

## Behind the Masks Part III

The next couple of chapters will cover the aftermath of the Dragon War on other heroes and teams. There will be an inevitable amount of bleed over, but the focus will be on different character povs. Hope you enjoy the two scenes I put in here mainly for my readers on Nifty. As always feedback is appreciated. To be honest, Nifty is about the only site I get regular feedback from, and I'm seriously considering closing my accounts on sites that stay silent. Some of them are an awful lot of work when it comes to coding the stories. All it takes is a few moments to drop me a line and tell me what you like, what you don't like, or just tell me to go to hell. I can be reached at [Cobalt-Blue](http://Cobalt-Blue).

### Scene 13

Aerin was sitting quietly in the large apartment she shared with the other members of The Wrought, and simply reading a book for the online economics class she was taking. It was boring and she had to force herself to stay at it. Lorna was taking a long bath, and Corbin and Leif had taken D'fen out to look for a Yule tree. Mother's Night was in two days and they'd decide to spend the holidays here in Vegas instead of travelling all over the globe trying to visit friends. Of course they were also getting ready for Kronia as well in honor of Corbin and Lorna's family. Leif liked to say that the mixing of two native religions meant twice the number of festivals and holidays.

The team had been very busy during the last week. There was a lot of work involved in just trying to get what was left of the State of California back up and running. The world's eighth largest economy and a population of forty million souls had been decimated to a tenth of that in a matter of hours by a series of earthquakes and tidal waves. What had been on continuous shoreline was now a series of islands, peninsulas, and bays that let the Pacific Ocean reach all the way to what were now the shores of North Las Vegas.

With a few exceptions like Santa Barbara and San Diego, most of California had been reduced to nearly a medieval level of existence. Clean water, electricity, telephone service were now luxuries, not part of the everyday standard of living. Medicine and doctors were in short supply. The whole state made New Orleans after Katrina look like a cake walk. Los Angeles, and San Francisco sat under three hundred feet of water. Hollywood was a lost cause. That entire industry had picked up and moved to Dallas. Aerin suspected they would have moved to Orlando had that city still existed, but it was now a wasteland after the dirty nuke set off on Christmas Day of two thousand one.

Aerin wondered how her country was going to survive. It had been hit by war, disaster and terrorism from all corners in the last decade. New York and Washington DC had been hit in September 2001. Two suitcase nukes had been deployed in

December by Al Quaeda in that same year. The first one as in Atlanta, but had been stopped by the young hero Dancer of the Homeguard team. The second nuke, the one in Orlando hadn't been stopped, and the thing had been a hell of a lot dirtier than anyone thought. The initial blast had killed two hundred thousand people. The radiation killed another million.

Not long after that, the Transhuman War had flared to life. The UN had declared all transhumans to be the property of the world and that it was seizing control of them to deploy at its discretion. They began sending their UNIPACT teams in to capture or kill any transhuman they could identify. In the middle of that war, the Shan had arrived back on Earth after being gone for sixty-five million years. The Chinese promptly tried to shoot them down with a nuke and caused them to veer off course. The pressure wave of their three kilometer wide bioship passing overhead at mach fifty had scoured the city of Mecca off the face of the Earth. Commander K'horal barely managed to get the ship back up for a controlled crash into the Gulf of Mexico.

Again the Transhuman War had flared hot over "kill rights" until the Shan made it clear that they were alive and would defend themselves. The President proved that he wasn't quite as stupid as his critics claimed he was and sent a crack first contact team. They forged an alliance and a peace with the Shan that was still holding even through the idiot in office now. Of course as soon as they had secured the peace both negotiators immediately resigned and married the Shan Commander. As one of the negotiators said, "At the time, it seemed like the logical thing to do."

Then in two-thousand seven Atlantis reappeared under the rule of the heroes formerly known as Liberty's Legacy. Their arrival threw the whole balance of power out whack and forced a lot of revelations about what was going on behind the scenes in the Transhuman War. It turned out that the leader of the UN's push to control the transhumans was the World War Two war criminal Shadu, and the whole thing was an attempt by him to gain enough ancient Atlantean artifacts to summon the ancient Dragon Gods of the Kheltians. Finally, the whole mess came to an end in two-thousand eight at the Battle of Wolf Creek. The nocturnal community had come out in the night and cut the UN forces to pieces and Shadu met his final death at the end of a boot knife.

What no one had realized was that his summoning was a partial success and he'd opened this dimension up to invasion by powerful dragons and their enemies the dragonborn, setting off the Dragon War. Again the nocturnal forces came to the rescue, this time shutting down the dragon's ability to use their elemental based powers. But the official government teams had been disbanded for disobeying a presidential order that told them to stand down and leave the dragons alone.

Now Aerin and her family were simply civilians working for the M-7 Corporation, commonly known as Murphy's Law. They were bonded transhumans contracted by

State City, or even regional governments to supply transhuman assistance for natural disasters and criminal intervention. That at least gave them all an opportunity to continue their educations, something that the the corporation was very happy to pay for.

As she finished underlining the last of the chapter, she came to the conclusion that John Maynard Keynes was a total idiot. Centralized control of the the economy had proven to be disastrous throughout history, and anyone who followed him had to either be an idiot or a closet Marxist. Folding the book with sigh she suddenly felt the presence of another mind take form in the room. It was a mind with which she was unfamiliar, but she knew of it. She turned and faced the woman wearing a black cat suit complete with ears. "Hello, Cat's Claw?" she said neutrally. This woman was one of the highest paid assassin in the world, and one of Richelieu Factor's top agents. She was also the assassin who'd killed Kevin Murphy.

"Hello, Coldfire," Cat's Claw said standing with her arms crossed. Aerin could tell that although she appeared to b relaxed, she was coiled for action at any second.

"There are several people I know that want to skin you alive," she told her. "A few of them live in this building."

"I am aware of that. But it was just business," she said. Someone paid a lot of money to eliminate Kevin Murphy. And now you've gone and resurrected him. This isn't the comic books, how'd you do that?"

Aerin smiled at her, "Haven't you heard? I'm the daughter of a Goddess."

"I don't put much store in Gods and Goddesses," she said.

"Actually, it was a joint effort on the parts of all The Wrought. Why are you here, to do it again?"

The woman smiled and said, "Believe it or not, to do a good deed."

"You'll excuse me if I'm skeptical," Aerin said.

"Of course, you have no reason to trust me. But in this case our goals are the same."

"I don't understand," Aerin said.

"I killed Kevin Murphy. That kill was confirmed and I was paid for it," Cat's Claw said. "I can't help it if some meddling Goddess goes behind me and undoes all my hard work."

"You aren't making a lot of sense, and you sure as hell aren't endearing yourself to me," Aerin told her coldly.

"Like I said, it was nothing personal. I was hired to do a job," she said. "Now someone is highly offended by the fact that you went and resurrected him."

"You?" Aerin asked.

"I couldn't care less. I did my job, and I got paid. Nobody can blame me for your actions," Cat's Claw said.

"Then why are you here?" Aerin asked.

"I have an agreement with Gates Murphy. I won't take any more hits on kids, and well, let's just say that things won't get any more unpleasant than they already are. It has become something of a policy of the Factor now. But someone out there is gunning for Kevin Murphy again. I just thought you should know," the assassin said.

"Who?" Aerin asked.

"Hardcase. She's rather irrational about it. After you guys kicked her ass in Bodego Bay, she sort of went off the deep end. She wants Kevin Murphy dead and she wants the Champion Battle Armor," Cat's Claw told her. "She thinks its secrets will help her defeat you."

"Anybody that would do what she did or allowed to happen in Bodego Bay is already off the deep end," Aerin told her.

"I'm not arguing with you over that. That kind of thing is bad for business, and is highly unprofessional," Cat's Claw said. "But you need to know a little bit about Malleah Niger. She wants the secret to the Champion Armor and doesn't care who she has to kill to get it. She's one sick little puppy." The assassin lay flash disk on the table next to her and then faded away.

Aerin picked it up and looked at it. It was a high end commercial device available at most electronics stores. She dropped it into her pocket and headed down stairs trying to figure out how she was going to explain this visit to Murphy.

## **Scene 14**

The Pacifica Academy would not officially go into operation until the first week in January. However at this moment there were twelve students dragging a huge Christmas Tree into the main hall downstairs. All of them were the children that

Tommy and Elizabeth had brought with them when they'd been rescued from their home dimension by her and Merrick.

Nicole watched as they struggled to get the fifteen foot tree upright and in place. At the base of it, Merrick and Tommy tried to direct them in its best placement. She and Merrick had decided it would best to come and celebrate Christmas here in the mountains that overlooked what was now the Bishop Straights. Tommy had much more work to do to get his school up and running than she and Merrick did theirs, so they could help with some of it over the holidays.

There were other reasons too. She was hoping that since it was closer to Las Vegas that Kymbrall would join them. He'd called her out of the blue about a week ago.

Their conversation had been terse, but it had at least been a conversation. He'd said he'd try to make it for the holidays. Adam and Steve had told her later that they'd try to encourage him to come.

One of the dragon youngsters, a girl of eight or nine came and said, "Ms. Stone? There's someone at the door for you."

She gave the girl a puzzled look and said, "Who is it, Tana?" she asked.

"I don't know ma'am, I didn't ask," the girl said with a shrug. Of course Tana wouldn't have asked. From what Tommy had told her of the way the world had fallen apart in their home dimension; toward the end, asking question was a sign of a dragon hunt. Something all of these kids would want to avoid.

Nicole brushed a stray raven lock from the child's face and smiled, "It's okay, Tana. I'll see who it is."

As she turned, she heard Elizabeth's voice from the stairs, "Kym!"

She turned to look at the door in time to see the physical wince in her nephew's eyes at Elizabeth's greeting. Elizabeth on the other hand didn't seem to catch it. Nicole took a moment to look at him, to genuinely look closely at him. His blond hair reached to his shoulders and was in need of at least a trim if not an old fashioned cut and style. His cheekbones were raw from the cold outside, obscuring the freckles that usually danced across the bridge of his nose and cheeks. They also looked somewhat sunken as if he hadn't been eating as well.

He was wearing a long grey woolen coat and a matching scarf. Under the coat he could see a heavy purple and black sweater and jeans. She noted that not even Adam and Steven had been able to break him of wearing cowboy boots, an affection that he'd picked up at about ten and had yet to outgrow. He had a small bag in one hand and a large sea bag that was bulging with odd angles in the other. For just a moment, she was reminded of his father, Sean.

He looked up at Elizabeth and nodded, saying, "Elizabeth."

Then seeing her he said, "Nicole." She saw a golden wink of light in his right ear when he turned to speak to her.

