

## An Untold Tale

# *Jez and Morgead's Night Out*

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**This is an untold story from the past, when Jez and Morgead were still struggling regularly with the leadership (and with each other). It's not for the faint of heart—Jez's gang is on the trail of a serial killer, but I think that it makes some valid social points. And of course, there's the love scenes, too!**

### *Jez*

Jez wanted to scream.

She knew no one else could tell. They only saw her, Jez, always ready for an adventure, with waving brilliant red hair that fell to her hips and silvery blue eyes that burned and chilled at the same time. She had never flinched from any game or task, and no one would believe her if she said that the thought of what must have happened in this apartment was such an obscenity that her furious soul rose up, wishing to rid the world of all the monsters who could do such things—even those who did them to human vermin.

Vermin were to be exterminated, of course . . . but . . .

But not like this!

That was why she wanted to scream. As the second-in-command of a vampire gang that hunted humans—specializing in the kind of humans that deserved to be hunted—she'd seen things that would make most grown-ups wet their pants and run. But, again, as second-in-command, she was expected to maintain a measure of cool in all situations.

"Well," Piece's light, cold voice brought her back to the present, "I should say that there's ample evidence that he's vermin, in every sense of the word." His thin, aristocratic features were pinched, as if trying to get away from the smell.

The smell . . . the sick puppy who owned this apartment had stacked body parts—actual parts of actual human beings' bodies—in piles all around the rooms. Jez, whose vampire senses were infinitely more acute than a human's, found that she was choking on the reek. How was it possible that foolish humans, even with their blunted senses, could walk by this dive of an apartment, day by day, and not inform somebody? The manager. The police. Anybody.

"Well, look here!" In tones of half-admiring disgust, Val, the biggest member of the gang drawled from a bedroom.

He had tilted up the narrow child-size single bed and was looking down at the bedsprings. There, flattened between the two surfaces, was the mummified body of a little girl. "Guess he didn't like to sleep alone," Val said, and chuckled at his own humor.

Now Jez thought she might throw up. But that was ridiculous. She'd never heard of a vampire vomiting, and if she did she'd be the first one in history to lose it that way.

Little Thistle was clapping and laughing, almost dancing around the apartment. "What a unique storage idea," she gurgled, and the words seemed strange coming out of the mouth of what looked like an elementary school student—a tiny fair-haired piece of dandelion fluff. She was a made vampire—changed as a child, she had had chosen not age a single day more. "Two can sleep in the space for one! I wonder if she kept him warm at

night?"

"Sure," said Val, still chuckling. "Extra insulation."

Pierce pinched his nose bridge, a sure sign that he was not amused, but fastidiously offended.

"She's a bad girl. She spends *every night* in someone else's bed," Thistle added, twirling.

"You want my opinion about her?" A tall, slim girl, who looked like Thistle's opposite in every way, turned from the other side of the room. She had black hair with a blue sheen to it, and it fell asymmetrically over her shoulders, covering one eye completely. Her other eye was piercing and midnight blue.

"Raven, dear, *I* always want your opinion," said Thistle sweetly. "You're *clever*, you know."

"Well, then, I think the girl in the bed was his first murder," Raven said. "I think he did her when he was just a kid like her—how old is he now, anyway?"

"He's twenty," a new voice said rather huskily, and Morgead came in from the tiny spare room. His dark, normally disheveled hair was even more mussed than usual, and his face looked strained. His eyes, usually gemlike—emerald green—against the black smudge of his lashes, seemed oddly dulled. "That back bedroom is the same as these," he added in a strange voice. "Except worse."

"Worse?" trilled Thistle. "I wanna see!"

"Maybe he really means 'better,'" Pierce said, putting it delicately.

"I mean worse. Even humans don't deserve what's been done to them. He recorded himself doing the things, and he's got a big screen in there. I watched what I could stand. If anyone else wants to go watch, they're welcome."

"We never did hear Raven's theory," Val said. Val had a one-track mind like 18-wheeler truck.

"It's just this. I'm betting that that little girl in the bed was his first murder. He didn't know what to do with her body—this is the city, you can't bury anything! And he was too young to drive, and he didn't want his parents to find out. They must have all lived here together then. So he put the body in there, and with enough air freshener and incense he could have disguised the smell. Enough, anyway. I bet rats die in these walls all the time. And so Mommy and Daddy never knew—and maybe he took them down, too. Then, since he found he enjoyed it so much, he just kept adding to his collection."

"Sounds reasonable," Pierce said. "Some people collect butterflies, some collect big game. This one collected"—he peered at a jar—"kidneys, if I'm not mistaken."

"Jez, you've just been standing there like a statue. Something wrong?" asked Raven suddenly.

"No." Proudly, Jez put her hands on her hips, her expression daring anyone to hint that anything here scared or revolted her. "I was just so fascinated by your theory that I was struck dumb with amazement. Now if we could only cut your head open and give half your brains to Thistle . . ." she added, getting a laugh from Val and a fastidious smile from Pierce. "And I was wondering about our collector friend—what kind of person he was." Well, that was true enough.

"He works at Value Gas'n'Snacks," Pierce said, pulling a small piece of paper from his jeans pocket. "Tonight he's on from 6 P.M. to 2 A.M. All we need to do is wait. Although waiting for four hours here . . ." He sniffed again.

Raven was fretting too. "Spend four hours just sitting?"

"I don't mind," Thistle said, still flitting from pile to pile. "Oh, did you know he's an artist? Here's all sorts of things drawn on skin."

"I don't mind either. He's got a TV. And some stuff in the fridge, har har har," said Val from the kitchen.

Raven turned away pointedly and Pierce just rubbed his forehead. Only Thistle tinkled laughter.

"I wanna see the fridge!"

Morgead cut her off before she could reach it. "It hasn't got any food. Just more of his 'collection.'"

"Sounds cool."

"Sounds like crap," Jez said, moving to stand beside Morgead. "And I'm like Raven; I can't sit still for four more hours. We know who he is and where to find him. Come on, let's ride!"

"Wait a minute," Morgead said. "Who's the leader of this so-called gang?"

Jez didn't turn. "You are," she said. "So? What else are we going to do for four hours? Meditate?"

"Oh, all right. Come on, everybody. Bikes. And don't forget the door. I want this apartment like we were never here."

"We can slip back in at one-thirty and be all ready at two," Pierce said as they filed out.

"What?" Jez stopped walking. "We're just going to do it without the Thistle routine?"

"Damn it, are you blind?" Morgead misplaced his temper easily, and he lost it now.

"What do you want? You saw these rooms."

"Yeah, I saw them." Jez was spoiling for any kind of action, and Morgead was usually ready to oblige with a fight. "So?"

Morgead said, "Well, do you think his auntie popped in to murder all the vermin while he was asleep—on his double bed?"

Jez couldn't help grinning savagely at the last. "No," she said.

"Well, then what do you want?" Morgead snapped. "He's definitely the only guy who comes in here. Steven G. Vizner. You want to see his driver's license?"

"No," Jez said again coolly. "I just want to see him flunk the Thistle routine. That's all."

"Oh, for . . ." Morgead turned sharply away toward Thistle. "Are you up for it with this sick dude?"

Thistle smiled and twirled again, making her thistledown hair stand out from her body. "Sure," she said. "All vermin are sick. The sicker the better."

Morgead gathered in the rest of the gang with his eyes to make sure that there weren't going to be any more objections or demands. Then, clearly making an effort to hold himself in check, he turned back to Jez.

"Does that satisfy your sensibilities?" he asked.

Jez smiled benevolently. "It does."

"Fine. Then we'll do it the second-in-command's way." Morgead said. He made sure to lay emphasis on Jez's status.

Jez didn't care. She'd got what she wanted. She usually did.

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At one thirty A.M. they converged on the gas station. After that, as Raven coolly pointed out, it wouldn't be too odd to lock the door and put the "CLOSED" sign up—without the target knowing it, of course. Then Thistle could do her thing without fear of interruption.

Thistle danced into the store lightly on small, sandal-shod feet. At first she just walked up and down the aisles, looking one way and then the other. Sometimes she would cup her hands to the window glass and stare outside as if hoping to see something.

She didn't have to put all that into the act, of course. But Thistle loved being on stage.

It didn't take long for Steven G. Vizner to get a good look at the child wandering in his store. And from the moment he saw her, Jez saw by his expression that he was going to fail the test. He was a fox and Thistle was a tiny, fluffy, witless little yellow chick with no parents in sight.

*He* had to approach Thistle, though. It was part of the rules.

No problem about that. He was cruising toward her as soon as he saw her. She was at the back of the store, away from possible security cameras at the checkout stand.

"Hey, honey," he said, and Jez thought how strange it was, that he looked and sounded just like any other of the vermin. He didn't wear a long black cloak and a mask and his face was no uglier than the average human's. No savage sneer, no lowering brow.



Overall, he looked like an oversized puppy that hadn't grown into his feet yet.

Human monsters look like human people, Jez thought.

Thistle looked toward him, not at him, burst into tears and turned to run away. But she was clumsy, or exhausted, and she managed to trip over her own sandals. She fell, and lay huddled, sobbing softly.

"Poor kid," Steven said. He wet his lips and he looked around the store. Then he walked the few steps to where Thistle lay and picked her up. His hands were large and looked clammy.

Rule Two was that the mark picked Thistle up without asking if she needed help, and Rule Three was that having got hold of her he didn't let go.

Steven passed with flying colors.

Thistle was playing this as six or seven years old, prattling out a story about how her parents had had a fight at a restaurant, and how out of all her brothers and sisters she had been left behind. Not very believable . . . unless you *wanted* it to be true. And when Steven put his arms around Thistle and promised that he would take care of her, Jez saw how much he *wanted* it to be true.

"And I walked and walked, but my house didn't come, and now my shoes are tired," Thistle said, making Jez wince behind the scenes.

"We'll go driving around looking for it, honey. I'm sure we'll find your home," he promised, and then Jez saw the monster that lived under his human skin.

Was it her imagination? Or did his features really contort, the eyes narrowing, the mouth twisting into a mad smile? Did a thin stream of spittle run onto his chin? Did his tongue come out to lick it?

No. It was her imagination. Because those things gave even Jez the chills.

"Let's go—to my car right now," Steven gulped out. "I'll take care of you. I'll take care of you."

"Otay, mister."

Steven clearly couldn't believe his good luck. It was like having a lamb walk up, ask to be slaughtered and then cook itself. With mint sauce. He closed the store for real, not seeming to wonder why the outside lights were out and the sign said CLOSED already. He took Thistle by the hand and led her around the back of the station and toward a medium-decrepit Bronco. What he didn't know was that there were eyes in the darkness behind him. He had no way of realizing that this was the turning point of his whole life.

He mumbled something Jez could barely catch about getting a blanket from the trunk to keep Thistle warm.

