

X
on the
Beach

By
Robin Smith

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to September of 2005 and the good people of the great state of California, but most importantly, to Maren, who had the bright idea of a Writer's Working Vacation in the first place. If it hadn't been for you, this book would still be sitting on my desk, stuck at Chapter 21.

Prologue

*** *The Room o' Doom* ***

Audra sat sullenly at the table, a good three inches lower than the other losers on account of her wheelchair. The table was realistically laminated to look like wood and the table was round, no doubt so that all who sat around it were equal. So naturally, Ms. Lupe sat on one half and the three students sat on the other half. There was Audra herself in the middle, a bony and bepimpled boy on her left who looked about twelve years old, and on her right--drumroll please--the Griffin, who was, as was not uncommon, sporting just one hell of a black eye.

Audra was making a point of not looking at anyone, electing instead to glare at the table top as if just being here were insufferable enough that she shouldn't have to participate, too. The feeling was dangerously close to becoming the truth. She had seen enough of Ms. Lupe this year to last her the rest of her natural life, but this...this..."Social Skills" class was the ever-freakin' limit. She wondered if her parents knew about it. She kind of doubted it. These days, just about everything they knew came out, either in hesitant, scarily-sympathetic conversation, or in after-hours angry "discussions" they only half-bothered to muffle.

No, Audra was pretty sure that the Social Skills class was Ms. Lupe's spur-of-the-moment idea. Audra had simply been summoned out of her Chemistry Lab class, which was not a huge disappointment now that she sat eight inches lower than the goddamn lab stations, and had to wheel what felt like ten miles across the quad to the office, only to scrape her knuckles raw going down the narrowest hall in the history of scholastic architecture, so that she could end up here--in the smallest, mustiest, reference material depository in the world, complete with round table, dayglo orange plastic chairs, two loser students, and the freakin'

school counselor, who was having a freakin' *ball* prattling on about personal progress and social success stories while watching her captives with undisguised glee, waiting for one of them to break.

Audra was miserably, furiously, absolutely sure that she was going to break. She never seemed more than five minutes from tears these days. Besides, the Griffin was only sitting there, chin in hand, watching Ms. Lupe talk with a crocodile's quiet smile and a distinctly unpleasant gleam in her eerie, gold eyes. The Griffin had probably never blubbered out in public in her life.

Audra snuck a glance at the boy next to her. He was a total stranger, which meant he was unpopular. He looked unpopular. He was tall and skinny as a pine tree, with his pizza-complexion inefficiently hidden by hanks of brown hair grown skater-style over his face. He was glaring out the only window, rubbing the fingers of one hand restlessly over the knuckles of his other hand, and every so often, he'd crack one, usually as punctuation to whatever Ms. Lupe was saying.

"...the difference between individualism (crack) and antisocial misconduct (crack). West Bridges High School is a place of learning (crack), of shaping (crack), and whether you know it or not, your behaviors are destructive (crack), not only to school property and to other students, but to yourselves (crack-crack)."

"Like what you're doing," Audra interrupted. "You're going to give yourself arthritis, you know."

The boy shrugged one shoulder irritably. "Good. I can bore my grandkids by predicting the weather someday."

The Griffin chuckled, closing her eyes to do so, and shook her head. She looked like a woman (not a girl, the Griffin had never been a girl, the Griffin was one of those who sprang fully formed from somebody's forehead, probably with a spear in hand) who was watching all this on television and enjoying herself tremendously.

An expression like a shadow stole over Ms. Lupe's carefully-made face and her perky smile slipped a notch. "Audra," she said, very gently, very pityingly. "Audra, Audra, Audra. You're doing it again. You're redirecting your anger."

"I'm not angry," she said, but it came out shrill and...well, angry-sounding.

Ms. Lupe nodded, but she did it by raising her eyebrows and pursing her lips first. Audra dropped her eyes to the table again, feeling her breath growing hot and tight already.

"Why don't we start by talking about why you're angry today, Audra?" Ms. Lupe pressed.

"Because I'm missing Chemistry," she snapped, and the boy to her left snickered. "And I'll get an F because of it, and then I can't go to Pony Camp this summer."

"They don't give you an F for bad attendance," the boy said. "You can't go any lower than a D unless you fail some tests, too. You can still ride those ponies, baby."

"Might take you off the track team, though," the Griffin remarked.

Ms. Lupe and Audra both dropped their jaws and stared at her. Ms. Lupe was actually white-faced with horror, but Audra heard to her utter surprise an honest giggle shiver out of her own chest.

"Track team," she said, her voice shaking a little with the unreality of that little concept. She giggled again. "Oh damn! Oh *damn*! My perfect record!"

"I'll bet you're a real speed demon in that thing," the Griffin continued, oblivious to Ms. Lupe's contortions of shock.

"You should see me when I hit the ramp," Audra answered, still smiling. "Zoom, baby." And then she burst into tears. She clapped her hands over her face, hating herself, hating the coarse sobs grating out of her. She kept shaking her head, trying to communicate to the Griffin in some way that it wasn't her fault, that she didn't need to apologize (as if the Griffin ever would), that it was

funny, goddammit, the first really funny thing since before the...before.

And Ms. Lupe's hated voice, triumphant and evilly gleeful, cutting right through her tears. "That's all right, Audra. Let it all come out. It's okay to cry, Audra. It's cathartic. You just cry, honey. You go on and cry."

'Oh, she loves this,' Audra thought miserably, sobbing harder into her hands. 'I bet when she was a kid, she was one of those who used to link hands when someone skinned their knees and chant, 'Baby baby baby, stick your head in gravy'!'

The boy on Audra's left cleared his throat uncomfortably. He jiggled his knees for a little, and then twisted around, unzipped a backpack that Audra hadn't even seen, and pulled out a clean, white handkerchief. He handed it to her, and she took it to hide behind. It smelled nice, like roses, and had an honest-to-God monogram in the corner. VFC.

The knot in her chest loosened, and she was able to sigh out her last three sobs. She dried her eyes, her breaths smoothing out, and blew her nose. She tried to hand it back, remembered she'd blown her nose in it, and they both started laughing at the same time.

"Uck, you keep it," he said, and she said, "Guess it's mine now, huh?" at the same time.

Audra clenched the handkerchief in her fist, wishing she had some pockets or something on the side of the chair, and felt her chin invisibly pulled up so that she had to face Ms. Lupe.

The counselor looked disappointed, but not defeated. There were, after all, forty minutes to go.

Audra brushed at her eyes again and glanced at the Griffin.

She was back with her chin in her palm, staring at Ms. Lupe, and smiling her sly, unpleasant smile.

Audra, desperate now for something to look at, looked back at the boy. "Who are you?" she blurted.

He went suddenly, inexplicably stoic, an expression that made him look almost twenty years older. He didn't answer her.

Ms. Lupe pounced into the silence. "What a good idea, Audra! Virgil! Why don't we go around the table and introduce ourselves, and maybe explain a little about why we're here?"

"Okay," said the Griffin mildly.

Audra and the boy, Virgil, both swung their heads to stare at her, and Audra thought Ms. Lupe might have flinched a little, but she didn't get a good look and couldn't say for sure.

The Griffin held up one hand, curled it elegantly through the air to shape it into a claw, and pointed at each of them in turn, beginning with herself. "I'm the underprivileged youth with sociopathic tendencies, but of course, we all knew that because we all know who I am. He's the fair-haired son and scion of what passes for wealth and privilege in this part of the world, and who apparently has no respect either for the school's authority or for student autonomy. For which you should be congratulated, really, as long as your revolutionary inclinations don't infringe upon my domain. And she's the cheerleader who turned herself into a cripple over summer vacation, which must have given her a head-and-shoulders boost over everyone else who had to write that stupid essay in English Lit this year. And she," the Griffin finished, eyeing Ms. Lupe with open scorn, "is the obdurate idiot who thinks that wallowing in our collective misery every Wednesday for fifty-five minutes is going to make her feel better about the colossal failure she's made of herself.

"I suppose," she continued, speaking right over the top of Ms. Lupe's first, gape-mouthed objections, "that she thinks the possibility, however remote, exists that she might actually fix one of us, which would be a disappointment to her on some levels, but then at least she'd know she had a chance with the one she's got at home. If nothing

else, she'd know that if there's a problem at home, why, it's not with her because by-God she fixed *someone!*"

Ms. Lupe was sitting rigid as stone, staring at the Griffin with her mouth still open in the shape of protests now forgotten. Her eyes were blue. Audra had never noticed that before, but now, with the whites showing in shock all around, it was hard to miss.

The Griffin lifted her head out of her palm and let her hand fall, talon-curved, to strike the table. She leaned in close, smiling, her teeth like the fangs of a carnivore, and her eyes like flame. Her voice, though, her voice never raised itself above the silky purr of words spoken in confidence. "I've got news for you, sweetie," she whispered into Ms. Lupe's frozenly staring face. "You've gone and fucked up again, because there's nothing wrong with any of us that a two-year undergraduate pseudo-psychology-puking sadist like you can fix, and just between us girls, I gotta wonder what in the hell you were thinking. What were you going to tell his dad, sweetcheeks? That sonny-boy can't play ball with the big boys? Do you honestly think he'd care? Do you even think you're going to have a job after you tell Abernathy Claymoore that his kid's defective?"

Virgil shook himself slightly and looked suddenly thoughtful.

"And me," the Griffin continued with a derisive snort. "Lady, if I had it in me to play nice with others, I'd have done it long before now. I've had years of therapy from real psychologists with real degrees. You're a joke. You're a goddamn toy. You haven't got a prayer. I know it's kind of going against years, if not decades, of habit, but try for a second to uncork your fat head from your ass and think a moment. What's stopping me from walking out that door and going back to my real class, you dumb cluck? As long as I keep getting the grades, you can't suspend me for skipping out on your feel-good Tupperware party and you know it. And if you

had it in mind to get me on the physical stuff, well, first you'd have to find someone willing to complain. Good luck on that. Let me know how it goes.

"And that leaves Wheels over there." The Griffin turned and studied Audra as if she were some rare species of orchid under glass that Ms. Lupe had, against all odds, caused to grow. "What was your big plan, Bubbles? After you make the lame walk, I mean. Did it ever occur to you that she might start coping better with her lot in life if you and the Feel-Good Brigade you've got going here just stopped rubbing her goddamn nose in her disability, as if breaking her back was her way of pissing on your living room rug!" she finished with scathing contempt, before whipping around to fix Ms. Lupe with her gold eyes again.

"So there you are, all set up for another glorious year of really impressive failure, which is funny to me, I don't mind admitting it. 'Cause I gotta tell you, if it were me, I'd be getting a little tired of being that dramatically wrong *all* the time. And it's not like you're attempting brain surgery, for Christ's sake. You're a school counselor. They're passing out jobs like this in boxes of Cracker Jack. But of course, kids with real problems would never come talk to you, even if you weren't such a hateful old bitch, because you're so ridiculously incompetent they'd rather live with their problems than give you the chance to come up with half-assed psuedo-solutions like--" Here the Griffin indicated the little room with a showman's sweep of her arms. "-- Social Skills lessons every Wednesday. I mean, come *on*, lady.

"And you know, the really funny thing is, out of all of us, it's your own kid you've got the best shot of fixing, but that would involve admitting that the reason he's snorting coke in the first place is because the reality he's trying to escape is *you*. Ask yourself, 'what am I doing to push drugs at him'? You might learn something. I know I did, when he and I had our little chat."

Ms. Lupe slapped both hands on the table and shoved hard. The back legs of her plastic chair caught on the carpet and fell over, but Ms. Lupe, strangely agile, sprang to her feet. She was trying to smile her counselor's smile and the effect was grotesque, like a giant puppet whose strings are being pulled by an inept child.

The Griffin tipped her head back to watch her, still smiling her hard smile, and her voice, her soft, predator's voice, was relentless. "I don't know how you can blame him for choosing the comfort he does. Not when you're sucking at the tit of fermented grain yourself."

Ms. Lupe yanked herself around and shrieked, "I don't do that anymore! I'm clean and sober six years!"

"Good for you," the Griffin said, her expression and tone both sincerely congratulatory. "Was it hard?"

"Yes!" Ms. Lupe said, almost shouting. "But I did it!"

"See?" The Griffin spread her hands. "You had it in you all along. And if you'd only done it ten years earlier, or been able to teach Jeffrey to change his own diapers, you wouldn't have had to give up all those weekends in visitation."

Ms. Lupe gasped, turned, and seized the doorknob, but the Griffin's voice, sweet as syrup, stopped her.

"Tell me something," the Griffin growled. "Do you ever lie awake and wonder, in the still small hours of the night, if Jeff would still be rolling up those dollar bills if he'd never left the Robinson's home?"

Ms. Lupe broke, sagging into the door, and sobbed.

"Go on," whispered the Griffin. "Cry. It's...cathartic."

Ms. Lupe fled, banging the door and leaving the snapped half of one high heel behind her.

There was a moment of silence. Audra watched the boy, Virgil, look at Griffin, who gazed serenely after the door. All three turned to each other at the same time.

"Wow," Virgil said reverently. "You really *are* mean." Spoken like someone who has heard this many times, but never seen it.

"Thank you." The Griffin brought out a pocketknife and began to pare her nails.

"I've heard about you for practically as long as I've been going to school," Audra heard herself say, and the Griffin watched her out of the corner of her gold eyes and waited. "I just never realized how it really was, is all," she finished lamely. "I don't think I've ever actually seen you, close up."

"Me neither."

The Griffin's face became unreadable as she continued to work at her fingernails. "Was it everything you hoped for?" she asked. There was a snarl running beneath her words, sensed more than heard, and poised to lash out.

"I don't know. I mean, I guess you could have just jumped up and punched her." Audra shook her head, started to smile, and shook her head again. "God, I've had to sit here and listen to her pick and *pick* at me until I wanted to punch her myself."

"You're a really good actress," Virgil inserted.

The Griffin looked at him, her brows slightly raised and furrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"You played her like a fiddle. I've never seen anything like that in my life. You ought to go to Hollywood. You could take home the Oscar in, like, a year. You were that good. I wanted to jump up clapping at the end." Virgil seemed to be hunting for something more to say, something to really drive home his sincere appreciation of her talent. "Hollywood," he said at last.

The Griffin continued to stare at him for a few seconds before frowning back down at her fingernails. "My boobs aren't big enough."

"They're plenty big enough," Audra objected, just as Virgil said, "They have implants now, you know."

The Griffin smiled faintly, something softer than her usual smile. "I'll keep it in mind. So. I guess we all know why I'm here, and same goes for Wheels, but I'm not getting you, Claymoore. What won you the season pass in the Room o' Doom?"

"Hacked into the records file and flunked Chet Bowers off the varsity team." Virgil shrugged, a modest shrug. "But I was stupid. Did it from the computer lab right down the hall. Stupid mistake. B.F.D." He eyed Audra, rubbing self-consciously at his acne-pocked face. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

Her mouth twitched, and she looked at her bent and skewed knees. "Sometimes. But not the way you're asking. Most of the time, I can't feel anything. Are you really as young as you look?"

He grimaced and cracked three knuckles. "Probably. I'm fourteen. How young do I look?"

"Young enough," the Griffin said. "They bring you in on the Minerva ticket?"

"Yeah," Virgil sighed, but Audra only looked confused.

"Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom," the Griffin explained. "And those bright bulbs upstate named a bill after her that made it possible to take the test results from your early standards and place kids in the same grade as you tested. Like, if you tested at the eighth grade level, and your parents went for it, you could skip up to the eighth grade."

"Yeah, but a senior in high school at fourteen?" Audra was frowning. "Weren't your folks concerned about...I don't know...self-esteem or anything?"

"I dunno." Virgil scratched at the side of his nose, not meeting her eyes. "I think my dad was pretty pissed they didn't pass the law until after Abe was already out of high school, but that's about it. Either he forgot about showers after gym, or he doesn't care."

"What do you do about it?" the Griffin asked, looking mildly interested.

Virgil laughed a little. "Get my ass snapped a lot and flunk people off the varsity team. I weigh eighty-seven pounds. What the hell else am I going to do?"

"Couldn't help you there." The Griffin returned her attention to her fingernails. "I don't go to Phys-Ed."

"I'd just rust these days," Audra added, and she and Virgil laughed as the Griffin rolled her eyes and shook her blonde head.

"So," Virgil said at last, eyeing Audra's spokes with a trace of returning curiosity. "Are you, you know...crippled?"

"Paraplegic," the Griffin supplied. She was feigning indifference, but only on the surface. Her eyes, gleaming gold beneath her blond bangs, never left Audra. The huge bruise purpling her left eye and cheek turned her face into a medieval jester's mask.

"No." Audra wheeled back from the round table as far as she could and, with a grimace of effort, lifted first one leg and then the other. "I ought to be walking again in a year. Maybe two. I can walk a little now, but I can't feel where my legs are, so I fall down a lot."

"Rough," the Griffin said, with some sympathy, but completely without pity. That was a whole new tone for Audra's ears. "How do you practice? With a walker?"

"Sometimes. And I go to a therapy pool twice a week, and when my Mom's home, she walks me around the room. My Dad works nights, and I...I'm afraid of falling." She glared at the Griffin defiantly at the admission, although the other girl merely looked back at her. "They took a lot of time off when it...when I fell. They can't really afford to take more. And when my Mom's not home...I can't do anything."

The Griffin nodded and folded her knife away with a whisk of one hand, like a magician with a deck of cards. "Would it help if you walked around here?" she asked quietly.

Virgil sat up a little straighter. "Yeah, we could move some of this shit out of the way. I mean, as long as we've got to be here anyway, we might as well get something useful done."

Griffin smiled. "And Ms. Lupe would be so pleased," she murmured, and stood up. She and Virgil moved the heavy table back and set it on one side against the furthest wall, then quickly shelved things and stacked boxes of books until a rough path was cleared.

Audra looked from one to the other, but set her brakes and slowly pushed herself up. She grasped the Griffin on her left, Virgil on her right, and took a shambling step. She felt cold all over, except for her face, which was flaming hot. She felt dangerously unstable, and oddly terrified, as if she wouldn't just hit the ground if she fell, she'd shatter apart instead. She felt a surge of resentment like bile, and in a fit of angry shame, turned to the Griffin and said, "Who hit you?"

"My 'Uncle' Kenny," the Griffin replied easily, almost amusedly. "And that's what happens when *my* Mom isn't home."

"She should leave him," Virgil said after an awkward silence.

"Brilliant deduction, Holmes, how do you do it?" The Griffin bared her teeth slightly, then shrugged an apology in Virgil's direction. "Fuck it. She knows she should leave him. She knows she could leave him. She's left enough others. She deserves what she gets when she stays."

"You don't mean that," he argued, in his creaky, teenage voice.

They walked Audra around the room.

"Sometimes I do," the Griffin said softly. She looked tired. "God, I really am mean."

They walked in silence for several long-seeming seconds.

"Do you know what the real bitch of it is?" the Griffin asked suddenly. Her voice was tight; she was staring straight ahead, her face furiously set. "I don't mean to be. Well, let me put that another way. I do mean it, because I am just too damn good at being mean not to mean it, but I don't want to be. It's just...there's nothing else out there for me. When I was a kid, it was be mean or get the living shit kicked out of you on a daily basis. And I'll admit life's been easier since I got good at it."

"But once you come this far, you can't really go back," Audra said softly and flinched when the Griffin fixed her in the fury of her golden eyes.

