

DOWN TO THE  
**BONE**

ALSO BY JUSTINA ROBSON

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Silver Screen

Mappa Mundi

Keeping It Real: Quantum Gravity Book One

Selling Out: Quantum Gravity Book Two

Going Under: Quantum Gravity Book Three

Chasing the Dragon: Quantum Gravity Book Four

QUANTUM GRAVITY BOOK FIVE

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JUSTINA ROBSON



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For Laszlo



## FINAL THOUGHTS

It's a bit odd to have some final thoughts at the start of a book, but as this is the end in a series of five I'd like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who stuck with me throughout the long cycle of Quantum Gravity's creation. It was made over a period of five years in which my entire real life got turned inside out. I don't credit that bit to anyone but myself, incidentally.

In no particular order then: thanks to Stephanie Burgis-Samphire, who gave me the first encouragement all those years ago and who is always there with sage advice and a big heart. Here's looking at you kid!

Thank you Simon Spanton, for being a sensitive and encouraging editor. Thank you Lou Anders, for being an inspiring and cheerleading editor. You guys rock.

Thanks also to John R. Parker, my agent, who went indie and started a new agency during QG whilst still keeping track of all the important details. Go team Zeno!

And finally thanks to you, the reader. I hope that you find this book to be a satisfactory conclusion to the story. I had a lot of fun writing it but mostly it was made with you in mind.



## CHAPTER ONE

Zal woke to the strobing flicker of orange light. It shattered the pitch darkness of the night, accompanied by the sudden whining scream of metal grinding on metal. His ears flicked with hurt at the offence and the hot chemical stink of burning bit his nostrils, sharp and fresh even though he'd been in the room for hours. He pulled his noise-cancelling headphones off the useless place they'd slid to on his neck and sat up silently to resume his spying.

Sparks jetted in the shape of a small firework flare and lit the unprotected face of his wife as she bent to her task. They leapt into her cropped black hair and briefly illuminated its scarlet streak as it consumed them. They showered onto her pale skin and finished their brief, brilliant lives there before falling away as motes of black dust; all passion spent in that single gesture. Well spent. He saw one dart straight into the liquid surface of her eye as if it were trying to give her an artist's impression of a wicked glint against the stormy blue iris and its peculiar lilac ring. She blinked and it was gone. Where they cascaded into the front of her short floral sundress they vanished entire and whole. The hem of the dress shed soot onto the raw concrete beside her knees.

Her arms, slender and muscular, were vibrating with effort. In

place of one hand was a large steel vice and in place of the other a spinning borer. The vice held the blunt mass of the engine block she was working on. She had it braced against the floor at a precise angle as she redrilled the cylinders with her other hand. Under her persuasion the antique thing had a resonance that made his inner ears vibrate to tones he hadn't heard in half a century. Elves were sensitive to sound and ultrasound, and he was particularly good with harmonics. His body told him that whatever care she put into her labour she was still as likely to break the old Ducati block as mend it. It was old, old metal that had endured years of use and huge temperature swings and its matrices were close to shot. She would know that herself of course—her machine-perfected hearing bettered his—but it made no difference to her. She had to try and she had to do it the right way, which meant attacking it with the antique brutality of metal tools and risk destruction when she could have plasma-gunned or light-cut it without any trouble or danger in a fraction of the time. The sound made him shiver with old remembered joy.

Zal waited for a pause, enjoying his admiration of her, and darkness returned. The yellow and orange spark fountain was replaced by a blue and green afterflare in his mind's eye. Against it her hands and face became a lime silhouette, the dress a yellow tatter whose vines and roses suddenly twisted into a face of its own—wickedly grinning. The dress smiled at him and winked and he didn't know if it was the faery's equivalent of "hello, darling" or "fuck you." He'd met too many faeries. There was no way to know the answer and they'd never tell. Like the elves, they liked their games too much to give anything away.

In the sudden silence he found his amusement at playing his own game had worn thin. He took an audible breath and spoke into the darkness, "Can't sleep?"

He heard a sigh. The drill briefly whirred and went quiet again in a blurt of annoyance.

"Darn, I didn't even know you were there." She spoke with the gritty

burr of someone who hasn't used their voice in many hours and added a snort of disgust. "There goes my theory of a soul-link between us through which I'd know your every move. How long've you been here?"

"Since you started taking it apart." Zal was referring to the latest motorbike carcass she had bought, one of several whole relics that she'd collected over the last month. Their dismembered parts lay all around in mute explanation of her mysterious absences. He hadn't known what had caused her to spend so much time away until tonight. He'd wondered, until that had lost its "poor me" tang. When he'd asked she said Agency business, but he talked to her agent partner, Malachi, too often and knew she wasn't there. Not that sitting on the premises was important to the work she did for them, but he still thought she was lying. His demon heart knew these things. Now satisfying his curiosity by following her and exposing her secret was pretty low, he had to admit, but after all they'd been through he wasn't about to let her get away without a fight. He'd rather face her anger.

She sat for a moment but "I see," was all she said in the end.

He heard the engine block meet the concrete floor as she put it down, and then the whirr and click whispering of precision engineering tools putting themselves away. The sounds were hollow and tinny in the old garage's bare space. A faint line above the rollup door glowed in waxy grey, like the end of the last candle, providing the only light in the entire place. It illuminated nothing, but neither of them needed visible light. Lila could see on every part of the spectrum if she chose to, and he was finally the creature of darkness that his enemies had always claimed him to be, although they'd been talking about his soul and not his body. Left without light or heat long enough Zal knew he could dissipate entirely into shadow, even in Otopia where all aetheric processes were reduced to fractions of their otherworldly power. He hadn't been sure that he could fool Lila by shedding as much material form as possible and cloaking what remained of his physical self in his aetheric body, but it seemed he'd done a good job.

He felt the cool touch of her hand on his cheek, long fingers and delicate skin where the vice had been a moment ago. Her voice was soft, close to his face, her breath kissing him.

“I don’t understand how you can exist without giving off any wavelengths at all. I don’t get how shadow can be anything. Darkness isn’t a thing, it’s an absence of light.”

It used to be the case that Zal didn’t have an answer that would satisfy her scientific curiosity. He hadn’t even known the technicalities of why he was invisible, though he’d made an effort to be so and intention was required. The scientific analysis of aether was a demon pastime and a human obsession. He was only a demon in nature but not in the particulars. Lila was the opposite. She knew the particulars about everything but she wasn’t a demon at heart. She was human to the core.

Zal released all intention to be invisible now and saw her start back slightly as the last of his cloaking aura vanished beneath the surface of his skin and revealed his Cheshire cat expression. “Humans never used to see my aura at all, even when it was the old me and nothing more.”

“They *felt* it,” she said, the expression of mixed annoyance and softness in her face convincing him that she was remembering their first meeting. She put her hand up to cup his jaw and tilt his head towards her.

At the time, being a smug bastard full of inflated rock-star importance, he’d used her ignorance against her, to score a cheap point and had felt her up using just his aura. He grinned at the memory himself. She snorted with laughter this time as her fingers against his lips felt his smile. “And I doubt they’ll see this one unless you choose to make it visible.” Her eyes narrowed fractionally—a movement he’d learned was a sign that she was listening to the Signal; the constant background hiss she was able to hear that comprised the world of machines, the full data record of everything that had ever happened and what was possible. It wasn’t a world like this one, or Alfheim or Demonia. He didn’t

know if world was the right idea. It was more like an idea than a thing, and less like either than suited his grasp of cosmology.

