

Dimensions of Desire



David Salcido

DIMENSIONS OF DESIRE

TALES THAT ASTONISH AND AROUSE

DAVID SALCIDO

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DEDICATION

To my son, Gideon, who has forsaken me; my niece Amber, who has often been my salvation; my long-time lovers Deb and Jesse, who have inspired and nurtured me and the love of my life, Donny, for never letting me forget who and what I am.

"If you dream the proper dreams, and share the myths with people, they will want to grow up to be like you."

– Ray Bradbury

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INTRODUCTION

"It's not just about sex."

Five words that changed my life forever, some 30 years ago, when the world was newer and far less cynical. I was a college student then, a stranger in a strange land. How I got there is inconsequential. The fact that I WAS there puzzled many at the time, including, if I must be honest, myself. I was there because I wanted to escape the small New Mexican town I'd grown up in and my options were limited. An eleventh hour scholarship had set me on the path, though I wasn't exactly sure what to do with the boon. Having not yet declared a major, I'd spent the last year and a half bouncing from one class to the next, trying to find a niche I could be comfortable with.

All that bouncing eventually brought me to the attention of the college superstar; the only poet laureate ever to grace those hallowed halls in the history of the Southwestern University I now attended. He'd tried to take me under his wing, but I'd resisted. I just wasn't that into poetry. I'd tried, but it didn't do anything for me. Sensing my restlessness, he took on the thankless role of Mentor and gently prodded me toward other forms of creative writing. There was a class on short story writing being offered the following semester. He strongly recommended I take it. I hemmed, hawed and finally gave in. It was another bounce, but what did I really have to lose?

What I almost lost was the opportunity of a lifetime. The class was a very popular one and hard to get into, but with my Mentor's insistence, I was accepted. Unfortunately, for me, that painted a large red target on my butt. The New England-born professor who had been "coerced" into accepting me, had taken one look at this silent, brooding country boy, judged me wanting and dismissed me outright. That semester was hell. Try as hard as I might, I just couldn't do anything right for that professor. His comments in the margins of my literary creations were cold at best, harsh for the most part and at times savagely mean. I still have the short story in my possession, bearing in his distinctive style, a comment in red ink which reads: "Perhaps, Mr. Salcido, you would be better suited to a career in the exciting world of

fast food." Bitch.

At the time, the immortal words of the Saturday morning sage Bugs Bunny bronxed through my head, "You know ... this means war." So, I took off the kid gloves and got to work. The assignment was typical of most green writing professors. *Take the main characters of your last story and put them in a completely different context. Do nothing to change their personalities, but change their situations, their sense of place or switch genres completely.* Okay, fine. The story I wrote was a hard-core bdsm tango that would have made even the most experienced pornographer blush. Or so I thought at the time. It was the most graphic and detailed sex scene I had ever written and I absolutely reveled in the freedom writing it brought me. As short stories went, it was lacking on several levels, but I didn't care. I wasn't going for a Nobel Prize; I was just trying to make a point.

Needless to say, the "story" was not very well received. In fact, so peeved was my writing professor that he kicked the story up to higher authority with a request to have me removed from his classroom. The war was on and I was sure I wasn't going to win it, but tweaking that asshole's nipples and watching him cry about it gave me a sense of pleasure I was hard pressed to deny. Somehow – and I can only credit providence for this little turn of events – the story landed on the desk of my Mentor, the poet laureate. Seems in an odd twist of fate, the dean of the college was away on some other business and my Mentor had been asked to fill in for him in his absence.

I will never forget the terror I felt when I was called to his office. I wasn't at all ashamed of what I'd done, but neither did I want to so blatantly disappoint somebody who – really for the first time in my entire life – had taken an interest in my creative abilities. I expected a long lecture on propriety. I expected him to ban me from the creative writing program. Hell, I wouldn't have been at all surprised if I'd been expelled from the college. This would have been strike two for me, as I'd already been kicked out of the drama department for an "indiscretion" with one of my professors. Another, much longer, story for another day.

What happened, instead, completely changed my worldview. My Mentor, the poet laureate, didn't berate me. Instead, he sat and studied

me for a few minutes, packing his ever-present meerschaum pipe with pungent tobacco, lighting it and puffing silent thought balloons into the air around his head. His expression was unreadable. He never took his eyes from mine. At the time I thought he was trying to stare me down, but even after I blinked he continued to eyeball me. I waited. When he finally spoke, it was in the same gentle, measured tones he always used with his students.

"You are a fine writer, Mr. Salcido. Perhaps too fine for this program."

I was stunned and said something ridiculously witty, like, "Wha ... huh?"

He continued. "I understand that you've been having a hard time in Mr. Hack's class." Not his real name, obviously, but it will do for now.

"I can't stand that prick," I said belligerently.

He nodded his understanding. "Is that why you wrote this?"

I clenched my jaw and nodded.

"What were you hoping to achieve?" he asked gently.

I answered flippantly. "I don't know, I guess I was just trying to get a rise out of him."

My mentor smiled around his pipe. "Both figuratively and literally, I assume."

My belligerence melted away and the façade cracked. I smiled back, sheepishly. "Yeah."

"And do you think you succeeded?"

I shrugged. "Probably not. I think he's a eunuch."

My mentor nodded. "Okay. Can I offer a little word of advice?"

I squirmed. Here it comes, I thought. He's going to tell me to tow the line. Play nice. Get the grade and move on. I nodded uncomfortably.

"Don't try so hard. It's not just about sex."

My mouth fell open, but nothing came out. It closed again with an audible pop.

My mentor continued. "It's obvious that you have a passion for this kind of writing. Your descriptions are vivid, your pacing is strong and your attention to detail is ... well ... let's just call it bold."

"Is that good?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think," I replied honestly.

"Here's my advice," he said. "Give your reader something more to chew on. It isn't enough to be brilliant in one scene; you've got to give the reader a reason to enjoy that brilliance. In genre writing, it is never about the obvious. Think about the best thrillers you've ever read. Is it about the killer or the monster in the end, or is it about the characters you've come to know and love, who are on a collision course with the bad guy, that really puts you on the edge of your seat?"

I stared at him, spellbound, but made no reply.

"It's the same for any genre. Is the science fiction story about the ship and the computers, or is it about the people who man the ship and use the computers? Is a historical narrative about the time and place of the story, or the people who are reacting to the events taking place IN that time and place? Yes, of course, all of those elements are important. Without them, you wouldn't really have a story worth reading, but the truly great writers are the ones who understand that it is the story and the characters that make for an enjoyable read. The elements are secondary and present only to give shape and meaning to the story itself."

I blinked. "So, what are you saying?"

"Next time, give us more. I'd like to know who these people are before I walk in on their intimate moment of self-actualization. You have the ability, now put it to good use. Think beyond the genre. Use it as a tool to tell your story, rather than a means unto itself. I guarantee your audience will appreciate it much more."

"And Hack?" I asked, referring to the professor whose pique had brought me to this point.

My mentor smiled. "He's a fourth rate writer with a chip on his shoulder. You're going to spend your entire life being challenged by people like him. It's up to you how you decide to respond. I would suggest simply dazzling him with your unrestrained writing style. Chances are very good that he won't give you the grade you deserve, but he won't fail you either. He will have to grudgingly accept the obvious, or be challenged by his superiors, myself included."

I sat humbled and somewhat dazed. This meeting hadn't gone at all the way I'd expected it to. I left feeling numb and over the next few days couldn't get the conversation out of my head. Was it possible that my Mentor was right? Had I found my niche, after all? Were my bouncing days over? Only time would tell.

I squeaked by with a B- in the class and didn't challenge it. I knew how hard it had been for Mr. Hack to give me that grade. I also knew that I had learned more in that 20-minute meeting than I would in the entire four years I attended the University, in pursuit of a Creative Writing degree. Now, some thirty years later, with over a thousand publishing credits under my belt, I can look back and see the moment of truth for what it was.

It was that moment that eventually led to my years in both the mainstream and adult publishing industries and a successful freelance career that now spans two and a half decades. It was that moment that led to my publishing Blue Food, the adult literary arts journal, which later morphed into a popular webzine. It was that moment that led most recently to my old friend (and one of my favorite writers), M. Christian, contacting me and asking, in essence, 'isn't it time you do your own book?' It was a moment that has not yet, after 30 years, lost its potency.

Those five words have served me well, not just in the erotica field, but also in the wider arena of creative writing; because, no matter what the assignment, it is all creative writing in the end. As I write this, I have another commission waiting and a literary agent interested in helping me publish my first novel. It may have taken thirty years to get to this point, but I guess the time was finally right. I'm not complaining.

Though he is no longer with us on this material plane, I would like to believe that my Mentor, the poet laureate, would be proud of me. He's up there in Literary heaven, sitting on a cloud, puffing on his meerschaum and bending words like Uri Gellar to fit his mood, but the impression he made, so long ago, has become his legacy here on earth. As for that asshole, Mr. Hack, I often wonder if he's still expecting fries with his crow?

BRING ME THE DISCO KING

Eartha Kitt. They always seem to come back to Eartha Kitt. In spite of himself, the old man smiles. Oblivious to his appreciation, the dusky drag queen expertly lip-syncs the words to My Discarded Men, strutting seductively in gold lamé and batting abnormally long eyelashes at the young men seated inches away at the small cocktail tables ringing her stage area. She's good. Very good. They all are tonight, which perfectly explains His presence here at this innocuous little cabaret in uptown Phoenix. He never could resist a good drag show.

Glancing up at the tilted mirror above his head, the old man zeroes in, once again, on his prey. Seated, as he is, at the bar, he can watch every move the other Man makes, without drawing attention to himself. The cabaret is crowded tonight, every table and booth filled, which means standing room only. This too works in the old man's favor, hiding him until he's ready to make his presence known. The mirror was a good idea, though he doubts the engineers had anything but cruising in mind, when they installed it.

"Can I get you anything else, sweetie," the bartender, Craig, asks. The old man looks down at the still full cup of coffee, now gone stone cold. Craig smiles, flashing white even teeth. He's practiced in his profession, but his blue eyes cannot hide the revulsion he feels for this sad, decrepit old fossil taking up space at his bar. "Maybe something a little stronger?"

The old man ponders, then replies, "Cognac. Remy Martin. VSOP."

Craig seems surprised. "We don't get much call for that, honey. One of the *girls* occasionally asks, so we've got some in the back, but it's pretty expensive..."

The old man reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a wad of bills. Flipping through them, he extricates a fifty and pushes it across the bar. "That should cover it, I think."

Craig, eyebrows in hairline, nods, snatches up the bill and rolls pretty blue eyes up to pierce sharp gray ones thankfully. "And then

some. I'll be right back..."

The old man sits back to resume his vigil. Around him the crowd erupts in enthusiastic applause for the statuesque drag queen exiting the stage area. The ensuing chaos makes it difficult to find his prey, but he knows He is still there. Another performer is introduced, the lights begin to pulse to a familiar beat and the crowd settles back. There, across the small room, seated in a corner booth and surrounded by beautiful young men, sits the Enemy. Staring at Him again, after so very long, the old man can't help but feel himself growing hard.

Then the music has him. He blinks. On stage, the new drag queen is dressed in a hot pink jumpsuit, complete with flared legs and glittery platform boots. Her wig is a huge blonde Afro and her eyelashes are sparkling like the rays of a brilliant pink sun. Blaring through the speakers is the unmistakable voice of Alicia Bridges singing I Love The Nightlife. Unbidden, the memories flutter back in a technosexual disco dance ball swirl, bittersweet like acid on a mint wafer. And he is there.

He is young again, beautiful and full of hope. The music is new and the energy fresh. It's a steamy summer night in 1978 and the Disco King has singled him out. Apparently bored with the harem of gorgeous young men and women He normally surrounds himself with, the raven-haired god of the dance floor has sent for him, danced with him, bought him drinks, had eyes for only him. And as Alicia belts out those magic words, the Disco King leans over and says, with a slight Euro-American accent, "I, too, love the nightlife. Are you game?"

Entranced, the young man nods and the pact is made. The rest of the night is a barely remembered swirl of bars, dance clubs and limousines, beautiful poseurs vying for His attention, soft lips and desperate promises made to ensure that they are included in whatever it is the Disco King has in mind for this hot new acquisition. In the end, however, it's just the two of them, alone. Dancing, dancing, dancing. Naked. High above the city in a penthouse apartment. All part of a drug and disco-fueled dream right out of a movie.

And the sex is exquisite. Raw and sensuous, primal and exhausting, but romantic, as well. Reciting haunting passages from Dryden, Gray, Byron and Blake, the Disco King touches parts of his soul he never

knew existed. Draws feelings and emotions from him in waves, using His voice, His touch, His mesmerizing gaze. Pulls pleasure out through his pores, his eyes, his lips, his cock. The Disco King devours him, leaving no inch of his body unexplored, no part of his mind unexposed. Orgasms are wrenched from him, more than he ever thought possible in one night, wringing him out until finally he collapses into blissful, dreamless sleep. From which he awakens into horror...

"Here you go, sweetie." Craig sets the snifter down on the bar, shattering the old man's reverie. He turns to stare at the bartender, temporarily disoriented. "She's pretty good, isn't she?" Craig says, nodding in the direction of the stage.

The old man closes his eyes and shakes his head. When he opens them again, they are focused, sharp, piercing. "Yes," he says. "She is ... delightful."

Craig nods. "One of the best in the city. You picked a good night to visit us here at Winks. How long will you be in town?"

It's an assumption on the bartender's part. An attempt to gain information. The old man has not said more than a few words all evening. He lifts the snifter, takes a small sip and inhales deeply, imagining the fire coursing through his body. Then the memory fades and he is left empty again. Wanting. His eyes fall on Craig. The bartender is patiently waiting for an answer.

"My business here is almost concluded."

Craig smiles. "Too bad. Phoenix has a lot to offer these days." He winks, knowingly. "If you know where to look."

"So I've discovered."

The bartender nods, then his attention is drawn away by another patron and the old man is left alone again in a sea of hunger. He sits back in his chair. The feeling of desperation is palpable to him, but he can't remember what that hunger really feels like. Can't remember much about what it's like to feel anything, anymore – except hatred. Looking up at the mirror he focuses on the object of his obsession: The Disco King – the Vampire who transformed him into ... this. Tiredly, he lets his eyes wander downward to the empty seat he now occupies.

It's been 25 years since he's seen his reflection. Both a blessing and a curse. If he has to be what he is, after all, best to be spared the constant reminders a mirror might bring. He's never seen the wretched bag of bones other people see when they look at him. But he can see his hands and the rest of his emaciated body – the skeletal remains, stretched over with parchment. To the average eye, he must look to be in his eighties, or older. Inside, he's only forty-five – still young, by some standards. But youth is something that was denied him long ago. Stolen from him in one brief night of ecstasy on a sultry summer night in 1978.

He looks up again, piercing the gloom to stare angrily at the raven-haired beauty holding court in the corner booth. The supreme irony of the situation brings an unfamiliar sourness to his mouth. Ironic that it is He, the Vampire, who is visible in the mirror, rather than His victim. The old man hadn't expected that, figuring that if he had no reflection, it would only stand to reason that the Creature who did this to him would also be so afflicted. It infuriates him to discover otherwise, but there sits the proof, still so young and vibrant, still desirable and full of energy. Energy stolen from others, leaving behind a long trail of mysterious disappearances, emaciated corpses and unanswered questions.

Why he himself is still here is a mystery to the old man. All the other victims had been dead when the Creature had finished with them. Drained of all life. Not blood, as might be expected, if one were to believe the old myths. Rather it was their very essence that had been drawn from them. Their spark. Why he himself was spared the finality of death is beyond him, even after all these years. All he knows is that for a quarter of a century he's been trailing this abomination, with nothing but questionable memories of a Man he knew only briefly to guide him. Watching the television, reading newspapers and studying scandal sheets, waiting for the next piece of the puzzle to fall into place, bringing him one step closer to an answer.

It's been a trail that has grown cold so very many times that the old man has known fear. More than once, he has lost track of his prey. Never for long, though. The Creature didn't feed often, but it did need to feed. Every five years or so was all it took. Plenty of time for trails

to fade. But when you've been left with nothing but obsession to keep you alive, even the coldest of trails pulse with expectancy. And it was always just a matter of time.

In fact, it was pure luck that had led him here to Phoenix. The Fiend had gotten sloppy. Always in the past, when a young man disappeared, foul play was logically suspected. No clues could be found as to the reasons for the disappearance, but it was always pointed out that the victim in question had been "beautiful and full of life." They always had so much to live for, held so much promise and their disappearances were always keenly felt by friends and family. Still, with no real leads, and no body to confirm the allegations of foul play, the case would be filed away, along with all the countless others that had gone unsolved throughout the ensuing years. Case closed. So sorry. Just another mystery to puzzle over.

But the last one had been different. The last victim had been preparing for a trip. And, for the first time since this nightmare had begun for the old man, the Creature had gone against form and taken advantage of His victim's plans. It was doubtful if anyone even suspected foul play in His last assault. The young man simply flew away to Phoenix, as expected, and had yet to resurface. Not that unusual in these troubled times. Everyone was looking for an escape of some sort and it wasn't like he had left that much in Portland to draw him back.

Eight months later, after studying familiar patterns and following one false lead after another, the old man found himself here, in a claustrophobic drag bar, so close to his prey that he could taste the eventual finality of his 25 years in purgatory. If taste was a word that could be logically applied to the situation. The old man hadn't tasted anything in decades. Couldn't taste anything, couldn't feel anything, merely existed, without dreams, without desires, without any of those things that sustained a normal human being. He was empty. A husk. A living scarecrow driven by vengeance. He was death for the deathless. And tonight would be his night.

Taking another sip at the tasteless amber liquid, the old man studies his prey. A beautiful blonde boy is whispering something into His ear, eliciting laughter. The Disco King is so relaxed, so comfortable, so

fresh. He wouldn't have to feed for another four years or so. He has all the time in the world. This is just one stop amongst many in His endless quest for meaningless pleasure and hedonistic thrills. So it comes as no surprise when He takes the blonde boy by the hand and gently prodding others out of His way, exits the booth.

The old man watches as concerned friends first question, then smile knowingly at Him as he passes. This won't take long; he can almost hear the Disco King saying. No need for alarm, He isn't deserting His admirers, just taking care of business. Whispering amongst themselves and watching as He and the blonde boy make their way toward the back exit, the boys in the booth chatter happily and return their attention to the show. None notice the decrepit old man who follows in the Disco King's wake.

* * * *

The Disco King's head is thrown back in the languid build up to sexual release when the old man enters the back alley. On his knees at His feet is the beautiful blonde boy, eagerly devouring His sizable organ. For a moment the old man hesitates, eyes intent on the familiar dimensions of the gorgeous cock, being licked and slobbered over by the expert mouth of the young hustler.

The look of ecstasy on the boy's face is to be expected, for the cock of the Disco King is not only flawless in every detail, but such is the Man's glamour that the taste and smell of His flesh defies description. Like an aphrodisiac, the musk He emits envelopes the senses, heightening the experience beyond mere elicit coupling. It becomes something more, something beyond carnal. Something intensely satisfying and fulfilling. Something akin to a religious experience.

So caught up in the act is the young man, in fact, that he never feels the cold dry hand which clutches the nape of his neck, snapping his spine like so much dry kindling. The Disco King's eyes snap open and are razored into awareness by the burning gray eyes of a murderer. His mouth drops open, but a clawlike hand wraps itself around His throat and the scream dies before it can escape.

"Remember me, Disco King?" the old man rasps. The look in His eyes says otherwise. "No, I don't suppose you would. It isn't every day that the predator comes face to face with long discarded prey."

Without relinquishing the hold he has on the Vampire's eyes, the old man pulls the young hustler's slack mouth away from the Disco King – a trail of saliva stretching from glistening cock head to dead, wet lower lip – then tosses the body carelessly aside. Instantly, the free hand returns to wrap around the large, spit-slicked organ, stroking it lovingly.

"It's been a long time since I've touched such perfection..."

"P ... please..." the Disco King gasps. "Don't..."

"Don't?" the old man asks, leaning forward until he can smell the alcohol on the other's breath. "Don't what? Don't hurt you? Don't kill you? Don't touch you so intimately? Why not? They're all my right. I've waited a very long time to do all those things. And more."

The terror in the Disco King's eyes fascinates the old man. He is, after all, an immortal. So long as He continues to feed, He should, it only stands to reason, live forever. The fact that He can know fear, however, is a bonus. It means that He is not impervious to harm. He is, in some way, vulnerable.

"How old are you, Disco King? How long have you been preying on beautiful young men to sustain yourself?" Loosening his grip on the soft, white throat, the old man prods Him with a sharp tug on His deflating cock.

The Vampire yelps in response. "Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Calling you what?"

"Disco King?"

It's the old man's turn to look surprised. "Why? Because it's the only title I've ever known you by. You took everything from me, but you never told me your name. Just as, I'm sure, you've never told any of your victims your name. Why bother, after all? Why should the butcher give any consideration to ... livestock?"

"No." The look in the Disco King's eyes changes, become less afraid and more ... pained. "You've got it all wrong."

"Do I? How wrong have I *got* it? Look at me!" A sob catches in the old man's throat, unfamiliar and dry, but surprising none-the-less. "I was once young and beautiful, just like you. I was twenty years old when you robbed me of my youth. You left me behind, just as you

have so many others, a withered husk of humanity!" Flecks of foamy spit shower the Disco King's face as the old man rants. "Something to be discovered and disposed of by those whose job it is to discard of the old and the homeless when they die, alone and uncared for. The only difference is, when you left *me*, I was *still alive!*"

The old man pulls back, shaken. Tears have formed in the Disco King's eyes. Sadness has etched itself into every contour of His beautiful face. "Don't pull that shit on me, Vampire. It won't work. I've had a long time to think about this day. I don't know how vulnerable you really are, but I have every intention of making you suffer for your sins."

The Disco King closes His eyes and large wet tears overflow onto His cheeks. "Suffering would be nothing new," He says in His strange Euro-American accent. "Coming from anyone else, those would be idle threats. I've waited a long time for you to come..."

"No tricks!" the old man snarls. "I won't let you rob me of my triumph. Shut up, or I'll kill you where you stand!"

The Disco King gives a tired smile. "I'm sure you've figured out by now that I'm not that easily killed..."

Tightening his grip until the Vampire's eyes begin to bulge and strangled gasps are all that escape from His throat, the old man leans forward. "Aren't you?"

Wrapping His own hand around the wrist of the older man, The Disco King squeezes until the grip on His throat loosens. The act angers the old man and he reacts by yanking, hard, on the fleshy cock in his other hand.

"Please..." the Disco King gasps. "It shouldn't be this way. Tell me your name." His eyes drill pleadingly into the old man's steely grays and something inside clicks.

Suddenly all the years of anger and spite seem to retreat from the old man, draining away into the warm Phoenix night. The grip he still has on the Vampire's throat loosens and his hand slides downward until he is leaning heavily on the hard, muscular chest. His other hand gently squeezes the flaccid organ one last time, then drops away.

"I don't remember my name. You robbed me of that, as well."

The Disco King nods. "As did He who came before me."

The old man looks up questioningly into the other's watery eyes. "You can't remember your name, either?"

The Disco King shakes his head. "I've used many in my travels, but none are my own. When I take a ... consort ... I purposely withhold the lie. I believe they deserve that, at least. I know it comes as small comfort, especially after so many years have passed, but believe me when I say, I have felt every minute of regret for all the lives I have taken. Even yours."

Anger flares again, briefly, in the old man's gray eyes, then is replaced by a heaviness he hasn't felt in years. "How would you know, if you can't even remember who I am?"

The Disco King closes his eyes. "New York. Summer. 1978. Studio 54. You were an artist. A photographer." Brilliant otherworldly eyes open and the old man is transfixed. "You were beautiful then. A perfect specimen. Possessed of an exquisite grace which has never been duplicated, by male or female, before or since."

The old man bows his head and the silence between them becomes palpable. "Please tell me one thing," he finally whispers.

"Anything," The Disco King answers.

The old man's face is a mask of anguish when he raises it again. "Why me? Why did you spare me? Why not kill me like you did all the others?"

The Disco King looks surprised, though only mildly so. Then a slight smile twitches at the right side of His beautiful mouth. "I didn't spare you. You spared yourself."

The old man's mouth falls open, but he cannot find the words. Thoughts ricochet around in his head like shrapnel, but nothing coherent will emerge from the chaos. Instead, he lets his eyes ask the question.

"My consorts are carefully chosen," The Disco King sighs. "I choose them for their vitality, their spark of life, their creativity and their ambition. To keep me sated, only the best will do. Every once in a great while, one comes along whose spirit is so bright, whose will to live so strong, that he cannot be snuffed out. Not even by one such as I. When that happens, the victim becomes the predator and the predator the prey. It is all part of the endless cycle. As it has been

since the beginning."

The old man's head is bowed again, hanging tiredly, eyes closed. He listens, as the words wash over him. He listens, but understanding is slow to dawn.

"Tell me," the Disco King whispers into the night, "How long has it been since you've cried?"

A heavy, soul-rattling sigh. "Too long..."

Placing a finger under the old man's chin, the Disco King raises his head and waits for his eyes to open. The other hand moves to the old man's face. The Disco King wipes at his cheek and lifts wet fingers for him to inspect. "I've waited a long time for you to come, my vengeful lover. Too many centuries have made me weary. So much so, I thought you might never arrive. But you have and the cycle refreshes itself. You've learned how to sustain yourself, by preying on the weak. You do not want for money and killing to get it has become second nature to you. You've become the perfect predator and I, your perfect prey. Like you, I was not ready before. I am ready now. Please, do what you came here to do. Release me."

