

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

It was barely six in the morning, but Melbourne had already begun to stir. A jogger ran past, the scent of his sweat staining the air and the sound of his steps deadened by the stirring fog. Even at this early hour, cars went by at breakneck speed, the drivers seemingly unperturbed by the fact that visibility was down to almost zero. The creak and groan of a garbage truck doing its rounds mingled with the noise of a tram rattling its way down nearby Swanston Street. Normal, everyday sounds of a city waking.

Yet something felt wrong.

Harry frowned, his gaze searching the street ahead. It was nothing he could put his finger on, just an odd sensation that had the hairs at the back of his neck standing on end. No hint of menace crept through the fog-shrouded

streets, but the wrongness remained.

He glanced at his watch. He was only a few minutes late for his meeting with Lyle, but there was nothing unusual in that. In the fifteen years they'd known each other, he'd only ever turned up once on time.

So why did he suddenly feel that *this* time, he'd landed his friend in trouble?

Frown deepening, he stepped out of the shadows and continued on. Ahead, a street sign gleamed in a puddle of murky yellow light. He turned right into Little Collins Street and headed down the hill toward Swanston.

Buildings loomed over him, their rooftops lost to the fog and somehow adding to the sense of doom haunting the pre-dawn darkness. A light breeze stirred the rubbish left in the wake of the garbage trucks, the sheets of old newspaper pirouetting limply down the center of the road. Despite the fact the city was coming to life, this street seemed ominously quiet.

He continued on, that uneasy sense of wrongness growing stronger the more he walked.

Sounds began to reach through the fog. The scrape of a boot heel against concrete. The smack of flesh against flesh. A grunt of pain.

And it was coming from the very place he and Lyle were supposed to meet.

Hoping like hell he wasn't already too late, Harry sprinted for the small lane that ran between Little Collins and Collins Streets--one that was usually little more than a haven for drunks and druggies. Both of which Lyle had been over

the years.

The sounds of the fight were becoming more aggressive, more desperate, with every step he took, but he nevertheless slowed as he entered the lane. It was narrow and filled with rubbish bins that spewed their contents over the bitumen. A solitary street light gleamed down the other end of the lane, but that left the majority of it in shadows. Not that he needed light--he could see as well in darkness as he could the day. A gift of his heritage--and one of the few he was thankful for.

In those shadows, three large forms were beating up a fourth, much smaller one.

Only the three large forms were not your every day, run-of-the-mill muggers. They were trolls. Which in itself suggested a professional hit. Trolls didn't touch anyone unless they were paid first. They claimed it went against their pacifist natures to do otherwise.

Lyle had obviously pissed someone off again.

But the troll factor prevented him from charging in, fists a-swinging. One troll he could cope with--they might be big, but he was fast and he'd been raised on street fights. Two trolls were a fifty-fifty proposition. Three meant a ride in an ambulance and some life-sustaining spells--neither of which he could afford right now.

He dragged his camera out of his pocket, switched it to infrared, and took several shots. Then he removed the memory stick and replaced it with a new

one.

After switching it back to standard flash, he walked forward and took several shots. The flash's light bit through the semi-darkness and as one, the three trolls turned around. Lyle slapped back to the bitumen like a piece of raw meat.

"Hey, that's not, you know, cool," the biggest of the three said. There was enough gold hanging off his ear to fill a barrow. It clanged when he moved, sounding like a symphony of ill-tuned bells. "We're gonna have to take that off you now."

"If you take one step in my direction, I'll press this little bitty-button right here--" he paused to show them one of the buttons on the top of the camera -- "and your smiling faces are splashed, via the satellites, right across the six-o'clock news."

Which was a total fabrication, but only because the optional sat-link wasn't working. The links were too damn expensive, and now that he didn't have a regular job, he simply couldn't afford it.

The troll wiped a hand the size of a spade across his bulbous nose. "A fuggin' reporter. Just our luck."

"Yeah, isn't it," Harry agreed, and glanced briefly at Lyle. He wasn't moving or making any sound, but he was at least breathing. "You want to tell me what you lot are doing?"

The troll grinned, revealing uneven rows of yellow-green enamel. Harry

could only be thankful he wasn't close enough to smell the troll's breath.

"Weez just discussing the weather," he said, almost cheerfully.

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell me who sent you here to discuss the weather?" Even as he asked the question, Harry didn't hold much hope of getting an answer. To a troll, a deal was a deal. You didn't break it unless more money was offered or your life was threatened.

The troll sniffed. "Man, you know we can't do that."

"Then step away from my friend, please." It didn't hurt to be polite. The less offence you offered a troll, the longer your life span was likely to be.

The three of them glanced at each other, then took one step back. Doing what he asked, nothing more. He didn't push the point.

"Lyle, get up."

There was no response. The trolls glanced at one another again. Obviously deciding whether to risk the early-morning publicity or not. He had to get Lyle out of here, and quickly. Yet he didn't dare step any closer. Their beady little troll eyes were bound to pick up the fact that the sat link button wasn't actually active.

"Lyle, get your carcass into gear," he said, voice curt. "Move, *now*."

The old elf groaned, then moved--with all the speed of a gnat--into a sitting position. "That you, half-breed?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, continuing to watch the trolls carefully. Most races signaled their intentions with their eyes. With trolls, you watched their hands.

Their sheer size meant they had to swing their arms into action first before the rest of them caught up. "Climb to your feet and walk toward me."

Lyle scrubbed a hand across his face, smearing blood. In the pre-dawn darkness, it looked like wet war paint. But he did as ordered, climbing slowly to his feet and staggering forward. Harry caught him before he could collapse again, holding him up one-handed and none too gently.

The hands moved. Only fractionally, but it was warning enough. Harry flashed the camera again. The trolls clenched their fists but otherwise remained still. "Let's make a deal, boys. You let us go peacefully, and I'll give you the memory stick."

They glanced at each other again. "You ain't no stinking reporter," the troll with all the gold muttered. "No reporter gives up a good story."

"This one *will* if it means saving a friend." He held up the camera, his finger hovering over the unconnected button. "But the choice is yours."

The troll held up his hands. "The missus will kill me if I land another jail term right now. You have a deal."

"I have your word that you'll let us go?"

The troll sighed. "Yes."

Few trolls ever broke a promise, but Harry wasn't about to risk turning his back on them all the same. He backed away, dragging Lyle with him. At the corner of the lane, he thrust his friend against the wall, leaning a shoulder into his chest to keep him upright, then removed the memory stick from the camera.

He held it up so the trolls could see it, then placed it on top of the nearest rubbish bin. Then he shoved the camera back into his pocket, picked up Lyle, and ran like hell for Swanston Street. Once he'd reached the relative safety of the larger, busier street, he glanced over his shoulder. The trolls hadn't followed him.

Relieved, he turned left and strode toward Flinders Street. The few people who were out and about barely even glanced at him. It was far too early--and far too cold--for people to stop and stare.

Lyle groaned again. Harry glanced down at him. The old elf's face resembled freshly tenderized steak. One eye was closed and puffy, and both cheeks looked as if he'd gone ten rounds with a bag of razor blades. A raw-looking cut thrust from his temple to the back of his head, and the oozing blood caked his thick black hair.

Trolls took their work seriously and they were both fast and meticulous when it came to beating people up. It was odd, though, that Lyle didn't appear to have any broken bones. It was either a warning, or the trolls had wanted something from Lyle before they'd begun the serious stuff.

Flinders Street station glowed brightly against the swirling tendrils of fog and, like the rest of the city, it was beginning to find life. A drunk stirred in the shadows of the clocks, gathering his belongings before staggering into the train station. Several people hurried down the steps and joined the small crowd waiting for the lights to change. A faun in a brightly colored caftan stood near

the tram stop, idly playing his flute. The happy sound of his music slid through the early morning murk like sunshine through rain.

Harry turned into Flinders street and headed toward the old Banana Alley vaults. Maggie Tremain had her store down there, dispensing new age medicine and ancient wisdom from the old bluestone shop. Despite the time, he knew the old witch would already be there, getting ready for the day.

He headed down the steps and kicked the door with his foot. The old wood was so thick and strong he didn't even dent it.

"Piss off," came the reply. "I ain't open 'till seven."

Polite and to the point, as ever. "Maggie, it's Harry. I need some help out here."

"Harry Phillecky?" the old girl asked, her voice drawing close. Chains rattled, then the door swung open. Maggie's matronly figure stood before him, gray eyes widening a little. "What's happened to Lyle? He had a run-in with a tram or something?"

"Trolls, actually. You were the closest medical help I could think of."

"And one of the few specialists of Elven anatomy who will still treat a couple of outcasts," she said, voice dry. "Don't stand there like a dag, boy, bring him in."

He glanced down to ensure there was nothing in the doorway that would trip him up, then stepped inside. Her store was literally bursting at the seams. Herbs hung from the ceiling, brushing like skeletal fingers against the top of his

head. Baskets and boxes filled nearly every inch of the floor, their contents overflowing into each other, creating a riot of texture and color. Weird-shaped bottles and cartons crowded the shelves that lined the four walls, mingling easily with an unusual array of pots, brooms and other witchy paraphernalia. The smell was incredible--a heady concoction of cinnamon, orange, eucalyptus and sage, mixed in with other, less definable scents.

"Head on through to the back, Harry. I'll grab some medicinals."

He zigzagged his way through the store and pushed past the heavy curtain. He might as well have entered another world. Everything here was orderly, all the bits and pieces stacked in neat little piles on the shelves with nothing overflowing or creating hazards on the floor. People expected witch stores to be untidy, Maggie had once explained. Give the people what they want, and they'll keep coming back.

She obviously knew her market--she'd been in this store for close to fifty years now, and was still one of the most sought after witches when it came to alternate medicines.

Harry placed Lyle on the worn sofa then walked across the kitchenette, grabbing a mug and helping himself to the coffee brewing on the stove. Maggie bustled in, arms full of bottles and bandages.

He leaned back against the bench, sipping the coffee and watching her tend Lyle. The elf's face looked no better with the blood washed away, and with the brightly colored salves Maggie was currently plastering all over him, he

rather resembled someone who'd been attacked by a squadron of kids armed with finger paints.

"He's lucky," she said eventually. "No broken bones, no internal damage. His face is pretty bad, but then, it was never much to look at anyway."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled to hear you say that," Harry said, voice dry.

Maggie waved a gnarled finger in his direction. "Mention it, boy," she said, voice sharp but grey eyes twinkling with merriment. "And I'll curse your sex life for the next year."

He snorted. "Curse away. It can't get any worse."

She raised an eyebrow. "Have I mentioned my nice--and very single--niece, Victoria?"

"Amongst others." He motioned toward Lyle. "You have a patient, remember?"

She grunted and shoved a vial under the old elf's nose. Reaction was immediate. He jerked his nose away from the vial, coughing harshly for several minutes before glaring at her one-eyed.