"No," she said. "You can't. I'm seventeen, and my life might as well be over. Everybody knows the Griffin, everybody fears the Griffin....and I am so tired of seeing fear when people look at me. It served its purpose for high school...if this place can be said to have purpose...but high school is almost over and there's nothing out there for me but a few hundred people in a damned small town who grew up hating me. And what do I do now?"

They had no answer for her.

"What's your real name?" Virgil asked suddenly, and the Griffin cut her eyes at him.

"Are you trying to be funny?" she demanded.

"No, I've just never heard it. Everyone calls you the Griffin, and I've never heard a teacher call on you at all."

Another lap in silence.

"Jenna," said the Griffin. "Jenna Sangriff."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Virgil Claymoore."

"Audra," said Audra. "Morley."

They stopped in the middle of the room, and Virgil and Jenna reached across her to shake hands as they held Audra between them.

She would remember that moment for the rest of her life.

They met every Wednesday for Social Skills without fail.

And they never saw Ms. Lupe again.

Chapter One

*** *Of Maps and Men* ***

The phone rang.

Audra Morley raised her eyes from her desk-sized paper calendar, slowly, as if it hurt to move, and looked at the phone. She wished she had Caller I.D. here at work. She disliked speaking to strangers.

The phone stopped ringing eventually, but the little orange light kept blinking, an indication that it was still shrilling off somewhere in the bowels of the building. But not here. Audra went back to staring at her calendar.

All the employees of Holbrooks, Inc. received one of these giant day-planners if they were fortunate enough to own a desk. Maybe it was supposed to help important people organize their very desirable time, or maybe it was supposed to keep their desks from getting scuffed up. Hard to tell. Audra's calendar was completely blank. Audra's calendar was, in fact, always completely blank. She had worked here for eight months. She had eight enormous blank pieces of month-paper sitting in a neat pile at home, just in case she ever got a canary or something.

Which is not to say that Audra never attended a meeting, but only that she saw no reason to mark the occasion in pen for fond recall.

Her Timex beeped and by habit, although it had been many years since the metallic alarm had prompted medication, Audra checked the time. It was four in the afternoon. She had only one hour left in the working day. Better make it count.

She resumed her stare.

Audra was a technical writer, in theory. It was her enviable task to make up the snappy prose for the company brochures, like: Holbrooks, Inc. provides this publication without warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied, including, but not

limited to, the implied warranties of merchandise, merchantability, or fitness for a particular purpose outside the structure of Holbrooks, Inc.

Then she'd shake things up a little, put them on the edge of their seats with: Some states do not allow disclaimers of expressed or implied warranties in certain transactions; therefore, this statement may not apply to you.

And of course, just to add a little touch of humor, there was Audra's personal favorite composition: References in this publication to products, programs, or services do not imply that Holbrooks, Inc. intends to make these available at any time.

This particular branch of the Holbrooks tree was more interested in shipping than in sales or research and development, which pretty much meant that Audra got paid to sit at her desk in her quiet little office on the fourth floor and stare at her calendar. And the days just flew by.

If Audra were any other person, she might spare a moment to wonder what force of Nature was keeping her employed, but Audra being Audra, she knew damn well what was responsible for her position here and she could sum it up in two words: Affirmative Action. Or if that was too much to get a grip on, she could narrow it down to just one.

Handicapped.

What the hell. That was more or less Audra's motto when she thought of this. So the Affirmative Action plan had gotten her this job. So what? It had gotten her the last six jobs. It would get her the next one, too.

She liked to think of it as job security.

Audra made a habit of bringing her cane to interviews, and if she was applying for anything that paid more than ten bucks an hour, she brought both of them. She firmly believed that those in charge of hiring were impressed by the attractive young woman in all her quiet dignity, nobly enduring the hardships of life despite her handicap. And there

was that whole double-A thing to consider--Get a cripple, make your quota, be the first on your business block to collect the whole set of minorities. In six months or a year or so, they'd find a reason to fire her, assuming she hadn't quit already, but they always threw her a party first, with a cake and sometimes presents. She'd make an impression there, too, shaking hands and hugging people and looking brave (but uncertainly so). And she'd go to the next interview with her cane.

The phone beeped, pulling Audra back from her reverie. An interoffice beep, this time. She supposed that meant she had to take it.

"Technical Scriptive Services," she said.

"Hi, Miss Morley." Only it wasn't 'hi', really. It was 'hiiiiiii', in a slow descent, rich with feeling, and that meant it was her boss, Mr. Camberstein, otherwise known as Mr. Sympathy. Someone needed to take him aside someday and point out that just sounding like a funeral director does not equal understanding the needs of the disabled.

"Can I help you?" she asked, playing with the eraser tips in her pencil mug.

"One of your calls was routed to the pool while you were...out," he said, vague and mildly apologetic. He probably thought she'd been having a seizure or something. "Can you take it if I switch it back? Or we can take a message. No pressure."

"I can answer it."

"Oh good." Naked admiration of her bravery. "Line Four. Thank you, Miss Morley." And hung up, before he tired her out too much.

Line Four was blinking. Audra sighed, running down a mental list of all the people who could possibly be calling her. She pushed the button. "Technical Scriptive Services, Audra Morley speaking."

"I need you," a man said urgently.

Audra sat up and smiled broadly. "Virgil!"

"I need to see you tonight," the man emphasized. He sounded edgy and excited, almost

nervous, and Audra felt a sudden surge of affection for him, as she might for a puppy that had suddenly appeared to pounce on her foot.

Still, she couldn't resist teasing him just a little. Virgil always seemed to go through life with his brain completely disengaged from his mouth. He probably had no idea how close he was to propositioning her right over the phone. She lowered her voice to a sexy purr. "This is so sudden, but I like it. Should I have my panties in my purse?"

"What?" Puzzled, but not startled. Something beeped. "Audra? Audra, I think my line is getting crossed with someone else's. Are you still there?"

She sighed, tapping her fingers lightly on her calendar as though patting her friend's head by proxy. "I'm here. What's this about?"

Virgil hesitated and Audra's interest was immediately sparked to life. Virgil was often gripped by whatever took his fancy and often took those interests to an embarrassing extreme, but he was not given to deliberate melodrama or secrecy.

"I don't want to talk about it over the phone," he said. "Can you meet me at Somerset's at six? Please, Audra, it's important." If he could have reached through the phone and shook her pleadingly by the collar, he would have done so.

"Of course I can," she said.

"Can you pick up the Griffin on the way?"

The plot thickened. "Sure."

"Thanks, Aud." Here, he interjected a nervous pause, and then said, all in a rush, "Audra, you won't regret this. I have the most amazing thing to show you. You're going to look back on this when you're eighty and know it was the most incredible night of your life, the night that changed everything."

Click.

Audra took the phone from her ear and stared at it for a little while before replacing it in the cradle. She laced her fingers together on the desk and

frowned, her eyes fixed without seeing, not on the calendar, but on the phone.

If anyone else had said that to her, she would have chalked it up to melodramatics and put it from her mind. But it was Virgil who said it, and Virgil may have a real excess of zeal at times, but he had to be believed.

Audra picked up the phone again, punched for an outside line and swiftly dialed the Griffin's working number. She had to deal first with a very blonde-sounding little desk jockey, but after a good six minutes of perky pop Muzak and vitamin-related infomercials, the Griffin's terse voice came on, and Audra ordered her to be ready to go by 5:30 at the latest.

"Check," Griffin said, and hung up without questioning the reason.

Another powerful wave of emotion pushed through Audra, fierce enough to sting her eyes shut. She sat, clenching the phone in her hands, smiling through a fog of affection as bright as pain. No, it would never occur to the Griffin to ask for reasons; it was enough for that one to know that Audra needed and/or wanted her, and so she would be there.

Audra could dimly recall a time in her life when she believed she had been popular, when she'd had more friends than she had time to see each week. She remembered having so many party invitations for birthdays, holidays and dances that she could have used a giant calendar like this one to keep herself on track. She remembered giggling with crowds of friends at the mall, at the clubs, at the beach...at the lake. She had climbed the trestle that sunny summer day with no less than a dozen of those fine friends. And she remembered....

She remembered diving....

...falling....

It was as if she'd gone into that dark water with a thousand, thousand friends. And wakened two

days later to find them slapped clean out of her life along with the feeling in her legs.

There was a time when Audra Morley believed she had been popular. Now Audra knew that she had only two friends in all the world.

But by God, those two were Virgil Claymoore and Jenna Sangriff.

Audra put her few things in order and called down to Mr. Camberstein's office to take an early leave.

Audra had a hard time convincing the bleach-bottle blonde behind the counter that she didn't own a pass to the fitness club, didn't want a pass to the fitness club, and didn't need a pass to the fitness club, she was just there to pick up Jenna Sangriff. The blonde, whose name, if her perky pink tag could be trusted, was Sondri, nibbled at the corner of her painted pinkie nail and looked dubious throughout the third run of this explanation.

"You mean," she said at last, in tones of dawning comprehension, "you want to see Jenny? Like, a personal visit?"

"I'm here to pick her up," Audra said, enunciating clearly in case Sondri's problem here was auditory rather than intellectually-related. "To collect her. To take her home, for God's sake."

"It's only five fifteen," the blonde said.

They blinked at each other.

"She gets off at five, right?" Audra said at last.

"Sure, she does, but she has to stay until six," the blonde explained, patiently, as if this were obvious even to her.

"Why?"

"It's my first day," Sondri replied, with a cheerful giggle. "And that's when I go home. So I need her to, like, show me how."

"How to find your home?" Audra echoed. "My God, didn't your mom give you a map?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Audra gave up on the whole concept of communication and stepped around the desk, through the tinted interior doors and into the noisy brick of sweat-thick air that the patrons of You-Go! Fitness Club were forced to breathe. The expression on Sondri's cute face as she did so was almost worth the discomfort of choking down that first lungful of sour air. She hated it here; it was always either too hot or too cold, and the muggy musk of human exertions was overwhelming.

"You can't go there unless you have a pass!" Sondri called fretfully. She came a dancing half-step after Audra and hesitated there, clinging to her desk as though she feared street thugs would swoop in and carry it away if she left her post. "You have to buy a pass!"

Audra let the door hush shut behind her, blocking the blonde's strident (yet cheerful) voice out behind the cacophony of a hundred weight machines in motion. Grunts, clangs, gasps, smacks, bongs, bangs, and thudding feet struck her like a wet towel. It took a while for the rest of Audra's senses to catch up, and when they did, she spied the Griffin on the far end of the room, standing behind a leotard-clad lady doing bench-presses. The Griffin hovered one hand motionless in place above the very center of the bar and she did not look up, although Audra was certain the Griffin knew she was there.

A rush of cooler air heralded the pursuit of Sondri, bare instants before the blonde's high voice cut through the clamor of health-conscious activity. "Jenny! Jenny, you have a visitor! A personal visitor! You need to tell your friends that they can't come see you unless they have a pass!"

The Griffin, poised and calm as a goddess of old rendered in paint, still did not raise her head. Her pale eyes continued to track the slow rise and fall of Miss Leotard's weights, sharp and alert to the slightest tremor. Between leonine serenity and raptor's vigilance, Jenna was every lean inch of her

the figure of her namesake in a poor human disguise. And now, in her languid sleeping-predator's voice, she very casually said, "My name is Jenna. Jen-na. Not Jenny, as I've told you now three times. If you call me Jenny again, I will slap your mouth so hard your lips will pop out on the back of your head in a ponytail. Seriously."

Miss Leotard, striving gamefully against her weights, looked visibly alarmed, an expression Jenna did not appear to notice.

Sondri, on the other hand, shook off her shock surprisingly well--taking only a half-step back before she rallied. "You can't talk to me like that!" she said, a declaration of civil rights rather than an accusation or a threat.

Now the Griffin did look up, however briefly, and the gleam of high fluorescents in the health club turned her avian gold eyes almost white. Quietly, she said, "I can't corner you in the parking lot and knock the living shit out you either, but I might if you don't lower your goddamn voice and talk at me with respect."

Miss Leotard abruptly recalled that she had, in fact, finished her reps on the bench already and scrambled away for the showers. Jenna watched her go, shrugging off a towel from her shoulder to wipe down the newly-vacated equipment. Only when this duty was discharged did she turn and run her hawk's eyes over Audra. Sondri, she ignored.

Jenna smiled, a hard smile, but a real one. "Be right with you. I've got to rotate the towels before I clock out."

"You're supposed to stay until I get off and show me how--"

The Griffin swung towards the voice, not speedily, but with ominous deliberation, and Sondri backed up fast. "Evers got you this job, and I've no damn doubt at all that he can help you keep it, but the day you give me orders is the last day you live a life of innocence and that's a fact. You want someone to hold your hand and teach you how to

spell your name on a timecard, you find someone else."

Sondri opened her mouth, worked it in silence, and then closed it and nodded.

To Audra, with that same hard smile, Jenna said again, "I'll be right with you." The Griffin turned towards the showers, paused, and looked back with narrowed eyes. "Say my name, Blondie."

"J-Jenna," Sondri said.

"Good girl," Jenna said, and showed the tips of her lower teeth in something that did not much pretend to be humor. "Give yourself a gold star." She turned back to the showers and stalked away.

Sondri stood looking after her, almost, but not quite, wringing her hands. She no longer looked like the perky little thing that had manned the desk when Audra first arrived; she'd had the smile knocked off her face, out of her eyes, and out of her voice, and the absence took about ten years with it and gave her a slightly rabbitish expression.

When she turned, jerkily, and saw Audra, the blonde flinched, as if expecting Audra to finish what the Griffin had started. "She's your friend?" she asked, in a voice that almost quavered.

"Yep."

Sondri's lower lip shook, just a little. Then, fiercely, with a hateful look that made her seem, just for a moment, positively haggish, she said, "She's mean!"

"Yep." But Audra relented a little at that point, and went on out to wait for Jenna in front of the building. She did this partially to ease Sondri's mind about the whole pass-no pass issue, and partially to give the poor girl a chance to be alone at her desk if she needed to cry. People usually did, when they came face to face with a Griffin for the first time.

Somerset's was pretty crowded, for a Wednesday night, but of course, it was the dinner

hour. Every booth that Audra could see from the parking lot was full, but she wasn't concerned. The three of them had been using Somerset's as a meeting place ever since high school. She thought Virgil's dad probably owned it or something; she had only to give her name to the gentleman at the register and a pretty server appeared like magic at her elbow to whisk her away to the private room in the back.

Audra glanced over her shoulder once as she followed the swishing skirts of her server. The Griffin was changing out of her work clothes in the front seat of Audra's car, as was her wont whenever she went anywhere straight from the job. Audra had no idea why she didn't just use the showers at the club. Maybe she had a phobia about being naked in public, although if Audra had a body like the Griffin's she'd personally take every possible opportunity to show it off. Streak through the frozen foods aisle at Kroger's, if necessary.

Virgil was in the back center booth, the same booth they'd been using for what, five years now? Six? It was scary how time flew by when you didn't have final exams to help mark and measure it. There were three places set at the table, and Virgil was fussing with the alignment of each silverware placement. His hair was hanging in his eyes, skater-style. Someone needed to tell him the eighties were over.

"Hi, Virgil," Audra said with a smile.

Virgil Claymoore didn't jump, exactly, but the full length of his narrow body tried to unfold itself to strict attention while still seated at the booth. The resulting hammer of limbs on the wooden table knocked his flatware arrangements badly askew, and Virgil's hands took it upon themselves to attempt to correct them while the rest of him tried to stand up and greet her properly.

"Ump," he said, sounding almost normal, and took a belly dive straight onto the carpet.

The server, being just a few steps closer, had the swift reflexes to yank the nearest chair out of the way, thus sparing Virgil's jaw a painful realignment, but then she only stood there, looking horrified, probably with thoughts of lawsuits dancing through her mind. "Oh Mr. Claymoore!" she cried. "Are you all right?"

Virgil stuck out one arm, hand outstretched, palm flat. "Good to see you again, Aud."

Audra pulled the chair out of the server's hands and carefully seated herself on it. She checked her feet, then took Virgil's hand and helped steady him as he untangled his ankles and then knelt before her. "Always a pleasure, Virge."

"You have very nice shoes," he told her seriously. "Where's Griffin?"

Audra glanced over her shoulder and saw the server staring at her with an appalled expression she wasn't even trying to disguise. She managed a wan smile herself, her fingers brushing over one knee self-consciously. "Our other party should be here any second," she said.

"Right." Virgil sprang to his feet with a grace completely at odds with his ungainly plummet of only a moment before. "Remember my instructions," he added, and offered Audra his arm, punctuating his dismissal by turning his back on the server completely.

Audra slipped her hands around his proffered elbow, but waited until the server had left the room before rising and taking the few short steps to their customary booth. "I think I made a friend," she said, wearing a lop-sided smile that felt frozen to her face. "I guess she thought I should have helped you up instead of sitting down."

"Aw, forget her, she's minimum wage," he said uncomfortably. He released her with a low bow as she slid into the booth, and stole a cheek-kiss when she swayed his way to check her knees.

She grinned up at him, her good mood returning, and he grinned back, but she could see

the nervous light in his eyes and wondered again just what they were doing here this time.

Virgil had only just perched himself at the edge of the curved booth seat when the door opened and he had to spring up again. The Griffin had entered the room ahead of the server. Jenna Sangriff traveled in no one's shadow.

"Hey, Virge," she said, and turned her head so that he could graze a quick kiss across her cheek as she slid into the booth ahead of him and seated herself at the U. "Looking good, stud."

"Thanks, you're looking particularly fierce yourself."

"Breaking in a new desk girl," Jenna remarked, raking her eyes critically across her flatware. "She cries a lot."

"You're so mean," Audra teased.

"So they tell me."

Virgil sat down again and gave a nod to the waiting server, who promptly wheeled about and left them. He picked up his napkin, shook it out, folded it again, replaced all his silverware, and then clasped his hands together and gave them both a winning smile.

"Dude," Jenna said solemnly, "You look like you've just had an espresso enema. Triple shot. What's up?"

"It's just...It's the most amazing....Wait for the drinks." Virgil ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the ceiling.

"Drinks?" Audra echoed, and she and the Griffin exchanged an amused glance. "Are you old enough to be sitting with the grownups?"

"Aren't you afraid of getting carded?" Jenna asked.

"I turned twenty-one two weeks ago," Virgil replied in a distracted voice, then blinked rapidly and frowned as he focused on Jenna. "You know that, you're the one who took me to Bazoom's and made me drink all those shots out of that stripper's belly button."

"She seemed very nice," Audra recalled.

Jenna gave a nod of lofty agreement. "So did her mom."

"They were," Virgil said defensively, darting swift looks at each of them in turn as though bracing himself for argument. "Both of them. Very nice. I had a wonderful time."

The server backed into the room at that moment, carrying a tray of tall glasses. She set one before each of them, and Audra watched Jenna run a suspicious eye over the dark contents buoyed with ice.

"These are some honking huge Mai Tais," Jenna said at last. "And while I appreciate your rather worshipful opinion of my alcohol-imbibing capacity-"

Audra took a careful sip. "It's iced tea," she said.

Jenna looked up at once. "Long Island?"

"Nestea." Audra sipped again. "Sugarless."

Both girls studied their glasses for a time in silence, and then turned as one to look at Virgil.

"I hate iced tea," Jenna stated, and pushed her glass firmly away. "I hate it when it's sugar-full."

"I know." Virgil nudged Jenna's glass back in front of her. "But you have to drink all of it before you get to say anything, okay?"

"This is all part of your exciting, incredible, amazing news?" Audra asked.

"Iced tea," Jenna muttered, poking dubiously at an ice cube.

