failed? The Ride didn't break up the riots?"

Tango shook her head. "No. I imagine Solomon is trying to compensate for that somehow. What surprises me is that we just met two of the High Circle downstairs. If that's the case, I suspect Solomon is using other members of the High Circle as guards elsewhere."

"He's nervous. He probably knows the court is working against him."

"That's not it. At the Bandog ceremony, it sounded like the High Circle was his right hand. That the Bandog are weak when it's not complete." She glanced at Miranda. "I've been around enough mages to know that a summoning rite is no easy thing. Even summoning a minor demon — or something like a demon's voice, I would imagine — is tricky. It has to be done just right. And minor demons don't require

that a whole city be thrown into chaos just so they can perform a little ventriloquism." Tango paused. "Miranda?"

The vampire barely heard her. It sounded as if Tango were calling to her along the length of a subway tunnel. Her voice was echoing and distant. The whole world seemed distant. Disjointed.

There was a pressure on her mind, as if something were trying to worm its way inside.

Just moving her eyes seemed like an effort, but she forced her gaze up to the top of the stairs behind Tango. A figure stood there, looking down at them. A tall figure, wearing black pants, but no shirt. A dog-face mask was in one hand, a small knife in the other. David.

Tango followed her gaze around. Miranda saw her eyes go wide. "No!" she breathed.

* * *

Another mage? For a fraction of a second, Tango froze; then she was throwing herself up the stairs at the blond doorman from Solomon's. There would be time to think later. She could feel the touch of human magick on her mind, presumably the same magick that had captured Miranda. She fought it back and lunged at the blond man. Startled at her resistance, he parried her knife with the mask in his hand. His knife flicked out, just nicking her arm near the wrist. The wound was barely enough to draw blood. A single bright bead welled up against her skin.

Apparently, though, that was enough. Magick poured into her body through that tiny wound, coursing through her veins like a cold wind. She drew her arm

back for another thrust. If she could break the mage's concentration.... Her arm didn't come back down. His magick had paralyzed her.

The blond man looked at her with a frown. Tucking the knife into his belt, he picked her up with one arm and carried her back down the stairs to stand beside Miranda. "Solomon," he said into the air. "I think you should come see this. I have Miranda and Tango."

The chanting from above faltered for a moment, then caught itself and carried on. A few moments later, Solomon appeared at the top of the stairs. He was dressed just as he had been for the Bandog ceremony in his house — black vest over bare chest. A triumphant grin lit his face. "Yes!" He came down the stairs and went over to caress Miranda's unmoving face. "You poor, sweet fool," he murmured. "Thought you could get away?"

"Stop that." The blond man slapped Solomon's hand away. "I warned you that this obsession of yours was going to lead to trouble."

"It was your idea to bring the vampires and that changeling into the Bandog, David."

"But not as sex toys."

Solomon glared angrily at the other mage. David looked back at him calmly, with no more expression than Tango had seen him display in opening Solomon's front door. She was more shocked by the implications of David's words. She knew that Miranda had been Solomon's lover, but Riley as well? Finally, Solomon looked away from David. "All right, I think we can talk about this later. We might still be able to salvage things tonight. Where are Matt and Blue? And Tolly?"

David drew his knife and pointed it at Miranda. The

vampire's eyes went wide for a moment. Tango couldn't move even that much. She wasn't even breathing — somehow David's magick must be sustaining her. She supposed that she was lucky he had set her down facing Miranda. At least she could see what was happening. "Down in the subway," David said somewhat distantly. "They managed to put a stake through Matt and hide his body. Blue may be dead. Electrocuted." He scowled, then blinked and lowered the knife. "Damn. You're not going to like this: Tolly was Riley's partner."

"What?" snarled Solomon. "Where is he now?"

"With the changeling procession, apparently. Do you want to have Matt brought up for the rite?"

"No. The High Circle is going to have holes as it is. I'll just tell the Bandog something about the High Circle being out making sure that everything goes smoothly. Warding off attacks." Solomon nodded to himself. "I like that."

"Don't change the rite too much. We want the Bandog to be in awe, not annoyed because the script keeps changing." David gestured at Miranda, as if the vampire were nothing more than an object. "At least we've got her back. The Bandog were looking forward to seeing a traitor sacrificed. And it will do them good to see what happens to the people who cross you."

Solomon stepped over to stand in front of Tango. "What about her? Does she know anything?"

David shook his head. "I don't know. I can't control her mind any more than I could Riley's. It's as if changelings are half-mad to begin with. It takes a mage with more skill in Mind magick than I have to control one. I had to use Life magick to stop her, or she would have killed me."

