

IV

Dymitia



The Sorcerer's
Apprentice

The Emperor

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The Sorcerer's Apprentice – Tarot card The
Emperor

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THE EMPEROR

The Emperor is the card of the Yang, the male principle, the embodiment of the engendering power of the sun. No matter where you find him, he will always be the leader, although he may choose to do so from behind the scenes rather than in the vanguard because his is the spirit of the guide and mentor as well. At the same time, he is the father principle: guiding, nurturing, protecting. The card of the Emperor stands for strength, discipline, intellect and will, and his appearance in a reading is a sign that you must seek within to find the inner teacher who will guide you to make the appropriate decisions.

To all those who never give up their dreams...

I

Mike handed the smiling young man who had carried her bags to her cottage a five-dollar bill, closed the door and took a running jump onto the huge overstuffed sofa facing the fireplace. Sliding down into the cushions, feet propped on the oak coffee table that looked like it weighed a ton, she took a deep breath, exhaled and thanked whatever gods had finally let her win something.

A week at the most exclusive spa in the state of Pennsylvania, where her over worked and underpaid body would be pampered by a slew of highly trained beauty consultants, massage therapists, while Cordon Bleu chefs tempted her with gourmet splendor.

Too bad there isn't anyone to bring with you.

"Shut up, Matilda," Mike muttered. Matilda was her inner self, a real pain in the butt who was always pointing out her flaws of character – and her lack of a love life, with were not mutually exclusive. However, after Earl had ditched her six months earlier for some Lara Flynn Boyle clone who looked like she hadn't

eaten since 1996, Mike had decided she didn't need a love life. Despite three decades of feminism, men clearly still had no appreciation for robust, intelligent women no matter how their consciousnesses had allegedly been raised.

It isn't as though you try very hard to keep one, Michaila Marie Kublewski. Matilda always used Mike's full name, just like her mom did when she was offering maternal wisdom. *Maybe if you behaved more like a woman instead of one of the boys Earl wouldn't have started looking elsewhere.* Nor had it escaped her that Matilda's voice and theories of male-female relationships were also a lot like Mom's.

Well, Mike thought as she got up to unpack, the thrill ruined, if I have to change my entire personality so someone will love me, what's the point? Better alone than nobody I know.

Besides, if Mom was so concerned about having her only daughter adopt her own traditional-woman image, she shouldn't have used her four sons as babysitters. Was it Mike's fault that she preferred muscle cars to makeup, sports to shoes, Harleys to hairdressers? It wasn't as if she *couldn't* do all the girl stuff. She was a fairly decent cook—nothing fancy but nobody had ever ended up in the ER because of it. She could turn out a fancy-patterned knitted sweater in two weeks if she didn't have too many interruptions—and it would fit.

"Enough!" she muttered as she stripped to the buff, tossing clothes wherever they landed, and

headed for the sunken Jacuzzi tub in the huge bathroom. After three months of diplomatically editing a textbook for a mechanical engineer whose only qualification for writing one was his Ph.D., Mike just wanted to shut off her brain and wallow in luxury and sensual delights.

Submerged to the neck in warm water, sipping a lovely white wine as thousands of tiny aquatic fingers eased taut muscles and over-wound nerves, she relented a bit and allowed Matilda to offer a précis of her life to date. It had, on the whole, been a good one. Her job as an editor for a textbook company allowed her to get her science and technology fix on a regular basis without actually having to be engaged in either. It also paid for a nice efficiency apartment in a decent neighborhood and personal transportation—she refused to dignify her Honda coupe with the term “car.” She had a reasonably active social life; and if that had not to date included the kind of overwhelming passion she had once dreamed about while reading romance novels, she had enjoyed the two committed relationships she’d had since leaving college...while they lasted.

The wine and the soothing swirl of water were doing more than just relaxing her. A heavy tingle had gathered between her legs and was seeping into her lower belly. Mike rubbed the palms of her hands over her nipples, sighing and wriggling a bit as the tingle expanded. She clamped her thighs together, denying

herself easy release as she switched on her favorite fantasy.

Dark eyes gazed into hers with torrid heat, warning her she was at his mercy – and he had none. He trailed the tips of callused fingers over her, exploring every inch of skin, seeking those secret places that would fan her embers into an unquenchable flame. She moaned as he bent his head and took a hard nipple into his mouth, rolling it with his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he sucked. He spread her thighs wide, thrust his finger into her juicy core. Another. And a third, filling her, stretching her as his thumb circled and rubbed the soft nub of her clit. She arched her back, begging for more, and he sped up his teasing manipulation as the erotic pressure grew and grew until it burst, flooding her body with searing delight.

The orgasm drove a groan from Mike, and she dimly heard water sloshing from the tub as she gave in to her release. She felt as though she were adrift on a sea of summer breeze...

And then everything went black.

II

She was cold—that was the first sensation the registered. She was cold and naked and lying on a hard, clammy surface that smelled of earth.

This is not a Jacuzzi.

And unless the scented candle she'd lit just before climbing into the tub had been laced with insect repellent, she wasn't even in the bathroom. Wherever she was stank of herbs and chemicals and faintly of mold and wood smoke.

You could open your eyes, Matilda suggested.

Nope, don't want to. If I just lie here for a bit I'll wake up and it will all go away.

If you lie here for much longer you'll die of hypothermia.

Given she was now shivering hard enough her teeth would have sounded like castanets if she hadn't been clenching them, that was too logical to argue with.

What was that?

Footsteps, shuffling around her in a cautious circle. Heavy breathing, though whether from fear or

excitement she couldn't decide.

"____"

Voice: male. Age: young—older teens, maybe. Definitely excited, but the language wasn't one Mike could place. Something Eastern European or Far Eastern, maybe.

Suddenly, something poked her in the lower back hard enough to hurt.

That does it.

Mike rolled over, cracked her eyes just enough to see a pair of boot-shod feet, the boots very well worn, and the metal-capped end of a long stick. She grabbed the end of the stick and yanked it from her tormentor's grip then swung it in an arc about where knees should be, hard.

The owner of the feet howled and stumbled backward yelling words that didn't really require translation to communicate their meaning. Mike sat up, paused to let a wave of dizziness roll through her head then did a quick reconnaissance.

"Shit, this definitely ain't Kansas—or Pennsylvania, either," she muttered.

She was in a stone-walled windowless room that had to be 15 by 20, high-ceilinged, with rafters each of which appeared to have been hewn from a single *very* large tree. Hand-hewn, by the adze marks. She sat in the center of a circle with a double rim that had been etched into a floor that was also of stone—flags of what looked like slate fitted together so well the

cracks between were all but invisible.

A massive fireplace occupied the middle half of the wall on her right. It wasn't lit, which explained the gooseflesh she was wearing. Tall, broad cabinets of sturdy wood flanked it, the one on the left with one door slightly ajar to reveal boxes and jars and bottles of all shapes and sizes.

On her other side, beyond the edge of the circle, a table to match the cabinets stood loaded with retorts and alembics and other constructs she recognized as standard gear for an alchemist's lab. Beyond that was an iron-shod door wide enough to drive a VW Beetle through, and the walls in front and behind here were packed floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

What caught and held Mike's attention was the row of pegs on the wall beside the hinged edge of the door, from which dangled what looked like robes. *Warm* robes.

The kid gaped at her as she stood and strode around the table to grab one and dive into it. The sensation almost made her groan with pleasure.

Turning back, she noted the pentagram marked in the center of the magic circle; and judging from the expression on her companion's face she ought still to have been there. His previously florid cheeks had gone deathly pale, and he had backed up until the wall kept him from going any farther.

Then, dashing to a podium to the far side of the circle, he paged frantically through a huge leather-

and-metal-bound tome, alternately glancing from her to the pages. Mike took a step in his direction, and he shrieked, back-pedaled to the wall and slid down to sit with knees drawn up staring at her with stark terror.

Warming up nicely in her wool wrapper, which fell all the way to the floor, she decided to have a bit of fun. The little twerp clearly had something to do with her being here and ruining her vacation, and she might as well collect some payback before she made him send her back.

He started whimpering at her second sauntering step, and by the time she was halfway across the room he was sobbing and pleading in that weird language. A moment later, the sharp scent of urine told her he had pissed himself. Suddenly ashamed of herself, she was about to try to communicate when the thick door slammed open.

"What in the name of Almighty Karalthu is going on?"

He filled the doorway in both directions—and the door was both tall and wide. Black hair cut short lay in soft waves around a square face with knife blade cheekbones and an arrogant prow of a nose. Defined black eyebrows curved in and down above eyes of glittering gold, and muscles twitched in his clenched jaw.

No shirt. Tight linen pants that had clearly been pulled on in a hurry because they were still unfastened—and he wasn't wearing Hanes. Bare feet.

In fact, he looked like he had just gotten out of bed; and if the impressive bulge slowly receding in his crotch was any indication, he hadn't been alone.

Mike realized she was staring and yanked her gaze upward. The glitter in his eyes now shaded more toward an amused twinkle, and she felt her cheeks heat up. The wool fiber of the robe was irritating the skin on her back, but she clutched it tighter, stiffened her spine, raised her chin and glared at his chin.

"Who are you and where the hell am I?" she demanded.

It was as if the air solidified. The whimpering behind her stopped and his golden eyes locked on her like lasers—she could swear she felt the beams burning tunnels in her brain. She couldn't breathe, and it felt as if she were tilting forward, iron filings drawn by a broad-shouldered magnet. Her common sense told her it was an illusion...until she had to catch her balance.

"Hugo!" the towering male inferno barked. Mike heard scrambling as the quivering lump against the wall got to his feet.

"Yes, Master?" he whined.

Wait a minute. How come I can suddenly understand what everybody's saying?

"Get your moronic ass to the bath and clean up. I'll tend to you later."

"But, Master...the demon—"

Demon?

"Out, you incompetent nincompoop!"

The stripling, reeking of ammonia, stumbled past her and out the door, the monolith stepping inside the room to allow him to pass. She fidgeted from one foot to the other and wriggled her shoulders. The robe was really starting to make her itch.

"You," the monolith snapped, "come with me."

Maybe this guy put the fear of God into some people, but Mike had been bullied all her life by experts. Besides, her feet were freezing, and it was getting harder and harder not to scratch.

"Not a chance. I don't know where I am or how I got here, but somebody better punch my ticket for home right now."

He fastened his pants, closed the distance between them in one stride and tossed her over his shoulder. Her shock and confusion lasted only half a blink, and then she put up a fight. She decided in a hurry that she was likely doing more damage to her fists than she was to his back—it was like pummeling cement.

"Behave or I'll put you over my knee," he growled, accenting the threat with a hard smack on her bottom that stung all the way through the thick wool of the robe. *Nice way to treat a demon.*

In her battles with her brothers, Mike had also acquired the wisdom to know when she was outmatched and to wait for opportunity. This was definitely one of those times.

"I'll walk."

He set her back on her feet. She'd had to give up

her hold on the robe, and it gaped open long enough for him to get a nice look before she snatched it back closed. He didn't repeat his order, just left; and she hurried after him.

The absence of windows in the room was explained immediately—it was underground. She trotted in his wake along a corridor lit by oil lamps toward a stone stairway. Halfway there the door at the top flew open and a uniformed man with a long sword stood silhouetted in the frame. He moved back as her escort took the stairs two at a time then waited for her to catch up with his hands on his hips. Mike's ascent was much less graceful. The robe was too long and got in the way. When she tried to hold the hem up, the placket gaped in the middle. When she finally managed to find a way to climb and keep a modicum of modesty, she was exposing a considerable amount of cleavage.

This time he was the one who looked up from staring and caught her eye, but he wasn't the least bit embarrassed. No, indeed, and the way he did look made her feel warm and fuzzy in the middle. *Don't be an ass, Mikhaila. You're a prisoner here—and he's the warden. This is no time to develop Stockholm Syndrome.*

The moment she reached the landing, he spun on his heel and continued. The guards—there was a second man standing off to the side—fell in behind with swords still drawn as they all but ran through a series of vast, luxuriously appointed rooms in which people stopped whatever they were doing to gape.

Another staircase, this one red-veined gray marble with a carved wooden balustrade and thick gold carpeting up the center, led to a second-floor mezzanine with archways leading to opposing wings.

He turned left down a short corridor to polished double doors flanked by two more uniformed guards. These efficiently flung the panels open as the parade approached then shut them firmly behind with she and the monolith within.

Mike leaned against the doors, trying to catch her breath without losing her dignity. She couldn't feel her feet at all, and she gritted her teeth to keep from rubbing her back against the edge of the frame. She wasn't allergic to wool, so why did this robe make her itch so badly? Worse, the exercise had generated enough body heat; the thing felt like a portable sauna, and sweat trickled down her face.

"Sit." He was no longer barking, but that didn't make it any less an order. He pointed toward a pair of comfortable-looking wingback chairs arranged in front of a blazing fire as he continued through an open doorway on the far side of the room.

Mike limped to the indicated seat, slouching down to get her numb feet as close to the fire as possible. Peeking around the back and discovering she was alone, she reached inside the robe and scratched her ribs. It didn't help.

She fought down a sudden urge to cry, confronted by the reality she was all but naked God-knew-where

at the mercy of a domineering, arrogant, incredibly sexy giant. Worse, she had no way of correcting the situation herself. She was helpless, and that scared her; and she wasn't used to being scared. Kublewskis didn't get scared.

A cascade of red silk tumbled onto her lap. She tilted her head back to meet golden eyes gazing down—she noticed they had outer rings of chocolate brown around the irises. His upside-down face was still hard as the stone the fireplace was made of but those eyes had a twinkle, and she could swear the corners of his mouth were quirked up just a touch.

"Put that on," he commanded. "I'll see you get something proper later."

She waited for him to move, but he didn't. She dropped the shirt on the floor.

"This is fine," she said, clutching the robe and shifting it back up a little higher on her shoulders.

"It won't be when the blisters start."

"B-blisters?" The itch was getting worse, and now it had an underlying burn. She couldn't help it; she rubbed her back against the chair, seeking some kind of relief.

"You're wearing my ritual robe. It's saturated with magic, and since you're not from this world you're going to react to it rather violently."