Nicole let her mind reach out to his and was surprised to see the strength of his shields. Nothing was leaking through them. "Kym!" she said ignoring the reticence in his mind and his body as she rushed and hugged him. "I'm so glad you came," she whispered to him.

He returned the hug but said nothing. She could feel his shields hold tight even with the physical contact. He looked past her and said, "I see you're putting up a tree."

"Yeah, Merrick and Tommy went down and bought the biggest one they could find. We figured that after everything the kids had been through, they deserved a big Christmas. I didn't hear a car pull up. How did you get up here?"

"I flew," he told her.

"Kym! It's ten degrees outside! You flew the whole three hundred miles?"

He shrugged and said, "It's not quite that far as the crow flies."

She reached up and touched his cheeks and found the warmth only now starting to return to them. "You could have taken a plane. We'd have gladly met you at the airport."

Again with the shrug, he said, "That's okay. I liked the feeling of the wind in my face."

Elizabeth flowed down the stairs and said, "Well, at least come in by the fireplace. I'll get you some hot cocoa."

He smiled at her and said very politely, "Thank you, I'm not thirsty." He picked up the sea bag, handed it to her and said, "I brought presents. For the kids. For under the tree. Murphy got the their names and ages for me." For some reason, the inflection of his voice reminded her of a famous celebrity known for his overacting.

"You didn't have to get them anything," Elizabeth said still somewhat oblivious to coldness in Kym's eyes.

Again, he just shrugged and said, "You try telling that to a kid on Christmas Day."

"Well, some of them are nearly as old as you are, Kym." Nicole said.

"I know," he replied as he moved toward the warmth of the blazing fire burning in the fire place. Nicole could see the ice crystals on his coat begin to melt.

"Well, Tommy has a room ready for you," Nicole told him.

"In that case, if you'll show me to it, I'll get unpacked," he told her.

This was not the Kym she knew, that she had helped raise. All the light in those golden eyes had gone out completely, even more than when they'd faced off from each other that first time in Murphy's office after she'd arrived here. There had been a glimpse of it then, burning underneath a deep frozen anger, but it was still there. Now there was nothing. She nodded to him and turned to Tana. "Would you show Kym to the room Tommy set aside for him?"

"Yes ma'am," the little girl said nervously. Then turning to Kym she said, "If you'll follow me." She watched her nephew climb the oaken stairs looking ahead like a condemned man going to the gallows.

She went over to where Tommy and Merrick were standing watching Kym go up the stairs. The look on her son's face was the saddest she'd ever seen. He turned to his mother and said, "To be honest, I'm surprised he came."

"Kym's a good boy," Merrick said. "He knows that this is a time for family." That was one of the strangest things she'd ever heard her husband say.

About five minutes later, Tana came back downstairs and began to help the other children unpack the Christmas ornaments for the tree. After a while, Nicole became so caught up in the tree decorating that when she looked up, the shadows had become long and the sun was setting in the west, yet Kym had not come down.

Looking around, she realized that nobody else had noticed. Brushing the garland from her maroon skirt, she stood and headed up the stairs. Finding the door to the dorm room set aside for Kym, she knocked. There was no answer so she tried the door, and found it to be unlocked. Kym was curled up on the bed, atop the covers asleep.

Turning to leave, she heard a much older voice come from Kym. "I have a question, Shadow."

Stopping in her tracks she turned back to see Kym sitting up, his eyes open but his face still asleep. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"I've been with the boy since the day he was born. I am the one that directed his birth," the voice said.

"Tyr," Nicole replied.

"How is it that you are here and he is not?" she asked her heart growing cold with fear. This was starting to sound like the legends of old prophecies hidden inside one another.

"His mind is asleep," the voice said. "While it is this way, I can speak."

"And what is your question?" she asked.

"Who is this warrior?" the voice asked. "What value does he hold?"

"He's my brother's son. He's my nephew. His value is beyond measure to me and my family. He's my last connection to Alex."

"How strong is he?" the voice asked.

"He's stronger than any of us realize," she told him.

"Is that all he is?" the voice asked.

"Oh, he's so much more than that, but that's something you wouldn't understand," Nicole told the voice bitterly.

"He's a child," Tyr said softly.

"Kym has never been allowed to be a child," Nicole said. "He has always been smarter, more perceptive than any child. He had to be because everyone around him pushed him to be more," she said remembering her arguments with several preceptors over how hard not letting him be a kid. "And for that, I blame the prophecy."

"You are more perceptive than I gave you credit for. He's a man-child. He has the strength of a thousand men, he has the knowledge to twenty-thousand years of combat, but he's a child; in a body that reacts in ways he doesn't understand, and with needs and wants that scare him. You have taught him all the skills he needed to be a warrior and an assassin, to be everything that I planned for him but you- we- all forgot something. We forgot to teach him to be a human. He threatens to become a danger to himself and to others."

"Human is the one thing none of the born have ever been allowed to be, so how can we teach him to be what we don't know ourselves?" She asked. "And what do you mean, and danger to himself and others?" she then demanded of the voice.

"There's a darkness growing in his soul. An anger, a resentment, and a hatred of what we've made him into. Why do you think he is here this holiday?" Tyr asked.

"I would hope because he wanted to spend it with family," she said.

"He is here because he was ordered here by your mate. He feels that once again, his needs must come after those of others- in this case yours, and your son's. He is as you would say, going through the motions, but there is an anger festering below the surface. It's small now, but it threatens to grow."

"What would you have me do? What can I do?" she asked suddenly worried. "We're all going through the motions. We've lost everything. We're refugees from a destroyed universe."

"Why did you order him out of that fight against Cain?" Tyr asked.

"The same reason I ordered Tommy out of it. To save him! To keep him from dying," she said. "To keep him from walking into a trap that he didn't necessarily want to walk out of."

"You just told me he is stronger than we realize," the voice said. "Did you do it because of your weakness or his?"

"Both," Nicole said softly.

"So you sent him into a fight with a hundred fifty other dragons? You could have given him the same order to survive against Cain that you did to survive against those dragons." There was an accusation in that voice and Nicole felt it bite deep. "You saved him, but you destroyed him too. You told someone else that he sees only his weakness. He ended the war, but he sees only that he could not save his fathers. He exposed Simon Walker, but he only sees that Drake's hatchling died because of it. He followed Cain here, fought his way through a flight of dragons but only sees the death of his world. Now he has killed more dragons than any 'born in history, but he only sees that he was too weak to kill a single wounded dragon, something your mate was quick to point out. He tried to stand up to you and Tommy, tried to stand on his own two feet, and your mate cut them out from under him. There will come a time when you're going to lose him. The question is going to be: for how long."

"No, I couldn't have given him the same order to survive against Cain. Number one, we didn't know how many dragons Cain kept as a personal guard. Two, we had no way of actually knowing if Cain was injured or was still weak. He wasn't above killing his own to feed himself. As for losing him, that's already happened. Now all I can hope for is that he knows that I'm here for him when he's ready to come back."

"Well, he doesn't know that. All he knows is that you see him as too weak to fight a single dragon. That he can't be trusted to do the duty that we gave him. Every child grows up, leaves the nest. You did not see yours leave the nest because you were out searching for this one. Kym will stay with you, at least until he's reached what he considers the age of majority. He will leave you then. This cannot be avoided, your mate wrote this in stone when he visited Kym, and ordered him to talk to you before he was ready. The question is what will you build between now and then? Will it be strong enough to draw him back?"

"No, I don't see him as too weak to fight a single dragon. I saw him much like myself too emotionally involved to fight Cain. And I thought you meant by leaving that he'd die," she said.

"He may at that. Mainly because he doesn't see that. He just sees, "that he had two months to bring down Cain and didn't." There are dark thoughts in his mind. He'd put them away for a while, found a way to keep them at bay. But they are back; stronger than ever now," the voice said.

"Suicide?" she asked.

"More along the lines of picking a fight with someone strong enough to kill him," he said. "There are quite few of those here on this world."

"It amounts to the same thing," she said.

"Not in his eyes," the voice said. "Why do you think he gave up the armor and the sword- the sword especially?"

"I don't know. As some kind of grand dramatic gesture to make a point?" Nicole asked.

"Look at his right ear," the voice said.

She stepped closer and saw where it had been pierced, and had a stud in it. Whoever had done it for him didn't do a very good job. The area around the ear was discolored and looked like dead white scar tissue. Then she realized what it was. a burn wound. He'd pierced his ear with orchalchum. It had burned right through the lobe in a scar that would never close. "My god!" she whispered. "That must have hurt!"

"I nearly blacked out from the pain," the voice told her. "But he simply grinned."

"Why?" she asked.

"He's reached a point of facing his pain, and whatever doesn't kill him will make him stronger. He flew here without his phyre shield. The reason he's sleeping is his his body is healing the damage that cold flight did. He wants to be strong enough so that his failures won't hurt," the voice said.

"He's turning into a masochist!" Nicole said in disgust.

"No, that would suggest an erotic element. Instead he's just trying to see how much hurt he can endure, because he sees nothing but a life of pain ahead of him, a life of failure, and of being alone," Tyr said. "The sword was a temptation for him, a temptation that began with the idea of burning off his dragonmarks, to cut the ties of those he thinks hurt him. Later, the thoughts turned darker when he realized that people might blame his foster family for letting him get burned. He sent the here, because part of him isn't quite ready to die, doesn't want to die but is along for the ride. There's a very scared little boy inside him being drug around by the man that has become obsessed with not failing, with not being seen as weak. In short Shadow, we created perfect warrior, but we did it about ten years too early. He wasn't ready for what happened- not emotionally."

"Who can be emotionally ready for what he's been through? Nicole asked. It's impossible." Believing that on some level that Kym had to be hearing this conversation, she faced him and directed her words to him. She spoke both verbally and with phyrespeak against those shields that still held even in his sleep. "You're not a failure, Kymbrall Lane FeyStone. You have nothing to atone for. You're my nephew, if I could change the past I'd do it in a heart beat. Always remember, never forget that you are loved. And I'll do everything in my power to make sure that you know that."

"Words, Shadow. Just words. Back them up with action," Tyr's voice said fading away.

## **Scene 15**

Noah reached back and took David's hand to calm him as they entered the night club. The guy at the door had carded Noah, and then hadn't wanted recognize the ID as legal. He was still having trouble looking younger than he was. When he pointed out that the guy was reading one of his novels and then pointed to the photo on the back of it the bouncer got a little easier to deal with. What bothered Noah though was that the man didn't recognized the significance of the iron rose he wore on his shirt.

Every Forever Knight in the southeast was supposed to admit anyone wearing one of those roses, no questions asked.

As they glided through the dimly lit club, the music blared at them with a techno-sounding club beat that set his teeth on edge. What ever possessed Vlad to start a series of nightclubs he'd never understand. "Faggot, you've got your own clubs in midtown," someone sneered at him. "Whatcha doin' here?"

