

Desire Island

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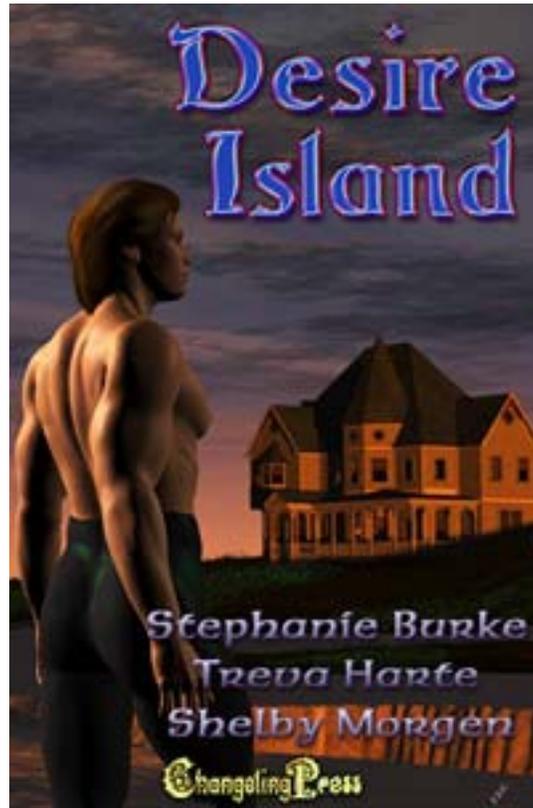
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The Inn

RE: I'm FREE!!!

From: Clrless1@aol.com

To: Marylin1987@aol.com

>It's official. One year from today I'll be a divorcée. Went to court this morning to sign the final paperwork. I'm now legally separated. From just about everything, including my sanity.

>

>I miss you so much, Gray. I want to SEE you. SICK of emails. Listen, I've been looking at this ad on the Internet... a bed and breakfast on the Gulf of Mexico, right on the water, and it's not that expensive. Check this out --

DESIRE ISLAND ESCAPE -- YOUR EVERY WISH COME TRUE \$399

>

>I know you'll say you can't afford it, but I can. Think of it this way. You never liked Don anyway. I got to the checking account before he could clean me out. Help me spend some of this money while I can. I haven't told him yet, but that's ALL I'm taking. I'm just going to walk away from all of this. I never wanted this place anyway. >You know my tastes. This house just screams new money and no class, just like Don. >Just plain garish.

>

>Please, please say you'll come. There's just something about this place. I have to go there. It pulls me. The first time I stumbled across the web address, I just sat and stared at the pictures. There's something compelling about this old inn...

>

>Say you'll come. Please. I need you.

>

>Marylin

You need me, Baby-Girl, I'm there.

Gray.

* * *

“Good evening.” The trim blonde woman’s voice held all the warmth of a bottle of Chablis on ice. She nodded her head once in greeting as she passed through the inn’s front parlor, both acknowledging and dismissing them...

And leaving them alone.

They hadn’t wanted company anyway.

Marylin turned away from the window to study the figure on the old settee just as thunder cracked loudly in the background. Gray wouldn’t want her to remember how much thunderstorms always frightened him. But he went rigid for the moment it took for the lightning to follow the thunder.

He didn’t say anything. Just sat there stoically, his hands wrapped around his tumbler, a tall, lean man, slightly shadowed in the light from the fireplace. She didn’t need to see his face to read him. She knew him too well. Dear Gray. Always trying to be a hero for her... she could have loved him for that alone.

Damn. She had such lousy taste in men.

No, that wasn’t fair. At least not to Gray. Gray was a fine man. Tall and graceful and handsome and -- gay. Well, bi maybe. He’d been married, once upon a time, at least for a while. Just not to her.

It wasn’t Gray’s fault she’d fallen in love with him all those years ago. He’d warned her not to. Told her often enough all they could be was friends. She hadn’t listened. Hadn’t understood. She was a rescuer, after all. She always fell for that wounded look. She’d been so in love with him once... or at least infatuated. Maybe that was why now he was the only one she felt would really understand.

She took her time crossing the room, reminding herself that he was a friend. Just a friend. That’s all he’d ever really been. All he could ever be. Sort of like a really great girlfriend. One who was actually taller than she was.

“I don’t know what went wrong or just exactly when, but one day it hit me. I could ignore the flirting with his students. I could ignore the not-so-subtle innuendoes from other professors. I couldn’t ignore my own feelings. People don’t change. We are who we are. I wanted Don to be someone he’ll never be. I wanted him to care about me.

To need me. The real me, the one inside he never got to know. Twenty years, and we were still strangers. Don had some image of who I should be, the perfect wife, and it was *soooo* not me! I just don't care enough to live with the lies anymore. Maybe I never did. Sometimes I think I married Don because I just gave up. I quit looking for that one perfect man I was meant to be with. My soul mate."

Because I thought my soul mate was you, and I'd already lost. I settled. For too little. Yeah. I settled for way too little. Marilyn swallowed two fingers of Amaretto, ignoring the burn. She'd never been much for subtlety. There was a time for sipping, and a time for getting drunk. This night was definitely the latter. "Do you still believe in soul mates, Gray?"

Gray raised his glass to his lips and drank deeply of his favorite poison, aged Canadian whisky. Marilyn cringed. "I used to. I wish..."

His deep, deep voice seemed to purr as he turned to lift his gaze toward her. Light filtered over his face. The color struck her once again, odd and fascinating and vaguely wrong for this world. How many people had violet eyes? Gray was the only one she'd ever met. His eyes were true violet, not some deep shade of blue that seemed to take on a purple cast -- a deep, rich, violet framed by eyelashes the color of midnight.

"What?" Marilyn took another long swallow of Amaretto. "Sometimes you have the oddest way of not saying things."

"Nothing." He smiled that deep, sad smile that always got to her. "I was just -- never mind. It was a long time ago. I'm sorry, Baby-Girl. I hoped things would work out better for you. I thought things were going swimmingly between you and what's-his-name."

"Swimmingly?" Marilyn threw her head back and roared with laughter as she sprawled on the couch next to him, her long legs bent double under her. "Swimmingly! I like that..."

No, nothing subtle -- or fake -- about Mary. Gray tossed back the last of his whisky, praying it would give him the courage and the power to forget. He pointed to her bottle of Amaretto. Maybe it was time for a change.

Still laughing, Marilyn poured them each a triple shot. "I'm so glad you could come, Gray. I've missed your friendship... I've missed you."

"I've missed you too. No one else understands my sense of humor anyway. I love your smile. And I love the fact that I don't get a cramp in my neck trying to give you a hug. And for the record, you've always had my friendship. No matter what, that will never go away."

He lifted the glass to his lips and took a quick gulp. Then he winked at her before his face twisted into a visage of disgust. How could she drink this crap? But when the warmth hit his stomach, he remembered. Amaretto had always had that effect on him.

"You didn't bring Carlos. I thought you might..." Marilyn tried to maintain her smile for his benefit, but he knew what she was really asking.

"Carlos... Carlos is gone. For good. It's just you and me this weekend, Baby." He stared down into his glass before a wry smile twisted his full lips. When did the forgetting start? Maybe he needed a bit more. He took another drink.

"Damn, I'm sorry, Gray. That was one beautiful man. Just the way we both like 'em. Tall, dark, and handsome. It's not just a cliché!"

Did she sound a little relieved?

Did it matter?

Not anymore. He wouldn't let it matter. "Tall, dark, handsome, jealous, and colder than a witch's tit in January. I always seem to fall for the betraying type, and most of that breed seems to be tall, dark, and handsome." Gray pulled her over against his side with a gentle tug on her wrist, jumping slightly as another crack of thunder split the night.

The lightning followed closer this time, lighting up the beach and the tossing waves beyond with a pale wash of fire. She snuggled against him, maybe for warmth, but he suspected it was as much for his benefit as hers. She knew how much he hated thunderstorms.

"What do you think's wrong with us, Gray? We have such lousy taste in lovers..."

Gray laughed at that, his mood lightening. Man, did his Mary-Baby have a gift for understatement. The logs settled in the fireplace, sending out a wave of small, bright orange sparks. "We're too good for this world, Baby. We would have to go to an alternate universe, back in time, another planet or something, to find people who are good enough for us. We're a special breed, Baby-Girl. The last of the heart-hungry people. We want... we need more than a quick roll and a few fake words of love. We want it all."

Marylin downed her Amaretto, blinking back the tears she knew he wouldn't want to see. "We had dreams, Gray. We were going to change the world. We were going to make a difference. All I got was older. Maybe you're right. Maybe we were born in the wrong time and place."

"Sometimes I couldn't care less about the world and then sometimes, I... I wish... Damn." His glass was almost empty again.

Marylin sighed, staring up at the tapestry on the wall. "I was meant to be surrounded by Warriors in chainmail, set to do my bidding at the flick of my finger."

He hugged her tighter, fighting back the desire to run screaming around the room as his frustration built. He could never do that to her. She wanted a big, strong Warrior type, and that was something he could never be.

He was too nice, too understanding, too much of a good guy. At least that's what Carlos told him when Gray caught him in bed with his three o'clock modeling appointment.

It was the same thing Paula had said to him when he caught her in their bed with his plumber. His plumber, for God's sake. The man had more crack than the San Andreas Fault and his droopy pants, caused by an incessant beer gut, perpetually showed it.

He was supposed to be sensitive. He was an artist, damn it. It wasn't his fault he was six-feet-four, with what Carlos had called the body of Atlas. That was just genetics and hauling around metal to weld into sculptures. So why did everyone seemed to think he should abuse his body in senseless fighting?

Not that he wouldn't fight to defend those he loved or himself, but why fight over an unfaithful mate? He knew Carlos was pissed when he handed him his suitcase instead of pounding the model into clay. But he didn't see the need to fight over a relationship that was so obviously dead anyway. The same for Paula and her plumber.

He liked to pick and chose his battles carefully, and trust was a major factor in his decisions. Besides, he was a sensitive man who hated bugs and was afraid of thunderstorms, and he didn't have the power to change who he innately was. Not now. Maybe once, long ago... "I wish... I was just meant to be..."

"Yeah." He didn't have to say it. She knew. It had always been that way with them, after all. "What do you dream of, Gray? What's your fantasy lover like?"

He didn't hesitate at that, this new game giving him something else to think of. "My fantasy lover? A cat. A big, tawny cat. Long and lean and sleek and sexy."

"A cat?"

"Yeah! A real lion of a lover. Color is not important! Gender is not important. I just want a big old lion who will do the lion thing."

"The lion thing?"

"The lion thing, you know? Don't you watch the Discovery channel?"

At her confused, albeit tipsy look, he went on to explain. "A lion makes love for ten days non-stop and then goes to sleep. I want someone who's going to be there for me and give me what I want. I want someone who'll stand by me and fight for what we believe in. A lion will do that. Of course, I don't want the cheating with other prides, the general laziness, and the gang mentality. They hunt in gangs sometimes, sneak-attacking hyenas. But I want me a big old lion who will make me feel protected, and... and damn it, Baby-Girl, I want to feel needed."

He took another sip and then his glass was actually empty. "What about you? Who do you see when you dream, Baby? Tell me your deepest and darkest. I promise not to go screaming off into the night."

She laughed, hiccoughing a little as she downed another shot of Amaretto. "You know, there's not another man in this universe I'd share this fantasy with. I want a man

who loves me to distraction just the way I am. I know it's crazy, but I want the kind of man who'll look at me and not think I'm some kind of freak."

"Freak! What are you talking about, Baby?"

"Come off it, Gray. I know what men see when they look at me. Back in high school I didn't even have a name. I was just 'The Amazon.' No one ever noticed my GPA in college. All they saw were three women's basketball championships. I want more than that. I want..."

"You can tell me, Baby," he coaxed, tightening his arms around her. "You know you can trust me." Hell. He knew she trusted him. That was the problem.

"I'm still looking for my soul mate, I guess. I want a man who'll worship me and love me and think I'm the most important thing in his life. I want a man who'll make me feel small, and delicate, and..."

"Needed."

"Yeah..."

Of course. They'd always wanted the same thing. Gray wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her against his chest. "Keep your dreams, Baby-Girl. Cherish your dreams. Never get stuck with a what-if."

After a moment or two, Marilyn pulled back, pouring them each another glass of Amaretto. "Speaking of dreams, did you notice that hunk on the ferryboat?"

"Hunk? I saw an ugly old guy in a gray uniform, an Elvis wannabe, and a woman with what I thought was Yoda, but turned out to be an extremely... interesting looking baby. You'll have to do better than that."

"Oh... well, when I came across, there was this man... you'd have noticed him if he'd still been there. He was our type. You'll think I'm crazy, but he was dressed all in black, and I swear he looked like a Warrior or some medieval knight. He could have stepped right out of that tapestry. Long, long, black hair, just a touch of silver at the temples, dark skin, wide shoulders, and a mouth..."

“Just made for kissing,” Gray finished, smiling down at her indulgently. “Go for it, Baby. You go get your long-haired stud and I’ll get my ferocious kitty-cat and then screw the world!”

“You too, Gray. Don’t let the cardboard people drag you down. Whatever you want, you go for it. Long live romance!”

Gray hugged her tightly again, as another flash of lightning illuminated the sky. “Long live romance! Romance and great sex! Really great sex!”

“Yeah...” She snuggled against his warmth, her eyes drifting closed.

Gray closed his eyes and fought back a tear or two that threatened to fall. “Thank you, Baby-Girl,” Gray whispered, bending down to kiss the top of her head. “I think I’m starting to believe in the colors again.”

“They’re out there, Gray. Our Warriors. Our soul mates. Keep believing...”

“Believing! Yeah...” Gray tucked the blanket around her, his smile a little less sad as he pulled himself away from her tempting heat and stumbled toward the courtyard door. It was time to leave the past in the past. He had a future to forge.

“You leaving?”

“Yeah. Time to crash. Night, Baby-Girl! See you tomorrow.”

“Night, Gray. Thanks for being here for me.” Marilyn sighed, turning her face against the settee’s pillowed arm. “I love you, Gray.”

Gray froze, his hand on the door. A tear welled up in his eye. No. He couldn’t -- wouldn’t tell her. Not now. Let her think what she wanted to. It was a lie they’d both been able to live with all these years, after all.

Resolute once again, he pushed the door shut. But the words needed saying.

“I love... loved you too.”

The Summoning: A Northlanders Tale

Shelby Morgen

Prologue

Soft footfalls echoed across the inn's old wooden floor. Someone was following her. How had he gotten into her room? Why wasn't she afraid? She should have been terrified. The dark presence looming behind her should have had her screaming for help. Instead she stopped, waited, watching the shadowy figure in the old-fashioned dressing mirror reach out to her.

Come back to me, my love. I need you.

The plea shook her. She hadn't heard his voice, not precisely. Rather it was as if she could feel his words in her head. Could feel his pain.

Come back to me.

This couldn't be real. Could it?

Somehow Marylin felt she knew the man who'd followed her back to her room. She recognized him now. He was the man she'd seen on the ferry, the tall, mysterious stranger who felt so familiar. He wasn't really a stranger at all. She'd dreamt of him before. By day she was Dr. Marylin Henry, Professor of Ancient History. By night she was a wanton, living out that history in her dreams. She changed from dream to dream, once an Egyptian priestess, surrounded by cats, once a slave in ancient Rome.

Whoever she was, wherever she was, he was there. He was the Warrior who stood at her side. They'd fought side by side against invaders who slew in the name of their gods. She'd been laid out on an altar in a Druid circle when the standing stones were still young. Their lives had never been easy, but somehow she knew he had always been there, and always she had loved him.

Tonight she was no ancient goddess. She was only Marylin, and he was the stranger whose dark eyes had haunted her on the ferry, yet he seemed even more real, as if history had finally caught up with them. He towered over her, this giant in black,

but she felt no fear, only need, as she looked in the mirror. Remembered desire swept over her, stronger than time. She loved this man. She had loved him before. She would love him again. He was the one. He held the missing pieces of her soul.

She didn't have to ask if he shared her feelings. She knew, without the words. Could feel it in his hands as they came to rest on her shoulders -- large, strong hands resting lightly, blunt, square fingertips trembling against her skin. His face was shadowed in the dim lighting, but still she could read the pain in him. Brushing her cheek over the back of his hand, she turned to face him, amazed once again at how small she felt in his presence.

His were a lover's hands, holding, stroking, comforting, healing the ache in her heart. His kiss was a lover's kiss, soft, then hungry, sucking her lip between his. Nipping, probing, demanding, he tasted her mouth.

Yes. Yes! He was the lover she'd waited for! Her body blossomed under his touch, her breasts thrusting against his gentle fingers, demanding more. He brushed lightly over the curves of her breasts, her nipples stabbing at him, hard and wanting. She didn't object when he turned her around. His hands slipped beneath her light cotton shift to skim it over her head. She would have helped him if her own hands weren't so busy trying to puzzle out the fastenings of the strange black pants he wore.

She stroked him through the fabric -- somehow she knew it was linen -- loving the way his cock responded to her, already hard and growing harder with her touch.

Her body was on fire, so sensitive to his every move that she twanged like a guitar string with each touch. Liquid fire pooled low in her belly, moving down, ready to consume her. Through the thin, fine-woven linen of his odd shirt her lips found his nipple, hard and tight, responding instantly to her gently swirling tongue. She felt more than heard his groan as he pulled her against his chest.

"By the gods I have missed you. So long this time. It's been so long."

Marilyn trailed her fingers down until she cupped his balls, feeling them tighten even as his cock reached for her. *"Too long."* She nipped at his shirt. *"You're wearing entirely too many clothes."*

A chuckle rumbled through his chest. "Maybe you should do something about that."

She would, too, if only she could figure out the damn pants. The shirt was easier. Although it didn't have any buttons up the front, the opening at the neck was loose enough. She pulled the tails out of his waistband and skimmed her hands up his torso, enjoying the trip. He bent to her, letting her pull the fabric over his shoulders. She paused there, exploring his face with kisses. Even the taste of him was familiar. Warm and salty and sweet with the taste of man. Her man.

It took him a moment to notice she hadn't undone the cuffs, leaving his hands trapped. When he tried to rip the shirt to escape, she stilled his hands, pushing him back toward the bed. He lunged at her with his teeth, nipping at her neck in a show of possessiveness, a low growl sounding in his throat.

The old-fashioned wrought iron headboard had a high arched center just made for what she had in mind. Her teeth hovering over his nipple, she urged him backwards till he landed exactly where she wanted him. He didn't fight her when she ran her hands up his arms, slipping the shirt body over the headboard and pushing it down until it held him pinned.

He might be able to tear the shirt if he tried, but then again he might not. Linen was exceptionally strong. Just how she knew this, she wasn't sure, but she sensed the shirt would hold unless he fought her in earnest.

Still, it wasn't the shirt that held him. Somehow she knew she could have held him with a word.

Her weight over him didn't seem to have much effect. His hips still bucked toward her willing cunt, but there was the matter of those pants. She leaned forward to rub her nipples over his, finding her targets easily enough in the pale moonlight, enjoying the sharp intake of his breath. He struggled briefly before he changed his mind, pushing the small puckered bud against her lips.

Taking her time now, she ran her hands over the pants, her fingertips reading the seams like Braille, until she found the hidden rows of fastenings over either hip.

Growling, she bent to assault the offending closures with her teeth. As she tugged the fly out of the way, his cock sprang loose, freed at last of the imprisoning fabric. His hips surged up off the bed, his cock thrusting toward her.

Hot. Hard. Demanding. Needing. He might be a dream, but he felt real enough. Even if it was a dream, she couldn't force herself to wake up. No. She didn't *want* to wake up. Waking up meant letting go. She didn't want to let go. She wanted, she *needed* to hold him here. An extra day, an extra hour, an extra minute, it didn't matter. She would defy the gods. She would keep him this time.

Was he any less real because he came to her only in her dreams? He was real to *her*. She wanted this to be real. Wanted her Warrior, strong enough to take her no matter how she might resist, yet held at her command by the simple artifice of her will. She wanted his cock filling her mouth as she raked her nails over the curve of his ass, pulling his pants down out of the way. She wanted the hot, hard length of him thrusting at her, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. *Yes. YES! Just like that.*

"I love you, Mael amin. I love you."

She wanted his voice, whispering unintelligible prayers to long forgotten gods when she lifted to rub her tits over him, his waves of heat making her nipples sing with desire. She wanted his balls contracting with need while he thrust against her cleavage, his cock weeping as she licked the tip. She could picture a hundred ways she would take him, over a hundred nights.

Right now she needed his thick, burning cock buried deep within her cunt. Marilyn slid down over the length of him. If this wasn't real, it was real enough. She could feel him, could feel his body, warm and alive, under her. She could feel his heartbeat under her palm. She rode him hard and fast, her hands splayed over the ridges of his chest. She stretched out over him, loving the feel of her smooth, bare skin against the thick fur of his legs. Fire lit her, pulling her with a longing stronger than time. She rocked back and forth, up and down, taking them both closer and closer to the edge with the slow, easy friction of flesh on flesh, bone against bone, need against need.

He thrust up hard against her, holding her mouth with his kiss, stroking the ridges behind her teeth with the tip of his tongue even as his cock stroked the spot within her pussy that made her wild for him. Sensations bombarded her, new and yet remembered. His cock buried deep within her, the hard, hot length of him filling her, stretching her, pushing her past her limits. He fought to recapture her when she broke the kiss, trailing kisses of her own down his chest. He fought her as she sucked at his sensitive nipples, first trying to get away, then pushing against her lips, groaning out his desire as he bucked helplessly up into her.

She rose up over him to rub their nipples together, rocking up and down the length of his throbbing cock, pressing her thighs closed to increase the sensations. She could feel every ridge of his cock raking her sensitized flesh, every vein sliding past the lips of her cunt. She squeezed him tighter, feeling his balls drawing up, beginning to tease her with their coarse, rough hair against her sensitive skin.

She knew a nagging fear, now. No matter how much she wanted this, he wasn't real. Once they came the dream would end. She would lie here alone in her bed, so close to what she wanted, what she needed, what she'd never found in the daylight.

Somehow, this time, she had to keep him here. Whatever it took, she had to hold him this time. "Stay with me," she pleaded.

"Come with me," he demanded, nipping at her lip.

She didn't want to come, not now, not knowing the consequences, but she couldn't help herself, not with his cock burning within her, not with need as old as the ages pulling at her. "I need you to be real! I don't want to lose you again!" she cried, tears streaming down her face.

"You cannot lose me," he promised. "Do you not know that by now? I'm as real as you are. You're mine. Wherever you are, I will find you."

"Then find me!" She drove against him, pushing herself harder, reaching for the release that would either destroy her or set her free. "Find me now! I can't wait any longer!"

She broke over him, her body shaking with the force of an electric shock running through her, her need enveloping them both till she was sure the air around them must shimmer with power.

He roared out his release, a cry of both triumph and despair as he slipped away.

"Take me with you, my love. I need you!" she cried.

"Wherever, whenever you are I will find you. Forever and always, my love. I will find you again!"

Chapter One

Marylin was positive that if she so much as blinked, her head would explode. God. What had she been thinking? She wasn't nineteen anymore. Apparently Amaretto wasn't what it used to be, either. Hadn't ever given her a hangover before. That was the reason she drank Amaretto -- to avoid mornings like this.

For that matter, she didn't remember ever having a morning after quite like this.

She'd have called out, asked some kind soul to bring her a damp, cool cloth to unglue her eyes, but she was afraid the sound of her own voice might shatter her brittle eyelids. As if by magic a cool cloth appeared in her hand. *Thank you, God.* Whichever, whatever god. She'd pray to any deity who was handy right now if her head would quit pounding. Moving carefully, she laid the scrap of cloth over her eyes, concentrating on slow, deep, even breaths, willing the pain away. Mind over matter. That was all there was to it. Simple chemical process really. Re-oxygenate the blood.

In with the good air. Out with the bad. Gray had taught her that. A dancer's technique. She didn't want to know where he'd learned it, or why.

As the pain subsided, awareness of sensations outside her body returned. Where was she? She wasn't in her own bed, that was for sure. The surface beneath her was hard, and the air was cool, but fresh. She couldn't remember... Gray. She'd emailed Gray. They'd met at a place she'd found on the Internet. Desire Island, in the Gulf of Mexico.

She smiled experimentally. Her lips didn't crack. Gray must be watching her, trying not to laugh. Gray would know to have the cloth ready. Its coolness made the thought of opening her eyes at least tolerable. Cautiously she wiped the warming water over the rest of her face, wondering just how bad she looked. Well, Gray'd seen her at

her worst before. He'd cope. Slowly, carefully, giving them time to adjust to the light in the room, she pried her eyes open.

There was a man watching over her, all right, but he wasn't Gray. Long, pale blond hair framed an oval face that was just a little too masculine to be pretty. It was a quiet face, the kind of face that soaked up all emotion, so that it was impossible to tell whether he was happy, or sad, or even interested.

Since at the moment he was studying her, in fact staring at her rather intently, and she seemed to be lying quite naked on a strange bed in a strange room, she did the sensible thing. She screamed. The watcher stood up, unfolding long, long legs that had been tucked beneath him somewhere. Paying no heed to her screams as she lunged for the closest covering -- some sort of thick, heavy hide -- he walked to the doorway.

"She is awake, Lord Lindall."

"Indeed. So I gathered." The voice, deep and rumbling and tinged with humor, betrayed traces of a Scots brogue. The man who went with the voice ducked his head to enter the small chamber, pausing there in the doorway, filling it so thoroughly that he blocked the light.

Marylin ceased her screaming abruptly. Good Lord. The man must be close to seven foot tall. His shoulders filled the doorway. From there he narrowed to slimmer hips and long, muscular legs. For the first time since she'd been a child staring up at her father, she felt small and vulnerable.

She glanced up at his face as he paused to stare at her. She knew this man. Had seen him before. Had dreamed of him for years now. In her dreams he was her Knight, her protector, her partner, her lover. Usually she knew him as a shadowy, indistinct figure. She always recognized him, sometimes even spoke to him, but she'd never heard his voice before, never seen his face.

Until last night. He was the man from the ferry. She'd seen him. Known him. Loved him. Fucked him.

He promised to find me...

No. He couldn't be her dream lover. This man was real. Maybe he really was the man she'd seen on the ferry. Had he been stalking her? Had he kidnapped her? But that didn't seem plausible. She wasn't tied up. Nothing kept her here but her own frozen inability to move.

She could see him clearly now, long, dark hair pulled back from his face, a close-cropped beard dusting his jaw, wide set green eyes studying her, questioning, probing, drinking her up. Their gazes locked. He moved toward her hesitantly, almost as if drawn against his will, his heavy woolen kilt barely swaying against his leggings. He paused again at the edge of the raised platform, towering over her as she lay clutching the hide over her breasts. Like a giant tree toppling, he dropped slowly to one knee beside the bed. Marilyn's head reeled as she read the emotions swirling in those eyes.

Grief. Hunger. Pain. Need. Fear. Love.

He *was* the man from the ferry. He was the man from her dreams. Her Knight, her lover, her protector. He was the one who held the missing pieces of her soul.

He picked up her hand, lifting it to his lips for a kiss that nearly broke her heart with its tenderness. "I have missed ye, *Mael amin*. Do no' leave me so again, for my heart nearly split asunder."

His heart? What about hers? One moment he'd been there, and everything had been right. The next he was gone, and she was alone -- more alone than she'd ever been.

It was a dream. Just a dream. He hadn't been real last night. He wasn't real now. She'd seen a man on the ferry and added his face to that of the man in her dreams. She'd dreamed about him last night. A rough, wanton dream of a middle-aged woman too long alone. Dreams. That was all it was. She was dreaming again now.

Marilyn broke eye contact as a gust of wind shook the pavilion, which she realized was actually a tent of great proportions, walled with huge, thick hides. She had to wake up, before this gentle giant of a man stole what was left of her heart. She could not fall in love with a dream. "No. Not again," she whispered to herself. She would not make the same mistake again. Just a dream.

The big man raised his eyes quizzically to the watcher, who merely shook his head once so that his long pale mane lifted slightly, then settled again against his shoulders. Marilyn clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle another scream. The blond man -- she'd thought him tall until the Warrior entered the room -- had ears that rose to sharp points at the tips. There was no mistaking those ears. She was staring at an Elf!

This man -- this Elf -- had certainly never been part of her dreams before. It was to the Elf-Man that Marilyn turned for answers, hissing her questions out with as much righteous anger and injured dignity as her pounding head would allow. "Who and what are you and where the hell am I and how did I get here?"

One eyebrow raised in a delicate point. "I am Shammall, M'Lady, your most humble and obedient servant."

Marilyn suppressed a most unladylike snort, thinking she'd never met anyone less humble or obedient.

"As for what, I am a Mage, and it was I who summoned you."

Summoned she understood, but Mage? As in -- as in what? Magician? Maybe he could make things appear, sleight of hand, like the cloth?

"We are in the Northlands, camped just below the Pass of St. Gregory, which separates the Northlands from the ancient cities of Talandar and Élahandara."

All right. She wasn't going to panic. No. Not now. Maybe later. Some of this at least made sense. Northlands. It was cold. Canada, maybe. But... "I thought I knew most of the Saints. I don't remember Saint Gregory."

The Mage raised an eyebrow. "His story is well known, M'Lady. Saint Gregory slew a Dragon, thus separating the races of Man from the elders."

Dragon? Slew a... "George. Saint George slew the Dragon."

The Mage exchanged a worried glance with the one who knelt beside her. "She speaks strangely, M'Lord. Perhaps the Summoning has affected her in some way we did not foresee."

“I do not speak strangely! I know my history! It’s an ancient legend. Saint *George* and the Dragon. George. Not Gregory. George!”

He kissed her palm again. “As ye wish, my love. We shall correct the name of the pass if it pleases ye.”

Was he laughing at her? Marilyn turned her gaze back to the Warrior. For he was a Warrior, of that there was no doubt. Even without the huge axe strapped across his back, and the dense layer of heavy black chainmail that covered his tunic, she’d have recognized him for what he was.

He looked so much like the man from her dreams. Something in her wanted to reach out to him, touch him, draw him into her arms and comfort him.

Right. As if he needed comforting. He was the one who’d kidnapped her, after all. Or ordered the other one, the Elf, to fetch her here.

A hint of a smile touched his lips as their gazes locked again. “I am Roanen, M’Lady, of House Lindall, and I am thy Lord and thy husband.”

Lord? As in Lord and Master? She’d have laughed at the audacity of it, especially since she sensed that one harsh word from her at just that moment would shatter the man, but the other word distracted her.

Husband?

Marilyn looked around the pavilion again, taking in as much as she could, before she let her head fall back to the pillows in utter exhaustion. Weren’t dreams supposed to come with sleep? How could she possibly feel this tired? Or hungry? “I suppose a cheeseburger’s out of the question... and a milkshake?”

The two men exchanged glances, and a worried frown creased Roanen’s handsome face. At this distance she could see the lines of strain around his eyes, and the set of his shoulders looked less regal and more just plain tired. “Cheese burger?”

You didn’t eat in dreams. Not real food. You weren’t ever hungry in dreams. At least she never had been before. “Beef?”

The men looked even more worried.

"Meat. From a cow. Cooked. Made into a sandwich, with cheese, between two pieces of bread?"

"Cow?" Both men looked perplexed.

"Cow." Crap. What other names for cows were there? "Cattle? Bull? Steer? Holstein?"

"Kine? The kine are gone, M'Lady, as are all the old species. Those that had been changed by the hand of man did not survive the cataclysm. Only the ancient races survived."

Cataclysm. Ancient races. Like Elves. Marylin stared at those pointed ears. No. She would not, could not believe this was real. She needed to wake up. She needed to wake up now. Maybe now was the time to panic. Yeah. Panic was a real possibility.

"We have other meat," the one who claimed to be her husband offered, his voice attempting to soothe her. "Do no' fear. Ye will no' go hungry here, my love." Roanen lifted his chin, and Shammall immediately disappeared beneath the hide that covered the doorway.

Marylin turned her attention back to Roanen. Her panic subsided. It was so hard to stay detached when a man looked at you like that. Would it hurt if she touched him? He wasn't real, after all. None of this was real. "That's hard on your knees. Sit beside me here and tell me everything."

He sat carefully, not quite touching her, hesitant, as if afraid she might break. "Ayaila, I -- we -- I am sorry, my love. We -- we lost the babe. It could no' be helped. For a time I thought we had lost thee as well. Nafésti, their High Priestess, is very powerful. We were lucky to escape with our lives, any of us. I -- the Mage brought ye back to me. I -- I should not have asked it of him, I know, nor of ye, but I had no desire to live without ye by my side. I know 'tis forbidden, once the spirit has left the body, but there was no time sooner, no' in the midst of battle, and I thought ye could no' be too far away just yet. 'Twas wrong of me, I know, and selfish, but I need ye here with me."

Baby?

Tears formed along the lines of her lashes, threatening to spill over. Her dreams had turned dark and cruel. She blinked them away, trying to maintain some coherent thought. No dream went like this. But if it wasn't a dream, if this Warrior was real, he must be insane. Or was she the crazy one for even thinking this might be real?

The only thing that made any sense was the one thing she couldn't tell him. She was Marilyn. She needed to be Marilyn. But she couldn't be. Not now. He needed her to be Ayaila. Roanen was at the edge of his sanity, of that she was sure. She didn't have to be a member of the Psych Department to figure that out. A wrong word from her would destroy him. Her heart would have to have been made of stone not to be moved by the man's grief.

They would deal with who she was and what had happened to Ayaila and the baby some other time. For now, there was healing to be done, and that, at least, was something Marilyn understood. She opened her arms to the huge bear of a man, offering what comfort she could.

The tears she'd sensed in him broke free to trail unobstructed down his cheeks as he collapsed against her, sobs shaking his frame. She wound her arms around him as best she could, though the battle accoutrements were a bit in the way. She wanted to tell him everything would be all right, there would be other babies, but that was a lie she could not manage. She was not Ayaila. If this wasn't a dream, if Mages and Summoning and Elves really existed, then whatever the Mage had done had gone horribly wrong. She wasn't supposed to be here, wherever here was, she wasn't Ayaila, and she was much too old for babies. The thought of the babies she'd never borne lent her a grief of her own. Their tears mingled until she could not tell them apart.

Was it wrong to let Roanen think, even for these few minutes, that his wife had come back to him? Was she hurting him even more by not telling him who she was and that there was, perhaps, a good reason why what he had asked was forbidden?

Right now she wanted to be Ayaila. She wanted this to be real. More than anything, she wanted to be the woman this man loved enough to have mourned her so

desperately that he was willing to follow her past the limits of time and even death itself.

She *was* going crazy. This was a dream, a nightmare brought on by overindulgence in Amaretto. She was going to wake up with one mother of a hangover, alone once again. Damn it. Even the man in her dreams was in love with someone she wasn't, someone she could never be. She had to wake up, before she let herself become the woman Roanen needed. Before she lost her heart to a fantasy man who didn't exist, and if he did exist, would not, could not see her for who she was.

Damn it, if he'd only loved *her* like that, she would have embraced the fantasy with all her heart. What was it Gray had said? *We're too good for this reality. We would have to go to an alternate universe, back in time, another planet or something, to find people who are good enough for us...*

This wasn't fair! Gray was right. She deserved a man who would love her the way Roanen had loved Ayaila. She was ready. Whatever alternative reality this was, she was ready to lose herself in this dream. What was there to a name? She could *be* Ayaila. Could play the part well enough to comfort him now when he needed her the most.

Would it matter so much that he had loved another before? He might notice the differences, and if he asked, she might try to explain that she had once been someone else, in another time, another place. Surely a man who loved like this would forgive her such a simple deception. He had summoned her, after all. Would it be so wrong to let him think she was who he wanted her to be? Was it so wrong to take what she needed from a man who seemed more than willing to give?

But she'd seen his face when he told her about the child they'd lost. He wanted babies. She couldn't give him that. She wasn't Ayaila, and it would do her no good to pretend she was. Just about the time she gave herself up to this fantasy, everyone would realize the truth, and she'd be alone again, heartbroken once more, trapped in a reality even worse than her own.

No. She couldn't do that to herself or this fantasy man. Whether he was real or just a figment of too much Amaretto, he deserved better. She deserved better. She wanted what he had to offer, but not like this. Not with a man who only loved her because he thought she was someone else.

She had to tell him.

Just not right this minute.

The curtain-door opened as the Mage Shammall reentered the room. He would be able to see Roanen had been crying. Marylin wished she had a damp cloth to wipe the big man's face. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than a scrap of toweling appeared on her fingertips. Fuck. Not cold water! That was for headaches, damn it. Warm! Soothing, not a frickin' iceberg. As if in apology, the cloth quickly adjusted to body temperature.

Whoa. The Mage wasn't even close. He couldn't have done that.

Marylin's hand shook as she raised it to wipe Roanen's cheeks. "Can't have you looking uncared for, can we? You look like you're still wearing half the battlefield."

Roanen smiled, turning his cheek against the fingers that held the cloth, nuzzling her hand for a moment before he turned to the Mage. "Have ye heard anything?"

"Nothing, M'Lord. The enemy seems to have melted into the ground. I fear they are but regrouping, readying a counterattack. As soon as I am able I will do reconnaissance."

"No, Shammall. I can no' ask that of ye. I know what this has cost thee. Ye must rest. Tomorrow will have to be soon enough."

She hadn't really looked at the Mage before. Not up close. Now that she was over the initial shock of -- of whatever had happened to her -- she wasn't quite ready to believe in Mages and Summoning yet -- she realized he looked tired. His mask of indifference hid more than just his emotions from those around him. She had to look hard to see the fine lines of strain around his eyes, the stoic set of his shoulders that kept them from bowing with exhaustion.

Well, perhaps there was more than one reason whatever the Mage had done was forbidden.

Marylin sat up, bracing herself against the headboard, tugging at the edges of the hide. They could have at least fetched her a robe, or a nightgown, or something. At the thought, a long silken robe of deep burgundy enveloped her. All right. Marylin took a deep breath. It wasn't the Mage. Somehow she had done that herself, with just her thoughts. Whatever dream this was, she was going to have to be careful what she wished for. Some thoughts could be downright dangerous if allowed to become reality.

Marylin glanced at the tray the Mage carried and had to suppress her laughter. Two pieces of bread, looking like a small loaf carved in half, with a slab of *some* sort of meat between them, and a mug of milk with a froth to it, as if its original container had been shaken hard before its contents had been poured into the mug. One taste had her setting the mug aside. It was white. But there the similarity to milk ended. Goat's milk maybe? She would also have to be careful what she asked of the Mage.

She shook her head. She was falling into the habit of thinking of this world as reality all too easily. No. She could not allow that. Had to maintain some hold on her sanity. She leaned forward to place a light, affectionate kiss on Roanen's cheek. "Would you give me a few minutes alone with the Mage, please, Roanen?"

Roanen glanced at the Mage, whose already fair face paled at the suggestion. Did Roanen look just a little guilty, like one brother running away while the other faced punishment? "Aye, M'Lady. As ye wish."

When he was seated, she could almost forget how huge Roanen was, but as he stood over her, bending down to press his lips to her cheek, she was once again amazed by the sheer massiveness of him. And yet one word from her, she was certain, would bring him to his knees.

She would not say the word. Not in front of him. Would not destroy the hope he clung to. To have loved as he had, and to have lost the woman he loved, only to see her brought back... she could not destroy that. Not with one killing blow.

For the Mage, however, she felt no such protective instinct. Marilyn turned to glare at Shammall as the curtain fell shut. She gestured to the spot beside her which Roanen had just vacated. "Come here."

In one stride, the Mage was beside her, kneeling as if in supplication, his hands extended, palms up, his hair a shield around his face as he bowed low enough to let its ends brush the dirt floor. "I live but to serve you, M'Lady."

Holy fucking Christ. What was she? Some sort of a goddess? "Stop that, damn it! Get up from there!"

Oh, good grief! Evidently *that* was the wrong thing to say. The Mage rocked back on his heels, tossing his hair over his shoulders as he raised his eyes to meet hers. Had she thought his face impassive? Nothing could be further from the truth. He couldn't have looked more remorseful. The strain of whatever he had done was catching up to him. Another moment and he, too, would be sobbing in her arms. "Forgive me, M'Lady. I have failed you twice over this day. Whatever your judgment, I shall accept your punishment."

Punishment? What sort of punishment might he be expecting to look so mortified? Would Ayaila have had him flogged? Marilyn did her best to suppress the images that flew to her mind, remembering the robe and the washcloth. If what she thought became real, anger could be very, very dangerous in this reality. "I'm not angry with you, Shammall." She said it out loud, in case the supplier of clothes was handy and listening. "I'm -- do you know what you have done? Do you understand at all what's happened?"

"I have failed you, M'Lady."

He repeated it like a litany. Marilyn sighed. "Fine. You have failed me. Only you haven't. You have failed someone called Ayaila. I'm not Ayaila. I'm Marilyn. I'm from the planet Earth in the twenty-first century. Wherever, whenever, this is, I don't belong here. And that man out there thinks you've given him his wife back. But I'm not his wife, and when he figures that out it's going to destroy him. He's already lost his wife

and his unborn child. You cannot allow him to face her loss twice. You have to fix this! You have to fix it now!"

The Mage raised his head, his eyes growing wider as he absorbed her meaning. "I -- M'Lady, I -- if what you say is true, I know not -- I cannot -- by the gods! What have I done?"

Humor pulled at her lips at the Mage's obvious consternation. "You, Shammall, have fucked up big time."

"*Fucked up big time?*" the Mage repeated incredulously. "Mother Earth forgive me. I know not what these words mean, but I can clearly understand the sentiment. What would you have me do, M'Lady?"

"Christ! Do? How should I know? I don't know how you got me here, so how can I tell you how to put me back?"

"Put you back?" He blinked, slowly, staring at her as if she'd gone daft. "You wish to return to the realm of the dead, then, M'Lady?"

"Dead?"

"Aye."

"I wasn't dead, you idiot! I was a little tipsy, perhaps, but not dead! I was --"

"Dead."

"No! I remember..." What did she remember? She'd been talking to Gray. He'd gone off. Left her there on the settee in front of the fire. Warm. Too warm. She'd downed the last of the Amaretto, looking for courage at the bottom of the bottle. Gone looking for Gray, to tell him what she'd wanted to all those years ago. She remembered the ocean, the waves. Could she have -- No. She'd been drunk, but not drunk enough to have accidentally killed herself. No. She'd gone back to her room. She'd dreamed of her lover. The one who looked suspiciously like Roanen.

"I can't be dead. A little drunk, maybe. But not dead. The last thing I remember was the waves washing over my feet. The storm had passed and the moonlight was shimmering over the waves. It was so beautiful... I must have passed out once I got back to my room."

“I left my body behind, Mistress, and went in search of Ayaila among the newly departed in the spirit world. I sent forth the Summoning, a projection of Lord Lindall’s message, among the spirits there. Most could not see or hear my message. They were too lost in their own cares. One spirit, and one alone, answered. Your spirit answered my call. I did not question your right to come with me. You looked like Ayaila, or as much like her as a woman with no body could. I did not drag you here against your will. Your spirit came to me. You answered the Summoning.”

No. She wasn’t dead. He was lying. He was -- he had tricked her somehow. Or Roanen had. Unless... “What --” Marylin swallowed hard and tried again. “What was the message? Roanen’s Summoning?”

The Mage closed his eyes and lowered his head, his hand finding hers, brushing her with the tips of long, sensitive fingers. She felt, more than heard, the image the Mage shared.

It was dark. The mists slowly parted to reveal a dark figure, a man, dressed in chainmail that had seen too much of battle, kneeling beside a body that might have been hers. The man raised his head to look directly at her, eyes filled with despair.

Come back to me, my love. I need you.

The plea shook her. She hadn’t heard his voice, not precisely. Rather it was as if she could feel his words in her head.

Come back to me.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she reached into the mist. “Roaenen,” Ayaila whispered. The vision faded, leaving her wanting, reaching for him. “Any time, anywhere, any way I could, I’d have answered his Summoning.”

Chapter Two

"Where are we? *When* are we? What happened?"

"Where would be Earth, M'Lady, though not the Earth you knew. When would be 2456, in the way you count the years. Earth as you knew her was changed by the Great Cataclysm. She grew hot for a time, very hot. The poles melted. The waters rose. After the Cataclysm the ice came. The ice saved us, else there would be no habitable lands left. Those races who survived once again populate the oldest lands, lands that were their homes long ago. Specifically the place where we are now is called the Northlands, part of what was once known as Europe, at the Pass of Saint Greg -- George."

The Mage actually blushed as he stumbled over the name. Once again Marylin wondered who Ayaila had been, and why these men feared her so.

"I am sorry, M'Lady, but I can no more undo what we have done than I could turn back the hands of time. The only release I could give you would be to free your spirit by ending this body's life once more. Should you make that choice I would willingly accompany you rather than face the end I would suffer at Lord Lindall's hands."

"We cannot lie to Roanen. Nor will I steal another woman's love. He deserves more. She deserves more!"

"Lord Lindall *deserved* to die in battle at Ayaila's side, M'Lady, as the fates decreed. Lady Ayaila gave her life to save his. Even if I could, I would not take that away from her. To do so would make her death meaningless."

"Can you not simply swap us back? Find Ayaila and exchange us so Roanen might never fully understand what has happened?"

"M'Lady, do you not understand? There is nothing to exchange. You answered my summons. Only one spirit could have done so. You *are* Ayaila."

"I am Marylin! Marylin!" she shrieked. Damn the man! No wonder Ayaila had thought to have him flogged! Marylin raised her hand as if to strike him, but as she moved lightning flew from her fingertips. The room filled with the smell of burning hair and singed cloth. The Mage moved, but not fast enough. The fire spread quickly from his hastily discarded robe to the carpets covering the floor, then to the tent itself.

"Ayeeee!" Marylin shrieked as the room went up in flames around her. She raised her hands to the gods in fists of fury. "Why! Why have you done this to me?" Thunder cracked and angry gray clouds opened, sending a downpour to drench the flames where the tent had stood moments before. "I am Marylin! Marylin!"

* * *

Roanen stared at the smoldering ruins of his tent and the woman kneeling in its midst, rain running in rivulets down her face, her beautiful burgundy gown singed and smudged with mud and ashes. "That went well."

Shammall merely nodded, passing a hand over the burns in his smoldering robe to repair the damage. "About as well as could be expected. It may take her some time to adjust, M'Lord."

"Aye. Speaking of time, I'm thinking this might be a good time for ye to do that reconnaissance, Mage. The farther away ye are for now, the better."

"As you wish, M'Lord. But have a care for yourself, as well. M'Lady is not happy with either of us at the moment."

The Mage took up his new form as if to do so were an everyday occurrence. Roanen cringed slightly at the sound of popping flesh and grinding bones, gritting his teeth as Shammall shifted. The Mage grew shorter, more slender, almost effeminate, his skin so black it appeared as if he had been heavily singed in Ayaila's fire, his hair the color of freshly mined coal. The Dark Elf male who stood in Shammall's place waved his hands once, surrounding himself with an aura of sweet perfume. His robes turned to sheerest gauze, floating lightly around his body, so thin that the hair on his chest

would have been visible through the filmy silk, had there been any. Roanen sniffed in distaste. "Ye go as a courtesan?"

"There is no better way to gain information, M'Lord, than in a Lady's bed. Women love to talk, and few men know enough to listen."

Roanen looked across the camp to the muddied ashes of his tent. "I shall keep that advice in mind, Mage. Though at the moment I have no' a bed. But if I mean to win my wife back, I shall have to start someplace. What did ye tell her?"

"The truth, M'Lord. Or as close as I might care to come. That Ayaila was killed in battle. That I journeyed to the Plane of Souls, seeking the return of her spirit. That she followed me willingly."

"Will she stay?"

"I did not give her a choice, M'Lord. I told her Marylin was dead."

"Ye lied to her? Ye just said ye told her the truth!"

"I told her as much as I could, M'Lord. And that is not so far from the truth. She cannot live in two times at once. She must choose. 'Tis better she chooses our time. If prophecy is to be believed, the future of our world hangs on her choice."

Roanen paced beside the fire, a heavy scowl creasing his forehead. "I do not like this. I do not like deceiving her."

"Then do not, M'Lord. There is but one spirit. One spirit, two bodies. She must choose. One must die. Help her make the right choice."

"I can no' ask this of her!"

"You have already asked more! And what of you? What of your choices? If we live by the prophecy, you will die! What choice is that?"

"I made my choice, long ago. An hour, a day, a year, it will be enough. She is my breath. My life. Without her I have no reason to live."

Shammall snorted softly. "Love. I thank the gods I am spared such Human emotions. May the gods be with you, M'Lord."

"And with ye, Shammall."

The Mage laughed as he faded into the growing dusk. "Élandine. Shammall is no more. Tonight I am Élandine, The Beautiful One. Courtesan to the Queens."

"Élandine," Roanen whispered to the night. But there was none there to hear his voice.

Forgive me, Mother Earth, for I have violated thy code. I have taken what was no' mine to take. Help me, Mother. Help me to heal her heart. Grant me thy endurance and faithfulness, Brother Wolf. I shall have need of ye most this night.

Gathering his wits, and his courage, he crossed the small camp to his wife's bedside.

* * *

"There is no' so much in a name, my love."

The deep voice, smooth as aged whiskey, startled her from her tears. Marylin stared up at the giant standing over her. Stripped of his armor, wearing only a charcoal gray tunic and a kilt of soft gray and blue hues over dark charcoal leggings, he looked even more like the man from the ferry. He no longer looked as if she might shatter him with a word. Strange, but her humiliation seemed to have lent him strength. For some reason his strength angered her all the more. "No? But what if the name is all I have left of who I was?"

"We have had many names through the ages, *Mael amin*. I do no' love thee for thy name."

"Don't you understand? The Mage was wrong. I cannot deceive you, Roanen. I will not. I would like nothing better than to be the woman you loved, but I'm not Ayaila. I'm -- I was -- Marylin. And if what the Mage says is true, I died over four hundred years ago, without ever knowing the kind of love you had with your Ayaila. I wish -- I wanted to be Ayaila for you. But I'm not. I'm not!"

Tears streaked down her face, mixing with the rain and the ash and the pain. To have come so far, only to have lost again. She pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging them tightly, rocking as she cried for the love she had never known.

Roanen scooped her up, holding her tightly against the soft wool of his tunic. She wanted to scold him, to tell him she was much too large to treat as if she were but a young child. She wanted to snuggle there against Roanen's massive chest until she could will herself to be the woman he wanted her to be. She wanted the rain to stop and the tent to be as it had been before, whole and sound, so that she could be alone with this man, away from the prying eyes that must think her a fool, away from the sights and sounds of a world too fantastical to be believed.

The tent, at least, cooperated. The ashes reformed until it stood whole and undamaged, the rain but a memory that made furtive noises against the sturdy hides. For some reason that power, that magic that must be Ayaila's, not hers, caused her even more misery. She cried for herself as well as Ayaila, and for all they both had lost.

Roanen sat on the edge of the raised platform that was the bed, holding her while she cried, his voice the low rumble of a waterfall, soothing as his hands stroked over her skin. "A dozen times in a dozen lives I have found ye, and always ye have known me, always I have loved ye. I have wronged ye, calling ye back from the realm of forgetfulness. I should have waited, trusted, known that we would find each other again, in another place, another time. But I was no' ready to let ye go. I thought only of myself. Forgive me my weakness."

A dozen times? A dozen lives? "I don't understand," Marylin admitted. "I don't understand any of this."

"Ye *are* Ayaila, my love. Ye are my wife."

"Haven't you heard anything I've said? I'm Marylin! Marylin, from the twenty-first century. I'm *not* your Ayaila! I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to hurt anyone. But I can't be the woman you think I am!"

"Ye are Marylin, and I would never take that away from ye. I shall call ye Marylin, if it pleases ye. But ye are Ayaila, too. As ye were Nylanéfer and Gwenevier and Catherine. The gods have blessed us with a love that is stronger than time and death. Always I have loved ye. Across more than four thousand years and dozens of lifetimes I have chased ye, and always ye have searched for me as well. I do no'

remember all, but I know I was made to love ye and only ye. A restless spirit inhabits us, and we are no' happy until we find one another again. I remember Marylin, and the time ye speak of. I searched for ye everywhere. Once I thought I had found ye, but ye slipped away like a shadow in the midst of a storm. Chance. Fate. Perhaps the gods were against us that time. I came close, so close that time, but I was too late."

