



The 7 Deadly Sins
and Virtues

Astrid
Cooper



PRIDE'S
PASSION

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Pride's Passion

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PRIDE'S PASSION

SEVEN SINS AND VIRTUES SERIES

PRIDE

BY

ASTRID COOPER

PRIDE'S PASSION

The naked man, holding a curved sword in each hand, pirouetted on one foot, then leapt, slicing the swords through the air around him, bringing them close to his body while spinning the blades. He landed softly on his feet. His dexterity was both beautiful and frightening to watch.

As he was frightening in his beauty.

A thick braid of golden hair swished across his tight buttocks as he swung around, going into a crouch, his swords at right angles to his body. Again, he balanced on one foot, holding the position as motionless as a statue, his muscles bunched, his cinnamon-hued skin glistening with a fine sheen of perspiration. Blue light, emanating from the sword blades, coruscated around him.

He turned to look at her, his black eyes captivating. His smile hinted of a man's pride and she knew that his prowess was not confined to sword-dancing. In that moment, desire swept away any caution.

She longed to touch him, ached to have him inside her.

He spun around, as agile as a dancer, his swords cutting the air around his body in rhythms too fast for the eye to follow.

Again, he paused to regard her. He made an elaborate bow, his sword tips pointing to her. He lifted his head and smiled.

Heat raced from her head to her toes. "I want you," she whispered.

* * * *

Lauren started awake, her body hot and moist, aching with need.

Disoriented, she blinked and shook her head, finding that she was kneeling on the rug she had bought that morning at the flea market. Why was that memory sharp and clear, but everything else muddled?

Gradually, her breathing returned to normal, but she still trembled.

She glanced up across the paddock, seeing the sun lowering in the sky. It was almost dusk.

Somehow, she had lost two hours—one moment she had been unrolling the rug over the verandah floor, then...the hallucination: the man dancing with the swords.

She sat back on her heels and ran a hand through her hair. What had happened? Then realization hit her.

Sibella! It must have been her doing!

Sibella, the owner of the Golden Lotus Bookshop-Café must have put something in the fig and walnut slice, or maybe the soy-chino that Lauren had consumed, while her friend chatted to her about her latest lover: a hippy, like Sibella, whose blonde hair

reached to his arse.

Lauren nodded. Yep, this was definitely Sibella's doing. Her friend didn't normally 'spike' any food or drink, but she said that Lauren was "uptight" and ought to get herself fucked to relieve her stress. Since Lauren rejected any man that Sibella had pointed out at the fair, well, the next best thing in Sib's opinion was some illicit substance...

If it wasn't over an hour to Sibella's farm, Lauren would have driven there and kicked her friend's arse, and her new lover's for good measure.

Lauren strode into the kitchen, picked up the 'phone and rang Sibella's number.

"Hi, hon," Sibella said in her sexy voice.

"Sib, what did you put in my coffee? Or was it the slice?"

"You're sick?"

"Hallucinating."

"Uh-huh. And you reckon I'm to blame? If I didn't love you so much I'd come over and kick your arse."

"I was driving over to kick yours," Lauren retaliated.

"Hon, I know how you feel about drugs—of any kind. I wouldn't do that to you. Or anyone!"

"Yeah...I'm sorry."

"What sort of hallucinations?"

"Uh..."

"Oh, *those* kind huh?" Sibella laughed. "You've been without a man—how long? You're not thinking straight, Lauren. Forget your pride and admit it. You need a man! I bet you haven't been held in years? Right?"

"I suppose."

"You're an artist for goddess sake, Lauren. Artists have to fuck and often. Passion's in our nature. Look, I know you don't want commitment, but well, there are alternatives – agencies..."

"Me, with a male escort? You gotta be kidding. I'm hanging up, Sib. I'll talk to you later."

"Happy dreams."

Lauren hung up the 'phone and stared at it. Sibella hadn't spiked the food, but someone must have. That hippy-lover of hers, maybe? Well, whomever, whatever, the combination of spiked food, Sibella's new hunk with the long blonde hair and Lauren's own sexual limbo had prompted that hallucination. And it wasn't out of her system. She felt its legacy in the tightness of her gut, the aching of her breasts and the heavy taut feeling in her pussy. *That* irritation would take a long time to dissipate.

She returned to the verandah and surveyed the rug.

"You've always had more money than sense, girl!" she muttered to herself, prodding the rug with her toe.

In a more generous mood she might consider herself a collector of the unique, but that was being too kind – she was a *hoarder* – with a capital 'h'. The more useless and elderly the object, the more she coveted it.

Like she needed another rug? But this carpet *was* unusual. Old, of unknown origin, even its design was unfamiliar. At the market, she'd seen it peeping out from under a pile of rags and faded curtains and

sentimentality had overruled common sense: she had decided to give the rug a good home in its declining years.

Threadbare in the middle from the passage of uncounted feet across its surface, the colors were now muted and the top right hand corner was fraying where something had bitten a hole in it.

Bending down, she ran her hand over the rug, her nails jaggging in the pile. "You need some work, old boy!" she said. "Good thing I came along, otherwise someone might have used you for compost."

Lauren returned with her rug-beater and dragging the carpet across the lawn, she flung it face down over the fence and proceeded to pound its length. Dust and grit flew in all directions.

Her arm stalled as she heard a man's deep moan. Lauren spun about, the beater clasped firmly in her hand.

No one was there.

She laughed shakily. The wind could wail through the hills and trees, and sometimes it sounded like voices, but today not a breath of air was stirring.

Shrugging, she turned back to the rug and walloped it with the beater for some minutes. When she had finished she heard the agonized cries. She flung down the beater and stepped backwards.

Her home was now without a ghost—Sibella had performed the ritual cleansing ceremony that had allowed the spirit to pass on to the next realm. What was making that god-awful noise?

Lauren stalked around the cottage, but found nothing.

Perhaps she was hallucinating again? Yeah, that had to be it. When she found out who had laced her food or drink...

She dragged the rug back to the shade of the verandah and rolled it out. Its appearance had improved with the beating. She knelt down, studying the exotic design with professional eyes. Her weaving was different, but nothing like this! She could only marvel at it. The rug must have been made by a master weaver—but who, where and when? She lay forward on the rug and inspected the warp and weft.

Something tickled her ankle, almost like the lick of a tongue, followed by teeth playfully nibbling.

She choked back a sob. Rufus was dead. They had been together for twenty years: Lauren had found the kitten when she was only five and the ginger cat had never left her side. Maybe his spirit had returned for one last visit? Had it been Rufus moaning?

“Rufus, is that you?”

The nibbling returned and she burst into tears, resting her cheek against the prickly rug. Rufus was inclined to assault her feet with tongue or teeth when she lay on the floor. Lauren rubbed her cheek against the rug.

Perfume, a mixture of patchouli and something unidentifiable curled into her nostrils as something curled around her ankle. She dared not move, in case it was Rufus’ spirit. A tickling circled her ankle, like the swipe of nails across flesh.

For a moment Lauren succumbed to the touch and then as another thought intruded, she screamed and reared backwards, afraid that it had been a spider

trying to infiltrate her jeans. She kicked off her jeans, inspecting her legs, but didn't find an insect.

"Fleas!" Lauren jumped back from the rug.

"You've got fleas you...carpet! You're getting deloused tomorrow! You can stay out here tonight."

Lauren picked up her clothes and padded inside to the shower.

* * * *

She woke in the early hours to hear a man sobbing, muffled as if from a great distance.

Lauren switched on the bedside light and grimaced at the clock. Three am. Great.

A wail echoed around her room.

"Look, I gotta get some sleep, ghost! Come back tomorrow and haunt me!"

She flung the cover over her head and closed her eyes, shivering despite the heat. Lights danced before her lids and she grew breathless and heavy, as if drugged. She saw multi-colored cards, shimmering with light and runes spread over a carpet. Lauren recognized the rug as the one she had bought, but where her carpet was old and tattered, this one was new and vibrant.

The golden-haired man—naked, *again*—sat cross-legged on the rug. He was leaning forward, a sword resting across his knees. His long fingers traced over each card as he studied the spread.

He drew out a card and smiled. "Terzsan, the lady of pride. I like a woman with pride." His black eyes studied someone across from him. "Give me your

hand."

Lauren reached out to him.

He raised her hand to his lips, swirling his tongue tip between each finger, sucking on each before tracing his tongue over her palm. He nibbled playfully at her skin. "You taste sweet. Is all your flesh thus?" he asked. "I could dip my tongue into you. Would you like that?"

"Oh yeah..." Lauren whispered, starting awake, her heart thudding in her chest. She was on fire and she squeezed her legs tight against *that* feeling in her pussy.

She flung her arm across her face. Maybe Sib was right—she needed a man to fuck the tension out of her body. How long had it been since Tony had left? Four...no, five years.

There'd been some other men sniffing around since, but they dictated terms: one even insisting that Rufus be "gotten rid of" because he didn't like cats. She'd left the man sitting in the restaurant, without a second thought, trudging over twenty kilometers in the rain and the dark to her home and to Rufus. No man had been allowed near her since then. "Well, screw men! All of them! Who needs 'em!" Lauren flung herself up from the bed. *You do, girl!* Her inner self responded. *Admit it!*

"I admit nothing!" Lauren said to the four walls, as she stalked down to the kitchen. What had Sib said? Something about pride? Well, she was that: proud, self-centered.

How else was a single girl to survive?

Through sheer guts and pride and without a man!

That's how! And she had! But was she now paying the price for her pride and independence?

Lauren hunted through the jars in the pantry, finally locating what she needed. Going to the rug outside, she carefully rubbed the tansy and wormwood powder into the rug. The astringent herbs would delouse the carpet and then she'd give the rug another beating before it came inside.

At dusk, she dragged the rolled carpet along the passageway into her room, placing it in front of the fireplace in her bedroom-studio. She frowned down at it.

This was the same carpet from her dream!

Sib would have something to say about it, making some sort of connection between lack of sex and a carpet: *What do you do with a carpet, Lauren? You lay it!*

Laughing to herself, Lauren brought up her weaving loom and placed it on the rug. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion, she began to weave more yarn into her wall hanging.

Alternating between the shuttles containing multi-colored hand-dyed wool, she used a needle to stitch silver and purple threads into the design.

She cried out as she heard a man's moan, not the pain-moan as before, but the kind of groan a man makes in the throes of passion. The needle embedded into her finger. Drops of blood fell onto the rug before she could staunch the bleeding.

"Ooooh, yes!" the male voice whispered about her.

"Who...who's there?" She flung herself to her feet and edged backwards. If she didn't know any better she'd swear the noise was coming from the rug.

Could a rug be haunted?