He let a few seconds pass, hours to Lila, and then saw the blink of her fugue state ending. She jumped up to sit beside him on the emptied crates and their lid of folded tarps that he'd been using as a bed. Her body was as warm and vibrant as any living human woman's, no heavier and no stranger. Her bare legs and arms were girlishly smooth. There were no clues as to where the machine structure had once fitted its bulky robotic prostheses to what remained of her human body, and no trace in her easy movements of the pain they used to cause her. They were long changed.

Since the two of them had been through the cauldron of Faery, she had been flawlessly combined, a machine of living structures that were able to replicate any material. What vulnerability she had ended on the inside now and was hers to share or conceal—her physical form was as close to invulnerable as anything he could imagine.

But he remembered the first time he'd seen her through the toughened glass of a recording-studio window in her security agency girl's suit, trousers burst at a seam, a streak of dust across her white collar. Her poppy-red lipstick had cut a streak of rich, contemptuous disapproval straight at him like a laser beam. She came, she saw, she on the spot couldn't stand him, so much so that he'd felt the roots of his hair ache with the surprise of it. Then his heart had shivered with the citrus zing of that ancient demon pleasure in opposites attracting and the simultaneous ancient call of what, if he were drunk, he'd've called destiny. He fell in love on the spot and so did she, and hell, did she hate it. And so their game of seduction cat and mouse was begun, dishonestly, deliciously, and under illusions. Since that moment his life had exploded from mere celebrity and notoriety into the realms of the truly madly dangerous. Zal had died and been lost but even that wasn't enough to keep him away. There were no words for how much he loved her and he used to be good with those.

He leaned in towards her and kissed her gently. Her mouth was firm under his. She was still thoughtful. It took her time to come down from being with the machines as though she had to find her way back to human through a difficult maze. He sat back. "I don't feel the metal in you anymore. Only the signature of the elementals bound into it, like they're all that's left."

She murmured her reply with amusement and affection. "You would, if I were in my battle gear."

"Maybe." He leaned into her touch, resting his cheek in her hand. "I hope not." Elf senses and aetheric powers didn't operate well around metals.

"I've refined myself," she said, smiling as she looked at him, not into his eyes but over his cheeks, his mouth, tracing their contours with one delicate fingertip. "There are alloys that wouldn't bother you now. Permeable matrices, tunable to the frequencies of any aether. They vibrate to the same harmonies as a charm. You could play me, like a musical instrument."

"I like the sound of that."

He hesitated, watching her watching him, content in the lull of her attention. This dancing around their changed ways felt delicate and uncertain, a charm in itself, although for himself he hadn't changed at all, he was still Zal, only a few particulars were different and what did they count for? He felt he ought to correct an important point however. "Shadow isn't darkness though. Shadow is a frequency of aether. Better think of it as a kind of black light. All living things have it, and some not living ones. It is as real as any other form of energy. It just happens that it's of a kind not visible."

She was not entirely impressed. "Energy, spirits, souls if they exist . . . I can't fit them together. I don't see them properly. It's like there's a missing piece in the picture. Is it because they don't emit radiant signals? And then there's all these priestly types talking on and on about the light. Another metaphor and nothing but? I wish I could talk to Tath. He'd know."

Zal wasn't sure that Tath would know or if he did that his revelations would satisfy Lila's incomplete pattern of the universe.

Tath's own personal bargain with Jack the Giantkiller had transformed him from a relatively simple, if slippery, necromancer into the speaker for the dead. This position, whilst not Death itself, gave him dominion over the half-tangible regions of transition through which the spirits of the newly dead passed on their way to their ineffable final destination, itself a place Tath could not enter. This was a zone that bordered on the fey, but also the elemental. Zal knew next to nothing about it even though he had passed through it himself on his way back from the brink of creation. Death herself had brought him most of the way. It hadn't inspired any fervour in him. Things lurked there in the grim darkness that were hungry and forsaken; needful things without the means to grasp what they must have. Bodiless hunters. Vampires and their like, or the things that would be vampires if they ever got the chance. They were spirits of a kind, mindless, raw. Necromancers knew to stay away from them. He didn't like the idea of Lila going on some hunt to find out what they were, either in the region of the near dead or by other means.

She was talking to herself again, so gripped by the whisper of the Signal and her own need to fit everything into a coherent whole that he could sit with her, even kiss her, even make love with her and know himself quite alone while she spun away into the strange infinities of her mind. He feared for her in that inner space, where neither he nor anything else could go, where she could get lost forever in the twists and turns.

"How about the bike?" The bike was a great sign. The bike was creative, important. The bike was sacred. The bike was something that existed in all her worlds, something he could ride to get in. "Is that fitting together?"

She smiled. "It's just a matter of time."

He saw parts he thought he recognised as old Harley Davidsons but there were other lost beasts in there too, laid out all over the floor

in precise patterns with Lila-sized pathways left between their ranks. “What are you going to run it on? Looks kinda petrochemical.”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said. “Might have to be petrol. Depends on whether anything else makes the right sound. Anyway, has to be if I use genuine parts. They aren’t up to anything else.”

He didn’t mention that there was no petrol industry anymore. She knew that. She’d figure something out. He wouldn’t even have been surprised if she could drink beer and piss petrol but although that might be a hell’s angel dream and he fancied himself one of those it wasn’t a particularly erotic fantasy of his so he let it go and coughed, perfectly mimicking the sound of a carburetor choking to death. “Care to run a diagnostic on me?”

Now she turned and poked him in the chest gently, making him sway back on the crates. A flickering rush of thrills ran through him as her ultrasound frequencies penetrated his clothing and skin to the energy centres beneath making him gasp and fall backwards. He caught himself in time. She snickered.

“C’mon,” he said, opening his arms and giving her a smouldering stare. “My nuts are rusted. I need an oil change.”

He could see her eyes, their faery-enchanted human irises glowing with lilac as they narrowed. In a flash she was on him, the tatters of the summer minidress flaring up in a nonexistent breeze as the pile of crates wobbled precariously. There was a distinct cracking and splitting noise from the wood as they swayed. Zal got a hand out to the wall behind him but it was a long way away. Lila’s knees gripped the outside of his thighs as she went for the pinning move and then he felt her fingers tug the lace knots of his jerkin. She got fed up after a second and he felt them part under a blade. Then her hands were inside his shirt, emitting faint pulses of deep low-frequency sound as she ran them across his chest and shoulders. The crates leaned and he had to keep his hand on the wall or crash to the floor as his body arched in pleasure involuntarily.

“That demon was a good teacher,” he muttered through closed jaws as she bent close to him and he felt her lips on his neck. He meant Teazole, their pureblood demon husband, who had been with her in her fall through Faery and after. “Fifty year—”

“It was *weeks*,” she hissed and he heard the ache and anger in her voice. Between hot kisses that ran up to his ears she breathed, “It was only weeks and we waited for you and we didn’t know if you were alive or dead and we had no idea what to do, *no idea at all*.” Her hands flared with hot and cold pulses, with bursts of specific vibrations tuned to the channels of aether that ran in him and he lost control of his aether body. Black spilled out in clouds around both of them, swallowing the pathetic remains of the light. With his free hand he found her waist, tiny and taut with power not far above his own. As he touched the dress he felt it slither away from his grasp with an eel-like shiver, cotton turning to satin the better to slip away from him, even though threads of it curled lasciviously around his fingers as it did so. It parted, unstitching itself, sliding away from her so that she made a sound of surprise as the faery thing escaped and his hand found her naked skin. He let it rest for a moment, feeling the texture of her, cool on the surface, hot underneath, soft and silky, dry enough for him to slide his palms on her with the same skimming ease she used on him.

He remembered his other hands, without regrets, their thick, three-fingered gloves that were overstuffed with the remnants from the weaving of the three fey sisters. For fifty years they’d left him able to feel almost nothing, were so clumsy he couldn’t have picked up a spoon to feed himself; not that there had been a need for food, or anything else in that time-lost place. His hungers now were savage in retaliation.

