



COVENANTS

prequel to *Down Came a Blackbird*

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Chapter One

Nathanial watched Lilith pace past the tall casement windows of the dining room. He knew better than to disturb her while she sorted out her thoughts. In 1962, after the Ash Wednesday storm destroyed the other sisterlines, she and Shiloh fled the pain and confusion of so many deaths and wandered the country.

Eighty years had passed since then. Time and distance had erased the total familiarity and acceptance they'd shared with him as oathsister and oathbrother by caterdru bonding.

He hadn't realized how much he missed the emotional link of his drubond with them until they returned, but it didn't matter. They came home. Together, they would learn to be a family again.

Lilith paused in front of the windows. The last rays of the setting sun transformed her platinum hair into a brilliant halo.

Great Aunt Elizabeth rose from the window seat and stared up at her niece. Lilith towered over the older woman.

Elizabeth said, "We need you here."

Lilith laid her hand on the diminutive woman's shoulder. "You're the eldest female of our sisterline. By all rights, you should be the one to decide in this matter."

Aunt Elizabeth shook her head. Soft gray curls framed her nut-brown face. "I am too old for this fight. That's why I called you home when he came here and offered to buy our land."

Percival came over to the oak table. He wore his hip-length salt and pepper hair in a ponytail tied with a single strip of worn leather. He leaned his hip on the side of the massive oak table and smiled at Elizabeth. There was no mistaking the confidence he projected about his half-sister's decision.

Nathanial sighed. Elizabeth was right. There was no other way. With only five of them left, they would never survive another attempt to resettle. They must stay and fight to keep their land.

Lilith sighed. "I don't know if I've made the right choice. It's too late for me to present myself as an older woman. I didn't foresee this human changing tactics and becoming a persistent suitor when I refused his offer for our land last year."

“Never you mind about that.” Elizabeth went to the fireplace and the cauldron of soup hanging there. She lifted the spoon to her mouth and sipped. Their great aunt looked like a small child standing in the massive maw of the fireplace. Neatly mended patches adorned the knees of her faded jeans. “You're no longer a womanchild fresh from your first romancing. You can handle him.”

Lilith leaned her cheek against the windowpane and stared outside. “I know what signs to watch for now. I won't allow myself to be deluded again by my desire for children.”

Elizabeth motioned at them to line up at the fireplace. She picked up a towel, wrapped it around the handle of the cauldron, lifted it from the hook and placed it on the metal trivet on the blackened firestone. Lilith and Shiloh joined Percival and accepted their portions. The men towered a full two heads taller than Elizabeth's slight form.

Nathanial came last. Elizabeth's head barely reached the top of his abdomen. He accepted his bowl and escorted Elizabeth to an ornately carved chair with thick cushions that raised her to a more comfortable height at the table.

When he seated himself in the next seat, the bright metallic shape of a yada popped out of a cubbyhole beside the fireplace and swiftly cleared the ashes off the blackened hearthstones. Shiloh's mechanical devices served them well. He'd created them two decades ago in order to save them time and energy keeping all the empty rooms of their homes suitably clean.

Shiloh had named them ‘brownies’ but the patent office said he couldn't because that word wasn't considered politically correct. So, he settled on ‘yada’, obtained his patent and sold the subsidiary rights to a small company to produce and sell the robots on the open market. Since then, their sisterline had reaped the dual benefit of yada labor and extra coin for the family coffers.

Lilith paused with her spoon in mid air. “Uncle Percy, which dog did you choose for tomorrow's gifting?”

Percival put aside his piece of buttered bread. “I chose Shillelagh. He's two and a half years old. His training is complete and he's already neutered.”

Lilith inclined her head towards the bread. Percival passed it to her along with the butter. “Shelley knows all the commands, both hand and verbal for his guard dog duties. I'll bathe him tonight. Tomorrow he'll be all prettied up with not one hair out of place.”

Lilith studied the simple fare laid out before her. "I know it hasn't been easy having me come back and disrupt your lives like this. For the most part I've tried not to interfere with what you've established here during our absence."

She sliced a piece of bread and pointed her knife at Percy. A wistful smile softened her face. "I know you've done your best, but I've noticed a few changes."

Uncle Percy opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated. Elizabeth reached over and squeezed his hand. He cleared his throat. "What changes?"

"The Porta-Potties in the field behind the barn, why have so many with only three persons living here? And that clay track? Is it a landing field? I didn't see any aircraft in the barn."

"Oh, those changes." Percy dismissed her questions with a wave of his hand. "They're for the biker reunion."

Lilith raised her left eyebrow.

"They hold a big bash here every summer. The rental fees they pay us take care of the taxes on the land. They race their bikes on the track. It's all very safe. The riders wear helmets and use giant orange rubber coated things that look like slinkies to hook their keys to their waists. That way if they wreck, the slinky pulls the key out of the ignition and shuts the bike off without endangering the spectators."

"They're very polite," Elizabeth added. "The women come to me and ask me about herbs. Some of the men have big potbellies, some are little and lean, some are hairy, and a few shave their heads bald. They have all kinds of tattoos and they're the shyest bunch of guys I ever did see. They stare at you and drink their beer. By the time they get up enough nerve to talk, they're usually too drunk to be any use for making love."

Percy stretched out his left arm. A long wavy line of intense blue ogham lines wrapped itself around his arm from wrist to shoulder. "They like our tattoos. The woad gives them a dark blue shade they haven't been able to achieve with their dyes."

Nathaniel rubbed the soft brown fur on his arm that concealed his tattoo. It listed his foremothers and forefathers for ten generations. He remembered how much it itched when his fur grew back after shaving it off. The others were lucky. They never had to put up with that additional irritation when they received their tattoos.

The Sidhe way of keeping track of their ancestry made perfect sense to him. He never understood how humans avoided the dangers of inbreeding. Their generations came and went so fast he found it difficult to keep track of their sisterlines.

Uncle Percy nodded at Shiloh. "When they find out how much you know about repairing and creating mechanical devices, they'll be lining up to pay for your services."

A shy smile flickered across Shiloh's face. He ducked his head down and stared at the table. Keen interest hummed from Shiloh into Nathaniel across their drubond.

Percy passed the bread to Nathaniel. "If we have to sell the land and leave, I can talk to Jubal, the one who usually tattoos the bikers. He has the salves and equipment for a complete laser removal of body hair. I know he'll help me. It may take a couple of days but we should be able to remove enough of your fur that no one will suspect anything about you."

Nathaniel picked up a slice of bread and buttered it. His hand trembled. He'd feel naked without his fur but he would do whatever it took to safeguard his family, no matter what.

"We haven't come to that point yet." Lilith's voice sliced through the subdued silence Percy's suggestion had created. "We may never come to such a point. There's no need to discuss such dire measures right now."

Casting a relieved glance at his oathsister, Nathaniel sat back and waited for her to finish talking. Her eyes went dark and distant. "I know it's hard to change. Our sisterlines survived all these centuries by keeping to ourselves. The problem is there's only five of us left now."

Lilith sat back in her chair. She looked at them one at a time then gave a decisive nod. "Uncle Percy has the right idea. We need allies. That's why I donated land to Lacrimas to build a clinic. That's why I'll seek out this female physician tomorrow and give her Shillelagh. If we had a physician allied with our family eighty years ago maybe more of us would be alive today."

Nathaniel looked at Shiloh. Absolute acceptance flowed to him along their subconscious drubond link. Nathaniel relaxed. His oathbrother's instincts supported his. Their duty was clear.

He rose to his feet, turned to Lilith and bowed. "We are your caterdru. We support your decisions, no matter what."

The tension in the room eased.

Chapter Two

Sunlight slanted down on an endless mass of black, white and gold topped foam. A mountain of cotton candy clouds billowed up miles below this. A few seconds later, a checkerboard pattern of green and brown appeared beneath a sudden gap in the clouds.

“Ma'am?” Conflicting perfumes invaded Bridget's scrutiny of the clouds below the massive scramjet. A trio of identically clad attendants, two female and one male held out their offerings. “Would you like a drink? A pillow? A vid?”

Bridget studied the artfully applied layers of blue, green, lavender and pink eye shadow of her female tormentors. The last time she'd seen that particular combination around a woman's eyes had been during her brief internship in a hospital emergency room compiling evidence for an Abuse Protection Order. Ever since then, she found herself seeing cosmetics as a profoundly idiotic way of expressing sexual attractiveness and availability.

Bridget accepted the vid helmet. The rainbow insignia on the visor glittered under her fingers. She looked down at her armrest and searched for the thumbprint slot to bill her for usage of the vid helmet and failed to find any. Oh right. This is first class, not coach.

In coach, she'd receive a bill for everything, including pillow and blanket and she'd be jammed in elbow to elbow with her fellow passengers in ten seat aisles. Bridget shrugged, put on the vid helmet and fastened the straps. As long as Kurt Walker was willing to pay for first class tickets she might as well enjoy the perks, even though her official contract named the town of Lacrimas as her employer.

She clicked the controls to scroll for recent news about Mr. Walker. Five seconds later, a newsvid of Mr. Walker shaking hands with a dark skinned white-haired woman flowed onto the screen. The mysterious figures of two veiled bodyguards waited behind the woman.

The newsvid announcer's voice purred in Bridget's ear. “Driven from their ancestral homes in the Sahara, the Tuareg Nation now flourishes in the Australian Outback. Defiant to the end, they retain customs and beliefs that outraged the radical Muslim Jihad. Tuareg males wear the veils while their women walk around shamelessly bare-faced. Ancient caravan guards, they incorporate modern weapons and body armor with their tribal robes and begin a new era guarding Mr. Walker's international spaceports.”

The Tuaregs were last week's news. Bridget clicked the mouse to resume its search patterns for newsvids about Kurt Walker. The computer pulled out yesterday's images of modified cranes resembling giant transformer dinosaurs removing ten thousand pound barrels of radioactive waste from the Nuclear Storage site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.

She saw the female driver of the Tyrannosaurus Rex crane open her window in the machine's head and wave at the camera. The experienced driver had her controls so fine tuned that the Rex looked alive when it rolled over on its tank treads to the side of the mountain, bent down, inserted its forearm into the tunnel, then pulled out a barrel with its massive pincers. It rose to its full height with the barrel clutched to its chest, carried it down the slope and inserted it in a massive shipping container.

This container would then be shot into orbit via a mag-lev catapult. Shuttles waiting in orbit would rendezvous with the container and haul it to the Farside Lunar Hazardous Materials Storage Site.

A series of chimes, the signal for impending landing, interrupted the vid. The chair tilted under Bridget and placed her in a reclining position. She removed the helmet and dropped it into the bag attached to the armrest.

Lap, chest and shoulder belts automatically deployed while the plane circled for landing. The brightly colored plastic structures of a porta-mall flowed beside the partially built spaceport.

The dark green foliage of an enormous swamp lurked behind the glittering expanse of the landing field. The swamp extended for thirty-some miles to the Atlantic coast and the marine base Camp Le Jeune. The opposite end of this vast swamp contained her destination, Lacrimas and Kurt Walker's new spaceport still under construction.

* * * *

Getting through the airport's security line wasn't as bad as she expected. Kurt Walker showed up with his bodyguards, whipped out his ID and they went through the line in five minutes flat.

So what if Lacrimas was a small town in the middle of nowhere. It's only a three-year contract. Bridget knew she'd survive the experience. This job was worth the hassle of mosquitoes and assorted wildlife from the swamp wandering around her clinic, just to escape from the corporate infighting going on right now at Duke. And best of all, it would pay off her outstanding debts from medical school.

Debbie, her previous boss from the genetics research lab, knew Bridget needed the money. She should count herself lucky for snagging the contract. Of course, the fact that Lacrimas was Debbie's hometown had helped her learn about the job offer before it was posted on the Net.

Bridget had already shipped her clothes, stereo equipment, Supra CDS and personal computer ahead. Debbie just about died laughing when she saw the stacks of pharmaceutical mail and drug samples she'd accumulated in her tiny apartment at Duke. They solved that problem by donating the entire lot to the Salvation Army.

The first thing she'd buy after she settled into her new apartment in Lacrimas would be one of the cleaning robots called yadas invented by S. Moonsammy fifteen years ago. Whoever he or she was, S. Moonsammy was making out like a bandit. Everyone wanted a yada.

“Dr. O’Keefe?” Kurt Walker's warm baritone voice reminded her that she wasn't the only passenger in the spacious limo. “Are you feeling all right? You've been very quiet.”

Bridget pushed a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “Your security is thorough.”

Humor glinted in his eyes. They were such a dark blue shade against his nut-brown skin that she wondered if the color was the result of cosmetic contact lenses, then remembered that Malcolm X had green eyes. He obviously had Caucasian ancestors mixed in with his predominately African heritage.

Kurt shrugged. “You'll get used to them.”

“Why should I have to get used to them?”

He stared at her for a moment. “Because, wherever I go, my security goes.”

Now it was her turn to stare. She didn't recall signing anything that said she was supposed to be his private physician. Her contract made her the physician in charge of a small clinic in Lacrimas.

The limo rolled to a stop. He leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “I'll explain later, after the ceremony.”

The limo doors opened. Two security guards helped them climb out. A guano-crusting statue of General Lee posed on the small lawn was the first thing she saw. The resounding blare of a band lined up behind the statue stopped her dead in her tracks.

His grip on her elbow kept her from bolting like a gun-shy horse. “Follow my lead. There’ll be a couple of speeches, a little bit of home-cooked food, then introductions to the mayor, sheriff and city council. It’ll be over before you know it.”

* * * *

She smoothed out the wrinkles in her white linen skirt and stared at the polished wood under her shoes. Folding chairs. They sat on folding chairs on a stage in front of everyone. She didn't care how many security guards Mr. Walker had, she was going to kill him if it was the last thing she did.

Bridget hated crowds. Sometimes she'd walk into a room filled with people and burst into tears for no reason at all.

The man holding the microphone turned around and looked at her. “Dr. O’Keefe.”

Applause drowned out the heavy thump of her heart. Bridget managed to stand up without knocking the chair over. Five steps. She counted them when she walked forward to accept the microphone. It almost slid through her sweat soaked palm. She tightened her grip and stared straight ahead. The spotlight felt wonderful. It blinded her completely.

“Thank you.” She returned the microphone to her tormentor, walked those five steps back to her chair and sat down.

“That was amazing.” Walker steered her off the stage, past the length of the buffet table then handed her a styrofoam plate. “The shortest speech in the history of Lacrimas.”

“I hate crowds,” she muttered. Crowds always made her feel like she had too many people pushing at her mind. She ventured a look sideways. Four tall Caucasian men wearing dark suits sported discreet wires in their ears and stood three feet away from her and Kurt.

Cheerfully ignoring her obvious irritation, Walker nudged her past the macaroni and potato salads and a plate of deviled eggs. “Here, try this.” He scooped his selection onto her plate.

She took a closer look at his selection. “These are violets, real violets.” She picked one up and took a tentative taste. “With a powdered sugar glaze. Who made them?”

He lifted his eyebrow. “Miz Lilith Harker, I presume. It looks like something she'd make.”

The combination of grudging respect and frustration in his voice was the last thing she expected to hear. She hazarded a quick survey of the room. "Where is she?"

'Miz Harker's not here.' He escorted her across the room to a plump black woman wearing sturdy shoes and a pale green dress. "This is Miz Lucinda Davies."

Lucinda held out her hand. "Dr. O'Keefe, I've been looking forward to working with you. I'm the physician's assistant assigned to the clinic."

They shook hands. Bridget stiffened at the sight of a team of reporters moving across the room towards them. A sigh of relief gusted from her lips when Walker smoothly stepped forward, intercepted the pack and led them to the podium.

Bridget eyed the soggy paper plate in her hands. "Where?"

Lucinda's smile broadened into a conspiratorial grin. She led Bridget behind a flag draped pillar and showed her a large plastic draped garbage pail.

"Thank you." Bridget hurriedly disposed of her burden and whispered, "Can we leave now? I'd much rather check out the clinic than waste my time here."

Lucinda frowned. "We can't. Not yet. The mayor didn't get a chance to give you the keys to the clinic." She peered around the pillar at the stage. "He's giving them to Mr. Walker now."

Bridget pushed a curly strand of hair behind her ears. She knew if she didn't leave soon, a migraine would be ripping her head apart. More and more, she regretted her decision to take this job despite the tempting provision that paid off all her student loans.

"I'll wait outside. Can you ask him for the keys and bring them out to me?"

Lucinda leaned closer and peered at her face. "You look a little tired dear. Are you feeling all right?"

She shook her head and moved closer to the exit. "I just need a little fresh air."

The sudden shift from the dark air-conditioned hallway into the sunlight blinded her for a moment. The hot July air slammed into her like a solid wall of steam.

A man's voice floated up into the sun-drenched air. "Good afternoon, Miz Harker."

Bridget blinked and focused on three figures at the bottom of the steps. She saw a short, stocky man wearing a Sheriff's uniform talking to a tall bronze-skinned woman with platinum hair who clasped the leash of a large black dog.

The sheriff lifted his peaked cap, wiped the top of his balding scalp and replaced his cap. Sweat stained the underarms of his tan shirt. "You know you can't bring your dog inside, unless he's a seeing-eye dog."

"I can wait here." The woman towered over the sheriff's stocky bulk by at least six inches. Her hair glowed under the bright July sun. The dog tilted his muzzle up and stared at Bridget standing above them in the shadowed doorway.

The sheriff bobbed his head. "Ma'am, I'm the sheriff now and as far back as the records go no Harker ever did any wrong. I hold your family in the highest regard no matter what anyone in Lacrimas says. If there's anything I can do, if there's ever any trouble..." His voice trailed off under Miz Harker's steady stare.

Miz Harker inclined her head. A thick five stranded braid with pale blue ribbon woven into its length swung past her shoulders. She shifted her stance. Her white cotton dress swirled around her ankles. "Your family holds no covenant with mine. Why would you aid us now?"

The sheriff dropped his gaze and his words tumbled out in a rapid-fire glut. "My great-grandfather, during World War II, one of your kin, Zachary Harker, saved his life. We've been beholden to you ever since."

"Ah." The soft sigh of her acceptance filled the air with its total certainty of a bargain signed and sealed for eternity.

Bridget scuffed her heel on the concrete.

Three heads swung in her direction. She came down the steps. "I'm Dr. O'Keefe. I just stepped out for a breath of fresh air. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Miz Harker smiled. The welcome in her eyes wrapped itself around Bridget. "Dr. O'Keefe! I'm so glad to meet you." She tugged on the leash. The dog sat up at attention. "This is Shillelagh, but he answers to Shelley most of the time."

Bridget blinked. She was being introduced to a dog. Did Miz Harker expect her to shake its paw?

“He will guard you with his life.”

“Miz Harker...” Bridget tried not to sound too doubtful.

Miz Harker held out her hand. “My first name is Lilith, but I don't mind if you call me Lily. What's your first name?”

“Bridget.”

They shook hands. A delicate tracery of blue lines spiraled around Lily's left arm from wrist to shoulder. It looked like ancient inscriptions pictured in archeological books and Lily's dress reminded her of an old movie about the 1920's bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde.

Lily retrieved a slim booklet from her skirt pocket and handed it over along with the dog's leash. “This is a list of the verbal commands and hand signals that Shelley understands. He is my gift to you.”

Lily tilted her head and looked over Bridget's shoulder at the town hall's doorway as if she expected an assassin to jump out at her. “I have to go now.”

She turned to the sheriff, “Can you give me a ride home? I lost my birth certificate and don't have a North Carolina driver's license yet.”

Two minutes later, Lucinda and Kurt found Bridget standing on the empty sidewalk with a dazed expression on her face. She clutched a small booklet against her chest. A large black dog waited at her side for commands.

* * * *

“That's a very expensive dog.” Walker shifted position in the limo seat and repeated his statement for the fourth time.

Bridget didn't know which was worse. The moody silences while he thought up more questions about her encounter with Lily or his abrupt topic changes.

“Why did she give him to you?”

She shrugged. “Lily said he'd guard me with his life.”

The muscles on his jaw tightened. “He's a Bouvier Des Flandres. They were bred to herd cattle in Belgium. During World War One, they were hooked up to carts and sent out to the battlefields to carry the wounded back to the Red Cross tents.”

He drummed his fingers on the armrest and traded stares with the dog seated between them. “They're very intelligent. They didn't need anyone to

go with them and constantly tell them what to do. They knew their routes and waited while the wounded were loaded on or climbed on the carts then returned to the Red Cross tents. The breed almost became extinct because so many of them were killed.”

She hoped there was a point to his rambling explanation. “So.”

“They're a rare and expensive breed. The Harkers raise them, train them and sell them to international security forces. A fully trained one sells for about six or seven thousand dollars.”

“What are you trying to say? That I should give him back because he's expensive or you're upset because she gave him to me and not to you? If you want one that badly, I'm sure she has others to sell.”

The glare in his eyes blistered her face. “Lilith Harker won't even give me the time of day.” He punched the seat cushion. “She refused to sell me any of her land but when she found out I donated funds to build a clinic for Lacrimas, she turned around and donated land.”

Bridget rubbed her thumb across the buttery soft leather upholstery. If Lily didn't want to sell him any of her land that was her prerogative. It sounded to her like a classic case of one-upmanship.

“May I call you Bridget?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be your friend!” His voice exploded with frustration.

“Why?”

He sat back for a few moments. His silences were very interesting. She could almost hear his mind sorting out an answer that would persuade her.

“Why must there be a reason? You're an intelligent woman and I'd like to be your friend, that's all.”

Shelley swiveled his furry head around and waited for her response.

“You can't buy friendship, you know.”

“I'm not trying to buy your friendship.” Walker jabbed his thumb at Shelley. “I'm not the one who gave you an expensive dog.”

Peeling the layers from an onion would be a simpler process. She felt like pulling her hair out one strand at a time while she replayed their entire conversation.

She sighed. "That was different. Lily's concern about my safety was genuine. She didn't care if the dog was expensive or not, she wanted me to be safe."

"Don't you feel safe with me?"

Another layer. She probed the sensation of sitting beside him in the limo. Oddly enough, other than the fact that he tended to irritate her, she felt perfectly safe around him.

"Mr. Walker..." she began.

"Mr. Walker is too formal. Call me Kurt, please."

"Kurt." She paused to see if he planned to interrupt her again. When he didn't, she sorted out the best way to express her instinctive reaction to his offer of friendship but diplomacy had never been and never would be her strongest feature. "The way I see it, the only reason you want to be my friend is because of Lily, not me."

"Woof!" There was a definite sound of agreement in Shelley's bark.

Kurt raked his hand through his hair. "No, it's you. I mean I want to get to know Lily better but I really do want to be your friend, too."

"I'll try if you'll try."

His confused expression was priceless.

"What?" She peered around the dog at him. "I said ... I'll try if you'll try."

Exasperation replaced the confusion on his face. "What do you mean by that?"

She slumped back in her seat, rolled her eyes up for heavenly guidance, leaned forward and rephrased her offer one more time. "I'm going to give you a fair chance. Okay? It has to be a two-way street. I'll try if you'll try and we'll see what happens from there."

"And Lily?"

"She's a separate issue. I won't spy on her for you. If she wants to get to know you better she'll tell me herself and I'll work things out from there. I don't even know if she's going to be my friend. All I know is she gave me Shelley and wants me to be safe."

"All right. It's a deal."

They shook hands on it.

Chapter Three

The limo rolled to a stop. Kurt leaned past the dog, touched Bridget's arm and said, "We're at the clinic now."

She opened her door and climbed out.

Shelley jumped out and almost knocked her over. He galloped up to the shiny new Jeep parked in the parking lot and sniffed the tires.

She rubbed her hand across her eyes. "I have a patient already?"

Kurt tapped her shoulder and handed her a set of keys. "It's part of the package deal. As the director you need your own set of wheels."

Her heart thundered in her ears. She didn't remember seeing anything about a vehicle in her contract. "Are you sure?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away. "Okay, I lied. It's not part of the package deal. I bought it because I figured you'd need one."

She tightened her hand around the keys. "Thank you."

Pride filled his face. "You're welcome. I built the clinic, too."

She turned to look at the one-storey brick structure. Blue solar panels covered the roof. A solid oak front door faced the parking lot. She walked around and saw how the back curved in a U-shape to accommodate a massive willow tree and oversized hammock.

Shelley galloped to the tree, sniffed it, lifted his leg and anointed the tree trunk. He scratched the ground with his hind legs and sent clods of dirt flying in every direction. His tail wagged furiously.

The lawn sloped down into the thick foliage of a swamp. Bridget studied the rear of the building. A series of French doors led out from the inside of the curve onto the lawn. A heliport pad with lights for night landings hugged the left side of the building.

She strolled around to the front. Shelley trotted at her heels. There she found Kurt leaning on the limo and peering at the thick foliage of the swamp on the other side of the driveway with a quiet intensity.

She cleared her throat.

Kurt turned around with an odd, secretive look on his face.

"It's very nice."

He responded with an abrupt nod, then opened the limo's door. "I'll see you later."

She watched him climb inside. The limo turned around in the parking lot, crawled down the driveway and turned right to merge onto the highway.

What was that all about? Bridget sighed, straightened her shoulders and took a deep, cleansing breath. Too late to worry about that now. She marched to the front door, fiddled with the keys and inserted them one by one until she found the one that unlocked it. "Ohmygod."

A sea of cartons dominated the middle of the waiting room. How in the world had she managed to accumulate so much junk? It would take at least a week to unpack.

"Hello." Lily's quiet voice coming from behind almost made her jump out of her skin.

Bridget spun around. Lily stood about five feet away in the parking lot clad in faded jeans and t-shirt. "Where did you come from?"

Lily jerked her thumb at the swamp. "Over there. I waited until he left before I came out." A wistful smile softened her mouth. "It looks like you need a little help unpacking."

Bridget grinned, strode to the box with 'clothes' scrawled on the side and used her key to slit the top open. It didn't take long to change from her linen skirt and jacket into jeans and t-shirt, too.

* * * *

An hour later, they had made a decent dent in the cartons.

Bridget leaned against the wall and caught her breath. Shelley plopped on the floor beside Lily and panted.

Lily scratched him behind his ears and wiped a dust-streaked hand on her shirt. She seated herself cross-legged on the blue tiled floor and opened the next box. The look on Lily's face reminded Bridget of a small child diving into a treasure chest. She selected one of the thick medical reference books and opened it. Her fingers caressed the pages.

"You can borrow them whenever you want."

The gratitude shining in Lily's eyes told Bridget her answer.

"I'm back!" Kurt's happy shout startled them both.

He leaned against the open doorway. A bouquet of roses filled his right hand and in his other hand, he cradled an insulated carton with the hologram of a pizza on its cover. A triumphant smile lit his face.

Lily leaped to her feet and clutched the book to her chest like a shield.

He stepped past a pile of flattened boxes, handed the pizza carton to Bridget and strolled over to face Lily.

Two bright red spots darkened her bronze cheekbones. “How did you know I was here?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “I caught a glimpse of white in the swamp. I figured you might show up after I left.” He held out the roses. “Here. I bought these for you.”

She rolled her eyes. “You sent me a can of fish eggs last week. Now you want me to accept a bunch of inedible half-dead flowers.”

His face closed up. He threw the roses aside.

Lily backed away to the French door that opened onto the lawn, unlatched it and left. He went out after her.

Bridget couldn't stop herself. She had to find out what was going to happen next. She hurried outside to catch up to them. Shelley marched at her heels. She ducked under the branches of the willow tree and jumped the tiny brook that trickled past on the other side.

Kurt had managed to track Lily into the underbrush but not very far. He froze, yelled out in a mixture of pain and frustration and collapsed onto the ground.

Shelley raced ahead into the underbrush. Bridget tailed him at a slower pace and found Kurt sprawled on the red clay dirt with his pants rolled up to expose his ankle.

Shelley sniffed the ankle then licked his cheek.

Bridget glanced at the underbrush and back to him. “What happened?”

“A snake bit me. I hate snakes.”

She went down on her knee and examined the two bruises on his ankle. Shelley lay beside him, rested his chin on Kurt's leg and watched.

Lily appeared out of the underbrush. She laid the medical book beside Shelley then turned in a slow circle. Her gaze swept the tall grass and bushes. “What kind of snake was it?”

“It was red with yellow and black stripes. I think it might have been a coral snake.”

When Bridget tried to stand, Lily motioned for her to stay put. “You can't treat him or order the anti-venom until we know what kind of snake bit him.”

Lily inched her way into the tall grass, moving her head from side to side to search the ground. She stopped, bent down and reached out so fast her hand almost blurred.

She held a three-foot snake aloft. Reddish brown in color with yellow and black stripes, it twisted in her grip and exposed a checkerboard pattern of black and white squares on its belly. “Is this the one?”

Kurt nodded and swallowed. “What kind is it?”

Lily walked deeper into the underbrush, bent down and let the snake go. She stood, brushed her hands on her jeans and returned to the path. “It's a milk snake.”

A greenish tinge marred Kurt's dark skinned face. “How poisonous is it?”

She tilted her head and stared at him for a moment. “You'll have a nice bruise but other than that, there's nothing to worry about. They're non-poisonous.” She pulled him to his feet.

He clung to her hand.

She yanked her hand from his grasp. “Why won't you leave me alone?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stood there like a little boy with his heart on his sleeve.

Lily backed away into the underbrush, lifted a mass of silvery green Spanish moss, ducked under it and vanished from sight.

Shelley nudged Bridget's hand with his wet nose and whuffed. She looked down, opened her clenched hands and saw the marks where her fingernails had dug into her palms.

Chapter Four

Six months later...

Bridget leaned against the French doors and stared at her yard. The swamp had awakened from its winter sleep. The massive willow tree held its ground against the torrent of reddish water that surged about its roots. Yesterday that torrent had been a placid brook trickling past the lawn and draining into the river.

A tree branch whirled by and disappeared into the chaos below. Shelley snuffled and leaned his furry bulk against her leg. Bridget looked down at the smudge on the windowpane where he'd pressed his nose. She scratched behind his ears. Shelley had become a part of her now, like family.

The clinic's heliport lights blazed on in response to a radio signal from Kurt's copter. He should be arriving soon.

The Sheriff had left a message on her voice mail. The bridge was out and Kurt had volunteered to retrieve her himself so the Medivac copter didn't have to be rerouted for her.

Shelley pricked his ears and whuffed. Bridget stared at the horizon. The steady whup-whup sound of the approaching aircraft reached her ears. Then the copter zoomed up over the moss-shrouded trees. She grabbed her slicker and hurried through her living quarters into the clinic's waiting room. The dog's toenails clicked on the smooth tiles behind her.

Bridget slid to a stop at the front door and pulled on her boots. Shelley stuck his wet nose into her hand and licked her fingers. She scratched his ears one more time. "Guard."

His ears flapped open. He sat back on his haunches ready to defend the clinic and apartment from all intruders. She donned the slicker, zipped it, picked up her bag of medical supplies and stepped outside.

The door's lock mechanism clicked behind her. The bulky leather bag she'd slung over her shoulder pulled her off balance. She ran across the parking lot to the helipad, skidded on the wet concrete and slid into Kurt's arms.

Kurt made sure she strapped herself in, did his pre-flight check and lifted off. He eased the aircraft into a gentle glide that skimmed the tree-tops. A single pull on the control stick took them higher.

He tapped her on the shoulder and pointed down.

She looked where he pointed and saw the swamp spread below like a vast lake with islands scattered across it. Her clinic sat atop one of the islands. Red clay-streaked water gushed past the willow tree and joined the river a few miles below.

Kurt swept the copter lower for a better look at the remains of the ruined bridge. A tangled mass of steel and concrete lay crunched in the middle of the river with slabs of ice and tree trunks crashing past it.

He leaned toward her and shouted over the noise of the propeller blades. "If I hadn't listened to Lily it would have been a lot worse."

She waved at the ground. "How could it be worse than this?"

"The day I submitted my proposed design for the spaceport to the City Council, Lily showed up. She took one look at the blueprints and said I planned to kill her and her family."

He grinned and shook his head. "The council members sat there with their mouths open and watched us argue for three hours straight. Finally Lily said she could show me what she meant if we took a flight over the land. I called my foreman on my cell phone and told him to bring my copter over.

The three of us went up and she showed us the lay of the land. If I built an access road with embankments along the north side of the swamp as planned, it would create a dam behind the landing fields, a dam that would overflow like a tidal wave into her swamp. I changed the plans, kept the old river road and added a series of drains under the landing fields."

Bridget pointed at the swamp. "But it's still flooded."

"It's supposed to be flooded. It's a swamp. Under normal conditions, it's a gradual overflow that allows her land to soak up the water and let the river drain itself into the ocean thirty miles away from her."

A wry grin twisted his lips. "This way, Lily and her family have time to seek higher ground and my landing field won't turn into a manmade lake. She saved me over a million dollars in flood damage costs."

He shrugged. "In return for her advice I agreed not to cut down the willow tree and built the clinic around it."

He eased the control stick forward and guided them down to the spaceport. The roof access doors of an immense hanger slid apart at their

approach. "I've got to pick up some supplies before we head into town. It won't take long."

* * * *

Bridget hugged her canary yellow slicker against herself and shivered. She felt weird, as if someone watched her from a shadowy corner of the hangar. A quick glance around didn't show her anything that looked abnormal. She tightened her lips and decided not to mention her uneasiness. What could she say? As far as she knew they'd be leaving in a few minutes.

Keeping a firm grip on her unruly imagination, she let her gaze wander around the cavernous structure. Bright fluorescent lights in the ceiling glared down upon five helicopters ranging in size from simple two-seater models to heavy-lift carriers.

A group of helmeted security guards, their black visors flickering with computerized readouts, climbed in the four-seater parked in the center. She flexed her toes and felt the squishy sensation of rainwater leaking out of her soggy sneakers onto the concrete floor. Two guards jumped out of the copter and ran across the floor to examine some cartons stacked against the wall.

A third guard positioned himself behind her and Kurt where he had a clear view of them and the entire room. Kurt stood six feet tall; that much Bridget knew. She squinted at the guard behind her. Carved from black onyx, the guard gave her a brief nod and pulled his visor down over his face. He stood a good head taller than Kurt. Layers of protective clothing encased his thick muscled body.

Had the acute paranoia of the security team affected her on a subconscious level? Black visors concealed the guards' faces. They used hand gestures to communicate with each other and carried thick metallic rods.

She rubbed her neck. Or, was she just tired and feeling the strain of a major flood and the evacuation of an entire town to the partially completed spaceport?

Kurt took hold of her left arm and pulled her along. A faded yellow slicker hung open over his dark gray suit, which had acquired quite a few creases and stains during the last twenty-four hours. Somewhere along the way, he'd removed his tie. His guard paced behind them.

"They're almost done," Kurt muttered.

Bridget turned around. The glare from the ceiling panels had darkened his eyes to a deep shade of violet. A pale blue speck of light danced across his left ear, down his cheek, and settled in the hollow of his throat.

She looked past Kurt's shoulder at the guard standing behind him. He stiffened, then with the coiled speed of a cobra, launched himself at Kurt and Bridget and bowled them over into a tangled jumble of arms and legs.

Wet concrete rasped against the back of her head. She winced and gasped while the sudden weight of two men expelled the air from her lungs. She forced her face sideways and focused on the copter's landing gear.

An elbow jammed itself into her rib cage and hot breath tickled her ear. She heard a prolonged hissing sound, muffled yells and thumps, the sound of running across the concrete, further yells and thumps. Then silence.

Just when she came to the conclusion that the guard lying on top of them must be dead, he shifted his weight and climbed off. Bridget sucked in a lungful of air. Now she knew exactly how an asthma attack felt. It felt horrible.

Kurt rolled off next.

She pushed herself to her knees and sucked in more air.

“Are you all right? Were you hurt?” A trickle of blood flowed from Kurt's nose, down his chin onto his shirt collar.

He pulled her to her feet. She dug a handful of tissues from her pocket and handed them over.

He held them against his nose and nodded his thanks.

She rubbed the back of her neck. Two shapes encased in bilious foam lay on the concrete beside the landing gear. Two security guards knelt beside the shapes with thick padded gloves on their hands. They grabbed hold of the gooey mass and rolled the shapes over.

Kurt brought her over to take a closer look at his attackers. Bridget wished she were anywhere else but there, then gasped with relief. The attackers weren't dead. Two Caucasian men with dark hair, one brown eyed, the other blue eyed, glared at her. Kurt shrugged and led her to the rear of the copter where the third guard waited.

This guard moved his hands in a rapid series of gestures. Kurt nodded and answered out loud. “Contact my lawyer and the proper authorities

while I fly Bridget to Lacrimas. By the time I return, I want all the paperwork completed to file assault charges against our attackers. Secure a separate copy of the video scan and police report for my files.”

* * * *

Kurt maneuvered the copter over the raging river. Bridget unclenched her fists and wiped her sweaty palms on her pants legs. As long as she didn't look out at the black clouds swooping down upon them or the ground rushing past below them, she could control her queasy stomach. “How often does that happen?”

He flicked a switch and deleted the computerized map on the dashboard screen. “What?”

She lifted her shoulders in a half-shrug. “The attack in the hangar.”

He gave her a startled look. “Industrial espionage is a common occurrence nowadays.”

An updraft jerked their craft sideways. Kurt looked out the window and shifted the joystick until they were stabilized again.

She gulped. “Why do your guards use sign language? Is this normal procedure in case anyone's listening in on your transmissions?”

“Oh that!” He swung the copter around in a long, gentle glide. “One of my guards is deaf.”

“Which guard?”

“Harold, the one who knocked us down.”

Taking one last sweeping turn, Kurt guided the copter to a perfect landing in the middle of the town square, reached up to the ceiling and flicked a switch. The rotors whirred to a stop. The silence almost deafened Bridget. She wasn't sure if she could hear and speak anymore without the aid of the microphone in her helmet.

“Thanks for the lift.”

He unfastened her helmet, lifted it off her head and grinned. “You're welcome. Now go. You've got work to do and so do I.”

She fumbled with the handle, opened the door and climbed out. The rotors moved in one slow spin, then faster and faster. She ducked her head and hurried across the slick grass. Sharp needles of water stung her face under the wind of the copter. It rose into the air. A bolt of lightning flickered behind the dark mass of clouds above. Kurt would barely make it back to the spaceport before the eye of the storm passed over.

An unending stream of hypothermia cases and broken limbs kept her too busy to worry about when she'd see him again.

Five hours later, a lull in patients allowed her to take a break in the relative warmth and safety of the Sheriff's cruiser. She cradled a plastic cup of steaming hot black coffee in her hands. Welcome heat seeped into her frozen fingers. She took a cautious sip and waited for the caffeine to revive her.

Fat ribbons of rainwater snaked down the windshield. She barely made out the blurred outline of a two-ton army truck parked on the opposite side. Twin beams from its fog lights showed her the wild stream of red clay-streaked water rushing by the narrow two-lane road.

She eased the cup back into its plastic niche, rolled down the window and peered through the gloom. A canoe with two figures hunched over their paddles moved across the river. The frail craft sliced through the white-capped water like a knife through butter.

The canoe landed about thirty feet upstream. Lily Harker climbed out first. The thick braid of platinum hair that bounced against Lily's hips while she strode up the embankment would identify her no matter where she was or how she dressed. Tonight, she wore an oversized mechanic's coverall with the sleeves rolled up to fit her frame and a pair of hip high waders.

The second occupant of the canoe swung his legs into the river and stood up. He tucked the canoe under his arm like a toy, carried it up the embankment and laid it on the ground. He waited in the shadows behind Lily.

He stood a full head taller than Lily with a set of shoulders to match his height. According to local gossip, Lily had two brothers. This must be one of them.

In addition to a mechanic's coverall and hip waders, he wore a sweat-shirt jacket with the hood pulled up over his head. It shielded him from the rain and did a great job of hiding his face.

Bridget rolled the window the rest of the way down and leaned out hoping to catch a glimpse of his face. A loud burst of static from the CB unit made her jump and she almost knocked the coffee cup from its niche into her lap.

Sheriff Ben Jackson loomed up out of the darkness, opened the driver's side door and stuck his head inside. He unclipped the dashboard microphone. "Unit one responding."

Another burst of static split the air. The dispatcher's voice yelled. "The levee collapsed! Flash flood warning! Get everyone off the river road!"

He dropped the microphone. Its wire recoiled in Bridget's lap. It seemed like she and the Sheriff moved simultaneously, but in slow motion. Bridget found herself standing in the rain beside the cruiser with no coherent memory of exiting the vehicle. He stood on the other side of the road yelling at the truckload of National Guard soldiers parked on the riverbank.

The truck's diesel engine sputtered, coughed, gasped, then settled into a full-throated rumble. The oversized tires spun. Loose gouts of sand and gravel flew in all directions. A three-foot high wave of water and red clay soared around the bend of the river.

Water and mud foamed onto the macadam road. The embankment collapsed into the mud-streaked rapids. Thick slabs of concrete split away from the side of the road and spun away into the night. The truck's rear tires slid backwards and dangled over the raging river.

"Yo!" Lily's shout made everyone turn around and look at her. She bent over, reached into the canoe lying on the ground by her feet, and pulled out a grappling hook.

Her brother held another hook and line in his gloved hands. He raised his arms in the air and whirled the hook over his head. It flew out in a perfect arc through the driving rain and landed with a solid thump on the olive green tarp and ripped through the material until it caught on the metal frame behind the cab.

Lily raised her arms and swung the second hook in the air. It landed next to the first one. Her brother took the other end of her line from her hands and wrapped it around his waist along with his line. Moving in unison, they bent over the canoe two more times, pulled out two more lines, lifted their arms up, and four more hooks landed, one after the other and latched onto the bumper.

A group of soldiers splashed across the highway with two logs balanced on their shoulders. They wedged the logs behind the front tires of the truck while their platoon leader cursed and screamed at them to hurry up before he threw them in the river himself.

Their leader doubled-checked the grappling hooks by pulling on them and make sure they wouldn't yank loose from the bumper.

The Sheriff ran toward Lily, grabbed one of the lines, braced his feet and yelled, "Don't stand around like a bunch of idiots! Help us pull, dammit!"

Bridget joined the mass of people grabbing hold of the lines. Bracing her heels against the rain slick ground, she pulled along with everyone else.

The rest of the soldiers ran double-time to the lines and added their muscles to the mighty tug of war. The rope slid through Bridget's hands and burned her fingers. She gritted her teeth and held on. A man's horror stricken face stared back at her through the rain-drenched windshield of the truck.

Slowly, ever so slowly, they edged backwards, a few inches at a time, until the back tires lurched forward and settled upon the relatively solid ground. With a volley of explicit curses illustrating his commands, the platoon leader told five of his soldiers to release the ropes and yank the logs out from under the godforsaken truck. They obeyed his orders exactly.

The truck's engine roared again. The tires spun faster and faster. The heavy vehicle lunged forward and landed with a solid crash on the middle of the road. Mud, water and sand fountained out from under it and splashed into the river. The rescued soldiers piled out of the truck. Everyone started running around, laughing, cheering, pounding each other's back and hugging one another.

"Ow!" An outraged, masculine yowl sliced through the air. "Ya screwy bitch!"

Bridget turned around. Lily stood in the middle of the road with her hands on her hips. She watched a soldier stumble backwards.

He bent over and covered his face with his hands. "Ow." he groaned, his voice muffled by his hands.

"Aw, did I hurt you?" Solicitous scorn filled Lily's voice. Rain dripped down her hair and into her eyes.

The soldier straightened from his bent over position and took his hands away from his face. Blood leaked from his nose, scarlet against his pale white skin. It trickled down his chest and blended into the yellow and green camouflage blotches of his combat uniform.

"I told you to keep your hands to yourself, but you wouldn't listen. You kept trying to feel me up." Lily shrugged. "So, I politely swatted you away."

He stared at the blood splattering his uniform, then leaned over to let it drip on the ground instead. "I didn't do nothing wrong," he moaned. "Just a friendly little kiss, that's all. The bitch slugged me, for crissakes!"

The platoon leader walked up and tapped his hapless subordinate on the shoulder. "Ya got wax in your ears maybe? Our orders clearly specified evacuation duty for today, not recreation."

"But Sarge!"

The sergeant shoved him aside. "Get your miserable ass out of my sight before ya bleed to death."

Bridget grinned. She couldn't stop the laughter bubbling up in her throat. A derisive chorus of catcalls greeted the miscreant while he retreated to join the rest of his unit.

"Ha!" The Sheriff shook his head. "He ain't from around here, that's for sure. 'Cause if he was, he would have known better than to get fresh with Miz Harker."

The platoon sergeant removed his beret and turned towards Lily. "Ma'am," he said loud enough to ensure everyone heard and witnessed his words. "Please accept my apology on behalf of the United States Army."

Lily smiled and extended her hand. "Your recruit needs some basic training in gentlemanly behavior."

"Yes, ma'am." The sergeant managed a relieved grin. "I'll take personal responsibility for teaching him."

"You do that." Lily flashed him another cordial smile. "Before my brother decides to help you."

She turned and walked away. Her brother had already climbed down the embankment and stood knee deep in the river. He eased their canoe into the water.

Now that the worst of the flash flood had raged through, the river looked fairly quiet compared to its fury a few minutes ago. A small tree floated by in the swiftly moving rapids. A few moments later, Lily joined her brother in the canoe. They dipped their paddles in the water and let the current carry their craft downstream and out of sight.

Bridget slumped against the Sheriff's car. It looked like Lily's brother wasn't the kind of guy who'd try to boss a woman around all the time. He obviously didn't think Lily needed his help with the unruly soldier. Maybe she should ask Lily to introduce him to her.

“What the hell?” the Sheriff shouted.

Bridget swiveled around to see what had startled him. A siren wailed in the distance. The ambulance appeared around the bend. The Sheriff motioned the crowd back to let it pass. It stopped in the middle of the road. The crowd surged forward and surrounded it.

A woman's wail tore at Bridget's heart. “No, not my baby.”

Bridget's medical instincts kicked into high gear. She pushed and shoved her way through the crowd. There she recognized the woman as Lucinda Davies, the physician's assistant from her clinic. She tried to remember the names of Lucinda's children and drew a blank. A soldier stepped in and blocked her way. She reached out and tapped his shoulder. “Excuse me, I'm a physician.”

He stepped aside. She saw the Sheriff standing beside two black body bags. The lifeless face of a young black man in his early twenties lay exposed in the first bag. The Sheriff pulled the zipper down on the second bag and exposed the face of a black woman who looked like she might be eighteen or nineteen years old.

Lucinda slumped in the doorway of the ambulance. Her plump shoulders heaved with sobs. Tears ran down her face. Her warm brown skin had been transformed into an ashy shade.

Rain dripped down the shiny black faces of her husband Roy, and her four sons. The five men huddled around the grieving woman. Roy wrapped his arms around his wife. “Just because they found Ulysses and Becky Sue don't mean Maellen's dead. Maybe she's all right and we just don't know it yet.”

Lucinda lifted her head. “She's dead. You know as well as I do that they were like the Three Musketeers. They did everything and went everywhere together. If her cousins are dead, she's dead. I never even got to say goodbye to her.”

She laid her head back against Roy's shoulder and sobbed.

An inexplicable anger washed over Bridget then seeped away. What had happened to her? Who or what had she been angry with? Death itself?

She didn't want to know the answer. She'd accepted a three-year contract to pay off her student loans. She had no desire to let her heart become involved in the daily lives of Lacrimas. When the three years ended, she'd pack her bags and leave without any emotional entanglements. Then

she'd return to what she really wanted to do for the rest of her life, pure research in human genetics at Duke.

Chapter Five

Bridget hated funerals. She didn't have any choice but to attend this one. As Lucinda's co-worker, it was expected. She moved into the shadow of a marble angel that gazed mournfully off into the distance. The minister's voice murmured above her on the hilltop.

Two teenaged girls with their dirty blond hair clipped back into tiny braids stopped in front of Bridget. The first girl tugged at the second one's arm and whispered, "Look who just arrived. It's the Harkers."

Bridget turned and watched Lily stride up the hill with a dark skinned man. Straight black hair flowed past the back of his dark suit jacket. He couldn't be the one who accompanied Lily in the canoe because this man only topped Lily's six foot height by a couple of inches, not a full head.

"Why does he have a red rag tied around his head?" the second girl murmured.

The first girl arched her eyebrows and sniffed. "He's wearing it because the Cherokee used to dress like that. The Harkers have Indian blood."

The second girl shivered and rubbed her arms. "What about the monster who guards their land? Is he a Harker, too?"

Bridget opened her mouth then changed her mind and shut it.

She'd learn more by listening than she would by letting them know she'd overheard their conversation.

Unfortunately for her, the girls moved away and joined the line of people tossing flowers into the open graves.

Bridget spotted Lily with Lucinda. Her companion crossed his arms and stood beside them like a statue.

Lily placed her hand on Lucinda's arm. They moved away from the crowd and spoke quietly for a few minutes. Lucinda nodded. Lily stepped back and motioned at her companion. He followed her back down the hill.

* * * *

Two weeks ago, they had helped the humans pull the truck from the river's clutches. Nathaniel wished that day had never occurred.

Lilith glared at Shiloh. "How could you? You know better than to let your hormones take over like that."

Even though she had every right to be upset with their caterdru, their brother by oath, Nathaniel would rather she vent her rage upon him than Shiloh. Nothing could change what had already happened.

Hunching his shoulder away from Nathaniel's outstretched hand, Shiloh matched Lilith's stare. "She needed me." His clipped words reflected the dark stubbornness upon his face. He bowed his head.

"The woman needed you and you gave her the comfort she sought from your body." Aunt Elizabeth's soft words filled in the part Shiloh left unspoken.

Nathaniel flashed her a grateful look for interceding on his caterdru's behalf.

Lilith studied Shiloh's bowed head. "I can understand how the woman needed the comfort and warmth of another human being. Why did you have to give her your seed also? Didn't you stop and think you might be taking your role as her comforter a little too far?"

"She needed me." Shiloh shoved his hands in his pockets and stared out the window. His voice mirrored his stubbornness.

Elizabeth bit her lip. She walked across the room and seated her diminutive body upon the window seat beside Shiloh. The sunlight slanting in through the shuttered window cast a golden glow upon her warm brown skin. "The woman consented. I heard him ask if she wanted his seed and she said, 'Yes'. There was no coercion. That's why I didn't enter the room and curtail their pleasure."

Lilith whirled around and pointed at Uncle Percy. "Where were you when this happened?"

He opened his eyes wide and projected a childlike innocence at her. "In the kennel feeding the puppies."

Dismissing him with an abrupt nod, Lilith seated herself at the massive oak table. No one said a word while she gazed at her reflection in the dark polished wood.

Nathaniel wanted his family back together again. He hoped she would not order them to shun Shiloh. Surely she understood how their caterdru

could not refuse such a desperate need from any woman. If he or Percy had been there and felt the woman's need, their response would have been the same.

Lilith placed her hands on the table and spread her fingers apart. "I went to Maellen's house this morning and spoke with her and her mother."

Nathaniel shuffled his feet, crossed his arms, and looked sideways at Shiloh. An aching lump of sadness clogged his throat while he waited for Lilith to pronounce the words of sanction against their caterdru.

"Maellen has ripened with child from Shiloh's seed. She told me he didn't force himself upon her and said she doesn't want to live here with us or have any more children from him."

"And the child within her, what did she decide?" Elizabeth asked the crucial question without flinching. "Will she keep the baby or abort it?"

Lilith's brown eyes darkened into black pools. She sighed and shook her head. "Maellen decided not to abort. She agreed to my offer to claim the child as my oathchild, giving the babe full rights to my name and land."

Nathaniel couldn't believe his ears. It was too good to be true. He stared at Lilith. A spark of hope that matched his own leaked out from under the iron control his caterdru had forced upon herself.

Lilith lifted her head. "Maellen agreed to move into one of the smaller houses on our land. The house will be transferred into her name when the babe is born. My oathchild will be twice blessed. She will know the love of both her truemothers and her oathmother. Maellen is free to come and go as she pleases and to live her own life as she chooses."

Shiloh raised his head. The hope glowing in his dark eyes filled Nathaniel's soul with joy.

Elizabeth opened her hand. Shiloh accepted her touch. His big boned hand engulfed her slender fingers. A tender smile softened her face as if he were a small babe instead of a full-grown man.

Percy grinned. Mischief gleamed in his bright blue gaze.

Lilith jumped up and slammed her hands down upon the table. "Stop that!" The heavy chair toppled over on the floor behind her. "It's not a laughing matter."

Nathaniel gaped. He could not imagine a logical reason for her sudden anger.

Taking a deep breath, Lilith glared at Shiloh. “Just because it worked out to our benefit this time doesn't mean you did the right thing. You don't give a woman your seed without going through the proper stages of courtship.”

Shiloh bobbed his head. “I won't do it again.” Absolute agreement flowed out from him into Nathaniel and Lilith through their caterbond. “I promise. The next time, I'll make sure the woman knows me well before I ask her to accept my seed.”

Lilith went to him and laid her hand upon his cheek. The thick down on her arms glittered in the sunlight like gold dust sprinkled across her bronze skin. “I forgive thee.”

Nathaniel sagged against the wall. His family remained intact. They had a house to prepare for Maellen. Time had swung full circle and returned an ancient bloodline to their barren lives.

Chapter Six

Bridget leaned back in the hammock, gazed up at the willow tree shading her face, then dribbled a couple of ice-cubes from her glass onto the grass for Shelley to munch upon. After wasting half the morning chasing a rabbit all around the riverbank, he wasn't about to refuse this special treat.

A dragonfly zoomed under the silver green tendrils of Spanish moss and stopped a few feet away from Bridget's nose. It hovered in the air like a miniature helicopter with translucent blue wings a busy blur around the fat round body.

Tires crunching and spitting out loose gravel out front interrupted her semi-drowse. She tugged the hem of her pale green halter dress down over her legs. The dragonfly banked left and soared off into the open sky towards the river. She glanced at the beeper clipped to her belt expecting a summons for medical services. It remained silent.

The car door slammed. Shelley jumped up and galloped around the corner of the clinic. His furious barks told Bridget that the person out front was a total stranger to him. A familiar shriek pierced the air, followed by the sounds of a car door opening and slamming shut again.

Bridget grabbed the battered straw hat hanging from a nail behind her and climbed out of the hammock. She rushed to the parking lot to rescue

Debbie, her former boss and favorite genetics professor, from Shelley's zealous wrath.

A simple command to sit solved that problem. She wrapped her fingers around Shelley's collar and grinned at Debbie's anxious face through the window of the bright red sports car. "You can get out now."

Debbie rolled her window halfway down. Shelley pricked his ears and stared at her while she said, "I don't know. He looks awful hungry to me. When was the last time you fed him?"

Bridget chuckled. "He's not going to hurt you."

Keeping her movements slow and deliberate, Debbie eased herself out of the car. She held out her left hand and waited for the dog to sniff her fingers.

She wore a crisp yellow blouse and shorts with white sneakers. A baseball cap shielded her face from the hot noonday sun. The yellow shirt looked spectacular next to her ebony skin. Bridget sighed. "Debbie you look spectacular. I could never wear yellow. It makes me look jaundiced."

Debbie nodded absently while Shelley licked her fingers. "Aren't you supposed to start off with something small like a Pekinese or a miniature poodle first?"

She pulled her hand back and wiped it on her shorts. "What kind of dog is he, anyway? His fur's so thick and black I thought he was a bear cub."

She scrunched her nose and squinted doubtfully at the dense tangle of vegetation around the parking lot. "Come to think of it, I read a news article the other day that said the State Forestry Department had reintroduced bears to this side of the state fifteen years ago. It also said the best hunting ground for bears nowadays happens to be in the coastal swamps."

