



FORBIDDEN
NIGHTS
ASTRID COOPER

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PANTHER

CHAPTER ONE

“Your soul-mate will be tall, dark and handsome. He’ll come to you on a dark and stormy night.”

“Yeah, right, gran!” I rolled my eyes. Her prophesies were always laced with clichés.

“Your lover will be more than even you can imagine. So *verrry* sexy, *chérie*!” She lapsed into her beloved French, speculating on how luscious this man of mine would be. When discussing sex or men, only the French language would do for her; she claimed English was too inadequate. “He’ll have to be big, of course, though quality is more important than size... Luckily for you, he’ll be both!”

“Cut it out, gran! You’re not supposed to know that kinda’ stuff!”

“Know about it, darling? I *invented* it!” She grinned. “We French—”

“I’m third generation Australian!” I sighed inwardly. Gran and I had this conversation repeatedly.

“But still French at heart!”

“Whatever.”

Gran sniffed. "And what about my reading? Have my cards ever lied?"

"Well..."

"That time was not my fault!" She pocketed her cards. "It's late. I'm leaving!"

Gran's readings often made her irritable, particularly when I was derisive. I kissed her goodnight and locked the door behind her, laughing to myself. She lived in hope that 'Mr Right' would arrive on my doorstep and sweep me off my feet and straight into bed.

I groaned. Now who was talking in clichés?

Six months I waited for 'Mr. T.D.H.' What happened surprised even Gran. For once her predictions fell far short of the mark.

Pan *did* arrive on a dark and stormy night. I found him near death in the shop cellar.

The vet said it would be kinder to put him to sleep, but Gran nursed the cat back to health, splinting his four broken legs, filling the poor creature with her vile concoctions.

The cat's injuries mended at an abnormal rate. Gran insisted that she hadn't used any magic on him. She said the cat possessed his own potency that would satisfy even me. Not in a million years! Gran laughed at my disbelief.

Within three weeks Pan was totally healed. He grew. And grew. He stood twice the height of a domestic cat and was pure muscle, with sleek black fur, like a panther. Hence his name: *Panther*. 'Pan' for short.

Pan was unlike any cat I had known. I spoiled him

unashamedly, rationalizing that after his close brush with death, he deserved special treatment. Besides, who else had I to spoil in this, or any other life?

I relented to all his whims, though sometimes I did resist, just to save face.

Take his eating habits, for example. Cats can be fastidious eaters, but Pan took fussiness to new heights. A battle of wits ensued, but Pan outmaneuvered me.

His favorite meal was roast chicken (with the skin removed—he had to watch his weight, it seemed!) and preferred it with liberal lashings of gravy with a side dish of vegetables. His dinner plate was an antique Royal Doulton dish that he chose from among the selection in my shop.

We dined formally each night, sitting at opposite ends of the mahogany table, Pan on a red velvet cushion, so that he could reach the table from the dining chair.

Once Pan recovered, that's when *it* started.

Oh, I'd had premonitions and hallucinations before, there was witch-blood in the family; Gran was living proof. But I had never thought I had inherited any of it.

Waking or sleeping, my thoughts turned erotic. I smelled a musky odor throughout the cottage. No amount of essential oil burning could mask the essence of sex.

I didn't think another ghost had taken up residence in the old building that was my shop and home.

Maybe it was Pan—he was an entire cat. But the scent permeating everything was not that of tom-cat.

Things grew worse the day I brought the mirror up from the cellar.

The mirror always gave me the creeps. It was a family heirloom, from the time when the DeMauris were aristocrats, before the revolution in France. Gran had given it to me last year for my twenty-fifth birthday.

Pan prowled around the mirror, swishing his tail over the dusty gilt frame as I wrestled it into the corner of my writing den.

As I was polishing the mirror, heat coiled from it into my body, spreading like fire, to pool in my woman's cleft. I shivered, my secret body contracting and pulsing. I smelled the sex-scent again, combined with cinnamon, a hot, heavy pungency that shrouded me like a mantle.

Pan wound around my ankles and gave my heel a playful nip. I yelped and he batted at my leg, purring deeply. I laughed and bent to lift him into my arms. And as I did so, I saw the mirror. The hairs lifted at my nape.

The mirror surface became opaque and then I saw people in pseudo-Renaissance dress dancing in a cloistered hall. Jewels glistened in the candlelight. I caught the faint sound of baroque music.

I saw myself dancing amongst that glittering throng, dressed in a black diaphanous silk gown, gold-embroidered and painted with swirls and tassels. Much of my flesh was bare. My dark hair was swept away from my face and held back by an elaborate bronze head-dress.

My dance partner moved around me sinuously, his body rubbing against mine. He was beautiful, this man, his black hair to his waist. He smiled, he laughed,

he tantalized with fingers that trailed over my skin in the softest caress.

The mirror-me shivered and I shivered, too.

I was mesmerized by what I saw and my heart beat in time with the sound of drums emanating from the mirror-world. My blood echoed the rhythm of the drum. I was aroused and I fought the desire spiraling through me.

Panther paced about the study then stood, his head to one side studying the mirror.

About me, the room turned dark and I felt a blast of heat. A blue light flared.

I gasped. Behind me, to my left stood a man—naked—save for a black studded collar. His erection was rigid against his taut belly.

I was too sex-incited to be afraid; all I could do was regard him.

Not a true man, this creature. His skin was golden, but over it, a dark nap of downy-hair. His eyes were slitted, glowing gold and green. His blue-black hair hung to his waist and as I watched, running my tongue over my dry lips, he shook his head and flung his hair away. It flew around him like a cloak. Blue lights sparked around him.

Here, before me, was the mirror-man, my dance partner! I was hallucinating. But the chimera held me in thrall and I gave in to it; wanted it more than anything.

He stalked to me, and wrapping an arm around my waist, drew me back against him. His body was whipcord muscles, strong, danger barely restrained.

I felt his turgid sex pressing the small of my back,

branding me. His hand fanned over my belly, his fingers resting at the tip of my pubic bone. He demanded intimacy and I surrendered.

He lifted the hair from my neck, his mouth lapping at my nape. A gentle bite; two. I lost count at the times he flirted with lips and teeth.

I watched him in the mirror as he nuzzled my neck. His hands quested over my body, cupping and stroking my breasts before exploring between my legs.

I leaned against him. He held me upright as his fingers probed. My skirt was lifted, his fingers traveling with soft determination towards my cleft, delving through my panties into my heated flesh.

I moaned and he growled...a primal sound that made me shiver, made me want him all the more.

I flung my arm back around his neck, holding him, raising my leg, encouraging him to quest within.

All the while I watched my squirming reflection; a wanton creature I had become, but I did not care.

His head lifted and in the mirror reflection our gazes met and held.

His smile was one of male triumph; of possession.

I watched in the mirror as he lifted me, carrying me to the table, pushing aside the books and papers before he deposited me onto its polished surface. He leaned me backwards so that I lay on the table, my legs dangling over the edge.

I turned my head to look at him, not watch him as a mirror reflection and I cried out—a sound between despair and alarm.

Against my body lay Pan.

I touched the cat's body, my hand shaking. He

purred.

I closed my eyes, trying to still the clamor of my heart, a tattoo that was borne of passion and fear.

Opening my eyes, I saw Pan, and he batted my chin, claws piercing, forcing my head to the left.

I gasped. The mirror reflection showed the man, but when I looked away, it was Pan against me.

I clenched my eyelids shut and groaned. *Sicko*. There were worse words for a person who used animals for sexual gratification.

Tears crept out from beneath my lids. A warm, rasping tongue lapped them up.

I cautiously opened my eyes towards the mirror and saw the man, his frown of concern over his beautiful face as his gaze met mine in the reflection.

When I went to turn away, his hand cupped my chin. I saw a hand, but felt claws gently extend into my skin.

"No," he whispered. "The mirror does not lie. Watch the truth in the reflection." His voice, deep, gentle, with a trace of accent I could not place.

"But—"

His mouth swallowed my questions.

His black hair fell across me and I reached up to caress him. He purred deep in his throat, and it vibrated into my bones. I curled my toes.

I opened my legs to his touch and he rubbed his erection back and forth over my cleft, teasing, arousing, a negligible probing inside, to torture with a promise of what would be...

He licked my face, his mouth descending, capturing mine in a leisurely kiss. His tongue penetrated inside

my mouth, a quick, gentle foray. He tasted of cinnamon.

Lower his mouth hungered, to my right breast, then the other. A tongue tip flicked each nipple, bringing them painfully erect. He bit gently and I flinched from pure pleasure. He laughed against my skin.

Then he quested across my belly to pause at the curls at the juncture of my thighs.

I grasped a fistful of his hair and when his mouth found me, it was like an electric shock. I lifted off the table. I cried out and quivered. I brought my knees up to hold his head as he loved me with his mouth. I became a wanton creature bent on pleasure, bent on the man to give me that pleasure.

His hands pressed me down as his mouth lapped.

Then licked.

Then bit.

He nuzzled deep into my sheath.

His silken hair chafed against my thighs, against my pulsing nub as he moved and licked and lapped and bit.

I groaned and squirmed beneath his touch. I had never felt this, had this...never dreamed of the possibility. *Oh...oh...*

I was being turned inside out. The heat and the passion made me light-headed, slightly queasy.

I wanted to touch him, feel his weight upon me. I wanted him inside me, opening me wide with his length, plunging to my hidden depths...

"Later," he whispered. "I will mount you. Later. This time, only for you!" His mouth repossessed my flesh.

I screamed my release, there on the table as his mouth continued to plunder me, his fingers holding me open as he devoured.

A weight pressed me hard against the table as he crouched over me. He stared down at me. His smile celebrated his victory, his conquest.

"Your nectar is the sweetest cream, Danielle." To emphasise his words, he ran a tongue tip over his lips. "Mmmm. You taste of heaven!"

I reached to grasp his rigidity and he laughed and shook his head, his hair flying around his shoulders.

"Too soon, Danielle. Patience!"

He lowered himself so that his body touched mine in the slightest merge and he kissed me.

"Remember and burn," he said, his mouth a fraction above mine.

I reached up, grasping the collar around his neck, to hold him fast to me.

With a terrible scream, he flung himself away. He fell onto the floor, his agonized cries filling the room.

Cold terror extinguished my sex-euphoria. I slid off the table.

But what...where...? Pan was lying in front of the mirror, writhing and screaming. The man had gone. If he had ever existed!

I crawled to the cat and as I went to touch him, he defended himself with claws that ripped my skin.

I reeled away, seeing the mirror. Its surface reflected only me and the cat.

Pan was in the throes of a fit.

I knelt beside him, not touching, hoping that my presence would soothe him. I wept to see him so

demented.

Hours later, Pan lay exhausted on his side and hesitantly I lifted him into my arms and carried him upstairs to my bed.

I put him on my pillow and covered him with my dressing-gown. He liked the tatty old thing and always slept on it during the day when he wasn't at my side.

Pan managed a feeble *meow* and licked my finger, before he shuddered and closed his eyes.

He slept like one dead for twenty-four hours, while I stretched out beside him, too afraid to leave him, too afraid to touch him.

But my mind was aw whirl.

Living too long alone...it did a girl no good to be without a good bedding, so Gran would always say. She was right. My frustrations were culminating in hallucinations—of an imaginary lover I could see only in a mirror reflection. But—what of the cat?

Where did Pan fit in with it?

I didn't like where my thoughts were leading.

Too much writing. Perhaps no coincidence that this hallucination occurred in my den, the place where I conjured imaginary landscapes and characters to fuel my stories. A fantasy writer might just have to be a little demented to write the 'new weird'.

I would never be satisfied with the normal: in real life or my writing. And so, somehow my hallucination had combined the real and the imaginary and brought me to orgasm.

I was afraid.

"Pan it's going to be our secret, right?"

The cat regarded me sidelong and pawed the

dressing-gown. I lifted him into my lap and he kneaded my breasts.

Ever after, at night, Pan slept across my chest, his head between my breasts, my hand curled into his scruff. The cat was a comfort.

I shifted the mirror out of my den and put it in the back room. I didn't go near the mirror for weeks. And when I did venture into the back room and looked onto its surface, I saw nothing. I felt nothing.

Life returned to normal.

Or, so I thought.

CHAPTER TWO

I worked furiously on my next book, turning out thirty pages each day, my fingers flying over the keyboard.

My novel had become erotic, despite my best efforts to steer the characters into a different direction. Their wills dominated; they bedded and explored the erotic realms of their psyche, while I, vicariously, joined their exploits.

I paused in my writing and re-read what I had typed. I blinked in disbelief.

"That can't be possible? No one can do that—can they?" I looked askance at the paragraph, my finger poised over the 'delete' key. *Nah, let it stay...*

This would not do! I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes.

Heat coiled from my head to my heels. My skin turned to gooseflesh. I smelt the musky aroma of sex, combined with cinnamon.

I glanced across the room. My jaw dropped.

There he was that gorgeous naked man from the mirror, reclining on my red velvet *chaise lounge*!

Propped up on an elbow, he was sex incarnate, his smile lazy, his come-hither eyes lambent as he watched

me. His hand stroked the velvet, his fingers teasing it, as he had teased and stroked my skin.

I shivered.

He shivered.

My gaze travelled the length of him—all his lengths—and my throat constricted as my heart hammered, as my woman's body clenched in a sudden tension.

The playful smile was replaced by an intensity that hinted—no! *Promised...* What he promised! I all but came on the spot.

Then, he winked at me.

"Who...?" I began.

He put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

He stood and I saw a spasm of pain cross his face. His pupils constricted to mere slits. He swallowed convulsively, his face paling.

I saw blood trickle onto his skin from beneath his studded collar. He collapsed onto the floor onto his knees, holding his head.

Blue light flared, temporarily blinding me.

When my eyes focused it was upon Pan, lying on his side on the lounge. He was breathing heavily.

I flung back my chair and raced to him, squatting at his side. I ran a light hand over his heaving flank. He managed a feeble *meow*.

I raced him to the vet who could find nothing wrong with the cat.

"But he was having a fit. He's had one before...it's because of his accident?"

"Possibly."

I'd always been afraid that Pan's first fit was due to

the terrible suffering he had endured before I had found him. Now, this second fit...

"He ought to be neutered, you know!" the vet said.

Pan's head twisted about, a contortion reminiscent of that head-spinning scene from 'The Exorcist'. His black eyes glared at the vet, his mouth down-turned. I swear the cat knew what was being discussed.

"I thought I'd give him time to recover from his attack." I put the cat back inside the carry-cage.

"I'd say by the look of him, he's recovered enough. I'll book him in for next Monday?"

"Yes. If you think He's up to it."

"He'll be fine."

Pan screamed at me from behind the bars of the cage. He continued to growl and scream as I drove back home. Once inside the cottage, I let him out of the cage and he disappeared.

He was gone for days.

On the 'phone, I told Gran that the cat had fled – the trip to the vet must have been the last straw.

"Neuter him, will you? What a fool you are, Danielle! Pan is an exceptional beast. Just how special you'll find out, if you have any sense," Gran admonished.

"I know he's special!" I burst into tears. Pan had gone. It was all my fault.

"There, there, girl. He'll come back. He's not that stupid!"

"Truly?"

"Trust me, *chérie*. The cat's besotted with you. And you, him, I think. Yes?"

"Oui."

I felt Gran's smile from the other end of the phone. She loved it when I spoke French.

Pan returned five days later, a little leaner, but none the worse for wear. Me? I was a frazzled wreck, having hunted the streets, inspected every drain, every possible place where a cat could hide...

When he pushed his way through the cat flap, I scooped him up in my arms and kissed him over and over. He licked me and pawed my face.

"I won't do it, Pan. Your cathood's safe with me. Only you mustn't go prowling. No kittens. Do you hear?"

He licked my face.

Cat-on-heat behavior didn't seem to be in Pan's nature. The only sex-fiend in the house was me, albeit in my dreams and visions and in my writing.

"We'll have a celebration, tonight, Pan. Like that? I've missed you."

He kneaded my neck and shoulders as I carried him into the lounge and put him before the fire.

I brought out the best candelabra and decorated the table with herbs and flowers. Pan, as always watched the prelude to dinner, sitting on the sideboard, his tail flicking, his tongue darting in and out, anticipating his dinner.

I dressed in a flowing red silk caftan, embroidered with black swirls and geometric patterns.

Pan took his customary place on the chair and watched as I dished out the meal. A paragon of manners, was the cat. He waited until I had sat opposite him before he delicately picked at his chicken and licked up his gravy.

"To us, Pan," I said, raising my crystal flute. The champagne slid down my throat like velvet. I ran my tongue over my lips and then glanced at Pan.

The glass fell from my fingers.

My dream lover was sitting where Pan had been, watching me with heavy-lidded eyes. Seductive eyes, dark with passion and alight with promise.

He raised his own flute, silently saluted me and sipped the golden liquid. He frowned, studying the glass. He tasted more champagne before replacing the flute on the table.

He smiled at me and I melted, fear overcome by desire. The candlelight shifted over his features, burnishing his burnished skin, his hair shining purple-black. He flung his hair back from his head, that gesture so familiar to me. So unconscious, but so erotically charged... *Oh hell!*

I swallowed down hard and closed my eyes. The sex-scent pervaded my nostrils, my every cell. Rapture thrummed within me.

I wondered what paths this latest vision would lead me...might I experience some of the sex I had written about in my latest book? I could hardly wait.

A warm, soft lick traced across my cheek and I reached out, smiling, blinking open my eyes.

For a moment I was disoriented, before Pan's rasping tongue brought me to my senses.

"Pan, I'm going crazy."

Should I make an appointment to see a counselor?

But how could I explain to anyone what I was seeing, feeling? Hallucinations they might be, but they were so real, so intimate. I could not share them with

anyone.

I staggered to my feet and cleared the table. It was only as I was climbing upstairs to bed that I remembered Pan's glass had been empty when I stacked it into the dishwasher... Was it ok for a cat to drink champagne?

I halted in mid-step and Pan thudded against the back of my legs. I absently reached down to scratch him behind the ears.

"You are a cat, aren't you Pan?" I laughed at myself. Of course Pan was a cat...what else could he possibly be? A...?

No! I put a firm halt to that impossible thought.

CHAPTER THREE

Ten days later, I entered the backroom, giving the mirror a disdainful glance as I placed a box of china plates into the opposite corner. A new acquisition, I'd have to restore some of them before placing them in the shop.

I stalked away, then halted, a skitter-warning racing up my spine as I heard a sound, like running water. Had one of the old pipes burst?

I turned back, and from the corner of my eye I glimpsed shapes and settings: people and places both historical and fantastic on the mirror's surface. I heard laughter and smelled an exotic spice-scent of cinnamon and musk-sex...

Oh, God! No!

Confronting the mirror, I found that its surface merely reflected my puzzled look and Pan at my feet, his nose against the glass.

"The mirror does not lie," the dream-lover had said.

But that was a lie in itself.

And yet, as I watched I saw another scene appear through a mist: a frozen landscape, a black sky illuminated by a stream of stars, a thousand times brighter than the Milky Way.

Cold air lifted a tendril of hair from my face and as I stepped closer I caught the ice-scent of this frozen world.

I heard laughter: a woman's light tinkling laugh and a man's deeper timbre. Then, they spoke...

"Love me!" he said.

"Again?" a voice responded — my voice — emanating from the depths of the mirror.

There were no visions, just sounds and scents. But it was enough. My body was thrumming.

"Love me!" he said, again, the deep whisper of a man in passion's sway.

"Again?"

"If you please, dear heart."

"If I please?" She laughed.

As an eavesdropper in this intimate exchange, my mouth had gone dry and my heart lurched against my ribs. I was being summoned and my body responded with a flush of arousal.

The mirror-scape darkened, but before I could reject its hold, the scene altered.

I saw a pond of mercurial water bounded on all sides by frosted rocks that glistened like diamonds.

Within that pool I saw myself and my mirror-lover. The scene intensified and if I could have reached out, I would have been able to touch them.

I caught the heat of the water, the humid, spiced scent. I breathed deeply.

My naked mirror-self stood in the water; it pooled around my hips. Thick droplets tracked down my body.

My dream-lover towered over me. He bent and

cupped his hands and lifted them above my head and opened his fingers. Silver water fell onto me, and I laughed as it rained down my body, tickling with its sticky warmth.

His fingers followed the path of every rivulet and then he knelt before me, kissing my stomach. I saw his fingers slip between my thighs and part my woman's flesh. In and out of me he worked, a slow rhythm. The mirror-me moaned and in the room I also moaned.

His mouth captured mine in a kiss as powerful as it was gentle: a man's kiss of domination, of unspeakable love and desire. The mirror-me answered; we were equals giving and receiving pleasure.

He surged to his feet and lifted me to him, wrapping my legs around his waist. His hips raised upwards and he plunged into me, a deep stroke that filled me to overflowing. He rolled his hips and he went deep inside, as far as I could allow. His length scorched me and I was stretched wide.

I swayed, I burned, I arched my body wanting this man's touch, wanting it so bad it hurt.

I smelt that musky-sex scent and it shattered me. I collapsed onto the floor and lay shuddering...

I came to my senses with Pan licking my face. I held the cat to my cheek and wept. I was alone and I was losing my mind.

I covered the mirror with a thick velvet drape and avoided the back room ever after.

I did not have another hallucination.

The world returned to normal.

The world was merely lulling me into a false sense of complacency...

* * * *

The bell hanging from the door jamb tinkled and I looked up from my desk, irritated at the late intrusion.

I had been thinking of shutting up early. There'd been no customers today because of the storm.

I stared at the man who entered the shop.

On a dark and stormy night your soul-mate will come to you. He'll be tall, dark and handsome. Gran's prophesy echoed in my mind.

The stranger at the door *was* T. & H. His akubra hid his hair. I suspected it would be dark.

He shook off the rain from his drizabone and pulled off his hat.

My mouth was suddenly dry and my heart lurched in my chest. But not exactly through desire. I felt afraid, a breathlessness...

This man might be countrified in Aussie dress, but his blue eyes and features screamed Europe. His gold hair was tied back in a barrette.

In that moment, I thought of my dark-haired dream-lover, his hair swishing across my belly...

Get a grip, girl! I rose unsteadily to my feet. "Can I help you?"

He inclined his head. "*Oui, mademoiselle* De Mauris."

His French was impeccable, but I knew it wasn't his native tongue. I sometimes had the sixth-sense about people and I knew he was taunting me and I felt my hackles rise.

He smiled and spread his hands. "Sorry, Ms De Mauris. Jet lag. I forgot where I was."

"Not France," I said.

His eyes hardened as he glanced about at my antiques. "Most assuredly."

"Are you looking for something?"

His gaze fastened onto me. "Yes, I collect mirrors."

"I have a few."

"Yes. Yes. I see them." His disdainful flick of his wrist dismissed my best stock. "I am specific about what I want."

Just then, Panther strode into the shop and froze in mid-step. His back arched, his tail bristled and he spat. His green eyes were huge, the slits wide. I was afraid he was going to have another fit. He was normally welcoming of any customer entering my shop.

The stranger regarded the cat quizzically. "What's the matter, pussycat?"

Panther reacted like a cat possessed. He jumped up onto the curtain pelmet and hissed down from a height, snarling at his antagonist, his eyes black, his ears flat to his skull. His tail was fluffed up like a feather duster.

"Your mongrel is out of control."

I bristled. "He's very discerning." I paused. "I don't have any mirrors for sale. Sorry *monsewer*." I made my French as non-French as I could, to heighten the insult.

His face darkened. "Truly?" He stalked from the shop and turned back at the entrance. "I am not so easily diverted."

I raced to shut the door behind him, locking it.

"Arrogant bastard! Pan, we should have torn him limb from limb!"

The cat rushed at the door and stretched full length against it, scrabbling at the glass with his claws. He

yowled.

