



Midnight Showcase

Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 06-11 ISSN# 1555-5496

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heart magic

the river god's bride
into the woods

summoning dangerously
leading lady

by mae powers

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by leigh ellwood

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Dragons, Elves & Myths, Oh My!

What's gotten into those wood nymphs and centaurs lately? They lust for humans now? Why are those mythical beings suddenly coming out of the wood works and demanding equalities and earthly desires? Even the Dragons are getting friskier too, especially when they shape shift or fall in love with another dragonish creature. Why these myths are just getting fractured.

Dragons, Elves & Myths, Oh My!

Heart Magic, by Mae Powers

Etris sailed the dark waters of the Forbidden Sea, searching for his heart's magic, until he found her quite unexpectedly, in his own home port.

The River God's Bride , by Tysche Dwai

Beautiful Mei Lin longs for love. Can the dragon under the Moon Bridge fulfill her desires? A tale of Ancient China with a modern twist.

Into the Woods , by Tamara James

Aiobhean's charges are missing. To find them she'll go into the wood and face the Dark Lord. Will love bring light to the Wood?

Summoning Dangerously , by Bridghid Parkinson

Alaunra thought the mage's lifestyle might be glamorous until the Dragon War. After the treaty, could her newly developed spells bring love, comfort, or danger?

Leading Lady , by Leigh Ellwood

A sci-fi actress is offered the role of a lifetime. Will she accept, even if it means moving to an alternate reality...with handsome elves?

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Heart Magic, by Mae Powers

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Visit Mae Powers website: www.maepowers.com

Heart Magic
by
Mae Powers

Etris took a reflective glance back at the small yacht anchored at one of the docking bays. Even though she had not taken him to his heart's answers, the Heart-Mage was a fine ship. It had always brought him home safely. This large and luxurious vessel had seen him on this past, yearlong journey. Now during the rising heat of the mid-summer season, on the return home, he and his crew stopped to refit the ship with supplies, and to allow the crew a last-minute shore leave.

He glanced above the sea vessel to the muted sky. Just before Captain Zekk safely brought the Heart-Mage into port, the skies above had only been slightly cloudy, now they threatened to engulf the whole ocean town in their darkening mists. Crisp, thin bolts of lightning could be seen on the far western horizon that led endlessly out into the Forbidden Sea.

For a split second, Etris grinned at the vast body of water's name. Those who sailed too far away from Landchor's safe haven were often lost. It was as if this Land didn't want her people to go too far. Catch a few fish, a few treasures, and bring them home to Landchor. He slung his small pack over his shoulder and headed down the gangplank. Etris liked the feeling of the rough wind on his unshaven face. It felt like the rumbling of fingers bristling through his hair, as if Aunt Telassa were tousling his hair with her soft hand.

He was looking forward to being home soon, though his year-long journey had not accomplished its mission. He remembered the day he'd started out on the journey to find his Heart-Magic. He had wanted to go sooner upon this life-filling quest, but there was always some excuse Uncle Daegus had for him not going. It was finally Aunt Telassa who made his uncle understand that Etris needed to go. Telassa and Daegus both had used their perspective magic powers to

learn what kind of incident, trinket, or place would be instigative in bringing about the full use of his inherent powers. Although he could do some magic now, the men of his family line always had to have something in which to enhance their powers.

His own, his siblings foretold, had something to do with garnet jewels. He'd found garnet charms and jewelry during his yearlong travel, but nothing had sparked his powers to full-might. Now, at nearly thirty seasons of life and a lot more mature and travel weary, he realized he may never be a full-fledged Heart-Mage.

With a wistful sigh, Etris made his way into the heart of Sea-Nest, its market center. Aunt Telassa's birthday was in a few weeks and he wanted to pick something up for her, not having found the right gift in his travels. He decided to stop at Captain Zekk's favorite inn afterwards, for some refreshments. The crew would be in town for only a few days or replenishments, then they all would head back out, down towards the harbor-town of Canpool, and on to his aunt and uncle's seaside estate.

He'd only been to Sea-Nest a few times, but today he felt as if he were almost looking at it with a new perspective. Perhaps it was only because he was nearing his journey's end. He perked up at the thought of going home real soon. Etris really missed his aunt and uncle. Feeling a bit more light-hearted, Etris took more mental notes of his experience here, including taking in every detail he could of the bustling seaport and trade town.

Unlike the flat, straight and narrow streets of Canpool, Sea-Nest's streets were of different levels. This smaller ocean city was so different from the larger Canpool, but not nearly as clean and promising looking. Daken, a friend of his who had visited Sea-Nest some years ago with Etris, told him the biggest joke about Sea-Nest was the slur upon the city's name, since the town looked like one nest built up on top of another. He noticed that the further he went into the town, the streets curved sharply and then turned up into a higher level, so that some of the streets looked like rows of curved stairs stacked up on top of each other. He was glad that his profession was not that of a city engineer or designer.

The town became less seedy and gloomy the deeper into it he traveled. Also, more life seem to exist within the city's walls, for he saw other proprietors selling wares; while barkeeps and whore-

masters beckoned him to enter their shops of delight. Etris could also see the eerie lights coming from some of their heads and hands. Deciding to wait until the morrow to shop for Telassa's gift, he went to the inn Captain Zekk mentioned. He finally saw, with some relief, the arrow shaped, neon green sign that boasted the presence of the Transport Inn.

It was large but, surprisingly, not run-down, and in a more pleasant-looking area of the town. An area he hadn't visited before. The sign, Etris saw up closer, crackled slightly and glowed like the flickering of a dancing candle. Definitely spelled or ran by some kind of magical energy unit. He had barely reached for the knob of the door, when it creaked open and a ray dim light caught him in the face. Then soft but lively music sharpened his ears and thumped a catchy tune into them. He shook the deafening music off and made his way through the small crowd of customers, to the main bar. Even inside, the inn was cleaner and more tastefully decorated than he had expected.

Etris sat upon a clean wooden stool, but like the slick and scratchy surface of the bar counter, it had seen better days. He glanced from one end of the long curved counter to the other before he saw a figure coming towards him. His jaw almost dropped at the sight of the feminine form. She was almost as tall as he; sported burnt gold tresses that hung above her head in enticing ringlets; and she was dressed in a subdued, cinnamon-garnet colored and serviceable gown that only complemented the same hue of her deep-set eyes. She could have been no more than his age, yet Etris somehow had the feeling those unusual eyes of hers saw a whole lot more than he ever had even in half his lifetime.

She was a buxomy woman, whose warm inviting shape made his groin ache with an irrational need. He wondered what she would be like out of that dark gown and into something more revealing. He was surprised at his wayward and wanton thoughts. Although he enjoyed the beauty of women of different sizes and shapes, and had slept with a few, none had stuck him with such blatant sex appeal as this sea town beauty did. She was incredible to look upon.

He tightened his thighs together and put a lock on his thoughts as she started to come his way. He felt it was going to be a long evening.

Her smile was amicable as she greeted him. "I'm Idalia es-Varth,

barmaid, co-proprietor and inn keeper. What will be your pleasure, stranger, that's on our house-sign today?"

He had to stifle a groan. What he wanted was to take that vivacious body of hers and lick every delectable inch. And to discover if her womanhood sported the same color of sun-burnt tresses that were piled prettily upon her fair head.

Etris glanced from her to the menu-like sign above the back counter of the bar. It was displayed in the standard Landchoric language, boasting of the Transport Inn's reasonable prices for all its' services, entertainments, and rooms. The prices were at least comparable, Etris thought; to those he'd visited in Canpool.

He turned back to the bewitching woman, giving her his best friendly smile. "I'm told the ale here is some of the best in the city."

She wiped down some imaginary specs of dust on the counter area in front of him, but he could see she beamed at his words. "You were told right. Your first time in Sea-Nest?"

"No, just never came to this part of town before. Etris looked from her back up to the menu-sign again. "You know, I really think I'd rather have some Quas instead of ale."

The sinfully delightful smile in her eyes matched the one on her full lips. "A man of taste, I see. That's the land of Denaeb's finest bottle of wine."

He watched her soft, deft movements as she turned away from him momentarily. Oh, he was a man of taste all right. One who wanted to taste every inch of that scrumptious body she so sweetly sashayed about. He also wanted her taking soft tastes of his own body. They would meld so nicely together.

It wasn't long before the sexy and sinfully smiling proprietress came back with a small wine glass filled with a sparkling, shimmering, golden colored liquid.

She placed the glass gently down in front of him. Those all-encompassing eyes almost mesmerized Etris. "Consider this small token on the house. Not every visitor to our grand harbor-town of Sea-Nest comes whisking into our city, bringing sunshine with him. Are you from the far country of Denaeb, then? Or elsewhere?"

Etris wasn't sure how to take the off-handed compliment. Sure his hair was almost the color of the sun, but no one had compared it that way before. Of course some Denaeb men had sun-colored hair,

and the famous Quas wine was the favorite of Denaeb men, according to Aunt Telassa. His aunt said men from that country had a reputation as being fantastic with their tongues and other parts of their bodies when it came to lovemaking. So, he thought, Idalia was hoping he was from the outer country Denaeb. Etris was quite flattered.

He raised his glass in salute to her. "Are your patrons always treated so fine, Mistress Idalia? Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

She leaned closer over the counter, not missing anything that went on around the room, although Etris felt her eyes totally on him. He also got a tempting view of her creamy mounds. Her nipples were close to peeking out of the tight bodice.

"The ones that deserve it." She said. "We try to take exceptional care of our patrons, sir. Anything you need to know about, Transport Inn can find the answers for you, fine sir."

He took off his feathered cap and placed it and his pack on the counter near him. "My name is Etris ze-Lar. I've just come to see what exceptional wares Sea-Nest has to offer."

"Then you are a merchant or trades person?" She asked. He felt as if she were deliberately keeping her big chest there for his viewing pleasure only.

Her curiosity didn't make him nervous, but he was still cautious, no matter how beautiful his groins and mind found her. Her supposition would work for him. His parents warned him never to reveal his magic-trek; so that a rogue wizard on a power craze person could not steal any powers he had or would come into by birthright or amulet.

"Of sorts. My ship and crew are in for a short layover." Etris responded.

"Ah," she said softly, but he thought she almost sounded disappointed. She toyed with a set of chains hanging around her lovely neck, whose length went down between her deep cleavage. "Well, we have fine shops here that boast trinkets from all over the quad-countries."

"Delightful." Etris nodded a salutation of thanks towards Idalia before she left his vicinity to go speak to other guests.

It surprised him at how he was already missing her. And, he thought hard about it, at how much he had liked and lusted after just meeting her. His inner instincts told him she was more than aware of

his interest, but was keeping her thoughts and hands in check. He would see what the night would bring as it wore on.

He took his eyes from her momentarily and surveyed the expanse of the inn's main room. For some moments he slowly studied the large edifice, with its high-ceiling wooden beams criss-crossing above; and then to the portraits of long dead kings and queens and hunting scenes that hung upon the walls around the steep, but wide stairs at the back of the Transport Inn.

He slightly scanned the other patrons, and was careful of not to stare too long. They were an eclectic mix of rich merchants and the working class. The pretty barkeep was mingling with one here and then one there, taking orders and seeing to their comforts. He hoped though, that only he would be able to sample the sensually pleasing comforts he thought of having with her.

After what he thought were long, agonizing moments, Idalia came back behind the bar, coming towards him, her breasts bouncing teasingly, and deliberately it seemed, within the tightness of the low-cut bodice. Etris almost blushed as he realized she caught him watching her chest bounce. She did not seem to mind however, because her enchanting smile lit up her pert face, making her whole demeanor that more appealing. She quickly refilled his glass, though he didn't ask her to do so.

"You are our first visitor from outside of Sea-Nest in several weeks. My uncle, Vett, is buying you this drink. Enjoy." She nodded sideways to the gray-robed man at the end of the bar, sitting by himself. "I want to make sure that you are made comfortable this evening also. Just let me know what all that I can do to accomplish that."

Etris had a feeling he wasn't reading her invitation wrong, but wanted to make sure he didn't overstep those bounds. Something told him that she didn't offer every man that came through the inn's doors that kind of proposal either.

He had to clear his throat before he asked his next request. "Do you happen to have a private bathing area in your facility? I haven't had a decent one in weeks, other than sea bathing."

"Ah to be sure, my fine gent. I shall show you our accommodations when you are done with your wine. I'll be with you shortly, but first I must take care of another patron now." She went

away again.

He finished his drink faster than one should the strong foreign drink. Quad could easily get to one if drunk too fast and too much of it. He knew he wouldn't order another. Especially, he thought, if he did get to become more intimate with Idalia.

She turned from her customer, and started back his way, a lively jaunt to her steps. "Come, let me show you to your room. My uncle will watch over the inn while I show you all of the inn's facilities that you wish to see the most."

Etris grabbed his hat and sling-pack, and then trailed after her through the pub area; after which he followed her up the stairs at the back of the large inn. Even the dark oak walls of the place seemed to hold the magical and emotional tension he still felt within the room. She showed him to a guest room that had comfortable furniture decorating it. He laid his belongings on a dresser near a window, out of which he could see the large Cove of Cause looming in the darkening distance.

"My uncle thought you might require a room also. I hope this meets with your requirements. Perhaps in the morning, I can help you with what you are looking for. Or at least point you in the right direction on your magic quest." She looked at him, puzzled as she spoke.

He jerked his head around in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I'm the daughter of an air wizard and a merwitch. We have the rare ability of being able to figure out when others have powers or are looking for them. Also, Uncle Vett mentioned he thought you looked like a young man on a quest. He's an empath-mage."

Etris smiled warmly upon her, feeling with inner instincts she was being honest. Something in his deepest recesses told him he could trust her. That made her all the more appealing to him. He sat down on the large bed near her, keeping his physical interests down at that moment.

Some inner instinct also made him feel that he could tell her his concerns, and she would understand. "I have yet to reach my magic majority. Though not through age, but by means."

"How so, Etris? What sort of magical being are you?" She asked, and he could tell that she was genuinely interested.

He explained as best he could to her, feeling more than

comfortable in her presence. "My ancestors came from near the Singing Peaks, the Northern end of the Zitten Peninsula that stretches out to the sea, so they are highly based in all kinds of magic. However, it's always been through some magical instigator such as an amulet or a place of magic or through another magical person, that we attain our full use of powers. My adoptive parents, my aunt and uncle, predicted, with eighty-five percent positive result, that it had something to do with the color garnet. I've journeyed for a year now, but found nothing."

She smiled at him. "Uncle says things happen when it's least likely to happen. For years I've gone through a similar situation." She pulled out the chains she'd been wearing around her neck and showed him two unusual looking garnet pendants, which reflected the cinnamon-garnet of her gorgeous eyes. "I too have powers I cannot use. These amulets used to belong to my parents. They've never glowed for me, which prevents me using all my powers. I've just never found the right person to share them with before."

"You are still young, maybe we both tried too hard. If I had given up all hope of finding my own magic, then I would have been devastated. My aunt always said there were special things for unique people out there." He leaned over and planted a gentle kiss on the top of her head. "Like my aunt, you're a special lady, Idalia."

To his surprise, she hugged him around the waist and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. "Uncle said you were an honorable man. Handsome too, well, I thought that."

He hugged her back and held on to her warmth for a few moments. "You promised to show me the bathing facility and the rest of the inn."

She chuckled and jumped up. "So I did. Shall we go then?"

"Lead on, dear hostess." He stood up with her.

She giggled and held out her hand. "Come with me, you'll not be disappointed. I rather think you shall be highly pleased."

Etris followed her out of the bedroom, but they went further onto the upper landing and down some other stairs that led to the back part of the Transport Inn. He was quiet as she showed him through a long, twisting corridor, until they came to the last part of the lengthy hallway. Before them was a semi-circle of closed doors. She opened one of the middle doors.

Etris followed her into a dimly lit area. After they entered, the door shut with a thud and Etris realized that he was locked in the darkness with her. She reached out and grasped his hand. He let her lead him away. In the quietness and in the half-lit area, he vaguely made out odd shapes along the wall, maybe portraits. Then suddenly it was breezy in the room. He heard a soft crunching beneath his feet. It took him only a few seconds to become aware that she had led him outside and the softness beneath his feet had to be sand. He heard a hollow, faint roaring sound just before the sky opened up ahead and he found himself staring up at the night sky full of twinkling stars.

They were now in a better-lit area and he saw they were out on some kind of wooden patio-like structure. In the midst of a gazebo, he realized with certainty. And in the middle of the octagonal edifice was a half-sunken vat of water with steam coming out of it. To his delight, he became aware of the pleasurable fact that he was at a natural mineral hot pool.

“As you can see, this area is magically wonderful in a natural way. The spring that runs under it connects with the Forbidden Sea.”

Etris moved closer to the pool, mesmerized by the light from the stars above glistening down on the inviting water. “It looks so tempting. Could we try it out now?”

“Yes,” she moved nearer to him and the pool, “We can.”

Etris hadn’t meant to be so forward, but he could tell she was pleased that he had inadvertently asked her to join him. “I’ve been hoping you were thinking deliciously wild thoughts as I have since meeting you.”

“I have, Etris.” Her soft whisper of invitation made him shiver with heated desires.

He reached out for her and gently but swiftly pulled her up against him. Etris gingerly held her face in his large hands and looked down into her bright garnet-brown eyes. He could see the desire within those alluring orbs. Lowering his head, he kissed her gently at first and then, when she responded and wrapped her arms around his neck, he deepened the kiss.

He moved his hands from her face, and wound his arms around her. “Shall we get out of these clothes and into the pool?”

She pulled back and grinned provocatively. “Mmmhmm. I like that we both have been thinking so much alike. I’ve been wanting to

see you without clothes on since you walked into the Transport Inn.”

Etris felt appreciative. “Your breasts bounce so nicely when you walk with that lively sashay of yours.”

Chuckling, she quickly removed her gown as he fumbled with his own clothes. “Thank you. And your groin sways quite enticingly when you move around. I’m glad you don’t wear one of those ridiculous codpieces.”

Etris felt all his heated senses rise at the site of her supple form, naked except for the twin medallions. She was round and inviting in all the right places. Although not overly athletic, he tried to keep himself in shape and was pleased that she glanced at him from head to toe in a sinfully appreciative manner.

He took her hand and led her to the pool. Together they entered the hot and enticing bath of mineral waters. They sank down into the pool until their shoulders were just above the water. He lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers. She teased him with her tongue, and then pulled away from his mouth. Her moist lips trailed hot exploring kisses towards his neck and shoulder. Etris let out a soft groan of satisfaction as her elegant hands explored his chest, splaying over his turgid nipples. She bent her head and lapped at their tips, her chin halfway in the water.

He reached up and undid the ribbon that held up the high ringlets on top of her head. They fell down around her moonlit skin. She smelled of the briskness and mystery of the sea. Her heavy breasts floated above the water. Etris reached down to first cup and toy with one, before holding both in his hands. He twirled a thumb over each responsive nipple. Then gently he squeezed her breasts.

She lowered down on her knees and Etris’s body responded to her hands as they splayed over his abdomen and lower. Finally, she touched his long shaft, and started gently stroking his cockhead back and forth. He leaned his head down and kiss-licked her from her lovely neck, down to her shoulders. His arms went back around her to cup her buttocks. Smooth and silky, they were high and tight, but feminine and just right for caressing.

Her head went under the water and he felt her putting her mouth around his cock. The medallions floated teasingly in the water, around her neck, often caressing his genitals. Etris saw the bench indentation that sank down partway into the pool, made for when someone

wished to sit while they bathed. He grasped her shoulders, wiggled loose from her mouth and pulled her up above the water. The moment she gulped in some air, Etris lowered his head and pulled her up against him.

“Let’s move over to the bench. We can still enjoy ourselves more and this water is soothing.” She nodded and waded with him to the bench.

Once there she knelt on a step of the pool bench and pressed him backwards. “Let me finish pleasuring you.”

He was more than happy to let her conclude her endeavor. Idalia’s full lips opened and her tongue darted out to tease the swollen mushroom-shaped tip of his cock. Etris closed his eyes and laid his head back against the headrest of the pool bench. She teased him with her delicious feeling tongue for several moments before she opened her mouth wider and started slowly taking his turgid member into it, inch by slow and sweetly agonizing inch. She sucked him gently, as if she were savoring him like a rare treat; tasting all of him that she could and making it last as long as she could. All the while, the heavy medallions teased softly against his balls.

He ran his hands through her thick, lustrous hair and would soon find out if her curly pubic hair was just as thick and silky when his hands touched her there. He pressed against her and knew if she kept that up it wouldn’t take long for him to come. He took her by her shoulders again, this time gently urging her upwards. Wet lips grinned up at him and he smiled back at her before he captured that inviting, pert mouth.

Without a word, he changed places with her and gently pressed her to sit down. Etris went down on his knees as she had. He took her legs and put them over his wide shoulders. Etris watched her face as he slowly caressed every inch of her body from her shoulders to her thighs. She sighed with such exquisite pleasure. He stroked her hairy mound and explored the hidden delights within. He delved one finger, at first, into her slightly wet insides. When he felt her relax after the initial touch, his finger stroked her insides for several moments before inserting a second finger.

Etris lowered his head and stroked her opening with his moist lips. Gently his tongue explored first around the tip of her crevice, then teasing her with heavier thrusts. She groaned against him and he

felt her become even wetter against his exploring fingers and tongue. His tongue flickered over her clit, teasing her with deliberate strokes. His fingers moved in rhythm with her hips as she arched against his hand and face. Etris knew both of them were close to climaxing, but wanted it to last longer.

He removed his fingers from inside her, grasped her hips and pulled her down into the water. "I want to be inside of you now, sweet Idalia."

"Now would be wonderful." She echoed his desire. "Very much now."

Etris put his hands under her buttocks, bringing her up against himself. She wound her legs around him, and then Etris shoved swiftly into her. She held onto him tightly as he did her. Both moved in perfect unison, letting the heat of their desires build to a satisfying crescendo. Etris pushed rapidly in and out of her, feeling her hot juices mingling with his own, swallowing them with the insides of her heated passion.

To his surprise, she pulled off one of the chains around her neck and placed it over his head. "These are said to heighten the pleasure."

Etris had no objections, the gesture only adding to his desires. He kissed her deeply, continuing to rock with her in perfect rhythm. Their bodies dripped sweat, their grinding increased. Etris felt her cum flowing to meet his own. He shivered with strange intensity as he felt his climax overcome him and mingle with her intense shivers of completion.

Just after the highest point of their incredible apex, the area around them shook thunderously, as if a piece of the earth had ripped open. Etris let her ease from him, but he kept her close. It wasn't raining, but the sky sizzled with lightening. Puffs of mist and smoke came up around them and the bathing gazebo, as if hot steam from a geyser burst forth.

Etris felt suddenly light-headed and lighthearted. He looked down at Idalia in confusion. Her large garnet eyes clouded with spent desire and concern. Garnet. The thought struck him hard. His coming into his heart-magic had something to do with the mysterious dark-red color. He looked deeper into her eyes then and felt something strange and wonderful come over him.

She was a magical person but with such an intense sexy liveliness

he'd never known before. Her eyes reminded him of a set of garnet jewels, he thought. The medallions and her lovely eyes were an unusual combination, but he knew, with sudden realization, that they, and she, had come to mean something to him. She had been the magical treasure he sought for so long. His chest swelled. He knew then, that he'd found his Heart-Magic.

"Well I'll be." Etris scratched his head. "You really are one special lady."

She looked at him quizzically. "Thank you, Etris. I have a feeling, something unusual, but wonderful just happened between us, besides our fantastic lovemaking."

He chuckled and looked down into her gleaming garnet-brown eyes. "With you I can believe that. I think you and I have lots to discuss. But for now, shall we make some more physical magic of our own, my sweet merwitch."

"By all means, my heart-mage."

He hardened again, and pressed her hips against his. She reached between them stroking his shaft up and down. Her hands felt wonderful, exciting. He returned the deed in kind, sliding a couple of fingers in and out of her deep depths. She groaned and moved her hips against his hand. He withdrew his fingers and placed his cockhead at her wet opening, and then shoved swiftly into her moistened canal. Her pussy opened up for him, willing and hot. They wrapped their arms tighter around each other and thrust their hips together in perfect union.

As their climax came forcefully, Etris realized that indeed he had really found his own special brand of magic within the arms and body of the woman he was making love to. His journey, his search for his enlightenment, had finally ended in bliss with his beautiful and sexy heart-mate.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

The River God's Bride , by Tysche Dwai

Beautiful Mei Lin longs for love. Can the dragon under the Moon Bridge fulfill her desires? A tale of Ancient China with a modern twist.

Tysche Dwai -- visit me at <http://www.tyschedwai.com>

The River God's Bride

by

Tysche Dwai

“Yes, Father. As you say.” Shang Mei Lin bowed her head with a sigh.

It was the day of the Dragon Boat races, and Mei Lin had been eagerly anticipating the festivities for months. This was the year of the Dragon – the second since her birth – and she was the symbol of the Dragon. No longer a child who could not fully enjoy the festival, she had been looking forward to seeing the races – perhaps flirting with the young oarsmen...

But she was ordered to stay home. Father had decreed that a proper young lady would not attend such an occasion without a chaperone and, as there was no older woman living in the household, there was no chaperone to be had.

Mei Lin hid her disappointment with a low bow and then fled to the garden. Here at least, she could vent her hurt anger without fear of repercussion. “Why must he be so cruel?” she raged at the ancient koi threading through the water lilies of the reflecting pool. “I am no longer a child. In fact, I have heard the whispers of ‘old-maid’ when I pass on the village streets.”

Hers was a lonely existence, only child to a father who had wanted a son, and knew not what to do with the daughter thrust upon him when his beloved wife died in childbirth. Despite pressure from his own father, Shang Yan Pin had refused to remarry. It was the only romantic thing she had ever heard about her pragmatic father, and she had learned it from a maiden aunt.

Mei Lin continued down the garden path, her slippers tapping lightly on the uneven paving stones. She stepped carefully, practicing the mincing gait that her father told her was the mark of a true lady.

But as she paused on the moon bridge to stare down into the flowing stream, she despaired of ever becoming a lady.

A tear slipped past her control and splashed into the stream below. One drop of salt in a flowing stream...

A rustle of sound emanated from beneath the bridge, and Mei Lin started back. Was there an animal nesting there? If so, she should tell her father. He would not approve of anything spoiling his pristine garden.

But no. If there was an animal there, it deserved to live the life it wanted. Just because she was trapped here in an ivory cage didn't mean this little one couldn't live free.

She was curious though. What might have taken up residence? Perhaps she could befriend it. Bring it food. Have something of her own, a secret...a pet to talk to.

Carefully, she climbed down the bank of the stream and peered into the shadows under the bridge. Cobwebs draped the underpinnings in lace. The water was dark as it wound beneath the span. Sunlight penetrated only a few inches into the shadows.

"Hello...?" she called softly. It felt silly, to talk to an animal, but on the other hand, it would be rude not to...wouldn't it?

The rustling under the bridge grew louder, as if something heavy were dragging itself across the bank. She could hear the sound of breathing, and there was a dank, musky odor that made her nose wrinkle.

Mei Lin backed away from the opening. Whatever was hiding beneath the bridge sounded large and potentially dangerous.

She heard a chuff of breath, and suddenly there were eyes shining in the darkness. Huge violet eyes, gleaming with a soft inner light. She found herself mesmerized by those glowing eyes.

"Who is there?" asked Mei Lin, her breath catching in her throat and making her voice husky.

Out of the shadows stretched a pointed snout covered with shimmering opalescent scales glittering in the sunlight. Sharp teeth lined the mouth beneath the snout, but they did not seem dangerous to her. She sensed a calm, gentle spirit emanating from the creature, despite the heavy jaw.

She squatted on her haunches on the bank of the stream. Could it be? Beneath her bridge? A dragon!

The violet eyes blinked, the mouth opened – and a melodic voice answered, “Who do you desire me to be?” The voice rolled over her like liquid velvet, soft, sensual, and stirring her thoughts into chaos. One little sentence. “Who do you desire me to be?”

