

Pearl Jones



Angel is a
Centerfold

Loose Id

Griffin

Praise for the writing of Pearl Jones

Angel is a Centerfold

In *Angel is a Centerfold*, Pearl Jones weaves a tale filled with sensual dreams and the possibility of love if you just believe. It wraps around your senses, curls into your heart and won't let go.

-- Melissa Schroeder, author of *The Sweet Shoppe: Tempting Prudence* (Loose Id)

Pearl Jones' writing captures the true essence of erotica. Where so many erotic stories today are hard and fast, *Angel Is A Centerfold* portrays raw sex so beautifully, so eloquently, yet with such utter description you are completely swept away into Angelina's dream world. Escape with this wonderful fantasy, it's a must read!

-- Alyssa Brooks, author of *Spell of Love: Lust Upon Roses* (coming soon from Loose Id)

If you were one of those girls in high school or college who drifted off mentally during class and dreamed in vivid colors, delicious tastes and decadent smells, this book's for you! Oh that we all could lose ourselves in Angelina's dreams!

-- Jet Mykles, author of *Dark Elves: Taken* (Loose Id)

ANGEL IS A CENTERFOLD

Pearl Jones

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This book is rated:

 SCORCHING

For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (multiple partners, homoerotic sex)..

Angel is a Centerfold

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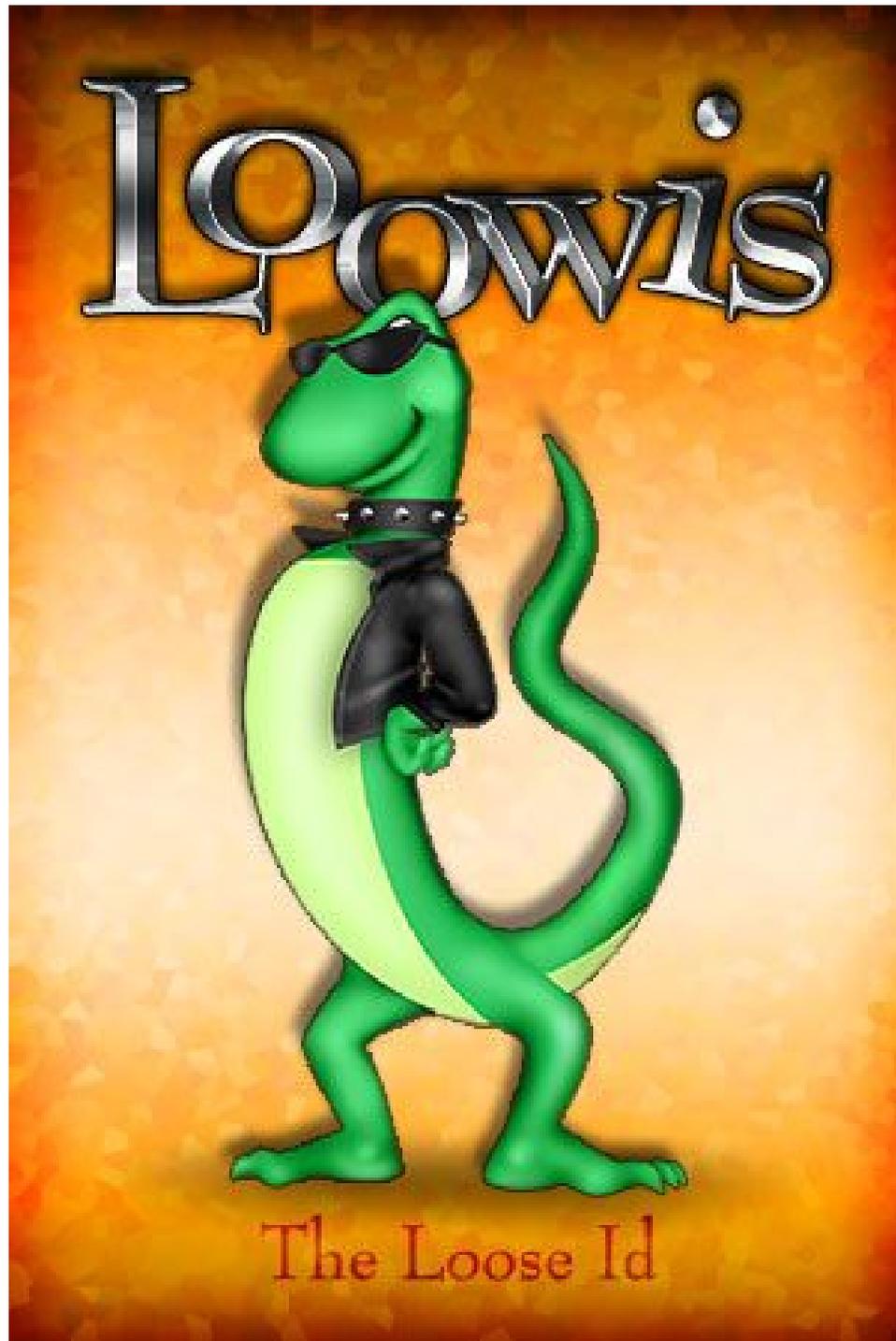
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Chapter One

She burned.

She was a flame, dancing, licking over that which supported her, that fed her, urged her to flare brighter, hotter, higher. She could feel every inch of herself: a sun, rising to the vault of the heavens, lifted by one love to the arms of another, from earth to air -- or was he both, encouraging her from below and above?

She reached skyward, and the reaching was a dance of fire shivering in a rising wind. Air kissed her everywhere, and where it did, she burned. And rose on wings of sensation.

She flowed and became water, licking at the banks holding her in close embrace ...

“Psst.”

Angelina shook the inevitable wisps of hair out of her eyes and looked up. Jim jerked his head toward the front of the classroom, where a teacher not long out of high school himself droned on.

She sighed. *Freshman orientation. Might as well just call it home room and be done with it. I thought things were supposed to be different now.* Still, Jim was right; it was only

polite to at least pretend to pay attention. She fixed her eyes on the teacher and folded her hands on her desk in a quiet parody of the good student.

Jim snickered, and her lips twitched. But soon the joke palled, and she sank back into her seat with a sigh. Why should she bother listening when she knew what he was going to say? Stay in school, do your homework, ask for help if you don't understand ... She'd heard it every year since she was six years old.

A dozen years. Do they think we wash our brains every summer, or what? She scribbled the thought down and tilted her notebook toward Jim. Passing notes, just like they were still in high school.

The teacher suggested his audience use the rest of the period to review or study or "remember why you came to college -- it wasn't just for partying," and finally shut up. Angelina rolled her eyes at the students already going at it hot and heavy in the back of the room, feeling vaguely sorry for them. They sought so desperately for something they could never have, something that could never be. In the waking world, at least. Her smile was a trifle smug as she turned to Jim, eager to tell him what she'd dreamed the night before.

He shifted in his seat, then stilled, her words almost enough to let him feel as she had. She was a stream, softly sliding over sand, slipping around stones, stretching out forever. She flowed, warmed by sun, tickled by breezes, touched everywhere at once, and touching the earth that cradled her.

She was a waterfall, splashing exultant over a thrusting cliff, sliding into crevices that welcomed her and stretched to accommodate her urgent touch. She smoothed over planes and angles that softened to match her strokes, then leaped over the edge, half reluctant, half joyous, to fall, after an eternal moment, into herself.

She was a pool, receiving and overflowing, pounding splashes making her shiver in waves, lapping free of her bed, escaping her confines to melt and spread ...

“Wow.” Jim sighed, his usual response to her recitations. “Better than *Star Trek*.” For him, that was high praise. “What’s the second feature?”

Angelina shook her head. There had, in fact, been another dream, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to share that one. She’d been herself, she thought, remembering glimpses of pale skin and long black hair and the shape of her hands, but her body had melted like the stream, bathed in heavy warmth and urgent pounding until she shivered into waves ...

* * * * *

“Next class, we’ll be talking about Frost’s and Dickenson’s use of imagery, so if you haven’t done the reading, you might want to skip the partying tonight, or at least show up late.” The professor waved a hand in dismissal, and students scurried to collect their belongings and escape.

The noise shook Angelina from her reverie; too late. The professor had seen her. “Yes, I’ve done the reading,” she said, not waiting for the question to be asked. Some impulse prompted her to mutter, “And I don’t go to parties anyway.” Scooping up her books, she hurried away.

When she’d chosen her classes, the two-hour break between English 101 and Intro to World History had sounded like a great idea. Now, though, it dragged at her; too long for a lunch break, not long enough to go home and take a nap. She usually spent it in the library, reading poets’ tepid descriptions of the worlds they dreamed, so much less vivid than her own dreamscapes, or looking at books of paintings, wondering why the artists’ colors were so bland.

Sometimes, she wrote down her own dreams, though her words, too, seemed wholly inadequate.

Today, the books and paintings could not hold her interest, and she let her eyes slip closed. The dreamworld might have been waiting for her.

Stone arched to the sky, a peak angled toward the heavens. Fog kissed the very tip, then descended, veiling and caressing, wreathing, writhing. She was the peak, and the land that shook with each soft, moist, misty touch ...

* * * * *

Angelina paused to catch her breath, thinking curses hot enough to blister. *A whole two hours, and I still can't make it to class on time?* She'd managed, she thought, to put together a few decent phrases, but that wasn't the reason for her delay; she'd fallen asleep. *And, oh, that dream!*

The auditorium was crowded, and chattering rang from the high ceiling like birdsong. She stopped just past the doorway to search for a familiar head of sandy hair rising above the crowd, looking first in the middle, knowing he'd have chosen someplace close enough to hear the lecture, far enough back to go unobserved. And not in the very back, where the sounds of slurping would make it impossible to hear. Sometimes it seemed to her that all humanity was constantly groping and pawing, or at least looking for someone to do it with. If it was like her dreams, she'd have understood the drive, but slimy spurtings and shamed morning-after awkwardness didn't appeal to her at all.

She slipped into her seat the second before the bell rang, smiling her thanks at her oldest friend for having saved her a seat.

Jim smiled back. Neither of them paid any heed to the TA's quiet gasp; she was always muttering beneath her breath. Her "Damn, but that boy's gonna grow up fine" meant nothing to them.

The lecture began, and the students settled in to take notes, or daydream, or snuggle, each according to his tastes. Jim managed both some scribbling and some fantasies, most of those featuring Angelina snuggled close to him. Familiar ideas, he'd had them in one form or another since the first grade. But the closest he got to sleeping with her was her daily reporting of her dreams.

And he suspected she didn't share them all. Certainly, on those occasions when she asked, he didn't confess his near-nightly vision of her, naked, hair spread like a cloak beneath her, opening to him.

He didn't think she'd understand. She was so innocent.

Someone giggled in the back of the room. A few of the students turned to look, but the professor droned on, paying no heed.

Angelina forced herself to listen to the lecture. It was harder than it should have been. As far as she was concerned, history was one great collection of stories, material for her dreams, but flashes of bright green and a soft, warm red split by gleaming white kept derailing her mind.

Jim's eyes. His smile. It was almost dreamlike, the way his smile changed him from the boy she'd known forever to a man she didn't know at all. Class was either too long or not long enough; she was shaken still when the bell rang.

"Hey, Angie. Now you're in college, think you could start picking out your own clothes?"

She didn't bother to turn. "Bubba."

Like her and Jim, Bubba'd elected to attend the local community college, for lack of money, grades, ambition, or likely all three. A second-string jock with a given name no one remembered, Bubba made an unlikely friend for quiet Jim.

"Don't call her that. You know she doesn't like it." Faithful, constant Jim to the rescue. "So, Lina, coming to the quad?"

She looked up into that warm, disturbing gaze and smiled. "No, you go on. I'll see you later."

"Party tonight?"

Now she turned, finding Bubba's sunburned skin easier to look at than Jim's lightly freckled tan. "Do you *know* any other words? Beyond curses, I mean?"

Jim tugged his friend away before he could think of an answer.

Angelina watched them go, unsettled still by Jim's smile. *Homework. Reading. Think of oddities after that. That look ...*

* * * * *

Jim whistled as he walked, counting down the hours until The Day. Angelina's birthday -- he could hardly wait. Eighteen. A quiet dinner, just the two of them, with maybe a little wine. A birthday kiss; she wouldn't object to that, surely? And then ...

Bubba dropped his bag at the base of a tree and turned, his mouth already open. "So?"

Jim rolled his eyes. "You never change."

"Why? I'm perfect just like I am." He flexed one massive arm. "Gotta admit, you can't beat that."

"With a stick," a passing blonde called out. Bubba pretended to growl and pant, and followed her halfway across the quad. Jim watched, laughing softly.

"She's got a roomie," Bubba said when he returned. "Guess that don't matter to you, though, huh? You've already got a girl. If you can find her under all them granny clothes."

"It's not like that." Jim sawed his hands in the air. "She's a friend. Friend, you know?"

"Yeah, sure. You ain't getting none."

"I'm not ... ah, to hell with it." No point to going over it again; besides, Bubba was right. He *did* want to sleep with Angelina, had since he'd figured out why there were two sexes instead of one. But she'd never shown any sign of awareness, or of interest, in that. Not with him, or with anyone. Perhaps her dreams were all she needed.

Jim caught the Frisbee Bubba threw, and tossed it back. "I just wish she'd dream about me."

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

* * * * *

Flicking her braid over her shoulder in a gesture so habitual she didn't realize she made it, Angelina sank into the embrace of a comfortable squashy chair in the corner of the local coffeehouse. Half-concealed by bookcases, near a wall with a high, small window, it was her favorite seat, a place she could write or read or daydream undisturbed. The acrid scent of espresso mixed with a dusty, affable claustrophobia familiar to book-lovers everywhere, the smell of age-refined knowledge and art, and dreams. Other people's dreams, so much less vivid than her own, but still similar. She breathed in the smell and shivered, as she did every time, a spark of some hot sensation burning behind her navel and spreading until she thought she might die. Her hands shook as she reached for her history book. She dove into the words, into the world.

The feel of her skirt beneath her fingers recalled her to herself. *Where? Was I -- did I...?*

If she'd done anything indiscreet, it seemed to have gone unnoticed, but she left quickly anyway. Her thoughts raced with her steps all the way home. *It's getting worse.* When she slept, she dreamed, and her dreams were all sensation, all desire. When she daydreamed, when she read history, or poetry, or any prose that told a story, she dreamed -- and her dreams were still of arousal, and sensation, and satisfaction that was not, that could never be, satiation. When she looked at art, listened to music, she dreamed.

She always had, from her earliest memory. But over the past couple of weeks, she'd begun to stroke herself when she dreamed. In all the eighteen years less one day of her life, she'd never done that before. She hadn't needed to.

Her skirt tugged at her ankles as she lengthened her stride, eager to get home, to safety. Privacy. Her mother would be at work; she'd have the place to herself. *A hot bath, maybe some bubbles.* Her fingers slid down her thighs.

She sank into the tub, breath hissing out as she felt the hot satin caress of the water on her skin, the slightly cool enamel unyielding beneath her. A rolled-up terry towel, scented lavender from its stay in the closet, served as a pillow. She closed her eyes.

Which dream should it be?

She remembered her earliest dreams, sensation without meaning, but no -- those were too innocent for her current needs. She wanted something ... *something Bubba could never dream of.* That crack about her clothes hadn't hurt, exactly, but still. People like him were part of the reason she didn't mind being different. *Something exotic. Exciting.*

Refined.

One night long ago, or was it yesterday? On a night lit only by stars and one cherished candle, a concubine anointed herself with oils, preparing for one night of forbidden love ...

Angelina blinked, confused -- that wasn't the dream she'd meant to recall. She'd been thinking of a night of soft string music and elegant pattern-dancing and delicate tidbits and butterfly-swift kisses that sent her sliding into ecstasy. But sweet-scented smoke and the soft slipping of silk over rounded shoulders and the same tingling she felt awake persuaded her; she slid into the dream.

Angelina let the sponge fall from her fingers, let her mind carry her on. Into the body, into the world ...

She panted, eager and afraid. Would he come this night? Could he? A step outside, soft scuff of leather on stone, harsh rasp of metal, quickly ceased. Almost, she smiled, despite the danger. He never would set that great hunk of a weapon aside, no matter that it increased the danger a hundredfold. Had told her so more than once, "A knight's sword belongs to God. As soon ask me to forsake my faith." She'd thought of doing that, as well, but in truth, his honor was part of what she loved.

He whistled softly, his signal a bird as foreign to her land as he himself. She returned it, feeling her lips purse on the sound as she hoped soon they would on his flesh. So far, he had allowed nothing more than her hands on him. Sworn to chastity.

It seemed an odd oath for a man.

She measured tea, a special blend dark with spices and sweet with fruits. He'd have preferred his barbarous wine, but that was beyond her means even had she dared the risk. And then she knelt, and waited for him to enter her tent.

"Rise, lady. You are no slave of mine."

"I am neither slave nor lady, lord. But I am yours." She took the hand he offered and drew it to her lips, kissing it as she had longed to do. Her teachers had told her she would one day yearn to perform the erotic arts, but none had explained how strong the need could be. Was this unique? Was it only him? The taste of him, salt and musk and with more than a hint of horse, made her head swim. She moaned.

"Lady ..." He fell to his knees beside her. *"Lady, I cannot ..."*

She spoke around his fingers. "I know your oath." Still, there was chaste and chaste. More than her honor was at stake; she risked her life. Feeling his flesh yield as she bit lightly down, she counted the reward worth the cost. Her tongue circled the digit, pulling it deeper; she sucked her cheeks in.

He groaned.

Leaning back until her head touched the rug, she let his hand slip from her mouth, down her neck, over her breasts, her belly. He pulled away with a hiss, then let his hand fall. Just a touch, a brush over her hips, away again. She shivered at the light touch. "Again."