"You said it, Pan. He's a *sonofabitch* and good riddance!"

I lifted the cat into my arms and he batted my cheek with his paw, his claws lightly extended into my skin. I cradled him against me. His face nestled against the swell of my breast.

That night I couldn't sleep. Even Pan's weight across my body wasn't a comfort.

"As close to a lover as you are going to get, that cat!" Gran said when I first told her about my sleeping arrangements.

Twenty-five years old, Dani, and not married...tsk!

It was a conversation often repeated; it was the one contention between us. It was her only wish to see me safely, blissfully married, as she had been.

So, she read her cards, made prophesies. But no man came, except the lover in the mirror and I couldn't tell gran about *him*!

And I couldn't tell her—I couldn't allow myself to even think it—that this mirror-man would be the only man for me. The only man in my life. Ever! What man could compete with my hallucinations?

Until today when Mr. Europe arrived.

He was tall and handsome, golden; my passions for him were of revulsion, not desire.

Tonight, Panther wound around my neck, head butting my cheek, tapping my face with a paw, stroking me, talking.

"I wish I could understand cat-speak, but I'm just a dumb human, Pan!"

Just a dumb human...

Try as I might I couldn't get the image of that

pseudo-Frenchman out of my mind.

Pan did his best to distract me with his licking and his paws, rubbing his cheek against mine, pushing his wet nose against my temple. I stroked the length of his body, scratching at the base of his tail—his favorite place. He went into ecstasy and rolled onto his back, twisting himself back and forth.

I went to sleep with my hand on Pan's stomach, his front paws wrapped around my arm. As I drifted off, I caught that musk-scent and it coiled into me, heating, arousing, but tonight it was strangely soothing...

I dreamed of the mirror-man and woke, bathed in perspiration.

As I struggled to wakefulness, I heard the thud downstairs.

Pan was instantly on his feet, his body rigid, his nose pointing to the door.

That was good enough for me.

I reached for the phone at the bedside table, but lifting the receiver, I found no dial tone. My mobile phone was downstairs on my desk.

Great!

Shrugging myself into my dressing-gown I crept to the door and opened it, heart hammering.

Pan raced ahead of me, stalking low along the wooden floor.

I paused at the top of the stairs, heart pounding, ears straining. There was definitely someone in the shop.

I crept downstairs and took out an antique umbrella from the hall stand.

The noise was coming from the back room. Was it the mirror again?

Swallowing convulsively, I slipped along the

passageway and peered around the door.

I saw a man shape pass beneath the skylight.

It was the bloody Frenchman!

"I've called the police!" I said, surprised that my voice was so firm. I was shaking so much I could hardly stand. I flicked on the light switch.

Golden-boy whirled, going into a defensive crouch, his arms extended, his hands curling, like claws. I actually heard him growl.

Then he straightened and he laughed, his blue eyes contemptuous.

"What do you want?" I demanded.

"What is mine by right."

"Fuck off!" I raced forward, wielding the umbrella with all my might and it crunched against his forearm.

He wrenched the umbrella away and slapped me across the face. I reeled backwards.

A black shape launched itself at him and as I struggled to my feet I saw Pan attached to the man's head, clawing and spitting. The Frenchman tried to peel off the cat. Pan held firm. Blood dripped down the Frenchman's face as Pan's claws and teeth found their mark.

Man and cat were locked in a fight to...what? Death?

I knew then with a terrible cold dread that only one would walk away alive from this fight. Would it be cat or man?

In the struggle, the cover over the mirror was torn away. I gasped to see that the mirror revealed the battle: two men, my dream-lover and another ...of similar ilk. Where my lover was dark, his antagonist

was fair; his muscular body covered in fine tawny down, his long golden hair to his waist.

Light and darkness were locked in mortal combat, kicking, gouging, biting, scratching.

For a moment my dark-man prevailed, then golden-man grasped the collar about my lover's neck.

Immediately dark-boy screamed and collapsed, writhing on the floor, crying out in a language I did not know. The scene of Pan's fit played in my mind, the night I had touched the collar...

Dry-mouthed, immobile with shock, I watched as golden-boy kicked his opponent. Over and over his boot contacted my lover, who in his utter agony was defenseless against the attack. Golden-boy laughed.

I launched myself at him, colliding against his rock-hard body. I clawed his face.

He grasped me by the shoulders and flung me away. I crashed against the wall. I sagged, winded.

He strode forward, wrenching at his waistband, zipping down, his erection boldly emerging.

He dragged me to my feet and hurled me face first against the wall, imprisoning me there with the weight of his body. He dragged my wrists up against the wall, holding me effortlessly with one hand.

His strength was inhuman.

Inhuman. I knew it then: this man was no man, but a monster...

I screamed as I felt his erection pressing against my tightly clenched thighs. I writhed, and he grasped me by the hair, dragging my head back.

His tongue licked my neck in a mockery of my dream-lover's caress.

"I have subdued better than you, bitch! Relax, you'll enjoy it...in the end."

A hot reeking musky scent coiled into my nostrils as he breathed over my face. I gagged at the awful stench.

My nightgown tore in the frenzy of our struggle, and I felt more than material rip as his fingers raked over me. Pain lanced down my body, my thighs, as his nails ripped my skin.

I felt him trying to finger-fuck me. I cried out and with all my strength I made one desperate bid to escape. He merely laughed at my futile attempt. His knee dug between my legs, pushing upwards, opening me to his assault.

"Get away from her!" a male voice screamed.

My would-be rapist was dragged away and I turned, pitching forward onto my knees.

The two men were fighting again, hands clawing at throats. In the mirror reflection I saw two huge cats tearing at each other: one gold, the other black.

The mirror does not lie.

I raced out of the room, hearing the screams and the crashes and returned with a heavy metal poker from the fireplace.

I wielded it against the golden-one, all my weight behind the blow. He fell to the floor and lay still. Dark-boy crawled away, coughing.

I crept closer, poker in hand, towards the enemy. Lightning fast, he grabbed me by the throat, squeezing. Sparks danced before my eyes and I clawed at his hands.

It was pure blind instinct that I punched him hard in the groin and he screamed and doubled up, releasing me.

Then he was on his feet again, stalking me, murder in his eyes.

The dark cat launched himself at his rival. They wrestled around the floor. But every time he gained the upper hand/claw/paw, his antagonist managed to subdue him by grasping the collar.

"I'll kill you!" gold-boy said. "Submit or die."

"Go to hell!" my lover spat.

Laughing, the golden one leaned over his prey, tugging at the collar. My lover screamed and contorted, blood dripping from beneath his collar.

"Leave him alone!" I cried.

Gold-boy straightened and looked over his shoulder. "I will finish him, then you." His dark eyes glinted. "You will not enjoy it, that I promise you!"

He turned away to subdue his enemy. I lifted the poker in two hands and shoved him in the back, piercing flesh and he was propelled forward, away from my lover.

He stumbled, crashing against the mirror.

His body, from the waist disappeared into the mirror, but the mirror hadn't broken. A strange landscape erupted over the mirror's surface; a thick forest, a turreted castle in the distance, two red moons in a purple sky.

He pushed himself back from the surface of the mirror that I saw was now suspended between liquid and solid.

Nerveless, my hand dropped the poker and it clattered to the floor.

In that moment, the dark one launched himself on his feet and was at his enemy, pushing him through the

mirror.

I leapt to help him, not understanding, just knowing that it was the only way to rid ourselves of our foe.

Between the two of us, and despite his terrible strength and his even more terrible screams, we managed to lift the golden-one through the mirror.

When I blinked away my tears of fright, I saw him behind the mirror surface, struggling with others like him, cat-men, claws extended, ripping, rending. No quarter given, or asked.

Before my eye he was torn asunder, and the mirror's surface split, shattered and fell into millions of light-shards, leaving only the gilt frame intact.

The dark one fell to his knees before the mirror, head cradled in his hands. He wept.

I dragged myself to him and reached out a trembling hand. Pain lanced through me: his pain. It pierced my brain like a brand and I screamed.

Darkness washed over me.

* * * *

I found myself on my bed, stripped, my dark-lover sitting at my side. He gently dabbed a herbal lotion at the scratches on my shoulder and thighs.

I hissed at the pain and his hand stilled. His gaze held mine.

"I'm sorry you were hurt because of me. You fought like a she-cat."

"Is that a compliment?" I asked shakily.

"Yes." His hand cupped my chin, his gaze intense.

"The first question that is generally asked in such

circumstances, is—who are you? I think I'd rather ask: what happened?" I swallowed against the pain and the fear, my heart in my throat.

"You called me Pan. Short for panther. It is an appropriate name for me."

"I called my cat...Pan!"

"And so I was...and am...a cat!"

I struggled to sit upright and drew the sheet across my body. He frowned at my protective gesture.

"Don't be afraid of me. Not ever, of me!"

"Then you'd better explain just why I should *not* be afraid of you!"

He shivered. We were both naked, covered in scratches and bruises. Rivulets of blood, emanating from beneath his collar, lay congealed on his neck and shoulders.

I reached out a hand to the collar and he flinched.

He smiled tightly. "An old habit. The device cannot control anymore. Will you remove it from me?"

I swallowed and leaned forward, sliding the collar about so I could reach the catch. He grimaced. It must have hurt him, but he remained motionless and silent.

I tugged at the clasp and it finally came free. Inside the collar were four needles that would have been embedded in his flesh.

I gasped at the cruelty, sickened to my stomach to remember the times I had touched the collar and what it had done to him. How I must have hurt him!

"They control...effectively," he said hoarsely. "The needles contain the dominance spell. Ferewn is...*was*...well versed in the darkness."

"What?"

He smiled gently. "I am not explaining very well, am I?"

"Not one damn bit."

"I am of the *wyre*. A shape-shifter; I am cat, I am man. It is my gift to be feline. Others who have the *wyre* gift can assume other forms. Ferewn—"

"Golden-boy?"

He laughed. "Yes, golden-boy! Ferewn was clan leader, but his way was corrupt. He became our nemesis. Those of the clan who opposed him were collared and banished."

"Those in the mirror...are your clan?"

"Yes."

And so for long into that night he told me about himself, his people.

"But I don't understand how you came here. I found you in the cellar..."

"Ferewn and I knew there was a gateway, and I found it first. We battled to possess it. I lost. I managed to drag myself here through the gate and you found me." He clasped my hand between his.

"Gateway? You mean a doorway between worlds?"

"Yes. For a human you understand remarkably well."

"Thanks. It's my job."

His brows lifted.

"You'd know I write about this sort of stuff, if you didn't spend so much time sleeping on my bed when I was working."

He grinned. "I prefer bed to work, any day!"

His finger traced up my arm and I swatted him away.

"And the mirror was a gateway?" I asked.

"A powerful one. We have been seeking it for years. Ferewn would have used it for domination, rather than pleasure, for exploration." He smiled. "This world offers a multitude of delights and it is a favorite playground of the wyre...and others."

"There are more cats?"

"Cats, wolves, falcons... The occasional eagle."

I lifted the collar. "This stopped you from becoming a man for me? So you stayed with me as the cat? Because of the mirror?" Disappointment was a lead weight in the pit of my stomach. I flung the collar away and it clattered against the floor.

"The collars stop us transmorfin' from human to wyre."

"But not you?"

"The pain of it was nothing to the lure of loving you."

I remembered the aftermath of the times he had *transmorfed*.

"I saw your true self in the mirror?"

"The mirror cannot hide our nature." He cupped my chin. "Our true intent."

"But the mirror is destroyed. You're trapped here."

He smiled gently. "I would prefer to be trapped here with you, than be alone." He shrugged. "There are other gateways, as I have said."

"And...and you will find one?"

"In the future. For the moment, my journeys are over. But later, you must travel the cosmos with me. I must take you to my home world when you birth. It is our custom."

My heart and mind reeled. His fingers stroked my palm, my wrist. I tried to tug my hand away, but he held fast, smiling, his eyes teasing, holding my gaze.

Take you to my home world when you birth? – that’s what he had said!

“What...what are you saying, Pan? Look, I can’t call you Pan. That’s the name of my cat.”

He laughed. “So I *am* your cat.” He leaned forward and I smelled him, cinnamon man-scent and cat-musk. He breathed that musk over me, that scent that drove me to distraction. Now I knew its origins. He had been seducing me as a...wyre.

The most terrible thought plunged into me. “I told Gran I was going to have you neutered.”

His face paled. “I remember.”

“And you ran away.”

“Naturally! I am wyre. We are proud of our potency!” He grinned. “Your kinswoman said you would prove a challenge.”

“Your what—?” I frowned. “You spoke to Gran?”

“We communed.”

“That doesn’t explain anything!”

“I’m tired of explanations.” He kissed me gently. “Shall I lick you, bite you, suck you?” His whisper thrummed.

I groaned. “Tell me your true name.”

“I like Pan better.”

“Your name?”

Smiling, he shook his head. He leant across me, across the bed and lifted a phial of oil from the table.

He poured a little of the liquid into the palm of his hand.

He rolled the oil between his palms, warming it with his skin and blowing on it. Musk scent combined with cinnamon to form that sex-essence I knew so well.

"What are you doing?"

He raised a quizzical brow. "You've been hurt in your defense of me. Let me soothe you." He smiled. "Later that other soothing, for the moment... this. Face down."

I did as he commanded. I felt his knee between my legs, a silent enquiry to which I silently agreed. He knelt between my wide spread thighs and leaned forward. I felt his hair swish across the small of my back. I stifled a groan into the pillow.

He laughed and then lightly traced my back with finger tips, the touch growing heavier as he traced over my flesh. I shivered in delightful anticipation.

He massaged my back, my neck, shoulders with sure, confident strokes. A deeper massage found pleasure places that made me shudder and gasp.

"You are very responsive," he whispered huskily. "That is good!"

His hands smoothed down my buttocks, and a finger quested into me. I nearly lifted off the bed.

"Hmm. Very responsive." He kissed the small of my back. Lower his hands feathered, rubbing and kneading sore flesh. I didn't know how much I hurt before his touch and his touch left a deeper hurt, a deeper yearning.

He probed my feet, pressing into the reflex points. I curled my toes in abject delight.

"Turn," he said.

"I'm paralyzed."

He laughed and slipped a hand beneath me, while using his other hand to guide my legs over him. In that process I was wide open to his gaze. His eyes were burning as he regarded me.

I lay spread-eagled on the bed, he kneeling at my thighs. Again, he reached across me, his hair swishing over my breasts, to grab the oil bottle. His lips brushed mine as he drew back across me, to resume kneeling between my thighs. He poured oil onto his hand and rolled it between his palms, blowing on it, scenting it with his own cat-scent.

He proceeded to massage my face, my neck, my shoulders. Lower, to my breasts. The nipples contracted to hard nubs and he bent forward to take each into his mouth, a gentle lick, a playful bite.

Lower his hands fanned over my rib cage, stomach, to the juncture of my thighs. He ignored my molten core and massaged his way down one leg, then the other, lifting each leg so that he could rub my toes, giving each individual attention.

"Oh," I cried.

"Oh?" He massaged deeper.

"Ooooh."

He grinned. "Much better. Ooooooh," he mimicked.

I gazed up at him, along the length of my right leg. My foot rested on his shoulder as he massaged my toes. He gazed down my length, to find that place so intimately exposed.

His smile was pure predatory cat. His smile was pure male arrogance. He dripped confidence—he knew how to please.

My mouth was dry. There was a heavy expectancy

in my chest, in the pit of my stomach, in the secret cleft that wept for him.

"Better?" he asked.

"No. It hurts all over."

His brow raised elegantly.

He pushed me down onto the bed and straddled my body, holding himself above me, by knees and arms. He swished his long hair across my skin, tickling, teasing. "Later, I will explain everything. Later." He put a finger to my lips. "Later," he purred.

Tentatively, I reached up to touch him, afraid that he would disappear and I would have the cat...

He laughed. Blue light played around his body and Pan-the-cat sat on my chest, his paws kneading my breasts, his claws digging ever so gently into my aureole. I hardened immediately.

Purring, he transmorfed back to the man and lowered himself onto me. I opened wide beneath him and felt his erection pressing into my belly. I shifted and he raised himself away, eluding.

"You are too eager. It is a human weakness. The wyre will teach you patience, and from it, pleasure such as you have never known."

He was true to his word. Lips, tongue, claws, hands, paws, feet, tail... wyre-man and wyre-cat loved me until I was disoriented.

Sometimes he hovered between cat and man, so that he could pleasure me in both his forms. Whiskers scratched down my body, pricking, teasing, then hair swished over me, claws dug gently into me, then fingers.

"Pan!" I screamed over and over. "Panther! Stop!"

"Stop? He paused above me, his dark brow raised, his green eyes aflame. "Stop? Is that what you wish?"

"Yes." I rolled my head from side to side in denial of my word.

He laughed. "I rather thought not."

"Those things I saw in the mirror..."

"A taste, *kitten*, of what will be."

"I am not a kitten!"

He smiled. "No, more the hell-cat."

He pulled me on top of him, drawing me up, so that I sat on his chest and he gazed at my secret body. He blew gently over my folds and I shivered.

For a moment I felt the rush of disquiet and he raised his gaze to mine.

"Embarrassment?" He smiled. "Let me ease, let me please. Never feel shame with me, Danielle."

"Dani," I said.

"It is a boy's name. You, dear-heart are certainly all woman. Certainly, all mine. Or soon shall you be!"

Hot cinnamon-musk was blown over me.

His hands cupped my hips, slid under my bottom, guiding me forward. His tongue tip parted me and his mouth delved. Again, his tongue tip led the foray, flicking and caressing. I was bitten gently and suckled.

He held me upright, his hands splayed at the small of my back, else I would have collapsed as pleasure-ripple followed pleasure-ripple.

"Yours is the sweetest cream a cat can find, Danielle. Mmmm."

Then, with our position reversed, I reciprocated and brought him trembling and screaming to his own release through the actions of my mouth and tongue

and teeth. He demanded that I bite him. So, I did. His growls of delight echoed about the room. I scratched him and he writhed and purred. I held my hair in my hand and dragged it over his body, over his swollen sex.

“Ah!” he screamed and growled.

Stretched out beside one another, we explored bodies with fingers, tongues, hands. He transmored from cat to man and I swatted him, grasping his hair in my fist, tethering him to me.

“It is the nature of the cat to be playful, Danielle.” He studied me, propped up on an elbow, his head in his hand. He touched me, stroking a nail/claw over my stomach. “You do not find me too alien?”

I sensed his fear and I shook my head. “No, you are beautiful. I love your cat-eyes, your skin, your fur...” I stroked his skin, my fingers sliding over the strands of black velvet. I reversed my touch and felt the resistance of stroking fur the wrong way.

“There is no wrong way to stroke a cat’s fur,” he whispered.

My hand halted and I looked at him. “You can read my mind?”

“The bond is between us, dear-heart. It is the soul-touch. I am part of you, as you are part of me.” He smiled. ‘Every wyre covets the soul-touch; we roam far and wide in search of it. And once found...it is forever.”

Forever. I liked the sound of that.

I reached out and tugged his thickness.

I leaned forward and flicked his nipples with my teeth and tongue. I licked and I bit. He purred in

contentment.

I laughed. I knew how to tame the cat! "Now," I said, my tongue tip touching his erection. "Now, will you tell me your name?" I bit gently. His fingers dug into my hair. He groaned and writhed beneath my ministrations. "Tell me your name."

"I...I cannot think when you do that. Ah."

I stopped and raised my head to look at him. "Tell me your name and I will torture you some more."

He smiled. "You do have the nature of a cat."

"Compliments might get you anywhere—if I'm feeling generous." I bit again. I scratched my thumb nail over his taut belly. Lower...I halted and lifted my gaze to his. I raised a brow in silent question.

"Dear-heart. I..." He reverted to his own language and I knew then he was a wyre about to lose control.

"Your name?"

"Danielle, what does it matter?" He paused and drew in a ragged breath. "Tarran. My name is Tarran."

I dipped my tongue over his length. "There's a good kitty."

With a roar, he launched himself upright, and dragged me into his arms. "I will show you, I am not a good kitty!"

He parted my thighs with his hand, slipping a finger just inside me. Remaining there, he gently teased, probed. I moaned with the pleasure; a pleasure that became a heavy pressure that spread within me; that raced across my intimate flesh, to my nub. I shifted away to gain a respite from the sweet torment. He allowed me to control the moment, and I returned my body to his finger-touch.

Over and over he repeated this, until at last I exploded and screamed, drawing him to me.

In that final moment he entered me, a swift determined stroke that spread me open, branding me as his; he, as mine.

He moved against me and I held him, drawing my hand to the base of his spine, scratching. Par's favorite place, was also the man's.

He purred deep within, the vibrations extending along the length of his body, into me, as his penis throbbed and vibrated against my inner flesh.

I wrapped my legs around him, crossing my ankles at the small of his back, where my heels pressured and rubbed as he moved against me. He growled.

Cat and man became one.

I laughed and he paused and raised himself on his elbows. His eyes were alight to my mischief.

"Tell me," he coaxed.

"Gran said I would meet my soul-mate on a dark, stormy night. He would be T. D. H."

"T. D. H.?"

"Tall, dark and handsome."

He grinned, his green-gold eyes blazing. "Your kinswoman is a seer! I saw it the moment we met. She saved my life."

"Gran is gran."

"True witch-blood is rare. She has it, as do you."

"I do not!"

He nuzzled my cheek and licked my lips. "You are witch, Danielle, else you would not be with me! Ah, dear-heart – no more questions."

"But..."

His mouth silenced me and he moved against me again.

"But," I managed to whisper. "I did meet you on a dark, stormy night." I stopped his undulations, by grasping his hair in my fist, pulling his head back so I could study him. "Are you my soul mate?"

"You have to *ask*?"

I frowned up at him. Then I smiled. "No, I do not."

"Soul-mate; *eireth-naem*," he said. "In the language of the wyre, it has more meaning than even 'I love you'. Shall I reveal what it means?"

"*Eireth-naem*, yes. But only show me a little at a time."

"You have learned the virtue of patience."

"So it would seem."

Laughing, he thrust into me again and then lowered his mouth to mine.

Your soul mate will come on a dark and stormy night. He will be tall, dark and handsome.

Gran's cards never lied. But they never told me that my soul mate would be a cat. There are some things that even the cards cannot foresee.

But now, with Pan, I knew that one day I would journey with him to places I had glimpsed and we would savor passions that only a cat-man and his she-cat could explore...

TO BE CONTINUED.

SHADOW-MAN

Do not judge me—you, human, who so wantonly kills for sport.

I hunt to live.

I hunt in places you cannot imagine; dare not imagine.

Demon.

Succubus.

I am these things and more. Misunderstood? Yes; but I do not need to justify my existence to you. I am *lilan*, hunter by nature and lover by choice.

I give pleasure in exchange for the Gift. Sometimes that pleasure is too much and the man dies from heart or brain seizure—his, an inherent weakness that I cannot know, until it is too late. I regret the death. I sometimes mourn.

Do not judge me. *Do not dare!*

* * * *

Sereia's melancholic thoughts raced out of control as she perched on the bar stool, her black leather skirt hitched up around her right thigh.

Hers was a blatant invitation, a practiced draping, a

posturing, intended to lure. It lured, but she often rejected those she attracted.

She was too selective, some of her sisters mocked. Yes, she was, but why take the first swine when with a little patience and finesse, she could bait a god?

She smiled ruefully at that. In the twenty-first century, gods were few and far between. But the godhood existed, in diluted form...

Bouquet, the vampire-kin craved it. *Soul-touch*, the wyre sought it. *Godhood*, the lilan hunted it; the essence, the nectar of life, fomented through death or sex.