Raven tried to surge forward, but Jez put out a hand to stop her. He could still try to help Thistle—maybe he *was* getting her a blanket—and choose to live. Or he could try to hurt her and choose to die.

He chose to die.

As soon as the trunk was open he scooped Thistle up and deposited her in it. Then he slammed it shut.

Then, panting with triumph, he looked to his right and left and behind him.

He obviously didn't expect to see anything there—and certainly not five teenagers; the one in front making a low sound almost like a growl in his throat. He didn't expect to see them standing there, in a casual line, their poses lithe and graceful. He didn't expect to see them dressed identically, somehow elegant in their black jackets and jeans and sturdy black boots. He didn't expect to see their eyes throw back the light at him as they stood without saying a word, just *looking* at him.

He gasped and gurgled.

"All right everybody," Morgead said, in a slightly distorted voice. "Smile pretty for Mister Monster."

Five sets of fangs glinted in the light.

Steven G. Vizner fainted.

They left the Gas'n'Snacks just as it was, Raven driving the Bronco—she'd ridden double with Pierce on the way here—and Steven making helpless gurgling sounds beside her

in the passenger seat. Thistle, who'd ridden double with Val, sat in the back seat, helping Raven control his mind, telling him how weak he was, and how his body didn't work. He couldn't move; his body was encased in lead.

*And you just don't know what we have in store for you,* she giggled, her telepathy reaching Jez as they drove toward the clean and deadly beauty of Muir Woods. *You're going to wish you didn't have a body at all, mister. Otay?*

That was what the fight turned out to be about.

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"I say we roll for how many days he takes to die," said Pierce, taking a pair of dice from his pocket. His ascetic face was pale with excitement and his eyes were hot. "I mean, this is our best catch of all, the most verminous vermin ever. I say we *definitely* take our time with him."

They had already whetted their appetites on his blood, in order of precedence, of course. Raven had bought a cleansing wipe, for which she received due applause, and they had moved the now-catatonic Steven's head back, back, back, to expose the throbbing lines of veins and arteries in his neck. And then, one by one, they had chosen their feeding points. Canines had once again grown long and sharp and delicate—translucent at the curved ends, like a cat's. And then the quick dart at the target, like the striking of a snake.

But unlike a snake, they were not here to inject poison but to delicately pierce—the thicker the artery, the greater the need for delicacy. Jez hit the carotid at the perfect angle, so that, in raising her fangs, she felt the double spray against her palate of the delicious copper-flavored blood. It trickled down her throat tasting thin and sweet and intoxicating and *different*. Maybe it was her imagination but human monsters had blood that tasted unique. It took her a moment in her pleasure at having made the perfect strike to realize that she had held out her hand and that someone was grasping it. Swallowing a mouthful of the heady red stuff she had glanced aside to see what she expected—it was Morgead. He had taken so little from the jugular that she had anticipated him taking an extra turn—and he was, but with his fangs clamped solidly into thick blue veins at the wrist. Together, they drank the nectar of immortality, their hands tightly clasped.

Not that it meant anything of course—her and Morgead. It was always more delicious to share a meal with a blood brother or sister—especially if the meal's mind was as repellant as this one. She and Morgead had linked their thoughts together, exploring the outer layers of each other's minds instead. But only the outer layers. That was perfectly within the traditions.

It wasn't as if—Jez laughed lightly, knowing that her eyes were liquid silver now, shimmering with the faintest hint of blue—she were in love with him. Lovepairs—well, they had all means of enjoying their meals together, mixing kisses with mouthfuls of the sweet-smelling red wine tapped straight from its living vessel. Lovepairs playfully picked the humans with the most beautiful auras, using senses humans didn't even have. A beautiful woman might have a dud of an aura, whereas a plain one might have a life force that would go off like skyrockets when it was tapped.

But they weren't a lovepair, and all they had was this monstrous vermin, now waxen-faced, unable to move a muscle, but able to see and hear—and feel. The time had come to finish him.

"I agree with Pierce," Thistle was saying, laughing her high, childish laugh. "He ought to suffer at least as much as his victims."

"As all his victims put together," Raven said, licking the last flecks of red from her lips and fingers.

"He'll never hold out long enough," Val said. "But we could try. It's the least we can do," he added. "Har har har."

"How much did you *take*?" Pierce asked with superior scorn.

"Well, O Fearless Leader?" Thistle was looking at Morgead, "Favor us with your orders . . . please?" She smiled prettily.

Morgead's face was grim, almost haggard. "I saw things in that other room that you

didn't," he said. "This vermin deserves more than anything we could imagine doing to him."

"Then it's unanimous—oh, wait, Jez hasn't said. Jez?"

"No," said Jez.

For a moment there was utter silence—Jez and Morgead had been trading the leadership for years—and a single word from her carried a lot of weight. But then Thistle laughed again, a tinkling sound.

"It was dirty, the floor that gas station. I didn't get my dress all dirty just so we could chase this guy to death." She held out her pale little arms, spreading the folds of her pretty little blue and white dress to show off the damage.

"Calm down." Raven's one visible eye looked jaded. "It's still five votes to one. It doesn't matter."

"It does to me!" Morgead's emerald green eyes were flashing, gemlike. "I want you to understand, Jez. This vermin—this human—doesn't deserve any mercy—not even the mercy of a quick death."

"Relatively quick," drawled Pierce, and there was laughter, which Morgead stopped with a look. He turned back to Jez again.

"Look," he said, "we go after the bottom feeders, right?"

There was a murmur of assent.

"We go after the vermin that *ought* to have been taken care of by their own kind.

The vermin who get off in court on a technicality or who go around committing violent crimes over and over, or the vermin who are just too smart to even get caught by the police. Right?"

Another murmur, somewhat louder as the vampires warmed to Morgead's fire.

"Well, we're never going to find one more suitable than this one. *This guy doesn't deserve mercy.* The things he's done—if you want, I'll take you back to that stinking apartment and I'll show you what he records himself doing . . . over and over."

"We can all go," Thistle said, with just a shade too much enthusiasm for Jez's taste.

"But I said it already: I didn't get all mussed and dirty just to chase tonight, Jez."

"Oh, shut up, Thistle," Raven said amiably.

Jez said, looking only at Morgead, "You convinced me a long time ago that this guy doesn't deserve mercy," she said. And, turning toward Thistle, but with her eyes on Morgead. "And I never said anything about chasing him. There's no point. He's in no shape to run."

"Then what *do* you want us to do with him?" Morgead looked exasperated. "Take him to the nearest hospital? Maybe donate a few pints for him?"

Jez didn't flinch. "No. I want to kill him—quick. Snap his neck."

"Well, what you want doesn't matter," Thistle said, huffing her scorn. "It's a 5-1 vote, and besides the leader is with us. You know the leader is the only person who could veto the vote, and you know Morgead won't."

"Hell, no, Morgead won't," Morgead said. "But I want Jez to understand so she agrees. I want you *with* me, not standing on the sidelines," he added to Jez, and this time his green eyes were so hurt that Jez was surprised, and she felt the strong tug of his convictions.

She had determined that she wasn't going to explain her position, no matter what, but now she felt a surge of anger of her own. *She wanted Morgead to understand, damn it!* And yet she didn't want to have to say it in front of the whole group.

"C'mere." She jerked her head to one side in a gesture that hadn't changed much since she had been leader. And when Morgead followed her, she lowered her voice.

"I know exactly what that vermin deserves," she said. "I had to blot it out while I was drinking his blood. And I did that by taking him back in his mind to his childhood—to where his drunken father beat him and his drunken mother forgot to feed him, and his druggie uncle molested him—over and over."

Morgead's green eyes were opening wide, horrified. The rising moon was reflected in their pupils.

"Jez—going *soft*?" he said, at least keeping his voice down. "Please tell me you're *not* going to tell me he deserves any mercy because once he had it rough."



"I don't—at least I don't think it serves as an excuse for him swatting a fly!" Jez watched Morgead settle a bit. "Nothing can excuse what he did—nothing! But on the other hand I don't want to see what I can't help imagining.

"What's that?"

"You—us, I men—turning into exactly what he is. If we torture him as he deserves—if we do the things to him that he did to other people, then what does that make us?"

And finally, as if the words were being pulled out of her, she said telepathically, *I don't want to see your eyes—while you're torturing someone. Not even vermin. I don't want to see you smile or hear you laugh while you're doing that.*

To her surprise, this argument seemed to carry weight with Morgead. He hesitated, not seeming sure what to say.

Then the stubborn look she was most familiar with came up again. *You know what I don't want to imagine? I don't want to imagine this guy loose on the streets. If Thistle hadn't already been in the trunk—if you hadn't already been mind-controlling him—I would have been worried. He had a razorblade palmed so that even I couldn't see it; just smell it. He's crazy-dangerous.*

"And I agree that we have to get rid of him," Jez said sharply. But no torture.

*Not torture! Just a hundredth of the vengeance that he deserves!*

Morgead returned. *If I were a father or a friend of one of those girls he got, or—or—lovepaired. . .*

Morgead worried about little old fathers of vermin? Jez couldn't understand it.

But telepathy did strange things sometimes. Strong emotions made it unreliable, and sometimes what you were most concerned about concealing were exactly the things that projected. In Morgead's case, it was a picture. A human girl—vermin—but nevertheless young and terrified. She was trying to get away from Steven and his handy razor blade, but she was tied up.

She had blazing red hair.

Jez shied away from the picture. Morgead wasn't aware that it had slipped through his mental barriers. He was turning back to the gang.

I just won't think about it, Jez decided, but she couldn't help seeing the picture again and wondering what had put it into Morgead's head. Nothing Morgead had said—nothing Morgead might or might not feel—had anything to do with her argument. The vermin had to be killed, yes, but without turning her gang into a band of torturers. If they did this, where would they stop? They would be just like Steven G. Vizner. They'd appointed themselves as vigilantes for vermin who didn't deserve to live, but there was an inherent problem in that:

*Quid custodiet ipsos custodes?*

Who will watch the watchers?

Well, I damn well will. My gang is not going to imitate the Marquis de Sade.

Funny, she always thought of them as her gang even when Morgead was delegated leadership. They had traded off on several occasions now, always peacefully and at Jez's instigation. There were times when she had been too busy carrying out missions for Uncle Bracken to give her full attention to the gang. Then she'd called on Morgead, as her second, to lead in her place. But he'd never made a fuss about giving the position back—until this last time when her uncle had sent her on a very long mission with one of her distant cousins, Ash Redfern. Ash had been amusing to work with, as well as being particularly easy on the eyes, but when she'd got back from the mission Morgead had declined to give up his role as gang leader—and what's more he had enforced that by beating her with fighting sticks.

She had never been able to understand what made him so furious—but furious he had been. And ever since then he had been gunning for her, giving her every reason to think he hated her, that he only stuck with the gang because of the others. Lately, he'd been softening a bit, but . . .

