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Purr-fect Seduction
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Book Blurb

Jill Morfranna, a sassy redhead from New York, is enjoying a photo shoot in the Scottish Highlands when she stumbles into an alternate realm. Trapped in a frightening world of strange creatures, her life turns upside down when a sinfully handsome shape-shifter kidnaps her. Will she win Dare of Knight Watch's heart or will he trade her for his sister at the next slave auction?

For Gary

Preface

Excerpt from THE GREAT BOOK OF THE PRIDES - personal entry by King Micah of Knight Watch.

The History of the Prides.

It came to pass that the Great One looked down upon his youngest child with sadness. The Goddess Boda sat alone beside the immortal black leopard, Arious. Once again, his daughter had turned away a potential suitor.

The Great One spoke to his daughter and She told her father She preferred the company of her cat, that he was her friend and protector. The Great One in his wisdom changed the cat into a warrior of great stature.

He gave him the face of a dark angel and eyes of amethyst. Fearing Arious would miss his former life, The Great One gave him the ability to change between man and beast.

Boda accepted Arious for her mate and many children came from their union. But as the centuries passed, Arious became restless. He picked up his great sword, Vengeance, and entered the lands of the Five Gates. Thunder roared and the ground shook as Arious cleansed the land of demons. Boda pined for her husband and fearing for his safety, she began to cry. The lands of the Five Gates ran with the flood of her tears.

Arious returned and seeing his mate's distress vowed never again to leave her. He watched, furious that the people of the Five Gates had become corrupt in his absence. He thought on the problem and decided to make all the wild cats within the Five Gates both man and cat, in order that they may serve him. From that day forth the prides were born.

Arious, joyous of his decision, informed his mate. But Boda was concerned. A man who was also a cat would breed indiscriminately. Therefore, in Her good judgment, She made the male cats attracted only to the scent of one mate for life. She enchanted their child seed so that only their true mate could release it with the venom of her bite.

Arious was concerned that this restriction would limit the growth of the prides. He instilled his males with venom so powerful that it would change any female of the Lady Boda's choice to a pride female. He in his wisdom gave the prides magyck and a powerful glamour to help them on their way.

He named his prides after the cities between the Five Gates.

The white Tigers became the Doucheron Pride.

The Lions became the pride of Lyoness.

The Snow Leopards became the Lonza Pride.

Finally, the black leopards of Dryad he created in his own image. The Arious Pride princes became the hand of Arious and the compassion of the Lady Boda, in order that they may forever ride the lands of the Five Gates under the standard of the Knight Watch for peace and justice.

Chapter One

"I wish I was coming with you on this shoot. I'm just so jealous. Scotland in autumn, the castles . . . *the men*. If you find a rugged alpha male Highlander, bring him back for me . . . please!" Sally begged breathlessly.

Jill chuckled at the thought of dragging a sex-starved author to a photo shoot.

"Sorry, Sally, somehow I think the drooling will put them off. I'll email the proofs. See you in a few weeks," she replied, snapping her cell shut.

Jill lifted the manuscript from the desk and read the final paragraphs.

He took her in his powerful arms and branded her his own with a possessive kiss. Gwen savored his rich exotic scent. Brogan lifted hooded, deep blue eyes and gazed down at her. A shock of silky black hair brushed against her cheek.

“You belong to me, my bonny Gwendolyn, there’s no going back,” he growled. He swept her into his arms and kicked the bedroom door shut.

Jill poked out her tongue at her reflection in the full-length mirror and pulled in her stomach.

“Yes, a rugged, handsome Highlander would just jump at the chance to follow me to New York. I don’t think so. Sorry Sally; if I offered to bribe him with cold hard cash a man like Brogan would still run back to the hills as fast as his legs would carry him.”

Jill turned over the pile of romance novels on the bedside table. Her fingers practically sizzled, and her heart filled with pride as she caressed the illustrations and traced her name in small print on the back. She reveled in the sheer joy of taking that one simple photograph, adding her artist’s flare and creating a sensual masterpiece.

She would miss London with its kaleidoscope of cultures. She had, in the name of research, prowled the musty museums to gain insight into England’s colorful history. Memories of Hampton Court Palace, Saint Paul’s Cathedral and the Tower of London would stay with her forever. The knights, the castles and the romance of the medieval buildings had seeped into her soul. This ancient city looked so different from her home in New York.

She glanced at the packed suitcase and backpack filled with overnight essentials. Her forehead crinkled; had she packed her cell and digital camera? The drive to Scotland in a cheap rental would be dangerous, but she could do this. She understood the risks involved with a woman travelling alone, but what the hell. Where else could she find the ideal castle in the perfect setting? The tall, dark, kilted hero might be difficult to locate, though. What would she do if men no longer wore kilts in Scotland? Well then, she would bat her eyelashes and try to persuade an alpha male to wear one.

Rainclouds hung menacing in the early morning sky as Jill packed the car and pulled on her gloves. A rush of excitement shot through her as she yanked open the rental car door and slipped behind the wheel.

“Scotland’s bonny kilt-wearing Highlanders beware. A wicked witch cometh forth.” She giggled.

The sun began to slip from view just as Jill arrived in the village of Triburn. She pulled the overheated car to a halt outside the Hangman's Noose, the only accommodations the small village had to offer. She smiled as she gazed with an artist's eye into the distance. The Grampian mountain range dominated the skyline. Granite peaks stretched toward the heavens, a million years in service as sentries to protect the valley. As the autumn sun set, it blasted a flame corona high into the velvet sky and coated the tree-covered mountainside, highlighting the many brilliant shades of fall.

"So this is the gloaming," she exclaimed, as she stepped stiffly from the car.

"Aye, lass 'tis a joy to behold," rumbled a deep voice from behind her.

Jill jumped and turned, surprised to see an elderly man waiting by the gate. His back bent with age, and he had a woolen cap pulled down upon a mass of unruly hair. He smiled broadly and his crinkly blue eyes twinkled with amusement. He tugged a thick cardigan around his chest, opened the gate and waved her inside.

Jill returned his greeting with a smile and noticed with some relief that he wore a kilt. Maybe finding a hunk-a-kilt-wearing man wouldn't be so difficult, after all. She picked up her bags and followed the old gent as he shuffled inside. She ran her fingers across the lichen-covered stone slabs that made up the walls of this ancient pub. Wide oak planks bolted together with thick iron rods formed the front door. Warmth flowed from the entrance, concentrating the strong smell of whiskey, beer, and beef stew. Voices hummed in muted dialogue. Jill peeled off her gloves and followed the man's tattered slippers down a set of well-worn sandstone steps.

She ducked her head to enter a very traditional Scottish pub with whitewashed walls and dark oak ceiling beams. A polished oak counter stood at one end, complete with beer taps displaying the usual logos. She slowed to admire an old oil painting of men in kilts waving swords above their heads. *Now those are original Highlanders!* She hurried to catch up as they entered the dining area. The place was delightful, she decided, as she maneuvered her bags between wooden tables and chairs scattered before a massive stone fireplace.

She lowered her gaze to avoid the curious stares from the men hunched on tall wooden stools along the bar. They drank dark beer topped with foam from large glass mugs. They fell silent, and turned as one to eye her with interest before they returned to their conversations.

The old man waved a hand toward a rosy-cheeked woman. She smiled and wiped her hands on a floral apron.

“Welcome to Hangman’s Noose, you’ll be the lass from London then?”

“Yes, Jill Morfranna,” she replied, offering her hand.

“I’m Nancy and this is my husband David. Your room is ready. Did ye have a good trip?”

Jill chuckled. “Well as good as possible in that old car, but then Rent-a-Wreck was all I could afford.”

The old couple smiled. Nancy showed the way to a small, cozy little room at the back of the pub. The threadbare rug on the floor covered irregular sandstone slabs. A comfortable armchair sat beside a fire, blue flames licking across a large chunk of peat. A lumpy single bed and a cupboard took up all the other space. Jill counted her blessing. Although tiny, the room appeared comfortable enough, was spotlessly clean, and best of all, it was inexpensive.

“You’ll be hungry. Settle yourself and come along into the bar. I’ll fix you up with a bit of supper,” said Nancy as she backed from the room.

After thanking her hostess, Jill unpacked and then returned hesitantly to the bar and waited. As if by magyck, Nancy appeared to show her to the kitchen. Seated at the scrubbed wooden table, Jill inhaled the rich aromas of stew beef, potatoes, and vegetables that wafted up from the great tureen set down before her.

“This looks lovely.”

Nancy smiled broadly. “You must sample the porridge while here in Scotland; ‘tis the best in the world.” She handed Jill a large floral plate with silver cutlery balanced on top. She filled Jill’s plate with savory stew then dished up some for herself. “What brings you to our bonny land? You’re not English, are you?”

“I’m from New York. I’m looking for castles and a handsome man to photograph for a book cover. Would you know where I might find a big rugged Highlander?”

David took the seat next to his wife and sighed. “You’ll no find a one of our fine Highlanders left in this land. The English are ta blame; slaughtered by the thousands, they were.”

“I *am* sorry. So there are no big, strong men left in Scotland?”

“Aye, there be many, but not any in our local villages that I ken. Don’t fash y’self lass; there be many castles to photograph. There is a fine one a top of the next hill yonder, Braeford Castle. That place overflows with history. Legend has it that the Druids traveled through time using the White Stones of Morfran.”

Jill’s eyes widened. “Morfran? How curious. That’s so close to my own name. Are they still there, those white stones?”

David smiled, showing blackened front teeth. “Aye, lass, they’ve been there since the

beginning of time.”

“Well, I’ll make sure I visit them first thing in the morning. A Druid stone circle is too good to miss.”

* * * * *

Morning came far too quickly. Jill opened her eyes, content to lie within the warmth of the bed, to concentrate on the small spindles of early morning sunlight that forced their way between the threadbare curtains. How intriguing, she mused as the illuminated dust motes formed tiny gold laser beams.

Clouds of steam escaped her lips as warm breath hit freezing air. She pressed her palms to her eyelids. *Damn, why didn't I stoke the fire last night?* The black peat smoldered, the once wild blue flames a distant memory. She sighed and watched a small wisp of smoke pour charcoal fumes into the air.

Jill shivered and pulled the thick checkered blanket up to her nose. Scotland is far too cold, she decided. The decision to rise from her warm bed more difficult than she imagined, she gritted her teeth and flung the blanket off the bed. An icy chill slammed into her as her feet hit the floor. She jumped onto the rug and hugged her chest. Pain shot up her spine, and her teeth chattered.

“Come on Jill; we have work to do,” she chastised herself and rushed into the bathroom. A hot shower to thaw out, and then off to find to perfect castle.

* * * * *

Jill enjoyed breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon washed down with strong, black coffee. The cozy kitchen and the smell of baking bread made her languid. She could stay there forever, wrapped in warmth and delicious aromas. She ran her hands through her hair, not wanting in the least to go out into the cold, but duty called.

With a yawn, she pulled her backpack over one shoulder and ventured outside. Icy wind slapped her face and invaded her clothes with frosty tendrils. She fumbled the keys with useless frozen fingers, taking three attempts to unlock the car. She slipped into a driver’s seat as cold as an ice tomb. Turning the key, she smiled when the old car spluttered into life.

The heater shook violently the instant she turned it on. Dust spewed out from the vents in a cigarette-smelling fog.

“How lovely. A free cigarette ash face mask so good for the complexion.”

She waved her hands toward the open window, the dust burning her lungs like a brush fire as it wafted past her face and outside. Once the car had cleared and she could breathe without choking, she took a map from the glove box. She spread it across the steering wheel and found Triburn Village. There were several different routes she could take to get there. Hmm. Which way to go? She bit down on the inside of her cheek and slid her finger along the winding road up the mountain, finding Braeford Castle only half a mile inland from there. She tapped her fingers on the map. She'd probably have to leave the car, and walk the last mile or so. Just the thought made her pull her scarf closer about her neck.

Jill drove slowly up the mountain road, admiring the Scottish countryside that fell away below. She smiled with pure joy as her soul embraced the wealth of color that spread out in every direction. Autumn had turned the leaves of the trees to every shade of gold. Holly draped with mistletoe climbed above clumps of blackberry and redcurrant, each celebrated the end of summer with a festival of berries. Trilburn Valley spread out from the foot of the mountains in a splendid cloud of amethyst heather. Along the roadside, tall pink thistles laced their way through the lush grass. The hillside above and valley below exploded with color as bold as an artist's palate.

She pulled the car off the road and gathered her backpack. Camera in hand, she stepped onto the windswept hillside. No other person wandered this path; in fact, not another soul passed by all morning. She stood for some moments, imprinting this wonderful place in her mind, the air so fresh, so crisp. She lifted her head, inhaled a deep breath and sighed in pleasure, immersed in the beauty. Hoisting the backpack over one shoulder, she followed a well-worn goat path that wound up the hill toward Braeford Castle.

She found the climb steep, but soon the hard ground leveled out just as she spied the castle nestled in the trees. The grass here grew short, springy and filled with small cream daisies. A wide circle of tall, weather-beaten chalk pillars encrusted with lichen and moss drew her interest. One single flat chalk rock sat in the very center. In the midst of all this beauty, a noticeably barren grey circle of earth sat within the White Stones of Morfran.

A will o' the wisp danced around the center stone before flitting off in another direction. Jill reached for her camera and stood motionless for several minutes in the hope of capturing the unusual phenomenon on film. She sighed in disappointment when the tiny light didn't reappear, and stepped into the circle. She wiped the back of her hand over the trickle of sweat running down her brow. Her nose twitched; the humid air stunk of brimstone. How strange, she mused. She jumped when a blast of heat shimmered from the barren ground and radiated through her clothes. Dropping her backpack onto the center stone, she took off her scarf, unzipped her jacket and tied

them both around her waist. She bent to touch the ground; the dry earth crumbled under her fingers. She shook her head; the heat and smell had vanished with the will 'o the wisp.

The castle rose above the trees, clearly visible from this vantage point. It climbed in majestic elegance from behind a clump of almost impenetrable undergrowth. It would be easier to shoot from on top of the stone, she decided, and scrambled with difficulty onto the large centerpiece. She lifted her camera and focused on the ancient structure, zooming in on the crumbling keep and decaying parapet with its broken crenellations.

She laughed at a noisy black and white-crested tit as it gathered ants from a rotten tree stump. She turned her camera, and took a couple of shots. The little bird turned its head, ants escaping from its beak. It eyed her with interest.

Jill smiled at the little bird.

Lowering her camera, she turned. "That's the castle in the bag. If I could just find a handsome man in the next hour or so, preferably with flowing black hair, and big muscles, I'd have a few days left for sightseeing."

Jill inclined her head toward the musical sound of a babbling brook drifting on the breeze. She imagined a loch containing a wealth of hidden treasures to photograph hidden beyond the bushes. She clambered off the stone and hoisted up her backpack. The winter dead copse of bramble was almost impenetrable as she pushed hard against it with her shoulder.

"Sweet," Jill exclaimed, as she forced her way through and emerged on the other side. She plucked absently at the thorny branches that clung tightly to her jeans. She glanced over her shoulder and gasped. A rainbow surrounded a high, craggy rock, and the misty spray of a waterfall glistened in muted sunlight as it fell down to bubble on the surface of a small loch.

She watched, camera poised, as dragonflies hovered, frozen in mid air, before darting back and forth. She laughed at the cloud of kingfishers dressed in cobalt and flame, dashing in rapid formation across the surface. She aimed her camera to capture that second in time as they took turns to dive for small fish in the shallows. On the far side, a red deer approached and gazed at her with soft chocolate eyes before bending its head to quench its thirst.

Jill lifted her camera and began to shoot.

"This is magical," she whispered, as she turned the camera.

Scents of the forest filled her with a surreal calm, making her feel as if she belonged. The red deer raised its head, started, turned and bounded into the safety of the trees. The surface of the water rippled, and then, in slow motion a golden-skinned man emerged, his head and upper torso breaking the surface.

Jill stared in wide-eyed amazement, her limbs frozen, unable to move or make a sound.

The man's long, dark hair fell in a wet sheet past massive shoulders, wide enough to carry a sofa. He tossed his head, sending a spray of water droplets in all directions. Lifting his strong square chin, he stared directly at her with such intensity her knees trembled. Hooded, deep violet eyes held her gaze. She remained frozen in time, transfixed by his beauty. A face as sinful as a dark angel drew her with incredible animal magnetism. She gazed unashamed, openly admiring his high cheekbones, long straight nose and full sensuous lips.

Even as he strode toward her, she didn't move. His powerful thighs cut through the water. Two gold armbands encircled biceps like pythons. His hands were strong, and his long, tanned fingers trailed in the water. A voice deep inside insisted that she should run away. Instead, as if compelled by an invisible force, she watched in awe as rivulets of water cascaded down his ripped, hairless chest.

He stopped a few feet from where she stood trembling. He evaluated her with interest; his eyes smoldered as they met her own for an instant. His gaze dropped, lingered with hunger on her tank top. Heat climbed up her neck and into her cheeks as his gaze continued down to her jeans, hiking boots, then slowly all the way back up.

Jill's hands clung to the camera as she continued to stare, mesmerized by a single drop of water that rolled between his huge pecks, and downward to his deliciously bronze stomach. She watched as it disappeared beneath a thin piece of material at his waist, and swallowed hard as she took in his unbelievable size. *They don't make them like this anymore*, she thought, dragging her eyes back to his face. A subtle change masked his good looks. He sniffed the air, his eyes narrowed, and he crouched as if prepared to pounce.

A rush of fear squeezed her chest. She spun on the spot and ran blind. Her legs as heavy as lead, she crashed into the bracken in a frantic search for a way through the undergrowth. If she could only make it through the bushes and return to the Morfran Stones, it would be an easy sprint downhill from there all the way back to her car.

But the sharp brambles were impenetrable. The green pasture eluded her as she pushed farther into the dark thicket. Her throat tightened as she gasped short, labored breaths. Her chest ached. *Oh, God, I don't want to die here*. Her ears rang as she threw herself beneath a densely barbed blackberry bush. She rolled into a small, dark hollow and curled around her backpack. The damp earth soaked through her jeans, and the rank odor of leaf mold burned her nostrils, but she held still. If she stayed quiet, and did not panic, she would get out of this.

She pressed her hand over her mouth to silence her ragged gasps and peered through the

branches. Hidden inside this cavern of moldy thorns, she could spot any pursuer before they spotted her. To her left, a small shaft of sunlight filtered through a thick broad-leaved vine. She waited, her entire body shaking with the adrenalin rush. She glanced up, stopping the scream in her throat and shuddering. *Spiders!* Several of the tiny black critters sat on filmy webs overhead, suspended within the dry branches. Stay calm, Jill, she thought, and stifled a sob. A black spider hung at eye level, busy spinning a silver prison around a fly caught in its web.

A line of inquisitive ants crawled relentlessly up beneath the hem of her jeans, tickling her as she struggled to lie still. She glanced up and her breath caught. A pair of gold eyes peered at her through the darkness. A cold shiver ran down her back, igniting a wave of panic. *I have to get out of here!*

“Ahh!” Her scream echoed in her ears as she rolled to her knees. Time slowed, her legs became heavy and refused to support her weight. She swore, dragged her backpack behind her and scrambled away on her knees toward the light.

She rose unsteadily to her feet. She clutched her stomach, nauseous and dizzy. The forest swam out of focus. She drew a deep breath and shot a nervous gaze around the small clearing. Sunlight streamed through a wall of green foliage and cast eerie patterns on the mulch-covered soil. She panicked, turned on her heel and ran at the vines with all the strength she could muster. The resilient bramble pushed back, as if it had a mind of its own and hoped to prevent her escape. She staggered and nearly fell before regaining her balance.

“You won’t beat me,” she spat between clenched teeth. She snatched up the backpack, clutched it against her chest and rammed it hard at the tight-knit leaves. Her breath came out in a rush; hard vines lashed against her face and arms as she crashed through the tangled mass.

She fell forward into open sunlight. A smooth, grass covered bank rose up before her; it reached out, curved inward in both directions to block her view. She jumped to her feet, grinding her teeth as she looked over her shoulder and scanned the undergrowth. She took a long, deep breath; neither the man nor the beast had followed. She bent over, resting mud-caked hands on her trembling knees and sucking in deep, steadying breaths. Exhaustion replaced the adrenalin rush and melted her muscles into quivering masses of jelly. She shook her head, mentally berating herself for not accepting the gym option offered by her employer.

“That was close, shit for brains. Note to self: do *not* approach naked men.”

She climbed with slow determination to the top of the mound and slumped, completely drained from the exertion. A cramp spasm knotted her calves, her arms and face stung. She grimaced at a trickle of warm blood dripping down her arm from the numerous deep scratches,

and wondered if the rental car came with a first aid kit. She'd definitely need a few dozen Band-aids. A light breeze licked painfully across the wounds as she shielded her eyes from the sun and looked both ways for the old rental car. The road to the castle could not be too far away. She wrinkled her brow, for only a dusty cart track wound along the hillside and disappeared inside a distant crop of trees.

"What the hell?"

She crouched low to the ground and scanned the dirt road. A group of people approached. Several massive men with long hair and beards sat astride horses. They dragged six women on foot behind them. The men were dressed in dark brown with animal skins draped around their shoulders. Each carried a short sword. As they drew close, Jill gasped, slid down the mound and flattened her body against the bank. The now too familiar rush of fear quickened her heart. Those weren't *people* at all!

Dear God! They all had pointed ears. Pointed ears and *large curled horns!* Their hands were rough and claw-like. She covered her nose in revulsion, her nostrils burning with the incredible stink as they passed close by. The women had pointed ears as well. Hands bound and legs hobbled, they followed their captors, their faces sad, dejected, many of them in tears. The tattered medieval dress appeared very familiar to her and she considered the period of their costume to be 11th Century.

Jill watched the strange party pass below her. *Could this be a historical re-enactment?* Although no Scottish history she had read had mentioned men with horns. Viking invasion? No. These men's horns grew from their skulls and were not on a helm like a Viking's. She lifted her camera, took a few shots and froze in horror when the leader of the group stopped. He sniffed the air and turned his horse in her direction.

She wiggled backward down the embankment, pushed the camera into her backpack and scanned the area below the mound for an escape route. She scrambled to her feet, tore down the slope, stumbled and fell hard onto her knees. Unable to gain purchase, she rolled to the bottom. The moment she stopped rolling she scrambled to her feet and ran. Cold air burned her lungs as she followed the edge of the thicket, desperate to find the circle of white stones and her car. A horse whinnied close by behind her and she dashed headlong into the bushes.

Her breath rushed from her lungs as the copse collapsed beneath her and she hit the ground hard. Bruised knees scraped as she crawled blindly across the damp, musty soil below the thicket. Sweat peppered her brow, dripping saline rivulets into her eyes. Brambles tore at her clothes and cut into her without mercy, lacerating her face and arms. Spider webs coated her hair. Hot tears

spilled down her cheeks, stinging the deep scratches. She fought the frantic desire to scream, and shuddered with uncontrollable fear as sobs racked her body.

She tried to keep her head. *Stay calm, stay calm*, her mind insisted as she pushed on through the bushes. Emerald ferns caressed her cheeks as a small bright clearing opened up before her. She scrambled to her feet and gasped, frantic for air. She lifted her head and froze. A scream caught in her throat as the shrubs across the clearing rustled. The bushes opened and a gigantic black cat sprung toward her. A pitiful wail escaped her throat, her knees crumpled and she descended into darkness.

Chapter Two

Jill opened her blurry eyes. Her head ached like a bitch and her mouth felt as dry as the Sahara. Above, a light flickered and illuminated the curved wall of a cave. Terror gripped her and turned her stomach as she tried to sit up. Rope secured her hands and feet. She wrestled frantically against her bonds but only succeeded in tearing the skin from her wrists. She rolled onto her side and stared into the gloom.

