

# The Lord's Daughter



Brenna  
Lyons

# *The Lord's Daughter*

**A short story in the Night Warriors series  
By Brenna Lyons**

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Dedicated to...

*Second chances...everyone should have at least  
one in life.*

*Stephanie dragged the amulet off, pausing in indecision. She'd left her purse at the table with Val. Where could she hide it that Jacob wouldn't feel or see it while they...*

Who knew something so simple could be such a major problem? She pulled off her sweater and snagged the clasp on the inside threads then folded it. She took a deep breath and headed back into the bedroom.

Jacob looked up from the bedside, panning his eyes over her as if he wanted to devour her, bare-chested, barefoot and highly aroused. She put the sweater down on the dresser and ambled toward him. *One night*, she reminded herself.

## *Glossary of Warrior Terms:*

- Beast** Beasts are what humans erroneously refer to as vampires. The stories humans tell are obviously not correct, but you can't expect a human to get everything right.
- Blutjagd** The "blood hunt." Warriors crave battle with the beasts, as the beasts crave blood. Warriors are tied to beasts in that they sense many of the beasts' special powers. A Warrior can feel the use of coercion, feeding, and other controls of humans. They also feel other Warriors engaged in Blutjagd, the death of beasts and Warriors in their range, and the presence of nearby beasts who are not ghosted.
- Elder** One of the original beasts, the stone stealers who were damned for their crimes against the stone and the Warriors. The elders are gifted with powers other beasts are not, including the ability to reproduce with a *Blutjagdfrau*, the ability to turn other beasts, and the inability to be killed by anyone but a Warrior.
- Ende Spiel** The point in printing when a Warrior must either seal printing or go insane. A Warrior who feels printing may not progress should break printing long before this point.
- Ghosting** A talent that both beasts and Cursed Warriors learn to harness. Ghosting can hide the physical form of Cursed Warriors or beasts and all they hold or carry from each other and humans. In a lesser strength, it can "blur" the image of the user so that humans do not note the passage but still see a person there, which avoids accidental collisions.

Even a ghosted beast cannot hide uses of power that a Warrior can track.

### **Printing**

Like imprinting, a Warrior becomes tied to his mate for life. He cannot choose another if she is lost, cannot be unfaithful while she lives, and cannot ever divorce or otherwise dissolve the union. A printed Warrior is the most stable of men unless his mate or children are endangered or lost. Then, he will suffer the printing madness and may have to be killed by his house. Likewise, a Warrior who breaks printing, even early printing, will suffer for it. A Warrior who breaks printing too close to Ende Spiel will face the madness.

### **Veriel**

The mad elder. The destroyer of lives. The mad deceiver, who led the traitors and freed the elders from the stone. The most hated and hunted of all the beasts. Fixated on one woman, he would destroy the world to own her. Or... At least, that's what the stories say of him.

### **Warriors**

Also called Cursed Warriors or Sons of the Stone. The Warriors were an ancient race of protectors who spawned the beasts and now are driven to hunt their former brothers to extinction.





May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Jacob Armen took a drink of his beer, panning his eyes over the club. He scowled. Why was he here? Did he really think he was going to find what he was looking for in a bar?

*No. But, I will find what I need – a way to stay sane for a few more weeks.*

Like all Warriors, Jacob required sexual release on a regular basis. Unlike most Warriors, he'd tired of simple release early in life; at only twenty-seven, he was tired of one night stands and blade chasers.

What he wanted was a wife, family, someone he could call 'home' when he returned from the hunt. What he needed was his 'fix,' just a little something to tide him over until he found what he really wanted.

*Not all junkies love the drug, he mused. Some loathe it as much as I do.*

So, who would it be, tonight? What woman would save his sanity? Would she be blonde? A red-head? Or maybe— Jacob smiled and downed the last mouthful of his beer in a gulp.

"That one," he breathed. He scanned the woman at

a table ringing the dance floor in hunger stronger than he'd felt in months. She had straight, black hair that curved at her shoulders and half covered her left eye, making her appear mysterious, giving her the appearance of a movie spy.

He nodded and started across the room to her. If she was interested, it was going to be a brunette tonight – that brunette.

\* \* \*

Stephanie Briony laughed heartily, setting her empty glass on the table. “Val, you are incorrigible,” she complained.

Her roommate tossed her short, auburn curls, playing the party girl as she did so well. “Oh, come on, will you? This place is a meat market. Relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I am relaxed.”

She glanced around, trying to push back her unease. She didn't like going out in Armen range. Though there was no way they could know who she was with her amulet hidden under her sweater, she secretly feared that one of them would recognize her somehow.

Stephanie squared her shoulders in irritation. She had autonomy. There was no reason not to pick up any guy she wanted for the night. She'd done it before – *in Hunter range*.

*But what then?* She pushed her glass along the table with two fingers. Could she stand another one night

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stand? Worse, could her father overcome his Warrior nature and allow her to marry without causing a scene? Even if he did, how would she explain the eccentricities of her family to a human man?

There was no doubt that she'd have to marry a human - if she married. A Warrior was out of the question. If she slipped up and exposed her family somehow, the results would be disastrous.

"Yeah," Val chided her. "I can see how relaxed you are. I just don't get you. You are a completely different person when you're back home."

She opened her mouth to make yet another apology for how tense she was when Val dragged her out to clubs, but a rough, male voice interrupted her.

"Care for a dance?"

She glanced up at the speaker and froze. *Gods, no!* It was undeniably a Warrior, most likely an Armen, though she'd never been permitted to meet Warriors outside her own house, so she couldn't be certain.

"Care for a dance?" he repeated, his hand extended to her.

"Mmm," Val purred. "Just your type."

Stephanie elbowed her, her heart pounding. She knew she should simply turn him down and clear out, but the words stuck in her throat.

Never one to take a hint, Val continued, "You know, it's spooky how much he looks -"

Stephanie kicked her then was off the stool before her roommate could say 'ouch.' She grasped the Warrior's hand, turning him toward the dance floor. "Dance? Sure," she stammered.

*Gods, what am I doing?* It was a senseless question. She had to get him away from Val. Two more seconds, and she would have mentioned Stephanie's cousins or worse, the fact that he could pass for Joel's older brother - by name.

*One dance*, she soothed herself. She'd dance with the Armen once then get out of Dodge as fast as she could. She'd rent a car and call Geoff's cell phone from the road if she had to.

She'd barely noted that the song was a slow one before he had her held lightly to his body, his hands on her hips. Stephanie hesitated then placed her hands on his shoulders, her eyes darting around the room.

"Jacob," he breathed.

She looked at him, trying to ignore the response of her body when she met his eyes. It was too bad that he felt so right, because this particular encounter wasn't going any further. "What?" she asked, reminding herself that he'd said something a moment earlier.

"My name... It's Jacob Armen."

She nodded, feigning ignorance of his hope for her name in return. The less information he had, the better.

"And you?" he hinted.

She hesitated. If she refused to tell him anything, he'd get suspicious. "Stephanie," she conceded.

Jacob smiled a truly devastating smile, and she swallowed hard. He pulled her closer, his body moving against hers, a positively sinful promise of

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what he intended.

Stephanie closed her eyes, trying to ground herself. It didn't work. Jacob's hands caressed her back, his breath pulsing hot and fast against her temple. She laid her cheek to his chest, dizzy in her responses, arguing that it was just the drink she'd downed too quickly. She gasped as his cock hardened, the gyrations of his hips stroking his pelvis against hers again and again.

The song ended, and they held to each other in the silence before the next started, their breathing ragged. Stephanie steeled herself to rebuff him, though being in his arms fired her under-indulged libido into a frenzy.

"Come home with me," he requested.

She opened her eyes, and for the second time in the space of five minutes, words stuck in her throat. *Dearest gods! What else could go wrong?*

Joel and Geoff weren't supposed to escort her home until tomorrow, yet there they were, standing at the side door, looking for her. Stephanie turned, guiding Jacob with her, gliding with the music as if she were still dancing, her mind spinning.

If she didn't get Jacob out of here, he'd see her cousins. There would be questions - what a Hunter-protected woman had been doing in Armen range on and off for the last two years without notifying the Armens about it, why it took two of Hunter's best Warriors to escort her home to their range, and why she had a lord's amulet.

"Stephanie? I asked -"

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“Yes,” she decided. She had to get him out of there before Val tried to introduce them to Jacob.

He stepped back, touching her cheek and smiling again. Her heart stuttered at that. What was she doing? Was she crazy to chance this?

She took stock of his body as he guided her toward the front door. Who was she kidding? She wanted him. Protecting her father was just a fortuitous circumstance. She had autonomy. Why shouldn't she have sex with Jacob and walk away?

He was a Warrior picking up a woman in a barroom. He wanted release. The night was all he was looking for. Since her schooling was complete, the night was something she could give him without fear of running into him again.

\* \* \*

Geoff wrapped his arms around Val and laid a playful kiss on her cheek, thankful that she wasn't pursuing some other man for the evening. “Well, if it isn't Little Red Riding Hood,” he teased. He was certainly the wolf that wanted to eat her up – until she screamed for more.