"You mean, like an allergy? This thing's giving me hives?" She flipped the edge of the robe open. There were patches of reddened skin on her thighs that

spread as she watched. Reflexively, she scratched the one that itched most.

He grabbed her wrist and stopped her, yanking her out of the chair.

"I don't recognize the terms, but based on the context—yes. Now, let go."

He prided her grip from the robe and stripped it off, tossing it over the back of the chair. Mike dove for the shirt, but he grabbed her elbow and stopped her before she could pull it over her head.

"Too late. We need to treat that first."

The itch made her want to scream, and she gaped in horror at the fiery patches of blisters rising all over her body. She moved to scratch, and he caught her wrist.

"Look at me." He slid the hand holding her elbow down to her wrist and transferred the one he already held so both were shackled in one. With the other, he trapped her chin and forced her to obey. Their eyes locked, and he murmured words she didn't understand.

It was as if a veil fell over her raving nerve endings, diluting the savage torment of the rash. The itch wasn't gone, just bearable. Bearable enough she could focus on the fact she was totally naked.

But blotchy. Grossly blotchy. That shouldn't matter—in fact, the less attractive she was the better.

He led her through the doorway, which turned out to access a bedroom bordering on sybaritic. Maybe he

didn't care about blotches. She braced herself for another fight, but he continued through a second door into a tiled bath.

"Don't scratch," he warned as he dropped her wrists and turned to fill a raised sunken tub big enough for six. It had sloped sides and a padded rim perfect for lolling.

Opening a large cupboard, he selected a stoppered jar from an array of similar containers and measured a small handful of herbs into the water.

"Get in."

Mike hesitated—until he muttered something and the level of itching returned to normal. Willing to accept this was meant to help, she slid into the hot water and felt better almost instantly. Whatever he had put in the water filled the room with a sharp aroma that soothed and stimulated at the same time. Kneeling, she cupped her hands under the nearest faucet and cleaned off the dried sweat.

The water surged around her. She had nowhere to jump as he ran one hand lightly over her shoulders. Where he touched, the itch lessened. In fact, she could almost feeling the blisters disappearing.

"Jubal."

"Wh-what?"

"You asked who I am and where you are. My name is Jubal, and you are in the imperial palace of Gotrana."

The itch was almost gone, but now the touch of his

rough skin was triggering sensations of an entirely different sort. Lower and lower his hands traveled until he slid them over her backside.

"Lean up."

"Look, can't I just —"

"No. I have to neutralize the cause of the rash and to do that I have to have contact. Now, lean up so I can reach the back of your legs."

Bracing herself on the rim of the tub, she rose up, keeping her thighs clamped together as he followed the lower curve of her buttock and down, touching the back of her knees with his fingertips. Mike tried to convince herself he was just like a doctor, but it wasn't working. Her doctor was a sturdy silver-haired woman who reminded her of her aunt Katrina.

"Turn around."

Taking a deep breath, she did; and although she swore not to the minute they were face-to-face she looked down.

Yep, it was every bit as impressive as her first glimpse had suggested, and she wasn't the only one with improved lower body circulation.

Feeling the heat of her blush, she yanked her gaze upward. He was watching her with a gleam in his eagle's eyes. For the first time she had a really good look at his face, and felt a shiver run up her spine that had nothing to do with being cold. It was the same one she had seen in her dreams for the last three years, those dreams that neither of her "romantic

liaisons” had even come close to matching, those dreams she had awakened from with a throbbing orgasm and a sense of loss that had brought tears to her eyes more than once. For a brief moment, she considered that this was just another one, just more real.

Then he raised his hands and settled them on her shoulders, which were still scarlet and blistered from the rash, gently sliding them down her arms. Their heat penetrated her skin and set her blood simmering; and she watched his pupils dilate until only a narrow golden ring remained between them and the dark outer ring, unable to tear her eyes from his. Her breasts ached, and her nipples turned tight; and she wanted to lean forward and run the tip of her tongue over his full lower lip.

It's just a reflex, Matilda griped. He's a man in a tub with a naked woman. Doesn't mean squat.

He came to her hands, still not looking away. Raised the right one and turned it. Lapped his tongue with exquisite slowness over her palm and sent a jolt of electricity into her groin that made her breath catch. Repeated it with the other hand.

The ache in her lower belly expanded, throbbed. She was trembling, her mind screaming she was being a fool, that she was at this man's total mercy, and her body screaming *So what?* Analogies tumbled through her brain of predator and prey, but when he took her fingers into his hot mouth one-by-one,

sucking them and running his tongue over the tender tips, she banished them right along with Matilda's distant shrilling.

"Do you know why you're here?"

His voice had lost the tone of slightly impatient command and turned to velvet, rich and dark, gliding over her.

"No." Barely a whisper.

He slid forward so his knees were between hers, resting her hands on his shoulders, the tip of his hard cock brushing her belly.

"Sorcerers in Gotrana must take a vow never to engage in pleasure with a member of the opposite sex."

He skimmed his palms up her thighs over the fading patches of irritation to her hips, her waist, her ribs. His thumbs brushed the sides of her breasts once, twice, again and again.

"So, we will from time to time conjure elementals—demons—to share pleasure with." His fingertips wafted over her breastbone and down; he brushed his callused palms over the very tips of her taut nipples. Mike whimpered, her hands sliding along hard muscle to mesh on the back of his neck. His hair was soft, silky; and she had a sudden sharp sense of it rubbing the inner surface of her thighs.

"I-I'm not a d-demon," she managed to articulate.

A slow, wicked smile curved this generous mouth, awakening a matched set of dimples. He lifted her by

the waist without strain so she sat astride his thighs. The crisp hair on his legs rasped against her sensitive skin, sparking flares that triggered a reflex as old as time; and she bucked her hips, rubbing her soaked, needy core against the part of him best suited to satisfying it. To her frustration, he stopped her by clamping his grip tight around her waist before moving his hands up to the middle of her back and pulling her close so he could trail butterfly kisses from the corner of her mouth along the underside of her jaw to her ear. He traced the whorls with the tip of his tongue, nipped the lobe.

"I know," he murmured, breath hot against fevered skin.

And then he straightened and set her back at arm's length, climbing from the tub to snatch a large towel from a nearby rack. Mike gaped, unsure whether she should feel humiliated or pissed off. And why didn't he look as ridiculous standing there with his stiff dick sticking out as every other man she'd seen in that condition?

He turned back to her, and she was on the verge of lying back and giving him a good view of what he was giving up when sanity prevailed. Instead, she clamped her legs together and rested one arm over her breasts, as ridiculous as the gesture was at this juncture.

"Soak as long as you like," he said, collecting his trousers. "I'll see what we can find for you to wear

after I attend to the young idiot who brought you here. I expect something to eat would be welcome, as well."

The last few minutes might never have happened, except for Mike's frustration and the still-hefty tent his lodgepole was making in the towel. She wanted to scream and cry and grab the heavy stone soap dish on the edge of the tub and throw it at his head. He sounded like the manager who had welcomed her to the spa.

He started through the door then stopped and spun around, and this time there was only command on his face and in his voice.

"Don't leave these chambers. Don't even think about it. Do you understand?"

Mike didn't understand anything else but that she could manage.

"Yes."

"Yes, *master*," he corrected her. "You will address me that way without fail."

He had to be kidding. Then he took a stride back in her direction, and the thunderous look on his face duplicated the one he'd worn earlier in the basement.

"Yes, master," she blurted, unconsciously sliding back to increase the distance between them.

"Practice it," he snapped, turning toward the door. "Your life depends on it."

III

Jubal Fengarven, Wizard-Emperor of Gotrana, had half expected to get a soapdish on the back of the head as he left the bathroom—he hadn't missed the way her gaze flicked over it when he abandoned her all hot and willing. That might have been the hardest thing he'd ever do in his life, leaving that luscious armful of flaxen-haired woman so he could beat some sense into a handful of twerps who knew better than to meddle with things beyond their level.

This wasn't the first time he'd had to deal with some horny novice's botched ritual, but the others had all been terrified, cowering in the circle weeping and screaming. All that required was the reversal incantation and they were back where they belonged, waking up wherever they'd started from thinking they'd just had one beauty of a nightmare.

But this one! She'd not only scared the living piss out of Hugo—literally—but had stomped out of the circle and broken the connection. Without knowing where she'd been snatched from, he was going to

have to do some serious research before he could send her home.

He paused in pulling on his boot to adjust his pants. By Janeth's dimpled knees, just thinking about her made him hard, and not just because she had eyes the color of a midsummer sky and a body that was all ripe curves and lips that begged to be licked and sucked and long, long legs he could already feel wrapped around him as he...

Damn! Enough! He didn't have time for that now. Word that his mud-headed nephew had conjured a lust demon would be all over the palace by now, and even children knew a novice couldn't control an elemental. He had about half a glass to reassure everyone he had the creature under his hand and that his trainees had been properly chastised for their temerity or there would be Harkhul to pay. The council would send the extermination squad and his lush lady would be a dead lady.

The council guardsmen, dispatched when Hugo's ritual was detected, had returned to their barracks, he discovered to considerable relief. If they'd had any doubts about his ability to deal with the situation, they would still be waiting. Ordering his personal guard not to let anyone into his suite, he strode for the stairs and down to his private office, where he sent servants to fetch the culprits. He waited for them standing in the middle of the room, feet braced and arms crossed over his chest, the image of the outraged

mentor.

Hugo arrived first, creeping through the door with eyes firmly fixed on his feet. He wasn't a stupid lad, just too malleable. He wanted to be liked, and that made him easy to persuade. The persuader arrived next, face all innocent inquiry. Bryn was a talented sorcerer, talented enough to be a candidate for emperor; but his ambition outweighed his common sense. He *wanted* to be emperor and had no qualms about doing whatever it took, using whoever he had to, to achieve that goal.

The other three came in a bunch, faces flushed. They clustered together, flanked by the other two but with a half-pace's distance between them and the brackets, no doubt hoping they would be believed innocent of any knowledge of or connection with the infraction and would get off with a lecture.

He let them wait for a long silent moment, Hugo biting his lip, Bryn calm with hand clasped behind his back, the others fidgeting. Then he strolled around them, stopping behind Hugo.

"Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"No, Master."

"Whose idea was it to summon an elemental?"

"Mine, Master. Only mine."

Give the boy credit—he didn't snitch. And as he said it he straightened his spine and raised his head, ready to take what was coming with as much dignity as he could muster. Maybe this would be what he

needed to learn to stand on his own feet.

Jubal glanced out of the corner of his eye and caught the smirk on Bryn's face, although it was there and gone in a breath.

"I see. So, I'm to believe you expected to have an elemental in your quarters and your fellow novices would remain totally ignorant of it." He went to the cupboard in the wall opposite the window and took out the paddle. He didn't approve of this method of discipline, but the choice wasn't his to make. Usually, he could find a way around it, but this time they had left him no option. The infraction was a major one, and anything less than the full punishment for it would only cause more trouble.

He could, however, make sure everyone responsible shared in it.

"Perhaps you are all under the mistaken idea that I don't use this with the regularity of other mentors because I'm weak or soft-hearted, and that, in turn, makes me a fool." He was looking right at Bryn now, and noted the way the lad's jaw muscles twitched. "Hugo, being the one who performed the ritual, will be punished as he deserves, for doing so. The rest of you, however, will share in his punishment for not reporting his plans as you are required to do." He slapped the board against his palm as he moved to the desk. "Hugo, drop them and assume the position—and let your sore ass remind you there's a good deal more you have to learn before you can take

on the rights of a sorcerer.”

* * * *

Dried, dressed and frustrated, Mike strolled around the sitting room trying to deduce something about her “host” that didn’t involve broad shoulders, sexy dimples and a deep voice that made her belly vibrate. She’d considered exploring his bedroom, that being a more likely location for personal effects; but the huge four-poster canopied bed had seemed to loom over her. So, she beat a coward’s retreat to a safer environment, where so far she had learned very little.

She had come to the wall of bookshelves that flanked the door into the bedroom, floor-to-ceiling stacks filled with volumes that showed not only signs of use but of frequent use. She plucked one at random and paged through it. The lettering on the pages, which she noted were printed, was gibberish. So, her ability to understand the spoken language didn’t extend to the written one.

As she flipped through the pages she came upon an extensive scrawl of margin notes in a bold, masculine hand; and she wondered if it was his. She had edited a book on graphology early in her career, and her eidetic memory now pulled the relevant information from the mental file drawer.

He’s organized and commanding, but he likes to take care of people. Strong, intelligent—he’d make a good teacher.

To no surprise, her libido jumped on that conclusion and tried to run with it, but she stomped it down along with the memories of those moments in the bath. She had to be sensible and get control of the situation. She was at the mercy of a man who for all she knew was some kind of pervert. After all, it was fairly clear he was one of those sorcerers he'd told her about, and given his healthy interest in sex it was likely he'd had an elemental or three himself. What kind of guy had sex with monsters?

No, she would leave the job of sorcerer's apprentice to the twerp who had brought her here. It didn't pay to mess around with magic when you didn't have a clue. She'd seen *Fantasia*.

Besides, there had to be a ritual to reverse the one that had dragged her here, and she meant to insist he tend to sending her back stat. No matter what he might think that episode in the tub suggested, there would be no hanky-panky with Mrs. Kublewski's little girl Mike.

"You won't be able to read."

She hadn't heard him come in—how did a guy that size move so silently?—and jumped so violently she dropped the book. She started to bend over to pick it up but remembered in time the tail of his red silk shirt barely reached mid-thigh. She stooped instead then slid the book back in place.

He was fully dressed, although her suddenly pounding heart and fluttering belly didn't seem to

discriminate. He wore tight black pants tucked into knee-high boots and a sleeveless silver-embroidered black doublet over a full-sleeved silk shirt the same dark gold as his eyes. He seemed to fill the room, something she had read about and dismissed as fantasy. Live and learn.

Get a grip, Mikhaila Marie!, and for once she was grateful she had Matilda. Somebody had to keep her from drooling like a starstruck teenager at a rock concert.

"I noticed," she retorted, straightening her back and lifting her chin.

