

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

TRISKELION

Jana Denardo

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TRISKELION

By Jana Denardo

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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TRISKELION

By Jana Denardo

Photo Description

Three firefighters stand proud. Their shirtless bodies are smudged, tired but defiant after battling a fire born of the demon-spawn.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The Prophecy:

Three to join – each a different race

Three to join – a saving grace

True to heart – one of blood, one of tail

True to heart – one of magic, they will not fail

Hold back the tide – with swords and shields

Hold back the tide – they will never yield

I've long been drawn to mixed paranormal matings, ménages and military stories. So my prompt is all in one... three men (my preference of wolf-shifter, day-walker vampire and magical fae or witch) all of military, law enforcement or clan leadership background. They are fated as "true-mates" and prophesied to bring down an evil (thinking demon horde, but you can go in another direction). Perhaps there is one demon and they fight it together or there is many and each man leads his clan in an epic battle. I would prefer a contemporary setting in which the supernatural exist, and while all the men are "alphas" outside the bedroom I would like at least one to give up control in it.

The picture is not ideal, but perhaps you can use it as a way they all met... volunteer firefighters or an end to the battle. I wanted to show that the characters are older; between twenty-five and thirty. Feel free to use my prophecy or one of your own.

Sincerely,

Alicia

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: paranormal, poly mmm, vampires, shifters, magic, law enforcement, mage/sorcerer, medical personnel, military men

Content Warnings: murder scenes

Word Count: 40,363

Author's Note

Thanks to Alicia for such a great prompt. I had a great time writing this. Thank you to S.J. Smith and L. Troy for the beta. A big thank you to the Athens Area Nano writers group who graciously allowed me to kill off their fictional selves (twice in a few cases where there was author/ RPGer crossovers), myself included. All places in the story are real, with the exception of the magic shop. The Ridges really was the former Athens OH Lunatic Asylum, but, of course, the Lucerna doesn't own it. Ohio University (OU) does, and the part doubling as housing for Faolan and the others is in part the Kennedy Art Museum (The rest is sadly closed due to age and asbestos). And a huge thanks to everyone who helped make Love's Landscape possible.

TRISKELION
By Jana Denardo

Chapter One

Just when he thought he'd seen the worst he could possibly witness in this job, Faolan inevitably found himself proven wrong. The sight of yellow, police tape marking off the Union Diner made his stomach clench. The yellow tape was nothing new in his line of work. The diner, however, was one of his favorite haunts, and a slow rage built in Faolan at the thought that something had touched it.

The scent of vomit assaulted his nose as he carried his medical pack up the hill to the diner. One of the uniformed officers leaning on a metal handrail outside the building didn't look well. Faolan wondered if the vomit belonged to him, and hoped it happened outside, rather than in the crime scene.

"You can't go in there," another uniformed officer said, stepping into Faolan's path. She looked young. Didn't she see his outfit? Did she think he roamed around in white jumpsuits and hair covers normally?

"I'm Doctor Fraser." Faolan hoped he wouldn't have to dig out his I.D. for the noob. He'd have to unzip the infernal jumpsuit.

"Faolan." Detective Jason Tsavaras leaned out of the glass front door to the diner, beckoning to him. Like Faolan, Jason was with the Lucerna, a militaristic magical group of protectors. They had been summoned to the diner for one reason. Whatever happened inside had its roots in the supernatural. "Get in here."

"Give me a moment." Dodging around the young cop, Faolan set his kit down in the doorway, freeing up his hand and the item caught between his fingers and the handle: paper shoe covers. Once they were on, he slipped and slid his way after Jason. The damn things offered precious little purchase and wouldn't until they were nearly worn through and his shoe treads could make meaningful contact with the floor.

The suit Jason wore couldn't hide his broad shoulders. It took the strong, metallic tang of blood to carry away the thought of how damn good Jason looked in his suit. Faolan relished the reminder of how lucky he was to have a man like this in his life. That thought would help get him through what he was about to see. Jason glanced over his shoulder, checking to see if Faolan still followed him. Faolan spotted Jason's blood teeth poking out from between his lips, a sure sign of tension. Faolan's stomach dropped in reaction, dreading

what he'd see. Jason surprised him by calling Faolan by his first name on the job. His lover must be rattled, and Faolan really didn't want to see what could shake up a vampire so old; he had been around for the original Olympics, something Jason never tired of talking about. Hearing whimpering coming from the direction of the kitchen, Faolan was surprised they didn't head back there.

Faolan caught a whiff of the stench of bowel, making a face, he asked, "What do we have?"

"Best you see it for yourself." Jason tugged at his tie. Faolan knew he hated them. The symbol of their organization—in the form of a tie tack—flashed in the light.

Faolan followed Jason down the steps to the lower dining area, which was more like a descent into hell. There had been a group of a half dozen women ranging from college- to middle-aged in the booths near the two TVs on the wall. An equal number of laptops sat in ruins of blood, coffee and soda. Two teens, one dark-haired and the other light, had never even made it out of the booth. Another with short, greying hair had nearly made it free of the fray. Two of the middle-aged women had fallen just outside their booth, their skirts sodden with blood. All of the women had been shredded. Bright red puddles and viscera painted the cheap, fake leather booths.

Faolan pressed his hand to his gut as his stomach flipped. Even though he functioned as the Lucerna's medical examiner, Faolan wasn't inured to scenes such as this. In the aisle between the booths, a dark-haired woman lay atop one of the forty-something women with reddish-brown hair. A broken hot sauce bottle had been jammed into the neck of the dark-haired woman. The woman with the reddish-brown hair obviously used the makeshift weapon to try to save her own life. She'd failed, but she had taken the enemy with her.

"What do you make of that?" Jason squatted down, pointing at the dark-haired woman's neck.

He indicated the purple foam, which had substituted for blood, and had bubbled out of the torn carotid. The dark-haired woman had most likely been the demoness or demon-possessed. There was something vaguely familiar about the older women, but Faolan was damned if he knew what it was.

"I have no idea."

Jason widened his eyes as he straightened up. "There's something not in that big head of yours?"

Faolan snorted. “Contrary to popular belief, I don’t have the whole of the Lucerna’s library in my head.” He turned back to the victims. The crime scene techs would have finished their job by now, probably already on the way back to the lab with their samples. Jason would have mentioned that Crime Scene still needed to do their work. Normally, the medical examiner’s office would have sent someone to do the work at the scene, but Faolan didn’t work for the county. Whenever the local cops saw something weird, they brought in people like Faolan and Jason. Most people were happy to punt the paranormal to the Lucerna. The group had a world-wide, centuries-long reputation, after all.

Faolan squatted down and opened his kit. He took his own sample of the foam. The diner fell away as he gently examined the body, trying to put the sequence of events into order in his head. Thoughts of his handsome lover watching him in his horrible white jumpsuit that nearly matched his potato-hued skin faded as Faolan tried to concentrate on his job. It was hard to be here and not think about the times he and Jason would stop by the diner in the past and how much they loved the diner’s fried cauliflower and fried Oreos. Jason inevitably ended up with ranch dressing on his chin every time they had the cauliflower.

Faolan hadn’t seen such carnage in a long time. It demanded his concentration. He brought with him not just science, but all he had learned from his druid ancestors. Demonic activity left some clue behind on occasion. It might give him a clear picture of who was behind this.

Chanting softly in Gaelic, Faolan put his hand over his throat. Under his jumpsuit, he could feel the wide, choker-like guard he wore. He rubbed his fingers over the silver Cernunnos embedded in the throat guard, hovering just above his larynx. It wasn’t necessary to have a touchstone for his magic, but it eased his anxiety. This time, his magic went unanswered, other than a glow around the woman leaking purple foam. It outlined her, showing a spiraling, but otherwise invisible, symbol. Faolan scowled as he tried to imprint the symbol on his brain, but it slid away like a shoe on wet ice.

“What is it?” Jason’s voice snapped Faolan back to the diner.

He gestured to the possessed dead woman without looking back at Jason. “You don’t see this?”

“No.”

Faolan grunted. It figured. It was going to be difficult to capture what demonic influence was behind this. “This demon left a very weak signal. I can’t even form a meaningful memory of it. Paper, please.”

Jason passed Faolan his note pad, and Faolan sketched as quickly as he could, but it still wasn't exactly right. He wasn't an artist at the best of times, and it showed now. "I need to get them all back to the lab." Faolan stood up and stepped over some of the bodies to take a closer look at the dead women in the right hand booth. He wondered if they were OU students. Sadly, they seemed to have died before they could get out from the tangle of laptop power cords and head phones. "We can't do the autopsies until tomorrow morning."

"It's only one in the morning. You should just be hitting your stride."

When he shot a hot look at Jason, Faolan saw his lover's smirk. "I'm not the vampire here. Besides, I need help with this one. I won't be able to organize that until morning. There aren't enough Lucerna medical examiners here to deal with this completely in-house. I'll need to bring in the county."

Jason scanned the scene, nodding. "Thought as much."

Faolan went back to his cursory exam. Finally, he had gathered all the information he could possibly do *in situ*. He wouldn't get any real information until tomorrow at the morgue. As Jason walked him out of the diner, they caught a snippet of conversation between two uniformed officers, one of them wondering if the smell inside the Union was like a delicious buffet to a vampire like Jason. While they were used to the fearful insults from the Normals, it still hurt. The glare Jason leveled at the cops could have set the place ablaze. Faolan thought the one who had said it might actually have wet himself. The Normals didn't necessarily like the Lucerna – some thought the paramilitaristic ancient organization was too violent – but usually they didn't hesitate to call them when there was the tiniest hint of the paranormal.

"We're going to have to call in all branches of the Lucerna," Faolan said as they stepped out into the chilly night air. The spring equinox was only a few days away, but it had been a long and unseasonably cold winter.

"I thought as much. I'll bring in the local group of vampires. We have too many who aren't old enough to have achieved Daywalker status yet," Jason replied. "But demons like the night as much as we do. I'll leave you to contact the furballs."

Faolan nodded. It was just better that way. Vampires and werewolves didn't always get along. It dated back to the days when they were still hidden from the Normals. Vampires had a habit of using the wolves especially if the vampire was too young to withstand the sun, and the werewolves had never forgotten it. "I'll give Douglas a call." Douglas Holtz was the youngest alpha Faolan had

ever worked with before. The Hocking Hills pack was widespread but not tremendously numerous. They were as Appalachian as it came. He knew Douglas wasn't completely prepared to be alpha, but his father had been killed last year by a teen texting and driving, of all things. That left the twenty-five-year-old in charge, especially since his twin was over in the Middle East. Faolan had only come to Athens five years ago and hadn't met the twin, who was on his third tour of duty.

"Good, because I'll be at this most of the night," Jason said.

"I know." Faolan also knew the Detective would be at it the rest of the day, too. Sleep was a luxury most detectives didn't get during the first days of a homicide investigation, even more so if the detective worked for the Lucerna. The Organization knew more than half its members were supernaturals and could work harder than the average human. "I don't envy your job."

"I was thinking the same thing about yours," Jason said before turning back into the diner.

Listing out the things he would have to do next, Faolan walked downhill to his car. His first action would have to be to wake up his grandmother. Brigid and he shared leadership over this section of the Lucerna, and the formidable woman would peel his skin like an orange if he didn't tell her immediately. Brigid wasn't entirely ready to retire. She was gone from the field, leaving that to him, but he didn't mind sharing power with her. He'd rather be lost with his books than sitting in meetings listening to everyone squabble. He didn't know what it was about meetings that brought out the worst in people, and it was too late at night to ponder it. Faolan headed for the Ridges and home. There was much to do.

Chapter Two

Faolan sliced through the superior and inferior vena cava first, before tackling the aorta. On this patient, the demoness had done that work for him, removing half the chest plate. The aorta's heavy muscle needed a bit of sawing through. He needed to change his scalpel blade once he finished this task. Once he had the heart free and quickly measured, he put it on the scale. Faolan dictated his findings as Gretchen, his assistant, took the organ to a side table in case he wanted to slice it down for a few samples. Faolan wasn't sure it would be necessary. It was plainly obvious how everyone had died. Still, there were procedures to be followed before he put down a cause of death as cardiac failure secondary to exsanguination status post evisceration. His heart went out to the families of these women.

His parents had died at the hands of demons when he was a child. Faolan hadn't seen the damage with his own eyes, but he had read the reports as an adult. They were haunting enough. The scar on his neck twinged. Attacks this bad always took him back to that day in New York when he and the Lucerna had been betrayed, attacked by rogue members of their organization. The remembered fear made his hand shake. Sometimes the memory of lying on the floor, bleeding out while he listened to his sister's screams as she was savaged stole his breath away.

Pushing the memories away, Faolan stepped back and stretched. He'd been at this all day. His back knew it, muscles begging for a rest. He couldn't stop yet. There was too much to do, even if his feet had other ideas. His eyes had begun to close. He would have to make this the last autopsy and hand the rest over to Dr. Christie. He started to cut the right lung free.

"Got anything?"

Startled, Faolan nearly took off his finger. "Pause recording, two-fifteen, Dr. Fraser." He turned around, glaring. How the hell could a vampire move so silently? "Damn it, Jason. You startled me."

He smirked. "I noticed. So, did you find anything useful?"

"Gretchen, take a break." Faolan studied Jason. Even vampires got tired, and Jason looked like he was fresh up out of the grave. "Well, the women died as you might expect. So far, I've come across nothing that would lend itself to the demon behind this, nor the conjurer who summoned it." He couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Do you think there is a conjurer?” Jason’s dark eyes lit up. “People can make their own deals with the devil.”

Faolan grabbed the cuffs of his gloves, drawing them off simultaneously to turn them inside out, trapping anything blood-borne inside the nitrile cage. He waved Jason over to the stools at the work station, wishing it was more comfortable. He woke up the laptop. “Not this woman. She looked familiar, so I spent some time last night looking her up.”

“When you should have been sleeping.” Jason patted his shoulder, and Faolan shrugged.

“I found this picture.” He pushed the laptop toward Jason. It showed an angry, middle-aged woman who bore a resemblance to the one who had purple foam issuing out of her. In the picture, she seemed to be screaming at three women.

“Is that you in the background?” Jason ticked a finger off the screen.

“Yes. That’s the Grove at the Unitarian Universal church, during Samhain. When we were at the diner, I had an inkling I had seen some of the other women, too. Look at them, Jason. The three older women are in that picture. The possessed woman was with some fundie Christian group who showed up at our ritual to protest our Satanic ways.” Faolan scowled. “The three older women were Pagans.”

“Other druids?”

Faolan shook his head. “No, I think Wicca, maybe one followed Odin, I’m not really sure. We briefly made small talk, and I don’t even remember what about. I do know they weren’t mages of any kind. Competent in spell crafting, yes, but not the sort of stuff the Lucerna looks for.”

“Do you think the possessed woman sought out the power, so she could take vengeance on a group of people she didn’t like?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know. That’s more your job, Detective.” Faolan smiled, wondering if it looked as weary as he felt. “It would seem unlikely given her feelings about God, but it wouldn’t be the first time severe hate drew in a demon.”

Jason stifled a yawn. “I was hoping for more than that, Faolan. How about that purple stuff?”

“I have no idea. I handed it off to lab techs, you know the people whose job it is to do that sort of thing. I deal with bodies.”

Jason leaned in, not put off by the blood all over Faolan's disposable autopsy garb. He planted a kiss on Faolan's lips. "You are an MD/PhD, *Doctor* Fraser. I expect you to know everything. You love the lab stuff. You're one of the smartest people I know."

"Flattery still won't get you a quick analysis of the purple foam." Faolan wished Jason wasn't so close to him. It made Faolan want to take Jason to his office and do unspeakable things to him. Of course, no work would get done that way. "I can't do multiple autopsies and be lab god and arrange to bring the wolves in all at the same time, no matter how smart I am."

Jason ran a thumb along the line of Faolan's jaw, making him shiver. "You did well enough to find this connection between them. That'll save us hours, if not days. Do you have anything else for me?"

"Not really," he said, shaking his head, leaning into Jason's touch, wanting to take more comfort, but there wasn't time for it. "They all died of what it looked like they died of, blood loss secondary to trauma. I completed the autopsy of Amy Bowman, the woman possessed, first, but other than her blood being turned into purple foam, I saw nothing else of interest, no demonic sigils stamped into her skin or organs, no nests of worms in her liver, nothing to indicate what demon did this or who might have summoned it. Grandmother has my drawing of what my spell revealed, and is looking it up to see if it's in the *Ars Goetia* or *The Lesser Keys of Solomon*."

"Hopefully she'll have more luck than I did." Jason slid off the stool. "I better get back to work. So, tonight, the wolves are arriving?"

Faolan nodded. "In theory. Will it just be you, or will the rest of your Murder be there?" He smirked, knowing how much Jason hated the term 'murder of vampires.' He loved teasing Jason.

He narrowed his dark eyes. "There isn't even a murder in this Podunk place."

"Athens isn't bad," Faolan protested.

"The rest of the place is," Jason said, and Faolan shrugged, conceding the point. The Appalachian region of Ohio was sparsely populated and even more spartan in terms of culture, at least in terms of things he and Jason enjoyed. "There are just me and a couple of clans of vampires. The clans are more than content to let me lead. They'll do whatever I say."

"That's because you're so forceful." Faolan winked at him.

“Are you flirting with me, Doc?” Jason nudged him.

“Just a tease for later, you know, in a year when we’re both finally not worked to death.”

“A year? You’re so optimistic.” Jason grabbed another quick kiss. “All right, I will see you later.”

“Until then.”

Faolan watched his ass shamelessly as Jason walked off. Sighing, he went back to work and called Gretchen back in. “Resume recording, two forty-five, Dr. Fraser continuing the post.”

Faolan carried his palak paneer from The Star of India up to the imposing edifice of the Ridges. He walked into the red brick building under its tiered, filigreed grand entrance. Fumbling with the lock in his second story apartment door, he stumbled his way into his kitchen, wanting to just drop onto the linoleum and sleep. He unwrapped some naan, plopped it on a plate, and poured himself a drink, then spooned out some of the paneer. He all but fell on the couch and turned on the TV. Using his naan as a utensil, he channel-surfed with his other hand. Faolan settled for *Dr. Who* on *BBCAmerica*. He could always trust the eleventh Doctor to make him grin, no matter how tired he was.

“I’m beginning to think you’re in love with that mad man in a box.” Jason’s voice came from the hallway.

Faolan nearly choked on his paneer. “Dammit, Jason! I didn’t know you had let yourself in.” Even though they had been lovers for years, the vampire kept his own house; partially because there were things the vampires as a group wanted privacy for, things that did not concern the Lucerna. Jason needed space to conduct those meetings. Though Faolan thought the real reason was Jason was simply too superstitious to want to live in The Ridges, a former insane asylum the Lucerna had ripped the asbestos out of and repurposed. Jason was uneasy about ghosts, and Faolan’s apartment was definitely haunted, by a sad young woman. The graveyard she rested in was barely more than a stone’s throw away.

Jason rubbed his eyes as he walked into the room. “I needed a nap, and since we have a meeting tonight, I figured your bed made more sense.” He flopped down next to Faolan, leaning against his shoulder. Jason made puppy eyes at him. “She crawled into bed with me again.”

“Just tell Rebecca to go and she will.” Faolan’s ghost was fairly benign, but she did like to get into the bed or go through his closet, leaving a lingering, vaguely astringent smell behind.

“She doesn’t listen to me,” Jason whined before stealing a quick kiss. “Mmm, spicy.”

“Not nearly enough. I’ve had two bites.” To illustrate his point, Faolan took another bite. “Have you eaten?”

“Waiting for you.” Jason took Faolan’s hand. He kissed Faolan’s pulse point.

“Can I eat before you snack?” Faolan poked Jason’s hand with his naan.

Jason nodded, shifting his weight so he could lean on the arm of the couch. “You eat. I’ll keep napping.”

He seemed to go right back out. Faolan didn’t rush eating since there was time enough, and Jason obviously needed the rest. Vampire physiology beat base-line human in almost every sense, but even it had limits. Faolan put the dishes in the wash and started tea.

Jason didn’t wake up until the kettle whistled.

He stretched with a Tarzan-like yawn. “What are you brewing?”

“Darjeeling Puttabong. Want some?”

“It’s wasted on my taste buds, but the caffeine would be nice. You could just whip in a generic tea bag in a cup for all I can taste.” Jason flipped his hand at Faolan.

Faolan pitied him. Vampires ate food, and while it made up the bulk of their diet, they seemed to have lost most of their taste buds. Blood was about the only thing with a taste that appealed to them. “I’m brewing a pot. Who else do I have to waste my more-expensive-than-crack tea on?”

“Grandma and Sorcha?”

“My sister does like her tea.” He programmed the timer before sitting back down.

Jason took his hand, running Faolan’s wrist just under his nose as if taking in the bouquet of a fine wine.

“The wrist? Really?” Faolan scowled. “It stings more there.”

“Buck up.” Jason smirked. “Besides, babe, you’re so tired, you don’t remember that you have on your infernal neck guard.”

“Oh, sorry.” Faolan took it off. The blessed leather and silver presented problems for a variety of supernaturals. Jason would burn himself if he contacted the silver. The alpha wolf they were expecting later wouldn’t appreciate it, either. No one knew why both lycanthropes and vampires had such severe reactions to silver, but it made for a great weapon against any rogues.

Jason wrapped his muscular arms around Faolan, pulling him across his lap. Faolan laughed until Jason nuzzled Faolan’s neck. The brush of his fangs galvanized Faolan’s skin. He wanted more than being a snack, but doubted there would be time or energy for that tonight.

“Just a snack, lover. We have that meeting shortly.” Faolan regretted that, until it filtered through his tired mind he didn’t particularly like sleepy sex to begin with.

“Just what do you think I’m doing? Do all druids have such dirty minds?” Jason chuckled against Faolan’s pulse point. “I guess it comes from all that naked worship.”

“That’s mostly Wiccans going sky clad. I wear a robe. Besides, I *know* you and what you’re like.”

“What you’re hoping I’m like.” Jason kissed Faolan’s neck, then sunk his teeth in.

Faolan barely felt the teeth going in thanks to the anesthetics, which ran down the grooves in the back of vampiric fangs. He was half-surprised and a tad disappointed that Jason did behave himself, feeding as utilitarian as the DMV. Faolan enjoyed the way Jason usually played with his feedings, over two millennia of practice showing in his touch. None of that was present tonight, and Jason let him up quickly.

Jason took one look at Faolan’s face and laughed, loudly. “Someone seemed to be hoping for more.”

“Someone was not.” Faolan felt the heat of his face. No one could stop a blush, being an involuntary reaction, but he did wish it didn’t show so brightly on his pale skin.

“Later. If we’re not too tired.” Jason brushed his fingers against the other side of Faolan’s throat where he was forbidden to feed.

Faolan shuddered at the touch, muted as it was over his scarred, insensitive skin. Jason liked to touch the scar, as if to prove it didn't matter to him. The ragged scar held too many bad memories for Faolan, which was why he refused to allow Jason to feed from that side. The timer beeped, and he went to pour the tea. "That's where this comes in." After sweetening the tea, he handed over Jason's cup, sitting next to him again. Jason slipped an arm around Faolan's shoulders.

Faolan couldn't think of too many things that made him happier: cuddled up with his lover with a cup of tea and a quiet moment watching *Doctor Who*. Okay, maybe a beer and athletic naked-times were better. He took a sip of the Darjeeling, a sweet muscatel taste filling his senses. Sex might be better, but there really was something about tea time, too.

"You're being quiet." Jason drummed his fingers on Faolan's arm. "You really do have a crush on the Doctor."

Faolan snorted. "More like I'm exhausted and half-asleep on your shoulder. Even with all the help I had in Autopsy, it was a very long day."

"I believe that. For all the hours I put in, it's not so much a who dunnit, but more, was she possessed by her own doing or is this the start of something?"

"The latter, that's what you're thinking."

"You, too, or we wouldn't be here waiting for a fur bag to help out."

Faolan elbowed him. "Be nice. No taunting the alpha. The last time you did that, he scent-marked your car."

"He does that again, I'm neutering him," Jason said, and Faolan wondered if that was an actual promise.

"I repeat, behave yourself."