"What the hell are you doing, woman? Trying to kill me?"

"Got your attention, didn't it? How are you feeling?"

"Surprisingly, just like I'd been set upon by a trio of trolls." Lyle hesitated, his gaze moving beyond her to meet Harry's. "Thanks for intervening."

Harry waved the thanks away. "Who'd you annoy this time?"

Lyle snorted. "You got ten hours?"

He smiled. At one time Lyle had towed the family line, becoming first a lawyer, then a magistrate. He'd even looked likely to replace his father on the High Court Bench. Then, to the despair of his family and the horror of his wife, he'd given it all away to work with legal aid and become a part-time private investigator.

The wife had long since departed in disgust, but the family still retained hope, alternating regularly between trying to persuade him to return to his former--and to their eyes, at least--more acceptable lifestyle, and attempting to get him declared insane.

Harry took another sip of coffee. Maggie, like most witches, only bought the top-shelf--at least when it came to the back-of-the-store supplies. The free stuff in the store itself stunk. Literally *and* figuratively.

"I can't imagine the much respected--and oh-so proper--Ruprecht clan deigning to mingle with the likes of trolls, even in an attempt to rein in a rogue son."

"You'd be surprised," Lyle said, voice weary and still edged with pain.

"There's more than a few skeletons stuffed in the family closet's, believe me."

"Yeah, and not all of them dead, I'll wager," Maggie commented. She climbed to her feet with a grunt of effort. "I've seen your old man work over a few people in his time. He doesn't need the likes of a troll hit squad."

Harry could certainly attest to that, having been at the wrong end of such a beating some five years ago. He'd escaped, but only thanks to a drunken

dragon's timely intervention. To this day, he still had no idea why Tye Ruprecht had ordered him captured and tortured.

One day, though, he'd find out.

One day, he'd repay the favor.

Even if it meant losing Lyle as a friend.

He drank some more coffee, then raised his mug. "Want some?"

Both Lyle and Maggie nodded. He filled two mugs, handed them across, then replenished his own. "So what have you been up to in the last week that warrants trolls being unleashed upon you?"

"I don't know." Lyle scrubbed a hand across his face, then winced. "I've had several weeks off from legal aid, and been working a case down in St. Kilda's red light district."

Harry raised an eyebrow. St. Kilda was siren territory and, as a general rule, the sirens were a well behaved, peaceable lot. So were the men who answered their call, if only because the sirens distaste for drunks and the drug addicted precluded those types from entering the area. Why, no one was really sure, but it was a fact that generally made them a welcome addition to any residential area, despite the risks of the occasional straying husband.

Maggie dragged a chair in from the outer shop and plopped down inelegantly. "You following anyone we know?"

Lyle shrugged. "There's a bloke by the name of Reg Turner whose gone missing. His wife is convinced he's shackled up with one of the sirens."

Having been raised by one, Harry knew *that* was something no man in his right mind would wish. From what he'd witnessed over the years, a siren's song and a night of heady sex did *not* equate to a life of bliss. Quite the opposite, in fact. "And is he?"

Another shrug. "I haven't found him yet, but the sirens can be a closed mouth lot when they want to be."

"That hardly seems a good reason to be setting trolls upon you, though." He hesitated, frowning. "Did the trolls say anything? Ask anything?"

Lyle gingerly scratched his chin. "Yeah, they kept saying 'da photos, man', like I knew what they were talking about."

"And have you taken any photos recently?"

"I did take some happy snaps last Tuesday. I thought I'd found my man and wanted the wife to confirm. Turned out it wasn't him."

Then why the beating? Harry frowned and studied Lyle intently. There was a hint of evasiveness in his friend's sapphire gaze that suggested Lyle wasn't telling him everything. Probably because of Maggie--who was as lovely a person as you could get, but she couldn't keep a secret to save a life. "Maybe there was more in those photo's than what you thought. You still got them?"

He shook his head. "I threw the prints away, but I think the negatives are still home somewhere."

Having seen the state of Lyle's home, Harry knew it could months before he found them again. "Bring them round to my place when you can. I'll run them

through computer imaging and see what we can pick up."

Lyle nodded. A doorbell chimed in the outer shop. Maggie glanced at her watch then rose, cursing softly.

"That'll be Jamie Green," she muttered. "The old faggot is always here seven sharp on Saturdays to get his pipe weed."

"So you're selling tobacco these days?" Lyle said, eyebrows raised. "I thought you witches were against it?"

Maggie swatted his knee with a wet cloth. "I said pipe weed, you old fool, not tobacco. Need your ears cleaned out, do you?"

"No, but I didn't know there was a damn difference."

"The difference, elf, is the fact that Jamie is a manic depressive. The weed helps him maintain the status quo."

"Oh."

"For such bright people, you elves know jack-shit." She turned away, a grin teasing her mouth.

"Maggie," Harry said. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

She turned, one bushy brow raised in query. "I haven't time for games, boy. Spit it out."

Harry tapped his nose. She gasped and rushed to the fridge. After pulling out a tray of what looked like black peas sprouting hairs, she carefully selected one then pressed it on.

"There," she said, putting the tray back and turning to face him. "How's

that?"

The wart now sitting on the end of her nose looked bigger, blacker, and definitely more hairy than it had in the tray. "The perfect old hag," he said with a grin.

"You always say the nicest things." She patted his arm briefly before turning away.

He waited until she'd left, then crossed his arms and stared at Lyle. "Now you can tell me the truth."

Lyle raised a dark eyebrow. "What makes you think I wasn't?"

"Because you couldn't lie straight in bed, old man."

"So my wife said, more than once." A grin touched his battered lips. "When I was following that lead last Tuesday, I happened upon a government car. The number plates were concealed and the windows were tinted dark, so you couldn't see inside."

Harry frowned. "Then how'd you know it was official?"

"The driver happened to be leaning against the bonnet, catching a ciggy break. He was wearing the official grays."

A government car in a siren zone--that was a photo more than a few newspaper editors would be happy to get their hands on. Sirens might be an accepted part of society these days, but they were, after all, still prostitutes. No minister who valued his career could afford to be caught visiting one. "You took photos?"

Lyle nodded. "That's one of the reasons I asked you to meet me early. Wanted you to develop the film and see if you could catch who was in the car."

"Any particular reason why?"

Lyle hesitated. "The siren in question was a friend of mine. She was reported missing two days ago."

Harry raised an eyebrow. If the slight crack of emotion in Lyle's voice was anything to go by, the siren had been much more than a friend. Which was unusual, to say the least. Elves were generally immune to the call of a siren--and to such a degree that most were physically sickened by the mere thought of coupling with one.

Though the occasional elf-siren liaison *did* happen. He was living proof of that.

"And you think the two events are connected?" he asked.

Lyle half-shrugged. "I wasn't entirely sure until the trolls attacked, but now, I'd have to say yes."

"You've hidden the stick for safekeeping?"

Lyle coughed. "Well, no. I have it on me, actually."

"The trolls didn't do a body search?" Disbelief edged Harry's voice.

"They did, but it's in my shoe." Lyle grinned. "And we both know it would be a brave soul that ventures anywhere near *my* feet."

And wasn't *that* the gospel truth. He'd shared a locker a couple of times with Lyle last cricket season, and his clothes had stunk for days afterward. Even

repeatedly washing them hadn't helped. "You'd better give it to me now, then. I'll see what I can pull from it."

Lyle nodded and carefully eased off his right shoe. "There *is* another reason I asked for a meet today."

"So you said."

Lyle picked the memory stick out of the fluff of his sock and handed it across. Harry held it carefully--not because there was any danger of damaging it, but because it had a definite sweaty-foot odor.

"Are you busy right now?" Lyle said, thankfully reclaiming his shoe before the smell could thoroughly infect the area.

"Am I ever?" Quitting his job at the Herald-Sun and going freelance had not been one of his brighter moments. He generally had enough income flowing through his accounts to get by on, but it was life's little luxuries--like a fridge filled with beer and the occasional bet--that he missed.

"Do you feel like working for me?"

He studied his friend for a moment, seeing the anxiety in Lyle's bright eyes. Seeing the shadows--truths not yet spoken. "You want me to track her down?"

Lyle nodded. "I can't risk it at the moment. Adelia's having me followed. She wants a divorce, and is looking for a reason."

And the fact they hadn't lived together in thirty years wasn't good enough, at least when it came to the Elven council, who still officiated in such matters.

"Where do you want me to start?"

Lyle dug a hand into his coat pocket. "Here's her address and front door key. The cops had a brief squiz, but I'd like you to have a look, too."

Harry accepted the key and the card. "I'm not likely to pick up anything the cops haven't."

"You're a photographer, Harry. You see things in a slightly different light to normal folk. It's probably the only reason you're surviving freelance. Most don't, these days."

Sometimes merely surviving got tiresome. In his leaner weeks, Harry often wished he'd stuck it out at the Herald-Sun. It was a decent enough job, even if it *had* become more than a little monotonous. But there was only so many ways to capture road carnage before the horror of it all began getting to you.

"When do you want me to start?"

"Now, if you like. The sirens will be retiring for the day, so no one will be around to bother you."

In other words, the siren community had not been too happy about Lyle's liaison. And--more than likely--wouldn't be receptive to him sniffing around, either. "What makes you think they'll talk to me?"

"Everyone talks to you, Harry. Besides, your mother is one of them."

Which wasn't the advantage Lyle seemed to think it was. "What's her name?"

"Mona." He dug into her coat pocket again, then handed across a photo. "No family, not many friends, even within her own community."

Mona was nice, if you liked the type. Busty, hour-glass figure, platinum hair that fell in ringlets to her waist, and big, baby blue eyes.

Thank *God* he'd inherited Elven coloring. If he'd ended up with platinum curls, he would have shaved his head. He pushed away from the bench. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah. I'll catch a cab home and rest up for a while." He hesitated. "I need to know what's happened to her, Harry."

"I'll do my best." He shoved the memory stick, photo and key in his pocket. "Call you tonight."

"Good. Just be careful."

Given what had just happened to Lyle, it was a somewhat superfluous warning. Harry pushed past the curtain. A small man sat huddled on a stool near the door, looking little more than a bundle of rags. Maggie was measuring what looked like yellow grass into a small sack, but looked up when he entered.

"Off so soon?"

He nodded. "Got stuff to do."

"You up for dinner later this week?"

Harry smiled. What were the odds that the oft-mentioned Victoria making a sudden appearance? Still, the old witch had been good to him over the years. It didn't hurt to humor her occasionally. "Sure. Give me a call."

Maggie smiled cheerfully and got back to her sacking. Harry left the shop, but hesitated on the steps, looking skyward. The nagging sensation that

something was wrong still haunted him.

From a distance came the soft *whump, whump* of rotor blades--a helicopter flying low through the city, probably heading for the helipad down near the old World Trade Center.

