



HEATHER AND THE HAREM SCROLL

By

Mardi Ballou

© copyright April 2006, Mardi Ballou
Cover art by Jenny Dixon, © copyright April 2006
ISBN 1-58608-906-4
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

The day's bright sunlight was rapidly fading when Professor Grant Drury arrived at the site of his archaeological dig in a remote sector of southern Turkey. He'd just completed the project's initial paperwork and could at last immerse himself in the hands-on work of searching for artifacts of the lost kingdom of Indurlia. Success would help solve a historical mystery and blast his career into the stratosphere. Hot and parched from his arduous trip in an overfilled jeep over rough terrain, Grant couldn't wait to meet with the crew for his first debriefing.

"So what have you all been working on?" Grant asked Mel Garth, his second in command, while he unpacked and stowed his gear in his quarters.

Mel recited an efficient summary of each researcher's discoveries. When he came to the most junior of their colleagues, he frowned. "Morrison has been wandering off by herself, not reporting much."

Grant paused in his unpacking. "Well, I'll put a stop to that. First of all, she's not safe wandering off."

"Oh, I'd be real careful about acting as if you think she's in need of protection."

Grant lifted an eyebrow. "You mean her reputation as a fire and brimstone feminist is accurate?"

"I've never heard it quite described like that," Mel said. "But you're probably not far off."

"As head of this dig, I'm responsible for everyone's safety. Even hers. And second, she needs to disclose all her findings. Even, as I suspect, if they do little to bear out her harebrained theories."

"You really didn't want to include her in this dig, did you?"

Grant waved his hand dismissively. "The project benefactors insisted on researchers with diverse views. And my department chair convinced me

that I'd do better discrediting her in open confrontation than by excluding her. Kind of the give 'em enough rope to hang themselves approach."

Mel shrugged. "I used to agree with you. But I've read some of her work. It's solid scholarship, and there might just be something to her angle."

Grant snorted with disgust. "Never thought you'd go for the warm, fuzzy school of history."

"Can't say that I do. But I like to keep an open mind until I hear all sides."

"Which should happen in about an hour, right?" Grant asked, checking his watch.

Mel chuckled. "Did I mention that the men on this dig have voted Morrison the woman they'd most like to get caught in a sandstorm with? What a major fox, especially for a talented historical anthropologist with degrees up the wazoo."

"So *that* explains your open mind." Grant shook his head. "I just met Morrison once, briefly, at the Stringer Conference. Can't say I particularly noticed her looks or anything else about her."

"Hey, Drury, this is Mel you're talking to. You didn't notice Morrison, and you picked her for this dig just to placate the benefactors. Right. Buddy, got any bridges you want to sell me?"

Not for the first time, Grant asked himself why he'd arranged for his old friend to be part of this dig. Rather than responding to Mel's ridiculous innuendoes, Grant headed off to clean up for the night's meeting.

* * * *

"Eureka!" After searching for hours, Heather Morrison located an intact earthenware jar of the kind used for storage of parchment scrolls. Gritty with the constant sand of the surrounding desert, she wiped her hands on her khaki shorts then cleaned them with a square of antibacterial scrub. As pristine as she could make herself, she held her breath and took off the jar's lid.

She gasped when she saw the top of a scroll. Gingerly she touched the parchment. To her relief, it didn't start to disintegrate. Heather couldn't resist removing the scroll from the jar and unrolling it a bit for a preliminary peek. She quickly realized the parchment was written in Indurlian, the now dead language of the lost kingdom this project was designed to learn about. Heather, an expert in ancient Indurlian, found she could easily read the written symbols. She carefully put the scroll on top of the jar and, with her hoots of celebration echoing off the walls, did an unscholarly happy dance.

This scroll, the first major discovery at the site, would be her entrée to tenure, grants, and academic nirvana. Her fingers trembling, she picked it up and continued to unwind the well-preserved document. With no conscious thought, Heather sank down to the hard-packed sand broken up by a few cracked mosaic tiles that formed the floor of the chamber. Used to deciphering symbols in the poorest light, she soon lost herself in the tiny marks aligned across the scroll.

This is great, she thought as she immersed herself in the text. She estimated it must come from the fifteenth or sixteenth century of the current era. According to what she read, the chamber where she now sat had been a place of ritual for the residents of a King Hashimur's harem. Residents, she snorted to herself. More like inmates. *Stop that*, her academic monitor snapped. *It's not up to you to apply twenty-first century standards and judgments to the people whose lives you come across in digs.* A tough lesson for a dedicated feminist like Heather when she learned how women fared in the past. But an important one for any anthropologist who wanted to bust through her university's glass ceiling and get to the top, where she'd be able to make a real difference.

So yeah. She needed to put her sensibilities on hold and objectively gather and analyze data. She'd just landed smack in a gold mine. Though King Hashimur appeared to be only a minor character in Indurlia's history, he'd merited having a substantial harem and the servants required to run it. Heather winced. Considering how little most female lives were worth throughout much of history, a male didn't need to be very powerful or important to have many women at his beck and call.

Heather's main professional agenda was to discover and spotlight the details of women's everyday lives ... lives that much of mainstream research previously overlooked or trivialized. And here in her hands was this treasure trove of instruction about the functioning of the harem. Written by an educated servant named Melgart, the section of the scroll Heather now read included a detailed step by step description of a young woman's preparation for presentation to King Hashimur as a concubine. It was fascinating and included many details previously unknown to Heather.

She knew that the people in charge of most harems were eunuchs. From her study of the ancient Indurlian tongue, Heather recognized the name Melgart as one given to males. Based on his writing, Heather surmised that Melgart was exacting, precise, and a bit of a control freak--probably all excellent qualities for a harem eunuch.

Come to think of it, those same qualities also described Grant Drury, the leader of this particular expedition. Professor Grant Drury, the history whiz-kid who had it all. At age thirty-four, just four years older than she, he'd already achieved everything Heather hoped for: tenure, professional respect, and recognition as an authority.

Too bad the guy himself was such a reactionary ... *prick*. Heather grimaced at the thought of having to work with him. Grant Drury, known in female academic circles as *Hunky Drury*. Leading man handsome, unfortunately a throwback to a male-centric view of history and anthropology. She'd met him only once, briefly, at the Stringer Conference. Knowing what she did about the man, she'd tried to avoid him. In light of their differences, she'd been amazed when he picked her for this project. She disliked feeling obligated in any way to him. However, she really wanted to be part of this dig, and now she was glad she'd swallowed her pride and applied. As leader of the project, Drury would get a huge chunk of the credit for Heather's find. Well, she'd have to work around that. Most important, she had to make sure he didn't bury the scroll, denying its earth-shattering significance because it primarily spotlighted women's lives.

When her right leg fell asleep, Heather reluctantly put down the scroll. She must have been sitting in the same position for a long time to have grown as stiff as she now felt. She stretched and shifted, rotating her head as she drummed her leg up and down to get rid of the pins and needles. After she stood up and stomped around the chamber for a few steps, Heather's leg began to feel better. She had little time to register relief before a high, keening sound whistled around her. She clutched the precious scroll to her as an impossible wind raced through the chamber, and everything around her began to shake, hurtling her from one wall to another. A grumbling sound vibrated around Heather, and then everything went black.

* * * *

Melgart, son of Jegai, frowned. He did not easily tolerate imprecision, lack of punctuality, or other failures in people's obligations to him. As a eunuch and thus supposedly weak in the traditional male sense, he often had to accommodate the peccadilloes and rudenesses of normal men, his so-called "betters". But within the walls of his harem, well, Melgart's word and his rule reigned absolute. It almost made up for the imperfections he was forced to put up with. Like right now, when the arrival of the newest virgin for King Hashimur's harem was yet again delayed. This lapse threatened to severely unbalance his meticulous schedule. Someone would

pay.

Melgart shook his head as he paced restlessly in his chamber. The time for preparing the new female would be cut unacceptably short. With Melgart in charge, the king and all the men of the royal House of Gsiladmi had learned to expect perfection as the norm. But perfection took time. If the female did not arrive within the next twenty-four hours, Melgart would be forced to either compromise her program or change the schedule. He'd never before done either.

Melgart paused in his pacing when his second in command, Tramador, son of Tragaron, at last arrived. "Where did you say the female is now?" he asked.

Tramador motioned that Melgart should sit down at his table and sample some red wine from a newly arrived shipment. Melgart, wondering why Tramador felt impelled to distract him, sat. He accepted a goblet of wine and took a small sip. "It will do. Would you also care to partake?"

Tramador, a large man several years Melgart's senior, shook his head.

Melgart hid his surprise at this. Tramador enjoyed his wine and never turned down an opportunity to taste a new one. Now Melgart knew for sure that something exceptional was going on. He repeated his question as to the virgin's whereabouts.

Tramador, usually the most forthcoming of men, looked away. "I understand that the young woman has arrived at the palace but, alas, feels too ill to be presented."

Melgart curled his lip. "What nonsense is this? We are not yet presenting her to the king. There's far too much preparation to be done before she meets His Majesty. You know this as well as I. Illness is no impediment to my beginning to work with her."

Tramador didn't respond, which was also unlike him. Melgart bit back his irritation. "Go down to the receiving quarters and tell them she must appear to me now. After all, the harem healers are equipped to help her recover from any indisposition. Probably better than whomever she is with at the moment."

Tramador inclined his head. "Very good. I will convey the message."

"I want more than that. See that you return with her by your side. We are already behind our schedule."

Tramador moved more slowly than was his wont. Melgart, half dreading to hear what excuse the eunuch would come up with next, took another sip of wine and prepared to record his observations about the day.

Melgart was in mid thought when he heard a clatter from the doorway and saw a flash of light.

Standing before him was a strange sight. A female unlike any he'd ever encountered before. Taller than average and less voluptuous--a detriment, but startling blue eyes and hair the color of sunlit sand would compensate some. She must hail from some distant land. Melgart knew of no land where females wore short divided skirts that bared their legs. A white garment with round buttons in the center covered her small breasts, and brown leather encircled her waist. Short brown leather boots encased her long, narrow feet. He rose and went to examine her.

Common sense told him this must be King Hashimur's newest virgin. After all, women did not just blunder unbidden into his part of the harem. But why wasn't Tramador with her? "I am Melgart, your guide as you prepare for His Exalted Majesty, King Hashimur," he said slowly and calmly. "Do you still feel ill?"

She did indeed look ill. Or perhaps in shock. She appeared not to understand what he said or where she was. She might have been dazed or simply a half-wit.

Melgart walked around the woman, studying her from all angles. Then he reached out to measure her rear end, and she reacted like a wildcat--hissing at him and baring claws. Clearly perturbed at his touch, she screamed in some strange tongue. Melgart backed away and fought back the beginnings of a headache--and the urge to have one of the guards toss her into a dungeon very deep beneath the palace. Deficient as she might be, she was all he had to work with and they were desperately behind schedule.

He hated having to deal with anyone ignorant of his tongue. Damn that Tramador for not being here. He could speak and understand several strange tongues. Melgart found his second in command's absence the most puzzling aspect of all the strangeness going on. Where was he? Why did he act secretive?

The woman looked at Melgart and, in his language, slowly said, "Where am I?"

Despite her accent, Melgart understood her words. If she could speak even a few words in his tongue, why was she confused? Females brought to the harem knew where they were and why. Entering the harem brought honor and distinction to their worthless lives.

"You are in the harem of the exalted, almighty King Hashimur, of the House of Gsiladmi," he intoned solemnly. "And I am your guide, Melgart,

son of Jegai.” Melgart directed his intimidating glare at her. The proper response was for her to lower her gaze to the ground, incline her head, and curtsey deeply. Instead, the hoyden laughed.

* * * *

April fool’s. Only it wasn’t April. Those guys Heather worked with. What an elaborate joke they’d set up and somehow plunked her in the middle of. She’d never have thought anyone at the site had such a great sense of humor or knew about her interest in harems. They even managed to dig up a guy who looked like central casting’s perfect harem guard. Tall, swarthy, sinister. Huge black mustache studded with silver. Piercing black eyes. High voice in sharp contrast to his intimidating appearance. Gorgeous white silk robe, gold hoop earrings, and a turban complete with fake ruby and gold brooch. She didn’t like that they’d given him permission to manhandle her, but she supposed that made the whole experience seem more authentic. She’d quickly let the actor know that she was off limits for any sort of touching, and it didn’t look like he was about to repeat that error.

Somehow they’d also managed to furnish the chamber with excellent fakes. Rosewood tables, elaborate divans draped in silks, luxurious chaise lounges. Fat candles scented with roses and some other fragrance illuminated the space.

But the *pièce de résistance* ... the actor knew how to speak and understand ancient Indurlian. Too much. She’d never heard the language used orally before or spoken it herself, so conversation was intense labor, especially when she felt like she’d just sustained a hard jolt to her knees and head. However, since she’d read so much Indurlian, with a little concentration she could produce and process the spoken words. Not that she intended to carry on this way for long. She’d get the guy to admit this was all a trick and they’d all have a few good laughs over some wine tonight. Or whatever they had to drink at the main campsite.

Maybe this was just the crew’s way of saying she really had been working too hard lately. *The scroll*. For a panicky moment, she wondered what had happened to the scroll. Then she saw that the “eunuch” had somehow gotten it into his hot little hands. Heather didn’t like that. After all, who was this guy that they’d trust him with something so precious?

Enough fun and games. “I’ll take that from you now,” she said, reaching out for the scroll, which he was handling far too casually.

He drew his dark, bushy brows together. “You’ll take what from me now?” he asked, sounding mystified and magisterial despite his high-pitched

voice.

Heather rolled her eyes. “The scroll. Hand it over now.” She could enjoy playtime as much as the next guy, but she drew the line at endangering artifacts. Not only could she not assume this actor knew how to handle the scroll, if he had an inkling of its worth, he might get the idea to hide it somewhere in his robes and take off. No telling how much it would be worth to unscrupulous collectors.

He bared his strong white teeth at her. “Perhaps there is a misunderstanding here. This is my scroll.” To Heather’s horror, she saw what looked like a quill and a crystal container of some dark fluid nearby. It was within the man’s capabilities to destroy the scroll, spilling ink on it or defacing it with some markings. Why would anyone tamper with history in such a way? Heather narrowed her eyes. Maybe this man was a rival who somehow snuck into their group and convinced the others to let him have access to their finds. Or maybe he was simply another of those diehards who wanted study to remain free from the details of women’s lives.

Terrified that she’d see the scroll defaced before her eyes, Heather lunged to get it away from him. Unfortunately, two strong arms grabbed her from behind before she could get her hands on it.

“So you’ve finally arrived, Tramador,” the man said. “Not a moment too soon. It looks like our latest acquisition will be unsuitable after all. Despite my dislike of delays and the prince’s impatience, we will have to extend our search.”

Something was way off here. Heather began to suspect that she was not in the middle of some practical joke after all. No one who knew her would ever set her up in such a physical situation. Not with the current laws on sexual harassment on the books. So it looked like she’d have to shift to her second assessment. Somehow, she’d fallen into the clutches of a criminal gang.

The man called Tramador held Heather tightly, but she couldn’t help noticing that he was careful not to injure her in any way. Somehow, despite her being a prisoner, she sensed that this man would not hurt her. For some reason that she couldn’t fully comprehend, she almost got the feeling that he’d look out for her. She hoped this wasn’t wishful thinking or a delusion born of desperation. After all, if he’d wanted to, he could already have killed her or done some permanent damage. So though she struggled to free herself, which she quickly knew would be very difficult because Tramador was very strong, she didn’t pull out her heavy artillery. Like a swift kick to

the balls. Before she took any sudden action, she needed to bide her time, to make sure she'd be able to leave this place with the scroll intact and unharmed. Probably the smartest way to do that was to play along for a bit 'til she got the lay of the land. As long as Tramador didn't show any signs that he would hurt her.

The men were talking quickly, and it was difficult for Heather to understand what they were saying. She couldn't catch every word, but if she concentrated hard, she got the gist of their exchange. The first man, whose name she definitely knew now was Melgart, asked, "Why did you let her come here alone?"

To which the other, whom she now knew was Tramador, responded, "She escaped from her guards. Once they told me, I followed her here as quickly as I could. Evidently soon after she arrived at the palace, she couldn't wait to begin preparations to see the prince."

Melgart snorted. "What of this illness of hers?"

"The healer must have made short work of it. Or maybe her excitement at being here has cured her quickly."

Heather understood enough of the dialogue between the two men to realize that Tramador was lying--and that she was very much part of his lie. Suddenly her understanding of the situation dissipated because whatever was going on was far too complex for her to decipher. Now she became convinced there was some sort of crime in progress, which made her what? A hostage? She shivered. Though she felt reasonably confident that she'd be able to rescue herself, she couldn't bear to think about abandoning her beautiful scroll to two thugs. Hell, she hadn't even had the chance to read through the whole thing. She'd be damned if she'd let it out of her sight.

Which meant she had to come up with a strategy to get away from here and keep the scroll safe. As she wasn't resisting, Tramador slightly relaxed his hold on her. She experimentally tried to pull away, and he instantly clutched her harder. Okay. So she knew the limits of how far she could move. She wouldn't try to make a break for it until she knew she could get the scroll. For that reason she stood still, and Tramador relaxed a bit.

The two men were arguing so hard and fast that she lost the thread. She remained focused on the scroll.

Then she heard some noise from the passage outside the chamber. *Good*, she thought. Finally the members of her crew were coming to call off this joke. Or to rescue her from her putative captors. She'd be real cool, act

as if she never had a moment's hesitation about what was going on. Praise them for their resourcefulness in finding these actors, these furnishings. Chide them for being careless about the safety of the scroll, but she'd be magnanimous and forgive them.

Yet another robed, turbaned actor trained in Indurlian flung open the beaded curtains that separated this chamber from the space outside. This was getting a little tiresome. So much for Indurlian being a dead language. From what the newcomer was saying, Heather could interpret a word denoting royalty. Possibly a king or prince. Tramador gasped, for a moment coming near to releasing her. Melgart remained stony faced, which didn't fool Heather. She suspected he was nearly as flustered by whatever was happening as Tramador.

"What is going on?" she asked, stumbling over the words. She must have been reasonably comprehensible because Tramador answered.

"Against the usual custom, the almighty revered prince is coming to this humble chamber," Tramador said, his voice, even higher pitched than Melgart's, filled with awe.

"Be still and quiet and look at the floor, female," Melgart growled.

Look at the floor, hell no. She was far too curious to see what sort of bozo they'd come up with to take the role of prince. Maybe this was just an elaborate way to bring the world's worst joke to a close. Or maybe, she thought, goose bumps up and down her spine, the criminal who was going to take charge of the scroll was about to enter the room. So yeah, she'd pretend to lower her eyes and look at the ground, but she intended to get a real good look at whoever was about to part the curtains.

Yet another guard came through and announced the arrival of His Royal Majesty, Prince Grentoori, scion of the House of Gsiladmi, son of King Hashimur. *Enough with the announcements and the titles already.* Heather was having some real problems staying in her humble, eyes on the ground pose. Evidently this guy moved very slowly, as if all his honorifics weighed him down.

And then he was there. Tramador still held on to her. Melgart said, "Welcome to these most humble quarters, Your Magnificent Majesty."

Now they were really overdoing it, Heather thought. Talk about bad acting. She raised her head just enough to be able to view the so-called prince. Thankfully, Tramador let her move without betraying her to Melgart.

The guy had great feet encased in reasonable looking sandals. Long, strong legs shadowed under his robe, billows of purple silk that was even

more opulent looking than the cloth of her captors' garments. Despite the flowing nature of the robe, Heather got a definite sense of a man of physical power in addition to his royal rank. Then she caught sight of his face and she nearly lost it. Black hair, olive skin, eyes black as coal on fire. So handsome that it nearly hurt to look at him, and yet somehow he seemed familiar to her. Who could he be? No matter how distracted or immersed she was in her work, how could she ever have forgotten meeting a man like him?

Though she usually held herself on a tight leash and ran like an Olympics hurdler from hot, gorgeous men, this one had her too weak in the knees to move. A bolt of desire slammed into her lower belly, and her pussy grew moist. Most inappropriate. She should have kept her eyes lowered to the ground after all. Not.

"We have heard of a disturbance in these quarters," he said. Heather's eyelids fluttered. His voice flowed over her like molten chocolate, making the guttural sounds of Indurlian sound like a love song. Good thing Tramador was still holding on to her or her useless knees might have buckled, leaving her sprawled on the ground.

What was she thinking? Clearly the stress of the intruders catching her with the scroll was affecting her sanity.

"No disturbance, Your Majesty, that merits your exalted notice," Melgart said. "There was a brief confusion. But now, all is as it should be."

The prince nodded. Seeing that he was about to turn in her direction, Heather quickly lowered her face. Yeah, even his feet and his sandals were sexy. He had amazingly long toes, which Heather could just picture.... "Is this the young lady the finders have brought in?" he asked.

Melgart said, "Yes, Your Majesty." He bowed for the fourth or fifth time. "With apologies to Your Majesty for her rough costume. She's just in from a long journey, and we haven't had a chance to prepare her for even an informal meeting with His Royal Highness."

What was with this shit? Heather did not appreciate having her appearance maligned in front of the alleged prince, even as part of the joke from hell. Who the heck was this so-called Melgart guy, and why did he act like a lost extra from a bad production of *The King and I*?

Heather wished the prince would just leave so her heartbeat and her pussy could return to normal. Instead, the prince came over to Heather, cupped her chin in his hand, and gently raised her face up. Heat and lightning shot through her from her body's new center of gravity, her clitoris.

Damn, it had evidently been too long since her last date. She'd have to remedy that....

His Royal Highness raised her face so that they were in complete eye contact, and then he smiled and her heart rate doubled. To her fevered imagination, it seemed that they were communicating wildly on a previously undiscovered subliminal level. But Heather didn't have a clue what she'd say to him in any language. He spared her the need to unscramble her brain and grope for her words of Indurlian. Before she could come up with a single word, he turned away. "Be gentle with this one, Melgart."

And then he was gone.