A small fire surrounded by stones glowed in the darkness and the man from the loch sat cross-legged beside it, his hands resting on his knees. This time he wore soft brown and cream leather.

“Where am I? What do you want?” she asked, terror restricting her throat so the words came out garbled.

His large, hooded eyes watched her for a very long moment. He rose in one fluid movement, walked over and examined her face. He knelt beside her and pressed a water skin to her lips. She shrank away in fear at first, but then common sense took over. If she wanted to survive, she had to stay hydrated. She put her lips to the canteen spout and took a long, greedy swallow. She coughed, choking as rivulets of cold water spilled down her chin, and into her hair.

“You do not *know*, Human?” he demanded, as he lifted her hair and ran a warm finger over one ear.

She jerked her head and tried without luck to move away from her captor. She took stock of her surroundings as her mind frantically sifted through all the information she had read about hostage situations. She wanted to scream her lungs out. *I must try to stay calm; this is the first rule of survival.*

“Well I know I’m in Scotland, but where, precisely, is *here*? Why do you call me ‘Human’?”

Why am I tied up?" she demanded, and wiped her mouth on her blood-streaked arm.

The man sat back on his haunches, his face concealed by the shock of black hair that hung to his shoulders like silk. Disorientated, her head pounded and the many cuts across her arms and face burned. The waves of fear dissipated as he leaned toward her to check her bonds. His warm, musky scent delighted and intoxicated her senses and she sucked it in like a pain-killing drug. *He's gorgeous; he would make a fortune as a cover model.* She shook her head. Had she gone completely mad? The man had bound her, and she was helpless. He could very well murder her in the next second.

"You are tied because you are my prisoner, and I know not of this Scotland that you speak. This is the realm of Lyonesse."

"Then I'm lost. Why do you call me 'Human'? We are *both* Humans," she exclaimed and picked at the knots at her wrists.

He lifted his head and glared at her.

"I'm *not* Human; I'm Arious Pride. He snorted as if insulted. He turned away and bent to add more sticks to the small fire. "You have a name, Human?" he demanded. He pushed the hair from his face with both hands, and lifted his eyes to stare at her intently.

"Jill Morfranna."

The man tipped his head back and hissed, his lips curled to display remarkably white fangs. He sprung toward her with menace. Jill screamed and rolled away, clawing at the ground in a frantic effort to escape.

"Witch! As I thought, Morfran sent you through the Stones to bewitch me and steal my soul. I've found the device you carry. Tell me the truth, and I'll let you die swiftly with dignity," he roared, as he stood over her waving a sharp blade from side to side.

Jill looked into eyes filled with fury. She sucked in a deep breath to steady herself. He would kill her in an instant if she failed to placate him. She desperately fought back the tears that had begun to prick the back of her eyes. Stay calm, she told her self. *Reason with him.*

"A witch? Give me a break. Do you really think they exist? Look buddy, I don't know what you're on, but I don't have any device to steal souls. No one sent me to bewitch you. Look at me; do you *really* believe I could do that? I am butt ugly *and* fat; no man would give me a second glance. It makes sense that this Morfran would send someone beautiful to bewitch you, not someone like me. You *must* be able to see that. I do know about The Morfran Stones; I visited them this morning but I took some shots, that's all. Hey let's *talk* about this before you kill me," she stammered and inched away until her back hit the hard rock wall.

The man inclined his head and sniffed, his mouth open as if he tasted the air.

“Mayhap I was mistaken, Human. If you think you can trick me you should know that I’m not easily fooled. Know this; *I will* kill you if you allow one lie to cross your lips.”

“I won’t lie to you, I promise.”

“I can smell your fear, but your underlying scent is indeed strange. Like honeysuckle. It makes my head ache as if it’s a demon scent. If you speak the truth, do you claim that you are unable to wield sorcery over me, Human? ”

“I swear I have no special powers and I’m sorry that my perfume offends you. What’s *your* name?” she asked as she tried to plaster some semblance of a smile on her lips.

He slid down on the floor next to her, and leaned his back against the cave wall. Jill desperately tried to appear calm. With a little luck she believed she could talk herself out of this. Her breath whistled out from between her teeth when he re-sheathed the dagger.

“You speak in riddles, Jill of Morfran. If you do speak the truth, it would seem that you came in error through the Gate. The Stones hold great magyck. Our wise men say they can send travelers through time, and dimension. The Fae tell stories of lost Humans abandoned within the Five Gates, never to return from whence they came.”

He sat in silence as if he needed time to decide how to continue the conversation. The long, uncomfortable moment hung between them until he inclined his head and went on.

“My name is Darrius of Knight Watch. My friends call me Dare. Methinks witch or not I’ll spare your life, for now, as you will make a fine trade when I find my sister.”

His deep, rich, baritone voice had dropped to a whisper that sent shivers up her spine. For a moment, Jill wondered if this were all nothing more than a nightmare. Perhaps she’d been injured, knocked on the head or something, and even now lay in a coma in some Scottish hospital. She blinked her eyes a few times and cleared her throat. “Your sister is missing? *I am* sorry.”

Good Lord, now I’m talking to an illusion. Maybe I’m not in a coma. Maybe I’ve gone stark-raving mad. “I think this must be a dream, or maybe I have a concussion. I feel very strange, and to be honest I’ve seen things that don’t exist. I read heaps of fantasy so it is probable that I’ve imagined all of this. Not that even *I* could dream up *this* nightmare.”

He remained silent, his head inclined as he listened to her rambling.

“Okay, I admit that you’re just the alpha male I need. A man like you is a fantasy come true. But *my* dream would *not* include kidnapping, and what did you say? *Traded* for your sister? How nice; did you lose her in a card game or something? No don’t bother to answer, I don’t for one minute believe that men with fangs exist, or even those men with horns,” she muttered and leaned

her head back against the cool wall. She sat very still and stared at the flickering patterns on the ceiling of the cave.

Dare observed her with interest. She could not conceal her fear and mayhap had a serious head injury; her rambling made no sense. If indeed she were in this realm in error, it would explain her confusion and her dress. She wore blue breeches and a knitted top of a soft fabric unknown to him. He knew pride females would dress like this to disguise themselves as males while travelling. But she had not attempted to conceal her gender, and in fact, the clothes accentuated her curves.

Her pack had indeed held many unusual items. Her pocket revealed a small square metallic object. *Had it not sent out a blast of light so bright it blinded him?* The small square at the back held his likeness. He moved away from the female and sat by the fire as fear clutched his heart. *Mayhap this device is a soul catcher.*

He blamed these discoveries for his harsh treatment of her. He'd used both force and the magyck of his glamour to control her. Now, as she lay bloodied and dirty, he felt a tug on his conscience. To treat a female in this despicable way made him no better than the Rams. And it was not this female's fault that Helsa was lost. Gods, he had tried so hard to find her.

"It has been many moons since my sister, Helsa, left our home on the Island of Dryad to search for her twin brother, Hawke." Dare shook his head as his memory of the events unfolded yet again. His family expected Hawke would return with his sister. They were devastated to discover that she had not met him as planned. They knew at once something was wrong, a female travelling alone could fall prey to many predators. "I believe the Rams have captured and enslaved her, or she would have returned home by now. For the past three moons, I have tracked the Rams . . ." *Yes, and watched helplessly as they raided the small villages, unable to come forward until I discovered the Rams' stronghold.*

He stood and leaned over the terrified Human. He winced when she trembled as he untied her hands. He rubbed the red welts on her wrists with his thumbs. He would calm her with his glamour, sooth her with his scent. His gaze lingered over her slowly. He had encountered no other female like her within the Five Gates. Red hair flowed down her back in abandon, long strands curling in a gentle caress around her flushed face. She held an Other World beauty unlike pride females. Under the dirt and scratches, pale skin, high cheekbones, lush red lips and a turned up nose met his stare.

Her skin bore Morfran's Curse, although the small spots only dusted the bridge of her nose, and scattered across the rise of her breasts. However, troubled exotic eyes betrayed the magyck

within, deep pools of jade surrounded by a veil of midnight lashes. They were Faerie eyes, almond in shape, and slanted. He held no doubt that she possessed Fae blood.

Her lush and rounded body intrigued him, but she had an obnoxious scent that confused his senses. *Did she not know of the magyck? Did she speak the truth? Only Fae could work the Stones. Mayhap Morfran disguised her ears to make her appear Human. Or, mayhap she had spoken the truth. She appeared to be exactly what she'd claimed – an unprotected lost female alone and in danger. Mayhap the Lady had sent her to him.*

Dare bit the inside of his cheek. Of late, the task of finding his life mate had consumed his mind. He had reached his twenty-fifth year now, and had watched both older and younger siblings paired. This female was attractive to him, but her unusual scent did not indicate that the Lady had sent her. It made no never mind; he would treat her well from now on. His family came first, and if needs be, he *would* trade her for his sister. Let the Rams deal with her, witch, or no. Why should he care?

He returned to the fire, and pushed a large pot of stew into the coals. He would not hunt tonight. Jill of Morfran would alert the Rams to his cave if she started to scream in terror. He smiled to himself. He would refrain from morphing into his cat for a while. At least until she realized this was not a dream.

Jill had frozen as he bent over her. His eyes explored her with an intimacy that sent heat soaring into her cheeks, and his hands were gentle as he undid her bonds. A shiver had run up her spine when his thumbs rubbed small circles across her wrists. His close proximity made her feel safe. How strange to feel that way. His dreamy eyes had never left her face. They were the deepest violet, soft as the velvet petals of a petunia. Vulnerable in one instant, and the next shuttered as if to hide his true intent.

“Thanks Dare, I won’t run away, I *promise*,” she said now as he leaned over a pot of stew. “I just want to go home. There were men with horns and they chased me. Then I saw a big black cat, a panther I think. Did *you* rescue me from it?”

Overcome by all she’d been through, she gave in to the sobs shuddering through her body. Her gaze darted around the cave in search of an escape route.

She watched Dare fill a bowl with water, and then set it aside. He rifled through his saddlebags in silence and took out a small pot and some rags. He settled beside her, took her hand and began to wash the dirt from her arms and face. Jill flinched at his touch then relaxed. His gentleness entranced her, brought on a deep sense of calm.

"I'm sorry that it was necessary to bind you so tightly," he finally replied, his gaze darting to her face. "It would be best if you stay with me until I can decide what to do with you. I can't send you back to your realm unless you can remember the exact incantation you cast to pass through the Stones. The risk to return you there without that knowledge would be great, as Morfran's demons protect that Gate. The black leopard followed you to protect you. I found you and brought you here to conceal you from the Rams."

"The Rams are slave traders, evil and untrustworthy. I've been tracking them for some time but have been unable to discover where they keep the females they've enslaved. The demons protect them, and their camps are secure behind wards that hide them from sight. Last eve, I discovered that they attend a slave auction every third moon at Devil's Hollow not two days' ride from here."

"Demons?"

"Aye, they have sharp claws like a bear and double lines of teeth with enough venom to kill ten men. They are witless creatures, which makes them easy to kill, although, I would not find it so easy in my present form."

He removed the lid from the small pot, and gently wiped a clear salve across the deeper scratches on her face and arms. The cool ointment immediately soothed the angry wounds. He examined each scratch closely, returned the small pot to his saddlebag and crouched down before the fire. Jill found herself relaxing as he filled a large bowl with stew from the bubbling pot, and then returned to her side.

She waited for him to hand her the food. Instead, he tested it first, and then proceeded to feed her between his own bites from a silver spoon. The meal was delicious, rich and tasty. She ate hungrily, which seemed to please him as his lips lifted slightly at the corners as he fed her.

"The Rams are very strange, and *you* are different. This place with its demons, magyck and slavers is a nightmare; oh boy do I hope this is a dream!" Jill exclaimed between mouthfuls.

Dare raised one dark brow and suddenly smiled. She saw his eyes twinkle in genuine amusement.

"It is you that's strange, Jill of Morfran. You've round ears, red hair, and you wear Morfran's Curse."

"I'm not exactly a catch in my world either, but perhaps you should explain this curse thing."

Dare tossed his silken hair and ate a few mouthfuls of stew. He took a long drink before he offered her the water skin.

“Morfran is our enemy, a witch who has lived many centuries. She brings disease, pestilence and famine to our realms. She commands the Bratach; they are the grotesquely deformed demons I spoke of before, who protect all that follow her. The witches of her coven are in her image; all have red hair and bear the curse – the orange spots that dust across your nose, and chest. The Rams worship her, so you will have great value to them, mayhap as a breeder or even a mate. In my realm, witches are not welcome. Before you could enter my realm, our king would decide if you were of the Lady.”

“Well I knew red hair and freckles were a curse but no one’s tried to kill me for being born like this.”

Dare finished the stew, and pushed the bowl to one side. “Tell me of the silver box, the soul catcher. When I took it from your pocket it blinded me and then my likeness was within.” He reached for her backpack, and spilled the contents across the floor.

“It’s my digital camera. Well, actually, it’s a lot of different devices in one. It’s a phone, an mp3, a Blue Tooth and a radio.” She picked it up and scrolled through the photos that she had captured earlier. “Oh, here you are. Look. You can scroll through the shots I took today. Some great scenery you have here.” She passed him the small camera, but he jerked his hand away and the camera dropped to the floor.

“Your words make little sense to me.” He glared at her. “Do you think to speak this way to befuddle my brain?”

Jill pulled back from his frightening scowl and shuffled away from him. “No, of course not. Why would you think that? What’s wrong with you? You act as if you’ve never seen a camera before!” She returned his scowl. Somewhere along the line she’d gone from fearing for her life to a state of cool, calm composure. Besides, she didn’t take shit from anyone in her real life, why should she take it from some dream creature or figment of her imagination? She scooped the camera up off the ground. “Now, do you want to see how this works or not?”

Dare raised one thick, dark brow, but nodded his agreement and leaned closer.

She scrolled through the photographs and explained each one. Dare seemed to relax and pay close attention to her descriptions of the photos she’d taken earlier. When she reached the end, she turned the camera off and sat back. A heavy silence hung between them.

Jill took the opportunity to further exam her surroundings. The cave seemed primitive, littered with animal skins, saddlebags, and a few cooking utensils.

“Do you live here, Dare?”

“No.” He snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Okay then, do you have electricity here in Lyoness?”

Dare shifted his huge body and leaned back against the cave wall. He raised a brow and shook his head slightly. “Mayhap if I knew what you mean by electric izzy I could answer truthfully.”

Jill took a deep breath, and let it escape slowly. “How do you make it light at night inside? Do you use candles, or light globes? How do you communicate with your family over long distances?”

Dare inclined his head. “We use light spheres, and birds carry our messages. Now you can tell me something too, Jill of Morfran. Your clothing is indeed unusual, but what are these used for?” He held up a pair of silk panties between the fingers of one hand, and the matching bra with the other.

Jill stared at him, and the hair rose on the back of her neck when he caressed the fabric with his fingertips. “Those are panties . . . er, undergarments.”

Dare’s gaze shot to her face, his eyes deep sultry pools of sin. After a moment, he turned his attention to the three other sets of underwear on the dirt floor, which were tangled between a clean pair of jeans, and two t-shirts.

“I can not imagine these offering you much warmth, so I’d imagine they are used to entice.” He dropped them onto the floor then rifled through her toiletries. He picked them up, one by one, removed the caps and sniffed. He made a great show of disgust, coughed and shuddered.

“’Tis no wonder your scent disgusts me so. Why would you cover yourself with these potions; do you try to ward off males?”

Jill lifted her chin. *He may be gorgeous to look at but he has the brain of a Neanderthal.*

“No. On the contrary, where I come from we use these perfumes to catch a man, not to repel him. Trust me, you wouldn’t want me around without my deodorant.”

Dare suddenly chuckled. “It would seem we must disagree. Our realms have many differences. A freshly bathed female or one in the thrall of Moon Fire is the sweetest scent of all.” He lifted a wine skin from the floor and held it up to her.

“Moon Fire?” she asked.

Dare chuckled, and licked his bottom lip. “A time when our mates have insatiable needs,” he almost purred and gave her a wink.

Jill cringed as heat flooded her face.

“Okay, fine I understand.” She looked away, regretting she’d asked the question.

“I have Miza, it’s a refreshing drink made from grapes. We shall drink then sleep some.

Tomorrow we leave for Devil's Hollow. It would please me if you'd wash some portion of the stink from your person before we retire, as we have to share a blanket."

"Is this how you romance a woman? Bang her on the head and drag her to your cave. Tell her she *stinks*, offer her a quick drink, and then jump her bones? Well *no thank you!*"

"You have spirit, Jill of Morfran, and the tongue of a viper. My offer is only for warmth. The skies threaten snow this eve and by morning the fire will be dead." Dare opened his arms wide and his eyes sparkled with amusement.

Jill's face burned, and oh boy, did she feel like a total fool. A quick change of subject seemed to be in order. "Okay, so where *is* the bathroom, anyway?

Dare's eyes narrowed as he digested her words. "This is a cave. We may bathe in here, but we must relieve ourselves *outside*. When this is necessary, I'll take you to a safe place. Do you wish to go outside now, or mayhap later after the Miza?"

Jill did not reply. Instead, she bit the inside of her cheek and stared into the fire. She felt like three kinds of fool. Why was she being so gruff with him? He'd untied her, and he'd treated her with some degree of care. He also seemed intelligent, not nearly the savage she'd supposed when he'd reacted so strangely to her camera. She looked up, catching his gaze. "I'm sorry, Dare. Yes I would like to pee, and wash the *stink* from my body."

Dare rose, picked up a metal pot and a lamp. He inclined his head toward her and ducked down a narrow, dark passageway. Jill grabbed her backpack and followed him. The tunnel was long, and the air grew chillier with every step. She followed, keeping close to the light, until the passageway opened out into a clearing opposite a rock pool.

Dare hesitated at the entrance and held up a hand, indicating she wait. He sniffed the air, looked in all directions, before he beckoned her into the muted moonlight. He pushed her toward a clump of bushes.

"You will be safe here. Hurry now while I fill this vessel with water so you may bathe." He turned away.

Jill glanced at his back as he bent down at the water's edge. She quickly stifled her first instinct to run fast and far away. *Without doubt, his tale about demons and slave traders was a rouse just to keep me quiet.* She couldn't think straight as she slipped behind the bushes to relieve herself. *I should run. But what if he was actually telling the truth?* She stood and peered into the darkness. How the hell could she find her way home now? She had no idea where they were.

Chapter Three

Devil's Hollow.

Helsa pulled her long blond hair over one shoulder. She split it into three thick silken strands and began to plait a long braid. She cast her eyes around the claustrophobic room. Four other females shared this decrepit, humid prison cell. Four females of various breeds, all in fear for their lives, all required to sit without complaint and wait for the next auction.

Although difficult, she had endured the Ram's filthy den of depravity for what felt like a lifetime. She had tolerated the pain when they tried to beat her into compliance. She had accepted the shame of being Rawtach's first wife, he being the first son of Brimish the Elder, the Great Chief of the Rams.

Helsa fought well; she had spat, scratched and bitten the young Ram. But her anger only acted as a stimulant and she suffered three moons of his nightly mating. Rawtach had finally conceded that mayhap she spoke the truth when she informed him that Arious Pride females could only be impregnated by pride males, and pride males could only impregnate their given mates. She still ached from the beating this revelation induced. He cursed her soul, dragged her by the hair through the village, spat on her and chained her to a stake to await transport. There she remained until she arrived here in Devil's Hollow, and the auctioneer threw her into this cell to await the slave auction.

She cursed her carelessness for her capture by the Rams. She made a stupid mistake, a simple slip of concentration. A brief encounter with a pair of superb Lonza Pride males had befuddled her brain. Their names were Tallin and Aric. She met them as they passed by on the road. They stopped, just to be polite, and shared a wine skin. Three travelers a long way from home, but their scent hung on the air and sent her an invitation that she could not dismiss. Each took her hand, and gave his name in a voice that had echoed in her dreams for many years past.

Her mates.

The males made by the Lady just for her. Life mates she had searched for since she had come of age. She took in every inch of them, imprinted them in her memory. At last, the Lady had paired her with two magnificent pride warriors, both very tall and as broad as oak trees. Tallin's angelic face held eyes as blue as cornflowers, lips full and sensuous and a square chin dusted with daylong whiskers. His long, silken hair of the palest gold curls contrasted with Aric's sleek, midnight locks. Aric's sultry, rugged good looks and golden skin were the exact opposite of Tallin's fair-skinned beauty.

Their eyes met and they made an immediate connection, an instant recognition imprinted at birth. She made a fateful mistake when she left them to seek Hawke, an error that she knew left them both confused.

She'd touched their faces gently and gave them both a warm smile. "I know by your scents that the Lady has matched us. I'm well pleased, but I fear my brother is in trouble. I must continue alone to Devil's Hollow. Hawke is my twin, and he needs me."

"We've waited many years to meet you, Helsa, but we can wait a little longer. I feel I must caution you. It's most dangerous for a female alone in Devil's Hollow. I would ask that you allow us to escort you. However, we'll journey to Dryad, and await your return if this is your wish," Tallin replied, but his voice echoed his disappointment.

"It is my wish. Seek my eldest brother, King Blaise of Knight Watch. He'll give you shelter until I return. Fear not, for I'm told my brother is ahead at Devil's Hollow, and he will protect me. I'm most happy to meet you both, and know that I'll return to Dryad with all haste."

Her heart ached as she mounted her horse and turned to leave. The Lady had cast her spell over them, and it was an internal fight to avoid the deep, primal attraction to go with her mates. Her thoughts had centered on Tallin and Aric, not on the dangers of a female alone when she entered the high ground along the borders of Lyonesse. She charged down a grassy slope that led between the mountains and rode straight into a group of Rams moving prisoners to their stockade.

Capture was inevitable although she did not make it easy for them. She fought like a she-devil but the Ram males soon restrained her. To morph into a sleek, black leopard may have given her satisfaction as she tore into their soft flesh, but a shape-shifter female held much value. If they discovered her true bloodline, they would sell her to the highest bidder at the next sex slave auction.

The Rams tied her to the other females. They led the pitiful group ten miles or so without water until they arrived at the stockade near nightfall. She engraved the days that followed in her soul for eternity, each name and every ugly face. She would escape, and when she did, she would bring the wrath of the Knight Watch Warriors down upon these animals.

She would never forget the humiliation; stripped naked, and paraded with the other females before the Chief to make his selection. She'd screamed her disgust when they gave her to Rawtach. A privilege, they said, as they seared her buttocks with the hot iron, disfigured her for life with the monster's brand.

Her hands steady, she tied the braid with a long piece of straw, stood and peered between the bars into the moonlit courtyard. She ached, every muscle stiff from the beatings. Sleep eluded

her as she kept a constant vigil for any glimpse of Hawke. Where was her brother?

Her mind wandered to the horrors of life with the Rams. She could not submit to Rawtach, and suffered rape each night. The stink of his body saturated her skin in a foul scent that made her vomit. Her thoughts of her mates sustained her. She would escape soon, or Blaise would bring the Knight Watch to rescue her. Her mates would have informed him of her tardiness by now and they would be growing impatient for her return. She must be strong. One or all of her seven brothers would come soon. It was only a matter of time and she would be free of this hell.

A shadow obscured the large yellow moon, drawing her eyes toward the midnight sky. She sprang to her feet with a silence learned in battle and raised her face upward. The shadow, wide and bat-like, drifted silently to the ground and the familiar voice of Nox, the King of the Faerie, called out to her, but his words could only be heard in her mind.