"How?" the old man whispers, unfamiliar feelings muddling his thoughts.

"Take back that which was taken from you." Placing firm, young hands on the old man's bony shoulders, the Disco King now pushes him down onto his knees. Rising up to greet him, the Vampire's beautiful cock finds its way to his lips and, without hesitating; the old man takes it into his mouth. It is good, so very, very good. The smell, the taste, the incomparable feel of the silky flesh – better than he remembers it being 25 years before. Hungrily, he gives himself over to the urge and concentrates full attention on the Disco King's scepter, suckling from it as though it is the very fount of life itself.

* * * *

The statuesque black drag queen is back, this time growling out the Eartha Kitt song, I Want To Be Evil. Looking up into the mirror, the young Man pays brief attention to the deserted beauties growing restless at the Disco King's booth, then lets his gaze fall to the handsome young reflection staring back at Him. Piercing gray eyes study the long-forgotten contours of a vaguely familiar twenty-year-

old face.

"You're the second person to order this tonight," Craig, says, placing a snifter of amber liquid on the bar. "The last guy was sitting right where you are. Weird huh?"

The young Man smiles. "Yeah. Weird."

Craig cocks his head. "You sure you're old enough?"

"Want to see my ID again?"

The bartender hesitates, caught up in the glamour, then shakes his head. "Nah, that's okay. You're new to town, huh?"

"Just got in."

Craig winks. "Welcome to Phoenix."

Nodding in return, the young Man lifts the snifter to inhale the strong aroma, then takes a small sip and smiles, savoring the fire coursing through His body. It will be years before He feels the hunger creep in upon him. There is so much to experience in that time. So much to catch up on. So much youth to savor and flesh to conquer.

But first, He thinks to himself, I will need a proper name...

THE INCIDENT IN HO-VILLE

Tinsel was one hot little elf and she knew it. She saw it in the way the other elves looked at her as she walked the production line, giving orders and reprimanding any she caught slacking. The males always blushed and looked away when she caught them staring, while the females tended to turn up their tiny snub noses at her disdainfully.

But that didn't bother Tinsel. She knew they were just jealous. Jealous of her beauty. Jealous of her high firm ass and shapely legs. And jealous that she had been blessed with a considerable cleavage, while most elvish females sported tiny buds, hardly noticeable beneath their green and red uniforms.

Then, of course, there was the fact that, despite her youth and lack of any real experience, she was the elf in charge. She'd caught the boss, the big man himself, leering at her lustfully one day from his high office window. A few simple visits to that office during off hours and the promotions had come quickly enough. Now, she oversaw the exclusive backroom of the factory; the workshop that manufactured sex toys and was the real moneymaker for the multi-million dollar Big Red Enterprises.

Tinsel was in charge and some day she would be married to Big Red and have her every selfish desire granted. Getting rid of the old man's wife wouldn't be a problem. She was old and fat in that way mortal women got, while Tinsel would be forever young and sexy. It was just a matter of time. Tinsel was going places...

* * * *

"Why are we stopping?" Tinsel asked peevishly.

The elf holding the reins turned back to look at her apologetically. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but there seems to be something blocking the road."

"What is it?"

"It looks to be a small animal. It may be injured."

"Then go around it, idiot! Do I have to make all the decisions?"

"The snow banks are too high, we can't go around..."

"Oh, for..." Tinsel opened the side door and stepped from the sleigh.

"I'd better not miss *Sex In The City* because of this!"

She walked around the two motley reindeer and found herself looking down into the eyes of the sorriest looking mutt she had ever laid eyes on. It had a stumpy-looking antler tied haphazardly to its head and bore the same expression of torment she so often saw in the eyes of her workers.

"Shoo!" she said, waving her tiny hands in front of her. "Go on, now! You're blocking the way!"

The dog looked up at her mournfully, but refused to budge. Tinsel had just decided that this situation was nothing a good kick in the ribs wouldn't remedy, when suffocating darkness closed over her head. She managed to gag out a single protest before the stench of badly cured hide, reindeer dung and something medicinal caused her to lose consciousness.

* * * *

When Tinsel awoke from her ordeal, it was to find herself stripped naked and tied spread-eagle to an oversized bed. It was only the pounding in her head that kept her from fully enjoying the predicament she found herself in.

Whoever had done this to her, she decided, must be a professional. She cast an appreciative gaze over the racks of tools and torture devices lining the walls of the sumptuously appointed cave. But the appreciation dissolved as quickly as it had come when she turned to see a tall, green hairy beast standing on the opposite side of the bed.

"Ahhhh, very good..." the beast said in a voice like a movie matinee monster. "I was afraid I'd used too much formaldehyde."

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Tinsel squeaked. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Oh, yes," the beast lisped. "I know exactly who you are. And I know what you like, as well."

"What I'd like is for you to cut the shit and untie me!"

"Oh, I'm afraid that won't be possible. I've been hired to teach you a lesson, my dear."

"Hired? By whom?" Tinsel squealed. "What do you mean teach me a lesson? I'll have you know I have big connections at the factory and..." Any more protest was cut short as the hairy green creature

jammed something large and spongy into Tinsel's tiny mouth.

Her eyes widened as the creature smiled down at her, pulling back the foreskin of his oversized organ and feeding more of it into her gullet. "Mmmm, very nice, my dear," the creature moaned. He closed his eyes and pumped slowly, enjoying the feeling as her accommodating mouth juiced up to accept him.

Fear found its way into Tinsel's mind then. Fear of this bright, green creature and its oversized organ. She'd never taken anything of that size into herself before. Not even Dasher, Big Red's prize reindeer had come close to the size she was experiencing now. But what would he do with it? Would he suffocate her by shoving it down her throat? Or would he use it on her the way it was meant to be used? Either way, she was in very big trouble!

Then, with an unexpected pop, the creature pulled out and replaced his cock head with a ball gag, expertly sliding the strap over her head and tightening it before she could protest.

"Oh, don't worry," he said soothingly. "There's more where that came from." Reaching up to the rack beside the bed, the creature pulled down a soft, wide-lashed whip and let it drop onto Tinsel's exposed belly, then pulled it slowly down to caress her moistening pussy and inner thighs.

The next caress of the whip wasn't quite so gentle and soon Tinsel was arching her back in anticipation of the next stinging fall. Her eyes glittered madly as the creature thrashed her tiny frame, turning her entire body into a raging fire of desire. By the time he got around to applying the clamps to her nipples and vaginal lips, she was gushing fluids with no relief in sight.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all, she thought. If she was going to die, she had to admit, she couldn't have picked a better way to go.

For his part, the creature grinned evilly from ear to ear, finding pleasure in the infliction of pain, but never getting close enough to extinguish the flames that were threatening to engulf the poor mistreated elf. Gazing longingly at the huge green cock that leaped and bobbed before the creature, Tinsel's eyes pleaded for consummation. But he held back, raking her body with painful

electric shocks and stinging needles, pinching, slapping and striping her with higher and higher levels of torture, until she felt she would spontaneously combust.

And then, suddenly, he stopped.

This was it, Tinsel thought/hoped/pleaded. Now he would fuck her with that huge green cock, splitting her open like ripe fruit and putting her out of her misery once and for all. She would go in the same way she had lived, engulfed in pleasure, sprinkled liberally with pain.

But instead, he laughed. A hateful, nasty, evil laugh. Then he turned his back on her and lurched from the cave, stopping at the entrance to look back over his hairy shoulder and lisp, "There's someone here to see you, my dear. Someone who feels you owe her something. Someone who has decided it's time for you to pay up." Then he chuckled to himself and disappeared.

It was only the ball gag that kept Tinsel, the hot little elf, from screaming when the woman strode purposefully into the room. Dressed entirely in black leather, she looked very different from the way Tinsel had seen her before. Thigh high boots, elbow-length gloves and a tightly synched corset accentuated her soft round figure, while severe make-up and snow-white hair pulled back in a tight bun, gave her a cruel look.

But it was the strap-on dildo that drew Tinsel's full attention. It was longer and thicker than any Jeff Stryker or Black Beauty she had ever seen. But worse, far worse, was the nasty row of barbs that ringed the underside of the glistening black head, curving inward. Her eyes flicked up to catch the cold grey gaze of the original ice queen and hope died inside her.

Smiling, ever so slightly, Big Red's wife stepped forward and, without so much as a word, positioned the head of the enormous dildo at the opening of Tinsel's wet, throbbing twat ... and pushed...

ENTER THE GORGON A TALE OF THE OTHERWHEN CHRONICLES

The blade fell twice before the creature's smile faltered. The third stroke removed its head from its Armani shoulders and sent it spinning away, luxurious black hair flying in all directions, until it bounced hard against the city's skyline and landed unceremoniously in the ornately carved base of a potted plant beneath the expansive window.

Inspecting his handiwork, Tristan Desmond smiled at the irony of bearding one of the corporate fucks in its spacious top-security lair. He never ceased to be amused by the look of shock that inevitably pasted itself across the dead faces of his prey. This one had been easy. Three strokes. The sign of the Trinity. Appropriate, if he believed in such things. Which he didn't.

Demons were a dime a dozen these days and had very little to do with neo-Christian religion. Or any religion, for that matter. True, they were hard to kill and every bit as dangerous, if not more so, than the demons of myth and legend. But they were also arrogant, vain and fatally dismissive of the human chattel they oversaw in this half-hell Desmond's world had become.

Turning the body over, he reached down and removed the silk handkerchief from the demon's vest pocket. Impeccably dressed, as usual, he thought with a sneer, as he wiped the blackening gore from his blade before the sulfur had a chance to eat away at the metal. Not much chance of that happening to the witchblade he was packing – a gift from some old demon happy meal who'd called himself a Sidhe warrior before shunting off to wherever dead pointy-eared freaks of nature went when they expired. Even so, he'd rather be safe than sorry.

He wasn't really sure what the blade was made of. Some kind of metal, sure, but not any metal his world had ever produced. His world. Odd to think of it that way. This was his world. Or what was

left of it after the Shift. That's what the scientists called it, before they were labeled heretics and their heads became the prized bounty of the corporate demons. The Shift. As if to say, 'something happened, but we're not exactly sure what.' Typical. What exactly had caused that Shift would forever be a mystery to him. Just as it was to the rest of humanity. Probably some cosmic bet lost by one of the nether gods.

Yeah, they were back, too. Gods, demons, faeries, trolls, vampires, hell, he'd even seen a fucking unicorn a few weeks back. Dead, of course. Guttled as if by a pack of starving hounds, its entrails spread out like a festering carpet of decay. He'd had the foresight to remove the horn before dragging the poor beast off to the side of the road. Never knew when that would come in handy. Or for what.

Point of fact was, Tristan Desmond was on a mission. Rid his world of demons. No reason really, he just hated demons. He'd been given the means and free license to use it. That was good enough for him. Oh, and people paid him to do it. A lot of money. That didn't hurt either.

* * * *

"How was the hunting today, lover?" Sultry, girlish, haunting. Soft Aegean breezes whispering through ancient corridors.

Desmond tossed the bag containing the demon's head onto the counter. "Too easy," he said brusquely, refusing momentarily to relinquish his self-control. "Made an appointment, showed up on time and commenced slaying. What's for dinner?"

"Well," she answered, coming up behind him and coiling her arms around his waist, then resting her chin on his shoulder. "I was hoping we could go out."

Desmond batted at the tiny tongues flicking against his ear and neck. "Damn it, Scylla. I'm tired and I just want to take a shower, eat something and maybe catch the news before I go to bed. Is that so hard to understand?"

She released her hold on him and stepped back, pouting. Desmond turned to look at her and, as usual where her particular glours were concerned, immediately felt like a heel. She'd obviously gone to great lengths to doll herself up for him. The shimmery green dragonskin dress she wore seemed to hang from perfect nipples, accentuating her

natural curves all the way down to her carefully painted toes and matching sandals. The thousands of tiny snakes that served as her hair had been trained into a fetching cascade of barely contained nervous energy over her left eye.

He smiled guiltily, giving in to the preternatural spell that was this particular Gorgon's specialty. "New gogs?"

She nodded, self-consciously touching the outside edge of the lenses that wrapped her deadly eyes in safety glass. She didn't bring her head up to look at him.

"I'm sorry, Scyl. I'm just tired, that's all."

She nodded again, then shuffled off toward the kitchen. A poisoned dagger slid between his ribs and twisted upwards.

"I'll tell you what, doll," he said quickly. "You make me a drink, I'll jump in the shower and once I'm dressed we'll go out. Okay?"

She turned back to look at him, her perfect lips curling up into the beginnings of a smile. He wished for the millionth time that he could read the emotion in her eyes. "Really? You're not too tired?"

"I was, until I got a load of you. What idiot wouldn't want to take his best gal out on the town when she looks as hot as you do?" Best gal? Scylla's pheromonal alchemy made him sound like a dime store pulp novel.

Scylla dimpled and clapped her manicured hands together with a squeal. "Can we do Avalon?"

Desmond groaned inwardly. Elvish food always gave him heartburn for days afterwards. But it was what Scylla wanted and he couldn't deny her anything. It was part of the spell she wove on him. Literally. Swallowing the groan, he smiled and nodded. "Sure, doll. Whatever you want."

Scylla cocked her head to the side, her snakes tumbling away to fully reveal her achingly beautiful face and making the emerald lenses of her designer goggles glimmer in the candlelight. Her smile was infectious. "Want a blow job, first?"

Not unexpectedly, his cock lurched against his thigh in anticipation. "Only if I get the whole package after dinner."

"You're on," she said, advancing in a slow, sultry stride that made her appear to slither.

Scylla slipped her soft, pillowy lips over the head of his enflamed cock, and began flicking it with her forked tongue. It was a sensation Tristan would never tire of. He'd been serviced by the best, but none could compare to the otherworldly charms of his gorgon squeeze and her preternatural tongue. Without so much as a gag, Scylla slid his eight inches of manhood expertly down her throat, while her tongue slipped out and caressed his heavy balls. If there was a heaven, this was proof of its existence.

She slid the cock from her mouth and nibbled on the underside, licking down its length to his balls. She gently drew the right testicle into her warm mouth and wrapped it in slithering movement. Meanwhile her cascading snake follicles took over ministrations on his cock head. Dozens of tiny tongues flicked at it, sending tingles to the base of his spine and upwards to his receptive brain. This particular aspect of sex with Scylla had been hard to swallow at first, but now he couldn't conceive of a more sensational way to receive oral pleasure.

The right testicle slipped from her mouth with a plop, only to be replaced with the other. He shuddered and a moan escaped him. Down below, Scylla smiled, happy to be pleasuring her man. She released the testicle from its wet embrace and slid her lips up along the underside of his shaft, engulfing it once again. Slowly, she began sliding the cock in and out of her soft mouth, flicking the head with her tongue as it reached her lips, then sliding down all the way to the base. She repeated the action, over and over again, slowly picking up speed until his overwhelming urge to release became insistent and undeniable.

The orgasm Tristan had been eagerly anticipating had just begun to peak when the obsidian dragon dropped silently out of the sky to pierce him with its smoldering gaze through the penthouse window. On its chest was emblazoned the corporate logo of the demon Desmond had so recently slain. His chest tightened and his face registered his shock, but the orgasm would not be denied. He gasped and cried out.

Locking eyes with its prey, the dragon unhinged its reptilian mouth and, just as the first burst of cum bathed Scylla's flickering tongue,

spewed molten death in a fiery cascade toward the window.

* * * *

Pain. So much fucking pain. Pain like he'd never experienced before. Twisting tendrils of pain that missed not one single nerve ending and made him wish he was dead. And why wasn't he dead? He should be dead. Snuffed out by his own arrogance. He was a fool and had paid the price of his foolishness. Let his guard down just one time too many. Now he was dead.

Or was he? Should he be having these thoughts? Should he be having any thoughts at all? He'd always considered death to be the end. A cessation of life, followed by nothingness. No afterlife. No ascension to a higher plane. No pearly gates waiting at the end, held up by nothing more than clouds and faith. Nothing like that. Just the beginning of nothingness itself. Nada. Zilch. Kaput.

And yet ... he had to be somewhere if he was having these thoughts. Maybe it wasn't over yet. Maybe the dragon's attack was playing itself out in slow motion and his mind was grasping at straws in his final death throes. Maybe, instead of watching his life flash before his eyes like a tacky, well-worn metaphor, he was trying to rationalize the inevitable. Maybe he just needed to shut up and give in to the pain.

But the voices wouldn't let him. What voices? The voices he wasn't even aware of hearing, until he thought about it. The voices that seemed to call to him, chanting in a language he couldn't understand. Wait, not calling to him, so much as washing over him. Enshrouding him in a tapestry of words. Wrapping him like a blanket. Keeping him together. Pulling at him. Drawing him out. Somewhere.

Were they angels? Spirits of some netherworld he was now being taken to? Proof of ecclesiastical life after corporeal life? Somehow he wasn't convinced. For one thing, the voices didn't sound all that soothing. If anything, they were harsh and manipulative, not trying to comfort him, so much as trying to secure him. Spiriting him away, yes, but not to paradise or purgation.

The pain began to subside as Tristan felt himself lifted away, bound together by words, sticky and fine like spider webs, but equally as strong to the fly held within. The chanting became louder, more

grating, and he found himself drifting away. Yes, he was being spirited away, but he was damned sure it had nothing to do with death. He was not being allowed to die. Of that he was now certain. But neither was he being rescued.

As the last tendrils of thought filtered through his soggy mind, Tristan Desmond knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that his hell on earth was just beginning.

* * * *

The first thought that registered in Tristan Desmond's fuzzy brain when he awoke, was the curious lack of pain. He was sure there should have been some kind of pain and was puzzled. Maybe they had him on some kind of painkillers. Heavy-duty painkillers. The kind that brought a pretty penny on the black market. He wondered if he could do without them long enough to sell what was left. If, that is, he was allowed to leave from ... well ... wherever he was. The only way to discover that was to open his eyes.

Easier said than done. He tried to lift his eyelids, but they were restrained by something. Bandages? He wasn't sure. Willing his right arm to rise, he was hit by a wave of vertigo. Rather than rise smoothly and make its way to his face, the arm seemed to shoot straight up and flail, before falling back down with a plop. It felt wrong, somehow. All wrong. Lighter? The familiar action he had always taken for granted seemed out of place. Like he was expending too much energy. Did that make any sense at all?

He tried again to lift his arm, this time paying careful attention to the action, willing the arm to rise by increments. The action went a little more smoothly. The arm rose. He willed it to bend at the elbow and it did so, but even that felt wrong. The arm bent until he felt fingers touching his face. A face? Even that felt wrong. He could feel the flesh with his fingertips and could feel the fingertips with the flesh, but both were just not right.

His fingers brushed the bandages stretched across his eyes. Not single bandages, but strips that led down, towards his ears and into his ... the hand jerked away. What the fuck was that? The other arm rose spontaneously, flapping spasmodically until he could get it under control. Soon both hands were exploring the bandages, which seemed

to wrap around his head, angering the tiny serpents, which writhed uncomfortably, trying to extricate themselves from the obtrusive cloth.

Stunned, Tristan dropped his arms to his side again, his mind racing. What the fuck was going on? It was his mind, he was sure of it. He still thought the same way, still believed the same things. All that was familiar. What he was physically touching, however, was not familiar. Rather, it was familiar, but in a very different way. It was Scylla. Raising his arms, he touched Scylla's face, Scylla's nose, Scylla's ears. And Scylla's ophidian follicles.

Tentatively, he moved his hands across the alien landscape that was his body. Soft. Naked. Definitely female. There was Scylla's soft throat. Her delicate collar bones. There were Scylla's breasts. He marveled at the tingling sensation, which shot straight to his groin when his fingertips gently grazed each nipple. His blood ran cold. This wasn't right. Not right at all! Wanting to know more, but refusing to accept what he'd already discovered, Tristan dropped his hands to lay quivering at his sides.

He didn't have to explore further south to know what lay there. Or didn't as the case may be. Suddenly an overwhelming sadness overtook him. He had been emasculated. The root of his manhood was missing. The strange impulses his brain was receiving from that area were completely alien. It was too much. Turning slowly onto his side, Tristan Desmond, or rather the body housing Tristan Desmond, curled up into an unfamiliar fetal ball and willed himself away from the misery of his discovery. The last sounds he heard were the hissing protests of thousands of follicles trying to accommodate his movements.

Then he was gone.

* * * *

Time passed slowly for Tristan as s/he healed. S/he was coaxed back to the land of the living slowly, but forcibly. S/he was bathed, fed and medicated to bring sleep to a rampaging mind. Hir stewards were nurses, dressed in crisp white uniforms. Which almost, but not quite, covered the fact that they were all pasty and pale, with very little responsiveness beyond the duties they performed, expertly and efficiently.

S/he also noted – at first with some confusion, then with a dawning realization-that each and every person who tended to hir, was blind. Or, rather, had been blinded, as their eyes were all sewn shut. Not crudely, like some B horror movie, but subtly, so that the threads blended with the eyelashes. It was only upon closer examination that s/he was able to make them out. It told hir all s/he needed to know about the place s/he now found himself.

Hir days were taken up with physical therapy (to get hir accustomed to hir new body), psychological evaluations (to ensure s/he was becoming accustomed to hir new body) and long hours spent staring at the ceiling while faceless, nameless candy strippers recited stories to hir. S/he didn't hear any of the words and resisted the magic exuded by the strippers; blind empaths whose sole job it was to make the patient feel comfortable and more at ease. But Tristan didn't want to feel comfortable. And s/he was hardly at ease.

In all the days (weeks? months? It was hard to say in this bright, sterile environment, devoid of windows and immune, it would seem, to the passage of time) that s/he'd been confined to this hospital, s/he hadn't seen or talked to one single person who would tell hir what was going on. Why s/he had been rescued in what had to have been a very expensive necromancing job, or even how it was that Scylla, who had also been within firing range of the dragon, had survived the attack whole enough to become a vessel for what was left of Tristan's mind.

The shrinks who grilled hir answered none of hir own questions – probably because they couldn't – so s/he stopped trying. Science was very closely monitored in this upside down world they all inhabited and, judging from the droning of said shrinks, there was very little left of their humanity at this point. Mindless golems doing their master's bidding. Asking the questions which needed to be asked, but never deviating from the script they had been force-fed. Dead for all intents and purposes, but kept alive by dark magiks that reeked of the pit. The work of Corporate Demons.

That was what worried hir most. Why would Corporate Demons have any interest in keeping hir alive? S/he was their sworn enemy. Nobody had been better at slaying demons than Tristan Desmond. He had been the best and proudly boasted the reputation to prove it.

Having him dead and permanently erased would be far more profitable for the pit fiends he preyed upon. With him out of the way, they could continue their dark mission unimpeded. The triumph would be theirs. They could trumpet it from the highest tower and know that they had been victorious. Unless they had other plans for him. S/he shivered at the thought and every follicle on his head reacted to the crawling sensation in his scalp.

All s/he could do was wait. And wait s/he would. Tristan Desmond could be very patient when s/he needed to be.

* * * *

Then came the day that s/he was visited by the men in suits. Or, rather, beings in suits, because despite their attempts at assuming the trappings of humanity, they were far from human. There were three of them, two carrying briefcases, one carrying a clipboard and wearing a white lab coat over his suit. All wore dark sunglasses, probably as added protection should s/he decide to dispense with his own protective eyewear.

An unholy trinity, how appropriate. Tristan almost smiled. Almost, but not quite. S/he had known something was up when one of the blind nurses brought his the ruby wraparound lenses and asked him to put them on. This meant that someone who could be affected by his deadly gaze would soon be visiting. So s/he had waited for that inevitability.

Behind the ruby lenses, s/he studied each suit carefully. The two in the back were minor demons, most likely. Errand boys for the fiends in charge, whoever they were. Imps, perhaps? The one in the forefront appeared to be in charge and had the unmistakable reek of the pit about him. A demon, but still most likely a minor one. S/he was hoping s/he was about to find out.

"And how is my patient doing, today," the demon in charge asked, feigning a cheerful bedside manner.

"That depends on who you are," Tristan countered. "I don't think we've been officially introduced."

"Of course," the demon said with an oily sibilance. "I am Dr. Uphir, chief physician here at the Sisters of Perpetual Agony. I trust your stay here has been ... pleasant?"

Tristan arched an eyebrow. "Well, I suppose that all depends on your definition of the word, 'pleasant,' doesn't it?"

"Ah, yes," Uphir said. "The venomous tongue. I had been warned."

Tristan crossed his arms across his ample chest. "So, is there a point to this visit, or are you just here to trade banal banter?" His decision to feign boredom was made all the easier when Uphir simply proclaimed what s/he had thought s/he would need to wheedle out of him.

"To the point, then. You are now in the employ of your savior and guardian, Lord Belial, to whom you owe your pathetic human life. Have you any questions?" The voice was droll and dripping with condescension.

"Just one. Why?"

"All that will be made clear in time."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're going to get, right now." the demon sneered.

"Then what's the point?"

Uphir smiled evilly. "No point, really. It pleases me not to tell you, that's all."

Tristan nodded, contemplating his next move. Demons, by their very nature, weren't very smart. S/he just had to find a way to make this one say more than he wanted to. Right now, what s/he wanted to know was why Belial, one of the most powerful demons at work in the city, would have interest in him. To his knowledge, s/he had never tangled with that particular fiend, though, to be honest, it would have been only a matter of time.