Heather was ready to be gone too. Past ready. She wanted to go back to her little room at the hostel, take a bath. Maybe she should stop putting off the guys from the project who'd been after her for a date.

Once the prince left, Heather's respiration returned to normal. Tramador tentatively released her. She took that as a sure sign that they were all ready to move on. Good. She was ready for this little adventure to come to a logical end. Maybe she'd even hire the actors to tutor her in Indurlian. She found she enjoyed having the opportunity to speak and hear the language. Helped make her experience more authentic.

Heather decided to clap her hands, showing by applause that the show was over.

Melgart and Tramador looked at her in apparent confusion. "My lady, why are you summoning more servants?" Tramador asked.

She had to hand it to them. They remained in character to the last. "I'm applauding you guys. Great job," she said in English. "If you tell me who hired you all, I'll make sure you get a bonus."

The two men frowned at each other and genuinely appeared not to understand a word she'd said. Okay, enough. Which she said to them. In English. They continued looking baffled.

Finally, Melgart said, "We do not understand the tongue you're speaking." Tramador nodded.

Okay. So they were foreigners. Heather almost laughed at herself. Here, at the site of the dig, she was the foreigner. These men were probably non-English speaking natives, though Indurlian was no longer the language of the land. Any land. Hadn't been for several centuries, not since the independent kingdom of Indurlia ceased to exist. Although evidently some Indurlian persisted in remote corners of Turkey like this one. Granted that no studies she'd ever encountered indicated any population of Indurlian

speakers still active. It seemed as if she and her group had stumbled on another discovery in addition to the scroll.

Now Heather shivered with the excitement of a major academic coup. In addition to her motor getting all revved up at the sight of the supposed prince. She was having quite a day. Nevertheless, she wanted the strangeness to end now. She wanted to distill the successes of this day and move on to explore all the implications and ramifications of her finds.

Still these guys continued to play their parts, and Heather suddenly realized that she didn't know how to get away from them, back to the people she was working with. She'd been so taken by the guy playing the prince that she hadn't thought to mention her plight to him. That was what she got for thinking with her clit instead of her head. Anyway, he appeared to be part of whatever script they were following.

"You do not speak English?" she asked in Indurlian.

They both looked puzzled by the name English, appearing not only not to speak it, but also not to have heard of it. Previously, Heather'd thought English so universal that all but the most isolated people recognized the name. Further questioning revealed that Melgart spoke only Indurlian. Tramador spoke some version of Latin and several languages so dead that Heather had seen their names only in obscure journals. Now the shivers shooting up and down her spine began to come more strongly and frequently.

"If you have no further questions, we will begin with your first bath and fitting for garments," Melgart said.

That was it. He'd just gone too far. "A bath and fitting garments? I don't think so."

Melgart looked puzzled and angry. "But this is the first step in preparing the king's new virgin for his bed."

"Virgin?" Heather asked. Now she knew they had to be kidding. She looked from one to the other. The blank expression in the two men's eyes told her they were dead serious.

Well, whatever bizarre ritual they were enacting was about to end. "Who do you think is a virgin?" She wasn't in the habit of discussing her sex life with strange men, but this might be the only way they let her out of her prison.

Both men gasped. "Not a virgin?" Tramador stuttered.

"Not many thirty-year old women are these days," she said.

Her age produced almost as much shock as her lack of virginity. She

was unused to either being remarkable.

They conferred between themselves. Heather never lost sight of the scroll or of her need to get the hell away from this loony bin.

“Fun’s over,” she said when they paused for a moment. “Give me the scroll and let me out of here.”

Melgart shook his head and said to Tramador, “This female has been interested in my scroll since she arrived. Must be some new custom in the northern countries. My dear, what do you want this for? It’s only of use for people who can read.”

“Of course I know how to read,” she said, becoming impatient.

More shock. At times Heather couldn’t figure out who seemed more baffled--her or them.

Tramador then said to Melgart, “We can find a virgin. But it will take at least seven days.”

Melgart shook his head. “Do you so doubt me? This female,” he pointed to Heather, “is a challenge. But I have been preparing the king’s concubines and his father’s and his grandfather’s before him, for many years. I’ve learned more than three eunuchs combined. I will shape this female into the king’s best lover yet.”

Tramador inclined his head. “Only you could take this on.”

“Get her ready,” Melgart ordered. He strode from the room taking the scroll--Heather’s scroll--with him.

Heather lunged to follow him, but Tramador was too fast for her. “Come, my lady. I will prepare you for Melgart.”

Heather hammered her fists on Tramador’s shoulders and, from desperation, brought her knee up to his groin. He easily avoided her attack. “I am being falsely imprisoned. This is kidnapping. A federal crime,” she protested.

He merely laughed and appeared to exert no effort to hold her off. “You will be in the best of hands with Melgart. Do not worry.”

The scroll was nowhere in sight, and Heather had clearly landed in the hands of madmen who had some weird plans for her. And the man said not to worry. *Right.*

* * * *

Prince Grentoori wanted to take the new female with him, and barely resisted the impulse. He’d come perilously close to telling the two eunuchs to take a well-deserved respite. As far as he was concerned, she didn’t need any preparation. She was perfect already. Unfortunately, she would soon be

ensconced in his father's harem. Lost to him forever. At a point where the old king had little interest in a new woman, even one brought to the harem specifically to arouse his sleeping interest. Whereas Grentoori was already hot and so ready to share his royal couch with the beauty.

One look at this female, so different from the others in the kingdom, so beautiful, with an air of rare intelligence, and Grentoori had nearly been ready to breach court etiquette and take her to his bed without regard to any protocols. Without Melgart's careful, thorough instruction in the sensuous arts, the ways to please a man that went into all the harem concubines. Without her going through all the beautifying processes Melgart had spent years compiling. Grentoori sensed she'd need no schooling in those areas. Word was that Melgart knew more about preparing a concubine than any other eunuch in the civilized world, but this woman was beautiful beyond Grentoori's wildest dreams already. His cock rose the moment he laid eyes on her, as if she were the first ever or the first after a long period of deprivation. Neither of which was the case.

Certainly Grentoori had enjoyed the fruits of Melgart's labors frequently and abundantly over the years and continued to do so nightly in his own harem. As the crown prince of his father's kingdom, the heir of the House of Gsiladmi, Grentoori had the right to an extensive harem, albeit one much smaller than his father's. He enjoyed women, and many of them appeared to enjoy pleasing him. He knew that all the females he lay with were highly trained in how to please him--and probably afraid not to. From his conversations with other men, he knew there were differences in how even the most polished courtesan reacted, and he'd never known one to leave his bed less than fulfilled. He prided himself in that.

Grentoori could easily have had two, three, or more women in his bed every night. All dedicated to and extremely proficient at pleasing him. But lately, he admitted to himself and none other, he'd experienced some sort of wanderlust or longing. He'd begun to want more, or, at any rate, something or someone *other*. In the past, he'd assuaged this need by taking yet more women, trying more exotic acrobatics in the bed. More, more, more, and yet never enough. On occasion, he'd even resorted to some warfare, a few good battles. But this time, nothing could stem his growing need for something different from anything he'd known in the past.

Today his restlessness led the prince to the eunuch's quarters, a place he'd never before even approached. Then his eyes fell on the strange female, the one who seemed to be at the center of a disturbance, the one who

agitated Melgart and Tramador. The moment she came into his sight, desire stirred in his loins and kicked up a frenzy. He grew hard and ready, nearly quivering with need. Of course, now that he found what he wanted, he learned she was destined for his father's harem. He could have taken her with him, but ... there lay madness.

He tried to bring a halt to his rioting thoughts and senses. Grentoori knew that Melgart wouldn't deliver up the woman until he considered her ready for the harem. So for now, Grentoori had a little time to come up with a plan. His cock stirred. For the first time in a long while, he'd found a direction for his wanderlust. Somehow, he divined, she would change his life. Tradition be damned.

Chapter Two

Even though Tramador was bigger and looked a lot stronger than Melgart, Heather quickly realized her guard was a gentle giant of a man, like a big friendly hairless grizzly bear.

“You know I won’t hurt you,” he assured Heather soothingly. She couldn’t have said why, but she was convinced he spoke true. He led her into some sort of chamber where several women bustled around. Perhaps later, she’d be able to learn from one of them how to escape this place. For now, she’d bide her time again. “I will give you a meal before Melgart begins to work with you.”

A meal sounded great. Heather hadn’t realized how hungry she was ‘til Tramador gestured for her to sit down on a large, plump pillow covered in pink silk. She crossed her legs and watched him scurry across the room. Tramador whispered some instructions to a female servant, then came back to Heather with a pitcher of water and a bowl. “To wash your hands,” he explained. Rose petals in several shades of pink floated in the warm water, which felt fabulous as Heather splashed it over her hands. Though she’d carefully scrubbed with an antibacterial wipe before, Heather now saw that she still had sand lodged under her nails. After she’d poured the water over her hands several times, Tramador ran a small, stiff brush over her fingers and got the last of the sand off. Then he handed her a thick white cloth for drying. Her skin sparkled and glowed with cleanliness.

“The servants will bring you a meal shortly,” Tramador said.

“Will you eat with me?”

“I would be honored.” The man actually blushed, and Heather found herself feeling charmed. Dangerous reaction, she warned herself. Bad enough she’d grown weak-kneed at the sight of the prince. She needed to try to be more on her guard with her guard, but she giggled to herself at how silly she felt.

Heather was glad Tramador wanted to eat with her, both for his company and because she could pump him for information. He seemed far less restrained and secretive than Melgart. If she was going to get out of this

place with the scroll, she needed a hell of a lot more information about where she was and what was going on than she had.

The servants brought dishes and goblets of thick ruby red glass that glowed in the candlelight, casting pink shadows. The goblets contained some sort of drink that tasted like honey with a major kick to it. Not exactly alcoholic, but something.... Then came the food. Some artisan looking bread with a thick crust, strongly flavored goat cheese, oranges, melon, grapes, nuts, and pastry studded with pistachios. Everything tasted luscious, and Heather was more than able to satisfy her hunger. Tramador evidently hadn't eaten in a while either.

"So talk," Heather said, nibbling on some fat purple grapes.

Tramador blushed again. "I am not one for talking much," he said softly.

"Oh, I just bet you have lots to say." Heather smiled at him. "Start with telling me who you and Melgart are."

"You do not know already?"

Heather shook her head. "I really am a stranger."

Tramador's brow furrowed as he shifted on his pillow. "Melgart, son of Jegai, is the chief eunuch, guardian of the harem. I Tramador, son of Tragaron, am his first assistant."

Heather winced at the word *eunuch* and hoped she could hide her revulsion at the images that came to mind. She didn't want to hurt this man who was being so nice to her by letting him know how freaked out she felt about his condition. If Tramador sensed anything, he didn't let on.

"Tramador, why am I here?"

"You have the honor to serve His Majesty, King Hashimur, as an honored concubine of his harem." Tramador sounded like he was reciting from a memorized manual.

Heather waved away his explanation. "I know that's the party line," she said. "But there's more going on. From what the two of you were saying this afternoon, I'm not the female you were expecting. Melgart seemed to think he'd be working with a young virgin. I'm neither. So Tramador, who was supposed to be arriving? Whose place am I taking? I think you know."

Tramador grew red in the face again. Heather'd never seen a grown man blush so furiously. Must have been something to do with the eunuch stuff. "I know." He shredded a piece of bread. "But, my lady, what you ask demands an answer that is a huge secret. One that could bring danger to us

all if it becomes known. I do not want to put you at hazard by telling you.”

Heather bit her lip so as not to give in to her impatience. She wasn't sure what game Tramador was playing at now, but she sensed it would serve her best to pretend to go along. “Please tell me this, Tramador,” she said, lowering her voice to a whisper as he had. “Trust me. I'll use your secret knowledge in such a way as to make sure no one gets hurt.” She wasn't sure how she could make such a promise, but she'd have said most anything to get information. “Whose place am I taking? Why am I here instead of the other woman? Who is she?”

“The king doesn't know ahead of the hour who his newest concubine will be,” Tramador said haltingly.

Heather bit her lip to keep from admonishing him to speak faster. “The king likes surprises.”

Tramador shrugged. “There is that. But keeping the new concubines a secret until they're prepared has always been the tradition of the harem. The females arrive from different places and are discovered in different ways. Occasionally a concubine arrives because of war or some political maneuver. For the most part, professional finders look for them in many places when a search is called.”

“Who are the finders?”

“Men who scour the countryside to find the most superb candidates for the harem.”

Sounded like another name for pimps. Heather shivered with distaste. “Do the females have any say in this?”

Tramador looked confused. “No, of course not. Why would you think they would?”

Heather could have expressed several hundred reasons why women might object to becoming the king's sex objects. But as discretion was clearly the better part of valor in this situation, she kept her answers to herself. “Please continue.”

Tramador took a swallow of his drink. “This time they found a beautiful young female.”

“And? What was different?”

He snorted, suddenly appearing to have gained some painful new wisdom or insight. “This time they found Talaria, daughter of Cronicus.”

“Is she a woman you know?”

Tramador sighed. “Talaria is in love with my cousin Obu, son of Malojan, and he is in love with her.”

Heather leaned back on her pillow. “In other words, this Talaria was not available. Couldn’t they just have told the king this?”

Tramador was not meeting her gaze. “It’s not so easy.”

“What would the king do to them?”

“As far as I know, nothing,” Tramador said. Heather heaved a sigh of relief. “He is not involved in this way.”

“I don’t understand then. What’s the problem?”

Tramador steepled his fingers and looked grim. “His Majesty’s advisers and the people in the business of locating concubines are the problem. They would see to it that any female who thwarts their plans and the traditional ways will suffer. Along with her family.”

“But that’s monstrous,” Heather protested.

He shrugged. “That’s the way things are, the way they’ve always been, and the way they will always be.”

Heather sniffed. “Not if I have anything to do with it. So you say I’m taking this Talaria’s place. What will happen now that I’m here and she’s outside?”

“Shhh,” he cautioned, looking around to be sure no one overheard them. When he felt satisfied, he continued in a whisper. “She is still here in the palace. In the still of night, I will sneak her out and return her to her home. Then she and Obu will marry immediately and flee to another land at the ends of the world.”

“Exile. They’ll be apart from their loved ones.” Heather shivered.

Tramador shrugged. “They will be alive. Young, in love, together. Most of all, alive.”

“Well, I’m sorry that they’re going to have to depart. But I’m glad I’m able to help them, even if it is against my will.”

“My family is forever grateful to you.” Tramador bowed his head slightly in her direction. “We can never repay you for your sacrifice on our account.”

Something in Heather stirred. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone expressed gratitude to her for anything.

“Now if you’ve finished with your meal, I will take you to Melgart.”

This was the part that Heather didn’t feel so great about. “I can’t eat any more, but I have to tell you, Tramador. Melgart makes me feel nervous.”

Tramador actually laughed, showing strong white teeth. “He makes everyone feel nervous, except Their Royal Majesties, the prince and his

father the king. But believe me. Melgart will be good to you and teach you many things.”

“Like what? What will Melgart teach me?”

Tramador leaned closer to her. “It is whispered that he knows the way to make of thee a virgin once more.”

Heather bolted up in surprise. She and any vestige of virginity had parted company long before. Besides which, she resented the hell out of any double standard value system that prized only female virginity.

Still, the academic in her was once again intrigued. Heck, she never could resist a learning opportunity.

* * * *

Melgart sensed the newcomer would challenge him on many fronts. Though he'd helped prepare many females for royal beds over the years, he'd never come across another quite like this one before. Not only because of her sharp wit, but because she did not appear the slightest bit in awe of the honor of being chosen. Or of him. On the other hand, the most oblivious fool in the world could not have remained ignorant of the attraction that sparked between the prince and the female when His Majesty visited the harem quarters earlier that day. Melgart shook his head at this break in tradition. The prince should never cast eyes on his father's concubine. Melgart stored his nugget of impropriety in his memory for possible future use.

From the way the female spoke and moved, Melgart realized she was no blushing virgin even before she confessed. Truth be told, she was far from the first to have lapsed from this state. She also appeared older than most of the others. He'd speak to the concubine finders on this point, though in the deepest chambers of his heart, he suspected she was not the one the finders had brought. Something was off in this whole situation. Something with Tramador. He didn't have time to sort this out now, not with the female coming for the start of her rituals. Fortunately, her advanced age did not seem to detract from her attractions.

Though Melgart suspected the old king would not find a lapsed virgin an affront, tradition dictated that the concubine at least strongly resemble a virgin for her first time with him. Melgart would have considered his store of tricks deficient if he didn't know dozens of ways to recreate the requisite illusion.

Tonight they'd start with the level one bath, preliminary cleanliness and skin smoothing. Maybe a massage. Melgart assembled the special oils,

creams, and unguents for the bathing process. He summoned the serving women to begin to fill the deep tub with warm water.

Once she was cleansed, they'd need to get the female's dimensions for the seamstresses. Melgart usually had one month to prepare a newcomer. With one like this, a month would barely be enough. Yet orders arrived from the king to have her ready in one week. One week! Few of his peers would be able to work such magic, but Melgart would rise to the occasion. Hardest would be diverting the seamstresses and all the other service providers he needed from their other duties to prepare this female. What was her name? Not that it mattered. If he didn't like what she called herself, he'd provide a name to his liking.

"How much more water do you require, my lord?" one of the serving women asked after pouring a full jar of steaming water in the pool.

He looked critically at the level of water. "Ten more full jars should suffice. Ask me again when you've brought that number in."

She looked as if she were going to say something. But the woman lowered her eyes and said, "Yes, my lord." She scurried off holding her jar, stopping only to whisper something to another of the women coming in with a jar. The other woman groaned. Was it only the two of them filling the pool? Why didn't they get more of the servants to help? Before Melgart could ask them, he heard a noise. Tramador and the female entered the chamber. Time to begin.

* * * *

Heather wished she had a digital camera with her. As she walked through the building with Tramador, she didn't know where to look first. Evidently the chamber where she and Tramador had just eaten, the only one she'd been in until now, was the plainest, least opulent. This was where she'd been reading her scroll earlier. At the time, she'd thought all the chambers in the structure were identical with the one she was in. Rudimentary walls, dirt floor, a few artifacts, most poorly conserved. Yet here she was, walking on floors of mosaic tile and marble, past fountains, displays of greenery lush almost beyond belief in a desert, gleaming walls adorned with fine tapestries and more mosaics--a treasure trove of fine arts and precious materials. Like she'd blundered into the ultimate high-end museum.

By now Heather fully realized what she'd begun to understand in her conversation with Tramador. However she'd arrived where she was, this was no hoax or joke on their part. Tramador and Melgart totally believed

everything they said. The king was some sort of leader or noble for real, and she was in a palace. On her way to a harem, no kidding. Her stomach clenched at the thought of female exploitation underlying the concept of a harem. Then thoughts of the magnificent prince brought a different sensation to the pit of her stomach and below. Difficult for her to reconcile her desire for the yummy prince with the despicable structure of the harem. If it were his harem she was going to, she almost might....

Well, her inner academic would kick in as observer, but she'd also use her skills to strike a blow against this patriarchal system. When the time came. Maybe she'd even be able to convert the king and prince to cease with the harmful practice of locking women away in a harem. Heck, Tramador, who'd connived to save Talaria, was probably already halfway to being an ally. Talk about bedroom politics. Heather squared her shoulders and, thanking Tramador for all he'd done, approached Melgart.

The eunuch studied her as if he could penetrate to her soul with his dark gaze. "My dear, I understand that you have partaken of refreshments. Now you will take a cleansing bath." He pointed to a deep ceramic tub that looked portable. Heather noted the gently steaming water in which roses floated. On this dig, people had been limited to taking short, barely warm showers. Now the opportunity for a long hot soak tempted her. She looked at Melgart and Tramador, mentally asking them to leave the room and give her some privacy. Neither appeared about to go anywhere.

"Please remove your garments," Melgart said.

Heather was not in the habit of stripping in front of two men, even eunuchs. Not that she was shy, but still. Tramador must have sensed her hesitation. "Would you like assistance?" He reached out to her.

"I'm perfectly capable of removing my own garments. But it's not my custom to do so in the presence of men."

Both Melgart and Tramador laughed at that. Finally Melgart said, "We are not men. Not in the sense you mean."

She blushed. "To me you are," she said at last.

Tramador smiled. "Thank you. Let me assure you, my dear, that we will need to see you in all your states for the next few days. We will both bathe you and anoint you with creams and oils and much more. You will soon grow quite used to us and understand that we view your body only as workers."

Intellectually she understood this. However, Heather wasn't big on being in the buff in front of anyone except her lovers, and those had been

few and far between. On the other hand, she had an agenda here. Several. She steeled herself and quickly got undressed. Melgart was by her side, taking each piece of clothing from her as soon as she removed it.

Instead of staring at her, both men examined her clothes like they were weird artifacts. For the first time ever, Heather felt like she was the subject of anthropological research. She shivered, weirded out by the notion of someone studying her.

Tramador tore his attention away from his minute inspection of her white cotton bra and helped her climb into the tub. Heather began to unwind the moment her toes hit the hot fragrant water. She could identify the scent of roses and something more--lilac, also some spice like cinnamon. She sat down and, grateful for a tub long and deep enough to really accommodate her, stretched out her long legs and rotated her feet at the ankles. She leaned back in the tub and stretched her arms along the sides. Her hair, which she pinned up in a high knot at the top of her head with a clasp Melgart provided, stayed clear of the water.

Both men were still engrossed in her bra. Evidently, as advertised, they really had no interest in her as a sex object. Heather had the sense that being alone with them was almost as sexually private as being by herself. The water continued to relax her, and Heather gave herself up to the delicious sensation of unwinding.

“Where are you from?” Melgart asked at last, pulling Heather from a deep reverie.

How could she explain this to them when she didn't know where she was. “Where am I now?”

Melgart and Tramador looked at her. “In the women's quarters of the royal palace of His Most Exalted Majesty, King Hashimur, of course,” Melgart pronounced huffily. “We have told you this.”