Tango wished that she had been willing to kill the blond mage. She wanted to scream in frustration, but she couldn't even focus her eyes to glare at Solomon. What was going on? Solomon knew about the Ride, but didn't seem concerned. He'd casually changed the summoning rite. At least now she understood Miranda's confusion when Riley said Solomon had tried to search his mind with magick. It must have been David who had done that.

Solomon smiled suddenly. "I think Tango wants to say something. Can you release her face?"

"Why? So you can gloat?" David looked at the other mage disparagingly. "What would we do with her afterward?"

"Actually," Solomon said, his smile growing broader, "I thought we could use her in the sacrifice. We get rid of that girl we have upstairs now, and replace her with both Miranda and Tango as prisoners. We begin the sacrifice using Miranda, then boom!" He slapped his hands together. "Shaftiel's voice comes out of her mouth before we can kill her. 'She is my chosen vessel, so that none of my faithful servants will die,' something like that. Then he demands Tango as a sacrifice. Miranda kills Tango, Shaftiel delivers his message...."

"And Miranda dies." David considered the idea as though he were considering wallpaper patterns. He nodded sharply. "All right." He caught Tango's chin and tilted her face up to look at him. "But let's make one thing very clear, Tango. If you scream or try to disrupt anything, you are going to die in pain like you've never felt before."

Abruptly, Tango could move her face again. "If I'm

going to die anyway," she spat, "what difference does it make?"

For a very brief moment, her blood felt as if it had turned into venom. The sensation left her gasping in shock. "Does that answer your question?" asked David. Solomon snickered. Tango shot him a hard glance.

"What the hell are you doing, you bastard?"

Solomon slapped her sharply. Compared to the pain David had inflicted, it was nothing. "I take exception to that." Then he smiled demonically. "Hell has nothing to do with what I'm doing."

Tango stared at him. "What about Shaftiel's voice? What about chaos in the streets? What about the pacts that the Bandog made?"

"Tango, I think you're missing the point here." Solomon drew a finger along the line of her jaw. "You can thank your friend Riley for Shaftiel's voice and the chaos in the streets. We need to restore the Bandog's faith in me. He and Tolly shook it badly when they started killing Bandog." He paused at her sharp breath of surprise. "You didn't know about that?"

"No. You lie." Jubilee had told her that Riley had killed a man, and she had had difficulty believing that. But how many Bandog had Miranda said died mysteriously? Three? Riley couldn't have killed *three* people.

David shook his head. "It's true. Solomon was able to track some skin fragments on a bracelet stolen from one of the victims. His magick led us to Riley."

"No," Tango said again. "I can't believe it."

If it was true, no wonder Riley had avoided telling her why Solomon had had him kidnapped. She felt ill with dismay.

"Believe what you like," said Solomon. "As for the pacts — they're as worthless as the blood they're signed in." He glanced at Miranda and grinned. "Sorry, Miri. I had a wonderful time, though."

"What?" Tango gasped.

Solomon shrugged casually. "There is no Shaftiel." Tango just stared in stunned silence. "There is no Great Hound, there is no voice to be summoned. We made it all up."

"But... but why?" stammered Tango. "Did Riley know about this?"

"I don't think so," said David dryly. "As for the why..." He shrugged as well. "Why do Nephandi pledge their souls to any infernal entity? Why did the Bandog join us?"

"For power," Solomon supplied. "Except we weren't quite willing to take the step of selling our souls. So we created our own cult. You'd be surprised what people are willing to do and give when they want something so very desperately: money, service, loyalty. Until yesterday, the house, but we knew that would be the first place you came looking for us, so we vacated."

"Sex," added David wearily.

Solomon wrinkled his nose. "You could have had it if you'd wanted it." He turned back to Tango. "Let's face it, Tango, we're more than human. All of us here are — you included. Humans are there for us to use."

"You used Miranda and Riley," Tango pointed out with quiet rage. "They're not human."

"They chose to join us. They offered themselves willingly. Who were we to turn them away?"

Tango clenched her jaw. "So you used them, just like you used the human Bandog — for your own power. You

had Miranda tortured and Riley kidnapped. You had fifteen innocent people killed. You started riots. All for your own power?"

"Remember that Miranda and Riley aren't so innocent, Tango. I doubt if you are, either."

"Miranda and I," hissed Tango fiercely, "regret what we've done. Do you have any regrets?"

"No," Solomon said flatly.

"Then you're not more than human," Tango spat. Anger seethed in her; anger and disgust and loathing. "You're inhuman. You're two of the most inhuman creatures I've ever met. Other Nephandi are evil because they serve evil beings. You're evil for your own sake."

"Enough." David cut her off. The blond mage glanced at Solomon. "It's almost midnight. Are you finished?"