Mei Lin felt her face grow hot. “I have no desires. They are unseemly for a lady.”

The dragon made a sound like a chuffing purr deep in its throat, and Mei Lin realized it was laughing at her.

Her face grew hotter still. “A true lady does not speak of desire.”

“Now that is more like it,” the dragon said, with a nod of its great head. “I would believe a lady choosing not to express her secrets far more readily than that she had none.”

She was beginning to feel more at ease with the creature. It did not seem intent on eating her. At least not immediately.

“May...may I touch you?” she asked tentatively, reaching forth a hesitant hand.

“Of course.” The dragon nodded again, bowing its great head.

Mei Lin laid her hand on its broad snout; the span of her dainty fingers – even spread to their greatest reach – was not as wide as the bridge of its nose. The glittering scales beneath her hand were surprisingly warm and supple, not the cold, brittle hardness she had imagined.

“I am Long Bai Yu. And you are?” it asked politely.

“Oh! Forgive my rudeness, Ancient One. I am Shang Mei Lin, daughter to this house. At your service.” She made the curtsy manners dictated.

“And I at yours, Shang *xiaojie*. Now that the courtesies have been performed, tell me what it is that makes a beautiful flower such as yourself weep into my crystal stream.” It settled back on its haunches like a great dog.

Mei Lin sighed. “I am so very unhappy. I wished to go out to the Dragon Boat Races, and Father has forbidden it. But that is only one cause. I despair of being the lady he desires me to be, and long for the companionship of young people my age. The children I grew up with now cradle young ones of their own, and we have nothing to say to one another. I feel like a captive dove here in the steel embrace of my father’s cage.”

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

The dragon nodded. “Many young people feel this way. It is a natural discontent. That does not mean it is any less difficult to bear. I cannot break your father’s chains...but I can take you to the Dragon Boat Races, if you care to go.”

“But how, honored sir? The courtyard is walled, and the gates are locked.”

“Climb upon my back, and I will show you the secret ways of dragons.”

Hesitating only a moment, Mei Lin stepped upon the bent knee the dragon offered and settled onto the dragon’s broad back. Her skirts were too narrow to allow her to straddle it, so she stretched herself full length on the soft, shimmering scales, and threw her arms about its neck. Her hands sank deep in the warm scales to touch butter soft skin below.

“Do not be afraid,” Bai Yu said solemnly. “I swear on my honor as a dragon that I will let no harm come to you.”

“I trust you, honored sir,” replied Mei Lin.

“Good. Whatever happens, do not let go of me.”

She nodded her understanding—and then the dragon plunged into the depths of the stream.

A stab of fear went through Mei Lin’s heart as he arrowed beneath the water. She had not expected such a thing, and her lungs had not filled with air before the dive. Did the dragon mean to drown her?

No. She could not believe that of him—after feeling the warmth of him seep into her very bones, she could not think of him as “it” any longer—he would not harm her. He had asked for her trust, and freely she gave it.

She raised her head enough that she could see past his great horns, and she almost gasped aloud. She was in a beautiful world lit with a green glow as the sunlight filtered through the water. The delicate stems of the water lilies swayed gracefully in the current of the stream, and the koi seemed to kowtow to the dragon as they swam past. Shimmering pebbles covered the bed of the stream, like huge pearls and opals scattered willy-nilly.

The air in her lungs was growing stale. She must exhale and draw in fresh—but the dragon showed no signs of returning to the surface as he glided along through the water. When she could stand no more,

the air rushed from her in a gasp, and she inhaled...air sweeter than any she had ever known. It held the scent of jasmine, and a clean edge of snow. And yet, they still swam well beneath the surface of the stream.

"Are you comfortable?" asked the dragon's voice in her head, as clearly as if he spoke aloud.

"It is magical, honored sir!"

"Indeed." She felt his muscles shift beneath her as he nodded. "This is the world I am master over, Mei Lin."

"Its beauty is beyond compare."

"I do not wish your father to lose face by having you appear at the races after he has forbidden you to go, but you will have a unique perspective." He chuckled. "I hope you will enjoy it."

Shadows darted above them, and Mei Lin looked up. They were beneath the racing boats. She could see the brightly painted hulls, and the flashing oars of the competitors. Even though she could not see the oarsmen, the excitement of the contest swept through her. The dragon paced the pack, but she sensed that he could easily draw ahead of them all.

"Beat them!" she cried out, and the dragon surged ahead. She felt such strength and power rising from him that her head was spinning. She clung to his shining scales and laughed aloud at the sheer wonder of it.

They crossed the finish line well ahead of the first boat, but far enough beneath the surface that no one even suspected their presence.

"And so, you win the Dragon Boat race," teased Bai Yu. "How do you feel about that?"

"I shall never forget this day as long as I live, honored sir."

"Then I ask but one boon from you, Mei Lin."

"Anything that is within my power I shall grant you, my lord."

"Call me Bai Yu instead of 'honored sir' or 'my lord'. I wish to have no formality between us."

Mei Lin felt her cheeks flame despite the cool temperature of the water. "As you wish...Bai Yu," she said hesitantly. It seemed presumptuous and unseemly to call so ancient a being by his common name instead of his title, but if such he desired, she would honor his wishes.

“And now, I must return you to your father’s house. He will be looking for you soon.”

“Yes,” she sighed. The thought of returning to his stifling rules after such a magical interlude tore at her heart, but it was the proper thing to do. When it came down to it, she was still the dutiful daughter of her father’s house. At least she would have this one bright, shining memory to cling to in the dull days to come.

“You may come to me under the moon bridge whenever you need a respite, Mei Lin. I will be waiting for you there.”

The gentle assurance gladdened her heart, and they swam the rest of the way in companionable silence.

She left Bai Yu under the moon bridge. As she stepped out of the shadows into the sunlit garden, she was astonished to see that her clothing was bone dry, and there was no trace of the magical ride she had just taken...except one beautiful, shimmering scale cupped in the palm of her hand.

* * * *

That evening, she excused herself early after dinner and sought her bed. The afternoon’s adventures had tired her, and she did not wish to listen to her father describing the Dragon Boat races in detail. She had her own memories of the event, and did not want them sullied by his.

As she lay beneath the cool sheets of her lonely bed, sleep overtook her, and she sank beneath its waves as surely as she had the waters of the stream. And in that sleep, a tall man with shimmering white hair pulled into a long queue visited her.

He was young, despite the white of his hair, and yet ancient. He was handsome, with features as sculpted as the statuary in the temple. His eyes were lavender, and when she saw them, she knew him.

“Bai Yu,” she breathed.

He nodded and bowed low before her. “I may appear in this form only in your dreams for the time being, Mei Lin. Perhaps, one day, it shall be different, but for now, we may meet in the waking world only as we did this afternoon. Can you accept this?”

“As long as I may speak with you, I am content.”

He stepped forward, and as he did so, the scarlet robes he wore dissolved like mist. “In dreams, we may do more than speak,” he said softly, his eyes locked with hers.

Mei Lin trembled. She had never been in the presence of a naked man before, and felt it unseemly that she should be so now...but curiosity got the better of her, and drew her eye to that portion of a man that a woman lacks.

It rose from a nest of snow-white curls, proud and erect, a shining pearl of dew upon its tip.

“See what you do to me, Mei Lin?” Bai Yu murmured. “I desire you as I have desired no other these many long centuries. I have longed for this day since you were a wide-eyed child laughing at the koi in my pool.”

“Oh, noble sir,” she breathed, wracked with fear, yet aching with an unknown need. “I-I am unskilled in such things.”

“Of course you are.” Bai Yu nodded, and glided toward her. “And so you shall remain outside the world of dreams—until the day that I may claim what is mine—but here, in the realm beneath the shroud of sleep, I can teach you much.” He held out his hand, and she rose from her lonely bed to stand before him.

He took her in his arms, and his skin was smooth and warm beneath her touch. It was hairless save for head and root, and glowed with an opalescent shimmer. She felt the strength in those arms and shivered with anticipation.

Was this to be her induction? Would she now learn the secrets that were whispered behind the fans of the young wives and mothers she grew up with?

Without another word, Bai Yu slipped her nightdress from her shoulders. The belted robe fell open and pooled at her feet. Naked before the dragon, Mei Lin felt a wave of shame...she was not beautiful. He deserved much more than a plain old maid.

He raised her chin. “What troubles you, *airen*?”

Beloved...he called her beloved.

“You are so magnificent,” she said miserably, her control threatening to break, “and I am nothing.”

He sank upon the edge of the bed, and pulled her down into his lap, cradling her like a sorrowful child. “You are the one woman in all my centuries of life who has stirred passion within my breast, Mei Lin. You are a beautiful flower, just beginning to open its petals to the sun. You are my destiny, and I will accept no other, now or forever.”

She twined her arms about his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. "I am afraid, Bai Yu."

"Fear nothing from me, beloved."

He rose to his feet as if her weight were nothing, and then laid her gently on the bed. Standing over her, he seemed to tower to the moon.

Mei Lin bit her lip at his perfection, her eye drawn again to his manhood.

A smile curved his lips, and he knelt above her on the bed, straddling her hips. "Would you like to touch it?" he asked softly.

She reached out a tentative finger to stroke the velvet softness of his rod, marveling at the warm hardness of it. Emboldened by his sigh of pleasure, she circled it with her hand. Her small fingers could not meet around its girth. Her two hands side by side could not encompass the whole length of it.

A pearl of moisture once more dewed its tip, and an overwhelming desire made her sit up and daintily lick this single drop from its precarious resting place. It tasted of the sea.

Bai Yu stifled a moan then regained his control. "Lie back, Mei Lin. Let me show you what I desire one day to show you in the waking world."

With a nod, and a thrill of anticipation, Mei Lin sank back among her pillows. This was a dream. Real as it might seem, she must remember it was so. But how could her sheltered imagination conceive such detail if it were not real? Her mind spun at the mystery of it.

Then Bai Yu lowered his head to her hidden pool, and all thought fled. His tongue probed gently about the gates of her maidenhood, and she thought she must cry out with the pleasure of it—but only a whimper of joy escaped her control. Dream or not, she did not desire to explain her cries to the household.

His tongue breached the gates of her hidden valley, and lapped at the secret core of her as if at a stream, and she writhed with the ecstasy of it. He delved deeper, and found the pleasure pearl nestled within her, sucking it into his mouth and laving it with his tongue.

Mei Lin felt the tension mounting in a growing wave that threatened to break and sweep her away—and then it crested, and crashed down upon her with tidal force. Her back arched into a bow,

and her hands clutched the bedding like an anchor. She would be washed away by the passion...lost in a sea of sensation...and then it ebbed away to lingering tremors of delight that left her weak and spent as if she had swum across the river.

Bai Yu lay down upon the bed beside her and took her in his arms once more. "I think that is enough for a first induction, *airen*. Tomorrow we shall explore further. Sleep now. I will stay with you till morning."

She nodded weakly, snuggling against the smooth warmth of him. She let her eyes close, and was instantly fast asleep, feeling safe and protected as she had never felt in her life.

* * * *

When Mei Lin awoke the next morning, it was as if nothing strange had occurred the night before. She wore her bed gown, and her sheets bore no sign of anchoring her soul in the midst of erotic passion. She almost dismissed the dream as wishful thinking...until she found an opalescent scale clinging to her inner thigh when she bathed.

The sight sent a thrill through her. It was true! Her dragon lover had come to her in the night.

She closed her eyes in the bath and remembered the fire of his caresses. Clutching the scale to her breast with one hand, the other played about her virgin valley. Her fingers traced the path that his tongue had explored the night before, and echoes of ecstasy radiated from her touch. She slid one finger between the guardian folds, contacting the hidden pearl. Gently, she took it between thumb and forefinger and rolled it back and forth until the fire surged through her once more, and she had to duck her head beneath the water to keep from screaming aloud.

After the bath, she dressed quickly, anxious to seek out Bai Yu beneath the bridge. But her father waylaid her on the way to the garden with chores to finish, and there was an unexpected visitor that afternoon in the person of a local witch woman that her father did not wish to offend. Mei Lin was forced to play hostess and preside over the tea things.

"What a pretty girl you are," cackled the witch, taking her proffered cup. Her bright eyes studied Mei Lin from a cocked head, and the girl felt uncomfortable.

"You are kind to say so, Madame Wu, but I am really very ordinary."

"No, no, my dear. You are as delicate as a porcelain doll. Such exquisite cheekbones. Really, most beautiful. She is an angel, Yan Pin."

Her father beamed approval and nodded.

Mei Lin felt her cheeks grow hot. She was unused to praise, and it made her feel uneasy. Something about this woman, with her rumored curses and arcane spells, frightened Mei Lin. It was a distinct relief to show their visitor the door shortly after.

The sun was sinking into the horizon when Mei Lin finally was able to slip from the house and race down to the moon bridge. Her heart rose in her throat as she searched the shadows beneath. What if he were gone? What if he had grown tired of waiting for her to come and decided to seek more experienced companionship?

"Bai Yu?" she called anxiously.

There was a stir of movement in the murk beneath the bridge, and his long snout edged forth. "I am here, *airen*."

She threw her arms about his great neck. "I am sorry I could not get away sooner. I have been in agony separated from you."

His breath blew warm and gentle against her cheek. "Do not fear or fret, my love. Soon we will be together for eternity, and in the meantime, I shall come to you tonight as before. I have much to show you."

"Every moment is a lifetime without you."

He chuckled. "The sun sets even now, impatient one. When the moon peeps through your window, I will join you. Now, go to your meal like the good, clever girl I love. It will not be long."

She hurried back to the house before she was missed, and went about the preparations for the meal with an automatic hand, thinking only of Bai Yu. Somehow, she made it through the dinner that seemed to stretch into days. But her inattention did not go unnoticed.

"What ails you, Mei Lin? You have been staring into your plate for the last half hour." Her father's voice seemed to come from another world.

She shook herself, and forced her attention back to the here and now from its dreams of the night to come. "Nothing, Father. I am quite well."

“What did you think of Madame Wu’s visit this afternoon? It is a rare honor when she comes to call on a young lady.” He sat back in his chair, hands folded across his paunch. The smile on his face reminded her of a contented cat.

“As you say, Father.”

“You do not seem to appreciate the magnitude of this visit.”

Mei Lin stifled the sigh that rose in her breast and played with the chopsticks beside her half-empty bowl. “She frightens me, Father.”

“You are a silly child, Mei Lin.”

“I am not a child, Father! How can I make you see that? I am laughed at in the village as the old maid daughter of Shang Yan Pin.”

“Not for much longer,” he replied, his voice rising in anger. “That is the reason for Madame Wu’s visit, ungrateful one. She came to see if you were worthy of a singular honor – one that will make you respected and admired throughout Yeh Hsien. She was evaluating your fitness to be the next River God’s Bride.”

Mei Lin felt her heart skip in her chest. To be the River God’s Bride? Did he realize what that meant?

She pushed her chair back from the table. “I-I must lie down, Father. That is a great deal to think about.”

Yan Pin nodded brusquely. “Yes, it is. Such an honor is given to only the most beautiful young women. If you are chosen, it brings much praise upon our house.”

Mei Lin fled to her room and threw herself upon the bed. Praise upon the house? Did he not understand the sacrifice involved?

The River God’s Bride was chosen once a year—the ceremony would be held to mark the beginning of the summer season. Only the most beautiful girls were considered for the “honor,” though Mei Lin knew of several families that had abandoned the city to move eligible daughters beyond the clutches of Madame Wu.

On the day of her marriage to the River God, the chosen one would be dressed in the finest silks, feted and feasted, and then stretched upon a gilded bed. This bier would be shoved from shore and set adrift in the river.

The bride was expected to lie quietly on the bed until the River God claimed her as his own. If he were pleased with the choice, the river would gently water the crops for the coming year, and provide

fish for the tables of Yeh Hsien. If he were displeased, the waters would roil up in a flood and destroy the fields.

Either way, the bride would be beyond caring.

No! She would not submit to such a thing. Not when she had found Bai Yu, and longed for the future he had promised. She could not be sacrificed to an unknown, uncaring god.

Tears soaked her thin pillow until she drifted at last into uneasy sleep. She sank down into the river of sleep, drifting through its dream currents until her feet came to rest upon the bottom. Silvery light rose from the opals and pearls lining the river bottom, and she ran along their shimmering surface toward the white jade palace she saw gleaming in the distance.

Bai Yu stood before the glowing palace, the scarlet of his robe a bright splash of warmth in the cool river dream world. A concerned frown creased his brow as she flung herself into his arms.

“What is it, *airen*? Why have you sought me here? I told you I would come to you...”

“Oh, Bai Yu,” she sobbed, suddenly wondering if she had made a mistake in searching him out. “I needed to see you as soon as possible. I feared to wait.”

His arms tightened around her. Gentle fingers stroked her hair, and she felt the brush of his lips on her forehead. “Come inside and tell me what makes you tremble so.”

He took her hand and guided her through a towering door carved from pale green jade. Inside the palace, all was fashioned from the precious mineral. The furniture seemed wrought from single blocks of creamy jade ranging from pale snow to deepest green. Cushions of silk and velvet softened chairs and lounges. Delicate golden trceries of filigree inlaid the walls. Everywhere was opulence and dazzling beauty.

Bai Yu led her to a broad stair arcing up gracefully to a second story. At the top, he opened the door to a bedchamber hung with deep green silk. The bed was carved in the shape of a mussel shell, with round, silk-covered pearls of pillows scattered at its head.

There was no other furniture in the chamber.

Bai Yu slid his hands to her shoulders, and again her bed gown fell away. His robe dissolved about him, and he bent and kissed the hollow of her throat where it met her shoulder.

"I am pleased to share my home with you, Mei Lin."

She turned in his arms. "I must talk to you."

He bent his head to kiss the swell of one small breast. "Perfection," he murmured, taking the bud of her nipple into his mouth.

She gasped with pleasure, but forced herself to remember why she had come. "They consider me for the River God's Bride, Bai Yu. If I am chosen, I will never see you again."

He chuckled, the action sending a pulse of sensation surging once more through the sensitive nubbin of flesh still held within his mouth.

She shivered, and stepped back a pace. "This is serious."

"Is it?"

"It could mean my death."

Bai Yu placed one hand on her shoulder, and tilted her chin upward with the other. "My precious girl, do you not see? I *am* the River God."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. She had not thought beyond the fear of death...but of course, it made sense that he should be so.

"B-But what about the girls who have come before? Have you senior wives ensconced in this jade treasure box?"

"No, my beauty." He smiled down at her, shaking his head. "All the others have lacked what I desired. After a night's rest, I have taken them to a distant shore and set them free to start a new life with a hefty dowry. I knew someday that I would find my true bride."

"But the festival—"

"—Is a sham conceived by that harridan Wu. She uses it to line her coffers with gold."

"The festival has been occurring yearly since my father was a boy. She will see no reason to stop it whether I am this year's chosen Bride or not. Next year there will be another knocking at your gates...and," she paused, biting her lip, "perhaps she will be more beautiful than I."

"Beauty of spirit is more important than a fair face, Mei Lin, though you have both. I have waited for centuries for you. I will not find another in my lifetime. You are my soul mate."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and drew her onto his lap. She could feel the hard length of his manhood beneath her thigh.

"No other woman will venture inside my palace once you are my Bride," he promised.

"Then the festival must be stopped, Bai Yu! It is a barbaric custom, and if we do not end it, girls will continue to be torn from their families and cast into the river for no purpose. What if you missed being there to rescue one from the currents? I could not live with that on my conscience."

"We will stop the festival if you so desire, my jewel. I do not wish to see the witch grow fat at the expense of the villagers any longer either." He ran his hand up her inner thigh. "But now, let us turn our attention to more pleasant matters. The night draws on apace, and you shall be awaking soon. Before that happens, I would like to continue the education we have begun."

Mei Lin ducked her head. She was suddenly keenly aware that she sat naked upon his lap on the edge of his bed. "I-I would be pleased with that as well," she answered shyly.

Bai Yu laughed, and then rose to his feet, lifting her in his arms as if she were a feather. "Tonight, I shall explore your hidden ways with my shaft." He looked down at her, studying her gravely. "Are you ready for this?"

Mei Lin took a deep breath, and nodded once. "Yes. Although I know this is but a dream shadow of the real thing, I wish to feel your staff within me, Bai Yu." She reached down with one hand and touched the warm velvet of his cock. "I claim this as mine."

"We will share," he replied dryly, and lowered her to the nest of pillows.

"What must I do?"

Bai Yu positioned himself above her. His rod jutted forth from its nest of snowy curls, proud and hard as iron. "It will make the penetration easier if you are ready for its entrance," he explained. "And if it is wet, to ease the way."

Mei Lin smiled up at him like a cat caught at the cream. "I see. And I can guess how it should reach this condition." She sat up on the bed and took the cock in her hand. "Let me see what I can arrange." Bending forward, she kissed the tip of his manhood. It trembled beneath her fingers.

Encouraged by the reaction, Mei Lin took the head of his shaft into her mouth. Its girth stretched wide her lips, and she knew that she

could never take it all into this moist cavern, but she laved the tip with her tongue, and then began to lick the entire length of the straining cock.

Bai Yu moaned as her fingers explored the sack of flesh hanging beneath his rod. "Lie back now," he commanded, his voice tense.

She did as she was bid.

"Spread your knees."

She let her legs fall open, suddenly nervous, and yet filled with anticipation.

"This is but a shadow of the waking world, Mei Lin. Here is only the pleasure, none of the pain. It will give you a sense of what there is to look forward to after your initiation as my bride."

"I am ready," she replied softly.

Without further words, he lowered himself until the tip of his cock knocked at the gate of her womanhood. Slowly, he pushed past the folds guarding the entrance and began to explore her depths.

Mei Lin felt every slow step of that exploration. Her secret valley seemed to be expanding to encompass his girth as he inched forward, as the drawstring of a purse might open wider the mouth. The pleasure she had felt the night before when he had come to her in her own bed began to build once more, teasing tremors of sensation on the edges of her consciousness.

Finally, she felt the brush of his curls against her folds, and knew that he was fully sheathed within her. She reached up to touch his face, and he brushed a kiss across her fingertips.

"Now, you shall know ecstasy," he whispered, and he began to slowly withdraw from her valley.

She gave a little mewl of protest, not wishing to lose this intimate contact.

"Patience, little one," teased Bai Yu, continuing his retreat until merely the head of his cock was housed within her. Then he thrust forward again, in one mighty movement that buried his sword to the hilt.

Mei Lin gasped, arching upward, straining to take in more.

He began to stroke faster now, driving in and out as she clung to him to avoid being swept away by the sea of passion that swelled within. Finally, she could take no more—with a ringing cry that tore

her voice from her throat, she exploded in a thousand fireworks. Or so it seemed.

Bai Yu tensed, and she felt his shuddering release fill her before he collapsed beside her on the huge bed, spent and drained.

"And this is but a shadow?" she whispered, still trembling from the receding waves of the tide.

He propped himself up on one elbow and brushed the damp fringe of hair from her forehead. "Yes, *airén*. When you are made wholly my wife, you will see that this is but a reflection of the real."

"I cannot wait for that day."

He chuckled and kissed her brow. "Yes, you can, and you shall. But it will be soon, I promise."

She nestled against him. "Soon..." With a contented sigh, she closed her eyes and fell beneath the layer of dreams.

* * * *

When Mei Lin arose from her own bed in the morning, she dressed carefully, and sought audience with her father. Kneeling before him, and bowing her head to the floor at his feet, she murmured, "Forgive me, honored sir. I was rude and disrespectful yesterday. If you so desire, I shall become the River God's Bride."

"Excellent," exclaimed her father approvingly. "I am pleased to see that you have come to your senses, Mei Lin. I shall send word to Madame Wu of our acceptance."

Mei Lin rocked back on her heels. Even though Bai Yu was the one who waited her as a result of this choice, it still stung that her father would so willingly sacrifice her. She knew of many families who had taken their daughters far away from Yeh Hsien to avoid the "honor."

"As you say, Father."

She rose to her feet. "When shall the ceremony take place?"

"In one week's time. There is still one other girl under consideration, but I am sure when we send our acceptance, you will be chosen. You are much prettier than Wang Yin Shu."

Mei Lin bit back a retort. Wang Yin Shu was sweet of temperament, but had a lazy eye and one corner of her mouth drooped as a result of a childhood fever. If the competition this year was down to such dregs, it was indeed time to end the charade.

"I am pleased that you think so, Father. If you will permit, I would like to walk in the garden now."

"Feel free, Mei Lin. Your time is your own between now and the festival. I do not wish you to redden your hands further with work, or stoop your shoulders from carrying."

Again, it galled her to think that it took such an event for him to notice that she was strained by the lack of servants, but she simply nodded and fled to the sunlit garden.

Amidst the rustling bamboo and bright lilies gracing the pools, she felt her spirits rise. The peace of the garden seeped into her bones. By the time she reached the moon bridge, she was feeling better, and eagerly searched the shadows under the bridge.

At first, she feared them to be empty, and her heart sank to her toes, but then she saw the violet glow of his great eyes, and contentment swelled within her. "Bai Yu," she called, "the date of the ceremony has been set. It will occur in one week's time."

He nodded his great head. "We shall be ready." The shimmering coils of his tail caught flashes of sunlight as he shifted beneath the bridge. "Come and rest...nap here in the shadows."

She laughed at the persuasive tone of his voice. "You seek to lure me to a dream in the middle of the day," she scolded, even as she ducked beneath the span of the bridge.

"And is that an evil thing?" There was reciprocal merriment in his voice.

"Not in the least."

He nudged her toward the crook of his hind leg, where the hollow of its joining to his body made a cozy, warm resting place. As she nestled against him, he covered her with the tip of his tail.

Mei Lin felt as safe and comfortable as ever she had in her own lonely bed. She pillowed her head on the soft scales, and let go the shore of wakefulness.

As she drifted in the shallows of the river of dreams, she could hear the dragon's melodious voice crooning a lullaby. The words swept her deeper beneath the surface of sleep.

At the bottom of the river, Bai Yu stood waiting. She rushed into his arms, and he embraced her, raining kisses upon her upturned face.

"I have missed you so, *airen*. It is good that the date of our true joining draws near. A dream liaison is fast losing its appeal."

“You tire of me already?” she teased.

“Merely the shadow of you. I long to hold your waking flesh in my arms, so I may do thus—” He lifted her off the bed of the river and carried her to a convenient nest of pillows nearby.

She arched a brow. “Pillows? Beneath the river?”

“That is one good feature of dreams. Whatever you imagine may appear as needed.” He grinned down at her.

She laid her head on his breast with a contented sigh. “All I need, I have.”

He kissed the top of her head. “For eternity.”

Kneeling, he lowered her to the soft pile of cushions, and undressed her. Slowly, this time—removing her gown with such infinite care that she feared she would go mad from the anticipation. His lips followed the path of his fingertips, trailing fire down her throat to her breasts, which arched up to meet his kiss. He teased the nipple of her left breast, sucking and licking it in turn.

Then, he held up his right hand, and a feather appeared between his fingers. With a wicked smile, he drew the plume down her skin. The sensitized flesh trembled under the tickle of the feather, and she bucked upward as he ran it from back to front along her slit.

“Please,” she moaned. “Please...”

“Please, what, my dove?”

“Take me now.” She reached for him, hands pleading. “I need to feel you inside me.”

He sat back on his heels, and opened his arms. His robe dissolved about him. He stretched out over her, and slipped inside her welcoming folds.

They moved in a rhythm ancient as the earth, but new as the tide. The passion built between them, the embers sparking, and then catching flame. As the raging inferno consumed her utterly, she cried aloud. Bai Yu’s answer rang in her ears.

“Mei Lin!”

The shout dragged her up from the cradle of sleep without a chance to say goodbye to her lover. She found herself curled beneath the bridge, but Bai Yu was gone.

“I am coming, Father,” she called out, patting her hair in place and straightening her gown as she emerged from beneath the bridge.

“Ah, there you are. Good. You must come along at once. There is a seamstress here to fit you for your bridal gown.”