She stared at the rug as it lifted a few inches from the floor and bunched in the middle as if something was under it.

Lauren squealed and jumped onto the bed as the rug swept across the floor. It settled against the base of the bedpost.

Outside the wind slammed against the house, gushing inside, knocking over a vase by the window sill.

Laughing shakily, relief flooding her body, she jumped down from the bed. The wind; nothing but the wind had moaned and moved the rug across the floor. So much for a haunted rug!

* * * *

Lauren awoke in the early hours of the morning. Dreamily, she gazed upon the room. A stream of moonlight illuminated the rug.

A heavy contentment settled over her and she closed her eyes.

Then she snapped her lids open. Bloody hell! There was a naked man reclining on her rug.

With heart hammering she lay still, her mind racing feverishly. She stared at the outline of a man lying spreadeagled on the rug. He moaned and then writhed.

Slipping out of bed and down its side, she squatted, watching the man over the mattress. The moonlight shimmered over him—over his long naked length.

She had to escape, but how? She'd have to pass by the man to reach the door or window. There was nothing in the room she could use as a weapon...her gaze flitted over every object, finally resting on her loom.

She inched along the floor and made a dash for the loom and was facing the man in seconds, standing over him, her weapon raised. He writhed on the rug, trying to lift off it, as if somehow he was pinioned to it by wrists and ankles. Along his torso were livid weals and several wounds were bleeding, dripping down his chest, to stain her rug!

"I'm calling the police! If you make a move, I'll clobber you. Do you hear?"

He gazed up at her with dark eyes.

Lauren's mouth went dry: first with shock, then with a deeper shock as she felt her sexual arousal at his gaze. Here was the black-eyed man of her dreams. Someone had beaten him badly.

"Are you hurt? I mean...what happened?"

"You beat me!"

Lauren almost dropped the loom in shock. "Don't be ridiculous. Look..."

"Help me!" His gaze held hers. "Please."

"I'm calling the police. Stay there."

"I cannot do otherwise. I am bound."

Lauren halted in midstep to look over her shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"I am imprisoned. Only you can free me."

"Yeah right!" Then, curiosity overcoming good sense, said: "How can I free you?"

"Come closer."

"Not a chance in hell."

"I cannot harm you." He glared at her. "Are you afraid?"

"What do you think?" She lifted her chin.

"I give you my word, I intend no harm to you. *My word!*"

Lauren shivered, but not through fear. His throaty whisper was soothing...cajoling. She knew she could trust him, but her instinct was to run.

"Ok. I can look after myself. You make one move and I'll hit you. Agreed?"

He let out a deep sigh. "Agreed."

Lauren stood just out of his arm's reach and stared down at him. "Well? How do I free you?"

"With a kiss."

"I will not."

"Time is wasting! Great stars, don't you..." He drew in a steadying breath. "In combination with the essences of a woman's tears and blood, I can only be released by the light of the full moon...such a pathetic world with one moon...but it will suffice. Barely."

Lauren frowned. By rights she should be running, screaming from the house, not having a conversation with a naked stranger in her bedroom—for god's sake! This was too freaky!

"I swear I will not harm you. Look upon my body!"

Not a chance in hell, Lauren thought, but her gaze did flick over him. *Oh man!*

His gaze burned into her. "See what you have done to me? Beaten me! I have done nothing to deserve it."

"What are you talking about?"

He lay motionless upon the rug and breathed deeply. "I am trapped here, in the rug. When you beat it, you beat me!"

"I—what?"

"It is true."

Lauren flung her hands on her hips. Their gazes clashed. The silence between them stretched to minutes.

She sighed. "And if I kiss you, what then?"

His lip quirked, his eyes laughed. "Then we shall see."

"Not bloody likely!" Lauren stalked to the door and yelped as the door knob burnt her palm. Gingerly she touched it again and her fingers came away with blisters. She turned to confront the man, her back to the door. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get free of this enchantment. I need your help. Please do not leave me."

"Are you roasting the door knob?"

He frowned at her. "I am spelling it with heat."

"If you can do that, then why can't you get free on your own?"

"I was bound by a witch. Please, at very least make amends for your torture by releasing me."

"I haven't tortured you."

"Not only the beating of the rug, you then placed that vile concoction onto it. I nearly choked."

"To get rid of the fleas."

"There are no fleas."

"The rug bit me."

"That was me."

"You *what*?"

"Me!" he said exasperated. "I tickled your ankle with my tongue and teeth. I did not bite, if I had, you would know it, I assure you!" He writhed against the rug and then stilled, sighing. "Do you like your lover to bite you?"

"I don't know. I've never..."

"Never been bitten?" He lifted his brow. "*Never?*"

Lauren's mouth was dry with shock. "Look, I don't understand what's happening here. I'm hallucinating again, right?"

"Well, if this isn't real, then I cannot hurt you."

"And if it is real, then you can."

"I choose not to hurt you. Release me and then I can explain all. I can even bite you if you ask."

"Keep your teeth to yourself." She inched forward and squatted down beside him. God he was beautiful! Sensuous. The blonde hair was laced with silver strands and the dark eyes, now she was close enough to see, had amber flecks in the iris. His mouth and chin were determined: here was a man who knew his own worth, his own place in the world, but there was also a capricious nature revealed by the light in his eyes. She could see it in the way he was watching her, from his smile. A silver diamond in his left lobe twinkled in the moonlight; the light pierced her mind and she winced. "Just a kiss?" she asked.

"Just a kiss."

As she leaned forward, he went very still, his breath held.

She slanted her lips over his and then scooted away. He lay on the rug, his head to one side watching her.

"That is not a kiss," he said.

"It was."

"On your world, maybe. On mine...a kiss is a *kiss*. Come here. Or are you afraid?"

"Well...shouldn't I be?"

"I have given you my word. Where I come from that is enough. Come here, please. Kiss me."

She inched forward and leaned over him. He wet his lips with his tongue and then Lauren's mouth descended. Her lips were on his. Immediately, his tongue tip was touching hers. He plunged inside her mouth.

He tasted wild: he *was* wild. Of pungent herbs and male salt, his flavor and touch was exotic, his tongue of probing velvet.

She went to lift her head, but found she was held by a hand splayed over skull. She panicked then, but an arm enfolded her to him and she was drawn down against him as he plundered her mouth.

He probed deeper and it felt as if the life was being drained from her.

Then, she was free and she lay panting on the rug as he sat cross-legged beside her. He stretched his body, his arms high above his head.

"My thanks for that, lady. The kiss was satisfactory."

"Thanks."

He smiled with his mouth and his eyes. "You are inexperienced. That can be rectified. If you dare."

"You...you've got some pride that you think that you can —"

"Thank you."

She blinked at him. "Thank me — for what?"

"For the kiss and for acknowledging my pride."

"I don't understand."

"You shall."

Lauren drew her knees to her chest and studied him. His gaze roamed over her with an intensity that made her shiver, made her shy. No man had ever looked at her like *that*.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"My name is Demerran. Prince Demerran of the House of N'Uran."

"Geography isn't one of my strong points, where is...what did you say?"

"N'Uran." He paused and glanced through the window. "I have been in your world for a long time, but before the exile...my home world is called Ranev."

"Where's that?"

"You have galactic references?"

"Uh. No."

He shrugged. "Then without a point of reference, what does it matter my origins? I am here and this is all that matters. For the moment."

"You said you would explain." She concentrated on his upper torso, well aware that certain parts of male anatomy were clearly visible; magnificently so, if she was honest.

He grinned. "Thank you. I am *magnificent*? I think I like the word."

Lauren flushed. "You're telepathic?"

"I cannot read your mind, exactly, I catch sensations..." He frowned at her, his head to one side.

"And what I read...very interesting. But time is short and I promised to explain. I was imprisoned on the rug." He held up his hand as she went to protest. "Imprisoned, Lauren. Yes, I know your name. I was held in stasis, living, cognizant of all around me. My enemies conjured a suitable punishment for my crime."

"What did you do?"

He smiled sadly. "Nothing more or less than any of my kind has done before. My only crime was that I lost and they won, so I was punished. Suffice to say that pride played a part in it. To teach me a lesson I was imprisoned on the rug, so that over the centuries I would be trodden upon, to give me the humility I did not have in life." He laughed. "Ingenious, my enemies. Very inventive."

"How can anyone be trapped in a rug?"

"Ah, not just any rug. This is a power-rug. I am a sword-dancer, and this rug is my anchor. I was entrapped and my essence woven into the fabric of the rug, there to remain until certain conditions converged: a woman's tears, her blood and the full light of the moon, all falling upon my prison."

"I...oh." Lauren remembered the time she wept for Rufus, the stabbing of her finger just minutes ago and the moonlight still resting on the surface of the rug. "The chances of that happening are..."

"Rare."

"Have you been released before?"

"Once."

"And what happens when you're released?"

"It is only transitory. I can only be free in the hours

between moonrise and moonset... A short time to find the magic to be forever free of the binding."

"What do you have to do to escape the prison for good?"

"I don't know."

"That's useful."

"I have clues, of course. A woman must free me; I must rely on her to provide the means of my escape." His gaze held hers.

"Me?" Lauren demanded. "I don't have any magic."

"Yes I can see that. Your hair is cut—you have been tamed."

"Tamed—did you say?" she snapped. "No one—"

He ran a hand over his eyes. "Have I used the wrong word and upset you? Your hair is short. Why?"

"My choice."

"No man cropped it?"

"I don't understand."

"On my world, there are two ways to render a witch-woman impotent. Temporarily, by cutting her hair, or permanently by rape, by taking her virgin blood and her power."

"That's disgusting."

"I have never raped."

"But you have...cropped?"

He spread his hands. "It has been necessary."

Lauren studied him beneath her lashes. "How do you make a man-witch impotent?"

"A man of my blood is never *impotent*," he teased.

"You know what I mean," she retorted.

"What will you do with this knowledge?"

"Not a damn thing. What do you take me for?"

"I do not *take* you – yet. But soon I shall."

"You think?" she demanded with a toss of her head.

"I *know*," he said evenly. "A diviner can be tamed by cutting his hair, but death is the only way to forever destroy his power." His gaze flitted over her. "In this world a woman has no elemental ability?"

"Well, Sib might...Sibella – she's a friend. Magic is her field, not mine."

"But you released me, where others have not. No." he shook his head. "You must have a skill that will be useful. I will have to trust you."

The dismay was evident in his eyes and voice. She grinned at him. "Poor Demerran! What a terrible predicament for you – to trust a mere woman!"

His face flushed. "Not all women are *mere*."

"Why were you imprisoned?"

"I would rather kiss you than talk. Please. It's been a long time since I've had a woman."