With anger he pushed the unwanted image away, feeling his rage direct itself at the skirts of the dress, now trailing themselves like waterweeds around his wrist and elbow, teasing him in their own inscrutable way. He had brought this dress to Lila, armour as it was

then. He didn't know what he'd done in that gesture. He hadn't known what it was. He couldn't tell if its complicity in getting Lila to jump the fifty-year penalty of his "death" was a blessing or a curse, he didn't know if it meant her harm or good or if, like any faery, it would change its intentions with limitless caprice. He didn't want its strange flirtation now. He focused his shadow body on it and *pulled*.

With the speed of lightning, a charge of aether shocked through him with such enormous force that he thought he'd killed himself. For the split second of its possession of him it interpenetrated every part of his being in a way he hadn't felt since the day that the three weird sisters had pulled him from the cloth. It was not simple, inert charge. With it he felt the faery herself—a feral intelligence, as peculiar as anything he had ever encountered—searching him. Then she was gone and only the energy he had sucked out of her remained with him. He felt her understand that he only wanted her out of the way to be alone with Lila and in that moment the tendrils of soft fabric around his arm became suddenly a thick rope wound there, binding him, then in a second instant he felt the slide of silk sateen as a python's coils slipped around him, letting him go. There was a hiss of heavy rich fabric falling to the floor off to their right, as if an entire theatre-curtain's worth had gone sashaying to the ground.

"What the hell . . . ?" Lila was saying, finding herself suddenly naked and touched not by one but by many hands of Zal.

But Zal was the darkness, his aether given form and mass in Tatterdemalion's wake as some of her faery nature lingered in his aura; a strange gift or theft he understood intuitively with a shock as great as the result of his bad-tempered attack. Now Lila's hands gripped and held onto his body beneath her as he was able to repay her kindness with his own new touch. His many hands, many more fingers, long and articulate, delicate as feathers, powerful, tentacular, slippery as oil, flowed across her. He was able to caress her everywhere at once as the dress's metamorphic patterns cascaded through his *andalune* body. It

was a fantasy he thought could never happen because she was human—they couldn't even make the common interface of one aether body to another like elves would together. But now he could play with her breasts and feel their soft reactivity to the teasing of his fingers and the lick of his tongue, at the same time as he played sweeping scales along her back and over her buttocks. His senses were filled with the roundness, the soft weight of her, the sound of her gasping moan in his ears. Meanwhile his hand on the wall held them from disaster and the one at her waist gripped hard enough on her to anchor him and stop him from falling into delirium and giving in, coming like a kid before he was ready or the gift was wasted. Before that happened he wanted to pour everything he felt for Lila into the way he touched her. Centuries of practice with musical instruments of every kind and with his own breath for voice rose through him, guiding his actions and his reactions. A sensitivity greater than any he'd had as an ordinary elf flooded back into him and he was able to attune himself to her as keenly as she was able to play him.

He felt her hands slipping down from his shoulders as she grounded and balanced herself on her knees. She leaned forward and he felt his breath, then her lips against his neck. The tough cotton of his trousers that had been hard-stretched against his hips in that position suddenly loosened and separated as she precision-dissected them, leaving them in tatters around the top of his thighs. He shifted precariously into a better position, crates juddering. He was as hungry to join her fully as she was for him. In the complete darkness of his shroud body the touch sensation was so heightened he had to bite his lips as she mounted him.

The metal elementals bound into her form acted as conduits for his shadow energy. There was traffic both ways; a subtle vibration ran through his aether body as she found a way to touch him back through the same circuit. Her charge, metabolised by the elementals, was very strong. The absolute dark of his covering, *andalune* about them, began

to glow very faintly red like a smouldering ember. He noticed it and felt the change but he was too far gone to care what it was or what it meant. It wasn't until she screamed and then sighed with delight on him and he did the same that he opened his eyes to a hot yellow-white flare so bright he was nearly blinded. Without his concentration his *andalune* reverted to its ambient energy form and she grabbed and held him as the crates gave way at that moment and they fell to the concrete floor amid the smoking, splintering wreckage. He landed on his ass with a painful jolt that ran up his spine and he got a lungful of nasty smoke. Lila was laughing. He heard her quick footsteps and then the hiss of a foam fire extinguisher being used. Something wet splattered around his feet and ankles as he stood up.

Now that he had lost contact with her, the brilliant glare died away rapidly, through all the colours to red and then crimson before his ordinary shadow body was all that was left, giving him a sun-glasses-view of a mess of wooden planks and singed tarps. In the midst of it Lila stood naked, holding the extinguisher in front of her. The nozzle was pointed at him.

He read the look on her face as he pulled a splinter out of his hand and raised an eyebrow, daring her.

Cold, wet froth covered his face and chest, then his naked crotch. He heard her laughing—the carefree, mischievous laugh of the pixies—and leapt forward at the same moment. She was hard to catch off guard but he did wrest the canister away from her and dance off with it far enough to give a good blast on her butt as she darted away, shrieking and dancing over bits of engine without treading on a single one.

When the foam ran out, they were in the midst of a wobbling white hillock, splattering each other with huge handfuls of soapy film, using great, cartoonish knockdown throws that gave the softest kiss to wherever it landed. Zal's trousers had become sodden legwarmers around his boots.

As he looked down at himself, Lila got a double handful and dumped it on his head, mashing it well into his hair and ears. Cold trickles of run-off showered out across his face as he looked up at her.

He raised his fist and shook it at her threateningly.

She scooped up some ammunition but he made a dive for her legs instead, caught her around the hips, and they both slipped and went down hard into the mound of foam. He heard the breath shoot out of her but both of them were too tough to care about a thump onto some dirty concrete. They wrestled, limbs slip-sliding against each other. It was a struggle but eventually she got the best of him and he found himself on his back with his arms pinned by a single hand of hers above his head. A triumphant look made her face radiant. In her free hand she held a mountain of white.

“Give me one reason not to.”

“Uhh . . .” He stared at her breasts, dripping with suds. “You like me too much?”

“Right,” she said, sitting down on his pelvis and letting up on his hands a little before smushing the lot right into his face.

He spat the horrible taste out, blowing, after she let up. “Okay, okay! You win.”

“Say it again?”

“You win.”

In a flash she was gone, standing over him. He ignored the hand she held down to him and got up, spitting and shaking his head.

“For now,” he added. “Come here.”

“The winner doesn’t come here.”

“She does,” he said more firmly and grabbed her.

The foam cut out conduction between them. They were just bodies this time and they took longer about it. The garage had an old, pitiful shower stall and toilet in one corner of its office and they used that to clean up in, though there was only a trickle of icy water until Lila siphoned it through her arm to make a warm jet. Zal threw his trouser

legs in her rag bucket and tipped water out of his boots. His shirt was the only thing left and it was soaking. He wrung it out hard and put it back on. Then he felt cold. The scrapes on his knees and elbows stung. He went out and found Lila wriggling into a lilac spaghetti-strapped evening gown that clung to her figure as if it was designer cut. For the first time he forgave the faery for her position, though it was a temporary arrangement. She was still on parole as far as he was concerned. He held up his arms.

“Great, you can go eat at the finest restaurants now and I can sell myself for fifteen bucks on the strip.”

She shook her head. “Twenty at least, have you no pride?” But she paused and retrieved the trousers, stitching them up roughly and quickly. Needles flashed in and out of her fingers, thread spooling spiderlike from their trailing ends. They were still wet but they were wearable. “That’ll work until you get home.”

He dragged his boots back on and pushed his dripping hair out of his face. He didn’t conceal his disappointment. “You’re not coming with me?”