How could she explain without sounding crazy that the information she needed was much more fundamental? Like what year, what part of the world were they in? For she suspected that she'd somehow landed in some different spot in space or time or both than where she'd started. Though her intellect balked at this possibility, she could no longer continue to deny the evidence of her senses. She strongly suspected that her displacement was in time rather than in space, for the first place she'd landed seemed exactly like the chamber she last remembered being in before.... But how could she get the information she needed from these two eunuchs?

Heather thought carefully about how to proceed before continuing.

“Please tell me the name of the lands King Hashimur rules.”

“Why he’s ruler of all Indurlia and Mindonal.”

Indurla and Mindonal. Two adjacent provinces of the ancient Ottoman Empire that had long ago, for reasons unknown, disappeared into the mists of history. Her group was digging in an area identified with the correct part of the Empire, so she hadn’t wandered away from them spatially. How could she learn the year?

“We follow many calendars here,” Tramador said, and she could have kissed him for anticipating her question with such sensitivity. He eyed her for a moment. “According to the Christian calendar, it is the year fifteen fifty-seven.”

Heather bit her lip to keep from gasping. She’d traveled back centuries to an era she’d studied. To a time when Indurlian was indeed a living language and Melgart could well have been writing the scroll that so fascinated her.

This was like a fantasy come true for an academic.

Three big questions came to mind though. How would she manage to survive in a time and place where individual females were worthless? How was she ever going to get home with all her newfound treasures? And how could she get more up close and personal time with Prince Grentoori before she returned to her own space and time?

* * * *

The woman’s questions added to the peculiarity of her being there with them. For the first time ever, Melgart experienced a frisson of doubt. Maybe, despite all his skills, it would be a mistake for them to take this woman into the bosom of the harem. Maybe she’d be more than a challenge of wildness and lack of cooperation. Maybe this woman would bring harm to them all. Maybe the wisest thing they could do for the kingdom and them all would be to dispose of her now.

Damnation. Tramador eyed her with total adoration. The fool was like a puppy dog, easily seduced by a few simple treats and kind words. From the way she behaved, the questions she asked, and the strange garments she wore, Melgart concluded they all needed to be on their guard.

Well, he could always arrange an accident of some sort. More difficult would be to put off the king, who kept asking about her. Perhaps before Melgart did anything else, it would be wise to learn what he could from this woman.

“What are you called?”

She looked surprised. “My name is Heather,” she said slowly. “Heather Morrison.”

Difficult name to pronounce in Indurlian. Melgart didn’t want to reveal weakness, but he struggled to say it. “Heather, daughter of Morrison.”

She laughed. “I guess that’s one way of looking at it. But actually, my father’s name was Carter.”

Melgart frowned. “Your father has two names.”

“Yes,” she said. “Most of the people from my culture have at least two names. The first one is individual, the second one from the family.”

“I do not understand. Your father’s name is Carter or Morrison?”

“It’s Carter Morrison,” Heather said, wondering if she could explain the current system of naming in the United States to anyone’s satisfaction.

“We will call you Hiliadra,” Melgart said. “The name suits you.”

Heather bristled at that. Melgart’s imperious mode grated on her. On the other hand, she imagined that the Indurlian speakers’ inability to pronounce “Heather” might be considered a source of humiliation. She swallowed her objection. “Hiliadra,” she echoed. “Does this name have a significance?”

“’Tis a kind of flower that grows on hills,” Tramador said.

Not that far different from the meaning of “heather”, she thought. Though Heather wasn’t sure she could easily learn to respond to Hiliadra, she expected that she wouldn’t be here long enough for this to become a problem. After all, at some point soon she’d need to wake up from whatever dream she’d landed in.

Or maybe she was just being complacent because the water lulled her into a state of peace. Heather grinned at the notion of what her colleagues would say if they could see her in so mellow a state. Before she could get too much more comfortable, there was a disturbance in the outer chamber. Melgart went out to see what was happening. Tramador knelt down next to the tub and thrust his hands into the water.

That got her attention. Heather, aka Hiliadra, instantly sprang to alert and sat up. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked indignantly.

Tramador smiled gently. “I’m about to begin washing you.” From the side of the tub he produced a large sponge-like implement.

“I don’t need anyone to wash me,” she protested. Much as she liked Tramador, the thought of him putting his hands all over her body was icky.

“Tramador would give you an excellent cleansing,” Melgart intoned,

“but he must leave to transact other pressing affairs.”

Tramador put down his sponge on the side of the tub and stood, looking bewildered. “Where am I to go, Melgart?”

“Come with me and I will tell you.”

“But what of the lady and her bath?”

“The eunuch Primori will complete the bath with me,” Melgart pronounced.

“The eunuch Primori?” Tramador asked. “Who...?”

“If you will excuse us for a few moments,” Melgart said to Heather. “I will return shortly with another eunuch well versed in the art of bathing. Together he and I will complete your bath.”

Heather sensed something even weirder than usual going on, but couldn't think how to object. She didn't have to wait long for Melgart and the other eunuch to return. Primori was even taller than Melgart, but that was about all Heather could tell about the new arrival. In addition to wearing voluminous robes and a turban, he covered his face with a mask.

When he saw the question in her eyes, Melgart said, “Primori covers his face because of an accident that left him with most unfortunate scars. The same accident also took his voice away. Despite these handicaps, he is most proficient.”

In the words of the famous Alice, with whom Heather more and more identified, “Curiouser and curiouser.”

* * * *

Prince Grentoori nearly suffocated under his disguise as the eunuch Primori. Still such discomfort was a small price to pay for the privilege of being with the female who'd captured his heart and set him aflame with just a look. Now he could feast his eyes on her beautiful body and touch her intimately. Surely some small discomfort was a small price to pay.

This strange, wild woman was exceedingly beautiful. Her body differed from those the finders usually chose for any harem. Nearly his height, she had luscious small breasts he wanted to gobble up, slim yet shapely hips, hair the color of desert sand and eyes the color of the sky.

Just the sight of her had him rock hard, his cock throbbing with desire to enter her. Melgart, horrified at the prince's ploy, only complied when Grentoori stated his plan as an absolute command. At which point, the eunuch stipulated both the disguise and the silence.

“But what,” the eunuch asked, “will happen if your male organ asserts itself during the course of the bath?”

In an effort to assuage the eunuch's concerns, Grentoori said, "I am the master of my organ. It will remain in its proper place until I grant it permission to arise."

Melgart had looked skeptical, and now, as Grentoori saw the unmistakable bulge tent out his robes, he acknowledged the flaw in his thinking. He wiggled his posterior and shifted his hips to try to redirect the erection to an inconspicuous section of his costume. He realized the futility of willing it away in the presence of his goddess.

* * * *

Melgart's eyes bugged out as he caught sight of Prince Grentoori's male organ raising the hem of his costume. Of all the insults to tradition and the sanctity of the harem, Prince Grentoori's transgression was the worst ever.

Melgart would have wrung his hands in sheer frustration if he were prone to that sort of action. He'd tried, with every stratagem at his disposal, to convince the prince of the monstrous impropriety he committed. Nevertheless the prince would not be deterred. Melgart shuddered at the implications of his action for the future. Now he had to complete the lady's bath with the burden of the prince as participant. Tramador knew all the procedures and performed them superbly. Melgart would have to give the false eunuch constant directions to keep him from sullyng the process any further. Also, he'd have to help the hapless prince figure out what to do with his blatant, persistent erection, which Melgart had the distinct impression the lady would recognize quite easily for exactly what it was.

* * * *

There was something very weird about Primori. For one thing, he appeared to have a permanent erection. Heather knew that couldn't be, but what the hell could be tenting out his robe at groin level? Quite deliciously too.

Heather mentally slapped herself. Eunuchs did not get erections. They couldn't, which was a direct part of their being eunuchs. Something else had to be going on with this guy besides his scarred face, voicelessness, and having some sort of appendage that looked a hell of a lot like a very healthy hard-on. One that inspired her pussy to vibrate with need. On top of all that, there was something manly about Primori, a whole different aura about him than Melgart and Tramador, who appeared masculine despite being eunuchs.

Melgart, who didn't seem too fond of Primori, ordered him to kneel

down by the tub to wash Heather. She shivered at the touch of his hand, and, even though he wasn't supposed to be able to make any sounds, she could have sworn she heard him moan.

"While Primori washes you with the skin softening soap, I will ask you questions." Melgart pulled a stool over to the side of the tub and held up Heather's bra like Exhibit A in a trial.

"I really don't need...." Heather sputtered.

"Please permit him to begin, dear lady," Melgart said. "If you do not wish him to continue after the first bit, I will take over the washing."

Heather didn't feel totally satisfied, but she was beginning to trust Melgart--however, not as much as she trusted Tramador. She wished he were still here instead of this new guy, who set her nerve endings on alert. Melgart said he was okay, so she acquiesced, and was soon glad she did. The weird eunuch had magic fingers. Or maybe it was just something in the sponge or in the soap he used, but Heather felt like she was getting an intimate massage and experienced a huge release of stress. Not quite an orgasm, but damned good. The weird eunuch seemed really focused on her, though he kept shifting his hips and wagging his rear end.

While Primori stroked the back of her neck and then moved on to her shoulders and her back, Melgart began his interrogation. "What is this?" he asked, turning the bra around in front of her.

"That is an undergarment to support the breasts," she said.

Melgart raised his eyebrows. Then he looked at Heather's breasts and ran his hand over the different parts of the bra. "Why do you need such an implement for your small breasts?"

Borderline offensive, but she felt he didn't mean anything by it. Heather was content with the shape and size of her body, all parts of it, thank you very much. She wasn't about to let Melgart or anyone else rattle her self-confidence. Primori seemed to be finding all of her much to his taste. More so than she'd have expected from a eunuch. He spent a lot of time washing her breasts, and what almost felt like playing with her nipples, which were rock hard. "In my culture, most women wear this type of undergarment."

Melgart shrugged. "Here the females do not wear such a thing." He put it aside and held up Heather's white cotton thong. "And this?"

Heather blushed. Primori was gently kneading her back muscles as with one hand he continued to stimulate her breasts. "Also an undergarment," she said. "This is for the lower regions of the woman, the

area for, uh, reproduction....”

Melgart frowned at the thong. “It looks painful.”

“One becomes accustomed to it.”

Melgart questioned her over every piece of her clothing, forcing Heather to think about these garments that she’d taken for granted. How to explain them to men for whom a bra was like a fragment of a meteorite. Both took in everything she said, appearing, like academics, not to form any hasty judgments. All the while, Primori continued washing every square inch of her body and, she thought, breathing quite heavily. When he came to her pussy, Heather jumped a mile. She was extremely sensitive there, especially after her encounter with the prince this afternoon, and Primori’s hands in the warm fragrant water felt awfully good.

It wasn’t like Primori appealed to her on any sexual level. Come on. The man was a eunuch, for Pete’s sake. But he had great hands, and he really put a lot of heart into his ministrations. Contrary to her best intentions, Heather felt herself become aroused as Primori’s hands stroked her inner thighs, touching the folds at the vee of her legs.

Despite her audience, despite everything, Heather moaned when Primori began soaping her pussy. She thought she saw him bite his lip under his mask. He definitely began to wiggle more. Primori had amazingly long, strong fingers, which now moved to the plump folds surrounding her clit. Melgart stopped talking, or maybe it was just that Heather stopped hearing him. She found herself quite free to focus on Primori’s creative finger play. Luckily she was sitting in a tub of water, for Heather knew she was moist with excitement, thrusting her hips up so that she could maximize his intimate massage. Heather stole a look at Primori, wondering what was going on under his mask. He appeared neutral, completely focused on her as he soaped and stroked her folds and her hungry clitoris. While he rhythmically moved his fingers, tweaking her clit, sliding along the folds, Primori also began to explore inside her, sliding in first one finger, then two.

Heather, so long on a tight leash, surprised herself with the freedom she felt to give in to the pleasure Primori produced in her, riding his fingers, bucking her hips, splashing around so that the water sloshed over the sides of the tub. No doubt Primori and the floor around them were soaking, but no way could Heather stop her movement. Not now. Not with her first come in a long time building, building.

Primori, who’d never seen her ‘til just moments ago, appeared to know exactly how to move his fingers and support her hips so that she could

fly into her release. And there she was, letting go for all she was worth. Calling out words and sounds, finally one long shriek. Then she subsided, feeling just a brief moment of something like embarrassment mixed in with her sheer relief.

After her climax, Primori patted her on the shoulder. He nodded to Melgart and excused himself for several moments. Melgart continued bathing her like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. By now Heather was extremely clean, and probably her skin was very soft. "If you are ready, you may exit the bath," he said.

Heather didn't think she'd have energy for much more than climbing out. Now Melgart held out a huge, soft white cloth for her to step into. Primori returned. For a moment, Heather thought that his hard-on was gone. But next time she looked, it was there again. Both men dried her thoroughly, even reaching between her toes and into the crack of her butt. Heather couldn't remember ever feeling so clean and calm before. She felt ready to fall into whatever sort of bed she'd be sleeping in, but her bathing process was not complete.

* * * *

By the time Grentoori flew from the chamber, he felt nearly ready to explode. Never before had he been required to abide so long with an erection without a place to put it. He pulled off his mask and savored the coolness of the air rushing to refresh him. Now he understood the complaints of the other men, those who did not have a harem to serve them.

Once sure of his privacy, the prince pulled his robes out of his way and thrust his engorged cock into his cupped hands. He nearly gasped his relief at his touch. Though it had been years since he resorted to his own fingers for release, now he rubbed and prodded his cock. He longed to be inside her, but that wasn't for this moment. He'd done enough violence to Melgart's worldview already. So imagining her hands on him, Grentoori rubbed and stroked, and within moments he felt his climax build, and then there he was, his royal seed dispersed to the air around him. Sighing with relief, Grentoori mopped himself dry. Next time he released his seed, it would be with her--no matter what price he paid for this extraordinary but necessary pleasure. As of now, he had to return to the chamber.

Grentoori availed himself of a pitcher of water and a cloth to wash his hands. Then he straightened his robe and put on his mask. Maybe now that he had climaxed, he would be less excitable during the rest of the bath. But as soon as he caught sight of her, his cock again sprang to life.

* * * *

Primori entered the chamber just when Melgart held up a jug. "This is a special cream made from milk and roses," he said. He held it out for Heather to take a sniff. Smelled just like it should, she thought. Roses were the big scent around here, though far from the only choice. Primori, who seemed a tad more relaxed than he had before, proceeded to rub the cream into every surface of her body, massaging her in the process. Heather, who'd always before considered baby powder a sufficient *après* bath finisher, would never go back. Though applying cream to herself would never rival the sensations Primori produced, she knew she'd always think of him when she rubbed a sweetly scented lotion all over herself. Too bad he once again seemed tense by the time he finished.

When Heather had been totally creamed, Melgart took out some sort of measuring tape. "I want to give the seamstresses your dimensions so they can begin to fashion preliminary garments for you." Primori put the tape around her bust, waist, hips, thighs, upper arms, and for her height. He seemed to linger on her breasts and thighs, but maybe that was her hyper imagination. No one had ever taken her measurements before, but she'd never gotten custom fitted clothing either.

Next Melgart indicated that she should lie down on a white silk covered *chaise lounge*. Thinking this was maybe her bed for the night, Heather asked, "May I have a gown to sleep in?"

Melgart shook his head. "You are not to go to sleep quite yet."

Heather felt extremely vulnerable lying down naked. Even after the bath, she still hadn't gotten used to being like this with the eunuchs, especially Primori. She sensed she'd have been more at ease with Tramador. Before she had a chance to say another word, Primori stretched her arms over her head and tied them to the posts of a screen with strips of purple silk.

He pointed to her legs.

"Not for now," Melgart said. "We shall start with just the arms fastened down."

Heather didn't like the sound of any of her being tied down nor the feel of it. She wriggled and squirmed in protest. Melgart knelt down beside her. "Do not be worried, my lady."

"What are you two doing?" she asked, her voice tight with anxiety. Easy for him to tell her not to worry. He wasn't the one being tied down against his will.

"This is one lesson in learning how to train the senses to be more

aware,” he said, sounding strangely modern. “Please, do not struggle.”

Heather stilled her agitated movements. She’d go along with what Melgart said for a few minutes. But if anything happened that she didn’t like....

A funny tickle began to move up her legs. What the? She tried to sit up to see what was happening, but the bindings held her down too firmly to allow enough movement for her to be able to sit up.

“Primori, halt. Let us show the lady what we are using so she can rest and feel.”

Both men came to her at eye level. Each held a huge white feather. Must have been from a prehistoric dinosaur era bird to be that big. They were tickling her with these feathers. Heather, who was extremely ticklish, shivered at the thought of these feathers on her skin. Though she didn’t understand what tickling would accomplish or, especially, why she was tied down, she nodded that they could continue.

Each man taking one side, they started on her feet. Try as she might to lay still, Heather couldn’t help reacting to the light brush of the feathers over her sensitive skin. Though she’d started off with her legs together, now she knew they were spread wide as she moved in response to the two eunuchs’ touching. Primori painted stripes on and between each of her toes, raising goose bumps, and seeming once again to be breathing hard. Melgart, who seemed relaxed, favored circles and spirals. The feel of the feathers was so light that Heather longed for more, for a stronger touch on her aroused skin.

By the time the two eunuchs moved up Heather’s legs to her pussy, her clit was in full arousal. She longed for fulfillment beyond the touch of the feathers on her moist folds, on the entrance to her core. Primori continued to stimulate her pussy while Melgart moved upward, feathering her belly and breasts, her arms and neck and face. After the relaxation of the bath, Heather now found herself tense with a new level of excitement.

Primori untied her bindings, and Heather soothed her wrists. What now? She didn’t have long to wait. Melgart indicated that she should turn over, flat on her belly. The eunuchs tied her arms down again, then ran the feathers over her back, and she ground her pussy into the silk beneath, amazed that she could feel free enough to do this with the two men there. Delicious. She wished they could have continued all night, though at some point she would need to reach a climax after all the foreplay.

With her arms still tied down, Melgart said, “Please get on your knees,

my lady.”

Heather, curious more than wary, complied. Next she felt a wet creamy sensation in the crack between her cheeks. What the hell? Melgart was evidently massaging cream into the crack. Primori knelt down and massaged some other cream into the folds of her pussy. She could have told him no moisture was needed there, but he couldn't ask.

The two of them massaging her with cream.... Her butt crack and her pussy ... felt amazing. Melgart's fingers were every bit as skillful as Primori's. Heather began to slide her pussy up and down, quickly positioning her clit right up to Primori's index finger. Mmmm. The pleasure of his touch radiated out from her core, bringing sensation out to her toes, up to her breasts, up and out through the top of her head.

As she moved against him, she felt Melgart begin to open her from behind. With one finger, he played with the rosebud of her anus. Heather had it in mind to protest, but she couldn't bring herself to say the words to make him stop. Primori and Melgart now stroked her and let their fingers dart in and out of her openings with a sublime rhythm, responding to her movements, as she slowed down and sped up. The feel of the two of them was like hot sunshine on a freezing day, a shock of delight transporting her to another dimension.

Now Primori had his thumb on her clit while one then two large fingers entered her, and she was riding high. Melgart probed her gently from behind, slowly entering her back chamber with one finger. She moaned, wanting more from him and showing it. With infinite slowness and care, he brought a second finger. Heather shivered. Almost too much, but she wanted him to fill her, needed him to fill her.

The only sound in the room was Heather's breath and her moans. Her arms still restrained; she bucked and moved with the men's hands. They gave her everything she needed. Her hunger guided the universe. Then she knew she couldn't take any more. She was climbing to the sky, ready to fall off the universe as she let go and let go. With a huge intake of breath and a mighty shout, she came in waves of release and collapsed on the lounge. She heard the sound of pouring water, then Melgart's voice. When she'd had some moments to come back to herself, he returned to the chaise and untied her. With a wet cloth he cleansed her pussy and her butt. Then he dried her off and rubbed yet more creams into the area. To her amazement, no one said anything about the experience she'd just been through. For once, Heather appreciated the silence.

Now a woman brought a filmy garment over to Heather. Melgart, still not saying anything, slipped it over her head. Mmm, silk. The garment, which left little to the imagination, had bands of gold that fit under her breasts and around her waist.

Next he indicated that she should sit down at the edge of the chaise. A serving woman came over and began to pull the pins from her hair. After Heather's hair tumbled down to her shoulders, the woman massaged her scalp with some scented oil. Heather closed her eyes. The massage felt heavenly. After the woman finished applying the oil, she brushed Heather's hair the proverbial hundred strokes.

"And now, my lady Hiliadra, you are ready for your night's sleep," Melgart announced.

The old control freak, she thought. Just to show him that he wasn't completely the boss, she intended to fight sleep. But then she yawned and gave in to the thought of how exhausted she was.

"Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a very busy day for us all."

Wondering exactly what Melgart had planned for the next day, Heather followed the two men to another chamber. "This is where you will stay while we prepare you for the king," Melgart said.

Heather felt too tired to make a complete survey of the room, but she still registered sumptuous, luxurious surroundings. The bed consisted of a huge mattress that came up to mid-thigh and was covered in white silk and masses of pillows in silk embroidered cases. Huge white netting, now pulled back, surrounded the bed. Patterned wool carpets covered the marble floor, and colorful tapestries adorned the walls. A table bearing many white glowing candles filled one corner. Flowers arranged in bowls and vases decorated many of the wooden tables and scented the air.

Before Heather climbed into the bed, Melgart said, "There is a bell on the bedside table. If you need anything during the night, ring the bell and a servant will come." Next to the bell, Heather saw a pitcher of water and several glasses.

Talk about ultra room service.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Hundreds," Heather admitted. "But nothing that won't keep until morning."

Both men bowed and took their leave. Heather got into the bed and propped herself up on several pillows. She fully intended to review the day's events in her mind before going to sleep. What she wouldn't give for a

laptop to record her impressions while they were still fresh. But the mattress and pillows were too inviting, the day too much. Before she could do much thinking, Heather slipped into a deep sleep.