Who could tell what Morgead *really* thought about anything?

He was wild and dangerous, a kid who had brought himself up on the streets . . .

. . . and who certainly hadn't become a torturer of little girls. He was right, there was no excuse, no mitigation for what this vermin had done. But still she couldn't stand by to watch his face—or any of the others', she added hastily, while they meted out carefully

considered portions of pain and terror. And either she left the gang or that was exactly what she was going to be watching in less than ten minutes.

There was only one thing to do.

She did it.

"Morgead," she said, turning to where he was standing with the others, "I call you out."

There was a pause, and then Morgead turned slowly toward her, his green eyes shining. "*What did you say?*"

Jez, one booted foot up on a fallen tree, refused to give way to melodrama. "I call you out. I challenge you for the leadership."

The rest of the gang was whispering in shock. Morgead didn't make another sound, but he stared at her with an expression it could take her a lifetime trying to decipher.

But there was no expression in his voice or eyes as he said, "Okay." He added, "Since the gang's here, and I don't want anybody to say I took unfair advantage, we'll let you decide on how we fight and where. Satisfied?"

Jez shrugged. "Fine."

The gang was looking caught off guard. They shouldn't be, Jez thought sharply. They should be ready for anything, anywhere, anytime.

You let us get flabby and out of shape, Morgead, she thought. That's bad.

"Okay," she said crisply, even though it wasn't her place. "Somebody name some weapons."

"Fighting sticks," said Pierce quickly, deepset eyes glowing.

"Ironwood swords!" cried Thistle, clapping. "Flails and maces!"

Raven was shaking her head. "Nothing lethal," she said. "We can't afford to lose a potential leader or second. Or both."

"Oh, all right," Pierce said, lifting his slim hands as if it didn't concern him. Thistle sulked.

Val struck a pose, showing off one of his large biceps. "What about nothing? Bare hands and feet and nothing else."

"They're both still lethal," muttered Pierce under his breath.

Raven ignored this and said, "Morgead's bigger, but Jez packs more of a *whack*. I'll be referee."

"I'd just like to see a little blood," Thistle whined.

"Oh, shut up," Morgead said, speaking for the first time. "I'm sure they'll be plenty of blood before this is over."

Raven was taking her role as referee pretty seriously. "Okay, you here, Jez, and you here, Morgead. You can use whatever you've got on you except your fighting sticks or wooden shuriken or anything else made as a weapon. And nothing from the ground—no fallen branches. Not even a twig. Who has the best watch?"

"I've got a Rolex we liberated from a killer who won't be needing it anymore," Pierce offered.

"Okay, then. Count off thirty seconds. Fighters on your marks—and remember, no dying unless you can't help it."

That got a laugh.

"Twenty seconds . . ." Jez took her mark.

"Fifteen seconds . . ." Morgead, for some reason, was refusing to move. It put Jez's calculations off, as little Thistle was right behind him.

"Ten seconds . . ." Morgead still wasn't moving.

"Five . . ." Val physically dragged Morgead to his mark. Jez was impressed.

"Four, three, two, one. Begin!"

Morgead just stood there, scowling. Jez walked over to him briskly as if she had just forgotten something.

"What?" he growled.

"Well I happen to know this rule, after being your second and—"

*Wham.*

She finished the sentence by punching him hard in the stomach.



Jez knew she had a tremendous advantage in this battle—several tremendous advantages. One was that Morgead was caught off guard while she had been planning this for several weeks. One was that Morgead didn't really like hitting girls. Especially with bare hands. That was his tough luck. Another advantage was that she did have quite a lot of the Power running through her today: maybe it was adolescence or maybe it was all the training she'd been doing lately. *She* wasn't slack and out of shape, and when she reached deep inside and gathered up all the Power she had to throw, she was impressed herself. She reorganized it and then added a little more, and then released it in a narrow, tightly directed beam, all at once, at the center of Morgead's brain.

She half expected the fight to be over with that.

It wasn't. Morgead gave her the most astonished and astonishing look of betrayal that she had ever seen, and then he collapsed to his knees beside a redwood the diameter of a car, with his arms wrapped around him and his head down.

There was a burst of chattering from the onlookers.

Jez was bewildered. If she had ended the sentence she'd begun while walking toward him, she would have said—well, she might as well say it out loud. "ONCE THE REFEREE HAS SAID 'BEGIN' THE FIGHT HAS BEGUN," she shouted from her new position behind another redwood.

"Hey, stop a sec," Raven shouted, breaking from the little group near the Bronco. Jez hoped she wasn't going to rule using Power as illegal, because she had definitely brought it with her. And deadly as she was just with her physical body, she knew that Morgead might have the advantage there.

"I just figured out the only way we'll know this fight is over," Raven said, looking steadily at Jez through the one eye not covered by hair. "Otherwise you could beat each other to a pulp and we still wouldn't have a leader."

"Putting death back?"

"No! But whoever can put the bite on the other one wins, okay? It's all I can think of." And she sauntered back to Morgead to give him the bad news.

Now it was Jez's turn to stare with disbelief and a sense of betrayal. Vampires didn't bite vampires. And they definitely didn't let themselves get bitten. It would be the ultimate humiliation to have your blood taken up by force like that—when you had fangs, too.

And in front of other people . . . other vampires? *Oh*, no.

Jez swung around to look at Morgead. Raven was already retreating from him and he was, as she expected, building up a blast of Power to hit her with. Now he met her gaze and saw her look of stricken betrayal not with smugness—"Ha! Now you know how it feels."—but with a look of kinship.

*Let's just see the referee keep up*, Jez said to Morgead, and he nodded. He didn't throw anything at her, punch or power.

Then they were running, Jez letting Morgead indicate the direction and then taking the lead herself, since he might be feeling slightly delicate. They were the two fastest in the gang by far and soon even Val's bellowing voice was left behind.

Morgead seemed to recover then, and they took to the trees.

As always, Jez felt the thrill of simply swinging and jumping and catching herself in this most dangerous of places for all vampires. Wood was all around her, wood containing lignin—whose chemical structure was the only thing that could score vampire flesh and stop a vampire heart. Even Night World chemists didn't understand why. They knew that lignin was what made wood woody, but they didn't know its exact structure nor why it stopped vampire cells from regenerating—fatally in the case of the heart tissue.

Sometimes Jez had the feeling that there was a branch out there with her name on it.

Jumping from burl to burl in the coastal redwoods, Jez forgot about everything else. She wore her fingerless motorcycle gloves to protect her calloused palms from direct contact with the wood which might have splinters, but still, after years, it was the most fun to try to land without using her hands.

She wondered sometimes why she loved this area so. Maybe it was because trees, were, like her, undead—alive even after they were dead. Anyone could feel that, who felt a fallen tree. Or maybe it was because trees lived so long—the longest living of all organisms

on earth—except vampires.

Whatever the reason, this was her favorite place, and she was doing her second favorite thing—biking came first—jumping and swinging and catching herself in a forest that was as dangerous to her as a forest of swords and bayonets would be to one of the human vermin.

And it was exciting.

At last, when she felt that they'd gone far enough away that they wouldn't be easily traced by the sharp-eyed gang they'd left behind, Jez turned and said, "Here?"

"Here."

They swung down to the pine-needle-covered forest floor and faced each other. Jez drew in a breath of sweet resinous air. Like Morgead, she was lamia—a breathing, eating, breeding vampire. Not a corpse brought back to unlife.

"Well," she said.

"Wel—" she heard Morgead begin, and then she was getting out of the way because Morgead had lunged. She had no time to feint, she simply boosted off her right foot as he was lunging to her left, and did a mule kick backwards that hit flesh and heavy bone before she somersaulted and got up again, whirling around to face him again.

Morgead didn't waste time rubbing what must surely be a very sore thigh, but lunged immediately again. Jez evaded by doing a high snap kick that brushed his ear, and then when he was off balance doing a second kick that he blocked with his arm. He tried to flip her by helping her heel on its way up and over, but Jez, instead of resisting, let herself be flipped backward, carrying it through and landing lightly in a crouch. At this level, she had to worry about him closing in on top of her and using his greater weight to bear her down, so she performed a move impossible for humans, boosting herself out of the crouch and doing a high front flip, sailing over his head and kicking him twice in the back as she came down.

"Come *on*," she said, whirling and landing ready. "You're going to have to fight me sometime, you know. Or are you just *giving* me the leadership?"

"Like hell," he said, sparking to life. If looks could kill, then he would have broken the rules already with his searing green gaze.

"Then fight!" Jez said. "I'm hardly going to go easy—"

For the second time Morgead rushed her while she was talking. *Smart* boy. Do what the enemy doesn't expect. She was never going to win unless he participated; she had too much pride to keep attacking a target that wouldn't or couldn't fight back.

Neither would either of them pick up any of the branches that were scattered plentifully on the ground, although Jez did give herself a moment's time off to curse that idiot Val and that other idiot Raven for the ludicrous rules she had to fight by. Bare hands and Power only? And then drawing blood from the loser?

It was ridiculous—and outrageous. Pierce and Thistle might want to be voyeurs but Jez had no intention of allowing them to have their way, whichever way the fight went. Who would follow a second who had been humiliated so? And how could a leader be sure that a second would watch her back, after she had done such a terrible, humiliating thing to him? But Raven had made up the rule, and Raven was referee. That cast it in concrete.

Morgead, seeing her inattention, flowed smoothly by her, giving her a karate chop to the front of the neck that would have broken a human's larynx, if not their spine. For Jez it was merely a wake-up call, she coughed once and was on her guard again.

She and Morgead circled each other, fighting in almost complete silence and each of them keeping an ear out for the rest of the gang. They traded punches, kicks, and chops, Morgead always having the advantage of height and reach, but Jez making up for it in speed and maneuverability. They were equally knowledgeable, equally determined, and, after a while, equally frustrated.

"Look, you idiot," a somewhat battered Morgead said finally. "We're never going to get anywhere"—dodge kick—"Like this."

"Scared already? We're going to get"—lean away from karate chop—"all the way through the woods"—frog kick, side flip—"at any rate."

"Scared, my ass! I'm just saying 'wait.'" Morgead did a backward somersault to avoid a deadly scythe kick that would have taken him down. "If you know what the word means."

He regained his balance in time to dodge a lightning fast second kick to his midriff. "I have . . . an idea."

Jez rushed him, then spun away as he tried for a bearhug. He did catch a long strand of scarlet hair, though, and it tore painfully from Jez's scalp.

"Oh, I'm sorry." The words were automatic and formulistic, but Jez could see Morgead's face in the twilight under the great trees.

Jez stopped attacking and they both stared at the long plume of scarlet waving in the breeze. She couldn't stop the words from coming; they were hard-wired into her brain. "No problem," she said, and then she started laughing helplessly. "Save me," she said, "I'm catching vermin-mouth disease."