"You're not having me." Lauren jumped up, edging backwards. As he stalked after her, his erection stood up hard and proud against his flat belly. Lauren's mouth went dry with fear and with...with curiosity and desire. She felt the wall at her back and could go no further. Her breath came in short, rapid gasps.

He smiled, and took her face between his hands. His lips touched hers. He licked her lips. "I will not force you. I have never forced a woman. Besides, I cannot bed you. It is part of the binding that I can

become aroused, I can want a woman, but I can only give pleasure, not have it for myself."

"That's a cruel punishment."

"A deserving punishment, for I was...cruel."

"What did you do?"

He shook his head and his golden braid swished across his body, touching his prick. He sighed.

"Touch me there, Lauren, please."

"I...I can't. I don't know you...I'm just not..."

He grasped her chin as she went to hide her face from him. "What is wrong?"

"I don't like men."

He sighed. "Ah, *that* sort of woman. I see. That complicates matters."

Lauren frowned, then realization dawned. "I...I don't mean that! I don't have men...um, because they don't like me. I've been on my own too long. I'm selfish."

Demerran smiled. "Touch me and find out what sort of woman you are, Lauren. Or are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of a man! Even if the guy's an alien magician bound to a rug."

He snorted. "Make no mistake, I am not a magician."

"Then what are you?"

"Demerran, Prince of N'Uran."

"That explains it all, does it?"

He raised his chin, his eyes flashing. "The House of N'Uran is legendary throughout the galaxy."

"In bed or out of it?"

He smiled and ran a finger over her lips, forcing her mouth apart. "Both, Lauren." He took her hand,

guiding it to his penis. "Take me. Let me pleasure you. There is little time left, only an hour or so before moonset. Hardly time to do a woman justice."

"It only takes a few minutes."

He raised his brows. "Has that been your experience? No wonder. A man or woman of my world can take and give pleasure all day and all night. Anything less is considered incompetent."

"Are you telling me you can do it all night long?"

"Yes." He raised his chin.

"I wouldn't be able to."

"You haven't been with the right man."

"And you're that man, are you?"

"Obviously."

"So much for your pride being trodden out of you...How long have you been in that rug?"

"One thousand years."

Lauren stared. What he had suffered in that time she could only imagine. And still he was proud and arrogant. She wasn't certain she wanted anything to do with this man.

"Lauren, please, there is so little time, do not waste it in talking."

Demerran leaned forward and kissed her, a simple exploratory kiss and when he drew back his head, she saw his frown.

"What?" she whispered.

"You are unlike any woman I have known and I have known many."

Yes, she supposed that was true. Given his looks and his...um...attributes, women would have pursued him all over the universe.

"Give me your hand," he said.

He held her hand between his palms and Lauren felt a transference of heat from his flesh into hers. It began to sting and when she tried to pull her hand away, his fingers closed over hers.

"It is the healing power. It will not be long. Endure it."

She tossed her head.

He smiled. "I drew the lady of pride from my cards, and for good reason. It was a warning that I would meet my match in arrogance. Perhaps I should re-name you Terzsan. Though I give you a warning, Lauren, too much pride can be an impediment."

"You'd know all about that, I suppose?"

"Indeed so." He released her and Lauren studied her hand. Where there had been blisters from her encounter with the doorknob, now there was only smooth flesh, though a little sensitive to the touch.

"If you can do all these things, Demerran, then why doesn't your power release you from that rug-thing."

He smiled. "That *rug-thing* you so disparage—I made it."

"I am a weaver, also," she said indicating the loom lying on the floor.

"Yes. I admired your skill as you worked."

"That was you moaning...all those times?"

"Yes. My spirit can but rarely leave the rug-binding, and then only after long rituals to focus the mind..."

"You haunted me!"

"I needed to attract your attention."

She laughed. "You did that!" Lauren glanced down at the rug. "That thing is your design? How is it made?"

"With ten conjurations, woven over seven days, by drawing in the power levels opened from my sword-dance..." He smiled and spread his hands. "One day you may understand it, Lauren. My enemies imprisoned me within it, a cleverly invoked spell, to reflect my crime, to match my nature. They left me enough of my power so that I could survive—killing me would be too merciful—so that I could struggle and almost gain freedom, but ever the binding was too powerful."

"They teased you?"

"Yes."

"It's a wonder you didn't go mad with it."

He nodded. "In the first years, I nearly did. I found ways to survive."

"It's cruel. Monstrous." She eyed him squarely. "What did you do to deserve such a punishment?"

"As I have said, I faced my enemies and lost the battle."

"Yes, but you must have done something to them to make them retaliate?"

"You wish to know? Would you rather not let me please you?"

"I need to know...before..."

"To consider whether the man is worthy enough to love you?"

"Something like that."

"Some women would take the pleasure I offer—and I can offer much—without hesitation."

"Well, I am not *some* women."

He nodded and drew in a deep breath. "On my world I am a Prince, but also a sword-dancer, a diviner...a magician, if you prefer this word. I was the best. In my pride I overlooked the machinations of my enemies—other Princes who opposed my power with their own. We compete for supremacy, to have our House the dominant political force. It has been, and still is, a bitter, merciless conflict."

"Wars are always unrelenting."

"Yes, that is true! One day a woman of my greatest enemy succumbed to my lure. I robbed her of her hair and her Songs, binding it to my swords, thus I absorbed her power for my own. That done, I left her, I—"

"That's cruel!"

"It is our nature and the nature of our war, Lauren, to rob and be robbed. Then I did not consider the right or wrong of it, merely accepted that it was the way of my world." He held her gaze. "In the battle, my enemies united and entrapped me. The woman I had robbed pronounced my doom and others invoked the spell. I would be held in the rug, the symbol of my power, for all time or until a woman could break the binding. I could give pleasure, not receive it. To lose my power was bad enough, to lose the ability to receive pleasure—it would have been kinder to kill me. My enemies knew me too well... So now you know the manner of man I am. Proud. Arrogant. Thief. All this and more."

"They did to you what you have done to others? Does that make them better than you? Or worse? I

think you are all the same."

"Yes. That's the irony. We are the same; all the Houses are related. There are other ways to settle our differences—better ways—but of course we considered such beneath us. Our pride would allow no compromise."

"It's the same here," Lauren said.

He went to reach for her and she swatted his hands away.

"No?" he asked.

"Absolutely — *no*."

"But you burn for me...for a man."

"Maybe so, but I can control it."

"I have disgusted you?"

"Yes and no. Look, all this is too much for me to take in. Our world...there's no magic...at least the kind of stuff you're talking about and I'm tired. I will talk to you, but that's all."

"What do you want to *talk* about?"

"Firstly, you need some clothes."

He glanced down. "I do? My nudity makes you anxious?"

Lauren laughed. "Yep."

He studied her with narrowed eyes. "You aren't a virgin. I can tell at a glance you have had a man..." he frowned. "No, two men. Both unsatisfactory. If your hesitation is due to their incompetence, then let me allay your fears. I know what I'm about when it comes to women."

"Get back on your rug."

Demerran's face flushed crimson and his lips drew together in a tight line. "You dare order me as if I am

some dog...?" He turned and stalked to the rug, flinging himself down upon it.

Lauren wiped her hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry. Look, I'm overloaded. Please, just give me some space."

"If that is your desire. I am bound to do as you order."

"I—what?"

"Another ingenious punishment I must suffer, to be controlled by the owner of the rug, who will always be a woman. I am at her mercy. Always."

"You've just placed a lot of power at my command with that admission," Lauren said, folding her arms.

"I am thus bound to tell every owner of the rug."

"You have to do what I order?"

"Yes."

"That's disgusting! No one should have that power over another creature. Then I order you to be free of this obligation. As I say it, so let it be." Wasn't that the Wiccan wording Sib used in her ceremonies?

His narrowed gaze bored into her. "The binding is not so easily overcome. I—" He paused, shivering.

"What's wrong?" Lauren took a step in his direction, but he held up his hand.

"Order me to do something."

"Anything?" Lauren's mind raced with possibilities, some of them positively decadent. "And you must obey?"

"That is the spell."

"Um, stand on your head in the corner."

"Is that it? You're not very inventive."

"Trust me, you wouldn't want to know the other

things I considered."

"Very well. By your command, I stand on my head!" Demerran rose to his knees and paused. "No," he said. "I won't."

"You said —"

"So simple, I overlooked it. I thought that the order-binding had to be deep and complicated to ensnare one such as me." He shook his head ruefully. "And all it took was a woman's gentle heart to release me." He bowed. "I thank you."

"Then you aren't compelled to do my bidding?"

"No longer."

"Well, that's a start. I think."

He laughed. "I will not abuse your generous nature, Lauren. I am indebted to you."

Lauren went to the wardrobe and hunted through the clothes. She flung down a silk dressing-gown onto his lap. "That's the best I can offer."

He lifted it disdainfully and inclined his head. "How generous! I thank you."

"Well, I'm not used to entertaining royalty."

"I accept your apology."

"I wasn't apologizing," she said and folded her arms.

Laughing at her, Demerran shrugged himself into the dressing-gown and tied the sash around his waist.

"You said you have only limited time out of the rug...between moonrise and moonset. That's a few hours each night."

"Only the light of a full moon."

"That gives you even less time!" Lauren paused. "I dreamed of you once..."

"My way of reaching you in spirit, when my body remains confined." His gaze burned into her. "Did you enjoy the taste of what I can offer?"

Lauren ignored his question. She wasn't going to go down that track. "Is that dream-sending hard to do?"

"Somewhat."

"Ok. I saw you reading cards, like tarot cards, only different."

"Yes, the *oberchon*. The card divinations. A rudimentary tool, not useful for this level of binding." His brow quirked. "Believe me, I have contemplated all avenues...given I have been contained for one thousand years, I have spent the time thinking and planning, not always lamenting my fate and the injustice of the universe." He laughed gently. "I am not always such a prideful brute."

"Cut that out! You're reading my mind," Lauren said.

"I do not have to do so to know what you are thinking." His grin was predatory. "You reject me because of pride. To acknowledge your passion for me would make you feel...vulnerable. You do not like to feel this way."

She flung up her hands in resignation. "Have it your own way. If you think I'm going to fall into bed with you, just like that, think again. I ain't that sort of gal!" Lauren chewed her lip. "So we have to figure out how you can escape this rug-thing and you only have a few hours every month in which to do it?"

"I have to open the portal."

"The – what?"

"The gateway between this world and my own. That done, I must confront my enemy."

"Physically? Not in spirit? How are you going to do it?"

"That I do not know. It is part of the binding, to keep me in ignorance. You, or another, have to find the way."

"But I don't know how."

"Every woman has power—if you must call it *magic*, then so be it! Lauren, you need to realize your potential."