"Just promise!" Virgil insisted. He hadn't raised his voice, but it seemed very loud nonetheless, or maybe it was just the desperation in his eyes that served as emphasis. His knuckles on the table were white with the strain of trying to appear relaxed.

"Cross my heart," Audra said finally, and did. Then she reached over and patted his hand, trying to smooth it flat and even out the coloration. "And so does Jenna."

"Hmm." Jenna tried a sip, made a face, and frowned at Virgil. "You're taking advantage of my

forgiving nature," she warned, and pushed the glass to the edge of her table-territory. "But fine. I promise. Now get to spilling it, buster."

Virgil turned his hand in Audra's and squeezed her fingers lightly. He bent his head, sucked in a deep breath, and expelled it in a steadying sigh. Then he reached his other hand across the table to take hold of Jenna. He leaned forward so that he could look them both in the eye at once. He spoke five words, his voice pitched to convey the terrible import of his earth-rocking news.

"My brother Barnabus is dead."

Chapter Two

*** *The Master Plan* ***

Griffin, for whom the word 'unflappable' had been coined, held a moment of silence for the dearly departed, and then raised an eyebrow with feigned concern. "Is this a séance? Should we hold hands, too?"

"I take it you weren't close," Audra remarked, at virtually the same time, so that Virgil's eyes darted astigmatically back and forth with growing confusion. "I'll admit Barnabus seemed like a bit of a jerk on the two occasions that I met him, but I can't think I'm going to look back decades from now and think of the anniversary of his death as the greatest moment of my life."

"He must have left a lottery ticket," Jenna said to Audra, and took her hand. "Speak to us, o spirit of the Claymoore!"

"We're very sorry for your loss," Audra added.

"Thanks," Virgil said, and immediately took back his hands. "I mean, no, we weren't close, but that's not the point. That's not the real news--Griffin, stop chanting, dammit, I'm getting to it--I guess I should have started another way. Hang on."

Virgil ducked under the table and popped up again with a small leather briefcase, which he set carefully before him. He opened it a crack, closed it without removing anything, and chewed at his lip, frowning across the table at them with clear indecision. "You both know where I work, right?"

"U-Dub, ain't it?" Jenna asked, shrugging.

Audra could do only a little better on such short notice. "You're in the basement somewhere, I think. Historical stuff. Archaeology?"

"Close. The lab's in the University, but I work as a kind of free-lance antiquity researcher for six or eight museums across the country. And one in Ireland. Never mind. See, what happens is, someone will send me a big box full of junk and I

try to identify what, if anything has any historical significance. And sometimes, they send me to auctions or estate sales or what have you, to assess specific items and purchase them on behalf of that museum. So I travel a lot and I go to a lot of auctions, and once in a while, I'll buy something out of my own pocket if I think it looks cool, and then sell it later to one of the museums."

"Your father must have loved that," Audra remarked. "'Dad, I want to be a carbon dater.'"

"Oh, he was thrilled," Virgil told her in an answering aside. "As long as I was dating something."

"Question." The Griffin propped her chin in her hands and looked curious. "What's stopping you from picking up a ceramic frog at a garage sale and passing it off as the Great God Ribbitz from the Ranidae Empire?"

"Ethics. Professionalism. The possibility of a second opinion from the museum's in-house guy." Virgil thought about it. "The words Made in Taiwan stamped on the frog's belly."

"I see. Go on. You intrigue me."

"Okay, well here's the deal. I went to an estate sale about three years ago and while I was picking up some Persian figures for the museum, the owner offered me a box of bas-reliefs, most of them broken. Maybe ten pieces total. Varying places-of-origin, he said. Three of them were Indian, two Roman, one Greek, three faux Roman out of England, and one of them...wasn't." Virgil gulped, drumming his fingers on his briefcase and cracked it open again, just a little. "So I kept it."

"Couldn't identify it?" Audra asked, not really curious but willing to be sympathetic as she waited to see how Brother Barnabus tied into this.

Virgil gave her a queer look. "No, actually...I thought I had, but....Do either of you know who Etienne DeGuarre is? Or was?"

Audra tried to exchange another glance with Jenna, but the Griffin was staring narrowly at Virgil

and would not be distracted. She settled for shrugging expansively instead. "Doesn't ring a bell. Was he a friend of your brother's?"

"No, he was a privateer for the French in the late 1600s. He was the captain of the *Shark* in the Caribbean Sea and--No, dammit, Jenna, you promised!"

Jenna picked up her iced tea and started chugging with a grim look on her face.

Virgil turned his full attention on Audra, locking eyes with her desperately, and talked faster.

"He wasn't a famous pirate, and he wasn't really all that good a privateer, but in the last year of his career, he fell in love with a lady he kidnapped called Isabella Pachetto. Isabella was just getting into the whole pirating thing when her brother kidnapped her back, and Etienne went after her and had what was either the best or the worst run of luck in his entire life. I mean, one massive glut of treasure after the other until he hit Tortuga, when he sent his first mate off with the treasure and jumped ship to go get the girl. He rescued Isabella, commandeered a ship from the harbor and started sailing like crazy for the open sea. They should have been caught, and they would have been, but of course, Tortuga was almost totally leveled less than an hour later by the famous earthquake. But Isabella's brother was waiting for them back in European waters, so Etienne and Isabella sailed up the American coast, threw down roots in Virginia and bought a plantation and grew sugar cane. By the time the local government knew a pirate was in town, he'd made an honest man of himself and bought a marque of legitimacy from King George. Isabella's brother and the whole Spanish army lurked around off the coast for a couple of decades, but Etienne never left land again, so they couldn't touch him. He never went after his treasure."

Jenna slammed her empty glass down on the table. "You can't be serious, Virgil!"

Audra pushed her iced tea in front of Jenna, who executed a flawless double-take.

"You're not buying this, are you?"

"He hasn't given us anything to buy yet," Audra pointed out logically.

"But--"

"Hush up and drink my iced tea."

"Flash forward ten years," Virgil continued, relaxing a little as he watched Jenna close her hand around Audra's glass. "DeGuarre's former first mate drops by the plantation to celebrate the birth of DeGuarre's third kid and hand-delivers an item later described as a map to DeGuarre's treasure."

Jenna snorted and started drinking.

"DeGuarre never did anything with it--he couldn't, not with the Spanish watching every ship that DeGuarre so much as looked cross-eyed at--and fifty years go by, and Etienne's grandson loses the family fortune and sells the map for money to go north to New York. The map vanished."

"Until it resurfaced in your brother's bedroom?" Jenna sputtered, choking a little on the last mouthful of tea.

Virgil thrust his glass at her. "Until it resurfaced in that crate of random bas reliefs I bought from a private collector at an estate sale."

"What idiot would use a treasure map to wrap a broken bas relief in?" Jenna demanded. "Check that, what idiot would believe the wrapping of a broken bas relief was a map to buried pirate treasure?"

"Drink your tea," Audra admonished.

But Virgil chose to answer this question. He opened his briefcase again and drew out a squarish chunk of slightly-discolored porcelain. He set it carefully on the table and rested his hand atop its smooth, blank surface. "The only pirates who used things like paper or sheepskin to make maps were stupid Hollywood ones. Paper was too expensive and too fragile for something that important. Most maps of the time were carved into more durable

materials like wood or plaster...or this. What they called Mongol pottery. Chinese porcelain."

"It looks broken," Audra observed.

"Goddammit," the Griffin snarled and started drinking her third glass of iced tea. The strain was beginning to show on her.

"It is broken, so even though I was pretty sure I knew what I had here, I couldn't do anything with it. I've been using it as a paperweight. I've been staring at it every day. I couldn't fail to recognize it when I saw it any more than I could mis-read my own face in a mirror." Virgil paused to watch Jenna struggle to down her third drink, and then reached across the table again to clasp Audra's hand. "And I did see it, Aud. When my brother died, he named me executor of his estate, and while I was cleaning out his private office, I found something."

He patted her hand twice, and then leaned back to retrieve a glossy brochure from his briefcase, which he deftly unfolded one-handed and set in the center of the booth table. It was an aerial shot of a tropical island, high enough to show the sparkling azure waters on every sandy side, low enough to display the central resort to best advantage. She could see swaying palms, tennis courts, and a luxurious sprawl of touristy buildings on one side of the island, while the other side remained more or less overgrown, with rough shoals, jagged cuts of stone, and gaily splashing waterfalls.

"This is Isla Tesoro," he said. "And that's where DeGuarre's treasure is buried. I've been staring at that island for three years, I'd know it in my sleep."

"Forget the island!" Jenna spat, thumping her third empty glass down beside the two others. "Even if I believed for a second that you really had part of a pirate's map, you said yourself it's broken! What makes you think you can find something that's been lost for four centuries with just a stupid little broken piece?"

"Because." Virgil's voice was calm and his hand was steady as he turned the porcelain square over

and withdrew his hand. The lamp overhanging the booth and the light from the window behind them cast shadows at two angles over the map; the markings etched into its face seemed to jump out at them like a hologram. "Because," he said again, "I've got the piece with the X on it."

There was a long moment of silence as Jenna stared at the piece of porcelain and Audra and Virgil stared at her.

"Well," said the Griffin in a mild voice. "Dip me in honey and throw me to the lesbians. It would appear I owe you a coke, Virge. That's a map."

Audra reached for the broken-edged square and gingerly held it in her hands, tilting it in the restaurant's light and watching the scrimshawed patterns carved on its surface give it the ghost of movement, waves lapping at its carefully-drawn shores. She could feel the age of it seeping up through her fingers, chilling them. The porcelain was not white, but a kind of tea-stained ivory, and the lines that crawled across it were slightly darker. The X on the lower left-hand side was very distinct.

She set the map down over the brochure. It was drawn just a little smaller than the unfolded aerial photograph, but apart from that slight anomaly, the two were a dead-on match. It wasn't just the careful edging of the beach, either. The artisan falls from the brochure emptied into a ribbon of blue that became a faint squiggle on the map; the rocky tumble of the cliffs lined up on both sides of the map precisely where the brochure indicated they should. The only glaring difference between the two was the resort itself, stacked neatly on the beach in the full-color photograph, but a bare expanse of sand on the map of four centuries past. If one overlooked that, it was simple enough to read that DeGuarre's treasure was buried within easy walking distance of the tennis courts.

"Getting in's going to be a bitch." Jenna clapped her hands and folded them before her on the table in a schoolgirl's posture, her eyebrows raised in polite inquiry. "What's the plan, chief?" she asked. If her tone could be trusted, which was not always the case, the Griffin, although a long way from being won over, had at least acceded to the possibility of pirate treasure.

Virgil relaxed a little, even offering the Griffin a faint smile. "Before he died, Barnabus apparently bought a three-week vacation package at that resort for himself and two of his lady friends. All three tickets are in the name of Claymoore, which, thanks in large part to my father, happens to be my name, too."

"Good old Barnabus," Jenna remarked, her eyes dipping back down to the map. "If I had a drink, I'd toast his afterlife."

"I could get you some more iced tea."

"Drop dead, Virge."

Audra raised her hand, and when she had Virgil's attention, said, "We don't exactly know what security on the island is going to be like, so how can you plan for a major excavation? I mean, I don't know exactly what the scale on this map is, but that can't be more than a half mile from those buildings."

"It's a risk," Virgil acknowledged with a grim nod. "But you've got to remember, it's a vacation resort, not a prison. And we'll have three weeks to come up with a plan, we don't have to jump right off the boat and start digging. But the key word here really is 'excavation'. When Etienne went after Isabella, he hit something like five major chunks of money. One of them, just one, was the *Mei Nehana*, a Persian ship picking up foreign treasure as wedding presents for the emperor of the Mogul Empire. The inventory of losses the Persians recorded lists thirteen chests of royals of plate, eighty pounds of Spanish coin, two tons of Incan gold, twenty-six tons of uncoined silver, and bags of

gold dust to equal one hundred fifty thousand British pounds."

"Holy cash flow, Batman," Jenna said appreciatively.

"Wow," Audra whispered.

"And that's one of five, maybe six hauls he made," Virgil said, thumping the table with his index finger for emphasis. "We know he caught the caboose of the Gold Train at Nombre de Dios, and the Silver Fleet in Hispaniola. His final take was probably more than a hundred million British pounds, in those days. Even if we find only Etienne's share of the treasure, and even if that share was only one share, as opposed to the ten shares a captain usually got, we're still looking at some major bucks."

Audra puffed out a breath and fell back into the cushions of the booth seat, staring at him.

"I've checked with the salvage laws," he continued. "We don't get to keep the treasure, of course, but we get half its appraised value, and they'll probably appraise it as gold, and not coins or relics or whatever. But gold, Etienne's share of just gold, is still going to be a minimum of twelve million dollars. That means we get six, and that equals two million apiece, worst-case scenario."

"No, worst-case scenario, we find jack-shit," Jenna countered.

Audra gave her a friendly poke in the side. "Yeah, well, we'd still get a three-week paid vacation on a Caribbean Island. Which in my book safely removes us from Worst Case anything." She grinned hugely at Virgil, who flinched back a little and looked palely disturbed by her enthusiasm. "And that's good enough for me. Count me in!"

The Griffin had slapped her hand over Audra's mouth, and she'd done it without taking her narrowed, golden eyes off Virgil. "What's the catch, Virge," she said, with a flatness that turned it from a question to an accusation.

"Urrf!" Audra began hotly, and then paused as she saw Virgil lick his lips.

"See," he began hesitantly. "The island...Okay, well there's two problems with the island. First off, it's owned. Obviously. Which means that whatever we find is going to be the property of the guy who owns the island, not the finders of the treasure."

Jenna took her hand away from Audra's mouth. "Something tells me that's just the little problem."

"Right," Audra said slowly. "I can see some cruising boats on the brochure... My dad used to have a little boat, and I'm pretty sure I remember most of the controls. We could dig up the treasure in secret, sneak it out a little ways--"

"There's another island that isn't owned by anyone about twenty miles east," Virgil said with a nod. "And I've got a boating license, so yeah, that's what we'd do. Toss the whole thing up on the shore, dig a hole for show, call the coastal salvage guys and drink daiquiris while we wait for the check. Problem solved."

"You said there were two problems," Audra reminded him.

Virgil ran his fingers through his hair and wouldn't look at either of them. "Have...either of you ever seen Fantasy Island?"

Jenna leaned back into the booth, folding her arms, and narrowed her eyes at him even further. "Ye-e-ssss."

"We're going to Fantasy Island?" Audra guessed.

Virgil winced. "We're going to Fantasy Fetish Island," he said, and slapped a hand over his eyes. In a defeated voice, he went on. "It's an erotic retreat for people who are into dominance and submission and stuff."

There was a long silence as frost slowly snaked across the table from Griffin's side outward.

But it was Audra who spoke first, and she did it laughing. "Barnabus? No way!"

She had met Virgil's family on a half-dozen occasions, all while the three were still in high

school, and she remembered them all as being almost brittle in their formality, as if a smile would crack their aristocratic features. Virgil was a whole different person in the company of the Claymoores, a silent shadow of a person with a face like a marble mask only vaguely stained by unhappiness. His oldest brother, Abernathy, took the brunt of the father's attention, and so was the worst of the bunch, possessing the full measure of the family's disdain for the common crowd like Audra and Jenna, but none of the elder Claymoore's cool skill in disguising it. Of Barnabus, she remembered very little; he'd avoided coming into direct contact with Virgil's friends while the father looked on, but Audra had a vague memory of him coming out into the yards with them one night when the Abernathys, Junior and Senior, were squirreled away having brandies, and she thought he seemed okay. A bit of jerk, maybe, but okay.

The thought of him in a leather slingshot brief with a zippered ski mask and a whip was a total mind-blower.

"You know, in a way, that almost makes sense," Jenna said slowly. She was staring into the distance over Virgil's shoulder, looking curiously sympathetic. "At least, he'd get to be the boss somewhere."

"That was pretty much my thought," Virgil said softly, and with virtually the same expression. "Not that any of us really want to be the boss, but...yeah, I can see the appeal. Definitely."

After a moment, he reached out and moved the map to one side so he could flip the brochure over. The narrow strip that would have been the first page if the brochure were still folded had simply the name of the island and a photograph of a shapely female derriere. Her arms were cinched in some sort of medieval-looking leather restraint, bound together at the small of her back. Her bottom was bare, full and round as the moon. Her thighs were

smooth slopes shadowed by stockings. It was a black and white photo, very stylish, distinctly erotic.

The rest of the unfolded pages were rambling praise-filled catch-phrases interspersed with pictures, some pastoral, some erotic, and some downright disturbing--tropical sunsets and beaches, wooden paddles, leather and latex fashionwear, empty stocks and harnesses, male and female bottoms (mostly female, Audra noted) in varying stages of abrasion or laceration. Scary stuff, right there next to prideful boasting of swimming pools, satellite television, and a full range of games and services. And of course, there were also seminars, demonstrations, parties, and, most ominous and surreal of all, a promise of door prizes.

What in the world would they be passing out as a door prize? Somehow, Audra didn't think a little goldfish guppy in a bag would do.

She glanced at Jenna apprehensively, half-expecting to see the Griffin's predatory side coming to the fore, but Jenna was looking thoughtfully at the map instead. Audra lifted her head to meet Virgil's anxious gaze. "But we'll be with you, right?"

"I...maybe." Virgil opened his briefcase yet again and this time withdrew three thin packets, each formerly sealed with a sticker, now torn. Each packet was almost featureless, bearing only the name of the island in print on the face, with the name of Claymoore handwritten in the upper corner. One, the one that Virgil kept, was green. The other two he passed to them were yellow. "These are the applications I got when I sent Barnabus's confirmation number into the resort. I guess we fill them out and we get matched up. I read through them. I can request my own pets, but they put a bigger emphasis on matching people according to--"

"Pets?" Jenna echoed.

"--to what the submissives want," Virgil finished, wincing. "So it's really up to you. But if we go for this, we need to hurry. I'm supposed to allow five

days for mailing and ten days for processing, and that leaves us with eight days to decide to do this thing or not. Listen," he said suddenly, and shoved his green application to one side. "This isn't even really about the money. Okay, it's a little bit about the money, but...I want to do this because...I mean, come on! Pirate treasure!"

Audra started laughing and even Jenna smiled her thin, hard smile. "I guess you can't exactly find a map that lets you be an astronaut, huh?"

"Or a cowboy, or all the other things I wanted to be back when I was a kid." Virgil ran his fingers through his hair, and then uttered a thin, unhappy sort of laugh and stared at the ceiling. "My father," he said quietly, "disapproves of me. He doesn't hate me, because hate is a human emotion, and we Claymoores simply don't have those. But he disapproves of me. Up until now, that's been just fine, because he had Abernathy following in his footsteps and he had Barnabus as a backup plan in case the elder scion did something unexpected, like die or vote Democrat. I haven't even needed to be there, but I'm there now. In the auxiliary position, you understand, but I'm still there."

"How much do you need him?" Audra asked, but the Griffin laid her hand over Audra's and corrected her in a low, grim voice.

"How hard can he hit you, Virgil?"

Startled, Audra looked back at Virgil, who now lowered his head by slow degrees until his face was buried in his hands. In a muffled voice, despairing and made somehow ugly by his father's tone of sardonic humor, he said, "Hard enough, Griffin. Hard enough. I'm only twenty-one years old, and the family's money-laws are damn near medieval. If he wanted to, he could still have himself named my legal guardian. He could cripple me, Griffin. He could kill me."

"Yeah, but you're not living with him, are you?" Audra asked. "And you're not working for him? You could walk away."