“Ooooh, he's early. Dare I hope you showed up tonight to ravish me?”

“Maybe.” His cock rose at the invitation. In truth, that was precisely why he'd insisted they come a night early. He'd slept with Val several times in the last year, and he'd make it a permanent arrangement if she gave any indication at all that she was the

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serious sort.

Joel leaned his crossed arms on the tabletop. "Maybe she wants to trade up," he suggested, raising an eyebrow at Geoff in challenge.

Val leaned back into his chest, licking her lip as she presented her cleavage for his perusal. "Maybe she wants to be a Val sandwich on Hunter."

Geoff shot her a look of disbelief, feeling the slight burn of *Blutjagd* at the idea of sharing her with his cousin, then grinned at her glittering eyes. "Maybe I should change your mind."

"Maybe you should."

Joel groaned. "I think I need a shot of Bourbon - or maybe insulin. Where's Trouble?"

Val chuckled. "Dancing." She knelt up on the bar stool, using Geoff's shoulder for balance, peering over the crowd. Her smile disappeared.

Joel tensed. "What is it?" he asked urgently.

"She was there just a minute ago." She whipped her head around, nearly losing her balance as she started searching the other half of the room. "They were right there when you walked in. She can't have left. Her purse is still here."

"They?" Geoff asked, worry gnawing at his gut.

"Yeah. He..." She met his eyes then looked at Joel, hesitating as if something of note just occurred to her.

"What is it?" Joel asked again.

"He... Well, he looked so much like you both, I mistook him for Joel at first."

Geoff rubbed at his forehead, hiding a grimace with the sleeve of his long black leather jacket. *An*

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*Armen! Gods alive! What do we do now?*

\* \* \*

Jacob stopped the car outside a row house and turned to her. "Home sweet home," he offered in a voice rough in arousal.

Stephanie nodded, searching for signs of habitation and praying none of the other Armenians were in residence. "Nice house."

"I try to spend a few weeks here once in a while. It's nice to get away from it all when you have the chance."

The tightness around her heart eased. There weren't any other Warriors in the house. "Yes. It is."

He got out of the car and came around to her side, opening the door and offering Stephanie his hand. She took it without hesitation, managing an honest smile.

*Just one night*, she reasoned, stepping into the dimly lit foyer. Even she deserved a mad adventure once in her life.

Jacob turned, crowding her against the wall. "I've wanted to do this since the first time you spoke to me."

She didn't question what he meant. His mouth closed on hers, hungry, full of promise as the dance had been. Stephanie wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into him, groaning as her amulet shifted against her chest. That was another problem to be dealt with. If only she hadn't left her purse behind,



she would have some way of hiding the amulet; but if she could have returned to the table for it, she wouldn't be here to worry about it.

"Do you need anything?" he asked, the unspoken comment that he wanted no interruptions echoing in his tone.

"Yes!" She calmed herself. "Bathroom?" She felt her cheeks heat.

He smiled. "Sure. This way." He led her to a master bedroom and motioned to what was undoubtedly the attached bath.

She retreated inside and shut the door, sighing in relief. Stephanie dragged the amulet off, pausing in indecision. She'd left her purse at the table with Val. Where could she hide it that Jacob wouldn't feel or see it while they...

Who knew something so simple could be such a major problem? She pulled off her sweater and snagged the clasp on the inside threads then folded it. She took a deep breath and headed back into the bedroom.

Jacob looked up from the bedside, panning his eyes over her as if he wanted to devour her, bare-chested, barefoot and highly aroused. She put the sweater down on the dresser and ambled toward him. *One night*, she reminded herself.

\* \* \*

*Gods, she is beautiful.* Stephanie's hips swayed enticingly as she made her way to the bed. Her

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nearly-black hair swung around her shoulders and followed the line of her jaw.

Jacob forced himself to breathe. What was it about her that made his heart ache? Was it her hesitancy? Her nervousness? Stephanie had a vulnerable quality about her that made him want to hold her - or maybe he was looking for something that wasn't there in hopes that he'd find a mate. If so, he was further gone than was prudent.

No. He was sane. He was certain of that. There was something in Stephanie that begged to be soothed and protected, little things that she seemed unconscious of like the way she sank into him even when he didn't pull her there. Armens tended toward women in need of protection. *They also fall for them quickly*, he mused.

She ran her fingertips along the line of his shoulder, the silk of her camisole teasing at his ribs. He kissed her, turning and pulling her to the bed over him. She reached back and flipped her heeled sandals to the floor.

Jacob took the opportunity to slide his hands under the camisole, edging it upward. Stephanie met his eyes, unfastening her jeans then raising her arms and ducking out of the cami as he peeled it away and tossed it over his shoulder.

She stared at him, seemingly uncertain. He eased her over him, cupping her cheeks and lacing his fingertips behind her head, feathering kisses over her mouth. Her eyes closed, and her hands pulled at the fastener on his jeans.

He pulled a condom from the front pocket as she

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pushed them away. He would prefer not to wear one, but he'd sensed her downstairs and confirmed that she was high cycle. By the laws of sanction, a Warrior never created life with a woman who wasn't sealed as his mate - and never without her permission. His honor and his life made using the condom necessary.

He looked up as she yanked the jeans over his feet and dropped them to the floor. Stephanie stood there a moment, scanning his body and licking her lips.

"Come back to bed," he grumbled.

She knelt on the bed, peeling her jeans back. Jacob took the fabric in his hands and pulled them down to her knees. Her eyes closed and she sank to her back. He rose up over her, laying kisses down her body as he removed the last of her clothing. She shivered, laying a hand over her stomach.

"Are you sure?" he asked, trying to gauge her attack of nerves.

"Yes." Her voice was soft and wistful.

Jacob leaned over her, easing her thighs apart and laying a kiss at the pulse point a hand's width below her core. She sighed, running her fingers through his hair. He trailed upward with the tip of his tongue, and she groaned, her hand fisting. He traced the line of her labia then circled her clit.

"My gods," she pleaded, panting as he sucked at her clit.

He flicked it with his tongue, and she muttered a curse in German. Jacob moved lower, parting her labia as he tore open the packet. He turned slightly and rolled the condom on, knowing it wouldn't take

much to push her over.

"Jacob," she begged. Another muttered phrase followed that sounded Italian.

He played at her more urgently, reining in his need as her breath started coming in spasms.

"Now. Please now."

That was his breaking point. Jacob pushed up over her and slid in fully in a single stroke. Stephanie met his eyes, sucking in her breath. Her eyes fluttered shut and her back arched up, as sweet contractions gripped his length.

*Not yet*, he pleaded as his cock exploded in sensation and climax rolled like thunder from the base of his spine and his balls up the length. He cried out harshly at her scream of pleasure. She relaxed to the bed beneath him, looking stunned.

Jacob laid a kiss on her lower lip. "Don't leave yet," he requested.

Stephanie bit her lip. "My roommate," she stammered.

"Is a big girl." From the other woman's show, Jacob couldn't believe that she was alone at the club for long. "Please, stay for a while."

She seemed to consider something carefully then nodded. He smiled, relieved that she'd agreed.

\* \* \*

"Okay," Joel grumbled. "Jacob's here, and Stephanie is probably with him. What now?"

Geoff ground his teeth in frustration. *Of all the*

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*boneheaded moves Trouble has made over the years, this one takes the cake. What in the Christian hell is she thinking?* But, whatever it was, it was going to sound reasonable when she explained it. It always did. It wasn't enough to get her out of the trouble she was named for, but it was always rational from a particular point of view.

"Geoff?"

"Load all of her stuff in the car and leave me here. Meet me back here as soon as you're through."

"We're running."

"As soon as she's away from him." *Back to Hunter range before anything worse comes out of this.*

\* \* \*

Jacob refilled her wine glass, smiling at Stephanie's red-faced laughter.

"Then what did he do?" she managed through hitching breaths.

"Kord?" He sipped his wine, savoring the burn in his throat. "He told Jack to collect his sister before he throttled her. It's amazing that those two ever married."

She nearly choked on a mouthful of the red liquid. "Oh, gods! I can picture their faces."

"So, tell me about yourself." It was the one thing she seemed to be avoiding, though he had no idea why.

Stephanie sobered and swallowed another mouthful. "Not much to tell."

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"Where are you from?" She didn't have a definitive accent that would tell him.

She shrugged. "Around. We didn't keep much of a steady address while I was growing up."

"Dad was a drifter?" he guessed.

"No. Mother was a doctor."

Jacob raised an eyebrow in surprise. Doctors were typically sedentary types, building a practice and tending it painstakingly. "Really?"

She managed a weak smile. "Really."

"Brothers or sisters?"

She stared into her glass. "A half-sister, but we don't see each other often. You know the drill. She's older and has her own life."

"What about your father?"

She stared into the fire he'd built in the fireplace, sipping her drink again, her eyes sad. "I don't have one."

He winced. "Dead?"

"No. I - just don't have one. You know. The old blank line on the birth certificate. I think it might actually say father unknown or something. I never looked closely enough to find out."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It doesn't bother me much."