"I think so." Solomon's face was dark. "Let's get this over with. I'll take care of the girl upstairs. Give me a few minutes, then bring them up." He left. David sat down on the bottom step, waiting. Tango glared at him.

"You..." she began, but he interrupted her.

"Tango, I can turn any word that passes between your lips into a scream of pain. I would suggest that you not say anything."

She didn't believe him. Then, as her blood burned a moment later, she did. She kept her mouth closed. After a few minutes, one of the High Circle appeared at the top of the stairs and gestured for David. The blond mage replaced his dog-head mask and approached her with his knife drawn. He pulled her own knife out of her grasp. She couldn't tell if he was surprised or not under the mask when the knife turned back into a ring,

but he slipped the ring onto his smallest finger mockingly. Then he cut her, drawing blood at her shoulders, hips and knees. The knife went back into his belt. David turned to go up the stairs. Miranda followed him on one side, Tango, her limbs moving like a puppet's at the mage's silent command, on the other.

For the first time, she realized how helpless she was. That single terror overwhelmed all of the hatred that she felt for Solomon and David. She was going to die. Miranda was going to be forced to kill her. And then Miranda was going to die as well. Tango wondered if the vampire had been able to hear what the mages had told her. She glanced as far to the side as her limited control over her own muscles would allow. She couldn't see Miranda's eyes.

They walked up from the stairs into the middle of the Bandog summoning rite.

Solomon had appropriated the great hall of Union Station for his false ritual. The room was huge and echoing, the walls faced in cold, dark gray stone. Immense pillars with ornate capitals supported heavy arches over passages leading deeper into the station. The ceiling vaulted high overhead, lost in the dense shadows. Broad, arched windows of thick, frosted glass dominated either end of the room. During the day they would have brought light into the hall. At night, they were vast, black sheets. Big, old-fashioned lamps hung from massive chains in the four corners of the hall, shedding a sullen light that did little to dispel the darkness.

The Bandog stood just to one side of the huge hall; the center was occupied by a large clock, the long hands of which stood ominously close to midnight. The

Bandog were arranged in circles, just as they would have been in the ceremony room of Solomon's house, except that all stood on the same level. The outer circle's black masks faced the thin-spread backs of the High Circle. The High Circle's gold-decorated masks faced Solomon. Solomon raised his arms. The Bandog's chanting round died out with a final murmured chorus of "I will obey his servant in this world. I am Bandog."

Solomon kissed the bracelet tattooed on his wrist. A whisper of movement filled the great hall as the Bandog followed suit. Solomon led them in the litany of the full obedience. Tango could hear David muttering the words as well. She looked at the backs of the Bandog. If they knew what kinds of lies Solomon had told them, if they knew the total falsehood they were so willingly accepting as the truth, she might still be able to stop all of this! She opened her mouth.

David glanced at her.

She closed her mouth sharply. *I can turn any word that passes between your lips into a scream of pain.*

But the mage couldn't touch her Kithain mind. Maybe.... Her eyes flickered across the thin-spread ranks of the High Circle, searching for one familiar old man. When she found him, she focused all of her attention on him. Miranda had said Jubilee Arthurs was a full telepath now, but surely he would still remember some of his old, simple tricks. She filled her mind with his name, concentrating on him alone.

Jubilee's head came up and he glanced slightly in her direction. *Shiv?* he asked inside her head.

That name gave her a start, but she didn't try to talk to him. She simply splashed all of what had just happened, all of her conversation with Solomon and

David, across her mind. She saw him start. *No. I don't believe it.*

True, she replied, focusing her thoughts carefully. Help?

We're outnumbered here, Shiv. Even if there were something I could do, how many of the Bandog would believe that it's all a hoax? How many would be willing to admit they were being taken advantage of? I know you're telling the truth. No more than a handful of the others would. He paused. *I'm sorry.*

Tango's heart sank. It was hopeless. She tried to look at Miranda again, but she couldn't even see the vampire. David stood between them. She spat mentally. Jubilee picked up her distress. Tenderly, he relayed his view of Miranda.

The vampire was crying. Tears of blood ran from her eyes down an otherwise impassive face.

Send a message to her? Tango pleaded.

Jubilee actually physically shook his head. I can't. David has control of her mind. If I try anything, he'd notice. Shiv, if you do anything, I'll try my best to help you, but I can't do any more.

Thank you. She hesitated then thought, *Call me Tango.*

Jubilee's touch left her mind. Solomon was speaking, something about the High Circle standing guard and defending the Bandog as the Great Hound guarded the gate between worlds. Shaftiel was pleased with the Bandog. The conditions for the summoning of his voice had been met. Tango noticed that Solomon didn't mention the Kithain court's attempts to curb the riots. She wondered if Riley and Tolly had been successful. Not that it would matter, of course. All of their plans

had assumed that the summoning rite was real, that there really was a demon — and not just two inhuman mages.