She preferred the sex-catalyst, to take the essence as a gift, but others were not so particular. They tore it from their victims, caring not what they did, only anxious that they could drink the nectar and live.

Would she taste heaven tonight? She sighed. The possibility... always the possibility... but rarely the reality.

The thumping music barely infiltrated her mood. Her hunter-instinct directed to the carnal, she caught the unmistakable scent of sex: performed and promised in the darkness of the night club. Also, the aroma of dope and cocaine, the designer drugs and the alcohol. 'The Den' was a dangerous place—she did not care.

Danger heightened the senses, fed the desire, making the hunt all the more intense.

Danger and sex: a potent, aged combination that lured many to their doom.

She shivered. Her instinct immediately alerted, she swiveled in her seat, her heart slowing. She scented the air and then saw him. Her body constricted. The blood slowed in her veins.

His silhouette dominated the top of the stairs. He paused to orientate himself, as one of the lilan might, his stance that of the hunter.

For whom or what did *he* quest?

She watched him descend the stairs and stalk across the floor, weaving in and out of the dancers, avoiding contact.

He stood at the far end of the room, arms folded.

With lilan-senses she studied his profile, probed his psyche. Would he have the godhood?

He was at least six feet, trim, muscular. Good. She liked a tall mount, with the strength to hold her as she demanded.

Dressed in black, his jeans hugged long legs and a taut butt; his shirt was rolled back to reveal tanned forearms. Her gaze dipped lower, taking in his length, down to the ring boots decorated with more chains and studs. His own particular fetish. This was getting interesting—she liked men with fetish-tastes! His dark hair was cropped close. Now, that was a pity! She preferred to run her fingers through her lover's long hair.

He was a man of shadow. And danger: a pistol was strapped to his inner right ankle, inside a sheath. *Hunter-joined* to him, she felt the irritation of the holster against his skin.

Her gaze swept up him again, savoring, eyes devouring. Dark of hair and clothes, dark of purpose—she would call him shadow-man. It would be his lilan-name.

In his designer-hip clothes he looked the part, but was not. Cop? Probably.

Excitement flared inside her. She hadn't had a cop before. Too much trouble. Too hazardous.

Tonight, she was in the mood for danger, else why be in 'The Den', the nightclub, the lair of the depraved: the innuendo no doubt intended by its colorful owners.

She watched as he jostled a place at the bar and stood leaning against it, facing outward, watching the crowd.

For whom, or what, did he search?

I am here. She sent out the thought, tinged with the gentle lure of hunt-pheromone.

She felt his heart lurch and blood race to his cock. He gasped, swallowed. His gaze swept the crowd, touched her, went to move on, then halted. Recognition was made.

She smiled.

His dark eyes smoldered as he studied her.

She inclined her head and sipped her soda, running her tongue over her lips as she lowered the glass.

Come hither! Her body beckoned, her fragrance seduced.

To her astonishment, he resisted.

Great Lilith, he resists my bait!

Rarely, in her experience did a human withstand her invitation. And those men who did carried the godhood within them.

Her woman's flesh tightened at the thought, the promise of what would lie ahead this night. Perhaps for many nights to come. *Come.* Literally, figuratively, he would, she would... They would both come.

She mind-sent more forcefully, a gentle invasion; she would not rape his psyche, or his body. She could do both, if she desired. But for her, sex and violence were

not synonymous.

In her mind's eye she viewed herself through his limited human perceptions. It amused her to discover what he saw.

A tall woman, slim, clad in a black leather mini skirt and bustier; her thigh-high boots with the impossibly high heels emphasizing the length of her legs. Her blonde hair cut in a jagged style, the ends tinged purple. No jewelry, no cosmetics save the purple lipstick that highlighted her amethyst eyes.

Fuck, who IS she? His thoughts touched hers.

I am yours, she retorted and raised a dark brow at him.

His sex-scent swirled around her, through her. Men were so easy to read, but this one, not so transparent, save for the tightening of his body, the erection thickening, as his awareness of her descended to a more primal level.

She withdrew her telepathic provocation.

He downed the contents of his glass; soda, no alcohol. So much the better, she allowed no drugs of any kind to invade her body. It pleased her to know that he would not be drug-blunted.

Then, he pushed himself from the bar and strode towards her. Determined. Almost the hunter. It amused her to allow him the illusion.

He stood beside her, again facing outwards, watching the crowd. Nonchalantly.

He glanced at her and smiled; a boy smile incongruous in his man face.

A handsome face, yes, but strong, a mouth determined and eyes the color of flint and just as hard.

A man who had seen too much, had done too much...

"Do you come here often?" he asked, a southern drawl, an accent, soft, inconsistent with his harsh façade.

"I never *come* here," she said, huskily, leaving no doubt of her *double entendre*.

He blushed. Actually blushed! Intriguing, this man of shadows and implications.

He frowned at her. "Zac Delaney," he said, extending his hand.

She noticed the silver bracelet and plaited leather thong on his wrist as she took his hand.

Male strength, male promise, raced up her skin at the contact. Her fingers twined with his.

"Sereia," she said.

His dark brows lifted. "Sereia...?"

"No last name. Sereia."

"I detect an accent. You're not from Vegas?"

"I'm cosmopolitan," she replied.

"A woman of the world?"

"Many worlds."

"Me too!" He smiled, an enigmatic smile.

He was playing with her. She rather liked the thought of playing a game or two with this god-man.

He glanced at her. "Would you like to dance?"

She eyed the crowded floor. "I never dance in public."

He smiled. "But in private?"

"Oh, yes."

"And what sort of dances do you do in private?" His voice was deeper, husky. Thrust and parry: hunt and

retreat—this man knew the rules of the chase. She savored him, scenting him. In response, his breath quickened.

"I could show you the dance I prefer," she purred.

"You could." He grinned and turned back to study the dancers. He shivered at her proximity.

Her nostrils flared. Here was a prey worthy of the hunt, of her skill to lure, to entrap. Great Goddess, it had been so long! Pheromones washed through her and some of that scent must have reached him, for he turned to her, his gaze feral.

She pulled back, a lilan's instinct controlling her reflex. *Danger. Beware.* Beware of this man? Her heart slowed again as she studied him.

Yes, whatever the cost, she would have him!

His hand clasped her wrist. "You don't belong here," he said.

"Neither do you," she countered.

"Touché!"

"And where do you think I belong?" She regarded him through narrowed eyes.

He laughed. "If I told you, you'd slap my face."

She laughed. "I could slap you, but not your face." She leaned forward. "Would you like that?"

"I might." He grinned. "Are you offering?"

"Are you asking? I—"

A crash of glass and a woman's scream erupted from the darkness and Sereia turned, as he turned, watching the brawl, the flailing bodies wrestling over the table, crashing to the floor. White powder misted into the air.

Alarmed, she rose to her feet, blocking the cocaine-

scent away. Her heightened senses would capture the drug, transmuting it. No telling what would happen...what she'd do.

"Time to leave," he said, offering her his arm.

That archaic courtesy had not been offered her for fifty years. A gentleman, this cop, this man with flint-hard eyes and body. She slipped her hand through his arm and splayed her fingers over his taut forearm, feeling beneath her hand the warm whipcord flesh and the light smattering of hair.

Security guards flung the crowd aside to reach the fight, before too much damage was done. They inflicted their own damage, blood flying.

Zac guided her up the stairs and outside into the alley. Sereia relished the cool night air. A little after midnight: the witching hour. She smiled at the thought. Perhaps one of the coven-kin would be hunting for her own brand of stimulation.

'Where to?' Zac asked.

'You want to take me home?'

"Your place, or mine?" He laughed at the cliché.

'Yours,' she said. She never took a man to her den, at least not the first time.

He led her across the road, to the parking station, using the key card to gain access.

In the elevator, their bodies touched from hip to thigh. She shivered and Zac's body super-novaed. His arousal-scent wafted over her, through her. In response, her body constricted with anticipation of having him inside her, every powerful male inch. The intensity of her *awakening* made her light-headed.

As she stepped out of the elevator, she stumbled;

and he caught her around the waist.

She smiled her thanks, and pressed her body against his length. His arms tightened about her and she lifted a thigh to push intimately against him.

He grinned, his eyes alight to her mischief. "If you do that sweetheart, we won't make it to my car."

She pressed a finger to his mouth. His tongue tip touched her finger, drawing it inside his mouth, sucking, biting.

Sereia groaned. Now who was hunter, the hunted? At that moment of awakening, she was uncertain. The only certainty was that she would have this man; devour him from head to toe, from inside out.

Arm in arm, they moved forward, Zac ushering her down the bay to where a black corvette was parked against the far wall.

An electronic chime and the car's security flashed, then Zac flung open the passenger door.

She slithered onto the black leather seat and he closed the door behind her. Inwardly, she smiled at this man of contrasts—the predator and the gentleman.

He opened the driver's door and folded himself inside the car, his frame dominating the interior.

As he went to turn on the ignition, she reached across and stilled his hand.

"Wait," she purred.

His brow raised. "Second thoughts?"

"Thoughts, yes. What I'm going to do to you here."

His brow arched even higher. "Do to me? I rather thought *I'd* do you."

"I might let you, if you're a good boy."

"I'm neither good, nor a boy, sweetheart."

"So much the better." Sereia reached down and cupped him between the legs. He all but lifted off the seat, stifling a groan. "You can't drive as you are," she said. "You'll crash the car."

He laughed at that. "This car's too small for *that* kind of dancing."

"There's dancing and there's dancing, Zac. I'll show you."

His dark brows lifted.

She unbuckled his belt, zipped down his jeans and snaked her hand inside. Surprise turned to delight as she discovered that he wore no underwear.

"Boy scout," she whispered.

"Excuse me?"

"Boy scout, always prepared, ready for any occasion. Ready for action!" Her gaze held his and she sent him the first *ping* of ecstasy. Against her palm, his arousal thickened, hardened, skin stretching. She felt his pleasure and it was a throbbing need, a delicious bitter-sweet pain.

She leaned forward, lowering over him, her mouth descending, flicking the tip of his erection with her tongue. His hands locked into her hair, fingers fanning out across the back of her skull, guiding, caressing.

"Oh..." A groan, almost in pain as she lathered him, taking him deep inside her mouth. She withdrew, then returned, teasing the tip with her tongue, moistening before descending on him again.

Male sex-scent washed over her. She opened her senses to it, devouring, drawing it deep inside. Her lilan essence mingled with his; theirs became a sinuous dance of essences that fed her hunger, fuelled him to a

deeper, savage passion.

She brought him to the peak and held him there, his thighs quivering beneath her cheek. She held him prisoner, until his pleasure became a pain too much to bear. He exploded into her; his seed, his power, his god-hood essence and she consumed all he offered.

The sounds of harsh breathing combined with the musky scent of sex brought Sereia back to herself.

"What about you, sweetheart?" his voice intruded.

"What about me?"

"What do you want me to do to you?"

Incredulously, she lifted her head. This man was asking about her needs in the aftermath of his climax? Rare – no, unique! This man was truly special.

"Later," she said. "Later, I'll show you what I want. Do you like adventure?"

His steady gaze held hers. "I'm not into pain, if that's what you mean?"

"Neither am I. I don't like whips or chains..." Both and more had been inflicted on her in the inquisitors' dungeon, before she had escaped. "I live for pleasure."

"Pleasure for you is going to have to wait unless I do you here? Because I'm not going to be able to drive for a while." He held up his hands to reveal his trembling. He smiled ruefully. "And I do want to fuck you. *Oh man!*"

"This car is impossible."

"A challenge," he said and reaching down, shifted his seat back as far as it would go. "See."

"Yes, I see," she said, her gaze resting on his erection rampant against his stomach. "An invitation I can accept." She reached down to unzip her boots.

"No," he said. "Leave them on. It's sexy. I have a boot fetish." He blushed. Actually — *blushed!*

Sereia climbed onto his lap, facing him, her thighs pressed against his.

Immediately, his hands quested upwards, lifting the leather skirt, coming to the juncture of her thighs. She saw his smile as he discovered that no underwear would impede his fingers.

"Boy scout, too, huh?" he asked.

She laughed at the *double entendre*. Always scouting for boys...all her long life.

Her mouth closed over his and their kiss intensified as tongues joined and explored, as his fingers quested upwards, entering. He slipped into her, so slow, so smooth. She sighed.

"You're ready for me," he said. "Hot and moist."

Truth be told, she had been ready for him the moment she had seen him. She couldn't tell him that, though. No woman, let alone one of the *lilan*, must ever reveal that to a man.

Human men might pride themselves on being the hunter; in reality it was women who hunted, made the rules of the ancient game of thrust and parry, whether the woman was mortal or *lilan*, wyre or vampire.

A finger carefully probed her depth, then twirled around, teasing inner muscles. She clenched her core against him, holding him prisoner, before relaxing.

"You've got strong control there, sweetheart." His sultry voice washed over her. "It's going to be a pleasure to feel you around my prick."

She enjoyed a man's pillow-talk; the sexier the better. "Yes, I will sheathe you hard. Do you know I

can pump you using only my inner muscles. Do you think you might like that?"

In response he shivered against her.

Another finger gained entry, then both withdrew to seek, to find her clit.

He teased with finger tips and scraped with nails until she shivered with pleasure.

She pulled back to look at him.

His smile was pure male: predatory, triumphant as he brought her closer and closer to that place of death and re-birth: the orgasm.

"You like this?" he asked.

"You can't tell?"

"I wanted to hear it from your lips."

She smiled. "Which lips?"

He laughed. "Both."

"You shall."

He hitched up her skirt to her waist. Then, grasping her buttocks, he cupped her bottom, guiding her over his penis, bringing her down upon it.

Their sigh in unison as contact was made, as he entered and she received... essences mingled. He thrust upwards, lifting from the seat, she drove down, her knees against his outer thighs, controlling the momentum.

She grasped his neck and rode him, her mouth upon his, savoring, hungering. He matched her strokes of body and tongue.

Sereia mind-linked with him, her craving accepting his life-force. About her, her aura glowed, bathing him in its purple tint. Her light, her power entered him, sought his core, merged and took all he offered as he

thrust up into her, harder, faster.

She tensed her inner muscles against him, holding him prisoner. He grew inside, fighting the restriction. Sereia held him fast and squeezed.

"God...what are you doing to me?" he whispered. "Ah...sweet Jesus, don't stop. Do it, harder. *Harder, damn it!*"

Sereia obliged and he gasped. His cock was burning her, scalding her with god-hood. They moved together, flesh to flesh in that most intimate of dances.

She screamed her release as his potency spilled into her, wave upon wave.

The minutes passed, the universe cooled and her body rested, sated, after so long an abstinence.

"Now," she purred, "will you tell me your real name?"

He pulled back to regard her, shocked.

"Tell me, please," she ran a finger over his lips.

"It matters?"

"Oh yes."

His smile trembled. He was spent—in every way; his life-force dangerously low. She had almost taken too much. The gift of a true name... would he give it to her?

"Jeff," he whispered, hoarsely. "Jeff Delaney."

And at that moment the driver's door was wrenched open and hands and arms plunged in, dragging them apart, pulling them outside.

Taken unawares, Sereia did not fight back and when she overcame the shock, it was too late. She was held between two men, as was Jeff.

"Here's the cop. I told you! Fucking out his brains

with a bitch!" one man said, a hulking creature as ugly as he was tall. Danger and drugs-scent emanated from him.

"Can't blame him, can ya?" Another man said, his stare centered on Sereia's body exposed by the skirt hitched around her waist. His hand went to his zipper. "We'll kill the cop, but let's have a bit of fun! Me first. Spread her on the bonnet."

"No!" Jeff's strangled cry was silenced by a fist to his gut. Coughing, he doubled over.

Sereia brought all her strength to bear as the men wrestled her forward. She tugged at each man and flung them together. The men slammed into each other, bones breaking with the impact. Screaming, they went down like sacks of wheat.

"What the —?" One of the men began.

"Get out of here, Sereia. *Run!*" Jeff shouted as he almost broke free from his attackers.

Jeff and the men fell onto the concrete in a tangle of arms and legs, punching, gouging, kicking and biting.

Sereia hauled one of the men backwards flinging him away. He landed on the floor with a dull crack, his head split open, blood pooling around him.

On the periphery of her awareness, she caught the taint of blood. It made her nauseous, the coppery-salty stench.

Jeff was on his knees, fighting with the remaining man, digging down to get the pistol in the ankle holster.

A shot rang out and for a moment both men were still. Then, Jeff crumpled backwards, clutching his gut, a red stain welling between his fingers.

The man turned to her, grinning, his gun leveled at her. "Your turn, bitch!"

Sereia held up her hands, building a shield. Then, with her mind-force she broke through his skin, finding his heart, tearing it apart.

In a moment, the man was at her feet, shock on his face, his eyes staring. Dead.

She knelt next to Jeff, cradling his head against her thigh.

'You ok?' he asked and moaned with pain.

"Better than you."

"I—"

"Sssh!" She put a hand over his eyes, soothing him, stilling him.

He might have had a fighting chance if she had not taken his essence. Now, depleted, his death was a certainty. She closed her eyes a moment and breathed deep.

No, he would not die. Not her shadow-man.

He would live, though it would cost her!

Slowly, gently, she merged with him, entering, healing. The bullet was lodged in his stomach; it would have to be removed.

Shivering with horror at the sight of broken flesh and blood—yes, she could still feel horror of it—she plunged her fingers into warm sticky flesh and withdrew the bullet, flinging it away.

Jeff groaned and shivered; she put a restraining hand against his chest.

Concentrating so much it made her brain throb, she healed the wound from inside out. Jeff would live.

In healing him, her strength was ebbing fast. To put

herself in jeopardy for his sake, her sisters would condemn. But she owed him. Some lilan paid their debts, even to a mere human.

"What were you doing here?" she asked, not expecting that he would answer.

"Looking for you," he whispered.

She withdrew her hand and stared down at him. "Me?"

"Woman in black leather...dead men in clubs, their dicks hanging out of their pants."

"You suspected I was to blame and yet you went with me?"

"I like to walk on the wild side."

"Fool!" Mortal fool! His blood might be god-mingled, but he could die, had nearly done so, this night. "I am not a killer." She glanced back at the bodies. "Except in self defense."

He followed her gaze. "How did you do that? Who are you?"

"Just Sereia." She was so tired. No strength, no time to make explanations. This man, this cop, asking questions, demanding answers, having seen her power unleashed! A man was not allowed to live if he had seen a lilan in action. That was the Law.

If she did not kill Jeff, she would have to face the Council, for recklessly allowing a human to see her true nature and thereby placing all her kind at risk. For the sake of a mere mortal?

At very least she would be made Outcast. *At very least!*

She gently lowered him to the ground and smoothed her skirt down her thighs as she stood up.

"I'll call 911 for you." She took a step away.

"Wait!"

She paused and glanced back over her shoulder. He was dragging himself across the floor, reaching for his pistol. He found it, held it in trembling hands, trying to aim at her.

If he was to shoot her now, she might be killed. Her life-force was dangerously low. Might be a blessing in disguise to die here than face the Council and have to submit to their harsh penalty.

"Are you trying to arrest me?" she demanded.

"No, goddamn it."

"I am not the killer you were hunting," she said. No, someone else. A Human? Or, perhaps one of the wyre, or one of the vamps? Had one of the Kindred gone insane with blood-lust?

She began to stalk away and tottered, weakness making her stumble.

"I'll find you!" he called.

She paused and glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "*Shadow-man*, you're welcome to try."

TO BE CONTINUED...

BOUQUET

The room was wall to wall vampires. Torquen hid his smile behind a crystal glass and sipped the very finest vintage burgundy.

There were four Blood in the room, the rest were humans come together to celebrate Bram Stoker's birthday. Of course the guest of honor was long dead, but the fan club celebrated the event each year. Sometimes, those of the Blood joined the party, as a tribute to the man who had immortalized their kind in his gothic horror, naming them 'vampires'.

But Bram Stoker had not invented them. Blood had existed on this world for ten thousand years... Transylvania might lay claim to Vlad the Impaler, but Vlad wasn't of the Blood—he only mimicked them. And poorly at that!

Torquen studied the people about him with wry amusement.

Two black-caped witches swept around the room. He squinted, and probed with vampire-senses. He didn't think they were coven-kin, but one never knew with those women. They preferred the anonymity of the glamor.

There were no wyre present, otherwise he'd be choking on their damn sex-pheromones. And as for the

N'Uran...he gritted his teeth at the thought, thankful that those arrogant bastards never deigned to attend such a gathering, spreading their sex-magic. Even one of the Blood wasn't immune to their spells; the wizards would target him just for the fun of it, and Torquen knew from experience that he'd be on fire, and his prick would be ruling his intellect.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. No, the field of humanity was for the sole pleasure of vampire-kin. They could hunt with impunity.

What would the humans do if they knew that within their midst four true vampires viewed their prey, savoring beauty, while discarding—

Great Heaven! Torquen almost bit his tongue such was the flood of sexual arousal flooding through him.

Bouquet hit him with all the subtlety of hitting a brick wall. Pain and passion seared his every cell. Torquen shivered.

Bouquet—that rarest of human blood was somewhere in the room. His body pulsed, quickened with desire and the need for immediate unification.

His Blood senses probed the room and found...her.

Her! So much the better. It wasn't often a woman possessed the *Bouquet* for which his kind hungered.

Mine! Torquen mind-shouted even as his brothers sensed her arrival. He was eldest; she was his by right. He shouldered his way through the crowd, his heart and blood alight only to her.

"Good evening," Torquen drawled and she glanced at him over her shoulder. Her eyes widened appreciatively as she gazed up at him. Torquen was aware of the effect his kind had on the humans.

Women were particularly susceptible to it.

His aura touched hers, entwined, coupled, drawing her life force to his. He felt her response to him. Female sex-warmth scalded through her. The faint stirring of arousal colored her cheeks.

Torquen smiled. He would do more than color her cheeks by the time he had done with her!

He smiled again and inclined his head. "Perhaps I should say 'good evening' with a Transylvanian accent?"

She laughed at that, a throaty sound that made his blood race.

"You don't look like Bela Lugosi to me."

"I should hope not!"

Torquen adjusted his cravat. The rules of the party were the same every year: all attendees were required to dress in costume. Within the candlelit room there were Goth vampires, ghoul vampires, half rotting mummified vampires, two Nosferatu and an odd assortment of vamps who were transvestites.

Torquen was dressed in a black frock coat and trousers. By contrast his silk shirt was stark white, his cravat blood red. His dark hair was tied back severely from his face and held in place with a black ribbon. A merging of times and tastes: he had been born in the seventeenth century and had been dress-tutored by Beau Brummel. Style remained style no matter the deprivations of the era and Torquen had no intention of diminishing his appearance for the sake of the twenty-first century.

She was dressed in a long black satin gown; simple but sexually potent, it hugged her curves and settled

against female crevices.

Scenting her, he ran a tongue over his lips to draw her essence into his mouth. Her brown eyes followed the path of his tongue as Torquen had anticipated. Desire flared within her, a red glow that coruscated over her body that only one of the Blood could see. He watched in fascination. He had never sampled Bouquet. Tonight would put an end to his virginity. He smiled at that.

"I'm Torquen. You?"

"Natalie." She paused, glancing down at his outstretched hand.

"I won't bite," Torquen said. *Not yet and not here, but later. Later, I will bite and savor you, drink you, fuck you.* His body hardened just with the thought of what he would do to her. And what she might be persuaded to do to him in return...

As their palms met, Torquen, again, felt that mental and physical crash. Ah, Bouquet. It was a pain, a delicious pain that pooled in his loins and set his teeth on edge and his blood searing through his veins.

Natalie stared up at him. She was petite, despite the curves; pretty but not a beauty, the mouth sensuous, the brown eyes large and...*damn it!* Trusting, innocent eyes. Torquen's desire ebbed a moment.