He took a calming breath. Stephanie wasn't much of a liar. It obviously bothered her a lot, but she didn't seem to want to talk about that. A change of subject was in order. "So - Where do you live?"

"On campus."

He searched her expression, wondering at how

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closed she suddenly was. "It's a big campus," he noted.

"I don't even know you, Jacob."

"I've been telling you about me for the last two hours, and we've made love twice so far."

Her skin flushed a deep rose, and she met his eyes. Jacob felt the breath being punched out of him by the stark hunger in her eyes.

\* \* \*

Stephanie set her wine glass aside, needing this connection with him one more time. She crawled across the quilt to him, taking his length in her mouth and closing her eyes to his groan of pleasure.

"Gods alive, you're trying to kill me," he accused.

She pushed him to the edge in a few dedicated strokes then knelt up and kissed him, grasping the condom he'd placed next to the wine bottle and ripping it open. His mouth came at hers more urgently as she rolled it down him.

He reached for her, but she smiled and turned away, dropping to her hands and knees. Jacob didn't question what she wanted. There were few words between them at moments like this; they didn't seem necessary.

His hands circled her hips then one eased down to stroke her clit. Stephanie moaned, pushing back on him, and he eased inside.

"Madre de Dios," she breathed.

Jacob chuckled then groaned as he set a slow, easy

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pace. "Just exactly how many languages do you speak?" he asked.

She swallowed hard, glad that he couldn't see her expression - what was surely pure panic. "Only three fluently. Besides English."

"Only?" He laughed heartily at that.

She winced. How many mistakes could she make in one night? "I know a few linguists who speak a dozen," she reasoned. *And grew up with Warriors who spoke between four and eight as a rule.*

She closed her eyes, trying to push away her fear of slipping and lose herself in this fantastic sex. As if Jacob agreed, he dropped the discussion and paid full attention to the subject at hand.

He murmured words in the ancient language of the Warriors, but they were words she didn't recognize. For some reason, the sound of them increased her pleasure. Stephanie found herself screaming his name, riding waves of delight to a second crest as his heat swirled against the latex between them.

Jacob cradled her to his body and pulled her to their sides, still embedded deep inside her, his arm under her head as a pillow. He laid a kiss on the back of her head, trailing his fingertips through the curls that covered her sex.

She shifted against the arm under her cheek, too tired and comfortable to do what needed done. *Just a few minutes, she assured herself. I'll leave in a few minutes.*

\* \* \*

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Stephanie came awake in a jolt of realization. Sunlight was streaming through the windows. Geoff and Joel were going to kill her for this.

She left the quilts on the floor quickly and quietly, looking to Jacob to assure herself that he was still sleeping. She pulled on her clothes, guiltily noting the sticky feeling of her thighs that announced her misdeeds.

She was nearly to the door, her sweater thrown over her arm and her shoes in hand, when he groaned. She didn't hesitate. She had to get away before he came fully awake. A grumbled curse followed, and she winced at the idea of a Warrior with a red-wine headache as bad as hers was. *His will be gone in an hour!*

"Stephanie, wait."

"I have to go," she replied brusquely, opening the bedroom door.

"You can't leave yet."

Her head pounded in terror. That was an order - an order he had no right to give. "I can't stay." She stepped through the door.

He moved behind her, and she hurried down the hall toward the stairs, praying he'd take the time to dress before he followed her.

"Stephanie, wait. This is important."

She glanced back at him, cursing aloud at the sweatpants he'd pulled on. Jeans would have taken longer. She started down the stairs.

"Damn it, I said wait." His hand closed around her

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wrist, pulling her to an abrupt stop.

Stephanie didn't look at him. The urge to scream the sanctions he was breaking at him in several languages was too strong. How would she explain knowing them in the first place?

"Now – I need to talk to you."

She nodded, swallowing hard and hoping that it was something mundane like an offer to drive her home that she would refuse kindly.

He sighed. "I don't want you to leave."

"I can't stay. I have a life – responsibilities." *Most notably the responsibility to protect my family. I'm only here for them. Liar!* She couldn't even utter the words in her mind and not call herself a hypocrite.

"Even if you have no intention of marrying me –"

She stared at him, and he winced, no doubt reading her horror at that idea clearly on her face. "I don't do marriage," she offered coolly, silencing the traitorous voice in her mind that was pleased he'd asked.

Jacob was a wonderful man: funny, tender, loving, exciting and great in bed. If he were human – or she wasn't what she was, she'd marry him in a heartbeat.

His face hardened, and he nodded curtly. "We still have to talk." His voice was strained.

"There is nothing to talk about."

"Yes, there is. We fell asleep after that last time – both of us. I was still inside you and –"

The blood rushing in her ears drowned out the rest. If he was concerned, she was high cycle. How dare he put her in this situation! She drew her fist

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back and punched him hard across the cheekbone, gratified when he released her arm to catch himself against the wall.

She turned and bolted for the door, knowing that punch wouldn't do more than stun him for a second. It wouldn't take him long to recover from his shock, and she had to be out the door and in public before that happened.

"Stephanie," he thundered as she pulled the door open.

"Don't come near me, you bastard," she shot back, slamming it between them. She turned to run, crashing into another broad chest. She snapped her eyes up, fearful that it was an Armen, then gasped in realization.

Geoff swept her to his back, drawing his weapon and planting it firmly in the lock. He hit the hilt solidly and snapped the tip off inside. Then he turned and dragged her to the car Joel had running on the other side of Jacob's Buick.

She scrambled into the back seat with her cousin at her heels, breathing a sigh of relief as they left Jacob Armen far behind.

\* \* \*

It was a full minute before Jacob recovered from her vehement exit enough to follow her to the door. The delay didn't worry him. She was a human on foot, and he was a Night Warrior. She couldn't possibly outrun him.

The snap of metal as he reached the door startled him, and the fact that the lock wouldn't disengage confirmed his worst fears. He sprinted to the living room window, intent on going through it if he had to, then stopped in shock.

A man in black had Stephanie by the arm, hustling her into a car driven by another. He wrenched the back door open, and she ducked inside with the man behind her. Before Jacob had recovered his senses and forced himself to motion, the car was gone.

He laid his head against the glass, his mind in a sick swirl. What in the Christian hell was this? Who were these men and what did they have to do with Stephanie? She went with them without a fuss when she'd proven only moments earlier that she could defend herself.

A niggling of unease ate at him. The men had looked roughly like Warriors, but they couldn't be. If they had been—

No. She hadn't been wearing an amulet, and no protected from other ranges were reported in Armen. Even if there was a slip-up, and a protected was here...

Without an amulet? He winced. Why would a protected risk that? Why would she feel the need to hide that she was protected from a Warrior? No. No protected would risk it, and no Warrior would have behaved as the two men had.

So, where did that leave him? Did she have a boyfriend? After her reaction, Jacob was certain she didn't have a husband.

He sighed, pushing away from the window and ambling back upstairs. No matter who they were to her, the men were immaterial. Jacob had a duty to find her. He'd screwed up in the most monumental way possible. He had to find her and –

*What do I do then? Good gods! Grandfather is going to kill me for this.*

*Where do I start?* Jacob sat on the quilts he'd shared with Stephanie, replaying their conversations in his mind. She'd said maddeningly little about herself. He didn't even have a full name to go on. She lived on campus. It was the best lead he had – nearly the only lead he had.

He started collecting up the glasses and quilts, planning his pursuit. What in Ani's name was he supposed to do if she thought he was a crackpot? He had a duty to protect and train his progeny.

Jacob stilled at the bed, spying an amulet kicked under the edge of the dresser. He sighed, crossing the room and scooping it up. It was no doubt one of Tommy's. The boy lost at least three amulets a year. He tossed the amulet up in the air and caught it with a smile, envisioning Tim's scowl when Jacob returned his son's amulet to him – again.

His smile disappeared, and he stared at the seal in disbelief then the dresser. Her sweater! She'd removed it in the bathroom and put it on the dresser before she came to bed.

Jacob fisted his hand around the amulet. So, Stephanie *was* protected. She'd taken off her amulet and played blade chaser. Well, that was just fine. If

she knew about the Warriors, his reasons for finding her would come as no surprise.

He grumbled a curse, remembering the men who drove her away. Jacob took the stairs down and went out the back door, speeding around the end of the block, two houses down, and to the front door. He pulled at the piece of metal broken off in the lock, his jaw tightening in fury as the tip of a sacred weapon slid free.

“What are they doing? Are they insane?”

Jacob looked at the amulet again, wondering which of the Lord Hunter’s nephews he had to thank for this damage. His eyes widened. *A lord’s amulet!* Who was Stephanie that she had a lord’s amulet?

\* \* \*

“Are you insane?” Geoff thundered.

Stephanie rubbed at her forehead, wincing in pain.

“Hangover?” he inquired.

“If you must know, yes. Between the mixed drinks with Val and the wine...and...” She groaned, looking ill.

“Good,” he snapped at her. *Stupidity should be painful.* “You know that doesn’t excuse you.”