Solomon swept his arms wide. "Send forward the traitor, Miranda Delara!"

Miranda walked forward, her body controlled by David's will. The outer ranks of the Bandog, then the thin line of the High Circle, parted to permit her passage. The cultists murmured as they saw the blood on her face. When she stood within the High Circle, Miranda dropped down to her knees before Solomon, her head bowed. The Nephandus pointed at her dramatically. "Miranda Delara, you stand before the Bandog stripped of mask and chain. The servants of Shaftiel are one to his gaze, but he sees each one who fails in her duty. The servants of Shaftiel are bound to him, but betrayal breaks that bond." Solomon's voice thundered in the great hall. "Miranda Delara, you have failed in your duty. You have aided an enemy of the Bandog. You have refused to serve as you pledged. Miranda Delara, in the sight of the Great Hound, you are a traitor, and so I name you!" He spat on the ground.

David spat as well. Following their lead, so did the rest of the Bandog.

Solomon produced a piece of parchment — Tango wasn't sure from where — and raised it over his head. "The pact that you committed yourself to when you became one of the Bandog names the price of treason. Your life is forfeit." He hurled the parchment at her. "You are the first Bandog to make that contemptible forfeiture. Let others learn from your treacherous example. Your life will be the final stone in the bridge across which the Great Hound shall speak to his

faithful servants.”

Plucking a lash, the same one he had used in the ceremony of initiation, from his belt, David strode forward on cue. The Bandog scrambled to get out of his way. The blond mage stood over Miranda like some dog-faced avenging angel. He raised the lash. Solomon spread his arms and turned his handsome face to the shadows of the ceiling. “O Shaftiel! Your servants call out to you! Answer us! Send your voice into our world to speak to us!” He kissed his tattooed bracelet again. David’s lash fell hard. Miranda bore the stroke silently. As if she had a choice.

The Bandog began to chant the full obedience. David’s lash fell again and again. Tango fought the magickal bonds that held her body motionless, fought desperately. Nothing helped. She reached for the thin Glamour that clung to the cold stone of Union Station, drawing it into her like icy light and throwing it against David’s magick. Nothing. The Bandog began the full obedience again.

Someone gasped. Tango looked up.

Red light was seething around Solomon’s body. The light was hot, smoky and hellish. It writhed, almost as if it were alive, embracing the Nephandus. Solomon’s arms were still outstretched, his head still thrown back. An expression of rapture covered his face. The chanting of the Bandog grew louder, more enthusiastic. David kept lashing Miranda. Sweat gleamed on his bare torso and working muscles, reflecting the infernal light around Solomon.

Solomon began to rise up into the air. Hanging as though the light were the grasp of some otherworldly entity, Solomon flung his eyes open and screamed out,

"The Great Hound comes!"

Everything, even David's lash, froze. Miranda raised her head. Her eyes glowed the same red as the light around Solomon. Still kneeling, she bayed like a dog, long and quavering. Her fangs were extended, as were her talons. "The Great Hound," she howled in an unnatural voice, "is here!" She stood and turned to David.

The blond mage dropped his lash and seized her left wrist, desperately beginning the motions of full obedience, as if he were terrified of her. Miranda touched his head gently and moved him away. "I am pleased with your service." The glow faded from her eyes. To the Bandog, however, her fangs and talons would have been enough. She looked around at the circles of cultists, turning so that all could see her. For a moment, even Tango was stunned by the magnificent effect that Solomon and David had created. Then Miranda pointed at her.

"I speak through the body of the traitor so that none of my loyal servants need perish! But I hunger for another life. I must feed before I speak my message. Let that one, who would attack the Bandog, come and feed me."

Tango felt David's magick lift her legs again, moving her forward. The Bandog shifted aside in awe. David stepped away from Miranda. His magick pushed Tango down to her knees. For a moment she could see Miranda's face, and, up behind her, Solomon. Solomon was smiling cruelly. Miranda was weeping still, red blood dripping from her eyes. One drop fell on Tango's upturned face. Miranda's eyes flickered toward that drop even as her hand reached out and took David's lash

from him. Her tongue flickered from her mouth briefly, hungry for the blood in spite of David's control. The expression made her entire face look utterly ridiculous. David touched the knife in his belt, re exerting his magick. Miranda's tongue slipped back into her mouth, though her eyes stayed on the drop of blood.

Miranda's instincts were strong, Tango realized, far stronger than her conscious mind. She was still a vampire beneath the mage's control of her will. She still had a vampire's craving for blood.