Only to be awakened by a large male person climbing into the bed alongside her. Heather opened her mouth to scream, but the male was faster. He covered her mouth first with his hand and then with his own eager mouth.

Chapter Three

Heather struggled futilely against the superior strength of the man who invaded her bed. Who could this be? She'd let herself be lulled into thinking she was safe, guarded by the two eunuchs and whatever minions fell under their domain. She should have known better.

"What, who?" she continued trying to resist. Biting the man's hand didn't work, so when he began to plunder her lips with his, she looked for an opportunity to cause damage. For about two heartbeats. And then, despite herself, she responded to his kiss. After which, she pushed him away and geared up to scream her head off.

"Shh. Calm yourself. I'm Prince Grentoori, and I could no longer wait to be with you."

"Prince Grentoori?" As Heather's eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she could begin to see that the audacious invader indeed bore an amazing resemblance to the delectable prince.

"Yes."

"But why are you here?"

"As I said, I cannot stand by while Melgart prepares you to grace my father's bed. I want you now. And then we'll have to see what we can do to change the direction of your fate and mine."

The sound of his whispers raised goose bumps along her spine and her arms, small potatoes next to her traitorous clit's happy dance. Though she'd climaxed so completely just a short time before, to her amazement she was good to go again.

Ha. Heather Morrison, Queen Hard-to-Get. Though more than happy to share the mattress with the hunky prince, something felt inherently wrong to her about just saying yes. She needed a road map here. Hell, she didn't even know what call him. "Uh, sir, I thought there are all kinds of rules forbidding this."

"When we are alone, you may call me Grent."

"Grent," she repeated. "I think you really shouldn't be here."

He traced a path around her lips with his thumb, which Heather

longed to lick. “Would you really banish me from your bed, condemn me to spend a lonely night?” His voice sounded husky.

“Uh, Grent. You have your own harem, don’t you?”

Now he ran his thumb down her neck to the top of her breasts. Heather’s nipples sprang to instant attention, and she longed to have his hands take full command of both breasts. He sighed. “None compares with you.”

“Oh, so you figure you want to try me out like a novelty.”

He kissed her, and the universe turned upside down. After a bit, he said, “You are new for me, yes. But there is some mystery about you, something different and special I sense that calls to me.”

Was she really going to fall for the line he so easily spouted? This guy was so smooth, a master pick-up artist. Even though she chided herself for feeling foolish, Heather couldn’t help getting soft in several key areas for him. Just like when her friends had swooned over the teen idol du jour back in high school, except then she’d been the sensible one. The prince sounded so sincere, and the look in his eyes could have melted an igloo.

“But Melgart...”

“What about Melgart?”

“He wouldn’t approve of our being together.”

The prince laughed, a low sound coming from deep within him, and Heather wanted to smother his lips with a hundred nibbling little bites. “No, he wouldn’t. But my dear one, things must change, even in our kingdom. Just because we have traditions and customs that we have followed for many years doesn’t mean that we have to continue. I say, it’s time for the new ... in this and in many things.”

“Have you told Melgart this?”

“I have. Also my father. But the older men have not been open to change.”

“That’s not unusual. Their job is to guard the old traditions.”

“Exactly. Which was why I had to exercise my command over Melgart tonight.”

“What? You mean he knows you’re here?”

“No, not that. But you see, I so wanted to be with you, that I ordered the great Melgart to let me participate in the sensual preparation of the king’s latest concubine.”

Heather gasped. “You mean, you were *Primori*?”

He laughed, a rich, deep sound. “Yes, and it got very warm for me

behind the mask. Not to mention under my robes.”

“I can’t believe it.” Heather laughed. “And here I was puzzling out how a eunuch could possibly have a hard-on.”

“Wicked wench!” He ruffled her hair and began to play, which ended in the two of them nuzzling each other. “You laugh, but you have no idea how I struggled to conceal my reaction to your charms.”

“You had me mesmerized.”

“Too much talking.” Grent covered Heather’s lips with his.

Heather wrapped her arms around him and drew up close. He was wearing silk pants and a shirt, perhaps the equivalent of pajamas in this culture. Then her mind went onto one track, where all she could think about was satisfying her curiosity and her lust for the prince. Everything else could wait ‘til later.

He ran his hands through her hair, and Heather closed her eyes savoring the sheer pleasure of his touch. She ran her fingers over his face, trying to imprint his magnificent features on her mind forever. For the truth was, she didn’t know how long she’d be in this time and space. She didn’t know how she arrived or when and how she’d leave. So she had to take everything Grent offered now, and then, whatever happened afterward, she’d have the memory of this night always.

* * * *

The rational part of him knew he shouldn’t have come to Hiliadra, especially after that trick he’d played on the eunuchs. There’d be hell to pay. Melgart was not the only one who’d seize upon Grent’s transgression to use as a weapon against him. Funny, how people thought a royal prince had great powers. In the palace, eunuchs like Melgart exercised a level of power a mere prince could only envy.

Maybe Grent was making a dangerous error, following his own counsel. Maybe he was about to fall into a trap that would leave him and his family exposed to the wiles and manipulations of their ambitious kinsman, General Ramand. A traditionalist, Ramand was always looking to foment the population against the royal family, especially when any breath of change came up.

Not that Melgart would ever side with an enemy against Grentoori’s family. He felt confident about the eunuch’s loyalty. Problem was, Ramand had spies everywhere. If he somehow found out that Grentoori had flouted Melgart and lain with Hiliadra, his father’s concubine, Ramand would try to exploit this information to divide the royal family’s supporters.

Amazing how Ramand nosed into so many places. It was from his spies in Ramand's camp that Grent learned of Tramador's substitution. Though Grent knew his father would have executed Tramador, Talaria, and the rest of their family for this betrayal, Grent couldn't bring himself to commit such a heinous punishment. He liked Tramador, but more than that, the substitution ended up bringing this remarkable woman to his notice.

The two of them fit together so completely. Grent almost couldn't wait to make love to her, to enter her and share the most intimate of pleasures. Part of him longed to plunge his hard cock into her and transport them to the top of the mountain of delight.

Melgart had trained him also in the art of making love. It was funny and strange how a eunuch could be so expert in the art of bringing a woman to complete ecstasy. Grent continued to be a fervent student of these arts. Most of all, Grent wanted this first lovemaking with Hiliadra to be a taste of heaven. He especially wanted the first time not to be the last.

"May I remove your garment?" he asked with gentleness though he longed to rip the scrap of cloth off her.

"Only if you let me remove yours too," she responded huskily. They both made short work of the thin layers separating them.

In the dark, her body gleamed like the finest white alabaster marble lit with a fire from within. Though he longed to feast his eyes on her, Grent needed to let the other senses run riot first. Afterwards, he would look at her all night, more than content to give up his sleep for the pleasure of being with her.

* * * *

Grent suckled on one nipple while his hand tweaked the other. He nibbled all around her breast, at first gently and then more aggressively tonguing her nipple, which seemed hard wired right to her clit. Heather could appreciate a man moving slowly as much as the next woman, but just this once, she'd be cool with Grent jumping her bones. She held his head to her and wound her legs around him, bringing his erection up to her belly. She wanted him. She tried to angle herself so that his cock played at the entrance to her deepest core. But aside from a few little wiggles, which ended with him pressing his erection even harder into her, he made no movement to enter her.

Heather wasn't sure if she was just super horny after the so-called Primori's stimulating hand job or because she'd been without a man for so long--or because she was so hot for Grent. Whatever impelled her forward,

she lay more than ready to open her legs to this man and draw him into her.

Equal time. Grent now sucked her other nipple and played with the one recently released from his mouth. Heather knew he could tell how excited she was. Cripes, her nipples must be practically stabbing him. His lips caressed her, leaving a trail of fire as he moved downward from her breasts to her feminine core.

She couldn't believe it. His Majesty, the exalted crown prince was about to go down on her. Her pussy tingled in anticipation and excitement when Grent turned her flat on her back. He licked her belly, his tongue tasting her navel before he moved down. Then he hit pay dirt, his tongue eager and quickly darting in and out of her moist waiting folds. Heather reached an unprecedented peak of excitement. As the prince lay between her legs, licking her, playing with her, tasting her, murmuring little words of pleasure and adoration, Heather closed her thighs around his head and positioned her hands on his ears. She savored each moment with exquisite awareness.

His face wet with her fluids, Grent raised his head and looked at her. "You are so beautiful and delicious," he murmured, and her heart twisted with delight. He lowered his head and continued his tongue play, bringing her to new levels of pleasure. Heather thrust her hips forward, free and happy to position her pussy so that Grent could kiss and lick her everywhere. Before she knew it, Heather began her ascent to climax, one that started deep in her toes and would set her whole body to shuddering satisfaction. Grent held on to her legs now, diving deeper and deeper into her pussy as he helped bring her around to her total satisfaction.

When she reached the top point, she called out his name and held on to him tightly. Then she shuddered with the aftershocks of her release, and collapsed into his embrace.

* * * *

What a magnificent woman she was already. Grent couldn't imagine what more Melgart could possibly do or teach her to make her better, more alluring. Sacred gods, if she became any more appealing to him, Grent might as well turn over his signet ring and crown to her because he'd be powerless to deny her anything.

She came to a deep, shuddering climax from the attention of his mouth and lips to her beautiful female core. Grent would have been content to spend many hours dallying at those breasts, but his own needs pressed--with great insistence.

Now, at last, he would become one with her. His cock near bursting, he kissed her lips again, entranced that she could taste herself on him. In the faint light of the room, Hiliadra's eyes glittered like two precious sapphires. The silk bedding around them carried the scent of her release, exciting him even more.

"You are my sacred flower, opening your petals to me like you do to the sun," he whispered. The love words of Duriat, his people's most famous poet, came easily to his lips as he prepared to enter Hiliadra.

Suddenly she appeared to grow alarmed, and she rolled restlessly, pushing Grent from her. "What is it, my pet?" Though he didn't know Hiliadra well, he'd considered her more than ready and eager for him to make total love with her. Could he have been so wrong?

"Prince, Grent," she said at last, "I must tell you something."

"What?" he stroked her hair, trying to calm her. All the while, he remained granite hard and oh so ready.

"I must confess."

"I am prepared to hear you."

She swallowed hard, and Grent experienced a moment of alarm. What could so disturb his beauty?

"I'm not a virgin," she said at last. "Melgart was going to help me find a way to act as if I still were one." She appeared embarrassed.

Grent bit his lip not to laugh. "Neither am I," he said at last. "A virgin that is."

"But you're not supposed to be. According to Melgart, I am," she whispered back.

"That old nonsense." He held her. His regard grew for her in the face of her confession. "Honestly, that's more of that old stuff, tradition. I don't give a rat's tail about whether or not you're a virgin. Do you care that I'm not?"

"Of course not." Hiliadra let out a sigh of relief that seemed to come from deep within her. "Do you think someone should tell Melgart how you feel?"

"I'd hate to cut into his pleasure." He couldn't help it any more. He gave in and laughed.

She joined him and then she cut short. "I really like you."

"And I you. Now shall we proceed before your poor prince royally expires?"

She wrapped her fingers around his cock, and Grent thought he'd die

from the amazing pleasure. He had to have her. Now.

* * * *

Heather couldn't believe how wonderful and perfect Grent was turning out to be. Finally, a gorgeous man whose personality and wit matched his exterior. Though being with Grent would probably ruin her for any other man she'd encounter in her real world, she'd already committed herself to throwing caution to the winds.

When she touched his cock, he felt near to exploding. Glorious. Round, firm, and filled with the juices all for her. Now on her back with her legs open, Heather welcomed Grent's weight pressing down on her. He had a magnificent body--tall, muscled, so strong. Her pussy, still wet, welcomed him.

His hips now between her thighs, his cock nudged open her pussy lips. Yes, this was what she'd been waiting for. Now with his cock at the mouth of her pussy, all they needed was one little thrust, and he'd be inside her. He moved down, and she moved up, and they were one.

Heather gasped with some primitive recognition as Grent slid down deep inside her. At that initial contact, Heather had the strangest feeling that she'd come home, met the other half of her being--and then she gave herself over to the sheer sensation of Grent inside her. He moved slowly at first. She felt like every surface within her became amazingly sensitized, as if everywhere he touched sprang to new life and alertness like a garden experiencing a rainfall after a prolonged drought.

At first his movements, tiny and subtle, brought her to a deep awareness of every little nuance. Then his arcs became larger, longer, more pronounced. She arched upward to meet his downward thrusts, the two of them soon joined in harmonious rhythm.

"My angel of the morning and queen of the night," he whispered, and Heather's heart melted. "You fill my soul with longing and my body comes to yours in delight."

"What is this that you're saying?" she asked.

"From a famous love poem by Duriat, son of Lamphir." He thrust harder into Heather, and she gasped.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"Do you mean the way I make love or the words of the poet?"

"Both."

He paused in his movements, then continued both the loving and the poem more slowly. Heather moaned. She drew her legs tighter around

Grent, pulling him in ever closer.

“My sweet bird of gold, antelope of my desire,” he recited. “Your breasts are to me like fountains of life, with your merest smile you set my world on fire.”

Heather groaned. She was such a sucker for poetry, and none of her previous lovers recited it to her, especially not when they were making love. Grent was laying siege to all her senses, and she’d never be the same.

“Where can I touch you, my dear one, to bring you pleasure?”

“Everywhere you touch me, every word you say, brings me pleasure,” Heather sighed.

He kissed her deeply, and their tongues and teeth began to dance harder as Grent’s cock grew ever larger to fill Heather. Then, he began to move faster, harder, and ever deeper. Heather, breathless, matched him stroke for stroke, whispering little words of encouragement to him in English, Indurlian, and a no-word language. Heather was going to come--but this time, with Grent so deep inside her, her climax became a rolling release, continuing on and on as she cried out her deepest, most esoteric understandings of the universe and her nature as a woman. At this moment, she was completely open and vulnerable to Grent, soaring across the sky above the two of them on the strength of her emotions.

Her prince appeared so caught up in the total release she shared with him that he grew large and tight with his own climax. With a shout that nearly brought the ceiling down upon them, Grent spasmed deep inside Heather and released all he had in her. They both continued like that for several long moments before they collapsed together in a total embrace.

“Oh my,” Heather said at last. She had no idea how to classify what just happened between them, though classifying and analyzing were a huge part of what she did in her real life. All she wanted to do now was to stay in the shelter of Grent’s arms, to be with him, to see if together they could ever again have an experience as all-encompassing as the one they’d just had.

* * * *

He’d expected the lovemaking with Hiliadra to be fantastic. But fantastic lovemaking was nothing new to Grent. Any man in his position had access to the best and the finest, yet nothing he’d ever experienced prepared him for how it would be to make love with this woman. He lightly kissed the side of her beautiful face.

When he made love with Hiliadra, Grent began to understand some of what he’d been feeling these past few months. With her, in her, he began to

lose the restlessness and dissatisfaction that had begun to erode his sense of all being right with his world. With her, he sensed that his vague feelings of need for change were important and valid.

Certainly if he wanted to be with Hiliadra exclusively from now on, something very fundamental would have to change in the kingdom of Indurlia. The thought of a king or prince who did not fully avail himself of a constantly replenished harem was too shocking to bring before the people without laying the ground for change first. But not as shocking as his taking the king's concubine to his own bed.

One thing he knew. Now that he had lain with Hiliadra, he could no longer bear for them to be apart. He could not think of being with any other woman, as he wouldn't tolerate her being with another man. He even cringed at the thought of the eunuchs touching her, though they were far from men in this regard.

The men of the royal family were expected to lay with many women, both to father children and to give chosen women and their relatives a chance to rise in society. While Grent cared about his people, and he would never abandon his hereditary role and responsibilities, neither could he think of sacrificing his love.

Because he did love this woman, and it was even more wonderful and magical and mysterious than the poet said.

So many things he would need to figure out. Starting with who to talk to, which advisor could tell him how to arrange his life so they would all end up with what they most wanted.

Impatient as he was to make the changes necessary for them to be together, he and Hiliadra would have to go slowly at first. Much as he longed to spend the night in her bed, he could not risk springing this on Melgart and through him the palace servants, without some preamble. He knew Melgart would soon come around to check on his charge, and that he would expect her to be ready to rise bright and early. After Grent had commanded Melgart to allow him to participate in the bath, being in the lady's bed would be too much.

So regretfully, his heart filled with love he could only show and not yet tell her about, Grent prepared to slip from Hiliadra's bed. Half asleep, she sprang to full alert when he drew away. She reached out to him.

"Where are you going?"

"My sweet," he said. "For tonight, I must go back to my own bed."

"Must you really?"

He'd have given anything to stay with her, but they'd need to be patient until he figured out how they could be together. "I must." He picked up her hand and kissed her on the palm. "I will go tonight. I promise, we will talk tomorrow. We will come up with a plan to be together."

"What should I do?"

"Go with Melgart when he comes to you in the morning. Do as he says."

"Even when he instructs me on how to be a virgin?"

Grent laughed. "Go along with him now. We will set him and all the others straight soon as possible."

He bent down and kissed her. Though he longed for more, and he sensed she did too, for now restraint was the wisest course. Using all his strength of will, he left Hiliadra warm and lovely in her bed.

* * * *

Heather had never felt so sleepy before. Once Grent left, however, she found herself wide awake. What the hell was she getting into? Up until just a short time ago, her life was so simple. Then after she found that wonderful scroll and began reading, it all became so complicated.

The scroll. She'd lost track of it. The last she'd seen of it, Melgart was writing on the parchment as if he had a perfect right to. Now she realized that maybe he did. Maybe the scroll, a living tool and not just a historical record, belonged to Melgart. Still, she was determined that, whenever and however she got out of this place, she'd take the scroll with her. Somehow she'd find a way to do that without hurting Melgart.

But the scroll faded in importance compared to Grent. How had she, the least sentimental and least susceptible to a line of male bullshit of all the women she knew, succumbed to a good-looking prince so profoundly that she'd actually apologized to him about not being a virgin?

Hello. This was all so not her. Granted, he was gorgeous and smart and romantic, and the sex between them had been beyond words. But how had she gotten to the place where she could no more consider leaving this place without the prince as without the scroll? Though Heather didn't know the rules of time travel and all that, she figured it would be a hell of a lot more difficult to smuggle out a person than an object. After all, she managed to come to this place with the scroll clutched to her.

Okay. So she'd somehow get her hands on the scroll and figure out how to go back.

But no, she didn't want to leave Grent behind either. What about

him? Would he be willing to give up what his life here and come with her to a new century? They hadn't even spoken enough for him to realize exactly where she came from.

Heather touched the place on her bed where Grent had lain. She wished so much that he could have spent the night with her, but maybe this was just the reality check she needed. Maybe it would be even more impossible for her to return to her time with him than it would have been for them to stay together this night.

Feeling confused and sad, Heather at last fell into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Four

When Prince Grentoori arrived back in his own quarters, Ramand was waiting. Damn. Who'd given that snake permission to enter the prince's quarters? Come to think of it, lately Ramand often didn't seek permission. He just did what he damn well pleased and dared anyone he offended to impose consequences. He'd have to be taken down a peg. Several pegs, actually. But Grent was not in the mood to deal with any of that now.

"Begging your pardon, Your Majesty," Ramand said, his voice oily with barely concealed contempt. "But I thought you would want to be the first to know of a deception among your eunuchs."

Actually this was the last thing Grent wanted to discuss, especially tonight, and especially coming from Ramand. Grent yawned largely and abundantly. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it can wait 'til morning, can't it?"

Ramand narrowed his eyes, enormously increasing his resemblance to a poisonous adder. "By morning the culprits will have escaped far beyond our reach. It may already be too late to capture any but your so-called trusted eunuch. Of course, if you'd rather, I can go to your father with this tale of betrayal instead of you."

Grent frowned. He knew Ramand knew that he preferred to leave his father out of any but the most monumental questions of life and death. After all, the king had turned over most of the routine command of the palace and beyond to the crown prince the year before. It behooved him to prove his father's bestowal of power a wise choice.

It pained the prince to think of betrayal among his eunuchs, the most trusted of his guards. In this instance, the prince felt sure Ramand was going to repeat the information he already knew about Tramador. Information he decided not to act on. Now, with Ramand involved, he would have to act like he didn't know. He'd also have to choose a course of action to defuse any Ramand might pursue. "Go ahead. Say your piece and then I shall decide what to do. Which eunuch is involved?"

"Tramador, son of Tragaron," Ramand spat out.

"Tramador?" Grent repeated. "What are you accusing him of doing?"

Ramand's voice grew low with confidentiality. "He's conspired to replace the female chosen for the king by the royal finders with another female of unknown origin."

As Ramand spoke, Grent tried to ignore the sensation of his dreams of Hiliadra crumpling into dust and blowing away. Oh great balls of excrement, how could this low-life have uncovered the ruse so quickly?

Grent would try to brazen the situation out, though he knew from recent experience that Ramand, like a wild dog with a fleshy bone, would not let go easily. "Thank you for coming to me with this," Grent said sounding as magisterial as he could. "As it happens, I am not unaware of Tramador's apparent action. Trust me on this, Ramand. Though it would appear otherwise, he's behaved with my full permission and knowledge in this situation. He's committed no treachery, done nothing wrong."

Ramand's eyebrows lowered. "But, my dear crown prince," he spat out. "You surely are not condoning such flagrant flouting of our traditions and ways?"

That was exactly what he was doing, though Grent could never admit so to Ramand. "Things are not as they might appear to you, Ramand. You are not in a position to know everything. I command that you leave this matter alone as of now and for the future. I know exactly what has happened, and it's all been with my approval."

"Very good, sir," Ramand said, withdrawing. But the look in his eye told Grent that the matter was, in fact, far from over.

He climbed into his own bed, which seemed cold and lonely. There was no way he could invite in the one woman he wanted. In the morning, he'd think of a way to stop Ramand from committing any mischief. But after the night passed, in the dim rays of the coming morning light, Grent realized he was no closer to any solutions than he'd been the day before.

* * * *

Was it morning already? Heather felt that she had barely slept when Tramador and a young female servant were roused her to wake up.

"What time is it?" she asked, still snuggled in the sheets.