He had taken innocents before, but something about her was different. More than bouquet...he could not identify it. His gaze rested on the valley between her breasts, higher to the black velvet choker around her throat, the dangling red diamante earrings.

"It's hot in here," Torquen said.

"I expected something more original from you,"

Natalie drawled.

He laughed deeply and poured her crystal goblet full of wine. "It's a very good burgundy. I prefer to drink a different vintage from a very different glass."

To his consternation, Natalie laughed and rolled her eyes at him. "You're a vampire?"

"Of course," Torquen said.

"Well, so am I!"

He gaped at her. "That's impossible, you're..." Then he saw her smile. She had teased him! That hadn't happened in...in...eighty years. This virgin child was toying with him!

Humans rarely had the ability to surprise him, but she had and he relished it!

"It *is* hot inside," Natalie said. "I hadn't noticed before."

"It'd be cooler outside."

"Yes."

He ushered her ahead of him. They passed through the throng of partying humanity and stepped out onto the patio. With his hand at the small of her back, Torquen guided her around the corner, away from the light and the noise, away from all eyes and ears.

On the periphery of his senses, he caught the scent of his brothers' blood, their jealousy, and agitation and...desire.

The cadence of their blood matched his own. They were all stalking their own prey as he now cornered his.

He severed the mind-link. Let them hunt and devour, as he would hunt and devour this Bouquet-child.

"Is this where you sink your fangs into my neck?" Natalie turned suddenly to him and Torquen stepped back, frowning.

"I..."

"You *are* a vampire, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I savor my victims, Natalie, slowly, very slowly." His gaze raked her from toe to head and back again and he was pleased to see the expectant shiver race over her, through her. Her nipples hardened and her woman's cleft pulsed. His temples throbbed in unison with her body. He swallowed down, hard, to bring back a measure of control. "You will be taken, but not here."

He pressed forward, pushing her up against the wall, covering her body with his own. He raised her face and his lips bore down onto her mouth, a soft kiss, tender, but hinting of future passion. They groaned in unison.

His teeth grazed her lip, and she opened her mouth to him. He accepted her invitation, his tongue tip touching hers, before plunging inside, to retreat a moment later. A slow in and out torment, his tongue caressed her.

His hands fanned over her bottom, raising her to his heated groin.

"I want to fuck you," he said.

She laughed breathlessly, then said: "Is that before or after you bite me?"

"Before, after and during, girl."

Her eyes widened and she laughed. Actually laughed at him!

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

"Natalie Dumas...and no, no relation."

Torquen had known Dumas when he had lived in Paris. For a moment the memory seeped into his desire, cooling with its sorrow. So many lives known, touched, gone to dust while those of the Blood endured.

"What is it?" she asked, raising her hand to his cheek. "You look sad. Let me help."

Torquen shook himself mentally and physically. Incredulously, he gazed down at her. This woman, who should even now be begging him to mount her, was offering him succor. That hadn't happened in centuries either.

"Let me help," Torquen muttered. "Three important words seldom used together in this world."

"We didn't come out here to discuss philosophy."

"No," Torquen agreed. "My intent was—is—more base!"

Natalie laughed and stretched up on tip toes to take his mouth in a kiss that sent shivers from his head to his heels.

His hands traced up and down her back, touching bare flesh, tearing her hair away from the nape of her neck. He unfastened the velvet choker and let it flutter down to the ground as his mouth descended to the base of her throat, eliciting from her a deep throated groan.

His lips traveled over her neck, to her mouth, to her ear lobe, while his hands fanned over her body, cupping and caressing. His touch became deeper, firmer as she responded. He branded her with his Blood-scent.

He raised her legs, wrapping them around his waist

as he pressed her hard against the wall.

"Here?" she whispered.

Yes, God! Yes! For once Torquen didn't care if he was seen, but his innate caution doused the desire to a level where he could think. "No, in the garden, there's an arbor."

"Yes," she said and captured his mouth again.

Torquen swung her up into his arms, marveling at her. So tiny, almost no weight in his arms, but her life force burnt hard, fast, deep, heavy. Such was Bouquet.

Bouquet...that rare blood coveted by all vampire kind, a human whose life essence flared bright and clear and unquenchable. A man of the Blood could have his fill and still Bouquet would burn and call for more—ravenous for the insatiable vampire.

Torquen's heart beat so fast it throbbed in his ears, drowning out all other awareness—save one: he had to bury himself deep in this woman or he'd die.

In the arbor, beneath the canopy of red roses, he set Natalie on her feet and held her out at arm's length, studying, relishing. Her brow raised quizzically at him.

He reached out and pulled her hair free of its restraint. She had used a black ribbon, too. Her russet hair spilled over his hands. He raised the silken strands to his mouth, sucking, scenting the hair with his own redolence, drawing in her woman's musk to his own body. He exhaled, their perfumes combined.

"Take off your dress," he whispered.

"I rather thought you'd do it for me. Please."

Torquen's hands snaked in under the ties at her shoulders and the narrow straps gave way. Satin slithered down to reveal full breasts with erect dusky

nipples. He knelt before her and pressed his face against the satin covering her belly, his hands at her back supporting her as he raised his face to her breasts, sucking, teasing her with his tongue. Her hands twisted into his hair as he lathered her over and over.

The sash at her waist came away and his hands shook as he worked on the lacings, before the satin slipped over her hips, down her thighs, to pool at her feet.

He gasped. Beneath the thin mantle of satin she was naked.

"You are shocked?" she asked huskily.

"No, sweetheart," he said. "If I had known that your only covering was the satin, I would have flung you on the dining room table and..."

"Free entertainment for the party?"

"No!" Torquen growled. "You are mine. For me, for my eyes only!"

His mouth caressed the dark triangle at the juncture of her thighs, as his fingers slipped inside to test her mantle. Heated dew spilled over his hand.

Torquen nudged her backwards to the garden seat and as she sat upon the cushion he knelt between her legs, opening her to his questing eyes.

"Beautiful." Torquen's mouth dipped into her, his tongue grazing her nub.

"Torquen, please! *Please!*" Her fevered whisper demanded and he acquiesced.

He quickly gave her the first orgasm, to put her out of her delighted misery. Later, he would prolong it, tease her, torment her, torture her until she touched oblivion, before he released her from his madness.

"Take off your clothes, Torquen. I want to see you. But slowly, Torquen. *Slowly*. I want the moment to last."

Torquen felt as if he would split in two, the pressure of male desire was so great. He drew in a shuddering breath and fought his craving as he teased off each piece of clothing.

When he stood naked before her, he spread his arms wide, his gaze capturing hers. Slowly, lazily, she took in the length of him, from head to heels before finally coming to rest on his cock.

She reached out to touch his penis, wrapping a finger around the head. She bent her head slowly, lifting away a fraction, before bending down. Closer, closer, her mouth lowered. He held his breath.

An eternity later, he gasped as her tongue tip touched him and it was all he could do to hold himself back, and not grind her face into him, to force her mouth over his cock, to surrender to her his very essence, his every thought...

Dear God in heaven! So this was Bouquet.

Torquen nudged her back against the cushions, raising her legs, letting her feet rest on his shoulders. She crossed her ankles against his neck as he buried his face into her mound.

Her taste was the sweetest elixir, the bitterest poison. He wanted this woman and he would have her. But she was a drug that had no antidote, she would forever haunt him. No other woman would satisfy him, now that he had scented Bouquet.

His fingers and tongue worked in tandem until he caught the faintest ripple, the orgasm deep inside her.

He spread himself over her and entered her, burying deep with one thrust as her climax rocked her. Her mantle imprisoned him, drawing him down inside her, enclosing him with taut female muscles.

He swallowed her scream of release into his mouth as he moved against her, with slow, unhurried strokes. Strokes that plunged to her depths, strokes that withdrew to the entrance of her; each stroke either deep or shallow measured to give pleasure and dulcet liberation.

The fire could not be quenched and he took her in all ways: on her knees, standing, lying, sitting and then at last on his lap, her body wrapped around his, her legs crossed at his back. He dipped his mouth to her breasts, nipping playfully, letting her settle against him, preparing her.

"Torquen, more," she demanded.

He laughed against her breast. "What more?"

"More," she said, shaking her head. "I need more."

She was ripe for the plucking and he surged inside her again, a tidal wave of heat and flesh.

His mouth fastened on her neck. "You want this?" he whispered against her throat, feeling the wild flurry of her blood through her veins. He could almost taste her. He groaned.

"Yes. Yes."

Gently, his tongue lathered her skin and the gentlest of nips parted her flesh. She screamed and he moaned, tasting her blood, her life-essence. He was drunk, intoxicated by her nectar, her woman's scent coiling into his every cell, as he coaxed her blood into his mouth.

Then her hand threaded in his hair, drawing back his head. They stared at one another.

Torquen caught his image in her mind's eye: his dark hair awry hanging about his shoulders, her blood staining his lips, but he had the wit to conceal his fangs.

"Darling, you *are* a vampire," she whispered and laughed.

Torquen smiled.

"I wasn't sure," she said. "I couldn't read you, unlike the others in the party."

His vampire-sense skittered a warning.

"I am Bouquet and I give myself to you, Torquen, only to you."

"Bouquet?" Fear dashed his passion as his gaze locked with hers.

"We were bred for your kind to enjoy, our rich blood, ambrosia for the golden gods—isn't that what you were once? Gods? Worshipped in body and spirit and seduced with blood? You think you pursued me? Darling, don't be so arrogant! I lured you, and you came to me... Don't frown so, Torquen, it doesn't become you. Smile, laugh, or grimace with passion, but do not frown. I want you to fuck me again and then I might let you take more blood, but only if you please me."

Torquen flung her backwards, even as she laughed and lay before him, resting on her elbows, her body open to his gaze. He tried not to look, because he knew if he did he would be lost.

He struggled mentally and physically against her call. But Bouquet beckoned and he was powerless to

resist! Powerless — *he!*

Embarrassment, fear, shame and God forbid it—
desire — heated him as he glared down at her.

“The hunter doesn’t like to know he is the hunted?
Tsk!” Natalie said. “We are both alike, Torquen, we
want what only the other can give. I have never shared
myself with any, save you. Only you.”

He ran a tongue over suddenly dry lips; swallowed
against a tight throat. “But...”

“Don’t be tedious, Torquen. Come here and enjoy
me. You want to, don’t you? If not you, then another of
your brothers?” She paused. “I sense they are waiting
for me.”

Torquen snarled. “You are mine!”

“Then come here!”

Torquen knelt before her, unsure, uncertain, a
trembling virgin youth to this woman.

His finger stroked her woman’s portal.

“I want you inside me. Hard, fast. Hurt me.”

“I never hurt.”

Natalie shook her head. “Foolish boy! Pain and
pleasure are but the same—the only difference is in
degree. I want you to hurt me!” She raked her nail over
his chest, drawing from him a thin sliver of blood. He
groaned.

Smiling, she bent forward and lapped at his blood.

Torquen shivered; he had never been tasted before.
His cock throbbed as his heart throbbed, as his blood
coursed aching through his body.

“There, hurting you has brought us both pleasure.
Lie down, Torquen.”

Natalie straddled him, squatting over him so that

her pussy touched the tip of his erection. She eased down, entering him, withdrawing, a slow thrust and retreat. She took his hand and slapped her buttocks in a stinging caress. She laughed.

"Do it," she said. "I want the pleasure, but I need the pain. Bouquet is a bittersweet brew, Torquen, you'll see."

He slapped her hard.

"Good," she said and rewarded him with a deeper entry into her body. "Again."

Time and again the lesson and the reward were repeated until the pleasure and the pain were one and they moved hard and fast against the other. She bit him and was bitten back; she drew blood and he drew blood, feasting, gorging, until the moment of oblivion when the world was laced with red and blackness beckoned...

Torquen came to his senses. Cold, it was so cold. He snapped his eyelids open.

He was alone. She had gone. His body was sated and feebly raising his head he saw the scratches over his flesh, the blood on his body — her blood and his!

He groaned and flung an arm across his face, remembering.

She had given him everything; he had given her everything. Bouquet and blood-kind had merged as equals for a time.

He smiled, then laughed.

Their paths would cross again. Their bond would never be severed; the promise was sealed with blood. Prey and predator, theirs was a deadly game of chase and retreat.

But for the next interlude, he would dominate and Bouquet would quiver at the return of the conqueror.

TO BE CONTINUED.

TIGER! TIGER!

“**S**tand and deliver!” the piercing demand startled Sir Julian Wentworth out of his reverie.

The carriage lurched to a halt and he was flung sideways, jarring his arm and shoulder even as his hand was reaching for the pistol in his jacket.

In that moment the door was flung open and a masked man leapt into the carriage.

“Don’t try it, mate!” the brigand hissed, his musket pointed at Julian’s face.

Swearing, Julian raised his hands. “What do you want?”

“Nothing you ain’t prepared to give.”

Behind the robber another figure appeared, also robed in a black cape, with a thick mask covering his face. His pistol was also aimed at Julian.

“Me mate’ll kill you if you make a move,” the first bandit said. “I’m going to tie you up.”

“There’s hardly any need for that. I have surrendered,” Julian snapped.

“Surrendered like a proper gentleman, eh?” The robber snorted. “We know’s all about ye, Lord Wentworth. Dab hand with the musket and the rapier. I ain’t taking no chances.”

Shamed, outraged, Julian suffered the brigand’s

harsh tethering. His wrists were tied behind his back and his ankles bound tightly together. He'd been trussed like this before, but on that occasion...

Julian swallowed, his body cramping as he remembered the lady's tethering and the games they had played. She had even whipped him with her garter. He forced the memories away. This roadside encounter was not going to end with a fuck—that much was certain! Julian swore beneath his breath.

"He's ready," the brigand said to his accomplice.

The masked man nodded and climbed into the carriage to sit opposite Julian.

"What's happened to my driver?" Julian demanded.

"He won't be harmed," the robber outside said. "He's bound and gagged and in the forest. When we're done here, he'll be freed."

"And what's to be done here?" Julian demanded of the brigand sitting opposite him.

"Wait and see!" the bandit outside said and laughed, before slamming the carriage door shut.

Moments later the coach rolled forward, driven into the trees away from the road.

Julian's gaze lingered on his captor, the pistol leveled at him, held by gloved hands.

"Well?" he demanded as the carriage halted.

The robber leaned forward, lightly dragging the pistol down Julian's face, over his neck, down his chest to his thigh. The cold metal of the gun lay against his groin.

"What are you doing?" Julian was pleased that his voice was even, betraying none of the fear coruscating through his body.

The robber wedged his pistol against Julian's penis.

Great God! Julian writhed against his bonds, but he had been tied securely.

The pistol dug into him harder.

"I'm not a god-damned catamite! If it's gold you want..."

The robber sat back in his seat and slowly unfastened his cape, flinging it back against the cushions. Slowly the robber unlaced his shirt and as he leaned forward Julian saw the swell of ample breasts.

His mouth dry, his throat taut with shock and sudden relief, Julian leant back in his seat.

To be raped by a highwayman was unthinkable, to be raped by a highwaywoman might prove...interesting. His cock hardened at the thought. He always enjoyed games—the more inventive, the more he liked them, but he stopped short of inflicting pain or degradation, though more than one lady of his acquaintance had demanded it of him.

"This puts a whole new connotation on stand and deliver!" Julian said huskily. "I can't stand, but I could deliver."

The robber's gaze, through the slits of her mask, traveled down to his erection. He heard her throaty laugh.

"If that's the way of it, madam, untie my hands and I'll give you what you want!"

She shook her head and leveled her pistol at him. "I will take you on my terms. Don't speak. Your mouth is to be put to better use."

Julian's eyes narrowed. Her voice was deep, husky; she couldn't hide the genteel inflection. Was this

woman of his class, or a consummate performer who could hide her base origins behind an aristocratic manner? What did it matter? He'd had blue-bloods and he had had whores—a woman was a woman when she was on her back.

"I am at your mercy," Julian said.

The woman laughed. "That you are. Now be silent."

She kept her pistol on him as her left hand tugged at his breeches, freeing his erection. She flicked it with the point of her gun. Julian flinched.

"Don't worry, your lordship, your precious prick is safe—for the moment."

A trickle of perspiration tickled its way down Julian's spine.

She unbuttoned his velvet jacket and unlaced his cravat. Hers were leisurely, confident movements that bespoke of much experience.

Was he but one in a long line of men she had captured on the highway? If it had happened before, no man would admit to the fact...to be overpowered and then ravished by a woman! Such a man would be the laughing stock of every society. And it was going to happen to him!

She parted his shirt and with the tip of her pistol traced a line down, pressing the metal into his navel. The pressure traveled deep inside, arousing, raising his prick.

He bit back the groan as her free hand curled around his erection, pumping him. Julian lifted off the seat.

"You lack control," she said. "Pity. I had hoped for more from you."

"Madam, there's precious little *control* left in a man when you do what you're doing to...me!"

"You are an ignorant fool. Most men I know can pleasure a woman over and over, without coming to release."

"How?" Despite himself, Julian was intrigued.

"It takes years of practice and commitment; both you know little about, my lord."

He frowned at the bitterness in her voice. "Who are you? You have me at a disadvantage, madam. Under normal circumstances —"

"Forgive me for stating the obvious, but these circumstances are hardly normal!" She paused. "But I know you. Your reputation is a disgrace."

Julian laughed. "So, this is revenge? I wondered at your motive." Her fingernails pressed into his cock. He shivered from the delicious touch. "Ah! Great God! Ah!" He almost exploded into her hand.

"*Tsk!* So soon and I have not yet begun!" She stroked his maleness, bringing him to another peak, then casting aside his turgid flesh before he could find emancipation.

She dug into his breeches and cupped his swollen sacs, rolling them in her palm. Julian writhed as she continued her manipulation and each time as he neared his peak, she paused.

This, a delightful, deliberate torture, Julian was bathed in perspiration, his fevered moans and gasps the only sound within the carriage. For she—the bitch—remained cool, in control. Julian hated her, wanted her...

Unique and intriguing, at first he had enjoyed the

reversal of roles, he, so used to being dominator, was now dominated. But it was now bordering on tedium. He wanted release and he wanted it inside her. To explode his seed and make her writhe and moan...to pound pleasure and pain into her body. Would she be tight and small, or would she have a woman's experienced body? Either way, he'd have her moaning from pleasure and maybe some pain.

She leant forward and in shocked disbelief Julian watched as she lowered her mouth to his erection. Her tongue tip flicked his penis and he snarled, a savage demand that she put an end to his torture. Her response was a throaty laugh, another tongue-flick and then she climbed atop him.

He hadn't witnessed it, she must have done it when he had his eyes screwed shut in delirious insanity, but her breeches were about her ankles. Now, her woman's nest touched his erection. He lifted off the seat to press into her, and she reared away, bringing the pistol to his temple.

"You have to earn your reward, my lord," she whispered against his ear. Her mouth lowered to his cheek, licking down his neck.

Her teeth clamped on his neck and she tugged his flesh between her lips, biting down. She continued to nibble, the sharp pain an exquisite torture that throbbed all the way down his body to his cock.

"Hellfire! What is it you want?" Julian panted.

"Something you are incapable of giving," she replied icily.

"I have more wealth and power and estates than half the *Ton* combined" he said.

She laughed. "You are such a boy!"

"Hardly a boy, madam! My cock would stretch you, or have you not noticed?"

"Ah! So proud of your size! Proportion is inconsequential. Application is all important."

"And you know about that, do you?" Julian hissed.

Laughing, she lowered her body, letting his tip touch her portal.

"You're wet for me," he said. "Let me fuck you, for both our sakes."

Her laugh was shaky, and as he surged upward to possess her, she retreated. "Be still," she ordered, the pistol again at his temple.

Julian sagged against the seat and she returned to allow him to savor her cleft. She rocked back and forth across his tip, grasping his erection so that she could rub against him, but deny his entry.

The ripples began deep in his gut and raced out to overwhelm him. She moved back and away, sitting opposite him, watching him in the throes of release.

Julian's fulfillment was deep and intense—more intense than he had ever known. He screamed his passion.

Hours, or minutes later—he had no way of knowing—he drew in a shuddering breath and opened his eyes. The bitch was sitting back watching him. Her eyes were alight to her triumph; doubtless there would be a smirk of triumph on her face, too, behind her black mask. He wanted to commit murder at that moment, but before he'd wring her neck, he'd make her pay, torment her, make her scream in orgasm-agony, make her beg for it.

She tugged up her breeches and fastened her shirt and cape. Her gaze fixed upon him as she reached for the carriage door.

"Where are you going?" Julian demanded.

"I must leave you, now. It has been an interesting experience." She studied him, her gaze upon his prick. "Tsk! Ready, again, my lord? I will leave it to one of your doxies to calm the tiger."

"When I find out who you are, when I get my hands on you...you..."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Both," Julian said. "I'm going to kill you."

Laughing, she slammed the door against his rage. Moments later, he heard horses gallop away.

Julian writhed against his bonds. He scraped skin from his wrists, but he did not care. He wasn't going to be found with his prick rearing out of his breeches...

* * * *

Six months later...

The soirees of the widow, Lady Desdemona MacLeod, were famous—or, perhaps, 'infamous' would have been a better word.

She shocked the unshockable *Ton*. Whispers behind fans and behind closed doors exaggerated simple truth. There was debauchery, witchery, magic. Courtesans from Europe and the Orient brought new experiences to the bedrooms of her secluded mansion in the Scottish highlands.

The more she spurned London society, the more that society sought her. It was rumored that an exclusive coterie fluttered around her, in their glittering jewels

and silks, the glittering intelligensia in her glittering soirees. But whose these people were no one could discover.

One coveted the invitation to be a guest at her home, but *entrée* could not be purchased, cajoled, or bribed.

That summer, Lord Julian Wentworth received his invitation, to the envy of his friends and enemies. Rumors and accusations abounded.

What had happened to Julian Wentworth? Society had noticed his transformation and had speculated endlessly and futilely as to its cause.

Almost overnight, Wentworth had become an aloof stranger to the people and haunts and practices that he had once embraced. He was now a sober drinker, was not seen at the gaming tables and horror of horrors...abstained from female company.

It appeared his passion ran to some secret that even his closest confidant could not discover. Julian became an enigma to friend and foe alike.

An enigma, Julian thought, as he strode down the silk-draped hallway, who had gained entrance to the fashionable widow's lair. Unexpected, but welcome, this invitation, a distraction from the torment, the fruitless pursuit of the one woman he wanted and could not find.

Now, in the widow's mansion, Julian drew back his shoulders as he paused outside the gilt, carved door. He could hear the bubble of voices, the tinkle of women's laughter. The servant opened the door and he stepped into madame's inner sanctum.

It was beyond imagination. The high ornate ceilings were painted with a Renaissance fresco—an Italian

master's hand, if he knew his art, and he did. The sight of nymphs and satyrs fornicating in a Garden of Eden might have made another man blush, but Julian enjoyed the spectacle for its artistic sake, as much for its eroticism. A promise for what might lie ahead at the end of the soiree? Julian's heart slammed against his ribs and his groin throbbed at the thought.

He drew in a slow breath, controlling his desire.

The salon was elaborately furnished with tables and chairs and ornate sofas bedecked with silk and satin cushions. Draped over the furnishings were men and women in immaculate evening attire, engaged in conversation. Some played cards. At another table, a woman was reading the fortune of a guest in a spread of runes and bones. And, incongruously, he saw a huge golden cat spread elegantly over a green velvet chair. The cat's eyes regarded him with a disquieting intensity. He glanced away, but something bothered him and he looked back. This time, he saw a golden-haired woman, her black eyes intense upon him. She smiled and raised her glass. Julian frowned, his heart racing. In the blink of an eye, the woman disappeared to be replaced by the golden cat.