"And if I refuse?"

Uphir raised an eyebrow. "Refuse?"

"Refuse to be employed by your master."

All three of the devils snorted. One actually laughed. Uphir silenced him with a wave, then directed his attention toward Tristan.

"You cannot refuse. You owe your life to Lord Belial. He owns you."

Tristan shrugged. "I'll thank him next time I see him."

The demon bridled, nostrils flaring. "Your impertinence is very unbecoming."

"Yeah, I've been told. Here's a little more for you. You can tell your master that I have no intention of letting him parade me around like some kind of trophy."

"You are no trophy," the demon sneered. "If anything, you are a slave."

Tristan squared his shoulders. "Let's get one thing straight, lap dog. As long as I draw breath, I am nobody's slave."

The demon furrowed its brow angrily. "The only reason you draw breath at all is because it was Lord Belial's wish that you do so."

"So?"

"So, little human..."

"Not human anymore, thanks to your master," Tristan interrupted. "Judging from the looks of things, I'm now a gorgon."

Uphir waved it away impatiently. "Whatever! Human, gorgon, mortal filth, you exist for one reason and one reason only. At the whim of Lord Belial in a form he finds most pleasing. You are nothing more than a plaything for him."

"A plaything?"

The devil refused to be interrupted. "He has planned long for this day. Waited for you to make the one fatal error that would put you right where he wanted you. And, lo, it came to pass that the great Tristan Desmond fell victim to his own carnal desires and was caught, both figuratively and literally, with his pants down." The other two devils tittered. Uphir's voice dropped to a resonating boom. "He owns not only your body and soul, but your very essence. He has bound it to his own. You exist only for his pleasure and only so long as he himself exists."

The realization of what the demon was saying hit Tristan like a bucket of ice water. S/he gasped in spite of himself. The devils all smiled triumphantly.

"Ah, I see you now understand, pretty one," the demon said ominously. "We'll leave you now to ponder this new development..." he paused to spit out the final words venomously. "...demon slayer." His laughter rang out like a death knell and Tristan's right hand

instinctively grasped for the sword that was no longer at his side. S/he shook with impotent fury as the three devils turned and exited his room, their combined laughter trailing after them long after they had disappeared.

Unable to contain his fury, Tristan lashed out at the tray of food sitting beside him, sending it careening across the room. Two candy strippers rushed in and began cleaning up the mess, while simultaneously sending soothing waves of calmness in his direction. Unable to do anything more than rage hopelessly, his shoulders slumped and s/he fell back against the headboard.

It was far worse than s/he could ever have imagined. S/he had heard of such hellish arrangements, but only in whispered stories, too horrifying to be believed. Not only did s/he owe his life to one of the very scum s/he had sworn to destroy, s/he was now bound to him, physically. Should anything ever happen to Belial, should his life be threatened in anyway, or forcibly ended, it would directly affect Tristan's own life, too.

S/he had been stripped of his masculinity and his pride, which had been a bitter enough pill to swallow, but this was far worse. Belial hadn't just put him in his employ, he had arranged it so that Tristan would have to do that which was, at his very core, anathema. To ensure his own survival, the demon slayer must become bodyguard and consort (his mind balked at the idea) to one of the most powerful corporate demons in the city. And there was nothing s/he could do about it.

Belial, the venerable general of Hell's forces and unquestionable Lord of lies, had played his hand very well, indeed.

* * * *

It really shouldn't have come as any surprise to Tristan that the corporate lawyer for the firm that now employed him was a bloodsucker. The nosferatu peered at him through tiny rat-sized eyes over the obscenely long nails of his steeped fingertips. The overhead neon lights gleamed dully on the dead white skin of his smooth, hairless pate.

"So," he hissed, his spade like incisors giving him a slight lisp. "You are the new errand being for Belial. Typical."

Tristan opened his mouth to speak, but was immediately cut off by a dismissive gesture from the testy vampire, his fingernails making a clicking noise like an insect. "It doesn't matter to me. I only work here." With his thick Slavic accent, he pronounced the word "verk", which almost made Tristan smile. Almost. "You can, I assume, write your own name?"

"I think I can manage. Do you want it in blood?"

"That won't be necessary. Simply sign the papers. Our clerks will do the rest."

"Meaning, the company will own me."

Again with the insect noises. "The company already owns you. This just makes it official. What would hell be like without paperwork? Now sign!"

"Charming..." Tristan replied, picking up the ballpoint pen from its place before him on the desk and scrawling out a name, without hesitation, on the dotted line. It was who s/he had been before his attempted assassination. It was who she ... yes she ... was now. Scylla was dead. The gorgon lived. Long live Tristan Desmond.

And all that the name implied.

THE ESSENCE OF DESIRE

Passable. To eyes older than time, the room was passable. A single king sized bed, a chair, a table and a dresser for what few possessions the wanderer brought with him. Thick, dark drapes covered the window, alluding to a sumptuously ageless nature, which the television, on its rickety aluminum stand, belied. Conspicuously absent was the mirror, which had been removed per the customer's request, before his arrival. Functional. The room would serve its purpose.

His interest had less to do with comfort than it did with history. The Hotel San Carlos was one of the oldest, continuously inhabited structures in Phoenix and carried with it an air of having been part of this desert way station's progressive walk through one century and into the next. Movie stars of the golden era had once called this oasis retreat their home for short periods of time. Tragedy and scandal had tripped through its narrow hallways. Death had been a frequent visitor.

Inhaling deeply, the wanderer could sense the lingering spectral aromas of abandoned prosperity, disillusion and decay. Opening his gold-flecked emerald eyes, he smiled and nodded. Yes, this would be a fine base of operations for the time being. Until ennui forced him to move again. Or he found a better locale. Turning his thoughts outward, he considered the reasoning that had brought him to this relatively young – and therefore normally uninteresting to his kind – wasteland city.

As he was a being of order, the layout of Phoenix appealed to the wanderer, laid out as it was like a giant grid of main arteries running in mile long increments from north to south and east to west. Or, as he admitted to himself for perhaps the hundredth time since discovering this curious anomaly, like a giant chess board. That in and of itself, appealed to him. Amused him in ways little else did in this charmless era. That was why he was here.

Pulling back the heavy drape, he looked down on the small bustling street, with its standard mix of suited business folk and comfortably dressed bohemians scurrying about in the noonday heat, entering and

exiting the restaurants and bars surrounding the hotel, in search of companionship and repast. The acrid taste of desperation made him smile again.

"The first move is mine," he murmured to himself, "Let the game begin..."

* * * *

"What did you say your name was again?" The thin redhead was smiling coyly at him as she played with the straw in her drink. Flirting, despite the presence of her nondescript male companion beside her at the bar.

"Devlin," he replied, with an appreciative grin. "Mark Devlin."

"British?"

He smiled. "Something like that."

"And you want to pay us to show you the city?"

He nodded curtly.

"Both of us?" the male companion interjected suspiciously, running a hand through thinning mouse brown hair.

"Both of you."

The woman turned away to look at her companion, biting her lower lip and raising her eyebrows, her doe brown eyes filled with curiosity and temptation. In the mirror across from the bar, behind the bartender, the man known as Devlin watched her, studiously ignoring the decaying horror that represented him in the mirror beside her. "Well," she said quietly. "You've been complaining that nothing interesting ever happens here."

The man looked perturbed. "Playing tour guide isn't exactly what I had in mind, Penny..."

She smiled at Devlin's handsome reflection in the mirror and moved closer to her companion, lowering her voice needlessly. Averting his eyes from the mirror, Devlin still heard every syllable as the manipulative music of a siren song older than history.

"He wants to pay us, Drew. Three hundred bucks. And he's a nice guy. I'll bet he's got some pretty interesting stories to tell, being from Europe and all. C'mon, what harm can it do? We weren't planning on doing anything tonight anyway, except try and drink McCaffrey's dry and we can do that any old night..." Then the kicker, "It'll make me

happy and who knows, you might even get lucky tonight..."

The last vestiges of the man's resolve crumbled and Devlin closed his eyes in admiration of this ageless move. Games within games. It was an appreciation he never tired of. Sensing the shift in attention beside him, he opened his eyes and turned to look deeply into the woman's unremarkable brown eyes. She blinked and gasped slightly, then licked her lips and said eagerly, "We're all yours Mr. Devlin."

Devlin smiled. Interesting choice of words. Yes, her companion would get lucky tonight, in ways he could never anticipate. They would both enjoy a unique sojourn experienced by few in their mortal realm. And for what was left of their pathetically short lives, they would thank him for it. Very lucky, indeed.

* * * *

"Are we done yet?" Drew whined petulantly, as Devlin traded charming comments with a young woman sitting at a table, outside the Willow House coffee shop. Watching the foreigner interact with people who were visibly impressed by his thick black hair, large, muscular body and easy animal grace had made the man acutely aware of his own paunchy build and receding hairline. "We've showed him everything there is to see in downtown Phoenix. We've been to the Heard Museum, the Museum of Art, Arizona Center, the Herberger Theater, Symphony Hall, Heritage Square, Bank One Ballpark, the fucking Arena and every damn hole-in-the-wall gallery between Thomas and Madison. It's getting late, Pen, let's wrap this up."

Penny looked perturbed. "Be nice. He's enjoying himself."

"You mean, you think he's enjoying you..."

The woman crossed thin arms over her small bosom, self-consciously, and frowned. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You've been hanging all over him all night long. Laughing at all of his witty comments like he's some kind of celebrity. He's not really interested, you know. I don't think we're his type..."

"What are you talking about? Don't be such an asshole, Drew. You might not see it, but something's happening here and you better as *fuck* not ruin it for me..." She stopped short, reconsidered her statement and said, less harshly, "...for us, baby. C'mon, be a sport.

You promised me..."

"I don't believe I've expressed my full gratitude at your generous hospitality," Devlin said, stepping forward warmly, his eyes lingering on the upturned faces of the bickering couple. "I fear I may have overdone it, however. May I invite the two of you back to my hotel room for a nightcap? As a thank you."

Drew cleared his throat. "No thank you, I think we'd better be..."

"We'd love it," Penny said, smiling enthusiastically. Drew shot her an apprehensive look, but she studiously ignored him. "I don't think anybody's ever invited me for a nightcap before. That's so ... European, or something."

"Or something," Devlin said, crooking his elbow for Penny to slide her willing arm through. Turning to Drew, he crooked the other elbow expectantly. Drew stepped back, but found himself caught in the lush green eyes of his benefactor for the evening. Devlin chuckled mischievously and put out his hand. "I have something I'd like to share with both of you. Equally." His eyes sparked with hidden meaning.

Hesitating, Drew took the proffered hand and shook it. An electric current seemed to run through him and he felt himself relaxing. Maybe he had been wrong about this guy after all. He'd been nothing but a total gentleman all evening. And there was definitely something intriguing about him. Almost like he was ... flirting ... with both of them. "Alright," he said. "I'm sorry I've been such a shit."

Devlin smiled broadly and draped his arm across Drew's shoulders. "Apology accepted." Drew looked across Devlin's broad chest into the expectant eyes of his fiancée. He knew what *that* look meant. She had been trying for months to get him to agree to a threesome – to "broaden his horizons" before she married him, she said – and he had finally relented. Now, unexpectedly, it looked like it might actually happen, although he had always imagined it would be with another woman. Looking up, he felt the draw of Devlin's vivid eyes and, again wholly unexpectedly, felt the tingle of anticipation in his crotch.

"Excellent," Devlin said, nodding at the man's final acquiescence. "You won't be sorry, I promise..."

* * * *

Devlin had been true to his word. Drew had never felt such sublime pleasure. Certainly never in all his adult life. He looked with wonder on the exquisitely beautiful face of his fiancée, so close to his own. Lying back against his shoulder, her eyes were closed, her full lips parted and a slight flush colored her high cheekbones. The sexual attentions she had been receiving for the past hour or so had seemed to change her somehow. Even now, being fucked by another man, he found her surprisingly gorgeous.

Looking up into Devlin's masculine face, his eyes closed as he rocked gently against Penny's body, Drew smiled despite himself. He could feel the larger man's cock rubbing against his own through the thin walls separating Penny's well-fucked pussy from her cock-filled ass. The sensation was incredible and he found himself wondering what that huge cock would feel like in his mouth.

As if on cue, Devlin opened his eyes and pierced Drew with his liquid gaze. Sliding out of Penny, he sat back on his haunches, grinning. Penny opened her eyes questioningly. Disengaging herself from Drew's cock, she rolled up onto her knees, her eyes on the magnificent upturned offering before her. Without waiting for an invitation, she lowered her face to lick the opening of the slick head and with her right hand, rolled back the foreskin to expose it fully.

Drew watched her try to take the entire head into her mouth, amazed once again by the sheer size of it, especially in contrast with his own average specimen. When she found she couldn't fully engulf it, the woman slid her lips sideways along the entire length of the shaft. Drew was acutely aware of the fact that, throughout this entire episode, Devlin's eyes had never left his own. The man hadn't so much as touched him, throughout their tryst. If anything, he'd been completely respectful of Drew's need to ease into this scenario.

They had both concentrated their attentions on Penny, much to her delight. They kissed and fondled her. They took turns fucking her, which had proved to be much more erotic than Drew had thought possible. Then, at her insistence, they had both fucked her at the same time. Now, as he watched his fiancée lick and fondle the other man's cock and balls, he knew the moment of truth had come.

Sitting up, Drew turned until he himself was on his knees facing the

enigmatic stranger. Then, slowly and without stopping to think about what such an action might portend, he lowered his mouth to first kiss, then lick at the enormous organ. Penny's eyes sparkled across from his as she helped him fall into a rhythm of rise and fall, lick and suck and occasionally traded tongueplay with him over the glistening head of Devlin's cock.

The smell was intoxicating. Not at all what Drew had expected. It wasn't musky at all, but rather sweet. Almost flowerlike. And heady, he realized, as his vision began to swim. Rather than make him hesitate, however, he found that he couldn't get enough of the cock before him. Judging from Penny's voracious attacks on the organ, she, too, was experiencing something similar.

Like falling into a dream state, Drew began to hallucinate slightly. One minute he and his fiancée were ministering to the same impossibly thick cock, the next they seemed to have their own, thinner, more elegantly defined organ to play with. Whereas before, he had found it hard to engulf the head of Devlin's massive organ in his mouth, now it slid almost effortlessly between his eager lips and down his throat.

Moans of profound pleasure rumbled from Devlin's broad frame. Moans that sounded, almost, like chanting, rising and falling in unknown rhythms, a language unlike anything Drew had ever heard before. At times almost musical, at others brutally guttural, the sound rose up to surround them. As it grew, Drew and Penny sucked and pumped with abandon on their respective cocks, drawing on them like lusty straws promising forbidden nectars.

As time seemed to slow to an agonizing crawl, they sucked with fierce desire until; finally, in a crescendo of slurping and chanting, Devlin threw back his head and roared. In response, his twin cocks began pumping Drew and Penny full of scalding hot cum. Both pair of eyes jolted open in surprise and pain, as the mercurial liquid gushed past their tongues and down into their gullets, turning their guts inside out. Filled as their mouths were, neither could scream, but neither could they withdraw, as pint after pint of life-altering fluids invaded every permeable inch of their bodies.

* * * *

The bellboy blinked as the door swung open to reveal a gorgeous, full-bodied and fully naked redhead. Despite himself, he found his eyes running the full length of her curvaceous body, lingering on her gravity defying tits, before averting themselves. "I ... um ... room service," he mumbled, holding out a tray filled with silver domes, condiments and glasses. "You ordered..."

"Thank you," the redhead said, taking the tray and caressing him with soulful brown eyes, shot through with gold. "Would you like to join us?"

The bellboy blinked again. "Huh?"

The woman giggled and stepped back to reveal two equally naked men in the room behind her. "Oh, I'm sorry..." he said. "I ... I'm kind of still on duty..."

"Don't be sorry," the woman said, placing the tray on a table just inside the door. "I like your piercings. And your ink. What's your name?"

Self consciously, the bellboy reached up with a heavily tattooed arm to brush the two rings in his left eyebrow and tug on the half-inch eyelet in his ear. "A ... Aaron..."

"Thank you, Aaron, for bringing us our food."

"Um, sure..." he said. "I ... is there anything else I can do... um... anything else I can get for you?"

The smaller of the two men stepped forward – all muscle and sinew and heavy bouncing cock, lightly brushed with golden body hair – to hand Aaron a fistful of cash. He wore the same amused expression in his blue gold-flecked eyes. With his free hand, he pushed a lock of thick blonde hair out of his face and Aaron felt his cock twitch.

Together the two people before him were fucking gorgeous, and the guy behind them was no slacker in the looks department, either. Suddenly Aaron felt small and insignificant. Snatching the money from the man's hand, he turned away embarrassed. "Just leave the tray by the door when you're done," he mumbled. "I'll pick it up later..."

"Come children," the tall, black-maned figure said in gently commanding tones from the interior of the room. "We have much to discuss and many tasks to perform."

"We'll be waiting ... Aaron," the redhead sighed. "We're planning on going out later in the day. Maybe if you're off duty, you can join us. Show us around a bit."

Aaron nodded, looking sideways at the naked woman. "Um ... okay. Maybe..."

The woman's smile held promises of pleasure undreamed of. Then the door slid shut, leaving Aaron alone and yearning in the narrow hallway.

FANTASTIC FUCK

Oliver Strange had no idea what he'd be in for when he accepted the invitation from the tall, distinguished gentleman with the square jaw, graying temples and rubbery skin. He certainly didn't expect to find himself in a penthouse suite overlooking New York City. The view was breathtaking, but nothing compared to the dainty blonde woman the distinguished man introduced as his wife, Susan.

"Oh, he's very nice, Reed dear," she said, dimpling. Oliver wasn't sure if it was the cognac he'd been drinking or an effect of the lighting, but it almost seemed that Susan was rippling along the edges, threatening to become less substantial. "Johnny will be so pleased!"

"Johnny?" Oliver asked.

"My brother," Susan said. "It's his birthday and he's just recently ... come out, so to speak."

"Right," the tall man interjected, striking a match and puffing heavily on an old-fashioned wooden pipe. "He's 29 today and we've decided that he's denied himself for far too long. We'd like to purchase your services for the entire evening. Money is no object."

Oliver smiled. This Johnny guy must be a real hound dog for his sister and brother-in-law to have to "purchase" a night of pleasure for him. Nothing new to Oliver, for whom sex was the only motivation. That and money – especially when it was "no object."

"You're speaking my language, Mr...?"

"Richards," the man said around his pipe. "I'll show you to Johnny's bachelor pad..."

* * * *

Oliver had been bathed, fed, pampered and was on his fifth cognac when footsteps sounded in the hallway outside the "pad." Show time! Slipping out of the silk robe he'd been loaned for the evening, Oliver took up his position on the darkened windowsill. He still didn't understand the kink behind wearing a red and blue spandex body suit with spiderwebs printed across its length and breadth, but the customer was always right.

The door swung open to admit a blonde man of medium height and

muscular build. Oliver inhaled sharply. This guy was no hound dog! He was fucking hot! Blue eyes quickly centered on the stranger in the room and Johnny went into a defensive crouch.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked menacingly.

"I'm here to see you," Oliver said, as instructed. He stepped out of the shadows and saw the reaction he'd been told to expect.

"You're not wearing your mask!"

"Isn't it time for us to dispense with masks, Johnny? I've been watching you for years. Trying to find a way to talk to you. To get close to you. To let you know how I really feel about you." Without waiting for an answer, Oliver triggered the clasp at the back of his neck and peeled the costume from his body with one fluid motion until he was standing naked before the confused hunk.

"Oh ... my ... god..."

"Yes, Johnny. And why should gods like us settle for mortal love, when we can have each other." Corny, but the script seemed to be working. Oliver saw the uncertainty and confusion melt away from the sky blue eyes of his trick, to be replaced by a long-simmering lust. In one quick motion Johnny was across the room, his strong arms wrapped around Oliver, his hot tongue drawing the moisture from Oliver's mouth.

Oliver wasted no time undressing the blond beauty and soon they were entangled in each other's arms, erections grinding. "I've wanted this since the first time I saw you!" Johnny gasped, pulling away to run his hands down Oliver's chest and stomach, to the inviting crimson-tipped cock below. "Everything about you is heroic!" he sighed, wrapping his hands around Oliver's erection. Oliver smiled. He'd been told that before.

Sliding down to admire the two fisted wonder in his grasp, Johnny flicked his tongue at it and Oliver shuddered. So hot, like a living flame! It had to be the cognac. He almost screamed when the molten mouth engulfed him, sending tendrils of electric fire throughout his body. Like a man possessed, Johnny devoured Oliver's cock, consuming it with his hot mouth.

"Whoa, there, cowboy!" Oliver whispered, pulling the blonde head from his crotch. There's plenty more where that came from. Let's

make this last.

The blond nodded hungrily, his eyes filled with exquisite pleading. Docilely, he allowed Oliver to roll him onto his back and return the favor. He'd never held anything so warm in his mouth before. Oh, he'd given plenty of blowjobs, but nothing like this. It was almost as if the man's temperature was rising the more excited he got. Moans of pleasure escaped his lips and Oliver was sure he began to see steam rising from the spit-slicked cock. Almost too late, he remembered the stern warning the man's brother-in-law had given him. Repeat the strange words. Don't question their meaning. Do it now!

"Control that flame, Johnny boy. You don't want to turn me into a crispy crawler."

The blonde inhaled sharply, then looked down at Oliver, an odd understanding warring with the passion that was threatening to consume him. Oliver had to admit, this was the weirdest encounter he'd ever had, but he'd come to expect nothing less since dedicating his young life to sexual pleasure for a nominal price.

The cock in his hand began to cool noticeably and Oliver went back to administering to it, drooling just enough to get his fingers good and wet before running them up the moaning man's ass crack. Johnny spread his legs wider, allowing Oliver to rub at the virgin pucker, slowly easing his index finger into the tight hole.

"Yes!" Johnny said between clenched teeth. "Yes! I want you in there! I want you to fuck me!"

Never easing his concentrated attack on the blond's thick meat, Oliver eased another finger, then another, into the relaxing hole. Soon Johnny was ready. Producing a specially insulated condom, given him by Richards, Oliver rolled it onto his cock with one practiced hand, while continuing the massage of Johnny's prostate with his trio of digits.

The blond gasped when Oliver removed his fingers, pulling him down and guiding him toward his objective. Hooking Johnny's knees with the inside of his elbows, Oliver slowly slid the head of his cock into the tightening sphincter. Before the man knew what was happening, Oliver dropped down to suck his tongue into his mouth. Johnny responded just as Oliver knew he would, both hands coming

up to hold his head in a death grip, as though drawing life from the other through their locked lips. With a spasm, Johnny's sphincter loosened and Oliver slid home.

So warm. So tight. Whimpering through their kiss, Johnny began to orgasm, unexpectedly, great gobs of cum shooting out to paste both their chests in a torrent of spasms. He threw back his head and wailed like a man possessed, sending Oliver over the edge like a man aflame.

* * * *

"It's getting late," Johnny said languidly, running a finger down the hollow of Oliver's muscular chest. "Don't you have a patrol to do?"

Oliver opened an eye. This wasn't part of the script. "Um ... it'll wait."

"Yeah, I guess so," Johnny agreed. "It's a pretty quiet night ... Want to do it again, then?"

Oliver opened the other eye, grinning down at the beautiful blond, whose head lay nestled on his stomach. "Four times wasn't enough for you?"

Johnny smiled. "I have a heroic appetite."

"I'll say."

"And maybe afterward you can show me how you do what you do ... I mean the web thing and all..."

"Sure thing," Oliver said, relishing another go at the blond's gorgeous ass. He had no idea what he was agreeing to, but that was a problem for later. Right now, he was feeling every bit as heroic as Johnny seemed to think he should. After all, how hard could this "web thing" be...?

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THRID KIND

"We are Thrid. Resistance is futile."

"What does that ... mean ... Mr. Phuck?" The Captain queried his first officer.

The Betelgusian raised its single eyebrow and considered both the cryptic message and the question it prompted. "I believe it means we're about to get our butts kicked, Captain."

"Not on my watch!" the Captain bellowed. "Helmsman, hard astern!"

"Aye, sir," the helmsman chirped.

"So, we'll be running away then, Captain?" The Betelgusian sighed.

"Of course. Turn and run away today, live to see another day ... or something like that ... Helmsman, get us the hell out of here, pronto!"

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Phuck, you have the bridge. If you need me, I'll be hiding ... er ... going over battle strategies ... in my quarters."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

* * * *

Captain Jonathan Thomas Maxiumus Casanova pondered, for the umpteenth time, the turn of events that had brought him to this point in his career. The youngest Captain in the Imperial Fleet, he had leapfrogged over other more capable and experienced Centurions to achieve what no other had ever achieved. And he hated it. Had he known, at the time, what being the Captain of an Imperial Star Cruiser would entail, he would have saved his sexual favors for more appetizing, and less regimented, pursuits. Like being a well-paid gigolo.

But such was not the case. Instead, he had listened to the carefully rehearsed pitch being spouted by the Imperial recruiters, when they came to visit his high school on his backwater home world. They made military life sound exciting and exotic. See the universe, they said. Explore new worlds and plunder ancient civilizations. Be one of the few, the proud, the conquering horde.