I'm here, close to the pigsty, she silently replied.

A light breeze scattered the hay, sending dust spirals across the floor as Nox landed softly beside the cage. He folded his wide, black gossamer wings and pulled them so close to his body only the silver tips were visible against the black leather jerkin and pants that molded to his sculptured body like a second skin. He turned his almond-shaped, jade colored eyes toward her and the bars of the cage vanished. She stepped through and followed him toward a group of trees bathed in velvet shadows.

"Nox, you are the last person I thought would rescue me. Thank you."

Nox turned to face her, his long raven hair moving slightly in the breeze. "If I had known you were here, Helsa, I'd have rescued you before you suffered. Sometimes the Lady works in strange ways, mayhap to forge a bond between mates. I'm here to inform you that Dare is close by and your mates have already entered the Hollow. You'll be free by tomorrow, but by Dare's hand. He's met his true mate but she's Human and she insists he take her back to her home. Go with Dare and don't look back."

Helsa stared at him in disbelief. "Leave my mates behind? No I will not!"

Nox touched her shoulder gently and her hair sprang from the braid and tumbled down her back, growing in thick waves until it covered her bottom. "You must go into the auction. Cover yourself with your hair. Go with Dare. Your mates will follow. Have no fear, Helsa, it's the Lady's way." He led her back to the cage and stood to one side as she stepped through the bars.

She turned to thank him but he had vanished, leaving the warm scent of fresh air and forest on the breeze.

Chapter Four

Jill sat silently and shared the wine skin with Dare. The rich cinnamon flavored wine warmed her belly. It muted plans of escape and eased her fear. Outside, the first flakes of snow had fallen. She would put her escape on hold for now. Doubtful she'd survive the night, let alone find her way back to the Morfran Stones alone out there. She would stay put until morning. At least then she would be able to see which way to go.

Jill declined the offer of a cuddle with Dare, although she had to confess to her inner self that the offer tempted her. *He is, after all, a magnificent specimen. But specimen of what?* She pulled the hood of her jacket over her head. Lying down beside the fire, she used the backpack as a lumpy pillow.

The floor of the cave was hard and cold, not to mention damp. Would she complain? No sir, she would show him just how resilient Human women were. She had, however, refrained from using the perfume after a quick wash. She'd changed her clothes and only used a small amount of body lotion and spray deodorant. But Dare reacted negatively, just the same. He sat with his back to her as she dressed, groaning and choking and making a great show of his disgust. She grinned at him; that was just too bad.

"You insist you're not a witch, but you continue to destroy my senses with those foul potions. Will you consider a compromise? Can you please refrain from using them upon your person and I will share my heat with you?" he grumbled, and fanned the air with both hands.

He lay with his back to her now, wrapped inside a huge lambskin that covered him from head to foot. He had shrugged when she refused to join him. He said nothing and fell sound asleep immediately, his breathing slow and even. Jill gave a mental shrug; she would be fine by the fire.

She fell into a deep sleep, her dreams sweet memories of floating on her back in the swimming pool at her parent's home. In this dream, a young reflection stared back at her, a familiar little girl of maybe six or seven wearing a favorite pink polka dot swimsuit. Without warning, the pool swirled into a whirlpool, and she slipped beneath the water. Her legs would not move and deathly coldness began to engulf her. She gasped great gulps of freezing air. She woke, sat up and peered into the darkness, legs cold and numb. Her spine ached, sharp spasms shot into her neck and pain exploded in her head.

She jumped in fright as Dare's arms slipped around her and lifted her easily. His warm, musky scent flowed over her, enthralled and soothed her. She snuggled into his shoulder, enjoying the soft strands of his hair as they caressed her cheek.

“You think mayhap it is time to share my warmth before you freeze to death?” he drawled, as he laid her gently between the soft pelts, and curled his hard body around her.

Jill let a small smile cross her lips as his warmth seeped into her body. *This just has to be heaven.*

Dare soon dashed that thought as he pulled his shirt up over his nose. “If you intend to share like this next eve, I must insist that you desist using those dreadful potions, or I fear I’ll leave you to perish. No male should have to endure such. Will you agree to this, Jill of Morfran?”

Jill sighed, and snuggled into his warmth. “If I don’t use the body lotion, my skin will get wrinkly, and trust me I *need* the deodorant.”

Dare chuckled, and pulled her close to his body, and yet Jill sensed his detachment. His hand rested gently on the top of her arm, his head turned away.

“The next time you bathe I’ll give you a lotion to use . . . one that will not offend my nose.”

Jill closed her eyes. The warmth of his body and his scent made her deliciously drowsy, and before she could reply, she drifted into a deep dreamless sleep.

Immediately upon waking, Jill felt for Dare, but he no longer lay beside her. She sighed and snuggled deeper within the warm fleece. Dare had covered the fire with damp earth. Only her backpack and a single lantern remained. She struggled to her feet, pushed the tangled mass of hair out of her eyes and stumbled along the passageway.

Outside, the green valley had transformed into a world of blinding white. Snow had fallen overnight, at least a foot, and deeper in the drifts. She shivered as she squinted against the sun’s bright glare and stared hopelessly across the unfamiliar terrain. She heard horses, panicked and hurried back inside, her heart thundering in her chest. They were almost on top of her as she pushed her body into a small fissure at the back of the cave. Heavy footsteps echoed in the passageway, and a huge cloaked figure dusted with snow appeared.

“Jill of Morfran, fear not; it is I, Dare,” boomed a familiar voice.

Jill stepped out into the dark cave. He turned, took a thick cloak from a leather bag in his hand and threw it around her shoulders. He bent down, folded the lambskin blanket, pushed it into the bag and hung it over one shoulder. He reached for her backpack, and held out his free hand.

“Come. The Rams have left the valley, and we must make our way to Devil’s Hollow.”

Jill took the warm hand offered, and followed him.

“I need to pee. I’m hungry, and if you intend to drag me out in the snow I’ll need my shades.” She moaned.

Dare stopped suddenly. She ran straight into his back, bounced off, and fell hard on her derriere. He turned, and glared down at her with narrowed eyes.

“The snow is deep so do not stray far. We’ll eat on the way. I’m sure you’ll explain to me why you need to keep in the shade. It’s much warmer in the sun.” He offered his hand, and pulled her to her feet.

Jill grabbed for her backpack. He waited with growing impatience as she searched one of the numerous pockets for the little pink case that held her sunglasses. When she slipped them on her nose, Dare raised one perfect brow, and touched the mirror surfaces.

“I’m impressed. The Rams will flee if they see a great red bee riding at my side. You’ve many unusual items concealed in your pack.” He chuckled as he stepped from the cave and strode toward two horses tethered to a tree.

Jill shivered. Freezing air shot up her back when she squatted, exposing her backside close to the snow. The winter chill sank into her bones as she pushed through the bushes to return to Dare. The wind whipped the snow around her, and cold seeped into her jeans. She wrapped the cloak around her body, shivered and regarded the horses suspiciously. She had never ridden a horse, except for those brightly colored ones on the Merry-Go-Round. But maybe Dare didn’t intend she ride at all. One of the horses was laden with heavy bags. Dare sat atop the other, grinning in obvious glee as she stumbled through the snow.

She lifted her chin and glared at him. “This is obviously not a dream. I’ve changed my mind and I want to go home. Point the way and I’ll be just fine.”

“You won’t be able to return unless you can repeat the exact spell you used to come here. The Morfran Stones are two hours walk south. You’ll freeze to death or a bear will eat you well before you get there. You must decide now, Jill of Morfran. I must leave before the way is blocked by snow.”

“I’ve never ridden a horse,” she mumbled, and her teeth chattered so loud they accompanied her voice like castanets.

Dare held out his arm. She took his hand and he lifted her effortlessly onto his lap.

“Place your legs each side of the horse’s neck. Sit back on my legs, and I’ll keep you warm. Did you think I’d insist that you walk behind me? I’m not a Ram, Jill.”

His muscled chest pressed hard against her back, engulfing her with its warmth. He hooked the wine skin over the pommel of the saddle, and pushed a small linen bag filled with nuts into her hand. His hair brushed her cheek as he wrapped his thick, heavy cloak around her to cover her completely.

“Eat, drink the Miza. We’ll travel until the sun is high, and then rest the horses. We should make camp before nightfall and then I’ll hunt. Hie, now, Gila,” he said and the horse plodded along the line of trees.

Jill ate the nuts – a weird selection of trail mix, all shapes and sizes of unusual seeds. She could not recognize many, although the mix did contain walnuts and almonds. Dare’s stomach rumbled against her back. She turned slightly, and offered him a walnut. His lips curled up at the edges. He opened his mouth and she fed him. She enjoyed the feel of those luscious lips against her fingers.

They travelled along a trail that led ever upward through tall pines and rocky outcrops. The valley below fell away like melting ice cream. The snow fell lightly, and dusted a soft coat of powder on the trees and vegetation. Jill leaned back into him, wrapped in his warm arms until the horse slipped and stumbled. She screamed in terror, but the horse regained its footing and Dare slipped a large hand around her waist, his fingers splayed across her stomach.

“Hush now. Gila will not falter; he has held me safe through many battles.”

“It’s my fault; I’m too heavy. The poor thing’s legs are probably about to collapse under the extra weight. I can’t imagine how *you* can still feel your legs with the weight of my fat ass on them.”

Dare laughed softly close to her ear. “Gila is a warhorse. He carries me in full armor with no trouble. If you mean to infer that your backside is as big as a donkey’s, I must assume that donkeys are quite small in your realm. In truth, I gain great pleasure when I hold you close. It’s been many moons since I lay with a female.”

“Ooh! That is so nasty. Put me down at once. I’ll walk.” She lifted her leg over the saddle, meaning to climb down. Instead, she tumbled to the ground and sprawled face down in the snow.

Jill’s stiff legs crumbled as she tried desperately to rise. She slipped, sliding off the pathway. Grabbing for a bush, she stepped backward and nearly toppled over. She windmilled her arms to retain her balance. *Dear God what now?* Moving slowly, she tried to gain purchase on the slippery ground, but her feet had other ideas. She plunged backward, her feet sliding apart. White turned to grey sky and tall pines; air rushed from her lungs as she tumbled onto her back and slithered down the mountainside into the soft powder. She grasped at passing bushes, but their tiny branches snapped off in her hands and her speed increased. Her legs and arms flailed in uncontrollable abandon as she bounced along.

Trees and rocks sailed past until her head came to rest in a thicket. For a moment, she lay there, catching her breath and mentally checking her limbs for injury. Satisfied nothing was

broken, she rolled from under the bush and scrambled to her feet. She took a few careful steps in the deep drifts and managed to link her arms around the rough bark of a pine tree. Looking up, she found Dare standing on the roadside way above her, a wide grin on his face and his hands resting casually on his hips.

“Although I’d love to play in the snow with you, we must continue if we are to reach the hot caves before nightfall.”

“Bite me.”

Dare jumped down to her in one impressive leap. He stood and looked at her, his eyes blazing molten gold as he tilted his head from one side to the other.

“What are you, the Bionic Man or something? And w-why are your eyes g-gold now?” She stepped away as gracefully as possible from the tree and clung to a nearby rock.

Dare hissed as he inhaled, his lips drawn back to expose sharp fangs.

“Enough of your insults, *Human*. Get back to the trail, unless you *want* me to take you now . . . here in the snow?”

Jill lifted her chin. This show of alpha male bravado had unnerved her, but he would never know. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. So when *exactly* did I ask you to do the dirty? Trust me; you are the *last* man I want in my bed.”

“Do not jest with me, Human. Although you attempt to cover your scent with potions, I know you’re a virgin. You gaze at me with lust in your eyes. Your nipples hardened when I held you in my arms last night. You’re over-ripe and you need a male to pleasure you.”

Before she could respond, he stepped forward, gathered her up, and threw her unceremoniously over his shoulder. Hanging upside down, Jill didn’t dare struggle. The last thing she wanted was to be dropped headfirst back into the snow. He took long, easy strides and bounded back to the road with consummate ease. He placed her on her feet, mounted the horse and held out his arm. Jill reluctantly allowed him to lift her into the saddle.

They rode in silence for hours, and Jill sat quietly, needing time to think over his outrageous claims. He appeared to be in no mood to chat either, so she decided to take in the views. The winter wonderland spread out below them. The mountains dominated the heavy sky, a crystal splendor rising in giant blue-white pillars. The path continued upward, winding between clumps of pine trees. She stared into the distance, to the valleys below. Rather than towns or cities, she saw the occasional small, isolated house, with snow covered roofs and chimneys billowing trails of wood smoke up into the air.

As the horses climbed higher into the mountains, the snow became less deep. When Dare

stopped the horses, clumps of green grass were evident. The chill in the air had lessened considerably.

Dare climbed down from his horse. He lifted her to the ground and held her close to his body until she found her footing. This inexperienced female impressed him with her bravery, although even her potions could not cover the scent of fear that radiated from her body. He could, *if* she rid herself of those putrid potions, teach her to enjoy insurmountable pleasure.

His carnal reactions toward her earlier disturbed him and his control had slipped dangerously. True, she attracted him, but the need to push her on her back and fuck her without consent worried him. What on Lady's earth had evoked that extraordinary response? He inhaled and grimaced at the stink of the disgusting lotion on her body. What was her natural scent? Perhaps his cat had sensed something? Dare tossed his head to clear his mind. This false reaction could only be due to his aching need to lay with a female.

"Put me down, big fella. Geez, I could go for a hot cup of coffee right about now. You don't have any in that saddlebag of yours, do you?" She rubbed her backside and walked in circles.

Dare ignored her, and turned his back to unsaddle the horses. He watched her wander around aimlessly as he rubbed both horses down and then replaced their blankets. When he turned back, she had settled on a rock and now chewed a stem of grass. He picked up the saddlebags, leaving her pack and several other small bags in a pile on the ground.

"Bring those bags, and follow me, Human." He walked away from her, sure she had noticed his grin.

Jill watched his impressive ass as he sauntered into a nearby cave, acting all strong and silent. He had called her Human again; definitely not a good sign. She had really pissed him off this time. She shuddered, remembering the way his eyes had turned gold.

"Yes sir, right away sir," she quipped, and picked up the remainder of the bags and followed.

The cave turned out to be a tunnel of sorts leading, to what resembled a faerie grotto. A waterfall dropped in a wide sheet, from the snow-capped rock face into a steaming pool. Tropical palms and tall olive ferns mingled with brightly colored hibiscus, and clusters of wild orchids grew in abundance. Heat radiated from the golden sand beneath her feet. She walked farther inside the grotto, and stopped to admire the large sunflower-yellow lizards that basked lazily on top of deep terra cotta rocks.

Dare appeared at the entrance to a cave adjacent to the rock pool, and watched her struggle toward him. "You'll need to improve your stamina if you're to be taken to wife by a Ram."

Jill stopped dead, letting the bags scatter at her feet. Her face crumpled, and her eyes stung with tears. "I don't want you to trade me, and I'd rather die than marry one of those things. I've had enough of this freaky place. I just want to go home."

She saw a flash of brilliant white teeth. So, her distress amused him, did it? Before she could open her mouth to complain, he spoke.

"I'd always believed that Humans held some degree of intelligence. Meeting you, I now have my doubts. Must I explain again why you can't return home?"

Fear shuddered through her body at the harsh reality of her situation. She wanted the comfort of her mother's arms, the mother she would likely never see again.

"I want to go *home*." She sobbed, her fists balled over her eyes.

Dare led her into the cave, his strong arm slipped around her waist. He gently pulled her hands away from her face, and looked into her eyes.

"I can't take you home, but mayhap we can strike a bargain. I'll take you to the Rams as a trade, but it will be a ruse. If my sister is there, I'll rescue her. If all else fails, I'll buy her, and all you must do is play your part as my slave."

"So you won't trade me?"

Dare shook his mane of raven hair. "No. In return for your cooperation, I'll take you back to Dryad and we'll consult the Spell Weaver. Perhaps she may be able to send you home."

Jill reached up to place a kiss on his cheek, but as she did so, he turned, giving her his lips, instead. Her eyes grew wide as his mouth met her own. After a moment, he pulled back, leaving her gaping at him like a love-struck fool.

"I must hunt this eve, so come and make camp. When I leave, you'll have time to bathe in the pool in privacy. The water is hot, and will sooth your aches. I'll return with meat for supper."

Dare unpacked the saddlebags, and lit a small fire. He filled a large pot with water, and threw in dried leaves. He instructed Jill to remove it from the fire when it boiled.

"Bathe now. I'll return before dark," he ordered as he slowly removed his clothes and stripped down to a loincloth.

Jill watched him in stunned silence. *Could a man really strike you dumb? Oh boy is he magnificent or what?* She savored him like a starving man at a feast, her mouth dry, and her pussy becoming increasingly moist. He turned, and gazed at her intently before he ducked out. She rushed to follow him to the outer cave, but he had vanished, not even a footprint remained in the

sand.

It was hot enough there to boil water. Steam from the pool increased the humidity to intolerable limits. She stripped off the heavy cloak, then the boots, jacket and jeans. She ventured outside and sat on a rock, pushing her toes in the hot sand. A light breeze brushed the wet hair from her cheeks but sweat trickled relentlessly down her back and soaked into her underwear. The pool shimmered in invitation, but how would she dry herself? Perhaps she would stretch out like a lizard on the warm rocks.

She stripped off, laid her discarded clothes on a smooth rock and slipped into the steaming water. She almost broiled the skin from her body as she floated on her back. The clear water became bearable as she drifted toward the waterfall. There, the temperature dropped considerably. A smooth rock became a comfortable seat; she dipped her hair, and washed the grime from her body. Parrots soared from tree to tree above the pool as she relaxed and mulled over the strange happenings of the past day.

She watched the noisy array of colored parrots argue as they hung upside down in a tall tree eating berries. She rested her head on a moss-covered rock and relaxed. Overcome with exhaustion, her eyes closed and she dozed for a while under the shade of the waving palms.

A roar had her eyes springing open. The parrots squawked, and rose in unison from the trees in a thick colored cloud. Jill froze. Her gaze fixed on a huge black panther at the top of the waterfall. Its jowls dripped with blood. She dropped down into the water and flattened her naked body to the side of the pool, praying like mad that *all* cats hate water.

But her prayers went unanswered.

The huge cat jumped. In a flash of black, it dived beneath the water. Jill scrambled to the side and began to climb out. She turned as Dare broke the surface. He grinned and his golden armbands glistened in the sunlight.

“Your backside is delightful, and more like a peach than a donkey.”

Jill ran blindly into the undergrowth, her heart racing wildly. Lizards and giant spiders flanked her on all sides. She headed toward a clump of trees and barely slid to a stop as a gigantic black snake slithered across the pathway.

“Stop! Must you always go to ground when you’re frightened? The females of my pride usually stand and fight.”

She turned to see Dare standing behind her naked.

“Didn’t you see that panther? D-did you k-kill it?” She wrapped her arms around her waist and struggled to stop her chattering teeth.

"I *am* the cat, sweetness. I told you truthfully that I'm Arious Pride. We're black leopards and man."

"You're a" She searched her mind for the right word, flashed on a term she'd read in romance novels. "You're a shape-shifter?"

"Aye, sweetness, we call it morphing. All of my kind, male and female, are the same as me."

Jill glanced down at her naked body. She pulled a face, cringed and tried to cover herself with her hands. "Oh shit, oh shit."

Dare's lips lifted at the corners. "Have no fear; I've hunted and I think it would be a great waste to eat you."

"Well then, I guess we should get dressed instead of frolicking in the jungle like Adam and Eve."

"Is this a common practice for them in your realm?"

Frustrated by her words being misunderstood once again, Jill stomped her foot. Her heel met something cold and slimy and she jumped back. Gazing at the ground, she shuddered. Dear God, she had nearly decapitated a large green frog. A screech escaped her lips as she turned on her heel, ran past Dare and sprinted toward the rock pool. She dove into the safety of the cave and almost tripped over the fire. Risking serious injury, she quickly righted the pot of meat that boiled in the heated water. She kicked the sandy floor in frustration, Where the hell were her clothes and backpack?

She glanced back the way she came and muttered a curse. She'd left her top out there on the rocks beside the pool. Well, she had no intentions of going back out there. Instead, she sorted through Dare's clothes, selected a cotton tunic and pulled it on. The shirt fell to her knees. His scent suddenly overwhelmed her, making her weak-kneed as it enclosed her in an invisible, erotic hug.

She turned to see him leaning against the cave entrance. He watched her with interest. Judging by the look on his face, he knew he had frightened her. She took a deep breath, lifted her chin defiantly and glared at him.

"Where is my backpack? I need my things."

He turned, and sauntered his magnificent naked body toward the pool. A moment later he returned with her backpack. She could hardly ignore the fact that he had rifled through it again. Her toiletries and all her clothes had vanished. He inclined his head at her indignation.

"I've removed all your potions and discarded all forms of witchcraft. To use them so close to Devil's Hollow is dangerous. You'll no longer wear those unusual clothes, as my shirt covers you. Since you are to act as my slave, it will be all that's necessary."

Jill stuck her nose in the bag; it was empty save for two blue silk thongs. She looked up. "I want my things, Dare. If you think I'm going to parade around dressed only in one of your shirts, you're very mistaken."

Dare lifted his head. His eyes flashed dangerously from violet to gold and back in an instant.

"Most slaves in Devil's Hollow are naked. It's a privilege to wear my tunic. Make up your mind, Jill; which would you prefer?"

"The shirt, I'll wear the damn shirt."

Dare pulled a clean tunic and a small silver bottle from his saddlebags. He did not dress immediately. Instead, he sat on a rock at the mouth of the cave and proceeded to rub lotion slowly all over his body. The scent that filled the cave intoxicated her to such an extent that by the time he had finished she had to suck her bottom lip to prevent drooling.

He threw the bottle toward her, and proceeded to dress slowly.

"That lotion will protect your skin. I need it more often when I morph. It will do all that your potions do, without the disgusting odor."

Jill opened the lid and sniffed. The lotion had no scent at all. She wiped a small amount on her hands, up her arms and finally over her face. As she rubbed in the unusual liquid, a warm fragrance began to rise from her skin. Dare turned slowly toward her, his eyes changed from violet to gold, and back again. He leapt to his feet, growled deep in his chest and gripped the wall of the cave as if he needed support. He shook his head violently, and strode from the cave.

"Dare, what's wrong? Are you angry with me?" she called and rushed after him.

He stood beside the rock pool gasping deep breaths. As she approached, he turned and leveled his gaze on her. His eyes had turned to molten gold and his lips had pulled back from his fangs. He held a hand up to stop her approach.

"Stay back. Go into the cave and remain there," he said.

Dare held his breath and waited for her to go. His heart raced when she pouted and stomped back into the cave. He spun around, slid into the jungle and stopped in the deep undergrowth to slump against a palm tree. Here, deep in the impenetrable foliage, shade had cooled the bright tropical hues to a tranquil grey. Concealed within the velvet zebra shadows, the rich earthy bouquet of the humid jungle closed around him in a calming embrace. Ladies blood, her scent had awakened his cat! His inner cat still roared with the recognition of its mate and Dare fought desperately to control the beast inside him. He scrubbed his face with both hands then lifted

the palm leaves to stare back toward the cave. He might have known those damn potions *had* covered her natural fragrance. The cream had enhanced her true female scent. He groaned in frustration. What should have been the realization of a dream had become a nightmare; gods how could he keep his cat from claiming her?

"Bite her, take her now, she is ours," pleaded his cat.

"Not now, I need her to trade for Helsa. Our needs must come second."

"Mine."

"Soon . . . we will hunt again, for fun and for females." And mayhap gain control . . . Lady help me.