Tramador appeared puzzled by her question. "Past dawn. Late in the morning for Melgart, who has a very full day planned for you."

Heather moaned. By the time she finally fell asleep, she exhausted herself with questions and plans. Groaning, she sat up. She saw Tramador looking back and forth at the bed, then at her, and frowning. She realized that, with his sensitivity, he probably could sense something had gone on

here. Heck, even she could smell the residue of last night's lovemaking, and she'd never considered herself particularly astute when it came to the senses. Tramador probably realized exactly what went on. Now she wondered if he would tell Melgart, and what the consequences would be if he did.

On the other hand, she knew Tramador's secret about Talaria. They each knew a crucial secret about the other. Tit for tat, so to speak. If he threatened her in any way, she could turn around and threaten him right back. Then Heather paused. Talk about palace intrigues. She'd been in this place for fewer than twenty-four hours and she already felt deeply mired in one. Plotting against Tramador, whom she really liked, the first person who treated her kindly in this place. Heather blushed at all the directions her mind took her.

Tramador looked at her. Without his saying a word, Heather realized he'd keep his silence for now. As for the servant woman, she kept her eyes averted and her mouth shut. Heather sighed with relief. It might just be temporary, but for right now, her secret was safe. If anything changed, she'd have to reassess and possibly change her course. This morning that course included presenting herself to Melgart for the day's activities.

* * * *

The moment Melgart saw Hiliadra and Tramador, he intuited that both of them guarded secrets from him. He did not appreciate people trying to keep information from him. Why didn't they just realize they'd fail and tell him what was going on? Oh well, the game playing did sometimes add a touch of piquancy to otherwise dull days. Not that he expected today to be dull. Nothing had been dull since Hiliadra's arrival.

What was it about Hiliadra this morning? She looked so different from the night before. Almost as if she'd had intercourse.... Hmm, he thought stroking his chin, that could just be it. Tramador would, of course, sense the same.

Well, enough about all that. "I trust you slept well," he greeted Hiliadra.

She actually blushed. "I'm afraid it wasn't the best night's sleep I ever had."

He didn't like that. He expected his charges to be well rested so that they could take on the day's activity with a full store of vitality. Not to mention that poor sleep played havoc with their appearance. "What interfered with your night's rest?" he asked. They'd of course have to fix whatever it was.

“Oh, everything was fine,” she said breezily.

“Obviously not, or you would have slept well. Was the bed not comfortable? Was the room too hot, too cold, too noisy? Perhaps you were hungry or thirsty?”

“None of those.” She looked dreamy. “I suppose I was just thinking too much.”

“If necessary, we can give you a sleeping draught. Some herbs our healer mixes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“See that you do. Now we will begin the day with some light refreshments, then a bath, and then we’ll get busy.”

* * * *

“Another bath?” Actually Heather was a shower in the morning person, so having her cleansing at the beginning of the day suited her better than the timing of last night’s bath. The cleansing aspects of it, at any rate.

“You shall have at least three baths a day when you move into the harem.”

Three baths a day? She’d turn into a prune. Though bathing might be one of the few forms of entertainment available to the women--a fact to note. She shivered at the prospect of such a tightly shuttered existence, even if Grent were the harem lord instead of his father.

“But first, join me in the morning’s repast.”

All Heather usually wanted first thing in the morning was full octane coffee, and today was no exception. When Melgart led her over to the pillows where they would sit to eat, Heather unfortunately neither saw nor smelled anything remotely resembling coffee. *Probably a beverage not even available at this time in this part of the world.* Something else to research when she got back to civilization....

A group of serving women brought in several trays full of food, dishes, and drinks. While there was no coffee, evidently she’d be able to drink as much tea as she wanted. She poured herself a cup then sat back on her pillow.

“You are surely going to take more than just that drink,” Melgart said, his voice dark with disapproval.

“I usually do not eat too much in the morning.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You will eat this morning.”

Breakfast in these parts included fruit, cheese, bread, yogurt, and some pastries. All foods Heather appreciated, but not at the crack of dawn.

She took some bread and cheese, a bunch of grapes, and a little dish of yogurt. “This is not enough, but it will do for a start,” Melgart lectured. “You will see, you will be hungry in the midst of our planned activities.”

Heather began to nibble her way through the breakfast and found that the food tasted much better than she expected so early in the morning.

Melgart not only encouraged her to eat heartily, he did so himself. Heather wondered where Tramador was, but she didn’t ask. “What are we going to do today?”

“After you’ve eaten a proper breakfast and had your bath, we will take you to the seamstresses to begin work on your wardrobe.”

“Will that take long?”

He scowled at her, as if to ask what else she had to occupy her. “You are in need of many garments. The seamstresses must measure you for each one. The mistress of the wardrobes will help you select the most advantageous colors and fabrics.”

“But why will I need so many clothes if all I’ll do is stay in the harem?”

Heather thought Melgart looked amused by her question, but he evidently stifled any impulse to laugh. “First of all, you must always look totally impeccable when you are in the presence of King Hashimur or any other members of the royal family.”

Heather bit her own lip to keep from reacting. Judging from last night, the prince was hardly fussy about her wardrobe. In fact, he showed a distinct preference for her to be *au naturel*. And then she sobered at the thought of King Hashimur having an opportunity to see her like this. They’d have to move heaven and earth to block that from happening.

“Second, your comment shows a lamentable lack of knowledge about life in the harem. Every woman strives to look her best at all times to keep her status with the others, which requires the most beautiful garments and jewels each one can get.”

Of course, Heather reminded herself. She’d studied enough about harem life to know that women inside tended to become very competitive in the only areas available to them, such as personal appearance and the time they got to spend with their master. She had no intention of entering into harem life on any level, and certainly not the harem she was intended for, but she wanted to learn all she could about how women had spent their lives in this confinement. She sighed when she realized how many secrets she was trying to keep from the astute Melgart.

* * * *

Melgart grew increasingly displeased. Something was definitely off about Hiliadra this morning, more so than he'd realized yesterday. What sort of female didn't respond enthusiastically to the idea of new garments made especially for her? She'd not even shown a flicker of animation at the mention of the fine jewels that would be her due. Her ignorance of the harem seemed out of keeping in one so intelligent.

But, the smell and feel of sex on her eclipsed her other inconsistencies and flaws. Good gods, how was he to deal with that? The scent around her and the look in Hiliadra's eyes this morning did not just come from the previous evening's diddling of her sex organ in the bath--even with the so-called Primori involved. It wasn't unknown for females to pleasure themselves following the initiation bath, especially the more experienced women, such as Hiliadra. However, Melgart had never known self-play to produce such startling physical residues, and self-play did not produce the scents of full-fledged intercourse.

Though he shuddered at the thought, Melgart reluctantly concluded that Hiliadra had not spent last night in her bed alone. But what man would risk the punishment for anyone caught breaching the security of the harem? How could anyone have gotten past all the safeguards? The only true male who had this sort of access was ... the prince.

What Melgart imagined was unthinkable, even after the prince's transgression of forcing his way to the bath. If Prince Grentoori had made his way to the bed of Hiliadra before she completed the ritual preparation, he'd truly broken the traditions of centuries--a sin infinitely compounded because Hiliadra was the intended of King Hashimur. Though Melgart knew the prince often had strange ideas, he couldn't bring himself to believe that the prince would so flagrantly violate laws so fundamental. If any hint of such a breach became known, the royal family would be rocked to its very foundations, and Melgart, if he were lucky, would merely face exile to an obscure corner of the world.

If his luck didn't hold, Melgart would face the executioner. He fought his sense of rising panic. He could not give in to fear. All was not yet lost. He would carry on as always, with one cautious eye on a possible escape route.

Could all the strange happenings of the past day be due to Melgart's momentary weakness in acquiescing in Tramador's small fraud? This was a question too profound to explore in depth now. First things first, he had to

continue Hiliadra's formal introductory ritual. All would flow from his following protocol and ritual as if there had been no rupture in either.

The first bath of the morning was to cleanse Hiliadra from her night. Only he, and of course she, knew exactly how much she needed that cleansing. Melgart frowned. Tramador knew, too. It was he who'd roused Hiliadra from her sleep. Tramador must have seen and smelled the evidence, but he'd said nothing to Melgart. So now it wasn't just one secret, one betrayal, that Tramador was guilty of.

The prince obviously knew, for he must be the transgressor. Melgart stopped in his tracks. What if this were some elaborate trick by the prince to trap Melgart, to see if he'd report the lady's lapse? Unprecedented. Melgart's best instincts told him to proceed with Hiliadra as if she were just one more of the hundreds of women he'd introduced to the ways of the harem before. Melgart swallowed hard.

For this morning, he would dismiss the serving women and conduct Hiliadra's bath himself. Though this was yet another departure from custom, he couldn't risk any of the females realizing Hiliadra had lain with a man in the night and talking among themselves. Once the gossip began from the tiniest scrap, Melgart knew it would take fire like a conflagration in a room filled with scrolls.

He took a last swallow of his drink. "We will proceed now to the morning bath," he said, amazed at how calm his voice sounded.

* * * *

Heather was glad to be done with the meal. Melgart seemed totally wired this morning, so tense that she thought he'd explode into a hundred small pieces if anyone startled him with a touch. Funny how she always considered that sort of tension a condition of modern life. Evidently it existed in the past, too. Whatever else changed for Heather after this interlude in her life, she'd never again naively view the past as some Edenic utopia of non-stop simple happiness.

Instead of taking her back to the tub of steaming water of the night before, Melgart led her to a mosaic edged pool she'd have to climb down into. To her amazement, she experienced no shyness in taking off her garment now. She'd evidently gotten real used to Melgart the eunuch. Anyway, the garment she'd worn had left nothing to the imagination. She felt no more naked with it off than on.

The clear turquoise water of the pool felt pleasantly warm to the touch. The pool itself was larger than a bathtub, shaped like a large letter S

and edged with white and turquoise mosaic tiles interspersed with squares of gold. Two women servants hovered near the pool. Melgart dismissed them with a nod of his head, which surprised Heather. As no other servants came over, it looked like it would be just her and Melgart for this bath. For a moment she wondered if Melgart would fondle her the way Primori had, and a wave of warmth crashed through her. “What kind of bath is this?” she asked, a slight wobble in her voice.

“We will begin the polishing of the skin in this bath,” Melgart said, eyeing her. “It would appear that you have subjected your skin to the sun and other sources of damage.”

Heather thought of all the times her work exposed her to various harsh weather conditions. Though she routinely slathered on sunblocks and moisturizers, she’d never given her complexion priority over her work. Melgart evidently disagreed with this ordering. “I have worked out of doors, yes.”

Melgart sighed. “Most of the females chosen by the concubine finders have had little exposure to the sun and wind or other sources of wear. You see, families who hope their daughters will become concubines protect them from harmful conditions.”

Heather’s head spun at the thought of parents grooming daughters for harem life. As if Melgart could read her mind, he added, “Such a life is really considered much to be desired. For most women, life in a royal harem is preferable to the hardships of being a wife and mother.” To himself he added, “But evidently not to all.”

Curious to see what the skin softening would entail, Heather lowered herself in the water up to her chin. “Why is the life of most women in this kingdom so very difficult?”

Melgart shrugged. “’Tis the lot of women everywhere to serve,” he said. “Surely it is the same where you come from.”

Despite the soothing warmth and delicious aroma of the water, which relaxed her better than a glass of wine, Heather bristled at Melgart’s comment. “No, it’s not at all the case where I live. Women and men are equals.”

Melgart actually laughed. “Oh, but now you are trying to fool me or play some sort of joke. Of course, I know the universal truth. The world is filled with inequality, starting with that between men and women.”

Heather wanted to dispute this, but not when Melgart held an evil looking implement in his hand. Making a mental note to resume this

conversational thread later, she asked, “What is that?” He held a piece of black wood studded with black wires of various lengths tipped with small knobs of different colors and textures.

“This is a polisher,” he said. “For after the bath.” Heather thought it looked more appropriate for stripping the finish from a car than buffing up her skin and expressed some doubts.

“This is a wonderful tool. All the females wish to have a treatment with it.”

She doubted that. “I’d like to try it out before you use it on me.”

“Very well. I will show you on your arm how this operates.”

She wanted to have control here. “I’d prefer to hold it myself for this demonstration.” She reached over to Melgart, who frowned but finally handed it to her.

Heather turned the implement over, examining it from all sides. She could tell it was made from wood and what looked like wire was probably some sort of animal bristle. Fully determined to turn down the treatment if she didn’t like the feel of the bristles, she ran the implement softly over the palm of her left hand. To her amazement, she quivered with the delightful current of heat and light the touch of the bristles unleashed in her hand.

Melgart, a smug expression on his face, watched her closely. “You approve?”

Heather nodded mutely. She started to rub the bristles over herself, but Melgart clamped his fingers over the handle and took it back. “You’re right,” Heather admitted. “I want it.”

Melgart snorted. “And you shall have it. But first you must cleanse yourself with this soap of olive oil.”

Heather, motivated, ran the creamy bar over her entire body, carefully cleaning every last inch. When Melgart pronounced her suitably clean, he helped her climb from the pool and lightly dried her. Then she stretched out, belly down, on a pillowed chaise. “Do I get the bristles now?”

“Not yet.”

Though patience had never been Heather’s long suit, she realized that, if she tried to rush Melgart, he’d make her wait even longer. Moving resolutely, he began to rub some cream into her skin. Felt delicious, but not what she wanted right now.

“What is that?” she asked in an effort to convince him she wasn’t panting for the implement. “Olive oil, the most basic creamer.”

Melgart’s hands felt warm and sure on her, and he moisturized her

thoroughly. He even massaged cream in the crack between her cheeks, which awakened all sorts of sensations in her pussy. After Melgart had completely coated her in the mildly scented cream, he told her to get up on her knees and began to stroke her pussy with the implement he'd used on her whole body. At last. If she'd had to wait another moment, she might have exploded. Heather clutched on to the sides of the chaise and bit her lip, as Melgart made little circles on her skin. This was more than worth the wait. She groaned.

The touch of the bristles was so delicious, especially on the delicate skin of her pussy folds, it became nearly unbearable. Everywhere Melgart touched, Heather felt a burst of heightened circulation. Ridiculous as it sounded, she felt her whole bloodstream joining in a triumphant chorus, singing and dancing, all these marvelous sensations focused on her pussy.

Embarrassed at the sexual reaction the bristles provoked, Heather tried to remain still, when her hungry pussy cried out for her to grip the implement between her legs and take her pleasure. Her eyelids fluttered. The hell with the implement. She wanted the prince in her, hard and ready for her to ride.

Melgart widened the sphere of the massage--but no matter where he stroked her, Heather felt a direct link to her clitoris, which beat and throbbed with pleasurable need. She sighed, mentally opening herself up to the prince, who would satisfy her hunger with a cock solid as granite and huge with his appetite for her.

As Melgart covered her skin with the bristles, Heather floated somewhere between the chaise and heaven, locked in her imaginary lover's embrace. Under Melgart's expert ministrations, she stayed perpetually at the edge of a massive climax, constantly just before the moment where she would let go and flood the universe with her release.

Heather startled when Melgart stopped. For a moment she felt as if she stood at the edge of the world, close to falling off. Melgart was murmuring soft words to her, bringing her back to earth. She understood him to be saying it was time for her to shift positions so he could continue the rest of her treatment.

Lying on her back, now more aware of Melgart's presence than she'd been before, Heather felt extremely vulnerable. Of course in this position she was far more exposed than before. Melgart's voice took on a soothing croon, lulling her back to drowsy mindlessness. He began stroking her on the tops of her feet, letting the bristles perform their magic.

Heather closed her eyes. Once more she could easily to imagine Grentoori there with her, covering her body with his. The soft sounds caressing her ears turned into Grent's words of love and encouragement. Grent whispered to her, saying what a beauty she was, how much he cherished her. Heather could not lie still as Melgart wielded the implement that brought pleasure to her on every possible level. She thrashed about on the chaise, longing to come ever closer to the source of her pleasure. Grent encouraged her to move in all the ways she needed to reach the pinnacles of sensation beckoning her. When Melgart again applied the implement to her feminine core, Heather at last reached the climax so long in building. Grentoori held her, from the first shudder through the waves of her total, bone melting, teeth chattering release. When she recovered sufficiently to find words, she looked at Melgart in question. "I thought you were to give me some sort of skin treatment."

"I was. Your skin is now glowing."

Glowing? Hell, she was probably a head to foot deep tomato blush. "Melgart, no offense, but that was a heck of a lot more than a simple skin treatment." She started to sit up. He held out his arm to help her. Now conscious of her total nudity, Heather looked around for a sheet or something to cover herself with. Sensing her need, Melgart handed her a silk robe. She thanked him and repeated her question.

"Ah, Hiliadra. Why do you think each thing must be separate?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are referring to the sensual pleasure you experienced during the treatment, are you not?"

"Yes," she said. "I never expected the bristles to produce such ... ecstasy." She had to search for the correct label for what she was feeling. Ecstasy seemed to sum it up better than any other word that came to mind. She realized that since arriving at this place and time, she'd had serious orgasms with two different men. Granted that Melgart probably didn't count as a man in the traditional sense. Still, she couldn't deny that she'd experienced a massive climax with Melgart working on her. Then she felt momentary guilt. How would Grent feel if he found out what she'd just experienced with Melgart? Would he feel jealous though there was no reason for him to? But then, how would she feel if Grent had a similar experience with the female equivalent of a eunuch, if such existed? Reminding herself of where they were, in King Hashimur's harem, she chided herself for the ridiculous directions her thoughts insisted on taking.

“Why,” he asked, “is it so difficult for you to accept that sensual delight is an important part of other experiences?”

Good question, she thought. Though he might not have the vocabulary to name what she was doing, Heather believed that Melgart just accused her of over-compartmentalizing her life. Saying pleasure belonged only in one particular quadrant, finding it a surprise to discover such sensual delight in other quadrants. She was embarrassed to realize Melgart probably had a point.

“So tell me, Melgart. Along with producing such amazing sensations, what did this implement do for my skin?”

“I am not in the custom of separating the functions. But to try to answer your question. Along with teaching you to have the freedom to respond to your feelings, we have also just removed old, tired skin so that you have the glow of a fresh layer.”

“Exfoliation,” Heather said, giving a label to what she just experienced. Though she now had a technical name, she got a glimmer of what Melgart meant when she realized how little the name was connected to the totality of what she’d felt. However, being an academic, she still wanted titles and names for the reality around her. Pointing to the brush she asked, “What is that called?”

Melgart smiled. “It’s a barrorarama.”

“I’m sorry I asked,” Heather said, stumbling over the name. She wondered how it worked, and briefly thought how successful an entrepreneur with this tool would be in the twenty-first century. Before she could think much about that, she had to focus on what Melgart was saying.

“Next you will bathe in milk harvested from special goats.”

That brought her down from her high. “I don’t think so.” She wrinkled her nose. Despite her appreciation for the cheese made from it, goat’s milk had little appeal for Heather, and she certainly didn’t intend to dip her newly glowing body in it.

Melgart raised an eyebrow. “Do you doubt my expertise in this matter?”

Even not being a true male, Melgart evidently had no shortage of male ego. Heather resisted her impulse to roll her eyes and just said, “Of course not. But I always think of goats as smelly animals with funny little beards.”

“This has nothing to do with the milk you will bathe in. Now give me your hand and come.”

Extremely reluctantly, Heather allowed Melgart to help her off the

chaise and lead her on to the next phase in her treatment. She wondered how much goat's milk he could possibly mean for her to bathe in and pictured a tiny pool of some white stuff. Figured they'd let her bathe in water after she dipped in it.

Evidently Melgart had a real immersion bath in mind. The goat's milk filled another of the mosaic edged pools such as the one she started in. "Exactly what is this supposed to do for me?"

"Goat's milk will impart a quality of soft creaminess to your skin. Enormously attractive to men."

Heather stifled a grin, wondering if she'd now have billy goats following her around. As she hadn't seen any in the palace, she'd be okay for a while. Prince Grentoori appeared to find her enormously attractive without the benefit of the goat's milk. Well, Melgart seemed to know his stuff. She would not be willing to dip into a vat of excrement if he demanded it, but she'd suspend her disbelief to take a dip into the milk.

Heather dipped her toes in first. If she felt really repulsed, she'd refuse to go any further. To her amazement, the stuff felt sweet and calming, actually appealing. She shed the short robe Melgart had provided and climbed in. The milk was cool, but not uncomfortably so. More what she'd call refreshing. She splashed around in the pool, where the milk came to nearly her chin level.

"We take you through all the steps of sensual awakening," Melgart said. "Our program is precise, the product of many years of following closely held traditions and old ways."

Was she fooling herself or did Heather hear regret in Melgart's voice? She had her own moment of remorse, wishing she were what Melgart thought--someone who could truly accept his careful tutelage in initiation. But then she reminded herself of who she was and why she was here.

* * * *

Morning did not bring inspiration to Prince Grentoori--just a hard-on that he profoundly wished to share with Hiliadra. Of course he knew as prince he could just order the servants to bring her to him--despite Melgart. In theory, his power was absolute, way greater than any palace eunuch's was. But in reality, he was better off not messing with Melgart unless it became totally necessary. Which might happen quickly.

What to do about Ramand and the Tramador affair loomed menacingly ahead and demanded his attention now. Grentoori knew that Tramador meant no disrespect by his ruse. Family ties drove Tramador to

hide the finders' virgin. Hard to fault him there. In point of fact, Grent would entrust Tramador with his very life, which was far more than he could say for the bloodthirsty, ambitious Ramand. Ramand would sell his own ancient wet nurse, his brothers and sisters and their families, for an iota of advancement.

To placate Ramand and his faction, the prince would need to sacrifice Tramador and his family. Grent balked at bringing evil down on good, honest folk caught in an untenable position through no fault of their own. After all, it would have made little difference to King Hashimur if the female Talaria or another were brought to his harem. Now, of course, Grent thanked the universe for Hiliadra coming into his life. Before he met Hiliadra, one female was pretty much interchangeable with another, but Hiliadra changed all that for him. Now he realized what it meant to be attached to one particular female and to be threatened with her loss. If someone were to come along to take Hiliadra from him, Grent would do far worse than Tramador had. Even if that someone was his father.