But beyond that, almost lost in the growing symphony of a waking city, came the sweeping sigh of wind, the creaking flap of leather. A sound he knew all too well.

A dragon, flying in restricted airspace, and beyond officially approved times.

And that meant trouble if it went anywhere near the helicopter. Dragons didn't have the best sight at normal times, but in the half light of early morning or late evening their problems in identifying smaller objects increased tenfold.

Harry stepped onto the pavement and headed back toward the railway station. He'd left his car up near the Melbourne Cricket Ground earlier this morning so he could enjoy the morning walk through the fog-shrouded parks. But he'd catch a train back. The parks, like the city itself, would be filling with people, most of them merely taking the shortest route to work. The serenity offered by the century old elms and oaks would be lost to the rush of everyday life.

He glanced skyward again. If the sighing rush of wind was anything to go by, the dragon was drawing closer. So, too, was the helicopter.

But most of them were equipped with equipment specifically designed to deal with the occasional misdirected dragon or griffin--though even witches had

been known to cause the odd problem or two for aircraft.

The pilot *had* to be aware of the dragon's presence in restricted airspace. There'd be all sorts of sirens and warnings going off by now.

A huge rush of wind hit him, making him stagger forward several steps before he caught his balance. He turned around, looking up again.

Like a shadow forming life, a fire-colored dragon swooped out of the fog, leathery wings outstretched, gleaming molten gold in the cold, early morning light.

Harry shoved a new memory stick in his camera and took a shot of the creature against the barely visible mirrored sides of the Rialto towers. The papers loved stuff like that--when there wasn't carnage to be had.

The sun chose that moment to break through the fog, dripping flames across the dragon's scaly hide. The creature suddenly dropped several meters, one wingtip brushing against the closest building, scraping a trench in the thick glass before it soared skyward again. Its tail flicked, smashing into the radio towers, sending them crashing downwards.

The dragon was either drunk or he was having severe trouble seeing. Probably the former, Harry thought, as it plummeted to almost street level. There was a distinct lack of coordination in the dragon's movement.

From his right, the helicopter swooped in, gleaming silver in the sudden sunshine. The dragon chose that very moment to rise.

Straight into the path of the helicopter.

Harry raised his camera as the two collided in a fiery explosion of metal, heat and flesh.

CHAPTER TWO

Dragon and helicopter plummeted earthward, hitting Princes Bridge with enough force to crack the asphalt. The dragon somersaulted and went nose first over the railings, plunging toward the river banks below. The helicopter exploded, firing heat and metal into the air. The smell of burning fuel and flesh was thick in the air.

But it didn't stop a crowd from gathering. Harry pushed his way through to the front and threw up an arm against the heat of the flames.

The helicopter lay on its side like some giant's ill-used toy. The tail boom hung over the same railings that the dragon had flipped over, the metal twisted and the rotor blade dipping toward the Yarra River. Flames covered the cabin

area, crackling fiercely as they devoured the remains--both metal and human. There was very little chance of anyone inside surviving.

He couldn't see the dragon from where he stood, but it was very obviously alive, if the drunken abuse currently staining the airwaves was anything to go by.

Only trouble was, it was a voice that sounded horribly familiar.

Hoping he was wrong, Harry edged round the crowd, stopping briefly to take a few shots of the helicopter from different angles. With a bit of luck, he could sell them for a tidy sum to the newspapers, as he couldn't see any of the regular *Herald-Sun* photographers here yet. The cops *had* arrived and were already taking control, pushing the crowd back from the danger of the flames. Fire and ambulance crews hadn't yet appeared, but the fast approaching wail of sirens indicated they weren't far off.

He put his camera away and headed down the steps that lead toward the river bank. The fire-colored dragon was on its back, thrashing about like a turtle trying to get right side up. One wing--battered and bleeding, but otherwise whole--flapped about, creating a wind strong enough wind to knock the unwary over.

The other wing was broken.

A dragon's wing--while fragile looking--actually wasn't. They were formed by a tough membrane of skin, muscle, and other tissues that stretched from their small back legs to a dramatically lengthened fourth finger. It took a lot of force to break a wing, and a long time for them to heal. Keale wasn't going to be

taking to the air anytime soon.

Black liquid oozed from under his back, staining the ground and stinking to high heaven. Dragon blood was highly toxic, though in an open area like this, it was doubtful it would do anything more than pollute the air. Still, the cops erred on the side of caution, keeping the crowd well back.

Harry headed toward one of the boys in blue. "Officer, the dragon is a friend of mine. If you'd let me closer, I might be able to calm him down."

The cop looked Harry up and down and an all too familiar sneer appeared on his lips. Humans looked at him and saw a half-breed elf. Elves looked at him and saw a half-breed human. Neither, it seemed, held him in very high regard. Pointing out that he was actually a half-breed siren only made the disdain from both camps greater. It was a situation Harry found somewhat amusing considering both races liked to sprout pretty words about tolerance and acceptance.

The cop sniffed. "We've orders to keep everyone away until the tow trucks arrive."

Harry shrugged and casually crossed his arms. "Only offering. The way he's thrashing about, he'll be close to the road in no time. Ever seen the damage a dragon's claws can do to tram lines and bitumen?"

The cop regarded him steadily for a second, then half turned away and spoke into the two-way clipped to his lapel. Harry waited. Sure enough, the cop turned back and gave him the go ahead to approach. Recklessly allowing

damage to public property was not seen as the way to get ahead in the force.

The dragon's one good wing still thrashed the ground, and trenches deep enough to lose a person in were beginning to scar the river banks. Harry stopped just beyond reach.

"Hey Keale, that you?" He had to shout to be heard above all the noise the creature was making.

The dragon stopped his thrashing and his head snaked around. Black eyes regarded him owlshly. "S'arry?"

A dragon's mouth was not designed to speak English. Everything came out a little weird. "Yeah. The shit's really hit the fan this time, mate."

"No drink, s'romise. Was with S'Becca."

Rebecca was a dragon, like Keale, and a stickler when it came to booze. Given Keale was in the midst of his mating cycle, it was doubtful he'd risk a drink and jeopardize his chances of getting his end in. And given a dragon's voracious appetite for sex, as well as their legendary stamina, he wouldn't have left Rebecca's any earlier than he had to. Certainly not for a drink.

So why the hell was he drunk?

"Where were you going, Keale? Home?"

"Straight s'ome. Do nots pass go, do nots s'ollect--"

"Yeah, yeah. I get the idea." Harry frowned and scrubbed a hand across his nose. The blood stink was getting worse. Keale must have cut his back up pretty badly. But he wasn't likely to get any medical attention until he changed form. It

was too costly--and a dragon's hide too tough--to be practical. "What the hell were you doing over the city?"

"S'old ya. Going s'ome."

Rebecca lived in Research, and Keale a stone's throw away in Warrandyte--he actually had to fly past home to get anywhere near the city. None of this made any sense.

"How long you been in dragon form?"

"Six S'ours."

Like all magic, a dragon's shapechanging had strict time limitations. No matter what form he took, dragon or human, he had to stay in it for a minimum of twelve hours. There wasn't much point in discussing the matter any further--better to wait the six hours and give Keale time to sober up.

"They've called in a tow truck to haul you away."

"S'ay'll not gets me on no s'uckin' s'uck."

"They've got no choice, mate. You can't stay here, bleeding all over the landscaping."

"S'uck the landscaping."

Harry smiled. "Keale, you're in enough trouble as it is. Be a good dragon and do as they ask."

The black eyes regarded him for a minute, scaly brows drawn down in a frown. He doesn't realize what he's done, Harry thought. This was something more than drunkenness.

"S'trouble?"

"Yeah. Listen Keale, I'm going to call Lyle in. Don't talk, don't say anything until he gets there."

"S'hy?"

He glanced across to the road as a tow-truck pulled up. It was a big mother, the size of semi, at least. But then, so was Keale. "Just trust me, and do as I ask."

"S'kay."

Three men came running down the slope, two of them hauling cables as thick as Harry's wrist and the other a medical kit. All three looked ready to bolt if the dragon so much as breathed the wrong way. Keale behaved himself though, watching thoughtfully while one man immobilized and splinted the wing and the other two attached the cables round his body.

It was the sort of look a spider gave its prey before devouring it. Not that many dragons actually ate humans these days. Too gristly, according to Keale.

The man with the medical kit ran back to the truck. The other two did a final check on the positioning of the cables, then waved a go-ahead. The winch roared into action. Keale was hauled, none too ceremoniously and swearing all the way, onto the back of the semi. He was quickly secured then driven away, two police-vans acting as escorts.

Harry dragged out his cell phone and quickly dialed the old elf's number.

"Lyle?" he said, when the phone was answered. "How you feeling?"

"Recovering. Why?"

"Need a favor." Lyle might be semi-retired, but he could still beat the ass off most of the lawyers currently doing the court circuit--and right now, Keale needed the best help he could get.

Lyle sighed. "Who's in trouble this time?"

Harry grinned. Truth was, though, he very rarely called on Lyle's legal skills. "It's Keale again."

"That pisspot? Nothing much I can do to stop them taking his flight license away this time."

"It's more than that. This time he's downed a helicopter."

Silence ran down the line for several seconds. "Any killed?" Lyle asked softly.

"Pilot, at least. It's only just happened."

"The crash we heard." Lyle swore softly. "They'll charge him with manslaughter, for sure."

And with Keale's record, they'd lock the door and throw away the key. "If you're feeling up to it, could you head over and see that he gets a blood test?"

"Blood test?" Confusion ran through the elf's voice. "They'll do that anyway."

"Yeah, but I want you to make sure they look for Prevoron."

"That's deadly to dragons. Why the hell would he be taking it?"

"He mightn't *know* he's been taking it. And its effects, at least in the first

forty-eight hours, are very similar to the effects of alcohol."

"Why would anyone bother drugging a pisspot like Keale? Feed him enough booze and he'd sell his mother. And throw in his sister as a bonus."

Having met both, Harry could understand why. "I haven't any answers just yet, only bloody questions. They'll be taking him to the remand center--it's the only place with a cell big enough to cater for a dragon Keale's size."

"I've just called a taxi, so I'll swing past and get things moving."

"Thanks Lyle. I'll talk to you later."

Harry shoved the cell-phone back into a pocket, then walked across to the crater Keale had left in the soft soil. He'd certainly packed a punch. The hole was a good four feet deep. Yet the landing appeared to have no impact on the dragon. Nor had he appeared to notice the shattered limb--even when they'd bound it by his side after hauling him onto the truck. Prevoron, once you had enough of it in your system, started desensitizing the nerves throughout your body. Maybe Keale hadn't felt anything because he *couldn't* feel anything.

Harry glanced up to the bridge and briefly watched the firemen hose down the helicopter. First things first. Find out what sort of trouble Keale was in, then head down to St.Kilda and poke around the siren's apartment.