He felt David's hand squeeze his tighter as he turned to look up at the guy who'd spoken. He was a tall dark skinned man with wavy black hair in his early twenties. His clothing looked designer and probably tailored. Noah smiled at the man and slipped into his mind. He could see the confusion and clutter from too much alcohol and ecstasy. He could also sense where his mind had been violated on more than one occasion by a very clumsy kinter or neo. In the low light, he could see the track marks healing on his neck. Somebody didn't even have the sense to clean up after themselves. Pulling out, he smiled and said, "Sorry, here on business, not pleasure." A quick psychic push on certain centers of his brain sent the man heading for the men's room.

"Did you just do what I think you did?" David asked him.

"I don't know what you think I did," Noah said casting his mind around the room. What he found worried him greatly. "No wonder Vlad wanted us to check into this place while we're here. Somebody's getting really sloppy."

"What?" David asked suddenly getting very nervous.

"At least six kinters and more neos than you can shake a stick at. This place is like a scene out of that bad Wesley Snipes movie," he told his lover. "Let's find Eli."

They made their way toward an empty table and sat down. It wasn't long before a waitress came over and asked them, "What'll it be boys?"

"Sam Adams for me, and Strongbow for him," David said.

"You wanna' start a tab?" she asked.

David nodded and handed her his credit card. "Look at the card," he said.

The waitress looked down at the card with the image of an iron rose on it. Her eyes suddenly got very big. She started looking around and then said, "Look, you'd better get out of here before someone sees that." The panic in her mind just about knocked Noah down. He saw in her memories where half a dozen patrons with Iron Rose cards had disappeared- most of them were vampires.

"Where's Eli?" Noah asked.

"Eli doesn't work here anymore," she told him.

David and Noah looked at each other. This was not good. Vlad specifically told them to ask for Eli, his agent here. "Funny, the owner didn't mention that he'd changed managers," David said neutrally.

"New owners," she said.

"Who's the new owner?" Noah asked.

"I am," a large man said from behind her. "Who's asking?"

David started to say something, but Noah squeezed his hand under the table. *\*He's lying. He's covering for his boss,\** Noah sent down the link they shared.

Noah looked at the man and simply said, "We're from the Council."

"What council?" the man asked.

"The Council of Whispers," Noah told him surprised at just how uniformed this man was.

"Never heard of it," he said. "But if you wanna' talk, we can go to my office."

Noah looked at David and nodded. He wanted to get to the bottom of whoever thought they could take over one of Vlad's businesses without informing him. The fact that they were indiscriminately killing vampires and other nocturnals as part of it was even more of a concern. The news they'd been getting out of Atlanta lately was not promising. "Sounds good," David said.

Noah saw several neos peel themselves off the wall and follow them toward the back of the club. He was right, this was going to be an ambush. Damn, he wished Brendan was here, twelve foot of raging weretiger would make even a Damned think twice. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw a familiar form nod toward him and fall in line behind the neos. *\*Guess who's here?\** he sent to David.

*\*Kent,\** David sent back. *\*I saw him when we came in.\**

As they made their way down the dark hall, Noah could sense the vampires waiting in the rooms off to the side. In the bathroom, he could feel where the man he'd sent to empty his bladder was being emptied of something else. He could feel the wild surge of fear that the nocturnals so close by were generating in his body. He could sense the excitement of the kill in their minds. He had a half a mind to let them have a taste of his blood. What it would do to them would serve them right.

If they wanted to go to war with Vlad that was their right. Any nocturnal could challenge him for his chancellorship. But it was way out of bounds to try and start your own undead army out of the patrons of his nightclub to do it. That attracted the attention of the few Directive hunters left. It also fell into his and David's jurisdictions as spiritwalker and elementalist, as judge, jury, and if need be executioner.

As they entered the office a tall black man with tats all over his arms and neck was sitting behind the desk. He was wearing several heavy gold chains around his neck. Peppered among them were vampire's fangs. "Two more flashing them rose cards," their guide said.

"You are one dumb fucking pair of cock-sucking faggots to come walking back here expecting to talk business." He turned to his guide and said, "Feed 'em to the girls."

As the man grabbed his shoulder, Noah reached up touched his hand, and released a quick burst of UV radiation. He was rewarded with a yelp of pain and spun on the man holding his now seared hand. He wasn't subtle, he wasn't gentle. He blasted through the man's mind and simply shut it down. "Sleep," was all he said. He didn't have time for finesse.

Turning back he could see where guy behind the desk was coming to his feet, his fangs deployed. At least his face hadn't become distended and grotesque like a neo. He was at least a kinter. The gold of his necklace suddenly became red hot and began to melt at David's command. The smell of burning flesh filled the room, as he grabbed at the chains to pull them away from his body. "Sit down, and we'll let you live just a little longer," David whispered to him.

Noah reached out and telekinetically shoved the vampire back into his seat and pinned him there. "Who are you?" David demanded.

"I ain't tellin' you nothin'!" he hissed at them.

"Why do I even bother asking?" David said to the air.

Noah reached out with his mind and read the vampire. "His name is Dushuan Davidson. He's only been a vampire for about three years now. He's got a talent for shadow porting and used that to get the drop on Eli. He's been running a vampiric prostitution ring out of the club," Noah told David.

Suddenly the door opened and Kent slipped in a stake in his hand. Noah noticed that his white shirt was now covered in thick black blood. "Six male neos, eight females. Two kinter," he said.

"How long?" David asked.

Kent looked down at his watch and said, "Eighty-eight seconds."

"You're slowing down. Too many midnight diaper changes?" David asked with a smile.

"Don't worry, your time is coming. In spades from what I hear. How're the girls?" Kent asked.

"Complaining of being hot and fat," Noah said.

"You live in South Florida, what do you expect." He turned to the vampire sitting in the chair and asked, "How you holding Davidson in place? Every time I've had him cornered, he's disappeared out of my hands."

"Simple," Noah said. "No shadows."

"Find out what happened to Eli and the others?" Kent asked.

"Dead," Noah said.

"Your friend is not going to be happy," Kent said. "Maybe you should send him this thing to play with."

"I ain't afraid of nobody," Dushuan said squirming in his chair.

Faster than Noah's eyes could follow, Kent's arm lashed out and the stake just seemed to appear in the vampire's heart. He smiled at Noah and said, "I really hate stupid people. Figured he'd be easier to ship this way."

"This means we have to drive back to Carlton," Noah said.

"So?" David asked. "A nice ten hour drive with two of my favorite people to talk to. Sounds good to me."

"With a vampire in the trunk," Noah said. "You know they're going to make us shower for three hours before letting us in the house. I can feel the skin peeling off already."

David grinned and said, "I'm sure we can find something to occupy our time for a few hours naked in the water."

"Yeah, but they're going to make us sell the car," Noah said.

"I'll buy you a new one."

Noah grinned and said, "Okay."

## **Scene 16**

Seth came home in a bad mood. It had been a long day of dealing the GBA on several missing persons in Atlanta. The more he listened to the facts, the more he thought this was more of a case for the Department of Nocturnal Affairs, than Murphy's Law. Come on, the manager of a nightclub called The Forever Knight and several patrons were missing. It had vampire involvement written all over it.

Then there had been the assist in cleaning up the mess from the battle of Spaghetti Junction during the Dragon Wars. He'd managed to help by moving a lot of the ice that was still melting and threatening the city of Chamblee with flooding. Also some idiot set up a shrine to Yankee Zephyr in the spot where she died on 75/85 North. Stopping to put flowers and teddy bears under an overpass on one of the busiest highways in the country was not a smart idea. He'd been able to suggest a better spot for it, at Stone Mountain where the base she worked out of was.

Boy had that set off a firestorm of protests. Stone Mountain was a Confederate Battle Memorial site and some people could not leave that kind of thing in the past. He'd pointed out that the Homeguard School was near the park, and that it would help change the karma of the place. He also mentioned the irony of a heroine with the name Yankee Zephyr working out of a Confederate Battle Memorial was karma in action. In the end, he came to the conclusion that some people just wanted to look for a reason to be offended and to justify their hate.

Finally there had been a meeting with the Atlanta Pride Commission. Being as he and Dustin as Moonwind and Challenger were the most openly gay transhumans in the country, they'd been asked to be Grand Marshals of the parade. There was a lot of disagreement on what kinds of activities would be allowed in the parade. Neither he nor his partner were comfortable with the audacious displays of sexuality on the city streets that gay pride parades were known for. That of course stuck his foot in another hornet's nest. People just could not seem to understand that he found half naked guys in thongs simulating sex acts in public to be disturbing- no matter how cute the guys. He was responsible for raising his nephew, Lee and was not about to expose him to that kind of behavior, gay or straight.

As he entered their newly acquired Victorian home, the smells of fresh baked cookies were coming from the kitchen. He smiled at himself as he hung up his coat and looked in the mirror by the door. His hair was still in the process of fading from black to blond as his huge black wings disappeared into his back and ankles. He ran his fingers through the now blond locks that reached to his shoulders and noticed that the ends were beginning to split. It was time for a trim.

Atlanta had been unusually cold the last few weeks, reminding him more of his Decembers in DC than anything he'd have expected in the deep south. His cheeks had a nice rose color to them from the wind and his hands were still cold. He considered

adopting some gloves for his costume but thought better of it. They would get in the way of choosing arrows from his quiver by sense of touch.

Entering the kitchen he found his eight year old nephew, Lee and his husband Dustin pulling a tray gingerbread cookies from the oven. "Coffee's on the counter," Dustin told him putting the tray down on the range top of the huge stainless steel Viking appliance- it had been a major selling point of the house to him. He pulled his oven mitt off, something Seth knew he wore only so that Lee wouldn't try take things out of the oven with his bare hands, and leaned over the boy to kiss Seth hello.

Smiling, he looked down at his nephew who was saying, "Ewww, you two are as bad as Mom and Robbie!" Seth chuckled as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"That's because we love each other just as much, Kiddo," Dustin told him. It was good that Lee was able to talk about his parents in a more normal fashion now. It had been over two years since they'd died at the Battle of Wolf Creek, and his Mom's death had been caught on camera and broadcast across the whole world. It was one of those seminal images of their generation: A UN soldier shooting her in the back as she cradled her dying husband's body. For a long time, Lee hadn't wanted to even mention his folks, because the pain of their loss was so intense. Seth thought that going to school near where she died had been helpful to him. He himself still had nightmares about that fight.

"How was your flight home?" Seth asked changing the subject.

"Cool!" Lee said. "Jett let me come home in battleform!"

"Battleform?" Seth asked. "Do they let eight year olds into battle these days?"

"It's what all the shifters at school call it," he said. "They let me play furball with them as long as I wear it."