The man on the ferry. He had looked at her, stared at her, called her with his eyes. She'd wanted to go to him, felt so drawn to him. Then the storm had hit, the crowd had shifted, the boat had docked, and she'd been alone.

She'd made love to him in her dreams, and he'd made her a promise.

Marylin raised a shaking hand to touch his face now, torn between her reality and the one he built for her with his words. Star-crossed lovers, doomed to wander the Earth in search of each other? Doomed to find one another only to lose once again to old age and death? How could God, her God, his gods, how could any god be so cruel?

How could she believe this, any of this, was real? If she embraced this dream, how would she live when she opened her eyes to find nothing but a timeworn inn and the aftermath of a surf-pounding storm? She'd searched for love all her life, thought once she'd found it with Gray, before she realized she could never hold him, never make him into what she wanted him to be. But this, what she sensed lay just beyond the wall she could not allow to crumble, this was a force stronger than any she'd ever known.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "If I let myself love you and you're not real, I'll be so much more alone when I wake up again." It had happened before.

"I am real, my love," he assured her as he pressed his lips to her hand. "I am as real as ye want me to be. If this is but a dream, then we are both dreaming, and I have found ye here. For us, even the dreaming is real."

"But if we both dream, then when you wake up, you will be alone, too, because Ayaila will be gone."

“No, my love. If Ayaila is gone from me, if I have lost her again, then I will come to the dreaming to search for ye here. Will it be so bad, to know ye have but to sleep to find me again? Will ye no’ wait for me here?”

Wherever, whenever you are I will find you. Forever and always, my love. I will find you again!

Marilyn knew she was losing, losing her hold on herself and her sanity. His lips were so close to hers. So close. She felt her body responding to the nearness of him, to the heat that was his life force pounding beneath her fingertips where they pressed against his chest, to the pureness of the love she saw in his eyes, to all that he was and all that he could give her if she would just believe. “I’ve found you before in my dreams. Whether you’re real or not, you’re real to me. Make love to me, Roanen. Give me sweet memories I can cling to in the daylight, so that I will search for you always in my sleep.”

She felt his pulse jump under her touch, felt his body tense, his arms pulling her closer. Yet he hesitated. “Are ye -- can we -- Ayaila -- she carried our child. The babe was but six weeks along. After the Summoning, there was blood. So much blood. Ye may no’ remember, but perhaps the body needs time to heal?”

Marilyn caught his hand, holding it against her breastbone. “I’m sorry, Roanen. I don’t remember. I feel fine. There’s no reason you should not make love to me. But I -- Marilyn -- I cannot have babies. I’m too old. And I had an illness as a young woman that scarred my fallopian tubes. The doctors have tried to repair the damage, but I cannot conceive.”

“That was another time, another place,” he reminded her. “Here ye are no’ too old. Ye have lived but a third of thy life. ’Tis foretold in the prophecy. Ye will have babies here, at least one more. She stands Guardian to the races, holding back the dark tide. Her name is to be Evalayna.”

Prophecy. In a land of magic and mysticism, where a woman might live a century and a half, there would be prophecy. Marilyn leaned back against him, wanting to believe. “Teach me, Roanen. Teach me to love again. Teach me to believe.”

Long dark hair touched lightly with silver cascaded over her as he bent his head, his lips caressing her temples, her eyebrows, her eyelids before they found their way to her mouth, the touch sweet, soft, the tease of a butterfly's wing, then again. He grew bolder now, sucking her lower lip between his as she parted to him, her breath a sigh of acquiescence. Real or dream, it no longer mattered. He knew her and still he loved her.

She would have turned in his arms to face him fully, but he swept her hair aside - - Ayaila wore it long -- to settle his lips against her neck at the base of her robe. Shivers coursed over her skin like small trails of electricity. She turned her head away, arching her neck, granting him access to as much skin as he wanted.

"So beautiful. So perfect."

She'd never felt perfect before. Not in this lifetime. Or was it the last one? Each touch of his lips, each stroke of his hands, so sure, so knowing as they skimmed over her to rest in just the right spots, made her feel beautiful, and more alive than she ever had before.

How did he know to touch her just there, where the curve of her hip met the small of her back? How did he know his kisses along the edge of her neck would coax her head back against his shoulder, baring her breasts for his touch as her robe fell open?

Her body knew him, knew his touch and responded. Her mind knew him, knew him as more than a dream remembered. He was no stranger, this dream lover. Yet each kiss was new, as if he explored her for the first time.

"Lord Lindall?"

Marylin cursed the voice from beyond the tent that intruded like a knock at her heart. Her body cried out with the loss as Roanen ceased his attack on her senses. "Wait here for me, my love," he whispered as he rose, sliding her deftly to the furs that covered the dais. "Much as it pains me to leave you, I must see to the men, else we will have no privacy. I will be but a moment."

The cold where his body no longer protected her raised goose bumps along her arms and thighs. Marylin stood long enough to survey the bed, making a few careful

mental adjustments to the place where she intended to gift this intimate stranger with her virgin soul. She thought of a mattress, something luxuriant as well as comfortable, but immediately dismissed the idea. She should not ask for things that were not of this world. The magic might become confused. A down comforter? Was that too much to ask? It appeared as easily as the mud and ruin of but a few minutes ago had vanished. The hides moved to cover the floor like a carpet, while a deep feather bed softened the hard lines of the dais.

She scattered a dozen silk pillows across the dais for both atmosphere and comfort. She could hear Roanen's voice, a deep rumble, almost a growl, from beyond the tent, instructing the guards that he was not to be disturbed. From off in the distance the mournful call of a lone wolf split the night air. Another voice answered, closer, and soon a chorus took up the calls, as if they were passing messages back and forth. Rather than fear the sounds, something in her strained to understand, as if she should have known their language. Something in her longed to join the pack, to answer the call.

Shaking herself out of the strange reverie, she dismissed the wolves as she concentrated on the room. The setting must be perfect. She imagined the soft perfume of wildflowers as a crisp breeze blew all traces of smoke from the room. She searched the tent with her eyes, but found no washstand or mirror with which she might study her reflection. She was plain enough as it was. 'Twould not do to have the residue of burnt tent streaked across her face.

The thought gave her pause. What face would stare back at her from the mirror? Hers? Or Ayaila's? Surely a body could not transcend time and space. The corporeal entity must be left behind for the spirit to travel.

Would she know the difference? Except for the dress, dark cobalt robes dusted with snow, the body Shammall had shown her could as easily have been her own. What if -- what if what Shammall had said was true? Could she really be dead? She didn't feel dead. Not now. She'd never felt more alive. Perhaps the Elf-Mage had given her a new chance to salvage a wasted life.

No. She would not -- could not -- think of this time and place as reality. This was but a fantasy. Still, she needed a mirror. If she was to bed the love of her fantasy life, she would at least indulge in some warm water and a moment in front of a mirror...

Why could she not think a mirror into existence? Were there limits to what she could wish for and hope to have appear? Well, then, how about some light? A dozen short, fat, flickering candles that would add light as well as fragrance to the room?

No sooner thought than they appeared. She thought of the mirror once more. Nothing. Damn. A stand with a washbasin and a pitcher and a mirror on the back? She got the washstand, exactly as she had pictured it, minus the mirror. All right. No glass. Anything shiny enough to offer her a reflection, then. She rethought the washstand. A highly polished silver oval appeared between its ox-bow frames.

Hesitant, now, she dipped the cloth in the water -- warm this time -- slowly raising her gaze. Her own face looked back at her, streaked and smudged and slightly fuzzy, yet still her own. She ran the cloth over the streaks, frantically trying to restore order to her image and her emotions. Her hair was a tangle, a rat's nest of unimaginable proportions. A brush. She needed a brush. A --

The brush appeared, Roanen's huge hand wrapped firmly around the handle. He stood behind her, his chin level with the top of her head. One arm slipped around her waist while the hand armed with the brush went to work, gently stroking through the tangled length of her curls.

Next to Roanen she felt once again, as she had in her dreams, small, and protected. She shivered as she let herself relax against him, giving herself up to the heat and strength of his body. The fear and uncertainty faded under his touch. Real or not, she would have this memory of a man who loved her.

"Ye are so beautiful to me," the man in the silvered reflection whispered. He bent his head to nuzzle the skin where he'd brushed her hair back away from her neck. "So delicate, like a fragile flower."

Delicate? Fragile? Marilyn closed her eyes, willing the tears away. Dear God, how she'd wanted to hear those words. Wanted to be something other than what she

was -- too tall, too old, too unloved. An over-the-hill ex-wife. A stuffy old college professor with nothing but her job and her dreams left to cling to.

Now a stranger stood behind her, merely brushing her hair, and she found herself transformed. For him, for this man, this here and now, she *was* small and delicate and fragile. For this man she would be anything, everything.

The feel of the brush caressing each strand of hair was almost too erotic to bear. She fairly hummed with tension as he continued his slow, measured strokes. "I remember the first time I saw ye. I thought ye a goddess, dropped to Earth, walking along the Nile. Ye wore a wrap of white linen, so fine-spun that in the sunlight your nipples seemed to beckon to me. I was but a youth, assigned to the temple as a guard. I swore ye were more beautiful than Nefertiti. Ye scolded me for my blasphemy, but ye did not send me away."

Yes. She remembered. She had had this dream. "There were cats..."

"Indeed there were cats. Hundreds of them. The sacred cats had free rein in the temple of our goddess."

"Bast." She'd always loved the statues of Bast, the goddess with the body of a woman and the head of a cat. Bast was the protectress of the Royal House and of the Two Lands -- upper and lower Egypt.

Bast was also the goddess of lovers.

So many times Marylin had told the story of Bast to her students. No wonder she'd always been able to make the temple come alive for them. Memories came flooding back. Bast was more than a story to her. She had served the goddess. Her name had been Nylanéfer, and she had been Bast's High Priestess.

The boy had worked his way up through the ranks, from kitchen servant to temple guard, and finally to her personal "hemu."

She remembered standing before a silvered mirror just like this while the young man brushed her hair.

* * *

She shouldn't have allowed such intimate contact. He was her guard, not her personal attendant. But she had been too long without a lover. She bit her lip as he laid down the brush, moving her hair aside to kiss her shoulders and the curve of her neck.

She watched in fascination as his hands moved down her sides to circle her hips, stroking up now over the curve of her thighs to her belly, pausing there, framing her mons as if he could feel the coil of need his touch aroused. His bronzed skin made a dark contrast against the bleached linen of her wrap. He was so young. She was nearly twice his age. She'd meant to wait longer, give him time to grow into his full potential. But he was hers, a gift from the goddess herself, and she could do what she wanted with him, could she not? Surely the goddess would approve. The great Bast always blessed lovers.

She stared at his hands in fascination. "I could have you killed for your impudence."

"I live but to serve you." His heat pressed into the curve of her ass, hard and hot and wanting, as his words whispered across her neck. "Do what you will with me, Lady. I would rather die than live without you. I have loved you since first I saw you." He raised his head, practically shouting to the stone walls of the temple. "Hear me, oh great Bast, and accept my oath! Before thee, oh great goddess, I swear I shall love this woman till the end of time!"

Oh, goddess. He was so young! Did he not know the consequences of such an oath? "A boy's promise," she chided. "Rash and reckless and dangerous. What does a child know of love?"

"I am no child, Lady. If I am old enough to give my life to protect you, should such be my fate, I am old enough to love you."

She closed her eyes, leaning back against the broad chest and hard cock that promised more than she could allow. "You cannot understand the implications of your promise... there will be consequences. Your rivals will not be pleased that I have chosen but a mere boy."

He rubbed slowly against her, his hips pressing hard against hers, his cock jumping with every move. She hesitated, her hand on the knot that bound her wrap in place. What would he see in the mirror? He was but a child in a man's body. He should be with someone his own age. One of the young priestesses. Not an old woman. Though she pampered herself, her body had seen too many years. Twenty and eight. If he turned away -- if he turned away, she would have him killed for the insult.

With a single tug, she loosed the linen that fell to puddle around their feet.

"Goddess," he whispered, his fingers moving to cup her breasts in the mirror. "You're perfect." His cock bucked against her naked ass with the firm strength of youth. One hand strayed back to her mons, sliding over the oiled skin of her plucked mound, his cock nuzzling her ass as his fingers slipped between her folds. He towered over her, a massive bear of a man-child, making her feel small and helpless as he ground her against his cock. What little he wore vanished quickly, falling to join her cherished linen, unheeded, on the stone floor. Her hands grasped the bowed bed frame for support as he prodded her ass with that hard, dripping cock. His fingers within her already had her panting, slick and wanting, but she froze as his cock pressed against her.

No. He couldn't mean to...

"Shhh. Relax, my love. I will not hurt you. Would you risk conceiving my child?"

"I -- no. But --"

"I will not hurt you. Trust me."

His fingers came first, teasing, stretching, lubricating her with her own juices while she clung to the bed for support. Each move, each caress, made her want him more. She thrust against him now, giving him access, panting for breath as she writhed against his fingers.

One hand held her, gripping her tightly, still caressing her mons, while the fingers of the other slipped in and out of her ass. She screamed as the pleasure/pain became too much to bear, but she could not escape him. More. She wanted more. She wanted...

"Patience, my greedy lover. Patience. Your body must learn to know me. Trust me."

To hell with patience. She wanted -- oh great goddess. She screamed again as his fingers slipped out and he carefully guided his cock into the void he'd left behind. The world stopped turning as he held steady within her. One second. Two. She forced her tight muscles to relax.

Slowly, gently, he slid in further, until she could feel the head of his cock, almost brushing his fingers as they pressed against her from the front. And then his fingers began to move again. And she screamed again as lightning flashed before her eyes and thunder roared in her ears. Falling. She was falling. Down a void of longing and lust that knew no end. Then he was thrusting, pushing, rubbing, pinching, taking her with the strength and lust of a boy just become a man.

Too much. Too much! She fought him now, fought to escape the sensations that threatened to shatter her calm, ordered world. "They will hear us!" she fretted. "They will..."

"Who would censure you, Mistress? The goddess will not condemn us. I will bear the jealousy of the Priests. I shall endure whatever punishment befalls me. I swear before the goddess, whatever happens, I shall always love you, Lady, in this lifetime or the next. Tell me only that you will wait for me."

"I have loved you since first I saw you," she admitted, her heart pounding with the boldness of her words. "I feared only that you were too young. If I must, I will wait for you again, in this lifetime or the next, it matters not. I am yours. Forever and always. This I swear."

His seed spurted into her, hot and searing, as she broke again under his demanding fingers. "Forever and always my love. This I swear."

Chapter Three

"I have loved thee since first I saw thee," Roanen whispered as his fingers caressed her. "In this lifetime or the next, it matters not. I shall love ye till the end of time. Forever and always, my love. This I swear."

Marylin opened her eyes to watch as his hands moved to skim the fine burgundy silk up over her shoulders. He left a trail of desire wherever he touched. She turned now to wind her arms around his neck, raking her nails against his scalp as she feathered his long, dark hair away from his face. "Senedjem?"

"Nylanéfer." He breathed the name like a benediction. "So long. It's been so long. By the goddess I have missed ye, Nyla."

"And I you. I looked for you everywhere, but only in my dreams did I find you." She stretched up to kiss him, this stranger she had known since the world was young, tasting this new flavor that was somehow familiar. "Are we in the dreaming yet? If I wake up and you're not with me, I shall not be able to bear it. I cannot lose you again!"

"Ye will never lose me, my love. Anywhere, any time, I will find thee." His hands gripped her ass, pulling her tightly against his hungry cock. "I will find thee, and I will love thee."

"Then let us not waste the time we're given." She giggled as her fingers found the hard bulge that strained against his dense wool leggings. "You're wearing too many clothes," she chastised as she tasted the pulse at the base of his throat.

A chuckle rumbled across his chest. "Perhaps ye should do something about that."

"Perhaps I shall."

Awake or asleep, real or the dreaming, it did not matter. He'd used the dreaming before to find her. She'd use the dreaming to find him again if she had to. She didn't

have to search for him now. He was here in her arms. Marilyn or Nylanéfer, or Ayaila, what did the names matter? He was no boy this time, this stranger she knew as well as she knew herself.

Still he was bound by the boy's oath. *I shall love you till the end of time...* She wished she could remember more. Surely four thousand years with one lover was more than any man was meant to endure. Surely he would have tired of her by now. Had there been times when they'd fought? Lover's quarrels that lasted for lifetimes? Had he ever regretted his promise? Sennedjem had been so young...

She would not let Roanen regret the boy's oath. At least not tonight. She paused to suck his nipples through the fine-woven fabric, enjoying the way he shivered at her touch, before she pulled the tunic up over his head. He must have remembered the night at the inn, for the wrists were not fastened this time. The tunic dropped to the floor beside the bed.

There were differences. Where the youth had been long and lean and untried, the man before her was broad and powerful enough to frighten her, had she been less sure of him. A shiver ran through her as she found the fastenings that held his leggings in place. She knew where to look this time.

It had always been like this with him. The warm glow of anticipation. The need, the hunger that coiled within her, making her want more, so much more. His long, blunt fingers explored the fine hair that adorned the dimple at the base of her spine, sending sparks like electricity through her as she shuddered in his arms. She let her fingers fumble over the pants, slipping inside to ride down the length of him until she could cup his balls in her palm.

So warm. So alive. His cock thrust at her, soft velvet skin over hard, hot steel. She ached to take him within her cunt, to ride him until he broke, but she wanted more. After four thousand years she knew how to get what she wanted from him, how to give him all he'd never think to ask for. She pushed him back toward the silk covered bed as she ordered her right hand back to its original job of undressing him. The left one had a mind of its own, tangling itself in his hair while it pulled his head down to her level.

Ummm. He tasted like sweet, spiced wine. She sucked at his lip, savoring the taste. The buttons undone at last, the leggings slid down to puddle around his ankles. She had a solution for that, as well. With a gentle push, her hand still guiding his head, she laid him back among the pillows.

Would he remember?

He'd been so young, yet his control had surprised her. She'd trusted him once, so long ago. She knew other ways to prevent conception. After that first time he'd trusted her enough to let her do as she would with him. She'd led him to her bed, not unlike this one, a raised platform covered with fine woven linen and soft cushioned pillows.

Had she really thought him too young? She had been wrong. It was a man's body that lay beneath her, fresh with youth, rippling everywhere with strength and power that had not yet learned the bitterness of defeat.

The Warrior's body was not so different.

In fact, he was quite gorgeous. A superb specimen of manhood. Time had added a few lines around those emerald green eyes, had dusted his black hair with streaks of silver, like a shooting star blazing across the night sky. He had the physique of a Warrior who had fought his way to where he was. If she was still here in the morning, she would ask him to teach her more of this world. She would make him tell her the story of the long scar that crossed his chest, and the fine line along the edge of his jawbone.

For now, she touched, memorizing the shape of him once again, the texture of his skin just where his breastbone hollowed above his heart, learning once again how he loved to taste her ears, her breasts, her eyelids, her lips.

He watched as she pulled back, lowered her mouth to take his length between her lips, moving slowly, loving the feel of his body, so strong, so powerful, so finely attuned to hers. He shifted beneath her until they lay side by side, his mouth hovering inches from the apex of her thighs. Yes. Yes! She wanted -- she needed --

For a moment her mouth went still on his cock as his breath warmed her already burning fires. His hands took their time, curling down from her knees to stroke the

inside of her thighs. She opened to him instantly, her pussy already wet with desire. His clever fingers found their way to her pussy, stroking as they parted her lower lips for the invasion of his tongue.

“So beautiful.”

She ran her tongue over the tip of his cock, just below the head, feathering over the sensitive edge. “So are you.”

He jumped as she blew her breath over his wet skin, his hips thrusting toward the promise of her kiss. Slow gave way to impassioned as his tongue lapped at her with sudden wantonness, teasing her clit, rimming her opening, his tongue sliding deep into her hot, needy cunt.

She swallowed him fully, taking his length deep into her throat, her lips teasing his balls as she sucked him like a sweet prize from the pastry chef. Her hands busied themselves with rhythmically squeezing his ass, kneading him like a large cat. Then she forgot altogether what she was doing as he took her clit between his lips, sucking as he ran his tongue over her, his fingers now sliding deep inside her, until she could feel them stretching her as no man ever had.

At least in this lifetime.

Damn. She didn't even know for sure whose lifetime this was.

She hadn't time to puzzle over that as the first orgasm tore through her, leaving her weak and helpless but far from sated in its wake. Reminded by his sudden thrusts in her mouth as she came, her muscles clenching around his probing fingers, she set to work on his cock again.

Damn, he was big. There was no way she could suck his cock and his balls at the same time. She freed her hand from under his hip and used it to stroke his balls as she sucked his cock, stopping only when she needed to let a groan escape as he sank his tongue back deep into her shuddering muscles.

As if observing herself from a distance, Marilyn watched the two of them there on the bed, a circle of entwined limbs laid out like a sacrifice on Bast's altar. If this was sex, she had come to Roanen's bed a virgin. A forty-five-year-old virgin. Certainly --

damn, she found she couldn't remember her almost ex-husband's name! Marilyn's husband. She could picture his penis, though. She suppressed a giggle as she fit the pieces together. Don. Dinghy Don she'd named him. Though she'd never had the guts to call him that to his face. Well, Don had never made her feel like this.

As if he sensed her momentary absence, Roanen nipping at her clit, sucked her back to the present. She exploded instantly, screaming as the orgasm shook her. Lights flashed before her eyes. Lights? They were not merely lights. Stars painted the night sky as she fought for breath. Whole constellations formed before her eyes. She fought for consciousness as the spasms shook her to her very soul.

He took control then, while she melted beneath him, too limp to protest. With a flash of insight, she knew he'd always been in control. From the grief he'd allowed her to see when she first awoke to the power he'd given her and the time he'd allowed her to remember, he'd always been in control.

He rolled her now face down in her pillows. Stroking her body with long, slow sweeps of his hands, he caressed places she'd never thought to find erogenous, like the backs of her elbows and the base of her skull. "Tell me what ye want from me, my love."

He'd manipulated her, reawakened her, and done it all slowly and gently until she didn't know what was real anymore. What was more important was that she knew what he was doing, and she didn't care. She just wanted him to love her. Her and only her. "I want you. I would live the oath I swore before Bast once again. Whoever, wherever we are, I want you, Roanen."

"The goddess goes by another name now, my love," he warned her, though she knew not why. "Seven gods and goddesses there are, in the shape of a star. Earth takes the center, her children around her. We follow the Way of The Wolf, and are known by her name. We are Clan Wolf."

"Her name matters not. My name matters not. I love you. I have always loved you. For now and until the end of time."

“There is much in this name,” he assured her. “I would teach ye the ways of my people. Our gods mean much to us. We honor the Wolf in all that we do.”

What was he trying to tell her? She searched her mind for some knowledge of wolves. From some resource of her mind she garnered the knowledge that wolves fought as a pack, an efficient killing machine, and they mated for life.

Any other thought she might have had got lost under his touch. He knelt between her thighs, raising her hips toward that scalding rod she’d sucked down her throat. Dear God. She might love him, but she wasn’t insane. If he tried to put that...

Her panic subsided as he stroked his fingers into her cunt again, relaxing her, teasing her, stroking her until a new sheen of liquid lubricated his fingers. Lifting her hips up even farther, he carefully fit himself inside her, guiding his progress with his hand, cupping her mons for support, his fingers splayed through her fur.

She was almost surprised that he fit. But then the surprise faded to longing and greedy need as she wiggled her ass against him, loving the feel of him stretching her, demanding release as she clenched hard around him.

Whatever slow, careful plan Roanen thought he had laid out she destroyed with the first thrust of her hips. He drew back for a quick, hard thrust into her slick, wet heat, then another, and another. Hard and hot and ruthless, he buried himself so deeply within her that his balls tickled the inside of her thighs, their rhythmic brush against her flesh exciting her even more. He thought he was in control, but he’d ended up right where she wanted him, thrusting into her mindlessly, his body shaking with the strain as he gave her everything he had.

She propped herself up on her elbows so that she could turn her head to watch them in the silvered mirror. Her ass raised in suppliant need, his head thrown back, teeth bared in a ferocious growl. Still he fought to hold back, to maintain a control he’d never really had.

Yes. Yes! This was what she had wanted! Raw and naked and animalistic it might be, but there was truth here. She met him as hard as she could, slamming their bodies together as she took all he offered her and asked for more.

“Yes!” she shrieked aloud. “Roanen!”

His breathing came hard, as if he warred with himself. “No! I can no’! Ye are no’ ready! I have no’ told ye all ye must know!”

“Roanen! Now!”

He growled, the strain showing in his face, then again. No. Not a growl. A call. A wolf’s call to mate. *We honor the Wolf in all that we do.* With his call he changed, the image in the mirror becoming fuzzy, until a huge arctic wolf fastened its teeth over her neck, his thick, hard cock pumping into her.

Fear and rage and need warred for dominance. A wolf? She was being fucked by a wolf? She fought him then, but she was no match for his strength. His teeth clamped on her neck held her as he thrust into her. His paws on her shoulders demanded her obedience. His cock pumping into her drove her wild. She opened her mouth to scream, but instead she found herself answering his call. No! No! This could not be happening! She would not -- could not be changing!

She could not turn into a wolf!

She screamed again in terror as she faced herself in the mirror, growling to show all her vicious white teeth. What she saw gave her pause. *We honor the Wolf in all that we do.*

She was beautiful. Black and silver with a coat that shone with the pale light of her candles. He was -- he was perfection. Eyes full of intelligence stared back at her. Predator on every level, he claimed his prize. She’d never seen anything as erotic as the sight they made together.

They fit together perfectly. She stared in fascination as his cock plunged in and out of her tight, wet sheath. So different, and yet so much the same. She dug her claws into the bed, meeting his brutal pace thrust for thrust. She cried out again, but this time in triumph as he shuddered within her. *Yes! Now! More!* Her release was devastating, starting at the ridge of her hard pubic bone where his weight slammed into her and spreading all through her body like a fire that burned from within. She screamed her release to the world, not caring who heard or who knew.

He came like a geyser, buried deep within her, her contractions around him so strong that he could no longer move, but only shudder within her while she milked him dry. At last she collapsed beneath him, her hind legs stretched back under his. Still the waves of sensation passed through her. Still she held him clamped tightly within her sheath. Her body would not release him, but he didn't seem panicked. His teeth still fastened in her fur, he fell to his side, pulling her into the embrace of his arms. Paws. Whatever. She'd figure it out later. Much later.

For now, his muzzle lay next to hers, and the heavy sound of his breathing told her she'd left him as spent as he'd left her. She closed her eyes to listen to the sound of his heart beating against her shoulder.

"Stay with me," he whispered against her cheek. "I need ye so."

"As I need ye." She drifted off to dream of mating wolves and a world full of possibilities.

* * *

Roanen...

She reached out, but the bed beside her was empty.

Bed. Springs creaked as she turned. Her bed at the inn.

Roanen!

Sobs shook her as she rolled to bury her face in a pillow. She'd known. All along she'd known he was no more than a dream, a product of years of fascination with a world long gone. She couldn't find a man who would love her for one lifetime, let alone four thousand years. She was a fool to have believed in the dreams.

A knock on the door called her back to this world. "Ms. Henry? Are you all right? Ms. Henry?"

No, I'm not all right! she wanted to shout, but she couldn't muster up the energy. *I am so fucking not all right!*

"I have your breakfast, Ma'am. I'll just leave your tray here on the hall table."

Christ on a crutch. She didn't want to be a fucking *Ma'am*, either. Son-of-a-bitch. She'd always hated mornings. Hung over mornings were worse. Hung over after a

night of being fucked by a seven-foot-tall Warrior who could turn into a wolf was entirely too much.

Stay with me. I need ye so.

How could it have been a dream? It had felt so real... Roanen had felt so real. She wanted to be there, not here. She needed to be there. Roanen needed her. What would happen to him without her? She hadn't even had time to learn about the world outside the tent. Life there had been harsh, she was sure of that. Obviously things had gone wrong somewhere in the future. No electricity. No running water. No modern conveniences of any kind that she could see. Pavilion tents and goats' milk?

Perhaps it was as well it had all been a dream. How the hell could a man she'd only dreamed of need her so badly, any way? He couldn't. He was simply a product of an overactive imagination and an even more overactive sex drive.

Get a grip, Doc. She could almost hear Tina, her research assistant's, voice. When did you start believing in fairy tales?

Get a grip, Baby-Girl. When did you stop believing?

That would be Gray.

Stay with me. I need ye so.

Roanen...

What if...

What if this were all true?

Stay with me.

What if he'd been offering her a choice?

What if she'd had only so much time to decide, and she'd blown it? Maybe Shammall had been wrong. Maybe she wasn't really dead, but sort of in a coma or something and now she'd woken up. What if...

Marylin sighed. She could what-if herself to death and not get anywhere.

If she could just prove any part of the dream was real, then it all was. And if she could prove any part false, the same was true. All or nothing, right?

And how could she prove any of it? Ever? Prove magic existed? Prove a disembodied spirit could travel through time and end up in another body? Prove...

Bast. Surely there must be some record of the High Priestess of Bast. If Nylanéfer and Sennedjem had existed, then perhaps someday Roanen and Ayaila would exist as well. She needed to get online. But her body resisted her efforts to move. Something was weighing her down, holding her pinned to the bed. Panic nearly overwhelmed her before she fought free, leaving the weight behind. Feeling suddenly lighter than she had in years, Marilyn practically flew across the ten feet of floor that separated her from her laptop. She hadn't unpacked her clothes, but she had set up her computer. A quick Internet search should tell her... Nothing. Nylanéfer didn't exist. Not on the Internet. Not surprising, really. It was the goddess herself who would have survived, not her high priestesses.

All right. A different search, then. High Priestess of Bast. Better. Thousands of references. That was odd. She didn't recognize any of these references. She clicked on the second one. A line drawing of a cat appeared. A human cat with female breasts. Not Bast. No. A beautiful cat-woman so very different from Bast. Someone's role-playing game character sheet. The cat-woman was downright sexy.

Scanning the other listings she realized they either led to Wiccan Covens of Bast or more online character sheets. She couldn't suppress the smile that pulled at her lips. The goddess would have approved. All right. Past lives. Maybe she could learn something about Nylanéfer from her own memories. If only she could believe when she was awake...

Ghosts? How had she ended up at a site about ghosts? ... *usually occurs when there is some unresolved issue holding the spirit to the site where the body passed on. Usually resolving the issue will free the spirit...*

The words seemed to jump off the page at her.

Stay with me.

What if she *was* dead? What if everything Shammall had told her was true? Could she be a ghost? Could she still be clinging to this life, this world, because she had

some unresolved issue? What unresolved issues? She'd given up on Don long ago. Don and his women and his need to prove how virile he was with a string of younger women. There was no one else. The college could live without her. There was no --

Gray. Her death would hurt Gray the most. She needed to let him know that everything would be all right. But she might not have much time. Not if she was going to die soon. How... Simple. Email. The way she'd kept in touch with Gray for years now.

Dear Gray, I want you to know...

No. She didn't want it to sound like a suicide note. She needed him to understand, without giving the details. If she turned up dead, there would be an investigation. She needed something only Gray would understand. Just a line or two. Then she remembered. Perfect. She smiled as she moved to hit send.

Behind her a soft knock sounded. The door swung open. "Housekeeping, Ma'am. I'll just bring your --"

A tray hit the floor with the sound of breaking glass as the woman screamed. Marylin spun instantly, following the shrieking maid's pointing finger to the bed. What... Who... Marylin moved closer to get a better look at the figure lying there in her bed. Then she screamed, too.

Chapter Four

"She is still asleep?"

"Aye." Roanen rinsed the sleep from his eyes. "Ye look like a man well bedded."

"As do you," the small Dark Elf agreed with a trace of a smile in his voice. With a shrug and a popping of bones the Dark Elf shifted, and Shammall emerged from the shadows.

The Mage looked more than bedded. His pale skin looked nearly transparent. Surely even a *Sidhe* must sleep from time to time. Roanen sighed. They all needed rest. Without a healer, they could not go on. His own men fared no better than Shammall. The Mage had done only what was necessary. "What have ye learned?"

"Nafésti has taken what remains of her house back into the mountains to hide, to lick their wounds and to grow strong again, M'Lord. If we attack them now, without their contingent of Ogres, we may be able to gain an advantage."

Roanen's fingers strayed to the hilt of his great axe, but he stayed his hand, remembering his last encounter with the great Sorceress. "Nafésti is too powerful, and we are too few, and too battle weary ourselves. If she has withdrawn, 'tis enough. The valleys are safe for a time. We can no' face a Sorceress of Nafésti's caliber without the help of an equally powerful Shaman. The risk is too great. We shall return to House Lindall, that we, too, may heal."

Shammall looked toward the tent beyond the reach of the firelight. "How is she, M'Lord?"

"She hovers here, on the edge of one world, still anchored in the other." Roanen looked to the west, toward their homeland. "Promise me this, Mage. When my time comes, ye must see to her. Keep her here. Without Ayaila's strength, House Lindall will

fall. The prophecy must be fulfilled. House Lindall must stand guardian to the seven races of Man. Ayaila must bear the one who will unite the Houses. Promise me, Mage."

Shammall stared at Roanen, swallowing hard, his meaning all too well understood. "M'Lord, I could not --"

"Ye shall protect her, and my house, Shammall, with thy life. The fate of the free races depends on her, and on thee. Swear it to me."

"Ye have my oath of fealty, M'Lord."

Roanen pressed his eyes tight shut. "I am no' important. No' in the grand design of the world. 'Tis the daughter Ayaila has yet to bear who matters. 'Tis Evalayna, and her daughters, who matter. Upon them rests the fate of our world. Ye know the prophecy. I will not live to see my granddaughters grow to power, Shammall, but ye will. Somehow I know thy fate is as intertwined with Evalayna's as mine is with Ayaila's. Into no other hands would I trust their care."

Shammall sank slowly to one knee. "I live but to serve you and your house, M'Lord. If by my life or my death I can protect the Lady and her children, it shall be done."

Roanen gripped Shammall's shoulder tightly for a moment. "Thank you. I must go to her now. Once she accepts this reality as her own, ye must teach her to harness her power. Arise, and find thy way to thy bed before the sun catches up with thy night's work."

The Mage swayed unsteadily as he stood. Roanen grasped him firmly by the arm. "I can no' give ye the time ye need to rest, Mage. I am sorry."

"I need but a little time, M'Lord. Go to your Lady."

A shrill scream split the night air. As one they turned toward the sound, all thought of sleep gone from them.

"Ayaila?" Arms wrapped around her, strong arms, crushing her against a chest of broad, naked power. "Marylin? I am here, my love. Shhh. Whatever it is, I will protect thee."

Her heart was beating as hard as if she'd run across the years that separated them. "Roanen? You're here? You're real?"

"Aye, M'Lady. Ye need not fear me."

Marylin ran her hands over his back, absorbing the warmth, admiring the sheer massive musculature of the man. "I must have been dreaming. It felt like a dream. I was so frightened. I went back. I had to. I needed to get a message to my friend... but then I saw myself, lying there, dead... the other me, a long time ago." Had any of it been real? Had she actually hit send? "I need to go back. At least long enough to say good-bye. Gray won't understand. He'll think he failed me. My death will destroy him."

Roanen pulled back a little, looking down at her with eyes full of misery. "I had hoped ye would stay. Did ye love him so very much, then?"

"I -- no. Yes. Gray was my friend. He was always there for me. Gray -- in my time, not all men preferred the company of women for sex. Gray was like a -- a sister to me. Does that make any sense?"

She tried not to laugh at the look of relief that passed across Roanen's face. "I understand. Always there have been those who prefer the intimate company of their own sex."

Had she really been back in her own time? Had she really sent the email? Even if she hadn't hit send, the note would be there on the laptop screen, wouldn't it? Somehow, it would reach Gray. "Gray is -- was, I guess -- he must have died four hundred years ago -- Gray was an artist. The sensitive type. He's fragile. If he thinks he failed me, I'm not sure he can live with that. I can only hope he got my message."

"I am sorry, M'Lady. I, too, have failed ye."

"No! No, Roanen. Never."

"I --" Roanen leaned back a little farther, the distance between them growing more than physical. "I understand. The Mage was wrong to deceive ye. Ye have the right to choose, Marylin. Return if ye must. We had no' the right to bring ye here."

To choose. She had to choose. Somehow she'd known. "It's all right, Roanen. Gray will find his own way. The Mage did not deceive me. I made my own choice, and I

chose you. Marylin is dead, Roanen. I saw her. I felt her passing. Her body was like a lifeless weight, holding me down, but I fought free of it to come back to you. I'm here because I choose to be here, with you."

His fingertips brushed lightly over the curve of her cheekbone, tracing down the line of her jaw to cup her chin with the gentle touch of a lover. "Sometimes when ye speak of her, Marylin is so real to me that I feel her. Ye can no' know, for ye have no' the memories of us I hold, but Ayaila was so like ye. Forgive me. I thought only of myself, and what I had lost. 'Twas no' Ayaila's time to go, any more than 'twas Marylin's. Still, 'twas no' my right to call her back."

Marylin kissed the base of his thumb, where it rested near her lips. "Who is there that would challenge you, Roanen? Who is there to enforce this Law of Magic? Will the Magic Police come knocking on our door, demanding my return to the land of the spirits?"

His lips quirked at that. "I think not. Ye can no' be punished for our misdeeds. Only those who cast the spell. 'Tis no' the Magic Police who might censure us. Or perhaps 'tis. There is an order to things. A hierarchy of races, ye might call it. After the Great Shift, when the magic reawakened, the oldest of the races made themselves known to Man again. They taught us how to use and control the magic, and they gave us rules. To each major house a guardian is assigned. 'Tis Shammall's job to see that we use the magic wisely."

Great Shift? Races? Magic? To be fair, she already knew about the magic. Hadn't she burnt down the tent, then put it back? And Shammall himself was no ordinary man. Not with those ears. Great Shift rather explained itself, though she'd need to trace back over that part of history. Later. The politics of the situation came slamming into her as she puzzled through Roanen's easily spun tale, separating the known from the unknown, the truth from the things he did not wish to burden her with. "And what of Shammall? Who might censure Shammall?"

As if in response to her summons, though she was not aware of having given one, Shammall appeared in the doorway, bowing low as he entered. The tall, pale -- Elf?

-- looked weary, even more worn about the edges than he had yesterday, as if he'd spent the night in hard work. "My father," he answered. "'Tis my father who assigned me this house to protect and to guide, M'Lady. 'Tis to him I shall answer."

"And if we do not tell him you have broken the Law of Magic, how will he know?"

"He will know, M'Lady. He already knows. A spell such as I used creates a ripple in the magic, pulling power through the energy field. Any other user of magic will feel a draw so large."

"How will he punish you, Shammall?"

"I will be censured, M'Lady."

"And?"

He shrugged, an elaborate gesture that went too far out of its way to appear unconcerned. "My father will punish me as he sees fit, M'Lady. 'Tis his right, and his duty. I would expect nothing less of him."

There was more, something he was trying to keep from her. "You will tell me the truth, Mage. Spare me nothing. I sense this is not a world I can survive in with half-truths and lies."

"I do not know precisely how Father will punish me, M'Lady. I do know he will be very, very angry with me. But it will not be the first time, M'Lady, nor likely the last."

The two men looked, she decided, rather like two of her students might have had she caught them cheating on a test. Whatever else the Mage's father might do, it couldn't be good. "Roanen said there wasn't time in the midst of battle. What exactly about what you two did was wrong? Could I -- could Ayaila have been brought back had you done whatever you did sooner?"

"Aye, M'Lady," they answered in tandem.

"Had we another Shaman, Ayaila could have been put into stasis until she was healed," Roanen explained. "But the war has depleted our numbers. We had but Ayaila and Shammall on our side. Shammall could no' get to her in time."

The Mage looked dead on his feet, ready to pass out from exhaustion. She should let him go, but she had to know. Had to understand the rest. "The misuse of magic?"

Shammall blushed, bringing a slight color to his pale cheeks. "I could have called her back, M'Lady, even though her spirit had slipped away from her body, had I but reached her sooner. I tried. I -- the enemy was too strong. They knew what I was about. Nafésti herself made it her mission to keep me from Ayaila's body. I was not strong enough to defeat her. Only after our Warriors had pushed the enemy back through the gap could I go to Ayaila. And when I called her, she was already too far away. She could not come back."

"Perhaps," Marylin thought aloud as she chewed her lip, "she did not want to come back."

A look like fear crossed the pale one's face, but whatever he had thought to say got lost as he crumpled slowly to the ground.

* * *

Marylin could feel the Mage's exhaustion, like a palpable thing, a cloak laid over the slight shadow that was his body. As if from a great ways away she watched herself gather the tall, pale body into her arms. Was this real? Or was she once again part of the dreaming?

Whatever he had done, there was no true evil in the Mage. She sensed he would give his life for her if the need arose. Whatever, wherever this reality, it was the Mage's reality too. Ayaila would have known how to help him, heal him. If only she could remember, could find more of Ayaila within herself.

Perhaps she was all there was left of Ayaila. In any case, she was here, she was now, and she would have to figure this out on her own. She sensed the Mage was not injured, but only drained. A thought occurred to her -- a silly thought. Marylin had to suppress a giggle as she bent over the crumpled form. Kiss it and make it better? So childish. But it was worth a try. She laid her lips against the Mage's temple, thoughts of comfort and ease flowing through her mind.

The laughter died on her lips. She could feel the energy flow to him. Easy, easy now. Remember the tent. She needed to heal him, not cook him. Cool, healing thoughts, like a gentle breeze in the spring.

The Mage stirred under her touch, dragging in a deep breath. Color began to return to his face. Marylin pulled back enough to watch the Mage wake up, though she let her fingers frame his temples. She could still feel the energy flowing through her fingertips, a slow, steady stream. His eyes fluttered open. Funny. She'd not noticed the color before. Deep lavender.

"M'Lady! You must not! I cannot allow you to drain yourself so."

Marylin laughed at that. "What have you to say about it, Mage? When you're strong enough to fight me, you will not need what I give you any more."

As if to prove her words, Shammall raised his hand, wrapping his fingers around her wrist, but he could not break her touch. He had the strength of a small kitten. Marylin let the smile turn to laughter on her lips. "Teach me, Mage. There is power in me. Teach me how to harness this power. Teach me how to heal, without burning down the tent again. Give me something more than instinct to guide my hands."

Shammall's gaze flicked to Roanen, who stood slightly back, his face a mask of concern. Roanen nodded slightly. "'Tis time. We need thy skills, *Mael amin*. Shammall is no' a healer. In truth we need ye greatly."

"Let me guide you," Shammall whispered. "Close your eyes, and come with me to the dreaming." His hold on her wrist loosened, his fingers sliding down to cover hers. She linked her fingers with his, closing her eyes, concentrating on the feel of the magic within her. "Can you see the lamp?"

Pure, raw energy. She saw flames, like the tent, but Shammall pulled back instantly. She tried again. Smaller, flickering flames this time. A lantern appeared, an old glass globe lantern filled with scented blue oil, its light dimming, then growing brighter. Yes. That was what the Mage was trying to teach her. The lamp was symbolic. Her energy touching the Mage's. She was the fuel, he was the flame. She reached into the dreaming, her fingertips ever so gently adjusting the small knurled brass knob that

raised and lowered the wick. Higher, higher, until the flames gave off a pure, radiant light.

Marylin felt the Mage tremble beneath her touch where her other hand still rested on his temple. Fear? He feared her? But why?

But she knew. The tent. If she turned the wick up too far, and the flames began to smoke, would she do him harm, rather than healing? No. That wasn't what he feared. He was concentrating on the scented blue oil, watching the level go down. Ahhh. Leave the lamp burning too long, and it would burn itself out. Run out of fuel. What would happen to her then?

"You worry too much, Mage," she chided, turning the lamp down low. She leaned in to kiss his forehead again as she opened her eyes. "Sleep now. You must sleep for your spirit to heal."

The lines of worry and strain eased from his face as his eyes slid closed. Roanen picked the Mage up as if he were no more than a child and laid him out on their bed. Marylin pulled one of the hides up to cover him, tucking him in as if he'd been their child. In truth, he looked very young just at that moment. He could be no more than twenty.

A child. Their child. There were things she must tell Roanen. She took his arm to lead him from the tent, but instead he gathered her close, dwarfing her once again with the sheer bulk of his body. Dear God he was huge. A tremor ran through her as she surrendered to his kiss, the warm mating of lips and twining of arms and melding of heart and soul.

A thought nagged at her, one that would not go away. He had stopped her for a reason. Roanen sought to protect her. From what? What would she see beyond the tent? Was this world incomplete? Would they cease to exist outside the doors? She laid her hand along his cheek, the gesture a caress as much as a distancing. "What are you keeping from me, Roanen?"

"I love ye," he whispered as he turned to kiss her fingers.

What was he not telling her? What would he want to hide from her? She ran through what she knew of this world in her mind. There had been a great battle, and Ayaila had been killed. Images flooded back to her, so hard she staggered. Wounded and dying everywhere. Men writhing in agony as the Sorceress' bolts cut them down. Pieces fell into place. The Mage was not a healer. Ayaila was. *In truth we need ye greatly.*

Without Ayaila, there was no one to care for the wounded. How long had the Warriors suffered, while she lay abed? Roanen needed her, yet he feared for her. Did he think she was not ready? "Take me to them. Now."

When he didn't move, Marilyn pulled away, knowing he followed as she placed a shaking hand on the hide that curtained the doorway. More images flashed through her head. Blood. So much blood, on a snow covered field. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the curtain aside.

The cold struck her with a force like a fist. Almost without thought she draped herself in a cloak of fine woven wool, stout leather boots protecting her feet. She would study their fashions later. For now, she needed to stay warm. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the rising sun, she raised her eyes to the world beyond the doorway.

White. They lived in a sea of white. Their world was carpeted by snow. A desert in winter. Beyond the perimeter of the camp, nothing moved. Fires dotted the snow. Men huddled next to the fires, their bodies broken and bleeding and begging for sleep. Hundreds of men. Maybe a thousand or more. Here and there a woman moved among them, bathing wounds and offering a canteen. "My God," she whispered.

"Ayaila, I --" Roanen stopped, abruptly, mid-sentence. "I am sorry, M'Lady. Marilyn. I will learn."

Marilyn closed her eyes, remembering the image she'd seen on the bed. "Marilyn is dead. These men have no need for Marilyn. They need Ayaila here. In truth they need more than one Ayaila, but as we have but one of me, I shall have to do."

"Ye give so of thyself, without thought or concern for thy own well-being. I would no' have ye let the lamp burn too low, my love."

“Then lend me your strength if I need it. But I will not have the men suffer and die if I can save them. These men know not Marylin. They know Ayaila. They trust her. They depend on her. Guide me, Roanen. But do not try to stop me.”

His touch turned from soft to firm, an arm under hers, guiding her through the trodden snow. She moved slowly among the men, touching, feeling, learning their pain, healing the worst with a touch.

“Thank ye, M’Lady,” and “We missed ye, M’Lady,” and “’Tis good to have ye back, M’Lady,” blended together until the morning had no start, no ending, only a sea of faces, hurting, hoping, healing. Too slow. Too slow. At this rate it would take her hours, even days, to reach them all. She reached out, laying her hands on the shoulders of the man to either side of her. Yes. She could manage two at once. And if two, why not more? “Join hands,” she instructed. About the fire, the men reached out to link their energies together.

“Seven gods we learned to name. Earth our Mother guides us all. Wind and Rain are ever her spokesmen. Wolf and Bear and Cat and Falcon are our totem spirits.”

Roanen’s voice led the choir, his chant low and deep, like a monk’s liturgy. The chant shifted, the rhythm as familiar as life itself, and Marylin found herself repeating the words.

Eight diamonds form the star.

One for the Wind, the breath of life.

Two for Water, that lends us sustenance.

Three for the Wolf, Endurance and Faithfulness.

Four for the Bear, Courage and Strength.

Five for the Cat, Swift and Cunning.

Six for the Falcon, Freedom and Vision.

They come together in the center,

Earth, Our Mother.

Energy spread out from her in a circle, amplified by the ring of hands. The women ceased their wandering, converging on her, lending their strength. From fire to fire she moved, as if in a trance, taking hands, letting the healing flow. So much pain. So many suffered. A dozen at a time was not enough. She called them to her, all who could reach, the circle growing ever broader. Pain. So much pain. So many wounded in spirit. *Help me, Mother. Give me strength.* She dropped to her knees, to be closer to the Earth. Still they came, some needing, others to add their strength to hers. *Show me who I am, Mother, she begged. Heal me as I heal them.*

Eight diamonds... two moons. How strange. She could see them both, still pale as the sun pushed back the night. An orbiting piece of space junk, her rational mind supplied. *It's sitting at a Lagrange point. L5 I think.* Had she said the words aloud? *How odd. Rather large piece of junk.*

Enough!

Shammall's voice, from a long way off. She must ask him about L5. Later. The circle was breaking. The lamp was growing dim. She needed to sleep.

* * *

"She is asleep?"

"I should not have allowed her to try such a thing. She was not ready. I had taught her only the basic rudiments of the magic. If she dies..."

Roanen pushed his ale aside to place a hand on the Mage's shoulder. "She will no' die, Shammall. She is strong. She gave of herself out of love. The gods will no' let her die. Trust in the gods. Trust in thyself. Ye have done all ye can. Ye must rest now. Ye look as pale as the night mists that roll off of the tundra. Sleep while ye can. We move out in the morning."

"Aye, M'Lord." With a curt nod of his head, the fair *Sidhe* was off, headed for his own tent. Roanen offered up a prayer for him, for forgetfulness.

"'Twas I who should have stopped her," he told the goddess. "Let not the Mage suffer for my negligence, Mother. Guide my hand, I beg ye. Show me how to heal her, else I shall shatter, like pieces of a broken heart."

"Go to her, Roanen. She needs you. Follow your heart."

Roanen glanced at the tent. There were worse things than death. This might just be one of them. He downed the rest of his ale, then nodded his head at his page. The boy ran to his side, his small, sure fingers quick on the leather straps that secured shin guards and bracers and greaves. Roanen divested himself of his weapons as well, even the small boot knife he wore always ready at hand.

The boy looked up, a question in his eyes.

"No' tonight, Garreth. I go to a different sort of battle this night."

The boy's eyes widened in fear. "Has the Lady turned Berserker, M'Lord?"

"I know not. But should she, I will no' have weapons about where she might reach them."

"Take the knife at least, M'Lord, for thy own defense."

"No, boy. Listen, and listen well. No matter what happens to me, the Lady must live. Understand me? Ye will live to serve under the one she will bear, the Lady Evalayna. Evalayna is the child of prophecy, favored of the gods. Without Evalayna, the lands will fall to darkness. Understand me?"

The boy trembled, then threw back his shoulders bravely. "Aye, M'Lord. If by my life or my death I can protect the Lady, it shall be done."

"Spoken like a true Warrior," Roanen praised. He patted the boy on the shoulder before he stole off to his bed.

* * *

A soft whoosh of air across his face awakened Roanen instantly, had him reaching for his knife.

It was not there. He'd left his weapons with Garreth.

Then he remembered why.

He reached out cautiously in the darkness, but found the place beside him empty. "Marylin?" he whispered.

Nothing. Nothing but the sound of his own frightened breathing. "Ayaila?"

Mayhap she had needed to relieve herself. Mayhap --

Whoosh.

He rolled in time to miss the impact of the teeth as they grabbed for his throat, warned by the movement of air as she lunged at him.

For he knew it was Ayaila. Gods forgive him. She had turned. There was no fate worse for Clan Wolf. She'd so exhausted herself as to let her humanity slip away. With a thought, he shifted, his sharp wolf senses hunting for her in the darkness.

There. He'd know her scent anywhere. Her low throaty growl was all the warning he had as she charged again, her fangs glistening in the pale light. He feigned an attack to her left, his teeth reaching for her shoulder, only to turn at the last moment and roll out of the way.

He could not kill her. Not now. Not after all he'd sacrificed to bring her back. There had to be a way to reach her. To make her remember. He called to her softly, the mournful call of a Wolf who'd lost his mate. She stiffened, listening, hesitating a moment before she lunged again. Then she was on him, teeth snapping, claws raking, her intent deadly and vicious.