"I must not." But even as he spoke, his hand was at her shoulder, tracing a path down her arm, reaching her hand to weave fingers together, matching until the fit was perfect.

His skin was hot, as though he fevered for her. She felt his touch like a brand and leaned into it, hoping to be marked forever. His hand flexed, stretching her smaller one.

Her turn to moan.

He tried to pull away; she gripped him tightly, rolling up to face him again. Holding his gaze with her own, she raised their clasped hands to her breast. He shivered and shook, and his mouth fell open. She smiled, and would not let him look away.

His hand loosened; this time, she let him go.

It was tempting to look down, to see his huge hand splayed in a futile attempt to surround her, but she enjoyed the look in his eyes. So might a man look were he visited by a djinn, awe and fear and hope and longing all at once. His other hand came up to join the first; she could almost believe it independent of him by the surprise that widened his eyes. And then his hot, hard fingers found her nipples, eager and thrusting through her silks, and her eyes fluttered closed at the sensation.

"Mother of God."

It might have been a prayer.

His fingers stroked and tugged and twisted through the cloth, sending tiny strikes of lightning toward her core. It was wonderful, so much better than when she played with them on her own. But it would be better still with skin on skin.

Deciding, she pulled free from his touch. His face fell on the instant, and he began to speak in some language she did not recognize. The tone was enough; he was apologizing. She

leaned in long enough to plant a kiss on his quick-moving lips, then twisted and came to her feet.

“You are greatly privileged,” she laughed, “for few infidels ever see a performance like this.” There was no music, but she needed none. She danced.

He gaped as she moved, her body free and swaying and not completely concealed within lengths of shimmering cloth. And then the cloth came free somehow, pieces waving from her wrists, veiling his vision for a heartbeat and then falling away, leaving inches of spice-dark skin to gleam in the lantern light.

One foot, bare but for painted symbols, touched his knee. He looked down, saw another piece of fabric drop down to curtain her maddered toes, rise, fall again. And then it was gone, and the foot was on his thigh, and the ankle, too, was bare, as was the calf.

He gasped, and his hands came up.

She stilled him. “The dance is not yet done.” Another length of cloth fell away.

When she was clad only in a few fringed bits, a single length around her breasts rising to circle her neck, and the last of her multitude of skirt-wraps, she ceased, falling gracefully to kneel again, inches away from him, hands palm-up on her knees. “Now,” she said.

He did not move. Did not even blink. A pulse in his throat leapt and throbbed; she could see it. It seemed to beg for her touch, so she reached out to stroke it.

He grabbed her wrist, hard enough to hurt. “No.” Too loud; he winced. “No.” Slowly, he reached for her other hand, pulling them toward himself until he could shift his grip, both small wrists trapped in one of his large hands, his sun-darkened skin still lighter than hers, and rough. Gently, firmly, he held her, and breathed.

Spices and honey and oil and tea and the scent of her.

He looked her up and down, every lithe inch she had exposed. Lantern-light flickered on gleaming skin. His gaze followed each dancing shadow, every bright flare.

She shivered at the intensity of that gaze, as hot as his touch, and as welcome. His mouth was open again. Did his lips tingle, too?

He held her wrists, but she was not immobile. She twisted in his grasp to bring her face to his, tilted up, and brushed a soft kiss over his mouth. He swore, and let her hands free, his hands reaching to tangle in her hair, holding her firm as he plunged his tongue between her open lips.

There was none of the delicacy she had been taught, but far more pleasure, and the taste of him was hot and urgent and stronger than foreign ice wine. She twined her tongue with his, darted a teasing tip between his lower lip and teeth, sucked his lip into her mouth and bit down not quite gently. He learned quickly, copying what he enjoyed; she learned from that, and discovered likes she had not known she had.

They kissed until they must breathe or die, and broke away only long enough to gasp for air before returning to their sweet duel.

Her hands, freed, roamed his back, his chest, finding his tiny nipples beneath the padded vest and thick shirt he wore, pinching and flicking in time with her tongue. He groaned into her mouth, and she swallowed the sound, never ceasing. When the kiss came to its inevitable end, she loosed his garments and ducked her head to suck the small nubs until he would have screamed had he not bit down on his own hand.

“Stop. You must.” His voice was strained. She ignored him until he pulled her up by the hair. “Stop.”

“Why?” She shifted, and saw his eyes go dark and wide at the sight of her breasts thrusting at him through the thin bit of silk that remained. “Is it your turn?”

“Oh, yes.” He set his mouth to the cloth and began to suckle.

Thought splintered and shattered as his mouth, even hotter than his touch, enveloped her nipple. The tug at her head as his hands caught in her hair was as nothing; the sounds

outside as guards passed meant little; the soft, wet sounds of his mouth were exhortations driving her higher than she had ever been.

He used the skill she had just taught him to roll and press and tease and tug her flesh until the waves of pleasure melted and melded into a tide that pulled her out of her center; she flowed like honey, thick and sweet. He suckled her through the arching, the freezing, the melting, releasing her only when she fell, limp, against him.

The candle smelled of honey. Soft breezes shook the walls of the tent, reminding them of their danger. Would the wind carry their soft moans to some guard's ear? Would they be discovered?

They could not stop.

He followed her as she slipped back to the carpet, lying fully atop her for a moment before placing himself at her feet. Beginning at her heels, he kissed his way up her legs, honoring each inch with an attention her teachers had never intimated she would ever feel. Reaching the satin smoothness of her thighs, he opened his mouth wide as though to devour her.

She shook, eager as he to be devoured.

But he merely played the flat of his tongue along the supple expanse and then moved on, murmuring of spices and honey and flowers that never bloomed where love was not.

He kissed his way up her sides, one kiss for each rib, and words she did not understand breathed along her skin, then all along her arms until he reached her fingers, laving each one with a delicacy that brought tears to her eyes. "Sweeter than wine," he said; she understood that.

His kisses traced a line down her spine as she lay on the piled rugs and bit a pillow to muffle the sounds of her passion. His hands gently pulled the last skirt away, leaving her bare to his gaze, and his touch, and his mouth. She caught her breath when he bit each firm

globe, sucking the flesh into his mouth. His sword scraped the rug as he shifted, and a second warm hardness pressed against her leg. She opened her thighs.

He resisted that temptation, instead pulling back to kneel by her feet. She bent and flexed, turning over to stare at him. Had he tired of her taste? Did he not know how she longed to feel his kiss where her legs met?

He wore that djinn-stunned expression again. It made her smile. She reached for her nipples, tugging the distended flesh almost cruelly. His eyes widened; he groaned and bent to her. She arched into him, feeling his mouth where she had so longed it to be.

His tongue parted her like a knife. She shook, startled by an orgasm, fast and furious as a storm. One of his broad hands cupped her mouth, blocking her screams. When she could think, she was grateful for -- and surprised by -- his quick reaction. But that thought soon vanished beneath a renewed onslaught, his tongue and lips and teeth exploring every fold and crevice. Her thighs locked around his head, and she tangled her hands in his hair, urging him to greater efforts still.

When he let her rest, or she he, a dim thought flitted through her mind: Solomon of legend had less skill in his tongue than this man.

She pulled his laces free, making a tease of it. Peeled the cloth down his legs, leaving it crumpled at his boot-tops. His thighs were bare, and his torso; what care had she for calves and feet?

The night was half-done.

Walking to the brazier where the tea waited, certain his eyes would be on her, she poured a glass and sipped carefully. There was water waiting near to thin it; she added some, then sipped again. Nodding, she walked back to him, and knelt to offer him the glass.

His eyes gleamed as he watched her move. He never looked away. The tea might have been poisoned, or water, or the nectar of the gods; he drank it because it came from her hand.

She accepted the empty vessel and made the brief journey again. This time, the return was on hands and knees, a teasing, taunting progress like a stalking cat's. She brushed her head against his thighs, smiling to hear him groan, then rubbed her cheek on the length of his shaft, stroking her soft skin against his hard cock.

He fell back into the piled pillows; she laughed softly, and pulled one free for him to bite on. And then she licked her lips, and parted them, and opened her mouth so wide that, for an instant, she surrounded his cockhead without touching it at all.

His eyes went slitted; she smiled, and the taste of him made her insides clench tight. The very tip of her tongue slid across his flared head, found the tiny opening, and dipped in. She tasted salt and something she could not name, but craved.

His thighs twitched and shuddered, and she put her hands on them to still them, and slid her mouth down his shaft until he was halfway in. Then she began to suck and twirl her tongue as she had been taught.

No one had ever told her how good it could taste. Or feel. The rare heat of him, the smooth strength, the way it moved and pulsed, and the pleasure she could tell he felt combined to bring tears to her eyes; she sucked harder, bit down the slightest bit and let him slide from her mouth so she could nuzzle the intriguing furry weight of his balls.

His fists beat at the floor; the pillow stifled his moans, but she could hear his snort and gasp for breath. She returned her attention to his cock, letting his balls slip from her lips with only slight regret.

This time she slid her mouth all the way down, angling her throat and swallowing to help him down. His head thrashed as he felt himself engulfed; she thought he was swearing behind the pillow, but couldn't tell. She bobbed her head up and down, shivering as much as

he at the sensation as her lips rubbed against his shaft. She moved her hands from his thighs to his belly to feel the rippling there, then gripped his waist and pulled herself as close to him as she could, until his pubic hair tickled her nose, then pushed away.

He shuddered and thrust up into her, and she pulled slowly back, bringing her hands to surround his shaft as it was revealed. Finally, only the head of his cock was still in her mouth; she pressed her tongue up, trapping him against the roof of her mouth, and squeezed his shaft in her hands.

His cock leapt in her grasp, and hot spurts and pulses coated her tongue, poured down her throat like the fabled source of pearls.

When he recovered, he declared it was his turn again.

Angelina woke in the tub, dawn streaming through the glass bricks. At some point, she must have pulled the plug; she was neither drowned nor terminally waterlogged. A little stiff, but not too terribly. *Better than I deserve. But, oh, what a night.* Her body tingled, every inch of it from her scalp to the soles of her feet -- it felt like his tongue laved her still.

If her alarm hadn't blared, she might have gone back to sleep.

Chapter Two

An overnight rain had left the air thick and scented with bruised greenery. Dew could not evaporate, the air already saturated, and so beaded on leaves and collected in puddles, runneled down stems and stones and pooled at the bases of trees.

Limbs bent beneath the weight like languid fingers drooping to caress what passed beneath. Sunlight sparked rainbows from each droplet.

Angelina's breath caught. Her sharp inhalation was the only stirring in the heavy air.

Happy birthday from Mother Nature. Hope you enjoy. Her skin tingled everywhere, moist air like her Crusader's kiss. Church bells chimed the hour, reminding her that she couldn't simply stand in her front yard all day.

"Oh, look, another granny sack. Angie, you look --"

"Shut up, Bubba." Jim pushed his friend aside, for all the three inches and hundred pounds the jock had on him. "Lina, don't listen to him. You look just fine."

Angelina shrugged. Appearance wasn't high on her list of concerns. She'd been hundreds, thousands of women in her dreams, some beautiful, some homely. Most plain.

She'd been objects, too, and nature -- what matter the form of her waking self? It was by far the less interesting.

Jim tugged her braid free of her dress, grinning as he pretended to haul a rope hand-over-hand. "Gets longer every day, birthday girl."

"Hey, that's right. Having cake and ice cream, girly? Or a real party?"

"No party, Bubba." She sighed, and moved past the men to take her seat. *Another day, another home ro-- no, sorry, orientation.* Her skirt swirled around her ankles; she remembered yards of fine, thin silk.

* * * * *

English 101. The professor chose to begin the class with a dramatic reading. Almost whispering, he weighted the poet's words with emotion. She knew it from the first words, Frost's *Once by the Pacific*.

Angelina had to lock her hands together to keep from running them down the line of buttons from collar to heel, unfastening and stroking as she went. She shifted in her seat, trying to relieve the sudden heavy throbbing between her thighs, wishing she dared rub her legs together, or cup her breasts in her hands. Her skin tingled as though the words were kisses. She could almost feel her Crusader breathing the words against her skin, his tongue darting into each fold and valley in the pause between verses. And her body responded to those touches with a flood of passion.

"So, class, what do you think?"

She had no idea what she thought, but she knew what she felt: Need. Poetry had never effected her so strongly before.

Nothing ever had, save in her dreams.

“Hey, birthday girl!” Jim raced up to her, panting and dripping in sweat. He’d probably been playing Frisbee or touch football, his usual off-time choices with the guys. “Can I take you to dinner tonight?”

“Oh, ah, no.” She blinked.

“What’s wrong?” Jim reached out to touch her, then pulled away. “Sorry. One shower short. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“If you’re going to take up lying, you’ll need to learn how. What’s up?”

“I wasn’t lying, just ... anticipating. A couple of aspirin and a good night’s sleep, and I’ll be fine.”

Jim smiled, that wonderful smile that changed his face. “Sleep. Your perfect cure. Can I walk you to your next class, or are you going to ditch?”

“You can even carry my books.”

Their hands touched for an instant, an electric sensation, gone in the blink of an eye. They made their way across campus. Jim walked a step behind Angelina, stealing glimpses of her. The long tail of her braid swung out back and forth, teasing his gaze all down her back to fall below her hips. Sunlight bounced off it in rainbows, every color from gold to purple gleaming within the black. The long, unshaped dresses she usually wore hid all her curves from view, but he’d seen her in swimsuits and cut-offs and jeans now and again, and memory filled in what he couldn’t see.

His hands ached to hold her. His erection strained against his shorts.

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Angelina had no idea how she’d made it through the day. Her body felt heavy, her balance shifted, and her skin was ridiculously sensitive. Hours after Jim’s parting tug on her braid, she could still feel the weight of his grasp. Her breasts were swollen, heavy. And

phantom breezes stroked through her clothes at the oddest moments -- when she passed a group of seniors lounging on the quad, brushed past a classmate, accepted a soda from a clerk. It was almost as though stares had fingers to reach for her.

And every man she saw, stared.

If she'd had the energy to spare, she would have been terrified.

I need ... what? To be kissed? The thought made her shiver, remembering her Crusader of the night before, but that was a dream. Life could not compare, all sloppy saliva and the rasp of braces and noses knocked together. *I need to sleep.*

To dream.

Her stomach clenched in her hunger. She hurried homeward, trying not to react to the strange ghost-touches she told herself were only her imagination in overdrive. The mile from campus home had never seemed so long, or so crowded with oglers. *What in the world?* Men never looked at her. Bubba's often-expressed opinion that she wasn't worth chasing was pretty much universal. Or had been. But she saw a few heads turn her way, felt strokes and pinches coincident with the leers.

By the time she reached her porch, her thighs were slippery. She reached for the doorknob, desperate to be alone.

"Not even a smile, birthday girl?"

She jumped. She'd thought the warmth surrounding her had just been more of her waking dream, but Jim was sitting in the porch swing. Could that phantom hug have been real?

He stood to cross the few feet between them, and late-afternoon sun turned his sandy hair to gold. A halo.

"Hi, Jim. Sorry, I didn't see you."

Was that a frown that flitted across his face? He reached her, took her book bag, let it slip to the ground. "I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday again, and a good night." His

hand lifted, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, tracing the curve. "And ..." He tilted her chin up, lowered his face to hers, and kissed her.

It was nothing like her dreams, and yet it was. Slow, sincere. Not at all like the desperate, sloppy fumbings she'd experienced behind the bleachers at school dances, or on her few other dates. He was gentle, tentative, a little awkward, his lips soft, not pressuring. She felt her mouth yield and fall slightly open to him, and her legs parted in sympathy, liquid, languid pleasure pooling somewhere behind her navel. But he took no advantage, simply pressing his lips to hers, his hands holding her face. And then it was over, and he pulled away, sighed, mumbled something about "tomorrow," and rushed away.

She sank down where she stood. Ten minutes passed before she found the strength to go inside.

The house was quiet. She left a note for her mother, pleading headache and begging off whatever had been planned for her birthday. It wouldn't have been anything elaborate, she was sure; her mother was always a little uncomfortable on the anniversary of her child's out-of-wedlock birth. She changed the sheets, teasing herself by postponing the moment she would lie down, take a breath, close her eyes.

She slid between layers of cool cotton, inhaled lavender, and sighed.

The alarm blared. *What?* Morning. Angelina's heart lurched -- she could not remember her dreams. The night might never have been.

Chapter Three

Angelina stood beneath the pounding spray, trying not to panic. Shocks shivered through her body -- emotional, physical, she couldn't tell. Her skin twitched like a horse's; she felt like live wires touched her everywhere. It wouldn't have surprised her to see sparks shooting from her fingertips. What had happened to her dreams?

She'd never, not in all her life, slept without dreaming. Her nightly adventures were more real to her, in many ways, than what happened during the waking hours. Her dreams were her life. The shower was cold, but that wasn't why she shook.

Her mother knocked on the bathroom door, telling her she'd have to hurry if she didn't want to be late for class. She grabbed a towel to rub it roughly over her body -- and new shocks joined the rest. The fabric felt nubbly as beard-bristle wherever it touched, and like a lover's beard, it made a welcome rasp. Her knees went weak as she drew the cloth across her shoulder blades; she moaned as she slid it over her shoulders, and dropped to her knees. The heel of her palm was as sensitive as her lips had been the day before, and the feel of terry against tingling skin was finally too much. She threw back her head, moaning as she let the towel fall to her parted thighs and slip between.

The climax was like lightning.

* * * * *

“Hey, where were you this morning?”

Angelina turned. Carefully. She felt mere heartbeats away from shattering again, and wasn't sure she wouldn't fly into a million pieces if she did. Not to mention the spectacle of a woman shrieking to the heavens in the middle of the quad. Beneath her ankle-length denim dress, her body quivered with phantom caresses still.