"But remember Lee, you're not a shifter, you're a feral. You can emulate their power, but you aren't tied to the phases of the moon," Dustin said. "Your power is transhuman not mystical." When Lee's powers first started manifesting themselves, he tried to use the fact that he took a werecat-like form as an excuse for bad behavior. Seth and Dustin had nipped that idea in the bud very quickly pointing out that his mother never acted that way- a slight stretching of the truth, but Lee didn't know it. Of course the difference between Lee's cat form and his mother's was that Lee's form was made of a golden hued metal, a legacy from Block, his biological father's stone morphing powers.

"I know, Uncle Dustin," Lee said as if he was stating something obvious.

"Besides, wasn't that a little tiresome on Quantum?" Seth asked. "You weigh what, eight hundred pounds in that form?"

"Four hundred forty-three kilos," Lee corrected proudly. Lately, he'd been insisting on using the metric system instead of the English.

"Guess, we're going to have to reinforce the stairs," Dustin said to him.

"And Jett said it was okay, that he could fly faster that way," Lee added.

"Yeah, and you liked to have never got all the ice out of your fur," Dustin said.

"But it was fun," Lee countered.

"I'm sure it was," Dustin said. Then turning to Seth he said, "They got here about three thirty. School let out for the Yule Break at 3:00 o'clock." Wolf Creek Academy recognized both Christian and Asatru Holidays.

"That's pretty slow for Quantum," Seth said.

"I think he had to keep it below mach one because of having Lee with him and the need to stay under radar."

"The FAA is becoming difficult for us flyers," Seth said.

"Not for you," Dustin countered.

"Only because I shrink when I want to get somewhere fast without staying low. Six inches is a little small for most radar to pick up," Seth said watching Lee snitch a cookie from the tray and bounce it between his hands a few times before biting into it.

"How was your day, Uncle Seth?" Lee asked. "Did you help catch those bad guys?"

Seth shook his head and frowned, "No, little buddy. I think this is more of a job for the DNA than Murphy's Law."

"Oh, speaking of nocturnals," Dustin said. "You remember that little blond guy who was hanging around with the elementalist?"

"The one who wanted to wear a cape?" Seth asked with a smile.

"Yeah. Guess who he is?" Dustin said.

"Don't know."

Dustin tossed him a book a paperback that was on the counter. *Split Empire- Tior's Tale* by Noah Hale. "He's your nephew's favorite author."

## Scene 17

Adam Atlan watched as his wife and daughter directed the decorations for the Winter Festival. It seemed to be a constant among certain cultures to have some kind of festival during the Winter Solstice, and the followers of Kierra Atlan were no exception.

The festival was not that different than those practiced in ancient Northern Europe, and Adam suspected that they have been a hold over during the long interim, sort of a cultural memory from the days of the Empire.

Of course when they'd founded House Atlan, they'd brought some of their own traditions with them as well, and those sort of spread among their people. It was a strange cultural loop, where the origins from which decorating a tree and gift giving came was lost in time. Did they originally come from what Adam's family brought back in time to the Ancient Atlantis, to be preserved in the memory of Europeans, or did they originate among the Atlanteans to be carried down the centuries until Adam and family brought them back. It was the kind of conundrum to give even his daughter a headache.

Honestly, Adam didn't care. It was one of his favorite times of year for several reasons. This year promised to be exceptionally special as their daughter was going to be joining them. As Adam sat there watching in a sort of domestic bliss, Dannon slipped up beside him and ran an arm through his and leaning his smaller head against his shoulder. "And what has you all warm and fuzzy inside, Love?" he asked.

Adam put his arm around the smaller man and said, "My family," he said. "For the first time in too many years, we're all here, we're all healthy, and the world's conflicts have settled down to a low simmer. I'm going to take my joy where I can find it."

"You sound like the High Quester. She on a real kick about remembering the High Mother's blessings at this time of year." He snuggled in closer and said, "I agree with your sentiment. It's good to have us all here." There was something about having Dannon close to him that always brought out the gentle side of Adam, even more so than Katherine.

"Would you look at those two," Katherine said to their daughter pointing to where they were standing. "Standing there watching while we do all the work."

"Technically you are directing the work, my beautiful queen and wife," Dannon said. He pointed to where the workers were decorating the tree, "They are doing the work." Then smiling hugely, he added, "Besides, I'm here on official business."

"And what official business is that my most snarky of fathers?" Winter asked with a teasing tone and a smile. Her long ice white hair was pulled back to cascade down her back like a sheet of frozen water. She was wearing a simple gown of midnight blue, and a single tear-drop diamond pendant at her throat.

"I'm here to remind both of you that you have fitting for your ball gowns. The woman made it clear that if I didn't see to it that you both were there on time, that she'd make my life miserable," Dannon said with a smile.

The two women looked at each other and Katherine said, "I almost forgot."

Smiling, their daughter nodded and said, "Don't feel bad, so did I." She then turned to her fathers and asked, "Dare we leave you in charge of the decorations?"

"I think we can manage it Snowflake," Adam told her.

The use of the old pet name brought a smile to their daughter's face. "Then we leave you in charge. Try not to get it too tangled up."

Adam and Dannon chuckled and Dannon said, "I'm not sure we can do that. I mean we only learned to fasten our boots five centuries ago. This may be above our heads."

"Maybe be we should call Sloan and Willie," Adam suggested with a grin.

"No you don't!" Katherine said gathering up her things. "Sloan's idea of putting up bunting is to use a cannon, and William is hopeless when it comes coordinating the colors. How a man who works with electronics can be so color blind, I have no idea. You two take care of it yourselves."

Adam laughed and kissed their wife and daughter. "We'll take care of it. Just don't miss your appointment, or the fabricator will put the seams too tight in Dannon's jacket."

"Can't have that," she said, kissing him and the Dannon.

When the ladies had left, Dannon turned to him and asked, "Have you looked at the guest list for the official Winter Festival Ball?"

Adam shook his head and said, "No, why?"

"Oh just some in-laws are on it. Some of Katherine's distant cousins, and your former school mates."

Adam found himself smiling at that thought. It had been a long time since he'd seen the Windsor boys- a lot longer for him than for them. Time dilation was a real bitch sometimes."

"You realize that this ball will be Winter's first formal engagement since she came of age," Dannon said.

Adam stopped a moment and said, "I hadn't stopped to think about that. She's not exactly the same little girl in pigtails who used to drive her security detachment up the wall by disappearing on them is she?"

Dannon grinned at him and said, "No, our little girl has all grown up." He stopped for a moment and added, "You do understand that as Katherine's daughter, the European royals recognize her as part of their nobility don't you. And since most of the world's governments have already recognized the Atlantean throne, that makes her fair game as far as marriage is concerned. Some of them may start to see her as a way to influence us."

Adam nodded at the thought. "I hadn't considered that, but you may be right. Winter has a good head on her shoulders though, I don't think she's likely to do anything foolish. And besides, Katherine's father went to a lot trouble to keep the transhuman gene out of the British Royal line, and Winter knows that. I think we'll wait and see what she wants to do about that kind of thing herself. Let's face it, she's a time lord. It's going to take a pretty special kind of man or woman to keep up with her."

"Just thought I should bring it to your attention," he said. "I know how you and Sloan can get about her."

"What are you suggesting, Dannon?" Adam said.

"Just that you two are very good fathers, and are very protective of our little girl. What was it you were trying to do to Merlin when she pulled you off of him?"

"I was kicking him repeatedly," Adam said. "Hard."

"And where were you kicking him?" Dannon asked with a grin.

"Just some place to make sure he didn't get any wrong ideas. She was after all only fourteen."

"Just thought I'd remind you love."

"I'm reminded," he said.

"Just as long as you realize that you can't do the same thing to scion of the House of Windsor," Dannon said.

"I know that. They're both old friends anyway."

## **Scene 18**

"I'll kill someone before I let that happen," Corbin said rather forcefully. Every eye in the room turned to the quiet young man who blushed deeply at the attention. The gathering was a meeting to discuss the security situation to protect Kevin from being assassinated a second time. Leif and Jake were currently securing Kevin's new quarters on ten north.

"Granted I share the sentiment, but I'm surprised to hear you say it quite so forcefully," Gates said.

"Why?" Corbin asked genuinely confused.

"Well, I'm his mother, of course I would feel that way. You barely know him," Gates Murphy said.

Corbin frowned and said, "That's not quite true. That spell required me to get to know him pretty thoroughly. You can't drag someone back from the dead, especially when they've been dead that long without getting to know them, and their history. It's a pretty primal connection," he said. What he was not telling her was that it also required the investiture of just a little bit of his own personal essence. He would be connected to Kevin Murphy for the rest of their not quite mortal lives.

"I'm sorry," Gates said. "I didn't know that."

"It's okay. It's one of the reasons that the spell wouldn't work for most mortal mages," he said.

"None of your spells work for any other mages, mortal or otherwise," his twin, Lorna teased him. She of course was right. His spells weren't exactly unique, they just didn't follow the rules of normal magic. It was his divine gift. All those disclaimers in the front of his gaming books meant nothing to him. If the spell was in the book, he could cast it. Spell components, and casting time didn't matter, all that mattered was that he'd opened the book to that page.

D'fen smiled over at him and said, "None of it makes sense to me, but I agree with you. I have grown rather attached to our young scientist and find this news to be rather disturbing." He cocked his head to the side in that peculiar gesture that so many defenders used- Corbin speculated it had something to do with how their sonar worked.

"I would however like an opportunity to engage Hardcase first hand. I regret that she escaped our first encounter with her."

"What do we do about protecting Corbin's investment?" Lorna asked.

"Hardcase is not an assassin, she's a thug," Aerin said. "I don't believe that we have to worry about the same kinds of threats as Cat's Claw brought to bear against him.

Hardcase is more likely to simply try and hit the building with a missile or something like that."

"Highly ineffective," D'fen said. "This building is an amalgam of Shan, Atlantean, and human technology developed by Kevin, and refined by Adam and Steven. It could withstand being at ground zero a a five megaton atomic blast and remain standing."

"Well, that's good to know," Jake said as he entered the room and sat down. "Leif's with Kevin right now." He looked at everyone and said, "I've worked out a schedule so that he can have around the clock security."

"Isn't that going to cut into your time with him?" Corbin asked the young man.

Jake shrugged his shoulders, "Maybe, but at least there will be some time with him. If Hardcase gets to him, then it won't matter." He grinned and said, "You can always turn your head."

"What about his Champion access unit?" Corbin asked. "Does he keep that with him at all times?"

Jake nodded and said, "He's been working on it. The old unit is obsolete. He's developed something else so he doesn't need it anymore."

"What?" Corbin asked.

"Dermal implant," Jake said. "Located behind his ear."