“Excuse me? If you hadn’t shown up at the club last night – a *day* early, I could have turned him down and made a quick exit and run for the border. But, no! I couldn’t let him see the two of you.” She winced again, as if her own shouting was making her as ill as his was.

Geoff raised an eyebrow, his face burning in rising impatience. "Are you saying you slept with him to save—"

"No! Well...partly, I guess."

"Stephanie..."

"Well, if I wasn't who I am, I wouldn't have balked at the idea, but I only went for it—"

"Stephanie!"

She paled and fished for her purse, pulling her sunglasses out and settling them on her face. "Don't do that. Okay?"

"Did it ever occur to you that we could have lied our way out?"

She moved her mouth as if to speak then shook her head, dumbstruck.

"We've been lying for twenty-five years. What's new? We could have claimed you were dating Joel or something. You could have pulled that off for five minutes, couldn't you?"

Stephanie laid her head back. "Yeah," she admitted. "I hadn't considered that."

"You never consider the possibilities, Trouble," he grumbled.

"But, Val! I danced with him, because Val almost said—"

"Do you think I couldn't have kept Val busy?" he challenged.

She sighed. "You could," she admitted.

Joel snickered. "Always knew we called you 'Trouble' for a reason. Wonder what your father will say about this one."

Stephanie looked at the back of his head in undisguised horror. "No. Don't make him worry, Joel. Just stop off somewhere so I can get a shower and change. It's over. Okay?"

"As soon as we clear Armen range," he promised.

Geoff cleared his throat. "What was that scene about when you were leaving?" He wasn't promising anything in regards to Corwyn until he had an answer on that.

She stared at the hands clutched in her sweater. "He asked me to marry him, and I refused." She peeked up at him through the hair hanging over her eyes and over the rims of her sunglasses.

"Oh, gods," he pleaded.

"I refused him," she repeated. "The sanctions say –"

"I know what they say," he snapped. He glared at her, his eyes settling on her camisole. "Put on your amulet, damn it!"

She sighed and unfolded her sweater into her lap, her brow furrowing as she ran her hands over the inside once - then again, even turning the sleeves inside out. Stephanie didn't meet his eyes. She paled.

"I think - I think I need to be sick," she managed weakly.

Joel groaned. "You lost it, didn't you? At Armen's house?"

"More likely on the way to the car," she suggested hopefully.

Geoff pulled an amulet from his pocket and shoved it at her. "Only if your luck has changed, Trouble."

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She looked at him with tears in her eyes, scooping the amulet over her shoulders.

He sighed. All her life, it had been like this. Where every other Warrior daughter was indulged completely, Stephanie's life had been nothing short of regimental. She was always watched. Losing her amulet was punished harshly. Hiding from her guards was punished even more severely. With Veriel's threat hanging over her during her childhood, it had to be that way.

Worse, she was hidden – always hidden away like some dirty secret. When Warriors called to see Corwyn, Laura and Stephanie had been sent away. When Warriors showed up unexpectedly, they would be snuck out a back door. In order for Stephanie to have a feminine room, Corwyn had to buy a new house to share with his second wife and daughter, one the other houses didn't know about.

His duty demanded that Geoff tell Corwyn all of this, but one look at Stephanie was all he needed to convince him that he couldn't do this to her again. She wasn't a Warrior. She was a freed female of his house. Veriel was dead, and the only reason for this treatment was to protect the family name. His honor wouldn't allow Geoff to let her suffer alone for the family. Not this time. If he could help it, she'd never suffer for no better reason than their honor again.

"Come here," he conceded, letting her cry into his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I never intended –"  
"I know."

Corwyn once said that being found stole Jayde's life and freedom. In truth, it did far worse things to Stephanie than it ever had to Jayde. It brought the eyes of the Warrior world down on Hunter range, effectively stealing her family from her when she needed them most.

It wasn't fair that Stephanie had to shoulder the responsibility for hiding her own birth. "I know," he repeated.

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Jacob rubbed his eyes, staring at the computer screen in relief. After five days of intensive searching, he'd finally found her. Who knew there could be so many Stephanies, Stefanis, Stefanys and any other number of variants of the spelling at one university. He'd finally given up and done a blanket search for any names containing Steph or Stef, but that had netted him every Stephen and Stefano at the college. He had even had to cross a George Stefani off of his list.

It had been painstaking. He'd whittled the printouts down by sex and then age. Finally, he'd taken five hundred and sixty eight names to the individual computer files, pulling them up and eliminating them one by one. With no clue as to the spelling of her name, he'd made the poor choice of taking them in alphabetical order starting with the Stefanis, solidified by the fact that most of the names fell in the Stef spellings. As a result, Stephanie Briony had been number three hundred and ninety two on

the list.

There she was, her black hair half-covering her left eye as he remembered it, laughing into the camera, wearing a skin-tight baby t. His heart ached. Why did she have to look so good?

He printed out the file with a sigh. It was a given that Stephanie wouldn't be happy to see him again, but that was immaterial. He had a duty to perform, a duty she was no doubt well aware of if she had a lord's amulet.

Jacob just hoped the wonder twins stayed away long enough for him to do that duty. In his endless replays of every moment with Stephanie, her would-be rescuers had become all too clear to him.

Stephanie's friend had pronounced him just her type, and she'd elbowed her. Then she'd commented that it was spooky how much he looked like someone; Stephanie had dragged him off before she could say who. There was only one North American Warrior who could be mistaken for Jacob... He glared at the amulet. And, he was a Hunter.

Joel Hunter and his cousin Geoff were laughingly called 'the wonder twins.' Exceptional Warriors in their own right, the duo were who Corwyn Lord Hunter sent in as a team when there was extreme trouble.

That word seemed coined for Stephanie - trouble! *Then why do I still want her? Why do I believe she's vulnerable and in need of protection?*

*She has protection*, he argued with himself. A lord's amulet and the wonder twins were protection enough

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for even young Erin König.

“Who are you, Stephanie Briony?”

An unwelcome thought lodged in his mind, making his gut twist uncomfortably. What if she was involved with one of the wonder twins? What if Stephanie had been playing him all along – getting a taste of a new Warrior cock?

He fisted her amulet, digging every line into his palm. Baiting a Warrior wasn't a smart move – not if she wanted to keep her protection for long.

He sighed, pushing away his uncertainties and pulling her school files from the printer. The best thing to do was to learn all he could about her before he approached.

His eyes wandered the pages, noting an apartment she kept in Hunter range, her stats and grades. He stopped in confusion when he reached her emergency contact information.

“Laura Briony, mother.” The address was a house in Denver in the same area as her apartment, but the phone number... It had been years since he'd had to check in at the Hunter manor when a track took him across the dividing line, but that phone number was definitely the manor line. The address wasn't one he knew of as a Hunter sanctuary, but the houses didn't share all their inner workings with the others. It could be one.

But the phone number... Why wouldn't her emergency contact phone be her mother's? If they were worried that Dr. Briony would be out of touch when Stephanie needed her... He shook his head. That

went beyond any sane definition of protection he'd ever heard of.

Jacob scowled at the information, more confused than ever. "Wonder what the Hunter finances would show?" he mused. His grandfather would surely disapprove of a hack into another house, but this wasn't a typical inquiry.

Four hours later, he was more confused than ever. The Hunter accounts had paid for Stephanie's condo and her mother's house. Monthly bills seemed to be paid from elsewhere - perhaps from Laura and Stephanie's own earnings, though it was hard to track with so many cabins and sanctuaries.

He set down the file, staring at the amulet warily. "Who are you, Stephanie Briony?"

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"And there she is." Jacob smiled at the sight of Stephanie walking out the side door of the city offices and toward her car. From his place in the alley - and ghosted, she couldn't possibly see him.

Without warning, Geoff eased from behind a van and grasped her by the arm. She swung around, pulling a small dagger from a sheath behind her, but the Warrior's hand moved from her arm to the opposite wrist in the blink of an eye - in roughly the time it took Jacob to tense to kill him if he harmed her.

Geoff laughed heartily, and she reached her now-free hand up to smack him aside the head. He

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released her, rubbing his skull in mock annoyance, and Stephanie sheathed the dagger again.

She kissed his cheek, winding both arms over his right shoulder and dropping her cheek to the pillow of her hands. Jacob fought for a decent breath, feeling as if he'd been gut shot with a sledge. By the time he recovered, they were moving toward him, arm in arm.

Joel charged across the parking lot with a battle whoop and a punch at the sky, swinging Stephanie around and planting a kiss on her cheek. He shot Geoff a look of challenge and tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of training equipment.

His cousin crossed his arms over his chest, his eyebrow raised in silent censure.

"Let me down," she complained, laughing.

"Only if you tell Geoff that you love me best," he vowed.

"Are you nuts?"

Jacob placed his hand on the wall, shaking his head in denial of what he was seeing.

Geoff cleared his throat. "I think the lady wants to trade up now," he suggested.

Stephanie aimed a kick for his chest that Geoff deflected.

"And that was for?" he inquired calmly.

"Trading up, you creep! I talked to Val and heard your idea of trading up."