Mei Lin ducked her head to hide the nervous excitement in her eyes. She was supposed to be opposed to this festival. She had protested loud and long. A complete change of heart would be sure to raise her father’s suspicions.

It proved quite simple to project a sense of impatience and distaste. The seamstress was a fat, oily woman who tsked over Mei Lin’s bony hips and tutted over her small breasts. She poked and prodded with her measuring tape and pins, and shook her head over the results.

“This will not be an easy gown to make, Shang *xiansheng*,” she confided to Mei Lin’s father. “The girl has no shape. But if anyone can hide the defects, I am that worthy person. Of course, it will be expensive...”

“Of course,” Yan Pin beamed. “Nothing but the finest. This honor must be properly celebrated.”

Mei Lin stared at her father in disbelief. Did he truly feel this was an honor that was being bestowed upon her? He did not know of Bai Yu’s habit of setting the girls free to start life anew. For all he knew, the ceremony would, at best, result in a forced marriage to a fickle god, and at worst, in her watery death. Most fathers would—indeed *did*—flee the city to protect their daughters from such a fate.

The seamstress rose to her feet with a creak of her knees. “I will purchase the satin this afternoon, honored sir. You will receive the bill by morning. I should have the dress completed within three days.”

“Good, good. The ceremony will be in five days time. I will pay extra if necessary to make sure that it is completed before that date.”

Mei Lin could see the calculations behind the woman’s black current eyes.

“I will make it my only priority until it is complete,” murmured the little woman with a bow.

No doubt at an added cost of several gold coins, Mei Lin thought with disgust.

“I am tired, Father,” she lied. “I believe I shall retire early.”

“Certainly, my dear. You must rest and keep yourself refreshed. A bride deserves to be pampered before her wedding day.”

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

Mei Lin bowed, and hurried to her chamber, seeking the waiting solace of her dreams.

* * * *

The next few days flew by. The daylight hours were a flurry of preparations for the festival. The nights were spent in Bai Yu's arms. He taught her much about the art of love, but her most intriguing lesson came from an unexpected source.

The night before the ceremony, as Mei Lin lay on her childhood bed for the last time, too nervous and excited to sleep, a soft call came from outside the door.

"Mei Lin, may I enter?"

Mei Lin propped herself on her elbows. "Yes, of course, Jiu Mu."

The door opened, and her father's maiden sister entered the room, a bowl held carefully between her extended hands. There was steam rising from the bowl, and something tucked beneath her arm.

Mei Lin sat up in bed, intrigued by the visit. "To what do I owe this honor?"

Jiu Mu set down the bowl beside the bed and raised a finger to her lips, then moved to shut the door.

Once it was securely fastened, she came and perched beside Mei Lin on the bed. "Tomorrow is your wedding day, Mei Lin. This should be a cause for celebration in a young girl's life—" She smiled crookedly. "—or even in that of one who is not so young any more."

Mei Lin tried to take offense—but realized that Jiu Mu knew what she was speaking of, and—for her—there was no enchanted prince to take her in her dreams. She nodded her agreement to her aunt's words.

"This is not a normal wedding day, Mei Lin, I know, but it is still an occasion that will bear expectations. I am here to teach you some of what will occur on your wedding night."

Mei Lin swallowed the smile that threatened to escape her. Jiu Mu was perfectly serious, and it would be dishonorable not to treat her so. Besides, Mei Lin was curious about the items her aunt had brought to the chamber.

"Do you know what this is?" asked Jiu Mu, holding up a limp leather tube.

Mei Lin shook her head.

"This is a device that can show you what to expect on your wedding night, and also help me assure your father of your purity."

"Does he doubt me?" asked Mei Lin angrily. "With what cause?"

Jiu Mu laid a gentle hand on Mei Lin's knee. "There is no cause, niece. He is just being himself. He has never learned trust. He must have proof to believe."

"What proof must he have?"

Jiu Mu merely lowered the leather tube into the bowl of steaming water.

As Mei Lin watched, the limp bag seemed to inflate into a solid rod. It reminded her of Bai Yu's sturdy manhood. The thought triggered realization. "Is that—?"

"It is a...tool, which can be used to simulate the act of a husband to his wife." Jiu Mu's cheeks bloomed with a tinge of pink. "Many have such devices...especially widows or...unmarried maids."

Mei Lin reached out to touch the bag. It was warm and soft under her fingertips. "How is it constructed?"

"A tube of soft leather is filled with dry rice or grain. When you place it in the water, the seeds inside plump, and fill the bag."

"How does one use such a thing?"

"Lie back. I will show you."

Curiosity inflamed her, so Mei Lin did as she was told. She gasped as the warm, damp tip of the thing nudged against the outer lips of her slit.

"Relax. It will not harm you, I promise."

Mei Lin bit back a reply. It would serve no purpose to let Jiu Mu know that she was not unfamiliar with the process, just startled by the execution.

Slowly, Jiu Mu guided the instrument into Mei Lin's virgin valley. It felt not unlike Bai Yu's first thoughtful penetration, and Mei Lin shivered at the memory.

"Do not be afraid. It will soon be over," soothed Jiu Mu, misinterpreting the shiver for one of fear.

In fact, Mei Lin was in no hurry for the lesson to end. The friction of the leather was beginning to waken her sleeping desires, and she caught her bottom lip in her teeth to avoid a moan of pleasure.

Suddenly, the forward progress of the tool stopped, and Mei Lin felt it bump against the sealed gate of her innermost chamber. She

gasped. Surely she would be left her maidenhead? To be delivered to a bridegroom without it would sully her reputation beyond repair—and her family could not know the truth of her relationship with Bai Yu to think any differently.

Jiu Mu nodded in satisfaction. “It is as I told your father. You are a maiden still.”

Mei Lin raised herself on her elbows and stared at the woman. “Was there any doubt of my purity?”

The older woman ducked her head. “You are a healthy young woman of more than childhood age. He...was worried.”

“You should reassure him at once, by all means. Go now, I wish to sleep.”

Jiu Mu looked as if she were about to burst into tears, but said not a word as she began to gather her things. She withdrew the device from Mei Lin’s slit in one hard jerk that made the girl wish it would be left behind.

Instead of asking such a thing, Mei Lin sat up in bed and shooed the woman toward the door. “Hurry along. Tomorrow is an important day. I must rest.”

Jiu Mu retreated as fast as she could. Mei Lin lay back amongst her pillows and let her fingers stray to her slit. *What a wondrous device...I must see about acquiring one of my own.*

But all such thoughts were forgotten as she fell into a deep sleep. The first without dreams in weeks.

* * * *

The next morning dawned crystal clear. It promised to be a beautiful day. Mei Lin woke before the sun, too anxious to sleep. This would be the day of her physical joining with Bai Yu, and they would be together for eternity. The thought made her heart sing with gladness.

Like a docile lamb, she let herself be fed and fussed over. She stood statue still as the oily little seamstress draped the beautiful red satin gown about her, tsking and tutting as she adjusted a seam here and there. The dress was exquisite. Mei Lin truly felt like a bride. If only the festival was not attached to the ceremony, she would be gloriously happy on this day of days.

A palanquin arrived at midday, carried by four sturdy young men. Mei Lin was helped inside the chair, the curtains lowered around her.

They raised her to their shoulders, and started for the temple where the ceremony would be performed. The ride was fairly smooth, but the enclosed space made her feel claustrophobic. She longed to sweep back the curtain and watch the progress of the bearers, but she was sure it would be frowned upon.

She tried to guess where they might be from the gait of the bearers. Their pace was too even. With a sigh, she settled back against the cushions, trying not to muss the elaborate coils her hair had been sculpted into.

After what seemed an eternity, the chair was lowered, and she was helped out of the conveyance. She blinked against the sudden sunlight. When her sight cleared, she found herself standing upon the mosaic courtyard of the festival temple.

Arrayed before her in all their splendor were Madame Wu and her entourage. Her father stood at the witch's side, beaming his approval. A gilded bed frame draped in satin stood nearby, bearer poles beneath it—prepared for the short journey to the dock, where it would be set adrift with the bride resting upon it, waiting to be claimed by the river god.

But where was Bai Yu?

Panic rose in Mei Lin's breast. If he were not on hand when the ceremony began, would she wind up in a watery grave despite his best assurances?

Madame Wu tottered forward and cocked her head to study Mei Lin critically. "You'll do...you'll do," she cackled at last. "Bring her inside for her bridal feast!"

Yan Pin stepped forward with a little bow, and Mei Lin slipped her arm through her father's. Where was Bai Yu?

The interior of the temple was decorated with flowers and banners. A long banquet table ran down the center of the hall. Mei Lin was ensconced at the head of the table in a grand, throne-like chair covered with gilt. A plate heaped with the finest delicacies was placed before her, but the thought of food made her slightly nauseous. A fine goblet brimming with crimson wine was set at her elbow, and this she managed to sip.

The wine had a curious aftertaste that aroused her suspicions as to the docility of former brides. She merely pretended to drink after that first sip, contriving to spill the rest onto the rush-covered floor.

The meal seemed to drag on forever, but at last, Madame Wu rose to her feet, raising her goblet in a toast. Mei Lin tried to wave away the servant at her elbow, but her own glass was refilled. Courtesy demanded she drink to the toast as Madame Wu cried in a ringing voice, "Hail the River God's Bride. May her marriage prove propitious to the entire village."

Mei Lin took a sip of the wine.

"Raise your glass high, Shang Mei Lin! This is your wedding day."

Everyone in the room was staring at her. She had to drink.

The wine had that strange aftertaste she had noticed before. She felt the room begin to spin. Where was Bai Yu?

Madame Wu came to Mei Lin's side and took her arm. "Come, dear. It is time."

Mei Lin allowed herself to be led out of the temple. The bridal bed wavered in and out of focus as she was helped toward it.

As they reached the side of the bed, a voice rang out, cutting the air like a knife. "Halt. I wish to see the bride."

Mei Lin blinked at the speaker. Her heart rose at the sight of him. It was Bai Yu, in his human guise, dressed in the formal robes of a magistrate.

Madame Wu rose to her full height, staring up her nose at the taller figure of Bai Yu. "Who are you, sir?"

"I am Hsi-men Pao, magistrate in this district. This is a state occasion, is it not? I am here to insure that the festival is conducted to the benefit of the district. That is its function, is it not?"

Madame Wu sputtered and fussed. "Why, of course! Without this ceremony, the River God would flood the fields, destroy our crops, and damage the village beyond repair."

"So you say. And to appease this angry god, you must send him the most beautiful girl in the village. So let me see the bride. I wish to judge her acceptability."

Madame Wu grabbed Mei Lin's arm and dragged her forward. The girl stumbled into Bai Yu's sturdy chest, laying her cheek against it for a brief instant before she righted herself to stand swaying before him.

Bai Yu raised an eyebrow at Madame Wu. "This is the most beautiful girl in the village?" His tone oozed skepticism, but his eyes

were warm as he gazed on Mei Lin. "This girl is plain and thin. I don't believe she will do. Go and tell the River God that we must choose another."

Madame Wu stared at him. "What are you saying?"

"Go and tell the River God his bride will be delayed while we find a suitable replacement."

Mei Lin kept her eyes focused on the ground. She feared if she looked at him, her love would shine forth and set the world on fire. She must pretend to be cowed in the presence of such power.

Therefore, she heard rather than saw the commotion as a protesting Madame Wu was dragged to the water's edge. A huge splash resounded, and droplets of water rained down upon Mei Lin like tears.

She glanced up. Bai Yu winked at her.

She lowered her eyes quickly. She had mixed feelings about his method of stopping the festival. Did Madame Wu deserve such a fate?

His voice spoke in her head, caressing as a kiss, "Do not worry, little one. She will not be permanently harmed, but perhaps the lesson will be well learned."

Aloud, he ordered the attendants whispering around the courtyard, "What is taking her so long to report back to me? You..." He pointed to one of the disciples. "Go and call her back."

There was a second splash. A short pause, and again he ordered another follower to bring back the witch. Another splash.

He tapped his foot impatiently. "None return. What is this breach? You must all go at once and bring back your mistress."

The remainder of the attendants threw themselves at his feet, kowtowing to the pavement until their foreheads were bloody. "No, great sir! We beg you. We confess. It is merely a way to cheat the villagers of money. The river god has never made such claims on us. Forgive us, oh lord."

"The river god detains this guest too long," sniffed Bai Yu. "Perhaps he has chosen his own bride. No longer will this festival be necessary."

He held out a hand to Mei Lin. "Let us adjourn. We have business of our own to discuss."

Her heart rose as she placed her hand in his.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “And now, the river god claims his own choice for bride. Come. It is your wedding night.” His eyes smoldered with unspoken promises.

With a thrill of anticipation, Mei Lin stepped forward to claim her bridegroom.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

Into the Woods , by Tamara James

Aiobhean's charges are missing. To find them she'll go into the wood
and face the Dark Lord. Will love bring light to the Wood?

Into the Woods
by
Tamara James

Cold as ice, dry as old bone, the stone floor of the Sidhe High Court had no connection to the earth. A reflection of its Queen, the magic of air and ice ruled here.

Feardorcha, lord of earth and night, resisted the urge to call up the rich dark bounty hidden beneath layers of pale marble. “As you desire my Queen.”

Twenty-seven crystal steps separated Feardorcha from his second cousin, the High Queen of the Sidhe. Points of rune carved elder arrows notched bows made from willow, each poised, ready to deal with any threat. Twin warriors flanked the stairs.

The gazes of those around him made the skin across the back of his neck itch. The breathless whispers of the court vibrated against the peaked tips of his ears. Their words slithered down the thin channel formed by the slender curve of cartilage and in. Plots, plans of assassination, and speculation made him weary. Feardorcha longed for the solitude of his wood.

With one knee pressed to the floor, forearm across the other thigh Feardorcha was a target. To see his cousin’s face he would have to crane his neck back at an angle that bared his throat to the pale warriors. Unacceptable.

He dipped his head in a quick show of obeisance. Feardorcha disregarded the indrawn breaths of the court behind him. Permission to rise had not been granted.

Like the elegant wings of a Luna moth the Queen’s robes fluttered about her gaunt frame. Her skin was whiter than the Thassos marble that graced her hall. Slender pointed ears, straight moon kissed hair, and a hollow cheeked face that radiated youth and beauty.

Feardorcha's cousin was the embodiment of what humans though fae looked like, cold death.

Low and deep, Feardorcha's voice enveloped the room. "I shall notify your guard when those blessed by the goddess reach the boarder between of my wood and the duir to the hill."

Pure and cool as water released from a glacier her voice cascaded down the steps. "Very well."

Feardorcha was impressed his cousin had almost managed to hide her irritation. Theirs was an unheard of situation. Since the first breath of life the duir to the High Court always resided in the heart of the high king or queen's land. It infuriated her that she ruled because he allowed her.

Quick and curt he nodded then strode toward the door.

"Oh, and Feardorcha..." The last syllable of his name hung in the silence like a single drop of water that struggled against frost's rapacious embrace.

He halted. His hand, encased in a thin black leather glove, hovered like a spider a hair from the shimmering entrance. Beneath his palm the power of the goddess pulsed. Ten descended to one Feardorcha used both syllable and number to tamp down his rising ire. Patience was not a well tread place within his heart.

The narrow bit of hope that she would speak her piece fell to dust when the silence stretched.

Damn frigid bitch loved her posturing.

Feardorcha hated the trappings and prostrations required every time he visited the High Court. He went through the rituals because peace maintained was worth a bit of his pride. Born hungry for power with the tongue of a politician and the mind of a schemer his cousin ruled far better then Feardorcha would ever.

The court scattered, their scurrying akin to tinder-dry leaves blown across the floor. Frost blues, wispy hints of gray clouds, dew kissed peaches, and the palest wisp of lavender mists scuttled into the corners. Feardorcha faced his cousin. The thick oily scent of fear mingled with the bile ripe odor of jealousy, the stink made his lip curl. His cousin's hall was filled with naught but treachery and falsehoods.

For a moment, Feardorcha pitied her to have to live with these pathetic aspects of the goddess for companions. He much preferred his empty hall.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

“My Queen?” Shift of shoulder, tilt of head, Feardorcha’s shallow bow bordered on insulting.

“Try not to kill all the humans who enter your wood.” Cruelty distorted the perfection of her mouth, twisting her smile.

“Those who have been blessed with the goddess kiss shall be allowed through.”

Outside the throne room the halls teamed with bare chested jinn, pookah, Babylonian chaos dragons, sphinx, and dozens more other poked their heads out doorways to watch his exit. The Queen was moving fast.

CHAPTER TWO

Aiobhean tossed the earthenware mug onto the table. The clatter echoed in the empty single room hut. Angry frustration made her voice harsh. “This is the third deserted village.”

Maggie Mae, her Irish Wolfhound, loped in, a clump of seed laden rye plants clamped between her jaws. Roots and soil fell in soggy lumps across the clean wood plank floors. The wolfhound deposited her haul next to the mug.

“Have a nice run?” Aiobhean dug her nails into the wiry hair behind Maggie Mae’s ears. A groan of doggy ecstasy encouraged Aiobhean to hit her hound’s favorite spots.

Puzzled, Aiobhean reviewed the events of the past month. All of the houses had been cleaned; clothing packed, animals missing, all portable items gone. No sign of violence physical or mental could be found. It appeared as though they’d all chosen to move at the same exact moment.

Nothing made sense. Aiobhean sat on the long wooden bench tucked under the table. Her thoughts searched for answers.

Bright sunlight reflected off the clear glaze that coated the thick mug. The clean, dry scent of herbs and soap hung in the air, and a soft breeze lifted the wispy tendrils of hair around her face. Cool from the brisk air the mug felt smooth between her palms.

Three blessed human and other villages lay abandoned. Imps, dragons, brownies, and fae, were missing.

After Aiobhean discovered the first village she went to Treasa, the green dragon of the valley. There she discovered her small corner of the world wasn’t alone, the strange disappearances were wide spread.

The great dragon had naught but weak assurances that all was well and a puzzling statement about the last human child of Danu

becoming one with the Dark. The dragon's words brought little comfort. Aiobhean was that child. Soon after her meeting with Treasa, the second village, then the valley of the dragons, lay bereft of life.

"Come." Bright morning sun grayed the world around her for a moment. Aiobhean's eyes adjusted. Small thatched roofed homes formed a circle around the fountain. Clear spring water bubbled from an urn held by the laughing figure of a water nymph.

Maggie Mae's long stride outpaced Aiobhean's. The wolfhound crisscrossed the yard five times before she'd made it to her mount. Maggie Mae tore past the houses. Protective of her the wolfhound would inspect the houses and outlying wood for intruders.

Cheerful ripples flowed across the surface at the base of the fountain. Aiobhean cleared the ring of houses. Off to one side set far away from the houses a series of buildings clumped together. One of them was a multi-chimney sprawling brick shop that housed the forges used by the glass artisans, potters, and smith. Several rectangular water troughs sat to one side.

"Hold up. I need to contact Bridget." The wolfhound's steel gray coat wove along the edge of the forest. Maggie Mae's joy filled yips grew louder and lower with her passage.

Not counted among the blessed, her assistant Bridget couldn't be contacted telepathically. The smooth surface of the water would act as a mirror, enabling Aiobhean to speak with her assistant.

Polished from the horses rubbing against it when they drank the wood was dark with age and wear. Aiobhean was careful not to touch the surface of the water when she gripped the edge. Pure and clear, the water reflected and oval faced woman. Wide green eyes, a straight nose, and pale peach skin arranged themselves into a pleasant package. Her hair was the one feature Aiobhean disliked blonde, brown, and red strands mingled in a mad tangle of wavy curls. The odd color and texture set Aiobhean apart from those in her care. Tucking the strands that had escaped her bun back into place, Aiobhean drew upon the core of magic within her soul.

"From my mouth to Bridget's ears let my words cross so that she might hear. Upon the water I see my face let this sight be replaced. Show me to her and her to me. As I will so mote it be." Aiobhean's magic acted as a bridge through time and space, linking her to Bridget.

Like the mist dissipating in first rays of dawn's light Aiobhean's image disappeared. For a moment nothing but sunlight shone on the water's surface. Then an image coalesced. A pink-cheeked girl with sun kissed freckles and light brown hair. Bridget's soft happy countenance was deceiving. Her assistant was tougher than an enraged wild boar.

"Aiobhean, you've news?"

Eight small sharp points of pain dug into Aiobhean's frustration. Unclenching her fists, Aiobhean rubbed her thumb over the bloody gouges on each palm. The tiny stings nothing compared to the wounds upon her heart. "Not good I'm afraid. Another empty village."

Bridget's blue-eyed gaze widened and her mouth formed a small o. "Was your magic able to discover where they'd gone?"

"Not a trace." Aiobhean kicked the hard packed dirt in front of the trough. "It's like they all just walked away."

The picture rippled and faded. Aiobhean caught and held the connection. Compassionate to a fault Bridget tried to touch Aiobhean.

A picture of a stern finger wagged in the now calm surface. "Now don't you be blaming yourself for this. You heard what the great dragon said." Bridget scrunched her face. Eyebrows, lips, and eyelids crinkled into a pinched frown, her voice haughty. The great dragon and Aiobhean's assistant did not get along. "All is as it was meant to be. Clarity will visit you when you accept the dark."

Bridget's hand hovered then curled away, her expression sympathetic, her voice firm. "Aiobhean you're not responsible for this. Beings choose their own path. Tis time for you to come home."

Tears blurred the world. Aiobhean felt her throat constricted with emotion. "Your words touch my heart, you are a true friend Bridget. Even if I could forget my duty as guardian of this land, do I not have a responsibility to care for my neighbors?"

Bridget's head bobbed up and down, then side-to-side. Aiobhean knew her assistant struggled with her need to keep Aiobhean safe and the need to thrust her out the door in search of the missing. "Of course, we all do. But you've tried everything and come away with nothing. What more can you do?"

Aiobhean squeezed her eyelids closed for a moment. Bridget wouldn't be happy. *Bugger*. Neither was she.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

While none would accuse the High Queen of being kind, the concern for and care she took of her people was above reproach. If any would be able to help Aiobhean find the missing the queen would. "I'm going to the High Court to speak with the queen."

Flushed, Bridget gasped. "But, but you can't."

Not surprised by her assistant's shock, no one approached the Sidhe unless invited. The Lord of the Dark of the Wood suffered no trespassers, especially not humans. Aiobhean hunched her shoulders. The sublime Gaelic shrug conveyed everything and nothing. "Answers are needed."

Bridget stole quick peeks over either shoulder. Her face filled the mirrored surface of the trough. Lower then a whisper her voice sent a series of rippled waves rolling over the surface. "Tis his domain."

CHAPTER THREE

Hooves skidded. Dust rose in a billowing cloud. Aiobhean slammed into the horse's neck as her mount fought to stop at the edge of the forest.

"Shh, it's okay." Murmuring nonsense, Aiobhean dismounted. Foam flecked sweat dripped down her mount's throat and chest.

Pain tore at her shoulders. "Oof." Aiobhean strained to keep hold of the bridle. Loud snorts punctuated each toss of the stallion's head. The leather of the reins stung her palms as it was yanked through her hands. Her mount used the slack created with each jerking movement to back up.

Aiobhean fought to calm the crazed horse. She murmured praise and bits of nonsense into his ear. In one continuous stroke she ran her free hand down his neck over his shoulder and back up again.

Five minutes later she gave up and cut the reins where they attached to the bridle. To force her horse to enter the Dark Lord's wood and risk injury made no sense. Nor would she reward the stallion's loyalty by binding his fears with magic. She could walk.

Neck thrust forward, legs extended to their full stride the stallion ran toward the nearest village. Without the reins Aiobhean didn't have to worry that they'd tangle or catch on something and get hurt.

A sensation akin to thousands of sugar ants crawling over her skin alerted Aiobhean to the presence of magic. Pure goddess blessed energy surround her, drawing upon that connection Aiobhean cast a spell. "Reveal the hidden so that I may see."

Deep moss green shield knots glowed on the bark of the trees that ran along the edge of the wood. Clean and simple the center of each knot contained a black raven clutching a silver spear dripping blood. Aiobhean took a moment to admire the bold warning. *Woods protected death to those who trespass.* She wondered if the Dark Lord

was as straightforward as his spell.

Scratch, click, the winter bare limbs of the shagbark trees brushed against one another. The sound desperate like nails scraping against the lid of a coffin. From their perches black-eyed ravens swayed to the hollowed melody. Thoughts of the Morrigan and the Dark Lord who ruled over this wood jumbled together like poorly matched jigsaw pieces.

This was not her domain the rules of her world did not apply here. Fear licked cold clammy kisses down each vertebra from the base of her skull to the tip of her tailbone.

Memory pulled Lady Rhiannon's firm clipped tone from the past. "Use fear to progress with caution, do not allow it to paralyze."

Lessons learned from her training on the Isle calmed Aiobhean.

She used her knife sliced the reins into usable lengths of leather. Then strung the strips through the holes she cut in the supply bag. Aiobhean had managed to salvage four of the eight bags from her saddle during her struggle to calm her horse.

A pair of satchels over each shoulder Aiobhean had one more task to complete before she entered. "Goddess, please grant your daughter the gift of your protection that she may serve those in her care."

Shoulders back, hands relaxed Aiobhean regulated her heart rate and breathing. From late afternoon bright to twilight shadows the world dimmed as her foot crossed the threshold into the Dark Lord's wood. Ancient magic pooled beneath her. Lapping over her toes it wound in slow increments up her body. The pale gray power spiraled down her elbow to encase her from wrists to fingertips. Like the glow of the full moon behind wispy clouds Aiobhean's shield held strong. Foreign magic writhed and rolled over her body. It sought a flaw in the shell of protective power Aiobhean had woven.

An alien hum abraded her senses.

Maggie Mae bumped her broad head against Aiobhean's waist then wedged it under her arm in search of comfort. A low huff whined against her hip.

"Pay no mind to the magic. The Dark Lord thinks he can scare us with his tricks." Aiobhean dug her nails through the coarse hair that covered her hound's back. Tisst, air whistled between her teeth. "They do naught but show his own fears."

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Aiobhean brushed off the foggy layer of magic that clung to Maggie Mae's coat. "Better?" Her wolfhound leaned into the strokes. Aiobhean continued to dislodge the Dark Lord's mist until all that clung to her hound's wiry coat was the soft luminous glow of the protective shield she'd woven around Maggie Mae.

"There you go girl." Aiobhean rubbed her palms against each other. Wispy pieces of magic spun toward the ground like fall leaves from tall branches. "Come."

CHAPTER FOUR

Moist doggie breath scented with cinnamon sugar panted in hot puffs over Aiobhean's face. "Maggie Mae, you didn't, did you?"

Sleep gritted the corners of her eyes, her back muscles knotted in protest over the lumpy roots and sharp stones she'd slept on. Gray light surrounded her. Still clutched in sleep's grasp Aiobhean wriggled toward conscious. Her internal clock marked the time just moments before dawn.

A warm crumb filled tongue spread saliva over her cheeks and nose. The sticky mess confirmed Aiobhean's suspicion. Maggie Mae had gotten into the fruit pastries. The hound had an incurable sweet tooth. Upright Aiobhean wiped off the doggie spit with the wide sleeve of her sleep tunic. "No doubt you'll be sick after gobbling up more than a dozen pastries."

The giant wolfhound's tail thumped. Her lolling tongue and wide grin gave her the appearance of innocence. Aiobhean hugged her companion. Laughter always close shared its joy her tone filled with its sound. "That who-me-I-didn't-do-anything look would be much more convincing if you didn't have bits of fruit in your teeth."

Aiobhean gathered up the remains of Maggie Mae's breakfast. She tucked the shredded bits of the oiled leather wrapper and chunks of pastry into the small garbage satchel. One did not sully a wood inhabited by the Sidhe. To do so might bring harm to the fae creatures that dwelt within.

"After I eat and clean up we'll head out. Okay girl." Aiobhean planted a series of kisses across Maggie Mae's broad snout.

Grateful that the stuffed flat bread had been left untouched Aiobhean sliced off a third. Sweet caramelized onions, roasted carrots, and spiced potatoes melted in her mouth. The slight tang of the flaky crust a divine counter to the sweet hot flavor of the filling.