"Pay her no mind, Julian," a man said at his elbow. "Delia loves to play games. She is wyre after all!" The man stalked away and sat down beside the cat, taking the creature onto his knee.

Julian shook his head. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he had entered a world for which he was unprepared...

Where was his hostess?

Since his arrival yesterday he had not met Lady

MacLeod, and his questions as to her whereabouts were met with shrugs from both servants and guests alike. It was rumored she was a beauty... But there were many beautiful women in this room, their regard intense upon him as he made his entrance. Some gazes lingered and with tongues sweeping over lips in bold invitation, Julian was in no doubt what the women offered and he could accept without inhibition. He inclined his head acknowledging each in turn.

His measured gaze swept around the room. A tall woman stood by the fireplace, her shimmering silver gown made transparent as the firelight shone through the silk. Her golden hair was swept up onto her crown and pinned with a simple diamond clasp.

She slowly unfurled her silver fan and swept it across her face, lifting tendrils of gilt hair across her cheeks. The feather edging of her fan caressed the swell of her breasts. She slanted her head and Julian's mouth went dry. He remembered to bow and that brought a smile to her eyes – eyes the color of slate.

Julian strode past the others in the room and came to stand before her. He was a tall man, but for the first time in his life he stood eye to eye with a woman. The experience only heightened his stimulation.

He bowed. "Lady MacLeod, I presume?"

"You may *presume*, all you wish, my lord." She laughed and touched the tip of her fan to his lips. "You have met my other guests, have you not?"

"Yes," Julian said, his gaze riveted upon her. She was not intimidated by him and stood her ground as he leaned into her. His chest touched her breasts.

"Ah, my lord," she whispered, tapping his cheek

with her fan. "You do presume too much."

"Do I, Desdemona?" He smiled. "I may call you by name?"

"I will allow it."

She turned from him and walked away, laughing at him over her shoulder. She, the dutiful hostess, visited her other guests, but her interest diverted to him.

Julian leaned against the mantle, arms folded, watching her and she often looked back at him, careful sidelong glances and gazes that hinted – no, *promised* – in the sultry depths of her eyes.

This night, would he be Othello to her Desdemona? The thought brought his blood thrumming to his ears and his cock to attention in his breeches. He swallowed down, hard, breathing deeply, quashing desire.

There was dancing, music and feasting, and twice Julian found he was partnered by his hostess, her hands, her body fleetingly moving around his in the carnal parry of the dances.

But as he leaned against the mantelpiece, it suddenly occurred to him what had been bothering him all night. There were no mirrors in this room, and mirrors were an integral part of the society in which he moved. Mirrors reflected sights hidden, reflected intentions hidden – teasing and tantalizing seductions. It bothered him for a moment.

He scratched at his neck, where that highwaywoman had bitten him, months ago. Occasionally the wound would re-appear and give him hell for a day or two, then vanish: as the lady herself had vanished.

Julian sighed and put the memory aside. He would

forget...

In a quiet interlude, a woman read Italian poetry from a book, the erotic prose of the courtesan. All guests were in silent, careful consideration of every verse.

Julian studied all, understanding the house-rules. The men must court, seduce and tease, must please before claiming the victor's prize that the women offered.

Lady MacLeod's court was subtle in its discipline, but blatant in its reward.

Julian's gaze lingered on Desdemona and was greeted with the sweep of her fan across her face, but her gaze held his. A smile lifted the corner of her mouth.

She walked across the chamber and exited through a side door, lingering once, to throw him a silent challenge over her shoulder. Julian stalked after her.

Outside, the passageway was lit by one lamp, but he heard the swish of her gown across the wooden floor and with dry mouth and thudding heart he followed her trail. He caught her scent—sandalwood—exotic as she was exotic.

And unique.

A door was left invitingly ajar and he stepped into the boudoir, kicking the door closed with his heel.

She stood with her back against the striped *chaise lounge*. She waited with her head tipped to one side, appraising him.

With two strides he was before her and as she went to sweep her fan demurely across her face, he took her wrist and bent over her skin, catching the pulse beat

through cream-silk flesh.

He straightened and smiled with his mouth and eyes. "Do I presume too much?"

"Never too much, my lord," she said, and laughed.

He took her in his arms and lowered his mouth to her lips. He had meant his kiss to be a teasing test, but he found that it was she who tested and teased, exploring his mouth with her tongue. Her body molded against his, her fingers knotting into his hair, dragging away the ribbon to release his black hair.

She stepped back, breathing heavily. She tapped his chest with her fan tip and then trailed it down his body, in a slow sultry caress.

Julian's body tightened. His fierce grip stalled her hand. He tipped her head back to look into her eyes...

Dark eyes, now as —

Then!

"You!" he said.

She tossed her head and laughed. "What is this game you play, my lord?"

"You started it in the carriage."

"In the carriage?" her brow furrowed. "I rarely leave my estate. I certainly travel in no carriage. Too confining! I prefer a mount."

Julian smiled. "I prefer to ride, also."

She tapped her fan to her cheek. "A black stallion would be your choice?"

"I prefer a golden filly." He folded his arms. "Take off your clothes, madam."

She stepped back and touched him with her fan. "You must first earn that pleasure, my lord."

"I did, that night six months ago. I have never..."

She raised a delicate brow. "You have never –?"

"I've never been the same since," he ground out.

"I had heard rumors about the sudden and dramatic reversal of Julian Wentworth's dissolution."

"Yes. Obviously."

She ran her fan over the bulge in the front of his breeches. "One thing is obvious, but of what is it you speak?"

"This!" he drew her into his arms and pinned her wrists behind her back, bending her over as he kissed her deeply, thoroughly.

He stepped back from her and she staggered, quickly recovered, her hand holding the sofa.

"The young buck has learnt a trick or two," she whispered.

"One or two."

"I am intrigued. You will need to be specific, to earn your reward."

"I can be very specific," Julian drawled, tugging at his cravat. All the while holding her stare, he shrugged out of his jacket, his shirt, his hands lingering at the waist of his breeches. He kicked off his shoes.

The soft fall and rise of her breasts increased. He smiled at her reaction. "Do I continue?"

"Please do, I would see what you have to offer."

"You are well acquainted with me," he said.

"You have me mistaken for another, my lord."

"Have I?" Julian peeled down his breeches and kicked them away. He held his arms akimbo.

He was rewarded with her heated gaze on his body, taken slowly, from head to toe. She smiled, a secret woman's smile. She appraised without embarrassment.

"And wither now, my lord?"

He took a step to her. "I will please you until you scream."

"And what of you?"

"I can wait."

Her gaze narrowed; her breath was fast and shallow.

"You can control your passion?"

"All night."

"You can harness the tiger?"

Julian nodded. Before the highway encounter, he had always spent himself quickly, finding release in a multitude of beauties...but after that night, he had learnt that what his captor had said was true: release delayed was far sweeter. Even delayed for days, or weeks... he had studied and practiced to achieve that level of control.

He strode to her and pressed his full length against her. She met him without flinching. Who was this woman? How had she come to be one such? Her life story would be one he would delight in learning—but as with all things, a little at a time.

He felt his prick engorge and she touched him carefully.

Julian bent down and lifted her into his arms and placed her sitting on the sofa. He knelt before her and raised her skirt, slowly feathering the material up her long legs. He drew her legs upward, placing her feet on either side of his shoulders. His finger traveled up and down her thighs, never touching her mound, but with each foray drawing ever nearer. Then his mouth, lips and tongue took over the quest.

It was some time later that he felt her hands in his

hair, holding him to her, guiding, seducing his mouth, her secret body lifting to his. He touched her folds once and drew away, kissing her inner thighs, dragging his lips down her legs, to her ankles, her feet. Sucking and biting, he slowly returned to her cleft.

She shivered beneath his touch and Julian smiled against her femininity. His mouth and lips and teeth brought her to arousal. She shuddered against him.

Smiling his triumph, he leaned backwards, resting on his heels.

She opened her eyes.

"I can bring you to it and let you dangle at the edge of oblivion. Is that what you want?" Julian demanded. He wanted her to shatter as he had shattered long ago.

"Is that what *you* want?" she demanded.

Julian admired her then, her control, her spirit. "What I want, Desdemona, are answers."

"You need to ask questions, if you want answers."

"Why? Why did you capture me, seduce me?"

"This case of mistaken identity, again!"

"No," Julian said. "I recognize your eyes—it was all I could see of you...that and your cleft."

Her laugh was shaky. "Most men would say that one woman is the same as the next when she's on her back. Isn't that what you said?"

"A boy might say that, but a man knows better. Every woman is different, if played correctly."

"And do you play correctly?"

"Very correctly."

"How so, my lord?" Desdemona breathed.

He knelt again and stroked her thighs, moving to her lower lips. "Like the strings of a violin, a woman

can resonate with the touch of a master..." He raised his gaze to hers. "I learnt many things that night, and after, Desdemona. I tried to find the woman who had seduced me, tormented me. To no avail. She vanished into the night."

"And what did this woman do to you?"

"Unraveled my world. I was a fool, a youth. I was used and discarded, as I had once used and discarded."

"Yes," she said.

"Yes?" Julian echoed.

The silence lasted—how long? Julian did not know.

Desdemona sighed. "You do not remember, how could you?"

She turned her face away, but Julian drew her back to look at him, his hand on her chin. "Tell me," he said.

"It was my first season, five years ago. I was only fifteen. When I saw you, I thought you were a god... I gazed too long and was lost... It was the masked ball at Lady Farnton's."

Julian drew his brows together in concentration. "I remember the ball; I do not remember you."

"You were drunk. We met in the garden. You took what I offered, in my naiveté. There was pain and blood; I thought I would die. I did not," she said. "The next evening you did not even look at me."

"I do not *remember* you."

"I have changed from that gauche child of fifteen."

"Undeniably," Julian said. "You were virgin?"

"I was. Not the first virgin you plucked, I imagine." Desdemona struggled to sit upright. "I could have forced you to marry me, since there was a witness to

what occurred. But when I truly saw you for what you were, I would not want to be married to you. The witness was Lord MacLeod. He was older than my father, but he was kind and gentle and he had traveled the world. He took me away from England and showed me more wonders than I had ever imagined. He also showed me the marvels of the marriage bed."

"Very skillful, this husband of yours."

"Oh, yes!" Desdemona said. "After he died, I was free to pursue what I willed, and then one day I saw you at the theater, parading in your arrogant finery with your latest doxie on your arm. You had not changed. I resolved to teach you a lesson. Which I see I have."

Julian grimaced. "If I had found you, I would have killed you."

"You would never have discovered me. And as for killing me?" She laughed gently. "I prove difficult to kill." She paused. "My plans were laid carefully. You rarely left London. I had my spies watch you. When it was known you were leaving London, I intercepted your carriage in Kent, very far from the Scottish Highlands."

"I am impressed."

"I am pleased to hear it." Desdemona laughed. "And now, what now, my lord?"

"There is unfinished business between us."

"Business? I do not call it *business*." She tapped his cheek. "I wish I had my pistol."

Julian laughed. "You would have shot me that night?"

"I wanted to. I did come with murder in my heart,

but there was a better way to punish you. A bullet would have been too kind, too quick."

"It would have," Julian agreed. He leant forward and drew his finger across her secret flesh. "I won't be too kind, or too quick with you. Now, my lady..." He flipped her across his knee and held her wrists at her back.

"What—?" she demanded, and he tore a piece of silk from the hem of her gown. He gagged her with it, gently tying the fabric at the back of her head.

He tore another strip from her gown and bound her wrists even as she struggled against him. He stood up and flung her across his shoulder.

Julian dumped her on the bed and holding her down with one hand, he took one flailing leg and fastened her ankle to the bed post. The other leg was similarly tethered.

Kneeling between her legs he took her gown and ripped it asunder, tearing her chemise, leaving her clad only in a pair of silk stockings, fastened around her thighs with gold garters.

His gaze feasted on her; his hands roamed freely over her body as she squirmed beneath him.

"If you promise not to scream, I will remove the gag. Well?"

She paused, then nodded.

Gently, Julian untied the gag and flung it aside. "Besides, I need your mouth to be more gainfully employed." He sat back on his haunches. "I'm not going to hurt you, Desdemona, but there is a debt to me, long over due. We need to fuck each other for both our sakes."

"Release me."

"Later. Maybe."

Julian bent to his task with questing tongue, lips and fingers. He savored every part of her, nipping, sucking, licking, probing. His fingers dove into her dewy folds, scrolling, expanding, testing, bringing her to a climax that spilled molten from her core over his hand.

He lay over her, holding his weight from her with his elbows and knees, while guiding his prick through her woman's shroud. He used the tip to touch, but nothing more. Then he moved back and forth between her folds, seducing her nub, rubbing, chafing. His mouth stifled her scream of release.

Again, his body touched hers, this time his prick probed further, then retreated. She strained against her bonds.

"Lie still. Earn your reward," Julian whispered.

She panted, her hair across her face.

Julian probed her depth a little more. Her inner flesh clenched around him.

It was a slow thrust and parry, retreat and advance. He retreated to her entrance and then plunged full length to her depth, then another foray, he withdrew and then entered a fraction. Each excursion was of different length and interval, on and on time uncounted.

Her muscles quivered around him, as her body shuddered its release and he held himself still, relishing the moment, his eyes tight shut for a moment to hold his control. He opened his eyes to gaze down at her, seeing her rapture and release. It was nearly his undoing.

He reared back from her and began, again, the slow orientation of her body with his gaze, his hands and tongue.

"Please untie me. I want to wrap my legs around you, touch you," Desdemona said.

"Ask me nicely."

"I did say *please*."

Julian laughed and slowly released her tethers. Before she could take him in her arms, he turned her on the bed, pressing her face first into the covers. He entered her from behind, one swift thrust that made her gasp; made him gasp.

There was more of the same until Julian pulled her from the bed and standing in front of her, raised her legs around his waist, and plunged into her taking her in slow unhurried strokes. She clung to him, as he rocked against her, surging like the tiger, anchoring him with her body, as her fingers threaded in his hair.

"Now," she said. "You have earned your reward. Take your release."

Julian's frenzied strokes met her own and then he stilled, drawing her down onto the floor. "Ride me, madam."

She mounted him, bringing his cock into her body, taking his pace and his tiger, bringing him to the brink. Then she withdrew.

They both dragged in ragged breaths, calming, controlling.

Then, she returned anew, astride him, his cock deep within her mantle. His fingers grasped her buttocks, she rose and fell, wave upon wave of release. Julian cried out, his liquescence bathing them both.

Julian pulled her against his body, wrapping his legs around her. He shivered and moaned.

Hours later, in the bed, Julian held Desdemona tight against him. She flung her leg across his thighs, her knee against his erection. The blessed thing has never really gone down, Julian thought, ruefully. He was going to have to fuck Desi for days...not an unpleasant thought, at all!

"So what now, my lord?" she asked, her face resting on his chest. "Will you denounce me for a robber?"

"And have them stretch your neck? I think not. Besides, what did you take from me, but my fool's pride. I have better use for you, woman."

"Oh?" she raised her head and smiled.

"Yes. Too much passion, too much knowledge to be left to roam at will. I mean to marry you."

"Is that so? Perhaps I do not want to marry again?"

"I do have more wealth than half the *Ton* combined."

"So you said before and it makes no difference to me. I have my own wealth. Would I surrender my independence for the sake of your cock?" She traced her finger over his penis.

"It's just one facet of the man you will come to know, Desi."

"I will consider."

"You mistake my meaning, madam. I was not offering you a choice," Julian said. "It will be robbery under arms, if need be."

"I would much prefer armed robbery." Desdemona wrapped Julian's arms around her. "Put those arms to good use, my lord and hold me."

"I might hold you in a moment, but I think I need to fuck you again."

"For both our sakes, I think you must."

* * * *

Julian lay back on the bed, hands behind his head. "You are unlike any woman I have known, Desi. Insatiable. Inventive. I thought I knew everything about sex..." He looked at her sidelong.

She watched him, her head resting on the pillow. "It is my nature."

"Yes, but most women..." He smiled. "I'm sorry. You are not most women. Most women would not hold up a man at gun-point."

She laughed and reached out to cup his prick, trailing her slender fingers over its length. When she raised her gaze to his, her face was drawn, her eyes dark.

"What is wrong?" he demanded.

She batted his hands away. "There is something I must tell you."

"Oh? Some dark, terrible secret? Oh, let me think! I know—that you have a new lover every night? Mnn?" He raised a brow. "If so, those days are over, Desdemona."

She slapped his thigh and dug her nails into his skin. "Be serious."

"Very well. I am listening. But not for long, my prick's rising to the occasion again and I want to fuck you. Again." He rolled his eyes.

"You said that you weren't the same after that

encounter on the road—that you changed your appetites.”

“Yes.”

“I changed them. God forgive me. I did the unthinkable. I changed you without your consent.”

“I changed myself, Desi. I came to realization. I became a man.”

“You are one of us. Or, soon you will be.”

“*One of us?* You mean one of Lady McLeod’s intimates?”

“No, sweetheart. That night you ravished me and Lord McLeod witnessed it, he promised me respectability and a life far removed from normal society, from normal expectations. I would have remained his wife forever, had he not been killed. There are some in this society who hunt us, occasionally kill us, though we are difficult to find and even more difficult to kill. My dear lord was slain.” She paused. “I owe him everything. When I was ready, he changed me and I rejoice in what he did for me. I offer it to you.”

Julian frowned, his heart thudding against his ribs. “An instinctive part of me understands what you are saying, but rationally, you aren’t making sense.”

“Instinct never lies.” She paused, her gaze steady upon him. “My husband said you would have come to us, because of your spirit, if you survived your own lethal pursuits. There was always the danger that you might have died before your full potential was realized. How many duels have you fought?”

“Recently? None. Before that night, maybe a dozen.”

“I have seen and felt the bullet scars upon your

flesh. Three, Julian. One almost close enough to be lethal. But my kind no longer fear bullets."

He frowned at her. "What are you telling me?"

"Immortality, Julian, or as close as may be to it. God forgive me, but I bit you that night, and mixed my saliva with your blood. Not enough to change, but enough to irritate. The wound has never healed properly. It cannot until you are one of us."

Julian scratched at the scab. "It's a nuisance, I'll grant you that. But like every itch, it can be endured." He took her hand and put it over his erection. "Like every itch, it can be soothed."

"You aren't listening to me, Julian."

"I'm not in the mood."

She squeezed his cock. "*Be* in the mood, because what I have to offer you is done so only once. I offer you a life beyond anything you can imagine, beyond the normal span of human years, beyond hunger and pain."

"I don't understand."

"My husband was not fully human. He is...was...of the Family. His was an ancient blood, rare, exotic. And in that blood is a strength of spirit and intelligence, god-hood, perhaps! Those of the Family may offer to share the blood with a chosen companion, a lover, a friend. Such was the gift that Lord McLeod offered me that night I bled from the wounds you inflicted upon me. I loved him from that moment and when he died it was as if I also died. Until that night I saw you at the theater and my spirit unfurled again. But how could I love a man such as you had become? I sought to punish you, but I ended up punishing myself, for when

I bit you, I marked you as my own." She laughed bitterly. "I have had no lover since and for one of the Blood, that is saying much."

"This...blood, this gift? It is exchanged with biting? Well, I can bite you if you want. Where exactly?" He reached out and she batted his hands away.

"Understand, Julian. Please! Once done this gift cannot be undone. You will live apart from society, you will see friends grow old and die. Your life span will be in the thousands of years."

"But?" Julian frowned at her. "I fancy there is a down-side to this offer?"

"We are accursed to some humans. As I said before...we are hunted, sometimes killed. Demon-spawn, our nemesis calls us. We hunger for love and sex is our greatest craving, apart from the blood-essence we need to survive."

"I wouldn't be partial to a diet of blood," Julian said.

"We bite, we exchange blood, but it is the force within the host and the recipient that nourishes us. It is a sharing between equals. We never mate outside our Family."

"You did with me."

"I...I was inexperienced and I wanted to hurt you." She smiled wistfully. "I am impetuous. My husband said he found it one of my more interesting qualities." Tears sparkled her eyes. "I never thought to love another as I loved him. Julian, I am sorry."

He shook his head. "Hush! No tears, no apologies. I am the one who ought to beg your forgiveness." He paused, drawing her into his arms, letting her head rest against his breast. "Desi?"

"Yes."

"Will you bite me?" The sudden stillness of her made his heart lurch. "Please. I want this. I want you. As for the other, this Family, the hunger you speak—I have a hunger that cannot be assuaged by anyone save you. I know that. Bite me."

"There is a risk."

"Yes?"

"Sometimes the gift kills the recipient. Why it is so, we do not know."

His fingers threaded through her silken hair, down her back to her buttocks. His hand stroked her crease gently. "I will die sooner or later, Desi. If it happens, now, on this bed...I'd have regrets, but if I leave here, never to have you again, what life is that for me? Bite me. Do it. Now."

"Yes. But know also, Julian, you will enter a far different world when you become one of the Blood. You will meet the other hunter-kin. This world is their playground and humans are their playthings. They love our kind; our violence and our passion lure them to this world."

Julian frowned. "I don't understand."

"The cosmos, Julian. There are creatures out there, some akin to humans, others—not so. They use the star-portals to play and seduce throughout the universe. You saw Delia, did you not? She is wyre...a shape-shifter. There are others... You will become part of this preternatural world, Julian, as far removed from your present reality as you can imagine....dare to imagine."

"I can dare much." He smiled.

Desdemona inclined her head. She rolled onto him and he opened his thighs to accommodate her body. His hands fanned over her back, again lowering to her buttocks. He slapped her gently, his fingers parting her, exploring lower, finding her folds.

His mouth captured hers, his tongue entwining with hers. She moaned.

Julian turned his head, his teeth finding her neck. He bit down gently and sucked her flesh, drawing skin into his mouth. He worried it with his tongue.

When he released her skin, there was a gentle slapping moist sound, akin to when his prick left her vagina. In that moment, he wanted to fuck her so hard, so fast that he was certain he would die...

Her mouth found his neck, her tongue tip probing the place where she had bitten him before.

"We begin, darling. Relax. Breathe. Take me in, all of me."

He raised his hips and she slid over him, her warm shroud encasing his cock.

Julian felt the pressure of her mouth upon his neck, then that tension built to an urgency that transferred to every part of him. Light burned through him, his blood rushed around his body, his heart racing.

They moved together as one, sometimes slow, often fast, and all the while they bit and sucked flesh and tasted blood.

Later, he was not certain how long it had been, Julian felt his blood slow, becoming a heavy tide seeping through his veins, a drawing that reached its apex where Desi was fastened on his neck.

His hands grasped her hips, anchoring his body as

he felt his own body spin out of control, flying off the bed, into a dark abyss where the only sound was that of his laboring heart in his ears.

"Julian...don't be afraid. Don't fight it. It's not going to hurt."

But he did fight it; his humanity rejected the blood-gift. Non-human and human blood mingled in his veins, each warring with the other for domination.

He felt her fucking him as he thrashed on the bed, her mouth on his neck, their essences mingling, transforming.

"I can'ttttt..." His voice trailed away as his heart stalled. *As he died.*

* * * *

"Julian."

Her voice brought him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes to see her looking down at him. His head lay in her lap. Tears streaked her face.

"Where am I?"

"On my bed." She sobbed. "Oh, Julian. You nearly died. I thought my gift had killed you. It's never like that. When I transformed, it was gentle. I welcomed it."

"I'm a stubborn bastard." He smiled weakly. "You know that."

"Yes."

"It's done?" he asked. "I don't feel any different."

"You will. The process takes time. You will have heightened sensations and appetites. We do not come into our own until months, or years after the gift is received."

"I am hungry," he said. As she went to slide away

from him, his arm around her pulled her back to him.

"Where are you going?"

"For food."