So though he'd have preferred to search for Hiliadra and rescue her from Melgart's program, or, better yet, to join in it, politics claimed Grent that morning. It was important to show strength and perform with decisive power. So if he weren't going to punish Tramador and his family, Grent would have to find a way to disarm and discredit Ramand.

That was it. Not an easy feat since Ramand led a most powerful faction with roots and connections to other influential groups. Recently there'd been much noise about dissatisfaction with how old ways were falling by the wayside. Ramand and his followers loudly called for a return to traditional ways.

Grent would not have chosen this time for a showdown, but these things did not always arrive when people wanted them. The best way Grent could think of to resolve the Tramador affair was to remove the disloyal opposition--Ramand.

Chapter Five

Melgart found himself warming to Hiliadra more and more. He hadn't enjoyed himself so much working with a female in a donkey's age. Despite his worries about Tramador's ruse bringing disaster down on his friend and possibly on him, despite his misgivings about Hiliadra being such a strange duck, despite his growing certainty that she'd already lain with the prince, which made a mockery of all the preparations and the king's prerogative, Melgart gave himself fully to the oft-repeated process.

"What's in this goat's milk besides goat's milk?" Hiliadra asked, splashing about.

"A mixture of honey and spices," Melgart said. Her skin would be baby soft by the time they finished today. The prince would surely enjoy her tonight, he thought, impatient with and fearful of his ruler's impatience.

"I can't imagine why this works, but it does," Hiliadra said. She always wanted to know the reasons for everything. He'd never before known a female who asked so many questions. She talked so much, she was quickly learning to be fluent in their language. "How much longer do I stay here?"

"Actually it is time for you to come out of this pool. Next you will step into a tub so we can give you your final cleansing of the morning."

"I thought all this bathing would dry my skin. Are you sure it won't?" she asked when she climbed out of the pool. He quickly dried her just enough to get the visible milk from her beautiful skin.

Melgart tried to look stern. "You will see. Smooth, soft skin."

Melgart helped Hiliadra to wash quickly. The morning was running away from them, and they had a long session planned with the chief seamstress before their midday meal. Afterwards they would see the keeper of the jewels to pick those most advantageous for Hiliadra.

* * * *

Heather felt like some sort of Hollywood star getting the super royal treatment, a universe away from her existence as a lowly academic. After her third immersion of the morning--the one meant to cleanse her again, she

and Melgart headed to see some sort of wardrobe mistress. As Heather bought most of her wardrobe from online catalogues, a consult like this was almost as far beyond the pale as a trip to the moon.

However, suddenly she realized she hadn't seen Tramador since early this morning, and she missed him. "Where's Tramador?"

Melgart wanted his assistant to keep a low profile today for a number of reasons. "He had other tasks to complete."

"Of course. I guess there are other matters in the kingdom besides me that need attention." She really must have been going Hollywood to so much see herself at the center of attention.

Heather looked everywhere, trying to take in all the sights as she and Melgart walked to the seamstress's workshop just off the women's quarters. Many women chattered busily in the outer room of the workshop while they completed the various tasks in garment making. Some sewed, others cut. Some embroidered, some sewed pearls and other gems on pieces of fabric of many different colors and types.

Heather would have loved to spend time here, talking with the women, seeing how they worked and what sorts of garments they were fashioning. The moment she and Melgart came into the room, a hushed silence fell upon the women, who promptly began to work with more speed and concentration. Heather wished she could signal them to resume their chatter, but she doubted that she was the one they fell silent for.

Melgart ignored them, hurrying through the room with Heather beside him. As soon as they'd gone through the doorway to what was evidently the chief seamstress's quarters, the chatter resumed.

"Here is the lady Hiliadra, who will be joining the king's harem within the next seven days," Melgart said by way of introduction.

A small, dark-haired woman dressed in orange silk wrapped sari fashion looked at Heather for one moment before bowing. Melgart introduced her as Kamalira, a magician with cloth. At these words, Kamalira smiled. "I'm honored and humbled by your most gracious words, sir."

Melgart waved away the courtesy greeting. "You will have to work faster than ever to provide the lady with sufficient wardrobe to meet His Majesty's needs."

Kamalira bowed again. "We in the workshop always try our best to suit His Majesty."

"Of course you do. Show me what you can start on immediately."

“Very good.” Kamalira studied Heather critically for several long moments and seemed a bit puzzled. “The lady has most unusual color of hair, skin, and eyes.”

Of course. Kamalira would be used to dark-haired, dark-eyed, olive-skinned people. A blue-eyed dark blonde like her was an anomaly in many ways.

Kamalira chewed her lip. Then she seemed to make up her mind about something. “I have a piece of silk, most unusual. A shade of blue that did not seem to suit any of the women in the harem. But perhaps it will be just the thing for the lady.”

“Bring it on,” Melgart growled. “Time is fleeting.”

Despite Melgart’s impatience, Heather could see that Kamalira moved with great deliberation at her own pace. Definitely her own woman. Heather hoped she would get the chance to talk to her, though she suspected that Melgart wasn’t about to leave them alone. Heather remembered once again that she had no idea how long she would be in this place. After all, she still had no idea how she’d arrived here. Chances were excellent she’d be leaving just as precipitously. She began mentally listing everything she wished to accomplish before her time here ran out. She thought longingly of the scroll Melgart had written on before. Did she have any chance of returning to her own time with the scroll she’d possessed so briefly? But most of all, she thought of Grent, and she swallowed hard. She didn’t want to leave him.

Kamalira approached her with a bolt of sky blue silk, a color several shades lighter than Heather’s eyes. Kamalira unfurled a length of the material and held it up under Heather’s chin, a stretch for the tiny woman. “I think this will be perfect for the lady. Sir Melgart, what do you think?”

He looked at her and frowned. “It will do,” he said. “What garment do you propose fashioning from this?”

“A gown for formal presentation. Perhaps also a robe.”

“We don’t want her to have too many garments of the same color. And how will you embellish the gown?”

“What do you think, sir? Some pearls on the skirt?”

“A good start, but it must look opulent.”

Heather actually preferred her clothes fairly plain. She tried to interject her thoughts into the conversation, then quickly realized that her comments and her preferences were of little import here. As with everywhere else in the harem, Melgart ruled.

* * * *

Before Grentoori dealt with Ramand, he wanted to see Tramador and assure him of his family's safety. Grentoori dispatched his most loyal personal guard, Julaco, son of Crimrin, to bring Tramador before him. By the time Julaco returned the prince had worked out what he wanted to say. He signaled Julaco to leave them in privacy.

"My lord." Tramador prostrated himself on the ground in a gesture of full obeisance, far more than the prince demanded from the servants he saw daily.

"Arise, Tramador. Sit with me. Let us have a drink together."

It seemed Tramador could scarcely bring himself to look the prince directly in the eye. Grent tried to think what he could do to put the eunuch at ease. Well, what seemed to be called for was an honest opening. "Tramador, I am here to tell you that I know the tale of Talaria and your kinsman, Obu."

The eunuch grew as pale as the snow on a mountaintop. When he could bring himself to speak, he said, "The blame for all is on my head. I humbly implore that you spare the others and let your just and merited punishment fall solely upon me."

Grent wished he could have spared Tramador the misery that led him to make such a pronouncement. How to convince the man that his offense did not offend? That Grent had no punishment in mind. Rather that he wanted to assure Tramador of his support and learn what he could do to relieve his and his family's anxieties.

Trying to look sympathetic, he simply said, "Perhaps it would be best for you to tell me the whole story before we proceed."

Looking like a cornered beast, Tramador proceeded to tell Grent the story he'd already heard several different versions of. How Obu and Talaria loved each other, how the concubine finders roughly insisted that Talaria leave Obu and accompany them. How they swore to speak and operate with the full authority of the royal house.

Grent winced. Who were these concubine finders? Most importantly, who was telling them they operated with such authority? He'd never granted such powers to any of the concubine finders, and he doubted that his father had. If anything, he warned them not to separate lovers or take females from families they were reluctant to leave. It seemed to him that someone was usurping the royal powers in the worst possible ways, misrepresenting his family and spreading misery. He needed to stop this

abuse before it grew more prevalent. “Who are these concubine finders who took Talaria against her will?” he asked when Tramador paused in his recitation.

The question appeared to surprise Tramador. “I do not know, Your Majesty.”

Grent waved away the other man’s concern. “Do not worry. It will be a small matter to find out exactly who these people are and why they behaved in such a manner, which contradicts my wishes. What is more important right now is for you to know that they lied to you and your family. Heaven knows how many more people they have lied to in the name of the royal family.”

Tramador frowned. “Are you saying that they did not speak for you and your father, His Royal Highness King Hashimur?” he asked in a soft voice.

“Exactly. My father would never have wanted Talaria and Obu to be parted so she could be brought to him. I speak for him and myself when I say I am glad you took action to ensure that they can be together.”

“Your Majesty,” Tramador whispered, bowing his head, apparently overcome with strong emotion. “Your words bring me hope.”

“Tramador, you have served me and my family well and faithfully for many years. My father and I know this, and I know you would not deviate from the standard without the best of reasons.”

The eunuch looked down at his feet.

“Now Tramador, there is one more thing.”

A flicker of alarm crossed his face. “What, Your Majesty? What do you ask of me?”

“What can you tell me of the woman Melgart is now preparing for my father, the one he calls Hiliadra?”

* * * *

Heather had never considered shopping a strenuous sport and could not understand why so many women claimed they shopped ‘til they dropped. Yet a morning spent with Melgart and Kamalira measuring, draping what felt like hundreds of fabrics over her body, and debating about her as if she weren’t there left her hungry, crabby, and ready for a nap.

By the time they left the wardrobe mistress, Kamalira looked like she’d added several worry lines to her forehead. Melgart appeared grimly pleased with himself. “You will have the minimum wardrobe ready in seven days,” he barked as his parting remark.

Kamalira muttered something dark and savage sounding under her breath.

Despite the strife of the encounter, Heather had learned so much. Not to mention how much she'd thrilled at the touch of the silks, the sight of all the colors flashed before her, when Kamalira wasn't painfully prodding her.

For now, Heather left the wardrobe mistress with several generic silks to wear, whites and blacks embroidered with gold that were evidently part of the on-hand stock. Universities and museums from the twenty-first century would kill to have access to such sumptuous garments from this era. The academic in Heather couldn't help speculating on the possibility of taking at least one of the robes home with her. Even though, as Melgart and Kamalira insisted, they were not the optimal colors to enhance her beauty for the king's delectation. Heather tried to avoid thinking about the king. When she thought of the prince, she bit her lip to keep from chuckling. When she and Grent were together, no garments remained on either of them for very long.

"What's next?" Heather asked Melgart.

"Now we will take nourishment. Then you will have a rest prior to our afternoon visit with the jeweler. Afterwards, you will have your first lesson in the dance of love."

Sounded ambitious. Heather had never been one for an afternoon siesta. Even when on assignment in countries where the siesta was the norm, she'd been tempted to take advantage of down time. Here and now, she desperately needed to figure things out, make some plans. With some luck, during her supposed rest time she'd be able to communicate with Prince Grentoori to let him know she was alone.

For their mid-day meal, Melgart led Heather through several chambers out to a garden. With a start she realized she hadn't been outdoors for what felt like ages, and she took a deep breath of the heavily perfumed air. Bushes and trees, highly geometric arrangements of plants filled the garden. Two large plump pillows dominated a path between patches of lavender and chamomile. "We shall sit here."

Heather eased herself down on a gold silk pillow covered with lines of white and black embroidery and got into a cross-legged position. Roses of all colors, hyacinths, lilacs, huge orange lilies. Somewhere close by a bee droned contentedly, sounding almost as lazy in the sunshine as Heather felt.

A serving woman brought out small bowls of water studded with rose petals and lemon slices. Heather followed Melgart in cleansing her hands. The next serving woman brought the honeyed drink they'd had before.

Lunch turned out to be an assortment of chicken and lamb, breads, nuts, grapes and pomegranates. Everything delicious, especially when she was so hungry. They finished their meal with a yogurt type drink flavored with coconut that Heather found refreshing. She still craved coffee, but she'd been away from so-called civilization often enough to be able to do without in a pinch.

When they'd both finished eating, Heather asked, "Is it generally the custom for people to rest after their mid-day meal?"

Melgart laughed dryly. "Only among the noble classes. Everyone else must carry on with their work."

Heather flushed. "Then I shall do the same."

He shook his head. "No. For now, you are considered of the noble class. This is a boon that the royal family extends to every female newly arrived at the harem. Besides which, you will be working very diligently to prepare for the king." He rose from his pillow in a fluid movement surprising for so large a man.

Sure she was far less graceful, Heather scrambled to her feet. He led her back to the chamber where she spent the previous night. She was not at all surprised to find her bedding changed, with fresh white silk sheets beckoning temptingly.

* * * *

Though Prince Grentoori was glad he and Tramador had the opportunity to clear the air, he still felt uneasy. Ramand remained a wild card. In the past, the general had complied less than enthusiastically with the prince's pronouncements. In truth, he'd grown increasingly less cooperative in recent weeks. Grent's instincts warned him that Ramand would not be quickly or easily put off the Tramador affair. He spoke of his misgivings with Belasair, his personal chief of guards. Belasair despised Ramand, an antipathy that was mutual. Grent ordered Belasair to prevent Ramand from taking any action against Tramador.

Nevertheless, a nagging sense of incompleteness continued to dog him. He couldn't have explained why, but he sensed that the lady Hiliadra would be a wonderful adviser for him. Of course a female adviser was unheard of in the kingdom of Indurlia and all the other civilized lands he knew of. Women's wisdom was at best considered of use in the children's schoolroom and in the recesses of the harem. However, in addition to her great beauty and mystery, Hiliadra glowed with intelligence. He cherished her for this above all her other gifts.

With just the thought of speaking to her and hearing her advice, the prince put his spies to the task of locating his new guest. Belasair himself quickly returned to the prince's side with the information that Hiliadra was at rest in her private chamber.

The prince soberly bowed and thanked Belasair. Then secure in the knowledge that Ramand had been sent on a mission two day's journey from the palace and would thus be harmless for the next few days, Prince Grentoori went to disturb her rest. Solely for the purpose of conversation.

Or so he thought, until he saw her lying in her sheets. Hiliadra had her eyes closed and appeared to be slumbering. He knelt down by her side and gently kissed her eyelids, which fluttered open languorously. "Pardon the intrusion, please fair lady," he whispered.

She smiled at him so warmly and tenderly, the prince understood that his lady did not find him at all in need of apologizing.

* * * *

Was she dreaming? If so, she did not want to wake to an alternate reality. As she surfaced from the light sleep she'd fallen into, the prince's dark eyes and luscious mouth loomed before her. Could he really have read her mind and come to her? As she grew more awake, Heather understood that Prince Grentoori was truly with her. She pulled a hand out from under the silk sheet and reached out to touch his handsome face. "Good afternoon, Your Majesty. Or is it evening already?"

He smiled, showing even white teeth. "Still afternoon, my sleepy one. May I join you here for a few moments?"

She sat up, drawing the sheet around her. "Please." She indicated the spot on the bed next to her. In her dream, they'd been making love by the side of a river. However, though her heart still hammered with her arousal, which she was sure he could read in her eyes, the prince-- despite being in her bedchamber with her-- seemed almost detached.

He sat where she showed him, on top of the sheet covering her. He looked like he was about to say something, but leaned over and kissed her deeply on the lips, and Heather's heart melted.

When he broke away from her, his eyes were closed. "Once again I break palace protocol to come to you. Melgart would protest vigorously to know how I am thwarting his plans and the palace protocol."

"Our secret," she said.

"Yes. So many secrets. I wanted to tell you that there appears to be an intrigue centered on Tramador's deception. Ramand, a general who

troubles me despite his sterling reputation, has been agitating to have Tramador punished.”

Heather gasped. She hadn't realized how much the kindly eunuch could be at risk. “But surely as prince, you've put this Ramand in his place.”

“I have ordered him away from the palace on a mission that I hope sufficiently distracts him. But he's shown himself to be wily before. We need to be on guard.” As he said these words, the prince traced Heather's lips with his fingertip, and she shivered.

“Things are never simple, are they?” she asked. He responded with a kiss, tasting her lips with his.

“Some things are,” he whispered, and he kissed her again.

Wonderful as her imagination was, nothing matched the reality of having him there with her. Heather growled low in her throat as she gave herself to the prince's kiss, falling deeper, deeper in his embrace.

He made short work of removing her simple garment. “You are so beautiful,” he breathed, his eyes taking her in.

Heather had never considered herself particularly beautiful before. If anything, she'd taken her looks for granted. She'd been no more invested in the way she looked than aware of the men around her in more than a rudimentary fashion. Still, all that had changed since she met Grentoori. Now she gloried in knowing that her body thrilled him, just as his body made hers sing.

“Your breasts are like two small birds breaking forth from their shells in spring, warm and alive.” Did he realize he spoke in poetic verse? Or was this part of his arsenal of tricks as the prince of the harem, the automatic favorite of every woman? The truth mattered little to her. He was here with her now, and that was all that counted.

Though she was completely naked, he remained fully dressed. She wanted to enjoy his body while he savored hers. Today he was wearing loose white cotton pants and a shirt with a black sash around his waist.

With trembling fingers, she reached over to pull the sash from him. In just a few short moves, it fell to the bed. Next she wanted to pull his shirt over his head. As she gripped the bottom edge, he watched her in bemusement. “Is this the custom in your land?” he asked, smiling.

Did women not undress their men in this kingdom? As Heather gave the matter some thought, she realized the shy virginal types usually presented to the prince would probably sooner jump in front of a speeding

camel than brazenly strip the clothes off their prince. She hesitated for about one moment, one very short moment, when she wondered if her aggressive moves were putting him off.

“Is it not the custom everywhere?” He threw his head back and laughed, a full sound that went to her head like a jolt of her favorite Merlot. “To my misfortune, I have not come across this before.”

Now she was working at the fastening of his pants, which she was gratified to see tented out over a very full and promising erection. He took her hand in his and put it smack dab over the erection, which grew beneath her fingers. “As you can see, I am entranced with you and your actions.”

She pressed hard, and he groaned. This siesta was going to refresh and renew her far beyond Melgart’s expectations and her own.

“Where are you from, my angel?” he asked now, as she removed his pants to reveal his gorgeous, swarthy, buck-naked cock jutting straight up at her.

As much as her mind functioned at all now, which truly wasn’t much, Heather tried to formulate a reasonable response to his quite reasonable question. All she could come up with was, “That’s very difficult for me to explain.”

To be truthful, she didn’t think he was paying complete attention now to what she said. He nuzzled her breasts, licked and nibbled, sucked on her nipples with dizzying attention to the task at hand.

“You are delicious, my pet,” he murmured during one of the few moments when his lips were away from the peaks of her nipples. Heather looked down and saw her nipples glistening in the filtered light of the afternoon sun, casting shadows around them. She ran her fingers through his thick, dark hair, worn long and loose today. Next to Grent, with his desert-roughened olive skin, she appeared pale and almost ethereal. She longed to have him cover her completely with his darkness, to have the two of them merge into one.

“I long to spend time making the slowest, most luxurious love with you,” he murmured. “But alas, this is not possible just yet.”

“Why not?” she whimpered.

“Because Melgart will be here soon for you, for one. But more, because I cannot wait.”

She touched his cock and felt the moisture of his pre-cum.

“Slow and luxurious can be vastly overrated,” she announced, flipping Grent over so that he lay flat on his back. “I cannot wait another moment for

you either.” She was so hot and wet for him, she suspected she’d sizzle the moment he put his cock to the mouth of her pussy.

“You continue to surprise me, my lovely,” he said, his voice so low and husky it brought goose bumps on her arms and beyond.

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” she said in English for she didn’t know the Indurlian equivalent of the expression. So much she had to explain to him about where and when she came from, about English, about....

Too much thinking. Nestling herself in the space between Grent’s hard, muscular thighs, Heather piled several pillows behind him. Then, when he was propped at just the right angle, Heather put her pussy exactly where she wanted it--with Grent’s hard and willing cock at the entrance.

Just a little nudge and he was in. He was about to say something, but she lay down and covered his mouth with her own. Too many sensations. She could have kissed him forever, but he filled her now, so completely, and her need to ride him took precedence over every other sensory delight of being so close to him.

Grent’s hands closed over her butt and drew her so tight to him that no glimmer of sunlight or shadow separated them. Heather rotated her hips, wanting to feel him everywhere inside her, wanting the most complete contact of skin and muscles, smooth to smooth. Grent’s cock was quite large, pleasurably stretching her in ways no previous lover could have matched. Her breath caught as she wondered how she could ever possibly be with another lover after Grent.

Still, she couldn’t let her mind wander in that direction. If ever there was a moment for being in the here and now, this was it. She’d have loved this moment to last forever--and even though it wouldn’t, she would imprint Grent and his cock and the way they were together now in her body and mind--for eternity and beyond.

* * * *

Grent had lost count of how many women he’d been with before, but none had ever come close to being to him and with him what Hiliadra was. Yes, he’d been with skilled whores in addition to the virgins supplied by concubine finders. He’d derived different sorts of pleasure from both kinds of women, but it all paled next to being with Hiliadra. How could this be? Was this woman some sort of sorceress who’d beguiled him with unnatural charms? If so, he was totally and willingly in thrall. Or perhaps, as he suspected, she was in fact a goddess come to earth--a goddess with powers beyond any mere mortal or sorceress.

While he was deep inside her, she grabbed hold of his bollocks and squeezed, sending him into paroxysms of pleasure. He stilled for a moment. When she thrust down like that and squeezed him and kissed him, everything at once overloading his senses, he nearly released and came. But he held on because he didn't want their lovemaking to end so soon. He wanted to make it last, both for the sheer pleasure of being with her, and because one never knew if there'd be another time for them to be together.

