



SEVEN SWANNS

By

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Chapter One

Day 4

Our parents are dead. Most of the original colonists to this world, more than twenty years ago, are dead or dying of this mysterious virus that struck without warning.

The older a victim, the more prone to mutate in pain and die quickly. The younger the victim, the more prone to fall into a deep sleep--and die mutating. Those who have advanced into the chrysalis stage are still alive, and they were pre-adolescents when they came to this alien world.

Do they have a chance? Time will tell. But time races against us. We lost eight people the first day.

Until this morning, I thought our parents would survive untouched. They're the head scientists. The leaders of our colony. King and queen of a new world.

Silly child. Why should an alien virus respect the king and queen? We are all invaders.

How long until my generation, born here, falls ill?

The only time we can determine who's still alive or mobile is when we gather the day's crop of dead in one mass grave. Our people have scattered to their homes, hiding behind locked doors, afraid that close quarters will spread the virus.

What virus rewrites the genetic code so easily, so rapidly?

There are only eight in our house now. My seven brothers and me. The silence is horrific. Less than a week ago, this house was the seat of government, our schoolhouse and social hall. It bustled at all hours of the day, full of people accessing the lab or discussing literature, making plans for the future. What future now?

Day 7

Everyone not born on this planet is dead.

How could it happen so quickly? What caused it? I live in the laboratory now, trying to find an answer.

I'm nineteen years old. My biggest problem should be coaxing my brothers to do their chores or if I should let Jonas or Teryl be my sweetheart. I once thought it unfair that I'm the only female of twenty-seven children born to the colony.

Such griping is too petty now.

Day 8

Other colonies reached this world decades and centuries before us. Slow travel doesn't matter in cold sleep. I wonder now about the fate of those colonies. Mother's journals record repeated attempts to contact our predecessors. All met with silence. Mother blamed politics and isolationism. After all, everyone came here fleeing the galaxy-spanning war. Our colony was formed of scientists who wanted to pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge, rather than to build bigger and nastier means of destroying our fellow Human beings.

Are those other colonies dead, attacked by the same virus and mutations that killed our elders?

Are the strange creatures we've glimpsed through the years their survivors, mutated to the point they lost their humanity?

Day 9

The twins, Gerard and Heinrich are ill.

Day 10

Benedict and Dominic are sick. Gerard and Heinrich have gone into the chrysalis stage.

Calvin wanted to cut into a chrysalis, to see what's happening inside the white film. Ethan dragged him outside and pounded him bloody.

Gerard's chrysalis is hard, yet as delicate as eggshells.

What is happening to my brothers? Who is next?

Day 11

Ethan and Francis sleep now. Benedict and Dominic are in chrysalis stage. By lunchtime, there were six chrysalises in the sick room.

Time works against us.

There's only Calvin to help me take care of everyone.

Day 12

Calvin is asleep and mutating. His hair looks like white feathers. His eye sockets have widened and his head is elongating. I went to wake him for breakfast and found this creature in his bed.

I felt no fear when I moved him into the sickroom. He was no longer my brother, just an interesting specimen.

Did the others change before they went into chrysalis stage, but I simply wasn't there to see it?

I took blood and skin samples, but what do I do with them, besides watch the mutation progress at the cellular level?

Day 15

To whomever may find this journal:

My name is Aileen Conqueston. Oldest daughter of Dr. Ian and Dr. Andromache Conqueston. Everyone, starting with Papa, calls me Princess.

I was the first child born here, their symbol of hope for a bright, free, safe future.

I will be twenty years old in sixty-three days.

I don't think I'll live that long.

My brothers: Benedict, Calvin, Dominic, Ethan & Francis (twins), Gerard & Heinrich (twins).

They're mutating inside enormous eggs, as fragile as the spun glass Trevor Calross' father made as a hobby.

If they follow the pattern I saw on Calvin, they all have big eyes and long necks. White, feathery hair covers their bodies. Membranes stretch between their arms and sides.

I fear they'll end up looking like the graceful water birds my parents called swanns, after the Old Earth swans. I wonder if all the swanns we've ever seen and could never study are Humans mutated from the silent colonies on our world.

I'll know soon, because my hair has turned white. My menses were due ten days ago and haven't come. I thought it was the stress, but I think it is part of the mutation. I started to cry, and realized that I had no voice left. With no one to talk to, how would I have known?

My senses have turned hyper-acute. Every sound, smell, taste, texture can be painful or a pleasure so intense it throws me into a daze. Either my mutation is different, or I am losing my mind from the solitude.

How soon until I sleep?

Day 18

My hair is taking on a feather-like texture and structure. When I fall asleep, what hope do we have?

Sometimes I wonder if I truly want to find a cure. I have nightmares where I cure myself but can't reverse the damage to my brothers, our friends, the pitiful remainders of our colony. I went around the colony yesterday, checking every house and lab and found no people. Only people-sized eggs.

Why would I want to spend the rest of my life alone?

Day 20

I'm so furious I could scream. If I had a voice.

I've discarded all sense of privacy. I go into every laboratory and read the journals and logs, to keep busy and find some clue to help us. Instead, I found the explanation.

Timoto Carr brought this curse down on us. He violated laws of common decency and the articles of colonization. I'm glad he's dead, but I'm angry he's dead, because I want to pound him until there's nothing left but a grease spot on the floor.

Carr killed a swann and captured others for study. He deconstructed their genetics, and found a 'piggyback' DNA strand attached to the main structure, encased in introns to keep it inactive. He unlocked the introns, the

junk DNA we all have in our bodies, and released the genetic code-rewriting virus.

It's against the articles of colonization to experiment on any living creature. It's against the articles of colonization to manipulate genetics without the knowledge and approval and oversight of the Colony Council. My parents never would have approved such work. Mother made the swann the symbol of our colony and declared it protected.

Carr released the virus into our colony. It struck his wife first and he did nothing but watch. His journal says he believed he would have plenty of time to reverse the damage. Carr was among the first to die. Justice, I suppose, but not enough.

He has cursed us. And there is nothing in his notes to give me a clue how to find a cure.

This planet has struck at us. It is justice, I suppose, but unusually cruel. If there is justice, could there be mercy? If mercy, a cure? But I have no idea where to look.

Day 22

I think I've found it.

Yesterday, I tended the garden. Maybe it was a waste of energy, but I had a need to make our house look nice, for those who find it after we have all turned into swanns.

I spent nearly three hours pulling up weeds. Huge nettles pierced my gloves, filling my hands with their needle-fine stickers. Hives covered my body by nightfall. I itched all night. And when I woke up this morning, my hair was normal.

It's still white, but no longer a mass of feathers.

Something in the nettles set off a chemical reaction in my bloodstream. That has to be the answer.

Too bad it wasn't strong enough to give me my voice back.

In my anger and discomfort, I burned all the nettles before I went to bed and nearly choked on the thick clouds of smoke just a handful produced.

There are no nettles left in the garden. I've searched the colony. Few of us had gardens and everyone else was a much better gardener than me.

There's nothing left to do but go out and hunt for nettles. Thank goodness it's early spring.

But how can I leave my brothers?

Day 22 continued

I won't have to leave my brothers. They've left me.

There is nothing in their beds but broken eggshells that turned to dust when I tried to take samples.

I don't want to stay here, alone.

I'm going to check the rest of the colony. If everyone is gone, their shells broken, I'll leave.

When I find more nettles, I'll have to go swann hunting.

What I'll do after that, I don't know. I'll figure out the dosage and delivery vector when the time comes.

Is there any hope that something remains of my brothers, inside their new bodies, wherever they've gone?

Chapter Two

Month 2, Day 19

My menses have definitely stopped. That's a relief, traveling as I do.

I've discovered that with my hyper-acute senses, I can read the forest and meadow by smell. The mutation lets me alter my scent to influence the animals I encounter. I feel safe, able to calm harmless animals to make friends with them, or drive away the ones who could hurt me. It's amusing at times. A relief and blessing at others.

But what I wouldn't give to have another Human for company, even if I can't talk.

I think I am going slowly mad, because I hear my brothers in my dreams, calling me, promising to watch over me.

* * * *

Rey saw a flash of white at the edge of the stream. He drew his bow and took three arrows from the quiver hanging at his belt and stepped into the clearing bordering the stream.

He nearly dropped arrows and bow when his jaw dropped.

She glistened with water, clothed in nothing but her knee-length, snowy white hair. Standing thigh-deep in the stream, she bent, displaying

the curve of her cream and peach backside, and splashed water over herself. Rey watched and wished he could follow those silvery droplets, licking them from her pale rose lips, that long arch of snowy neck, over the smooth, firm curve of her breasts. They looked like snow apples, golden and pale pink. He wondered if they tasted like sweet, tangy snow apples.

He groaned and took a step forward, nearly snapping a twig underfoot. Panic made his heart race. His involuntary movement revealed how tight his trousers had grown in the space of a few breaths. He held still, watching, half-convinced she was all illusion, composed of shadows and sunlight.

When the spring sunshine was hot, it evaporated the cocoons that covered ghost-trees, turning the air to wine. He could believe this wild creature was a product of intoxication, rather than a real, flesh-and-blood woman.

She climbed from the stream and knelt, picking up a pile of cloth. Rey watched, his mouth dry and his pants hotter and tighter as he watched her rub the water from her body. She twisted her long hair into a braid. The movement of her curves nearly brought him to his knees.

This 'illusion' made him more aware of the hungers of his body than he had ever been before. Aware to the point of pain. But such sweet, hot pain. Every girl in the Valley of Snow Apples was his for the taking, but none compared to this stranger. Any girl would surrender her virtue to him,

in hopes of wearing his marriage band, standing by his side as his wife, queen over the fortress that protected their people.

Watching the white-haired woman pull a long shirt of rough brown cloth over her head, Rey knew he would never enjoy another woman ever again. If he couldn't have her, in his arms, in his bed, writhing under him and crying his name with her heart in her eyes, he wanted no one else.

The question was: how to take her? And once he claimed her, could he keep her?

No sane woman wandered the forest alone. Was she a scout for an enemy village days of travel away? Or was she a wild forest creature, with no more mind or soul than the birds sailing in silence overhead?

If she were a wild creature, he certainly couldn't take her home with him. She would die, caged inside the fortress, like the wild animals he had brought home as a boy. His father killed many of the animals if they didn't die of being kept in cages. Rey had been his father's prisoner and slave too long to willingly torture another living soul as he had been. And yet he wanted her, to the point of physical pain.

Rey's heart raced as he imagined tumbling through the grass by the stream, her arms and legs wrapped around him, mating with the abandon of wild animals. She wouldn't be like the girls of the valley. She wouldn't be afraid of her own shadow, terrified that monsters from the forest would carry her away. She wouldn't lie under him, eyes closed, limp and submissive. She might even fight him, when he claimed her.

That would be a novel experience. A woman who dared to say no to the leader of her people.

He imagined struggling with her. Screams of passion ringing in his ears. Holding her still with the weight of his body. Rey ached just imagining the thrill of the battle. How long would she pretend to resist for the sake of her pride, until she opened her legs and body to him?

Standing in the shadows, watching her draw on leather leggings and boots, he could almost taste the musky salt of her sweat as he suckled at her breasts. Maybe love bites, to drive her wild with hungry need for him. She would scream when he took her for the first time. He wouldn't be able to claim her slowly. Need would drive him into her.

His wild creature wouldn't demand patience and restraint from him. No need to teach her the hidden joys of her body. Rey imagined her bucking under him, straining to meet his passion, building the rhythm between them until they exploded together.

This was a woman he would hold tight as he slept, after claiming her multiple times, to teach her to honor his claim. To teach her to admit she wanted him as her lord and master and mate. Rey looked forward to making her want him, and then no man would dare try to coax her to take off his marriage band and leave him.

She would be his, this white, wild creature of the mountain forest. And like any wild creature, a wise man studied his prey until he knew its patterns and movements and habits. Then he would move in for the capture.

Sighing at the ache that didn't want to rest, Rey stepped backwards into the forest and put his arrows away. The wait would make the ultimate chase and victory all the sweeter.

* * * *

Month 4, Day 19

I saw a man today. The first Human to cross my path since I left the mountains protecting our colony.

He was like a figure out of a Medieval tale, armed with bow and arrows and sword. I felt fear for the first time in months. Who would carry a sword, except someone who attacks or fears attack?