He walked back up the steps, then hesitated and scanned the crowd. Across the road, close to the bus stop, stood his successor, Grant Pickham. Judging from the look on Grant's butt-ugly face, he'd been too late to catch any decent action. Not that there was anything unusual in that. Lady luck, it seemed,

hadn't been on speaking terms with Grant for some time now.

Harry made his way through the crowd and came to a halt beside the rotund figure. "How you going, Pickham?"

"Piss off, Phillecky. This is my shoot."

Seemed to be his day for being told to piss off. "Oh yeah? Got shots of the dragon coming down, did you?"

Pickham's scowl created face craters deep enough to shove a fist in. "No." He hesitated, looking up, eyes narrowing. "Did you?"

Harry smiled sublimely. "Many killed in the 'copter?"

"Why don't you ask a copper, if you're so damn smart."

Harry glanced around, then grabbed the grease-stained collar of Pickham's overcoat and dragged him close. The fat young man smelled of cigarettes, Old Spice and sweat--an unpleasant combination at the best of times let alone when combined with the stink of burning fuel and flesh. "Because I'm asking you, aren't I?"

Pickham licked his lips, and nodded so fast his head looked in danger of falling off. Harry let him go.

"There were four people in the helicopter," Pickham said quickly, voice a little shrill. "Two press, the pilot, and Logan's brother."

Harry frowned. "Logan? The Federal Treasurer?"

"The same. Apparently Logan himself was meant to be on it, as well."

Just as well he wasn't. Keale was snout-deep in shit as it was. "Why would

Logan be hiring a private helicopter to come down to Melbourne?"

"Word has it that he had business problems down here. And don't ask me what, 'cause I don't know."

"Then why was his brother on it?"

Pickham snorted. "Get real. They were business partners, weren't they?"

Were they? Last Harry had heard, the two men had had a rather violent falling out. Maybe he'd been out of the news flow for too long. He roughly patted Pickham's shoulder. "Thanks for the help."

"Anytime," Pickham muttered, wincing away from Harry's touch.

Harry grinned. He didn't normally get into terrorizing people, but with Pickham, he couldn't seem to help it. Whistling softly, he headed into Flinders Street station. After a short train trip through the underground loop, he was walking past the MCG on the way to his car.

Twenty minutes later, he was driving down Fitzroy Street looking for Lock Street. Mona, like most sirens, rented an apartment just off the main strip. He found parking, then walked back. Fitzroy Street had once been the trendiest of hang-outs for legions of yuppies, but that had all changed once the sirens moved in. By day, the place was so deserted seagulls had taken over the pavement. The neon signs and gaudy lights that had once blazed so brightly were dead, and the old posters that hawked the wares of lap dancers lone gone flapped forlornly in the breeze. Under the harsh glare of the sun, the place looked, and felt, like some sleazy sideshow trinket cast aside for brighter cousins.

Of course, the sirens, the area's biggest attractions, needed no lights or signs. They had their voices.

He found Lock Street easily enough and headed down, looking for number seven. It turned out to be a three-story affair, the outside bricks painted hot pink and the window frames lavender. Harry shuddered. He still had nightmares about living in a house like this, having grown up only a couple of blocks away in nearby Burnett Street. If Mona had the same tastes as most sirens, it wouldn't only be the outside of the apartment that was pink, but the interior walls, the furniture, even her clothing.

And his teachers used to wonder why he'd got in so many fights at school.

He climbed the steps. The front door wasn't locked--sirens apartments rarely were. He'd never been able to figure out why they were so trusting. He'd certainly never believed his mother's explanation that the siren's aural shield kept away the worst elements of crime--it might keep away the drunks and drug addicted, but it seemed to have little effect on any one else. It certainly had never stopped their apartment from being robbed more than a dozen times when he'd been growing up.

He shoved open the glass door and entered the building. According to Lyle's instructions, Mona's apartment was on the second floor. He climbed the stairs, the steps creaking softly under his weight. The air was warm, thick with the mixed scents of orange and sage.

The scent of his childhood.

The scent of his mother.

He paused and briefly looked up. Surely she wasn't back in town? Surely she was still up on the Gold Coast, warming the arthritis from her old bones in Queensland's winter sunshine. Surely the day could not get any worse.

He grimaced and walked on. Once he hit the second floor landing, he paused again and looked around. The corridor was shadowed, and there was little evidence that anyone actually cared about this place let alone lived here. Only three doors led off the hall--Mona's was to his left, down the end.

He had the key in the lock, the door almost open, when one of the two doors behind him opened.

"Well, strap my ass to a pole and hoist it skyward. Harry!"

Harry closed his eyes. He'd been wrong before. The day definitely *could* get a whole lot worse.

Only it wasn't his mother.

It was Valentine Prytoria. The half-brother Harry had spent half his life avoiding.

CHAPTER THREE.

Harry turned. Standing in the doorway of the apartment closest to the stairs was what could be only be described as a thin streak of colorful humanity. His sharp face was framed by platinum blonde curls that flounced down to his shoulders, and he wore a bright red smock and purple pants, which were artfully torn at the knees and splattered with blobs of blue and gold paint. His feet were bare, and his toenails were painted as bright as a rainbow.

Harry scrubbed a hand across his eyes. "You told me you bought a house, Val, not a fucking apartment block."

"It's almost the same thing, darls. And you know I've always loved this area." Val waved a hand around, fingernails glittering. "Isn't the place simply delish?"

Harry glanced at the pale pink walls. *Delicious* was one word to use. *Fucking*

awful were two others. "Why the hell would you want to live in a place like this again? In a building filled with sirens, for God's sake?"

Val raised silvery eyebrows. "My, don't we have some deep-seated resentments hanging in our subconscious cupboards?"

"Yeah, don't we," he muttered, and thumped open Mona's door. There was no escaping Val, however. Not that he thought there would be.

"And to what do we owe the honor of your presence?" Val said, as he trailed in after Harry.

"You mean, it isn't your birthday?" He stood in the center of the apartment and looked around. As it turned out, Mona wasn't like most sirens. She'd painted her walls a deep, almost black-purple. The doorframes, skirting and cornices *were* pink, however. Hot pink. It was a deadly combination, and it *wasn't* the sort of place you'd want to be in when you were drunk. Not that you'd ever get that chance with a siren.

"You know my birthday is in December." Sarcasm edged Val's voice. "You send me a pair of scissors and a packet of hair dye every year."

"And one of these days, you'll take the hint." Harry walked across to the desk and started opening drawers. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to be searching for, but Lyle was paying him to look, so look he would. The cops had already gone through the desk, though. Fingerprint dust decorated both the top and the drawer handles. Lyle had to be pulling some major strings to have gotten them in here so quickly. A hooker's disappearance didn't usually rate such

instant action--even if that hooker was a siren.

"I gather you have a reason for entering this apartment and searching that desk," Val said.

"I do indeed."

Silence met his answer. It obviously took Val a few minutes to realize Harry had no intention of elaborating.

"Well?" Val said impatiently. "What is it? I do *own* the building, you know. I'm not sure if I should be allowing you in here."

Harry closed the final drawer then turned, studying the apartment for a minute. Where would a siren keep stuff she didn't want anyone to find? The bedroom was out--far too obvious and with all the traffic, no where near private enough. Neither was the bathroom.

His mother had always kept her 'treasures', as she called them, in the laundry--usually at the bottom of a laundry basket half-filled with stinking socks.

"Are you listening to me?" Val asked.

"Do I ever?"

Val picked up a tissue box and threw it at him. Harry caught it, dropped it onto the nearby sofa, then walked passed him. He found the kitchen first and hunted through the cupboards, searching for something, anything, out of the ordinary. Her fridge provided the first revelation. A dozen cans of beer were neatly stacked on the bottom shelf.

Lyle was a champagne drinker from way back. He hated beer almost as much

as the sirens. It had to be for someone else, someone who visited regularly.

Which meant that Lyle had competition.

Harry slammed the fridge door shut, then glanced at Val, who stood in the doorway tapping a brightly colored foot. He rather looked like a garishly colored flamingo. "What do you know about Mona?"

"Oh, so now you want to talk to me?"

He didn't have much choice. Not if he wanted to be of any help to Lyle.

"She's disappeared. I've been asked to help find her."

"Mona's always disappearing. Sometimes for days, sometimes for a weeks. I told the cops that, when they were here yesterday."

"How regular is always?"

Val pursed his lips. "Once a month, at least."

"Was she married or engaged?"

"Are any of them? Was mother?" Val snorted softly. "Get real, darls."

Harry headed through the next doorway and found himself in a shoebox-sized laundry. "What about customers?"

"Plenty of simply *delicious* men, as you might expect."

No wonder Val had bought the apartment block. He probably sat in his doorway, eating popcorn and watching all the beefcake walk by. "Any trouble recently?"

Val shrugged. "None that I couldn't handle."

Harry picked up the laundry basket and tipped it upside down. All sorts of

wispy undergarments fell at his feet. "Then there *was* trouble?"

"Five nights ago. Nothing major, just..." He hesitated. "If I tell you, you won't report me to the wizard's guild or anything, will you?"

Harry glanced up and gave Val his very best cheesy smile. "I'm your brother. Would I do something like that?"

"If it meant pissing me off, then yes."

No point in denying the truth. "I won't this time. I'm here to find Mona, nothing more."

Val nodded. "Seems two customers answered her song at the same time. Neither were exactly pleased about it."

"Did you recognize either of them?"

Val frowned. "I've seen both at one time or another. I'm not sure where. If they don't swing my way, darls, they don't have much impact, I'm afraid."

"So what happened?"

"Got into a fight, didn't they? Fists and anger were flying everywhere. Mona rang me, begging me to come in and help."

"And you did?"

"Yeah. I...er...changed the pair of them."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

Val wrung his hands. "It was only a little change, and only very temporary."

All wizard magic was temporary, lasting at the most a week. That's why many wizards tended to be interior decorators. Their magic wasn't much good for

anything else. "What did you change them to?"

"Butterflies. They don't fight, you see. They're such gentle creatures."

Friggin' *butterflies*. Harry snorted. "What happened then?"

"Oh, they saw the error of their ways and flew away."

Scared shitless, no doubt. But it was odd that the two men hadn't reported Val's breach of etiquette. The guild had strict rules when it came to using magic to alter human form, but the first and foremost rule was that it had to be a consensual act. "How long would the spell have lasted?"

"Half an hour, max."

Harry picked up a handful of silky bodysuits, shaking them lightly before dumping them back in the basket. A weird sense of déjà vu hit, and suddenly he was ten years old again, sorting through the laundry, separating his mother's stuff from his and Val's, getting it ready to dump into the washing machine. "The two men didn't come back?"

"Not that night."

Harry stopped and looked up. "But they *did* come back?"

"One did. Heard him, all shouting and angry again. But he left before I could do anything. He had a car waiting outside."

"Government car, by any chance?"