"Impressive," Aerin said from across the table. "He's been back for about a month and he's already upgraded the most advanced suit of power armor the world has ever seen."

"He felt the old unit dated the armor too much. He's working on programming several new battlemodes as well. I've been reading technical specs for the past week, and some of it is over my head. Part of this I blame on Leif and Trey."

"What do you mean?"

"He's exploring zoological configurations for it as well. I swear if he comes up with a blue wolf, or a triceratops, I'm going to turn him over my knee and spank him," Jake said. "The coding is what's really holding him back. He's having to invent several new computer languages to make the damn things do what he wants them to."

"I am curious as to how he is able to reconfigure non-organic technology into so many different forms," D'fen said. The fact that Shan technology was biological in nature, meant that he was sometimes surprised by a purely mechanical approach to it.

"Actually, I think he's crossing the line between biology and technology. He's using technology to mimic biological functions," Jake said.

"How did he get interested in that kind of technology?" Aerin asked.

"Robotech," Murphy and Jake said together.

"He's been a fanatic about it since he was a kid. He started designing his own when he was five. He started building it when was thirteen." She looked over at Jake and smiled. "By mutual agreement, we don't mention the other influence on him."

"Must be some story," Lorna said.

"It is, but some things we just don't talk about," Jake said fighting to keep a straight face.

"For now, he will have a security contingent from the main base, plus at least one of Murphy's Law with him at all times," Gates said. "Once we ascertain the exact threat level to him, we will modify it. I'm also assigning some EMP weapons to the security team. They should not effect anyone on the teams, but I'm told they will play havoc with Hardcase's armor. Any questions?" Nobody said anything, it was all pretty simple. "In that case, you've got the schedule worked out by Jake and Leif. Get any changes to it approved through Jake since he's in charge of Kevin's security." She smiled and added, "And he answers to me."

The meeting broke up and everyone went their separate ways. "Guys," Aerin came up where Corbin and Lorna were standing and said, "I have some shopping I need to do. I'm not due to go on security detail until tomorrow. Do you want to come with me?"

Corbin looked at his sister. Her face made it clear that she had other plans. He looked back to their lover and shook his head, "No. I've got some reading I want to catch up on," he said.

"Okay. I'll see you in a couple of hours. I've got my phone if you need me." With that she waved and headed out the front door, waving bye to them.

Later upstairs in their quarters, he settled in to his favorite chair with a stack of his gaming books on the table next to it. Lately, he found himself with a plethora of sources to use. The problem was that he could only lug around so many books at a time, and downloading them to his PDA hadn't worked. He had to pick and choose which books he would haul around with him, otherwise his magic was severely limited.

He was unsure how much time had passed while he was marking spells and putting little tabs on the pages of the various books, but the little sheet was almost gone when he sensed Lorna standing over him. He'd sensed her moving in the periphery of his vision when he looked up to see her standing there.

It took his mind just a moment to realize that she was wearing a very sheer little pink negligee and matching panties that left very little to the imagination. There was a little red heart just above the dark patch of black hair above her sex. It perfectly accented her lush frame, and very sexy body. "A girl could start to feel like part of the furniture around here when you stick your nose in those books," she said with her hand on her hips. "I have something better for you to stick your nose and other things into."

The sight of her set a stirring in his loins. He smiled and put the book down saying, "Trust me, you won't be mistaken for the furniture when you're wearing that," he said with a smile holding his hand out for her. "That's enough to wake the dead."

She took his hand and collapsed down into his lap with a smile, saying, "That's better." She kissed him and began to unbutton the front of his shirt, running a hand along his well-defined chest. Unlike Leif who was built like the quintessential superhero, Corbin had a much thinner runner's frame with a chest unbroken by even the first hair. His skin was smooth, tanned and unblemished, and he felt more than just the spike in his slacks harden as she began to run a finger around his left nipple.

He kissed her seriously, probing her lips with his tongue as he felt the link the two shared flare open with her mouth. Their minds raced toward each other, co-mingling as they did in the womb into the perfect sharing of heart and soul. He gently ran his hand over the outside of the sheer material of the nightgown rubbing her hardening nipple and feeling the heft of her breast. She groaned against him as their tongues danced. She tasted of cinnamon and sugar, and a thousand other promises and delights.

He loved the feel of her breasts, not too large, and not too small. He loved the look of them, lightly tanned with light brown nipples that hardened to the touch. He loved the heft of them as they seemed to float on her ribcage defying gravity. Mostly he loved them because they were part of her. Pulling back from the kiss he leaned forward and pushed the silk aside, to lick around the areola, before gently sucking the hard little nipple into his mouth. She pulled his face to her chest and groaned.

"I have an idea," she said pulling away.

"What?" he asked.

Standing, she took his hand and pulled him toward the bathroom. "Didn't you already take one long bath today?" he asked with a smile.

"Yeah, but that was alone," she grinned at him and as they made their way to the huge double tub. Reaching over, she set the drain, and started the water, giving Corbin a clear view of her silk covered sex. He could see a small spot of moisture spreading out from where the lips met below her her deliciously rounded butt. Beyond the lips he could see where the material had the black curls of her pubes pressed flat.

Neither he nor his twin had much body hair, something unusual considering their Greek heritage. But then again, maybe not, their mother was after all the Titaness of the moon, and there was no telling what effect their divine heritage had on their bodies. As she spread the expensive bath salts that she loved into the water, he dropped to his knees behind her, pushed the material aside and ran his tongue along the the length of her opening. He loved the taste his twin's pussy, it always sent a shudder of desire straight through his body.

Standing she pushed him back gently and said, "Let's save that for later." Pinning him against lavatory, she licked around his lips and then kissed him again, the whole time, her fingers were nimbly unbuttoning his shirt. "I want you you naked too. And before you put your face back down there again," she reached behind him and pulled down a razor. "I want to shave you."

He smiled at her and pulled her body tight against his. She felt lush and soft in all the right places. He kissed her again, and then said, "Sounds sexy. Just one thing though."

"What?" she asked.

"That's Leif's razor. Mine's in the other drawer," he told her as she pushed the button-down off his shoulders and began to work on the buckle of his belt.

The hot water from the tub began to steam up the room, and by the time she'd managed to pulls his slacks and briefs off, the large mirror was completely fogged over.

A few seconds later, they were both naked and slipping into the warm water of the tub. Corbin was reminded of their baths together as children, when they would play with and explore each other's bodies. When they became older, they resumed that exploration and had become each other's first lovers. Now they shared their bed with two other scions of the Gods. But this, this was a return to their first memories.

He watched as she lathered up the badger-hair brush in the cup of shaving soap. With a deft and gentle touch she spread it across his face, thick and luxuriously. He found her light touch to be both strong and erotic at the same time. She smiled at him and reached under the suds to find his rock hard dick sticking almost straight up. She pulled his hips down until he was stretched out against the sloping back of the tub, the base of his skull resting on the edge of the small counter surrounding it.

Sliding forward she straddled his hips and took hold of his dick. With a practiced ease, she lowered herself onto it, until he was buried deep inside her. Sitting there, she took the razor and began to slowly shave his face, her movements forward and then back slowly stimulating him. She would lean forward against him slowly, pulling up until only the head of his dick was embedded in her hot warm sex. Then as she slowly and gently stroked down with the razor, she'd settle herself back until he was buried pubes deep in her. Each time their thoughts would intermingle again, and he started feeling a fullness in a part of his body that didn't exist.

As the shaving soap and stubble were removed from his face by the razor, the long lingering touches of their bodies, built their passion. By the time he was clean shaven, taking two passes with the shaving soap and razor just for fun, she was stretched out fully against him, her breasts meeting his. The razor and shaving cup, discarded over the edge, he grabbed a double handful of her butt and rolled her over.

Getting a good grip against the other side of the tub with his toes he took his weight onto his hands and began to thrust in and out of her in long slow strokes. The soft sounds of the suds-filled water sloshing against the sides of the porcelain tub was in harmony with the gentle moans of pleasure they were both making. Slowly the pressure in both of their bodies began to rise. He felt the something deep in his lower torso begin to contract, and her soft warmth began to spasm around his dick. His balls pulled tight up against his body as he thrust as deep into her as he could.

They both trembled against each other, their orgasms locking their minds together. As the wave of pleasure slowly subsided, he opened his eyes and kissed the end of her nose. Reaching over he pushed his body off hers, feeling his dick come free of her soft wetness. Standing in front of her, his now softening dick over her face, he stepped out of the tub and offered her his hand.

Taking it she rose from the sudsy water like Aphrodite born from the foam of the sea. He took the thick terry-cloth towel and gently began to dry her off, paying careful

attention to each and every part of her body, first drying it and then kissing it, loving the taste of her skin mixed with the last residue of the bath salts.

When he was finished, he held his hand out for her to wait. But instead she took the towel from him and returned the favor. Once the task was completed, he kissed her gently then swept her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom where he lay her out gently on the huge bed the two of them shared with Leif and Aerin.

Starting at her feet, he kissed his way up the inside of her calves and knees and then her thighs. Eventually reaching the juncture between her legs, he put her knees over his shoulders, and lovingly ran his tongue along the soft skin of her smooth lips. She moaned above him and ran her fingers through his thick black hair, pulling his face hard against her sex. The taste was exquisite- a mixture of the bath salts, her sexual excitement, and his own cum. He drove his tongue deep into her as he lapped the remnants of his own passion from her depths.

It wasn't long until she pulled his face tight up against her and he switched targets, pushing and pulling against her hard little clit with his tongue. Finally he took the nub between his lips and sucked it like a small cock. She shuddered and locked her legs tight around his head as she bucked her sex against his face.

When she finished with her second orgasm, he heard a clapping noise coming from the doorway. Looking up, he saw Aerin standing there with a big smile on her face. "Can I get some of that too?" she asked.

## **Scene 19**

Tommy watched as everyone gathered for breakfast. Kym had never come down from his room last night, and when he'd asked his mother about it, all she would say was that he was very tired. She took a tray up to him, but he was certain that it had been brought back down uneaten. When he'd looked in on his cousin this morning he was already up, and gone.

Going searching around the grounds, he found Kymbrall down in the school's gym doing kata. For long moments he watched the blond youth go through some very deadly combat techniques. They weren't the kind of thing that a kid learned in a regular karate, or taegwondo class, but were serious killing maneuvers. He saw both his mother's and uncle's teachings there.

He watched as the sweat poured off Kym's bare skin as he went through the kata first at full power and full speed, then flowed again into it at full power and in slow motion. It was grace, it was poise, and it was beautiful. It was also deadly as hell. He reached out with his mind to touch his cousin's only to find a solid wall of mental shields. There was no leakage, only a wall that said: STAY OUT.

The touch did not go unnoticed either. Kym glanced over to where he stood in the doorway, tightened his shields even tighter and continued with his exercise unbroken. It was a very clear rebuff of even a familial connection, and as far as Tommy was concerned very rude.