“Angie?”

“Don't call me that.” The automatic response helped; she felt a little more real as she glared up at Bubba. “What do you want?”

He looked her up and down -- she felt the gaze, she was sure of it -- and smirked. “Your boyfriend was worried.”

Boyfriend? Oh, he meant Jim. She shrugged.

“You change your hair or something?” He surveyed her again, head to heels and back to her chest. She felt her nipples throb, then some force raised her breasts and let them fall. Her bra was no more impediment than the denim. Bubba's smirk faded into something almost wistful, but then he shrugged and turned away.

She leaned against a lamppost, struggling for breath.

What is happening to me? She knew about orgasms, of course -- she hadn't been raised in a box -- but this was no muscular spasm, desperately sought and disappointing when finally reached. This was something closer to her dreams. Not a dream, no, she was sure she was awake; there were long minutes when she was not wracked on ramping desire that did not crest, when everyday annoyances held her attention. Nor was there a partner, a man to please and be pleased by, a mate to dance with, a glove the perfect match for her hand, as there always was in her dreams.

But the sensations were closer to dream-state than anything she'd ever felt in the waking world. Or read about.

I've heard of nightmares -- could this be one? She'd never had one. Still, it seemed likely she was awake. She couldn't imagine why she'd dream of being aroused by Bubba, of all people. Those gross, battered ham-hands, too-fleshy lips, and red face left her cold. And his imagined touch had been crude, letting her breasts bounce and jiggle so he could feel their weight.

She moaned as the memory called the sensation to her body again. It excited her.

* * * * *

The librarian directed her to the proper shelves, and Angelina selected an armful of texts on dreams and dreaming. Many proved too technical, but she found some written for the layman. The ones on symbolism and interpretation were fascinating; she read of tunnels and trains and cigars and oceans, and lightning stirred in her belly again. Determined to control herself, she set those books aside, went to the bathroom to splash cold water on her face, and returned to her research.

There was one book titled *Nocturnal Emissions: The History of the Wet Dream*. She didn't dare so much as open it, but set it in the pile of books to take home. Her dreams had never been exactly "wet"; her pleasure came in the dream itself, not her physical body's response to it. *Ecstasy, not orgasm*. Until lately, she'd had little physical desire at all. A late bloomer, her mother had called her once.

Well, Ma, I think I've bloomed. Angelina reached for the next book in the stack. At first glance, it was hopelessly dense, but there was a section at the top of each chapter that detailed the contents -- and here was what she thought she needed. "Phantom limbs and remembered sensations, déjà vu, dream lovers, and stigmata: In this chapter we delve into the phenomenon of psychosomia -- physical response to unconscious apprehensions."

Dream lovers. And she knew the word psychosomatic -- it meant something that was all in her head. She took that book and *Nocturnal* and went to withdraw them. The librarian goosed her with his gaze, and then she was free to run home. Or waddle as quickly as she could.

Jim called; she told her mother she was studying, that she'd call him back. And then she locked her bedroom door and turned the radio up high. Her schoolbooks sat on her desk; she brought her library books to bed with her. Lying on her stomach, thighs pressed tight together and ankles crossed, she propped the technical tome on a pillow and began to read.

According to the book, dream lovers were simply an unconscious response to shifts in hormone levels as the body reached optimum condition for procreation. Angelina wrinkled her nose; that didn't explain *her* dreams. She paged slowly forward, looking for the parts about changes in the physical body that stemmed from dreams, instead of the other way around.

She didn't find much that applied to her, though the section on stigmata was interesting. She didn't feel a part of her body that had been taken from her; she wasn't imagining that God had chosen her, or identifying with some saint or martyr; she was just ...

Horny. That's what Bubba would say. A shiver ran through her, her breasts rising and falling to jiggle again, just at the thought of the man's crass interest. *Oh, no. Ick.*

Static made flyaway wisps of hair cling to her arms as she moved, setting that book aside and turning to the other. *Nocturnal Emissions.*

She hadn't read more than a page before she was wishing to feel Bubba's gaze again. Closing her eyes, she imagined what it would be like.

A locker room, musty sweatsock smell and chlorine and men. She breathed in the scents of exertion and masculinity, and shivered as something primitive in her rose. Large

hands squeezing her breasts made her feel small, helpless. Vulnerable. It was strangely exciting. He smelled of salt and musk.

The heat of his hands went through her. She lifted her arms to circle his neck (almost too high to reach), pressed hard against him, feeling his stiffness against her ribcage, long and thick and unyielding, almost threatening. It made her moan.

He grunted out a laugh, and pushed his leg between hers.

She felt weak, wanton. Conquered. "Oh, please."

Another grunt, a harder squeeze, and his hands shifted, sliding under her arms and pulling her up off her feet. She slid up his body, her nipples catching in the thatch of his chest hair, and wrapped her legs around his waist, eager, desperate.

Another set of hands, from behind. She started to turn, but Bubba claimed her mouth with his own, thrusting his tongue between her teeth. Crude force, but thrilling -- she let him, and the other, do as they wished, using her hands only to hold on.

The stranger's hands were almost as large as Bubba's, but not so hot nor so hard. Urgent, as they slid over her ass, parting her from behind. She moaned as a finger pushed into her channel, retreating too quickly for her. Tugging urged her to unwrap her legs, to climb higher, bracing herself on Bubba's massive arms. Legs spread, she waited, not for long.

The feeling was incredible, the hot, slick ramrod inching ever so slowly into her, stretching her, teaching her of nerves she hadn't known she had. A warm sensation threaded up through her vulva, down from her breasts, to meet and mingle in her belly and seep down. The man behind her tugged, and she slid along Bubba's chest, hanging impaled and suspended between the two men.

Bubba shifted his hold and sat, straddling a bench. When he was settled, he changed his grip again, taking most of her weight. The other man took a step, and sat as well. She cried out as his cock twitched inside her, the head rubbing the roof of her vault in a delightfully urgent fashion. And then the men shifted again, and her breasts slid down to the

bench, and she smelled musk stronger than ever, and opened her eyes to see Bubba's massive cock in her face.

Her lips opened with no conscious thought; she engulfed the mushroom head and wished fleetingly she could, like a snake, unhinge her jaws. And then the taste overwhelmed her, and she forced her head forward, down, devouring him.

Her lovers fore and aft matched their strokes, using her like a receptacle. Bubba held her hands, the other her legs, and they pistoned into and out of her. She could neither speak nor move, only feel.

And climb desperately toward release. Each twin stroke reshaped her body, insistent heat calling an answer from her flesh, driving her higher and higher toward an end. Bubba held both wrists in one of his huge hands and used the other to pull her hair, directing her motion. Her breasts pressed into the hard plastic bench, throbbing with her pulse. The man behind her held her hips still.

They came together, and as their hot juices spilled into her, she screamed.

“Angelina? What’s wrong?”

Oh, God. “Nothing, mother. Just ... saw a bat. I’m fine.”

What’s happening to me?

Angelina huddled beneath her covers, shivering. That fantasy, daydream, whatever it had been, was nothing she wanted any part of. Her dreams were beautiful; that was -- *Sex. That was sex. That was what everyone else longs for.*

Blecch.

Still, it had felt ... good.

Incredible. *Bubba?* She stared at the ceiling, sightless in the darkness, and wondered. When at last she slept, there were no dreams.

Morning came far too soon, Angelina aching and flinching away from every loud sound and each errant breeze. She'd never felt so strained, so raw. The books claimed that dreams were only the mind writing short-term memory to long-term storage, which was patently ridiculous. They did acknowledge that dreaming helped maintain sanity. She thought she was a second or so from screaming madness.

And she itched like it had been weeks since her last bath. Her mind felt unclean, stained by visions of Bubba and empty sex with a man she'd never even seen, shamed by how much she'd enjoyed it. *All that time I wrinkled up my nose at everyone else for pawing and groping, and here I am, dreaming of two at once.*

That was one dream she wouldn't tell Jim about.

* * * * *

She rushed across backyards and alleys, the fastest route she knew to class. It involved a bit of trespassing, but none of her neighbors would object; few of them would be home to see her, anyway. She made it in time for orientation, only remembering as she reached the classroom door that she hadn't returned Jim's call. And realizing a second thereafter his likely reason for phoning.

I've lost my dreams and my mind. How could I forget about that kiss?

I thought we were friends. Just friends.

"Good morning, Angelina. So nice of you to join us." Young or not, the teacher had that sarcastic tone down cold. But his voice warmed as his gaze ran down her body. "You may as well come in. The door doesn't need holding up."

She felt his stare, and smiled. *Damn, but that's nice.* As she moved past him, she brushed her hand along the edge of her desk, and heard his breath catch.

Jim looked away as Angelina neared him. She thought of reaching for him, but shook her head. Of course he was hurt, probably thought she'd skipped class just to avoid him. She knew she should say something, but what?

Class ended, and she still hadn't thought of a single word. He leapt over his desk in his haste to avoid her. Her eyes stung. But then she felt another phantom touch, not comforting, but very warm, brushing over her breasts.

Jim can deal with his own issues. I'm ... mm. Again, please?

Her wish was granted. Over and over, all the day long.

In the break between classes, she sat down (alone; she didn't think she could concentrate past the leers that stroked her skin) and thought of what she would say to Jim. Wasted effort; he didn't go to history, or take her call that night.

By morning, hurt had turned to anger. She chose another seat, far away from him.

* * * * *

Angelina wondered if there were some illness that might account for the way she felt. It didn't seem likely, but what other explanation could there be?

It's the dreams. It has to be. But how? Dreams didn't randomly affect the waking world; there was logic even to stigmata. Begin at the beginning: I slept, but didn't dream. And I felt strange when I woke. So I daydreamed, only it didn't feel like a dream. I felt everything. Maybe ... maybe this is like DTs? She'd heard that drunks dreamed awake, pink elephants and things they thought were really there.

Back to the books. She had to smile; she'd never done so much homework in her life.

Her mother wasn't home to smile at this sign of academic industry. After a moment's thought, Angelina decided that was just as well. *I have no idea what I'd say if she asked how my day went, but I think maybe it's better that way.* She raced up the stairs to her room, grabbed up the library books, and lay them out side by side, opened to their indexes.

Ah! “Delirium tremens. Mania resulting from prolonged use of intoxicants. Characterized by trembling and hallucinations as the brain attempts to dream during consciousness.” Angelina scowled. She’d never even had a glass of wine, but the symptoms did fit.

Okay, I’ve got DTs. How do I get my dreams back in my sleep, where they belong?

The doorbell rang. She checked the clock, realizing her mother wouldn’t be home, and hurried down the stairs.

Some days I really wish I’d gone away to school. Old friends dropping by, neighbors who’d known her since she was five and seemed not to have noticed that she wasn’t in kindergarten anymore, the same cars driving down the same streets with the same faces peering blindly out ... and secrets known as soon as they were spoken. Three different people had called to ask why she’d missed orientation that day, and two had come to the house.

How am I supposed to have a breakdown in peace?

One benefit to the concern, at least: old Mrs. Smitty from up the street had brought a pie. A slice or two of that and a glass of milk would be nice.

In the kitchen, she stopped to water her mother’s windowsill garden, and to admire the play of light on the various herbs. She’d dreamed of herbs, rioting over hedges and tangling together, offering scents and textures to wind and rain and any passing caress. The memory made her smile, then frown. *Will I dream tonight?*

She thought of skipping her snack and heading back to her books, but the pie was still warm from the oven, and it was her favorite -- berries and cream. Besides, if she didn’t eat any, the whole neighborhood would be saying she was anorexic by morning. *Can’t have that.*

She reached for a plate. Hesitated. The everyday plain stuff was at the top of the stack, but there were hand-painted dishes below. She reached for one of those. Her fingers stroked the surface, tracing swirls and feathery brushstrokes. She sighed.

Yes, it's beautiful. Everything is. But I'm so tired! She felt like all her nerves were firing on overdrive. Nothing that touched her was just ordinary anymore -- not the soft touch of a passing breeze or the swirl of her skirts around her ankles, or even her toothbrush. And men ... *No more. Please.*

The pie glowed, bright berries in a cloud of creamy white that blushed where it kissed the fruit. It looked almost too pretty to eat, but not quite. The taste made her moan and rub her thighs together. She ate slowly, savoring each and every bite. Another neighbor telephoned; the ringing shook her from a stupor. She made her excuses briefly, reminding herself to be polite, and moved around the kitchen as she half-listened to the scolding everyone seemed to think she deserved. The plate was cool and ridged beneath her fingertips; she bit her lip. Lemon-scented dishsoap sputtered at her squeeze. She moaned. "I'm sorry. I've got to go." The voice was still scolding as she hung up.

I can't take any more of this. I just can't. She left the dish in the sink.

Back in her room, Angelina frowned over her books. The technical tome seemed to suggest that it was possible to reset her mind by reviewing remembered dreams just before sleep. She wasn't sure it would help, but what could it hurt? Though it was early yet, she was tired. Slipping on a plain cotton nightgown -- she didn't dare attempt silk, not when the feel of a simple glass at her lips had nearly made her eyes roll back in her head -- she turned out the lights and tried to decide on a dream.

Every little girl dreams of being a princess once or twice. Angelina had princess dreams all the time. She was a princess riding a high-stepping horse, the wind singing through her hair, urging her and her straining mount to greater speed. She was a princess seated at a tea-table carved of satin-smooth wood, made just the right size for her. A cloud of chocolate mousse melted on her tongue, cool kiss of silver adding the tiniest edge to the taste. She was a princess tucked into a warm, soft bed, held snug by a mattress softer than a pillow, tickled by soft fleece.

As she grew older, spun-sugar fantasies of all the toys she could want shifted to worlds of refined experience. The teen princess read of Cleopatra's bees, and wondered; learned of Victorian-era doctors' treatments for hysteria, and thought; discovered the reason her nurses insisted she sleep with her hands outside the covers, and learned. And sleeping, Angelina felt each tentative poke and probe, every tiny quiver, the shivers and shakings that built to an ecstatic paralysis and broke in waves of pleasure that washed over her. Them. Angelina never worried about that.

It was one dream-series of many, not missed between, but welcomed anew each time. In Angelina's dreams she was many women, black and white, in power and powerless -- the only constant was sensation. No matter the dream's setting, when she dreamed, she *felt*. Each nerve, every fiber of her being sang.

That was why she woke so often with tears in her eyes, hating that the dreams had to end. Real life had never been like that. It couldn't be.

She wondered if even a princess's life could be as perfect as her dreams. The latest one ...

She'd been to the cabin before, enjoying the simplicity. Trees that had never known a woodsman's axe rose straight and tall farther than the eye could see. The cabin had been set in a tiny natural clearing, a marvel of architecture set like a jewel in a natural setting. A plaything for a princess. She cherished it.

It was a place to be alone, or nearly so. A place to relax, to spend time in quiet contemplation. The estate stretched far enough she never saw the walls, could have wandered the grounds naked with no fear of discovery. She was never alone, but her single companion would never have said a word. A quiet man trusted by the family, he'd been at her side almost since she'd learned to walk.

She was sure he knew of her various private adventures, though he'd never spoken of them to her. He had, however, appeared at her window the night she'd decided to climb out, intent on a tryst. And he'd managed to be in the stables when she'd thought of jumping a handsome groom.

Her eyes lit on him. He was more handsome still, in his own unobtrusive way.

He served her dinner before the fire, turning to withdraw, but she held out a hand to stay him. "Please."

He looked at her, dark eyes deeper than oceans, waiting.

"Please."

"Princess."

Her heart pounded; her hands shook. She spilled her wine. He cleaned up her mess as he always had, silently, calmly, without censure or complaint. Watching him, his blunt-tipped, callused fingers gentle on delicate lace, she smiled and poured more onto her blouse.

He arched one brow, then shook his head. Taking the glass from her, he lifted her and carried her closer to the fire. He brought a blanket, wrapped it around her shoulders, and held out one hand, waiting for her to remove her top.

She shrugged the blanket away. If he was shocked by her daring, he didn't show it at all. Nor did his eyes widen at the sight of her corset.

She drowsed, there by the fire, as he went away someplace, no doubt to soak the fabric before the stain set. When he returned, he had a scrap of fabric and a bowl from which steam rose. He knelt by her side to clean her, his hands as sure and certain on the swell of her breasts as on the cloth, and as impersonal.

Words boiled behind gritted teeth. She longed to command him to love her, but would not. In all the years he had served her family, he had obeyed her every instruction. She wasn't sure which would be worse -- if he obeyed that order, too, or if he would not.

He wiped her tears away with the scented water, and held her until she fell asleep.

She awoke with her arms tied above her head.

“What --?” Her first thought was that she had simply tangled herself in something. She raised her head, seeking the source of the obstruction, but saw nothing but her faithful companion kneeling by the fire. Her wrists weren’t wrapped in a blanket; she saw the wide band of silk, and frowned.

“Shh.” He moved to her side, passing his hand gently along her cheek, her neck. The planes of his calluses were rough. “I’ve waited so long,” he murmured, almost too softly for her to hear. “So long.” His hand continued its journey, tracing a path over skin she didn’t recall having bared. Down her ribs, her waist, her hip, her thigh. Pausing at the knee, he squeezed, firm and gentle at once, then moved on. Reaching her heel, he cupped it, squeezing just hard enough to feel, then proceeded to massage her foot. Oil, warm from the fire, a knowing touch, the careful attention he brought to everything he did.

Each pulse of her heart beat strong enough to make her shake. Her nipples were hard as stones and jutting, her mouth too dry to speak, even if she could have thought to form words. Though she did wonder why her hands were bound.

“Shh.” He knelt above her, reaching for something she couldn’t see. Brushing the gentlest of kisses across her lips, he pressed another band of silk to her mouth, a knot placed just right to keep her quiet without causing pain. He tied it firmly, then traveled the length of her body to her feet, his hot breath scalding her.