But her hair *was* a disadvantage, and a big one. Usually Jez was so superior to whoever she was fighting there was never a need to worry about it. Humans, the other gang members, anyone but Morgead. She had to admit, he was good. And in a breeze like this her hair was electrically charged and flying everywhere. In her eyes. Into Morgead's hand. She realized instantly and resentfully that he had deliberately been avoiding an easy grab that would land her flat on her back.

It made her furious. "Who gives a"—double mule kick—"about your ideas?"

"*You* should." Morgead feinted, but didn't follow through with the attack. A gust of wind blew hair across Jez's eyes, and she almost fell, dodging an attack that never came. "There's another way to end the fight. Don't rush me," he added.

Jez rushed him, turned aside at the last moment and ran straight up a tree, then pushed off with powerful leg muscles to backflip over his head. But she was thinking. Her hair was a problem and she needed time.

"All right," she said. "Pax until we talk it out?"

"Okay. Pax."

Jez immediately reached into her jeans pocket. She knew that among all the junk in there, she had a few bobby pins and scrunchies. Still circling Morgead warily, she hurriedly twisted her hair into a long thick tail and wound it around her head. It made a discouragingly heavy crown. "Gotta get it cut off tomorrow," she muttered to herself, doing her best with the bobby pins to anchor it.

"Cut off your *hair*?" Morgead sounded as if she were proposing to amputate her arm. "Cut your hair *off*?"

Take any advantage you can. Jez was well aware that her long fiery hair was one of her best features, and that it netted her astonished stares whether she was biking, walking, or even talking to the human prisoners the gang chased.

To tell the truth, she felt a small twinge herself when she contemplated doing it. Maybe—maybe even a medium sized twinge. It was such a bother, taking forever to wash, forever to dry and forever to drag a brush through, ouching all the way, after she went cruising.

But it was *her* hair. She wasn't going to keep it at an inconvenient length because of anyone else's opinion.

"Cut it all off," she said, somewhere in between cruel and practical. "It's just a nuisance."

Morgead said nothing, but he looked as if she had scored a kick to his gut.

"Of course," he said slowly, "if I'm leader tomorrow, I can order you not to. It goes to the morale of our gang."

So that was it. He just wanted to control her and keep up the status of the "gang with the red-haired girl in it."

For the first time though, she saw his emerald eyes glint. It was the first time he'd been interested in the fight.

"So what's your big idea?" she said. "This pax only lasts so long, you know."

"My idea—oh, yeah. What I was going to say was that is that if we keep fighting this way, it's going to take all night and we won't be in any shape for—anything—afterward."

"What you mean is that you won't be in any shape to torture him this way. Good! I'll be in fine shape to snap his neck even after beating your sorry ass."



Morgead's green eyes turned luminous, glowing like a cat's. That was good too. Now that he was mad, he'd be more likely to make a mistake.

He made one.

"Right," he said. "You want to waste Power, we'll waste Power. Let's do this using nothing but Power, eye to eye, palm to palm."

"Oh, for—you really are a jerk, aren't you?" And that really was a waste of Power. Besides, it was dumb. Dumb on his part. She was definitely his superior in the uses of the strange psychic ability that vampires simply called "Power."

No one knew exactly what it was or how it worked. It was like wood that way—not as painful to research, but as elusive. The consensus of vampire scientists was that it was a branch off the witchfire witches used: unearthly Power in its purest, most raw form. Some vampires had so little, or were so clumsy at using it, that they might as well not have any at all. Others were better than witches at healing. And, of course, all had greater or lesser facility in telepathy, and in controlling the behavior of other creatures, vermin included.

The aristocrats of the vampire world were the ones with the most raw Power. That was how they'd gotten to be aristocrats. The Council put strict regulations on its use, concerned, as always, with secrecy.

But Jez was a gutter-fighter; she'd spent her childhood roaming the docks and warehouses of San Francisco, and she'd use Power any time it gave her an advantage. She wasn't picky about weapons—she couldn't afford to be.

So if Morgead wanted to *give* the leadership away, that was fine with her.

"Eye to eye, palm to palm, mind to mind," she agreed, completing the formula. She took another few steps forward, so that she faced Morgead squarely.

He held his hands up, palms open and facing out. Jez did the same. Then she looked straight into his green eyes, which were still luminous, making her think of green fire. She knew that he was looking into her own eyes: silvered blue and blazing like the base of a flame.

Then, carefully, holding each other's gaze, they moved their palms together until they were flat, touching wherever they could touch.

Something like an electric spark exploded in Jez's palm and raced straight up her arm, blossomed through her body. But it wasn't an attack with Power; it wasn't any kind of attack. She was fairly sure that it wasn't even a deliberate doing of Morgead's, but . . . she couldn't . . . *think*. This was . . . this was not . . .

Something deep below the level of her consciousness, something that was frightened and shocked and elated all at once, said, *Don't hurt him*.

Morgead's eyes widened. They seemed to be all pupil. But Jez wasn't focusing on things like that. Her vanity was stung. He'd *heard* her. Could anything be more embarrassing than that?

Like an involuntary sob welling up from within her depths, she let loose a bolt of pure Power and slammed it into him.

Palm to palm, eye to eye . . . but Morgead couldn't do that anymore. He was on his knees, retching and choking. Yes. She was good at this.

"Had enough? You really want to stop at one?" Jez made herself gather more energy, pulling it from her toes and her fingernails and the roots of her hair. She put together everything—

(liar, that's not everything)

—and stepped over to clasp his hand.

"Look up and say cheese."

Morgead slowly lifted his head up. Their eyes met—and Jez threw it all at him in one concentrated egg-shaped burst.

Morgead convulsed briefly. His fingers scrabbled at the black earth beneath the fallen pine needles. His boots scored the ground, throwing up little sprays of mud.

So that's that? She made herself yawn. But something was battering at the back of her mind.

*This isn't fighting*, said an ice cold voice that didn't seem to come from her, but certainly wasn't the almost-insensible Morgead.

This is . . . . torture.

Jez froze, her eyes wide.

What is the difference between what you're doing and what that vermin back there did? For that matter, what's the difference every night when you hunt the vermin . . . the terrified, agonized vermin . . . .

No! she wasn't going to give in to this. Killing vermin was different.

But Morgead . . . .

Jez had a silvery taste, as of vomit, at the back of her mouth.

*Morgead?* she asked.

No answer. He was still, now.

Jez felt horror—and shame. She tried to pull herself together. She told herself that this was a fight, not torture. They had both agreed to do this; nobody had made Morgead accept her challenge.

But impulse was overwhelming her. Jez wasn't used to repressing her impulses. She was used to going with the flow, doing whatever she felt like at the moment. Discipline would come later, she always thought, and she never worried about how or when it was going to come.

Right now, Jez's impulse was to go and see how badly Morgead was injured. She went over to him and touched his arm.

"Are you—"

***Slam.***

It felt like getting hit by a freight train, like thousands of shards of glass being hammered into her raw nerve endings. It felt like having her skin pulled off and put on inside out in a vat of acid.

*It hurt.*

It hurt so much that Jez momentarily grayed out. Not blacked out—her survival instincts were too good for that. But the world slowed down and sound disappeared and her vision was only a tunnel—with the threat-to-survival at the end of that tunnel.

And it was from a *cheating* move.

In Palm to Palm you could only strike with both hand and eyes in contact. It wasn't just a starting posture; it was the whole ball game. She'd actually won as soon as she'd knocked Morgead to his knees—the problem was getting him to accept it.

What he had done was simply temper—if you could call it that. Every year it got colder and more deadly—so that making him mad was a calculated risk. You might get a red-hot Morgead who would make mistakes, or you might get an ice-cold ruthless hunter who would work with his anger like a deadly craftsman.

Tonight it seemed she'd gotten both—and she should have expected it. But Morgead had, or used to have, this thing about his word. Once he gave it he prided himself on never breaking it. And the game was something like a sworn word.

"You bastard," Jez muttered, and realized that Morgead was trying to send his thoughts to her.

*Go jump in Stinson Beach,* Jez wordlessly told him. *Go find a cliff.*

Jez—

*Don't try to talk to me, you jerk. You suggest the game, and then you cheat at it, Jez said. I should have guessed, you worm. Y-you realize what your word is good for now. It's good for spit.*

The falter was not deliberate. Jez's muscles were still cramping from the blow. She was still shaking and sick to her stomach.

And you see? the unwanted third voice was asking in her head. You see what happens when you torture somebody? They torture in return, or their kin do, or their country does. It's an endless cycle . . . .

*It wasn't torture,* Jez exploded, in her fragmented state of mind sending the thought to Morgead.

*Torture? Jez, what are you—?*

*Shut up! Nothing! Leave me alone, you cheat.*

*Jez, I'm trying to say—*

*I don't care—  
Please—  
I can't hear you.  
Jez, I'm sorry.  
Sorry?  
Yes. I'm sorry.*

It was one thing she had never expected to hear Morgead say. Morgead had no pity for himself, and none for any opponent.

Jez could open her eyes now and she squinted to see Morgead lying, apparently resting, on his stomach.

She gathered all her bodily energy so that she could get up, stumble to where he was lying, and flip him over. Then she half-fell, half-sat on top of him.

*And if he tries to cheat again I'll shatter him like glass. I swear I will, she thought.  
I heard that.*

*I don't care. You cheated, you cheating . . . cheat!  
I know. I mean, I know now. But it wasn't something I thought about then. I was thinking . . . about something else.*

*So what? Who cares?*

*They had a play over at Berkeley. It was outside, where anybody could watch for free. And . . . Morgead faded a bit but they had been talking telepathically long enough that Jez could follow his thoughts without his help.*

*. . . a play about a boy and girl our age, but it was a long time ago and they didn't talk at all like us. If I hadn't been telepathic I couldn't have figured out what everybody was saying. But it was about this boy and girl who were, you know, lovepaired—*

*"Hmmp!" Jez grunted, losing interest.*

*Yeah, but this was all different; it wasn't the usual stupid vermin love story. Anyway, they wanted to get together. But they couldn't because their families hated each other. But they decided they'd rather die—see, that was the point of it all—than not be together. So they died. It was called Romeo and Juliet.*

"So? So what's it got to do with anything, cheat?" Jez was still sitting astride Morgead, still impatient.

*Well, there was a part in it when they're just falling in love, right? And they stand facing each other and holding their palms together.*

*"Oh, a fight?" said Jez, regaining some interest.*

"No!" Morgead was moved to speak out loud. "I told you they're just getting lovepaired."

Jez didn't want to hear about love or lovepairs.

If Morgead had an explanation, then he should just explain.

"I know," Morgead said. "I'm trying! And this love story was—it—it was somehow different from anything I ever saw. It—it—just was . . . different."