Val frowned. "How would I know? He left. I didn't peek outside to watch him walk away. Not my style."

But he would have, had the visitor been his *type*. "Did you see Mona at all

that day?"

"Haven't seen her since. But as I said, that's not unusual."

Harry picked up another handful of silk. "These two men you saw--were they both human?"

"One human, one elf."

Harry glanced up quickly. "Old or young?"

"Young, both of them. Probably no more than late thirties, early forties."

Harry relaxed a little, and continued shaking the undergarments. "Don't suppose you could work up a sketch of the two men?"

"I could. But it'll cost you."

He all but groaned. "What?"

"Dinner party. At your place. Your friends and mine." Val hesitated, an almost contented grin touching his lips. "And don't try that I-can't-cook crap. It may have worked on your ex-missus but it's got no weight with me. I know better."

Harry threw another handful of silk into the basket. How often had he wished he *had* left the cooking up to their mother? At least when it came to feeding his runt of a brother? Probably as often as he'd wished he didn't have two siblings. Though, he had to admit, if he had to choose between either of his half-brothers, he'd take Val any day. Gilroy was a straight-out asshole.

Not that Val knew Harry's other half brother. The Phillecky clan was the biggest of the five elven clans, and there were literally hundreds of Phillecky's in the phone book. As far as Val was concerned, Harry's father and other brother

could have been any one of them. He'd never really cared. Hell, Val had never even asked after his *own* father.

"Deal," Harry muttered. Then he frowned, and flicked aside a fluff-covered thong. Sitting nestled in the bosom of a purple body-suit was a little black book.

"Deal?" Val repeated, almost incredulously. "Really?"

"Yeah." Harry picked up the book and quickly leafed through it. It wasn't an address book, and it certainly didn't contain any phone numbers. What it *did* have was a whole lot of memory sticks, each carefully taped to a page.

Mona had been taking photo's, maybe of the men who answered her call. And if one of those men *was* a government official, to what extremes would he have gone to get the photo back?

Murder, quite possibly.

What he had in his hands was a time bomb just waiting to explode.

He gave the rest of the underclothing a quick shake to see if anything else was hidden within them, then he scooped them back into the basket and put it back on top of the washer. Val still stood in the kitchen doorway, mouth agape.

"You really mean it?"

Harry frowned, wondering for a second what the hell he was on about.

"Dinner? Sure."

As much as he didn't particularly want Val fluffing about in his life, he owed Lyle more than a few favors. If repaying a fraction of that debt meant putting up with his brother for a night, then put up he would. Besides, seeing Val and Keale

together could be a riot.

"I'm all a-quiver." Val placed a hand on his forehead, somehow managing to look paler than normal. "The shock is just too much."

"Quit the act and move your carcass from the doorway."

Val grinned and stepped to one side. "I'll get drawing straight away."

"Great." Harry hesitated, frowning. "If you happen to see either of the two men again, give me a call, will you? Particularly if they come in here."

"Sure thing, darls."

Harry pocketed the book, then walked from the room. Val trailed after him and locked the door.

"You really think something has happened to her?" For once, Val's voice sounded almost normal.

"Honestly? I don't know. But my friend's pretty certain something has." He hesitated, one hand on the banister as he looked back at his brother. "Don't go anywhere near them if you see them again. They might be a little annoyed over the butterfly business."

And if they'd kill a siren, they'd certainly have no qualms about killing a runt of a magician.

"I shall make like a bear." Val grinned when Harry raised an eyebrow, and added, "I shall hide in my cave and not come out until spring."

Harry snorted. *That* was unlikely to happen. Val was like the rare moon-flower--he only bloomed at night. He waved a sketchy good-bye then high-tailed

it down the stairs.

Fine rain had begun to fall outside and the street was still deserted. Overhead, seagulls flew, surfing the breeze lazily, looking for the next scrap to squabble over. He studied them for a long minute, then frowned. There were an awful lot of birds up there. You usually didn't get a flock that size unless someone was throwing a lot of food their way, or something big had washed up on the beach.

It couldn't be a whale. Not in Port Phillip, not these days. And the bay's dolphins didn't usually hunt this close to the city's shoreline. The attraction *could* be dead fish washed up on the beach--it had happened once before, when some foreign tanker had decided to offload excess oil in the middle of the bay. Or it could be something else entirely.

Like a body.

He flicked up the collar of his coat then shoved his hands in his pockets and headed down to check it out.

A crowd had gathered on the foreshore. The police and ambulance were already present, the red and blue lights on their vehicles providing the only spot of color in a suddenly gray day.

Harry pushed his way through to the front of the crowd. The waves whispered up the shoreline, their foamy fingers tickling the toes of the woman who lay on the sand, but not quite touching the tiny tattoo of a dolphin that leapt across her calf. A plastic sheet covered her, but the wind was fierce this

close to the sea and the ends flapped unrestrained, revealing chilling glimpses of what had been done to her.

The dead woman was a siren. And if the bruising was anything to go by, she'd been beaten then strangled

CHAPTER FOUR

There were a number of officers standing near the yellow and black tape that marked the no-go zone around the siren's body. Harry studied them, noting the way each one surveyed the crowd. You could tell a lot about the type of cop they were by simply watching how they viewed the public--especially in situation like this. Three of the four showed varying degrees of disapproval in their expressions, but the fourth had a more easy-going look about him. If any of them were going to be forth-coming with information, then it'd be him.

The cop's beetle brows drew down into a slight frown as Harry approached him. "I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to keep your distance."

"I just need to ask a couple of questions." He stopped and dug out his press

card. It had passed its use-by date by about eight months, but no one seemed to notice. Which was one of the reasons why he hadn't handed it back when he'd quit. The press card was an advantage he needed if he wanted to survive freelancing.

The cop glanced at the card, then grimaced and crossed his arms. "You lot are as bad as the bloody gulls. You're always look for a fresh feed and you don't care where it comes from."

"Is that a quote I can use, officer?" Harry said, eyebrow raised in amusement.

The officer snorted, though a glint of humor appeared in his brown eyes. "Do and I'll thump you. Off duty, of course."

Harry smiled. He liked a cop who wasn't afraid to use the threat of physical violence. "Has the corpse got an ID yet?"

"We've run an ID scan, yes. And no, you can't have the name. We've got to contact her relatives first."

If it was Mona, and *if* Lyle was to be believed, then they were out of luck, because she didn't *have* any relatives. "Are you aware of the fact that a siren named Mona was reported missing two days ago?"

The cop studied him for several seconds, all affability gone. "I'm aware of all circumstances pertaining to that case, sir."

Which meant he'd probably taken the report, and could at least guess at the identity of the woman on the beach. It also meant he wasn't about to relay those

suspicious to a nosy reporter. It didn't mean *he* couldn't keep asking questions.

"Then you're treating the discovery of this siren's body as a murder?"

"Until the coroner's report is in, we are unable to say how investigations will proceed on *this* case, sir."

Uh-huh. "What time was she found?"

A slight smile touched the cop's lips. "The *body* was reported at eight forty-six this morning."

Harry's smile grew. This officer might look affable and easy going, but he wasn't dumb and he wasn't about to be tricked into admitting anything. "Who found it?"

The cop raised a beetle brow. "Are you going to piss off if I tell you?"

"I just might."

The cop thrust a chin toward the crowd. "The bloke in the green bike shorts."

Harry glanced across. The bloke in question was a dwarf with legs as thick as tree stumps. The green bike shorts were *not* a good look. "Thanks for the help, officer."

The cop nodded benignly. Harry headed back through the crowd. The dwarf stood at the far end of the tape, close enough to the waves that the occasional wash of white foam bubbled across his Nikes. He stared unblinkingly at the sheet-covered form, his blue eyes haunted.

Harry stopped beside him. "I heard you were the one to discover her body."

The dwarf glanced up. Droplets of rain silvered his eyebrows and lined his

handlebar moustache. "I ain't got nothing to say to no stinking reporter."

As a profession, it obviously *wasn't* held in high regard in this neck of the woods. But given the bad press the papers had been giving the St. Kilda area of late, he wasn't at all surprised.

"I'm not a reporter--I'm a photographer and part-time P.I." *Very* part-time, if the truth be known. He'd worked for Lyle maybe four times in the last two years. "I'm investigating this woman's disappearance."

The dwarf's gaze swept him, assessing. If his expression was anything to go by, he wasn't buying it. "Oh yeah? Why?"

He'd known Mona, Harry realized. It was evident in the pain that mingled with the shock in depths of his blue eyes. He shrugged in response, and said, "Because a friend asked me to."

The dwarf snorted and looked away. "Likely story."

"Did you see any indication of how she died? Was she shot, strangled? I noticed the bruising on her body and around her neck."

The dwarf seemed to hunker down into himself. "You're a bloody ghoul, you are, mate."

And *he* knew something, Harry thought. Something that scared him. It was there in his physical response, and in his voice--it possessed an edge that spoke of fear. "How well did you know Mona?"

The dwarf glanced up again, gaze narrowed slightly. "Ten months," he admitted, almost grudgingly. "I used to drive her about, for shopping and the

like."

Harry nodded. A lot of sirens employed drivers, simply because few of them ever bothered getting a drivers license. His mother had once explained that it was simply easier to pay someone else to worry about traffic and road rules. And, of course, cash rarely ever exchanged hands in such deals. "Do you know if she had any enemies?"

The dwarf's gaze slid away again. "Ever think you're asking the wrong question, laddie?"

Harry raised his brows. "What question should I be asking?"

The dwarf shrugged. "If it were me, I'd be asking who feared her enough to kill her."

Meaning Mona had been threatening to expose one of her clients? Maybe even one, or both, of the men involved in the argument Val had stopped? "When did you last talk to her?"

"Haven't seen her for a week." The dwarf hesitated, and shook his head. Droplets of water fell from his bald head like tears. "She was so excited."

"About what?"

The coronor's men lifted the plastic-wrapped figure and carried her away. The dwarf's gaze followed them, and grief briefly twisted his features before he got control of it again. "About leaving the business," he said softly, "about giving it all away and becoming an honest woman."

"You're kidding, right?" He couldn't help the incredulous note in his voice. A

siren giving up her song was as unheard of as a dragon giving up its wings. It was a part of them, a part of what they were. Christ, how often had he asked his mother to give it up when he was young, only to be told she might as well stop breathing?

"I never kid," the dwarf said sourly, then glanced at his watch. "I have to get going."

Harry dug a business card out of his pocket. "Call me if you feel the need to talk about Mona some more."

The dwarf accepted the card and raised an eyebrow. "You *are* a bloody photographer."

"I don't lie," Harry said, imitating the dwarf's tone.

The dwarf snorted, but seemed to relax a little. "I'll remember that," he said, and walked away.

Harry glanced at the time and saw it was nearly ten. If he wanted to eat for the next week, he'd better get the photos of Keale's crash developed. Otherwise, someone else might beat him to it.