Jason simply rolled his eyes at him. The problem was the werewolf alpha wasn't the only alpha male in the group. He and Jason were just as dominant, and meetings between the three branches of the Lucerna usually ended up in more fights than needed.

They drank their tea in companionable silence, before leaving the apartment and walking across the campus to one of the many outbuildings, the former auditorium with its stark Greek columns, where Faolan's business office was. Susan, one of the young researchers, had offered to play secretary tonight, and she waved at them as they walked past her desk and into his office. Unlike his

space in the morgue, which was cramped and overflowing with paperwork, Faolan's office, as the partial head of the southeast Ohio branch of the Lucerna, was richly appointed. It would look at home in an English gentleman's club, lots of warm wood smelling of lemon oil and thickly cushioned leather chairs. He had several bookshelves with his most common references resting on them. A small table stood under the window with an altar to Cernunnos atop it. A clay statue of the horned god rested on some fresh oak leaves from the grounds.

Jason took up residence on one of the well-padded leather chairs, looking too damn fuckable, and Faolan wondered if he had draped himself on the chair with that in mind. Jason liked to play up the sensual vampire when he had an audience. When Bram Stoker, one of the Lucerna's dissenting members, had outed the vampires, the entire species had nearly panicked, but other than the people who just had to have someone to hate and rail against, society accepted it better than expected. Books and movies loved the vampires. Werewolves followed suit a few decades later, during the first war to end all wars. It took the mages a lot longer to come out of the broom closet, not until the end of the next world war. Faolan's grandmother told him stories about the mages stepping out into the open with the other supernaturals.

Hearing Susan talking to someone in the anteroom, Faolan shot Jason a warning look he knew the vampire would simply ignore if it suited him, then turned back to the door. He took a step back when someone slightly different than he was expecting came through it. Instead of Douglas, his doppelganger swaggered in. Either that, or Douglas had shaved off his long dark hair and beard, opting for the Marines' high and tight style. However, that wouldn't explain the thousand yard stare. The amber eyes fixed on Faolan had seen some things that left their mark. Granted seeing too much would be true of anyone in the Lucerna, but this seemed to be something more. It was common for Lucerna members to go into the military first, as further training because they would be expected—well, most of them, at any rate—to fight and do any number of dangerous things if need be, from combat rolling into the street after a rogue mage or rescuing hostages from burning buildings. Faolan hadn't gone the military route, opting for the rigors of both graduate school and the Lucerna's own combat training.

“Ah, this must be the twin.” Jason studied the werewolf. “Or else the big bad wolf caught the mange.”

First words out of Jason's mouth were a taunt. How did Faolan know it would go like this?

The young man's eyes narrowed, and if he had hackles in this form, they'd be up. "I expected the vampire to be a douche, but not the head of the Lucerna," he growled, and Jason balled up, laughing so hard Faolan thought he'd roll out of his chair.

"Derrek, it is Derrek, isn't it?" Faolan asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "Jason is the vampire."

Jason waved a hand at Faolan. "He's just Irish white."

Derrek's face went red right to what the military barber had left of his hair. "Sorry," he muttered.

"You won't be the first to make that mistake," Faolan said ruefully, gesturing to the chair nearest his desk. "Have a seat. I did get it right, didn't I? You were already in the Middle East when Jason and I were assigned here five years ago."

Derrek nodded, but he didn't sit. He kept his eyes on Jason as if hoping he could turn him to ash just by the heat of his gaze. "Yes, it's Derrek."

"What happened to Douglas?" Faolan asked before Jason could jump back in to stir the pot some more. He took a seat, hoping the alpha's twin would do the same. Faolan tried to remember what he knew about Douglas's twin. Not much other than he was a Marine, had done more than one tour of duty, and had earned some medals. Derrek had certainly proved himself. To the other werewolves, Derrek just might have had to prove how tough he was. He recalled Douglas telling him he planned to share the alpha duties with his twin, which hadn't sat well with the Appalachian pack. Derrek was gay.

"Not Lucerna business." Derrek finally sat. "Just a pack squabble over who gets to run where in the Hocking Hills."

"I thought you fur balls just peed on your corner of the world to solve that sort of issue," Jason said, and Derrek's lips peeled back in a way that was definitely not a smile.

"Jason!" Faolan shot him another warning look, hoping his idiot lover would take it. What was it about vampires that they couldn't resist pulling a werewolf's tail? He turned back to Derrek. "Did your brother tell you why we asked him here?"

Derrek nodded. "I saw it on the news, too. The mass murder at the Union. Was it really a half-dozen women dead?" He swiveled in the chair so he could give Faolan his attention.

“Unfortunately.”

“But the demon who did it was killed.” Derrek wrinkled up his nose. “Or should I say, the person possessed was.”

“Yes. We’re looking now for information on whether or not she was responsible for her possession, or if this is the start of something new.”

Derrek frowned, an expression that oddly didn’t take away from how handsome he was. “I hope not. I’ve had enough action for a while. I was looking forward to quiet time back home.”

“I doubt you’re going to get it,” Jason interjected, serious now.

Derrek’s expression found a new level of down. “Do you agree with him?” He inclined his head to Jason.

Faolan nodded. “While there is suggestion the possessed woman knew some of the others...”

“She wasn’t known to all of them,” Jason broke in. “She slaughtered a writers’ group, but some of them were also in a coven or something like that.”

“I think they were solitary practitioners actually.” Faolan leaned across his desk to show Derrek the picture on his tablet. “But they did at least go to this holiday together.”

“That’s you.” Derrek pointed to Faolan in his robes.

“Yes. I remember meeting them, vaguely. I didn’t know them though.”

“Can’t tell that from this picture.” Derrek shrugged. “I’ll have the pack keep an ear out, but you know we don’t know a lot of magic.”

“Yes, you are here for the muscle.” Jason smiled at the werewolf, and Faolan barely resisted the urge to throw something at him.

Derrek narrowed his eyes. “I don’t have to—”

“Ignore him, Derrek. And the point I was trying to make is we’re all going to need to work together if this is the start of something big. That’s why I invited your pack in as early as I have. Jason is the leader of the local murder of vampires. We’re going to need to work together, even if I have to get a gag for Jason.” Faolan pointed at Jason who raised his eyebrows.

Derrek snorted. “Do they make them big enough for vampires?”

“Take a walk back to his apartment and find out,” Jason said, sweeter than honey.

Derrek rolled his eyes. "My brother had already made up his mind to help. He wanted me to see what was really going down."

Faolan noted Derrek didn't have as much of an Appalachian accent as his brother, but then again, as far as he knew, Derrek had been many years away from here. "Good. Then let's see what we can find out about these women and any rumors we can investigate." Small towns like all the ones around Athens were good for rumors and gossip. Too bad most of it turned out to be pure crap. "We can meet at Jackie O's tomorrow to compare notes and grab dinner. Jason will buy."

Jason's eyebrows climbed higher, but he didn't protest.

"Good. I'll bring my appetite." Derrek smirked at Jason. He rose up from his chair. "Anything else?"

"No, thanks for coming on short notice. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Will do."

Derrek let himself out. Faolan watched him go. The young man had a fine ass. Jason came over and tapped Faolan's shoulder.

"You like him."

Faolan looked up at Jason. "I barely know him. I'm more annoyed at you being a prick."

Jason sat on the desk. "You can't change centuries of instinct when it comes to werewolf-vampire interaction."

"I can if I bust your heads together." Faolan shoved him, but failed to dislodge his muscular lover. "I should make you get in your car and head home."

Leaning back on the desk, Jason grabbed Faolan's shirt, hauling him off his seat and into a kiss. After nipping Faolan's lip, Jason let him go. "I was pretty well-behaved for me."

Sadly, Faolan knew that was true. "Doesn't mean I don't want to knock you in the head."

"No, I think you might rather knock something against that kid's ass."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Faolan knew his blush made a liar out of him. "And he's not a kid. He has to be in his late twenties. I'm not that much older. It's not my fault you're a million years old."

“I’m not that old, but point taken. Still, he is cute. I’m surprised. Usually I like men with hair I can play with.” Jason reached up and toyed with Faolan’s. “So I would have thought his twin would have been cuter. But there’s something about him.”

“Why are we even talking about this? We’re together and he doesn’t even know us.” Faolan tapped Jason’s nose. “Unless you’re thinking about a Greek orgy.”

Jason rolled off the desk, holding out a hand to Faolan. He took it. “You never know.”

That was the thing about Jason, one never did know. He’d had countless lovers before Faolan, and would have countless more when he was gone. Susan had already left, probably off to the library to study, so Faolan locked up. Even as they walked hand-in-hand back to his apartment, thoughts of the well-built werewolf stuck with Faolan. It was an interesting development.

Chapter Three

Faolan took a long draught of his Meigs County Black I.P.A., savoring the citrus and resin flavors of the dark beer. He loved experimenting with beer, but today had been as hard as yesterday, so he went with a favorite. Jason had a Black Betty porter since its bold flavors made their way through to vampiric taste buds in ways most food and drink didn't.

Jackie O's was relatively empty at this early hour, but still as darkly lit as most pubs. John, someone Faolan, as a regular, knew casually was tending bar. A noisy group of barely twenty-one year olds were in the corner table by the street-view window but other than that, it was fairly sedate. The music could be a little less loud and Faolan wondered if that meant he was getting old.

"I'm hungry," Jason said, rousing Faolan out of his thoughts.

"No nibbling here." Rubbing his neck for emphasis, Faolan looked at the door as if he could will Derrek to come through it. The werewolf wasn't late yet, but he was pushing it, and keeping a clamp on Jason's sarcasm wasn't an easy thing.

"I might spice my beer with werewolf blood if that boy doesn't put a wiggle in it."

"I don't think anyone says 'put a wiggle in it' anymore. And if he wiggles it, we might lose it." Faolan took a deeper drink, trying to drive the image of Derrek wagging his tail out his head. He failed. He shifted around on the stool, nearly kicking over his *Fullmetal Alchemist* messenger bag, the one Jason hated—because it proclaimed Faolan's geeky side to the world—but respected whenever it came to a fight. Faolan had it loaded for bear just in case they were ever surprised on the street. After getting his throat torn out five years before, he took no chances.

"Is that the Royal We?" Jason reached over, slapping Faolan's arm. "I don't recall saying anything about wanting to see the fur ball wiggling it."

"Thank Jesus."

Derrek's voice at his elbow made Faolan jump. He banged his knee against the table leg, making him swear. "Where did you even come from?" he snarled, rubbing the offended joint. "There's not that many people in here. How did I miss you?"

“It’s dark in here. Besides, I had to hit the restroom first.” Derrek shrugged, taking the stool next to Faolan. “Do I even want to know why the leech is talking about my ass?”

“Why? Hoping I might do something about it?” Jason arched his eyebrows.

Derrek sneered. “Not even close. Did you have any luck tracking anything down because I came up with a goose egg.” He waved at the waitress to get her attention. “What’s good to drink? I’m used to Bud.”

“No piss in a bottle here,” Faolan pointed to the dry-erase board. “There is plenty. If you like darks, I have a black IPA, and Jason has a porter, but if you like it paler, try the Paw Paw Hefeweizen, or the Firefly amber ale.”

A bewildered expression flitted over Derrek’s face as he perused Jackie O’s beer list. “Um, I have no idea, but I don’t want beer that dark. Hell, I thought you were drinking cola.”

“Never trust a beer you can see through.” Faolan laughed. “Also, Jason is whining about being hungry. Might want to have a look at the menu before he starts snacking on us.”

“I will bite him right in the face.” Derrek jabbed a finger at the vampire.

“We were thinking pizza,” Faolan said, trying to derail any nonsense, even though he was the one to start it.

Derrek picked up the menu, peering over it at Faolan. “You’re a druid, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You aren’t gonna insist on the vegan pizza or something are you?” Derrek’s face pinched so comically Faolan had to bite his lip to keep from laughing again.

“I guess the fur ball is voting for the Neanderthal pizza.” Jason drained his beer, then waggled the glass at the waitress.

“Well, most of these pizzas are vegetarian.” Derrek frowned, studying the menu with too much enthusiasm, either embarrassed or restraining himself from dining on vampire.

“I’m fine with the Neanderthal.” Faolan peered at the menu, trying to read in the dim light. “The Reuben’s are pretty delicious, too.”

“I’m thinking burgers.” Derrek tapped the menu. “These fancy pizzas are always pretty small, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are,” Faolan said.

Derrek nodded, looking over the burger selection. They ended up ordering the Neanderthal pizza and sandwiches all around. If nothing else, there would be leftovers. One would hope. Derrek went with the Firefly amber ale. Once the waitress moved off, Derrek asked, “So, really, why were you talking about my ass?”

“We weren’t. Jason said you needed to hurry your ass up.” Faolan wondered where business-like Derrek had bugged off to. He liked that side of him and really didn’t want to have to confess to why they were talking about his butt. He didn’t exactly want to advertise how attractive he found Derrek.

“I couldn’t find a damn place to park. I hate that about Athens,” Derrek grumbled, and Faolan couldn’t argue that. “Doug said you two are a couple. That true?”

“Yeah.” Jason gave Faolan the hairy eyeball. “Not that it keeps some men’s eyes from wandering.”

Faolan was glad it was too dark to show his blush. He’d about sell his own soul to have skin color other than mother of pearl. So much for not advertising. “Ignore him. You know how vampires like to tease.”

“I know how they like to think they’re funny,” Derrek replied. “Hey, can I taste that stuff?” He pointed to the dark beer. Faolan pushed the glass toward him, watching Derrek’s lips as they sealed over the glass. Was this a test? Derrek had a perfect little cupid’s bow to his lips, or did until he made a face. “That is *so* strong. Shit.”

“It’s over seven percent alcohol. Puts hair on your chest.” Faolan reclaimed his pint glass.

“Just what a werewolf needs, more hair.” Jason snorted.

“Shut up.” Derrek scowled at Jason.

“Back to your original question, I found nothing much,” Jason said. “Bowman, that’s the demon possessed woman, had a rather boring life, a pretty despicable one if you ask me. I’ve never liked people who use religion like a weapon. She never met a group of people she didn’t like to criticize, or at least from what I’ve learned from co-workers and neighbors. She thought the Westboro Baptists had it right. Gays were condemning this country to hell, and we were still better than the Pagans. If she could have brought back stoning for either offense, she would have.”

"It's hard for me to feel tremendously sorry she's dead, and I know that's awful." Faolan drained his beer, pushing the glass to the edge of the table.

"Don't waste too many tears on her, Faolan. She's the type who organizes protests when little girls want to wear short hair and t-shirts, claiming it's promoting the lesbian lifestyle. I'm serious." Jason took out his tablet and brought up something. "Here, it made the news." He surrendered the tablet to Faolan and Derrek.

"That is gross." Derrek's face twisted up, and Faolan didn't blame him.

"Extremely. I do remember her at Samhain. She made the news then, too," Faolan said.

"What's that?" Derrek sat back from the table so the waitress could slide his beer in front of him. She promised to be back with their food shortly.

"It's a hinge time of year, when the doors to the other side swing open. Ghosts, fae and other entities can walk freely here then. It corresponds with Halloween," Faolan explained.

"Okay, yeah I can see where that would upset someone like her." Derrek took a swig of his beer. "Oh, hey, this *is* good."

"Most of their beers are." Faolan spread his hands apart.

"Do you remember anything important about that rant in the grove?" Jason wagged his hand at Faolan, rocking back a bit on his barstool.

"Not really. It was your usual 'you people are going to hell and taking the country with you' speech. Most of the protest was directed against the women, but she did spot me as I was coming to move her and her cronies along. I really got it because, as a man, I should have control of these wild women, and it was my fault we weren't giving glory to God, and that my family must be so ashamed."

Derrek snorted, sitting back in his chair. He crossed his arms over his chest "Glad I spent years getting shot at for people like this."

"Tell me about it," Jason said, and at Derrek's puzzled look, "Well, not recently. Last round was Desert Storm for me."

"Ah." Derrek bobbed his head. "Served with vampires in Afghanistan, kinda creepy."

"All that killing does bring out the blood lust," Jason said with less rancor than Faolan had been expecting. "In the wolves, too."

Derrek looked uncomfortable with that statement, but was spared answering when two waitresses arrived with the large pizza, their sandwiches and Derrek's burger. Derrek grabbed a couple slices immediately. Werewolves had a higher metabolism rate. Faolan rarely saw one who wasn't always hungry.

"What did you tell that lady after her outburst?" Jason took a bite of pizza.

"That we were all there giving glory to God, *our* Gods, and the only time my family had ever pretended to be anything but druids was in the time when the Christians killed anyone who didn't see things their way." Faolan shrugged. "Honestly, thought she'd have a heart attack on the spot. But she did tell me it was a shame they hadn't wiped us all out, and that we would pay for our sins. I can't see her actively hunting down a possession ritual, so she could kill gays and pagans at will. She was far too holier than thou to welcome a demon into her."

"I hate to say it, but I agree with you. And I found out nothing particularly helpful, not even rumors of kids messing with Satanism," Derrek said. "But I probably covered that earlier with the goose egg comment."

"No help, no food." Jason tugged Derrek's plate toward him.

Derrek growled deep in his throat, a wholly inhuman sound.

"By that logic, do you get to eat?" Faolan beckoned for the waitress. He was going to need more beer before he was tempted to murder his lover.

Jason pouted. "No."

Derrek snatched back his plate and took a huge bite of hamburger for emphasis. He took two more, nearly demolishing the thing, before focusing on Faolan. He swallowed his bite then asked, "Did you do better?"

"Not really. I did an analysis on the purple foam leaking out of Bowman, but I'm still waiting on some of the results. It is acellular, which is peculiar, since it was traveling in her blood vessels." Faolan paused for pizza then, as the waitress returned, gave his beer order to switch it up with a Dragon's Milk. At ten percent alcohol, it might mellow him enough to withstand this meeting of the alphas.

Derrek made a face, going a bit pale. "Also gross."

"And here I thought you wolves loved rolling around in carrion." Jason snagged the pizza slice off Derrek's plate.

"That's dogs!" Derrek's color shot from low to high. "I'm not a dog."

Faolan kicked Jason in the ankle, making him yelp. "Jason, seriously, I will bring out a gag and make you wear it in public."

"You're dating a prick," Derrek growled in his throat, more wolf than man in that moment as he replaced the stolen slice.

"He's dating me because of my prick." Jason held his hands up nearly a foot apart for emphasis. Derrek rolled his eyes.

The waitress looked at them funny as she put Faolan's drink in front of him, then hurried off.

"I don't know why I date him half the time." Faolan shook his head. Jason could be a trial.

"It's the centuries of experience," Jason replied.

"Centuries? Really? I'm not sure I've ever met too many really old vampires. Some said they were around in Jesus's day, but I'm not sure I believe them." Derrek finished off his bacon cheddar hamburger and started with the pizza. "Be interesting though to pick their brains if they were."

"That's what draws me to vampires." Faolan took a drink, the bitter stout going down easily.

"I was already over three centuries old by then." Jason chewed his Potter melt, with the faraway look Faolan associated with story-telling time.

"Really?" Derrek swiveled his stool to look Faolan in the eye. "Is he still teasing me?"

"No, he really is that old. He was a pankratiast back in Greece, got famous, then was assigned a pretty embarrassing death." Faolan grinned, but regretted it when Jason's eyes clouded over.

"They didn't understand vampirism then, were terrified of it. They said I committed suicide after being framed for theft by the Macedonians." Jason chased a drop of condensation on his glass with a finger. "I would like to have been remembered differently."

"Jason, was that your original name? It doesn't sound that Greek, but I guess there's Jason and the Argonauts." Derrek swiveled back to Jason.

Faolan said, "That isn't his original name. It's—"

"Don't you dare." Jason returned his kick to the ankle with interest.

Faolan shook out his wounded leg. "Fine, but the next time you try to get a rise out of Derrek, I'm telling him."

Jason pouted. "You take the fun out of it."

"You're the only one having the fun." Faolan pointed at Jason, but his lover didn't seem the least bit sorry.

"What's a pankratiast?" Derrek seemed to have forgiven Jason for the moment.

"If I can finish my report, then Jason can tell you all about it because we'll be here all night hearing tales of Olympic glory," Faolan said, serving only to deepen Jason's sulk.

Derrek's eyebrows climbed toward his shorn hairline. "He was an Olympian?"

"He's right here." Jason thumbed his chest for emphasis. "And yes, back in the original days. But go ahead, Faolan, finish your story."

"We did a little book work. Grandma and I believe the demon has the ability to obfuscate his sigil. I literally can't remember what I saw over Bowman's body in the diner. If I hadn't drawn it then, there would be nothing left in my head of it. Only a handful of demons can do that." Faolan gestured with his beer, nearly sloshing it.

"Let me guess, all of them high-powered and bound to be a pain in our ass." Jason rolled his eyes.

"We wish that's all they'll be. These are the types where calling in reinforcements from the outside might be needed," Faolan replied. "Grandma is more interested in who might be behind it all. She says there have been some portents whispering about something bad on the horizon."

"Your grandmother is a seer?" Derrek asked, flicking his gaze back to Faolan.

"No, the gift of prophecy doesn't run in my family, but there are many seers in the Lucerna."

"If you guys were psychic, you would have known you were dating a douche before you got involved." Derrek favored Jason with a feral grin.

"That public gag can just as easily be used on you if you try to wind up the vampire, Derrek. Douglas will not be amused if I return you to the pack muzzled and collared." Faolan hoped the warning was plain in his tone.

"No, he'd be amused. He'd take pictures. But I'd like to see you try it," Derrek scoffed.

“He’s not just a druid. He’s a mage,” Jason warned. “He’d have you collared before you could move. Mages cheat that way.”

Derrek took a fresh appraisal of Faolan. To a Normal bystander, Faolan looked just as muscular as his companions, but in a physical fight, no human stood much of a chance against a vampire or werewolf.

“It’s not cheating,” Faolan said.

Jason waved him off. “So why hasn’t Brigid mentioned this before?”

“She has to me. The Dark Summer, but I haven’t put much stock in it since it’s not even Beltane yet. Even though the tourist advisory boards would like to convince us May Day is summer, it’s not until mid-June.” Faolan shrugged. “And you know how prophecies are, vague to the point of uselessness. Grandmother and Sorcha are looking into that angle.”

“Sorcha?” Derrek cocked his head to one side.

“My sister. She’s also a doctor with the Lucerna.”

“So you have to share leadership, too?” Derrek frowned slightly making Faolan wonder how rough things might be within the pack after Derrek’s homecoming.

“With my grandmother, yes. Sorcha was... injured.” Faolan scowled, rubbing the stellate scar on his neck, earned during that attack. Derrek eyed the old wound, opening his mouth to ask, but Faolan glanced away. “She can’t go in the field anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Derrek said just as Faolan’s phone interrupted, trilling out a reel of violins and pipes. Derrek rubbed his ears as if his sensitive canine hearing didn’t like the melodious tones.

“Sorcha?” Faolan said, seeing his sister’s number on his screen. “We were just tal... what? Damn. We’re only a few blocks away. We’ll head there now. Reinforcements are on the way, right?”

Jason was already on his feet. Faolan slid off the chair, grabbing his messenger bag.

“What’s up?” Derrek leapt to his feet as Faolan pulled his neck guard free from the bag.

“Demon attack at the Athena Theatre, the one here, not the one out on State Street.” Faolan snatched his wand out of the bag as he ran for the door. “John,

we have a situation. We'll be back to settle up," he called to the bartender, who knew them well.

"We'll pack up the food and have it waiting for you," John shouted back.

"The theatre wouldn't have people there yet, would it?" Derrek asked, loping along.

"Not normally, but it's the international film festival. It goes all day. Usually I'm there," Faolan said. "Go on, don't wait on me."

His supernatural companions didn't need to be told twice. Faolan had no hope of keeping up with them as they raced up the street. Faolan was fast, but he was still only human. He pounded up the broken, uneven sidewalks. Why were the sidewalks always a mess? Faolan had to dodge half-drunk OU students as he ran. Really? Drunk this early? Of course, he was regretting his own high alcohol content beers now.