But underneath his fumbling, Jez could hear the truth about it, what he really thought:

*It sang.*

But she still couldn't see what it had to do with the cheating.

"So what?" she said.

Now Morgead was writhing. Jez sensed that she couldn't have found a more effective mental—

*—torture, whispered the voice—  
mental punishment if she had tried.*

"I don't know. No—I'll tell you. I'm telling you, all right? I guess—I guess for some insane reason I was thinking of the play when we were standing there. *I don't know why,*" he added bitterly. "There can't be two more opposite things in the world. But I swear, Jez; I swear on—on anything—that that was what I was thinking about when I was looking in your eyes. That's what I was thinking about when this blast of Power hit me, and knocked me over. And then another one that—that—"

Jez felt uncomfortable. "I know," she said. "But it was all fair. You took my hand.



You looked me in the eye.”

“I couldn’t see anything. And Jez, I swear, I didn’t know it was you who was doing it. I thought it was some monster attacking both of us. Attacking . . . them.”

If Jez hadn’t been a vampire, she would probably have thought that what Morgead was talking about qualified him for a rubber room, straitjacket included free. But since she was still connected to his mind, she knew he wasn’t crazy or lying, or shifting facts for his own purposes. He was telling the exact and literal truth.

And this did something unexpected to her. It disarmed her.

Suddenly she was left with no clear reason to be angry with Morgead.

She could feel her anger drain away, like shower water under her feet.

But still . . .

“Well, what did you care about Romeo and Orange Julius?” she said scornfully.

And Morgead’s reaction was most stunning of all. He sounded . . . humble.

“I can’t explain it. I don’t have any excuse. You’re leader. But—are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay, idiot.” It was very difficult for Jez to admit that her head was swimming and the tunnel vision was getting narrower, not wider. But just as her mind overlapped Morgead’s, his overlapped her to a degree.

“Jez?” he said, and then more urgently, “Jez?”

“I’m all right,” Jez lied. “I just need some sleep, that’s all.” But the strange thing was that Morgead’s admission and open humiliation had had an unusual effect on her. Jez had been sharp and alert, able to follow the story with no trouble, ready to fight again if it should be necessary—while she had been pushing Morgead. She was a huntress, after all. But now . . . the chase was over. She had won, won more spectacularly than ever before, even if she did have to wonder now about Morgead and his bizarre fantasies. But that was in the future.

Now, now with her victory came the inevitable letdown as adrenaline drained away. She was used to that—but this time it was having truly remarkable effects. She could *feel* all the pain she had shifted to the back of her mind.

“You sure sleep’s going to do it?”

Jez wasn’t sure of anything. She had taken Morgead’s blow without any kind of shielding, from the side—where she was more vulnerable than the front, and in a null period after having dissipated her own energy.

I’m not fine, am I? she thought.

Half of her expected some new attack from Morgead. Maybe he had shown that he wasn’t a deliberate cheat, but she knew well how dangerous he was, and she had just humiliated him thoroughly. What better time for him to grasp her numb hands, look into her dimming eyes, and then blast her again.

None, she concluded. There was nothing at all to prevent it, and she knew Morgead well enough to know that he might decide to take advantage of this situation. He could invade her mind and wrest secrets from her. And if he did . . . well, he could certainly find a lot to ridicule there.

And it was the only logical next move.

It was what she would do in his place, wasn’t it?

She was a little confused now—and getting more confused fast.

Hell, if only they’d stayed with the rest of the gang she wouldn’t have to worry.

Raven had a strict sense of justice. She wouldn’t let this go on when the real fight was over. Thistle . . . what would she do? And Pierce would enjoy it. But Val . . . he’d side with Raven . . .

Oh hell, I’m going to do something really sissy.

She didn’t faint exactly. It was just that her tunnel vision tunneled to a pinpoint of gray, and she lost control over her arms and legs. She was limp, a blind rag doll. Defenseless. At the mercy of the enemy.

And then, just as she was thinking that she couldn’t remain in this state—she didn’t dare—she went into another state.

A state of entire darkness, in which she wasn't aware that she wasn't aware.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Jez . . . Jez . . . Jez . . .*

Jez tried to open her eyes, found it impossible, and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

**"Jez!"**

A long time later, Jez came to herself, muzzily, to find that she was lying cradled in Morgead's arms. He was saying her name over and over, in different tones, from an urgent call to a whisper.

. . . and there was something else, something she couldn't identify, or wouldn't identify, not even in the tiny part of her that had always kept watch over Jez from a distance. Whatever it was, it wasn't something Jez was ready to hear, and it scared her. Even the urgency scared her. Their gang played rough and knockouts weren't uncommon. They were just uncommon for Jez, who somehow managed to evade half the rough stuff and stand her ground for the rest of it—take it in the teeth without visibly flinching. Often sheer pride had kept her standing when her body felt as if it had been put through a grater and minced fine.

She felt fairly minced now, but apparently Morgead wasn't going to . . . to do all the things she'd been confusedly thinking before she collapsed. She could think properly now. It seemed that Morgead had caught her as she fell. Why he was holding her in this undignified and . . . and . . . unusual way—well, she would figure it out later. For now she had to keep up appearances.

Could she talk? If she tried and it came out as a whisper or a croak she'd be humiliated, and . . . one point to Morgead. But—she had to try.

She summoned all the energy she could clumsily gather to her throat. She was pleased to find that it felt almost normal, and she felt ready to speak.

She even managed to put some annoyance into her voice, as she said, "Yes, I'm here, I'm all right. You caught me off guard, is all."

Even as she said it a part of her stopped to marvel at the words. She *had* been off guard, totally unshielded, utterly exposed—and she'd taken one of Morgead's best blasts of Power. She ought to be dead. She ought to have burst open like a plum hitting the sidewalk. She preened herself a little. She was even tougher than she'd realized.

Morgead had turned away sharply. His voice was odd and he was breathing as though he'd finished running a marathon around Muir Wood. "You were—I had to start you breathing again. I killed you. Gods damn me."

Jez stopped preening. Not breathing? That was *bad*. It was worse. She *owed* Morgead for starting her up again. She'd been . . . dead meat. And a dead lamia was like a dead vermin. They didn't start ticking again when you removed the stake or whatever.

Morgead wasn't much given to swearing. At least standard swearing. He could be marvelously inventive at times. But damning himself? For a vampire, that was just pointless. And why was he *hiccupping* now?

Deep down, powered by the part of her that always kept watch, she knew he wasn't really hiccupping. And she knew that she was even more scared than before.

Jez reacted the only way she knew how. She gathered all her power and put more annoyance in her voice to cover the fear and the slight unsteadiness. "I ought to court-martial you, you know? But we don't have time; we have to get going—"

To her astonishment, she was flipped over as if she'd been a six-weeks-old kitten, and Morgead was kneeling above her and shaking her shoulders. She had no energy to resist him. His face was furious—and wet. It was so pale in the moonlight that to vampire eyes, it looked luminescent. He wasn't trying to hide any of it from her, that he'd been crying so hard that his eyelids were swollen and shadowed—or that he was still crying, crystal drops that fell on Jez's upturned face.

Or that he was almost out of his mind with fury. Between the shadowed lids, his green eyes were incandescent with it, and it pulled Jez in like a magnet, locking her gaze on his. The shadows made his eyes look deep-set in hollows and with the rest of his face pale

as moonlight, Jez felt she'd never really understood the word "fury" before. She understood it now.

"Court-martial me? Don't you understand, Jez? *I . . . killed . . . you.* I didn't even know it was you I was hitting out at. My mind was inside this play, this stupid vermin play, and then something hit me so hard that I could think straight and it ruined everything. And I lashed back at it—and it was *you.* I hit you with everything I had. And you didn't even . . . didn't have a shield . . ."

Morgead's face twisted. Jez was dizzy from the shaking, but it was more than that. She felt—strange. Very strange. Light. Hot and cold at once. Her stomach was a ball of ice. But the other parts of her . . . her heart was thudding as if she'd just now finished the fight—and she didn't know why. Why should Morgead's pain give her tingles in her palms and in the soles of her feet? Why did it make her ache all over—but with a strange, unfamiliar ache, not the kind of pain that she'd ever felt before?

Morgead could have left her alone, unbreathing, and made up any story he liked for the rest of the gang. They never would have suspected anything, even when they came to hide her body. She and Morgead fought like cats and dogs, and nobody would even be surprised that a blast of his Power had broken her shields and killed her. He could tell them the whole truth—except the very end, and who would know?

Why hadn't he? She was always a nuisance to him, even if they sometimes enjoyed honing their skills against one another. Why had he even bothered to save her . . . much less all the rest of this?

There was no one to ask. She couldn't imagine talking to Uncle Bracken about all this. Raven would only smile her secretive smile and look up one-eyed and enigmatic through her dark hair. How did people learn about this?

You don't have to learn, the deep-down part of her counseled. You know. You're growing into a woman . . . now. Boys are always slower than girls. Deep down, where I am, you know. It just depends on what you want. You can cut him down to size, smack him, snub him. Just being your normal obnoxious self would help. What do you think? What do you want? Be honest, now.

She was surprised to feel her reaction to that. Smack him, snub him? Do that to *Morgead*? Who felt so badly already? Who had worked so hard to save her even if it meant she took the leadership away?

No, what this poor shaking, confused young man needed was comfort, and she could use some on her own account.

But she hadn't been brought up knowing how to comfort, or how to take comfort for that matter.

Meanwhile Morgead only seemed to be getting more furious. "You don't get it, do you? There's no way to make you understand what almost happened!" And he shook her again. There was definitely something wrong with him. He was right, too—she didn't understand these lightning shifts between tears and fury.

And Jez, being Jez, couldn't help her reaction.

"What the *hell* is wrong with you? And why the hell didn't you just leave me there when I stopped breathing? It's what I would have done to you."

"I'm sure you would. That's the vampire way, isn't it? That's all we are." At least her words had acted as a tonic for Morgead. There was no trace of the tears he had shed, and although his face was ravaged, he looked much more like the Morgead she knew. "That's all you want to be."

"It's what I am! I thought you were the one who was all for torturing vermin, weren't you? And as you pointed out a little while ago, I'm your *leader* now. So I'll thank you to get off of me and let go."

"And if I don't?"

Think quick, Jez's instincts told her. Really quick because you're in no shape to do anything else. "Then it's another charge for the court martial. Do you really want to get beaten out of the gang?"

The hell that you had to go through to get into their gang was nothing to the hell promised to anyone who was thrown out. It meant having your blood drawn three times by



every single member . . .

"As if I give a damn," Morgead said furiously. "But it does remind me of something, *second*. I was—upset for some reason then and I made a mistake. It's the one who puts the bite on the other that wins the leadership. And . . . right now . . . there's nothing I'd rather do than put the bite on you."

"You wouldn't dare, you—traitor!"