It all sounded so glamorous. How was he to know that being one of the conquering horde meant he'd have responsibilities and liabilities? Being a Captain meant everybody looked up to him for hard decisions and worse, he had to answer to pompous, hard-assed superiors – whose faces were so pinched they looked like a Plutonian cat's ass – for every action. He hated it!

So lost in thought was he when he entered his luxurious cabin, with a whoosh of pneumatic doors closing behind him, that he almost missed the naked blue man lying languidly on his bed.

"Ngyah!" he said, spastically, once the intrusion had registered on his troubled mind. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I am Thrid," the naked blue man said, flashing a broad, toothy smile. "I am for you." The Captain's eyes traveled over the entire length of the naked blue man hungrily. Aside from his obviously unnatural light blue pigmentation, the man appeared to be human in every respect. Right down to the quarter-sized blue nipples, the perfectly muscled chest, arms and legs, the washboard abs and the foot long, uncut meatroll lying turgidly against his lightly furred thigh.

"For ... me?" Casanova asked suspiciously. His eyes darted around the room. "Is this some kind of a joke? Did somebody put you up to this?" Nodding he pulled himself up to his full height and feigned a laugh. "Very funny, Mr. Phuck. You got me. You can come out now..." He waited, nervously. "Mr. Phuck?"

"There is no Mr. Phuck here," the naked blue man said, languorously pulling at his enormous blue sextant, rolling the foreskin back to reveal a dark periwinkle head, sparkling with the pre-cum oozing from its winking slit. "Only Thrid and I am for you."

The Captain began to sweat profusely. It had to be a trick. With practiced movements, he systematically searched every inch of his quarters, expecting to find something, anything, to prove his suspicions correct. After half an hour of tearing the room apart – all the while studiously trying to ignore the indisputably mythic dimensions of the naked blue man's enticing kidney cracker – he came up empty. No cameras, no microphones, no recording devices of any kind. He was alone. In his cabin. With a naked ... Thrid.

"Promise you won't tell anyone?" the Captain asked coyly,

fumbling with the catches in his skin-tight uniform.

"I am for you alone," the Thrid whispered seductively, pushing shiny black curls off of his forehead boyishly. It was too much for Captain Casanova. In record time his uniform had been shed and he was on the Thrid like mean on a drill sergeant. Unceremoniously, he buried his face in the Thrid's ample ball sack, drowning in the ambrosia of manly smells, which caused his own weapon of mass destruction to jerk spasmodically. Licking and sucking up the shaft of the enormous lap cannon, Casanova rolled back the foreskin and began polishing the head. The Thrid sighed heavily. It had been so long since Casanova had put his considerable skills to use. He was going to enjoy this.

No sooner had the thought entered his head, then the communicator on his uniform buzzed. The Captain jerked his head up, the Thrid's magnificent thruster slipping from his mouth with a wet pop. "Damn!" he said, fumbling through the pile of clothing, as his own straining moisture seeker flopped against his stomach forlornly. Finding the device, he punched the button and growled, "What is it?"

"Captain, it's Mr. Phuck on the bridge. Sensors indicate that we have been boarded by several alien life forms. In fact, they've even found their way to the bridge. Crewmen are beginning to act peculiarly throughout the ship. Odd, considering I had no idea there were so many species interested in female Betelguisians..."

The Thrid slipped from the bed and took Casanova's raging tractor beam into its warm, inviting mouth. "What's your point, Mr. Phuck?"

"Point, sir? That your ship has been invaded by alien life forms. I thought I had made that clear."

"Well ... I'm busy right now. You'll just have to deal with it. Don't call me again, unless there's a real emergency." And with that, the connection was cut. Looking down at the Thrid, single-mindedly making a meal out of his yardarm, the Captain apologized. "Sorry about that. Ship's business. Now, where were we? Oh, that's right, I was conducting a ... personal interview with a new alien life form..."

The Thrid made a hungry noise. "Never have I tasted such exquisite maleness."

"You don't taste so bad yourself," Casanova murmured proudly,

playfully slapping the Thrid on its shapely bottom. "Now, let me at that fuck stick."

Pulling the Thrid into a sixty-nine position, the Captain set to work investigating every inch of the alien landscape before him. He hadn't been lying when he'd said he liked the way the Thrid tasted. The copious pre-cum which drizzled from the alien's probe was sweet and light, though it curiously seemed to dissolve into nothingness before it ever made it to the back of Casanova's throat. "Mmm.." he thought to himself. "Like cotton candy. At least I don't have to worry about swallowing with this one..."

Despite his best efforts, however, sucking and slobbering on the alien's delightful dipstick, Casanova couldn't seem to bring him close to orgasm. The pre-come continued to ooze in buckets, but nothing more. As for himself, the Thrid's expert ministrations on his woefully underused rudder was beginning to reach critical proportions.

The familiar tingle began to build in his balls and slowly travel up the length of his shuddering shaft until he couldn't stand it any longer. With a mouth full of fleshy alien fuck fruit, Casanova huffed, puffed and instinctively began humping the Thrid's face, slamming the back of its head into the carpeted bulkhead. Without missing a beat, the alien received his thrusts all the way to the pubic bone and when Casanova finally came, it was in a protracted series of bursts straight into the alien's eager gullet.

To Casanova's surprise, when the alien finally pulled off of his lodestone, it was still as hard as a dylithium crystal and seemingly ready for more. "That's odd," he thought briefly, before the thought was whisked away as the Thrid began kissing up his body, finally planting a firm, tongue filled-kiss on his mouth. They lay like that for a while, entwined in each other's arms. Casanova was becoming more excited by the minute, until finally he rolled the Thrid onto its back and lifted its legs up onto his shoulders, preparing to mount.

"Take me, human," the Thrid trilled. "I am for you."

That was all the invitation Casanova needed. Using the cum still oozing from his purple picklock as a lubricant, he placed the head against the alien's dark blue pucker and pushed. Effortlessly, the Thrid's sphincter opened to accept him. In fact, rather than protesting

the invasion, it seemed to pull and suck at Casanova's spine tickler, as though welcoming it deep into the confines of its inner sanctum. The alien sighed and closed its eyes as Casanova began pumping slowly into it.

"Harder," the Thrid cooed. "Do not be gentle with me, human."

Casanova smiled. Perfect. Just the way he liked it. Rocking back onto his knees and pulling the impaled alien along with him, he began to jackhammer furiously into the grasping and curiously soft orifice. Soon he was howling like a madman as his hips pummeled the alien's shapely ass. Another orgasm began to build slowly to an almost painful crescendo, finally sending him over the top and into blissful oblivion.

Languidly, Casanova opened his eyes to find the alien Thrid standing over him, its enormous blue flagship hooded once again and dangling like so much kosher sausage in a deli counter. He had no idea how much time had passed, but aside from a dull ache in his nether regions, the only evidence that anything had occurred between them was the fact that they were both naked. Casanova ran his hands across his flat, furry stomach. No sticky residue, no hardened clumps, no matted hair. He was as clean as he'd been at the start of the day. Odd.

"Thank you, human," the alien said smilingly. "We find the essences aboard this primitive vessel more than satisfactory." And with that, the Thrid was gone.

"Bitch," Casanova mumbled lazily. "Didn't even leave me his phone number..."

* * * *

Hours later, the Captain was in the ship's sickbay, grilling his Chief Medical Officer. "And you're sure that all that ... mindless debauchery ... is over, Doc?"

The Ophidian turned its reptilian head sideways, so as to look his human commander directly in the face. "It appears to have passed as quickly as it came, Captain."

Casanova nodded officiously. "And none were ... harmed ... by the insidious effects of whatever diabolical mind ray these aliens used?"

"There is no indication of a mind ray, per se, Captain. In fact, my

investigations suggest exactly the opposite; that each crewman aboard this vessel acted of his own free will..."

"Obviously that's an oversight, doctor," The Captain growled. "We're all ... professionals ... aboard this vessel. If they didn't use a mind ray, they must have had some sort of ... chemical aphrodisiac ... oozing out of their pores. Or something. The details aren't important. What I want to know is ... was anybody harmed?"

The doctor stared unblinkingly through one wide yellow eye. "There doesn't seem to be any lingering effect, except perhaps for widespread lethargy and the overwhelming need for a smoke."

Putting his arms behind his back, the Captain turned and strode purposefully to the nearest view port. The stars whisked by like Christmas lights being dragged across a black tarp. "What I don't understand is ... why, Doc? Why would it be so important for these ... Thrid ... to have sex with every male aboard this vessel?"

The doctor shrugged his thin shoulders. "Perhaps semen contains something the Thrid need to survive. Perhaps they'll use it for the building of a multi-race slave colony. Perhaps it's nothing more than a gastronomical delicacy. They're a species unlike any we've ever encountered. And they left nothing of a residual nature behind for us to study. We may never know."

"Insidious," the Captain growled, his square jaw set. "How can anyone, no matter what the species, conduct a full course of wild, sloppy sexual experimentation and not leave a single drop, smudge or stain behind? Insidious."

"Indeed," the doctor agreed. "On many levels. Not only do they leave no trace of their attack, apparently the Thrid have the unique ability to take on the characteristics and form of our deepest and most perverse sexual desires to conduct that attack effortlessly."

"They what?" Casanova all but shouted, turning to fix the alien doctor with a penetrating glare. "How can you be sure of that? What ... proof ... do you have?"

"We've all experienced it, I'm afraid," the doctor hissed apologetically. "We all saw exactly what we wanted to see. Including you, Captain, if I read you correctly. What was your pleasure, a multi-breasted Amazon from Sapphos Prime? A dancing girl from Labia

Majora?"

The Captain's steely eyes narrowed. "Something like that. I'm not the ... kiss and tell sort, Doc."

"Of course not, my mistake," the doctor deferred, his spines rattling with embarrassment from crown to tail. "So far as I can tell, the only males who weren't affected were those in rejuvenation stasis, including Security Chief McFelcher."

The Captain had turned back to the view port, his expressive face hidden from the doctor. "I see ... and what if ... they come back for the rest of them, doc? What ... then?"

"As I said, the Thrid don't appear to have harmed anyone, but, on the off-chance that they do return, there is one way to spot them."

"Their color," Casanova grunted.

"Exactly. They may be able to change their form at will, but they can't seem to change their soft blue pigmentation."

"And you're ... sure ... that even when they're seen with someone else, they always take on the form of the ... viewer's desires?"

"My investigations appear to bear that theory out. I've questioned several crewmen and the story is always the same. Girlfriends, slave girls, mothers, whores, they only saw what they wished to experience. And I also have my own personal familiarity – involved as I was in the ship's cafeteria orgy – to attest to the validity of the supposition. I've never seen so many crimson tailed and amply sacked sleestak in one room. Not even during my mating assignments to the Imperial Nest..."

The words trailed off as the doctor realized that the Captain was staring intently at him, his face registering something akin to ... relief? Or was it annoyance at his prattling? He couldn't be sure. Human emotional response was still something of a mystery to him, even after years spent serving aboard the I.S.C. Bearded Lady.

Just then the communicator on Captain Casanova's wrist chimed. "This is the Captain," he clipped.

"McFelcher here, Captain," the Security Chief's brogue crackled abrasively over the tiny speaker. "I canna be certain, but I think I may be hallucinatin'..."

"Report, Chief."

"I think I just saw a blue goat wanderin' the hall outside my quarters."

GRAVE DESIRE

"There the wicked cease from troubling; and the weary be at rest."

Job iii, 17

They met over dinner, in a most unexpected way. It was on a night when the fog hung heavy and thick over fallow fields, illuminated from without by a misspent Harvest moon. A perfect night for supping and not much more, he had believed. After all, he had arrived late for the feast, hunger gnawing at his belly like a ravenous beast and making him think of nothing else. It is often that way with love.

The banquet still lay spread invitingly, despite his tardiness, and he immediately felt a surge of relief. To the right of the gate, two mangy dogs tussled over a meaty bone and, for a brief moment, he considered entering the fray himself. He was that hungry. But dimly remembered decorum, and the tantalizing aromas assailing his nostrils from the still plentiful buffet, kept those urges in check. Bounteous variety lay before him. He had only to pick and choose his drooling heart's desire.

No sooner had he closed in on a particularly mouthwatering morsel, his teeth sweating in anticipation and his mind racing with fevered desire, when he saw her. Like an angel of death she appeared to glow in the half-light, hunkered down over her expertly picked meal, similarly engaged in single-minded and ecstatic repast. Alone, as was the way with their cursed kind, she squatted before her dinner, delicately scooping jellied horror from an exposed eye socket. Her thinning hair lay in disarray and a decaying wedding dress hung in tatters from her thin shoulders. It was at that moment that he knew he had found his one true love.

Stepping lightly over the carnage of the recent battlefield and the brittle cornstalks trampled into mud, blood and excrement, he moved closer, hunger momentarily and uncharacteristically forgotten. Sensing the movement, she looked up and in so doing, locked eyes with her destiny. Her jaw dropped in mid-chew, clear liquid oozing over lips to hang in trembling dollops from a charmingly skeletal chin. As if in a dream state, he unconsciously brought his hands up to

straighten what was left of the dusty and stained bowtie to his shredded tuxedo. Perfect. She was perfect, in so many ways.

Stepping forward, he lowered himself into a squat before her, his gummy yellow eyes never leaving hers. In response, she lifted, with a gore-slick right hand, a mass of muscle and congealing plasma, and laid it gently into his waiting hands. He broke the mesmerizing gaze he held with her to look down at the gift. A heart. Still whole and unsullied. A token of her affection and, perhaps, more. Smiling, he lifted the favor to his mouth and wasted no time in devouring it greedily.

Satisfied, she lowered her head to bite the lips off the corpse before her, then sat back to watch him as she chewed. And so it went, throughout most of the night, the two of them sharing their finds, wordless and united in a preordained ritual of despair and desecration. The wedding feast of eyes, teeth and rapidly swelling bellies gave rise to a bond promising more, much more to come. In the distance, a dog howled, joined by another, then another. Overcome by emotion, even as his nature drove him to perform the ultimate sacrilege, he bowed his head in thanks for the hopeful redemption he had found.

And finally, when the meal was done, and their unsavory hungers abated, she cocked her head to the side. Wisps of frazzled blonde hair waved fetchingly from a head gone almost completely bald, as she reached up with trembling fingers to push the wedding dress from her emaciated shoulders. As it slipped unhindered to the ground with a rustle of finality, she stood exposed before him in the glow of the fog-shrouded moon, and lowered her head demurely.

She was, to his caked and putrid eyes, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Her withered breasts hung flat and empty upon her ribcage. Her distended stomach bulged obscenely beneath them, filled to capacity and beyond. Her legs, free of sinew or girlish curve, tacked as they were below hollow, hatchet-like hips, appeared incapable of supporting such weight. And yet, to him, she was a long-awaited goddess.

Fumbling with the rope that held his pants in place, he soon stood in a puddle of rotted cloth, his withered member jutting out before him expectantly. She raised her head and nodded at the offering.

Stepping forward, she helped him rid himself of the tuxedo coat and shirt. The bowtie she left in place, drooping in dejected formality across pronounced collarbone. Soon he was as naked as she and, after a chaste kiss was attempted between thin, dry, formless lips, she began to pull him down to the charred and blood-soaked ground. He followed willingly, and in so doing, sealed his fate.

Running her hands over her willing supplicant with a sound like leaves skittering across gravestones, she lowered her face to his nether regions. Inhaling deeply of the musty decay and filth that arose to assault her senses, she began first kissing and licking at the wasted genitals with a surprisingly agile tongue. Then as the passion of the moment overtook her, she began nipping and biting, making him squirm with anticipation. Her ministrations became frenzied and soon she was rooting feverishly into his groin, a vibration like the rattling of bones rising up to merge with his unearthly moans, until finally the shriveled penis came loose.

He screamed through the ecstasy, never looking away from the bright glowing orb swimming in the milky and oppressively close sky. Gripping her scaly head tightly, he pressed her face deeper between his legs, yellowed eyes gleaming with long-forgotten tears. Emboldened by his gratification, she made short work of his deteriorated testicles and fervently attacked the swollen bladder that was his stomach. Working her way upward toward the birthplace of his sin, she reveled in the ecstasy of their union by devouring every organ offered her one by one.

As the music of their lovemaking filled the night, frightening children and committing mothers to their rosaries, he howled an orgasmic thank you to the gods of darkness for granting him this unexpected reprieve from deathless wandering. And, as has always been the case where true love is concerned, his curse became his saving grace.

REAL

The alchemist smiled. Finally, after years of painstaking research and heartbreaking trial and error, he had accomplished the impossible. Running an appreciative finger over his handiwork, he marveled at the warmth and resilience of his creation. Soft to the touch, just like real flesh. Even the most observant of his colleagues would be hard pressed to tell the difference between this automaton – made up of metal, clockwork mechanisms and a mastery of higher spagyrics – and a real human being.

That is IF he were planning on making his breakthrough common knowledge, which he most definitely was not. This creation was for him and him alone. Wrapping his hand around the enormous erection of the naked automaton, his smile grew broader and blood began rushing to his nether regions.

And so it was that within hours of taking its first labored breath, the automaton was pressed into the service for which it was created: satisfying the insatiable lusts of its creator. With practice, it learned to perform admirably and within a week, had earned the praise of its human host.

"You are perfection," the alchemist said, as he ran his fingers through the golden tresses of his creation. Emerald eyes, empty of emotion, stared back at him. The alchemist wiped a glob of his essence from the automaton's lower lip. "Would that you could understand more than that which has been taught you."

"There is more?" the automaton asked.

The alchemist smiled. "So much more."

"Then teach me."

It was only because of the inquisitive nature of the alchemist himself that such an odd request was granted.

After a month of tutelage, the automaton raised a sticky hand and asked the alchemist, "Is it this which defines life?"

The alchemist nodded. "In part, or so it is speculated. There is also the anima, or soul, which is the spark of life."

"Have I a soul?"

The alchemist pondered. "The materials from which you were made had souls. The distillations and recombinations used to create you served to strengthen and regenerate the life that gives you mobility. Logically, it stands to reason that you are the sum of your parts and, thus, in possession of a soul, which is unique only to you."

The automaton turned its attention back to the congealing semen plastering its hand and smiled for the first time ever. Then proceeded to lick its fingers clean thoughtfully.

After six months of continued tutelage, the automaton asked the question it had been harboring from that day when it had discovered that it had a soul. "Will I ever be a real boy?"

The alchemist, who at the moment was thoroughly engrossed in a much baser pursuit, grunted, "You are as real as any boy I have ever lain with, now pick up your pace and give me the release I need."

The automaton complied and, when the alchemist lay spent and sweating, asked the question again, "Will I ever be a REAL boy?"

Filled as he was with contentment and satiated in ways he had never been before the creation of this blond giant, the alchemist pulled the automaton down and kissed its soft, warm lips. What he felt could not be called love, so much as magnanimity. "Is that your only wish?"

The automaton thought about it. "That and to know more of the world outside this chamber."

"The world is an evil place, my son," The alchemist replied, "where such as yourself would never be understood."

"So you have told me," the automaton said quietly. "It is for this very reason that I ask the question. For I know that without the former, I will never achieve the latter."

The alchemist smiled. "Logically deduced."

"And the answer?"

The alchemist's eyes narrowed and took on a faraway look, his head filling with formulas and heretical invocations. "Perhaps."

And so it went, for years after. The automaton would ask the question and the alchemist would ponder. Eventually, curiosity gave way to actual practice and the alchemist found himself truly contemplating the impossible. He'd done it once, with the creation of his perfect golem. Why, then, couldn't he do it again and complete the

process he'd started?

From that point on, the automaton became not only the alchemist's willing love slave, but his laboratory assistant, as well. Because the automaton was tireless and never needed more than a few hours in the sunlight streaming in through the high windows of the bedchamber, many of the more repetitive and menial tasks were left to it to perform.

In those moments, the automaton would dream itself more than a collection of gears and plant matter. It would contemplate the meanings behind the poetry and literature the alchemist gave it to read. And it would repeat the mantra that had become its affirmation: "Some day, I shall be a real live boy."

And, as so often happens when a pursuit becomes an obsession, after a while, the alchemist became so engrossed in his alchemical calculations that his physical needs began to take second place. Which left far more time for the automaton to read and dream and imagine.

Eventually the day came when the alchemist, burdened by the distillation of tinctures and the correct combination of kabbalistic symbols, snapped at his assistant, "Your nakedness distracts me, put some clothing on!"

After almost 20 years of living in such a state, the automaton was at a loss. Rummaging through its father's closet, it found shirt, shoes and pants. Years of watching its father dress had given it an understanding of how buttons and ties worked. The problem it ran into was where to put the enormous erection, which was an ever-present part of its physiology. Settling on a solution, it presented itself to its father for approval.

Focused though he was, the alchemist stopped what he was doing to look with surprise and amusement on his creation. To accommodate the mammoth erection, which had caused it such concern, the automaton had simply cut a hole in the front of the pants it wore. The erection emerged from the fabric, just as impressive and distracting as it had been before. For the first time in years, the alchemist felt movement in his own pants.

That night, the automaton happily provided him with hours of

pleasure, just as it had in the early days of its creation. It would be the last time for many years to come.

Eventually came the day, in the alchemist's winter years, that the solution finally presented itself to him. This was not a pursuit for the laboratory. Life was not speculative; it was organic and must be conducted in a natural setting. It also required a sacrifice. Something he would have been unwilling to provide in his earlier, more selfish years, but now found to be completely within the boundaries of possibility.

Consulting kabbalistic and astrological charts, the alchemist calculated and performed the necessary invocations necessary for the ceremony. Then, on a sultry summer evening, with a joy approaching ecstasy, he ordered the automaton to clothe itself for only the second time in its life. This time, he took the time to help the creature bind its erection to its body, so as to hide it from view, then dressed it in the plain clothing of a working man.

Slipping out of the building that housed his laboratory and home just an hour before midnight, the alchemist led the automaton through the darkened streets and into the park. The automaton's eyes widened at all that presented itself and it would have been lost had the alchemist not taken it by the hand and guided it like a child.

"Do all of the things I see have names?" the automaton asked.

"Of course they do," the alchemist answered. "All of which are known to you."

"Tell me!" the automaton demanded.

"Later," hissed the alchemist. "First we must perform the ceremony. Everything must go according to plan. We will not have a second chance."

Sensing the import of the words, the automaton held its tongue, though its mind roiled with questions and excitement. So distracted was it that, when they reached their destination, it missed the alchemist's order to disrobe. The alchemist busied himself with vials and potions produced from the satchel he had brought with him for this very purpose. Symbols were drawn in the grass with colored sand and powders were blown into the air. Looking up at the stars, the alchemist finally turned to the automaton.

"You're still dressed!"

The automaton looked confused.

"Hurry, lummo!" the alchemist barked, yanking the tie at the automaton's waist and loosening the bindings within, the enormous erection bounced forward, ready for the task at hand. Ripping his own clothing off, the alchemist handed the automaton a vial and ordered it to drink, then followed suit with a vial of his own. Tossing the vials aside, the alchemist laid down on the grass, amid the symbols, and pulled the automaton down on top of him. Taking its cue, the automaton fell into its natural rhythms and soon the two were coupled in the moonlight.

The alchemist felt it first as a tightening in his chest, then a clenching in his bowels. Looking up with love and apprehension, he said, "I grant you your wish, my son" and promptly expired. A fact that was lost on the automaton, for at that very moment, it felt a tingling in its loins unlike anything it had ever felt before. The tingling gave rise to sensations that were completely unfamiliar to him.

Guttural sounds began to arise from his throat, becoming growls and eventually howls of pleasure as he pumped in and out of the shell that had once housed his father's soul. The onset of his very first orgasm took the blond beauty so completely by surprise that he shrieked his pleasure out into the night, then collapsed in a sweaty heap on top of the body.

It wasn't until a voice commanded him to "get up slowly" that the young man realized he was no longer alone. Bewildered, he forced himself to get groggily to his feet. The policeman stared in horror at the old man with the ripped clothes lying on the grass, then up at the strapping, young behemoth with the enormous softening erection. Fury filled the officer's face as he brought his gun up and pulled the trigger.

The beautiful giant registered surprise at the new sensation and looked down in wonder at the dark liquid pumping out of its body and staining the front of its shirt. Blood. Real blood. Looking up, the creature smiled, even as its eyes became glassy and began to lose focus.

"I'm a real live boy!" were the last words it ever uttered.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The school groundskeeper. He was the reason I was back. It took me a while to figure that one out, but there was nothing else in this crappy little town to draw me back here. It wasn't until I saw him, sharpening his scythe with a whetstone on the edge of the playground that I knew. Even as the school children cowered and moved away from him, just as they always had, I felt myself being drawn in. There was something deliciously malicious about old Willie. Something dangerous. Something exciting.

He still looked exactly the way I remembered him. Disheveled blazing red hair, bushy red beard, bulging, demented eyes and that trademark kilt. There was no way I could forget that kilt. Many a fevered dream had centered on that kilt. There was so much that remained a mystery about the man who wore it, even after all these years. His cloudy past. His barely suppressed anger. His legendary celibacy. His obsession with a long forgotten murderer and a famous Scottish princess. He was, in a word, an enigma.

Once I realized that this man was the one I'd returned for, I followed him as he went about his business, skulking in the shadows like a stalker, awaiting my chance. That chance came later that night, as he sat next to a roaring fire, outside his little wooden shack on the outskirts of the school grounds.