Several half turns proved fruitless Aiobhean couldn't orient herself in the shadowed monotony of the forest. Massive shagbark trees gave each other a wide birth. Curled brown leaves carpeted the vast stretches of open space. Thick roots rose and fell like the ridged humps of the great sea serpents that traveled across the locks.

A perpetual half-light, that repulsed and fascinated Aiobhean, replaced the rays of both sun and moon. The gloaming played hide and seek along the wide buckling ridges of the tree's surface. Three inch sheets of bark peeled away from the under layer of wood to curl in ragged plates along the surface. The strips resembled charred flesh, broken and tattered as it peeled away from a body. Repulsed Aiobhean shifted her gaze to the deep green oval leaves.

Ravens perched on low limbs. They'd been her constant companions for the past two days. Creatures of the Dark Lord, it was well known that he used them to spy on trespasses.

Aiobhean ignored them and headed deeper into the forest.

The soft shushing of her leather boots moving through the leaves broke the abnormal stillness that engulfed the wood. Aiobhean flexed her hands in an attempt to dispel the Dark Lord's magic. It continued to pcourse over her skin in search of any weakness in her shields. The strange energy made her joints feel swollen and her nerves sluggish. Maggie Mae brought her body next to Aiobhean's. The gesture sought and gave comfort.

A raven's single deep kaa ended the silence. The territorial called grew as it swept through the air. Maggie Mae's hair bristled and a low growl rumbled through her bared teeth.

The fluttering of countless sighs as they dragged against one another filled the air. The ravens wings spread launched into the sky. They flew as a single unit, winding like a great black, silk ribbon of shimmering feathers, in the direction she headed.

Low on food and water Aiobhean prayed to the goddess that their desertion meant she was near the duir that lead to the High Queen.

* * * *

Feardorcha's conscious filled the shadow ravens. His body shattered and reshaped into their winged forms. Fuller than the crow's harsh cry, his beaks opened and his voices screeched in triumph. "Kaa kaugh."

Muscles stretched. Strong wings beat. Flight feathers caught the

current and lifted his bodies. He flew toward the lone silver glow in the shadowed twilight.

Joy vibrated along their sleek forms. Their primitive brains focused on one thing. She was coming.

Like ink poured from a bottle, the shadow ravens spilled through the sole window in his keep. Round they twirled, the loop tightened with each circuit. The silvered light struggled to illuminate the growing dark. Lost. Its rays swallowed by the shadows.

His bodies melted, merging one into the other. Funneling downward they began to coalesce in the center of the tower room. From the murky storm a form grew. Broad masculine feet, muscled calves, thick powerful thighs, narrow hips that spread into a powerful chest, wide shoulders, and night dark hair flowed into being.

Ripples undulated across the form. Fae muscles battled aviary ones for dominance. Wings fluttered and fought for freedom.

We fly. The ravens wanted to return to the sky. Sharp beaks sloped into tapered heads that pushed against smooth connective tissue. Flat black eyes peered from striated muscle. Deep angry caws screeched from half formed throats. Viscous liquid stretched, sucking the rebellious bits back. Bones snapped into place. Sinew flexed. Skin spread sealing in blood and fluids.

Released from the shadow's grasp, silver light once more suffused the small tower room. Body whole, Feardorcha wrenched his conscious into a single entity.

For the sake all The Others, Feardorcha had allowed the blessed humans safe passage through his wood. For months they'd traipsed about, brash, and grating with slovenly habits and negligent care of the earth. Humans kissed by the goddess or otherwise were the antithesis of Feardorcha. A being of the dark earth, Feardorcha was descended from the bottomless solitude and deep silences found within the heart of world. More than once Feardorcha had to hold his temper, when he wanted nothing more than to expel them from his domain. But the goddess was kind, for those who passed her tests there was always a reward.

Aiobhean was the goddess reward. One Feardorcha intended to claim her.

Helpless to stop after he'd first glimpsed her bright sun kissed form, Feardorcha had spent years watching the sexy guardian from

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the shadow of his wood. She was everything he wasn't, a social, outgoing being of light and love.

She'd taught him that not all with human blood were selfish greedy creatures. Though he still loathed most of the vile race of man, Feardorcha had grown to cherish this glorious guardian of the land and he'd never spoken a word to her.

Anticipation combined with a feral lust. The demigoddess roamed his wood. The potent combination beat through his blood. Feardorcha's muscles jumped. Tall and well proportioned with magnificent curves, a sweet rounded butt and full breasts

The bright crystal globe extinguished when he exited the chamber.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rough-hewn onyx towered above Aiobhean. The keep at once glittered and swallowed the faint glow that suffused the forest like lovers upon a bed. The combination of light and dark was disconcerting because it followed no set pattern, a shiver rolled over Aiobhean it wasn't natural.

Agitated Maggie Mae paced. A grunting huff punctuated each step. Aiobhean didn't blame her companion.

She'd been to the duir before, brought by one of the Queen's guard through time and space to a small clearing in the middle of the Dark Wood. This windowless keep before her was not where she intended to be. A reflection of all aspects of the fae, the shape and appearance of the duir shifted on a whim. However, it always appeared in the center of a small sunlit clearing filled with the blessings and bounty of the goddess.

Maggie Mae whined. The wood seemed to shift and breath. Aiobhean's skin pebbled and the small hairs came to attention. Anxiety sloshed like a thin layer of oil in her gut.

She slipped her hand onto her sword, magic gathered. Then regulated the rapid beat of her heart and quick puffs of her breaths.

Keeping her tone light, Aiobhean scratched behind Maggie Mae's ear. "Know what, girl? I've never approached the duir through the Dark Wood." Aiobhean traversed the exterior of the Dark Lord's tower. The structure appeared to have torn its way up through the bowls of the earth. "Perhaps the duir's aspect reflects how it's approached."

Smooth to the touch there were no latches, triggers, or depressions that would indicate an entrance. The surface radiated warmth. Magic pulsed into her fingers and palm. Its feel identical to the layer that coated her when she'd first stepped into the wood. This

was not the duir. Unease set small sharp teeth into her gut. Aiobhean had found the Dark Lord's tower. As a guardian she was accustomed to protecting those in her care with magic and muscle. Her skills as a warrior and mage had been honed on the Isle of the Lady. Wielders of dark magic didn't scare her. Enraged beasts she could deal with, but this odd tingling aroused and confused her.

The Dark Lord was different then any other she'd faced before. Rumors of his prowess in battle, his ruthless treatment of trespassers, and his even darker sexual appetites abounded. All feared him, even the queen tread with care around him. Aiobhean was no coward nor was she a fool. She'd come for answers and the Dark Lord's keep wouldn't provide what she sought. Getting to the duir was imperative.

Aiobhean's hushed tone held urgency. "Maggie Mae, come." With care and magic she made sure no prints would be left behind in the soil.

"You've entered my land without permission." Night dark and silky smooth, his voice halted Aiobhean's hurried retreat. "Come all this way."

By the goddess, he was behind her. Spine stiff Aiobhean turned to face the Lord of the Dark Wood.

The world spun before her. A harsh gasp embarrassed her by escaping. Dressed in tight black leather from his massive shoulders to his large boot encased feet. Every mouth-watering muscle delineated by the body hugging clothes bulged with strength. Unease slithered down her back. His thick-framed form screamed his earth elemental heritage.

Rough angles and square edges merged to form masculine perfection. Not handsome, his sensuous lips and heavy lidded gaze made her want to rub her skin against his. Unease morphed. Arousal spread like lovers hands from her tailbone, over her hips, and across her abdomen to settle in a womb clenching liquid rush between her legs.

"Surely, you're not leaving so soon?" One side of his mouth tipped up in a cynical smile.

Aiobhean worked enough spit back into her mouth to speak. "I seek entrance to the duir and an audience with the Queen."

"I see and this gives you leave to ignore courtesy?"

An angry grumble vibrated against Aiobhean's right thigh.

Maggie Mae settled her body against Aiobhean.

"I ignored nothing." Chin up. "You sir answered none of my requests." Hands to hips she gripped to keep from pointing her finger at him. "Don't think to deny your receipt of them. After the first one went unanswered I made sure to tag them with a spell. Each one made it to you and was read by you." Angry, Aiobhean didn't hide her disgust. "Two weeks have passed and no reply." She paced closer. "I could no longer wait. So if you would just point the way to the duir I will be happy to leave your wood.

"No." Arms crossed the Dark Lord lounged against the sloped walls of the tower, one leg draped over the other.

"What? Why?" Aiobhean snapped her mouth closed.

Another one of those half smiles transformed his face from stern and harsh to breathtaking. Aiobhean's clit applauded. Her labia slicked and the whole of her sex throbbed.

His nostrils flared. His gaze darkened and he grinned. Smug prig knew what he did to her.

Maggie Mae growled, hackles rising. Caught between desire and anger Aiobhean choose to not to give in to either instead she crossed her arms and waited for an answer.

"To allow you entrance into the Sidhe without finding out your intentions would be terribly dangerous. For all I know you could be plotting the Queen's demise." His deep voice stroked and aroused. "You are human and can not be trusted."

"Not trusted." Aiobhean poked the thick expanse of his chest. "I am a guardian! Daughter of the goddess. It is my duty to protect all who dwell upon the land I was entrusted to care for." Skin hot nerves tight. Outrage coursed through Aiobhean. "You knew all this. You play with me fae."

Rumors didn't just speak of his power and temper. They also spoke of how he was the true ruler of the High Court. How it was the Sidhe not the fae that chose who ruled. That even though the Dark Lord refused the throne and appointed his cousin Queen in his stead the Sidhe refused to accept her. Thus the duir remained in his land.

For once they told the truth. As a student on the Isle of the Lady, Aiobhean had studied the laws governing the others. Knowing this, Aiobhean had been careful in the wording of her requests for passage through the wood. She included her status and the information she'd

gathered on the missing villagers. Its Lord may have rejected the crown but he couldn't change the reasons why the Sidhe chose him. He was a caretaker.

His casual demeanor and unconcerned attitude could mean the villagers were safe. But with the fae it was hard to know. At times they were compassionate. Even when they helped and fixed those who accepted their gifts paid a higher price than they could ever imagine.

"What do you want?"

"A bit of your time." His dark gaze stroked over her. His desire a potent force surrounded her. "I promise to make it pleasurable."

Aiobhean felt her body move toward the promised pleasure. It had been a while since she'd felt the full satisfaction of a male seated within her. Her gaze stole down. His thick length stretched a long way from root to tip. Aiobhean pressed her legs together, hopping to ease the ache between her thighs.

Despite her wants, Aiobhean shook her head, no. "Your offer is kind. Perhaps I might visit you after I've spoken to the Queen."

"You've no need to seek an audience with the Queen. I can provide you with the answers to your questions."

"You know where they've gone?"

Behind him the wall evaporated. In its place an arched door lead into a narrow passage. "Yes."

The Dark Lord slid through the door. The shadows engulfed him. All that remained the empty dark of the hall.

Standing in the gray twilight of the wood Aiobhean debated her options. Stumble about the enchanted forest in the hope of finding the duir, or follow the Dark Lord into his keep.

Aiobhean entered the dark.

CHAPTER SIX

Near black filled the passage. Rounded bumps rose and fell over the surface of the wall, they bounced against the pads of her fingertips. They guided her forward. Maggie Mae trailed several paces behind her. Lavender scented air teased her nose. Thoughts of lazy summer days spent harvesting the earth's bounty filled Aiobhean's mind.

Her hound's easy stride, and relaxed posture, released the tension from Aiobhean's muscles. If she were in any danger Maggie Mae would never have allowed Aiobhean the lead. She held onto that thought as she traveled the near dark hall.

Emptiness greeted her hand. Aiobhean groped behind her. Solid stone. She pivoted inched forward, more stone. She pondered her options. Back the way she came or follow the new direction. Other than this annoying game of follow the leader the Dark Lord hadn't harmed her and he had offered her information on her charges. Aiobhean took the turn. Like the removal of a blind fold an intimate dinning hall. Silver candelabras graced the center of a round polished wood table. Platters of steaming dishes littered the surface. Cut crystal glasses, and two table settings lined up with the high backed padded chairs.

A form separated from the shadows. Aiobhean tensed.

"Please, sit and join me in a meal. You must be tired and hungry." Wispy tendrils of dark clung to the gloom that resided in the corners of the room. Like the arms of a lover they draped the Dark Lord's form, making it appear as if he was formed from the dim murk that resided in the recesses.

Hand to hilt, magic harnessed, Aiobhean fought her attraction. "You said you knew what happened."

He nodded, approval of her tenacity evident in the slight

amusement that turned up the corners of his mouth. "I do."

She found herself staring into a broad silk covered chest. He moved like a breath, without notice. The rumors of whom the duir chose were true. Before her stood the true High King. How was she to deal with him?

"Join me."

Aiobhean's gaze had a long way to climb before meeting the Dark Lord's gaze. At five nine she wasn't accustomed to a being that towered over her. Taller and wider than any man she'd ever known. Aiobhean liked the feel of him above her.

She wanted to force him to spill the knowledge he held of her people's whereabouts immediately. Aiobhean's teeth ground against one another. Her polite tone near killed her. "Will you share the information with me?"

"Of course." Dark promises filled his voice.

Dragonflies somersaulted in her belly. Her nipples swelled, pouting in aching need. Aiobhean's emotions were a confused knot. Part of her longed to learn of him, his loves and hates, his wants and needs. Something in her was drawn to the towering fae with the sad brandy colored gaze and rough beauty. Its need awakened the first time she saw him. The rational guardian in her cautioned against quick decisions and Sidhe tricks.

That small bit of caution won. Aiobhean scanned her shield. The envelope of pure white energy remained intact. No fae glamour enchanted her. Half remembered stories of perfect mates, a gift promised by the goddess to each guardian surfaced from the murky depths of her mind. Her heart shuddered and her soul rejoiced.

Aiobhean had been alone for a long time unwilling to settle for less than what her parents had. They'd been best friends and lovers. She backed away afraid to believe her time had come. "Thank you."

The soothing calm of the slumbering earth surrounded her. Heat from his palm branded her. His long fingers wrapped her bicep in a gentle grasp. Tingles radiated from his touch tweaking her nipples. "Please sit. We can discuss everything you desire while you eat. Days of eating hard flatbread are not enough to sustain you."

Need etched his face. Dark wants swirled in his brandy colored gaze. Lust stroked Aiobhean from toe to crown. Her loss of control over her emotions and body scared her. Never had she lost track of

her duty. She backed up. “Your offer is appreciated but....”

The Dark Lord tugged her against him. The heated silk covering his chest soaked into the skin of her cheek. Damp warmth stroked against her hair, bringing with it sin laden thoughts. His words curled around the shell of her ear. “My oath that they are unhurt.”

Magic of a vow given swirled in the small room, sparks popped and crackled from the fire that blazed in the hearth. Deep within the core of Aiobhean’s soul the truth of his statement rang clear and pure.

Maggie Mae grunted from her sprawl across the thick padded bed by the hearth. Next to the hound a half eaten bowl of choice cuts of meats sat in a tray designed to hold two bowls chest high. The bed, food, and water had appeared when they’d entered the dinning room.

“Unhurt is a far cry from safe, fae.” Aiobhean retreated from the exquisite press of his body. Cold took the place of heat. “Fae are well known for telling truths that lack that which has been asked.”

“True.” Warmth surrounded her face, calluses abraded Aiobhean’s skin as his palm cupped one of her cheeks and his fingers splayed over the other.

Aiobhean felt drawn to his craggy, square jawed features.

His mouth looked uncomfortable with the closed lipped smile that struggled for freedom. Hand to heart he tipped his head down. “While I cannot guarantee that they will never know the sting of pain, I vow to you that they are under the care of the goddess and are in a safe place.” His long arm dragged across her shoulders, the firm muscles draped her from shoulder to shoulder. They bunched, scattering chills down and over her torso while he pulled a chair away from the table. “Sit so that we might learn of one another. I find I crave to hear all you have to say.”

Once more the truth of his words settled within Aiobhean’s soul. Her people were alive and well. Now she had to determine what amusement he sought at her expense. “Why would the great Dark Lord of the Wood be interested in a mere human?”

“Mere human?” One of his midnight colored eyebrows rose in an elegant arch. “I think not Aiobhean, guardian of the land of Erie, daughter of the goddess, you are no mere mortal.”

“It’s true that I am gifted by my lineage, however, I am human and you no love of my race. What more about this human could you wish to learn?”

Side to side he shook his head. The gesture denied her words. "Why would a male not wish to get to know you? You are a beautiful woman." He rubbed the pad of his thumb over her lower lip. "I can see your lovely form and feel the bright purity of your magic. They call to me as a male, make me want to touch your soft pale skin, and allow the essence of your light and energy to merge with mine."

He pressed the digit to the seam of her mouth, asking entrance. Aiobhean parted her lips. He dipped into the opening. The tip of her tongue tasted the calloused heat of his skin. Their moans mingled.

Gravel rough, his voice stroked her body. "None of those things however tells me about your heart. What you think as you lay in your bed wrapped in the deep welcoming shadows of the night? As you go about tending your duties? The things that make you smile. What makes you sad?"

Aiobhean rose to meet him. Long strokes of his tongue explored the hollowed cavern within her parted lips. The smooth heated feel of its moist length danced pleasure over her. Aiobhean's hands sought an anchor. Her muscles melted into one liquid nerve ending of ecstasy.

A series of soft kisses ended the scorched heat of his claim. "These are the things I crave to learn. I wish to share with you. Would you honor me with that knowledge?"

Boneless, Aiobhean slid into the seat he offered. Praying that the scent of her arousal wasn't as strong to him as it was to her. She crossed her legs and twisted so she could meet his gaze. The black of his pupils engulfed the brown of his irises. His long fingered hands gripped the back of the chair she sat in, his chest bellowed, and a fine sheen of moisture dotted his forehead.

He looked like a male fighting for control. Aiobhean's channel clenched and the liquid evidence of her arousal streamed from her. The sight of him made her want to climb over the chair and onto him.

This Dark Lord of the Wood was different than the one spoken of in whispered rumors. Aiobhean had no doubt he was more than capable of the deeds credited to his name. His magic pulsed with a strength she'd never experienced and his powerful body moved with the ease of a male capable of speed and deadly force. But his sad brandy colored gaze was filled with a deep well loneliness. That combined with the unconscious care of his actions spoke of layers yet to be uncovered.

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Intrigued by the contradicting facets, Aiobhean nodded her consent. “Sit, Dark Lord, and we’ll share with each other.”

A small frown pulled the skin between his eyebrows together. “My name is Feardorcha.”

Tender warmth snaked past the shell that protected her heart. Fea names held power. Aiobhean hesitated not sure why he would give her that power over him.

Shadows shifted around them in a restless shuffle. Foggy tendrils snaked through the air, along the ceiling, and floor. “Would you honor me by using it?”

Dark man, his name fit him. “Very well, Feardorcha.” Gaze shuttered, mouth compressed. He looked so worried Aiobhean couldn’t refused his request.

His lips stole across hers in a quick pass before he went to his seat opposite hers. “Tell me of what you were like as a child.”

Aiobhean felt the goddess nod her approval.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The afternoon passed in a blur of words and heated touches. Not surprising, Feardorcha held strong opinions on everything. After their meal he'd shown her his home. Aiobhean had been surprised that it wasn't the gloom filled cavern she'd first thought it to be.

A well-lit library filled with scrolls, books, and folded parchments tempted Aiobhean to curl on the deep chaise set before the fire. In the heart of the keep a garden of night blooming plants and a slender spring glowed soft moonlight that shone through the high glass domed ceiling. Moths fluttered in graceful dancing arcs. Delicate fragrances caressed the skin and filled her senses with peace.

Sinking beneath the heated warmth of her bath, Aiobhean rinsed the soap from her hair and body. After her tour, Feardorcha had brought her up the narrow tower stairs to his bedroom.

Solitary by nature his home had only one sleeping chamber. Once inside Feardorcha gave her a choice. Spend the night in his bed with him or spend it alone.

Always honest with herself, Aiobhean admitted long before Feardorcha's question that she wanted him. Not because his tall frame drew her and his kisses ignited her body to the point of near orgasm. While valid reasons for taking him, who he was, his thoughts, feeling, vulnerability made him more desirable than any male she'd ever known.

Aiobhean took the only acceptable choice, a night in his bed.

Outside the bathing chamber Feardorcha waited for her. Aiobhean's nipples tightened at the thoughts of the night to come. Cream glide from her channel, her clit swelled, and her nipples ached. She swam across the heated bathing pool. Thick black towels lay on the warm stone slab at the entrance to the pool.

Feardorcha left them for her after he drew her bath. The fae knew

how to take care of a guest. Her womb fluttered in memory of his tender care. Aiobhean scooped them up as she climbed out of the pool. Anticipation made her movements rushed. Quick swipes gathered the moisture along her skin. Even faster movements removed the water from her hair. She left it free to curl in soft waves around her face and down her back. From one of her satchels she took a container of lavender scented cream.

The silky texture and floral scent of the moisturizer heightened her arousal. Aiobhean smiled when she thought of Feardorcha's reaction to the light hints of fragrance it would behind. Ready, she headed out the door.

The sight of his powerful frame ceased her forward momentum. Squatting on his haunches, Feardorcha's legs bulged with power, his thighs curved into a tight perfect male butt. The slope of his back eased into shoulder muscles packed with strength. They bunched, released, and bunched again, moving in time with his hands. His straight black hair draped his face, blocking it from Aiobhean's sight. Maggie Mae lolled at his feet; her back legs akimbo, a continuous moan of pleasure escaped her parted snout.

Feardorcha had found the wolfhound's favorite spot, her armpits.

Sensing her, his head rose and turned so that his hair slid back, exposing the harsh planes and angles of his high cheekbones, broad forehead, and squared jaw. His dark gaze pierced her. His voice a rough caress. "Think I could rub your sweet spot and make you scream your satisfaction?"

Giving her wolfhound one last scratch, Feardorcha stood, hand out stretched, palm up.

Aiobhean crossed the floor and slipped her hand into his. She tucked the dark silky strands of his hair behind his ear, then leaned up and ran the tip of her tongue along the shell of his ear. "Not if I find yours first." She nipped stinging bites from the tender skin of his throat down to soft flesh between his collarbone. "And make you pour your pleasure into my mouth."

Balls tight, Feardorcha felt a pearl of pre-cum drip down the broad head of his penis. Aiobhean's hot words and cleaver mouth had him near spilling his seed on the floor.

Feardorcha dragged her body to his. The velvet soft globes of her breasts smashed against the wall of his chest. With his hand splayed

across the smooth dip above the rounded curve of her butt he pushed her against him. The silky skin of her belly rubbed a delicious friction against his member. Feardorcha pumped his hips. Sweet, oh so sweet. Aiobhean's body glided over his shaft. Her light floral perfume surrounded him.

Aiobhean squirmed. Needy moans pushed from her mouth to his. Feardorcha's hand roamed, sliding from her hip to the plumped out side of her breast. He lingered at the delicious flesh.

His cock beat with the heavy pulse of unfulfilled lust. Cupping his hand under her butt cheek, Feardorcha lifted Aiobhean. The cream slicked lips of her sex dragged moisture up his erection. The nub of her swollen clit caught between the notched flesh at the base of the flared tip of his cock head. Pleasure sank sharp fangs into the base of his spine. Feardorcha moaned. Need craved.

Neck arched, Aiobhean tossed her head. Sexy groans accompanied the grinding movements of her hips. Passions heat dripped from her channel, coating Feardorcha.

He loved how the full globes of her rear filled his hand. Her hipbones hit against his. The blood flushed flesh of her clit dragged over the sensitive flesh at the base of his head.

Nails scored his back, her hips pumped against him, her lips hugged his length, and the honeyed heat of her channel slicked the way. A long guttural growl accompanied the fluttering muscles of her vagina. The full scented aroma of a woman's release filled the air. Feardorcha's mouth watered for the taste of her and his penis insisted he sink into her.

Torn between twin needs, he soothed Aiobhean down from her release.

"Feardorcha."

Mouth slack, eyes closed Aiobhean raced through him like a tide wave against the shore.

"By the goddess, do you know how magnificent you look? Your body blushes with arousal. Your scent clings to the air and paints my skin. I can't decide if my need to feel your wet heat wrap around my cock is greater than my need to fill my mouth with your cream."

"You can taste me later. My body is so empty." Aiobhean licked then nipped at Feardorcha's lips.

Her hand flattened across his right pectoral, giving her the

leverage to push back. Color rode pleasure's kiss across the skin of her cheeks. Sweat dampened tendrils of hair stuck to the sides of her face. Swollen from his kisses, her lips pouted and her gaze held a dazed sheen. Feardorcha had never seen a sight more beautiful than this woman right at this moment.

"Will you end my ache?"

"Yes." Widening his stance, Feardorcha's hands tucked under the notched seam between her buttocks and legs. "Wrap your legs and arms around me and hold on tight."

Her eyes widened. "You not going to take me here in the middle of the room, with nothing to lean against?"

"That is my intention." Feardorcha planned on taking his woman in the traditional mating stance. When an earth fae took the woman who was his fated mate he took her standing before the elders of the court. The ritual acted as proof that he was strong enough to bear the weight of the responsibilities he now took on. With the elders already under the care of the goddess Feardorcha couldn't perform the ritual publicly, at the moment. But witnesses or not Aiobhean was the woman fated to be his mate and he would take her for the first time as a bound earth fae takes his woman.

"I'm too heavy for that." Aiobhean squirmed against him, trying to wiggle down his body and out of his grasp. Shifting her weight so that it rested on one broad palm. Feardorcha raised his other hand.

The firm slap sung through the quiet. A startled gasp puffed from her mouth and her eyelids slid down. Her dew coated his hand. She rubbed against the palm of his hand like a cat. Feardorcha's cock jumped. His woman liked the bite of his palm against her flesh. Pleased, he anticipated being able to explore how much she like it.

"Aiobhean." He called her name twice more and ceased his ministrations before her glazed eyes cleared enough that he was sure he had her attention. "I've been supporting your weight since I first kissed you." Feardorcha punctuated his words with another stinging slap.

Fresh juice leaked from her channel. The muscles in his belly flexed in time with the twitching of his shaft. Slick with need her tight sheath fought the second finger Feardorcha added to the first. Using the pad of his thumb, Feardorcha circled her clit. Aiobhean's head fell forward. Her lips tickled the skin between his neck and color bone.

More groaned want than question. "How."

"My ancestors were formed from the dark solitude found deep in the hollowed caverns of the earth. Though we are one with the night and shadows we are of the earth not the air. Your weight is naught but a small pebble held in the palm of my hand."

Feardorch teased the velvet entrance of her womb with the tips of his fingers. Up to the first knuckle then out in shallow strokes. Aiobhean's clit plumped further. She flexed her hips, shoving her vagina down onto Feardorch's fingers. Her sheath clamped around them and she ground her mound against his hand. A moan punctuated her release.

"Goddess look at you." His cock pulsed, cum dripped from the tip. Feardorch squeezed his shaft just below the head in an effort to stop his orgasm. Pleasure teetered on pain's edge.

Feardorch transferred her weight back to both hands and lifted Aiobhean so that the v of her thighs was level with his face. Fingers tunneled through his hair. Gripping the strands in her fists, Aiobhean used her hold to steady herself. A small yip accented her surprise. The small pain added to his arousal.

Pulling her mound to his face, Feardorch drew the woman's scent of her musk into his lungs and the taste of her into his mouth. *By the goddess she was sweet.*

The small sample not enough. Feardorch sucked her plump clit into his mouth. Aiobhean's hands tore at his hair. He nearly came from the bite of her nails digging into his scalp. He groaned, his mouth flush with Aiobhean's lips. From slit to clit Feardorch dragged his tongue savoring her luscious flavor. She pulsed. He stuffed his tongue into her channel.

"Feardorch." Aiobhean rode his face. "Enough."