Bridget shrugged. "Lily gave him to me. He's a Bouvier des Flandres. They herded cattle in Belgium. The breed almost became extinct during World War 1 because they used to pull carts of wounded soldiers off the battlefields."

Debbie pulled off her cap and fanned herself with it. "I don't know about you but if we don't get inside soon, I'm going to melt."

Bridget led her into the back yard and through the kitchen door. They sat down at the table with a pitcher of iced tea and glasses. Shelley settled himself on the cool tiles beneath the table.

Bridget leaned back in her chair. “How's it going back at the lab? Did you fire Nancy McLoughlin yet?”

Debbie wrinkled her nose. “She hasn't tried to appropriate any more of my private files after I changed the access codes on the computer.”

She leaned forward and rested her arms on the table. “I didn't drive down here to gossip about her. I'm here because I'm worried about you.”

Bridget took a deep breath and exhaled it in one long slow breath. She knew it. There was a specific reason behind Debbie's unannounced arrival. “Why would you be worried about me?”

“Because of your emails.”

“My emails?”

Debbie pursed her lips. “Because, from what you've written so far, I've got the feeling that you've developed a close friendship with Lily Harker.”

Bridget looked down and frowned at her clenched hands. Why should a friendship with Lily bother Debbie? She relaxed her hands. “Lily gave me Shelley. She visits me once a week to chat and borrow a medical text or two.”

She lifted her head and gave Debbie a puzzled frown. “I enjoy her company. What's wrong with that? We haven't slit our wrists and become bloodsisters. She's an intelligent and lonely woman. I don't see why you're making such a big fuss over this.”

Debbie laid her hand over Bridget's. “I was born and raised here in Lacrimas and my great grandfather still lives here.”

Bridget shook her head. “I know that. You helped me get this job. What does it have to do with my friendship with Lily?”

“Well, you know, there are a lot of stories going around Lacrimas about the Harkers.”

Bridget yanked her hand from Debbie's loose grasp. “I've heard a few things. Ugly lies spread by a bunch of superstitious fools. Just because the Harkers own the swamp and have always lived there doesn't mean there's a ‘haunt’ guarding their land. For crying out loud, this is 2042, not the dark ages.”

Debbie ran her hand through the tight curls on her scalp. “All I want is for you to visit my great granddad and listen to his story. I'm not saying you shouldn't be Lily's friend. The Harkers have never harmed anyone. I

just don't want anyone from Lacrimas to hurt you because Lily's your friend.”

Bridget sighed. If visiting her great grandfather was all Debbie wanted, why not humor her? “That sounds like a good idea. How about if we visit him now and get this over with?”

It took fifteen minutes to drive to the other side of Lacrimas. They turned onto a narrow dirt road that brought them to a double row of wooden shacks hidden behind a ragged clump of sycamores, cottonwoods and oaks.

Debbie parked at the end of the row in the shade of an ancient oak towering over one of the tin roofed shacks like a battered sentinel. When they walked around the huge tree, she called out to the elderly black man seated in a wicker chair on the porch. “Great Grandpa, it's Debbiechile. I brought a lady friend to meet you. Can we set with you for a spell?”

He turned his face in their direction, lifted his hand, and waved at them to climb the narrow wooden steps. Cataracts clouded his eyes. A carved wooden cane lay propped up against the railing.

Debbie climbed up the steps, kissed him on the cheek and peered at his eyes. “I'm going to call your eye doctor today and get you scheduled for cataract surgery. You're way overdue for it.”

Bridget stood there. She didn't know what to say.

The old man snapped his arthritic fingers. “Debbiechile, have you forgotten your manners? Hurry up and introduce your friend, then go inside and bring out the lemonade from the fridge.”

Debbie gestured at Bridget. “Grandpa Lucas, this is Dr. Bridget O'Keefe. She works at the new clinic in Lacrimas. Bridget, this is my great grandpa, Lucas Jefferson.”

Bridget stepped forward and shook hands with him while Debbie unhooked the screen door and went inside the house. Despite his advanced years, Lucas's grip was strong and secure. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Jefferson.”

Debbie returned a few minutes later with a pitcher of lemonade and three glasses. When she handed Lucas his glass, she whispered in his ear. He listened carefully then nodded. Debbie went back inside the house.

Bridget sat on the worn out steps and sipped lemonade.

The screen door banged open and Debbie came out with a battered case under her arm. She opened the case, pulled out a solar powered holographic projector and set it up on the porch.

Lucas Jefferson stretched out his legs and eased his long bony frame back into his dilapidated wicker chair. “So, you're the new doctor they hired for the clinic. I heard talk about you already, a red-haired Yankee.”

Bridget arched her eyebrows. It was amazing how fast word got around in a small town. Thank God she didn't hang her wash out on the line or he'd know what color underwear she wore, too.

Lucas pulled a clean bandanna from his pants and wiped his forehead. “Debbie says you need to hear my father's story 'bout the Harker haunt.” He shoved the bandanna back in his pocket. “We recorded it on a holo-projector. I figure it's all right to show you it seeing how Miz Harker took to you from the very first day you moved to town.”

Debbie turned on the projector. It hummed. A ghostly image of an elderly black man sitting on a rocking chair appeared.

Lucas leaned forward. “Is it on yet?”

Debbie fiddled with the controls. “The hologram's up. I'm trying to get the sound.”

The image moved its lips. “I be Elias Jefferson. I'm gonna tell you a true story about the Harkers.”

Debbie stood up and studied the image. It flickered. She squatted down on her heels and adjusted the controls. “Pop Pop, I'm buying you a new projector tomorrow. This one's shot.”

Bridget leaned against the porch railing. Nothing she could do except wait.

The holograph solidified again and rocked in its chair. The steady creaking continued while the image of Elias gathered his thoughts.

A fat bumblebee flew around the corner of the porch and dove into a honeysuckle vine. The image turned its gaze towards the bumblebee. “I'll never forget that day, August 25, 1969. It'd been threatenin' to rain. Black clouds hung in the sky. I was uptown loadin' my pickup truck with supplies. My oldest boy, Lucas, had just turned eight the week before. Lucas was settin' on the tailgate when I came out with the last bag of seed in my arms. The sun had set and the first stars came out from behind the clouds.”

The holographic image of Elias shook his head. "I swear I never seen Miz Stewart 'cause if I'd seen her then nothin' would've happened." He sighed and let his gaze focus on his memories.

Sweat trickled down Bridget's neck. She readjusted her hat. If she didn't take care, she'd be burnt to a crisp by the time the hologram finished talking.

Lucas held out his glass.

Debbie groaned. "Pop Pop."

He turned his face towards her voice. "Debbiechile, mind your manners."

She rolled her eyes, hit 'pause' on the holographic controls and heaved a weary sigh. "I'm sorry."

Lucas pulled a bandanna out his pocket and wiped his face. Debbie refilled his glass with lemonade.

Bridget shifted her position. More sweat trickled down her back.

Debbie seated herself cross-legged on the porch and turned the hologram on.

The image of Elias flickered and solidified onto its rocking chair. "I didn't see Miz Stewart. I was carryin' out that big ole sack of grain when I bumped right into her and knocked her flat on her behind in the gutter. Miz Stewart, she started hollerin' and carryin' on like a crazy woman. I knew I was a goner. I dropped that sack on the ground and my boy Lucas, he jumped down from the tailgate. I grabbed him by the arm and told him to run on home and tell his mama what had happened. He ran off while I went around to the front of the truck and climbed inside."

Bridget gulped. She knew exactly how he felt. Back in 1969, the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panthers had everyone on edge.

The image sighed and wiped its brow. "I drove out of town. I didn't want to lead them back to my family, so I drove in the opposite direction straight towards Harker land. Because Lacrimas has only one road, I knew they'd follow me instead of Lucas.

When I reached the bridge, my front tire blew. The truck swerved sideways and went into the river. I climbed out and studied the tire. Then I looked back and saw a cloud of dust on the road behind me. I knew there wasn't enough time to change the tire before they caught me. I climbed up

the embankment, tripped and fell down on my hands and knees. I got up and ran across the bridge as fast I could into the swamp.”

Debbie tapped Bridget's leg and pointed at the pitcher of lemonade. Bridget shook her head. She didn't feel like drinking any more just now.

They waited. The bumblebee flew up from the honeysuckle vine like an overloaded cargo plane and disappeared into the sunlight.

Lucas put his glass on the table and closed his eyes.

Bridget wondered if he had fallen asleep. Debbie squeezed her hand.

The holograph turned its head and stared at Bridget. “Oh yeah,” the image sighed. “I was scared of the haunt who guards Harker land, but I didn't have too much choice in the matter. I was even more scared of what was followin’ me. I heard hounds bayin’ and hollerin’ in the distance behind me. I kept runnin’ deeper and deeper into the swamp through the sand and mud and water ‘cause I knew if I stopped, the hounds were gonna tear me to pieces.

I ran until I couldn't run anymore. I tripped and fell on my knees and started crawlin’ through the mud towards an old cypress tree all covered up with Spanish Moss. That's when I heard the sound of something big comin’ through the bushes. I didn't know what to do. I was too scared to go back and too scared to go forward.”

Bridget leaned closer and bumped her glass with her knee. It wobbled. She lunged for it. The glass toppled over, bounced down the steps and splashed lemonade in every direction while it rolled over in the dirt at the bottom. Despite all the bouncing around, the glass remained intact. The last drop of liquid vanished into the parched soil.

Lucas leaned forward. His blind eyes fluttered wildly for danger. “What happened?”

Debbie slapped at the controls on the projector. The image froze. “It's all right, Pop Pop. Bridget knocked over her glass, that's all.”

She jumped up, went down the steps and retrieved the fallen glass.

Lucas settled back in his chair.

She climbed the steps, grinned and winked at Bridget. “Now Pop Pop, I'll start the projector up as soon as I get back. I've got to wash this glass out first.”

Lucas laughed. “Take your time Debbiechile. We ain't going nowhere.”

Bridget sighed and waited for her heart to slow down. This wasn't a ghost story. It had really happened. She had to hear the rest of the story.

It didn't take long for Debbie to return. After she refilled everyone's glass with lemonade, Debbie resumed her cross-legged position on the porch and switched the projector on.

The holograph of Elias flickered to life again. It nodded. "Well, I was on my knees in the mud when something big and black whooshed right by me. I didn't hardly see anything 'cause it ran by me too fast for me to get a good look. I was too scared to look back at it because I heard it thrashin' around in the bushes. I heard the hounds. I heard their yelps go way up high then cut off one at a time when they died."

Elias's holographic image turned its head toward the river. "It got real quiet then. So quiet, I heard my heart a poundin' away in my ears. I couldn't breathe. My chest was so tight, it hurt.

I sat back on my heels. Where was I gonna go? It didn't make any difference anymore if I lived or died. The only thing I heard was the air wheezin' in and out of my lungs while I waited for the haunt to finish me off next. I figured this way I'd have a cleaner and faster death at his hands than what those white boys planned to do.

Then I saw him. That haunt, he came over and hunkered down in front of me. Heat lightnin' flickered in the sky behind his head. When he spoke, I nearly jumped out of my skin. His voice was soft and low and rough, like someone who wasn't used to talkin' much."

He told me. "Thou art free to go."

A toothless grin transformed Elias's face and gave Bridget a glimpse of how he must have looked as a young man.

"I went a little crazy then. Instead of getting the hell out of there while I had the chance, I said, 'No sir, I can't leave. Please, you got to help me. Those white boys, they know who I be and they know where my family lives. If they can't get hold of me with they hounds, they're gonna go down to Crestmont land and hurt my family.

"I'm tellin' you this as plain as I can. If you don't help me now, then you might as well kill me 'cause I don't want to live no more if they hurt Susannah and my babies."

Goosebumps pebbled Bridget's arms. She rubbed them. Her sweat went cold. She felt like she were sitting in the mud along with Elias. She shook her head and focused on his holograph.

The image heaved a heavy sigh. “That haunt, he moved so fast I hardly saw it happen. One minute he was all hunkered down on the other side of that clearing, the next minute he stood on the other side with me. He plucked me out of that mud like I was a child instead of a full-grown man and held me with his hands under my arms ’til I got my balance.

“The moon came out from behind a cloud. He smiled at me. I seen him real clear and I saw how different he really was from other men. One thing I found out for sure that night. The haunt on Harker land, he's not a haunt. He's a man, just like me. He's a man but he looks different than any man I ever saw.”

The image stared past them with a faraway look on its face. “I made a promise that night. He told me, ‘I will help thee. In return for thy life and the lives of thy kin, if I or any of my kin should call upon thee for aid, then thee will help us without question. All the generations of thy family shall carry the burden of your covenant with me until it is fulfilled.’”

Debbie stood, went to Lucas and laid her hand on his shoulder.

The hair rose on Bridget's neck. She shivered and swallowed against the tightness in her throat.

The holographic image rocked in its chair and continued its story. “He took me to his canoe and brought me across the swamp to Crestmont land. We got there just when them white boys set a cross on fire in my front yard. They had three pickup trucks with their headlights shinin’ on Susannah and the babies. She sat on the ground, holdin’ the twins in her arms.

“Lucas stood by her side tryin’ not to cry while those white boys passed a bottle of whiskey ’round and joked about how they was gonna have themselves some black pussy and hang the babies from a tree ’cause their pappy had insulted a white woman.”

Lucas twisted his bandanna into a noose and closed his eyes. Debbie squeezed his shoulder.

The image of Elias shook its fist. “I was shakin’ mad when I heard them say those things, but that Harker man, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back down behind the trucks. He pointed out the can of gasoline setting in the back of one of the trucks. I emptied it on the ground and took a box of matches out of my pocket.”

“‘Count to five,’ he told me. ‘And light the fire. I will take care of them.’ He slipped away into the shadows like the haunt everyone always supposed him to be.”

A sly smile crossed Elias's face. "I counted to five like he said, set the fire, and ran like hell. A couple of seconds later, things started explodin' behind me like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. I didn't dare look back. The heat from the fire scorched the back of my head. I ran down the slope and hid behind a big ole oak tree.

"There, I stopped and took a good look. I saw fireballs soar up into the sky. I saw tires meltin' into puddles on the ground. I saw the Harker haunt run through those white boys like a hurricane. He knocked them down and tossed them aside like sticks. They didn't even know what hit them he moved so fast. When they got back on their feet, they ran in every direction like the devil himself was chasin' them. I guess they figured if they looked back and saw him, he'd kill them for sure, just like he killed their hounds."

The holograph shifted position. Its rocking chair creaked. "That Harker man, he went right to Susannah, picked her and the twins up his arms and carried them to me. Lucas didn't know what to do. He was kickin' and yellin' and pullin' and tryin' to get his mama away. Susannah, she held onto her babies as tight as she could and lay real still in his arms. She didn't shed a tear. Not my Susannah. I ran up the hill and told Lucas not to be scared because this Harker man had come off his land to help us.

"He walked us home and helped us carry our belongings out. We hid out over at cousin Jeremy's place until we pieced together the news from Lacrimas. Those white boys told everyone they had gotten themselves so drunk they wound up chasin' ghosts in the swamp. They said the Harker haunt got them so turned around and confused that they crashed into each other. They said he caught their hounds and tore them apart while the trucks was burning.

"Everyone said they were damned lucky they didn't get burned up along with the trucks. Miz Stewart never did say anything 'bout me knockin' her down. I guess she decided it wasn't worth the embarrassment of admitting how it got started in the first place. Maybe she figured the haunt might come after her, too, if she said anything. Anyways, that was the end of it."

The holograph spluttered to a stop and the image of Elias disappeared.

Bridget rubbed her arms. She managed to keep her voice from squeaking. "Elias said the Harker man looked different from other men. What did he mean by that?"

Lucas shook his head. "I can't tell you that. It's part of my father's promise to the haunt. I can't tell anyone what he looks like." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I can tell you this though. As

near as I can figure out, there's a curse on the Harker family that says in every generation, one of them is born different. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I have this funny feeling that pretty soon one of us will have to honor the promise my father gave him and you're going to play a major part in helping us keep it."

Bridget exchanged a long, hard look with Debbie. Elias's story happened seventy-three years ago. She knew from her psychology classes how the mind could play tricks with your memories.

Lucas sat back in his chair. "I can tell you this much. The one who guards the Harker land, his name is Nathaniel."

Bridget glanced at Debbie. Debbie pursed her lips and shook her head.

Bridget picked up her glass and sipped her lemonade. Now, more than ever, she wanted to learn the truth about the Harkers. How should she begin? What would Lily say if she asked her point blank about Nathaniel?

Chapter Seven

"If you don't sit still..." Lilith pulled Nathaniel's head back. "...I'm not going to fix your hair."

He jumped to his feet. The chair crashed to the floor. It didn't make him feel any better to know he'd reacted like a child, but he knew if he didn't move he might explode with nervous tension. At the same time, he didn't want to fight with his caterdru because his restlessness irritated her.

He paced across the dark polished floorboards. His tangled hair flew in every direction. Early morning sunlight slanted into the room between the wooden shutter slats on the casement windows. Even though he understood the necessity to conceal his presence from Maellen, he resented it. Especially now that she carried Lilith's future oathchild in her womb.

He should not have to conceal himself. 'Twas not proper. He was Lilith's caterdru just as much as Shiloh. As her oathbrothers, they should be present at the birthing of her oathchild, to cut the cord and help establish the first bonds of the babe. Unforeseen and ill-timed as this pregnancy was, this would be the first daughter born to Lilith's sisterline since she lost her baby over eighty years ago.

Hunching his shoulders under his caterdru's disapproving gaze, Nathaniel strode over to the fireplace. Dust motes swirled around him. Their wild arcs matched the fierce energy banked behind his restless thoughts.

This fireplace provided a secondary passageway between the dining room and kitchen. The mantelpiece on this side consisted of a ten-foot long slab of solid oak.

He ducked his head under the archway and instead of continuing through to the other side into the kitchen, seated himself on the high backed bench set against the inner wall. Firebrick surrounded the circular hearth. The hearth lay within a circle of firebrick. The smoke-darkened chimney towered above.

A second bench set against the opposite wall of the huge fireplace flanked the hearth. He scuffed his boot heel on the pattern of unglazed tiles and bricks that covered this section of the floor and rested his head against the rough stone of the cavernous alcove.

Long hard hours of work had gone into the building of this hearth; satisfying hours that called upon the full strength of bone and sinew and burned off excess energies without harming anyone. Many a night he had found that same satisfaction working in the moonlight with Shiloh in the scrap yard using sledgehammers to create smooth panels out of the dented and twisted steel of wrecked cars.

Two cast iron kettles dangled from hooks over the unlit wood stacked in the hearth. Their black sides made him remember cold winter nights with the benches filled with children waiting for kettles of stew to finish cooking over the roaring flames of the fireplace. While they waited, he stood before them and wove a tapestry of tales about their foremothers' strength and courage.

Most of all, he missed the children.

He remembered Shiloh as a fat, brown skinned toddler playing on this hearth with the pieces of a cuckoo clock. Even then, Shiloh had a gift with inanimate objects.

After seventy-nine years of exile, events had finally returned to their proper course and Lilith had found a kindred spirit with Bridget. Hopefully, their friendship would grow into something deeper and stronger. His family had become too inbred. How else could a man meet unrelated women except through his sister?

They were the last generation. Maellen's gift of an oathchild to Lilith's sisterline was a hope they had never dreamed of claiming. It felt strange to

feel hope again after so many barren years. 'Twas only natural for uneasiness to ride his shoulders.

Nathaniel slanted his eyes towards Lilith. She sat on the edge of the table. Her thick braid grazed her hips. Its jewel bright ivory color made her bronze skin appear even darker than usual. Faded jeans covered her long, full-hipped legs. A narrow band of white cotton around her chest supported the generous curves of her breasts.

A strange blend of irritation and deep consideration hovered over her dru-bond with him.

Nathaniel exhaled his pent up breath. Her heart remained open to him. Nevertheless, 'twas not right to sadden his caterdru with his childish rage. As this thought crossed his mind, Lilith turned and looked at him.

He rose from his self-imposed banishment within the immense fireplace chamber, went to her side and hugged her. She closed her eyes and relaxed against his chest. Relief, comfort and concern bounced back and forth between them in a jumbled outpouring of mutual love while she forgave him.

Lilith lifted her head. Alerted by her reaction, Nathaniel shifted his awareness and felt Shiloh's familiar presence approaching the dining room.

The heavy doors swung open and their caterdru strode inside. Old grease stains marked the legs of his tan coveralls. A large sledgehammer dangled from his right hand like a toy.

"What's wrong?" Shiloh propped the sledgehammer against the wall. "I felt a disturbance within our caterbond."

Lilith squeezed Nathaniel's arm and sent a swift burst of warm approval gusting through him. "I'm the one who upset Nathaniel. I just figured out why. Bridget's a natural telempath like us and I've linked myself to her through our friendship. Because she's an outsider I didn't expect this of her. Something must have upset her recently. I felt it echo within me."

Nathaniel seated himself. He exchanged a long considering glance with Shiloh. An unrelated telempath lived near them. He wished he could have a chance to meet Bridget but he knew better than to voice his wish.

Lilith picked up a handful of leather thongs and passed them to Shiloh. Then, with a swift assurance, she combed the scalplock from Nathaniel's tangled brown hair and tied it in place.

Nathanial sighed. "If Bridget had come into our lives when she was yet a child, she would have learned to know us without fear."

Shiloh and Lilith echoed his sigh. Nathanial tilted his head back and stared at them.

Their hands went still and a faraway look filled their eyes. Their inner eyelids slid across from the corners of their eyes and muted the dark brown color of their irises to amber.

Lilith recovered first. Her eyelids slid back into their corners leaving behind the dark embers of her dilated pupils. "We must deal with what fate has given us, not with dreams of the past or regrets about our future. Those days when our kin were many are gone forever. We can never look back."

Shiloh selected a thin section of hair from Nathanial's head and twisted it into a thin plait. "If she's a telempath, then..."

"Then what?" Lilith snapped. "I can't just walk up to her and say, 'I'm Sidhe. Everyone in my family is Sidhe. We're empaths. Oh, and one of my caterdru is a direct genetic throwback to a furred sisterline.'"

She bit her lip and raked her comb through Nathanial's hair.

He stared at his clenched fists. It didn't really bother him anymore when Lilith jerked his head back and tied off the braid. At least he knew now why she felt upset. She carried too much responsibility for the family. 'Twas only natural for her to worry over the consequences of revealing the truth about them to an outsider. "How much longer must I keep myself hidden from Maellen?"

"I don't know." Lilith rested her hand against his cheek and let her uncertainty flow into him. "I'll have to decide when it'll be best to tell her about you. I know how much it means for you to be at her side when she gives birth to my oathchild."

Shiloh moved closer. Tension rippled through his voice. "What about me?"

"Don't worry. You'll be there, too. I would never forbid you your responsibility as caterdru." Her fingers flew across Nathanial's hair, matching Shiloh braid for braid. "After I've dealt with Maellen, I'll figure out how to tell Bridget, but until then..."

Nathanial tilted his head back and looked at her. "What?"

“Keep your distance. It's bad enough Shiloh got Maellen with child without the knowledge of what she had chosen. I don't need either one of you reacting with your hormones with another woman before she's ready to settle down.”

“Aye,” Shiloh managed a fervent nod. “I'll remember.”

Nathanial sighed. “Aye.”

Lilith completed another braid. “I'm not worried about either one of you. You know your manners.”

Nathanial remembered another issue. “That outsider, Kurt, is he still trying to court you?”

Lilith seated herself and held her head in her hands. She lifted her head and sat back. Confusion tinged her voice. “His persistence is admirable but lying is as natural as breathing for him. I don't know if he wants me or my land.”

Shiloh cleared his throat.

Nathanial turned and looked at him. A muted sensation of mischief brewed within his caterdru.

Lilith struggled to keep a straight face. She shook her finger at Shiloh. “I know you can't resist playing with Kurt's pretty toys. Just be careful. As long as he doesn't find out you hired yourself out as an illegal alien to work at the spaceport, you can tinker with his spaceships for as long as you wish.”

Laughter gleamed in Shiloh's eyes. “But it's a lie.”

Lilith nodded. “Aye, but as long as you harm no one, I won't interfere.”

“Um.”

Alarm flowed into Nathanial from Lilith. Her fingers tightened around his hand. “Um, what?”

Shiloh ducked his head and found a spot on the floor to study while he mumbled. “The foreman wants to put me on the regular payroll as a licensed mechanic.”

“Does he know you speak English?”

“No, he bought himself a Spanish-English dictionary. His accent is atrocious.”

Nathanial exchanged a worried look with Lilith. Now what?

She rose to her feet, strolled down the length of the table and stopped. “This requires a little thought. You already have a driver's license under the name of Shiloh Moonsammy. Right?”

“Aye.”

“What name do you use at the spaceport?”

“Miguel Carreras.”

“Miguel, I think you better return to Mexico for a couple of months because your grandmother is very ill.”

Shiloh grinned. His relief soared through their caterbond.

Lilith sighed and shook her head. “I wish we didn't have to lie.”

Chapter Eight

Lucinda slanted a hopeful look at her daughter, Maellen.

Soft black curls framed Maellen's heart shaped face and golden brown complexion. The hot August sun poured in through the windows behind her head. She wore sandals, black shorts and a sleeveless white shirt distended by the basketball shaped mound of her abdomen.

“Mama!” Tiny flecks of gold glittered in Maellen's dark eyes. “I'm not going to change my mind. So why don't you just drop the subject”

Bridget took a deep breath and pushed her desk drawer shut.

Lucinda tugged the skirt of her white uniform over her plump legs. She folded her hands in her lap and sent another agonized look at her daughter. “Honey, you know I only want what's best for you.”

Maellen leaned her cheek against the French door and placed her hand on the windowpane. She gazed at her hand as if it belonged to someone else. Her lower lip quivered. “I know Shiloh's a nice man. I'll always be grateful to him for saving my life, but that doesn't mean I have to stay with him.”

Bridget drew a squiggle on her blotter. Now was as good a time as any for her to try and defuse the tension that hovered between mother and daughter. “If Maellen doesn't want to marry him, I think we should respect her wishes.”

Lucinda shook her head. "That's not the issue here. The Harkers aren't the marrying kind. They usually move in with whoever their current lover is, male or female. I want to know why Maellen doesn't want him after she let him get her pregnant."

Maellen whirled around. "I don't love him and I'm not going to spend the rest of my life living in a swamp raising kids. I've got dreams of my own. Right after the baby's born, I'm going to apply for that scholarship Mr. Williams donated to our church during the funeral. I want to be a choreographer."

Maellen shot another defiant look at her mother. "Shiloh works in a scrap yard." Her voice rose a couple of decibels. "And, his clothes." She curled her lip. "I heard he buys them from the Goodwill Store."

"Well I never!" Lucinda lifted her chin. "That's your grandpa's scrap yard you're talking about. You used to play there all the time with your cousins. It wasn't too filthy for you then, was it?"

Maellen turned her head and gazed out the French door windows at the yard. A bright red blush stained her cheek,

Bridget studied the blank computer monitor embedded in her desk. It seemed like Maellen was popping off any excuse she could find rather than admit the real reason why she didn't want Shiloh.

Bridget cleared her throat. "Maellen, I don't really know you and I certainly don't know Shiloh. I need more information before I can give you any advice. Would you mind telling me how it happened; how he rescued you from the flood?"

Maellen shrugged and continued to stare at the yard.

Bridget tapped her fingers on the desk and focused her attention on the view outside. The hammock swayed under the ancient willow tree. Shelley loped around the corner running after a butterfly as if he were an overgrown puppy instead of a highly trained guard dog.

The butterfly zoomed away into the cloudless sky. Shelley ambled over to the French doors, sat on his haunches, leaned his head to the side and peered at Maellen with his tongue hanging out. Chuckling at his doleful expression, she opened the door and let him enter the air-conditioned room.

The hot air that came in with him carried the sticky scent of honeysuckle and freshly mown grass. He trotted to the desk and collapsed on the floor by Bridget's feet. He edged himself a little closer to her feet and

rested his head upon the cool tiled floor. She felt the heat radiating from his thick black fur.

Maellen pulled the door shut behind her, turned around and darted an annoyed glance at her mother then Bridget. "I was goofing off with my cousins, Ulysses and Becky Sue, that afternoon. We parked the car in the middle of the bridge and threw rocks and stuff into the water trying to see who could make the biggest splash just like we used to when we were little."

She swallowed. Her complexion had a definite greenish tint.

"It's okay baby." Lucinda patted the sofa cushion beside her. "Just tell it one step at a time."

Maellen joined her mother and let her hold her hand.

Bridget wondered if this was the first time anyone had even asked Maellen about that dreadful night. Could it be that everyone in her family had avoided the topic because they didn't want to upset her during her pregnancy?

"The water got darker and darker. We heard this horrible crack that went right through us. The bridge swayed back and forth and bucked like a wild horse trying to throw us off. We never even made it to the car.

The whole thing just fell apart right under our feet. The concrete base split in two. I grabbed hold of the railing and screamed. A big chunk of the bridge slid sideways and dumped me in the freezing water."

Maellen sniffed. Lucinda handed her a tissue. She blew her nose. "The river spun me around and around and dunked me under the water. I couldn't tell which end was up. I slammed against something that knocked the wind out of me. I managed to grab hold of it with my frozen fingers. When I caught my breath and looked around, I found out that it was a small tree growing out of a sandbar in the middle of the river. I climbed it as high as I could and wrapped my arms and legs around it."

A shudder shook Maellen's slender shoulders. "Then Becky Sue's body floated past me. I figured it was only a matter of time before the river pulled me back under. I don't know how long I hung on to that tree. It felt like days."

Lucinda kissed the top of her head. "It's over now, baby."

Maellen sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "When Shiloh drove up in his truck, I couldn't feel my arms and legs anymore, they were so numb from the cold. He slammed his foot on the brakes. The

truck skidded to a stop. He opened the door and jumped out. Then he grabbed a piece of rope from the back, sat in the mud and yanked his boots off. I didn't think he'd be able to swim all the way out to me, but he did."

Bridget chewed on the end of her pen. If Shiloh had jumped in the raging river and swam against the current at the peak of a flood to Maellen the way she said, it implied an incredible amount of brute strength on his part.

Lucinda had a faraway look in her eyes. "It don't surprise me none. The Harkers have always been as strong as bulls. One time Grandpa told me Shiloh was working on a wreck at the scrap yard and he just tore the door off the hinges with his bare hands."

Lucinda frowned. "Or was it Shiloh's father who did that?"

Maellen shrugged. "Well, as I was saying, he swam to me, climbed that tree, tied me piggy-back to him with that rope and jumped back in the water. We had a couple of close calls but we finally made it back to the shore."

Lucinda patted Maellen's shoulder.

"Anyway, he untied me from his back, wrapped me in an old quilt then picked me up and put me inside his truck and drove us to his place."

"Was it the 1925 Chevy?" asked Lucinda.

Maellen stared at her mother as if she were crazy. "I don't know. The hood opened sideways and the headlights looked like old fashioned oil lanterns."

Lucinda bobbed her head in a satisfied nod. "Then it's the 1925 Chevy. Grandpa told me how Shiloh replaced the original engine with a three fifty one from a race car and added on a four wheel drive."

Maellen sighed. "Mama, I can't remember everything if you keep interrupting me."

"Sorry." Lucinda hugged her. "I won't do it again."

"Like I said, he drove me to the Harker home in the middle of that swamp. It looks like one of them old plantation mansions with a porch that goes all the way around it. He carried me into the dining room and set me down on a bench inside this double-sided fireplace. That fireplace is huge. You can walk right through it from the dining room into the kitchen. There, he took the wet quilt off me, wrapped me up in a dry one and left me sit while he lit the fire in the hearth."

A flush darkened Maellen's cheeks. She took a couple of deep breaths.

Her mother leaned forward. "And?"

"He came back and held me in his lap like I was a baby and dried my hair with another quilt."

Maellen shook her head. "You know what? From the time when he saw me in the river he never said one word to me. Anyway, he stood me up next and held the quilt around my shoulders so I could remove my wet clothes without getting embarrassed."

Maellen stared at the floor while the flush on her cheeks deepened. "I don't know what came over me. I took my clothes off and the next thing I knew I was hanging all over him and kissing him. I felt like there was a big empty hole inside of me. I kept remembering Becky Sue's dead face when she floated past me in the river.

Then Shiloh kissed me real sweet and gentle and asked me if I wanted his seed. I told him to shut up and make love to me. The last thing I was thinking about was getting pregnant. I just wanted him to help me feel alive again."

Bridget nodded. Maellen's reaction was a textbook example of how people responded to a close encounter with death.

Lucinda hugged Maellen. A knowing smile blossomed on Lucinda's face. "Well that answers that question."

Maellen wiggled out from her mother's grasp and wrapped her arms in a protective curve around her abdomen. "What question?"

Lucinda's smile broadened. "How he managed to get you pregnant when everyone knows he's so shy he hardly ever says two words to anyone."

A sly smile flickered across Maellen's face. She looked away. "Well, he didn't have to say a thing. He just did what came natural and lived up to the Harker reputation."

"What reputation?" The question popped out of Bridget's mouth before she could stop herself.

Maellen muttered. "Rumor has it that the Harkers are fantastic lovers."

Bridget frowned and shook her head. "But they're not the marrying kind."

A warm chuckle burst from Lucinda's throat. "You got that part right. You'll never see a Harker set foot inside a church."

An idea coalesced in Bridget's mind. "This is Bible Belt country. Every preacher for miles around can rant and rave about witchcraft and devil worship because the Harkers refuse to go to church."

Lucinda smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "Exactly!"

Another thread appeared in the tangled pattern. "The Harkers are forbidden fruit," Bridget murmured. "How often does this happen?"

Lucinda cocked her head. "What?"

Bridget gestured at the small bulge of Maellen's three-month pregnant stomach. "The Harker's adopting a baby when a girl got pregnant from one of them and didn't want to stay with them."

Lucinda and Maellen exchanged amused glances.

Maellen wrinkled up her nose. "It's not that unusual. It's happened quite a few times already."

Lucinda fiddled with the hem of her uniform skirt and looked away. "Lots of people talk about how all the Harkers are bisexuals and a couple of the girls weren't too comfortable with this idea. Why I remember one time when..."

"Mama! I'm not done yet."

"But baby, I thought you were finished."

"You wanted to know why I don't want to stay with Shiloh, don't you?"

Lucinda gaped at her daughter.

With a gratified nod at the chastened look on her mother's face, Maellen resumed her story. "His Great Aunt Elizabeth walked in on us right after he zipped up his jeans. Talk about perfect timing. I took one look at her and that's when I knew those stories about the Harkers being related to our family from slave times were true. She looks exactly like me."

Maellen pursed her lips. "Well, not exactly, you see, I'm nineteen and she's an old lady. It was like looking into a mirror that showed me how I'm gonna look when I'm old. I wanted to crawl under a rock and die 'cause I realized it meant I had just made love with one of my cousins."

Awkward silence filled the room.

Lucinda patted her daughter's knee. "I don't think the relationship's that close."

Maellen hunched her shoulders. Two bright red spots deepened on her cheeks. "We're still related."

Bridget cleared her throat. Lucinda and Maellen turned their heads and stared at her. "Um, I think I better go now. You two need some privacy to discuss this."

Maellen lifted her head. "I want you to stay. It's about time someone outside our family knows what happened. It's not like we're living in the 1950's where everyone tiptoed around the idea of blacks and whites mixing."

Lucinda nodded. "She's right. And besides, since Miz Harker took to you from the very first day you came here, you better know as much as you can about them before something happens."

Bridget sat back and folded her hands in her lap.

Lucinda smoothed the wrinkles out of her skirt. "Way back in 1753, Ben Jacobs, one of the founding fathers of Lacrimas, owned a set of twins, Rebecca and Richard. Rebecca became the cook at the main house. Mr. Jacobs apprenticed Richard at eight years old to a carpenter. By the time Richard was fifteen, Ben Jacobs hired him out to his neighbors for a tidy profit."

Lucinda chuckled at Bridget's startled expression. "A slave was a big investment back in those days. Their masters profited when they had them educated in specific trades and hired them out. Besides, in the 1700's, the law permitted a slave to keep some of his earnings. Richard hoped to save up enough money to buy his freedom and his sister's freedom."

Maellen sighed. "Mama."

Lucinda looked at her. "Who's telling this, you or me?"

Maellen folded her arms across her stomach. "You are."

Lucinda sat back. "The Harkers were the first ones to hire Richard. He helped them build that mansion in the middle of the swamp. He liked working for them 'cause they paid him a fair wage and treated him like a free man. By the time he turned sixteen, he and Joanna Harker became lovers.

Over the next five years, Joanna had three daughters from him, Elizabeth, Sarah and Priscilla. Every night, Richard returned to Ben Jacobs' place. You see, as long as Ben owned Richard, then that meant he owned Richard's children, except he didn't know about Richard's children from Joanna Harker."

Shelley heaved himself to his feet, ambled over to Lucinda and laid his head in her lap. She smiled and scratched him behind his ears. "Richard never let on to anyone except his sister about his daughters. People were already talking behind their hands about the Harkers 'cause they had Indian blood and Indian names in their family. Names like Moonsammy, Littletrees and Rainbolt. Because his daughters carried the Harker name, people just assumed they were half breeds on account of their dark complexions."

Bridget lifted her hand. "Wait a minute. I have a couple of questions. Moonsammy's the name of the inventor for the yada cleaning robots. Is Shiloh the inventor? And why didn't Joanna Harker buy Richard and Rebecca from Ben Jacobs?"

Maellen chuckled. "Everyone around here knows Shiloh's the one who invented the yadas. We have three yadas running around and cleaning our house."

Lucinda nodded and lifted her shoulder in a half shrug. "Joanna didn't buy them because that would have been a dead giveaway. People would have put two and two together and caused a lot of trouble. Joanna knew better than that. Besides, Richard was a prideful man. He would never accept charity from the woman he loved."

Lucinda exchanged a sad smile with Maellen. "As long as there wasn't any real proof, people could talk all they wanted and the Harkers just ignored them. Then, to make matters worse, Richard's sister fell in love with a free man of color, Samuel Jenkins, the blacksmith. She had a set of twins, a boy and girl, from Samuel and now Richard had two more slaves to include in the price he was saving up."

Lucinda sighed. "Joanna was pregnant with her fourth child when Ben Jacobs hired Richard out to Amos McCray. The McCrays were a tight-fisted bunch and Amos figured out a way to get Richard's labor for free. On the last day, when Richard stood in the McCrays' yard waiting to collect the agreed upon fee for Mr. Jacobs, Amos came out his front door carrying a rifle. He stood there, pointed his finger at Richard and accused him of stealing his wife's wedding ring from the master bedroom.

Amos's sons jumped out from behind the porch and grabbed Richard by the arms. They forced him to lie face down on the ground while Amos shot him in the head."

Bridget swallowed the bitter taste of bile in her mouth.

Lucinda leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Joanna and her brother, Benjamin, came running out of the swamp like they knew something bad had happened to Richard. They arrived so fast Amos didn't get a chance to plant the ring on the body.

Benjamin went into a killing rage when he saw Richard's body, but Joanna held him back. The McCrays ran inside their house. Benjamin, he calmed down after that and carried Richard to Ben Jacob's plantation.

Mr. Jacobs sued Amos for killing Richard. The magistrate ruled against Amos and fined him three hundred British pounds sterling. Amos had to reimburse Mr. Jacobs for the lost earnings of a valuable slave."

"I see," Bridget murmured.

A cynical smile twisted Lucinda's mouth. "Back then three hundred pounds was an exorbitant sum. Amos had to choose between selling his farm or indenturing himself in order to come up with that much money."

Lucinda shrugged. "Amos hung himself. His sons sold the farm and paid their father's debt. They left town the next day. Nine months later, a tinker came through town with the news that the McCray boys had killed each other in Raleigh during a drunken brawl over a prostitute.

In the meantime, Joanna and Benjamin went to Samuel Jenkin's blacksmith shop with the hundred and fifty British pounds Richard had saved up before he died. Samuel added in fifty more pounds from his earnings and used the money to buy Rebecca and her two babies from Mr. Jacobs."

Bridget stood up. The image of Richard's shattered head with blood, brain matter and bone fragments splashed on the ground replayed itself in her mind. "All that money didn't make up for the way Richard died."

Lucinda bobbed her head. "This is true, but Joanna didn't have much choice in the matter. She made sure his death was avenged under the letter of the law and honored his wish to free his sister and her babies from Ben Jacobs."

Bridget sighed. Would she have been able to keep her wits about her like Joanna did and focus on the survival of both sides of the family tree?

She studied Maellen's flushed face. "Your mother's right. The relationship is very distant. You and Shiloh aren't first cousins or even second cousins. I doubt if you'll have to worry about any problems with the baby because of inbreeding."

She stopped and did a rapid calculation of the time frame since Richard's liaison with Joanna. "At the most, I'd say he might be your cousin twelve times removed."

Maellen lifted her head. "I don't care. We're family and that changes everything between us."

She glanced at her mother and looked away. "I'm not saying he's ugly or anything. He's a very nice man and I like him a lot, but as a friend. He should go out once in a while instead of hiding out in the swamp or the scrap yard. He's never going to find himself a girl that way."

A tremulous smile lit up her face. "Besides, it's not like he follows me around with puppy dog eyes pestering me to change my mind. He's accepted my decision to let Miz Harker adopt his baby."

Lucinda put her arm around Maellen's shoulder. "It just built my hopes up that you might change your mind after he and Miz Harker got all excited when the ultrasound showed that the baby was going to be a girl."

The tense knot in Bridget's stomach unraveled. She hated it when people got all prickly and upset with each other. She looked out the French door windows. A bright green grass snake slithered across the lawn.

Shelley lifted his head, pricked up his ears, barked once, and laid his muzzle back down on his paws. Then a cheerful honking sound of a truck's horn announced Shiloh's imminent arrival.

While Lucinda helped Maellen to her feet, Bridget thought how this might be the perfect chance for her to settle the rumors about monstrous offspring in the Harker family. "I already tested Maellen for sickle cell anemia and didn't find anything unusual. How about if I test Shiloh's blood, too?"

Maellen's face brightened. "It'll put my mind at ease if you do."

* * * *

When Maellen asked Shiloh if Bridget could take a sample of his blood, he gazed at her for a long moment, then nodded.

One thing for sure, other than his height of about six foot three Shiloh didn't resemble his sister. With his long straight black hair tied back in a ponytail, dark brown skin and eyes, high flat cheekbones and hooked nose, he looked more like a purebred Native American warrior.

The sterile white walls of the cubicle made his dark hair and skin appear even darker and swarthier while Bridget tied the tourniquet around his arm and watched his blood vessels bulge.

She slid the needle into one of the arteries and loosened the tourniquet. Dark red blood spurted into the syringe.

Even though he still hadn't spoken a single word, his continued silence didn't upset Bridget. It felt like the most natural thing in the world for him to sit there without speaking while she finished taking the samples.

His skin felt hard and smooth under her fingers. He had long well shaped hands, big boned with strong flat fingernails cut straight across. There wasn't a single speck of grease under his fingernails, on his blue work shirt, or faded jeans.

She gazed at a frayed spot on his collar. Someone had mended it with neat, precise stitches. Despite the well-developed musculature on his long, lean frame, nothing about him or his appearance matched her preconceived image of a mechanic from the local scrap yard.

The pleasant scent of lavender permeated his shirt. She pulled out the needle, placed a small piece of gauze over the puncture wound and held it in place with her left hand.

She tossed the used syringe into the bin labeled 'Medical Wastes, Infectious, Handle with Care', picked up a bandage and looked at him. His dark gaze met hers, warm and intelligent, filled with a friendly curiosity that matched her feelings exactly.

He took the bandage from her fingers. Moving with a swift assurance, he lifted it to his mouth, bit a hole in the paper and held it out to her. She caught a glimpse of white, well shaped teeth. No need for him to have long, painful sessions with an orthodontist. She pulled the paper off the band-aid and placed it over the scrap of gauze on his arm.

Bridget turned away and fumbled with the tray of blood samples. She'd been staring at him and cataloging his features as if he were some kind of space alien or lab specimen instead of a living, breathing human being. Heat scorched her face. The tips of her ears felt like they were on fire. She picked up the tray and fled from his continued scrutiny.

She managed to slow down when she turned the corner into the supply room and made it over to the refrigerator without spilling everything on the floor. Balancing the tray in her right hand, she eased the door open and placed the tray on the top shelf. Later, after everyone left, she'd pack

the samples into an insulated cooler and mail them to Debbie's lab at Duke.

Bridget shut the refrigerator door and sagged against it. She rested her cheek against the cool ceramic. The harsh scents of antiseptics filled her nostrils. I didn't do anything wrong, not really.

She returned to the examining room. Shiloh lifted his head and stared at her. The sudden intensity of his gaze reminded her of how Shelley would perk his ears up and watch her whenever she came within his sight. She swallowed the sudden tightness in her throat. "Um, you can go now."

"Do you like to play chess?" His clear tenor voice caressed her frayed nerves.

"Ah, yes." She wasn't sure what had startled her more, the fact that he'd actually spoken to her or the question itself.

"Good." He strode over to the doorway, paused, inclined his head in an abrupt nod and left.

Bridget blinked.

By the time she came to her senses and went into the waiting room, she found only Lucinda.

Lucinda flashed her a grateful smile. "I'll come in a half an hour earlier tomorrow morning. I'll make us a pot of coffee before we set everything up for the Well Baby Clinic."

Bridget followed them out the door. Shiloh helped Lucinda and Maellen into his truck. With bright red paint and shiny chrome bumpers and running boards, it looked like it had just rolled off the assembly line.

Shelley poked his head between Bridget's legs. His tail thumped against the floor while Shiloh drove away.

Chapter Nine

Summer's heat lingered into October. The cool caress of the evening breeze upon his furred face reminded Nathaniel of Maellen's child, who promised new life to their sisterline.

He paused beneath a cottonwood tree festooned with Spanish moss. The familiar thumping sound of a butter churn in use reached his ears. He pushed the silver green curtain of moss aside and saw Great Aunt Elizabeth. A pale cotton dress flowed over her slender torso. She sat upon a stool and repositioned the churn between her knees.

The screen door to the back porch had been latched open. Fragile moonlight drifted past the grapevine coiled around the porch. Elizabeth's hands flickered in and out of the shadows while she worked the dasher in the churn.

She stopped, tilted her head and stared in his direction. "You can come out now. Lily walked Maellen back to her cabin a couple of minutes ago."

Even though there was more than enough room for his body to enter, he hunched his shoulders and lowered his head out of long established habit, having suffered many goose eggs and cuts in his younger days to take chances with any doorway. "I know. I followed them. She carries the child well."

Elizabeth rose to her feet, put her hands on her hips and tilted her head back to look all the way up at him. "I must be losing my touch. I can't get the butter to work its way up tonight."

He smiled. Many times in the past, when he was young and eager to please, Aunt Elizabeth would con him into doing extra chores for her. She knew just how to make him feel needed and cherished. "I will do it for thee."

He braced his feet on either side of the churn and took hold of the dasher.

She brushed her hand through the soft gray curls on her scalp and listened. He pumped in a slow, steady rhythm. The beat of the churn changed. It came out strong and sure and the splashing inside had a heavier sound. She gave a satisfied nod. "I do believe it's coming up now. I'll get the working bowls."

Nathaniel chugged away with the dasher. The butter formed. He felt it thickening, gaining weight and clinging to the dasher under his hands.

Elizabeth returned carrying three wooden bowls. Her dress swished around her ankles while her pale brown feet moved soundlessly across the lightly varnished floorboards. She placed the bowls on the table, lifted up her arms and arched her back in a luxurious stretch, then seated herself on the battered sofa in the corner.

Nathanial rested his hands on the stick and felt its weight. He stooped to draw out the vent plug on the side, let the air escape, removed the lid and peered inside. "It looks good. It'll weigh a good thirteen pounds, at least."

He nudged an old wooden bucket over with his foot.

Elizabeth smoothed out her skirt. Bright curiosity shone about her face like a halo. "Why are you and Shiloh fixing up his mother's cabin?"

He crouched down on his heels, tilted the churn sideways and watched the yellow buttermilk splash into the bucket. Now that Elizabeth mentioned it, it did seem a little odd how his caterdru's feverish haste had swept him up into remodeling the cabin.

They'd gutted the structure, rewired it from top to bottom and added fresh plaster to the drywalls. They replaced the window glass with clear monofilament solar activated sheets. They added solar panel shingles to the roof. Last, but not least, they hooked up an emergency generator and underground heat pump as secondary power supplies.

Working with Shiloh like that brought back fond memories of earlier times when other Sidhe cousinlines needed their skills. However, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had no idea why his caterdru wanted to repair this particular cabin in such a hurry.

The cabin belonged to Shiloh's mother, Roan, of the Moonsammy sisterline. Nathanial straightened to his full height, flipped the churn back onto its base and held out his hand for the two wooden paddles lying on the table beside Elizabeth. She passed them to him.

He nodded. "I believe we are fixing it up for Maellen."

Her eyes sparkled with glee. She shook her head and the short cap of curls hugging her scalp bounced. "I don't think so. Maellen's had her own cabin for the last five months. Why would she need a new one?"

He scooped the butter out with the paddles and dropped it into one of the bowls. With a flick of his wrist he halved the thick lump into the second bowl and passed it to Elizabeth.

She balanced the bowl on her lap, accepted her paddle and inclined her head for him to seat himself beside her.

He complied with her unspoken command, scooped a handful of salt from the third bowl on the table and sprinkled it on the butter in his bowl. She tilted her bowl and he poured the rest of the salt over her portion. "It's for Maellen's child."

Elizabeth stirred the salt into the butter with her paddle. The butter had turned into a smooth, creamy color just like her pale yellow dress. "The baby won't need a house of her own until she's fully grown."

Nathanial stared at the bowl in his lap. Total bewilderment filled his mind. "We repaired the house for Lilith?"

Elizabeth patted his leg. A delighted chuckle burst from her lips. She wiped a tear from her eye. "No, it's not for Lily, but you're on the right track. He's fixing it up for a woman's usage, the same way a male bowerbird builds a nest to attract a mate."

Nathanial sat up just like someone had kicked him. Her dark eyes glowed with unspoken amusement. The sensation of hope long deferred filled his chest to bursting. "Who?" He whispered.

She smiled. "I was hoping you knew the answer to that question."

He shook his head and handed her his bowl.

She placed it on the table with hers and arched her left eyebrow. "Why don't you ask him?"

He scooped her up in his arms, cradled her small boned shape in his lap and planted a grateful kiss upon her brow. "I will question him tonight when we bait the traps."

* * * *

It had seemed like such a simple task when he discussed it with Aunt Elizabeth, but now he felt unsure of how to proceed. Because Shiloh had already erred with Maellen, by getting her with child before she was prepared to have one, he doubted very much if his caterdru would become involved with yet another woman without consulting Lilith first.

Nathanial leaned over the side. The flat-bottomed boat rocked under him. He lowered another trap into the shallow water.

Shiloh stuck a pole into the thick mud drenched water and braced the boat from overturning under their combined weight. A full moon hung low in the sky. The scent of night blooming flowers filled the air.

Ever since that day when Lilith mentioned Bridget's natural empathic ability, time had passed in a blind fog for Nathaniel. It was as if Bridget had placed a geas upon his soul. Every night he waited outside her house and watched over her.

Almost every morning, just before the sun crept over the horizon, she came out with Shelley and met Kurt Williams in the clinic parking lot. Together, they would run for at least five miles and loosen up their hearts and muscles in the cool dawn air.

Shiloh poled the boat around to a small inlet. Nathaniel baited two more traps and dropped them over the side. The only other empaths he'd known were other Sidhe. Seeing a human with this ability astonished him. Bridget's emotions felt pure and uncluttered like a child's with the added strength and passion of a woman grown.

Last week while he waited for the sun to rise, he'd woven a love token from his hair. When the daylight came, he wandered deep into the swamp to the tree house where they'd played as children and hid the token.

Had Shiloh noticed his heart-struck interest and decided to play an elaborate joke upon him? Perhaps, 'twould be prudent not to say anything, and in this manner, force his caterdru to make the next move.

Moonlight bathed the air. A multitude of stars blazed in cold beauty across the midnight sky. Frogs and crickets cried out their availability for mates. Water slapped against the sides of the boat while they lowered the last trap. An owl hooted. Its shadow dipped across the moon. A mouse shrieked in terror as it scurried for shelter.

Shiloh bent over his pole and pushed the boat into deeper water. A fat water moccasin slithered down the branch of a cypress tree and lowered its head behind Shiloh's shoulder. Nathaniel reached up with his pole and knocked the creature away from his caterdru. It splashed harmlessly into the water and swam away downstream.

Tall grass and reeds parted in front of the boat, then closed up behind them. They drifted deeper into the night.

Shiloh lifted his head and studied Nathaniel's face. "I like her too."

"Who?" The words flew from Nathaniel's lips before he had a chance to consider what he was saying. "Maellen?"

Moving slowly with long ingrained care, Shiloh turned and sat down without toppling them into the water. He placed the pole upon his knees. The surprised hurt he radiated stabbed into Nathaniel's bewildered heart.

An alligator slid from the beach into the water behind them. Nathaniel gasped and spoke her name in soft wonderment. "Bridget!"

Shiloh ducked his head in an abrupt nod.

"We repaired your mother's house for her."

That prompted a second embarrassed nod.

Taking his time while he decided how to proceed, Nathaniel drew a couple of long, slow breaths. "Does Lilith know?"

Shiloh looked up with his heart in his eyes. "I made a gift for Bridget. She likes to play chess." His words tumbled out in a desperate rush of need and desire. "I know you made her a gift, too. I want you to ask Lilith to speak with Bridget for us and bring her our gifts."

The more Shiloh talked, the better his plan sounded. By going through Lilith, they could initiate their courtship in the proper manner. With both gifts given at the same time, Bridget would have a free and clear choice from the very beginning.

Nathaniel slumped back in his seat. "My face. How can I...?"

Shiloh hunched his shoulders. "I don't know." He prodded the last wicker trap in the bottom of the boat with the tip of his boot. "Bridget's a telepath like us. That ability should let her learn to see you with her heart instead of her eyes."

Nathaniel bowed his head. There had to be a way to make it work. The attraction he felt went far beyond the surface of the woman's physical beauty. He could not bear the thought of never having the opportunity to speak to her, touch her hand and feel her reactions to him. It had been a long time since he felt the need to open himself up to anyone, let alone a human woman not bound to him by blood or oath.

'Twas natural for Shiloh to feel the same need as he did for her. She carried the psychic gift that made her desirable as a potential lifemate. Neither he nor his caterdru should spend the rest of their lives without at least trying to be with her for one night. They might never again have another chance to find a woman who could link with them in the full bonding of a telepath.

Nathaniel leaned over, dipped his fingers into the soft radiance of moonlit water and watched it flow past his fingers. "Aye." He spoke past the husky growl trapped in his throat. "We will bide our time and let our courtship find its own pattern."

Shiloh lifted his head and smiled. His relief and joy flowed into Nathaniel's heart through their caterbond. "Aye, we'll do it the right way this time."

Chapter Ten

It was only supposed to be a routine genetic scan of Shiloh's blood. The last thing she expected was to have Debbie call her up in the middle of the night demanding to know the source of the blood samples. At least she turned the camera off before she answered the vidphone. If Debbie had seen the expression on her face when she mentioned the blood samples, the jig would have been up.