They rolled together, her hind legs clawing, trying to rip at his guts. He fought her in earnest now. If he lost, if she escaped, the others would kill her. The pack could not afford a Berserker on the loose. They tumbled and rolled, teeth tearing loose patches of hide, blood making them slippery. At last he feigned injury as she raked her fangs over his forearm, yelping in terror as he rolled to his side. She lunged for his exposed throat. With a twist he had her, his teeth firmly anchored in her ruff, his paws hooked over her shoulders, pinning her flat.

She whimpered under him, her body suddenly going soft, her posture acquiescent.

He was not such a fool. There was nothing in Ayaila or Marilyn that would ever give up so easily. If he released her she would battle him to the death. But how could he reach her? He had to find the woman in this maddened creature.

As he shifted his weight over her, his cock brushed her opening, growing instantly hard. By the gods his body had bad timing. He shifted again, trying to think of anything but sex.

Beneath him he felt the crazed she-wolf tremble. She sniffed at him, turning her head as far as she could with her neck caught in his hold. "Mate," he told her. "Remember me, Love. Remember us. I am thy mate."

She stretched under him, tentatively, until his cock rubbed her again. His body's reaction was inevitable. He tensed, his cock shooting toward her, ready to mount her in earnest. With a small mewling noise she pushed up with her hips, shifting her tail out of the way.

It was all the invitation his willing cock needed. With all the savagery of the Wolf he named himself, he thrust into her, her tight, wet sheath bidding him welcome. Powerful muscles captured him, pulling him in farther with wave after wave of undulating spasms. He jerked his hips over her, pounding into her in a rhythm no man could match. Hard and hot and angry and frightened for both of them, he buried himself within her time and again. Nothing could match this. Tight, tight, so tight he fought her for escape with each stroke.

"Mate?" she whimpered, calling him back.

"Mate," he assured her, slowing his attack, remembering why he was there. He buried himself deep within her, forcing himself to hold steady. "My mate. My love."

She twisted beneath him, as far as she could, her eyes, wet with wolf tears, turning toward his. Her voice came as a whimper, both frightened and hopeful. "My mate?"

"Thine. Forever and always," he agreed. The wolf tried to push him, to tease him to resume their mating, but the man who owned the wolf's body ruled now.

Beneath him she shifted, ever so slowly, as if she fought to remember the body of the woman. Sliding out of her, Roanen shifted as well, his hands taking tight hold where his paws had been. He was not such a besotted fool as to trust her. Not yet.

Carefully, cautiously, he shifted his grip, letting her face up from where it smashed against the silk pillows, rolling her until he could look into her eyes. He held her with his body weight, his hands locked over hers, pinning her to the bed, lest she attack once again, while he used his voice to calm her. "Ye are safe, my love. No one will harm ye. I am here."

Wild, dilated eyes shifted their focus in rhythm to her heavy, labored breathing.

"I am here, my love. Trust me. I am Roanen, and I love ye."

She squirmed under him, her hands fisting and releasing as her hips thrust up against him, whether in ardor or attempting escape he was not sure. One leg slipped loose, her foot sliding up his leg to shove his hips down hard against her, grinding his cock against her mons.

That he was sure of. He lifted just slightly, sliding slowly into her wet, willing cunt. He was tempted to close his eyes, to lose himself in the moment, but he had to stay in control. This time he had to be the one in control. There was nothing so dangerous as a Wolf Woman who had turned Berserker. If she forgot who she was, what she was, she could kill him in an instant. His life was a small price to pay, but if she was not yet pregnant, the prophecy might die here this night as well, and the evil they fought would win.

He thrust into her slowly, savoring every stroke, every nuance of each movement, every quiver, every moan that tore from her throat. So little time. They had had so little time together. He stored up the memories for the long years he would spend searching for her again. Always he remembered. Remembered the wanting, remembered the needing, remembered the glory that was the promise he read in her eyes.

She fought him now, fought him as a woman, nipped at him with teeth that could still rip his flesh if she tried, but instead captured his lip, pulling him down for a kiss that threatened his own sanity. Sweet. She tasted sweet as fine aged Merlot. His tongue raked her mouth, savoring every ridge, every swirl as she battled with him. He

loosed her arms now to hold her as a man, his fingers raking her scalp as his hips pistoned against her, testing the depths of her hot, wet cunt.

Both of her legs locked around him now, her feet drumming his ass while her nails raked over his back. She tightened around him, her whole body going rigid and flushed. He waited, savoring the sensations as her cunt gripped his cock in waves of pleasure, let her ride out the storm, then took up the battle once more. So little time. He buried himself in her fully, searching for the bliss that would make him forget.

If they had only this moment, this hour, this day, it would be enough. He had found her again. He had memories that would last him a lifetime should he fail the next time. But he would not fail. Unless the world shifted again, he would come back as a Wolf, and he had her scent. 'Twould not be so hard to find her again.

Her hands clenched on his waist as she tightened again, her voice a muffled scream as she bit at his shoulder. The long, tight spasms of her delicious cunt pulled at him, warred with him, begged him to follow this time. Just when he thought he might manage a while longer, her teeth moved to his nipple, biting and licking until he lost all control, thrusting wildly into her, a man driven by desperation.

"Say my name," he ordered. "Tell me ye know who I am, Wolf Woman!"

She growled and bit him again, the pain so intense he howled as he shot his load into her, twisting and bucking as the pain and the pleasure collided.

"Roanen," she cried as he exploded into her. "You're Roanen. My lover, my husband, my mate."

Roanen laughed and kissed her again, her lips sweet and soft against his as he thrust slowly through the last lingering shivers of their desire. "Forever and always, my love. This I swear."

"Forever and always," she whispered back to him as he gathered her into his arms. "I think I must sleep for a time."

"Sleep, my love. I shall watch over ye."

"I love you, Roanen," she whispered as she lost her battle, her eyes slipping closed.

His heart filled with her till his eyes pooled with tears he would not shed. So little time. But it was always enough. "Wherever we go I will find ye, my love. Ye may lose me for a time, but always I will find ye again. Wait for me next time. I promise 'twill no' take me so long. I love ye more than life itself."

Chapter Five

"Ye shall be the death of me, my love. Ye must never, never do that again."

Her head hurt, worse than any hangover she'd ever had.

Water. A cool cloth. It appeared in her hand, as if by magic.

Oh. This was where she'd come in on this dream the first time. With the damned headache. Marilyn sighed. Made sense, now. Overindulgence of magic led to a headache, worse than any hangover she'd ever had. Well, she didn't have to be a fucking genius to figure that one out.

Shit. Her head wasn't all that hurt.

A buzz like a thousand bees assaulted her ear. Roanen's voice droned on, in a long, low monologue designed, she was sure, to annoy her beyond all hope of redemption. What was the man whining about?

"Come back to me, my love. Can ye not see I need ye here? I know ye can hear my voice. 'Tis the voice of a man who needs his woman, his wife, his daughter's mother, his Shaman. Wake up, my love. Come back to me."

Marilyn forced her voice to remain calm, low, so that her head might not shatter. "Roanen, if you don't shut the fuck up right this instant I shall crawl out of this bed and kill you."

The sound started as a soft chuckle, then built, a snort, a chortle, then full-fledged, roaring laughter.

Marilyn opened one eye and aimed a tiny bolt of anger at him. "Die, you bastard."

He dodged, letting the small fireball whiz by to singe the curtains. "Welcome back, my love!"

The laughter sat well on his tired face. Despite herself, she began to smile. "Where are we, and how did we get here?"

"We are returned to House Lindall, my love. Thanks to ye, the men were fit enough to shift. We crossed the tundra in but four days. They are very grateful to ye."

She'd slept for four days? He'd marched for four days, transporting an army and tents and injured men. And her. Now he stood guardian over her as she slept. No wonder he looked tired. "How long have you been sitting beside me, you big oaf? An hour? A day? A week? Can I not trust you to take any care of yourself?"

He came to sprawl beside her on the bed, propping himself up on one elbow to smile down into her face. "A day, a week, what does it matter, so long as ye are by my side?"

Her fingers traced the lines of strain in his face, soothing, relaxing, with the gentlest touch of her mind. "It matters, my love. You matter to me. I love you, Roanen. If I remembered nothing, still I would love you. Perhaps I'm here to protect you from yourself. I know you meant only to take care of me, Roanen, but you cannot take care of me if you do not take care of yourself."

His hand over hers stayed her fingers, and he turned his lips against them. She felt the warmth spread through her at first contact. "Perhaps," he murmured, "we were meant to take care of one another."

Marylin brushed her lips over his beard-roughened cheek. "Perhaps. Are you feeling more rested, then?"

"Ye have the healer's touch," Roanen laughed. "And if ye had no', just the sight of ye would restore my spirit."

Marylin giggled as she slid her hand down his belly to tease his already hard cock. "'Twould seem more than your spirit has been restored."

His smile grew even wider. "Do ye know, *Mael amin*, how beautiful ye are to me?"

"Have you not grown tired of me, then? Four thousand years is a long time to love the same woman."

“Or the same man. In truth, I have worried that ye might remember how oft I have angered ye, rather than how much ye have loved me.”

She tasted his mouth lightly, her blood warming at the touch of those soft, gentle lips. “Perhaps that is why the memories become indistinct, that we might remember only how necessary we are to one another.” The heavy leggings apparently were not necessary in the house. She slipped her hand under his kilt to caress his naked cock, wrapping her fingers around the hot, jutting length of him. How she loved the feel of him. Satin-smooth skin, soft and sensitive to her touch, over a shaft of pure, solid heat. “This much I remember for certain, my love. Always I have loved you. And always I have loved making love to you.”

“Are ye trying to seduce me, woman?”

“Aye.”

He laughed, rolling to take her into his arms. “Ye did that many lifetimes ago. For me, nothing has changed. The sun still rises and sets at thy will. Would ye have me as thy Lord and Master, or thy slave? It matters not. Always I am thine.”

The possibilities. Marilyn grinned. Like the flavors at an ice cream shop. She always had such a hard time choosing. “It could be my mind has grown fuzzy, to where I can no longer tell the difference between truth and dreams, but I seem to remember a very large wolf standing over me. How did you do that?”

Something flickered in his eyes, some doubt, some question. “We are Clan of the Wolf, M’Lady. ’Tis our way.”

Her mind sifted back through hundreds of sci-fi and fantasy novels. Werewolves? “Can you do this at any time, or only when you mate? Or only when the moon is full?”

One heavy black eyebrow arched as if she’d gone quite mad. “The moons have naught to do with it. Those of Clan Wolf can shift at any time. The first time is the hardest. The first shift comes after the change, when the cubs’ bodies ripen with maturity. Usually a cub shifts when he or she mates for the first time, but it may happen in the rage and lust of battle, as well. Once a cub has joined the pack, they can shift at

will." As if to prove his point, Roanen shifted, blending so easily from man to wolf that she almost didn't realize what he was doing until green eyes laughed at her over a long black muzzle highlighted with silver.

So they could control the shift. Like another set of clothes they put on at will. Not werewolves, then. Shape-shifters. "Is that what you were afraid of, Roanen? That I would not wish to mate with you? That I would not change with you when we first mated here? That Marilyn would not love you as Ayaila had?"

Roanen closed his eyes for a moment, the strain of the last weeks showing once again on his face. "Aye, my love. When couples mate for the first time, they shift together as a bonded pair, as a symbol of their commitment. I wanted ye aware before we took that step. I should have taken the time to explain."

"You will always be my chosen mate. I remember reading somewhere that wolves mate for life. But I have mated with you for dozens of lifetimes. Mate with me, Roanen. Claim me once again as your own."

His eyes, human again, widened, then narrowed with pleasure. Like a hungry predator he growled his response, his breath drawing in sharply. "Do not tease me, my love."

He might feel soft and gentle under her touch, but he was the Warrior she'd longed for. The hint of danger in his intense gaze made her shiver in anticipation. She nipped at his jaw, all thought of teasing gone. "I want you, Roanen. I do not need more time to remember. I want you as you are to me. My mate."

With a feral snarl he was over her, all thought of tenderness gone from his eyes. Sharp teeth snapped at her shoulder, nipping hard before he paused to lick the spot where his teeth marks showed. An answering lust, equally primitive, sent waves of fire through her core. Her cunt flooded with hot, liquid desire. She tore at him, her nails raking his chest as she fought his clothing to free more skin to her touch.

He reared back, loosing the kilt so that it puddled around them, skimming the tunic over his head.

She hadn't seen him naked in full light before. Hadn't taken the time to fully appreciate his body. He was perfect. A Greek god. The statue of a Warrior. Broad shouldered and lean at the hips, rippling with muscles that bunched and shifted as he stalked her across the bed.

"Wait! Give me a minute."

His eyes narrowed even farther, his snarl like a hungry wolf approaching his kill, but he paused, held frozen in time by her will. "'Tis a poor time to change thy mind, my love."

"Never," she promised. "I just wanted -- needed -- you're so perfect. I wanted to capture that picture of you in my heart. You make me feel small, for the first time in my life. I -- you're everything to me, Roanen. I've never wanted anything as I want you."

"Then ye shall have me," he promised. He didn't shift then, as she had thought he might. Instead he pinned her helpless beneath him, her hands under his, as he hovered over her, kissing first her mouth, then down to her chin, his teeth closing and holding for a moment over the soft skin of her throat. She knew the tiniest trace of fear. He could end her life with but a thought. Instead he licked at the pulse that bubbled under his lips.

Coils of molten desire tore through her, demanding release. *Now. Now! Make it now, Roanen!*

Still he toyed with her, licking, kissing, nipping with teeth sharp enough to draw blood. Teeth and tongue branded her, washing her skin with desire. His cock burned against her as he moved, trapped between them like a glowing rod from the fire as he ground his hips against hers in long, slow, lazy circles. "Do ye know," he growled, "how I missed ye?"

Her breasts strained to reach him, aching for his touch. "As I have missed you," she breathed, searching for any part of him she could reach, pinned as he held her. Finding only his ear, she sucked at its edge, her tongue darting in small patterns over its surface.

She felt his cock quiver as he stiffened, his whole body going rigid. "By the gods, woman, ye shall be the death of me."

"Mate with me, Roanen. Now!"

"Patience, my love. The getting there is half the fun." His kisses moved from her shoulder to the spot between her breasts, so close to the nipples that strained toward his touch. "Marry me, Marylin. Say ye will be my bride."

She stilled beneath him, confusion warring with desire. "I thought we were married?"

"Do ye remember the ceremony? Do ye remember the vows we took together? I would no' have ye bound by words we said long ago."

"How could we hide a thing like that? Your people will already consider us as husband and wife. If we tell them I'm not Ayaila, will they trust me?"

Finally, now that she was thoroughly distracted, he decided to pay attention to her straining nipples. "A couple may choose to repeat their vows before their gods and their houses, as an act of faith and a renewal of their commitment to one another. Only we will know what the words mean to us. Say ye will marry me, Marylin. Once again."

How many times had she said the words? "Yes!" she fairly screamed as his teeth closed over the elongated tip of her nipple. "Now, and again, and a dozen times more if the fates allow. Mate with me, Roanen! God, you're driving me crazy!"

She spread herself open as far as she could as he rose up enough to brush the tip of his cock over her clit. He was lying. He didn't really want to marry her. He wanted to kill her. Marylin lunged at him, wrapping her legs around his waist as he alternately licked and sucked her tits.

"Now!" she ordered.

He only chuckled. "Patience, *Mael amin*. We have all the time in the world."

"I don't care! I want you now!"

"And you shall have me," he promised. But instead of his cock, he gave her his tongue. He slipped low enough to breathe in hot waves over her aching clit before he lowered his stubbled cheeks to rub them over her wet, needy flesh. Marylin nearly

screamed in frustration before he sucked her tiny member into his mouth, teasing the tip with his tongue.

“Oh, God! You are trying to kill me!” she shrieked. “Roanen!”

He let go of her hands to put his own to better use, one busy set of fingers fastening to her left nipple, tweaking and tugging, while the others slid into her cunt. “Ye are so wet for me,” he teased. “Do ye desire me so much, then?”

“Yes!” was all she could manage.

First two, then three fingers slipped in and out of her, becoming slick and slippery in her juices. She writhed and bucked against him, forced past the point of all endurance. “Roanen!” she screamed.

“Sing for me, woman of the Wolf Clan. I would hear ye sing.”

What? What did he want? What did that mean? “I don’t --”

His tongue began a fresh assault on her clit, and she screamed as she broke under him, thousands of tiny pieces of her soul shattering like so many panes of stained glass. She screamed, and screamed again as his fingers pounded into her, harder, harder, her nails raking his shoulders as she fought to escape the sensations that asked for too much of her. “Roanen!”

“Sing for me!”

She was sure she could take no more, but he pushed, and pushed, and pushed her farther. She must escape him before he destroyed her! She fought him in earnest now, afraid, as he replaced his tongue with his cock, pounding into her with hot, burning thrusts, his grip bruising her hips as he took all she knew how to give him. “Roanen! I cannot --”

“Sing for me!”

He sucked her breast into his mouth as he bent over her, his cock thrusting deeply, demanding more, more. She broke again, her sheath tightening around him like fists of steel, her heels locked around his ass, her hips pistoning against him in a short, staccato rhythm. There was no more! What did he want? What was he trying to wring

from her? She would give him anything. He owned her soul. But she could not give what she did not understand.

Her body screamed with the loss as he pulled free, turning her face down against the bedding. She grabbed a small silk throw pillow to hug against her chest, biting its edges to keep from screaming as he pumped back into her, deeper, impossibly deeper now, so hard and so strong she could not understand how he had the strength to continue. Could this be the same man she had thought near exhaustion but a few minutes ago? What did he want? What was he waiting for? What more could there possibly be?

A new ache built in her, one she'd not felt before. She wanted. She needed. Something. Something just out of reach. He slipped a hand under her to stroke over her clit, torturing her as the need grew stronger, more demanding. *How many times could a woman come? How many ways could a woman come?* She twisted, writhing against him, snapping and snarling, trying to reach him with her teeth. *Now, damn it! Now! Take me with you now!*

She opened her mouth to scream out his name, but instead a high, shrill cry tore through the cool winter air. She screamed again, knowing the sound for what it was, knowing at last what he asked of her. It was the mating call of the wolf! She looked down to find the hands that raked at the bedclothes were paws, tipped with sharp claws. Roanen's voice laughed behind her, but only another wolf would recognize the laughter in his bark. She understood now. He had been waiting for her to shift first this time.

As she fisted around his wolf's cock, tying them together, he shattered, pumping her wolf's body full of his sperm in wave after wave of long, hot release. His voice broke over her, answering her mating cry, and they sang together, both voices tinged with laughter.

For a long time after they lay together, while she held him trapped within her, tied as wolves. The fact that her body would not release its hold on his cock, that he could not escape without possibly injuring himself, did not seem to concern Roanen at

all. Perhaps he was used to mating this way, but she found it strange. Did the women of the Wolf Clan increase their chances of conception like this? Or was the mating done strictly to honor their gods?

She knew the timing was right. If she had been younger, if she had been more fertile, surely she would have conceived this time. Had she met this man, this perfect dream lover, when she was younger, surely he would have given her the children she'd longed for.

"What are you thinking, my love?"

Were the words human? Or was she learning to speak wolf? Did it matter? She snuggled against the warmth of his body. "I was thinking that such exercise must take its toll on a body, even one so strong as your own. You must sleep, Roanen. Magic alone cannot sustain you."

He curled around her, one hand cupping her breast. "If 'twill please ye, I will sleep for a time."

"'Twill please me," she assured him as she turned her head to kiss his shoulder. "Everything about you pleases me."

Chapter Six

A soft whisper of footfalls reached her from the empty hallway at her back. Someone was following her. Marylin made her way a bit farther before she turned into a large, sun filled room. The dark presence looming behind her should have had her screaming for help.

Instead she stopped, waiting for him to come to her. Why should she be afraid? No one would think to harm her here. She was Ayaila. All loved her and feared her. She was a powerful Mage. No. A powerful Shaman. A Mage could not heal.

Of course she wasn't nearly as powerful as most people thought she was, but Ayaila had been very powerful, and Marylin knew she would need to be as well.

The figure moved out of the shadows, appearing almost wraithlike as he moved to her side. "Ayaila loved the solarium."

Yes. She would have. 'Twas a perfect place to study, or simply bask in the sunlight. "What was she like?"

"Warm, and generous, giving always of herself, M'Lady. She was much like you."

"Pieces of her come back to me from time to time. Yet I fear to remember too much. I don't want to lose myself to regain Ayaila's memories."

"You are who you are, M'Lady. You are pieces of all your lives. You are young, but you have a very old soul."

"Young?" Marylin snorted. "I'm forty-five. I do not feel young any more. Far from it. What I wouldn't give for your youth, Shammall."

He laughed at that, a magical, quicksilver sound. "I have seen the moons cycle more than sixteen hundred times, M'Lady."

Math? She hated math. "My ex-husband was a math professor. How old is that in years?"

"One hundred and twenty-three, M'Lady."

"One hundred and..." Marilyn sat down abruptly on the bench by the window. "Are Elves immortal, then?"

"Elves? No, M'Lady, I believe not. Neither are my people. Though we are very long lived."

"And who are your people?"

Shammall raised one long, thin eyebrow in a high arch. "The *Tuatha Dé Danann* of *Tir na nÓg*, M'Lady. We are called among men by the name of *Sidhe*, or Faerie."

Faerie. A six-foot-four faerie. Marilyn blinked, then blinked again, trying to assimilate that information. "My own Oberon."

"I do not understand, M'Lady."

"Shakespeare, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare was a well-known playwright of almost a thousand years ago. He wrote of the King of the Faeries, Oberon, and his Queen, Titania. They had had a falling out over a pretty human boy she wanted to keep for herself. Or perhaps it was one of his lovers."

A smile pulled at Shammall's straight line of a mouth. "My father has many names, M'Lady, but I have never known him to be called Oberon. Yet the rest of the story fits. The King's and Queen's courts agreed to disagree more than three millennia ago. And where Pajja is concerned, there are always women involved."

Marilyn stared at him incredulously. "Your father is the King of the Faeries and his name is Pajja?"

"Yes, M'Lady. Well, his *Sidhe* name is not really Pajja. That is the name Humans call him, as I am called Shammall. Our language is much older than the common tongue, so we take names the Humans will find more palatable to their tongues."

"Shammall, the point is that you're the son of the King -- the *King* mind you -- of Faerie! Who am I to have such as you as my -- my whatever you are? Advisor?"

Shammall laughed. "I am not *the* son of the King of the *Sidhe*, M'Lady. I am *a* son. One of hundreds. *Sidhe* breed true. A Human mother or a Wolf or a Bear, it matters not. My mother was an Elf, one of the elite from the fair city of Talismar. But she could have been a Dark Elf from Élahandara. It would not have mattered. *Sidhe* breed *Sidhe*. My father alone has sought to repopulate the world with *Sidhe*, siring children with any woman who would have him."

"You have every right to be bitter, or even jealous, Shammall. But know that you're loved. Roanen, too, holds you in his heart as he would a son."

"Jealousy is a Human emotion, M'Lady. I know it not. I know duty and honor and good and evil."

"And love?"

For that, a wash of regret passed subtly across his features, gone before most would have seen it. "I know duty and honor. These things I love. These things I live for."

Marylin smiled, tucking that information away for future reference. "You will know love, Shammall. Somewhere, someday, when you least expect it, love will come to you. The moons may cycle many times more before love finds you, but when it does, do not be afraid to give your heart."

He looked so uncomfortable that Marylin laughed, changing the subject. "I would know your father's name, that I might address him properly should I meet him."

Shammall frowned. "I think you would find his full name a bit hard to pronounce, M'Lady, but I will tell it to you, as there is great power in a *Sidhe's* name. You might have need to call upon him some day. He is known among the *Tuatha Dé Danann* as *Pawiaeadja Adhamhán Élanadhache*."

She'd always been good with ancient languages, but this sounded like a mixture of Ancient Egyptian and Old Gaelic with a mouthful of river sand thrown in for good measure. "Try that again."

"*Pawiaeadja Adhamhán Élanadhache*."

"Paw-edge-ja..."

"*Pawiaeadja.*"

"Paw-ead-ja?"

Laughing, he tried again, slowly. "*Pawiaeadja Adhamhán Élanadhache.*"

"Write it down for me."

Laughter lit Shammall's deep lavender eyes as he printed the words in large, bold script.

It looked like a mixture of Egyptian and some old Gaelic dialect. Spelled like Gaelic. Mentally she reduced the Gaelic vowel redundancies and worked her way through what was left. "*Pawija Adhaman Elanadash,*" she pronounced carefully.

"Close enough. Should you ever need him, you have but to speak his name."

Just calling his name would invoke the King of the Faeries? *There is great power in a Sidhe's name...* "And what of you, Shammall? Have you a name by which I may call?"

A heartbeat passed, and another. She sensed him weighing her, his trust hanging in the balance. When he spoke, his voice was so low she had to strain to hear. "*Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache.* Once there was a 'son of' in there -- son of the house of *Élanadhache* -- but I choose the simpler form."

Simpler. Oh, yes. Leaving the articles out made it sooo much easier. Ayaila snorted as Shammall printed his own name below the King's. Well, at least it was true Gaelic. She could read it. At least the first name. "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, *Shaymmadah.*" She paused to smile up at him. "I was once known as Nylanéfer, High Priestess to the goddess Bast, Protector of Upper and Lower Egypt, and the House of Ra. Now I'm only Marilyn Henry, Professor of Ancient History. But I want to be more. Clan Wolf needs me to be more. I sense that Ayaila loved you very much, Shammall. She trusted you. I would do the same. I need your help, Shammall. There is much I must learn if I'm to survive in this time. Teach me. Help me to become Ayaila."

The tall, fair *Sidhe* knelt once again before her. "There is much in a name, M'Lady. Our name holds the key to our soul. Nylanéfer Marilyn Ayaila, it would be my great honor to accept you as my pupil. I live but to serve you, M'Lady."

"I have not a sword to Knight you with, Shammall, but had I one I would name you Sir Shammall, and I would make you my Knight Protector."

"'Tis as well, M'Lady," Shammall agreed. "I care not for edged weapons."

"Mama?" a voice called from the doorway. "Mama? Ye are well again?"

Marylin looked up, pure terror in her heart. *Mother of my children...*

She was, perhaps, four or five years old. Too tall, too thin, with a face that told of too much worry for one so young. Marylin held out her arms, feeling suddenly too shaken to move.

One hesitant step. Two. Then the little girl was running across the room, her small body flung into Marylin's arms.

No. Ayaila's arms. Whatever it took, however hard she had to work, she would be Ayaila. If not for herself, then for this innocent one.

"I was afraid. When Papa said ye had taken the full force of Nafésti's firebolt, I was afraid ye might not know me."

She formed the words in her head, her attention to the accent making her critical of every detail. "If Nafésti had blasted every thought from my head, if ye were a total stranger to me, still I would love ye, child. Truly, I have forgotten much, but know this. Never, never have I forgotten how to love thee."

Shammall rose, bowing deeply. "I will meet you here in the morning, M'Lady, that we might begin your training." He turned to the child. "Travanya, perhaps you can help me."

Marylin could have loved him for that alone. *Travanya*. The child had a name.

The little girl looked uncertain. "How can I help, Mage?"

"I will be in charge of spells and all matter of combat. I shall leave history to you."

Travanya brightened at that. "I'm good at history."

"Bring your books, and recite your lessons to your mother, then. I shall quiz you both at the end of the week."

Marylin -- no, Ayaila -- hugged the child tightly. "We shall study together. I like that. 'Twill be fun."

"Shall I get my books now, Mother, or are ye too tired?"

"Ye can get them in a few. But first, fetch me a brush. We must do something about thy hair."

Travanya giggled as she ran from the room, her waist-length tangles spread out behind her like the wings of a large black bird.

"I thank thee, great goddess," Ayaila whispered. "Ye have given me every prayer I have ever asked of thee."

* * *

"Again."

Panting hard, Ayaila swung to face her attacker. Damn the Mage. He could shapeshift into almost anything. This time 'twas a ten-foot-tall Ogre. She knew them all, now, the enemies of this land. Orc. Troll. Ogre. Élandra -- the Dark Elves, whose High Priestess was Nafésti.

Ogre was, she decided, definitely the worst. Though she'd thought that of the Troll. She swung her staff to block.

"Cataclysm," Travanya instructed, giggling as Ayaila missed and the "Ogre" landed a training size fireball that singed her robe.

She knew the history. Some of it she'd seen coming. The change of the seasons. The shifting of the poles. Scientists of her time had passed it off as global warming. It had been so much more. Mother Earth, herself, had suffered from their neglect, and had nearly died. Wars and disease and the rising oceans and changing tides had left Earth's populace on the waning edge. A dying populace on a dying planet.

The moon she'd named L5 was, as she suspected, an orbiting piece of space junk. Debris from a passing comet's tail. A new ice age, caused by the ash of hundreds of smaller volcanic eruptions all over the world, brought an end to global warming, saving what little was left of the landmasses still above water from being lost for hundreds of thousands of years.

She told the story their way now, both to entertain the daughter she'd come to adore, and to test her concentration.

"In the long ago before, the magic that had been in the world since the beginning of time fled, hiding from the great unbelief. People no longer acknowledged the gods. Humans ruled, and the races became as one. The gods lost touch with the world."

Lightning strike to singe the Ogre's toes.

"In this way the centuries passed, and the people began to build machines to take the place of the gods. They worshipped the machines and ignored Earth. The people warred among themselves. Earth suffered, and at last she began to die. Disease and pestilence ruled. Kine and other domestic animals died by the thousands. Famine ruled the lands. The air was no longer pure. The plants and the young trees suffered and died. The great waters rose to swallow the land."

Block another fireball and parry with shards of ice. Small. Keep the blasts small. Training size. Behind the Ogre was still Shammall.

"The machines the Humans had built to protect themselves failed as the knowledge of their maintenance passed away. Eventually mankind was reduced to a shadowy existence, living in caves beneath the earth. Earth was no longer strong enough to defend herself, and at last the cosmos itself conspired against her. Asteroids bombarded her, pieces set adrift from another dying universe far from here. Among the debris was the moon of a long ago world, drifting homeless and bereft. That moon sought to join the dying Earth, that they might end their grief together."

She would end this Ogre's grief. She changed tactics, planting her feet and standing her ground. Two shots of pure energy, one from each hand as she dropped the stupid, cumbersome piece of useless wood.

"Of the gods, only Wind and Rain still maintained hope. Those two roused the others to assist Earth, to revive her from her deadly lethargy. Despair was rampant, but their end was imminent. They had to act to survive. Together they bent their wills to revive Earth's spirit. The six pleaded with Earth to resist the new moon's pull. At last

she roused herself, shaking off some of the layers of her despair. Still, she was no' strong enough to fight the influence of the new moon completely."

"M'Lady, you must use the staff." Shammall's voice, coming from an Ogre. Ayaila and Travanya both laughed as Ayaila summoned the staff back into her hands.

"Instead, as is her way, Earth compromised. She made a pact with the new moon to provide him a home, an end to his ceaseless journeying. In exchange, the moon would awaken the old magic. The moon's compromise was no' without price. The tides changed, and the cold returned to the planet. Slowly the waters receded as the ice caps froze again, and Earth revealed herself once more to mankind. The tundra spread down from the north, and mankind fought to survive against the elements."

The staff had its uses. As the Ogre changed tactics to charge her, its arms flailing wildly, Ayaila lifted the staff, bringing it down hard on the Ogre's head.

"The changes the magic wrought were subtle at first. Earth found that there were those among us who could hear her voice once again. The old races, absent since before the magic fled, returned. The gods spoke, and we learned once again how to listen."

The Ogre sat rubbing his head, looking as stunned and stupid as a hundred-year-old Fey creature pretending to be an Ogre could.

"Seven gods we learned to name. Earth our Mother guides us all. Wind and Rain are ever her spokesmen. Wolf and Bear and Cat and Falcon are our totem spirits. We of the Northlands are the first among the peoples of the Earth. We are the chosen ones. Our Shamans are gifted with strong magic. We have the task of guiding our people. Our daughters are prized and welcome in every household. We follow the Way of the Wolf. To the East live our sisters, who sing the Song of The Bear. Their daughters and sons, like ours, are great Warriors and Clerics. Where the Earth is warmer the Cat people bask in the sun, in a place called Talismar, where the Elves walk in the trees."

"And you will not find a snottier bunch of prima donnas than the Elves," the Shammall-Ogre added, lumbering back to his feet.

Ayaila thumped him again on his head, urging him to stay seated.

“The oldest magic belongs to those who have returned from before. The spirits of the Fey often lead them to serve as Mages. As the Falcons they watch over us, their mission to serve and protect, their ways mysterious.”

She looked down at Shammall. “Over us, up at us, what is the difference?”

Shammall growled as he rolled, coming up in a crouch out of her reach.

“The Dwarves are the keepers of Earth, her core, and her center, and they burrow within her, being privy to her secrets. They are the smiths of fine weapons and sturdy armor for those with the strength to bear such encumbrance. The Humans have scattered, like the Wind and the Rain, living at all points of the compass. Dark races there are, as well, lurking ever in the shadows, but theirs are tales for another day.”

“Mother, will ye have to face Nafésti again?”

“I know no’,” Ayaila admitted. “But if I do, I shall be ready.” She turned toward the charging Ogre, leveling the tip of her staff this time, blasting him full front with a wave of sleep.

The Ogre paused in mid-stride, a look of shock on his face, before he tumbled slowly, almost acrobatically to the floor, landing with a thud like a falling tree.

“I believe,” Ayaila smirked, “that we’re done for this day. Shall we go see what Cook has for us in the kitchen?”

Epilogue

An image flashed through her mind, of blood. So much blood. Of electricity charging the air, of creatures much like Shammall, but dark, their skin so black it shone blue in the sunlight. The Dark Ones did not fight her themselves. She couldn't get to them. Instead they'd sent down an army of Orcs. She knew them as soon as she saw them. The gray-skinned horrors appeared half man, half some ancient primate. Their long arms reached nearly to the ground when they ran, and their shorter, more compact bodies held the strength of two men. The gods had not gifted them with excessive brainpower, but thinking was not what Orcs were needed for. They were here to fight. They felt no fear, not even of their own deaths.

The screams of the dying filled her ears, and an ocean of blood washed over her. Anger. So much anger within her that these beings threatened her people. She hit them with wave after wave of fire and ice. The stench of burning flesh fouled the air. She slaughtered them in waves, and still they came. Her people were dying. All that she knew and loved would die with them. There would be nothing left. Travanya would grow up with neither a mother nor a father to teach her their ways. And if she lived, she would be alone again. No matter what happened, she would lose Roanen.

She couldn't let him go. Not again.

A Dark Elf Priestess appeared in the midst of the Orcs, her force urging them on when the sheer numbers of their dead might have turned them. Nafésti. Ayaila raised her staff and struck its tip hard into the ground, screaming out her rage and defiance as Nafésti prepared to let loose her own magic.

"Die, ye foul Daemoness! Die!"

From across the horde of the dead and dying Nafésti raised her eyes to stare at Ayaila, a sneer on her face as she held up her hands, blocking Ayaila's wave of rage.

Hundreds of the Orcs went down, but still Nafésti stood. Again Ayaila pounded her staff into the ground, her focus narrower this time, with a clear path to her target. Nafésti staggered, nearly knocked to her knees, her attempt at blocking so much weaker this time. She was grinning as she stood back up, a look so malicious that something inside Ayaila went cold with fear. Nafésti raise her staff and pointed.

She aimed not at Ayaila, but instead picked the weakest point in Ayaila's defense. "Roanen!" Ayaila screamed. He turned toward her, but he would not see the threat in time. Ayaila dove toward him, knocking him out of the Dark One's path. Her own defenses failed. She felt them shatter like a wall of ice collapsing upon itself. The force of Nafésti's bolt broke through, hitting Ayaila so hard she went flying, slammed to the earth atop Roanen's body. "Forever and always, my love," she whispered as he reached for her. "Forever and always."

* * *

"Ayaila!"

She sucked in her breath hard, fighting to remember that it was Ayaila who had died, not her. No. Ayaila *was* her. Marilyn and Ayaila were both dead. She was little more than a reanimated corpse.

"'Twas a dream, my love. But a dream."

She understood fully, now, what the Mage had been trying to tell her. She was Marilyn. But she was Ayaila as well. She had lived out their lives, as she had Gwenevier's and Catherine's. Nylanéfer lived on in each of them in turn, questing always for her lost love. Lifetime after lifetime she found Sennedjem again, but the ending was always the same.

Anger such as Marilyn had never known bubbled in her veins. "The dead should stay dead, Roanen. 'Tis wrong for the spirit to meet itself. The lives we have lived before are meant to be no more than soft memories we revisit in our dreams. There is a reason the Summoning is forbidden. What ye have done is wrong. Did ye think I would no' remember? I remember too much!"

He reached for her with arms that begged for forgiveness, but she would not be placated. Not this time. She pulled away from him to stalk the length of the hall, trying not to feel his pain as he watched her. "How many times, Sennedjem? How many times are we doomed to relive this lie? Did ye think ye could change our fate by bringing me back? Ye could no' last time, nor the time before that. How many times am I destined to watch you die? Can ye no' see what ye have done to me? Once, just this once, ye felt what I have felt. Over and over ye find me. Over and over I lose ye. How many lifetimes? We're doomed, Sennedjem! The gods will no' let us have what others have! I chose to end it, once and for all. But ye, ye could no'! Can ye no' see what this does to me? I do no' want this life any more! I cannot love ye just to lose ye again and again!"

"Forgive me, my love. 'Tis so much easier to be the one who lets go than the one who is left behind. I did no' understand."

"Only this once ye have known the grief of losing me. How many times have I lost ye? Ten? Fifty? I thank the gods I can no' remember them all. Alone I live, always, an old woman, unable to love until I find ye again, only to lose ye once more! Shall I spend what time we have left together trying to pretend it will no' happen again? We're cursed! I am destined to know no happiness, no' in this lifetime nor the next. In my nightmares I see nothing but thy dying body stretched before me a dozen times. How long will it be this time? Do I have a year with ye? Ten? Then decades to mourn ye? I am old and bitter inside already! I wanted to die! I wanted to end this wretched curse!"

"No!" Roanen roared. "Better to have these few years than nothing at all! I love ye, Ayaila! I have loved ye since first I saw ye. Ye ask me to unmake my heart. To give back my soul. I can no'. I can no' cease to love ye more than I can cease to breathe at my own command. But tell me you love me no', and I will give thee thy freedom, for this and a thousand lifetimes. I will walk away, Nyla, from ye, from everything we have built together, from everything we have been together, from everything we shall ever be. But tell me ye love me no'."

"Love ye? Love ye? I have loved ye across a hundred lifetimes! I can no more stop loving ye than I can stop the breath from my lungs. But that does no' make thy

parting any less painful, my love. Can ye no' see? We must end this! *Pawiaeadja Adhamhán Élanadhache!* I call on thy name! Release us from this foul curse, I beg of ye!"

The air in the room shimmered with power. A breeze blew through, so frigid it must have come straight off the glaciers. The power coalesced into a tower, like a small tornado, tilted, then righted itself. For a moment Ayaila thought she saw an apartment-sized Dragon forming there in the center of the vortex. But when the power faded, there was just a man.

Well, not *just* a man. *Pawiaeadja*, Divine Speaker of Runes, Consort to the goddess Bast, the reason for Nylanéfer's lifetimes of suffering.

"Break the curse? And how would you have me do that, Nyla? You could not give him up the first time Bast asked it of you. Would you give him up now?"

Ayaila screamed in rage. She knew this man who stepped out of the shadows. Had known him long ago as the consort to Bast, her goddess. "*Pawiaeadja? Ye are Pawiaeadja? What are ye that ye have plagued me across the centuries? Whoever, whatever, it matters no'!*" 'Twas ye who cursed us. 'Tis ye who can release us!"

"Think what you ask of me, Nyla. Never to know Sennedjem again. Never to see him again. To face your future alone, then to die, never to love him again, without even the memories of what you have had together to comfort you? Is this what you would have of me?"

"Never to know... never to love..." Blindly she reached for Roanen, clinging to him as the tears streamed down her face. "No. No. Ye can no' take him from me again. Ye can no' take everything from me."

"What you call a curse I gave you as a gift, Nyla." His voice was low, soft, the tone of a father scolding a child who had disappointed him badly. "You knew when you asked me to spare his life that I could not. I am not a god. I cannot change the fates. You asked me for more time. I gave you the only gift I could, that of remembrance, that you might find each other again. It was all I could do. If you ask it of me now I will give you the gift of forgetfulness."

Ayaila turned back to stare up into Roanen's face, nuzzling his hand as he wiped the tears from her eyes. "I have tasted but a small bit of the pain ye suffer, my love, and I would no' go through that again. I would do anything to spare ye that. Take the gift *Pawiaeadja* offers. 'Tis little enough after all the centuries of pain I have given thee."

Ayaila drew in her breath, a long, slow, dancer's breath, the way Gray had taught her. *Breathing cleanses the soul.* "Forgive me, my love. Even knowing what fate awaits us, I would no' give back one day we have had together. All I am, I am because of my love for thee. All I shall be, I shall be with thee at my side. If I must lose thee again, then I will accept our fate, and when that day comes, I will cling to the knowledge that I will remember, and ye will find me again. In this lifetime or the next, it matters no'. I am yours. Forever and always."

Pawiaeadja sighed deeply. "Mortals. You can never make up your minds."

"Fairies," Roanen returned with a smile, his arms wrapped tightly around Ayaila. "Forever leading us to believe we had a choice, when in fact we never had one at all."

Ayaila fought to absorb Roanen's calm. Had he known all along how she would choose? Had he not feared she might take the other path, just this once? Was it always like this when she remembered? "What in the name of the gods are ye doing here, *Pawiaeadja*? Have ye no other mission in life than to plague me every few thousand years? Why are ye no' dead?"

The *Sidhe* lifted one eyebrow in a modest show of surprise. "I am here because you spoke my true name. You summoned me."

There is power in the name of a Sidhe.

"I meant only to call to the King of the *Sidhe* for help. I did no' expect -- well, ye."

Pawiaeadja drew himself up to his full height, taking on an air of injured dignity. "I am *Pawiaeadja Si Adhamhán Si Élanadhache*, King of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. The *Sidhe*, my dear, or Faeries, as your Roanen so casually calls us, are not bound to Human years. We are a long-lived race. We can live many hundreds of your lifetimes." The tall, pale

creature she had known as a god moved his head to stare into the great hallway's shadows. "Or but a few, if we are not careful of our duties. *Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache*, as long as I am here, there is the matter of your transgressions to be dealt with. You will return with me to *Tir na nÓg* to stand trial before a jury of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*."

Shammall. She had forgotten Shammall, and the crime he had committed. "He is but a boy, *Pawiaeadja*. He meant no harm. What he did he did out of love for the house he was assigned to protect."

"I will thank you to call me Pajja, as most mortals do these days. My *Sidhe* name is not a thing to be tossed about carelessly. And this 'boy' you speak of so glibly was old enough to leave my house. He is quite old enough to be responsible for his own actions."

"Yes, I am responsible, Father. I and I alone. You were not there. Judge me not. You would have done no different."

Ayaila stepped between them, placing a hand on each chest. "What's done can no' be undone. We can no' go back, only forward. Punishing the boy will no' help him to be a better man. Was what Shammall did so different from what ye did, Pajja? Ye were young, once, and prone to acts that were more whim than thought. Can ye put him on trial without standing trial thyself?"

The image before her faded slightly, losing its aura of strength and power. The god-like figure she had known became more human, leaning heavily against an aged walking stick. "Always you were my Lady's favorite. I could refuse you nothing, then or now, Nyla. His fate is in your hands." He held up his hand when she would have spoken. The power was still there, different from the aura that had cloaked him, stronger, deeper. "If she will have you, you have your reprieve, Shammall. But I warn you. Another such violation of our code, and son or no, you will be brought before the high council."

Shammall dropped slowly to one knee, his face so pale it might have matched the sun-bleached linen *Nylanéfer* had once clothed herself in. "It is to you I owe my

apology, M'Lady. I beg your forgiveness. If you will have me, I will serve you well, M'Lady, and your daughters after you. I give you my word as a son of the First House of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*."

"It is enough," Ayaila proclaimed. "Ye are my teacher, my friend, my protector. Ye have given all of thyself. All ye have is all ye can give. Thy fate is bound to this house, as is that of the Northlands."

Shammall took her hand, touching his lips to her palm, traces of tears glazing his lavender eyes. She was wrong. He had already begun to learn the power of love. "I live but to serve you and your house, M'Lady."

* * *

"Explain to me again how it works."

"You focus on the one you wish to reach, M'Lady, even as you fall asleep. Once you enter the dreaming, direct your thoughts to the point where you believe that person to be. It helps if you have a knowledge of world geography."

Or world history? She didn't say the words aloud. By now Ayaila knew Shammall would object to her trying to reach Gray back in her own past. Too bad. He could object all he wanted to. Gray needed to hear from her. She swallowed the strong tea Shammall had made for her, trying not to gag at the taste. Old grass clippings would have tasted better, she was sure. Still, as she slipped beneath the covers, the warm haze of sleep reached out to her. She pictured the inn as she'd first seen it, nestled in fog, outlined against the white sand beaches.

It was working. She could feel him. Almost. Gray was here, she was sure of it. Though she wasn't sure just where here was...

"Gray? Are you all right? Gray? Where are you? Gray!"

It was as if he were drugged. Finding him was like chasing a kitten through a yarn store.

"Gray, damn it, listen to me. Pay attention! I don't have much time!"

He snapped at that, growling in such a surly note that she almost laughed. "Listen to you? Who the fuck are you?"

"Gray, I love you. Remember that, no matter what happens. You're -- you're like a brother to me. You're my best friend. I love you. Whatever happens, don't forget that. I'm not dead, Gray. Not the way they'll tell you I am. Remember what you told me?"

"Mary?"

"Tell me you found what you wanted, Gray. Tell me you're happy. I need to know you found someone who's right for you."

"Mary-Baby, I think I found someone I could love. She's great! She's wonderful! Her hair is pink!"

"Pink? Well, that should suit you!" Marylin laughed, then her voice grew serious again. "I found everything I ever wanted, Gray. I found my Warrior. I'm going to have a baby, Gray. The only thing I'll miss from our world is you. But sometimes perhaps we'll meet, here in the dreaming. I'm learning how to reach out. It can be as real as we want it to be. I have to go, but I'll find you here again."

"Mary! Don't go! Mary, she is in danger. What do I do?"

"Go to her, Gray. I know you thought you could never be my Warrior, but you're wrong. You're a fighter. Don't be afraid. You won't let her down. Finish what you started. Don't be afraid to love her, Gray."

"Ayaila? Are you all right?"

Had she been talking in her sleep? Would Roanen understand? "I love ye, Roanen," she whispered as she let him pull her more tightly against that broad Warrior's chest. "Whatever happens, I want ye to know that. I will never be afraid to love ye again."

She felt his lips smile as he kissed her cheek. His hands stroked over her shoulders in slow, lazy circles. "In this lifetime or the next, it matters no'. I am yours. Forever and always, my love."

The End...for now.

The Sidhe of Pawiaeadja Adhamhán Élanadhache

Tuatha Dé Danann: an ancient race we call the *Sidhe*, or the Faeries. Long before the introduction of Christianity to Ireland, *Pawiaeadja Adhamhán Élanadhache* led the *Tuatha Dé Danann* to the land that later would be called Ireland. It is thought that *Pawiaeadja* fled Egypt after the fall of the Pharaohs left his people alone in a land that no longer welcomed them. Thus the decision of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* to live alone, apart from the races of man.

Tir na nÓg: The island of the *Sidhe*, or Faerie Folk. Once Ireland became populated by Humans, many of the *Sidhe* felt that another home was needed. The King's Court of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* left Ireland to separate themselves from Humankind, isolating themselves on *Tir na nÓg*, a magical island unknown to mortals.

The King's and Queen's Courts: About 3000 years ago two factions arose within the *Faerie* nobility. The King and Queen disagreed over their role among Humans and their choice of a homeland. Those of the Queen's Court felt that Humans, while flawed, showed promise, and should be given assistance through direct intervention and guidance. Those of the King's Court feared the destructive nature of the Humans would destroy the Earth. They refused the Humans further aid. After the Cataclysm restructured the Earth, the King sent emissaries to the remaining Houses to try to guide the Humans away from their self-destructive ways. Although the two Courts now work toward the same goals, the King's and Queen's Courts have not yet reunited -- but that is a story for another day...

Reflections

Treva Harte

Prologue

To: Mason_4444
From: HisLilli
Subject: Meet Me

Surprise! I found the most interesting advertisement on the Internet for this charming inn. The directions are attached. I've made reservations for us both for this weekend. Please meet me as soon as you can. It seems like forever since we've gone anywhere together.

Lilli

Lilli checked her email on the laptop again. She wasn't uneasy. Why should she be? She was safe and dry now and she'd even reapplied her makeup. Mason hadn't answered her email, but that didn't mean he wasn't coming. He'd arrive at the inn soon. Everything was just the way it should be.

There was no reason to be upset.

The only problem was, she was lying to herself and she knew it. Lilli wasn't sure what was wrong, but she was fingering her silver hand mirror, the one she'd insisted on buying at the antique store last month. She only did that when she was nervous.

"What the hell do you want that for? It doesn't fit with the house. The thing's not even a part of a matched set. Someone tossed out the brush and comb long ago."

"I just want it. I can't explain why."

"And stop playing with the damn thing all the time! That would be a bad habit at sixteen. At your age it looks ridiculous."

She really shouldn't have defied him. Mason was right about everything, of course. If she'd picked their décor out by herself, they would have more Victorian pieces in the house. Mason would have hated her unsupervised taste. Mason disliked

old furniture, old houses, old anything. Even the ornate mirror looked out of place on their sleek black dresser in their contemporary home. But stupid or not, Lilli had become very fond of the house's only antique. Sometimes just looking at it soothed her. She found herself tracing the ornamentation on the back whenever she felt stressed.

The moment she'd first touched the mirror, she had a mental image of herself in a crisp linen period dress, serenely sipping tea. Who could get upset at a tea party?

Not that she had any reason to be upset or stressed. Mason gave her everything. She hadn't worked since college. Her stepchildren were grown and out of the house. She and Mason were the only people she had to please. Mason was always pleased with her.

Lilli turned the mirror over.

She looked good. Nearly as good as when Mason first met her at that cheap restaurant. Hell, maybe she looked even better. After all, back then she'd already been on her feet for hours and was ready to curl up and die from exhaustion. Classes and a full-time job could do that to you. Lilli couldn't remember when she'd ever been so tired.

Mason had looked at her in that crowded room and smiled.

"You're too young and pretty to have such big circles under your eyes, honey. Can you take a break?"

She wasn't supposed to. But Mason got things done. Within a half hour, somehow she was sitting, having coffee and really relaxing for the first time since the semester started.

By the time she graduated, she wore his engagement ring. It hadn't bothered her then that the wedding needed to be put off until Mason's divorce was final.

Things like that bothered her now. Lilli knew she was probably shallow, but the older she got, the more thoughts of Mason's ex-wives gnawed at her. Jean had been thirty-five when Mason divorced her. Teresa had only been thirty.

Lilli turned forty in two weeks.

"I wish I knew what the future held." Lilli stared at her face. People said blondes showed their age faster than other people. Bullshit. She wasn't as youthful as that waitress from long ago, but she knew how to put herself together. She was still attractive. She might not be perfect, but she held her own. Anyhow, Mason still thought she was the sexiest thing alive.

Screw pimply gas station attendants who called you ma'am. Idiots.

Lilli put the mirror down on the bureau with a click.

The uneasy feeling had begun at the gas station. Up until then she'd thought it was a fine idea to send an email asking Mason to meet her at the inn. It was halfway between their house and his convention, and they could relax together after he'd been gone for the week. Mason worked much too hard lately and stayed away from home much too long.

When she first pulled into the gas station right before the dock by the ferry, she'd been amused that she had to pump her own gas. Mason always took care of that for her when he was around. Still, it wasn't as if she didn't know how.

She stared up at the threatening sky. Getting her own gasoline was one thing. Pumping gas during heavy rain was another. She hurried out of her car, determined to finish the task as fast as she could.

As she bent over the pump, she heard a low whistle.