"And I can only do that through sex, I suppose."

"It is the easiest, most pleasurable route."

She sniffed her derision.

He spread his hands. "If you will not try, then I am consigned to the rug until such time as another woman owns it, starting the process anew."

"Just tell me one more thing."

Demerran looked heavenward. "Yes?"

"Why here? The universe is a big place. And as you said, this world is pitiful...no magic at all. Hardly worth worrying about."

"Spare me your sarcasm, Lauren! This world...is known to star-farers, though not often visited, save for the foolhardy. It is a barbarous place, lacking in fundamental knowledge."

"Whoa! It's not *that* bad! We do have our good points."

"Yes, I see that now," he said, his gaze slowly taking in her length. "Perhaps the *wyre* and the *lilan* are correct to covet your species."

"Who? The *wyre*; the *lilan*? Who—what are they?"

"Magic-kin. They use this world as their playground. The wyre...the shape-shifters and the lilan...the succubi. The tales they bring back through the portals about your species, I thought were exaggerated." His smoldering gaze lingered on her. "Perhaps the N'Uran have underestimated the sensuality of your species."

"Prince Demerran admits to making a mistake? We are making progress."

"In one direction, but in the other...the progress is very slow."

"Don't you like it slow?"

"Ah yes..." He laughed gently. "*You* are teasing me!"

Lauren folded her arms. She was reaching critical overload...shapeshifters, succubi...everything she thought she knew about her world was fast crumbling around her, thanks to this over-sexed, over-sized wizard. Her gaze flitted over him. That damn robe was hitched up around his thighs, not hiding much at all.

"I can satisfy your curiosity," Demerran said, his hand flinging aside the fold of robe to reveal his erection. "Allow me to humor you."

"*Humor* me? Is that what you call it? No thanks. There must be another way to free you from the spell without resorting to sex?"

"No, it is the only way. My enemies thought it improbable that any creature here could possibly undo the binding. Hence, the rug was consigned to this planet."

"Yeah, well, your enemies have underestimated

this little world."

A sudden light flared in his eyes. "Then," he said, rising to his knees, "you are willing to help me?"

"I might. But right now, I've got a headache."

"Let me soothe it."

"Keep your hands to yourself. I have to think." Lauren climbed onto her bed and lying down on the cover, closed her eyes. She'd just rest a moment, and then...

The cry of pain started her awake. She vaulted off the bed, thinking at first that it was Rufus yowling, caught in a trap...but Rufus was months dead and the noise emanated from within the room. Then memory returned.

She raced to the rug and saw Demerran writhing upon it, his wrists and ankles held by invisible bonds. His body fluctuated between flesh and transparency. Slowly, he *melted* into the rug, his anguished gaze upon her, entreating. Then all that was left was the rug.

Tears stung her eyes. She knelt down and smoothed the rug with trembling fingers.

* * * *

"That was the dream," Lauren said studying Sibella over the rim of her cup.

Sib flicked back a strand of purple hair and regarded Lauren steadily. "That's a way cool dream, hon." She leaned forward. "You need a man."

"Puleeze."

"No. Look, some of the most potent magic is between a man and woman. Covens have sex rites, and what about tantra? I've done it all, hon, I know."

"Where's Mr. Blonde Hunk?" Lauren asked glancing around Sib's kitchen.

"Pfft." Sibella flicked her fingers. "Took off with my money and credit cards, not to mention my pride." She laughed.

"You've reported him to the police?"

"And have the gossip all over town by lunchtime? I don't think so."

"Everyone will know soon enough."

"Yeah, the bush telegraph..." Sibella reached across the table and stroked Lauren's hand. "Forget about me, it's you I'm worried about! Look, I'm telling you straight. You need a professional to get you out of this entanglement. Sex...or the lack of it...can do funny things to people. No, don't argue with me! I'll check up on the net and with a few friends. We'll find you a professional who can screw you senseless. That'll do it for your dreams."

Lauren swallowed "Thanks." If she gave Demerran the slightest encouragement, he'd be on her bed, inside her, filling her with his great prick. She fancied he would be tireless, inventive...

Bloody hell, he was an alien magician and screwing her senseless would be the very least of what he could and would do. The thought made her wriggle uncomfortably on the chair, but part of the discomfort—if she was honest with herself—was because she did want him and the expertise he offered...curiosity and desire were a perilous

combination.

She pushed herself to her feet and swayed, clutching the table.

"You see, Lauren," Sibella said. "This is doing you no good."

"You don't know the half of it. I'm going home. Thanks for the coffee and advice."

"Yeah. Anytime."

* * * *

Hand in hand with Demerran, Lauren walked over a field strewn with red rose petals. As they crushed the flowers beneath their naked feet a musk perfume wafted into the air.

Demerran was telling her about his world.

She wore a diaphanous gold silk robe, similar to a Japanese kimono, but with slits up the sides revealing her thighs. Lauren knew he was watching her as they walked, his gaze heated.

He was dressed in a pair of black harem pants with a short-sleeved red shirt, gold embroidered about the high neck. The sight of him clothed—for once—was a shock and a turn-on. Because she knew what lay beneath the clothes and having him hidden, but knowing what he offered...*oh man!* It was too much to bear.

She sniffed the air. "What is that wonderful scent?"

Demerran smiled. "Me. Every man and woman has a particular redolence; you smell mine. That is a good sign."

She tugged at his hand and he halted, turning to

her. He put his hands on her shoulders, pushing the robe from her shoulders, so that his thumbs could caress her skin.

"It is time I pleased you, Lauren. You want me to do it, else you would not have smelled me. Your own scent is driving me crazy. Let me do it."

"Is that all I am to you?" she demanded. "A trophy of male pride to have me squealing beneath you?"

"I have naught else to offer for the moment. Please." The last word spoken huskily as he leaned into her.

She felt the strength of his arms as he lowered her to the grass. The ground transformed into his rug, its design and color and texture so vibrant the thing almost felt alive.

"It resonates with my energy, Lauren."

"I suppose this carpet can fly, too?"

"You will *fly* upon it, this I promise you."

"That wasn't what I meant."

He smiled.

Wizards, flying carpets and enchantments...she began to laugh. Just when she thought she knew it all, he surprised her...as...

What was he going to do to her now?

She gasped as he knelt between her legs and untied her robe, pulling it open.

As she sought to cover herself, he caught her hands, lifting her arms above her head, pinning her wrists beneath his left hand. His right hand roamed over her breasts, stroking and gently massaging.

His gaze captured hers as his knee rubbed at her, angling her legs wide. His fingers trailed over her

thighs, skirting around, evading that which he truly sought. Lauren could see the passion in his eyes; the game he played cost him dearly. Finally, he probed her cleft with a single finger that slid in between her folds. He parted her, entering a fraction.

"You are wet for me already, Lauren."

"Yes. Are you shocked?"

He frowned. "How — why would I be shocked by your response to me? I am delighted, because you pay me a compliment. Allow me to reward you."

"Oh?"

"I will release your wrists if you promise never to hide yourself from me again."

"Ok. I suppose it is a bit late for modesty."

Laughing, he released her hands. He bent forward, his long hair trailing over her body. She shivered in delight at the silken sweep of his hair. He lowered over her, keeping his weight from her by his knees and elbows.

She felt his penis tip touch her belly button. He probed and she gasped.

"One day I hope I may love you as a man, my pride inside you, deep inside you, stretching you wide. Would you enjoy that do you think?"

Lauren bit her lip. *Enjoy* would be an understatement, but she wasn't going to tell him that! His pride, like his prick would swell to intolerable proportions.

She reached down and grasped his erection, scrolling her fingers up and down its length.

"Oh ... yes," he whispered. "That feels so good. Do it harder. Faster. Then slow and gradual. At your

discretion.”

His beautiful face was lined with passion and he flung back his head.

“This is too cruel,” Lauren said. “For me to have pleasure and you denied it. I won’t do it. I can’t.”

He opened his eyes and gazed down at her. “It is my gift to you, Lauren.” He lowered down onto her and rolled with her in his arms so that she was atop him. His hands cupped her buttocks, his hands splayed wide, delving into her recesses.

He kissed her, taking possession of her mouth and tongue in one swift motion. Lauren drank deeply of him, twining her tongue with his. His taste was of the exotic: wild and unrestrained.

He rolled with her again and this time he lifted her legs onto his shoulders, twining her ankles at the back of his neck. His fingers explored her nether lips, teasing them apart. He smiled, a smile of triumph and pure male greed. He then lowered his mouth.

“Nooooo.” She moaned.

He raised his mouth. “No?” he whispered against her pussy.

Lauren gripped his hair in her fists as his mouth lowered again and he resumed his plundering with lips and tongue. He tasted and nibbled, he quested inside her. He gave her the gentlest of love bites and it felt as if he was drawing forth her life-essence.

The first spasm made her squeal and then the delicious heavy weight traveled outwards to engulf her every cell. She moaned and sighed, holding her breath, dying a little as the orgasm blotted out all conscious thought save the pleasure of his mouth...

* * * *

Lauren reared up off the bed, disoriented, shivering.

"Oh God!"

"I have been called many things in my time," Demerran drawled, "But never a god. I rather like the term."

Lauren turned to the voice, seeing him lying on the rug, watching her, the moonlight reflected in his eyes.

"You sent me that dream, didn't you?" she demanded. "You bastard."

Immediately his smile vanished and his gaze became granite hard. He came to his feet and padded to her. He was furious. In that moment she sensed his other nature, and knew just how dangerous he could be.

"I am not a bastard," he said softly. "My lineage is traced back two thousand years. I am a Prince of N'Uran."

"I wasn't casting any aspersions on your pedigree, Demerran. It's a saying here. Ok, it's an insult. I won't use it again. But you deserve it for what you just did to me in the dream. Uh...it was a dream, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." He folded his arms. "Did you enjoy it?"

Lauren tossed her head. She would be condemned to another of his insufferable conceited smiles if she revealed just how much she had enjoyed the dream.

He scented the air as a wild animal might and his smile was feral as he studied her. "Ah! Your arousal-scent is *very* strong. Is was *that* good, was it?" He

laughed. "A woman with such a perfume promises to be a potent mate. Excellent! A very strong, unique scent, Lauren." He drew in a deep breath.

She flushed. "Demerran, don't do that."

"Why not? I take it as a compliment that I can arouse such a reaction in you. I sent you that dream, so that you would know me and realize that you can accept me without fear." He placed a knee on the bed in a tentative silent enquiry.

Lauren moved over for him and he pulled her back against his body, so that her bottom rested against his groin. She felt the hard evidence of arousal against her buttocks.

"I've been thinking," Lauren said. "About this binding. It's a woman's magic and I think it needs a woman to break it."