Screams drew him to the battle. His companions were alone in the fight, the rest of the Lucerna not in evidence. They were probably stuck somewhere on the crowded streets. People, mostly teens, ran everywhere, some of them bloodied, like a disturbed ant hill. There didn't seem to be any demon-possessed, but imp-like demons, low level but still dangerous, bounced around. They were hired out by other demons not wanting to face a battle themselves, and by mages looking for more power. Their red hides and long whip-like tails were what gave rise to the common image of the devil.

Derrek stood half-transformed, facing off with three of them. Faolan knew Derrek couldn't go full-wolf without stripping. The Hollywood ideal of werewolves just bursting through their clothes like the Hulk was impractical, and occasionally painful, if one considered the effects of a zipper. However, even half-transformed, Derrek had an elongated snout full of fangs and strong claws at the end of his fingers. A feral glint in his amber eyes suggested Derrek enjoyed the workout he was getting.

"Hey, Gandalf!" Jason bellowed. "A little help."

Faolan swiveled around to spot Jason rather overwhelmed under the marquee. Vampires usually fought with brute strength, and if they could sink their fangs into it, they would. Most, however, wouldn't bite a demon unless there was no choice. They tasted bad. Faolan pointed his wand, using it to concentrate his natural power. He sent forth gale-force winds, slamming a handful of the demons into the brick walls of the theatre. Reaching into his

messenger bag, he came up with one of the several water pistols he usually carried full of holy water. He threw one to Jason. It was a myth vampires didn't like holy water, but it definitely worked on demons.

"Didn't know it worked for non-believers," Derrek lisped, pounding a demon's head into the concrete so hard both bone and cement split.

"The faith only matters when it's being made." Faolan slashed his wand, knocking away a few more of the imps so Derrek had room to move.

"No fire?" A wolf-headed grin always looked strange to Faolan, like a Husky on caffeine.

"I could, but it's too close quarters. Too much collateral—" Faolan grunted as something hit his back. He dropped to the ground. Pain shot through the knee he landed on.

Before the thing could savage him, Derrek jumped it, bowling it over onto the street. He finished it with a swift, bone-crunching bite to the neck. Faolan picked himself up off the sidewalk, ignoring the stinging pain in his abused knees and hands. This was going on too long, with too much risk to innocents. Where the hell was backup? It would drain him almost completely, but he needed a bigger spell. Faolan took a quick survey of where most of the imps were, then concentrated, stabbing his wand down. The concrete and ground responded. Thick, pliable ropes of earth, with manmade shell clinging to them, rose up. Loops of earth, guided by the magic his body strained to direct, reached outward, ensnaring the imps. They raged against his construct, making Faolan's body shake with exertion.

"Fucking cool." Derrek leapt after the nearest one. His claws ripped out its throat, and Derrek sprang back from the spray of blood.

"He can't hold it forever." Jason raced in with the water pistol, blasting two imps right in the eyes. The holy water melted straight through their heads.

"I can hold it long enough!" Faolan raised his wand, and shot concentrated energy straight through the skulls of the three nearest imps, ending their struggles. Drained now, he fumbled in his bag for a sheathed hunting knife. He'd use it if necessary, but Jason and Derrek made short work of the captured demons. They were left with an earthen curlicue that bore a sick resemblance to something out of a Dr. Seuss story.

"Is that all of them?" Faolan's voice quavered with exhaustion.

"Yeah, bud, it's over," Jason said.

Faolan sagged down, his wand nearly tumbling from his numb fingers. The earth melted down to its natural state, dropping the demons like rotted apples. His breath rasped in and out, and Faolan didn't know if he had the strength to stand up.

Derrek stuck out a furry hand to him and hauled him up. Faolan steadied himself against Derrek, feeling the strong muscle under his fingers. Derrek thumped Faolan's back. "Never seen anything like that. No wonder you're in charge," he said, or at least that's what Faolan thought he said. It was hard to understand wolves in their half-shifted state.

"Easy there, furball. You're drooling everywhere." Jason slapped Derrek's shoulder.

Derrek growled at him, wiping at his jaw as it receded into its human form.

"Hey dog-boy," Jason said, and Derrek's amber gaze went so hot, Faolan thought he'd just slip back into wolf form. "You fight well."

Derrek smirked. "I know. You, too, leech."

"Don't make me rap your heads together. I'm much too tired," Faolan said. "We have to check on the wounded, and find out where this started." He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "I'm assuming inside. Where the hell is back-up?"

"Got me." Jason started climbing stairs to enter the theatre. Derrek followed, but as soon as he did, Faolan lost his support. He nearly toppled. Jason doubled back, catching Faolan's arm. "Whoa. Maybe you need to sit down."

Faolan shook his head. "Just give me a second. I can do this. Or at least sit down inside." He did slip an arm around Jason for support then mustered enough strength to walk inside.

The metallic stink of blood was even worse here than it had been in the diner. It shouldn't have surprised Faolan, but it still took him aback. More demons, enclosed space, and a lot of victims. There were three bodies that never made it out of the theatre. The Athena was small, and international film festivities weren't enormous draws, at least not this early in the evening. It could have been worse. Of course, he had no idea how many had been injured and escaped.

"Fraser!"

Faolan twisted so he could look over his shoulder. Behind him were Jack Parker and his team. "We have it contained," Faolan said. "but the injured are probably far afield by now."

“Sorry. It’s game night. The streets were clogged.”

Faolan nodded. “Get your team helping any injured they can find and start cleaning up. We’ll handle things in here.” He sat on the seat. “My medical kit is back in the car with the jumpsuit.”

“We don’t really have to worry much about contaminating this scene,” Jason said. “We know who killed them. We need to find out who is calling them here.”

“And why here?” Derrek hunkered down near the body of an old man, no doubt a local. “This is a college campus. There are plenty of targets with more victims if that’s what they were after, like the game.”

“Good point,” Jason nodded.

“I like this theatre.” Faolan rubbed his forehead. “But you’re right. It’s not a logical spot. That will have to be our next task. Figure out why. The diner can almost be explained away as a grudge between Bowman and the pagans, but this? I have no idea. Are the attacks linked or just coincidence?”

“We don’t have enough information yet,” Jason scowled “And I’m not entirely sure how we’re going to get it.”

“We better figure it out and fast.” Derrek said.

Faolan nodded. “And it starts here. Help me back up. I need to investigate the dead.”

“Can you do a spell to tell us who sent them?” Derrek asked.

“I wish, but it doesn’t work like that with the imps. I don’t even know what I think the dead can tell me, but I need to do *something*,” Faolan said, and his companions helped him back up. He’d investigate and feel worse when he learned nothing as he expected he would. He sent Jason and Derrek back out to see if the witnesses could at least tell them how the attack began, leaving him alone with the dead. Faolan hadn’t felt this helpless in a long time.

Chapter Four

Faolan rubbed his eyes, wondering why the hell he was awake before dawn. A quick glance at the clock told him it wasn't much before, but still. What was worse, he felt energized. That surprised him after how draining the night had been. Luckily, there had only been the three casualties at the Athena. The injured were all expected to fully recover, and with a better understanding of how real the dangers were. Hollywood made being in the Lucerna and other demon-fighting groups look fun and exciting. Well, they had the latter part right, but in all the wrong ways.

He shut his eyes, but that made Faolan more aware of all his aches and pains. It was going to be a long day. Maybe the morning should be more enjoyable. He rolled over on the king-sized mattress. Next to him, Jason sprawled out, taking up most of the bed. Hitching himself up on his elbow, Faolan played with Jason's thick chest hair, following its path down to his ripped abs before curling around the coarse thatch of hair around Jason's unaroused cock, then reversed course.

Jason swatted at his hand, still sleeping. "Rebecca, stop it."

Rebecca? Faolan plucked at a chest hair and Jason's eyes snapped open. "So just what are you doing with my ghost? It's true. Vampires will do it with anything," he teased.

Jason looked over at the clock, groaned, and pressed a hand against Faolan's chest, pushing him away. "That better be six in the evening, babe."

"You know it's not." Faolan moved in close again, brushing his lips over Jason's.

Jason captured Faolan, crushing him to his body as he deepened the kiss. When he let Faolan go, Jason's fangs showed. Jason caressed Faolan's cheek. "Did someone wake up horny?"

Faolan circled his fingers over Jason's awakening cock, stroking up its length. "Someone did."

Jason arched his hips to make the most of Faolan's touch. "Does someone have time before he's supposed to be back at work?"

"Not as much time as he'd like." Letting Jason go, Faolan reached over and turned off the alarm. He wouldn't need it now. Afterward, he straddled Jason.

Taking hold of Jason's wrists, Faolan pressed them against the pillows above Jason's head. "So instead of tying you to the headboard, and doing any number of unspeakable things to you, I'll have to get creative."

"You always are." Jason chuckled, wiggling under him. "You'll just have to picture me all tied up to carry you through the day."

"Since I'm working with Grandmother today, I think not." Faolan let go of Jason's wrists, skimming his hands along Jason's strong arms.

Jason laughed louder, so Faolan kissed him quiet. His tongue scraped along Jason's sharp fangs as Faolan plunged it deep into Jason's mouth. Jason ran his hands down Faolan's back, giving his hips a gentle squeeze when his fingers got there. Faolan shifted, resting more of his weight on his knees rather than on Jason's chest. He couldn't stop from wincing as his knee informed him that wasn't his better idea.

Jason broke the kiss, and moved his hand down Faolan's thigh, stopping short of the joint. "Babe, that knee looks sore."

He put his hand over Jason's. "It is. Sorcha is working up a healing spell for it, but you know how that goes."

Jason nodded. They both knew too well. It would take the soreness out, but healing spells only worked on minor things like his bruised and scraped knee. Otherwise, Sorcha and he wouldn't have the scars they did.

Jason caught hold of Faolan and flipped him onto the mattress in one smooth move. Jason had been a vampire for centuries, but he had been a wrestler all that time as well. The sheer physicality Jason brought to their relationship was one of the many things Faolan loved about him. They didn't really have much time for that this morning, though. Jason cupped Faolan's face.

"I know you like to be the one in control, but you might want to let that knee rest." Jason twisted around to gently kiss Faolan's swollen, abraded joint.

"I'm in your hands." Faolan rested back against the bed, the bedding soft, like a caress, against his skin.

"Mmm, just like I like it." Jason shifted about again, pressing his lips against Faolan's thigh, kissing his way up. His fangs were retracted by the time his mouth started playing with Faolan's jewels. Jason wrapped his calloused hand over Faolan's cock. The heat of his touch radiated through Faolan,

awakening him deep to his soul. Sex charged his inner stores. Done right, there was something sacred about it, and he'd never known Jason to do it wrong.

Faolan lost himself to Jason's touch. His knee still ached as he pressed his heels down into the bed, so he could thrust into Jason's mouth. Jason pinned Faolan's hips down, laughing.

"You still can't let go of control." Jason tapped Faolan's cock, making it bob.

"It's my nature," Faolan reached down, running his fingers through Jason's hair. Jason knew how to let go, how to not dominate, but Faolan had never mastered it.

"I know." Jason kissed the tip of Faolan's penis before taking it deeply into his mouth.

Making a happy noise, Faolan gave himself over to Jason, fighting to let it all go. The slow but demanding rhythm of Jason's mouth eased Faolan back into that sacred, inner place. His fingers curled in the soft bedding as his desire coalesced deep inside. As his body tensed, Faolan wished every morning could start like this. They should be free to have easy days with nothing more to do but love each other. Unrealistic, but a lovely thought none the less. He rode the divine wind of orgasm, his body going taut before puddling down against the sheets, senseless.

Nuzzling his way up, Jason nestled his hot body against Faolan's. As Jason sucked against Faolan's neck, he rallied enough of his senses to lick his hand, thoroughly dampening it. Jason's teeth pierced Faolan's skin, making him groan. This was the sensual sort of feeding Faolan loved so much. It was nearly enough to make him hard again, and Jason damned well knew it. As Jason fed, Faolan stroked his thick cock, sweeping his thumb gently over Jason's foreskin and the moist head of his shaft. He held tight to Jason with his other hand, trying to touch him as much as possible. Jason stopped feeding, his body tensing against Faolan. Faolan quickened his caresses over Jason's shaft. Jason muffled his cry against Faolan's neck as he came. Afterward, Faolan rubbed Jason's sweaty back, in no hurry to disentangle himself.

Eventually, Jason rolled off onto the bed, his breathing still ragged. "You have my permission to wake me up like this all the time."

Faolan patted Jason's chest. "Noted." He stole a kiss before climbing out of bed to wash his sticky hand and get ready for the day. The necessity of it

sucked. All Faolan really wanted to do was lounge in bed all day. Jason joined him in the bathroom, but there wasn't time now for fun shower games—even if he trusted his knee for it. They both got ready, but Faolan doubted either of them was ready to face what this day would hold.

Faolan nestled himself down against the thick trunk of one of the old oaks on the vast property the Lucerna held around the Ridges, what he called the little grove. He would rather rest in the woods just outside the cemetery where the proper groves grew. The trees there were older, more numerous and powerful but he was meeting Sorcha and his Grandmother to do the research. It was asking a lot for them to meet outside. While his Grandmother could have easily made the hike into the woods—and as a druid would have been happy to do so—Sorcha's ruined legs weren't really up to going that far.

Their grandmother rested on the bench under the oak's budded branches. She had a hefty stack of books on the bench next to her. Sorcha sat in her wheelchair, looking vaguely amused by him. A fat tome sat on her lap. "Finally awake, brother?"

"I've been awake since before dawn." Faolan chanted a quick spell, one of the first he'd learned as a child. Now no bugs would come anywhere near him as he sat on the ground.

"Rolling around in the sheets with your vampire boy toy doesn't count." Sorcha shook her head, grinning. There were only eighteen months between them and Sorcha loved to live up to her big-sister-in-charge reputation.

"I dare you to call Jason my boy toy to his face."

"Vampires often enjoy being toys or keeping them," Brigid said, handing him a book, maybe to shut him up. Sex talk never bothered the old woman. She'd join in if he'd let her. "Let's have a look at that knee, son."

Faolan didn't want to know what his grandmother knew about having vampires as sex toys. Obediently he rolled up his loose sweat pants worn just because he knew his sister should have a poultice for him. He took off the dressing he put on after he finally got out of bed. Most of the skin was abraded away on his knee cap, and the joint felt soft, like a rotten melon, from the swelling. It was as big and purple as the fat end of an eggplant.

Brigid's brow creased. "Are you sure nothing's broken, Faolan?"

"It was x-rayed. The injury's all soft-tissue." It didn't rule out a meniscus or ligament tear, but Faolan didn't think he was hurt that badly.

Sorcha handed a bag to their grandmother who passed it to Faolan. "This should fix you up quickly, herbs and magic together."

"Thanks." Pulling a jar out of the bag, he opened it and slathered the minty-smelling salve all over his knee. He rubbed the rest of the stuff into his hands before plucking some gauze out of the bag. Faolan taped himself up well before cleaning his hands on the towel his sister had thoughtfully put in the bag. Finally, he picked up the book his grandmother had given him. "Have you two found anything yet?"

"There is supposed to be a prophecy about the Dark Summer." Brigid traded her book for another. "But so far we haven't found it."

"Did the new werewolf know anything? What's Derrek like? I haven't met him yet." Sorcha shot him a quizzical look, leaning forward in her chair. "Should I introduce Deirdre to him?"

"I don't think you can avoid it. He seems like he's staying." Faolan thought his niece would like Derrek, but the four-year-old liked just about everyone. "He's like Herne himself in a fight, a wee bit short-tempered, but Jason keeps annoying him, so it could just be that." He shrugged. "And no, he hasn't found anything yet."

"Doug's cute." Sorcha tapped the edge of her book against her chin. "I have to assume his twin is, too."

"Sorcha, really." Brigid narrowed her eyes at Sorcha. "We have work to do."

"Faolan doesn't have his 'I'm here to work' face on," Sorcha protested, but she did turn back to her text.

"I've already been working. I had a call from the governor's office and Athens's mayor already this morning." Faolan took off his shoes and socks. He pressed his toes into the loam, feeling the prick of twigs and the pressure of an acorn or two. He slapped his palms against the ground a bit too hard, forgetting they, too, were bruised. Ignoring the bite of pain, he sent his weakened power into the earth. Roots surfaced, wrapping around his bare feet. He gasped as the oak fed him some of her energy.

His grandmother arched an eyebrow at him. "Better now?"

Faolan went boneless against the tree trunk. This was way better than the best spa he'd ever been to. "Much."

“That was a hell of a stunt you pulled yesterday.” A hint of recrimination hid in Brigid’s tone.

“Had to. Too many civilians and back-up was delayed.” Faolan looked at his book wondering just how old the idea of a Dark Summer was. This book dated back at least a few centuries, and naturally didn’t have anything helpful like an index. “So, Dark Summer?”

“I found a reference to a trio of powers, but I’m not sure if that’s our team or theirs.” Sorcha shrugged. “It’s going to be a long process.”

“So I suggest we all get on it,” Brigid said in a tone that brooked no argument. Neither Faolan nor Sorcha offered any, turning their attention to their tomes.

Chapter Five

Derrek looked up at the house, surprised it housed a vampire. He always pictured something more Gothic. This was a tri-level out of the Sixties, part brick, part white siding. It was typical of housing in the Athens-Albany area, and at least better than the abundant, decade or more old doublewides that could be found everywhere. Of course, he never imagined going into a vampire house alone, but Jason answered Derrek's call, while Faolan's people said he was indisposed. Getting out of his Ford F-150, Derrek followed the walk to the house and rang the bell.

The young man who answered the door could only have been a newly turned vampire. His skin was so pale and grey, he looked fresh from the grave. "Jason is expecting you. I'm Bob." He wiggled his fingers at Derrek. "I'll take you to him."

"Thanks."

Derrek noticed all the curtains in the house were black, long and drawn. He wondered if other vampires were in the house. Derrek decided he should know, but didn't want to ask. Bob didn't offer anything. He delivered Derrek to the basement, which made him a little nervous. He knew Jason and the vampires were just as much a part of the Lucerna as his pack, but he didn't feel an abundance of trust for them. He didn't really want to be in an underground room with only one way in and out.

Once he glanced around, he realized he was being stupid. No lines of coffins, no rampaging blood suckers, just Jason sitting in a leather recliner, listening to jazz. Or at least Derrek thought it was jazz. It wasn't his thing. Music, not Dracula's secret lair fixtures, dominated the room. Derrek saw shelves of albums and little records, but he couldn't remember what they were called. CDs took up at least two walls on either side of an impressive sound system. Next to the sound system was a pillar with a smiling man's head carved at the top, his curly hair and beard making him look almost real. Derrek decided not to look at that, so he turned away and saw a desk sitting opposite the sound system with a collection of art on the array of shelves behind it.

Sitting up, Jason turned the music down with a remote. "On the phone, you said we had something to talk about."

Derrek rubbed his back pocket where his phone was tucked away. "We probably could have done this on the phone, except the reception sucked where I was."

Jason smiled that shit-eating grin of his, stretching. Derrek tried not to notice the way it made Jason's muscles move. "Worried about being in a vampire den, Fuzzy?"

What was it about this vampire that got his hackles up? Repressing the urge to make him eat the chair he was sitting in, Derrek said. "Hardly worried about vampires."

"Maybe you should be. Vampires can be downright dangerous when they want to be." Jason climbed out of his chair, sauntering over as if to prove his point. "Though, you can say the same of your kind. So, what's up?"

Derrek would be damned if he gave an inch to this little, if imposing, man. "I tried to get in touch with Faolan, but they said he was indisposed. He's the one who really needs to hear it."

Jason's brow furrowed as he parked his butt on his desk. It would have been a sexy sort of pose if Jason didn't seem so worried. Not that he thought the vampire was sexy. Faolan on the other hand, the man was smoking. Derrek shook his head slightly, trying to knock the wizard out of his mind's eye.

"He's probably recharging his batteries after a spell that big." Jason picked up a little statue of a woman with a bear at her side and a bow in her hand. He turned it over in his hands. "What did you hear?"

"Was there something weird about how Faolan took over here?" Derrek couldn't keep his eyes off the stuff behind Jason. It seemed a better bet than meeting a vampire's eye anyhow. They could make you do stuff if they caught your eyes. That's what his grandfather always said.

Off to one side was one of those old-fashioned record players, the ones with the big flower-like bell on them, sitting on top of a wood cabinet, and next to it was a marble statue of what might have been a Greek God or warrior or something. More interesting to Derrek were the two things behind glass, directly off the vampire's right shoulder. "Something that might make someone pissed at him?"

Jason's dark eyes took on a dangerous glint. "His family came here five years ago from New York. She took over with the understanding Faolan would transition into the role, which he has."

“So, not local.” Derrek rubbed his chin. “He has an accent, but I didn’t think it was New York.”

“They’re all originally from Ireland, but after his parents were killed in the line of duty when Faolan was a kid, his grandmother took a leadership position in New York.” Jason ran his hand through his hair before asking, “How does this relate to what you’ve learned?”

“Haney, one of the gray-hairs, loves to gossip, swear to God he knows everyone. Anyhow, he heard someone at the Donkey Bar, you know the coffee house next to the magic shop, about someone complaining about being passed over as the leader for our branch of the Lucerna,” Derrek said, unable to contain his curiosity about the two items on the shelves behind Jason. He took several steps closer. One was in a light box under glass, a small, very old-looking coin. Next to it, unilluminated and out of line with any natural light that came from the small windows near the ceiling, was a Greek vase with a picture painted on it. Faded now, the vase’s picture bore a resemblance to Jason.

Jason slid off the desk, crowding a bit into Derrek’s space. “Did Haney say who it was?”

Refusing to step back, Derrek shook his head. “The person didn’t say who was doing the complaining, just that they felt cheated and planned to do something about it.”

“I came with them from New York,” Jason said, surprising Derrek. While he had known he’d never seen the vampire before his deployment in the Middle East, Derrek had assumed the relationship between Faolan and Jason was more casual. Werewolves didn’t usually think much of vampires on the whole, and the high sex drive of the vampire was legendary. They weren’t known for sticking to one partner for long, or at least not exclusively. Of course, how much of the legend was true Derrek didn’t really know. Maybe he was hoping it was casual between the two men because he found Faolan striking. Derrek didn’t usually go for blonds, but there was just something about the druid.

“You grew up here, right? You would know more about who was in charge before than me,” Jason said.

“Born and raised in the Hocking Hills.” Derrek caught himself looking between the vase and Jason again. Standing this close, it was hard not to notice Jason was handsome, too, not that he’d ever say that out loud about a damn leech. The difference between Jason and Faolan was that Jason *knew* he was handsome. Derrek could tell. “When I was growing up, it was the Barneses who

were in charge. I think he killed himself, but I was in Afghanistan at that point. I might have heard wrong. I'm sure everyone here knows, though."

"Yeah, you're right. We should go tell Faolan about this." Jason looked up at Derrek, a question in his eyes. In that moment, it occurred to Derrek Jason hadn't sat on the desk to look sexy, but rather to gain a little height. He couldn't be more than five foot five. That had to be the sucky thing about immortality. The race evolved, getting taller by the generations, and Jason was stuck in Ancient Greece. "You're fascinated by something on that shelf. What is it?"

"Two things. The coin and the vase. The picture on the vase looks like you." Derrek pointed over Jason's shoulder.

"It is me. After my Olympic win, which was *akoniti*, by the way." Jason flexed his biceps.

Derrek rolled his eyes. "I don't know what that means."

"They were too afraid to fight me, so I won by default." Jason beamed, thumping his chest with his fist. "They put my face on olive oil bottles. You know, this is the oil of champions thing."

"You're shitting me." Derrek laughed. "Seriously? Athletic endorsements are that old?"

"Yep. I can't hold onto everything over the years, but I do make exceptions. Sometimes I think I should just put it in a safer place, but I like looking at it." Jason threw his hands up. "You probably think I'm vain."

"Eh, you're a vampire. I expect that." Derrek nudged him, and Jason's lips curled back, showing fang.

Jason went around the desk and picked up the box the silver coin was in, handing it to Derrek. "It's my obolus."

Derrek stared at the worn coin. Had Jason lapsed entirely into Greek? He didn't know. "Again, clueless."

"The coin they put in the mouth of the dead to pay Charon for the fare to the underworld." Jason's shoulders slumped, his face seeming more sad and vulnerable than Derrek had ever seen it. "They didn't know I was still alive. They didn't understand the change."