Fear began to rise above desire, half-heard stories of revolt and revolution and betrayal running through her mind. Why was she tied? Gagged? Her breathing quickened; her heart beat harder. What was going to happen?

He bit her heel. Firm, not truly painful, shocking. Arousing. She leaned into the odd caress. Holding her foot immobile, he laved the arch, tongued the spaces between her toes. By the time he took her smallest toe in his mouth, the speed of her breathing had nothing to do with fear.

He set her legs over his shoulders in one smooth motion, lifting and stroking and exposing her. And then he simply stared at her for a long moment, the faintest of smiles curving his mouth, dark eyes still and unblinking. She lay beneath him, still, helpless. Wondered what he thought of her body. What he thought of her.

If her hands had been free, she'd have pulled him close for a kiss.

"Oh." The sound he made was almost too soft to hear. She drank in his expression, and butterflies burst into flight in her belly at the sight. It reminded her of paintings of saints, of men confronted by angels: Love and lust and admiration, desire and awe.

"Ooh," he breathed, leaning in to place a kiss at the top of her mound. She arched up to meet him, but he had already withdrawn.

Almost tentative, he traced a line down the center of her body, collarbone to navel, using only one finger. Then, firmer, both hands reached her hips and grasped. Squeezed. Released. He met her eyes, smiled crookedly, and dove.

His mouth attacked her nipple, lips, tongue, teeth. No warning, no exploration. No tentative probing. He sucked greedily, a child nursing. She didn't feel at all maternal. Her body rose to meet him, folded beneath his strength in what should have been an awkward position, only the bonds at her wrists seeming any sort of impediment. With varied pressure, he sucked, nibbled, twisted, pushed, and pulled until she was blind with need, feeling each tug deep within her core, wanting to cry out for him to stop, to keep going. He pulled back suddenly, using his hands to hold himself away from her, no part of him touching her but his shoulders beneath her calves, and that wonderfully insistent mouth. She writhed, desperate to crest the wave of sensation. Pressing her legs together as best she could, she bucked, pulling her chest back, forcing him to increase his suction, and as he bit down hard, she came.

When she could see again, he was kneeling between her legs, sitting back on his heels, staring. Smiling that crooked grin again, he bent himself like a penitent at prayer, and commenced his attack on her center.

Using the tip of his tongue, he explored each crack and crevice, fold and depression. Then again, using the flat. By the time he started using his lips, she was squirming beneath him, as desperate for release as if she hadn't just come. His hands were on her hips, holding her down; her thighs were around his ears. She quivered with spasms, mini-orgasms.

And then he stopped. Bit his lip. Helped her to sit up, removed her gag, and reached for her bound hands. "I am yours," he whispered. "You must command me."

She struggled to find the right words, then gave up the attempt. The silk was wrinkled where he'd tied the knots, wet where her mouth had been. She reached for it; he made an abortive gesture at the cloth around her wrists, then stilled.

She smiled to see his nervousness. "Love me?" It wasn't an order, didn't need to be. She leaned back again, trusting him not to let her fall.

"I do," he murmured against her skin, resting his cheek on her breast. "But you are too used to getting what you want the instant you conceive it.

"Sometimes, waiting is the best part."

He lifted his head long enough for her to see his expression, equal parts humor and sharp anticipation, and then set about teaching her. It was a long night, filled with pauses and beginnings, as he used his hands and his mouth and the warm planes of his body to drive her higher than she had dreamed desire could go, never letting her crest until dawn. If not for the gag he'd replaced to hold in his kiss, she'd have begged him to cease; if her hands had been free, she'd have thrust fingers hard and sharp into her core and brought the torment to an end.

As it was, she could only receive what he offered, hours of tender attentions that drove her beyond thought, into a world she'd never known. And then, with the first flush of dawn

staining the skies, he lay himself full over her and thrust gently, firmly, parting flesh that had yielded to his fingers and tongue with a different sort of silky heat, stretching and reshaping her from within.

She shrieked, high and desperate beneath her gag, and he laughed a soft sound of triumph low in his chest. Her bound arms looped 'round his neck to pull him closer, and he inched his way deeper until she enveloped all of him.

And finally, as his soft, springy hair rubbed her clit, and his shaft stroked high till the head brushed the roof of her vault, she came. And fell into heights, pulling him along with her.

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It can't be morning again. It just can't. Angelina winced as she levered herself out of bed. She'd spent the night reviewing her dreams. Most of them seemed rather more sexual than she recalled, and even the most innocently sensual of them drove her higher toward a peak she could not reach. *If this is how other people feel, I'm sorry for every unkind thought I ever had.* She'd always thought it rather pitiful, the amount of attention everyone paid to sex. Dreams were so much more satisfying. Or they had been.

She hadn't gotten even a wink of sleep. The air seemed razor-edged, myriad tiny motion-stirred breezes like knives intent on flaying her. She swallowed a handful of aspirin and raced through her morning routine, each everyday activity a new, painful sensation. Orange juice burned her throat; her favorite cotton shift scratched like burlap; her book-bag bruised her hip with every step.

And then she stepped onto the street, and a deliveryman looked up and saw her, and her body *sang*. The feel of his stare was balm for her aches, food for her hungers -- a soul-deep kiss.

He came where he stood, gaping after the sway of her long ponytail.

Chapter Four

Angelina didn't do parties. Too-loud music, too-crowded rooms, too many people she'd just as soon never see at all ... whatever was the point? She'd take a good book any day. Better still, a nap.

But it hadn't exactly been a normal week. Jim's continued shunning was at least one straw too many, so when Bubba's teammate Rick invited her to a "bash," she said yes. Better dancing than worrying and waiting for dreams that never came.

She chose a slightly fitted dress from her closet, one with a row of buttons from neck to ankle. It wasn't one she wore often, the fabric slightly too thin for her comfort, but the color was nice, a deep forest green that made her hazel eyes glow, according to her mother, who'd bought the thing. Loosing her hair from its usual confinement, she chose a simple barrette to keep it at least slightly controlled. Sandals on, and she was ready to go.

But she waited for a minute, hoping the phone would ring, that Jim would call. He didn't. Sighing, she went.

Women's voices in strident harmonies. Guitars wailing. Bass shaking the windows. The stench of spilled beer.

Men, lusting after her. Angelina's eyes widened as she felt a sudden surge of delight and strength. Whatever was happening to her, it wasn't all bad. She'd never experienced such vitality before -- awake.

Rick rushed down the sidewalk to greet her, giving her a quick one-armed hug and leaving his arm around her shoulders as he led the way toward the house. "Love the dress."

She smiled, feeling the truth of it. His eyes rested on her breasts, gaze circling her nipples like a tongue-tip, then surrounding, pulling, urging them erect.

Men parted like the seas around her; she thought she might drown. Willingly. Every glance was a caress, and they built one upon the next.

Fingers pinched and poked and prodded, stroked and scratched. Her nipples, her areolae, the swelling weight of her breasts. Hands as untutored as Bubba's (imagined?) paws, as knowing as the lovers from her dreams, and all points between. Touches as certain as a certain servant's, as tentative as Jim's kiss ...

Where is he? Why isn't he here?

The wandering touches continued. She looked down at her chest, surprised not to see herself naked, finding a span of green cloth undisturbed except for her nipples pressing it up from within. Phantom hands slid down her stomach, up the column of her neck. Someone's fingertips traced her lips, a slow, gentle motion that made her mouth open slightly.

Heat touched her shoulders, crept up the back of her neck to her ears. Cloud-soft warmth circled the shell curve, tickled the lobe, darted into an opening no one save her had ever touched.

She closed her eyes, trying to concentrate on that one sensation, so kind, gentle, undemanding. It wasn't possible; the multitude of eager fingers weren't going to go away. She succumbed to their more insistent tuggings and touches, and moaned.

"Can I get you a beer?" Rick asked.

Some interminable while later, Angelina writhed in time to music, nearly out of her mind and thrilling with each discarded inhibition. The top half-dozen buttons of her dress had been yanked free as heat and desire rose; the two -- or was it three? Or four? -- beers she'd downed had done nothing to cool her.

Rick thrust his pelvis at her; she felt the force. More hands, she wasn't sure anymore if they were real, physical, or simply stares. They slid down to cup her ass-cheeks, squeezed.

"Angelina?"

She shivered, raked by sudden cold. Turning, she met Jim's incredulous, disappointed stare. All the warmth she'd sensed vanished; she almost fell.

The next minutes were a blur, a fever-dream. All she knew was that Jim was beside her, and she had never felt so alone.

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"What were you doing there?"

Jim wrapped her hands around a mug of tea, waiting until he was sure she wouldn't drop it. He managed it somehow without once looking at her.

She knew; she could feel the chill. Her head hurt, she was dizzy, her skin still twitched, and she was altogether miserable. Her oldest friend couldn't even look at her. The tea was too hot, too sweet; she gulped it anyway.

"Well?"

"I went to a party. People do that."

"Not you," he said.

All she could do was shrug. She huddled into her blanket, burrowed into the couch. Wished Jim would go away, let her crawl upstairs to her bed. If she'd had the strength, she would have asked him to leave.

Jim sighed. It wasn't at all how he'd hoped to spend the night. He'd gone to the party hoping to forget his troubles, and instead saw his Lina humping the nearest thing campus had to a pimp, her body a living invitation to any -- every -- man. He flushed to think of his first reaction, how tempted he'd been to accept. Instead, he'd done the decent thing, got her out of there, escorted her home.

He should leave, he knew, but she looked so miserable. If she wasn't hung-over yet, he figured she would be; she'd looked beyond drunk when he'd caught sight of her. So free, so alluring. And so precious. That last, at least, she still did -- like a statue, or a jewel. Her skin gleamed like alabaster. Her eyes were a shade he'd never seen, changeable hazel become somehow gold-lit green, emerald. Her lips glowed a deep coral. He tore his gaze away.

It didn't matter; he could see her anyway. And feel her. Close enough to touch. Too far away. He could smell her, freshness beneath a slight overlay of hops, with every breath. Time passed. The clock claimed it was less than an hour, though he would have sworn it had been days. But she looked up at him at last, her eyes shining with tears.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was a whisper, and her smile trembled. "I just ... needed company. And you weren't speaking to me."

"No, I'm sorry. Did you have fun?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "I'm just so tired."

He had to clear his throat twice before he could speak. "Let me take you to bed." For a moment, he wasn't sure he had the strength to stand. The thought of being able to touch her helped. Her body fit in his arms like it had been made for him. He'd held her before, of course, tossing her into the pool, helping her up when she fell, but that seemed years ago. Her hair was cool as silk where it lay soft on his arm. He wished he could feel it everywhere.

She did seem tired, though there were no circles under her eyes. She sighed and let her head fall to his shoulder. He felt honored, proud, and climbed the stairs slowly, wanting to

prolong the contact. Her eyes closed as though in sleep. Her mouth curved slightly up, the innocent hint of a smile. Her breath gently lifted the swell of her breasts.

His breath caught.

Her room hadn't changed in years, still a young girl's confection of satin and lace, but his heart raced to be so near her bed, innocent as it was. "We're here," he said softly, and leaned to lay her down. Slowly. His whole body throbbed in time with his cock, hard and hot and humid and longing for her, wishing he could take the place of the moonlight slanting through the window, spilling over her so gloriously.

She clung to him, pressing her body full against his. It was too much -- his body could simply take no more. He came, cock straining against the confinement of his jeans; almost as much pain as pleasure, spurting release and then wetness and a sudden tangy scent.

"Oh, hell. Angelina." She made a noise, twisting for better contact. "Lina, let me go. I have to ... let me go a minute. I'll come back."

The kittenish sound she made then made him shudder and buck again. He tore himself away and raced downstairs.

"She's drunk. She doesn't mean it. Down, boy!" Jim grabbed some ice from the freezer, holding it in his hand, an old trick to calm himself. There was a note on the refrigerator door. Her mother wouldn't be home that night.

His cock leaped. "No." He stared at the ice, wondering if he should just drop it down his shorts. If it would help. He couldn't leave her alone. Not after the show she'd put on at the party. College men could not be trusted. Besides, he'd promised he'd go back.

She'd be even more uncomfortable if she slept all night in that dress ...

Angelina smiled as warmth stroked her. She'd been cold earlier, but no more. This was a calm place, a good place. A bed. Soft and welcoming. And the warmth was joined by

another, a firm, gentle weight that moved her, that shifted her this way and that, peeling irritating cloth from her, then turned her onto her side.

She relaxed into the oddly familiar warmth of a man's body, inhaling the scent of him, musk and spice and a touch of the sea. He tucked the bed sheet around her -- she pouted, but said nothing, overall too comfortable to speak -- and aligned himself, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her to himself. She felt his cock pressing along the cleft of her ass, the head reaching the small of her back. Still erect, hard and throbbing. His chin rested on the top of her head; an odd feeling, wrapped and sheltered and cherished and vulnerable all at once.

She sighed, content, and fell asleep.

Jim groaned, but told himself it was for the best. It wasn't long before he, too, slept.

* * * * *

She breathed. There was no disorientation, no confusion; she simply *was*. As in a dream. This was unusual, though, waking without a partner. No man's hands molded her form; no male spirit sang to her. No one touched her.

She stretched, enjoying the feel as muscles flexed, tendons shifted, skin slid. Cloth scratched where she moved against it; she enjoyed the rough caress. And the scent in the air, of promise and musk. She opened her eyes. An undistinguished room, though clean; a little frilly. The young man beside her had promise, long, lean lines and a finely molded face beneath the last remnants of babyish curves. If he'd been awake, he might have been fun.

But there were others yearning near, hungers strong as her own. She could smell them. So she rose, pulled on the nearest garment, and went out.

She might have been a tracking hound intent on prey; nothing distracted her. The feel of asphalt on bare feet, stares of the few men out so late, sound of squealing brakes and shattering glass -- all were unimportant. Somewhere ahead lay a concentration of yearnings, and she moved toward it with unerring aim.

A youngish woman with a clipboard looked up as she approached. Angel smiled. "Hello, love."

She left the door-guard moaning softly, lost in dreams of a forest glade and a lover who walked on cloven feet, and moved toward what called her there. The scent was strongest down one hall, behind a door. The bright-lit warning sign above was no deterrent to her; rather the opposite. She opened the door, breathing deep and smiling at the scene; two men, one naked, one clothed. Both *hungry*. The photographer snarled. "Closed set, dammit."

She simply stood, waiting for him to turn. Which he did, at last, realizing that his model was staring at whoever stood in the doorway. He grunted as if he'd been hit in the stomach, then croaked out, "Model?"

She nodded.

"Sh-show me."

She tore the horrible dress from her flesh and spread her legs eagerly. The photographer's gaze might have been hands, running warm and insistent up her thighs to hover just below her slightly parted labia, the hood of her clit caressed only by the air of his passing.

The phantom fingers slid down, back, denting her ass-cheeks to expose the tiny star to the air. She held still, wondering, unafraid. Warmth slid over the crinkled opening, declined to duck inside. Her cheeks undented as Phil's attention returned to her vulva, tugging the plump, rubbery lips, feeling the moisture, sliding between to deeper red and resting where her clit had fully escaped its protective hood. What need had she of protection? She craved heat, touch, sensation.

Her nipples nuzzled the air, eager as the rest of her. He didn't seem to notice, staring unblinking at her clit. And then he sighed, "Perfect," and turned away.

She almost screamed, blinded by hunger.

He spoke over his shoulder. "Two hours. Make-up. Tell Sherry I sent you." He jerked his head toward the side door; she went where she was bade, pushed by his yearnings and her own. His hands ached to hold her and his camera, equally. If she hadn't been so desperate, she would have laughed.

There were other hungers in the building, though, one where he had told her to go. So she made her way through poorly lit, musty hallways to a door marked Wardrobe. Before she reached for the knob, the door opened, and a well-rounded redhead stormed through -- to stop, wide-eyed, as she saw Angel, naked in the hall.

"Eek?"

"The photographer sent me."

"Eek."

Angel breathed in the taste of longing and reached. It was easier this time than it had been with the guard, or perhaps Sherry's dreams were closer to the surface of her mind.

Dreams into which Angel fit quite well ...

Sherry stood in a forest glade, fairy-tale setting for a fantasy: emerald-green grass studded with ruby-red flowers and a perfectly round, gleaming silver pool. She wore adventurer's clothing as described in any fictional quest -- anonymous tunic and trouser and high, fitted boots, a hat made for sweeping gestures, a small pack by her feet. She was herself, multi-hued hair and all, with maybe a few pounds and a couple of years less.

She was smiling as she waited for Angel to appear.

Angel stepped in, rising from the water to stand, dry, on the surface long enough to pose. A gown the same gleaming silver hid nothing and everything; a matching cape had a cowl that rose to frame her head. She glided to the tiny lake's edge, extended a hand.

Sherry took from her belt a small chalice, battered, old. "My lady," she murmured, "the Grail is yours."

Angel knew her lines, and spoke them with only a hint of a laugh. "And you, brave chevalier, are mine." She folded her arms, and the object disappeared beneath the cloth, to go wherever used plot devices rest, replaced by a single flower. An orchid, perhaps, or something more mystical, it glowed pearl-white against Angel's equally pale skin. "A token."

"I'd sooner a kiss."

"Brave indeed, my chevalier. Know you not the cost of kissing one such as I?"

"No cost is too high, even my soul." Sherry knelt by the puddle of Angel's skirts, a proper heraldic pose, head high, shoulders back -- bringing her ample breasts into sharp relief. Nipples large as a baby's fist thrust eager at the world.

"I have no need of that," Angel said softly, breathing deep. Desire moved like strong wine into her, welcome fire that traced a path through her frame. "But, perhaps, your heart ... and your body, for a time."