David couldn't control Tango's mind because Kithain were already "half-mad." Miranda had been unable to control Atlanta Hunter's mind for a similar reason.

Kithain blood could drive a vampire mad.

Suddenly, Tango had a way to fight back against Solomon and David. It was desperate, and it would be dangerous — both for her and for Miranda. Kithain blood could kill a vampire as easily as it could drive her mad. There was no way to predict the effects. But what other chance was there? Tango still had control of her face and mouth, even if she dared not speak. She bit down savagely on her own lip, just as Miranda stepped in front of her and raised the lash. The vampire eclipsed Solomon, his ruddy aura flaring around her like a demonic halo.

Tango's blood spilled from her lip. The nocker bit deeper, bit at the inside of her mouth, anything to make blood flow. Red warmth trickled down her chin and over her cheeks.

Miranda's arm froze. The lash quivered at the apex of its swing. Tango couldn't see David or Solomon, but Miranda's eyes were alight with a hunger that no mage

had placed there. Her upraised arm trembled for a moment as her mind fought her nature, as David's magick fought her nature.... Vampire nature won. Miranda's body darted forward, kissing and licking at the bright blood on Tango's face. Her tongue darted across the changeling's lips. Her fangs brushed her cheek. Tango felt a thrill of fear — had she gone too far? Was this what humans felt before a vampire fed from them? Tango's eyes met Miranda's. She could see struggle in them as Miranda fought David for control of her own will. The vampire's lips touched hers once more and then moved down to her neck, an act of defiance against the mage.

"The Great Hound seizes the throat of his enemy!" shouted Solomon triumphantly. Tango could see him over Miranda's shoulder, though, and his angry eyes were anything but triumphant. She grinned at him as fangs penetrated her skin.

Ecstasy raced through her body, as sweet as any epiphany she had ever experienced. Tango wanted to hug Miranda against her, to push the vampire's working mouth against her throat.

Suddenly, though, it was over. Miranda was pushing her away, Solomon's red light glowing in her eyes once more. Tango felt weak, but at the same time energized. Glamour tingled in her limbs, flushing away her exhaustion. She grinned wildly as Miranda raised the lash once more. "My enemy's blood," the vampire howled, "is sweet. But her life will be sweeter still!"

The lash fell across the top of her shoulder, wrapping around to snarl against her back and upper arm. Tango kept smiling, buoyed by the ecstasy of Miranda's feeding. Miranda growled. She lifted the lash again.

Then screamed, dropping the whip to grab desperately at her head. The scream started in Shaftiel's horrible voice, but ended in Miranda's own, and it was echoed by David. The blond mage was on his knees clutching at his head as though it were about to explode. Tango had only wanted to end his magickal control of Miranda's mind, but something of the vampire's sudden madness must have echoed back through the magick to affect him as well. Abruptly, Tango's limbs were her own again.

She leaped for David as the Bandog around them started to shout. She didn't think, just acted on instinct, moving quickly. The light that flickered around Solomon suddenly went out. Tango could feel his magick sucking at her like quicksand, desperately trying to control her again before she could destroy his plans completely. She wasn't going to let him have that chance. She grabbed for the little knife that David had tucked into his belt. The blond mage tried to stop her, but couldn't. Tango got her hand on the knife and twisted around. Solomon's magick finally took hold of her, freezing her legs like thin pillars of stone even as she drew back her arm. But she still had control of the rest of her body. She snapped her arm forward and released the knife.

Solomon was fast. The infernal light blazed again suddenly, this time smooth and condensed, a shield over his head and chest. The magickal shield would have deflected a killing shot — if killing had been Tango's intention. All she'd really wanted to do was distract the mage and prevent him from using his magick against her. The knife sank into flesh. Solomon screamed horribly and tumbled hard to the ground.

Never go for the balls seemed to be one of the unspoken laws that connected men around the world. Maybe that was why they always seemed so surprised when a woman did it.

Silence fell over the Bandog, then they shouted and jumped forward. For all that they knew, their dark master and their leader had just been attacked by a woman declared the enemy. Tango swung around, Solomon's grasp on her broken along with his concentration.

"No!" One of the High Circle leaped in front of them. Jubilee. "Run! Get away!"

The mercenary's powers of command weren't nearly as powerful as Miranda's, but they worked. The front ranks of the Bandog turned back, snarling the advance of those behind. The mob of cultists boiled in confusion. Jubilee kept shouting. Bandog began to flee, running for the doors that would lead out to the streets. Tango grabbed for Miranda, wrapping her arms around the vampire. "It's okay," she whispered. "It's all right. Everything is going to be fine."