A flash of amusement crossed his face, though why she had no idea. Then he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, tugging at the waist of his trousers. They fit too snugly for her not to notice why. She was suddenly all too aware of the way scarlet silk slid over her skin and tapped against her thighs when she moved.

"How soon can I get out of here?" she demanded through clenched teeth.

He had been watching her from just inside the door, hands on hips; but now he started toward her. Halfway across the space between them, just as she was gathering her muscles to slide to one side and add some distance, he stopped, looking toward the fireplace.

"What's that doing there?"

She followed his line of sight to where she'd left

her damp towel on the floor when she'd put on the shirt.

"It's a towel."

"That wasn't the question. Put it where it belongs."

Okay, so she wasn't Suzy Homemaker and maybe was a little lax about keeping things all neat and tidy; but with everything else going on why was he obsessing on a damned towel? He sounded just like her mother—well, if her mother had a voice that put James Earl Jones's to shame.

He took a long step toward her.

"I don't give orders twice. Do as you're told."

Arrogant asshole! However, some deep survival instinct kicked in before she could say it out loud. Not willing to totally concede, she strolled over and picked up the offending object.

"There's a laundry press next to the bathroom door."

Still taking her time, Mike found the press and draped the towel over one of several bars meant for that purpose. His already hung there. When she turned to go back to the sitting room, he was clogging the doorway, leaning one shoulder against the frame, arms crossed, one foot cocked on its toe.

"I'll make allowances this time for ignorance, although you might have returned it to the bath."

That did it.

"Look, buster—"

"Master."

"In your dreams, bud—I don't live in a lamp. I didn't ask to be here and I want to go home right now. Maybe you get to lord it over the peasants in Goatland—"

"Gotrana."

"*What* ever! I—"

"Do you like being alive?"

The question brought her tirade up short.

"Well, duh! What—"

"And do you wish to stay that way long enough to go home?"

Her temper was dissolving into wariness, and she recalled his warning right before he'd left her earlier.

"That would be my first choice."

"Then listen very carefully." He stood erect and came into the room, taking off his doublet and draping it neatly over the back of a chair. "Your continued existence depends on one thing—that everyone believes you are under my complete control. Elementals are dangerous if unchecked, and uncontrolled ones are destroyed. Clear?"

Mike swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded.

"Because you broke the ritual circle that should have contained you until a binding spell could be invoked, you are considered especially dangerous. It helped that I didn't have to carry you here, but not much."

"Why can't—"

"I'm coming to that. Learn to hold your tongue."

When you broke the circle you also broke the direct link that would have allowed me to send you back where you come from. Now, I'll have to figure out where that is before I can do that."

"How long—"

The glare he gave her shut her up.

"At least a week, perhaps two—it will depend on how much help my nephew is. In the meantime, you are in danger every moment of every day unless you play the part of what everyone expects you to be. That means you will not speak without my permission, you will do everything I command you to and you will not leave these quarters unless you go with me. When you do, you will walk one pace behind me, and you will look at no one. If you require anything, you will tell me, and I will see to it." He crossed the space separating them in two strides to loom over her, and Mike felt petite for the first time in her life. He smelled of lavender and musk and male, and the stern look on his face told her better than even his warning that discussion was not an option.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes *what*?"

"Yes, master." She damned near choked on it. *Jeez, they have magic here. If I blink maybe I can get myself home.*

His face softened.

"I assume you have a name."

"Mike Kublewski..." He cocked an eyebrow.

“Master.”

“Are ugly names common where you come from?”

Mike felt her face heating up—again.

“Mickaila...Mikhaila Marie.”

That slow, sexy smile curved his lips, and her knees went all floppy. This was bad. It was very bad.

“Mikhaila,” he repeated, and the sound of it rolling off his tongue took her breath. It had never sounded like that before. “A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

Ho, boy, time to draw the demarcation lines.

“Look, *master*, let’s get one thing straight. Despite what went on before, I’m not here to be your lust object. I’ll go along with this slave crap, but there are going to be definite limits.”

“Do you know that when you become aroused your lips open, as if inviting a man’s tongue to taste you?”

She slammed her lips together and backed up, only to collide with the door of the laundry press. She was so wet her thighs were slippery, and the glide of the silk against her puckered nipples when she moved was pure torture.

“Please,” she squeezed out. “Don’t.”

“Why not? I want you. You want me. Everyone assumes I will take pleasure with you, and I can promise I will give more than I take.”

He traced her jawline and down her throat to where the open shirt gave a glimpse of cleavage. He

hooked his finger in the placket and pulled ever so slightly.

“Because I have to go home,” Mike said, feeling tears of frustration spill from the corners of her eyes, “and if I let you touch me I don’t know if I’ll be able to.”

IV

Her plaintive answer would have been enough to end his seduction, but Jubal's reaction to her tears was like a fist to the gut.

He had never had a problem banishing the elementals he'd summoned when he needed relief. For one thing, he rarely found them all that attractive. They tended to slenderness and a semblance of fragility, and their responses were enthusiastic but, in the end, mechanical. They gave and received pleasure as a glutton dined, without any real connection to the one receiving and giving in return. And, to be honest, he found their servile fawning annoying within a very short time, even knowing it was his will that caused it.

This, however, was no elemental but a living woman who was as drawn to him as he was to her. He could not keep her, even if he wanted to—no one would be able to carry off this pretense he had constructed for long. As much as he wanted to strip off that silken barrier and bury himself deep in her,

feel her tight around him as he took her to the highest heights of pleasure, he didn't dare.

Because he wasn't sure if he would be able to live without her once he did.

On the other hand, he didn't know if he'd be able to keep his sanity if he didn't. Desire was a bone-deep fire, something he had thought totally contained after these last twenty winters. Every man or woman who undertook the training to become a sorcerer did so with the full knowledge of what he or she was giving up. Some assuaged the loneliness by taking same-sex lovers, but that had never worked for him. He'd preferred to use self-discipline—and the occasional lust demon. It had earned him the unanimous vote of the council when the last emperor retired.

And if there were still nights when his empty bed seemed too large, days when he longed to have someone to share his thoughts and ideas and worries with, it was a price he had always believed worth paying to be able to do some good in the world.

Until now.

He drew a deep, shaky breath and stepped well back out of reach of her.

"Yes, you're right." He turned his back on her and retrieved his doublet, putting it on as he strode back into the sitting room to return to his office. He had more than ample work to keep him busy, and by the time he had to return here he would have this insane lust under control. Getting her decent clothes to wear

should help. Maybe, if he were lucky, this obsession he had with her was simply inspired by her having been naked most of the time he'd been around her.

To that end, he sent for the housekeeper the moment he was at his desk. She gave him an odd look—one didn't ordinarily clothe elementals—but he knew she was loyal to him and wouldn't make any more out of it than a whim. He told her to give whatever she came up with to his guards and tell them to just set them inside the door.

Then he concentrated on the stack of documents to be read and signed or passed along for review by the council until one of the bondmaids came in to light the lamps. That was another element of the Gotranan system he wasn't mad about, but so far he hadn't come up with anything better. The simple fact was that young women without dowries couldn't get husbands. By signing their lives away for five years, the ones who wanted to wed could earn one—and some man who liked that sort of thing could acquire an eager, submissive wife with every necessary skill to make him happy.

There was one last document, a letter from the governor of the western province of Elgarlea. Assuming it was simply the man's monthly report, he was going to set it aside for the next day when a word caught his eye.

Plague.

He spread the sheet of parchment on the desk and

began to read.

* * * *

The skirt hem came just below her knees, since there apparently were no women her height in Gotrana, and the simple scoop-necked blouse was a little too tight across the shoulders; but at least she was decent. There were even several pairs of linen underdrawers.

Now if she could only find something to do.

A tray of food had accompanied the clothes, but that had only occupied half an hour. The bookcases taunted her, a shop window full of cakes and cookies before a penniless child. There was a gameboard on a table in one corner, but she couldn't figure out if it was a form of chess or a variation of checkers. She thought about stepping out onto the balcony she saw through a pair of wide French doors but then remembered Jubal had told her not to leave. Technically, that wasn't leaving, but she had decided it was smarter to wait and ask him whether his quarters extended there before she took the chance.

So, she ended up falling asleep on the big bed, there not being anything remotely comfortable in the sitting room. It might be day here but it had been late evening when she'd been abducted, and the hours and the stress caught up with her. She told herself it didn't bother her that the pillow smelled like Jubal.

She was dreaming when he woke her for supper.

Dreaming she was home, in the backyard of her parents' house surrounded by her brothers and their wives and children. She had a child, too, a sturdy toddler with hair black as midnight and bold hazel eyes, and as she watched him stand up to his older cousins like a lion cub she leaned against a broad chest...

He sat sideways on the edge of the mattress, looking at her with a hunger that had nothing to do with food. She braced herself to fend him off, all the while hoping he would try. Instead, he just said "Dinner is here" and went back into the sitting room.

A drop-leaf table had been moved from next to the fireplace to the center of the room and set for two. Porcelain dinner plates seemed to absorb the light from the white tapers in the silver candelabrum rising from a bowl of red roses, and gold cutlery glimmered in the firelight. There was a basket of rolls hot from the oven and gold and silver covered serving plates giving off aromas that made her mouth water. He held her chair then poured rich red wine into a crystal goblet for her before filling one for himself.

"Go ahead," he said, taking his glass and the bottle and heading for the fireplace. "I'm not hungry."

Something's wrong, Mike thought, and felt a pang of fear that it had to do with her. Then she told herself he would have said something were that the case. She filled her plate and began to eat. The wine was wonderful, rich and fruity without being too sweet—

and she didn't really care for wine.

"You have questions, I'm sure," he said from the wingback chair he'd settled in. "I've given orders we're not to be disturbed, so go ahead and ask."

"When I first...arrived, I couldn't understand what Hugo was saying. But by the time you got there I could."

"It would be pointless to summon a being and not be able to communicate with it. Part of the ritual has the effect of allowing the one summoned to understand spoken language. I suppose there's an explanation somewhere of how it works, but no one really cares any more how as long as it does work."

"Why can't sorcerers have sex?"

"All sorcerers are eligible to become emperor, a position the one chosen then holds until he or she wishes to retire. Centuries ago, the title was hereditary, and the country suffered from internecine war as the ruler's offspring battled for the succession. They almost destroyed us in the process. Five hundred years ago the Imperial Council met and decided to end hereditary succession and to prohibit the rulers from having offspring. Since there is no way to be certain who will be chosen until the time comes, they extended the prohibition to all of us. And we can have sex. Just not with anyone who can give us children."

The next question came out before she could stop it.

“Don’t you get lonely?”

There was a long moment of silence.

“You have no idea.”

Feeling that she’d made a serious social gaffe, Mike finished eating without saying anything more. When she’d finished the last of the sweet fresh strawberries provided for dessert, however, it was time to ask the one question she hadn’t—and wished she didn’t have to.

“Where am I supposed to sleep?”

“With me, of course.” Then, before she could point out the lack of wisdom in that idea: “Unless you’re prepared to sleep on the floor and be up before dawn every day to put away a pallet.”

Any idea was better, but she understood what he meant. She knew from sleepovers at family gatherings at her grandfather’s house that the floor was not really a choice, and “before dawn” was a concept she didn’t even want to think about.

She waited for him to say something more, but he didn’t. What’s more, she could sense that, now he had nothing to distract him, whatever had been bothering him earlier came back full measure. Folding her napkin and laying it next to her plate, she got up and sent to stand behind his chair.

He was slouched down, empty goblet dangling loosely from his fingers as he stared into the fire. His handsome face was drawn, his brow furrowed.

“Jubal, what’s wrong?”

She expected him to yell at her for using his name, and the fact he didn't turned her concern into outright worry. Coming around to the front of the chair, she crouched down by his outstretched legs and laid her hand on his knee.

He gave a heavy sigh and shook his head.

"Nothing for you to be concerned about. Go to bed."

She started to argue but "I don't give orders twice" popped into her brain. After all, why should he confide in her. She was nothing to him, a chance intruder who would be gone soon.

"Yes, master," she said, rising, not caring if he was annoyed by the heavy sarcasm or not. It was going to be a long two weeks.

Being without anything resembling pajamas, she put his red shirt back on over her underdrawers and slid under the covers. Between her nap, the early hour and her unassuaged curiosity about what could set someone who had seemed so totally in control to brooding, she was awake several hours later when she heard him come in. She lay without a twitch, listening to him undress, place clothes in the laundry press and the wardrobe, go into the bathroom and use the water closet. Ants ran along her nerves at the intimacy of those sounds, and then the movement of the mattress as he slid in next to her.

"Still awake?"

He lay on his back, arms at his side as if he were at

attention...as if he were afraid if he moved he would touch her. His scent surrounded her, mingled now with the fruity scent of the wine, as the warmth of his body seeped across the space between them.

"I shouldn't have slept so long this afternoon."

Silence, broken only by breathing.

Mike sat up, spinning to face him and tucking her knees under her.

"All right, what the hell is wrong?"

He looked at her, face unreadable in the dim light from the fire.

"I told you –"

"I know what you told me. Didn't anybody ever tell you that talking a problem over can help solve it? Never heard of brainstorming?"

He leaned up on one elbow, the covers sliding down to his waist. God, she wanted to run her hands over those shoulders, tangle her fingers in the dark curls on his chest that tapered down...

Firmly pressing her lips together, she took a deep breath, but the damage was done. He was staring at her mouth with an intensity that made the breath shudder.

He clasped the hem of the shirt in his fingers where it pooled on the sheet, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the soft fabric.

"Brainstorming? It sounds painful. And someone in my position has to be very careful whom he confides in."

“Who am I going to tell?”

“Why would you want to know? There’s nothing you can do—”

It was a reflex, an automatic response acquired over years of arguing with bullheaded brothers. Exasperated, she punched him on the arm and snapped, “How do you know?”

He sat up slowly, rubbing his bicep. Mike resisted the urge to do the same to her knuckles—it was like punching a tree. Then it occurred to her she was a little to close for safety, judging by the look on his face.