"He donates pretty heavily to the university...not enough to elect a chairman maybe, but enough to get some basement-bound antiquities researcher fired." Virgil sighed. "And I don't have my own bank account. I can't, not until I'm twenty-five."

"Bullshit," Audra insisted, but the Griffin gave her a pitying glance from her gold eyes and said nothing. "I'll give you a hundred dollars to open an account of your own. He can't know everything! Stand up for yourself."

"Claymoore family rules. No one handles their own money until they hit their majority at twenty-five. If I go behind my father's back, that's as good as slapping him in the face. Even if Barnabus were alive, he'd never overlook that. He'll take my job, he'll take my apartment, he'll ruin my name and my reputation, he'll see to it that I don't work anything but fast food for the rest of my life, and I can't stand up to that, Audra. Not with your borrowed hundred bucks."

Virgil spread his hands out on the table so that he touched both the map and the brochure. "I never expected an opportunity like this, but if I ever want to walk away, this is the only way I can think of to do it. Two million dollars. For two million dollars, I can get out." He looked up again, straight at Audra, his eyes like mirrors. "If we don't find anything, I can learn to live with that, but I can't just not do this. I can't spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened. I can do this, Audra. But I can't do it alone." He glanced down at his green folder speculatively. "For one thing, I don't think I can show up without my submissives."

"And when you think of submissive, you naturally think of us," Audra said.

The Griffin uttered a throaty growl, a lion-like rumble of warning.

The ghost of Virgil's natural smile blew across his thin features. "Well, yeah, in a way. I did think

of you. Not you, Griffin," he added quickly. "But...my first thought, when I realized what I had, was of you, Audra. I thought, this is perfect. I mean, it's not like you can get hurt."

He shrugged her an apology, which she accepted by tossing off a rueful smile.

"But seriously, Virgil," she continued. "The Griffin...Submissive...The Griffin. Let me know when you make the connection."

Jenna smiled faintly with one half of her mouth and leaned her chin on her palm.

"I know," Virgil said, and sighed. "Look, I just don't have any other friends. All I can hope for is that we find the treasure and the Griffin can be so distracted by counting pieces of eight that I sneak off the island before she can beat the crap out of me."

"That'd be a whole lot of distracted," Jenna remarked. She was toying with the map, pushing it this way and that with the tip of her finger. She flashed Virgil a quick, toothy smile and added, "If I'm in, Virge, I'm in all the way. I take my lumps and I take my chances. I won't hold it against you, regardless of what we find...or don't find."

"You sound like you've made up your mind already," Audra observed.

"Yep."

Audra picked up the brochure and folded it so that the photograph of the woman's bare bottom faced her. The woman's face couldn't be seen; most of her body was lost in shadows. Her identity was unimportant. She was just an object, something to be struck for someone else's pleasure.

Not that Audra gave a rip, but she couldn't imagine the Griffin tolerating this for a second.

She looked across at Jenna, who sat with zen-like serenity, staring down at the porcelain map. "You know there's a chance that we'll get paired up with someone else, don't you?" she asked, and the Griffin nodded peaceably. "Someone who'll hit you? Not just hit you, but spank you? A spanking, for

God's sake! I remember when you threw a guy over a bank of lockers for bumping into you in the hall, and you expect me to believe you can take a spanking for three weeks without blowing our cover?"

Griffin smiled her predatory smile, showing the sharp tips of her white teeth. "I got the shit knocked out of me for twelve years and I never saw a fucking dime. For a shot at two million dollars, I'll take my spankings in a pink, ruffled pinafore. I'm in, Virgil. Anchors aweigh."

Virgil looked back at Audra. He didn't make any other plea. He'd said everything that needed saying, anyway, and she knew that if she said no, they could still be friends.

Audra opened her submissive's application and scanned some of the questions. She studied the woman's ass on the brochure. Finally, she shrugged and nodded. "What the hell," she said. "Like you said, it's not like I can get hurt."

For a moment, Virgil just continued to sit there, like a man waiting for the other shoe to drop. He looked from one to the other and back again, and finally his relieved smile spread across his face, taking out the pinch of anxiety and making him seem just a little less like his father.

There came a subdued knock at the door that brought all three of them around staring as the waitress of ages past pushed her head inside. "Mr. Claymoore? Would you like more drinks?"

"Champagne all around, I think," Virgil replied, blinking back at Audra and Jenna. "And dinner menus. Open tabs, ladies. And thank you."

"No sweat," Jenna said in her off-hand way. She had shoved her application to one side and was already holding out her hand for a menu. "I always wanted to be a pirate."

"They'd never let you join up, Griffin. You're too mean."

Chapter Three

*** Audra Takes a Holiday ***

Audra sat naked at the kitchen table, beneath the low glow of a hanging lamp, chewing on a pencil and reading her application. Her red hair was still a little damp from the shower; it lay heavily on her back, spitting little trickles of runoff over her hips, where she could sometimes feel them in swift burns, like darting slashes from a brutal imp's claws. Mostly, though, she felt nothing. Not the cold water dripping from her hair, or the dimpled press of the waffle-iron pattern on the seat of her wrought-iron chair.

She had read the application twice, thoroughly, before she ever picked up a pencil. She had resolved to answer the questions as honestly as she could. The Griffin, an accomplished and ingenious liar, had once instructed her to stay as close to the truth as possible in every situation, because what betrayed you in the end was almost never the lie itself, but the struggle to remember the lie.

The application was uncannily similar to a high school final exam. It was split into three parts: twenty true or false...that is, yes or no questions, twenty multiple choice questions, and one essay question.

The yes or no section was easy--*Have you ever fantasized about being restrained during sex? Do you believe spankings are an appropriate way to be disciplined when you "misbehave"? Are you turned on by the sound of slapping flesh?*

Audra answered yes to all of these questions. They were the obvious ones, the way that true/false tests tended to be in History class back in high school. Had anyone anywhere ever failed a true/false test in History?

But there were a number of questions obviously designed to separate the merely submissive from the...rather more adventurous, and these were the

ones Audra took the most pains to answer honestly, just in case she wasn't paired up with Virgil and the Griffin after all. *Have you ever "set" a fantasy in a military or boot camp setting?* No. *Have you ever included a medical examination in your fantasies?* God, no. *Have you ever masturbated in the same room with another person who did not know you were masturbating?* Of course not. She didn't even do that when the other person did know what she was doing. What would be the point?

And of course, there were a couple of "specialty" questions peppered here and there. *Do you own a blindfold or a gag?* No. *Do you own any item that could be used as a blindfold or gag?* Well, sure, she had socks, didn't she? *Do you enjoy sucking on your partner's fingers or toes?* No. Gross. *Do you enjoy having your fingers or toes sucked on?* The opportunity seemed to have passed her by, astonishingly enough, but she'd have to assume no. *Have you ever acted out parent-child roles in play?* Whoa Nelly, no. *Have you ever included a plush toy in your sexual play or fantasies?* Boy, that one couldn't be no enough.

Then there were the 'vocabulary' questions: *Have you ever used a pinwheel?* Audra had a feeling they didn't mean the pretty foil ones she'd played with when she was six. No. *Have you ever used an iron horse?* Again, she was reasonably sure they weren't referring to an early steam engine train. No. *Have you ever used a violet wand?* Audra pictured, with some confusion, a child's fairy wand, complete with sparkly star at the tip, in a soothing lilac color. She marked it as No. *Have you ever used a TENS unit?* And that would be what, an abacus? No. *Have you ever used a Spyder sling or similar device?* Just for variety's sake, she marked that one as Yes.

The first multiple choice question was a Duzy: *Please list all implements you have used or would be interested in using.* The answers, marked A-Z: Switch, Rattan Cane, Wooden Cane, Paddle,

Perforated Paddle, Teacher's Paddle, Round/Ping Pong Paddle, Thumper, Tawse, Strap/Belt, Slapper, Perforated Slapper, Flogger Whip/Cat, Twin Lash, Martinet, Crop/Flicker Whip, Squid, Beaded Squid, Horsehair, Q-Flogger/Rug Beater, Slipper, Hairbrush, Spoon, Spatula, Goad, Zapper/Electric Paddle.

'Beaded squid...' thought Audra. She filled them all in, humming a little under her breath like a child coloring with crayons.

The rest of the multiple choice questions were a little harder. She had the option of A) Never; B) Sometimes/Maybe; C) Never tried it, but I'm very interested; or D) Yes, I like it or would like to. The questions, on the other hand....

Do you like to watch erotic reality shows? Audra was only peripherally aware that those existed, but sure, why not? D.

Would you ever participate in one? D. Provided there was a paycheck attached, she'd work just about anywhere.

Do you own or would you like to own any gear that could be used for bondage or discipline? (That one snuck a couple of yes/no questions in with its follow ups--*Did you have to think before you answered the last question?* and *Have you ever bought any item or clothing because it could be used for bondage or discipline?*) Audra did have to think about it, but ultimately decided that she did. She had wooden spoons in the kitchen; she guessed some culinary disciplinarian could whack away at her with those. D.

Would you ever include certain items or articles of clothing in sex play to please your partner? There was a second multiple choice question below that, listing A) Footwear, B) Leather, C) Latex, and D) Metal. Audra filled them all in.

Has your partner ever successfully attempted to control your orgasm by means of discipline, restraint, or denial?

That last question made Audra smile a little, but she had the feeling it was not a very pleasant smile. If you counted trying to give her an orgasm as controlling it, every partner she'd ever had fit that particular bill. She marked it down as B.

Would you ever engage in bondage/discipline acts in front of others?

Audra started to pencil in D, and paused. She knew it was what she should mark down. It fit in perfectly with the rest of her faux-persona. She'd make the perfect display, god knew.

Still....

She could probably handle having people watch her getting her ass whipped or fondled or whatever. She could visualize herself in a set of medieval stocks while some masked man in a tuxedo lashed at her from behind with a cat of nine tails, for the pleasure of dozens of grey-suited men with green-apple heads, and that was fine.

What kept her from marking down her D was the sudden transformation of two of the audience into Jenna and Virgil. Watching her.

Audra stared down at her application, frowning unconsciously, still pressing the tip of her pencil into the little D bubble. All of a sudden, it didn't feel so much like a game. It was easy enough to sit here and make mental jokes about her faceless future "Master" while she scribbled away at her ridiculous questionnaire, but she had to remember that Virgil and the Griffin were going to be there with her.

Memory, sharp and thick as smoke, momentarily fogging out her true surroundings: Walking laps in Ms. Lupe's Room o' Doom, feeling hands on her arms--Virgil's careful grip on her right, the Griffin's hard talons on her left--as she watched her feet pace off the carpet. The smell of books and cheap rug shampoo.

Audra shook it off with a kind of sick horror.

Her pencil was still on D. D was a good answer for that question.

Walking laps in that laughably-titled "Social Skills" back room, rigid with the fear that she would fall down and make them have to pick her up again. Audra had undressed for three lovers in her short life, but she had never been more naked than on those high school days, stripped down past flesh and bone with the shame of her blatant disability.

There were days when Audra felt like she had a white stick-figure-in-wheelchair logo stamped indelibly in her forehead. Days when every stagger or catch in her stride gave her the itching sense of pitying eyes on her from every nearby stranger. There were days when she couldn't stop checking to make sure her feet were still moving one in front of the other, couldn't stop touching her knees covertly beneath the desk just in case they'd come uncrossed and now lay wantonly splayed, couldn't look another human being in the eye without feeling that dumb, throbbing ache that comes from knowing that you are not *whole* you are not *right* you are not really *there*--

Audra's pencil snapped in her fist. The tip of the rounded lead still touched lightly down over the D bubble. The bit with the nubby eraser clattered down and rolled merrily over the table until it dropped onto the cheap linoleum floor. Audra stared at it dully, feeling a thin, embarrassed pity for it.

Stupid pencil, didn't know it was broken.

She'd spent the last five years learning how to pretend to be a whole person in front of her friends. She couldn't go back to the way she was, not even for show. She couldn't stand in the stocks and let Jenna and Virgil see her being handicapped again, not if Etienne DeGuarre himself popped up and handed her a galleon full of pirate treasure.

Would you ever engage in bondage/discipline acts in front of others? the questionnaire pressed.

"No," Audra whispered furiously. "Never." Audra scribbled in a hurried A and sat frowning at the page.

Maybe when she actually got to the island, maybe if she lucked out and got herself a Master other than Virgil, and maybe if she knew that her friends were safely ensconced on the other side of the resort, and if the situation arose, she might play along in public. But maybe not. This wasn't about what some faceless, masked fetish-enthusiast wanted, anyway. This was about her, this was about the only two friends she'd ever had for real and forever, and this was about what they were doing, and the playacting of a bunch of kinky tourists had nothing to do with her.

She was going to go to the island, lie around in the sun smelling like coconut tanning oil, drink something slushy with little fruit ka-bobs sticking out of it, and look for pirate treasure. Virgil would be right there, and the Griffin would be right there, and even if they didn't end up together, it didn't make a damn bit of difference. If there was a set of stocks out there with Audra's name on it, all she had to do to get through it was to close her eyes and think of England, and her faceless masked Master could go into screaming orgasmic rhapsodies at finally having a girl without a pain threshold beneath his paddle or his strap or his beaded squid or whatever the hell he wanted to use.

Audra's eyes were stinging. Poor light and tiny print, she told herself sourly and in a fit of pre-emptive masochism, made herself sit and finish the application.

There was only one question left anyway, the essay question.

Why do you want to come to Isla Tesoro?

Audra glared at it, her fingers almost white as she clenched the gnawed remains of her pencil. Her arm struck out once, savagely, and wrote four words. Then she flung the pencil away, slapped the folder shut and shoved it across the small table. She stood up, slapped her palm on the nearest wall, too angry to bother with balance, and reeled towards her bedroom.

The slamming of that door blew a puff of air across the kitchen table. It caught the Tesoro application and pushed it just enough to send it sailing to the floor, where it lay open, partially illuminated by the lamp Audra had left on.

Four words, brutally and passionately carved beneath a column of neatly-filled bubbles.

I want to FEEL!

The days flew by. It was a cliché, but it was true. Just flew. On jet packs.

Between Virgil's revelation over iced tea and the flight to Miami were only fifteen days. It should have been plenty of time to tie up the insignificant threads that passed for loose ends in Audra's life, but she still felt rushed. Oh, getting time off from work was nothing. She just knocked on Mr. Camberstein's door on Monday morning and asked for three weeks the same way she would have asked for an extra fifteen minutes for lunch.

For a second there, Mr. Camberstein looked utterly off his heels, but Audra never really thought he'd refuse, and he didn't, although she knew it would be a different story if she was anyone else in this company. No, Mr. Camberstein had only taken a few minutes to collect his thoughts, ruffling through his papers and lining up his pens and dusting off the well-marked surface of his giant desk calendar, before finally folding his hands together and cocking an eye up at her and saying, "Is this...that is, is there a particular reason for...?"

"Oh yes," Audra had said, a lie coming unpracticed and unhurriedly to her lips. "I need to have the rivets in my cervical vertebrae replaced. It's supposed to be only every ten years, but I've developed some hairline fractures. Too much activity, I guess."

"My God!" Mr. Camberstein, who had gone fish-belly white at the word 'rivets', now jumped to his feet and indicated the plush visitor's chair before his

desk with an urgency that made him look positively palsied. "My God! I'm so sorry! I had no idea! Of course you can have the time off! Paid leave, of course! My God! And I'll have Ms. Spenglervelt adjust your schedule to accommodate whatever recovery--"

"I wouldn't want any special treatment, Mr. Camberstein," Audra said, demurely dipping her eyes as she sat down.

"Don't even worry about that, please. Oh, Miss Morley, I had no idea you were struggling so--that is, I'm sure you were...your work here has always been exemplary, Miss Morley, exemplary!" Mr. Camberstein hovered over his desk, obviously expecting Audra's spine to come flying out the back of her in a spray of bony shards, and slowly lowered himself back onto the very edge of his seat. "Rivets?" he ventured, looking queasy.

"In the plates connecting my cervical vertebrae. What's left of them. You know how it is. Otherwise, my spinal cord would just be--"

"Yes, yes, of course. My God." Mr. Camberstein ran one hand through his hair, patted down his desk calendar again, and then hesitantly offered her a rubbery smile. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"I couldn't take advantage of you that way, sir." She would go buy a swimsuit. Surely, they'd have time to go swimming in between whacks with a beaded squid and digging up doubloons.

"I insist. You must have quite a lot of...things...phone calls or...arrangements." Mr. Camberstein trailed off, well out of his element, but recovered roundly with, "Of course, I'll expect you here tomorrow promptly at nine!"

"That's very generous." Audra stood up, turned toward the door, and then turned back, squaring her shoulders and giving him her very best 'brave little paraplegic that could' expression. "You've always been very...supportive of me, Mr. Camberstein. Thank you."

"Oh. Well. Yes. Quite." Mr. Camberstein realigned the pens on his desk, pleasantly flustered. "Holbrooks, Inc., has always represented a very high standard in diversity, and I have always been proud to--that is, not that I view you solely as a, er...."

"That's all right," Audra said quietly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Mr. Camberstein walked her to the door. He probably would have walked her to her car if she'd so much as coughed. And Audra had driven straight to the mall and bought herself not one swimsuit, but two, on the grounds that one of them might still be wet when she wanted to go swimming again. And she didn't feel the least bit guilty.

The rest of her packing was harder to manage. After all, it wasn't like a regular vacation, was it? Everything she owned seemed wrong. Either it wasn't "rich-looking" enough, or it wasn't sufficiently submissive. And she couldn't exactly go and buy a whole new wardrobe just for this trip. Every night, Audra would pick out an outfit, think about it all day while she was alone in her office, and then come home and try to bury the whole thing under the next, and hopefully better, outfit.

Halfway through the week, in agonies of despair, she'd called the Griffin to ask what she was taking to Tesoro.

"Just your basic stuff. Some jeans for digging. Some tees. Sandals. I bought a swimsuit."

"Everybody on this island is going to be rich," Audra said. "They're going to look right through us."

"Christ, is that what's bothering you?" Griffin managed to make a sigh sound sharp, and then continued on in a crisp, no-nonsense tone: "Look, jeans go with everything and every class wears 'em and no one can tell the difference between cheap denim and the other kind. If you get freaked, go with jeans. Second, your basic cotton t-shirt. Just leave out the ones with beer labels or kittens on

'em, and go oversized whenever possible so you can tie 'em off at the midriff. Third, no socks. Rich people never wear socks. If you get sandals, go with Birkenstocks. Birkenstocks are the only sandals tolerated by the rich. If you don't get sandals, go barefoot or grit your teeth and buy a two hundred dollar pair of something with open toes. Never skimp on shoes. Rich people can tell."

"How do you know all this?"

"Are you kidding? It costs three hundred dollars an hour to work out at that gym. Fourth...Are you listening? Fourth, you don't have to spend a lot of money on tops if you just buy a bunch of bikini tops instead. Go skimpy. Very, very skimpy. You've got the shape for it, you can pull it off, and as long as they're all checking out your tits, they won't be thinking about the price tag. Fifth, fancy underwear. Doesn't have to be expensive, you can get 'em at K-Mart if you want, but nothing cotton and nothing in solid colors unless it's red or black. Oh, and nothing with animal prints on 'em. That's just plain tacky no matter what your income is. Unless it's snakeskin," the Griffin added thoughtfully. "Snakeskin pattern would probably be all right...but that's pushing it. Go thong whenever possible. I know it's uncomfortable, but considering where we're going, we're probably going to be raising the bar just by wearing panties at all. And it's just like the boob thing, as long as they're checking out the goods, they aren't thinking about the money. And if anybody asks you where you got something or how much it cost, just laugh and toss your hair and say something like, 'Oh, I can't even remember, and I never look at the receipt.' Then just breeze off. You'll fit right in. You'll be fine."