"How?"

Lauren shivered as he lifted the hair from her neck and kissed her.

"You have such lovely hair. Like the sky of Cvantris." His tongue swirled over her nape. He bit gently.

"Mnnnn. Cvantris?"

"A world without a sun. Darker than the darkest night on your world." He paused, studying her, raising a strand of her hair to his lips. "No, your hair is incomparable!"

She smiled. His hands were pure art and his speech pure poetry. How could a girl resist?

"Can't you stop that? I need to think and talk."

He sighed. "You do not enjoy my love-talk, Lauren? You taste of jasmine. I will bite you again."

Mmm."

"Will you stop that!" She prized his hand from her breast. "There's magic in sex...Sib...Oh, man! Ohhh." Lauren paused as his tongue tip traced over her ear lobe. "C'mon, listen to me. You can do that later!"

"You promise?" he whispered against her neck.

"If you like."

"If I like?" He laughed.

Pressed against his body, she felt his laughter vibrating into her bones. She glanced at him. He lay on his side, propped up on an elbow, his cheek resting on his palm, his eyes dark, his smile...

"Demerran!"

"Very well, you have my attention. Talk; tell me what you have discovered."

"It's quite simple. Sex is the answer."

"It invariably is."

Lauren rolled her eyes. "I don't know why you didn't figure it out."

His smile faded. "The binding has blinded me to many realizations. I know the answer is close, but I cannot fathom it. To be rendered thus is difficult to bear. Answers have never eluded me."

"Yeah, well, I think the answer is that you need to...to ejaculate to free yourself from the binding."

"I can't."

"Have you tried?"

"Of course I have." He shivered.

Lauren put a hand over his. "What is it you're not telling me?"

"Five hundred years ago, I was found by a woman who agreed to aid me. When I entered her...let me

just say that the pain sent me to oblivion. When I recovered, one hundred years had passed. I cannot have a woman or obtain release."

"There must be a way you can... If it's not the answer, then why are you prohibited from screwing?"

He frowned. "*Screwing?* You have strange euphemisms for sex." He regarded her steadily. "You are offering to help me?"

"I suppose so."

He smiled without humor. "Your enthusiasm overwhelms me."

"Well, that makes us even."

"How so?"

"Since meeting you, that's all I have felt—overwhelmed."

"Thank you." He inclined his head.

"I wasn't exactly paying you a compliment."

"You will thank me for what I do for you, Lauren, after you have begged me to do what I do best."

She ignored that conceit, knowing he was deliberately baiting her. Ignore him—that was the best strategy. "That sword-dancing thing you do. What is it?"

"My swords are the focal point of my invocations. I open the energy lines and transmute the power to whatever purpose I choose. It is my gift. It was also my ruin."

"Why?"

"By using the dance, I could tap the universal energy. No man should have that knowledge, that power. But I embraced it, harnessed it, used it

recklessly." He reached for her and tucked her under him. "Now, no more talking. There are two hours left to us, until the next full moon, I want to love you. Prepare you."

"Prepare me?"

"Yes. You are ignorant of your own power, your own sensuality. You are going to need your knowledge if we are to attempt to break the binding."

"And if we succeed?"

"A thousand years ago I would have sought vengeance upon my enemies, now—I just want to return home."

"Home might have changed in a thousand years."

"I will return to my own time."

"You can do that?" Lauren's heart skipped a beat.

"The sword-dance upon the rug can open the portals of time and place. But first," he said smiling down at her. "First, Lauren, I have to free you."

* * * *

Lauren stared down at the rug. Demerran had gone and her body still thrummed with his sex-magic. She ached in places she didn't know existed: his fingers, tongue, teeth and mouth had loved her until she had screamed her release. His ministrations had not abated even though she begged him to stop. It was too much to bear, the exquisite rapture he channeled into her.

She had passed out once from the intense orgasm he instigated. With his mind linked to hers, he had augmented her response, until she had reached

overload. He had been merciless and she thought it was male pride that made him smile in triumph as she met his finger-fucks with her hip thrusts. He was merciless; he was inventive; he was tireless.

It had been magic—literally; figuratively. She would never be the same again and that brought inexplicable tears to her eyes. If he broke free of the binding, then he would leave her. He had said so.

She rubbed her big toe over the edge of the carpet. She knew he would sense her touch.

The only man to show her what Sib had hinted—to find a man who knows what he's doing in bed and never let him go—was an alien wizard. It was bloody typical of her luck!

How could she hold such a man as Demerran? He was as free as the wind, as wild as the storm...

Lauren closed her thoughts. Demerran would leave her once he was free of the binding. And she must help him and thereby lose him.

And if he did not escape the enchantment—what future for him as her hearth rug?

She bent down and gently stroked the top of the rug. A tickling curled around her wrist, almost she could feel his fingers against hers.

"I'll do what I can, Demerran." She had one month before he could manifest again and that time would not be wasted.

* * * *

Lauren sat in a chair by the rug, anxiously watching the clouds through the bedroom window. She

glanced about. Over one hundred candles in containers illuminated the room; incense perfumed and purified the air.

She had placed crystals in every corner and around the rug; Sib had said that the crystals would ward off evil.

And Lauren had enhanced her friend's knowledge with information gleaned from books, the net—from the plain ridiculous, to scientific research and every piece of lore in between, she had read and rehearsed until she had made herself sick with exhaustion. She was nothing if not thorough. But would it be enough? Would she be up to the task before her?

The splash of moonlight rested on the center of the rug. Lauren drew in a breath, her heart beating frantically. She frowned. Nothing happened.

What was wrong? Had Demerran's enemies destroyed him, perhaps sensing that he might free himself from their binding?

"Demerran," she whispered, tears stinging the backs of her eyes.

Tears. Of course!

Tears and blood and moonlight.

Lauren went to her jewelry box and flinging open the lid, located her pearl and garnet brooch. She tested the pin against her skin; it would be sharp enough.

Kneeling at the edge of the rug, she used the brooch pin to prick her finger and let the drops of blood well up over her fingers. She swept her hand over her eyes, collecting tears. She combined the essences on her fingers and then transferred the

concoction onto the rug, patting it down for good measure.

“Demerran?”

For moments nothing happened, then she saw a shifting of colors emanating from the rug’s center. Slowly, the light fanned outwards, along the woven patterns. A shape began to form; a man’s body solidifying with every second. She saw the light-ropes that bound him at wrist and ankle. He tested the restraints, writhing against them.

She stood up and stepped away, fear and wonder making her shiver.

At last Demerran lay spread-eagled on the rug, in all his magnificence. His penis, erect, jutting upwards, as if to greet her.

For a moment she saw him struggling to orient himself, the vague look in his eyes giving way to cognizance.

With a sigh he pushed himself upright.

“Demerran?”

Lauren waited for forever until his gaze lifted to her. She saw his fatigue. He smiled, then his brow quirked as he took in the sight of her.

She flicked her hand over the negligee. The black silk had been outrageously expensive and she had traveled two hundred kilometers to town to buy it. She hoped he appreciated it. And by his smile, the light in his eyes, he did.

She smiled shyly.

He struggled to his feet and stretched. Her mouth and throat went dry at the sight of him, the shifting muscles, the hard flat planes of male anatomy, the

blonde hair hanging to his arse. God, he was beautiful!

"Am I?" he asked hoarsely, holding out his hand to her. "You are the one who is beautiful, Lauren." He stepped to her and pulled her into his arms and kissed her. The passion took her breath away. He breathed into her mouth.

He stepped back, holding her out at arm's length. He glanced about the room. "You have prepared all this for me? Bought this gown for my pleasure? Thank you, beloved." Again, he slanted his lips over hers.

For a moment, she forgot who she was and she swayed, disoriented, on her feet as he set her from him.

"You have so much restrained passion within you, Lauren, it needs to be released, for your own good."

"Mnnn?" She drew in a deep, steadying breath. "I thought all this would help our...mission. I've been researching stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Tantra. Sex magic."

"I know all there is to know on the subject."

"I might surprise you."

He laughed gently, kneading her shoulders. "You have done that already, lady!" His gaze sobered. "I cannot overemphasize the danger of what we do. For us both. If we fail...If I fail, it will be the end, Lauren."

"We'll die?"

"Worse. You will be imprisoned with me. In the weeks we have been parted, I have thought about what we intend. I am not prepared to risk hurt to you,

Lauren. You are not to do this." He put his finger to her lips as she protested. "I have decided."

She lifted his finger away, holding his hands. "I promised I would help. You don't think I'm up to it, do you? I was ignorant of magic, ok, so I am *still* ignorant! But we have to try. To do nothing, to accept one's fate...that's a cop out. It doesn't matter what happens; if I get trapped in that rug-thing, no one will care."

"I will care, Lauren."

"And I have to do this, for my sake and for yours. I promised to help you, whatever the cost."

"You are certain?"

"Yes."

He ran a hand through her hair. "One day I shall see your hair grow longer than mine."

"Just so you can crop it and tame me?"

He smiled sadly. "No. You will always have power over me. That is a woman's magic over *her* man. You will learn it soon enough and then I will not be safe."

She lowered her gaze, but his hand cupped her chin, lifting her head.

"You don't have to promise me anything, Demerran. I know you have to leave, go home."

He studied her deeply, his smile enigmatic. "Come," he said, taking her hand and leading her to the rug. "What must be done, must be upon the *rug-thing*. It is the place of power." He sat down and pulled her down onto his lap.

She straddled his body and Demerran lifted her negligee to her waist, his hands cupping her buttocks. His fingers spread to the inside of her thighs, gently

teasing her curls.

Lauren put her arms around his neck and rested her cheek against his.

"Breathe with me," he said. "Slowly. Draw in the air, hold it, breathe out. Establish the rhythm to match heart and breath, yours and mine together."

"I read about this. Tantra."

"The truth is the truth, whatever you call it, Lauren. We call it *Schahor*. The sex-magic."

Lauren ran her hands down his back, tracing her nails over his spine, up and down. His skin goosepimpled and beneath her caress, he shivered. She had studied the acupuncture meridian points and the yoga chakras—Sib had been a wealth of information, only too happy to impart all her knowledge for the sake of Lauren's secret quest.

"Do you like this?" she asked him. "It's part of the stuff I read about."

"I like this *stuff*," he said laughing softly. "Do that again. Oh, yes. Again, please. Ah, lower. Oh...great...stars!"

Encouraged by his response, Lauren dared more and more and she had him trembling uncontrollably within minutes.

"Now, my lady, it is your turn. Lie down. Open your legs. Mmm. Wider, Lauren. Let me feast upon you."