Until today, I wondered if there were any Humans left on this world. Now, I still don't know. Just because this man looks Human doesn't mean he is. There's more to Humanity than the body. If he carries such primitive weapons, how far has civilization devolved?

I would like company, but what if my only choices are the swanns who fly over my head a dozen times a day, or barbarians?

I sensed him, hiding in the shadows. He didn't know I saw him. He watched me bathe, but he didn't attack me.

I found him by his scent, musky and thick with something that made my heart pound and my insides feel quivery and hot. I liked the sensation, as if everything from my navel down would turn to hot, churning jelly. I could

have stood there in the water all day, just breathing his scent, that wonderful perfume making me feel like I wanted to fly and dance and sing. But I can't sing, can I?

I couldn't even scream for help, if he was a brute ruled by his stomach and his cock, and he had attacked me.

But he didn't attack. He just watched. The scent blown to me through the trees grew stronger and made me drunk.

What would he have done if I had turned and faced him? Would he have waited and let me approach? Or fled?

Why would I want to face him? Why go near this stranger, who didn't have the good manners to call out to me? A civilized man wouldn't have stared at me while I was naked.

Did he like what he saw?

I know I was stupid to bathe out in the open, but I was so sure there were no people anywhere. He was rude to watch me ... even though I started to like knowing he was there.

I wonder if that wonderful scent was lust. He smelled nothing like the boys I grew up with. I'm silly, knowing nothing about him, but I think if he tried to kiss me, like Jonas did last summer, I might have let him.

Would he taste as good as he smelled today?

* * * *

Rey went back four days later to look for his white vision. He couldn't find her at the stream. He tried to find her trail, but it had been erased by time and weather. He cursed himself for not following her the day he saw her. For not claiming her as his own immediately.

He spent the rest of that day hunting for her, moving in ever wider circles. He imagined finding her cold and dead, torn to pieces. Or worse, fatally wounded and beyond his help. He would have to watch her die.

"Don't be a bigger idiot than you already are," he scolded himself as he turned to head back to the valley at nightfall. Sweaty, filthy, with an aching head and an empty stomach, he was ready to believe she had been nothing more than an illusion. A dream brought on by his longing for a woman of spirit, rather than the timid, obedient maidens who fainted if they rode beyond the boundaries of the valley.

He saw a flicker of movement, a flash of white, just before he started down the trail into the valley. His heart leaped in his chest. Heat washed over him at the thought of seeing her. He tried to tell himself that it was nothing but a bird and he was mistaken, but his body insisted otherwise.

Rey followed that glimpse of white along the ridge that overlooked the valley like a scowling brow. He stayed in the shadows and shelter of the trees, hoping to learn where his dream creature lived before he approached her. He was so intent on staying hidden, he didn't see the great white birds swoop down out of the sky.

A shadow crossed his face. He glanced up and stared as the creatures flew past overhead. Seven, with a wingspan twice the arm's reach of a man. Silent as shadows, they flew straight toward the open meadow and the white blur that was his wild maiden with her hair blowing in the breeze.

Terror and protective anger shot through him. Rey stayed in the shadows, but he ran and readied his bow. If the spirit birds attacked her, he would kill them. It didn't matter the great winged creatures were sacred to the people of his valley and guided the souls of the dead to the Great Reward. They could take any soul they wanted--just not this woman.

She stood still, face to the sky, arms spread, the wind tangling her glistening white hair in her face. He admired her bravery, even as he churned with fury and the need to shout for her to run. Breathless, he couldn't call out. He kept running.

The spirit birds landed, circling the woman. She didn't make a sound. Rey slowed and raised his bow, ready to let fly with a hail of arrows.

She lunged at the largest of the birds. Rey cursed when she put herself between him and the creatures.

He lowered his bow, dumfounded when she wrapped her arms around the bird. A moment later, the creature enfolded her in its wings. The other spirit birds moved in, surrounding them, and their wings rose high and slammed down, filling the air with a thunder like applause.

* * * *

Month 4, Day 23

My brothers are still whole and healthy, locked inside their swann bodies.

They came to me today. Our minds touched. We communicate with images more than words, and with music in our minds that conveys emotion so much more clearly than faces ever could.

They have been looking for me ever since sanity returned. I told them what I had discovered about the nettles, and my search for the plants. They were so excited, their chorus of emotion-music nearly knocked me senseless.

They told me about the people in the valley below me. Here, the swanns are called spirit birds, revered as holy creatures. My brothers find it quite amusing. They tried to communicate with the various pockets of Humanity they found during their search for me. I'm the only Human who can receive their thoughts. Most likely, this is because I started to mutate.

They've left me to hunt for nettles and tell the news to all the swanns. I am physically alone, but no longer solitary. I was not dreaming, when I heard my brothers speak in my dreams. They will always be with me now. The relief I feel makes me cry even as I write this. I wish I had my voice, so I could laugh and wail and shout for joy.

Chapter Three

Rey dreamed nearly every night of his wild maiden dancing with the spirit birds. Her white hair streamed out behind her until it turned to feathers and she flew away.

He told no one of what he had seen, or of his plans to tame and capture her. Some among his people would try to destroy her, seeing her as a threat to the spirit birds. Others would fear her as something new and therefore dangerous, and also set out to destroy her. And he most feared the men like himself who hungered for a woman of spirit and fire, who would try to catch and tame her for their own beds.

He knew better than to spend too much time out alone in the mountains, looking for her. He also knew better than to ban travel out of the valley, to prevent his rivals from seeing her and giving chase. He did find many excuses to keep the men in the valley, busy with repairs and building projects. And he sent those he trusted to watch for unusual activity among the spirit birds. Anyone who heard of his orders considered him a little more pious than usual, but they didn't wonder about it.

Whenever he could, he went up the mountain to watch her. He followed her through the forest, studying every plant. Sometimes he thought she looked right at him where he hid in the shadows, but she never fled. She never spoke. She never made a sound.

Sometimes, she smiled and sat still, eyes closed and her face turned to the wind. He was content to simply sit and look at her. He learned her patterns and followed her trail and left gifts where he thought she would find them; sweets, ribbons for her hair, an embroidered scarf, needles and thread. Things he thought any woman would want and delight in, no matter how wild.

* * * *

Month 4, Day 35

I have an admirer. The same man who watched me bathe. I know his scent, and I know when he comes up the mountainside.

He leaves me gifts. I know I am cruel, to pretend not to see him. And maybe I am vain, to sit still and let him look at me. Something inside me refuses to make contact. As long as he does not speak to me, as long as we do not acknowledge each other, I am free to continue my quest for my brothers' cure.

He watched me yesterday while I spoke in my mind to my brothers. They warned me to leave this mountain as soon as possible. The people here have regressed, my brothers say. The women are kept cloistered and timid, treated as possessions. There is no science, no industry, and very little medicine or education. The other swanns told my brothers that women are no longer taught to read and write.

I was right. My admirer is a barbarian. But he is so handsome, and my whole body feels deliciously achy and alive when I catch his scent on the wind. I should leave before my hyper-acute senses are my downfall. Before we meet face to face and I do something incredibly stupid.

Month 5, Day 10

My brothers have returned with sad news. They found huge patches of nettles and rolled in them. Other swanns did the same--but there was no change. No signs of mutating back to what they had originally been.

They aren't discouraged. All the swanns still hope. Perhaps a specific breed of nettle is the cure. Or their thick feathers prevent the organic material from entering their bloodstream. Or they need repeated inoculations. Or the time of year affects the potency. I think the delivery vector needs to be different.

For now, my brothers have hope. All the swanns are working together to search the entire world.

Strange, how this tragedy has broken down all barriers of race and language and culture. The Humans on this world are working together.

Could it be they can finally work together because they are no longer truly Human?

* * * *

Rumors filtered through the fortress of the white maiden on the mountainside. She had an uncanny ability to see hunters before they saw her, and slip away no matter how cleverly they set their traps.

Rey struggled against the volcanic fury inherited from his father when he heard the news. His woman was threatened. He had run out of time to learn her habits and gain her trust.

“My son.” Regina, headwoman of the valley and his mother, stopped on the threshold of his council chamber. “Have you heard the rumors of a woman who dances with the spirit birds?”

“No, Mother.” He finished gathering up his weapons and started for the door. “I have seen her. I intend to bring her into the valley.”

“Is that wise? The spirit birds are sacred. Bringing her among us could bring a curse on us.”

“She will be my wife. A blessing, not a curse.”

“Is she willing?” She didn’t look worried or skeptical. Rey felt again the overwhelming gratitude that he had broken his father’s tyranny and saved his mother’s life. Where would he be without her to advise him?

“I’ll persuade her, but not too easily, I hope. I need a strong woman.” He paused to caress her cheek. “You are the last strong woman in our valley, Mother. I can’t lead our people if my wife is weaker than watered milk.”

“How can you lead them if your wife brings a curse into the valley?” she countered. Regina stepped back and let him leave the chamber.

When he looked back, just before riding out of the gates of the fortress alone, she stood at the top of the steps, watching. Rey didn't doubt she would still be there when he returned.

* * * *

Rey saw his wild maiden racing down a wide gap between two sheer rock faces, a slim shape moving like the deer his ancestors had brought from beyond the stars. Her long white hair was bound in a tail that streamed out behind her. She ran in leaps, from one rock to another, creating the illusion that she barely touched the ground before vaulting through the air again. He reined his horse to a halt and sat, watching her come running down the slope toward him. He smiled.

She was free. She was safe. She was beautiful. Tonight, she would be his.

A hunting horn blared, shattering his momentary vision of his white maiden leaping into the saddle in front of him and demanding that he take her far away, where they could be alone together, forever.

Rey looked past her and roared in fury.

A band of hunters tumbled down the mountainside after her. An arrow flew through the air and clattered against the rocks, almost at her feet. More arrows followed.

Rey stood up in the saddle and blew his horn, four sharp, hard blasts that echoed and crashed against the walls of the gap. The maiden stumbled to a halt and staggered, falling against the rock face. The hunters behind her didn't stop.

Cursing, Rey dug his boot heels into his horse's sides and raced up the rocky slope. The white maiden shrank back against the rock face as the two sides converged, both aimed at her.

Rey cursed and urged his mount to go faster, despite the danger of a fall and a broken leg on this rocky ground. The hunters would reach her first.

She pushed away from the sheer rock face and ran again, heading straight toward him. He shouted and held out a hand, as if that could bring her to him faster. His horse seemed to slow, as if it ran through mud as high as its belly.

Rey vowed to kill all the hunters if they had put one hand on his woman. Even though they were his loyal subjects, he would show no mercy. No one would touch her but him.

She fell, sprawling headlong in the leaves and sand and pebbles that lined the long, narrow slope. Ray shouted in terrified fury. The hunters caught up with her in that moment. Rey had visions of rape, kicking and punching to force her to submit, but no one fell on her. They surrounded her as she leaped to her feet.

A glimmer of light on a blade explained why they kept their distance. Rey drew his sword as his horse clattered up the last heartrending distance. With a shout, he rode through, scattering the men. Several shouted his name, stunned. The white maiden staggered away and put her back to the sheer rock face, ready to make her stand.

He leaped off his horse and nearly went to his knees, his legs trembling from fury and relief--and the ache that never seemed to leave when he looked at her. The hunters called out questions, started to tell him what had happened, but he snarled and gestured them all to silence. He forced his face into calm as he stepped through the loose line they formed. Now, he faced her. She was his entire focus.

The white maiden made no sound. Sweat darkened her clothes, making them stick to her slim shape. She had nothing but two knives, one still strapped to her waist; a long cloth pack on her back; and the clothes she wore. She didn't fight, didn't swear, didn't weep and plead for mercy.

"It's all right," he said, and held out his hands in a gesture of peace. "I won't let them hurt you."

Her eyes were wide, dark, gleaming with intelligence and wariness. She wasn't crippled by fear, as any other woman would be in this situation.

Rey studied the curves displayed by her clinging, damp clothes. His hands itched to tear off those rough clothes and glory in the smooth, pale skin hidden underneath. He would clothe her in the finest, softest gowns--

and glory in ripping them off her. His body ached and burned, just thinking about the pleasure that would soon be his.

Once he gained her trust and brought her down from this mountain.