He walked back to his car and drove home to Abbotsford, but finding parking once he'd gotten there was an entirely different matter. Some bastard had parked a big black van in his usual spot, and in the process had managed to block a good half of the narrow street. He edged his old Ford past it then continued on, working his way back up Park Street before finding a spot half a block away from home.

His house was a single-fronted, single-story Victorian on the corner of Park and Stafford, and it pretty much faded into the background when it came to looks. The government had declared this section of Abbotsford a heritage area last year, and most of the other Victorians in the street had received the required face-lift. Harry was in the process of bringing his place back to its original condition, but it was a slow process because he didn't have a lot of money. And unlike some of the other residents in the street, he refused to go the quick-fix route and shell out a retainer for a wizard to place a weekly restoration spell on it. He'd rather do it the old fashioned way, even if it did take longer.

The gate creaked as he opened it, scraping harshly along the concrete. The hinges had obviously dropped again, but it was just another thing to fix in a list that was getting ever longer. He forced it shut, rattling the picket fence in the process, then headed up the two steps to his front door--which now stood wide open.

Laughter drifted out to greet him--raucous, deep laughter he was more than a little familiar with. A mix of amusement and frustration ran through him as he walked down the long hall to the dining room. Four man-mountains turned away from the TV to greet him. He knew one of them--Guy, the biggest of the lot of them.

"Welcome Harry, my friend," he said, and held out a can of beer in a paw the size of a small mountain. "Have a drink."

It was one of his own beers he was being offered. Guy was a good friend,

but like all ogres, he seemed to think what belonged to a friend also belonged to him. And really, who in their right mind would actually argue with an ogre? Especially when they had hands and teeth the size of Guy's?

Not that *that* had ever stopped him. Being sensible wasn't always one of his stronger points.

"Guy, how many times do I have to tell you to stay out of my damn house when I'm not home?"

"But Harry, my friend, you didn't lock the door. How was I to know you weren't home unless I came in?"

A deadlock to an ogre is like a fly on the back of a horse. An irritation, nothing more. "You *could* knock," he said patiently. "And I want the lock replaced." Again.

"But I did knock. That was when the door opened."

"Then use a little less force the next time, and the door might just stay closed for a change."

The ogre grinned, revealing more tannin-stained teeth. "I'll try to remember. And I'll get Kristo to fix the lock. He's really good at that sort of stuff."

Harry rolled his eyes. Kristo was all he needed right now. The gnome was heavily into the planning side of things, but not big on the action. It'd take him a week just to decide what sort of lock was needed.

"Besides," Guy continued. "The only thing worth stealing is the stuff we're drinking."

Meaning he could only thank *God* the ogre's enormous feet couldn't handle the narrow stairs that lead up into the loft. His computer and photographic equipment would have been traded-in for slabs of beer in no time. Hell, he was surprised the TV and sound system hadn't gained legs. "Well, at least with you lot here, no one else would dare come in."

Guy raised his beer and grinned in agreement. One of his compatriots let off a fart that sounded like the rumble of a jet taking off. His two mates fell about on the floor laughing. The whole house shook.

Harry grabbed a beer from the fridge and high-tailed it to the safety of his loft. At least with the window open, the air was less polluted up there. He cracked open the beer, took several gulps, then sat down and fired up the computer.

He transferred and developed the digital images of Keale first. The shot of the dragon, his body aflame with sunlight and mirrored in the Rialto's windows, was a stunner. It almost looked as if two dragons were flying through the skies. The picture of the helicopter and dragon colliding wasn't bad, either. And both would be worth damn good money--enough to replace the booze and the food the ogres were currently demolishing, anyway. There might even be a little left over for much needed house repairs.

He emailed the proofs across to Greg Harris at the *Herald-Sun*, asking if he was interested and stating his fee. The response was almost immediate and, for once, Greg didn't quibble about the cost. Why would he? Eye-grabbing photos on

the front page usually guaranteed at least an extra ten thousand or so newspapers sold.

He waited until the fee had been transferred to his bank account then sent the pictures. With that done, he began uploading the images from the memory stick Lyle had given him.

Lyle was no photographer, that much was certain. There were only five shots on the stick--four of the car from different angles, and one of the driver in government gray. All were blurred, as if taken on the run.

It took him a good twenty minutes to get clarity. He ran off prints, then homed in on both the driver's face and the number plate, and got a couple of copies of those as well. Lyle could probably use his connections to grab the driver's name, and maybe even the name of the man he'd been chauffeuring.

He studied the five images tiled onto the screen for a few minutes longer, then frowned. In one, there seemed to be a vague outline evident through the back window. A passenger, or merely a shadow from the nearby building?

He selected the photo, then zoomed in. The shadow was definitely more the shape of a head than a building edge or pole. He re-selected the area, then played around with the pixels, color shifts, and tones, trying to sharpen the image. He didn't have much luck--the image merged too well with the tint-darkened windows.

He sat back, contemplating options as he drank his beer. Maybe if he actually assigned the glass a different color, the darker, head shaped area might stand

out more. He selected a small area of the car's rear window, changed the color to a light gray, then hit re-assign all. And as simple as that, the image jumped into focus.

It was a side shot of a man looking back at Mona's house, and something sank deep in his gut. He knew that profile, even if he didn't know the man himself all that well. In many respects, the profile was so very similar to his own, if you discounted the hint of grey in the hair, the pointed ears, and the slight hook at the end of the aristocratic nose.

But this wasn't any old elf. This was the head of the Elven council, a man who sat on the High Court bench, a man whose word was almost revered in government ranks.

His father, Charles Bramwell Harrison Phillecky.

CHAPTER FIVE.

This was fucking unbelievable. First Lyle's case draw Val back into his life, now its his goddamn father. He didn't have much in the way of relations, but they all seemed to be popping out of the woodwork right now. Who was next? His other half brother?

The way things were going, he wouldn't be at all surprised.

And what the hell was he going to tell Lyle? He studied the profile for a long moment, then hit print. The reality was, he *couldn't* say anything to his friend until he'd confronted his father.

Not that he owed the old man anything. Far from it. It was more for his mother's sake. She still cared for Bramwell, despite the years and everything that

had happened between them. She'd be horrified if he didn't at least try to talk to his father before he began making accusations that might well destroy Bramwell's reputation and career.

Seeing him would not be easy, however. He'd never denied Harry's existence or parentage, but he'd never publicly acknowledged it, either. In thirty-three years, Harry had met him exactly three times--and for never more than five minutes at a time.

He rubbed a hand across his eyes, then drained the last of his beer. He would have liked another, but the ogres had progressed from farting to a burping contest and he doubted if the air down there would be breathable.

He rose and walked across to the window, leaning a shoulder on the window frame. His neighbor--Dalilah--was currently attempting to hang out her washing. She was perched tippy-toed on the top step of a ladder, but her dwarf-short form still had trouble reaching the line. He shook his head and wondered when she'd get around to actually buying a decent ladder. It was his short three-step she was currently using, borrowed several years ago and never returned.

She must have caught his movement, because she glanced up. "Harry?" she said, her voice deep but holding an edge that grated. "That you hiding up there, Phillecky?"

He grimaced, but leaned out the window a little. "Morning, Dalilah."

"When you going to do something about that house of yours? The smell coming from it is something atrocious."

He somehow managed to restrain his smile. There was a fairly decent breeze blowing this morning, and Dalilah's house was downwind. "Guy's bought a couple of mates over again."

"Guy?" Dalilah's stout little body suddenly quivered with indignation. "That ugly ogre bastard owes me fifty bucks."

She clomped down the ladder then marched toward the gate she'd cut into the fence between their two properties. When it came to privacy, none of his damn neighbors seemed to think he needed or wanted it.

He sat on the windowsill and crossed his arms. There was no way in hell he was actually going down there.

The back door crashed open. "Guy, where the hell are you?"

He could practically hear the ogres cringing from where he sat. Dalilah might be a good quarter of their size, but she was meaner than a pack of dogs fighting over a scrap of bone.

"You got my money?" she demanded. One foot tapped, the noise as sharp as a gunshot on the polished floorboards below.

"Er...no, Dalilah. Mom had to go the doc, and...um...the car needed a new battery and--"

"In other words, you pissed it up against the wall again."

Guy mumbled something Harry couldn't quite catch. But from the general tone of his voice, it wasn't exactly polite.

"Don't you go cussing at me, boy. I want my money, not more of your damn

cheek."

"I get paid in a couple of days."

The ogre's voice sounded suspiciously whiny. Harry rubbed a hand across his mouth, trying not to laugh. He almost felt sorry for the ogres. Almost.

"That black van blocking half the damn street belong to one of your mates, does it?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"Give me the keys." Dalilah's voice was imperious. The wise did *not* ignore that tone. "When I get my money, you'll get your keys back."

"Get real. Shemp needs the van for work."

"Then borrow the money from him. I don't really care where it comes from."

"He ain't got no money either," Guy mumbled.

"Then give me the keys."

"Harry!" Guy said, voice plaintive. "Can you lend me fifty bucks?"

Harry rolled his eyes. Who'd have guessed that was coming? He rose and headed slowly down the stairs. The four ogres were huddled in the far corner. Dalilah stood in front of them, foot a-tapping and hands planted firmly on her hips. A sheep dog working her flock, he thought with amusement.

He pulled out his wallet and got the fifty. Dalilah practically snatched it from his hand, then waved the note fiercely at Guy. The ogre threw up a hand, as if warding off evil.

"Don't you think you can go cheating Harry here. I'll make damn sure you

pay him back, too."

"I'll pay, I'll pay," Guy mumbled.

"Good." Dalilah glanced up. "Want me to get rid of this scum, Harry?"

"Thanks, but no." If the ogres went, Dalilah might stay. He'd take the ogres farts over Dalilah's voice any day. Besides, given what he'd discovered on the memory sticks so far, it just might be handy to have a little muscle hanging about the place. Extra protection never went astray.

"Then I'll be going." She hesitated, glancing around, expression fierce. "There really is a shocking smell in this room. What you been doing, boy?"

"Plumbing's playing up again," Harry said benignly. If he mentioned the true source of the smell, none of them would hear the end of it.

Dalilah harrumphed and stalked from the house, bleached blonde hair standing on end and waving a good-bye. Once the coast was clear, the ogres erupted into gales of laughter, the sound almost deafening. Harry shook his head, then grabbed another beer from the fridge and headed back to the safety of his loft.

Back at his computer, he retrieved the images from the memory sticks taped into Mona's little black book. It was a long task. There were twenty-two sticks, all up, each containing the images of at least half a dozen men. Mona had been a very busy little siren.

He was developing the last of the sticks when he noticed something odd. There was a slight deviation in the color of the last page. He frowned and ran a

finger across it. It felt sticky, as if something had been taped there but ripped away. He turned on the desk lamp, and held the book under the light. There'd definitely been something attached to the page.