"Thanks, Griffin," Audra said, feeling a relief so profound for a second or two she was afraid she'd start crying.

"Don't thank me, just obey me. Oh, and remember that vacation clothes are really the least of your concerns. If anything is going to give you

away on this island, it's going to be your fetishwear, so listen up. First--You know, you should probably get a pen and write this stuff down."

"I'm going to ask you again," Audra began, scrambling to find a pen on the cluttered surface of her kitchen counter. "How do you know all this?"

"I know everything," the Griffin said loftily. "Ready?"

Audra bit the cap off a Sharpie and flipped over a piece of unopened junk mail to use for a list. She scribbled Jeans, Tees (plain, X-Large), Birkenstocks, Bikini tops, and Sexy Panties (no animal, no cotton, no solids, 2 Thongs), and then said, "Shoot."

"Simple stuff first. Go pick yourself up a couple of mini-tees that have those stupid, sparkly brat comments like, 'Nice when Naughty', 'Daddy's Girl', 'Princess', heck even 'Brat'. Nothing, let me repeat, nothing that hints at shopping, or anything too classless, like 'Porn Star' or 'Pimp me, Daddy'. Too aggressive."

"Where am I supposed to find these things?" Audra asked.

"Junior Miss section of any department store. I know, I know," the Griffin said, omnisciently sensing Audra's gape-mouthed amazement. "I blame society. Moving on. Now, we're supposed to be submissives, here, so avoid anything in black unless it's leather, and even if it is leather, pass on it if it's got chains or studs or spikes or anything like that. Try things on. Odds are good, you'll be in 'em for a while, so don't buy anything unless you think you can wear it for six hours at a time."

"Now, by 'things', what exactly do you mean?" Audra asked apprehensively. "I have a feeling we're not talking about mini-tees anymore, are we?"

"Ah, no, we're not." There was a short, puzzled pause on the Griffin's end, and then she said, "Have you given any serious thought to the fact that we are going undercover at a three-week BDSM party

and you can't even define the word 'things' when I use it in context?"

"I know," Audra sighed. "I'm trying not to think about it, actually."

More silence. The Griffin, when she was listening, could be scarily perceptive. Audra took a moment to choose her words carefully, knowing that every one of them would betray all her unspoken thoughts.

"I think it's starting to sink in," she said at last. "I mean, the whole pirate treasure angle is nothing compared to the disguise we're going to have to wear to dig it up."

The Griffin grunted agreement.

"And I'll admit I'm nervous. I mean, we're looking at the mother of all specialized fields here, and I've never been very good at pretending to be an expert when I'm not," Audra concluded.

"No one expects us to be experts," the Griffin countered. "What they are going to expect is a modicum of enthusiasm for this specialized field as you put it."

"You're right." Audra sighed and rubbed at her eyes, then found it in her to laugh a little. "You know, someday you're going to have to tell me what it feels like to be right all the time."

"Baby," Jenna said, in her most solemn voice, "It would blow your mind." She hung up.

Audra replaced the phone in its cradle and looked at her new list. Now that her shopping fears had been ably met and answered, she felt no pressing urge to run out immediately and get these things, but she supposed she ought to.

'Things'.

Of their own accord, Audra's eyes wandered away from her shopping list and along the kitchen counter to the earthenware pot in which she kept her utensils. Tucked in alongside the spatulas and whisks and ladles was a wooden spoon. It had come with the pot, she recalled. There used to be two others, but they'd broken or got lost or

something over the years. No one used wooden utensils these days. God bless teflon.

Still thinking these thoughts, Audra walked over and got the spoon. The handle was smooth. The bowl was broad and slightly rougher, quite shallow. Experimentally, Audra turned her arm so the tender underside faced up and gave herself a smack. Her white Oregon-summer skin pinked up promptly, but it didn't really hurt. Audra smacked again and achieved a slight stinging sensation in her forearm.

'Enthusiasm,' she thought. She reached around and whapped at the seat of her jeans.

Nothing. She had only the denim-muted noise of it to be sure she'd hit herself at all.

She swung harder, producing an admirable whipcrack of sound, but of course, she felt nothing at all. What was she supposed to be feeling anyway? She tried to think back to when she was still a kid and actually got spanked for real. Her parents were the sort that always thought they could solve things nonviolently, and Audra had to admit that having her computer and TV privileges rescinded on occasion worked wonders for her young bouts of snarkiness, but there had been one July when she was eight and her parents had sent her to live with her Uncle Jim and his family, and he did not share his sister's views on discipline.

About a week into the visit, Audra had decided to leave the house and walk down to the Tas-T-Freeze for a slushee. There was nothing deliberately naughty in it. It was just a hot day, and she'd had a dollar in her pocket, so she went. Only she went without telling anyone she was going, and when she'd come back, Uncle Jim was frantically searching the neighborhood, and Audra's cousins had solemnly informed her she was going to get a hiding.

What had that been like? Audra tapped the wooden spoon against her thigh, eyes shut in thought. She remembered having to go up to the bedroom she shared with her cousins and wait for

Uncle Jim to get back. That had seemed to take hours, and she remembered how utterly bereft and scared she'd been. She could still taste the slushee, too sweet now.

Then, the heavy tread of Uncle Jim's boots climbing the stairs, and Audra had shrunk small on the bed, cold with dread. But he hadn't been mad--she remembered that clearly--upset, yes, but calm. He'd come over to the bed, obviously reading her fear and remorse on her strained face, and sat down beside her. There had been a lecture on the importance of telling people where you were going to be while you were visiting, and another lecture on always using the buddy system in an unfamiliar neighborhood. And just when she was beginning to think there wasn't going to be any 'hiding' after all, he'd taken her hand quite gently and said, "Now there's going to be a spanking, so you'll be sure never to forget."

"I'll never forget," she'd promised, her chin trembling.

"Don't make this any harder, punkin." Uncle Jim had patted his lap, his gaze stern and unyielding, and Audra had climbed over it, her face hot with embarrassment.

He'd spanked her right over her shorts, and the only thing that Audra really remembered well about the spanking itself was that it had lasted forever. She'd been crying after the first swat, and she hadn't let up until it was over and he was hugging her and telling her to be good. She couldn't even remember how much it had hurt, although it couldn't have hurt that much because she was sitting down for dinner later that same day.

Would the spankings at this island be like that? Would there be rules she'd have to break in order to 'earn' them? Would her spanking partner want to hug her afterwards? Was she supposed to be afraid of the spankings and fight them, or was she supposed to go meekly over like with Uncle Jim? And as for the spankings themselves...clearly, this

Tesoro resort was eroticizing the spanking aspect, but just how turned on was Audra supposed to be? Should she be getting a thrill out of the spanking itself, or just afterwards?

Audra raised her spoon and whacked her fanny again, this time trying on a little moan that she hoped was sexual-sounding. The results were disappointing; to her own ears, it sounded like she was on some undead quest for brains. She continued to spank herself, the spoon bouncing off her unfeeling buttocks, as she practiced whimpering, gasping, and groaning. She found that if she tossed her hair right, it added a breathy quality to her moaning, so she did a few of those, settling into a nice rhythm.

'Maybe I should be pumping my hips a little,' she thought. 'Or would that be too turned on? I wonder if there are videos I can rent--'

Her thoughts and her arm both came to a sudden jolting stop as she happened to glance out the kitchen window mid-hair toss and see some guy standing in his kitchen staring at her. He was overpouring the contents of a coffeepot continually into a mug and, presumably, into the sink. His mouth was hanging open.

Audra hurriedly stuck her wooden spoon back into her utensils pot and rushed into the bedroom to unpack all of her unsuitable vacation clothes. It didn't take more than five minutes, but when she peeked into the kitchen again, at least the guy was gone. Relieved, Audra picked up her list and her car keys and headed out to do her shopping.

She opened the front door of her apartment and there was the guy, pacing back and forth on her landing. He jumped and they both stared at each other.

"Hi," said the guy suddenly, blushing. "So...like, I was thinking that maybe if you were, you know, looking for a guy that could help you with your, like, spoon--"

"Go away," Audra snapped.

He fled, and she backed up into her apartment and slammed the door.

Chapter Four

*** *Spanking is Such Sweet Sorrow* ***

Audra decided that the day they all left for Tesoro was easily the longest day of her entire life and that included the day she'd woken up and found out she was now crippled. After the rapid passing of the previous week, it was something of a shock to spend hours at the airport undergoing invasive security screenings and hours more in a cramped plane listening to little kids alternately scream and giggle, and then look at your watch and realize it was still only ten o'clock in the morning. It was as if all that time that had disappeared while she was trying to prepare for this trip had congealed into a solid mass now that the day of the trip had finally arrived.

And it only got worse as the day wore on. The airplane overbooked their flight, and they couldn't sit together. There was no meal service on the plane, not even a little bag of peanuts, and by the time the flight attendant (they didn't call them stewardesses anymore; apparently that was sexist) got to her row with the drink cart, all they had left was diet cherry 7-Up. Audra was drinking it, thinking how much she hated cherry flavoring in soft drinks, when the small child seated next to her leaned over and threw up in Audra's lap. There was supposed to be a two-hour stopover in Chicago during which Audra had been looking forward to changing her clothes and getting a bite to eat, but due to the delay in takeoff and an 'unexpected headwind', their stopover ended up being a little less than seven minutes long. In order to reach their next gate before the flight took off, the Griffin had actually picked Audra up fireman-style and ran with her across the airport, leaving Virgil to come loping after with all their carry-on luggage.

It was dark when they arrived in Florida, and, accustomed as she was to the climate in the Pacific

Northwest, leaving the plane was a lot like getting hit in the face with a hot, wet towel. Audra had actually choked on her first breath and had to stagger to one side of the terminal, gasping for air. In a moment, Virgil was at her side, supporting her and patting her back while the Griffin kept the on-lookers moving with a series of especially potent snarls.

"How can you breathe this?" Audra demanded.

"I'm used to it. I work in a gym," the Griffin replied. "Or at least, I used to."

"Used...?" Audra and Virgil both turned around and stared at her. "You quit your job?"

The Griffin smiled, showing all her teeth. "Boy, did I ever! I walked into the gym, walked straight to the fuse box, shut off the circuits to the juice bar--it doesn't open 'till eleven--went back behind the bar, filled up all the blenders with the reddest juice I could find, turned them all on 'liquefy', tossed all the blender lids into the trash, wrote 'I QUIT' on the countertop in protein powder, and walked out again." She caught Audra's wrist, turned it so she could see the face of Audra's watch, and grinned even harder. "About ten hours ago, Bronson Evers went to open up the juice bar, and when the lights didn't go on, he went into the back room and flipped the switch in the circuit box. Splat. I wish I could have seen it."

Audra frowned. She tried to enlist Virgil in her disapproval, but his expression was openly admiring, so she had to go it alone. "You shouldn't have done that, Jenna. They'll charge you for damages or something."

The Griffin snorted. "How much does it cost to mop up a couple blender's worth of juice? They can friggin' bill me. Besides, I have no intention of going back to collect my last paycheck. I figure it's a small price for so much personal satisfaction." She cocked her head to one side for a second or two, and then smiled again. "I bet they probably

figure it's a small price to be rid of me. So everybody's happy. Lighten up, Wheels."

She must be in a good mood, Audra decided. Jenna hadn't called her Wheels since High School. Still, there was a principle here.

"You still shouldn't have done it," she said.

"What kind of juice was it?" Virgil asked.

"Cranberry, mostly."

"You are the coolest person I've ever known," he said sincerely.

Audra gave up on the lesson in personal ethics and started walking in the direction of the luggage claim carousel.

After that, it was just a shuttlebus ride to the hotel overlooking the beach, and they finally got something to eat from a tiki-style shack that shared the hotel's parking lot. The shack (Audra could not bring herself to call it a restaurant) proudly boasted a menu of seafood and barbeque, hideously intermingled. Its mascot was a cartoon crab in a chef's hat, cheerfully presenting a platter on which lay a roast suckling pig with an apple in its mouth and x's for eyes. The special of the day was rum-glazed swordfish kebobs. They all ordered cheeseburgers and ate them back in their hotel room.

They had only one night all together in Florida before Virgil's ship, the *Tesoro Master*, sailed. One night to try and keep each other's spirits high as they grappled with the enormity of what they were about to attempt. Virgil had brought as much of his working laboratory as he could fit into a set of Samsonite suitcases, and he seemed determined to list every last item and run through its particular uses until either the girls memorized them or their brains melted, one or the other. She supposed she could see the need for a metal detector, but honestly, did he think they were going to use a spectrum analyzer at some point?

"Does your dad know you're here?" Audra interrupted finally, not without a sense of desperation.

Virgil stammered to a stop, blinking like a man emerging into summer from a dark movie theater. "No, actually, he thinks I'm at ComiCon in London," he said, and a shadow crossed his thin face. "He...he told me to give him a call if I saw something I wanted...but keep it under fifty thousand if I could."

Audra and Jenna looked at him, Audra with amazement and Jenna with suspicion. "I didn't think your dad was into comics," Audra said finally.

"He's not," Virgil said, and started repacking his equipment. "And he's never loaned me money in my damn life. God, I hope we find something. I don't think he'll call the convention looking for me...but I wouldn't put it past him. And if he knew you two were here...."

He sat on the edge of the bed and looked grimly at the wall.

"He never minded us before," Audra ventured.

"That was then," Virgil said curtly. He stood up, took two curt steps away from them, and then stopped and looked back bleakly. "He sees me now. He never really understood why we hung out together before--"

"Sure, he did," Jenna interrupted. "He asked me once."

Virgil looked openly astonished. "What? What did you say?"

"I told him we were sleeping with you." Jenna shrugged nonchalantly, but with a gleam in her eyes.

"Both of us?" Audra asked, amused.

Jenna nodded, showing her teeth in a grin. "Said it took both of us to keep you engaged, so to speak."

"You didn't," Virgil said faintly. "No, of course you did. Christ, so that's what that was about. I never could figure out...God, Griffin, if I thought I

had a chance of making it out of this room alive, I'd give you a boot to the ass right now."

Now Jenna's smile faded into a look of concern. "Did you get in trouble? I didn't mean--"

"No, hey, trouble? Are you kidding? My father comes up to my room, grabs my Thor comic right out of my hands, hands me the biggest box of Trojans--we're talking super-economy-Costco-size box of Trojans--and claps me on the back hard enough to make me cough up a lung. He doesn't say a word, not one. He just turns around again and slams back out, leaving me there with this *huge* box of condoms--"

"Ribbed for her pleasure," Jenna said wisely.

"Oh shut up! I was scared! You don't know my father like I do! I thought I was going to come home someday and find a bunch of call girls lined up on the staircase with my father at the bottom with his gold card in his hand. I could *kill* you, Griffin! You gave me a damn ulcer!" Virgil ran his hands through his hair and then laughed. "Christ, I could kiss you!"

"You can't do both," Audra said reasonably, and then brightened as a new idea struck her. "You could give her a spanking!"

"What?" Virgil's voice and Jenna's, in unison, was almost choral in its perfect harmony.

"You've got to get used to it sometime," Audra pointed out. "It might as well be with someone you like, the first time." As opposed to some creepy neighbor from the apartment across the parking lot.

"What cracked attempt at logic is that?" Jenna demanded, and Virgil discretely backed away from her. "I'll take my first big, scary spanking the same way I lost my damn virginity--quick, clumsy, and with a complete stranger, just like God intended. I'm not baring my butt for Virgil!"

"Heck, you told his dad you were sleeping with him."

"I lied, Audra. I lie a lot. I should think you'd know that about me by now."

"I could use the practice." Virgil cleared his throat a little awkwardly as Jenna swung around and stared at him. "I've never hit anyone before. And you don't have to take anything off."

"You're goddamn right I don't!" she shot back, and might have said more, but then made a visible attempt to muzzle herself, glaring down at the floor while her hands clenched convulsively into fists. She considered her feet in furious silence.

"I could practice on Audra," Virgil admitted, almost timidly. "But what would be the point?"

"Shut up, I'm considering it." The Griffin made one of the few gestures of indecision Audra had ever seen, raking her talons through her hair and baring her teeth sharply at the floor. When she looked up again, her eyes were sullen with acquiescence. "Go ahead."

Virgil didn't move at once. "Are you sure? Because I don't want to get a little ways into this and have you rip out my kidney and show it to me."

"I'm sure." The Griffin turned, swift in her hunter's stride, and bent at the waist, like a knife someone had only half-unfolded. She struck her palms against the cheap hotel bedspread, braced her legs apart, and stared grimly at the curtains.

Virgil still didn't move.

Audra drew up her knees on the other bed, wrapped her arms around them, and leaned forward with interest to watch.

After several seconds went by without interruption, the Griffin, still without turning her head or twitching any muscle, said, "Daylight's burning, Virge. This butt ain't gonna spank itself."

"You're going to hurt me," Virgil stated.

Jenna bent her head and sighed. "No, I'm not. I swear I'm not."

"You can tie her down," Audra suggested.

"Don't push your luck," Jenna said dryly, before Virgil could say or do anything. "Just get it over with and log your simulation hours or whatever it is you're looking to do."

Virgil crept a few cautious steps forward, circling the high, round curves of the Griffin's waiting ass. He raised one hand, dropped it slightly, made a few practice swishes that did not quite touch her, and then lifted his arm to the level of his head and gave her a solid smack.

"Did that hurt?" he asked quickly.

"No. Keep going. Pretend you're the mighty Thor or something."

He smacked her again. The Griffin took one hand off the bedspread to brush back her hair and then returned to her previous position. Virgil edged around into a slightly better position, checked behind him for swinging distance or wind shear or something, and then gave her two more swats.

"Harder, Virge. And hurry up, I can see my hair turning grey here."

Virgil turned and looked back at Audra over one shoulder, his hand still raised to deliver another blow. "Is it just the ass, do you think, or can I get creative about it?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"I think you can go down the thighs," Jenna answered, but she didn't sound as sure of herself as she had in the past. "I picked up some magazines before we left. They're in my backpack."

Virgil trotted over and began to root through Jenna's belongings as Jenna remained locked in position. "What's all this stuff?" he asked.

She gave him a rueful glare. "I'm going to be undercover, you dimwit. I picked up a disguise. I got some corsets and stockings and a couple of cuffs...and some sleeves, I think. I don't really remember if I actually bought those or just looked at them. And a box of Happy Nips--"

"A box of what?" Audra interrupted, and Jenna swung her head to look at her over her other cheek.

"Happy Nips. These little flesh-colored rubber bands you put over your nipples so they look all perky and glad to see ya."

Virgil was playing with a Happy Nip, trying to fit one over his fingertip. "How neat!"

"I got some magazines, too, so I can pick up on the culture. You know. Talk the talk. Like, 'I've been bad, Daddy', and 'Naughty girls need love, too'." Jenna tossed her hair, scowling at the curtains. "Am I the only one who ever *plans* for things?"

"Geez, I wish I'd thought of that," Virgil muttered, returning to Jenna's backside with a Sassy Bottoms magazine open in his hands. "Holy cow, those poor girls!"

"I've had worse," Jenna remarked. "Just not on my ass. Get going, Virge, my arms are going numb."

"Give me a second, will you? You're supposed to be a Sub, you know. How great is your disguise going to be if you're sitting there going, 'Hurry up, Master, my arms are going numb'?"