Now she took her mouth from his and lowered her lips to take in his nipple. Grent whimpered with the pleasure of her tongue on his flat chest. Was this the type of delight a female felt when he kissed her breasts? With Hiliadra, he was discovering so many new sources of stimulation, ways of giving and receiving the ultimate pleasures that he'd never known before.

Now she pushed herself up from him, digging her hands into his shoulders and swinging her legs around so that she sat with his cock buried deep inside her. She moved her hips, a triumphant smile lighting up her face. He reached up to touch her beautiful face, and she quickly stroked his hand as he caressed her cheek. However, she needed both hands to keep her up where she was, dancing with him deep, deep inside her.

Grent longed to possess this magical woman in every possible sense of the word, though his instincts warned him she was not so easily possessed. Something fundamental about her eluded him, even when they were locked in the most intimate of embraces.

She continued to croon to him in the strange harsh language of her homeland, one he'd never heard before. He tensed as the muscles of her feminine core began to tighten around his cock, caressing him with silken fire over every bit of his organ. Her breathing grew shallow, and the way she moved her head from side to side, he knew she was upon her moment of release. He was perilously close to his own climax, but he bit his lip and exercised every last iota of his will to keep from spilling until she had reached her climax. Though he knew many women were schooled in the art of pretending to surrender to their pleasure, with Hiliadra he knew there was no pretense.

Now she called out words and sounds, some maybe in that language of hers that he couldn't even name yet. With each word she drove him harder, bringing him to the nail biting edge of endurance as she rode him to her last gasp. She shuddered, and, with a sigh, collapsed down upon him.

At last, he could give himself up to the climax that felt like it had been building forever. He had so much for her, so much love, such passion. This

was how he could express it all, in the seed that he would let flow deep, so deep, to the deepest place inside her. There he was. He embraced her with all his strength and let fly with a climax that built from the tips of his toes, his fingers, the top of his head, and the space beyond him. Everything he had and everything he was flowed forth from him, and with a shout of joy and triumph he filled her. Again and again and again.

With a final shudder, at last he was spent. Now he felt a bone curling sense of relief, a relaxation took him over. Both of them sticky with love, they lay embraced in the no longer cool sheets of Hiliadra's couch. Neither said a word. Neither had to. The most perfect understanding seemed to spring up between them like an embrace. He could have lain just as he was forever. Unfortunately, he had far too much calling him away from her side-for now.

"I must go now, my darling one," he whispered, blowing softly over her face.

She stretched like a contented cat sated on the finest cream. "I thought princes could do anything they please."

He laughed and shook his head. "Yet another legend with no roots in reality."

"When will I see you again, Grent?"

"Not soon enough for me. But know that I will be with you as soon and whenever I can."

"Must we continue to sneak around behind Melgart's back?" Hiliadra asked. "You know, he's very smart."

"I know."

"I think he suspects that something's going on."

Grent did not appreciate hearing this, but he believed Hiliadra was correct. "Has Melgart said something?" He rubbed the back of her neck as she spoke, and she purred in response.

"No, not exactly. But his eyes take in everything, you know?"

"Yes, I do."

"I don't think Melgart would ever say anything unless he was a hundred per cent sure. But he processes information, maybe saving it until he's either sure or he has a very good reason for revealing what he knows."

"That sounds like an excellent description of Melgart." Much as he hated to admit it, what Hiliadra said presented all the more reason for Grent to leave her until he could make sure his affairs were going the way he wanted. Very reluctantly, he moved away from her and left the bed.

His clothes lay discarded on the floor a short distance away. She must have tossed them out after she'd taken them off him. His lip curled at the memory. Many memories of this interlude with Hiliadra would sustain him during the rest of the day. And with any good luck, he'd be back with her tonight.

After he'd fastened his black sash around his waist and he looked as he had upon arrival, Grent bent over and kissed Hiliadra one last time. "Until tonight," he said and swept out of the room.

* * * *

With tears in her eyes, Heather watched her lover depart. She touched her fingers to her lips as if to seal away his kiss there.

A sense of disastrous foreboding swept over her, nearly strong enough to undo the languorous pleasure of making love with him. Why did she feel like she'd never again be with him? And what could she do to make sure the intimate lovemaking of the past hour would not be their last time together?

Heather didn't know any answers, but she could no longer lie in this bed alone. Determined that she'd be with the prince again, she arose and got dressed.

Chapter Six

While the lady Hiliadra rested, Melgart kept very busy. Though he was under orders to have the lady ready for the king much faster than usual, for some reason his principal assistant, Tramador, was not available to him today. Though there were other eunuchs he could work with, in this situation, with this very peculiar female to prepare, Melgart did not want to have to rely on any eunuch of lesser ability and experience than Tramador. Damn. The two of them together were a flawless team. Though Melgart could do all the work required himself, he resented having to work so hard.

Things were so peculiar, Melgart for once didn't even know who to complain to. And he didn't have time to straighten things out.

Melgart's spies informed him of Tramador's interview with the prince. Though Melgart had experienced some apprehension, they told him that Tramador looked exceedingly happy and relieved when he left the prince's private quarters. So from that quarter it seemed his friend was not in any danger.

Furthermore, Ramand, who'd lately grown more and more into a thorn in Melgart's side, had evidently been dispatched on some mission that would keep him away from the palace for several days. This was even more good news. With Ramand gone, it was like a poison polluting the atmosphere had been dissipated. At least for now. All of Melgart's instincts warned that Ramand was going to be big trouble in the palace before too long. Though Melgart had successfully guarded his own neck and protected his little base of power over the years, Ramand posed the most significant threat he'd ever known.

Perhaps the time had come when he had to take Ramand's threat seriously and do something to stop him. Melgart only hoped it wasn't already too late.

When Melgart summoned a slave woman to go to rouse Hiliadra from her afternoon's rest, to his dismay and shock he learned the lady was already up and about. Damn, but he'd never seen a female who found it so difficult to follow his directives and the simple schedule he laid out for her.

Now she came to him with the sheet of her bed draped over the simple silk garment she'd worn for her rest. "I'd really like to wear some of the real clothes Kamalira sent with me this morning."

"Why?" He wondered what crazy idea was animating her now.

"Seeing as I'm going to meet with the jeweler this afternoon, I should look a little more dignified than I do in these sheer numbers."

Melgart took a good look and a good whiff of the lady. Once again, he had to admit she looked and smelled like she'd just spent an hour in her lover's arms. "I assure you the jeweler will not be in the slightest put off by your sleep garment." But the eunuch jeweler would notice the smell of sex that permeated the cloth. Though it would make them late, Melgart insisted that she bathe again, just a quick one for cleansing and, though he wouldn't say it, the banishment of scents. "It is a simple matter for you to change garments. First, however, a bath."

"My fourth of the day." She sounded like she was mocking him.

"You are a prodigious counter," he said, half bowing.

"Are so many baths usual?"

He chuckled. "For such an unusual lady as yourself, why would you expect anything to be usual?"

She said something in another language that sounded like, "Touché."

Melgart really did want them to have maximum time with the jeweler, who needed to get a start on fashioning the gems and baubles the lady would need. Nonetheless, he escorted her to a pool where she took a quick cleansing bath. Afterwards, she put on one of the least embellished, most opaque garments, made of black silk. At her insistence, she brushed her own hair and fashioned it into a topknot. Despite Kamalira's misgivings about the color, Melgart thought the lady Hiliadra looked quite lovely.

* * * *

The creams Melgart and the various serving women had been rubbing into her skin must have been doing the trick. Heather was pleased that, despite all the baths and the desert climate, her usually dry skin felt luxurious and silky.

After she'd bathed and put on the black garment with white embroidery that Kamalira gave her that morning, Heather felt more dignified than at any time since arriving. Though she suspected the jeweler would be either a eunuch--the only "real" man she'd encountered was the prince--she still preferred to dress in a way that left something to the imagination.

She didn't find the jeweler, another eunuch as expected, nearly as

simpatico as Melgart and Tramador. Funny how she'd grown accustomed to knowing which men were eunuchs. Not all had the stereotypical voices and mannerisms she'd imagined from her studies, but they were unmistakable. Straight men had a particular aura, gay men a different one. The eunuchs' aura was something else entirely.

This eunuch, named Ucreeno, son of Ustinal, was large, dark eyed and dark haired, wearing a peculiar version of what must have been eyeglasses. Something about him set Heather's teeth on edge, though she wasn't quite sure what. He couldn't seem to wipe a supercilious smirk off his face, as if he knew some nasty secret about her. Most of all, it was his grating, whiny voice that had Heather fervently hoping this man would not touch her in the course of his services. If he did, she'd be the one insisting on yet another bath.

"The king commands that you furnish the lady Hiliadra with an initial outfitting of jewels within the seven-days coming," Melgart intoned.

Ucreeno, always smirking, half bowed. Heather couldn't believe anyone as sharp as Melgart would be taken in by the other eunuch's imitation of humility and compliance. Melgart, to her surprise, played it straight.

"I am sure the king realizes that artistry such as my workshop is famed for cannot be rushed," Ucreeno said. Heather cringed as he measured the base of her neck with thick fingers and kept staring at her.

"Divert all your workers to prepare the jewels for this lady," Melgart said. Though he kept his voice low, Heather could hear the full authority behind his commands.

Ucreeno held his palms together and bowed again. "We will do our humble best, as always."

Melgart raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. "Show us the gems and precious metals you will use for the lady Hiliadra."

"Very well. Please be seated." He indicated a bank of plump purple velvet pillows. Melgart led Heather over to them and indicated that she should sit. He remained standing, which she'd have preferred to do too, but for some reason he wanted her seated.

Ucreeno planned to use gold as the primary metal for Heather, claiming it suited her much better than silver. Melgart grunted assent. What followed was a stunning display of pearls in white and black, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, diamonds, topazes, opals, and other stones Heather was less familiar with. She'd never been one to go in for jewelry, but now she

began to understand the impulse that led people to devote their lives to the pursuit of precious stones and metals.

Distasteful as she found Ucreeno as a person, she had to admire his expertise and deep knowledge about the jewels and how to design pieces that would maximize their impact. Of course she had to remind herself that the jewelry was all part of the fantasy she found herself in. None of this could ever be part of her real life, to which she'd surely return sometime soon. Still, for now, she could enjoy it.

One sapphire especially snagged her. The sparkling blue startlingly matched the color of her eyes, and she began to understand the emotion of craving ownership. Though she didn't believe possession of such a stone would transform her life, make her more beautiful or special, given the choice she'd prefer to take it home with her. She'd love to spend time looking at the stone, cut so that the light emanated from it like from a sun in a tiny solar system. Though a cool blue, the sapphire felt warm in her hand and as she held it against the base of her throat. Heather smiled to herself as she imagined the prince's touch on this precious jewel suspended from a fine chain to nestle at the sensitive spot.

As Ucreeno demonstrated different arrangements of the stones and gold, Heather's imagination wandered. She pictured herself on a warm, sandy beach at the coast of a sea, running hand in hand with Prince Grentoori, both of them laughing as the gulls circled overhead.

Grent wore the unmistakable colors and cutlass of a pirate, and Heather knew he was leading her to unearth a huge chest filled with plundered treasure. Together the two of them would pull out strings of pearls, gold necklaces, ear ornaments heavy with precious jewels, and sacs of uncut gems. They found the spot where Grent was sure the chest lay and, using a heavy shovel, he began to dig while Heather exhorted him to work quickly.

Far sooner than she'd have expected, his shovel hit the top of the chest. Though he insisted he could hoist it up without her help, Heather couldn't just stand idly by. Between the two of them, they soon had the chest out of its hole and open. They stood back for just a moment admiring the glow of the treasures before giving in to the impulse to plunge their hands in and grab up fistfuls of precious gems.

Grent would have just flung the beautiful strings of pearls, the brooches and bracelets and ear fobs about, but Heather, after an initial wildness, urged some restraint. His dark eyes now glittering more than the

jewels, Grent wound a long string of pearls round her neck. While she fingered each pearl, he took another long rope and put it round both their waists, drawing them tight together. She could feel his huge erection prodding her through the thin brown leather of his breeches. "I have an even bigger treasure for you here, my pet," he growled. The two of them fell together in the sand with the sun high above and the waves lapping at the edge of the beach.

"My lady," Melgart said, sounding exasperated. "We must choose which of the designs Ucreeno's workers should finish the earliest."

Feeling slightly embarrassed that she'd let her mind wander so far off base, Heather brought herself back to the present. "Definitely a long string of pearls," she said dreamily.

Melgart looked surprised. "I thought my lady felt a special attachment to the large blue sapphire."

Of course. "Yes. A necklace of gold featuring the large blue sapphire. Would it be possible to have the string of pearls also?"

Ucreeno cleared his throat. "As my lady wishes. I trust you will be more than pleased with the jewels we will furnish you."

Heather inclined her head. She had to admit she was already pleased with the effect the jewels had on her. Still feeling a bit lost in space, she joined Melgart in taking leave of Ucreeno and followed him back to his quarters.

* * * *

Prince Grentoori indicated the nervous-looking messenger could appear before him and speak his piece.

"The eunuch Tramador has been reported absent from his post," the messenger announced and swallowed hard.

This surprised the prince. After their interview this morning, Grent was sure Tramador would continue more solid and faithful than ever in fulfilling his assigned duties. "How long has he been gone?"

"No one knows. He never reported for his afternoon duties."

Very strange. Well, Grent would soon get to the bottom of this. He looked over at the messenger and was set to dismiss him, but the young man appeared to have more to say. "Is there more?"

"It has also been reported that the lady Talaria has disappeared along with the eunuch Tramador's cousin Obu and members of their families."

The prince sharply inhaled. Suddenly the problem at hand loomed much larger than Tramador not reporting in for duty. "When and how did

this situation come to light, and what is being done?”

“The general Ramand reported these disappearances in his daily dispatch from his current mission,” the messenger said. “He has ordered his men to follow any trails left by these people, but so far none of them have been located.”

Ramand. Grent recognized the general’s mark on the whole situation. Ramand was notorious for causing people to disappear, and having them resurface only when it best suited him. Grent had to face the reality that Tramador and his family were now Ramand’s prisoners. Still, an even greater problem loomed. What did Ramand’s perfidy imply for the kingdom and for Grent’s possible future with the lady Hiliadra?

* * * *

Still feeling somewhat in a daze, Heather went with Melgart to their next appointment.

“Now you will have your first lesson in dancing for the king,” Melgart announced.

Heather loved to dance, getting out on the floor and boogying to the music whenever her crammed schedule would allow. After all the eating and bathing and resting, she felt in major need of some physical exercise aside from her bedroom gymnastics with the prince. But she wasn’t quite sure if she liked the sound of dancing for the king. To her, it smacked of more harem exploitation.

With another self-admonition to keep an open mind, Heather settled down on a gold silk pillow with Melgart seated beside her. Only then did she become aware of the subtle beating of a drum accompanied by what sounded a lot like flute music. Two eunuch musicians sat in the shadows of large plants in the corner of the open room. A tall fleshy woman with long hennaed hair danced into the room in time to the music. She wore a midriff baring top of gold silk and, riding low on her ample hips, a gold silk version of a Hawaiian grass skirt. Several strings of beads hung round her neck, and bands of golden coins encircled her hips, wrists, and ankles, with one circlet adorning her head.

Though she’d never been much of a fan of belly dancing and didn’t think she’d ever be able to duplicate the woman’s sinuous moves, Heather grudgingly admired the dancer’s obvious control of her muscles and her rhythmic interpretation of the music’s insistent beat. She grew moist at the thought of performing in such a way for the prince, who would no doubt be panting for her after she executed a few hip rolls.

The woman, whose name was Avelina, performed one long dance, and then Melgart indicated that Heather should rise. “Now Avelina will teach you.”

Heather’s eyebrows shot up. “I don’t think I will be able to learn.” She smiled at the woman to make clear she didn’t imply any criticism. “This kind of dance is a special art.”

Avelina, so bold in her dances, kept her eyes downcast. Still, when she heard the compliment, she looked up and smiled. She quickly looked down again.

“Avelina is a gifted teacher in addition to her skill as a dancer,” Melgart said. “For the rest, we realize you will be only beginning right now. To dance like Avelina takes much long practice, far more than you have time for. Even so, you can start to learn.”

Curious, Heather stood next to Avelina. Avelina shook her head. “Sir, the lady’s garment is not suitable for dance.”

Melgart looked Heather up and down. “I agree. But we must accomplish what we can in very limited time. Teach her what you can now. We will bring refinements later, as we can.”

Avelina bowed her head. She took Heather by the hand and stood opposite her. “First you must place your consciousness in your belly,” she said. Though Avelina’s Indurlian was fairly fluent, Heather could tell she spoke with what sounded like a foreign accent. Heather wondered where this woman, an alien here like her, came from. Wherever that might have been, Avelina appeared accustomed to being part of the court. A shiver passed through Heather. Would she also be in this place for a long time? Perhaps forever? Delightful as she found this interval, Heather would never consider this time and place home. Though having to leave the prince behind would certainly be an argument for remaining here.

Avelina gently insisted that Heather focus. Belly dance required total concentration. She tried to follow Avelina’s lead and really pay attention to her middle, a spot she’d ignored for most of her thirty years. When Avelina seemed reasonably convinced that Heather’s head was where it should be, she modeled a hip rotation and indicated that Heather should imitate. Looked easy enough. Heather swiveled her hips, and though Avelina nodded encouragingly, Heather felt her movement more resembled a clunk than a glide.

Heather tried harder, and Avelina appeared relieved. Quite a workout. After Heather had rolled her hips to Avelina’s satisfaction several times, the

dancer modeled stepping forward and backward while moving the hips. Though Heather felt anything but sexy, she worked hard to coordinate the movement of her hips and her feet. She practiced the same movements over and over, bringing new meaning to the term *perfectionist*. She was more than ready to quit and rest several times, but both Avelina and Melgart insisted that she keep repeating.

When Heather had the basic moves down, Melgart signaled for the musicians to resume. At his directives, the musicians varied the rhythms from fast flurries to slow and languid. With Avelina modeling by her side, Heather soon found, to her surprise, that she was able to adjust her dance steps and vary them to fit the changing music.

Just when she began to feel confident, almost complacent, that she could dance for the prince, Avelina stopped her and said, "Now we will include the hands and arms, which make the dance especially sensuous." Until now, Heather's arms had dangled at her side, which suited her just fine. Having to think about her arms seemed one element too many to coordinate.

When she protested, Avelina pointed out, "The hands carry special importance for the dancer's story telling, the way the dancer can express emotion."

The thought of being able to find one more mode of body communication with the prince convinced Heather. Following her leader, Heather began to combine her arm movements with the swing of her hips and the steps of her legs. She was glad there was no mirror in the room, for in the absence of proof, she could picture herself moving as smoothly and seductively as Avelina. Heather experienced a moment's jealousy, wondering if Avelina ever danced for Prince Grentoori. Then Heather thought of all the women who'd probably danced for him since he was a little boy. Of course she quickly realized that if she was going to give in to jealousy, she could find a hundred occasions and reasons to do so. Then the memory of what the two of them had felt together, just as recently as midday, persuaded her to let go of any twinges of jealousy and put her mind to more productive pastimes.

Melgart watched her in silence. By the time Heather had begun to feel reasonably confident that she didn't look completely grotesque when she moved, he clapped his hands to indicate the end of the lesson. "You've done well for a first lesson," he said. Avelina and the musicians bowed. "We will gather tomorrow for the next one."

Heather caught a glimpse of a future that Melgart took for granted

included her. Despite the comfort she felt in this setting, the image of all of them reassembling in this same place the next day filled her with foreboding. Though she couldn't have said why, from somewhere deep in her bones, she knew she would not be here again, in this place, with these people. She needed to find her way back to her own time in the universe. But she had even less of a clue about how to go home than she did about how to belly dance.

An image floated before her mind, just beyond the point of recognition. There was a key for her, a way back. The hazy image clarified for one moment, and she made out the scroll she'd last seen in Melgart's hands. The scroll, like the one she'd been studying before she arrived here.

"We will now have our evening meal," Melgart said. "And then your bath and beauty treatment before you retire."

Heather smiled. Food, which she'd finally moved enough to build up an appetite for. Then tonight's bath, with whatever surprises that would include, and last, but far from least, her chambers and her bed. The place where she and Prince Grentoori could be alone together at last.

Surely he'd come to her tonight. He had to.

* * * *

The lady Hiliadra took to the dance surprisingly well. Melgart was pleased, or he would have been, had all his instincts not cried out loud and clear that he and all those he cared about were perched at the lip of a deep and rocky abyss. Mere inches of shaky terrain saved them from a plunge to total destruction.

He'd spent the day holding life together as best he knew how, through order, discipline, and structure. He sensed there was something else, something he could barely fathom, that he should be doing. As a eunuch, he realized how very limited his powers in the world of men actually were. Not for him the battles of warriors, the weapons that could destroy with one swing. Furthermore, he was a builder, not a demolisher.

So he continued as he best knew how. Even though Tramador was gone without a word. Melgart knew his old friend and faithful second would never disappear like that ... willingly. Something was definitely wrong. Though he'd have been unhappy to think Tramador's disappearance was the doing of the prince or the royal family, somehow this would be understandable. After all, Tramador had committed a transgression.

Still, icy fingers of fear gripped Melgart, and he couldn't completely shake them off. Whatever was going on with Tramador, the prince and the

royal family were not the source, which made his absence all the more sinister.

Though not an optimist by nature, Melgart had to carry on as if he believed his actions would have desired outcomes. As preparing Hiliadra for the king was now his main duty, he followed the usual program impeccably. If only the lady had arrived by the usual means, Melgart would have been more than pleased with her progress. Even though the female was far older than most he'd worked with, she'd shown herself adept at learning the belly dance. As things were, her unusual arrival only added to his personal unease.

Melgart was determined not to communicate his misgivings and worries to the lady. After all, females--even one of such quick wit as the lady Hiliadra--were not designed to carry such burdens.

Tonight she appeared to eat with more gusto than previously. Certainly she attacked the evening's repast--a soup made from chicken, a dish of rice with nuts and dried fruits, and a pastry studded with pistachios--with a greater appetite than he.