“Look, I’m sorry,” she blurted, sliding backward. “I didn’t mean to—”

The rest of the sentence dissolved in a yelp as he grabbed her by the upper arms and yanked her close. All the lamps in the room flared with light; and the covers slid all the way down as he turned onto his knees, revealing whatever was on his mind hadn’t been the only thing keeping him awake.

“Do you know the penalty for laying violent hands on the Emperor of Gotrana?” he growled.

“I said I was sorry. It was just—”

This time it was his mouth that cut her off as he captured hers in a kiss that sent whatever she’d meant to say spinning into oblivion. Jolts of electric passion arced along her nerves, fired her blood. It was like nothing she had ever known or imagined, even in those erotic dreams—a kiss so all-encompassing and

utterly possessing all rational thought melted into sensation.

He moved his hands to cup the back of her head as his tongue explored her mouth. His musk swaddled her, and he tasted of clove and cinnamon. His skin was satin over sculpted steel as she skimmed her palms down his back to his taut buttocks.

He set her back on her heels, and she swayed, bones turned to warm taffy. The logic that had come to her rescue that afternoon was shattered by the siege of sensation pulsing through her. She wanted this man with every fiber of her body, wanted him inside her, filling her, possessing her. It didn't matter that in a week, a month she would have to leave him. Better a dream lived and abandoned than one not lived at all.

She fumbled for the hem of her shirt, and he caught her hands.

"Let me."

He undid the lacing slowly, never taking his eyes from hers. She wasn't used to being done to. She wasn't used to slow. She wanted him now, had wanted him the moment she laid eyes on him, wanted to impale herself on his cock and ride him until they both exploded.

He hooked one finger in the top of the lacing, still moving without haste; and impatience made her reach for what she wanted.

"No."

She ignored him, but he caught her wrist and made her let go, though not before she felt the pulse that told her she wasn't the only one suffering.

"I want—"

"I know what you want. But there are consequences for assaulting the emperor."

He loosened the lacing, and the shirt slid off her shoulders to her waist. He studied her, and the intensity of it made it hard for her to breathe. It was almost as if she could feel the touch of that gaze gliding over her skin, cradling her breasts, circling the nipples that tightened and reached for him. No man had ever looked at her like that, as if she were some marvelous work of art he had never seen and that he wanted to memorize so he might never forget it. Her womb throbbed, and dampness trickled to soak the crotch of her drawers.

Then his touch followed the same path, just the rough tips of his fingers brushing shoulder, collarbone, scaling the top of one breast then circling under and spiraling around to the top. She leaned forward, wanting more, and he extended her arm over her head then pushed her backward until she touched the headboard of the bed. He lowered it and slid something over her hand.

The leather cuff was lined with soft fur, and it snuggled around her wrist almost before she realized what he was doing. Leaning in, he captured her mouth, swallowing her protest with another searing

kiss as he trapped her other wrist. He straightened her legs one after the other, sliding the shirt off then spreading them so he could kneel between. The need to touch him was maddening, and she fought against the restraints.

And then his hands were on her breasts, cupping and kneading, thumbs toying with her aching nipples ever so lightly. He played with her, tongue teasing all the sensitive corners of her mouth while his hands traveled over her skin. The fragrance of his arousal mingled now with the rest of his unique scent.

He moved away again, licking his lips as if savoring her taste. A thrill of fear juddered through her as the storm of desire eased enough for her to be aware of her bindings. She'd played bondage games but always by consent and only after she'd known her lover long enough for a reasonable level of trust. This wasn't what she'd planned on when she made the split-second decision to change her mind.

He loosened the tie of her drawers.

"Are you frightened?" His penetrating gaze was sultry. "Perhaps if you beg my forgiveness I will show you mercy."

"Just let me loose," she said, wishing her voice sounded a little less quivery. He had slipped his fingers under the waist of her drawers and was rubbing the backs against the skin of her belly. "I'm not really into this stuff."

"That was a demand, Mikhaila, not a plea." He

kissed her forever, hands traveling along her thighs first on the outside, then the inner curves, nearing but not touching the aching center. Even so, she could feel the heat of him there, and her hips arched and twitched as she pleaded with her body instead of her voice.

He moved back. "I am the one who will make demands. It is your punishment for disobedience."

The words were stern, but his voice was ragged with the hunger that glowed in his eyes. His cock thrust toward her, veins swollen, head glistening, as eager to be buried deep inside her as she was to have it there. She wanted to take it in her mouth, run her tongue over it, taste him—just the thought generated another rush of burning ache.

He grasped her ankles and tugged, sliding her onto her back. The bindings seemed to give enough to allow her arms to go over her head then tightened again. He stretched over her, holding his full weight off her with his forearms, and sucked one nipple into his mouth.

She screamed. Waves of enjoyment radiated to the farthest tips of her body as he lapped and sucked and nipped the bud he had sensitized beyond anything she had ever experienced. He moved from one to the other, torturing each with agonizing thoroughness, pinning her hips to the bed with his so she could not move. The pressure built where the hard ridge of his cock pressed against her seething loins, and she could

do nothing to relieve it.

He moved down to tease the skin of her belly with feathery kisses, moving her drawers lower as he went. Somehow he always found a way to hold her still, and the frustration of her need to respond added to the torment. She screamed again when he finally reached her hot core and nuzzled it through the drenched fabric, felt herself rising to the edge only to be held there as he lay his head on her thigh and blew gently on her swollen lower lips. Tears blurred her eyes, her need for release was so great.

“God, Jubal, please!” she wailed.

He traced his finger along the seam of her drawers and the fabric parted, but the wordless alarm that flashed through her vanished utterly when he ran the tip of his tongue along her slit, tasting, teasing, moving her even farther toward fulfillment and still refusing it to her. Her body was beyond her control, a seething mass of urgent craving for completion that made the very touch of the air on her skin almost more than she could bear. The tears in her eyes escaped, and she was sobbing when he slid his arms under her knees, bent her legs almost to her chest and thrust into her, stretching her, filling her.

She exploded, fragmented, dimly aware of his shout as he released deep within her blending with her own deep-throated howl. Shocks of pleasure jolted up her spine again and again, echoing the spasms that milked him.

He tumbled to one side, carrying her with him, pressing her pelvis to his until she stopped shuddering and lay breathless and dizzy, cheek against the coarse, crisp curls on his chest. A moment later the covers drifted over her, just as the sweat that slicked her began to chill. Languid, boneless, she recalled how the lamps had burst into light, how the bindings had yielded – and now were gone.

Magic, Mike thought as she drifted into sleep on the hard plain of his body.

V

Jubal stroked her hair, drowsing, savoring her weight against him, the softness of her skin, the velvet warmth of her around his cock. It was a good thing she'd fallen asleep. He was still hard, and it wouldn't take more than a moment for him to be ready to take her again...and again.

He had forgotten what it was like making love to a real woman: the scents of sweat and arousal, the tastes of passion, the involuntary cries as mind surrendered to body in a flood of desire.

And the heat.

The body warm and alive and responsive to his hands and his mouth, the grip of pleasure muscles deep inside surrendering to then encouraging invasion, not tepid and alien, providing release without fulfillment, lust without passion.

Don't get used to it, his internal disciplinarian warned. She can't stay.

She sighed and shifted, and he turned on his side, spooning her against him so his cock nestled in the

crack of her bottom, draping his free hand so his fingers rested between her legs where she was wet with his cum and her own sweet juices. She sighed and snuggled closer, sending lightning from the base of his spine to his balls.

He'd forgotten how that felt, too.

He slept, despite the lump in his chest the dispatch from Meldrene had given him. The sensual dreams that so often plagued him, the ones that over time drove him to seek some relief by conjuring a willing elemental, were notably absent—and why not? He had the real thing, and he woke in the first light of dawn to the feel of her lying against his side, one leg flung over his. He trailed his fingertips up and down the back of her thigh, heard the change in her breathing when she woke. She tilted back her head, summer-sky blue eyes narrow with sleep and glittering with desire, and moved on top of him, teasing his arousal with the honey-colored curls of her mound.

“My turn,” she purred, and flicked the tip of her tongue over his beaded nipples.

He considered, for a very brief instant, stopping her. She was too bold, acted without thinking, and she needed to learn compliance if he were going to keep her alive long enough to send her home. Then she slipped down and took the head of his cock in her warm, wet mouth; and logic surrendered without a fight.

She held him by the root with one hand as she slid her mouth along his length, sucking and licking until he was on the verge of explosion. He moved his hips slowly, then more quickly, fists clutching the sheet under him then gripping her hair and pulling her off before she drove him over the edge. He drew her up and captured her mouth, moaning as he tasted himself on her. She raised her hips, grasped him and guided him to her slit, sliding him back and forth and then inside. Tongues dueled as their bodies joined and moved in sensual harmony to another shattering completion.

Panting, slick with sweat, they lay in a tangle, and he moved the blankets back over them. The bedroom door opened, and Mikhaila stiffened at the sound of soft footsteps padding across the floor. He held her in place with an arm around her waist as the bondmaid set wood on the smoldering embers in the hearth. The girl took the shovel from the rack and began clearing out some of the ashes, but it slipped from her grasp and clattered onto the stone.

The bondmaster strode in, though he made no more noise than she had. He grasped her by the arm and led her back into the sitting room, closing the door behind them. Even so, a moment later they heard the unmistakable sound of leather on flesh and wailing sobs.

“What—” She tried to sit up, but he held her still.

“Stay out of it.”

She fought him, and he turned her onto her back and held her down with his body, trapping her head between his hands and forcing her to look at him. When he had her full attention, he gave her a brief synopsis of the bondmaid system.

"So, you're telling me these girls volunteer to become dom-sub slaves."

He waited too long to answer, which was answer enough. She shoved his shoulders, but he stayed right where he was, keeping her in check as the sobbing bondmaid crept back into the room and finished her task. Only when she was gone and the door closed once again did he shift over to sit up against the headboard.

Mikhaila scrambled from the bed and fled into the bathroom, and he didn't need to see her stiff back and clenched fists to know she was outraged. Water began to pour into the bathtub, and with a sigh he followed her.

"Would you rather they starved?"

She wouldn't look at him, sitting wrapped in a linen cocoon on the edge of the bath watching it fill with total fascination. He crossed to the cupboard and took out bath salts, tossing a handful in and filling the room with the scent of lavender.

"So, that's your answer?" she snarled. "It's okay to force women into slavery and beat them because they need a man to look after them?"

"I did not say I thought it was a good thing. It is,

however, the only thing. Perhaps in our world one can change centuries'-old customs in one day but here such things take time."

She peered up at him through her eyelashes.

"Are you? Trying to change the custom?"

He stepped up and into the water, sliding down so only his head was clear. He held out his hand, and for a dreadfully long moment he thought she would ignore it. Then, with a grimace, she dropped her towel and joined him, though she kept on the far side out of his reach.

"One of the first things I did when I took the office of emperor was to end the practice of public flogging of bondmaids. And even that raised a furor that lasted a good five years." It was his turn to grimace, remembering the times he had seen such public punishments applied. "Much of the protest came from women."

She opened her mouth as if to protest then paused. Then blushed.

He moved around to her side and lifted her onto his lap. It was time for another warning.

"They will be here most of the morning cleaning the chambers. You cannot react to anything you might see or hear. Do you understand?"

She gave in, leaning against him.

"For a little while," she murmured, "I thought there might be a way for me to stay here."

He took a washcloth from the pile on the edge of

the tub and wet it, running it over her. It gave him something to do with hands that wanted to touch her, show her how much he would like her to stay. But he knew it was impossible, and so did she; and he wondered if the thought made her feel as hollow as it did him.

“What had you so upset last night?”

The abrupt change of subject caught him off-guard, though he ought to have known she wasn’t going to rest until he satisfied her curiosity.

“If you must know,” he said, moving back to the other side of the tub and beginning his own bathing, “there are reports of plague in one of the port cities.”

He had expected — well, he didn’t quite know what he had expected as a response. Shock? Horror? What he got was an interest so intense he could almost feel it.

“What kind of plague? What are the symptoms? How is it spread?” Now it was her turn to close the distance between them.

“It comes in cycles. We will be free of it for years, and then it comes from nowhere and people die by the thousands.”

“Don’t be ridiculous — diseases don’t come from nowhere. And the cyclical ones are usually triggered by other factors.”

She might as well have been speaking Volarean, for all the sense she was making. If it hadn’t been clear from her tone and the look of concentration on her

face he would have thought she had suddenly gone mad. He must have let something show on his face, because she sat back on her heels.

"You don't know anything about disease vectors, do you?"

"I don't even know what those are."

She glanced at the faucet.

"You must have some kind of science, unless you construct plumbing by magic."

He sighed.

"If I understand what you mean by 'science'," it's banned."

Now she looked at him as if *he* had gone mad.
"Then how can you —"

"There are some things that were left undamaged by the wars that those with certain skills can keep operating. Like the...plumbing. But when the fighting was at its worst, science was used to create terrible weapons that would have destroyed everything. So, those who studied it were proscribed, and slaughtered. Their books were burned and their places of study razed to the ground."

He stepped out of the bath and went to shave, preferring not to see the look on her face. Not all the books of science had been destroyed. He had many in his library, rebound with innocuous titles by his great-great-great grandfather and handed down in secret. *Law built of fear and without wisdom is insanity*, he had been taught and firmly believed. The hope

was that, someday, sanity would return and the lost secrets could be unraveled. But that day was not yet.

"So, you'll just let thousands of innocent people die who might not have to."

"Even if we had access to such things, we have no one who can understand them."

"I might."

He paused, the razor just touching his cheekbone, staring into the reflection of his eyes before moving his gaze to where she knelt in the scented water. Slowly, deliberately, he stroked off the lather, letting the silence lie between them as his disciplinarian argued he was a fool to even consider it. Even if she were right, even if she had some knowledge that would prevent the disaster that hung over his people's heads, what good would it do. In their ignorance, they blamed the plague on curses and sought help from the sorcerer, not the emperor. He would travel from one city to another, performing useless rituals because that was all he was permitted to do.

But what if...?

He skimmed off the last patch of bristles and splashed warm water on his face, then wrapped a towel around his waist and turned to face her.