"As my lady wills."

Angel began by willing her dress away.

Sherry gasped and shook, then swallowed hard and bowed her head.

Angel reached for her chin, tilting her face up. "If I did not want you to look upon me, my own, I would not have bared myself to view. Take pleasure in what you see." She stood quite still, unbreathing, for a span, allowing her knight to gaze freely, then requested the same favor in return.

Anonymous cloth tore easily, until Sherry was bare but for hat and boots. "Does this please you, Lady?"

Angel had had enough of words. She stepped forward, rising on tiptoe to reach Sherry's height, and kissed her, first softly, then with greater urgency.

Sherry froze for only an instant, then began to take the lead. She pressed her breasts against Angel's, and Angel felt a shock as their nipples rubbed together. The texture, the pressure, was incredible! For long moments there was nothing in her world but that single

sensation, her lover moving slowly this way and that, sliding and catching and slipping past again, dueling very feminine swords. "My chevalier," she gasped.

And then Sherry claimed her mouth in a delicately thorough kiss. When the first came to an end, she began again. The second kiss began with what each had learned the other liked, and moved on from there in a teasing dance of nibbles and suckling, darting tongue-tips and twining tugs.

Sherry paused a moment, breathless, to step away and admire again, and this time, Angel let her own look slide down her form. Her breasts were high and round, twin blancmange mounds tipped with small pale coral nubs. Her waist was long, barely dipped in, her legs long and gracefully turned, the whole almost coltish. And nearly as colorless as the water from which she'd risen. The small tuft of hair at her crotch was some shade between silver and white, as was the dead-straight fall of hair from head to feet, and only the faintest hint of coral peeked shyly through.

Still, she felt anything but sexless. And the look in Sherry's eyes was enough to tell her of her beauty, if she'd had any doubt. A lustful sort of reverence stretched the air between them, as though what occurred was a sacrament.

The Lady of the Lake reached for her chosen knight again.

The sun never moved in this fantasy landscape, so time was measured only in sensation, the progress from standing to lying on cool, welcoming, insect-free grass, new tastes learned and cherished, cries wrung free and sipped. Angel lay by turns passive and aggressive beneath her lover, luxuriating in the glide of sweat-slick skin and soft weight and the unexpected tickle of feathers when Sherry descended, hat still on, down her form ...

A stirring from outside the dream prodded Angel -- other yearnings, other urges, lustful hungers strong and directed solely at her. They were tempting, but so was this. She blinked; there was an end to this passionate play, scripted into the fantasy.

... Sherry nodded at something, though Angel knew not what. "I know, the day is nigh to its ending, but I would not be parted from you."

"My place is here," Angel said, "beneath my lake. And you ..."

Sherry looked at Angel, her eyes wide and so bright they seemed almost to glow. "My lady? Could I ...? It would mean my life, I know, but that is truly no cost at all. Please, Lady, please. Just once, I would sink wholly into you -- your home."

"Oh, my chevalier. This is not wise." Angel shivered, a thrill running through her at the forbidden thought. The Lady might briefly leave her lake, but the knight who chose to follow her in again gave up his life in doing so.

His life. What of hers? She didn't know. The death was said to be exquisite, though.

As she thought, Sherry rose from their bed of grass and reached down, wrapping one moon-pale arm around Angel's pinkish-tan shoulders, one coral nipple brushing against a taut bicep.

The moan might have come from either of them. Or both.

Spring-warm grass met sun-warmed water with no intervening span of stone; Angel simply stepped off the verge to the gleaming surface, which held her as easily. Sherry gulped, locked her gaze to Angel's, and took the step. And sank into gleaming water, warm as a womb, and welcoming.

Angel descended, too, willingly. Breast-deep, they came to rest.

"I thought ... I mean, you rise ... Isn't it deeper than this?"

"Yes." Angel smiled, reaching out to tease Sherry's nape, where damp hair clung. "But this is deep enough, for now." Her hands slid down the firm, strong line of Sherry's spine, following the tiny incurved bend, pausing to tease and test the supple curve of her bottom, then falling away. "There is a chalice from which I would sip." And she knelt, supported by the waters of her lake, and parted Sherry's second lips with her tongue.

She sipped, most delicately, the silver water and creamy nectar she found within.

When she had emptied that cup and filled it thrice, she bade the waters part, selectively, so Sherry slipped down to her level, and the slightest bit more. Angel took the top position, and drank of her mouth as sweetly and thoroughly as she had before. And when Sherry was moaning and climbing the crest of pleasure again, bodies slippery and clinging, no gravity, no weight, Angel shifted the water again, until it rose to swallow them, carrying them together in directions that had no names, up and down and onward to an endless eternal sea.

“Wow.” Sherry shook herself, blinked, shook again. “Ah, I think he’s doing retro stuff today. Mind if I iron your hair?”

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The scenery was uninspired, but Angel did not complain. Phil’s camera-framed stare thrilled her, and technicians’ leers filled her; she drank every touch, every wish, and wrapped herself in their desires. Only when both film and watchers were exhausted was she willing to leave, and dawn was only moments away by then.

If Sherry hadn’t so longed to see her in a dominatrix jumpsuit, she might have left the set naked but for the scarves she wore.

Angelina jumped at the sound of the alarm. Her yelp was nothing compared to the sound she made when she saw what she was wearing.

Chapter Five

I'm going mad. There's no other explanation. Angelina longed to talk to Jim, but he'd been gone by the time she got out of the shower, and for all his kindness the night before, he was still mad at her. *Damn it, it's not fair! I didn't ask him to kiss me. Or to rescue me last night.*

I didn't ask for any of this. Her body was changing; she was sure of it now. Sensations might have been simply imagination, but there were physical differences, too. Her nipples were broader, darker, a blood-dark red against her pale skin. Her lips, too, and (she'd blushed when she checked) the second set of lips between her legs. Her breasts were fuller, not too much for her frame, but ripe curves begging to be touched. Even her hair -- it curled, now, below the swell of her ass, framing her body, twining around her limbs.

What happened to me last night? She couldn't remember anything after falling asleep in Jim's arms; like the night before, it seemed she'd slept without dreaming, waking at the alarm. But that outfit was nothing she'd ever seen before. It was ... kinky.

Men stared as though she wore it still, heavy corduroy failing to deflect the slightest tangible eye-stroke or caress. Even in the midst of panic, she enjoyed every single one.

Jim didn't look at her at all.

* * * * *

Jim stood in the back of the auditorium, staring across the sea of students. His eyes were blurred, but he had no trouble seeing Angelina. She looked lost, forlorn. Anger bled out of him, replaced by pity. He began to pick his way across the room. A yank at his collar pulled him up short.

“Hey, Jimmy boy! Think you can get your little girlfriend to give us a private show? Gotta say, I never dreamed she had that under those granny sacks!”

Jim pulled Bubba down into the nearest seat. “She’s not like that. Your friend poured half a keg down her throat. God only knows what could have happened to her.”

“She might have had some fun.” Bubba leered. “Seemed eager enough. And --”

“Shut it. Not another word.”

Bubba looked at Jim for a long minute before a smile spread across his face. “So, how was she? I heard you spent the night. Give.”

“You know, I really hate you sometimes. Nothing happened. I just figured I shouldn’t leave her alone in case you and that slimeball got any ideas.”

“Let me guess: slept on the couch?”

“Something like that.” Jim wasn’t about to tell Bubba any more than that. Especially not the glimpse he’d gotten of her nightwear the instant before she’d ducked into the bathroom.

Class passed without his hearing a single word.

Later that day, Bubba, grinning like a maniac, dragged Jim to a corner newsstand. “You gotta see this!” He pulled out a flimsy community periodical, the *Local Rag*.

Jim’s eyes narrowed; he wasn’t a fan. Somewhere between the *Star* and *Hustler*, though without the quality of either, the *Rag* was best known for having published photos of the

mayor's wife -- engaged in breaking the community decency statutes with a man not her husband.

"They put out an extra!" Bubba flipped a few pages, then handed the issue to Jim. "And check this."

Angelina? No, it wasn't. It couldn't be. This woman was older, and her eyes were grey, not Angelina's hazel. A pang of doubt assailed him. Her eyes were hazel, a changeable sort of color. He'd seen them grass-green, amber, even a sort of turquoise once or twice. Could they look grey sometimes?

The hair was wrong. Iron-straight, and almost knee-length. Angelina's fell only a breath past her hips, in gentle waves. But when had he last seen it loose? Couldn't it have grown?

Her breasts weren't gigantic, but they were certainly larger than Angelina's gentle swell. Not even a granny-dress could hide those melons from view. And he'd seen her nearly naked only the night before. This was not the same woman. What little text was on the page reinforced that; according to the *Rag*, the model was twenty-one.

Relieved, he let his eyes roam the photo. She was beautiful, so much like his Lina, but this woman wasn't completely innocent. Her expression told him that. She was open to the possibility.

It wasn't a truly knowing stare, though. There was something of confusion in it. Like the way he so often dreamed of his Angelina -- feeling things she'd never felt before, looking up at him and pleading for him to help, to teach her, to show her what to do to quell the yearning, and lie sated at last.

"You gonna buy that, son? This ain't a library." Bubba cackled along with the stand owner.

Jim flinched. He'd forgotten he wasn't alone, in his room, with no one to see his hand rubbing his crotch. He had a few dollars stuffed into a pocket; grabbing the wad, he tossed it

on the counter and turned away, trying to decide if holding the magazine in front of his erection was a good or a bad idea. He hurried home. College could wait.

He lit candles. The apartment wasn't much, but it was his, a place he could be alone. He'd planned to bring Angelina some day. Now, it was only a paper Angel -- he laughed when he found her name, in that same little bit of text that listed her favorite hobbies and plans. Not his Lina, and not real, but he lit the candles anyway. Laid the pictures on the bed, and undressed. And then he lost control.

Jim's breathing sounded loud in his ears; the smell of him, spunk and sweat and animal need, made him snarl. Animal response. Where was she? His eyes squinted away from the candlelight, peering into the dimness, seeking motion. None. But then he saw the bed, and the pages lying open there.

Growling, he fell on them. His cock rubbed against the cheap, gritty paper, thrust at it, trying to penetrate an opening that wasn't there. Hips pistoned, hands gripped the bedcovers, lips pulled back from teeth. It didn't take long; a few urgent thrusts, and his force tore through Angel's picture -- he spasmed, and spurted, hot jets of fluid torn from his body to soak the image through.

Tears rolled down his face, half sated, half sorrowful. Part of him felt he'd been unfaithful to Angelina.

His cock didn't soften at all. He showered, dressed, went out to buy another copy. Or three.

He wasn't alone. The next days saw unprecedented extra issues, and larger print runs. And any number of men began to walk with their legs bowed.

* * * * *

"Are you?"

Angelina shivered beneath a particularly raking glance, and looked up at Bubba. “Am I what?”

He pursed his lips, sucking them in and out. He looked like a fish. Ludicrous, but she couldn’t help but imagine that fishmouth on her body. *Down, girl!* She repeated her question.

“Damn, you can’t be. It’s gotta be a cousin or something. But,” he gasped, groaned, closed his eyes and shuddered. A stain grew at his crotch; she swallowed her own moan at a sudden heat blooming within. “Are you --” Imagined hands slid up her thighs and gripped tight; she felt a pressure at her crotch. “-- are you *her?*”

Students brushed past them as the bell for class rang. She saw Jim, frowning; it gave her strength. She pulled away from the touch, shaking with the effort. “I don’t know who *she* is, Bubba.” She took the first empty seat she saw, in the back of the auditorium. The necking going on didn’t bother her, for once; she was too busy calling herself the worst names she knew.

He wanted ... I felt ... and, oh, how I wanted it. Right there, everyone watching. Or joining in.

What have I become?

It had been another long day -- too many sensations, too much need, and nowhere near enough answers. She thought she could almost grow used to feeling stares, but phantom touches when there was no one near were harder to bear. Worse were the phantom feelings that were nothing like hands or mouths, and they were more common with every hour.

Angelina closed her eyes, trying to summon a dream. Something peaceful. The ocean drinking all the colors of a sunset, or a field slowly being drenched by rain.

It didn’t work. Her skin shivered with electricity; her hair crackled with every breath. The air smelled like storm and summer, ozone and heat and moisture. *Oh, God.* Smoothing

her hands down her thighs, she moaned at the sensation -- it felt like someone else's hands, pressing her legs open.

Opening. Unfurling.

The pulse between her thighs was a siren song, beckoning her touch. She ran her thumb up her slit, the hard chill of her nail delightfully unfamiliar, compelling. It made her shiver and shift her weight, spreading her legs wider and wider still.

She'd never been a gymnast, or done yoga, or anything like that, but rising tension prompted her to pull her knees up and out, to press her heels up until they brushed her labia, to arc her pelvis skyward. The posture felt completely natural, even comfortable. She waited for some celestial lover to plant angel kisses on her mound.

No angel appeared. Instead, her pulse slowed, strengthened, hammer-blows from inside shuddering through her. She thought of chicks and eggs, roots and earth, insects and cocoons. And images flashed through her mind, a waking dream.

A form shrouded in spider-silk, starlight shining through to reveal the fetal curl. A sinuous, languid twisting, stretching toward the light. The slow, balletic movements revealed first the figure's hands, long fingers straining through the fine veil, nails as pale and shining as the stars. Strands parted easily, sliding down the hands, the smooth, sculpted arms bare of any pore or imperfection.

She reached her arms toward the stars, and rose to her feet as though climbing a rope of light, shroud-silks around her feet like seafoam. Hair as silver-white as the fallen shroud cascaded to her ankles, framing her nudity. Total nudity -- she had not even body hair to mask her form from view. Her face was a perfect oval, tiny shadows beneath the cheekbones and a slight blush to her lips the only color to be seen; her eyes were the same silver-white as her hair.

And then she bent back, reaching for the floor behind her, her body a bridge, naked vulva her highest point, and a beam of starlight leapt from the heavens to enter the gate she offered. She felt a cold more profound than any heat, chill more palpable than flesh or stone, and yielded to its insistence to shatter into gleaming dust ...

And that dust became a body open to take the star-spear once more ...

And Angelina fell, screaming, onto the bed, uncertain whether what she'd felt was pleasure or pain, if the fluid pouring from her core would be clear or bright blood red.

She was asleep before she finished the thought. Waking the next morning, her second thought -- after wondering where the tube-top mini had come from -- was about that dream. It wasn't one she'd had before, so why had it felt so familiar?

* * * * *

Angelina sighed. She and Jim were sort of speaking, but it wasn't the same. He ditched half his classes, always running off someplace, and hadn't asked once about her dreams. She wished he would; she hadn't found the courage to bring it up, but thought she might feel less unbalanced, less lost if she could talk about it.

Jim was the only one who'd ever understood her dreams.

Days passed. She told herself she was sleepwalking, and began to lock her bedroom door. It didn't help. She woke with leaves in her hair once, decided sleep-climbing was more dangerous than the alternatives, and went back to her normal routine, as much as she could. Half her clothes were now unbearable, feeling like nettles on her skin. She felt physically most comfortable naked, or nearly so. But she couldn't go out in public that way. Her hair protested its daily confinement with an almost sentient fury, snaking free of its braids and bands and thongs to cascade like a waterfall over her body.

And always, there were stares she could feel.

* * * * *

Jim handed over his money eagerly, paying no attention to the stand owner's crass remarks or to the rustling of the men in line behind him. His mind was all on Angel. His Angel.

He rushed home, vaulted the stairs to his apartment, threw the latest issue of the *Local Rag* onto the bed like a woman he intended to ravish, and tore his clothes off. And then, his fingers gentle, he turned a page.

Her hand lay half an inch from a length of pipe. Easy enough, in his mind, to change that to his shaft, easily as thick and hard. His breathing was loud in his own ears. The toolbelt she wore hid little.

Her hand moved. Daydream, fantasy, hallucination, he couldn't have said, only that her hand moved. Traced up his leg, rested gentle as a whisper on his cock, moved away.

"No! No teasing, not today."

He glared at her, trying to stare her into submission. She smiled, her mouth -- *So like Lina's, but she's not; she's older, wiser, not innocent. Not real* -- curving with a knowing, approving lechery that seemed to egg him on. She rubbed his cock again, a careless caress, impersonal as if it had been a pipe.

"Please," he almost sobbed. "Be ... be nice." Lame, but his mind was fuzzy; he couldn't remember anymore why he thought this woman was better than his sweet, innocent Angelina, this sex-mad, hard-edged woman might be more accessible, but was that what he wanted? Really?

Some part of him thought he should close his eyes, make the apparition or fantasy or whatever vanish. His cock had other ideas.

He felt a hand on his cock, gently tracing up the shaft, teasingly pinching the head. A firm pressure over the slit as the stroke passed, just the way he liked it. Sliding, gliding, building heat.

Another hand squeezing his balls, lifting from below.

Now his eyes were closed, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. He could see her, Angel, with her leotard torn strategically, legwarmers and heels, amber eyes -- weren't they grey before? What did that matter? They weren't Angelina's hazel-gold-green; that was all he needed to know. He could feel her hands, milking his balls, encouraging his juice up the shaft.

The first spurt jetted free; he groaned. A second and third followed, just as strong, then a few gentler, softer, more satisfying pulses, and he fell back with a sigh, feeling his cock soften slightly in his grip.

His. He was alone, he knew, but for the torn pages by his side.

Angelina shivered at a sudden wash of heat. One among many, but this one thrilled her more.

* * * * *

Jim went for a walk. It was that or tear his cock off by the root. He throbbed after his Angel, every day, all day, but his heart still longed for Angelina. Guilt didn't diminish the lust.

The night was cool, the scent of storm still in the air, but clear skies twinkling with stars. A fitting setting for a meeting from a dream.