Obviously, he wasn't the only one to know a siren's hiding habits. One of her clients had been familiar with them, too. The question now was whether that client also responsible for her murder.

He tossed the book down on the desk and leaned back in his chair. An incomplete client list was better than no client list, he supposed. At least it gave them somewhere to start, faces to match names to. Some of her clients obviously knew each other--maybe one of them might know who was on that last memory stick.

He glanced across to the printer and saw the photo of his father outside Mona's apartment. Bramwell knew a siren's hiding habits well enough. He'd lived for a year with Harry's mother, before the call of duty and prosperity had become more alluring than the call of the siren.

Had his father succumbed to the song of a siren yet again? Harry couldn't actually imagine that happening. Before, Bramwell hadn't even been on the elven council, let alone the head of it. He'd been a magistrate, but not particularly one pegged for greatness and a seat on the High Court bench. He'd been married, of course, but like most elven marriages, it was not a love match, more an arrangement to strengthen political and business ties. According to Harry's mother, Bramwell had, at forty, been little more than a bored adolescent looking

for excitement.

Thirty-three years later and in the prime of both his life and his career, it was doubtful whether he'd risk losing it all for an hour or two of pleasure with a siren.

So why the hell had he been outside Mona's apartment?

Only the man himself could answer that question. Harry reached for the phone and dialed the number he knew by heart, but had only ever used twice in his life.

After several rings, a posh voice said, "Phillecky residence."

It was Jose, the butler. Harry knew a lot about his father's residence, even if he'd never been there. It was amazing what you could discover when you were a bored teenager armed with a computer and a little hacking knowledge. "I'd like to speak to Bramwell Phillecky, please."

"May I ask who's calling, sir?"

"Just tell him Harry."

There was a click, and some symphony trumpeted down the line. He winced. There was something to be said for elevator music--at the very least, it didn't assault the ears. Jose came back after several seconds. "Transferring you now, sir."

Harry had no doubt he was being transferred to both a more secure line *and* room. Wouldn't want the dirty washing aired within hearing range of the neighbors, would we?

"What do you want?" His father's voice, deep and impersonal

"Got a photo you might want to explain," Harry said, imitating his father's tone, letter perfect.

"I haven't got the time for games, boy." Impatience edged Bramwell's voice.

Annoyance surged through him. "Nor have I. This is a photo of you outside the residence of a recently murdered siren. I want a meet, and I want an explanation."

Silence fairly crackled down the line. Harry could almost hear Bramwell's mind ticking over, figuring ways and means to get out of the situation.

"When?" Bramwell asked, eventually.

He glanced at his watch. He still had to contact Lyle, and go see Keale in the clink. Better leave himself plenty of time. "Coffee at Noah's Ark, in Lygon Street. Four PM."

"Fine." Bramwell said, and slammed the receiver down.

No surprise there. He dialed the restaurant and booked a table for two, as the place was usually busy on the weekends, then stared at the photos tiled onto the screen. Bramwell might be his father, but he was also an elf and they definitely *weren't* the fine upstanding citizens humanity believed them to be. Not all the time. Especially not when it was easier--or more discrete--to sweep things under the carpet. And he'd given his father a heads-up about the photo.

He could keep the memory sticks in the safe and the images themselves in the computer, but neither was one hundred percent thief-proof. Thanks to some rather nefarious friends he'd had as a teenager, he could crack most safes

currently made inside of five minutes. A professional would take far less time than that to get into his. And his computer had a dedicated line to the net--any hacker armed with a reasonable amount of knowledge would get into it without problem.

Which meant the only place he could store the images and be reasonably assured of their safety was by transferring them across to Clive's. Clive was an old school mate, a human who these days ran a large ISP. Clive had given him fifty gig of space on his system some time back, in return for Harry doing the photos at Clive's wedding. Up until now, Harry had kept only a few of his favorite pictures over there. But given *these* photos could very quickly become more than a little hot, it might be wise to transfer a copy of everything over there. Then erase all record of having done so. Just in case.

He wasted another hour doing precisely that. Then he wasted more time transferring them all onto a USB drive, which he hid in his bedroom under the mattress. Once he'd secured the memory sticks and book in the safe, he picked up the phone again and dialed Lyle's number.

"Hey, Harry," Lyle said, obviously ignoring the niceties and getting straight down to business. "That punch-drunk friend of yours is in a heap of shit."

Which wasn't at all surprising, considering what he'd done. "You asked them to run the tests for Prevoron?"

"Yeah. They weren't too pleased, and said the results may take four or five days to come through. But the biggest problem is the fact they've charged him

with murder, not manslaughter."

"What?" Harry said, incredulously. "Are they saying he *deliberately* downed the 'copter?"

"Basically, yes. Apparently air traffic were tracking him at the time and he made no attempt to get out the helicopters way."

"He's a dragon, for Christ's sake. He doesn't come equipped with radar, and his eyesight is shot to hell." Harry hesitated. "Besides, the helicopter wasn't exactly in legal air space, either."

"Air traffic say they were."

"Then how do they explain the fact the two crashed over Princes Bridge?"

"Wind shift."

Harry snorted. "It would have to have been a gale to blow a dragon and a helicopter that far out of legal air space." So why would air-traffic lie? Especially over something that could so easily be double checked?

"I'm heading over to the airport now to have a nice little chat with the controller in question."

"Good. Keale going to make bail?"

"Yeah, but not until he sobers up. They'll probably release him tomorrow."

"He talking coherently yet?"

"Close enough. He's still swears he hasn't had a drink since yesterday morning."

Harry tended to believe him. The only thing Keale valued more than booze

was sex. And given a female dragon's mating cycle only lasted two months, he wouldn't have done anything to jeopardize his chances with Rebecca. "Can I get in to talk to him?"

"I've made arrangements for you, yes." Lyle hesitated. "How'd things go at Mona's apartment?"

Telling Lyle over the phone his girlfriend was dead was not something Harry wanted to do. Yet he couldn't lie, either. Lyle knew him too well--he'd detect it in an instant. "Did you know Mona was collecting photos of all her clients?"

Lyle was silent for a moment. "No, I didn't."

"Well, someone did. One of the memory sticks is missing from the book."

"Book?" Confusion edged Lyle's voice. "What book?"

"The little black book I found in the laundry basket."

"The laundry basket? Why would she hide anything so valuable in there?"

"As my mother used to say, would you go through a pile of dirty knickers just to see if there was anything worth stealing?"

Lyle snorted. "You developed the sticks yet?"

"Done both lots, actually."

"Really? Get anything from my lot?"

"Yeah. Remind me to give you photography lessons some time." Harry hesitated. "I've printed out shots of the number plate and the driver. Thought you might know someone who could run a check on both."

"Great. I'll drop by tonight and pick them up. Discover anything else?"

Yeah, someone strangled her and dumped her in the sea, Harry thought, and rubbed his eyes wearily. "Did you know Val owned the apartment block Mona's living in?"

"Really?" Surprise ran through the elf's voice. "His decorating business must be going fairly well, then."

"Looks like it. He stopped an argument between two men in Mona's apartment a couple of days before she disappeared. He's working on sketches for me." And what if one of them was Bramwell? Maybe he'd better hassle Val to get the sketches done this afternoon. He doubted if his father would agree to more than one meeting.

"He never mentioned anything like that when the cops questioned him," Lyle said.

"He wouldn't." And not only because it might have landed him in trouble with the wizard's guild. Val's brain went to mush at the sight of a uniform. All his boyfriends, past and present, had been sailors, firemen, or coppers.

"Well, the sooner we get the drawings, the sooner we might be able to discover what's happened to her."

There was an edge in Lyle's voice that made Harry frown. "Why are you so certain she was in trouble?"

Silence met his question. Harry swiveled his chair around, staring out the window as he waited.

The response that came wasn't the one he wanted.

"What do you mean, was?" Lyle said, voice devoid of any sort of emotion.

Harry swore silently. One little slip, and the game was up. "The body of a siren was discovered on St. Kilda beach this morning."

"And just when were you planning to tell me?" Lyle's voice held a monotone note, yet managed to hint at fury.

"Certainly not over the damn phone. I'm generally a little bit more sensitive than that, mate."

The silence stretched on. He let it, knowing Lyle needed the time to gather himself together.

"ID verified?" Lyle asked eventually.

"Not yet. But I was talking to the dwarf who discovered the body. Appears he was Mona's driver. Wouldn't talk much, but I got the impression he knew a whole lot more than he was saying."

"Darryle," Lyle muttered. "I'll get the little bastard to talk."

The violence in Lyle's voice spoke volumes about the depth of his feelings for the siren. "He did mention one interesting point--that Mona was giving it all up. That she intended to retire and save her song for just one man."

"Me." The admission was almost grudging. "But it was complicated."

"No doubt." For one, Lyle was already married. "Is that why were you so worried about Adelia having you followed?"

"The bitch wants to get her greedy little paws into my money. If she can prove I've been having a serious, long-stand affair, then she gets more, see?"

Harry blinked. Lyle had been with Mona for several years? The secretive sod.
"And you have no idea why Mona was photographing all her men?"

"How the hell would I know, when I didn't even bloody know..." he stopped, and sighed. "Sorry, Harry."

"When you drop round tonight, we'll have a drink to her memory." *If* the ogres hadn't discovered his secret cache of booze by then.

"Okay. But in the mean time, I'll ring the St. Kilda police station and see what I can discover. Talk to you tonight, Harry."

He hung up. The phone rang again almost instantly.

"Finished those sketches for you, darls," Val said without preamble. "When we having that dinner party?"

"When I can get the ogres out of the house."

Val sighed dramatically. "Don't tell me you're still collecting the dregs?"

"It's my natural charm. Can you scan the pics and mail them over?"

"Not a hope, seeing I haven't a computer. But I could magic a copy over, if they're that urgent."

"They are. Thanks, Val." The copies might only last a week, but all he really needed was time enough to make a hard copy.

He heard Val muttering an incantation, then two rolled-up sheets of paper popped into existence, glowing a weird pink color around the edges as they hovered in mid-air, inches from his nose.

"Got them?" Val asked.

"Yep." Energy tingled across his fingers when he grabbed them.

"So, our dinner date?"

He sighed. Val was going to harp on this until it happened. "How about Tuesday night?"

"I'm all a tingle."

"Oh, so am I." His voice was dry. "How many friends you bringing? And remember, my place is not large."

"I'll restrict myself to Bryan, then. He's a fireman."

"Fine. I'll get back with the details later, Val. And thanks."

Harry hung up, then unrolled the drawings. The first one looked human--a man in his mid to late thirties, with receding blonde hair and dark brown eyes. They were the eyes of a politician, he thought. Calculating, almost sneaky.

The second man had black hair, striking blue eyes, an arrogant, aristocratic nose, and wingtip ears. Harry closed his eyes and shook his head in disbelief.