The tip of his penis teased open her lower lips, then he used his prick to scroll back and forth, up and down across her cleft. His hands meanwhile roamed over her body, seeking and locating her sex meridians. She was trembling uncontrollably within

moments.

Their breathing heightened, their heart rates quickened.

He licked the hollow between her breasts. "You taste different." He lifted his gaze to her. "No need to use this false unguent, your perfume is unique...all I need to smell and taste." He sucked her greedily.

She tongued his neck and bit him gently. "You taste good, too."

"What do I taste like?"

"Indescribable."

"Please try."

"Ok. Exotic. You taste of a world far away. Cinnamon, maybe and patchouli. I like it very much."

"I am pleased."

He lifted the negligee up her body, the whisper soft scrape of silk against her aroused skin made her moan. He flung the garment away and his hands cupped her breasts. He took one nipple into his mouth, his tongue tormenting it to a tight peak. He traced his mouth across to the other breast and brought its nipple erect. He gently nibbled, as his hands slid up and down her body, his nails scraping over her skin.

She shivered. She locked her legs around his waist and that brought his penis tip to the periphery of her slit. She drew in a breath, for he was a big man. And...

"Not yet, Lauren. Too soon. Have you learnt nothing of me that you think I will attempt this without proper, and adequate preparation?" He

laughed as he lowered her to the rug and knelt between her knees, opening her wide.

She reached down and took his erection, thumbing the tip, opening him. His gasp made her pause. "Did I hurt you?"

"The *best* pain, Lauren. You give me the best pain. Do it again."

She wagged her thumb over his opening and he shuddered. He threw back his head, his hair flying wildly around him.

She pumped him then, her fist around him, fast and hard, then slow and soft; she established a rhythm and he rocked against her matching her tempo.

Demerran encased her wrists in one hand and lifted her arms above her head. He leaned over her, sweeping his hair over her torso. His finger tip begged entry to her and he plunged inside.

"You are so soft and warm and wet. Thank you for your gift." He drew out his finger and traced it over her face. "Taste," he said. "Do you dare? Know yourself, Lauren, only then can you be free."

She took his finger into her mouth, her attention on him. He smiled and returned his finger to her body, dove into her again, finger-fucking her slowly. He possessed her mouth with a deep kiss, his tongue joining hers, mimicking the action and pace of his fingers.

Lauren spread her hands over his buttocks, exploring the crack, dragging a nail down to his balls, while her other hand grasped his penis, pumping him as fast as he fingered her.

His fingers fanned over her pussy, one finger at her nub, the others stroking and pulling her folds; every finger at work to bring her pleasure in a different place, with a different pace and pressure. It was mental and physical overload and she cried out.

She began to shiver and he paused, holding her at the edge of the orgasm.

“Feel it, Lauren. Feel it...*now!*”

She lifted off the rug as the first wave hit her.

It was more than climax, something burnt into her back. Demerran forced her down onto the rug and she experienced orgasm amid the sex-power. She screamed.

“Accept the magic, Lauren. Take it into your body. Savor it. Store it. We will need its strength. That’s it, beloved. Gently. Have no fear.” He kissed her fiercely, his tongue fucking her mouth.

Lauren wept with the pain and the excruciating pleasure of the sex-magic, the *Schahor*. God if this was what Demerran practiced, channeled and was denied...how could he bear its loss?

She barely had time to catch her breath before he lay back on the rug, lifting her atop him. He pulled her across his chest, her knees coming to rest at his temples.

“Now, I taste you, again.” He gazed up at her and smiled. “You are shy with me still?”

Lauren felt the heat race from her head to her heels. His eyes devoured every part of her.

“I will make you forget your reticence. Part of you at least welcomes me.” His tongue swirled around her lowest lips. “Aaah.” He held her hips and proceeded

to plunder her depths.

Lauren felt the tingling in the soles of her feet. The tingling spread upwards. She opened her eyes and saw the light traveling from the rug up her legs, her veins afire with the magic Demerran invoked. She was bathed in light and heat and both reached a crescendo of pressure inside her as Demerran's mouth tugged and teased and licked. His finger tilted into her, scrolling around, using different angles to penetrate and different tempos to plunder.

"Let me love you, too, Demerran." She slid down his body, turning as she went and lay face first onto him, her mouth upon his erection. She felt his mouth on her pussy again, working his magic, and then she took him into her mouth.

Lauren invoked her magic upon him; her teeth, lips, tongue and fingernails tracing up and down his length, while her other hand cupped his swollen sacs. She squeezed gently and he bucked against the rug, moaning.

She shuddered as he whispered across her pudenda, his breath teasing, soothing, cooling. Enflaming.

"Aaah," she moaned.

"You like that, Lauren?" He blew on her again and again, fanning the heat inside her.

She fell face first onto him, holding his ankles, seeking an anchor in a world gone suddenly topsy-turvy. Darkness washed around her, through her, as did a fierce pain. Like a thousand knife cuts, the pain lashed her and she screamed.

"Your breath to mine, Lauren. Remember. Breathe.

Heartbeat. Yours; mine. Together. One."

"It hurts."

"The pain shall pass." He whispered over her flesh again and again and she shivered. The orgasm exploded inside her.

She felt Demerran's fingers gently sweep over her weeping flesh. She raised her head and saw him place her essence upon the rug.

"The most potent magic, Lauren. Don't be ashamed. You give me a great gift. It begins." He drew her to him and he flung a leg across her, his ankle at the small of her back. "Hand-fuck me," he said. "Again."

He rocked against her in time with her motions. He screamed and wept and she halted, to see his body bathed in light. He was being consumed. His hand curled over hers. "Continue. It is nearly there. Ah great stars! I didn't think it would ever happen!" The slightest drop of male-essence emerged from him and he took it on his finger tip, merging it with her essence on the rug.

He rolled onto her, leaning over her, taking his weight onto his knees. Lauren felt his prick sliding down, probing. She held her breath.

"Breathe," he coaxed. "Heart and breath in unison." Then he entered her with a gentle movement that became a slow dance of thrust and withdrawal. Again and again, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, sometimes deep, sometimes slight. "Yes!" he cried.

He cupped her head in his palms and lowered his mouth to hers. His tongue moved inside her as his penis moved inside her. She moaned. He moaned.

Together. United.

There was a moment of suspended reality and then something held Lauren to the rug. Something bit her, cut her, burnt her deep. She screamed. Minds plunged into her; laughing, tormenting. Hurting.

"No!" Demerran cried. "No!" His body was rigid above her, inside her. His prick was burning her from inside out. He would not—could not withdraw, she struggled beneath him, beating her fists against his back.

Then there was a moment of calm and she breathed deeply, but the respite lasted only a moment before the burning pressure began to tear at her.

It felt as if she was being ripped open and she struggled against him, but Demerran held her fast with his body.

Lights swirled around her, ravaging her mind. She was sliced open and energy poured from her, swirling to Demerran. He screamed. She screamed.

Darkness descended as she was turned inside out.

* * * *

"Lauren?"

Demerran's whisper against her temple brought her to consciousness.

She was pressed into something hard and cold, as his body lay full length over her, still inside her.

Pain lanced her and she struck out at him. "You hurt me."

He reared back and knelt beside her, anguish marring his features. She raised herself on her elbow

and stared at him. His body was scarred with weals, his face was awash with tears.

She frowned down at her body. Blood smeared her skin. Beneath her nails she saw blood.

"We each caused the other pain amid pleasure, Lauren. I'm sorry."

"I didn't realize I could do that...I hurt you, too."

He shook his head. "It will be better next time. I underestimated you. You made me wild..."

She drew in a shuddering breath and glanced around. They were in a room...at least she thought it was a room, but there was no beginning or end, only stark white all around.

"Where are we?"

"This is the limbo of my existence for the past one thousand years."

"We're inside the rug? The magic brought us here?"

"Yes...and no. My power opened the portal; but we were conveyed here," he said, standing up.

"The enemy brought us here?"

"Yes."

Demerran lifted Lauren to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. "I hurt you, beloved. I did not intend that to happen. I—"

About them they heard a woman's laughter and then the 'room' fell away to reveal a columned chamber with a vaulted ceiling—all made from white marble.

The stone beneath her feet was smooth and cold, but colder still the fear growing in her heart as Lauren gazed up at the woman on the throne.

She sat beneath a canopy of gold net. Beside her sat a man, dark of hair and blue-eyed, as glacial as the woman he flanked.

The woman stood. She was tall and beautiful, robed in red brocade. Beneath her diadem her black hair hung to her knees.

Demerran placed Lauren at his back.

"What *thing* do you have there, Demerran?" the woman demanded, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of Lauren. "You dare bring that creature with you?"

"I had no choice. We were joined, Erella."

Erella descended the stairs of the dais.

"What is this place, Demerran?" Lauren asked. "Please tell me what's happening."

"Oh, how that *thing* whines. In your desperation, you use the basest of creatures. I am disappointed in you, my Prince."

"This is Erella," Demerran said glancing back at Lauren. "The witch who bound me to the rug."

"Her?" Lauren gasped, measuring the woman with new eyes.

Erella inclined her head. "And so it comes to this, Demerran? You have broken the binding and confront me here, with your whore. So be it." She turned to go.

"Wait," Demerran said. "The battle is over, Erella. Let it be over."

Erella's gaze swept him from head to toe, her eyes, her smile deep and cruel. "Over? It has not yet begun. You have been brought here at a time before our encounter. Are you blind?"

"Your hair has grown," he said.

"It has not been cut," Erella said.

"What did you say?" Demerran whispered, his body rigid with shock. "You cannot do this. You cannot upset the Sequence!"

"I have done it. Your power is nothing compared to mine. You will never rob me of my Songs."

"Don't forget my part in this, Erella," the man sitting beneath the canopy said.

"Vadon, shut up! It is I who has the power. The Prince taught me much and," she said turning to Demerran again, "I tell you this, Prince of N'Uran, it will never be over while you live."

"As you say, your enmity is with N'Uran, return Lauren to her world."

"No!" Lauren said, shouldering past Demerran to face him. "You need me."

"You don't understand, Lauren."

"All I need to know is that she is the one responsible for imprisoning you. If she wants a fight, then she'll get one."

The man who had spoken before joined Erella's side. He was as tall as Demerran, of similar build and almost as beautiful, but his hair was dark, his eyes blue, ice-cold blue. "Let the human whore stand at his side, sister. Allow her the pleasure of seeing the Prince defeated, and I will then have my pleasure of the bitch. She's been well schooled, and recently, if her scent is anything to go by."

Lauren gasped and only then realized that she was naked. She retreated behind Demerran's back to the sound of the man's laughter.

"And shy, too?" he said. "All to the better. I will have her squealing beneath me, then she can pleasure us all, every man of our House."