She hesitated. “Let’s get coffee. Talk where it’s warmer.” Her eyes were looking at him with affection. He agreed and they wheeled the Agency’s state-of-the-art black bike outside. He sat on the seat as she locked up the garage and set some security device on the door, checking it over.

“Expecting someone?” he asked as she pulled the dress skirt up and set herself behind him.

“I sometimes get rogue attacks,” she said as if it were an everyday matter. “I like some warning as to when they’re coming so that I don’t have to monitor the situation myself all the time.”

Zal paused. “You do?” The rogues were those who had survived Otopia’s cyborg project, as she had, except they had felt no loyalty to the Agency once created. Those who wouldn’t guarantee loyalty to the state were hunted down. The project was concluded now and there

were very few left, he knew, and none who could cause her trouble, she claimed. But he felt less sure of that suddenly.

“You know how it is with machines,” she said lightly. “A hacker war. If they feel they need to get close enough for a direct connection, well . . . then we fight.” She nudged him to start driving but he was too disconcerted.

“I thought they were all taken care of?”

“It’s fine, Zal. Don’t worry about it. Ride.”

After a moment of failing to muster any real objection he put his hands back on the bars. Nothing happened. “How do you start this thing anyway?”

“Like this.” She leaned forward around him and showed him, then wrapped her arms around his waist. He found it touching she would let him drive though he’d never say so. He *carefully* teased the bike out onto the narrow streets until he figured he’d got the measure of it, waiting for her to say something about it though she didn’t. She just snuggled against his back. On the highway he opened it up slowly. He saw what she meant about it then. He could drive it as hard as he liked; it was full of compensatory mechanisms that made the ride perfect and secure. He could have had more thrill from a hairdryer.

“Can you turn it off?”

“Here.” She held out her hand and a brief spark shot across from her to a part of the machine just under the tank. Suddenly it came alive, juddering and sliding under them across the surface. Then he had to fight to control it and keep the speed, dodging the sedate lanes of AI-ordered cars and floats, setting off a dozen proximity alarms until he’d got the hang of the thing—too light and overpowered—and found a path through. It was so much fun that he almost forgot he was freezing his ass off, starving, aching, and hungry. But then Lila tugged his hair and put her hand to his ear. She was playing music for him in the palm of her hand—his favourite old track—but she interrupted it DJ-style to say, “Food!”

He obediently took a look around on the GPS, saw what district was closest, and took a curve down the next off-ramp, easing back until their speed matched the dawn traffic. Bay City had changed almost out of recognition since he'd been there last but in recent days he'd been finding a new way around and this place was something that was so unusual he found himself pulled to it easily. There was no lot so he parked on the street and they got off in the early, misty yellow light of morning as a cleaner truck whirred past on automatic, almost spraying them with its washer jets.

Lila looked it over from its ordinary oh-so-subtle stone and glass front to its heavy, studded wooden door like a cathedral vault entrance, and he was sure she was pulling all its files. He felt smug that he knew somewhere she didn't.

"An elf bar," she said, not quite believing it. "Isn't that some kind of Alfheim statute violation?"

"We're not in Alfheim," he said and palmed the door. A trace of magic reacted to his aether body and the locks slid open in five separate heavy-bar slams before it silently swung ajar.

"Seeing that . . ." Lila glanced up at him with a wry grin and real pleasure, the light flashing off her eyes into his. He grabbed her wrist and kissed her hard as he moved her past him. She smiled up into his face before sliding beyond into the dim glow of the oak-panelled room and its two fully armed elf guards. He didn't blame them for overdoing it here.

The humans were in the middle of an agonising fall from a world that had been scientific and made sense to them, and the throes of it vomited up some horrible scenes that wouldn't have been out of place in an all-out war. Sometimes he wasn't sure it wasn't a war conducted on very slow guerrilla lines. In any case, though Zal was *non grata*, he was still a *persona* and a previous visit and some bloodied noses had gained him enough respect to get in a second time without questions.

The guard who had spat at his demon blood before was standing

there now, looking straight ahead from his black eye as if he was bored beyond belief. The other one, much more advanced, gave Lila a curious look that was a mixture of so many expressions it was comical. Surprise, awe, disbelief, interest, and the difficulty posed by being expected to do a pat-down weapons check on her all warred for a moment and left him slack-jawed. Weapons weren't allowed and Lila, well known among the worldly elves at least by reputation, was nothing if not a weapon in herself. Also, they universally despised what he was wearing and the condition he was in.

"She's with me," Zal said in elvish, quietly, as if that covered and explained everything.

Lila glanced at him curiously and returned the frosty guard's icy glare.

The guard looked at Zal and their auras briefly entangled, communicating faster and more efficiently than speech. With a slight blink of deference he moved aside and held open the heavy black curtain to let them pass. Behind the defensive one-way glass surrounding the entryway, Zal felt several more guards pursue a sudden curious interest in him. As they moved through into the main room, he felt them tracking him through their secret passages in the walls.

A familiar sensation of several very widely diffused *andalune* energies greeted him and he recognised the mages employed as wait-staff from his previous visit, briefly touching them all before he withdrew into his customary silence, inside his physical body. They all turned to watch Lila, feeling the oddness of her presence, and he was aware of a degree of ill intent, which he ignored completely. Beyond the second room with its gentleman's-club arrangement of sofas and low tables, the bar proper opened out into an enormous glass-roofed conservatory entirely filled with grass and trees like a tiny park. They sat at the edge of this on a huge floral recliner, Zal in the pit of it and Lila in his arms, looking up through the roof at the clearing skies.

"Too surreal," she murmured.

“Just one of many things,” he agreed, ordering for them both through the auric connection to the spiritual net that swirled invisibly around them in a pale imitation of Alfheim’s own massive psychic presence. In the casual touches of the other elves he read all the nuances of their feelings about him and they were deeply ambivalent. Only one mage had no animosity in her signature. He asked her to fetch the breakfast and a set of clothes from the room he used when he was staying in town.

“What happens at night?” Lila peered around, identifying the bodies of sleeping elves under and in the trees in the glasshouse, a few human companions scattered among them and the odd faery. They kept human hours. Most of them were hungover, Zal guessed, or exhausted.

“It’s a madhouse,” he said. “But on the plus side, lots of teenagers desperate to hook up.”

“And do they get their wish?”

He shrugged, “No idea but there are plenty of predatory elves in the world and surely some of them are here. There must be thirty in this room so hundreds potentially in and around the place.”

She shook her head. “Can’t believe it. It seems just . . . wrong.”

“Times change,” he said, letting the meaningless words slip out as he lay back and gave in to a minute of exhaustion. He wasn’t as young as he wished he was. “Speaking of which—meaningless segue—you haven’t seen much of Teaz since we got back. Are you avoiding him?”

“Why, did he ask you to ask me?”

Which sounded defensive and then some, so he took it as a yes. “He misses you is all I was going to say.” Not exactly true but he was going to have to fish here before he figured it out.

“Hmm,” she said, fiddling pointlessly with the rent front of his shirt. “He won’t mind, Zal. He’s got a billion things to do.” She made some slicing and dicing motions with her hand. A sigh escaped her nostrils.

“I didn’t pick you for the jealous girlfriend type.”

“What? That’s insane. I mean, when you were gone we . . . it was convenient Zal, and it was distracting and he just found it terribly terribly entertaining and I . . .”