She looked into his eyes, started to smile, and took a step toward him. She inhaled deeply. Rey's mouth went dry, watching her breasts lift. He imagined her arching her back as she lay under him, begging for his touch, for his mouth on her flesh. She pressed a hand to her forehead and staggered another step. Then she shook her head and moved back again.

"It's all right. You're safe with me. They won't hurt you." He feared he had begun to drool. "What is your name? I am Rey."

Tears suddenly gleamed in her big, dark eyes. She shook her head and pressed a hand to her throat. When he could only look at her in confusion, she opened her mouth and moved her lips as if speaking--but no sound came out.

"Mute." Rey muffled a groan of frustration. He took a step closer and was encouraged when she didn't move away again. Holding out a hand to her, he bowed slightly and pressed his other hand over his heart.

"I swear, I am your friend. I will protect you. Come home with me."

She shook her head and seemed to wilt. Then with a tiny gasp, she suddenly smiled and slid her pack to the ground. Rey dared to take two more steps closer to her as she went down on one knee and rummaged through the pack. She brought out a bound book in some soft, metallic material. She opened it, and he was astonished to see uniform pages of

paper with lines drawn across them. She held out the book to him. He smiled to reassure her and finished crossing the clearing.

When he took the book from her, he saw that only the top of the first page was filled. Then he looked at the words in neat, tiny handwriting. Another wonder--a woman who could read and write. For a heartbeat, he mourned the loss of his wild creature. This was a civilized woman.

Then he realized that the alphabet she used was foreign. Understanding crashed down on him, chilling his body's hunger and making his head ache in frustration.

"You don't know my language." Rey fought not to slam the book down into the dirt.

He looked at the maiden, so close he could smell her sweet, clean sweat and see the fine texture of her pale golden skin. She offered him a tentative little smile. She held out her hand for the book. He gave it back to her, then held out his hand in return. She looked at his hand, covered in a dirty, scarred leather glove. Rey hastily tugged it off and held out his bare hand to her. Slowly, she put her hand into his grasp.

A hot thread of victory and pleasure shot through him at the touch of her warm, elegant, long-fingered hand. He felt the calluses from her outdoor living, and vowed she would become a creature of luxury, pampered into soft sweetness. His woman. Starting this very night.

She rode before him in his saddle, sitting still and straight at first, but relaxing by degrees. Rey smiled, not caring that he looked like a drunken

fool. He smelled her sweet scent and indulged from time to time in pressing his cheek against the silken fall of her long braid. He tightened his arm around her waist until his open palm could feel the curve of her hip under her clothes. He took advantage of the horse's movement to lift his hand and brush his thumb against the bottom curve of her breast.

She gasped and sat up straight. Then, to his intense satisfaction, she leaned back against him, so the firm curve of her bottom fit against his groin. Satisfaction turned to frustration and he learned again how tight his pants could be.

Chapter Four

Month 5, Day 15

I am inside a fortress from my nursery storybooks, all raw stone and mortar, round towers and winding staircases. Am I insane, only dreaming all this? Or did I truly see safety and caring in his eyes?

His name is Rey. I had to trust him. He stopped the men who chased me with nets and bows and arrows. He must be someone of great importance and power. He protected me.

What good does it do me to be here? These people don't speak my language. Rey showed me battered old books when we first arrived, and we don't even use the same alphabet. I can't even communicate in writing with him.

He spilled out orders from the moment we rode through the gates of his fortress, and someone came running with a slate and thick sticks of colored chalk. While we ate--my first taste of bread in months, and it was glorious!--we communicated with pictures drawn on the slate.

He asked my name. For the first time in my life, I was glad of my silly nickname. Surely every culture has a word for Princess?

I drew my parents wearing crowns. Just stick figures, representing male and female. Then my seven brothers, smaller, wearing crowns. I think Rey understood. Then I drew myself, with a little crown and braids. He

laughed, tapped the picture, then squeezed my hand. He nodded and said a word, several times, and nodded.

So now I am Princess. I hope he treats me like one.

Was I a fool to trust him?

How could I resist him, when that wonderful scent of him filled my head, so I felt dizzy and hungry? I wanted to throw myself into his arms and feel them tight around me. I wanted him to kiss me. Maybe my loneliness and some chemical imbalance have shattered my mind and common sense, because he took every opportunity to touch me on the ride here, and I liked it.

When he touched my breast, I nearly leaped off his horse. I wanted more. I quite shamelessly snuggled up against him.

He's definitely male, definitely attracted to me, and I'm sure my face was quite red as I let my imagination run wild. Just the shape of him, pressed up against my bottom, was enough to fire thousands of questions.

What does it look like, when he's aroused? Was it only my imagination, or was there extra heat coming through his clothes?

What will it feel like, inside me?

His mother, Regina, is gracious and hospitable. She brought me to this room. I could see clearly despite her neutral expression that she wasn't happy about having me here. I think this is Rey's room, and I'm to share it.

It's a man's room, with heavy furniture and a huge fireplace, dark curtains across the balcony door, furs on the floor, and more dark, heavy curtains on the bed. There's enough room for four people in that bed.

I doubt he'll let me sleep alone in that bed tonight. Perhaps it's silly, but I hope he holds me when he sleeps. I need to be held. Even if I can't talk, we can communicate. Even though I don't understand the language, it's glorious to hear Human voices again.

My brothers' voices in my head aren't enough anymore.

I'm tired of being alone. Tired of being cold and hungry and dirty half the time. Is it wrong to be willing to give Rey what he wants, for a little while, in exchange for some comfort and company?

What would my parents say? Would they accuse me of abandoning my quest for the sake of comfort?

Every time I let my thoughts focus on Rey for more than a few seconds, all other questions become moot. I want his touch. I want to learn the taste of him, to have it fill me as his scent filled me all the long ride to his castle.

A big, metal tub full of steaming, rose-scented water waited for me when Regina led me here. These people have regressed, just as my brothers said. I watched a servant girl lug a huge metal can of steaming water into this room and pour it into the tub.

Regina gave me a long robe of soft, pale pink and took all my clothes. She said something I didn't understand, but I doubt she promised to have

my clothes cleaned and mended. I'm a prisoner here unless I want to climb off the balcony in this flimsy robe and nothing else.

When I think of Rey, my senses go fluttery and my knees weaken and my insides melt, just like when he touched me or I breathed his scent.

I wonder if it's such a bad thing to be his prisoner.

Will he be kind or cruel?

I think of him holding me, naked skin to naked skin, his hands on me, kissing me, and I honestly don't care about that. I only know that the waiting will drive me mad soon. If I'm not mad already.

He's here. I can sense him on the other side of the door.

What is wrong with me, to be so attuned to a man?

Or is the question: Has everything finally become right?

* * * *

Rey knocked once in warning, then opened the door. Princess couldn't call out for him to enter or stay away. He hoped she was still bathing. The thought of wrapping her in a towel and rubbing her dry made his breath shorten and renewed that aching that grew from the moment she fitted herself so neatly against him in the saddle.

She sat by the fireplace with her long hair dry and hanging loose all around her like a second robe. She held that book on her lap, writing with an odd sort of quill pen that needed no dipping in an inkwell. Such things were

mentioned in the history books. How did she get one that worked? He pushed that question aside for later. Much later. His gaze feasted on her.

The robe clung to her long, lean curves, gaping open just enough to reveal the shadowed valley between her alabaster breasts. She watched him, eyes wide and bright, and a delicate pink flush grew across her cheeks.

“You don’t understand me. I’ll teach you. But right now ... I just don’t have the patience.” He turned to the door and slid the bolt home to lock it.

His mother didn’t approve of him bedding Princess without making sure she understood. Rey didn’t care. He had waited long enough to make her his woman. She would understand soon enough. After tonight, she would understand that she belonged to him.

He felt his smile slipping. Her muteness changed the image he had carried in his mind and embellished through long, aching, hungry nights. Princess wouldn’t laugh. Wouldn’t scream his name. Wouldn’t beg him for more kisses and cry out for him to be patient or gentle or rougher or to hurry.

“You won’t need that.” He knelt next to her and slid the book and pen from her fingers. He put them on the floor and took hold of her wrists. Her pulse jumped under his fingertips. He stood, drawing her to her feet.

He slid his arms around her. A groan escaped him as she pressed close against him. He cupped her bottom in one hand, lifting her up to crush her against the aching hardness in his groin. Her eyes went wide and she

clutched at his shoulders, pushing away. He caught a handful of her hair at the nape of her neck and tipped her head back.

She opened her mouth, a silent cry of panic. He saw it in her eyes, but he also saw a spark that would explode into roaring flames if given half a chance. He captured her open mouth under his and drove his tongue in deep, tasting her, stealing her breath. She struggled for another moment. Then she went still. Her mouth opened a little wider.

Tentatively, her tongue brushed against his. He stroked through her mouth, claiming territory, relentless, until he felt her arms slide up around his neck. She tipped her head to the side, accommodating the invasion of her mouth. A low rumble of triumphant laughter spilled from his mouth to hers as he enfolded her in his arms. His fingers dug into her bottom, pressing her tighter against him, then moved down her thighs. He lifted her and spread her legs to wrap around his waist.

Princess didn't even flinch, but entered battle, her tongue fighting his, sliding past his lips into his mouth. Her breath rasped in her nostrils, warm little gusts against his cheek. Her breasts brushed against his chest with every breath she took.

Rey stumbled blindly across the room and fell down onto the bed with her under him. He had to tug her arms from around his neck so he could get his hands between them and find the belt of her robe. In moments she lay bared to his sight, golden pale skin flushed.

She gasped for breath, eyes half-lidded with the daze of growing passion. Her lips looked darker, gently bruised by kisses. Rey licked his lips, savoring the sweet, wild, rich taste of her that lingered there as he stripped off his clothes and climbed up onto the bed. He knelt over her, giving her time to study him, as he had studied her.

Princess' eyes widened and she stared at his aching manhood. She propped herself up on her elbows and her high color began to fade. Rey swallowed the laughter that rose at her sudden nervousness. He didn't want her afraid.

"It's all right," he whispered, and lowered his head to kiss her.

Princess closed her eyes and slid one hand up around his neck. He thought she sighed as he lay on his side and took her into his arms, pressing her against him, shoulders to toes. Rey kissed her until she relaxed and fit herself against him. Then he left her lips and kissed and licked and sucked his way down her neck while his hands roved gently over her body, squeezing and stroking, learning her curves, claiming every part of her.

She jumped when his fingers closed over her breast. Her breath caught when his thumb flicked across her nipple. He circled the nipple until it grew hard, then lowered his mouth to it. She twisted against him, and he slid over on top of her, holding her still under him. He suckled one breast while his fingers gently squeezed the other, holding her still until he felt that resistance seep out of her. He raised his head and opened his eyes and

grinned, triumphant, to find her lying still, her head tipped back, eyes half-closed and her cheeks flushed with passion.

In that moment of stillness, she reached for him. He shuddered, aching and hungry, when her long-fingered hands cupped his head and guided him back to her breast. Her hands stroked down his back as he continued his exploring caresses, encouraging him, holding him close. They clenched tight, when he stroked one finger through the golden-white curls between her legs. Her fingers became claws, digging into his shoulders as his caresses grew hungry and demanding, squeezing, stroking, invading the untouched recesses of her body.

She tried to push him away when the first shudders of climax tore through her. He grabbed her thighs hard, spread her legs and crushed her under him as he captured her mouth for a long, deep kiss that left him breathless. She continued to struggle, eyes tightly clenched shut, fingers digging into the blankets, back arching. He caught her hips and raised her up to meet him and drove into her, taking her prisoner as he matched her struggles to the rhythm of his pounding thrusts.

A woman's shriek, high and triumphant and astonished reverberated through his mind as one final shudder tore through her and she went limp under him. Fire rolled through his veins and he spilled his essence into her in one wave that left him drained and emptied. Rey hung suspended near the stars, just for an instant, before the fall began. He opened his eyes and saw her smile before he collapsed across her.

“Princess,” he whispered, and buried his face in the thick, silken carpet of her hair spread across the bed under them. She slid limp arms around him, as if to keep him from leaving. Rey smiled as darkness rolled over him. He couldn’t have moved off of her or out of her if his life had depended on it.

* * * *

Month 5, Day 16

I am an idiot. But I’m a lucky idiot.

I woke up alone, late in the morning. Though Rey’s scent lingered, it had faded enough I was able to think clearly.