He saw a woman in the distance, white dress and pale skin gleaming, a shadow hugging her back -- her hair. Angel?

Angelina?

He couldn't tell.

Chapter Six

Angelina felt like crying, but she seemed to have forgotten how. *When I lost my dreams.* Too restless to write, or read, and hating the thought of sleep -- where would she go? What would she do? Why couldn't she remember? -- she decided to go for a walk. She found a pair of sandals that wouldn't be hurt by the rain she could smell coming, and set out.

Though she had no destination in mind, her feet pointed toward Jim's apartment. He'd said he was going to invite her there, but she hadn't seen it yet. Just another sign of the strain between them.

The rain came with a crack and a splash, soaking her to the skin. She managed a wan smile. *Mother Nature's tears?* It ceased as suddenly, and, sighing, she moved on. Reached Jim's apartment building, shook her head, went past. Stopped a block later, beset by a flash of determination.

It's time that boy and I have a talk.

"Angel-lina?"

"No, it's your Aunt Fanny. Hi, Jim."

One cloud must not have emptied with the rest; she was already wet, but he hadn't been. "Ah, come in and get dried off?"

She nodded.

He rushed around, muttering under his breath, to clean empty cans and newspapers out of the way. She wished she could smile, watching him, but it just seemed like so much effort. She was tired. The couch looked hard.

"I, ah ... Lina ..."

She shivered as he looked at her, feeling heat and chill at once. It felt like he was still mad, or uncomfortable, at least, even as he longed for her. That cold (*disapproving?* *disappointed?*) sensation was finally too much, and she sobbed.

And then his arms were around her, and he was shaking and whispering that it would be all right, and she thought it really might be.

He let her cry herself out, then announced she was going to catch cold if she didn't get out of her wet clothes right that instant.

"You, too," she said. He looked down at himself and nodded, and she took his hand. "Let's take a shower."

"T-together?"

"Just like when we were kids."

But we're not children anymore.

She glanced up from under her lashes to watch him strip, and sighed. Often as she'd seen him in cut-offs, running shirtless on the quad, this was different. He moved only a little, and that slowly, so she could see his lines. How had she never noticed how elegantly made he was? His arms didn't bulge with muscles, but they weren't scrawny, either, just gently widening at the bicep, curving in a bit at the elbow, firm and tight and flexing a little with

each movement as though begging to be stroked. His chest was broad, muscle the only padding between bone and skin, and his nipples poked up like tiny thorns. His abdomen was slightly ridged; she longed to touch it. And then he turned away to undo his pants, and she watched, wide-eyed, as he let them fall. He wore briefs, not boxers (she'd never thought to wonder, but now she knew); fabric stretched to contain his apple-round ass. His thighs were as lean as the rest of him; his calves rounder, bitable. She flushed at the thought. His feet were neat, toenails clipped. Altogether a pleasant sight.

His hands hesitated at the elastic of his briefs, pushed down. *Pleasant* was not the word. The man had dimples; a matched set of indentations just below the small of his back. Her breath squeaked out; she fell back onto the bed.

He turned, a look of concern on his face, and his erection pointed her way.

Oh. My.

His cock rose proud and eager from a nest of copper hair, pale on the shaft, ruddy at the base, rosy red at the tip. The flared head pulsed, almost winking at her. She licked her lips. His cock leaped, drawing symbols in the air.

She tore her gaze away long enough to smile at him. His cheeks were red, but he managed a grin in return. "I don't ... I mean, we don't have to ..."

"Come here."

She meant only to relax him, but her kiss did strange things to them both.

Jim pulled away to look at her, then moved slightly forward and slipped his fingers between her thighs. She let her legs fall open to give him greater access, but made no move to draw him near. His hand darted like a hummingbird, touching her and gone before she could react, until he finally held his breath and slid one finger along her slit.

Finding a warm and welcoming home, he slid his finger inside her, slowly, reverently. His lips curved into a beatific smile; she thought she might cry. It felt so good, warm and hard and right. And then he pulled back a bit and pushed forward again.

She couldn't help but clasp him tight.

"Is this okay?"

She nodded, loose strands of hair brushing overheated cheeks.

He pistoned his finger back and forth, then added a second, biting his lip as he eased the digits in.

She moaned. "Oh, please."

"Too much?"

"No. Not ..."

He cupped his hand around her mound, and his palm pressed against her clit. She had never felt so swollen, so tender, so sweetly aching before. And then he curled his fingers up, and her breath fled.

Oh.

Her hips arched up into his touch, but he pulled away. She whimpered, eyes she didn't remember having closed popping open in time to catch a glimpse of his face as he lowered his head to set his mouth where his hand had been.

Ooh.

His tongue circled her clit as delicately as a wisp of fog, then pulled away to lap her slit with long strokes. He alternated, using first the tip, then the flat of his tongue, drinking her passion and calling more with each sip.

And then he curled his tongue and plunged it to her core.

As her breathing slowed, he let her clit slip from his lips, began to withdraw his fingers. She grabbed for his wrist, keeping him there, clenching around his fingers. He laughed under his breath and climbed onto the bed, curling around her hip.

Sweeping the weight of her hair over his shoulder, he planted kisses at the nape of her neck. She murmured her pleasure, snuggling into his body, and then let out her breath in a kittenish sigh.

He recognized the sound -- she was asleep.

Again. Groaning, he wrestled with the thought of waking her. But no, there would be time. He wasn't going to be foolish enough to slink away again. Honor be damned; she'd made the first move this time.

Images of what he would teach her when she woke sent him smiling into sleep.

The sound of his door closing brought Jim fully awake. And suddenly, unreasonably, furious. His hard-on throbbed. Had she just used him? Was she going home to her so-precious dreams now that her itch had been scratched?

He thought of his paper Angel, and winced at a stab of guilt, then deflected it with jealousy. Who else might Angelina be playing with? He'd seen the looks, and the way she'd been at that party ... and the changes in her. She could be going toward some other lover. Taking what she'd learned from him, and using it somewhere else!

Rational thought rallied, but was lost in time. He got dressed and started to search the town.

He'd never noticed the sign on the warehouse, but now the *Local Rag* seemed like the perfect place to search. No matter who he found, he'd count it a success.

* * * * *

Angel looked at the setting, and one brow arched. Phil smiled into her eyes; she felt his excitement. Drank it in like wine. Her dress was loose. She shrugged like a dancer, and the thin cotton slipped down her body to puddle at her feet.

Stepping free, she stood in bra, panties, and sandals, posing almost insolently for a moment to let everyone look. Everyone did. Man and woman, gay and straight, they looked, running their gazes down her porcelain skin. She felt every gaze, tasted them, and laughed.

Sherry was waiting, her brushes and puffs and pillows readied, creams and paints and ointments selected. Hands shaking in her eagerness. No one said a word. Angel moved through air thick with desire, and every step was a work of performance art.

Some anonymous intern held out a scrap of lace. Barely tinged with pink, the panties were a marvel of innocence and seduction. Angel nodded her approval, and Sherry stepped in front of the intern to set her hands on Angel's hips and peel her panties down, sighing as she revealed the night-dark triangle, moaning as she tugged the pink high-cuts up Angel's legs and smoothed them into place.

The brassiere didn't deserve the name, demi-cups not so much covering her breasts as decorating them. White ankle-socks and high-heeled Mary Janes joined the ensemble, and then Sherry nodded to a chair, reaching for a hairbrush as soon as Angel sat.

The mirror showed a scene worthy of Phil's camera already. Sherry's multi-colored hair came out of several bottles, and the strands of reds and pinks and yellow-blond were a psychedelic swirl. Her rounded frame was so top-heavy, it seemed almost impossible she could wield the tools of her trade with any delicacy. Her small mouth was outlined in fire-engine red, but not painted at all, the natural pink looking vulnerable.

Next to Angel, she was almost a caricature, but at the same time, there was something earthy about her, something real. Angel's stark black-and-white coloring and sleek lines were cool beside Sherry's day-glo tones, her mouth the only touch of color, a red almost as deep as fresh-spilled blood.

Sherry's nipples were drawn tight as pebbles and trying to poke out of her halter; Angel's were long and slim and somehow almost threatening. Sharp.

She could feel onlookers yearning to cut themselves on those points. Yearning to do other things, as well.

Sherry finished painting, and Angel looked into the mirror again. She had to smile. The make-up artist hadn't done much, just given her an extra youthfulness, a slight naivety around the eyes, a shimmer on the lips. Nice. Reaching out, she traced Sherry's lower lip with one finger.

Sherry cried out as a sudden climax tore through her. Angel turned away. *Next?*

There were hungers aplenty, an embarrassment of riches. She tasted the longings and fantasies, and smiled. No need to choose; she could have them all. Or not. Perhaps a little frustration to add spice? An intern stood nearby. He had the rest of her costume ready, such as it was: a translucent cotton blouse and ultra-mini plaid skirt. She let him fasten her in, felt his hands clammy against her flesh, and decided not to do anything for him. He sobbed as she walked onto the set.

Making her way around the lights to the "stage," she drank in the admiration, the desire, the jealousy, the myriad yearnings. Phil was almost the strongest in the room, and his arousal was darker than she'd felt him before. She quivered excitedly. This would be fun.

Her co-star for the shoot was waiting. He was nervous, his hands fiddling with the manacles he held. He looked from her to Phil, uncertain, and cleared his throat. The sound was loud in the near silence.

"Music," Phil called, his voice harsh. Someone scurried off, and power cords throbbed. "So, Angel, we're going to do this slow and steady. He cuffs you, you struggle a little -- photogenically, natch -- and he gets you slung over that piece of furniture. What do you call it ... a lectern. And then he whips you, and you hate it, and you enjoy it. Clear?"

She shrugged assent, and held out her hands.

The music pounded like a pulse, and she moved in time with it, becoming Phil's vision of a half-scared, half-excited, just-nubile schoolgirl. The male model caught some of her

excitement, and his hands steadied. Phil called out instructions to him, knowing that Angel needed none.

The leather wrapped tight around her wrists, a caress she could not escape if she had wanted to. She tested them. Secure. Twisting away from the man for a moment, she raised her bonds to her face to stare wide-eyed at them, then direct a pleading gaze at Phil.

He chuckled, shutter clicking away, and told the model to grab her, to pull her -- slowly -- toward the polished oak stand. It was, of course, the perfect height and angle to support her stomach if she stretched her legs, but left her breasts to the mercies of whatever, or whomever, might choose to play. The base of the placard holder made a fine hook. Not for the first time, Angel admired Phil's attention to detail. And the heat of his focused attention, now directed just at the lowest curve of her ass as she stretched, the skirt's hem pulling up to reveal all.

Almost all. The scrap of blushing lace was hardly an impediment to view. She shifted, pretending difficulty in finding her balance, and spread her legs an inch wider. A cool breeze stirred the room as watchers inhaled simultaneously. It caressed her, mixing with the probing heat and phantom touches of all her admirers.

She wanted more.

Needed more. Wagging her ass as slowly as she could, she bowed her legs out, offering herself to the camera, to the viewers. She felt empty and filled and eager, yearning and inviting. Hungry, like she'd been offered only tidbits when a banquet was within view. Still, they were delicious nibbles.

Phil shifted his angle to shoot from the side; she felt the change in his gaze as he eyed her nipples, pulsing almost visibly through the two thin layers that veiled them. "The ruler," he rasped.

She longed to smile, made her mouth open wide in pretended fear.

The model was too gentle for the first few strokes, but Phil yelled at him to strike! Strike! The music changed to something harder, stronger, drum and bass insistent, guitar screaming like a lost soul, and Angel sneered up at him, and he struck.

She hissed out a scornful sound to make him do it again, and drank in the feelings, pain and pleasure and awe and fear and lust, tinged with shame and fire, that ran from her breasts to her core.

“More. More.”

He timed his strokes to the beat, lips pulled away from his teeth in a fierce smile, and struck first her right breast, then her left, all the way to the bridge, when Phil called out for him to move to her ass. “Take the skirt off her.”

He ripped it away, Phil cursing that it was too fast, and reached for a threatening black coil conveniently displayed. The whip uncurled with a sound like a snake. Angel moaned. The watchers were mostly seconds away from their second or third climaxes, and she felt each and every twitch. Some imagined themselves whipping her, and those strikes were almost as exquisite as the ruler had been, pain become pleasure become something beyond either. Some imagined themselves soothing her stripes, and the lips and tongues and soft hands they wished to run over her were perfect in their sweet attentions. Phil saw himself conquering her, the ultimate puppet master, directing the shoot and her body; she could feel his strings, stronger binding than the manacles, and as exciting.

The song changed, and the feel in the room. The lyrics were too appropriate for the moment. Those who wished to comfort her decided to watch as she earned that comfort; those who yearned to torment her imagined their blows falling just as the model drew back and sent the leather across the full of her ass-cheeks, and she reeled beneath the multitude of blows. Strained lace shredded, and each new strike sent the tatters fluttering, pale against her reddened, bucking flesh.

The concerted sensations were finally enough, and she thrashed as they fell again and again, forcing her ass-cheeks to yield, pressing her pelvis into the smooth wood, sending waves of red heat deep into her body, to meet the heat of her own desire and explode outward, only to crash into the pleasure/pain of the next strike.

Her body danced to Phil's tune, to the Survivor song playing, to the rhythm of massed desire.

Jim stood in the shadows. Angel. Lina. Both. He'd licked those perfect thighs only hours before, saw the tiny birthmark not quite hidden by a triangle of night-black hair. He knew. He tasted copper, realized he'd bitten through his lip. Swallowed, taste bitter as his heart.

Chapter Seven

Angelina stretched, smiling as she came out of sleep. She remembered Jim's hands, his mouth. *Incredible*. But where was he? She'd sort of hoped to have the chance to explore him as he had her.

A sudden, bone-deep chill made her lift her head from the pillow. Jim stood in the doorway, glaring at her as if she disgusted him. No, worse.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't even." He lifted her dress with his foot, kicked it toward her. "Get dressed. Get out."

"Jim, please. I don't understand. Last night ..."

He barked out a laugh that had nothing of amusement in it. "Really took my advice to heart, didn't you? If I didn't know better, I might even believe your act. Innocent little virgin girl. Oh, please."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you. *Angel*. Saw what you let those people do to you. Saw you enjoy it all. You left my bed, my arms, to go get painted and posed and whipped. How could you?"

"How ... what ...?"

He threw a rolled-up periodical at her.

She stared at it for a moment, frowning, then uncurled it, opening it at random. "Oh. Dear. God."

Jim scuffled his feet, uncertainty in a motion poem. She felt the confusion in his gaze as chill faded, returned, faded again, replaced by a tentative warmth. "Don't you remember?"

Her turn for the unlovely laugh. "Jim, I don't remember much of anything since my birthday. Not my dreams, if I dream, and not where I go while I'm asleep. Or what I do, or who I do it with." She sobbed.

"And I'm so scared!"

"Oh." He fidgeted in the doorway for another minute or two, but the sight of her shoulders shaking as she sobbed was too much; he climbed onto the bed to hold her, murmuring reassurances.

"What am I going to do?"

"We," he said. "What are *we* going to do?"

She turned her face up to look at him.

He kissed her, and her fears evaporated.

She would have pulled him down to lie with her, but he had other plans. "Get dressed. We'll go to the studio. Maybe it'll help you remember."

It was easier to walk down the street with Jim holding her hand. The glances still raked her form, but they were less enticing than his fingers twined in hers. She drew strength from him, not the way she did from men's desire, but simply as anyone might from the touch of a friend.

He's more than that. A love, then. Who else would stay, with what she'd become? Faithful Jim, who loved her. The thought was like a sunburst; she basked in it.

They reached the studio. A young woman with a clipboard lounged sleepily against the door. Jim and Angelina exchanged a worried glance, but they needn't have bothered. The instant the woman saw Angelina, she blushed and opened the door. Shrugging, the pair stepped through.

"Now what?"

"Do you remember this place?"

"No." She looked around. "Maybe. Through there, a small stage, a scaffold. Bright lights. Clicking."

Jim led the way. When he saw the layout, he nodded. "Tiger Eyes. You were here --" He motioned. "-- kind of crouching. Your hair was striped, and there was a sort of thong with a tail. Very, um, exotic."

The way he held his body told her what he meant, as did the increased heat she felt. She climbed up on the stage, let him move her limbs until she was in the pose he described. It felt right, but not particularly familiar; it could have been a scene from a dream.

His hands shook as he helped her up. "Maybe another room."

They toured half the studio, Jim holding back as much as he could, trying to restrain his lust in the face of her distress. Her own yearnings threatened to drown her, but the part of her that could still think was horrified that her sleeping self was so different from the person she was awake.

"Why would I do this? This just isn't me!"

Jim's laugh was slightly strangled. "Sure it is. Half your dreams are sex. Classier than this, but still sex. You just never admitted it."

"That's not true!" She stalked toward him, her hands curved into talons, but stopped a few feet away. Yes, a great many of her dreams were about people sharing each other, but there were all the dreams of being streams and storms and candles and comets shooting

through the heavens, of being a canvas as a painter created his masterpiece, thrilling to be marked by feathery brush and strong fingers and all the sticky shades of ecstasy. Each night, each dream, a new adventure. She was the pen, throbbing with potential, clasped tight in a poet's sweaty hand and pushed to glide across the page in exultant dips and swirls. She was stone, yielding to a sculptor's chisel. She was virgin bride and regal wife accepting her love ...

"Ooh."

She looked around the room, seeing it for what it was -- a stage set for teasing. What must it be like to torment men to such heights? And she remembered ...

... Heat brushed over her labia, the heat of gazes, a moister heat she decided must be imaginary kisses. Gentle ghost tongues traced her nipples, spiraled the peaks of her breasts, snaked down her stomach to probe her belly button, licked their way up her slit to her waiting, eager core.