"Vadon, I'll kill you!" Demerran held up his hand, tracing a symbol in the air before him. The man staggered back.

"So the pup still has his bite," Erella said. "We shall extract your power, Demerran, piece by piece. You'll scream as I once screamed."

"After so long, you still want revenge?" Demerran asked. "Haven't you had your fill?"

"Your incarceration has mellowed you, N'Uran," Erella hissed. "I think I prefer the other man, the man who had pride and power and a more select taste in women. You have become debased."

"I do not want to fight you. I wish to live in peace."

"With *her*?"

Lauren clasped Demerran's fist between her palms. "Together, we can fight them. You aren't going to go back to that rug-thing."

He smiled down at her. "No, beloved."

Beloved ... Her mouth went dry as she gazed up at him.

"Yes," Demerran said. "Yes, I call you *beloved*. And so you are to me, Lauren, truly my gentle beloved." He touched her cheek. "But understand this, I will not be bound again. This battle will be to the death. Do you understand? Only Erella or I will walk away from this duel."

"But why?"

"We are enemies. House-kin enemies. There can only be one House left to rule this world."

"That's what it was all about? Domination?" Lauren asked.

"Yes."

"It's the same the universe over, huh?" She studied his face. "Genocide was practised by all sides?"

"Yes. I tried to wipe out their blood forever. I failed. I won't fail again." He straightened, facing his enemies. "Name your terms and your strategy."

"As before," Erella said. "Sword-dance, Prince, and I will use my Song. If you win, then you and your whore are free to go. But when I win, I will have your power, your swords and Vodan can have your woman."

"Over my dead body!" Lauren hissed.

"Dead or alive, it makes no difference to me," Vodan said.

"You bastard!" Lauren countered.

"Lauren, no!" Demerran whispered.

"You'll pay for that insult, bitch!" Vodan said.

"We'll see who gets made to pay. Fix them, Demerran. Do it this time. Properly."

"I was once as they, Lauren. Cruel. Proud. We are but two sides of the same coin."

"But no longer. I know you, remember?"

"Yes," he said gently. "You understand me better than I do myself." He stroked a knuckle across her cheek.

"This is such a touching repartee," Erella snapped.

"Yes, isn't it intriguing and entertaining?" Vodan said. Again, his gaze plundered Lauren and she turned away, hiding her body with her hands.

Demerran put his palm on her shoulder and

Lauren felt the tingle of power, followed by heat racing over her flesh. She blinked. Where moments before she was naked, now she was robed in that golden kimono she had worn in Demerran's dream.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He smiled and inclined his head. "The least I could do, beloved. Besides, it is fun to tease the robe from your body. Await that pleasure."

"If I wasn't so impatient to see N'Uran founder, I'd ask that you continue with your display," Erella whispered. "It is so *touching*."

"Erella—" Vodan began, but his sister silenced him with a dismissive sweep of her hand.

"Prepare yourself, Demerran," Erella commanded.

"Where are my swords?"

Erella nodded and from out of the shadows another man appeared placing a covered object at her feet. Erella lifted the silk to reveal the long curved swords Lauren had seen the dream-Demerran wield.

Erella kicked the swords and they slid across the marble with a rasping chink and came to rest at Demerran's feet. He made no move to retrieve them.

His attention was riveted upon Erella. "I want your word, your *Song-Word*, Erella, the terms of the battle."

"I have said. So I will Sing."

Lauren watched as Erella squared her shoulders and a chill crept up her spine as the witch-woman began to sing: to the victor go the spoils: the power, the freedom, the alien woman, thus, the battle is agreed. All this was in a song of such melody, its beauty a mockery of the evil that it contained.

Erella spread her hands. "Does that suffice?"

"Is that it?" Lauren demanded, tugging at Demerran's hand. "You're going to trust her?"

"The Song is her magic, Lauren. As binding to her, as my magic is to me. It is enough."

"And what do I do in this battle?"

Vodan waved a hand towards Demerran. "Watch your Prince die and anticipate my body in yours," he hissed. "That's all you're good for. Warm yourself for my shaft!"

"Not in a million years," Lauren said.

"That can be arranged."

"Stop this useless banter, brother! Control yourself," Erella said, slapping Vodan on the cheek. She turned to confront Lauren and Demerran. "It begins; we draw the battle ground."

Beneath their feet, Lauren saw the marble transform to another carpet. She cried out and leapt from it, recognizing the symbols that had entrapped Demerran on the other rug.

"This is the field of battle. We are not allowed to leave its confines," Demerran said. "I'm sorry, beloved." He cupped her cheek.

"Finish it, Demerran, then we can go home." She stared up at him. What she had just said...

Home, for him, was some Prince's palace on an alien world where genocide was the norm. Not with her—not ever with her, though he had called her his beloved...

He smiled down at her, a soft, secret smile and then kissed her. "I won't be long."

Demerran bent down and lifted the swords. He twirled them about, as if to acquaint himself with

their balance. He ran his finger along the edge of each sword, blooding the blades with his life force.

She saw that each blade was decorated with runes and talismans, similar to the designs on the rug-thing back home.

Demerran glanced at her. "I shall call my first sword, Terzsan, the Lady of Pride." He bowed to her, pointing the sword tip to her in salute. "And the other?"

"Sibella. If it wasn't for Sib..." Lauren shrugged.

"It is so," he said and bowed again to her.

Erella sat cross legged on a pile of cushions at the far end of the carpet. She folded her hands in her lap, her head bowed.

Forgotten for the moment, Lauren lingered indecisively, until she saw Vodan's leer.

"Fuck you!" she said and turned her back.

Vodan laughed. "It is I who will fuck you. In every way; I'll tear you apart."

"Yeah, as if! Guys who boast their size, usually need a microscope to find their prick!"

Demerran laughed heartily. "She has the right of it, Vodan!"

Even Erella laughed at her brother's red face. "When you have the wit to engage with N'Uran, do so! For now, be silent!"

Lauren sat on the edge of the carpet, drawing her knees to her chest. She felt cold, sick with dread, vulnerable. Everything hinged on Demerran and he had lost once before...and he was tired and in pain from their passage to this god-awful place. She rested her head on her knees.

"Lauren?" Demerran touched her head. He squatted before her, his swords on the rug beside him. "Trust me. I have prepared for this moment for a thousand years. But..." He lowered his voice. "But if things go ill, there is naught else I can do for you. Remember breath to breath; heart to heart? I can give you a quick, painless death. Or not, if you prefer to remain here with...him." He pointed with his chin at Vodan sitting under the gold net.

"Better dead," Lauren said. She raised his hand to her lips, licking each finger in turn. She blushed. "You taste of me."

"I will always taste of you," Demerran said. He snatched up his swords and flung himself to his feet. He strode to the center of the rug and standing on one foot, he went into a defensive crouch, twisting his swords around him, so fast that they formed the illusion of a silver cloud about his body.

The witch's song began and Demerran commenced his dance.

Lauren shivered. The song would stall the heart of any man or woman, would pluck the life essence from any living thing. The barrier of Demerran's magic protected them both from Erella's vengeance. But such a fragile protection from such vile sorcery...

Faster he moved, faster his swords arced and parried, spun and twirled. His wrists moved too rapidly for the eye to watch, his body dancing too fast to follow each intricate step.

A beautiful, deadly dance that led to death, this the swords-dancer's magic. Oh God! Lauren dared not watch, but could not look away.

The battle swept back and forth across the rug, lines of golden power running through its design to attack and to deflect. Blue light flashed from Demerran's swords. One moment the song gained the ascendancy, the next it was the swords-whisper.

The air crackled around Lauren; an electric charge that smelled of burning. It was deflected from her by the coruscating blue light of Demerran's magic.

Rivulets of perspiration tracked down his body and here and there were smears of blood. Had he wounded himself in the sword-dance? Lauren glanced at Erella. Her diadem was crooked, and her face was pale and lined with fatigue. Vodan was white-faced, his hands curled into fists on his knees.

Lauren watched him beneath her lashes. Something was wrong. She glanced back at Demerran to see him falter, almost lose his balance, before righting himself.

A murmur touched the edge of her mind. It was Vodan! But his focus was not upon her, but the Prince. His fingers made a slight movement. She heard Demerran gasp and saw a slit appear in the Prince's shoulder. Again he faltered. She felt his pain as skin parted on his thigh. Vodan was doing something; this wasn't in the rules—in the bloody Song-pact that Erella had made with Demerran.

Lauren dug her fingers into her knees, the pain clearing away her anger.

Demerran's magic was vacillating in the dual assault of Erella and Vodan upon him. Lauren bit her lip tasting her own blood.

Blood!

Blood and magic seemed to go hand in hand in this terrible world. Might her blood help Demerran, as it had once before on the rug-thing in her cottage?

She swallowed against the rising hope and panic, calming herself, focusing upon Demerran. Her breathing matched his. She felt his pain, felt his labored breathing and the frantic beat of his heart. She caught his magic; so potent, so wild, so...Demerran. For a moment their spirits merged. She gave him her strength, but it wasn't enough.

She bit harder on her lip; her mouth filled with the warm copper taste of blood. She wiped her finger over the wound and transferred the blood to the rug. Tears. That wouldn't be hard, tears were already in her eyes as she watched Demerran's proud battle against his enemies.

She transferred her tears to the carpet, placing her hand over both essences.

"Heart to heart, Demerran. Blood to blood. Body to body. Breath to breath." She felt him respond to her call. His heart and breath slowed. She kept her hands upon the carpet as energy traveled from her to him.

For a moment he was still, then his movement intensified. He spun, he leapt, his swords circling his body in twists of his wrists that brought the blades so close to his body. Just one slip and he would slit his body from neck to knee...

Erella's song faltered, then Vodan's spell bolstered hers. Lauren focused upon Vodan.

"You're a coward and a bastard, Vodan. You want me? You'll have to fight me. If you dare! C'mon are you *man* enough?"

Vodan's ice-blue gaze impaled her where she sat. His spell lashed her and she shivered.

"Is that the best you can do, little man? Well, fuck you!"

His attention swept to her. "Fuck you? That I shall! Every man in my House will rape you, bitch."

"I don't think so!" Lauren laughed at him and his face went grey with anger.

His incantation diverted to her and she groaned as his mind lashed hers. It hurt, god it did! She almost screamed with the burning from inside out. A slash appeared on her arm, the wound seeping blood. She bit her lip again. She dare not cry out as that would distract Demerran. He needed to maintain his focus.

He danced around the rug. His enemies were now mere energy and his magic and his swords must counteract them.

Erella's voice was hoarse, but still she continued. She sang another song and Demerran leapt to meet its challenge.

Lauren held off Vodan for as long as she could, but it was not enough. Not enough. She wept with frustration.