When Kym finished with the katae, he went directly into the next one with the same routine: first full power full speed, then full power slow motion. Tommy wondered how many his cousin knew and how long he could stave off talking to him. An hour later, Tommy gave up in disgust and left him to see if breakfast was ready.

All of the kids were downstairs by the time he made his way to the dining area. With so many mouths to feed, Elizabeth and his mother had drafted several of the older kids to help out in the kitchen so that they could use the school's large facilities to prepare the family's meals. It was a tradition of the orders, especially the Thorns and had worked rather well so far.

Seeing his mother standing there next to the door, he said. "Kym's in the gym."

"Did you tell him that breakfast was about ready?" she asked.

"He was working through katas, looks like he was planning on going through everything from white belt to sixth dan- twice. He did everything except tell me to get the fuck out of there," Tommy told her.

"Did you try to talk to him?" she asked.

"I got the feeling that he didn't want to talk. His shields are locked down tighter than Blade's panties on prom night," he told her.

His mother gave him a long look that told him exactly what she thought of that particular expression. "Go speak to him. Tell him that breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. Say the words out loud, Tommy."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I'm still your mother, and I told you to," she said.

"Okay," he told her and headed back to the gym wondering exactly what was going on.

Arriving at the gym, he found it empty and the lights were out. The only light was a pool of yellow coming from the locker room. He could hear the shower running and a steady base beat, he couldn't identify. He crossed the gym and entered the shower hearing the strains of Wagner coming from boys' dressing room. Following the sounds

of the music, he found an MP4 player sitting on bench next to a towel and two stacks of neatly folded clothing; the first being Kym's sweats and tee that he was wearing earlier, and the other being jeans, a pink button-down and a maroon sweater.

He called out, "Kym?"

No answer.

He followed the sound of the shower to find Kym standing under a stream of what had to be scalding hot water, his back to the door. Steam was rising through the shower area like low cloud. Tommy took a moment to take in the sight of a body he'd known quite well back when he was this age. Of course for Kym that was only a year or two ago, for him it was a decade and a half. Time had flowed at different rates between dimensions. He'd put on some muscle mass in that time, and most of the baby fat was now completely gone from his lithe form. There were scars that hadn't been there back then, a long nasty gash along his side just above his belt line. I looked like he'd taken a dragon claw there. There was another along the back of his left thigh, just below his butt cheek, again it looked like a claw wound. Tommy realized that they were both in areas where the armor he'd left on Tommy's balcony did not cover. "Are you going to freak if you turn around and realize I'm behind you?" Tommy asked.

Without turning around, Kym stopped washing the strawberry blond locks that had turned almost blood red in the water- his hands frozen in place on his scalp. "No, I'm not going to freak," he said.

"Well, I'm behind you," Tommy said.

"Are you going to stand there ogling my butt or do you have something else to say?" he asked.

Tommy was embarrassed to admit to himself that he'd been doing just what Kym was accusing him of. His protestations to Elizabeth notwithstanding there were times when missed the male form. "Mom says breakfast in ten minutes."

"Tell her I'll be right there," Kym said with his back still to Tommy making it clear that he was not going to turn around.

Tommy could play that game too. "What time did you come down to the gym?" he asked crossing his arms.

"One o'clock," Kym answered resuming rinsing his hair in the stream.

Tommy checked his watch and then asked, "You've been doing katas for the last seven hours?"

"Is there a problem with that?" Kym asked.

"It's a little intense isn't it?" Tommy suggested. "The war is over. Why keep pushing yourself?"

With his back to his cousin, Kym said, "Tommy, there are sixteen other people in this building with the phyre gift, all of them phyre bonded. Last night around midnight every one of them began trysting in one form or another. Of those sixteen people, only two of them bothered to shield what they were doing. It was a little intense for me up on that second floor."

"Kym some of those guys are only six years old!" Tommy protested.

"Trysting doesn't have to involve sex to start broadcasting the phyre-bond," Kym said. "About half of them ended up in bed together because their partner had a nightmare. Just the need for and receiving of physical contact, to feel safe, sets off the same kinds of broadcasts as a sexual tryst. I came down here to get away from it.

Kata centers my mind and lets me relax," Kym told the wall, his voice echoing around the tiled room. "Of course the fact that your wife is a screamer, didn't help."

"Nightmares?" Tommy asked worriedly. He knew that the kids were still adjusting to the memories of the dragon hunts they faced in their home dimension. He hated that they were still going through that. "Do you know what kind of nightmares? What set them off?"

Kym looked down for a moment and then said, "Yeah, I know." Something in his voice told Tommy that he wouldn't like the answer to the question on his mind.

"What kind, Kym?"

Kym finally turned around. Tommy got a good look at his body, at the scars on the front- the wound on his side had evidently gone all the way through his body. There were several on his upper thighs, and a very nasty one that was uncomfortably close to the area that no man wants to be hit. He looked Tommy in the eye and said, "All the nightmares came from your hatchlings, and all of them were of me hunting them down and killing them." He viciously turned off the water. "Evidently I became something of a boogey man to the dragons after I disappeared."

"It was stupid propaganda that Cain's followers started among the dragons," Tommy said.

Kym nodded and reached for his towel and began to dry off. The look he was giving Tommy made him feel like a pervert, like he was challenging his cousin to go ahead and get his fill of the sight. "I figured as much. Of course the dragonborn that are bonded to them, are only a little better. I guess that's just another price I have to pay for going after Cain." He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked past Tommy.

Tommy followed him out and said, "They don't know you Kym."

"Yes they do, Tommy. They know exactly what I am, what I was created for, and then was trained to be. I'm the death in the darkness waiting to slip a blade into the skull of all dragons," Kym said pulling his boxers on under the towel- a clear message to Tommy that the show was over. "I'm the thing that their mothers would frighten them into behaving with. As for the dragonborn, I'm the threat to their phyrethane."

"But they don't know that you wouldn't do that to them," Tommy protested.

"Do they?" Kym asked. "They watched the films on television. They saw me kill all those dragons in Las Vegas while I was working with Murphy's Law. They saw the film of me in the fight against the dragons in that final battle. They have seen me do the one thing in life, I can do well- kill dragons. To them, I'm a threat, something to be very afraid of."

"You're not a hatchling killer!" Tommy protested.

"How do they know that. That's what the dragons accused me of when I went after Cain. They said that I killed Matthew." He stopped for a second and Tommy could see a very pained look in his eyes. "In a way I guess I did. If he hadn't been with me at Tannehill, then he wouldn't have died. I led him to the place that Cain stuck Spellbreaker through his chest."

"Kym, don't do that. You didn't kill, Elizabeth's son, Cain did it. Don't you take on the blame for something you didn't do," Tommy said as he watched his cousin pull on the jeans.

Buckling the belt in jeans, Kym said, "Tell that to those kids out there."

Tommy reached out to touch Kym's shoulder, but the look he suddenly shot toward Tommy's hand stopped the gesture half way. Tommy let the arm fall back to his side as he said, "They just don't know you, Kym."

Kym reached for his shirt and pulled it on. "Go tell your mom, I'll be there in five minutes. What are we having?"

"Eggs, gravy, bacon, sausage, pancakes, French toast, juice, and coffee," he said.

"Sounds like Saturday morning at the stronghold," Kym said with a rueful smile.

"Yeah, but this time, we don't have to do the cleanup," Tommy said with a smirk as he left the gym, forcing Kym to remember happier times.

Returning to the kitchen, he watched as the children interacted with each other. He noticed that the bondmates never left each other's sight, and they constantly reached out and touched each other for reassurance. He let his eyes shift into phylesight and was amazed at the complex web of connections that was running through the dining hall. He could see the phyrebond between every couple in the room, a mark that said that not only could the couple produce phyre gifted children, but that they *would* produce such children. He shook his head at that thought because of what it implied for he and Elizabeth as well as his mom and Merrick- children; a little brother or sister for himself and sons or daughters or both for him.

About five minutes later, Kym entered the dining room, and Tommy could feel the hackles rise in the children. Their body language shifted completely. Some of the born children got up and casually placed themselves between his cousin and their bondmate. Worse yet, Tommy noticed something else. There were lines of phyre connecting everyone in the room: except for Kym. He stood as an intense beacon of bright powerful phyre all to himself, not connected to anyone else. *My God! What have we done?* Tommy asked himself.

## **Scene 20**

Sharon and Delia lay in their large bed basking in the post coital bliss of each other's company. The boys were all gone. David and Noah were on a trip to Atlanta for a book signing at the Outwrite Book Store for Noah's latest novel. Nelson was in the study working on a case brief, and Brendan wasn't scheduled to get off shift for a couple more hours. Delia had been feeling down, she was a week past due, and frankly miserable. Being as Sharon was an empath, the general feeling of irritability was starting to leak through.

When Delia had said that she was going to take a third bath of the day, Sharon had grabbed her, kissed her seriously and suggested something else. Their family doctor had commented that orgasmic contractions had in the past been known to stimulate labor, so she'd suggested the two girls play while the boys were away.

Both of them now lay on the huge bed they all shared- it seemed that there was a company that specialized in furniture for transhumans and nocturnals and over sized reinforced beds was a major seller for them- feeling warm and comfortable. Their lovemaking had required a great deal of flexibility on the parts of the two very pregnant girls, and had been very exhausting. The purpose had been to make Delia feel sexy and then to reach an orgasm. That had taken a while.

Suddenly Sharon felt something very warm and wet against her leg. Looking down, she could see the a large puddle of water spreading out from below Delia's distended belly. "It worked!" she said to her wife and leaned over and kissed her soundly.

Delia looked up at her surprised and grabbed her stomach. "Oh dear," she said.

Sharon went to the door and called loudly, "Nelson!"

"Yeah?" his voice echoed back across the walls of their huge home.

"Call Nana, and then call our wayward husbands. I'm calling Doctor Hart now," she yelled back picking up her cell phone from the bedside table and hitting speed dial for a very unusual doctor who lived and worked in the Miami area. Doctor Hart was a specialist in transhuman and nocturnal medicine who'd been their family doctor ever since Doctor Rice retired.

"Why am I calling Nana?" he yelled back. She could hear the telephone being picked up in the office.

"Delia's water just broke!"

"What!?" he yelled back.

"Delia's water just broke. Call David's grandmother, and then call David and Noah and Brendan."

Thirty minutes later, the bed had been cleaned up and Doctor Hart was checking on Delia. Nana and David's mom had arrived just after the small doe-eyed doctor. Ten minutes later the rest of the pride came traipsing into the bedroom. The little woman looked over at Nana and said, "Oh, it's going to be one of *those*."