Geoff looked horrified, and Jacob bit back a laugh at the unexpected treat of seeing him this way.

Joel howled in laughter. "Geoff's in the dog house

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now.”

Stephanie smacked him on the shoulder. “You’re not exactly off the hook, either,” she warned him.

Joel’s smile disappeared. “Aw, come on, Stephanie. You know the Hunter sandwich thing wasn’t my idea.”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t mine,” Geoff countered hotly.

Stephanie huffed in annoyance. “Let me down, and we’ll discuss who’s at fault over dinner. Your treat, Hunters.”

Jacob felt the need to be sick. He’d heard of blade chasers like this, but he hadn’t believed it. How could he have called Stephanie so wrong?

Joel settled her back on her feet, and both men hooked an arm around her hips.

Geoff smiled at her. “Back where you belong,” he sighed. “We missed you, Trouble.”

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Stephanie locked the door to her apartment behind her, groaning. It had been a long day, and a hot bath followed by bed was just the ticket. She dropped her backpack on the table in the front hall and ambled toward her bedroom, pulling her shirt from her jeans and peeling it off her body.

“So, the lady returns...”

She stopped with a gasp, pressing the shirt to her chest and looking toward the bed in disbelief. She

didn't bother to ask how Jacob found her. With Warriors, there were too many possibilities for tracking her to count. Her initial stunned indecision didn't last long. "How dare you —"

Jacob lifted his hand and opened it; her lost amulet unfurled and bounced back slightly before setting into a gentle swing at the end of its chain, looped around his index finger. "You lost something, Stephanie."

She didn't hesitate. She stormed across the room and ripped the amulet from his hand, stuffing it in her front pocket. "Thank you for returning it. Now, leave my home. If you come back, rest assured that I will report you to —"

"To Geoff or Joel? Tell me. Which one of the wonder twins is it that you care so much for?" His eyes were hard and dangerous.

Stephanie felt her cheeks heat. "To neither. You've seen my amulet. You know who I'll call, if you don't leave me alone."

"Ah, yes. The lord's amulet. Tell me... Why exactly would you have one of those?"

She swallowed around a dry spot in her throat. "My... My mother is a doctor. She has the lord's seal, because she's so trusted, and —"

"And, her protection extended to you?" He raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Corwyn is generous and kind," she countered hotly. "He chooses who he protects, and it's none of your business if he chooses to protect every child and spouse of every professional he —"



"But, he doesn't choose to. Why you? And, why the lord's seal?"

"That is something you need to take up with Corwyn – if you dare approach him and admit you've done this."

Jacob rose from the bed, towering over her. Stephanie grasped the phone receiver and reached for the autodial button to the manor with an outstretched finger. Before she connected, he cut through the cord with his sacred weapon then sheathed it again smoothly.

"You have to follow the sanctions," she reminded him, trying to calm the pounding of her heart.

"Yes, I do, and the sanctions say that I must be certain that any progeny of mine is under my protection and trained appropriately."

She fought back the automatic response that any child of hers would be well-protected and trained. That was something she could never admit to a Warrior outside her family. "Let me put your mind at ease, Jacob. My mother is a doctor. If I do conceive, I guarantee she will take care of that for you. You will have no duty to me."

He tensed, grasping at her shoulders as if he would hurt her. Stephanie dropped the receiver, reaching automatically for the dagger at her back. His hand closed over hers, stopping the slide and shoving the weapon back into the sheath. His eyes bored into her, and she shuddered. She'd pushed him too far. Warriors were biologically and psychologically committed to their children. Her threat had snapped

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him.

Jacob released her and turned to the door, striding away as she sagged to the wall. He stopped in the doorway, his breathing harsh. "Stephanie..."

"Yes?"

"I'll be back to check on that. Don't think I won't." He didn't move for a moment. "I'll be at the Governor's Inn - if you have anything to say to me. Anything at all."

Then he was gone, the front door slamming behind him.

She sank to the bed, running a shaking hand through her hair. "Great," she grumbled. "Just great."

What was she supposed to do now? If she went to her father, he'd end up dead when he revealed his connection to her. If she went to Geoff or Joel, most of the Hunter warriors would end up dead or judged. Her mother was her only choice.

\* \* \*

Geoff ground his teeth in fury, taking in the Warrior slouched against the medical building, a sour look on his face. How dare Jacob Armen stalk Stephanie in her own range! No wonder she'd been so edgy the last few days. She probably feared what Geoff would do if he knew about this, and she was right about that. She'd said 'no.' That should have ended his involvement.

Jacob turned to him when he was still two body

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lengths away, glaring at him. "Hunter," he growled.

"You are inviting judgment, Armen. I suggest you leave Hunter range before I haul you in."

"I have unfinished business here —"

"She turned down your offer of marriage. By the rules of sanction —"

"I have a duty," he snapped.

Geoff's stomach rebelled. "What are you saying?" he demanded.

"Let me guess. She hasn't told you." His face was set in a scowl, his voice cynical.

He fisted the hilt of his sacred weapon, fighting back the urge to play the role of judge. If there was judgment to be passed, it was Corwyn's place to pass it. "You took her unprotected at high cycle? Tell me you didn't, you bastard."

"Of course, I didn't!" He paced along the wall and back again, seemingly ready to snap mentally.

His breath eased, though the answer confused him. If he hadn't taken her unprotected... Or had he simply asked the wrong question? "Then what are you talking about?"

Jacob ran a hand through his hair, mussing it more instead of straightening it. "We were drinking and... It's no excuse. I know that. I screwed up." The words seemed to torture him.

"How?"

"I fell asleep still inside her. I don't know how much spilled — If I spilled inside her at all. I don't..."

Geoff grasped the wall, his legs uncertain beneath him.

"She felt so right, so comfortable, and it just happened. You must have some idea what I mean," he decided miserably.

"What?" Where had that come from?

"Oh, come on! I've analyzed what I've seen of you three so many times it makes me dizzy. You're the one she's sleeping with, aren't you? Joel is just taunting you about it like he does in training."

Geoff forced his mouth to shut, abruptly aware that he looked like an idiot.

Jacob laughed harshly, a half-mad sound. "She's not the marrying type, you know. She told me that. She's probably carrying my son, and she'd rather abort than consider being my mate."

Geoff looked to the building in sick horror; Laura would do that without question if Stephanie requested it. Stephanie wouldn't... But, he knew she would, just as she'd done nearly everything else she thought would protect Corwyn.

"Get out of my range, Armen."

"I have a duty—"

He grabbed the other Warrior by the throat, just a warning of what would come next if he dared utter another syllable about staying in Hunter. "Consider your duty done."

His face paled. "What are you saying? She hasn't—"

"I hope not. If she chooses not to abort, I'm raising this child as my son. Get used to the idea." Geoff didn't give him time to answer. He pushed Jacob away and stormed into the medical building and up

the three flights of stairs to Laura's office.

\* \* \*

"You did what?" Laura asked, her eyes wide.

Stephanie fought back tears. All those years of careful living, and she'd blown it. She hadn't even had the courage to go directly to her mother. She'd procrastinated two days, trying to figure out the best way to approach this. Now she was getting a lecture, when what she really needed was a solution.

"Oh, Mom! Please, don't lecture me. I screwed up. I know it."

Obviously realizing she'd already beaten herself up for this mess, her mother wrapped her arms around her, sighing. "Okay. Planning session."

She winced. That term sent a cold wave through her. It was usually preceded by some stunt of Stephanie's that called for emergency action on her father's part. Out of all of her options, getting Corwyn involved was the lowest on her list.

"If you have conceived, what do you plan to do about it?"

"I already told him I'd abort," she admitted.

Laura nodded. "Are you sure about this?"

"What other choice do I have? Do you know any Warrior that would willingly give up his child?"

"No," she agreed. "They aren't wired that way. You're right. This is probably the best course."

"Right. Then, I don't have a choice."

"Well— We better get moving. A blood test should

tell us definitively.”

“You can’t go in there,” the receptionist shouted.

Stephanie pushed to her feet, forcing herself not to bolt. Where would she run? “Oh, gods,” she pleaded. “He wouldn’t dare.”

But the flash of black coming around the opening door told her that Jacob would. She backed toward the wall, bumping past her mother as she retreated, swallowing a whimper of fear and blinking back tears that it had come to this.

Laura didn’t hesitate. She placed herself between them, pulling her amulet from under her smock, prepared to take on Jacob with her bare hands if it became necessary.

The coming Warrior wasn’t Jacob. Stephanie sobbed in relief at the sight of Geoff then pressed herself hard to the wall at his expression of pure malice.

“Geoffrey Paul Hunter,” Laura snapped, throwing her full authority as Lady Hunter into her demand. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He ignored her, rounding Laura and grasping Stephanie by the shoulders. He growled a series of curses. “Your luck couldn’t be with us just once, could it?”

Stephanie’s knees gave way at that proclamation, and Geoff supported her. She’d hoped— She’d secretly believed that it wouldn’t happen, that the gods who’d cursed her from birth wouldn’t dare do this to her as well.