"Hot damn!" She smiled at the young male voice. She straightened, turned around to pay the bill. The gas station attendant gaped at her.

"Oh. Excuse me, ma'am," he gulped.

Ma'am.

All right, maybe she did have just a few lines around her eyes. She might have gained five pounds since she got married. Other people looked a lot worse than she did.

Apparently being ma'amed wasn't enough. As Lilli grimly signed the bill, the rain let loose all at once. Within seconds she'd been drenched, insulted and ready to end her vacation right then.

She jumped into the car rather than ask the gas station lout for directions. After all, she knew she was close and she had a good sense of direction.

Her hasty departure came close to really hurting her. The trip from the gas station to the inn turned into a nightmare. Somehow she got lost in the blinding rain. She almost ran off the road two or three times.

When the thunder and lightning began, Lilli would have stopped right then if she thought it would be safer. But she'd been desperate to find some better shelter than her BMW. The tiny sedan shuddered under the pelting rain and gusts of wind.

"I want to stop now!" Lilli heard herself whimper.

Too bad. As best she could tell from her directions, she was miles away from the inn. Miles from anything.

A nearby crash of thunder made her grip the steering wheel even tighter. A brilliant flash of lightning blinded her for a moment. She stomped on the brake, skidding to a stop. A loud crack overhead made her cry out. She thought about how big the trees surrounding her were and how dangerous it would be if one fell on her car.

Then she couldn't think at all. Noise and light combined into a terrifying horror movie. For a long moment everything before her flashed fiery bright. Lilli hid her eyes and whimpered like a baby, but the ball of light still burned behind her eyelids.

Then the thunder and rain and the bright light disappeared.

When Lilli finally opened her eyes, everything had changed. A hint of sun showed itself through the disappearing clouds. The humidity dogging her during the last bit of the trip was replaced with a cool breeze. This was a fresh, clean world she was entering, full of possibilities.

Better yet, after all her confusion, the inn was right in front of her, looking more inviting than any place she'd ever seen. Lilli glanced down at the directions. The inn shouldn't be here. She shrugged. Obviously, it was. She must have been disoriented -- she hadn't even been able to see the inn during the storm. Thank heaven the tempest had ended!

Thank heaven she had arrived. The inn was beautiful.

Mason might complain because the place was so old. Right now she didn't care about what he thought. It looked perfect to her. Quaint and charming, and almost beckoning for her to enter. She was suddenly wild to see what the interior was like. She could imagine odd nooks and fascinating woodwork, candlelit dinners and charming pictures.

All the things she'd been thinking during the rain had been wrong. This trip was wonderful. She couldn't remember ever feeling happier.

As Lilli walked toward the front steps to the wide porch, someone opened the door. A tall man with alert eyes smiled at her and waved her inside. She liked his face -- lined but pleasant. His smile made her feel lighter, freer -- even drier. What a great smile!

She hurried toward him. Funny. She almost felt like she was hurrying home.

"Welcome, Lilli." The man pushed the door so it opened wider yet. "We're so glad you've arrived at last."

* * *

"You're mine, Lilli. Say the words."

"Make me."

"I can. You know I can." His fingers pushed ruthlessly into her and she gasped. Thick and hard, they pressed against the most sensitive spots of her body. Devil! Only he knew how much she loved his fingers pulling at her just that way, so that pleasure was almost pain. She'd make him pay for that knowledge, soon...

Thud.

Lilli started at the knock on her bedroom door. Sensations still shuddered over her body from her fantasy. She pushed herself off the bed, a little unsteadily.

Thud.

Lilli peered through the viewer. Her host was there. The greeting he'd given her before made her open the door without hesitation.

"Is everything all right?" he asked as she stood at the threshold.

"Oh, yes. Fine." Lilli clutched her mirror tightly as she spoke. The man's eyes turned from her to the mirror.

"A nice heirloom there."

"Yes. It is pretty."

"Your looking glass must give you pleasure every time you use it."

How could he know about the strange reflections she saw? Her original visions of serene tea parties had soon disappeared. Sexier, more disturbing -- and more pleasurable -- images now replaced them.

Lord, she could get hot just thinking about what she and her powerfully built dream lover did together, or at least what she imagined they did. She'd never come so close to being caught before, though sometimes she wondered if Mason objected to her owning the mirror because he sensed the not-quite-fantasies she conjured up with her possession.

Lilli looked up into the innkeeper's wise face and blushed. Oh, God. Could he tell, too? "Oh, yes. I use my mirror quite a bit. No. That didn't come out right. I'm not really vain, you know. It's just -- just --" Lilli heard herself blurt out the words as if she had no will to stop them. Why would this man want to know her reasons for holding a mirror? Even if he did, who would believe the things she almost saw there?

"Yes?" He sounded like he was listening.

To her horror, Lilli heard herself babble on. Why couldn't she control herself? She could still hear the laughter downstairs. She hadn't drunk nearly as much as some of the other guests, but she still had this horrible urge to talk about things she'd rather keep private, things no one else could possibly care about or believe. Instead of detailing all the things she envisioned in the reflected image of the mirror, Lilli managed a half-truth.

"I like to make sure I'm still seeing myself properly. Sometimes it's hard to judge your own looks. My husband praises me so much that I know I can't use other people's reactions to be objective. I need to see for myself."

Shut up, you idiot. Shut. Up. Now he figures you're vain and a maniac. She never told people such things. Let others think she was absorbed by her looks. She wasn't. Her face and figure were valuable commodities and she took proper care of them. They'd gotten her out of poverty and given her Mason. All she really cared about was that Mason continued to be absorbed with how she looked.

"It's good to see things for what they are." The man nodded and smiled again. "You'd like to arrange that for your life."

"Absolutely." Lilli nodded back. "Everyone should."

They stared at each other. Lilli found she'd now run out of any words at all. Then she caught herself. "Thank you for asking about everything. I'm fine. Good-night."

That was what I should have said to start with. She shut the door and moved quickly to the slightly battered looking bureau to put the mirror down. A strange reflection caught her eye as she placed it on the wood surface.

Was she going to see her sexy fantasy man again? She leaned forward, eagerly. No one would catch her this time; no one would make her feel guilty.

For just a moment she thought she saw Mason in the mirror's reflection. How odd. She looked again. This image wasn't of some distant, strangely alluring past. Mason's back was to her but she knew her husband after nineteen years. He held a woman with blonde hair. A young woman. One who looked up at him as adoringly as Lilli had when she was that age. One who was almost naked in his arms.

The woman stepped back, laughed, and then pushed her thong off. She slipped her fingers between her pussy lips, stroked herself, and then put her fingers up, slowly, invitingly, to Mason's mouth.

Lilli blinked and the image was gone. Just her own shocked face stared back at her.

"I need to go to bed." Lilli backed away from the mirror. "I must've had much more than I thought to drink."

So much for being a happy drunk. She was the type who saw things. Evil things. Where were her other images, the ones of a man she knew she'd care about, one who was fascinated by her, inside and out, no matter what she looked like...

Stupid. She'd just sleep this off, and when she woke up Mason would be in bed next to her and everything would be fine.

She was lucky. Incredibly lucky. She just needed to rest and remember how lucky she was. Fortunately for her, the bed looked inviting and much more comfortable than any place the others downstairs were undoubtedly going to pass out on...

Chapter One

"Wait."

"Sir." She didn't make it sound like a question. No, the lady was peeved at not being able to leave.

He looked at the blonde woman before him and got harder. All the while she'd talked, in that odd, rather cool tone of hers, he'd been fighting stinging hot lust. He kept himself behind the desk to prevent her from seeing the effect she had on him.

He'd told himself he'd get over this schoolboy passion after seeing her again. He'd been wrong. This time was worse than when they'd met for the initial interview.

"I thought things were settled. You want me to wait for...?" Her voice wasn't reproachful, but he imagined reproof in the way she fingered her gloves. She was ready to put them on as soon as he told her good-bye.

He didn't want to.

When she'd picked up her reticule at the end of the interview he'd wanted to sweep her down to the floor and take her then. She'd held out her hand and he'd wanted to place it on his barely controlled erection. He could imagine her cool white fingers struggling to hold his cock -- a cock grown bigger and harder than he could remember, just from watching her.

Now he'd asked her to wait and he didn't even know what to tell her. All he knew was he couldn't have her disappear from his office so soon. "I have another position to offer you. Additional duties, shall we say."

He was out of his mind. A sanitarium ought to admit him for what he was about to do.

Harry always put things in proper, discreet order. His daughter knew nothing about his sexual life. He took care that almost no one did. He wasn't one for gracing the

society or gossip pages in the newspapers. That meant he kept his family at home, his business at the office and his fucking at his private apartment in the City. After one look at this Lilli, he knew he was going to break those rules for her.

“You don’t find me suitable for the one you advertised?” She tucked one lock of hair behind her ear. He itched to do it for her. After he played with her hair, he’d run his hand down her back, press her sweet ass against his cock while he cupped her mound, and grind their bodies together so hard neither would be able to keep from moaning...

“Oh, you’re eminently suitable since your references confirm your claims. I agreed that I want to hire you as a chaperone for my daughter on a trial basis. But I’ve thought of additional duties since we first talked.”

Her chin went up haughtily, but he thought he saw her swallow hard first. Could she be a little frightened? God knows he was. What was she doing to him? “Of course my references backed me up. What else did you have in mind? Sir.”

His mind had nothing to do with what he wanted from her.

“I need a mistress. A woman like you.”

She blinked at him.

The silence stretched out and, inwardly cursing, Harry wondered what kind of idiot would ever conclude an interview with a woman this way. Even the cheapest prostitute would be ready to claw his eyes out.

But he couldn’t help what he’d said. None of what he was feeling or what he’d said made sense, but he’d been compelled to ask. Damn his compulsion. If he hadn’t been overcome with lust, he would have been able to seduce her into bed slowly. Trying gentle charm would never work now that he’d both tipped his hand and sounded like the worst kind of lout to boot. In a few seconds she’d leave and he’d never see her again.

Wouldn’t she?

She hadn’t moved yet. Where were her tears or outrage? She stood absolutely still, her face blank.

Her reaction to him was as odd as his had been to her. Could she feel as off balance as he did? He ought to be grateful that, for whatever reason, she hadn't slapped his face when he'd blurted out his proposition.

Her eyelids fluttered as she absorbed what he said. That pretty pale skin of hers grew even whiter. For a moment he thought she might faint.

He should have known better. Fool. Dolt.

Oh, God. Had he wanted to put her off? He wanted her so badly he was terrified. Terrified enough to drive her away? He didn't enjoy wanting women desperately. The last time he'd been fool enough to do so, he'd been under twenty and he'd married the woman. That escapade should have cured him for the rest of his life.

Lilli put her hand to her mouth.

Maybe she wouldn't slap him. Maybe she'd immediately agree to his terms, no matter how badly he'd phrased them. He'd had both happen to him when he propositioned women before -- admittedly more often the second than the first. Women usually wanted him. He didn't care if it was for his money or his cock, so long as he got what he wanted. Except for Lilli. He wanted her to burn for him the way he did for her. He wanted -- he didn't know what he wanted. Yes, he did. He wanted everything.

Slowly, life came back into her face. Her shock must be over. He braced himself.

Lilli Dayton looked him over, from head to toe, her lip caught hard between her teeth. He loved her thoughtful stare, as if she were deciding just whether or not he was up to her standards. His cock actually throbbed with anticipation. How long had it been since any woman had been able to do that with just a look?

Oh, Mrs. Dayton, I'm up to anything you can imagine.

"Yes."

"Yes?" He clutched the back of his chair even tighter, not sure if he was ready to laugh with triumph or run in terror.

He saw her in his mind, spread out on his desk, her legs curling tightly around his hips, urging him in. He visualized the flush rising up on her face as she came closer

to satisfaction. She'd want to scream, try to swallow it. He wouldn't let her stifle her cries. He'd --

"Yes, I'll accept the job you advertised for." Lilli looked at him again, her gaze assessing his face, his body -- ending with a look at the desk that was concealing his erection. "I'll consider the other and let you know what I decide. In due course."

She turned, picked up her valise, and left without any more ceremony.

He laughed, a little more breathlessly than he'd like. Then he adjusted his pants. For those words alone he'd be willing to wait, to let her take the next step. Whatever she decided would fascinate him.

How long was "in due course?" She'd best make his wait worthwhile.

Lilli stumbled over the carpet on the stairs going down and clutched the railing tightly. What had she done? She had to get out. With a huge effort, she pushed the door open.

The dimness and quiet of the man's office made a sharp contrast to the bright sunlight outside and the clamor of the street. Lilli leaned back against the outer wall of the building, trying not to gasp. The trolley noisily clattered down the street with people jammed inside.

This wasn't the New York she remembered, though it was still noisy and crowded and much too hot in the summer. But the skyscrapers were gone. The people were dressed oddly, even for the City. She blinked, trying to orient herself, trying to understand.

"Hey, lady! You okay?" A young newspaper boy stopped a safe distance from her, looking as if he might help -- if she paid for a newspaper.

"Yes. I just had a bit too much heat." The boy shrugged and walked away, hawking his news. Lilli giggled, a little hysterically. Too much heat indeed. Much too much.

Her fantasy man had just offered to fuck her.

He'd put it a bit more politely than that, but no one could mistake his intentions. From the moment she'd found herself in his office, confused and shaken, he'd looked her over like she was a particularly yummy dessert he could hardly wait to devour.

She'd been dazed. Just like all the times in the mirror, she had no clear picture of his appearance. She couldn't recall his face, dizzy and confused as she felt. All she could remember was the sense of power that came from him.

She'd been fantasizing about him for a month now, half-ashamed of what she'd conjured up. In her mirror, he'd been... loving. When Mason was absorbed in his work, when he'd snapped at her efforts to make conversation, she'd retreated to the bedroom to dream about someone and something different. She hadn't seen him clearly but from the mirror he smiled into her eyes as if they shared a joke together. She'd seen them walk down the street, her arm tucked into his, her head brushing against one of his broad shoulders. She even half-remembered the interview he'd talked about -- their first interview -- where he'd stared hotly at her but remained at a distance. She'd felt protected with her mirrored dream man.

But in person, he wanted to fuck her. He was willing to pay to do it, too. That's what he thought of her. Additional duties, my ass!

"I'm out of my mind."

How had she gotten here? She'd fallen asleep in the inn's bed. Lilli had no idea what had happened afterwards. Waves had lapped peacefully at first outside her window and then a huge, crashing surf seemed to catch her up and toss her about. She retained dim memories of whirling through space and shrieks ripping from her throat.

Her first clear memory afterwards was standing in front of Harry Nelson with his eyes focused intently on her.

Everything else might be blurry, but his intensity was clear and strong.

"He's not real. He's not real and I'm not really here at all," Lilli whispered out loud. "That's the only possible explanation."

First she'd imagined Mason, then Harry. Soon this dream would be over and she'd come to her senses again.

* * *

"I told you not to go play tennis with David Bradshawe unless I came along to supervise. Your father doesn't trust him."

"Father isn't here to say anything. He never comes to our summer house. He never will. If you write and tell him, you'll just look weak and unable to manage me. Father has already sacked two of my companions this year for that very reason, so I'm not terribly concerned." Anabelle pulled her straw hat off and skimmed it lightly across the room to land on the ornate credenza against the wall.

Lilli counted to ten. In French. Backwards. Anabelle had her doing that a lot lately and she'd only recently started with her sixteen-year-old charge.

Very recently. Where was she? How did she know this peculiarly dressed teenager's name? Come to think of it, how did she know French? She hadn't studied that since her first years in college!

"I'll discuss this with you later." Lilli spat the words out through her teeth. Even as she spoke, Lilli knew she sounded like a governess from a bad Victorian novel but... well, she was starting to feel like one.

For a moment the girl in front of her looked faintly uneasy. Then Anabelle laughed. "When I have time. For heaven's sake, it's well past the turn of the century. Stop being so old-fashioned and stuffy, Lilli! I have a right to make some decisions for myself."

She is supposed to call me Mrs. Dayton.

Lilli stalked up the curved staircase to her own smallish bedroom by the children's rooms. She pulled open the door.

Their introduction had gone less than perfectly. They'd talked for less than a half hour and already the girl was ready to openly defy her. "No one talks to me like that! Mason would have had the kids' heads if they'd said anything disrespectful to me..." Her words trailed off.

Mason wasn't here. This wasn't their house. She was Anabelle's paid companion and this was her room. The room she'd seen in the mirror. The one where a man who wasn't Mason came to her...

Not thinking about what was going on hadn't worked. The dream hadn't ended. God, what was happening to her? She stared at her new living quarters. A washbasin and pitcher of water stood neatly on the tiny pedestal. She would wash with them every morning. She certainly wouldn't have her own private bath. She was a servant, after all. A well-paid servant, but a servant nonetheless.

The room was tiny, without any pictures or ornaments. She looked down at her bureau. An ornate, handheld mirror sat, gleaming, next to its matching comb and brush. It was a very familiar mirror, though its silvery presence was as out of place on a servant's bureau as it had been in Lilli's own home.

"This is too weird," Lilli whispered as she stared down.

The faces of her stepchildren filled the mirror. She leaned over, blinking.

"She's disappeared?" Kerry asked. "What does Dad mean, disappeared?"

"Maybe he killed her and hid the body." Zack shrugged. "You know Dad was getting ready to dump her anyhow. Divorce is so expensive. Especially the third time."

"Shut up, idiot. He wouldn't do that. Then he'd have to wait seven years to get married again. There was an accident. She drove into one of those tropical storms that got really bad. They just haven't found her body yet."

"Maybe she'll turn up. Who cares."

"What difference does it make. I mean I always hated her, but I hate all Dad's new wives. I hated your mother, too."

"I don't hate her or anything, but it's not like she ever cared about me or what I wanted. Whatever Dad wanted, Dad got. She didn't even know I existed when I came to visit. That's all it was -- a visit. I never lived with them. I wasn't welcome."

The two of them were silent.

Then Zack said, "I bet the new girlfriend is even prettier. Younger, too."

“Of course. Didn’t you know? It’s Betsy. Not even one of my bridesmaids -- she’s my bridesmaid’s baby sister.” Kerry shrugged, too. “Daddy gets more ridiculous with each one. His wives stay the same age, he just gets older. Now I have to hate someone I used to like. Plus, I’m stuck with her sister in my wedding party.”

Mason? Oh, my God. Lilli’s hand moved from the mirror to her mouth. The images disappeared, showing her own reflection looking sickly back at her. She was alone in the room. Alone in her life.

“I won’t throw up. I have to think. Think.”

Mason’s children had always been polite, if somewhat disinterested around her. She had sensed something behind Kerry’s polite façade now and then, but the girl had already been twelve when she married Mason and had rarely visited. Zack had always been busy on the phone or watching TV when he was around. Lilli had no idea...

Yes, you did. You knew. You just didn’t want to know. You let Mason handle everything so you didn’t have to know.

She looked at her hand again. She wore no jewelry. There wasn’t even a tan line from the wedding rings she’d worn for almost two decades. Everything about her real life was gone.

Then again, everything about her real life might have been an illusion anyhow. Or was Mason’s betrayal and his family’s indifference some bizarre hallucination in her own mind? Lilli took a deep breath. Nothing made sense. Somehow she had to sort things out.

To start, she needed to think carefully about what she knew and didn’t know about her present life.

Anabelle had said they were in the turn of the century. Lilli knew what she meant. The twentieth century, not the twenty-first. A part of her was stunned by the knowledge. The other part was at home. She knew this world just as well as she did the other.

How had she gotten here and how long had she been in this place? Perhaps she’d hit her head during the storm. That made sense. Or she was dreaming? That

could be it. She certainly hadn't disappeared. Her own family had sounded like they thought she was -- well, she was very much alive. So what they had been saying must have been wrong. None of what was happening right now could be true.

Then what was? Lilli held her head.

Anabelle's laugh came clearly from outside. Lilli stared out the half-opened window. The girl was talking to a young man on a bicycle. David Bradshawe. Anabelle looked up at the window, saw her new hired companion, and laughed again.

Dream or not, Lilli's emotions were all real. She was ready to go downstairs and kill Anabelle and David Bradshawe both. At any rate, she wanted to kill someone. If Mason wasn't around to atone for what he had or hadn't done, she had no qualms about others paying for his misdeeds.

"Little bitch. She's sure I won't do anything."

Lilli knew she was angrier than she should be over a girl who had more defiance than sense. It didn't matter. Anabelle was going to regret her attitude. Maybe she had no control over Mason, wherever he was, but she knew how to deal with saucy chits who thought Lilli was too weak to do her job.

"We'll see about that. She doesn't know her father. Or me. Little Miss Anabelle has no idea what she has started."

She'd show Anabelle she could win the war before the little brat had begun to battle. Anabelle had no idea how close an ally her father could become to her new companion.

She was going to do something, by God. Nineteen fucking years of worrying whether she looked right for the man, if she was smart enough, sexy enough... Wherever she was, whatever she was, she was in charge now. Things were going to change.

Even more than they already had.

* * *

Harry Nelson looked down at the telegram in his hand. Lord God, was his hand shaking over her summons?

"Bad news, sir?" Thomas, his secretary, asked.

"No. Not particularly. It's from my daughter's governess." Calm. He needed to stay calm.

"Governess? But your daughter must be seventeen or so."

"Chaperone then. Someone I hired to watch over the girl at any rate." He frowned down at the paper. Her answer had been so -- right. Nonsense. She wasn't perfect. Something must be wrong with her. "Her name is Lilli Dayton. Frivolous name."

"Sounds like an actress. I never heard you having any objections to actresses, er - - sir." Thomas almost audibly gulped when his employer looked up at him. "Sorry."

"This isn't one of my mistresses. She's my daughter's chaperone." Harry was sure he'd kept his voice neutral, but Thomas hastily turned to the letters he was getting ready to dispatch.

"Absolutely, sir."

"Get me a ticket for the train this afternoon. I'm going to Westwood."

"Sir? I thought you said you didn't have bad news. Why do you need to leave the City and see your daughter?"

He ought not to rush. She'd think he'd run to her whenever she whistled. He'd set a bad precedent. He'd -- oh, to hell with how he'd look.

Come to think of it, she hadn't said yes.

"I don't have bad news. I'm not going to see my daughter, either. Not particularly. Get me a ticket with a return after you've finished with the mail." Harry left the office abruptly.

Thomas stared after his employer. Cautiously he stood up and went to the desk. The telegram lay, face up, on the flat surface. After looking over his shoulder and making sure no one was near, Thomas peered at the message.

PLEASE COME. LD

* * *

The girls sounded like birds in the parlor, chirping high and shrill. Lilli pinched her nose, fighting a yawn. She'd been sixteen once, laughing with friends. But had she ever sounded so inane? How did girls manage to live to seventeen?

"Did you see the color she wore to the lawn party? Hideous!"

"I suppose because Susannah wore something pink she thought she could, too."

The titters began again. Lilli caught David Bradshawe's eye. She'd sat next to the young man deliberately, cutting him off from his covey of females. Perhaps she'd done him a favor. He grinned at her -- a real smile, not the flirtatious ones he usually gave the girls around him. For a moment she almost grinned back. What must it be like to be the lone male surrounded by white linen dresses and soft organdy ruffles? She almost felt sorry for him.

Lilli reminded herself he was a wolf among innocent little sheep and she was paid to guard the flock.

"When you aren't summering here, what do you do with yourself, David?" She addressed him by his first name deliberately, emphasizing his youth and lack of social status. She'd heard he was a second or third son -- good for nothing but giving tennis and flirtation lessons to girls who knew no better.

He looked uncertain. She was sure his hesitancy was an act for her benefit or for anyone else who might be listening, especially when he gave her a quick, too-practiced response. "Very little, Mrs. Dayton. I've left Princeton. I'm afraid university life was not meant for me. I suppose I'll have to seek my fortune."

A fortune-seeker, indeed.

"Mrs. Dayton? Mrs. Dayton?" The butler walked toward her. "Please come. You're wanted in the study."

* * *

"Good afternoon, ma'am. You wanted me?" He was a big man. Tall, broad-shouldered, deep-voiced... someone you noticed when he arrived. Lilli couldn't help the way her breath caught when she first saw him. Need pooled directly to her pussy. The man just had that effect. Energy of all kinds leaped around him when he walked.

He looked like someone who should be a tycoon, someone who ordered the world to his liking. Then again, he was.

Right now Harry Nelson sounded faintly amused.

"I didn't say I wanted you. I considered your offer, just as I said I would, and I accept. I thought you'd want to hear the news in person." Lilli tilted her head back to look into his face.

He wasn't handsome. His face was too rugged. Powerful, yes. Perhaps even charismatic. No, he wasn't handsome, but he was compelling. She suspected his gray eyes could mesmerize you if he wanted. Right now his eyelids drooped lazily, almost concealing his sharp gaze. She wasn't fooled.

She might have met him only once in person, but she'd seen him often enough in her mirror. She knew what he wanted. She knew what lengths he would go to in order to get what he wanted.

If the mirror didn't lie, she knew he would get what he wanted from her. Fortunately, it was what they both desired. She touched the tip of her tongue to the roof of her mouth. The fantasies she'd tried to suppress before were very clear in her mind.

She didn't need to suppress anything now. Whether her current life was real or fantasy, she wouldn't hurt anyone by pursuing him. Of course she hadn't had to chase him -- he had come to her.

"I do like to deal with someone face to face. Especially for this." Harry had his hands in his pockets, looking as if he was prepared to negotiate for as long as it took to nail the agreement down.

"Very well." Lilli hesitated. Whatever she'd expected once she sent that telegram, this wasn't it. He didn't seem ready to rush into her arms -- or into bed. "What do you want then? To shake hands on the deal?"

He had big hands. Strong, large hands. Of course what people said about big hands probably wasn't true, but if every part of his body was as big -- Lilli's mouth went dry.

She wasn't married. Even if this wasn't a dream and she was married, it was to someone who was about to divorce her. Or said she was dead.

Her employer laughed.

"So we have a deal. In that case, why don't we be less formal than a handshake, Mrs. Dayton?" he suggested. He bent, as if to kiss her hand. Instead he turned his face and nuzzled his lips against her wrist.

She felt the prickle of his mustache. Then the wet sweep of his tongue against the pulse in her wrist. Lilli shut her eyes, breathless for a moment. All she was aware of now was him -- and her own responses.

"Do you always conduct business this way, Harry?" Her voice was huskier than she wanted it to be.

"No. But this isn't business. This is exquisite... pleasure." He straightened, his breath fanning her hair when he spoke against her ear. "A pleasure I have been dreaming of since we first met, Lilli."

Oh, God. Yes. She had dreamed of this, too. One male hand spanned her waist, then began to creep upward, stopping to trace the lace in her bodice. For just a moment Lilli felt excited, frightened, almost virginal. He was powerful. He was experienced. This man could take her. Anywhere. Any way.

No. She was going to change things. Do things. She wasn't a young girl, unaware of the possibilities.

She could take him.

She opened her eyes again, moved her head forward to lick the pulse at his throat. His breath caught for a moment, just the way hers had for him. Lilli stopped herself from completing the gesture.

"I. Don't. Think. So."

Lilli couldn't believe the words came from her, sounding cool and calm and controlled. She was lava about to erupt. She wanted to get her hands on that starched collar and rip it open. She wanted to let her fingers run down his chest and then move to his stomach and groin and cock...

She just wanted.

"Why not?" He looked stunned for a half second. Lilli knew it took a lot to stun this man. It took even more to have him show it.

"You aren't in charge here. I am." Lilli touched her hair, made sure it wasn't tumbled down. No, everything was in order. "That's why you leered at me during the entire interview last week, wasn't it?"

"I didn't leer!" Harry straightened up, affronted.

"You peered then. You kept looking as if you were imagining me without my clothes."

"I'll grant you that. I didn't see you blushing or saying you wouldn't take the job. Or my other offer."

"I didn't see you upset over my reactions, either. After all, I am an almost-forty-year-old woman." Lilli forced the last few words out but Harry's face didn't change with her confession. She continued again, with more confidence, "A woman who is older than you by a bit, one who is in charge of your daughter's reputation and gave you impeccable references as to her character and morals."

"I'm thirty-five. Old enough to know how to get exactly what I look for. I wouldn't have interviewed you unless you had those references. Each one agreed exactly with what you had told me."

Lilli ignored the interruption. "But when I didn't faint at your leer -- I mean, peering -- you became even more interested. Don't deny it. You aren't looking for some innocent you have to woo and persuade. Or someone less innocent who would cheat or blackmail you."

"I wouldn't settle for either."

"Precisely. What I am appeals to you. I may not be your social equal now, since I haven't your money, but I'm not someone inconsequential. My late husband used to have influence in the same way you do now. I understand all your... expectations. However, I'm also not a woman who is part of your set and whom you'd be forced to marry if you ruin. In short, I fit your requirements exactly."

He nodded, looking faintly amused again. Amused, but interested. "A nice summation. I can afford the best and you're what I want, Mrs. Dayton. The very best."

Don't worry. You haven't asked, but I'll get what I want too, Mr. Nelson. A relationship based on what I say for a change. A powerful man who will have to listen to me. That ought to be enough. I'll make that enough.

She looked at his broad shoulders and strong thighs. A very powerful man. She'd like that, too. "Then we're agreed. I'll give you excellent value for your money, Mr. Nelson." Lilli licked her lips, slowly, watching his eyes follow her tongue. "I can take care of everything you desire. You simply have to do what I say."

"I do what you say?"

"You do exactly what I say. When I say. If I tell you to kiss me, you do. If I tell you to stop, you stop. No arguments. When I say strip, strip. When I say suck my nipples or my clit, you will." Lilli threw her shoulders back, knowing Harry watched her breasts when she moved. "That's my deal. Take it or leave it. Take me or leave me."

Had she gone too far? He was hard and he wasn't concealing his erection this time. But his eyes narrowed as he considered her words.

Mason always liked to be in charge. Always. Damn that thought. Damn Harry, too, if he was the same way. If he rejected her, he was a fool. She could make them both very happy. She was sure she could. But what if he said --

"All right." His smile was almost feral. "So long as that part of the deal is subject to renegotiation later."

"Perhaps. Let's see how well you perform your duties before we consider anything else." She felt dizzy. Dizzy and ready to claw at his clothes, to get at that cock. Her cock.

He bowed his head. If he was mocking her, he hid the mockery well. Right then he looked obedient and ready. She looked at the bulge in his pants. Very ready.

"Very well, ma'am. What do you wish me to do?"

Which was why she found herself dressed in her underclothes, putting the finishing touches on the neat bow that tied Harry's wrists. Her work didn't interfere

with him sucking hard on her clit as she straddled him. Hmmm. Her Edwardian underclothing, with the split drawers, had some advantages. Lilli fastened her teeth hard into her under-lip to keep from moaning while he pulled gently on her. He was damned clever with his mouth... as if he'd had a great deal of practice.

Instead of losing control, Lilli delicately stroked her labia against that mustache. Each tickling movement increased the delightful sensations. Damn, that felt good! Had she ever been on top quite this way with --

No. Never. Not that she was going to think about him ever again.

"Enjoying yourself, ma'am?" Harry whispered the words against her wet, aroused flesh. The vibrations felt good, too. Almost too good.

Lilli edged herself away, sliding down his naked body, wanting the pulsing sexual tingle but not the ultimate sensation. Not yet. She rocked back on her heels to look at and savor that hard male body under hers.

"So far, Harry." She felt his cock surging hard against the crack between her buttocks. He was enjoying himself, too. Lilli clenched her butt cheeks, just for the pleasure of feeling that hardness twitch against her tightened ass. "So long as you do what I say."

Delicious. His cock was already showing how strongly he wanted what they were going to do. The hard shaft jumped yet again, just from her look. His lungs were already sucking air, as if he were running. She looked down at his face. His gray eyes stared into hers. They sparked the low heat boiling in her into something more intense.

"We're not having intercourse this time," Lilli warned. "We're doing things according to my rules, my way." After all, she didn't have anything to protect herself from someone who hired mistresses on a whim. AIDS might not exist yet, but that left syphilis and gonorrhea and God knows what else. Damn it, where did a nice woman find contraception in this era?

Besides, she needed to keep her distance this way because she needed additional protection. Protection from this stranger who might just be able to seduce her

completely. What would she do if she fell in love with Harry? With someone who might be only an imaginary lover? With someone who seemed only too real?

His eyes narrowed and he half-smiled. "Understood."

Abruptly he turned his head away, as if he didn't want her to see him exposed this way. She stared at the suddenly vulnerable neck. He was powerful, but she could be as well. She would show him how strong she could be. Her rules. Her way.

Her turn.

Lilli swallowed. "I'm going to lick you now. Everywhere. And we're both going to like it. You can beg if you want."

He hadn't expected the wait to be so long, to be so uncertain of the answer. To be unsure of what answer he'd wanted. While he'd waited for her to decide what she'd do, all during that interminable week, he'd reminded himself she wasn't suitable to be his mistress. He liked women of a different social class. He liked younger, compliant women. After all, he was a man who knew how to get the better of any deal. He mastered others for his own desires. Lilli shouldn't be right for him. She was older than any of his previous women, even if she was still beautiful. She was better educated than any of them -- hell, better educated than he was -- and she knew it. He puzzled over why he wanted her so badly even while he fantasized over her.

You can beg if you want.

He never dreamed he lusted after her because his body knew she could dominate him for her own pleasure.

And for his. Damn it. For his. God, she could make him forget the vows he made to himself after he married. He had to be careful. He'd escaped that trap and didn't need another. That thought should have cooled him down, but just then Lilli's teeth fastened onto one nipple and delicately rested on his skin, not quite closing down. His nipples hardened, and he knew he was close to begging her to --

She bit. Hard.

He cursed at the pain.

His cock jerked against her ass, begging for more.

She laughed and he wanted to curse again. He wanted to weep. He just wasn't sure if the tears would be from frustration or joy. Whatever the hell she did, he wanted her to do more. Harder, sharper, fiercer. Just more.

She cocked her head at him, inquiringly, as if she heard his thoughts. She ran her finger down his chest, toying with muscles that knotted at her touch. Her hand slid between the two of them to tease at his balls, squeezing, scratching, stroking. His wrists hurt from straining against his bonds. But even that slight pain felt good.

He knew he was doing exactly what she wanted, even while he fought to contain himself. She wanted him to fight her before he gave in. Damn it, his body was turning into her plaything. Even while he panted his refusal to groan out loud, part of him wanted his body to be her toy -- to be stroked and teased and incited into submission. Eventually she would make him moan and, finally, beg. They both knew he would. But would she tease him into coming -- or would she let him stay in unsatisfied longing forever? He almost didn't care. Whatever she wanted, however she wanted him, she was already more exciting than any woman he'd had in years. In forever.

Harry shut his eyes. Ha. As if that gesture could hide how much he wanted her to keep going. As if he couldn't see her even with his eyes shut, her hair beginning to tumble to her shoulders, eyes gleaming and her fingers poised to tickle or prod, to incite and tease. As if his cock wasn't full and stretched, demanding more. He moaned as she gave his sac almost too hard a tug. Almost.

"What do you want, Harry? If you ask me nicely, I may give it to you." Her voice purred against his ear.

"Masturbate me."

"Wrong answer, Harry. I said to ask. Just for that, you must pay penance." The voice disappeared from his ear and then her pussy slipped against his lips again.

Penance? She had no idea how good she tasted. With every slurping sound he made, his cock surged and pulsed. When she ground her clit against his tongue, he laughed, letting the vibrations excite her. She was wet. Dripping for him.

If this was punishment, let him be punished often.

"Anything. Anything you want will be fine, Mrs. Dayton," he whispered, paying special attention to that swollen clitoris, worshiping it with his tongue.

"Right answer, Harry. Very right." Her body shifted, even as he continued to use his mouth on her.

When her mouth covered his cock, he gratefully moaned against her flesh. She knew exactly what he craved -- long, deep swallows that sucked his aching penis down, short, shallow sips that stroked devilishly against his sensitive cock head. He shuddered, fighting his climax.

No. He wasn't going to make this so easy. Not for her. Not for him. He fought to concentrate on servicing her instead. But the two sensations, tasting her, her tasting him, were too much, too good...

He groaned at last, loudly. She broke free and laughed.

"Go on, damn it!" he gasped.

"Ask nicely, Harry."

"Please, then. Please."

After that, the battle to see who came first wasn't silent. She moaned against him, kneading his balls tighter and faster. The ropes strained against his legs and arms as he thrust up harder with his cock, then his tongue. The bed creaked wildly as their rhythm sped up.

"You can come now, Harry!" Her voice was high, wild. She shuddered against him.

Damn it, he had to obey her orders in this as in everything. He couldn't hold back anymore. He didn't want to hold back. The surge of heat sped up from his hard, drawn up balls, through his cock and then the rest of his convulsing body. It was as if everything in him -- blood, soul, heart -- spilled out with the rush of sperm. She squeezed him, milked him ruthlessly, and he moaned in defeat and ecstasy.

Then he realized he wasn't alone in his defeat. Dimly, he heard her own broken cry as she came.

Harry's face was lax with pleasure as she untied him, gently rubbing where his struggles had left marks. Lilli smiled. He hadn't been a docile prisoner. Neither of them had wanted him to be.

He didn't move, even after he was untied. He looked as if he might have fallen off to sleep. Lilli sniffed. Men! They never changed.

She turned to her washbasin, poured a pitcher of the cool water and wrung out a washcloth. She wiped herself carefully, enjoying the feel of the cloth against her still sensitive cunt. When she was done, she turned to him.

His eyes opened as she gently washed away the sperm streaking his belly and thighs.

"You are amazing." He no longer sounded sleepy. He didn't sound happy, either.

"Of course."

"Can you continue to do this?"

"Far more easily than you, sir." She gestured to his flaccid cock. At her words, it began to stir. Lilli paused, briefly distracted.

"No doubt you're right, Mrs. Dayton. But I didn't mean that."

"What do you mean, then? I need our terms spelled out clearly, Harry."

"I --" He paused, then sat up, no longer drowsy and sated. "This isn't easy to explain."

"I doubt that. You have been quite clear about what you expect so far."

"Very well. Meet me downstairs. I don't want anyone to wonder why we've been gone so long."

Lilli looked at the cock that was already half-erect and fought a sudden urge to lick it again. She struggled to keep her voice cool as ever. "Are you sure you want that?"

Harry didn't mean them to be public lovers. Only part of her was glad of his discretion.

He leaned over, kissed her deeply. Tongue to tongue. He held her taste in his mouth and she knew he was finding that as erotic as she did. Lilli caught herself digging her nails into his shoulders.

He pulled back and smiled. "I want you."

"Well, then --" To hell with discretion.

"Downstairs. In fifteen minutes."

* * *

"Stupid!"

Anabelle's voice was cross. Lilli paused at the entrance to the hall. Did she really want to have yet another scene with little Miss Adolescent? Maybe she was lucky no one else in the early 1900s knew about teenage rebellion.

Lilli sighed. She wanted to go find Harry. She was still hot and flustered and randy. She didn't want to deal with sulks and bad manners. She ought to quietly sneak away and let Anabelle take her bad humor out on someone else.

She heard a half-stifled sob. Maybe Anabelle wasn't just angry.

Inwardly cursing, she walked further into the hallway and said, "What's wrong?"

"My hair. It's stupid. I look wrong. Dowdy."

Lilli stared. Anabelle was dressed in her crisp tennis outfit and would have looked quite ready for the courts except for her pout. But her comb was in her hand though her hair was already pulled back with a neat bow to hold it.

"You look perfectly appropriate for -- oh." For seeing David Bradshawe.

"I don't want to look appropriate." Anabelle sniffed. "My hair needs to go up. More like yours." She paused and then the confession dragged itself out. "I wish I had your hair."

"Silly." Lilli untied the bow and carefully combed Anabelle's dark hair out. She probably ought to tell Anabelle to keep her mind on tennis rather than her hair. Or that she didn't approve of trying to dazzle David Bradshawe. Instead she said, "Your hair is beautiful. There was a time when I longed for rich brown hair like yours."

"Really? Why?"

"I have no idea. I suppose it's because when you're unsure of yourself, you think changing how you look will make everything better."

"You never sound unsure of yourself," Anabelle replied, flatly.

Lilli laughed. Miss Anabelle didn't need to know how very unsure of herself her chaperone was.

"I'd like pale skin and long blonde hair." Anabelle looked sideways at her. "Powder could make my skin whiter."

What did people think of makeup in this world? More importantly, what was she supposed to think of makeup for Anabelle? Lilli paused.

"You're a young lady. You don't want to look fast."

Anabelle pouted but her attitude was resigned. She'd expected that answer, thank heaven. Lilli reached into her pocket, remembering a trinket she'd thrown into it not long ago. All her hairpins had fallen down a few minutes before when... when hairpins hadn't been as important as now. Lilli placed a glittering butterfly pin in the girl's upswept hair.

"The bow is sensible but let's try not being sensible. Look at yourself now."

Anabelle stared in the mirror. "You're much more fashionable than my last chaperone, I'll grant you that. I almost like this."

Harry watched the two of them, laughing and gossiping in front of the hall mirror. They hadn't seen him enter. They were swept up in their own female world.

He'd wanted Lilli, thought she would hurry down to meet him. For a moment he felt almost lonely. He might have interrupted them and shattered their mood -- and his -- but for the picture the two of them made. They were too lovely to disturb.

The afternoon light caught the glitter of Anabelle's hairpin, the luster of Lilli's hair. Anabelle was laughing. He hadn't heard her laugh for a long time. Not since Sarah died. Maybe not before then.

"Oh, hello!" Anabelle's smile dimmed a little when she saw him but didn't die down completely. "How do I look?"

He'd thought being around him had made her unhappy. He thought he just didn't know how to talk to his daughter. Maybe he'd been wrong.

Sarah had sucked the joy out of him. Had she done that to her daughter as well?

"Well?" Lilli prompted, a warning in her eyes.

He wanted Anabelle to laugh. Wanted both of them to laugh. Suddenly inspired, Harry gravely pulled the ornate flower arrangement from the hall vase. With a bow, he handed the bouquet to his daughter.

"You are the loveliest flower of them all, my dear." He gave the words his best burlesque actor's imitation.

Anabelle tried to hold the huge armful of dripping foliage and laughed until she hiccupped. When he saw her giggling face against the flowers, he blinked suddenly. He'd made her happy.

"You are silly, Daddy." She kissed him on the cheek and pushed the flowers haphazardly back into their container. "I need to hurry. I have an appointment."

"I'll be there in a moment!" Lilli called after her. After Anabelle scampered out of the hall, Lilli laid her hand on his arm. "Well done."

"She is a pretty enough girl." Harry tried not to let the pride -- and worry -- show. "Almost a woman."

"Almost. Almost-women are temperamental."

"All women are," he corrected, grinning. He picked up a rose that Anabelle had left on the floor and idly tucked it into Lilli's hair.

"I'm only worthy of one flower?" Lilli asked, looking as if she wanted to smile.

"I --" He paused. There weren't any words. The sunlight from the windows still made her glow. Or perhaps the glow was from Lilli herself. He couldn't say that. Those sounded like more burlesque actor words.

He felt a fool because he meant them. Not long ago, Lilli had brought excitement and lust. Now, just as easily, Lilli brought joy and sunlight. His chest tightened. She could give him something more innocent and more dangerous than he'd bargained for.

Still unable to explain to her how much she was worth, he bent and kissed her hand. He'd done it once to seduce. This time was different.

"You almost make me think you're not like all women," he said at last.

She stared at him. He'd put it badly. Perhaps he'd insulted her. He should order a real bouquet of flowers for Lilli and deliver them tomorrow. He'd give her a traditional gift. The gesture ought to show what he meant.

Damn, he couldn't do that. She wasn't one of his actresses who could display a gentleman's bouquet as a trophy. She was a part of his household, an employee who didn't need gossip about her. He scowled. He'd at least send his daughter flowers. He could try to make a new beginning with her.

Lilli slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. "Come with me to the garden," she suggested.

"Perhaps you're Eve. The first woman." He said those words without thinking.

She smiled. "May we have tea with our apples?"

He laughed. One moment she offered the most ferocious sex, in the next she offered him tea as if she were the mistress of the house.

He never had tea. But she had asked him to do so and today she would have anything she wanted. "You may, Mrs. Dayton. But I suspect you don't need my permission."

Chapter Two

She did look like the lady of the manor as she poured his tea. Far more the lady of the manor than any other woman he'd had in his home, including his late wife. The whack of the tennis balls was the only thing that disturbed the summer quiet.

"I see you have allowed my daughter to meet with David after all."

Lilli appeared as calm as if she had never tied him up and fellated him less than a half hour ago. Had never laughed at him in the hall. She was back to being the perfect chaperone, showing she could hold up both of the jobs he wanted her to do.

He'd known that. But her calm perfection now made him ache to have her under him, moaning and uncontrolled. "I decided it's better to have him under my eye than make her sneak away and imagine herself in an illicit romance." Harry knew his fingers looked big and crude holding the delicate teacup. He was lousy at the social graces women found so important.

Not that he needed to impress this woman. He'd paid for her services. All of them. For a little while, he'd forgotten. Now, he reminded himself of that very deliberately. She wasn't Eve in the garden and they weren't in Paradise. He'd allowed her too close. It was past time he showed her who was really in control.

"Clever. You know how to handle my daughter better than I suspected."

Lilli held up the sugar bowl. "Would you care for any, Mr. Nelson?"

The two of them stared at each other.

"Very much, Mrs. Dayton. I want some very much."

Anabelle's giggle broke their sudden intimacy. Harry blinked, set the teacup down, watching it rock for a moment on the tiny table.

"I know what her mother and I did at almost her age. I know I have no desire for history to repeat itself."

"I'll watch her, Harry."

He shook his head. "I don't mean just Anabelle. I had to marry Sarah. I regretted that every day until the day she died. I regretted how things turned out even more after that. Lilli --"

"Yes?"

"This affair of ours."

"Yes?"

"I want you very much. But I will not risk children." There. What he'd planned to tell her when he first asked her to join him had been said.

He'd been laughing and relaxed. Now he was different. Lilli couldn't quite put her finger on the difference, but she was sorry for it.

"I told you I'm almost forty, Harry. I never had a child with my husband." She'd wondered. It had to have been her, despite what the doctors said. Mason had children.

"I can't take that chance. Ever."

"What do you mean, Harry?"

"We must never, ever, be in a position where you might conceive. I know you're inventive, Mrs. Dayton --" the formality reminded them both of how inventive she'd been -- "and, so long as we remain that way, I believe both of us can be satisfied with our arrangement despite its limitations."

Oh. Didn't the man know about contraception? She'd have to explain an awful lot to him. Damn. Weren't women of this time allowed to know?

"Provided we never have intercourse, you're willing to do whatever we need to satisfy ourselves?" Lilli asked, carefully.

Part of her wanted to blush. Part of her was already calculating what they could do together. It sounded like one of the most titillating games she could imagine.

His smile at her question almost blinded her with its brightness. Had he been afraid she would refuse? He must be mad. She was already so hot for him she'd agree to much more than this request.

"Haven't I already demonstrated how needy and willing I am? I'm putting all my desires in your capable hands." He bent and kissed one hand, then the other.

Oh my. Suddenly Lilli wasn't sure she was nearly as expert as he trusted her to be.

While she searched for the right words to reassure them both, she felt one large foot snake up inside her skirt. Lilli swallowed. He'd somehow rid himself of his shoe and hosiery.

Higher. That naked foot inched up higher. Bless those split apart drawers of hers. She opened up her knees, spread her legs wide.

"Lemon, Mr. Nelson?" Her voice sounded as polite as ever.

When his toe reached her vaginal opening, she knew he had to feel how hot and wet she was. Damn, a trickle was running down her leg as he nudged her labia open.

"I'd be delighted, Mrs. Dayton." His voice sounded as polite as hers. "A little sweet, a little tart... it all adds to piquancy, don't you think?"

"Papa!" Anabelle called. "Look at my serve! I think I'm getting much better!"

"Forty-love!" David's voice called.

His head turned briefly toward his daughter. His toe continued stroking. Lilli leaned hard into the pressure, using him to pleasure herself. Perhaps it wouldn't be quite as easy to master him as she thought. Not when he could so effortlessly control them both.

"Excellent, my dear. I see your lessons have paid off," Harry called.

He turned back to her, his face unreadable. Lilli knew her lips were trembling, her cheeks flushed with color. She couldn't stop. She ought to stop, oughtn't she? To assert her dominance. Her fingers twisted in the linen napkin in her lap.

But he was so clever. They were both enjoying themselves too much. Harry's lips curled up, smiling and coaxing her, though his face grew intent. They both were breathing fast.

"Come." He mouthed the word silently.

The blood was surging inside her. Could he compel her to come? Loosening her grip on the cloth, Lilli put her hand on that toe, rubbing it against her wet clit where it nestled between his big toe and the next.

He brought the toes together in a short, sharp squeeze against her swollen, aching flesh. "Oh!" She let out a gasp, unable to stop.

Just one gasp. Only because the world rocked around her and screaming fireworks shot off inside her. His toe pressed harder. Lilli compressed her lips and shut her eyes, her nails clenching hard into her palms. She fought herself, refusing to allow herself to say more. It didn't help. The ricocheting sensations inside her intensified as she fought to contain them.

She shuddered, once. Twice. Then she opened her eyes.

"Would you care for more, Mr. Nelson?" Lilli held up the teapot, her hands steady, a composed smile on her lips. "I would hate for anything to be cold."

He was still breathing hard, but his smile glinted. It was a victor's smile.

"I'm finding everything is quite warm, Mrs. Dayton. Thank you."

* * *

Lilli stared into the mirror, almost in despair. She saw her face, the remnants of satisfied lust still showing in her half-smile and sparkling eyes.

She didn't look depraved. She certainly didn't look old. She looked full. Lush. Pleasured.

But she didn't look in control. What would she do with this man now that she'd let down her guard? Both of them knew he had renegotiated their bargain. Both of them knew he'd meant to do so all along.

This was becoming much more serious than she'd expected when she first imagined a lover. She was too involved. She was too willing to do what he wanted. When had she forgotten her real life and her real husband?

The mirror's reflection shifted once more, fluidly changing to a different time.

"She wants children." Mason poured himself a drink.

"You always pick ones that do." Fred sipped from his glass. "I thought you'd taken care of that."

"I did. One simple operation eliminated any more possibility of child support."

"Your last wife handled that operation well enough. Eventually."

"Well, I never got around to telling her why we didn't have children."

Fred laughed. "I wondered. Well, I suppose not telling will work again."

She'd never liked Fred, the sneaky bastard. Of course he was. He was Mason's best friend.

Lilli set the mirror down. Mason. She'd never realized Mason had been lying to her all the time. God, even if she was fantasizing this, the scene made sense. All this time she'd thought there was some lack in herself. She'd been young when she married him. More naïve than she thought. Hell. How stupid had she continued to be, allowing Mason to dictate their life?

How stupid was she now? Wasn't she with another man who didn't want children -- who didn't really want her? At least he didn't want the Lilli who had inconvenient emotions or desires.

"Mrs. Dayton?" Franny tapped at her door.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Nelson would like to talk to you before you get ready for bed. He'll meet you in the study."

* * *

"Harry?"

"My dear Mrs. Dayton." He seemed different tonight. She could feel heat, carefully controlled. But the sudden distance she'd seen in him this afternoon was still there.

She felt different, too. More uneasy. More needy.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to come with me." He stood, opening a small door by a bookcase.
"This is an entrance to my bedroom."

Come with me.

She should never have surrendered to his command at tea. Never. He was smiling a self-satisfied smile as he led her into his bedroom. It was larger than hers, of course, though not as opulent as she had expected. She'd seen museums that showed bedrooms of the time and most of them were designed to impress the world with the wealth of their owners.

Harry's furniture was simple, taken from a different era when simplicity was more valued. The rug on the floor was a rich-hued Oriental, but that was almost the only sign of bright color in the room. The room was very masculine, impressive in its severity.

"Sit down, Mrs. Dayton."

Harry gestured to the bed. She thought about refusing. She'd lose that argument. Something about the way he held himself, as if he were waiting to pounce, told her so. So she graciously inclined her head, the way she had when he offered her a chair at the tea table. But once she sat, Lilli smoothed her hands nervously against the cool, crisp sheets and wondered why she was there. Strange. She'd gradually been feeling so at home she forgot how very out of place she was.

Now she remembered. Harry stood over her. He was a very big man.