"Tango?" Miranda tried to focus on her.

"What's happening?"

"The shadows are coming for me, Tango. The shadows are coming!" She started to shake. Tango held her, rocking her gently. David continued to scream. Solomon rolled over and over on the ground, clutching at himself. Blood soaked his clothes.

Bandog began to scramble back away from the doors out of Union Station, some fleeing out other exits, some diving down the stairs to the subway tunnels, some just cowering in corners. Tango heard singing, a rollicking pooka drinking song. Through the open doors, ducking

low to pass under the frame, rode the Kithain court. Most of the torches were gone and the censers cold, but the smoke of the magickal drugs still clung to the descendants of the ancient faeries. Many of the Kithain wore souvenir T-shirts, ball caps, peaked police hats, or simple wreaths of leaves in addition to their finery. Most had silly, half-drunk looks on their faces. There were a few humans mixed in with them as well, laughing and singing as though the Kithain were old friends. Only Duke Michael still looked as sternly cold as he had when the Ride began. Riley waved at Tango from Tolly's back. "Are we too late?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Laura awoke as from a dream,
Laughed in the innocent old way,
Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice*

Toronto was quiet again. The sun rose in the morning, clear, bright and cooler. The heat of the previous day had passed. The downtown streets were littered with the debris of the riots, to be sure, but they were also empty. The city felt as though it had been reborn. The sunlight falling across the streets was like wonder, the breeze that stirred the air was fresh with possibility. It was a feeling that would probably only last for the day. On Monday morning, people would return to work in the offices and stores, dragging the dull monotony of the suburbs with them.

The riots hadn't vanished from memory, though. The city's anger existed independently of Solomon's control, and it didn't disappear with his defeat. There was still a certain tension in Toronto. There were still people in the hospital and in jail. There was still damage to be repaired. There was still the fear of the penny murders; still outrage, loathing and suspicion. Toronto was cool now, but it would become cold again very quickly. And Tango suspected that it would stay cold for a long time.

The Ride had, by all reports, been an outstanding success, both in terms of breaking up the riots and of entertaining the Kithain. The humans, befuddled by the chaos, the magical smoke and their own disbelief, were busy trying to explain it all away. Vague reports were being made on the news the next day describing the court's appearances throughout the night as, variously, reinforcements of mounted police, helpful passersby (conveniently ignoring the court's horses), or simply hallucinations. A few people claimed to have seen angels. The most popular explanation for the sudden end to the riots ignored the Kithain altogether, and attributed the relative lack of violence to Toronto's own peaceful character and the exaggeration of events by an over-zealous media.

The Bandog, of course, were scattered and frightened, some misled or pinched painfully by Kithain cantrips as they fled. The cult was broken. Solomon and David had been taken into the custody of the Kithain court. Tango had looked around for Jubilee, to thank him, but the old mercenary was gone.

Epp was being loudly fêted the next day by the Kithain. After its timely arrival at Union Station, the court had ridden back up Yonge Street amid the last ragged pockets of the riots to the hall that Epp had rented for a feast. They were about forty-five minutes late, but Epp had somehow managed to keep everything on hold until they arrived. The Cornish saffron buns, it was said, were especially wonderful, as rich and sweet as pieces of the sun. After the feast, many of the Kithain had wandered off, although they had gathered again down by the lake to watch a magnificent display of fireworks as the sun peeked up over the horizon.

Tango had seen none of that. She had taken Miranda back to Riley's apartment and held the shaking vampire throughout the night in a room that blazed with light. Shadows frightened Miranda. She panicked every time something shifted. When her eyes were open, they darted back and forth nervously. Sometimes, instead of merely holding her, Tango had to hold Miranda down, talking her out of her wild fright. With the rise of the sun, however, she had finally relaxed, falling into daytime sleep with a blissful smile on her face. The poison of the Kithain blood had passed out of her. Tango had hung two heavy blankets over Riley's bedroom window, blocking out the daylight, then collapsed into bed beside Miranda. Sleep was a welcome balm.

Dex came for her late in the morning, hammering on the door until she got up and answered it. She almost tripped on Tolly in the darkness of the bedroom, but there was no sign of Riley anywhere. The pooka had apparently not come home. She opened the apartment door and stared blearily at the golden sidhe. "Get dressed," he told her shortly, "and come with me. The Nephandi are going to be judged at noon."

Tango dressed very quickly and went with him. His white Mustang waited outside the door, a car once more. "Dex," she asked as she got into it, "have you seen Riley?"

"He's with the court."