That question brought the total number of times Audra had ever seen Jenna stumped for a reply up to six.

Virgil didn't seem to notice his little victory. "According to this," he said, frowning at the magazine, "you should have your jeans off. Some of these girls get to keep their panties on, but none of them are wearing jeans."

"Kiss my ass, Virge. I'm as naked as I'm going to get."

Virgil looked at her, still with that studious frown on his face. "Hey, weren't you the one who was complaining because I didn't do enough research? What do I know about jeans or no-jeans? Maybe it makes some huge, colossal diff--"

Jenna shoved herself up off the bed, unzipped her jeans and yanked them down in a single furious movement. Then she bent sharply and re-assumed her position, now almost visibly smoldering.

She was wearing a sea-green thong. Audra never would have imagined Jenna even owned a thong, let alone a sea-green one. It was kind of

pretty. Certainly, it did a beautiful job of framing her bottom, separating the cheeks into two distinct targets. And Jenna had a nice ass. No, a truly magnificent ass. The sort of ass even a straight girl like Audra would write home to Mother about. It was full, it was voluptuous, it was almost completely flawless. The only imperfection was a small, white crescent-shaped marking, perhaps a tattoo, on her left cheek. It was not clear to Audra just what the tattoo was supposed to be; there was a funny jagged line intersecting the crescent part, like a spear stabbing the new moon, although if that was really what it was, then the tattoo-person did a really crappy job.

Virgil was far too wise a man to spend a lot of time ruminating on the Griffin's ass. Consulting his centerfold in one hand, he slipped his arm around Jenna's waist in what was apparently the manner depicted (Audra, watching from the next bed, saw the ripple of the Griffin's impressive body as it locked briefly and then relaxed), then tossed the magazine to fall readably open on the floor, and gave Jenna a whole series of sharp-sounding swats in a circular pattern over the whole of her bottom.

"How was that?" he asked nervously.

A brief silence as Jenna considered. "Okay, I guess."

"Did it hurt?"

"You keep asking me that. How the hell am I supposed to answer? I'm just not putting a spanking in the same league as serious hurt. Just go, already. Whack away." Jenna grumbled something under her breath, tossed her hair in a show of annoyance, and then went still again.

Virgil rolled his shoulders to loosen them, flexed his spanking hand to crack the knuckles, and took her at her word, whacking cheerfully away in various strengths, speeds, and formations, occasionally sending a critical eye down at the open magazine. Audra watched and listened with open fascination. She was captivated by the sound of it,

a little like the sound made by playing cards in the spokes of a bicycle, one riding very slow, a kind of whup-whup-whup, only very loud. As Jenna's bottom blushed up pink, the white mark only stood out starker and whiter.

The Griffin wasn't flinching, gasping, groaning, or doing anything at all. Every so often, the fingers of her hands would dig into the coverlet a little, in the manner of cat wanting to sharpen its claws. She had her eyes fixed on the curtains and she didn't turn from them, or even seem to blink. Her brows were very slightly furrowed, as if she were contemplating a thorny arithmetic problem.

Virgil, on the other hand, was starting to flag. He wasn't flushed or breathing hard, but he was hesitating between blows to flex his hand or shake it, and finally he stopped, laughing a little. "Man, that stings!"

"Are you done?" Flat. Toneless. Not even a proper question. The Griffin glared at the curtains and didn't move, not even when Virgil took back his arm and stepped away.

"Um...thanks, Jenna."

The Griffin straightened, moving only at the waist. The rest of her body remained hard and somehow brittle. She looked like a marionette. A mean one.

Virgil collected her magazine, closed it, smoothed out its cover. He made a few abortive attempts to present it before finally nerving himself to hold it all the way out.

The Griffin bent again, pulled her jeans up and fastened them, and then only stood there and didn't move.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be an ass. It was good practice." The Griffin continued to face the curtains, solid as a statue. Then she turned, all as one body, so that she faced them, but she still wasn't looking at them. "It didn't hurt."

She walked past him, taking her magazine on the way and dropping it without looking on top of her backpack as she passed it. She went into the hotel bathroom and shut the door. A second later, the sound of the shower began to drum through the walls.

"That went well," Audra said finally, when Virgil only stood there looking after her.

"God, I hope we get matched," Virgil said fervently. He shook himself, looked around with a new clarity and even greater intensity. "I hope I get her. Because if we don't, she's going to take it for like, three days, and then she's going to snap and kill someone."

"No, she won't," Audra said without thinking. "She promised she'd do this, so she will. The Griffin never breaks promises." She leaned out over the bed to pick up the discarded magazine and leafed through it for a few seconds, looking up only when she became aware of a great and heavy silence.

Virgil was looking at her over one shoulder. His eyes were half-hooded in shadows and there was a look stamped across his features, one of pity curdled by cynicism. It made him look older, and oddly enough, taller. It made him look like his father.

"What?" Audra heard herself ask numbly.

Virgil went back to staring at the bed. "Yeah. You know what? She probably will. She'll do it...and she'll end up hating me for making her promise to do it."

Audra put the magazine down and swung her legs off the bed, so disturbed by his words and the low, emotionless manner in which they were spoken that she didn't even check the lie of her lower body before she stood up. "She won't hate you!"

"Maybe we shouldn't do this. I can live with a lot, but this could change things. I don't want to change things, Audra. I don't...have anybody in the world except you and Jenna." One of his hands rose in wooden jerks to the level of his heart and

hung there, curled slightly inward, unmoving. "Can you do this, Audra? Really do this? Can you do it and still...like me?"

He turned around as soon as the words left his mouth and stayed there, his back to her and his hands curled into fists. Even when Audra stood up and went to him, he didn't move, didn't even appear to be breathing.

Audra slipped her arms around him, feeling him cold and stiff as marble, and when he didn't lean back, she came forward until they were pressed into a single body. She leaned her cheek against his shoulder (It was a nice, broad shoulder, too. When did scrawny Virgil grow that?) and tried to be warm enough for both of them.

"I can do this," she said, and Virgil shuddered out a breath and tipped his head back to rest on hers. "I can do this and still like you. Silly Virgil. You're not our Master yet, you know. If we didn't want to do something, we'd say so."

"Yeah, but--"

Audra squeezed him tighter. "Have you ever known the Griffin to do anything because she was too polite to refuse?"

Virgil made a quick hiccup of laughter, paused, and then let all his breath out in giggles. "No," he said finally, as that sick, stony quality eased out of his body. "No, I can't even imagine that."

"So relax," Audra said, and stepped away, giving Virgil's shoulders some comforting pats as she receded. "It's going to be fine. Three weeks of sunshine and exercise, intermittent paddling, and to top it all off, a boatload of doubloons. And we'll all still like each other. I promise, Virgil. And I can keep my promises, too."

She sat down on her bed and he sat down on his, looking into each other's eyes like friends again.

Chapter Five

*** *Anchors Aweigh, Bottoms Up* ***

She dreamed of a small room in a ship at sea.

The walls, the floor, and the ceiling all were paneled in wooden planks, stained dark and well-weathered. There was a bed--about half the size of an army cot, little more than a straw mat covering a shallow wooden crib--and above it, there was a tiny round window, the glass so crusted with sea salt as to render the view a blur of white light and shadow. There was even a table, nailed into the floor, and a toy-sized chair to sit before it, and it was there that Audra sat.

Before her on the table was a child's slate-board, with two rows of letters printed upon its dark face. One was a neat and simple spelling of an old pangram: *The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog*. Beneath that, an uneven scrawl of the same.

It was an outdated puzzle anyway. The Griffin knew dozens of shorter pangrams. Audra rubbed out the letters with a swipe of her sleeve, meaning to write in a better one, but stopped to stare down at herself when her eyes registered the rich brocaded silk that frothed around her arm. She didn't know what the dress was called, but she recognized the cut of it easily enough. It was very French-looking, very fashionable, very eighteenth-century, and very, very tight around the chest. The bodice and gathered overskirt were pearl-grey in color, with a flower print in subdued shades of peach and lavender. The dress itself was pink, luridly so to Audra's modern eye, and the petticoats were glossy white and trimmed with roses. She was even wearing a charm bracelet of sorts, loosely looped around her right wrist, from which dangled a cameo drop pendent tied with what looked an awful lot like human hair.

This was a very strange dream.

The door to the cabin opened unexpectedly and a man entered. Audra, who had seen every Horatio Hornblower mini-movie on A&E, immediately understood that she was looking at the captain of this ship, and further understood that he was a man of some quality. He was clearly built for working wear, but he'd taken some pains to smooth out the rough edges of his appearance, and the overall effect did not disappoint.

When he saw her, his dark eyes narrowed and he raked the fingers of one hand curtly through his blonde hair in a gesture of restrained frustration. "Isabella," he said.

Aha. Now she knew where she was. Audra smiled at him, clasping her hands before her on the table. "Etienne," she countered, quite pleased that she had remembered the pirate's name well enough to dream about him. She'd have to remember to tell Virgil. He'd get a kick out of that.

Etienne DeGuarre took a step toward her in the claustrophobic cabin and shut the door behind him. In a low voice, and with a steadily-thickening accent, he said, "We had a discussion on the subject of you wandering about abovedecks, *non?*"

"I have no idea," Audra replied cheerfully.

This was obviously not the answer the pirate was expecting. "What?"

"Guess I wasn't paying attention," Audra shrugged.

DeGuarre's brows lowered, darkening his whole face by slow degrees. "Well then," he said through gritted teeth. "I can see I shall have to voice my requests in a manner which makes a greater impression upon you."

His hand clamped down over her wrist without warning and in a blur of motion, they exchanged places. Now he was seated and she was standing, but only for the second it took for him to settle into position. Before Audra could even try to pull free, Etienne gave a sharp tug and brought her tumbling down over his knee. Her skirts fell up over her

head, and the unfamiliar weight of their many layers of fabric came down like a cudgel, effectively pinning her to the floor. She felt a breeze (how did such a close-walled cabin come by a breeze anyway; this was a very strange dream) and realized that underwear had apparently not been invented yet. She was completely bare to this man.

And all of a sudden, she realized exactly what that meant.

"No, wait a minute!" she cried, but that was as far as she got.

The pirate's huge work-weathered hand cracked down over her bare bottom, the sound of it like an explosion in the tiny room. Audra, who had already been drawing in breath for a good scream at the indignity of her position, was too shocked by the intensity and reality of the pain to actually make any noise at first, but she recovered when the second spank flattened her other cheek and let out a piercing tea-kettle shriek.

It had been nearly eight years since she had felt anything so vivid in the lower half of her body, and even though this was a sensation she definitely did not want to feel, it was as though every nerve in her whole body was locked into the spanking, savoring it, drawing it out and letting it sink into every pore for her to experience again and again. And it was only getting worse because DeGuarre wasn't stopping.

It was sickeningly, staggeringly unfair that her treacherous body could remember so precisely how to feel pain, but couldn't remember how to kick away from it. Audra's struggles--the weak twitch of one leg, the stuttering shimmy of her hip--were not combated so much as utterly ignored, but they did earn her extra paddling as well as the admonition to "Hold still, *ma desole fille*, you know better than this!"

She didn't know better, she didn't know better at all, but she did know when to give up. Her body surrendered to him, falling limp against his lap, and

she slapped her hands over her face and broke into tears. As if this were the cue DeGuarre had been waiting for, he added the force of a lecture to the physical effects of his punishing hand.

"And now, *ma professeur*, now I give you a lesson, and see to it that you learn it well!" DeGuarre pulled her up from over his lap and bent her over the table instead, his arm like iron around her waist as he applied his hard palm to places he had apparently not been able to effectively reach from his previous position--the underswell of her cheeks, the inner slope of her thighs, the tender crease between her buttocks.

Audra could not scream, could not struggle. She could only press her hands harder into her weeping eyes and sob as the spanking scorched on.

"When you take your health abovedecks, you do *not* leave the foredeck, you do *not* get in the way of my crew, you do *not* go near the rigging, and you do *not* address the men!" On every 'not', DeGuarre's hand returned the very center of her bottom and swung with extra force, sending her slamming up against the table and forcing a miserable wail of pain from her lips. "And most importantly, *ma cher professeur*, you do not!" CRACK! "Push!" SMACK! "Master Ottah!" WHACK! "Down the stairs!" CRACK-CRACK-CRACK! "When he orders you back to my cabin!" He must have swung from the tips of his toes, because the last SMACK lifted her completely off the floor and pushed her partway onto the table. DeGuarre pulled her back onto her heels, adjusted the lie of her disheveled skirts, and let his hand rest heavy on the blistered, throbbing swells of her well-spanked bottom. "Now," he said, almost pleasantly. "Have we reached an understanding?"

"Yes!" Audra bawled.

"Are you certain?" he pressed, and gave her a single swat, by no means as hard as his previous blows, and yet it awakened such a sting of hornets that she screamed every bit as loud. "Don't be

hasty," he was saying. "Really think about it. I would not want this lesson to slip your mind again. If it did. I should have to become harsh with you."

"Yes!" she cried again, the word broken into gibberish by the force of her sobs.

He must have understood her anyway, because he lifted her off the table and set her on her feet. "*Bien*," he said, and then trapped her again. This time, it was not over his knee, but against his chest, enfolded securely in the prison of his arms. "Why do you do such things, *ma folle*?" she heard him sigh. "Don't you know that I could not live if I allowed you to do injury to yourself with these games? You take advantage of my lenient nature."

Audra sniffed, unable to think past the pain to a suitable answer. She couldn't keep from rubbing at herself. The layers of skirt, soft as petals against her hands, scoured the throbbing flesh of her bottom without mercy. She felt as though she were being eaten alive by fire ants down there, and he was talking about his lenient nature! What she wouldn't give to be able to turn into the Griffin for just five seconds! She'd show him a lenient nature! She'd show him lenient natures all the way through the damn wall!

But then...if that was really how she felt...why on earth was she snuggling up to him now? Even in a dream, that didn't make sense. She looked up at him, and saw his eyes shut and his features pinched as if with pain. Any thought of going Griffin on him dissipated, replaced by a faint swell of regret for causing his unhappiness. "I'll be good," she promised.

"Will you?" He opened his eyes, the very corners crinkling with amusement.

"Well." Audra felt herself frowning. "At least, I'll be better. You'll just have to take what you can get."

The un-wisdom of those words didn't exactly escape her, but DeGuarre only laughed. And then he put her at arm's length, his hands still tight on

her shoulders, and shook her. "The ship's docking," he said.

"What?"

He shook her again, rattling her whole body, and then puffed into smoke and blew away.

"What?" Audra thrashed sleepily into a half-upright position, her eyes stinging from sunlight and, even more disorientating, her bottom stinging from that dream-spanking. "What?"

"I said, the ship's docking. Pull yourself together." The Griffin gave her another good shake to grow on and then strolled away to lean out over the starboard rails.

Audra slapped sleepily at her hair and her eyes, still trying to sit up straight, and then looked down and realized her legs weren't moving at all. Like lumps of meat, they lay there, somewhat splayed, utterly unresponsive. Her face flamed with embarrassment, and she searched the deck for any watching eyes, but no one was around except the Griffin, and she wasn't watching.

Audra glared at her limp lower half, and her left foot twitched once before the whole useless appendage rose and swung out over the chair. She pushed herself around and sat up straight, using her hands to move her knees into position to take her weight. She could feel the slow pitching of the boat moving in the water, a kind of lurching rise and fall that seemed to emanate from her stomach. Needless to say, she had spent the first day of transport hanging over the rails while Griffin braced her from behind and held her hair. After that, she had found a very nice Submissive with extra Dramamine.

Walking really wasn't as horrible as she had feared. As long as she was looking at the deck, she didn't have any trouble at all. If she took her eyes off herself for a second, however, her stupid feet tried to step out into empty air while the yawning

deck dropped away, and the only way to handle that was to try and fall sideways into Jenna instead of flat on her face on the deck.

She'd wanted to bring her canes, but in the end, had decided that it wouldn't be characteristic of a Submissive to show up with a set of heavy wooden canes. Of course, this was before she'd shown up at the docks for boarding the Tesoro Pet and seen simply dozens of perky Submissives milling around with hundreds of canes, paddles and God-knew what-all in tow.

But apart from that, it had been a pretty pleasant voyage. The ship was very appropriate in a private-joke kind of way: A wooden, tall-masted pirate-y sort of ship, with plenty of amenities for those accustomed to cruise liners. Audra stayed in the cabin she shared with Jenna as much as she could stand to, and when she couldn't take it anymore, she would venture out to the deck and sit and watch the ocean go by. Meals were plentiful and delicious, and the crew was cheerful and not overtly perverted. They all wore uniforms with the word Tesoro on the collar, but Audra couldn't tell if that meant they were working for the island resort or just wearing the logo while they made this run.

Thinking of the crew made her look for them, but the deck was uncharacteristically empty. "Where is everyone?" Audra asked.

"Am I speaking Cantonese? I said, the ship's docking." The Griffin shot a look of feral irritation behind her. "They're all off helping people get ready to disembark. Are you awake or what?"

"I'm awake." And now that her legs knew it, she was able to straighten them out and stand up. She took a few careful steps and joined the Griffin at the rails. "Is that the island?" she asked, running her eyes over the jagged outlines of tropical trees and sun-bright buildings.

"No," the Griffin said sourly. "We were hijacked by rogue paleontologists while you were sleeping, and they took us to Jurassic Park. We're about to

be sacrificed to a spinosaurus, just like I always knew I would be."

Audra risked a sideways glance to judge the Griffin's mood, found it distinctly dark, and silently weighed the merits of continuing this conversation before plunging ahead. "Something eating you? Besides the spinosaurus, I mean."

"No." Jenna bowed her head and considered her hands folded atop the railing. At last, she said, "Somewhere in between playing shuffleboard and sipping my third pina colada, it occurred to me that at this time tomorrow, odds are extremely good I am going to be getting a spanking, that I'll be expected to stand still for it, not lip off about it, and not be looking at Virgil when I turn around. I agreed to this thing with my eyes open, but now that I'm here and looking this island in the face...I just don't know how well I'll be able to concentrate on pirate treasure when I am being hit."

The last four words were delivered with a curiously crisp enunciation. Audra suddenly found herself thinking about her dream, about how it felt to be so vulnerable over that man's lap, and all the fury and intensity of being paddled. Not punched in the face or otherwise smacked around, with all the horrific emotion that went with that kind of treatment, but spanked...like a errant child. She said, very tentatively, very much aware that a dream-spanking was not in the same league as the real thing, "It won't be that bad."

"I'll still be getting hit."

"Yeah, but it's just a fantasy, isn't it? His as much as yours. You can always say no, step back, find a little middle ground."

"I don't know how. I've never had to compromise before." Jenna raised her head and gave Audra a crooked smile. "That's the scariest thing about all this, for me. For the first time since I can remember, I'm going to be around people who do not know me from Adam. No one on Isla Tesoro has ever heard of the Griffin. No one is going to be

afraid of me. I don't...I don't know how to feel about that."

From a distance, Audra heard a cheer as, presumably, the ship's gangplank was lowered and the Submissives of the Tesoro Pet were greeted. When she looked in that direction, she saw one of the ship's crewmen hovering at a discreet distance. He saw that he had caught her attention and mouthed 'Five minutes', then flashed her an O.K. sign and retreated from the deck. Audra turned back to Jenna, but she was still looking out to the horizon.

"I'd be excited," Audra said firmly. "You should think of it as an opportunity. A chance to be a whole new person."

"What if I'm not good at it." It was not a question. The words 'what if' were purely ornamental.