The most she had hoped for were a few minor variations to compare with other known genetic oddities but that's not what happened. Debbie ran a comparison of the samples against her computerized listing of every rare blood type and that's when the shit hit the fan.

Bridget wished she'd never sent the samples. If she called back and said it was a practical joke, would Debbie believe such a flimsy story? No. She'd lost that chance last night by hanging up on Debbie instead of telling her whose blood samples they were.

When Kurt arrived for their morning run, she found another message on the answering machine. Debbie planned to run more tests and computerized scans and wouldn't stop until she'd deciphered the mystery.

A burst of sunlight reflecting off the river's edge stabbed into Bridget's eyes. She stumbled. Kurt slowed his pace, caught her arm and steadied her. About fifteen yards ahead lay a log half buried in the sand.

She staggered over to the log and slumped against it. The only way to stop Debbie's quest for more information would be to tell her the truth. On top of everything else, she'd also have to put up with Debbie's famous lecture on professional ethics.

Shelley galloped past them and splashed into the shallow river. Kurt sank to his knees beside Bridget. It didn't feel like October. The heat from yesterday's sun seeped into her bones from the hot sand beneath her butt.

Now that Shelley had himself soaked to the skin, he decided to return to them and shake himself dry. Bridget managed to lift her arm and shield her face from the worst of it. Kurt just groaned, closed his eyes and let the

water trickle down his flushed face. With his nappy brown hair plastered to his scalp, Kurt didn't fit the image of a wealthy corporate executive.

Shelley rolled over on the sand. Bridget wrinkled her nose at the pungent odor of wet dog.

Kurt snorted. "It's about time you got your head out of the clouds. We're not training for a marathon. Just because you skipped a couple of mornings doesn't mean you have to run twice as hard and make me suffer right along with you."

Bridget shrugged.

Kurt flashed an evil grin. "I asked you if you wanted to go skinny dipping and go a couple of rounds of mud wrestling with me, and you know what you said? You said, 'Uh-huh!'"

Bridget straightened. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

Kurt arched his eyebrows.

Shelley lifted his head and growled.

She scratched him behind his ears until his growl muted into a contented rumble. It wasn't Kurt's fault she'd been distracted by her thoughts.

Kurt's evil grin deepened. "I couldn't resist it."

She pulled her braid over her shoulder and gnawed on the tip. Was he teasing her? Hard to tell with Kurt. He had a warped sense of humor. "I actually agreed to go skinny dipping and mud wrestling with you?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Oh," Bridget studied the cloudless sky above for a few moments. "Well. Excuse me. Mud wrestling and skinny dipping weren't included as part of our friendship-not even in the small print."

Kurt looked her over from head to toe. "I don't know. I was kind of looking forward to that part. It would have added a new dimension to our relationship."

"Kurt! That's enough. I've had it with your infernal teasing."

"Spoilsport." He sat on the log. "Oh well, it wouldn't have worked anyway. I'm still stuck on Lily. Now, that would be one hell of a wrestling match, wouldn't it?"

Bridget grabbed Shelley's collar and pulled herself to her knees. "I saw her punch a guy in the face when he tried to kiss her after she told him to back off."

Kurt's eyes skittered sideways. "Lacrimas is having a town meeting tomorrow. I'm going to donate matching funds so they can hire at least three more residents to help you out at the clinic."

Bridget's mouth dropped open. What the hell was he up to now? Why did he change the subject from Lily to a town meeting? "Let me get this straight. You want the clinic to have enough staff on hand to help me re-attach your arms and legs after Lily rips them off when you ask her to go mud wrestling and skinny-dipping? Then, you'll sue her for every cent she has."

"What the hell?" Kurt gaped, then laughed so hard that tears ran down his face.

She jumped to her feet and brushed the sand from her sweatpants.

He raised his hand. "Wait! Don't leave. Let me explain."

She crossed her arms. "This better be good."

"All right." He took a couple of deep breaths and wiped the tears from his face. "I've noticed how tired you've been lately. I've invested a lot of money in the clinic. I'll recoup my investment in another five or six years with the savings on the insurance premiums."

She shook her head. "How does adding more staff to the clinic tie in with Lily and me and mud wrestling?"

Kurt stood and brushed the sand off his sweat pants. "I was just kidding around." He stopped and peered at her. "Why do you get so defensive every time I mention Lily's name?"

"You're changing the subject."

"I'm not changing the subject."

She imagined him skewered on a barbecue rack.

He shook his head and groaned. "I'll never understand women. All I wanted to do was show you my concern about your health by getting some more staff. I figured if I helped you out, then I could ask you for a favor." He sank back down on the log and buried his head in his hands.

"What favor?"

"Lily's been avoiding me lately."

She snorted. "That's not new. She always avoids you."

"She had a birthday a couple of weeks ago."

Bridget smothered her surprise and scratched a mosquito bite on her wrist. She knew better than to let Kurt know he'd startled her with his revelation. "I didn't know that. How did you find out?"

"I know someone who knows someone else who knows someone who has access to the computer at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles in Raleigh."

Guilt flooded Bridget. She turned her back on him. What he'd done reminded her of her deceit with Shiloh's blood samples.

"Dammit!" Kurt grabbed her arm and spun her around. "Stop treating me like I'm some kind of criminal."

She yanked her arm from his grasp and averted her gaze. Her actions with Shiloh's blood tests were even more criminal than his activities with Lily's driver's license files.

Shelley pushed himself between them. His ears went flat against his scalp. He bared his teeth and growled.

Kurt backed off. "Will you listen to me?"

"You're not giving me much choice, are you?"

Keeping a wary eye on Shelley, Kurt mumbled, "I know Lily's your best friend."

Bridget arched her eyebrows. Exaggerations and flattery would get him nowhere.

"All right. I admit I might be stretching the truth a bit there. Maybe you're not her best friend but at least you get to talk to her every once in awhile. That's a lot more than I've managed to do so far."

He lifted his hands in surrender. "I'd never ask you to do anything to hurt her. All I'm saying is that I bought her a birthday present and I want you to set up a time and day when I can meet her at your place and give it to her. That's all."

"You're bribing me to help you by adding more staff to the clinic?"

He shrugged. "Call it a bribe if you want. I really am concerned about you. Will you ask her for me?"

She thought it over. Coming from Kurt, it sounded pretty straightforward. No trick clauses. "All right, I'll talk to her, but I can't promise you anything."

"Great!" He held out his hand. They shook on it.

Shelley sat on his haunches and whuffed.

Chapter Eleven

Uncomfortable with the idea of traveling by water, Bridget took the long way around to Lily's house by land.

After a few false starts, using the map Lily faxed her, she finally found the right road-if you could call it a road-two deeply imbedded ruts in the thick red clay that disappeared into a confusing morass of moss covered trees and assorted mud puddles.

Bridget downshifted past one of the deeper potholes and raced around yet another narrow curve. She looked up, saw Lily perched on the top railing of a rust-encrusted cattle gate that blocked the road, yelled "Oh, shit!" and jammed her foot on the brakes.

The jeep skidded sideways and stopped a few inches away from the gate. Lily flashed an appreciative grin and tapped the bumper with her sneakered foot.

Bridget shifted the vehicle into reverse.

Lily jumped from the gate, unlocked the shiny new padlock, pushed the metal frame aside and waved at her to come ahead. When Bridget drove through, Shelley decided to dive out the passenger side window at Lily.

Interestingly enough, as big as Shelley was-about ninety plus pounds of solid doggy muscle-he didn't knock Lily over. She swayed under his weight. He whined and slobbered at her then she dropped him back on the ground.

The muscles under Shelley's thick fur rippled. He prepared to launch himself at her a second time.

"Stay!" Lily reinforced her order with the proper hand signal. He promptly seated himself, perked his ears up and waited for her next move.

Lily stepped forward. Sunlight transformed her platinum braid into a dazzling white rope falling down her back. The pale hair on her arms sparkled like gold dust. She looked relaxed and content, the queen of her domain in faded jeans, sneakers and a chambray shirt.

Shelley tilted his head and watched her. Lily gestured at the jeep and snapped her fingers. He jumped in the back seat. She strolled around to the driver's side. "Scoot over. I'll drive the rest of the way."

The rest of the ride went a lot smoother. Lily dodged every rock and pothole without slowing down her headlong rush into the depths of the swamp. She parked the jeep in the shade of a honeysuckle-covered hedge and tossed the keys to Bridget. "Let me take you on a quick tour first."

Numerous cabins, large and small, filled the wooded area behind the main house. A confusing maze of narrow paths snaked their way around the bushes, trees, streamlets and footbridges that linked the cabins. Judging by the number of empty structures Bridget saw, a very sizable village of Harkers must have lived here at one time.

The main house crouched on the highest piece of land. Judging by the haphazard arrangement of rooms, it had started out as a two room log cabin that grew into a sprawling three story structure complete with towers, balconies and a colorful array of trellises filled with grapevines, honeysuckle and roses.

Silver green curtains of Spanish moss draped a matching pair of giant oaks in the front yard. They echoed the moody atmosphere of the enormous mansion.

Lily led Bridget along a narrow cobblestone path. "The kennels are in the back."

By the time they reached the barn door, the barking told Bridget they'd reached the kennels. Lily flung the doors open. A black, gray and brindle sea of curious dogs and puppies flowed out to meet them. She silenced them with a wave of her hand. They plopped back on their haunches, ears erect.

Lily went from dog to dog and introduced each one.

Their names—at least the ones Bridget managed to remember after that lengthy introduction—came out in a curious and exotic jumble—Cleopatra, Caesar, Conan, Jezebel, Licorice, Sinbad, Sapphire, Salome, Hannibal, Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, Nicodemus and Puck.

Shelley stretched out in the middle of the barn and endured the avid attentions of the puppies. They clambered over his back, gnawed on his ears and played tug of war with his tail.

Bridget shook her head.

Lily nudged her. "What's wrong?"

Bridget gestured at the spotlessly clean barn. "With all these dogs running around, I expected to see and smell..." Her voice trailed off. There was no graceful way to say it.

Lily laughed. "Shiloh programmed four yadas to clean up all doggie poop within five hundred yards of the house and barn. Would you like one of them for your yard, too?"

Bridget grinned. "Of course."

Lily brought Bridget to the main house next. She radiated pure happiness. It was almost as if her own private ray of sunshine shone from her face. They climbed up the back steps into the kitchen where they almost collided with the older man and woman waiting just inside the entrance-way.

While Lily introduced them, Bridget studied Great Aunt Elizabeth's features first. Except for the soft cap of gray curls that hugged her scalp and the fine lines at the corners of her eyes, Elizabeth could have been Maellen's twin. The resemblance was uncanny. Just like Maellen, she stood barely five foot two inches tall.

Bridget felt like a giantess standing next to Elizabeth. The older woman's skin was a rich warm honey brown color a few shades lighter than Shiloh's.

They shook hands. Despite her fragile appearance, Elizabeth had a strong competent grip that hinted at hidden reserves of inner strength.

Lily nudged the man forward. "This is my Great Uncle Percival. There's no need to be formal. Just say Elizabeth and Percy from now on."

Bridget turned her bemused gaze upon Percy. Instead of the dark brown eyes shared by Lily, Shiloh and Elizabeth, blue eyes that stood out even more against dark skin the same color as Elizabeth's studied her. He stood maybe a fraction of an inch shorter than Shiloh and shared his nephew's long straight nose, wide jawbone, flat cheekbones and whipcord musculature.

Percy's smile matched the appreciative gleam in his eyes. He bowed over her hand. With his salt and pepper hair tied at the nape of his neck with a leather thong, he reminded her of a hippie relic from the previous century.

When he straightened up and released her hand, an odd sensation wrapped itself around Bridget's heart. It felt like finding a part of herself she had never even known was missing.

Why? Why do I feel welcome here when I've heard so many stories about the standoffish and reclusive Harkers?

Before she had a chance to sort this out, Lily gave her a tour of the house. She saw an endless series of empty rooms, some sparsely furnished, others cluttered with books and magazines. Every room looked spotlessly clean. Tall casement windows lined the plain white plastered walls.

The aura of sadness she expected to find in the deserted rooms never materialized. Instead, the laughter of ghostly children lingered in every nook and cranny.

Bridget peered at the boxes of books stacked in the corner of the dining room. "Where do you find all these books?"

Lily went to the windowsill where one lay face down. She flipped through the pages then put it aside. Bridget caught a glimpse of the title, 'The Three Musketeers' by Alexander Dumas, the French edition. "We buy them at yard sales and auctions."

Retracing their steps through the maze of corridors and staircases, Lily brought Bridget to a screened-in back porch. Grapevines spiraled around the semicircular enclosure. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun poured past the vines and patterned the walls with shifting shadows of leaf, tendrils and grape clusters.

Bridget sighed and sank into the soft cushions of the oversized sofa. Peace saturated the air. Lily went over to the small cloth covered table beside the sofa, picked up a pitcher of ice water from the tray on the table and poured it out into two glasses.

Bridget narrowed her eyes. "This is the first time I ever saw a gazebo tacked on to a back porch. Aren't gazebos supposed to be sitting out by themselves in the middle of a lake?"

A soft chuckle escaped from Lily's lips as she handed Bridget a glass of water. "Why shouldn't it be here?" Lily seated herself on the other end of the sofa and tucked her long legs under her. "It's more convenient this way." She leaned forward and winked. "You wouldn't believe how many times I've conned my brothers out of this spot when I've wanted to sleep here during a hot summer night."

Bridget kicked her sandals off. She took a sip of ice-cold water, tilted her head and listened to a faint sound in the distance. "Someone's chopping wood. Who could that be?"

Lily tilted her head. Then she smiled. "That's Nathaniel. Aunt Elizabeth asked him to bring in a good stack for tonight. She's going to bake bread."

Bridget's heart jumped against her chest. Her hand shook.

Lily took the glass from her limp fingers. "What's wrong?" She laid her hand over Bridget's.

"Nothing!" Bridget muttered. "It startled me when you said his name was Nathaniel, that's all." Heat flared up in her cheeks. "I watched a holo vid last week that showed an old man telling a story about the haunt on Harker land. He said the haunt's name was Nathaniel."

An odd tingle of nervous tension flowed from Lily into Bridget. She pulled her hand away and sat back.

Bridget flexed her fingers. The sensation vanished just as quickly as it had come. Her imagination was running away with her.

Lily's voice remained quiet and matter of fact as if she asked about the weather. "The old man, would his name be Elias Jefferson, by any chance?"

"Y-yes."

"I didn't know you knew his family."

Bridget moistened her parched lips with her tongue. She couldn't think any more. At least, not in any logical fashion. "Debbie Allen, my teacher from Duke, came down to visit me and took me to see her great-grandfather Luke Jefferson. They showed me a holographic recording of Elias Jefferson telling about an encounter he had with one of your ancestors."

Lily lowered her eyes.

Bridget swallowed the lump in her throat.

Lily lifted her left shoulder in a half shrug. "When Elias had his encounter, that happened a long time ago."

Bridget sagged back against the sofa cushions. It seemed like a good time to change the subject. She cleared her throat. "Nathaniel's the only one in your family I haven't met yet. How about introducing us now?"

An odd look flickered across Lily's face. "I can't. Not yet. He's farouche."

Bridget's mouth dropped open. "He's what?"

Lily looked away and studied the grapevine. "He's lived alone in the woods ever since his wife died and has become very shy around strangers. If I tried to introduce you, he might run away."

The memory of a spring day when she was a little girl walking in the woods with her grandmother flashed into Bridget's mind. She saw a stag jump into the path in front of them. He stopped there, frozen in mid-step and looked at her, shook his antlered head then vanished into the bushes.

Bridget cleared her throat. "I suppose he's a lot older than you if he's already been married and widowed."

Lily brushed her fingers across Bridget's hand and shook her head. "He's only fourteen years older than me." Lily jumped up with her hand to her mouth then paused in the doorway. "I almost forgot! I'll be right back."

It didn't take long, two minutes at the most for her to return with a carved wooden box and a small cloth-wrapped package.

Bridget accepted the box, opened it and gazed at a set of chess pieces created out of shiny nails, nuts and bolts. "I can't."

Lily pushed the lid shut and closed Bridget's hands over it. "Yes, you can. It's a gift from Shiloh's heart. You cannot refuse such a gift."

Bridget bit her lip. She ran her fingertip over the chessboard carved into the lid. "It's beautiful. Tell him I said, 'Thank you!'"

Lily nodded. "He told me to tell you his first move is King's pawn to King's four. When you decide on your move, you can relay it through me or tell him yourself the next time he stops by the clinic."

"All right." Bridget smiled, put the box beside her on the cushion then peered at the second, smaller package Lily placed in her lap.

"Go ahead," Lily said. "This one's from Nathaniel."

"B-but..." Bridget hesitated. "He's farouche."

"Aye, so he is. It means a lot to me to see him finally come out of his shell."

"I don't know him. How can I accept a gift from a man I never met?"

Lily hunkered down on her heels and held the package out on the palm of her hand. "Please, I know it seems odd, but I promise you he means you no harm by it."

Bridget swallowed her misgivings and fumbled with the string knotted around the piece of oilcloth. She thought about her promise to help Kurt give Lily a birthday present. Should she wait a few minutes and try to mention it as an afterthought? She folded the oilcloth back and exposed a delicate silver bracelet interwoven with a narrow plait of dark brown hair.

Lily stroked the bracelet. An indulgent smile softened her mouth. "Men can be so impractical when it comes to selecting gifts."

Bridget frowned. "Wait a minute. A couple of months ago you refused to accept roses and caviar from Kurt. Yet, you expect me to accept these things from your brothers. What's the difference between their gifts and Kurt's?"

Lily shook her head. "It's not the same thing. Kurt never took the time to figure out what might please me. He wants to own me, to place a collar on my neck with dead flowers and fish eggs."

Despair washed over Bridget under the spell of Lily's voice. "If that's the only choice I have, then I'd rather be lonely. My brothers know better than to try to own you. If you accept their gifts, they won't expect anything in return from you. It's your choice if you want things to go further. You can take as long as you want and get to know them as friends first. Afterwards, whatever happens will be by your free choice."

Put that way, Lily's refusal made perfect sense. Kurt had too much money and power already. In his world, everything came with strings attached. Bridget slid the bracelet over her wrist.

The empty rooms in the house flashed through her mind. Tears filled her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Lily's fingers tightened around her wrist.

"I don't know what's gotten into me lately." She sniffed. "All of a sudden I've become a big crybaby. I just thought to myself how lonely it must be for you in this big old house with most of your family dead and gone."

Lily's eyes went cold and distant. She released Bridget's wrist. "I left home a long time ago and traveled all over the country. Shiloh went with me. We went from college to college and audited whatever courses took our fancy and filled our minds with new thoughts. Nathaniel couldn't leave. He had to stay behind and live with his memories."

Lily hugged herself. "Don't worry. It's over now. When Shiloh and I returned, the pain had vanished. I'm happy now. This is my home. It'll always be my home and you've become a part of me. You're the little sister I never had. I'm not lonely anymore. I no longer have the need to spend my time digging up bones and mourning the past."

Bridget wiped her hands on her pants and glanced over Lily's shoulder. The sun hung low in the sky. "Ohmygod." She picked up the chess set. "I didn't realize it was this late. I better go."

Lily pulled her to her feet. "Not so fast, little sister. Let's find some food so you won't have to cook tonight."

Chapter Twelve

Bridget smothered a yawn, rubbed her eyes and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. The last thing she needed to do was fall asleep, run off the road and crash into a tree. Having additional staff should have cut down on her workload, but so far, it hadn't worked out that way.

The interns assigned to the clinic looked like babies with their eager faces and crisp uniforms. The first day she arrived for work in the genetics lab had she made the same impression of innocent enthusiasm on Debbie?

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't such a bright idea to start a mobile prenatal clinic when the three new residents showed up for work. Of course, it wasn't her fault the people of Lacrimas-and the surrounding county-thought prenatal care meant calling a physician two hours after the onset of labor. In the last forty-eight hours, they had delivered sixteen live births and airlifted five other women to Raleigh for possible C-sections.

Lucinda Davies' experienced hands saved them. A fully accredited Physician's Assistant, she had one year's internship in the delivery room. Also, after giving birth to five children of her own, Lucinda projected serene confidence while she reassured frightened young women.

The first time Bridget dealt with a woman in labor, she found herself in the same boat as her three residents-great on theory, but a little shaky with hands-on experience. Next week would be better. They should soon run out of pregnant women.

The jeep swung around the last sloping curve. She spotted the gravel driveway that led to the clinic, slowed down, flipped on the turn signal and turned right. The only thing on her immediate agenda was to crawl into bed and get a good night's sleep for the first time after two chaotic weeks.

The tires spun on the loose gravel, caught traction and the jeep lurched forward. She drove up the slight incline and turned left onto the relative smoothness of the macadam parking lot. Her headlights illuminated the neatly lettered sign that said, 'Reserved parking, Dr. Bridget O'Keefe'.

She pulled the key out of the ignition. The engine sighed and shut off. The fluorescent numbers glowing on the dashboard clock said 3:15 a.m. A

luxurious yawn escaped from her mouth. Tomorrow was Saturday, her day off. She could sleep as late as she desired.

A single yellow bulb glowed over the front door of the clinic. She'd left the heliport lights on power miser status also. Dim yellow strips marked off the boundaries. Clouds obscured the night dark sky, although there wasn't any rain in the forecast.

She opened the door. A cool breeze caressed her face. She sagged back, put her hands on the seatbelt latch and closed her eyes.

A man's voice said. "Wake up."

Bridget opened her eyes. Her heart shuddered in her chest.

She whipped her upper body around and peered between the bucket seats. Clumps of black dog hair decorated the empty back seat. She turned and gazed at the dashboard clock, 3:35 AM, then rested her head on the steering wheel. "Now I'm hearing voices."

She straightened up and felt the tangled mess of hair at the back of her head. This morning she'd confined it in a neat French braid. Should she comb it out tonight? She wrinkled her nose. Maybe tomorrow. In the meantime, falling asleep in the middle of a parking lot wasn't exactly the smartest thing in the world for her to do.

She unfastened her seatbelt and exited the vehicle. Her sweat soaked shirt clung to her skin. The scent of honeysuckle tickled her nose. Night-time in the country always seemed darker and quieter than the city. She'd noticed that when she moved here six months ago.

In the city, harsh neon colors blocked the sky and the stench of rotten garbage in the gutters filled the air. Many times when she heard the wailing screams of sirens she felt like an aura of hatred smothered her senses.

She bent over the drivers' seat and tugged a bulky satchel from the passenger seat. Then she slung it over her shoulder, shut the door with a shove of her hip and staggered away.

Bridget collapsed against the front door of the clinic and held her keys up with a triumphant flourish. "Well, look at that. I didn't forget and leave them in the jeep like I did last night." She unlocked the door and pushed it open. There she tripped over the threshold, landed on hands and knees on the smooth tiled floor and burst out into a prolonged giggle attack.

She sat back, wiped the tears from her face, hauled herself to her feet and kicked the door shut. Because her eyes had already adjusted to the darkness, she decided not to turn on any lights.

Her sneakers whooshed on the floor. She went through the conservatory, then the kitchen and slipped into the living room. There she bumped into the sofa and let the satchel fall from her shoulder onto the floor.

She kicked her shoes off, crawled over the back of the sofa, sprawled face down onto the cushions and groaned with relief. Shelley's deep rumble penetrated her sleep-fogged brain. Her dog was happy. That was the sound he made when she petted him or scratched him behind his ears.

Whoa! Bridget pushed up from her facedown position. Sucking in a couple of deep breaths, she waited for her heart to stop pounding in her ears. Her hands weren't anywhere near Shelley. They were holding her off the couch. Her heart skipped another beat. If Shelley was rumbling his happy sound because he was being scratched behind the ears and she wasn't the one doing the scratching ... That meant only one thing. Someone else must be in the darkened living room with her.

Bridget crawled to the end table. Breathing in short shallow gasps, she stretched her hand out and slapped the base of the lamp. A brilliant shaft of light stabbed her eyes. She shielded them with her hand.

She heard furtive movements, Shelley's soft whuff, a thud and books crashing to the floor. Holding her left hand over her eyes to shield them from the light, she slung her right arm over the back of the sofa and pulled herself to her knees. She lowered her hand, blinked away the afterimage of the light superimposed on her eyes and focused on the blurred blotch beside her bookcase.

She rubbed her eyes. The blur became two distinct shapes, one of which was Shelley on his haunches. The second shape turned out to be a man kneeling on the floor. Shelley cocked his ears and gave her a quizzical look as if he were saying, "What's up, doc?"

Strangely enough, she didn't feel afraid. She stared at the broad shouldered man huddled in the corner. Thick, kinky hip length brown hair curtained his face. Thin strips of leather bound the sleeves of his shirt and pants to his arms and legs like someone from a medieval play. Tan leather gloves and thigh high boots added the final touches to his anachronistic attire.

Shelley trusted him.

Bridget frowned. Should she call 911? And say what? There's a man in my living room. My dog trusts him. Please send an officer over to arrest him. "Why didn't Shelley stop you?"

“I watched his dam whelp him. I held him in my arms and cleaned the blood from his mouth. I gave him his name.”

Could this be Lily's elusive brother, Nathaniel? Who else could it be? Bridget yawned and scratched an annoying itch on the tip of her nose. “Who are you and what are you doing in my living room?”

“I be Nathaniel.”

His low-pitched voice had a gravelly texture to it.

“You're Lily's brother.”

“Aye.”

She let her head fall back on her arms. Was he here because he needed her help? Had Lily or Shiloh been in an accident?

“Why are you here?”

He bowed his head lower and gestured at the keys by his knees. “I had concern for thy safety. Thou left the key in the front door of the clinic.”

She nodded. Was he hiding his face because he was farouche? “Why can't I see your face? I'm not going to hurt you.”

“My face would affright thee. I be ill featured.”

“That's okay.” Another huge yawn stretched her mouth. “I look like hell right now, too.”

He shook his head. “Thou art comely.”

One thing for sure, he really knew how to flatter a girl.

“I would beg a small favor of thee.”

Bridget held her hand over her mouth, smothered yet another yawn and studied the thick muscles that bulked out his shirt. Why was he talking like someone from a historical recreation? No one said thee and thy and thou anymore.

She blinked. Oh yeah. He had asked her a question. “What's the favor?”

“Extinguish the lamp.”

“Why?”

“So I may speak freely.”

Under the circumstances, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable request. Maybe the light hurt his eyes. She leaned over and slapped the base

of the lamp. The light went out. She turned around on her knees, untangled her legs and plopped into a sitting position on the sofa.

Shelley loped around the sofa, sat by her feet and put his head in her lap. She reached back and probed at the stiffness in her neck and shoulders.

Warm callused fingers engulfed her hands. She gasped at the sudden contact.

Comfort and reassurance flowed into Bridget. Nathaniel's raspy whisper soothed the tension from her. "I would never harm thee."

She sighed. Her hands fell into her lap of their own accord. He traced the line of her cheek with the tip of his finger. Fingernails scraped her skin. A shiver of delight soared through her.

He unbraided her hair. She let her head fall forward while he combed his fingers through the tangles. Damn. It felt good.

His hands flowed unerringly over her neck and shoulders and kneaded away the stiffness. A wave of friendship washed over her. She slumped sideways until her head found the arm of the sofa and heard Shelley's tail thumping on the floor beside the sofa.

Nathaniel straightened her legs out into a more comfortable position. He sat on the edge of the sofa and bumped her with his hip.

Strong fingers found a particularly sore spot on her spine. "Uhhhh." The room spun around in a slow, lazy loop.

A groan of pure pleasure escaped from her lips. "There! To the right. A little bit lower. Ummmmm, mfphfff." She closed her eyes and sank into sweet oblivion.

Chapter Thirteen

Bridget opened her eyes and curved her mouth into a smile of smug satisfaction. Contentment soaked every inch of her body. If falling asleep on the sofa made her feel this good, maybe she should make the living room her bedroom and the bedroom her living room. The aroma of freshly cooked bacon reached her nose. Lily's voice hummed an unfamiliar melody from the other end of the apartment.

Whoa! Bridget sat bolt upright in her bed.

Lily stopped humming.

Bridget rubbed the sand from her eyes and gazed at the tightly closed drapes of her bedroom window. She took a deep breath, lifted the covers and peered beneath. Her clothing remained intact—a bit wrinkled, but nevertheless, the same shirt and pants she had on last night. Which meant nothing had happened. Or had it? Who moved her from couch to bed? Had she walked here in her sleep?

She pushed her tangled hair away from her face, climbed out of bed, hurried to the door, opened it and gazed at the living room. It looked normal. The green vase filled with wildflowers sat on the coffee table. Her books remained neatly stacked on the bookcase.

Someone had pulled the drapes back. Sunlight streamed in through the beveled glass of the patio doors.

'Dammit.' She pulled a strand of hair to her mouth and chewed on it. "How did Lily get inside?" Then the answer popped in her head. "Lucinda has a key. She must have let Lily in. They probably got me to walk from the couch to the bed and then Lily decided to stay and make breakfast."

A nice, hot shower should wash the cobwebs out of her brain. She hurried into the bathroom, skimmed out of her clothes, turned on the water, entered the shower and lathered up her hair and body.

"Hey!" Lily's muffled voice penetrated the cloud of steam. "Are you trying to drown yourself?"

"Hold your horses! I'm almost done." Bridget wrapped a towel around her wet hair and belted her bathrobe. She couldn't wait to see the look on Lily's face when she told her about last night's dream. A proper introduction to Nathaniel should cure her overactive imagination.

She entered the living room.

Lily grabbed her and swung her around in an exuberant hug. "I'm so happy everything worked out so well between you and him. At first, when he told me he made sure you arrived home safely, I was mad enough to rip his head off." She sat Bridget down on the sofa, picked up a towel and dried her hair with it then combed out the tangles. "But it worked out anyway. You spoke with him and accepted him completely."

Bridget's heart stuttered and skipped a couple of beats. Nathaniel had really been here and he'd already told Lily what happened. Last night's events weren't a dream.

Lily took her by the hand, pulled her down the hall and sat her at the kitchen table. "I should have relied on my instincts and trusted you." She went to the counter, picked up Bridget's favorite plate, the blue one with the tiny chip on its edge and filled it with scrambled eggs and bacon. She brought it to the table, seated herself and covered Bridget's hands with hers. "Now that you've met him and seen his face, we don't have to hide our differences from you anymore."

She pointed at her eyes and blinked.

Bridget watched a translucent inner eyelid slide across from the corners of Lily's eyes and change the rich dark brown of her pupils to amber. Lily had a fully functioning set of nictitating membranes under her regular eyelids. The membranes transformed her pupils into a slit-eyed appearance like a cat.

"Uh." Bridget gulped. The nictitating membranes explained why Lily's family remained so reclusive after hundreds of years in Lacrimas. It explained the odd rumors of witchcraft and monsters on Harker land. It also accounted for the genetic variations in Shiloh's DNA scan that had gotten Debbie all fired up at the lab. When did this mutation appear in their family?

Lily sat back, closed her eyes and opened them. The membrane disappeared. Her eyes looked normal again.

Heat flared across Bridget's cheeks. Lily was a living, breathing human being, not a genetic fluke to be dissected in a lab. She glanced around the kitchen. "Where's Shelley?"

Lily raised her eyebrows. "What's wrong? Kurt took him out for a run. You're not doing a very good job of changing the subject."

"I know." Bridget stared at the food piled on her plate. What could she say?

Lily put her hand under Bridget's chin, tilted her face up and gazed into her eyes. "You didn't see Nathaniel's face, did you?"

Her cheeks felt like they were on fire. Bridget couldn't think of a tactful way to explain it so she just blurted it out. "No, I didn't. I was tired. It was dark. I put the light on and saw him kneeling by the bookcase with his hair hiding his face. Then he asked me to put out the light and I did."

"You weren't afraid."

"Yes and no. At first I wasn't sure if he was real, then after we spoke for awhile I forgot about being afraid."

"Why?"

"Because I felt safe."

"You felt safe."

"Uh, huh."

Lily released Bridget's chin. She raked her fingers through her hair and stared at the ceiling. An irritated frown marred her forehead.

Bridget imagined Lily striding up to Nathaniel, slapping him aside of his head and saying, "You neglected to tell me a very important detail." Slap "You forgot to tell me she didn't see your face."

Bridget rubbed the bracelet of braided hair on her wrist.

Lily stood up, pulled a set of keys out of her back pocket and tossed them on the table. "He told me you left these keys in the front door of the clinic and fell asleep while he spoke with you. He asked me to return them."

Bridget wrapped her fingers around the keys as if they might disintegrate at her touch. "Does he have nictitating membranes, too?"

"Why?"

"Because if that's why he hid his face from me, then it's not such a big deal after all. Right?"

Lily shook her head. "It's not just his eyes. There are other differences in his face and body."

Bridget leaned forward and propped her elbows on the table. Excitement hummed through her. Finally after everything that had happened, after hearing Elias's story, she'd know the truth about Nathaniel. "Then what is it?"

“I can't tell you. When he's ready, he'll show you.”

Bridget slumped back in her chair. This was crazy. She'd never find out at this rate.

Lily stood up, went to the counter, leaned her hip against it and averted her gaze. “Nathaniel likes you. A lot. He asked me to ask you if he could come over tonight and talk with you.”

Heat seared Bridget's cheeks again. “I d-don't know.”

“What's wrong?” Lily returned to the table and laid her hand on Bridget's arm. Her fingers clamped down in a fierce demand. “Did he hurt you?”

“He didn't do anything,” She pulled her arm away from Lily's grasp. “It's just that, well, you know...”

“Ah.”

“Ah, what?”

Lily shrugged. “You felt him. You knew he wasn't going to hurt you.”

“Well,” Bridget managed a wary nod at Lily's odd way of explaining the situation. “I guess you could say that's what happened.”

“That's because you're perfectly safe with him. He knows his manners. May he come visit you tonight?”

Bridget bit her lip. She'd never let a complete stranger walk in on her like that. And his hand ... A delicious tingle raced up her spine at the thought of his hands on her neck and back again. “He gives nice massages.”

“Aye. He does.”

“Okay.”

Lily tilted her head to the side. ‘Okay, what?’

“He can visit me tonight.’

A frown flickered across Lily's face. She tapped her fingers on the table. “You know you're going to have to keep the curtains closed and all the lights off when he visits.”

“Why?”

“Please.” Lily leaned closer and stroked Bridget's hand. “Let him get used to you first. Then, later on, when he feels a little more comfortable with the idea, he'll let you see his face. Until then...”

Bridget sighed. "All right. I'll keep the curtains drawn and the lights off, but after we finish talking, I'd like him to give me another massage."

Lily chuckled. "It's a deal!"

The front door slammed. The sound of Shelley's toenails against the tiled hallway floor reached their ears. He burst through the doorway behind Lily and skidded to a stop under the kitchen table.

Lily turned around and saw Kurt standing there with a brightly wrapped package in his arms.

He looked at Bridget, saw the horrified expression on her face and groaned. "You forgot to ask her."

She rose to her feet, tightened the belt on her robe and glared at him. "I didn't forget."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"I just didn't find the right moment to tell her."

She turned to Lily. "He asked me to ask you if he could meet you here because he wanted to give you a birthday present."

"I see." Laughter glittered in the brown depths of Lily's eyes.

Bridget decided this looked like a good time to exit the room. She pushed her chair back and rose to her feet.

Kurt pointed at her. "And just where do you think you're going, young lady?"

She lifted her chin. "I'm going to change my clothes. I'm not exactly dressed for company."

"Forget it. You're not running out on me. Not at this stage of the game. I want you to stay right here and be our official chaperone while she accepts my present."

Lily's chuckle interrupted them. She accepted the present and led Bridget into the living room. Kurt and Shelley trailed them.

Bridget eased herself onto the sofa and tucked her legs up under her robe. Lily sat on the other end of the sofa. Shelley jumped up and settled himself on the cushions between her and Lily. The sound of paper being torn off the package filled the air.

Kurt retreated to the opposite end of the room. He stared out the patio doors. The sunlight streaming in through the beveled glass brought out

blond highlights in his brown hair. It had grown quite a bit longer during the last couple of weeks and curled at the nape of his neck.

“No!” Lily gasped. “I can't.”

A mound of multicolored tissue paper lay on the floor by her feet. She held a violin case on her lap. The smooth dark leather case seemed to glow with a life of its own. She undid the clasp, opened it, reached inside and stroked the red velvet lining. A wistful sigh escaped from her parted lips.

Bridget wished there was something she could say to make Lily smile. Weren't people supposed to be happy when they received presents?

He turned around. “I followed you and your brother Shiloh out to that auction in Raleigh a couple of weeks ago. You brought a truckload of furniture there and auctioned it off.”

The sadness in Lily's eyes deepened.

Hunching his shoulders under her wordless stare, Kurt continued speaking. “You shouldn't have to sell your furniture just to pay the taxes on your land. You deserve better than that. I can help. All you have to do is say the word and I'll pay the taxes for you, no strings attached.”

Lily lifted the violin out of the case and cradled it in her lap. She plucked one of the strings and listened. “I don't need your help. I saw you there.” She kept her head down. “You helped Shiloh unload the truck.”

“I saw you examine the violin before the bidding began.” Kurt looked at Bridget. His eyes pleaded with her to help him out.

Lily plucked a few notes and tightened the knobs on the violin.

Bridget scratched Shelley behind his ears. She had no intention of butting in right now.

He slumped against the wall and sighed. “I wasn't sure how you'd react if you saw me buy it. I pulled this old lady aside, gave her money and asked her to bid on it for me.”

Lily picked up the bow. “It's not that simple. I don't...”

Bitterness filled Kurt's voice. “I know what you're going to say. I've heard it a million times already. You don't trust me and you don't need my help.”

Bridget held her breath and waited for the fireworks to begin.

Lily closed her eyes, lifted the violin to her shoulder and began to play.

Bridget gasped. That was one of her favorite concertos. Where did Lily learn to play like that? She must have had years and years of lessons and intense practice in order to play that well.

Kurt took a step toward Lily. A desperate need flowed from him.

The last pure note of the concerto floated up to the ceiling. Lily opened her eyes. Kurt flinched under her probing gaze.

She laid the violin down on the sofa cushion, rose to her feet, walked across the room and came to him. "Thank you."

Hope glowed in his eyes. "I bought box tickets for the opera in Raleigh next month. Could you? Will you go with me?"

She looked away. "I-I can't. I sh-shouldn't. I have to think about it first."

"Dammit!" He whirled around and stared out the patio doors. Bitter rage clung to his shoulders like a dark cloud.

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Say it. I don't mind hearing what you have to say."

"Words," he muttered. "That's all I have. You won't take my money. All I have is words. I don't want your land. I don't need it. All I want is you."

Bridget sighed. Shelley whimpered and pushed his wet nose into her hands.

Lily lifted her hand from his shoulder. He turned around. They stood toe-to-toe and gazed into each other's eyes. She placed her right hand on his cheek then took his right hand and held it against her cheek. It was a strange, yet, intimate gesture.

Bridget rubbed her fingers back and forth on the bracelet of silver and hair around her wrist. She almost thought she saw an invisible doorway open up between them.

Lily stumbled backwards. "No. I can't." Her confused fear seemed to quiver in the air.

Bridget pulled her hand away from the bracelet as if it had scorched her fingers. This wasn't real. She didn't actually see threads of light weaving a doorway between Kurt and Lily. A vein throbbed on the left side of her forehead. She rubbed at it and sighed. She was going to have one hell of a migraine.

Lily returned to the couch and put the violin back in its case. Her hands shook. "I can't." She fumbled with the leather straps. "I'm a woman, not a man. I'm supposed to be the practical one in the family."

Kurt held his hand out to her. "Wait."

Holding the violin case in front of her like a shield, she backed away from his outstretched hand. "You don't know who I am. This is a gift from your heart. I shouldn't accept it." She paused in the doorway. Tears glittered on her cheeks. "You disturb me."

Then she left.

"What was that all about?" Kurt's agonized voice pulled Bridget's attention back to him.

"She's farouche."

He gaped at Bridget as if she'd suddenly sprouted horns. "What?"

"It means she's wild and has to be handled carefully."

"But I didn't do anything to her."

"Shut up!"

"But..."

"But nothing. You got what you wanted. She accepted your present. Now it's your turn to leave. I have a headache and I don't feel like listening to you moan and groan about your problems with her."

"Women!" Kurt balled his hands into fists. His disgusted glare blistered the air between them. He spun around on his heels and strode out of the room.

Chapter Fourteen

Waiting on a sofa in a pitch dark room wasn't the most comforting feeling in the world, but it was too late for her to change her mind. Nathaniel would arrive soon. Shelley bumped his wet nose against her slack fingers. She scratched behind his ears.

Shelley's head was a lighter shadow silhouetted against the deeper darkness all around them. His fur felt rough and warm. A soft sigh gusted past Bridget's lips. She sank back into the soft embrace of the sofa cushion. In a very literal sense, this counted as a blind date. Although she'd never heard of a blind date taking place in a totally dark room.

Shelley lifted his head, gave a soft whuff, jumped off the couch and landed with an audible thump on the floor. His shaggy shadow reared up and blended in with a second shadow standing beside the couch.

The dual shadow of man and dog went to the patio doors. The clicking sound of a latch reached her ears. The curtain opened, then shut again. She caught a fleeting glimpse of the back of Nathaniel's head while he let Shelley out. His hair hung down his back in a thick bundle of tiny braids.

She better start their conversation off on a neutral topic. "Your hair looks different tonight."

Nathaniel's shadow flowed across the room toward her. No one can move that fast! As this thought crossed her mind, Bridget exhaled and forced herself to relax.

His bulky shadow sank to the floor by her feet. "Aye, milady. Tis true. I was not properly groomed last night."

An overwhelming desire to touch him rolled over her. "Um." She pulled her hand back and swallowed against the tight sensation in her throat. "May I touch your hair? Since I can't really see you, would you mind if I felt how you did your hair tonight?"

He bowed his head. "T'will cause no harm."

The scalplock filled her hand easily. Just below it, a multitude of narrow plaits slid past her fingers like baby snakes. Did he braid his hair himself? An image of Shiloh's face framed by the same hairstyle flowed into her mind. Not bad. Not bad at all. She eased her hands a little lower.

He seized her wrists. "Thou may not." His stubborn refusal flared through her senses. She yanked her hands from his grasp. "My name is

Bridget. Why do you keep on saying thou, thee and thy instead of you and your when you refer to me?"

"Milady ... Bridget." Confusion washed over her. "I h-hardly know thee. We just met. Is it proper?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to tell you how to talk."

"I am not offended."

"Nathanial."

"Aye."

"You can sit on the sofa. It's a lot more comfortable than the floor."

He seated himself. The sofa groaned under his weight.

Bridget sucked in her breath. The scent of lavender mingled with wood smoke tickled her nose. "What do you do besides chop wood?" A hot blush heated her face. Once again, she'd stuck her foot in her mouth. That was why she normally avoided social occasions and conversations. So far, the only good thing about keeping the curtains drawn and the lights off was the fact that he couldn't see her embarrassment "I'm s-sorry. That was a stupid question."

"Tis forgotten." He shifted his weight. The sofa creaked and protested under his movements. "My constraints have placed us in an awkward situation. If thou wilt excuse my sudden boldness I have a solution to our dilemma."

"What's your solution?"

"Give me thy hand. Flesh against flesh 'twill breach the barriers between us."

The more she thought about his suggestion, the more she liked it. The situation was awkward enough as it was. Holding hands while they talked should make her feel more comfortable. "Okay."

He moved closer. The cushions sagged under his weight. She slid into the concave depression that opened between them. She grabbed hold of his leg to steady herself. The muscles felt hard and solid under her touch. Warm, calloused hands engulfed hers. His breath tickled the top of her head.

He stroked her hands. A dislocated sensation took over her brain. She exhaled her pent up breath.

The rough callused texture of his fingers felt wonderful. His pleasure over her reaction soared through her. He wanted. No, it was a stronger, more intense feeling than want. He needed to touch her. He needed to feel her reactions.

He turned her hand over and scraped his fingernails across her palm. Concern, comfort, and fierce protectiveness flowed over her.

His raspy whisper raced along her hyper-sensitized nerves. "Don't be afraid. I would never harm thee."

A kaleidoscope of memories tumbled through her brain. She remembered walking down a hallway at Duke and seeing a neatly lettered sign on a door at the end of hallway 'Paranormal Research'.

She remembered being a small child skipping on the sidewalk beside her granny. She remembered their neighbors making the sign of the cross on their chests and hearing them whisper about her granny's 'healing touch'. She stood in her granny's herb garden. A cloud passed across the sun and the silvery gray stalks of lavender bent over in a sudden gust of wind that swirled through her hair.

She sighed. Nathaniel had his arm around her shoulder. His heart beat under her ear like a runaway train. Was it his heart she heard, or hers?

She pushed herself away. "Sometimes you have to hit me with a brick before I see what's right in front of my nose. You, Lily and Shiloh, all of you, you're telepaths."

His eager approval rippled through the darkness.

"That's why I felt so warm and safe the first time I saw you by the bookcase. You projected the fact that you weren't going to hurt me and I felt it."

"Aye. Thou hast the same ability. I knew it the first time I saw thee. I felt the strength and purity of thy mind even then."

She sat up real straight and stared at his shadowy figure. "When?"

"When what?"

"The first time you saw me, when was that?"

"The day of the flood. Thou stood in the road. Thy hair glowed like copperfire in the misty rain."

She bit her lip. She liked hearing his compliments but knowing he felt her emotional reactions to his compliments made her feel weird and a little uncomfortable.

His regret washed over her, then vanished. She couldn't feel him anymore. It was as if a wall had suddenly materialized between them. Why had he withdrawn from her so suddenly?

“Oh.” She whispered. “You have rules. That's why you asked me if you could hold my hand. If I had said no, you wouldn't have touched me.”

“Aye.”

“I don't understand.”

“What is it thou does not understand?”

“You said I have the same abilities. That means I'm a telempath, too. How come I never knew this before?”

“Thou ... You have a natural shield. You must have developed it in order to live with the headblind ones who surround you everyday. But now, here with me, you dropped your shields and...” His voice petered out.

“What?” She hated unfinished thoughts.

“I must remember to tread very lightly 'til you learn control.”

“I never really thought about it.” She let her hand slip back into his grasp. His touch soothed her. “I never really liked it before when someone touched me without my permission. I always hated being around crowds. They made me feel like I couldn't breathe and I'd get terrible headaches.”

“Pain is another natural shield.”

“My migraines are a shield?”

“Aye.”

“When I'd go to a concert or play, I'd start laughing or crying for no reason at all and I'd have to leave. I always felt better working by myself in the lab. I thought it meant I was shy, that's all.”

His grasp tightened around her fingers. Approval rushed into her in a wild spurt. Beneath the approval, his need to touch her leaked out. “Concentrating on someone special or on your work, both of these are additional natural shields.”

Bridget shook her head and tried to organize the confused questions that tumbled through her mind. Why did Lily say she has to be the practical one when Kurt gave her the violin? Was it because she really believes that men are more emotional and impractical than women? Maybe Nathaniel believes he doesn't have as much control over his emotional projec-

tions because he's a man. If Lily can feel that Kurt really likes her then why does she keep rejecting his overtures?

Nathanial would know the answer to that question. All she had to do was ask him. Theoretically, he couldn't lie to her. At least not while they were holding hands. If he tried to lie, she'd know, she'd be able sense it. "If you're telepaths, why doesn't Lily trust Kurt? She knows he likes her."

"Because love is a sword with two edges. It cuts both ways. Lilith must choose wisely. She is the last woman of child-bearing age of the Harker sisterline. A wrong choice will end that sisterline."

"Wait a minute!" Bridget grabbed his shirtsleeve. "You're not making any sense. What about you and Shiloh? You're Harkers, too. Why should the sisterline end with her?"

"Women provide life and name for their children. Men provide the seed. They cannot place their name upon a woman or a woman's children."

Bridget blinked. Their family ... their culture ... is matriarchal. "Then the only way Lily can accept Kurt is if he accepts her beliefs."

"That is one side of the sword."

"What's the other side?"

"When Lilith chooses, she opens herself to the possibility of a life bond. This bond, once forged, cannot be easily broken. An unwise choice could destroy her."

"How?"

Nathanial hesitated. Uneasiness cloaked the dark air that separated them. "The only way I know how to explain this is to tell you about another Lilith, one of our foremothers. She made an unwise choice that caused her death."

Bridget's ears perked up. She felt like an anthropologist sifting through an ancient burial site. "You have an oral tradition, don't you?"

"Books teach us facts, nothing more. They cannot teach us the height and breadth of life itself. My training was as a Speaker. I know all the stories of our sisterlines. When Maellen's daughter grows older, I will give her these stories and share with her the strength, passion, beauty and agony of her foremothers."

"Could you? I mean, would you mind telling me about the other Lilith?"

Nathanial bowed his head. "You honor me with your request." He pulled her into the shelter of his arm. "Sit with me. You must open your heart. Then I will tell you the story in the proper manner."

Bridget tucked her legs up and snuggled against his side. She really did feel safe around him. She'd never trusted anyone this easily before in her life. It was an amazing sensation. "I'm ready now."

"This is the story of Lilith and Zachary of the Harker sisterline, twice bonded as twinborn sister and brother. When they were two, their mother, Talina, died with a stillborn son cradled in her arms and their elder sister, Rachel, took them away into her house.

"Zachary's face carried all the differences of our lineage."

"Then it's true!" Bridget jumped up and barked her shins against the coffee table. "Your face, how you look is a specific genetic trait."

Oh god, what an idiot she was. She was supposed to be listening to him, not interrupting him. Bridget resumed her seat, rubbed the bump on her shin, tucked her feet up out of harm's way and laid her head back on his chest. No more interrupting him, she promised herself. "Is it a dominant gene for the males and recessive for the females?"

"I do not know."

Idiot! She took a deep breath and reminded herself to calm down and focus on the conversation properly. "I forgot. Shiloh doesn't look like you and he's your brother. We could be dealing with a double recessive, a recessive linked with a crossover factor or..."

Nathanial tightened his arm around her shoulder. Concern laced the husky rasp of his voice. "What is it? Why did you stop talking?"

"I have to see your face."

"No. Not yet."

Bridget shivered. That wall slammed down between them again. She didn't like not being able to feel him anymore. "I'm sorry. I won't ask you that again. Please finish telling me about the other Lilith."

Warm approval soared through her. "From dusk to dawn, Lilith explored the woods with her brother. She dreamed of the day when she grew into womanhood and brought children to her sisterline, but her dream was doomed.

By the time she came of age, the cousinlines had become too inbred for her to risk a pregnancy. Bitter seeds of pride and jealousy burrowed deep

in her heart. Twice bonded to Lilith, Zachary suffered with her. She turned her face away from him and brooded over the long barren years yet to come with no child in her womb.”

Nathaniel shifted himself, readjusted his arm around her shoulder and continued speaking. “The years of her womanhood waxed and waned. Lilith shared pleasure with her cousins but refused to bond her heart. Greed overruled her common sense. She wanted to have it all with the same person, body, heart and soul.

Her cousins would have bonded with her but they dared not give her seed. To do so would risk the chance of her miscarrying misborn children 'til she died in the birthing chamber. Zachary suffered with her but could do naught to ease her heartache.

Then, in the summer of 1693, their elder sister, Rachel, begged Lilith to accept seed from Standing Water, the man who was Rachel's clervant. An outsider he was, kin to no other woman of the sisterlines. He...”

“What's a clervant?” The question popped out of Bridget's mouth before she could stop herself.

“A clervant is one who has bonded in a life partnership.”

“Then clervant is your word for husband.”

“No!” Nathaniel's fierce denial shocked her into silence. “A clervant is neither husband nor wife. A clervant is what we call each other when we bond our hearts as life partners. We do not purchase licenses to marry. We do not place our names upon each other like collars and claim to own each other.”

Bridget wanted to dig a hole and crawl into it. As soon as she thought this, Nathaniel's anger evaporated. “Forgive me,” he said. “You know nothing of our ways.”

She shook her head. “No. It's my fault.”

“Hush.” He stroked her cheek with his finger. It felt wonderfully soothing to have him touch her like that. “You did naught but question me about a strange word.”

She sighed with relief. He wasn't upset by her constant interruptions. “I promise to wait until you're finished before I ask you any more questions.”

Nathaniel's quiet amusement vibrated through her. “That is fair enough. Now where was I?”

“Twas the summer of 1693.”

“Aye. Twas the summer of 1693 when Rachel went to Lilith and begged her to soften her heart. Standing Water was Rachel's clervant. Rachel had four daughters and a set of twinborn sons and needed no more children. She asked Lilith to accept Standing Water as her frone. Even though he could not bond as clervant with Lilith he could become her frone and give her strong children for her sisterline.”

“Was your gene pool that small back in 1693?” Dismay filled Bridget as she put her hand over her mouth. She'd broken her promise already.

“Our numbers have always been small. Common sense dictates that a woman not weaken herself by bearing too many children.”

Seeing how her latest interruption didn't upset him, Bridget decided to go for broke. “You said Lilith shared pleasure with her cousins but refused to bond with anyone of them? What exactly did you mean by that?”

“Lilith was a woman fully grown and awake, she did not deny herself the need to share bodily pleasure. What she denied herself was the bonding of her heart with another.”

“If you have a strict taboo against having any children from close kin, how could she?” Bridget took a deep breath and reworded her question. “How could she have sex with her cousins without having any children?”

“Surely you jest.” Nathaniel's puzzlement flowed through Bridget as he spoke. “There are many ways for men and women to share pleasure without sharing seed. A woman can pleasure herself with another woman. A man can pleasure another man. And if a woman wishes to share pleasure with a man, her ass is just as sweet as a man's.”

“Whoa!” Bridget held up her hand. “I get the point.” Boy, did she ever! Her face felt like it was on fire and she had no one to blame but herself.

“How have I offended you?” Nathaniel's bewilderment sliced through her acute embarrassment like a knife. He felt everything she felt but that didn't mean he knew what she was thinking. He couldn't read her mind. He was a telempath, not a telepath.

Bridget throttled her errant thoughts and embarrassment. “You didn't offend me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She put her hand on his leg and projected her eagerness to hear the rest of the story. Hopefully, she'd soon get the hang of this telempathy

and learn how to control her emotions properly so she wouldn't be broadcasting everything she felt at him like a silly child.

Nathaniel tightened his arm around her shoulder. Warmth and safety wrapped themselves around her again. "Lilith refused her sister's generous offer. She told Rachel to take her pity and pour it out upon some other woman. That night, Lilith slept with her foul words and knew herself for a spiteful fool. She awoke with every intention of begging her sister's forgiveness and accepting the gift of seed from her sister's clervant. But 'twas too late, fate had already stepped in and dealt an unforeseen blow."

"What happened?"

"One of Rachel's granddaughters, a mere child of four, had wandered away during the night. Standing Water found the child just before dawn. He saved her from a water moccasin. However, he forgot to look for its mate. It slew him while he slew the one that attacked the child. Rachel felt him die and ran to his side but could not save him. His life was the price of her granddaughter's life."

A shudder raced through Bridget. Snakebite was one of the most painful ways to die.

"Of course, Zachary came to Rachel's side and gave her comfort. She needed him. Her heart was torn apart with the loss of her clervant, but 'twas not how Lilith saw it. She felt a great anger with Zachary because he comforted Rachel. At the same time she knew that if she told him of her anger, he would say it was her own fault and she didn't want to hear that either. While he helped Rachel heal from her ruptured bond with her clervant, Lilith left."