I took a deep breath and approached the fire. The Highlander ignored me. He was rolling a cigarette with stubby, callused fingers that were a lot more graceful than they looked. He licked the edge of the paper and fixed me with heather green eyes, overshadowed by thick red brambles. In his strong Scottish brogue, he said something that sounded like, "Ken ay help yew, boyo?"

I stared straight into the inferno flickering in those eyes. "Do you remember me, Willie?"

He pondered, crimping the edges of the cigarette into tight prupices. "Aye, I remember," he growled. "A real trouble maker, yew. I heard yew were sent away when yew were 12, after being raped by the clown. Can't say as yew were missed." The humor in his

voice was unmistakable. He was making fun of me, in his rough Highlander way. He stuck the entire cigarette in his mouth and pulled it out again, smoothing it with his generous lips.

"It wasn't the clown," I said evenly. "It was his sidekick."

Pulling a stick out of the fire, Willie expertly lit the cigarette, then jammed the stick back into the flames, causing sparks to rise up into the night and cast diabolical shadows on his craggy face. "A clown's a clown," he burred. "I also heard it wasn't rape. Some say he didn't deserve what he got."

I pondered the commentary. Willie was nothing if not truthful. And he didn't care how much that truth hurt. "He'd had it out for me for a long time," I said, trying to sound controlled and dangerous. "He deserved what he got, alright. Maybe not for doing that, but for other reasons."

Willie chuckled. "So, now yew're all grown up and back for more, ey boyo? Bad news. No clowns here."

I ignored the dismissal and decided to get to the point. "I didn't come back for any clown. I came back to see you."

"Yew've seen me."

I hesitated, then plunged ahead. "I heard a few things, too, back then."

Willie didn't answer. He just inhaled deeply from his rolled cigarette and stared at me with that maniacal gleam in shadowed eyes.

"I heard that you're harboring a weapon of mass destruction under that kilt."

Willie smiled. "And yew thought yew'd come back here to find out?"

I didn't answer. It was the truth, forged by an incident in my youth, when I'd pranked Willie by lifting his kilt in a crowd of townsfolk. The reactions by those who'd witnessed the full brunt of the prank were indelibly imprinted onto my mind. The gasps would have been enough, but when one of the older women actually fainted, curiosity was born. That childhood curiosity had since grown to full-blown adult obsession.

Willie laughed, then leaned back and spread his hairy legs wide. The ubiquitous kilt rose and grew taught, perfectly framing a

monstrous piece of meat, a wide fleshy canvas for the dancing flicker of the flames. A single drop of liquid hung poised on the edge of the puckered tip. I had never seen so much foreskin on one dick before. I was mesmerized.

Suddenly, Willie slammed his legs together again. The spell was broken. "That'll be enough of that, yew blouse-wearing lily-hugger. Yew've seen what yew came here to see. Now leave Willie in peace."

My mind raced. That couldn't be it. That couldn't possibly be all there was. I hadn't come all this way to be turned away so easily. Then, as it had so often in the past, an idea popped into my fevered brain. Simple. Masterful. Sublime. "I have something for you, Willie."

The groundskeeper eyed me suspiciously, drawing deeply on his hand-rolled cigarette. "Yew've got nothing I need."

I swung my duffle bag off my back and set it on the ground, then dropped ceremoniously to one knee to rifle through it. Willie tensed, like a snake ready to strike, but watched me quietly. It was there somewhere. I dug deep seeking the key to unlocking Willie's resistance. My fingers settled on it and I clutched at it, pulling it from my duffle triumphantly. Willie stared at the prize I held aloft.

"Twine?" He sneered. "I've got spools of it in my shack."

"Not like this, you don't," I crowed. "This isn't just any twine. It's piano wire. Strong and unbreakable as cable, yet thin enough to slice flesh. Perfect for the job HE needed it for."

Willie cocked his head. "He ... who?"

I had him! Now to deliver the coup de grace. "The Aberdeen Strangler."

I had to hand it to Willie. He didn't overreact and for a moment or two, I thought I might have overplayed my hand. His eyes widened only slightly, then settled on the coil of wire in my hand. He stared at it, then dropped his maniacal gaze to meet my own. "That's his own wire, is it?"

"The one and only."

"And how is it that yew have come into possession of such a prize, yew clown-humping blaggart?"

"I stumbled upon it by accident, while traveling through Europe."

The story slowly unfolded in my head and I was carried away by it. "As luck would have it, I stopped into a Glasgow pub and fell into conversation with an older woman. A lovely thing she was, ruddy of complexion with a wild fall of red hair only just starting to fade with age. After a few pints, this lovely lass revealed to me that she was the only victim to survive the Strangler's grasp. The last victim. The one who turned the tables on him."

Willie's eyes grew increasingly wider. "The Duchess of York," he whispered almost reverentially. "Sarah Ferguson, herself?"

I had to stifle a laugh. "None other! I was invited back to her flat where we made passionate love for hours. Then, when I was dressing to leave, she told me that she wanted to give me something to remember her by. She pulled open a chest and pulled forth this cord, the very cord that had been used to strangle all of those innocent women. The cord that had almost spelled her own death! She entrusted it to me as a token of her affection."

"Yer lyin', boyo..." Willie growled.

"Am I?"

He stared at the coil of wire in my hand. "Are yew tellin' me yew sullied the grace and perfection of my Fergie?"

"Yes, but I did it for YOU, Willie," I said dramatically. "I did it in honor of you!"

The groundskeeper was thrown off balance, unsure... "Fer me? How? Why?"

"I've been obsessed with you for years, Willie. I knew I couldn't have you, especially back then, but I knew I could have the next best thing. I could BE you for one evening.

And now that I'm back ... I want to bestow on you this blessing which is rightfully yours."

Willie's bulging eyes narrowed and he swallowed hard. "Whut's yer price?"

I chuckled. "It's simple, Willie. Let me complete the circle. I've *been* you for an evening. Now I want to *have* you. All I ask is just one night and this holy relic will be yours. Forever."

Adrenaline pumped through my system as I teetered on the edge of the precipice. Would the old Scot take the bait I had so expertly laid

out before him? Would he break his legendary vow of celibacy to own the one thing he'd never dreamed of possessing? Would he give it up for a piece of wire I'd stolen from my sister's grand piano last time I'd visited her?

The old man's lip curled and danger flickered in his fire lit eyes. "I know yew, boyo. Yew canna fool old Willie. It's a trick to make me lower my guard, so yew can make me the butt of one of yew're cruel jokes. Yew and yer malicious friends..."

I lowered my hand and spoke so quietly the groundskeeper had to lean forward to hear me. "There's nobody here but us, Willie. You. Me. And the spirits of both the murderer you secretly admire and the woman you secretly love." I held the cord out toward him and watched his eyes fall hungrily upon it, as firelight played along its coiled lengths. "What'll it be? One night of passion for a lifetime of possession, or years of regret because you didn't take the offering that was yours for one brief moment?"

Turmoil played in the groundskeeper's wild eyes. He furrowed his brows angrily, then his face softened and his eyes grew watery. Still he remained silent. I nodded and slowly made to return the cord to its resting place deep within my duffle.

"Wait..." he said. I paused, not looking up. The cord hung poised just inches from the lip of the duffle, a fading memory retracting into bleak darkness.

"Promise me it's not some form of cruel joke," Willie whispered. "No cameras. No friends lurking in shadows. No newspaper reporters waiting to pounce..."

"You have my word, Willie. It's no joke."

He sighed and I looked up. Our eyes met and slowly his legs parted again. This time, they stayed parted and the glory of his Highland broadsword lay revealed for my inspection. I stared at the offering triumphantly.

"Do with it what yew will, boyo," he whispered. "It is but flesh and not easily tempted, but to possess this holiest of relics, I will perform all manner of perversion." He stood and, in one swift movement, ripped his shirt open to reveal that magnificent rippled torso, blanketed with thick, curly red hair.

I nodded, dropping the cord into my bag and pulling the string taut. He watched it disappear with understanding and made to unbutton his kilt. I stopped him. "Wait. Let me have that honor."

He closed his eyes and nodded. I stood and walked around the fire, feeling its warmth diminish, as I grew closer to the realization of my own heated fantasy. The heady musk of his masculine body assailed my nostrils and I felt blood surge into my nether regions. My hands shook as I raised them to slowly caress the muscular, hairy pecs, then slide through luxurious fur over six-pack abs and to the waistband of the tattered kilt. Willie's breath came slowly, but he never opened his eyes.

My questing fingers found the flap and crept under. An expanse of rough fabric grazed fingertips, heightening their sensitivity until the roughness gave way to the warmth and suppleness of naked flesh. Willie's cock flexed as my fingers stroked its length, then wrapped around the thick, heavy stalk. He was growing turgid. He opened his eyes and looked at me, but said nothing. I squeezed the growing member, slipping down to pinch the puckered foreskin. I was rewarded by a dollop of sticky fluid. I removed my hand and brought my fingers to my lips, licking the stickiness from them.

I had to have it. Dropping to my knees, between the crackling fire and the burly Highland god before me, I lifted the kilt and ducked my head under it. Instantly I was enveloped by the smell of sweat and sex. His sex. The growing cock brushed my cheek as I buried my nose in his bushy ball sack. They hung low and heavy, responding to my ministrations by jerking upward spasmodically. I inhaled deeply, then flicked the soft skin with my tongue. Somewhere above me, Willie groaned. I smiled and began licking at the hirsute testicles with earnest until they were soggy with my saliva.

By now the erection I'd been hoping for had become a reality. I pulled my head out from under the kilt and, with a flick of two fingers, unbuttoned the waistband. The kilt unfolded and slipped away, leaving Willie shivering in the night, his enormous cock bouncing stiffly now that it had been freed from the confines of the heavy cloth. The foreskin had rolled back just enough to reveal the tip of a purple head. Fluid oozed from the exposed piss slit. I sat back on

my heels to take it all in.

Willie's cock was huge. Nine inches long, I figured, but thicker than any I had ever encountered. I would be hard pressed to get an entire hand around its girth. Veins encircled it. Large, pumping veins. Puckered flesh bunched around the tip, unraveling slowly as I pulled it back to reveal the angry head beneath. It was both the ugliest and most beautiful cock I had ever seen and I wanted more. I licked the precum from its slit and Willie's knees buckled slightly.

"Not here," he whispered coarsely. "Inside."

I nodded and watched as he turned and walked toward the mythical shack which, to my knowledge, no human eyes except those of Willie himself, had ever borne witness to; the place that had once been described as "outside all laws of man and god." My eyes lingered in the hairy slabs of Willie's butt as they flexed with the exertion of his stride. He stopped at the door and turned toward me.

"Yew comin'?"

I nodded. He turned and pushed the door open, then stepped through into the darkness beyond. I stood and followed.

Once inside the shack, I was struck by how expansive it seemed. From the outside it seemed barely large enough to hold a few tools and maybe a man while standing upright. I had often wondered how Willie could sleep in what seemed like little more than a freestanding closet. I could see now that I'd been mistaken. The shack was large enough to be comfortable for one man. Sharpened tools hung menacingly from every wall. A roughly hewn table sat smack in the middle, covered with tools, rags and cleaning supplies. Beyond that was a tattered mattress pushed up against the far wall, lending a semblance of comfort to the sparse surroundings.

Willie stepped around the table, kicked a tangle of blankets aside and squatted before the mattress. Without turning, he asked, "Will this do?"

"It's perfect."

He nodded and crawled onto the mattress, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. I followed, lowering myself down between his hairy legs and returning to my ministrations upon his crotch. His cock was still rock hard and he sighed again as I slipped the foreskin back.

A dark smell caressed my nostrils as I wrapped my lips around the head, sliding down to take it all in. My mouth barely accommodated it. There would be no way I would be able to engulf the shaft, too. Using my hand, I rolled the loose skin up and down along the shaft while licking and sucking at the head.

I don't know how long I'd been attacking the mythical cock with relish, but it was sopping wet from engorged tip to lathered balls when Willie groaned and began to pump feverishly upward.

"Whoa, Nelly," I said, backing away. "I'm not ready for you to blow just yet, old man."

Willie groaned again. "So, it's torture yew're after then."

"Hardly," I responded, standing and quickly shucking off my own clothes until I was as naked as Willie in the shivering darkness of the shack. Willie looked confused. I turned and ran hands over the smooth, moon-bright globes of my ass. "Your Fergie had an ass like this, Willie," I whispered.

His breathing grew brisk again. I squatted down beside him and waited until rough hands first cupped, then roughly caressed my ass.

"Would you like to come inside?" I asked. "Would you like to feel what I felt when I made love to her? Would you like to make love to her ... through me?"

"Yew talk too much, boyo," the Scot groused gruffly.

Taking that as an answer in the affirmative, I turned and straddled Willie, stopping when his engorged head grazed the crack of my ass. I reached back and spread them wide, then rubbed my soon to be stretched hole across it. Precum oozed out to lubricate both. Willie was ready. I just hoped I was.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, I situated my asshole over his cock and pushed down. Willie's rough hands grasped my hips and his own rose up to meet them. A moment of stretching followed by momentary pain and the purple plum of his cock head popped inside. I took another deep breath, blew it out and surged downward. Willie's breathing quickened. He pushed upward and I almost screamed. Before I knew it the entire length of his shaft had penetrated me. I felt lightheaded and couldn't catch my breath.

Willie, on the other hand, was encouraged. Using his hands to lift

me up by my hips, he slammed me down onto his shaft, then did it a second and third time.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa..." I cautioned. "You're gonna split me in half. Slower. Slower!"

One of Willie's hands shot up and grabbed my face hard. My eyes popped open to find him staring maniacally up at me. "Yew've gone where no man has gone before, boyo! Yew wanted this, now yew're gonna get it. All of it. All that Willie has to offer and more!"

I barely had time to register the threat when suddenly Willie grasped me like an expert wrestler and with a twist and a roll, I was on my back with the Highlander heavy upon me. His acrid breath was in my face as he settled in to the new position. My ass screamed and the sound worked its way up to my mouth. A callused hand squelched the scream as soon as it emerged and Willie began pumping roughly into me like a wild, otherworldly beast.

"Yew want to be my Fergie?" He huffed. "She got away once by clocking me on the noggin with a haggis press. Willie had forgotten all about that, until now. Until yew awakened the memories with yer base desires. Yew want to experience love the way Willie would give it to that scheming, faithless bitch? To all of the faithless bitches who rejected him? Enjoy it while it lasts, boyo. Enjoy it while it lasts!"

Willie's breath came quicker and quicker and his pumping increased until he was jack hammering my aching asshole like a piston machine. Smashing into my internal organs like a plundering Gaulish invader. As he grew closer and closer to orgasm, his hands wrapped around my throat and he began to squeeze.

"Feel me!" Willie shouted. "Feel my love, Fergie! Yew got away once, but yew'll nay get away again!"

I stared up into the face of my fantasy in realization and horror, trying desperately to breathe through constricted airways. His obsessions with the Aberdeen Strangler and the Duchess of York weren't just quirky fascination on his part. Why had nobody ever questioned the mysterious past of Groundskeeper Willie? Why had nobody ever probed the demons that haunted him? Why had nobody ever put two and two together?

My vision began to swim and the world around me to telescope

outward. I was drowning. I was being sucked down into a thick, swirling void until even the pain wasn't registering anymore. The last thing my dimming eyes saw was the beast awakening fully as Willie howled and pumped his hot murderous essence deep into my bowels. Then, predictably, there was only darkness.

THE HERO TRAP

(with respectful apologies to Larry Niven)

"It's over, Chlamydia!" the avenger said, the powerful muscles of his immense chest flexing as he raised his fist victoriously. "Did you honestly think you would get away with such a nefarious plan?"

The woman's tinkling laughter came as no surprise. Villains always laughed in their hour of doom. Her answer, however, puzzled him. "What makes you think I haven't?"

The levitating man of iron will narrowed his eyes, his heroic chin jutting out in set determination. "You've failed, bitch. I've dismantled all of your evil STD bombs and rounded up all of your hench-hookers. The city of Megalopolis is safe once more."

Again the laughter, this time low and sinister. "You fool," she said. "You've fallen right into my trap."

"Trap?" The muscles of his thick neck rolled and tumbled under the skin as he darted glances around the room, infrared eyes taking in every detail before coming back to rest on the heaving breasts of the villainous vixen standing imperiously before him. He pulled his eyes away with a heroic force of will and attempted a dismissive smile. "The only one who has been trapped here, is you. You'll never escape my grasp."

"Mmmmmm," Chlamydia purred. "And what makes you think I'd want to?" Running the middle finger of her right hand languorously from the hollow of her throat down between her gravity defying breasts, she again drew his gaze and continued to hold it as her fingers found the zipper of her spandex jumpsuit and began pulling it down. She completed the operation and stepped clear of her costume in one fluid motion to stand naked before him. The look on his handsome face was a mixture of horror and, yes, she could see it in his eyes, lust.

For the first time since his emergence from her acid moat, the superheroic man of sinew became aware of his own nakedness. Like a lumbering ballet performed by a burly marine, he twisted in mid-air to bring one tree trunk thigh up in the hopes of concealing his exposed, and heroically expanding, private parts.

"You didn't think it at all odd that I would go to all the trouble of building this complex inside a historic landmark, fully knowing that you would go out of your way to make sure that not a single brick was harmed?" Chlamydia asked, her voice taking on a husky insinuation, "Then, despite knowing that your otherworldly flesh was completely impervious to any element known to man, fill the chambers under the complex with a highly corrosive acid so that you would have to swim through them to get to me?"

His eyes narrowed once more. "Uh ... no."

She laughed. "Just because your flesh is impervious, doesn't mean your costume is."

The man of might reddened, his heavily muscled arms reacting instinctively as one enormous hand came to rest on the opposite shoulder while the other dropped down between his powerful legs. "You fiend!"

"Oh, c'mon superstud. You want it. You know you do. Have you ever seen a pair of tits like these?"

"Don't call me that!" He answered indignantly, trying desperately to keep his gaze leveled on her face. "My name is..."

"I know what your name is. It's not your name that I'm interested in. It's that slab of super meat you're trying so vainly to keep hidden from me." Chlamydia smiled, kneading her swollen breasts with her left hand while the other hand slipped and probed wetly between her sensuously defined legs. "I've often wondered, are you as good in other departments as you are at saving this pathetic city from evil? You've certainly got the muscle for it, judging from what I've seen in its relaxed state."

The hero's blush deepened. He was quickly losing the battle to keep his super-manhood unfurled and already he could feel his strength ebbing as the much-needed blood rushed away from his body to fill the titanic prow between his legs. No, he thought, I must not give in! I am better than this! I am the protector of truth, justice and the corporate way! I am ... sinking fast ... Nervously he began scouting for a spot to land his heroic bulk as the now fully erect supercock acted like an anchor, dragging him down from the safety of the sky.

Smiling in anticipation, Chlamydia lay back on the huge triple wide king-size bed to await his arrival on the only safe landing spot in the entire chamber. With a mighty thump the man of sinew came to rest on the platform at the foot of her bed, his enormous cock jutting out like a mighty redwood threatening to topple him with its prodigious weight.

Chlamydia's eyes widened. "Oh, baby!" she said. "Come to momma!"

"I will not do this!" the hero said, straining against the weight pulling him forward.

"Oh, c'mon Supes," Chlamydia purred, using the fingers of both hands to spread the lips of her drooling love hole. "All this foreplay has made me so horny I can hardly stand it. Just do what you have to do..."

Gritting his teeth, the veins throbbing on his broad forehead, the sinews of his neck standing out like cables on a suspension bridge, the mighty avenger tried vainly to rein back on the raging stallion between his legs. Pulling with both hands, all he managed to do was roll back the foreskin of his steed to expose its magnificent purple head. Chlamydia took the opportunity to spring into action. Rolling forward, she grasped the bucking mammoth in both hands and engulfed the head in her hot mouth. Stars exploded behind the hero's eyes and he felt the last vestige of strength leaving him. His knees buckled and he toppled sideways to land on the bed, Chlamydia swinging up into the air and back down between his titanic thighs, never losing the rhythm of her bobbing head.

"No," the man of mush whined, "You can't!"

Chlamydia raised her head, precum glistening on her lips like sugar glaze. "Oh, I can," she said. "And I WILL!" Raising herself up, the villainous bitch straddled the hero's narrow waist, grasping his steely rod in her hands and aiming it toward her eagerly awaiting nest of vice and virtue. Then, as the hero wailed pathetically, she lowered herself onto it, plunging its ramrod stiffness deep into the velvety confines of her fortress, stretching the walls beyond their means until she felt she would explode from the pressure.

"I've waited a long time for this!" Chlamydia crowed, reveling in

the combined sensation of pleasure and pain and riding the heroic muscle like the experienced slut she was. Pumping harder and harder, she ran her hands shamelessly over the superbly ripped abdomen and mountainous pecs of the mighty hero, laughing at his feeble attempts to stop her and twisting his baseball-sized nipples mercilessly until he groaned with unrestrained pleasure.

"Stop ... please..." he moaned. "You ... don't ... know ... what ... you're ... doing..."

"I know exactly what I'm doing!" Chlamydia proclaimed triumphantly, feeling the waves of sensation building within her. It was going to be a heroic orgasm, she thought, an orgasm befitting the woman who had finally tamed this warrior of justice known throughout the galaxy for his upstanding virtue and moral fibre. "I have won!"

"Noooooooooooo..." the hero cried as the tingling in his grapefruit-sized balls began to overwhelm him. He was going to cum! Chlamydia felt the throbbing of his massive organ as his orgasm began and the sensation was enough to push her over the edge herself. She screamed as the first wave of her own orgasm overtook her, smashing through her pleasure centers like a mighty Vaseline-coated fist. Another was on its way, promising to be even more magnificent than the last and she began to laugh, throwing her head back in triumphant abandon.

She never knew what hit her after that, as the muscular organ deep within her spat out the first of its mighty loads, ripping through her body like a heat-seeking missile. By the time the man of might had gotten control of the bucking steel girder between his legs, and the last of the spasms had passed, Chlamydia had been reduced to little more than gooeey paste on the ceiling of the chamber directly over the bed.

Closing his eyes to avoid the horror, the ravished hero curled up into a ball on the bed. Such was the curse of an otherworldly creature with strength far beyond that of mortal men. 'Man of titanium, woman of toilet paper,' he thought, then gave into the languid feeling that was overtaking him and snuggled down into the plush bed to sleep it off.

BIRTHRIGHT

"The walls are collapsing, I tell you." Crandell Payne said, shaking a bony finger in the direction of a bemused Ray Potter, bartender of the Underground Bar. "With every year that passes, the borderlands get thinner and thinner. Soon they'll be able to come and go as they please and then nobody will be safe!"

Four stools down, Ed Grell raised his heavy head drunkenly and swung it in the direction of the outburst. "Pipe down, old man," he slurred, blowing out a fine spray of beer and foam. "Nobody wants to hear your stories today. It's always the same damn thing anyway ... don't you know any other ones?"

Weak laughter rippled through the dank corridor that made up the
U n d e r g r o u n d .

"Easy Ed," Potter intoned warningly. "He's not hurting anybody. Here Mr. Payne, have a drink. It'll help calm you down."

Crandell Payne drew himself up, pulling his hands back and away from the sticky bar with disgust. "I never indulge in alcohol, you know that Raymond. I merely come to this establishment for the company."

"Sure you do..." Grell snorted. "Just like the rest of us."

Potter nodded, ignoring the outburst. "Of course, Mr. Payne, but there's always a first time, huh? Here have some of the good stuff..." He placed a shot glass filled with amber liquid on the bar before the old man and pushed it forward.

"Hey!" Grell shouted. "How come he gets offered the good stuff and all we get is this watered down swill!"

Potter glared at Grell. "Nobody's talking to you, Ed. You want to keep drinking here, shut yer mouth and stop bothering my customers." Then, turning back to Payne, he said supportively, "C'mon, Mr. Payne, just a little. Maybe it'll help calm some of those bad dreams you've been having."

Payne stood stiffly and brushed downward on his frayed black jacket to straighten it. Anger sparked in his rheumy eyes like blue

lightning. "Thank you, no, Raymond. I shall not presume on your time or charity any longer." Turning from the bar he gathered his tattered dignity around him and sidled out of the dark narrow hole that was the Underground, climbing the stairs and stepping out into the bright sunlight of the busy city street above.

Crandell Payne wasn't a large man, but it was clear that he had once been a man of some stature. It could be seen in his bearing and the way he dipped his head respectfully when a woman passed him on the street. Often they paid no attention to the genuflection, but on the odd occasion that they did, distaste or fear was the common reaction. Such courtesies were foreign to the women of this ever-changing world.

Though he wasn't exactly sure how it had happened, the world had changed around him and left him behind. He had grown old. But even though his stride had grown less measured with the passing of time, he still walked with a purpose and a fierce light still glowed like banked coals in the watery blue eyes all but hidden beneath wild, snow-white eyebrows. He was a relic. But a relic with a mission, he reminded himself. One last thing to do before bowing to the darkness once and for all. He had made a promise and to Crandell Payne, his word meant everything.

* * * *

It wasn't a long walk from the bustling downtown area of the city to the tree-lined street of old Victorians where the Duncan domicile sat – just a few blocks really, but Payne was winded all the same when he got there. Pushing open the wrought iron gate to the old ramshackle church, he shambled up the walkway and, avoiding the imposing double doors altogether, veered off to the right to pass into the chapel gardens.