He laughed. "I want to sup on you, Desi. Lie down, open your legs."

"But..."

"Lie down, Desdemona. Spread yourself, madam!"

He saw her pupils constrict at his command. He smiled to himself. She had not known a man's mastery...until now. The gift, he knew, would give him dominance over her, if he was inclined. He was not so motivated, but he did enjoy a good game of cat and mouse. Tonight, he would be the cat.

No, better still, he would be the tiger.

LE PETIT MORT

Tonight she was Carmen.

Tess tied the red silk shawl around her hips and shivered with delight as the long fringe, like the fingers of a lover, brushed her ankles.

She stepped out into the spotlight. In silence, the theater awaited her. She stood tall and proud, the arrogance of her flamenco stance demanding unrivaled attention before she deigned to commence her dance.

The music erupted. It was an impassioned piece that wept and beguiled making her heart thud against her ribs and pound in her temples.

Thud. Thud. Her blood coursed with its own tempo, swirling and igniting, reaching a pounding apex at the juncture of her thighs.

Tess took one step and twirled, her black skirt flaring around her legs. She moved sinuously, stretching out her arms and hands to her partner, beseeching him to join her this night.

She arched her back, undulating her body provocatively. The music and the dance consumed her. She invited. She cajoled. Her body became the instrument of her desire: come to me, she entreated.

Fresh male scent caressed her moments before she felt his tensile strength enfold her. A finger fleetingly

traced over her cheek, and then it was instantly withdrawn as he whirled away from her.

She smiled at him and saw the welcome mirrored in his dark eyes; saw the fierce burning gaze, which spoke more eloquently than mere words. His promises struck straight to the heart of her femininity. This night, he would be hers.

His heels drummed thrice against the floor. As if in response, about her, the music changed to a deep resonance, its tone compelling.

With an arm curved upwards and his taut body uncompromising, he stood poised, dominating the stage with his masculinity.

Tonight, he wore a full-sleeved white shirt, a red cummerbund and dark silk trousers. How well the fabric highlighted his contours and the bulge—the considerable bulge—of his manhood. His shirt, unbuttoned to the waist, revealed muscular planes and one bronze nipple peeked at her from around a fold of silk.

She skipped towards him, holding her skirts high, sweeping the material about her, allowing him to glimpse the shadowed delight that she would offer him later.

The heat of his gaze raked her naked thighs. He took one step towards her and Tess darted away. Moments later she was pulled back as he captured her, his fingers entwined in the shawl about her hips.

She twisted free, and again he entrapped her, this time his hand encircling her wrist. He pulled her towards him and they collided, body to body, every inch of heated flesh meeting and searing the other.

Capturing her gaze, he released her.

Each panting with expectation, with desire, they circled and stalked one another, testing one another's defenses. Around the stage they challenged and taunted, retreating then returning for more sport, bodies never touching but melding on a higher, more intimate plane.

Then, the music changed, slower, now, it soothed them. They met, joining briefly again and again. Hip brushed hip and thigh pressed thigh. Breast to breast they strained and gyrated, bodies just meeting in a tantalizing, sultry union before they pirouetted away.

Always a fleeting union, but it was enough for her to feel his body, his heat and know his desire. Did he know how his nearness inflamed her, making her blood and female flesh swelter?

He slammed his feet down onto the floor, his demand clear, the sound echoing in the heavy, expectant silence.

She postured wantonly before him, one side of her skirt lifted to reveal her parted thighs and her nether lips. She lowered her skirt a fraction, then raised it again. *You want this?* She silently asked, tracing the hem of her skirt over her naked mound, before again shielding her femininity from his fascinated gaze.

His indigo eyes held hers as he twisted on the soles of his boots, back and forth, traversing the distance between them in a lazy zigzag dance.

His bronze skin shone with a fine sheen of perspiration, and his raven hair hung in disarray about his shoulders and his face, now fierce with male arousal.

How she longed to run her hands through his hair, stroke his face, trace that fine sheen of perspiration down his chest with her finger and her tongue, to fondle the whipcord flesh and follow the beckoning line of hair to his navel; to delve lower. She closed her eyes, imagining, and groaned in the back of her throat, a primal scream, a primal desire that only he could quench. But not yet, oh, not yet! They must first finish the dance.

She opened her eyes and saw his indolent, attentive smile. It seemed that he read her desire as easily as she read his.

Tess twisted away. Time and again he intercepted her as she curved her body back and forth to avoid him. He laughed, its sound vibrating through her, tensing her muscles and her female mantle that now pulsed, demanding unification.

His arm snaked in under her chin, raising her face so that she gazed up at him along the length of his forearm. He smiled and drew away slowly, her chin gliding over the length of his arm to his hand. His fingers curled a moment against her chin before he retreated from her.

Returning, he circled her, as if he was a predator, stalking his prey. How apt that description, she thought. But in this confrontation, was she the prey or the predator?

Let him have his male arrogance. Let him think he dominated the moment. She raised her skirt, swishing it back and forth in warning, keeping in time with the beat of her heels against the floor.

He would not desist. Closer and closer he gyrated,

his warmth reaching out to her as his man-scent washed over her in a challenge, in an allure, she could not ignore.

Her nipples constricted and her breasts throbbed. How she wanted him to cup their fullness! How she wanted his fullness to fill the weeping emptiness in her loins.

He stood before her, leaning into her, his strength dominating. His body was all whipcord and harsh planes. She refused to yield. Slowly, inexorably, the insistent pressure of his body bent her gently backwards. His hand fanned over the small of her back, over the swell of her buttocks, holding her as he tilted further and further, groins meeting in a fervent union.

His lips slanted over hers and then withdrew. She moaned. He smiled a secret male smile of triumph and possession that made her weak and feverish.

Gently, he drew her upright and took one of her legs and wrapped it around the back of his thighs. He lifted her, pressing her body to his so that she knew, unequivocally, the depth of his passion by the rigid brand of flesh that burned against her stomach. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Holding her, they swung around the stage, the flamenco forgotten as they found a more fundamental dance and rhythm.

Tess pressed into him and he took her weight with one arm while his free hand quested, drawing her skirt upwards, the folds teasing along the length of her thigh. She shivered as the silk of her skirt and the silk of his hand worked in tandem to torment her. How could she bear it?

"Aaah," she moaned.

And with his own exultant moan he found her molten core.

On and on his fingers pursued and teased, finally encircling her tiny pulsing nub. His stroking embodied the rhythm of their dance and Tess arched back as the first heated ripple engulfed her. He paused, holding her on the edge of sweet oblivion, until the passion subsided, then he renewed his onslaught. Again and again, over and over, always halting just at the brink, sweetly torturing, he never permitted her that final pleasure-pain release.

"Please," she whispered, moving impatiently against his palm.

He smiled, its warmth promising her all she craved and more.

He let her body slide down his, slowly, so slowly that they both could experience every curve of the other.

He lowered her to the floor and she lay where he deposited her, her skirts bunched around her thighs, her legs open and inviting. Barely able to breathe, to think, she watched as he stepped over her, straddling her body, lowering himself to her, poised a fraction from her before retreating. He swiveled his hips, undulating his body, mimicking the dance of love.

His gaze holding hers, he leaned forward, his body descending, parting hers as she lay on the stage, the spotlight illuminating them.

He captured her hands above her head and laced his fingers through hers. He moved against her, simulating a dance older than time. His trousers chafed against

her thighs, inflaming her *Mount of Venus* with an insistent, scratching caress.

Tension coiled through her. She wanted this man! Must have him! *Now!*

In one fluid movement, he rose to his feet and holding out his hands, he assisted her to stand. Tess reached hungrily for him.

He knelt before her, his palm sliding up from her ankle, to her thigh, a heated trail that promised so subtly of more delight. His fingers parted her female folds to capture her. Pivoting her hips and pelvis, she swayed from side to side, mimicking the dance of Salome. Her secret female lips kissed his hand and palm, anointing him with her sacred oil.

His head lowered to her thighs and she brushed her hidden mouth against his mouth. It was her turn to tease and torment. She laughed, hearing his exasperated sigh as she shimmied her hips so that his mouth could not fully capture the object of his desire.

With a snarl, he gripped her buttocks, fiercely holding her still while his tongue and lips plundered her. Drawing sensitive fleshy folds into his mouth, he sucked and nibbled over and over.

Tess groaned and writhed, pleased that he held her, for without him, she knew her legs would not hold her weight, as he carried her closer to that little death: *le petit mort*. How apt that French term for the orgasm. Each time was like a little death: darkness and oblivion and then a re-awakening.

A finger, then two, plumbed her depths while his tongue flicked her inner lips. With the swaying of her body, she opened herself wide for his deeper questing.

Clasping his hand, she brought his fingers to his face and traced her sex-scent over his skin, marking him as hers. He twisted his cheek to capture his hand and sucked his own fingers, all the time their gazes holding each other immobile.

“Aaah,” he whispered. “Your elixir intoxicates me!”

It was the first time he had spoken. His voice was as she imagined: rich, melodic. How it caressed her every cell.

Smiling, he withdrew his hand from hers and returned it to her cleft. On and on, over and over he plundered, pillaged, coerced until that suspension of reality, when he allowed her to embrace that abyss of narcotic pleasure.

She was only dimly aware of him raising her against his body and then she sighed as she felt the tip of his penis begging entry. Oh, how she yearned for his length to fill her throbbing emptiness! Tighter, she wrapped her legs around his waist and bore down on him, but he retreated, then returned, each time he allowed more of his erection to tease her inner core.

She paused and lay in ambush for his next foray and when his penis tip probed, she thrust downwards, capturing his length in one swift, sudden lunge. His delighted laughter reverberated through her body.

Muscles clenched beneath her hands, between her thighs as he loved her tirelessly, on and on. She licked his sweat-slickened skin tasting the musk of male arousal, amid his own redolence. His taste was a heady brew that intoxicated and addicted.

His possession became fiercer and she responded with her own ferocity, meeting his driving strokes with

her own. He moved his body imperceptibly so that his cock chafed against her clitoris and a thousand nerve endings writhed in ecstasy.

She screamed her release and moments later, his body tensed. With one fierce, possessive upward thrust his climax filled her.

The blood pounded in her temples, at the apex of her thighs and within her secret shroud that he filled so utterly. She moaned and buried her face in his hair, rubbing it against her cheek...

* * * *

"Oi, Bob, what was that? Didja hear it?"

Behind her, Tess heard a familiar, male voice. The cold wash of panic extinguished her euphoria. She struggled to escape; to hide. His hands upon her were no longer passionate, but unyielding and cold. She heard him whisper a curse as he stepped back, carrying her into the shadows, their bodies still intimately enjoined. The stage was suddenly dark.

"What did you hear?"

"A woman moaning."

"Having those dreams again, Mac?"

"Shutup! It's not the first time I've heard noises here." Torchlight lanced across the stage. "Gees! Look at that!"

"What's going on?" Tess whispered. He put a finger to her lips and shook his head. She watched as two security men strode onto the stage.

What were they looking at?

She craned her head over her lover's shoulder to see.

Just a bucket and a mop, what's the big deal? Tess looked at him and he shook his head.

"She must've left them there, the poor little bitch."

"Don't speak ill of the dead, Bob!"

"Huh?"

"Don't ya know? Tess got killed last night. A hit and run. Just outside the theater."

"Gees! She was just a kid."

"Yeah, just a kid, crazy about dancing."

"Was she any good?"

"Too bloody right."

"What'll we do with her cleaning stuff?"

"Leave it here. I'm not moving it. Come on, let's get out of here, this place gives me the willies."

The security men strode away.

"Let me down!" Tess shuddered and his hands tightened around her.

"No, darling."

She struggled against him. "I have to go!"

"No Tess. There's no place you have to go, except with me. Some place special. God, I wanted to explain, wanted you to understand, but not like this. Not like this!" He set her on her feet and took her hands between his.

She gazed into his eyes—eyes now brimming with tears—and shivered as his dark, pain-filled gaze searched her face.

"Forgive me, darling," he whispered. "I should have explained. But I couldn't wait. I wanted you so much. And now it's too late."

"What's too late?"

"Don't you know me? Don't you remember, Tess?"

"This is a dream. I've always wanted to dance on this stage. None of this is real."

"It is real, more real than you can imagine. Search your memories."

She tried to drop her gaze from his, but he held her captive. In his eyes she saw the flickering of flames...the theatre engulfed in fire, burning to the ground...all except the stage, that, somehow, miraculously survived. Survived, so that she could, again, one day dance upon it! How did she know that?

He nodded. "I thought you were inside the building and I went in to save you. You escaped, but I perished, and so lost you."

"Robert!" she cried. "Your name is Robert."

"Yes. But do you remember who you are, Tess?"

She frowned and clung to his shoulders, leaning against him, her legs too weak to hold her upright. Her heart beat erratically. Images swept past her in a confusing array.

"I'm Teresa," she whispered.

"Yes, then as now. We have come full circle. Together again, as we were meant to be."

"But if you're dead, then you're a...a ghost?"

"Yes."

"No, I don't believe it. I can't! You don't feel like a ghost and when we were together on stage—No! I don't like this dream anymore. I want to wake up."

Tess turned away and his hand clamped on her wrist, drawing her back. His free hand stroked her hair.

"This is no dream, Tess. I am a ghost. So are you."

"No!"

"Yes. Remember the accident. I was too late for you. You died, alone, on the road."

In denial, Tess screwed her eyelids shut. Pain lashed her, along with the memories. The rain. The headlights that dazzled her, the scream of tires... Her scream and then impact. The crack of bones, the tearing of flesh. Her broken body becoming airborne. Her last sight before the creeping darkness was the silhouette of the theater. Her beloved theatre!

It was all true. She cried against his shoulder and he swung her up into his arms.

"You're safe now, Tess. Together, we'll always be safe."

He shifted her in his arms and she raised her head from his neck to look backstage and the stack of props leaning against the wall. He reached out and opened a door at the far end of the wall.

"I've never seen this door before," she said.

"This theater is mine. I control its many secrets, as you will do in the times ahead."

He closed the door with the heel of his boot and carried her across a room and gently laid her on a pile of silk and velvet cushions stacked before an open fire. He knelt beside her and took her hands between his own. His flesh was warm and solid. Real. Too real, for a ghost!

Tess stared, her senses at war with her intellect. How could he exist? How could this room exist, except in a dream? It was straight out of a museum, except no museum she had ever imagined, for artifacts and *objets d'art* from many time periods, many cultures, contrasted with one another.

The fire in the ornate gilt and marble fireplace spread fingers of warmth across the room, illuminating all with an amber glow.

He stroked the back of her hand. "I am real, Tess. As real as you are. Your transition is so new that you have trouble realizing what has happened. Death is an altered reality, nothing more." He paused. "I loved you one hundred and twenty years ago, but we were sundered by death and life. But now you have returned. You even have the same green eyes and golden hair that my Teresa had, then."

A pressure grew inside her skull as Tess studied his anguish-pale face. She saw herself dancing on stage and about her other members of the troupe pirouetted. The theater was crowded: they had come to see her.

How the men had paid her court, but she had spurned every gift; every man. Her heart had always been his. Always. Now. Forever. What need of the accolades and the diamonds when she had his love? Every night she danced for him, only for him, as he played in the orchestra and every night after the performance they lay enfolded in each other's arms and swore undying love with their hearts and bodies.

Her gaze lifted to his. "You told me that you and I would always be one."

"Yes. I died in a fire that all but destroyed the first theater built on this site. I didn't have the heart to leave this place with its memories of you, so I remained."

"I remember a little." She brushed a hand over her eyes. "But remembering gives me a headache."

"In time you will recall everything. The discomfort and the disorientation will pass. Tess! Tess!" He

gripped her hands. "My heart, my love. I had despaired of ever seeing you again. And then that day, I could scarcely believe it when you walked on stage, not to dance, but to clean, where you once received ovations!"

"Yes, and then that night! Now I remember! The pain, then darkness. I was lost, until I heard your violin. Its music soothed me. You brought me here...after..."

"After you died," he said, cupping her face between his hands. "Don't be afraid. Now nothing can ever harm you. You can dance forever if that's what you want, in this theater, in every theater in the world."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. I've had over a century to learn what is possible. Let me show you the magic of the universe, beloved. But first let me show you my magic." He leaned over her and took her into his arms.

She savored his kiss, finding his mouth sweeter than ever before. Life sang in her veins and her body pulsed with desire, so much desire, so much life that she was overwhelmed. As much overwhelmed as by her love for this man.

She lifted her lips a fraction from his. "But, Robert, if we're ghosts, how is it that we're not wispy pieces of cloud?"

He laughed into her mouth. "Some ghosts are like that, but others, such as ourselves, have substance because love transcends all, darling, even death." He smiled. "There are other creatures of different reality to whom you will be introduced...aliens, if you will, Tess, who frequent this world and seduce and love..."

"Love me, Robert." She tugged at his shirt, her hands fanning over the width of his back, seeking and stroking every plane, every muscle that tensed beneath her fingers.

She smiled and buried her face against his neck and breathed in his scent, his heat, his strength. She licked at his throat tasting the saltiness combined with male musk.

He raised himself on an elbow to gaze down at her. "Last week you were Salome. Your dance was pure eroticism! After you had left, I was consumed with lust. I roamed the theater for hours, moaning my frustration. I gave your security friends quite a scare."

"You saw me dance?" The heat of her blush rushed over her body. "*You watched?*"

He laughed. "I have always watched you, darling. Before, when I played in the orchestra pit, and now, week after week when your cleaning duties were completed, you danced. Danced alone, for no one, or so you thought. I was always with you, but you thought I was a dream. Until tonight, when you called me—a spirit summoning another." He kissed her languidly, allowing his tongue to explore her mouth. He drew back from her a moment. "Tell me, do you always dance without underwear beneath your costume?"

"Never." She laughed as his eyes became impassioned obsidian.

"I never knew. If I had..."

She smiled to see the delicious strain on his face. "Robert, look at me."

His gaze was savage with desire.

She ran a hand from his temple, down his face, to his

throat, to his chest. She traced a finger around his nipple, seeing the flesh pucker and spasm. She plucked lightly at the fine smattering of hair on his breast. Moving lower, she dipped into his navel, swirling her finger around and laughed as his body convulsed. Following the trail of hair she arrived at his groin, reveling in his contrasts: the satin smooth skin amid the granite-hard male muscles, the erection.

Beneath her fingers his body flamed hot and moist. She captured a drop of perspiration and raising her fingertip to her lips, she curled her tongue around his moisture, her actions and her eyes holding him captive. He groaned as she sucked and licked her finger, promising him of future pleasuring from her tongue and mouth.

His smile was slow, sultry. "Tonight, will you again be Salome? Will you dance the dance of the seven veils for me?"

"And tomorrow night?"

"I will dance for you and love you so much that you will not be able to think."

She smiled. "Then, I will be Salome for you."

There was a moment of suspension, when the world about her shimmered and darkened before returning to form and substance. The chamber was now decorated as an Arabian tent, with braziers burning sandalwood and piles of tasseled silk cushions were spread over thick carpets.

Tess glanced down and saw that she was dressed in an exotic harem costume of beaded turquoise silk, and he wore the garments of a potentate. The gold silk brocade enhanced his dark beauty.

He smiled. "Reality is ours to shape as we wish. In time you'll be able to visualize and space-shift reality. Meanwhile, I'll robe you in satins and silks and pearls and diamonds. Whatever your heart desires."

"I have only one desire," she breathed.

"Oh?"

Tess concentrated and closed her eyes, when she opened them she saw him as she had visualized: lying naked against the silk cushions. But his parted legs and rampant cock were not her invention.

He laughed. "This is how you want me? I can robe myself in whatever you desire."

"Our next dance requires no costume. My name is Salome and I dance for you – only for you!"

FLIGHT NIGHT

On the world of Turean:

Golden feathers stroked her body, a teasing caress that made her shiver.

Smiling, she opened her eyes and saw him, this beautiful man of her dreams.

His mantle was of brown feathers; his eyes were tawny and his hair was mahogany streaked with gold. His smile was for her alone, as were his kisses.

He knelt beside her cot and touched her face, a touch so light it was barely discernible.

"Please," she whispered.

Bending forward, he captured her mouth with his own, his lips slanting gently over hers.

There had never been the need for words between them; he loved her, this phantom lover who came to her in the time just before dawn, when the world was languid and when, it was said, the doorway between the worlds of mortal and faerie could be breached.

Was he fey, or ephemeral?

He lay beside her and took her in his arms and as always she went eagerly into his embrace.

His mouth again found hers and now his kiss became insistent, demanding. She opened her mouth to his tongue. His hands fanned over her body, stroking,

igniting as his mouth stroked and ignited.

"Please," Melisande whispered. "Tell me your name."

He raised his head from hers a fraction. "You must know it."

She frowned up at him, and raised a trembling finger to smooth back the sheet of hair falling across his cheek. Such beautiful hair, alive with light and color and life.

He kissed her again and shifted over her, pressing her to the bed. She opened her body and felt against her the rigid brand that had branded her virgin flesh ten nights ago and had plundered her each night thereafter.

He demanded entry and she acquiesced. He possessed her in one swift thrust. Buried deep within her, he lay motionless, taking his weight from her with his knees and elbows. He took her mouth again, drinking deeper and deeper.

For a moment, it was as if she was turned inside out and Melisande felt herself floating. The walls of her bedchamber disappeared to be replaced by the wide open sky.

She soared over the countryside so far that below her she could take all in one glance: the forests, the holder castles, the thread of rivers and the patchwork of tilled fields.

Freedom. It was hers. She cried with happiness.

In the distance, she saw a huge golden eagle and it soared in the updraughts, its wingspan the width of a man's body. She strained to match his height, calling the creature to her. The bird dipped downwards,

gliding towards her.

Then she saw her arms. They were no longer flesh, but mottled cream and brown feathers.

She gasped.

She fell, screaming, while the eagle circled her, crying...

* * * *

Melisande started awake, the blood pounding in her temples. Disoriented she looked around. She was no longer in the sky, but in her cell. The confining grey stone walls of her chamber; the harsh reality of her life greeted her.

Despondent and angry, she kicked off the blanket.

Outside the rooster crowed and she heard the first stirrings of the castle. She rose, as did the other servants. Shivering in the cold she splashed her face and donned her gown.

The routine of her days was without exception.

Upon the death of her father, twelve months ago, she had come to her uncle's castle. Where once Melisande commanded her father's keep, now she was servant to her cousin, Lythia.

Lythia, who was never pleased, who found fault with everyone and everything. Lythia, who took perverse delight in tormenting Melisande for real and imagined transgressions.

The one and only time Melisande had protested, a whip across her back brought screams to silence her protests.

Melisande made her way to her cousin's

bedchamber.

With sinking heart, she saw that Lythia was in a frenzy. For today, Lythia's husband would come to claim her. And nothing was good enough: no clothes, jewels, hair style...Melisande's arms ached from slaps and pinches from Lythia's spite.

"Of course, once I have gone, Melisande, you will become a scullery maid! You can scrabble in the dirt as befits you."

Melisande bit back the retort. Whatever future awaited her, could it be any worse than serving Lythia for the rest of her life?

From Lythia's bedroom window, Melisande watched the entourage halt in the cobbled courtyard. She saw a covered wagon, ten men at arms in polished armor and wearing spotless livery flanked two men: one on a chestnut stallion, the other robed from head to toe in brown sat astride a grey horse. Which man was Hanten, Lythia's betrothed?

Melisande's gaze was drawn to the cloaked man. A curious scent filled her nostrils and the blood swirled in her veins. Her heart thudded against her ribs and she could hardly draw breath. And in the pit of her stomach was that same butterfly feeling, the excitement that was both a pain and a pleasure when she lay with her dream lover. Melisande drew in a ragged breath.