"Where did she go?"

"Out of the swamp and across the river she went. There she met a stranger from the north who came down to carve out a homestead for himself. His name was Charles Evans. He owned two bondservants, Mary and Paul, twelve and ten years of age. Hungry for land was he and Lilith ripened under his attentions. He wooed her with fine words and promises of wealth to come. She ignored her misgivings. She ignored the fact that he had no kin, no sisters to stabilize him and keep him from becoming mabgli."

"What's a mabgli?"

"A mabgli is one who feeds upon the pain and misery of others."

Nathaniel paused. Melancholy brushed against Bridget's senses and flickered away. Now she knew why they had an oral tradition. As telem-paths, it was the best way to teach their children not to repeat the same mistakes their ancestors had made. They deliberately reinforced the emotions of the stories when they told them. It must have taken Nathaniel a long time to learn all the stories and how to reinforce them in the proper manner.

“Zachary hid himself and watched them from afar. He heard this stranger preach at Lilith and curse her kin because they had Indian children. Zachary watched his sister discard her bright garments and clothe herself in the dark, ugly fabrics this man selected for her. Lilith went with this man for a month where Zachary dared not follow. Charles Evans brought her to a preacher who married them to each other according to human law.

When Lilith returned, she sought Zachary out and told him she had accepted the vows of Charles Evan's Bible and had become his wife. Zachary tried to reason with her but her heart remained closed to him. Bereft from his sister, yet unable to sever their twinborn bond, he walked the land in sorrow. It mattered not.”

Another touch of melancholy brushed Bridget. “Lilith had already bonded her heart as clervant to Charles Evans. The bondservants helped. Being only ten and twelve years old, they satisfied Lilith's craving for children of her own. She took them into her heart as if they were her oathchildren. They blossomed under her love and their labor pleased Charles Evans.”

Nathaniel ruffled Bridget's hair with his hand. “With every touch the bond between Lilith and Charles grew stronger. Night after night, he wept with fear as he crawled to her bed craving her caresses. ‘Incubus! Succubus! Witch!’ He whispered in the darkness while she slept beside him. After his seed took root inside her womb, he sat for hours reading his Bible but found naught there to console his fears.”

“The first time Lilith felt the child move within her womb, Zachary felt her joy from afar. Out into the field he ran where she carried her husband his midday meal. Charles saw Zachary in the full light of day, fell to his knees and called upon his god to strike down the demon upon his land. Zachary fled from his madness.”

Nathaniel sighed. The melancholy he projected deepened and Bridget echoed his sigh. “On the day that Lilith's time drew nigh, she could no longer deny her twinbond with Zachary. She knew he waited for her in the

woods, her truebrother. 'Twas his duty to be by her side and cut the cord after the birth of her child.

That night, she crept from her bed to be with Zachary. Her husband crept after her. There, in the moonlight, she confirmed his worst fears. His wife embraced a demon. He fired his pistol at Zachary but his hands shook and the bullet went astray. Zachary fled once more. Charles had bonded as clervant to his truesister. If he harmed this man, this mabgli, he would also harm his sister."

Bridget took a couple of deep breaths. Calm. She must remain calm. Even though the story was real, it had happened hundreds of years ago and there was nothing she could do to change those events. She resettled herself against Nathaniel's chest. He hugged her close and continued, "Heart-sore with his fear of Lilith while her body twisted and turned with the contractions of childbirth, Charles reloaded the pistol and forced her to walk back to the cabin. He brought her to the shed and chained her to the wall.

The bondservants, Mary and Paul, could not bear to see their mistress treated in such a foul manner. They crept outside into the woods and wept in the shadows. Zachary stood behind the trees and spoke to them under the cover of darkness. He did not wish to frighten them. He told them he was Lilith's twinborn brother. He told them where to cross the river and find the trail to the Harker kinfolk."

Nathaniel sighed, stroked Bridget's cheek and lightened the sadness that pressed down upon her. "Charles came out of the cabin with his Bible and a whip. He scourged himself. While he busied himself with this insanity, Zachary ripped a hole in the back of the shed and helped his sister birth a set of twins, girl and boy.

When Charles heard the babies cry out, he ran to the shed, opened the door and aimed his pistol. Lilith shielded Zachary with her body. The bullet ripped her stomach apart. She handed the babies to Zachary and pushed him towards the hole he had torn in the back wall. Charles fell to the ground filled with remorse because the twins looked perfectly normal to his eyes.

He had no powder with him to reload the pistol. He took flint and tinder from his pocket and set fire to the shed. He called Lilith a witch and Zachary her familiar. He believed if he burned her, the demon would also burn and this would save his children from eternal damnation. He failed to comprehend his bond with Lilith. When she died, the bond he shared with

her pulled him to her. He threw himself in the flames and joined her in death.

Zachary could do naught to save Lilith. The stench of burning flesh rose into the night sky. At the edge of the clearing he knelt with the twins cradled in his arms. He did what he had to do in order to block out the texture of his truesister's death from his soul. He focused his mind upon the twins, and sealed them within his heart with the true bond of a brother. They needed him. He had to live for them in order to honor Lilith's sacrifice."

Tears poured down Bridget's face. Horror encased her mind and body in a block of ice.

Nathaniel wiped the tears from her face with a handkerchief. "The next morning, when the sun rose and touched the smoldering embers of the fire, Zachary tore his shirt and wrote a poem for his truesister. He nailed it to a tree and left it there."

"What did the poem say?"

Nathaniel stroked her cheek and murmured these words.

"Wild is my heart to think that he,

Can rend thee from me.

Blinded by fear, my soul flies

Against the bars and shatters its wings.

Alone, all unseen,

Heartsblood seeps into the dream."

Bridget smiled. Then sniffed. The poem had captured the sad beauty of Zachary's love for his dead sister. "What happened after that?"

"Zachary took the twins to Rachel and helped her raise them. He named the twins Joanna and Jonathan. The bondservants chose to live with Rachel and Zachary. They swore catemorf with Rachel and accepted the Harker name as their own. When Mary grew into womanhood, she chose Zachary for her frone, then her clervant. He gave her a daughter and a son, single births. Lynanna of the Rainbolt sisterline chose Paul. He gave her three daughters."

She sighed, a long shaky sigh. The story had ended. Now she could ask all the questions she wanted. "Zachary looked like you, didn't he?"

"Aye."

“What was so different about his face that Charles thought he was a demon?”

“I cannot say.”

Anger soared through her in a harsh wave. Her body stiffened. She pushed herself out of Nathaniel's grasp. “You can tell me, but you won't!”

His voice came out in hoarse, raw whisper. “I cannot. I promised Lilith I would wait until we know each other better.”

She stared at his shadowed form. He didn't say a word. He just sat there and waited for her response. She was going to have to accept his restrictions or tell him to get the hell out of her life but she couldn't do that. He had every right to be cautious. Look what happened to the other Lilith.

Why am I so angry? She wondered. Was it because he'd put her through all the horror of Lilith's death? Did she feel like he'd invaded her privacy when he projected his emotions upon her?

No, that wasn't it. She knew what she was getting into. Kind of, anyway. He had asked her permission first and after he'd finished his story, he stopped projecting emotions.

She sighed and folded her hands in her lap. “What happened to the poem? Did anyone ever find it?”

His eagerness crashed against her and settled into a warm buzz of contentment. “More strangers moved into the area. They found the burned out cabin and the yellowed scrap of linen. They built their town hall upon the ashes of the homestead and named the town Lacrimas because of the poem. It lies enshrined under glass in the town library for all to see and ponder the meaning.”

She rubbed her fingers across the smooth linen texture of his shirt and thought about Lucinda's and Maellen's stories. She did a little mental arithmetic. “Lilith's babies, Joanna and Jonathan Harker, they're the ones who knew Maellen's family. Joanna must have been at least forty years old when she met Richard.”

“This is true. When they first met, she had just celebrated her forty-first birthday and he his fifteenth. The age difference mattered not to them, Richard was a man fully grown in his heart and mind. They bonded as clervants of their own free will.”

Bridget found a loose thread in the shirt and twirled it around her finger. “But...”

“But what?”

“Your customs, your beliefs, the strange words you use, where did you learn them?”

Nathanial turned her sideways with her back towards him. His fingers found the knotted muscles in her neck and loosened them. “Those words come from our foremothers. Over the centuries we lost that language. In the year 1589, we found the starving remnants of a colony of English folk on Roanoke Island. We accepted these strangers into our sisterlines and took English names into our lineage.”

Bridget wanted to ask him something else. It was on the tip of her tongue. His hands moved down the length of her spine. An enormous yawn escaped from her lips. She toppled over, stretched her legs out and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

Lying on her back in bed, Bridget stared at the ceiling. The color of the sky, the way the sun felt on her face, the wind in her hair; all of these things were exactly the same as they were before. Or were they?

Shelley's happy whuff when she scratched him behind his ears told her how much he loved her in his own doggy fashion. She had never owned a dog before. Now she couldn't imagine him not at her side.

It wasn't just Shelley. The Harkers had changed the fabric of her existence. Time had divided itself into two distinct halves, before Nathanial, and after Nathanial. Night after night he visited and they talked.

She let him borrow her medical books last week. When he brought them back, they'd discussed the infinite possibilities of how every person carries within him or herself a blueprint, written in a shorthand code of only four letters. Yet, this code, if it were written out in longhand, would fill forty-six massive volumes.

The Harkers had a wealth of knowledge tucked away in their heads. Over the years, they had apparently accumulated a huge selection of books. The three of them were equally fluent in nine languages, Latin, Greek, German, Russian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Arabic. They preferred reading books in their original language.

They had an oral tradition for their family history, an inefficient and incomprehensible tradition. There had to be another way to preserve their stories. Maybe she could get him on videotape.

“Ha!” Bridget rolled over on her stomach and yanked the covers over her head. “Talk about putting the cart before the horse. He won't let me see his face. How in the hell am I going to get him on videotape? Dammit!”

Shelley nudged her with his cold, wet nose.

She took a halfhearted swipe at the pillow, propped herself up on her elbow and peeked at Shelley. “Could I teach you how to operate a camcorder?”

Even though Shelley couldn't talk, he did the best he could. He pricked up his ears, sat on his haunches and waited for her to give him a recognizable command like ‘Stay!’ or ‘Walk!’

Bridget couldn't stop the smile that twitched on her lips. “Thank God for small favors. Kurt's not around to see me talking to my dog.”

Kurt had e-mailed her last night. He was in Washington, D.C. finalizing the financial details with Congress and the UN Security Council for his spaceport and space station. On top of that, the Russians planned another bargain basement sale of their space technology this coming weekend. Between Congress, the UN and the Russians, he'd be out of her hair for another couple of weeks.

Bridget kicked the covers off her legs and enjoyed another leisurely stretch. In many ways, Nathaniel reminded her of the river. On the surface, he felt placid and calm. Yet, underneath it all, she sensed a brooding strength he kept tightly leashed every time he touched her.

Sometimes, in the cold light of day, she questioned her sanity. Then, Shiloh or Lily would stop by, and she'd sense a similar raw power banked within them. There weren't any words to describe what she felt. It was too new; a part of herself she hadn't even been aware of for most of her life.

“There were three ravens sat on a tree.”

“What the hell?” Bridget listened until she realized that the rich tenor she heard soaring effortlessly into the morning sky was Shiloh singing a song. His voice sounded wild and free like a hawk swooping down upon the wind. She slid her legs over the side of the bed, grabbed a T-shirt and pair of shorts from the laundry basket and slipped them on.

Shelley followed her. She unlocked the front door and stepped out into the parking lot. The dog pushed himself in front of Bridget and sniffed at

the boots sticking out from under her jeep. A cursory sniff satisfied his curiosity. Shelley dismissed Shiloh as a harmless distraction and selected a shady spot beside the front door where he had a clear view of the driveway.

The clinking sound of a wrench against the bottom of the jeep provided the background music for Shiloh's song.

“...Lies a knight slain in his shield.”

Bridget sank to her knees in the parking lot and studied the assortment of tools on the ground beside his coveralled legs. She identified nuts and bolts, various wrenches and screwdrivers, a shallow basin and two clear plastic jugs filled up to the brim with black oil lined up on a grimy piece of fabric.

“His hounds, they lie downe at his feete,”

A particularly loud clank drowned out his voice for a couple of seconds. Bridget leaned closer and listened to the rest of the song.

“Downe there comes a fallow doe,
As great with young as she might go.
She lifted up his bloody head,
And kist his wounds that were so red.
She buried him before the prime,
She was dead herself before the even-song time.”

Even though the song had nothing to do with the Harkers, it made her sad. It made her remember the other Lilith; burned to death in a shed by her husband.

“God send every gentleman,
Such hawkes, such hounds and such a leman.
With a downe, derrie, derrie, derrie downe, downe.”

Bridget asked, “What's a leman?” A solid clunk against the bottom of the jeep was Shiloh's first response. She winced at the sound.

Shiloh rolled out from under the jeep.

Considering how hard he must have hit his head on the bottom of the jeep, he didn't seem very upset. Bridget suppressed a grin. He's a man. He's not going to let me know how much it hurts. She held out her hand.

In that moment, the situation reversed itself. With the same uncanny strength and speed Nathaniel had often displayed around her, Shiloh stood and pulled Bridget to her feet as if she weighed nothing.

Being five foot ten and weighing a hundred forty pounds for most of her adult life, it felt rather startling, to say the least.

Elation brightened his saturnine face. "Leman's an archaic word for a common-law wife or priest's wife."

"Of course!" Bridget jumped with excitement at her sudden realization. "The Lost Colony of Roanoke Island used an earlier version of English. Their English was a lot bawdier than what we use nowadays. Ass and arse were perfectly acceptable words."

Shiloh flashed a brief smile. "Aye. We tend to use the older English when we're at home. It's the version of English that Nathaniel grew up with."

"Ohmigod, I'm such an idiot." She hugged him. "Tell him I'm sorry I acted like a prude when he said ass."

He put his hands on her waist, picked her up easily and placed her on the hood of the jeep. "Tell who? Nathaniel?"

She nodded. Her throat tightened with embarrassment.

Shiloh smiled, a long, slow smile that darkened his brown eyes into soft black coals. "What were you talking about when he said ass?"

Bridget decided a straightforward response would be the best way to defuse the situation. "Birth control."

"Ah!" Shiloh's black-eyed gaze studied the heat on Bridget's cheeks.

She looked away and stared at his hands. Against her naturally pale skin, his hands looked even darker. They felt warm, almost hot on her arms. She took a deep breath. He had a very pleasant, yet masculine smell, stronger and muskier than a woman, with a hint of lavender just like Nathaniel.

Shiloh radiated the same sensation of friendly warmth and safety she always felt from Nathaniel. And Shiloh was the one who'd made love to Maellen on a bench in front of a fireplace and gotten her pregnant.

Shiloh stood in front of a fire. Tall and broad-shouldered with taut-muscled swarthy skin and long midnight black hair that caressed the masculine curves of his ass. He was aroused...

She jerked her hands away from his grasp. I'm twenty-nine years old. Lily's twenty-four and Shiloh's younger than Lily. He's too young for me. I shouldn't be thinking about him like that.

Shiloh ducked his head down and shoved his hands in his pockets as if he were the guilty party. Carefully avoiding any further eye contact with her, he said, "I changed the oil in your jeep and tuned it up."

He knelt on the ground and pulled the rest of his things from under the jeep. It gave her time to gather her thoughts.

Nothing had really happened anyway. Just because it made her feel uncomfortable knowing he could sense her emotions didn't mean she was supposed to act like a robot around him. Their telepathic ability took a little getting used to, that's all.

Bridget frowned. If he's a telepath, why didn't he sense me when I came out? Then she smiled. He didn't sense me because we were feeling the exact same thing at the same time. He was happy and I was happy. Our emotions were identical. Was that why he avoided eye contact with me and looked embarrassed just now? Was he feeling the same embarrassment I was feeling a little while ago?

Shiloh rose to his feet, pulled a rag from the back pocket of his coverall and wiped the grease from his hands.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

He returned the rag to his back pocket. "It's nothing. Lily asked me to pick Shelley up today. He needs to have his hair clipped and his toenails cut. I'll bring him back tonight."

"How much do I owe you for the oil change and tune up?"

The aggrieved look on his face answered her. "You don't owe me a cent, I like doing things for you."

Now it was her turn to duck her head. "Sorry."

He picked up a leather harness from the ground, went to Shelley and buckled it to the dog's sturdy frame. Bridget stared at Shelley. Her dog really did need his hair clipped. He looked like a sheepdog right now.

The tools, the empty oil cans, the shallow basin and the two plastic jugs filled with oil fit into the leather slings draped around the dog's furry sides with no problems. Shelley was living up to his breed's reputation as a 'working dog'.

Shiloh straightened up to his full height and cleared his throat.

Bridget waited for him to speak.

He said, "Queen's knight to bishop's three." Then turned and walked away.

Shelley looked at his mistress, whuffed softly as if he were saying goodbye and ambled after Shiloh's lanky shape. A few seconds later, they disappeared into the heavily wooded section at the bottom of the driveway.

Bridget glared at the empty driveway. "Well, I'll be damned! What am I? A woman or a mouse?"

One thing for sure, she could tell Shiloh and Nathaniel were related even though Nathaniel was the more talkative one of the two. Both men had the same annoying habit of leaving without saying goodbye.

Oh well, it was her day off. She didn't have anything special planned for this afternoon. Now, more than ever, she needed to have a nice long talk with Maellen.

* * * *

Bridget ducked under a vine-covered tree branch and wondered if she was doing the right thing. Maellen had first claim on Shiloh's affections.

"Oof!" Maellen looked over her shoulder at Bridget. "The baby, she just kicked me again."

This is your big moment, Bridget reminded herself. Don't blow it. Start out with a neutral topic first. She eyed the tiny bump moving its way across the swollen curve of Maellen's abdomen. "It won't be long now. You only have six more weeks to go."

Maellen braced her hand against her side. The gesture communicated her weary acceptance of the situation more eloquently than mere words. "If I survive that long. Six more weeks of this kicking and I'll be black and blue from the inside out."

She turned around, pulled aside a seemingly impenetrable curtain of Spanish Moss and revealed a hidden pathway that led them deeper into the swamp.

Bridget asked, "What about Shiloh? Have you changed your mind about him?"

Maellen shook her head. "When Lily offered to take the baby as her oathchild, I thought it meant I was giving the baby up for adoption, but I found out different. After my baby's born, I can come and go as I please.

Lily says our daughter will receive twice as much love from her true mother and oath mother.”

Bridget didn't see how this explained Maellen's feelings towards Shiloh. A companionable silence settled upon them while they followed the twists and turns of the trail. A few minutes later, they stopped in front of a small clearing and gazed at a sturdy cabin in the middle, perched on stilts.

A series of large flat stones embedded in the red clay led them through the vegetable garden to the front steps. They climbed onto the wide-planked wooden porch. Maellen collapsed in a cushioned rocking chair with a gusty sigh of relief.

Bridget sat on the top step, propped her back against the railing and waited.

Maellen dug a handkerchief from the back pocket of her cutoff jeans and mopped at the sweat pouring down her face. “Shiloh visits me almost every night with Lily, Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Percy. They take turns helping me study for my GED test in January.”

“I see.”

“They set up a quilting frame in the living room and take turns sewing while I'm studying. You know, I never saw a man sew until I met them. They don't think it's strange. They think it's normal.”

Bridget nodded. They seemed to be drifting farther and farther away from the main topic.

The baby moved. The outline of a tiny foot appeared under the thin cotton blouse draped over Maellen's stomach. She patted it. “I know it shouldn't make any difference to me, but I feel funny knowing it's Shiloh's daughter growing inside of me. Every time I see Aunt Elizabeth, I remember we're related. If I knew then what I know now, I never would have gotten pregnant from him in the first place.”

Bridget took a deep breath, then plunged in anyway. “The relationship is very distant. You don't have to worry about any gross genetic abnormalities due to inbreeding. No one would blame you if you change your mind and decide to stay with Shiloh after the baby's born.”

Maellen grinned. “I haven't changed my mind about him.” She lifted her left shoulder in a half-shrug. “He feels more like my brother now instead of a lover. Besides, I plan to go to college and become a choreographer. What's done is done. My daughter will know exactly who she is and

who her real parents are. It's just that..." Her voice trailed away into an uncomfortable silence.

"What?"

"I know there's another brother named Nathaniel. He leaves me presents for the baby. A couple of times I caught a glimpse of him in the woods but he ran away from me. I asked Lily and she said I can't see him yet. She says he looks different and might scare me into losing the baby."

Maellen paused to get her breath back and curved her arms protectively around her distended abdomen. "I don't care if he's as ugly as sin. I want to see him with my own two eyes. He's family now and that's all that matters to me. I want to know why they're hiding him from me. If the baby's going to come out looking like him, I should know about it beforehand so I won't be shocked when it happens."

She squirmed under Maellen's expectant stare. "Why are you telling me this? Shouldn't you be talking to Lily about him?"

Maellen leaned forward and lowered her voice to a husky whisper. "Shiloh gets a funny look on his face every time I mention you."

Bridget twisted the hem of her shirt into a knot. She wished she had dark skin like Maellen. That way no one would see it when she blushed. "What kind of look?"

"He likes you, doesn't he?"

She hazarded a quick glance at Maellen's face and didn't see any animosity or jealousy. "I'm not sure. Maybe. I can't tell yet. We've played a couple of games of chess. That's it."

Maellen smiled. "It's all right with me if he likes you. He's not my type anyway." She tilted her head to the side. "What about Nathaniel? Have you met him yet?"

"Kind of. I've talked with him but he won't let me see his face either."

Maellen sat back with a triumphant grin on her face. "What's he like?"

"He's very intelligent and soft spoken."

Maellen gave a conspiratorial wink. "Lily and Shiloh get scared every time I mention Nathaniel and I get all messed up inside and can't explain why I want to see him. At least he's talking to you. The next time you talk to him why don't you tell him what I said and let him decide for himself if I can meet him too?"

Bridget traced the pattern of the grain in the wooden floorboard with her index finger. "It might work. I feel bad enough not being able to see his face. It must feel even worse for you knowing you're pregnant from his brother. You, of all people, deserve to know the truth."

Maellen beckoned at her to come closer.

Bridget rose to her feet and stood beside the rocking chair. Maellen grabbed her hand and held it against her side. The baby's foot pushed against her hand.

Maellen trusted Bridget enough to let her feel Shiloh's baby kicking inside of her. Bridget sighed. She should tell Maellen the little bit of information she knew. It would make her feel better. She leaned over, kissed Maellen on the cheek and whispered, "Their eyes are different. They have an extra eyelid, a transparent one like a cat."

The pupils in Maellen's eyes dilated to twice their size. "That's it! That's what I saw when Shiloh swam out to get me. I just couldn't put my finger on what it was I saw. Do you think the baby will have the same kind of eyes?"

Bridget shook her head. "I don't know. We have atrophied tissue in the corners of our eyes that might have been membranes at one time in our past heritage the same way our appendix might have actually been an important organ like the spleen. I think the Harkers have a missing piece of the genetic puzzle in their DNA that brings out that gene in their children."

Relief brightened Maellen's face. "I can live with that. It's not such a big deal after all, is it?"

Chapter Sixteen

After she relayed Maellen's message, Nathaniel sat without speaking for the longest time. She wished he'd say something. Anything! She hated having to keep the lights off and the curtains drawn every time he came over. Why didn't he trust her yet?

He wore his hair loose tonight. She'd seen that from his silhouette in the doorway when he came inside.

Finally he spoke. "I am not accustomed to strangers."

Bridget balled her hand into a fist. "That's a stupid excuse. Maellen's not a stranger. Not really. She's related to you and besides, she's pregnant from Shiloh. She, of all people, deserves to know the truth. She should be allowed to see you before the baby's born. Then she won't be surprised if the baby takes after your side of the family."

He shifted his position on the sofa. It groaned under his slight movement. "I cannot. She is headblind."

There were times when he was just as taciturn as Shiloh. It was like pulling teeth trying to get a coherent statement from them. "What exactly do you mean by headblind?"

His patient voice soothed her nerves. "She is headblind. You are not. You feel things when I explain them to you. Maellen cannot. Lynn, the human woman who became my clervant, was also headblind. It was not easy for her to learn to accept me but you are different. The first time I saw you I knew this.'

She ducked her head and fumbled at the sofa cushion between them. Her fingers found a loose thread. She twisted it around her finger. He was talking about the woman who became his first wife.

"Um, what was she like?" That didn't make any sense. He had no idea who she was asking him about. 'I mean, Lynn, your clervant, what was she like? If you don't mind telling me about her?"

"I do not mind. I want to tell you about her. Then you will know I am truly healed from her death."

Beneath the outward calmness of his voice, a deep, quiet melancholy filled the air.

"Lynn was deaf, a stranger to us, when she wandered into my life. I found her in the swamp, curled up in a ball on the ground, scared and

alone and weary of life. I carried her to my mother's house. There, she abode with us until her heart healed from loneliness and fear. In the weeks that followed she taught us how to talk with our hands. By the year's end, she grew to love me and I loved her.”

His voice softened. Bridget leaned closer.

“Lynn chose me to give her seed for her firstborn child. I knew her joy as her belly ripened with the promise of new life to come. With this gift of joy, her heart opened to me. We became as one and I bonded my heart to her as clervant.”

The memory of a tiny foot pushing up inside Maellen's swollen abdomen flashed before Bridget's eyes. She sighed.

Nathanial echoed her sigh.

“That Spring the storm came upon a gray sky. Other than that, there was no warning, no sign of trouble, no animals fleeing before the storm. I walked by the river. The sky grew dark as night. Rain drenched my head. I could scarcely see my hand before my face. I heard naught but the wind howling and screaming in my ears. The rain swiftly changed to ice, then snow. I struggled up the hill to warn my family.”

Bridget clenched her fists. Her body shook all over. Her teeth clattered in her ears. She felt freezing cold from head to toe.

His voice went harsh and thick with sorrow. “I found Lynn. Lightning struck a tree next to me and knocked me senseless. While I lay unknowing under that tree, she drowned.’

Bridget closed her eyes. She imagined the red clay bleeding into the river and staining the water. She pictured lightning flash in a storm-darkened sky.

“There, on that same hill, Lilith fell to the ground.” The emptiness in his voice filled Bridget's heart with an aching need. “There, she suffered the pains of a child born too early, too soon for life to prosper. All alone, helpless she lay with pain. No brother, no sister, no life partner, no one to bring her through the pain.”

Anguish flowed over Bridget, his anguish. Tears streamed down her face. He wasn't holding anything back.

“Within the space of three hours, we lost the ones closest to our hearts. I lost Lynn. I lost the child Lynn carried within her. Lilith lost the child she carried. And Shiloh, he lost the girl who had pledged to become his life

partner. She was too young yet to bond her heart to him. He had been waiting for her to come of age.”

Another wave of anguish crashed into Bridget.

“Shiloh came. He felt Lilith's sorrow. He came to her and held her in his arms through the bitter fruit of birthing a dead daughter. Of his own free will he came and gave her the warmth of his body and heart. He shielded her mind from following her babe past death's dark and silent gate.”

The air shook under the weight of wordless grief. Bridget couldn't see anything past the tears in her eyes. Need slammed against her. Her body swayed.

Nathanial's voice turned into a harsh, raspy whisper. Bridget scrubbed at the tears upon her face. “Their sorrow pierced me. I awoke and pushed the tree from my body. Blind as a child, I crawled to their side. There, in the darkness, upon our knees in the cold, wet snow, we clung to each other and pledged catermorf. We sealed our oath with the pain of our loss. Ever since that day, we call ourselves caterdru, oathbrother and oathsister to one another.”

Bridget shook her head and tried to concentrate, to think in a logical fashion. “I don't understand. Why would you and Shiloh have to become Lilith's oathbrothers when you're already her brothers?”

“We are not her brothers. 'Tis simpler to say we are brother and sister rather than explain our true relationship to outsiders.”

“What is your true relationship?”

“I am her cousin four times removed.”

This was going to take a little getting used to, having to rearrange their family tree in such a drastic manner in her thoughts. “W-what about Shiloh? What's his relationship?”

“He is my cousin five times removed. Lily and he are first cousins twice removed. His grandmother and her grandmother were sisters.”

Desperately trying to keep all the details straight in her mind, Bridget shook her head. “The man who fathered Lilith's child, what happened to him?”

“He did not want her. He tried to kill her. She left him.”

The room started spinning around and around in a sickening whirl. Bridget was nowhere and nowhen, hanging over the edge of a bottomless pit. She struggled to form a coherent question. "Didn't she love him?"

"She chose him to give her his seed. She did not choose to bond with him."

Nathanial bowed his head. His sigh created another wave of intense grief that crashed against her senses. She closed her eyes and tried to block it out by concentrating on his voice.

"When I awoke under that tree, I knew by the empty space in my soul that Lynn had died. Lilith and Shiloh gave me a reason to live. Their pain pulled me to them."

She saw Lily lying on the ground, half frozen with cold while the storm raged around her. She saw a tiny baby, face covered with blood in the frozen mud.

The room dipped and swayed in a dizzy spiral.

A coffin waited in the center of the spiral. She was only ten years old with her hair in two tight braids. She walked down the aisle to look at her granny's body inside the coffin. An endless scream echoed in her skull. Strangers stood around the coffin, whispered behind their hands and wondered who would be stuck with her now that Granny had died.

She refused to let them see her cry. They didn't know her granny! They had no right to be here! That wasn't her Granny lying there all stiff and cold. Granny never felt like that before.

It wasn't fair! Why did Granny have to leave her and go to a cold, empty place where she couldn't follow? That place scared her. What if she didn't find her granny? What would she do then? Would she be able to find her way back home? Or would she be lost forever, crying alone in the empty darkness?

She opened her eyes. Tears soaked her face. Strong arms held her close. Hands stroked her hair, her arms and legs. She shivered. Delicious warmth penetrated the ice that sheathed her.

Bridget wiped the tears from her face and leaned into the hollow beneath Nathanial's shoulder. She breathed in the musky scent of lavender and wood smoke on his shirt.

Shiloh shifted his weight under her. He rubbed the icy stiffness from her fingers. Lily knelt on the floor and wrapped around Bridget's legs.

Their voices murmured in her ears. Their soft voices spun a soothing cocoon of love around her heart.

“We love you.”

“Don't go.”

“Stay with us.”

“You'll never be alone again.”

“We feel your pain. It doesn't show, but we can feel it anyway.”

“We are with you.”

“We love you.”

“Love is strong; stronger than death, stronger than sorrow.”

“We will never, ever leave you.”

A deep sigh shuddered through Bridget's body, leaving her limp and weary. She hiccupped. Shiloh handed her a handkerchief. She blew her nose. A melody played in the background. She listened, then recognized it as the CD with her favorite recording of the Nutcracker Suite. She moistened her parched lips with the tip of her tongue. “W-who put that music on?”

Lily tightened her grip on Bridget's legs. Strength flowed into her from Lily. “You imploded. As soon as he realized what had happened Nathaniel tied a note to Shelley's collar and sent him to us. We came as soon as we could.”

Lily rose to her feet. “You went catatonic with grief. We've seen this happen before to our kin. We couldn't let you wither away into death.”

Bridget snuggled closer to Nathaniel. His arms felt warm and strong and safe around her waist. Shiloh stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

The fact that two men held her in their arms penetrated her brain. She jumped to her feet and stumbled against Lily. Lily held her until she regained her balance.

Lily's voice sliced through the silence. “We need to sit.”

Nathaniel and Shiloh vacated the sofa and seated themselves on the floor.

Lily seated Bridget on the sofa with her.

Bridget shrugged Lily's arm from her shoulder. "I have to tell you something."

"Hush," Lily murmured. "You don't have to tell us a thing. We understand."

Bridget shook her head. "I have to. I have to tell you why I was crying."

A hot, brief spark of anger flickered from Lily to Bridget. "I know what happened. Nathaniel failed to control his grief when he told you about us."

Bridget grabbed her arm. "It's not his fault. He made me see what I'd hidden inside myself. My parents died in a car accident when I was six. My granny raised me and when she died I was only ten years old. I never cried when she died. Nathaniel made me remember and made me cry. It's over now. I'm not a little girl anymore."

Lily reached for Bridget's wrist.

Bridget pushed her away. "There's something else I have to tell you. I deceived Shiloh. I lied to all of you."

"When?" Lily's voice went wary.

"That blood sample I took from Shiloh. I lied to him. I sent it to Debbie. She ran a full DNA scan on his blood and found a number of anomalies. Debbie wants to do some more tests."

Shiloh jumped up. His lean shadow paced back and forth in front of the curtained French doors. "It's my fault. I should have realized you'd send it away for more involved tests."

Bridget frowned. Even though she knew he was upset, she couldn't feel anything. Was it because she was still numb with grief? She turned her head and looked at Lily. No, it wasn't that. There was some kind of barrier between her and them.

The three of them had deliberately blocked themselves away from her. She supposed it was because they didn't want to overload her again. It made her feel weird, like she wasn't connected anymore. They felt flat and two dimensional to her now with no substance behind their forms.

Nathaniel stood up and wrapped his arms around Shiloh. Their shadows merged into a single shape.

Lily turned towards Nathaniel and Shiloh. "You know her instincts are correct. She deceived us."

Shiloh pushed Nathaniel away. Bridget felt his anger lash out. "I don't care! You can't make me stay away. I won't. Bridget needs us."

Nathanial spoke next. "This woman, Debbie, is she kin to Elias Jefferson?"

Bridget said. "She's his great-great-granddaughter."

Lily strode back and forth in front of the curtained doors. "I should have remembered the kinship. Bridget must remind Debbie of her family's debt to us, tell her it's Shiloh's blood and Debbie will end her investigation."

"Can I tell Debbie about your eyes?" Bridget asked in a very small voice.

Lily inclined her head in a regal nod. "You may. It's a fair request. After you've reminded her of her debt, if she wishes, I'll meet with her myself and show her my eyes."

It didn't feel right. It felt like she was getting off too easy. She leaned forward bracing herself for the other shoe to drop.

Lily said, "What you did was wrong but Shiloh's right. You've punished yourself enough with your guilt. We will exchange the burden of your guilt with an even heavier burden, the burden of becoming my oathsister."

It was too good to be true.

Lily stretched out her hand. "Little sister of my heart, will you pledge catermorf with me?" The morning light seeping in between the folds of the curtains gave a soft glow to Lily's face.

Bridget blinked. If there was enough light for her to see Lily's face, then...

It was as if Shiloh had read her mind. By the time she turned around, he had already repositioned himself to block her view of Nathanial's face.

She shrugged and sat back against the cushions. Hell, he didn't have to read her mind. It was probably written all over her face. If she asked Lily, would that work? She looked up.

Lily compressed her mouth into stern lines. "I can't let you see him. Not yet."

"Why not? What about after I've pledged catermorf, can I see him then?"

Lily stretched her hand out again. "Perhaps. Do you wish to become my caterdru?"

Bridget accepted her hand.

Lily smiled. Elation trembled between them.

“W-what do I have to say for this catermorf?”

Lily murmured. “We’ll do it later. You’ve been through too many emotional changes tonight. A week from now, under the full moon, we’ll pledge catermorf. You have but to follow where I lead.”

Bridget nodded. “Yes. I just went through a long, hard journey from ten years old to twenty nine.”

Lily pulled her to her feet and slid her arm around Bridget's waist. “Aye. It's time you slept, little sister.”

They walked into the bedroom. Joy pierced Bridget's heart. It bounced from her to Lily, Nathaniel and Shiloh, then back.

Chapter Seventeen

The fiberglass canoe slipped easily over the water, riding high and light as a leaf. Bridget stared at Lily's back, wiped her hands on her jeans and shifted the bright orange life preserver under her into a more comfortable position.

Hopefully, Lily wouldn't realize how nervous she was about tonight's ceremony. Pinching herself wouldn't change a thing. In a matter of hours, she would become Lily's caterdru.

A small electric lantern swung from a flexible metal rod fastened to the bow of the canoe. Its harsh yellow glare made their craft seem like an intruder upon the water.

They glided through a narrow passageway under a double row of moss shrouded cypress trees. Lily dipped her paddle into the water at a sharp angle and swung the canoe around a tight bend.

They shot out from the narrow stream onto a small lake. A flock of snowy white egrets exploded into flight at their entrance and joined the stars floating in the sky above them. The moon hung low in the sky and blazed a silvery trail across the grass-filled lake.

Lily's back and shoulder muscles moved under her shirt. She dipped the paddle and propelled them onwards. The waterlogged expanse of saw-grass glistened in the moonlight like a multitude of tiny spears. An un-

ending chorus of frogs and crickets nearly drowned out the sound of the water against the hollow sided craft.

A clump of trees waited like sentinels on the opposite shore. Laying the paddle across her knees, Lily gestured at the narrow channel they followed through the sawgrass. Here, the water ran deep and clear and black as the sky above. A swift current carried them along at a steady pace.

“This is an alligator trail.”

Bridget popped her head up in a nervous jerk. She craned her neck and looked around for the telltale sight of eyes jutting above the waterline.

Lily's chuckle floated backwards on the breeze. “There aren't any gators out tonight. It's too cool for them. As my sister, I want you to know as much as possible about the land around you. Gators like clean swift water for hunting. They walk along the bottom and let their heavy tails sweep the ground clear of grass and plants. These trails continue across the land and leave a network of interconnecting trails from island to island.”

Lily looked back over her shoulder. “You don't have to worry about a thing. Nathaniel and Shiloh came here earlier. They gathered the proper herbs and laid them out in the required pattern to ward off any incursions of snakes and animals at our catermorf.”

Bridget nodded and tucked this information away for future reference. She had gotten used to Nathaniel. Getting used to Lily's no-nonsense style should be a piece of cake compared to his system of reinforcing ideas with emotional projections.

“Telempathy made it harder, not easier, for my people to survive. We had to learn how to keep our emotions separate from outside influences. That's why we established a system of bonds and oaths. I know it sounds like a contradiction, keeping our individuality by bonding with another telempath, but it works.”

Lily flashed an indulgent smile. “We can bond with a headblind person, but it's not the same. Bonding with another telempath creates a feedback loop that filters out outside impressions. Linking three or more telempaths together creates an even stronger shield. Isolating ourselves from strangers was a partial solution. Remember how you always hated crowds?”

Bridget sat up with the excitement of knowing exactly what Lily meant. The boat rocked under her. She grabbed hold of the sides until it steadied. “I never realized it before. I can't even count the number of times

I'd walk into a room and start crying for no reason at all. I'd leave as soon as I could. I hated having people stare at me. I thought I was an introvert.”

Lily beached the canoe. Pebbles grated against the bottom. She climbed out and pulled it to higher ground. “Your instincts were correct.”

She tied the rope around a sycamore tree. “You fled because your identity was overwhelmed by the emotions of the group. We've experienced this many times. That's why we have bonds. Our bonds shield us and help us maintain our sense of identity whenever we're in a crowd.”

Moving with a swift assurance, Lily came to Bridget and held out her hand. “When you met us, you began to learn how to interact with other telepaths. It's a difficult task to learn. It can tire you out very easily, especially when you've spent most of your life avoiding close contact with others and building up shields.”

Bridget grinned. “That's why I always fell asleep after a couple of hours with Nathaniel. Interacting with him wore me out on an emotional level.”

Lily pulled her out of the canoe into the ankle deep water and helped her wade ashore. “He told me about that but I didn't make the connection at first. You're such a strong natural telepath I didn't realize you were untrained. Tonight, we're going to take another step in your training.”

Bridget frowned and shook her head. “What about Nathaniel and Shiloh? They're your oathbrothers. Doesn't that change things between us?”

“Of course it does. It changes everyone but it's easier for women. We have more stability. Our bodies follow the same pattern from moon to moon. Men, on the other hand, have no rhyme or reason in their patterning. Their hormones fluctuate in wild swings while they mature. They can become unpredictable and dangerous to themselves and others during puberty.”

An indulgent smile softened Lily's mouth. “The catermorf stabilizes men. We have always bonded with our brothers and, in order to help those who had no sisters, we would choose them to become our caterdru in mind and body the same as if they were truebrothers.”

Lily tugged at the knotted rope around the tree and made sure it was securely tied. Bridget wished she could figure out a tactful way to rephrase her question. What she really wanted to know was if she became Lily's oathsister did that mean Nathaniel and Shiloh became Bridget's oathbrothers? Gah! No matter how she phrased it, it came out weird. Why make things more complicated than they were already by asking Lily that?

Bridget gestured at the canoe. "What about the jacklight? Shouldn't we turn it off?"

Lily shook her head. "Leave it on. It'll make it easier for us to find the canoe on the way back."

She pushed a branch aside and exposed a narrow trail worn into the red clay soil of the embankment. Bridget followed her into a hauntingly beautiful forest of hardwoods shrouded with Spanish Moss, air plants and ferns.

They walked down the shady pathway. A companionable silence wrapped itself around them. About ten minutes later, Lily led her out from the shadows onto a moonlit glade filled with night blooming flowers.

The aroma of crushed herbs, sage, thyme, lavender, ginger, mint and coriander, rose in a heady cloud around them. Lily stepped out of her sneakers, unbuttoned her shirt and pants, slid out of them and let them fall to the ground. She turned, her dark eyes glowing with happy anticipation.

Bridget managed to smile, a rather shaky smile and fumbled with the buttons on her jeans and shirt. She stepped out of her jeans. The cool night breeze flowed across her legs and made every hair stand on end. Even though Lily had explained the ceremony and had let her handle the llandru and ghradru a few days ago, Bridget still felt apprehensive. It meant she'd have to open herself completely on an emotional level in order to form a complete bond. She wasn't sure she could do that.

She unbuttoned her shirt and let it fall to the ground.

Goosebumps pebbled her arms. Bridget remembered the cold void she had experienced during her granny's funeral. After the catermorf, she would never, ever be alone again. She took a deep breath, exhaled and straightened her shoulders. "I'm ready."

Side by side, hand in hand, they walked to the center of the clearing. A white veil of hair drifted past Lily's hips and legs in a brilliant counterpart to the dark copper that cloaked Bridget's torso. They stopped in front of the mound of silver and moonstones. The fragrance of crushed herbs filled their lungs.

Lily bent over, and selected one of the llandrus. The silver chain blazed between her fingers with all the reflected glory of the moon above. Bridget lifted the hair from her neck. It slid through her fingers, crackling with static while Lily fastened the llandru around her neck. The large teardrop

shaped moonstones attached to the filigree collar slid into the hollows of her neck, between her breasts and down her spine.

The words fell from Lily's mouth in a formal cadence. "From another people thou wert born. Tonight, thou art born again as true sister of my heart."

Bridget felt an invisible thread forge a fragile connection between them. Her heart pounded in her ears. It felt like it was going to explode in her chest.

She accepted the thread. Her pent up breath escaped past her parted lips. It felt right. Lily hadn't invaded her privacy with this thread. Her mind remained her own, intact, inviolate.

Lily fastened the ghradru around Bridget's waist. The web-like belt had a whole series of filigree chains dangling from it with moonstones attached to the bottom. It circled her hips like a silver miniskirt. Pale blue moonstones bounced against her thighs.

Lily garbed herself in jeweled splendor next. "Thou art a true daughter of the Sidhe. Moonborn was I. Moonborn art thou. Earthborn, windborn, we are sisters true."

The intricate swirl of silver and gemstone blazed with an inner fire against Lily's dark bronze skin. In that moment, in the full light of the moon, barefooted and naked, with her hair blowing in the breeze like white gold, Lily wasn't just Lily. She was Lilith, the Queen of Air and Darkness.

She took hold of Bridget's hands. Strength, passion, respect, and loving acceptance flowed from her. The fragile thread between them thickened into a band of light. It went through them into the ground and back through them.

The heartbeat of the land thundered in Bridget's ears, slow and steady, cool and dark, eternally peaceful and patient. It soared through them, the source of Lily's inner strength. No wonder she fought so hard to keep her land when Kurt arrived and tried to buy it.

Lily's soft voice continued to weave its spell. "Thou wert lost and now art found. I welcome thee into my heart and my home. From this night forward, thou art my caterdru, truesister by oath, gem and silver. This I swear in the presence of our foremothers, the Earth, Moon and Sky."

Bridget gulped, then managed to say her part. "I was lost. Now I am found. Into my heart and home, I welcome thee, Lilith. From this night

forward, thou art my caterdru, truesister by oath, gem and silver. This I swear in the presence of our foremothers, the Earth, Moon and Sky.”

Bridget reached. She wasn't exactly sure how she did it, but she forged a thread of light and linked it to Lily.

Lily reached. A shaft of pure joy pierced Bridget. Their threads bounced back and forth in an endless loop and spun a solid cocoon of light around them.

Lily smiled. “Even as we go our separate ways, we'll always be together. As we wait for the night to pass and turn to day, we'll know each other's heart. Each year, in the same circle of light, we will renew our catermorf. Bridget, thou art my sister, my caterdru. So mote it be.”

Bridget moistened her parched lips with the tip of her tongue and managed to croak out her part of the oath. “As we wait for the night to pass and turn to day, we will know each other's heart. Lilith, thou art my sister, my caterdru. So mote it be.”

Lily cupped Bridget's face in her hands. “It is done. There is no need to speak for the rest of the night. We must go our separate ways and contemplate our bond. In the days to come, I will teach you more about your gift and show you how to use it.”

Bridget inclined her head in acceptance.

There, in the light of the full moon, they clothed themselves. They returned down the narrow path under the trees and climbed into the canoe. Lily retraced the watery path homeward, guided by the moon and stars above.

The journey home ended. Dreamlike, it felt as if no time at all had passed. All too soon, Bridget found herself standing beside the parking lot looking at the empty clinic. Like a brooding creature, it waited for her.

Lily vanished into the tangled greenery of the swamp. Bridget went to the front door and went inside. Shelley greeted her with a happy whuff and eager licks of her hand. His doggy friendliness felt normal and reassuring. She sank to her knees and buried her face in his thick, coarse fur. That didn't last long. Four violent sneezes exploded from her nose.

She giggled, stood up, kicked her sneakers off and wiggled her toes on the cool hardness of the tiled floor. Shelley licked her toes. She backed away from his sloppy caress, tied the shoelaces on her sneakers together and dangled them from her hand. “Let's check the place out and make sure everything's all right.”

The clinic felt different to her senses tonight. The pristine white walls and the sharp antiseptic odor told her exactly where she was. She wandered through the waiting room, past the cubicles and past the receptionist's countertop. The computer console glowed with a life-force of its own.

Down the hall she went, shutting doors behind her. She passed through the conservatory, the kitchen, and went into the living room. Memories of midnight conversations with Nathaniel filled her mind.

She tossed her sneakers on the couch, went to the French doors and opened them. Outside, in the back yard, the willow tree waited. Its leaves whispered to her of dreams and life and friendships lost and gained.

Shelley padded ahead into the bushes. She reached for him and savored the pure simplicity of his presence. He felt like a furry child, filled with love and an intense need to protect her from harm.

She watched him trot away into the bushes. He was going to patrol the perimeter for a couple of miles like he did every night. He'd come back home in a couple of hours.

She lifted her hands up and spun around in a circle. The moon and stars blended into a dizzy ribbon of light. She staggered back inside. Laughter bubbled from her throat. She closed the French doors and drew the drapes shut.

Her mind felt like it was running on overdrive. There were so many things she wanted to learn. When would Lily give her another lesson? Reaching for Shelley felt like turning the dial on a radio to find the right frequency.

She closed her eyes and touched the llandru around her neck under her shirt. Moonstones suspended from delicate silver chains slithered past the hollows of her collarbones, her breasts and down her spine. They felt smooth and cool, almost alive against her skin.

She lifted her arms and arched her back in a luxurious stretch. The ghradru under her jeans shifted around her hips. A small round moonstone nestled in the clump of wiry curls at her crotch.

Up and out, her senses soared into the velvet darkness wrapped around the land. Out, she reached even further, trying to touch the cold fire of the moon. Out, she reached and found Nathaniel standing in the room with her.

She plummeted down.

When did he come in? Was I that wrapped up in myself that I didn't notice him arrive?

She turned and faced his bulky shadow. The cold, smooth moonstones felt like liquid fire on her skin. A moonstone bumped against her nipple.

Nathanial's shadow stepped closer. His warmth and concern, his need to touch her, his need for her to touch him slammed into her in a jumbled mélange. Her shirt rubbed against her erect nipples. They itched with an incredible itch that demanded her attention. An invisible thread formed between her and Nathanial, drawing him closer and closer to her.

She stepped back and hugged herself. He stepped forward. What should she do? What was she doing?

She flung her jangled awareness of him back. "Why must you sneak up on me like that? I'm not in the mood to play hide and go seek right now."

His stunned silence was answer enough. He said her name in a soft, hesitant whisper.

The hoarse, raspy texture of his voice scraped her senses. A shiver raced down her spine. She couldn't move, aware of him in a way she had never felt before, of his heat, of how close he stood beside her, of the fact that all he had to do was stretch out his hand and touch her.

Her legs wobbled. A hot, wet arousal centered itself in her crotch. She moved back. He advanced a step closer.

She took a deep breath, told her heart to slow down and blurted out her question in a jangled rush. "If you're Lily's oathbrother and I'm Lily's oathsister now, does that mean you're my oathbrother also?"

A curious expectation trembled between them. "No, I am not your oathbrother now. There is no oath between us."

He tilted his head sideways. "You will need a brother to help you raise any children you may choose to have. Do you want me to become your caterdru?"

She shook her head. Why was he asking her that? "W-what? No! I never, I mean, I don't want. I want."

"Tell me what you want. Let me help you."

Heat flared across her face. She moved back and collided with the bookcase.

He reached out and kept it from toppling over. His shirtsleeve brushed the top of her head.

She hugged herself and tried as hard as she could not to think about him.

He stepped back. Curiosity stabbed at her, harsh and fierce at first, then softened into a wistful hope. "Why do you shut yourself away from me?"

If he touched her, he'd know exactly how aroused she felt around him tonight. She wasn't sure she wanted him to know that. He won't touch me without my consent. That's why she always felt safe around him. "I want..."

"What do you want?" Eager expectation touched her and retreated.

The last time she had sex it was a total bust. One of her classmates cajoled her into a midnight rendezvous. They went into the chemistry lab. He pinned her arms down and pushed himself into her. She felt like a robot going through the motions.

He made her feel dirty and smelly, hurrying her along, ordering her to get her clothes back on before someone caught them. Then, a couple of days later, she overheard him talking to his friends. He said she was a cold fish.

She sighed. "I'm twenty nine years old but I've never really been ... um ... good ... in bed."

"Ah, I understand now. You're not awake."

She straightened up to her full height and jammed her hands on her hips. "What do you mean by that snide remark?"

The unspoken amusement that hovered over his shadowy form didn't help matters any. "You have not yet learned how to use the full power that lies within every woman."

What was he talking about? First he said she wasn't awake then he said she hadn't learned how to use her power as a woman. Was he talking about the further training Lily intended to give her with her telepathic abilities?

His heavy sigh ruffled the top of her head. She inhaled the familiar scents of lavender, musky sweat and wood smoke that permeated his clothes. He stood so close she felt the heat from his body.

Need quivered between them, then vanished. She stared at the black blot of his body directly in front of her and wondered what was going to happen next. His emotional control was amazing, almost as good as Lily's.

The only hint she had of how he felt was the hoarse, ragged sound of his breath.

“May I awaken you?”

“I don't know.”

“Should I send for Shiloh? You already know his face. Perhaps you would be more comfortable if he awakened you.”

She shook her head.

His confusion washed over her. “Who do you want? Lilith is your caterdru now. She cannot awaken you.”

She shook her head again. “I don't want Lily to awaken me.”

If she thought he felt confused before, that was nothing compared to the absolute consternation he radiated now. “Do you want a total stranger to awaken you?”

She pushed her hair away from her face. What the hell were they talking about? “How about if we start this conversation all over again?”

“Aye. Where shall we begin?”

“Let's begin with this ‘awakening’. Exactly how is this accomplished?”

“It is an intimate gift of pleasure from one person to another.”

She blinked. This was getting more confusing by the minute. Instead of beating around the bush, maybe it would be better if she just got it all out in the open. “I hardly know you. It's not like I don't care for you or think you don't care for me. I like you a lot. I like being with you. I like it when you touch me but I'm not ready to jump into bed and make love to you. For one thing, I'm in no particular hurry to have a baby any time soon.”

“Ah!”

A fervent wish to kick him in the shins materialized in her mind.

“You misunderstood me.”

Bridget did her best to put a lid on her unruly temper. Lily might cancel their catermorf if she shoved him into the trash compactor. “I appreciate your concern. What did you mean by that last ‘ah’ of yours?”

Dead silence greeted her. Bridget shifted her feet. If she could see his face, it might help her figure out what she was doing or saying wrong. Why

had he blocked himself from her like this? Was it because he didn't want to influence her decision with his emotional needs?

"You're a woman," he whispered, so softly she barely heard him. "I felt your need and offered to awaken you. You faltered when I made this offer. I offered Shiloh in my stead for your awakening. You refused him. Then when you said you didn't want to lie down with me and accept my seed, that is when I knew you misunderstood me."

"Okay, you're doing fine so far. What's next?"

"When I asked you if you wanted me to awaken you I did not intend to lie with you and give you my seed. What I wish to do is ask your permission to use my hands and mouth to awaken you to the full pleasures of your body."

"Oh."

He wasn't talking about intercourse. He wanted to indulge in a heavy-duty petting session with her. The more she thought about it, the better it sounded. It meant she could enjoy herself without worrying if he was going to push her into something she wasn't ready for yet.

In order for him to understand what she was feeling she had to tell him what she wanted. He was a telempath, not a telepath. He felt emotions, not thoughts.

She moved forward and laid her head on his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. She listened to his heart beating in her ear.

"May I awaken you?" His breath tickled the top of her head.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He tightened his arms around her.

Now what? One thing for sure, she didn't want to try anything standing up. Too awkward and her nerves were a frazzled mess already. Taking a firm grip on his shirt, she led him around the coffee table over to the couch. There she pushed him down, climbed on his lap and closed her eyes. "Yes, I want you to awaken me."

He stroked her cheek. His fingers trembled. "The first time I saw you, I never dared dream of this moment."

He traced the outline of her lips. Her mouth quivered under the gentle pressure of his fingertip. "Woman thou art."

He brushed her forehead with a single chaste kiss. "I salute thee."

He slid his hands down, placed his thumbs under her chin, he tilted her head back then fastened his mouth onto hers in a fiercely demanding kiss. He released her mouth, lifted her in his arms, then rose to his feet and carried her into the bedroom.

The air grew heavy and thick with desire. Slowly, ever so slowly, he lowered her legs and stood her on her feet with his hand in the small of her back. Her legs wobbled. He steadied her, kissed her closed eyelids, the tip of her nose and returned to her mouth.

A growl vibrated in his throat. He nipped her chin, dipped his head and nuzzled her throat. His beard felt soft and silky on her skin, not wiry and rough like she always expected a man's beard to feel.

Her eyes flew open. He has a beard!

A groan escaped from his lips. His breath felt hot against her skin. He fumbled with the buttons on her shirt. A cool breeze stroked her breasts. His fingernails scraped her stomach.

"Whoa!" She pushed him away, staggered back and hugged her shirt closed. "You didn't say anything about taking my clothes off."

His desire vanished. "When you pledged catermorf with Lilith, you were unclothed, were you not?"

What did that have to do with what they were doing now? "Uh, yes..."