They drove north, the wind and sun streaming in Tango's hair. Eventually, Dex turned off the street and into a grand old cemetery. He parked. On a beautiful day like this, Tango would have expected to see other people in the peaceful, parklike graveyard. There

weren't. They were alone. They walked across the green lawn, with its shallow depressions and clustered, weathered gravemarkers, back into the oldest part of the cemetery. Huge trees cast deep shadows over the Kithain clustered there. More of the court had discovered the true purpose of the Ride during the night's feasting, and they wanted to watch as judgment was passed on the mages who had terrified Toronto. Sin, Marshall and Slocombe stood guard over Solomon and David with naked swords. The two mages were still dressed as they had been last night. Dex joined his brother and the other guards. Tango looked around for Riley. She spotted him on the other side of the court and started toward him.

He slipped away, avoiding her.

She clenched her teeth. Was he afraid of talking to her? She had told him and Duke Michael the truth about the Bandog last night at Union Station. She had, however, lied a little bit to the duke about why Solomon and David had staged the riots and the false ritual — to rebuild the Bandog's faith in Shaftiel, she had said, after the unfortunate deaths of three of their number. She hadn't said exactly how the three Bandog had died. Riley had still gone pale for a moment. He knew, and he knew that she did now as well.

Tango stepped around the crowd of the court again, making sure Riley saw her move, then ducked down behind a tall memorial when his eyes were off her. She waited several minutes before peeping out again. Riley was about ten feet away from her, scanning the crowd nervously. Tango sprinted out of her hiding place and seized his arm.

He flinched at her touch and tried to bolt, but

Tango's grip was too tight. Inexorably, she dragged him back over behind the memorial. She stared into his frightened eyes. "Why, Riley? Why did you have to kill them?"

"We didn't have a choice, Tango!" The pooka shivered and looked away. "We had to try and shake the Bandog. It was the best way we could think of. We chose the ones we killed carefully. If you knew what those three had done...."

Tango seized him by the shoulders and wrenched him back around so sharply that he yelped. "That doesn't make it right."

"What would you have done, Tango? Sat back and let Solomon grow in power?"

She froze. What would she have done? She shoved him away. "You had Tolly, didn't you? And your contacts, like DeWinter? Couldn't you have found some other allies to help you?"

"I've known Tolly for a long time — since before the Sabbat made him a vampire. It's not easy to make allies in Toronto." He sighed and slumped to the ground, leaning his back against the cold stone of the memorial. "We did try other things. I tried to get... close to Solomon." His face twisted.

Tango squatted down and put her hand on his knee. "I know."

"I couldn't give him what he wanted. Then Miranda joined the Bandog, and Solomon didn't even bother with me anymore. He had another toy." Riley plucked a blade of grass out of the ground and cupped it between his hands. "I never even suspected that David was a mage, too! He never seemed to be more than Solomon's servant." He brought his hands to his mouth, blowing

across the blade of grass and making it whistle hauntingly.

“How did you find out about the Bandog in the first place, Riley?”

He looked up at her harshly. “One of the Bandog hurt someone he shouldn’t have. Solomon was good at attracting people with some very unpleasant desires and pastimes to the Bandog. He promised them all kinds of rewards. Money. Youth. Protection from discovery. More of what they craved.” His face darkened. “Some of the Bandog figured Shaftiel rewarded those who rewarded themselves. Tolly and I started investigating. We found out about the Bandog. I ended up joining to find out more — and to try and stop the cult from the inside. That didn’t work.” Riley flicked the grass away. “I’m not proud of what I did, Tango. It’s going to haunt me for the rest of my life. But I don’t regret it either. I know I did it for the right reasons. I don’t know if you can understand that.”

Tango struggled to find her voice. Her throat felt thick suddenly. “I can,” she said finally. “If it ever stops haunting you, though....”

Riley considered her for a moment. Considered her with the most serious expression she had ever seen him muster. He looked away, then commented, “I knew that Solomon and Shaftiel didn’t seem to be living up to their promises. Maybe Tolly and I should have guessed that it was all a fraud. It seems so obvious now.”

“Does it?” Tango shook her head and stood. “It’s more comfortable to believe in a demon that inspires inhumanity than it is to recognize inhumanity in other people. Or ourselves.”

From the other side of the memorial, a murmur rose

from the court of the Kithain. Tango glanced around to see what was happening. Sin and Dex were bringing forward the Nephandi. The other Kithain were drawing back from the duke, leaving an open space around him and the two mages. Saeeda the eshu had set a wide, shallow dish of age-darkened brass on top of a low gravestone just behind and to one side of Duke Michael. Tango reached down and pulled Riley to his feet, dragging him up to watch.

Saeeda scattered reddish cedar chips into the brass dish, then broken scrolls of cinnamon and cracked, golden crystals of resin. Over these, she sprinkled liquid from a little crystal flask. Tango could smell alcohol. Saeeda nodded at Duke Michael.