"So Melgart, what is tonight's beauty treatment?"

"We must soften your feet and attend to the nails of both hands and feet. Also your hair."

"What's wrong with my hair?" She looked affronted.

Melgart shook his head. "Nothing. But a new style, perhaps. Some beautifying oils to raise the shine. We would like to braid your hair with a few enhancing ornaments."

"All of that tonight? What will that leave for the rest of the week?"

How little she knew. "Do not worry yourself. We will find many ways to beautify you over the week. By the time you are formally presented to the king, you will know many ways to direct the slaves on how to prepare you."

Now why did what he said make her look so sad? Despite the fact that he liked this female very much, Melgart could never bring himself to ask her such a personal question. Just as he had many secrets about himself that he would never willingly share, he respected that others--even females--felt the same.

With an air of melancholy and finality, he led her through the evening's activities and saw her off to her chamber for her night's rest.

Chapter Seven

By the time Heather finished her bath, she felt that the attending servants had paid attention to every square millimeter of her body. They'd cut, buffed, and colored her nails, both on her hands and feet, a deep wine red. They'd applied a pumice stone--hard--to the soles of her feet, the tips of her elbows, and a few other choice spots deemed less soft to the touch than optimal. Of course she'd been bathed and creamed to an inch of her life. Her hair--washed, oiled, curled, and braided with multi-colored beads--framed her face like a dazzling crown. Never one for so much girly-girly enhancement, Heather found that she would miss spending time this way and wondered how to include facials and marathon beauty treatments in the busy life of a rising academic.

Tonight she would have to figure out a way to go home. As she soaked in the pool and enjoyed the ministrations of the women working on her, Heather kept focusing on how to get the scroll back from Melgart. She couldn't just straightforwardly ask him to give her the scroll. After all, did women in this culture even know how to read let alone write? How freaked out would he be by her request? He already seemed tense and not quite right.

Though Melgart had expected her to get right into her bed, Heather paced around her quarters as she thought. She'd just resolved that tonight she'd tell Prince Grentoori what she could of her story and ask his help in getting back to her time when she heard his footsteps in the corridor outside her quarters.

* * * *

Grent should be a long distance from the palace, but he could not leave without seeing the lady Hiliadra once more. Already dressed for travel, he let himself into her quarters. Fully expecting to see her snug in her bed, he was surprised that she was up and about, fully dressed.

They ran to each other's arms for an embrace. He kissed her, and then broke away so he could deliver his urgent message. "I must flee from here tonight," he said without preamble.

The lady looked at him in shock and disbelief. "But why? What has happened?"

"Far too much to explain now. News has come that the general Ramand has rallied troops to capture the royal family and usurp the government. I must gather forces to combat him."

She gasped. "How terrible."

He touched her face to reassure her. "You will be quite safe here. And I will return to you as soon as I can, once I've dispatched Ramand."

"No," she said most vehemently. "Don't leave me."

Grent's head spun with the strangeness of the situation in which he now found himself and the woman he loved. "I must, dearest. But I will return for you."

"You don't understand," she said. "There is so much you don't understand, and I must explain. Take me with you now, or we will be apart forever."

The prince couldn't begin to understand what she was saying or why she was acting so strangely, but he couldn't risk losing her. So though he once again flew in the face of every tradition by doing so, he agreed. "We must hurry. You can take little with you."

"I can leave everything behind, but one thing. I must have Melgart's scroll."

The whole encounter with her was growing more and more curious. "Melgart's scroll?" He nearly laughed at the absurdity of her request.

"Please," she pleaded. "I will explain. But we must take Melgart's scroll."

"Very well, my lady." Holding her hand, he tried not to be concerned about the rapid passage of time as he rushed through the darkened quarters to the room where Melgart kept his careful records. He opened a cabinet door and indicated layer upon layer of scrolls. There had to be several hundred of them, each neatly rolled and banded in a ribbon. "Which one do you want?"

The lady seemed undecided for a moment. Then she pointed to one scroll lying on top of all the others. "That one," she said, her voice quavering.

Sorry for the distress Grent knew Melgart would feel when he discovered a missing scroll, Grent nonetheless picked up the item and gave it to his lady to carry. "This is what you want?"

She looked enormously relieved and nodded. Well if anything in their

impetuous trip could bring her relief, Grent would agree to it. Only the heavens knew how they would end up. He'd considered Ramand a formidable foe before. The general's latest foray proved him to be a most dangerous enemy. "Very well. Then let's go. We must make haste." He grabbed her hand and together they ran to the royal stables.

Though he'd be able to travel faster on horseback, Grent couldn't risk being so exposed. Therefore he and the lady would travel in a covered carriage, from which his stable slaves had removed the royal insignia and colors. Harnessed to his fastest horses with his best drivers, Grent figured they'd arrive at his ally's palace almost as quickly in this conveyance as he could riding alone. Especially because four horses working together had far great endurance than one ridden hard through the night.

Besides which, he could not have borne to leave the lady behind after all, especially after she told him what she foresaw. He'd never expected any female to mean so much to him as this one did.

When they were en-route, he held her close to him and began to talk. "The general Ramand, who has long nurtured ambitions to rise beyond his rank, has seized on Tramador's transgression as a pretext to move." Grent felt relieved that he could freely confide in her the most intimate matters.

"But why does the general feel he can rise beyond where he is?"

"You see, Ramand is the son my father's younger brother had with a foreigner."

The lady winced at that description. Grent realized it applied to her too and wished he could take back his words.

"And his mother being a foreigner makes him illegitimate?"

Grent nodded. "Only the children of particular royal unions are recognized as heirs. Ramand, the product of an illegal union, has made a point of holding me and the royal family to every last nuance and letter of the law. In Tramador's act, he has seen an opportunity to press his point. Even worse, he threatens to reveal that I have diverted you from preparations to be with my father. Heaven only knows how he learned this. I must admit, unfortunately, Ramand has a significant number of followers."

"But what do you think has happened to Tramador?"

"I shudder for him," Grent said. "We know that Ramand and his men have captured the whole family. I am less than hopeful for their safety. Ramand might have tortured Tramador and thus learned of us...."

The lady buried her face in his chest. "It's only because of Tramador that we were able to be together," she said at last.

“And that is only one reason why I am grateful to him. If I cannot save Tramador and his family, I plan to avenge them.”

Grent stroked the lady Hiliadra’s hair and inhaled the floral scent she’d been perfumed with. His cock stirred, and he shifted on his seat. Even now, he longed to make love to her. “Now you know what is happening up to this very moment. Tell me what your story is, my lady Hiliadra,” he said. “Why did you insist on coming with me? And why must we take one of poor Melgart’s scrolls?”

She pressed herself against him, and he could sense her need. “To begin with, my name is Heather,” she said.

“Heather,” he repeated, straining to pronounce her name exactly the way she did.

* * * *

Heather loved hearing the way he said her name. Of course, she loved everything about the way he did everything. If she lived one hundred lifetimes, she didn’t think she could ever forget the way he looked when he came to her quarters to tell her he was leaving. Or the way he looked when she insisted that he take her with him.

Now that he’d told her about Ramand and what may have happened to Tramador, suddenly she felt like everything was falling weirdly into place. As if things were beginning to make a strange sort of sense.

But even compared to Grent’s story, hers seemed beyond belief. Nevertheless, she needed to tell him. She’d need him to help her get back home and, God help her, she hoped to hell he’d be coming with her.

“I think you and Melgart and the others all sensed that I come from another land,” she started.

“Yes,” he said. “No one is quite sure which one, and you have not told us.”

Heather smiled, wondering what Grent and the others would make of her coming from the state of Ohio in the United States. “I grew up in the city of Toledo.”

“From the lands of the Spanish royal family?”

“No. My Toledo is in a country you have never yet heard word of.”

“I know of many lands,” he said.

“Not this one.”

“We can speak of this later, and I will prove to you that I do know. For now, please continue.”

“Not only do I come from a different place, I also come from a

different time.”

Grent’s eyes grew wide, and Heather suspected that he was biting back a laugh. A hint of sympathy flickered in his eyes, as if he thought she was mad. “This is not possible.”

Until a short time ago, she’d have agreed wholeheartedly with him. Travel through time like through space? Yet here she was somewhere in the sixteenth century with the most wonderful man ever. “I know this is difficult for you to believe. How can I prove what I am saying?”

“When is this time you say you come from?” With his eyes he pleaded with her to give him something to believe in.

“The twenty-first century.”

He shook his head. “I cannot believe this. Tell me something about this twenty-first century, something that is different from the time in which we are now.”

There was so much different, Heather almost didn’t know where to begin. Then she realized she should demonstrate something that was at hand, available to her. So she said, “In my time, most women can read and write.”

He shook his head. “Prove this to me.”

Easily done. She unrolled the scroll they’d taken from Melgart and she read to him the eunuch’s account of his plans to prepare the lady Talaria for the harem of King Hashimur. Realizing this was just what Melgart and Tramador had been involved with before her arrival, Heather’s eyes filled with tears. Was this the scroll she’d been reading in her own time before she landed here?

Grent’s eyes flew open, first with surprise then a look of cunning. “A trick. You have learned what the scroll says and are now telling me, merely acting as if you are reading the words. Everyone knows that women are incapable of learning how to read and write.”

Several emotions battled to take hold of Heather. Fear that their current situation would lead to disaster. Overwhelming attraction to the man enclosed in a small space with her. Disappointment that he’d believe her capable of trying to lie to him so monstrously, at such a time. Heather took a deep breath, collecting herself carefully before responding. “How can I prove to you, dear prince, that I am speaking the truth?”

Now he thought for several moments. “I have never known another woman to be able to read. Next you will tell me that you can write too.”

“I can. But tell me, how do you think I managed to read that passage

about the lady Talaria?”

“Someone read it to you, and you learned to say the words in the exact order.”

“Who would have read this to me and planned such a trick with me?”

Now he appeared wary. “I don’t know. Perhaps you can explain.”

“Dear Grentoori, I am not in league with anyone who would try to fool you or harm you. The truth is, I really know how to read the words as they are written. In my time, most women can read. Some even write whole books.”

This apparently did little to convince him.

Finally, Heather asked, “Would you believe me if I read from a different place in the scroll? One that you pick?”

Grent considered her offer. “Yes, try this. I realize that even a well-accomplished deceiver would not be able to commit the whole scroll to memory.”

Heather decided not to point out that actors memorized whole scripts all the time. Why undermine her position with a fact that would do little to advance matters? Grent rolled the scroll to a section far distant from the one where she’d read and pointed to a densely written section. “Try this one.”

Heather read the section Grent chose. This dealt with the delivery of a variety of merchant goods from Africa. “The tradesman Mazadrox has sent the tusks of ten elephants and says it will take two more months before he can supply the additional eight tusks requested. Payment should be withheld until all the tusks ordered arrive safely.”. Wanting to see if Grent required more proof of her ability, Heather looked up at the end of the passage.

“This is too much to take in,” Grent said softly. “You are so beautiful and lovely. I knew you were of exceptional wit and intelligence, but you know how to read also. I no longer doubt you on that.”

“But you still can’t believe that I come from another time?”

“I would rather believe that than think you are in collusion with my enemies, trying to use deception to bring further harm to me and the royal family.”

“That’s a start,” Heather said, allowing herself now to snuggle tighter against Grent. She was more than ever conscious of the shakes and rattles of their ride. The carriage was sumptuous, furnished with soft pillows of gold silk and velvet that went a long way to making their ride comfortable. The horses galloped quickly and steadily into the night, providing probably the smoothest ride possible, which was not terribly smooth at all.

Grent drew her tight into his embrace and lowered his lips onto hers. Heather didn't know if the accelerated beat of her heart came from her fear of the whole developing situation, Grent's nearness, or the two combined.

"When you are with me, when I kiss you, I cannot believe there are any secrets between us. But my lady Heather, why have you come here?" he asked at last.

"Even I do not understand it all," she admitted. "In my time, I work at a university."

"Indeed? Women do not attend university here, not as students or as workers. Very few men do."

"I know. That is another of the ways my world differs from yours." He stroked her arm now, raising goose bumps of desire that flared out from her middle. "I came to your land to study your culture, and I discovered a scroll like the one Melgart was writing. I was reading when there was some sort of disturbance. And then I found myself in the quarters with Melgart and Tramador."

"This story amazes me," he said, never stopping the hypnotic movement of his hand.

"I do not know the exact mechanism of how I arrived here. And, most of all, I don't know how or when I will leave."

Grent stiffened. "You choose to leave me?"

"No." Her voice cracked. "But just as I didn't choose to arrive, so I will probably not have any choice of when and how I leave." She laughed harshly. "I don't even know if I will be returned to my own time. Perhaps the mechanism that brought me here will pick me up and take me to some era different than the one I came from."

"But I must stay here to keep my people safe from Ramand and other enemies. Yet I long not to part from you."

"Oh, I shall not willingly part from you either, Your Majesty." Heather now lost herself completely in his kiss, wishing with some desperation that he could keep her by his side with his embrace and the sheer power of their mutual desire.

* * * *

The horses drew them on through the vast night. Grent, filled with concern about Ramand's attempted coup and what it could possibly portend for the royal family and the entire kingdom, could not let go of this female. Now she came to him with some preposterous tale of being from another time. Insane as she sounded, Grent couldn't shake her story or get her to

change it. Nor could he convince himself that she was telling the truth--or at the least what she understood to be the truth.

Now, impelled on by the urgency of their dire situation and his own staggering desire, he had to have this woman. Here, in a carriage speeding to rescue the royal family and perhaps Tramador from the perfidious grasp of the damned Ramand.

As the carriage jostled them both from side to side, his cock grew full. Loving her was the only way he knew how to show this woman the riot of feelings she awoke in him. No matter how many hundreds of women were his at the blink of an eye or a crook of a finger, no one had ever affected his senses as she did. And no one else ever would. He longed to sink his aching cock deep in her and just remain with her, the two of them joined to eternity and beyond.

He tilted her face up to his and gazed at her for a moment. Then he traced his fingers down from her forehead, over her nose and cheeks, her lips, her chin. Let his fingers commit her beloved features to this memory, to his soul, so that if they were now parted, she'd remain with him no matter where he went in this world--or the next.

Her mouth, lips sweet and red like fruit begging to be devoured, drew him. She opened to him, and he slid his tongue into the cinnamon and mint flavor of her mouth. Tooth against tooth, tongue dancing with tongue, he could tell her so much more this way than with mere words. No matter where she said she came from, this world or another, their mouths meshed as if they'd been fated for each other from the moment of creation.

The carriage swerved, thrusting his body against hers. He moaned at the momentary connection of his hard cock to her softness, and he could wait no longer to be naked with her, intimately joined. Nowhere to stretch in this carriage, but they would find a way. "My darling, my beloved pet," he crooned to her. "Let me love you now, while we are together. Once we arrive at our destination, we may be separated. Though we will be together as soon and as much as I can possibly make this be."

She ate him up with her eyes. Without saying a word, she began to pull off the garments forming a barrier between them. "I am here for you, with you," she said, her voice low and husky to his ears. He drew off his garments and held her to him, the feel of her skin against his raising him to a fevered pitch of need.

* * * *

Heather's mind stopped working. All she knew was her

overwhelming desire and need for this man. She clung to him, savoring the warmth and energy of his touch. If only she could take him in completely. His scent, the musk of his arousal. The ripple of his muscles as he held her to him. Now she straddled him as he sat on the pillowed seat of the speeding carriage. The bottoms of her thighs grazed the tops of his strong, firm legs, now heating her up to an unbearable pitch. His magnificent cock, jutting forth proudly from the vee between his legs, prodded her lower belly.

They'd have to manipulate themselves into just the right position for his cock to slide into her hungry, moist pussy--so ready for him. With his big strong hands guiding her hips, Heather pulled away from him so she could return to the exactly right position for him to come into her and fill her with all she could ever wish for. Fortunately, she was so wet, the moment he touched his cock to her he would slide right in.

Grent had to splay his legs and position himself at the edge of the seat so he'd be at the best angle for their union. Heather moaned as Grent seated himself between her open thighs, so his rod could nudge open the slick folds of her pussy. Then she lowered herself onto him, surrounding his hips with her knees. Ecstasy.

Grent placed his hands on her butt and began to nuzzle her breasts. Heather's nipples beaded into two tight buds at the touch of his tongue, his lips and teeth on her sensitive skin. "My prince," she groaned, caught up in the flood of sensation between his face at her breasts, his cock in her pussy, his hands on her ass, and his skin touching hers in so many places.

The steady rhythm of the moving carriage rocked them back and forth. Grent moaned, and Heather sensed that he wanted to move harder and faster than the rhythm of the carriage's rocking. She wanted that too, but she also wanted this moment, this lovemaking to last. Both of them were so close to the edge, just the added sensation of speeding up the smallest bit would have them climaxing to raise the roof--and the moment would come to an end.

Heather clutched Grent in her determination never to let him go. Her pussy muscles clutched at his cock for its whole length, and he caressed every drop of her aroused sheath. His slightest move set off ripples of reaction in her folds and her engorged clit, and she wriggled to close whatever possible small distance there might be between them. To her amazement, Grent grew ever larger in her, finally giving in to his impulse to move.

She could no longer hold back. Supported and helped by his big

hands, she thrust her hips forward, exposing even more of herself to his magic touch. The two of them worked the carriage's rhythm into their own. Soon, far too soon, Heather was seeing flashes of light and stars, and she knew she'd be coming. No force on earth could stop that.

"Grent," she called out as her toe-curling climax reached up and out through her, setting her off to shudder and shake with the strength of her emotion and her total body satisfaction.

He called out some incoherent syllables in a language she wasn't at all sure she could ever identify. As he spasmed, emptying himself into her, Heather saw a huge flash of light. Rather she became one with the flash of light, a tremor worthy of a 6.0 earthquake, and then she spiraled down into blackness.

Chapter Eight

Heather awoke cold and stiff, clutching a scroll and surrounded by sand in one of the chambers her team was studying. “What the hell?” she asked, feeling disoriented and, somehow, bereft.

She looked down at herself and felt vaguely surprised to be wearing the same plain cotton clothes she usually wore for working at dig sites. Admittedly she looked very rumpled, definitely the worse for wear. Like she needed to go through a cycle at a Laundromat, both for herself and her clothing.

Why had she expected to find herself clothed in elegant silk? She’d worn exactly two silk garments in her life--a blouse that went with her interview suit and a dress she allowed herself to buy in the midst of her last, long-ago love affair. Still, now she felt as if she’d been wearing silk for much of the day. Weird.

She put her hand up to her head and winced at the feel of a large bump. Where and how did she get that? Most of all, why did she feel like she’d just had a panoramic dream with many characters? Most of all, why did she feel like she’d just come? Heather blushed at the possible implications of this. Had she been involved in some sort of self-satisfaction at a work site? She fingered the bump again. Definitely not her usual mode of operation.

Then she realized what she was holding. A precious scroll she’d been reading when something happened, some massive interruption. Well, whatever had happened, she’d sort it out. Having the scroll was the important thing. With trembling fingers, she delicately unrolled the script and her heart clenched with warmth. Before she even attempted to make out any of the symbols, she let her fingers carefully touch the surface of the ancient document.

Suddenly she heard a door open and footsteps coming to her. For some reason she couldn’t have explained, she felt scared. “Who is it?”

And then the man of her dreams stormed into the chamber, filling the place with his energy. “Grentoori,” she gasped, knowing his name from somewhere deep inside her.

He scowled at her, then held out his hand to help her get up from the ground. “That’s Grant Drury, the alleged leader of this pack.” He shook her hand. “Are you all right?”

“All right?” she echoed, not sure what those words meant in relationship to how she felt at that moment.

“There was some sort of earthquake here. Not too serious, but this chamber seems to have borne the brunt. We’d better get you to a doctor to get you checked out.”

“I’m fine,” Heather said, sure she would be once she grabbed all the facts that were sliding around in her head and got them to stand still. “I found this.” She held out the scroll.

Grant Drury’s eyes widened. “Oh, let’s get a look at that. Bring it along, and we’ll study it once we get back to headquarters. Have something to eat and drink, and we can talk.” He looked deeply into Heather’s eyes in a way that made her blush. “I’ve been waiting a long time for you,” he finished, his voice going down several notes.

“My Grentoori,” she said far too softly for him to hear. “And I’ve also been waiting for you,” Heather said, preparing to follow him. “Longer than you could ever imagine.”

Grant Drury put an arm around Heather, and she shivered with anticipation.

Epilogue

Not many couples would choose to spend their honeymoon at an archaeological dig, but Heather Morrison and Grant Drury were far from average. From the moment they really met, they became partners in work and play. After their wedding ceremony on the island of Cyprus, they returned to the Indurlian site where they'd met to search for more clues.

"Look what I've found!" Heather shouted to her new husband, waving an intricately carved box.

Grant put down his own work and kissed his new bride passionately. "Looks intriguing. How about we take a short break for some connubial bliss before we open it?"

She looked at her watch. "What's it been? A whole half hour since our last bliss?"

"Hey," he said, indicating an incipient hard-on, "I'm not a clock watcher." He hugged her and pressed his erection against her butt.

Tempting as Grant was, Heather couldn't wait to see what was in the box. With little difficulty, she opened it and gasped.

Grant frowned. "What is it?"

Her fingers trembling, Heather removed a perfect sapphire from the box. A sapphire she'd seen before.

"It's gorgeous," Grant said. "Probably priceless. Wonder when it's from."

"There's a small piece of parchment." Heather nervously opened it and began to read the Indurlian. "For my lord Ramand, from your most faithful messenger, Ucreeno."

Heather sat down hard. "Ucreeno was the traitor."

"What?" Grant asked. "What is this about?"

She held up the parchment. "Ucreeno informed Ramand. He gave him the ammunition to bring the royal family down."

He looked from the parchment to the stone. "You got all that from this scrap?"

She nodded. "You remember the feeling you've told me you have-- that we've known each other a long time?"

“Yes.”

“Well, I have quite a story to tell you.”

The End