"It does look like you're dead, even after you wake up from the transition. Like your friend, Bob, there." Derrek couldn't imagine what it would be like to wake up and spit your fare to heaven out of your mouth. What sort of man kept

that? Then again, Derrek thought he might have done the same, but the idea of not getting to heaven was too depressing.

“Ah, Bob, not exactly a friend. An abandoned fledgling.” Jason looked up at the plastered ceiling. “Sarah is taking over his training. They live here for now so I can keep an eye on things.”

“I didn't think that happened anymore.” Derrek handed the coin back, and Jason replaced it on the shelf.

“We still get bad vampires. The Lucerna would have less to police if we didn't.” Jason clapped a hand on Derrek's arm. “Let's go talk to Faolan. Actually, let me grab a change of clothes. You can drive, and drop me off with Faolan.”

Derrek didn't want to think about Jason spending the night with Faolan, even if he knew that was just how things were. “Fine.”

Derrek waited for Jason in his truck, surprised to discover he found Jason less irksome now that he had gotten to know him a bit. Jason didn't take long to reappear with a small overnight bag. Once Jason strapped in, Derrek turned the truck back toward the Ridges, thumbing on the CD player. “You obviously like music, so I didn't think you'd mind some now,” he said as the *O Brother Where Art Thou* cd started.

“I love music. Bluegrass isn't music. It's an assault on the ears.” Jason leveled a fierce look at him.

Derrek snorted. “You're so wrong, but all right.” He switched from cd to a country station. “Country better?”

Jason rolled his shoulders, settling back. “I like country.”

Derrek hated silence. His grandfather always yelled at him for it. He couldn't help it so he thought of ways to keep the conversation going. Derrek glanced sideways at Jason. “I'm surprised you weren't at work today.”

“We know who killed them, and since I work for the Lucerna and not the police department, my role as detective is different.” Jason shrugged. “Besides, I will work. Tonight. I'm fine with daylight now, but even I get tired and need to rest. I'm better at night, anyhow.”

Derrek nodded, and they lapsed into companionable silence for most of the trip, even if the hush started to grate on him. When they finally climbed the hill to the Ridge's parking lot, the late afternoon sun was all but blinding. The sprawling, red brick structure was actually rather pretty. He parked in the lot.

“Even in the light, this place is creepy,” Jason said, as if he could read Derrek’s mind, and naturally had to disagree. He slid out of the truck with his bag.

“Really? *This* is what a vampire finds creepy. I was thinking it’s too attractive for what it was.” Derrek locked up his truck and walked with Jason to the building. “Back when Dad was a kid, Granddad used to scare Dad with telling him if he didn’t behave, he’d drop him off at the Ridges. And now, here we are. Though what possessed the Lucerna to take over an insane asylum is anyone’s guess.”

“Big, defensible building that no one else wants to be around, they knew it was perfect or something.” Jason paused, glancing around. “I wonder where Faolan would be recuperating. Let’s start with the apartment and go from there.”

“Fine.”

They didn’t make it further than the lobby when Jason made a beeline for an old woman. Derrek tagged along after him.

“Brigid, we need to talk to Faolan. Know where your grandson is hiding out?” Jason asked.

So this was the co-head of the Lucerna that made Doug so wary. Her white hair, thick still, hung over her shoulder and her face wasn’t quite as lined as one might suspect, but she looked like any little old lady to Derrek. Still, his twin hadn’t cautioned him about her for nothing. If she was the one who trained Faolan to fight—and she probably was—Derrek could see why there would be a need for care.

“Right through to the oak out back. You know the one, Jason.” She looked at Derrek and smiled. “You must be Derrek, then.” She held out a hand to him. Her handshake was firmer than he expected.

He smiled at her. “Yes, ma’am. Nice to meet you.”

“My grandchildren are right. You are a cute one.” She let his hand go, and he could have sworn she checked him out.

Jason chuckled, then said, “You’re not the type he goes for, Brigid.”

“And I’m a million years too old.” Brigid started down the hall, going back to whatever it was she had planned to do. “Besides, I’d break a young one like him,” she added as she turned the corner, out of sight.

Derrek couldn't quite believe she had said that. "She's joking, right?"

"Doubtful. Come on, it's this way." Jason beckoned him to follow.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised you know I'm gay. I'm sure Doug told everyone." Derrek sighed. "I think he's still pretty embarrassed by that. He says he's not, but what people say and what they do aren't always the same thing."

Jason shot him a sympathetic look. "No, they rarely are. And you wolves aren't particularly forward thinking on that matter."

Derrek wanted to argue on principle, but he couldn't. He followed Jason back outside. Even he would have been able to find the oak in question without much trouble. The tree grew tall, thick, and old. Derrek's step hitched as he got a better look at Faolan. The druid had his shirt and shoes off. Roots had burst from the ground, wrapping over all four of his limbs, and the tree seemed to have softened, rounding under him like a mattress.

"He looks dead." Or like Sleeping Beauty, and damned if Derrek didn't want to wake him with a kiss. Jason was a lucky bastard to be dating Faolan. He was pale enough to resemble the marble statue Jason had in the corner of his basement. His petal-pink nipples were erect in the cool spring breeze, and Derrek wondered if Faolan was as hairless as his chest looked or if he shaved. It could be his hair was as colorless as the rest of him.

"Mages recharge in a number of ways. Nature works best for the druid types apparently." Jason reached down and wiggled a finger between the roots to tickle Faolan's bare feet.

Faolan's eyes snapped open, and he grunted at them. "What?"

"Wakey-wakey, babe. You're about ten minutes from going up in flames like the freshly turned." Jason pointed to stripe on the ground between light and shadow. "Besides, Derrek has something for you."

Faolan made a face. "I will not burst into flame."

"All I know is if we didn't arrive when we did, I'd be calling for crab crackers and drawn butter." Jason smirked. Derrek couldn't help himself, laughing.

Faolan's annoyed expression deepened. The roots started unwinding from Faolan's limbs, submerging back under the earth. "I'm ignoring you. Derrek, did you learn something?"

He nodded, fascinated by the process. He'd never seen anything like it. "Are you okay now?"

Faolan patted the tree trunk as it regained its normal shape. "She is just waking up so it took a while for her to give me some of her energy, but I feel fine."

Jason stuck out his hand and hauled Faolan up. "How's the knee?"

"Almost entirely healed. Sorcha makes good healing salves." Faolan fetched his shirt, showing his back to them. Between his shoulders was a circle of Celtic knot work tattooed in navy. Inside the circle were three lines like the rays of the sun, a dot at the top of them. He arched his eyebrows when he caught Derrek staring.

"Interesting ink," he said, since he'd been busted ogling Faolan.

"It's the symbol of Awen, a sign of my faith." Faolan scooped up his shoes and socks but didn't put them on. "Come on. Let's go get comfortable so we can talk."

"Your office?" Jason asked.

Faolan shook his head, his white-gold hair flopping into his face. He brushed it back. "I'm starving. My apartment will do." He walked past Derrek, an earthy scent wafting after him.

"You smell like the forest," Derrek blurted out, then flushed as he remembered humans didn't usually like to be sniffed.

Faolan just smiled. "I often do."

Jason wagged a finger at Derrek but said nothing. He didn't need to. Derrek already felt guilty enough.

Derrek noticed Faolan walked back barefoot with no problems. He'd make a good werewolf. They were used to barefooting it before and after their change.

Derrek had never been in the apartment part of the Ridges before. The pack didn't encourage their pups to play with the human kids so he hadn't spent much time at the complex. The halls were an unrelenting, bright white that unnerved him a bit. The apartment, once Faolan let them in, was bigger than he expected. While Faolan went into the kitchen, Derrek nosed around the living room. He stopped at one shelf stuffed with superheroes, Spock, Han Solo and several figures he couldn't even identify. He pointed to them. "Action figures?"

Jason rolled his eyes. "He's a geek. It's embarrassing."

"I can hear you." Faolan put the kettle on the stove, then dug out a bag of salt and vinegar chips. "Did you drive him here, Derrek?"

"Had to. Your staff wouldn't go find you for me," Derrek replied, eyeing a large Deathstar on another shelf.

"He's going to have a helluva long walk home then." Faolan shot Jason a look, then held up the chip bag. "Want some crisps?"

"I could go for some junk food." Derrek helped himself to the bag, and Faolan rooted around in his fridge, coming up with a piece of fried chicken that he tossed on the plate.

"Help yourself. Any preference for tea?" Faolan opened a cabinet stocked with zipper bags in an array of colors and names.

"Should have known your tea to blood ratio was off after being outside all day." Jason stretched then rolled his shoulders. "You know I never have a preference. It all tastes the same to me," Jason said.

"I was asking our guest."

Derrek peered at the stuffed cabinet, reading one colorful container after another, many of them bearing words he didn't know and assumed were Asian. He didn't know where to start. "Um, I have no idea. Mom usually made Lipton."

Jason leaned close and said, "Notice he didn't even ask if you wanted any. He just assumes everyone is addicted like he is."

"I wouldn't mind a cup. The caffeine would be good," Derrek said, noticing Faolan's slotted eyes. At least he wasn't the only one constantly annoyed by the vampire's smartass mouth.

"Earl Grey then, something basic." After fixing the pot, Faolan brought his chicken into the living room and sat on the couch. He waved a hand at the loveseat.

Derrek sat on it. "Someone has been complaining about how you and your grandmother came to take over here. Sounds like they want to do something about it, but that's all old Haney heard. No names or particulars, but still, I thought it was important. You said you were a fan of that theatre, and I thought maybe that's why the demons were sent to that target instead of one where they could do more damage. You knew some of the women who were killed in the first attack."

Faolan took a bite of chicken, chewing slowly as he seemed to think about it. "I didn't know them well, but I like the diner, too."

"If they attack Wizards, we'll know for sure they're taking out things you like." Jason flopped down next to Faolan.

"Wizards?" Derrek glanced over him.

"The comic book store." Faolan took another big bite, and after swallowing asked, "But that could be coincidence. They're rather popular places in Athens. Tell me more about what you've heard."

Derrek did, even though there wasn't much more to say. Faolan returned to the kitchen to deal with the tea. By the time he served it to everyone, the druid's expression would have made Derrek nervous if he was a Normal. This was a man he wouldn't want to cross.

"Jonathan Barnes was the leader here prior to me." Faolan settled back on the couch. "You're right. He did commit suicide. He had a seventeen-year-old son, Justin, who thought he'd be taking over for his father. Even if we let teenagers run the organization, which we don't obviously, Justin failed his own psych eval. He wasn't even going to be put in the field. He was assigned to the research department."

"Let me guess, he didn't take it well." Derrek knew this story. It had been acted out in pack history, though in that case the young alphas would have to battle it out with the older ones. On occasion, they did have a teenaged leader.

Faolan drank his tea before answering. "I only met him a few times. He was encouraged to wait, take the psych evaluation again when he was a little older and was under less strain. He quit instead, lots of rage behind it. I learned later that he'd had a pretty hard life, and his father was more than a little bit of a bastard."

"That is exactly the kind of kid who'd go off and summon up a demon hoard to exact his revenge and tack on a Mwa-ha-ha for good measure." Jason dry-washed his hands, mimicking the Hollywood idea of a super-villain.

"He'd be a couple years younger than me. I think I remember him, but really, unless we have to be here, the pack prefers to keep to itself." Derrek could count on his fingers how many times he'd been brought to the main Lucerna estate as a kid. "Why would he wait five years to come after you, if this is him?"

"He's a mage, and magic takes years to learn and control." Faolan rested heavily against the couch pillows. "He might feel ready now."

“If this is him,” Derrek said again.

“It’s a place to start.” Jason returned his mug to the kitchen. “I can look into what he’s been up to in the last few years.”

“I’ll see what magic he specialized in, and Derrek, if you could follow up on these rumors, it would really help.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll see what the pack knows about the kid. Someone might have known him then,” Derrek replied. “You might want to ask some of the younger members here if they knew him.”

“Good idea.” Faolan finished his tea, setting it on the table. His pale-blue eyes were encircled with rings that looked darker now than before when he had still been hooked up to the tree or whatever it was he had been doing.

“I’ll go talk to them now. You look like you still need rest anyhow.” Derrek stood.

“I probably do. Thanks, Derrek. This is a help. I’ll also cross reference it with the rumors of the prophecy.” Faolan walked him to the door.

Derrek said his goodbyes and retreated to his truck. If he hurried, he’d make it for the pack run tonight. He’d get some answers hopefully, and just as importantly, he’d exercise away some of his frustrations. God knew he needed to.

Chapter Six

Derrek looked around the Lucerna's library. Two stories high, and almost every bare space crammed with books. The werewolves rarely had mages among them. Hell it was rare that they even had researchers. Jason's unkind comment about them being muscle had been too close to the truth. He wasn't here to pitch in on the research, either. He wanted to know if there was anything more he could be doing to help track down the jackhole who kept calling up the demons. He had failed to learn any more than he already knew while talking with the pack.

One of the young researchers said Faolan was in the library, but so far he hadn't spotted the druid, which surprised him. Derrek half expected him to glow in the dark, Faolan was so pale. Hearing someone ahead, he turned a corner and found a woman the same shade of moon glow as Faolan. She smiled up at him as he approached.

"Hi. I'm looking for Faolan. I was told he was here." Derrek could smell a sweet, almost cotton candy-like perfume on her. He liked it. "Are you Sorcha?"

"What gave it away?" She tugged at a lock of her hair, offering him a wry smile. "And you have to be Derrek. Sorry, Faolan traded me jobs, research for my shift at the clinic."

He made a face. "Really? I thought he was a medical examiner. You let him deal with living people?"

Sorcha laughed loudly, as if that were particularly funny. "He does double duty. It'll be fine. It's mostly sparring injuries, magic gone awry, and spring allergies at this time of year." She patted the books in front of her on the table. "He's probably doing better than me. Want to give me a hand putting these away, or was there something urgent you needed Faolan for?"

Her blue eyes reflected her smile, as if she was amused by him. What did she think he wanted Faolan for? Was he reading too much into her question because there were things he wanted Faolan for that had nothing at all to do with work? "I just wanted to see how else I can help out, so this will work."

"Good. Take that pile." She nodded to the giant stack. "I'll show you where they go." Sorcha tucked some around her, which seemed strange until he realized she was in a wheelchair. It forcibly reminded him of the attack Jason alluded to.

“Do you need me to take more?”

“That’s enough for now. Down this way.” Sorcha maneuvered her chair with more ease than Derrek would have thought possible. She stopped three rows into the stacks and surprised him by standing up to put a book back on a higher shelf. That’s when he saw the crutches on the back of the chair and realized she must be able to walk a little. He could see her legs shake, looking far too unsteady to be trusted. Sorcha sat down again and continued down the row. “Yours go down this way.”

Derrek walked down the row, then paused hearing a child-like giggle. He looked around, seeing no one. “Ghost?”

Sorcha smiled, shaking her head. “The Ridges is certainly haunted. However, show yourself, young lady,” she called out.

From around a corner, a little, dark-haired girl darted forth, giggling harder. Behind her, a harried-looking, young woman followed more slowly, twin boys holding onto her hands. The little girl all but flew into Sorcha’s lap, hugging her neck.

“Hiya, baby-girl.” Sorcha kissed her cheek. “How was she in daycare, Brittany?”

“She was great, but these two need to go take a nap.” She raised her hands slightly for emphasis.

“I won’t keep you then.”

As Brittany beat a hasty retreat, Derrek realized the little girl on Sorcha’s lap eyed him curiously. Sorcha swung her chair around, and the girl squirmed on her lap, sliding free. She trotted up to Derrek, then, pointing up, looked back at Sorcha.

“Doug lost his hair!”

Sorcha chuckled, shaking her head. “That’s not Doug. That’s his twin brother, Derrek.”

The little girl took a long look at him then back to where Brittany had gone with her boys. “Twins are trouble.”

“My mother would agree,” Derrek said, squatting down. He shifted all the books to one hand, holding out the other. “Nice to meet you. I’m Derrek.”

“Deirdre. That’s my mom.” She pointed back at Sorcha.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Deirdre. I was just helping your Mom put away books."

"I wanna help." She pulled a book out of his hands.

"Baby-girl, all of his books go on the top." Sorcha gestured to the top shelves.

Deirdre pouted. "Aww."

"Not a problem." Derrek stood, scooping Deirdre up. She climbed around onto his shoulders, agile as a monkey. As she did, he caught her scent, stunned to realize she bore a faint wolf scent. Deirdre had to be half-lycanthrope. He was stunned. No one had mentioned Faolan even had a niece, let alone a half-breed.

Deirdre giggled in his ears as he handed up books for her to put away. It did, however, make him too acutely aware of what he was unlikely to have, a family. He tried to content himself with the idea of being the best uncle to his twin's eventual pups.

"I see you met my niece."

Derrek twisted around so he could see Faolan, standing next to his sister's chair. He still wore scrubs and a white lab coat that had some kind of mysterious stain all over it. Derrek didn't really want to know what it was. Faolan smelled rather antiseptic and a touch sour, but that was probably the mystery stain. "She's helping us with the books."

"I see. Did you need to see me?" Faolan tilted his head. "I was told you were looking for me."

Derrek knelt down so Deirdre could slither off. "I was. I just wanted to help out. I didn't get far on my own assignment."

"We can head back to my place so I can change." Faolan tugged at his scrub top, wafting up that sour smell, but Derrek's eye was drawn to that silver-bearing neck guard. It made his skin crawl, just thinking about the allergic reaction if he somehow came into contact with it. "I'll catch you up on what little we learned."

"Sure. It was nice meeting you, Miss Deirdre." Derrek ruffled her hair.

"You're nice." Deirdre's gap-toothed smile warmed him as she hugged his knees.

“Thank you.” He put away the few books he had left, and said his good-byes to Deirdre and Sorcha before he and Faolan left the library.

“You have a cute niece,” Derrek said as they walked.

Faolan smiled. “Thank you. She’s a darling wild child.”

“And half-werewolf.”

Faolan cast a sharp glance at him. “You didn’t say that to Sorcha, did you?”

“No, but it’s not really a secret, is it?” Derrek wrinkled his brow. What could possibly be the problem? He didn’t think Faolan was prejudiced against lycanthropes. That crap was rare these days in the Lucerna. “Deirdre obviously knows my twin.”

Faolan studied him for a moment before asking, “So, what has Doug told you about Deirdre?”

More confused, Derrek shrugged. “Nothing. I didn’t even know you had a niece. Why?”

Faolan rubbed his chin, then dug in his pocket for his keys. “You’ve seen the scar on my neck. I saw you looking.” He opened the apartment.

“I didn’t mean to stare.” He followed Faolan inside.

“And since we were talking about how I came here yesterday, this relates. Have a seat.” Faolan kicked his shoes off next to the door, then removed his lab coat, tossing it on the floor. He pulled off his scrub top, also stained, before picking up the coat again. Faolan disappeared into the bedroom with his discarded clothing.

Derrek tried not to look like he was staring, but he was. He wondered what Faolan would taste like? Would he smell of Jason? Why wasn’t that thought putting him off? Derrek didn’t mess with men in a relationship. Usually, he never gave them a second thought since it wasn’t worth the heartache.

“We left New York for here after the attack on Sorcha and me.” Faolan’s voice was muffled by the walls, but Derrek didn’t dare just follow him into the bedroom as much as he might want to. He had been told to sit, so he did. He didn’t want Faolan to think he was a creeper. His inner wolf laughed at his compliance, mocking him. The Marines had taught him how to obey other alphas, even if his wolf didn’t appreciate it.

“It was obviously brutal. Can your sister walk at all?” Derrek made a face. It felt horribly invasive to ask, but it was possible it had some bearing on everything that was happening. “I saw she has crutches strapped to her chair.”

“Not well, and not for long distances. There was a lot of damage to her muscles and the nerves.”

“What happened exactly?” Derrek shifted around on the loveseat, trying to get comfortable. He decided it was the conversation and the idea that Faolan was mostly naked in the next room causing the discomfort, not the furniture.

“We were doing rounds after a bad attack. The worst of it was over, and everyone was being patched up in the Lucerna’s hospital. We didn’t think we needed that much protection, since we were on our own ground.” Faolan padded back out wearing jeans. He carried a T-shirt. Sitting on the couch opposite Derrek, he took off his neck guard, baring the scarred side of his neck to Derrek. “We never expected trouble. It was a group of vampires and werewolves gone rogue.”

Derrek changed seats so he could get a closer look at the wound. “This was done by a vampire?”

“I knew him. We knew all of them. They were Lucerna, people I had fought with. They decided it was better to use their superior powers against the humans.” Faolan shut his eyes for a moment.

“I can’t even imagine,” Derrek whispered. How could they turn against their friends? What would he do if the pack turned on him? He had no idea.

“The werewolves savaged Sorcha. Jason led the group that saved us, mostly already wounded Lucerna members who were in the hospital. He killed the vampire who was doing his damndest to kill me.” Faolan shuddered, but didn’t put his guard back on. He set it on the table, then pulled on his T-shirt. It had a white tree on it, a crown at its top and seven stars off its branches.

“Were you with Jason before the attack?” Derrek hated himself for asking. It wasn’t any of his business, but he wanted to know exactly what kind of relationship they had.

“No. We knew each other, but he had only been there a few months at that point. My boyfriend was George, the vampire who tried to kill me.”

Derrek’s jaw dropped. For a moment, he couldn’t even form words. He put a hand on Faolan’s arm. “I don’t... wow, I’m speechless. I’m so sorry.”

Faolan raised his hand, shaking his head. “Anyhow, Sorcha was far more severely injured than I was. She was in a coma for weeks and they did many surgeries, but several of the surgeries she needed, and some of the physical therapy afterward was delayed. She ended up pregnant by one of her attackers.

Sorcha chose to keep the baby.” He paused, his jaw clenching. “I’m not sure I could have made that choice, but Deirdre is a beautiful little girl.”

Derrek felt an urge to find these mangy excuses for werewolves and tear them apart. He hoped someone had done that for him. “I’m sorry.”

“It is none of your doing, but thank you.” Faolan’s blue eyes looked wet, and he dragged a hand over them before speaking again. “That is why we came here, to get away from all that pain. Jason came with us. We didn’t get involved until we got here.” A sad smile moved over his face. “Though I don’t think he realized how little there would be to do anywhere outside of Athens. Jason is easily bored, and that is never a good thing.”

“I know it’s not any of my business, but I’m surprised you’d even consider a vampire after what happened.” Derrek clamped his mouth shut, swallowing hard. He could be a jerk sometimes. “Or that Deirdre obviously knows my twin. She seemed very shocked Doug shaved,” he joked, running a hand over his brush cut.

Faolan’s smile brightened. “Neither Sorcha nor I blame all vampires and werewolves for what happened. Just the ones who actually did it. And Sorcha wanted Deirdre to know the pack. It’s rare that a half breed can change, but it does them good to know pack ways.”

Derrek nodded. It wasn’t uncommon for half-breeds to end up marrying a pack member. It helped keep the gene pool clean.

He liked that smile on Faolan’s face. He shouldn’t have moved to the couch. This close to him, all Derrek wanted to do was kiss him. He could smell only a hint of loam under the astringent scent of the medical clinic. “The pack is good people.”

“We’ve had no trouble with them.” Faolan leaned forward, and picked up some papers too near the silver medallions on his neck guard for Derrek’s comfort. “This is what Jason came up with for Justin Barnes.”

Derrek accepted the paperwork, looking it over. “There’s not much here.”

“No, outside of the initial outbursts after his father’s death, there is nothing of any note.” Faolan rested back against the couch. “He hasn’t been in any trouble.”

“But he could just not have been caught,” Derrek argued, looking up from the paperwork so he could study Faolan’s face. Faolan’s eyes were grim under his so-pale-they-were-barely-there eyebrows. At least they were no longer dark-ringed from exhaustion. “Or we could be wrong about Justin.”

“Possibly, but I’m thinking more that he was busy studying magic so he could achieve his goals.” He flicked a finger against the papers. “His specialty was with fire. That is not an easy thing.”

“Could that be why he’s hoping the demons will do you in?” Derrek shifted a little closer to him on the couch. Yep, he was definitely a shithead for flirting with someone else’s lover, even if that someone else was a vampire. They barely counted if you asked the wolves. Too bad he was starting to like Jason, too.