“You?” he prompted in the pause. His mage came up in her soft flowing robe and wordlessly handed over a set of towels before laying his clothes out on the arm of the sofa and retreating. She tried quite hard to get a reading off him but he was closed to her now and registered how much she didn’t like it. It was considered deeply impolite to remain aloof in that manner. Only agents of the secret service from old—the Jayon Daga—were permitted to habitually contain their aetheric bodies. He hadn’t served there for a long, long time but he was going to keep the privilege. “You?” he nudged Lila and handed her a towel for her hair, even though it was almost dry already from their ride.

“I don’t know,” she said unhappily.

Zal realised this angle was going nowhere. He knew perfectly well what was going on, but if she didn’t want to admit it to him that was another thing. “I think you should talk to him.”

She made a “not now” gesture and busied herself with the towel. “He’s full demon, Zal, he couldn’t care less. It’s a marriage of convenience and politics. No need for the drama.”

Zal smiled under his own towel, gave up, and tossed it aside. “If you don’t, I’m sure he’ll come for you,” was all he said.

“Yuh,” she replied, curling against him like a large cat.

“How’s Greer?”

“Fine,” she said before she had time to think it over. “Why you—”

“See, I know you inside out, Metallica. You can’t help yourself. The Agency fall in another pile of shit and you have to be there to help them out.”

“Yeah well, the pile of shit you refer to is walking around out there in its hundred bits of undead glory and it shows no sign of stopping.

As for cause, since I was instrumental in the cause, I guess I do feel some responsibility towards finding a solution.” She was clipped with him. He felt duly rebuked but that only made him angry.

“It was Xavi,” he said. “Not you.”

“She’s in the cells,” Lila replied. “I’m in charge of her.”

“It’s a fucking bad idea,” Zal said. “Every time I go near her I feel the same thing and it’s not good. And yeah, you tied her to us, to me, you, Tea, Tath, and Malachi . . . but it remains to be seen how far those bonds will pull. I know lots of friends and lots of lovers who are more than able to stab each other in the back.”

“She’s totally contrite,” Lila said in a tone that made him shut up, not because he wanted to but because he felt anything more would only push her into a greater defence of the woman. “And she’s in prison. And she’s doing all she can to stop it.”

“What’s that?” Zal asked. “Is she reading a book on it?” But he wasn’t going anywhere with it. Lila would always take the underdog’s position first. It was something he liked about her, but now it was driving him nuts.

“She’s explaining everything.”

Zal could only roll his eyes at this. No human had any idea of the nature of elf politics, which was infinitely long in its centuries of progress and infinitely complex. One reason he had left Alfheim behind. Still, maybe she could be right. The magical bond was written in the blood of Nyx, the black dragon of creation. It was probably enough to alter time, space, and more than a few hearts. It could have the power to make a friend of an enemy, he didn’t doubt that. And yet . . . still he couldn’t rest easy with it. “Your power is making you insensitive to other angles of attack,” he said, in a tone that made her look around at him.

“You’re serious,” she said, folding her own towel and laying it aside.

“Always,” he said, hopeless now.

“Zal, that prison was built by Sarasilien and a hundred others, especially to contain aetheric beings. She can’t get out, not any way. She’s got nothing. She’s going nowhere.”

He gave up. “Here’s breakfast.”

She looked down. “Oh god, what *is* that?”

He handed her a sealed, disposable hot cup. “At least I made them go out to the Italian place down the street for the coffee.”

She opened it and took a deep inhale. “You’re forgiven. I suppose this isn’t the time to mention that Malachi wants to see us all.”

“All?”

“You know who.” She poked him with her elbow, sitting up.

“Is he going to ask us to hunt down the undead for Temple Greer?” Zal’s heart was sinking.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t think so. He seemed a bit disturbed. Wanted it to be soon. Today or tomorrow.”

“You should see her before that,” he said without thinking.

“Who?” She sipped the scalding drink in her hand, settling herself down against him again.

“You know who.” He was referring to her sister and he knew she knew it. The talk of undead never left Max far behind: she had died of old age during Lila’s fifty-year blackout, but a month ago Otopia had suffered an incursion of beings from the undead planes and ever since then the numbers of Returners had increased steadily and unpredictably. Max was one of these, apparently alive, full of memories and not a day over twenty-five. She had gone back to live in the house Lila had inherited from her and he was sure this was the reason Lila had tried to live in Demonica with her husbands again, and taken to sneaking back to spend any nights in Otopia sleeping at the office with Malachi and whoever else was unlucky enough to pull two shifts.

“It’s fine,” she said.

“You can’t run from them forever, Lila.”

“Yeah well, it’s not forever and it’s not even her.”

Except that he knew as well as she did that for her Max really was still twenty-five, alive as the day she'd been left behind a few months previously. And there was more to it.

"Zal," Lila said quietly after a minute. "I called them, didn't I? I wrote that note in that ink with that bloody pen and I called her back. And they followed."

"They didn't follow without a lot of help," Zal replied, though he couldn't deny it entirely.

"Still. I did it."

"The pen did it. These things have minds of their own. You were just the fingers and the legs that delivered it."

She took another drink and watched the sunlight come through the roof. "I wish I believed you."

He pulled her against him closer. He wished he believed it too, but he didn't have any of the feelings that equated with things being over, finished, and done. This brought him to a question he knew she'd know the answer to and which he didn't want to know the answer to. For all of them it was the elephant in the room these days. He guessed it was behind the elves' rapid incursions into Otopia—a *see it before it's too late* kind of impulse. Since long before he had met Lila, before she was born, before he was even born, fissures in the space-time fabric of all their worlds had started opening up. Some led onto the Void—a vast space brimming with creative energy from which he'd seen the youngest of the three weird sisters pull the material she spun on her distaff to create reality. Some others opened onto the least understood of all the worlds it was possible to go to.

Dubbed Thanatopia, rather fatuously, by the Otopian security agencies, as if it were some kind of paradisaical death playground, it was a place into which material beings could not pass. They said these days that things came out of it; invisible, immaterial creatures—spirits and ghosts. But ghosts spawned in the deep Void so Zal didn't believe that. He was familiar enough with ghosts to know these fresh invaders

weren't that. And since those later cracks had opened up, creating tensions along the planar divisions, it had been clear that unless something was done eventually a critical rip would occur. After that all bets were off, no matter who you were or what power you had.

The humans blamed the bomb they thought had created the entire situation from their ordinary single space-time seventy years previously, but the elves and fey and those who'd been around longer than Otopia knew it wasn't the bomb's doing. It was something else. There were even speculations that the bomb was an indirect product of the abyssal formations that had permitted wild aether to leak into Otopian space somewhere too close to a quantum-research facility. Otopia's bomb was just some minor occurrence in a much larger pattern. Since the bomb, however, there was no doubt that the problem had accelerated. And since Xaviendra had made her ill-fated bid for godhood, they had moved into exponential figures. So Zal really didn't want to know the answer, because it was like asking when the world was ending, but he asked it anyway.

"What's the cracking rate?"

"Five percent acceleration per Otopian month," Lila replied without even having to check.

"When's critical break point?"

"Don't know," she said. "Nobody knows. Weeks, months, years. Depends where the weakest warps are and what happens across the cosmosphere. Inherently unpredictable and not even certain. There have been reports of temporal anomalies closing previous cracks and stabilising local continua. It's not possible to survey most of the worlds due to their size and some not at all—Zoomenon, for instance. Nothing survives long enough there to take readings that are reliable."

Yes, that was a *far from over* feeling if ever he had one. "Can't you hear it in the Signal?" he asked her, hoping the answer was no. The Signal was the machines, they were information and process, nothing more, nothing less.

“Yeah,” she said unhappily, putting the empty coffee container down. She leaned over him to look into his eyes and gave him a lingering kiss and a wryly sad half-grin. “If only I had a clue what most of it meant.” She cupped the palm of her hand, shell-like, next to his ear, and played him the sound.