Chapter Five

Jill waited. Bored, and not a little afraid, she stirred the pot of meat on the fire. She had cut up the meat with Dare's dagger, and it had almost cooked through. The herbs Dare had thrown into the water had dissolved to make a tasty gravy. Telling herself she merely wanted to find some coffee, she'd snooped through his saddlebags. She had discovered two leather pouches wrapped in a pair of leather pants. Inside the first pouch a collection of intricate gold jewelry, beads, earrings and pendants nestled in black velvet. In the other, she excitedly counted over fifty heavy gold coins. She repacked the saddlebag, fighting back a wave of shame at having snooped in the first place. He went through her things first, she thought as she returned to the fire to stir the stew.

What was wrong with him and where was he? The sun had almost set and she had no idea how to light the strange lanterns. A small trickle of unease rapidly turned into a torrent as the light disappeared. Soon she had only the small fire to illuminate the cave.

Jill glanced at the small pile of dry branches. They would soon run out, and she would be alone in the dark. She hated the dark. She had always been a night light kid, and had never grown up. In truth, the monsters had never left from under her bed. She cuddled her knees, and in increasing terror watched the spiders in the corners of the cave grow larger by the second. A giant lizard, flanked by a couple of his friends, ran toward her. They changed their minds rapidly and fled into the darkness when she screamed at them at the top of her voice.

She pushed the last of the kindling onto the fire, and rocked back and forth on the damp sandy floor. Tears began to spill down her cheeks. She was lost, alone, and most likely stuck here forever. *How could this happen to me?* She could see her mother's face. *Oh God, she'll think I died. This is so not fair.* She wanted a wedding, kids, a life.

Heavy breathing broke the silence, and she glanced up. A black cat stood in the entrance, its massive size nearly filling the space. It stopped and watched her intently with large, gold eyes. She froze. Not a muscle in her body moved as the big cat slunk toward her. It nuzzled her back and rubbed its massive head up and down her spine. Then, without warning, it lifted its head and roared. Jill almost jumped out of her skin as the fierce sound bounced off the walls. Bile rose up the back of her throat. Her stomach twisted, fear took over and she began to shake uncontrollably.

The cat strolled around the fire and stopped directly in front of her. The air shimmered, and Dare appeared before her, naked. He turned on his heel, pulled a loincloth from the saddlebags and wrapped it around his waist. Lifting a lamp, he whispered a few words, and the wick caught flame, bursting into a soft glow.

“Where the hell have you been? Do you get off scaring me?”

Jill watched him as he threw more herbs and spices into the stew. He remained silent until he filled a bowl, sat beside her and began to feed her.

“I didn’t intend to frighten you. My cat seeks a mate. Many moons have passed since I’ve lain with a female, and he craves, nay *demands*, satisfaction. This eve I almost lost control. He wanted to bite you, to take you for our bond mate. I left here, went in search of a female to satisfy his hunger, but those I discovered, he rejected.”

Jill accepted the offered food in silence. She had no idea what to say. The implications were just too crazy to contemplate. She chewed the stew slowly and wondered why he insisted feeding her like a baby. She pushed the spoon away when he took none for himself.

“Why don’t you eat?” she said at last.

“I hunted as a cat earlier today, not as a man.”

“This is all too much for me. I need explanations. I’ve read enough fantasy to know what a shape-shifter is; in fact, I admit I’ve had the odd erotic dream after enjoying one of those particular books. I just can’t believe this is happening. This is real, isn’t it? You *are* a shape-shifter, a damn sexy, alpha male shape-shifter. ‘Cause if you’re not, I’m afraid I’ve lost my marbles.”

Dare smiled as he aimed a full spoonful of stew toward her lips. “I am as you describe me, Jill of Morfran, and I do believe that was a compliment. I thank you.”

“Oh, please. Will you stop already with the Jill of Morfran stuff? My name is Jill, just plain Jill, okay?”

Dare chuckled and offered Jill the wine skin. He watched her with some amusement as she took several long swallows.

“So, you went out to get laid, when you had a perfectly good woman waiting at home.” The

minute the words left her mouth Jill regretted her loose tongue.

“You informed me that I was the last man you’d take to your bed. I don’t take what’s not freely offered, Jill.”

“Explain about this biting thing. You mentioned that I’d never be the same if you, you know, bit me. Will I turn into a vampire or something?”

Dare lifted his gaze to her face. His handsome brow crinkled into a frown. “When a pride male finds his mate he bites her, to mark her as his own for life. The venom in his bite puts a female into Moon Fire; she then bites her chosen male. Her venom releases his child seed so he can give her a cub. Now, if a pride male chooses a Human, once she’s bitten, the female grows fangs but she cannot morph. Not until she’s produced her first cub.”

“Your females have kittens? How many do they have? I had a cat that had six once.”

Dare put his head back and laughed. His eyes danced in the firelight.

“No! My cubs will be as I am, with skin, not fur.”

“I see. So before this mating thing, it’s just sex, right? Your cat doesn’t need to bite all the time. You *are* in charge some of the time?” she said and leaned back on her hands.

Dare raised a brow. “I’m in charge *all* of the time, Jill. My cat has never before demanded that I bite a female.”

“So why now?”

“The lotion I gave you brings out our natural scent. My cat and I find your scent most desirable,” he replied huskily.

Jill suddenly felt vulnerable, although strangely excited. She decided to change the subject. “Why do you insist on feeding me? I haven’t been fed like this since I was an infant.”

Dare got slowly to his feet, unpacked the large sheepskin, and threw it onto the floor.

“It’s what we do. Come; it’s time to sleep.” He yawned and lay down, placing his hands behind his head.

“First I need to go outside.” She rose unsteadily to her feet, tired and emotionally exhausted.

Dare rolled to his feet and followed her outside into the dusky moonlight. He searched around with the lantern for a safe area, and waited a discreet distance away. She finished, walked to the pool, sat down and washed her face. Tears came easier this time, and she sat and sobbed, with her feet dangling in the hot water.

“For whom do you cry, Jill? A Human man or your family?” said Dare softly.

“I miss my family and my mom, most of all. I’ve never had a serious boyfriend, but you claim to already know that.”

Dare sat behind her and surrounded her with his body, his arms wrapped around her waist. His rich, hypnotic scent fell over her like a baby's security blanket. She leaned back into his embrace as he kissed her cheek. His strong arms held her and his long fingers caressed her arms in delightfully sensuous strokes. The heat from his hard chest burned through the thin material of the tunic, sending warm tendrils of desire streaking through her. He held her like that for a long while. She felt safe, cuddled within his warm embrace. After a bit, she stopped sobbing.

The croaking frogs and the evening song of tropical birds serenaded them, and Dare's powerful scent consumed her being, filling her with a frightening erotic desire. His gentle touch sent tongues of flames through her, awakening a longing in her she did not know existed. How long had she dreamed of finding a man who would hold her just like this? Who would desire her as much as she desired him? She craved his touch, and the realization both frightened and enthralled her. *I'd give up everything, my family, my home . . . anything at all just to have him.*

She caught her breath when his caressing hands moved slowly up to her breasts. She moaned as he cupped them, groaned when he rolled her taut nipples between his callused fingers, tugging them into hard peaks. His warm lips sucked at her earlobe, and when his hot tongue trailed down her neck, the delightful sensation sent shivers down her back.

"So sweet, so innocent . . . your heart flutters under my embrace. Let me teach you to fly, little dove."

He rose and lifted her into his arms, turning her to face him. His warm hands snaked under her tunic and he captured her bare breast and she gasped. Warm tingles of pleasure engulfed her when his fingers pulled at her aching nipples. She pushed her breasts toward him, wanting more of this delightful sensation.

"My touch pleases you. Your skin is so soft, and your nipples call to me to suck them. Do you want more of me, little dove?"

Jill drew a deep, steadying breath. Decision time. Memories of a life spent alone—always a bride's maid, never a bride—flashed through her mind. Hell, she decided. Life is too short, and a chance like this may never come again. "Yes, teach me everything,"

Jill pushed trembling fingers into the raven silk that framed his face and brushed her tongue across his bottom lip. A ripple went through his body and he made a growling sound.

"*Everything?* But you're so innocent. Are you sure, little one?"

"Yes." *Oh, God, yes.*

He took her mouth fiercely, deeply. He tasted divine, hot, musky. His spicy tongue lashed the inside of her mouth, molding her to his will. His kisses became deeper; his warm hand teased a

nipple while the other slid around her waist, enclosing her in sweet passion. Pulling him closer, she kissed him back, melting beneath his touch. She pushed against his fingers to ease her insatiable need. He pressed closer and the heat from his body burned her skin. His thick cock pushed into her stomach, pulsed against her skin, proof of his desire for her. She wanted this, wanted his touch, his lips, his body hard against her, deep inside her.

The cat inside Dare roared with pleasure as he lifted Jill into his arms and carried her into the cave. He bent to lay her gently on the sheepskin. Flames from the fire sent velvet shadows dancing across the walls, and the hot, spicy aroma from the stew hung faintly in the air. He removed her tunic, and tossed it to one side, and the sweet moan from her lips made him burn with desire for her. She laid before him, gloriously naked, all dewy-eyed innocence. Her skin looked so delicate in the fire's glow. Damp curls framed her pink flushed cheeks and flowed across her shoulders in glistening gold highlights. The warm, luscious scent of female arousal surrounded him and his inner cat purred.

"Do you want me inside you, Jill, as your first?" he said huskily. He removed his loincloth, and lay down beside her. Her pure white breasts firmed under his touch, her deep red nipples reached toward him.

He wanted to taste her, to bury his tongue into her slick wet folds and suckle her hard pearl. He craved her, desiring only to drive her over the edge in insurmountable passion. He looked into her eyes but she showed no fear. Only need burned in those twin emerald pools, desperate need for him.

"I want you, Dare. I want you to touch me, to love me. Teach me how to love you." She reached for him.

He took her lips again, sweet as spiced apples. She moaned in his mouth, and the delightful sound sent blood rushing to his cock with such speed his ears rang.

"Wrap my tunic around your neck. My cat is anxious, and I don't want to bite you."

He handed Jill the tunic, and she covered her neck. Dare slowly licked his way around each breast and purred. Her damp skin tasted sweet. The potent scent of aroused female surrounded him. He watched her as he scraped his fangs over each nipple before suckling hard. She looked so delicious, so wanton, writhing beneath his touch, but he must wait to plunge deep within her heat. He groaned as his cat demanded so much more. The need to bite, to sink his fangs into that tender white skin, threatened to overwhelm him. He craved to suck and savor her hot, sweet metallic

blood. He looked up into her eyes, and she smiled so innocently and arched her back in a silent plea for more.

His control slipped, and his inner cat roared. *Mine. Bite her. I need her. Now.*

Dare took a few deep breaths to steady himself. His gaze wandered over her body. Her tantalizing skin, so soft, so white and ripe for tasting, felt moist under his touch. Her luscious upturned breasts were round and full, topped with bright pink nipples. Her curves were soft, and her belly slightly rounded, but between her legs, he did not find the soft peach fuzz he expected. He stared in shocked surprise. Her folds were completely bare. Dare's gaze shot back to her face.

"How many summers are you, Jill?"

"Are you asking me how old I am? I turned twenty-three last fall. Why? How old are you?"

Dare sighed with relief. "Twenty-five summers, sweetness."

Jill swayed, light-headed as Dare kissed her deeply, his sharp white fangs scraping against her chin in a deliciously tantalizing manner. She shivered when he trailed those same fangs slowly over her breasts, and continued the deliciously sensuous assault on her tender nipples. The unfamiliar sensation sent flutters to her core. His warm hand rested lightly on her pussy. She flinched a little at his touch, and her heart quickened as his head lifted, his lips moist and glistening in the firelight.

"Trust me," he whispered, blowing hot breath on her cheek.

Dare watched the slightly bewildered look on her flushed face as he trailed his fingers between her wet folds. She bucked, lifting herself up and pushing hard against his hand. He stroked her, and dipped gently into her luscious center. She moaned delightfully as he lay between her legs and buried his face in her bare folds. Her petals opened for his tongue like a rose to the sun. Her hands sunk into his hair and she squealed with pleasure when he found and encircled her hard pearl. Her fingers twisted his hair as she began to pant. He looked up and watched her eyes turn to large pools of velvet. She trembled, screamed his name in her climax. He closed his teeth around her pearl to increase her enjoyment, circling it slowly with the tip of his tongue until her tremors slowed.

Moisture flowed from her channel and coated his chin. So wet, so ready. He rose above her and kissed her mouth. She groaned, meeting his kiss with passion. His cock found her wetness, and she lifted toward him, her nails grazing his back. *Go slowly*, he told himself, *she's untested*. She lifted her legs and encircled them around his waist, pushing her tight channel against his cock.

“Lady’s blood, Jill, I’m trying not to hurt you.”

“I’m burning for you; please, Dare.” She groaned as she clung more tightly to his neck.

Gods she is too tight. I’ll tear her apart. He pushed into her slick channel ever so slowly. Her cry stopped him on the edge of paradise. He stilled and cupped her face.

“Do you want me to stop, little one?”

She shook her head. He waited, legs trembling, until she relaxed and then he withdrew completely before burying himself deep into her strangling tightness. His first virgin The tear of her maidenhead and her brief cry of pain brought a curse to his lips. *Gods, I’m going to kill her; Lady forgive me.* She stiffened under him, her nails digging into the tender flesh of his neck.

“Gods, Jill, I’m sorry. This was a mistake.”

“No, it’s okay, *really*. I just didn’t think you’d be quite so big. Don’t stop; it doesn’t hurt now.” She pressed her mouth hard against his.

He chose a slow pace, to allow her to stretch to accommodate him. He wanted desperately to be gentle. Sweat beaded on his brow as she molded herself to him, her soft body a tormenting caress at every stroke. Her scent filled the cave, infusing her essence into his soul. She rose up, and her teeth sunk into his neck as her second climax milked him. His cat roared, the beast within driving him past reason. His balls tightened and he gave into the need to ride her hard and fast. His orgasm climbed a white-hot tornado that dragged him helplessly into her, binding him to her. He roared, exploding deep within her core. White spots danced before his eyes. Reaching for her, he cupped her head and buried his fangs into the tunic around her neck. The rough wool soaked with his own scent brought him to his senses. He pulled his head up, and shuddering with an unfamiliar emotion, took her mouth in a long, deep kiss.

When he slid from her, she rolled away from him, turning her back. A pang of regret shattered his euphoria.

“Jill, did I hurt you?”

“No, it was wonderful, but I’m so tired.”

Dare curled around her, covering them with the sheepskin.

“Are you purring?” she asked suddenly.

Dare nuzzled her neck. “My cat is *very* happy.”

“Good.” She yawned. “Tell him I am too.”

She woke to his hot kisses across her shoulder and gasped as his sharp fangs marked a trail down her spine. Delicious shots of pleasure surged deep through to her core. She rolled onto her

back and stared up at the cave ceiling, which was blackened with the soot of many fires. *Their* fire still danced, warming air saturated with Dare's musky scent. She inhaled deeply, enjoying the enthralling stupor that flowed through her body.

"Are you ready for your next lesson, little one?"

"I'm a little sore."

"You'll be fine the next time; there'll be no pain, I promise. I'll want you again soon, little dove, but now I've other pleasures to teach you."

"I'd like that."

He pulled her to her knees and positioned his body behind her. His long fingers stroked her from behind, caressing her newly awoken nipples. They tingled deliciously, hardening at his touch. His soft, gentle kisses sent shivers down her spine and the intense thrill as his fangs grazed her ass was immeasurable.

Dare could hear her heart beating. The rush of blood through her veins and her scent drew him into madness. *She's my mate; there's no doubt.* He could not deny it, and his inner cat demanded this female. *I must have her now and again later before we leave, to placate the cat and tie her to me, to imprint her with my scent.* He would not bite her, not now. He needed her unmarked for the slave auction. Once his sister was safe and they were closer to his home in Dryad, he would mark her and bind her to him for life.

He grasped her hips.

"Open for me," he demanded as he reached forward and fisted her long silken curls, pulling her head backward.

She wriggled when he massaged lotion around her ass.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm teaching you pleasure; relax and enjoy."

Her moans of delight ignited an insatiable need as he dipped first one then two fingers inside her tight hole. He stretched her gently and then sat back on his heels. She pushed back toward him, moaning in frustration.

"Have you been spanked and enjoyed the caress of a male's hand to sooth the hurt? Have you yearned to have a cock buried deep in your ass?"

"Does it feel good?" she whispered in the darkness.

He spanked her once, leaving his hand on her ass cheek to soothe. She moaned and pushed against his hand. *So trusting, his little dove.* He tried again – two sharp slaps on both sides followed

by a warm caress. The heat of her passion filled his nostrils; he needed desperately to bury himself deep inside her. But he must wait until she had tasted the delights of his hand.

“Do you like that, little dove?”

“Yes.”

The light from the fire picked out the bright red marks on her ass cheeks. Moisture glistened on her folds and left damp patches on her thighs. *Gods, to find a female so willing, I've been given a great gift.* He stroked her thighs and she moaned and waved uncertainly under his hands. He reached between her soaking folds and caressed her pearl and she climbed for him before tumbling into a trembling climax.

“Oh Dare, I'm on fire.”

He pulled her toward him, caressing her hard nipples and drawing his fangs down her back. She trembled as he rubbed the head of his cock against her tight puckered hole.

“You must relax and breathe deeply. I don't want to hurt you.”

She took a deep breath and he drove into her. She closed around him, the small ring of muscle becoming a painful grip on the head of his cock, before her ass yielded, slick and hot. The sigh that escaped her lips when she accepted all of him nearly drove him over the edge. He paused, buried deep inside. Her whole body trembled and she glanced at him over her shoulder, her hair reflecting in the firelight like a halo of blood.

“Dare?”

He held her hips, so smoothly rounded under his touch, and his gaze met trusting green velvet eyes. She smiled so sweetly that words of comfort died on his lips. He sunk his fingers into her damp flesh to hold her still and withdrew slowly, watching her expression. Her eyes became unfocused when he filled her again, harder this time; she tipped her head back and exhaled, red curls spilling down her back.

She rocked against him at every thrust, their bodies meeting with slaps that echoed off the walls. His heart twisted with an unfamiliar emotion when she called out his name in passion. He rode her hard with deep even thrusts. She climaxed and her ass clenched around his shaft, pulling him over the edge. Legs trembling, he spilled endless spurts of hot seed deep inside. She fell forward. He slipped from her, and watched as she rolled over, peering up into the darkness.

Dare rolled off the lambskin and got to his feet. He collected the water sack and rags, washed himself and then returned to her side. She moaned deliciously as he cleansed her most intimate parts. Gathering her in his arms, he savored her succulent mouth. She opened for him and ran her tongue around his mouth, touching first one fang and then the other. So sweet . . . She

tasted like apples and cinnamon.

His cat stayed silent, content for the moment, and Dare remained in control as he lay on top of her, nibbling her lips. Her large porcelain-skinned breasts fascinated him. They had swollen with his caress, her nipples now a deep red. He licked, suckled and teased the rosy nubs with the tips of his fangs as she writhed beneath him. His tongue lapped the soft skin that covered her ribs and circled her navel before dipping inside. Her gasp made him lift his head and return to those luscious hard nipples, so sweet.

“You’re insatiable, but I love it.” She moaned and arched her back.

“Do you want more?”

“Yes, you make me feel special,” she replied, lifting her legs to encircle his waist.

“I’m glad this pleases you.” He purred as he entered her again, riding her slowly this time.

In control, he licked the sensitive skin of her neck before slanting his mouth across her lips. Her wet, sweat-soaked body slid deliciously against him, long fingernails raked his back in delightful torment. She bucked, driving her hips against his, demanding more of him. Breaking the kiss, he grasped her shoulders and drove into her deeply. She climaxed at once, her whole body shuddering. Her core held him in waves of contractions, so hot, so tight. He roared and drove deeper, riding her hard and fast to his own completion.

* * * * *

Sometime later, Jill awoke in Dare’s arms. Alive, she thought. *I feel so alive.* Her nipples ached wonderfully. A thrill ran through her, straight to her core as he cupped her breast, rolling the tender peak between his thumb and finger.

“We’ve a difficult journey ahead, and we must leave soon,” he said, moving her onto her back and staring at her intently. He stroked her cheek.

Jill slipped both hands around his neck and heaved a sighed. “I’m falling for you, big guy, falling hard.”

Dare traced his tongue along her bottom lip and kissed her. “Last night was very different for me as you were my first Human lover.”

“Different in what way?” she asked in a small voice. He had totally disregarded her declaration of love.

“I was concerned that I may damage you. Our females are very experienced and demanding lovers at your age. In truth, with a pride female, I’d have had little sleep. Indeed, during Moon Fire

neither male nor female sleep for three days.”

Jill’s mouth fell open. She frowned as he chuckled and rolled to his feet.

“No matter, come and bathe or the sun will be high before we leave.”

Jill picked up the tunic she had borrowed from Dare and followed him into the bright sunlight. She had changed significantly overnight, and chuckled to herself as she stepped from the cave, unconcerned by her nakedness. The music of nature surrounded her. Birds, bees and crickets sang in harmony, as if they were so happy to be alive they had to shout about it. Massive butterflies, their wings bright indigo with golden spots, settled on the heavy scarlet blooms that surrounded the rock pool. She could smell the scent of every species of flowers in the grotto. The clear sky seemed a deeper blue, the palms a brighter green. This beautifully strange world spread before her, enhanced by her newfound awareness.

Dare sat in the rock pool, watching her with interest. So, the old stories were true. When a Human had sex with a pride male, they changed. *She can see true color and scent the air almost as good as I can. She will crave me now and as my true mate she will have the desire to bite. Gods, I wish she had her fangs; to feel her sink them deep in my neck would be bliss.* He smiled at the sight of her enjoying her newly enhanced senses. So unique. So soft and pretty. So *very* pretty. He belonged to her, had been made for her alone, but he could not reveal this, not yet. He had promised to see her safely home, but mayhap he could change her mind. She already cared for him and would soon learn how to satisfy him. Her stamina would increase with time and if — *when* — he sunk his teeth into that sweet skin, her Moon Fire would be a challenge he would enjoy.

Jill slipped into the water, diving deep into the soothing warmth. She ached deliciously; her nipples drew to excited peaks at the thought of what she had learned last night. But the man himself confused her. Last night she had felt a deep connection with Dare. She knew he wanted her and she felt special. This morning he acted as if their lovemaking had meant nothing. *Just like a man to be nice when he wanted sex.* She turned her back on him. Last night she would keep as a wonderful memory, she decided. How stupid she was to believe a man like Dare could *actually* care for *her*. She should just think herself lucky that he was her first.

“Jill.” His voice was a soft embrace as he waded to her side.

“What do you want? I’m sorry I didn’t come quite up to your standards last night, but never mind. What’s the old saying? Ah yes, any port in a storm.”

Dare inclined his head and looked at her. “You speak, but the words from your lips make no

sense.” He turned her around and pulled her against him.

Jill gasped as his hands slipped down to her buttocks and he lifted her to his waist. She instinctively locked her legs around him as he bent his head and crushed her mouth with his. She could hardly take a breath between the ravenous kisses he lavished upon her. Their tongues tangled, he tugged and sucked on her lips. She clung to his neck as his head dropped to her swollen nipples and he nibbled each sensitive one until she whimpered with need. He smiled then and lowered her until the engorged head of his erection brushed against her soaking wet folds.

“Tell me, Jill; tell me what you crave from me.”

“I want you inside me,” she moaned.