"Well, then you go home in three weeks and never have to see any of these people again. But what if--" And here Audra allowed a little sharpness into her tone, enough to get a narrow glare out of Jenna. "--What if you have a great time and make lots of friends and are able to put spankings in the same mental category as a game of Red Hands you play with your ass, at least long enough to sneak around looking for treasure chests? What if you find out that you actually *do* play well with others and everyone likes you and wishes they could be your friend? What if you get over yourself for three whole weeks and stop letting the person you were in high school anchor your whole emotional make-up?"

Jenna leaned back in a sudden swoop, planting one hand on the rails with a loud slap and using the other to catch Audra by the neck of her tee and pull her up onto her tiptoes. Audra was eye to eye with the Griffin now, but at least the Griffin was grinning. "Do you know how lucky you are that I really can put aside high school once in a while?" she asked

cheerfully. "Because if I couldn't, you would be in serious danger of a whoop-ass."

"I think the time of the whoop-ass has come anyway," Audra said seriously, and pointed a thumb back over her shoulder in the general direction of the gangplank on the opposite side of the ship. "We need to get going. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Jenna lowered Audra carefully back onto her feet and waited until Audra had taken an experimental step before releasing her steadying grip on the neck of Audra's tee. "Thanks for putting my head on straight, though. Once in a while, I need that. Once in a very *long* while," she added, with a narrowing of her golden eyes. "So don't be thinking you can just saddle up and ride my ass every day."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Audra took Jenna's arm. "Let's go."

They went to the cabin they had shared during the trip, only to find a crewman there, waiting for them. Audra sat on the bed while the Griffin speedily packed their loose possessions, and the crewman then took their luggage and whisked it away, leaving the two of them to make their way to the gangplank alone.

There were three women waiting on the dock when Audra and the Griffin reached it, one on the left, one on the right, and one exactly in the middle. All three wore pretty little tunics the color of the clear, tropical sky. The one in the middle, an island beauty with coffee brown skin and dozens of hip-length black braids, was facing the gangplank, so that Audra could see the way the top of the tunic very modestly covered her from waist to throat (where she wore what looked for all the world like a dog collar, complete with silver tag), and how the skirt part was scarcely long enough to cover her pubis.

The other two were not facing the gangplank. Indeed, they were folded up like a pair of pocketknives, their hands locked around their own

ankles, allowing Audra to see that the tunics were completely backless down to the belted waist. The act of bending had pulled their short skirts up, exposing their round bottoms fully to view. Both of them were honey-tanned by life on the island, but their upturned bottoms were red as Tudor roses.

Audra felt flames crawling in her cheeks. She looked away helplessly, but her gaze was pulled back in spite of herself. So red! So utterly, evenly, brilliantly red!

In a desperate attempt to prove that she was not staring at the bottoms, Audra deliberately pinned her wide-eyed gaze on the third woman's serenely-smiling face, and as soon as she did, the woman opened her arms as though offering an embrace. "Welcome to Isla Tesoro!" she said, and her voice was rich and warm as cocoa. "You may call me Calico."

"Hi, I'm Aud--"

"Please!" Calico swiftly held up one silencing hand, still smiling. "The resort operates on a strict code of anonymity. We've found it encourages openness among the clientele." Calico shrugged to show she appreciated the paradox, and then said, "Once you have signed in, no one among the staff will ever address you by your given name, and of course, our guests are strongly advised not to give out personal information of any kind to the other guests."

"So, what, we're expected to just 'Hey, you' each other for the next three weeks?" The Griffin was wearing her puzzled frown, so different from all the other frowns that came more naturally to her.

Calico laughed. "No, no! You will, of course, adopt a pseudonym for the duration of your stay. This will be part of the sign-in procedure. But I am getting ahead of myself."

Calico clapped her hands twice and the other two women instantly released their ankles and stood up. In perfect unison, they turned, smiled, and came lightly over--one to Audra, and the other

to the Griffin. Audra felt herself being towed gently but insistently away from Griffin, and she turned, flustered, into an unexpected kiss on the lips.

"Oh!" said the happy little blonde holding Audra's arm. "That was supposed to be on your cheek!"

"That was inappropriate," Calico murmured with a smile.

"Please see that I am punished," the blonde chirped.

Calico dipped her eyes in what was almost a bow. "Certainly, Honeybee, I shall."

"Thank you!"

Audra could feel a sense of unreality creeping up on her.

"And now, if you please!" Calico returned her attention to the newcomers, the promise of punishment apparently concluding that conversation. She beckoned invitingly, her teeth very white against the flawless brown of her beautiful face. "Come with me! Tesoro awaits you!" She did bow then, almost completely in half, before heading away up the beach.

Audra and the Griffin exchanged a glance as their exuberant escorts each wrapped themselves around an arm and followed after.

Chapter Six

*** *Tea Rooms and Whipping Posts* ***

Calico and her little helpers, Honeybee and Flutter, escorted Audra and the Griffin up from the beach, around the tennis courts, and onto a quaint cut-stone path. Following this eventually led them to a broad V-shaped garden, which separated the long triple row of cozy-looking cabins from the round white-walled buildings that were clearly the resort's offices. The garden fit every romantic idea of "tropical paradise" that could ever have occurred to Audra--lush with flora at the peak of health, explosive with color, it needed only a few macaws and a hovering cloud of butterflies to achieve idealistic perfection.

When they came to the largest of the resort buildings, Calico stopped at the heavy double doors. "This is the Rotunda," she announced. "In a moment, you will go inside to register yourselves, but first, if you please, take a moment to mark your surroundings. Here--" She gestured with one arm to the left, graceful as a hula dancer. "--are the kitchens and staff services. Beyond them, in the Tower, you will find the Overseer's offices and personal quarters." Calico smiled, then turned and held out her arm again, presenting all the structures to the right as though they were prizes Audra had just won on a game show. "Here you will find the event rooms, the dining hall, the tea room, the slave quarters, the library, the computer room, the whipping post, the ballroom, the auction block, and the gift shop. You see how they are all connected? You cannot get lost, and in a day or two, you will know every door as though it hung in your own home."

Audra frowned, caught the Griffin's eye and mouthed, 'Whipping post?'

The Griffin, with the same wrinkle of alarm beetling her own brow, mouthed back, 'Tea room?'

"Now, I leave you," said Calico. She clapped her hands once, and the two young things who had escorted them here promptly released their guests and stepped back. "I hope to see you again very soon," Calico said. "Enjoy your stay on our island." And with that, the three of them sashayed away.

"A ballroom," the Griffin muttered, still looking gravely concerned. "Do they expect us to dance? I don't know how to dance."

"Did you completely miss the part where they said, 'slave quarters?'" Audra asked, exasperated.

The Griffin shot her a narrow look of warning. "Of course not, but then, I remembered where we were. Slave quarters, stocks, auction block, whipping post...all of these things are perfectly normal here. Tea room? That's what you should be worried about! All of these overpriced idiots are going to know how to take tea except you!"

Audra opened her mouth, thought about that, and shut it again. "I see your point," she said quietly. "We're never going to get away with this, are we?"

"Not if they expect us to come to tea. No, just forget I said that. Relax. We'll do fine." The Griffin squared her shoulders and faced the double doors. "Game face on, Audra. We're about to register."

The Griffin put one hand on each latch and pulled hard, whipping both doors widely open at once. If Audra had tried that, they would have been the kind of doors that opened by pushing, and all she would have succeeded in doing would be to dislocate both shoulders and fall on her butt.

The Griffin glanced back at her, holding both doors at their widest. "Are you coming or what?" she asked.

So Audra went.

Even though she hadn't really known what to expect when registering, the mundane view in the Rotunda's main lobby took her by surprise. There was a neat row of three desks, each of them faced with a neatly-lettered sign: A-G, H-P, Q-Z. Behind

each desk was a severe-looking man or woman in the Dominant's uniform, typing busily away at a computer. With very few exceptions, the guests waiting in line looked, to Audra's admittedly unpracticed eye, increasingly frantic. In fact, from this distance, it kind of looked like they were being forced to take some sort of pop quiz. After several tries, the guest would seem to stumble on the correct answer, and the Dom behind the desk would hand over a welcome package in the form of a plastic bag with little palm trees on it.

Audra joined the other H-through-Ps, fussing in her pocket for her wallet so that she could show her ID when that became necessary. Once she had that in her hand, she had nothing else to do but stand in line and wait for her turn, but watching the guest at the head of her queue grow more and more agitated unnerved her, and she finally plucked at the nearest Submissive holding a plastic bag and asked, "What's going on up there?"

"First time?" the Submissive asked with a smile, and without waiting for an answer, explained, "She's trying to come up with a name."

"A name?" Audra echoed stupidly, and wondered why on Earth no one had told her this before now. She could have spent the entire cruise working on that instead of watching Jenna play shuffleboard and getting sunburned. "Can't I just use my real name?"

"No, you can't," said about three people at once, and then the Submissive who had been talking went on, "No one gets to use their real name. That's kind of the point. And there are certain rules that have to be followed when selecting a pseudonym, like no silly names. No Babybrat, no Spanky, no Rosycheeks, no Smackers....nothing that sounds like you got it in a chat room. Second, it can't be a name that's actually just another name, like Sally or Mary or Bob. Third, unless you have a very good reason, you can't just translate a name someone

else is already using into another language, like using...oh hell, I don't know...."

"Tesoro instead of treasure," the Griffin volunteered, still without turning around.

"Is that what that means?" the Submissive asked, eyebrows rising. "I always thought it was just a gas station. Well, anyway, the last and most important rule is that all names have to be unique for this season. Which means you can't use any name that's already registered by any guest or staff-member, and as you can imagine, all the good ones are taken. Everyone comes here wanting to be Treasure or Trinket or Precious or Kitten...God save me from all the Kittens," she added, rolling her eyes, and then walked away.

Audra's mind went instantly blank. Try as she might, the only words she could dredge up from the recesses of her imagination were Treasure, Trinket, Precious and Kitten. Over and over and over.

She moved forward in line slowly but steadily, wracking her brains for a better name and coming up empty every time. On her right, the Griffin also advanced, her gaze hooded and distracted, occupying herself, no doubt, with one of the many silent puzzles employed by the mentally-gifted. Proving Fermat's Lost Theorem or something. The Griffin never got impatient in long lines. This was why they always had her buy the concert tickets. Also because she scared the bejeezus out of scalpers and got really good seats at cheap prices. And why was she thinking about the Griffin? She needed to come up with a name!

The Submissive in front of her suddenly moved off with his plastic bag, and Audra found herself staring a Desk-Dom in the face. She had a few seconds grace during which the Dom monkeyed around with her computer and Audra's photo ID, but it didn't help any. Treasure, Trinket, Precious, Kitten. In desperation, she turned again to the Griffin, silently pleading for input.

"Champagne," the Griffin said at once. "It enhances any celebration and it tickles the nose."

Before Audra could even turn back to her desk, the Submissives on either side of her had screamed, "Champagne!" and immediately began to bicker over who said it first.

"Bitches," Jenna remarked, utterly devoid of rancor. Then she leaned out of line, brushing Audra's hair away from her ear, and whispered, "Pearl."

"Don't call me a bitch!" snapped the flustered not-Champagne ahead of Jenna in line, and as Audra bent over to relay her whispered name to her Desk-Dom, she heard the Griffin's amused reply, "You're lucky I'm limiting myself to talk, lady. Eyes front."

The Desk-Dom exchanged a good-humored glance with the other Desk-Doms, and then all three smiled faintly in the Griffin's direction before resuming their typing. There was a second or two during which the computer hummed, and then Audra's Desk-Dom nodded and said, "Welcome to Tesoro, Pearl," and handed her a welcome package.

Audra stepped out of line and went to the Griffin's elbow, grinning. "Pearl, huh? Because it's a treasure from the sea?" She thought that was a very cute play on circumstance, even if she couldn't say so out loud.

"No." Jenna's voice was low, her expression difficult to read as she met Audra's gaze. "Because it's something precious, found within an unfeeling shell."

Audra could not think of a thing to say to that, but she didn't have to. The Q-Z Desk-Dom leaned out to where she could clearly see Jenna and said, "Get up here. You," she added, narrowing her eyes at the three Submissives ahead of Jenna who were just working themselves up to protest. "Hush it. So." The Desk-Dom ran her eyes expertly up and down the Griffin's lean frame, and then turned her palm up. "I haven't seen you before."

"Nope." The Griffin put her driver's license into the waiting hand.

"Ha." The Desk-Dom said nothing more until she'd finished entering whatever it was that needed to be entered. Then she passed the driver's license back and fixed the Griffin with a piercing grin. "Now. I expect a truly stellar name from you. We've had Pearls and Champagnes before, of course, but not many...and it's been a loooong time since I've seen someone rattle off two unclaimed names in a row this late in the season."

"Big deal. I could give you a dozen Submissive-sounding names," the Griffin shot back, apparently not able to hear a challenge when it was set unspoken before her. Or at least, not able to resist one.

"A dozen, eh?" The Desk-Dom's grin broadened to Grinch-like proportions and the other two Desk-Doms stopped typing entirely and turned around to watch. The Q-Z Dom stood up, unhooked a wicked-looking riding crop from her belt and slapped it down on the desk.

That got Jenna's attention.

Then the Desk-Dom reached into her back pocket, brought out a twenty-dollar bill, and set that down beside the crop. "A dozen names," she said. "Unmistakably Submissive-sounding."

The Griffin's eyes gleamed as they narrowed.

"Ten cuts with the crop for every name you give me that's already in our files. Twenty dollars for every name that isn't. You have sixty seconds. Go."

"Precocious. Pegasus. Calliope. Lyrical. Sugarsnap. Willowisp. Windflower. Ribbon. Savory. Peppercorn. Surrender. Aurora." The Griffin leaned over and eyed the Dom's watch. "I've still got a little time. Should I keep going?"

There was a smattering of applause from the registered guests and the other two Desk-Doms, while those Submissives still in line scrambled to claim at least one of the precious names. The

Griffin's adversary held her stare for a long while, still smiling, and finally sat down and began to search her files. With each name entered, she shook her head a little harder and smiled a little wider, and at the end, she opened up her wallet and started counting out bills.

"If I asked you to do it again, you probably could, couldn't you?" she said, not really making it a question. "However. If you want a real challenge, why don't you come up with something for yourself that's a little less generic, now that we all know what a whiz you are?"

Uncertainty settled into Jenna's features. "I...I do have a nickname," she admitted. "But it's not very submissive-sounding."

"Hey." The Desk-Dom opened her arms invitingly. "How dominant-sounding is Cypress?"

Jenna cocked her head. "Must be pretty dominant. The Romans thought the cypress had the power to encourage spiritual growth during moments of pain."

The Desk-Dom's mouth dropped open, her arms still wide; it only lasted a moment, but there it was, and everyone saw it. "Okay, I've got to know. What is it they call you? Encyclopedia?"

"No. The Griffin." Jenna looked mildly apologetic, which was more apologetic than Audra had ever seen her look before.

There was a short pause during which Cypress the Desk-Dom studied Jenna's face. "Suits you, actually." She typed it in, shrugged one shoulder, and then hit a few buttons and typed it in again. "Lemme just run it past the Master database. I know they get a Griffin now and then...nope, you're good to go." She fished through a box filled with welcome packages and brought out the one whose coded label apparently matched with Jenna, and held it out. "Orientation will be held in Event Room 1, just down the hall on your left. Enjoy the novelty, Griffin."

Audra and the Griffin had stepped away, but now turned back. The Griffin's face was cool and wary. "The novelty of what?"

The Desk-Dom met her suspicious gaze with a knowing smile. "Submission. Ta now. Ten cuts with a cat if you're late." She turned her attention on the next in line, adding, "God, I wish I'd thought to sign up for a Slave this season."

The Griffin didn't move immediately. Audra had to tug twice at her arm to get her going and even then, she walked backwards for a few paces before turning away.

Stepping through the doors of Event Room 1 was like stepping back in time. Suddenly, Audra was back in high school, reporting to the gymnasium for an assembly. Age was erased from the excited guests seated throughout the lecture hall; they huddled together in the same tight, giggling cliques that Audra could remember once belonging to (and then being shunned by) back when she was a teen. There were seven people on stage, seated behind a speaker's table, relaxed and chatting as they watched the auditorium fill up. Four wore the costume of a Dominant. The three Submissives were all women; all but one of the Dominants were men.

The Griffin gave Audra a not-so-subtle nudge to remind her she was blocking the doorway, and so Audra led the way to find a seat. Without thinking, she took them directly to the extreme lower-left corner that had been "theirs" all the way through high school. Judging from the faint smile on the Griffin's face as she sat, the moment of nostalgia was not one-sided.

Audra sat, arranged her legs, and began to fiddle uncomfortably with the handles on her welcome package. Every time the eye of one of those on the stage slid in their direction, she felt herself sit up a little straighter.

"I knew I should have brought a book." Beside her, the Griffin crossed her arms and leaned back,

settling in for a long wait. "First rule of travel. Always bring a damn book."

"Just sit there and have deep thoughts."

"How do I spank thee?" mused the Griffin, without the slightest hesitation. "O let me count the ways. I spank thee to the depth and breadth and height my hand can reach, and feeling without sight thy hind end and flaming ass."

Audra leaned back and stared at her.

Oblivious, or at least seeming to be, the Griffin went on: "I spank thee to the level of everyday's most quiet need, by switch and leather strap. I spank thee freely, as thou does strive for Right; I spank thee purely, as thou doth writhe in pain. I spank thee with the passion put to use in thy old grief, and with thy childhood's faith."

Audra wasn't the only one staring now. The Griffin's voice was low and rich and golden as honey, serene and even blissful as she made her recitation.

"I spank thee with a love I seemed to use to crimson up thy ass as with paint. I spank thee with all my breath, smiles and tears of all my life, and if God choose, I shall but spank thee better after death."

At least a dozen people applauded, and the Griffin's body jerked and she blinked around, only now noticing how many listeners she had attracted.

"That was beautiful!" a grey-haired Submissive said mistily. "Did you write that?"

"No! That is, I mangled it, but--" The Griffin was having some trouble collecting herself. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote it first. One of her sonnets. It...." She trailed off, looking flustered, and then faced resolutely front once more. "Should have brought a book."

It was a long wait after that, during which the Griffin did not speak, but at last, the door at the back of the auditorium opened to admit, not a guest, but one of the Desk-Doms, who flashed a

thumb's-up sign at the center stage before retreating again.

One of the Submissives at the table stood, bowed to the assembly, and adjusted her microphone and said, "Greetings. My name is Quiver and it is my happy duty to welcome all of you to Isla Tesoro! For those of you returning to our resort, please bear with us patiently through the orientation process. It won't take long, I promise, and we'll soon have you out there meeting your Masters and exploring the island. And if I'm wrong and we do go long, you'll be meeting your Masters and getting nicely toasted for tardiness, so it's a win-win situation." Quiver paused to allow the little laugh to run the room, and then got down to business. "Please open your welcome packages and locate your release forms and official Tesoro pen."

The sound of ninety plastic bags rustling was bat-like and somehow intimidating as Audra pulled out a handful of very professional-looking documents (as well as a pink, blue, and green ballpoint pen). She ran the practiced eye of a Technical Writer over the pages, translating the legal-ese into English, and what she saw before her was admirably ironclad.