Stopping to admire the wild roses that bloomed next to the weed-choked fountain, he inhaled deeply, then swung his scarecrow frame down onto a bench looking out through the overgrown garden, onto the street. It all looked so peaceful: neighbors working in their small manicured yards, children on bicycles, and somewhere down the street a dog barked. Even so, Payne wasn't deceived. None of this would be possible if not for the actions of the great man whose spirit

still hung heavy in this one-time house of a powerful and stern god.

"Fools," he muttered. "The walls between our reality and theirs are crumbling. You're only inches away from complete disaster. Isn't that right Joseph?" The old man nodded as if answering his own question. "We must always be on our guard. There must always be a sentinel..."

Payne's mutterings were broken by the sound of the old iron gate slamming shut. He blinked at the figure making its way up the walk, then smiled broadly as Joey Duncan entered the garden and plopped down on the bench next to him. The boy looked troubled. Payne checked himself. No, not a boy anymore: a man. Tall and thin, with hair black as midnight and eyes the color of moss, a strong jawline shadowed by an unrealized beard lurking just below the fair skin, young Joey was the spitting image of his father, God rest his soul. At 21 he was the rightful owner of this venerable fortress and head of the Duncan household. Of course, he was also the only surviving member of the Duncan household, but that was simple rhetoric.

"What's bothering you, my boy?"

Joey looked up absently, the black eyebrows of his clear brow furrowed into a crease. "I just saw the weirdest thing, Uncle Crandell."

Payne felt a tendril of something cold and familiar crawl up his back, but he forced himself to sound calm. "Weird?"

"Yeah," Joey said nodding. "I just went down to the corner market to grab a soda and ... I don't know, it was just ... weird."

Payne leaned forward. "What *exactly* happened, Joseph?"

The young man pushed an unruly lock of raven black hair from his face and turned expressive eyes to the sky, as though seeing something there that nobody else could. "Well, I was standing in line to pay and these guys in front of me ... punks, you know? Real assholes, making all kinds of noise and ... Anyway, they got up to the register and ... I guess it was because I was standing right behind 'em that I noticed what they did."

"What did they do?" It was all Payne could do not to come up out of his chair and shake the young man.

"When the cashier told them how much they owed ... they paid ... I swear, I saw it so clearly ... they paid with strips of newspaper. I

mean, they had a lot of stuff – sodas, chips, candy – you know, armloads of stuff. But they paid for it with old strips of newspaper."

The old man's spine was vibrating. "And what of the cashier?" he asked calmly.

"She took it ... and not only that, she gave them like eight dollars in change."

"The glamour..." Payne muttered to himself, his nostrils flaring and blue lightening playing in his eyes.

"Huh?" Joey asked, turning to look at the old man as if for the first time.

"What happened to these punks after they paid?"

"They left, I guess..."

Payne leaned in and wrapped a bony hand around the younger Duncan's wrist, startling him out of his reverie. "Where did they go, Joseph? What did they do after they paid? You watched them, did you not? You followed them..."

"Yeah, I did. How did you...?"

"Where did they go?"

"I followed them down to one of the warehouses on Jackson Street."

"Is that where they're staying?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"Did they see you following them?"

"I didn't think they had, but ... yeah ... they must have because one of them turned and smiled at me as he was going through the door. Kind of like he was letting me know that he knew I was there. It gave me the creeps."

Crandell Payne leaned back in his chair, his mind awl with what he had just heard. "The creeps, indeed."

"What's going on, Uncle Crandell? How did you know that I followed them?"

The old man turned, fixing a crackling gaze on his young charge. "You did what any Duncan would do. What they've been doing for centuries."

Joey's eyes narrowed. "Waitaminnit ... you're not going to bring

that old elf shit up again, are you? They were punks, uncle..."

The old man waved away his protests. "And that's why you felt compelled to follow them?"

Joey's mouth opened, then snapped shut again. He didn't have an answer for his actions.

His uncle turned to look in the direction of Jackson Street, some two miles distant. "They're back, Joseph. And they already seem to know who you are..."

* * * *

"I don't know, Uncle Crandell, it all just seems so out there." Joey sat a cup of hot water before the old man and dropped a tea bag into it.

"No, no, no, son. How many times do I have to tell you, tea bag first, then the water."

"Oh, right, I forgot. Sorry."

Payne sighed. "It'll work just the same. I'll make do."

Joey smiled affectionately at the old man. Payne wasn't really his uncle, just an old and dear friend of his father's. After the elder Duncan died some 20 years before, Payne had been there to help raise him. And now that his mother was gone too, the old man was all the family he had.

"Let me pour you another one, the right way this time."

"And let this one go to waste?" He shook his grizzled old head and began dipping the bag into the water rhythmically. "Waste not, want not, that's what I always say."

Joey nodded warmly. "You and every other guilt-monger out there."

Payne raised his eyes to peer at him through the overhang of tangled eyebrows. Dropping the soggy teabag into the tiny bowl provided, he picked up the cup and sipped at it. "Out there, huh?"

It took a second for Joey's brain to switch gears. "Huh. Oh! Yeah, that..."

"Still think it's the ravings of an old man."

"Well ... not ravings exactly..."

Payne nodded. "And what of all the things I've shown you? The books and the tools that have been handed down from generation to generation of Duncans, did I make all those up, as well?"

"No, of course not, it's just ... I don't know, so ... weird."

"Weird," the old man repeated. "Like your inability to operate any computer-based technology?"

Joey rolled his eyes. "So, computers and cell phones don't like to work around me. What does that prove?"

Payne sipped at his tea, absently. "Just that there is more to you than you seem to think."

"My techie friends say I just have some kind of magnetic field or something like that surrounding me and it disrupts microchips. It's a pain in the butt. I'm an anomaly."

"Your father was just such an anomaly."

"So it's genetic. That doesn't mean I'm some kind of sorcerer."

"Nobody said you were."

Joey waved it away with exasperation. "Hunter ... whatever. It's just weird, that's all."

Payne signed. "There's that word again. Just one of many to describe what to many must seem like so much mumbo-jumbo."

Joey nodded.

"But it's not mumbo-jumbo, my boy. The borderlands are as real as this teacup and just as fragile. The Sidhe are older than time, a magical race, seductive and cruel, with no regard for humanity except in the most dismissive way. To them we are no more than animals to be despised. Or perhaps lower, even, than that, considering they hold most aspects of nature in high regard."

"I don't know, Uncle Crandell," Joey interrupted. "These guys didn't look like elves to me, and they sure didn't look like nature lovers. They just looked like punks, all covered with tattoos and piercings and body modifications. They couldn't have been much older than 17 or 18."

"Naturally. The Tuatha Dé Danaan don't live by the same rules that we do. They always appear young, but don't be fooled. That youthfulness can hide great age, and with age comes great power."

Joey shrugged. "Well, they didn't seem to be hurting anyone..."

"Yet," Payne said, staring at him sternly over the rim of the teacup, ancient eyes crackling. "They don't belong here, Joseph. Their appearance in so bold a fashion does not bode well at all and is not to

be taken lightly. Your father gave his life defending this realm from the Sidhe. Would that I had followed him into that greater glory." The old man's eyes clouded as he stared off into the distance, reliving another time.

"Uncle Crandell, my father was killed in a traffic accident. You have the newspaper clippings..."

The rheumy eyes sharpened once more. "Yes. A traffic accident. That's what they called it. But there was more to it than that. Much more. Your father was a very good driver, even in the rain..." He looked hard at the young man sitting across from him. So green. So disbelieving. And yet he carried the Duncan name. He was his father's son and thus rightful heir to his legacy. It was time he knew the truth. "There was no accident that night, Joseph. His car was run off the road by the Sidhe."

It was all Joey could do not to roll his eyes. He had been hearing stories about the Sidhe his entire life, it seemed. More so after his mother had died. She hadn't allowed this kind of talk in her house. It frightened her, she said. And it brought back bad memories, which she would just as soon forget. But using them as an excuse for past sins was something altogether different.

"There were eyewitnesses, Uncle Crandell."

"Who saw what they were supposed to see!" The old man slammed a fist down on the table, slopping tea over the edge of his cup and causing Joey to jump. "That's the glamour at work. The minds of ordinary humans are easily clouded. You saw that today with your own eyes at the market. Those eyewitnesses saw your father lose control of his car and skid off the ramp onto the roadway below. What they didn't see was the nightmare that caused the accident. The whooping, hollering pack of evil which ran him down like a fox and pushed him to his fiery death." The old man slumped in his chair, his head dropping forward onto his chest.

Joey expelled a short staccato of breath and shook his head. "Why are you telling me this? Everybody knows what happened. My father was manic, he deliberately drove his car..."

"No!" Payne's bony finger seemed to fly across the table to hover between Joey's eyes. "Never! Your father was a great man, but like

most great men, he was greatly misunderstood. He had no intention of dying that night. His work was far from over."

"But if he was so strong," Joey said, pushing the accusatory digit out of his way and leaning forward, tears forming in his eyes. "How were they able to defeat him? One man against a whole pack? C'mon, Uncle Crandell ... I think he wanted to die!"

Payne looked startled. "Is that what you think? Your father was not a stupid man, Joseph. And he loved you and your mother very much. He had the world to live for. He just made a miscalculation..."

Joey wiped at his eyes angrily. "What kind of miscalculation?"

"He should never have gone out alone to meet them," Payne said hollowly, dropping his eyes to stare into the half-empty teacup. "His strength was here, in this fortress he had built on holy ground. He should have let them come to him, but he was tired of the battle and worried for his family. I would have gone with him. Should have gone with him, but he made me stay behind. Made me promise to protect you and your mother." Payne raised his white-haloed head to pierce Joey with a fierce gaze. "And to make sure, that should anything happen to him, you would receive the instructions you need to carry on the family tradition."

Joey pushed away from the table, rising to tower over Payne. A fire burned in his hazel eyes. So like his father in so many ways. "Forget it!" he said. "I don't want anything to do with some stupid family tradition."

"Stupid, Joseph? Is keeping humanity safe from the invasion of evil from beyond the borderlands stupid? Noble, yes, but never stupid."

"Noble, my ass! My father was 33 years old when he died." Bitterness coated his throat, making the words taste acrid. "He left behind a one-year-old son who would never know him and a wife who jumped at shadows for years until finally following him to the grave. Is that noble, Uncle Crandell? Because if it is, I don't want to have anything to do with it! And stop calling me Joseph, I am NOT my father!"

The sound of the screen door slamming was like a slap across the face to Payne. Closing his eyes, he let the sting of the words seep

deep down into his soul. He had failed.

"I don't know what else to do, Joseph," he said hoarsely. "I've tried everything to make him see what he must do, but the times have changed. Your son is a disbeliever and I have grown old."

Opening his watery eyes, Payne pushed his aching body to a standing position. Jackson Street. They were back and living on Jackson Street. The boy was in danger and he had promised to protect. Straightening out his tattered jacket, Crandell Payne hobbled out of the kitchen, leaving the Duncan home by the garden door, as he had entered it.

* * * *

It was worse than he had expected. Standing in the shadows of the looming warehouses on Jackson Street, Payne took in the changes that, to a less practiced eye, would seem far from unusual. Like heat traces rising off hot asphalt, the building before him shimmered in and out of phase. Windows appeared to fade out of sight and doorways appeared, only to disappear moments later. Sometimes light, sometimes dark, the walls shifted imperceptibly going from brickwork to gray stone masonry to what appeared to be a barely discernible grassy knoll, then back again.

This was the place all right. A Sidhe sifra right in the middle of the city! They had grown bolder. Twenty years before, the sifra had appeared on the outskirts of the city in an open field. But then, the city had been much smaller twenty years before, and far less sprawling. There weren't many fields left, even at the extreme edges of the metropolis. The times had changed all that, as well.

Payne shivered despite the summer heat, gathering his thin jacket around him and pulling it close at the throat with one bony, blue-veined hand. It was dangerous to have such a powerful force within the city limits. Already he could smell the changes taking place all up and down the street and for several blocks in every direction. A smell like ozone and mosses, with lingering traces of swamp gas.

A sound of tinkling bells reached his ears and a cool breeze swept past him, bringing with it the scent of flowers and fresh cut grass. Looking down, he saw a large fat toad hop past his foot, only to shimmer out of sight a second later. Above him the sky shifted from

deep azure to glowing lemon, then rippled like the Aurora Borealis before returning to the more familiar blue.

He would have to work fast, Payne thought. Get rid of the emissary before he could do any lasting damage and the gateway would vanish back to the twilight dimension from which it originated. Who knew how many of his kind he had brought through already? The emissary was the key. It was his magic that was creating the rift in the paper-thin walls of the borderlands. Get rid of him and all would be well again.

Whether he liked it or not, Crandell Payne was the only one with the knowledge to complete the task. He would have to do it, with or without the younger Duncan's help.

* * * *

"Ah, Christ..." Joey thought to himself. "This is exactly what I need right now..." Letting the stack of vinyl records drop backwards in the bin, he turned away from the door. He'd come to the record store, like he always did when he was upset, to spend money and take his mind off the conversation he'd had with his uncle. The last thing he expected to see was the group of punks from the market pushing their way into the store.

Keeping his back to them, he began to busy himself by flipping absently through another stack of vinyl. The ruckus they were making made it hard to ignore them completely, but when one of the quartet addressed Gina, the clerk behind the counter with, "Hey, baby, nice tits, mind if I touch 'em?" he couldn't help but turn back.

Three of the goons were crowded around the counter and Gina appeared to have her hands full. Instinctively he began to make his way down the aisle to help her. The fourth member of the pack, however, stopped him cold. Set apart from his friends, he stood languidly flipping through a bin right in Joey's path, his strange golden eyes fixed on him, a small smile playing on his lips. To Joey, his teased out purple hair made him look for all the world like David Bowie in that puppet movie, *The Labyrinth*. Except that he was much better looking. And younger.

"Going somewhere?"

Joey narrowed his eyes, a feeling of vertigo washing over him that

he attributed to adrenaline. "Don't try to stop me."

"Why would I do that, Joseph Duncan?"

The dizziness got stronger and Joey had to grab onto the nearest bin to steady himself. Then, just as quickly, it passed, leaving him feeling leaden and drained of energy. Time seemed to slow to a crawl around them.

Joey shook his head to clear it. "My name's Joey. Who are you?"

The purple-maned stranger smiled and his face became even more beautiful than before. "I doubt you could pronounce my name, but I like the one you've chosen for me. Bowie will do."

"How did you...?"

Bowie laughed and the sound was clear and pure like a wind chime. "I know many things about you ... Joey. I can be anything you wish. You do find me desirable, do you not?"

Color rose to Joey's cheeks and his nostrils flared. "Don't flatter yourself, asshole!"

Bowie shook his head. "Tsk, tsk, Joey. To thine own self be true, isn't that how the saying goes?" The stranger stepped closer to him, bringing with him the smell of lazy summer warmth and a hint of lavender. "You need have no fear of rejection from me. I'll deny you nothing, unlike your judgmental brethren..."

Joey's stomach dropped through the floor and he began to tremble as the Sidhe leader lifted a long-fingered hand to run it lightly across his right cheek, down across his neck, his chest, his stomach ... the hand flattened and slid down to cup Joey's expanding crotch. He could feel the heat of his growing erection and the stranger smiled. "Very nice, for one so young," he whispered. "So fat and juicy. The things I could do with this eager piece of man flesh..."

Joey's breath became ragged. So beautiful ... and so masculine ... He closed his eyes and forced himself to pull away. Time seemed to be moving slowly around he and the strange punk named Bowie; almost like they were in a bubble, unseen and unheard by those shopping around them.

"No," he croaked out, stepping backwards and feeling the vertigo wash over him again. "I know what you are ... what all of you are..."

"Really, and what are we?"

Joey's eyes snapped open and the world seemed to lurch back into motion around him. Still, the bubble remained. "Assholes!"

"Poetic," Bowie said, bringing his rejected hand up to his mouth to suppress a yawn. "... and also quite banal. You'll have to do better than that."

"I don't have to do anything," Joey spat. "You don't scare me."

Bowie nodded and his smile became cruel. "No? We should. We scared your daddy. He knew what we were too, for all the good it did him."

"You leave my father out of this!"

"There's another saying you humans have, 'like father, like son.'" Bowie stepped back to fix him with an appraising stare. "I'd like to find out just how like your father you really are."

"What do you know about my father?"

"The greatest Sidhe hunter of his day? Oh, not much, really. One hears stories ... are you as much a coward as he was, I wonder?"

"My father was no coward."

"Wasn't he? You didn't see him running for his life in those last few minutes before his death."

"That's a lie!"

"Oh, it's no lie, fledgling. I should know. I killed him..."

"Keep your hands to yourself, freak!" Gina shouted angrily. The bubble burst.

Kissing sounds and laughter, then a short shriek from the girl. That was it. Ripping his eyes from the golden gaze before him, Joey pushed past Bowie and strode purposefully forward. Placing a large hand on two of the goon's shoulders, he yanked them back and flung them sideways. The other whirled around to meet him, smiling broadly in anticipation. With an amazing agility, the two Joey had manhandled seemed to flow back up to crouch eagerly on either side of their friend. All had wild expressions and far too many pointed teeth, like dogs that had just cornered a cat.

He studied them with a detachment that surprised him, as though appraising their worth for the upcoming battle. Elaborate tattoos and piercings decorated their faces and upper bodies. Two had shaved heads, their pointed ears standing out like beacons. The other sported

a Mohawk, which fell to one side completely covering that side of his face and head. Several rings ran up the curve of his elegantly pointed ear. Joey had seen these kinds of modifications before – the pointed ears, the sharpened teeth, the split and forked tongues – but what really brought him up short was their eyes. Golden in color, like Bowie's, and sweeping back at an angle, they were like nothing he had ever seen before. Like characters out of a Japanese Anime movie, he thought absently to himself.

"That was really stupid, little man."

Joey stepped sideways to bring Bowie back into his line of sight. Joey was tall – 6' 2", like his father – but these guys all outstripped him by at least a few inches. Bowie stepped around the bin to approach him.

"Okay, that's enough!" Gina shouted, the sound of a shotgun being cocked shattering the tension. Bowie turned his head a fraction of a degree and raised an eyebrow at the girl behind the counter. The weapon was leveled at his face. Snarls of disapproval rose up from the trio before Joey, their golden eyes bouncing back and forth between him, their leader and the girl behind them.

Malicious humor continued to dance in Bowie's golden eyes, but he raised his right hand slowly nonetheless, signaling to his comrades. Without question they slunk around Joey to gather around him. The young man turning slowly to follow their progress.

"Now get out!" Gina shouted from behind him. "And don't come back or I swear I'll blow your fuckin' face off!"

Still smiling, Bowie nodded and the others pushed their way out of the store to wait on the sidewalk. "Strong words for such a little girl," he purred. "I could make you eat those words."

"Fuck you, freak," Gina spat. "I'm the one with the gun, remember?"

His eyebrows rose. "How could I possibly forget?" Then, turning his golden gaze on Joey, he began to laugh. This time the sound was unpleasant and cruel, it unnerved him and he found himself stepping backwards. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement behind the counter, but before he could turn his head completely, Gina had already placed the barrel of the shotgun in her mouth. His eyes locked

with hers, wide with fear and a lack of understanding, then the sound of thunder ripped through the store and she flew back against the wall with a meaty impact of finality.

Joey was stunned. He didn't know how long he stood staring at the oozing stain on the wall behind the counter, but when he turned back Bowie had disappeared, taking his pack with him. Outside the windows, traffic slowed to a crawl again, but this time out of curiosity. A crowd was beginning to gather. Somewhere behind him a woman was screaming. But still the laughter echoed in his head, taunting him.

* * * *

When Joey finally got back home, later that evening, Payne had already returned with the ingredients he needed and was busy in the kitchen, putting together his arsenal. He stopped and looked up when Joey entered the room, still visibly shaken.

The old man's look hardened. "What has happened?"

Joey shook his head dazedly. "Gina Monroe ... is dead."

"How?"

"I ... I don't know. I saw it happen but I still don't know." The entire event had taken on a sort of dreamlike quality that wasn't exactly clear to him. He vaguely remembered having a conversation with one of the punks, but what was it they had said to one another? What could they possibly have had to converse about? It didn't make any sense. "I've been down at the police department for hours trying to explain what I saw but nobody seems to believe me..."

"Fools," Payne said, turning his attention once again to the cabalistic designs he was burning into the surface of what looked for all the world like a wooden fence post.

"Everybody seems to have seen something different," Joey continued. "No two stories are the same and I seem to be the only one who remembers those punks being there at all."

"Naturally," Payne grunted. "It is ever that way with their kind. Chaos follows them wherever they roam. Why do you think the world is in the state it's in these days...?"

Joey looked up. "What are you saying, that all the problems of the world are caused by these ... Sidhe?"

"Not all," Payne conceded. "But most. There are far more of them than there are those of the hunter blood, like yourself. The walls are crumbling and their influences are widespread." He looked up from his task. "Now do you begin to see the urgency here? They've come back to this city that was once protected by your father. With him gone ... and nobody to take his place ... they will devour it from the inside out."

Joey screwed his face up in concentration. "But wait a minute, here ... if the Sidhe killed my father 20 years ago, why has it taken them so long to come back? Why didn't they just overrun the place then, once he was out of the way?"

"They couldn't. The protections he put into effect were strong and made all the stronger by his death. There was a time when that would have bought a town or village at least a hundred years of peace, but the times have changed and twenty years of disbelief have eroded away at them. I only hope that I'm strong enough, not being of the blood myself, to make a difference."

Joey stared hard at the old man he had come to know as his uncle. "You want me to fight them, don't you? You want me to risk my neck fighting something that can't be seen by anybody else. Something that has the power to make a girl put a shotgun in her mouth and pull the trigger..."

"I only want you to claim what is yours by right."

"And if it kills me like it did my father?"

"Then, so be it!" Crandell Payne looked up fiercely at his charge. Blue lightening crackled in his eyes and color flooded to his aged cheeks, making him look for a moment like a much younger man. "A true Duncan would never shrink from such a task, no matter what the dangers. Yours is a lineage of heroes. Never before has a Duncan put his own well being before his duties. And never did I believe that I would live to see the day it would happen in this household."

Slamming shut the book he had been working from, Payne stuffed it under his arm and strode from the room angrily, the smell of burning wood and incense following in his wake like bitter perfume.

* * * *

Later that evening, as Joey prepared for bed, his uncle's words

continued to echo through his head. Hero? He wasn't a hero. Heroes were myths. Just like these Sidhe his uncle was always raving about. But even as he tried to convince himself of these logical truths, the events of earlier in the day continued to haunt him. Gina Monroe was dead. He watched her kill herself for no reason at all. He kept going back to that final look in her eyes, before she pulled the trigger. Confusion, surprise and fear. She had done it against her will. Something or somebody had forced her to do it. And he had been there to witness it all. But it didn't make any sense.

He lay in his bed, trying to banish the ugliness from his mind without any luck at all. It was at times like this that he wished he were more adventurous. He'd never really taken any chances in his life. It was almost as though he was geared to an even-keeled existence; one that didn't offer any real temptations. While his friends had always anguished over "right" and "wrong," there had never been a question in Joey's mind. He always seemed to know what was right. He never really deviated from the gut instinct that told him how to proceed. It had earned him the unwelcome nickname: Moral Joey.

Case in point, his friend Mac was always trying to get him to try marijuana. "It'll help you sleep man," he would say. "It quiets the voices in your head and lets you relax." While his other friends slowly succumbed to the temptation, Joey had never faltered. To be honest, it was one of many things that Mac was always telling him, when he wasn't trying to get into Joey's pants. He had always seen Joey as a challenge, a soul to be corrupted: all to no avail. Mac wasn't really a friend anyway, just somebody he had known since grade school. While all of his other classmates had graduated high school and gone away to college, Joey had stayed behind, not sure what to do with his life. Mac had stayed behind, too, but he still wasn't a friend. Mac had issues. Mac was a pothead who was always making the wrong choices. And Joey? Well, Joey had always done the right thing, but he was also a little lost right now...

When sleep finally came to him, it was fitful and, not surprisingly, filled with dreams. What was surprising was the quality of those dreams. Rich with color and seeming almost real, he was swept away to a magical place in which his father and mother were still alive and

guiding him through his difficult life. Everybody was happy and smiling. At one point, Gina Monroe, face scrubbed and glowing, her enormous jugs spilling invitingly from a low-cut blouse, was telling him how much she had always liked him. Gina had never really talked to him before, except when ringing up his purchases at the record store, but he found that he liked her. She was cool.

And all his high school friends were there, too. They had returned from college and included him in their activities. Everything was right with the world. He was happy. A knock briefly interrupted his happiness and he tried to ignore it. His mother kissed him on the cheek and placed before him a large plate filled with all of his favorite foods. The knock continued. He tried to wave it away. His father was making a toast telling everybody how proud he was of his son. The knocking became insistent. He turned away from the happy family scene and the dream dissolved.

He awoke disoriented in the darkness of his room, blinking and trying to get his bearings. A light tapping caught his attention. He looked first toward the door, then at the window. The tapping was coming from there. A shadow was outlined against the blue glow cast on the panes by a full moon high in the sky. Hesitantly, Joey pulled the covers back and sat up. The shadow waved at him. Curiously, he slipped his feet into his slippers and tiptoed toward the window. He couldn't make out who the shadow belonged to. Mac? What time was it? Still slightly disoriented, he unlocked the window and pulled it open.