The sidhe lord looked out across the gathered court, his hair rippling slightly in the breeze, his jet-black false eye glittering. "These mages," he pronounced without preamble, "have committed acts of great evil. Who shall judge them?" He pointed at Dex and Sin. "You hold swords, the steel of justice. Will you judge them?"

"No." The twin sidhe sheathed their swords. "We shall not judge them."

Tango's fingers almost clenched around her knife-ring, retrieved from David last night. Riley squeezed her other hand. "What did you want them to do?" he whispered to her. The nocker didn't reply. She saw Solomon sneer.

Duke Michael gestured to the court. "You are the people. Will you judge them?"

"No," murmured the court in unison, then asked in return, "You are the lord. Will you judge them?"

"I am a lord of the Kithain," replied Duke Michael. "I will not judge them. What right have I? Who has

the right to judge them?"

"They have already been judged." Saeeda draped a scarf across her face. "Fate has judged them." Blindfolded, she dashed a handful of silvery powder into her brass dish.

Flames flashed, blue and green, crackling and fragrant, gossamer-thin in the shadows.

"Step forward," she called. "Step forward and look into the fiery face of what will be. Know your *Dán*, then go from this place, judged by Fate and punished."

No one moved. Then Dex gave David a push forward. The blond mage stumbled as though he were asleep on his feet. Dex pushed him again. David's eyes fixed on the flaming bowl and he began to shuffle toward it. Riley leaned close to Tango. "They say your trick with Miranda last night drove him mad as well. He hasn't spoken since he stopped screaming, around dawn."

David looked down into the flickering, burning depths of Saeeda's fire.

His face twitched once. His mouth jerked. "So," he said simply. A smile spread across his face. He turned and walked away from the fire, past Solomon toward the open space of the cemetery.

"David!" Solomon called after him, half-turning. Sin grabbed Solomon's arm, though, thrusting him toward Saeeda. Solomon glared at the sidhe. Sin glared back, and half-drew his sword again. One eyebrow rose, challenging Solomon to try something. The Nephandus glared for a moment longer, then turned and limped toward Saeeda. The crotch and legs of his pants were stiff with dried blood. He glanced at Tango and flushed angrily. He glanced at Duke Michael as well, but the

duke refused to look back at him. Blindfolded, Saeeda was oblivious to his gaze.

Solomon stood before the flames. Then, without looking down, he spat into the bowl.

His saliva sizzled. The fire turned blackish-red and began to smoke. "A mage," he hissed to Saeeda, "makes his own fate." He spun around and marched defiantly after David. Every step, Tango noticed, brought a wince of pain to his face.

He was on the edge of the court when Saeeda called after him. "Solomon!"

He paused.

"Not even a mage can avoid *Dán*." The eshu's face shifted under her scarf, smiling mockingly. "Not even magick can restore all wounds."

Solomon snarled and stalked away.

* * *

"They let them go?" Miranda asked in disbelief.

Tango gave a little grimace, but nodded. "Kithain judgments may not always seem fair or timely, but when *Dán* is invoked, justice is inevitable. Solomon and David have been punished."

"No," Miranda spat. "The duke should have been..."

"What?" Tango looked at the vampire. Her mouth twisted. "What did you want him to do?" She snorted. "Riley asked me the same question."

Miranda bit her tongue. Tango had told her about the judgment of the Nephandi when she woke at sunset. The changeling had also asked her how she felt. Miranda shuddered at the memories of last night, the feel of David's mind riding hers, the sweet burn of

Tango's blood against her tongue. The raging fire of madness searing inside her. The changeling blood had battered away the mage's hold, but it had also attacked the darkness inside her, her vampire nature, burning it bare.

The shadows that had terrified her so much had been her own. But Tango had been there. She had kept the shadows back. Miranda smiled at the changeling and took her hand, gripping it tightly.

Tango squeezed back for a moment, then let go. She flipped down the top of her suitcase and zipped it shut. The other things that she had brought back to Riley's apartment at sunset were two first-class reservations on a night flight to San Francisco. For tonight. "Are you sure there's nothing you want to take with you?" Tango asked. "No souvenirs of Toronto?"

"No," Miranda said, surprised at how good that made her feel. There really was nothing she wanted to take with her. She had said goodbye to Tolly, and that was enough. The mad vampire would be staying here, along with Riley, for a little while longer, then they would be moving on as well. "Nothing. I've got everything I need."

Tango's mouth twitched. "What is it?" asked Miranda.

"Nothing." Tango grinned. "Just suddenly, I feel about fifteen years younger."