Nana grinned at her and then turned to shake her cane at all the young men crowding around the bedroom. "Out! All of you!" she shook her cane at them in warning. "This is women's work!"

There was very little in the world that frightened the Fist Pride, but Nana's cane was one of them. As the boys were leaving, something that smelled like an open grave caught Sharon's attention. "Who's been playing with vampires again?"

Suddenly Noah and David turned to look at each other. David said, "Oh shit, we forgot!"

"Forgot what?" Brendan asked as they headed out of the room.

"There's a staked kinter in the trunk of the car," Noah said.

"Why do you have a vampire staked and in the car?" Nelson asked. "Is this something to cause me or Brendan more work?"

"He killed Vlad's proxy in Atlanta. We were bringing him back for questioning," Noah said.

"Well get him over to the Forever Knight and then sell the car. Then both of you take a long shower with lots of soap and burn those clothes," Nelson told him. "You don't get anywhere near the babies smelling like an open grave."

"My isn't fatherhood making him all bossy?" David said to Noah with a smile.

After that, their conversation was lost to Sharon's ears as the boys headed outside. She turned back to Doctor Hart and asked. "How is she?"

The small woman smiled at her and said, "She dilated about eight centimeters. It's still going to be a few hours."

"I could kick Noah's ass," Sharon muttered to herself.

"What ever for?" Nana asked.

"Because he knows how we feel about smelling like vampires. He could be in here helping her with pain management," she growled.

Doctor Hart looked up at her and said, "You're angry with him for doing his job?"

Sharon smiled at her and said, "To you, he's the spiritwalker. To us, he's our husband."

"If her not hurting is that important to you, then put up with smell and have him in here," she said. "Or deal with the pain, but don't blame him for doing the very thing that Council of Whispers designed him to do." Doctor Hart was not exactly known for sugar coating issues. She'd been described as having the bedside manner of a badger when she was riled.

'I'm just griping," Sharon said.

Doctor Hart looked at her and said, "It's up to you. This is going to be a long labor. She's having quads, and they look to be close to full term. I don't know how the werecat gene is going to affect that, but for a normal woman this would hurt like hell, and I'd probably have her on an epidural if not do a C-section. But you don't want to

do this at the hospital and I understand why, but them's the facts girl. If you think Noah can keep her from hurting, then send for him."

Sharon growled herself and said, "You're right. She headed out the door and down the stairs. She caught Noah and David as they were heading out the front door. "Noah, wait!"

He turned his head and asked, "Yeah?"

"You're needed here. Let David and Brendan handle the vamp."

Noah stopped and sniffed his jacket and asked, "You sure?"

Sharon nodded, "Go strip in the pool house. I'll send Nelson out with some clothes for you and then get your ass up here and help Doctor Hart."

Noah pointed his thumb over his shoulder at David and said, "He's the medical student."

"And you're the healer, and can block pain," she growled at him.

"Oh," Noah said. For someone whose IQ was pushing two hundred, he could be really dense sometimes.

He quickly kissed David and Brendan and headed toward the pool house. She looked over to where Nelson was standing looking a little dumbfounded. "What are you waiting for Funakoshi. Go get Noah some clothes to change into."

Fifteen minutes later, Noah was standing by the bed holding Delia's hand. The look of pain was gone from her face and Sharon could feel none of it echoed through the link they all shared. Delia looked up at Doctor Hart and said, "Good call, Doc."

"All my calls are good," the petite woman said with a smile. She looked over at Noah and said, "Although I may keep this one for myself. That's some damn good pain management." She looked at him and asked. "Exactly what are you doing?"

"I'm suppressing the part of her brain that recognizes pain. It's still there, it's just not getting to her brain."

"Sort of like an epidural," the doc said.

"Kinda, except no needles," Noah grinned hugely. No needles was always a good thing for Noah. Sharon knew that he was irrationally afraid of needles.

"You're definitely a keeper, Kitten," Sharon said. "Even if you do smell like you rolled in something dead."

"Gee thanks, Shar. I love you too," Noah told her.

"You know I love you. I just don't like you smelling like dead things."

Noah looked at Doctor Hart and asked, "Hey Doc. You sure that I didn't marry a bunch of werewolves instead of werecats. I mean their sense of smell is extremely strong."

Doctor Hart looked at him and said, "I'm not putting my foot into that one, Noah. And here you want to be a diplomat."

## **Scene 21**

Dustin rarely took a day off, but today he insisted. Seth *had* to be at those meetings, and someone needed to be home when Lee had arrived. Dustin wasn't really happy about sending the little guy to boarding school, but he had to admit that there was no better and no safer place for him to be than Wolf Creek Academy. The curriculum there was top notch, their scores were off the charts, and they specialized in shifters, mages, psis, and transhumans whose powers mimicked those of nocturnals.

He loved the little boy like his own and wanted the best for him even if that meant sending him away to school.

He had gone away to school, as had his mother, father, and step father. But that was back in the day, when Doctor Green was running the Pacifica Academy and had recruited transhuman students from the local population of San Medilla. Dustin, Seth, and Seth's sister, Sarah had grown up as very close friends since they'd been in kindergraten in San Medilla. Seth and Sarah had been there for him when his own powers kicked in and that had strengthened the bond.

Dustin had been in love with Seth since he'd figured out what that meant. He'd also known that Seth had a lot of issues to work out. The hardest thing he'd ever done was let Seth go off to join Parforce 1 without him. He knew that Seth had to find himself before he could come back and see himself as Dustin's equal, and Dustin wanted and equal partner. When he had come back however, Dustin had wasted no time in staking his claim on the young man, and was very happy to see that Seth's feelings hadn't changed over the intervening years. What started as a simple date had blossomed into a relationship that had withstood the test of the years.

They hadn't meant to come out of the closet on national television. It just happened. Their emotions were running high after they'd taken down UNIPACT Prime ending its

years long reign of terror. Seth had set out in the fight with one goal in mind: to bring down Stonewall, the transhuman who'd left Block, Seth's former lover a paraplegic.

He'd risked his own life to stop the giant Chinese operative, peppering him with depleted uranium arrows from the bow he'd designed himself- a bow that had been designed to handle his own awesome levels of strength.

While Dustin as Challenger had tangled with the UN's top transhuman operative, Sentinel, Seth and his friends had dealt with Stonewall and the rest of the UNIPACT Prime. When he'd finally pulled Seth as Moonwind off Stonewall, he was preparing for a killing strike. That was a line that he couldn't let his lover cross. After talking him down from putting an arrow through the stone-bodied villain's heart, he'd swept Moonwind into his arms and kissed him right there, not thinking about the news cameras covering the action.

After that, his old team had become the new Paraforce 1 and he felt that he'd done a good job leading them. They'd lost Sarah and Robbie and Richie and Miguelena at the Battle of Wolf creek. That just left him and Seth and Lionel and Tabitha. Jett and Evan joined the team as Quantum and Razorwing to try and fill in the gaps. Things hadn't started to fall apart until the new administration had come along and the Dragon War flared to life.

In the end, the team had been disbanded. Tabitha and Lionel retired back to what was left of California to try and help with the situation there, and to raise their daughters. The remaining team members had taken Gates Murphy and the M-7 Corporation up on their offer to form a corporate team here in Atlanta called Murphy's Law: Atlanta Knights. Someone had suggested the name Southern Knights, but that name had been copyrighted.

Now they were still in action this time working in the private sector instead of the government. There were a few more restraints on them and a few less, but they at least had could make a difference. It was also giving them a chance to get to know their new teammates better. Jett and Evan were good kids. They'd had good teachers in the form of Runeclaw, Avalon, and Azrael, and were strong additions to the team. It just made the Atlanta Knights a team made up entirely of gay heroes, something some in the press had jumped on quickly.

The Christmas party this evening at the house had been something of a reflection of that. Almost the entire guest list was made up of same-sex couples and the few children that they had, and most of them suspected who they really were. The current administration had not done a good job of protecting their identities, even going as far as to pull Lee's MI security detachment.

It was a comfortable evening of getting to know their neighbors, in the area. The owners of their favorite bookstore over on Tenth and Piedmont were there, as were a few other friends they made. The problems they were running into was that there was

so much focus on clubbing, something in which neither he nor Seth had a lot of interest. They'd gotten that out of their system in the first few years of their marriage.

The main reason to go clubbing was to pick up a date. Both of them would rather skip the overly loud music, the drug scene, the drama, and smoky atmosphere and simply stay home, watch a movie and then go upstairs and make love.

The party had gone well. The neighbors were friendly and nice, very much reminding Dustin of the traditions of southern hospitality. The fact that there were even a few children for Lee to play with was a nice addition. The only real problem had been all the jokes about seeing blackbirds around the place. After about the third time, Seth had just sighed and rolled his eyes.

The food had been good, there was eggnog to share and even a white elephant gift exchange. By the time the evening was over, and everyone left, it was time to put Lee to bed. He insisted on a bedtime story, which Dustin knew was his way of saying that he missed his parents, and needed to feel loved. Seth had settled him with the story of the Thunderbird, one of his favorites, before he finally drifted off to sleep.

It hadn't taken long to get most of the mess cleaned up and the dishes in the washer. About twelve thirty the two had locked up and slipped into their bedroom on the second floor. As he stood in his pajamas at the lavatory brushing his teeth, Seth slipped up behind him and kissed him on the back of the neck running a hand down the front of his chest to gently cup his balls. "Just how tired are you?" the smaller man whispered.

"Not that tired," Dutin said taking the toothbrush from his mouth, bending over and spitting into the sink. As he did, he could feel Seth fold his smaller frame across his body. He felt something hard stab beneath his balls and realized that his husband was already naked.

"Good," Seth said and gently squeezed his balls before turning and leaving the bathroom. In the mirror, Dustin could see his tight muscular form walking back toward the bed.

Two minutes later, he was naked, hard and slipping under the heavy duvet next to his blond lover who was grinning like a madman. As he reached over and turned down the lamp next to the bed, he felt Seth's strong hands reach for him. Sliding down into a prone position, Seth pressed his whole body against Dustin's and kissed him. He felt the smaller man's tongue gently probe at his mouth while strong hands roamed along his sides.

Because his bones were hollow, and his generally small size- barely clearing five feet- Seth weighed next to nothing. With a ferocity that surprised him, he felt those strong hands pull at the back of his head pressing their faces together in a passionate kiss.

"Woah there Rabbit, slow down," he teased his lover using the old nickname from their academy days. "What got your fuse lit so fast tonight? Seth usually was the one who was on a slow burn of passion, not this raging horndog.

"You," he said. "I've had you on my mind all day long- ever since I came out of the bathroom this morning and you were lying there asleep on your stomach, our naked butt in the air. I've been wanting you all day long. Then there was all that talk today at the Pride meeting with pictures of all these cute guys in thongs and I couldn't wait to get home and get my hands on you."