With one quick motion, the shadow bled into his room and coalesced into a crouching figure that stood slowly. Joey's heart stopped and he stepped back. The shadow's hand shot out and covered his mouth. The index finger of the other hand rose up to press against smiling lips in a shushing motion. Filtered moonlight outlined those lips, then spread as the shadow stepped forward until the entire face was lit. It was Bowie!

"What are you doing here?" Joey whispered when the elf's hand had dropped away.

"I wanted to see you," was the only reply. Mischief played in the elf's strange golden eyes and the moonlight streaming in through the

window turned his purple mane of hair into an explosion of dark colors.

"Why?" Joey asked, suspiciously.

"Why not?" Light. Casual. Unthreatening.

"I ... I don't think my uncle would like it very much if he found out that you were here."

"Do you always do what your uncle tells you to do?"

"No," Joey said, instantly on the defensive. "I think for myself."

"Yes, I'm sure you do, but you're a good boy, aren't you, Joseph Duncan?"

"Joey."

"Very well. You're a good boy, aren't you ... Joey?"

"What do you want?"

The elf cocked his head. "I think you know."

"I don't, actually."

A slow seductive smile crept across the elf's face. "I want you."

Joey's eyes widened. "Are you going to kill me like you did Gina?"

The elf laughed and the sound was like tinkling bells. "Really, I'm sorry about your friend," he said blithely, causing Joey to wince. "Sometimes people react in unexpected ways around us. No, I'm not going to kill you, Joey. I find myself ... strangely attracted to you. Curiosity has always been one of my weaknesses. That and beautiful mortal boys with big dicks."

Joey blushed and instinctively crossed his hands in front of his crotch. To his horror he discovered that his penis had grown turgid and was probably protruding slightly against the front of his pajamas. His blush deepened. "I don't have a big dick," he found himself saying and instantly wished he hadn't.

Bowie laughed again. "So modest. I got a nice handful of it earlier today. I've been thinking about it ever since. That's why I'm here."

Joey blinked, unsure of how to respond. Bowie stepped closer. Joey backed away.

"Don't be afraid, little mortal," Bowie said gently, his voice becoming hypnotic. "I'm not going to hurt you. If anything, I'm going to help you."

"Help me?" Joey stammered. "Help me what?"

"Get rid of that little virginity problem you've got."

Joey stepped back and instantly found himself against a wall. "I ... I'm not a virgin..."

Bowie smiled and cocked his head. "Okay. Then why don't you show me what you've got, Mr. Experienced?"

"No."

"No?"

"I don't want to..."

Bowie's eyes dropped to take in Joey's hands, pressed firmly against the erection threatening to burst from his pajama bottoms. "I think you do," the elf said in a singsong fashion, giving emphasis to the last word.

He reached out slowly to touch Joey's clenched fist and the boy started. Golden eyes flicked upward to pierce his own moss-rimmed pupils. "I'm not going to do anything you haven't thought about yourself." Bowie's hand stroked Joey's until it relaxed, then pushed it aside and gently wrapped around the pajama-clad erection. "Can we lose these?"

Before Joey could respond, the elf had released the snaps and the pajama bottoms fell away into a puddle at his feet. His hard cock sprang upwards, straining to feel the touch again, now that it was free. Bowie happily complied, wrapping a slender hand around it and caressing downwards to cup warm, dangling balls.

"I knew you had a big dick," Bowie said appreciatively. "I just have a sense about these things."

"It's not that big," Joey muttered.

"Really? And how many big dicks have you seen in your life?"

"Just ... just pictures."

Bowie licked his lips. "Take my word for it, lover. This is nothing to sneeze at. And now, I'm going to see what it tastes like."

Joey shuddered as the elf lowered himself back to a crouching position and his tongue flicked out to lick playfully at the head of his cock. He groaned. Smiling, Bowie wrapped his lips around the tip and slid it expertly into his mouth. His fingers gently massaged Joey's balls.

"Oh, god..." Joey whispered. "I think I'm going to ... cum!"

Bowie let the cock slip from his lips. "Not yet, you're not. I've still got plans for this monster." The elf rose and looked into Joey's eyes again. "I'm glad you liked that."

Joey nodded. Bowie smiled and brought his face close to his. It hovered there, just a fraction of an inch away, their breath comingling, before descending. Their lips locked and Joey's entire body relaxed. The elf's hands came up to cradle the young man's face and Joey became lost in the kiss. His arms came up to wrap around the slender elf's waist, then slid upwards to his back. That kiss, Joey's first, was everything he had ever dreamed of and more. When Bowie pulled away, he gasped, then leaned forward for another. The elf complied. The next kiss was longer and more involved. When it was over, Joey knew he would do anything the elf asked of him.

Later on, Joey could never really be sure how they ended up in his bed. It seemed to him that one minute they were leaning against the wall, locked in a passionate embrace and the next they were lying naked and entwined, exploring each other's bodies. The one thing he could be sure of was how magical that moment was. The elf's body was one of wonder. Exactly like a mortal body, but smoother, softer and the smells it produced were intoxicating. The cock was beautiful; long, smooth and curved upwards, like an alabaster statue. It was the first time Joey had ever seen one up close and in person, though he had dreamed of it for as long as he could remember.

He'd often wondered if he would "do it" right, the first time he gave a blowjob, but when the opportunity finally presented itself, he found himself falling into a natural rhythm. The cock just felt right in his mouth. It fit perfectly and when it slid down into his throat, there was no gag reflex whatsoever. Bowie moaned appreciatively, urging him onwards. He eagerly devoured the elf cock like a starving man who had never fully realized just how hungry he actually was.

While the elf licked and sucked on his own cock, Joey paid attention. Learning as he went along, he nibbled along the underside and felt the elf shudder. When he let his tongue travel along the shaft and down to lick at the silky, hairless balls, the moans told him he was on the right track. He learned that if he slowly pumped the cock in and out of his mouth, while flicking at the head with his tongue, the

elf would respond similarly and the feeling was intense. He felt his orgasm building and knew the elf was getting close, too.

He was surprised when Bowie pulled away. He looked down at him expectantly. The elf lay glowing in the moonlight, his left arm thrown across his eyes, a smile playing on his face. His breath was ragged, but he quickly got it under control, saying, "Not yet, lover. There's still one more thing I want from you."

"What could be better than this?" Joey asked innocently.

Bowie uncovered his eyes and looked at him, his golden eyes dancing. "Come here."

Joey furrowed his brow, but did as he was told, twisting around until he was facing the elf. Bowie reached out and pulled him up on top of him. Joey smiled and kissed him. The elf kissed back, eagerly, squirming until he was in place, with one leg on either side of Joey's hips. He cradled Joey's head and lifted his legs until the young man's erection was grazing against his ass pucker.

Joey looked surprised. "You want me to..."

"Fuck me," Bowie answered.

"But, don't we need a condom or something?"

The elf laughed. "Not necessary, lover. I'm your first and am completely immune to human diseases."

"But..."

Bowie placed a slender finger against his lips. "Shhhhh ... no buts. Just do it."

Joey nodded and began applying pressure. Despite a lack of lubrication, the elf's asshole seemed to open up easily and swallow his cock with out any effort whatsoever. The feeling was beyond anything he had ever imagined. Joey groaned loudly.

"Yes," Bowie said. "Do it."

Just as when he had been giving his first blowjob, Joey instantly fell into a natural rhythm, sliding in and out of the elf's ass effortlessly. He was amazed that the elf took it all the way to the base and never even winced. His cock felt warm and tingly and he could swear that there were muscles inside Bowie that were massaging it and pulling at it until he just couldn't hold it any longer. Opening his eyes, he looked down at Bowie and became lost in the elf's golden gaze.

As his orgasm built to the point of no return, he became aware of the elf whispering something he couldn't understand. Rhythmic and hypnotic the strange words carried him along, becoming one with the sensation building in his balls and traveling up his cock, down through his thighs and radiating outward into his lower torso. When the orgasm hit he was so overwhelmed that he howled loudly and the howl became a gasping laugh. He continued pumping and another orgasm overtook him, stronger than the last. He howled again, laughing even louder, reveling in the sensations that were shaking him to his very core. He had never felt anything like this. He knew he would never be the same again.

A loud knocking at his door brought everything to a crashing halt. He sat up, disoriented and blinking, the sound of his own laughter echoing in his ears along with his uncle's distressed voice calling out. "Joseph? Are you alright, boy? What's going on in there? Open the door!"

Joey looked around him. His blankets were disheveled and his pajamas lay on the floor in the bright moonlight. He was naked and ... he touched his stomach. Gross! A sticky mess plastered itself all across his torso, even as high up as his neck. He was a mess.

His uncle continued to pound at the door.

"It's okay, uncle," he stammered. "I was just dreaming, I think."

The knocking stopped. "Dreaming? It sounded like you were being murdered!"

"I'm sorry, uncle. I'm fine. Go back to bed."

"Open this door, boy. You scared the bejeezus out of me. I thought we were under attack."

"I'm fine, uncle. I'm just ... a little embarrassed, that's all..."

A pause. "Embarrassed?"

"I kind of made a mess of myself ... if you know what I mean..."

Another pause, then, "Um ... oh ... I see. Well, clean yourself up. I'll ... I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, uncle."

"Good night."

Joey listened to the sounds of his uncle's slippered footsteps shuffling down the hallway and smiled to himself. He'd surprised himself with

that response. Never in his life had he ever been quite so bold with his uncle. He wasn't quite sure what had come over him, but he felt exhilarated, nonetheless. He'd actually admitted to his uncle that he'd had a wet dream and flustered the old gent. God, but he felt so alive, right now.

Then the full realization of what had happened hit him and he was instantly sobered. It had all been a dream. Hadn't it? He was alone now and covered in his own jizz. He hadn't been fucking Bowie at all. He was still a virgin. But it had all seemed so real. Even now he could still smell the elf in the air. Taste him on his swollen lips. What had happened to him?

Reaching down he scooped up his pajama bottoms and began wiping the mess from his stomach and chest. His mind raced. When he was done, he tossed the bottoms back onto the floor and lay back with his head cradled in his hands. It couldn't have been a dream, could it? It all seemed so real...

* * * *

The rest of the week was spent in silence, with Joey helping where he could, but too embarrassed to say anything to his uncle who was working like a man possessed. He seemed to work around the clock, sleeping only briefly in short phases, carving symbols and creating a bewildering array of objects, then disappearing with them for hours on end and always coming back either empty handed, or with more materials on which to work.

As his uncle worked, Joey watched the local news and pored through the newspapers, following the every-widening string of disasters and tragedies as they occurred throughout the city. Officials and media personalities all speculated on what was causing them – the summer heat, the moon, something in the water – an endless parade of speculations, each more ridiculous than the last.

Finally, on Friday morning, he decided to sit down and discuss the matter with his uncle.

"There's nothing to discuss, boy," Payne said gruffly. "Time is running out."

"I know it is, uncle, that's why I'm asking you what I should do?" Joey pleaded.

"Do? Do what your heart commands."

Joey nodded. "Fine. Then I'll go tonight to the warehouse on Jackson Street and confront these ... Sidhe."

For the first time in days, Payne stopped what he was doing to simply stare at his young charge. "Have you gone insane?"

Joey blinked. "I thought that was what you wanted..."

"Have you learned nothing from your father's actions? The last thing you should do is try to beard them in their den."

The young man sighed in exasperation. "Then what do you want me to do? Tell me."

Payne smiled indulgently. "I knew you'd come around in your own time, that's why I've been working so hard to set up the wards."

"Wards?"

"Protections. I'm replacing all the ones your father set up, but I'm doing it in a more systematic pattern. One that is sure to get the Sidhe's attention."

Joey was puzzled. "But why do you want to get their attention? Wouldn't it make more sense to hit 'em when they're not looking?"

"The Sidhe are never 'not looking,' my boy. My plan is not to get their attention, but to get as much done as possible before they decide to make their move. I've set traps throughout the city, but that will only anger them. A showdown is brewing and I need time to figure out the best place to conduct it, while at the same time protecting you."

Joey bridled. "I don't need protection. I can take care of myself."

Payne favored him with a pitying expression. "You're out of your league, my boy. Believe me when I say this, these fiends won't pass up the opportunity to destroy the only living heir to a family that has plagued them for two millennia."

"If that was what they wanted, couldn't they have done it just as easily at the record store when they killed Gina?"

"They didn't kill you before because they were testing you. Their reckless doings have already proven that they don't think you a threat. The only thing we have going for us, right now, is that they don't know where you live. Not that it would matter. Your father was very canny in building his sanctuary on hallowed ground."

Joey winced inwardly. They knew where he lived. He was sure of that. "So ... what can I do to help?"

"You can stay out of my way, for now. I'll let you know when you're needed."

"That's it then?"

Payne studied him, then nodded decisively. "That and lying low. You are not to go out for any reason, until I have a handle on things. Should they discover where you are, this is the safest place for you."

"What happens if they do come here?"

"They will be thwarted. Have you listened to nothing I've said? This is hallowed ground. Only the blackest of magics could negate that and only from the inside. So long as you are here, you are safe. Do you understand me?"

Joey's jaw set, but he nodded his understanding. "Yeah, I get it. Don't do anything. Just sit and wait. Fine." He hesitated, anger sending hot thoughts ricocheting through his brain, then added, "I just don't get *you*. A few days ago you were telling me how disappointed you were that I didn't want to risk my life to save humanity from these Sidhe creatures. 'A true Duncan would never shrink from the task, no matter what the dangers,' isn't that what you said?"

The old man looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry it had to come to this, my boy. I would have liked to be standing at your side when this final confrontation came, but such is not to be the case. You're just not ready."

"Wait, I was ready three days ago, but I'm not ready now?"

Payne stared at him, his expression unreadable. When he spoke, his words were carefully measured and devoid of emotion. "You are 21 years old, Joseph. A man by many standards. Your father, by the time he was your age, had already mastered the arcane arts and fought several battles. He had already suffered losses, many of which you will never be aware of. He was a man, in truth. He was ready. You have never shown an interest in those arts. You have never known the adrenalized terror of imminent failure, nor the joyous rush of unexpected victory. Your measure has been taken and you have been found wanting. You are soft and spoiled. You are in need of protection. One day, with luck, you may become the man your father

was, but that day is not today."

Joey was shocked. His uncle had never spoken to him like this. He felt small and ... unworthy. "It's not like you went out of your way to teach me!"

The old man smiled. "Ah, but I did, Joseph. Your mother, god rest her soul, forbade it. By the time she was gone you were already a teenager with your own ideas about the world. It's never too late to start learning, but one has to want it first."

Not one to give in to hot temperament, Joey weighed his uncle's words and saw the logic in them. He didn't have to like it, but those words were true. His uncle was right. He wasn't anywhere near ready to fight any battles. And to be quite frank, he wasn't even sure if those battles were necessary. Who was this terrible foe, anyway? The image of Gina blowing her head off came back to him and he pushed it away. The news reports echoed through his head, but still he wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to be feeling about it all, right now. There were still too many questions. Joey's face relaxed and he nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I know that. I just wish things had happened a little differently. I wish that I had believed you. I wish I had paid better attention."

Crandell Payne nodded, sadly. "As do I, my boy. As do I..."

Joey sat dejectedly watching as Payne put the finishing touches on his marker, questions bouncing through his head unanswered. He felt completely helpless. What he wanted to do was tell his uncle about the orgasmic dreams he'd been having, but the thought of describing the graphic and all too realistic scenarios to the gruff old gentleman left him cold. That was where the questions began. Not with the violence and chaos happening outside his door. They really began with a gentle touch and a kiss and the sighs of expert lovemaking. It was hard to marry the two ideas together and see them as some sort of whole.

Every night, the elf Bowie seemed to come to him and spend hours instructing him on the finer points of man-to-man sex. What confused Joey the most was that when he looked some of what he was learning up in books at the local bookstore, there were plenty of facts to corroborate what he had been dreaming. How was that possible?

How could he possibly know what it was like to fuck and be fucked by another man? How could he know about the prostate, which he had never even heard of until Bowie showed him where it was and how to massage it with the head of his long, slender cock until he came buckets? How could he have gotten it all right, while dreaming?

His uncle interrupted his reverie, by changing his tempo. His project completed, he began bundling the marker up and checking his pockets to make sure he had his necessary tools.

"Don't forget your keys," Joey said automatically.

The old man patted his right pants pocket. "Check."

It was a routine they had followed for years and they fell into it naturally enough. It brought them both up short. They looked at each other, then Payne shook his head and gathered up his bundle.

"Don't do anything until I get back," the old man said sharply, to which Joey could only nod in reply. Without further pleasantries, he turned and scooted out the front door, like he had so many times before, leaving Joey with his unanswered questions.

There was more to this than his mind could fathom. He needed answers and he knew who could give them to him. It wasn't his uncle. Neither was it the cryptically inscribed logs his father had kept. It was Bowie. There was just something not right about his uncle's view of things. If the Sidhe wanted to kill him, why didn't they just do it?

Feeling slightly guilty, he considered the possibility that his uncle was losing his grasp on reality. Maybe there was more to this than Payne was telling him. There was really only one way to find out. He knew exactly where he needed to go: the warehouse on Jackson Street. The "den" of the enemy.

* * * *

Joey had only gone three blocks when a voice called out to him, bringing him up short. He turned to see Bowie straddling a green plastic worm mounted on an industrial spring. All around him, children gamboled and played on the tiny playground of an urban daycare center. Joey blinked.

"What are you doing in there?" he asked, not sure if this were really happening or just another of his strange and wonderful dreams.

"Waiting for you," the elf answered.

Joey stepped toward the chain link fence and stared at the elf. "But how did you ... how did you know I'd be coming to find you?"

The elf smiled. "I have my ways. So, I guess you got my messages?"

"Messages?"

The elf continued smiling, bobbing back and forth on the plastic worm.

Joey registered his realization with a nod. "The dreams."

The elf didn't answer, choosing instead to watch him going through his inner struggle to understand the situation.

"They *were* dreams, weren't they?"

Bowie shrugged.

"They seemed so real..."

"They can be, if you like," Bowie said.

Joey hesitated. "I ... I don't know..."

"What's to know, lover?"

Joey started and froze. Bowie was standing beside him, his breath warm against his ear. He had never even seen him move. One second the elf was sitting, bobbing back and forth on a child's toy, the next he was standing beside him, whispering in his ear.

Forcing himself to be calm, Joey turned to look at the elf. Bowie leaned in closer and grazed his lips with his own. "I want you," he whispered. Joey realized he was shaking.

Bowie fixed him with his golden gaze. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Joey swallowed hard and nodded.

* * * *

The walk to the warehouse on Jackson Street was conducted in complete silence, with Joey stealing glances at the elegant elf striding along beside him. There was an unfamiliar smell in the air, both strangely pleasant and upsetting at the same time. His senses and his emotions were at war with themselves. On the one hand, he wanted to reach out and touch the elf, just to make sure he was real. On the other, he wasn't really sure what he was getting himself into. Logically he knew that this was madness. The last time he had actually talked to the elf had been in the record store, the day that

Gina had killed herself. Everything that had "occurred" since then had been, for all intents and purposes, a dream. Hadn't it? All of which meant that his uncle could very well be right and he could be walking into a trap.

That was part of the problem with logic. It wasn't always ... well ... logical. For one thing, Joey had a very hard time wrapping his head around the idea that HE could be so important in this mystical war his uncle was always raving about. Who was he, anyway? A 21-year-old loser, that's who. No direction, no prospects, no real goals to speak of. He just drifted through his days in a haze, watching as his more motivated peers made big decisions that would alter the course of their lives and taking steps to make those decisions a reality. He watched and he waited, but for what he didn't know. The idea that he could be important to anybody, besides his aging uncle, seemed ridiculous.

Hell, he was still a virgin, wasn't he? Except for the heated dreams he'd been having lately, he'd never even really thought about sex seriously. Even when he'd been going through puberty, and all of his other friends had been exploring their urges with one another, he had abstained. Just hadn't been feeling it, at the time. His interests had been more cerebral. He'd spent a lot of time by himself, reading. He'd been an outcast even then. Easily overlooked. Unimportant.

Bowie stopped at the metal door leading into the warehouse. His golden eyes were gentle and understanding when they found his own, not hard and malevolent like they had seemed in the record store. He smiled. "You're not unimportant to me."

Joey swallowed and gave him a lopsided grin. "Thanks."

The elf winked and pulled the metal door open with a creak. The smells that rushed out and assaulted Joey's senses were not at all what he had expected. He smelled grass and living things carried on springtime breezes. It made him feel like a little boy again, returning him to a time when he hadn't a care in the world. Intrigued, he stepped forward and into the darkness beyond the door. Bowie stepped through behind him and the door creaked shut, dropping them into absolute blackness.

Joey blinked and allowed his eyes to grow accustomed to the

gloom. Slowly, he began to make out a glow somewhere in the distance. Bowie took him by the hand and led him forward, down what appeared to be a hallway. The glow began to become more substantial until it became a patch of light, cast upon a sidewall. As they neared the light, Joey saw that the light was emerging from a doorway set deep into a metal wall to his right. Strange voices emerged, light and almost singsong, in a language he had never heard before.

The room fell silent as Bowie led Joey through the doorway and into what appeared to be an office, converted into a lounge of sorts. Soft pillows were strewn everywhere and a short table bearing a gigantic hookah sat in the middle. Three sets of otherworldly eyes, turned from the hookah to study him. It was the other punks from the record store, but here they didn't seem anywhere near as malevolent as they had then. Whereas before they had appeared rough, garish and alarmingly out of place, here they seemed softer and more beautiful, like they were slightly blurred along the edges and radiating an inner light that seemed to make them glow. The tattoos that covered their arms, chests and faces seemed more elegant and artful, like ribbons of radiance burned into their translucent skin. What had appeared outlandish before seemed perfectly natural now.

Joey turned to Bowie and saw that he, too, appeared to be glowing. Even more startling were the shadowy birdlike figures that appeared to be encircling Bowie's head. He blinked but the barely perceptible birds continued to flutter, just on the edge of his vision, easier to see when he looked away than when he tried to make them out directly.

"How...?" he asked, unable to complete the question.

Bowie favored him with a beatific smile. "Different reality, lover. Devoid of the harshness of your own."

"You're all so ... beautiful."

The elves all smiled.

"So are you, Joey," Bowie said softly. "Despite your mortality."

Joey blushed.

"These are my brothers, the sons of Dagda." Bowie ticked them off from left to right, "Cermait, Bobd and Midir. Here I am known as Aengus, but to you I will always be Bowie. We are Tuatha Dé

Danann."

"You're not at all what I expected," Joey said.

"We are many things to many people," Bowie replied. "Perception is often misconstrued as reality."

"But why are you here?"

Bowie cocked his head. "Ah, the million dollar question. We're here, my dear mortal, to reclaim what is rightfully ours. To take back that which was taken from us by a vengeful and despotic god. To bring balance back to an unbalanced world." He hesitated briefly to let the words sink in, then took Joey's arm and pulled him toward another door, set on the opposite side of the room. "Come with me."

Bowie pushed the door open and stepped through, pulling Joey along with him. The springtime smells were stronger and he felt a sense of vertigo and displacement as he stepped through onto a plush carpet of opalescent grass, flecked with brilliant flowers. A cool breeze embraced him, ruffling his hair. He looked up at lemon yellow skies swept by lavender clouds and spotted by immense flocks of birds unlike anything he had ever seen before. Trees rustled in the distance and the air was filled with birdsong. This was no warehouse. This was another world entirely!

"This is what humanity gave up, so long ago," Bowie said. "I thought you might want to see it, before you made a decision to embrace your legacy."

Joey stared gape-mouthed. "The skies were once yellow in my world?" was all that he could think to say.

Bowie laughed. "Not exactly. This is *our* version of the world. Your skies have always been blue, your clouds white and your grasses green. When they were combined, however, it was not unusual to see colors your kind would now find strange and incomprehensible. Thousands of years ago, when mankind was younger and less fearful, the extraordinary was embraced as a gift of the gods, not derided and dismissed as unnatural and suspect. It took a strict and regimented religion to destroy man's innocence. And with it, to drive away all that was enchanting from your world."

"But..." Joey hesitated. His brow furrowed as he tried to concentrate.

"Why the chaos?"

Joey looked at Bowie. He nodded. "And the violence."

Bowie looked thoughtful. "Change is never easy, Joseph. It seems easy enough to look back on the whitewashed past and think of it as a necessary part of man's progress, but in the early days of your religion, there was a lot of bloodshed and darkness. For centuries, religious zealots led unruly mobs in the destruction of anything that did not meet their standards of perfection. There will always be opposition to change, no matter how necessary it is to your continued well being. Your world is dying, Joseph Duncan. It is unbalanced and has been for two thousand years. It yearns for that which was taken from it. It is slowly starving to death."

Joey contemplated his words. He had never been much of a romantic and understood the vagaries of history far better than most people his age. Somehow he understood that Bowie wasn't looking for a debate, but was stating facts as he believed them. Besides, there was still something niggling at the back of his mind. "You and your brothers seem so different from the way you were the first couple of times I saw you."

"Different laws. Different perceptions. In your world, we are defined by the guidelines placed upon us by an unbalanced universe. We are seen as interlopers, bringing unwelcome change. We are outsiders on a mission of madness. We cause hysteria and panic. We are the riders of the Apocalypse. We are the harbingers of doom to a crumbling reality. We are death and destruction. We are a necessary evil."

"And it's my job to stop you."

"Is it?"

"Isn't it?"