It wasn't his father.

It was Gilroy, his other half-brother.

CHAPTER SIX

Obviously, Gilroy had taken after Bramwell in more ways than anyone had ever imagined. But how had he managed to keep his taste for sirens so well hidden? Gilroy was a politician--a high ranking member of the Liberal Party and the shadow-minister for Education. He had the plan and the backing to go right to the top. He was also a favorite of the media, who followed him about like puppies, charmed by his re-tooled smile and effusive personality.

If Gilroy was hooked on a hooker, then surely the press would have found out by now. Or maybe they had. Maybe Bramwell was shelling out big bucks to keep someone quiet. It wouldn't be the first time.

And if he knew Gilroy, it wouldn't be the last.

But it was a development Lyle was *not* going to be happy with. The Ruprecht

clan were staunch supporters of Gilroy's political aspirations, as were the elven council, who had high hopes that Gilroy might actually be the first elf in history to become Prime Minister. If Lyle tried slinging mud Gilroy's way without having solid, irrefutable proof, he'd find himself totally on the outer, not just half-way there. And they certainly wouldn't consider Val's testimony either solid or irrefutable.

Although it *did* perhaps explain his father's presence outside Mona's. Maybe he'd been trying to talk some sense into Gilroy. Or maybe even Mona.

But no matter what, this was going to get ugly. And he was betting some of that ugly was headed his way. It had been that sort of week, and it didn't seem to be improving.

He pushed to his feet and suddenly realized everything was quiet downstairs. Maybe the ogres had finally left...His gaze caught the time. Two-twenty. Which meant it was time for the only religion ogres truly believed in-- football. They were no doubt kneeling in front of the TV screen right now, fervently praying for the center bounce that would start the day's play.

Smiling slightly, he gathered everything together and headed downstairs.

He wasn't far off in his estimation. Guy and one of the others were sprawled on the floor in front of the big screen. The other two were on the couch.

"You lot planning to stick around awhile?" He walked across the room and opened the side window. If he didn't get air into the place, he wouldn't be able to sleep later tonight.

"You kidding?" Guy didn't bother looking away from the screen. "North plays West Coast live tonight."

So they'd be here until ten, at least. "Lyle's coming over later. Try to be polite to the man if I'm not here."

"I'm always a gentleman," Guy said, and belched loudly.

His three mates didn't respond with their usual gale of laughter. They barely even twitched. The umpire had the ball in his hand. The sermon was about to begin. Harry shook his head and left.

It didn't take long to drive to the remand center. It was Saturday afternoon, the MCG had the full-house signs out, and the game was being relayed live across the country. Melbourne was the home of Australian Rules Football and there were very few people out on the streets.

He parked in Adderley street, just round the corner from the remand center. After feeding the parking meter, he made his way around to the main entrance.

Two electronic scans later, he was being escorted down the sterile white corridors and out a side door into what had once been the old exercise yards. Four dragon-containment cells now dominated the space. Built with titanium, they were fire-proofed and fully electrified, and had a hundred percent success rate so far. Once in, dragons didn't get out. Of course, the real trick was getting something the size of a semi into a cell in the first place.

"Don't touch the walls or you'll fry," the prison guard said, and opened the first of two doors. "Just buzz when you want out."

Harry nodded and stepped into the barren space between the two doors. The first one slammed shut, then a buzzer rang out, and the second door opened.

Keale had regained human form. He lay--not quite spread-eagled--in the center of the concrete expanse, a gangly, red-haired scarecrow staring up at the cloudy sky. Dragon's weren't fond of small spaces, even in human form, so though the cell did have a shelter, it was small and only had three walls. Presumably, the bed, TV and bathroom facilities were all open to the elements, though he'd hazard a guess that the hut had been built in such a way that the rain wouldn't get in. The unions would be up in arms about it, otherwise. Football commentary blasted from the shelter, although he couldn't tell if it were the TV or the radio.

He walked across the yard and sat cross-legged next to his friend. A roar came from the direction of the shelter. The Western Bulldogs--the team Harry half-barracked for--had just kicked a goal and were leading Richmond by a point right on the first-quarter siren.

"I've backed the Dogs," Keale said. "Got three to one on them."

"Good odds, considering they're second on the ladder."

"I though so." Keale stared unblinking at the sky for several more seconds, than ran his left hand across his eyes. His right arm had been plastered elbow to wrist. "The shit has really hit the fan this time, hasn't it?"

"Buried it, I'm afraid," he agreed affably.

"They said I hit a helicopter. Killed three people." Disbelief edged Keale's

voice. "Mate, I can't even remember leaving Rebecca's, let alone flying home."

"Then what in the hell were you doing flying through the city?"

Keale turned to look at him, his black eyes bright with confusion. "The city? How the hell did I get there? *Why* would I even go there? Christ, twelve hours with Rebecca and I'm knackered. It was an effort to fly home--why the hell would I take a detour?"

Harry frowned. "You were only with Rebecca six hours before you left. You told me so, at the bridge after the crash."

"Nah, I was there longer than that. *Had* to have been." He hesitated, and scrubbed a hand across his jaw. "You know, I have absolutely no memory of what happened after I got there. Shame really. If the cops get their way, the memory of all that hot sex is all I'm likely to have for a while."

"Lyle's working your case, and he's one of the best." He hesitated. "Tell me what you *do* remember."

"Got there about eleven-thirty--"

"Why so late?"

Keale shrugged. "She didn't want me any earlier. Probably had another dragon lined up for the early evening shift."

Harry nodded. Dragons were not monogamous creatures. Females were fertile for two months of the year, and usually took on three or four males over the course of a cycle. They could afford to be choosy, given the males outnumbered them five to one. Of course, both sexes *could* have sex other times

during the year, in human form. They were just infertile with other races, which is why you never saw half-breed dragons gadding about the place.

"So you turned up at eleven-thirty?" Harry prompted, when Keale didn't continue on immediately.

"Yeah. Went in, had a coffee, then we went to bed."

"In human form?" Harry asked, surprised. Dragons couldn't conceive in human form.

"Yeah." Keale scrubbed his chin again. "Sort of an appetizer, Rebecca said. Only I can't remember much after that."

Meaning the coffee had probably been drugged. But why? And what had she done to Keale in the six hours she'd him unconscious? "What are your first clear memories after that?"

"Waking up in this fucking cell with a broken bloody arm, my back ripped to shreds, and a freight train thundering through my head. Bit of a shock, I can tell you."

"Your back's obviously okay though." After all, he was laying on it.

"They've shot me full with painkillers and told me to keep off it." Keale snorted. "As if. Besides, I'm floating, mate. Can't feel a thing."

But he would, once the painkillers wore off. The wounds on his back had been pretty deep if the amount of blood seeping into the ground this morning had been any indication. "Tell me about Rebecca. How did you meet her? What does she do for a crust?"

Keale frowned. "She began working in the bottle shop near home about a week ago. I started chatting her up, just for the hell of it. " He shrugged. "Couldn't hurt, I figured, and I had nothing else to do that day."

Harry nodded. Keale worked for the Country Fire Authority part time, back-burning, clearing undergrowth, stuff like that. It gave him enough cash to eat and drink, and that's all he cared about. When he had bills to pay, he just worked a little extra.

"Meaning the famous Finch charisma bowled her over?"

"Worked a charm, mate, I'm telling you. Putty in my hands, she was." Keale smiled at the memory. "She came into season about two days later. Couldn't believe my luck."

Harry nodded. He remembered the phone call. Keale had sounded like a kid who'd had all his Christmas presents delivered at once. "So you never actually got around to uncovering much about her?"

"Nope. Too busy enjoying myself."

Given the decided lack of fertile females in Keale's past, that was totally understandable, Harry thought wryly. Then he frowned. "You said you met Rebecca at a bottle shop?"

"Yeah. Ain't that the stuff dreams are made of? Not only fertile, but able to get me free booze."

"But you told me Rebecca hated beer--that she hated the smell of it."

"She did." Keale hesitated. "That really doesn't make much sense, does it?"

No, it didn't. There was something rotten in Keale's Garden of Eden, Harry suspected, and its name just might start with the letter R. "Where about in Research did she live?"

Keale scrubbed his jaw again. It made a harsh sound, like sandpaper scraped against a wall. "She had a little place on Joslyn road, just off the Research-Warrandyte road."

"Number?"

"Christ, I never took that much notice. It was a little wooden place on the right hand side of the road. Had all these pretty white and yellow daisy's lining the fence."

"I'll find it."

Keale looked at him. "Be careful. A female in heat can be very bloody touchy. Wouldn't like to see you crisped, or anything."

Harry snorted. He'd learned over the years that females of *any* race could be bloody touchy at that time of the month. Although dragons *were* the only ones who could actually barbecue you, then serve you up for an entrée.

"Did you know anything else about her? Any friends or relatives I might be able to speak to?"

"Give me a break. I only knew her a week, and most of that time we spent horizontally."

"Did you at least manage a last name?"

"That I managed." Keale grinned. "Price."

"Which bottle shop did she work at?" And what were the odds that she was no longer there?

"She worked at the Grand's bottle shop. Did the day shift during the week."

Harry nodded and glanced at his watch. It was just after three, which meant he needed to get moving if he was to meet his father on time. "Have the police said anything to you about being released?"

Keale shook his head. "But as I said, I get the distinct impression that if they had their way, I'd be in here for the long haul."

That was yet a possibility, if they couldn't dig up any evidence to prove Keale had been drugged and--at the very least--had diminished responsibility. "From what Lyle said, you'll be charged tomorrow, then bailed. You can stay over my place, if you like." At least that way, Harry could keep an eye on him.

Keale nodded. "Appreciate that."

Harry rose. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Keale nodded and waved a sketchy good-bye with his left hand, his gaze fixed on the sky. Drinking it in while he could, perhaps.

The game must have taken an uninteresting turn, because the city streets were suddenly crawling with traffic. It took him a good half hour to get across to Lygon street, but finding parking anywhere close to the restaurant was almost impossible. He ended up parking in a side street several blocks away and walking back.

Noah's Ark was a small, single fronted restaurant situated in the heart of

Lygon's entertainment district. It served brilliant coffee as well as a mix of Italian, Greek and Australian foods at reasonable prices and, as usual, was packed. Which is why he'd arranged the meet here--there was less chance of their conversation being overheard.

He ordered a coffee then headed for their table, which was situated in the corner, away from the windows. Bramwell wasn't likely to appreciate the chance of roving reporters spotting the two of them together.

Four o'clock came and went. Harry ordered another coffee. Four-thirty slipped by and still no appearance from Bramwell. Either he'd been stood up, or Bramwell had resorted to more nefarious methods of checking the photos out.

His phone chose that moment to ring. He thought it might have been Bramwell, armed with some lame excuse for being late.

He was wrong.

It was Guy.

And the ogre sounded madder than hell.