Geoff hugged her to his body, letting her vent tears

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into his chest. "It's okay. You don't have to do this."

"I do," she choked. "I don't have a choice."

"Fuck that! There are always options. You just never seem to see them until it's too late. Now— Do you really want to abort?"

Her mind wouldn't seem to function. Want to? This wasn't an option, was it?

"Stephanie! I know how you feel about the subject in general. It's your body and your baby now. If you had another option, one that would let you keep the baby and not expose Corwyn, would you choose it?"

She nodded, her mind numb.

He sighed in obvious relief, smoothing her hair. "Then this isn't necessary."

"How? I don't understand how."

"Trust me. But, there is one thing we have to do."

Stephanie wiped at her tears. "What's that?"

"We have to tell your father what's going on."

She swallowed a sour wave in her throat. "No. I can't."

"We have to. For this to work, we need his help. Be reasonable, Stephanie. If you have a baby, he's going to know details. He'll demand to."

She nodded. "Tomorrow," she requested. Anything but facing him at this moment.

"We'll meet for lunch," Laura added.

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*Time to face the music.* Stephanie squared her shoulders and headed for the restaurant entrance, scanning the

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cars in the lot. Her mother, Geoff and Joel were here. Unless her father came with Laura or one of the guys, he'd yet to arrive. She breathed a sigh of relief at that. She'd never been the type who simply wanted to get an unpleasant moment over with quickly. Avoidance was her unofficial middle name. Everyone around her knew her first name well enough.

She knew her cousins meant it as a joke, but she'd always hated the nickname. Calling her 'Trouble' was too close to the truth of her entire existence.

A Warrior was only supposed to print once and only supposed to produce children with a sealed mate. From her conception, Stephanie had been an anomaly. Her mother had been nearly a month pregnant before she and Corwyn sealed printing - a printing that shouldn't have been possible.

Corwyn had already printed and lost a mate and daughter, Anna and Jayde. Was it his fault that the stone decided to give him another shot at being a husband and father by letting him print again? Was it hers?

Stephanie came into the world at a disadvantage. As if Veriel's mad games, tormenting her father with the possibility of taking her from him, were not bad enough; the Warriors of Hunter saw her as a liability. The threat of losing Corwyn to judgment had solidified the name 'Trouble' with a capital T.

A hand grasped at her arm, and she sighed. Wouldn't Geoff ever get tired of this game? He'd played it since he started training, long before her father gifted her the dagger she typically wore at her

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back.

She didn't reach for the dagger. Instead, she swung around and smacked his cheek - hard. Stephanie swallowed a scream as her eyes locked with Jacob's.

His face hardened. He pulled her behind a shade tree. "I need to talk to you," he informed her.

She pulled at his hold. "We have nothing to discuss." *And, if my family sees you here, you will be dead without ever standing before a judge.*

"You're carrying my child. We have a lot to discuss."

Stephanie struggled to form words. She couldn't tell him she intended to abort when she didn't. She didn't know what Geoff's plan was yet, so she couldn't even offer that.

Jacob's hands gentled and he nuzzled at her lips. Her head swam. What was he doing to her? His mouth closed on hers, softly, seeking. She found herself responding, opening for him when he sought entry and anticipating his touch.

He pulled away, laying a kiss on her forehead. "You're not a blade chaser," he whispered. "I know you aren't. I didn't call you wrong that first night. I couldn't have."

She shook her head. Blade chaser wasn't a title she'd ever earned.

"Then marry me." His lips traced her ear to the line of her jaw.

Her mind cleared at that, shocking her back to the reality of the situation. She shook her head, pulling back tears. "No. I—"

"I've seen you with Geoff. He's fun, but you don't love him."

"I do," she insisted. *Too much to see him judged for killing you.*

"Not like this."

She couldn't argue that.

He nodded, his eyes pleading with her. "Then marry me."

"I can't." Geoff said there were always choices, but there weren't. No matter how much she wanted him, there were some things she could never have. "Please, let me go."

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Jacob forced his fury back. "I can't. Don't you see? You love me. You've all but admitted it, but you're going to go through with this travesty."

"What travesty?" she demanded.

"Isn't it bad enough that our child's been conceived before printing? Ani only knows what will come of that. It's never been done before."

Her jaw tightened and her eyes flashed in anger. "Of course it has! You're not really that stupid, are you? Good gods—" She snapped her mouth shut, seemingly mortified for her outburst.

"What do you mean? What babies—"

Stephanie shook her head, her face paling.

He grumbled a curse. "You still expect me to take this offer and walk away, don't you?"

She didn't seem capable of answering. If he didn't

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know better, he'd swear she had no clue what he was talking about.

He reined in the urge to shake her. "You love me, but you expect me to walk away and let a Warrior you don't love raise our son. I can't! How can you ask me to?"

Stephanie lost what little color remained in her cheeks, shaking her head in seeming horror. "Who—" She winced. "Geoff."

Fury herded his thoughts on. She really *didn't* know Hunter's game. Did he really hope to win her hand - and Jacob's son in this dishonorable manner?

"Jacob," she gasped, no doubt reading the murder in his eyes. "Don't. You can't do this."

"Can't I? Watch me."

The blade was at his throat in the blink of an eye, and Jacob froze in understanding. If he moved against either the Warrior or Stephanie in any way, he wouldn't make it to a judge. The rules of sanction gave the Warrior defending his protected or an unprotected human that right.

She grasped at the wrist holding the sacred weapon, desperation in her eyes. "No," she gasped. "Don't kill him. Please."

"Release her." The growling voice left no room for argument.

He pulled his hands up and back in a sign of surrender. The blade moved back, and Stephanie went with it. Jacob turned to the Warrior slowly, expecting to see Geoff, but the eyes that stared back at him with the promise of death were those of the Lord

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Hunter.

*Well, at least my judge is here. I won't have to wait long for him to kill me.*

Stephanie pulled at his arm. "Leave him," she requested. "Let's just—"

"Are you insane?" Corwyn demanded. "I have—"

"Nothing to do with this. Geoff has taken care of it. It's over. Jacob won't be coming back." She met his eyes, pleading for his agreement. "You won't be back, will you?"

Jacob ground his teeth in frustration. She'd played him perfectly. If he gave his vow not to return, he would be bound by it. With Lord Hunter in a full *Blutjagd*, not giving his vow could see him dead.

Other Warriors came at a run, Joel then Geoff. They stopped cold at the scene laid out for them, shooting each other nervous looks.

His mind kicked into gear. He faced judgment; that much was true, but so did Geoff. A sudden certainty that Corwyn had no idea what his nephew was up to any more than Stephanie had propelled him toward a desperate course.

"I demand my judge," he stated.

"No," Stephanie pleaded with him. "There's no need for this. I told you—"

He glared at her, panning his eyes to her flat stomach – to his child. "It's easy for you, isn't it?"

She straightened her spine, her cheeks burning crimson. "No. It isn't easy for me, but you are leaving me no choice."

Jacob shook his head. What was wrong with him

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that she wouldn't consider marriage with him when she wasn't so picky where she spent her nights? She loved him. He was sure of it. "I demand my judge."

Corwyn nodded. "I'm sure you can find your way to the manor. Leave your weapons at the door."

"Straight away," he promised.

The lord turned, sheathing his weapon and drawing Stephanie under his arm. Geoff took up position at their backs while Joel escorted another woman toward the cars. At the last moment, the woman slipped from him and took the shotgun seat in Corwyn's vehicle. Stephanie slid into the back, and Corwyn took the wheel. Geoff and Joel stood guard between Jacob and the car until it was in motion then headed to Geoff's.

Jacob stood where they left him, his heart sick in what was about to happen. Stephanie didn't want this. She didn't want him to seek judgment. He only wished he knew if she didn't want to see him hurt or Geoff.

Her newest threat to their child stung. If there was any way for him to release their care to Corwyn and stay sane, he would do it, but Jacob was honest enough to admit that he'd have to be executed within a month of his son's birth if it came to that. He couldn't give his word to stay away. It wasn't possible.

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Stephanie breathed a sigh of relief as the restaurant

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fell away. She tried not to consider what would happen at the manor. She had thirty minutes to calm her father down so that he wouldn't kill a man who didn't deserve it. She ground her teeth at Geoff's 'plan.' She should never have left this to him. It was her problem, and it was up to her to settle it. It always had been, and for once in her life, she had to clean up her own mess instead of letting the Warriors do it.

"Does anyone want to explain *why* I'm about to pass judgment on Jacob Armen?" Corwyn asked in a voice she knew to be deceptively calm.

Well, there was no route but the direct one. "I - slept with him."

He swerved then pulled the car into line again, his hand tightening on the wheel. "Any particular reason you decided not to tell me this?"

"I have autonomy," she snapped. "Do you know the names of the other men I've slept with?"

"All three of them," he growled.

That figured. The other three had all been in Hunter range. What had she expected? "Well, put your mind at ease. I had *planned* to tell you today - until..." She motioned hopelessly.

"He's printing on you?"

She groaned. "I guess so."

"If this is the way he accepts no... You *did* say no, didn't -"

"I'm pregnant."