Dare eased her trembling body down teasingly slow until he slipped inside her. She cried out in ecstasy at the deep penetration. He rocked within her heat and she bounced on his waist, increasing his pleasure. Water spilled from her wet hair and tickled his chest. Hair clung to her cheeks in long ruby ribbons, as unruly wet as it was when it was dry. Her gaze locked on him, her breath coming in short pants. Lunging at his shoulder, she bit down hard. The thrill of her teeth on his neck caused him to immediately spill his seed. He felt her spasm and climax, her head lolling against his shoulder. She clung to him, a shudder wrenching her body. He had imprinted on her. *Lady forgive me.* The next few days would be difficult and confusing for her. With his mark upon her – the only protection he could offer – she would long for him, and only him, and when they came together, the need to bite would overwhelm her. She would allow no other male to touch her now, and later, after he’d rescued his sister, he would give her the choice to stay. He would not take a female that yearned for her family; she would be his, heart and soul, or not at all. Dare dropped to his knees in the water and cupped her head, kissing her gently.

Jill pulled her head back and looked into his eyes. “You’re different this morning. How come you didn’t try to savage my neck?”

Dare stood. Water rushed from his body, sending small rainbows dancing in all directions.

“The water removes the scent that attracts my cat. Last night it was he that wanted to bite you.”

Jill rung out her wet hair and stared at him. She was confused. Hell, she was *very* confused.

“Okay, okay, so if it was your inner cat that had sex with me all night and *you* don’t have any feelings for me, what just happened?”

Dare rested his hands on his hips and looked far into the distance. “You have much to learn

about me, Jill. I'm *not* Human and don't have Human emotions. Love as you know it is different for me. Human males may choose any female for a life mate. Pride males chose by scent alone and only after mating does our love truly blossom. Arious Pride males have respect for all females and lie with many; 'tis our way. You ask me if I care for you after we've known each other only two days. My answer is that you attract me as no other has before. *I* desire you, Jill, and my cat craves your scent, but the time is not right for taking a mate. My sister is in danger and finding her takes priority."

"How is it you profess to know so much about Humans, and yet you know nothing about our technology?" she replied, climbing naked onto a warm rock and stretching out.

"The castle library at Dryad has many books on the other realms. I'm familiar with your race, Jill, but our books are ancient and many things change with time. I do know that there's no magyck in your realm. The Fae have written much about that subject."

Jill wrinkled her nose as Dare's heady scent wafted past her on the gentle breeze.

"It's strange that we don't know about you. There have been theories about other dimensions but nothing proven."

Dare plucked large purple berries from a plant and shared them with her. They tasted like raspberry ice cream.

"Only the Fae pass easily between the Human realm and our realms. Those of your race that came here by accident died here."

"Wonderful."

Chapter Six

Devil's Hollow

Tallin shielded his eyes from the sun that bore down upon them in relentless heat. Dust formed a grimy film on his sweat-covered skin, caking in the corners of his eyes, wrists and elbows. His horse shied constantly and almost unseated him, dancing on its back legs, snorting at a noisy cart filled with squealing pigs. The road to Devil's Hollow milled with merchants and slave traders, all traveling to the auction. The slavers held them up at every turn, offering to sell the tightly bound naked females they had in tow. Aric rolled his eyes at Tallin's constant refusals of free sex and laughed behind the large blue silk bandana covering his mouth.

Tallin pushed his horse off the road into the surrounding forest and reached for the wine

skin hanging over the pommel of his saddle. Cool spicy Miza slipped down his throat and the shade from the trees was a cool, welcome relief from the oppressive heat. Aric reigned in beside him and pulled the bandanna from his face. He looked comical, his upper face caked in thick grey dust.

“Gods, this place is well named. It’s as hot as hell,” moaned Aric, slipping from the saddle and putting a hand to his back.

“Here, drink and rest in the shade. Devil’s Hollow is not more than another half hour away. I hope we find Helsa before the auction; I fear she may bring a bigger price than we can meet.”

Aric wiped the droplets of wine from his mouth with the back of his hand and looked past Tallin, his eyes wide. Tallin spun around and froze. Not ten paces away in the clearing stood Nox. Tallin drew a deep breath, his gaze fixed on the brilliant emerald eyes of his first love. Nox stood like a golden sculpture in the sunlight, holding his gaze like a sensual vice. Nox lifted his wings and the silver tips of the black gossamer caught the sunlight. A halo of rainbows reflected across his bare chest. Tallin fell to one knee and bowed his head, but the command to rise drifted into his consciousness. He lifted his head. Nox stood closer now, his long raven hair moving as if it were alive, undulating around his chiseled body.

Memories of a year of insurmountable bliss made him instantly hard. The Faerie King held his heart in a special way. Even so, he could not bring his hand up to touch him; their intimacy had not softened his awe of the faerie.

“Your majesty, I’m humbled by your presence.”

Nox inclined his head. His hair drifted back from his face as if tickled by the breeze.

“Tallin, I’ve missed you. I’m happy that you have found contentment with Aric and now Helsa; it’s the Lady’s way. Mayhap one day she will see fit to send me a mate of my own.”

“You know about Helsa?”

Nox chuckled, his laughter ringing out like deep bells.

“I know everything about you, Tallin. She’s within the Hollow in a cage near the pigpen. She’s suffered greatly under Rawtach and she carries his brand upon her soft buttock. You knew she was here; why did you allow this suffering? Methinks the Lady will be displeased. She matched you more than three moons ago.”

Tallin ran a hand through his dust-filled hair. “You taught me that females are to be respected and that a mate before marking may be quite difficult. Helsa requested that we leave her to meet with her brother, Hawke, in Devil’s Hollow. She instructed us to travel to Dryad and seek King Blaise. We respected her wishes and waited at Feltich Castle. When Hawke returned without

Helsa, we made haste to come here. We were informed that Blaise had been uneasy about her journey and had dispatched Dare to find her.”

“Did you find her whole?” demanded Aric, his hands balled in fists at his sides.

Nox narrowed his almond eyes to slits, like a cat ready to pounce.

“Whole in body, but the memories of misuse are hard to remove. She’ll need your understanding and patience. This, however, is not why I’m here. You must allow Dare to purchase his sister at the auction.”

“No!” gasped Aric.

Nox lifted his head and Aric fell silent, frozen in time. Until Nox released him, Aric would neither see nor hear anything around him.

Nox laid a hand on Tallin’s shoulder. His touch sent a shimmer of sheer pleasure, a memory of warm, open-mouth kisses and bodies sliding together, slick with sweat. Nox’s breath brushing warm against his ear, his scent . . . *Gods, why did his body respond instantly to a memory?*

“There’s a Human female. She has long red hair and bares Morfran’s curse. Dare will bring her to the auction and I want you to buy her. Protect her and take her to Prince Darrius.”

Tallin shuddered.

“A *Human* female. She’ll be of little use to us.”

Nox ran a finger down Tallin’s cheek and sighed.

“No. She bares Dare’s imprint; you shall not touch her. Although before you bite Helsa you are free to indulge as you will. Aric pleases you?”

Tallin tipped his head back to look into Nox’s bottomless emerald eyes; he stood so close he could feel the heat of his body.

“Yes I love him, but I’ll never forget *our* time together.”

Tallin sighed when the wet warmth of Nox’s tongue lashed across his lips. “You will when you take Helsa for your mate, but mayhap we’ll have one more night together. I may bring Tani with me; she is a favorite, is she not?”

“No females, not now that I know Helsa is for us. As for you and I, I’m not sure. I’ve been with Aric for some years; he trusts me to be faithful.”

Nox laughed and his hair flowed out behind him in long swirling tendrils. “He desires me with a passion. It will be my gift to you, to both of you.”

Nox held out a leather pouch and Tallin took it. The bag jingled, its weight surprisingly heavy.

“Gold for the auction; it is more than enough to buy several females. Go and rent rooms

suitable for our evening. There are many with their own hot springs if you are willing to pay the price. You must buy clothes for the Human, mindful that she belongs to Prince Darrius."

"I'll do as you ask, thank you."

A flame of desire shot through Tallin's body when Nox touched his cheek. The gold dropped with a thud to the ground as Nox's long fingers slid to the back of his head, pulling him close. The kiss brought back a passion long left in glowing embers. His mouth, both soft and demanding, devoured him, flooding his mind with erotic memories. Nox's wings held him close with a crushing strength, removing any doubt of this faerie's intentions.

Nox held his gaze for some moments before nodding slowly. He smiled. "I will come when the Human is sleeping."

Tallin glanced toward Aric when he heard him calling his name. When he looked back, Nox had disappeared.

"This is true? We leave Helsa for a *Human*? Does the heat befuddle you, Tallin, or mayhap 'tis your cock that is ruling your head? I see how it strains against the leather of your pants with desire for the Faerie King, yet you told me he was your past and I was your future."

"Nox is the Lady's messenger; we've no choice but to do as he asks. Helsa will go with Dare but we'll need to find out which female belongs to him. No doubt there will be more than one with red hair; methinks I saw perhaps six or more of that coloring on the road today."

"I'm sure the auctioneer will know which female Prince Darrius brought to the auction. Don't avoid my question about your lover," Aric spat, grasping him by the arm and spinning him to face him.

Tallin looked into Aric's eyes, finding them filled with pain, not anger as he'd suspected.

"I met Nox when I was twenty-one summers. I was insatiable then and we shared a number of faerie females at an orgy. He invited me to Other World to learn faerie magyck and we became lovers. I believe I'd have stayed with him if my father had not ordered me home. He was my first male lover and I believe my first love. Yes, I admit that I desire him and his offer of one last night of passion is attractive to me, but he has offered to join us both. It's not as if we haven't shared both males and females before; why does this upset you?"

"You want me to share you with Nox and a *Human* female? Gods, Tallin, we three will break her apart."

"No. The Human will be sleeping; it will be Nox we share. Come now, Aric, how many pride brothers can say they lay with the Faerie King?"

Aric grinned broadly and wiped the sweat from his grime-streaked face with a bandanna.

“A room with a hot spring and a night of passion; we’ll be in fine shape to protect the Human by the morrow.”

Tallin grasped the trailing reins of his horse and swung into the saddle. “Methinks a Human won’t need too much protection. Let’s make haste to Devil’s Hollow; the lure of the hot springs is too much for my weary body too resist.”

Chapter Seven

Jill watched as Dare made preparations to leave the cave. An involuntary shudder followed the thought of mixing with the Rams at Devil’s Hollow. What choice did she have? She hoped Dare would keep his word and try to get her home. She tipped her head back to catch the warm breeze, pushing her fingers through the mass of tangled auburn hair. Dare refused to allow her the use of the hairbrush in her backpack. He stuffed the offending bright blue bag behind a rock. The wide toothed comb, which he placed in her hand, would have to do.

She smiled at the ornate comb, a surprisingly feminine item for a man to carry. She turned it over in her hand, judging its weight. The shiny comb reflected the sunlight. Most likely solid gold, she mused, but then he *did* have a lot of gold secreted in his saddlebags. Both gold armbands were thick and heavy, Celtic in design, and now he sported a strange ear decoration. The intricate piece of jewelry slipped over the pointed tip of his ear and attached by a thin chain with an impressive blue gem to his earlobe. Two long gold chains hung around his neck, each containing matching amulets. She waited patiently as he sat buck-naked on a rock, plaiting gold beads into two warrior braids hanging from his left temple.

She watched him rise and dress in a pair of buff leather pants that clung to his strong muscular legs like a second skin. He shrugged massive shoulders into a white linen shirt as soft as brushed silk. He then stuffed his feet into brown boots crafted in the softest leather she had ever seen. A gold handled sword hung from a black leather scabbard at his waist. He was magnificent, princely, and he sent a pang of hunger deep inside her. He threw her one of the clean shirts he had washed and hung to dry the previous evening.

“Cover yourself; it is time to leave,” he ordered, before returning to the cave to collect the saddlebags.

Jill pulled the long dark brown tunic over her nakedness and followed him. She collected the remainder of the bags and stood waiting for him to speak. He said nothing. Instead, he threw the bags over his shoulder and strode out toward the horses. He saddled and packed the horses

before finally turning and staring at her. A long rope dangled from one hand, a length of rag in the other.

“We will join the road into Devil’s Hollow after we cross the next ridge; at that point, it will be necessary to bind you.”

Jill stepped backward, bile rushing up the back of her throat. “No! I won’t be tied up. Why should I? We haven’t seen one other person since we left.”

Dare’s expression hardened. He stepped forward and grasped her arm. “This land is familiar to me, Jill. I have followed paths not used by others to keep you safe. You must travel as my slave. Keep silent and respectful, and endure all that is to come.”

“Endure what, *exactly*? You’d better fill me in here, because I’m not going into this unprepared.”

Dare grasped her wrists, wrapped them in rags and looped the rope around them securely. His eyes met hers and a frown creased his handsome brow. “It’s a slave auction, Jill. Females that are barren or unsociable are sold to males who have lost their mates or to armies for companions during battle.”

“Sex s-s-slaves?”

“Aye. For the most, our pride and all in our realm find this practice distasteful. Rams treat females at an auction despicably; many are raped, tortured and humiliated. This is why I must find my sister; already she’ll have suffered.”

“So it doesn’t bother you that *I’ll* suffer. Don’t you care if they rape me?”

Dare cupped her face in his warm hands. “It’s true that you may be mistreated, but I’ll give instructions that you’re not to be touched. It’ll be necessary for the Rams to believe that I’m at the auction to buy a female and that I agree with this despicable practice. They must not discover that Helsa is a Knight Watch princess. Wars have been started for less.”

Jill shuddered and tested her bonds; the rag didn’t give. “So even after last night, you still intend to trade me for your sister? How do you know she will even be there?”

Dare lifted her chin and brushed his lips across hers. “This I’ve already explained. You must trust me, Jill. A pride female in this situation would endure until the matter is resolved. I hope my sister is at the auction, for as a breeder, she’s of no use to the Rams. She can only be impregnated by her mate.”

“Trust you? Are you mad? A pride female will endure, will she? Well good for her. She can only get pregnant by her mate . . . how convenient. I’m Human, in case you forgot; weak by your mighty standards, and guess what, big guy . . . I can fall pregnant by any man.”

Dare's mouth crushed her lips with a deep possessive kiss. Jill's knees began to buckle with the swell of emotion that flowed into her body. His scent surrounded her, filling her lungs like an opium rush. Fear of the auction and Devil's Hollow seeped from her mind and no matter how hard she tried to grasp reason, it eluded her. When he lifted his head and looked deep into her eyes, she knew she must follow his orders.

"Trust me," he said again before lifting her and placing her in the saddle. He climbed up behind her and pulled her close. She shivered when her bare bottom rested against the soft leather covering his thighs. Jill leaned back, wrapped in his warmth, feeling strangely erotic with her bare core wide open to the breeze, her hands tied and her lover's hands splayed across her belly.

They travelled ever upward, through vegetation as thick as an African jungle. The air around them heated unbearably and became putrid with the smell of brimstone. Dare stopped and pointed toward a cloud of dust that hung over a road filled with loaded carts and horses. The horses carried numerous types of men, most dragging bound naked females behind them.

"When we join the road you must walk beside my horse. Do not speak or look at any male. Do you understand?" He rested a hot hand on her bare thigh.

Jill muttered an agreement and looked ahead. Devil's Hollow sat within a massive ring of trees, steam hissing from between the surrounding rocks. *An active volcano, good grief, is he insane?* No wonder the air stank of brimstone.

"This place may erupt at any second. Don't you know about volcanoes?"

Dare stopped the horses and dismounted, lifting her down to her feet. He held her close, pressing his nose into her neck and inhaling deeply. After a moment, he lifted his head and smiled at her.

"The earth here hasn't spat lava for many years, and this town has been here for as long as I can remember. Drink and relieve yourself now, for we join the others beyond those bushes."

Jill trudged beside Dare's mount as he wove his way between carts and men on horseback. Many offered him the females they were towing, for trade or for sex. Often a foul smelling Ram would push his horse beside her and inform her in intimate detail what he would do with her after the auction. Some of them spat at her and cursed or threw things. Dare remained silent when a small word of encouragement would have helped immensely. The putrid air became hotter at every step; she could hardly breathe and she was parched from the dust that billowed up from the carts. It filled her mouth and eyes, covering her skin in a thin powdery crust. She stumbled onward, brushing her tied hands over her dust-covered face. The dirt quickly became an irritating paste as it mixed with the sweat running in constant streams down her body. The hard road

pierced her tender feet. She looked up at the distant look on Dare's face and let the tears prickling her eyes tumble down her cheeks.

Many greeted Dare reverently as they entered Devil's Hollow through large wooden gates. On each side stood heavily armed Rams, each of them dressed in a gray uniform of sorts. Many of the townsfolk fell to their knees as they approached.

"Welcome, my prince," they called as he passed by.

He is a *prince*. Good Lord, no wonder he carried so much gold. Jill's heart sank. *What a fool I am to go on with this charade*. From his current demeanor his interest in her well-being had dropped dramatically.

Dare stopped the horses next to a bright red wooden building and dismounted. He did not cast a single glance toward her as he strode inside. He returned shortly with an elderly bald man who carried a large bunch of keys on a silver ring in one hand, and a thin walking stick in the other.

"We're most privileged to have you attend our auction, Prince Darrius, most privileged. What have you to offer our humble patrons?"

"This female is Human. I broke her in myself and she's ripe for childbearing. She is unusual in color and is as bare as a youngling."

"What is your price?" The old man casually lifted the hem of Jill's tunic and licked his lips.

Dare placed a firm hand on his arm. "Mayhap a trade? I tire of this female and seek one that is fair with golden skin."

"We have many such females. Come and secure this prize and I'll show you all we have before the auction begins."

A massive Ram untied the rope from Dare's saddle, led Jill to a small cage and locked the door. Before he turned to go, he cast her a cruel grin. She sat down, looking back and forth between the empty bucket in one corner and the water skin in the next. She watched Dare saunter off without a backward glance. The cages on either side contained women of various races. A Ram female, her face bruised and beaten, lay curled up in a crumpled heap on the earth floor. On the other side a woman with tall pointed ears and graying hair sobbed quietly, her head in her hands.

Jill sat for hours on the dry sandy soil, until dehydration made her head throb. She reluctantly took down the water skin and sniffed the contents before gulping down the tepid metallic water. Her vision began to waver. *Drugged! The water was drugged!* Pushing fingers down her throat, she heaved, expelling a good portion across the sand at her feet. But she was too late. The feeling of tranquility cloaked her and she dozed.

* * * * *

Voices, deep and rough, woke her; she peered up drunkenly into the old man's eyes. Males of various races surrounded him. Rams and others looked down at her salaciously. Keys jangled, the door opened and rough hands pulled her to her feet. The Ram holding the rope lifted her arms high above her head and her skin tore as he ripped the tunic from her body in one swift movement.

"She's all that you promised. I'll sample her and if she's as compliant as you say, she'll make a fine wife for Rawtach. I'll take her to my hut. Inform the prince that on these terms Rawtach will agree to trade her for the blond whore."

In one swift movement, the Ram slung Jill over his massive shoulder and marched through the village. She could not breathe; the stink rose up from his body like putrid meat. His clawed fingers pierced her tender skin as he massaged her buttocks, probing the sweaty crack. Marching into a wooden hut, he barked orders to his men. She shrieked when he dropped her onto a large wooden bed swathed in animal skins. Her stomach lurched; the room smelt like death. She lifted her head and tried desperately to focus, scanning the room for an escape route.

The Ram tied her hands to the end of the bed and ran his razor sharp talons across her breasts. Not speak, be damned, she decided. She screamed, aimed a well-placed kick at his groin and swore every obscenity she could muster. He recoiled and sent a stinging slap across her face. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth and she spat, showering him with crimson spittle.

He laughed at her. Laughed. Dear God, her fighting him had turned him on. She shrank back as he removed his pants, uncovering a massive erection.

"Dare, for God's sake he's going to rape me," she screamed.

Heavy footfalls echoed in the room. The Ram jerked backward and flew into the far wall. He slid down to lie in a crumpled heap on the floor. Dare stood over the Ram, his eyes blazing gold. Another Ram had followed him into the hut. This Ram stood beside the bed, staring at her nakedness, a small smile on his ugly face.

"There'll be no trade until I've purchased my new female. This Human will attract a high price. I'll not allow her to be contaminated by your men, Rawtach," boomed Dare, his hand resting threateningly on the hilt of his sword.

"You have my word," replied the Ram as he executed a bow.

Jill called out to Dare again. Pain gripped her heart when he ignored her pleas and walked

away. She watched in horror as the first Ram got slowly to his feet and stood beside Rawtach. They both stood staring at her with interest; she rolled up into a ball under their intent gaze. Rawtach leaned over her and ran his claws the length of her thigh and she shuddered. His foul breath flowed over her, stinging her nostrils.

“No, she’s not to my taste. Leave her undamaged or the prince will extract compensation from the flesh of the one who touches this female.”

The Ram genuflected, grabbed his pants and strode from the room. Rawtach stood beside the bed, a thin smile on his young, demonic face.

“Well fought, Human. I’ll have you returned to your cage. Methinks you’d make a fine regiment slave. My men would enjoy your spirit and any young you produce will increase my army. I *will* bid on you, slave, but not as a wife for I’ll have none of your fire.”

* * * * *

The auction began at midday with the sound of a horn. Devil’s Hollow had taken on a carnival atmosphere. Stalls selling wares of every description crammed the square and the rich aromas from the food vendors made Jill’s stomach growl with hunger. She noticed there were no women walking free, this auction apparently being an exclusively male event. The Rams, it seemed, had their own varied social status. Many appeared as slaves but some herds were of a higher standing and the other women in the auction were aware of this. During the hours before the auction, they offered themselves without shame to some Rams while avoiding others like the plague.

The auction proceeded with loud howls and cheers as the auctioneer offered each selection of females for sale to the crowd. Jill had no choice but to follow the other women as they were paraded naked through the town center. The ramshackle town spread out in every direction as if no thought had been given to the position of the various stone houses or the numerous brightly colored huts that surrounded them. The humiliation Jill felt at being seen like this was nothing compared to the extreme heat and a thirst so intense that her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth like sandpaper. The crowd of noisy, vulgar men parted as the women moved forward. Rams pulled her hair; she swore and spat at the gnarled hands that fondled her breasts.

A large wooden platform rose from the center of the square with wooden posts set evenly spaced across the floor. Men flanked each side, buying or selling various items: food, livestock, swords, finely crafted leather boots, gold and silver jewelry. Brightly colored displays were piled

high on garish painted barrows sitting on massive wooden wheels. The noise rose and fell like a crowd at a football game, interspersed with the cries from the food vendors.

Jill stared into the mass of people. Surely Dare would stop this indignity. *Where the hell was he?* A horn trumpeted and the crowd surged forward as Rams tied three women to the posts on top of the stage. Interested patrons examined the women in intimate detail. Jill watched in detached horror as a variety of men demanded oral gratification to the cheers of the crowd. The bidding then began, fast and furious.

Time dragged by until finally, in the late afternoon, they pushed a beautiful woman with long flowing platinum blond curls to the stage. Dare stepped out from the crowd, climbed onto the stage and spoke to her. He remained by her side, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, preventing any males from touching her. He began to bid and no one could better him. The crowd cheered when he topped the highest bid by ten gold pieces. He paid the old man his coin and took the female. He untied her hands and took the shirt from his own back to cover her nakedness. Jill stared helplessly as he kissed the blond beauty's bruised cheeks and slid a protective arm across her shoulder.