"Even if you could," he told her, not even trying to hide the bitterness, "all that trying to help would achieve is getting you killed. And in a very painful and unpleasant fashion. Now, finish your bath—

breakfast will be here soon.”

“But —”

He didn’t wait to hear what came after “but.”

VI

Once again Mike had to restrain her urge to whack him on the head with the soapdish. After last night—and this morning—she thought she'd detected a bit of flexibility in the man. She ought to have known better. When had she ever met a man who wasn't as stubborn as a mule in concrete?

She ducked her head under the water and used the soft soap in the dish to shampoo her hair then dunked again. She hadn't even had time to savor the feeling of having experienced the best sex she had ever had, better than she had imagined possible. Even now, as frustrated and angry at him as she was, she wanted him.

It wasn't as if she didn't understand his constraints, although the memory of hearing that poor girl getting her bottom blistered just for being a little fumble-fingered made her skin crawl. She had already determined Jubal was no revolutionary. She simply couldn't believe he was so stodgy he wouldn't even consider a possibility that bent the rules a little.

Well, okay, a lot, if science was a capital crime.

Her stomach grumbled, but there was nothing she could do about it at the moment. Among the other bits of information Jubal had given her to help her maintain her masquerade was that elementals didn't eat people food. So, she couldn't eat if there was anyone to see her—like a troop of bondmaids. She dried quickly and went into the bedroom to dress. Jubal was just pulling on his second boot, and he made a point of not looking at her. Fine, whatever. But she wasn't finished with this discussion, not be a long shot. Mrs. Kublewski's little girl Mike hadn't been raised to ignore a problem she had the ability to solve, and she was pretty sure she could at least make a dent in this one.

By the time she padded barefoot into the sitting room, he was already at the table, nose-deep in a stack of papers while he ate. As he'd warned, there were a half-dozen women working around them, dressed in knee-length black skirts and tight-laced bodices that barely covered their nipples and boosted even the least endowed to a reasonable amount of cleavage. The bondmaster, a good-looking man in tight leather pants and a sleeveless shirt, stood by the door watching them with sharp eyes and a stern expression.

Mike sank to her knees just inside the door, aware the maids were tossing her looks from the corners of their eyes. The bondmaster glared at her, and his

hand dropped to the hilt of a broad-bladed knife sheathed to his thigh. Sheesh, you'd think she had claws and fangs the way people acted.

"Suzerain," he growled.

Jubal looked up, and his face darkened when he saw her. *Oh, hell, what did I do wrong now?*

He laid aside the sheet of paper he was holding and slowly got to his feet. She bent into a full kowtow as he loomed over her, and heard the tread of the bondmaster approaching. The sound of her own breathing was loud in the little cavern between her face and the carpet.

Time dragged on forever—or seemed to.

"I will tend to this, Terrent, thank you," Jubal said, then, to her. "Come."

He strode for the bedroom, and she crawled on hands and knees after him as fast as she could without sustaining rugburn. He stood in the center of the room, legs astride and hands on hips.

"I am sorry," he murmured as she stopped in front of him, too softly to be heard by anyone else. His voice was raw with regret and that only frightened her more. "I meant to tell you to remain in here until they were gone. You are forbidden to go anywhere except in my company. Your coming into the room alone looks like disobedience."

"What...?"

Then she saw what he held in his hand. Not a knife but a leather paddle, and the full realization of what

he intended swept through Mike in a wave of nausea. The strained look on his face that said he was not happy with himself didn't do a thing to alleviate her anger and humiliation.

"Do you trust me, Mikhaila?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she wouldn't trust him to tie her shoes, but she understood how fragile their deception was. She also realized that if he had not assumed the responsibility for punishing her "transgression," that thug of a bondmaster would have done it for him.

He reached out his hand, and she placed hers in it so he could draw her to her feet. Her butt muscles were already clenching in anticipation. He led her to the side of the bed then sat on the edge of the mattress.

"Remove your skirt," he ordered in a sharp, angry tone that didn't match his eyes.

Biting her lip, Mike obeyed, letting it drop to the floor; and he laid her over his lap. She couldn't help it—the position was just too shaming, and she fought to escape; but he caught her wrist and bent her arm up against her back to hold her still.

"There are those, I'm told, who find a bit of discipline arousing," he said, once again murmuring so his words wouldn't carry into the next room, and the velvety purr in his voice sent a jolt of just that into her loins.

He ran his hand over one cheek then the other, his

palm hot through the thin lawn of her drawers. She wriggled, half in anticipation of a smack and half with the gathering pressure between her legs. He slipped his fingers in the space above her knees then up to where her thighs met, rubbing the edge of his hand in the dampness.

"It would seem I have been correctly informed."

She was whimpering, bucking her hips in response to his teasing, so she had only an instant's warning before he moved his hand from its warm nest and landed it on her bottom hard enough to pull a yelp from her. He spanked her with sharp slaps that stung the punished curves into blushing heat. Then he slid her off to her knees beside him on the floor.

"That hurt, dammit," she whispered.

He picked up the paddle, which he'd set aside on the bed, bent her forward by grasping the nape of her neck and gave her a light swat with it that nevertheless left a lasting and painful impression.

"Shall I send for the bondmaster after all?" He leaned down and kissed her temple. "Take off your drawers."

"What?"

Right, he didn't repeat himself. Standing, she undid the laces and let them drop. She stepped out of them, and he took them and ripped them in half, tossing the pieces to opposite sides of the room.

Mike was suddenly aware that the heat from her flushed bottom had spread between her legs and

down the back of her thighs. It re-ignited the flame he had started when she lay at his mercy.

Jubal was watching her as she gave an almost involuntary wriggle. Without taking his eyes from hers, he slid his hand between her knees. She resisted for a moment, but the fire flared hotter and she opened the way for him to where it burned. He played her, thrusting one, then two fingers within while his thumb teased her hungry clit. She was wild with need, wanted him inside her.

She leaned her hands on his shoulders as the pressure climbed and her thighs turned liquid, watching as he undid his trousers with his free hand. He stopped caressing her just long enough to slide them down to his knees. He guided her to kneel on the bed, face pressed against the mattress, and plunged into her from behind, burying himself deep as he once again tormented her with his fingers to a screaming climax.

He lay on her back, braced on his arms, until his breathing returned to normal then stood up. Mike couldn't move; her muscles had abandoned her. She heard him fasten himself up, heard the click of the latch as the door opened and closed. Minutes later it opened again, and she heard the scurry of the bondmaid come to tidy the rooms accompanied by the heavier tread of the bondmaster. She snatched up the sheet and wrapped it around her as she rolled onto her side facing him, expecting to find him

wearing a smirk.

To her utter surprise, what she saw was compassion. He stood near the doorway to the bath, his paddle once again in its sheath, arms crossed over his chest, gazing at her with a face at once stern and regretful. She wondered, of a sudden, if Jubal were the only one unhappy with the bondmaid system, then why would a man who objected to it become an active part of it? She wanted to ask him, but she didn't dare.

The maid emerged from the bath and started past him, eyes demurely downcast. He stopped her with a hand on the nape of her neck, turning her to face him and lifting her chin with his other hand. He kissed her, a deep kiss that ended with her pressed against him, arms snuggled around his waist and the first flush of arousal coloring her bosom.

Then he led her by the hand into the sitting room, gathered the rest of his crew and left Mike alone to ponder the nature of human relationships.

* * * *

Unfortunately, that topic was only good for the time it took Mike to find the stash of food Jubal had left her behind a half-dozen heavy books on one shelf. Out of habit, she looked at the spines; but they were as meaningless as ever. Hoping for pictures, she took one with her to a chair by the fire and paged through

them as she ate.

About twenty pages in, she discovered Jubal had not chosen these particular books at random. The dense lines of prose turned into what was clearly a technical text—biology, judging by the illustrations. She found what was clearly a microscope, drawings of specimens that were more than a little familiar. Setting that book aside, she fetched another from the same group and was shortly looking at astronomical charts. With mingled excitement and frustration she went through all of them before she carefully replaced them on their shelf and went to the doors onto the balcony.

She yearned to step out into the sun, but with everything else she had forgotten to ask if it was allowed—and she had a painful memory jogger to remind her how necessary it was to ask. Gingerly rubbing her sore butt, she gazed through the French doors at what she could see of an extensive garden. The sky was partly cloudy, mounds of whipped cream cumulus drifting on brilliant blue, their tops gleaming with sun. She opened the door, and the scents of high summer wafted over her: mingled flowers, sun-warmed earth, fresh-cut grass. Somewhere children played, shouting and laughing, and a warm breeze ruffled the hem of her skirt.

It's not fair. I finally find someone I could fall in love with and I can't have him.

Could fall? Matilda's voice chided. I think you're way beyond "could."

And, as usual, she was right. Mike's eyes burned with the tears she refused to shed. She had known what she risked making love to him, knew it would shred her heart to confetti when she had to leave him behind and go back to her real world. Did he feel even a fraction for her of what she felt for him? Her heart wanted to believe he did. Otherwise, why would he show her those books, trusting her with a secret that would get him killed if it were discovered? If love was all about trust; then he had, with that one act, told her he loved her.

It said something else. It said he wanted to find a way to stop the plague, believed she might be able to help him do it; and Mike was fairly sure she could. Even if the microbes responsible were different, it was likely his plague worked the same as most others. That meant identifying the transmission vectors and eliminating them, then trying to find something that would cure the sick. Maybe even a vaccine.

The trick was to do it without revealing how it had been achieved.

"Well, Arthur Clarke said any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

A secretary's desk stood in one corner of the sitting room, and it only took her a few minutes to unearth paper, pens and ink. Padding the chair by the table with the softest cushions she could find, she settled on them and began to make notes.

VII

The red-gold light of sundown colored the room when the click of the latch startled Mike from her thoughts. A twinge sent her off the chair and onto her knees on the floor, only to hastily scoop her notes from the top of the table and hide them under her skirt. Hopefully, if Jubal wasn't alone, no one would be suspicious of the writing materials.

However, he was alone; and Mike scrambled to her feet as he closed and locked the door then strode over to snatch her into his arms for a kiss that made her body vibrate like a tuning fork. Picking her up, he carried her into the bedroom. Clothes flew in all directions, and it was a good hour later before either one of them was fit to talk.

Mike lay in the shelter of his arm, coiling chest hairs around her pinky.

"I got your message," she told him, and felt his arm stiffen briefly.

"And?"

"And...I think we may be able to pull this off."

He ran his hand over her bottom, and gave it a light spank then slid up to lean against the headboard. He pulled her with him, settling her on his lap.

"Tell me your plan."

"First, I need some information. What do you do when this plague hits?"

"There are rituals and potions, none of them worth anything."

"Are they always the same?"

She was watching his face, and she saw when he caught on to where she was going.

"No, of course not. We may be fools, but we aren't big enough fools to keep doing the same thing over and over when it clearly doesn't work."

As comfortable as she was snuggled against him, Mike was too excited to stay there. She moved to sit on her heels.

"What's supposed to be the source for the plague?"

"Angry gods, malevolent demons..."

"So it wouldn't be too big a stretch for someone desperate to find a cure to search in old religious tomes looking for a new ritual and/or potion that hasn't been tried yet?"

"It happens every time."

She leaped off the bed and ran to fetch her notes then paced as she began to read them to him. She had barely finished the first page when he called her name

in a strangled voice.

"Please, my lady, sit down."

She blinked, her mind deep in what needed to be done. Then her eyes focused on him—and saw the effect her nude meandering had had. She climbed back on the bed, well beyond his reach, and wrapped the coverlet around her.

"Sorry."

"I will allow you to apologize properly later." His grin made her belly melt. "Now, tell me what you need."

There had been times in Mike's life when she had both praised and damned her eidetic memory. This was definitely a time for paeans. She outlined her plan, which she had devised using information from books she had read as well as ones she had edited, fending him off with a promise to answer his questions once she was done.

The first thing needed was information: the symptoms of the disease, where it started, the directions it spread, the living conditions where the first victims appeared, how fast it spread. Next, she would need equipment, including a microscope. The few volumes of the secret collection Jubal had here weren't enough; she needed something with illustrations of the disease-causing bacteria common to his world. That meant retrieving the appropriate books from the ones he'd left behind when he took the throne.

"It will have to be someone whose loyalty is unquestioned," Jubal said, brow furrowed.

Then would come the part that could get them both dead. They would have to set up a lab in his basement room, where he already had equipment that could be adapted. Somehow, she would have to manage to obtain some kind of sample from a plague victim—blood or saliva were the most likely—and culture the germs and find some way to stain them. Hopefully, that information would be in the books as well.

Then, she would need to learn what medications were available that might conceivably be used to fight the disease.

"Molds, in particular," she said. "People used molds for several thousand years on my world to treat certain diseases without really understanding why they worked. Again, this may all be in one of your books, which will make life a good deal easier."

"It may be another of the books has this information as well. And when we know that is causing the disease and what cures it, I will announce that I have found a new ritual in a long-lost volume."

"Bingo!"

"What?"

She laughed, the first time she had felt like laughing since coming to in the middle of his cold stone floor. The next instant she was on her back, the coverlet torn from her grip; and his mouth and hands

were burning trails all over her skin. He got on his knees and draped hers over his shoulders so she was all but standing on her head and buried his face between her legs, licking and sucking until she begged for release. He quirked one eyebrow and slowed down, holding her on the brink until she thought her sanity would break before he finally had mercy and took her, riding the waves of her orgasm to his own release.

* * * *

Jubal gazed into the garden as the door opened and closed. He was about to place his life in the hands of someone who could all too easily betray his trust out of simple clumsiness. Still, after going over and over the list of those he knew well enough to predict their response, this man had been the only one with whom he could find no fault.

“You sent for me, Uncle?”

He turned. Hugo stood in front of the desk, looking as if he expected another beating. For all his faults, the lad had a good and loyal heart; and he was as dedicated to family as he was to his pursuit of sorcery. He might even have been a good candidate for emperor one day if they hadn't been so closely related.

“Let's take a walk in the garden, son. I have a difficult job I think you're just the man to take on.”