"Afraid?" he challenged.

"Not in the least." Lilli's chin jerked up.

"It's my turn, Mrs. Dayton. Aren't you wondering what might happen to you now?" His smile wasn't lazy or amused any more. It was predatory. Almost frightening with its sharp ferocity.

What had she done? What had she done? She was at his mercy now. Her body responded to that frightening thought with a sudden twang of pure lust. Desire curled up in her stomach, warming her with a scorch of heat. "What do you want to happen, Harry?"

"Me? I want everything, of course. I didn't get to where I am now by thinking small, Mrs. Dayton. Though you are small --" His hand cupped her face, holding it for a

moment, before it released her as he stroked her skin. "Small and tight and... what I want."

Consumed. His eyes devoured her. That wasn't some silly phrase from a Victorian romance. For just a moment she saw how sharp and hot his needs could be and Lilli was terrified. Terrified and fascinated.

Her own hand stretched up to touch his chin. The dangerous look on his face eased when he smiled at her this time. The amusement warmed her. This was Harry, not some stranger.

"Not afraid then, tigress?" he asked. "You're ready for anything?"

"I'm ready for you."

He laughed. "I believe you are. That's what I enjoy most about you."

"Why don't you take off your clothes, Harry?" She would regain dominance here. She had to. Everything felt too off-balance. Too frightening.

"Why don't I take off yours?" With one swipe he ripped her dainty summer gown. Lilli felt the pulse beat hard in her throat. But was she afraid or aroused?

Both. She was both.

He was in control again. He saw the uncertainty in her face when he tore her clothing off. His turn now. At last. He practically heard the hiss of the blood in his veins, beating hard. He'd keep her uncertain, then take her thoroughly.

"You're beautiful," he said instead.

He hadn't wanted to say that, though she was. God, she was. Lilli blinked at him. Didn't she know the truth? She was as exotic as some hothouse lily, with her pale blonde hair contrasting with her dark brown eyes. She looked fragile, but he knew she was capable of amazing strength. She spoke disdainfully, but he could see her swallowing her nerves to challenge him. Beautiful. Complex.

She was capable of annihilating him if she wanted because suddenly he wanted her more than anything else in this world or beyond.

That was precisely why he wasn't going to let her control him.

"Trust me, Harry. I love you. Everything will be fine." Sarah had seduced him with those words, tricked him, almost destroyed him and he had never come close to desiring her the way he craved this woman. No one was going to do that to him again. Especially not this mysterious Lilli.

"Bend over, Mrs. Dayton." He crooned the words to her as he stripped. "Let me see that truly delicious rear of yours."

"But I'm pregnant. We have to get married. We have to." He hadn't thought what the consequences of living with Sarah would be after she'd said that. Not the years of mistrust and boredom, of petty quarrels and deepening hatred.

Sarah had given him a child. Or had she sold Anabelle to him for a price? Was a child a worthwhile exchange for marriage? It had seemed worth it once. Anabelle had been a loving child -- shrieking with delight whenever she saw him. As the years went by and Sarah interfered more and more, Anabelle became yet another unpleasant familial duty.

Lilli seemed different from other women he'd been close to. She didn't whisper sweet, lying words. She didn't turn sullen and indifferent. Instead Lilli gave. She struggled not to, but even her attempts to refuse satisfied him. No matter what, she didn't ignore him.

Would she struggle over this? His cock hardened even more at the thought. "I want to get inside you, Lilli."

"But I thought --" She paused, thinking over what he'd said and her position, stretched out over the edge of the bed, her ass in the air. "Oh."

He waited, tensing, for her reply.

She'd never particularly wanted to do this before. But the guarded excitement in Harry's voice set off a responsive quiver in her cunt. She tightened her ass cheeks. Maybe.

He leaned over her, his body heat warming her. His cock fit snugly against the small of her back. How tight would the fit be inside?

"Please, Lilli."

He wasn't begging. He was seducing. She felt the wetness of sweat and the fluid slowly coming from the head of his cock -- and her own excitement -- flowing from between her legs.

"You want to, Lilli. It will be good. I'll make it good."

"All right. If you promise." She tried to sound teasing. The words hung there, though, as if she were depending on him.

She wasn't. She wasn't. She wasn't going to depend on any man, ever. She wasn't going to trust any of them that far. Not even when she was stretched out on a bed, listening to the sounds of a man preparing himself to enter her. A drawer opened and shut. What was he doing? She shivered.

The head of his suddenly too-large cock probed, gently, at her anus. She tried to relax.

"Let me make it easier for you, darlin'," Harry whispered to her, and then his finger entered, gently, passing by her initial resistance. The fingertip carried something wet and soothing. Lilli couldn't relax, though, because soon that fingertip wasn't soothing at all. He was stroking sensitive, intimate spots she'd never dreamed could exist.

Excitement curled up slowly from her pussy and then swirled out through her body. The heat that was centered in her clit crackled, flamed up impossibly high. His finger promised all sorts of illicit delights.

Lilli gripped the bedcovers tightly. His legs cradled hers, steadying her as she began to tremble.

"If you're afraid, I'll stop."

"Afraid?" Lilli gritted out. "Of anything you can do? Please, Harry. Don't insult me."

His chuckle rumbled against her neck. Another finger entered, delicately, testing the nerve endings she didn't even know she had. She shivered again.

Slow. Excruciatingly slow. His fingers slid out and his cock began to enter. Lilli let out one soft breath. It had been long ago, but had she been this nervous with Mason,

back when she was a virgin? Of course she had. More. This was scary but exciting. Unknown, but safe. She was an adult and she wasn't afraid of anything Harry would do. Much.

"Ahhh." That was Harry, as he lodged himself inside. "You're tight, Lilli. It feels good."

His slide in stayed slow. He rested, snug up inside her for a long time. She could feel the eager bump of his cock though he fought to stay still. She was starting to feel a little eager herself, now that the first wash of surprise was over. The pain she'd feared wasn't there. She was stretched and full in an entirely new way.

"I'm going to touch myself," she announced, liking the sound of the words said aloud. Harry's breath caught and his cock, held tightly inside her previously unused channel, twitched harder.

"Don't get me going too fast, Mrs. Dayton." His voice was amused but hoarse. "I need to be very gentle with you this time."

"You can, but I don't have to be." She wondered how much he could feel as she slid her hand under her body, touching her pubic curls. She could play as long as he could. Longer.

She felt his cock stretching her more as she slipped her own fingers inside. When she brushed against what had to be the head of his cock pushing against her skin, she felt the thrust of his erection. He shook when she rubbed against him.

"Can you feel my hand?" she whispered.

"God, yes."

Fascinating. Her clitoris swelled in response to his choked words. That was all it took. Suddenly she was swamped with heat -- from the strangeness of their union, from the excitement she sensed blazing in her partner, from the friction of their bodies as they moved in strange harmony together.

"I can't last much longer," Harry grunted. He moved carefully in and then out. Then less carefully.

Lilli shook with a desire intense enough to strangle her. The overwhelming pleasure she gained while her body absorbed this new act was increasing slowly, too slowly. This crawl to orgasm was going to kill her.

"No... need," Lilli gritted out.

Her increasing tension was the trigger for Harry. He groaned, deeply, and she felt his shudders through her own body. She was on the rack, but it was stretching her with pleasure. Harry's climatic movements sent her hurtling into sudden, sharp pleasure, faster than she'd expected moments before. She sucked in a breath. Heat started from her ass and cunt, engulfing her. As he pulled out, she moaned with her own orgasm.

"Ohhh!" She couldn't help but whimper the exclamation into the bed sheets.

"That was incredible," she heard Harry say at the same time.

Wet, breathing hard, she turned to face him. For the first time, Harry held out his arms and they clutched each other. Lilli's eyelids closed almost before he removed the condom. She'd had no idea how much she'd missed this part of sex -- the closeness afterward. No matter what, Mason had always cuddled after sex.

Lie or not, she'd loved the sweetness of holding a man, the protection a male body promised.

She thought perhaps Harry's lips brushed over her forehead. Tenderness was something she'd longed for, almost as much as wild intercourse. She hadn't even admitted to herself how much she needed that until now.

So had she won this time or had he?

* * *

"You never talk about your husband." He knew he spoke too abruptly, especially when she stiffened in his arms. Lilli had been drowsy and sated and pleased just moments before.

"No more than you do about your wife."

"You know more about Sarah than I do about your spouse. What was his name?"

"Mason."

“Were you happy with him?” She knew so much about keeping a man happy. But was she? Even when she bit and moaned and climaxed, he sensed her holding back. Had this Mason taught her to guard her responses?

“Happy enough. Until the end.”

“Until he died?”

“Until... yes. That was when I found out our life together was a lie. He was never the man I had thought he was. I don’t understand how I allowed that. Unless I’m lying to myself now.” She sounded pensive. Confused. Angry. Angry with herself as well as her husband? He could understand all those feelings. He’d traveled that road too often himself.

“Marriage confuses a person,” he offered. “Compromise and confusion. That’s what marriage is about.”

Lilli laughed. “Once I would have disagreed with you.”

Harry stroked her back as she spooned up against him. She sighed and relaxed, just a bit. He tried not to feel smug that he’d managed to make her lie sweetly against him, relaxed and responsive to his touch.

But he did. Lilli wasn’t conquered, not yet, but she made him feel triumphant. The thought soothed him as much as the feel of her did. This must be why she intrigued him. She was willing to put up a fight before being conquered. With Lilli it was no compromise and no quarter. He always liked to triumph against a worthy opponent.

He liked to be merciful, too, once he was sure of his victory.

Just then Lilli turned her head, a small smile on her face. She no longer looked sated and quiet. The gleam in her eyes made Harry realize he wasn’t quite as spent as he thought. His cock stirred, just a little, at her look.

“What next?” she asked. “I’m ready for more.”

Harry frowned. Was he sure he was the victor? He needed to be sure. Here he was, holding Lilli like he was her lover, wanting to see how pleased she was. Was that winning? How the hell did you know when you won with a woman?

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll think about it.” He kept his voice light.

"I'd like to ask something first."

"Yes?" Harry tensed. What did she want from him? She'd done what he wanted -- and more. Smart women like Lilli knew that made a man generous. Damn, but he was inclined to agree to her demands without knowing her terms.

She was a dangerous woman. All the more dangerous because she was looking at him right now as if she cared.

"You used protection."

"What?"

"A condom. You used a condom."

"Of course."

"Then why are you so worried about pregnancy?"

"I used a condom with Sarah, too." An old hurt flickered through him.

"Oh."

"She was older than I and she said she understood when I told her I loved her but I had no intention of marrying at eighteen. She got pregnant anyhow."

She hadn't been much older when she met Mason.

"Admittedly sometimes there are accidents but --"

"Years later she admitted she'd tampered with the condoms. Sarah was desperate to marry a man who was on his way to making a fortune. I was too young to know better then. Now I'm much more cautious." He ran his finger across one of her nipples, watching it pucker for him. Just for him.

"God, I am sorry, Harry."

"No need to be sorry, Mrs. Dayton. Just be careful. Very, very careful."

Control. She needed control. Neither of them wanted her sobbing and clinging. For just a moment they'd forgotten what they really meant to each other -- excitement, desire, temporary need. Lilli deliberately calmed her voice.

"I'm always careful, Harry. Don't worry about me. I'll remember exactly why you hired me."

She saw his face shut down, his finger stop stroking. Was he going to end things this way?

Then, deliberately, his hand closed over her nipple. He pinched. She gasped, excitement in the sound. They both knew her reaction was lust, not fear.

“I’m sure you will remember just as well as I do, Mrs. Dayton.” Did he sound angry? He leaned over her and kissed her neck and soon she forgot to wonder what he was thinking.

Chapter Three

"Alice, my love, may I come in?" Harry held his hand out to meet her gloved one.

"Certainly, Harry. What a pleasant surprise!" Alice threw her gloves carelessly onto the mantel and leaned back.

"You look beautiful as always, girl, but I'm not your paying public. You needn't strike a pose for me." Harry leaned over the chair by the fireplace. "I need advice, not acting lessons."

"Be still, my girlish heart," Alice drawled. "The Mighty Harry actually wants advice?"

"You make me sound very arrogant."

Alice raised her eyebrows. "You are very arrogant."

Harry bowed his head in acknowledgement. "I suppose that's why I feel ridiculous now."

"Indeed?" Alice laughed. "This should be interesting. You haven't asked me for advice and sympathy in years."

"Not since Sarah." Harry's voice changed from lazy to cold. "Not that any advice or sympathy could help there."

"We're still good enough friends to want to help, even when there is no help for us." Alice's voice changed, too. "I was there for you with your wife. You were there for me when I was pregnant. What's the problem now?"

"I didn't mean to remind you of bad times, Alice. This problem isn't nearly so awful. I'm just -- I'm just a bit unsure of myself." Harry rubbed his face. "I'm not even sure how to explain things to you. You'll think me a fool."

He hated to admit such a thing, even to Alice, though he trusted her as much as he trusted anyone. She'd seen him at his worst, after Sarah would lash out at him and then ignore him. When he'd been scraping by, praying for some luck during his bust times, and Sarah threw yet another party he'd have to pay for. Harry would go to the privacy of Alice's poor lodgings and drink himself to sleep.

When Alice had been unable to work after falling ill and losing her runaway lover's baby, he'd found the money to help her pay the bills. He'd comforted her when she found she'd never have more children.

They'd both moved on to better days long since, thank God.

"Harry, boyo, how long have I known you?" Alice sounded like an echo of his thoughts.

"Too long, Alice. No one will believe how old you say you are if I tell them how long we've been friends." He had a real urge to smile when he saw her make a face.

"Let's not talk about sordid things like age. I'll fix you a whiskey and soda instead." She bustled about, expertly mixing his favorite drink. "I was merely going to remind you I've seen a lot of damn-fool things you've done over the years. What could you possibly hesitate to tell me?"

"You say such pretty things. Ah, Alice, why couldn't I fall in love with you?"

She glanced up at him. "Well, boyo, there is the matter of me preferring females to you. Though you have made me question the matter once or twice." Alice handed him the drink and sat on his lap. Her warmth was comforting. He rubbed the nape of her neck. "Also, there is the problem that you have no more desire to be in love than I do. Fortunately for me I have Clara. She understands when she's on the road with her acting, I may have other profitable amusements. But she can always come home to me."

"Would I had a Clara." Harry smiled. "Such an understanding liaison would be perfect."

"You prefer someone who sees you as a profitable amusement." Alice looked sharply at him. "Or you have up 'til now."

"I still do. It's just --"

"Yes?"

"I'm breaking my rules with someone. She's not right -- I mean, I suppose, I'm not right with her." Damn, how to explain Lilli?

"Oh?"

"I hired her, the way I do all my women. But I keep wanting more."

"More from her? Or more from yourself?"

"Her. Me. Both of us." Harry swallowed. Because his thoughts were in a tangle, he admitted something he never meant say. "I let her take the lead. Sexually."

Alice laughed. "Now there's a confession I never expected of you. Does she beat you regularly? Shall I give you lessons in how to accept a flogging? You know that was another problem for us. You always said you enjoyed mastery, but you never wanted to take a whip hand, so to speak." Alice shifted in his lap.

"That's still true, minx. I don't want to be beaten, just as I see no pleasure in beating someone. Or perhaps I'd take too much pleasure in it. Damn, half of me wouldn't mind taking a whip to her when she infuriates me." *Just like half of me wants to hold and protect her when she's unhappy. Damn it, why can't I explain the problem clearly to Alice?*

"Nooo. That's not the way to do things at all. But it saddens me such a thought even crossed your mind. You usually keep your emotions under lock and key, boyo. I'm not saying you shouldn't be emotional now and then, for your own good, but --"

"She gets me crazy, Alice. As crazy as Sarah did. Crazier. Because she can make me feel better first, before she turns away from me. I can't go through anything like Sarah, ever again."

"No." Alice stopped her teasing movements and gripped his forearms tight. "You can't. You don't deserve such a thing, even though you can be a thick-headed idiot."

"So, what do I do?"

"What do you want to do?"

“Go on as I always have. My life is pleasant enough. There’s my work to keep me busy and women to occupy me when I’m not.”

If only he could stop feeling so much for Lilli. She was just another woman. No more, no less. Just because she could make him laugh -- or want to cry -- meant nothing. Or it should mean nothing.

Harry was a little stunned to see Alice stand up and glare at him.

“If that’s all you want, go back to this woman, fuck her silly -- or let her fuck you -- and pay her off when you’re done. Maybe she’ll teach you a few things you didn’t know about yourself and what you desire -- though if you enjoy being dominated, there’s no need to make such a fuss. Plenty of men enjoy such things, boyo, as I can tell you. You’re no less a man for finding such a thing out a bit late in your sexual career.”

“It’s not that exactly -- I mean, I dominate her as well.” Perhaps that was his whole problem. He simply wasn’t sure he’d mastered her sexually yet. Harry shrugged. If he couldn’t explain what the other things bothering him were to Alice or himself, perhaps there was no other problem.

Of course there was no other problem. None.

He thought about Lilli’s body as she’d moved under him -- and when she’d moved above him -- and smiled. Heat flashed through him, just as hot -- hotter -- than when he’d first seen and wanted her beyond reason. “I think I’ll go back and show her who’s in charge.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Here you got me all upset and I find out it’s because you enjoy being on the bottom now and again. Men! Drink your whiskey and soda and be gone with you before my latest paying customer finds us here. He’s rather a possessive sort.”

* * *

What was the matter with the man? Lilli picked up the racket that had been discarded near the tennis court. She swished it forcefully through the air, as if Harry was on the receiving end.

He'd gone back to the office. Back to his life. He'd scribbled a note to her that said nothing, not even when he was returning. If he was.

She wanted to return to her own life. Yes, she did. Even though this one became more real every day. Even though her real life grew less desirable all the time. But this one wasn't full of the serene contentment she'd envisioned once from her mirror. She couldn't see clearly how things were, the way the inn host had promised --

Promised? No one could promise her the ability to know the truth. Lilli rubbed her forehead hard. Surely she wasn't thinking the innkeeper had managed all this? Everything she thought now was muddled. Absolutely nothing was going right. Nothing.

She heard footsteps coming down the graveled path. With Harry's disappearance, David Bradshawe was appearing more and more. Her plan to have Anabelle's father squash any romance had only worked while Anabelle's father cared to be about.

Idiot man.

"Hello, Mrs. Dayton!"

Lilli kept her lips from twisting into a snarl only with a huge effort. David's glib speech and overly broad smile reminded her of Mason's dear buddy Fred. Only a teenaged child could fall for such false charm. Anabelle was dazzled, though. Lilli had interrupted far too many meetings that Anabelle "forgot" to mention.

"David." Lilli stretched out her hand.

"It's wonderful to see you." David even sounded like he meant it. He grasped her palm, bending over it European style. Lilli kept her jaw from dropping when he kissed her hand. When he straightened he gave a serious look, not a charming one.

He really was a pretty boy. Graceful, too. She was sure many women would melt with that hand-kissing gesture. He simply hadn't picked the right woman this time. She had felt more for him when he looked directly at her like a man just then, instead of acting as a young gigolo.

"Isn't that just a bit excessive?" Lilli drawled out the words. She knew he could hear the snap to her voice despite her polite smile. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"You're much too pretty to be my mother," David answered.

"I think you're much too practiced a flirt for me to believe you mean that."

"Of course I do. Lilli -- I've been thinking about you for weeks now. Wanting to know you better."

Oh, God. Now what? She used to have a kind of radar about when men were interested. This interest stunned her.

Her amazed hesitation cost her. Suddenly she was mashed up against David's chest. Apparently tennis could make strong arms. Lilli struggled, realized how tightly he was holding her and relaxed.

"Why don't you let me go before you embarrass us both, David?"

"Why don't I not?" He laughed and forced her mouth open with his tongue.

She kicked him sharply in the shins. These stupid skirts were hampering her movement.

"Harlot!" Anabelle's voice cracked.

Wonderful. At least the word made David's arms drop from her. Lilli stepped back, took a deep breath. "Anabelle, I haven't --"

"Haven't what?"

Oh, even better. That was Harry's voice. It held steadier than Anabelle's, but she heard the same note of accusation in it as his daughter's.

"I haven't done anything to make you sound as if I am on trial." Lilli stepped back again. "Good-bye, David. Better hunting next time."

"You led me on!" David wasn't aiming for charm now. His voice shook with sobs instead. If she hadn't been involved, she would have sworn he was sincere. "I didn't know... Lilli, you must have cared. You were always looking at me, singling me out from the crowd. You're the first woman I ever --" He choked.

David Bradshawe was a much better actor than she'd given him credit for. Now even she was feeling confused. Yes, of course she'd singled him out while trying to keep him from Anabelle. Could he be that misled by her actions?

"Go home, David. Try with someone who might believe your lies." When she saw Anabelle's pinched face, she knew she'd hesitated too long yet again. At least one member of the Nelson family already believed David's half-truths. What about the other?

She turned to Harry, dismissing the other, lesser man from her thoughts. Harry looked impassive. She knew he wasn't. He bubbled over with emotion, emotion that he usually hid from others. He couldn't hide from her.

Harry was upset. Furious. With her?

"You believe me, Mr. Nelson, do you not?" She kept her words formal in front of Harry's daughter. "You know me. You know David."

"Do I?"

Oh, God. He was angry with her.

Anabelle interrupted the tense silence with a mewling noise. She turned and ran, sobbing noisily, toward the house. Lilli took a step to follow her and then hesitated.

"Why don't you go take care of your charge, Mrs. Dayton?" Harry turned to the sniffling David. "I have other matters to attend to."

"Do you believe me or not?" Lilli planted herself in the path.

He turned to look her up and down. Would she like the answer she got?

"Yes. I do," he answered. His voice sounded certain, but also unhappy, as if he disbelieved her.

"Then why --" Lilli took a deep breath. She didn't want to ask more with someone else there. They'd have time later.

"I see. You're hoping for someone wealthier." David's voice made Lilli jump. "Good luck. Other women have lost their reputations trying to land him."

“Get out of here, puppy. Don’t return. You’re not welcome.” Harry spoke to David Bradshawe without bothering to glance at the young man, not even raising his voice. His contempt was clear enough... and his interest in someone else.

He looked only at Lilli.

Tension rose inside her as the sound of running footsteps grew more distant with every second. She hadn’t wanted to discuss things in front of an audience. Suddenly she was afraid to discuss anything with Harry at all.

“He’ll start gossip about you.”

“Gossip will die.” Lilli swallowed.

“He’s a little viper who will keep rumors going. He could make things reflect very badly on you.” Harry held out his hand. He said the next words as if they surprised him. “Marry me.”

He wasn’t the only one surprised. Lilli shook her head in disbelief. “You don’t like marriage.”

He dropped his hand down and stepped back a little. “No, but perhaps I’ve made too much of my dislike. After all, it’s simply a more formal, legal arrangement of our current terms. Our current arrangement has been rather enjoyable.” He smiled. “I could learn to like our marriage. You could, too. Marry me, Lilli.”

Marriage to Harry? He stood, hands in his pockets and head to one side, looking much like he had when he’d made his original offer to her. For a moment she felt almost giddy... almost like she was nineteen and being proposed to.

Once she had seen only the advantages of being with someone powerful and wealthy, sexy and interested. In fact, she’d stayed blind until recently to the trap of being with someone who didn’t want to be married to you.

“Thank you for your offer, sir.” Lilli gave a deep curtsy, as if she were meeting the queen. “However, I’ve already had a marriage much like what you propose. I don’t want another. We can continue as you originally agreed to, or we can terminate our agreement entirely. You decide while I see to Anabelle.”

Anabelle's room was quiet. Lilli stopped outside the door. No noisy sobs, no hysterical shrieks. Was she really needed inside?

Coward.

Lilli turned the doorknob and walked inside. Anabelle's room was all girlish lace and frills, dried flowers and ruffled curtains. Curled up on the bed, a lump of silent misery, was Anabelle.

"I'm sorry," Lilli whispered.

"Why? No matter what happened out there, you won."

She had won her petty war with Anabelle. Why was she sorry? Whether Anabelle believed the boy or not, she'd been shown David Bradshawe wasn't for her, something Lilli had wanted to show her for weeks.

"I'm terribly sorry that you've been hurt." That much was also the truth.

Anabelle's chin quivered. Her face was splotched from her tears, but she didn't cry this time.

"I wanted this so badly. I should have known he didn't care about me."

This was spoiled, careless Anabelle? Lilli took a cautious step forward and laid her hand on the teenager's shoulder. The girl turned her head away from Lilli, but nothing else.

"You made a mistake. It won't be the first time someone your age makes a mistake. That doesn't make you unlovable, Anabelle."

"I didn't want to be like my mother."

"Oh?" Lilli frowned. What had Harry said in front of Sarah's daughter?

"I want to have boyfriends, flirt. Get married when other girls do. Not like my mother."

"Your mother married."

"When she was almost thirty! My father had been one of her students. She taught school for years and years, never meeting anyone, never having any fun. She told me that people laughed when she married my father. Said she robbed the cradle. But who else could she find?"

No wonder Harry hadn't been worried about whether Lilli was too old for him! She gripped Anabelle a little tighter.

"Your life will be very different. Your father is wealthy. The good part of that is you'll never be forced to do anything for money. Unlike your mother, you can go places and have fun. The bad part is that you'll have to think carefully about why certain people want your company."

"No one loves me. Just my money."

"Anabelle, that isn't true --" Lilli spoke carefully. Now wasn't the time to discuss how spoiled behavior was unattractive.

"Not even Daddy wants to be with me. He sent you to console me instead of checking to see how I was. I bet he's already on the train back to the City. You're hired to care for me." Anabelle sounded weary instead of snippy. "I don't want to pay to have people look after me. I'd hoped David would be the right one for me. The one who loved me."

"Things don't always work the way you wish, dear."

"Money doesn't fix that, does it?" Anabelle suddenly sounded more adult than she ever had. "You don't have any money, but I saw how David and my father look at you. You make things and people work the way you want them to. I don't know how to do that."

"I didn't know how to do anything like that when I was your age, Anabelle. Not a thing." Lilli bent, gave the girl a kiss on the cheek. "You'll learn."

Anabelle gave a long sigh. "You make me sound like a baby. Maybe I am, but I hate it."

"I know." Lilli laughed. "Believe me, it makes me feel like I'm an old lady."

"You are old. Now please go away." Anabelle didn't sound happy, but she didn't sound furious, either.

Lilli paused. Was going the right thing to do? She'd ignored her stepchildren. She knew now she'd been wrong. But did Anabelle need some time alone to gather her pride together?

"If that's what you want." Lilli decided to compromise. "I'm here whenever you need me."

"I need to wash my face and tidy myself up." Anabelle sat up. "Mary is coming to visit this afternoon and I'm not going to let her see me like this. She's a horrible gossip."

Anabelle would be fine.

"When you're ready I can put a bit of powder on your face to hide things," Lilli offered.

"You use powder?" Anabelle's eyes grew big. "Really? Thanks, Lilli -- Mrs. Dayton."

The two of them stared at each other. Had they actually reached a truce? Lilli ventured a little further. "I do want to help, Anabelle. Not just because I'm paid to, either." Anabelle smiled tentatively. She looked like her father then -- wanting to believe, but afraid.

"I suppose you aren't so bad for a chaperone. Though I wish you had kicked David. The wretch. I hope Daddy scared the pants off him."

Lilli laughed, though in the distance she heard the train whistle. She had the feeling Anabelle was right. She didn't know why, since he ought to be thankful she'd saved him from his sacrificial marriage proposal. Silly man. He might deny why he'd gone, but they both knew. He'd run away.

He'd be back. He had to be. He didn't ask for sympathy or cosseting, though the more she knew of him, the more she wanted to offer both. She wanted to help him -- and not just because she was paid to.

Oh, damn the man. Instead of just wanting sex from Harry, she was starting to care about his feelings. To believe he or any man had them caused nothing but trouble.

* * *

He went straight to Alice, right from the train station. She'd taken one look and known, just as he half-expected her to. "Well, whoever she is, she's slapped you down hard." Alice pushed him into her guilt chair. He sat, heavily.

"When have I ever let a woman get close enough to slap me down?" He gripped the arms of the chair. They creaked in protest.

Lilli was like all the rest. He'd simply managed to fool himself into believing she was different. He'd managed to realize he was lonely without her.

"Now."

The word hung in the air. Harry shook his head. "I asked her to marry me. After all these years of solitary bliss. But all of a sudden I realized -- I thought I realized -- marriage was the best thing for both of us."

"But she said no."

"She said no." He turned to grip her hand. "Alice, stay with me. Let's make a permanent arrangement. I'll even let you have your affairs as long as you stay."

"Oh, Harry. You don't mean that."

"You won't take me on either, then?"

"You'll never get a woman unless you pay for her, Harry. You aren't the sort that inspires a woman's love or loyalty."

"I'm only sorry I paid for you by the hour instead of for our lifetime."

"More fool you. You wanted a respectable woman. You pay for respectable women with marriage."

"I won't be the same fool twice."

"Harry. Stop. You know we're much better as friends."

He opened his mouth to protest and then slumped in the chair. "I know. It's a real pity, too. I wish things were different. You and I have always been honest and easy with each other. I don't find such virtues too often. Not in women."

"Or in men, either."

God. How many times did a man have to learn his lessons?

Alice leaned over him, smoothing his hair. She was dressed in a negligee, perfumed and powdered. Attractive. Sexy. Why couldn't he turn to her and forget?

"I have to rid myself of her, Alice. She'll haunt me if I don't."

"Dismiss her, then. Isn't she one of your women?"

"No. Yes. I mean, yes, she is, but I don't mean I want to merely send her packing. I can't tell her to just go. Oh, she'd leave my house and not return quickly enough. She's already told me so. But I need her out of here." Harry tapped his forehead.

"And here?" Alice tapped her chest. "That was the biggest problem of all between us always, Harry. It's hard to love a man who doesn't love you. I was never in your heart. Is she?"

Harry shrugged and turned to bite her earlobe. "Damn my heart. I don't need one."

Alice shivered in pleasure from the brief flash of pain, just as he'd intended. Her tongue touched her lower lip, sensuously, in a gesture they both knew.

They hadn't been together for a long time. Did he want them to be? Why did he even have to ask?

"Will you help me, Alice? For old times' sake? You have more trickery... and more loyalty... than any other woman I know." He slipped his hand against her pubic curls, teasing her labia. "I know you can help. Alice, I'm a fool enough about her now to believe her when she asks me for faith."

"Is that so bad, Harry?"

"Yes. I know what I believe she is -- the naïve part of me believes, anyhow. I think she cares. But I'm besotted. When I'm calmer, I think about what she's like in reality. I know she doesn't trust me. Other than her distrust, I don't know anything about her -- her past, how she feels about me, what she wants. She's accepted my terms for our affair and never pushed for more. In fact, she just informed me she wants no more. Not marriage. She laughed at the idea. I must mean nothing to her."

"She's an idiot. If you truly want to marry her, you'd be a prize. Harry, are you sure she's not right for you?"

"I'm sure that I'm as big an idiot as I was at eighteen, imagining a woman to be what I want her to be. I can't help myself. Alice, you have to make me not care, to not imagine her as some ideal no one could be."

"I can try, boyo. But it may not be that easy. I'm an actress, not a miracle-worker."

"I'm not expecting miracles. Why do you think so?"

"Well, for one thing, you've been fondling me for a number of minutes now. But your manly member there is no more hard than if you'd been working on one of your business accounts." She squeezed his stroking hand and then backed away. "You must be damned involved with her. Why didn't you tell me so, straight out, last time?"

"I didn't know. Not exactly. Oh damn, I'm sorry, Alice." For running to her. For seeking comfort. For wishing she was someone else even while he ran and sought her comfort. He was a bastard.

"So am I. Your cock deserves better." She knelt before him. He swallowed and his shaft began to harden. She unbuttoned his fly. "You like me to suck you this way, don't you? On my knees?"

"You like it just as much."

"That I do." She fastened her mouth onto the head of his cock and he groaned.

Lilli hadn't quite killed off his desire for another woman, thank God. When Alice's knowledgeable hands began to squeeze his balls, he moved himself closer to her face. Alice would work him until he released the edge of his frustration. He'd forget Lilli or die trying --

Damn him for being able to remember her even while someone else was getting him hard. The other woman sucked him down, deep, and his toes curled with delight. He remembered -- or had that just been one of his fantasies, the ones that seemed so real when he was away from her? God, he thought he remembered when Lilli had tied him to the chair once and did the same. God, they'd done so many things. Things he'd never let a woman ever do.

His breath caught in his throat and he inched his hands backward, just the way Lilli had placed them. Then he caught himself.

This wasn't Lilli.

He looked down at the actress who had been his whore and stayed his friend. She knew every sensitive part of his anatomy. Her hands, moving to knead his thighs, reminded him how clever she was.

He'd learn to forget. He'd -- "Alice. Alice, darlin'."

"What?"

"Enough. That's not why I came here." He fastened his cock back in his pants.

Damn Lilli.

"That wasn't the only reason you came here. But you want some."

"I want some. But I like you too much to use you this way. I'd be imagining Lilli the whole time I came."

"It's been done before, Harry. Hell, pretending to be someone else is one of my specialties... and not just on the stage. Many a man has your particular problem."

Harry shook his head. Tried to smile. "You're too much a friend to do such a thing to. And I've got too damn much pride to be satisfied with such a pretense." *I hope. God, what if I'm doomed to spend my life pretending other women are Lilli? Will there be a time I beg Alice to play such a part?*

Alice looked thoughtful. She tapped him lightly on his thighs, close enough to his balls to make them quiver in anticipation. "Pretense can be a good thing, Harry."

"Careful, girl. I've said no, but I'm not above changing my mind if you tease enough."

"I'm not teasing. Or not much. You've given me an idea on how to exorcise your pesky woman problem. Boyo, you may change your tune entirely when I tell you how I can help. You don't want to dismiss her. You want to know she doesn't care for you and save your pride. What if we make this woman give you the gate instead and have her be glad to tell you it's over?"

Chapter Four

"Mrs. Dayton? Mr. Nelson would like to see you in the library."

"Thank you, Franny." Lilli put down the book. "I'll be there soon."

She wasn't going to run down the second Mr. Harry Nelson returned, even though that was her first impulse. Bastard. He'd disappeared for almost a week without a word to her. If he thought she'd forgive and forget, too bad for him. She'd stopped forgiving men for leaving, one man before Harry. Any lingering tenderness she had for this male should be long gone by now.

Yes, indeed, if he thought he'd sweep her from the study to the bedroom, he was in for a shock. Lilli stood up, smoothed down her skirts, took a deep breath and readied for battle. She paused to inspect herself in the hall mirror before she entered the library. Good. She looked composed.

"You wanted something?" She stopped at the library threshold, her calm shattered. Harry wasn't there.

Someone else was, though.

"How do you do?" A young woman stood and offered her hand, smiling at her. "You must be Lilli Dayton. Harry has told me a lot about you. I admit you're not quite what I expected."

God. She was looking at a reflection of herself. A much younger self.

Lilli shook her younger self's hand.

"I can't say the same about you, Miss --"

The woman had made herself up to look like her. There was some resemblance, but now that Lilli looked more closely, the differences were apparent, too. The other woman had broader cheekbones, thinner lips. Lilli noted her coloring. If that woman

was a real blonde, Lilli was an Eskimo. Why was this person doing this? Why was Harry?

"Alice. Alice Bryant. No, Harry doesn't usually mention me. Naughty man! We've been friends for so long, too."

Bitch. Lilli dropped her hand.

"I see you two have introduced yourselves." Harry's presence filled the room the moment he stepped into the doorway. For a moment Lilli fought to blink away tears. She'd missed him. If they had been alone, would she have given in and run to hold him?

Yes. Damn it, she would.

She glanced at Alice, who was standing much too close to him. Harry hadn't missed her, that much was obvious. Why did she get all the cheating bastards?

"If you'll excuse me now, I have your daughter to deal with." Lilli kept her voice supremely reasonable. "She's doing very well, thank you for asking."

She was far from a delight, but Anabelle was actually becoming easier to handle. Her little friends were an annoyance, but at least she was with only her female friends now. One of the jobs she'd been hired for was now a relatively easy task.

"Lilli --" He never called her by her first name. "I have a favor to request." He called it a favor and a request, but his voice was that of employer to servant.

* * *

Alice stripped down, showing high, youthful breasts and much too firm skin. Lilli sat at the head of the bed, feeling very foolish and vulnerable.

She'd made a bargain. What he wanted, she wouldn't be afraid to do. But there was hurt in watching a younger body, one that was like but not like hers, slowly baring itself. Her body was naked, too, and where she'd once been sure and proud in her nudity and its effect on Harry, now she couldn't help but think of sags and lines, imperfections and age. Lilli was competing where she knew she couldn't win.

Harry was there but not close. She could feel his presence as he sat in the chair away from the bed, watching the two female bodies presenting themselves to him.

"Kiss her." Harry snapped out the order.

Lilli froze. This was too much. Alice leaned forward, her hand resting on Lilli's hip. She kissed Lilli's jaw first. Her lips were gentle and coaxing, almost like a mother to her child.

"It's all right, Lilli," Alice whispered, tenderly. "We were wrong, Harry and me. I can see you care. Relax, darlin'. Let me make this easier for you."

Oh, God. Darlin'. She'd said that almost the way Harry did. Had she picked up the habit from Harry or Harry from her? It didn't matter. Alice knew Harry. Knew him intimately. Not just for sex, but for intimacy. Lilli had thought she was unique to Harry. Now she knew she was one of a group, literally and figuratively. One of Harry's whores.

He'd paid for her.

Was that all she'd been all her life? Someone to be bought and then discarded? She'd covered over everything with a marriage license to Mason and pretty ideas of their life together, but Mason had rid himself of her when he tired of her. She'd been destined to be one in a line of Mason's trophy wives. She should have known she'd fail from the start by the time she met Harry.

"Don't cry, love," Alice whispered to her, crooning the words. She licked the tears from Lilli's cheek, upward to her eyelashes. "Don't."

Lilli turned, trying to understand the soft words.

Alice smiled and put her lips to Lilli's ear, tickling her earlobe as Alice continued to whisper. "He's a fool, trying to make you disgusted with him. He says he wants you to push him away. He's lying, girl. Let's make him suffer for his stupidity."

Lilli felt a sudden, unexpected, unwelcome warmth as Alice put her hand behind Lilli's head, her fingers tangling into Lilli's hair. Alice stroked her head. Lilli's hair began to fall loose from the pins holding it up. That didn't matter. The surprising tenderness in Alice did. Too much.

"Kiss me," Alice whispered in her ear.

Lilli turned, hesitantly, let her lips brush against Alice's. Alice's mouth opened and she let her tongue rest against Lilli's lower lip, waiting. Oh, why not? Lilli opened her mouth and let Alice inside.

It was a lover's kiss. Tender. Slow. Enjoying what Lilli offered and not pressing for more. Lilli realized Alice was cupping her breasts. Not fondling. Just touching. As if they weren't a bit too full, a bit too drooping. As if Alice liked her breasts.

"Go ahead," Lilli whispered. "Touch my nipples."

She thought she heard Harry make a sound, low in his throat, as Alice obeyed her. Alice's fingers were smooth and gentle, the touch of her hand as sweet as her tongue had been. Lilli felt a dim surprise as her nipples hardened, a surprise that blazed down her body toward her pussy. She was getting wet. Her legs shook with sudden tension. Her excitement wasn't all from knowing Harry was watching.

"You do like me after all, even if you don't want to. I'm so glad, Lilli."

Alice's voice was tender, charmed, happy. Her voice held a lover's pleasure in pleasing a lover. Was she? Or was Alice acting? Lilli decided the reason didn't matter. Alice was intent on making her happy and Lilli was grateful.

As a reward, Lilli leaned forward to trace the veins in Alice's breasts. Alice was so pretty. Lilli had never really thought of how lovely another woman's breasts could be.

Alice moved closer, her pubic curls close enough to tickle Lilli's mons. Lilli squirmed and Alice giggled against her neck.

Harry moaned, louder now, unable to conceal his desire. That sound triggered another trickle of wetness inside Lilli's vagina. She shifted upward a little, to rub herself against Alice. Pussy against pussy. The sensation felt odd. Good, but different. Good different. Exciting different. She was going to make love to a stranger, a female stranger, in ways she could never have done before in front of any man.

She wanted to.

"So hot. So wet. Lilli, let me taste," Alice told her, low and clear. "I want to try you."

"Let me try you." A flicker of the Lilli who thought she could be in charge remained.

Alice pulled at her. "Let's try each other."

Head to pussy, pussy to head. Lilli held back the doubts, the screams at why she was here. She would enjoy what was offered, no matter why or who was doing the offering.

She traced the opening before her. She was an explorer in a new land, finding a new passage to treasure. Alice tasted like something from the sea. Alice tasted just the way Lilli knew a woman would taste, though she'd never thought about the matter before.

Lilli found a firm nub that swelled when she put her lips against it. She sucked at Alice's clitoris. Then Alice did the same for her, in an exact, mirrored motion.

"Ohhh." Lilli couldn't help the joy in her exclamation.

In response, Alice put her hand under Lilli's ass to push her closer up against her mouth. From tender to relentless took a half-second. Lilli forgot to reciprocate, forgot everything except the warm tugs of Alice's mouth and tongue and the responsive heat flashing through Lilli at each suck and nibble.

This wasn't anything Lilli planned or even knew how to plan. She didn't know why Alice had made this initiation so easy. Lilli didn't want to think why what she was sure was meant to be a humiliation had turned into something different. Maybe later she would feel a stinging shame, but right now her body hummed with lust. It didn't matter that she was meant to be age next to youth, to be a show for the man who demanded one. She was supposed to be shamed and disgusted. Instead she was enjoying every nuance. Lilli bit back another moan as Alice pushed her on. She wasn't sure what she was having was an orgasm -- it was a slow, steady building of delightful shock moving to another, new level of pleasure. She wasn't sure where it would end, if it could end.

"Can I stop for just a moment?" Alice raised her head to ask. "I want to kiss you on your other mouth first."

Why couldn't the men in her life be this caring?

Limp and responsive, Lilli nodded. She'd agree to anything right now.

Then, as if he'd called her aloud, she looked over at Harry. Strange, she'd almost forgotten him. Then again, if she had remembered him, how could she have enjoyed this? He wanted to belittle her, to make her nothing but a convenient pussy.

Her lips twisted in a bitter half-smile. He was hard. Hard and ready to come. By the time she was done he wouldn't be able to raise his cock again for a week. She could use sex, too. She could take something wonderful and twist it into...

Pain.

Harry knew what he was doing but he didn't like it. His face reflected his thoughts as clearly as if he told her in words. He knew and he was in agony. He wasn't just randy. He was miserable. She sensed his unhappiness as clearly as his pulsing excitement. He was helpless to stop either emotion.

What were they doing to each other? She couldn't let him go on this way. She loved him too much.

Love?

Hell. This was a fine time to realize she loved him. Why would she love such a contrary idiot? She'd come close to climax under a woman's hand and mouth, by his own orders. She couldn't love him. She couldn't love him.

She saw his mouth, pinched tight to shut down the pain -- and the lust boiling inside him. He tried so hard to hide the fact that he was needy, but he couldn't hide from her. He couldn't. He needed her too much. He needed her and she wanted to help him. To love him. She didn't even care if she got hurt in the process.

Oh for heaven's sake, she must love him.

What was she going to do about it?

This wasn't going according to plan. His cock was screaming to come. His thumb pressed hard under his cock head while he fought himself. He shuddered as hard as if

he were ejaculating. Harry wasn't sure he'd ever been this aroused in his life while at the same time so reluctant to finish himself off.

He could whistle and the two women would crawl to him, would service him. He'd stripped while he watched them, planning to order them to do just that.

They'd do whatever he told them to do. They'd probably even enjoy it. All of them knew they were at the edge of huge pleasure, ready to leap into any action to accomplish that conclusion.

He wanted that. He could almost feel the wetness, the fingers and breasts, the soft skin and sighs against him.

"Harry?" Lilli looked into his eyes. "We're enjoying ourselves. Why not come join the fun?"

Harry stared back. He didn't want that. He hadn't planned for joy. He couldn't remember anymore why he'd demanded this, but he knew Lilli and Alice's actions had transcended his petty plans.

They'd tumbled him into another trap instead. One he didn't even know the name of, one that made him groan with need as well as despair. Women. There was no escape from them. He didn't want an escape. He wanted Lilli. Forever.

He focused on Lilli. Her face was flushed and beaded with sweat. Her hair was a wild mop of half-destroyed former perfection. In the light of day he knew everything she wanted to hide -- she wasn't perfect, she wasn't twenty still, she'd long since stopped being fresh and naïve and half-ripe.

Why didn't she know she was even better than her ideals of youthful perfection?

When he saw Lilli crouched in front of him, her thighs spread wide and ready, he bit back a moan. She was sex and love personified. She was carnal and innocent delight all in one. She was what only a whole woman could be -- and he wanted her so badly right now the need gnawed at him like pain. He wanted to be whole with her.

Alice, too. He clutched at that thought almost in fear. What man in his right mind -- or wrong one -- wouldn't want someone so skilled? What man wouldn't crave to have

them both if he could? There were two women in front of him, both of whom were capable of arousing him.

But he wanted Lilli more. More than anything or anyone. Once he admitted that to himself, Harry wanted to cry in a way he hadn't in decades. He just wasn't sure if it would be for despair or joy. He loved her.

Wasn't that a fine thing to decide right now?

He didn't want to want anyone this way. Hadn't known he could. He was used to being without. This special desire for Lilli could destroy him.

It didn't matter.

His love was a gift he would give back if he was able -- but he couldn't. Even worse, now that he had it, he couldn't bear the thought of being without any longer.

His mouth was dry. Harry couldn't speak. He could only stare at the woman in front of him. The one Alice had kissed as tenderly as a male lover. The one he should have kissed with as much ardor and care. He had to stop things. His gift was going to be cheapened and destroyed. If things went as planned, he was going to be left alone and wanting again. He wanted to scream --

"Enough!" Lilli's voice was as hoarse as his would be if he could speak. "Stop doing this to yourself. We're fine, Harry. Come with us and be fine, too. We both care about you. This isn't something ugly any more. We don't have to let it be ugly."

He looked into Lilli's eyes. They weren't cool now. They carried as deep a pain as his, as hot a need. His exotic Lilli was human. As human and hurting and wanting as he was. He shook his head.

"It's all right. I give up, Harry. I don't need to be in control anymore."

He could tell Lilli wanted to cry, too. How could she so exactly reflect his own emotions?

"I want you to be happy. Please don't push me away. Don't keep yourself pushed away. Don't watch and stay outside. Come inside. If you want things to be with Alice and me and you, I'll accept that. I don't care how, but let yourself be part of something loving. You can. Harry, I love you."

He'd failed. He thought he would master her and he'd failed. He'd wanted to make her just another woman. She wasn't. Not to him. She never would be. But he was about to win something better.

Harry got his voice back. "No, I won't join the two of you." No matter how much part of him wanted to. This was too important. Lilli was too important.

Lilli's face suddenly crumpled. "Oh, God. I'm not superhuman. I may be strong enough to tell you the truth, but it still hurts to have you reject me." She curled her head into her bent knees and began to cry.

God, didn't she understand? Did she really think he could reject her? Damn it, he'd done things wrong again. "Alice, please. Go. This is something Lilli and I need to finish by ourselves."

"I don't think so, boyo. Not unless Miss Lilli here wants me to go."

She heard Alice's voice cut through her misery. Lilli looked up. Her tears slowed as she saw the gleam in Alice's eyes. "No. Why should Alice leave? You certainly had her share everything else up to now."

"Alice, this is important --"

"So is this. Lilli, I think it's time to show Mister Harry here the error of his ways." Alice smiled, quite wickedly, and bent to the floor. She rose with Harry's discarded belt in her hand.

Speechless, Lilli nodded.

"Alice, I've told you --" Harry began. "Lilli!"

"You don't do the telling this time. Lilli does. But I can help." Alice smiled. "I can be very instructive on all the ways to punish a naughty lover."

She hit the belt with a slap on the floor. Lilli knew her eyes were huge. Harry looked almost as stunned.

"I don't think --" Lilli stopped. He had just shoved her declaration of love back in her face. Love was one thing. Martyrdom was another. "He does deserve to be punished, doesn't he?"

"Damn it, Alice, this isn't the time for one of your games!" Harry didn't sound quite as cross as he should be, though.

"Isn't it? Do you think it was easy for Lilli to tell you all this? Do you think you've treated her fair? I heard your story about how she turned you down and I felt bad for you, boyo, I truly did. But now I'm wondering how much of the fault was your own." Alice fondled the belt, running the length of it gently between her palms. "I'm not a personal advocate of the belt. It's a bit too harsh. But it's here and I think a little correction is in order."

Harry eyed her and the belt. Lilli had a sudden urge to giggle. He'd stopped protesting. "I'm sure Harry will appreciate the correction, too. Look at his cock." Lilli pointed and, despite his groan of -- of denial? -- his cock swelled and then bobbed eagerly at her words.

"Sit down, Lilli. Harry, lie your ass down in your woman's lap."

"I --" Harry looked at Lilli.

The belt cracked. Lilli could hear him gulp. But despite her words, she was amazed when Harry crawled to her lap, resting his hard cock between her thighs as he stretched out.

"Are you sorry you treated Lilli so badly?" Alice demanded.

"Yes. I am. But --"

This time Alice's open palm made a cracking sound -- hard against Harry's butt cheeks. He and Lilli both jumped. His cock drew against Lilli's vagina like a violin bow.

Ohh, that felt good. The way Harry quivered, Lilli suspected he thought so, too.

"Not as sorry as you will be, boyo." Alice smiled. "Spank him, girl. He's damned deserving of a good spanking."

Lilli raised her hand. Hesitated. His cock thrust against her again, silently urging her on. She felt a few drops of pre-cum trickle down her leg.

"You'll both feel better, Lilli. Trust me."

Lilli smacked his hard buttocks with a sound blow. He twitched against her legs and sighed. His hands clenched into fists and relaxed. She smacked again.

"Nicely done, Lilli." Alice settled herself on the floor next to her and pulled Harry's head up against her lap. Her legs brushed against Lilli's and they exchanged smug grins before Alice said, "Come on, boyo. You deserve to finish me off after interrupting me and telling me to leave."

"Alice, damn it, this isn't about you --" Harry began.

"If this is about me, go right ahead," Lilli said. "I promise not to mind a bit."

"There you are. You have nothing to worry about, Harry. We're all friends here. Keep up the good work, Lilli, girl. He's just getting warmed up."

Smack.

Lilli couldn't decide if she had gone mad or sane. She'd never in a million years believed she would ever do such a thing, but she smacked and Harry groaned and squirmed. Alice moaned as Harry's head began to move between her legs.

Smack.

Lilli's hand grew numb but she kept on, watching the imprint of her hand against her lover's flesh. Harry rubbed his stiff cock against her in a fierce, uncontrolled rhythm, while more trickles of wetness ran down her legs -- from her and him both. But he didn't come.

Lilli wanted to laugh. He was holding himself back. They were both enjoying themselves too much to stop.

"A more formal, legal arrangement!" Lilli smacked him with each word. "You idiot, why didn't you just say you wanted to marry me?"

"God, Lilli!" Harry turned his head. "Of course I did. Do."

Crack.

Alice used the belt on his backside then. Lilli watched Harry arch his back up before he slammed himself down against her.

"Back to your work, Harry, or you'll get more," Alice crooned sweetly, and then fondled her own breasts.

Very deliberately, Harry turned again. "Will you marry me after all, Lilli?"

The belt cracked again and Lilli saw his face contort with pain and lust combined. He turned back to Alice, his head once again bobbing, not waiting for an answer. Bastard. He knew she wasn't going to give him one here and now. She wasn't sure she could say the word. Not even yes. Or no.

But her pussy quivered and heat pumped up inside her. His cock tickled and teased her, especially when she smacked him, but it wasn't quite enough.

They were all close, so close, to coming. Alice's hand snaked over to fondle Lilli's clit -- and hand her the belt. Lilli snapped it down once and then gasped as Alice's hand and Harry's cock together began to push her hard.

She let the belt fall as she used both her hands to steady herself against the onslaught.

"Oh Lord, have mercy!" Alice cried and positioned herself, legs apart, for Harry to fully penetrate her with his tongue. The fingers of one hand fisted into Harry's hair. "Harder, damn it! Harder!"