“If it is him. I don’t want us to get tunnel vision.” Faolan rubbed his neck over the scar. Derrek had seen him do that several times before. Was it residual pain or just an unconscious gesture? “The demons would be easier, though. Fire magic takes a lot of concentration and a source of fire to begin with, like all elemental magic. The mage can’t just call it into existence. It’s one of the reasons fire magic is the most difficult. Most things aren’t on fire at all times.”

Derrek grinned. “Thankfully.” He touched Faolan’s wrist, shocked when Faolan allowed it. Hell, was this a two way street? Maybe he’d better end it now. Last thing he wanted was to go tooth and claw with a vampire over another man. He might lose to a vampire as old as Jason. Oh, the hell with it. Derrek leaned in, brushing his lips against Faolan’s. A chaste kiss as far as that went, but it also didn’t seem to startle Faolan that much.

Faolan sat back a bit, running his fingers through the short, thatch of hair Derrek sported on the top of his head. Instead of kissing him back or saying anything, he turned his attention back to the papers as if searching for something to show Derrek. Damn, had he just fucked up royally?

The door to the apartment opened and Jason walked in. Derrek sprang back against the arm of the couch. Could he have made himself look even guiltier? Faolan’s blush wasn’t helping matters, and Derrek was sure his own face was equally bright. Why the hell didn’t the damn vampire knock? Of course, he was letting himself into his boyfriend’s home. Jason probably assumed knocking wasn’t necessary.

Jason gave them an arched look, then said, “Your grandmother found something. She’d like us to come right now and have a look.”

Standing, Faolan grabbed his neck guard. He put it on, and Derrek wasn’t sure if that made things look even more suggestive than they already did. Did Jason wonder why the guard was off in the first place? “I was bringing Derrek up to date on Justin.”

Jason didn't look like he bought into that. "Ah. And did the furball have anything to add?"

Given the things on his mind when Jason interrupted, Derrek opted to let the slight pass. "I didn't learn anything new. Guess we should go see what his grandmother found."

Derrek tried to get around Jason without looking like he had something to hide. It wasn't like the vampire caught them doing anything. Still, as Faolan locked up, Jason gave Derrek what looked like a casual nudge. With vampiric strength behind it, it bounced Derrek into the wall. He pushed off the wall, ready to pound Jason. Faolan snapped his head around, and Jason cowed a bit at his glare. Derrek barely caught that submission, but it was enough to completely change his mind about who was really in charge here. He never suspected it would be Faolan. Jason seemed dominant, then again so did Faolan. He had done what Jason warned him not to. He had underestimated Faolan.

Derrek said nothing about being elbowed. He deserved it. He shadowed them through the complex without another word.

Faolan cursed himself for not expecting Derrek's kiss, for not discouraging it. He had wanted it, and he didn't know what that meant. He loved Jason, but he couldn't discount his attraction to the young werewolf. He had almost welcomed the news that Grandmother had found something, but could see in Jason's eyes he suspected something happened. He did not look forward to the moment they were alone again.

If anything, his grandmother's office was even more warded than his own. The magic made his skin tingle as he passed through the door. The walls were all paneled, symbols of power carved into the wood. Her rosewood desk was carved in an oak leaf and acorn motif, but she didn't sit behind it waiting for him. Brighid was at the old-fashioned sideboard. On one end was a small altar with her two patronesses, her name sake, Brig, with her serpent, and Morrigan, with a wolf at her side and a raven on her shoulder. On the other end of the sideboard, Brighid attended to a tray of tea. The warm, sweet scent filled the room.

Derrek leaned over to Jason and said as an aside, "I see the tea thing is inherited."

Jason laughed.

“You don’t have to have a cup if you don’t wish.” Brighid leveled a look at Derrek that straightened him right up. Faolan knew it was wrong to be amused by how quickly his grandmother brought a werewolf alpha to heel.

“Sorry. I’d like a cup, ma’am.”

“Don’t ma’am me, boy. It makes me feel old.” Brighid gestured for them to sit in front of her desk. Faolan wasn’t about to remind her she was old. His grandmother might skin him and hang his hide as a warning and a sacrifice to Morrigan. Instead, he transferred the tray to her desk and let his companions serve themselves.

Sitting down with his own cup, Faolan tried to let the sweet, almost peachy undertones of Golden Monkey drive the guilt out of him. He failed. Brighid’s bright, blue eyes studied him intently. Did she guess something had happened? He sure as hell hoped not. “Jason said you found something, Grandma.”

She brought over a tome that looked only slightly younger than Jason, thumping the thick, leather-bound book down. Tiny billows of dust curled out around it. She had bookmarked it with a paper marker bearing the cover of some lurid romance. If Brighid had one vice, besides a little whiskey now and then, it was her fondness for trashy romances, the trashier the better. She turned the book to face him and his companions. She tapped a passage with the edge of the bodice-ripper bookmark. “Here, it refers to the Dark Summer.”

Faolan stared at it. It figured it was in crabbed, faded handwriting. On either side of him, Jason and Derrek leaned into him trying to get a better look at the book. Their breath curled hot around the line of his jaw, dragging his attention away from the matter at hand and centering it somewhere entirely inappropriate with his Grandmother looking on.

Jason tapped his hand. “Read it out loud. I can’t see it at this angle.”

Faolan squinted and did his best.

“Three to join, each a different race.

Three to join, a saving grace.

True to heart, one of blood, one of tail.

True to heart, one of magic, they will not fail.

Hold back the tide, with swords and shields.

Hold back the tide, they will never yield.”

“And always, a prophecy that could mean any damned thing.” Jason leaned back on his chair.

“Am I supposed to be the tail?” Derrek’s amber eyes darkened to the color of sherry, and Faolan would have found his annoyed expression more comical if he wasn’t on the same page as Jason as to what the hell this meant.

Jason peered over at Derrek, his gaze sweeping over the tight butt the werewolf was currently resting on. “You are most definitely the tail.”

Going red, Derrek jabbed a finger toward Brighid. “There’s a lady present.”

“A lady who already checked out your tail,” Jason said with a wicked grin. Faolan didn’t want to know about it.

“You have to admit; there is a bit of a resemblance to you three.” Brighid tapped the book, trying to bring them back on topic.

“Certainly I’m magic. Jason’s blood, and Derrek’s...” Faolan trailed off, shooting the werewolf an apologetic look.

Derrek threw his hands up. “Say it. I’m the tail. But you could find this sort of arrangement anywhere in the Lucerna, can’t you?”

Brighid took her book back. “Certainly, but not all of them join together. Do you usually work with vampires?”

“Not if we can help it.” Derrek shrugged. “Not like I’ve fought with a sword before, either.”

“You’re being a bit too literal. For vampires and werewolves, your natural weapons are your swords and mages can conjure shields.” Brighid drummed her fingers on the desk. “I do believe this is the prophecy we were looking for.”

“I’d have been happier if it told us who and how to stop them.” Faolan had known it wouldn’t. Prophecies never did. At least he knew his partnership with Derrek and Jason was a step in the right direction, even though he might have messed that all up when he indulged himself, allowing Derrek to kiss him.

“Why does that they’ll never yield comment make me nervous?” Derrek asked.

“You’re smart.” Jason shrugged. “We know this is going to be brutal.”

The phone on Brighid’s desk rang, making them all jump. She picked it up, saying her hellos. Seeing his grandmother’s mouth pinch, Faolan stood. His companions followed suit.

“What?” he asked as she set the phone down.

“Another case of possession, but this time the demon-possessed got away.” Brigid rose to her feet to walk around the desk and take his hand. “The attack was at the Wizard’s Guild.”

Faolan felt his knees start to buckle. He put his hand on the desk to steady himself. Jason jumped up to check on him.

“Isn’t that the place you said would clinch it as being about Faolan?” Derrek asked Jason.

“I was kidding.” Jason slipped an arm around Faolan. “You don’t have to go with us. We’ll handle this.”

Faolan pulled away. “Like hell I don’t. Let’s find this asshole.”

Chapter Seven

Jason wished Faolan would just leave the small comic book store. He didn't need to be here, but he proved frustratingly resistant to Jason's attempts to coddle him. Faolan examined a fallen woman, using Derrek to help him. Jason couldn't remember her name, but knew he had seen her before. One clerk was dead at the register and another by the new comic book display. At least no teens were dead.

Derrek's head snapped up, his nostrils flaring. He left Faolan's side, skirting around two dead clerks. Snatching up a backpack on the counter near the register, he darted past Jason. He decided to follow Derrek out, only to find himself confronted with the whole pack. All the werewolves but Douglas were already shifted, and, since he was fully clothed, Jason assumed he was going to be the handler.

Derrek handed his twin the backpack. "They said the boy who was possessed was wearing this. You should be able to track them from the scent."

"Then what? Can we get the demon back out of him?" Doug asked, hefting the backpack.

Derrek turned back to Jason. "Can we?"

Jason wished he could say yes. He strode back inside the shop. A couple of the Lucerna members who had come with them to deal with the disaster glanced at him. "Barb, Jim, go with the wolves." To Derrek and Doug, he added, "They're mages. Let them deal with it."

"Fine by me," Doug said, as the two mages hurried outside. "You coming, brother?"

"We could use him here," Jason said. "Unless he wants to go."

Derrek shook his head. "I'll stay. You don't need another nose."

Doug nodded, and held the backpack out to the wolves. Jason didn't wait around for them to go running off. He trusted them to do their job. He had already done his part, questioning the teens of the RPG group who had managed to run and hide from their possessed friend. The only real thing left to do was to move the bodies to the lab. He startled when a hand closed over his shoulder.

"Sorry." Derrek gestured to Faolan. "Should he be doing this?"

“No, but that boy is half-Irish, half-Scot and a hundred percent stubborn.” Jason faced Derrek. “If you think you can get him to go home, be my guest.”

Derrek scowled. His attention captured by something, he huffed, the tip of his nose wiggling.

“Do you smell something?”

“Grandma’s coming.” Derrek stepped away from the door.

“I can live another three thousand years and never get used to how keen a werewolf’s nose is,” Jason said, also stepping aside as Derrek rolled his eyes.

Brigid came in with three older mages. None of them were field agents any longer. Jason wondered if they were here for support or if they had a lack of confidence in Faolan after this turn of events. Knowing Brigid, it would have to be the former. Her jaw clenched, her few wrinkles deepening. “This can’t be tolerated,” she said, resting a hand on Jason’s shoulder. “You couldn’t convince him to leave it?”

“No, he couldn’t.” Faolan stood up over his patient’s body, stripping off his gloves. Derrek’s eyes widened, obviously unfamiliar with Faolan’s Vulcan hearing. “And I’m not stubborn, Jason. I need to do this.”

“I think it’s both,” Jason replied.

Faolan shrugged. “Erin was my friend. I went out to her place every other Saturday.” He made a fist. “At least her daughters got out of here unharmed. Where did you take them, Jason?”

“Unsurprisingly, the Donkey evacuated like it was on fire when this went down. My men and I took the survivors there to question. They’re home with their father by now.” Jason pointed in the general direction of the Donkey Bar coffeehouse two doors down. “They don’t remember anyone coming in here that they didn’t know, but they were engrossed in the game. Luckily when Shawn, that’s the kid who was possessed, went crazy, he went for the adults first.” He grimaced. “Sorry, not so lucky for Erin, but at least the teens got away safe. The other two who were killed were the clerks.”

“She would rather it was her than her daughters.” Faolan’s chest heaved, and Jason didn’t give a damn any more if it was unprofessional. He put his arm around Faolan, guiding him over to his grandmother.

“Take him home now, Brigid,” Jason said, and when Faolan opened his mouth, Jason pressed a finger to Faolan’s lips. “You’ve done enough and you

know damn well you'll do at least one of the autopsies, on the clerks. You lost a friend. Go home and grieve. Derrek and I have this. We can finish up the final details."

Faolan rubbed his forehead, looking like he might argue, then he let his hand fall. "Okay."

Jason took it as a bad sign that Faolan actually agreed so easily, but he said nothing as Brighid led him out of the store. Joining Derrek, he clamped his hand on Derrek's shoulder. "Come on, we have work to do."

Derrek wanted to go home and sleep. He didn't even know what hour of *too damned late* it was. Instead, he was still at the Ridges in Faolan's office. The druid wasn't there, which was just as well. He felt awkward enough alone with Jason as they wrote up everything they knew on a couple of whiteboards so they could visualize the events. Derrek had called up a map of the area on his tablet, pinning all the locations where an attack had happened. The only pattern they saw was the one where Faolan was at the center of things.

Jason's expression grew dimmer by the hour, and how could Derrek blame him? He couldn't imagine what Faolan was feeling now. Could Jason even possibly comfort Faolan at this point? Hell, for all he knew, Jason might be a bit pissed with Faolan. Derrek felt sure Jason thought something was going on. He wasn't exactly wrong.

"We're not going to get anything more out of this." Jason tossed the dry erase pen on the desk. "We should get some sleep and come at this fresh."

Derrek loved that idea. Jason seemed pale and ready to topple over. Derrek didn't think he looked much better. "You look done in."

Jason cracked his neck, then rubbed at one of the muscles. "I'm starving."

"Oh." Derrek shrugged, then the implication sunk in, "*Oh.*"

Jason smirked at him. "Relax."

He showed his teeth to Jason, figuring the gesture might mean the same to vampires as it did to lycanthropes: back off. "I didn't think your type even liked lycanthrope blood."

"No, we do. It's one of the few things we do like about your kind." His smirk deepened. "But that still doesn't mean I'm going to jump you."

“Like to see you try.” Derrek glared. He didn’t think he could take Jason if it came to it, but no sense in letting him even guess at that. If it came to a fight, Derrek wouldn’t go down easily.

Jason laughed, sauntering to the door, but not before stopping and patting Derrek’s back. “Though someone should let me have a snack after what he did today.”

“Look, I don’t know what you think happened today, but it didn’t,” he protested, jumping to his feet. He was not going to meet this thorny problem sitting down. He was at a complete disadvantage that way.

Jason looked so amused that Derrek wanted to punch his smug face. “And just what was it, then?”

“I was reading over what you found out about Justin.”

“You’re such a bad liar.” Jason tapped Derrek’s cheek. “It’s cute. Behave yourself, fuzz-butt. You might be in for more than you can handle.”

Derrek sputtered, but no words came. He was more embarrassed than worried.

Jason sailed on by, but paused in the doorway. “It’s damned late. You should just check with the night clerk and take a room here tonight. You’re likely to put that truck in a ditch, and I don’t want to have to explain that to your twin.”

Derrek rubbed his eyes. They felt like sand. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll do that.”

“Good night, and don’t let the vampires bite.”

He heard Jason laughing down the hall. “They wouldn’t dare!” he bellowed back. Derrek shut the office door and dragged off toward the lobby where the night shift would be at the front desk. It hadn’t gone as bad as he feared. Jason didn’t look overly worried that Derrek might be trying to poach his boyfriend, and that either meant he had nothing to fear when it came to Faolan’s loyalty, or something Derrek had yet to consider. And it was too damned late to be considering anything. All he wanted was a bed and a few hours’ sleep.

Chapter Eight

Knowing he'd find Faolan there, Jason walked out to the grove. It had been nearly a week without a new attack, but also without them getting closer to finding out who was behind the assaults. No comfort was taken in the lack of attacks. Everyone felt the same way: something big was in the works. Jason was crossing the parking lot to go down to the cemetery and beyond to the woods when a familiar Ford pickup drove into the lot. He waited for Derrek to climb out. "Anything to report?"

Derrek shook his head. "No, feeling all kinds of useless at this point."

"Join the club."

"Where are you going?" Derrek glanced toward the hill.

"Faolan's down there, blowing off some steam." Jason started walking. If Derrek wanted to follow, he would, and he had no doubt the werewolf would. Too bad Derrek didn't know where they were going because Jason wouldn't mind following and watching that fine ass work.

"He needs to. We all do."

"Like you didn't have a big night last night of sniffing wolf butt, and running around after hapless squirrels." Jason watched Derrek's face to see if he took the bait. "I know there was a pack run last night."

Derrek slotted his eyes. "Did not."

"I can smell the blood." It was faint since Derrek had clearly bathed and brushed his teeth, but under the mint was a hint of blood. You couldn't sneak that past a vampire.

Derrek pouted. "It was deer."

Jason chuckled, picking up his pace. Not hearing footsteps, Jason turned to see Derrek paused in the cemetery. He stared down at one grave with a stalk of corn growing next to it, blown in from some not-too-distant farm. Derrek glanced up at him.

He tapped a toe next to the headstone. "This is so sad. These people don't even have names."

"Just numbers. The code book is in the asylum files. No one wanted their disturbed relatives back for burial elsewhere." Jason shrugged. "If they even

had any relatives. A few of the newer ones have names, but yes, it is sad. Extremely so.”

“Why would he have come down here to relax?” Derrek made a face.

“He’s not in the cemetery.” Jason pointed ahead of them. “The walking paths go for miles. The grove is just up over the rise. They find it peaceful.”

“They?” Derrek lifted his chin. “Is that music?”

“It’s his band, the Art of Awen. They play at Irish festivals, the ren faire, that sort of thing.”

“Really?” Derrek caught back up with him, a huge grin on his face. “Ren faire? Does he wear those tights?”

Jason laughed, wagging his head. “Hell no.”

“Did you?” Derrek tilted his head as he studied Jason. “I mean you had to live in that time period.”

Jason climbed up the hill to the grove. “Hose and a sizeable cod piece to go with.” He swept his hands apart.

“You try too hard. I’m beginning to think it’s as small as the rest of you.” Derrek shoved him lightly.

Jason shoved back, liking the feel of Derrek’s solid biceps under his hand. “I’m *not* small. Well, I wasn’t back in my day. Not my fault the human race is getting freakishly tall.”

The music grew louder as they came upon the grove. Brigid sat under a tree, a basket of bluebells and dandelion flowers next to her. She seemed to be enjoying the music. Abby, the piper, lit up the grove with the raucous reel she blared. Beth danced with her violin as she played. Faolan pounded on his drum with enough fervor, Jason swore he was trying to summon up Pan himself. Nick, their other drummer, matched Faolan. Jason and Derrek stopped next to Brigid.

Derrek seemed to be taking stock of the scene, or maybe he was just eyeing up Faolan. Jason didn’t really blame him. All Faolan had on was his red, green and blue Fraser clan tartan and the drum strap over his shoulder. Jason half-wished everyone would just go away so Faolan could fuck him right here in grove. Well, maybe Derrek could stay. Judging by looks alone, and the way the young wolf moved, Jason figured he had to be good in the sack.

Derrek’s huge smile lit up his face. “So, no tights. He wears a skirt.”

Brighid slapped Derrek's knee. "Don't let him hear you call his kilt that."

"Yeah, your hide will be his next drum head." Jason caught Derrek's wrist, pulling him to the next tree over. He sat down to watch the group, testing to see if Derrek would do the same. One could never tell about a werewolf. They always had such bugs up their asses about vampires, and bigger bugs about following orders from anyone other than their alpha. Derrek probably had a hell of a time adjusting to the military.

Derrek folded his knees up as he sat, back to the tree. "They're good. But I can't believe you like to listen to bagpipes and not bluegrass."

Jason shrugged. "Greece had a type of bagpipes."

"You know you still haven't told me what a pankratiast is yet." Derrek shifted against the tree. His line of sight was not on Jason. He still watched Faolan.

"It's a lot like ultimate fighting today, you know, mixed martial arts. Heracles and Theseus invented it," Jason replied, thinking back on the smell of sweat and olive oiled bodies. "Basically a mix of wrestling and boxing, no holds barred except biting and eye gouging."

"And people were too afraid to fight you."

Now Derrek's attention was on Jason. He smirked, rubbing his chest. Derrek tracked the movement, his breathing accelerating a bit. "That's right. And imagine what I can do now with centuries of experience and a vampire's strength. There's always one werewolf who wants to give it a try."

Derrek didn't look away. Good boy. That made Jason want him more. "Must be hard obeying the no biting rule as a vampire." He smirked right back, then resumed watching Faolan. So much for that attempt at seduction.

Jason peered over to make sure Brighid wasn't watching them. Her attention was on the Art of Awen. He pressed against Derrek, his lips beside his ear. "You want him," he whispered.

Derrek startled, whipping around. His mouth clumsily connected with Jason's before he jerked away, nearly tipping sideways. "I don't know—"

"Yes, you do." Jason slid his hand along Derrek's denim-covered thigh and down to give his half-hard cock a squeeze. Derrek pushed him back, but Jason was difficult to move when he didn't want to be. "The question is what to do about it. I suppose calling Brighid over here would be like a bucket of cold

water.” He rubbed Derrek again. “Or I could make you climax right here. Do you know how good it can feel when a vampire feeds?” Jason flicked his tongue against Derrek’s carotid pulse point.

“Stop it!” Derrek pushed him harder this time, gaining a little distance between them.

Brighid looked over. “Jason, are you misbehaving?”

“No ma’am. You know how werewolves are. Temperamental, the lot of them,” he replied sweetly. Derrek punched Jason in the arm. The boy had a good deal of strength.

She harrumphed at them before returning to the music.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Derrek’s pained voice was so soft Jason barely heard him over the pounding drums.

“I think you’re mostly doing it to yourself.”

Derrek closed his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be more angry about it? Why are you treating it like a game?” He took a deep breath before opening his eyes and fixing that amber, lupine gaze on Jason.

“You know what I am. You know the stories they tell about vampires.” Jason felt uncomfortable under Derrek’s scrutiny, but it was his own damn fault. He was the one who started them on this path. “We’re fickle. We’re experimental. We’re freaks. We’re this and that. Some of it is true. Do I love him? Yes, I do. But I’ll close my eyes, and when I open them, Faolan will be as old as Brighid, if he’s lucky. I’ll close them again, and he’ll have been gone for fifty years. And I will not have changed. In a few hundred years, I’ll be lucky to remember his name.”

Derrek hunched his shoulders, grimacing. “That sounds horrible.”

Pity from a werewolf? Who would have guessed? Jason rolled his shoulders. “It sometimes is. I keep journals just to remember the things I don’t ever wish to forget. But I’m also a realist. A vampire might not ever be the best choice for a human. Of course, we’re not a good match for other vampires either. Too much time together might sound romantic, but not many can make centuries together as a couple.” Jason scowled. “Faolan likes us. He likes to learn about all the history we’ve lived. But he also likes you. I’m fine with sharing him from time to time.”

Derrek’s eyes were comically wide, so Jason decided to go one step further. “Or better yet, he brings his new friend along with him when we’re together.”

Derrek twisted away from him, his pulse pounding. Jason could see Derrek's carotid bouncing. Jason moved with him, lathing his tongue over Derrek's neck. He got a nose full of the spiciness unique to lycanthropes. Derrek shuddered, but didn't push him away. A cell phone rang. Derrek jumped up, nearly clobbering Jason's nose, and he fished the phone out. "Sorry," he said, before darting back up the path to take his call.

The music stopped, and when he saw the musicians putting their instruments away, Jason sauntered up to Faolan. His chest glistened with sweat, but he didn't unslung his drum. Damn, Jason really regretted there were so many people here.

"Why did it look like you were molesting Derrek?" Faolan waved goodbye at Nick, who was already halfway out of the grove with his drum.

"Saw that, did you? I was just messing with him." Jason leaned forward, his next words for Faolan's ears only. "And telling him I didn't care if you two hooked up, and that I might join you."

Faolan took a hurried step back, his drum nearly unbalancing him. Jason caught his wrist, hauling Faolan closer. "You tell me that here!" Faolan hissed. "Where there are other people! What is wrong with you, Jason?"

"Honestly, I assumed you already knew that I don't mind a threesome. Besides, no one heard me." He swept his hand around to the women remaining. Abby and Beth had already started up the path, but Brigid was still seated, watching them. "You, they heard, but not me. Zeus knows what your granny is thinking."

"You make me insane, sometimes. You know that, right?" Faolan wagged his head.

Jason grinned. "Yes, naturally, but it's also true about Derrek."

"We can talk about this later." Faolan put a hand on Jason's chest, giving him a gentle push.