He intoxicates me, like the scent from the moth trees when the wind blows just right in the warm spring afternoons. That’s my only explanation for why I did what I did last night. All night. I’m a slave to my hormones.

I suppose my loneliness can be blamed. Even being in mental contact with my brothers isn’t enough. I need a Human touch, Human voices, the company of people. Even though I can’t understand a word they say.

But I was alone and able to think clearly when I woke. I took the food someone had left on the long table, and I took some of Rey’s clothes to replace the ones his mother took. My incredible luck held when I slipped out of the vast fortress and no one stopped me.

I'm free again. And safe. My brothers will be pleased--if I ever tell them what happened to me last night.

I'm ashamed to admit that I let comfort and my fears become more important than finding the cure for my brothers. My heart aches more than my body, right now. Between my headlong flight yesterday, then racing back up the mountain after almost no sleep last night--and my reason for not sleeping much last night--it's no wonder my body is weak and trembling and aching in such unaccustomed places.

I'd never realized all the things two people could do to each other, so strange, yet so very pleasant. Intoxicating. So many things Rey taught me in the span of one night. Things I'll likely never do or experience again.

I have to hide from him, if he comes looking for me.

Why do I want him to look for me?

Month 5, Day 17

Rey has come looking for me. I'm happy, and I'm sad, and I'm furious with him.

Doesn't he realize that if I run away, that means I don't want to stay with him?

Or maybe he realizes more than I do, and he knows that I do want to stay with him--even though I can't.

Chapter Five

Month 5, Day 19

He's back. For the third day in a row. He comes alone, calling for me. My heart aches to hear his voice. My body aches for his touch. I wonder if he would let me stay if I met him and made love to him.

Don't be stupid, Princess.

Month 5, Day 20

I've found nettles. Just a small patch. There have to be more nearby. I can't leave the mountainside until I've gathered up every prickly leaf and stem.

* * * *

Rey found her kneeling in a sunny clearing, carefully digging up nettles. She didn't realize he was there, so he crept up behind her slowly, feasting on her with his gaze. When she turned away from her task and saw him, she stared for only a moment in shock. Then, incredibly, she smiled and held out the plants filling her hands for him to see.

"Yes, nettles. So what?" He knew she couldn't understand his words, but she definitely understood the ire in his tone. Rey couldn't understand

what was so special about the wretched, prickly things. “I have an entire garden full, back home.” He yanked them from her hands and tossed them away when her smile started to fade.

Princess scrambled to gather them up again. She made motions with her hands, trying to communicate. Rey sighed and dug in his backpack. His mother had insisted he bring the slate along, if he was so intent on finding Princess again. He wished she hadn’t been right that he would need it.

When he held out the slate to Princess, she shook her head and grinned. Then she snatched the slate from his hands and scribbled furiously with the round lump of chalk. When she handed it back to him, he could only stare.

She had drawn the spirit birds pulling up nettles with their beaks. She had drawn a female figure wearing a crown and long white braids--her--gathering up nettles and giving them to the spirit birds.

The only conclusion Rey could draw was that the spirit birds wanted her to gather the nettles.

A shiver ran down his back and through his soul. The explanation made sense, and yet frightened him. From the earliest recorded history, his people had cultivated the nettles and burned them at the change of the seasons and at births, to drive away evil and bring blessing on the people. Some said the spirit birds had commanded it. Others said the burning ritual was done to help and protect the spirit birds.

He had seen Princess with the spirit birds--hadn't he? She had embraced them and they had surrounded her, enclosing her in their midst. If Princess said the spirit birds wanted her to gather nettles, he had to believe her.

"You want the blasted things? Come with me, and you can have more than you'll ever need." He sighed, still grinning, when she shrugged and shook her head. He wiped the slate clean with his sleeve and drew a bad sketch of the fortress. Then he took one of the mangled nettles and held it up in front of her nose, then slapped it against the picture of the fortress. "Come with me--understand?" He held out his hand, beckoning for her to come.

It took more attempts at pictures to convey his meaning. Finally, he took a stick and dug long lines in the soil, like the furrows of a garden plot. He gestured at himself, pointed at the drawing of the fortress, and put the limp nettle leaves in the furrows. He knew he had succeeded when Princess' eyes went wide and she stared at him in amazement and a hope so piteous, he almost could have wept.

Princess insisted on sitting behind him this time, instead of in front of him where he could touch her. Rey fought the niggling fear that she had had her fill of him already.

That fear died when he took her through the gate of the garden his great-great-grandmother had built, and showed her the forest of nettles growing there. Princess laughed silently and did a little dance. When she

hugged him and kissed him, Rey snatched her up in his arms, determined not to let go until he had her in his room again. She didn't resist him.

* * * *

Month 6, Day 2

Somehow, I'm married to Rey.

This morning, his mother knocked on the door and spoke through it to him in a cool, no-nonsense voice. She never allows anger into her voice or face. Until I learn the language, I have no idea if she is my supporter or my worst enemy.

When we finished breakfast, Rey led me to a long room full of people, and spoke to them all before he put a band on my wrist. I was sure that I was being claimed as a slave until he gave me a matching band and held out his wrist for me to put it on him. That was when I realized that we were married.

It's useless to ask about the legalities, because I've seen enough to know Rey is the law here. I'm completely at his mercy.

If I weren't such a slave to the glorious, delicious things we do to each other in his bed, I think I'd be frightened.

And because of the garden full of nettles, of course. I wouldn't think of staying if the nettles weren't here.

Am I insane? Or am I just a slave to my body?

What would my parents say?

I like to think they'd smile and remember what it was like to be young and so insatiable for each other. After all, they did have eight children.

* * * *

Month 6, Day 9

Rey brings me books that are clearly meant for children; his alphabet, illustrated with drawings; schoolbooks with simple words and pictures. He laughs with me as I struggle to put together a vocabulary in writing. Our lessons are always interrupted with lots of kisses. He likes it when I sit on his lap and take his clothes off.

Is it wrong to be so happy?

Regina wasn't happy to find me spending so much time in the nettle garden, until she realized that I pull up any plants that might compete with the nettles. I think I've won her over.

These are strange people. As long as they leave me alone, I don't mind being here.

When my brothers come for me, they won't be happy. I have to convince them that staying near this garden full of nettles is worth the risk. There are enough nettles here to make clothes for my brothers and at least fifty more swanns. As if nettle shirts will be the cure.

I harvest the nettles, cutting them off with enough stem showing above the ground to let it grow back. I've decided that drying them won't destroy whatever healing quality they contain.

I'm happy, for now. I won't think about the future. About leaving when my brothers are cured. Thankfully, I can't become pregnant. How could I leave then, separating child from father? It will be hard enough leaving the only lover I will ever want. But I can't stay. I know that. We come from two different worlds and times, and I can't stay.

* * * *

Rey had always enjoyed his duties, until Princess came into his life. He hated the hours spent away from her, the niggling fear that when he returned he would find a rival trying to convince her to take off her marriage bracelet and refute his claim. For the first time, he regretted the many laws he had created to protect women. Only a woman could end a marriage. He had made it possible, so men couldn't abuse their wives physically, mentally or emotionally without punishment.

A man whose wife left him was considered less than garbage, no longer a man, because he didn't protect his greatest treasure. No woman would ever agree to be his wife again. Rey had made that law, knowing how his mother had suffered in secret. He knew he was a coward and liar, to keep Princess from learning she had that right--but the thought of waking up

without her beside him, not teaching her his language or sharing his world with her was already too painful to be endured.

How could she become such an integral, necessary part of his life, so quickly?

He wavered between teaching Princess to understand his language so they could fully share their hearts and minds, or leaving her limited to hand signals and slate pictures, so no man could court her. He refused to let the fortress' teachers near her because they were all men.

Rey would have to be blind not to see how men desired her, and the fear and envy in the eyes of women. Princess would never have any friends among his people but him, and he was both relieved and weighted with guilt. He had taken her away from a life she loved when he brought her down from the mountainside.

"Is she happy, spending her days locked away in the nettle garden?" Regina asked him one afternoon.

Rey had spent the day determining the progress of the harvest and when the first frost would come. Soon they would perform the ceremony for the changing seasons. He enjoyed the onerous duties of fall because he looked forward to spending the dark, cold winter days and nights secluded with Princess.

"I think if she didn't have the garden, she would flee back to the mountain," he admitted with a grin. Rey knew better than to think Princess stayed only for the pleasure of his bed or the protection he offered her.

Princess didn't need him, and it made her adoration and eagerness all the sweeter.

"Your father would chain and beat a woman like that until he broke her spirit," his mother said, lowering her voice as if the despot still lived and could hear.

"He never broke your spirit," Rey countered, and cupped her cheek a moment with his gloved hand. "Princess tends the nettles because the spirit birds told her to." He saw his mother flinch. "I think they come to her in the garden, in the twilight."

"Does she bring blessings on us, or a curse?"

"They love her, Mother. She weeps and throws her arms around them and they ... embrace her."

"Perhaps that explains it," she murmured.

"What, Mother?" He sighed, expecting her to make some accusation against Princess. After all, he had refused every maiden she had chosen as a suitable wife, and brought home a wild, mute woman from the mountainside.

"She has a healer's touch, a healer's senses and compassion."

Grudging respect softened her face. "She saw Jesiree's sick daughter, picked up the child and pestered me until I let her into the stillroom. She put together a potion and rubbed it on the girl's chest and her breathing eased. Before you came home, we had four others come to her to see if she could heal them."

“Word spreads fast.” Rey glanced around the outer courtyard, expecting to see more people waiting with sick children in their arms.

“Indeed. She helped everyone who came to her and plundered my supplies.”

“You don’t sound too upset to have your healing duties taken away.” He grinned, relaxing now. Perhaps his mother was starting to accept his wife.

“Let her be useful. The more duties she can perform, the easier it will be to forgive her.” Regina turned and walked away, heading for the stairs into the main building.

“Forgive her for what?”

“Her first duty is to give you healthy sons. If she fails that, the people will not easily endure her odd ways,” she called over her shoulder.

“Sons.” Rey felt his stomach twist and turn over.

The mental image of Princess, her limbs and face swollen and her belly huge with his child, stole his breath.

If she has a child, she won’t fly away with the spirit birds.

That thought startled him. He had feared just such a thing happening, but had never verbalized it even to himself.

Rey hated those mornings when he woke and Princess wasn’t curled up next to him. He hated the fear, the dropping sensation of relief when he found her again--always in her garden--with the marriage bracelet still on her wrist.

He feared for her, too, whenever someone gave her an odd look for her silence and coloring, or high-ranking parents expressed disappointment that he hadn't chosen their daughter as his bride. His mother was right. The sooner she gave him a son, the sooner his people would completely accept her.

Really, would it be such torment to get her pregnant? He would miss her sleek form in his arms, but that change wouldn't last. The more he thought about seeing Princess carrying his child, nursing his child, the more he liked it.

Chapter Six

Month 7, Day 12

Fall is almost on us. My brothers met me in the chill before dawn and begged me to leave and go home to our abandoned colony today. Before Rey woke. Before anyone could stop me.

Leaving is easy, I have learned. Two days ago, a woman with a bruised face came before Rey in the main hall, before all the people. She took off her marriage bracelet and gave it to Rey. A big, red-faced man tried to stop her, but Rey just looked at him and he seemed to wilt, like a kicked puppy. Rey talked to them and the woman was insistent. Rey was angry with the man. I don't know what he said, but the woman was smiling and weeping as she walked away, and all the witnesses turned their backs to her husband. Former husband.

I slipped away before Rey saw I was watching. So, marriages can be dissolved that easily. Just take off my bracelet when I leave. And from what I have seen, the husband can't do anything about it. So why am I not comforted?

Besides, how could I leave my garden right now? There are still nettles to harvest and dry.

I tried to persuade my brothers to let me stay another three weeks--half a month. Just to add more nettles to what I've dried and packaged

already. I didn't tell them Rey is building me a greenhouse, so I can grow nettles all winter.

That happened quite by accident. Regina has become friendly since I now help her doctor the people of the fortress, and she took me on a tour three days ago. We went into a storeroom, and she wrote words on my slate for everything we saw, piled up and dusty. She said them out loud, to increase my vocabulary.