"I couldn't tell," Dustin said in surprise. Seth had made no indication that he was sexually excited all day. Of course his costume incorporated a loin cloth over his leggings and that went a long way to hide the very large package that carried swinging between his legs. "So you're excited by cute guys in thongs?" Dustin teased him.

"I'm excited by you. Those cute guys in thongs kept reminding me of what I had waiting on me at home," he said.

"You know, that is one of the most flattering things you've ever said to me," Dustin said with a smile and then kissing Seth back running his hand down to grip the smaller man's very muscular bubble butt, massaging it.

He could feel Seth press his body against him as they kissed, grinding the almost eleven inches of dick against Dustin's stomach, spreading a puddle of precum across his torso. He could feel strong hands run down his well-muscled sides, massaging the skin and, almost trying to crawl inside of him. Seth kissed his way down Dustin's neck and then across his collarbone, licking along its length. He pushed himself down his body, kissing and nibbling at Dustin's furry nipples and broad chest. He then licked down the cleft between his pectorals and all the way down his stomach stopping to run his tongue into Dustin's navel as he reached down and started to stroke Dustin's own manhood.

With a quick dip of his head, Seth engulfed the entire six and a half inches of throbbing meat into his mouth. Dustin lay his head back and groaned in pleasure as his husband took his tool down his throat and his strong hands kneaded at his butt. Seth slurped up and down, the length of his cock, sending a thrill of excitement through Dustin's body.

Years of loving each other meant that they knew one another's responses. It wasn't long before Seth was backing off his oral ministrations as he brought Dustin closer and closer to cumming. His hand slipped down below Dustin's balls spreading the slick precum and spit until he found his opening. He pulled his mouth off Dusty's dick and began to stroke him with a long and steady pressure as his tongue dipped into the cleft of his ass.

Dusty shifted his weight to put his legs on the smaller man's shoulders and felt the soft ruffle of feathers. Looking down he could see where Seth's hair had shifted from blond to raven as his wings were released from inside his back- a sure sign that Seth was getting lost in loving his husband. The long black raptor's wings were spread out across their bed, reflecting the low light of the lamp in a cascade of blues, greens and whites.

He felt Seth's tongue probe at his opening as he continued to stroke Dustin in a motion that was guaranteed to keep him hovering on the brink of release . After about five minutes of this treatment he said, "Damn it Seth, I want you inside me now."

Seth looked up at him over his dick and said, "That was what I was waiting to hear." With a strength capable of lifting a semi-truck Seth flipped the much larger man over onto his stomach and pushed his knees up under him. He reached into the drawer of the nightstand and pulled out a towel and a bottle of lube. The towel he put under Dustin's groin, and the lube he used on Dustin's ass and his own dick. Dustin smiled at that. Seth usually liked this position when he was feeling exceptionally randy. It gave him access to Dusty's broad muscled back which he claimed to take great pleasure in laying against.

Dustin looked back between his legs and watched his lover shrink down to about a foot tall. He heard the beating of feathered wings and then felt something small enter him from behind. With a low groan of the mattress, he felt the small length of flesh in his grow and expand inside him, filling him with its mass. Dustin found himself moaning as Seth began with long and forceful strokes driving his face into the pillow.

A strong hand reached around and grabbed his cock and began to jack him. It didn't take Seth long to build up a good head of steam and soon his balls were slapping back and forth against Dustin's. He varied his stroke over time to again take Dustin to the edge of release and the hold him there.

For Dustin it was an exquisite feeling of being full and complete. He'd once heard man to man love described as the ultimate expression of brotherhood. It was at times like this with Seth's dick deep in his body, that Dustin believed that description to be true. He lay his face in the pillow and reached down to bat Seth's hand away. He'd long ago learned that he didn't always want to cum with his lover.

He began stroking himself, to bring himself off. With the head of Seth's uncut cock brushing against his prostate on each of the backstrokes it wasn't long before he was blasting a load onto the towel under him. He then collapsed down onto the towel and arched his butt up. Seth stretched out on top of him and grabbed his shoulders as he sped up his strokes.

Dustin could feel the power of those strokes drive Seth's length deep into him, as the wings on his lover's ankles began to tickle the inside of his thighs. He felt himself grow hard again from the stimulation but knew that he probably wouldn't cum again right away. He didn't want to. He loved the feeling of Seth's trembling body atop him when the smaller man climaxed. He loved the stretching feeling on the ring of his ass when Seth blasted deep inside him. Those were the little things that he missed when they orgasmed at the same time. Those were the little things that he loved and that he only came to appreciate after years of lovemaking.

He felt Seth thrust once deep inside him, and then pull himself tight against his back. He felt the smaller man's mouth make little "oh's against the back of his neck, and he felt the ring of his ass pushed wider by Seth's throbbing cock. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the great black wings stretch straight out on either side of the bed and tremble there for moments before finally collapsing onto the floor. They had long ago discovered that a four poster bed was not a good idea, and neither was too much furniture too close to the bed.

Dustin didn't know how long they stayed like that; him on his stomach, Seth lying atop hip, his dick still buried in Dustin's ass. He knew that he was just starting to fall asleep when they both heard a pounding on the stairs that led up to the third floor and to Lee's room. The boy was coming down full tilt and they could hear him screaming. Seth barely had time to shrink and roll of Dustin pulling the covers over both of them.

"Mooooonnnnnsssstteerrrr!!!!!!" Lee literally came crashing through the locked door to land on Seth's now sheet covered lap. "There's a monster in my room!" The boy was trembling.

"What?!" Dustin came out of bed and grabbed his pajama bottoms as he headed out the door and up the stairs. Lee didn't scare that easily and the idea of a monster scaring a kid who could become nine hundred pounds of screaming metallic cat was something to check out.

He made it to the boys room to find the window that looked out over the back yard open a cold wind coming through it. He looked around and could see what looked like scratch marks on the plastic of the frame. Of more concern was the muddy foot prints on the rug and on the sill. He closed the window and locked it. Looking down he saw a drop of what looked like blood on the floor.

He did a quick check of the room to make sure there was nothing or no one in it before closing the door and heading downstairs. As he entered his and Seth's bedroom, he heard Lee's voice. "I woke up and he was kissing me on the neck," the little boy was saying.

Dustin came in and saw where Seth was checking their nephew's throat. There were two small marks right at his jugular. Seth and Dustin exchanged glances, "You still got Murphy's number?"

## **Scene 22**

The Imperial Palace was decked out in full Winter Festival regalia. Bunting was up everywhere, there were holiday trees in every corner, and bright golds and greens could be seen on everything that didn't move- and sometimes even that didn't stop the fun. The main ballroom was a light with decorative candles and the fireplace was a roaring inferno to keep the chill of the winter at bay. Lord William Norris Atlan, Emperor, Consort, and Husband stood watching as guests from all over Europe came to Atlantis to celebrate the Winter Solstice.

There were many royals from several families in attendance as well as a few prime ministers and one or two presidents. There was even a high ranking member of the executive branch of the United States Government. Mostly though the celebrants were the golden skinned Atlantean nobility, all dressed in their finest clothing for this evening. He watched with a great deal of fatherly pride as Winter made her way through the guests stopping and speaking to various nobles and representatives. She was like snow queen in her gown of white and light blue as she made her way through the room.

"Your daughter is making quite an impression on your guests, Your Imperial Majesty," a very familiar voice said next to him.

"I would expect nothing less. She's had the finest teachers, Your Grace," he turned and smiled at the High Quester. She was a tall woman with the deep golden hue of an Atlantean Gifted, and hair that was the color of burnished copper. Her green eyes could convey the joy of a Spring day, or cut you like an emerald laser. She was one of William's favorite people to talk to, and close friend.

"Of course, an imperial education is always of great value," the woman said.

"I was speaking of my husband and my wife, Lord Dannon, and Lady Katherine," William said. "Our daughter has always paid close attention to the way they have played the game of politics." William told her. In reality, they were only slightly more ruthless than he himself. William had no illusions about how deadly a game politics were in the ancient empire, or how deadly it was today. All of his family were fiercely protective of not only each other, but of those houses that had sworn themselves to House Atlan when it was founded. However, Sloan and Adam were the quintessential boy-scouts - the big blue and red white and blue school boys that always played fair and by the rules. William himself was willing to bend or occasionally even break the rules to see that justice was done. But Katherine and Dannon were vicious in the way

they defended the family, their house, and their people. He did not doubt that for one moment that should the UN become as troublesome to them as it had been to their allies, that there would be quite a few state funerals to attend. Those two played for keeps, and there was little they wouldn't do to see to the safety of the Empire.

"That my friend is as the American's would say, an entirely different ball match," the Quester said.

"Game, Viencelle, ballgame," William told her with a smile.

"English idioms don't make sense," she said.

"And Atlantean idioms do?" William teased. "I mean think about it, we refer to someone who takes the hard way to solve a problem as sleeping with the cat."

"If one understands cat biology, it makes sense- when you think about it, William," she told him. "But considering the number of werecats that are prominent in the world right now, that particular idiom is taking on a whole new meaning." She sighed and said, "Speaking of which, did you know that we've had an unusual request from that friend of yours in America."

"Which friend?" William asked.

"The one to which you made a gift of an Atlantean cloak," she told him.

"Hale?" he asked.

"I believe that is the name. He and his family want to visit next August," she said.

"Okay, why do they need permission to do that?" he asked.

"He and his Pride want to plunge the depths of the Temple's records, and to do some research on the worship of Kierra Atlan," she told him with a smile. Your little project with the Ministry of Culture has caught his attention. He is a writer of some repute I'm told."

"That could be interesting. Is he looking for something in particular?" he asked.

"Just information on some of the legends of the Founding and of the Great Hunt," she said.

"I'll leave what you wish to grant him access up to you. That's a Temple matter and I long ago learned not to mix politics and religion," he said.

"You are a wise Emperor," she said with a smile and gently hugging his arm. It was a familiarity that few felt comfortable showing toward any members of the Royal family in public.

"Any more word from the Vatican about trying to reconcile their texts with ours?" he asked. The whole issue of finding out that the Hebrew God was mentioned in their own Holy texts was giving the Catholic Church fits, especially the story of his consort Ashera. Add into the history of the Great Hunt and Lilith, and how Vinciel the Gray gave refuge to Lilith and her children from the angels sent to kill them and you've got a real mess. It throws out their whole monotheism concept.

"We're still in negotiations. Two out of three of the derivative religions are at least talking. The third is just making threats. For some reason they want to blow up the main Temple." She shook her head and added, "They keep strapping bombs to themselves and trying to detonating in the main square. For some reason they think that will send them to heaven. The temple guards quickly disavow them of that idea."

"I'm glad to hear that," he told the woman.