"Is there anything else to say? I meant it. Unless the idea makes you angry." Jason studied his lover's face. Faolan seemed more annoyed than angry. "It's not like I've forgotten human morality since it's shoved in our faces so often, but I definitely have a different view on the matter."

"I'm well aware of that." Faolan inclined his head toward his grandmother. His cheeks had pinked up.

Jason snuggled up against Faolan the best he could with the bass drum in the way. "I'm saying if you want to fuck 'the tail' go ahead," he said, referencing the prophecy.

Faolan rapped him on the head with his drumsticks. "You mean that?"

"You know I do."

Faolan scanned the grave. "Where did Derrek go?"

Jason scowled. "I didn't mean here in the grove right now, unless I get to stay."

Faolan rapped him harder with the sticks this time. "Honestly. Grandma would just love that."

"Tell her you're celebrating Pan." Jason gave Faolan's butt a squeeze, though the wool tartan probably didn't make that quite as pleasant as either man would have liked.

"I keep telling you that, yes, horns are associated with Pan and Cernunnos, but no I'm not sure they're the same god." Faolan started up the path just as Derrek reappeared.

"Sorry to interrupt like that. I forgot the ringer was on," Derrek said, stopping next to Brighid. She looked up at him expectantly. "That was just Doug."

"Anything helpful?" Faolan asked.

"Not unless you count a grocery list he wants me to get at the Kroger's on my way home." He held out a hand to Brighid. "Need a hand up, ma'am?"

She clasped it and let Derrek help her up. Brighid collected her flower basket, saying, "I was hoping for something more useful. We haven't gotten anywhere in days." She didn't wait for them to keep up with her. Jason thought she was pretty damn spry for her age.

"We've been working together just like the prophecy said to do," Derrek said, walking beside her. "It hasn't helped any."

"The Lucerna has always had mages, Norms, vampires and werewolves working together. I think you boys are misinterpreting the three to join." Brighid patted Derrek's arm, then put on a burst of speed. "I wish someone had a prophecy about me like this back when I was young. It'll be great *craic*, boys," she called over her shoulder. Her laughter filled the grove.

“Grandma!” Faolan shouted his irritation.

Derrek stopped, and Jason came up even with him. Derrek looked at Jason. “Does she mean what I think she means?”

“A fun threesome, yes, I think she does.” Jason gave Derrek’s ass a squeeze. If anything, it was tighter than Faolan’s, and Jason couldn’t wait to hang on to it. To his surprise, Derrek didn’t pull away.

Derrek pushed Jason away, then swiveled around to face Faolan. “Was she raised by him?” He nodded toward Jason.

“Grandma has always been feisty and that’s all I’ve ever wanted to know about it.” Faolan started walking again.

“So, I vote we do this,” Jason said, figuring neither of the others would go there without a little more prodding. It would hardly be the first time he’d had a ménage e trois.

“Of course you do.” Derrek took off up the path without him.

“I don’t hear you saying no,” Jason shot back, but before either man could answer him, Jason’s phone rang with its 911 tone. “Damn it.” He yanked his phone out of back pocket and answered. “Hello? Sarah, what’s wrong? Well, fuck. I’m going to kill him myself. I’ll be right there.”

“What is it?” Faolan asked as Jason ran off.

“Bob has been talking about finding his girlfriend and bringing her over. Apparently, all the warnings about fledglings being unable to do that didn’t sink in. Sarah thinks he might have conned a friend into giving him a ride to Columbus in the trunk of the car.” It would have to be that way since it would be decades before Bob aged into being a daywalker. “Damn him.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Faolan called to him.

Jason didn’t reply. He didn’t want to be talking about it later. He wanted to go back to Faolan’s apartment and follow the natural progression of this. Instead, he had to chase down a brat. Maybe it would be better this way. Not for him, but for Faolan and Derrek. Jason had centuries of experience. Threesomes weren’t new to him. He knew they were for Faolan, and Jason had to think they were utterly foreign to Derrek. Let them get to know each other. If the gods wanted them to be together, well, Jason believed in fate. He was hardly going to argue the point.

Faolan unslung his bass and carried it into the second bedroom of his apartment. It doubled as an office and music room. He heard Derrek shuffling around in the living room, and his mind coupled that with Jason's explicit permission to play. Surely that's why Derrek had followed him to his apartment. They had gotten to a state of limbo with finding Justin Barnes—if it was indeed Justin behind this—with no fresh leads, so Derrek hadn't hung around to discuss business. But did Derrek really want this? Vampires and werewolves were notorious in their not getting along.

Hell, did he even want a threesome? Faolan loved Jason, but thoughts of Derrek naked under him made his cock stir under his kilt. He'd never get his answers hiding in the computer room. He set the drum on its stand and padded back into the living room. The cheap rug that came standard with the place felt like a wire brush to his feet, his whole body already sensitizing. He regretted kicking his shoes off at the door like he usually did.

Derrek was studying Faolan's vintage Millennium Falcon that sat on a shelf near the bookcase. The main characters were ringed around it except for Darth Vader, of course. He was by his tie-fighter. "You're a geek," Derrek said without turning around. Naturally, a werewolf would hear his footsteps, even on carpet.

"Always have been. Sorcha's worse, and don't get Grandma started on *Star Trek*."

Derrek faced him, his eyes sweeping over Faolan. He felt almost naked under the intensity of that amber gaze, but with the exception of a swatch of wool, he was. The strength of Derrek's gaze only served to make Faolan want him more. His cock twitched and started to harden.

"What do you think of what Jason said?" Unless Faolan missed his guess, there was a hint of fear in Derrek's question.

"I'm pretty sure I remember you kissing me the other day."

"I didn't mean that." Derrek slashed his hand in the air. "You already know I'm attracted to you, and I'm pretty sure you're attracted to me. But all three of us?"

Faolan closed the distance between them, resting a hand on Derrek's shoulder. "No one is going to force you into anything you don't want, Derrek. Jason may tease you, but he'd never do anything like that."

"I thought I was going to be his mid-morning snack." Derrek rubbed his neck. "And the weird part was I didn't even mind it. That's just wrong."

“I’m sure the pack wouldn’t approve, but he really wouldn’t hurt you.”

Derrek snorted, slipping away from him. He ran his hand over a book shelf. “I’m a gay Alpha. The pack is used to being disappointed by me.” The bitterness in his tone made Faolan wince. “I don’t know what to think about the whole prophecy. Forgetting for a moment how embarrassing it was to have your *grandmother* point out we should be together as lovers, I don’t like this fate stuff.”

Faolan nodded, feeling his ardor ebb away. “It does go against the idea of free will.”

“Yeah.”

“Consider it this way, seers see the future and report it. They don’t make it happen. It was always going to happen.”

Derrek furrowed his brow. “That’s the same damn thing. It’s not that I don’t really want to be with you. I just don’t know...” He shook his head.

Faolan wanted to go to him, pull him into his arms, but the look on Derrek’s face made him doubt it would be welcomed. “If you don’t want it, it won’t happen. We will stop this one way or another. You don’t have to sacrifice yourself and do something you don’t want to do.”

Derrek laughed, managing to make it as sarcastic a laugh as Faolan had ever heard. “Yeah, but as far as sacrifices go, partnering up with two fucking hot guys is hardly the worst thing that would ever happen to me. I know dudes who’d give their left nut for something like that.” He made a face. “Though that might make things difficult later.”

Chuckling, Faolan took Derrek’s hand. “You have a point.” He tugged Derrek closer. “Jason is very pliable in bed. He usually will do what you want.”

“And you?” Derrek’s voice was tight.

“Me? I’m the one in charge, but open to suggestions.”

“Have you ever done this before? Three?” Derrek’s pupils were fully dilated, his breathing rate ticking upward.

“No. Jason has. I doubt there is anything he hasn’t done, really.” Faolan smiled, cupping his hand over the back of Derrek’s neck. He pulled him into a kiss far less chaste than their first, his mouth hard and demanding over Derrek’s.

Derrek didn't pull away, his tongue easing into Faolan's mouth, tentatively exploring, as he pressed against Faolan. Closer to Faolan's height, Derrek was easier to kiss than Jason. As the kiss heated up, Faolan brushed his hips against Derrek, his cock awakening. Nothing about this felt wrong, surprising Faolan. He expected it might. There was something to that prophecy, after all.

As their mouths warred for dominance—something Faolan could tell neither of them gave up quite as easily as Jason—Faolan rubbed a hand over Derrek's crotch, feeling the heat of him. Derrek groaned against Faolan's lips.

"We don't have to wait for Jason, do we?" Derrek pressed into Faolan's touch.

"He won't be back until late if at all." Faolan interlocked his fingers with Derrek's, pulling him toward the bed room. "He can catch up later."

Derrek nodded. Faolan relished the idea of getting to know Derrek on his own first. He had no idea what Derrek might like in bed, and with the three of them, it might have been too confusing. Faolan let go of Derrek so he could draw the curtains against the noon sun. Derrek caught him from behind, wrapping his arms around him as he nibbled Faolan's neck. Werewolves were just as mouthy as vampires and Faolan liked that.

Derrek's attempt to get a hand up Faolan's kilt was a bit clumsy, but once he managed it, he trailed his fingers along Faolan's cock's length, exploring. Faolan pushed into Derrek's hand, encouraging him to take a firmer grip. Faolan reached behind his back so he could fight Derrek's zipper down. He circled his palm over Derrek's cotton covered cock. Derrek leaned against him, increasing the friction.

Finally, Faolan wiggled free of Derrek's hands, turning around. Lust plainly evident in his eyes and now very red lips, Derrek watched Faolan for a cue. Faolan tugged Derrek's shirt up, leaving his arms still captured over his head so Faolan could plunder Derrek's mouth. The alpha squirmed a bit, obviously not used to having someone take control over him. This could make it very exciting or very awkward if neither of them was willing to give up control.

Freeing him, Faolan tossed the shirt and skimmed his hands along the muscular planes of Derrek's torso. He snuck his hand down Derrek's boxers, toying with the coarse curls growing in a thick thatch there. Faolan nipped Derrek's chin before taking a step back. He wanted to see how Derrek took simple commands.

“Finish getting undressed,” Faolan said.

Derrek did, in a rush, no finesse or seduction in his movements. Still, he was young, at least five years Faolan's junior and no doubt nervous. Besides, finesse and werewolf didn't usually go together in the same sentence. His skin was paler than Jason's, but he had a similar walnut hue to his hair. Compared to him, Faolan almost glowed. His sizeable cock was cut. It had been years now since Faolan had dealt with a guy who'd been circumcised. Faolan rimmed his thumb around the edge of the shaft just where the head joined it, making Derrick's thighs quiver.

Faolan pulled Derrek close with his other hand before exploring his way down to cup one firm buttock. “Tell me what you want,” he whispered to Derrek.

Derrek's eyebrows rose and he started to say something then stopped. “I... no one's ever really asked before.”

“Too bad. I want to feel your mouth around me.” Faolan stepped back again so he could ditch his kilt. The wool was doing no one any favors. His own cock, nearly as red as the kilt thanks to his overall lack of skin pigment, jutted forth. Faolan feathered his fingers up it. Derrek tracked the movement like the hunter he was. Faolan took a few more steps back until he felt the press of the mattress against his legs. He twisted around and flung the bedding aside. “And I want to taste you.”

Derrek stretched out on the bed, holding a hand out to Faolan. “I'd like that.”

Faolan smiled. “Gods, you're beautiful.”

Beaming, Derrek spread his legs more, stroking himself. “Yeah? No one's ever said that before.”

“They've been doing you a disservice.” Faolan joined him on the bed, pinning him to the mattress for another breathless kiss. He considered it a win when Derrek didn't fight against him. Derrek was an alpha even if he was used to having to share power with his twin, and follow Douglas's lead. Faolan hoped it hadn't disheartened him too much. Of course, he should enjoy it in this case.

Derrek broke the kiss so he could kiss his way down to Faolan's erect nipples. He sucked on one while caressing Faolan's belly. He let go, canting his face up to Faolan. “Been wanting to do that since I first saw you communing with that tree.”

Faolan rubbed Derrek's shoulder. "Lucky me."

Derrek turned his attention to Faolan's cock, licking along its length and raising his hand up it at the same time. Faolan sprawled on the mattress and let the wolf's hungry mouth do its work. Any fears he had about the three of them working out started to fade. Any guilt he might have had about cheating on Jason was long gone. This didn't just feel fantastic; it felt right.

Faolan tapped Derrek's shoulder, then signaled him to roll onto his side. When Derrek complied, Faolan changed positions so he could help himself to Derrek's fine, fat cock. The musky smell of him was different than Faolan expected; the scent of his wolf nature perhaps. With his tongue, Faolan chased the bitter pearls of moisture at the tip of Derrek's shaft before taking him inside his mouth. Derrek moaned softly, his breath hot on the hypersensitive skin of Faolan's cock, making him shudder.

Faolan caressed Derrek's fuzzy balls as he sucked on him. He wanted more than this, as great as it was. If Derrek had wanted to play with his nipples since the day Faolan recharged, Faolan had been thinking about the young wolf's ass since the moment he had stalked into the office. As he bobbed his head over Derrek's shaft, Faolan swept his fingers up it until he caught them in his mouth as well. He transferred the wet fingers to the cleft of Derrek's ass, sliding them down to circle his entrance. Derrek's stroking hitched for a moment but didn't stop. He gasped a little as Faolan sank a finger into him. He flicked his tongue quickly on the sweet spot under the head of Derrek's cock.

Derrek hesitated, looking down at Faolan. "Do you want me to stop?" Faolan pulled his finger back out and Derrek shook his head. "Will you let me inside you?" When Derrek didn't answer instantly, Faolan added, "You don't have to if that's not your thing."

"No, I've thought about it." Derrek wet his lips. "I want to try."

The hesitancy in those words made Faolan pause. Did he really mean it? Had he tried before and someone hurt him? Had it been disappointing? Faolan doubted Derrek would simply tell him. He pushed up on one arm so he could see Derrek better. "I'm not trying to pressure you."

"I really have thought about it. I trust you."

Faolan's throat tightened with the rush of emotion. Trust was not something werewolves did easily outside of their pack. He twisted so he could kiss Derrek on the lips. "Thank you."

“How... how do you want to do this?” Derrek flushed.

“We can... uh, oh, this is awkward.” Faolan grimaced. “I’ve been with Jason for the last handful of years, and vampires can’t catch or transmit mortal diseases. I don’t have any protection.”

“Werewolves aren’t so lucky.” Derrek scooted to the edge of the bed, standing slowly as if unsure his legs would hold. “I have some.”

While Derrek fetched the condom, Faolan fished the lube out of the night stand. It had been so long since he’d worn one, Faolan let Derrek help his fumbling fingers get the damn thing on. Afterward, Faolan pressed Derrek back against the mattress, locking his mouth over Derrek’s. He brushed his body over Derrek’s, luxuriating in the heat of him.

Derrek ran his fingers through Faolan’s hair. “I love it when you kiss me.”

Smiling, Faolan planted a kiss on Derrek’s lips. “Then we’re already in the best position for us.”

Derrek moved his hands down over Faolan’s back. “Yeah.” He fumbled in the sheets, trying to come up with the lube. Derrek slicked up Faolan’s cock, as Faolan did the same with Derrek’s entrance, and in between, grabbed quick kisses. Once that was done, Faolan moved in for a longer kiss, and Derrek guided Faolan’s cock into position.

Derrek gasped against Faolan’s lips as Faolan pushed inside him. Starting slowly, Faolan thrust more deeply, Derrek softly begging for more. As they kissed, Derrek locked his legs over Faolan’s hips, letting him in as deep as he could go. Face to face, Faolan loved it this way almost better than any other. He felt so close to Derrek now. It didn’t take long before Derrek’s body tensed under him. His back arched as Derrek came with a loud, wolf-like howl Faolan didn’t know could come from a still-human throat. Slightly stunned, Faolan paused.

Derrek wrapped his arms around Faolan’s shoulders, squeezing tight. “More, gimme more.”

Faolan gladly complied, feeling the tension building inside him. It didn’t take him much longer to reach climax, senses-clouding swirl of bliss. When it slowly cleared, the first thing Faolan was aware of was Derrek rubbing his back and shoulders. Faolan was in no hurry to move, enjoying every bit of Derrek’s touch.

“I almost said no to all this. It scared me,” Derrek said finally, his voice sleepy. “I’d be stupid to miss this.”

“It’ll get even better from here.” Faolan had no doubt of that now.

Derrek smiled in answer, continuing to caress Faolan’s back. Soon enough they’d have to be back to work, but for now, Faolan had no intentions of going anywhere.

Chapter Nine

Sweat poured down Faolan's aching back. Maybe he should have remembered he'd promised to help turn over a new garden for his grandmother before he engaged in a day of strenuous activity. Jason never returned, calling to say he'd rounded up Bob and was headed back to his place to deal with him. Derrek had never left, and the afternoon loving turned into evening and nighttime sessions, very athletic ones at that. Faolan had tried to beg off gardening, but when Grandma asked why, he decided it was better to suck it up than explain.

Derrek had abandoned him at breakfast, saying he had to go finish the chores his twin had set for the day before. Faolan didn't blame him. Shopping for groceries sounded better than digging in the hard ground. When his shovel hit another rock, he gave up and sat next to his grandmother and sister in the shade. Brighid sorted dried, pressed plants into two piles, faded yellow flowers in one and equally dulled purple in the other. Agrimony and Betony, Druid's sorrow and cure-all, so he could guess what she'd be brewing. Fresh ferns lay in a pile of their own. While Sorcha was theoretically helping their grandmother, she seemed more interested in watching Deirdre play in the far side of the garden where he had finished. Next to her, her crutches rested against the bench. Deirdre broke up clumps by hand, looking for worms and whatever else that might catch a child's eye.

Faolan flopped over in the grass, pushed his robe's hood back to let his head breathe. Sweat plastered his hair to his scalp. His back instantly stiffened up. Tonight would suck if his back didn't start feeling a little better. He might have to ask Sorcha for more healing salve, but at least he could blame the shoveling.

"Someone looks exhausted." Sorcha poked him with her crutch.

"Shoveling is hard work."

Sorcha glanced around to check that Deirdre wasn't in earshot before adding, "And it has nothing to do with that werewolf howling in your apartment."

His face felt hotter than the sun. "Sorcha!"

She snickered. "I wish someone would have warned me before I went down there looking to see if you had made any progress." Sorcha tossed a sprig of betony at their grandmother.

"I didn't see you, or I would have," Brigid replied, not looking up from her sorting. "I'm just surprised they made it out of the grove before ripping off each other's clothing."

He gave his grandmother the evil eye. "I'm not talking about this with you."

"All I'm saying is the werewolf sure sounded like he was enjoying himself." Sorcha smirked.

"Lookee!" Deirdre rescued him, running up with a palm-sized hunk of limestone. "A dragon egg."

"Oh, I don't think so, sweetie." He sat up, taking the vaguely egg-shaped stone from her.

"Is to! I know it is." Deirdre stomped her foot at him.

"You might be right. You know who collects dragon eggs? Your mom. Why don't you give it to her?" Faolan surrendered the rock.

Beaming, Deirdre presented it to her mom with a flourish.

"And I bet you can find her more," he said. Deirdre squealed, and raced back to the turned earth.

"She's going to bring me every dirty rock in the world. Thanks for nothing." Sorcha made a nasty face at Faolan.

He arched an eyebrow. "Shut up about my love life, and I won't put evil thoughts into your daughter's head."

"Children." Brigid chuckled to herself. "That garden isn't going to turn itself over, Faolan."

Faolan hauled himself back to his feet. "Why can't some of the druid initiatives do this?" He knew he couldn't argue with her for long. Grandma was likely to call lightning strikes in to make her point.

Her answer was a flat look. Sighing, he picked up his shovel and pushed his hood back up over his head. It shielded his pale skin better than a hat. The smell of the freshly turned earth was the one bonus, but it didn't really make up for having to break through roots and dig out rocks.

"Someone's hard at work and looking like he belongs in the middle ages."

At the sound of Jason's voice, Faolan straightened and turned around.

Jason jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at Derrek and Doug. "Look what I found in the parking lot."

“Doug!” Deirdre came flying out of the garden, and wrapped her dirty arms around his leg, only to abandon him nearly as quickly for his twin. “Derrek!”

“You’ve been playing hard in the mud, pup.” Doug ruffled her hair.

Deirdre studied him and his shoulder-length brown hair and long beard, then looked at Derrek. She tugged on Derrek’s jeans. “I like this face better, not shaggy.”

“Deirdre! We don’t say things like that,” Sorcha said, appalled.

Derrek scooped Deirdre up and spun around with her, making her squeal in delight. “That’s okay. One of us had to be the handsome twin. I’ve always said it was me.” Doug swatted his arm, and Derrek put Deirdre back down. She ran back to her dragon egg search.

“So what is up with the monastic robes there?” Derrek asked.

“This one is light cotton so it’s cooler than jeans. It’s not one of my ceremonial robes,” Faolan replied. “I use them when I have to be out in the heat.”

“Nah, the truth is, he’s in the sun. A simple hat won’t do. Without those robes, Faolan will burst into flames.” Jason smirked, pushing Faolan lightly.

Faolan rolled his eyes. “I can replace you, you know.”

“Sounded to me like you already had.” Sorcha leveled her gaze at Derrek.

He flushed brightly as his brother looked at him, eyes wide. Doug’s eyebrows slowly climbed, looking between the three men.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Derrek said, not backing down from his brother, but unless Faolan missed his guess, Derrek sounded nervous.

“No wonder you were so quick to volunteer to stay behind.” Doug rolled his eyes. “That’s why I stopped by. We’re going for a pack run, getting too close to the full moon, and we’re getting restless. Derrek has a cell phone that will hopefully get reception where we’re going. At least in the base camp, we’ll have reception if something happens.”

“How does a werewolf even carry a cell phone in wolf form?” Faolan jammed his shovel into the ground, turning over another patch.

“Hooked to a collar.” Doug shrugged. “We tag it on the young ones.”

“I can’t imagine too many wolves want to be collared.” Faolan stabbed with the shovel again, very glad he couldn’t read Doug’s mind at this point.

"Just the pervy ones," Jason pointed out with a laugh.

"We're not pervy." Derrek slapped Jason's arm.

"I'm amazed you can say that with a straight face." Doug shook his head.

"Don't you have a bunch of werewolves in a van to get back to?" Derrek glared, snapping his jaws at his twin's neck. Doug cuffed him.

"Boy, I hope someone cracked a window so they can get their heads out." Jason lolled his tongue for emphasis.

"Jason." Faolan shoved him, ricocheting Jason toward Derrek.

"You suck." Derrek pushed Jason back to Faolan

Jason flung his arms out to either side to ward them off. "Of course. I'm a *vampire*."

"On that note, I'm out of here. Derrek, call us if you need us." Doug shoulder bumped his brother.

"If you need to go and run Derrek, we'll manage," Faolan said, wondering what he looked like as a wolf. Probably like his twin, dark, solid and handsome.

He shook his head. "I'm fine. I can always just run around here."

"Better get a tennis ball so you can play fetch with him, Faolan." Jason beamed, and Derrek's hackles went up.

"Jason, I'm digging a damn big hole here. I can bury you in it," Faolan warned. He'd miss Jason, but the silence might be blissful.

Jason shrugged. "He'll probably be too busy chasing cars and licking himself, anyhow."

Derrek balled up his fists. "I'm going to—"

"Pick up a shovel and get to work," Brigid finished for him. She leveled a look at the men. "The three to join can get this garden done in no time."

Jason waved her off. "I'm not doing manual labor."

"I wonder if it's too late to catch up with the van." Derrek made a show of looking in the direction his brother had gone.

"Come on, I'll get you some shovels," Faolan said, annoyed no one followed.

"How about I provide you with a tintinnabulum made with *fascinus*? It'll watch over the garden." Jason smiled.

Derrek wrinkled his nose. "A what?"

"A tintinnabulum is a wind chime that we used to put in gardens to protect us of evil and the *fascinus* was the most powerful symbol we had for doing that," Jason replied. "It's a phallus."

Derrek's jaw dropped for a moment, before snapping closed. Shaking his head, he asked, "You want to hang a wind chime made of dicks in the garden?"

"It's great magic. We wore them as charms, a fist over a phallus, especially in battle." Jason used his hands to demonstrate the design. "You stroked them for luck. I know I've always found it particularly lucky if I get to stroke a phallus."