Tucked away in a corner were enormous panels of wavy, green-tinted glass. With drawings, she explained the panels had been part of a building for growing food during the long winter, but no one used it because they could no longer heat it. I knew how to heat it, without power plants or fan systems, and we spent two very pleasant evenings conferring over sketches. If I am not wrong, Rey will build it for me.

He wants me to stay, enough to do anything to please me.

My brothers want me to leave. Soon. Before I am trapped by the heavy snows that fill the valleys and make them impassable.

Month 7, Day 34

I missed some strange ceremony today. I spent the whole day putting the finishing touches on the boiler system that will circulate warm, damp air through the greenhouse, and checking the seals on all the glass panes. I have decided it will be my gift to Rey and his people when I leave, so they can have fresh food in the cold days that follow.

When I stepped through the garden gate, there was a strange, sweet-sour, powdery smell in the air. It made me cough. I had the strangest sensation that I had smelled that odor before, but I couldn't remember where.

Rey reeked of it when he came to bring me to dinner. It made me dizzy, made me churn inside and my head ached. My throat hurt as if my voice would return. It frightened me. I wished I had fled with my brothers last week. I wished I had abandoned the greenhouse and let Rey and Regina finish building it from my sketched instructions.

Month 8, Day 1

My menses have returned. I woke up with horrible cramps and found blood between my thighs. If I could have screamed, I would have. Rey was all sweetness, bringing me treats, urging me to stay in bed, reading to me from children's storybooks.

I can't make love to him with careless abandon any longer. What if I get pregnant?

What if my slight mutations are reversing? When will I regain my voice? What have I done here, eaten here, touched here in the fortress to cause the reversal?

I don't dare leave. Not yet. Not until I have some answers.

Month 8, Day 10

For now, my life is limited to the garden and greenhouse, my duties as healer, and Rey's bed.

How strange that I am content here, because I grew up expecting to be a scientist and the leader of our colony after my parents, with no time for marriage and domestic duties.

All that will change soon, when I figure out how to carry away all the nettles I have harvested and dried. I have quite a stockpile now. But for now, I truly am content.

I'm a hedonist, I suppose. I like where I am, even knowing how much it will hurt to leave. I like all the things Rey has taught me. They are triply wonderful and precious to me now, as my time to leave draws closer-- because I know I will never have another lover. It makes me want to please him, to make up for the pain I think he will feel when I vanish.

I surprised Rey last night. He laughed, and though I didn't understand half his words, I know I pleased him.

Whenever I wake in the night, his arm is around me. I like this assurance that I am not alone. I still hurt deep inside from all those months of solitude. And it's rather flattering to know he doesn't want to lose me.

Rey caresses me in his sleep. I've lost count of the times I wake with that lovely, warm, melting sensation inside, and find him fondling my breast. Or those long, strong, deft fingers of his start exploring over my hip

and across my belly and down. I get that melting feeling just thinking about the things he does to me when he's only half-awake.

Last night, I turned the tables. I pulled down the blankets and learned his body by moonlight, to my heart's content. He's a stranger to me when he lies still, relaxed. I'm able to think more clearly when he isn't watching me, devouring me with his gaze. I like touching him when he isn't touching me, because I can pay attention to all the sensations under my fingertips.

Certain parts of his body wake up much faster than his brain!

He twitched and rolled over and his eyes opened. Then he stared, as if he couldn't believe I would dare do such a thing.

Then he laughed and pulled me over on top of him. He likes to pretend that I lead sometimes, even though he is strong enough to force me to do anything he pleases. He could hurt me without thinking, but he is always careful of me, even when passion and pleasure tear him apart. He likes to tease me, tickling or holding me up so I can't touch anything. Sometimes he pins me to the bed, making me helpless. Or he holds back when I need so desperately to feel him inside me, I think I might die.

Playing during our lovemaking is sometimes even better than the lovely falling, spinning feeling that comes after everything just shatters deep inside me.

Only Rey can do this to me. I thought this sense of finding a perfect fit, a perfect match, was only a daydream, a notion left over from more

fanciful eras. Something my parents and their scientist friends left behind when they fled to this world beyond the explored rim of the galaxy.

It will hurt to leave him. I have to leave him.

I can't let myself love him. Or rather, love him too much. He's already come too close to my heart in some ways. How can I not feel affection for the man who makes me fly, who makes me feel cherished, who takes away my loneliness?

But I can't stay. We come from two different worlds. Rey has his duty to this valley. I have a duty to my parents' colony. I'm the princess, after all. Just as he is the prince of this valley and these people.

* * * *

Rey was tired. Worn out from preparing the valley and fortress for winter. Tired of the heavy burden of thinking for people who should have been able to take care of themselves. And tired of wondering what troubled Princess. His project this winter would be to break through the wall that still existed between them and forge some kind of understanding.

That afternoon, with an icy storm nipping at his heels as he rode through the outer gates of the fortress, Rey decided he was tired of Princess' obsession with her garden, too. She had missed the ceremony that marked the beginning of the descent from fall to winter, because she was busy in the greenhouse. Rey didn't have much faith in the ritual of burning nettles to

ward away disaster, illness and evil, but he knew better than to scoff at something that would help his people survive. Belief was just as potent a force as medicine or a good sword.

Deciding now was as good a time as any to reach for that deeper understanding, he headed for the garden gate. Princess was always there, as if she thought she could hold off the winter snows with her work.

Rey grimaced as he grasped the latch and an icy gust swirled around the courtyard and reached down the collar of his shirt. The heavy wooden door swung open slowly on silent hinges.

A sea of white filled his vision. Seven spirit birds--swans, Princess insisted on calling them--gathered around her.

Princess sat on the ground, stroking the neck of the nearest bird. She smiled through tears when another tugged on her long braid with its truncated beak, while a third put its head in her lap. All around the strange grouping were piles of wilted nettles. Had the spirit birds brought them to her? Why? What did the creatures want her to do for them?

She looked up then, as she rubbed tears from her cheeks. Her eyes widened and she leaped to her feet. The spirit birds made a thunderous sound as they all rose up in the air and hovered at man-height above the ground. She raised her hands, beckoning the birds to settle again.

Rey staggered, thinking he heard a woman's voice, speaking in a foreign tongue. His head ached for a moment. He recalled times he heard

the same phantom voice, crying out in passion when he made deep, slow, aching love to Princess.

"Come away from them." His voice cracked and he scowled, furious at his weakness.

The spirit birds landed, but they raised their wings in threat and glared at him with their huge, dark eyes. Images clattered through his mind, knocking him to his knees. Tall, white-haired, angry men and boys hovered over him, threatening him with fists and clubs the size of the mountains.

Threatening him to stay away from Princess?

She went to her knees in front of him and wrapped her arms around him. At her touch, the aching that reverberated from his head down to his belly faded, and the thundering muted to a dull roar. Again, that woman's voice rang softly at the very edge of his hearing, imploring, sweet and foreign.

The spirit birds settled down, folding their massive wings and calming, losing the angry sparkles in their eyes. He stared at them. Could it be the spirit birds were protecting Princess? They thought he was a threat to her?

He couldn't stop a moan when she slid free of his arms and darted across the garden. Then she came back, holding her slate.

She drew again the picture of her family; king and queen, seven princes, one princess. Then she drew a circle around the princes and wrote 'sick' under them. He nodded that he understood, though he didn't.

Princess drew ovals around them and colored them in. Something tickled at the back of his brain, making connections he didn't quite want to accept.

"Eggs?" he whispered.

Princess' eyes lit up and she kissed him. She erased the slate with an impatient swipe with her sleeve. She drew another egg, with cracks in it, and drew a spirit bird coming out of it. Then she pointed to the seven spirit birds, watching as if they understood everything passing between him and her.

Rey shook his head. The explanation that leaped into his mind was that Princess' brothers had been ill and turned into eggs that broke open and released spirit birds. It would explain her strange connection to the creatures, their protective manner toward her. Still, how could men turn into spirit birds?

A quiet voice inside whispered, *Spirit birds are mute, and so is Princess. What if ...?*

"Brothers?" he said.

With a radiant smile, she flung her arms around him and kissed him. Rey wrapped his arms around her, picking her up as he kissed her, putting all his need for her, his fear of losing her, into that kiss.

Common sense prevailed as he drowned himself in the sweetness of her mouth, the gentle warmth of her arms around him. Likely, Princess merely *believed* that her brothers had died and turned into spirit birds. It

didn't matter whether he believed her story or not. It only mattered that Princess thought he believed her, and she was happy.

He would do anything to keep her happy.

He would do anything to keep her.

If she would eventually turn into a spirit bird, what could he do to stop her?

A mother never abandons her child, the same quiet voice whispered to him. If he got her pregnant, if she gave him children, she wouldn't leave.

"Come with me," he growled, and swept her up in his arms.

The slate clattered to the ground as he strode blindly out of the garden. Princess didn't reach for it, too busy returning his hungry kiss. The spirit birds rose up in the air with a rumble of wings and a gust of wind.

Rey ignored the people he passed as he strode through the fortress. He wished he could banish everyone, escape his responsibilities and the constantly watching eyes and whispering voices. He wished it was just Princess and him, alone in a valley that was forever springtime.

It felt like forever before he kicked the door of his room shut behind them. He stumbled to the bed and dropped down, turning so he didn't crush her under him. She struggled free and he froze, positive that he had finally frightened her into flight. Princess got up on her knees. Her hands shook and her face was flushed as she peeled out of her clothes. Rey laughed as he sat up and stripped as quickly as he could manage.

In his haste, he forgot to remove his boots. He bent over, trousers around his ankles, to remedy that problem, and Princess tackled him, stretching him out on the bed underneath her. He let out one shout of surprise, which turned to laughter a moment later as she straddled him. The laughter cut off abruptly, cracking and turning to a groan as she took him deep inside and began to rock, hard and fast, almost bruising with the intensity that matched her expression.

They were both bruised and sated when a servant brought a tray of supper and left it in front of the bedroom door. Rey left Princess sleeping and limped across the room to fetch the food. He froze when he thought he heard the muted thunderclap of enormous wings outside. Clutching a blanket around himself against the chill of night, he stepped out onto the balcony.

Was it just his imagination, or did he see seven white blurs on the horizon?

“She’s mine,” he muttered. “You can’t have her. Leave her alone, do you hear me?”

He hurried back indoors, shying away from the blasphemous thought that hovered at the edges of his mind.

The only way he could ensure Princess would always be his would be to find and kill every spirit bird.

Chapter Seven

Month 9, Day 29

I'm pregnant.

I've been too much of a coward to journal for weeks now, and I have to face this truth before I do anything else.

I suspected for a while, but I chose to ignore it. After all, if I didn't have my menses for months, what were the chances I could get pregnant almost as soon as my cycles returned? Fool! After hours in Rey's arms, in his bed, living in a sensual haze, the chances became very good indeed.

I'm nauseous at the smell of certain foods. My breasts feel tender, and not just after Rey spends half the night driving me wild with his mouth. My stomach feels rounder. That has to be an illusion, because I certainly couldn't be so far along.

I want my mother. I want a good science text, to explain what's about to happen to me.

I want my voice, so I can tell Rey he's a father.

No. I don't want him to know.

I pray I'm mistaken.

But despite the disaster this has created, something inside me shouts like a silly little girl with a brand new doll.

And I think about how happy Rey will be.

Or will he? I don't know anything anymore.

* * * *

Rey smiled as a fierce fall storm lashed the expensive glass of his balcony. All was right with the world: his people were safe in the fortress, the harvest had been more bountiful than ever, and Princess sat in front of the fire, writing in her journal. That was a good sign; a sign she felt better. He felt guilty for resenting the time she spent in her book. Whatever had been bothering her had passed. She would be her usual self soon. All was right with the world.

The seven months of winter lay ahead of them. Seven months to create a deeper bond between her and him, to teach his people to accept her as his wife and adore her. No more sidelong glances and whispers. No more leaving her in silence until they needed her healing knowledge.

Seven months to teach her to understand his language completely, so she could communicate with written words, rather than pictures, signs and gestures.

The spirit birds didn't fly in this weather. Princess no longer slipped from his bed before dawn to stand on his balcony and watch for the spirit birds to come to her. Perhaps now she would forget her nettles and abandon her greenhouse.

He had seven months to wean her from that strange part of her life, to make her completely his. He had to ensure that he was as much a part of her as she had become a part of him. Perhaps it was weakness, but Rey knew something deep inside him would tear and bleed forever if Princess ever left him. He would be able to live without her, but he wouldn't enjoy it.