Bowing her head, marshalling what little strength she had, she mind-enticed Vodan away from Demerran. Blood flowed through her body and her mind reeled with the force of her confrontation with her enemy. There was a rushing in her ears.

Then, she heard Demerran's triumphant cry.

"It is done. Concede, Arella! Concede, or die!"

"Never!" the witch-woman screamed. "I sing you the Song of Unmaking! I will —"

Lauren watched as Demerran held aloft his swords and then with one swift downward stroke thrust the sword tips into the rug, the blades disappearing to the hilt into the floor beneath.

About her the air crackled and the room wavered. Lauren saw veins of light creep across the rug, following the power lines woven into the design. The veins spread outwards, past the rug, traveling the length and breadth of the room, then racing up the walls, to engulf all, even the ceiling.

The marble began to dissolve and Erella screamed.

Vodan toppled forward, landing face first on the floor. His body twitched once and was still.

Lauren saw Erella lying on the rug, the light consuming her.

Demerran fell forward onto the rug and lay as if dead.

Weeping, Lauren crawled to him and cradled his head on her lap. "Don't die on me, Demerran. Don't you dare, you bastard!"

"I am not a bastard." He smiled weakly up at her.

Lauren bent over him and kissed him. "You've won," she said.

"Yes. The greatest prize any man may claim. Kiss me again, beloved!"

As her lips found his, about them the world shivered out of existence. First there was the white room, then they spun in a void. The cold and the darkness was so complete that it stilled the heart and took away the breath.

Numbly, she felt strong arms about her and she clung to that strength... A mouth fastened over hers

and warmth flowed into her and life. Light seared her from inside out.

It was over and Lauren closed her eyes.

* * * *

She awoke to the chirping of birds and the raucous squall of a cockatoo.

"What—?" She flung herself up in the bed. Her bed.

Then she burst into tears. She was home, in her bed. Alone. There was no tattered rug before the fireplace.

Where was Demerran? Of course, he had left her; he had won back his power and his Princedom...what use did he have for her now?

She hugged her arms around her body. But worse...a hundred times worse was the creeping thought that it had all been a dream.

A memory she could savor, but a hallucination...to re-live over and over the ecstasy contained in a hallucination?—that was a path she dared not tread. She turned her face into the pillow too sad, too hurt to cry.

"It's time for me to wake up."

"You are awake, darling. See. Turn around. It is over."

Lauren rolled, sat upright and stared. Demerran stood at the doorway, the silk dressing-gown hanging askew around his body. He held a tray containing two glasses of juice and a plate of cheese and fruit.

He padded barefoot across the floor and placed the

tray beside her. He climbed onto the bed, sitting opposite her.

"Am I dreaming?" she whispered.

"This is reality, Lauren-beloved."

"But...but you're here."

He smiled and inclined his head so he could study her. "Where else would I be?"

"You're a Prince. You won back your power and...everything."

"I won you. That's all I want."

"Don't be ridiculous."

He sighed. "Do you always awaken in such a contrary mood? That does not bode well for me in the years ahead."

"What?"

Demerran leant back on the bed, propped up on an elbow. His hair fanned out over his body. Lauren felt her pulse rate increase, and it was suddenly hot in the room, where moments before it had been chill.

"What are you doing here, with me?" Lauren said, shocked at the hoarseness of her voice.

"I rather thought you wanted me here. Heart to Heart, as I recall you said when you offered me your blood and your tears."

"That was just magic."

"There is nothing *just* about magic, Lauren, and especially the kind you offered to me."

"To win the battle."

"Yes, but also when it is offered by a woman to a man, do you know what that means?"

"No."

"It is a love proposition." He reached out and took

her hand. "I do love you, Lauren, from the moment I awoke in this place and saw you. Even when you tortured me with that rug-beater..." He laughed.

"You don't love me. How can you? You...you're a Prince, an alien, a wizard – god knows what else."

"I may have my power, but it is a different kind of magic. I am *Prince* Demerran no longer! I renounced my rank when I left my world. Let those remaining Houses fight over my lands and title. I have no need of anything but you."

"No," Lauren said.

He quirked his brow. "No?"

Lauren blushed. "You can't."

"I can." He pushed aside the tray and crawled to her, leaning over her, gazing down at her. What she saw in his eyes took her breath away.

"You love me?" she whispered.

"Oh yes."

She put a hand to his cheek and he turned his head to kiss her palm.

"But won't you get bored here. I mean, there's nothing much to do."

"Except love you."

"That won't keep you occupied for long."

He grinned. "You underestimate your allure, Lauren-beloved. Besides, this world has much need of magic."

"You can say that again."

"This world has much need of magic."

She laughed.

"You are teasing me again? I like to be teased." His heated gaze traveled her length. "There is much I can

teach you and others...I shall weave other rugs and send them forth and they will be found by those who can use them. But the one we shall weave together...then, Lauren-beloved, *then* you will truly see what magic there is between a man and his woman. I will show you *schahor*, Lauren—the sex-magic will take us to places never before experienced. I know the depth of your passion and combined with *schahor*..." Demerran rolled his eyes. "We are going to fly!"

"I love you, Demerran. I never thought I would find a man I could love. But, I do you. And it hurts so much!"

"Ah," he said, laughing. "The sweetest pain there is. Let me fuck you. I can now. I can find release with you. Let me."

"Oh, yes."

"You should say, please." He nipped her lip.

"Please, you insufferable, arrogant, proud..."

He bent his head to her nipple and coaxed it erect, biting it, then licking it, then sucking it. He moved over to the other breast and administered to it also.

Lower, his mouth moved, his silk hair trailing over her skin. His tongue found her belly button and he explored its boundaries before embarking downwards. He found her curls and tugged at them with his teeth. Lower, he parted her flesh and dipped into her with tongue and lips and teeth.

She moaned, writhing from side to side on the bed. He held her hard, his fingers splayed over her thighs.

He came to kneel between her legs and spread her wide as he lowered down onto her. His penis tip

scrolled over her cleft, teasing and caressing her flesh-folds. He found her pussy and she reared up to meet him.

"No," he said, pushing her back against the bed. "Patience. I want this to be special."

"It will be."

"No," he said. "*Special*."

"Wait," Lauren said.

"*Wait?*" he demanded.

"I need to know how we got here; I thought we were dying after the battle...I just need you to explain that and then you can do what you want."

"Truly? *Anything* I want?"

"Ah...yes, anything."

"Very well. With such a promise, how can I refuse? The energy lines in the rug were collapsing, but I managed to divert my power back through the pathways to this world. We escaped the destruction... You slept for two days; I feared you had succumbed to Erella's Song of Unmaking..." Tears flooded his eyes.

"What song?"

"She began it, Lauren, that vile song that no man or woman should ever wield...a spell that can unmake time, life, the universe...the knowledge of it died with her. Now," he said, leaning forward. "I have explained all that I intend, and now, Lauren-beloved, you did say I could do anything to you...."

His penis rubbed, tickled, touched her pussy and retreated. He kissed her mouth, her cheek, her ears, her neck, sucking, biting, kissing each place alternatively.

"I will teach you another way to dance, beloved," he said, raising her arms above her head, lacing his fingers with hers. "A dance like no other." He lowered his mouth as he lowered his body.

He entered her with an agonizingly slow gentleness until he filled her completely, resting deep within her. "Lauren-beloved, you surround me with your warmth, I will never be cold again."

"Love me," Lauren begged. "Please. I can't stand it. Move."

"Like this?" He lifted to her entrance and returned to her depth and stilled.

"Mmmm."

"Or do you prefer this?" He shifted his hips and entered her at a different angle and depth.

He repeated the motion and as he lifted away from her, she swept up to meet him with one thrust of her hips. He embedded deep within her and she gasped at the totality of his possession.

Then he moved against her, slowly, gently, then hard and fast, repeating and alternating his movements. She matched his pace.

Breath to breath; heart to heart. She touched him, held him, controlled him until all control gave way and there was nothing left but the passion. Lights swirled around her, through her, warming, igniting. This, his magic, he gave her, as she gave him her own magic.

He paused and shivered and she opened her eyes to gaze up at him.

"Why are you stopping? You haven't come yet."

"Come?" he frowned. "Ah...Now I understand. I

will *come* in my own good time. My kind have a certain pride, Lauren. We hold ourselves in check. The essence is given and received not often. It is to be savored."

"I'll savor it, I promise. Forget about pride, Demerran."

"Pride is my birthright, beloved."

She slapped his buttock and he yelped. "Demerran, if you talk like that, I'll slap you."

"Pride!" he said. "Pride!"

She slapped him a dozen times and each time he laughed and spoke of pride.

"Demerran, please. No more games. Love me. Do it. Please." She curled her fingers into his hair. She kissed him and he smiled.

He turned her face down in the bed and raised her to her knees. He bent over her and cradled her breasts in his palms, before his hands trailed over her hips, to touch her cleft from behind. He tickled her, pressing a finger to her sacred meridian point.

"Demerrrrrran!"

In answer he plunged into her, twisting his hips, finding more depth, filling her to his length and width.

His essence spilled into her and he cried out, shivering as she screamed her release. Exhausted, they collapsed onto the bed, his leg thrown across the back of her thighs.

Demerran nudged her ear with his tongue. "I would wait another thousand years to have that sensation...I have never known its like."

"A thousand years?" Lauren demanded. "I don't

think so. Maybe you can wait that long, but a thousand seconds and I want you again."

He laughed. "Are you always so demanding?"

"When I want something bad enough."

"And do you want me?"

"You want me to tell you? Or show you?"

"Both," he said. "I like to hear my woman say how much she wants me, loves me."

"That's pride for you."

"Absolutely and always. Pride and Love: two faces of the same coin, beloved, I thought you would understand that by now!"

"You'll have to explain it to me."

"I rather think I'll show you."

"Like this?" she asked, grasping his erection.

"No," he said, swatting her hand away. "Like this." He thrust into her body and there were no more games, but a deeper need drove them to a deeper understanding of pride's passion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Astrid has been writing since she was five years old and even then her stories were of the “fantastic”: aliens, spaceships, knights on magical quests. Astrid is an award-winning, best-selling author whose works encompass many genres and many formats (traditional print, electronic and POD). Active in s.f. fandom, she has organized s.f./fantasy conventions, edited over 100 fanzines, and run several fantasy ‘fan’ groups. When not writing, Astrid works in her two and a half acre ‘garden’ in rural South Australia. She is currently working on more erotic stories, a mainstream fantasy novel of ‘epic proportions’, has been offered a new contract by Zumaya for her best-selling book ‘Crystal Dreams’ and is contracted to edit an anthology ‘The Fabled Towers’ featuring stories about the Arthurian myth.