Derrek put a hand over his eyes. Faolan didn't blame him.

On a roll, Jason added, "It's where the word fascinate comes from."

"Of course it does, because you men are fascinated with those little things from before you can even walk." Brigid flipped a dismissive wave Jason's way. "This garden isn't going to plant itself. Hop to it boys." She clapped her hands together.

Derrek trotted after Faolan to get the shovel, while Jason protested his phallus wasn't little. "I think she's the real alpha here," Derrek said once they were out of ear shot.

Faolan snorted. "She is."

"And if your boyfriend doesn't knock it off, I might just see how good of a stake a shovel handle is." Derrek's smile was pure predatory wolf.

Faolan reached over and patted Derrek's arm. "You let him get you too easily. He'll just keep it up if he sees it's annoying you."

His feral grin broadened. "And after I tear out his throat?"

"He'll just heal and start all over again." Faolan shrugged.

"How am I supposed to..." Derrek shook his hands as if he could make the words fall out of them. "He drives me nuts, but at the same time, I'm attracted to him. I just don't know how the three of us can possibly work."

"I think Jason will end up surprising you, Derrek, and the prophecy never promised being fated for one another would be easy. Nothing about Jason is ever easy," Faolan said woefully as they reached the shed. He fetched two shovels. "But since I did warn him if he continued to be an ass, I would tell you

his real name. I'm sure he was proud of it back in the day but now, not so much."

"How bad is it?" Derrek took one of the shovels, his eyes gleaming.

"Dioxippus."

Derrek snickered. "Really? That's rather horrible."

"I know. We better get back there before he escapes Grandma. Jason will definitely try to get out of digging."

"Who said I'm not going to do the same? This is not my garden."

Faolan tapped Derrek's butt with the flat of his shovel. "Oh, you'll shovel. Trust me."

Jason was sitting in the shade next to Sorcha when they got back, and not a single iota of dirt had been turned over in their absence. He looked over, hearing their approach. "You probably didn't need another shovel, Faolan. Fuzzy could just transform and make like a Jack Russell." He made doggie digging motions with his hands.

"Got a knife, Faolan? I need to whittle the tip of this into a stake." Derrek brandished his shovel.

"Do I have to knock your heads together?" Faolan sighed.

"Save that for later." Jason pointed to his crotch, and Sorcha slapped his stomach.

"Just get over here and help." Derrek pointed at Jason with his shovel. "Zippy."

Jason's jaw dropped. "You told!"

"I said I would if you kept being a jerk." Faolan beckoned him to join them.

"Boys, I'm busy working on potions to help you three in the battles to come. I will be supremely annoyed if it all goes to waste because I'm forced to kill you all, and have to search for a new mage, werewolf, and vampire who can get along." Brighid stabbed a boney finger at them. "Now quit being as useless as chocolate teapots and get to work."

Faolan knew better than to mess with his grandmother when she used that tone of voice. Mindful of where Deirdre was still digging for rocks on the other end, he started to turn over the garden. His companions joined him without another word.

"I know about two million better ways to wreck my back than how we did it today." Jason flopped on Faolan's couch.

"I almost believe that." Derrek sagged into the chair. "Now I see why Doug is afraid of Brigid."

"Always wise," Faolan called on his way to the kitchen.

Jason got up, stretching. He sauntered over to Derrek, then in one smooth move, straddled his lap. Faolan blinked in surprise. Derrek didn't look any less shocked. "He's probably going for tea over there, so if we don't start soon, we'll be swimming in lapsang souchong or something."

"I was getting us beer, smart ass." Faolan didn't move toward his fridge. Mostly he hated his open concept kitchen since grease got everywhere, but tonight it was coming in handy. He wanted to see what Jason did and how Derrek handled it. It might be good for them to start without him. Jason worried Derrek far more than Faolan had.

Jason kissed Derrek. From his angle, Faolan couldn't really see Derrek's expression but saw his muscles tense. He expected for Derrek to push Jason away, but instead, his shoulders softened. Derrek looped an arm under Jason's, resting his big hand on Jason's back. The kiss looked tender, and Faolan almost wanted to join in. He didn't expect it to be quite so hot watching these two. Jason sat back, giving a little wiggle of his ass over Derrek's lap.

Derrek's chest heaved as he glanced at Faolan. "You said he'd ask first."

He shrugged. "For biting. Kissing is another story."

"I might need that beer," Derrek said, but his hand didn't leave Jason's back.

"Hmm, maybe I did that wrong." Jason moved in for another kiss.

Faolan didn't go for the beers. He tried willing his body to behave itself, but the autonomic nervous system was just that, autonomic. His penis reminded him of that as it stirred. The way Jason cupped Derrek's cheek as they kissed made Faolan doubt his legs' ability to reliably hold him up. Jason might enjoy teasing the living hell out of Derrek, but the tenderness with which he handled Derrek—knowing the young man was nervous about all this—made Faolan melt inside. Derrek's grip on Jason tightened.

When he broke the kiss, Jason said, "Last chance to back out."

Derrek curled his fingers in Jason's shirt. "Not leaving, but this means you have to stop provoking me."

“Sure thing, fur bag.”

Derrek released Jason so he could thump him on the back. “Damn vampire.”

“You just going to watch, Faolan, or are you going to join us?” Jason didn't turn to look at him.

“Watching is quite enjoyable, but I was about to move you both from that chair.” Faolan sauntered over so he could hug Jason from behind. He kissed Jason's cheek and Derrek arched up to kiss the angle of Faolan's jaw. “Because it won't survive the three of us.”

Jason nodded, giving Faolan a gentle push back. “Especially since you two are new to this. The bed would be safest. If one of us strains something, your kin will never let us live it down.”

“If that happens, they would take pictures for prosperity provided they could manage it.” Faolan gave Derrek a hand up.

Derrek closed the distance between them, his lips touching Faolan's. He felt that first mingling of their breath, a promise of what was to come. Faolan palmed Derrek's erection, hidden by his jeans. Jason pressed against Faolan's back, the heat of him stoking Faolan's fires. Faolan broke the kiss, locking fingers with both men. They followed him into the bedroom. Faolan let go of their hands so he could play with Jason's hair.

“You should probably start with Derrek,” Faolan said.

“Already taking charge.” Jason circled his hand over Faolan's belly, making him wish he hadn't just opted to be the last man in. He pulled Faolan close, whispering a plan in his ear.

Faolan grinned. “I like that idea. Go on.” He caressed Derrek's back. “If that's all right with you, Derrek. If you rather it be with me first, we can do that.”

Derrek eyed Jason, and for a moment Faolan thought he'd bolt after all. “What does he have in mind?”

Jason put a finger through Derrek's belt loops, pulling him closer. “Let me show you. If there's anything you don't like, don't be afraid to say so.” He rucked up Derrek's shirt. “I think I'll start with sucking you until you howl.”

Derrek's Adam's apple bobbed. “Hard to argue that idea.”

“Thought so.” Jason tugged Derrek’s shirt off, trailing the wide plane of his tongue down to Derrek’s left nipple. As he sucked on Derrek, who swirled his fingers slowly in Jason’s hair, Faolan couldn’t stop from joining in. The only other thing he could do was stand by his dresser in the small room. Watching was fun, but there was no reason he couldn’t do both. He slowly took down Jason’s jeans, planting a kiss on the backs of both of Jason’s knees.

Faolan stood, hearing Derrek yelp. Jason teased Derrek’s nipple with a finger, a red pearl of blood forming at the tip where Jason obviously simply couldn’t help himself. Jason licked the drop of blood away.

“Mmmm, you’re as delicious as I’d hoped,” Jason murmured, sucking again on the pinprick wound.

Faolan sandwiched Jason between him and Derrek so he could lean in and steal another soft, slow kiss from him. He rubbed his own cock against Jason’s backside, wanting to take him now. Waiting would be better, but sometimes the animal inside didn’t agree. Instead of giving in, Faolan worked Jason’s boxers down.

“Oh.” Derrek stared down at Jason’s erection.

“Ah, never seen a foreskin before?” Jason plucked at Derrek’s nipple.

“Not in person.” Derrek stroked up the length of Jason’s cock, tracking its upward, right-curved length. Faolan assumed that it had been damaged back in Jason’s mortal, pankratiast days, giving it that slight bend.

Derrek touched the foreskin briefly, as if testing it.

“I don’t break,” Jason said.

Derrek stroked Jason more firmly. Faolan put his arms around Derrek, nuzzling his neck. Derrek arched his neck, giving Faolan better access. Jason reached past Derrek’s hip, rubbing Faolan’s crotch. Faolan lost track of how long they spent just touching each other, learning through their fingers and lips.

“Derrek, you need to lose those jeans,” Jason said finally.

“Yeah.” Derrek stripped in a hurry only to find himself bowled over onto the bed.

Faolan watched Jason pin Derrek crossways to the bed, kissing him hungrily. As they kissed and stroked each other’s muscular body, Faolan undressed. Jason had shared his idea of how this should go, not exactly taking dominion over it all, but rather offering up his vast experience. Faolan

concentrated on being patient when his body wanted to dive in, slowly stroking himself to keep his fire going.

“I promised to suck you until you howled.” Jason nudged Derrek to move more fully onto the bed.

“You did.” Derrek looked at Jason with undisguised lust.

Faolan wished Jason's smile was for him. Jason straddled Derrek, positioning himself so he could take Derrek deep into his mouth, and affording Derrek the opportunity to do the same for him. The heat rose in Faolan as he took in the amazing view of his two lovers pleasuring each other with tongue, lips and hands. The soft sounds they made formed a gratifying symphony.

Faolan couldn't wait forever. He fetched the lube before joining them at the edge of the bed. Derrek's coarse brush cut tickled Faolan's thighs. Derrek let Jason's cock slip free of his mouth, reaching up to bring the tip of Faolan's shaft down to where he could ring his tongue around its head. Faolan took a deep breath in, losing himself to the moment. When Derrek turned his attentions back to Jason's cock, Faolan slicked his shaft before caressing Jason's ass. Faolan admired his lovers, their enthusiasm for each other driving him nearly out of his mind. He slipped a couple fingers inside Jason, pumping them.

Jason moaned, letting Derrek pop free. “Don't play games, Faolan. Fuck me.”

“As you wish.” Faolan grinned. Derrek paused for a moment as well, as if waiting for Faolan to fully join them.

Faolan thrust into Jason, eliciting another delightful groan. Once Faolan found his rhythm, Jason turned his attention back to Derrek's cock. Derrek returned the attention with interest, sneaking his hand up to caress Faolan's balls as they slapped against Jason's ass. Faolan had never planned for something like this, but now he couldn't imagine why not? He couldn't read minds but he didn't have to. Faolan couldn't be the only one who felt so connected to the others that he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to go back to the way things were. Was it love? Faolan didn't know. Whatever their connection was, it ran deep.

Derrek let Jason's cock go as his body shuddered. Howl he did, loud and resonating in Faolan's chest. Derrek looped a hand around Faolan's leg as he rode his orgasm to the end. Jason pulled Derrek's cock out of his mouth, licking his lips. Faolan paused deep inside Jason.

“Told you I’d make you howl.” Jason grinned.

Derrek panted, stroking his hand up and down Faolan’s leg as he started up his slow rhythm again. “Damn vampire.”

“Time for you to make me howl.” Jason slapped Derrek’s thigh and pressed back, meeting Faolan’s thrust. Jason made a soft, happy sound. Derrek took Jason’s cock back into his mouth. “Won’t take me long, so close.”

Faolan caressed Jason’s back as he pumped into him. Leaning forward, he kissed Jason’s sweaty shoulder, tasting his salt. Derrek rimmed the head of Jason’s cock as he swiftly circled his hand up and down the length of it. Jason knew Faolan’s body well. Faolan’s hips shuddered as Jason came, catching Derrek on the lips and chin. Derrek continued to lick Jason’s shaft, as Faolan picked up his pace.

“Come on, babe.” Jason writhed his hips.

Faolan couldn’t hold on. Like a bowstring pulled taut, the release was quick; forceful. Faolan cried out softly, his hips breaking rhythm. He wrapped an arm around Jason’s belly, using him to steady himself. Derrek’s fingers caressing Faolan’s backside were the first thing to break through his bliss. Faolan pulled out of Jason, his senses still whirling.

Jason rolled off Derrek, coming up in a sitting position. He pulled Faolan down onto the mattress with them. Faolan flipped onto his back and Jason snuggled up alongside him. Derrek curled around Faolan’s left. Jason and Derrek clasped hands over Faolan’s belly. He put a hand over theirs. No words were needed in this moment. It was perfect.

Chapter Ten

The Yunnan Gold did nothing for him. Faolan was almost face down in his tea while his laptop seemed to mock him. He shouldn't be in his cramped medical office trying to write a patient note. He should still be curled up in his big bed with his lovers even if Derrek did growl a little in his sleep.

He was so tired he didn't even hear Sorcha approaching on her forearm crutches, but he didn't miss her snicker, however. He twisted on the task chair so he could glare at her. Like him, she wore blue scrubs and a lab coat, but unlike him, she was bright eyed.

"Did someone fall under a couple of buses last night?" Sorcha hobbled in and sat in the worn chair in the corner.

Faolan deepened his glare and took a big drink of his tea.

"I can't believe you got those two to stop provoking each other long enough to go along with sleeping together." Sorcha grinned.

"The trick is finding something else for their mouths to do."

Sorcha made a face before threatening him with her crutch. "Oh, I don't want to know that. You keep that stuff to yourself."

He cocked up his eyebrows. "My love life is nowhere near as kinky as you think."

Sorcha's grin broadened. "Think about what you did last night and say that again with a straight face. I dare you."

He shrugged. "Fair point."

"I don't want to know what my little brother gets up to when he's naked." Sorcha gave an exaggerated shudder.

He snorted, but it turned into a yawn. "I will pay you a million dollars to write this patient note for me."

"You don't have a million dollars. Besides, I have to take Deirdre to the dentist soon." She held up her hands. "You're on your own, brother."

"Then why did you even come in here?" Faolan drank more tea, but if he was expecting a miracle burst of energy, it wasn't happening.

"Just to see if you survived." Sorcha slapped his knee.

He gave her the finger. "If you're not going to help, let me sleep in peace."

"You have patients."

He slipped down further on his chair. "Tell them I'm dead."

"I'll tell them the vampires and werewolves ate you from the hips up."

Sorcha beamed.

Before he could form a response, Amy, one of the nurses, poked her head in, her face ghost-pale. "Dr. Fraser, your grandmother just sent word. Building Blocks was just attacked. The day care workers are dead, and the kids were taken!"

Faolan smashed his knee into the desk as he jumped up. He swore loudly, rubbing his knee.

Sorcha gasped. "That's Deirdre's daycare." Her crutches rattled from her nerves. "She should have been there!"

"She's not. She's safe." Faolan hugged his sister, then pulled out his cell, calling his grandmother first. "Any clues where they took the kids, Grandma?"

"They left a note on the chalkboard. 'Catch us if you can. We're waiting in your favorite place in the Hocking Hills.' We're assuming they're talking to you, Faolan," Brigid told him, her voice brittle. "I'm mobilizing half a dozen units with dogs since the pack isn't at home. You take Jason and Derrek. Put Sorcha on the phone. I know she's with you."

Faolan handed the phone to Sorcha. She nodded at whatever Brigid had to say, then gave the phone back, struggling to her feet. "Amy, get me a spare chair. I need to get something from my room. Robyn, one of the girls who's gone missing left her nightie when she stayed over with Deirdre last weekend. The dogs and Derrek will need it. Round them up and meet me there, Faolan."

"Of course." As Amy helped Sorcha into a wheelchair, which she could go faster in than with her crutches, Faolan made a call to Jason first.

Jason had been asleep and had no idea where Derrek was, but he wasn't in the apartment. Luckily, Derrek answered his phone, but he had to call Faolan back. Faolan had forgotten Derrek hadn't been in his life for long. He had no idea where Sorcha lived.

Jason met Faolan in the family wing of the huge Ridges complex. "Did they get our baby, Faolan?" He sounded out of breath from running so hard.

“No. Deirdre’s here. She had a dentist appointment, but they don’t know that. Justin probably doesn’t know what she looks like, and they might want the kids for more reasons than just to hurt me. In terms of bad magic, little kids and their innocence is gold,” Faolan replied. “I wish I knew where Derrek went.”

“Probably out pissing on stuff to make it his,” Jason said, as Faolan knocked once then opened the door to his sister’s place.

“I was not!” Derrek rounded the corner in a tank top and shorts. His earphones dangled around his neck. “I was out running. Is the pup okay?”

“She’s fine,” Sorcha said, coming out of her bedroom. She had a bag on her lap. “Here’s the nightie. I’ve cut it up so all the teams can get a piece.”

“Thank you. You take Deirdre and get to the safe house, Sorcha. I’d say take Grandma, but she probably won’t go,” Faolan said.

“I will. You get those kids back.” Sorcha shoved the bag at him.

“We will.” Faolan took it and spun on his heel.

None of them spoke as they ran for the garage to get a ride. Faolan stopped at his apartment just long enough for his messenger bag full of weapons. He already wore his neck guard. The SUVs would be fully stocked, but it felt more comfortable to have his own weapons. They were the last to arrive at the garage, the teams waiting by the sleek black SUVs. Faolan handed off the bits of nightgown so everyone could get started. It wasn’t a close drive to get to the Hocking Hills.

“Where is your favorite place?” Derrek asked once they were underway.

“I don’t know. I love it all, but the falls, if I had to choose, especially at this time of year when the snow melt makes the falls beautiful,” Faolan said, pushing the SUV as fast as it could safely travel. On the roof of the SUV, their bubble light flashed. They had as much leeway as the highway patrol to speed. No one wanted between the Lucerna and the demon hoards. “Did you get a hold of Doug?”

Derrek shook his head. He rode shotgun, claiming motion sickness if he was in the back. The last thing they needed was a dizzy, vomiting werewolf tracker. “I left a message. They’ll get it. But without a scent trail, I’m not sure they’ll ever find us. Cell phones will be spotty at best. All we can do is try to get to them there. At least you guys keep bloodhounds to help out.”

“Your pack is too small to rely on exclusively,” Faolan said in explanation. “Jason, we didn’t have time to gather your Murder. If we don’t get him now, we’ll need their help.”

“I’ll call Ollie and get him to round them up. I have too many who are nightwalkers only. This is a young clan.” Jason sat up against the back of Derrek’s seat. “It will have to do.”

“Why are they doing this? Everywhere else they just came in and killed everyone. Why take the kids? I’m not sure I really want an answer.” Derrek tugged at his seatbelt shoulder strap.

“I’m sure they targeted the daycare because of Deirdre. They’d have no way of knowing Sorcha kept her home today.” Faolan tightened his grip on the steering wheel, swinging the vehicle around a slowpoke in the damned left lane. “Justin and whoever he’s working with—”

“Because he would have to be working with someone to pull this off,” Jason said.

“Right.” Faolan nodded. “They might want to spoil the energy of the area by doing something big and bad.”

“Or draw us away from the compound so they can attack there,” Jason said.

Faolan scowled. “This is why we have you doing detective work, Jason. You have a horribly devious mind. Call Brigid and suggest that.”

“Knowing your grandmother, she’s already thought of it.” Jason made the call anyway.

The drive to the hills seemed to take forever. Faolan chose the parking lot closest to the falls. It wasn’t very crowded, being in the middle of the week. Derrek stripped off his shirt and shoes as Faolan parked. Derrek opened the door, using it as a shield as he removed his pants.

“Someday, we need to come back out here. He looks good naked in the woods.” Jason jerked a thumb at Derrek before bailing out of the SUV.

Faolan rolled his eyes, though he appreciated Jason’s attempt to lighten the terrible mood. He pulled his messenger bag on, stuffing in some of the water bottles from the back of the SUV. They’d be warm, but they’d do the trick. Jason helped himself to some of the guns.

“No, to the woods. I’m not a fan of twigs and bugs.” Derrek stretched. “And contrary to popular belief, not all werewolves are into doggy style. Ugh.” The grunt accompanied a loud crunching noise. Derrek’s form changed, shrinking in, rearranging as his humanity submerged, and the wolf came out.

“Faolan knows a spell to repel bugs,” Jason said, as Faolan handed the remaining strip of the little girl’s nightgown to Derrek, letting him sniff it. “And we can talk positions once we get these kids back.”

Derrek curled his lips away from his thick fangs.

“Was that enough to get the scent?” Faolan asked.

Derrek howled, trotting over to a white van that might have been a plumber’s once based on the faded logo. He growled at the door.

“I’m taking that as we were right about your favorite spot, Faolan.” Jason peered in one of the windows. “Nothing’s in there now.”

“You sure?”

“Vampires know when a warm body is around. Do you know how many kids they took?”

Derrek head-bumped Faolan’s leg and took off toward the trail. They followed.

“No, but it’s a small daycare. There are only a dozen kids, so no more than that. That means if this is Justin, he simply cannot be alone.”

A coolness descended on them the moment they entered the woods. The deciduous trees hadn’t leafed out yet, but hemlocks dominated this forest. The dappled sunlight couldn’t abate the cool touch of shade. The soft dirt path led down into the valley through walls of limestone and lines of trees. It would have been the easiest way to get kids into the woods, but how anyone could control a pack of two to four year olds Faolan didn’t know. He wondered if drugs or a spell had been used to make them docile.

Derrek moved more swiftly than his two-legged companions could manage. Jason handled the woods better than Faolan expected. He remembered being surprised by that the first time he had taken the vampire into them years ago. That’s when it really hit home, just how old Jason was. He grew up in times where there were more woods than anything else. Once they were down to the valley floor, Derrek started loping along faster. Thankfully Jason and he were in good shape and could keep up.

“He has to be a complete idiot to try and attack a druid in the woods.” Jason leapt over an exposed root.

“That worries me. He has to know that. That means he’ll have planned for it.” Faolan reached out to the trees, stretching his essence into them, tapping them for strength as he ran.

“Or he’s just flat out bonkers and didn’t think it through. You did say he failed the psych test.” Jason panted a little as he ran, adding to the noises of the woods. Birds and insects kept up a constant stream of sound as did the wind through the hemlocks.

“That would be the best case scenario.” Faolan cast a glance over at the tannic creek meandering through the valley floor. “Or maybe he just picked it because he knew I liked this place and didn’t know why. Hell, he could have just been using the creek to make a statement.”

“Not following.” Jason’s foot skidded on a twig, and he flailed his arms to stay upright.

Faolan pointed at a turtle sunning itself in the creek. “That’s Queer Creek.”

“Really? We’ve been coming here five years and you never mentioned.”

“You never seemed particularly interested in the wilderness, Jason. It’s not our kind of queer, but like I said, it could be a statement.”

Derrek barked at them, looking back to see if they were following. He left the path, climbing up the hill. This was slower going for Faolan and Jason. Needles and dry leaves were everywhere, and the hemlock’s little cones were underfoot, making it slippery. Hefty limestone boulders, covered with mosses and ferns, at least made convenient handholds.

Faolan slowed before Jason or Derrek. He listened to what the wind and trees had to say. It wasn’t a voice per se, nor words, but the sensations were there. “Derrek,” he whispered bringing the werewolf to heel. “Slowly now. They’re ahead.”

Jason took out his modified gun. It shot a “bullet” of holy water and silver flakes in a thin shell. It would take a demon out, and certainly slow down any vampires or werewolves that might be helping. Mages were human, and humans didn’t do well when punctured by any high velocity projectile. Faolan readied his wand but he’d barely need it in a setting like this.

“We know you’re there, Fraser. You had to come. The wolves can smell you,” a voice called, giving them information that the person probably should have kept to himself. Though, Faolan had already suspected other supernaturals were helping out.

Together, the trio made their way to the top of the ridge. A large, flat hunk of limestone adorned the top of the hill. A small tree split the stone, growing up

out of it, its roots wrapped around it. The children were ringed around the rock, sitting there like little dolls, not moving one iota. Definitely drugged or bespelled. Closest to them was a thin young man with close-cropped honey-blond hair. He looked like he should be an OU student, but his eyes said something different. They spoke of a fever, of something broken in him. Faolan thought it was Justin, but he wasn't entirely sure. He had no idea who the other half-dozen men were. He only saw two werewolves, but there could be more.