He shifted her down. Positioned her weeping slit over his rock hard erection. Sweet heat enveloped his head. Her tight channel parted, granting entrance to the slow press of his length.

Near ready to spill his seed, he prayed Aiobhean was close to another release. Seated balls deep, Feardorch drew her back up his shaft. Aiobhean whimpered and nipped the tender skin along his shoulders. Ecstasy spread from the base of his spine.

"Feardorch. Faster. I'm so close."

Thank the goddess. "Hold on to my shoulders." Feardorch

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gripped her hips and plunged in and out of her slick welcoming sheath.

Aiobhean's orgasm fluttered rapid contractions that gripped the length of his cock in a series of mind-blowing pulses. Feardorcha's seed pumped from him in a stream of ecstasy he'd never experienced before.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pleasured nerve endings rejoiced, Aiobhean's body moistened with the memory of ecstasy. She felt like warm honey, boneless and content. Feardorcha was a sensuous and talented lover with an unexpected tender side that snuck into her very soul and warmed the cold empty places. Guilt sucked the pleasure out. Here she lay, her channel hot and wet with his seed. Her stomach stuffed with decadent delights. Aiobhean's heart curled tight like a new bud ready to open and accept the first rays of love. All she'd hoped for was so close she could feel the breath of its promise upon her.

Had she once thought about the missing or her duty to them over the past day? No.

"You've not shirked your duty." His words soothed the doubts that plagued her heart. "They are happy and comfortable in their new homes." Feardorcha's fingers drew patterns over her belly, his long body pressed against her side.

"Why would they leave?" Aiobhean propped her elbows under her. Silver gray wisps of his magic clung to the tips of his index finger. Crisp edged the elegant lines of knot work began to take shape on the sloped pooch of her belly. She knew the pattern was familiar and significant but her orgasm drugged mind couldn't place it. "Where did they go?"

Fingers splayed, palm tilted up toward the ceiling. Feardorcha murmured. "Withdraw." Like a pupil going from light to dark the ceiling dilated open, reveling a clear evening sky.

"The goddess sent them to distant worlds so that they might live in peace." Magic flowed up and out from his fingertips. "Show us our kinsman where they now dwell."

The bright twinkle of the stars faded into the night. Small orbs floated down, hovering over Aiobhean and Feardorcha. Afraid to end

the spell Aiobhean touched one of the delicate orbs. A purple sky, with twin suns filled the background. Miniature frolicking satyrs, fauns, and imps bloomed over its surface. Aiobhean reached for another orb, then another, each showed scenes of others settling into their new homes, their joy evident.

Contented that all was well Aiobhean had one question. “Why now?”

“Because it was time for us to leave.” Feardorcha placed a soothing kiss on the soft skin between her hipbones. His thumb rubbed tiny circles. Goosebumps chased his movements across her flesh.

Scooting up, his lips pressed a tender to kiss hers. Sympathy softened his brandy colored gaze. “Unblessed humans and locusts have many things in common.” Feardorcha scowled. “Both breed like over exuberant rabbits, then devour everything around them until nothing remains.”

“Feardorcha...” Using his forearm, he levered himself up and over her. His weight pinned hers to the mattress. Warm lips dominated hers, ending her protest.

“Sweet, you know it’s true. The unblessed have spread to every corner of the world. With each year their numbers grow in giant leaps. Already many of the others have been squeezed out of their territories.” Feardorcha leaned back. “Filled with fear and jealousy, the unblessed destroy that which they cannot control. It is no longer safe to dwell in the land that gave us life.”

Aiobhean wished she could argue with the words Feardorcha spoke but she couldn’t deny their truth. She could also understand the unblessed’s aggression and fear. Many of the Others were arrogant. Taking what they wished, forcing those weaker than them to do their bidding. Aiobhean had to admit separating the others from the unblessed was best for all.

“Have they all gone?”

“Most. Some are completing the clean up. They will erase all trace of our existence.” Feardorcha’s eyebrows bunched together. Aiobhean grinned he looked confused. “A scattered few have chosen to stay. They will help the unblessed grow and learn to live in harmony with nature.”

She felt adrift. A hollowed out pain echoed in her heart. The

goddess had not called Aiobhean to accompany her people on their journey. Was she to stay and be among those to guide the unblest?

"Aiobhean." Feardorcha looked scared, unsure of himself.

She threaded her fingers through his. "Yes?"

"My time to leave has come." All planes and angles, he averted his face as though seeking guidance.

A sharp tearing lacerated her already bruised heart. She'd been afraid to believe the stories told to her as a child. A perfect mate, one she would recognize the moment her gaze fell upon him. It had sounded like the nonsense of foolish girls and she'd thought that was what the tale was. Until she followed Feardorcha into the dark and, just like the stories, she'd lost her heart upon their first kiss.

Now he was leaving. Tears stung and anguish settled in to stay.

His large warm hands surrounded hers, his thumb stroked over the back. "Aiobhean, I want you to come with me." Feardorcha lifted his head. Midnight hair fell to his shoulders, his brandy colored gaze wide with fear and hope. "The moment you crossed the threshold into my wood and my magic touched yours, your goodness and love sank deep into my soul. When you stood in front of my tower and I watched your determination to find those in your care and your fierce loyalty, a crack broke in the stone I'd encased my heart in. Then we spoke and I learned of your strength and wisdom, your passion and joy and my heart belonged to you forever."

Both his hands held hers. His mouth lingered in the center of her palm. "I love you, Aiobhean. I know that not much time has passed. We've yet to learn much of one another, but please say you'll come with me and consent to be my mate."

For a moment Aiobhean could not draw her breath. Air came to her in a rush and with it her words. "Feardorcha, I thought I'd be naught but an empty shell when you said your time had come to leave." The tears spilled over lids and down her cheeks. "Then you said those words and told me you love me as I love you and my heart filled to near breaking."

Aiobhean brushed aside the hands that tried to gather the moisture and pushed at his shoulder rolling him onto his back. "Dear Sweet, Feardorcha, there is nothing I want more than to accompany you wherever the goddess sends us and be your mate.

A true smile, broad and full softened his face. It was the first

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she'd ever seen, but Aiobhean vowed not the last. "I believe it is customary to seal that promise with a kiss."

Feardorcha drew her mouth to his.

The goddess smiled, delighted by their union.

Summoning Dangerously , by Bridghid Parkinson

Alaunra thought the mage's lifestyle might be glamorous until the Dragon War. After the treaty, could her newly developed spells bring love, comfort, or danger?

Visit Bridghid's website: bridghidparkinson.blogspot.com

Summoning Dangerously
by
Bridghid Parkinson

“Get away from me... now!” Alaunra screamed.

Because it was her magical creation, the stone golem did exactly as she ordered.

Mindless, she thought. She sat up from the table and started to get dressed. The stone golem had walked backward to the far wall and it gave only a blank stare from the carving on its face. In spite of the thick penis poking outward in front of him, it was lifeless. She refused to refer to the *creature* as a ‘he’ with any references that might indicate it was human.

Now, she was frustrated from simply attempting to relieve her frustrations.

The wonderful, magical life of a mage... she thought scornfully. *God... if they only knew.*

Alaunra worked hard to make her magical talents strong as a girl. When in training, none of the regular boys wanted to go out with her any more because they were afraid. They didn’t believe she would turn them into a horse, but they were afraid she could enchant them with a spell. Even the other young men in magical training appeared to be afraid—or they distrusted her—because she was the teacher’s pet. Of all people, they should have known but it was an uphill battle all of her life. The citizens had been intrigued with the romance of the magician’s lifestyle and the seers’ wisdom and she found out the hard way that it’s lonely work.

The Dragon War started when she was a girl and her talent was immediately put to use by apprenticing with the defenses mage. They

were at war with the dragons for twenty years before the treaty was signed. In spite of the fact that the dragons were easily ten times larger than the humans, the humans have them matched in magic and outnumbered, four thousand to one. The war was declared a draw. The peace is tenuous but there is still covert work to make sure defensive capability doesn't falter. The treaty states clearly that all wartime magic ends, especially research, but neither side can yet trust the other.

Alaunra taught young magicians in the arts and she gives them all the information on the basics for defensive magic, but she wasn't permitted to train them in anything expressly against the treaty. The younger generations are afraid of dragons. Alaunra grew up with the romantic myth that the ancient mages created the dragons but none of the legends agreed on the exact origins and the dragons were secretive. No one understood how the war started, either. Some of the citizens believe the rumors were propaganda by the King's command. The children taught in recent years learned that the dragons were not trustworthy. Alaunra didn't know what to believe anymore.

Alaunra taught the young mages, but her social life lacked people her own age. The other teachers were usually significantly older, or the students were much younger. Her own teaching started because her career ended in the war. A mages life can be lonely, but she knew that from the beginning.

When Alaunra went out to the pubs in town, she could silence an entire lounge just by walking in, especially while wearing mages robes. They all knew her and she couldn't lie about it. She won several decorations from the King for service during the war.

Dressing in regular clothes, she could go out into a distant town and find a man willing to show her a good time, as long as he thought she was poor farmer's daughter just taking care of her dear old sweet daddy. She justified acting cute in a tight bodice—for a little while—just to find a lover that has a real pulse.

Alaunra tightened the lacing of her bodice and then sat at the edge of the table while she untangled the ties on the robe.

She tried to figure out what she did wrong with her golem and knew it was nothing. She thought that even with her skills she could make an acceptable substitute for not having a man in her life. The smooth marble of the golem even had a flesh color. She applied a

warming spell to the stone and even gave it the capability of magical speech.

It isn't the same. It doesn't enjoy anything.

She put on the robe and clipped it in place before walking over to the golem to try figuring out what she did wrong. It still smelled of her scent and it was a shame she couldn't even get a single satisfactory orgasm out of it before she got frustrated. The truth was that she had an easier time just using her fingers. She could have done without the disappointment of the failed enchantments and so much lost work.

"Alaunra..."

She didn't enchant it to call her by name! She couldn't identify the distant voice.

"Alaunra... Spell... Summon... Him..."

That was definitely not her doing but she couldn't identify the source. There was some other magic going on and she flashed her hands upwards with the utterance of the counter spells. The golem cracked. Starting at its head, dark lines ran over the surface of the marble all the way down to the floor. When it started to break apart, pieces were falling to the floor in a cascade of marble. She was not going to put up with any spy in her work caverns, especially not in her bedroom when there is nothing to spy upon!

Lovely. She stared at the pile of rubble at her feet. Having to counter that golem was frustrating, but not one piece on the floor was bigger than an apple tart.

While she cleaned away the rubble, she thought how the voice presented a possibility. She worked with summoning during the war and could bring a person in the Army to the King's offices.

Today, if she created a wish list of qualities she wanted in a real man, she could summon him, even unnamed, to her and empty his memory when they were done. She could leave enough memory to let him think it was a dream and if he were to see her again, he might not be afraid. She would just love to have a man look at her and see a woman before they see the mage.

Your spell is going to fail because the man you want is only a fantasy.

Alaunra wasn't so sure this was just a fantasy.

First, she needed to make sure there were no creatures, no matter

how small, that might be another mage, or even a fairy, in disguise. Usually, her spells for warding are enough to keep the spies away but because magic is mutable and changing all the time, she has to keep on her toes with fresh spells and this mysterious voice was proof of it. She valued her privacy. Because she researched illicit magic against the treaty, she felt she had something to hide.

She swept over the back caverns and found nothing. She reassured herself, *I knew that*.

The voice did come from a distance so she immediately went through her concealed doors into the public areas of the house. She worked to keep the area hidden and the seams in the marble were almost imperceptible. She was proud of that and it was difficult to find a craftsman that could accomplish the work and not ask questions.

She raised her staff in the foyer of her retreat and discovered the glow of the new magic but it appalled her. Her mother had another package delivered and Marta set it on the table behind the front door. It glowed when she raised her staff.

Her mother, the seer.

Her mother, the meddling seer.

Her mother, who works so hard to get a personal item inside her sanctuary so she can monitor her like she is thirteen instead of thirty-five.

She opened the package to see what was inside. It was a lovely sculpture of a gnome.

“Nice try, Ma!” she screamed at the gnome. “I love you, but get out of my house!”

She raised her hand, but stopped herself because she was reacting in anger. If she completely disenchanting the gnome, it would shatter like the golem and the energy recoil could hurt her mother as the spell rebounds. She settled for a simple banishing spell. At worst, Mom will just get a headache. It was a cute statue and a very accurate depiction of the tiny forest people. She heard the spell ball inside shatter but the stone remained intact. She accused her mother of many things, but having bad taste in artists wasn’t one of them.

She took the paper and cloth wrappings outside and with a snap of her fingers they burst into flames on the stones of the steps. Just before the wrappings were completely engulfed she heard, “You are

such a beautiful woman! Why won't you let me help you?"

Alaunra swept away the ashes with relief when she was done. The good news was that it was just her mother. The bad news was that her mother now knew Alaunra's frustrations and the attempts to relieve them. She also knew she wasn't getting a grandchild from Alaunra anytime in the near future.

She set the statue on the cabinet near the entrance.

Her mother would know she didn't shatter the gnome. If she doesn't see her gift prominently displayed when she visits, she starts to cry and create a guilt trip about not having any special keepsakes around to remind Alaunra of her when she's gone.

Alaunra thought, *I don't know why she's worried. She's in great shape. We have a great family health history so she knows she won't die, she'll just fossilize in about 40 years.*

She instantly regretted the way she had disintegrated the golem. She should have known her spells were impeccable. The war made her jumpy and she don't trust anything or anyone. Nobody, except her mother, knows about her laboratory in the caverns and it is difficult to get anything past the defenses she has in place. She thought briefly that she could have fixed the golem but she knew she put her best effort into that spell. For a golem—it might have been one of her finest magical pieces. As a lover—it sucked.

Maybe Mom has a point. It hurt her to admit it.

She sat down on a lounge in the front entrance and thought of summoning a man directly into her lab. *It's possible.*

It just seemed unfair to manipulate a man and wipe his memory, leaving him with only a vague recollection or a dream. The senior Mages taught her not to manipulate people from the earliest days of magic training—manipulating people is only for selfish purposes. This is one of the first ethics precepts because it's the reason some people are afraid of the mages.

Alaunra would have to be meticulous with the spell. In spells like this, the forces worked by finding the closest match to the criteria dictated by the magician.

It won't hurt to try it once. If it were bad, she would wipe his memory completely and pretend it never happened.

She went back into her laboratory and started writing down all the details she would like in a lover. She let her fantasies run wild

when she was sketching his physical appearance but she knew she shouldn't be too fussy because she was looking for someone close to her own age of thirty-five. Personality traits would include a sense of humor, intelligence, and a sense of adventure.

She tapped her quill on the paper on top of her big desk. Magical purists, like her, are the only ones that insist on using quills anymore, but it did allow her time to think.

The man I summon will have to have a sense of adventure because I'll use a spell in short order to shackle him. It would be nice if he were willing to be submissive.

She thought back to one of the men she met in a pub. He was a very strong, burly fellow that worked on the ocean ships. He was all swagger and ego but as soon as she took him back to her room in the inn, he wanted her to hit him. She discovered the captain of the ship he served used a whip and insults liberally and his mind equated the pain to pleasure, affection and praise. The instant she would start to snarl and cuss at him, he would become erect again. It was amusing for a time because she used her belt to whip him or her fingernails to scratch him and he wanted more. He kept control while she pumped her hips over him until she was gasping for air, but she had to scream at him just to give him permission to let his penis erupt. When she started thinking about sleep that night, he was hard again, ready and eager for more. The experience drained her because she was afraid of hurting him. It was work but she had to admit that he was good. He followed her orders and the look in his eyes was pure adoration.

She continued to make notes but she was suddenly afraid that the spell would fail because she had set impractical parameters. She hoped that in the end, she could leave him a dream of a memory in the hopes that when he saw her again he would know her.

That's not looking for a good time—that's looking for love.

Alaunra knew exactly what she was doing.

If it fails, I can try again.

She should have stopped when she realized she was being greedy. She was manipulating a man to submit to her will. Love never grows in a situation like that. It's not fair to him and she should know not to get her hopes up. She still gathered the spell components, her herbs and candles, copied her notes to a spell sheet and drew sketches of her desired result.

She also knew she needed to eat and gather something that she could use as a sacrifice. This is symbolic of the price she pays in exchange for the results she wants. It takes a lot of energy from her to work spells. The item she sacrifices is connected to the success or failure of a spell. During the war, the King gave the mages precious stones for sacrificing toward the success of the spells. It doesn't have to be a significant monetary value but it does have to be something precious to her because she has high expectations for the result.

She piled some meat in a round piece of bread from the kitchen. Marta knew that she never ate routine meals and she only ate heavy foods when she was getting ready to do spell work, but she kept foods ready for her at a moments notice.

"Prepare a large meal," Alaunra warned her. "I may be having a guest this evening."

Marta smiled at her. The wrinkles around her eyes became more pronounced but the older woman smiled often. "I'll fix a *grand* meal. You will enjoy."

Alaunra loves Marta and her family—they do exceptional work in her sanctuary—but Marta is as eager as her mother to get her settled down with a man 'so she can have pretty babies'. Alaunra didn't understand the fascination.

"Go home at sunset and leave us." Alaunra wasn't about to tell Marta the guest might arrive by magic and she wasn't about to deny that the visit was personal. She refused to tell her that she has no idea who he is, yet.

Marta nodded. Alaunra knew not to say anything more but she smiled at her with one of those knowing glances that her mother gives her when she's fantasizing about grandchildren.

As she ate, she thought about the items she had around the house that would make a suitable sacrifice component for spell work. She had shelves full of sculptures from her mother but she knew she shouldn't use them because it had to be something that was valuable to her. She certainly didn't want to deal with guilt from Mom when she noticed one missing.

She walked around the house but nothing stood out as a suitable sacrifice for the spell. She had lived in the same old house for ages. The same stone walls, the same glass panels and windows, and the same statues staring back at her. There was nothing exceptional. She

stared at the wall where she kept her medals and decrees from the King for the service during the war. She was proud of her magical achievements but this wasn't something that she valued, either. Her magic and her research had been valuable to her.

That's it! Suddenly, she knew exactly what she needed.

She crammed the last bit of food into her mouth and pushed aside the marble portal to her laboratory. She flew down the steps into her research area and opened the case where the defensive magic tomes lay. Resting on oak racks, surrounded large quartz points mined from this very cavern, were three leather bound tomes.

There it is! She really did find the perfect solution.

She held the tomes reluctantly. *If the treaty is to work, everyone needs to honor the spirit of the treaty and give up researching destructive magic.*

These books held the details of some of the most potent spells used during the war and some of the spells she researched recently. This is not to say that she didn't have notes and other books but these three books held all of the details in one place with instant access to fire magic and hurling projectiles, shields and force fields. She had some of the spells memorized from using them during the war.

She thought seriously about it because this would mean that she would have to reconstruct all of this information from scratch if the dragons ever attacked again. If the spell failed, she would lose the books and have nothing to show for her efforts.

She eyed one last item, but she was reserved. It was the wand her teacher gave her just before he died, leaving her in charge of the Defenses. The wood was heavy, made from a rare tree that produces black wood and grows with a natural spiral shape. It had two large stones affixed into each end with gold braid entwined all around. The base held a ruby that was as big around as her thumb is long. The other end of the wand held a diamond that would focus the energy with precision. This wand was precious to her because it was a gift from her teacher but she had not used it since the war and she only used it for battles.

Do it right... and do it all.

She set the wand on top of the books and carted the stack from the library into her workroom. Hoisting the books and wand in the crucible, her gaze the leather bindings but she knew this was the way

it had to be. *All or nothing.*

Alaunra cleared the room of old spell work that she had done, and brought in a soft mat that she laid on the floor with the rings for the shackles nearby. Gathering the components for a fast memory spell and the summoning reversal spell, she set them in the cabinet by the door for easy access.

She cleaned the workroom and searched for any possible indications that would identify her. If the subject got his ire up, he could report her magic to the King. She knew the memory spell would work but she didn't want to give him her identity. Since the sun was starting to go down, she used a light spell on the globe hanging from the tall ceiling of the corridor.

She stopped when she was satisfied with the preparations, went into the main house and took a bath. She put on a real dress with her best bodice and chemise.

Marta eyed her when she came out, she smiled but said nothing when she left to go home.

Alaunra returned to the workroom. *It hasn't been this clean since the end of the war.* She looked around and was proud of herself.

She reviewed her spells. She didn't have anything to dictate what he looked like other than the qualities that he be active, strong, preferring women, and close to her own age. She didn't dictate his work but the other qualities she wanted were humor, intelligence, and a sense of adventure. On the page, she also had a 'submissive' notation that she scratched out and just entered the words, 'sexually willing'.

This spell was either going to solve all her problems, or create a complete disgrace. At this point, she was willing to try anything. *I should be ashamed,* she thought to herself.

She started the summoning chant from her sheet on the stand. It was slow at first but the energy began to build and the leather and metal bindings of the books showed some wear and then began to disintegrate. She held her hands over the crucible and put all the force she could muster into the spell, letting her voice get louder. She focused her mind on the type of man she would like to see in front of her and continued the chant.

Fragments of the books drifted into the crucible and Alaunra felt no regrets. The sacrifice for this spell was unusual because she was

willing to give up her illicit research and its symbols. She thought again of the desired result and all of the emotion and longing came to the surface that she held back in the past. She had to be strong while fighting the war and admitting that kind of longing was tantamount to admitting weakness.

She felt the goose bumps rise and knew the energy of the spell felt right. She looked into the crucible. The books were now just a pile of leather and vellum dust and the wood of the wand was disintegrating. She kept chanting and focused intently on drawing the energy up, through her feet and hands, and out to this unknown man, to draw him to her. On the creamy color of the book dust, the particles of black wand, red ruby and diamond were sparkling. She felt a sense of triumph and pushed that extra energy into her spell.

Her heart began pounding. It was as if she had snuck a hand into her skirts and even her breasts were beginning to tingle. The spell was sexual so she should have expected the response. She used the feelings to enhance the spell. She looked up, almost screaming into the rafters, and chanted the summons louder as the energies swirled around her with flickers of light.

Her focus shifted to the thoughts of having a real companion in her life, not just the benefits of strong arms and hot penis. She wanted trust. She wanted to scream when she was angry, or cry if she felt like it, without feeling the need to apologize for not being strong. She thought of the women in the piazza that screamed at their husbands. She thought then that they must be out of their minds, but the men didn't seem to care. She thought it was horrible—the woman was a nag and her husband was weak—but she came to realize that it was a state of grace in a good marriage. They could fight and they would still be together at the end of the day. He might even have his own temper flare. He would still love her at night, holding her tight and pushing long strokes into her body with his penis until she moaned out and tightened her body against his—forcing him to erupt.

Her body started to tingle. She enjoyed the thoughts of not having to command a partner, or having to dress up and play dumb. She just couldn't find this elusive man on her own.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a shimmer on the mat in front of her. The spell was working! Her heart rate was still quick and her pussy was starting to tingle. She gave in to the fantasies of hard

cock while she looked into the crucible at the tan, brown, red, white and black dust that remained of her books and wand.

The shimmering on the mat began to show definition, with darkly tanned skin and long golden hair. He lay on his back with his hands in front of him and she realized he was naked. She continued the chant and watched as his form solidified. Alaunra realized his hands were wrapped around his erect penis, not covering it.

Her skin tingled with the obvious success of this spell.

The image on the mat solidified, but then he screamed out, “Witch!”

She stopped chanting. She didn’t expect an immediate, enthusiastic response but the term ‘witch’ was crass and derogatory among the mages. Since she didn’t know what he might be capable of doing, she immediately bound him with the shackles spell with his hands extended out to his sides, but with his penis in the air.

“No wonder you can’t keep a man in your life!” he screamed. “You drive them all to madness on the edge of eruption and then bind them in iron!”

“I have no idea who you think you are...” Alaunra started. She was breathless from the spell and these insults were unacceptable. She thought of reversing the spell but didn’t act on it.

“When I enjoy a fantasy, I don’t normally get transported to her chambers!” he was panting from his own exertions but his tone softened to desperation rather than anger.

Intrigued, she stepped closer to him. Her own rapid breathing and the glisten of sweat showed the exertion from her spell.

He was shifting his hips to try getting his penis closer to a hand and finish the work he’d begun before the spell began but his shoulders sagged in resignation. He was unsuccessful. “I could use a hand here... or your mouth... or your tight bodice... I don’t suppose you might raise those skirts since you must hold me prisoner.” His hands were shaking and he was sweaty.

Alaunra took a chance, because his hands were bound, and she stepped over to him as she raised her skirts, putting her feet on either side of his hips. She pulled the hems to her waist, giving him a clear view because she wasn’t wearing any undergarments.

He sat up with his arms still pulled to the sides. “Come closer.” He was strong and made the motion easily, causing the muscles of his

stomach and chest to stand out in ridges.

She stepped up and held tight to the fabric.

“Down a little...”

She bent her knees and he drove his tongue deep against her hair and through to her clit. She was tingling just to be touched and not by her own hand. In her already frantic state, he could have her panting, if not screaming, in short order.

“Hold still...” he cautioned.

“Easy for you to say,” she finally said to him.

He gave the little piece of flesh a hard suck, flicking his tongue against it, and it felt like he was pulling it from of her body and holding it between his teeth. Her heart skipped around in her chest and her knees trembled until he pulled his head back slightly.

“Give me a longer chain,” he pleaded.

She flicked one hand, extending the chain and he brought his hands up to her butt to pull her clit closer to his mouth. He was licking in earnest and she was wishing she didn’t have the restrictive clothing. He sucked hard again and she could only moan because she was starting to loose control, and with every flick of his tongue, her body shuddered.

“Sit,” he pleaded softly.

Her legs were trembling and she didn’t give much thought to the fact that he could have throttled the life out of her with the extra chain as she lowered herself onto his penis. She wanted his rod buried in her body and she shifted to bring her knees to the floor as she lowered her hips. The head parted the hair and found no resistance as it slipped deep inside.

“Ah... yes... flex your legs.”

She let go of the skirts, balanced herself with her hands on his shoulders, and flexed her legs so that her hips worked up along the shaft. She had to push against him hard just to make sure she could enclose him inside her body.

“Ahh... It’s been too long.” He guided her with his hands still under her dress.

She was panting and beginning to loose control as she bounced over him.

“Yes... let it squeeze, push down hard.” He moaned.

She gave in and pushed her hips frantically against him. The

golem lacked the ability to share pleasure in the act and she enjoyed it as much, if not more, than the stimulation. She tossed her hair back out of her face as the orgasm began to build.

“That’s it... rock it out,” he said. His breathing was sharp and heavy.

“Oohh!” she leaned toward him as her stomach muscles tightened.

“Don’t stop... keep rocking...” He used his hands to guide her hips.

Her legs were shaking and when the final release came, she wasn’t able to move. She moaned out loudly but he kept frantically lifting her up and down over his cock.

“Yes... let me give you every drop...”

“Yes!” she screamed.

He pushed her hips down hard and rocked his hips forward as the surges came. He held her tight and grunted.

Alaunra was shaking. She didn’t expect the spell to work this well or this fast.

He pulled his arms around her to the limit of the chains and then he shocked her by kissing her neck. She felt his arms flick and the chains fell. For a moment, she was terrified and her skin prickled but he pulled her closer.

Alaunra looked up at him. There was a bit of fear because she knew he broke the shackles with his own magic. Her heart was still quick but she just looked into his eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere. I needed that as much as you did.”

She stayed silent. She needed it and she continued to let him hold her as they calmed down, but she had to prepare for the possibility of danger.

He found it necessary to kiss her. It started sweet, but became deeper and passionate.

Once she began to relax and calm down, she began to enjoy the way his mouth felt and the way they responded to each other. His hands ran over her body and engulfed him.

He stopped kissing her and looked at her to prove he was not intent on harming her. His eyes were a golden hazel with flecks of green. He seemed to be searching for an assurance that he too would not be harmed.

"I'm sure there is some food upstairs, are you hungry?" she asked.

He nodded.

She stood up. Her skin was sticky but she didn't care. She did bring towels.