Three circuits of the grounds later, they paused beneath an ancient beech. Jubal had considered only telling the lad as much as he needed to know to get the task done, but his honor tweaked him. It wasn't fair asking Hugo to risk his life without giving him all the facts.

"Understand, Hugo, there will be no shame in your choosing not to do this. I—"

"Of course, I'll do it, Uncle. If there is any way to stop the plague, it should be done. Besides, I've always thought those rules about...science?...were stupid. Knowledge isn't evil. It's only how it's used."

Jubal stared at his nephew, seeing as if for the first time the undernote of steel in his soft brown eyes. As if he could read his uncle's thoughts, Hugo lifted his chin and straightened his spine.

"I can't promise I won't make more mistakes," he said, "but if I do it will be because of something I chose to do." He reflexively rubbed a hand over his backside, which had to still be uncomfortable after the hiding he'd gotten. "How soon do you want me to leave?"

* * * *

Inevitably, gossip arose. Jubal received a visit from the Council, who questioned him sharply about his sudden burst of cleanliness, which he attributed to his being previously neglectful. They inquired after his

nephew, and were told Hugo had requested a leave of absence from his studies to go into retreat and contemplate his vocation for sorcery after his most recent debacle. He assured them the demon was docile and under his complete control, and breathed a silent sigh of relief when their questioning of the bondmasters and the maids who had seen Mike supported his contention. Even so, he sensed an undercurrent he didn't like, and prayed to all the gods in the pantheon the battle against the plague would be won before he had to send her back.

For he knew now how to do that. He had picked Hugo's brain before he left and determined how the planes had been breached during the ritual and where the lad had gone wrong. From there, it was a matter of backtracking, then determining the proper reordering of that ritual. So, if he had to, he could send her to safety at a moment's notice.

Thinking about it made his chest feel as if someone had driven a tree through it.

* * * *

For the next several nights, Mike and Jubal studied the forbidden texts, he reading and she taking notes. The design for the microscope was given to a lens crafter, who was told it was a very important ritual object that had to be made to precise specifications. Glassblowers were put to work creating Petri dishes,

a smith to the creation of an incubator and a fermentation tank. Servants were dispatched to the basement, where they cleaned and polished until the room all but sparkled. The walls and floor were whitewashed, the flasks and retorts and other equipment scrubbed.

A week after the first dispatch from Meldrene he received a second. At Mike's suggestion, he had blockaded the section of the city where the disease was flourishing and ordered the streets cleaned and vermin exterminated on the grounds they were demonspawn. Now, as he read the report that the disease had slowed but not stopped, he took hope from that slowing down. The last time, the entire city had been infected by the end of a week and the disease spread to three others.

Someone tapped softly on the doors to the garden. He went to open them, and Hugo slipped into the room. He was dusty from travel, and there was a hectic flush on his cheeks that gave Jubal a sinking in his gut; but he held out a padlocked box with a triumphant grin.

And sank to the floor in a dead faint the moment Jubal took it from his hand.

VIII

Mike read over the information she'd jotted down over the last few days about the nature of the plague and how it had behaved in the past. She still couldn't decide if there was a carrier or if the infection was airborne. She was hoping it wouldn't turn out to be both. She'd learned enough about general living conditions and social customs to know there was little to no chance of stopping a Godaran version of the Spanish flu.

A quiver along the back of her neck made her look up. It was impossible, but she could have sworn someone was watching her. She got up and went to the balcony doors, searching as far as standing in the opening would allow. That was as far as she dared go—when she finally remembered to ask Jubal she'd learned demons of her persuasion were averse to direct sunlight.

Nothing.

I'm just getting the willies waiting for news from Hugo.

She was heading back to her chair when the door burst open and Jubal strode in. She automatically sank to the floor, but her knees had barely contacted carpet before he caught her by the elbow and dragged her into the bedroom. The look on his face had nothing to do with lust.

"What—"

"Hugo has the plague."

"Oh, God." She sank onto the bed as he continued into the bathroom, where by the sounds he was searching through his cabinet of herbs.

"I've put him in the laboratory and told everyone he's working on a special ritual for me and isn't to be disturbed." He came back into the bedroom carrying a leather bag. "As far as I know, he had no contact with anyone."

"But how...?"

"Our estate is only a half-day's journey from the city."

It wasn't how she'd envisioned doing her research—and if she had to have a live guinea pig she would have preferred anybody but Jubal's only nephew. If she had known she would be putting the boy in danger by allowing him to help she would have tried to think of another alternative. Which was probably why Jubal had neglected to mention this little fact before.

Well, hopefully, there would be time enough to tell him what she thought about that later. Right now, the

need to find out the cause of the plague and look for a cure had just become desperate. She got up and gathered her few items of clothing, rolling them into a blanket. Then realizing she would be sleeping on the floor, she snatched three more blankets from the linen cupboard and wrapped them around the bundle.

"Let's go."

He led her along the route they'd taken her first day. This time, she was able to catch glances from the corners of her eyes as they passed servants and courtiers and all sorts of people whose function wasn't clear at first glance. Invariably, they looked at her with mingled fear and contempt.

The hall outside the lab was empty, yet again that sense of hidden eyes stole through Mike; and she searched in both directions as Jubal unlocked door. It was no use. There were niches and corners dark with shadows that could easily serve as hiding places. She considered mentioning it to Jubal, but when she stepped into the room and saw Hugo everything else fled from her mind.

He lay on a cot naked, tossing and panting with fever. The covers Jubal had thrown over him lay piled on the floor, thrown off as he twisted. His entire body was flushed, as if his blood were running just under the surface of his skin instead of through veins and arteries. When she rushed to his side and touched his forehead, she yanked her hand back, half-expecting to see scorch marks on her palm.

"We have to get this fever down. Cold water – and what do you use for fever?"

Jubal was already at the hearth lighting the fire. "In the pouch – the blue box. Two small measures of the powder in the cup."

She went to the table and searched until she found both the designated box, a packet of spoons in graduated sizes and a small clay cup. Using the smallest of the spoons, she dropped two level measures into the cup and carried it over to him.

He had poured water into a teakettle and had it suspended over the flame. He took the cup and kissed the back of her hand. She looked up, startled by the feeling of being watched for a third time and realized the door stood ajar. She all but ran to close and lock it then filled a basin with water and set to work wiping Hugo down. She used the opportunity to see what other signs of the disease were obvious.

Swollen glands, difficulty breathing – but that could be the fever. She noticed the flush withdrew when she touched him then returned. Oddly, the palms of his hands and soles of his feet were ashen and, she realized when she touched them, almost cold compared to the heat of the rest of him.

Still, the cool bath had an almost immediate effect, enough that he stopped tossing. His limbs twitched, and his chest pumped as he fought for air to feed the flames of his fever.

Jubal came over, propped Hugo up with one arm

and held the cup to his lips, slowly dripping the medicine down his throat. Mike went back to sponging him down, and after a time his breathing slowed and he sank into something close to real sleep.

“Come,” Jubal said, taking the sponge from her and pulling her to her feet, “I’ll show you how to make the tisane. He should have it once every two candle-fingers.”

He lit one of the candles marked with scores a man’s finger-width apart then showed her how to pour the hot water onto the powder in small increments, stirring thoroughly each time before adding more. When he was satisfied she knew what she was doing, he set out the rest of what he’d brought and told her what they were for. Those were fairly straightforward to prepare, either steeped or decocted. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her until she was dizzy before leaving her to tend her patient.

The first thing she did was to examine Hugo thoroughly, looking for signs of insect bites or rash. He seemed to be all but comatose, his body a dead weight as she rolled him onto one side, then the other. Nothing—or, at least, nothing that left a big enough welt behind to be noticeable.

Pulling a light blanket over Hugo, she turned and stared at the stack of books on the table next to a dusty coffer. It was very likely the answer lay there, in one of those leather bound tomes, and she had to

sit here helpless until Jubal could return and read them to her.

Mike had taught herself to read at age four and couldn't recall a time when she couldn't find an answer she needed by looking into a book. Her oldest brother Tom, however, had been an adult when they learned his poor performance in school was the result of dyslexia. While she had empathized with him as he studied to make up for all he hadn't learned before, her understanding of just what the struggle to do it was like for him had been intellectual. Now, though, she understood all too well the frustration of having knowledge you craved locked away and out of reach.

Having nothing better to do, she went to the open center of the room where the ritual circle had been repainted over the white. She sat in the center and thought about going home, back to computers and vaccines and books she could read...and an empty apartment with a bed that was going to feel much too big with only one body in it.

It wasn't fair. Why couldn't she have met someone like Jubal in her own world? *Because, she answered herself, there aren't any sorcerer-emperors there. We're as much a product of our environment as we are our nature, and there's so very little magic left in a world where a person's value has come to be based on how much money he or she has. Where heroes last only as long as it takes some enterprising reporter to dig up something in their past that shatters their pedestals and darkens their haloes.*

And I am becoming a maudlin cynic, Mike

decided, but she was blinking back tears even so. At least I will have had the chance to know somebody like him exists—and what love is like. Real love, the kind that lasts as long as you breathe. So, it probably wouldn't matter even if I did find somebody like Jubal in my world. He wouldn't *be* Jubal.

"Are you in such a hurry to leave me?"

She hadn't heard him come in, and the rough edge on his voice startled her as much as the sound of it. She spun toward the door to find him standing inside holding a basket wafting the rich scent of food across the room, and the pain of anticipated loss on his handsome face was a clear reflection of her own.

"I don't want to leave you at all," she said, and the tears she had tried to subdue escaped to flow down her cheeks. "This whole thing just sucks!" Suddenly, a thought crossed her mind, and she wondered why it hadn't occurred to her before. "Why don't you come with me? If I can come this way, then you should be able to go the other way. We could be together, and you wouldn't have to put up with everybody looking over your shoulder all the time."

He set the basket on the worktable and came to kneel in front of her, wiping her tears with the heel of his hand. Then he cupped her chin in both and laid feather kisses over every inch of her face until he reached her lips. He claimed them in a kiss so sweet it broke her heart.

"You know I cannot," he said when they finally

broke apart. "I have a responsibility here, have given my oath of honor. There are things I hope to achieve, hope to change. Can I just abandon them for my own selfish desires?"

No, of course, he couldn't. He wouldn't be Jubal if he could.

"I love you so much," she whispered.

"As I love you," he whispered back, his voice raw with their shared pain. "I had not thought to ever know it, had resigned myself to a life bereft of all but the smallest hint of it. It was better, I believed, to not know it, for then I would not suffer over what I had given up."

"I wish—"

He silenced her with a finger on her lips.

"We have now," he said. "Let us not waste it wishing."

They heard it at the same instant—the soft click of the door latch. Jubal leapt to his feet and ran to fling it open, running into the hall and looking in both directions. His face was a mask of anger when he strode back inside, closing and locking the door as she came to stand beside him.

"We don't have much time." His voice was as grim as his face. "I suspect I know who that was, and he has every reason to hasten to inform the Council I have fallen in thrall to a demon."

"How long?"

"Two days, perhaps three. They will need to

convene the full Council before they summon me for questioning, and it will take at least that long for some of the members to arrive.”

“Then we’d better get to work.”

IX

They ate the meal he had brought, although neither had much appetite. It had been bad enough when Mike didn't know precisely when she would be separated from him. Still, Hugo needed help; and she was determined she would find a way to cure him before she had to go.

From a small bottle filled with alcohol she retrieved a sterile needle, which she used to prick one of Hugo's fingers. She smeared samples onto half a dozen glass slides while Jubal paged through one of the new books. He was looking for diseases with symptoms that matched those of the plague. During the time it took her to prepare the slides, using stains they had found formulas for in the textbook he had already had, he found three.

She wrote down the descriptions of the bacilli responsible when he came to them. Then she slid the first slide under the lens.

The microscope was necessarily crude, and it took her several tries before she managed to get the hang

of the focus. Once she did, it was only a moment before the culprit appeared, a chain of oval cells that bore no resemblance to any blood component. They were everywhere, heartless invaders proliferating in the young man's body and destroying it as they spread.

"We've got it!" she said, pointing at the second description. "Porgyrian fever. Does it say in there what kills it?"

Jubal quickly thumbed through the pages until he found the correct chapter, then read it carefully. His grimace of frustration was all the answer she needed. Tossing that book aside, he looked at the others, yanking one out from the middle of the stack. He ran one finger down what the table of contents, then flipped it open and found the page he wanted.

Just then Hugo groaned, and they both turned to look. His fever had spiked again; and he writhed on the bed, covers shoved onto the floor. When Mike went to sponge him down, she noticed a deep red rash developing on his belly. The book had said the rash didn't appear until the fourth day after symptoms first appeared, which meant Hugo had already been sick well before he arrived back at the palace. Worse, the rash signaled the disease was reaching its final stage. If they didn't find the treatment within a day the infection would be too far advanced for it to do any good.

Jubal came with another dose of the herbal

concoction, but Hugo was too delirious to take it. Instead, they used one of the syringes to inject it into his throat, hoping enough would get inside to do some good. This time it was nearly an hour before it took effect and Hugo fell into comatose slumber.

Hearing a clock ticking down in the back of her head, Mike paced as Jubal studied the texts looking for information on a cure. The first book, he'd told her, said there was one, which was some relief; but finding it was going to be a struggle. Not knowing enough about what he was looking for, Hugo hadn't taken the time to ensure he included a book that had the information they needed.

The heavy door vibrated with a thundering knock, and she froze, eyes locked with Jubal's. The rap had all the authority of law enforcement behind it, and she had a vision of the Council guards with their drawn swords. Had Jubal underestimated his enemy, whoever it was?

"Kneel in the circle," he commanded, and she didn't hesitate. She glanced at Hugo, but he merely looked like he was napping. She prayed his fever would stay in abeyance.

Jubal opened the door, screening the room with his body.

"Suzerain, we have had a report there is a problem with the demon."

"What sort of problem? And by whom was this report made?"

"The novice Bryn has stated he observed you behaving in a manner that proves you are possessed by the creature."

Jubal gave a loud, rude snort then moved aside just far enough for the guard to see her kneeling meekly in the center of the ritual circle.