Corwyn slammed on the brakes, pulling off the road and turning to her, his face a mask of pure dismay. "You're what?"

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"Pregnant. Gravid. In the family way. Trouble, just like always."

He buried his face in his hands. "Dear gods. This was what you intended to tell me over lunch?"

"Lunch was Mom's idea, but yes... In a slightly less dramatic fashion, of course."

Laura stroked his arm. "Corwyn, it's not how it sounds. I'm sure Geoff's plan - whatever it is -"

"No," Stephanie interrupted them. "There won't be a judgment and there won't be a plan. I'm out of options. I shouldn't have left this to Geoff. All he did was make it worse."

Her father dropped his hands. "If you're saying what I think you are, you're going to push Jacob over the edge."

"The same edge breaking printing is going to force him to. It's not too late for him."

Corwyn nodded wearily and put the car in gear. "I hope you're right about that."

She closed her eyes, praying to gods who didn't care whether she lived or died as long as her father stayed stable. Maybe they cared enough about Jacob to take pity on him and not see him killed over this.

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Jacob entered the manor, handing his weapon off to Joel then his jacket. He followed the younger Warrior into the library, wincing at the line of Hunter Warriors against the far wall, most likely every Warrior who wasn't on trail or based at the far

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reaches of Hunter range – a full four of the eight.

Stephanie sat on a leather sofa, her knees pulled to her chest, the other woman's arm wrapped around her. He stopped in recognition of their resemblance. So, her mother was at the restaurant with the Warriors. *The plot thickens.*

"Dr. Laura Briony, I presume," he said with a stiff bow of his head.

Corwyn tensed as if his greeting were some sort of threat. "I believe I've been given the full story now, Jacob. I'm sorry, but Stephanie's choice to terminate and to refuse you is beyond my ability to change with a judgment."

Jacob felt his legs weaken and grasped the chair back in front of him for support. "You don't want to do this," he breathed, seeking her eyes for confirmation.

"Of course she doesn't," Geoff countered hotly. "If you'd just drop this, she wouldn't be forced to –"

"You shut up! You face judgment for what you've done already."

"Me?"

"Yes you, you son of a –"

"What the blazes are you talking –"

"When did you plan to tell Stephanie what your plan was? How did you intend to get you lord to agree to it? You may want her, but she loves me! If you think I'm going to stand by and –"

"She *asked* for my help."

"She doesn't want to marry you, Geoff."

"I *know* that. I don't know where you got this mad

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idea that I want to marry –”

“Don’t you?”

“No. I don’t.”

Jacob stopped in confusion. “Then why are you doing this?”

“Because I won’t let you force her into a choice she doesn’t want to make.”

“You’re saying you’re not doing this to keep her in your bed?”

Joel put a restraining hand on Geoff’s weapon hand, and every Warrior in the room lit in varying levels of *Blutjagd*. Jacob looked around in rising unease; it would be far too easy for them to kill him and lie about why they did it. It would be dishonorable, but it wasn’t impossible. He’d obviously just made a monumental error, though he had no idea what it might have been, and the Warriors looked ready to take that dishonorable step at their first opportunity.

Stephanie pushed from the couch and stormed to him, slapping his face with a resounding crack. Corwyn winced at that.

“How dare you,” she demanded in a shaking voice. “You unspeakable bastard! You want to toss accusations? How about one that you planned to get me pregnant so I’d have to accept your offer of marriage?”

“I didn’t. You know –”

“No. I don’t know that, but I do know that I have never – that’s right, *never* slept with a Warrior of Hunter range.”

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The silence in the room was absolute. Jacob reached for her, intent on apologizing for offending her so grievously. "I'm—"

She pulled away with a sound halfway between a sob and a growl. "Don't touch me," she ordered, running from the room in tears.

Corwyn sighed. "Doc?"

Laura stood and strode toward the door, her head high. "I have her, Corwyn."

Jacob met the lords eyes, surprised at the older man's seeming indecision. "I suppose you intend to judge me for getting her pregnant - and for being an idiot."

"No. I intend to talk to you - alone."

"Corwyn, I don't think—" Stephen began.

"Alone."

Geoff pulled out from under Joel's hand, glaring at Jacob all the way to the door. Joel and Nicky avoided his eyes as they followed their lord's orders.

Stephen remained. "I think I should—"

"Alone," he repeated patiently.

"Should I—"

"You'll know soon. Won't you?" he replied cryptically.

He nodded and left the room, closing the doors behind him.

"Sit down, Jacob."

He hesitated then circled the chair and sank into it.

Corwyn dropped onto the sofa Stephanie had vacated. "You're printing, aren't you?"

Jacob felt his face flush. "Yes. I am."

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"Then this whole thing has to be agonizing for you."

"Yeah." Agonizing was a pale comparison to the actual sensation, but Corwyn hardly needed that reminder.

"She doesn't want to abort, you know. She loathes the practice."

Jacob winced at that. He didn't want her to do something she would regret, but he couldn't conscience walking away. "I don't want her to. You know I don't."

"If it came to a choice of knowing your child was safe somewhere else—"

"Did you spend a single day not wishing Jayde was with you?"

He sighed. "No. I didn't."

"Wouldn't knowing where she was and not being able to touch her have killed you?"

"I imagine it would over years of it. I didn't weather it well for even the few weeks after she was found."

"Then how can you ask this of me?"

"I have to. Either I ask you to do this or I allow Stephanie to follow a course you'll both regret for the rest of your lives."

"She respects you. Talk sense to her."

"I can't. If I could..." He opened his fist and stared at it miserably. "Sometimes, I think she has more honor than I do. She'll never abandon it."

"So, you would honestly ask me to stay away, to sacrifice my sanity this way? Can you imagine what it

will be like for me to never be able to claim my child?"

Corwyn didn't answer. He stared at his hand as if lost in thought, tracing first one line and then another, over and over.

It took a moment for the significance to hit him. *Two* scars. *Two* blood oaths. Jacob looked at the closed doors in shock, facts racing through his mind.

Corwyn granted Stephanie and her mother the lord's seal. He bought their home and Stephanie's condo. He paid for her education. He sent the wonder twins to escort her 'home.'

Stephanie had the look of a Warrior-born daughter. She said she had an older half-sister, and there was no father listed on her birth certificate. She was fluent in four languages and moved a lot as a child.

Joel and Geoff acted like older brothers - teasing, protective, as they would be of any woman of their house. Their faces when he'd accused her of sleeping with Geoff... Outrage! Pure and simple outrage had been their reactions. And Geoff's look of shock the first time Jacob said it... How had he missed the significance?

He looked back at Corwyn's hand. The second scar wasn't for any other blood oath. He knew it. It was a second freeing scar.

"You do know," he whispered. "She's yours. That's why her contact information is yours, why you foot the bills. How could anyone miss it? When she... Dear gods! When she argued that children have been born out of printing before, she meant herself."

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"My daughter is no bastard," he growled, an edge of *Blutjagd* burning in him. "Believe what you like, but it was never that. Yes, she was conceived before printing was... But...the stone..." He closed his eyes with a pained look. "I stopped caring if I lived or died, so it arranged to give me a purpose in life. You probably don't believe me. I wouldn't believe me, but it's true."

"She's doing this to protect you."

He nodded. "If I thought it would make her happy, I'd announce who she is today, but it wouldn't."

"Because you'd face the judgment of the other lords." He didn't question it.

"I would give anything to make her happy, but I don't know how to do that. It's been too many years and too many lies. Even if I gave her permission to marry you —"

"You'd do that?" he asked urgently.

"In a heartbeat," he vowed. "But the mistrust runs deep. I didn't intend to make her so fearful. It just happened along the way, but you see why she can't trust you."

"She's afraid I'd expose you? Or that someone else in my house would?"

"Yes. To you, this is simple. You see it as her accepting you or not. For Stephanie, the choice is much more dire. You're asking her to endanger or lose her family - or to go against what she really wants to protect us."

He fought for a decent breath, his mind grasping at the one possibility to work this out. "Maybe not." If

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there was any chance, he had to take it.

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Stephanie burrowed her face into the pillow, so exhausted that even sleep seemed unobtainable. She forced her eyes open as the door creaked, staring at her father.

“Is he gone?” she asked.

He nodded, crossing the room and sitting on the bed beside her.

Her heart ached at that, but she pushed it away. She had to do this. “Good,” she grumbled.

“Is it?”

She blinked her eyes, certain she was dreaming. “What?”

“He was right. You do love him. Don’t you?”

Breathing was abruptly difficult.

“That’s why you wouldn’t let me kill him.”

“It would have been too hard to explain—”

“It wouldn’t have been hard at all! You know that.”

She felt her cheeks heat and looked away to the bathroom door. Of course it would have been easy. Hadn’t she considered that when Corwyn’s blade was to his throat? He could have been dead in moments, and even his own house wouldn’t have questioned it once her father declared that he’d proven a danger to a human protected.

He turned her face back to his, searching her eyes for answers she couldn’t seem to come up with in her scattered mind.

"What if I offered to take on the baby's care and training?"