When he stood, his penis still hung thick in front of his body. "If I must be naked, so will you." He unlaced her bodice without resistance.

She didn't object. With the warmth of spring, it was comfortable without clothes but they would have to move through the caverns quickly. Aside from her heating spells in the rooms, the halls of the cavern were still chilly and damp.

He lifted away the bodice, unlaced the ties of her skirts, and then pulled her chemise over her head. He took the towel and gently wiped her skin before cleaning her legs. He leaned down and kissed her, again, enveloping her in his arms.

She looked up at him. She thrilled to the way her bare skin felt against his but she was feeling awkward because she didn't even know his name. "My name is Alaunra," she offered.

He smiled as his eyebrows rose in surprise. "I have heard of you, a great mage and hero during the war." The emphasis of his words was almost sarcastic, as if he was mocking her, but he stopped. "My name is Tignaroc."

"Like the old mage?" she asked.

"Yeah... like the old mage." The silence that followed was awkward but he followed her.

She thanked the stars above for the foresight to send Marta home at sunset. She gave him a head motion to the stairs rising up to the hall.

She lit one of the lamps in the halls with a magical spark just by snapping her fingers again. There was no use in hiding her talents and they had not yet reached an area served with automatic lamps. She pushed open the portal into the main house and closed it behind Tignaroc as he came through. The contrast between her laboratory in the caverns and the main house was stark. The house was lavish and Alaunra had taken pride in building her home since the war.

He looked at the seemingly perfect wall and just shook his head with a smile.

She led the way into the areas of the kitchen and discovered Marta had set an ornate table with large trays of food under the storage domes on the buffet.

“This is beautiful,” he finally said.

“Well, this is embarrassing. Marta went a little overboard with the food.” She lifted the dome for the cold storage. Inside were the bowls of fresh vegetables chopped for salads, with smooth cheeses, sauces and creamy dips. There were two large bowls with little balls of fruit in bite size pieces. Under the warming dome, there were creamy sauces on the meats and little sliced potatoes dripping with thick cheese. A third dome kept breads warm with little rolled buns, heavily glazed with spices and sugar. She set the domes aside and looked to the table. There were only tiny picks to eat with and napkins. This impish little old woman had set her up for a sloppy meal in the hope that it would become intimate and physical. She looked at the spread of food in dismay and just shook her head.

“I think she’s ingenious.” Tignaroc dipped a finger into a vegetable sauce and smeared it across her nipple. He leaned down and sucked it away, sending tingles through her as both nipples reacted and hardened. He heard her appreciative moan.

Marta set her up, and she knew exactly what she was doing. She had set the table with dainty candles, flowers and decorations but piled up pillows on the floor near the opposite end of the stone table.

She hated to admit he was right and her mind floated back to the present world from the pleasures of his mouth on her breast. She felt daring and reckless standing there naked but she lived so far out in the country, the only ones that might be offended were the squirrels.

“So you’ve had magical talent all your life?” he asked.

Alaunra just nodded. She was glad he was conversational but she knew she needed to open her mouth. “My mother is a seer, a nosey one at that, too. Her name is Cardamel. But, if she hadn’t dropped in on me this morning, we wouldn’t be here.”

“She’s your mother?” Tignaroc asked in disbelief. “Oh, yeah, I’ve heard of her—there are things she can see in her crystals, and she knows the truth or outcome of some situations just by holding a scrap of fabric.”

“Yeah, that’s my mother. She never became involved in the war by pretending to be crazy. She seemed upset with me about getting

involved with defenses.”

“She’s not senile! Why didn’t the king order her to service?”

“She can pretend to be anything, and be damned convincing about it, too.” she explained carefully, “She would go collect the oddest spell casting materials like dead animals that had been lying on the roads for a couple days. She would pretend they smelled like the finest roses, stare at the innards and declare that the fairies were responsible for the attacks and we needed to talk to the dragons. The King thought she was completely *off her nut* but she liked it that way because he left her alone and she only continued working for special clients.”

“She was right about one thing; the fairies are a toxic lot. It’s a shame they only pretend to be cute in front of humans.” Tignaroc started picking at the vegetables as she set down the trays at the table. “The gnomes deserve more credit than they get, too.”

Alaunra stared at him. She couldn’t say anything. He didn’t know some of her spies had been fairies. She also knew that most people knew little to nothing about the gnomes. She opted to say nothing as she set the trays on the dining table. She motioned for him to sit to her right at the corner. Marta set the table so the place settings were close together at the corner of the enormous square marble table. She started passing bowls between them.

“Don’t tell me you still think the fairies are cute,” he said.

“I didn’t say that.” Alaunra remembered her reasons to question the information she was getting during the war. The fairies turned out to be convincing liars and she followed up any information from the pint size, flying informants with information that she could rely on from her own magical golems.

“You didn’t say anything.” Tignaroc looked at her and sighed. He was disappointed. “The fairies were deliberately feeding the King bad information about dragons. They didn’t want a war any more than the humans did. The fairies have had a fight with the dragons since the dawn of time, it seems, and they have never gotten along. They also know that a flick of the wrist would be all it takes to make them extinct.”

“I’ve heard that... why not just eliminate the real enemy and end all of the problems?”

“That’s called Genocide. It’s not exactly ethical,” he said with a

wry grin.

Alaunra snickered. He said it as if he interpreted her statement literally. She let her shoulders fall and her head dropped with the overstatement of the obvious facts. He was flat and irreverent with his satirical points. She hadn't intended to suggest such a drastic solution but realized her words came out with the implication. She grinned about the notation in her spell about the desire for a sense of humor, and she got that.

"So, how long have you been a mage?" she asked, hoping to change the subject while they eat.

"I probably started around the same age you did." Tignaroc pondered his explanation, as if he were getting ready to say something sarcastic again but decided against it. "It's not unusual to start magical training after the basics have a good foundation. I lit fire to my mother's cottage before my parents realized the exact nature of some of the problems or blessings that happened on the farm."

Alaunra nodded. Some mages had difficult discoveries of their abilities and some didn't understand the source until they lost control of their temper. "Since my mother was a seer, my discovery was not that drastic."

"Sounds like a normal childhood," he offered.

"Are you kidding?" Alaunra looked at him to determine if he was trying to be funny again. "My mother was a *seer*! That alone means every step I took was monitored like a hawk until I couldn't think about stepping out of line without her knowing about it."

"On second thought..."

"Yeah, no kidding. She knew the instant I was admiring any tight pants and a short robe!"

It was Tignaroc's turn to laugh.

"I didn't find it humorous at the time but it did give us an excuse to talk later." Alaunra prized a few of the memories about discussions with her mother. "She didn't want to see me make the same mistakes that she had."

"So you just didn't get involved at all?"

"I wouldn't say that!"

"Your house tells a different story!" Tignaroc raised his hands to the decorated areas around him like a carnival showman. "I'd say you became more involved with the dragon war than with men when you

were in your teens. Because of the war, your closest relationships have been your teachers, which were more emotional and mentor, than sexual. If you are looking for something sexual, you dress in plain clothes and travel to another town.”

Alaunra felt like she’d just had her entire life laid out bare. It might have been funny had he not been right, even with his oversimplified synopsis.

“It’s not just you, other women have had the same problem,” he offered. He pulled his chair around, leaned to her and kissed her neck. “I’d like to fix that,” he said.

Alaunra was embarrassed by this conversation. “Did you *fix* them, too?”

“No! I’ve never been summoned like this!” Tignaroc laughed but when he noticed she wasn’t laughing, too, he reconsidered and decided to explain. “I don’t flit around the countryside looking for young women in desperation! I haven’t enjoyed the company of a beautiful woman for many years. You shackled me just as I thought I was close to unloading my own frustrations on to the hems of your skirts. Even with the shackles, I thought it might be my own spell at work, so I was bold enough to ask for help.”

Alaunra realized that the lonely existence of mages was shared. “I’d been looking for a lover when I started the spell so when you came to me, umm—ready, I wasn’t surprised.”

“You were looking for more than just a lover! A golem would satisfy the basic needs.”

Alaunra nodded her head slowly because his answer didn’t surprise her. “I’ve never had a man that could see me as a woman first. When I would go into other towns, they would flirt as if I were an object to be possessed. If the man knew I was a mage, he would be afraid and he would get that terrified look in his eyes, as if he were afraid I’d enchant him.”

“My own spell was just a beacon, of sorts. I wanted someone in my life but I was more interested in just letting someone know I was here. I didn’t think I would collide with a big spell that would draw me into her bedroom.”

“I didn’t think it could be big, but I knew I had to put some effort into it.”

“Usually, I find out about a big spell performed by a mage from

another seer and I can initiate contact from that discovery. I've never been the target of such a spell."

Alaunra was suddenly confused. "What in the blazes are you talking about?"

Tignaroc eyed her warily. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Your mother never told you?"

"Told me what?" Alaunra demanded.

"Cardamel! She is not ready! She understands nothing!"

"She can't hear you! I remove all of her spells, but she keeps trying."

"Yes, she can!" Tignaroc eyed Alaunra wildly in disbelief.

She's ready Tig.

"Mother!" Alaunra almost choked on her food. She heard her mother's voice in the same tones that she heard this afternoon but the speech was clearer. She was certain that she'd eliminated all of her mother's spy balls from the statuary and other gifts that she sent.

I tried to tell you, little one.

"I banished that spell this afternoon!"

Honey, I don't need a spell. That was only a small love charm. You should have identified the components before you blew it up.

"So... it's OK to drop in and spy on me at any time?" Alaunra covered herself with the napkin from the table.

No, but it's hard to ignore Tignaroc when he screams like that. I can't see what you are doing but I can hear you once he called me.

"I'm still trying to figure out what he's saying... what haven't you told me?"

I couldn't tell you anything when you were serving during the war because I'd become 'the enemy' and I didn't want to give it away.

Alaunra's eyes widened and flashed. "Explain!" Her frustration showed in her tone.

I became a dragon two years after you were born. I stayed among the humans until you were old enough and I'm still maintaining the old house but I'm seldom there any more.

Alaunra rubbed her neck and rolled her head around, and then she sighed with disbelief. With this revelation, Alaunra knew some of the strangest events in her life had a cause. She understood why her

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mother opposed her efforts in the war, and she understood why her mother evaded any service during the war. She didn't answer but released a disgruntled, "Humph!"

Honey, you know I'm not the enemy. I can't fault you for your service during the war but I had to make sure you were getting the right information. I had to come to you as a fairy on a couple occasions and that work helped end the war.

"You are a traitor!"

You know better than that. I was a dragon before the war started.

"You mean to tell me that the dragons are old mages?"

Yes, little one, or they are simply mages and seers that create an exemplary spell. My spell started as a seer's technique, but with it I could see the truth about the fairies and the gnomes. Within two days, I had Daleos knocking on my door.

"The Daleos?" Alaunra heard the legends of the old mage that created the medallions most people maintained for communications.

The same. I thought he had died long ago. He looks great now. Broad shoulders, muscular legs and a mouth that is delicious.

"Mother! Enough!"

Oh, you should see me! I walk around without a corset or a tightly wound bodice! I'm proud of it and Daleos...

"Mother!"

I'm not dead, honey. You aren't the only one trying to satisfy a need.

"Enough!" Alaunra leveled her eyes at the heavily muscled man sitting across from her. "That means you are *the real* Tignaroc. You should be ninety or one hundred years old."

He smiled. "One hundred and twenty, if you must know." Tignaroc raised his hands. "Hey, I have to work on even a magical body."

"So when are you going to kill me for what I know?"

I won't let you be killed. We don't do that. If you are against becoming a dragon, I'll just have your memories cleared. Marta will find you on the floor in the morning and it will be like you had a fever. I'll make sure you don't even remember the spell that got you here.

Alaunra stared at her plate, drumming her fingers against the wood of the armrest. She wasn't sure she followed all the events she just heard. The silence lingered until she shifted uncomfortably in her

seat.

“Cardamel, I think I can take it from here,” Tignaroc said.

Call if you need anything.

“I will,” he answered. Tignaroc sat on the edge of the table and watched Alaunra in concern but the silence lingered.

“You are a dragon?” Alaunra asked, accusingly. “...and so is *my mother?*”

Tignaroc held up his hand. “I don’t know when she became dragon or even that you were her daughter, not until I was here. She is an advocate for you. She’s been saying we needed to watch for you since the end of the war.”

“I summoned a dragon!” Alaunra continued to stare at the half-full plate of food in front of her. She leaned her elbow on the arm of the chair and twirled her hair while she thought about her spell. *When a spell fails, it’s a real zinger of a failure, isn’t it? To think I was just patting myself on the back for my blazing success.*

“That *was* an incredible spell. You didn’t fail.”

“You can read my mind, too?”

“Reading minds is unscrupulous. Your body language speaks volumes.”

Alaunra leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs and crossing her arms over her bare breasts, painfully aware that she was naked.

“Look, this doesn’t change what we’ve done.” Tignaroc seemed disappointed. “I did a spell of attraction two days ago. I thought I would be encouraging a female dragon that might be seeking companionship. Maybe my spell was also successful and that was how I landed in your research arena.”

“You were, umm, taking matters in your own hands at the time I started the spell, and so that was the way you came to me.”

“Yeah, the draw of your spell was very sexual. When I woke from my sleep, I didn’t think about magic, I only felt like I was close to bursting. I had to take care of it somehow. I then felt the pull of the magic but I could see you. I thought it was my own spell, until the shackles snapped around my hands.”

“Actually, it was cute the way you were struggling to get your penis back into your hands. You are very agile.” Alaunra smiled. She began to relax and started eating again.

“I would not be averse to enjoying a bit more of that.”

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“That bothers me.” Alaunra found it necessary to explain. “I know you are a dragon. I’ve always thought of the dragons as ‘the enemy’ and not a goal to achieve in my career. I’m afraid that you could strangle me and I would just be another conquest in the war.”

“The dragons aren’t like that. Did you notice during the war that the only areas that we attacked were people or armies that attacked us first?”

Alaunra nodded. She pointed out that fact to the King when the treaty meetings started. She would fight, but her specialties were defenses. Her spells deflected the missiles targeting the Kings domain, the main city and the strongholds.

“You refused to attack a couple times... as I remember.”

“Yeah...” There were seven battles where she used attacking spells and she made sure that there was cause to use them because she dreaded the magical effects. There were four battles where she refused to use spells in spite of the orders to the contrary. Alaunra thought about the first time. “Fairies had told me that a dragon was sleeping in cave with large stores of attack spell components. When I investigated with a small golem, I found an injured dragon, comatose in a healing spell. He was not capable of attacking anyone. The king ordered the attack through the generals, and I refused.”

“You could have been imprisoned.”

“I can’t attack someone that is not conscious!”

“That’s my point! That was noticed among the dragons, especially the one that was healing. He reported to me. That’s how I heard of you. A dragon is capable of thinking and communicating even when his body is not functioning. He’d seen the fairies and then saw your golem. He sent a scout. He found you and he heard that you risked prison.”

Alaunra nodded. That was the threat for not carrying out the King’s orders. Luckily, when she spoke to the King, since she wasn’t under his direct command, he was willing to listen to her ethical concerns. The first offer of a treaty came from the dragons one week later.

“I am curious. Usually a large sacrifice is needed to make big summoning spells work. What did you put in your crucible to have such a huge magical signature?”

“Just some old spell work...” Alaunra mumbled.

"I didn't hear you," he leaned forward.

"This doesn't get repeated... am I clear?"

"Sure."

"I had some old spell books from the war. I had worked on researching defensive spells because the King was certain the treaty would fail. Since I was teaching, I kept the volumes secure in my lab and no one knew I was still researching. I also had a wand that was given to me by my teacher that I used during the war. It was made of *ebonirot*a with a ruby in one end and a big diamond in the other. I couldn't keep using it because of all the negativity spoiling it from the war but I kept it because my teacher, Gerras, gave it to me before he died."

"Actually, before he transformed," Tignaroc corrected.

"He's still..." Alaura asked happily.

"Very much so!" He smiled. "He got sick of the war quickly. He trusted your ethics. When he started getting sick—allegedly—he made sure you had extra studies in logic and ethics so that you would understand the fallacies."

Alaura was happy to think that her old mentor was still alive and well, even as a dragon. She also thought of the work that Gerras could have done had he stayed human and met with the king himself. "Why not appear in human form to the king?"

"Oh, sure... and get whacky-zapped by that magical monkey he has with him every waking moment?" Tignaroc gave her a comical look of disgust, "No, thank you!"

Alaura giggled. The first magician to the king was the punch line of several mages jokes. No other mages worth their training were willing to perform any spell the king wanted when he wanted it, except Zedrick. The king could not find a mage that would accept strict service to him and give him the spells he wanted, including tormenting the prisoners or any dignitaries he thought were lying. He had no real power; nothing other mages considered 'evil', but he was greedy, ignorant and unethical. When Zedrick was seen in town, he carried himself as if he was the king, but no other mages would associate with him.

"I hear he zaps anyone at the King's command. Is that why his hair is..." and Tignaroc made a motion with his hands, outward from ears, with his fingers splayed open.

Alaunra laughed. It was starting to feel again like it had in the beginning of the evening before she found out Tignaroc was the old wizard of notoriety and he didn't die, he transformed himself into a dragon. Maybe she had uncovered something that she was meant to find and this was part of a bigger scheme.

Once her giggles died down, she found the courage to ask, "How did the dragons start?"

Tignaroc looked relieved that the conversation had taken a turn for the better. He answered, "It was an old wizard long ago that wanted to continue research in the magical arts. He's called the Old One. He thought of trying an immortality spell but the universe transformed his body as the price he must pay. He was terrified of lizards, so in order to give him the long life, the cosmos forced him to become a large reptile. He's the only one that cannot transform himself back to human. I don't think he's afraid of reptiles anymore."

Alaunra started laughing again. "So the Devine has her own sense of humor!"

Tignaroc nodded emphatically, with a mischievous grin. "It's still not known if dragons are immortal but that wizard is over three thousand years old and just as strong as the rest of us. Because of the war, we do know a dragon can die."

"So... when you realized that your being here may not have been entirely your own spell work, you thought there might be a connection to a mage that was ready to become dragon."

Tignaroc nodded. "But when you didn't understand the possibility I was summoned here as part of transformation, I was completely confused."

"So, all we did was have two spells collide," she clarified.

Tignaroc nodded. He raised a finger to his lips to silence the dinner conversation. He stood and pulled pillows from the pile and laid them on the bare corner of the table. He gave her a hand motion to come closer with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Alaunra was smiling again when she stood to meet him. *OK, so he's a dragon. He's a nice looking dragon.*

Tignaroc wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close daring to look in her eyes before he leaned down to kiss her.

Her breath caught in her throat before she finally moved forward and consented to the kiss. She didn't think about whether he could kill

her, she just hoped that the spells were opening new doors between them that they might not have considered before. Her mouth tingled but she reached her hands up and laced her fingers into his hair.

Tignaroc lifted her quickly so that she was sitting on the pillows. His mouth blazed a trail down her neck towards her breast. “Mmmm... your cook is a genius, or you left a little sauce for me.” He gave a lingering suck before moving on to her nipple.

The lingering tingles felt like her breast was on fire again as he switched between both nipples. She found that she was thinking of him less as ‘the enemy’. With the lavish attention she was receiving now, she saw him only as a very handsome man willing to please.

He put two more pillows behind her and rocked her back so that she lay closest to the corner. He stood along her side and bent over her like she was a serving tray.

Alaunra felt a little nervous and wicked laid out over the table. She looked over her shoulder and found the tray of chilled foods within reach. She pulled the tray closer and reached for the fruit inside but found a creamy sauce instead that now covered her fingers. She started laughing when she pulled her hand from the gooey mess and it dripped down her arm.

Tignaroc started smiling, too, but not mocking her. He just pulled her arm gently so her hand came up to his mouth and he licked the sauce away.

Alaunra watched him intently because he was trying to distract her from all the previous stressful discussions, and it was working. She tasted the spices from the sauce when he leaned down and kissed her again. It was easy to relax when she didn’t think about the aspects of his arrival.

He began with a different distraction. He kissed a trail down her belly to her legs, which he pushed open, but he teased the insides of her thighs.

I’m on the dining table. She laughed to herself. *His tongue will drive me crazy!* It was awkward when he first arrived, but there was no telling what he might do now that she was in a better position. The privacy from living alone in the country was priceless at times like this.

Tignaroc licked gently at first, until Alaunra relaxed her legs with her feet gently resting at the edge of the table. The first lick against

her clit caused her to arch her back but she quickly settled and let him flick over it with the end of his tongue until she shuddered. He inserted a finger and pushed it upward but quickly returned to sucking and licking.

Alaunra felt him push inside and she liked what he was doing but she wasn't going to keep control for long. She moaned her appreciation but tried to draw him up to her so that she could push his penis to the hilt.

He was eager to kiss his way back up to her breasts and tease her with the head near her opening while he sucked again at each nipple. When she tried to reach her legs around him, he finally pushed forward and filled her. With slow strokes, he pushed forward and listened to her moans before pulling back and then pushing again to the hilt.

She was loosing control. The only thing that mattered was the heat growing in her hips and her pounding heartbeat. She relished the feel of his hands as they cupped her breasts and he gently rolled the nipples but he gently massaged over her skin leaving tingling trails. She wanted to touch him and reached her hands to him as he leaned over her body. Her heart began to race and she gave him small groans of appreciation each time he pushed forward.

Tignaroc watched her and timed his thrusts, becoming faster.

She couldn't hold back anymore. Her body stiffened as an orgasm peaked. Her back arched on the pillows.

Tignaroc slowed, then finally stopped, and withdrew. He reached his arms around her back and pulled her up to his chest.

Alaunra was panting but it was obvious his erection had not subsided. She rubbed her hands over his back and relished the sensations of touching him and being touched by him as she calmed down. It was a moan from Tignaroc, or maybe a sigh, that caught her attention and she looked up to him.

His long hair was disheveled but he quietly asked for the bath basins.

Alaunra nodded. She slid her feet to the floor and let the pillow lay where it fell. She escorted him to a side room, waiting at the door.

"Come here..." he soon said.

As she entered the bath, he was reaching for the levers on the wall, letting water fill into the big basin. His cock was still very thick,

hanging in front of him but rising even as she watched. He may not have erupted before, but she wanted to change that.

The small pipes let the water cascade into the basin from several points like a waterfall. She stepped into the large basin and drew him in with her. The water was warm, from a magical component she devised, although such components were common. On the shelves, she kept herbal soaps and some unusual concoctions that her mother sent. She pulled down a knotted cloth for scrubbing and turned Tignaroc into the water to wash him.

Tignaroc smiled. The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled and the creases at the corner of his mouth stood out. Something in this odd adventure made him happy and he couldn't disguise it. It was hard to determine what qualities about him appealed to her the most.

Alaunra worked the lather over his body. Even though his penis was bouncing against her belly, straining for attention, she waited to wash it last. She was smiling, too. In part, she had her old prejudices about dragons turned upside down and her misgivings about the fairies confirmed. She didn't want to think about what might happen tomorrow, afraid that she would suddenly wake up on the floor and think of this as nothing more than a dream. *This is not a dream. This is not a dream. This is not a dream.* She reached around Tignaroc's rod and felt the blood vessels straining at the surface. She focused on how it felt to her as she slid her hand along the shaft.

"I see it in your eyes..." he said.

"What?"

"It doesn't have to go away... not tomorrow... not even next week," he whispered.

"How did you know that?"

"I keep an eye on you. Just relax... enjoy."

Alaunra leaned up to him and kissed him. She focused on what it felt like, here and now. She banished any thoughts of what might happen in the future. He was strong, intelligent, funny, and at this moment, there was nothing more important to him than the look in her eyes and the rhythm of her hands. She let the water run over her own back while she wrapped her fingers around the head of his cock.

He shifted his feet against a ridge in the rough-hewn stones of the basin floor. He leaned against the wall and pulled her close, looking her in the eye.

She shifted her feet so that she could stand closer to him. Her hips could meet his and by shifting his penis down, she targeted it into her body. She didn't want to hurt him when she pulled on him. As they pressed together, she watched him intently.

He inhaled and his eyes half closed. He rubbed along her back and then around to her breasts, flicking the nipples with her thumbs. The nipples were hard and the skin around them began to pucker. He moved his hands back around her back and pulled her close as his breathing started to get heavier.

Alaunra thought for a brief moment that they would meld together and she worked to think again, of how good it felt to be engulfed in his arms while she rocked her hips against him. All of the tingling sensations, from her legs, upward to her mouth, fueled her to move faster. Her clit rubbed against the upper ridges of his penis and the head thrilled her deep inside.

His breathing became heavier as they moved faster but held tight to one another.

She rocked her hips along the shaft, working to push him deep. Another orgasm began to build but she focused on him instead because she wanted to drain every drop from him. Every thrust and every spurt had to be burned in her memory forever. His moans drove her but her legs began trembling.

"Ah... yes..." he said.

She pushed her hips against him but her breathing was ragged.

"Don't stop..." he pleaded as his stomach muscles tightened.

Alaunra let out a cry as she peaked but she used her legs to keep moving. There was a pulse between them. Her muscles clamped over his rod, and he began to surge within her.

Tignaroc pulled her body tight and gave a long groan.

They clung to each other as they settled. Alaunra pulled back and let the flow of water wash over them both. She looked into his eyes and he was still smiling.

He moaned and just said, "I've missed that."

"When was the last time you were able to enjoy... company...?"

He wrapped his arms around her tightly for a moment. It seemed like he was hesitant but he leaned back to look at her, he stroked her back as he explained. "My wife died after I turned fifty. I never remarried as a human. After I transformed, I had a lover that never

knew I was a dragon. I hated that deception. She was a widow and a very successful merchant, making clothes in town, and she passed away before the war. I couldn't tear her from her life and she could not transform to join me, but we were happy living apart."

"You were never involved with another woman after that?"

"Until now... no." His voice dropped, "I've got a hope that you could be with me for a long time. I won't have to hide anything."

Alaunra's skin tingled because he looked her square in the eye with a glint that cried out for acceptance. "You seem so human to me," she said wistfully.

"I am!" Tignaroc answered with a smile. "My life as a dragon is a magical responsibility. I did a lot of work with translocation spells until I finally succeeded in transporting myself to the Old One. I was shocked. I was sure he was going to kill me but my old way of life, in a way, did end that day. Starting tonight, yours will never be the same, either."

His words were merely a reminder of the differences between them.

"I wish you could stay." Alaunra heard the words come out of her mouth and wasn't quite sure she had actually said it but she knew it was true. "I don't want to wake up in the morning and think this is all a dream."

"You don't have to... you don't have to make a decision right now... it could even be a year from now. Just don't tell anyone what you know."

"But... my spell was simply complicated with your own."

"That *was* the caliber of spell needed to trigger what would have been a visit about transformation." Tignaroc explained.

Alaunra stared at him in disbelief.

"You summoned a dragon! That's nearly impossible... for even another dragon to do!"

"But, my components... I sacrificed my research and my wand."

"... and you sacrificed performing other detrimental magic. It might not have been the tangible objects you put into the crucible, it was the intent."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"You sacrificed from here..." he tapped the area of her heart.

Alaunra gave him a questioning glance.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

"I think it's beautiful." He smiled. "The qualities we both wanted were brought together from halfway around the world."

"So it wasn't the things I sacrificed..."

"You made a positive resolution, and it was rewarded. Even the Old One thought that being transformed to a dragon was a mystical revenge."

"Isn't that a blessing?" she asked.

"It's seen that way now. The dragon's body is more agile. The ability to fly helps, too."

"I want to know more."

Tignaroc smiled. "We have time. We could spend more time discussing it, but I don't want to be seen when your staff arrives in the morning."

"I'll take care of that. I'll keep you in my bedroom!"

"I have a better idea... are you teaching in the next few days?" he asked.

"Just a couple students," she began to explain. "There is a classroom in the front."

"Leave a note to have them come back on the Full Moon."

"Did you want to go somewhere?"

"Yes. My house... I can manage a spell for the both of us... and we won't be disturbed for several days."

"Can you fly us there instead?" she asked with a wry smile.