"Our word for awakening is glimorf. Gli means hand and morf means ceremony or oath. You must be clad only in the gems of a woman when I place my hands upon you. At any time, if you ask me to stop, I will stop."

"I can change my mind? Any time I feel uncomfortable, I can ask you to stop and you'll stop?"

"Aye."

She moved closer to him and laid her hand on his shirt. It felt soft and smooth under her fingertips. "It's okay now. I got scared, that's all. I didn't know what you were going to do."

"You wish to continue."

"Yes."

He circled her neck with his hands. He kissed the top of her hair, slid the shirt past her shoulders and arms. It fell to the floor. "Woman thou art."

He brushed her lips with his mouth. "I salute thee." He lowered his face to her neck with a soft, guttural moan. His face rubbed against her shoulder. It felt thick and soft, almost like fur.

He moved his hands over her breasts. Her nipples stiffened into hard, little peaks. He rolled them between his thumbs and forefingers.

He stopped. "May I continue?" The hot air from his whispered words feathered her breasts.

She put her arms around his neck. "Yes, dammit!"

He hugged her. His hips moved convulsively against her. She felt the hard lump of his erection under his pants against her crotch and understanding flooded her mind.

Rape is impossible for him. He's too closely linked to my desire. If I'm not aroused, he can't get aroused either.

He released her and cupped her breasts in his hands. Need flowed through her. Slow, throbbing warmth flooded her crotch while her desire flowed from her into him.

He stroked and pulled and tugged at her nipples. She arched her back under his hands. They itched! He pinched them and it felt wonderful. He slid his hands down the smooth line of her stomach to the top of her jeans.

He unbuttoned them and pulled the zipper down. Then, with that startling effortless grace, he went to his knees and pulled her jeans and underpants down to her ankles.

She looked down at the shadowy blot by her knees that must be the top of his head. Moonstones slid and bounced against her erect nipples. Her breasts ached. They felt strange, heavier and fuller than they'd ever felt before.

He lifted her feet, one at a time, and removed her pants and socks and underwear. "Woman thou art. I kneel to thy womb. May I taste thee and know thy pleasure?"

She whispered, "Yes." Her throat hurt.

He tasted her.

Ohmygod!

He knew exactly how to use his tongue. His desire soared and met hers. Like a pendulum, desire swung from him to her, from her to him in an endless cycle, back and forth, up and out, back and forth.

She swayed and grabbed hold of his head. Braids slithered through her grasp like tiny snakes. The more excited she felt, the more excited he felt. He let his tongue push against her faster and faster. His fingers dug into her buttocks.

She ground her hips against his probing tongue. She whispered his name under the searing waves of pleasure that filled her crotch.

He released her.

She fell. No she didn't. His hands cupped her buttocks. He rose to his feet, picked her up and held her against his chest.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and rubbed herself against his erection. His harsh groan matched her eager moan.

He cried out, "Woman thou art."

Eager anticipation roared through her. "I bow to thy heart and share thy joy."

He lowered his head and latched his hot, wet mouth onto her nipple.

All thought fled her mind, only sensation remained. She lost herself, totally within his need. Her nipples swelled under his tongue and teeth.

His penis pulsed and moved in the same insistent rhythm of his mouth upon her breasts. She impaled herself against him. Moisture poured down her legs.

The room spun around. He walked with her in his arms. She clung to him with her arms and legs.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she opened her eyes.

They sat on the bed. Or rather, he sat on the edge of the bed with her on his lap facing him. She opened her legs wide and tucked her feet back against his legs.

He nipped at her lower lip and tugged her mouth open. An eager growl rumbled in his chest. The coarse material of his pants rubbed against the inside of her thighs. He slid his hand past the wiry curls of her crotch.

"Whoa!"

He pulled his hand back. "Did I hurt you?"

“N-no.” She relaxed her grip on his shirt and flexed her fingers. “You didn't hurt me. You moved a little too fast for me, that's all.”

“I can stop now, if you wish.”

She ran her hands up the back of his head, through his braids and laid her head in the hollow below his shoulder. “Don't stop. I want you to finish it for me.”

Relief, desire and need rolled over her in a wondrous rush of joy and anticipation. He moved his hands away from her body. She felt him fumble at the buttons on his pants.

He stopped. His heart thundered in her ears. “May I?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “It's all right. I don't mind.”

He shifted himself under her and freed himself from the confines of his pants.

The soft velvet top of his penis bumped against her navel. Moisture dribbled from the tip onto her skin.

He placed his left hand over her crotch again. “May I touch the door of thy womb?”

With a convulsive movement of her hips, she opened her legs wider. “Yes, you may.”

He brushed her clitoris with his finger, slow and easy. She moved her crotch against his fingers. He groaned and rolled her clitoris between his thumb and forefinger like a marble.

She moaned and clung to him for dear life. Moisture gushed from her crotch.

He inserted his fingers with swift assurance and dexterity

She gasped and rocked her hips up and down.

He moved his fingers. She squirmed against him for more and climbed the peak of desire.

A ribbon of light seemed to materialize between them as he took her pleasure into him and sent it back to her. He rocked his hips under her and let his penis rub her stomach. The wet tip probed her navel.

She rocked faster.

He grabbed her buttocks with his other hand and pulled her against him while he thrust his fingers up inside her faster and faster. The pendu-

lum of desire and mutual need rocked and swayed, up and down, in and out between them.

Their hips moved in frantic, uncontrolled thrusts. Ecstasy exploded through her groin in short, hard bursts of pleasure. Hot semen spurted across her belly and splashed her breasts.

She sagged and gasped for air while she rubbed her cheek against his shirt.

Hot, wet, sticky drops of semen trickled down her breasts, past her navel and dribbled down her legs. The muscles in her inner thighs quivered.

Nathaniel shifted his weight under her, tucked his penis inside his pants and buttoned them. He stroked her legs until they stopped trembling. "Woman thou art." His breath gusted past the top of her head. "I thank thee for this honor, for giving me the pleasure of your awakening."

The musky odors of smoke, sweat and lavender tickled her nose. Damm! He's good. Goosebumps galloped across her arms. She shivered.

He slid his arm under her legs and stood. He turned, laid her on the bed and pulled the covers up over her. The bed groaned under his weight when he braced his knee on it, bent and brushed his lips across her forehead.

"Sleep. Tomorrow, I will return with my caterdru and we will continue this courtship in the proper fashion." Then he left.

Bridget stared out at the dark empty room. What did he mean by that last statement? Was Lily supposed be their chaperone from now on?

Chapter Eighteen

Bridget sighed and picked up her hairbrush. Nathaniel awakening her the way he did had turned her hair into a tangled mess. The doorknob rattled behind her. She turned around and stared at the patio doors.

Kurt shouted. "Bridget! Are you awake?"

Shelley flicked his ears at the sound and thumped his tail.

Bridget wrinkled her nose and laid the brush on the dresser. If she kept quiet, Kurt might give up and leave her alone.

He rattled the doorknob again. "Open the door. I know you're in there!"

"Go away," she yelled. "Leave me alone. I need my beauty sleep."

“Please.” Kurt's voice came out in an abject moan. “Pretty please. Let me in.”

She thought about saying, ‘not by the hair on my chinny, chin chin.’ A grin twitched on her lips. She sighed. “All right. Wait a minute. I'm not dressed yet.”

A quick look around reassured her that no incriminating evidence of last night's awakening remained. She belted her robe, strolled to the doors and pulled the drapes apart.

Kurt's cross-eyed face flattened against the windowpane greeted her.

“Yech!” She shook her head, opened the door and let him inside. “Why are you in such a godawful hurry? How was your trip to New York? Did you get the extra funding you needed from the UN?”

Impudence lit his unrepentant face. “The CIA and the FBI tailed me. They're suspicious ‘cause I'm buying all the surplus hardware I can from Russia. When I told the UN Assembly they could have a Peacekeeper's Academy and Patrol Base on my space station, they gave me additional funding.” He crossed his arms and looked her over from head to toe. “I was bored out of my skull. Let's go. We have a date to go jogging. Remember?”

Bridget narrowed her eyes. Kurt looked different. Then it finally penetrated her scatterbrained senses. “A beard!”

He struck a pose. “Do you think Lily will like it?”

She shook her head. “A beard. He has a beard.”

“Yes,” Kurt said slowly. “I have a beard.”

She blinked and waved him away. “Not you. I meant Lily's brother. He has a beard.”

Kurt snorted. “Shiloh? He's got too much Indian blood in him to grow a decent beard.”

She shook her head. “No, not Shiloh. Lily's other brother has the beard.”

Kurt leaned on the doorjamb. “How silly of me. It's as clear as mud. Of course, Lily's other brother is the one with a beard.” He cocked his head. “What's his name, anyway?”

Bridget sighed. “Nathaniel. His name is Nathaniel.” Shelley bumped and wedged his chunky body between her legs. She scratched his ears then peered at Kurt. “If it isn't too much trouble, could you do me a favor?”

He gave her a wary look. "What?"

"I stayed up late last night. I'm tired. Could you take Shelley jogging instead of me? That'll give me time to take a shower and get dressed. When you come back, we can go into town. I want to show you something that belongs to Lily's family. I'll tell you all about it on the way over."

Kurt's poker face didn't fool her. Not when she could sense his interest rearing its head every time she mentioned Lily. He shrugged. "Sure. I've got nothing better to do."

* * * *

A half an hour later, while she clipped a beeper to the waistband of her pants, Kurt asked, "Are we going to the bank, by any chance?"

Bridget frowned and peered at him. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

Kurt picked up the llandru and ghradru from the dresser. "These are valuable, too valuable to be left lying around in the open like this. They belong in a safe deposit box. I bet you don't even have them insured."

Bridget's first thought was he had a lot of nerve telling her what to do. Then common sense kicked in. She shook her head. "We're not going to the bank. I'd rather keep them here for now."

Kurt hesitated. "I could arrange a private appraisal and install a fire-proof safe here if you want."

"Well, um..."

"At least get 'em insured!" His concern rose to a fever pitch along with his voice.

"All right, all right." Anything to shut him up. "First thing Monday morning I'll bring them to the bank."

Kurt relaxed. "Good. Where are we going now?"

"We're going to the library. There's something there I want to show you. One of Lily's ancestors wrote it."

* * * *

Bridget parked the jeep. "When they found that poem at the burnt out homestead, they named this town Lacrimas. That's why we're going to the library. They have it on display there as part of the town's history."

"Dammit!" Kurt slammed his fist against the dashboard, climbed out, and kicked the car door shut. "I'm not Charles Evans. I'd never do anything like that to Lily."

Carefully shutting the door on her side of the jeep, Bridget murmured. "I know."

"But she doesn't." Kurt ran his hand through his hair. "I'm not a religious fanatic waving a Bible around and preaching at everyone I meet. Hell, I can't even remember the last time I went to church. I don't care if she really is a witch." He hunched his shoulders and stared glumly at his dirt stained sneakers. "Now what am I going to do? How can I get her to trust me?"

Bridget walked around the front of the jeep. "I thought maybe you could become my oathbrother. That might help."

Kurt's head popped up. He stared at Bridget for a few seconds and sighed. "No. It's not gonna work."

"Why not?"

"Because if you're Lily's oathsister, and I become your oathbrother, wouldn't that make me her oathbrother, too? I sure as hell don't want to be her brother." He quirked his eyebrow. "Unless you think incest is a logical solution."

Bridget suppressed a grin. This wasn't a joke and she had no intentions of letting him treat it as a joke. "Trust me. It'll work. Nathaniel sorted that out for me last night. He said that even though Lily and I are sisters and he's Lily's brother, that doesn't make him my brother because his oath binds him to Lily, not me."

Kurt boosted himself up to a seat on the hood of the jeep, and slanted at doubtful look at her. "I don't know. Sounds rather complicated to me."

"Scoot over."

He scooted over. Bridget boosted herself up. "I know it sounds complicated, but it works for them doesn't it?"

Kurt gave her another sideways look. "Will I have to change my last name to O'Keefe?"

She pulled her braid down over her shoulder and twirled it absently. "Lily didn't say anything to me about changing my name to Harker when we had the sistroath ceremony. I think Nathaniel and Shiloh took the Harker name simply because it was a lot easier to do it that way instead of having to explain why they're brother and sister but have different last names."

Kurt jumped down and stuck out his hand. "I'll do it!"

Bridget studied his face. She hoped he understood that taking this oath was a serious matter. "Are you sure?"

He laughed. "Can a pig fly? I've been beating my head against a brick wall for two years trying to get Lily to trust me enough to go out on a date with me."

He held his hands out. "What happened? Nada! Zilch! I turn my back on you for two weeks and Lily adopts you. All right, so what if she's a female chauvinist pig and an empath. Minor details. What have I've got to lose?"

A sudden frown darkened his face. "Uh, maybe I better wait. I'm not too sure I can handle the mind reading part."

Bridget held up her hand. "Whoa! Back up a few steps there. They can't read minds. They're empaths, not telepaths. They sense what you're feeling, that's all."

Kurt's relief flooded Bridget's senses for a few seconds. "I see. That's why Lily ran away when I gave her the violin. She knew I wasn't lying. She never really believed me before."

Bridget frowned. "I don't know if that's what happened."

Kurt shrugged. "I guess we'll figure that one out later."

He stuck out his right leg and executed an elaborate bow.

"Until then, let's go take a peek at the family heirloom."

Bridget jumped down and threaded her hand through his outstretched arm. "Lead on, MacDuff."

* * * *

Thick yellow wax coated the highly polished hardwood floor. A multitude of dust-covered books stacked on every available shelf filled Bridget's nostrils with their uniquely familiar odors. The cool, clean scent of honeysuckle and freshly mown grass floated in through the open casement windows.

The second floor contained an open promenade. Fresh white paint gleamed on the wooden balustrade around the perimeter.

Kurt tightened his grip on Bridget's arm and spoke in a loud stage whisper. "Over there. In that case below Big Ben."

The tiny white haired woman perched behind the desk looked up at him, then tried, sentenced and condemned him to perdition with just one look from her steel blue eyes.

Unbowed by the librarian's righteous ire, Kurt blew a kiss in the librarian's direction, then linked hands with Bridget. His unbridled interest raced through Bridget's fingers. They tiptoed over to the glass display case in front of a wide staircase. At the top of the steps, a huge grandfather clock glared down at them. Mahogany gargoyles peeped out from the top and sides of the clock. A high-backed loveseat with faded red velvet nestled between its clawed feet.

Kurt bent over the glass case and repeated the last lines of the poem in hushed tones. "Heartsblood seeps into the dream." He straightened up. Excitement exploded from him in a crackling burst. "It's real. That story you told me. It really happened."

Bridget tugged at the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Come on. Let's leave before the librarian kicks us out."

Kurt looked over his shoulder. "You're right. She's headed our way."

He grabbed her hand. They ran past the librarian like a pair of errant school children but they weren't fast enough to escape the faint 'oh my' that floated out the front door behind them. Whooping and laughing, they staggered down the steps, raced through the parking lot and collapsed against the jeep.

A cheerful honking sound interrupted them. They turned around.

Shiloh parked about twenty feet away. A mob of black-haired Mexican children overflowed the front seat and back of his truck. He climbed out. His long rangy stride swiftly covered the distance between them. Bridget didn't mean to stare at him but she couldn't help herself.

A bright yellow cowboy hat glowed on his head. Turquoise and silver glittered at his neck and waist. Ink black hair flowed down his back in a single long braid. A crisp white shirt, tight jeans and boots added the final touch to his attire.

Kurt looked at the boots, up at the hat and grinned. "Well I'll be a hornswaggled puppy dog. It's the Lone Stranger."

Shiloh grinned, ducked his head and covered his mouth with his hand. Why did he do that? Bridget wondered.

Then, because she wanted to see him smile, she asked, "Are you stealing children now?"

His head jerked up. Alarm filled his dark eyes. "I didn't steal them. The Migrant Labor Council pays me to bring them out to the Well Baby Clinic. We finished the paperwork for their medical cards last month at the Welfare office."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Kurt's enthusiasm shattered the awkward moment. "It's a great way to secure extra funding for Bridget. Digging up all these new patients will justify the additional expenses." He slapped Shiloh's arm. "Right?"

Shiloh gave him a dubious stare. "Aye."

Now was as good a time as any to tell him. Bridget cleared her throat. Shiloh's enigmatic gaze turned to her. She couldn't read him at all. "Kurt's agreed to become my oathbrother."

A jolt of pure joy leaped from Shiloh to her. He grabbed Kurt in an enormous bear hug and spun him around the parking lot. A chorus of high-pitched yells from the truck accompanied this display.

Shiloh released Kurt, ducked his head, removed his hat and kneaded it between his hands. "I need to talk privately with Bridget."

Kurt's gaze flickered back and forth between them. He gestured at the truck. "I'll just mosey on over there with the kids."

Shiloh nodded.

Kurt backed away with an exaggerated wince. "Take your time. Take all the time you want."

Bridget stepped closer to Shiloh. "What's wrong?"

He raised his head. She stared into his dark and vulnerable eyes. Wistful yearning brushed her senses and her heart speeded up. Yanking her gaze away from his face, she glanced at his hands, big and strong boned. Like Nathaniel's hands. A delicious thrill rushed through her. She let her gaze dip lower and spotted the obvious bulge in his jeans. Horrified dismay flooded her brain. She scuttled backwards until her hip collided with the jeep.

Shiloh just stood there and said, "It's all right."

Bridget didn't want to choose. Not now. She liked both of them. It was too soon. She needed more time to decide. She needed to see Nathaniel's face. What would he do if she flinched away from him? She couldn't hide her reaction from him. He'd know right away how she felt. Then what? What if she chose Shiloh over Nathaniel? Shiloh would know how Nathaniel-

nial felt if she did that. How would Lily react? No matter what she did, someone's feelings would get hurt and she didn't want to hurt any of them.

Bridget stared at her sneakers. She took a deep breath and looked at Shiloh. "I'm g-going to see Nathaniel's face tonight."

"I know."

"H-he said I'll be able to choose then."

Shiloh stepped closer. "It's not the kind of choice you think it is."

"But..."

Shiloh shook his head. "You don't understand. Later, we'll talk, the three of us together. Okay."

Bridget nodded.

He spun on his heels, walked to the trunk, opened the door, climbed inside and drove away.

Kurt's amused voice yanked her back to reality. "I'm not an empath, but I know a lovesick man when I see one."

If looks could kill, then Kurt was in the process of being hung, drawn and quartered.

He sighed. "At least you have a love life. Which is a hell of a lot more than I have."

Bridget opened her mouth and shut it with an audible snap. "We have to go now. I'm supposed to be at the Well Baby Clinic today."

Kurt spread his hands and grinned. "Hey, relax, will ya? You've got plenty of time. When he brings in that load of kids, Lucinda will dump a whole stack of medical history forms in his lap."

He lowered his voice. "You only have one more year to go on your contract."

Bridget stopped. What was he up to now?

"I have an opening for a physician at the space station."

Was this another one of Kurt's bribes? "Why?"

"Because if you're working for me, maybe Shiloh will, too."

She frowned. "Why do you want him all of a sudden?"

"Because he's the best damn mechanic my foreman has ever seen."

She walked around to the front of the jeep. "You're not making any sense. If you want him to work for you why don't you just ask him?"

"He worked for me before as an illegal alien and I want him back."

Kurt had finally gone over the deep end. Bridget leaned on the hood and propped her head on her elbows. "Why would he do that?"

"What?"

"Pretend he's an illegal alien."

Kurt snorted. "Because he doesn't have a social security number."

Bridget let her empathic senses reach at Kurt. As far as she could tell he sincerely believed he was telling her the truth as he saw it. She sighed. "Why don't you start from the beginning and explain it step by step?"

Kurt lifted his arms over his head, stretched, winced and pressed his right hand on his side. "That's the last time I'll let him get near me. I think he cracked a couple of my ribs with that hug."

Kurt's flippant attitude and constant subject changes were getting on her nerves. "Okay. Don't tell me. See if I care." She strode to the driver's side of the jeep and yanked the door open.

Kurt held up his hand. "Hold on a minute. I'm sorry." He opened the door on his side, climbed in and pulled it shut. "Let me get my thoughts together first."

Bridget climbed in and pulled her door shut.

Kurt raked his fingers through his hair and gave her a sideways look.

She crossed her arms. "I'm waiting."

He looked out the window. His eyes had a thousand mile stare. "When I came back from New York last night I called my foreman on the carpet for falling behind schedule. He hemmed and hawed a bit, then he told me how he had this Mexican guy working for him who was doing real good. He was so good my foreman wanted to put him on the regular payroll. The only problem was when he told the Mexican he wanted to help him get a social security card and alien ID card, the guy just cut out."

Bridget raised her eyebrows. What Kurt had said so far still didn't show her a logical connection between Shiloh and his foreman's missing Mexican laborer.

Kurt glared at her. "My foreman gave me one hell of a description of this guy's truck and Shiloh's truck fits that description to a T."

“I see.”

Kurt grinned. “Then when you add in the fact that Shiloh could pass for a Mexican, it doesn't take a genius to put two and two together.”

Bridget shook her head. “I don't see how it adds up to anything at all.”

Kurt leaned forward and ticked off his points on his fingers. “Haven't you noticed how everything they do is on a cash-only basis? Lily cleans houses and people pay her in cash so they don't have to pay social security taxes. She collects cash rent every month from the guy who runs the scrap yard on her land. I know because I asked him myself. Shiloh works at the scrap yard for cash under the table and for any parts he wants out of the scrap. Lily breeds Bouviers and sells them by word of month, cash only. I'll bet you even money the Migrant Labor Council pays Shiloh cash, too. And, last but not least, they bring antique furniture out to Raleigh on a regular basis to auction it off. I know that 'cause I asked the auctioneer. He said the Harker family's done business with his company for over fifty years.”

Bridget shrugged. “Lots of people work on a cash-only basis.”

Kurt slumped back in his seat. “You don't get it yet, do you?”

“No, I don't.”

He yanked his wallet out of his back pocket and flipped it open. “I have a social security card. I have a driver's license and credit cards. So do you. I file an income tax return every year and so do you. Everyone leaves a paper trail; but the Harkers don't. I know they don't 'cause I checked. They don't file income taxes. They don't even have birth certificates. The deeds to their land and the title on Shiloh's truck are the only tangible proofs of their existence. The title for the truck was filed over eighty years ago.”

Bridget stared at him. “Lily and Shiloh must have birth certificates. They both have driver's licenses. I had to bring my birth certificate with me when I got my driver's license.”

“They don't have birth certificates.” Kurt returned the wallet to his pocket. “I know someone at the State Police office who owes me a favor. She looked it up for me in their computer files. They got their licenses last year when the Sheriff went with them and swore out an affidavit to identify them. He said the records of their birth certificates were destroyed during a flood.”

“That's not unusual. Lacrimas gets flooded every other year.”

Kurt rubbed his head as if he had a migraine coming on. "There's a major discrepancy between the birthdates on their drivers' licenses and the date on the deeds in Lily's name."

"What kind of discrepancy?"

"The transfer into her name occurred in 1962. According to her driver's license, she was born August 16th, 2017."

Bridget sagged back. Lily still didn't trust her enough to tell her the whole truth.

"Well?" Kurt asked.

Bridget rested her hands on the steering wheel. "It's a mistake. Maybe the deeds were put in Lily's grandmother's name and never transferred into her name."

"Really?"

She cocked her head. "Her name Lilith is a name that's been in her family for centuries. What are you going to do about it?"

Kurt raked his hand through his hair. "I'll do whatever it takes. I'll lie for Lily. I'll steal for her. I'll buy fake birth certificates and social security cards if that's what she needs."

Chapter Nineteen

Nathanial fastened the final button on his shirt. Doubt rode his mind like a demon upon his back. Its claws pierced his heart.

"I don't remember that shirt." Lilith's uneasiness jumped at him despite the casual tone of her voice. "When did you make it?"

He selected a pair of soft chamois gloves from the bed and turned around to face his caterdrus. Tension marked the supple lines of Lilith's body. She rested her hand on the mantelpiece. Shiloh knelt at her feet and placed another log on the hearth. The last two nights had been noticeably cooler.

"I finished it last week." There wasn't enough time for him to add a few pieces of fancy needlework around the cuffs or collar. He smoothed his hand over the cloth. "Do you think she'll like it?"

Shiloh stood, hung the poker back on its hook and brushed the ashes from his jeans. "She'll like it. She notices little things." A stray spark flew out from the hearth and landed on the firebrick beside his boots.

Drawn by the sadness in Shiloh's heart, Nathaniel went to his side and rested his hand upon his caterdru's shoulder. "You saw her today. What happened?"

Shiloh sighed and shook his head. "I felt her desire. She desired me. She saw my body's response to her desire and it confused her."

"Why did her arousal confuse her?" Nathaniel turned toward Lilith. Her caterbond with Bridget remained his best guide. "She gave me her full consent for the glimorf."

"You didn't do anything wrong." Lilith slipped her hand into Shiloh's. "You don't know how it is with her people. You haven't been out there like we have. Her society uses guilt to control women from birth through death."

"They have a double standard." A brittle cold anger filled Shiloh's voice.

"Aye." Lilith inclined her head. "Their double standard applies separate rules of behavior for men and women."

Lilith reached out. Her fingers dug into Nathaniel's wrist. She pulled him closer. "You haven't been in their churches or heard their preachers. Guilt saturates their Bible. Their God banished them from paradise because of the woman's sinful weakness."

Her eyes darkened with anger. "This double standard says that men who share pleasure with many women are to be admired by all as following their natural instinct to procreate. They teach their women to bind themselves to only one partner during their lifetime. Those women who choose more than one partner are cast out as harlots."

Nathaniel looked at Shiloh and saw total agreement. "That contradicts their marriage laws. I know if a man or woman desires to dissolve their marriage, he or she may petition the court for a divorce. After the divorce is granted, then either partner may choose another to marry."

Lilith lifted an eyebrow. "That's correct. Their laws permit different partners, but in sequence, not at the same time."

Nathaniel struggled to find the right words. "A heart can be bound to more than one person. I love you. I love Bridget. I love Shiloh, Elizabeth

and Percy. How can anyone limit their heart in such a foul manner? How can a woman breed herself a strong sisterline from only one man?"

Shiloh jerked his shoulder from Nathaniel's touch. "Because it's a warped society. They call it survival of the fittest. The man is supposed to kill or scare away all other males from his partner's side. The strongest male will then be able to breed with as many women as he can control."

Nathaniel stared at them. "A strong body does not guarantee intelligence. That is why the female chooses, not the male. She carries the children. She must be able to choose the best possible partners in order to give her children a better chance to survive."

His body shook with anger. Nathaniel clenched his hands and took a deep breath to try and calm himself. Lilith and Shiloh pulled him closer and hugged him between them. They reached for him through their caterbond and let their love and concern wash the anger away.

Lilith whispered. "I know, but that's the way it is. They fear women and bind their women with guilt."

Nathaniel sighed. "Guilt is a powerful tool."

"Aye." Her fingers dug into his arm. "Remember this when you see Bridget tonight."

Shiloh smiled. "Her passion is strong and vibrant. Last night, the leakage from her glimorf pulsed through your caterbond into us."

Lilith tucked a loose strand of Nathaniel's hair behind his ear. "I would have appreciated a little warning before you started that emotional feedback loop. Tonight, if you react on your impulses and have full intercourse with her, she'll feel guilty every time she sees Shiloh."

It had been a long time since he'd shared himself with another empath. How could such a simple joy become twisted into a complicated mess? Nathaniel sighed. What he felt for Bridget was more, much more than his body reacting to her desire. "Her mind is incredible. Every time I am with her I forget she is not one of our people."

The bitter anger banked within Shiloh softened into warm appreciation. "After I tested her mettle in our first chess game, she focused. In the second game, we battled to and fro for two weeks until she saw her goal and pushed me into a checkmate. It felt wonderful!"

Nathaniel smiled. He and Shiloh hardly ever played chess anymore. They knew each other's mind too well. Their games had become too predictable. With Bridget, it would feel different. Her unique combination of

wit and passion and intelligence made every encounter an exhilarating experience. 'I wish we had found her sooner. The best time would have been when her grandmother died. She would have known us from the very beginning.' He looked at Shiloh. "Then when she came of age, she might have asked you to assist me with her glimorf."

"Stop that!" Lilith pushed them apart. Her stern gaze quickly dampened the heat that had flared up between them at the thought of such an awakening. "You know as well as I that we must live with the changes life has dealt us instead of wishing for what might have been." She glanced at the shuttered window. The first faint pink light of the setting sun trickled in between the cracks. "It's time for you to go."

"Aye," Nathaniel managed to speak past his suddenly parched throat. His heart thundered in his ears.

Lilith tapped his arm. "We're going with you. We'll be waiting close by when you see her."

Nathaniel gave her a grateful smile. "I will try not to do anything rash."

"Good." Lilith pulled him and Shiloh to her for one last hug. "In my eyes, both of you are the best possible choice. Your bloodlines are diverse enough to provide any woman with strong, intelligent children for her sisterline."

Shiloh coughed and cleared his throat. "Something else happened today."

Lilith stared at him. "What?"

"Kurt agreed to become Bridget's caterdru."

Lilith's elation soared though them.

Feeling as if his heart would burst in his chest with relief, Nathaniel followed them outside. It was the perfect solution. It wouldn't be as difficult as they thought for Bridget to learn their ways.

They walked down the slope. The leading edge of a storm cloud raced across the darkening sky. A quicksilver curtain of rain moved across the water. It caught up with them just as they reached the dock. Fat droplets splattered against the dust at their feet. Running hand in hand like children under the sudden downpour, they ducked into the shelter of a mimosa tree. The curtain of rain enveloped the tree and shook loose a shower of pale pink blossoms.

The storm moved on its way as fast as it had come. Wisps of steam rose from the overheated water into the cooler air around the two canoes bobbing in the water below the dock.

Lilith plucked a blossom from Nathaniel's hair and handed it to him. He cradled it for a moment and opened his hand. They watched the fragile flower drift to the ground. Nathaniel looked at Lilith with his heart in his eyes. "Love comes and goes like the wind. Sometimes it hurts but most times it brings joy. I am willing to risk losing my heart to Bridget. What about Kurt? Will you give him a chance?"

Tears flooded her eyes. She shook her head. "I don't know if I have that kind of courage yet."

* * * *

The traffic light was taking forever to change. Bridget took her hand off the stick shift. "It's not worth the hassle of getting caught."

She rubbed at a stiff muscle in the back of her neck. A curtain of rain poured down ten feet away while her side of the street remained dry. Fat raindrops splattered onto the dusty sidewalk. The storm moved away down the street in the general direction of the courthouse. Soft tendrils of steam curled from the wet concrete.

Bridget rolled the window down. A rain-dampened gust of wind ruffled her hair and tossed a feathery soft mimosa blossom inside the jeep on the passenger seat. She picked up the flower. It looked just like a tiny pink fan. She looked up just in time to see the traffic light change from yellow back to red.

A chuckle gusted from her mouth. Twirling the tiny flower between her thumb and forefinger, she tucked it behind her right ear and waited. This time when the light changed to green, she drove through.

The two-lane highway skirted the edge of the swamp. Wisps of steam rose from the rain-slick macadam and coalesced into a ground-hugging fog. Splashing through the puddles beneath moss-shrouded trees that crowded the road, Bridget wondered how it would feel to live deep in the heart of the swamp itself. She imagined a shadowed refuge deep within the tangled vegetation, forever hidden from the blistering rays of the sun.

She drove around a wide curving turn and saw an ancient mimosa tree beside the road. Its shaggy head loomed high against the pink-streaked sky. Twisted into asymmetrical beauty with huge rents gouged in its branches by many long years of wind and lightning, it reminded her of a huge bonsai tree. Tenacious and strong like the Harkers, it continued to

flourish despite the modern-day hardwoods that invaded its territory. It followed its own rhythm, bursting into bloom at the height of the summer's heat and holding on to its blossoms through September into late October.

The setting sun dipped below the horizon. The placid river flowing along beside the road became a molten ribbon of fire.

* * * *

The last rays of the setting sun touched the land. Nathaniel stepped out onto the parking lot in front of the clinic. He stopped. Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong. He heard a steady thudding sound. Over and over, it repeated itself with no rhyme or reason. He studied the darkened building. None of the lights remained lit, not even the yellow parking lights around the heliport.

The front door hung open. He saw deep gouges in the wood around the keyhole.

Nathaniel stopped and let his senses reach for Bridget. He found her. She would arrive within moments. No fear or danger clouded her mind. He let his mind search the deserted clinic and found the wild fever of Shelley's rage. That sound was the sound of the dog throwing his body repeatedly against a locked door, in a desperate attempt to batter it down.

Nathaniel let his senses reach further inside the building and found the mind of a stranger. Someone who did not belong there waited inside the clinic.

He must stop this intruder. The forbidden fires of adrenaline coursed through Nathaniel's veins and propelled him across the darkened parking lot. He stepped inside the open door and stopped. The locked door on the other side of the waiting room shook under Shelley's weight as the dog threw his body against it again. Nathaniel rested his gloved hand on the doorknob and pulled. The hinges flew off. He threw the door aside. It crashed against one of the chairs and shattered it.

Shelley barreled past at full speed. His paws skittered wildly on the tiled floor. The dog gathered his legs under him and galloped past, a black blur of fur and muscle intent upon the intruder at the other end of the curving corridor.

Nathaniel followed. There was no thought, only reaction.

* * * *

A nameless dread flowed into Bridget. The driveway twisted and curved like an angry snake in front of her headlights. She turned the jeep. Loose gravel flew out from under her tires. She skidded to a stop on the parking lot. Her headlights blazed like a torch directly at the front door. It hung open and swung ajar on its hinges like a wounded animal. She fumbled at the dashboard for the CB controls and flipped the switch.

The CB crackled into life. Bridget cradled the microphone against her chest. "Help." She whispered. "911. Come in, 911. Please help. This is Dr. O'Keefe. Someone broke into my clinic. Help."

"Ma'am." Anna Mae's distinctive voice crackled over the static. "Dr. O'Keefe." Bridget dropped the microphone, scabbled blindly on the floor and picked it up again. "Where are you, ma'am?"

"I'm in the parking lot outside the clinic." Bridget whispered. "I can't see anyone. It's dark. The lights are off. The front door's hanging open. I can see it."

"Ma'am." Anna Mae's calm, matter-of-fact tones ignored Bridget's panic. "You just put your jeep in reverse and get out of there. I'm ringing the sheriff right now. He'll be over to check things out. Don't go inside. Let the sheriff handle it when he arrives."

Bridget sat frozen in her seat. A man's voice yelled from inside the clinic. The rattle of automatic gunfire drowned out the yell. She heard a scream. The scream crawled up and up and stopped.

She threw the microphone down on the seat. Anna Mae's voice continued forlornly from the microphone. "Ma'am, are you there? Ma'am, Dr. O'Keefe, please respond."

Bridget opened the jeep's door and climbed out. She heard the sheriff's voice roar from the discarded microphone. "Where the hell is Luke? Where's my gun? No, not that damn peashooter, gimme the shotgun Anna Mae."

Bridget turned, stared at the jeep and listened.

"Where is Luke? Why hasn't he reported in yet?"

"He's out on patrol, sir."

"Anna Mae."

"Sir?"

“Get on the horn and ring Gooches’ store. Tell Luke to stop stuffing his mouth with hot dogs and get his sorry little ass out to the clinic as of yesterday.”

“Yes sir!”

Bridget heard a crashing sound inside the clinic, the sound of breaking glass. Even though a part of her brain screamed at her to run like hell in the opposite direction, there was no time for thought, only reaction. She ran into the clinic.

* * * *

Glass crunched under Nathaniel's boots. Shelley's rumbling growl vibrated in the air. The dog walked stiff legged toward the intruder, a man with stringy brown hair flopping over his colorless face. The medicine cabinet lay toppled on the floor with brown plastic vials spilling out from its shattered glass door. A filing cabinet stood against the opposite wall, its drawers half opened while papers and folders poured out at its base in an untidy pile.

Moonlight spilled in from the French doors behind the stranger's head. He held a pistol in his right hand, a pistol with a short ugly muzzle. Nathaniel saw no similarity whatsoever between this gun and the sleek deadly lines of the many revolvers and rifles he'd taken from hunters who had dared to trespass upon his land.

The muscles in Shelley's haunches bunched under him. The dog launched himself at the intruder. The man fell back under the dog's weight. His feet scrabbled for purchase on the tiled floor. His left shoulder crashed against the filing cabinet. The stranger jammed his weapon under the dog's head.

Nathaniel stepped forward with his hand stretched out to slap the pistol aside. His shadow fell across Shelley's back. The man looked up, yelled “What the fuck?” And jerked his hand sideways. The gun exploded into sound. Blood spurted from Shelley's hindquarters.

Shelley yelped and clamped his jaws around the man's leg. The man screamed. The gun exploded into sound again. A brutal force punched through the right side of Nathaniel's body and spun him around. Nathaniel's left hand crashed against the stranger's head. The man's high-pitched scream of pain stopped in mid note. Nathaniel's body slammed into the wall. He could not see. He heard the pistol spin uselessly across the tiled floor.

Nathanial placed his hand on the wall and pushed himself to his feet but it was too late. He felt the man's life flicker out into nothingness.

Shelley lifted his head, looked up with pain filled eyes and whined. Dark red blood pooled around the dog's shattered hindquarters.

The gunman lay with his arms and legs akimbo. His head twisted so far sideways, it looked like someone had twisted backward on his neck. The filing cabinet swayed back and forth and toppled across the man's legs. Shelley yelped again.

Nathanial took a breath. Pain seared through his lungs. He looked down. Blood drenched the front of his shirt. His right arm dangled like a useless appendage at his side.

Absolute denial roared through his brain. The walls of the room melted into a pulsing crimson. He could not escape the guilt that illuminated every crack and flaw in his soul. Blindly, instinctively, he reached for the presence of another living being and found Bridget.

No. Not her. She must not know. Frantically, his mind reached again with a skill he never realized he possessed and severed the fragile thread linking him to her. Shielding his face with his left arm, Nathanial fled into the night. The French doors splintered and shattered beneath his body. Shards of moonlit glass fell to the ground behind him.

* * * *

Bridget ran through a crimson tunnel of terror. Skidding across the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut by a giant pair of scissors, she landed on her hands and knees. The sour taste of vomit filled her mouth. Bone-white walls gibbered at her. The sound of glass shattering and splintering away into nothing assaulted her ears.

She sat back on her heels and tried to form a single coherent thought. The acrid tang of antiseptics stung her nostrils and penetrated the skewed sense of wrongness that fogged her mind.

A pitiful whimpering sound came from the open doorway in front of her. Using her hands to brace herself against the wall, Bridget rose to her feet and edged her way into the supply room.

She fumbled for the light switch and thumbed it on. Nothing happened. She blinked. Moonlight poured in through the gaping hole in the wall. A few scraps of splintered wood and one hinge from the destroyed patio doors dangled from the right side of the hole. The malevolent shape

of a nine-millimeter semi-automatic handgun lay on the moonlit floor. A thick black stain oozed its way into the pool of moonlight.

Shelley's whimper pierced the frozen numbness in Bridget's brain. She turned. The dog's blood stained body sprawled beside a pair of jean-clad legs sticking out under the overturned filing cabinet. The stench of fresh feces filled her lungs. The gunman's bowels had emptied during his death throes.

Shelley whimpered again. He lifted his head. His eyes pleaded with her to stop the pain.

Bridget went to her knees. "Oh baby." She let Shelley smell her hand. Ignoring the wet blood that seeped into her pants legs, she whispered soothingly. "Mama's here. You did good. I'm going to take care of you now."

If she didn't do something soon, Shelley would die. Making sure she didn't jostle the dog any more than she had to, Bridget rose to her feet and stepped over the gunman's body. He wasn't going anywhere. Sorting through the mess scattered across the floor, she found a vial of liquid Valium, a syringe and needle, topical antiseptics, a box of surgical gloves and several rolls of gauze. She clutched her bounty to her chest, hurried into the next room and dumped everything on the gurney.

Valium and a few basic antiseptics were safe to use on dogs; she remembered that much from her post-grad excursion into veterinary medicine. Unfortunately, just about everything else she had, like Tylenol, would poison a dog. After she stopped the bleeding and bandaged Shelley, she must keep him calm and make sure he didn't bleed to death while she tried to contact a veterinarian for emergency surgery.

Bridget re-entered the supply room and knelt by Shelley's side. Absolute trust glowed in his eyes while she stabbed him in the rump with a minute dose of Valium. She studied the extensive damage to his hip. Amputation would probably be the most likely scenario. She pressed a thick wad of gauze over the wound.

Shelley's eyes glazed over when the Valium took effect. He sighed and slumped into a deep sleep. A light moving around outside caught Bridget's attention. When the flashlight moved closer, she instinctively let her mind search for the person behind the light and found Lily's familiar pattern.

Vigilance wrapped Lily's mind like a cloak. Considering the circumstances, that made perfect sense. Lily had every right to feel wary. Hearing gunshots in the middle of the night wasn't exactly a normal occurrence.

Glass crunched under Lily's sneakers. She stepped through the gaping rent that used to be the patio doors and spared the intruder's body a single glance. She clipped the flashlight to the waistband of her jeans, squatted down on her heels, slid her hands under Shelley's head and rump and rose to her feet with the dog cradled against her chest.

Bridget stood up and motioned at Lily to follow her. They placed him on the examination table in the next room. Lily dug a blanket from the bottom drawer and wrapped it around the dog's sleeping body. Her brain felt like it struggled through molasses. When she reached over the crude bandage and tucked a corner of the blanket under Shelley, the moonlight seemed to gather around her hands. Bridget stared at the blood-soaked bracelet of brown hair coiled around her right wrist. Time stretched itself out and looped back in upon itself.

"Nathanial."

She looked into Lily's eyes. Their caterbond pulsed between them.

"He's grievously wounded." Lily kept her voice precise and tightly controlled. "One bullet lodged in his chest, and another in his right shoulder. The third passed through his right arm. I left Shiloh with him."

"He needs me." Bridget bumped her hand against the gurney and hesitated. If she didn't get Shelley to a vet, he'd die.

Lily brushed her finger across Shelley's ear. "I'll call my vet. When I tell him what happened, he'll call the State Vet School and handle all the arrangements for emergency surgery." She paused. A frown creased her forehead then she nodded. "Kurt will fly him there."

"Kurt?"

"He agreed to become your caterdru. Right?"

"Yes, he has but I don't see..."

"If he agreed to become your caterdru, then he'll do this with no questions asked."

Bridget took a deep breath and glanced up at the darkened ceiling. "The lights don't work. How can you use the phone if I don't have any electricity?"

Lily twisted her mouth into a wry smile. "The phone company laid a separate underground cable for your lines because of all the floods we have around here."

A siren wailed outside the clinic. Bridget and Lily froze and stared at each other.

Lily recovered first. "It's the sheriff. I'll talk to him."

Bridget pulled the surgical gloves off and tossed them in the waste container. "What about the vet?"

Lily paused in the doorway. "Right after I settle the sheriff down, I'll call my vet, then Kurt."

Bridget nodded. "While you're doing that, I'll pack what I need to work on Nathaniel."

A few minutes later, Bridget opened the bottom drawer in the cabinet and pulled a couple of IV lines out.

"Ma'am? Dr. O'Keefe?"

She jumped and almost knocked over a tray of surgical instruments at the sound of the sheriff's booming voice behind her. She turned around. "What?"

Sheriff Ben Jackson stood in the doorway. He wore a paisley print pajama top tucked into his gun belt and brown uniform pants. He readjusted his pants to a more comfortable position under the solid bulk of his abdomen and retrieved a pen and notepad from his back pocket. "I have to ask you a few questions, ma'am." An apologetic grimace crossed his face. "Seeing as how you're the only witness I have."

Bridget inclined her head. It was the safest response she could think of at the moment.

"It's just a formality." He gave her another grimace and waved his hand. "You're not a suspect but I need to have an official record of your statements about this unfortunate incident before I release you."

Bridget gulped and bobbed her head. A rather incriminating assortment of surgical supplies laid on the countertop behind her. She smothered an insane urge to rub her hands together and cackle at him to help her do an autopsy.

He tapped his pen against the pad and asked his first question. "Did you see the bear?"

"The bear?" Bridget repeated blankly. "What bear?"

He flashed an encouraging smile. "The bear. Did you see the bear that killed the burglar? Did you see it running away into the swamp?" Bridget shook her head. "I didn't see a bear."

Taking advantage of the moonlight streaming in through the remains of the patio doors, he scribbled her words down on his notepad.

Bridget perked up. "Shelley."

The sheriff lifted his head and waited with his pen poised over the pad. "Shelley?"

Bridget waved her hand toward the next room. "I've had a couple of people mistake him for a bear cub, the first time they saw him."

The lights flickered and came on all over the building.

Luke stuck his head around the corner of the door. "I got the heliport all lit up now." He wandered over to the other side of the room and stared outside through the hole in the wall. A few seconds later he hurriedly removed his hat, bobbed his head and backed away.

Lily stepped inside. A large green duffel bag and Bridget's leather satchel dangled from her right hand. Giving the sheriff a cursory nod, she stepped over the body and strode to the countertop. Her movements remained grim, self assured and efficient. She opened the satchel and duffel bag and stuffed everything she found on the countertop inside them.

Bridget stared at the twelve-gauge pump action shotgun strapped to Lily's back. Lily's thick blond braid bobbed beside it.

A soft cough over Bridget's shoulder reminded her of the sheriff's continued presence. "You best get going now before the State Troopers arrive and hold you for questioning." He coughed again. "Watch out for that bear."

"Aye." Lily slung the duffel bag over her shoulder. "I'll do that." She handed Bridget the satchel, unclipped the flashlight from her belt, thumbed it on and jerked her head at Bridget to follow her outside.

The sheriff stepped aside and glared at his deputy. "Luke! Don't just stand there. Give me a hand with this dog."

They left and added yet another set of footprints to the evidence in the shattered patio doors, footprints that would hide Nathaniel's tracks.

* * * *

Clouds scudded past the brilliant light of the full moon. Bridget slogged behind Lily. "Why did the sheriff make up that story about the bear?"

A bemused wonder brushed at the edge of Bridget's mind. Lily ducked under a branch. "There's value in him." She stopped and waited for Bridget

to catch up. “A value I never expected to find. His great-great grandsire swore no oath, yet he'll play the part of a fool for us.”

“A fool?”

Lily shifted the duffel bag on her shoulder into a better position. “Only a fool would let two witnesses walk off into a swamp in the middle of the night. He told me he'd use hair and blood from a bear he'd shot last night in the town dump and add it to the mess at the clinic for additional evidence. Then he gave me the shotgun in case we ran into any problems along the way.”

A somber consideration filled her eyes. She studied Bridget's face. “Do you know why I wanted you to come with me?”

“Nathanial's wounded. He was shot. He needs me.’

“He needs you to pull his mind back from the darkness he has chosen. You will have to walk the edge of madness when you do this task. I cannot force you. The choice is yours.”

Bridget gulped. “Of course I'll do it. I don't want him to die.”

Chapter Twenty

Red clay clung to Bridget's sneakers. She followed Lily down the path onto a narrow beach.

A moss-shrouded cypress tree leaned over the two canoes moored at its base. Shiloh knelt in the sand beside the canoes. A breeze drifted in over the water and lifted the hem of the silvery green curtain of moss above him. The pitiless glare of the jacklights attached to both canoes lit his bowed head and slumped shoulders. His ponytail flowed down his shirtless back like a thick-bodied snake.

Shiloh lifted his head.

Bridget stumbled under the black despair that slammed into her from Shiloh. She went to her knees. Nathanial's dying. He's dead. I'm too late. Fat, sloppy tears dripped down her face.

She scrubbed the tears away on her sleeve and looked inside the canoe. Shiloh had wedged a hard, square flotation cushion beneath Nathanial's right shoulder. A second cushion shielded his head from the hard

fiberglass bottom. Blood-stiffened pieces of Shiloh's shirt covered the wounds in his chest and arm.

A sigh of relief gusted from her parted lips. Bridget sat back on her heels. Shiloh knew enough to seal off the gaping holes in Nathaniel's chest with bandages and prop him on his left side so he could breathe easier.

If he hadn't taken those simple precautions, the open chest wounds would have sucked air into the pleural cavity around the rib cage. Then both lungs would have collapsed under the pressure from the pleural cavity and squeezed Nathaniel's heart into full cardiac arrest.

Shiloh's strong fingers wrapped themselves around Bridget's wrists. He pulled a pair of surgical gloves over her hands, wiped her eyes with a piece of gauze and helped her blow her nose. She blinked away the rest of her tears and adjusted the stethoscope around her neck. Lily and Shiloh slipped surgical gloves on, too.

Bridget reminded herself not to flinch, then leaned over the canoe and pushed a handful of matted plaits away from Nathaniel's face. More surprised than shocked, she gaped for a few moments. He had bushy eyebrows, closely trimmed mustache and beard the same rich medium brown shade as his plaited hair. A soft downy coating of light brown fur covered the rest of his face, except for his eyes. He isn't ugly. He's just a lot hairier than I expected, that's all.

Bridget reached down, picked up his hand and turned it over. He didn't have any fur on the palm of his hand either. That's why I never noticed it. He always touched my hands. I never touched his.

She leaned over even further and stared at his face. His bone structure and wide jaw matched Shiloh's.

Bridget closed her eyes and shifted mental gears into the cold, ruthless efficiency drilled into her during her internship. She opened her eyes, placed the stethoscope against his rib cage and listened to the distinct gurgling sound of Nathaniel struggling to breathe under the slow inexorable pressure of a collapsed lung.

Luckily, he remained unconscious. She didn't have the luxury of time to use a local anesthetic for this procedure. Bridget extended her hand. "Scalpel, please. Cut six strips of adhesive tape about three inches long. Get me IV lines and two cannula."

Shiloh handed Bridget a scalpel. Lily pulled the adhesive tape and IV lines out of the duffel bag. "What are cannula?"

“They look like turkey basters.” Bridget unbuttoned Nathaniel's shirt and exposed his rib cage. “Shiloh!”

“Aye.”

“Uncoil the IV lines. Open two bags of the saline solution. Pour half of the solution out on the ground.”

Placing the scalpel just above the third rib from the bottom, she made her first cut. Dark red blood welled up in the narrow incision and matted his fur. “Give me one of the cannula.”

Lily handed it to her. Bridget pushed the pointed end of the ‘turkey baster’ cannula into the incision and held out her left hand. “An IV line and three pieces of adhesive tape, please.”

Shiloh passed her the IV line and adhesive tape. She removed the rubber bulb from the protruding end of the small plastic tube, guided the narrow end of the IV line into the incision and eased the cannula back over the IV line.

Shiloh took over the task of sliding the cannula the rest of the way off the IV line while she taped the other end down. No time to shave, either. Nathaniel was going to have to put up with the aggravation of losing a good hunk of his fur when they removed the tape.

Bridget looked into Shiloh's worried eyes. “Suck on the other end of the IV line until the air hisses out, then insert it in one of the bags of saline solution. Make sure the bag's at least two feet lower than his body.”

Comprehension lit up Shiloh's face. He picked up the IV line. “I know what you're doing. We're siphoning fluid from his lungs just like I'd siphon gas from a car.”

Relief steadied Bridget's hands. She didn't have to explain everything step by step to them. Counting under her breath, she placed the scalpel above the eighth rib in Nathaniel's back and made the second incision. When the blood welled up in the narrow cut, Lily reached in with the other cannula and pushed it in. While Bridget removed the rubber bulb, Lily threaded another IV line inside and slid the bulb the rest of the way off.

Shiloh spat out a mouthful of blood. He slid the second IV line into the second bag of saline solution. Clots of blood and mucous swirled from the IV lines into the partially filled bags. Nathaniel coughed. His chest started to expand and contract in a slow, steady rhythm. An enormous pressure released its grip on Bridget's heart. Lily and Shiloh echoed her heartfelt sigh.

Bridget shifted her gaze from Lily to Shiloh and back to Nathaniel.

Lily whispered. "Being an empath means we can feel and react to his pain, too."

Bridget blinked. Hell of a reaction! It's a wonder we didn't all pass out from hyperventilation.

Lily removed her gloves and passed them over to Shiloh. Bridget followed Lily's example, peeled off her gloves and gave them to Shiloh. Shiloh tossed their soiled gloves in a small plastic bag, discarded his gloves into the same bag and sealed it.

Lily nudged Shiloh. "Load everything into your canoe. I should be able to manage both Bridget and Nathaniel in mine."

"Why?" Bridget looked back and forth between them. "Wouldn't it make more sense if I rode with Shiloh? You'd have three people versus one person in two different canoes. The weight difference isn't practical."

Lily hunkered down on her heels. Shiloh picked up the duffel bag and stepped around her while she stared at Bridget. "In a physical sense, that's more practical, but we have a psychic trauma we have to deal with also. Nathaniel wants to die because he killed that man at your clinic."

"B-but it was self-defense. What was he supposed to do? Just stand there and let that man shoot him instead."

Sadness shadowed Lily's eyes. "Self-defense or accidental, however it happened, the fact remains that he killed another human being. By our laws, I should name him mabgli and turn my face away from him."

Bridget stared at her. "What good is it for me to pull him back if you're going to punish him."

"I'm not going to do that. He's already banished himself. He doesn't know how I feel. He doesn't know I won't banish him." Lily picked up a twig and snapped it between her fingers. "He forged a bond with you during the glimorf. Such a bond is difficult to seal off. I believe you're the only one who can reach the place in his mind where he fled and sealed himself away from us. Remember when I asked you on the way over here if you knew what I wanted to do? I told you you'd have to walk the edge of madness to help him. You told me you'd try, and that's all anyone can do right now."

Bridget shivered. "I did say that, didn't I?"

"Aye."

“I don't know what to do!”

Lily studied Bridget's face for a long moment, then said. “I'll be with you. I'll help you gain entrance.”

Bridget swallowed the lump in her throat, glanced at Nathaniel's face, then reached for his wounded arm and twisted his biceps as hard as she could. He didn't react at all to the pain. He remained comatose, totally unaware of his surroundings. She pushed a loose strand of hair from his face. Her head felt mushy. She couldn't concentrate. Her thoughts kept skittering in every direction like fleas.

Shiloh took hold of Bridget's arm. She climbed into the canoe. Shiloh helped her lay down on her right side beside Nathaniel. Nathaniel's soft silky fur soothed her fingers. The gentle pressure of Shiloh's hands while he tucked a warm blanket around her and Nathaniel crackled through her hyper-extended nerves.

Comatose patients felt people touching them. They heard people talking to them. Even though they showed no reaction to external stimuli during their vegetative states, they remembered these things when they regained consciousness.

Lily climbed inside and launched the canoe. The bobbing motion of the canoe every time she dipped the paddle in the water didn't do too much for Bridget's queasy stomach. Moving with deliberate slowness, she eased her left arm up without disturbing the IV lines and bags of saline solution tucked between her and Nathaniel. His fur felt thicker and springier in the middle, tapering down to the bottom of his abdomen.

I've had plenty of practice shutting people out all my life. Bridget studied the blood soaked bandages on his chest and moved her hand lower until it rested on his hip. Nathaniel pulled me out when I imploded and relived my grandmother's funeral. How did he do that? He sent for Lily and Shiloh. They held me in their arms and let me feel how much they loved me.

They loved her. Love was the key. Love was stronger than death. Do I love him? Yes! She traced the soft curve of his lips. Nothing wrong with his mouth. Now that she knew how he really looked, it didn't really matter. She would always love him.