His sister, it must be his sister. He did say she had blond hair, didn't he? Jill's mind raced. *His sister is safe now, so what about me? He wouldn't leave me here, would he?* Her anxiety peaked as a pair of tall, well-dressed men stepped out of the crowd. They showed their fangs and hissed at Dare, drawing lethal-looking swords from scabbards at their waists. Jill stretched her neck to see between the group of people that turned as one to surround them. Dare pushed his sister behind him and drew his sword with a swish. The crowd surged forward, blocking Jill's view of the fight.

Suddenly, the crowd sighed as if one and slowly dissipated, opening just enough for Jill to watch. They had not fought; the other men had simply turned their backs and walked away. Dare walked to where he had tethered the horses. He settled his sister behind him on Gila and collected the reins of the packhorse. He rode away without a backward glance.

"Dare, please don't leave me here." Jill knew he had not heard her, her voice hardly made more than a squeak in her parched throat. Her stomach clenched as an overwhelming feeling of deep grief flooded over her, twisting her heart with immeasurable pain. She sank to the floor, her legs no longer supporting her, and wept. He'd used her. Used her and then left her to her fate. She rubbed her face with the rough rope that bound her hands. The son of a bitch. He'd left her there to rot. What kind of a man did that? *But of course Stupid me. He's not really a man, is he? He's a bloody cat!* She buried her head in her forearm, tears streaming down her cheeks to form wet patches in the dry sand.

“Get up, Human,” a deep voice demanded close to her face. Rough hands grabbed her arms and yanked her to her feet. She stumbled, fell, and he laughed.

“Don’t laugh at me you hairy pig,” she spat.

“Get up and walk. We don’t want that pretty pink skin all bloody when I drag you to the stake,” a massive Ram, with long brown hair demanded. He pulled roughly on her rope and dragged her to her feet.

“God you stink; don’t you creatures ever bathe? It’s no wonder you have to *buy* women. Nobody in their right mind would go with you willingly,” she yelled, aiming a bare-toed kick at his shins.

The Ram only chuckled. He gathered her under one arm like a small puppy and patted her on the head as he walked slowly to the stage. Jill’s earlier humiliation was replaced with a rush of anger, hatred and disdain for the men who ogled her naked body. Many of them mounted the stage to touch her or to feel her hair or wave their huge erections at her face. She swore colorfully, kicking and biting down hard on anyone who came too close

The sun had slipped behind the mountains as the bidding started. Youths hurriedly brought flaming torches to the market square, setting them up in the brass holders surrounding the stage. Many Rams bid and she spat and swore at each of them as they stepped forward to make their offer. The crowd parted and the two men who had challenged Dare stepped forward. The blond-haired one threw a full bag of gold coins at the feet of the auctioneer and the bidding stopped. Rams uttered their dismay as the auctioneer accepted this bid. The blond glanced toward Jill and his cornflower blue eyes met hers for an instant. Did she see pity there?

He turned to the auctioneer as the request came for him to supply his name for the record of sale.

“I’m Tallin of Lonza Pride. Clean her and bring her to my hut. Let no male touch her or they will die by my hand. We shall be leaving at sunrise.”

The auctioneer handed Tallin the book to make his mark. He cast Jill another quick glance, turned on his heel and strode away, head held high. The other dark haired man fell into stride beside him.

The Ram that had secured her to the stake smiled broadly, showing a fine set of thick yellowing fangs.

“Allow me to bathe her, and mayhap extract recompense for the injuries sustained,” he begged the auctioneer, his arms spread out at his sides.

“No, Zafim. The pride male that purchased her was very insistent she not be touched.” The

auctioneer walked toward Jill but stopped when he was still some distance away. "For a Human, being a slave to a pride male would be preferable to becoming the slave of a Ram. My advice to you, Human, is to calm yourself so I can arrange a bath for you. Would you not want to please a master that would pay a king's ransom for you?"

Jill lifted her chin. *Another bloody cat, but thank God not a Ram.* "I'll behave as long as that pig has nothing more to do with me," she said, pointing to the Ram as she struggled to stand on wobbly legs.

"Cut her free." He addressed his assistant and then turned and glared at her. "And slave? Don't think that you'll escape Devil's Hollow. If you so much as breathe in the wrong direction I'll gladly give you to the Rams," he threatened.

Jill followed him, her legs stiff and her wrists burning as she walked through the town. Despite her discomfort, she held her head high. She would get through this, she decided. Flickering torches lit the pool, heated, she suspected, from the volcano, the same as the one in the grotto, although this one was lifeless and barren. Nothing survived for long in this atmosphere, and the rocks around the pool were dark red and devoid of moss.

Many frolicked in the hot water and Rams took turns copulating with their new slaves on the warm rocks. The air hung heavy with the stink of the Rams and the unmistakable smell of sex. The auctioneer stood, arms folded over his chest, as Jill ducked below the thick swirling red-stained water. She scrubbed her body, trying to rid her skin of the touch of the men who had pawed at her.

Jill's keeper ordered her from the pool and marched her to the last unit in a line of brightly painted huts set hard against the rock face. He knocked once on the door. When it opened, he pushed her toward the man standing inside. She stepped into the hut, holding her head high. Water streamed from her hair down her back, forming puddles on the scrubbed wooden floor. The room enclosed her with humidity made more unbearable by the steam rising from the rock pool at one end of the cabin.

Tallin stood bare to the waist. He touched her arm gently and handed her a thick piece of linen.

"Dry yourself, Jill. Prince Darrius left a tunic for you to wear." He turned away to spoon spicy smelling food into a blue porcelain bowl on the table.

Jill watched him closely as she dried her body and then her hair. His skin carried a slight tan. His face was strong and yet his eyes made him appear almost angelic. His body was strongly muscled, and he had the most fascinating hair. She found it took a great deal of willpower not to

reach out and touch it. It tumbled down his back in a cascade of cherub curls, almost as if he wore a magnificent halo.

She started, noticing the other male lounging on a massive bed, his dark eyes intently watching her every move. He stretched like a cat, his huge muscular body clad only in a thin silk loincloth. His hair fell in a sheet of black silk to wide shoulders of burnished copper, so much like Dare he made her weak at the knees. He smiled at her interest, resting his head in the palm of one hand. Tallin followed her gaze and frowned.

“This is Aric.”

Aric inclined his head but remained silent.

She watched Tallin retrieve a tunic from the massive bed and bring it to her. His eyes never left hers. She grasped the tunic and brought it to her nose as Dare’s hypnotic scent surrounded her. She clutched the shirt to her breast as true pain stabbed deep in her heart, the need for Dare overwhelming.

Tallin watched Jill with interest. The prince’s mate was unmarked but already tied to him by his scent. No doubt, he had already claimed her body and imprinted on her. This female showed great strength and courage, a fine choice for a prince. She had fought so hard this day to prevent any other from taking his place. He presumed, by her gentle sobs into the soft fabric of the tunic, that she was unaware of Dare’s plans.

“Put on the tunic, Jill, and sit here,” he requested politely, sitting down at the small table in the middle of the room.

Jill sat. Tears ran constantly from her red-rimmed eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

“I don’t belong here! I j-just want to go home to my f-family,” she pleaded

“I *do* understand, Jill. But at present you have no choice; you must remain with us.”

Jill cast Tallin a glare. “I’ll *never* love you. You may do with me as you wish but I’m *not* yours and *never* will be. No matter how much gold you threw around to buy me.”

“Well said. Now eat, drink and get some rest. We must leave at daybreak.” Tallin lifted a spoonful of food and held it to her lips.

She ate everything he offered. She consumed a great deal of wine – Miza, Dare had called it; the spicy liquid gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling and took the edge off her fear. Aric came to the table and sat on the edge, his heavy masculine musk so different from Dare’s delicious scent. He ran a warm finger down her cheek, and lifted her chin, examining her with a confused expression.

“She is unmarked. There’s no reason we can’t enjoy her while she’s in our company. I can see she desires us, her nipples harden at my touch.”

Tallin laid a hand on his arm. “She’s been imprinted by Prince Darrius; can’t you see how she grieves for him?”

Aric smiled. “She grieves for a male’s touch; her eyes tell me I’ll do nicely.”

“She requires rest and Nox will be here soon. Mayhap you should use your glamour to calm her to sleep.”

Jill flinched as Aric bent toward her and she pushed away the hand that cupped her cheek.

“You must not fear me, Jill. Prince Darrius’ sister, Helsa, is our true mate and we’ll follow her tomorrow so we can claim her as our own.”

“So why did Tallin buy me?”

Tallin turned his cornflower blue eyes toward her. “I did this on the prince’s behalf. He thought it necessary to get his sister to safety as soon as possible. He feigned disinterest in you so that I might buy you without suspicion. If it was known that you’re his mate, the Rams would’ve held you to ransom.”

The world spun for an instant and Jill trembled. “I’m his mate? Oh boy has he got a lot of explaining to do.”

“He did this to protect you, although it pained him greatly to do so. We conversed for some time before we staged the confrontation. He thought a challenge from us for his sister would give him an excuse to leave before you were sold.”

“He really cares for me?”

Tallin made a strange purring sound. “Aye. That is why he left his tunic. It’ll placate you until he can meet with you again.”

Aric slid off the table and stood. He offered his hand to her. “There’s a bed over there. Rest now. We’ll keep you safe.”

Jill took his hand and felt a wave of warmth slip up her arm and flood her body with a comfortable weariness. The bed, a pallet on the floor, had a rush screen offering a small modicum of privacy. She sat and looked up into Aric’s dark eyes; the need to sleep overwhelmed her. Snuggling down in the rough uncomfortable bed, she smiled. *I’m his mate*, she thought, as she drifted on the edge of sleep.

Soft lanterns bathed the room in a yellow light. A cloud of steam hovered above the rock pool, sending rivulets of condensation running down the beech wood walls. Before the large bed stood an ethereal creature, a naked statue whose chiseled body glowed in the dancing lantern

flames. His wings, black and tipped with silver, spread out like a magnificent butterfly touching both floor and ceiling. He stood tall, perhaps seven feet or more, with long black hair that flowed down to his hips like a twilight waterfall.

Aric and Tallin stood before him and she watched while the creature cupped their cheeks, one in each hand. He whispered to them and brushed his lips across Tallin's before turning and taking Aric's mouth in a long, slow kiss. Tallin sunk to his knees and gave devotion to the massive cock that rose from the creature's groin. Aric followed and they knelt before him, licking and sucking his shaft in slow deliberation. Jill sighed. The beautiful creature could only be a faerie. *Imagine finding him at the bottom of the garden.*

The faerie's hands slid into Aric and Tallin's hair and he tipped his head back and groaned. Jill's hand slipped between her legs, feeling the familiar wetness. She pressed her hand hard against her nub to ease the longing. The faerie called Tallin's name and lifted him to his feet. He stroked Tallin's hair, kissed him with tenderness and turned him toward the bed. He then took Aric by the shoulder and instructed him to sit before Tallin and pleasure him. As Aric took Tallin's hard cock in his mouth, the faerie pushed Tallin down and began to anoint his buttocks with oil. Long fingers caressed and oiled his crack, interspersed with kisses and bites on his back and buttocks.

Jill blinked and tried to sit up but the desire to sleep held her dreamily to the bed. She could not take her eyes of the scene before her. Their actions surprised her. She would have expected men to be demanding and rough with each other. This faerie treated Tallin with reverence, as if he loved him. Her suspicions rang true when the faerie slid his massive cock into Tallin's ass and rode him gently. He bent his head to lavish kisses down his spine, one hand reaching down to caress Aric's cheek. Tallin turned his head toward her, his face a picture of true ecstasy. They three were making love and Jill thought it the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Chapter Eight

The morning brought a wave of humidity as heavy cloud cover hung over Devil's Hollow and all it touched glistened in the mist. The sun had been up only an hour when Tallin and Aric decided to go shopping. Jill grinned. Men who wanted to go shopping were a rarity, like finding a diamond ring on the ground. And for them to suggest it? Well, that was like finding the matching earrings.

She blushed, remembering the erotic dream from the night before. The memory made her

wet between the legs and by the look Aric gave her he knew she had become aroused. He offered her a cup of herbal tea, sweet with honey, and gently touched her cheek.

“Dare is only a day’s ride from here – two at the most. Be strong, Jill.”

Jill decided she liked Tallin very much, especially when he requested that she remain seated after feeding her a sumptuous breakfast. He surprised her by standing behind her and gently combing the knots from her hair.

“I’ve braided your hair. This will keep you cooler while we’re travelling,” he said, slipping the comb into his back pocket and stepping back to admire her.

“Tallin, thank you; thanks so much for everything. You don’t know me but you’ve treated me like a princess. I’ve never known men to act this way. You’re both so respectful.”

Tallin’s lips lifted at the corners and Jill could swear a slight blush stained his cheeks. “You’re most welcome. Pride males believe that our females are most precious. For is it not the female who accepts our child seed and carries our cubs? The female holds the future of our race, and must be loved and protected. It’s what we do.”

He turned and followed Aric toward the door. He swung it open, only stopping when he’d reached the foot of the steps. He turned his large blue eyes on her and frowned. “Jill, I’m sorry but I must treat you as my slave while we remain in Devil’s Hollow, and until we’re safely on our way.”

“Fine.” Jill had no problem with that. Not if it meant she’d be leaving this place sans the company of Rams. She followed them through the crowds and into the busy marketplace.

Standing motionless, she waited as they selected a variety of silk dresses, holding them one at a time against her body. They were beautiful, each ankle-length gown a simple design but elaborately embroidered. The two men discussed each dress at length and finally chose two different shades of green and one of midnight blue.

Tallin turned to Jill and lifted a brow. “We require clothes for Helsa. She can hardly travel to Dryad in her brother’s tunic. What size would you say she wears? She’s much smaller than you,” he said, lifting a crimson dress into the air.

“That one looks fine and the color would suit her, also the pale blue.” Jill fingered the fine fabric.

“Do not allow the slave to touch the material. I don’t want her contaminating my wares,” snarled the green-eyed Ram, leaning across his merchandise protectively.

Tallin rose to his full height, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

“I’ll take these and those three,” he snapped, dropping a gold coin in the Ram’s gnarled

open hand.

The merchant pushed the parcel into Jill's arms and she followed Tallin and Aric along the line of barrows. They browsed the vast collections of merchandise, casually selecting items here and there and loading them into her arms. They stopped when they reached a cart piled high with leather goods. Britches, tunics, boots and long cloaks sat in piles according to size. They chose a selection, stopping only to check if the soft leather boots fit Jill's feet.

She was relieved when Aric took charge of the heavy parcels and led them back to the hut. Inside, he poured a pitcher of water into a large porcelain bowl. He placed a finger in the water and said something under his breath before adding a little rose oil from a small bottle he had purchased earlier.

"Take a few minutes to refresh yourself, Jill. I think the pale green dress will suit you well." He handed her a large piece of clean linen. "I'll help Tallin pack the horses and then we'll be on our way."

Jill placed her fingers in the scented water. "How did you make the water warm?"

Aric turned, dropping the saddlebags onto the bed. "Magyck, how else would you heat water?" He smiled.

Jill watched his back, her mouth hanging open with amazement. There were just too many crazy things happening. She lifted the tunic over her shoulders and a deep feeling of loss swamped her so hard that tears pricked the back of her eyes.

"I don't want to wake up! If I'm lying on a hospital bed in a coma don't wake me up," she sobbed, pressing Dare's tunic to her wet cheeks.

Aric's arms slipped around her body, enclosing her in a warm hug, his chin resting on her shoulder. "You *are* awake, Jill. This grief that torments you is normal. The prince has linked with you, imprinted his scent on you. He's made a claim that can only be satisfied by a full bonding."

Jill shook violently. Dear Lord, now she was standing naked in the arms of a stranger. Surely, her damaged brain couldn't be this sordid, she concluded. Taking a deep breath, she patted Aric's arm. "Right, okay, I can do this. Just explain one thing. How come you're not getting all blubbery over Helsa? She *is* your mate, isn't she?"

Aric dropped his arms and turned his back. "There was no chance for me or Tallin to lay with her, for indeed we'd have bitten her at the first opportunity. We met on the road. We were returning from Gillin . . . our pride sells horses there. Helsa stopped. 'Tis not often one passes another pride member in these parts, and we shared a wine skin. Her scent enraptured us as ours did her, but she was insistent that she travel alone to meet her brother in Devil's Hollow.

“We journeyed on to Dryad at her request only to learn from King Blaise that he had sent his brother, Prince Darrius, in search of her. Her twin, Prince Hawke, had arrived home without meeting her. We rode with all haste but I knew in my heart that we had lost her to the Rams. Our only option was to come here to this dreadful place in the hope that she would be placed in an auction.”

Jill dried her body and slipped on the dress. It had splits to the hips on both sides. She watched Aric as she pulled on the soft leather boots.

He turned, his eyes filled with sorrow. “My heart aches, it’s true, but not for the scent of my mate. I know what Helsa has suffered at the hands of the Rams and I’d kill each and every one of them if I were able. My heart tells me that we’ll be able to remove some of her pain, but memories remain forever. They raped her, beat her and she carries the brand of the High Chief’s son Rawtach, burned into her buttocks with hot steel, like an animal. These atrocities will be with her until the end of our days.”

Jill went to stand beside him and folded the pile of clothes on the bed while Aric packed the saddlebags.

“Is this why she left with Dare?”

“Mayhap. She couldn’t meet our eyes after the auction. Does she not know we share her shame? We should’ve followed her and kept her safe. It was our fault she was captured,” he said, looking away toward the bare walls of the hut.

Jill laid a hand on his arm. “Dare mentioned that she’s strong. That she rode beside him in many battles. That doesn’t sound like someone who doesn’t understand the danger of travelling alone. She told you she wanted to go alone, right? Well, trust me, when a woman makes up her mind nobody is going to change it.”

Aric gave her a tight smile and pushed the folded garments into the saddlebags. “We must leave now if we are to meet Helsa before nightfall.” He threw the saddlebags over one shoulder and heading for the door.

They left Devil’s Hollow by the back gate. Tallin produced the receipt he held for the purchase of his *slave* to the Ram that guarded the exit. As soon as the gates closed behind them, Tallin pulled her onto the back of his saddle. She rode behind him, after he explained to her that it was customary for only mates to ride in front of a male.

Slipping her arms around his waist, she rested her head against his broad back. She could smell his sweet sandalwood scent, but it did not stir any emotion within her at all. They rode at a steady pace. Aric led the packhorse; it trotted beside him, grasping and eating any branch within

reach. Jill watched the passing vegetation lessen as they travelled ever downward, winding through narrow trails, and keeping away from the main path.

The sun was on its way down when they finally stopped to rest the horses. The air here was clean and the jungle had given way to fir trees and dense forest. They rested and ate lunch, sitting on a leafy forest floor, leaning against the tall pine trees. Jill breathed deeply; the fragrant pines and the cool fresh mountain air filled her with hope.

“Where are we going?” she asked as Tallin passed her the wine skin.

His lips lifted at the corners. “A fine time to ask when we have already been travelling for some hours. Methinks your brain is addled from passing through the Stones. If I said *Dillings*, it would mean nothing to you, so your question is pointless. You know it’s our intention to meet Prince Darrius and this is all the information you should require.”

Jill pushed the stopper into the wine skin with force, stood up and walked into the bushes.

“Be mindful of bears,” called Aric, his voice rumbling with laughter.

Men! Jill crashed through the undergrowth, looking for a suitable tree to duck behind. She froze in mid-step. Farther along, down the valley, black swirling smoke curled through the trees. An unfamiliar pungent odor engulfed her, making her cough. Turning on the spot, she ran wildly back to the clearing where Tallin and Eric shared a wine skin, waiting patiently.

“Fire! The forest is on fire!” she screamed.

Tallin lifted his nose and sniffed the air. His eyes turned from blue to gold in an instant.

“Not fire, ‘tis the demon fog of the Bratach,” he roared. He picked her up, threw her onto the horse and leaped up in front of her.

They all rode frantically toward a narrow pathway that led down a steep fissure cut into the mountainside. Wide caves flanked one side, while the other held a dizzying drop. Underfoot, loose rocks made the horses slip dangerously. Pebbles and dust rained down on them as the rock face above crumbled. The horses reared and stepped frighteningly close to the edge of the trail.

Tallin stopped the horses, looking behind them and then frantically side-to-side. Aric jumped from the saddle and led the horses up a steep, dusty mound formed by a recent rock fall. Tallin slipped from the saddle and followed. Jill clung on for fear of a grim death as the horse almost toppled, dropping to its knees before finding its balance. Tallin encouraged the animal and pulled the wild-eyed beast until they followed Aric into a large, wide-mouthed cave high above the path. He reached up and pulled Jill from the saddle.

“Take the horses to the back of the cave. Remain still. Do not move until we come for you,” he said grasping her arms tightly and glaring into her eyes.

“You’re *not* leaving me here alone!” She grabbed at his arm as he turned to leave.

Tallin brushed her hand away. “The Bratach eat females, especially soft Humans. We’ll try to lead them in the other direction; stay here,” he growled.

The air around them shimmered and a pair of magnificent white tigers appeared. The beast that emerged from Tallin lowered its head and looked at her before bounding from the cave.

Jill trembled with fear as she sat huddled inside the damp cave. She could hear the demons deafening war cry and the crackle of broken branches as they combed the forest. They were close and the stench of the demon fog began to fill the cave. She covered her ears to block the sickening shrieks of pain as the big cats fought for their lives.

Dear God, please don't let them die. She prayed frantically, fearing what would become of her if Aric and Tallin never returned. The cries stopped and the forest fell silent. She sat frozen, huddled in a ball as darkness fell and an icy chill crept into the cave. *They're not coming back; there's just no way they could've survived. The demons are probably dividing their bodies for dinner and I'm next.* A sob escaped her and she realized she was crying.

The horses became restless. The sound of loose rocks moving broke the silence. Jill shrank back as one figure then another lunged into the cave; not men but foul smelling beasts. One shimmered into Tallin, the other crumpled to the floor. As the clouds passed from in front of the moon, Jill could see the form of a white tiger, Aric. He lay in cat form, blood seeping from deep cuts across his flanks, staining the once pure white coat. His eyes were closed and his tongue lolled out from between his bloody teeth.

Jill knelt beside him, stroking the head of the beast. “Aric, come on, wake up. Don’t you die on me! Wake up!”

The cat did not respond. Barely alive, his flanks rose and fell in shallow, uneven strokes. Jill groped along the cave walls to the horses and found the wine skin. She crawled back to Tallin and pressed the skin into his hands. He took a long draft and leaned against the cave wall, breathing heavily. He passed her the wine skin and with great care, she dripped some of the spicy liquid onto the big cat’s tongue. She sighed with relief when Aric began to lap. His eyes opened. He stared at her for a moment, then blinked and rolled away from her. The air shimmered and Aric stood before her, naked and unharmed. He smiled at her and offered his hand to pull her to her feet.

“You cry for me, Jill?”

Jill took a long drink from the wine skin and tipped her head. “Yeah, it sure looks that way. I thought you were dying. How come you haven’t got a scratch on you? What on earth happened

out there?"

Tallin walked to the horses in the pitch-black darkness without difficulty. He pulled out a lantern that sprang to life in his hands and set it down. Turning to Jill, he waved her to his side. "The air is cold; come, dress in something warm. We can't risk a fire tonight. After eating, I think it would be best if we continued on our way. I fear the prince and Helsa may be in danger," he said, pulling clothes from the saddlebags and handing them to her.

"Can you see in the dark?" she asked casually as she pulled on warm leather pants.

Tallin tossed a bundle of clothes to Aric, and pulled a long sleeved tunic over his head. "So many questions. Bring the wine skin and sit with us." He carried a small loaf of bread and a wheel of cheese toward the lantern and sat down.

She watched patiently as he broke the bread and cheese and offered it to Aric. Then he held a small piece of cheese to her lips. She reached out and took it from his hand, arching a brow.