Tignaroc's delight showed. "Sounds like fun..." he answered, and his eyes were dancing.

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

Leading Lady , by Leigh Ellwood

A sci-fi actress is offered the role of a lifetime. Will she accept, even if it means moving to an alternate reality...with handsome elves?

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Leading Lady
by
Leigh Ellwood

Dina stared down at the black and white likeness of her younger self and poised a thick-tipped pen over the smooth curve of the photographed bare neck. “Hello, darling,” she greeted the wide-eyed man standing before her. “This is for whom, now?”

He couldn’t have been more than twenty-five. Thick, dirty blond hair hung in clumps over one brow. A large button covering one breast of his Metallica T-shirt informed the world that his phaser was always set for “stunning”. Dina imagined the collective sigh of relief settling around the room from any female conventioners having seen that button.

“J-Jeremy,” he croaked.

“Jeremy. Thank you, Jeremy.” The syllables rolled off her tongue with seductive ease; she trilled the *R* with her trademark purr, the throaty growl that had sent thousands of Jeremys to enjoy euphoric wet dreams over the years. This Jeremy, looking so young, had to be a recent fan as opposed to the legion of first generation faithful, a fan who had come to know *Mission: Jupiter* through endless reruns on cable or through the recent DVD releases of the popular 70s science fiction series.

Either way, Dina thought, *he’s here*. He paid his ten bucks admission, and the five dollar charge for the glossy photo her assistant distributed from the stack at the next table. His presence paid for at least one drink she had enjoyed last night at the hotel bar.

He was cute, too. Maybe he’d be good for more than his money. Dina smiled to herself and crossed her legs tighter to counter the sudden desire flooding her pussy, rustling the star field print

tablecloth in the process.

“I-I just wanted you to know,” Jeremy was saying as Dina scribbled a random platitude and a loopy signature on the photograph, “that you’re my favorite character on *MJ*.”

“Thank you, Jeremy. That’s so sweet of you to say.” That’s what everybody called *Mission: Jupiter* these days. *Star Trek* was either *Trek Classic*, *TNG*, or *DS9*, depending on the proper incarnation, and other popular sci-fi favorites suffered similar abbreviation. Dina disliked it; *MJ* sounded more like an illegal sex act performed in an alley behind a liquor store.

She glanced at the photograph, giving it one final inspection. It was a stock publicity photo of twenty-five-year-old Dina Joseph attired in her incredibly sexist *Mission: Jupiter* uniform. She had to laugh every time she saw the action pose of Lieutenant Mayda Moran, that blonde bouffant with the black minidress and white go-go boots, pointing a phaser at the camera like she meant business. The men on the show had worn jumpsuits suitable for NASA—the women looked like waitresses at the Swinging Pussycat Club. Apparently modesty and reality applied only to men when portraying the future on television back then.

Of course, she was the favorite character of all the Jeremys. Dina studied the photo: look at the tits on that phaser-wielding wench! This was a woman who had defied gravity and laws of physics merely by slinking past fellow officers along the corridors of the *USS Jupiter* every Monday night for five years. Never mind that Mayda had been the only officer on the ship capable of rubbing two brain cells together in order to formulate plans to defeat the evil Narciscans, *look at those tits*. These were the show’s biggest stars, pun intended. That’s what Jeremy was addressing as he complimented her, Dina knew.

She sat up straight. The two biggest stars of *Mission: Jupiter* continued to defy gravity well into Dina’s forties without the aid of plastic surgery, thank you very much. The quest to remain young for the cameras by way of a sadistic exercise and diet regimen had seen to that, for all the good it did. The body remained fit, but producers saw only a stock character from a campy sci-fi TV show when it came time to cast for their serious dramas.

Thanks for screwing my career, chick. She mock-scowled at the

young girl and planted a pouty kiss on her rump to the collective gasp of fans clustered around her table. She then slid the photo across the table, into Jeremy's trembling fingers. There was no mistaking the delight on the young man's face; he checked the Internet, Dina was certain. He knew the code.

"Wow. Thanks, Mayda," Jeremy said, and floated away. Dina sighed. It used to bother her to be referred to by her character's name, but when opportunities for work dried up Dina had eventually come to accept her alter ego with the rising demand for her appearance at science fiction conventions. Mayda was a part of her now, a part she had quickly come to appreciate for its fringe benefits despite her occasional grouching.

Dina watched one possible benefit stride confidently to a remote corner of the hotel ballroom, then turn expectantly back toward her table. He knew now that the legend was true...that a lipstick mark on an autographed Dina Joseph was a special, coveted treasure. He was in contention with other lucky conventioners to fuck Mayda Moran herself. He held the proof in his hands like a golden chocolate factory ticket.

Jeremy had a deliciously tight ass encased in black jeans, and judging from the pronounced bulge in the front he definitely advertised that he was more than just fringe. Perhaps he did pack impressive heat, as his button advertised. Dina smiled at him; there was that pulsing sensation that engorged her pussy lips. Yes, she definitely appreciated these opportunities.

"Jenna, you know the drill." She craned her neck as she quietly addressed Jenna Boyle, her personal assistant. "Screen test, money shot."

Jenna smirked and fished through her bulky shoulder sack for a digital camera. "Six we nix?"

"Seven is heaven," Dina confirmed. "Eight, great, and nine is *divine*." The two women giggled over the puzzled look on the next fan's face.

Dina then watched Jenna approach Jeremy and, after viewing a few silent words and restrained hand gestures, smiled to see the young man willingly follow the young redhead behind a blue cloth partition. There Jeremy would "audition" by letting down his pants and granting Jenna a picture for Dina to later peruse. *Six we nix*. A six-

inch cock or less was an automatic reject...but seven or more was a definite casting, and Jeremy would get the part provided he wasn't surpassed by another. Dina had seen enough cock in her day to discern size herself, no tape measure was necessary.

Dina returned to her task. She wondered how many of the other men snaked around the convention space in the various autograph lines would be willing to put themselves through the rigorous audition expected of a lip-printed fan?

The autograph session dragged slowly, and when three o'clock mercifully arrived, Dina was down to her last original nicety. Her hand ached from signing, and her pussy ached for want of a young stud's attention. The myths of sci-fi conventions were just that—there was nary a pocket protector or taped-up pair of horned rims to be seen in this crowd. Dina saw handsome young men in T-shirts advertising various fandoms, curvy women in skimpy character dress, and older fans weathering age quite well. A few decades out of the sun, watching the same *Mission: Jupiter* episodes over and again, was clearly good for the skin.

Despite the collective musk of hormones settling in the room, however, this con proved somewhat of a disappointment. She had marked only three other fans since Jeremy, and surprisingly all four fell short of the prerequisite. Phasers had apparently been set for *dud* tonight. *Sorry, boys*, Mayda thought as she bid the last fan farewell, *you must be so big to ride*.

Jenna helped her close up shop and counted the till. "Not a bad haul," the assistant remarked, fanning a wad of bills into a metal moneybox. She counted out the required ten percent to cover the con's share and snapped the lid shut.

"Moneywise, anyway," Dina grumbled.

"Sorry, hon." Jenna pouted. "I blame these new jeans the kids are wearing. They wrinkle weird. False advertising."

"Yeah, and here I used to think false advertising meant me endorsing a product on TV that I never used," Mayda laughed. It hurt to laugh, for she was probably going to bed alone tonight. Jenna might have sufficed, the girl was always willing, but she really wanted a cock tonight.

"Well, you'll score at next month's Jersey gig, I just know it. We'll need to order more Mayda pictures for that, too," Jenna said. "We

should probably get rid of those other ones, I don't know why you keep them, Dee. Nobody ever buys them."

"I know." Dina sighed at the stack of publicity shots Jenna placed into an accordion folder. The photos depicted a thirtyish Dina Joseph in regal dress for her only major film role, an epic that had played to many empty houses and was never released on DVD. Dina had no way to sell copies.

"I didn't even go see the film," she told Jenna. "About a month of box office, shown on network television once. Now it's locked in an airless vault with other turkeys."

"Was it that bad? The costume is gorgeous. Looks like a big budget flick."

"Not really, more a labor of love sort of thing for this guy I was seeing. He started out as head writer on *Mission: Jupiter* before breaking into film. He knew I always wanted to play a queen, so he wrote the script for me." Dina lifted her chin. A sad smile touched her face as she thought of Alan Widmark. Of all her lovers, he was the only one with whom Dina would have considered having a long-term relationship or, dare she suggest it, marriage. She might have pursued it, too, had he not died shortly after the film was released. When Dina learned of the car accident, occurring after Alan had left her house at that, she couldn't bring herself to see the film. The tragedy had done little to boost box office or inspire sympathy raves. The film simply died with its director.

"I was always afraid I'd jinx my career if I ever saw myself onscreen," she told Jenna instead. It was the truth, to an extent, but her life with Alan was her own. "I never watched an episode of *Mission: Jupiter*, either. Figured if I watched myself perform," she said, "I'd never work again. Guess I should've done the opposite, huh?"

Jenna handed her a DVD set of the show's first season. "Never too late. Pop in a disc, maybe Spielberg will call."

Yeah, like I have no big plans tonight. Dina waved away the package with a smirk. She *didn't* have plans, thanks to false advertising. "Please. I haven't worked for years outside a con, so I wouldn't know what to do anymore. And I won't degrade myself by participating in one of those reality shows that feature other one-trick ponies, either." This was a long-suggested idea Dina knew Jenna

would revisit. Best to head her off at the pass.

"It's a nice paycheck," Jenna sang, "and it might bring in offers of legitimate work. It has for other actors."

"Yeah, other reality shows. It's not worth the hassle of living in a mansion listening to a bunch of other has-beens spout their catchphrases. Forget it." Dina stood and arched her back, working out the kinks. The only reality she wanted to face was a warm tub and a soft bed, seeing as how the added bonus of a hard body to join her in both wasn't likely. "Let's get out of here."

"Ms. Joseph?"

Dina almost didn't turn her head; few people addressed her by her real name. Even her doctor called her Mayda.

When she snapped to the attention of the two gorgeous men standing before her dismantled station, she knew instantly that she wouldn't have minded playing doctor with either of them. Or both.

One was the photonegative image of the other, and both sported soft brown eyes and hair cropped behind pointed ears. That narrowed their possible fandom preference to six shows, at least. *Mission: Jupiter* had its share of characters with pointed ears and eyebrows, webbed feet and hands, and whatever other physical anomalies the producers concocted while drinking.

The blond had olive skin—his otherworldly look well suited the convention, and Dina wondered if the man wore makeup to enhance his shading. He wore an Eisenhower jacket and black pants that nicely accentuated his muscled thighs and front bulge. Not a wrinkle to be seen. A leather strap around one shoulder indicated he had a scabbard behind his back; a sword handle protruded from behind one shoulder.

Nice.

The dark-haired one was pale by comparison, and dressed entirely in white. The uniform and gilded insignia resembled nothing from any TV show Dina had seen, but there were a number of European TV fandoms represented here; he could be representative of any of them, for all she knew. Dina was already a fan of his equally impressive bulge.

Please, let one of them be divine. "Yes, I am Dina Joseph," Dina said. It felt strange to say that...to think, she saw herself more as Mayda Moran than her real self. The thought to offer an autograph faded quickly. Despite the obvious costume, she got the feeling these

men were not *Mission: Jupiter* fans. “How can I help you?”

The two men looked knowingly at each other before the blond spoke again. “I am Kray, and this is my, er, partner, Lane. As you can see, neither of us have signed photos bearing lipstick markings.” He winked. “Nevertheless, we have noticed you are still alone...”

Dina wanted to roll her eyes at this. *Thanks.*

“...and we are hoping this will not prevent us from, ah, an *audition*,” Kray finished.

“I see.” Dina caught a peripheral glance of Jenna’s eyes practically bulging from her sockets. The younger woman was a better judge of size than she when looking at *clothed* men. The night might end well for her, after all. “Well,” she said slyly, “certainly I’m not above bending the rules. A kissed photo isn’t necessarily the only invitation I offer.”

“There is one catch, Ms. Joseph,” the dark-haired universal soldier broke in. “We would like to audition as a pair.”

“Meaning?” Dina thought she might orgasm at the husky tone of the man’s voice.

“Meaning,” the blond rejoined, “if we both pass, we both play. And, if we may be so bold...” His hand flipped upward to reveal some snapshots pinched between his fingers, “we’ve taken the liberty of performing our own screen test for your consideration.”

“Well...” Dina was grateful for her training. On the outset, she regarded the proposal coolly, yet within her she battled every nerve that fought to splay wide her legs right there on the table. The photos Kray handed her revealed two cocks, impressive even in their flaccid states. Her pussy felt ready to melt. She couldn’t remember the last time she had enjoyed a *divine* rod. Actually, she could—Alan, despite having been twice Dina’s age, sported a nine-inch cock and knew how to use it. Lord, but she missed that man.

Here, though, she was being offered two in the preferred size range, and a hotel key card held by the dark-haired one. Her kind of sweeps week.

“Shall we say, seven?” Kray asked.

Dina took the card. “We shall.” Now she couldn’t decide if seven or nine was her favorite number.

CHAPTER TWO

“This won’t work.”

Kray looked up from the row of lighted candles arranged on the bureau. The overhead lights were dimmed, soft music wafted from the small bedside radio, room service champagne chilled in a bucket stand. A scene for seduction was set as best as the two could arrange it.

Everything seemed workable to Kray, save for the combination of burning vanilla and lavender that stung his nostrils and encouraged a nauseous feeling. He had forgotten how noxious the scents were to him, yet this was what Dina Joseph liked. For this to work, everything had to go as planned, and that meant for Kray to control his olfactory discomfort and for Lane not to act so skeptical.

“This won’t work,” Lane said again.

“We’ll have to suck up the odor.” Kray nodded to the candles. “It’s a nice night out, maybe if we open the balcony doors it won’t bother us as much.”

“I don’t mean the candles, Kray, I mean this whole thing. This. *Us*.” Lane paced their hotel room, clad only in a pair of jogging shorts, tension evident in his gait. “I don’t think we can pull this off. She’s going to see right through us.”

“She won’t. She’s used to meeting up with odd people at these conventions. Whatever quirks that slip past, she’ll attribute to some kind of science fiction fanaticism she thinks we’re harboring.” Kray perched on one corner of the bed and tracked Lane’s every movement. Lane was beautifully sculpted, from his strong arms and taut, bare legs. The obvious tension Lane exuded overrode the discomfort from the candles’ too-sweet aroma. Kray felt suddenly dizzy and wobbled.

“Lane.” He scooted farther into the mattress and gestured the fairer man to sit between his legs. Kray ground his fingers into Lane’s

shoulders, untying the knots bunched in the other man's muscles. Lane was always a delight to touch, and Kray felt his cock stirring between them. It had been a while since the two had made love, and Kray felt well the effects of withdrawal. The scent of Lane so close taunted him, and it was all Kray could do to keep from thrashing Lane back onto the mattress and straddling his gorgeous body. For two days they'd been away from home, two days since Kray last felt Lane's delightful tongue teasing his erect shaft and puckered anus...two days too long.

Patience, Kray reminded himself. They had to save something for Dina.

"Dina is beautiful." Lane's voice was soft.

"So are you." Kray brushed a kiss into Lane's hair.

"I can only hope I'm worthy of her, and that I'll please her."

"You are and you will. And she will love you. Everything is going to be fine," Kray assured Lane. "By morning, Dina will be crazy for us, and willing to leave this nothing of a life behind her."

"By morning we'll be in prison after she has us arrested, or committed." Lane caught Kray's hand as it slid down his shoulder. "She's a smart woman, what makes you think she'll believe us?"

"Faith, my love. She is the one for us." Kray leaned forward and kissed the bend in Lane's neck.

"How do we explain these?" Lane tapped at a pointed ear. "How do we explain they don't come off when she asks us to remove them?"

"Eccentricity." Kray let Lane guide his hand across Lane's broad chest. He rolled a toughened nipple between his thumb and forefinger, satisfied as Lane relaxed. "We're science fiction fans. We want to ravish the luscious Mayda Moran while dressed as those Narciscan characters on her old TV show." That was their agreed cover, the fetish excuse they planned to deliver should Dina question the ears. "I'm sure others have made similar concessions with her, some even stranger than pointed ears."

"We're not science fiction fans, we're elves," Lane said, though the edge in the voice softened significantly as Kray's hand found the soft sac between his legs and squeezed. "We're not human, we're not even from this lifeline! She's not going to believe we're from an alternate reality, much less that we're not human, that I'm not, anyway. You're half-human, at least."

"I don't look it, though. Don't presume to know what's going to happen, Lane. You might be surprised with how well our plan is executed."

"She finds out these ears are real, we'll be executed when she dies of fright." Lane's voice was heavy. "They'll think we killed her."

Kray nipped at Lane's earlobe. "Such delicious ears, too. Dina will love them as much as I do. She'll be fine." Lane appeared to fight Kray's caresses, but Kray could feel his partner continue to succumb.

"Weren't the Narciscans the villains on that show?" Lane asked. "Why would any of them want to sleep with an officer of the *Jupiter*?"

"We can fill in plot holes later, love." Kray pressed a finger to Lane's chin and forced him closer for a light kiss. "Tonight, we claim Dina Joseph as our own." Lane's worries were unfounded. By the time they were through with the lovely Dina, the actress would willingly take her place in the triad, and take on her new role as the queen of her husbands' hearts.

Lane was completely relaxed now, falling forward to straddle Kray's hips as the two men kissed. This was exactly what Kray wanted to prevent, but it felt too nice to ignore any further. Kray's cock pressed against Lane, aching to be inside him; Lane was a sensuous, giving lover, and Kray blessed every day they were together. To have Dina finally join them would be heaven, Kray knew. No way would the consummate actress turn down the role of a lifetime...the role of an alternate lifeline, and a life much better than the one she currently lived.

Kray kissed Lane's throat, his collarbone, his breastbone, and continued a soft, loving trail down Lane's body. He loved the way Lane's body stiffened with every kiss. Lane was going to love having him *and* Dina doing this to him, and Kray was going to love doing it...forever.

CHAPTER THREE

What is that sound?

Dina leaned into the door until her ear barely brushed the painted wood. A wicked smile curled her lips; it wasn't too difficult to decipher the deep moaning within the room. The divine photonegative twins had started without her. Interesting...this was going to be *that* kind of threesome.

Dina felt her nipples tighten at the thought of Kray and Lane going at it on the other side of the door. Homoerotica was a big turn on for her; these two must truly have been fans of hers to know that. The fetish wasn't something she advertised, but no doubt, news of her favorite proclivities had circulated around the sci-fi convention circuit over the years.

She wondered what they were doing. Did the dark-haired one—Lane—have his head between Kray's thighs, sucking his cock? Their introduction was brief, but Dina imagined Lane was likely the more submissive of the pair. She could see a man like Kray roughly pounding his cock into that delightful, pale ass and enjoying every minute of it.

Oh, yes, she *really* wanted to see that. Maybe Lane would eat her pussy while she watched.

She knocked twice, hard, and waited.

"Coming!" shouted a distinctly surprised voice.

I'll bet. Dina chuckled, but said nothing.

Muffled chaos vibrated the door, and Dina smiled as she pictured the two men hastily righting their clothes and smoothing down their hair to look presentable.

She hadn't expected either man to be nearly naked, but Dina didn't complain when Kray escorted her to the edge of the bed. The vertical

tenting of his shorts was as much a delight to behold as his smooth, planed chest. Lane was equally appealing, sitting shyly next to her. His dark nipples were thick and ached to be bitten, Dina noticed. The bulge in his shorts throbbed as he shifted for comfort.

Thank God, she thought, thinking fleetingly of her years of training by many an acting coach. Stoic on the outside, volcanic within. The thought of having these two magnificent specimens fucking her simultaneously, and perhaps doing more with each other, would have made her entire body quake had she not been able to suppress the excitement. As it was, her pussy ached to the point of atrophy and she clenched to keep her juices from soaking the sheets; she feared the slightest touch by either of them would cause her to explode.

Kray stood before her, ramrod straight, with a relaxed expression. How he could look so blasé impressed and frustrated Dina. Despite years of playing with groupies, the notion of sex still made her giddy.

She bit her lip as Lane rose and wrapped an arm around the other man's waist.

"Ms. Joseph, as always, you are a vision of beauty," Kray said. "Lane and I thank you for coming."

"Thank you for wanting to make me come." Dina laughed awkwardly at her lame joke, relieved neither man expressed any distaste with it. They only stared down at her with a love struck awe that quickly unnerved her. Was coming here a wise thing to do, she suddenly wondered. Neither man seemed like the other young men she'd fucked over the years. They seemed interested in more than just a casual fuck.

An unbidden thought drew Dina's gaze down to her clutch purse. Jenna had the day's till in the hotel safe, but these guys didn't know that.

"Dina, you look nervous." Kray's face straightened. "Don't be. Lane and I want this to be a night you won't forget."

Dina might have relaxed more if Lane concurred vocally. As it was, the fairer man only stared. The thought to conjure an excuse to leave suddenly came and went when her eyes fell to their bulges. Two cocks! Huge ones, at that, circumcised tips peeking over elastic bands. How could she turn away?

If they turned out to be robbers and murderers, Dina decided, hopefully they'd give her the courtesy of a few good orgasms before

doing the deed.

“O-kay. Well, let’s get right to it, shall we?” She crossed her arms and reached for the hem of her scoop-necked shirt, but Lane’s hand stilled hers. The electric pulse shocked her heart.

“No,” Lane whispered, “you shouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?” Odd. This was the part where she was supposed to be naked, too.

“You don’t lift a finger tonight,” Kray supplied. “This night, you are to be pleased. We will do all the work. We will undress you as you wish.”

“Oh, really?” *Nice*. She was going to be pampered. This was a first for the convention circuit. Past playmates tended not to be as accommodating. Dina shook her head quickly to jar away memories of those encounters—the guy who requested a strip tease, the guy who laughed like Jerry Lewis during a blowjob, the guy who pestered her with *Mission: Jupiter* questions as he fucked her. She wanted to concentrate on Kray and Lane; these were the only two heavenly bodies she wanted to conquer tonight, and so far they seemed saner than others she’d had.

If only...Dina touched her own ears and arched an eyebrow at them. “About these...” she began.

Kray ran his fingers through his hair and momentarily stopped at his pointed ears. “If you please, Ms. Joseph,” he said, “it’s been a fantasy of ours—”

“Say no more.” Dina sighed, but kept her smile. Ears weren’t as conspicuous as, say, full body armor. Now *there* was an experience she’d just as soon forget.

Both men seemed to read her mind. Tonight, there would be no *Mission: Jupiter* trivia, nothing juvenile. As Kray and Lane sat on either side of the bed, enveloping her with their heated desire, Dina felt ready to come at a verbal command.

Hands caressed her all over, smoothing over her collarbone, shoulders, and arms. As an unseen cloud of vanilla and lavender wafted around them and numbed her senses, Dina felt a cool sensation and looked down to see her exposed skin, raised with goose bumps. Lane had managed to remove her skirt and panties without her moving, and Kray had undone all the buttons on her blouse and now unhooked her bra. Somewhere in the course of their ministrations

their shorts were removed as well. How had that happened so quickly?

Soon her breasts were free, vulnerable to their touch. Each man stroked a breast with amorous synchronicity, circling her nipples with roughened thumbs. Each stood immediately to attention. Dina felt the pleased sensation shoot straight to her pussy. She needed a cock inside her now, and judging from how much thicker the ones on either side of her had become in the last few seconds, she knew Kray and Lane had to share her consensus.

“Soon,” Kray whispered in her ear. “Let us pleasure you first...”

“Dina.”

“What’s that?” Kray asked.

Dina looked into his eyes, and felt a sudden pang of anxiety. No lust raged in those deep brown eyes, as Dina had expected. What she saw seemed...different, serious. Yet, somewhat familiar, too. Dina might have felt uneasy had not Lane dissolved her reserve with a few well-timed kisses on her bare shoulder.

“Call me Dina,” she said, not necessarily to Kray. “I sensed you were about to call me Ms. Joseph again.” She squirmed when Kray’s hand pried her legs apart. “I think we’re beyond formalities. Don’t call me Ms. Joseph, or Mayda.” Mayda had been good to her at these shows, but Dina wanted her to have none of this. “Call me Dina.”

“Of course,” Kray said, “Dina.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Dina. *Beloved*.

How wonderful to say that name again. How familiar it sounded on his tongue after so many years of self-imposed silence. To have said her name in the past evoked only sadness and regret. Tonight, however, signaled a new beginning for Kray, with the two most important people in his life. Tonight, all the wrongs of the past decade would be reversed. Only tonight, and every night thereafter, mattered.

Kray tucked his knees underneath him and crept up the mattress behind Dina, easing her onto her back. “Relax,” he whispered as he stretched Dina’s lithe yet suddenly tense body. She was beautiful, her skin smooth and flawless and belying her true age. He couldn’t wait to explore to every inch of her and, watching Lane’s face split into a wide grin as Dina’s legs parted, looked forward as well to his partner’s first experience with a woman.

Dina’s pussy was as smooth as the rest of her body...ripe and delicious. Kray could see her labia twitch as Lane shouldered his way between her thighs. Gently Kray smoothed a hand to one breast and palmed her nipple, delighting as it stabbed at his skin. Her response to their touch was as he hoped, giddy and expectant, feelings to soon give way to thrashing pleasure.

Dina’s shoulders shifted in his lap; his erection pressed into one of her shoulder blades. “Dina, please,” he said, and eased her up slightly to free his cock. Pivoting toward her, he grasped his shaft at the base and pointed it toward her. Oh, how he ached for her touch.

“Dina, I know we said earlier we would do what you choose, but I’ve waited so long for this and I was hoping...”

To his relief, Dina didn’t protest. Dina curled her lips outward and pursed them around the bulging head of his cock. Kray thought he’d go mad when the tip of her tongue swiped at the pre-come bubbling

on the slit. Slowly, seductively, Dina applied a suction that saw Kray's cock disappear, centimeter by centimeter, into her mouth.

So good. He wanted to close his eyes and savor the moment, but the sight of Lane buried between Dina's thighs was too stimulating to ignore. Lane seemed to have Dina's entire pussy in his mouth, given the way his upper lip was clamped over her mound. His eyes closed and head wavering back and forth, Lane seemed lost in his own world as he ate Dina, a world he'd be loath to depart, if Kray could correctly interpret the smile pulling back Lane's face.

Lane had enjoyed few partners in his time, all men, yet Kray knew the younger man was looking forward to forming this mixed triad. He had to wonder, though, how Lane was eating Dina's pussy. Did his tongue lap at her swollen pussy lips with broad strokes as his mouth collected her juices, or maybe Lane's tongue was tracing the edges of her slick core, teasing her with penetration before sliding up to tap on her clit? Whatever he was doing, Dina was clearly enjoying it, and Kray hoped there would be enough left to enjoy once Lane was finished.

As it was, Lane was close to bringing Dina to orgasm; Kray felt it through the sudden tugging on his cock as it muffled Dina's moans of pleasure. He bent low to caress one breast, pinching the nipple as Dina released his cock with a light *pop* and cried her release.

"Mmmmm." Kray picked up on the satisfaction humming through Dina's body as she rode the orgasm back to earth. His fingers glided over her raised flesh, reading her desires. She had enjoyed that first explosion—yes, there would be more—and Kray saw that she hungered for more. So she would receive, but not quite so quickly.

He had waited too long to rush this night.

* * * *

This made up for everything—endless years of being snubbed for awards, being asked to purr catchphrases on cue by multitudes of fans, being called Mayda during auditions. As Lane lifted his head and offered her a sticky, satisfied grin, Dina realized that if, indeed, these men turned out to be criminals, they wouldn't need blunt instruments to kill her. Death by orgasm had a much, much sweeter ring to it.

"Did you enjoy it?" Lane asked, his voice young and betraying the confidence in his glowing eyes.

“Baby,” she gasped, her abdomen heaving, “that was incredible.” Imagine what his cock could do; Dina felt her pussy twitch in anticipation.