It took three of them to bring me back. It'll take all three of us to bring him back. When this realization shaped itself in Bridget's mind, she relaxed and let her empathic senses reach for Lily. The caterbond thickened

between them into a solid band of light. Lily's inner strength flowed through Bridget the same way it did during their catermorf.

Without any further thought as to why or what she was doing, Bridget instinctively reached for Shiloh. A second thread of light burst into life and solidified between her and him. His steadfast love and loyalty rushed through her and around her in a warm wild protective embrace.

Shiloh's love looped from her to Lily into Nathaniel then back to her again. He loved her. He loved Lily. He loved Nathaniel. Lily's love soared through her and Shiloh. Water slapped against the hollow fiberglass sides of the canoe. Damp, cool air gusted in and out of Bridget's lungs. The jack-light swinging above her head glowed like a second moon against the black sky.

A warm cocoon of light wove itself around Bridget and Nathaniel. Her eyelids drooped. There is a time halfway between awake and asleep. The aborigine shamans in Australia have a special word for it. They call it the dreamtime. According to them, it's a special time where our minds are free to wander through the past, present and future. In our dreamtime, we have all the time in the world because all time is accessible to us.

Holding as tight as she could to the threads binding her to Lily and Shiloh, Bridget let her mind reach inside for Nathaniel. It felt weird, as if she spun and fell around and around in a dizzy spiral, down, down, down inside him, deeper and deeper, until she crashed against a wall of denial, despair and desolation.

A cold sterile void surrounded her. Why didn't she feel cold? She raised her hand. Light glowed around her and through her. Where is the light coming from? My eyes are closed. Then she smiled. I'm in the dreamtime. The light came from the same place it always came from when she dreamed. It was created by her mind.

Bridget looked down. Her clothes had vanished. Her hair hung loose. It flowed and rippled about her shoulders with a life of its own. Light clothed her. It shimmered over her breasts and hips. It traced the silver and moonstone lines of the llandru and ghradru around her neck and waist. She looked back over her shoulder. Lily and Shiloh sat behind her, two tiny unclothed images in the distance. Long, silvery bands of light stretched from them to her. They anchored her. They waited to pull her back when she needed them.

Lily and Shiloh were in her and with her. Bridget seated herself in the featureless void and kept reaching. Over and over, she threw her love

against the featureless wall. Strength and love flowed into her from Lily and Shiloh.

They pushed against the wall together. Nathaniel could not withstand them forever. They had all the time in the world in the no-time of dreamtime.

She looked up. The wall had vanished! Crumbled stones lay on the blank emptiness in front of her. How long had she sat there waiting for that wall to disintegrate? As long as it took. This was the dreamtime. Nathaniel waited out there, ahead of her, in the void.

Bridget looked down and ran her hand across her abdomen. Why am I naked? In the same moment that her mind formed this question the answer came to her. Because looking for someone like this, mind to mind, means I have to strip myself of all pretenses and let him see me as I really am. That's why Lily and I removed our clothes during the catermorf. We acted out the concept of two naked minds connecting with one another.

As this realization crystallized in her mind, Bridget looked up and saw Nathaniel. He stood off to the side with hunched shoulders and his head turned away from her. He stood tall, taller than Lily, taller than Shiloh. The soft brown fur coating his body smoothed out the thick musculature of his arms and legs and chest. He felt shy and scared and unmistakably male.

Bridget uncrossed her legs and rose to her feet. She hesitated, desperately wishing he'd let her come closer, let her touch him and let her see his face.

She stood there, poised between now and eternity. Bridget had no earthly idea what to do or say next. She wanted to touch him, to be with him. She wanted to tell him everything was all right. That he didn't have to hide from her anymore. She couldn't speak. The words wouldn't come out.

Nathaniel tilted his head and slanted a sideways look at her. Bridget lifted her hand and reached for him.

* * * *

Bridget's delighted wonder crackled and sparkled around Nathaniel like fireflies. Her sweet competence soothed his aching ribs. Hope whispered in his heart.

He looked at himself. The soft leather gloves he always wore to conceal his hands had vanished. His clothes had vanished. Coarse, filthy hair covered his monstrous body. Blood, pus and offal coated and matted his

hands, arms and legs. A hideous stench filled his lungs. Pain exploded through his brain in dark lines of fire. He fell to his knees and emptied his belly in a wrenching rush of self-disgust. He'd killed a man. He was mabgli. From this day forward, he had no sister, nor kin. He had no one. He did not deserve to live.

He scuttled backward, pulling his shame about himself like a cloak. She must not see him!

Where could he hide? How did she find him? He couldn't escape. The bonds he thought he had severed remained with him. He twisted and turned and rolled his body upon the gore soaked ground and failed to remove them. Three gossamer threads clung to him and held him back from the emptiness he craved.

Sick shame flooded his veins. Stale vomit rushed into his mouth. He ducked his head, tucked his knees to his chest and folded his arms around them in a last desperate attempt to hide.

It didn't work. Bridget stood beside him. Her hand rested upon his shoulder. Nothing was as it should be. How could she bear to touch him? He was mabgli. The blood of another man's death stained his hand.

Hope trembled in his heart. She knows what you did. She can see you. There is no fear, no repugnance in her heart. Look at her one more time before you leave.

He loosened his grip around his knees and opened his eyes. Copperfire coated her sweet curves. Slowly, carefully, he stood, feeling huge and clumsy as if he went through puberty all over again. He didn't know where to put his hands. Would she reject him?

She smiled. She pushed the tangled braids away from his face. The fragile caterbond they shared rippled and thickened between them.

Joy thundered through him. She loves me! Her heart opened under him, generous and warm and safe. He poured himself into her and drank her essence into him. They merged in a giddy impetuous rush.

Never before had it happened like this, all at once. Such a bond was only achieved after a long, gradual courtship. Nevertheless, it happened with no turning back. The bond sealed itself, clean and pure and straight from her heart to his.

Eternity passed.

Nathaniel gasped and opened his eyes. He found himself lying in Lolith's canoe with Bridget's supple form wedged against him. Her soft gray

eyes gazed back at him. Lilith's caterbond and Shiloh's caterbond curled themselves around them in a soothing cocoon of light and love.

Everything was as it should be. Bridget had bonded herself to Shiloh, then to him. When she wanted to have children, she had both clervant and frone available to choose from. Between the two of them, they would breed for her a strong and fertile sisterline. Yes, everything was as it should be.

* * * *

A shuddering gasp shook Nathaniel's body. He opened his eyes and smiled.

Bridget blinked and stared at his teeth. Fangs? Yes, that's exactly what she saw. Nathaniel had fangs. Four eyeteeth flashed at her within his smile, longer and sharper than normal. Not ridiculously longer than normal, not like a vampire-they didn't extend out so far that he couldn't open and close his mouth like anyone else.

She traced his mouth with her finger. His smile broadened. Warm and tender love flowed from him into her. No wonder Nathaniel remained so secretive about his physical appearance. If you didn't know him and saw the hirsute features, and elongated eyeteeth, you might think he was a werewolf. But Nathaniel didn't have the luxury of changing his appearance according to the moonlight. He looked like this all the time.

Shiloh didn't have to worry about anyone mistaking him for a werewolf. With his unique combination of Native American and Black heritage, he had inherited a beardless face and hairless chest. Had the Harker women deliberately bred for those characteristics? Bridget shrugged. Probably not. The more likely scenario was that Indians and Blacks accepted the Harkers more readily because they experienced similar persecution regarding their 'racial' differences.

Memories flooded Bridget's brain. She remembered how Shiloh would always duck his head down and cover his mouth with his hand. She saw Lily laughing in the sunlight with her braid of platinum blond hair blazing like white gold. She remembered the thick coating of downy hair that dusted Lily's arms.

Bridget pushed herself up on her elbow. The canoe rocked dangerously under her sudden motion. She looked first at Shiloh, then twisted her head around to include Lily in her accusatory stare. "You have fangs, too."

Lily stabilized the canoe with her paddle. "Aye, we do. We never really concealed that from you."

Bridget sighed. "I saw them. I just didn't pay attention to them because they're smaller and more delicate in shape compared to Nathaniel's." She looked back at Shiloh. "And you. Every time you smiled, I looked at your eyes, not your mouth. I did see your fangs once. I didn't realize what I saw because even though yours are larger than Lily's, they're smaller than Nathaniel's."

Shiloh relaxed his hunched shoulders and flashed a lopsided grin at her. "People usually see only what they expect to see. You didn't see our fangs because you didn't expect to see them."

Nathaniel moved under Bridget's weight. His discomfort flared through her.

She hurriedly lifted herself off his left arm. "Don't move. You've lost too much blood already."

"Bridget." Nathaniel's raspy voice tugged at her heart.

She put her hand over his mouth. "Wait. Don't talk. You need to rest."

His gaze pleaded with her. His need to explain himself pulsed through her. She sighed. "All right. You can talk, but only when I let you. I don't want you to tire yourself out. I'm going to do most of the talking. Okay?"

Nathaniel inclined his head in reluctant agreement.

She plunged ahead at breakneck speed. "I saw the body of an intruder at the clinic with a broken neck. You fled because somehow you feel responsible for his death. Am I on the right track?"

His mouth tightened into a grim line. Guilty apprehension flooded Bridget's senses.

"This intruder, he had a gun. Right?"

"Aye." Bleakness, an apathetic emptiness permeated his voice.

"You had no weapon. He shot Shelley and he shot you."

"Aye."

Bridget exhaled. "Okay. Tell me what happened."

"His gun ... he shot at Shelley. I tried to disarm him. He saw me and fired at me. The blow I meant for his hand went astray and..."

"You hit him in the face instead of his hand and broke his neck."
Bridget finished in cold, flat tones. "It was an accident."

Sad formality filled Lily's voice. "There was no intent on your part to kill this stranger. You did not prolong his death needlessly; neither did you take pleasure from the manner of his death. We cannot alter the fact that you killed another human being tonight. You will always carry the mark of his death upon your soul."

Nathaniel's guilt and misery deepened into an open sore.

"Caterdru," Lily said finally.

"Aye."

"You are not mabgli."

He jerked under Bridget's hand as if an electric current had raced through his body. Disbelief, joy, disbelief, joy, then a swift healing warmth exploded through the emotional bonds linking him to Bridget, Lily and Shiloh. In that moment, the festering wound deep inside him healed into a thick scar. He had other scars inside him. Bridget felt them. She had a similar scar inside her. A self-inflicted one from that day when she stood by the coffin and stared at her grandmother's corpse.

While this tangled morass of thoughts and impressions flickered across her mind, Bridget's total acceptance of Nathaniel flowed from her into him, Shiloh and Lily and their total acceptance flowed back into her.

Nathaniel whispered. "We are clervants now. We are bonded to each other as life partners." His elation washed over Bridget, and floundered into a hesitant concern. "This was your free choice, was it not?"

My choice? Life partners? Bridget probed at the intricately woven strand between her and Nathaniel. He had filled up an empty space inside her heart that she had never even imagined existed in the first place. Now that he was there, she couldn't imagine life without him anymore.

Nathaniel's diffidence hovered over her. "You chose Shiloh as your frone, as your lesser partner, did you not?"

Bridget looked at Shiloh, reached, and found the second bond. Shiloh's protective love and strength remained sealed within her also. Relieved comprehension washed away her confusion. Everything was as it should be between them. Shiloh loved her even though he knew she had bonded with Nathaniel.

She patted Nathaniel's cheek. "My heart chose for me. Everything's all right now. I didn't realize at first what had happened. I just need a little more time to adjust to our bonds, that's all."

“Shiloh,” Nathaniel called softly.

“I am here.”

“If I should die, hold her to life with your bond.”

“You're not going to die. I won't let you.” The fierce totality of her stubborn denial shocked Bridget into momentary silence. The bond she had established with Nathaniel interfered with her professional detachment. How could she attempt to operate on him feeling like this?

Two lights floated on the darkness ahead of the canoes like a pair of fireflies. The canoes moved closer. Bridget saw Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Percival waiting on the shore with kerosene lanterns in their hands.

The next couple of minutes passed in a jumble of swift impressions. They tied the canoes up at the dock. Bridget climbed out and gave Shiloh and Uncle Percy hasty orders to untie the canoe. Lily climbed out while Bridget explained how they should lift the canoe out of the water with Nathaniel inside of it. That way they could carry him up to the house without moving him around too much and causing him to bleed again. He'd lost too much blood already.

Bridget hopped from one foot to the other while Shiloh and Uncle Percy followed her directions. Lily removed the medical supplies from the other canoe. Aunt Elizabeth took Bridget by the hand. Bridget looked down at the tiny woman. A kerosene lantern swung from Elizabeth's left hand as she led the way up the hill. Her resemblance to Maellen was uncanny.

“Where's Maellen?”

“She's in Lacrimas.” Percy answered from the rear. “She was bored. Then, when Lizzie and I felt trouble brewing in the air tonight, I drove her into town. She decided to stay the night with her mama.”

Bridget and Aunt Elizabeth went up the wide wooden steps of the front porch. Elizabeth's strong and competent grip on Bridget's wrist contradicted the seeming fragility of her petite frame. And Uncle Percy, despite his salt and pepper hair and lean physique, easily matched Shiloh's whipcord musculature. One thing for sure, the Harker family obviously bred for strength. It was the only logical explanation. Two ordinary men couldn't have carried the canoe and Nathaniel upon their shoulders up such a steep hill as easily as they just did.

Bridget had walked up the same hill without carrying anything and she was the only one who had to catch her breath. Everyone else breathed normally.

Shiloh and Percy eased their burden onto the porch. Shiloh squatted down on his heels by the canoe and patted Nathaniel's hand. "I'll be right back. I have to start up the generator. We're going to need a lot more light than this for the operation."

Chapter Twenty-one

A semblance of order formed out of chaos. Blood-stiffened bandages and surgical gloves filled the bucket placed under the table. Shiloh and Percy pulled clean surgical gloves over their hands and took their assigned positions on the right side of the sheet draped dining room table where Nathaniel lay. Clean gauze pads soaked up the blood oozing from his left arm and chest. Percy strategically draped a clean sheet over Nathaniel's hips and legs.

Shiloh picked up a can of shaving cream, shook it with quiet efficiency and proceeded to spray a generous coating of white foam over Nathaniel's furry chest.

Bridget pulled a pair of surgical gloves over her hands. "How tall are you?"

Nathaniel turned his head and smiled at her. Pain flickered across his face. "Six foot six."

Bridget nodded and did a quick estimate of the proper dosage of sodium pentothal for a man of his height and musculature. "How much do you weigh?"

"Three hundred and forty five pounds."

She frowned and ran a practiced eye over his body. That can't be right. Where is he carrying all that extra weight? I've seen football players his height who weighed three hundred pounds but they all had barrel chests and beer guts.

Bridget eyed the washboard musculature of his abdomen. Not a whole lot of extra fat there. She gnawed on her lip. There! He's a little thicker around the waist than Shiloh. He has 'love handles' just like the ones Granny always used to say grandpa had.

Lily's voice penetrated Bridget's thoughts. "That sounds about right to me. Our bone structure is much heavier and thicker than the norm." Lily cupped her hand under Elizabeth's elbow and helped the elderly woman climb onto a tall stool on the left side of the table.

Elizabeth tucked her feet beneath the top rung of the stool. A stethoscope dangled around her neck. Surgical gloves covered her hands. She smoothed her dark blue dress over her knees and flashed a reassuring smile. An open notebook, a pen and blood pressure cuff lay on the table beside her.

Lily rested her hand on the tiny woman's shoulder. An indulgent smile softened her mouth. "Great Aunt Elizabeth weighs a hundred and forty pounds. Great Uncle Percy weighs about two hundred forty nine pounds."

Laughter lines crinkled around Lily's eyes. She murmured. "I weigh a hundred ninety five pounds. And Shiloh..." Her voice trailed off and her eyes darkened into an implacable stare.

Bridget followed the direction of Lily's stare and her mouth dropped open. Shiloh had shaved a large X around the puncture wound in Nathaniel's chest.

"...he weighs two hundred seventy eight pounds." Lily finished weakly.

Bridget glared at Shiloh. Tightening her mouth into a narrow line, she looked at Nathaniel. His unswerving faith in her skill flowed from him into her.

Her legs felt like rubber. She stumbled against the edge of the table and clutched at it to keep herself from falling to her knees. "I can't do this. It's too risky. I can't take that kind of chance with your life. I don't have the training. I don't have the experience. My specialty is genetics research, not surgery."

"You can do it." Nathaniel grasped her hand and squeezed her fingers. "You have the strength within you to accomplish what needs to be done. I can feel it."

Anguish tightened her throat. "What if you died? What then? What would I do? How could I live knowing it was my fault you died?"

"The fact that you tried is enough. You can do no more and no less. If I should die, your bonds with Shiloh and Lilith will hold you to life."

Lily slipped her right hand into Bridget's left hand.

Nathanial's voice sank into a raspy whisper. "You are strong. I have bonded with you and I will strive to hold to that bond for as long as I can. Your strength will keep me alive."

Shiloh held Nathanial's right hand. Percy linked his hand with Shiloh. Elizabeth clung to Lily's hand. Percy reached across the table to Elizabeth and completed the circle of hands.

Trust and absolute love flowed into Bridget. Her fears, anxieties and self-doubt melted under their acceptance and belief.

Bridget released her grip on Nathanial's and Lily's hands and pulled the surgical mask up over her face. The others followed suit. She tightened the tourniquet around his left forearm and selected a vial of sodium pentothal, syringe and IV line.

It took a little bit longer than she expected to knock him out, but other than that he tolerated the anesthesia well. His breathing remained steady. When he lost consciousness, her inner awareness of him muted into a constant undercurrent that didn't interfere with her concentration.

Bridget tightened the clamp on the IV line and interrupted the flow of sodium pentothal dripping into Nathanial's arm.

"Aunt Elizabeth, I want you to check his pulse, blood pressure and respiration every sixty seconds. When you write your readings down, say them out loud."

Elizabeth inclined her head in a gracious nod, unpinned a silver stopwatch from her dress, flipped it open, pushed the knob at the top and placed it beside the notebook.

"Lily."

"Aye."

"Your job is to open the clamp on the IV line when his pulse, blood pressure and respiration speed up and close it when they slow down."

Lily accepted control of the clamp with a steady hand.

Elizabeth wrapped the automated cuff around Nathanial's left arm. It inflated itself and slowly deflated. The reading flashed on the dial. She wrote the numbers and said, "One hundred and nineteen over eighty-two."

Bridget looked around the room one last time. Thick orange cable, jury-rigged electrical sockets and heavy-duty mercury lights circled the room. An antique chandelier dripping with beadwork and prisms swung

from the burnished pine ceiling. A pile of logs burned on the hearth of the oversized fireplace passageway that linked the dining room to the kitchen.

A shiver raced down her spine and lifted the hairs on her arms and neck.

Percy reached over the table and touched her wrist. Concern flowed into her from his touch. "Are you cold? I can add a couple of more logs to the fire, if you want."

Bridget shook her head, walked around the table and positioned herself between Percy and Shiloh. "I'd rather have it too cool than too hot right now. It's a crude but effective method to maintain Nathaniel's body temperature at a reasonable level. Hopefully, it'll keep him from developing a fever during the operation."

Shiloh uncovered the tray of surgical instruments. Bridget flexed her fingers inside the surgical gloves, selected the first razor-sharp scalpel from the tray and stepped up to her patient. She placed the blade against Nathaniel's chest, pressed down and made the first incision through his skin, the layer of fat under his skin, then layer after layer of muscle fibers.

Blood welled up. Percy wiped it away with a clean gauze pad.

Nathaniel's rib cage proved to be a formidable obstacle. His bones proved too hard and thick for her to reach inside without bending the scalpel. She blurted out hasty instructions for Shiloh and Percy. They used the rib spreader and opened up a space wide enough for her hands to fit inside his chest cavity.

The long tedious surgery continued. Bridget traced the bullet's erratic path through Nathaniel's right lung without any X-rays to use as her guide. She discovered a bone fragment lodged in one of the major arteries inside his lung, clamped off the slippery blood vessel, and slowly eased the minute sliver out into the open air.

With a flick of her wrist, she discarded the sliver and blood stained scalpel in the bucket by her feet, reached inside past the rib spreader and used a hand-held cauterizer to seal the minute nick in the artery wall. Shiloh sponged out approximately three cc's of blood around her precise sutures.

She selected a new scalpel from the tray and probed even deeper into the exposed lung. Percy wiped her face. After a half hour of intense labor, she found the bullet and removed it. The second scalpel, the bullet and forceps splashed into the bucket of red stained water on the floor.

Bridget yanked off her soaked surgical gloves and tossed them into the bucket. Percy helped her put on a second clean pair of gloves. She selected the smallest needle on the instrument tray. Percy and Shiloh switched places and changed into clean surgical gloves also.

She didn't even try to count how many clamps they used. Shiloh and Percy kept up with her every step of the way. They clamped off every broken capillary she found and removed the clamps when she cauterized the ruptures in the tiny blood vessels. As far as she could tell, she'd managed to find and tie off every one of the small bleeders inside Nathaniel's chest cavity.

Bridget stepped back to change her gloves and select another needle. Shiloh stepped forward with a needle in his hand, took her place and sewed the first layer of muscle overlapping the entry wound.

“Quilting stitch.” He mumbled through his surgical mask. The curved needle looked tiny and fragile in his big boned grasp. His hands moved swiftly and his precise stitches looked as neat and exact as a fully trained surgeon.

A sigh of relief gusted past Bridget's lips and dampened her surgical mask. While Shiloh closed that incision, she could concentrate on the wounds in Nathaniel's arm.

Choosing yet another clean scalpel, she nodded at Percy to stay with her. The entry and exit wounds in Nathaniel's arm and shoulder looked clean and straight. One bullet had passed through his shoulder and out his back. The other one had gouged a deep gash across his right biceps. Bone fragments and ruptured blood vessels remained her primary concerns.

One hour and sixteen bone fragments later, Bridget cleaned out the gash in his biceps. She switched places with Shiloh. Both men worked swiftly while they stitched those incisions.

She double-checked Shiloh's work on the chest wound and finished the last couple of stitches needed there.

Bridget pulled off her gloves and told Percy and Shiloh how to wrap the bandages around Nathaniel's arm, shoulder and chest. They followed her instructions like trained paramedics. As a final precaution, she had them strap that arm to his chest to keep him from moving it around too much while he slept.

She looked at Lily and managed to croak the final set of instructions past her chapped lips and parched throat. “You can stop the anesthesia now.”

Lily tightened the clamp on the IV line. The last drops trickled into his left arm. Bridget pulled off her surgical mask and gloves, discarded them in the bucket and tried to remember every little thing that could possibly go wrong. "The anesthesia should wear off in fifteen to twenty minutes. We have to move him to a bed before he regains consciousness." The floor dipped and swayed under her. She sagged against the table.

Shiloh scooped her up in his arms.

A couple of minutes later, comfortably ensconced in one of the dining room chairs with a pale blue quilt tucked around her shoulders, she watched Percy and Shiloh slide a plank of wood under Nathaniel's inert body. They tied him to the board, raised it to their shoulders and carried him away.

Bridget surged to her feet. Elizabeth put her arm around Bridget's waist and guided her. Lily led the way up the long, curving staircase. The kerosene lantern in her hand threw distorted shadows on the wall above them.

They entered the room at the end of the hall. Lily, Shiloh and Percy laid Nathaniel in a king sized canopy bed, plumped up the pillows behind his head and pulled up the covers.

Bridget hugged the quilt around her shoulders. "Get me my bag." Her voice sounded harsh and shrill in her ears. "He's lost too much blood. I might have to give him a transfusion." She pushed her hair out of her face. Somewhere along the way, her braid had become completely undone. "I need to take samples from everyone and send them to a lab. It's the only way I can find out whose blood type matches his."

She took the required samples with her hands operating on autopilot, passed Lily the last vial and ordered her to refrigerate them.

Lily left and closed the door behind her.

A wave of intense joy, love and sensuous warmth tumbled over and through Bridget. She turned around. Nathaniel had regained consciousness. She looked into his eyes and felt like melting into him. His bond filled her mind and heart. She took a wobbly step backwards, and grasped at the first rational thought that popped into her head. "If you try to leave this bed for any reason whatsoever during the next forty-eight hours, I'll stick a catheter in you."

Nathaniel turned his head and gazed at Shiloh. He said, "Caterdru." Then added in an oddly shy tone of voice. "Frone."

Shiloh stood beside Bridget and rested his hand upon her shoulder. His love rushed into her, through her and into Nathaniel. "I am here."

A bemused smile formed on Nathaniel's mouth. "Is it true? She chose the lesser bond with thee?"

Shiloh tightened his grip on her shoulder. "Aye. I am frone." Elation hummed through her from him.

Bridget fumbled with the syringe on the night table beside the bed. She inserted the needle into the vein a few inches above the IV line still taped to Nathaniel's left arm. "You need to rest. We'll talk this over later."

Nathaniel smiled. "Shiloh, my caterdru, frone thou art. Hold her. Watch over her while I sleep."

Shiloh turned to Bridget and held out his hand. "May I?"

She placed her hand in his.

He pulled her close and slipped his arm under the quilt and around her waist. His pleasure at her easy acceptance of his touch soared through her and back along her link into Nathaniel.

"This is a goodly sight." Nathaniel's voice slurred while the injection took effect. "I can sleep with my mind at ease now, knowing she is safe within thy arms." He sighed. His nictitating membranes slid shut, softening his hazel eyes into a lambent glow. His eyelids fluttered and closed and he drifted off to sleep.

Bridget relaxed against Shiloh. His shirt felt soft and smooth under Bridget's cheek. She inhaled the familiar scent of lavender.

The door opened and closed behind them. Lily crossed the room and hugged her and Shiloh. Bridget yawned and waved her hand at the ten vials of sedative lined up on the night table. "Hook one to the IV line."

"Sure." Lily ruffled Bridget's hair with her hand before going to the table. She selected a vial, twisted off the cap, hooked it up to the IV line and taped it upside down on the bedpost.

Bridget struggled through a second yawn. "Someone should stay here and keep an eye on him."

Percy pulled a rocking chair up and seated himself beside the bed. Elizabeth opened a chest at the foot of the bed and lifted out a quilt patterned in blue and green squares. She tucked it around Percy. "I'll take the next watch."

A breeze lifted the curtains at the casement window. The first pink flush of dawn glowed in the sky. No wonder she felt like something the cat dragged home. "Percy, if he shows any signs of discomfort or restlessness, open the clamp on this IV line and give him more sedative."

Shiloh swung Bridget into his arms in one easy motion. Bridget closed her eyes and rested her head in the hollow below his shoulder. His strong, steady heartbeat thundered in her ear.

* * * *

The rich warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee penetrated her dream-fogged brain. Bridget opened her eyes. She was curled up on a long wooden bench placed against the wall of the passageway that led to the cavernous fireplace. There was a blue quilt wrapped around her like a cocoon. A second quilt lay folded and tucked under her head.

She struggled to a sitting position on the bench and untangled her legs from the quilt. Her jeans felt like boards, heavy and stiff with dried blood against her shins.

Shiloh hunkered on his heels in front of the black kettle hanging from a chain over the fire with a pair of long, black tongs in his hand. A thick yellow mixture bubbled inside the kettle.

He lifted the kettle off the fire with the tongs and stood. His boot heels clicked on the unglazed tiles. He ducked his head under the archway and carried the steaming kettle to the dining room table. Bright sunlight filled the room above the shutters on the long row of casement windows lining the wall behind the table. A selection of mugs, bowls and spoons covered a heavy silver tray beside the coffeepot. Shiloh placed the kettle on the table and ladled the yellow mixture into two of the bowls.

Bridget pushed her snarled hair from her face. By the time she struggled to her feet, Shiloh stood beside her. When she accepted his outstretched hand, his radiant smile filled her.

The high backed chair he pulled out made her feel like a child again. Her feet dangled in mid air. He lifted the lid on a small earthenware crock and spooned out a generous dollop of fruit preserves on the steaming mixture.

Bridget's stomach growled. The hell with dignity. She tucked her legs up under her and accepted his offering. She felt hungry enough to eat two horses.

The yellow mixture turned out to be hot cornmeal mush with gooseberry preserves. The coffee was a little too sweet for her taste, but other than that, Shiloh's cooking tasted great.

By the time she finished her second bowl, Lily strolled in through the fireplace entrance carrying a black sweater and knapsack. She handed Bridget the sweater. "Percy took the rest of your stuff out to the canoes."

Lily opened the knapsack and exposed a packet wrapped in oilcloth. "I added crushed ice from the freezer to the packet to keep the blood samples cold until we reach the clinic and transfer them into a better container."

Bridget jumped to her feet and wiggled into the sweater. She had wasted too much time already. At the same time, her senses automatically reached for Nathaniel and found him. "He's all right. He's still asleep."

Lily exchanged a knowing look with Shiloh then hugged Bridget. "Thank you. You're strong, stronger than I ever imagined. You bound yourself heart and soul with Nathaniel and Shiloh. I've never seen anyone forge two bonds so completely and so swiftly all in one night."

Bridget ducked her head as a hot flush stained her cheeks. "I only did what I had to do."

"No." Lily put her hand under Bridget's chin and tilted her face up. "You made a choice last night, a difficult choice. You chose to bond with both of them of your own free will."

"All right. I did it of my own free will. Now let's go. We're wasting time talking when we have more important things to do." Bridget's cheeks grew even hotter as she heard the harsh ugly insensitivity of her clipped words. Accepting compliments gracefully wasn't her best trait. She never knew what to say and always wound up sticking her foot in her mouth.

The brilliant acceptance of Lily's smile evaporated that guilt. "You're right. I talk too much. We're wasting time."

* * * *

Tendrils of white mist girdled the tree trunks. Dew clung to every blade of grass and soaked Bridget's sneakers and jeans by the time they reached the dock. She shivered in the damp air, climbed into the canoe and sat down. Shiloh tucked a thick quilt around her legs, climbed in and dipped his paddle in the water.

Bridget started to feel warm again. Lily paddled her canoe alongside of Shiloh, easily matching him stroke for stroke. The heavy gray clouds

parted for a few seconds and a scrap of sunlight ignited Lily's thick braid into a rope of pure platinum.

While they moved along the watery trail, Bridget recognized landmarks from last night's journey. There, up ahead on the right, a rotted cypress stump leaned precariously over the water from a sandbar. A thicket of milkweed flowed along the left embankment. Shiloh and Lily steered the canoes to the left into a narrow stream beneath a stately row of pecan trees.

A clump of saw grass parted in front of the two swiftly moving canoes and sprang up behind them as if they had never even passed in the first place. An egret exploded into the rain-drenched sky. Bridget wished this moment could go on forever. It felt so peaceful. Too bad they couldn't just canoe all the way up to Durham. Traveling this way seemed a lot faster and simpler than negotiating the crowded freeways and innumerable traffic lights.

Shiloh leaned forward. The muscles under the back of his shirt bunched. He twisted his paddle sharply to the right and beached the canoe. Pebbles grated under the fiberglass craft. They had returned to the same moss draped cypress tree from last night. Shiloh jumped out first. Lily tossed the rope from her canoe at him. He caught it, went down on his knee in front of the tree, and tied the canoes to the rusty hook embedded deep in the gnarled trunk.

Stepping ashore with a sudden burst of speed, Lily grabbed Shiloh by his ponytail and twisted his head up and back at an awkward angle. "I'd grow an extra pair of eyes in the back of my head if I were you, because when Nathaniel finds out you shaved an X in his fur, he's going to sneak up on you one of these nights and carve an X in your scalp."

"I'd like to see him try." Unabashed impudence lit up Shiloh's face.

Lily snorted and released him with a flick of her wrist. "I'll be there when it happens and we'll find out then who has the last laugh."

It didn't take long for them to unload everything from the canoes. Shiloh took charge of his knapsack, the duffel bag and Bridget's satchel while Lily slung the knapsack with the blood samples and the shotgun over her shoulder.

Bridget yawned. The caffeine and sugar rush of her breakfast had worn off. The only thing that kept her going was the thought of how she could curl up in the back seat of her jeep while they drove two hundred miles one-way to Durham.

A few minutes later, Shiloh stopped so abruptly on the narrow dirt path in front of Bridget that she bumped into him. Placing his right forefinger against his lips, he reached for her with his left hand and pulled her to his side.

Bridget swallowed her irritation and listened carefully. The faint sound of a man's garbled shouts reached her ears. She nodded at Shiloh. They tiptoed hand-in-hand past a moss laden oak tree to where Lily hunkered on her heels behind a clump of honeysuckle.

They sank to the ground beside Lily. Bridget leaned against Shiloh. He wrapped his arms around her and she felt a surge of fierce protectiveness flow from him into her.

Lily parted the honeysuckle vines. Two heavily armed State Patrolmen and three State Police cruisers blocked the driveway in front of the clinic. It looked like the entire town of Lacrimas waited impatiently on the other side of the road for the blockade to be removed. In the parking lot, four white vans filled with equipment, the sheriff's cruiser, his deputy's cruiser and six unmarked black sedans circled Bridget's jeep.

The sheriff and his deputy paced in between the vehicles.

A mob of white coated lab technicians wearing hairnets and white face masks, heavily armed State Patrolmen, and a tall black man in a dark brown three-piece suit filled the rest of the parking lot. More technicians rushed in and out of the clinic like ants around an anthill.

Right outside this circle of vehicles waited a battered old Ford pickup truck with a pack of skinny brown and tan hound dogs milling around in the back. A rail-thin white man wearing heavy work shoes, a pair of grease splattered jeans, a filthy sweatshirt and a red plaid flannel jacket leaned against the side of the pick up truck. A viscid mass of amber colored saliva flew from his mouth and splattered on the ground.

The tall black man strode up to him. The white man wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket, took another plug of tobacco out of his pants pocket, popped it in his mouth and chewed on it for a bit.

His lip curled and twitched. He spat out another glob of saliva and chewing tobacco that barely missed the black man's shoes. "I ain't gonna do it. You never tole me that bear ran onto Harker land." He pushed his baseball cap back and hitched up his pants. "I've got a heap of money invested in these hounds. The Harkers don't take kindly to strange dogs running around on their land. I ain't setting foot on that land unless Miz Harker herself comes out and says I can."

He rolled the lump of tobacco around in his mouth and settled it in his other cheek. A thin stream of brownish saliva dribbled out the left corner of his mouth. "I don't care who you are. You're nobody around here. I got my rights. You can't make me do a damn thing."

Another blob of tobacco juice splattered down on the tarmac. The white man climbed into his truck and started it up with an ominous roar. Gouts of black smoke exited from its tailpipe when he spun it around and headed down the driveway.

"Now what?" Shiloh whispered.

Lily slanted her eyes at him and lifted her shoulder in a half shrug. "We could go back, get your truck, take the long way around and come out on the other side of the swamp."

Bridget sagged against Shiloh's arm. "We can't. It'll take too long. The blood samples will deteriorate. We have to go inside the clinic, get more ice and transfer the samples into a properly insulated container and bring them to Debbie's lab at Duke as soon as possible."

"Then we don't have any other choice." Lily surged to her feet, handed the knapsack to Shiloh and pulled the shotgun off her shoulder. "We have to walk in, get what we need, then leave as fast as we can."

Surprisingly enough, by moving when everyone else moved and stopping when everyone else stopped, they actually made it to the front door. Unfortunately, their luck ran out then.

"Hey!" A man yelled. He sounded very annoyed. "Who the hell are you and what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Feeling like a deer caught in a car's headlights, Bridget turned slowly. The tall black man elbowed a lab technician aside and strode across the parking lot. "This is a crime scene. A homicide. Who's the idiot that let you waltz in here without going through me first?"

Shiloh pulled Bridget back. Lily stepped forward. The black man saw the shotgun in Lily's hand. His pupils dilated. He slid his right hand under his jacket and moved into a half crouch.

By the time the black man pulled his gun out, Lily had already placed the shotgun on the ground and stood up again. Shock, surprise, and a keen appreciation at Lily's swift reaction in defusing the situation raced across the stranger's face.

Bridget winced under the sudden onslaught of his emotions against her newly forged sensitivities. She let her senses reach for Shiloh and Lily.

Their caterbonds clicked into place around her and blunted the harsh rawness of the stranger's emotional aura.

The sound of a helicopter engine shattered the silence. The black man spun around on his heels, tilted his head back and stared up into the cloud-covered sky. The helicopter popped up over the treetops behind the clinic and settled down in the heliport.

Bridget smiled. Kurt had returned. Instead of having to endure a two and a half hour drive to Durham in her jeep, they could fly there in half an hour.

Chapter Twenty-two

Scraps of paper, dirt and leaves whirled around the like confetti. Bridget caught a blurred glimpse of the sheriff running towards the heliport. Chaos is the key word for today. She thought. In fact, now that Kurt had returned, he might even volunteer to pay for the antibiotics she wanted to order for Nathaniel.

Unfortunately, there was the minor detail of a very disgruntled detective standing in front of Bridget and showing her his photo ID card. She read the name on the ID, Lynwood Jefferson.

No, it didn't look like a typical peaceful Saturday morning in Lacrimas.

Considering the circumstances, Lynwood's voice, a warm, pleasant baritone, remained deceptively mild. "As you can see, I'm the SBI agent in charge of this fiasco."

An SBI agent? Bridget frowned. That didn't sound right. Maybe she should ask him to show her his ID card again. Then her tired brain dredged up the pertinent information. Due to the lack of manpower and shortage of advanced forensic labs in North Carolina's rural counties, the nearest State Bureau of Investigation office handled all homicide cases while FBI agents handled interstate crimes. Obviously, since her clinic remained in the state of North Carolina at all times, this required the presence of an SBI agent.

Lynwood droned on. "Approximately twelve hours ago, a gunman forcibly entered the premises of this clinic."

Bridget studied his face. He looked familiar. Had she met him before? "It's about time you came over and got rid of the body."

He stopped and turned his head in Bridget's direction. His eyes narrowed. "And whom might you be?" Sarcasm saturated his voice.

Bridget winced. Ouch! I really put my foot in my mouth with that statement. This man's a homicide detective, not a janitor in charge of corpse removal. She dredged up a professional smile and extended her hand. "I'm Dr. O'Keefe. This is my clinic." Then gestured at her companions. "This is Lily Harker and Shiloh, Lily's brother."

A strangled sound came out of Lynwood's mouth. Disbelief, total, absolute, stunned disbelief crashed against Bridget. He stared at her jeans. "Blood," he muttered. "You have blood on your pants."

"Of course I do." Bridget frowned. Where was the SBI office recruiting its agents from anyway? The bottom of the barrel? "I had to step over the body in order to get to the supply cabinet."

The sheriff stepped in at that particular moment and picked up the shotgun.

Lynwood spun around. "What the hell!" His tightly leashed rage scorched the air.

Lily reached into her sweatshirt jacket pocket, pulled out a handful of shells and gave them to the sheriff. "Thanks for the shotgun. I didn't shoot it 'cause we never did run into that bear."

Lynwood grabbed the sheriff's arm. "You! I've been trying to talk to you all morning. Where in god's name did you come up with that half-baked theory about a bear?"

"Now, there's no need to get all riled up." The sheriff pried the SBI agent's fingers from his arm.

Lynwood snapped his fingers. "We're going to get this cleared up right now." He fixed the sheriff with a hard glare. "First things first. Did you find any bear footprints in the vicinity?"

"Ah, no."

"Were there any claw marks on the body? The door? Or the wall?"

"No."

"Did you find any hairs from a bear anywhere inside the clinic?"

The sheriff pushed his peaked cap back on his forehead and eyed the technicians in the parking lot. "I'm not in charge of gathering evidence. Why don't you wait and see if your crew finds any?"

“What about the shattered French doors? Did you find any blood, hair or footprints that would lead you think it was bear?”

“No sir, I didn't.”

“Okay.” Lynwood took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Then why do you believe it was a bear?” Menace hovered beneath his soft-spoken question.

The sheriff shrugged, flipped his shotgun open, removed five shells from its chamber and handed it over to his deputy. He pushed his cap back and scratched his scalp. “Last week there was a bear sighting only two miles away from here.”

Lynwood opened his mouth and shut it. The silence lengthened.

Kurt coughed. “Maybe we should go on inside and discuss this without putting on a show for the entire community.”

Lynwood whipped his head around and glared at Kurt. “Who the hell are you? Who let you on the premises?”

Kurt extended his hand. ‘My name's Kurt Williams. I'm the guy who's building the spaceport on the other side of the swamp.’ He gestured at the tall bald-headed black man standing behind him. “And this is my body-guard, Harold.”

While Kurt and Lynwood sorted out their introductions, Bridget followed them into the clinic and wondered why she didn't have a front door anymore. Did they impound it as evidence?

She flashed a grateful smile at the sheriff when he led her around the receptionist's counter, pulled out a stool and sat her down. He wasn't wearing his pajama top anymore. She supposed his wife must have stopped by and brought him his uniform shirt.

Kurt and Lynwood drifted into the waiting room. Bridget dug a pen and blank prescription pad out of the drawer. At the same time, Lily went to her knees on the floor behind the counter. She shrugged the knapsack off her shoulder and added ice from the small refrigerator beneath the counter into an insulated blood specimen cooler.

On the other side of the room, Shiloh and the sheriff intercepted Kurt and Lynwood. When the sheriff launched into a rambling discourse about why he loaned Lily his shotgun, Shiloh positioned himself beside them.

Bridget crooked her finger at Kurt. He ambled to the counter with his bodyguard two paces behind him. "You look like something the cat dragged home."

She ignored his comment because she probably looked worse than that and finished scribbling the last prescription on the pad. "What happened to Shelley?"

Obviously relishing being the center of attention, Kurt prolonged the agony by strolling around the counter. He nodded at Lily, appropriated a chair and straddled it. "I had to land in a cow pasture right outside the State's Vet School. They started up their cars and used their headlights to show me the landing site. Because I brought Shelley in within twenty-four hours of his injury, they performed a bone graft on his hip instead of amputating."

A relieved sigh gusted from Bridget's lips.

Kurt grinned and raked his fingers through his hair. "You now have a bionic dog."

"Ma'am?"

Startled by the unexpected sound of Lucinda's voice, Bridget looked up. Sure enough, Lucinda's warm brown face looked back at her from the other side of the counter. How long has she been standing there? When and how did she get inside past the State Troopers?

"You should have called me." Lucinda leaned even further over the counter and directed her aggrieved attention at Lily. Hurt indignation marked her face. "The sheriff told me your brother had an accident in the swamp. I could have come along with you and helped."

"We didn't have enough time." Lily rose to her feet, extended her hand and projected a strong pulse of sincere regret at Lucinda.

"That's okay." Lucinda patted Lily's hand. "I understand. Maellen's due to have her baby any day now. We're almost family now. You don't have to worry about me. I know when to hold my peace. There's no reason why I can't stop over later and help nurse your brother back to health, is there?"

Lily sighed, slanted her head at the SBI agent on the other side of the room. "Can we discuss this later? When things quiet down a little more?" She slid her hand out of Lucinda's grasp.

Throwing a contemptuous glare at Lynwood, Lucinda lowered her voice. "Don't you worry about him."

Bridget kicked Kurt in the shins as a subtle reminder to keep his mouth shut. He deserved it. She already knew by the look on his face that his ears had pricked up during this provocative exchange of words between Lucinda and Lily.

Lucinda sniffed. "I took Mr. High and Mighty down a few pegs when he tried to lay into me 'bout Dr. O'Keefe leaving the scene of a crime and destroying critical evidence."

Evidence! Bridget looked down at her blood stained jeans. No wonder Lynwood had given her such a strange look and mentioned blood. He must have thought she was a total idiot. Her jeans were evidence. He needed to have them examined at a forensic lab. She leaned over the counter. "Lucinda, could you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Get a clean pair of jeans from my room. I have to give Mr. Jefferson the ones I'm wearing. I'd like to change before he decides to tell me to strip in front of everyone."

"Well, I never!" Lucinda stalked away.

Lily squeezed Bridget's arm and walked over to stand beside Shiloh. The brief flicker of caution Bridget felt from that touch clicked into place. She stared at Lynwood. Everything about the SBI agent, his belligerent stance, the way his eyes scanned the room shouted 'Danger' to her newly-aroused telepathic senses.

She thinned her lips. Lily and Shiloh had positioned themselves to block Lynwood's access to her like a well-oiled team. Knowing what she knew now about the Harkers certainly made it a lot easier for her to see a pattern in the way they interacted with people.

They distrusted Lynwood because he stood outside their system of bonds and promises. They trusted Kurt because he had agreed to become Bridget's caterdru. The fact that he'd agreed to take the oath satisfied them. The oath itself acted as a formal acknowledgment of his relationship with Bridget. They accepted the sheriff because he honored his great-grandfather's debt to the Harker family. And, last but not least, they trusted Bridget because of her unique status as Lily's caterdru and because of her newly established bonds with Nathaniel and Shiloh.

This was also why she felt like she was running on empty. The bonds she had established were the result of highly-charged emotional events. All the other times, whenever she had an intense empathic interaction with one of the Harkers, she'd fallen into a deep sleep after her reckless expen-

ditures of psychic energy. Except now she had no choice except to stay awake. Too many things had happened one right after the other.

As soon as this most recent adrenaline surge wore off, Bridget knew she was going to have one hell of a crash landing. Hopefully she'd be standing beside her bed when that happened.

Turning her attention back to Kurt, she nudged the cooler toward him with her foot and whispered. "Can you fly Lily up to Duke? I need to have these blood samples tested as soon as possible."

Giving Bridget a long, hard look, he leaned closer and whispered back, "I'll take her anywhere she wants."

"Good." She shoved the hastily scribbled prescriptions in his hand. "While you're waiting for the test results, bring her over to the pharmacy to get these prescriptions filled."

"Okay." He slipped the papers into his pocket. "What's going on?"

Kurt had his poker face on, bland and expressionless. His eyes shifted toward Lynwood.

Bridget leaned forward. "I had to perform emergency surgery on Lily's brother last night. There was an accident."

Kurt's eyebrows popped up. He inclined his head in a barely perceptible nod and stood up.

Thinking that now was as good a time as any to mention another minor detail to him, Bridget put her hand on his shirtsleeve. "There's something else I need you to do."

Slanting another shrewd glance in Lynwood's direction, Kurt whispered, "What?"

"Lily doesn't have a whole lot of cash on her. Would you mind paying for the prescriptions?"

Relief flickered across Kurt's face at the realization that she wasn't asking him to do anything illegal. He grinned, reached out and squeezed her fingers. "Sure I'll do that. Thanks."

Bridget frowned. "For what?"

"For giving me a chance to show Lily how much I can do for her."

Should she tell him how expensive these particular antibiotics were? She waved at him to move out of her way. He'd find out soon enough.

Walking a gauntlet would have been a lot easier than walking across the waiting room under Lynwood's intense stare. Think! Bridget warned herself. Watch what you say. Don't screw things up at the last minute.

Refusing to flinch away from his obvious anger, she wished she had met Lynwood under better circumstances. He looked like a highly intelligent and well-trained adversary. She might as well rack up some brownie points by cooperating as much as possible without telling him a thing.

She stretched her lips into a reasonable facsimile of a smile. "Please forgive me, Mr. Jefferson, I was horribly rude to you a little while ago. I've had a long night and I wasn't thinking too clearly. Is there anything I can do for you now?"

Lynwood coughed and cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I'd like you to step behind the counter again, remove your shoes and pants and hand them over to me. That would help me tremendously with this investigation."

Shiloh angled his body between Bridget and Lynwood. His saturnine face darkened even more.

With a deliberate look into Shiloh's eyes, Bridget shook her head a fraction of an inch and dared him to defy her. He shifted his weight back from the balls of his feet onto his heels and his gaze flickered sideways at the sound of Lucinda's return.

Lucinda walked up to Bridget and deposited a clean pair of jeans in her outstretched hand.

Hoping her cheeks wouldn't crack under her determined smile, Bridget focused her attention on Lynwood. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

By the time she changed and stepped out from behind the counter, the SBI agent stuffed his palmcorder pad into his jacket's inside pocket. "You people are nuts. How the hell was I supposed to know that Shelley's a dog? The way you all carried on about his gunshot wounds, I thought you were talking about a real person."

Bridget coughed. Lynwood spun around and glared at her. She didn't even blink an eyelash. His rage rolled off her while she thrust her soiled jeans and sneakers into his hands. Knowing how her bonds with Lily and Shiloh shielded her from the agent's unwanted emotions helped her tremendously.

Lily chose this particular moment to step forward. "Mr. Jefferson, when we came back here with Dr. O'Keefe, I saw a bunch of gators fighting in the water. Now I really didn't get a close look at what they were fighting

over, but it must have been something pretty big to have them carrying on the way they were. Maybe it was the bear. It's possible that the blood from his gunshot wounds caught their attention and they went after him.” Reaching back without looking behind her, she grabbed hold of Shiloh's shirt and pulled him closer. “My brother can take you anywhere you want in the swamp. He'll help you look for that bear.”

Lynwood accepted this generous offer with great enthusiasm. He added everyone's name, address and phone number to his palmcorder and cautioned them not to discuss last night's events with each other while he searched for the bear.

Would Lynwood survive Shiloh's tender mercies?

With the Harkers' cultural conditioning against violence, she supposed this meant Lynwood would be in relatively safe hands. Most likely, Shiloh would drag the poor man through every snake-infested, mosquito-ridden, gator-filled mudhole within a ten-mile radius. If letting Shiloh take him on a guided tour of the entire swamp made Lynwood feel better about everything, Bridget didn't want to be the one to puncture his illusion. Besides, it didn't matter to her. She planned to climb into bed and pass out for twelve glorious hours.

Chapter Twenty-three

For some strange reason, the alarm clock sounded exactly like Debbie's voice yelling at her to wake up. Bridget scrunched her left eye open. Nope. That wasn't her alarm clock. Debbie sat on the edge of the bed. She wore her normal work clothes, a wrinkled lab coat with a photo ID clipped to the lapel, a white blouse and navy blue skirt.

Whatever happened to the premise of a woman's bedroom as her private sanctum? Maybe she should appropriate a 'do not disturb' sign from one of the local motels. It was probably the only way she'd get a good day's sleep after a long night's work. Bridget forced her other eye open. “Hi Debbie. Long time no see. How'd you get past those State Troopers standing guard outside my non-existent front door?”

Instead of responding to this, Debbie bounced to her feet and prowled around the room. She opened the closet door, then the bathroom door. She went to the patio doors and stared outside. She returned to the closet and pushed the clothes aside. Bridget scowled. Watching Debbie dart around the room made her feel like a worn out dish-rag. What was she

looking for anyway? Snakes? The image of a giant fly-swatter materializing out of thin air and knocking Debbie down popped into Bridget's mind. Would it stop her infernal flitting or make her worse?

“My nephew let me in.” Debbie's muffled voice floated back from the closet. “Where did you hide your computer? I sent you the test results a couple of hours ago.”

Bridget managed to sit up. “Your nephew? My computer?”

Debbie crossed the room and planted her hands on her hips. “We have a lot to talk about, young lady.”

Bridget plumped her pillow and settled into a more comfortable spot. “I don't have to tell you anything until you tell me about your nephew.”

Debbie sat on the bed again.

Bridget groaned. “Stop bouncing around. You're giving me a headache.”

A gusty sigh exploded from Debbie's lips. She threw her hands up in the air. “My nephew is the SBI agent for this half of North Carolina.”

Lynwood's outraged scowl resurfaced in Bridget's mind. “That's why he looked so familiar.” She pursed her lips. “How closely related is he to Elias?”

“Elias is his great grandfather, three times removed.”

Bridget pointed at the hallway door. “I had to send my computer out for repairs but if you really want one, you can try the one in the clinic.”

“Great!” Debbie jumped to her feet, exited the room and popped back in the doorway a few seconds later. “Well, what are you waiting for? An engraved invitation? I want you to look at those printouts. Then I want you to explain to me in great detail exactly how you managed to pull the wool over my eyes this time.”

“What printouts?”

“The ones I sent with the test results from the latest batch of blood samples you sent me.”

Bridget snapped her fingers. “Those printouts! Did you cross match the samples? I might have to do a transfusion.”

“Who needs a transfusion?” Debbie rushed back to the bed. “You're in trouble with my nephew, aren't you?” She took hold of Bridget's hand. “I can't help you unless you tell me the truth.”

Bridget pulled her hand away and rubbed her wrist. The bracelet of braided hair rolled under her touch. Fragments of dried blood flaked away under her fingernails. Where should she start? At the beginning? Which beginning? Last night, last month or last year?

* * * *

Wincing at the skepticism Debbie radiated, Bridget searched for the best way to plead her case. "I don't want him to die after everything I've done." Her voice cracked. "I love him." She finished lamely.

"It's all right." Debbie patted Bridget's shoulder. "I understand what happened. It's the Florence Nightingale effect. It happens to the best of us. I'll explain it to Lynwood. He'll understand. All you have to do is bring him to Nathaniel. Lynwood will place him in a hospital under protective custody until he recovers and gives his testimony at the coroner's inquest."

Bridget pushed Debbie away and kicked the covers off. Falling asleep in her clothes had its advantages. She sucked in a couple of deep breaths and achieved a minimal level of control. Yelling wasn't going to accomplish anything. "You of all people should know me better than that. I'm not the type of person to fall in love with a total stranger just because I took a couple of bullets out of him. Nathaniel and I have known each other for the last couple of months. This isn't a silly infatuation with a sick patient. I'm a grown woman, not a teenager."

Debbie hovered over her. "If you say so." Then her face brightened. "Tell Lynwood the truth. He'll understand. I'll make him understand."

"I don't know about that."

Debbie slanted an odd look at her. "Why?"

Bridget swung her legs over the side of the bed and wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans. "Because we told Lynwood a bear wandered into the clinic during the burglary and killed the intruder. Because Nathaniel looks different."

"A bear?" Incredulity filled Debbie's face. She leaned closer. Her hands twitched as if she wanted to shake Bridget. "How different?"

"I can't tell you that because he's a Harker." Bridget looked into Debbie's eyes and tried her best to project sincerity at her. "Remember Elias's promise? I'm asking you to keep that promise now."

"What the hell?" Debbie's eyes narrowed. "What gives you the right to call in that debt? You're not a Harker."

"I'm Lily's caterdru now, her sister by oath." Bridget felt another blush sear her face. "Technically that makes me a Harker. That's why I sent you those blood samples."

Debbie's skin changed from a warm butterscotch shade into a sickly greenish shade. "Those samples were real? Not fake?" Her voice came out in a strangled whisper. "Whose?"

"The first sample I sent a couple of months ago came from Shiloh Harker."

Debbie nodded.

"I took the latest samples from Nathaniel, Shiloh and Lilith Harker, their Great Aunt Elizabeth and Great Uncle Percy Harker."

Debbie's eyes widened. She spoke in a strangled whisper. "There really is a genetic mutation in their family. I have all the evidence I need to prove this in my computer files."

"Yes, you do."

Enthusiasm lit up Debbie's face. "Most times it's a recessive gene, isn't it? Except for Nathaniel, he's inherited the dominant form."

"Well ... It's not exactly a recessive gene."

Debbie leaned forward, her gaze had turned feverishly bright. "What?"

"I can't tell you."

"What about Nathaniel, the one you like so much?" Debbie's intensity had a hypnotic quality about it. "What about him? What can you tell me about him?"

"He looks exactly like the Nathaniel who rescued Elias in 1952."