Alice's fingers on her other hand pinched Lilli's swollen clit tightly, just before her fingers slackened and the woman screamed in delight.

That left just Harry to pleasure Lilli. A Harry who, as Alice came, turned, pushed Lilli hard down on the floor and slipped inside her completely. A Harry who covered her mouth with his own and rode. Hard.

She could taste Alice -- and Harry's blood when Lilli bit his lip -- and the sweat that poured between them. Her legs thrashed under his body, then slipped up, grasping his hips without thinking.

"Damn it!" Harry swore.

Lilli froze. She'd rubbed against a welt. She was wrong to do such a thing, she knew she was wrong, but the screaming need inside her leapt even higher at the idea of her smooth legs rubbing against the redness of his ass. Her heels rose, deliberately pushing against him and he stiffened at her touch.

Her rough touch was what he needed. Harry's cum spurted hard and long. She had been waiting for his pleasure because not until then, finally, did she climax. Too far gone to scream, Lilli gasped desperately for air as she orgasmed.

She was lost, lost in this blinding pleasure. Lost under Harry's touch and smell and weight.

To her horror, even as waves of pleasure pulsed hard through her, Lilli began to cry.

* * *

"Lilli!"

Lilli turned to glare at him. If he wanted to see a middle-aged woman with her face blotched from tears, fine.

"Why are you crying?"

She sniffed and looked for something to wipe her nose. Harry stuck a handkerchief in her hand and she blew. She certainly didn't have to maintain her image any more.

"What a way to ask me." She ought to be angrier. But Alice -- clever Alice -- had come up with a way to let the anger out. What Lilli really wanted to do now was laugh. Laugh and grumble. "Who would marry someone who proposed in such a fashion?"

"Not formal enough?" Harry grinned. Did he feel the same bubble of joy in him? He dropped to one knee. "All right. I'd like to ask permission to marry you, Mrs. Dayton. My very dear Mrs. Dayton."

"You're sick. Perverted and sick. No one gives a formal proposal stark naked... stark naked with a red backside, might I add." Lilli fought back a snicker -- and more tears of joy.

Harry, his pants now pulled on, looked more presentable than she did. He also looked terrified. "You ought to know how perverted and sick I am, love. But I'd still like to marry you. No. I need to marry you."

"Why?"

"The usual reasons."

The usual reasons? She should have smacked him more. "So you can be confused and -- and compromised? That's what marriage is about, remember?"

"Partially. You do confuse me. I hope you'll compromise me. Quite often." He brushed her hair from her face. "I want to marry you because you're the only woman in the world I have loved or could ever love. I'm perverted and sick, just like you said, but you might be able to change a few things about me. Make me a little better."

"I thought you wanted me to feel disgusted, to want to leave."

"No. I mean, yes. I meant to do exactly what you thought. To win... or at least to make you lose. But we don't need to keep score. We aren't playing a game. You care as much as I do."

"You don't deserve to have me care." Lilli sniffed again.

"True enough. I admit you're better than me and I don't deserve you, but I want you anyhow." There was no more amusement in him. Harry's mouth tightened. "I can understand if you don't trust me. I didn't understand before. You showed me because you're braver than I am. Brave enough to admit you love me. So I can admit it, too. I do love you."

"Do you?"

"Can't you believe me? Can't you try?"

"I shouldn't." Her heart twisted. This was serious. Could she trust him? For a moment she longed to look into her mirror. She could tell the truth in there.

"True enough," he said again. "There's no real reason for you to. I should have treated you much better than this long before now. You just showed me -- rather forcefully -- how angry I made you."

Lilli took a deep breath. "We'll have to work on that trust thing a bit more, the both of us."

Maybe she'd tell Harry who she really was eventually. He might believe her. After all, she was finally starting to believe what happened herself. She'd been hurtled through time to meet him.

“Good. I don’t want to be left alone anymore, Lilli, just like you said. Let me join you. I don’t want to be without you.”

For a moment his intensity shook her. Then the joy came back. “Very well. You’ll be kept on a trial basis, of course, Mr. Nelson. We’ll see if things work out. Do you suppose Alice would give you references?”

He slid his hand against her back, pulled her toward him. She moved into his arms and heard his heart thudding hard against her ear, as if he’d been frightened. As frightened as she’d been. They’d almost said good-bye. That would have been wrong. Somehow the inn and the mirror and her own desires had sent her to Harry. And somehow she and he together had learned to accept her arrival.

“I’ll do my best to perform to your satisfaction, ma’am.” His cock pressed against her, waiting to slip back into her.

“Then fuck me.”

“One other thing first.”

“You monster! What other thing?”

“I’ve said good-bye to Alice. I told her how much I love you. She understands. You’ll never see her again. You’ll never see me be such a fool again.”

“Oh well, I don’t know. I rather enjoyed Alice. I know you did, too.” Lilli looked up at him through her lashes. “I didn’t say I disliked your perversions, after all. I simply want to be the focus of them.”

He bit her shoulder as she squirmed against him, enjoying the feel of his cock pushing hard against her while trapped inside his pants. He unfastened his clothing hurriedly.

“You are. You always will be.”

“I better be.”

“Ahh, Lilli, that feels good. Let me in just a little more.”

Lilli grinned, letting the tip of his penis brush against her pubic curls. “What about Alice?”

"Very well, we won't rule out Alice, but I don't think I'll let you meet her again for a while. You two seemed a bit too harmonious for my peace of mind."

Lilli slid her hand down and rested it on the root of his hard cock. Peace of mind? The man didn't want peace of mind. A piece of her maybe. She scratched his balls and felt them tighten.

"For a while, then, I'll enjoy just you, though I'll admit I'm curious as to what the two of you could do to me."

"Anything you want, love."

"By the way, make sure she's a brunette or redhead when we meet next." He slid inside her and they both sighed.

"God, Lilli. I do love you." He said the words thickly, even as he thickened inside her.

"I love you, too, Harry." She almost whispered her response.

"Love?"

"Yes?"

"You did notice, I hope, that I didn't use a condom last time. I was a bit distracted."

"Ohh."

"No matter what happens, I won't regret a minute. Truth."

Lilli let her head rest against his chest. "Me, either. Truth."

* * *

She stared into the mirror, wondering what it would reveal this time.

"I'm so happy. Aren't you happy?" His newest bride hugged Mason and giggled.

"Ecstatic, darling. Our wedding went off perfectly. Champagne?" He began to pour.

"No, I don't think so. Mason, I think this is the right time for me to give you my wedding present."

"Darling, you didn't have to --"

“Oh, I absolutely should. Mason, I’m pregnant.”

Lilli stared at the slack-jawed astonishment that turned into wrathful suspicion on Mason’s face. When the image finally dissolved, she began to laugh. Soon her sides ached from giggles. When she’d finally wiped the tears of amusement from her eyes, she blew the mirror a kiss.

“Thank you. That was perfect,” she whispered. She picked up the mirror and began to walk downstairs.

Lilli didn’t have far to go. Franny was cleaning the front hall stairs. Lilli sat down next to her. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Yeah? I don’t have much time to talk. I’m busy.” Franny paused in her sweeping to look suspicious.

“Then I won’t talk long. Would you like this mirror? I don’t want it any longer and I thought you might.”

“What would I do with a fancy mirror like this? I don’t have nothing like this.” Franny held her fingers out, hesitantly, stroking the filigree.

“Use it, sell it, give it as a gift. Here. The mirror is yours.”

Lilli saw Franny raptly stare at her reflection. Lilli hid a smile as she stood up. Her mirror would be taken care of the way it deserved. She’d already receded into the mist for the people who knew her in the mirrored world. Lilli didn’t care. She didn’t need the mirror or her old life anymore.

“Lilli! Where the devil are you, woman?”

Lilli walked away from Franny and her new toy, toward the sound of Harry’s voice.

Take Me With You

Stephanie Burke

Chapter One

"I am such a fool," Gray sighed as he pressed his hands against the closed door for a moment, then turned to face the storm raging outside. The storm without was easier to face than the storm raging within. Turning away from the door, he set out across the small courtyard that separated the front parlor from the guest rooms. He shuddered as he felt the warm water plaster his waist-length hair to his face and back, but it was the clap of thunder that made his eyes widen in sudden fright.

"Damn!" he cursed soundly. He recovered and began to move at a faster pace. "Some hero, afraid of a damn storm." As he hurried across the cobblestones, he stopped for a moment in the relative protection of the huge firebird fountain that dominated the courtyard, to dig his keys from his pocket. When they had first arrived, he had seen the huge stone bird and had been drawn to the power it seemed to emanate. Now, as it was back-dropped by the gray stormy skies and the wild pounding rain, it almost seemed frighteningly mystical.

Shaking off the strange thought, he tried to remember where he had put his key. In his pocket, of course. Squinting both from his inebriated state and the general lack of light, he fished around, finally managed to get the solitary key from the pocket of his soaked jeans and raised it in triumph.

"Gotcha!" he crowed, just before a loud clap of thunder made him almost leap from his skin. The small metal key tumbled from his hand and into the shallow waters of the phoenix fountain. As he bent over to peer into the violently heaving waters, the air filled with the smell of ozone. Before he could move, a loud crack boomed through the air, and something slammed into his chest, hard.

He was momentarily blinded as the air was sucked from his lungs. His ears popped and he could smell something burning, then all he could see was white. But he

could feel. And he felt himself falling, falling, falling. Headfirst, he seemed to plunge down what seemed to be a mountainside, before his head slammed into something hard. *Damn*, he thought as his lungs began to fill with water. *I guess I never will find my lion.*

* * *

Breathe! The command slammed into his brain and suddenly Gray was aware of being in the water -- way too much water for a fountain or a rain puddle. *Breathe!* came the command again. *Breathe and fight!*

He obeyed, kicking his legs sluggishly as he tried to push the water away from himself. He fought toward the diminishing light above him. He wanted to live. He knew that in his heart, no matter how bad things got, he would never wish for death. He was too young to die. He had so much to live for!

But the flesh was growing weak and his ability to move was being called into question, as well as his ability to continue to hold his breath. His lungs were screaming for him to suck in a deep breath and he didn't think he could hold out much longer.

Just when Gray was sure his lungs were going to explode -- he was seeing spots in front of his eyes -- something else thrust itself in his line of sight. Who cared what it was? He reacted instantly and latched onto it, using it to pull himself up. The thing, he realized, was a human hand, pulling him to the surface. It gave him an extra reason to fight. Then the world began to spin as he popped from the water like the cork from a bottle of wine.

Gray sucked in a deep breath of air. Cool sweet air. The sun was blazing down, burning his eyes, and the warm air was...

Day?

Then he saw the most amazing thing. Bright pink hair. It was bright pink with white stripes and yellow eyes! Yellow eyes! Pink Hair was dragging him onto shore and the sand was...

Sand?

He was in a hotel courtyard. He was at an inn. There were no beaches and it was night, and there were no people with bright yellow eyes and pink hair. He had to be drunk. No more Jameson.

In the perfect imitation of a Southern belle, his eyes rolled toward the back of his head and he landed face first. In the sand. On a beach that should have been a friggin' fountain in a courtyard at an inn!

Chapter Two

“Mmm,” Gray sighed as he snuggled deeper into his bedclothes. He was so happy he’d decided on the mink comforter. It wrapped and enveloped him in a tingling heat as its soft fur caressed him tenderly. It was almost like being held in a lover’s arms. He groaned in delight as the soft fur caressed his morning wood, almost like a soft teasing grasp.

He felt a pleasant buzzing in his balls and had to resist the urge to thrust up against the material and intensify the feeling. But he was really too relaxed to get into a heavy masturbation session so early in the morning. So he settled back and enjoyed the feel of his blood filling his cock, his seed churning in his balls, and the gentle stimulation of the fur over his skin as it tangled between his legs and rubbed all his sensitive places the right way.

The crackle of the fire was nice too. He was really blessed to have this fireplace in his bedroom. It was so much easier to run around naked when there was a constant source of heat. And a lover’s skin by firelight was truly a thing of magic. This was a damn near perfect morning. Though his mattress was a little harder than he liked...

Mattress? He had a waterbed! And he never bought the fur comforter. It was too damned expensive to have a friggin’ fur muff on said waterbed. It would cost too much to get cleaned. Well, he did have a fireplace in his bedroom, but it was the middle of summer. Who had a fire in the middle of the friggin’ summer?

Jolting up and pushing the furs away, Gray discovered a few more things about his situation. It was the middle of the night, he was outside, and he was completely buck-naked.

“What the hell?” he muttered as he heard something move off to his left. Turning slowly, he saw a sight that would be engraved in his mind for the rest of his life. It was a bug! It was a huge bug! It was a huge bug slowly rotating on a spit over an open fire!

“Uh...” he managed as his face took on an amazing green cast as memories of the past crowded his mind. *Never again*, he thought in a panic.

“For you,” a rich voice rasped, pulling him away from his waking nightmare.

Gray looked around to see a fall of pink hair and brightly glowing eyes, a face hidden in shadows. “I...” He tried to speak, but the words seemed to be caught in his throat, along with a lot of whisky and Amaretto.

Smiling, the pink person stepped closer and Gray got his first true look at its features. If it was male or female, he couldn't tell, but he/she was tall. At least six feet, if he/she was an inch, and it moved with a fluid grace he envied. It moved like a cat. Long hair, about the length of his, shone almost purple in the firelight, but he knew it was pink. He remembered seeing that unusual color before the world ceased to exist for him.

As he stared in wonder, the eyes turned to him, flashing their brilliant shade of bright yellow, before the creature knelt beside the fire. It was dressed in long flowing robes that defied gender, but it was accessorized nicely. A bright, shining diamond shone in the middle of its forehead, suspended there how, he had no idea, but it seemed to sparkle with the life of its wearer.

The wearer that was now smiling at him, flashing a set of perfect white teeth a dentist would envy, a welcoming look on the pretty face. He stared in open-mouthed wonder as he/she started reaching out to him, wanting to hand him something. Then he recalled the earlier words, “For you.”

“For me?” he managed, his voice sounding rough to his own ears. A personal sex toy? A fantasy made flesh to replace all that he had sacrificed for the greater good of a friend?

Nodding, the beautiful creature held something that emanated warmth and smelled vaguely of chicken.

Looking down, he noted what this beautiful pink-crowned creation was holding out to him. It was a roasted bug on a stick. He gulped twice, his eyes going wide as he stared in horror at the smoking thing. One of its many legs seemed to wave weakly at him, inviting him to take a bite.

“Delicious,” the voice rasped, and he felt the world begin to shift. Darkness converged upon him as his eyes again rolled toward the back of his head.

The last thing he remembered before his head struck the furs was that someone really needed to cater these little flights of fancy he was going through. And no open bar. One hallucination this major per lifetime was more than enough.

Chapter Three

Gethla stared down at the man who now lay in a heap on her furs and shook her head. If he didn't eat *Chroan*, he should have said so. And after she spent half the day culling one of the young tender ones from the herd too.

She had to admit, he was unusual looking. First off, he was extremely tall, easily the tallest man she had ever seen. That was saying something because her tribe was known for their height. Then there was his hair. Who had ever seen hair the color of the night sky? That was strange, but his eyes were... well, they were really eerie. They were the color of some of the grass that grew in the northern region, the poisonous stuff that only *Chroan* could stomach without dying.

She sighed as she stared down at the stranger she had plucked from the enchanted lake, and wondered what he was. It hadn't been her intention to travel this path with the herd, but a young one had escaped and she'd tracked it to this place she tended to avoid more than others.

Despite what the village story-mage had told them about the dark powers of the mystical waters, she had decided to make camp there for the day. The herd traveled best at night. No one could imagine her shock when she went to collect water for washing and saw the dark-haired one struggling to the surface.

At first she had thought him some strange plant or unfortunate creature that managed to get itself into some kind of trouble. Then as the thing flipped, she noticed the distinctly human features and raced in to help.

She never thought that she would pull this tall, lanky specimen of a man from the waters. She stripped him down to be sure. Well, getting him warm was the excuse she used, but she was curious to see what a grown man, particularly *this* grown man, looked like.

She was not disappointed, though she did wonder at the strange markings that circled his navel and the metal bar that pierced the flesh right above it. Maybe that was his sign of virility. Maybe he was... able to get it up.

Gethla almost crowed in delight. Hard, hot, male cock! And all hers for the taking. But there was that little matter of her fertility, and the fact that she was already spoken for. With a sigh, she tossed out all thoughts of having him riding high between her thighs. This was her last roundup. When she returned home, it was her duty to give up the mantle of leadership that she had worn since her parents passed and take up the role as breeder.

Not that she wouldn't be cared for and comforted in her place, pushing out children every year to sustain her people. And she would be getting a lot of sex then, if the progeny-starved villages had enough to pay stud services, but she doubted the sex she was going to get would be the sex that she wanted.

She wanted what her parents had. Sure, she was born of a breeder, but her sire seriously loved his partner. She recalled the times they disappeared together, giggling like the newly-partnered, and the shout of joy that did flare because they were truly in love. The sex was just an extension of that feeling.

But in her preordained role as breeder, she doubted she would ever find love, or even enjoyment for that matter. It was just something that she had to do, for the life of her people, for the protection of their valley, for the honor of her sire. He had chosen to love the breeder-born child he sired. Most of the breeder-born were sent off to be reared in seclusion, protected from all of life's pains and enjoyments, going blissfully ignorant into a world that would offer them nothing more than the want of their fertility.

Her sire had explained to her a long time ago that some people thought it best to keep the breeders blissfully ignorant of what life had to offer, besides a string of pregnancies that would result in the loss of that child so that the next fertile male with the money could have progeny. He felt that it was her right to experience some joy in life, to have some happiness before the rest of her existence was boiled down to what was between her legs and the jewel in her forehead.

Absently, she ran her fingers over that clear jewel, and duly cursed and praised the damn thing. She praised it because it granted her status. It was a tool to help her people. She cursed it for what it would lead her to be.

A moan from the man lying limply across her furs jolted her out of her dark thoughts and back to her present reality. What to do with the strange one? She looked around the nearly arid area surrounding the mysterious lake and the broken stones and pillars. The story-mages told of a once greatly misunderstood power, and warned to leave such magical things be.

The strange one was not equipped to deal with this land. He had no weapons to defend against rustlers, no provisions to last the next day, and he was woefully unprepared for the stray wild *Chroan* that would devour him before he could even think about running away.

There was no help for it. Potent temptation or not, she had to take the strange male with her. It would be murder to leave him behind. Plus she had the added bonus of having some company as she made her final, fateful trek home. It would be good to have someone to talk to, and not dwell on the future that loomed depressingly over her.

Her decision made, Gethla turned her mind to other areas, like how much to charge for this roundup at market, how to choose the next leader of her people, and how to explain the strange male.

Chuckling, she settled herself to take watch for the rest of the night, on the lookout for predators both human and *Chroan* alike. At least this final trip lent her a bit of excitement before she began her long drudgery of an existence.

Chapter Four

The first thing he felt was the annoying dry mouth. He must have drunk far more than his fair share. The next thing he was aware of was that he had not turned the air conditioner up high enough. It was a bit hot in the room.

Or it could be because of the fire that was burning brightly, or the fur on his bed.
Fur?

“Sweet Lord, not again!” he groaned as he lifted one hand to his eyes, trying to ignore what his rapidly awakening senses were telling him. He just didn’t want to open his eyes. He was afraid to see what would happen when said eyes opened. But that nagging voice in the back of his head was calling him a coward, trying to force him to open his eyes and face what was just outside his blocked line of vision.

“Get a grip,” he ordered himself. “You know this is just an Amaretto-induced hallucination. You can do this.” Moving one of his hands aside, he peeled one eyelid open, dreading what he would see.

What he saw made him emit the most feminine sound he ever produced, including his venture into role-play with Carlos and the Catholic schoolgirl uniform. Sometimes he hated being the partner with the longer hair.

“EEK!” It was the person -- the he, the she, the it. In all of its pink-haired glory and sparkling yellow eyes.

“You can wake up,” he gasped as he closed his eyes and tried to remember his Tantric lessons. They weren’t just for prolonging sex, he recalled. “You can wake up now!”

“Is that cock real, or an illusion?”

Damn! Hallucinations aren’t supposed to speak.

Gray cracked his eyes open again and yup, the mirage was still there. Fighting back the urge to whimper, he slowly sat up and examined the talking figment of his imagination.

"My cock?" he asked, confused, then jerked the furs over his nakedness.

"Yes. It is rather long and thick. Will it grow more or will it stay that size as it hardens?"

"What?"

"Your cock. You *do* know what that is?"

"What is it?"

"It's that long thing between your legs. I've never seen one so big."

Gray blushed at -- her? -- comment and again he found himself at a loss of words.

"Is that thing in your navel a sign of your virility? That is a good place to have it. The crystal in my forehead tells everyone who and what I am."

Gray tilted his head to the side. "I think you're a male," he theorized out loud. "I think you're male because of your height and your voice. But your features are so feminine that you may be a girl. I think my dual nature is trying to tell me that. Maybe it's telling me that I can get the best of both worlds only in a fantasy."

The pink-haired figment blinked at him.

"Dreams," Gray continued. "That is exactly what it is!"

He poked a finger at he/she and jumped as his finger hit the soft skin of his/her face. "I always liked soft skin," he said as his figment regarded him as if he were a rambling idiot. "Soft skin and long hair."

His fingers made forays into the long soft strands of pale pink hair that streamed around his/her robes. "Oh, this is nice! Almost makes me want to go back and get those burgundy underlights I wanted. But I thought it would clash with my eyes."

"Your eyes are strange."

"My eyes are unusual, I admit, but they are nothing like yours. Why yellow eyes? Must be my desire for peace and my pacifist nature." That straight in his mind, he decided to sit back and enjoy the fantasy.

"But what about your cock?"

"My cock? Hmm, this must be my feeling of inadequacy. But that can't be right. I haven't had a premature ejaculation since I was twelve. I was a very gifted child. So that must mean that I'm not getting enough. I guess that means I'm going to have to start dating. Yes, that's it. And you must represent the fact that I need to let go of the idea of Mary-Baby and get on with my life, that love dies if it doesn't get nurtured and whatever we could have had years ago has died, leaving only the love of a man and his good friend in its place."

"Uh..."

"And now that I've figured that out, I'm going to lay down, go back to sleep, and wake up refreshed and ready to people-watch with Mary-Baby tomorrow on the beach. Good night, pink-haired one. Thank you for your subconscious message to get on with my life."

"Strange man?"

Still lying back, his eyes closed, he answered, amusement in his voice. "My name is Gray. And you should know who I am because I'm the one who created you."

"Gray, would you like something to eat?"

"Yes!" he said, still not bothering to open his eyes. "I would like a steak, rare, a baked potato, fully loaded, and..." Gray paused when he smelled something delicious. "Okay, that will do!" It was his dream. He could eat what he wanted.

He sat up, opened his eyes... and gagged. It really was a bug! A roasted bug... on a stick. "This must be my subconscious fear of bugs!" he whispered as he stared in fascinated horror at the roasted thing the pink-haired one was holding out toward him. He closed his eyes and swallowed deeply.

"I got you a young fresh one," Pink Hair told him with a smile. "It is best to get them when they are young. If they get too old they are all exoskeleton and no meat."

He meeped. "My dream," he whispered through gritted teeth. "In my dream, I don't eat bugs."

"Bug? No! This is a *Chroan*. What is a bug?"

"That," he whimpered as he pointed to the hideous thing on the stick. "That is a bug and I don't eat them! I can't."

"Oh!" Pink Hair smiled. "You must be fertile. I cannot eat the *Chroan* either."

"Fertile?"

"Yes, like me. I guess that means that I can't even think of touching you. You are too much temptation for me, but I must take you with me."

Gray blinked as he/she rose to his/her feet, the long robes swirling around his/her ankles, and walked over to the edge of the firelight. He/she tossed the stick out into the darkness beyond.

"The older *Chroan* will devour that one and there will be no waste. But in the meantime, I have something for you to wear until your garments dry. The robes complement your eyes, Gray. And while you are dressing, I will prepare you some roots and bulbs."

"Roots and bulbs? Robes?"

"Yes. And then we will discuss where you come from. You speak oddly, but you are fertile so you must be important to somebody."

With that and a swirl of dark blue robes, it turned and walked away, leaving a befuddled Gray behind muttering the one thing he could think of. "Please wake up, please wake up, please wake up!"

Chapter Five

The purple-blue robes fit him, though they were a few inches short. And they were made of some material that he had never felt before. It was silky, almost like good satin or silk. But it seemed to be as sturdy and breathable as cotton or linen. Despite himself, he was impressed as he admired the rich dark color in the firelight.

As far as hallucinations went this one was pretty fantastic. But there still was that matter of him waking up, something that had yet to happen. He wondered what that meant.

"Pretty." He jumped at the husky voice, turning to face the he/she who'd spoken. Pink Hair was gazing up at him in admiration as she took in his form draped in the purple-blue fabric.

"A bit short. You would think that my subconscious would know my inseam size and my height." But then, he wasn't wearing pants or underwear under these things. He sighed ruefully as he contemplated his mental state. It had to be pretty bleak for him to think up this arid dreamscape complete with the husky-voiced person of undeterminable sex.

"You speak strangely. But then as strange as you look, I guess that is excusable."

"You think I look strange?" he asked, incredulously. He tossed his hair over his shoulders and placed his hands on his hips to glare at the pink-haired one.

"Whoever heard of black hair?" Pink imitated his pose as it stared back.

"Well, whoever heard of someone with pink hair and yellow eyes?"

"It's a common thing," it retorted. "My father had yellow eyes and my breeder had pink hair."

Before he could respond, there was a squeak and something latched onto his leg. He lifted the leg in question, peering to see clearly in the dim light, and choked. It was

one of those things. Those things that had been roasting in the spit. And it was attached to him. Again he felt faint. "What is that?" he gasped as he gave his leg a shake, hoping to break the thing free, but it held fast.

"*Chroan*." He/she sounded exasperated. "Don't you know anything?"

"*Chroan*?"

"It seems to be attracted to you," Pink mused, looking puzzled as the tiny pink bug attached itself to the strange one. "Maybe it is your unusual smell."

"I smell unusual?"

"Like sweet spice," Pink agreed sagely as it watched the little *Chroan* cling to the man, and his attempts to shake it off. "Where do you come from, stranger, that you do not know even the simplest of things that our children know for survival?"

"Baltimore, Maryland," he snapped. "How about you?"

"I come from the mountain villages at Chornth. Where is this Baltimoremaryland you speak of?"

Gray paused in his mad dance to shake the disgusting bug from his person. Instead he took a really good look at Pink. "Okay," he fairly growled. "What are you? Are you a man or a woman?"

"I... you can't tell?" Her hands went to her hair, to her face, to the jewel that sat in the middle of her forehead.

"Okay, you're a woman."

"You can tell now?" She sounded even more confused, still checking her person.

Gray snorted. "Only a woman would fret over her hair and face like that. You're a girl."

"Yes, I am. And you are male, with a large cock that hangs low between your thighs and is bare. I thought that all men had hair when they reached maturity. That is what my father told me."

"The hair..." He blinked a few times and then an almost shy blush lit his face. "I, uh, I shave."

"Shave?"

"I remove the hair. Okay, this is too much. Who are you and what have you done to my mind? I have to be..."

"Asleep," she cut him off. "I have heard that litany fall from your lips before. You are not asleep."

"Prove it!"

She walked over to him and socked him in the stomach, as hard as she could. Which was considerably hard as she had been a rancher and a worker all of her life.

Gray's eyes widened as he automatically tightened his stomach to absorb the blow, but the strength behind it was enough to give him pause. Slowly, the realization dawned that he was no longer drunk, that something strange was going on, and that he was definitely awake. A figment of his imagination would not actually cause him pain. "Okay," he sighed, finally believing what his senses were telling him. "You proved it."

Her face broke into a huge smile as she again motioned to an area just below his waistline. "Your cock?" she asked. "Is it real and normal?"

"If you're real, you have to have a name. What is your name?"

"My name? Gethla. And yours is Gray."

"Okay, Gethla. First things first, get this thing off of my leg, please show me some food that doesn't have more legs than I do, and please tell me where I am."

Chapter Six

Gray picked at the boiled tubers in the bowl that Pinky -- Gethla -- handed him. They seemed, to his shocked palate, little better than that cooked bug.

"Fresin root. Very good for you. Good for the bones and for potency."

Like that was an endorsement to eat the white blobs. "Thank you." He lifted one tuber from the bowl and did something he always criticized people for -- lifted the root to his nose and took a hard sniff.

A giggle pulled him from his scientific experiment. He eyed his hostess as she covered her face and tried to hide the mirth bubbling up inside her. "You are funny, Gray. As well as having a large cock. You must have a lot of partners, though I have never heard of a male breeder."

"Now wait just one minute," he responded, sitting straight up and tossing the tuber he held to his pet roach, as he called the *Chroan*, who devoured it and seemed to wriggle in enjoyment as it stared at its captive human. "I don't breed anything."

"Then how do your people survive? And the jewel in your stomach, is that not a sign of your virility?"

"No! It's an ornament. It's body jewelry. I was not born with it as you were born with your... jewel."

"I understand. So your women carry the jewels?"

"Not any that would get them to have children. Then again, I guess that depends on the size of the jewel you offer."

"I do not understand."

"No." He lifted another tuber, took a deep breath for courage, and shoved it into his mouth. Then he blinked in surprise. The tuber was pretty good. It tasted almost like chicken.

"No?"

"This is good," he said, losing his train of thought, before remembering what he was saying. "And no, there are no jewels to determine potency. Men and women decide when and with whom they have children. And if the couple has problems bearing, then there are measures that can be taken to ensure offspring."

Gethla stared in amazement as she listened to Gray's words. This was unheard of. This was amazing. This was too good to be true. If she could go to his village... But no. That was not an option for her. She had to help her people. "I envy your people, Gray," she said with a soft sigh, her eyes downcast as she worried a small slip of her robe between her fingers. "Ah, the freedom..."

"You're free, Gethla. Look at you, roaming the countryside of this place and doing what you want to do. A lot of women from Baltimore couldn't handle that."

"What I do, I do because I have no choice, Gray. And soon, even this welcome task will be taken away. Soon, it will be time for me to take my place as the village breeder."

"The village breeder?"

"I will bear many children for the men of other villages, Gray, to increase their progeny. This jewel means I am fertile, and therefore many will pay for me to bear a child."

"What?" Gray leapt to his feet, staring at Pinky with horrified amazement.

"I am fertile. It is my destiny to bear children to increase the population of my people. It is what I was born to do."

"That's insane!" he roared. Pity for the vibrant young woman overwhelmed him.

"What about your rights? What about what you want?"

"Rights?"

"Your God-given ability to choose!"

"But God chose for me, Gray. He created me with this jewel in my forehead and therefore decreed what I must do for my people."

Before he could comment further, there was an uneasy rustle from the group of bugs that were beyond the light of the fire. "What is that?" he asked, turning to stare at the still unseen hordes of bugs, praying that she wouldn't light a light and force him to see the mutated things.

Instantly, she was on her feet, a streak of pink until she pulled the folds of her robe over her head. She blended into the night as if she had never been, investigating and leaving Gray standing there, wondering what was going on. "Gethla?" he hissed. It just didn't make sense to yell when you had no idea who or what could be listening in. "Gethla?"

Then she was at his side, emerging from the darkness as if she were a phantom phasing in, and gripped his arm, her yellow eyes narrowed in anger. She said one word that shook his world and tested the limits of his disbelief. "Rustlers."

"What?"

"Rustlers! They are after my herd."

Gray shuddered. "They're only bugs. Let the rustlers have them."

"They are important to my people. Next year's breeding stock. Food for the winter. Beasts of burden and tools to help us exist, Gray. I have to save them!" With that, she gave a piercing whistle, looking expectantly into the dark.

When after a few seconds nothing happened, Gray relaxed, but he let down his guard too soon. With barely a sound, a huge pink and white *thing* -- a cross between a tarantula and a roach -- appeared at her side. It was easily as large as a horse and carried on its back something that looked like a thick saddle. Its small round head was low to the ground, but at least four sets of beady black eyes honed in on his person and stayed there.

"What the hell is that?" he shrieked, staring in horror at the biggest bug he had ever seen.

"Zy!" she hissed as she climbed onto its back and reached out a hand for him to grasp.

"You've got to be kidding!" His voice squeaked in disgust as he stared at the monstrosity of a bug. He could feel the phantom crawlies running up his arms as he shuddered and rubbed his arms.

"Gray, we must hurry!" She guided the bug around him, clucking at it, making it use two of its rear legs to kick sand on the fire.

"I am not getting on that!"

Then the first dart flew past his head, narrowly missing his nose.

"Okay!" He leapt for the -- Ick -- bug! like he was the Lone Ranger leaping on Silver.

Chapter Seven

Gethla jerked the strange one, Gray, in front of her on the saddle, easing back to make room for him. There was little time to waste. The rustlers would do whatever they could to get their hands on a valuable herd like this one, and they would run over anything that got in their way.

Grunting at the time it took for Gray to mount up, she reached behind her, into the concealing robes, and pulled out what had to be the mother of all bows.

"Where were you hiding that?" Gray gasped as another arrow zinged past them. He ducked low and tried to see into the darkness that Gethla seemed to be able to see through. Gethla didn't answer, but pulled back on some unseen string and a bolt of pure energy exploded from the arc of the bow.

"Damn," Gray all but screamed as a huge explosion sounded behind them. There was a high-pitched squeal and then the sound of many soft footfalls. "What did you do?" Gray cried out as he tightened his grip on the saddle and tried to forget that he was riding a huge reason for Raid.

"Scattering them." She turned back to release another energy arrow. "I just hope the *Chroan* don't scatter, too."

"Scatter?"

"The vibrations," she explained as another arrow whizzed past them.

"How many are there? I was sure there were only two." She released another arrow then turned again to guide the bug across the desert-like plains. Gray looked down, catching an impression of the land passing at a frightful rate, then slammed his eyes closed, vowing not to look again.

"There are more," she hissed. "And they are going for the herd."

She tugged on the reins, spinning the bug around with a gut-wrenching twist, and seemed to aim toward something unseen. Gray found a good handhold and tightened his legs around the bug's body as they shot off in the direction of what he assumed were the rustlers.

He could feel his anger building. What kind of vacation was this? He got drunk, he got half drowned, and now his hostess was being attacked by bug rustlers!

"What can I do?" he growled, his words easily heard over the nearly silent footfalls of their mighty steed.

"You?" Gethla asked, surprised. She had been alone for so long, doing things on her own and surviving, that she never even considered asking for help. But if the strange man was offering... "Can you guide Zy?"

If he could guide her mount, then she would be better able to target the rustlers and stop them from scattering the herd. If the herd stampeded, they would lose precious fat and nutrients, as well as maybe even losing a limb or two.

Not to mention the loss of life that occurred when instinct tried to force a being that was too large to scamper up walls in a more vertical direction. At every stampede, there were at least a few casualties of genetic imprinting and that would not do. Every *Chroan* was needed to see her people survive through the long and brutal winter.

"Guide? Damn right." He was proficient in horseback riding, and this couldn't be much different.

Almost instantly the strange set of reins were tossed into his hands. There were four leather straps as opposed to the usual two. But he gave all four of them slack and snapped them sharply. "Ha!" he shouted, spurring the bug on to speeds so fast that the wind stung his eyes and chapped his lips.

This was kind of fun. If it wasn't for the silent passage and the odd gait from the lurch of multiple limbs, he could easily forget that he was riding, in essence, a huge bug. But thinking those thoughts reminded him that he was terrified of bugs, so instead he concentrated on trying to see the terrain.

As he squinted into the darkness, he ignored the occasional whoosh of the energy arrows that Gethla seemed to sling with glee, and tried to make out a landmark or something. Then in the distance, he could have sworn he saw a lighter patch of darkness move toward the right. Trusting his instincts, he pulled the reins and the responsive animal sped off in that direction.

"Yes, Gray," Gethla whispered, her delight obvious. "You've spotted the leader! If we get him, the rest of the band will disperse."

Again, she fired at the disappearing blob of darkness, driving him away from her precious herd and trying her best to break up the band. "Yee ha," Gray growled, fast on the scent of the leader now.

When her battle became his, he had no idea, but the thought of catching that rustler and giving him what he deserved took over his mind. The male instinct to capture and conquer and punish all that did him wrong was flying high in his mind. The world disappeared, all except for his goal -- stopping that man before he hurt his kind Pink Hair.

Closer they came upon the retreating man, his steed in no way a match for Gethla's Zy. "Yes!" Gray hissed, kicking their mount in the sides, driving it forward at a faster rate.

Just as he could make out the deep purple of the bandit's robes, there was a huge muffled boom and Gethla let out a shriek of dismay. "The herd!" she screamed, losing interest in the escaping thief. "They're scattering the herd!"

Without thinking, Gray jerked hard left on the reins, making the bug rear before it spun at dizzying speed and reversed its direction. In desperation born of fear, Gethla draped her bow over one shoulder and wrapped her arms around Gray, praying they would make it in time.

The ebony sky began to lighten into a deep royal purple as they crossed the land, the landmarks missed in the dark beginning to take on a hazy shape as they raced forward.

As they crested the rise of one hill, Gethla let out a pained gasp. “No!” she cried as she surveyed the valley below.

Pink, yellow, purple, blue, the huge *Chroan* trampled each other in an attempt to escape the sonic boom someone had loosed on them. Some scampered up the dark, almost black, face of the mountains, to tumble onto their backs, legs flying up in the air, their high-pitched clicks filling the cool dawn.

Gray stared and tried to hold in his stomach, which was trying to forcibly eject itself through his mouth, as he watched his greatest nightmare unfold before his eyes. The biggest bugs he had ever seen seemed to be vying for escape routes, trampling over everything that got in their path. Their clicks and squeals were awful to his ears as the sight of the repulsive things froze him in place.

Never had he seen the like. This is what Gethla was striving so hard to protect? These... mutated bugs? But a low sob drew his attention from the sight of the bug stampede to the woman behind him. “Gethla?”

“It’s gone. They are all gone. My people will starve. We are lost.”

And despite the fact that she was crying over things that needed the world’s largest roach motel, Gray felt a strange urge to hold her in his arms and offer her what comfort he could.

Chapter Eight

Gray looked around at the ruined campsite and shook his head, feeling sorry for himself. His clothes were gone. His last link to his real life was nowhere to be seen, and he had never felt so lost.

He looked over at Gethla, noting the slumped shoulders and the dispassionate gaze as she glanced from the ruins of her camp to the wide swath of destruction the retreating *Chroan* left in their wake. He didn't know who he felt the sorriest for.

"Can't we... get them back?" he asked, turning to look at the beast that had carried them on their hunt, the only *Chroan* left in the area. The large pink and white thing was not too bad to look at, he decided. It stood placidly as it kept beady eyes on its mistress, as if it felt her depression as well.

"Get them back? Gray, the *Chroan* will be of no use to anyone now. Most will be killed in the stampede and the rest will scatter as their instinct tells them. It is hopeless."

"Did the rustlers get any of them?"

"No. If they can't have them, they destroy them so that no one will benefit."

"Okay. This is beyond weird. They rustle bugs and are maniacal enough to destroy what they can't have, and there is no law. What kind of place is this?"

"This is my home."

Her calm answer took some of the fire out of his anger, and he stared at her, one question in his mind. "What is this place?"

"I told you, we are at the magical and mysterious lake, Gray. It is one of Earth's great remaining mysteries."

"Earth?"

"The name of our planet."

"This can't be Earth!" Gray suddenly felt off-kilter, like his world had been shifted off its axis and he was falling. "This isn't Earth. Earth is where I live, it is where people choose to have children if they so desire, and almost everyone can do it at will. Earth is where people don't stampede bugs big enough to saddle up and go for a ride. On Earth, we stomp on the bugs. Earth is where I was last night. This is not Earth!"

"It is."

"Is not!"

"It is."

"It's the twenty-first century, Gethla. We have a president who keeps failing, but goodness knows he keeps trying. We have our share of problems and crimes, but we do not have bug rustlers who stampede six-foot excuses for pesticides!"

"It is two hundred years after the disaster, we have several villages and settlements, only those who possess the jewels are capable of reproduction, and what is a president?"

Gray stared at Gethla in amazement before he stuttered out, "Disaster?"

"When the skies burned and the great cold came. When the survivors had to go underground to survive the cold and the ash. When the skies cleared and the air was slightly pure, the only things that survived were the *Chroan* and a few plants. It has been told that we struggled for years after coming out from the under, but a few remembered the old ways and we started over. This is Earth, Gray. And I believe the mysteries in the lake brought you here for a reason."

Gray shuddered as he stared around him in horror. The only thing that came to mind was that old ape movie with Charlton Heston. "Those idiots! They really blew it up."

Then there was the startling realization that he had to have gone forward in time. There was no other explanation for this. The facts were standing in front of him. Gethla, with her pink hair and her yellow eyes that glistened with tears she tried to be too strong to shed. The dry, arid land, the huge bugs that they all seemed to rely on so much, the stark severity of their lives.

He had gone forward in time, and there seemed to be no way to get home. But he shook off that problem for now, pushed it into the back of his mind. If he were forced to dwell on it, he would go mad. Already, there was this tiny voice in the back of his mind that was shrieking and screaming that this was impossible.

If he paid too much attention to that voice, he knew that what mental sanity he had left would snap and he would be lost in the void of fear and confusion. So he turned his attention to problems he *could* handle, easy things, things that would improve their immediate situation.

"We have to make a plan," he began. "We have to do what we can to help, and then these mystical people of yours can help me."

"You would do that, Gray?" Gethla turned amazed eyes to the man she had fished out of the lake, the man that seemed so strange to her, and wondered what he wanted.

"I would do that, and then you can do something for me."

She'd known there would be a catch. "What?"

"You can help me get back home."

* * *

"The legs on the bug go round and round, round and round, round and round," Gray sang, his deep baritone ringing out over the countryside, as they loped over the parched land.

He could almost forget that he was traveling by bug, he thought as he shifted to a more comfortable position. Gethla sat before him, her arms loosely holding the reins as they followed the massive trail of destruction the bugs left in their wake.

Confused was a good way to describe her. Even if he was singing those ridiculous songs, his voice vibrated through her. As she sat before the man, his thighs lined up behind hers, all she wanted to do was to melt into a puddle in his lap. His crotch was so warm she could feel it through her robes and against the flesh of her ass.

"If I had a bug, I'd travel in the morning, I'd travel in the evening, all over this land!"

"Gray?"

"I'd travel through danger, I'd travel with warnings..."

"Gray!"

"I'd travel..."

"Gray?"

"Gethla?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm formulating a plan."

"How can you formulate anything when you are bellowing those stupid words?"

"Stupid? I'll have you know that they are traditional range songs."

"The legs on the bug?"

"Close enough."

"You are going to scare any *Chroan* away, Gray."

"You said they were all gone anyway, Gethla. Besides, I'm singing to take my mind off of the fact that I'm riding on my worst nightmare."

"You don't like *Chroan*?"

"*Chroan*, where I come from, would start a panic in the street."

"Odd place. Please, tell me about Baltimoremaryland."

"Tell you about it? It's a city."

"What's a city?"

Sighing, Gray settled back to tell her a bit about himself, and hopefully garner some information as well. This would be a peaceful exchange of information and ideals, he would help her, she would help him, he would be back to that blasted island before the next night was over. Simple.

"A city is a place where hundreds of people gather to build homes and work."

"Hundreds?"

"Thousands, actually. Baltimore is a pretty big city."

"What work did you do there, Gray? Were you a warrior?"

"Hardly. I'm an artist."

"An artist?"

"I created things with metal and paint and a lot of time."

"Oh! You are a craftsman."

"You could say that, yes."

"And where did you live? Were you alone? What happened to your bearer and her partner?"

"My mother and father are dead. They died when I was young."

"How awful! Who raised you?"

"I raised myself, basically. Well, the city has a system where children are placed with couples who will rear them for money."

"So someone paid them to love you? Children should be cherished."

"Well, love had nothing to do with it," Gray sighed. "I ran away after some unpleasantness that no one would believe."

"Unpleasantness?"

"Let's just say that the head of the household had an unnatural attachment to children. So I ran away when I was about thirteen and lived on the streets for a while."

"That is so sad, Gray. What is a street?"

Laughing, Gray looked down at the curious woman riding between his legs and suddenly the dark thoughts of the past were washed away. "A street is a paved trail where vehicles can travel in safety. There are no *Chroan* in the past, Gethla."

"So you lived on a trail. What did you do for food?"

"I, ah, ate out of garbage cans." He shuddered as he recalled having to wipe the roaches off of a half-eaten sandwich when he was near starving. He recalled his hatred of the large things that seemed to be everywhere, getting into his sleeping quarters, crawling through anything that he left unattended, especially at night.

"Garbage?"

"Refuse. Things that people waste."

"Waste is bad, Gray. How can you survive if you waste?"

"Well, I survived *because* people wasted. But then Jarvis found me and things changed."

"Who is Jarvis?"

"Jarvis was my best friend," he said, a soft look on his face. "Jarvis was a runaway too, but he kept us all together, and formed a family out of us."

"There were more of you?"

"Every city has throwaway boys. I was just one of the lucky ones. Jarvis had a collection of us. If he felt we had potential, he would keep us. He was only five or so years older than me, but Jarvis had us organized into a real family."

"How wonderful."

"Some of it was," he sighed, remembering times past. "Jarvis had Candy with him, and Candy was our unofficial mother. Then there was Paul, my older brother if you will. And Christian, and Mazie, and Ellain. I was the baby of the group, the last one he took in. Jarvis taught us a lot, like how to find food, to avoid a fight, to defend ourselves, and how to pick the trick that wouldn't kill you."

"Trick?"

"Never mind. Jarvis helped me a lot. He practically raised me. And when I got older, he saw to it that I got my GED and enrolled in college. He always saw to it that I could take care of myself."

"He sounds like a sire."

"Oh, he was. And he saw to it that I had money and I kept my dreams."

"Where is he now?"

"Jarvis? He's still with Candy. They both live in Florida now. Jarvis is a psychologist, believe it or not." At her blank look, he added, "A special doctor."

"Doctor?"

"Healer?"

"Oh! He takes care of the body."

"No, he is a healer of the mind."

“Oh.” Gethla was impressed. Those who had been touched, the insane ones, were usually driven out of villages, if not killed outright. It was said that insanity was contagious and had led to many deaths during the time when they lived below.

“Yes, he’s very successful at what he does and he still takes care of castoff children.”

“That is wonderful, Gray. You have a sire that seems to care for you deeply.”

“As I care for him.” He grew silent for a moment, then prodded Gethla gently. “So tell me about your sire.”

“My sire? Oh, he was glorious, Gray. He was as tall as you, and his eyes sparkled. He always laughed and smiled and told me that he was lucky that I was born to him.”

“He loved you.”

“Yes, he loved me and his partner loved me as well.”

“They took care of you?”

“They taught me to survive, Gray. And then they went away.”

“What happened to them?”

“I do not know. They went away and never returned. The elders think that the rustlers got them. We found their equipment, but we never found them again.”

“I’m sorry, Gethla,” Gray sighed as he gave the woman a quick hug. “Losing the ones you love is always hard.”

But Gethla lost her train of thought as she felt those strong arms encircle her from behind, pull her against a hard wall of chest, the voice murmuring comfortingly to her. How she wanted this man.

She felt a strange dampness in her lower regions and felt her lower stomach ache with longing. Longing, she decided, that was all for this man who was trying so hard to help her. Longing to experience what her parents so enjoyed before they were gone, longing to be... normal.

But as soon as the thoughts crossed her mind, she pushed them aside. She had a purpose and a duty. She had to do what she could to save her people. Since the *Chroan*

were lost to her, she would have to go home now and become their breeder. She had expected to have a little more time.

"It was long ago," she said, pulling herself from his wanted embrace and looking around her yet again. "And I have to do what I have to."

And that included sending Gray home. He was clouding her thinking, making her want dangerous things she knew she couldn't have.

"I guess." Gray also looked around the barren land, still seeing no sign of the bugs.

"And then we send you home."

"Yes," Gray readily agreed. But for some strange reason, the thought of leaving this woman was starting to bother him. And he hadn't even seen her naked yet.

"So we shall proceed directly to my village and talk to the elders."

"Without even trying?"

"What is there to try for?"

"How do you know that the bugs, the *Chroan*, are destroyed? Have you ever *seen* them after a stampede?"

"Well, no."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because the elders said so."

"And they know because?"

"Because?" That was a good question.

"Have they ever seen them, the destruction, I mean?"

"I... I don't know."

"Then how can they tell you?"

"I..."

"So I propose that we follow this trail and see where it leads. Then when we find the rustlers, who probably have your bugs with them, we steal back as many as we can and take them back to your people. Your problems are solved."

"This... has never been tried, Gray."

"Then what is stopping you? Fear?"

"I..."

"Look, you said you were willing to do anything for your people. I think this falls into that category."

"You are correct, Gray."

"Then stop whining and let's get those things."

"I do not whine. What is whine?"

"To whine, my dear, is to complain about your problems and do nothing to change them."

"I will change them, Gray."

"Then let's go. The sooner you and your people are settled, the sooner you can get me home."

"Agreed," Gethla shouted and Gray kicked the bug into what was its form of a gallop.

"Yee ha!" he roared and away they flew, chasing the trail of bugs, following their destinies.

Chapter Nine

The trail of destruction led to a blind valley where the barren hills created a natural barrier. It was the perfect place to hold a pack of unruly... varmints.

The journey to get there was long and tiring, and nothing like traveling through the ruins and trails that Mary often dragged him through, but it was fascinating nevertheless. Fascinating because the body of his hostess was full and firm, and felt good between his legs. As the bug rocked, it pressed her tighter and tighter against the ache that developed between his thighs. Her softly rounded ass ground against the free head of his cock as the bug cantered, and brushed against him as he pushed it into a full gallop. It was those times that he could envision parting the robes and...

"We have to be close now," Gethla whispered, her words tearing Gray away from his fantasy and flinging him back into reality with a hard thump.

"I guess," he growled, his erection still throbbing behind his robe. Thank goodness she was too innocent to actually know what it meant.

But then she turned and smirked at him, her expression knowing. "Maybe you would like a, um, rest?" she snickered as color exploded into his cheeks.

Without a word, he pulled the bug up by a cluster of rocks and glared at Gethla.

"Maybe you should take care of that," she insisted as he climbed stiffly off of the bug. "And I can watch."

Gray stared at her, eyes wide as she winked. He snorted and rolled his eyes. "You just want to see how my cock works and I'm not giving you the satisfaction."

Of course he had no problem letting her watch. He insisted on a mutual masturbation session at one point with all of his lovers. It was the best way to find likes and dislikes, though the full body exploration was still one of the best methods in his book.

But watching someone pleasure themselves seemed to strip away all pretense and show. When you were touching yourself, you couldn't lie to yourself. All of your feelings, thoughts and emotions seemed to show up on your face. And that information was priceless, he'd learned when he was younger. It was still worth its weight in gold, but instead of a protective measure, it now showed you who you were really dealing with.

"I want to see if the tales are true," Gethla said, breaking his train of thought. "I want to see it in action."

"Well, the *it* in question is not to be ogled at by young girls about to give their lives away into a forced breeding program."

"I am not being forced."

"Sounds like force to me."

"You don't understand."

"And I don't want to understand either."

"Damn you," Gethla screamed, leaping off the *Chroan* and facing Gray head on. "Damn you for making me question myself!"

"Damn you for giving in to them." The combination of frustrated anger, uncertainty about his position in this place, and his strange attraction to this weird female was taking its toll on his usually calm demeanor. And now it seemed an argument was just what he needed to relieve his tension.

But as he stared at her, her eyes narrowed in anger, almost like a cat's. Her chest heaved beneath her robes, her aggressive stance... he felt his plan backfiring. More blood rushed to his cock and it began to throb with his rapid heartbeat. Damn, it was official. He wanted her.

"I do what I have to do to survive." She stepped forward as if she was going to do him some bodily harm.

"That's a nice excuse for a while, but when you have options there are no excuses."

"What do you know of it, Gray? What do you know about survival?"

"I know that I'm worth a lot more than what's hanging between my legs. And honey-pot, I have been there. I've sold my body to many a bastard just to be able to afford a value meal. I know what I'm talking about."

"Sold? This is not the same thing! This is survival."