"The novice Bryn spends too much time skulking and insufficient time studying. As you see, the creature is completely under control. And, in any case, I have grown weary of it and will be banishing it shortly."

"If that is the case, then you will have no objection to my observing the banishing."

Ice shot through Mike's veins, and her heart thundered in her ears. No! her soul protested. Not yet! I'm not ready to leave him yet.

Not to mention what the nosy devil will discover if he comes in to watch, noted Matilda.

"No, of course, I have no objection," Jubal was saying. "However, I had already begun casting a solitary spell. If you are to be present, I must neutralize that spell and begin preparations for one to include you. Shall we say an tomorrow midday?"

There was a pause that went on much too long.

"Tomorrow dawn should be sufficient," the guard said at last, and there was an edge to his tone that gave Mike the chills.

"As you will." Jubal closed and relocked the door. Then he turned slowly around to face her.

She wanted to fling herself into his arms and make love to him for the time they had left, to emblazon his smell and his touch and his feel on her body and mind and soul so she would carry it back with her like a brand. From the fire in his dark eyes, he had the same impulse.

But he was Jubal, and there was work to be done. He began to gather up the forbidden instruments, carrying them to chests and cupboards to hide them away.

"I'll do that," she managed to say. "You look for the cure."

So, their last moments together were spent with her clearing the room of what could get him killed and him seeking a way to prevent his nephew from dying. Doing what needed to be done first before giving in to passion and emotion.

"I've found it!" he cried as she was filling the coffer with the proscribed books. "And it is not only easy to prepare but is still in use—as a tonic to improve appetite. We'll need to distill it—the text says it must be administered as an essential oil in the late stage of the disease."

"Tell me what we need and I'll get things set up while you get the stuff."

So, while he raced upstairs to find a bottle of tonic she set up the distilling apparatus on the floor in front of the hearth, where they could feed the small furnace to keep the temperature steady. It was unfortunate

that the task failed to occupied her mind as well as her hands.

Three hours – and we'll need it all just to get enough of the essential oil to treat Hugo. She glanced over at Hugo, now sunk into a coma, his chest rising and falling much too slowly, his skin blotchy with patches of rash. It wasn't fair. They should have at least been able to make love one last time. Wasn't it just her luck to find the love of her life and have him turn out to be Mr. Responsible Adult?

The instant she thought it guilty washed over her. Hugo had contracted the plague doing them a favor, and it wasn't his fault some nasty little spy had gone whining to the council.

What if him sending me home isn't enough? What if they still suspect him? What if they search his rooms and find those forbidden books on his shelf?

She crammed those into the deepest, darkest recesses of her mind. Bad enough having to consider spending the next however-many decades with nothing but memories to keep her warm—because she didn't doubt for an instant she could ever be with another man without comparing him to Jubal. Finding him wanting. That she could survive, knowing he was alive here, across the worlds and dimensions, beyond reach but not beyond recall.

If anything happened to him, her heart would die with him.

He opened the door only far enough to slip inside, pausing to look up and down the hall before closing it

and setting a bottle of brown liquid on the table. It was about three-quarters full.

"I have to hope this is enough—I don't dare ask for more too soon and there may not be time to fetch any from the apothecary."

Working as if they had done so all their lives, they readied the decoction and started the distillation process. Their still, which they had designed along with an incubation system to be sure they had all means they might need to create a cure, was an amalgam of the alchemical equipment Jubal had always used updated with as many more "modern" elements as they had felt they could safely acquire to enhance the purity and strength of the end product. As with most watched pots, it seemed they waited an eternity before the first drop slid into the capped collection beaker.

"How much do we need?" Mike asked, standing behind a crouching Jubal and risking putting her hands on his shoulders. God, she needed to touch him, to memorize the way he felt.

He leaned back and slid her hands down to clasp them against his chest.

"If I translate the dosage correctly, he'll need one spoonful every four hours for at least two days."

He sat and spun around so he could lean his cheek against her belly, clearly as in need of touching her as she was of him.

"By the goddess of passion, I want to lay you down

and bury myself in you,” he groaned, gliding his hands up under her skirt.

He paused and straightened to look into her face.

“I stopped wearing them ages ago.” She tried to make it sound off-hand, but she felt the heat in her cheeks and knew she was blushing. A moment later she felt heat in another place as he cupped her backside and kneaded it, tracing his fingers over the sensitive skin of her thighs. She almost groaned in frustration when he stopped and turned back to the still.

But he was only stoking the furnace. When the flame was fueled, he stood and pulled her into his arms, claiming her mouth with a demanding invasion, his tongue exploring every tiny niche and corner as he slid her blouse off one shoulder, then the other to gain access to breasts that strained for the touch of his hands. He lifted her high enough she could wrap her legs around his waist and continued his depredation on her taut nipples as he carried her to the table and set her down. He withdrew, but only long enough to unfasten his trousers and free his eager cock.

Mike raised her skirt and spread her legs, watching his eyes as she slid her fingers into her slippery pussy, rubbing the swelling lips until she lay open and wet for him. He didn’t wait—they had no time for it. He hauled her to the edge and slammed into her, and she wrapped her legs around him as if she might pull him

completely within and keep him there. There was no romance or finesse, just pure lust and the need for them to join body to body. The pressure built and built until Mike howled with the pleasure/pain of it and bucked against him in a frenzy until she burst in wave after powerful wave and felt the hot jet of his cum deep within her as he exploded with her.

He leaned on his hands on the table, then wrapped her in his arms and sank to the floor, holding her as they got their breath back and their legs agreed to work again.

"I love you, Mikhaila," he murmured, the words vibrating against the bare skin of her breast. "I wish..."

He didn't finish. She knew what he wished, just as she knew he would never say it. Jubal Tregarven dealt in facts, not might-bes. She couldn't stay with him, and he couldn't go with her and that was the end of it.

They couldn't even stay this way, holding each other, storing away the memories of touch and sound and scent and taste. Tears rolling down her face, Mike drew away and stood, pulled her blouse back up onto her shoulders, ignored the mirroring tears on his face. She went to the chest where he stored linens—towels and such for cleaning up after an experiment or a ritual—and used one to wipe her face and thighs. She heard him get up and fasten his pants then go to the still and open the door of the furnace to check it.

She waited to join him until the clutching pain in her chest was gone and she could breathe again.

* * * *

For the second time, the hourglass was turned. Their world was reduced to the steady drip of the essential oil into the container. Then, at last, there was no more of the original decoction left. Praying as she never had in her life, Mike removed the collection beaker while Jubal doused the fire in the furnace. The medicine needed to cool just a bit before they could administer it.

Jubal went to sit beside Hugo. If it hadn't been for his moving chest, the young man might have already been dead, so still did he lie. Again they waited.

"He can't swallow," Jubal said as Mike uncapped the beaker.

"Don't worry, we'll get it into him." She took a clean syringe from the box and removed the needle, drawing an amount she estimated was close enough into the tube. Jubal stood so she could take his place on the bed.

She worked the syringe into the corner of Hugo's mouth, sighing a prayer of gratitude that his jaw was slack enough to allow it. Slowly, she lowered the plunger and trickled the serum down his throat with one hand while she stroked his Adam's apple with the other. Reflexively, Hugo swallowed.

Again they waited. They sat on the floor by the bed, the hourglass beside them, Mike cocooned in Jubal's arms. Was Hugo breathing easier? Was the rash slightly better?

After four hours, she repeated the dose and tried to tell herself she was imagining it that Hugo seemed to have swallowed some of it on his own. More waiting, and now there was no question—the rash that had all but covered his body was receding and his breathing was deeper and less strained. Midway through the second four-hour period he twitched once, twice and a faint glisten of sweat appeared on his brow.

Mike had just sat on the edge of the bed, syringe in hand for the third treatment, when Hugo sighed and opened his eyes.

"Welcome back," she said. "Now, open wide."

He obeyed, then grimaced as the liquid flowed over his tongue.

"That stuff is *nasty*," he complained in a voice barely more than a whisper.

They had no time to rejoice. An officious fist pounded on the door. The book they had used still lay open on the table, and Jubal rushed to shove it into the coffer and shut it inside a cabinet. Mike stood and took a step toward him, arms rising to go around him one last time—

Again the officious pounding interrupted, and he clenched his fists as if he would shatter the door with them.

“Take off your clothes,” he said, not looking at her. “Go and kneel in the circle.”

Tears streaming, she obeyed, not caring that she was about to be exposed to the scrutiny of a stranger. The stone floor was cold against her skin, and a clammy draft blew over her when Jubal opened the door to admit the guard. They came around the table to take opposing positions on the north-south axis of the circle, and Jubal began to chant.

It seemed as though the light in the room began to dim, and the hairs all over Mike's body stood on end as if she were naked in a thunderstorm. The painted designs on the floor began to glow then pulse like neon in electric blue and dusky rose. Jubal's voice became a hum that grew more and more distant.

Then there was a sensation of falling and chill darkness and a scent of ozone...

...and Mike opened her eyes on the gleaming white tiles of the sumptuous resort bathroom. Her bathwater had grown tepid, and the scented candle on the edge of the tub had burned halfway down. Numb and slightly dizzy, she crawled out and stumbled into the bedroom, where she fell onto the king-sized bed and sobbed until her throat was raw and her eyes ached.

* * * *

The sharp-scented mist of the transference ritual

swirled and dissipated. She was gone. Forever. He was alone again.

Forever.

The Council guard nodded once, then bowed and left without comment. It shamed him, but Jubal allowed himself to feel satisfaction that Bryn was likely going to discover a paddling by his mentor was nothing to what an irate Council guard would impose on a young man who would make a vile false report against the emperor.

He felt hollow, as if someone had extracted his heart from his chest. He went to where her clothes lay, neatly folded on the end of the table, and smiled as tears stung his eyes to see them. He picked up her blouse and pressed it to his face, inhaling her unique scent as the tears sank into the soft silk.

But he had work to do. Time enough to mourn her loss tonight, when he lay alone in a bed he had always considered barely big enough that now would seem far too large. Hugo was dying, thousands of other innocents were dying; and he had the means to prevent it.

He gave Hugo another dose of the herbal tisane to keep him comfortable. Then he hurried back upstairs to find the housekeeper and commandeer a bottle of the cream highborn ladies used to brighten their teeth.

X

At some point Mike fell asleep, only to awaken when she became chilled lying naked on top of the covers. She wrapped herself in the comforter and drifted off again, hoping to dream of her lover, disappointed beyond what she would ever have believed possible when she woke to bright sunlight and knew she hadn't.

She checked out of the resort, repeatedly assuring the manager it had nothing to do with either the service or the accommodations. She had received a call, she lied, that a family member was ill and wanted to be there in case she was needed. After all, she could hardly tell the woman she couldn't bear being in a room where she had traveled to another dimension, fallen in love and been forced to return to a world she only felt vaguely a part of.

She buried herself in work, to the point where her mother began warning her she was becoming a workaholic and was going to make herself sick. Three weeks after her return from Gotrana it dawned on her that her period, always regular as sunrise, was way

overdue. All but breathless with mingled hope and disbelief, she bought a test kit and got the little blue plus sign.

Then she cried.

* * * *

Micah James Kublewski burst into the world on a rainy Friday at 10 pounds, 7 ounces, and 23 inches. He had a shock of wavy black hair and eyes that shone dark, dark blue from under a fringe of lashes. The maternity nurses oohed and ahhed over the minute they saw him. It took him approximately three months to discover the power these attributes had and how to use it. By the time Micah turned two, even his grandparents had stopped fretting over who his father was and why his mother adamantly refused to discuss the matter.

The urban assault vehicle carrying the last of the toddlers pulled away from the curb, and Mike breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ma, I don't know why I let you talk me into this," she griped as she started down the hallway picking up blocks. "We should just—"

"Micah loves parties and he loves having his friends over," Lizzie Kublewski scolded over the rattle of the dishes she was loading into the dishwasher. "Just because you want to hide in the house all the time he shouldn't have to suffer."

Tossing the blocks into the plastic storage bin, Mike rolled her eyes heavenward. Her mother had no sooner given up nagging about who Micah's father was than she started in hinting the boy needed a substitute.

The birthday boy trotted up with a block in each hand. He paused and balanced them on his open palms, and they drifted into the bin. He gave her a grin and a flirty sideways look from under those eyelashes. It struck her chest and brought tears to her eyes he looked so much like Jubal. And acted like him—she never had any problem getting him to put away his toys and he had never thrown his food around like most kids, but sometimes, like now, she wondered how she was going to deal with the little...talents...he had started showing the last few months.

"Hey, Mikey Mouse, can I talk you into a nap?"

He thrust his lower lip out and frowned, and she could almost hear him debating the question.

"Mama read cat hat?"

"Deal," she laughed. "Go get into your jammies and I'll be right in."

He took off at a run, but not before he'd snatched his well-worn copy of *The Cat in the Hat* off the shelf. He insisted she read it at least once every week and usually two or three times even though she knew he had it memorized. She had overheard him "reading" it to his Piglet one afternoon when he woke up early

from his nap.

Deciding the rest of the clean-up could wait until he was tucked in, she started for the kitchen for a glass of iced tea. The doorbell stopped her halfway there, and she groaned. The last thing she needed was company or some salesperson.

The bell rang again before she could get to the door.

"All right, all right. Jeez, have a little patience." She flung the panel open, ready to give the nagging visitor a firm rebuke.

The words caught in her throat, and her head began to spin. She staggered back a step and probably would have fallen on her ass if he hadn't caught her by the upper arms.

"J-Jubal." It wasn't possible. She was hallucinating. She'd finally gone crazy from missing him.

"Mikhaila, who's at the—"

Jubal looked over her head at her mother and smiled. Mike didn't need to see Lizzie's face to know she knew she was looking at her grandson's father.

Micah!

"Mikhaila and I are old friends," he said, still with a luscious hint of an accent. "I'm afraid I've surprised her, dropping in unexpectedly."

"Well, don't just stand there in the door for all the neighbors to gawk at," Lizzie ordered, though her voice lacked its usual asperity.

Sliding his arm around Mike's shoulders, which

was good because her knees had turned completely useless, he closed the door as ordered.