Debbie sighed. The silence lengthened between them. Bridget's stubborn refusal to say anything further finally penetrated Debbie's obsessive curiosity. "If Nathaniel looks that different and Lynwood brings him out and the telenet reporters hear about him, then..." Her voice faded away.

"You'll destroy him," Bridget said flatly. "You'll destroy his family. The newshounds will descend upon the Harkers and eat them alive. If Nathaniel's lucky he'll spend the rest of his life locked up in a research lab."

"Ah." Debbie blinked. Her eyes lost their focus for a few seconds. She looked at Bridget and smiled. Her smile boded ill for anyone who dared to get in her way. "Lynwood and I, we have a debt to settle, don't we?"

* * * *

The situation went from bad to worse first. Lynwood glared at Debbie and told her he'd arrest her for interfering with a homicide investigation if she didn't keep her mouth shut while he questioned his witness. Debbie crossed her arms and parked herself in the doorway. Bridget sat where he told her to sit.

Tapping his fingers on the edge of the wafer slim laptop which he had placed on the spot normally reserved for Bridget's console, the SBI agent flipped his notebook back a couple of pages and slid it into the scanner port, then looked up. His gaze remained crisp and impersonal. "May I address you as Bridget instead of Dr. O'Keefe while we go over last night's events?"

"Bridget will do. It's just a few simple questions, right?"

He picked up a pencil and twirled it between his thumb and forefinger. "Bridget."

She inclined her head at him to continue.

"The dead man in your clinic, do you have any idea why he was there?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Bridget studied the wobbly stacks of magazines, faxes, brochures, billing forms and unanswered correspondence piled up on the bookcase behind Lynwood's head. She should at least dust them off every now and then. A slight breeze lifted a corner of the curtain at the window to the left of the bookcase. A handful of hard discs lay on the blotter besides Lynwood's laptop. She recognized the labels on the discs. Those were hers. Why were the police looking through her files? Her files had nothing to do with last night's blotched burglary. She pushed away her resentment and shrugged. "I don't know. Most likely he was a junkie raiding my medical supplies for drugs."

Lynwood leaned back in his chair and steeped his hands in front of his face. "Wrong."

His cat and mouse tactics made her want to jump over the desk and throttle him. Bridget drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "You tell me who he was and why he broke into my clinic."

Lynwood arched a sardonic eyebrow at her, then said, "Your so-called burglar used to be a CIA spook."

"What does that have to do with me? I'm not a spy."

Lynwood dropped his hands to the desk and picked up one of the discs. "What's this?"

Bridget glanced at the discs and shrugged. "I seriously doubt the CIA pulled a retired agent out of mothballs to secure detailed medical histories of my prenatal cases for the last six months."

"You used to work for Aunt Debbie at Duke. What about those blood samples she has?" He laid the disc back down on the desk with the others. "She made such a big fuss about the blood samples you sent here when she arrived an hour ago that I had to come out and let her in before the State Troopers handcuffed her and took her away."

Bridget exchanged a wary look with Debbie. "Why would this burglar want something I didn't even have in my files last night?"

"Where did you get the blood samples? Why was Aunt Debbie so excited about them?"

A dangerous spark glowed in Debbie's eyes. "That's none of your business, young man."

Lynwood slammed his hands on the desk and surged to his feet. "Aunt Debbie..." Danger simmered beneath his quiet voice. "You're asking for trouble."

"No!" Exploding out of the doorway like she'd been shot from a gun, Debbie flew around the desk. "You're the one who's asking for trouble." Punctuating her comments with sharp jabs of her finger into his chest, she forced him back into his chair. "I'm here to make sure you do the right thing, that's all."

She reached back, shoved a stack of papers aside and boosted her hip onto the desk. "I want you to tell me exactly what kind of evidence you have and what you intend to do with it."

He slanted a dubious look at Bridget.

Debbie sniffed with disdain. "This is her office. She has even more right to know what's going on than I do."

Lynwood opened his mouth, but that was as far as he got because Debbie wasn't finished. "Besides which, you don't have a shred of physical evidence that links her to the body in her supply room." She ticked off her points one by one. "He's an ex-CIA operative. Bridget's work here has nothing to do with national security. The only eyewitness is a dog and that dog is recovering from emergency surgery. What are you going to do? Give the dog a lie detector test?"

Crossing her arms on her chest, she added quickly. "All you have going for you right now is a gut instinct that something's not right. You can't arrest her for that."

Giving Bridget another annoyed look, Lynwood said stubbornly. "It's not just a hunch. She's hiding something. The Sheriff's not fooling me with his redneck routine. He's as sharp as a tack. I know him. I've worked with him before. He doesn't screw things up by letting everyone and his uncle walk all over the evidence. He doesn't let two of his witnesses walk off into the swamp in the middle of the night."

"Do you know who's sitting in the waiting room right outside this office?"

Lynwood's mouth dropped open. He stared at his aunt for a couple of seconds. Bridget ducked her head and swallowed the laugh that bubbled up in her throat. Debbie's habit of switching topics in mid-stream had made her the holy terror of every grad student who had the misfortune to attend one of her seminars.

Irritation flickered across Lynwood's face. "Lilith Harker, her brother, Shiloh and a man named Kurt Williams."

Debbie lowered her voice. "Lily and Shiloh Harker, do those names mean anything to you?"

Lynwood compressed his lips into a tight line and straightened his tie. "Who they are has nothing to do with the fact that I'm investigating a homicide."

Debbie shook her head. "Bridget knows about Elias. She sat on his porch with me and heard him tell his story on the holograph recording."

Lynwood arched his eyebrows, slanted another quick glance at Bridget, and sat back in his chair. He folded his hands in his lap and let his lean dark features transform into a cynical mask.

Debbie ignored his theatrics and smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt. She leaned forward. "Remember when you were a little boy and how you used to sit on that porch and listen to him telling his story? Remember how you wanted to be the one to keep the promise he gave the Harkers?"

"Yes." Lynwood's cold voice sliced the air. "I remember."

"Did you ever stop to think what that promise did to you? Did you ever think what it did to our entire family?"

Lynwood gave her a perplexed look and shook his head. “What did it do?”

“It made us who we are now. Elias Jefferson was a dirt-poor share-cropper when he made that promise. The Harkers, they owned half the county back then and they still own half the county now.”

Lynwood arched his eyebrows again. “Your point?”

“Your father became a respected businessmen. I went to Duke and graduated with a Ph.D. in genetics. Now I’m in charge of a genetics research lab. You became one of the youngest and most powerful SBI agents in North Carolina. We could have grown up resenting the Harkers because one of them helped Elias. We might have felt like they took pity on Elias. Instead that Harker treated Elias as an equal when he placed that promise on him. We grew up proud because of it. We knew that someday, somehow, one of us was going to keep that promise. Every last one of us worked as hard as he or she could to become somebody important enough to have the power to pay that debt in full.”

“Are you asking me to file a false report?” A dangerous undercurrent laced Lynwood's voice.

Bridget stared at her hands.

Debbie said. “I’m asking you to look at the facts you have in front of you right now. I want you to review those facts without adding any hunches or suppositions. Then file your report.”

“I see. Just the facts, ma'am.” He folded his hands on the desk. “It's not going to be that simple.”

“What do you mean?” Bridget asked.

He picked up the discs and held them aloft. “That ex-CIA spook didn't break into her pharmaceutical supply cabinet looking for drugs. That was a cover-up for his real job. We found a complete set of duplicate discs in his pants pocket. Which means he was here a lot longer than you think. Long enough to power up her computer and make copies of everything she had before he died.”

“Hmmm.” Debbie's abstracted gaze drifted to the assortment of loose papers and forms piled up on the shelves behind him. She murmured, “Pharmaceutical companies. Corporate spies.”

“Junk mail.” Bridget groaned, sagged in her chair and put her head in her hands.

“Junk mail!” Lynwood snarled. “What's the connection?” His frustration boiled over Bridget.

Bridget sighed, vacated her seat and walked around the desk to the bookcases. “This is junk mail.” She blew the dust off the first stack of papers, picked them up and dumped them in Lynwood's lap. “We might be able to find the connection in here somewhere.”

She took a second stack of papers and handed them to Debbie. “It's not as bad as it could be. I had to come up with a system to deal with it. Lucinda goes through my mail first. She discards most of it before it winds up in here.”

Balancing another wobbly pile in her arms, Bridget returned to her seat. She dropped the stack of papers on her side of the desk. She stabbed her finger at the bright green container beside the desk. “We put the free drug samples in that recycling bin.”

She tapped the papers in front of her. “What we're going to look for is the correspondence I haven't responded to yet. Somewhere in this mess is the information we need.”

* * * *

Lynwood shoved the last stack of papers off the desk into the overflowing trashcan. He held up an envelope and added it to the small pile on the blotter. “We have about six possible companies interested in your process for synthetic blood here.” He gazed at Bridget. “Where did that come from?” His voice remained deceptively mild despite the suspicion in his eyes. “You don't have the lab facilities here for that type of work.”

Bridget looked at Debbie. Their gazes locked.

“Those blood samples I sent you,” Bridget whispered.

Lynwood stared at them.

“Nancy McLoughlin!” Bridget and Debbie said simultaneously.

“She's the connection.”

Lynwood leaned his chair back and placed his feet on the desk. “Who is Nancy McLoughlin and what's her connection to this?”

“She's one of the post docs from Debbie's genetics research lab.” Bridget explained.

“That's right.” Debbie gave Lynwood a distracted nod. “I caught her sticking her nose in my computer files over a year ago. I should have fired her then. Instead I let her stay because she's a competent researcher.”

Tears prickled at the edges of Bridget's eyelashes. "It's my fault. If I hadn't sent you that sample of Shiloh's blood, none of this would have happened. Nancy must have gotten hold of the test results and tried to sell them to the highest bidder."

"It's as much my fault as it was yours." Debbie paced in the narrow aisle between the desk and the sofa. She stopped at the French doors and stared outside. "I should have taken more precautions when I handed out the assignment to test his blood."

Debbie whirled around. "The latest samples you sent me, those came from the rest of the Harkers."

She stalked over to the desk, shoved Lynwood's feet out of her way and opened his laptop computer. "I have to patch into my computer at Duke. I've got to find out if Nancy's trying to hack into my files again. I should have fired her six months ago."

Lynwood stared at her. "Wait a minute, the blood samples, the ones you're all worked up about. They're not synthetic blood? They're blood samples from the Harkers?"

Debbie gave him a very worried look. "Yes, they are and that's why we have to stop Nancy from selling them to another research lab. The Harkers have a very unique difference in their DNA that shows up in those blood samples."

Lynwood typed in his password, vacated his chair and let her take his place at the keyboard. He looked at Bridget. "Elias was right, wasn't he? There really is a mutation in the Harker family and in every generation, one of them is born with all the physical manifestations of that mutation, isn't he?" Debbie's fingers stopped flying over the keyboard.

"Yes," Bridget said it past the lump in her throat.

Lynwood's gaze went avid. He leaned forward as if his body pulled against a leash. "Have you seen a Harker with this mutation?"

Bridget nodded.

"Was he here last night?"

Bridget looked away.

"Ah." It came out as a sigh from Lynwood's mouth.

"What are you going to do about that homicide report?" Debbie asked quietly.

Spreading his hands apart in helpless resignation, Lynwood muttered. "Unless we come up with something better, I suppose I'm going to have to go along with the bear story." He turned around and stared at the closed door that led to the waiting room. "Insofar as our promise is concerned, I won't consider it settled until..." His voice trailed off.

"What?" Bridget asked.

"I'm not settling it by proxy." His eyes remained focused on the closed door. "The Harkers are here now. We might as well let them in."

"Her." Bridget corrected him.

He looked at her and arched his eyebrows again. "Her?"

"I sent Shiloh home with the antibiotics for his brother. I don't know if he's back yet, besides, Lily's the one you'd have to talk to. Technically, she's the head of the family. Everything's in her name."

"That's fine with me. Shiloh Stoneface, whatever you want to call him, hardly said two words to me the whole time we went bear hunting. I'd much rather talk to her than him. Send her in."

* * * *

"Would you mind telling me what's going on around here?" Kurt raised his voice into a peevish whine.

Bridget picked up Shiloh's knapsack, rummaged around inside and pulled out a candy bar. It tasted just as good as it looked. One thing for sure, Shiloh always made sure she ate well. At this very moment, he stood in her kitchen making another pot of coffee, bacon and eggs. "What don't you understand?"

Kurt's glare promised havoc. "Don't play games with me. Five hours ago, that SBI agent wanted to lock you up and throw away the key. After I went back and forth to Durham with Lily, your friend Debbie barged in here. She yanked you out of your bed. The two of you had a private meeting with Lynwood, who happens to be her nephew. Two hours later, you stuck your head out the door and asked Lily to step inside. Twenty minutes later, Lynwood strolled out of the office into the parking lot and fed the local press a cock and bull story about a bear following a drug crazed junkie into the clinic and killing said junkie."

"Well, I don't know." Bridget flashed him a blatantly false smile. "You thought it was a pretty good story this morning. What changed your mind?"

Kurt stared across the room through the open doorway to her private office where Lynwood still sat at the desk with the laptop computer open in front of him. Lily stood behind Lynwood and massaged his neck. Lynwood's eyes were closed and there was a blissful expression on his face.

Kurt muttered. "That guy's a pro. He solves homicides based on hard facts and evidence, not bullshit!"

He whipped his head around. "The next time you ask me to pay for something, I'd appreciate a warning about the price."

Bridget retrieved a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from the knapsack. "Why?" She kept her voice unconcerned. "What happened?"

Kurt curled his lip. "I thought you wanted me to buy a couple of bottles of pills. I wasn't expecting six different kinds of intravenous antibiotics with IV lines and specially insulated coolers for each prescription. When the cashier rang up over six thousand dollars for the total, I couldn't believe my ears."

Bridget couldn't resist teasing him. "Poor baby. What did you do then?"

"What do you think I did? I wrote a check." Kurt's amused appreciation leaked out past his peeved façade. "Not bad. Not bad at all for someone who's agreed to become my little sister. You keep hanging around with me and I'll teach you a thing or two about corporate infighting."

Bridget unwrapped the sandwich. "I'm sorry. I didn't have any other choice. Lily's family has a rare blood type. I wasn't sure which antibiotic would work on her brother. That's why I ordered so many different kinds."

She took a bite of the sandwich, chewed on it for a few moments and swallowed. "I might be able to reimburse you from the clinic's discretionary funds."

Kurt brushed aside her offer with a careless wave. "Forget it. It's not about the money." He paced back and forth a few times and stared across the room at Lily and Lynwood again. "What's he got that I don't have? How does he rate that much attention from Lily after only one day around her? I've busted my gut for two and a half years and got absolutely nowhere with her."

Bridget frowned. If Kurt let jealousy control him, he'd destroy any chance he had with Lily. Hopefully she could get her point across without grabbing him by the neck and screaming at him. "Lily trusts you now because you agreed to become my oathbrother. Lynwood's great-great-great

grandfather made a promise to a Harker male back in 1952. Lynwood's keeping that promise now, that's why Lily's being so nice to him.”

The silence lengthened.

“For the Harkers, a promise is forever.” Bridget added helpfully. “That's all you need to know. There's no such thing as a written contract with them, only promises.”

“That's it? She's being nice to him now because of a ninety-year-old promise?”

“Yes.”

“What was the promise?”

Bridget swallowed another bite of the sandwich and shook her head. “It's a private matter between his family and hers.”

Kurt sighed and raked his hand through his hair. “Okay. I can take a hint.”

Debbie crossed the waiting room and re-entered the office. She bent over the computer with Lily and Lynwood. Kurt jerked his chin in their direction. “What are they doing now?”

“They're trying to see if another woman who works in Debbie's lab tapped into the restricted files.”

Bridget paused. This wasn't going to be easy to explain. She glanced at Kurt. “What do you know about corporate spies?”

Looking at her as if he'd like to dissect her brain, Kurt pulled one of the waiting room chairs and straddled it. He lowered his voice. “Give me a name. I have contacts. I bet I can find out a lot more about this spy than Dick Tracy over there.”

Bridget whispered the names of the six pharmaceutical companies.

Kurt's expression smoothed itself out into a bland poker face. He raised his voice. “Don't worry about your front door. I'll send in my men to replace it and install a brand new security system free of charge.” He peered at the knapsack between her feet. “Is there another candy bar in there? I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Three weeks later...

Nathanial sat on the edge of the bed, dipped his fingers inside a jar of Aunt Elizabeth's herbal cream and rubbed it on the rough red scar upon his chest. He rose to his feet and peered out the window. He didn't see the sky, or the sun dropping down over the horizon. Instead he saw the face of the man he had killed. The stranger's anguished scream filled his heart. No!

The jar fell from his hand onto the floor and rolled under the bed. He leaned against the cool glass of the window. The past could not be altered. The man was dead. There was no escape. The memory of that death would haunt him forever.

Nathanial studied the X shaved around the scar in his chest. In another week or so, the rest of his hair would grow back in and obliterate the shaved area. His caterdru had a warped sense of humor.

Last night, with the help of his family, he had evened the score against Shiloh. They had plotted it out beforehand. Lilith and Percy helped Nathanial capture their unwitting prey at the front door. In a matter of moments they bound Shiloh hand and foot with a couple of sections of good, stout rope. They carried him into the dining room where Bridget and Elizabeth waited with razors and shaving cream laid out upon the table.

Fifteen minutes later, they finished shaving both sides of Shiloh's head leaving only a three-inch strip of hair in the center of his scalp. They took the rest of Shiloh's hip length scalplock and fashioned it into a single thick braid and added an assortment of brightly colored beads and feathers to their creation.

Shaking his head at the thought of attempting such a dramatic style for his own hair, Nathanial felt the satisfying weight of his braids settle upon his back and shoulders. He selected a strip of leather lying on the coverlet and tied it around his pants leg. Fur could be a royal nuisance. If he didn't take this simple precaution, every time he took a step, his pants would slide across his fur and bunch up on his legs.

Next came his boots. Shiloh knew an old man who still worked with leather and always had them made to order to Nathanial's measure.

Nathanial stretched his arms over his head. Such simple freedom of movement should be enjoyed to its fullest. The long, dreary hours of con-

finement in his bed had been the worst aspect of the last three weeks. The only thing that alleviated the tedium was seeing Shiloh and Bridget learn each other's moods and temperaments during that time.

In a few more hours, Bridget would be here. Perhaps tonight would be the night when the three of them would consolidate their newly forged bonds as clervant and frone.

He had found no guilt lingering in Bridget's heart whenever he or Shiloh reached for her through their bonds, only a joyous acceptance. A good ten years awaited her decision to begin her own sisterline. Until then, they could take their time and learn exactly how to pleasure her. Just thinking about the many long hours of experimentation made his heart quicken.

A vague sense of wrongness tickled the back of Nathaniel's mind. He looked about the room. His second-best shirt lay on the bed. A slight breeze lifted a corner of the curtain at the window. On the night table beside the bed, a kerosene lantern hissed and glowed with a soft yellow flame. One of these days they should get around to wiring the second and third floors, but until then...

He cocked his head. The faint sound of stealthy footsteps on the back staircase reached his ears. Shiloh! Who else but his caterdru would have the audacity to try and sneak up on him? Should he reach for Shiloh's mind? No. If he did that, the game would end in a stalemate. Carefully holding his growing anticipation in check, Nathaniel shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet, crept over to the door, placed his ear against it and waited.

The furtive steps paused at the landing for a few seconds, then edged closer and closer. Now! He flung the door open and saw Maellen.

"Milady." He pulled her inside. "I be Nathaniel." His voice sounded harsh and ugly in his ears.

Maellen tilted her head up. Her brown eyes held flecks of gold in their depths. "I figured that out months ago." She wore a bulky gray sweater and a pair of black pants made of stretchy material.

Bending his head down for a closer look, Nathaniel peered at the thin straps of elastic keeping her leggings in place inside her sneakers. Her way of holding her pants legs down made a lot more sense than his cumbersome system of leather cross gaiters.

"I couldn't stand the suspense anymore." Maellen's words penetrated his bemused thoughts. "I had to see you before the baby came. I had to

know why you kept yourself hidden from me all this time.” She smiled. “I mean, what if you were deformed or ugly?”

Nathaniel moved closer to the light and let her look her fill. “Am I deformed?”

“No,” She said softly. “You're not deformed.”

He braced himself for what she might say next.

“I've seen some pretty hairy men in my time, but you...” A triumphant grin exploded across her face. “You take first prize.”

She laid her hand against her side and grimaced.

Fear laced its fingers around Nathaniel's heart. “Your baby, she comes now.”

“Yeah, she's coming all right.” Maellen's voice remained dry and matter of fact. “I've had contractions for the last couple of hours.” Taking a step forward, she stumbled and grabbed hold of his arm. “Oh shit! That one really hurt.”

Nathaniel stood frozen with indecision. What should he do? Should he pick her up? Would she object if he put his arm about her shoulder?

The harsh yellow glare of a flashlight flowed around the door and into the room. “Don't just stand there.” Lilith stepped inside and projected exasperation at him. “Pick her up.”

Gratitude surged through his heart while he eagerly followed his caterdru's command. Lilith had sized the situation up with a single glance and taken firm control.

Someone ran up the inside staircase steps two at a time. The sound echoed in the hall. Lilith turned around. The door flew open. Shiloh peered back at them from the dark hallway.

Lilith snapped her fingers. “That cell phone Kurt gave me last week, where is it?”

A distracted look crossed Shiloh's face, then changed into comprehension. He blinked. His eyes refocused upon them. “On the table behind the back door. I put it there.”

Lilith's warm approval crashed across their caterbonds. “Bring it to me. I'll call Bridget. Meet her at the crossroads and lead her in with your truck. She doesn't know the back way that well and I don't want her driving by herself after dark.”

* * * *

Maellen shifted herself cautiously inside the slippery tub. “I don't know about this. Taking a hot bubble bath while I'm in labor feels awful silly to me.” She twisted her head back and looked at Nathaniel. “Can I get out now?”

He reached into the water and dribbled another handful over her shoulder. She didn't look silly. Her flushed face looked wonderful. Shiloh placed another log on the fireplace behind them. Maellen's labor pains grew stronger; Nathaniel knew this by the waves they created in the water around her.

Bridget crossed the room and studied Maellen. “I don't care how silly you feel because it's helping you relax between contractions.” The firelight glinted off the dark copper ringlets around Bridget's face. Another contraction rippled across Maellen's stomach. Bridget glanced at her wrist-watch. “Don't worry. You won't have to stay in the tub too much longer. A couple of more hard ones like that last one and we'll be ready for the final stage of your labor.”

Percy straightened up from the double bed where he had been helping Elizabeth pile on the fire-warmed quilts. He placed his hands on the back of the sturdy birthing chair positioned beside the bed. A large piece of oil-cloth beneath the chair glistened in the firelight. Elizabeth circled the bed and laid her hand over his. A gigantic triple shadow of Percy, Elizabeth and the chair loomed on the wall behind them. Candles hissed all about them and filled the room with the distinctive scent of beeswax.

Lilith leaned over the tub and wrapped Maellen's fingers around a thick porcelain mug. Steam rose from its contents. The end of Lilith's braid slipped down her shoulder and plopped into the water beside Maellen's knee. “Take another sip of Aunt Elizabeth's red raspberry tea. It will relax the opening to your uterus. When the time comes for you to push, the baby will come out without any hassle.”

The dogs in the kennels outside started barking wildly. Lilith stood up and reached for whoever approached the house. Nathaniel reached, too but he couldn't identify whose mind he touched. Lilith rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. “Percy!”

“Aye.”

“Go see who it is and get rid of him or her if you can.”

Shiloh straightened up to his full height beside the fireplace, brushed the ashes from his knees and replaced the poker on its hook. "I'll help him."

He followed Percy out. The heavy oak doors at the other end of the room swung shut with a satisfyingly solid whoosh behind them.

Nathaniel gathered up the biggest, fluffiest quilt he could find on the bed and returned to the tub. Holding tightly to Lilith's and Bridget's arms, Maellen levered herself to a standing position inside the tub, wobbled precariously on one foot, then stepped outside onto the hardwood floor. Nathaniel wrapped the quilt around her shoulders.

After they dried her off, Maellen lifted her arms over her head and let Aunt Elizabeth pull the sleeveless birthing robe over her sleek brown body. Woven from the finest nettlecloth, the short linen shift clung to her damp legs and beautiful swollen curve of her belly.

The heavier, full-length birthing robe, embroidered in intricate patterns of silver thread and moonstones lay draped over the foot of the bed. After the birth, they would remove the soiled shift and garb Maellen in the robe that suited her station of newborn mother.

Maellen shivered. Goosebumps raced across her arms. Nathaniel rushed to her side with his heart in his throat. He had neglected his duties. Carefully wrapping a dry quilt around her shoulders, he picked her up and carried her to the birthing chair. He sat down and held her in his lap. Another strong contraction rippled through her. She curled her hands into fists under his grip. He told her. "I'll hold you. You're safe with me."

Maellen slapped his hands away and scrambled to her feet. "Get that damn quilt off of me. I don't need it. It's too hot."

The doors flew open in a flurry of confused activity but Nathaniel didn't bother looking to see who had entered. He was too busy trying to untangle himself from the quilt and stand up at the same time. Maellen grabbed his arm and twisted her body sideways while she looked over his shoulder. Her astonishment flowed into him. "Mama!"

Nathaniel stopped. The hair on his spine stiffened. His shirt lay on the bed upstairs. Maellen's mother could see his fur now. He didn't know what to do. Should he turn around? Should he flee?

"Now look what you've done!" Bridget's ire matched her voice. "I told you not to come."

Lucinda planted her hands on her hips and glared. "Shiloh and Percy told me about Nathaniel's fur before they let me in. So you can all stop wasting time and energy trying to hide him from me. I'm not going to bite him. I just want to get over there with Maellen. That's my granddaughter she's having."

The next thing Nathaniel knew, the baby decided she wanted to be born. Proper introductions would wait until later.

Bridget held out her hand. "I need a flashlight and a speculum."

Nathaniel knelt with Maellen. They faced each other. He held onto her waist and supported her while the contractions increased their tempo. An awkward position, but it happened to be the one Maellen preferred at the moment. Shiloh knelt behind her and supported her from the rear. Maellen braced herself against Nathaniel and pushed. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders. He felt two contractions flow through her. The baby eased its body down a little further into her pelvic area.

Lilith and Lucinda passed the flashlight and speculum to Bridget. Nathaniel scrunched himself sideways and let Lucinda pull a pair of thin plastic gloves over his hands. Bridget pulled a pair of surgical gloves on her hands, thumbed the switch on and scooted down on her back on the oil-cloth.

Maellen braced herself while Bridget used the speculum and peered inside her crotch.

"There!" Bridget's triumphant cry soared up from between Maellen's knees. "I can see the baby's head." Dignity wasn't her prime concern at the moment. Nathaniel loved her all the more for her intensity. "I might have to use the forceps. The head is snagged on her tailbone."

Bridget handed the flashlight and speculum to Lucinda and wiggled out from her awkward position on the floor. Nathaniel gazed over Maellen's bowed head into Shiloh's eyes. Now that they knew why the baby's head hadn't moved down, his caterdru knew what to do. Shiloh placed his hands in the small of Maellen's back and waited for the next contraction. It came.

Shiloh pushed on her back and braced her against the baby's head when it bounced off her tailbone and moved downwards. Maellen gritted her teeth and leaned into Nathaniel's strong grasp, grunting and groaning with effort while she pushed with the powerful contraction shuddering through her body.

Nathanial felt the slow, heavy vibrations of her pelvic bones shaking and stretching apart under the pressure of the baby's body when it slid out into the birth canal.

"That's it, baby," Lucinda crooned. Her plastic coated hands cradled the baby's black haired scalp. "One more push, that's all we need to pop those big shoulders out. Why can't Harker babies have normal sized shoulders like everyone else?"

Another contraction surged through Maellen. She pushed.

Her fingernails dug into Nathanial's arms.

"That's it, baby. You can do it! There!" The baby slid out into Lucinda's hands.

Nathanial reached down with his right hand and picked up the baby. Maellen pressed her face against his chest and hiccupped, laughing and crying at the same time. Tears drenched Nathanial's face. He looked past Maellen at Shiloh and shared a tremulous smile. Tears streamed down Shiloh's face, too. Between the two of them, they held Maellen close while the final contraction rippled through her and expelled the placenta. Then they eased her to her feet and helped her sit in the birthing chair.

Nathanial gazed at the girlchild nestled in the crook of his arm. The umbilical cord pulsed and pushed the rest of her blood from the placenta into her body. Her skin changed color from dusky blue to bright pink. Nathanial breathed in the heavy blood scent of her birthing, a richer, earthier smell than that of freshly shed blood. The baby opened her dark and beautiful eyes and gazed at his face with a wondrous intensity.

Maellen touched her daughter's cheek. The baby turned her head and gazed at her mother. A dimple blossomed on the child's left cheek. Nathanial's heart skipped a beat. More tears prickled under his eyelids.

She had Roan Moonsammy's eyes, black and lovely like her hair. Nathanial blinked his tears away and laid her in Maellen's arms. He fumbled for the sheathed blade that dangled from the silver chain around his neck. Shiloh had already unsheathed his silver blade and held it ready in his right hand.

Lilith tied off the umbilical cord with a silver thread. Placing her hands upon her caterdrus' knife hands, left for Nathanial and the right hand for Shiloh. She looked at Maellen and asked the crucial question. "What name did you choose for our daughter?"

Maellen lifted her chin. "Roan Moonsammy Harker."

Lucinda placed her right hand on Maellen's shoulder. "That's a lovely name."

Lilith traced Roan's cheek with her fingertip.

Nathanial and Shiloh cut the cord with their knives and wiped the blades across on Roan's belly. They had witnessed her name and marked her with the blood of her birth.

Nathanial sheathed his blade. He looked into Shiloh's dark eyes and smiled. Maellen needed to rest and complete her bond with her daughter. He and Shiloh had one more task. They must bury the afterbirth and seal the baby to her oathmother's land.

* * * *

The birthing chamber was dark by the time Nathanial retrieved his shirt from his bedroom. He stood in the doorway of the birthing chamber. Shiloh doused the kerosene lantern. In the fireplace, the remnants of a log glowed softly. Moonlight streamed in through the casement window behind the four-poster bed.

Percy rested upon the wide windowsill with one knee up and his back braced against the side. A quiet smile lit up his face. Bridget leaned against the wall by Percy.

Lilith and Elizabeth stood arm-in-arm at the foot of the bed watching Lucinda tuck her daughter and granddaughter in for the night. Catching sight of Nathanial and Shiloh in the doorway, Bridget placed a warning finger against her lips and tiptoed across the floor.

Her copperfire hair tumbled down her back in a loose tangle of curls. Sweat marked her flushed face while her blouse clung to her damp curves. She looked extremely sexy and desirable to Nathanial, exactly the way she'd appear after making love all night long.

She approached. Heat rushed through Nathanial's veins. He reached and savored the caterbond that linked him to her. He followed that bond to Shiloh and felt desire growing deep inside his caterdru. Nathanial wanted to embrace both of them and let the flames burn through them all at once.

Bridget stopped. She looked back and forth at him and Shiloh. Two bright red dots blazed on her cheekbones. She felt their hunger. That much was obvious. "We have to talk. We have to get everything out in the open between us. I mean, now that Maellen's had her baby, I've been thinking about how much both of you mean to me, and we need to talk this out."

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Can we go somewhere else and talk privately? Maellen's all worn out. She needs time alone with her daughter."

The meaning behind Bridget's words penetrated the heated fog in Nathaniel's brain. He gazed at her upturned face. Her pupils dilated and blotted out the gray in her eyes.

Shiloh's gaze devoured Bridget's face also. "The house we fixed up for you. It's close by. We can take you there."

He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets, ducked his head and studied the floorboards under his boots. "You can move there if you like. It'll be safer if you live closer to us."

Bridget blinked. "I never thought." She looked away. "I mean this is rather sudden."

Nathaniel didn't want her to feel like they were trying to tie her down in one place all of a sudden. "You don't have to decide anything tonight. We rewired the cabin from top to bottom and added solar panels to the roof. That way you can bring your computer and stereo and whatever else you need. Just take look at it, that's all we ask."

He aimed a warning scowl at Shiloh. "You don't have to move. We can still visit you at your place anytime you want us with you."

Shiloh lifted his head. Hope flared within his eyes. "We fixed the house months ago when you knew only Lily. You're her caterdru now. Where you live now, it's hard for us to see you."

Bridget looked at them. "That's why we have to talk. Everything's changed between us. I'm Lily's oathsister now and..." Her voice faded away into uncertainty.

Nathaniel put a damper upon his turbulent heart. Now was not the proper time to project his lust upon her. She needed to have a clear mind in order to choose for her sisterline. Rushing her into a decision would be unwise.

They should wait for her to bring up the subject of babies and explain that it mattered not if she chose one over the other. Shiloh's seed would not guarantee her furless babies. There were too many foremothers in common in their lineage. "Come with us. Look at the house. Think things over first, then we can talk."

An eager smile illuminated her face. "You're right. There's no hurry. We can take it one step at a time."

Nathanial extended his hand. Bridget slipped her hand into his. Shiloh grasped her other hand. Down the hall they walked, the three of them. Bridget said, "Nathanial."

"Aye?"

"Lucinda told me to tell you she likes you. She said at first your fur surprised her, but now the way you look makes sense when she thinks about all those stories about a werewolf in your family. She saw how you were with Maellen tonight, and she knows you'd never do anything to hurt her or anyone else."

Nathanial looked at Shiloh. Their eyes locked, hazel and brown, while he tried to signal a question at his caterdru.

"What?" Shiloh mouthed his confusion back.

Bridget looked back and forth between them. "What's going on?"

Nathanial gazed down at her. He was her clervant and Shiloh her frone. She had but to hold out her hand, and they would be by her side. He took a deep breath and questioned Shiloh. "Did you remember what we spoke about last night? Did you purchase what we need?"

A distant, wary expression filled Shiloh's face for a few seconds. He reached into the inner pocket of his jean jacket and pulled out a brown paper bag. "I remembered to buy them." His eyes pleaded with Nathanial to change the subject.

"What things?" Bridget asked.

Nathanial frowned. Would she be upset if he told her? Why else would she want to talk to both of them alone if it wasn't about choosing? "Things we need around the house, should you decide to stay the night."

"Oh, all right." Bridget sighed. "I won't spoil your little surprise. Let's take a look at the house. After we finish the grand tour, you can show me what Shiloh bought."

Chapter Twenty-five

The kerosene lantern they'd used on the walk there sat dark and silent beside the front door. They didn't need it because every square inch of the compact cabin had been rewired with modern lighting fixtures, outlets and appliances. Solar panels on the roof stored extra power during the daylight hours.

Now that the tour was over, Bridget leaned against the kitchen table and waited for them to explain their surprise.

A proud smile exposed the fangs in Nathaniel's mouth. He gestured at the smooth wooden planked floor and pale blue walls of the kitchen. "When you are ready, let us know and we will help you move in. You do not have to move in right away. You can sleep over every now and then and take turns with us. That way we won't tire you out and you can take your time deciding who will father the first born child for your sisterline."

Whoa! Wait a minute. Nathaniel didn't just say he expected her to go to bed with both of them, did he? Bridget held up her hand and stared at the brown paper bag sitting innocently in the middle of the kitchen table. "Would you mind explaining what you just said one more time?"

Shiloh stood very still as if he were holding his breath. He shifted his gaze back and forth between Bridget and Nathaniel and waited.

Nathaniel reached for the paper bag and picked it up. "There is no hurry. We won't try to coerce you into choosing one over the other." He unfolded the top of the bag, tipped it over and spilled the contents—an assortment of condoms in brightly covered wrappers and two tubes of lubricating gel—onto the table. "When you are ready to have children, we will abide by your decision as to whose seed you chose to begin your sisterline."

Every moment of the last couple of weeks slid into focus for Bridget. Nathaniel expected her to go to bed with his cousin Shiloh. He expected her to go to bed with both of them. She yelled, "How could you do this to me? I thought you loved me."

Nathaniel's eyes widened and all of his hurt confusion flowed into her through their caterbond. "We love you. You love us. You can feel our love. Why are you so angry?"

Shiloh backed away. His voice sounded harsh and brittle. "She doesn't understand."

Bridget looked at him. He flinched from her stare as if she'd slapped him. He closed his eyes and sagged against the wall. His face grew dark and sullen. She felt the caterbond shrivel between them while he shut himself away from her anger. She reached for him with her mind and couldn't feel him anymore. That hurt. Not feeling his emotions hurt her more than anything she'd ever known.

She leaned against the table and held on to it to keep herself from falling. Why should it bother her so much not to feel him anymore? Wasn't that exactly what she wanted? Didn't she want to stop those guilty twinges of desire every time he looked at her or touched her?

Bridget turned her head, looked into Nathaniel's eyes and realized she couldn't feel him anymore either. "If you loved me, you wouldn't expect me to..." This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. Nathaniel and Shiloh expected her to make love to both of them. How could they?

Nathaniel divided his attention between her and Shiloh. "I thought you understood when you bonded yourself to both of us that night. The love you share with me is not altered by the love you share with him."

Shiloh sank down the wall until he sat on the floor. He crossed his arms on his knees and bowed his head upon his arms.

It wasn't her fault. Bridget averted her gaze and straightened her shoulders. She wasn't the guilty party. What they asked of her was morally repugnant. She couldn't do it.

"I thought you understood." Nathaniel pleaded with her. "To bind yourself to only one person is folly. The bond is a sword with two edges. If I were to die and you had no other bonds, then my death would pull you into death with me. The bond you share with Shiloh will hold you to life. He would be able to stay with you then and raise the children you chose to have from either one of us."

Bitter resignation etched Shiloh's voice. "I should have known it wouldn't work between us. Tell her the rest of it. Tell her how old we are."

Bridget risked a glance at his bowed head and slumped shoulders. What did their ages have to do with this?

Nathaniel cleared his throat. His raspy voice raised goose bumps on her skin. "I was born November 30th, in the year 1909."

She subtracted his birth date from the current year and came up with an impossibility. One hundred thirty three. Next week he'll be hundred and thirty three years old. Inconsistent data from the printout of Debbie's

genetic study of their blood raced through Bridget's mind. She took a good hard look at both men.

If she'd met them as strangers, she'd describe them as warriors born and bred in another time and place. Tall and incredibly strong, either one could kill her with a casual slap of his hand. When they smiled, she saw fangs. When they blinked, she saw nictitating membranes shield their eyes. They carried the same mutations in their genetic profiles.

She also knew with absolute certainty that they loved her and would never harm her. When Nathaniel killed the intruder at the clinic, she'd felt his horror. When they cradled baby Roan in their arms, she'd shared their joy and wonder.

An ember of hope flickered and glowed in the bond she shared with them. Shiloh lifted his head and stared at her with eyes like black coals. Nathaniel stretched his hand out to her and crooked his finger.

Bridget backed away. "Don't touch me. I can't think when you look at me like that." She spun on her heels and fled out the door into the cool dark shadows of the night.

She didn't get very far, though it wasn't from lack of trying. The paths in the swamp led her in circles. I should have figured it out. Bridget sagged against a moss-shrouded tree and replayed the sequence of events one more time in her mind. The clues had been there all along and she'd ignored them. She'd ignored everything she'd learned about matriarchal cultures from her anthropology courses. She knew polyandry and group marriages were common practices in those cultures so why did it surprise her so much when they offered it to her.

Did 'survival of the fittest' mean the strongest male fertilized the most females? Strength as a criteria for selection from the gene pool instead of intelligence didn't make sense especially when she added in the 'double standard' that said monogamy was the norm for women and promiscuity the norm for men.

A twig snapped in the underbrush behind her. Bridget turned around with the tree protecting her back and waited. Lily and Percy stepped out from the shadows into the moonlight.

The caterbond she shared with Lily trembled between them. Bridget knew if she reached with her empathic senses, she'd find similar bonds forged between herself, Nathaniel and Shiloh. Like it or not, they were family now. Lily was her sister and Nathaniel and Shiloh expected to become her husbands. She couldn't escape the bonds she'd forged with them.

She could chose one or the other or both to father children upon her. They would abide by her decision. Her decision wouldn't change how they felt about her or how she felt about them. She'd given a piece of her heart to both men and they'd linked themselves to her. She couldn't change that and neither could they.

“Are you ready to talk now?” Lily's quiet voice broke the silence.

Bridget shook her head. “I need to think.”

Lily gestured at Percy. He stepped forward and inclined his head. “I believe you're too upset to drive and think at the same time. Will you allow Percy to drive you home?”

* * * *

Bridget tilted her head and stared at Percy's profile while he steered the jeep from the dirt road onto the highway. A childish taunt surfaced in her mind. Cry baby cry! Stick a finger in your eye and cry baby cry! She'd acted like a baby running out on them instead of talking things out.

He drove past a clump of moss-covered trees standing beside the road like hooded druids. Bridget blurted out her question. “How old are you?”

His eyes flickered sideways. “I had my two hundredth and sixty second birthday a few months ago.” He pulled over to the side of the road, stopped the jeep and turned to her. “Give me your hand, please.”

Strong fingers covered hers. He turned her hand over, lifted the palm to his mouth and kissed it. At the same time, warm hot desire flowed through her like a bolt of lightning. She pulled her hand away and cradled it against her chest and stared at him.

Laugh lines crinkled at the corners of Percy's vivid blue eyes. His voice remained calm and reasonable. “Sex doesn't always equal love. Just because you can have an orgasm by yourself doesn't mean you're in love with your hands. Sex can be shared pleasure between two friends. It can also be a lifelong commitment between lovers. If you can love more than one child, why can't you love more than one person at a time?”

The question popped out of her mouth before she could stop it. “If I decided to have a child with you, what would Nathaniel and Shiloh think?”

Percy shook his head. “It wouldn't change how they feel about you. They'd love your children regardless of who fathers them upon you.”

“I'd love to run a complete genetic profile on you.”

A feeling of wary alertness flared from Percy. "What am I?" Soft velvet sheathed the razor sharp steel of his voice. "Do you consider me a freak, as not human?"

A heated blush flared across Bridget's face. Why did she always put her foot in her mouth every time she opened it? "I know you're human. I just want to find out more about you."

She managed a weak smile and another quick question. "How old is Shiloh?"

Percy cocked his head. A dimple materialized in his left cheek. "Why do you ask?"

"Because every time I'm with him, I feel like I'm robbing the cradle."

Percy smiled a slow, seductive smile and exposed the white fangs of his eyeteeth. "He used to be the baby of the family. Roan now has that honor. Shiloh's only ninety four."

"And Lily?"

"She's a hundred and nineteen."

"Great Aunt Elizabeth?"

"Two hundred and eighty four."

A plain white van drove past them. Percy turned his head and watched until it disappeared around the next bend in the road.

"What's wrong?" Bridget asked.

He shrugged, turned the engine on and drove back onto the road. "I'm getting paranoid in my old age. There are too many strangers around here with the spaceport being built on the other side of the swamp. I don't like having strangers near my home."

They continued in silence. The moon slipped out from behind a cloud and blazed down upon the deserted two-lane highway. Bridget sagged back in her seat and yawned. "Tell them I'm sorry. Tell them I've changed my mind and we need to talk again."

Percy nodded absently, tapped the brake, downshifted and steered the jeep into a sharp right turn up the driveway that led to the clinic. Gravel crunched under the tires. He turned left into the parking lot. A white van waited there.

He slammed his foot on the brakes, looked back over his shoulder and shifted into reverse. Bridget looked backwards, too. Another white van

moved up the driveway behind them. Percy muttered. "Brace yourself. When I ram into them, open your door and run as fast as you can into the swamp. Don't look back. I'll catch up to you and lead you away while they stumble around in the dark like fools."

The tires spun under the jeep and spit gravel as it moved faster and faster down the incline and they crashed into the second van.

Bridget's seatbelt held her in place and the airbag just about suffocated her. She heard the door open on Percy's side of the jeep while she pushed at the airbag away from her face and struggled to unfasten her seatbelt. The door opened on her side of the jeep. Percy reached in, ripped the airbag with one hand and tore the seatbelt from her with his other hand as if it were tissue paper.

A heavy set man approached them. Percy spun around and slapped him aside. The man landed on the hood of the jeep and the metal dented under his body. Bridget floundered out of the jeep and felt a prick in her side. She looked down and saw a feathered dart sticking out from her blouse.

Percy ran past her to a second man, slapped the gun from the man's hand and bent his arm back. She heard the distinct sound of the man's bone snapping followed by his scream.

Five darts had blossomed on Percy's back. Bridget tried to run. Her legs wobbled under her and she fell to her knees. She stared at the bush that blocked her view, yawned and toppled over onto the ground.

* * * *

Nathaniel stood on the edge of the empty parking lot with Lilith and Shiloh. Fear froze his heart, squeezed the air from his lungs and hissed in his ears. She's gone. You'll never see her again or hear her laugh. She's gone.

Shiloh said, "She's gone. Percy's gone."

Lilith lifted her head and her eyes went distant as if she stood outside her body. "We felt it and didn't know what we felt. We didn't know if it was a cry for help or a cold wind through an open door."

Shiloh dropped to his knee beside a line of red droplets on the paved lot. He dipped his finger in the liquid, tasted it and spat it out. "Transmission fluid."

Nathanial closed his eyes and reached with his senses. He found the faint traces of the bonds he shared with Bridget and Percy. He opened his eyes. "They're alive. They're still alive."

A cold, deadly anger simmered beneath Lilith's voice. She gestured at the parking lot, the driveway and the wooded area behind the lot. "Search every inch of the surroundings first. Afterwards, we'll pool our findings and decide our next step."

Nathanial turned and scanned the treetops. The moon had set over an hour ago and the faint pink glow on the horizon heralded dawn's imminence. He looked into Shiloh's troubled eyes and inclined his head in agreement. Lilith was right. They must not let fear control their thoughts. Now, more than ever, they needed to use their eyes, minds and hands to discover what had happened and find the proper direction for their search.

* * * *

The morning sun burned in the sky but the air remained crisp and cool. Nathanial waited behind the trees and watched from a distance of over a hundred yards. In the middle of the partially completed bridge, a tall woman wearing the distinctive hard-hat and coveralls of a construction worker sat in the control cabin of a giant crane. Her hands moved with blinding speed over the levers.

The crane reached into the water and pulled Bridget's battered jeep out. Water cascaded from the mangled remains of the vehicle. A scuba diver waved his arm, waded into the water until he reached a spot deep enough to dive, then he disappeared beneath the surface.

On the embankment stood Lynwood, the sheriff, Kurt Williams and a tall, heavily muscled black man wearing a shoulder holster over his turtle-necked sweater. White puffs of air gusted in front of their faces. Blotches of red clay clung to their pants and shoes like blood. A silent ambulance waited on the road behind them.

About thirty yards away on either side of the ambulance, patrol cars with their lights flashing blocked the road. The river swirled past a jumble of rocks and steel girders left over from last year's bridge. A line of cars parked along the highway had already disgorged a crowd of curious on-lookers.

A man shouted. "Look!"

A ripple of excitement rustled through the crowd like the wind in a pile of leaves. Heads turned in unison and watched Lilith and Shiloh stride out from the underbrush onto the highway, continue past the crowd and stop

in front of Lynwood. Lilith said a few words and gestured. Shiloh eased the knapsack from his shoulder, untied the flap, pulled out a miniscule camcorder and placed it in Lynwood's outstretched hand.

Nathanial didn't know if they'd made the right choice even though it felt like the only choice they had left. Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

For him, the passage of time had always been marked by the years blending into each other in a gradual procession of unfolding seasons, one into the next. Bridget's turmoil made sense to him now. They had asked her to adjust to a radical change in her life, to change everything she knew and live with them. They should not have asked her to endure such a drastic alteration of her beliefs. If he had the power to turn the clock backwards, he'd tell her it no longer mattered if she wished to leave.

The sun climbed higher in the sky. Lynwood, the Sheriff, Lilith, Shiloh, Kurt and the armed man went to the limo parked behind the ambulance. They passed the camera hand to hand and took turns viewing the recorded images. Numerous gestures accompanied their discussion.

Nathanial frowned when the armed man viewed the tape. He moved with the sure grace of a man totally aware of the strengths and weaknesses of his body. Why did Lilith and Shiloh trust this stranger? They had no covenant with him that bound him to their sisterline.

Kurt and Lynwood shouted at one another and pulled the camcorder back and forth between each other like a pair of children in a tug of war. Shiloh and Lilith exchanged a long stare with one another. The sheriff and the armed stranger leaned against the limo, crossed their arms and watched.

Lilith stepped forward, held out her hand and said a few words. Both men stopped their struggle. She plucked the camcorder from them and handed it to Shiloh. He returned the camcorder to his knapsack and waited.

More words were exchanged. Lilith made a cutting motion with her hand, turned around and walked away with Shiloh at her side.

Their actions made perfect sense to Nathanial. Lynwood and Kurt had acted like a pair of children squabbling over a toy. The best way to deal with that was to remove the object of their desire and force the children into a temporary truce to regain their toy. Afterwards, during the process of retrieving the toy, they'd learn how much better it felt to work together instead of fighting with each other.

* * * *

Shiloh lifted the curtain of silver gray moss for Lilith and stepped into the clearing after her.

“What happened?” Nathaniel asked.

Lilith lifted her left shoulder in a half shrug. “They agreed to meet us at McAllaster farm.”

“Do we have a plan yet?”

She firmed her mouth into a scowl. “We have to work the details out first. Based on what we saw on the camcorder and the feathers we retrieved from the driveway, the kidnappers used tranquilizer darts. Kurt recognized one of the kidnappers as a mercenary agent for industrial espionage. Between his knowledge and Lynwood's police powers as an SBI agent we hope to find them before their captors reach a decision to dispose of them.”

She inclined her head at him. “Are you ready?”

“Aye.”

She turned and led the way deeper into the swamp.

Chapter Twenty-six

The McAllaster homestead had never been much, just a simple two-story wooden structure maintained by cash crops of corn, tobacco and moonshine. Twenty years ago, the last McAllaster shot himself after he killed his wife and children during a drunken rage. Nowadays, bats and owls roosted in the rafters of the broken-windowed house. Both doors front and back had disappeared. Gaping holes dotted the roof and the porch steps lay in splintered shards on the red clay ground. Milkweed, cattails and scrub pine trees had reclaimed the worn out fields.

The sun sank past the horizon. Pink and red streaks chased each other across slate gray clouds. A bright goddess moon blazed past a gap in the clouds. Nathaniel followed Lilith and Shiloh out into the field. He spotted the outlines of a black van and prefab geodesic dome hidden beneath camouflage netting behind the ramshackle farmhouse.

Bug zappers hummed and hissed around the perimeter. Nathaniel strode past them and peered into the open rear doors of the van. Wall to

wall gadgets had transformed the interior into an advertisement for an electronics store.

The sensation of a strange presence behind him lifted the fur on Nathaniel's neck. He whirled around. Lynwood Jefferson lifted a corner of the camouflage netting and moved closer. "I can see the tabloid headlines in the supermarket checkout lines." Gloom and doom saturated his cynical voice. "Sasquatch found in North Carolina swamp. SBI agent arrests Bigfoot on manslaughter and accidental death charges at medical clinic."

The door flap of the geodesic dome lifted. Kurt Williams and his bodyguard strode out into the moonlit clearing. Kurt's dazed eyes focused on Nathaniel's face while Lynwood continued his grumbling monologue. "Thank God I went along with the bear story. I can live that one down, but Bigfoot, holy shit, the newshounds would have a field day with that one. I'd be the laughing stock for the entire world."

Kurt stuck his hand out first. "Hello Nathaniel. I'm Kurt Williams. Are you really Lily's brother?"

Nathaniel shook hands with him. Rampant curiosity galloped into him through the contact with Kurt's hand. "Lilith and I be cousins by birth."

Kurt nodded and turned his bemused gaze to Lilith's face. "Then there's a distinct possibility that one or more of Lily's kids might turn out looking just like Nathaniel."

Lilith inclined her head in a regal nod.

Feeling no animosity from Kurt, Nathaniel selected a diplomatic response. "This is true."

Kurt blinked and looked down at his hand still engulfed within Nathaniel's furry grip. "Okay. I can live with that."

The only outward sign of Kurt's inner turmoil was a single bead of sweat that trickled down his face. He pulled his hand out of Nathaniel's grasp. "I don't mean to be rude but I need to sit down for a few minutes." Then he turned around and walked back inside the geodesic dome.

Lynwood stepped forward. Enthusiasm brightened his dour face. "You're a southpaw." He announced this simple fact as if it were the most important discovery in the universe. "When the guy in the clinic shot the dog, you tried to slap the gun aside with your left hand."

Lynwood raised his left hand as if he was going to slap Nathaniel. "The gunman looked up, saw you and fired a full clip at you." Lynwood staggered back and spun around in a complete circle. "The force of those bul-

lets slammed into your right side and spun you around like a top. Your left hand was still extended for the original slap. It connected with the gunman's face instead of his hand and snapped his neck like a twig.”

The gunman's death wasn't a topic Nathaniel wanted to discuss at this moment in time. Lynwood stared at the right side of Nathaniel's body. “Would you mind removing your shirt so I can see where he shot you?”

Nathaniel looked past Lynwood at Shiloh and Lilith. Lilith tightened her mouth into a frown. Shiloh spread his hands apart as if to say. “It's your choice.”

Nathaniel risked a discreet probe at Lynwood's emotions and found no taint of bloodlust associated with the agent's avid interest. He unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off his shoulders.

Kurt's silent bodyguard moved closer. The same avid interest as Lynwood filled the bodyguard's amber eyes when he leaned forward and studied the scars on Nathaniel's chest and right arm.

No jacket concealed the holstered gun under the bodyguard's right arm. Nathaniel studied a similar bulge under Lynwood's jacket. The fact that both men habitually carried weapons gave him an odd feeling under their intense scrutiny.

When they touched his scars, he let his senses reach deep inside them and searched for the slightest taint of mabgli within their hearts. He probed for the sick sensation of minds that fed upon pain and terror. He looked for the sickening stench of a mabgli's gloating over the power to hold another's life in his hands while that life faded into the cold emptiness of death. He found none of these things within their hearts.

They felt normal to his empathic senses, like normal men with strong and well-defined sexuality and professional pride in their skills. He felt their respect and admiration for the strength contained within his physique. They radiated a warm, comfortable feeling of friendship toward him.

“I don't know about you.” Kurt's irritated voice broke the silence. He stood in the doorway of the dome, turned sideways in order to expose his hands to the light that blazed behind him and moved his hands in the familiar gestures of sign language as he spoke. “It's getting a little cold out here. Why not come inside where it's warmer.”

Nathaniel shrugged his shirt back over his shoulders, flashed a grateful smile at Kurt and gestured his agreement.

A brilliant smile lit up the bodyguard's ebony face. He moved his hands swiftly and introduced himself.

Nathanial glanced at Shiloh for help. Perhaps he'd misread the bodyguard's signs. He'd felt no hatred, only admiration and friendship when Harold signed his willingness to fight.

Shiloh laughed and signed his words as he explained the problem. "He wants to fight you but it's not the way you're thinking. He wants it as a contest. Remember when we used to play the men-women games at mid-summer."

Memories flowed through Nathanial's mind in a glorious rush. He saw the brown leather ball. He saw men and women stripped down to breechcloths with hair braided tightly back and their muscles delineated under the oil that coated their skin.

The women's breasts gleamed taut and lovely upon their oiled bodies while they lined up on opposing teams, men against women. Nathanial, of course, had to use extra oil to coat his furred body.