It sounded like white noise to him, a low hissing whisper of meaningless static like the sound of radio telescopes listening to the echoes of the first moment. There was nothing to cling onto, no trace of a pattern that he could detect. But she was a million times more suited to it than he was. Even so her face had a bleakness, a greyness in it suddenly as she listened with him.

“There it is,” she said quietly over the wash of sound. “There it all is. If only I could understand.”

A flash of insight occurred to him and he said aloud, “You’re hoping that the rogues know, that they have an ability to listen that you don’t. You want them to come and find you out in the middle of that industrial nowhere-land, so you can take it.” He wondered if all those components were more than bikes.

She fisted her hand and there was silence.

“Lila,” he said, knowing they were the only thing that really threatened her. “They’re more advanced—”

“They just lived longer. They had more time. That’s all,” she said stubbornly and put a piece of bread in his mouth.

He stuffed it into his cheek with his tongue. “Don’t get that look with me.”

“What look?”

But his objection was cut off by the sudden commotion in the entryway—a wash of rage and energy coming through the *andalune* that jolted Zal half out of his seat and woke every last sleeping elf in the building, spilling them to their feet wide-eyed and witless.

Zal was out of the seat and halfway there as he heard the snapping of teeth and the desperate sound of blades ringing out uselessly on scale

armour. Lila was close behind him, barefoot on the stone floor. He heard her dress catch and tear and her curse it as steam and smoke billowed under the curtain, lifting it enough for him to see the guards' feet in fighting stances and the huge claws that feinted a savage strike at them, pushing them backwards into the weighted cloth. Their stumbling retreat was echoed by running in the walls and the sudden high-pitched shriek of armour-piercing arrowheads slicing the air open. Wooden shafts peppered the screen and fell clattering to the floor. There was a low, sinister hiss that became a snarl of rage; a deep, bloodied sound of raw ill-intent that was formed into almost incomprehensible elven words by a huge, nearly lipless mouth and a barbed mass of tongue, "Get out of way if want live!"

Zal didn't think the owner of that voice was in a mood to be too careful with the Otopian armistice agreements. He caught a swaying edge of the screening and pulled it back to let him through. The guard on that side tumbled past him, losing footing and falling on his ass. Blood splattered from several shallow wounds, onto Zal's boots, and across the floor.

Before him, filling the confessional-box confines of the entryway, a draconid the size of a horse was busy pulling the last of several arrows out of his hide with his teeth. Their feathered ends were dwarfed in any case by his own blue quills, wet with poison. These rattled and erected themselves with the slight pain of the attack. With a jerk of his long neck, the demon yanked the shaft out impatiently, leaving the head stuck in his skin. It was an impressive sight. Zal knew the shots could have gone through a car door. Then the huge ugly head tilted towards him and glared at him with one and then another slitted white eye. A slight pall of steam rose from the long lines of its face, up from the white mane of hair rising between its long horns, and from the cramped lines of its wings. Its tail lashed around, striking long splinters off the panelling as the finned edge, tipped with diamond, struck the walls.

More arrows were aimed from the hidden sconces, but Zal was already extended into the *andalune* matrix of the place and waved them back. At his touch the remaining guard looked up at him with a faint dawning of horrified comprehension running across his handsome features.

“*This . . . is . . .*” the guard started to say, sword still held out before him until the dragon head swung in his direction and fixed him with its inscrutable glare. Yellow and white light radiated from its hide in sudden brilliance and then, in a motion that was as smooth as it was impossibly awkward, the demon stood up on its hind legs, shrinking, changing until it was of a similar size, height, and form to the rest of them.

“Yes,” it said much more clearly from its human mouth, as unreal as a white statue talking from the pedestal of an ancient gallery, “this is that demon you always wondered about. Yes, I will kill you without a care. Yes, I have come here for them. Yes, you will get out of my way and make me very comfortable until I tell you to stop. No hysteria. No touching, unless I say so.” He paused and glanced unerringly towards the hidden elves behind the security panes. “No more arrows.”

The arrowhead that had lodged in his hide fell to the floor from somewhere among the narrow panels of blue cloth that now draped off his shoulders and around his waist. His white hair fell over his shoulders unbound, and at his back two long swords were crossed, one gleaming yellow, the other a blue-white. A faint and nasty sound came from them but it was overpowered by the distinctly visible, although translucent, white wings that seemed to grow from his shoulders out and through their sheathed blades.

Zal pulled the screen aside wider and stepped back to let Teazole in.

As they drew level, he moved forward again until they were chest to chest. This put them eye to eye as well. Teazole’s eyes were almost completely clear, like crystal. They stared at one another and Zal felt the demon’s will pushing at him but he didn’t move. It was going to be this way from now on. Even though Zal was pleased to see Teazole,

the demon was getting older and that meant that his dominance would have to be kept in check all the time. If he got overconfident around Zal, their tentative equality—dodgy at the best of times with Zal's elf nature in the mix—would tip in Teazole's favour. At that point Zal could expect to start watching his back and considering an exit strategy. One day in the future he'd lose one of these alpha-male contests as Teazole altered from youth to maturity. One day he'd be in the fight of a lifetime and he knew that he'd lose it. But not today.

The vertical slits in the demon's eyes expanded slightly and only then did Zal slide his leg back and allow Teazole to pass him. He felt Teazole's hand on his ass briefly, in the kind of idle, suggestive caress that was inviting and submissive at once and then figured they were in the clear for the length of his stay.

Lila, who never believed Zal when he warned her about how things were heading with Teazole, blushed and ducked her head for a second as she moved forward to greet their husband. Zal rolled his eyes as he felt Teazole's energy level increase.

Demon auras operated at different frequencies antagonistic to elven ones, hence the legendary hatred between the two races. Zal had learned to tune to it and not mind the rasping disharmonics. Now touching Teazole that way was a familiar and not entirely unpleasant feeling. He knew he could grow to like it and that this went both ways between them. Lila had no such contact available, but fortunately she noticed in time and lifted herself to her full height as she met Teazole and embraced him. She lifted her hand up and twisted one of the demon's sharply pointed and fan-edged ears that were the butt of a lot of elf-ancestry jokes and pushed her face into his neck to kiss him under his jaw the way she liked. The demon's long tail, tipped with a blunted arrowhead point, snaked under the hem of her dress and Zal snorted in resignation and let the screen door go. He stepped over the prone guard, ignoring the man's open stare, and went back to the recliner and the food without a backwards glance.

He hadn't actually thought that Teazole would arrive for at least another day and felt annoyed that he'd spent so long lying and freezing in a cold garage before announcing himself. For reasons that largely escaped him, he felt it was important the three of them did not experience any conflict that might lead to separations. The conviction bothered him. Zal wasn't possessive but now he found himself the unexpected arbiter of their relations and peacemaker wasn't his forte. Troublemaker used to sit much more easily on him, but that was before Jack Giantkiller had slammed the life out of him on the bank of the frozen dead lake with his floating dead friends inside it.

He moved to the comfort of the sunny grass, newly vacated, and waited for the others to come and sit down there before lying down with his head in Teazole's lap. He found the demon's tail with one hand and pulled it around and over himself like a blanket.

The chiselled, handsome face bent over him, speaking Demonic so that nobody could understand whom he didn't wish to overhear. Their aethereal bodies teased each other with a sensation like popping candy just under the skin. Teazole's tone was affectionately mocking, "Do you feel safe now?"

Zal ignored him and closed his eyes. "Don't move around too much. I'm tired."

"You smell of each other," the demon said.