Something troubled her. Sometimes he caught her sitting in her greenhouse, surrounded by her bundles of dried nettles, with a distant look in her eyes. Sometimes she cried, great crystalline tears and shudders strong enough to bring her to her knees. Sometimes she stood for hours in the churned, empty garden with her arms spread to the wind, as if waiting for feathers and wings to appear.

That always terrified and infuriated him. The only way to fight his growing rage of helplessness and keep from lashing out in violence like his father was to sweep Princess up in his arms and carry her away for hours of hot, sweaty, hungry loving.

And sometimes, he roused from the daze that followed the steep plunge from ecstasy, and found her curled up around her pillow, out of his reach, silently crying. She would never tell him what was wrong.

* * * *

The last time my brothers were here, Rey saw them with me, and he carried me away in fear that gave a new spice to our passion.

How appropriate. And symbolic.

I wasn't sure I was pregnant, but the moment my brothers gathered around me, they knew for certain.

Dominic and Calvin and Benedict are delighted. I caught images from them of spoiling my baby.

Heinrich, Ethan and Francis were unsure. Gerard was angry. It took a while to sort through the tangled images, and when I understood, I cried until my throat hurt from the sobs I couldn't voice.

My brothers came to force me to leave, because it was the last visit they could make until spring. Swanns go back into their chrysalises and sleep all winter.

If I had left that day, my brothers could have guarded me two-thirds of the way home before they had to abandon me. Now, with the baby coming, I can't risk the long trip and I certainly can't spend the winter alone in our abandoned colony. There would be no one to help me when I went into labor.

My brothers are furious. They warned me all through the fall to leave this valley, so I wouldn't become trapped. They consider Rey and his people barbarians, living among fantasies and fears and a caste system that makes women into property and degrades people into servants for the comfort of others. They don't want my baby raised among these people.

But there's nothing any of us can do until spring. Until I find the cure.

I am trapped. They were right.

Rey will never let me leave, once I've given birth.

I'll simply have to make up my mind to leave when he's busy, when he can't stop me. Do I spend the winter trying to make him understand I can't stay, once spring arrives? Or do I hurt him by vanishing from his life with no warning?

I don't want to leave. I don't want to deprive my baby of his or her father. I want to be Rey's lady and stay here, healer and lover, and become one with his people.

How can I?

They revere the swanns as messengers between life and death, between physical and spirit world. When my brothers are cured, we will destroy one of the beliefs that give beauty and hope to Rey's people. How can I take that from them?

My vanity needs to know, will he be wounded when I vanish? He cherishes me. He enjoys me. He likes to dress me up in pretty clothes--and then take them off me as often as possible. He likes to listen to people relate how my simple medical knowledge helped them. He likes the envy he sees in other men's eyes when they look at me, walking at his side.

But does he love me? As part of his soul? Does he feel about me as my parents felt about each other?

I don't think so. He's never taught me the word for love in his language. I'm afraid to ask him.

I'm afraid to consider if I truly love him.

What a mess I've made for myself, just because I couldn't control myself. I let my hyper-acute senses, my loneliness and my silly schoolgirl infatuation with a handsome, powerful man carry away my good sense.

* * * *

“She’s pining away, for someone or something,” Regina said. “I’m worried about Princess.”

“Do you, really, Mother?” Rey had to smile. He looked around the great hall, where most of the fortress’ inhabitants had come to be together during the first of the winter storms. “I thought you didn’t like her.”

“How can anyone not like her? She is obedient and giving and sweet-spirited. She doesn’t chatter until I wish I were deaf. Her skills have warded away a dozen illnesses that could have turned fatal.” She sighed. “I like her, if only because she makes you so happy, but something tells me to keep my distance. And now this sadness in her. If we don’t find the answer, she’ll waste away to nothing by spring.”

“Waste away?” Rey snorted. “She’s rounder every day. Her clothes hide it, but she is putting on flesh.” He grinned, savoring in memory the feel of her breasts in his hands; fuller, softer, more sensitive to his teasing play if her gasps and writhing were any indication.

His mother stared into his face until Rey started to feel uneasy. Then that calculating look came to her face.

“Mother? What are you thinking?”

“My son, you are an oblivious fool.” Regina laughed and stood and hurried out of the room. Rey followed his mother, wondering what she was up to now.

Princess sat alone by the fire in the library with a book open on her lap, her gaze focused on the flames. She didn’t look up right away when they entered the library, and Rey knew that was a bad sign. He had thought her spirits were improving, but if his mother was worried, something had to be wrong. Princess stood when she saw them. Regina took her by the hand.

“Child” Regina laughed and sat on the long cushioned bench, and drew Princess down to sit facing her. “Are you with child?”

Rey reached for the nearest shelf to steady himself. He couldn’t breathe as he waited for the answer. His mind raced and he cursed himself as an oblivious fool, just as his mother had said. How could he have noticed the changes in Princess and not realized what they meant? What sort of hedonistic idiot was he, to take pleasure in her softer, fuller flesh and not realize what caused the change?

Princess took a deep breath, then placed her free hand flat across her belly. She nodded. The shadows in her eyes made him want to howl and take his sword and slash something to ribbons. What could make her so sad and fearful when he was there to protect and pamper and adore her?

“Bless you, child,” Regina whispered. She cupped Princess’ face and kissed her forehead.

Princess burst into tears. When Regina embraced her, she clung to the woman as if she had been drowning and finally found something to keep her afloat.

Chapter Eight

Month 15, Day 3

I am totally alone. It's ironic. Rey never leaves me alone for a minute. Someone is always watching me, pampering me, making sure I'm warm and I have something hot to drink and I never have to do anything for myself. But I feel so alone.

I've lost my brothers. They don't speak to me in my dreams. When I try to reach them with my mind, I work myself into terrible headaches. Are my brothers dead, or simply lost in their winter sleep?

Most of the time it doesn't matter. I sleep for long periods myself. Probably a result of my partial mutation, like my voice and hair. Rey was worried the first time I slept for two nights and a day, but I convinced him it was all right. How did I convince him, when I'm not sure myself?

He was worried because I slept through the midwinter protection ritual. He is so careful of me, and I do adore him for it. I don't want to hurt him, but I will.

Spring and the birth of my baby will come too quickly. I have spent this winter in sleep, in dreams of joy and sorrow. I flee in the night, soon after my baby is born. Or I give up on curing my brothers so I can stay here as Rey's wife and the mother of his children, his toy and treasure.

How can I condemn my daughters to such a limited, fearful, shadowed life? I can't. So I must flee.

If only I could take Rey with me, make him part of my world. But I can't. He can't leave and I can't stay. If only we could make a new world where we both could fit.

Month 17, Day 20

I have a son.

I look at him, lying beside me on the bed, and I can hardly believe he came out of my body. He has his father's thick, dark hair and my mother's blue-gray eyes, and Gerard's snub nose.

I weep whenever I think of my family. I know it's only weariness and hormones making me weepy and irritable, then giddy just a few moments later. And yet, I wonder. The birth of my son, the coming of spring, signals the end of my safe, quiet life. The end of my fool's dream of love and shelter. Rey doesn't love me, Aileen, the daughter of scientists. He adores the toy that gives him pleasure and a son. Rey only sees me as a thing, not a person.

Though I would give him my soul and heart, he will never give me his. Though I have learned his language and we 'talk' through my slate, have we ever truly communicated? As my parents communicated? As I have dreamed of communicating with the man who would share my life?

Regina interrupted this to give me a cup of warm milk and to wipe my eyes and encourage me to lie down and rest.

She has been utter goodness to me all winter, but yesterday she was my guardian angel. I thought I would die from the pain, but she gently, implacably, made me walk and made me breathe and made me listen when I wanted to cover my head with pillows and smother and end the pain.

She sits on the end of the bed, watching me write, and smiling. I know she accepts me only because of the fine, strong boy I birthed, her grandson, and not because she truly likes me for me. Still, it's nice to have someone smile at me.

I haven't written much here because really, what was there to say? Until my brothers return and we can try my theories to find the cure, there is very little to do. Except wait.

And adore my little son.

Rey hasn't told me what he wants to name the boy. I have to think of him as my son, never Rey's. It's the only way I can leave without tearing my heart out.

My heart aches at the thought of never seeing him again, but I know it's useless to live with a man when I'm the only one in the relationship who dares to love.

I love Rey. My first lover, my only lover, the father of the only child I will ever have, my protector. My jailer. Yes, I can admit that now, too. I've

learned enough over these months to realize that he only married me to make sure no one else could have me.

I'm going to cry again. My depressing thoughts are partly a result of my raging hormones. But only partly.

Rey is coming. I have to stop. He doesn't like to see me writing in this journal. It's a part of me he can't control.

* * * *

Rey paused in the doorway, watching Princess wipe at her eyes and scramble to hide her battered journal under her blankets. He tried to hide his irritation. It was foolish to be jealous of a book filled with paper and ink. When she used her language instead of his, it felt like she deliberately hid a part of her soul from him.

“She is fine,” his mother whispered as she slipped out the door past him. “Every woman is torn inside, body and spirit, after giving birth. She can no longer completely protect the boy. Now it is your job.” She chuckled. “No woman ever quite trusts a man to do some jobs properly.”

Rey mustered a smile, kissed his mother's cheek and stepped into the room. He waited, watching Princess, until the door shut and the latch clicked behind him. He brought his handful of flowers from behind his back, snow spears topped with vibrant gold and blue flowers, and approached the bed.

Princess' eyes brightened and that knot of fear in his gut loosened. She didn't hate him. His friends had warned him that after giving birth, some women never let their men touch them ever again. As if it was all the father's fault that a mother endured so much pain giving birth.

Rey hadn't been able to stand in the hallway while Princess gave birth. She couldn't scream and curse him like other women, to release the pain. So he had violated all tradition to kneel by the bed and hold her hand. He had watched her strain and suffer, watched her go pale and then flush red with effort and pain. He had seen her throat strain with silent screams. She had never accused him with her eyes--and somehow that condemned him more than if she had cursed him in front of all his people.

"You're beautiful," he whispered as he placed the flowers in her hands. She blushed and looked away, making him choke even as he laughed. When she responded to his kiss with a shadow of her former eagerness, he knew everything would be all right.

He sat with her for the rest of the afternoon, telling her about all the activity as the inhabitants of the fortress prepared for spring planting. He described the fields and forests, the animals he had seen waking and moving through the trees and sky and streams. She listened eagerly, and he knew she couldn't wait to be outside and exploring again.

Rey remembered how he had first seen Princess, wandering the fields, taking samples of all the plants, searching for something. What had she

found in simple, irritating, pervading nettles? He was afraid to ask her. Afraid that she would one day walk out the gates, never to return.

No. She couldn't leave him. She had given him a son. What mother would abandon her child?

Swans? She scribbled the word on her slate--and flinched when he scowled.

Rey hated seeing her name for the spirit birds. It brought back memories of that one eye-to-eye encounter with the creatures. The threats he had sensed from them, their protective, possessive attitude toward Princess. She was his wife, not theirs. His to protect and shelter and hold.

"No, my treasure. No spirit birds in the sky yet." He took hold of her hand and stroked the palm until that pained look left her face. "Mother says you can leave your bed tomorrow. Would you like to go outside if the day is warm?"

He didn't need her scribbled 'yes!' on her slate. The brightness of her smile was all the answer he wanted. Rey swore again he would do anything, everything, to keep that delighted expression on her face.

* * * *

Princess disobeyed every caution Regina gave her. She got out of her bed less than a day after giving birth and staggered around the room, holding onto furniture to hold herself upright. She refused a wet nurse for

their son, insisting on feeding him herself. She fought for her recovery from childbirth like a man would fight for land. Rey admired her for that, even as it tied knots in his gut. Regina laughed at him when he confessed his fears more than two weeks after the birth of their son.

“Leave you? Why would she leave you? You are the father of her child, her lover, her protector. Where would she go?” She patted his cheek, as if he were a five-year-old. “Such thoughts, my son. Who would she love, if she doesn’t love you?”

Rey knew his father had never shown kindness, much less love for his mother. He had valued her, needed her strength to rule their people, but love was beyond his skills or values. Rey knew his mother had never loved his father. What kind of man would he have been if they had been more than partners? What kind of man could his son be? A better man, if Princess loved his father? Did Princess love him?