The man in the brown cloak glanced about, then upwards to the place where she stood beside the window embrasure.

His gaze touched her. Heat spiralled out of control, coursing through her body in a heady tide that left her weak and trembling. Her skin prickled.

Then, Hanten reached towards the man, diverting his attention.

As one, both men dismounted and Melisande saw her uncle and Lythia hasten to the side of the man standing next to the chestnut horse.

Melisande sighed in relief. The man in the brown cloak was not Lythia's

Betrothed! But why did that give her comfort? What was the man—any man—to her?

Hanten bowed low over Lythia's hand and she curtsied, her blue gown billowing about her, her golden hair and jewelry glinting in the sun.

Lythia placed her fingers on Hanten's sleeve and the young lord followed Lythia's father into the hall.

Melisande returned to the task of packing Lythia's clothes trunks.

* * * *

Again, that softness stroked her cheek and Melisande started awake.

The shaft of moonlight illuminated her cell. She was alone. But who—or what—had touched her?

She sat upright in her cot, drawing the blanket to her chest.

A scratching at the open window made her gasp.

"Who is it?" How could anyone be there? Her room was in the topmost tower, a hundred feet above ground.

The silence was punctuated by her short breaths and her heart beat so fast it hurt.

A shape settled on the window ledge and

Melisande's eyes widened in surprise as she saw the giant bird. It hopped down onto the floor and regarded her, its head to one side.

This was the eagle of her dreams. Was she dreaming now, or awake? She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

She gazed upon the bird. "You are so beautiful! What are you doing here? If they find you, they'll kill you!"

The eagle stretched and flapped its wings, sending currents of cold air over her.

A light appeared around the creature, washing through it, consuming it.

A rainbow shifted upwards, grew larger and the outstretched wings became arms with hands; the body of the eagle transformed into the shape of a man. Slowly the light faded and the man solidified.

Naked, he stood before her, the man of her dreams.

She gasped and dragged the blanket to her chin as he stepped towards her, his hand outstretched.

"Melisande," he whispered. His voice was soothing, compelling, as beautiful as his face, as his mahogany-gold hair that hung to his waist.

He knelt beside her cot and put his palm to her cheek. "Do not fear me!"

"How can I be afraid of you, Rohell?"

"You know my name."

"Of course."

"May I join your side?" he asked.

"Must you ask?"

Smiling, he lay beside her and drew her into his arms, his hands fanning over her body.

Tugging at her thick bed robe, he drew it over her head. His gaze riveted upon her and as she sought to cover her body, his hands stilled her as his mouth swallowed her protests.

Hands feathered over her body, exploring contours, valleys, peaks and troughs. His fingers traced over her breasts, a nail razoring over her nipple. Lower his nail dragged, across the valley of her stomach, to the opening at her thighs. Dipping in, he touched her pulsing body, a finger curling into her.

The pain was unexpected and she gasped. He looked into her eyes, a soothing warmth slowed her breath and blood. He lowered his mouth to hers, his tongue begging entry.

"Oh," she sighed and his tongue dipped inside as his finger dipped inside her secret valley. No pain, this time, just a delicious heaviness, a filling of an emptiness...an emptiness that she had never realized was there until this moment.

She watched his hand, his fingers, plucking, probing, caressing.

His touch was gentle, his skin smooth. He smiled at her. "This pleases you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Close your eyes, Melisande. I have a gift for you."

"What do you call what you do for me, if not a gift?"

"There is more. Please, close your eyes. Open them when I say."

She smiled and did as he bid. The sensation of his hands upon her altered. His touch was soft, unlike anything she had ever know, ever dreamed.

"Look, Melisande."

She no longer saw his hand, but a 'hand' formed from feathers and flesh: fingers shaped like feathers, feeling like feathers as they caressed her, sweeping over her. Down her body to the place between her thighs.

Feathers, as soft as silk, probed inside, tickling her. She moaned as the exploration deepened. Her face was gently fanned and stroked with more feathers. Scent, a combination of man and bird wafted over her, through her.

In fascination, she watched the stroking of fingers that changed to feathers that changed back to fingers until she could no longer watch the exquisite torture. She closed her eyes and allowed his hand-feathers and kisses to carry her far away.

* * * *

Melisande knew she was losing her mind. What other explanation could there be for her dreams, for the fevered arousal incited from flesh and feather?

She had awoken on her bed, cold and alone and she had wept until she was sick.

But for her there was never a respite: if she did not tend her duties she would be whipped. And she must see to Lythia, for her hand-joining with her husband.

Lythia was waiting for her, and before Melisande closed the door, her cousin struck her across the face.

Melisande put a hand to her stinging cheek.

"You are late!"

"I am sorry."

"Not as sorry as you will be if you do not make

amends. Quickly!"

The hours sped by and Melisande massaged Lythia's skin with fragrant oils, washed and polished her hair, dressing her in her white and silver brocade gown and silver and diamonds—all gifts from her husband.

"That one with him... Roheel, why—*Ouch!* You stupid bitch!" Lythia slapped Melisande's arm.

"Who is Roheel?" Melisande's voice quivered.

"My lord's companion. He's strange—the way he looks at me, through me. He's from the east."

The east! The brush in Melisande's hand stilled. Her family had been from the east; an old clan. Proud. Arrogant. Annihilated.

"Of course, there's always a bit of bad blood in any creature from the east, isn't that so, Melisande?"

"If you say so."

"And I do. My lord Hadan has no such corruption! But why he chooses Roheel as companion, I cannot understand!"

Melisande's thoughts were distracted by her cousin's incessant demands. When Lythia walked to her wedding, Melisande followed at a discreet distance to watch with the other servants, as her uncle pledged Lythia to Hadan.

She saw Roheel, dressed in simple grey raiment, standing behind Hadan and this time Melisande was careful that he did not see her.

Once, during the ceremony, his gaze lifted to where she stood in the shadows of the balcony beside the arras. And, again, she caught the curious scent, had the shortness of breath...a drawing of her essence to his.

Yes! That was what it was.

Melisande! His whisper touched her mind and she gasped at the intrusion. His was a deeper, more intimate trespass than the contact of flesh to flesh. Such a touch had been forbidden, such a touch had been denied her for so many years! Her face flamed and her body burnt.

She fled the hall as soon as she could and sought refuge in her room.

Slipping off her boots and stockings, Melisande let her feet soak in the small bowl, sighing as the cool water soothed her heated skin.

She was losing her mind: it was the only answer. The only answer she dared consider, because the alternative was too horrible to contemplate. But she must face it, must not deny who she was. What she *might* be.

She bit back a sob and drew in a breath.

Roheel. She had known his name before Lythia had revealed it.

Melisande shivered. Old blood still flowed in the eastern families; her own father had the gift of foresight. Her mother, of the south, had no such power.

Yet, if the legends were true, foresight was the least of the gifts in the blood of the ancient eastern families. Melisande shivered again.

There was no sound, nothing to alert her to the fact she was no longer alone, but the hair at her nape lifted and Melisande turned and gasped.

Roheel stood at the doorway.

Melisande flung herself to her feet, upsetting the bowl and backed away. In several long strides, Roheel

was before her, his hand on her wrist restraining her.

"Do not be afraid."

Melisande lifted her chin. "I am not."

"That is good, for I do not want you to be afraid of me. *Ever*." He paused. "Melisande."

The last spoken gently, so longingly, it made her want to cry. She blinked back the tears.

"I have come for you," he said.

"I..."

He smiled. "I know you don't understand. How could you?" He took her wrists in his hands and drew her to him, placing her hands on his hips.

"I dreamed of you," she said.

"I sent you those dreams, so that when I came before you, as a real man, you would know me and not be afraid."

Heat rushed from her head to her heels. She backed away from him, anger supplanting fear. "You sent me those dreams?"

His smile was crooked. "It is the way of our kind, Melisande."

"Your kind?" Her mouth was suddenly dry, her throat closing against sudden dread.

"Our kind, Melisande. Yours and mine."

"I...I have to go!"

He strode to her and held her by the wrist. "You can run, Melisande, if that's what you want. How far can you flee? You and I are *recognized*." He pulled her to him, her body held crushingly against his.

The blood surged through her, and as he kissed her, all strength left her limbs. She clung to him for support, for sanity.

When he set her back on her feet, she was furious to see the all knowing, all male understanding in his eyes.

"You did that to me on purpose!"

He smiled. "Of course. We are a passionate race, Melisande. You have your father's eyes! And his talent, too, doubtless."

"You knew my father?"

"Yes. We met once to discuss your dowry."

Melisande opened her mouth to speak, but she was struck dumb.

Roheel inclined his head. "His early death was a blow to you, to us. Your uncle confiscated you, your heritage, disposing of your estate before we could intervene."

"You speak in riddles."

"Yes." He stepped forward. "Let me mind-speak with you. Then you will understand, then there will be no need for tedious questions and denials."

Melisande raised her chin.

He regarded her deeply, then smiled. "You have a temper. That is good. I would not want my woman to be dainty like your cousin."

"My cousin isn't dainty, as your friend will soon find out. Anyway, I am not your woman."

"Not yet." He folded his arms. "Why are you denying me?"

"I...for your own good, Lord Roheel," she said. "My uncle has decreed that I am to have no man. Ever."

"He has no say in the matter."

"He owns me," Melisande whispered.

Roheel's anger inflamed his tawny eyes. "Owns you?" His voice was soft and chill.

Melisande grew afraid. This man kept power in check—a power she had never before encountered.

"You are free, Melisande!" He held out his hand. "Your uncle struck a hard bargain, but in the end his greed overcame reluctance. Gold and land changed hands this morning. You are free. Let me show you."

"How?"

"Mind to mind."

"I do not have the skill."

Roheel shook his head. "Our dream-sharing is proof positive that you do have it. Untrained as you are, your thoughts, your scent reached me leagues away. You are *wyre*, Melisande."

Wyre—the demon-shapeshifters. No! No! Melisande retreated from him, shaking her head.

"Is it such a shock to you? Yes, I suppose it is. Living among ignorance, how can you know your true nature?" Roheel shook his head. "I have much to teach you."

"And I am to obey, since you have bought me? You are my master? What do you require of me?"

His face paled and it was as if he reached out to her. She tasted the cold wash of anger and disgust—his!

Roheel's mind-touch made her stagger.

"You are free. To stay, to go, to deny your nature, to exalt in it. You control your own future, Melisande."

"I have never known freedom," she said.

Roheel spread his hands. "Once tasted, Melisande...you will never be content in your cage. Will you come with me? Will you allow me to touch your mind?" He stepped closer. "Will you allow me to touch your body as I did in the dreams?"

"But why have you come now. Why was I left here, alone, for years with my uncle...if I was so important to you?"

Roheel looked down, his jaw clenched. "I was ordered away by my clan leader. One day you will understand what *that* means! We thought that perhaps you would be happier in your new life. The letters we sent were returned—"

"Letters? I had no letters!"

"I feared as much. But I was ordered..." He shook his head. "I should have disobeyed! I used to dream of you; sometimes I mind-sent, but when you did not answer, I assumed the worst—that you did not want me. Then when Hadan announced he intended to wed your cousin, I knew I must accompany him and see you for myself. I sent the dreams and the wyre-scent and when you responded, I knew that your time had come: you would be mine." He smiled. "I know this is all new and strange to you, beloved. Let me reassure you as a man." His hand traced down her cheek, to her neck, to rest on the swell of her breast. His gaze held hers and between them heat rose, then desire. Finally, there was a recognition of spirit.

Melisande felt the faint caress of his mind. Love. Desire. Loneliness. Her thoughts? His?

We are alike, Melisande. Until this moment we have been only half alive. You do not remember the bonding? You were perhaps too young?

"Bonding?"

"I came to your keep with my mother. You were meant for me. Always. I recognized you the moment I saw you, even as a babe in the cot, you were destined for me!"

Melisande's mind reeled with the image of herself as a babe, seen through Roheel's eyes; the sweep of his gaze around the room to his mother, to her father. Their nods and smiles: their joy that their two children would be united.

'But your father died and all our plans came to naught," Roheel said. "By the time we reached your keep, you were gone and we could not wrest you from your uncle."

"You tried?"

"That we did. He wanted vengeance for your father stealing his sister! *Stealing*—that was his word! None of wyre-kind would dare to force a woman against her will. Your mother went to your father willingly. That, your uncle could never forgive. He could not punish the sister, so he punished you, the child." Roheel raised her chin. "He never broke your spirit, but he tried, didn't he? For that I will kill him!"

"No!" Melisande said.

"No?" he asked. "You wish me to spare him?"

"Please. I do not want any more pain." She smiled, despite herself, despite the tears in her eyes and on her cheeks.

"As you command, so I agree, Melisande." He paused, a smile tugging his lips. "Wyre are strong of spirit," Roheel said. "Our passions run deep." He leant forward and kissed her.

"I am wyre?" she asked. "I...have never *changed*."

Roheel smiled. "The skill is inherited, but must be learned."

She half turned from him. "I cannot believe..."

His hand on her shoulder squeezed reassuringly.

"You have much to learn, much to overcome. Let me help you."

"How?" She turned to him.

"Let me touch your mind, your heart, your soul. Let me become wyre; let me love you."

"As in your dreams?" Heat coiled within her, to be squashed a moment later by fear.

"Better than any dream, Melisande. Much better. Trust me. I am yours, as you are mine. Have no fear, only desire. I will give you pleasure and understanding. Please." He dropped to his knees before her and pressed his temple against her stomach.

Tentatively, she stroked his head, her fingers knotting in his hair. He kissed her at the juncture of her thighs and she trembled.

Roheel's gaze lifted to hers. "Beloved, I belong to you. Have no doubts, do not deny yourself, or me."

He came to stand before her and cupped her face between his palms. He kissed her, a gentle kiss, restrained, but full of passion, of unspoken promises and hints of the future.

Melisande felt the feather-soft caress of his mind to hers. Her body responded, as did her mind. She touched his mind and that drew a gasp from him.

In the intimacy of mind-union, denials and fears faded.

She leaned forward and kissed him.

He held her out at arm's length, smiling, his gaze deeply intense and so welcoming.

"Tomorrow we leave this keep, Melisande. We return to the east, where you belong, with whom you belong."

She put a finger to his lips. *You are asking me to wait?*

You cannot ask me to love you in this accursed place.

It matters not to me. Only that I have you, know you, as you will know me. Please. I recognize you. Please.

Tears sprang to Roheel's tawny eyes. A golden light flared across his face.

Please. As you command, my beloved lady, so I obey.

He bent down and raised the hem of her robe, lifting it slowly, teasingly up over her legs, thighs, over her head. He cast it aside disdainfully. *Ugly, so ugly! How dare he! That bastard uncle!*

Roheel's affront that she had been so garbed touched Melisande. It made her laugh, but that laughter was short lived, as she saw his smouldering gaze upon her breasts.

She glanced down to see her taut nipples straining through the cotton chemise. His hand cupped her right breast as he lowered his mouth to her, drawing in the nipple to his mouth, lathering it through the chemise.

Touch me! Roheel pleaded.

Melisande gently held his head as his lips passed back and forth between her breasts. She threaded her fingers in his hair.

He bent down and raised the chemise up over her body, casting it away. He stepped back to admire her and Melisande shivered, forcing herself to deny the urge to cover her body from his heated gaze.

Beautiful.

Am I?

Oh ... yes! His grin was predatory. *Mine.*

YOU are mine! She contradicted.

Oh, yes, soon!

Melisande ran her hand over his shirt, diving into

the opening at his throat, finding his flesh misted and hot. Her other hand delved lower, over leather breeches. He gasped at her daring and she smiled, realizing in that moment, the power she could wield over this man.

Wyre, not man!

Then, wyre, not man, remove your garb.

I would rather you assisted.

I have never undressed a man.

Then you shall learn, beloved. His hands guided her to clasps and laces.

At last she drew his breeches down his legs and he stepped out of them, kicking them aside.

Dry-mouthed, Melisande regarded him. He was no man. Across his chest, at his genitalia, no hair but a fine golden down, his maleness truly rearing from a nest formed from feathers and down.

Touch me, beloved my lady! Please.

Swallowing, she placed her hand around his male rigidity and she shivered in unison with his own shiver of pleasure.

Bending, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the wide chest against the wall. He sat down upon it, bringing her onto his lap, kissing her neck and tugging her earlobe with his teeth.

Not the bed?

Darling, that cot is not by any stretch of the imagination, a bed. When I bed you, it will be on a bed worthy of the name. In the meantime, here and now. Let me love you.

I don't know how, exactly.

I will show you.

She allowed him to kiss and tease her with lips, tongue, teeth and fingers.

He slipped his hand between her thighs, opening her body. She swallowed hard, her heart beating frantically. He paused a few moments, his attention upon her.

Am I allowed?

Yes, Roheel.

He quested through her lower curls to part her folds. His fingers scrolled over her flesh.

Feathers! Melisande mind-whispered. As I dreamed.

You wish to know the wyre?

Pl... yes!

She watched his frown of concentration, then a light played over his face, lighting his eyes so they were molten gold.

He lingered between two realities: between man and eagle, feathers and flesh. Melisande felt the soft caress of feathers over her body – fingers and feathers, tracing and delving.

Long wing feathers teased against her opening and she moved herself to accommodate his quest. She gasped as the feathers probed into her, a slow sawing motion.

She caught his *desire-thought* and obeyed, grasping his manhood in her fist, slowly teasing him with her fingers.

I need more, Melisande. Will you trust me further? Will you allow me to love you in other ways?

Yes.

He knelt before her and lifting her legs to his shoulders, probed her mantle with his tongue.

She gasped, not through fear, or embarrassment, but at the intense pleasure he invoked. She rocked back and forth as his tongue loved her.

Then his feathers loved her.

She watched them enter her, finger-hands-feathers blurring as man and wyre hovered on the brink of each Roheel manifestation.

Deeper. More. Deeper. Is it allowed?

Of course it is allowed, beloved my lady! If it gives you pleasure, I will do it for you, whatever you ask...

The silken texture of feathers invaded her, plumbed her to her deepest extremity.

"Oh!" She cried out. *Oh. Oh.*

The gentle severing of her virgin flesh by wyre made her cry out; her cry a mixture of pleasure and pain. Roheel paused, retreating, allowing her time, before pursuing onwards.

The warmth spread from her stomach, tightening muscles, bringing scalding heat and pressure that must surely kill her if it continued, but must surely kill her if it desisted. On and on.

There was a moment of oblivion, sweet, intense and her world turned inside out. She screamed.

Melisande lifted upwards, her arms flailing. Beneath her skin she felt the rush of air.

Beloved my lady! Look!

She caught Roheel's shock, then delight and she opened her eyes to see that her own body hovered between woman and wyre, and then returned to woman, her feather hand-fingers returning to flesh.

You are the falcon. She is rare. Beautiful. I thought perhaps you might be hawk, as your father. Roheel kissed her. *Now may I know you as man? You are ready for me.*

He lifted her onto his lap and turned her so that her body rested over his. Gripping her hips he guided her, the tip of his penis touching her woman's dew.

When you are ready, beloved my lady!

Melisande swallowed. Slowly, a fraction at a time, she lowered herself down, pausing, adjusting, accommodating her body to him. His hands cupped her bottom, holding her, guiding her.

The pressure became a pleasure that slowly filled her, igniting and burning, branding her. His fingers dug into her skin and he shivered beneath her, supporting her as she accustomed herself to his dimension.

Then she gave a sudden downwards thrust and he filled her and she cried out and paused.

It is not enough for you, my manself? He laughed at her frustration.

I prefer the wyre.

Roheel lifted her and brought her down onto him, slowly, over and over. *As waves upon an ocean, Melisande. Crash or gentle, the pace is yours to choose. I suggest a combination of both.*

She acquiesced and under his tutoring, she found new pleasure in the man's body.

Liquid heat spilled from them both and at the climax that lifted them both, their mental cry became a verbal cry of passion released in unison.

Later, her legs wrapped around him, her face against his neck, Melisande came to awareness, his mind to hers, a gentle stroking, soothing.

It will grow better, beloved my lady.

Better. How can that be?

Feathers delved into her, in searing, silken caresses.

Much better

He smiled at her naivete. *Much better?*

The sound of heavy footsteps sounded outside her

chamber and the door was flung open.

Melisande felt Roheel tighten against her, heard his mental gasp. She saw, through Roheel's eyes, her uncle and two men at arms, before she turned to confront the intruders.

In that moment, Roheel was part man, part eagle. Wyre faded to be replaced by man: tall, angry. And afraid.

"Demon-spawn! I knew it!" her uncle cried. "Neither of you will leave here alive."

Roheel lifted off the chest, placing Melisande behind him.

"There was an agreement between us, Lord Raxon."

Lord Raxon waved a soldier forward and he raised his crossbow.

"No!" Melisande cried. "No!" Before she could move, and place herself in front of Roheel the arrow was loosed.

It thudded into Roheel and she screamed. Another arrow was fitted to the bow. Roheel was on his knees, the shaft through his shoulder, blood pooling onto the floor around him.

"No!" Melisande flung herself forward, screaming, hands extended.

Fingers became talons and she lifted into the air, flying into the faces of the men. She tore, she bit, rending flesh from faces. There were screams: her own. Her prey.

One soldier was down, the other badly wounded. Her uncle, his face ripped to shreds sagged against the wall.

No, beloved! No!

Roheel's mind touch brought her back from the

brink of savagery as she went to kill the last attacker.

Awkwardly, Melisande landed beside Roheel and he reached out a trembling hand to stroke her head.

"We must leave!" Roheel whispered.

You are wounded.

As man. Not wyre.

Mind-linked, Melisande shared his pain; the awful drain of blood from his body, the heart labouring... *You are dying, Roheel! No! No!*

I will not die. When I change to wyre, I will heal. Do not be afraid for me. But we must flee.

And what of your friend?

Roheel smiled. *Even as we speak, he is fleeing. He will be safe.*

How can we leave here?

As wyre. Fly, Melisande. You are falcon, I am eagle.

I don't know how to change.

You did so when danger threatened. It is easy.

Melisande staggered to the door and closed it, wedging it shut.

How can I change?

Help me to stand.

She watched as Roheel concentrated, but his pain was distracting. She placed a hand to his cheek. *I give you strength. Forget the pain.*

Beloved my lady!.

Roheel concentrated and slowly the light, emanating from his eyes moved across his face, down his body. It was like a river of gold racing through his body. Veins, arteries, heart glowed, melding wyre and man.

Minutes later, Roheel stood upon the window ledge, whole, free of pain and wound. He had become the great golden eagle.

Now you. I will guide you.

Melisande frowned, concentrated. It hurt to think so hard.

Relax. Slowly. Image your falcon self. Fingers to feathers. Yes. Skin to feathers. Let the light wash through you, bathe you, cleanse you.

There was a gut-wrenching awful turning inside out and Melisande screamed, and fell over, scrabbling for purchase against the floor. Talons could not grip...

Talons.

She stared at her body.

Beloved my lady is so beautiful!

I am beautiful? She asked, her gaze upon Roheel. Then she swivelled about as other senses came to the fore. Blood. Death. More enemy on the stairs below. The acrid scent of man was sickening.

Yes!

Roheel leapt to the window ledge, fluttering his massive wings. He cried, sensing the air, tasting the freedom. *Come.* He glanced back over his shoulder.

Afraid.

Yes. But come.

Roheel leapt out of the window and soared, circling back, his massive wings dipping and gliding. He keened to her.

Melisande hovered on the window ledge. *Afraid. Fall. Die.*

Not fall. Fly! FLY! If not fly, die! Or caged. Beloved my lady wants to be caged?

She had lived in a cage too long. Better death on the rocks below than trapped in a stone keep.

Melisande closed her eyes and leapt. The wind rushed around her. She screamed. Roheel 's eagle body

halted her fall.