"That's 'leader,' *Jezebel*—get used to it!"

Jez was in a bad position. She'd let Morgead pin her to the ground, and she was still weak from . . . well, bluntly, from being dead. She could struggle all she wanted, but this was only going to go one way.

Morgead had a grip on her chin and she was being forced to turn her head. The rest of her body was clamped solidly to the ground by his greater size and weight. A sudden feeling of weakness, of futility, washed over her, and she found her cheek being pressed to the grass.

Then she felt cool, wet fingers tracing the lines of her most prominent veins and arteries. It was something she had often done to a target once he was down, but nothing she ever imagined she'd feel herself.

"You'd better relax," Morgead said, still furious, but now cold as well. "You know how much it hurts if you resist."

"Morgead, I swear that you'd have been better off leaving me dead. Because I am going to kill *you* for this."

"Kill *me*? You were the one who challenged, Jez. We're here because you wanted to get away from the others. And you agreed to the terms."

That was the fly in the ointment. She had agreed. And if it had been Morgead lying here, with her on top, as it ought to be—as it would have been if he hadn't blasted her unawares, she'd be saying exactly the same things.

Jez was too proud to fight, to struggle, when there was absolutely no point. Instead, she began, mentally, to prepare a poison dart for him.

A poison dart, in the psychic sense, had no weight or physical substance. Instead, it was a concentration of feelings, thoughts, knowledge, that was meant to take a target down. One had to hate the target. A really good psychic dart was made of such undiluted hatred that sometimes, although rarely, it actually killed. Of course one had to know the target well because the contents of the dart had to be true—or true enough that the target would believe it. You had to know what the target would be hurt by most.

Jez could meet all the qualifications.

I'll hit him in the middle of when he's drinking, she thought. Right when he thinks he's winning. I've got to keep a clear head through the pain so that I'm *able* to throw it.

Her poisoned dart was composed almost solely of pure, unmodified hatred, plus the knowledge that he would take over leadership of the gang by force and by cheating—by breaking his word.

Now she felt warm breath against her neck, but still no pain. Morgead lifted his head and again traced the most prominent vein, flicking with an expert finger to get it to rise, like a nurse readying it for a blood sample. Once again, she felt his warm breath on her neck, warm turning to cool as he paused, hovering over her.

Try to relax, Jez told herself. Then, right in the middle of his triumph, you throw the dart. You might even kill him stone dead with it. Wouldn't that be luck?"

She ignored the deep-down part of herself. It wasn't doing her any good now; it was weeping like a child.

Warm breath again. She wished he would just bite down and get it over with.

And at that moment she felt the delicate prick of elongated canines. She kept her eyes shut determinedly.

But the canines didn't pierce. They stayed just as they were for a long moment, and then they disappeared.

Jez opened her eyes in exasperation. What was going on?

Morgead's green eyes were blazing into hers, his face haggard. Then, abruptly he rolled off her so that she was free to move. He was muttering something over and over.

"What?" Jez said sharply.

It didn't make Morgead speak any louder, but by leaning closer she could hear what he was saying.

"The hell with it. . . . the hell with it. . . ."

He couldn't do it! Perfect. And he was completely vulnerable to her from the back; he wasn't even normally shielded.

Jez threw her dart.

At the last moment, the deep-down part of her lashed out and tilted her aim upward. Jez was furious. It was like having another person inside her, knocking her hand up at the last second and spoiling her shot.

The next second, though, she thought, it worked!

As before Morgead seemed to convulse slightly. His whole body jerked as if connected to an electric wire. He had been trying to get up; now he fell down and for a moment there was a shower of pine needles. Then he was still.

Well, Jez wasn't falling into that trap twice. She was lying on her side; she pushed herself up into a sitting position and waited, watching him. No change.

"Morgead, I'm not going to fall for it. I barely scratched you. Now get up."

She hardly expected him to leap to his feet obediently, but she did expect *some* reaction. There wasn't any.

*All right*, she thought to him, *it isn't funny anymore. Quit it.*

And at last, telepathically, she felt a response. Not the vibrant glowing—almost blinding response that was Morgead's usual mind signature, but a feeble barely-there stirring. It felt like almost dead embers being stirred in a firepit, there was a dull red glow here and there, but most of it was gray ash.

It might be an ambush—but Jez couldn't see any place in his mind to ambush her from. The landscape stretched out barren and featureless as far as she could see in all directions. And Morgead's mental fires seemed to be on the verge of going out.

He was dying.

Jez could feel herself start to panic. But Morgead *couldn't* die from the dart she had thrown. It had hardly touched him. And it had happened too fast; he hadn't had time to take in the contents and examine it and be poisoned by what the psychic layers contained.

He was a strong, healthy guy—used to fighting like this every week, practically every day of his life. Big tough guys didn't fall over dead from a few punches and a zap of Power.

But then, she thought, he's been acting strangely all day. From wanting to torture that vermin—that's not like him!—to crying, actually crying and holding me as if I were a baby. Maybe there was something wrong underneath all the time. Maybe he was sick—deathly sick—and he didn't want us to know it.

But vampires didn't get sick in the ordinary way. *What on earth was going on with him?*

Looking at the deep red, sullen coals that were all that was left of Morgead's life force, Jez knew she had to find out. And there was only one way to do that. A deep-mind probe. She would have to go down into Morgead's mind and try to find out what was the matter with him. She only hoped he knew, himself! It was dangerous, but . . . she touched his skin to find that it was already cooling . . . it was the only way to get the information she needed in time.

All right then: she steadied herself, made herself sit tailor fashion by his body, anchored her own consciousness at one end in the here-and-now, so she'd have something to come back to, and prepared to go spelunking. Let's see, when should she start? Just before the fight with Power? That ought to be sufficient.

And she let herself down into the core of his consciousness.

## ***Morgead***

There was a hard hot fizzing inside Morgead's head that Jez mustn't be allowed to see. It had been there since he'd gone into that damned vermin's trophy room. The room where the killer kept the finest specimens of his collection. There were things too terrible to

think about in there—like the jam jar full of teeth. Or the wall covered with scalps, with hair of every shade and length.

*Here Jez hit a barrier. Something had happened, but Morgead's mind wasn't going to cough it up, not without some . . . really forceful urging. Painful forceful urging.*

*So she let it go. It was like a skip in a recording, the next thing Morgead's memory would give her was him shutting the door to the room, determined not to let anyone in. And him only wishing he could shut the door to his mind to it as easily.*

*Well, he'd managed that. Jez fast-forwarded.*

And now here he was, standing facing Jez, his second-in-command and about to fight her in a Palm-to-Palm contest. And that was just plain stupid. He didn't understand quite how it had come to this, but it had. His feelings were in a state of complete confusion.

Looking at Jez only made the confusion worse. She was striding gracefully toward, him, her own red hair blowing in the wind, waist length or longer. It gave him a strange feeling to see that, and to see how tall she'd grown. She wasn't a child anymore.

But that feeling was nothing to what he felt when he looked at her face. Jez was most beautiful when she was most dangerous and today she was absolutely deadly. Her fair flawless skin with just the faintest flush of dawn color over her high cheekbones. Her softly curved mouth, which could quirk in sudden amusement, revealing a totally unexpected dimple in her cheek. But just because her skin was the delicate, baby fair and soft skin of the true redhead, that didn't mean her disposition had any softness in it. You saw that when you looked into her eyes. Normally they were a beautiful cerulean blue—heavenly, with just the faintest sheen of silver. But when she allowed her vampire nature to manifest itself, when she was angry, or even when she felt strongly about something, they changed. Then they were like liquid silver, like mercury, with a little blue missed in. It made anyone around her feel that they were standing close to the moon. And that was a dizzying feeling. The moon up in the sky was very well, but the moon standing right beside you was another thing all together.

Morgead was angry with himself. Here he was, when he ought to be getting ready for the fight of his life and all he could think of was the uncanny silver in his opponent's eyes.

Jez already had her palms out, her expression cool and distant, her hands steady.

All right, then. Morgead turned to face Jez fully. He took a deep breath and carefully placed his palms against hers. And then he lifted his eyes to hers—

—and was immediately transfixed. Memory flooded his mind. That play, the one they'd had over at Cal Berkeley. Romeo and Juliet. Normally, Morgead would have scorned to watch a vermin play, but this one was different. The words were like a river in the way they flowed, sometimes swift and effervescent over smooth stones, sometimes more slowly as the current spread over deep waters. But all of it flowed and as it flowed it seemed to make a song. A sad song, but the most beautiful he had ever heard. And now he and Jez were standing the way Romeo and Juliet had when they first met. And what was that line? *Palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss.* Because he could see into the mind of the actress playing Juliet, he had understood the meaning of the words, but it still made him flush. Right now, he and Jez were . . . kissing, he thought shyly.

That had been when the bolt of Power hit him.

It was strong, the strongest he'd ever felt, and it splintered his shields. It slammed into him with raw, elemental power and sent him flying. And then he slammed into the ground with raw physical power. He had been aware, dimly, that he was having something like a seizure.

And then someone or something took hold of his hand, and when he blindly lifted his head hit him with another bolt.

Someone was trying to kill him. To kill him and Jez, he thought dimly. That was it. The killer from the apartment of grisly trophies was an adult vampire and he was trying to get them. Morgead remembered the terrible smelling trophy room. The killer was out to get their scalps! He had to protect Jez. He had to. But he couldn't get up. His muscles were paralyzed. He couldn't get to her.

And although there was still Power surging through his body, keeping him awake, even if he felt as if he were in some hallucinatory nightmare, he was blind! He didn't know



where to direct it. He had to gather every ounce of Power he could and then blast the monster—and he had to find the monster so he could do it. It was concealing its presence remarkably well. All he could sense was himself and Jez.

But then the monster made a mistake. Physical contact. It touched his arm.

Morgead unleashed all that hoarded Power in one single bolt of destruction. He meant to kill and he felt pretty certain that not even the strongest of the Night People could have survived that onslaught.

## *Jez*

Jez pulled herself out of Morgead's mind with difficulty. She'd gone too far back. All right, it explained why Morgead hadn't considered it cheating when he'd hit her as she touched his arm. But it still didn't explain later events. He'd recovered enough to talk, to sit up, to argue—and all the while she had been concealing how quickly she was going downhill. That was what she wanted to see from his perspective.

## *Morgead*

As Jez collapsed, he managed to catch her in his arms. It happened so fast that he did it without thinking. Then he sat and stared down into her face.

Her skin wasn't the fair, dimpled, almost luminous skin that he was used to seeing. It was tinged with gray. Her eyes were open but unseeing. And her body was completely still.

It took a long time to realize that she was dead.

He'd seen enough dead bodies in his life that he ought to be able to recognize the signs. But somehow he refused to see them in Jez. The blue color of her lips, the cooling of her body, the flattening of the eyes.