“The spirit birds,” he whispered. He felt sick to his stomach at the mention of the word, ‘love.’

All laughter left his mother’s face. He had told her about seeing Princess surrounded by the spirit birds. He couldn’t tell his mother that Princess claimed the spirit birds were her brothers. She would think Princess had lost her mind.

The days sped past and he watched Princess work in her garden, growing golden under the spring sunshine. Everywhere she went, she carried their son in a sling across her chest. Rey spent all the time he could

with her, when his duties didn't drag him away. They spent hours discussing the name of their son, but still hadn't come up with a choice that suited either of them by the time the first moon birthday came.

"Think of something!" he pleaded, teasing, as he gathered up his bow and quiver and packed his saddlebags. Tradition demanded a feast for the first moon birthday and naming ceremony. "Maybe I'll see something while I'm out hunting."

Talon? she scribbled on her slate. *Muddy rock? Flowering tree?* Princess' eyes sparkled, and he swore he could hear giggles, at the back of his mind.

"Why not Prince?" he whispered, and snatched her into his arms to kiss her, hard and deep and fast.

Princess wrapped her arms around him, pressing herself full-length against him. Rey ached with the intensity of his response. Tradition forbade husband and wife making love until after the child's first moon birthday.

"When I return" He stepped away from her reluctantly. And with some discomfort.

Something tore at him, deep inside, when Princess stood by the gate, holding up their son as he rode out. She lifted the boy's little arm, making him wave. Rey shuddered, sickened with a foreboding he couldn't explain.

* * * *

Month 18, Day 19

I am sick with relief that Rey is gone.

Ian--I named my son for my father--is mutating. It's a blessing I refused to let anyone tend him but me.

I am free of the virus, but I must have carried it in my genetics all this time. Ian's dark hair is streaked with silver-white. This morning as I nursed him, before Rey woke, I noticed a feathery texture at the nape of his neck. How long before all his hair changes?

His eyes are darkening. Is it my imagination, or are they bigger?

My mind screams for my brothers, but they don't hear, they don't come. Are they still in their winter sleep?

Or are they dead?

Chapter Nine

Month 18, Day 20

I have to find the cure NOW. And flee.

All Ian's hair has changed and he has white down all over his body.

I keep him away from everyone and hide in the greenhouse, preparing all the formulas theorized over the winter. Powders rubbed on his skin, tinctures on my nipples when I nurse him, concentrated paste rubbed on his lips. I've even scraped his tender skin with nettles, making him cry.

Nothing works. How soon until he grows mute? How soon until his neck lengthens and his eyes turn black and grow enormous in his head? How soon until the chrysalis? Is he contagious? If all I manage is to halt his mutation and keep the virus from spreading to others, I will be content.

But I want my baby back, the way he was three days ago.

I have one more day before Rey's hunting party returns. When I can't make my mind focus on formulas, when Ian sleeps, I spend my time writing down everything I know, everything I have done, in Rey's language, so he will at least understand. Even if he never accepts what I have done.

Day 20, continued

I fell asleep, and Regina came in and picked up Ian before I could rouse.

She left him with me, mercifully, but I heard her shouting as she fled the garden. The sounds of people talking, arguing and running grow louder as I write this.

They're coming into the garden. I have nowhere to run.

I can't understand half the words they say. Rey never taught me the words, I never heard anyone use them in my presence, all this time. But I don't need to know the words--their voices tell me all.

I am evil. I am a danger. I am condemned.

They won't even call me out of my greenhouse to face them.

They're barring the door.

Fire. I heard dozens of voices calling for fire.

Where are my brothers? Why can't they hear me?

The people are going to burn me and my baby, and there is no one to help me.

Just once, before I die, I want my voice back so I can scream for Rey. Just once.

And tell him I love him, even if he could never love me. Even if I don't know the word in his language, and he doesn't know it in mine, I would make him understand. Just once.

* * * *

Rey pulled up hard on the reins, positive he heard a woman scream his name. The hunters trailing out behind him didn't see him raise his hand for silence. He snarled at them to shut up, and stood in the stirrups as if that would help him hear.

In the quiet, when even the wind paused, he heard her. That voice had cried out in passion and giggled like a child in those most private moments with Princess.

He knew she called him. He felt the terror, the sorrow rippling through the air, as if he could touch her heart and share the deepest stirring of her soul. Rey didn't care how it happened, only that it had.

Why was she afraid? Why did she cry out for him so intensely that he heard her on the highest slope above the valley? Rey shook his head, refusing to waste time in questions. He could figure that out later, when he was sure Princess and their son were safe. He slammed back down into the saddle, dug his heels into his horse and raced down the mountainside again. If his men followed, he didn't bother to look.

* * * *

The mob isn't satisfied with letting the fire burn through the wooden supports. They throw stones to break the glass and let the burning sticks piled all around the building fall through. Some flames have caught in my

dried nettles, which are piled up everywhere like kindling. The smell is peculiar and the smoke clings to everything as if it were solid, like glue.

I remember last spring, when I first discovered what I thought was the cure. The same sweet-sour, powdery smell filled my nostrils when I burned those nettles in a fit of pique.

I remember feeling the strangest tingling sensation through my skin, into the roots of my hair.

I remember this same smell after the ceremonies to push away evil and sickness. Were they burning nettles? Why? That explains why this garden was allowed to grow nettles instead of food, yet explains nothing.

An enormous wave of smoke is rolling toward Ian's makeshift cradle of blankets and chairs. Should I move him or leave him there, to let the smoke put him to sleep, so he dies peacefully, instead of suffering in the fire?

Rey, where are you?

* * * *

Have I been an oblivious fool?

I went to move Ian, unable to give up hope even this late. His hair was no longer white. Just from a few moments in the smoke. He didn't seem harmed, but what do I know?

I breathed smoke from the nettles. That's what changed my hair last spring. Not the stinging of the nettles in my skin, but the smoke! I breathed enough smoke last fall to bring back my menses, if not cure me completely.

If I had participated in the rituals this winter, would Ian be safe from the virus right now? Would I have my voice back, my natural hair color?

The ritual to drive away evil spirits with the burned nettles protects the people from the virus!

I have to put Ian back into the smoke, to cure him. If he changes back to normal quickly enough, maybe I can get someone's attention, show them he's all right, stop this murder.

Even if they insist on killing me, as the carrier of the disease, my Ian will be all right.

I've found the delivery vector, the catalyst to activate the healing, but is it too late?

Where are my brothers? Why don't they hear me? I've called with my mind and heart and soul until my head hurts but they don't come. They can't still be asleep. I refuse to believe they're dead. Have they abandoned me, because I wanted Rey? They were angry because I stayed here, instead of going home to our abandoned colony while I had the chance.

I refuse to give up. I've found the cure.

Please, don't let it be too late!

* * * *

My voice has come back.

A rock and a rain of the glass hit me in the face and I cried out at the pain and shock.

After silence for so long, I don't even recognize my own voice. If my throat hadn't hurt, would I have even known the sound came from me?

If I scream, will someone have mercy?

Please don't let it be too late.

Where are my brothers? I can feel something, someone, at the edges of my mind, but something blocks me. Wouldn't it be ironic if my long-sought cure keeps me from calling for help when I need it most?

If I am to die, please, let someone find this journal and learn the cure for this virus before more generations suffer.

I write this now, in Rey's language, for him to find.

Rey, I give you my heart. You are the other half of my soul. I don't know the word for this in your language.

Your world is trying to kill me, but I no longer want to leave you.

Come to me. I cry out in my soul for you. Hear me and feel what my heart feels for you.

* * * *

Rey saw the plumes of smoke rising up over the walls of the fortress as he neared the gates. He smelled the sweet-sour, dry odor of burning nettles, and frowned, confused. The naming ceremony for the boy was still a day away, and the spring ceremony another month away.

Then he knew, and fury twined with fear roared through him.

Princess' nettles were burning. She wouldn't burn them. And she wouldn't *let* someone else burn them.

He pushed visions of disaster from his mind, knowing they would cripple him when he needed a clear mind to act. Roaring at people to get out of his way, he stormed on horseback through the connecting courtyards, heading around the fortress, to the isolated little garden he had given Princess. The column of smoke grew thicker and darker in the sky, and the air smelled stronger of burning nettles with every hoofbeat.

Thunder boomed overhead and he looked up, craning his head back so he almost overbalanced and fell off his horse.

Seven spirit birds soared past him, their massive wings tearing gusts through the sky. They aimed toward the column of smoke.

Rey dug his heels into his horse and ignored the people who had to leap out of his way. Wind stung his eyes, and grit and bits of ash. That was the reason for the tears that blinded him.

He watched the birds dive. Heard the crash that seemed to shake the ground and the walls, the echoing tinkle of glass, and knew they had broken through the roof of the greenhouse.

A woman screamed. The same voice he had heard during the deepest passion and ecstasy with Princess. The woman who had called his name in his mind on the mountainside.

Princess had found her voice.

Rey snarled at the people blocking the gate to the garden. They dove out of his way and he thundered through and leaped off his horse. His mother knelt facing the building, her hands over her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. She was covered in ash and burn marks where sparks had hit her face and clothes. She slowly swayed back and forth, staring at the building.

“Mother—” He wanted to shake her and demand an explanation. There was no time. “Princess! Where are you?”

“Rey?” Her voice shattered. Violent coughing came through the crackle and roar of the flames consuming the wooden frame of the greenhouse.

Glass shattered and more sweet-sour smoke filled the air, as thick as cloth, wrapping around everyone and everything. He saw the barred door and something snapped inside him. This was his fault. He had kept Princess here when she tried to roam the mountainside, serving the swans. Who was he to keep her prisoner? Just because he didn’t understand her mission from the swans didn’t mean it was worthless.

That thought stung him to action. He leaped forward and grabbed the bar holding the door closed. The wooden bar smoldered and scorched his

hands through his thick riding gloves. He pulled it out of the brackets and flung it aside and heard someone cry out in pain when it hit him.

Glass tinkled and chimed as it fell, shattering all around him as he ran into the greenhouse. His eyes streamed from the smoke. Rey stumbled toward the furthest corner, hoping Princess hid there, where the flames hadn't reached.

She knelt near the center of the greenhouse, only her head visible above a sea of nettle smoke. Dim shapes surrounded her on the floor, writhing in the heavy folds of the smoke. Princess watched them, her eyes wide, streaming with tears. She turned to him and lifted one hand to wipe her eyes, and tried to smile.

When he saw she cradled their son in one arm, he swore loudly, a long string of words that couldn't express his fury and guilt.

"No." She held her free hand out to stop him from coming any closer. "You will step on them."

"Who?" He looked at the writhing shapes again. "You can talk now?" A quiet place in his mind marveled that he wasn't overwhelmed by the miracle. How many times had he wished for her voice, to hear her moan and laugh when he gave her pleasure?

"Nettles cured me. Cured Ian."

"Who?"

"Ian. My son. Named for my father," she said, glaring defiantly at him as she stumbled through the words. Princess gestured at the writhing shapes.

“My brothers. Swanns. Came for me. Save me.” Her face twisted in a mixture of laughter and tears. “Cured.”

“I came to save you,” he protested.

Princess stared at him, her eyes wide and for a moment, he feared she didn’t see him. Then she blinked and nodded, and cuddled their son closer with both arms.

He heard shouts and then the splash of water against the scalding glass. Fury snarled through him again. The people had imprisoned his wife in here and tried to burn her. They only fought the fire now because he, their ruler, was in here. Would he have to stay with his wife and son every moment of every day to keep them safe?

Glass screamed and shattered as icy well water hit the overheated surfaces. Rey leaped forward, dodging the smoke-veiled shapes, and threw himself over Princess and the baby to shield them.

The greenhouse disintegrated around them. Fresh air blew in, tearing the heavy folds of smoke away like scissors through cloth. Rey stared at the shapes now revealed on the charred, glass-littered floor. His gorge rose, even as some glimmer of understanding started tugged on the edges of his mind.

Seven young men lay curled up on their sides, naked. Bits of white down clung to their elongated limbs, but that vanished, melting like snow in the hot sun as he watched. People screamed or whispered or gathered

around or fled. Rey ignored their varied reactions, caught in one place by his need to protect Princess, and his curiosity.