"Justin?" Faolan asked.

"Oh, good, I wasn't sure you'd have figured it out. At least you aren't an idiot. I'd hate to see my father's group in the hands of a fool." Justin beamed, spreading his hands wide.

"They're vampires," Jason hissed in Faolan's ear. He nodded. He knew better than to doubt Jason's senses. At his knee, Derrek growled, his hackles standing up. He hoped Derrek wouldn't just charge in. Werewolves were known for that.

Faolan spread his hands, trying to project a calm and, hopefully, quieting figure. "Why are you doing all of this, Justin? Why would you hurt the kids?"

"As you can see, the kids are just fine." Justin leaned over, patting a little girl on her head. She still didn't move. "As for the other attacks, well, things happen to bad people, Fraser, people who steal. I didn't really do anything. I just enabled it." He snapped his fingers, and a teenager popped up from behind the rock.

Faolan knew the boy, Shawn, from the gaming circle. "You still have him possessed."

"You know how it is. Once a demon moves in, they don't like to move out." Justin chuckled. "Of course, today didn't go quite as I planned. Good help is hard to find." He glared over at the vampires, but they seemed unimpressed. "I missed picking up your little niece."

"You leave her out of this." Faolan pointed his wand at Justin, unsure of what spell he could use that wouldn't hurt the kids, since Justin stood so close to them. He hoped Justin couldn't see the hesitancy on his face. Of course, he might have already guessed that, which was why he stood where he did.

"Why? You stole from me. Why shouldn't I take something that matters so much to you?" Justin took a lighter out of his pocket.

Faolan's breath hitched. It was all Justin needed to make the spark for his fire magic. He could burn down the entire damned forest if he wanted to. He hoped Jason and Derrek remembered what he'd said about Justin's powers. "No one stole from you, Justin. You know the succession as a Lucerna leader isn't naturally all in the family. You were far too young at seventeen. Hell, at thirty, they didn't trust it to me to completely take over without my grandmother staying on for years. You could have become leader once you had more experience. Instead, you decided to quit."

"Should you be pissing him off?" Jason asked just loud enough for Faolan to hear.

Faolan slashed his hand at him.

"As if you would ever have let me lead!" Justin spat, taking a few steps away from the kids. That's what Faolan was hoping for. "They said I was unfit for the field."

"At that time. You had just lost your father. You were encouraged to be retested later." Faolan didn't think he was getting through to Justin, but he had to try.

Justin's face went pale, then blotchy red. "It wouldn't have changed things. You'd still be in charge."

"I have to agree after seeing this." Faolan gestured to the kids with his wand.

"Want us to fuck up this asshole now?" one of the vampires asked.

Justin smirked. "By all means."

Derrek howled a call Faolan hadn't heard before and charged. Faolan hoped Derrek stayed out of the direct line of fire. Justin flicked the lighter on and sent a wave of flame their way. Faolan managed to draw up a line of earth to block it, but some of the dead leaves caught fire. Most were too wet from the heavy snows which had just melted, making the fire sizzle.

He tried to ignore the growls and yowls as Derrek took on two of the other werewolves. Jason's gun roared, sending the other werewolf rolling on the ground, yipping in pain. Jason shot two of the vampires before they could move.

"Tell them to stand down, Fraser!" Justin pointed his lighter toward the kids. "Think you can stop me before they die?"

Faolan clutched his wand so tight, he nearly snapped it. "They're babies. Leave them out of it."

"I had hoped to, but since this is going sideways, why not? I could use them to call up something to wipe the Lucerna out." Justin laughed at the idea.

Faolan felt something coming up behind him, destroying his ability to deal with Justin. He whirled and shot a bolt of concentrated energy straight through the vampire's head, dropping him. Faolan whipped back around, hoping he could at least disarm Justin. He had no idea what Justin's shielding abilities were.

Justin had stepped even closer to the kids. None of them had an easy shot at Justin. The wind brought in a new sound: a chorus of wolves. Derrek howled back to them, but when he took his jaws away from the wolf he'd pinned, the other werewolf bit him, scoring a hit on his arm. Snarling, Derrek bit him right back.

Justin scowled, his hand holding the lighter, dipping down. "I didn't expect the whole pack."

"You should have." Faolan set a wave of force at him, not really wanting to kill the deluded young man, but what choice did he have?

He quickly learned what kind of defense Justin had: a good one. The force didn't cut him in half, or even touch him. It bounced off his shield. The collision threw Justin several feet, landing him under a tall hemlock tree. His lighter went flying. Faolan ran after him, calling on the hemlock, trying to use its roots to ensnare Justin. Justin came up with a second lighter, setting the tree ablaze.

"Damn. Better retreat," Justin called to his men. Faolan didn't look to see if any were still able to run for it. Justin chanted something, and the brush moved. Several large, shaggy man-like things crashed out of the tree line. "Have fun with them."

Faolan drew on the strength of the woods around him. He summoned up a little rain cloud for the tree. As he tried to contain the fire, he realized the new combatants headed right for the kids. They were as immobile as ever. Whatever Justin had done to them had yet to wear off.

"What the hell are those?" Jason bellowed.

"Grassmen," Faolan shouted back.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Next it’ll be sheepsquatch!” Jason leapt on the nearest grassman as Derrek raced off after Justin.

Justin whirled, sending a streamer of fire right at Derrek’s face. Derrek turned, catching the flames with his side. He fell onto the loam, rolling and making a sound like a dog hit by a car. The flames were out by the time he scrambled to his feet. Justin was out of view. Faolan started after the mage himself.

“Derrek, guard the kids. I’ll deal with Justin.”

Shouting orders might not have been his best idea. The Grassmen seemed to understand, trying to surround him. Faolan shot one with the gun while firing the concentrated energy from his wand at another. By the time he was free, Justin had vanished. Swearing under his breath, Faolan staggered back to the big boulder and the kids. He flopped down next to one little girl, ostensibly to check out if she was okay, but damn, going into this fight as exhausted as he had been and using so much magic, Faolan’s strength had failed him.

“Are they all right?” Jason asked.

Faolan shrugged. “I’m not sure if this is a spell or if they’re drugged. Whatever it is, they are utterly docile. I think we might be able to get them back to the SUV under their own power once we figure out if they’ll follow us. If not.” He looked off into the distance. “I’m not sure how far the pack is from here. I’m no judge of wolf howls.”

“At this point I’m doubting your own ability to climb around on rocks to get out of here, babe.” Jason sat next to him. “Hey, fur bag, are you all right?”

Derrek’s body shuddered and stretched into his wolf man form. He backed around the rock some. “Yeah. Bleeding some, but nothing bad.”

“You could help me carry some of these kids if they won’t walk. Faolan could stay here, worse comes to worse, and watch the ones we can’t carry on the first trip,” Jason said.

“One problem. In this form, something is sort of dangling free, if you get my meaning,” Derrek said, clearing up why he had backed up behind the rock.

“Oh. We should have put his pants in your messenger bag.” Jason slapped Faolan’s arm.

“Noted for next time.” Faolan wiped his sweaty forehead. “Derrek, is the pack far off?”

Derrek pointed his still-elongated snout into the wind, sniffing. “Yeah, not as close as Justin thought.”

“All right. I’ll try to call the other teams. They can help, too,” Faolan said. All he wanted to do was sink into the loam and recuperate. At least the kids were safe. That was more than he dared to wish for. Now all they had to do was get them home and find some way of getting ahead of Justin before he hurt anyone else.

Chapter Eleven

Still connected to the oak in the smaller grove closest to the Lucerna complex, Faolan listened to his grandmother's chanting at her altar just a few feet away. He wore only a light cotton kilt, and even that had been rucked up to a barely decent length. He saw Derrek, a bit battered and bruised from the fight yesterday, enter the grove with Jason. Derrek watched him curiously. Jason had seen the lustrations before. Brighid washed his hands and feet with the blessed water laced heavily with the agrimony she had prepared. He prayed as she poured it over his head and body.

Brighid set the bowl aside and picked up another one. She sprinkled some of its contents over his head as well. She beckoned Jason and Derrek closer. "I'm glad you came, boys. I wanted to bless you with this."

Derrek eyed it, his discomfort plain on his face. "What is it?"

"A mix of fern to help you slip past your enemies unseen, and betony, a cure-all. It will protect you in battle." Brighid dipped her hand into it and anointed Jason's head.

"I don't know. It seems... sacrilegious for me." Derrek scowled.

"Think of it as spilling some tea on yourself. That's about what it is. Just herbs and water," Jason said. "A little magic."

Derrek bit his bottom lip, nodding. "Okay."

Brighid brushed the water over his brow as well, before setting the bowl back on the little altar. Faolan disconnected from the tree and padded over to where he had folded up a change of clothes. He pulled on boxers and trousers up under his kilt before taking it off, then tugged on a shirt. It stuck to his wet torso in a few places.

"Is everyone here?" he asked his lovers.

"The pack is waiting outside the conference room and the murder of vampires is inside." Derrek eyed Faolan's wet hair. "Was she putting the most invisibility stuff on you?"

"No, that was the *Mur-druidhean*, the Druid's Sorrow," Faolan replied, hanging the wet kilt over a tree branch. "We better go before everyone gets antsy."

“Druid’s Sorrow?” Derrek asked, as they walked back toward the main complex. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

“It means to dispel sorrow,” Brighid said in explanation. “It is powerful.”

Derrek widened his eyes. “And only you get it because?”

“Because like holy water, it requires faith. The fern and betony was mixed with faith, but the *Mur-druidhean* acts on the faith of the person it was administered to. I can’t make Christian holy water, and you can’t activate the *Mur-druidhean*.”

Derrek nodded, satisfied with that answer. “And did your sister and the kids get away from here safely?”

“Sorcha and several of the other parents are in one of our safe houses. Sorcha might not be able to run and fight, but she has enough magic to keep the kids safe,” Faolan replied, angry they had to displace so many from their homes, even for what would hopefully be a short time.

Doug was leaning on the door to the conference room when they got there, eyes locked on a vampire with the skin the color of the perfect cup of coffee. Ollie watched Doug just as intently. Both of them broke off their staring match, and Doug opened the door. Jason swept his finger at Ollie who went right inside.

Doug sniffed at Derrek. He wrinkled his nose, probably trying to figure out the smell of fern and betony. “What did you do?”

“I dunno. It’s something out of a six-demon bag so I can see things no one else can see and do things no one else can do.” Derrek shrugged.

Faolan’s jaw dropped. “Did you just quote *Big Trouble in Little China*? I think I’m in love.”

“That’s a good thing given how much of you I smell on my little brother.” Doug showed his teeth to Faolan, who ignored the threat, knowing it wasn’t real.

“I’m younger than you by like two minutes,” Derrek protested.

Doug cuffed Derrek on the back of the head. “And don’t you forget it.” He made an odd little noise like a fussing wolf-bitch at her cubs. It had about the same affect. All of the werewolves entered the conference room, looking like they’d be more at home at a potluck social at the Baptist church than they did in

a room filled with mages and vampires. From what Faolan remembered, most of the pack was Baptist or Lutheran.

The room was already packed with other Lucerna members, the ones who made the Ridges and the surrounding housing areas their home. Mages, researchers, non-magical warriors all intermingled toward the left side of the room. The vampires were in the middle, except for a few in the shadows who probably weren't old enough to day-walk comfortably yet. The werewolves took the window seats. Doug and Derrek made a unified front as they prowled in tandem to the head of the room. Faolan and Jason did likewise, with Brighid following them.

Faolan looked to the werewolf twins first, then to Jason, getting a silent acknowledgment from them all. He took a step forward, raising his voice. "You all know why you're here. Some of you know Justin Barnes well. You grew up with him. I did not, but I regret that one of us could go so tragically wrong, and for so little reason. His hatred is not targeted just at me, unfortunately, but on the things I love. He means to strip everything from me, and that puts all of you in danger. I need us all to work—"

A shrill alarm went off, several in fact. It took Faolan a moment to even figure them all out. One was magical, and the more frightening because it meant something evil had breached the defenses around the complex. The other was the fire alarm. He didn't have to tell the Lucerna what to do. Everyone who could go out in the sun spilled out of the building in a swell of bodies.

Faolan's heart thudded when he saw several buildings on fire, including the family wing, hospital, and library. Some Lucerna members scrambled for the garage, where they kept fire trucks. They might not be quick enough. Several red monstrous-sized, black-spotted, salamander-like creatures crawled through the complex. He saw Justin just behind them, whipping the fire demon's flames even higher. Other demons, like the imps at the Athena Theatre, raced about, dozens of them.

"How do we fight something like this? What are those things?" Derrek ripped his shirt off so he'd be free to shift forms.

"Fire demons. I have to get the flames out." Faolan fumbled for his wand. Not a single Lucerna member had attended the meeting unarmed. Transformed wolves and pissed off vampires met the imps head on while the mages tried to figure out a way to stop the fire demons.

"I have the hospital," Brigid shouted to him.

Faolan twisted around seeing his grandmother, wand held high, calling up a massive storm. Several younger Lucerna members made a protective phalanx around her. "I'll do what I can for the rest." Faolan charged toward the library and the salamander circling it.

"Stay in wolfman form," Jason rasped out as they ran after Faolan. "We can't fight magic, but we can fuck up these imps and keep them off Faolan's back. The holy water would be better than our teeth."

"Right." Derrek already had his water gun out in one furry hand.

Faolan dropped to all fours once he was close enough to the library, and thrust a huge burst of his power into the ground. The dirt and rock rose up like a cliff, then dumped all over the library and the salamander. Without oxygen, the fire smothered, and the demon was stunned. Derrek ran in and blasted its head clean off with the holy water. Faolan caught his breath, digging in deep, but before he could get up, an imp slammed into him, bowling him over.

Faolan grunted in pain. Dirt clouded his eyes. Something caught him in the gut, but the weight was lifted off of him. A gout of foul-smelling ichor drenched him as Jason tore the imp's throat out with his teeth. He shot holy water into its chest. Spitting, Jason reached down and dragged Faolan bodily to his feet, giving him a shake. "Don't give up all your power in one go," Jason said.

"I didn't!" Faolan took his own water pistol, and shot himself in the eyes until they were cleared. "Besides, it was the library."

"If you die over books, I swear the furbag and I will piss on your grave, dumbass." Jason turned and spat again, clearing the purplish ichor.

"What the leech said." Derrek loped past, charging after another imp.

A clap of thunder from his grandmother's storm all but deafened Faolan. Through the smoke filling the air, he saw the fire trucks at the family housing. They could deal with the last fire. He had to put a stop to Justin. It had to end here. He suspected the young man had the same idea. Faolan wasn't sure if Justin was sane enough to understand the danger he had put himself in by attacking the Ridges head on. Maybe Justin thought the hoard of demons would be enough and it could well be true.

"Derrek, I can't see through this smoke. Can you pinpoint Justin?" Faolan moved away from the library and the other buildings and closer to the trees

around them. He saw flames blazing toward the small grove and wondered if a salamander had crawled in there.

“I can’t smell shit.” Derrek sounded congested. Faolan could only imagine what all the smoke was doing to the werewolves’ keen senses.

Faolan had no choice. He didn’t want to use his energy to create a wind to blow the smoke away, but the smoke limited his vision. He raised his wand, and it burst into flames. Startled, Faolan dropped it, and dowsed it with his water gun. “Dammit!” Another ball of fire hit near his feet, making him jump back.

Justin laughed loudly, standing at the mouth of the grove. Imps ringed around him, shielding him with their bodies. “You’re not so hot in a fight, pun intended.”

“Razing this place to the ground won’t get you what you want, Justin.” Faolan took a step toward his wand only to get another fire ball shot at him. Derrek edged closer to Justin, but came up short when Justin pointed his lighter in Derrek’s direction. He obviously remembered what happened last time all too well.

“Actually, since that is what I want, yes it will.” Justin’s skin gleamed with sweat.

“Fuck him up already, Faolan!” Jason bulled his way right into the two nearest imps, startling Justin. He probably thought no one would be so bold.

Derrek rushed in after Jason. Faolan tried for his wand again, but Justin was ready for that. Changing tactics, Faolan followed his hot-headed lovers’ examples. He advanced directly on Justin, reaching into his bag for a gun loaded with the holy water and silver bullets. It wouldn’t kill Justin, but it might stop him. Stalking Justin, he fired. One of the bullets hit Justin in the leg. Screaming, Justin spun around, hobbling deeper into the grove, using the oak for cover.

Faolan grinned, dodging as Derrek, and an imp nearly crashed into him. Derrek’s eye glinted as he shredded the thing, the man in him almost completely gone over to the beast. Faolan had to trust Derrek and Jason to keep the imps out of his way. He kicked off his shoes and struggled with his socks, nearly falling over as Justin shot another fire ball at him.

“You don’t have your wand, Fraser. What do you think you can do to me now?” Justin’s voice didn’t sound as brave as his words.

Drawing himself up to his full height, Faolan felt the force of the grove's magic driving into him. He couldn't help but brag. "You're in *my* grove, my sacred space. You let me corner you in the worst possible place."

As fear flared in Justin's eyes, Faolan pressed his toes against the soft loam, connecting instantly with the old oak. He had never tried what he was about to do before. In principle, he knew it was like how he moved earth, but the earth wasn't living. The tree was.

"You're still without a weapon." Justin waved a line of fire at him, and Faolan brought up another small wall of earth. "And trees burn."

Perhaps trees also understood. Faolan tapped into the oak, feeling its strength fill him, taking him to a space he usually only went to when with a lover, that sacred, blissful spot of deep still waters inside of himself. His magic radiated out, touching the grove. Creaking loudly, the tree's branches dipped down even as its roots surfaced. It wrapped around Justin, tighter than an irritated python, slamming him back against its trunk. Justin grunted, his lighter toppling from his hand. Faolan knew he could keep tightening those branches until Justin was crushed. It might even be what he deserved.

But it wasn't in him to kill a man if he didn't have to. Faolan punched Justin hard on the jaw, rocking his head against the oak's trunk. Justin slumped, held up only by his branchy confines. Faolan hit him again for good measure. Resting his palm against the oak, Faolan grew two strands of bark up from its trunk. He wrapped one over Justin's mouth and the other over his forehead, pinning him just in case he regained consciousness before Faolan could summon the guards to take Justin to the prisons the Lucerna used for their more dangerous enemies.

"You should kill him, you know."

Faolan rotated around to face Jason, shocked to see how coated with demon blood he was. Derrek stood next to him, chest heaving, seemingly unaware bits of demon flesh were stuck in his lupine teeth. Faolan's breath caught, seeing how many imps they had kept from his back while he had summoned his deep magic. "I know, and the Lucerna may still go that route, but for now, he gets to live with the hell inside his head."

"Fitting he chose to attack here. It's like the last psychotic break at the Athens Lunatic Asylum," Jason said. "You up to rejoining the battle?"

"Yeah... only where are my socks?"

They never found them, but Derrek came up with Faolan's shoes. They didn't wait for him, running off to rejoin the group. Faolan felt remarkably unaffected by his outlay of power. He paused before the oak, and thanked it before following the others.

It took another hour for all the demons to be dealt with. The guards came and removed Justin. He'd regained consciousness, but had been completely unable to move or utter a sound. Faolan returned to the grove to watch them take Justin away. Afterwards, he slumped against the tree, in a different spot from where he had imprisoned the mad fire mage. Derrek put an arm—a human and unfurry arm—around Faolan's waist. Jason did likewise, leaning his head against Faolan's shoulder.

"We did it," Derrek said. "We stopped him, and we didn't die. Guess there's something to fate, after all."

"And Grandma's special potion." Faolan smiled.

"That, too."

"I hate to say it." Jason kissed Faolan's neck with his crusted lips. "We need to go back and address the troops."

"I know." Straightening up, Faolan patted the tree. Side by side, they went back into the complex's heart, soot streaked, bloodied, but unbroken.

Epilogue

“I have a better appreciation of the power of a trio.” Derrek downed another of Jackie O’s ales. “I mean, it’s big in Christianity, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, but I guess I never really thought about it much.”

“Trios were huge in my day, the fates, the *horae*, the *moirai*, the muses, you get the point.” Jason sat back to let the waitress slide another porter in front of him.

“It’s a triskelion. We are a triskelion.” Faolan finished the remains of his stout before starting in on the next one the waitress handed him. “Threes have always been important. Who knows, this trio might go down in Lucerna history, if nothing else.”

“I’ve already gone down in history.” Jason grinned, thumping his broad chest. “But I’m all for doing it again.”

“It still seems unreal to me. This was my first big battle with the Lucerna. It’s sure as hell different than being in the Marines.” Derrek shook his head. “I don’t know what comes next.”

“Hopefully, some relaxation.” Jason leaned back on his chair.

“Yeah, well that, but that’s not what I mean. I don’t know where I go from here.” Derrek tapped his chest.

“You don’t plan on leaving us, do you?” Faolan’s voice hitched a bit at the thought.

“No, that’s still not what I mean. Look at you, Faolan.” Derrek gestured to him. “You and Sorcha aren’t just Lucerna. You’re doctors. Jason’s so damn old, he’s probably been everything at one point or another.”

“Pretty much.” Jason nodded.

“I’m now out of the military and sure, I’m pack and Lucerna, but isn’t there more I can be doing?” Derrek took another big swallow of beer.

“Take it easy on that. I plan on taking you home and doing any number of unspeakable things to you.” Faolan circled a finger on the back of Derrek’s hand.

“Gods, speak some of them please.” Jason ran the toe of his shoe up Faolan’s leg.

"In a minute." Faolan held up a hand to Jason. "Derrek, think of it this way. You're in an area with a fantastic university. If OU isn't your thing, there're Hocking College and the University of Rio Grande, all within forty miles. You can do whatever you want. Train for the police or fire department. I know some of your kin have farms in the area."

"No farming." Derrek wrinkled his nose. "I know you're right. It's just... I want it done now, I guess."

"Nothing happens overnight. You've barely been out of the military a month. Take your time. For now, just relax, spend some time with us. Hell, we still barely know each other as well as we should." Faolan waved a hand at Jason.

"He has a point there, furball."

"I know, leech." Derrek smiled. "I get what you're saying. I've never done patience well."

"Perfect. Neither of us does, either. We'll probably make the Lucerna implode." Faolan chuckled. "Beltane is in a few days. Come with me and see what that's like. I'm not looking for you to convert, but it will give you an insight into me. I'll be conducting the ritual."

"Okay, and yeah, I just joined the Athens First Christian Church since the one I grew up in was a bit too much of a jackass about gays." Derrek shrugged. "I like the reverend at my new church, but yeah, I'll come see your ceremony. I might even go to a con with you since no one with that much geek stuff in his apartment misses a con."

"He goes in costume." Jason shook his head woefully.

"Listen, Dioxippus, you keep whining about that, I will fill Derrek in on all the dumbass shit you do." Faolan finished his beer.

"Please." Derrek's eyes lit up.

"How about we just finish these beers and get to know each other back home with a lot less clothing on?" Jason tossed back his beer and stood.

"Better idea." Derrek fished out his wallet.

Once they settled up, they headed out into the cool night air. Hand in hand, they strolled toward home. They didn't get across the street before the window broke out of Buffalo Wild Wings as a college student and one of theimps tumbled out.

“Guess we missed a few,” Derrek said. “We can’t catch a break.”

“Oh, he’s going to pay for ruining our night.” Jason grinned, cracking his knuckles. “Faster we do this, the faster we get home.”

Faolan dug his wand out of his bag. “Let’s do this thing.”

The End

Author Bio

Jana Denardo's career choices and wanderlust take her all over the United States and beyond. Much of her travels make their way into her stories. Fantasy, science fiction, and mystery have been her favorite genres since she started reading, and they often flavor her works. In her secret identity, she works with the science of life and gives college students nightmares. When she's not chained to her computer writing, she functions as stray cat magnet.

Jana is Queen of the Geeks (her students voted her in) and her home and office are shrines to any number of comic book and manga heroes along with SF shows and movies too numerous to count. There is no coincidence the love of all things geeky has made its way into many of her stories. To this day, she's still disappointed she hasn't found a wardrobe to another realm, a superhero to take her flying among the clouds or a roguish star ship captain to run off to the stars with her.

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