Sharp fingertips pinched her nether lips, tugged them to make her twitch and moan. A single long, talented tongue traveled the length of her, finally plunged high and deep to measure her from within.

A weight, like the air before a storm, pressed down upon her. Someone had a strong fantasy presence! She reached, felt a crackling energy surround her fingers like ball lightning, heard a whispered moan. A mouth found her clit, lips pressing around the bud, soft vacuum tugging and a hint of teeth.

The pleasure was almost too much to bear, rolling over and through her body in waves and tides. A scream escaped her as juices poured down her thighs, shining on a chin for an instant -- but then the face faded away. Other tongues took its place, jostling with fingers for space at her mound. A mouth lapped at hers; she tasted herself and cried.

Phil hissed curses and compliments, and the shutter snapped softly beneath it all.

Jim watched as she sank gracefully to the floor, her eyes unfocused as she looked at things he couldn't even imagine. She sighed, smiling, and his hands clenched into fists as he

wondered who had put that sated expression on her face. But then she blinked, and looked up at him, and her eyes were a green-lit gold as she reached for him.

“Lina,” he sighed, “maybe ...” But honorable intentions can only go so far; when she offered her lips to him, he knelt so fast his knees nearly dented the floor. “Angel ...”

She didn't care what he called her, only that his eyes and his hands and his mouth were hot enough to burn fear and uncertainty away, and she was tired of being afraid. His kiss made her feel safe, and cherished, and *known*.

And when his hands touched her, they touched *her*. Not some fantasy figure created solely for sex, not even a dream image of an ideal beloved, but her. His caress was a flame that burned without pain, cleaning, purifying.

She tried to show her appreciation in her kiss. The taste of him drew her nearer; she longed to swallow him whole. Scratchy clothing met her fingers, and she tried to tear through it.

He laughed into her mouth and broke away long enough to pull his T-shirt over his head, and was back kissing her almost before she had time to feel bereft. She stroked her hands over the broad planes of his shoulders, luxuriating in hairless, smooth, sunwarm skin and resilient muscle, testing the flesh with her nails. And then she let her hands trail down to find his tiny taut nipples, and trace and tease and tug.

A half-remembered impulse made her rise to her knees, press her breasts to him, and twist. They both gasped at the sensation.

Jim thought he might have been dreaming; the place was unfamiliar, but the scene was one he knew well: his Angelina looking up at him with a question in her eyes, and the answer beginning to form. His Lina with trembling hands, putting them on his body with no clothing to hide her touch. His Angel.

He traced her lips with the very tip of his tongue, something he'd wanted to do from the moment he had any interest in the opposite sex. She opened softly for him. Though he longed to accept the invitation, the need to see her was stronger; he pulled back to drink in her expression. What he saw thrilled him; it was his dream made real.

Real. The floor was hard beneath them, and the overhead lights sharp and bright, casting flattened shadows of props and equipment and him and her. Real.

Angelina knew the smile that spread across his face, the one that changed him from the boy she'd been friends with forever to the man who made her melt. And she knew, now, what that feeling meant. It was a lovely smile, worthy of admiration, but she had more urgent needs -- she reached for him, pulled him to her, and lay back, taking him with her, his weight heavy and welcome on her breasts, her stomach, her mound.

The posture reminded Jim of one of the pictures; almost unwillingly, he reached for her hand, tugged on her arm. Arranged her as she -- as Angel -- had been posed.

She let him move her, less concerned now than he with re-creations, but thrilling to the feel of his body shifting atop hers. Fear had not vanished, but *this is Jim. Who loves me.*

He adjusted the position of her arm, stretched imploringly above her head, fingers curled just so. And his shiver ran through her, as well, as he looked down at his fantasy woman lying truly there for him.

I know this! This moment, this feeling, this pause at the gates. Promise and potential and passion held tightly in check -- *Why? What is he waiting for?* Angelina opened her mouth to ask.

Jim blinked, and shook his head, and she felt his intent to pull away before he could move -- the tightening of his muscles, perhaps, or a sudden chill in the air. She wrapped herself around him, tugged at his hips, and it was too late to retreat.

He groaned as he felt silky curls give way to satin flesh, eagerly opening heat and moisture and a passage almost too tight for him. "Angel-lina. Love."

She could not speak, feeling herself impaled and reformed. The pain surprised her, an almost impossible stretching become suddenly a sharp ache. She tried to hold still, could not, and her twitches and shrugs bled the sharpness away to a dull discomfort, soothed with each breath, vanished when he pulled away.

“Lina? Are you -- were you ...?”

Emptiness was no better than the aching; she frowned and pulled him to her again. This time the discomfort passed quickly, replaced by a gentler heat and a pressure that answered a need she had never expressed. She raised her hips, urging him deeper within her, and he fought her only for a heartbeat before sinking himself to the root.

“S-sorry,” he whispered. She silenced him with a kiss, drawing his tongue into her mouth, feeling full and complete for the first time in her life. Sucking and squeezing to the same rhythm, she kept him trapped for long moments before releasing him.

All reluctance vanished; he pulled only partially free before plunging into her again. And again, his hands on her waist for purchase. She laughed and urged him on until his first furious thrusting settled to a maintainable pulse, then rolled them both over so suddenly he yelped.

Atop him, surrounding him, she shook out her hair and let it fall, unfettered, to cover them both. And then she began to move, up and down, and her hair swished over his skin with each lift and fall.

His ultimate fantasy. His Angelina, so eager for him that she took the lead.

He felt her climax beginning, and the tiny internal motions spurred him to his own. His eyes rolled back in his head; he thought he could hear colors, all the darker shades of the rainbow sleeting over him -- or was that just the fall of her hair? Were the choirs at his cock simply her butterfly flickers, the quick flutterings and flexings that caressed him as they carried her toward that place she felt most truly herself -- that, this time, finally, carried her and him all the way there ...

Chapter Eight

Openwork struts, the bones of the building bent in elegant arches to a vaulted ceiling set in rose-colored stained glass. Stepping gently through the door into warmth and welcome, Angelina -- Angel? -- *she* sighed softly. She knew this place.

Home.

Perhaps she spoke the word aloud, or Jim could hear her thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“This place. It’s the beginning of all my dreams, the place I come to when I sleep. Or did, until my birthday. This is where I belong.”

“Truly spoken,” said a voice from the skies. “Welcome, daughter of mine.”

If Jim hadn’t been there, she’d have fallen, her knees gone weak.

A beam of light pierced the glass, poured into the doorway, swirled into a fury of air. The whirlwind coalesced into a human -- no, a humanoid form. Too tall, too sculptured to be merely human, all grace and masculine beauty from the way his feet caressed the ground to the curl of rainbow-dark hair around his ... pointed ears?

An elf. My father is an elf.

“I am not,” he said, and his voice rumbled like distant thunder. “I do not make cookies.” He frowned, and his face shifted, growing wider, darker, the eyes shadowed beneath a strong brow. An older man, brimming with vitality and something she had only encountered in her dreams: not quite heat, nor light, but a strength she could feel. An aura? Presence. “You liked this image, no?”

“No!” She held up a hand to forestall his objections. “Yes, I liked it. Please don’t look like that. *Dad.*”

Jim made an inquiring sound.

“A dream. One of the ones I didn’t tell you about.”

“How many of those have there been?”

“Ah, well ...”

“My daughter is a credit to her kind,” her father purred.

“So, what kind of a dream was it?”

She blushed. “Ah ...”

Her father cut in smoothly. “Sexual, of course. That is our calling.”

Jim frowned. “Sex? And dreams. So you’re, what, an incubus?”

The building shook with laughter. “*Very* good, mortal man. Boy? No, man, I see.”

“Hello? Excuse me. Incubuses, incubi, whatever. Aren’t they myths? Just wet dreams?”

“Yes. And no. After all, if my kind were truly imaginary, you, daughter of mine, could not exist. Or would you prefer to believe in immaculate conception?”

Angelina had always known that Jim was smarter than the world thought him. His interests were just a little odd. But that grounding in sci-fi and fantasy served them both well. While she was trying to digest the thought that her mother had been impregnated not only *in* but *by* a dream, he questioned her father about what was happening to her.

“Eighteen. Adulthood, right? So what happens now?”

“She makes her choice.”

“What choice?”

“Whether to embrace her heritage.”

“And what would that entail?”

Her father turned to her, face shifting again into something sculpted long before she was born, all cliff-sharp jaw and cheekbones like jutting stones and a nose like a ski-jump for Lilliputians. It should have seemed forbidding; she longed to stroke each angle. “Here. See.” He held out his hand, a match to that stone face; she took it, and fell into his memory, his world, his dream ...

She was human. Strange, how easy it was to tell that -- and how different it was from her own identity. Had she ever been truly human herself? But this form whose dream her father had entered was truly human, mortal, not virgin yet more innocent than Angelina had ever been.

Poor thing. Had she ever experienced pure pleasure?

Shadows veiled the room, making the familiar alien. In this night, monsters might lie in wait in closets, under the bed. And something kneeled by her feet, waiting, but it was no monster. Not in the unusual sense.

Perfectly still, not even breathing, it waited for her to become aware of it, for tension to draw her body tight. The mortal form held her breath, listening with all her strength, but heard nothing over the pounding of her own heart. Was it fear that made it race so? Yes, and no. Not fear of her life, but the thrill of uncertainty made her blood rush through her veins.

As still silence stretched, she became, if not calmer, than less inclined to shriek. Perhaps this was a dream. Anything might happen in dreams, and no part of it would spill over into the waking world.

Angelina smiled at the thought, the conviction; she herself was not so sure. No matter. It was true enough for now.

She breathed a sigh, half acceptance and half frustration that whatever was going to happen hadn't yet begun, and her next inhalation brought her the scent of brandy and wood smoke. It seemed intensely male.

She shivered; one foot kicked out, encountering nothing.

The shadow moved. It was not human in form, more a pillar of greater darkness than anything. It did not bend, but somehow the distance between her and it was less. And then it lowered in height, like a man kneeling to her level.

Her heart skipped a beat. What was it going to do?

The bedclothes moved, lifted by some invisible hand.

"Oh ..."

Angelina licked her lips as she felt the mortal's struggle: to accept, to scream, to thrash and wake herself -- but what if she wasn't dreaming? What if she struggled and could not escape? -- to admit to herself how much she wanted whatever this was to go on forever. And then the decision. Stay asleep. It's only a dream ...

She felt a hand, strong and slim and spidery, cool but not unpleasant, not unwelcome. Soft and strong and gentle, it circled her ankle, slid up her calf, tugged her leg slightly to the side. She let her legs part.

It was tempting to move, but she stayed still with an effort. If she did not react, it was not, could not be, real. A swift kiss at the back of her knee made her jump, but she set her body as it had been. Another butterfly bussing at her inner thigh, a tender nibble. She could predict where he would touch next, gave up the fight for calm, and began to beg, couching her pleas in terms that could be mistaken for sleeptalking.

If she'd been dreaming about sex, at least.

His tongue swiped the length of her thigh, from knee to a single hairsbreadth from where she needed it to be. She moaned, heard a sound like a fire laughing, shook. His tongue was cool; why, then, did she think she might burn?

Angelina sighed in appreciation; he was playing the mortal's body and mind at once.

A strange sensation, like dust blowing across her skin, and then fingers pressing into the meat of her thighs. Not enough to hurt, the firm grasp tugged her thighs wide, and then thumbs moved to part the pulsing, secret lips. Hot breath blew up, fanning the fire inside her.

She lifted her crotch to him.

Nothing.

"Please!"

The scent of brandy cut through the smoke. His mouth descended, that impossibly long tongue thrusting inside her all at once. Her breath rushed out of her on a squeak. He drank of her like a hummingbird, too fast for a merely human mind to comprehend -- she knew only that she was parted like a flower in the darkness, filled and being emptied and refilling, and that this was what she had yearned for all her life.

He paid no particular attention to her clit, all his attention on her center, but his thrusts rubbed his nose against her nub, pressed it into her pubic bone, and his tongue flicked her G-spot as often as any other spot, and small pulses of ecstasy bloomed. The only sounds were hers, harsh breathing and moans and the slippery sounds of her sex. But for the feelings, she might have been alone.

He pulled that incredible tongue out to suck her labia into his mouth. His tongue teased her clit at last, tugging it, flicking it from side to side, and she shrieked loudly enough that, had she been dreaming, she'd certainly have awoken. And then there was a parting lick, and the shadow paled into the surrounding darkness.

She curled around a pillow, breathing hard, and wondering.

Angelina blinked, half sorrowing to feel herself again, half sorrowed on that woman's behalf. *Strange, to have been so close and not even know her name. She could be anyone.*

"Poor thing."

"There is no need for pity. She dreamed well. That is what we do."

Angelina frowned at her father. "She'll be miserable. You gave her a dream she can never equal."

"I gave her *her* dream. She'd always wondered, that one, what a really good orgasm felt like. So I showed her."

"And she'll spend the rest of her life searching for a man with a prehensile tongue. This is a good thing?"

"At least she knows what all the fuss is about." His smile left no doubt that he knew she'd wondered that, once. Before. "We give them hope, in our own way, and take nothing they aren't eager to give."

"You give them false hope. No human man could equal what you did to her."

"Thank you." He smiled.

She could think of no reply to that. Jim took over the questioning again, and she tried to catch her breath -- metaphorically, at least. Her body felt as strong and vital as it ever had in her dreams, or when Angel drank desire and excitement from watching men. There was something she was missing ...

"Lina. That dream, with the older man. Tell me."

"Just a dream. He was a widow, in love with a girl young enough to be his daughter. I didn't want to talk about it -- I know how that stuff sounds -- but it was really beautiful. She loved him, too, and he taught her ... everything. She had no idea how her body could feel, but then he kissed her, and it was like the whole world stopped to let them enjoy what they became.

“Words. I could show you, I think?” She looked to her father, who nodded.

Jim shook his head. “I don’t need to see it.” Turning to the incubus, he said, “You’re a damned sphinx.”

Rumbling laughter again, which shook the ground beneath their feet.

“Ah, a clue, please,” Angelina said. “Sphinx? What do you mean?” She saw Jim open his mouth, but her father held up a hand.

“No.” It was night, starless, moonless, dark as the inside of the grave. She was sure she hadn’t even blinked. “This is your journey, not his. Ask, daughter of mine.”

Ask what? “If I ‘embrace my heritage,’ what then? Will it be like my dreams were before, or like what I’ve -- what Angel -- like the past few weeks?”

“Both. Neither. Dream, and conceive.”

That wasn’t a word to thrill a teenage girl. She tried again. “What is the difference between the way I am right now, back there in the world, and the way I would be if I chose what you offer?”

“The way you are right now is ephemeral. Even more than mortality. A choice must be made.”

Jim hugged her, in the darkness, and she felt his body straining. Strange feeling; part of him yearned to be as they were in the world, him thrusting, wrapped and enraptured, in her; part of him longed to be free of some bond ... she tried to trace what held him, felt or sensed or intuited something like a gag, and pulled it away.

He gasped, but murmured in her ear even before his breathing eased, “In the dreams you talk about, you’re loved. I’ll bet it’s the same with the others. One partner, or maybe a group, but you’re loved -- it’s not just sex.”

She nodded.

“That’s the difference. That’s the choice. Mortals love.”

“Very good,” the incubus said.

Jim shrugged as the air brightened. "It's not much of a riddle, you know."

"So, then, is love your choice, daughter of mine?"

"Lina," she said, and smiled at Jim. "I think --"

"No." Jim tugged her hair, sharp enough to turn her words into a squeal. "Don't answer yet. Can she ... I don't know, get a trial run? Not your experiences, but hers. So she'd know what it was like, firsthand? What *she* would be like?"

Her father smiled, gleaming sharp teeth denting his lower lip. And then he pursed his lips, and blew up a small breeze. She smelled brine ...

The ocean breeze stirred sand around her feet, teased the hair from her face, tickled her ribs and the undercurve of her breasts. She stepped toward the ever-changing line where sea met shore.

Greens and greys and blues beyond names lay before her. She walked until the waves lapped at her toes, smiling at the soft susurrations as the sand reclaimed her footsteps.

A shadow rose on the horizon, cloud-shape growing and floating over the water toward the land. Waves stilled in its wake, and calm spread, until finally the ocean was glass, and the cloud touched down on two bare feet, taking human form as it strode near.

Human form, but not human substance -- his edges blurred as he moved. Skin the color of the waters gleamed. As he came close enough to touch, she looked up at the great height of him, seven feet and more, and felt the first stirrings of fear.

And then she looked halfway down his body, and fear vanished utterly.

His staff was such as Poseidon might envy, rising proud from a nest of seafoam, with a head so gracefully flared it seemed a wave frozen at its crest.

He reached out a hand to her, and she saw he had only three fingers. It seemed no deformity, but rather the proper shape for one such as he. His grip was tender, cool, moist but not clammy. He pulled her close, and she went willingly.

She had expected simply to be lifted onto him, but when he raised her up, it was to look deep into her eyes. His own were the color of deepest ocean, midnight blue or black or something darker still, with a strangely familiar phosphorescence shining though. She heard his invitation, not in words, but in something much like whalesong.

“No,” she sighed. “I cannot. But for a while.”

He smiled like a shark, and his gaze changed, green fire flickering in the depths of his eyes. She felt like an island adrift in currents, pulled toward the sea. The ground melted beneath their feet, then -- they sank beneath the waves, and then they were someplace else. On a fogbank, perhaps, or lying on a cloud; someplace soft and cool and smelling strongly of salt, and him.

He laid her back against whatever it was, shifted his hands to cup her breasts -- and she gasped. His palms were cups, like an octopus's, to hold and suck, not just her nipples, but nearly the full of her globes. She arched up toward the odd caress, and he set his mouth to hers.