Her stomach lurched. It was a terrible idea when Geoff offered, and it was still terrible. "No."

"No? You don't want to abort. Why say no?"

"Jacob...won't give up. He—"

"The truth!"

She swallowed hard. Nothing made sense anymore. How could she tell him the truth when her mind seemed mired in the complexity of this situation?

"Geoff didn't tell you his plan."

"No. He didn't," she admitted, her head spinning.

"What was your reaction when you found out?"

Jacob's face swam before her eyes. All she remembered was his pain.

"Disbelief? Horror? Fear? Pity?"

No. She didn't pity – or did she? "I don't know."

"Did you consider what would happen to Jacob if you did that to him?"

"Of course, I did!"

"That's why you won't choose that course. Not because he won't give up. Judgment would make him give up – or he'd be killed for breaking sanction."

"No," she gasped, all too aware that he would be killed, if it came to that.

"So, you do love him."

Stephanie rubbed at her forehead, trying to stop the room's incessant spinning. Why was he doing this to her? Why was Corwyn making this more complicated?

“What do you really want, Stephanie?”

She felt the need to laugh and cry at the same time. “I don’t know what I want anymore,” she admitted.

“If you weren’t my daughter... If it was just you with no worries about exposing our family, what would you do?”

Memories of her night with Jacob flooded her mind. How many times that night had she reminded herself that it couldn’t be more, but only because of who she was? The rest of his comment filtered in slowly.

“I’m not giving up my family for him.” That wasn’t an option she would ever consider seriously.

Corwyn shook his head. “I’m giving you permission to marry him, Stephanie. At some point in your life, you have to start doing what’s right for you.”

“But, what about you?”

“You are my daughter. I can’t let you —”

A block of ice settled in her stomach. “You told him that?”

“He already had a clear picture. All it took was seeing us all interact to pull it into perspective for him.”

She pushed from the bed, shaking her head in denial. That was it. It came down to accepting Jacob or endangering her family? In actuality, it wasn’t even that simple. She endangered them either way.

“Just consider it,” Corwyn soothed her. “If you want him —”

“I don’t.” She fumed at the thought that she ever

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had. If he did this, he had no honor.

"Stephanie—"

She turned and bolted from the room, pulling the spare keys to her father's car from the rack by the front door. If Jacob Armen thought he could bully her this way, he was sadly mistaken.

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Jacob raised his head at the knock, praying to Ani that it was the news he hoped for. Perhaps, Stephanie would accept his offer of marriage once her father talked to her.

He opened the door, letting out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding at the sight of her on the stoop. He barely had time to wonder at the pale, strained expression on her face when she punched him hard across the cheek.

"What did you do?" she shouted, her chest heaving in dry sobs. "Did you think I'd agree to this blackmail? That I wouldn't fight you?"

Jacob grimaced. Was *that* what Corwyn told her? He'd thought the man was earnest in his support. "Maybe you should come inside," he offered.

"Why? So, I don't ruin *your* honorable name? Two can play this game, Jacob. You want to convene a Council of Lords? How about one for yourself! I have nothing to lose now."

"There isn't going to be a Council of Lords," he assured her through gritted teeth.

"If I marry you, you mean," she countered

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sarcastically. "Or maybe I should just give you your precious son! Your damn duty is all that's important to—"

She stopped on a gasp as he lifted her by the waist and hoisted her inside the room, kicking the door shut.

"Wh— What are you doing?" she stammered.

Jacob deposited her on the edge of the bed and strode to the mini-fridge, thankful that he'd been taught to keep nutritious food on hand. He returned to her with a bottle of juice, noting that she seemed too stunned to move - or too frightened. He nudged her clasped hands with the bottle, and she looked at it in confusion.

"Drink this," he requested, "and calm down." Being so upset while she carried was a bad idea.

Stephanie opened the bottle and drank down several swallows. She glanced at him then away, scooping the hair that typically covered her eye over her ear. "Don't do this," she whispered. "Please, don't."

He grumbled a curse. "I don't know what your father told you, but—"

She looked up at him in undisguised fear.

"Stephanie, please... You have the wrong idea."

"Do I? Are you saying you didn't investigate my background until you had enough evidence to implicate him?"

Jacob felt his face heat. "I did, but I didn't realize what I was seeing until today. I swear it. If I did, would I have accused you of sleeping with..." He

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groaned at that.

She shook her head slowly.

"You just confused me. Nothing fit. You're hot for me, but you were *violently* against a relationship. You were panicked every time it was brought up. Your amulet. The won—your cousins. I never—"

"What was it? What led you to Corwyn? Was it my travel? He insists on—"

"Your schooling. He paid for it, and while he has the money to do it on a whim, the emergency phone number in your file—"

"The manor," she choked.

"The manor."

Her lip trembled. Stephanie tried to hide it by taking another drink, but she spilled some of the juice. She sobbed, pressing a hand to her mouth.

Jacob knelt before her, blotting at the stain on her shirt with his cuff. "What is it?" he asked.

"I can't do this," she wailed, tears spilling down her cheeks.

He winced. "Why not?"

"Someone would find out. I'd slip up. I can't—"

"Shhh," he soothed her. "We can do this. Corwyn and I—"

She shook her head fiercely. "No. I won't be responsible for bringing him down. I can't. All my life, I've avoided Warriors. One wrong word—" Her eyes pleaded with him. "It would be my fault. It would—"

Jacob pulled her to his chest, anger warring with his need to protect her. He'd wondered what it was

about her that screamed for comfort, and now that he knew, he wanted to hurt the ones who put her in this situation.

"It's not your responsibility to protect him. It's never been. I'm sure you were told that, but you're..." *You're the one who should have been protected, not them!* "It wasn't right to do this to you," he raged. "It's too much."

He suddenly realized that he was rocking her. It felt right, so he continued. Stephanie was silent save her hitching breaths. Just when he thought she'd fallen asleep in his arms, she spoke again.

"What if I slip?" she whispered.

"It won't matter. We've taken care of it."

"How?" she squeaked, tensing.

Jacob pulled back until he met her eyes. He stroked at her tears with his fingertips. "He was willing to announce who you are, you know."

She paled. "He can't."

He shook his head. "He won't. I convinced him to take a page from my grandfather's book."

"I don't understand."

He brushed his lips over hers, hungry for more. "My grandfather James married a widow with daughters. Your father doesn't dare admit printing again, but—"

"You believe him?" she asked urgently.

"Yes, I do. Look... The Lord Armen has raised human girls who weren't his own as his daughters. Can't you see—"

"You believe him." She laughed nervously, as if his

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acceptance was more than she ever dared hope for.

"Yes. I really do." He looked to her lips, wanting to taste her again. He met her eyes reluctantly. "He needed something, Stephanie." *I need the same thing.* "You and your mother filled that need." *Please, do the same for me.* "The other lords won't begrudge him taking a special interest in a family that needed him, a family that helped fill the empty ache in his heart."

She laid a hand over his heart, as if she heard even his unspoken comments.

"You were raised as his daughter from infancy much as Michelle and Melissa were raised as James' daughters," he continued. "They call him Daddy. What child wouldn't?"

"I never—" she managed.

Jacob cupped her head and brought her mouth to his in a slow, solemn kiss. "It's too much to do alone, Stephanie. You've had too many years of shouldering this. Let the burden go. Let the rest of us carry it for you."

"Give—give me your vow."

"You have my vow that I never had any intention of exposing or blackmailing Corwyn. You have my vow that I will live this version of the truth until I die. You have my vow that I will never let a hint of this harm you..." He swallowed hard. *It was time to risk it all.* "No matter what you choose to do."

Stephanie sank to his chest, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and grasping his shirt in her fists. She didn't answer him; she just clung to him until her hands unclenched and her arms slid away.

Jacob lifted her onto the bed and laid beside her, praying this meant she'd choose him.

As if she read his mind, Stephanie turned into his chest. "Take me home," she grumbled sleepily.

His heart sank. "Your condo or the manor?" He kept his voice neutral, though he wanted to hit something - hard.

She yawned widely and wrapped her arm over his waist. "Do you live at the Armen manor?"

He chuckled. "Most of the time."

"Mmm. Okay," she breathed, tucking her cheek further in, "but I need to pack first."

## *About The Author*

Brenna Lyons lives in Haverhill, MA with her husband, three children, and a zoo of pets. She was born and raised in the Hazelwood/Glenwood area of Pittsburgh, PA and toured the east coast as a Navy wife for thirteen years.

She enjoys the Society for Creative Anachronism and is a member of such groups as Broad Universe, EPIC, WRW and ERA.

Brenna holds a BS in Accounting and a Certificate of Computer Programming. Why? An auditing teacher commented that she would either "make the perfect auditor or the perfect thief," and she had been writing for eleven years with little professional training - in effect, a thief of attention by misdirection.

Never one to pass up a challenge, Brenna has worked as an auditor, tracking down fraud suspects, finding the backdoors into exchange computer systems, creating accounting programs for government and small businesses, and as a writer. Overall, it's the best of both worlds.

Brenna enjoys talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>