She looked up at Kray, curious that he hadn’t moved except to fondle her breasts. His cock looked near bursting; she had loved the feel of it throbbing in her mouth and longed to taste it again. Yet, she wanted the men to switch places, too. She had to know how gifted Kray was with eating pussy, had to know how good Lane tasted...

Kray seemed to read her mind. Suddenly he edged Lane to one side and took his place between Dina’s thighs. He smoothed his fingers over her moistened pussy lips, delving one finger deep into her slit and massaging her inner walls. Dina gasped at his touch as it quickened, then thickened with the addition of more fingers.

She arched her back and moaned. Kray continued to assault her pussy with his hand and tongue. He lapped at her clit as fingers scraped inside her, massaging her G-spot. Lane snaked upward on the mattress to take a nipple hard between his teeth. Every nerve ending on that breast ignited. *So good.*

Lane pulled at the nipple, then let it slip through his front teeth. “You like that?” he asked.

“Yes.” Dina followed his gaze down the landscape of her body and stopped at Kray’s face buried in her pussy. His technique was slower, yet equally sensuous.

“He is so beautiful,” Lane said. Dina noted a catch in the man’s voice.

“He is,” she replied softly.

“I love watching him do that to you.”

I love him doing it. Was that jealousy in the young man’s eyes? Did he envy Kray for the opportunity to drive her orgasm again, or did he envy her for being on the receiving end of Kray’s attentions? Dina tried to ponder it, but the sensations building up in her pussy were too great to ignore. She lolled her head back and focused on the fire spreading up her legs.

Lane turned on his side and stroked her cheek. “What can I do for you now?” He sounded earnest.

Dina leaned closer to let him nuzzle her. “What were you two doing before I came here?” She bit back a laugh at Lane’s sudden blush; she didn’t want to embarrass him too much. “You said, lady’s choice.”

Lane looked away, but Dina saw a smile. She braced her arms behind her and lifted her upper body, splaying her legs further apart and granting Kray better access to her pussy.

“Let me see you suck his cock,” she told Lane.

* * * *

Oh, if it were possible to love Dina even more...

Kray slid his hands underneath Dina's ass and eased her further up the bed, not missing one second of attention to her pussy. He continued to suckle her clit and nibble her pussy lips as he found a comfortable position below her, one that would allow Lane to suck his cock.

Lane didn't miss a beat, either. He rolled onto his back, his feet toward Dina's head, then to one side and took Kray's thick shaft in hand. Kray looked up long enough to see Dina start to stroke Lane's erect cock; then the room blurred as Lane's lips touched his sensitive head. Dina's musk and juices, coupled with the added sensation of his balls tightening in response to Lane's ministrations, sent his body into overload. If he shot his load into Lane's willing mouth now, would there be enough for Dina?

Looking at Dina smiling and cooing at them, clearly enjoying the show, would she care?

Kray cared, for Dina's happiness and pleasure. He cared very much to be clamped by this sweet vice, just as Lane had his cock trapped tightly between his lips. It would be hell to have to ask Lane to stop.

He eased a reluctant Lane from his cock and pointed him to the nightstand. “You liked watching that, you naughty girl,” he said, reveling in the low, throaty giggle that was Dina's answer. “You want to see more?”

He positioned his cock toward Dina's waiting, swollen core. “You want to watch me pound this cock in Lane's ass, or do you want some first?”

Dina's eyes widened. “You'd fuck him for me?” She looked up at an ebullient Lane as he fumbled with the foil packets in hand. “You've done it before,” she said knowingly.

“We'll do it again or not, your choice. We'll do it as we're doing you, whatever you wish. I could fuck Lane while he fucks you. That would be so sweet.” It would, too, but Kray wanted his chance with Dina first. When Dina suggested just that, he felt his heart lift to the

ceiling.

Reluctantly, they parted long enough to allow Dina to position herself on her knees. Lane wobbled on the mattress to kneel before her, and Dina bowed immediately into his cock, taking him in one swallow. Grasping her buttocks and spreading them to reveal hot, waiting pussy, Kray traced the edges of her cunt with the tip of his cock before pushing into her.

“Ohhhhh.” She was everything he had hoped and dreamed—hot, tight, wet. She was everything he had dreamed of possessing for years. This moment, this gentle rhythm and soft moaning accompaniment as he slid in and out of her, well made up for time lost. Kray was going to enjoy catching up with her.

He watched her suck Lane’s cock, her movement jerky as he pushed into her. Her breasts shook with each thrust, and Kray longed to reach over and pluck the softened nipples back to attention. “Beautiful,” he murmured, then to Lane, “Sixty-nine her.”

With a smile, Lane released her hold and dove underneath Dina. Lying on his back, Lane presented his cock again, and Dina wasted no time reclaiming it. Dina moaned her approval as Kray timed his thrusts with Lane’s assaults to her clit. Kray smiled, too, with the occasional, literal, slip of the tongue as Lane lapped at the base of Kray’s cock. The pleasure heightened for Kray, so much that he almost didn’t want to relinquish his position.

But, this night was about making Dina happy, and she wanted to see some hot bi action. Definitely, it was a good trade-off.

“Now,” he commanded, and freed himself from Dina. Lane scrambled from underneath her and sheathed himself quickly before taking Kray’s place. As Kray applied some lubricant to his cock, he noticed Dina barely had time to register what was happening before Lane eased her on her back and drove his cock home. Dina’s gasp at contact, though, was nothing like the deep-throated groan Lane set free when Kray pried apart the other man’s buttocks and, after teasing the anus first by inserting a finger, slowly eased his cock into the growing hole.

“Can you see?” he asked Dina, his voice huffing as he moved with Lane, like pistons in a machine, working at pleasure.

Dina’s head lolled to one side, her face a mask of pure rapture. “No,” she cried softly. “I wish I could.”

“Next time.” For her benefit, and Lane’s, Kray bent forward and rained kisses across the other man’s shoulders and back. He was rewarded by Lane clenching the proper muscles, tightening the hold.

“I’m gonna come,” Kray breathed into his ear. “How do you want me to come? Do you want it in your ass? Or should I pull out and spray all over your back? He likes that,” he told Dina.

“Come in my ass, don’t stop fucking me,” Lane grunted. To Dina: “Let me come in your pussy. Please.” He sucked in a quick breath and Dina flicked his nipples.

“Yes,” Dina said. “Fuck me hard like he’s fucking you.” Her voice was choppy with each hard thrust.

“Yes,” Kray seethed. They reached a speed that caused skin to slap against skin, and sweat to shine on Lane’s back. Arms tangled and hands scratched; Kray no longer knew where Dina ended and Lane began. Their voices were a sensual chorus that rose in pitch with the simultaneous climax, Kray’s being the loudest as his cock spasmed in Lane’s ass and came. He collapsed on top of the other man, whose braced support gave away, causing them roll to one side as Dina gasped for breath.

Kray took the moment of disorientation to roll over them to Dina’s other side. Together the men sandwiched her and caressed her to calming. Kray watched the jagged rise and fall of her breasts with deep satisfaction.

“Oh, God.” Dina drew the two simple words into several syllables, laughing all the while. “That...was fucking incredible.”

“That,” Kray rejoined, “was only the beginning.”

“Oh, really?” Dina arched a brow at him. Lane rested his cheek against one breast, and she idly stroked the other man’s rumpled mane. “Honey, I don’t think I could go another round tonight. I need to have *something* left for tomorrow’s Q&A appearance at the con.” She chuckled. “Have to stay on my game.”

“I don’t mean now, although I wouldn’t mind another round,” Kray said. “I meant this is the only beginning...” he winked at Lane, “of the rest of our lives together.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Do what?

Dina sat up abruptly, trying to ignore the looks of alarm on her new lovers' faces. Loud, ringing coo-coo noises suddenly pierced her consciousness. Certifiably insane, these two were. She should have suspected that when they wouldn't remove the pointed ears, but then she'd picked up a many a fan dressed more outrageously who didn't try to "claim her." She should have been more adamant about the ears. A more forceful refusal would have queued her to leave.

Then again, she'd have missed out on the best orgasm of her life. No win. Ugh.

"Excuse me," she murmured and slid off the bed. Where were her clothes? She searched the floor around the bed and found nothing.

"Dina, have we done something to upset you?" Kray asked, concern coloring his voice. "Did you not enjoy yourself?"

She had enjoyed herself, immensely, but talk of forever spooked her. She'd been lucky in her life never to meet up with a truly obsessed fan of the Mark David Chapman variety, but that one word sparked an alarm within her. *Forever*. Dina shivered.

These two were cool, she had to admit. They knew the audition "process," knew her favorite scents and fetishes...she should have picked up on the signals instead of listening to her aching pussy. She should have realized she might be falling into a trap.

"I'm fine," she finally managed. Where *were* her clothes? What had they done with them? She looked around the room once more, then at the two puzzled faces before her and sighed. "I-I have to go now," she said. "I'm on a panel early in the morning..."

"You don't have to go so soon," Kray said.

"We were hoping you'd stay here tonight," Lane added.

"That's sweet of you to offer, but no thanks. I don't do sleepovers." Fine. She'd march out of the room wrapped in a bed sheet if she had to. It wouldn't be the first time, and who knows? Maybe a tabloid

reporter would be lurking in the hallway to snap a photo and offer her some much-needed publicity. Dina Joseph still has it. Ha!

"Really, I should go," she repeated. Her head swam, dizzy from the lavender and vanilla. A swatch of color caught her eye. *Aha!* She dove for her clothes and scrambled to get them, at the same time wary of Kray and Lane's approach. They remained naked, their cocks still impressive in their limp states, though Dina noticed one straining toward another erection.

She turned away and quickly dressed. *No, don't get horny. These guys are loons.* Great sex or no, it wasn't worth the risk.

"Dina, I don't understand," Kray was saying, "everything was going so well..."

"I knew it," Lane broke in, sounding mournful. "I knew it wouldn't work."

Dina felt the flush of shock at that remark. Knew what wouldn't work? Their plan of seduction, then abduction? Hold her for ransom, even? They'd be lucky to get half the till she made today in payment, as little as Hollywood valued her...and her fans? They'd mourn, then turn their attention to the next phaser-wielding bimbo in go-go boots.

The warning glance Kray shot Lane told her plenty. She had to get out of there before the pain supplanted the pleasure that still lingered. "Gentlemen," she said, her back straight, "thank you for the lovely evening." Willing her wobbly legs to stiffen, she started for the door.

Kray, however, was too quick, and blocked her exit. Dina's heart pounded, this time out of fear.

"Dina, you have to understand we're not here to hurt you," he pleaded. "If anything, we want to help by giving you the life you deserve."

"I have a wonderful life, and I'd like to continue living it."

Hands cupped her shoulders, and she jumped slightly at the touch. Lane was behind her, trying to soothe her nerves. He was failing.

"Is it...wonderful?" Kray challenged. "You've been stereotyped and reviled by an industry you once worshipped, and you're reduced to these giggling appearances at dog-and-pony shows when you could be perfecting your craft—"

"Hey!" Dina snapped. "I'm a damn good actor, thank you very much."

"I never said you weren't. You're a fine actor, and an excellent

lover...”

Dina felt herself blush at this.

“I knew your potential for both when I saw *The Regal Plot*,” Kray continued.

“You saw my film?”

“We both have, many times,” Lane said, and she jumped again at his voice. “It’s our favorite movie, because you’re in it.”

No. These men were but children when that film was released, and the film wasn’t suitable for children. It wasn’t available on video or DVD, and had never been on television. Dina was amazed enough that Kray knew the title, as Dina never bothered mentioning it in her official biography for these conventions.

“H-how?” she asked.

“Dina.” Kray came forward and covered Lane’s hands with his own. “I have the original film reels, willed to me by the director.”

“What? You knew Alan?”

Kray looked at her, the sincerity evident in his glowing eyes. “He was my grandfather, Dina, and he loved you very much, as I love you now.”

* * * *

She wasn’t buying it. Kray could tell immediately from her reaction. Lane’s soft sigh of defeat, wafting in the background, offered little encouragement.

Dina’s guarded expression cut deep into Kray’s heart. He could almost feel the blood flooding his body, heating his skin at the thought of what was to come. He turned quickly to see Lane appeared equally unnerved, knowing their secrets were to be revealed. For Dina’s sake, and for their future, however, Kray knew it was an eventuality they had to face. Premature though it seemed, it had to be done quickly and convincingly.

As many times as he had practiced his words, Kray expected the tremor in his voice. He wanted to cringe. He sounded like a fraud.

“Dina,” he said, taking her by the elbow. “Sit.” His relief was small comfort as Dina did not resist. She perched on the edge of the bed between the two men.

“This is impossible,” she was saying. “I knew Alan for years, and he never married or had kids. You can’t possibly be his grandchild.”

“I’m telling the truth, Dina. Alan Widmark *was* married, for a time,

although...” He sighed and pinched his eyes shut for two seconds. How to say this without looking the fool? He would have to be as good an actor as Dina.

“Although,” he repeated, “he was not married here.”

“Here?” Dina frowned. “Here as in this hotel? That makes no sense. You mean, here as in Chicago?” She huffed. “You know, if you’re married in one place, it sticks wherever you go.”

“Dina.” Kray shook his head. Dina’s acerbic nature wasn’t making this any easier. Best to go for the jugular, he decided. “Dina, pull on my ears. Take them off.”

Dina complied, and Kray relaxed and let himself be tugged to and fro in the futile effort. Dina’s cry of fearful surprise hurt nearly as much as her fingers did pinching the pointed outer shell of his right ear.

“We are elves, Dina,” he said, “Lane and I. Real, live elves. We are not playing dress up like the others at this convention, this is who we are.”

“No,” Dina whispered. “Y-you just used a stronger stage glue for those ears.” Her eyes widened, and with trembling fingers, she snatched at one of Lane’s ears as if to prove Kray wrong. Lane let out a soft gasp when Dina herself was proven incorrect.

“No.” *No.* The word sliced Kray’s soul in two. How could he convince her?

* * * *

Okay, now this was *really* getting weird. Whatever makeup artist they used did quality work. Dina hadn’t bothered to notice the ears in detail, but as she tugged stubbornly at them she noted how seamless the outer shells came to a point. The physical anomaly *looked* real, but it couldn’t possibly be...

She looked from Lane to Kray. They looked so sincere, they wanted her to believe them. Nuts, the both of them. Elves didn’t exist. Elves were cartoons who lived in large, hollow trees and baked crackers.

“Why is it so difficult to believe?” Kray asked her. “Your television show dealt many times with issues that seemed impossible for the time. Alien encounters...”

“Actors in rubberface,” Dina shot back. “That show wasn’t filmed on location, you know.”

“True, but many theories presented on that show have since come to

pass, on the scientific end, anyway,” Lane said. His boldness surprised Dina, as this was truly the first time he asserted himself. “Don’t you think it’s credible that encounters with non-human, sentient beings might come to pass as well?”

“Not in Chicago! Not here.” Dina leaped from the bed and paced its width. “You can’t be elves.” She pointed at Kray. “And you can’t be Alan’s grandson, he wasn’t an elf! I knew every inch of that man’s body, there was nothing pointed on him that wasn’t supposed to be pointed.”

“Yes, my grandfather was human, and I am half-elven by my mother,” Kray supplied. “Alan’s son was part of an elven triad.”

“So, what, you’re saying you’re elves from outer space?”

“Not outer space. We were born on Earth,” Kray said.

“Really? I’ll assume there are more of you on the planet, so how come you don’t see more pointed ears these days?”

“You do in our reality,” Lane offered.

Right. Of course, all the friendly little people in Kray and Lane’s reality had pointed ears...and nice white jackets with extra long sleeves and buckles in the back.

“We are from an alternate universe, Dina,” Lane continued, “where our Earth is populated with elves in addition to humans. Our traditions are similar to yours, though because of population concerns many people of both races have taken to mating in threes...” His voice trailed off as he looked down at his naked body, appearing as though he had said too much.

Too much nonsense.

“Dina,” Kray said, his head lowered and fingers steeped, “you are familiar with a certain story about a ring, and elves, and other human-like creatures who sought to destroy the ring?”

“Am I?” Dina snorted. Yet more movies in which she hadn’t had a chance in hell of landing a role. “Don’t tell me Tolkien was an elf from your bizarro world.”

“Not an elf, but yes, he came from our alternate universe,” Kray said with casual seriousness. “It certainly explains the realistic quality of the books he wrote. They weren’t appreciated as much in our world, and when he and others like him discovered a breach in the time continuum he took advantage of the opportunity to gain fame through a fresh audience.”

Time continuum? This entire conversation read like one of her old scripts. It didn't make sense twenty years ago, either. "People like him?" Dina frowned. "People like Alan?"

Kray nodded. "My grandfather and his wife sought to find a third with whom they could form their triad. Nobody in his world appealed to him, so he hopped the continuum and met you. Only people who exist in one world and not the other can do that." Kray looked into her eyes and smiled. "There is no Dina Joseph in my world, just as no Kray or Lane or Alan Widmark exists here. Dina, my father told me many times of how you and Alan met. Didn't you think it odd that a man with virtually no credentials or history could get a prominent writing job with a popular television series?"

"It was LA." Dina shrugged. "If that's the weirdest thing that happened, the town's much better off than I originally thought." To think of it, though, Dina never recalled seeing much of anything personal at Alan's apartment when they dated, on the rare occasion they went there. Alan had been a private man, sharing little of his past. Not once, either, had he mentioned a wife in another world with whom he wanted a perpetual three-way.

If Alan had indeed come from another universe, why not share the news with her?

You know why. Dina shook her head. Yes, she would have dropped him the way her agent had dropped her.

"He had hoped to take you back with him, Dina, but he was killed before that could happen," Kray said mournfully. "His family barely managed to close his affairs here before anyone became suspicious. When I heard the stories, and saw the film," Kray raised his chin at this, "I knew my grandfather would still have wanted you to cross over and enjoy a better life."

Dina snorted. Right. She wanted to live in an alternative timeline playing Hollywood has-been to a whole new population of sci-fi fanatics, spouting tired one-liners on *The Alternate Hollywood Squares*.

"Hear me out, Dina." Kray's voice darkened. "You have no idea how popular your film is in my world."

"What?" Dina felt the heat of both men closing in on her. Somewhere in the course of conversation Lane's hand had sought out the sensitive flesh under her arm, and he massaged her. Kray's fingers

glided up and down her thigh and he spoke.

“Everything you hoped for in your career, you can still have, it’s not too late,” Kray whispered in her ear, then flicked the lobe with his tongue. “You’ll star in movies, be loved everywhere you go.”

“Best of all,” Lane added in her other ear, “you’ll have us to love you every night.” His breath was warm in her ear. The sensation prickled her skin and stiffened her nipples. There, too, was that familiar ache in her pussy. Dina’s senses swam as she grasped hold of the bed’s edge and tried to stand.

“No.” The concept, of course, was heavenly. To have the successful career, her name above the title, a closet full of awards, had been her dream. To come home every night to two waiting cocks, well, that surpassed any dream script handed her way. She knew, however, no matter how serious these two sounded that it couldn’t be true. To drag poor Alan’s name into their deceit only hurt more.

She was tired, disappointed, frustrated and horny. She wanted to believe she had slipped into an episode of *Mission: Jupiter*, but would be happy instead to just crawl back to her hotel room and drink away the memory having her pussy filled with a pair of divine rods. “I-I’m sorry,” she murmured, and dove for the door. “This is just...too much...”

“Dina, no!”

She couldn’t tell which one had shouted after her. She kept her eye trained on the door, then the hallway and the bank of elevators, stumbling in a heartbroken daze. No footsteps followed her, no sharp rapping on her hotel door invaded her sheltered privacy as she slipped into the warmth of her own bed and closed her teary eyes in vain.

* * * *

“Let her go, Lane.” Kray kept his grip across his lover’s chest, finding it more impossible to do as the other man fought the restraint.

“We’ll lose her, Kray.”

“We won’t. She’s not going anywhere,” Kray said. “More than likely she’ll have extra security at the Q&A panel tomorrow in case we show up, and we will.” He felt relieved to Lane’s reserve melt with the simple optimism in his statement. “I know enough about Dina through Grandfather to know that she never backs away from a commitment, no matter how strange the circumstances become.”

“She certainly hightailed it out of here,” Lane said with a strained

laugh.

“We’ll get her back, Lane, don’t worry. Think of this as another *Mission: Jupiter* episode. The mission is never complete until the last scene. We have time.”

Lane eased back onto the rumpled bed, his cock resting on his abdomen. He teased Kray with a few gentle strokes to his shaft. “You sound as though you already have a plan.”

“I do.” Kray knelt between Lane’s legs and reached forward to cup the other man’s balls. “You know what Mayda Moran always said on that show, never go into battle without a Plan C. I certainly have that, and because I had the forethought to plan ahead, I now have the time to do this.”

He dipped his head forward and took Lane’s cock into his mouth, tasting Lane and Dina together, as he knew was meant to be.

CHAPTER SIX

She would take two more questions from these numbskulls, then check out of the hotel and get the hell out of here. Never mind that she still had two hours of autographing to do, and that her room was paid for through morning, and that Jenna would be miffed, and that her flight didn't leave for another three hours after the hotel's checkout time, Dina was ready to go home *now*. She hadn't minded before the mild annoyances of answering the same questions about *Mission: Jupiter* con after con after con, but the knowledge that she probably wouldn't be getting any divine fan cock afterward took the zest out of today's planned activities.

Should a strapping young man with the qualifications to audition cross her path today, Dina knew she wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. Kray and Lane had ruined conventional sex for her. They had been so wonderful, fucking and sucking her to new heights of ecstasy, but they had to spoil everything by turning insane on her. She knew she had been putting herself at risk in the first place, offering strangers the opportunity to bed her, but last night's experience cemented what she had to accept grudgingly: auditions were officially closed for good.

Head propped on her palm as her elbow slid slightly underneath the weight, she listened half-heartedly to a co-panelist reminisce about a scene he and Dina had flubbed twenty-five years ago. The crowd chuckled along, clearly understanding more of the story than she did. Dina couldn't recall the man's face from the sea of extras and bit actors who had passed through the *Mission: Jupiter* set. It stood to reason that his career had met a worse fate than her own.

The panel's moderator called for calm and announced one last question to be directed at her. Dina straightened to attention as hands shot up throughout the small auditorium. She hoped for something simple. She didn't feel like straining to recall details of specific

episodes so these guys could settle bets. All she could think about was Kray's cock throbbing in her pussy and Lane's silken shaft sliding past her lips.

All she could think about was how badly she wanted more.

"Okay, I see a hand in the back," the moderator was saying. "You, sir, in the black, come on up to the mike, please."

From the shadows of the auditorium a tall figure with shocking blond hair emerged. Dina felt her pulse explode as Kray stepped up to the microphone planted several feet before the stage. She wanted to run, she wanted to stay, she wanted the ache in her pussy to subside. She did nothing, could do nothing, but watch Kray watch her with an intensity that set her loins on fire.

His words were confidant, unlike the other conventioners who had stumbled over their questions. "Ms. Joseph, I just wanted you to know that I enjoyed your performance in *The Regal Plot*, and I was wondering why you hadn't pursued more films after that."

Kray's knowing smile tested her, taunted her. He knew the answer already. Dina imagined much of the audience did as well, but rather than let herself be shaken by a perceived veiled jab, Dina held her head high and smiled sweetly.

She could still see him naked, his cock like a mast, aching to be inside her.

"Though I enjoyed making *The Regal Plot*, I decided not long afterward that film was not for me. I preferred the more flexible schedule television work offers, so after *Mission: Jupiter* ended I tried to focus on more roles for the small screen." What a lie that was. "I feel I made the right decision for myself."

"But given the chance, say you were offered the film role of a lifetime...the next Scarlett O'Hara," Kray challenged, "would you reconsider?"

"Uh, sir," the moderator broke in, "you asked your question..."

"I did, and I want an answer." Kray was bold, and held his gaze to Dina's with a strength she could feel shorten the distance between them. "Would you reconsider, Ms. Joseph?"

"I would, provided I felt the role was right for me," she said evenly. The rippled murmur of a hundred conventioners barely fazed her, as did the gruff, nervous *ahem* from her co-panelist. She saw only Kray in the room, clearly offering her a role in his delusion. "Mind you,

though, I couldn't take any role in film or television if I felt the story was not genuine."

"How about a love triangle story, with a happy ending for all involved?" Kray had the audience's awed attention, there was something about the confidence in his stance and voice that kept all eyes on him, Dina noticed. Nobody seemed perturbed that he was monopolizing the session. Even the moderator returned to his seat, as if bidden there by a spell.

"Would you consider a role like that, Ms. Joseph?"

A love triangle...each participant latched onto a lover, sucking a cock or licking a pussy. Yes, that she could do again. "It's not implausible, I might consider."

"Okay, say this love triangle is set in an alternate universe, and two members are not considered human. What then?"

This brought the room to life. A hundred different conversations, pondering the logistics of such a plot, rumbled like distant thunder. Dina watched Kray watch her for a reaction and smiled.

"I don't know," she said. "I'd have to read the script, and see the set."

Kray smiled back. "Very well." Without further pretense he closed his eyes and raised one hand over his head. His mouth twitched in what looked like a silent incantation, and the rumbling of the audience spiked with curiosity, then shock as Kray's fingers seemed to grasp air the way a person would fist a cloth tightly in hand. Dina gasped herself when she saw the air above Kray ripple in his grasp and tear away.

Shock rippled throughout the auditorium. Cell phone cameras held aloft captured every moment. A lone voice wondered aloud if this was part of the show. Dina couldn't answer, muted by her own shock.

He was actually doing it. Kray was actually creating a tear in the time continuum. There actually *was* a time continuum, just like the one explained in the *Mission: Jupiter* episode earlier in the session, the one in which she had flubbed lines with her co-panelist...

Dina blinked and put a hand to her mouth as she remembered. That episode had been written by Alan Widmark.

* * * *

This, she would have to believe. The look on her face was evidence enough that she was nearly there.

Kray now stood next to a vertical slit from which she could clearly see another place—a park blanketed in bright, green grass in the foreground of an impressive, futuristic skyline. This was Chicago in Kray's world.

He peered through the slit and a smile split his face as Lane approached from their homeworld to view Kray's side of the continuum. Lane's appearance caused another wave of excitement among the stunned crowd, Dina included. Kray was happy to see, though, that Dina was more pleased than upset.

"Here we have your set, Ms. Joseph, and your two co-stars." Kray gestured to the slit, then to Lane. "Your motivation for every scene would be the knowledge that in this universe you are admired for your lone film role, and that your fans are dying for more work. You have the love of two men who want to see these dreams come true for you. I ask you again, would you reconsider?"

Dina was silent, and stealthy. Kray didn't hear the scraping of her chair against the floor for the pounding in his ears. He couldn't breathe in her scent as she approached for the catch in his throat. Even tired from an obvious lack of sleep, she was still beautiful, more so when she stopped at his side and regarded Lane with a radiant smile.

"It is real," she whispered, awed. "Am I dreaming?"

"I'm dreaming, Dina," Kray whispered. "I've dreamed of this moment of years. I've dreamed the same thing every man in this room has dreamed, and if you cross this threshold with me everything you have dreamed will come true. *We* promise you that." He winked at Lane.

Dina touched his shoulder. Kray felt his cock twitch in response.

"It's beautiful there," she said.

"It is," Lane said. "It's home. It's your home."

"Home," Dina said. The word fit perfectly. Kray relished her reaction, and ached all the more. He had to get her across now, and make love with her and Lane. If they made it past the park, he would be showing great restraint.

"I'd consider this role," she said finally, looking at Kray slyly, "if a sequel was guaranteed."

"My lady, that is definitely something we can work out in the contract negotiations." Kray offered his hand and guided Dina home to a crescendo of whistles and cheers from the audience. Looping an

Dragons, Elves and Myths, Oh My!

arm through those of her two men, Dina walked further into the new world as the slit in the continuum quickly sealed shut. She didn't look back, Kray noticed. She didn't need to. Mayda Moran was left behind, but Dina Joseph was here now, as she was meant to be, and ready to begin her new role.