Lila moved up to Teazole's other side and they found a position where they leaned on each other, heads close together. Their conversation covered a lot of what he'd talked about before but there was a hesitancy about Teazole that was interesting. It only confirmed what Zal had already seen. Teazole was in love with her. Whether the demon knew it hardly mattered. He knew that Lila wasn't conscious of the fact and wondered if it was going to lie dormant until some moment of crisis when it would ambush one of them and get someone killed. He probably should have left them alone together, he thought, but then again he actually found Teazole's lap *comforting* of all things and Zal was

bad at denying himself anything these days, especially something new and curious. Not that he'd ever been remotely good at it.

It didn't even occur to him who else might notice.



The elf who had served them before returned and gave a half bow, her eyes fixed on Teazle and steely with self-control. "I must ask you to leave. Our guests consider this a place of refuge and you are severely disrupting the aether." She spoke in beautifully precise Otopian as a clear deference to Lila, but her discomfort and hostility was palpable.

Lila opened her mouth but Teazle beat her to it. He spoke elvish like it was a blade weaving in the air between them. "And if I do not?"

"Cut it out," Lila said sharply, placing her hand on his knee at the same time. His head inclined towards her and she felt him relax slightly. "How about we stay long enough to finish what we ordered and then go quietly?"

The waitress composed her lips in a line and then said, "That might be possible if he would contain his aura as long as he is in here." She looked as though she had a terrible taste in her mouth.

Teazle turned his gaze back to her, baleful, but the tension lessened and Lila figured he must have done whatever he was asked because she started to hear voices again and then the movement of the other customers slowly creeping out of hiding. The woman hesitated.

"Thank you," she still hesitated, looking at Teazle as if she were watching something repellent but unusually fascinating. "You . . ."

"Get lost," Teazle said in Otopian but with absolute finality. She departed although, Lila was glad to see, she didn't actually run. Under her hand Teazle's body was solid as stone, temperature rising in reaction to his temper. "Elves," he snarled, back in Demonic again, every ounce of contempt rendered so deeply in the utterance that she smiled—no other language had the ability to enhance the world with

its speaker's feelings in quite the same way. For a split second she saw every elf in her field of vision transformed into a strangely loathsome colour, all except for Zal.

"Familiarity hasn't softened your opinion then?" she said, seeing him look down at her hand with the intensity that used to both scare and excite her. It did so now although she tried to suppress it, and the memories of their unions in months past. She felt abruptly angry with herself for being embarrassed, for being an idiot, for talking foolishly to cover up in front of him. In front of Zal.

Teazle glanced down at Zal's head. "He and they are not of one kind," was all he said finally. There was an undercurrent of darkness in the statement she found she didn't like. Then that juggernaut attention turned itself on her with full force. "You are ashamed of your liking for me."

She should have known nothing would get past him.

"I'm ashamed of myself," she corrected, trying to find the words that would explain even though she didn't understand it, but he shook his head fractionally and put his hand on hers, gripping it tightly enough to hurt. She felt the balance of power between them tipping away from her inexorably and cursed herself for her stupidity. She hadn't been expecting him and she wasn't ready. She realised that she was afraid of him. This was what added such spice to their relationship, although now that she saw the fact clearly it appalled her but didn't stop her breath from coming faster as he gently moved his own head closer to hers and very, very gently rubbed his cheek against her own. His breath was soft over her lips as he murmured affectionate nonsense syllables to her.

She might as well have been cuddling up to a tiger, but there was such a thrill to his interest in her that she couldn't resist. She kissed him, almost without meaning to, at the side of his lips and saw him looking down at Zal with a strange, fixated expression. Then his diamond clear eyes flicked towards her and it was gone.

“I have a favour I must ask,” he said in Demonic very quietly and straightened his back. “Since we have come back from Faery all of us have been altered but I am still changing,” he said finally. “I want you to see if there is anything you can detect—if you are able to know what is happening. I went to see a necromancer who wouldn’t speak to me about it and now won’t be speaking about anything anymore, and a shaman who told me something unbelievable.”

“What do you mean?” The moment of his trust was so surprising that it touched her deeply. She tried to cover for both of them by the first thing she could say. “I can try. But you’re so very aetheric. I doubt I could identify what something was even if I could see it.”

“No,” he said and she knew that she was the only one he trusted enough to show the depth of this vulnerability to. “Do it. Look. As you can. Look everywhere.”

Tenderness made her nod gently at him, showing her sympathy, but he shot her a look that was a warning and then Zal quietly dug him in the back of the knee and the moment in which she had seen a killing light rise in his face passed. Confusion filled her, and a touch of new fear. She was falling foul of that demon domination thing, she knew. She’d done it when he had exposed a weakness and she had sympathised, thus agreeing to notice it. But even so, to find that look heading in her direction was a shock. She stumbled over her words. “Sure. Of course I’ll try.”

“Now?” he murmured, so softly she barely heard him, and his tone was a command.

“Yeah,” Lila activated all her sensors. She realised there could be no real love between her and Teazle, because all her care would be a weakness his nature could only exploit. She felt a feeling she was used to—despair—and wearily pushed it aside.

He started when she gave a slight laugh. “What is it?”

“Well that can’t be right,” she said dismissively, checking and rechecking the data. She was using the graphs and charts from a

demon aethero-medical resource, testing readings against their collection of averaged scores on every kind of material manifestation. Their zeal for excess meant there was no parameter left unmeasured with regard to the makeup of any kind of demon. "I think . . . I think I have to check that with an expert. I'll go to Bathshebat and—"

"Tell me!" he hissed, and his hand was getting stronger on hers again. "If you have any idea I want to hear it, I don't care what you think of it."

"All right." She wrenched her hand back with just as much violence as it took and looked him in the eye. She was surprised at how much of a shock it was to her human expectations to feel that she saw right through into his soul every time she did this. Humans said poetically that the eyes were the windows to the soul, but with demons it was absolutely true and also that their soul was capable of staring right back into yours with a deadly accuracy no human vision really ever managed. It was why they had never had any time for lies. Once, looking at Teazle had been like looking at a snowfield or an arctic whiteout. The colour was supersaturated. Over the last year, however, he had started to shine and take on a quality she could only describe to herself as translucent. She felt his apprehension and his hatred of how much this was weakening his basic ability to dominate everyone in his path. She saw his self-loathing and he saw hers. With difficulty she assembled her results into words, ignoring it, knowing it wouldn't go away.

"Your basic vibration sequence, the way that your fundamental particles resonate in the material planes, are mutating from demonic normal activity to . . . something else."

He stared at her. "What?"

"Yeah, exactly. What?" she shrugged. "I have no idea what." She paused and he sat back, deep in thought, frown lines cutting across his high forehead and down between his heavy brows. She said with more venom than she planned, "What did that shaman say as he was begging you for mercy?"

Teazle shot her a dark look. “I did not touch him in any way.” His scowl deepened and even she could feel his mood drop the overall room ambience into a brooding, gloomy pall. “He said I was turning into an angel. Not metaphorically. Literally.”

“Death’s angel,” Lila said, looking at the swords, the faintest veils of light trailing off them, forming spectral wings that vanished into the sunlight. “Because those are her swords.” The idea emptied her mind of anything else. She remembered seeing Teazle as a descending angel when he came with her to the Fleet where they had finally cornered Xaviendra, the elf who would be a god. Angels had flown with Xavi at the time and they had been almost unwatchably alien. They had left before the end and not explained themselves, and Xavi’s own explanation—that they were there to ensure her safe rise to power—didn’t stand up as far as Lila was concerned. Even so, the notion was ludicrous. It was there and it was impossible. “Literally.”

Teazle growled, “So he said.”

On Teazle’s lap Zal made a short sigh although he didn’t speak or open his eyes.

“I don’t know what an angel is,” Lila said after a second. “I mean, outside of books and stories. When Xavi said she had angels escorting her I thought that she was delusional.”