And then suddenly he knew that he didn't want to live any longer and he was able to admit it. Jez was gone and he didn't want to be alone.

He never even analyzed why he should have thought "alone" when the rest of the gang was still waiting for him. The gang that he and Jez had created.

It took a long time for him to realize that there was a chance to bring her back.

It would take a tremendous amount of energy, though. And he just didn't have that. Even if he scraped the bottom of the barrel, pulling energy from his spine and the soles of his feet—he had nowhere near enough.

And meanwhile Jez's brain wasn't getting any oxygen. She was losing brain cells, which, even in vampires, was a disastrous thing.

They'd thought they'd been so clever in losing the gang. Now he could have used the others. He would have ruthlessly stripped them of energy to give Jez what she needed. If only they were here . . . even if it killed one of them . . .

That was when he realized he didn't need them.

He was here, and he had always had a particularly strong life energy. If he was willing to give it all to Jez, it should be enough.

He didn't waste a second after that.

He needed to get in contact with her, in better contact than just eye to eye and palm to palm. It only took him a second to stretch her out on the pine needle rug and brush her hair off her face. Then, holding both her hands he clamped his mouth over hers as if giving her artificial respiration. Which, in a way, this was.

And then he channeled the life energy which flowed in and out of him solely out—into Jez. Normally he generated it and it flowed through his body, refreshing and renewing the organs—making him lamia, in short. It was the energy that allowed him to choose to age or not to age, the energy which made him heal much faster than any human could heal and move much faster than any human could move. And then, when the energy had circulated throughout every part of his body, he took it back in, and it was mysteriously renewed by something in his heart, the way human blood picked up oxygen at the lungs. Then the cycle began all over again.

It was why staking through the heart was the only way to kill a vampire.

But now, he was channeling the energy outside his body and into Jez's. And once it completed its circuit he was channeling it to Jez's heart, not his own.

It was all he could think of to do. But . . . it wasn't pleasant. As each sweep of life energy went by, his own starving cells demanded their share.

He wouldn't let them have it. This was for Jez.

It got harder and harder as time went on. It . . . burned. His lungs ached.

But he would only think of Jez.

*Please, just a little*, his body begged.

No! He had killed Jez; he deserved to die.

And still Jez lay without stirring.

*You see? It's not doing any good. Why condemn yourself too?*

I don't care, he thought. Even if we both die.

It was particularly cruel torture, like showing a drowning person a stream of bubbles, or dripping water in front of someone dying of thirst. But Morgead refused to take even one cycle of the energy. He wasn't even sure now why he was doing this. But he knew he had to give Jez back her life.

And then he felt her try to gasp under his lips and he hastily blew a lungful of air into her open mouth. Then he got out of the way and looked at her.

Her skin was baby fair again, the color of the palest luminescent dawn. Her eyes were moving under her eyelids as if she were dreaming. And her parted lips were rose colored.

It was all so beautiful that it wasn't until the world began to go cold that he realized he still wasn't channeling his life energy back into himself.

He remedied that quickly, and felt the blessed flow of life through his body.

And then he began to call Jez's name, barely realizing and certainly not caring that he was crying.

## *Jez*

That idiot! He ought to be completely dead by now! Burning his *life energy* to heal her. No wonder he was in the state he was.

And *why*? Why would he want to save her so much that he was willing to die himself? *Why*?

And why did it make her feel like crying? Why did it give her a strange, melting feeling in her stomach?

The deep-down part of her knew why. But she still wasn't ready for any revelations from it. She was still too much of a child, whatever her age.

All she knew now was that Morgead had traded one dead gang member for another. At least, he was almost dead. And she wasn't going to make the same mistake he had. There was no way for them both to live on the energy currently flowing through her body. It might be enough to allow them to scream and yell at each other, but it wouldn't sustain them as vampires for long.

No—there was one thing a vampire needed, and that was mortal blood. It carried its own variety of life energy, and it could revive a seemingly dead vampire in no time.

There were only three sources of blood that Jez could think of. One was from some sleeping hiker—but those were more than rare; camping out was forbidden in Muir Woods and the gang very seldom ran into them. The second was Steven G. Vizner, who was somewhere in the woods with the rest of the gang—but how far away she had no idea. The third was the blood of an animal, like the white-tailed deer that lived in the wood. But all of them had been driven away by Morgead and Jez's yelling and fighting.

She was *not* going to leave Morgead here, in this state, and go hunting. Anything might happen to him.

Just then, though, a memory came back to her. Herself a child, "helping" Uncle Bracken with a carpentry project. The sharp edge of a screwdriver and a sudden pain and spurt of blood over her hand—and drops on Uncle Bracken's hand, too. Uncle Bracken absently licking his hand before helping her learn to close her wound with her mind—and

giving her the *oddest* look. Shaking his head. Muttering something about “the best champagne” and going on to teach her. But she could see the change in Uncle Bracken’s face, the smoothing out of wrinkles, the youthful flush, and she had wondered—could it have been her blood that did that? Vampire blood wasn’t like mortal blood. It wasn’t supposed to *do* anything.

Now, though, it would seem to be the only option she had. A desperate guess based on a ten-year-old memory.

“Here, Morgead,” she muttered. He was lying very still, with his face white, but he was breathing, and he could follow orders—just barely. “Let’s just get you this way, and me this way.” It wasn’t easy to align him with her neck. He was *heavy*. But by leaning him against a convenient tree, and then kneeling and putting his head on her shoulder, she finally managed it.

*Now, drink*, she told him with all the authority she could muster. *Be a good boy, and bite and drink.*

Morgead didn’t seem to understand what was going on, and his thoughts were gibberish.

***I said drink!*** Jez ordered, backing it up with the power of all her frustration and fear.

Still nothing. Morgead’s mouth was near her neck, but he made to effort to turn his head to reach it.

Oh, for the Goddess—for all the little demons’ in the Underworld’s sake! This was pitiful. Was she going to have to *feed* it to him?

Then she remembered something.

She was sitting astride Morgead’s body, which was propped up by the tree. Now she took him, not very gently, by the top of the head, and pulled so that his mouth was in contact with her arched-back throat.

Then she sent a telepathic stream, not of words, but of pictures, the way vampire mothers and fathers did to their children. Throat + bite = dinner. Now *you* try! she sent to him, and felt a distant response in his brain. A return to childhood maybe.

Just to make sure, she added a nursery poem remembered from her own early childhood, when she was just learning to hunt.

“When you see a pretty throat  
Bite it and see what comes out!  
Red as roses, sweet as dew,  
Suck and see what comes to you!

And then, to her vast relief, she felt the sharp stab of canines and the flow of blood. And even more reassuringly, she heard Morgead swallow. That meant the blood was getting in. He wouldn’t need much before he started coming to his senses, not if what Uncle Bracken had said was still true. Would she have to fight with him then, too, to make him stop? And was his brain permanently damaged from the time that he’d spent without oxygen?

Since she definitely wasn’t resisting him, the blood-drawing brought no pain. Oh, there was the initial sting, but then, holding Morgead and feeling the throbbing warmth of her blood trickling out, felt good. Almost too good. It made her uncomfortable, this closeness, this sharing. She wasn’t ready to understand her own feelings. She tried to distract herself from the warmth at her center, the smell of Morgead in her nostrils, the heaviness of Morgead’s relaxed body against her own, the physical languor that always came after a fight.

Was she entitled to look into his memories again now? Just to see if he were okay? She knew she wouldn’t want to be revived without a working mind. And to make sure it wasn’t anything like the stuff she had been seeing, she would take him farther, farther back.

## ***Morgead***

This apartment . . . it was appalling somehow. Morgead couldn’t explain why he should



be so concerned with what humans did to each other. He knew of vampires who did certain cruel things with humans . . . but he'd never seen it; not on this scale. And somehow it was worse to see a human doing it to others of its kind.

. . . and doing it to the young. Vampires had several classes of young. There were the ordinary young of lamia who would grow up just as human children did but who turn the aging process off and on as many times as they liked. Then there were the made vampires, those who had once been human—they stopped aging the instant they became vampires and stayed that way indefinitely. Morgead had heard that there were vampire elders who had lived for tens of thousands of years, but their affairs were unlikely to affect *him* in any way. And the strange physiology of it was, they wouldn't look like elders in any way. Only teenagers had the resilience to undergo the process it took to making a human into a vampire. After that, the body just burnt out.

Made vampires, like Thistle, could never grow up. Morgead forgave a lot of what Thistle said and did because of *this*.

As he thought Morgead had been watching the large screen at the end of the room. The vermin Steven G. Vizner had recorded himself doing various . . . things . . . to his victims. And not just a few times. There were many, many recordings.

Strange, thought Morgead, that he could be so moved on the account of vermin young.

Then he noticed the wall in this overcrowded room. It was decorated with human scalps.

A grisly memento from each of his victims, perhaps, because as Morgead looked closely, he could tell that many of the scalps were those of children. Really, anyone who could do this . . . and be proud of it . . .

That was when he noticed the red hair.

It had been in shadow before or he would have seen it sooner. It was a red almost as vibrant as Jez's—astonishing in a human. And it was long. Until you looked at the other side and saw the mummified skin, you might think it was a particularly lifelike and beautiful fall or wig.

He hadn't been able to keep away from that one, but he couldn't stand to look at it either. Nor could he just toss it in a corner.

So he stood staring at it until he lost track of time.

He came back to himself some while later—and it was a self that he hardly knew. He had never thought of himself as more savage than the average vampire. But he came back to himself with the feeling that his brain was on fire. He wanted to kill . . . to *kill*—now. His fangs and jaw ached from prolonged projection. Usually it just took a mental command to make them dull and retract. But now he kept seeing Jez as helpless as a human—she would never forgive him for thinking that—and seeing human monsters all around her. It was absurd, of course—Jez was as far as could be imagined from a victim. But it didn't matter to his feelings. He was dying to kill, to maim, to tear to pieces the human who had collected these gruesome souvenirs.

There couldn't be a death slow enough or painful enough for the vermin who had done this. He had enjoyed torture? Well, now he would see torture from the other side.

At last he managed to get his canines to recede. But they still hurt and so did his jaw. In fact all of him hurt, as if he'd been in a fight and taken a beating. But it was just the violent tension of his muscles against each other: the unthinking need to run out and kill *something*, and the more civilized restraint that said he couldn't.

The fight made him feel dull and stupid; in no shape to deal with the argument that he knew would face him when he left the room. But one thing he was certain of. Jez shouldn't see that bright red . . . ponytail. It was easier if he thought of it that way.

Detaching it gently from the wall, picturing its former owner all the time, he put it, almost reverently in a dark corner. This whole place should be burned he thought. All the remains cremated in one mass grave, all those who had gone through similar horrors. But that probably wasn't what the human owners would want. And his gang wouldn't give a damn.