Because the women lacked the size and strength of their male opponents, they were permitted to carry the ball in their hands and throw it to one another. The men could use only their feet and heads to propel the ball into the wicker baskets hung between opposing goal posts. Everyone else, men, women and children lined up on the sidelines and voiced their opinions of the game. The losing team must prepare and serve the midsummer night feasts. The gathering lasted three days and nights with feasting every night.

Shiloh was seventeen the first time he joined the men's team. As usual, the game deteriorated into pure chaos. Men and women ran, screamed and slipped and slid on the grass while they crashed into one another in a mad scramble for the ball.

Sweat poured down Nathanial's face and body. He gasped for air. The final ball came into play, the ball that would decide today's winner. It soared into the air. He ran for it.

Lilith jumped up, slammed her weight against him and knocked him off stride. She jumped again, caught the ball one-handed and sped down the field like a deer. Nathanial ran and joined the men and women kicking and shoving each other aside while they followed her fleet form. Frantic hands reached for Lilith and tried to pull her down. Oil gleamed on her golden skin. She twisted sideways and slipped through the reaching hands like an eel.

A rough hand grabbed Nathaniel's braids and pulled him back. He ignored the pain and dragged whoever it was along with him. Shiloh raced ahead and reached with long brown fingers for the flying tail of Lilith's breechcloth. He caught hold of it. The waistband parted and Lilith flew onward, unencumbered.

Shiloh skidded to a stop and stared at the breechcloth in his hand. The entire mob of men and women, Nathaniel included, ran into Shiloh and toppled over into an unruly heap of arms, legs and torsos. The spectators whooped and yelled and pounded each other's backs.

By the time they untangled themselves, Lilith stood stark naked under the hoop laughing so hard that tears streamed down her face. Her right eye had swollen shut. Long streaks of green grass stained her ribs and legs.

Shiloh limped up to her. He ignored the blood dripping from his nose, gave her a sheepish grin and the breechcloth. She flashed a wicked smile, snatched the cloth from his fingers and retied it around her hips while the crowd roared their approval and savored her triumphant exultation.

Nathaniel smiled, looked into Harold's eyes and moved his hands in sign language as he spoke. "When this is over, I will enjoy the opportunity to fight you."

Harold opened his mouth in a silent laugh, stepped forward and hugged his newest friend.

* * * *

The camcorders belonged to Kurt. Apparently, he'd had them installed after the break-in at the clinic for security reasons.

Regardless of his reasons, their most important clues were the captured images of the men who had kidnapped Bridget and Uncle Percy. Using Kurt's knowledge of corporate espionage and the information in Lynwood's computerized files, they eliminated all the obvious possibilities until only one name remained, Nowan Pharmaceuticals.

They'd contacted Debbie via cell phone and she'd agreed to rendezvous with them at the deserted library in Lacrimas. Nathaniel picked up Shiloh's knapsack and slung it over his shoulder. He signed his words as he spoke. "I know I cannot go along with you for the final stage of this rescue attempt. I will wait by the phone and maintain any computer linkages you may need along the way."

Kurt shook his head. "Who said you have to stay behind?"

Everyone turned around and stared at Kurt as if he'd gone insane.

Nathanial gestured at his face and stopped. It was obvious to all that he could not show his face in public. Why should he have to explain the obvious?

Kurt spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "I have the perfect solution to that. You've heard of the Tuaregs, haven't you?"

"I have," Lilith wasn't used to signing her words so she took her time while she spoke. "However, I fail to see the connection between a tribe of nomads from the Sahara Desert and the people who kidnapped Bridget and Uncle Percy."

Kurt paced back and forth and waved his hands excitedly.

"It's the perfect solution because Tuareg males keep their faces veiled while the women walk around bare faced. We'll disguise Nathanial and Shiloh as Tuareg males while Lily and Debbie play the part of Tuareg women."

Lynwood shook his head. "It'll never work. They know Debbie's face. You'll have to find another woman to play the part and I won't endanger another woman in your half-baked scheme."

Shiloh's voice broke the angry tension rising between Kurt and Lynwood. "Great Aunt Elizabeth will join us. Uncle Percy is her brother."

Lynwood rubbed his chin. "She's a civilian. All of you are civilians. I'd rather bring in my own team."

"No," Kurt glared at Lynwood. "By the time you select a team and brief them, it'll be too late. We have to move fast before Bridget and Percy get hurt."

Lynwood rubbed his hands through his hair as if he wanted to pull it out by the roots. "All right. We'll have Aunt Debbie go as a special consultant hired by the Tuaregs for their tour of pharmaceutical research labs."

Kurt rubbed his hands together. "It'll work. It's got to work." He grabbed Lynwood's arm. "All you have to do is convince a judge to issue a search warrant to cover our asses when we find them."

Lynwood pursed his lips. "Finding a judge willing to issue a search warrant on such short notice and pure supposition isn't going to be easy."

Kurt slapped Lynwood's shoulder. "You can do it." He lifted his right arm and glanced at the time. "In the meantime, we have an hour and a half to dismantle everything here and meet Debbie at the library."

Lynwood stared at Nathaniel. Mischief flared within his intent gaze. "Aunt Debbie hasn't met you yet, has she?"

"No, she hasn't."

"Oh, this will be great!" Kurt rubbed his hands together again and exchanged a gleeful look with Lynwood. "I can't wait to see the expression on her face when she does."

* * * *

Sneaking him into town wasn't as hard as Nathaniel had anticipated. Shiloh drove them in his truck with Nathaniel wedged in the front seat between him and Lilith with Aunt Elizabeth seated on Nathaniel's lap for additional concealment. Rows of leafless oak arched their branches over the empty side streets. Shiloh parked in an alley behind the library.

The Sheriff waited at the side entrance. Cocking his head sideways, he took a good long look at Nathaniel's face under his hooded jacket. The Sheriff's brown eyes held a wealth of shrewd intelligence in their depths. He shook hands with Nathaniel. "You'll do. I've seen worse in my dreams."

He turned his attention to Aunt Elizabeth and Lilith and tugged at the brim of his hat. "Ma'am, Miz Harker, you take care now." He unlocked the door and let them inside.

They walked inside. Debbie waited on the other side of the library with Lynwood and Kurt. She stood with her back to the door idly flipping through the pages of a book. A staircase loomed behind them with an elaborately carved grandfather clock on the landing above.

Dark curly hair hugged Debbie's scalp. She wore a gray jacket and matching slim skirt and high heels. Nathaniel took another look at those heels. How could she walk or run in those things? What should he do now? He didn't want to startle her. He'd never forgive himself if he caused her to twist her ankle in those awkward shoes.

Lynwood and Kurt looked past Debbie and identical grins blossomed on their faces. Debbie whirled around to see what they saw. Her mouth dropped open. Then anger swiftly replaced her initial surprise. She closed her mouth and strode across the room, heels clicking against the hardwood floor and stopped in front of Nathaniel. She placed her hands on her hips and looked him over from head to toe with a critical eye. A formidable woman, the strong willed determination leashed within her small frame flared out at Nathaniel.

A dangerous undertone laced her soft voice. "It isn't Halloween. I don't appreciate having to drive all the way down here in the middle of a night for a childish prank."

Childish prank? Nathaniel turned his head and gave Shiloh a hard look. Had his caterdru dared to play a foolish trick with this woman?

Shiloh widened his eyes with innocence and shook his head at the condemnation shining within Nathaniel's gaze.

"Look at me. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about." Debbie grabbed Nathaniel's beard and forced his head around. She released his face and her mouth dropped open a second time. "You're real," she whispered.

Lynwood and Kurt hooted with laughter and sat down on the staircase. The gargoyles carved into the grandfather clock glowered down upon two grown men giggling helplessly on the steps.

"Yes, he's real." Lynwood gasped.

Kurt wiped the tears from his face. "She thought he was someone dressed up as Sasquatch."

Debbie grabbed Nathaniel's hands and stroked the soft fur on his wrist. "You're real," she repeated in reverent tones. She flexed his fingers, turned his hands over and studied his calloused palms. Shiloh, Lilith and Aunt Elizabeth moved closer until they stood in a half circle around her.

She snapped her head up and glared at Nathaniel. "Say something."

He coughed, cleared his throat and said, "Our eyes are different." He smiled and showed her his fangs. "And our teeth."

Debbie's eyes widened. She turned her head and looked at Lilith, Shiloh and Aunt Elizabeth, one after the other. They blinked in turn, showed her their inner eyelids and opened their mouths to show her their fangs. Debbie clung to Nathaniel's hands. Amazed wonder and comprehension flowed from her into him.

She swayed. Nathaniel risked a peek at her feet. Were her shoes going to betray her now? Should he help her to a chair?

Lynwood pulled himself to his feet. "Aunt Debbie. We need your help. Nowan Corporation believes you and Bridget invented synthetic blood for blood transfusion work." He gestured at the table in the middle of the room where Harold sat quietly beside a laptop computer. "We need you to

hook into your computer at Duke and create a fictitious file for them to access that will keep them happy until we retrieve Bridget and Uncle Percy.”

He moved across the room to the front door and inclined his head in a brief nod. “I’ve got to snag a search warrant now. See you later.”

Righteous anger flared out from Debbie. She pointed at Lynwood. “You!”

Lynwood opened the door and said over his shoulder as he fled into the night. “Sorry. Gotta go now. Talk to you later.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

“Fools! Cretins! I send you out on a routine task and you screw it up. How many times did you shoot her? Why did you bring the old man with her? If I told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, no witnesses.”

It was a lousy way to wake up.

Sharp pains stabbed into Bridget's head like spikes. Her lips felt parched and dry. Her mouth tasted like the inside of a sewer and she had to listen to a horrible voice wheezing and ranting away in the background. She tried to lift her hands and rub at the gritty sand coating her eyelids and found out she couldn't move her hands or her feet.

She blinked, peeled her eyelids open and peered down at herself. Black webbed straps bound her arms and legs to the gurney.

Turning her head sideways and back as far as she could, Bridget spotted the intercom and camera lens in the right hand corner of the windowless, white walled room.

“She's awake.” The grating voice said through the intercom.

Bridget winced at the sound and watched the camera lens change focus for a close up of her face. She turned her head to the left and saw Uncle Percy's unconscious body strapped onto another gurney.

We were kidnapped. Bridget closed her eyes and studied the vivid memories that flowed into her mind. She remembered the jeep hurtling backward and colliding with the van and tree. She saw Uncle Percy slamming the jeep's door into a man's abdomen, remembered how he broke another man's wrist with a single slap and when he fell to his knees with five tranquilizer darts in his body.

A beeping sound outside the door told her someone was using a computerized keypunch pad and entering a password to unlock it. The door slid open and Nancy McLoughlin entered, followed by two beefy white men clad in dark business suits. The brown-haired man had a cast on his right wrist. Nancy's lab coat hung in wrinkled folds over her brown slacks.

A third man, wearing an impeccably tailored gray suit entered next. Every detail about him screamed perfection. Diamond cufflinks glinted at the wrists of his pristine white shirt. A gold clip held his black tie in place. Straight blond hair clung to the nape of his neck and a teardrop shaped diamond swung from his left earlobe. He had a cleft chin, straight nose, well-shaped mouth and emerald green eyes, old eyes, empty eyes. The way he looked at her made her skin feel like spiders crawled over every inch of her body. The strong scent of expensive cologne filled the air.

She wondered how old he was. Based on his unlined face and physique, he looked like he might be about twenty. His eyes betrayed his true age. They were the eyes of an old, greedy man, isolated and drunk with power, hungry for even more power.

Seeing this man made her long for the strong angular features of Nathaniel's face. She wanted to feel the velvet texture of his fur under her fingers and feel the strength in his calloused hands upon her body. She wanted to see Shiloh's lopsided grin soften the harsh, sullen lines of his lean, dark face. She felt a sudden contentment with her unruly copper hair, her tendency to freckle at the slightest hint of sunlight and the scar that dented her chin from when she fell off her bicycle at nine years old and connected with the corner of a brick wall. She savored the fact that Lily's strong features, wide mouth and slightly crooked nose were the opposite of conventional feminine beauty.

Nancy stepped closer, leaned over Bridget and stared at her. Looking into Nancy's haggard face, Bridget felt no sympathy for her former colleague. Nancy had her sleek brown hair pulled back into a tight bun that made her frightened hazel eyes appear even darker and larger against her pale skin. A stethoscope dangled from her hand.

The stench of fear clung to Nancy's hunched shoulders while she examined Bridget's eyes and said, "Most of the sedative has worn off. Her eyes are evenly dilated and the pupils appear to be normal-sized now."

Bridget didn't dare glance at Uncle Percy. If Nancy had checked his eyes while he was unconscious then it was too late for her to hide his secret from them.

"Uhhhhh!" Uncle Percy groaned.

Nancy jumped back a step. The stethoscope slid from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Did Nancy know about Percy's eyes? Or not?

"I hope you have the common decency to let us use the bathroom." Percy's angry voice flowed over Bridget and washed away the fear clogging her thoughts.

To Bridget's surprise, Percy's request was granted in a limited fashion. They were released from the gurneys and escorted to the restroom but given no privacy whatsoever. An armed guard led them to the same restroom, followed them inside the cubicles and watched them urinate.

Then they were escorted into another windowless room. The inevitable gurney waited on the left side of the room along with a group of chairs, two tables, a computer console and printer.

"As you can see, I can be a very accommodating man." Their captor gestured at the selection of food piled on the second table. "Please sit down."

They seated themselves. Armed guards positioned themselves behind their chairs. Nancy seated herself. A third guard picked up a napkin and tucked it under his employer's chin. He leaned forward, picked up a drumstick and bit into it while his gloating satisfaction filled the room. He wiped his mouth with the napkin. "Why don't you make it easier on yourself and give me what I want?"

"What do you want?" Bridget asked.

"Don't play games with me." He jerked his head at the guard standing behind Uncle Percy. The guard unholstered his gun, pulled Percy's arm behind his back and placed the muzzle against the right side of his head. "Your friend will die if you don't give me your formula for synthetic blood."

Keeping her face perfectly still, Bridget spoke in slow, careful tones. "There is no formula. There never was a formula."

"Enough!" He threw his napkin into the gravy bowl and stood. The guard behind Bridget put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. Percy stood next under the prodding from his guard. Nancy stayed huddled in her chair like a terrified mouse.

Percy climbed onto the gurney under the prodding of his guard's gun at his back. Bridget went to the table with the computer console in response to the gun jabbing her in the ribs.

She seated herself in front of it and folded her hands in her lap. What did he expect her to do now? Type out a nice little formula for him?

“Turn around. Look at your friend.”

Bridget complied with his order. She turned around and saw Percy strapped spread-eagled on the gurney. The guard with the cast on his wrist waited beside him with a taser in his good hand; a stun gun that generated enough electricity to knock a man unconscious with each burst.

“This is just a sample of what will happen to you if you don't cooperate.”

Bridget swallowed the vomit that welled up into her mouth. It didn't matter what she said or did, he was going to kill the both of them. He wouldn't torture Percy like that unless he planned to eliminate them afterwards. Nancy was expendable, too. When Bridget gave him what he wanted, he'd eliminate her next.

“Please.” If he wanted her to beg, then that's exactly what she'd give him. “I'll give you the formula.”

His smile was as cold and unfeeling as his eyes. “We're going to have some fun first. Then you'll tell me everything I want.”

* * * *

“That's the best we can do for now. I hope it works.” Debbie hit the enter key on the PC and sent the hastily created files to her databank at Duke University.

Aunt Elizabeth turned her head and studied Nathaniel and Shiloh. Using the illustrations of Tuareg warriors from the encyclopedia, she and Harold had been taking turns winding a twenty-foot blot of dark blue cloth around Nathaniel's head and face, then Shiloh's, in order to achieve a reasonable facsimile of the traditional tribal head-cloth and veil.

From the very first moment Aunt Elizabeth had walked into the library and crooked her finger at Harold, he'd followed her commands like a half-grown puppy.

As for Kurt, there wasn't a thing he could do about his bodyguard's behavior but roll his eyes up as if to say “Women!” and pull out his cell phone. His first call went to his attorney's home to initiate a series of nuisance lawsuits against Nowan Pharmaceuticals for stalking, harassment and invasion of privacy. His next call pulled one of his managers out of bed with instructions to call Nowan Pharmaceuticals at 6:00a.m. and arrange an impromptu tour at 8:00a.m. for oil-rich Tuareg clients and possible investors. Last, but not least, Kurt ordered two more limos to pick them up at the library at 7:00a.m.

Debbie leaned back in her chair and groaned while Lilith's fingers worked on the tightly wound muscles of her neck and shoulders.

Harold rose to his feet and held out his hand to help Aunt Elizabeth stand also. Debbie opened her eyes, turned her head and stared at Nathaniel. The sharp edges of her curiosity stabbed into him. "How did Bridget meet you anyway?"

He cleared his throat.

The loose tangle of curls on Debbie's scalp bounced as she nodded at him to continue. Perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning. "First, we asked Lilith to intercede in our courtship."

Debbie frowned. "We?" She looked at Shiloh and back at Nathaniel with a dawning consideration in her gaze. "Both of you?"

"Aye." He inclined his head with proper courtesy to Bridget's mentor.

Aunt Elizabeth stepped forward and gestured at Debbie and Lilith. "This is woman's talk. Come with me. We will discuss this privately while my nephews don their robes and cover their faces in the manner of decently-garbed Tuareg males."

Chapter Twenty-eight

Cocooned within a steel-plated car, cushioned by soft leather upholstery, Nathaniel stared through tinted glass windows at an endless stream of brightly colored houses bordering the six-lane highway. A sick shadow lay upon the land. Its name was Fear. He turned his veiled face away from the window and studied his companions instead.

Shiloh sat beside him, while Kurt and Lynwood sat facing them. A thick plastic sheet separated them from the front of the vehicle where Kurt's bodyguard, Harold, rode alongside the chauffeur. A bulletproof vest covered Harold's torso, and his pants and shirt were also made from Kevlar thread for additional protection.

A black helmet hugged Harold's head. He had flipped down an amber colored lens over his left eye and was busy typing messages on a small control panel strapped to his right arm. The chauffeur, with his sleek brown hair concealed under another half-helmet, drove with the aid of a computerized map superimposed on the windshield in front of him.

Kurt watched the signals flashing back and forth on his laptop screen with half-lidded eyes, while Lynwood's team of agents and State Police exchanged security protocols with his personal bodyguard. Keen intelligence animated Lynwood's dark features. He listened to his agents' reports through his earpiece and spoke to them by way of the button microphone clipped to his jacket lapel. A second laptop with its screen flipped up rested on Lynwood's knees. He studied the flickering images for a few seconds, gave a final decisive jab at the keys and folded the laptop shut. He leaned forward and peered at Nathaniel. "You've been very quiet. Are you feeling okay? You're not getting carsick, are you?"

The indigo cloth wrapped around Nathaniel's head and face muffled his voice. "My sickness does not come from this vehicle." He lifted his gloved hand and pointed at the land flowing past the car window. "It lies there."

Kurt looked up. His dark brown hair lay in soft curls at his neck. Soon it would be long enough to tie back in a small knot. "You're empaths. What do you feel out there?"

Shiloh shrugged and formed a circle with his hands. "We're driving through the Research Triangle, which is listed as infinitely safer than the razed tenement neighborhoods of New York and Washington D.C. Here you have suburban communities surrounded by walls, concrete speed bumps and armed security guards." He lifted his shoulder in a half-shrug. "It's a fortress mentality out there, and we feel it like a sickness upon the land."

Lynwood leaned forward even more and studied Nathaniel's eyes, then Shiloh's eyes, through the narrow slits in their veils.

A feeling of deep introspection flowed from him as he spoke. "You know, I never really thought about it, but you're right. It's happening all over the country. People are scared. They sit at home and watch TV and hide from their neighbors. Kids don't play in the streets or in the playgrounds, and people don't hang out with their neighbors anymore."

"Aye." Deep sadness flowed out from Shiloh. "It's the hidden cost; it's the price they pay in order to feel safe."

Nathaniel struggled to explain it better. "To them, the world is a hungry predator waiting to devour them. Fear controls their lives and warps their souls." He turned and studied Kurt.

"You're a predator, yet you need Harold to watch your back, because he is neither predator nor prey. His focus is protection not power."

A beeping tone from Kurt's laptop interrupted them. He read the message scrolling across his screen. "It's from Harold. He wants to know if you consider yourself predator or prey or neither."

Shiloh lifted his hand as if he wanted to grab the laptop and see the words for himself; then dropped his hand. "Harold's deaf. How did he know what we were saying?"

Kurt jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the back of Harold's helmeted head clearly visible through the glass partition between the front seat and them. "You see the amber colored lens that's flipped down over his left eye?"

"Aye."

Lynwood's gaze flickered between Kurt and Harold. Kurt grinned at the agent's sudden alertness. "The price I pay for my safety is my privacy. I have hidden microphones installed in my vehicles, my office and condo. The software in Harold's helmet receives those transmissions and prints them out in words on his eyepiece. He's my ace in the hole. Most people underestimate him because he's deaf. They confuse deafness with mental limitations and think he's all muscle with no brains."

Lynwood inclined his head in a brief acknowledgement. "Interesting," he murmured then turned his attention back to Shiloh. "You changed the subject. I'd like to know the answer to Harold's question. Are you predator or prey or in-between?"

Nathaniel sighed. Shiloh took hold of his gloved hand. Strong and sure, his oathbrother's presence flowed through their drubonds and settled his mind. "For the most part, we choose not to be predators, despite our capabilities."

Lynwood sat a little straighter. Kurt leaned forward and almost knocked his laptop from his knees. Nathaniel's throat constricted into a hard knot. Shiloh squeezed his hand again and sent another burst of reassurance through him. He directed his question at Lynwood. "Does the name Jerome Wright mean anything to you?"

Lynwood's gaze narrowed. "Yes, it does. He was the SBI investigator for a series of brutal murders during 1952. He left the area for a few days and the murders suddenly stopped. When he returned he had a broken arm, and closed the files. He never said where he went or how he broke his arm. None of his fellow investigators could ever prove he had anything to do with the murders, although they had their suspicions about him when they stopped just like that."

Lynwood stared at them. Accusation sharpened his voice. "What do you know about him?"

Nathaniel sighed and spoke the sad truth. "Ezekiel, my mother's true brother, was the murderer. When a stray bullet from a poacher upon our land killed her, Ezekiel left and we knew not where he went."

"How did you find out where he went?"

"Ebenezer, Shiloh's sire, went to Lacrimas to purchase medicinal supplies and read about the slayings in the local paper. He returned to our land for Uncle Percy and together they went to Raleigh, found Ezekiel and brought him home for judgment. Because he'd committed his crimes against outsiders, they went to Jerome Wright and brought him also to our home so he could bear witness to our judgment."

"And..." Lynwood prompted him for more.

"He was judged and named mabgli."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Kurt raised his hand. "Bridget told me it's the word you use for criminals in your family."

Lynwood stared at Kurt. Antagonism flared between them.

Nathaniel wished they'd learn how to leash their animosity and raised his voice. "Ezekiel refused to accept the judgment. 'Fools!' He cried out to us. 'Why do we hide ourselves from the humans when we have the power to rule them?'"

The story must be told. Nathaniel knew this. It was his duty to teach and keep the memories alive. How else would they know? How else could he show them the horror he'd felt when he stood there in the bright sunlight transfixed by the darkness in his uncle's mind because he'd recognized the same darkness within his own heart?

Shiloh tightened his grip on Nathaniel's hand and sent his total acceptance into him, regardless of his flaws. "Ezekiel seized Jerome, broke his arm and captured his weapon in front of us all. He stood there and drank in the power he gained from feeling Jerome's pain. I knew exactly how he felt because I felt the same way when I knocked aside those men for Elias Jefferson."

Lynwood stared at Nathaniel in total shock. "You knew Elias?" he whispered. "How old are you?"

Nathanial stared at him and said softly. "I am a lot older than I appear to be. A longer life-span is part of our inheritance."

"Who is Elias?" Kurt asked.

"He's my great, great, great grandfather," Lynwood muttered.

"And..." Kurt prompted.

Lynwood blinked and favored Kurt with a cold stare. "It's none of your business."

Nathanial ignored their squabble. The story must be told to the bitter end. "Ebenezer and Percy threw themselves upon Ezekiel, freed Jerome from his grasp and stopped Ezekiel from feeding on the man's pain and fear. Released from the horror of Ezekiel's soul, we blocked our hearts away from him. Mabgli he was and mabgli he would remain until he died or his heart cleansed itself. Ezekiel refused to accept our judgment. He screamed his defiance. 'We are kin. You will not deny me like this.' Then he slew himself with Jerome's gun."

Nathanial bowed his head and said what he must say in a raspy whisper. "I came forth then and told them of the evil that lived in my heart. I told them how I had exulted in the fear of the men I'd tossed aside for Elias. My kin judged me. They named me mabgli for one month. For one month, I was alone. No one knew me. No one touched me. No one spoke to me."

Understanding glowed on Lynwood's face. "They shunned you. That's why you fled after you killed the man in Bridget's clinic."

"Aye," Shiloh picked up the reins of the story. "It didn't matter if it was accidental. The fact remained that this time he'd killed a man. Lilith brought Bridget to him and between the three of us, we convinced him to live."

"By operating on his wounds?" Lynwood's puzzlement stabbed at them.

Shiloh shook his head. "He wanted to die. Bridget had to convince him to live first. Afterwards, she performed the actual physical surgery."

The limo slowed down and the chauffeur turned off onto a freeway exit. Kurt shut down his laptop and put it aside. "We're almost there."

The road wound around a walled compound surrounded by a large expanse of empty grass. They rolled to a stop in front of a closed gate and booth. Two armed men stood outside the booth and one waited inside. In-

scribed on a metal plaque in the wall beside the gate were the words, Nowan Pharmaceuticals, Research and Development.

Kurt pressed his thumb to a button on a control panel embedded in the car door and the windows rolled down. A cold breeze tugged at the dark blue cloth that concealed Nathaniel's face. Two guards stuck their heads inside the limo, stared at everyone with cold, hard eyes and asked for ID. Kurt handed them a zip disc and said, "This identifies everyone in both limos. We have an invitation for a private tour of the facilities at 8:00a.m."

One of the guards waited beside the limo while the second guard went to the booth with the disc and handed it to the guard inside. He inserted the disc in a slot, stared at the words that flashed across the booth's window, flipped open a cell phone and spoke into the receiver.

The guard inside the booth returned the phone to his shirt pocket, removed the disc from the slot, opened the door and gave the disc to the guard who waited outside. This guard trotted to the limo with a broad smile on his freckled face and handed the disc to Kurt. "You're cleared. They're waiting inside to give you the grand tour."

The gates slid back into the walls. The slab of sharp spikes embedded in the ground folded down. They drove past a parking lot filled with rows of multicolored and almost identical cars up to the front entrance of a sprawling concrete block building. A solid glass front wall reflected the slate gray sky. The car tilted and swayed under Nathaniel. He was going to have to go inside this prison filled with strangers and feel all of their petty jealousies and fears pressing down upon him.

Nathaniel closed his eyes and swallowed the acrid taste in his mouth. Shiloh squeezed his hand. The oppressive sensation of too many outsiders faded away under the strong familiarity of his oathbrother's presence. He opened his eyes and sighed. Bridget's and Uncle Percy's safety were far more important than the temporary discomfort of having to endure the emotional outflow from so many strangers.

The limo drifted to a stop in front of the building. Kurt tapped his button control and the black tinted windows of the limo slid shut. He leaned forward. "Don't be fooled by the fact that it's only two stories high. According to the latest reports from my operatives, most of the facility extends underground for five more levels."

Elation soared within Nathaniel. Soon they would be reunited with Bridget and Percy.

* * * *

A slender man wearing a ubiquitous dark blue business suit greeted them effusively at the front door. Nathaniel and Shiloh waited with Kurt, Lynwood and Harold, while Lilith, Aunt Elizabeth, and Debbie exited the second limo. In a matter of moments, Kurt, Lynwood and Harold positioned themselves in front of the women while Nathaniel and Shiloh went last as honorary rear guards. Three armed SBI agents joined them from the second limo while six more piled out of the third limo.

They strode past a security desk with an entire wall of screens flickering behind it showing views of various rooms within the building. Harold uncoiled himself to his full height, unholstered his gun with the swift fluidity of a snake and pointed it in their hapless guide's face. The sound of more weapons snapping into position from Lynwood and his agents accompanied the silent efficiency of Harold's action.

All movement stopped.

Lynwood raised his left hand and held his SBI badge and photo aloft for all to see along with a sheaf of papers. He laid the papers on the security desk and spoke in clear, crisp tones.

“This is a search warrant. Do exactly as we say, and no one will come to harm.”

Three agents swarmed the security desk, disarmed the two guards behind it and handcuffed them.

Harold strode behind the security desk, studied its controls for a few seconds and moved his hands with blinding speed over the switches and keyboard. A brief smile flickered across his face. He looked up and motioned at Shiloh and Nathaniel. Shiloh jerked his head at Nathaniel and they joined Harold behind the desk.

Lynwood tucked his badge inside his suit jacket and walked backward until he stepped behind the security desk. Kurt followed on his heels. Harold adjusted the controls and a three-dimensional grid map of the building appeared on the screen embedded in the desk itself. A cursor blinked at the top corner with the words ‘security desk’ under it. Harold typed in a command. A second map flowed up and overlaid itself on the building grid. It showed the location of every security camera.

Harold pointed at the camera above them and flipped a switch. One of the screens in the wall behind went blank. He jabbed his thumb at a blank screen and pointed at a smaller cursor blinking in a room on the third sub-basement level that represented this blank screen. He keyed in another

command and every door in the building locked itself except for the series of doors between the elevator and corridor that led to that secluded sub-basement room. Lynwood and Kurt exchanged triumphant looks.

There was no time to waste. Lynwood left one agent behind to guard their first set of prisoners and everyone else followed Harold's lead into the next room. This one turned out to be a beehive of activity filled with a maze of cubicles, desks and clerical workers. Machines clicked and clattered while workers rushed to and fro with papers and flat computer discs clutched to their chests like precious objects.

Lynwood displayed his badge again, repeated his announcement about having a search warrant and brought all activity in this room to a halt, too. The rest of his agents and Harold fanned out across the room and herded the clerical staff away from their desks into aisles where they were forced to kneel on the hard tiled floor with their hands on top of their heads.

Kurt strolled forward and positioned himself beside Lynwood. A shocked undercurrent of recognition flowed from the kneeling workers. He smiled with smug satisfaction and brushed a piece of lint from his gray suit jacket.

Lilith, Aunt Elizabeth and Debbie joined Lynwood and Kurt. Debbie's high heels created a vivid burst of staccato sound. Harold's face remained cold and expressionless. Corded muscles bunched and slid under his black shirt and pants. Was he aware of the dangerous aura he projected? Nathaniel believed he must be because it flowed out of him in a strong wave of distilled emotion.

A young oriental woman, barely out of her teens, knelt in the aisle. Dark eyes slanted appealingly within her soft round face and a cap of sleek black hair hugged her scalp. Her breasts appeared to be mere buds under her pale pink blouse. A tight dark skirt accented the slight curve of her hips. She swiveled her head around and watched Harold with the hapless gaze of a trapped fawn.

Harold turned his head and looked at her. His eyes remained flat, empty chips of amber within his coal black face. A twinge of regret leaked from his controlled projection of danger when he approached her. Abject terror flooded the young woman's face. She opened her mouth and screamed.

* * * *

Bridget had begged them to stop torturing Percy. She'd promised them anything they wanted, but they didn't stop. The horror had escalated and her mind went blank.

“Hit her again. Stop that infernal screaming.”

A hand crashed against Bridget's face. Her head flopped backward then forward under the blow. She opened her eyes and blinked away her tears.

The scent of ozone burned her lungs. The crackling, sizzling sound of electricity arcing through Percy's body had finally ended. She was going to have a nasty bruise on her cheek, but that was nothing compared to Percy's torment. One thing for sure, it had shocked her into silence and snapped her into thinking again instead of reacting.

Bridget wiped her face with the back of her hand. Feeling sorry for herself wasn't going to change a thing. What she must do now was stall for time. As long as Percy still lived, they had a chance.

Their captor smiled. “Are you ready to give us what we want now?”

Bridget turned to the keyboard and switched the computer on. It didn't take long to warm up. Her hands shook as she logged on the Internet, typed in the Website for Duke University and coded in her priority access link to the genetics lab. That was the easy part. She went in under her normal procedures as if she were going in for her old research files.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Bridget bit her lip. How long had they been unconscious? Was it long enough for Lily to contact Debbie and Lynwood and ask for their help? Was it long enough for them to find out who had kidnapped her and Uncle Percy?

The acknowledgement of Bridget's ID and access to Duke's main system flashed on the monitor screen. When Nancy leaned over her shoulder and gazed at the screen, Bridget forced the surge of anger that threatened to overwhelm her aside. So what if it was Nancy's fault they'd been kidnapped? It was a waste of her time and energy to hate Nancy, and obsessing over it wasn't going to change what was happening right now.

Bridget requested access to Debbie's files at the genetics research lab. ‘Password’ blinked on the screen. She typed in Nathaniel. The computer

responded with 'Second Password'. Her heart jumped in her chest when she saw that. They did it! They managed to contact Debbie, and Debbie set up false files for me to produce for Mr. Meekam.

She typed caterdru for the second password. 'Access denied' flashed on the screen and 'Password' again. She wiped her hand on her pants, typed in Nathaniel and received the 'Second Password' prompt. This time she typed Clervant and the words 'Login Accepted' formed on the screen.

She pulled up the menu for Debbie's files and studied the list of file-names that scrolled up.

"Rainbolt and Moonsammy," Nancy's irritated voice broke the silence. "I never saw those files before. Where did they come from?" Jealous accusation tinged her voice.

"That's because Debbie changed her access codes and file names when she caught you snooping around in her system last time." Bridget couldn't keep the snide triumph from her response.

"Shut up!" Their captor strode across the room and stopped beside Nancy. "Are those the files we need?"

Nancy cringed, bumped into Bridget's shoulder and her loathing flowed into Bridget. "I don't know, Mr. Meekam."

Bridget moved the cursor to the Rainbolt file, right clicked and selected 'download' to her console. While they waited for the file to finish downloading, Nancy inserted a flat silver speedo-disc into the console.

Thirty seconds later, the computer flashed their choices at them, open file or copy. Bridget selected the 'open file' command. A detailed report filled the screen.

Nancy reached over and tapped her finger on the listing of blood values alongside a DNA profile. "What's this?"

Bridget bit her lip. It looked like gibberish to her. Another symbol flashed up on the profile and she relaxed. "It's not synthetic blood. It's chimpanzee blood. That's why you couldn't figure out the blood type."

A combination of fear and curiosity oozed from Nancy's pores. She pointed at another series of blood values and numerical codes. "How did you combine human fetal blood cells with chimpanzee blood?" More data scrolled up. She leaned closer. "And the high resistance to HIV, was that intentional or a serendipitous result of altering the DNA patterns here, here and there?" Her finger touched the critical data and punctuated her questions.

Fetal blood cells? HIV resistant? Bridget caught her breath. Their extended lifespan. There's a direct connection. She didn't dare turn her head and look at Percy. No, the last thing she needed to do was draw attention back to him.

Mr. Meekam walked around them and positioned himself beside Bridget. His cold voice cut the silence. "Copy it now."

Bridget brought up the file menu, right clicked on 'select all' then 'copy' and the computer hummed and whirred while it performed the indicated tasks. She risked a glance at their tormentor. As soon as he had everything he wanted, she and Percy would be killed. The fake files on Debbie's computer meant the Harkers already knew the identity of her kidnappers and until they found her, she better drag out the process of retrieving those files as long as possible. She pointed at the Moonsammy file name on the screen. "There's a secondary file. I'm not sure if I know the password for it."

"What?" He slammed his fist on the table. Saliva sprayed from his open mouth over Bridget's arm and hand. "Isn't this your work?"

She shook her head and carefully wiped her hand on her pants. "I don't have the facilities at my clinic to do that kind of in-depth work. I was the go between. I sent Debbie samples from a secret lab she maintains in Raleigh."

"Oh," Nancy said in a very small voice. "That's why I never found out where you got the samples."

Mr. Meekam slammed his fist on the table again. The monitor shook and swayed. Bridget grabbed it and kept it from falling over. Their captor snarled, "Find the access codes now or we'll have more fun with the old guy."

Bridget clicked on Moonsammy file. 'Password' blinked on the screen. She typed in catermorf and received 'Access denied' for her efforts. 'Password' blinked at her again. Her mouth went dry.

She rubbed her head and frowned.

"What are you waiting for?" Mr. Meekam's cold voice slapped at her senses.

Bridget risked a peek under her hand at Percy. Both guards standing beside his gurney watched her instead of him. She spotted a frayed spot on the black webbing around Percy's left wrist. Think! Don't panic now.

She lifted her head and stared at Mr. Meekam. "I'm thinking. I'm trying to remember what Debbie told me the last time I saw her."

He inclined his head and tapped the watch on his wrist. "I'll give you exactly sixty seconds to remember."

Bridget closed her eyes and reached with her mind for Uncle Percy. His anger had vanished, replaced by a calm conviction as if he stood poised on the edge of a cliff ready to leap. She reached further and found the bright strands of her caterbonds with Lily, Nathaniel and Shiloh. They must be in the same building. Stay calm. Take a deep breath and exhale.

Meekam's cold voice iced the air. "Thirty seconds. You have thirty seconds remaining to produce the correct password."

Caterbonds. She had the greater bond of clervant with Nathaniel. Nathaniel's name before he changed to Harker had been Rainbolt. Her primary caterbond was with Nathaniel. That's why the first file was named Rainbolt and clervant worked as the password. Her secondary caterbond with Shiloh was that of frone. Shiloh's original surname came from the Moonsammy sisterline before he became oathbrother with Lily and changed his surname to Harker, too. Thus, the second file, the Moon-sammy one, represented her bond with Shiloh.

Bridget opened her eyes, reached for the keyboard and typed in Shiloh. 'Password Accepted' crossed the screen and the words 'Second Password' blinked up. She typed Frone. 'Login Accepted' appeared and she moved the cursor to Moonsammy, right clicked on it and opened the file. Another stream of data scrolled up on the screen.

Meekam's hand dug into her shoulder. "Download it now. We can look at the data later."

A blast of alert anticipation from Percy flooded Bridget. The memory of his hands ripping the seatbelt apart in the jeep popped into her mind. The webbed straps that bound him to the gurney were frayed. If anyone could break free from those straps, he could. Her job now was to provide a nice juicy distraction and let him do his part.

She left clicked on the file, selected download and waited. When it finished downloading, she clicked again and selected the command that copied it to the storage disc. While it did that, she turned around, fluttered her eyes and smiled at Meekam. "You've got what you wanted, how about letting us go now?"

Meekam widened his eyes and managed a thin smile. Stunned silence filled the room. Nancy stared at Bridget as if she'd sprouted wings and the

guards stared at her with an identical look of disbelief. Good. No one's paying any attention to Percy. The ball's in his court now.

* * * *

Room by room, level by level, they raced for the third sub-basement corridor. There were no plants to sweeten the dry, sterile air of this windowless labyrinth. No sunlight or moonlight slanted across the walls. Harsh fluorescent lights made Nathaniel's eyes water. The odor of stale cigarettes, sweat and strong perfumes assaulted his lungs. The stunned faces of the employees blurred in his mind. Their fear and hatred flooded his mind along with hushed murmurs about terrorist attacks.

His fur itched under the heavy shirt and pants he'd chosen for the cold fall air. The veil clung to his nose and mouth like a cold wet hand. Sweat matted his fur and puddled on his spine. He wanted to rip away his robes and his veil and feel a cool breeze sift through the fur that covered his skin. How would these outsiders react if they saw him without the veil that concealed his appearance?

He stepped around the corner of another long corridor indistinguishable from all the other corridors in this maze and his caterbond hummed with Bridget's mental touch. She's here!

She's alive! He ran for the steel-plated door at the end of the corridor. Shiloh and Lilith lengthened their strides and matched his reckless burst of speed while Harold followed upon their heels.

They stopped at the door and stood aside for Harold. He went to his knees in front of the door lock, connected the computerized device strapped to his arm to the lock and keyed in a command.

Nathaniel clenched his fists. They needed him.

Shiloh wrapped his arms around Nathaniel and whispered. "I can feel them." Lilith stood beside Harold and watched the lights blinking on his computer while it probed for the right code to unlock the door.

"Damnit!" Lynwood's voice and hasty footsteps echoed behind them. "They're unarmed civilians. Who let them get ahead of us?"

Nathaniel leaned into Shiloh's strong embrace. His heart slowed down and his mind began to function again. Now, more than ever, he appreciated how his caterdru's love kept him sane and kept him from turning mabgli. He must remain calm. This was the crucial moment.

He opened his eyes and found Lynwood's disapproving gaze locked with him. Why was Lynwood upset with him?

A final click warned them that Harold had bypassed and unsealed the lock. Lynwood's disapproval vanished. He slid his hand within his jacket, pulled out his gun, thumbed off the safety and waved them aside. Nathaniel, Shiloh and Lilith heeded his warning and moved out of the line of fire. Harold had his weapon ready also and positioned himself on the opposite side of the door from Lynwood. The running footsteps of the rest of the SBI agents thundered in the air behind them.

* * * *

Bridget looked over Meekam's shoulder and saw the door slide open. Kurt's bodyguard, Harold rushed in with a pistol in a two handed grip and jumped sideways. Lynwood came in next holding a pistol ready also. A smoky aura of deadly intentions cloaked them.

“Aiii!” Percy yelled.

The broken ends of the straps around his arms and legs flew apart. He slapped the stun gun out of the first guard's hand, rolled over onto the opposite side of the gurney and pushed it into the second guard's side. The stun gun flew across the room and landed with a clatter against the wall.

The first guard crumpled to the floor. He moaned, cradled his hand to his chest and watched blood drip down his fingers on to the yellow tiled floor.

Two tall men with indigo robes and veils entered the room next. Recognition soared into Bridget with the touch of their caterbonds like a crackling ladder of lightning. Nathaniel and Shiloh surged across the room, picked up the second guard by his arms and threw him against the wall. He slumped down to the floor unconscious.

Bridget rammed her chair sideways into Nancy, braced herself and kicked Meekam in the back of his knee. He toppled with a startled yell.

“Help me.” Nancy ran past Lynwood and Harold with her hands raised. “Don't shoot.”

“Stop her.” Bridget yelled. “Don't let her escape.”

Nancy collided with Lily in the doorway. Lily hugged Nancy to her chest and pinned her arms to her side. Nancy's brown hair flopped around her face as she struggled in vain to escape Lily's hold.

Lynwood strode across the floor to Meekam, slapped handcuffs on his wrists and pulled him to his feet. Three more armed agents swarmed the doorway. Lily passed Nancy to the agents, walked up to Percy, linked hands with him and came to Bridget with joy glowing in her eyes.

Chapter Thirty

Nathanial leaned against the wall beside Shiloh and watched the rest of the events unfold. He dared not approach Bridget. Not yet. Later, when they had a private moment, he and Shiloh needed to talk to her and resolve their misunderstanding.

Meekam's shirt was no longer pristine. Dried flecks of spittle adorned his tie. One of his diamond cufflinks had vanished; possibly under the mound of printouts scattered across the floor.

“You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney. If you do not have an attorney or cannot afford an attorney, the court will appoint one to represent you. If you choose to speak without an attorney present, anything you say can and will be used against you.”

Meekam stared across the room at Kurt. His gaze glittered with malice. “You were behind this, weren't you?” He arched his left eyebrow at Lynwood's SBI team ushering the rest of the prisoners out of the room and yawned. “This is a nuisance. You know my attorneys will have me released on bail within the hour.” Triumph gleamed in the cold recesses of his eyes. “They didn't file a copyright on their synthetic blood. What I have you can't erase, and I'll sue you if you infringe on my patents.”

Kurt glanced at Bridget, Lilith, and Debbie and back to Meekam. A muscle twitched along the right side of his jaw. Irony etched his voice. “A nuisance perhaps, but I'll reap a large portion of favorable publicity from this incident.”

Meekam studied Kurt for a moment of deep introspection. His face remained thoughtful while giving nothing away.

Lynwood flipped the card over from which he'd just finished reading. “Would you like me to read you your rights in Spanish also?”

Meekam's mouth thinned momentarily, and his gaze flickered to Lynwood's face. “No.”

Lynwood crooked his finger at the agent waiting by the door. The agent stepped forward.

Meekam sniffed and followed his escort out of the room with rage evident in his stiff posture and stride. He ignored the handcuffs that shackled his wrists and disrupted his image of a successful businessman.

Harold removed his helmet, clipped it to his belt then uprighted one of the toppled chairs for Great Aunt Elizabeth.

She seated herself with queenly dignity and flicked a piece of lint from her dress. It was her second-best dress, the pale green one with mother of pearl buttons at her throat and wrists.

She held her hand out and her brother Percy selected another chair and seated himself beside her with a weary sigh. A large tear in his shirt exposed his left shoulder. Harsh bruises marred his face.

Kurt and Lynwood stood toe-to-toe in front of Lilith and glared at each other like small boys in a playground fighting over a favored toy. They didn't see the disgusted look upon Lilith's face. Nathaniel sighed. When would they learn how to behave like adults? Lilith was a living, breathing woman with a mind, heart and life of her own. She wasn't a prized object to be owned and put on display to satisfy their childish pride. The choice of who would remain at her side rested with Lilith, not them.

Even though he did not voice his thoughts, Lilith lifted her head and gave Nathaniel a sharp look that said, I can handle this myself. She shifted her gaze to Harold waiting patiently behind Aunt Elizabeth's chair. Harold's face remained devoid of expression but nothing could conceal the keen interest and open admiration he projected at Lilith.

She smiled, lifted her right hand and crooked her finger at Harold.

His eyes widened with shocked surprise. He poked himself in the chest and mouthed the word, "Me?" at her.

She inclined her head in a regal nod and crooked her finger again.

With the eager desire to please her illuminating his dark eyes, he went to her side and held out his arm. She accepted with a smile and walked away with him, leaving both Kurt and Lynwood staring at her with identical expressions of dumbfounded shock.

Lilith looked at Uncle Percy, at Aunt Elizabeth and at Debbie standing in the doorway with a bemused expression on her face. Uncle Percy knew better than to argue with such an obvious hint. He rose to his feet, helped Aunt Elizabeth to her feet, then went to the door, collected Debbie and departed.

Harold followed with Lilith on his arm. Kurt and Lynwood exchanged one final glare with each other and rushed out together to catch up with Lilith and Harold.

Nathanial shared a resigned glance with Shiloh. Deserted by their oath-sister at this crucial moment, they had no choice but to approach Bridget and try to resolve their differences in the proper manner of Sidhe conduct.

Nathanial turned his gaze to Bridget's face and his heart turned over in his chest. Warm golden freckles burnished her nose and cheeks. Her hair was tangled and grass stains marked her shirt and slacks.

She was beautiful and perfect, vibrantly alive and the woman he desired most in his life. Now, more than ever, he felt her womanly strength straining beneath the caterbonds she'd established with him and Shiloh. At the same time, if she chose to leave, he could not and would not stop her.

Shiloh slipped his hand into Nathanial's grasp. Together they went to her. What should he say? His heart was splitting into two, trying to make room for her, and for life without her, if that was her choice.

She lifted her chin and waited. Uncertainty shone in her eyes.

Shiloh spoke first. "We're sorry. We didn't mean to..."

"...force our love upon you." Nathanial finished.

Their disjointed pleas tumbled out in a torrent of need and desire.

"We're bonded with you now."

"We cannot undo the bond."

"We don't want to undo it."

"All we ask is to be near you."

"Don't shut us out of your life forever."

"If you need one of us to hold you..."

"Call and we'll be there."

"We need you to laugh..."

"We need you to be free."

* * * *

Bridget's mouth dropped open. After all she'd been through...

After she'd bonded with them. After they teased her with their love, now they were saying, "Let's be friends." Was that the kind of relationship she wanted with them? Hell no!

She had no intention of letting them off the hook that easily. Did they think she'd let them walk away now? No way. They had bonded with her just as much as she had bonded with them. Which meant they'd have to put up with her while she learned how to undo a lifetime of guilt and cultural conditioning that said she should love only one man at a time.

She pursed her lips. Why should she feel guilty, if they didn't see anything wrong with both of them loving her?

Bridget held up her hand. "Stop it. Before things get even more confused between us, I want to go over a couple of ground rules first. Okay?"

Their confusion rolled through her. She smiled. It was a satisfying sensation to know she called the shots. Maybe she should take control more often.

Nathanial and Shiloh exchanged startled glances with each other then inclined their heads at her to continue.

Great! She wanted control, and they'd given it to her without question. Where should she start? She studied the veils and wondered who'd thought of them. They were an efficient and intriguing way to let Nathanial walk around in public without letting anyone see his physical differences.

Bridget took a deep breath and exhaled carefully. Thinking about the veils at a time like this was her mind's way of stalling. Right now she needed to sort out what they meant to each other and focus on their future lives together. The veils could wait for later discussion. "Back at the house, the one you fixed up for me, it's mine, isn't it?"

"Aye," they spoke together.

Her heart skipped a beat. "Do I have to move in right away?"

"No."

"We would never do that to you."

"We'll keep it clean and cook for you because you have more than enough work to do at the clinic."

That sounded pretty good. They didn't expect her to become a live-in housekeeper, cook or laundress. She tucked her tangled hair behind her ears and straightened her shoulders. Now was as good a time as any to sort out the pertinent details of her relationship with them. "Do I have to choose?"

Shiloh unveiled his face, and Nathanial followed suit.

Their eyes were soft and vulnerable. Shiloh murmured, "You don't have to choose if you don't want to."

She put her hands on her hips. "That's not what I asked."

Both men exchanged a long, puzzled look with each other and waited.

"I don't want to have to choose one over the other. I want things to happen naturally. If I get pregnant, does it matter which one of you is the father?"

Enlightenment, comprehension, exultation, interest and desire chased each other across their faces. Relief filled Nathaniel's eyes. Shiloh gulped and stretched out his hand. Slowly, tentatively, he traced her mouth with his calloused thumb.

Heat scorched her face. She reached up and clung to his hand. Nathaniel lifted his hand, placed it on her waist and let his desire flow into her. He knew she desired Shiloh, and his love remained constant. The last shred of guilt about loving both men evaporated from her heart.

Shiloh cupped her chin, tilted her face up and kissed her. It was a hard, demanding kiss.

Nathaniel moved closer, turned her sideways to face Shiloh completely and positioned himself behind her. Shiloh wrapped his arms around her, buried his face in her neck and pushed his erection against her.

Her throat hurt. She could hardly breathe. The lavender scent of his shirt stabbed through her senses and brought back the memory of the first time Nathaniel's hands had massaged her neck.

Nathaniel moved his hands lower, lifted her hips up into a better angle and pressed his erection into her buttocks. She remembered the tube of lubricating jelly on the table and knew exactly how he'd planned to use it.

He groaned. Shiloh echoed his groan. Both men tightened their grip around her. Anticipation soaked her crotch with their desire rushing into her through their caterbonds. She gasped for air and responded eagerly to their erections thrusting against her body front and back.

"Bridget."

She didn't want to stop. They loved her and she loved them.

"Bridget."

A shudder shook Nathaniel's body as he stepped back and released her. Shiloh moaned, lifted his head and released her, too. Bridget stum-

bled. Nathaniel steadied her with his hands. She reached up and dug her fingers into Shiloh's shirt trying to pull him close again.

“Bridget.” Lily's voice saying her name for the third time finally penetrated the sensual haze. It felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over her.

Bridget turned and looked at the doorway where Lily stood with Harold. A bright flush stained Lily's face and the caterbond she shared with Bridget hummed with the combined tension of arousal and tightly controlled irritation.

Lily's quiet voice reflected her irritation. “Now that you've settled your differences, I believe you should wait until we return home before you attempt a physical consummation of your relationship.” She flicked her wrist at Harold. “Harold has agreed to be my escort for now.”

Shiloh and Nathaniel rearranged their veils. Harold looked at Bridget, Nathaniel and Shiloh. No one said a word. There was nothing they could say.

Harold turned and studied Lilith. Speculation filled his eyes. Lily arched her eyebrow and shook her head at him, adroitly refusing his unspoken question.

He grinned, gave her an exaggerated shrug and a wistful look that communicated his acceptance of Lily's rejection while offering his continued availability should she change her mind.

Lily laughed. Harold relaxed his tense stance and projected ardent admiration at her.

Lily said, “Let's get out of here. We have a small side trip to take before we go home.”

“Side trip?” Bridget asked.

A lopsided grin brightened Lily's face. “Don't you remember? Today's the day we're supposed to pick Shelley up from the Veterinary Hospital and bring him home.”

“Ohmygod, yes!” How could she have forgotten that? Shelley was going to be one fat, sassy dog after he pigged out on all the treats donated for his welcome home party.

While they followed Lily and Harold down the corridor, Bridget considered Harold. He didn't mind having Lily boss him around. He remained secure in his masculinity, appreciated Lily as Lily and felt no burning de-

sire to mold her to suit his fantasies. He had a nice build on him, too. She liked the way his butt filled out his pants.

“Whoa.” Bridget stopped and looked back and forth at Nathaniel's and Shiloh's veiled faces. She'd felt that. Just like her, they'd been checking Harold out and liked what they saw. “You're bisexual.”

“Aye.” Indulgent amusement sparkled in Nathaniel's gaze. “Everyone is to some extent.”

It looked like things might be a bit more complicated than she anticipated. Oh well. One thing for sure, she didn't have to worry about getting bored out of her skull for the rest of her life. What were they now? A happily married triple? What would their distinctive and complex relationship evolve into in the future? A happily married quartet? Only time would tell.

About the Author:

With 28 years experience as a bilingual (Spanish/English) caseworker under her belt, Barbara Karmazin utilizes a unique blend of multicultural knowledge for her Science Fiction. When she was seven, she read George MacDonald's "The Light Princess" and became an avid reader of Science Fiction and Fantasy ever since. She incorporates the same sense of adventure and wonder in her SF stories.

During 1999, 2000 and 2001, three of her short stories were published in Hadrosaur Tales, a print SF magazine based in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

DOWN CAME A BLACKBIRD, her first novel, is available from Atlantic Bridge Publishing. DOWN CAME A BLACKBIRD takes place in an alternate future where the extra-terrestrial Sidhe migrated to Earth during humanity's infancy and their advanced technology was mistaken for 'magic'.

Her second book, the prequel to Down Came a Blackbird is COVENANTS.

COVENANTS tells about the Harkers, whose mysterious lineage links Roanoke's Lost Colony to a time when myths walked the land with humanity.

She is currently hard at work on a sequel entitled OUT OF THE DARK, which continues the adventures of Cait, Indio and Tiny on Earth after their return from the asteroid mining expedition.

A new book of SF/EROTICA titled THE HUNTRESS is a new work in progress. Ms. Karmazin worked as the publisher-interviewer for Mystic Visions ezine during 2001 and her non-fiction article, The Dreaded Synopsis, was published in three RWA newsletters and is available at www.FictionAddictions.net/contributed/karmazin.html

Another short story, She is Not Dead, is scheduled for 2004 publication in Spiritual Visitations, an anthology of true ghost stories edited by Heather Froeschl.

Her personal website where you can read the first three chapters of her books is located at <http://www.sff.net/people/selkiewife>

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