He wore black jeans and a bright blue polo shirt that clung to every curve of muscle. He had let his hair grow long enough to curl at the nape of his neck. He smelled of Paco Rabane and male. He had to be a figment of her imagination.

He tried to guide her to the couch but her legs still weren't working, so he picked her up as easily as she did Micah and carried her there.

"You are Mikhaila's mother, no?" he asked, going to Lizzie and taking her hand. He gave her his slow, sexy smile, the one with the dimples, and kissed it. "I am Jubal Fengarven."

"Mama, who's here?"

It was as if time froze. All three adults turned to look at the small figure standing in the arch to the hall that led to the bedrooms. Jubal's face shifted from curiosity to shock to a look of such wonder Mike felt tears prick her eyes. Slowly, as if in a dream, he let go of Lizzie's hand and moved toward the child. Halfway there, he stopped and sank to his knees.

Micah said one word, dropped his beloved book and ran to the stranger as if he had been waiting all his life to see him.

"Papa!"

Lizzie stared at them, the huge man hugging the delighted child and weeping with a joy that filled the room like the scent of incense. Then her gaze turned

to lock with Mike's, and it promised there would be explanations expected very, very soon.

But not now. One might have said any number of things about Lizzie Kublewski but accusing her of not knowing when to leave wasn't one of them. Without a word she went to the foyer closet, took out her purse and left, closing the door gently behind her.

Jubal stood, Micah perched on one arm, and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. Just as on the day she had first laid eyes on him, he dominated the space.

"Mama, Papa's here," Micah chirped, bouncing on his seat and grinning like a demented clown.

"How...How...?"

Jubal settled on the couch beside her, transferring the boy to his lap. Micah sighed and leaned against his father's broad chest.

"We share the same blood," Jubal said, as if that explained everything. When he saw it didn't, he went on. "There is very little magic in your world, but it seems the bond of blood still survives." He studied her face, as if he could read all of what had happened in the nearly three years they'd been apart there. "Thank you," he murmured, running his big hand over Micah's thatch of curls with a tenderness that finally broke the spell that held her.

Her breath caught in a great sob, and as the next came close on its heels he reached with his free hand and pulled her so she, too, rested against his chest. He caressed her hair as she wept, and when Micah asked

in a worried little voice why Mama was crying he explained they were happy tears because Papa was home.

Finally, Mike had no more tears, and she sat up to snatch a handful of tissues from the box on the coffee table. Her impulse was to go wash her face, but her curiosity was stronger than her impulse.

"How did you get here?"

"The same way you did."

His face was dead serious, but she caught the twinkle in his eyes. She didn't know whether to hug him or smack him. How dare he show up on her doorstep after three years and across who knew how many dimensions and have the gall to tease her!

"Jubal!"

"Shhh!"

Only then did she realize Micah had fallen asleep snuggled in the safety of strong arms. She stood up and reached for him, but Jubal would have none of it. He stood and cocked an eyebrow, and she led him back to the child's room. He gently laid Micah down and covered him, then stood looking at him with an expression just shy of worship for a long moment. Only then did he take Mike's hand and lead her back to the living room.

Suddenly, she was nervous. Her body was responding as it had from the beginning, eager to feel his touch again. She pulled her hand from his grip and stepped out of his reach.

"Can I get you something, some iced tea or coffee or —"

"Whatever you wish."

Oh, God, how could she have forgotten how that velvet bass rumble rippled over her skin and made her blood feel like it had been carbonated. Again she had the sensation her body was leaning toward him, drawn as if by a magnet, and again she stumbled and had to catch herself because it was true. Spinning on her heel, she all but ran to the kitchen and yanked the pitcher of iced tea from the fridge. Her hands trembled as she managed to get two glasses from the cabinet without dropping them. She had to hold the pitcher with both hands to pour or she would have gotten more on the counter than in the glasses.

She turned, expecting to find him standing right behind her, but it was only his presence that had followed her. It gave her an incredible sense of relief, and that surprised her.

After all the days and nights and the empty feeling that something was missing that had become as much a part of her as her left leg, he was here, now, in the gorgeous flesh. She should be delighted.

Shouldn't she?

You don't even know the man, a familiar and long-absent voice said in her head. Those few days of romping in the sack didn't tell you anything about him except he can turn your brain into libidinous mush.

But maybe she was getting ahead of herself. After all, just because he had traveled across who knew

how many dimensions and fought for three years to find a place in her world and then find her didn't mean he was looking for anything permanent.

Right. And donkeys fly. Short acquaintance or not, she had learned enough about Jubal Fengarven to know he wasn't the sort of man to blow off his obligations. Not to mention that he had once resigned himself to never having a family – and now he had a son.

When she returned to the living room, he had started putting away the post-party clutter.

"I'm sorry, it usually doesn't look like this. I –"

He looked up at her from where he had knelt on one knee to pick up a toy truck, sideways, through his lashes, and smiled at her. She had to set the glasses on the coffee table quickly before they went on the floor.

He was by her side in two strides, settling her on the couch again. He put the toy on the floor and sat next to her, holding her hand, pressing the back of it to his lips. Moisture spilled from between her legs and she could barely breathe.

"I will tell you how I come to be here," he said, his voice neutral. He knew what he was doing to her, but he was too much a man of honor to take advantage of it.

Why didn't that make her feel any better?

"It seems," he went on, turning so he faced her and resting his arm on the back of the couch, "I had more enemies than I expected. I had no trouble stopping

the plague, but suspicion remained. The apprentice who spied on us was apparently in the employ of a faction that wished me replaced and was prepared to go any lengths to achieve their goal. It became clear to me that not only my life but Hugo's was in danger.

"I spoke to him about this as he recovered his strength and learned his brief contact with science had given him a hunger for it. So, a season after I returned you to your world, he and I performed a transition ritual and followed."

They had arrived with the clothes on their backs and their pockets full of gems—diamonds, emeralds, rubies. The first few were sold to fences they located by careful observation of certain criminal elements they encountered during the first few months when they lived among the homeless in Philadelphia. Hugo discovered the computer rooms at the public libraries, which led to their being able to establish identities.

After a year, Hugo was able to enroll in college, where he was studying computer programming and biochemistry with a goal of getting into genetic research. Jubal, on the other hand, was intrigued by the popularity of fantasy fiction and turned a segment of Gotranan history into a novel that bucked the odds and was picked up by a major publisher.

He grinned. "I am told the fifth printing will bring the total to ten million copies, and the sequel is ready to go to the printer."

The tale, told in his soothing rumble, had calmed

Mike's nerves a bit—enough that she was all too conscious of the way her body was responding to him. She grabbed her glass and drank half of the contents, asking herself what she should do next. She *wanted* to fall into his arms and stay there until the equator froze over, but she had Micah to think about. How was she going to explain the reappearance of the long-missing father, the man she had allowed her family to think had been a one-night stand of no consequence until the condom broke?

"So, I began to look for you," Jubal continued, taking the glass from her hand and setting it back on the table. "Hugo, as you can imagine, has become quite adept with computers, and although I cannot entirely approve his methods he was able to help me find you...and the gift you have given me. When the courthouse opens on Monday, we will go there and obtain a license, and then we will wed."

There it was, the one thing she hadn't wanted to hear—and had wanted to hear for so long. Mike snatched her hand away and jumped to her feet, stalking to the other side of the coffee table before she turned to face him.

"Jubal, you can't just walk into my life after three years and act as if it were three days."

"Why not?"

"Because...Because..." *Well, come on, Mikhaila, think of something.*

He leaned back and braced one foot against the

edge of the coffee table, arms stretched over the back of the couch, waiting. The ripple of muscles under his shirt didn't help her thought processes.

"Jubal, it's been three years. I never even thought about seeing you again. You were a lovely, lovely dream."

He raised an eyebrow and shot fire into her belly.

"Micah seems to me a very substantial dream fragment."

"Please, don't be facetious. We hardly even know each other, and you waltzing in here and giving orders about how I'm going to live the rest of my life isn't a good sign of things to come."

His gaze grew distant—she could almost hear him grinding that up in the mortar and pestle of his mind.

"Come," he said, tilting his head to indicate the empty space next to him she had just abandoned, "sit and talk to me."

"I'm fine right here." *Oh, for Pete's sake!* Shut up, Matilda!

"I have missed you, Mikhaila. Since the moment I watched you vanish from the transition circle I have had an empty place in my soul. In the dark of night, my memories have tormented me with visions of you, with the taste of your mouth and your skin and the secret places of your body, the scent of your hair and the feel of you warm and soft and wet around me as I move inside you."

He lowered his foot to the floor and got slowly to

his feet as he spoke, his gaze never leaving her face, his words wafting over her skin and setting her nerve endings on fire.

"I have dreamed of finding you, of taking you in my arms and savoring your lips and your breasts and your sweet core, of thrusting my tongue into your deepest places and lapping the nectar there. I want to touch you, taste you, smell you, hear your cries of pleasure as I claim you, watch the rapture as you join with me in utter surrender.

"But I did not think how my arrival might affect you, and for that I apologize. It was arrogant and selfish from the beginning, and the sight of my son deprived me of any remaining consideration of your feelings that might have remained. I'm sorry."

He meant it. She'd had enough fake apologies from guys wanting to get into her pants to recognize the real thing when she heard it. That he'd prefaced it with words that had her pussy throbbing and her nipples puckered didn't change the verity. The proper response hung in her brain, the one where she said she needed time, needed space, needed...

Needed him. What was she, nuts? She'd known he was the only man she could ever really love practically from the moment he'd slammed into that basement room, and here she was dithering like some Victorian schoolmarm pretending to be cool and practical?

He held out his hand, as if he sensed that her

uncertainty was gone; and she drifted to lay hers on top of it. His fingers closed around hers and he guided her around the end of the table and into his arms and this time his kiss wasn't sweet but blazing with demand and need. She groaned deep in her throat and melted against him, devouring him with all the hunger she had buried for so long. She slid her hands under his shirt, running her palms over the hard muscle of his sides and back, thrust her hips so her aching groin was pressed against the growing hardness in his. She was all frantic desire now, wanting, needing to feel flesh on naked flesh, feel that hardness moving within her.

He grasped her wrists and held her hands away, lifting his mouth from hers and fixing her with eyes blazing with passion.

"Tell me what you want," he commanded, his voice a rough growl.

"I want you inside me," she moaned, her body feeling bereft without contact with his. "I need you to make love to me."

"But you will not wed me?"

"Oh, God, Jubal, yes, I'll marry you. I love you. I loved you the minute I laid eyes on you—even before that, maybe, in my dreams. I'm just being stupid."

His lips curved, slow, sexy, melting her insides to pool between her thighs and soak her panties. Still holding her wrists, he turned in place and pushed her back onto the couch, undid the button on her jeans,

lowered the zipper with tormenting slowness, hooked his thumbs in waistband and elastic and peeled her bare, tossing sneakers, jeans and panties aside. Just as slowly, he undid his own jeans and lowered them, slipped out of his loafers to strip as bare as she was then spread her legs and knelt between them.

She was panting, reaching for him, her mind lost to the throbbing hollowness that begged for him to fill it. He leaned down, spread her lower lips and blew a light breath of warm air over the drenched folds and the swollen nub as she writhed and lifted her legs to his shoulders. Sliding his arms under her knees, he bent her legs up, exposing all of her, and then thrust into her with a growl of pleasure. He withdrew and thrust again, harder and faster; and she rose to meet him, taking all he had to give and begging for more. Nothing existed save their two bodies joined in the ancient conjunction of male and female and the waves of sensation that grew and grew until they shattered and sank into ecstatic oblivion.

Jubal pushed her down onto her side, still sheathed within her pulsing center, and stretched out so they lay skin to skin, breath mingling, legs tangled. He kissed her, those feather kisses from brow to chin that ended as he sucked her lower lip into his mouth and gently nipped it with his tongue. He ran his palm down her flank, over her hip and along her thigh then back up under her T-shirt to cup her breast, rubbing the rough pad of his thumb over her nipple through

the lace of her bra.

"You wear too many clothes, woman," he breathed in her ear. "We must do something about that."

She grasped the hard muscle of his buttock and squeezed, adding a bit of nail for emphasis.

"I don't take orders on my own turf."

"Then I shall have to resort to persuasion...and I can be *very* persuasive." To demonstrate, he rotated his hips then rolled and pulled her on top of him. He pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it. Her bra went next and he teased her nipples with his tongue and teeth. She held out as long as she could then rode him until orgasm again rippled through her, and he smothered her cry of completion with his mouth.

She lay on top of him, her ear pressed against the rough hair on his chest, savoring the steady thud of his heart. When she shivered with the slight chill as the sweat dried on her back he pulled the afghan down and covered her with it.

"We need to get dressed," she said after a bit. "Micah will be up soon."

"Micah." He said it like a prayer. "I have a son. It is a thing I did not even dare to dream."

"Yes, well, you'd better brace yourself. He takes after his father—stubborn, opinionated, fond of giving orders..."

His chest vibrated as he chuckled.

"That sounds a great deal like his mother to me."

"A serious problem child, then."

“Definitely a handful and a half.”

“And how many more like him do you think we could handle?”

“Oh, no more than three. Four, tops.”

He lifted her face and took her mouth in a kiss that was at the same time utterly possessive and impossibly sweet.

“I love you, Mikhaila Marie,” he murmured when he let her go. “When you vanished into the vortex you took my soul with you. I had thought I knew the ache of loneliness, but what I knew before you appeared in my life was no more than a thorn prick to the slash of a dagger. Even if I had not been driven from my throne, I would have given it up so that I might find you again.”

Tears streaming, Mike slid off him and began to dress, aware of him watching her, wanting her, needing her. She picked up his trousers and, as she’d expected, found a perfectly folded white handkerchief in one pocket. She tossed his pants at him and used the hankie to blow her nose and wipe her eyes.

“This is totally nuts, you know,” she said.

“I know,” he agreed with that grin that turned her knees to overcooked pasta, “but it is also the most formidable of magics. I will teach you all you need to know to become its mistress.” He zipped up as he came to stand in front of her with one stride and give her another long, mind-bending kiss. “It is high time I took on a new apprentice.”