Well, maybe Jez would. She was an odd one; the thorn in his side; his eternal rival;

once, his oldest friend; and now . . . maybe something more. They'd started this gang together. Jez would understand how he felt. Even vermin shouldn't sink so low.

## *Jez*

"Jez would understand how he felt." And Jez did understand. She felt the pure elemental rage of fire course through her at the thought of that room. But still . . . there were too many strange things she *didn't* understand despite her invasion of his mind.

He was all right, though. His memories were intact, even if his block against hadn't held this time. His mind seemed clear, merely asleep. He'd made it.

And his grip was strengthening. In fact, he resisted quite effectively when she tried to move away. She could always heal the wounds in her throat, but he could simply break through again with razor-sharp canines. They went through a few rounds of this before Jez began to feel dizzy. This was crazy. He shouldn't care any more for her blood than for vermin concoctions like soft drinks or hard liquor.

"Morgead! It's me, Jez! I'm no human! Gettoff!"

He muttered something against her throat that sounded like "delicious."

She didn't want to beat him up. But if she let this go on, she wasn't going to be *able* to beat him up.

*Morgead, it's Jez! I'm dizzy and I feel weird. Please don't make me hit you!*

*Jez? There was pure astonishment in the thought.*

*Yes! You're squeezing too hard and you're taking too much blood.*

*I'm drinking your blood?*

*It was all I could think of! I was afraid you might die.*

Abruptly she was let go, by a Morgead with a drop of her blood still on his lips. He stared at her, but by the flush in his cheeks and the brightness of his eyes, he wasn't going to die anytime soon.

"But it was the most—" He broke off and looked confused. "Jez, how could you let me? Are you all right?"

"I'm okay." Jez determinedly ignored the dizzy feeling. Hell, they could go on like this all night if somebody didn't stop the cycle. "And I was just returning one favor for another. You saved me by burning your life energy."

"I—I don't remember that."

It occurred to Jez that Morgead's eyes were *too* bright, and that he was too flushed for a vampire. Also, that when he jumped to his feet, he stood with a distinct list to one side.

She got up as well. "Are you really feeling all right?"

"I feel . . ." He seemed to consider, then he looked up at the sky. "I feel . . . *wonderful*."

"Oh, good," Jez said nervously.

"Just two things," Morgead said.

"What?"

"Why are you leaning over like that? And what were we fighting about?"

"I'm not leaning over, you are. You're going to fall over any minute now. And—and—you really don't remember?" Something in her blood, she thought. Maybe something she'd picked up from one of the last few donors—some weird mix. Or maybe she was sick.

"Would I be *asking* if I remembered?" Morgead said, his face two inches from her nose. The scariest thing was that he didn't snap out the words. He just said them with a lost look.

"N-no, I guess not." Jez found herself leaning back. Something in his eyes was making her flush.

"Did I ever tell you about your eyes?" Morgead demanded suddenly.

"What about my eyes?" Jez found herself leaning back even further, but Morgead leaned as well, and he wasn't any farther away.

"They're blue, but they're silver, too. And the more you get fired up, the more silver

they get. It's not a metallic silver, though. It's *living* silver."

"Oh. Well—that's good to know." Morgead was getting closer and closer to her. His own eyes were different than she had ever seen them. The green was blazing, but somehow it was blazing softly. He was looking at her as if he'd never seen her before and it was disconcerting. Most disconcerting of all was her own reaction to it. Something inside her felt very warm and very . . . joyous. Yes, that was the only word, even though it was trembling slightly, too.

She tried to back up again, and found that she was solidly in contact with a tree.

"It's not just your beautiful eyes. It's what's behind them. Jez, we haven't talked, just the two of us, in a long time."

"No," Jez said. She just didn't know how to say that this was not the time to start an in-depth conversation.

"But we were the first ones. The first gang members. Do you remember in the beginning when we were alone together? We said we'd always be together."

"Yes—"

He had hold of her hand now. For an instant she started to stiffen into the Palm-to-Palm stance, but then she realized that fighting was the last thing on his mind. He had intertwined his fingers with hers and that gave Jez a definitely shaky feeling in her stomach.

"Morgead—"

"Jez." He tried to take another step forward and stumbled. Jez reached out automatically to help him, and for a moment they were holding onto each other and then he seemed to slip and his lips brushed hers.

It was the lightest touch, but it was warm and it sent a wave of feeling through Jez. Even as it confused the outer layers of her mind, it spoke somehow to deeper, older layers. It seemed to open a kaleidoscope of feelings. She wanted to kiss him back.

Then she was supporting his full, unconscious weight. She tried to get her mind back into the moment. She was just setting him down when his eyes popped open again.

"Jez! What's going on?"

"That's what I don't know. What *is* going on?"

"I know! That guy, that Steven G. Vizner—we were going to get him."

"Actually, we got him. And then we got into an argument. And then we got into a fight for the leadership. And—I—guess . . . you won." She hadn't thought about it before but she'd actually helped him fulfill the conditions that the others had agreed to.

"I—withdraw my challenge."

"All right, then. Come on, let's get moving!" He jumped up. He had never looked more confident but he was still swaying and tilting to the left. Jez got more slowly back to her feet.

"Morgead—"

"So, let's hurry! Hurry! The others are waiting for us." At least he remembered that. But this manic mood just wasn't Morgead.

"So wait a minute," Jez now had to get through the difficult part. "Are you going to grin and laugh this way all the time I'm torturing him?"

Morgead looked utterly blank, then said, "You're going to . . . torture him?"

"Well, you're the leader and that was your decision. So I don't have much choice, do I?"

Jez held Morgead's slightly unsteady green stare.

"No," he said and then added, shaking his head and putting a hand to it. "But I don't really remember the contest."

"That's okay," Jez said flatly. "I do."

"Anyway," he said, swaying again, and sticking to what he seemed more sure of, "I'd never smile while taking revenge." He laid emphasis on the last two words. "I'd think of myself as a substitute for the parents of the children he murdered."

"Pierce will smile," Jez said, allowing into her mind the picture she'd been trying so desperately to keep away from her. "And Val will make some clumsy joke, har har har. And Thistle—Thistle will laugh all the way through. You know she will. And when Thistle laughs,



what will you say?"

Morgead looked confused. "I'll—tell her not to."

"And you think she'll listen? Thistle? And what about the rest of it? Do you know what you plan to do to him?"

Morgead looked even more confused. He swayed again. Jez kept expecting him to revert to the distant Morgead, but he didn't.

They walked through trees in what Jez vaguely sensed was the right direction; Jez leading, Morgead following. Neither of them spoke. Morgead seemed to be lost in his thoughts.

Suddenly he said, "We fought right here, didn't we?"

Jez looked around at an area of torn up bushes and deep grooves in the ground. Even some of the trees looked damaged.

I shouldn't have taken him directly back. Some other way would have been better.

She said, "We fought a lot of places."

"But here, too."

"Yeah, it looks like."

Morgead said nothing else for a time, and Jez was beginning to think that she had gotten away with it, when he said.

"When we fought . . . way, way back there, we did Palm-to-Palm didn't we?"

"Yes," Jez admitted.

"And I won that round."

"Yes."

"Because I cheated."

"Because you made a mistake. You were confused."

"But I *cheated*. I never gave you time to get your shields up."

"No."

"So basically, in that moment, I forfeited."

Jez had no idea why she was she was avoiding the subject and acting as if she didn't want to be leader. If she hadn't wanted to, she would never have come out here to fight.

The problem was, that in all her arguments with Morgead, she wasn't sure any longer exactly what was right. If she were leader, she had to take responsibility for it. She had to be the one to tell the rest of the gang how to kill him, or she had to do it herself.

Jez had killed before. But only in the white-hot, adrenaline fueled excitement of the chase. She'd never *thought* about it. Even innocent vermin were barely worth thinking about and they always made sure they picked guilty ones.

She gave a huge sigh.

"Jez, are you listening? I forfeited."

"I heard you."

"And you know the rules."

"Yes." They'd made them up together.

She couldn't help but shake her head. Here they were, both of them arguing that the other one should be leader. It was a strange world.

Just then she began to see very familiar signs. The others, the Bronco, and Steven G. Visner were not very far away.

"So, fearless leader," Morgead said, in a quiet voice, "What are your orders going to be?"

They could hand him over to vermin police. In a case like this they'd *have* to prosecute, have to have a trial. But there were so many little things that could happen: botched evidence, vermin fears for personal safety, defense lawyers making pleas for mercy, shrinks swearing that he wasn't evil but crazy, escapes, parole. Come to think of it, they'd probably contaminated much of the evidence inside the house by handling it.

"Jez?"

And now that she was leader she could see Morgead's original point about them acting as agents of the parents, of the friends, of the terrified, tortured, murdered people whose bits Steven had sawed to bits and strewn about his house like trash. She knew what they would want done to him, or most of them.

"Jez."

They were at the Bronco now, and there, waiting patiently or impatiently were Pierce and Raven and Val and Thistle. And in the car, Steven G. Visner. And they all looked gloomy, except Steven and she couldn't see his face.

Jez expected them to be excited now, asking how the fight had gone and who their leader was. But they listened to Morgead's abbreviated description of the fight sitting very quietly. And then, before anyone could say anything else Raven stepped out of the shadows to look at Jez.

"I think this comes under the headings of 'the boys' fault. It certainly wasn't Thistle's job or yours or mine."

"What wasn't?"

"Searching him. He's a bad, bad guy, remember. And he's a guy."

Morgead looked bewildered. Val and Pierce looked away.

"Anyway, whatever you two decided, it doesn't make much difference to *him*." She nodded at the figure in the car.

Jez was just coming around to look at him. He was slumped against the passenger side window. But she said the obligatory words anyway. "Why not?"

"We knew he had one razorblade. Turns out he had two."

Jez opened her mouth and then shut it again. Nothing would make her admit that she had just felt a burden slip off her shoulders.

She didn't ask whether or not they were sure he was dead. They were vampires. They knew.

"I suppose," Raven said slowly, "that a guy like that must have had quite an imagination. After we showed him what we were and we didn't kill him immediately . . . well, maybe it got working."

"It's better than he deserves anyway," Thistle added sorrowfully.

"It's been a whole night of waiting," said Raven.

Val just yawned.

Jez opened her mouth again. She had finally thought of something to say, but Morgead said it first.

"Let's get out of here. It's almost bedtime."

She started to turn toward her bike, stopped and looked at him.

"Who's the leader of this gang, if you don't mind?"

"You are. So?"

"So let's get out of here. It's almost bedtime. See? Dawn."

They left the Bronco where it was in the woods with Steven G. Visner in it.

The police never solved the mystery of why he committed suicide.

It took two more years before Jez found out who she was, and exactly what was in her blood.

When she did it changed her life forever. But that's another story . . . in the Night World.

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