“She is, and they’re The Others,” Zal said then, coughing to clear his throat. He still kept his eyes shut and feigned a sleeping pose. “Angels are what the rest of us whisper about around the campfire when it’s time for the scary stories. Humans wonder about ghosts and demons. We wonder about angels. And, to a lesser extent, dragons. And spirits. And shadow. We just say Others, because that means all of them and we really don’t know if they’re all different or all the same. They certainly come and go from the same place.”

“They *can’t* all be the same surely?” Lila let her AI page through the vast texts on these matters in an offline mode while she stroked Zal’s hair. Later, once she’d slept, she’d wake up and know the contents

as if she'd read it properly. Better, in fact, because she'd never been that diligent a student. She let her head come into contact with Teazle's and then both of them turned to kiss one another for a moment. He was so on edge that he didn't notice how tense she was in return, or didn't comment. Lila was taking notes on him now, endless, cold notes: I do this, you do that.

She asked him, "How does it feel?"

The demon flexed one hand, claws suddenly apparent on his fingertips in a way that happened only when he was readying for a fight. She'd seen them rip through limbs with a seemingly casual swipe. Their edges and tips were diamond sharp and in the tentative Otopian dawn they shone with a wet look. Then, as readily as they'd emerged, they subsided into more of a human nail, blunt and shortened, all the easier to make a fist with. He looked at her for a long moment and she saw him struggling to find any words.

"I feel strange tides," he said finally, disappointed with his own pronouncement. "Things move unseen beneath."

Lila appended it to the casebook she'd opened on him and closed it down. "I can track your progress, but I can't say anything about it. Only give you the facts."

At that moment the waitressing elf returned. Lila expected her to ask them to leave but instead, face firmly steeled against their reaction and eyes averted from any direct eye contact, she said, "Azrazal Ahriman-Sikarza, someone wishes to speak with you privately."

Zal opened his eyes and looked up at her without moving. "Who is it?"

"I cannot say."

Zal closed his eyes. "Then I can't go. Tell them to come here."

Lila scanned the entry records, wondering who was there, but as a private club it didn't have to reveal its data to her without a warrant even if she had the highest level of clearance, and she didn't have one. She considered hacking them but that seemed a bit excessive and

they'd already strained Zal's status there to breaking point as it was. She didn't want to ruin it entirely for him.

The waitress hesitated and it was clear that she wanted to deliver Zal's message about as much as she wanted to drink poison, but after a second she turned on her heels and paced away with that elegant stride that made elves seem to glide easily over any ground. Lila found she was glad of the intrusion. Wordlessly Zal reached out and passed her the coffee cup. As she took it she felt his thumb brush the backs of her fingers. Teazle saw it—it was right under his nose—and sighed with a strange softness. She had no idea what to make of this but there was no time to wonder.

A new figure came drifting towards them, tall and as narrow as an arrow. It wore a green cloak with a large hood that hid its face in a deep shadow. Here and there movements revealed a delicate female body wearing ranger's clothes in plain materials. An Otopian government-issue Tree-pad was attached to her belt, concealed in a tiny leather satchel. Lila thought you probably couldn't do much without one of those, hate it as you might, and looked up as the mystery elf's two long, white hands started to lift themselves towards the hood. With slow exactitude they lifted it and swept it backwards.

There was nothing that could have prepared her for the sight.

Lila froze. Zal was suddenly on his feet with no apparent transition from asleep to vertical. His eyes were wide, his expression grim. Only Teazle sat with an expression of mild interest.

Before them, as large as life and as pretty as Lila remembered her, stood Arie, the Lady of Aparastil, whom she'd last seen disappearing down the gullet of a large dragon in the dark depths of Aparastil Lake.

It had honestly never occurred to her that anyone other than the humans could become Returners, but she supposed that if the dead could be brought back here, they must be able to be brought back anywhere. There seemed no law governing who returned and who didn't. Perhaps this was spectacularly bad luck. But looking at Arie's face she

didn't think so. That confident, preening air suggested the same level of calculation was in place that had plotted Zal's permanent imprisonment and eternal torture and justified it with the survival of Alfheim as the necessary greater good. Because of Arie, Lila had stabbed her friend and lover Dar to death. Because of Arie, Dar had killed Ilyatath in cold blood. All in the name of survival, but that didn't make any difference.

The guilt and horror of that moment, the shame and misery of it, erupted as if it was happening again. Tears filled her eyes and she felt as though she had taken a hammer blow to the solar plexus, so hard that she was forced to cave in around it, hunching protectively over her heart. She saw Teazle react to her movement with strange understanding dawning in his face. But she never took her eyes off Arie. She wanted to carve that face off. The level of her own hate and how good it promised to make her feel should she act on it was a shock that rendered her motionless so that she lost the initiative.

Arie ignored her in any case.

"Hello, Zal," she said, her golden hair shining, her blue eyes giving him a look as if he were her favourite toy. She shrugged eloquently at his returning gaze, which was slowly moving from stunned emptiness towards wary loathing. Arie smiled, "I wager you did not expect to see me again."

"No," Zal said quietly. "I hope you put a lot of money on it. What do you want?"

"I thought you might like to know what happened to me after you ruined my efforts to save our world." Now she did flick a glance at Lila, as though the effort of ignoring the architect of her downfall had finally proved irresistible. Her loathing and repulsion were unchanged from the first second that she had first seen Lila for what she was—an ignorant human welded badly to an incomprehensible machine. It was an expression that made her beauty ugly in a moment.

Lila wished she had a mirror, but there was no avoiding the ill wish of that stare. Added to the shock of her arrival it lanced other old

wounds open she'd thought were long done with. She felt a freak, worthy of spite.

By her feet Teazle hissed. He was amused and alert, keen with anticipation as he watched them fight.

Zal did something with his hand, some arcane gesture that flicked Arie's attention right back to him and at the same time released Lila from the grip of the sorceress's intent.

His voice was a rock star's disinterested drawl. "State your fucking case and be done. I'd be content to see you twice dead."

Anger flashed through her green eyes. "Very well. I assume you thought the dragon of the lake had eaten me up. And it did, in a way. But a dragon is not a blood-and-bone creature, some monster of the elements made flesh. I was consumed but I was not destroyed. It kept me in its belly."

She spat the words out as if each one was a bullet given to her to bite on for a separate pain. "It took me to the edges of existence and there it showed me the source of the destruction that is ripping all of our worlds into shreds. A point of stillness, of opposites meeting, where energy spits from the mouth of nothingness. It showed me that all I would have done was speed the destruction."

She had become stonelike in her resistance to what she had come to say next. Her fixation on Zal remained, the only thing that was keeping her self-control in place. Her lips worked, narrowed, and finally she said, "I have come to offer you my aid in what is coming. I owe it to Alfheim. And I was convinced that I am in some part to blame, so it must be paid back. I am no longer Arie of the Lake. I am Arie of the Waters. You may summon me through that element, when the time comes."

With the mention of her titles some dignity returned to her, though she was unable to conceal her loathing of Zal behind aloofness anymore. Lila realised that even though she considered him a traitor, Zal was the only one Arie could stand to look at. She and Teazle were

abominations too far. Without another word Arie turned on her heels and walked back the way she had come.

Zal stood for a moment or two, his hands flexing at his sides, watching her go. “Something’s really off here,” he said.

“Do you want me to kill her?” Teazole offered.

“Nah,” Zal sat down again, picked up the nearest drink of clear liquid, and drank it all. As Teazole surrendered grumpily to his reply, Zal shot Lila a loaded glance.

“It’s time we all had a nice sit down with our friend Malachi and found out what the hell’s going on.”