"Tonight I'll feed myself; *you* both need to eat. Dare informed me that morphing takes a lot of energy."

Tallin frowned but did not argue. He ate hungrily, following each bite with a healthy swig from the wine skin. When he'd finished, he sighed.

"We are cats, so we possess many more qualities than a Human. Our eyesight is better. We can jump, climb and we're much stronger than a Human male. Humans have inferior abilities of taste and smell, which to me is more important than breathing. This eve we killed five demons in our cat form because they're stupid. They split up to search the forest and they became easy prey. Morphing from cat to man heals all injuries. As a man, Aric would've surely died."

Jill chewed the dry bread. She wished for just a scrap of butter and a coffee. How she missed coffee. Did it even exist here? Aric tipped his head and looked at her, got up and went to the horses. When he returned he pushed Dare's tunic into her hands and sat down again, staring at her strangely.

"What?" She raised the tunic to her nose and savored the rich scent that was Dare. How strange the way his rich spicy odor wove a spell over her. She sighed, breathing deeply. The now familiar drop in her stomach and the awful feeling of loss flooded over her. She lifted her eyes to Aric. "This makes me feel good and bad all at the same time. I feel as if he's dead. My heart breaks when I smell him."

Aric nodded and pushed the stopper into the wine skin. "When travelling with males, it's good to be reminded to whom you belong. Now come. We must leave. We'd expected to meet the prince long before nightfall."

Chapter Nine

Tallin tied Jill to his back, worried she may drop asleep and fall from the horse. After no more than half an hour, he could feel her head lolling against his shoulder. She had been thankfully silent for some hours. He looked at Aric's drawn face. There had been no sign of Prince Darrius and they had travelled without stopping. The sun was beginning to shower the forest with light. In the distance, he could clearly see the snow covered fields of Dillings.

He led the way along the leaf-covered path as it dipped between rocky outcrops and pulled the horse to a halt. A black leopard stood atop the rocks, its head tipped back, whining pitifully.

"Jill, wake up," he ordered, pleased to hear her answer him with a muffled yawn.

"Is that Dare?" she asked, her voice laced with excitement. She gripped Tallin firmly about the waist.

"No, I think not. 'Tis a female; methinks its Helsa. Wait here. Something is amiss." He untied the rope, swung a foot over the horse's neck, and slipped to the ground.

Aric leapt from his horse and the two men ran up the rocks with ease. Jill watched them bound from one boulder to the other until they stood facing the black cat. The air shimmered around them and the leopard changed into Helsa. She threw herself into their arms, burying her face into Aric's neck and sobbing hysterically. He removed his cloak, wrapped it around her naked body and lifted her into his arms. Holding her tightly against his chest, he jumped to the ground with ease. Tallin followed. They landed a few feet away, spooking the horses. Jill battled to keep hold of the reins and miraculously secured them after a few frantic steps.

Helsa looked at Jill and narrowed her eyes.

"This *Human*, covered with Morfran's Curse *She's* my brother's mate? There must be some mistake. Dare would never take a *witch* to wife."

Tallin touched her arm and she spun around to face him. "She's no witch. This I know for certain and she's all you have to save the prince."

"Save the prince? What the hell is going on here? What's happened to Dare?" Jill demanded, standing toe-to-toe with Helsa.

A shadow formed overhead and they all looked up as Nox glided down and stood before them, his face grim.

"Y-you you're r-real." Jill gasped.

Aric placed a hand on her arm. "This is Nox, the Faerie King."

“They were attacked by Demons. A demon staked the prince before he could morph. He lies in a small crevice deep in the rocks. He asks for you, Jill. He’s dying,” Nox explained, his eyes filled with sorrow.

“Then what are we standing here for? Take me to him.” She turned to Tallin. “What did you mean when you said only I could save him?”

Tallin shook his head, turning away.

Jill rushed at Aric and shook him hard. “Tell me, damn it.”

Aric, too, held his tongue as he collected a rope from the horses and the wine skin. Taking a firm grip on her arm, he helped her climb up the rocks and onto a small plateau. He pointed to a deep crevice. Jill ran to the edge and fell to her knees, peering into the darkness.

“Dare, I’m here, hang on,” she called, taking the long rope that lay curled up in the dirt beside her and tying it securely around her waist.

“Lower me down right now and give me that wine skin, damn it.”

Nox touched her shoulder, and a strange tingle shot through her.

“Look into your heart, Human. Dare is a Knight Watch Prince, a fine and courageous warrior. He offers his life to free you; he promised to take you home, did he not?”

“What has that got to do with this?”

Nox shook his head. “He’d die rather than break his word to you. Think on this, Human.”

Jill looked into Nox’s deep emerald eyes and bit her bottom lip. “Can’t you fly me down to him?”

Nox shook his head. “My touch for more than a second would bind you to me for life. I’ll try to keep him alive while you decide what must be done.”

The crevice was dark and spiders ran in all directions as Aric lowered her down. She squinted as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. Her feet touched the bottom, and she could just make out a hunched figure on the floor. Her shaking fingers untied the rope and she crawled over to him. A cold hand touched her face and Dare’s heady scent rushed over her. She gasped with the intensity of feelings that slammed into her body.

Nox fluttered down beside her and reached out a hand, laying it on Dare’s blood-soaked chest. His face contorted and Dare released a deep, ragged breath.

“No, dear friend, take no more of my pain. Please leave us, and inform Blaise that Helsa is safe,” groaned Dare.

Nox inclined his head and as he rose in the air, Jill noticed a single silver tear run down his cheek.

“Jill, I’m so sorry I left you in that hell. It worried me when Tallin and Aric missed our meeting. I’d turned back to get you when the demons attacked. Please forgive me, little dove,” he whispered, his breath coming in labored pants.

She found his lips and kissed him, cupping his cheeks in her hands. His skin against her lips felt as cold as a corpse.

“Tell me what to do. I don’t know what to do,” she cried in desperation.

Dare coughed and spat blood onto the floor. “I’ve a stake through me, my love. It’s only a short time before the Lady takes me beyond the veil. I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry and that I lied to you. In truth, *I do love you*, Jill of Morfran. I’ll keep our time together with me through all eternity.”

“Aric was injured and he recovered. He said only I could help you. Don’t leave me, Dare; I couldn’t live without you,” she sobbed, raining kisses over his cheeks.

“No, it is too much to ask. You cry for your mother and your family. I can’t ask you to forgo them for me. When I pass through the veil, go with Tallin and Aric to Dryad. You must see the Spell Weaver and she’ll send you home. It was selfish of me to want you for my own . . . selfish and cruel. Allow me to keep my promise and allow me to pass through the veil in peace.”

Jill shook her head. “Not so fast, buster. I gave you my virginity because I care for you. I *love* you, you big idiot. I’m not leaving you here to die. I do miss my mom, that’s true, but *you* are more important to me than life. So tell me what I must do to save you.”

Dare coughed and wheezed, turning to grasp both her hands. “I need your strength. My mate’s blood will give me the strength I need to enable me to morph. I need to mark you and drink your blood. If I do this, there’ll be no going back to your homeland. You’ll change, grow fangs and become my mate for life, Jill. Can you give up your home and family? I feared that you’d hate me if I forced you to chose; it was never my intention.”

“Do it,” she said, pressing her forehead to his and looking into his eyes.

He drew in a ragged breath and a wheeze of pain escaped his lips. He grasped her arm and drew her closer. “Listen to me, Jill. Do not fear my cat when I morph and *please*, pull out the stake.”

Jill nodded and he slipped his hand around her head. He took a deep labored breath and his tongue licked a path down her neck. A wave of bliss surged through her as his needle-sharp fangs pierced her neck and his hot venom poured into her. Heat flooded her body and intense erotic tremors surged through her to her core. Her nipples peaked. Her body shuddered in a thousand climaxes. She panted, trying desperately to breathe, and her head spun. She could hear Dare’s thoughts, his deep love for her. Memories foreign to her flooded her mind in a kaleidoscope of

breathhtaking color. His hand cupped her head and he drew her into a deeply possessive kiss. She tasted the tang of her own blood as their tongues danced. He sucked her bottom lip before tipping his head back and smiling weakly.

“Stand back, give my cat room.”

The cavern echoed with the big cat’s triumphant roar. Gold eyes flashed as the black leopard stood bathed in a shaft of sunlight piercing the darkness of the cave. Jill stepped forward, fearless. She gripped the stake with both hands and pulled it out in one swift movement. The cat roared in agony, shimmered and vanished. Dare appeared in its place. He lay perfect, whole and completely naked before her, grinning broadly.

He sprung to his feet and pulled her close. His hands sank into her hair and his mouth slanted over her lips. He kissed her deeply and stripped the clothes from her body, scattering them about the sandy floor. His body heat radiated through her and his scent made her quiver. He broke the kiss only to spread her leather cloak on the cold damp floor. He growled softly, returning to kiss her swollen lips, long and slow. He kissed the tip of her nose and lowered her to the floor, covering her with his hard body.

“I love you, Jill. Don’t fear the change that will befall you for I’ll never leave you again. This eve you’ll grow fangs and the desire to bite me will be very strong. We’ll need to find a place to mate.” He reached to untie her hair and let it fall over one breast.

Jill pulled his head down and moaned as his tongue explored her mouth in unrestrained passion. His lips traced the line of her chin, down her neck. He lapped at the puncture marks on her neck, sending waves of pleasure through her body. As he trailed his fangs over her left breast, she lifted her legs, encircling his waist. He growled, taking her nipple in his mouth and suckling hard before paying the same attention to the other.

“I need you,” she gasped, her fingers slipping into his hair.

He looked at her flushed face surrounded by a mass of tawny unrestrained curls. His mark showed prominently on her neck. Gods he wanted to bite her again in the passion of a climax. He had cheated her of that pleasure and she had given him the ultimate gift. She arched, hungry for him and only him. Her entire body exuded a scent so powerful that he trembled in erotic response. His inner cat hummed in contentment; he, too, could feel her love. No female had ever ensnared him so completely. She reached up and touched his face and a surge of love pulsed through him, twisting his heart. He knew he should say something but in that moment words would not form. He had fallen into her very soul. He pitched forward and drove inside her in one swift movement,

burying his throbbing shaft to the hilt. She was slick, hot and her inner muscles gripped him tightly. She lifted to him, meeting his strokes, opening for him, demanding all he had to give. He rode her hard, enjoyed the cut of her nails down his back, the soft mew and kisses on his neck. Her final scream of delight shook him to the core; he sunk his fangs into her neck and drank deeply, pushing them both into an explosive climax.

Jill lay still, enjoying the weight of Dare crushing her body, intoxicated by his powerful scent. She felt loved, and wanted. He kissed her again and she could taste the metallic tang of blood on his tongue and the rich potent musk of his venom. He smiled and rubbed his nose against hers. A soft purr rumbled in his chest.

“Mine,” he declared, rolling over and pulling her on top of him.

“Yes,” she replied, remaining flat against his chest.

Jill savored the closeness as Dare held her, nuzzling her contentedly. The slide of their wet flesh, the caress of his hair against her breasts and the deep purr of contentment that rumbled in his chest filled her heart. His eyes were so tender and his words would stay with her for eternity.

“I thought you a dream when I found you, as if I had dreamed you into life. I’ve waited so long, little dove, for you to come to me. Never leave me, Jill, for without you I will fade into dust.”

They lay in bliss for some time before Tallin’s voice echoed loudly above them.

“We should leave. It’s but a few hours ride to Dillings where a good meal and a soft bed await us.”

Dare chuckled, kissed Jill on the tip of her nose and rolled her to one side. “Throw down a water skin, some rags and my spare clothes,” he yelled.

“It is good to hear your voice, my prince,” replied Tallin as he lowered the bundle down on the rope.

Jill cheeks burned. Had an audience witnessed their most intimate moment?

“Shit! I just know they were watching us. I can’t possibly face them now,” she said, covering her breasts with her hands.

Dare smiled at Jill as he poured water over the rags and washed her so diligently her whole body blushed.

“Most likely they were doing the same. Helsa was most anxious to complete the ritual.”

“What ritual?”

“Tallin and Aric would have claimed Helsa by marking her neck. She in turn would have reciprocated, releasing their child seed. Our ritual is not complete until you change. You’ll be

considered unmated until you transform and experience Moon Fire. You must bite *me*, sweetness, and claim me for your mate."

"Are Tallin and Aric a part of your family now?"

"Aye, and you must remind me to inform them that now they have joined our pride, they may use my preferred name." He helped her dress before pulling on his clean clothes.

He tied the ropes around her and called to Tallin to pull her up. Climbing the rock face easily beside her, he reached the top and lifted her to her feet.

Dare drew Tallin to one side.

"The Bratach threat is close. We must ride swiftly to Dillings, but first I'll require that you both bear witness to my pledge to Jill," he said, offering his arm in friendship.

Tallin smiled broadly and grasped the offered arm. "I will be honored, as will Aric."

Dare went to his saddlebags and withdrew his princely trappings. Jill watched him as he quickly plaited the gold beads in his hair and fitted the elaborate ear decoration. He came to stand before her and took both her hands. Resting his forehead on hers, he looked deeply into her eyes. She felt him tremble slightly and opened her mouth to speak, but he went first.

"Jill of Morfran, will you take me for all eternity?" His voice was clear and strong, his eyes damp with unshed tears.

Jill blinked as he gently squeezed her fingers. *Oh my, this is a marriage ceremony.*

"Yes I will take you for all eternity," she squeaked.

Dare removed one of the gold amulets from his neck and placed it over Jill's head. He gathered her into his arms and kissed her with such tenderness tears of happiness spilled down her cheeks.

Tallin's voice rang out clear and strong. "I, Tallin of Lonza Pride, bear witness to this royal bonding."

Aric stepped forward. "As do I, Aric of Lonza Pride."

Helsa walked toward Jill, her face drained of color. "Thank you for saving my brother."

Dare stared at her and then his gaze rested on Aric and Tallin. "You have refused my sister?"

Helsa laid a hand on his arm. "No Dare, I asked them to wait. I couldn't do it knowing you were dying."

Dare placed a hand on her shoulder and bent to kiss her cheek. "Go with them, I'll keep watch. The horses need to rest a little longer and I'm famished."

Dare's hand enclosed Jill's firmly as he led her to the saddlebags piled under a tree. He bent

and collected a bundle of food and the wine skin and led her into a clearing. They sat watching over the trail that led from Devil's Hollow, the forest quiet but for the call of birds.

Jill leaned against a rough bark pine and accepted the dried fruit, nuts and cheese Dare offered. He ate between feeding her and drank copious amounts of Miza, his eyes constantly scanning the trail below their position. The forest moved with every gust of wind, sending the sweet fragrance of pine and fresh air. Jill's gaze wandered to where Aric and Tallin were piling blankets and cloaks into a makeshift bed not twenty paces away. She felt a blush creep up into her cheeks when Dare caught her gaze. He touched her face and smiled.

"You should watch them; it'll be a part of your lessons. I can't join you, for the thought of my sister mating makes me rather unwell."

"I had a dream last night, that Nox was . . . um . . . making love to Tallin and Aric. Now I know he exists, I'm not so sure it was a dream. Is that normal for pride males to enjoy males and to share one mate?"

Dare raised one brow and ran a finger down her cheek. "Yes. Although I prefer females. Indeed I've never lain with a male. I'm far too jealous to share a female, although many do with much success," he replied as he offered her the wine skin.

Jill tried to keep her focus on Dare but her gaze wandered to the trio wrapped together in the full sun. They were naked; Tallin and Aric had stripped quickly and took Helsa between them, taking turns to kiss her. They treated her with reverence, standing motionless as she explored their bodies. With her clothes peeled away, the bright red brand on Helsa's buttock was clearly visible.

They lay her down, stroked and caressed her nubile body in practiced unison, both taking a breast each and tormenting the nipple into a tight rose pink bud. Aric's hand slipped between her open legs and he bent to lick her folds, pushing her legs over his shoulders and lifting her hips with his large brown hands. His raven hair fell across her thighs, glossy in the sunlight

Tallin grasped her breasts, pushing the nipples together and taking them both in his mouth, raking them with sharp fangs. Helsa's head fell back and she arched in pleasure. Jill drew a deep breath as Dare's hands cupped her own aching breasts; he rubbed her sensitive nipples between his thumbs and fingers.

"Yes, watch. I can smell your arousal already."

With a signal from Aric, Tallin rolled Helsa over so she straddled him. Jill could see his massive erection, the red shaft bobbing against his belly. Helsa lifted her body and took his cock into her in one smooth slide. Tallin pulled her down to him and his mouth closed over hers in a long kiss. Her hair fell across his body, curls dancing in the sun like a thousand moonbeams. Aric

knelt behind her; in his hand, a cut glass bottle sent rainbows in all directions. Jill trembled slightly as she watched him pour oil down the crack of Helsa's bottom.

Jill sighed when Dare removed her leather breeches and slid between her legs. His warm hands cupped her hips and his hair tickled her thighs as he bent his head to taste her. She gasped as his tongue circled her hard pearl but she could not drag her eyes from the scene before her. Dare lifted his head and blew on her pearl and she trembled.

"Come for me," he whispered as his mouth closed on her again.

Aric smoothed and caressed Helsa's bottom, his fingers sliding up and down the crack. He grasped his shaft and rubbed it up and down her ass before pushing forward. The massive cock slipped inside and both men began to move in unison. Jill's hands sunk into the silk of Dare's hair, her gaze not leaving the erotic scene. She heard her own cry when both men drew back their lips to expose their fangs and plunged them deeply into Helsa's neck. She heard Helsa cry out, her body pinned between her mates who continued to slide into her as they feasted on her blood. They seemed to quiver as one; Aric raised his head in a strangled scream, his lips ruby red. Helsa lifted her head. She had bitten Tallin, and a stream of crimson blood flowed down his neck. She reached a hand to grasp Aric's hair and her head turned. She hissed and sank her bloody fangs into his neck.

Jill's body began to shudder; the orgasm built from deep in her stomach and swirled around her core, shooting down her legs to make her toes tingle as she writhed in climax. Dare held her firmly, sucking and teasing until she finally stopped trembling. He raised his head, his lips slick with her juices.

"You're learning much, little dove, I'm well pleased." He chuckled.

Chapter Ten

The town of Dillings sat nestled in a snow-covered valley surrounded by massive pines. They pushed the horses through the graying sludge on the main street, weaving between the carts and horses of people going about their everyday life. It surprised Jill to see rows of brightly colored shop fronts, their roofs heavy with snow and awnings glistening with rows of icicles. Children played happily in the snow. The scene appeared so very normal, if she ignored the pointed ears and fangs.

The buildings here were sturdy, built with large stones, and brightly painted. The people appeared happy and wholesome, such a stark contrast to Devil's Hollow. Those who recognized

Dare bowed respectfully while others just moved past without a second glance. They continued through the town and began to follow a cleared path to an impressive sandstone building, the front barred by massive doors complete with iron studs.

“This is one of our homes. We use it for hunting,” Dare whispered close to her ear.

She leaned back, as warm as toast, held close to his body. His hand cupped her breast under the cloak.

“What is Dryad like?” she asked, turning her head.

“Dryad is paradise. It’s warm all year long. We have an abundance of fruit trees, wildlife and white sand beaches that stretch out forever. We’ll live in Feltich Castle with my brothers, sisters, cousins and my mother. It’s the home of the Knight Watch. ”

Jill rolled her eyes. Life with his mother would be a challenge, she decided. “How many siblings do you have?”

“I have seven brothers, two sisters, six cousins and one nephew. You’ll only see them at meal times if they are at home. My wing of the palace is very secluded. I know that females require a den of their own, so have no fear.”

Inside the gates, a bustling staff of a dozen or so had assembled to meet them. All the servants bowed respectfully and muttered their thanks for Dare’s safe arrival. A tall elderly man stepped into the courtyard, genuflected and Dare grasped his arm, smiling broadly. He referred to Dare by his name so he must be a family member, Jill concluded. Dare introduced Tallin and Aric but ignored Jill completely. Here we go again. So females are precious but *not* important enough for introductions to the family. She stamped her feet to keep warm while Dare and the older gentleman walked a few feet away.

Dare finally turned and smiled at her, his eyes dancing with amusement. “My uncle Portis is slightly overwhelmed. He finds it quite shocking that I would find a Human mate. He informed me that my brother, King Blaise, would arrive in the next two days. News has already reached Dryad of my choice. Our rooms are ready. We will be secluded from the rest of the house,” he said, taking her hand and leading her into a huge hall with wooden polished floors of the deepest amber.

“Why didn’t you introduce me to your uncle?”

Dare continued walking. “It’s not seemly to introduce a marked but as yet unmated female to another male. If he acknowledged you and looked upon your beauty, I may have killed him.”

Jill looked up at the massive cast iron chandeliers. She admired the intricate tapestries and magnificent artwork that dressed the walls. Dare held her hand firmly and led her up a winding

staircase, each step worn down in the center from hundreds of years of use.

“These are my rooms,” he announced, opening a heavy wooden door and stepping back to allow Jill to enter.

Inside, Jill stepped into another world. She stood in an opulent sitting room. A long comfortable sofa sat before a glowing wood fire, surrounded by a white marble fireplace. Through a far door, she could see the side of a four-poster bed surrounded by heavy blue velvet drapes. Dare stood still, watching as she explored, his expression somber.

A bay window covered with leafy ice swirls sat above a wide window seat. Another door led to a huge sunken bath and in one corner, a toilet, a real toilet! She spun around and laughed. Dare frowned uncomfortably.

“Is this not to your liking?”

She walked toward him and threw her arms around his neck. “It’s perfect.”

* * * * *

Jill would use the word *perfect* many times over the next few hours. They ate a *perfect* meal, bathed together in the *perfect* tub and made *perfect* love until they fell asleep.

The first few rays of sunlight had peeked through the heavy drapes when Jill opened her eyes. The darkened room appeared strangely clear to her. She could make out every detail. Dare’s heat ran down the side of her body, one of his legs rested over her hip. Her body hummed with a strange passion that burned deep to her core. Excited to the point of seeking a climax, she pressed her hand to her soaking folds to find relief.

“No, let the Moon Fire engulf you. I’ll satisfy the lust that fills your body,” Dare insisted as his hands brushed nipples so tender they felt as if they were on fire.

A moan escaped her lips as he lowered his mouth to cool her heat. She pushed her hands into his hair, holding him to her as he swirled each nipple. She inhaled his scent and lost control, twisted her fingers into his hair and held him to her breast, her legs encircling his waist.

“I need you right now,” she gasped.

Dare rolled onto his back, bringing her with him. She climbed up his body and straddled him. She felt his rock hard cock rise against her stomach. He lifted her with ease, impaling her on his length in one swift lunge. She shrieked as waves of uncontrollable delight rocked through her pussy.

Dare pulled her toward him and took her mouth. Their fangs clashed. She gasped, reaching

a hand to her lips, tracing a finger over the sharp points.

“You’re beautiful, Jill. Your fangs are new and sharp and your pointed ears beg me to lick them,” he said, running fingers from both hands up her very sensitive ears.

“I feel the need to bite you, but the thought of it makes me feel strange,” she heard herself growl.

Dare took her head and lowered it to his neck. “There’s nothing to fear, little dove. You’ll only desire to taste my blood during Moon Fire. Your bite will release my child seed and give life to our cubs. Just taste me, sweetness, lick my skin,” he encouraged, lifting his hips to rock inside her and sending wild tremors through her pussy.