"Only you can make that decision, Joseph Duncan. It is your legacy, this much is true, but how you are defined by that legacy is your choice. Your family has been a bane to mine for eighteen centuries. We have been locked in struggle for many of your generations. I have personally known each and every Duncan bearing the title "hunter," and have been instrumental in many of their deaths. But I have always known that one day, a Duncan would be born who

might listen to reason. One who might put an end to this struggle and do something right, not just for himself, but for his race and his world."

Joey weighed the words carefully and for once Bowie had a hard time reading his mind. "What troubles you, Joseph?"

"You're asking me to betray my family name."

"This is bigger than a name, my love."

"You're asking me to betray civilization as I know it. You're asking me to become instrumental in bringing about an Apocalypse."

"In a sense, I suppose I am. Nobody ever said such decisions would be easy."

"I have to think about it. I'm sorry, Bowie, but there's just too much at stake here. I recognize that what you're saying makes a kind of twisted sense, but I just can't decide to throw away everything I have ever believed to be true in favor of ... a dream."

Bowie smiled. "I understand. You're right, it has all been pretty dreamlike, hasn't it? Do you think that you're asleep now?"

"I'm not sure."

"I assure you, you are not asleep, lover. This IS reality, even if it isn't the reality you are accustomed to. And I owe you something."

Joey looked up questioningly. "Owe me?"

Bowie leaned in and kissed Joey. "Yes, I owe you something real. Something tangible. A gift. I cannot see the future, but I do know that all we have is right now. All we have is this moment. Whatever comes later will be decided in another reality. Your world, harsh and unrelenting, will be our final stage. Here, we are alone and time is inconsequential. Here, we belong only to each other."

As he spoke, Bowie had been unbuttoning, unzipping and unsnapping Joey out of his clothing. It didn't come as any surprise when the last of his protective coverings fell away and Joey was standing naked before Bowie. He blinked and the elf, too, was naked. Here, however, the elf was even more beautiful than he had appeared before. Here, he was almost translucent. And when he touched Joey, when his hand gently grazed his chest and traveled downward to caress his eager erection, the sensation took Joey's breath away.

"You've learned much through your subconscious, lover. Let's see

how well your waking mind remembers those lessons."

Bowie stepped forward and kissed Joey, first on the lips, then on the cheek, the jawline, the neck, the collarbone, his right bicep. Feather-light, Bowie's tongue flickered on the protruding nipple like a flame and Joey felt the sensation deep in his crotch. His knees felt like they were going to buckle. As though sensing this, Bowie encircled him with his arms and slowly lowered him into the soft, yielding grass.

He continued kissing his way lightly down Joey's body, sending shivers through him and making him squirm. At his right hipbone, Bowie hesitated and licked, making Joey moan. Who knew there were so many nerve endings in such an inconspicuous place? Bowie's tongue traveled along the hipbone and down, along the well-defined iliac furrow, into the dark curls of Joey's pubic patch.

He nuzzled and licked playfully at Joey's balls, licking and nibbling upwards along his shaft until his lips were encircling the turgid head. Without hesitation, he engulfed the entire shaft, swallowing it down to the base until his nose was pressed into warm hair. Joey groaned loudly, his eyes focusing on a flock of birds languidly floating across a lemon sky. This, then, was the only reality that mattered, right now. This was what he had been hoping for. Not answers so much as experiences. Let the world fall apart around him, all that mattered right now was this.

Bowie sucked and nibbled at Joey's cock for what seemed like hours, before kissing his way back up his body until he was looking down at his conquest. Joey regarded him through enflamed senses, giving himself fully to the elf lord. As though sensing this, Bowie lifted Joey's legs and set them into the crook of his elbows. He lowered his head and kissed the young man, feeling the eager response. And while Joey was lost in his hunger, the elf drove his cock slowly, easily, deep into his bowels, just as he had so many times in the young man's dreams.

Joey bucked against his lover, engulfed in a sensation of utter abandonment and feeling electrical charges shoot through his system with each thrust. He kissed Bowie like a madman, eagerly sucking at his lips and pulling the breath from him. Bowie, in turn, fell into a

rhythm of movements that slowly brought Joey to the precipice. When the orgasm threatened to overtake him, Bowie pulled away and looked deep into Joey's eyes. Joey gasped and held his golden gaze.

Bowie was saying something in his lilting, alien language. Like a singsong chant he wove his spell with authority and purpose. The orgasm built to the point that Joey couldn't take it anymore and without warning spilled over. He screamed his pleasure out into the yellow sky and hot rosy strands of cum shot out, plastering his stomach and chest. At that very same moment, Bowie joined him in a lover's song, closing his eyes and emptying his own balls deep into Joey's eager ass. They howled together and when they were done, collapsed together in a sweating, sticky mess, while cool springtime breezes caressed their naked bodies.

"Forgive me, lover," Bowie whispered into Joey's ear.

"Forgive you?"

"Never forget that, right here, right now, I love you more than any mortal has ever been loved by one of my kind."

Joey's brow furrowed. "But why are you asking forgiveness?"

Bowie sighed against his neck. "For doing what I must."

Joey would never get the clarification he desired. He blinked and the world changed around him, once again. Whereas before he had been lying in the soft, yielding grasses of a foreign world, he now lay cold and shivering upon a filthy and warped wooden floor. He sat up and shook his head, looking into an empty rectangle of light. Around him, scattered about the darkened warehouse, were crates and boxes, dusty with age and misuse. To his right lay his clothing in a rumpled pile. He reached for them and began, automatically, pulling them on. First his shirt, then his socks. He stood and pulled his jeans on, snapping and buckling them hurriedly. A heavy lethargic feeling washed over him and he staggered a bit.

Something didn't feel right about all this. He could still feel the cum drying on his chest into a congealing crust. That and the dull throb in his rectum told him that it had been real, but what had happened to Bowie? And why had he been thrust back into this cold reality? He stepped forward into the small anteroom, where Bowie's brothers had been and found it strangely empty too. Gone were the

pillows, the table and the hookah. In their places were a rusted metal desk and part of a chair. Paper, glass, crumpled aluminum cans, pieces of wire and a few things that defied description littered the floor, or gathered in small piles along the walls and in the corners. Dust sat thick and heavy in the air.

Pulling on his tennis shoes, and fighting back the sluggishness that continued to wash over him, Joey rushed out of the office and down the dark hallway toward the metal door. Pushing it open, he stepped out into a strangely quiet night. He breathed deeply of a city under assault. Exhaust and garbage co-mingled with dark, rich earthy smells and a putrid aftertaste like acrid farts lingered in the back of Joey's throat. The city was sleeping and the hour appeared very late. Without a watch to let him know what time it actually was, he felt disoriented.

"I've got to get home," he whispered to himself, a feeling of uneasiness helping to drive the unnatural lassitude away. Singsong shadows flittered through his consciousness like apparitions ghosting through barriers and dissolving walls wherever they lit. His head was throbbing and his chest was tight. Muscles were threatening to cramp. He let the door clang shut behind him, before stumbling off in the direction of his family abode.

* * * *

The clock on the mantle said it was just after 3am when Joey entered the quiet old church. He couldn't believe it was so late, but despite the lingering fatigue he still felt, sleep was the furthest thing from his mind. He had to check something. Now.

He heard his uncle's slipped footfalls before he saw the old man. Payne rubbed at his eyes and slowly took in the chaos around him. Joey sat behind his father's old desk, surrounded by open books and papers. The boy looked almost frantic.

"A little late to take up an interest in the arcane, isn't it Joseph? And might I enquire as to your whereabouts earlier this evening? Didn't I tell you to...?" The look the young man cast upon his uncle made the older gentleman's stomach drop. "What is it, my boy?"

Joey shook his head miserably. "Trouble, uncle. I think..." He wanted to say, 'I think I've fucked up. Literally,' but he didn't. The

words wouldn't come out that way. Instead, he swallowed and finished his sentence with "... there's something terrible coming our way."

His uncle was at full alert now. He raised his head, looking about wildly. He appeared to be sniffing the air. "None of the wards have been breached. They all seem to be in place."

"I don't think that they will be enough. I wish I had known more about these Sidhe before today. About their charms and glamours. About who they are and what they're doing here. I wish I had known. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so betrayed."

"Betrayed?" Payne interjected, surprise written upon his aged face. "Betrayed by whom?"

"By my father. By you ... and by them."

"What are you going on about, boy? What betrayal?"

"Uncle," Joey said sharply. "Why didn't you tell me everything?"

The old man's brow furrowed, sternly as he attempted to gather his tattered dignity together. No easy feat while wearing faded pajamas and a thin, worn robe. "You were told everything you needed to know."

Joey shook his head. "You never told me the real reason my father chose this church as his fortress."

"The real reason? It's hallowed ground, what other reason could there be?"

"I've done some research. It's all here in my father's journals."

"There's no possible way you can read those," Payne barked. "Only one steeped in the arcane arts can decipher the ancient languages. Your father chose them for just that reason."

"I couldn't read them before, but I can now," Joey said evenly. The look his uncle gave him made him push on quickly. Best to get it out now, before the old man started asking too many questions. "It says right here that the reason he chose this place was not because it was blessed, but because it sits squarely on a concentrated intersection of Ley lines. It's a power point, Uncle Crandell. If the Sidhe should gain control over this spot, they will have a ready access point to create a tear in the fabric of reality. What I don't understand is why they didn't use it before my father took control of it. There's nothing here to

explain that..."

"Because before that time, this church was steeped in the faith and strong beliefs of its worshippers," Payne said evenly. He quickly fell into a didactic pattern, not unfamiliar to Joey. "It was a true fortress against evil. It wasn't until its congregation forsook it, abandoned by its god and fell into disrepair that it became vulnerable. It was at that point that your father took control of it, in the hopes of reestablishing the protections this former place of worship had provided for centuries. It was that very thing that made him a target. Whereas before he had been a hunter, he became the hunted. The Tuatha Dé Danann smelled weakness in a former stronghold and became desperate. I believe that desperation continues to drive them. They must find some way to access this stronghold and destroy it, but the only way they can do that is from the inside."

"From the inside..." Joey intoned hollowly.

The old man regarded him warily. "Yes. Only by corrupting the incorruptible can they gain entrance and once they're inside..."

"There will be no stopping them," Joey finished.

Payne came around the desk to lay a hand on the young man's shoulder. "You shouldn't waste so much time on this, dear boy. As I said, the wards are still in place. There are protections you could never fully comprehend at work here. In fact, what you may not know is that you are our greatest asset. As the heir to the Duncan name, you are the ultimate protection here. Even without a full working knowledge of the arcane arts, you are still a very powerful force to be reckoned with."

"But what if I'm not, uncle? What if I've been tainted? What if I've been corrupted?"

The old man's eyes narrowed. "Why would you think you had been corrupted?"

Joey held up the heavy, leather bound book. "Because before today, I couldn't read the language of the Tuatha Dé Danann. I didn't even know what those words meant. That is what this cryptic language is, isn't it, uncle?"

Crandell Payne's eyes widened as realization hit him. "What have you done, Joseph?"

Joey lowered the book and dropped his gaze miserably. "I've given myself to one of them."

"How?"

The answer came out as a whisper, but its effect was as devastating as a bullet. "Willingly."

The old man clutched at his chest with a claw like hand and stepped backward unsteadily. "I ... I don't understand, Joseph," he sputtered. "How could you? How is it possible?"

Joey sniffed. "I allowed him to corrupt me ... from the inside. I can feel it, even now: a deadness radiating outward from my gut. It's like something has been taken away from me. Something I never even realized existed until it was gone. I feel as though I have been ... negated."

Payne squeezed his eyes shut and a pained expression etched itself upon his face. "Oh, god..." he wailed.

A shudder rocked the building and Payne's eyes snapped open. He looked first one way, than the other. "No!"

"What is it, uncle?"

"They're here! That was the first of the wards going down! We must act quickly!"

A cry rang out; a sound of startled rage echoing down the street as one of Payne's traps took the first victim.

Suddenly the old man was back in control. His eyes flashed and his jaw set, but the corner of his mouth lifted in the beginning of a smile. "Good! Let them come! We're ready for them!"

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to prove them wrong, that's what!"

Joey stared at his uncle, unable to comprehend.

"A true hunter can never be negated, Joseph! Temporarily weakened, perhaps, but so long as there is breath in you, the Sidhe can never win! They may breach our stronghold, but the only way they can defeat us is if we allow them to. The poisons within you won't last forever and have had the double effect of awakening that which was sleeping. You are a hunter, Joseph Duncan! Whether you like it or not, the time has come to fight!"

Joey blinked, wide-eyed. "What do you have in mind?"

"A good, old-fashioned shoot-out!"

Joey stared at him in disbelief. "A what?"

"Better that than a siege, don't you think?" Payne cackled to himself and rubbed his hands together, obviously relishing the challenges that lay ahead.

"Uncle, what...?"

Payne glanced sideways at his nephew, a gleam in his weathered old eyes. "I've waited a long time for this, my boy! To relive some of the glory. To show that I'm not a useless old man. To make your father's spirit proud!"

"But how?"

"Bell, book and candle, boy! Those wretches think that you are all that stands between them and victory. They aren't counting on me! All we have to do is lure them to the proper place, make them think they've won and when their arrogance has made them lower their defenses, turn the power they crave against them!"

"But you said shoot-out! What are we going to use as weapons?"

Payne waved wildly about. "I've set traps all around the house and up and down the street, which should keep them busy for a while. I've also got an arsenal of my own at the ready. For you, however, something a little more mundane." Reaching over to pick up a wooden box from a side table, Payne lifted the lid and withdrew a pistol.

"A gun?" Joey stammered. "A gun is supposed to protect me from otherworldly creatures?"

"Not the gun itself, Joseph. The bullets in the gun are made of iron and have been carved with the ancient symbols of destruction so lethal to their kind."

"Iron? Shouldn't they be silver bullets or something?"

"You're confusing your legends, Joseph. Cold iron is to the Sidhe what silver would be to a werewolf, if such a thing existed."

Joey snorted. "Oh, I see. Evil elves are okay to believe in, but not werewolves."

"Believe what you will," the old man said implacably. "The world may never have seen a true werewolf, but the Sidhe can take many shapes. There's a grain of truth in every legend, my boy."

"Don't you have something a little more ... I don't know ... magical for me to use?"

Payne laughed. "Like a magic wand, you mean? Or an enchanted suit of armor?"

Joey looked chagrined. "Okay, maybe it does sound stupid, but I'm new at this. Shouldn't I have something to protect me besides a gun?"

The old man looked thoughtful, then tottered over to a bookcase at the other end of the room. Rummaging about and knocking books from the shelves, he finally found what he was looking for. Joey got up from his chair and walked over, curious. Withdrawing a long narrow wooden case, Payne opened it and smiled.

"Ah, yes, here she is. Just as I remember her."

"What is it?" Joey asked, craning his neck to get a better look.

The old man dipped his hand into the case and drew out what looked like a medallion on a silver chain. It was covered with many of the same symbols he had seen in abundance over the last few days.

"Your father had this made for your mother, to protect her from any marauding influences. She refused to wear it, of course, holding firm to her Christian beliefs. I had completely forgotten all about it until now. I can't think of a better form of protection for his only living heir, especially under the present circumstances, can you?"

Joey shook his head, accepting the surprisingly lightweight medallion from his uncle and draping it around his neck. Looking down at it, he could swear that it burned with some sort of inner fire, blue filaments of flame crawling along the grooves and inscriptions that decorated it. Probably his imagination, he thought, but he certainly felt a little safer knowing it was there. Oddly enough, wearing the medallion lifted the heaviness from his chest and made him feel much less ... vulnerable.

Nodding his head in approval, Payne stepped back. "Well, let's get into the chapel and make our final preparations, shall we. I don't think it will take that evil pack long to knock out the last of our wards. What we have going for us is that sundown is still hours away, and though they're not adverse to venturing out in the daylight as you have seen, they are at their most powerful at night."

"Then why aren't they waiting? Why attack now?"

"Perhaps they're afraid of what you can accomplish, now that they have awakened the hunter in you."

"I don't think that was his ... their intent, uncle."

Payne smiled. "No, but it IS a byproduct and one they can't afford to take for granted." Looking appraisingly at his nephew, the old man continued, "Let me teach you a couple of useful phrases. I don't know if it will help, but it certainly couldn't hurt."

* * * *

It seemed to take forever for Bowie and his brothers to knock out the last of the wards. The morning warmed into a sultry afternoon, then cooled into evening. The sun was setting and both Joey and his uncle understood what that meant. Time was no longer on their side. It had been spent preparing, but also lost in a curious procession of thoughts for young Joey.

At first he had been conflicted. What Bowie had said to him in the warehouse had all made a certain kind of sense. There were a lot of problems in this world, that much he couldn't deny. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized that those problems weren't exactly new. It wasn't like violence and bloodshed had been unknown before Christianity gained a foothold and began shaping the cultures, histories and destinies of man. There had been war, famine and destruction for millennia before that, going all the way back to man's prehistory.

Spending all those years reading voraciously had given Joey a layman's knowledge of man's history and it didn't quite jibe with the utopian ideal Bowie had outlined for him. Simpler, yes, but hardly idyllic. Though he was sure that things must have been in some ways better two, three or even four thousand years ago, he was also sure that the one driving force for mankind had always been change. His constant push to know more and delve deep into the mysteries of life was part of his genetic makeup. Without that, he would grow stagnant and unproductive.

There had been many improvements made over the centuries. The last 150 years alone had seen exponential growth and advancement. Admittedly, with more rapid changes had come more rabid dissension, but that was to be expected. Man was a finicky and easily dissatisfied

animal. It came with the territory.

To be honest, Joey kind of liked the world he lived in now. He wasn't sure he wanted it to slide back into some sort of halcyon faux paradise. He liked cable television and jet planes and being able to pay for things with credit. He even liked computers, despite the fact that the damned things wouldn't work for him. They made life easier for everybody and he benefited in many ways, even if it was indirectly. He was a citizen of a modern age and the thought of giving up all of those amenities in favor of lazy days spent lying in the grass and attributing anything strange and wonderful to unseen forces didn't quite sit well with him.

As far as he was concerned, it would just be exchanging one form of existence for another and who was to say which was better? Not him and certainly not a three thousand year old Sidhe warrior who was, apparently, locked in the past and unable to see the changes around him for what they were; a necessary progression for the curious, hyperactive psyche that was both the blessing and the curse of mankind.

The church groaned and shuddered one final time, followed by a loud popping noise and a feeling like all of the air was being sucked out of the room. Then, seconds later, the creaky old church was buffeted by the deafening sounds of a storm and the bell began to ring above him. The lights went out and suddenly all was movement. He felt queasy and unbalanced. He swallowed back the bile threatening to rise up in his throat and planted himself.

Waiting at the back of the chapel, only a few feet from the huge wooden doors where his uncle had placed him, Joey stood with his gun at the ready. Shadows and lights streamed by the stained glass windows transforming the dank old cathedral into a frenzied kaleidoscope of colors. He marveled at the spectacle in rapt fascination. Chaos seemed to have gripped the area around the old church and madness ran rampant through its gardens. Whether it was his uncle's doing or that of the Sidhe, he couldn't tell.

Then, abruptly, the double doors burst open and one of the skinheads was bounding through, directly for him. It was impossible to tell whether or not this was one of the brothers he'd met earlier, but

there was no mistaking the intent. The beautiful, gentle creatures he had encountered in the warehouse had been replaced with snarling, murderous thugs. Without hesitation he pulled the trigger and watched as the cold iron tore through the forehead of the startled Sidhe warrior, transforming him into a screaming ball of fire that Joey had to fling himself into the pews to avoid.

His vantage point breached, Joey retreated towards the altar of the chapel, felling two more Sidhe warriors as they sprang through the doorway. So intent was he on watching his retreat that when the Mohawk warrior from the record store crashed through one of the stained glass windows to his left he was taken completely by surprise. With one swipe, Mohawk knocked the gun from his grasp and, snarling with gleeful rage, lunged at him. The collision sent them both flying, but in opposite directions. Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs, it took Joey a moment to realize what had happened. The attacker had been repelled.

Rolling to his feet, Mohawk glared at the shining medallion on Joey's chest and decided to use another line of attack. Screaming like the proverbial banshee, the Sidhe warrior flung out its arms and began pelting Joey with chunks of crumbling masonry, wood and glass from all directions. Without thinking, the words his uncle had so recently taught him spilled from Joey's lips and the assault abruptly stopped. He had no time to revel in the accomplishment, however, as more Sidhe warriors decided to brave the sacred ground and crowd through the door to join their comrade. Turning quickly, Joey dove over the railing onto the altar and rolled through the doorway into the nave. How many of them were there?

Mohawk and his friends were hot on his heels, but Joey had planned for this eventuality. His uncle had said that cold iron would stop the Sidhe. Snatching up the nail gun from its place on the counter just inside the door, he swung around to take aim. The nails weren't carved with sacred symbols, but they did the job just the same. In a rapid-fire motion, Joey began hammering at his opponents, driving them back into the main chapel, howling in pain. Then, when he was in place, he snatched up the waiting basin of holy water and flung it outward to shower the pack of snarling warriors.

Like gasoline on embers, the iron-studded Sidhe warriors burst into flames and he had to throw up his arms to shield his eyes from the glare. Then, just as quickly the bright light was gone and when he lowered his arms, so too were the warriors.

Shouts reached his ears from above and he whirled back around to re-enter the nave. Groping through the connecting hallway, he reached the foot of the stairs and began to ascend them to the belfry, three at a time. By the time he reached the first landing the wind and sound had ceased, leaving a deathly pall over the ransacked chapel.

"Uncle Crandell!" Joey shouted, bounding up the second flight of stairs to the belfry where the old man had taken up his position.

He stopped short midway as a familiar, purple-maned head lowered itself to look at him with amused golden eyes. "Hello, lover," he purred. "Uncle Crandell is busy dying at the moment, but we'll get to you soon enough."

"Bowie, no!"

The elf's face was stony and cruel. "What did you expect, Joseph Duncan? A reprieve?"

"You used me!"

Bowie laughed, a harsh and ugly barking sound. "Used you? I own you! You were a pathetically easy target. Your weaknesses were your undoing."

"I won't let you do this, Bowie! Change is the natural order here. You don't belong!"

"You won't *let* me?" Bowie laughed again. "YOU are soft and weak! You are insignificant. YOU are a pawn! You've served your purpose, mortal fool. Today, you die and with you dies your stupid legacy. Tomorrow the skies will bleed and the earth will be swallowed by fire and when your kind has been burned away, order will return once more!"

Laughter surrounded Bowie as two other faces crowded into the opening. Then the cracked voice of his uncle rose up behind them, shouting out an incantation and Bowie spat over his shoulder, "Shut him up! Now!"

Rage boiled up in Joey as he surged forward to meet the invaders. What happened after that he was never quite sure. Just as he reached

the square opening in the floor of the belfry a terrific blast blew him back down the stairs. He had a momentary glimpse of Bowie's face, contorted in surprised rage at the ear-shattering cacophony that assaulted him with the sound of a hundred ringing bells. Then silence and the doorway was empty.

Bruised and wincing from what had to be broken ribs, Joey shook himself off and plunged back up the stairs. What met his eyes when he got through the opening knocked the air from his lungs further. The belfry lay in shambles, the ancient bell cracked and lying on its side. Amongst the rubble, only one unmoving body could be seen, burnt as though by an intense fire. Sobbing, Joey ran forward, dropping to his knees near the shattered remains of Crandell Payne.

Nobody had to tell him that the old man had given his life to save him in those final moments. He had fulfilled both his promise and his destiny by letting Bowie place himself under the bell where he could be destroyed and thus sealing the gateway to the Otherworld once again. The charred binding of an ancient bible lay nearby and pages fluttered in the breeze. Candle wax coated the old man's burned hands. Bell, book and candle; a simple excommunication ritual turned into a banishment ceremony. His uncle had proven himself brilliant in his final hours. Joey would never forget that.

And if what Payne had said was true, in so sacrificing himself, he had brought about a few years of peace for his charge. There was no telling how long, because Crandell Payne hadn't been a true hunter, but Joey knew in his gut that there was time enough for him to learn the arcane arts himself and take up his position as sentinel to this beleaguered city.

Tears streaming freely down his face, the young man swore on the old man's body that he would not fail him. That he would continue the legacy of his family, and that, by god, he would never again flinch from his duties no matter what the cost. He knew he was now bound to the Sidhe warrior named Bowie and that they would meet again. Next time, however, it would be different. Next time, he would be ready.

Dropping his head to rest on the charred chest of the only father he had ever known, Joey swore through his tears that Bowie would pay

for this death. He would pay dearly. Joey would be the best goddamned Sidhe hunter who had ever lived. His children would know of the sacrifice this man, who wasn't even of the Duncan blood himself, had made for them. For Crandell Payne, the war was over, but for Joseph Duncan, it had only just begun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Salcido is the former publisher of the adult literary arts journal *Blue Food* and for the past 20 years or so has made his living writing for and editing such notable entertainment magazines as *Entertainment Weekly*, *Playtime*, *Video Business*, *Pop Smear*, *Suspect Thoughts*, *Spectrum*, *Voices*, *Impulse* and *Red Magazine*. As a fiction writer, his credits include *Yellow Silk*, *The Dream People*, *Wicked Grin*, *The Journal Of Sister Moon* and the anthologies *Blood Lust: Erotic Vampire Tales*, *Redsine Ten* and *Hard Working Men: Gay Erotic Fiction*.