Their eye sockets shrank and their faces melted like wax in the fire, becoming totally Human as he watched. Their white hair darkened to gold. Princess' hair had changed too. It now shone a deep gold with hints of red.

"Seven swans," he murmured. "Seven spirit birds."

"Brothers," Princess said. "Cured. Saved."

The baby whimpered and she lowered him from her tight embrace and peeled a thin layer of blanket away from his face.

"He's--he's normal," Regina said in a choking voice. She staggered toward them, staring. "I thought he was being turned into a spirit bird--as punishment," she ended on a whisper, as Rey turned his furious glare on her.

"You did this." He raked his gaze over the people who dared to remain and stare. "You imprisoned my wife and son and tried to kill them."

"I thought she was evil," his mother blurted, and backed away. "I saw her with the spirit birds. I thought she had betrayed you. Endangered us. Threatened the birds. I thought they were taking the boy to punish us."

"So you condemned her to death without a trial."

"It is the law! Burn the nettles. Bathe the changed ones in smoke. Repulse the evil that festers in our flesh!"

"I should throw you in the fire. All of you!" Rey started forward, one gloved hand reaching for the sword at his waist.

Two things stopped him. Princess' hand clutched the sleeve of his jacket. And the swanns-turned-men began to move and moan.

“The law is right--but you read it wrong,” Princess said. A ghostly smile twisted her lips when the people reacted with shock at hearing her speak.

Chapter Ten

“Nettle smoke is the cure for illness, not evil.” Benedict, the oldest brother, stood at the head of the long council table.

He had taken Rey’s place, but Rey didn’t mind. He felt as powerless, insignificant and dazed as all the other leaders who had listened while the brothers related what had happened. In a few short hours, they had revealed mysteries that had endured for generations, after the knowledge of their ancestors had been lost and warped by time.

Two brothers stood behind Benedict. The other four had insisted on remaining with Princess. Rey knew they were there as guards. He didn’t blame them, because he didn’t trust his own people when it came to his wife and son.

All these months, he had worked to keep Princess here, his treasure--his prisoner. Would he have to send her away to keep her safe? According to the law, she had the right to leave him, because his actions had threatened her life and well-being. She had the right to take their son.

One of her brothers had yanked the marriage bracelet off her wrist and threw it at Rey before they led her away. Everyone in the garden had witnessed it. He ached too much to protest. He feared too much for her safety to ask her to stay.

He listened, his mind and spirit torn as he struggled to understand. Benedict related the entire tale, from the onset of the virus to the deaths of the first generation of their colony, to the mutations that took everyone but Princess.

“Women are naturally resistant, but not immune,” Benedict said. “Aileen would have eventually mutated just like us.”

That was another thing Rey would have to get used to. Hearing Princess’ real name changed her, took her another step away from him.

“Fortunately, she burned nettles and inhaled the smoke. Not enough to cure her, but enough to halt the mutation. That’s all anyone can do. We don’t have the science to eradicate the virus, because it’s buried in our blood. Your ancestors learned regular doses of nettle smoke could keep the virus in stasis. That’s why you have the ceremony at the turns of the seasons and at the naming of each child. To protect you.”

“Please, stay and teach us everything we have forgotten,” Arnon, the eldest council member said.

Others chimed in. Rey kept silent, agreeing. The brothers needed his people because their home had been devastated by disease. Princess was the first child born of these settlers who came from another world. They were all little more than children, on the verge of becoming men. Yet they held the lost knowledge and science of his ancestors who had come from the stars. Rey could give them a home--if the brothers could forgive what his

people had done to Princess--and her family could help them regain what they had lost.

If they had that lost technology, his father could have warned Princess' father when their colony first landed. No one would have died of the virus.

He would never have met Princess and seen her as a wild, white vision. Would he have ever taken her to his home, his bed--his heart?

Rey only half-listened while the debate continued and conditions and ideas flew back and forth across the table. The shock of what he had realized took the breath from his lungs.

Princess was more than his treasure. She was his soul. He knew he could be a better man, a better leader, with her to guide him, to teach him. To love him.

Did she love him?

From the look in her eyes when she walked away with her brothers, he suspected she was already halfway over the mountain and he would never see her again.

Benedict had called them barbarians. Throwbacks. Uncivilized brutes who consigned women to the level of possessions, with no right to choose their lives, their craft, their husbands.

Why should Princess stay with him?

* * * *

Hundreds of swanns gathered in the valley leading down to the river in front of the fortress. Rey marveled that every one of them contained the mind and soul of a person who had been changed by the virus that had struck Princess' people. What astounded him more was the silent communication, mind-to-mind and soul-to-soul that the swanns shared. Princess' brothers had learned the language of all the colonies across the planet, through their contact with the other swanns. They had learned the history, the geography, the rhythms and patterns and cycles of the entire world.

The swanns did not breed--but neither did they die, unless killed by storms and accidents. There were swanns among that flock of white who had been alive, Human minds locked in alien shapes, for over three hundred years. When enough nettles were found to create enough smoke to cure them, those people would regain their true shapes and speak to their descendants and teach them.

Rey knew a great and good thing had happened for his people and for the world today.

So why did his heart sit so heavily in his chest?

He was busy until nightfall, giving orders, making decisions and preparing for the harvest of nettles. He kept busy, refusing to let his mind and heart drift into the area that pained him so greatly.

The soft sound of a woman's voice in lullaby met him when he opened the door of his room, near midnight. Rey shook his head, positive he hallucinated. It was understandable, after the strain of the day. He walked into the room, unbuttoning his shirt. All he wanted was sleep and forgetfulness and--

Princess sat before the fire in the cushioned lounging chair he had made for her during her pregnancy. She nursed their son. Ian, she had named him, and Rey was determined Ian he would stay. The sight of her pale golden skin and full breasts and her red-gold hair streaming over her like a garment stunned him. How could she be here, with their son, when she had left him?

"You never taught me the word," she said, without raising her head or looking at him.

"I was wrong." He shut the door and slowly approached her at the fireplace, seeing her again as the wild creature that he feared to frighten and wanted so desperately to hold.

"We both were."

A sweet smile lit her face, totally focused on the baby. Ian had fallen asleep, still suckling. Deftly, she detached his small mouth from her nipple and stood, walking the few steps to the cradle. She didn't cover herself. Rey wondered if she did it to torture him with his need for her. Princess put the sleeping baby in the cradle and stood over him a moment.

“Your brothers are changing our world. When the swanns are restored and come to us, we won’t be the same. I need you, Princess--Aileen.” His heart twisted when a tiny sparkle lit her eyes at the use of her name.

How could such a small thing mean so much to her--unless she had been chafing against her imprisonment more than he had imagined?

“Need me?” She glanced at the bed.

Rey didn’t dare look. He recalled all the times he had swept her up in his arms, declaring he ‘needed’ her. How many times had she been slow to respond? He should have realized she wouldn’t be, couldn’t be eager for his touch all the time.

If she hadn’t responded to his first kiss, hadn’t stepped into his embrace their first night together, would it have been rape? He had been so determined to possess her, he hadn’t tried for courtship or seduction. Or even gentleness.

“I need you to help me be a better man. A better leader.” He swallowed hard and stepped up to the cradle. “A better father.”

“What about a better husband and lover?” Her head bowed further, hiding her face--but he glimpsed a sparkle behind her hair and dared to hope her smile had returned.

“I forced you. Ambushed you. Gave you no say in our marriage. Are we married?”

“What is the word for when a soul reaches for another? When I feel like I would die without your smile, your touch? When I want to stay, even

knowing how hard it will be?" She brushed her hair back from her face and he realized that sparkle in her eyes was tears.

"You never taught me the word," she whispered. "Why didn't you teach me that word? Everything you taught me, the things you demanded from me, the things I asked and you gladly did, even when you didn't understand. Why not that one word?"

"I'm an oblivious fool, just as my mother said."

He felt as helpless and brainless as the boy he had been, eight years old, mounted on a horse far too large for him, trying to prove to his demanding, cold father that he could hunt with grown men. It had been almost more than his young arms could manage, to bend a bow nearly as tall as him, but he had done it.

Why couldn't he speak the word she wanted to hear?

"Is that why you were so unhappy all winter?" he said instead.

"We come from two different worlds and times. I knew I couldn't stay here, or I would lose my mind. I would be crushed down into a shadow of myself. "

"So you are leaving me." The unspoken word hovered on his lips, tasting bitter. He knew, as if he could read her mind like the swanns did, she would think he spoke it only to manipulate her. "I don't blame you."

"I can't survive in your world ... and I can't ask you to leave it for me." She tried to smile, and blinked away the tears that gave him a little flicker of hope.

"You changed my world by bringing your brothers here." Rey caught hold of her hand and raised it to his lips. She shivered at the light kiss he brushed over her palm. "Teach me your language, Princess. Teach me that song I heard, so I can sing it to our son. Help me change my world? Help me make it safe for you to live here."

"Why?" All the aching loneliness he had seen in her eyes these many months and hadn't understood--if he was honest, hadn't wanted to understand--came out in that one word. "If I do all that, I will have to stay. Why should I stay?"

"Love." He pressed her hand to his chest, even knowing she couldn't feel the aching deep inside that made his heart lose its rhythm. "That's the word you want."

"Love." She closed her eyes and nodded. She pursed her lips as if tasting the word. "Why didn't you ever teach it to me?"

"Maybe ... you had to teach it to me first?"

Her eyes flickered open. They glistened with more tears, and he knew she understood and ached for him.

"My parents loved us more than anything. More than the colony, more than all the scientific knowledge they could ever collect. They told us and showed us. I won't live without it."

"Stay and you won't have to." He took a deep breath. "I was wrong. Teach me to be the man you deserve. The father our son deserves." He stepped around the cradle. "I do love you. Even if I never earn your love--"

He stopped short, feeling a jolt of mixed pain and pleasure when she pressed her cool fingers to his lips. Princess stepped back, picked up her battered, silvery journal, opened it and handed it to him. Rey read what she had feared would be her last words, in his language, not hers. Hot tears stung his eyes. He closed them and held his breath, refusing to cry. Strange new thoughts swirled through his mind and upended his world.

When he opened his eyes, Princess was gone.

He dropped the book and turned to the cradle, expecting to find it empty. Ian slept undisturbed. Soft laughter nearly startled a curse out of him. He turned, following the sound, and found her standing at the side of the bed, one hand reaching out to grasp the curtains. Hope stole the breath from his lungs. Her robe hung open, tantalizing him with glimpses of her curves and golden skin glimpsed under the garment of her hair.

His body immediately ached. Rey remembered the last time he had listened to his body's demands and acted on them without thinking, without finesse or concern for her needs and feelings. How had she endured his selfish treatment of her so long?

Princess only smiled and held out her hand to him.

"Tell me," he whispered. "Tell me what you want."

"To start over." She slid her robe off her shoulders, letting it fall into a puddle of fine, wine-colored cloth at her feet. Now all she wore was her hair and that smile he thought he would never see again. Rey wanted to touch that red-gold mass, wondering if her hair was still as cool and silken

soft as when it had been snowy white, or if it was warm like flame. "We've both been oblivious fools. I stayed for the wrong reasons. You held me here for the wrong reasons. But some good did come of it. You didn't mean to make me a prisoner. That's simply the way women are treated here. Silent and servile and putting their man's pleasure above their own." Mischief lit her eyes. "I admit, you did make sure I knew pleasure."

"Then always tell me what you want." He kept his steps slow as he crossed the room and unfastened his clothes. He left them in a trail across the floor. "I'm tired of a silent wife. I can't read your mind, like the swanns."

"Yes, you can. You did. You heard me calling you with my heart, didn't you?"

He stopped, gripping his belt and loosened pants, and stared at her. Princess laughed and sat on the bed, scooting over to make room for him. Her grin shifted to open-mouthed shock when he stepped away from the bed.

Rey locked the door and hurried back to her, nearly tripping as he stripped off his pants and dropped them on the floor. He leaped into the bed from three steps away and she squealed, laughing as he nearly landed on her.

"Never, ever be silent," he growled between kisses. "Never again."

"Didn't my brothers warn you how noisy I can be?" She sighed as he turned her onto her back and stretched out on top of her.

"Good." He nipped at her neck and grinned as he earned another squeak and a moan of pleasure that vibrated against his lips. "I plan to be very noisy."

And so they were. And for many nights--and days--to come.

Ever after.

THE END