Jill moaned and extended her tongue. His skin sizzled as she lapped, his scent filling her mouth. Her body excited to the point of madness as he continued to drive within her. She lifted her head and plunged her fangs into his neck. She heard him sigh as his blood tricked into her mouth. Not the sickly metallic taste she had dreaded but sweet like floral nectar. She tumbled into ecstasy as her mind joined to Dare’s in a kaleidoscope of images. She could see his past, her face through his eyes, his love so deep it hurt her heart. She felt his joy and when they climaxed they were one.

* * * * *

The madness that Dare called Moon Fire lasted four days. Dare never left her side, as her body burned for him. He cared for her, often carrying her to the warm tub and washing her aching body and sweat-soaked hair.

She recalled in misty detail her continuous demand for more of him, his gentleness and soft words of encouragement. She lashed out at him and the ecstasy of sinking her fangs into the sweet skin of his neck grew into an addiction.

He needed rest, she supposed, when he objected to her fancy to tie him to the bed. Her body hummed with desire and Dare looked so peaceful; perhaps if she tied him to the bed she could just bite him when she felt the need. He woke with a growl before she had secured the first hand.

“You are wanton, my wife. Don’t think to bind me for your pleasure for indeed that’s my perversion.”

He took the binding and wrapped it around her wrists. He carried her to the low table in front of the fire, pushed her to her knees and tied her face down across the table. Her hands and legs were spread out and tied securely to the short fat stone legs. The polished marble pressed cold against her breasts and belly, and she turned her head to watch him. He walked into the bathroom.

When he returned, he laid a leather switch on the table close to her face, along with a tub of cream. He sank onto the sofa and watched her in silence. He looked magnificent, gold streaks reflected from the flames in the hearth in his long silky raven hair. His body stretched out dark against the pale fabric, his cock jutting out, ready for her pleasure.

She quivered with excitement; he ran a hand through his hair and shook his head.

“’Tis not usual for a mate to thrash a female during Moon Fire, although your eyes tell me you want this as much as I do.”

“Dare, please, this madness will kill me.”

He stood slowly and lifted the leather switch. The five long leather straps were dark with a coating of oil and the sweet scent of roses and leather drifted to her nose. He trailed the ends of the switch over her face and let it caress her shoulders. He brought it slowly down her back and between her legs. She bit her lip to stop a moan when he drew the switch across her swollen folds and pulled it between the crack in her ass.

“Does your Moon Fire demand this? Are you lucid enough to be aware of the connection between pain and ultimate pleasure? I can give you this, little dove, but are you ready?”

“Yes.” *Oh God, yes.*

“The cream will heighten the pleasure and you’ll feel every inch of me, more intense than ever before. I’ll not be gentle, Jill. This is not a mating; it’s a flight of unbearable pleasure.”

“Show me how to fly, Dare. I want to know everything, feel everything you have to give me.”

The first cut across her buttocks made her scream. The sharp pain shot straight through to her pussy, so strange that such an intense pleasure followed pain. Dare’s face showed no emotion as he brought the lash down twice more. His hand, hot and covered in cream, soothed and caressed each welt. Four more cuts and his fingers slipped into her folds. The cream had a strange peppery smell and when he brushed a little across her pearl, she enjoyed a wonderful sucking sensation. Perched on the edge of an unfulfilled climax she growled her dismay when he lay down the switch.

He pushed the hair from her face and lifted her chin.

“I would fuck your mouth if I were sure you wouldn’t bite me.” He chuckled.

His hand trailed down her back, hot fingers slipped into her pussy and the warmth from the cream flooded her to the womb. He moved his fingers to her ass, coating the hole with cream. His cock nudged at her ass, demanding entrance, and she felt the breath she held rush out when he took her in one forceful stroke. The cream intensified the great girth of him, so hot, filling her to the

limit. He withdrew and thrust in deep; her breasts squeaked against the marble beneath her at every delightful plunge. He grasped her hips and shoved so hard inside her that the room began to spin. Spikes of fire shot through her ass and welled up her folds in an invisible caress. Her nipples peaked painfully hard against the smooth cold marble. She could not possibly survive such intense pleasure. The need to bite him became intense and as he plundered her ass, she could taste her own venom seeping in spurts from her fangs.

She heard screaming as the orgasm coursed through her body with ferocious intensity and suddenly realized that the screams were coming from her. Dare cried out and came in her ass, sending streaks of lightning through her shuddering body. Her cries echoed off the walls. Footsteps sounded in the hallway and someone hammered on the door. Dare's cock slipped from her ass and he fell forward, resting his head on her back and breathing hard.

"Lady's blood, your screams have summoned the guards."

He bent to untie her and wrapped her in a blanket, then pulled a towel around his waist before answering the shouts at the door.

"All is well. Send in fresh linen and food," he ordered before turning back to her.

"Come and bathe," he said, leading her toward the bathroom.

"That was incredible; I guess nothing will be the same after my Moon Fire."

Dare shut the bathroom door and pulled her close. "It will be even better and not so frantic and rushed. Sometimes slow is good and if you enjoyed that cream it can be as intense as you need. You've much to learn, little dove, and I've a lifetime to teach you."

He bathed and dressed her in a peach silk nightgown. The smell of another female reached her nose before she noticed the servants. Dare chuckled and held her firmly as she tried to attack the wide-eyed females as they changed the linen and brought food. In her fevered state, all females were a threat to her male; she wanted to kill them all.

On the morning of the forth day, she opened her eyes, missing Dare's heat at her side. She sat up in bed and her entire body ached. Her back cramped, throwing her into agony. She moaned loudly and fell back, burying her head into the pillow. The edge of the bed dipped as Dare came to her side. He pushed the hair from her eyes.

"Do you need me, sweetness?" he said, brushing her lips with his thumb.

She looked up into his face but her gaze fell to the numerous puncture wounds on his neck.

"What I need is some codeine. Good grief, did I do that to your neck?"

Dare grinned boyishly and ran a finger down her ear. "You did and I'm proud to wear your marks. I don't know what you mean by *codeine*, but I assume that your body aches. Bathe in the hot

water, sweetness. We'll eat and then I'll take you to meet my brother and his queen. They've been waiting patiently for your Moon Fire to conclude. Indeed you outstayed my sister by a full day." He chuckled.

By lunchtime Jill's legs had stopped shaking, and her back felt remarkably well after Dare's massage. She followed him down the spiral staircase. He led her through the great hall and into a reception room. They waited, and all the while, Dare instructed her on the protocol of meeting a king.

Jill stared as Blaise walked into the room, dressed in black leather. He looked like Dare, apart from his magnetic blue eyes and perhaps another three inches in height. A tiny, elfin woman stood beside him. She glowed with exotic peach colored skin and hair that looked like frosted moonbeams as it cascaded to her waist.

Dare genuflected and Jill sunk to her knees, pressing her head to the floor.

"Brother," said Blaise and they grasped each other's arm in an embrace.

"Rise, Princess Jill of Knight Watch," Blaise commanded, stepping forward and offering his hand.

He looked down at her and shook his head slightly. Then he placed a large hand on the top of her head and closed his eyes.

"The Lady's light shines upon you, Jill, and already you carry a male cub. He's strong with hair as rich in color as blood. It's well that you conceived during your Moon Fire. It's a great gift that the Lady has bestowed upon you," he said, standing back.

Dare slipped a hand around her waist and kissed her cheek. His face radiant, he turned back to his brother, grinning broadly.

"We shall call him Flame of Knight Watch," he announced proudly.

"How could he know that?" gasped Jill, glancing at Dare.

"He's the Lady's Champion and knows and sees all."

Jill stood speechless, trying to come to grips with the fact that he thought her pregnant. Blaise smiled benevolently and introduced her to his queen.

"My mate, Daii; she has good news for you," Blaise said, tipping his head toward his wife before leading Dare toward a table with glasses and a carafe of wine.

Daii picked up a circular mirror and handed it to her. "When we return to Dryad, I'll teach you how to scry. It's magyck, which allows you to view your family through the mirror. I've been able to weave a spell so that you may pass letters through the mirror to your mother. It's not the same thing as being able to go home for a visit, but it may ease the pain of losing your family."

Jill smiled broadly, hugging the mirror to her chest. "Thank you so much, but I'll never regret my decision to stay with Dare."

"This I know, for I'm also from another realm, but it's difficult not to miss our loved ones. With this mirror they'll never be too far away from you."

* * * * *

The following morning they travelled by land to the coast and climbed aboard one of a fleet of large black-sailed boats that took them to the tropical island of Dryad. Feltich Castle, a gigantic, ancient building, rose up above the clusters of villages, a dark blotch against the brilliant azure sky. The surrounding countryside overflowed with an abundance of crops, orchards heavy with fruit and vast varieties of livestock.

Stone houses with thatched roofs lined the streets, each with a neat garden. The cobblestone roads that led to the castle quickly filled with people who stopped to watch them pass by. The people were devoted to their king and knelt in reverence, their heads touching the ground as he rode past. They appeared to Jill to be well fed and their children rose with happy smiling faces to run after the horses.

Jill stiffened slightly as Dare turned his horse toward his brother while they waited for the portcullis to rise. Clearly visible in the courtyard were twenty or so knights on horseback, complete with chainmail and armor, not silver but black. They wore grey tunics emblazoned with the head of a black leopard over a lightning strike. On their backs, they wore a scabbard with what resembled a Scottish Claymore.

Dare's breath brushed her cheek. "Don't be afraid, Jill. The warriors are the Knight Watch. My brother, Helsa's twin, Hawke, leads them."

"You fight with swords? Not guns?"

Dare chuckled, his hand stroking her stomach in a tender caress. "We find that solving problems this way is more personal. For any other problems we have the magyck of Daii, the Spell Weaver, or Nox."

They followed Blaise and Daii into the courtyard. Helsa followed closely behind, sitting in front of Tallin, with Aric bringing up the rear. Dare dismounted and pushed through the knights to speak with Blaise. She found herself left standing between Daii and Helsa. The mass of tall muscular bodies closed around them and she bit back the need to scream and run away. The crowd parted to allow two enormous knights through. They stood before them, nodded to Daii

and removed their helms.

They were different and yet the same. One had platinum blond curls and he swept Helsa into his arms in a bear hug. The other's hair fell past his shoulders in deep russet highlighted with molten gold. He inclined his head and looked at Jill but remained silent. Daii leaned toward Jill.

"Hawke is Helsa's twin. Zandor is, well Zandor. He's one of the Chosen."

"Chosen?"

"Aye, an immortal. Blaise decided on it, because he feared Zandor might be in danger of being killed. Not in battle but because of how he is."

"How's that?"

Zandor turned slowly toward her and smiled brilliantly. "My brother worried that my enjoyment of the lash and my variety of sex partners would kill me."

Jill felt the color rush into her cheeks. Hawke turned ice-cold blue eyes toward her. His look frightened her and she stepped backward, straight into Dare.

"Ah, so you have met two of my brothers," he said, slipping a warm hand around her waist.

"This belongs to you, Dare? Have you lost your wits? You would flaunt Morfran's witch so close to our queen?" Hawke demanded, his voice a threat.

She felt Dare stiffen behind her, his body a rock at her back.

Zandor laughed and turned his amethyst eyes toward her and winked. Dare pushed her behind him and rose to his full height, standing toe-to-toe with Hawke.

"It's well that you're my blood or I'd have run you through for speaking with disrespect to my mate."

"Can't you smell his scent on her, Hawke?" Zandor asked, turning to his brother.

Hawke growled deep in his chest. "Methinks the Knight Watch will soon be lost. Our king takes a wood nymph for a mate and now you a witch. What next? Mayhap Zandor will find himself a gnome," he spat, turned on his heel and pushed his way through the crowd.

"I've never had a gnome," Zandor said seriously, rubbing his chin, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

The interior of the castle spread out in every direction. It would take a year to explore all of it, Jill decided as she followed Dare to his wing. Although the knights appeared medieval, not so the castle interior. Opulent furnishings, fine china and portraits abounded. The bathrooms had running water and every convenience of a real home. She would miss modern technology, movies, television and computers but for some strange reason in this place, with Dare it felt like home.

Life quickly settled into a pleasurable routine. Daii had become a good friend; Jill worked hard with the Spell Weaver to unlock the Fae magyck flowing in her veins. With practice and much hilarity, the simple tasks of heating water and lighting globes became easy. It took a month but she finally mastered the spell to scry her parents' home in downtown New York.

Dare stood behind her. His chin rested on her shoulder as she picked up a pen to write the first of many letters to her mother.

Dear Mom,

You will never believe what happened to me in Scotland . . .

~The End~

A sneak peek at book two in H.C. Brown's Pride Brothers Series, coming in January 2010:

Preface

Excerpt from THE GREAT BOOK OF THE PRIDES - personal entry by King Blaise of Knight Watch, Eighth King of Dryad.

First Treaty of Trust.

My reign as Eighth King of Dryad began the day my dear father was murdered at the hand of Passiot, a demon lord from the Underworld. It is true that demons continue in our realms; the Bratach remain in Lyoness but these demons are under the control of the witch, Morfran, and cause the prides little concern.

My mate, Daii, the Spell Weaver, delivered me a son, Ryees. He will bring pure magyck to the lands of the Five Gates. In him, the Lady combined all that is good in both Fae and Pride. To represent us all, his eyes, deep pools of opalescence, are glittering orbs of violet, green, blue, and silver. His birth and the recognition of his greatness by the good King Nox of the Faerie brought about the first Treaty of Trust. From this day forth, both Faerie and Pride will fight as one for peace.

Chapter One

“You can’t do this to me! You don’t understand. I must morph; inside me there are two

souls. It's imperative that you allow the cat to materialize or it'll claw its way out."

Beth cringed when the deep, desperate, voice bellowed behind her. She rolled onto her side and forced open her eyelids, which were still heavy from drugs. Through tiny slits, she caught a glimpse of her surroundings, but the overhead light blinded her and she shut her eyes tightly to stop the room from spinning. She tried again, slower this time, but the room still shifted. She rolled into a ball and clutched her stomach. *Oh God, please let the nausea stop.* Neon lights above dissolved into a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors. Cold from the tiled floor seeped into her body. She tried to lift her head and decided immediately to lie still. Her stomach rolled again, sending the acrid taste of bile up the back of her throat.

Bright colors sharpened and formed a metallic web. A cruel silver cage surrounded her. *I'm back in the laboratory; what have they done to me this time?*

Aluminum-topped benches swam into view, rising up like silver sentries along the walls. She shielded her eyes from the bright strip-lighting and watched a procession of masked men dressed in starched lab coats drift by as if unaware of her presence. *How strange to be a no more than a lab rat.* She knew this hell and recalled in vivid detail her experimental work at the Research Institute. *Perhaps this is God's justice.* The normal low hum from the technicians and their equipment had escalated into a piercingly indistinguishable madness. She pressed her hands to her ears to muffle the relentless noise. What did they want from her? Why was she here?

Why have I stopped fighting? I've become as complacent with my capture as a lazy lab rat. She clamped a hand over her mouth and retched violently, the rank smell of the unwashed so vile that vomit spilled into her mouth. The concentrated scents from the other inmates burnt her sensitive nostrils.

She looked down the rows of silver cages. Each contained a specimen of a diverse Humanoid. Some sported fascinating brilliant white fangs like vampires, while others had horns of different shapes and sizes. In the cage to her left huddled a beautiful pale-faced girl with black gossamer wings. To her right, the owner of the persistent, loud, angry male voice that had disturbed her drugged dreams.

She remembered having surgery and reached for the dull pain in her shoulder. She moved her fingers slowly, anxiously prodding the tender area. *Dear God what had they done to her?* Sweat coated her face when her shaking fingers located a small painful scar. No stitches, the surface felt wax-like. *They've closed the wound with a laser.* She pushed against the cold floor to sit up, desperately fighting the drug haze. It took some moments before she managed to raise herself up and slump against the bars.

She lifted her head as the doctor moved toward her cage. Her ears rang with the incessant noise but her sight had an unexplained clarity. His burnt umber eyes gazed down at her over a white paper mask. Her tormenter. The Human doctor usually spoke in an unfamiliar language. This afternoon she understood every excruciatingly loud word he uttered. A sudden flare of anger rushed through her body. *Why on earth had he continued to babble streams of unintelligible gibberish to her when he spoke English?* She cringed when he turned to shout at the loud angry male on her right.

“You’re our choice as a sample of your race. It would be better if you relax and accept your fate. There’s no escape from the Druik Void.”

“You’d do well not to displease me, Druik scum. Release my cat or I’ll escape this cage and tear out your neck.”

“Back down, cat, or I’ll arrange another taste of the prod. You’re nothing here. I’ll keep you for as long as it pleases me and do to you as I wish. You’ll soon learn to comply; they all do. Your life would improve considerably if you’d agreed to my wishes. “

The cage bars shook violently.

“Never! I’ll tear apart any female you place with me. Do you think that I possess compassion, Pic? You’ll die slowly when my brothers arrive, and arrive they will.”

The doctor, Pic, leaned toward the cage and grinned. “Only a fool would pit the hapless troops of a mythical goddess against the Druik’s weaponry. I know what you are, cat. I’ll enjoy watching your training.”

Beth turned to view the new inmate, his cage only an arm span away. He stood naked, his back rippling with fury and his massively muscled arms held above his head as he shook the cage with fury. The laboratory fell silent as if a great storm raged. All faces turned toward this creature whose anger thundered so violently Beth expected lightening to shoot from his fingertips at any moment.

He gave a slow deep growl as the doctor turned and walked from view. Beth gripped the bars, watching her fellow prisoner’s awesome beauty. Sweat flowed in rivulets between rock hard muscles bunched across his broad shoulders. She licked her lips, her gaze following a single droplet’s hypnotic trail. It wet a tantalizing path to his slim waist and disappeared between the cleft in his impressively muscled ass. His legs were long and when he moved, taut muscle slid delightfully beneath skin the color of warm honey.

His hair hung in a long shaggy mane and glowed as if it held the warmth of the sun. The russet, fire, and sunburst streaks danced like flames in the overhead lights. He turned his head to follow the retreating back of his captor and her stomach twisted. His profile resembled a

Michelangelo statue, chiseled yet darkly angelic. The lights in the laboratory dimmed, followed by the now familiar whoosh of the food dispensers. She cringed away, pressing her cheek against the cold bars when he shook the cage violently, his language colorfully graphic. *Dear God, that cage won't hold him; he's going to break out of there and kill us all.*

He turned his head as if he read her thoughts. His wild amber eyes met her gaze and his lips drew back, displaying long white fangs as he hissed. Her entire body shuddered at the uncontrollable rage reflected in eyes that danced with streaks of liquid fire. His nose wrinkled and he growled in frustration. He lowered his voice to a murmur but Beth caught every word.

“What is this place?”

Beth backed away until cold bars dug into her back. She trembled, her eyes opening so wide they hurt. She tried to reply but only managed a gasp. He dropped his head as if defeated and took a deep, shuddering breath. Hair streaked with molten gold cascaded over his shoulders and covered his face, sticking in wet strands to his cheeks.

“Don’t fear me. My anger is for those who hold us against our will,” he purred softly as he slowly raised his head. His soft, sensuous voice fell over her in a strangely calming rumble.

“I don’t really know where we *are* but it’s obvious they’re not letting us out any time soon. I believe that we’re a collection of different species for an experiment of sorts.”

His gaze drifted around the room then he stilled and sniffed the air. “There are many enemies here, Human. Would seem only we’ve an alliance.” He looked toward the girl with wings. “Mayhap it’s only us and that Fae female. The others, by the stink that clings to their bodies, are Rams of one herd or another. Have you seen any other pride brothers?”

“Pride brothers?”

“Other males that look like me,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

“No.”

He turned and sat down in one fluid movement. He crossed his long legs, straightened his spine, and faced her. Large hands with long strong fingers rested on his knees. Beth watched him in fascination. *You’re a doctor*, she reminded herself, gazing at the massive cock that nestled between his legs. He tapped on the bars to get her attention. Heat crept into her cheeks as she slowly lifted her gaze to look at his delectably sinful face. He raised one perfect brow and sighed. Beth blinked in disbelief; his eyes were slowly turning from molten amber to pools of amethyst velvet. He gazed at her from under the shade of sienna lashes for some moments as if assessing which way to proceed.

“You appear to have lost your spirit, Human. What’ve these beasts done to you?”

“I’m really not sure. I think they’ve enhanced my hearing, sight and smell. I know they’ve performed other procedures but I haven’t noticed any other physical changes. Have they changed you as well?”

“Aye, I believe they’ve made changes. They want my child seed to blend with these animals.” He angrily waved his hand in the direction of the Rams. “I’ll not comply with their demands; they’ll have to kill me first, which will be extremely difficult,” he growled, his hands balling into fists.

His sudden change of demeanor frightened her and she decided to make idle conversation to calm him. “Where are you from?”

“Dryad, it’s within the Five Gates. I assume that you’re from the realm of Scotland?”

“No, I’m Australian.”

“I know not of that realm. I only know of the portal in Scotland. Over the years, many Humans have stumbled mistakenly into our realms from there. They make passage through the Morfran Stones. I assumed that you were one of those, all of whom know of the prides. You’d notice my pride brothers as we’re like Humans only bigger and we’ve the teeth of a cat,” he replied softly, speaking to her as if she were a small child. “I’m not Human. I’m Arious Pride. The prides are families, and we are all both man and cat. I’m Zandor of Knight Watch,” he said inclining his head.

Beth wet her lips. His eyes were hypnotic and the strong, musky scent that poured from his naked body made her nipples ache. *His sweat must be an aphrodisiac.* She drew a breath, holding it to savor his scent. Breathe, she told herself, as his gaze wandered boldly across her body. Her cheeks burned and she reached to pull down the hem of the hospital gown. The short smock hardly covered her nakedness and gaped open at the back.

“I’m Beth. Doctor Elizabeth Clark.”

“How long have you been here, Beth, and how did they capture you?”

“I think I’ve been here for ten days. They kidnapped me on my way home from work, bundled me into a car and drugged me. When I woke, I thought aliens had abducted me.”

“I’m not familiar with the term *car* or from which realm *aliens* come from, Beth. I was drunk when captured; they threw a net over me when I left a tavern. They forced me into a strange looking wagon that travelled as fast as the wind, but I knew the Druiks had taken me.”

“You knew about these people?”

“Yes, but I’d no idea they took prisoners for breeding.”

“The others held in this laboratory are strange too, but I assumed the Druiks were Human,

aren't they? This is the only place they've held me and I haven't seen any others like you."

"Human, no, mayhap they appear so to you. In truth, their females have three breasts and are masculine in manner. Methinks if they had their way the males would bear their spawn. And spawn they are, as they bear four to six at one birthing."

"You must be joking!"

Zandor shook his head. "No, unfortunately I don't jest. *Doctor* is a Human term for healer, is it not? Why do they torment us, Beth?"

His eyes changed, softer now as his gaze stopped at the purple scar on her neck. She instinctively lifted her hand up to touch it. He turned his head to reveal a lump on his shoulder.

Beth shrugged. "Yes, I'm a healer. At first, I thought they wanted me for my government's secrets. I work in a lab much like this one. I couldn't understand a word they said so I tried to remain calm and silent. It was lucky that I'd just completed a course on Biological Warfare Espionage and knew what to do. You heard what the doctor said . . . the reason why we're prisoners. We're the gene pool for a master race."

* * * * *

About the Author

H. C. Brown lives in Queensland, Australia where she enjoys walking along the long, white sandy beaches. She loves to read and finds peace in painting waterfalls and fairies. Her passion is writing, which she does most days. She finds that variety is the spice of life and her stories run the gamut, from a murder mystery series to historical, paranormal and time travel – all with a healthy dose of spice.

She married her very own alpha male and he is her love and inspiration. Learn more about H. C. Brown by visiting [her Website](#).

* * * * *

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