You have wings! Fly, Melisande! FLY!

She arched her back, unfurled her wings, and caught the updraft. She moved her arms...wings, now. A strange weight bore down upon her, then she arched upwards, flapping her wings.

She knew she was ungainly, but she flew and beside her, Roheel matched her pace.

Free!

Yes, beloved, free. Aim east. Follow me.

Melisande matched his pace, and slowly the keep disappeared from view and ahead—all she could see was the wide open sky and beneath her the land reduced to a patchwork of different shapes and colors.

I am going home, Roheel. Home...with you.

Yes, beloved my lady. Home. And then I will show you truly what it means to be loved by a wyre.

You promise?

He laughed. Yes, beloved my lady, I promise.

RESURRECTION

With confident, practiced strokes, her lover's hands caressed her skin, cupping her breasts, slipping lower, across the smooth, flat plain of her stomach.

Finding her core, his fingers plunged into her, parting, probing as his kisses swallowed her moans, drawing her pleasure into his mouth.

Wanting, aching for more, she spread her legs wide. Her reward was the skilful manipulation by fingers that twirled against her inner muscles—fingers that retreated, attacked, slowly brining her to the brink.

She moaned. He smiled down at her, delight in his dark eyes as she writhed beneath his hand. He lowered his mouth against her flesh and...

Simone groaned.

She kicked off the sheet, the rickety camp bed squeaking beneath her.

What was the point of trying to sleep? She was an inferno, the desert around her Arctic in comparison. Her fevered dreams would consume her.

She flung an arm across her eyes and swallowed down hard. Slowly, her heart returned to its normal pace, but the frustration, the longing inside her would

not abate.

There was a price to pay in working in that bloody tomb: a secret tomb that hadn't seen the light of day in over one hundred years, when the last Egyptologist had hidden it.

Much too provocative for prudish Victorian sensibilities, the tomb frescoes were graphically erotic. Inventive and instructive if anyone had the guts to mimic the actions portrayed on the tomb walls.

Though the tomb was unique, it had been secreted because it didn't fit the view of Egypt that had held sway since before Howard Carter's day. So the tomb had been sealed and forgotten for a century. In peril of their reputation, no scholar would—could—make a serious study of it.

A new breed of Egyptologist had re-opened the tomb, and worked unfazed beneath depictions of vigorous sexual acts that seemed physically impossible. And add insult to injury, Simone knew there was little chance she might test the ingenuity of those positions; she had no man.

Except in her dreams. And there was precious good in a dream-lover!

Those bloody dreams!

Simone pushed herself upright. Sleep would, again, elude her this night. She shrugged herself into her shirt and shorts and then pulled down her boots hanging from the tent pole. She shook the boots, tapping the soles to make sure that no scorpions or other nasties had found a home inside.

The rest of the camp slept; soft snores emanated from the other tents. Holding the lamp high, she

picked her way through the camp and headed up the rocky path to the excavated crevice.

Once inside, the silence beat against her ears. In the artificial light, the light and shadow made the frescoes three dimensional, almost animated. Again, she marveled at the colors, the craftsmanship.

Weeks ago she had gasped in shock at the graphic scenes, much to the delight of her male colleagues who had been working on the site long before her arrival. But she guessed that her reaction had been theirs when they first beheld the tomb decorations of Prince Re-Nefru.

History had forgotten this Prince, but his tomb endured; even the sarcophagus had been intact when Jack Priestly had unearthed it one hundred years ago. The treasure had gone, but greater treasure was the unique murals adorning the Prince's tomb. The mummy had been smuggled out of Egypt, to a private collector, but it had been lost en route to England. So the story went.

Simone held up the lantern and moved the light over the scenes. Again, the figures wavered in the shifting shadows.

"You know, Prince Re-Nefru, working in your eternal house isn't good for my nerves!" She spoke to the fresco in ancient Egyptian. "But I suppose someone had to do it and it may as well be me!" She'd publish a paper or two and be damned to her reputation. She didn't have a reputation to damage!

Which wall would she choose as her focus? Such a choice!

Every sexual position was depicted; every carnal act

and always the prince was at the focal point of each scene.

She wondered if Re-Nefru was truly the master of the bedchamber, or were the drawings just his own conceit? Typical of a man: pride in the size of his phallus—the Prince's erection stretched all the way to his navel; a thick prick that pleased every woman on the fresco. Had the Prince done so in life, as his alter ego did in death?

The poetry written on the walls was also graphic and couched in metaphors, typical of Egyptian love poetry. A cock wasn't a cock, but blessed rod of Re. And Re-Nefru's *blessed rod of Re* poked and probed and soothed and throbbed through eternity.

Simone knelt down by the latest excavation and unpacked her tools and brushes and began the laborious work of whisking away the sand.

In the early hours of the morning she unearthed the alabaster box. Her hands shook—the seal was unbroken!

She was the first person in over three thousand years to hold the artifact! What might it contain? She had never seen its like. The cartouche on the box identified its owner as Prince Re-Nefru. And upon its surface there was a warning to leave the box alone, or suffer the agonies inflicted by his protector, Sebek, the crocodile-god.

A chill raced up her spine, as a breath of air infiltrated the musty chamber, as if some door behind her had suddenly opened. Spirals of dust floated upwards in the shaft of lamplight.

Hemet.

She glanced over her shoulder, half expecting

someone to be standing behind her, but all she saw were the shadows and the light falling on the life-size fresco of the Prince, his penis jutting out between the sheer folds of his linen kilt.

Her gaze locked on the image. The Prince's smile was for her; a smile full of mischief and promise. Her gaze dropped down to his erection and she ran a tongue over her lips, her mouth hungry to taste him.

Hemet the whisper came again and this time, in response the lamp dimmed.

Hemet – the Egyptian word for 'wife'.

Heat raced through her body and she trembled as something fluttered down her arm. She reared away, terrified that it might be a spider. She hated spiders. The box fell from her hands and smashed open on the sands.

Simone gasped at her clumsiness. *You stupid bitch – Whoa!*

A yellow with age parchment rolled out of the box and as she bent to lift it, she paused. Personal desire warred with professional procedure.

With fingers and intent no longer her own, she retrieved the papyrus. Tearing open the Prince's personal seal, she scanned the writing.

She saw spells, incantations and a promise from Prince Re-Nefru that he would smite his enemies who had brought down ruin upon him. There was nothing revolutionary or unique about what she read. Re-Nefru had saved the unique and the revolutionary for his sex-frescoes.

At night, around the communal camp fire, the Egyptologists had speculated about the Prince. What, or who, had ruined him, he who was favored of

Pharaoh?

Perhaps too much the libertine, his desires and tastes had shocked and made enemies? Perhaps he had seduced where he should not? Maybe his cock had strayed into secret temples forbidden him?

Simone read the papyrus, the Egyptian script as familiar to her as her native English, perhaps more so because for years she had lived in Egypt pouring over manuscripts and tomb etchings until her mother tongue was more foreign to her than a script and language thousands of years dead.

Shadows wavered on the walls and her lamp sputtered once and died.

She screamed as all consuming dark enveloped her, as another touch feathered down her arm.

"Gently, beloved! Have no fear!"

A melodious sound, like many bells tinkling together wafted through the tomb. With a knowledge not truly her own, she recognized the sistrum, the magical musical instrument so beloved of the Egyptians. Its sounds soothed her.

The atmosphere was thick and expectant. Her heart beat against her ribs, the blood pounding in her ears.

Hemet!

Desire spiralled from her woman's core at the male voice, husky with its own desire.

A finger traced over her arm and she screamed, swatting at the hand that caressed her. Her fingers hit nothing but air.

"Would you prefer that I do not touch you, *hemet*?"

The hairs on the back of her neck rose and Simone turned in the darkness. It was not the voice of any man in camp.

"W...who is there? I don't think this is funny."

"Assuredly. I am not laughing."

The lamp at her feet flared, casting light and shadow about the tomb.

She spun about and froze.

Against the wall he leaned, his arms folded, his smile teasing, his dark eyes consuming. He was dressed as Prince Re-Nefru, down to the kohl eye-paint. Good—a very good rendition of an ancient Egyptian—she had to hand it to his attention to detail!

Simone retreated until she felt the wall at her back.

"Those bastards put you up to it, didn't they?" She didn't wait for his answer. Her colleagues resented her presence, her credentials. The desert and the tomb were no place for a woman and they had long conspired to rid themselves of her. "You can tell Professor Colroy that I'm not going. I'm not going to be run off—"

"You are mistaken," he said gently. "I am not here to frighten you, or expel you. I have waited a long time for you."

"Pardon me?"

He smiled and spread his hands, the bracelets about his wrists chinking. "You've read my words, my spell. I have returned to you."

Simone's world narrowed and for a moment she felt faint as she looked at the fresco image, comparing it to the man standing before her. The resemblance was uncanny.

But how could this be happening? Was he a flesh and blood man, or the product of her cravings? Or a cruel practical joke?

Her gaze fastened on the sheer kilt that hid nothing of the man beneath. The fresco had been no exaggeration!

She swallowed down hard and looked up at him. His grin was predatory.

"You may look as long as you wish, beloved, but I think rather you would do more than look?" He pushed himself away from the wall.

"Keep back!"

He laughed. "Your mouth lies, because your eyes beckon."

"No!"

"Truth's feather would prove you a liar, beloved, if we should stand before Ma'at for judgment."

"Who are you? What do you want? How did you get in here?"

"I have always been here, waiting. I am Prince Re-Nefru and as for what I want, I wish to give you pleasure." He turned his head to one side, appraising her. "There is much tension within you. You have had no lover to ease your passion. Yes, too long have we both been denied."

She slid against the wall, evading him as he strode forward. He knew his art too well, and imprisoned her against the stones, his arms at either side of her forming the confines of her prison.

She stared up at him. "This is another of those god-awful dreams. I can't stand it!"

"Yes, night after night you have burned, but until you spoke the words of resurrection, I could not join you. How I waited in frustration! As you have waited in agonized frustration my *hemet*."

"I am not your wife."

"You soon shall be. Again!"

"I—"

He bent his head, his nose caressing hers. "Do you prefer the kiss of my lips?" he asked hoarsely.

"I...I can't believe..."

His mouth slid over hers. "Believe!" he whispered against her lips before he kissed her again.

She tasted myrrh and honey, as his kiss deepened. She surrendered to it as she surrendered to the dream.

Her hands crept up his back, feeling the smooth skin, the taut whipcord of muscles and the supple flesh. Her fingers slipped into the waistband of his kilt and pulled at the sash.

He broke free of the kiss, laughing.

"My *hemet* is too eager. Patience, beloved! You know that it is too soon for me to love you!"

"This is *my* dream and I want you, now, inside me. Now!"

He laughed, again, and shook his head and placed her hands firmly behind her back. He pressed against her and Simone felt the pulsing heat of his erection.

His tongue lapped her cheek. "Soon, but not too soon, I shall enter your portal, but only when I deem." His kiss swept away her protests and demands.

Faint with desire, Simone dimly allowed herself to be led by the hand away from the ante chamber and down the newly opened corridor to where the sarcophagus had lain.

The erotic detail on the walls was even more graphic, and stark against the more traditional tomb scenes and resurrection spells.

She blinked, shaking her head. The chamber had been transformed. Gone was the decay of the centuries: it was clean and fresh and whole.

In the centre of the chamber, there was the tomb, the Prince's cartouche etched and colored on the stone. Torches lit the chamber and patchouli incense burned in a brazier in the corner.

Upon the altar, cushions had been piled and to this he led her.

He deftly unfastened her waistband, tugging down the zipper of her shorts. His fingers parted fabric, then quested inside, lower, touching her curls, stroking, all the while his gaze holding hers. He withdrew his hand and smiled. The smile brought a weight to her core and she resisted the urge to cross her legs in pleasure.

The Prince was darkly handsome, strong of feature rather than beautiful. His glossy black hair was cut in a square bob, his sultry eyes outlined in kohl. A mouth—ah, his mouth! Sensual, made for one purpose and one purpose only. To kiss and be kissed. By her! Only her! She smiled.

"I like it when you smile," he said. "It is a woman's smile for her man."

"Why you arrogant—"

"I know you too well, Sen-set."

"What did you say?"

"Sen-set? Your name, my wife!"

"I am Simone Beauris."

"For the moment. Soon you will be my Sen-set!"

He kissed her until she was dizzy. His fingers teased at her thighs, but not touching her in the place she most craved.

"Please..."

"Do I please you?"

"No!"

His eyebrow arched.

"You do not please me. I want you to..."

"Yes?"

"If you are my husband, then I want you *now*. Inside me, your blessed rod of Re! Fuck me for the gods' sake!"

He tugged at her shorts and drew them ever so slowly down her legs. She kicked the garment aside.

He gazed up at her from where he knelt at her feet. Then, slowly, his hands skimmed up her inner thigh to stop where her panties sheathed her mound. He snaked a finger inside the silk.

"Ah, you weep for me, beloved."

"Yes. Oh yes!" Her fingers curled into his shoulders, nails biting deep as his fingers plundered her.

"Ah, you want the pleasure with the pain?" he demanded.

"I don't care, so long as you do it. I want you to fuck me. Now!"

"I will...fuck you – later! I have not started with you, yet."

His gaze captured hers. He stretched up his hands and drew her panties down, the silk whispering against her skin.

He remained kneeling at her feet, and his hand traveled up her leg, and then slowly, so deliciously slowly his mouth and tongue followed the path of his hand to touch her woman's flesh with a tongue tip.

"Ah, as sweet as honey. I remember the taste even

after so long. Your taste, so unique among women, I could never get enough."

Simone writhed against his mouth, but he moved away, standing up against her. She reached down to his penis, gripping it in her fist, her finger flicking the head, scrolling around the skin.

He took her hands and placed them at her sides.

"Do not touch me, yet. I will tell you when you may."

Slowly, he unbuttoned her shirt, then leaned closer, his arms around her as his hands unfastened her bra. He flung the clothing away and stood back, his arms folded, admiring her. His gaze raked her from head to toe, over and over, his smile deepening with each foray.

"Skin as smooth and pale as alabaster, eyes the color of lapuz, hair the color of the sun; truly you are unique and mine, my *hemet*! How I have missed thee!"

"Make me yours, darling. Now."

"Soon." He leaned against her, pushing her into the cushions upon his altar-tomb.

"Isn't this irreverent? Your last resting place?"

He laughed. "It is fitting. This last place shall also be my beginning."

Leaning over her, he parted her thighs and bent forward, his hair swishing across her skin, tickling and teasing. His mouth found her molten core and his tongue dipped in to taste the nectar that flowed only for him.

He moaned as he loved her, and she moaned and writhed, her fingers knotting in his hair, holding him tight to her. The silence was punctuated by his lapping,

the smacking of his lips against her inner lips.

The darkness flowed around her, over her, through her. He bit down on her and she screamed her release as his teeth grazed her.

Hazily, she felt him turn her onto her stomach. Moments later his hands brushed aside her hair and his kiss scrolled her nape.

"This is one of the most sacred places of a woman's body," he said.

"It's just my neck."

He laughed against her skin, his body pressing against hers, parting her legs wider. "Most fools worship the obvious, it is true, but it is the hidden recesses of a woman's body that hold the key to pleasure. Have you forgotten? I will have to prove it to you."

He pulled away from her and as she went to turn, his hand at her back held her firmly face first against the cushions.

What was that delicious smell? She struggled to remember. *Hekena*. The word wove into her mind. Sacred oil.

He smeared its warmth over her body from head to toe, in every recess, his fingers deftly, gently, firmly massaging and probing. And as he worked he chanted love spells, poetry he had written three thousand years ago. For her. Only for her.

And in his love, his devotion for his foreign wife his enemies had seen the path for his demise...

Simone jolted upright, startling him. She turned.

"Husband!" She paused, frowning, her heart racing. "You were my husband. They killed you... Oh God! I

want to wake up from this dream.”

“I was killed, as you, beloved. But they did not know me, or my power. Death can be overcome. We are here together at last. Together and no enemies to smite us.”

He kissed her breathless, his tongue plunging into her mouth, sinuously joining, probing, teasing back and forth.

His hands skimmed her body, cupping and enfolding.

Simone groaned her frustration. “May I touch you, now?”

“You may.”

She flung aside his kilt and grasped his erection, drawing her fingers up and down its length. A powerful man in every sense of the word and he was hers and she would have him. Now.

“Lie down, Re-Nefru, beside me.”

Dutifully he did so and she pushed him onto his back. Her tongue lathered his body, taking first one nipple and then the other into her mouth. She licked, she bit, she kissed and fondled, until at last her mouth found his cock. She tasted *hekenu* and man-salt and quested deeper, while his fingers curled into her hair, enticing her to greater daring.

His climax shuddered against her, but he did not give in to it. Instead, he moved, stretched over her.

He infiltrated her depths in an impact slow, deep and unhurried. He laced his fingers with hers and drew her arms over her head and stared down at her as he moved against her. He loved with his eyes and his body and in that gaze and in that embrace eternity

slipped by.

Then, his pace altered, his strokes were random; sometimes deep and slow, sometimes deep and fast, sometimes fleeting, barely penetration, and at each thrust her hips rose to meet him in this, their intimate dance.

"Ah, my *hemet* remembers."

"I do. How can that be?"

"In this place of cessation, there is understanding. There is beginning."

"I don't understand."

"It is my magic. Did I not promise you?"

"I can't think."

He laughed. "That is good, beloved. I don't want you to think, but feel only me, your husband deep inside your lotus-flower."

Faster, deeper, harder. Gentle, soft, harsh demanding, his strokes and his loving continued until there came the delicious moment of pleasure-pain and together they toppled over that chasm to die and be re-born...

* * * *

She awoke cold and alone. The stone beneath her made her bones ache. She moaned.

"Re-Nefru?"

But she was alone, naked and alone in the tomb. She swore. Just another bloody dream.

Until she saw the gold bracelet around her wrist, his parting gift—she knew then it had been no dream!

"I will come back to you, beloved. I promise you."

Three thousand years ago he had promised, and again that same promise only the night before had brought him to her body.

Tears came to her eyes and she blinked them away.

Simone struggled into her clothes.

Leaving the tomb entrance, she gasped with the heat. Barely past dawn and already the sand was boiling, but she hardly felt it, for the chill of loneliness frosted her inside and out.

She trudged down the well-worn path, meeting her colleagues.

"Been working all night?" the professor asked.

"Yes."

He nodded and the men resumed their climb, disappearing into the tomb.

Simone went into her tent. Fatigue gnawed at her as other emotions gnawed her. She forced them away. Had last night been a memory to last yet another lifetime...?

The camp was silent as Simone stretched out on her camp bed.

She must have slept, for some time later she awoke to the sound of an engine. Through sleep-fuddled wits she identified the gurgling of a motor bike. She ignored it; just another delivery of mail, or supplies.

Some time later a shadow crossed against the outside of her tent and a man's tall frame ducked inside. She raised herself on her elbows.

"Yes?" she asked icily; that frosty voice that struck terror in the hearts of her colleagues.

"Giddyay," he said. "Sorry to disturb you. I'm here to join the dig."

"You – what?"

"Will Hamilton. I'm expected."

"Oh yeah?"

He stepped forward, removing his sunglasses and Simone gasped. She couldn't help it. For the brown eyes, the dark hair held back in a thong...it might be another face, but the same eyes, the same mouth...

"I... Christ!" His voice faded as he stared at her. There was an instant and mutual recognition. "I know you," he said.

"Yes," Simone answered. "Come here!" He obeyed.

Halting before her, his stance was full of arrogance. His gaze took in her length, knowing that beneath the thin sheet she was naked. He was intrigued, not embarrassed, she saw this in his narrowed gaze.

"And what is your expertise... Doctor Hamilton?"

"As for expertise, I can rise to any occasion." His smile was lopsided and she laughed. "But I do know you. How?"

"It's a long story." Simone eased off the sheet and slowly came to her feet, swinging her legs over the camp bed, opening herself. She was pleased to hear his gasp and pleased, too, to see the passion-light flare in his eyes.

She pressed her full length against him and his arms fastened around her as she kissed him.

"I have something to show you," Simone said.

"I think you've shown me *all* there is of you," he replied.

Simone laughed. "Not quite, but I will. Take off your clothes."

"Excuse me?"

"Unless you're shy?"

"Hardly that, darling," he said and proceeded to discard his shirt and shorts and work boots. "Well?" he demanded as he stood before her naked.

"Well enough," she said. Of course his body was different; taller, more muscled, pale in the places where the sun had not tanned, but the erection was all too familiar. She smoothed her thumb over the tip of his penis and felt the tremor pass through his body.

"I...remember," he said. "Something... But it doesn't make sense."

"It will, I promise you." She raised her leg to his hip, drawing him against her. He lifted her off the ground, and she draped her other leg around his back.

"Is this the way you greet all your colleagues?" he asked, a husky tremor in his voice.

"Only for my lord," she said and kissed him.

"Only for...?" he asked when she had released his mouth. His eyes searched her face. "*Hemet*," he breathed. "I dreamed...it was a dream, wasn't it? Only—I remember your eyes."

"You only remember my eyes? Ah well!" She shook her head. "It was no dream. And now, I want you inside me."

His smile turned her inside out. The tip of his cock touched her woman's valley and he rubbed his body back and forth, dipping into her, retreating.

"Please, now. I want you. Now," Simone whispered.

"That bed looks impossible."

"It is."

He drew her down with him to the ground and brought her across him, positioning her and she

plunged down as he rose up to meet her.

"Ah," their cry in unison at the merging.

As she rode him, he cupped her breasts, stroking and kneading. But as his passion took him over the brink, his touch became harsh and demanding, and she pressed into him, wanting all he had to give and more.

* * * *

Hours later, washed, dressed and both looking the cool professionals, Simone and Will met the returning Egyptologists.

"You'd like to see the tomb, I expect?" Professor Colroy asked. "We'll be returning in the evening, it's too damn hot at midday."

"The heat doesn't worry me," Will said, his gaze capturing Simone's.

"Well, then, suit yourself."

"I'll show you," Simone offered.

"Thanks."

They walked silently to the tomb, occasionally their bodies contacting, in a fleeting caress that made them gasp.

They entered the tomb and Simone held up the lamp.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Will ran a tongue over his lips. "I wasn't expecting so much detail."

Simone laughed. "Leaves nothing to the imagination?"

"Oh, I don't know. There are some things I could imagine that aren't here on the walls."

"Oh?" the expectation and the promise made the blood pound in her ears and in her pussy.

"Are you going to explain to me what's been going on? My dreams. That I know you...?"

"Lie down, Will, on the tomb. I'll answer your questions."

She opened his jeans and drew out his penis. Kicking off her shorts, she straddled him and slipped her woman's sheath over his prick.

Passion and memories kindled in his eyes. She smiled above him and he nodded.

"*Hemet!* Your scabbard welcomes my blade!" he whispered. "Now we shall always be together, joined as one. The pictures on the wall do not lie."

"You did say that you thought you might have more to show me than these walls reveal. What would you show me?"

He laughed gently and scrolled his finger over her nub, tracing down into her, back and forth, a nail scraping against her flesh. She shivered.

"Fuck me, now! Oh, now!"

"Why the rush?" he drawled, his fingers caressing, not missing a beat as she writhed against him.

Laughter chimed and Simone looked over her shoulder to see Re-Nefer and beside him a ghostly female image: she, as she once had been.

She smiled.

Together, united, she and Will moved as one, while the specters of Re-Nefer and Sen-set passed through stone to another chamber, secret, hidden, forever hidden, for ghost lovers.

And in the other tomb, a place of beginnings for

mortal lovers again they were united in body, mind and spirit.

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. She has also recently organized a local writers’ group and is convening ‘writefest’ a writers’ conference in her home town.