"And that's what I told myself when some fat fuck was thrusting and humping over me. Or beating the hell out of me with a belt and calling me by his son's name before he reamed my ass but good. There is survival and there is living. So what are you going to do?"

That gave Gethla pause. She didn't understand by half what he was speaking of, but she knew that it was not good. Still, she had the survival of her own people to think of. It was not just herself. "I have to think of more than my own needs."

"As did I," Gray growled, stepping closer, feeling the heat of his arousal grow. "As I had to if we were going to survive, and it killed me inside." Silence. "Why am I wasting my time with a pink-haired idiot with a Joan of Arc complex?" He turned and made his way to the nearest boulder. "Martyrs are such bores."

Damn her anyway, he cursed as he stalked away to some semblance of privacy. *Not willing to see what's before her own two eyes*. His erection was pounding painfully.

As soon as he was free from the feel of her gaze, he whipped the robe aside. His fingers were shaking, his body trembling as his need made itself known. He had never been one to deny himself pleasure before, and this period of celibacy was grating. His body was confused, about as confused as his mind.

Relief! He looked down at the swollen purple mass between his legs. He whimpered as he ran his finger around the base of the steel-hard cock. He sucked in a deep breath as a shock of pleasure shot through his chest, making his legs weak. He was going to do it. He was going to beat off in the middle of nowhere and nothing could stop him. But the sound of a sandaled foot on the sand behind him made him aware he was not alone.

So. She still wants to come and play. Let her watch all she wants. He threw back his head and moaned as he let his hand drift below his throbbing cock to cup his achingly

full balls. He felt a flash of excitement, and his knees began to tremble. His free hand tore at the ties that held the robe together. He let the silken material fall open to frame his body like some exotic drape. Leaning his back against the boulder, he let his hand travel over his chest, stopping to pinch at his nipples, making his hips arch up into the warmth of his loose grasp.

“Yes,” he whispered, the sound of his voice making his heart race. The knowledge that she watched made his blood pulse all the faster. “So long, it’s been so long.”

He reached up to grasp a handful of his hair, running the soft mass around his chest, centering on his nipples before he stopped, letting the silken strands flow around his chest. His free hand went to his mouth, his fingers gently caressing his lips as he would a lover’s.

“Mmm,” he purred as he let two of his fingers sink into his mouth, down to the last knuckle, sucking slowly as he moistened his digits. Then the fingers, glistening with his saliva, returned to his nipples, creating a more pronounced reaction as he again tugged at them, turning them into hard nubs of desire.

The hand cupping his balls tugged down slightly, causing a whining sound to explode from his chest at the slight pleasure-pain, before his fingers slid back an inch further, touching the hot flesh just behind his sac and pressing his prostate externally. He spread his legs to grant himself easier access. “Umm.” He moaned as his body responded, sending endorphins rushing through his bloodstream and heightening his arousal.

With his head rolling back against the boulder, his fingers left his nipples to caress his washboard abs, tracing around the slightly harder skin of his tattoo before tugging a bit at his navel ring. His other hand slid up from behind his balls to dig his nails into the skin of his thighs. A sheen of sweat broke out across his body. Slowly, his hands rose and lowered, tickling and caressing, meeting at the swollen cock that now dripped a clear and steady stream of pre-cum around the purple head.

He shuddered as the hot flesh of his cock was met by the slightly cooler and rough caress of his hands.

"So good," he muttered as both his hands fisted around his long hard cock, squeezing lightly at the base while smearing the falling pre-cum as a lubricant over the swollen shaft. Slowly his hands began to pump, starting at the base and tightening up as they reached the throbbing head. Again and again he repeated this until the pre-cum flowed like a faucet and his fingers began to glisten with his fluids.

He groaned, closed his eyes tighter, arching his hips into the caress, forgetting he had a voyeur looking in on his act of self-pleasure. One hand drifted again to cup his balls, tugging at the swollen orbs while his fist moved at a faster rate.

"Yes," he muttered, shuddering as he felt fire lick through his lower back and blossom in his stomach. "Mmm."

His head rolled back and forth, the long inky strands of his hair sticking to his chest as his movements intensified. "Harder," he gasped to himself, the hand cupping his balls moving to his abandoned nipples, stroking and pinching, sending more sensation shooting through him.

"Good, so good!" His mind began to spin and lights flashed before his eyes. He forgot about where he was and what was happening. All that mattered was the extreme sensations flowing through his form, shaking his body and his very soul.

"Mmm," he growled, his hand pounding at his cock, the skin burning beneath his fingers. His muscles locked, freezing him into a near painful arch as his balls slammed to the base of his cock and he felt the almost ticklish sensation that signaled his immediate release.

A flash of yellow eyes and bright pink hair intruded in his ecstasy. In his mind's eye, he saw her face, open in its eroticism, her mouth slack as she shouted his name in climax.

"Gethla!" he roared, his cock pulsing in his hands as stream after stream of white-hot cum exploded from the tip, coating his hand with the scalding juices, splattering the sand between his legs.

He slumped.

What did I just say?

Then he heard the small moan and sigh from behind his not-so-hidden private boulder. He'd forgotten the lady of the fantasy was watching, and now probably knew how he felt about her. "Damn," he whispered as he milked the last few drops of semen from his still hard cock. He opened his eyes. She was standing before him, her gaze glued to his hand where he still cupped his turgid length.

"Want a taste?" he offered, his sarcasm rolling strong.

"Can I?" she asked eagerly, her eyes shining.

Shaking his head, he released himself and offered her his semen-coated hand. Tentatively, she stuck out her tongue and tasted a small sampling from Gray, her eyes watching his face as she tried this new experience. But soon her curious expression twisted into one of displeasure as she got her first taste of his alkaline saltiness.

"And people sometimes swallow this?" she asked as she turned her head to the side and spat, trying to get the taste out of her mouth.

Gray exploded into laughter as he shook his head and began to straighten his robes. "It's an acquired taste," he snickered as he rose to his full height. "Did you enjoy the show, or do you want me to go again? I used to get paid for doing this, you know."

"I..." She swiped the back of her hand across her mouth and stared at him, her eyes shining with desire. "I wanted to let you know that I think we should camp here for the night."

"And you couldn't call that out? You had to come over and tell me face to face, so to speak?"

"I, well, I heard you and I wanted to see. It looked so exciting, Gray. It was beautiful and it made my thighs tingle. I think my body has prepared itself for possession, though I am not at liberty to have you now." With a sad sigh, she turned and began to walk away.

"And what did you learn?" he called to her retreating back.

“That men are lucky to have an outside appendage, shouting is very exciting, and the taste is acquired. Can I learn to do that, Gray? Is there a female spurting?”

“Um, yes, but the mechanics are different.”

“Can you show me?” She stopped and turned to face him, her curiously aggressive stance back as she regarded his half-clothed body like he would eye a steak at this very moment. The best description would be hungry.

“I could.” He walked toward her, his hair flying free around his body, his robe alternately hiding and showcasing his assets, his skin gleaming with its slight sheen of sweat. He stopped right in front of her and leaned down. His warm breath washed over her face as a sudden wind blew strands of his hair across her, bringing with it the scent of raw sex and hungry male. “But then I would have to take you, and that would interfere with your survival plans.”

Gethla felt her left eye twitch in irritation. She had to suspend the sudden urge to reach out and sock the man in the stomach as he headed toward Zy, who stared at the humans as if they were the biggest cosmic joke ever.

Suddenly, the survival of her people didn't seem all that important.

“Shall we camp?”

Gethla moved to assist in setting camp, ignoring the leaking wetness between her thighs as well as the tight longing in her heart.

Chapter Ten

Gray stared at the small hideout the rustlers had created for themselves. At the moment there were only three men there, if you wanted to call them that. Their hair color ranged from bright orange to auburn and each was amazingly tall and slim. They all looked so... effeminate, he decided. Like a drag show gone bad.

Two were dressed in those long robes that Gethla sported, but the robes the rustlers wore were a deep brown and not very well cared for. The men also seemed uneasy, nervous, almost jumping at shadows, like a lot of cocaine users he knew in the past.

"What's wrong with them?" he asked as Gethla sidled up beside him, anxious to get a closer look.

"The urge."

"The urge?" he asked, still confused.

"They desire to mate, to release the hot blood from their thievery, I imagine," Gethla informed him, nibbling on her bottom lip as she lost herself in thought.

"How do you know?"

"My father and his partner acted this way when they returned from a successful trade. I know the look."

She gazed at him, a sly smile spreading across her face as she stealthily viewed his body. She wondered if she would carry that look if they could save the *Chroan*.

"So where are the rest of them? Were there only three?"

"I think there were more, Gray. We gave chase to four men."

"Okay, four men and three here. We should assume that there are at least two more out there somewhere."

"Maybe taking care of that hot blood," she nodded.

"How?"

"There are places nearby, Gray. A male can pay for what he wants."

"Oh." That shut Gray up. These people seemed to have reverted to something like the Wild West, so why wouldn't there be saloons or houses of ill repute? Prostitution was bound to crop up where there was a shortage of mate-able women and lots of... hot-blooded men.

"That may work in our favor. We need a distraction."

Gethla turned to look at him. He didn't seem like much, she decided, but he sure spoke like he knew what he was talking about. "Why?"

"You need to get their attention, to get them up here so we can knock them out. Once they're out cold, we can take back your bugs and be a long way from here before the others return."

"But we don't know when the others will return, Gray. We don't even know how many are out there."

"Do you have a better idea? I know it's a bit rushed, but we have to act when we're given the opportunity."

Gethla thought about that, then nodded. Who knew when there would be this few men left to guard the *Chroan*? They had to take whatever opportunity they had, and just deal with the consequences. "How do we distract them?"

"Easy! They're hot blooded. You go pretend to be lost. Just get their attention and then run back up here. I'll knock them out or you can use that energy bow thing, and then we get the *Chroan* and make a break for it."

"That will not work."

"Why not? What do you look like under that thing?" He picked at the sleeve of her robe, grazing her skin and sending shafts of heat through her arm. "Ashamed, are you?" He pricked her vanity and he knew it. But he needed her to show some skin to draw their attention. That, and he wanted to see what she looked like under those robes. As an artist, his imagination was good, but he wanted to see the real thing. It had

been a while since he had his hands on some good honest feminine flesh and he found that he missed breasts a lot.

"I am not!" she hissed before she crawled back to a safe distance and stood up to her full height. "I have a very nice body!"

There was a flurry of material and the robe slipped over her head to puddle into a soft heap at her feet. Gray's eyes bulged as he took a look at what his little Pink Hair had been hiding all along. "Boobies," he sighed as he stared at the small firm breasts held fast by a tight band of blue.

Her skin, a dusky brown shade with a slight olive tint, seemed smooth and supple to the touch. And how he did want to touch. Her waist was trim, flowing into a set of hips he just wanted to slip between. His eyes slowly followed the curve of her naked flesh until the small loincloth she wore wrapped around her hips blocked his view.

But that was okay too. It looked very jungle girl, a favorite fantasy of his. Her legs were long and sleek, her thighs muscled from riding, he presumed, and her stance slightly aggressive, just the way he liked them. He bit back a groan as he felt his heart thump in his chest. Gethla was the perfect combination of feminine beauty and physical strength.

"It won't work," she said again, a faint flush reddening her cheeks as she read the hunger that seemed to burn within his eyes.

"I would go for it." Gray licked his lips as lusty thoughts crowded his mind.

"It won't work because they only go to women for progeny. For fun, most men like men."

Gray blinked twice. That couldn't be right. They preferred men? "But... but..."

"So it looks like you had better take off the robe, Gray. Guess who gets to play distraction?"

* * *

Gray looked helplessly over his shoulder at Gethla, who stomped her foot and pointed. "Go!" she hissed, ignoring his entreatings look.

With a resigned sigh, he turned to do his duty. Flinging his hair over his shoulders, he shook his bare chest and gave himself a small pep talk. *This is no different than playing games with Carlos. Remember how you stripped to get through that rough period in college? Remember that bet you lost to Mary-Baby and had to do that damn bachelorette party? My God, I want to go home!*

But he plastered a fake smile on his face and began to make his way down the hill toward the hideout. The plan was simple. Get their attention, get them to chase him, get them knocked out, get the *Chroan*, and get gone. Easy. He could do this.

With the top half of his robe wrapped around his waist, he put a little extra swing in his hips and strutted his stuff. It didn't take long for the first rustler to notice him. "Excuse me?" he called out, sweat from both exposure to the sun and his nerves beading up on his well-muscled flesh, making his navel ring flash in the sun. "I'm a bit lost and I was wondering..."

"What is someone like you doing out *here*?" the orange-haired one asked as he rose to his feet and eyeballed Gray closely.

"Who cares?" A peach-haired male in braids grinned a gap-toothed smile, leering as he took in Gray's form. "So long as he plans on staying for a while."

"I don't like it," the third, yellow-haired male snorted as he glared at Gray.

"I just need directions," Gray snorted back, tossing his hair. He knew that his ebony hair was rare and exotic here, as were his purple eyes. He played both to his best advantage, as he looked down his nose at the trio of men who could actually look him dead in the eye without strain.

He was kind of the short one here, and he hoped that played to his advantage. Men loved feeling bigger and stronger than any potential partners. Well, at least he did. He knew it was a safety measure instilled in him from his time on the street, but old habits were hard to break.

"Directions to where?" Orange Hair asked, stepping closer and taking a big whiff of the air around Gray.

"To the nearest village," Gray answered, fluttering his eyelashes a bit. "My *Chroan* died a way back and I'm trying to get out of this heat." As he spoke, he began to wave his hands in front of his chest, drawing attention to its muscular planes.

Peach Hair licked his lips as he stared at the display, while Orange Hair ran his hand up and down his thighs, his thumbs outlining what had to be the biggest bulge in his robe that Gray had ever seen. He spent a few seconds being grateful that he was a top, before he turned his attention to the hard case, Yellow Hair, who still glared at him.

"You don't look like you're from around here."

"If I was, do you think I would be asking directions?" Gray snapped, annoyed with the lack of intelligence this group seemed to have. "So are you going to help me or what?"

"I'll help you," Orange Hair snickered. "But what are you going to give me in return?"

"My undying gratitude?" Sarcasm rolled off his tongue like honey from a jar, smooth and thick.

"I was thinking you could show your gratitude in other ways," Orange Hair continued. "Like showing me if that hair color is real."

"Oh, I don't think so." Gray took a step back. "I am so out of here. I'll find my own way."

"I don't think so!" Yellow Hair growled as he grabbed Gray by the wrist, jerking him to a halt. "Something's not right about this."

"Yeah, like the stench coming from your person!" Gray struggled a little to get them ready for the chase.

"I'll show you stench," Yellow Hair growled as he applied a stinging pressure to Gray's wrist, bringing a gasp of pain and sending him into an automatic reaction.

Snarling, before he could stop himself, Gray fisted his right hand. And faster than the eye could blink, he sent the rock-hard fist flying at Yellow Hair's face. Not expecting his maneuver, Yellow didn't duck and found a fist planted deep in his face, knocking him a foot up and off of his feet, and out of consciousness.

“He hit Garl!” Peach yelled. Gray took off, racing back the way he had come, shaking his hand as he ran.

“Stupid, overbearing, Neanderthal son of a...” He stopped swearing as the sound of the pursuit drew closer. Darting around the nearest boulder, he looked up and nodded to Gethla who had the knock-out agent in her hand. The first huge rock struck Orange Hair directly on top of his head, rendering him unconscious instantly.

Peach Hair stumbled over the fallen body of his comrade, swinging his arms wildly for balance. He never saw the fist Gray sent flying into his face. It connected with a meaty thump and Gray followed through with a swift kick to the stomach, knocking his bandit out as well.

“Treat me like a piece of meat,” he growled as he straightened his robe and ran his hand through his hair to smooth it down.

“What?” he asked as Gethla began giggling at his actions.

“Nothing, Gray,” she laughed. If he didn’t know, she wouldn’t tell him. Besides, his little feminine movements were amusing to watch.

Chapter Eleven

Getting the bugs to move was a challenge. Knowing that their time was limited, Gethla raced toward the side of the hideout where a wooden enclosure was erected to keep the *Chroan* inside their corral.

"I can't believe I'm doing this!" Gray suppressed a shudder as he observed the sea of *Chroan* milling before him. There were millions of the beasts. Well, a few hundred, at least. All of those beady eyes, all of those swaying antennae, all of those bugs and not one shoe big enough to squash them all.

"We have to get them to move." Gethla held her robe in her hands, not wanting to trip on the dark, silky material.

Gray eyed the bugs with repugnance. "How did you get them to move in the first place?"

"I use the bow, but that would bring the other rustlers here."

"What powers that thing anyway?" he asked, curious about her weapon, which seemed little more than a bent piece of wood any time it was not in use.

"It is tuned for me, Gray. It was created for me. It reacts to my jewel. Other than that, I do not know."

"How did you find it?"

"My father. He was near the Mysterious Lake and he found it. But it only seems to work for me. The Wise Men said that it was meant for my use."

"Hmm." Gray decided to ponder the problem later. There had to be a reasonable answer. "So how do we get them to go? What draws their attention?"

"Food."

"Good, so go and cook one of them up."

"Sweet foods, Gray. And I fear I have none."

"Will they move if we yell at them?"

"No."

"If we throw sand at them?"

"No."

Then he noticed her robe. As the wind attempted to tear it from her grasp, he noticed that a few of the bugs' heads were following the movement. They had four sets of eyes, he thought. So it would only be right that movement would catch their attention. "Can we round them up if we flapped a robe at them?"

That gave her a pause. "It's never been done before, Gray."

"Okay. So here is the plan. I'll get your pink bug..."

"Zy."

"Okay, I'll get Zy, and I'll open the fence. Since you're so comfortable with the bugs..."

"*Chroan!*"

"Okay, *Chroan*, you go out and wave at them, get them moving. I'll circle back to pick you up and away we go. You can do your herd thing and we'll be at your village before the rustlers know they were rustled."

Gethla smiled, staring at his bare chest, and decided his plan made sense. He had yet to pull the robe on correctly, and his upper body was lightly muscular and bare, a tasty treat for her eyes. "You flap *your* robe at them, Gray."

"There is no way in hell you're getting me to walk among the roaches, Gethla. I'll jerk off for your amusement, I'll walk like a hooch in front of men more feminine than you are so that we can knock them out, I'll even ride on the back of that overgrown bug you're so attached too. But there is no way you're getting me to tiptoe among the *Chroan* and get up close and personal with the ugly bastards. Riding on one is enough. Put me in the middle of them and I'll be a blithering idiot."

His words were serious and final. Gethla knew there was no way to talk him out of it. So she soon found herself wandering into the middle of a *Chroan* herd, avoiding the multitude of swinging legs and swatting away antennae that got too close.

Suddenly she felt very small and unsure, as she had never been required to be in the midst of the beasts without being seated on her Zy.

"Gray?" she called out as she heard the wooden gate squeak open.

"Do it now!"

Gethla found herself whipping her robes over her head. Standing in a field of *Chroan* was disturbing, but doing it wearing just your foundation bindings was more than a bit frightening. Her skin was so tender and their exoskeletons were so tough...

Before she could dwell on all that could go wrong again, she waved the robe above her head. Nothing happened. "Woo-woo!" she called out, and she garnered the attention of a few who came over to sniff at her robe, but that was about it. How was she going to get all of their attention at once?

"It's not working!" she called to Gray.

"Woman, they're *your* bugs. You should know what makes them tick!"

"They liked your scent, Gray. Perhaps if you made your cock spurt again..."

"Forget it, woman!"

"Maybe you can ride in so that I may mount Zy? You are the taller one. More would see you if you..."

"Hell no!"

What was this hell anyway? "Gray," she screamed, exasperation and frustration in her voice. "We have to do something!"

"Whip them," Gray shouted back.

"Whip them?"

"If something goes wrong, you must whip it!" Obviously, she was not attuned to great eighties music. "With your robe! Whip them! Into shape, shape them up, get it straight!" he sang. "Go forward, move ahead, try to detect it, it's not too late! Whip it, and whip it good!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" she screamed as she flung her arms out in frustration, snapping the robe and deciding that the word felt damn good rolling off her

tongue when she was upset. The robe snapped with a whipping sound that made Gray crow in delight.

“That’s it. Whip that robe! Whip it, and whip it good!”

Gethla’s eyes turned to the robe she held in her hand as awareness dawned. The robe made a snapping sound as she flung her arms out. The sound, combined with the motion, had grabbed the attention of quite a few *Chroan*. That *whip it* thing could possibly work.

She raised her arms again and snapped the robe, sending it flying in the direction of a stubborn purple *Chroan* that studiously ignored her. The snapping sound and the movement of the whip caught its attention and it began to move away from the annoying human. Giggling, she turned to another and snapped her robe again with the same results. Again and again, she snapped her “whip,” deciding that it was fun as the *Chroan* began to slowly move toward Gray and the open gate.

“Whip it!” she cried out, snapping at the *Chroan* and soon a slow mass exodus was underway. This was going to work. “Whip it good!” she screamed, in imitation of Gray and let her robe fly, staring one huge *Chroan* directly in one set of beady black eyes.

“Oops!” she yelped as the *Chroan* began to click and skitter and rear. It landed on top of a fellow herd mate and it too set up a loud clicking before it turned to attack its attacker.

“Gray?” Gethla eased away from the growing melee. But the fight had begun as more *Chroan* were brought into the battle as the two bugs began to fight in earnest. Within seconds the sand churned up as Gethla fought to get away and the *Chroan* began to...

“Stampede!” Gray bellowed. Suddenly there was a loud skitter as *Chroan* broke toward the gate that Gray was trying desperately to tear down.

“Gray!” Gethla called out as the first frightened bug raced past her, almost knocking her off her feet. The wind it kicked up as it passed blew her hair out in a bright pink puff as another raced round behind her. She was trapped as the bugs began

to run, leaving her in the middle of a sea of colorful bodies all capable of crushing her with a small misstep.

“Gray!” she called again, dodging around the racing bugs. Spitting dust out of her mouth, she tried to make it to the nearest fence. Suddenly she found herself surrounded by a sea of brightly colored death. Coughing and sputtering, she desperately tried to see the fence, to get away from this madness as fear clouded her mind.

Was this the way she would die? Suddenly, all that she thought to sacrifice for the greater good of her people seemed to pale in the face of what she had accomplished in her life. She would die not knowing true, deep, meaningful passion. She would die without ever having experienced anything remotely like the life Gray felt she should have. She would die without ever making a decision for herself, without ever doing anything for herself.

She was pathetic. Tears threatened to fall, but she held them back as some inner coil of strength demanded that she keep fighting. She might be pathetic, but she would never just let death come for her. She would fight it with everything she had. Snapping her robe before her, she tried to clear a path through the angry clicking *Chroan*. Her arm began to tingle, then grew numb and heavy as an ache settled deep within the muscles, but she kept fighting.

Using her free hand, she beat at the legs and backs of the beasts, forcing them out of her way as she began to make progress. But it was the roar that gave her pause, for it was the most terrifying sound she had ever heard. It was an enraged male, his deep purple, almost black exoskeleton glistening in the sun. Seriously annoyed, it roared its displeasure and reared up on its back leg, its eyes tracing any moving object on which to take its ire out.

Gethla, with her swinging robe, swatting arm, and flying hair, was obviously that object. Without warning, the *Chroan* began to charge, all six legs churning up sand. Gethla looked around her, but saw nothing but the backs of the immovable *Chroan* all

around her, preventing her escape. "Gray," she whispered, the enigmatic man the last thought that roared through her head as she faced her death.

The bug charged closer and closer, so close she could see herself pictured in all four sets of eyes. She sucked in her breath, one tear falling down her cheek, as she waited for the *Chroan* to introduce her to the sweet mysteries of death.

"Yee-ha!" The bellowing roar made her jump and her head jerk to the right as a blaze of bright pink, a flash of flying black hair, and the lithe form of Gray filled her eyes. She had time to gasp, then Gray blocked her view of the enraged male. She found her arm gripped in a steely grasp and she was flying through the air.

"Gotcha!" Gray cried as he tugged on the reins and sent Zy skittering in a circle. They raced out of the way, so close to the big bull that the air of his passing ruffled their hair. "Hi-Yo Pinky!" Gray roared as he directed the *Chroan* toward the entrance gate, using his reins to whip the beasts on either side and clear a path. Gethla turned back, her face still reading shock, and saw the bull swallowed up by a mass of bright swirling colors. Then they were through the gate, the clicking *Chroan* right behind them.

"I think that made my dick hard!" Gray shouted as the whole brightly colored herd of *Chroan* raced after them, their chittering announcing their move. He tightened his grip on Gethla as he crowed his delight to the heavens.

He would never forget the sight of her, frozen in her fear, as the huge bug charged at her. His own fears disappeared when faced with the thought of losing the pink-haired woman. He could not survive without her, not with the knowledge that she was dead and he had done nothing to protect her! Visions of her bloodied and trampled body gave his courage a boost and leant his voice an air of command that even the skittish Zy could not refuse.

One more second and he would not have been holding the squirming woman across his lap. All his opportunities to have her, to hold her, to instruct her, just to plain be with her would have been lost. But now, elation filled him as he felt her wiggling, shuddering, laughing and crying, and being totally alive across his lap. He wasn't lying about his cock being hard.

“We’re burning daylight!” he cried. He whooped again and forced Zy to the head of the herd. *And maybe burning up the bed furs tonight*, he thought to himself as they raced off into the sun. It wasn’t a sunset, but he’d take it.

Chapter Twelve

Lifting her gaze to him, Gethla laughed. "We did it!" Giggling, she struggled to stay on the back of the racing bug as she rested across Gray's hard thighs.

"Woohoo!" Gray shouted, one hand on the reins while the other struggled to hold an armful of wiggling woman in place. Exhilaration filled him as he realized his plan had worked. They had outsmarted the three rustlers with minimal damage and retrieved almost all the *Chroan*.

He turned to Gethla, only to freeze at the sight of her pert rounded bottom thrust up in his direction. Instantly all thoughts of holding back with her vanished. His tension had been riding high ever since she'd pulled off that damn robe and paraded around him in those tiny scraps she considered undergarments.

"Gethla," he breathed, his eyes dilating as his heart began to pound in his chest.

"Gray!" she laughed again, then felt the tension zinging through him. Her gaze traveled from his tight face, down that heaving chest, and straight to the hardness that prodded her.

The arm wrapped around her waist tightened and her world spun madly for a moment. When it righted itself, she found her legs draped along either side of his thighs, her back pressed tightly against his chest. She shuddered, a low heat snaking through her abdomen and down into her legs as she felt his warm breath against her neck.

"Say yes," he purred, the vibrations sliding through his chest to quiver within her. She knew what he was asking. She knew it was wrong. But how could she say no? She had never wanted anyone as badly as she wanted this man. She had to have him, she had to have something for herself once in her life. "Yes."

"God, Gethla!" Gray exhaled a breath he didn't recall holding.

“Yes.”

His hands, hard and warm, traveled over the bare skin of her abdomen, caressing the strong muscles that quivered at his touch. Her hands went up and behind her, wrapping around his neck as she arched into his touch. Her head dropped back to rest on his shoulder, her face turning into his neck to breathe in his masculine scent. “I want you so badly.”

Gethla couldn't stop squirming. His light touch was making her feel things she had never experienced. Her nipples hardened beneath their thin silken barrier and gooseflesh rose up on her exposed skin.

“Ohhh,” she moaned as his hands slipped beneath the barrier to graze the firmness of her small breasts. Her head dropped forward, sending a cascade of cotton candy hair flowing over her stomach and his hands. “So good, Gray.”

His hand sought out her hard nipple, rolling it between his fingers as he let the rocking rhythm of their steed slide her silken body against the skin of his chest. “Let's get off of this bug.”

Gethla couldn't have agreed more. The *Chroan* were settling down now, returning to their usual placid state. She wanted more of the feelings that Gray was causing in her. Gray pulled their *Chroan* to a halt beside the grazing herd and they slid off.

Gethla's whole body shuddered as Gray bared her skin to the dry wind and his hungry gaze. “Damn, you're hot.”

Gethla thought for a moment, then decided that she wasn't that hot. Tingly and breathy, and there was that strange throbbing longing that had settled between her legs, but she was not hot. She looked up to ask him what he meant, but as her eyes met his, his mouth began to descend.

Is he going to --

Then his lips touched hers. What breath she had left, left her in a rush as his lips, soft yet firm, pressed against hers. Fine tremors shook her arms as she raised them to wrap around his neck. Gray groaned and pulled her tighter as her taste exploded in his

mouth. His fingers buried themselves in her hair, massaging her scalp and tugging at the long strands. Damn, she felt perfect in his arms. Lifting her in his arms and never breaking the kiss, he lowered her to the robe he'd laid out for them. But as his knees hit the sand, he decided the robe was not enough protection. Shifting, he turned and sat on the hard ground, positioning her legs so they straddled his lap.

By this time, Gethla decided that she liked his kiss and was ready for more. Her hands raced over his bare chest, pausing at his swollen nipples. "Ohhh." She ran her hands over his pecs, her thumbs brushing his hardened peaks.

"You learn fast." His head fell back, his neck arching as his breath hissed through his teeth. Seeing his neck so open and vulnerable, Gethla decided to take advantage. Her lips clamped around his fast-beating pulse and her tongue laved him, tasting his skin.

"Yes," he hissed, his hands tangling in her hair, pulling her closer.

Eagerly, Gethla's tongue traveled over his neck and down his chest, over his salty skin, until her mouth settled over his right nipple. He grunted as she applied teeth to his delicate flesh, but just enough to test his pleasure, to see his reaction. Her hands slid down to where his robe was still tied around his waist.

"That's right. Explore all you want." His hands ran encouragingly over her back, pausing at the bindings around her breasts, and then his deft fingers worked the knots, freeing her delicate flesh to his touch.

Gethla whimpered and pulled away from him, her fingers going to the robe, untangling it to get to the large hot mass that lay beneath. She wanted to touch his cock. She had seen it shoot, had watched it grow under his knowing hands, and now she wanted it to grow for her, to shoot for her.

Gray's breath left him in a rush as her fingers finally encountered his cock and then it felt like all the blood in his body rushed straight down. He tangled his hands in her hair and lifted her head, pulling her in for another kiss, thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth.

Gethla moaned at the contact, amazed that something so hot could feel so good. Instinct moved her to touch his tongue tentatively with hers, moaning at the clash of sensation that flowed through her at the contact. Her eyes dropped to half-mast and she ran her finger along the ridges and veins of his cock.

She was amazed at the heat, the texture, the softness of the skin. She pulled her lips from his and her eyes dropped to his lap. *That would fit into her? That throbbing hard hot piece of flesh?* She shuddered again as she brought her eyes up to his. "Gray, I'm scared."

Gray struggled away from the sensual hold that had taken over his body and really examined his Gethla. She was excited, the hardened nipples and the dazed look in her eyes told him that. But underneath, there was the natural fear of the unknown.

Thinking back to his first time, Gray shuddered and vowed to make this good for her. He would not rush her. He wanted her to enjoy this. In his opinion, one-sided pleasure was no pleasure at all.

"Shhh," he soothed. "It'll be all right. Do you want me to stop?"

"No." Shyness stained her cheeks red and made her eyes drop. "I want to go on. But..."

"I understand, baby." He pulled her close, ignoring the feel of her soft full breasts flattening against his chest, the hardened nipples digging in. "We don't have to rush this. We can go as slow as you like." His thumbs caressed her temples as he pulled her back far enough to rest his forehead on hers, looking intently into her eyes. "We'll do whatever you want."

"Will... will it hurt?"

"It may," he said after a moment. Not all women were born with hymens, and maybe *Chroan* riding or some casual fall had broken hers, if she'd ever possessed one. He couldn't tell, and there was no telling with the physical changes that the human body had made here.

"Thank you," she responded, calming a little.

“For what, little one?” He rubbed his cheek against the softness of her face, inhaling the intoxicating scent that was feminine and musky, and all Gethla.

“For telling me the truth.” His honesty did a great deal to bely her fears. Gray would never lie to her or lead her astray.

“How could I do anything less?” He moved lower to drop little kisses along her shoulder. Sighing, she relaxed again into his embrace, shuddering at the feel of all that hard male flesh presented just for her.

Slowly, her hands crept around his waist, feeling the muscles bunch under her caress. And just as slowly, she let her hands drop to the front of him again, caressing where there was a small fuzzy growth of pubic hair at the base of him, feeling the humid heat that rolled from the erection he’d never lost.

Gray’s arms caressed her back, comforting as well as urging her to explore until she was comfortable. He enjoyed her touch and it got her comfortable with his body. He nuzzled her chin again, and when she raised her head, he laved her lips with his tongue, asking for an invitation that was readily given as she parted her lips in welcome. Gray sighed into the kiss, starting a slow exploration of his own as he ran his tongue along her teeth, encouraging her to parry with his tongue.

Soon she was taking control of the kiss, then giving way in the next moment, enjoying the kiss with all of its nuances and styles. He tore away to place nibbles along her chin and to her shoulders, whispering against her skin, “You’re so beautiful, Gethla. You make me want to weep with your beauty.”

Before she could respond again, his lips were on hers and he was worrying at the knot that held her loincloth in place. Within moments, the knot was free and she was laid bare before his gaze.

The bright pink hair that made up the triangle of her pubis was a sight to behold. It looked like cotton candy and his sweet tooth was aching. But knowing that might be too much for a beginner, he decided to stick to the basics. His hands made a tender foray up her thighs where they rested against his, moving slowly upwards to the treasure that awaited him.

Gethla moaned, one hand gripping his cock while the other trailed up to his back. Never had she felt anything like this. She was half tempted to close her legs in fear, but his touch felt so good. Her body was going wild, flashes of fire shooting through her veins, tingling her muscles and making her mouth produce the most amazing sounds. "Gray," she whimpered. "Please!"

But she had no idea what she was pleading for.

Finally, just as his fingers parted her lush curls, his other hand found her nipple, gently rolling the small bud between his fingers. "Gray!" she panted, throwing her head back as unbelievable feelings coursed through her. But then it was her turn.

Gray leaned back a little, his stomach muscles tightening, to give her more access to his throbbing cock. Gethla took him up on his offer, her fingers encircling him, encasing him in one soft fist. Gray shuddered at her first stroke, her eyes looking intent as she carefully copied the movements of his earlier self-love.

"You're good at that," he stuttered as she took up a rhythm, carefully running her thumb along the head of his cock, collecting the moisture that beaded so freely there, and using it to lube her movements. Faster and faster she pumped her fist, until Gray let out a groan and clapped both hands to her waist.

In one swift movement he rolled her to her back, parting her knees with his hips, and making a place for himself between the softness of her thighs. Gethla shuddered as she felt Gray looming over her, taking the dominant position as his purple eyes blazed down into hers. A slow grin spread across his face and before she could comment, his mouth latched onto her right nipple.

The burning pleasure was such a shock that Gethla arched up and cried out, her scream echoing over the desert. Her hands tangled in his hair, playing with the silken strands as she pulled him to her other nipple, demanding equal pleasure for that one as well. Gray was only too happy to comply, nipping her gently, then licking the small pleasure-pain away.

But he was not content to stop there. As he nursed at her breasts, his fingers trailed over the tense muscles of her stomach, until they tangled in the pink curls between her spread legs.

"Gray!" His name exploded past her lips, a gasp of erotic delight. "More! Touch me more!"

Gray was only too happy to oblige. Grinning, he detached himself long enough to do that finger trick again, sinking both of them deep into his mouth before taking his wet shiny fingers and parting her lower lips.

Gethla gasped at the sensation, feeling fire shooting through a place on her body she never considered much. Reading her expression, Gray slowed down, letting her feel every nuance of the sensations as he firmly caressed her swollen lips, feeling the moisture gathering there and using it to lubricate his actions. When he had caressed her, learned which side was the most sensitive, he carefully parted her lips, exposing her clit for the first time.

"Mmm," she panted. "Oh Gray, don't stop!"

"I won't," he assured her as he used one finger to gently caress her clit.

Fire! Fire and an ecstasy so deep filled her that her legs automatically spread wider and her hips arched toward the caress. Her eyes slammed shut, moans erupting from her throat as her head whipped back and forth. It was like something had possessed her, enhancing all the feelings she had merely thought pleasant and sending her a sensation so great she thought that she was going to die.

But then Gray used two fingers, caressing that spot firmly as his palm pressed the whole area and the first scream erupted from her lips. "Gray!" she shrieked as she felt a rush of liquid pleasure drip from her feminine opening. Smiling, Gray began to use his thumb to stimulate her as he pressed one finger carefully to that flooded opening. "Yes, yes, yes," she chanted as his finger gently penetrated her, stretching her for his possession.

Gray shuddered as the tight heat tightened around his finger, feeling the strength of her inner muscles, imagining her tightening around him. Carefully, he

pulled out and added a second finger and slowly began to pump. Her hands left his hair and reached out to latch onto his shoulders, tugging him down to her, raking her nails down his back.

"Damn, baby," Gray gasped as he dropped low enough to take a pert nipple into his mouth, his free hand braced above her shoulder. But soon his heavy petting was not enough for either of them. He spread her legs wider, placing the weeping head of his cock against her opening. "Do you want this?" he rasped. "Open your eyes," he demanded, watching as she struggled to obey. "Do you want this?"

Gethla struggled to find her voice, so lost in her passion was she. But she managed a "Yes!" Then her whole body arched and a sharp inhalation filled the air as Gray pressed forward.

She was hot, so hot and tight, so tight. It was almost painful to penetrate her. He fought the urge to just slam his way home. He pushed his hips forward, sliding ever deeper into her molten heat until he was buffered by the softness of her pink curls. An almost animalistic sound exploded from her throat as she felt herself filled by his thickness, a thickness that rubbed at that magic button that sent her senses flying. Pulling out slowly, almost to the point of leaving her, Gray suddenly reversed his movement and slammed into her deeply.

"Gray!" she shrieked as her legs went up to wrap around his waist, tightening, urging him to continue. Again and again, faster and faster, he thrust himself into her wet heat that was suddenly no longer tight, but open and soft and welcoming. Tears filled his eyes and he moved inside her, his eyes boring into hers, as he fought to take them both to a paradise never before felt on this earth.

"Gethla," he gasped. He felt the tingling in the small of his back, felt his balls slapping her ass, felt his control start to slip. He pulled back, took her right leg in his hands and placed it on his shoulder, exposing her to his gaze. "Look, Gethla," he whispered as he looked at their joining. "Look at us, baby. We fit. Lord, how we fit."

Gethla's eyes dropped and a sudden flush filled her face. There he was. He was inside her. It was him and her, joined as one. It was the most wondrous, weird, strange,

beautiful thing she had ever seen. Then she watched as he lowered his fingers, pressing to that place where they fit, touching that button that made her scream, and then he was pulling out and sliding back in.

"GRAY! Yes, oh please, more!" she shrieked as the double sensations slammed into her. Faster and faster he moved, his head tossed back, his hair waving around him, as he struggled to maintain his control to please her. Whimpering, Gethla closed her eyes and gave in to the tight coiling sensations tensing up her body.

It was too much, it was not enough, and she needed more! Just as she thought she was going to lose her mind, something snapped. White hot flashes flowed through her mind and her body froze as her first climax slammed into her. A high-pitched whining sound was all the warning Gray got before he felt her muscles clench around him, milking him, forcing his release.

He gladly gave in, his balls slamming to the base of his cock, his back arching, his hips driving into her deeply as spurt after spurt of his essence shot into her body. "Gethla!" he shouted, his whole body shuddering as he collapsed on top of her, her leg sliding down his shoulder to land limply around his waist.

His arms wrapped around her, hugging her tightly to his body as he gave into the lethargy that filled his body.

"Gray," Gethla rasped. "I feel so strange."

"Afterglow," he managed as he rolled to the side, turning her until he spooned around her smaller frame.

"Afterglow," she breathed as her eyes closed. "I like afterglowing, Gray, with you."

Chapter Thirteen

"What are you going to tell them?"

"That my body is my own."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Anything I want!"

"That's my girl!" Who knew that sex could actually mend a mind? Just that thought recalled the feelings he felt when he touched his Gethla. She was so hot inside, so silky smooth and wet. The heat of her wrapped around his cock was enough to start another woody growing beneath his robes. And her tightness...

"I'm going to miss you," he whispered, more to himself than to her, his words showing more emotion than he usually allowed himself to reveal.

Gethla felt a pain in her heart that she had never experienced before. Gray was going to leave her. *How quickly the heart becomes entangled with another.* She thought of the lonely times she faced without her precious Gray beside her.

Gray knew that in experiencing her own sexuality, her own worth outside of a breeding factory, Gethla had discovered a lot more about herself. Now that they had recovered all of their *Chroan* and quite a few more besides, her village would be set for many a month.

Gethla had never felt so proud. And then there was the sex. This was what sex was supposed to be. Now she realized why her father and his partner smiled so often. It might not be love, but it was a generous and gracious exploration. Gray had shown her so much about her body, pleasures that she would have never guessed.

Now that she had experienced such tender and erotic care, nothing less would do. There was no way she could lie down for unknown and uncaring men and be the vessel to hold their seed. She wanted more out of life. She was going to help Gray find

his way back home, and then she was going to discover the real Gethla, not the one bound by traditions of old.

If she had followed traditions, she never would have recovered the *Chroan*, and that alone gave her something to think about.

"We are almost there," she called out happily to her temporary mate as they herded the huge bugs toward the valley that would house them until they were all sold or consumed. "We will be able to rest and refresh."

"Rest and refresh," he echoed, but it was with a sense of dread that he viewed the small settlement off in the distance.

* * *

"This is not exactly the hero's welcome that I expected."

Gray's dry understatement would have been painfully humorous, if there wasn't a spear pressed to his throat.

"Spirits!" a crazed orange-haired man bellowed as he danced around them, tossing dust and brandishing a staff that appeared to be made of *Chroan* tentacles and a human skull. "Be gone! Leave this place! Leave us in peace!"

"You are not helping," Gethla growled as she motioned for Gray to be silent. Then to the apparent spiritual leader of her people, she intoned, "Man of Mysteries, Keeper of Secrets, I have returned. I have brought the stolen *Chroan* back to our village, so that we may survive the cold times."

"Spirits," the man returned, but he stopped doing the funky chicken or whatever dance he was attempting. Maybe it was a hexing dance, but Gray wasn't too sure. "You have returned from the dead to aid your people, but now it is time for you and your spirit guide to depart! Leave this place before you curse us all!"

"Spirit guide?" Gray asked, and got the spear jabbed deeper into the flesh of his neck for his troubles.

"I am not dead," Gethla insisted. "I have returned our stolen *Chroan*!"

"No one returns from the Lake of Mystery. No one recovers *Chroan* from the rustlers."

"Well, we just did, Methuselah," Gray snarled, losing patience and swatting the spear away.

"Your guide grows angry," the old man whispered in an aside to her. "Best you return with him to the great mysteries of the beyond."

"*I am alive!*"

"No one could survive this!" With a wave, one of the many brightly haired men raced to a nearby structure and returned carrying a handful of shredded material. "Gethla, we have retrieved your equipment, at great risk to ourselves, and will give you a proper burial."

"I am..."

"No one could have survived this!" he cried out as he snatched up what appeared to be what was left of the bed-clothes, Gray's shirt, and one tattered robe. "Your sacrifice will not be in vain. We will honor your courage in returning from the dead to aid your people. But now it is time for you to go on to the next world."

Gethla stared, speechless. Well, at least he did have some kind of precedence for his decisions, but she was really alive. "But... but I returned the *Chroan* home. I was going to tell you that I couldn't take my place as a..."

"The spirit needs help in returning. Her memories of us are too joyful and she wishes to return to that joy."

"That does *not* sound good." Gray took a step closer to Gethla, ignoring the soldier who kept a careful eye on him, keeping him away from the rest of the people gathered beyond the gates to the village.

"We must drive the lost one away. We must cast her out so that she may find peace in the afterlife." Then to Gethla, "Be not afraid, young one. The richness of a new existence awaits you." With that, he cast the first stone, literally.

"Ouch!" Gethla screamed as the round rock hit her on the arm.

"Where did he get that?" Gray asked, looking confused as the man seemed to produce the rock out of nowhere. Then a questioning look crossed his face. "And does he have any more?"

Before he could blink, the people Gethla had fought so hard to save were pelting them with stones. "Ouch! Ow! Stop it!" Gethla cried, swatting the stones away. "Ouch!" She yelped as the rocks continued to fall, despite her actions. There were more than she could swat or dodge.

"Why are you doing this?" she screamed, a sudden sense of betrayal galling her heart. Were these the people she fought so hard to save, the ones she was going to give up the rest of her life for? These close-minded individuals led by a man who refused to be wrong?

"Tinti!" she screamed, appealing to a young woman whom she had often played with when she was young. "Tinti! It's me! Don't you know me? I am alive!"

"Be gone, spirit," the young orange-haired woman gasped, tears falling down her face. "It's okay to let go, Gethla. Be not afraid." Then she threw a stone that struck Gethla in the forehead, raising a fierce knot in addition to the many lumps she had already received.

"That tears it," Gray growled as he stepped forward, ignoring his guards who stepped back at the first sign of his aggressiveness, fear evident in their faces. They actually believed that he was some kind of protector of the dead or something. These people were idiots!

He strode into the midst of the rock pelting, the expression on his face daring anyone to throw another stone. The pelting abruptly ended, and Gethla looked up, confused, one hand on her forehead, her eyes filling with tears as she watch those she loved betray her in the worst way.

"What is wrong with you people? Gethla has risked everything to come back here and save you, and this is how you thank her?"

"Be not angry," the old man cried out, falling to his knees as Gray's eyes met his. "But the spirit must leave so that she may find peace. If she remains, she will bring bad luck."

"Bad luck? You people eat friggin' roaches with spider legs, for goodness sake! You live in a desert and you sell the fertility of your women to the highest bidder. Bug

rustlers plague you and you never step up to defend yourselves, yet you send a single woman out with the fate of your village on her shoulders. How much worse can your luck get?"

Mumblings met his words. "And what do you know of it, spirit? Is your world so much better?" the leader snarled, rising to his feet, his eyes narrowed in anger.

"My world is not, you old sick fuck. But in my world, there is a thing called gratitude. People have choices, and not everyone decides to follow the ramblings of a self-appointed apostle with delusions of godhood. Who are you to speak of the next world when you've never even seen it? What do you know outside of this barren-assed valley?"

"I would like to see this place, guide, this next life," the man fairly roared, anger filling his tone.

"Then go and drown yourself," Gray snarled back as he reached out a hand for Gethla and pulled her to his side. "Do yourself and these people a favor. Drown yourself, shoot yourself, hang yourself for all I care! Get trampled in a *Chroan* stampede. Go and meet this next life you're so fond of talking about and sending people forcibly to with the aid of rocks and stones. Then try and return to tell us what you've learned, old man, I dare you."

Utter silence fell as the two stared at each other. The Mystical Leader knew that this stranger was dangerous. He was making the people question things, and having his people question him destroyed the proper order of things. The Mystical Leader's sly eyes took in the curiosity on the people's faces, the close observation to the challenge of his position, the questioning of the next world. He had to do something.

"Evil spirit!" he hissed and the people took a collective step back.

"As evil as the one stoning the person who saved your sorry asses? As evil as the one clouding his people's minds with theory and unproven half-truths?"

Stalemate.

“Leave this place!” he bellowed, turning and walking away. He had to save some face. He had spent too many years as the Mystical Leader to have his reign questioned. “Leave or my people will make you!”

“Like I wanna stay with a bunch of doddering old fools. Try to make us stay. That would be the challenge.” Gray turned to a stunned looking Gethla and gently tugged her arm, leading her away from the village that was all she’d known. The people remained silent as Gray led Gethla back toward the gates, toward her Zy, and away from the baleful, resentful, and fearful stares of her people.

Gethla paused, tried to jerk away, but Gray pulled her tightly against his body. “Never look back,” he whispered. “What matters is done. You did your duty, and now it’s time to move on.”

“Where?” Gethla gasped as the first tears fell from her eyes. But Gray urged her forward, away from the most recent cause of pain in her life. Gethla was now truly alone, more alone than she was when her father and his partner died. She had no home, no safety of a village of people, no one to share troubles with, to share the hard work, to share survival.

She felt her whole body tremble as she realized her loss. Something within her bright yellow eyes dulled. She had no one, nowhere to go.

Unless...

“Take me with you?”

“What?” Gray paused as they neared Zy and turned to stare into her face.

“Take me with you. Please, Gray. I have nowhere else to go. Please, take me with you.”

And for the second time since he’d landed into this postwar horror of a time, Gray let a true smile cross his lips.

Chapter Fourteen

"And you will love hot tubs," Gray said as he ticked off another point on his fingers. "A nice hot bubbling soak will make you feel all warm and toasty. Then there are movies. You've got to see *Joe's Apartment*."

"Joe's apartment?"

Gray stared at her for a moment, his eyes shining with suppressed amusement. "You'll relate," he decided, thinking of the movie with the talking bugs. Mary-Baby had insisted that he watch it, and he had and surprisingly enjoyed it, though the main characters were a bit creepy crawly.

They were riding Zy, heading back toward the river and, hopefully, a way home for both of them. Gethla was still pretty torn up about her people and their reactions toward her, but she was trying to remain strong, just as her father and his partner would have wanted. But it felt as if a gaping hole was at the center of her universe. Could Gray fill that hole, she wondered.

"What will I do in your world? Can I herd *Chroan*?"

"Um, no *Chroan*." He heard the dismay in the groan she let loose. "But I bet you would be good as a bouncer. Or a model. But I'd place my bet on bouncer."

He recalled the feel of her muscled flesh bunching beneath his active hands and let out a dreamy sigh. Gethla was the perfect combination of erotic feminine charms and masculine aggressiveness. Her body, a product of a lifetime of hard work, was strong and supple, flexible as hell, yet retained that softness that contrasted so beautifully with her strength. It was all that he ever was attracted to, all that he ever lusted after, and it was wrapped up together in one enticing pink-haired, raspy-voiced, yellow-eyed package.

“What does a bouncer do, Gray?” Gethla asked, curiosity in her eyes as she looked back at the man.

“He bounces... people.”

“Bounces?”

Was that a bit of eagerness in her voice? “Beats up people who behave badly. Well, more like kicks them out of clubs.”

“How can a person fit in a club? They are handy weapons, Gray, but they are hardly large enough to fit people inside them.”

“Um, a club is a place where people get together to dance, and drink, and meet others, and just have fun.”

“Oh! So when they misbehave, I get to beat them up and kick them out?”

“Yeah, but usually it will be the women. It doesn't look good for the male bouncers to toss ladies out on their collective tushes. So you bounce the girls, the male bouncers will bounce the boys, and maybe you get to bounce the boys too. They like it when the women beat up on the men. Gives them a hard reputation.”

“Oh! I get to beat on men? Really?”

“You don't have to sound so excited about it,” Gray groaned, then a smile came to his lips as he pictured himself at the mercy of the marauding Gethla. She could tie him face down on the bed any time! And he did have that nice black leather paddle. He would have to teach her about warming up to the task, so to speak, slowly, letting endorphins rise high, before she began the really good punishing...

“*Get them!*”

“What the hell?” Gethla and Gray turned to stare at each other as the words exploded from both their mouths at the same time. But before they could dwell on this phenomenon, there was a chattering sound, and then they were surrounded. Orange Hair, Yellow Hair, Peach Hair, and the addition of a meaner Yellow Hair and a larger Orange Hair, all sat on the backs of deep blue *Chroan* and glared at them.

“We're surrounded,” Gray deadpanned, his eyes wide with this unexpected development.

"Where are our *Chroan*?" meaner Yellow Hair growled, his face twisted in a fierce scowl.

"They were not yours," Gethla snorted as her hand reached back for her energy bow. "And they have been returned to their rightful owners."

"You cost us a whole lot of trouble, girl!" the original Yellow Hair growled, one eye blackened by Gray's fist and his mouth set in a deep grimace.

"She's a jewel," larger Orange Hair pointed out, and they all fell silent. "And he's not from around here."

"So don't try me," Gray growled, his eyes narrowing as he looked for weakness in their positions, their persons, their attitudes. He didn't like the way that the larger orange-haired man was staring at Gethla. It reminded him of the meat markets where the pimps picked up fresh chicken. It made him seethe inside. He kept his eyes on the ones he perceived to be the bigger threat, and that was his mistake. The rock that struck him came from behind. He fell like the proverbial sack of potatoes.