He tasted faintly of the freshest sort of fish, salt-sweet. His tongue darted and dove like a fish in a reef, teasing her tongue and teeth, tracing the insides of her cheeks and her gums. It was, she thought blearily, less like being kissed than being explored, as though he were some sort of adventurer.

Perhaps he was.

That thought brought tears to her eyes, tears he broke off his kiss to lick away. Salt? He flicked seawater from his hair, touched her cheek with his own. Salt?

“Tears,” she said, then shrugged, not having the words to explain, and pulled his mouth down to hers again. His hands never left her breasts.

The fogbed held her, growing warm as her body heat bled into it. His legs pressed down on hers -- she felt the pressure, and a strange lack of boundaries, as though he had one broad leg, not two. No matter; gently insistent weight pressed between her knees, parting

her, encouraging her to open her thighs. She let her hands slip from the tangled mass of his sea-wrack hair to the broad sloping shoulders, down the sleek line of his back. Reaching a swell where his buttocks should have been, she tugged. The ivory length of his shaft butted up against her mound.

He pulled back to look at her again; she met the sea-dark eyes and tried to show all her feelings in her gaze. He laughed, the sound like the waves lapping a distant shore, and his body leapt -- like a dolphin playing, he teased her. Nuzzled his cock at her lips, rubbed his leg -- trunk? tail? -- along her thighs, flexed his hands to increase the suction at her breasts.

“Please.”

She clawed at his torso, reaching, searching for his cock, and, finding it, she wrapped both hands around it. There was room on the column to spare. A word floated through her mind and was gone: narwhal. It meant nothing to her beyond the impression of something rare and wonderful. And horned. Her fingertips barely met around his “horn.” He gave in to her tugging and shifted, setting the glorious crest of his cock at her entrance.

And then he pushed in, and she felt herself a teacup trying to hold an ocean.

There was no pain, only a stretching like water shaping stone, and a filling that left no least part of her emptied, and then a rhythmic flexing pounding like the tides. He lay full against her, his weight on his hands, and his mouth had become another suction cup, tugging her tongue in the same inevitable pulse with which he plumbed her depths. She arched into the strange caresses, urging him on, even as she melted into waves of her own climax.

He shook violently, his cries sounding like seagulls, and poured into her -- all of him, melting into froth. The new filling sent her rising on a new wave of sensation, which rose without cresting longer than any human form could bear, and crashed in a riptide that tore everything, body, mind, and dream, away.

She blinked. “Wow.”

“You see?” the incubus spread his hands, three-fingered now.

Angelina gnawed the inside of her cheek, trying hard to think. What her father offered ... but then, there was Jim. And her mother, of course.

And poetry. Dreams ...

“Do your kind grow? Learn, change?”

Angelina leaned gratefully into Jim. There was her answer. In her dreams, she -- whoever she was -- grew. Grew up, grew wiser, grew into love. She didn't want to give that up.

Her father shook his head, completely human in appearance now, and kind, a comforting sort of presence, though still impossibly tall. “I know.” He smiled, and dwindled to a human height to give his daughter a kiss. “It is ... a good choice. Live well, daughter of my love.”

And then he was gone. And ecstasy washed over Jim and Angelina as their bodies finally reached the peak of their joint pleasure, and they fell back into the waking world ...

The instant they were returned to their bodies, Jim's exploded into orgasm so violently that he banged his elbow on the floor near her head. As soon as he could see past the pain, he disengaged from her.

“Hmm?”

“Ah,” he would not look at her, “we should get out of here. In case someone heard us.”

Angelina rose in a catlike twist, reaching a hand to help him up. “Let's go, then.”

He heard the smile in her tone, but did not ask her to share the joke.

They walked back to his place in silence, hands twined together. But as soon as they crossed the threshold, he pulled away, muttering something about needing a drink. She looked around the small apartment -- not quite what she'd expected; neat, clean, furnished -- listened to the clattering for a minute, then followed him into his tiny kitchen.

“Jim. It’s been an incredibly long couple of weeks. Especially the last time you weren’t talking to me. Give.”

He mumbled something; all she caught was “... short again.” It made no sense to her, and she said so. He sighed, and looked up finally.

Have his eyes always been that bright?

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” She pulled herself up onto the counter so they’d be face to face. “What for?”

“I ...” He laughed, a strangled sort of sound. “A lot, I guess. I’m not sure where to start. If I’d known -- and I should have. Or, guessed, at least. I mean, all you did in your sleep was pose for pictures. But I was just so angry, and then we ... and it never even occurred to me. You have to believe me, Lina, if I’d been thinking, I never would have ... on a floor, like animals. Tell me you’ll let me, I don’t know, make it up to you? Try, at least?”

“Jim, you’re an idiot.” He tried to look away; she grabbed his face with both hands and held it turned toward hers. “Very smart, but still an idiot. Did I look like I was complaining? Did it feel like it?” She could feel a slight heat in her cheeks, and a small part of her mind was amused that, after everything, she could be embarrassed about such a small thing as having to talk about an encounter for which they’d both been present, and equally enthusiastic. “Half the people we know had their first, ah, engagement in the back seat of a car, or in a bathroom stall. So what? What matters is with who, not where. And whether it’s right or not.” She paused. “This was. Is. Us. Okay?”

“Whom. It’s with whom.” His grin faded into a solemn, measuring look. “But I still wish it had been more romantic. After all the thought I put into it.” He sighed and shook his head, almost pouting.

“You thought about us?” Her cheeks were hotter. *Stop that. The time for the blushing virgin bit has definitely passed.*

“Why do you think I got an apartment? It’s not like it’s closer to campus or anything.”

“I thought you were just tired of your brothers.” She shrugged. Actually, she’d never thought about it all.

“I was. But I couldn’t imagine being with you in the back of a car, or behind the soccer fields. Or in a stall -- and who did that? No, never mind. The point is, you deserved better than that. You do.” His eyes glowed as he looked at her, and she wondered how she’d ever not known how he felt about her.

And then he smiled that smile again, and she couldn’t have said if she reached for him or he for her.

“Not here.”

“Hmm?”

“Not in the kitchen, okay? I want to do this right. A bath, candles, roses ...”

“You.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes, you are. Idiot.” She smiled. “Come here.”

“No.”

“What?”

Jim laughed. “No.”

“Don’t make me chase you.”

“Why not? I’ve been after you for long enough.”

“And that’s why you’re an idiot. I’m finally here, and you’re telling me no, because you don’t have flowers or candles or whatever you think you need.”

“You’re right. I am an idiot.” He scooped her up, laughter rumbling in his chest, and carried her off to his room. “You don’t mind a bed, do you?”

Her kiss was all the answer he needed.

He laid her down on his bed and pulled away to stand to the side, looking down at her face. "Close your eyes," he said, not quite a request, not a demand.

She blinked at him, then let her eyes close, concentrating on the feel of the air moving softly through the room. She could feel him, still, not the same way as before ... whatever ... but his love as a weight that lay gently on her, anchoring her to the world. And his desire, a separate yet intertwined sensation.

She smiled, and drank in the feeling as he looked. And the silence -- all the random phantom touches and heats were gone.

Now there was only Jim.

He leaned forward, inhaling deeply, then blew a soft, cool stream of air over her lips. She shivered, and gasped. "Don't move," he said. Her tongue-tip darted out, back.

She stilled.

"You're human. Now. Mortal. Now. So this really is your first time. Let me ..." He trailed off, using his breath to tease her, so much cooler than tangible stares had been, so much more welcome. His. No part of him touched her for what seemed like eons, only his breath and his feelings.

"Why?" she gasped once, half surprised her voice worked at all.

"Your dreams," he answered. "All the streams and flames and light. I always wanted to be those for you." And then his voice cracked, like any nervous young man's might. "Is it okay?"

She opened her eyes, greener than he remembered, but her eyes did sometimes seem to change. "As long as it's not all you're going to do, it's more than okay. Just ... wake me when you get to the good stuff."

"Why, you!"

She'd always been ticklish. For a few minutes, he had the upper hand, but then one of hers found his cock, and he discovered he wasn't interested in winning anymore. When she

pulled on him, gently, he went more than willingly where she led. And shivered as he felt the slick heat, liquid flame that seared so wonderfully, he cried.

She licked his tears away. And then he entered her, in a single slow stroke that seemed to go on forever.

It was better than her dreams. It was Jim.

They romped, children exploring and playing together. They teased and stroked, nibbled and scratched like animals. They learned, and used that learning to please each other more. Time passed; they knew, but did not care.

She could feel his pulse in the throbbing of his cock within her, fast and strong and steady and delightful. His body tensed, and she rose, pulling away.

He hissed out his breath, and his intense green eyes stared at her, questioning. She smiled down at him, shaking her head, enjoying his shiver as her hair tickled him. His hands gripped her hips almost hard enough to bruise, but he didn't try to pull her down, just held on. She waited for his nod; when she descended, he shivered, but remained perfectly still. Her hips moved, restless movements as though she were trying to pull him even higher, deeper; she stilled herself, as well, until nothing but breath moved either of them.

Even their breathing was in unison, and they looked at one another as though matching green gazes could sustain them forevermore, with no need for food or drink or ever to disengage.

"Ow." Jim shifted, and Angelina squeaked as his movements briefly pinched sensitive flesh. "Sorry. Cramp." He lifted her, forearms bulging with the effort, and set her aside. She lay back, and he followed, rolling atop her to enter her again.

The new position gave him greater control, which he used much as she had, to tease and stop and start until she was desperate for release. And then to take his own pleasure in time with hers.

He collapsed atop her at last, small jitters and shudders testament to his release. “Okay?”

“More than okay,” she sighed, and tightened muscles where he rested still inside her. “Again?”

His face was conveniently placed; he turned to take her nipple between his lips.

She arched into his caresses, raking her fingers through his hair, giggling as she flung sweat from her hands. He set his teeth to his mouthful, teasing warning, but she could feel amusement shake him, too. “Shower?”

“After,” he growled, and moved his hips. She gasped agreement or encouragement or both at once.

The next pause was longer, both of them panting like they’d run a race, but still they did not disengage. She was so sensitive, she thought she could have counted each of the springy hairs that nuzzled near her clit, but not sore, nor fully sated yet. And he was as hard as if he hadn’t ejaculated yet even once.

She licked at his chest with swift lapping motions, a kitten after milk. All the salty breadth of him from collarbone to collarbone she laved, then slid down to tease his nipples, drawing moist spirals that drew near only to slide away. The tight nubs contracted even further, tiny tight thorns piercing the air.

“Shower. Water. Food. Priest.”

“Priest?”

“Last rites,” he explained, and frowned as he saw her expression ease. A moment’s thought and years of friendship told him what she needed to hear: “Hey, Lina, you didn’t

really think I meant exorcism or something, did you? 'Cause I gotta say, any church says I can't do with you what we've been doing, I don't want to deal with anyway.

"I just kind of thought we'd be doing this for years, instead of one marathon session that's going to kill us both."

"You're not dead yet ..."

They rested together after that, by choice rather than necessity, a fact that had Jim muttering about pixie dust.

"Maybe it's a going-away present from Dad, so we'll always remember what we gave up."

"What *you* gave up, you mean."

Angelina just shrugged. "Whatever."

"Do you regret it? Your choice?"

"No-o-o," she said, and snuggled deeper into his embrace. "I don't, really, but I do wish I could have shared that last dream. I think he was a merman. It was incredible!"

"Thank you," Jim whispered, and his eyes glowed in the darkness. He stole her lips in a kiss.

And then to sleep. And dream.

Epilogue

Phil's shutter clicked and clattered like gossips chattering; he was silent, as his model needed no direction from him.

Green eyes stared at him, challenging; they would stare out from the page the same way, daring any man to measure himself against the pleasure she had found. She moved from pose to pose like a seasoned pro, or a predator stalking prey, slow and deliberate. "That's it," he sighed at last. "Ten minutes."

Technicians scurried about, setting up the next scene. Angelina smiled up at her partner for the scene. "You're sure about this?"

"If you can do it, so can I. Besides, better me than anyone else."

"Jealous, love?" She laughed, reaching up to pull Jim's face down to hers for a lingering kiss. "You know you're the only man for me."

He smiled, a bit like a predator himself, proud and masculine. Phil's breath caught as he snapped the picture, a candid shot of the two hottest models in the adult biz. Their eyes gleamed the same hot, passionate green, an almost phosphorescent shade. He knew, even before developing, he'd use that picture. They were almost inhuman in their perfection, and they went together so well it made him ache.

But that would be an inside page. Angel was the centerfold.

 THE END 

Pearl Jones

Pearl Jones writes erotica, erotic romance, horror, and fantasy, some of which may possibly be based in part on personal experience -- but she's not inclined either to confirm or deny. She has been known to claim she'll try almost anything at least once, if promised caffeine, chocolate, and/or designer shoes. Silk is always good, too.

At present, she may be chained to a keyboard and typing madly away. Or she could be chained elsewhere. One never knows. The sad truth is, she's probably feeding a refrigerator on feet sometimes referred to as a cat. But writers are known for their rich fantasy lives, so let's go with artisan-crafted silver chains and a handsome alpha to crack the whip...metaphorically, at least.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Rebel Angels 2: Echoes and Embers

by Cyndi Friberg

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Rebel Angels 2: Echoes and Embers

Darkness embraced Sariel more snugly than his ermine-trimmed mantle. Alyssa strode along beside him, her back straight, her head held high. She hadn't spoken since they crossed the river. He wasn't sure what Lailah had told her; no doubt some dire warning. Alyssa refused to meet his gaze and avoided even the most casual touch.

She licked her lips. He drew in a slow, deep breath, expecting the acrid scent of fear. Faint, alluring, unmistakable, the musk of desire filled his nose. Shock slammed through him. She was aroused by him? Startled, yet intrigued, he reached out and scanned her thoughts.

Chaotic. Jumbled. Swirling images he didn't understand combined with a vivid representation of his half-naked body. He grinned. The little spitfire was fantasizing about him. Her imagination rapidly worked to divest him of his clothing. Her hands caressed his naked flesh, squeezed his shoulders, traced the distinct ridged dissecting his abdomen. Her image reached for the lacings on his hose and his shaft bucked in eager agreement.

“It would benefit you greatly to think of something else.”

Her laughter sounded forced and strangled. “What do you believe occupies my thoughts?”

He stepped into the path in front of her and turned around. She collided with his chest, then scrambled back a step. “You were picturing me unclothed, wondering what it would feel like to touch me, to have my hands caressing you as I --”

“Enough,” she said sharply, placing her palm on the middle of his chest. “If I were ... I apologize for ... having impure thoughts about you.”

He didn't move. The warmth of her hand seeped through his mantle, stirring fantasies of his own. He pictured her sinking to her knees, completing the task she'd begun in her mind, and taking his turgid shaft into her warm, wet mouth. Trembling with the need to make the image real, he stared at her. *Aching*.

Cyndi Friberg

“How are you able to see into my mind?” Her question interrupted the unwanted stimulation.

“It is always within my power, but -- impure thoughts are more readily available to me than any others.”

“How inconvenient.” She moved her hand and put more space between them.

He laughed. “I’ve been celibate for the past three millennia. It’s a bit more than inconvenient.”

Her eyes rounded owlshly. “Three thousand years? You’ve not ... for three thousand years?”

“Two thousand, eight hundred, and sixty-five, so I suppose three millennia is a bit of an exaggeration.” He turned back to the path, his mantle billowing out around him. “How much farther to Mae’s cottage?”

“She lives on the far side of the village. This path will take us around.” She hurried to catch up with him as he continued down the trail. “How many Grigori still exist? Lailah said you delegate the majority of these missions to lesser angels in your order.”

“Lailah talks too much.”

“What makes this mission so important that it warrants the attention of the Prince of the Grigori?”

He paused and glared at her. “You dare mock me?”

She flashed an innocent smile, effectively melting his anger. This female was trouble, no doubt about it!

“It was an honest question. What makes Rosalind’s case so important?”

“The Grigori assigned to her case has failed to report for some time now. He’s attempting to conceal his presence from me, which is most disconcerting.” She didn’t need to know that Gadrayel was one of his closest friends, and this sort of behavior often preceded a

Fall. The possibility of losing yet another of his order tormented Sariel. “My purpose is to locate my ... subordinate as well as conclude Rosalind's case.”

“Conclude her case. That sounds so simple, so harmless. But you're not harmless at all, are you?” He didn't reply. They walked for a time in silence and then Alyssa said, “I thought the stories about your order were myths.”

“My order is real enough,” he said stiffly, resenting the pressure in his groin with each step he took. “As to the stories, I would have to hear them before I can respond.”

“Are the Grigori really able to produce offspring?” Her tone was hushed with awe.

The ability to procreate had been withheld from the other angelic orders. The power to create life set the Grigori apart, made them different. Sariel understood her fascination, but the question led in dark, painful directions. “Not while we remain celibate.”

Moonlight filtered through the trees, gilding her lovely face. Her riotous hair appeared brown in the dimness, but the curling fullness held no less appeal. Her lustful thoughts resonated through him, stirring his desire like never before. Was it just his incredibly long abstinence or was there something special about this female?

Her brows knitted together. Clearly his admission confused her.

“Do you remain celibate by choice or by decree?”

“I choose to obey the decree.”

She smiled faintly, apparently amused by his churlishness. “What happens if you ignore the decree?”

“If a Grigori ever again indulges in the pleasures of the flesh with a Daughter of Man, he will Fall.”

I'm not a Daughter of Man.

Desire tore through him with staggering intensity. His heart thundered and blood roared in his ears. Sariel's wings began to unfurl. He stopped the transformation.

Damn her! She knew he could hear her thoughts.

Cyndi Friberg

He grasped her shoulders and spun her to face him. “Do you want me to toss you to the ground and ravish you right here, right now?”

* * * * *

What people are saying about

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