"You like playing with rocks," the angry Yellow Hair growled as he cocked his arm back to toss another if need be. "Play with these!"

The sudden weight of his unconscious body dropping on her knocked Gethla's hand away from her bow. But as she twisted to see what had happened, the meaner Orange Hair reached forward and before she could draw in a breath to scream, the world twisted on its axis and she found herself face down across his *Chroan*.

"Let me go!" she screamed as she began to kick and fight. She screamed again as she saw the crumpled form of Gray falling from Zy and dropping to the hard-packed ground.

"Gray!" But even as she screamed, the rustlers were whipping Zy into a frenzy, sending the now skittish *Chroan* racing to safety, and the rustlers were riding away with the struggling Gethla with them. "Gray!" she screamed again, her lone voice echoing over the barren land, the anguish and despair in her voice ringing eerily through the air.

Chapter Fifteen

He was floating. Time held no meaning, there was no up or down. He was floating and for once in a long time, he was content. His mind was at rest, at peace. All of the troubles that had plagued him for years seemed nonexistent, or rather like the lost threads of a remembered childhood nightmare.

He could have floated there forever, lost in the nothingness that gave his soul respite, but there was some little thing tugging at him. It started out small, like the buzzing of a minor insect, but as he concentrated, the buzz gradually grew into a roar. *Gray? Are you all right? Gray? Where are you? Gray!*

That voice sounded familiar. He was growing curious, but he valued his hard won peace. But that voice pulled at him. *Gray, damn it, listen to me. Pay attention! I don't have much time!*

Pay attention? No one spoke to him like that, not anymore. Not since he gave up his past life, not since he became his own man!

"Listen to you? Listen to you? Who the fuck are you?" His temper flared as his anger drove the harsh words from his mouth.

"Gray, I love you. Remember that, no matter what happens. You're -- you're like a brother to me. You're my best friend." Best friend? Then it clicked. There was only one person he would even consider a friend, let alone a best friend. The voice had to be Marylin. "I love you. Whatever happens, don't forget that. I'm not dead, Gray. Not the way they'll tell you I am. Remember what you told me?"

"Mary?" he sent out, confused. What had he told her? He recalled that he loved Mary, and that Mary loved him. But there was someone who loved him more. What happened to her? Where was she? Who was she?

Follow your dreams. *Are you following your dreams, Mary?* Mary loved him. He would never forget that. But... but... Gethla loved him too. Gethla! She was Gethla, his yellow-eyed lioness lover. Gethla loved him. At least he thought she did.

"Tell me you found what you wanted, Gray. Tell me you're happy. I need to know you found someone who's right for you."

"Mary-Baby, I think I found someone I could love. She's great! She's wonderful. Her hair is pink." But as he thought of Gethla, he recalled quite suddenly what had happened.

"Pink? Well, that should suit you!" Marilyn laughed, then her voice grew serious again. "I found everything I ever wanted, Gray. I found my warrior. I'm going to have a baby, Gray. The only thing I'll miss from our world is you. But sometimes perhaps we'll meet. Here in the dreaming."

A baby? He grinned at her words, but remembering Gethla made him frown. Something was wrong. She was in danger! He recalled a sharp pain to the back of his head, and then she was screaming his name, and he was falling, falling, falling. What had happened to her?

Then it came to him like a bolt of lightning in the nighttime sky. The rustlers! They had Gethla. They'd left him to die and run off with his woman. She was in terrible danger. He had to get to her. He had to... but damn it, how?

"I'm just learning how to reach out in the dreaming. Just starting to believe. It can be as real as we want it to be. I have to go, but I'll find you here again."

"Mary, don't go! Mary, she is in danger! What do I do?"

"Go to her, Gray. I know you thought you could never be my warrior, but you were wrong. You *are* a fighter. Don't be afraid. You won't let her down. Finish what you started. Don't be afraid to love her, Gray."

"Finish what I started," he muttered as the voice began to fade. "I'll finish it, Mary. I'll make it right. Thank you."

He felt his world shift as his priorities became crystal clear. He had to save Gethla, to finish what he started.

Sending all the love he could muster toward the disappearing thread of Mary's consciousness, for lack of a better description, he let her feel his absolute glee for her happiness. And he sent her his determination to fight for the happiness so long denied him.

He would find Gethla. He would save them both. He would have his lioness and, damn it, he would grab hold of his happiness. He would finish what he'd started, and there would be hell to pay to anyone who stood in his way.

Chapter Sixteen

Grit tasted terrible.

And he knew that he was alive because he hurt too badly to be dead. Gray groaned as he struggled to blink his eyes, and discovered up close and personal that the sand of this new Earth was indeed gritty. He slowly raised his hands to the aching throb in the back of his head and wondered if his skull was cracked. He managed to peel one eye open and winced as the bright sunlight almost blinded him. This new pain made both his eyes water, but he blinked rapidly to get the waterworks under control, and forced both eyes open.

"Time to finish what I started," he muttered to himself as he forced his body to move. Slowly, he placed his palms on the ground, forcing arms to straighten. He pulled his chest up and brought his knees underneath him. "On the count of three," he urged himself as he mentally ticked off the numbers. "Three!"

He forced his muscles to move, to bring him into a standing position. And flopped back onto his face.

"Damn," he shouted. "Damn, damn, damn!" He pounded the sand in front of his face, sending dirt flying as he gave in to a small fit of temper.

"Help me!" he screamed as he rolled onto his back, his sudden anger at the world lending him strength. "Help me!" he screamed again. "Is this why you brought me here? Why is this happening? What do you want from me? What are you doing to me? Help me!"

Then he felt a tugging at his right leg. It was so unexpected that it pulled him from his fit and made him look down. There on his leg was the small pink *Chroan* who had latched onto him before. It was so startling that he lay there for a moment, his eyes locked onto the pink bug that seemed to be urging him to his feet.

"Damn," he muttered. "This may be a sign." Pulling himself into a sitting position, he stared at the small bug stuck to the right leg of his robes. "Okay," he groaned as the bug began to click and chatter. "I'm moving."

Garnering his strength again, he rolled to his hands and knees and this time managed to successfully climb to his feet, his six-legged cheering section urging him on. "Now to finish what I started," he said, his face flushed with the thrill of his successful standing. The bug released its grip on his leg and scuttled a few feet in what seemed to be an easterly direction. It then scampered back to him before repeating itself.

"What?" he asked, no longer concerned that he was speaking to a bug. He had bigger problems. But the bug repeated itself, its beady eyes looking almost imploringly at him. Then the light dawned.

"Are you doing that Lassie thing?" he asked, still blinking past the pain in his head. The small *Chroan* just waited in what appeared to be anticipation. When he took a tentative step in its direction, it did a little happy dance and repeated its pattern of leading and returning. Soon Gray was following the small bug without hesitation. Someone needed to know which direction to go and following the bug was as good as any guess. He had no idea how long he walked, but it seemed like he had trekked a thousand miles.

The sun beat down upon his head and the robe did little to protect against the damaging rays. He gave a thought as to what he would sacrifice for a good sun block, knowing that moving in all of this sun was courting skin cancer, but soon the wish for sun block changed into a wish for an icy cold bottle of water.

"I hope you know where you're going," he sighed for what seemed to be the millionth time to the small pink pestilence, but the bug, long since used to his ramblings, continued on its merry way, moving toward some unknown destination as swiftly as its six legs, and its human counterpart, could move. His feet began to drag in the sand and sweat to pour down his body. In deference to the heat, he pulled off the top of his robes, tying them around his waist as he did before, and prayed that he

wouldn't get sunburned too badly. The warm desert breeze felt better on his damp skin than the robe, but it was not enough to cool his overheated body.

Miles seemed to drag on endlessly, and just when he thought he saw something in the distance, it turned out to be more boulders or sand dunes. "What's the point?" he growled as he paused to sit on his latest "mirage," hanging his head as he pulled air into his tortured lungs. His thighs hurt, his back hurt, his feet hurt in those one size fit all sandals he was wearing. Even his bug was getting winded.

"Finishing what I started is becoming more difficult every second," he added as the bug took a break with him. But then the wind shifted and suddenly the bug was perking up. He turned three circles on the ground then took off at a gallop. "What the hell?" Gray growled as he watched it, curious despite himself, and rose to his feet. He managed to muster up a trot, and followed the bug as swiftly as he could.

The bug zigzagged around a few boulders, over more sand, and then suddenly he was staring at a huge wooden structure. "Hello?" he whispered as he checked his walk, beginning a stealth approach. "What have we got here?"

The building was a small wooden one, roughly the colors of sun-bleached oak, but had many windows surrounding it. There were no outside markings, no visible door on his side, and he would have thought that no one was home, except for the five *Chroan* that stood tethered in the distance.

Dropping to his knees, Gray crawled out of direct line of sight toward the nearest window and settled in for a listen.

"... should have killed the male," a disgruntled voice yammered.

"Why waste time? Her people could have been looking for her for all you know," the calm tones of meaner Orange Hair answered.

"We have a way to replace what you three lost and it was easier than gathering up all those *Chroan*."

"We should have killed the man."

"You have been saying that since we got here," another voice, the voice of larger Yellow Hair, answered. "You're just upset that someone obviously meant to be a breeder knocked you out."

"Am not!"

"Are too! And you wanted to sleep with him."

"I did not! I told the other he was trouble and look what happened."

"Well, I wanted to mate him," a voice Gray recognized as the original Orange Hair's rang out confidently. No shame in his game, Gray thought as he rolled his eyes. "It would have been nice."

"Well, go and mate the female," a voice he recognized as Peach Hair said, smug in its humor.

"And risk having a baby?" Orange Hair was outraged. "Like I want to be tied down with the responsibility of raising a child! You have to feed them, and clean them, and teach them. I don't need that kind of trouble."

The conversation went on and all that Gray got out of it was that Gethla had not been physically assaulted or raped and that a few of the rustlers had good taste by wanting to, uh, mate him.

"But where is she?" Gray whispered. His question was answered in another unorthodox way. The little pink *Chroan* again began its advance and retreat game, and this time Gray eagerly followed. It led him to a small room that seemed to be built onto the side of the shack. The room had two windows, cross ventilation, he assumed, and that was about it. All was silent. It was well away from the gathering of seedy men who sat and discussed what to do with the human booty they'd pirated.

"Please be in there," Gray prayed as he rose up into a kneeling position and peered inside. Sure enough, Gethla was there, lying on a small pallet of blankets, her bright shining pink hair unmistakable. There was one door to the room, the only way in or out besides the windows, and there was nothing else there.

There had to be an alarm or something, he thought as he stared at Gethla. It would be too easy for him if there wasn't a catch. He found his catch soon enough.

Gethla shifted on her pallet, and there was the unmistakable clink of metal. Upon closer inspection, he saw a small metal loop attached to the floor beside her pallet. And on that loop there was a chain, and on that chain there was another leather loop. And in that leather loop was Gethla's leg. And her pink hair spread all around and around, and her pink hair spread all around, he mentally sang as he tried to force down his panic.

There had to be a way, but what? He could lure them out one by one and knock them out, but he doubted they were that stupid. He could scream fire and hope they'd come running out, but he had never been that fortunate. But maybe if...

Yes, that would work. A sly grin crossed his face as he eased backwards and began to plan his assault. This would work or neither of them would be going back to the mystical lake and heading home.

Chapter Seventeen

Slam! Gray kicked the door open and stalked into the room, his purple eyes blazing as he took a headcount and visually plotted his escape route just in case this turned bad. As expected, all the men jumped, startled by his wild entrance. They appeared to be eating, which only made his plan better.

“It’s the male breeder!” Orange Hair bellowed as he jumped to his feet, but the others were stunned into silence by his strange appearance. Gray had torn the sleeves off of his robe and made this world’s first extremely uncomfortable G-string. His body glistened with a light sheen of sweat and his hair billowed out behind him. To their hungry eyes he looked like a sex giver, on the hoof. Well, *Chroan*-back.

Tossing his hair and throwing what was left of his dignity out the door, Gray sauntered into the room, his eyes daring them to move. “You’ve put me through a lot of trouble,” he said as he walked over to Orange Hair and shoved him back into his seat. But in a neat trick he learned while shaking it for men and women who stuffed fives down his G-string, he followed Orangey down, straddling his hips and leaning into his face.

“You want me,” he growled in his face, ignoring the other four men.

“Hey!” larger Yellow shouted, rising to his feet and walking over toward the pair just as Gray leaned over and licked the side of Orangey’s face.

Everyone was startled when Orange Lite, as Gray nicknamed him, rose to his feet, Gray clasped securely in his hands. Orange Lite slammed Gray on the middle of their dinner table, sending plates of -- Gray didn’t want to think about what -- flying around the table and crashing to the ground.

“Mine!” Orange Lite snarled as he reared up over Gray, his eyes taking in the others in the room. Heavenly. To egg him on, Gray slowly licked around his lips,

making them glisten. He ran the fingers of his right hand over and down the chest of Orange Lite, his fingers grazing his crotch. Orange shuddered and brought his gaze back to Gray, who again licked his lips and blew a kiss at the poor lust-struck man.

"Why should he get him?" Peach Hair bellowed as he pushed larger Yellow out of the way. "I want him too!"

"Mine!" Orange Lite growled again, then whimpered as Gray wrapped his long legs around his waist and tightened them, letting him feel the strength in his legs. By now, Orange Lite's attention was all his, and he made the best of it by arching his back and running his left hand over his chest.

Call me a slut, he thought to himself as every eye in the room focused on him. *But if I can hold their attention for a few moments longer...* He bit back his revulsion and arched his hips a little, just enough so that Orange Lite could feel the lithe movements of his body. The movements were familiar to him, having long ago perfected his seduction techniques, but it opened a black void inside him to have to revert to survival techniques learned in the past.

In that moment, all that Gethla had done to survive suddenly made sense. Gray understood why she would risk everything to help the people she loved. He had done the same thing to protect Jarvis and the others. Jarvis never made Gray turn tricks for food and money, as Jarvis was doing the same thing. But Gray made the decision to help the man he knew as a father, brother, and protector, to help the family who took him in when he had nothing.

Gethla was doing the same thing. No one forced her to become a breeder. It was expected, but no one was forcing her. She did it to protect the people who had cared for her when her father and his partner perished. She did it so that the brothers and sisters she had, the mothers and the fathers, would not starve.

He now understood as he made the choice to sacrifice his pride and open the wounds of his past to do this thing to free her. Not because he had to, but because he chose too. He owed her a major apology.

His thoughts snapped back to the present as he felt another approach. Peach Hair reached out and grabbed Orange Lite's shoulder. "I said we share him."

"I said mine!" Orange responded as he shrugged his shoulder and knocked Peach's hand away.

"I don't like this!" the original Yellow Hair said as he cast his suspicious eyes on the half naked man writhing on the table. "I have this funny feeling..."

"I want him too," Meaner Yellow Hair growled as he stepped forward to regain control. "We all want him."

"I don't," meaner Orange Hair said as he shared a glance with black-eyed Yellow Hair.

"But I have him!" Orange Lite-in-the-brain-department antagonized his partners. Gray turned and winked at Peachy, and then it was on. Peachy dove for Orange Lite, knocking him to the floor and almost taking Gray with them. But he managed to unlock his legs as he saw the dive coming, and slid to safety higher on the table. He glanced out of the window as the other two moved up to stop the fight, while the black-eyed Yellow Hair named Garl started toward him.

"Where are you?" Gray muttered as he turned to smile at Garl. "Want more?" he asked, speaking up louder to be heard over the sounds of fists striking flesh and the abstract curses the quartet of men behind him were making.

"I'll kill you this time," Garl snarled, lunging for Gray. Gray shot off the table and watched as Garl's stomach hit the edge, momentarily distracting him by knocking the air from his lungs. Gray snickered as he glanced out the window. This time he saw what he wanted to see.

"Is that smoke?" Gray asked casually, and all five men froze. Fire was the real hazard here, as there was no ready source of water available. They had a few wells, but nothing that could handle a blaze. And this shack, small as it was, was their only protection from the cold nights, in addition to being their safe-house.

Gray smiled as he read the fear and frustration in all of their faces. He almost felt guilty for starting the small smoldering fire. Almost. They had, after all, hit him with a rock, stolen his woman, and left him for dead on the desert floor.

Bad rustlers.

Almost as one, the rustlers in question abandoned their fight and raced out toward the wooden pens where they kept their *Chroan*. Gray knew that the small fire would smolder more than burn, as he started it with parts of his robes and a few pieces of green shrubbery he yanked from the ground, but once it caught, it would burn fast.

Picking a hunk of meat that he would rather not name up off the floor, he peeked out the door and gave a tentative click. Almost instantly, the small pink *Chroan* skittered into the room. Using the meat to lead it, he coaxed the insect back into the room where Gethla was kept. When they entered, they found her sitting up, a scowl on her face.

"Gethla!" He raced to her side only to feel the flat of her hand across his face.

"What have you done?" she snarled, her eyes shooting fire.

"I... uh..."

"And where are your robes, Gray?"

"Saving your ungrateful ass!"

"But at what cost?"

"I didn't fuck them, if that's what you mean." He bent to rub the meat onto the leather. *Finish what you started* rolled through his mind, but his anger tried to swallow even that mantra.

She'd heard the rustlers speaking of her Gray. She remembered the lewd suggestions and taunts they made while bringing her here. But to hear his seductive voice, to hear the rustlers ogling her man while she was locked in a back room, helpless to defend him... it was too much!

"Gray, I apologize." She'd lashed out as soon as she saw him, her ire clouding her judgment. She didn't mean her words to come out that way, she really didn't. The words just came out all wrong. And the slap, that was pure fear. How dare he put his

life in danger to try and rescue her? She just wasn't worth it. How could she make him understand?

And what was he doing?

He smeared meat onto the leather cuff holding her chain to the floor. "Gray?"

"Shush," he hissed. "Don't scare it."

The *it* was the small pink *Chroan* Gethla had dubbed Gray's pet. She hadn't seen it since the stampede, but she figured it had followed Gray's tasty scent and raced to the man after they returned the herd. It must have been mixed up with the stolen *Chroan*. But how it found her...

Maybe it bonded a bit to her as well. After all, her scent had mingled with Gray's -- both before and after they'd mated they'd spent so much time in each other's presence.

As she watched, the shy little bug skittered over to the metal and leather straps, opened its tiny little mouth, and exposed its razor-sharp teeth.

"Damn," Gray whimpered, stunned by the tiny bug's orthodonture. He paled when he thought of the damage the thing could have done to him any time it wished. But the small pink bug began to almost delicately chew at the leather, sucking down the meat soaked binding, chewing it in half.

"Oh Gray!" Gethla laughed in delight. "What a wonderful idea!"

Gray said nothing as he watched the bug eat the last of the leather, and Gethla was free. That was the thing that attached itself to him? Eww!

But it was Gethla bounding to her feet that tore him from his shock. Remembering where he was and what had happened, he motioned for Gethla to follow him. "They'll be back soon." He led the way out, his finger rubbing the place where she hit him.

"Gray?" she whispered, not liking the look on his face, but he remained silent as he walked out of the room.

Chapter Eighteen

The fire had been set in the holding pens, making it easy to snag a *Chroan*. Away they went, the small pink *Chroan* following along behind. They were headed for the river, but the trip was silent, each person lost in their own thoughts.

What does she think of me? Gray thought as they galloped toward the river. *Does she really think I'm a slut for trying to save her life?*

Gethla's thoughts ran parallel to his, wondering if he hated her for her unthinking actions, wondering if he would ever forgive her. Silently they traveled mile after mile until it became too dark to see and Gray shivered in his rough G-string.

"Gray?" Gethla broke the silence. "We should stop for the night."

Gray said nothing, but pulled the *Chroan* up sharply. Unfortunately, they didn't have any fire-starting materials with them.

"Hell," Gethla snorted, and Gray stared at her in sudden amusement. He hadn't expected that particular curse word from her mouth and it almost made him forget his hurt.

"Problem?" he asked, the shimmer of amusement quite clear in his purple eyes.

"Nothing to start a fire! You are cold and I cannot warm you!"

Gray blinked at that, unused to the notion that someone actually wanted to care for him. "I'm fine," he managed as Gethla looked around, her eyes scanning the ground as if in hopes of discovering some miracle fire producing stone.

"No you are not fine! You are shivering and your nipples are hard." Gray looked down in surprise then actually managed to blush.

That was too much. It wasn't as if he was turned on by her scent. When was the last time he'd taken a real shower anyway? And it couldn't be because the feel of her body pressing against his for hours was bringing up remembered memories of them

entwined together, writhing in the sand and screeching their sexual fury to the heavens. It wasn't that at all. Besides, she thought he was a slut. Well, she implied it.

The voices in his head argued back and forth, swirling in confusion and fervor until finally he'd had enough. He wanted answers.

"Do you think I'm a slut?" he bellowed, startling Gethla, who was looking around for the right type of rocks to strike together to ignite the small pile of tinder she'd gathered.

The rocks fumbled in her hands for a moment before she regained control of them. She turned wide yellow eyes toward him. "What?"

"Do you think I'm a slut? Because if you do, you can consider this relationship train over before it starts to move good!"

"Relationship?"

"So?"

"So... what is slut? And we have a relationship?"

"ARGH!" She didn't understand a thing. He would have to take this slowly. "A slut is a man or woman who just gives their body away. Stop looking at my crotch!"

She couldn't help it. Gray's body in the dim light of sundown was something to behold. The colors caressed each limb lovingly and highlighted his best features, mainly the bulging cock that was barely restrained by the strange garment he had fashioned for himself.

"Am I not supposed to look?" she asked, unconsciously licking her lips as she struggled to pull her eyes up to his face.

"That's not the point. Do you, Gethla, think that I, Gray, am a slut?"

"A slut shares his or her body. Is that not good?"

"No. A slut gives his body away without a relationship."

"But I thought that we were in a relationship. You just said that we were."

"A slut would be someone who, in a relationship with one person," he growled, "would give his body to someone else."

"Have you given your body to someone else?"

"No! There's no one else that I respect enough, no one else that I've wanted!"

"Then I guess you are not a slut. Can we discuss this relationship? Will we become partners like my father and his partner?"

"Am I doing something stupid here?" Gray stared up into the darkening sky. She didn't think he was a slut. She didn't even know what a slut was. "Why did you hit me?"

"The only stupid thing you did, Gray, was to risk your life for me. I am not worth your life. You should have gone to the river." Now she was angry as she took up pacing. After a moment, she paused, looked down at the rocks in her hands, then winding up her arm, hurled them as far away from herself as she could, which was a considerable distance. "I am not worth your life!"

Gray blinked. Bingo. And he thought he had low self-esteem. "Gethla..."

"You have so much to live for, Gray. You have a future in Baltimoremaryland. You have your art and your Jarvis. You have so much to live for!"

"I couldn't leave you behind."

"Why? They were just going to sell me into the life that I was going to lead myself. I would not have been harmed. But you... you, Gray, could have been killed. Why?"

"Because I love you!" he shouted. "Okay? I love you. You mean the world to me and I'm taking you with me when I go back. Life would have no meaning without you. You belong to me!"

"I belong to no man," Gethla whispered, her eyes filling with tears as his words sank into her brain. "I belong to myself. You taught me that."

"You belong to me," he growled, stepping closer and taking both her forearms in his hands. "You belong to me. I thought I taught you that."

"Maybe you did," she whispered. The feel of his precious body, so close to hers, began to move things within her soul.

"Then maybe I have to teach you again." They had only her robe, tattered and torn, but it was filled with the scent of her. It felt as comfortable as his waterbed, he

thought as he sat and drew her down to straddle his lap. This time, there was no fear, no uncertainty as she sat on him and relished the feel of his growing hardness between the two of them. A tug and his G-string was history. Some clever maneuvering and she was on her knees, her arms wrapped around his head as his mouth latched on one nipple.

"You know what I want," she growled, her eyes narrowing as she took control of this episode. Gleefully, he gave in to her, letting her express herself and discover her own pleasure.

"Yes," she snarled as she fisted her hands in his hair, pulling his head back to plunder his mouth, her tongue invading, drawing in the flavor of him. Gray gave in, submitting to her, letting her explore his mouth at her leisure as her hands left his hair and began to travel over his chest.

His nipples were pinched and pulled just this side of pain, and his response was just what she wanted. His cock grew hot and hard, throbbing with his heartbeat, the tip growing wet. "Mmm," he purred and his arms went around her waist, his hands resting on her hips, kneading her ass cheeks. This was getting good. "Do what you want."

"I was going to," she returned before she pulled away to shove him on the ground on his back. Her eyes went directly to his cock, standing upright and proud. The purple head seemed to glow, beckoning her to touch, to caress, to taste.

Without missing another moment, she dove down, her tongue lashing at his tip, tasting the salty fluid that bubbled from his slit.

"Shit. Gethla," Gray gasped as he felt the rough surface of her tongue caressing him. This was a lot better than his seed, this fluid that was clear and plentiful. Fisting her hand at his base, she held him steady as she ran her tongue all over his cock, over each bump and vein. But then she paused. What was she to do now?

"In your mouth," Gray tutored, seeing her hesitance. "You can try and take me into your mouth."

"And then?"

"Suck." So she did. She licked her lips and then Gray trembled at the feel of the hot wet mouth enclosing him. Her tongue cradled his head and she started a slight suction. "Oh sweet mother," he groaned as the feelings of her went straight to his head, the one in her mouth, the most sensitive part. His hands reached up and fisted in her hair as he urged her up and down. Gethla thought the taste of him strange, but the texture was intoxicating. She wanted to try more, so she heeded his urgings and slid down on his cock until she met her fist.

"Please!" The cry burst from Gray's mouth, much the way Gethla's earlier pleas fell from hers. "Whatever you want!"

So she did it again, this time twisted her fist the way he did when he was self-pleasuring.

Gray went wild, his hips thrusting up to meet her mouth, losing himself in the sweet sensations. Sweat beaded across his skin and his hands automatically began to caress her scalp, silently urging her to do more. Gethla loved the feeling of him growing completely hard within her mouth, but she wanted to try something new. At the same time, one hand went to his hard nipples, while the other traveled low, like she saw him do, and gently cupped his hanging sac. Gethla was fascinated by the tender sac she held, and shocked to discover that it pulsed with his heartbeat yet was cool to the touch.

And her touching caused such a strong reaction in Gray. He arched up, a yell on his lips and she got a fresh spurt of his pre-cum.

"This is fun, Gray," she gasped as she came up for air, tossing her hair behind her head.

"Are you ready for me?" Gray panted. He didn't think he could take much more of her sweet torture. At her puzzled look, Gray decided to forgo pleasantries and just act.

Gripping her hips, he pulled her up, past his clenched stomach, past his chest, past his neck and directly onto his mouth.

"Ieeee!" Gethla screamed, as his tongue parted her lower lips and Gray got his first pure taste of Gethla. She tasted smoky, and feminine, and all of those good things.

She bucked wildly in his hold, her hands going to her nipples to enhance the sensations. She learned fast.

Gray sucked and lapped at her clit, rolling it with his tongue, striving to give her maximum pleasure. Though she had been damp before, as he manipulated her clit, she became positively wet. He tongued her desperately, trying to wring every new sensation from her that he could.

Gethla, for her part, decided enough was enough. Her body had begun to crave that full feeling that his licking mouth just couldn't give. "Gray," she whimpered as she squirmed, "I need more."

With one last lick at her clit, Gray decided to let her work her way down his body until she was poised directly over his cock. Her mouth watering, Gethla looked down and saw what she wanted. She looked into Gray's eyes and smiled. "Just like riding a *Chroan*," she whispered before she grabbed his swaying cock and directed it to her slit.

Gray opened his mouth to speak, but Gethla was lowering her body down over his, letting him sink into her slowly.

"Oh!" she gasped as she felt herself being filled to overflowing. "It feels deeper this way." She tried to decide if she liked this new fullness.

But as she contemplated her next move, Gray slinked his fingers down and zeroed in on her swollen clit. Gethla jumped, involuntarily shifting him deep inside her where he struck something that made sparks fly in her mind. She rose up a bit, and let herself down, experiencing more of the same. Now this was more like it.

Gethla hit a pattern of raising and slamming herself down, increasing in speed as more sensations swamped her body. Gray, for his part, gripped her by the waist and thrust his hips up. Slamming himself deeply inside her, he relished the feel of her body tightening around him. Together they moved, feeding off of shared sensations, sliding higher and higher into erotic bliss.

"Gethla, move, baby," Gray hissed as he planted his feet and began to thrust up sharply.

Gethla keened as she felt that familiar tension knot in her stomach. She felt the upward spiral of passion that would lead her into the bliss that she had experienced in his arms before. Leaning forward, she thrust her tongue into his mouth, tasting the taste of Gray as well as herself. That was enough to send her over the edge.

Screaming, Gethla toppled over into ecstasy, her inner walls rhythmically clenching on his swelling cock. Gray paused for a moment, letting her ride out her first orgasm, gritting his teeth and praying for control. Finally when she began to sink down on him in exhaustion, he removed his caressing thumb and gave one hard thrust, striking her hidden G-spot.

“What...?” Gethla shrieked as the sensations that just left her body immediately flooded in again.

Again and again, he thrust against that spot, making Gethla sink her nails into his chest, leaving welts on his skin as she felt her body building yet again. Grunting under the strain of holding back, Gray was determined to hold on until Gethla released again.

With an arch of his hips, he reversed their positions, quickly rising above her, never losing contact or rhythm as he slammed into her. Gethla threw back her head, her hair flying wildly about her as her body arched uncontrollably under his, meeting each of his thrusts, moving faster and demanding more.

She felt the tension recoil, felt the muscles in her body grow tighter and tighter, and she couldn't stop. Finally, she felt that stillness approach, that itching in her clitoris, that tensing of her inner walls in preparation to explode. Then she was flying again, this climax more intense than the first.

“Gray!” Tears rolling down her eyes, screaming his name to the heavens, Gethla felt her body orgasm again, felt her muscles milk the rock-hard cock within her. She was vaguely aware of Gray shouting and digging his hands into her hips, but then she was overwhelmed by the feelings. As the ebb and flow of her muscles began to ease, she felt Gray's body settle onto her, a comforting weight that caressed her as well as soothed.

“Afterglowing?” she whispered through a mouth parched from yelling.

“Afterglowing,” Gray responded and closed his eyes. His climax was nothing short of spectacular, seeming to drain all the energy from his body. His shrinking cock still twitched within her, letting him know that he survived this ordeal, but left him eager for more.

“I can’t wait until we get home so we can do this in a bed,” he whispered, but Gethla had already drifted off into a deep sleep. Gray smiled and closed his eyes for a small rest. His soul felt complete.

Chapter Nineteen

"Mmm. And can we do this every day?" Gethla snuggled her face deeper into Gray's chest. In the aftermath of their passion, both lay tangled in the robes on the uncomfortable ground. But it could have been an air mattress or Gray's famed waterbed, for all they noticed. The important part was that they were once again in each other's arms.

"Every day," he promised. "Unless you're on your monthlies. Or if we both have to work. Or if we're angry, because angry sex may be fun but it causes more problems."

"Monthlies?"

"You know? That once a month bleeding thing."

"Your women bleed once a month?" Gray eased back a bit and looked down at her. Gethla, for her part, looked up at him, fear in her eyes. "Sure. Don't you?"

"No! Would I have to start? They bleed once a month?"

"For a few days, yes."

"They bleed for days and they don't die?"

"Um, it's not that kind of bleeding."

"Then why do they do it? It doesn't seem natural."

Gray sighed and placed his palm on the back of her head, urging her face back into his chest. "Never mind," he sighed. "Just rest here. I'll explain it when I have the books."

"Books?"

"I guess I have to teach you to read."

"Read?"

"Go to sleep."

"Yes, Gray."

"We have to move early. We have to figure out what to do."

"Yes, Gray."

"You're horny again, aren't you?"

An evil giggle filled the air. "Yes, Gray."

With a sigh, he took her hand that was slowly massaging his chest, and began to lead it down. Gethla's giggles faded as she felt the hard muscled plane of his chest give way to his cobblestone abs.

Then as her fingers touched the short hair around the base of his cock, her breath caught. It was hot and hard and throbbing, and all for her. "Mmm, Gray," she purred and felt his stomach contract as he chuckled.

Hugging her closer, Gray ignored the sharp warm shafts of pleasure that tightened his balls, and ran his other hand down over her back. Sighing, Gethla snuggled in closer, enjoying the warm unhurried touching and the closeness this intimate act brought, lazily stroking her man, learning what made him shiver in delight.

"Follow my lead," he whispered, then wrapped his fingers around her hand, teaching her which strokes worked for him, showing her which was the most sensitive places on his head and shaft.

"You get so wet," she purred. "Like I do."

"It's to lube the way." He ran his thumb under the head of his cock, biting his lip in ecstasy as her thumb followed his lead, her tentative touches driving him mad.

"And I get wet for the same reason?"

"Yes," he purred. "Are you wet now?"

"Yes."

"How wet?"

Curiosity and desire filled his voice as he grinned down at her, his fingers stilling on his own erection. Before she could answer, he flipped her over onto her back and slid over her, holding his weight above her on his elbows.

"You're wet for me?" He dropped his head and lapped at the soft skin of her lips.

Gethla tilted her head back, exposing her neck, welcoming his touch, but gasped as he rested his hips between her legs, pressing his erection against her moist opening.

“Not wet enough.” He thrust against her, dragging his hard cock against her lips and clit. Moaning, she arched up against him, trying for closer and more intense contact, but he rested his weight on her, holding her still.

His lips spread in a wide grin as he lapped at the skin of her neck, nibbled with his teeth, and trailed his caresses lower and lower. He licked and kissed the skin of her breasts before he pulled her hard nipples deeply into the wet heat of his mouth.

“Oh, Gray!” Gethla whimpered, arching her back and gyrating her hips against him, giving herself the stimulation that she craved, feeling the tension coil within her body.

“I love it when you call my name,” he purred. “Call me daddy.”

Gethla blinked up at him, some of the haze of her desire leaving as she listened to his words. Call him daddy? Not likely. She cocked her eyebrow at him.

“Challenge,” he chuckled in delight. He had never failed to fulfill a partner in bed, to get them to scream out in passion, and he would not fail now. Wrapping both hands around her thighs, he rose up and gave her a jerk, sliding her hips up on his thighs, exposing her opening to his attentive gaze.

She was wet, dripping in fact with her own wetness and the evidence of his possession, but that was not enough. Chuckling, he caressed her with his thumb, rubbing slowly on the hood of her clit and touching nothing else.

Gethla moaned at the sensation, wiggling her hips to bring a more intense touch, but Gray kept his caresses light, a grin on his lips. Gethla wondered what he was going to do. She knew that this would soon bore her, but the confident look and the building pleasure between her thighs gave her reason to lose a bit of her doubt.

Soon the sensation became an itch that demanded to be scratched. And since he was doing nothing more, she lowered her hands to scratch it herself, but Gray’s free hand intercepted her.

“Uh, uh, uh,” he teased as he bent low to bite the flesh between her neck and shoulder, sending a blinding flash of desire through her. “No cheating.”

Gethla closed her eyes as her mouth opened, a deep moan spilling free. She couldn't even comment on Gray's answering chuckle, because right at that moment, he ran his thumb over her swollen lips, pressing firmly inward.

Gethla's heels dug into the robe beneath them. She arched her hips closer as his lips traveled down to her breasts. Gray kept his hold steady and firm as his lips pulled at one swollen nipple, then the other, slowly increasing the pace of his caresses.

Her hands reached up, her nails digging into the skin of his wrists, trying to pull him closer, but Gray let his lips travel up to her neck again, stimulating the erogenous zones there.

The taste of her skin, the feel of her body beneath him, all combined to make his hunger rise to the surface. He began to grind his hips in sympathy, but he maintained his control, always stimulating her, but never giving her enough to send her over the edge. Teasing and consistent, he slowly aroused her senses with those few concentrated caresses.

“Gray,” she finally gasped as her heart began to pound in her chest, her nipples to swell, and her body to be taken with fine tremors. “Please?”

“Not the right words,” he growled as he loosed one hand to pinch her nipples, heightening her pleasure.

“Nnn,” Gethla bit her lip, determined not to speak those words.

Then Gray decided to add another element. He let the pinky of the hand that was massaging her clit and opening drop low to graze the flesh just behind her vagina, the tender perineal area filled with sensitive nerves.

Gethla's mouth dropped open as her body arched toward him. She needed penetration. Her inner walls were throbbing, clenching, and her clit was burning, so hot it felt as if it were on fire. And still he kept those fingers moving, slow, tantalizing, teasing.

Tears filled her eyes as her whole body became overly sensitive. She could feel the heat of him above her, feel the roughness of his fingers strumming her desires, hear his ragged breathing as he fought to keep his control. It was all driving her mad.

Then he began to speak. "God, baby, you feel so damn hot, so wet, so hungry."

Gethla whimpered and tried to tune him out, but some hungry wicked thing inside her forced her to pay attention. "I want you so bad," he whispered in her ear, his tongue caressing the delicate shell. "My cock is so hard for you. I want to be inside your honey walls, feel them caressing me, pulling my climax from my toes. I want to come with you."

"Gray," she whimpered again.

He pulled back, grasping his rock hard cock, and began to tease her clit with the head, his wetness adding to hers. Gethla tightened her legs around his waist, but he held back, teasing her, caressing her, making her want to scream.

"Who am I?" he asked as he pressed just the tip against her, parting her slightly but not penetrating.

"Gray!"

"Not good enough, baby," he whispered as he began to gyrate his hips, teasing her by spreading her a little, giving her a taste of what he could fill her with, if only she said the words.

"Please!"

By this time, sweat shone on Gray's body and his hands shook as he resisted the urge to thrust inside her again and again and lose himself within the sweetness of her body. But he wanted to make her scream, to make her feel the thrill of submission and the release you got by giving in to your desire, to please your partner.

"Tell me," he hissed as he dropped low enough to graze her lips with his. "Tell me and I'll give you what you want."

"Gray!"

"Tell me!"

"Gray!"

“Now!”

“Daddy!” As the word exploded from her throat, Gray slammed into her with one sharp deep thrust.

“Oh, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!” she shrieked, her hands tearing at the robe, her hips thrusting up to meet his, whimpering as his balls began to slap her ass.

Gray began a powerful rhythm, slamming himself as deep as he could, twisting his hips to be sure to hit her G-spot, and pulling out to the point where he was on the verge of leaving her body, then repeating.

Gray was lost in the feel of her, her strong walls gripping him greedily, her body twisting beneath him, her voice whimpering and crying out his name, calling him Daddy. He closed his eyes as he felt the teasing burn as his seed began to churn in his balls.

Gethla was beyond hearing anything, beyond anything but feeling what was happening to her body. She didn't know if it was his actions, his word play, his overwhelming sexuality, but whatever it was it was like nothing she had ever felt.

He built the rhythm, moving faster and faster, his hips straining, his muscles pumping. He felt himself reaching the end and struggled to hold on until he gave her the release she deserved.

“Gray! Yes, Daddy,” she screamed and Gray felt the vibration that signaled the beginning of her release.

“Gethla,” he gasped, then he felt the muscles at his lower back tingle. He closed his eyes, thrusting deeply to continue her climax as he tumbled straight into his. “Gethla. God yes!”

Underneath him, Gethla opened her mouth in a silent scream as her inner walls clenched around his steel hardness. Everything burned as the fire threatened to burn her to ashes. Her whole world narrowed to the man who was above her and the sensations that were tearing through her body.

Then the feelings began to ease. She looked up into his face and stared amazed at what she saw.

Gray's eyes were closed tightly, his teeth clenched, and his face twisted in unmistakable ecstasy as he gave in to his need and released within her body.

Gray.

Her arms reached up and enveloped him, helping to ease him through his own crisis. As his hips stopped thrusting, his body tensed, and his breath left him in a rush.

Then he collapsed, boneless, on top of her, into her comforting arms.

I think I love this man.

It was her last conscious thought.

* * *

It was hitting high noon when they finally made the river, but then they stood there, confused as to what to do.

"So, then," she said as she arranged her crumpled robe around her body.

"So then." Gray adjusted the G-string, all that he was still wearing. G-strings and bug-back riding did not go well together.

"So we just go into the water?"

"I don't know," he sighed as he slipped off of the *Chroan*.

"How did you... get here?"

"I don't know. There was a storm, and it was night, and there was a lot of drinking. A lot of drinking. And then there was lightning..."

They both looked up and saw nothing but bright blue sky. "Hmm, this may take some work." As he spoke, the tiny pink *Chroan* clicked excitedly.

"What?" Although the thought of the tiny creature still creeped him out, especially after he saw the gaping maw filled with the razors it used for teeth, he still found speaking with the thing... normal.

The bug chattered and spun in a circle.

"What? You know something that I don't?"

The bug chattered again. Before he could say anything else, the bug shot off, clicking all the way.

"Is it something I said?" Gray asked, feeling confused.

"I think it could be the way you smell."

"Like you?" he snickered as he took a whiff. "You may be right," he mused.

Gethla nodded as she took a delicate sniff of herself. "But it's... it's... it's the mystical lake." Gethla let out a small giggle as she began to pull off her robes. "Ohhh! Mystical or not, Gray, it's wet and after a liberal application of water and some scrubbing with sand, I shall feel normal again."

Gray stared at her as she pulled her robe from her body. Her tall, lithe body was muscled and firm, yet had the feminine curves that made him drool. Her pink hair flowed around her and her yellow eyes flashed with mischief and humor. Immediately he felt the blood rush to his cock and a low ache start in his stomach. His heart began to race, and his breath began to rasp deep in his chest. It had to be love, or a mild case of the flu. Turning, she presented her pert bottom, looking over her shoulder at him and tossing her hair back, a patented Gray move.

"Oh, seduction." Gray snickered as he pulled the ties that held his exotic undies in place and started toward her.

Laughing, Gethla turned and dashed off toward the water, daring him to follow with a glance. Gray took three steps before a low hissing voice caused him to turn. "That's the way you belong."

"Oh, what in the name of nuclear fallout hell," Gray groaned as Orange Hair seemed to pop out of nowhere. Of course Peach Hair, both Yellow Hairs, and the alternate Orange Hair were close behind.

"I think you have something that belongs to me."

"What?" Naked and unashamed, Gray turned, arms akimbo, to glare at the five men. "Haven't you idiots had enough? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"We just want what we deserve."

As Orange spoke, Gray's temper started to boil. Narrowing his eyes at the interlopers to his interlude, he visually dared them to say another word. But as his temper started to boil, something began to happen. The sky darkened, the air filled with ominous rumbles, and a strange tension, more like pressure, filled the air.

“What you deserve? What you deserve? All you deserve is a swift kick in the ass, and I’ll be happy to give you one.”

“Gray?” Gethla called out, starting to climb from the water to assist her mate.

“Stay there,” he called to her, never taking his eyes off of the gathered men. “I don’t need help to deal with imbeciles like these.”

The men chuckled among themselves, assured of their victory. And why not? Any time they’d seen the strange long-haired man he was either undressed, knocked out, or flat on his back. He didn’t have the build of a fighter and he looked more seductive than dangerous. But when Orange reached out for Gray, he found his hand gripped in a painful hold, his body spun around by his arm, and his back pressed up against the naked chest he admired so much. He managed a grunt before he felt Gray’s free hand press against a spot in his neck, then his world began to go dark.

Gray didn’t even break a sweat as he dropped the heavy body to the ground, his breathing still even and calm though his eyes were spitting fire. “Who else wants some?”

The four remaining rustlers all rushed him at once.

“Gray!” Gethla called as she saw what was happening. She knew that he couldn’t resist them all. But as she stepped forward, her tender foot came down on something sharp and rather painful. “Ouch!” she screamed as she jerked her foot to the surface. Embedded in the bottom was something small, sharp, and metal. As she lifted it from the water, there was a crash of thunder and a flash of lightning. Gray braced himself to fight, but hearing Gethla’s cry made him turn to see what the problem was.

In her hand, she held a key, and not just any key. It was the clunky old metal key that was supposed to get him into his room at the inn.

Gray’s eyes widened in surprise, just before he was hit by four men bent on doing him as much bodily harm as possible in the shortest amount of time. One man went down with a scream as a small bundle of pink leapt and attached itself to his leg, its teeth snapping. Then the world began to move as if in slow motion. He felt the

impact as someone dove onto his stomach; he felt his body lift from the ground to fly backwards, felt the breath leave his body as he slammed into the ground.

Then the lightning flashed, the thunder boomed, and the sky burned white. His arm flew out automatically to take some of the impact of his fall and his hand slammed into the water. As soon as his body touched the lake water, the lightning exploded in a klaxon of white fire. Gray felt the air sucked from his lungs, felt his hair stand on end. All sound seemed to be suspended (or someone stuffed cotton in his ears). He felt his consciousness leaving him. His last thought before everything was sucked from him was, "I'm sorry, Gethla. I failed you. I guess I'm not a warrior after all."

* * *

Gray exploded from the water, throwing back his head as the harsh sound of him drawing in air filled the courtyard. Flailing his arms, he struggled to the surface of the water, his mind clouded with panic as his lungs drew in air for what seemed to be the first time in hours. Then two things happened. His hand struck the concrete wall of the fountain and a face, a name, screamed across his mind.

"Gethla," he gasped as he pulled himself to his knees, leaning over the wall as he coughed up water. "Gethla." He turned wildly, his eyes scanning for a hint of pink hair or the flash of yellow eyes.

"Gethla!" Where was he? He looked up into the sky and gasped at the inky blackness he saw between the haze and the shower of warm water that rained down on him. When had the midday become the night? He looked down and recognized the row of doors that stood like sentries, their numbers shining in the bright flash of lightning.

Slowly, awareness dawned. He was back at the inn.

But where was Gethla? He splashed to his feet with renewed energy as he struggled to move around the fountain. "Gethla!" he called, his voice growing stronger as he circled the giant stone phoenix. She had to be there. She just had to be! But she was nowhere to be found.

Gethla! His eyes began to burn as he felt tears demanding to fall. He had lost her. Throwing his head back, his hands fisted, his chest heaving, he bellowed his anguish to the heavens. "Gethla!"

Just as the despair in his heart threatened to overwhelm him, he heard a small cough. Then the cough became a heaving sigh as air was drawn into starved lungs.

"Gethla!" Gray turned and splashed his way through the water toward the sound. He rounded the far side of the fountain, then he saw the wash of pink hair that floated around a huddled form. As he approached, her head lifted and Gray was struck by the emotion that cut through the dark skies and the falling rain.

In her eyes, he saw his completion. As he approached, he knew his eyes were wide with emotion. He saw her lift her hand. Hanging from her fingers was that blasted, ugly, beautiful key. And in that moment, he knew that he had found his lion -- his lioness -- at last.

Epilogue

Gray tugged his tie from around his neck and hurled it onto a nearby chair. He sighed and ran his hands through his hair, tugging the long locks free of its band as he stalked through the maze of boxes that crowded his apartment. There wasn't much left there as most of his heavier pieces were shipped ahead of time. He was finally going to Florida, going back to spend time with Jarvis and Candy before starting his new life.

He sighed as he sank into one of his few remaining chairs and pulled his laptop onto his knees. As he waited for his computer to boot up, an arm holding an icy glass slipped into his view.

"It was a lovely service."

Gray accepted the glass and ran it across his forehead. "Yeah," he sighed as strong hands began to massage his tense shoulders. "But I still don't believe it."

Gethla leaned on his shoulder, her soft pink hair falling around them as she eased off her shoulder rubbing and wrapped her arms around him. "You know your friend best."

"I know that Marilyn would never do anything to end her life. She had too much to live for."

Gethla nodded, her confidence in Gray complete. He had kept his word, finished what he started, as he liked to say.

When he pulled her from the fountain, he brought her into a wondrous world filled with marvels that she had never imagined. There were magic boxes called televisions and computers. There were foods, already slaughtered and prepared, and no *Chroan* to be found. There were hot showers, and ice cream, and pizza, and coffee. And Gray had procured her a job as a bouncer, as he promised. This bouncing thing seemed

simple enough when explained. But she had to take a self-defense course, where she simply knocked around two men until they said she was proficient in bouncing.

Actually, the way it sounded, it was just another way of herding things, though this time she would be herding people instead of *Chroan*, but it seemed to be a fun job. And they were going to travel to meet his family. Jarvis seemed particularly interested in the jewel that proved her fertility and in her energy bow, which she no longer had. Jarvis told her that since no one else had jewels, he would tell people that it was an implant, and that she could fit right into the club scene in New York, whatever a club scene was.

Without her energy bow, she could only offer explanations as they were relayed to her, but she hoped that the man could find her tales useful. Giving Gray an extra squeeze, she rose and went to pull off the constricting clothing she had been forced to wear. Bras, panties, dress shoes, it was all a bother. She much preferred her loose robes and her under bindings, but she had discovered a few fashions that suited her. Thigh-high boots were nice, with or without the heel. Gray had gotten her several pairs and she loved to wear them for him. They seemed to have a strange effect on him though, making him drool and pet her legs as if he had never seen the like.

Sometimes she still missed Zy, and the extended family she had since her father and his partner died. Gray himself, using several of her descriptions, had recreated pictures of her family. She was almost brought to tears the first time she saw her father's bright yellow eyes, so much like hers, and his partner's shorter thin form.

Gray had been surprised to find out that her father's partner was female, and told her that partner had a different meaning here. Mate wouldn't work either, because he said it was crude. Wife was the word he said the partner, with her soft peach hair, was. He also said that soul mate was acceptable, and that she was his.

That term needed no explanation, and was a title she would gleefully wear. As she tossed her shoes onto the shoe rack Gray had demanded she get, as her number of shoes outmatched the number of her outfits, she heard a soft gasp come from Gray's

chair. Turning, she made her way back into the room only to see tears streaming silently down his face.

"Gray?" she asked, concerned as she took in his condition. "What?"

"She's alive!"

Gethla didn't need to be told who the she in question was. Even though they'd just come from a memorial that had declared Marilyn dead to all of existence, it seemed that the declaration was premature.

"Where is she?" She looked over his shoulder and smiled as she watched the unfamiliar characters dance across the screen. Gray was teaching her to read, but it was strange trying to place a word name with all those squiggles and lines. Seeing her questioning look, Gray read the short message that flashed there.

You were right. We're too good for this reality... Good bye, old friend.

"But that says..."

"That she found what she was looking for." His words rang with an awesome finality as he looked up at his one true soul mate, his lioness. He had to be zapped into the future to claim her, he had faced his worst nightmares and learned a lot about himself and the prejudices he held. But in the end, all the pain and fear, all the struggles and hardships, all the painful learning and the self-examination were worth it. "I love you," he said, his heart filling so full of emotion that he knew he would explode.

"As I love you," Gethla returned, her smile lighting up the room and filling his soul with peace. "Now explain this once a month bleeding thing."

Sighing, Gray placed his laptop on its table and pulled Gethla onto his knees. "Well, the woman has these eggs inside of her."

"Eggs, Gray? Surely you jest."

"No. And once a month, one of them will drop."

"Don't they break?"

"Pay attention! The egg falls, and..." And on the screen beside them, unnoticed by either, the message began to disappear, taking along with it uncertainty and unhappiness, delivering a measure of closure and peace.

Rogues Gallery

Stephanie “Flash” Burke, Treva Harte, and Shelby Morgen

Flash, Treva, and Shelby call themselves the Rogues Gallery -- three East Coast friends who get together whenever they can -- if Flash doesn't get lost. Flash and Shelby share several things, primarily useful to annoying Treva -- dyslexia and ADD being foremost on the list. Treva often wonders how they get anything done. But then, Treva's the overachiever. (She starts as many projects as the other two; she just tends to finish more of them.) They all have overactive imaginations and a love for sharp, shiny things and caffeine. When it comes to sci-fi and futuristic, they share a love of the unusual and the just plain odd.

When the Rogues focus on writing, they'll always come up with a twist you didn't see coming, be it pregnant men, sorcerers, dragons, or six-foot-tall cockroaches. This odd trio can be found hanging out at sci-fi cons and writers' conferences, and if Flash hasn't gotten them thrown out for molesting the waiters, they'll most likely be at the local restaurant, eating chips and salsa and plotting more mayhem on napkins.

Dig up more good dirt on Flash, Treva, and Shelby at writingdivas.com, TrevaHarte.com, and ShelbyMorgen.com.