"Page one, please," Quiver began cheerfully. "This is a very basic non-disclosure agreement that simply states you may not discuss your time here with any journalist or other media, up to and including internet reporters or anyone with a pulse, and that includes friends, family, and even other Tesoro guests. Also that you may not yourself write a book, article, or on-line journal entry describing your experiences. Naturally, short of implanting mind control chips in your skulls, this is difficult for us to enforce, however, I would like to delicately point out that it is not in the least difficult for us to track down the source of illicit video or photography, etcetera, etcetera in the outside world when we are properly motivated. Your signature states that you understand and agree to this

condition. Please sign and date, using your real name, please, and turn to page two."

The Griffin raised her hand, and Quiver sent a knowing smile in her direction.

"Yes? Blondie in the corner? I believe you were about to ask what happens if you don't sign?"

"Actually, I was going to ask for another pen. Mine won't write." The Griffin waited expertly for the laughter to fade and for Quiver to come down to her with a new pen and then said, "But that's a good point you make. What does happen, hypothetically?"

"If your forms are invalid, you leave. No refunds and no exceptions, so if you have any questions pertaining to this form, you'd better ask." Quiver returned to her seat. "Okay, page two. Medical release. Box A. This states that you undertook the required medical examination and were declared fit at the time you came to Tesoro. Just initial to show you understand and agree that Tesoro has a copy of those exams in our files. I know you had to do this already in your doctor's office, but just do it again for our records. Box B. In simple language, this states you are all aware that Tesoro is an island resort without full hospital facilities. We do have a staff of licensed physicians on call 24 hours a day--"

Here the four Dominants stood. One of them waved.

--Who are qualified to administer basic medical care. In the event of a medical emergency, you will be airlifted at the island's expense for treatment in Miami. Initial to show you understand that transport will take at least fifteen minutes and neither the resort nor its owners are liable in the event of complications arising from this delay. Box C only applies to those guests who are taking prescription medications at this time. You'll have to check them through Dr. Saxon, so initial Box C to show that you agree to see Dr. Saxon within 72 hours of arrival. Okay, all initialed? Good. Now

everyone, read the medical protocols listed on the bottom half of the page, because it covers the medical privacy act as well, and sign and date at the bottom."

The sound of ninety pens scratched on paper and the doctors sat.

"Page three," Quiver continued. "The sex clause."

Audra and the Griffin both looked up sharply.

Quiver leaned forward and folded her hands together so that she seemed to be embracing her microphone. She smiled. "I recommend you read the whole thing, of course, but in simple language, this states that Isla Tesoro is not providing a sexual service to any guest and that no guest of Isla Tesoro is required to submit sexual favors to any other guest. This includes, but is not limited to, blah blah blah, etcetera, etcetera, unlike our former President, I think we all know what sex is."

Nervous titters from the audience. Quiver's face softened and she gazed down at them reassuringly. "Now believe it or not, some of the people who come to Tesoro want to have sex and are going to have sex before they leave."

A smattering of "No!"s and "Imagine that!"s ran through the assembly.

Quiver laughed and nodded. "This is the reason for certain blood tests that I'm sure you all remember taking. However, it is important for all of you to understand that no Master on this island has purchased you along with his or her resort pass. In the bottom of your bags, you'll all find a self-adjusting ring. Looks a little like a mood ring, and we all remember those, right? Please bring it out."

Audra rummaged through her bag and sure enough, there was a ring with a large, flat-topped cabochon set deeply in a gold-colored setting.

"This is a panic button," Quiver said serenely. "You are strongly advised to wear it at all times. Shower with them. Sleep with them. *Never* take them off. Please put it on so that you can see the

stone with your palm turned up. With the ring in this position, you can depress it with one thumb even in handcuffs, mitts, or sleeves. You'll notice the stone is recessed to avoid accidental--"

"Miss Quiver?" A young man in the audience raised his hand nervously. "I just pressed my button."

Almost at the same time, a phone on the wall behind the speaker's table rang, and Quiver laughed and went to answer it. "Yes," she said into the handset. "False alarm, please reset. Okay!" She hung up and turned back to the audience, beaming. "That's all right, it happens every year, but at least it illustrates the alertness of our Security team and the speed of their response. Each individual ring is keyed to the individual owner of that bag, which means that our Security team knows it wasn't just any emergency, it was yours, and they can track an alert anywhere on this island. Security will always make an effort to first contact you at the nearest telephone, and if that doesn't work out, they will dispatch a team to find you within thirty seconds. Please initial Box A to show that you received a ring, and Box B to show that you understand its function."

Audra did so, then slipped the ring on, pinched it tight, and turned it palm-inward.

"Now please sign and date at the middle of the page to state that you understand that sex is not a service of Tesoro nor a requirement of your stay here as a Submissive guest. You will have to sign again at the bottom to state that you understand and agree that the staff, owners, and operators of Isla Tesoro are not liable in the event of any sexual misconduct, but before you do that, please read the promissory claim at the bottom of this page which states unequivocally our Zero Tolerance policy on sexual misconduct. I wish I could say that such incidents have never happened here. I can't. But I've been here now twelve years, since the very beginning, and I can swear to you that the Overseer

has personally seen to it that such offenses were pursued, prosecuted, and punished not just to the letter of the law, but to the victim's satisfaction. I can also honestly say that we've never had an incident since the introduction of the panic buttons, so at the risk of repeating myself, *never take them off!*" Quiver managed to give the impression of looking each of them in the eye before nodding. "Now sign please."

They all signed.

"Okay then, that's done, so if there are any questions...? No...? All righty, Eggshell will be coming around to collect your forms, so please dive into your bags again, where you will find a collar and tag, and a complimentary costume. Of course, none of you are required to wear the costume after today. The collar, on the other hand, is mandatory. You must wear it whenever you leave your cabin, and you will be reprimanded if a staff-member sees you without one. Take a moment to look them over. You may notice a color difference."

Audra held hers up beside the Griffin's and indeed, hers was gold while Jenna's was silver.

"I assure you, this is not an indication of the individual's worth, merely a handy way to tell you apart, because you see, you are all about to fall into one of two categories. You silvers are unassigned at the moment, and you are open to public displays of discipline by any other silver Master. Furthermore, your Master may loan you out to any other silver Master at his discretion or whim. Lucky you!" Quiver's own tag was silver.

The Griffin was beginning to frown.

"Golds, on the other hand, have been assigned a Master who you will be expected to serve devotedly and faithfully. No other Master, not even a staff member, may discipline you."

One of the doctors, the woman, spoke up dryly at that. "Although we can certainly keep him or her informed when you step out of line."

"You'll note that every Submissive staff member, or Staff-Sub, as we like to call ourselves, has a collar as well. And every Dominant, whether a guest or Staff-Dom, has a belt buckle. Your assignment to one or the other of these categories, and any pre-assignment to a particular Master, was determined by careful examination of your applications. We've got a terrific success rate, but if you're dissatisfied with your assignment, simply report to the administrator's offices for re-assignment. And by the way, you can have these tags engraved with your Tesoro name for only five dollars in the gift shop."

Quiver checked the time, then clapped her hands smartly. "Okay! If all you golds will come this way, you'll be escorted by either Eggshell, Panda, or myself to your cabin to meet your Masters. You silvers will go with Drs. Saxon, Sage, Bamboo, and Remedy to be auctioned off. Have a wonderful time, and I hope to see you around!"

The assembly began to break up as guests divided obediently into their two groups and went to stand with the corresponding staff members. Audra looked at the Griffin helplessly. "I guess this is it."

"Auctioned off." The Griffin was still frowning at her tag.

"Maybe you'll get Virgil." But it didn't seem likely at this point, so Audra had to grope blindly for something more comforting to say. "Maybe it won't be that bad."

The Griffin turned her unblinking gold stare on Audra for a few seconds, then swiftly strapped her collar around her neck, got up, and left.

Chapter Seven

*** *Meet the Masters* ***

Audra was taken to cabin 22, which had, according to Panda, the most spectacular view of the gardens. Just how the view of cabin 22 differed from the other cabins in the front row overlooking the gardens was not clear to Audra, but she accepted it on faith.

The cabin itself was nicer than most hotel rooms Audra had stayed in. The front door opened on a spacious sitting room with two overstuffed chairs facing a entertainment armoire, a wide sofa facing one of those fake fireplaces, a mini-office area, even a corner bar with two high barstools parked before it. Her Master had obviously moved himself in already. There was a broad wooden paddle lying across the sofa, a riding crop hanging on a hook beside the bar and, most disturbing of all, a saddle slung over the back of one of the overstuffed chairs.

Forget butterflies. There were full-grown dragons swooping around in Audra's stomach. What did he think he was going to do with that saddle?!

"I know you're anxious to get started, but let me just give you the quick tour," Panda said pleasantly, prancing across the room to demonstrate how a door worked. "This is the bedroom!"

Mirrored closet doors on either side of the room caught the two queen beds between them and made them infinite. Audra walked into the center of the room, watching a million reflected Audras do the same, then moved decisively to the right-hand closet and opened it, destroying the illusion and, to her surprise, revealing her own luggage. Orientation hadn't been that long. It had taken the airplane twice as long just to chuck it down the baggage carousel as it had taken Tesoro's staff to carry it to her cabin from the ship.

"Everything there?" asked Panda, and when Audra nodded, she turned and showed Audra to the bathroom.

Those dragons kicked it up a notch as Audra's eye fell on the massive chrome-and-polymer contraption perched over the luxurious Jacuzzi tub. It looked...a little like a harness....

"All right then, I'll let you get changed and gussied up." Panda strolled back into the sitting room and picked up the phone. She pushed a few buttons, glanced at her watch, and said, "Cabin 22, the package is delivered." Hanging up, she gave Audra a beaming smile and added, "Ten minutes! Too exciting! See you around!"

Then she was gone, and Audra was left standing there, next to the saddle, holding her plastic welcome bag in both hands.

Ten minutes. Get changed.

Audra peeked into her bag apprehensively and after several long seconds, admitted to herself that the very small bundle of shiny white fabric and floss was indeed her costume. Feeling horribly self-conscious in spite of the fact that she was alone, she laid the dainty little outfit over the top of the saddle and began to strip. She wondered if she should keep her panties on. The costume was slinky, but the simple cut and whiteness of it gave it a look that was almost virginal. Audra's panties, on the other hand, were black silk with flames licking up the front and the words "Hot Stuff" in scarlet on the back. They had looked suitably sexy in the store when she'd bought them, but now they seemed inappropriate.

She went to paw through her luggage for another pair, rubbing nervously at her stomach to quiet those dragons. There was supposed to be laundry service on the island, so she'd only brought ten pairs of panties for the three-week stay. At the time, she'd thought that was plenty. Unfortunately, she'd bought them with the Griffin's recommendations in mind. Three little black

thongs, three little red ones, one pink lace, one metallic silver bikini cut, one with "Princess" written in pink on the bottom and a little crown in a delicate position on the front, and one boy-brief style with pink, yellow, and blue stripes because she thought it had a tropical-island look. None of them went with the virginal-slave-girl contraption they expected her to wear when meeting her Master.

She supposed she could just go bare. That would make a heck of an impression. The costume was the exact same design as the one worn by the Staff-Subs, which meant that most of Audra's behind would be hanging out in the breeze as it was.

Well, maybe the silver ones weren't so bad. The store had carried the same style in metallic gold. If she'd gotten them, it would have matched her collar.

Her collar! Audra went swiftly back out into the sitting room where her welcome package had been discarded, fished out her collar and put it on. A little snug. Maybe it was supposed to be. Certainly it wasn't so tight she couldn't breathe or eat. And it looked good, she decided, taking a detour into the bathroom to find a mirror. Cute white collar to match her white Submissive costume.

And still no panties. Audra returned to her closet, poring fussily over each pair of panties one at a time. She thought the silver one might really be her best choice, but it would look so incredibly garish next to that pristine white. The "Princess" one was mostly white. If only it wasn't for the stupid letters and the crown. Maybe thong was really the way to go, but should she wear black or red? Neither would really match, but one of them had to look better than the other.

Audra headed back into the sitting room to fetch the costume, thinking she would try on a few different pairs of panties and pick that way. She only got halfway across the room before the door opened.

'Oh drat,' she thought faintly, watching the man that entered drop his jaw roughly to the level of his belt buckle. 'Well, at least I made an impression.'

"Hi," she said. "I'm Pearl." She collected her regular clothes from the sofa where she'd left them and started to put them back on.

"Ah, howdy, Pearl. You, uh...." The man laughed and shook his head hard. "You kinda threw me for a loop there. You can call me Cowboy." He took a few steps, and stretched out his hand to her.

Audra shook obediently. 'Cowboy' had extremely soft hands and a not-very convincing accent.

"You're not...?" Cowboy frowned as he watched her step into her jeans and pull them up. "You're getting dressed? In those?" He gave her neglected little virgin's costume a wistful glance.

Audra paused, her shirt in her hands, and thought. 'You don't have to wear the costume after today,' was how that little speech in orientation had gone, which implied that she may actually have to wear it now. And that if she didn't, there might be a spanking in it for her. Even knowing that it wouldn't hurt, Audra wasn't too keen to receive that first punishment.

"I couldn't decide on a pair of panties to go with it," she explained finally. "Why don't you go pick me out a pair, uh, Master, and then we'll go."

Cowboy had perked up at the thought of rifling through her underwear, but stopped at the end of her sentence and looked back at her, one eyebrow raised. "Go where?"

"I've got a friend in the slave auction, and I really want to be there when she's sold. You know, make sure she..." 'Doesn't kill anyone,' was on the tip of her tongue, but Audra squelched it with an effort and substituted, "gets a good one." She hunted for some submissive behavior, and put on a wheedling expression. "Please?"

Cowboy wasn't exactly a raging ball of enthusiasm, but he shrugged and went on into the

bedroom. By the time Audra had her jeans back off and was navigating the slender string-straps that criss-crossed the back of her costume, Cowboy was back. With the silver panties, she saw. "I was kinda hoping we could settle in," he was saying. "See where our boundaries are." His eyes trailed toward the saddle.

"We can do all kinds of settling after I see my friend auctioned," Audra announced, stepping into her panties. "But you should know now that my personal boundaries stop well short of you ever using that thing on or near me, barring a truly phenomenal night of heavy drinking." She tugged her skirt as low as it would go, scowling, and wished she'd done more aerobics before she'd left on this fool vacation. At least she'd gotten a wax.

Cowboy looked disappointed for a second or two. "Well, who knows?" he said finally, without a lot of optimism. "Maybe you'll change your mind once you get to know me. You might like it if you tried it."

"Unless we're talking about spinach here, the answer is still no."

"Hang on a sec." Cowboy caught her arm, looking quizzical rather than accusatory. "Are you smartin' off to me because you want to earn a spanking later on?"

Audra blinked, and made a mental note to sound more submissive. But for now: "Yes," she said, and gave him what she hoped was a shy smile. "Is it working?"

"Well, heck yeah! You got some nice sass in ya, girl!" Cowboy grinned and unexpectedly gave her a slap to the ass.

It was the sound--crisp and clear as a pistol-shot--that made her jump. She felt only a faint tingling sensation, but she rubbed at herself to reward him. "I can see you're going to have some good times keeping me reined in," she said, with a half-hearted stab at humor.

Cowboy beamed and slung an arm around her shoulders. "This is going to work out fine," he said, making what Audra would later consider the world's worst psychic prediction of all time. "Let's go see your friend get sold."

Audra's second trip across the gardens to the main buildings had an even greater unreal-paradise feel to it, because now there were Master and Slave couples strolling the grounds as well. All the Submissives were wearing their little white costumes and most of the Masters were in some sort of themed getup. The only dressy things the Cowboy was wearing were his boots and hat. Looking out over the gardens at grown men dressed up as Romans, gypsies, Pharaohs and wizards, Audra felt intensely lucky.

The slave auctions were held, conveniently enough, in the Event room adjoining the slave pits. It was not as big a room as the one that had hosted the orientation, but it had the same stadium-style seating and center stage on which most of the lights were trained. There was a middle-aged redhead on stage now, in shackles, her chains held by a Staff-Dom on either side of her, while a third Staff-Dom used a long switch to point out her obvious charms to an audience of interested bidders.

"Sundae is a nine-season veteran of Tesoro, my fellow Masters. She knows how to play the game. And just look at that fine, full ass! Turn around, Sundae."

Blushing, but clearly excited, the redhead turned and even flipped up the back of her short skirt to show a voluptuous bottom with two cheeks sporting circles of pink nearly the same color as her nervously-smiling face.

"Ho ho!" crowed the auctioneer, using his switch to catch the hem of the skirt and push it back up before it could curtain the woman's marks. "Has our little strawberry Sundae been playing grown-up games on the ship? You greedy little thing! You bend right over!"

Cowboy and Audra found a bare patch of wall to stand against where they would not block the door as the auctioneer gave Sundae a short count of hissing strokes with his switch. Sundae jumped and yelped a little with each one, but she was clearly enjoying herself, as were all the on-lookers in the audience.

"You know, I don't think she's the least little bit repentant," the auctioneer remarked. "So now someone is going to have to take this naughty little Sundae home and see to her before she melts all over. Who will start the bid? A measly thousand dollars for this delicious little treat!"

"Are they using real money?" Audra asked, astonished.

Cowboy gave her the sort of look that Audra might expect if she'd asked if the bidders were breathing real oxygen. "'Course they are. What'd you think they'd be using, seashells and beads?"

It was a quiet auction. Little nods and raised hands were enough to keep the number climbing and in less than a minute, blushing Sundae was sold for the sum of a round five thousand to a gentleman by the name of Brace. The Staff-Doms holding her shackles transferred her chains into her new Master's hands and then left the stage, returning in short order with a diminutive Asian beauty.

"Ladies and gentleman, a treasure from the Orient," the auctioneer began after bending to hear a whisper from one of the new girl's keepers. "I give you Tattletale! Returned to us for the third time after a three-year absence! Shall we show her how much she was missed?"

Cowboy leaned over to whisper in Audra's ear, "What's your friend look like?"

"Blonde, fairly tall." Audra thought about it. "If you see someone step out who looks like she'd ought to be the centerfold in Playboy, that's probably her. Gosh, I hope she hasn't already been sold."

The door opened just as Tattletale's bidding began, and Audra heard a blessedly familiar, "Excuse me, could I just--*uff!*" and an equally familiar thud as Virgil tripped on the first stair and landed in the lap of a severe-looking matron in leather. His voice, wounded, floated earnestly up from between her stiletto boots: "You have very nice shoes."

Audra ducked out from under Cowboy's arm and helped pull Virgil to his feet before they could distract too many people from the bidding. He thanked her distractedly, brushed himself off, then executed a flawless double-take, broke out in a sunny smile, and scooped her up in a bear hug. "Hey!" he whispered happily. "Who are you?"

"Pearl. You?"

"Claymore."

"How'd you manage that?" Audra asked, envious.

"I filibustered them with the argument that it was also a sword. Plus, I had to drop one of the o's, so you have to call me Claymore instead of Claymoore," he said seriously, and then his eyes darted past her to the stage. "Oh, thank God, there she is!"

Audra hadn't noticed Tattletale being sold, but brought out in chains to replace her was the Griffin. She heard Cowboy utter a low, appreciative whistle, and not a few people in the audience shifted as the Griffin reached center stage and turned an expression of badly-banked fire out on all of them.

"Well now," purred the auctioneer. "We have a virgin here, folks."

The Griffin snorted. "Not unless you've got a time machine, sport," she said, and the Staff-Dom holding her right shackle snickered.

"Never been to Tesoro before," continued the auctioneer, unfazed. He let the tip of his switch tap against her knee, trail up to her hip, then light away and flick at the tips of her golden hair. "Fresh-faced. Unbroken. I confess, I am tempted to keep

her for myself. But no, my duty is clear, and so ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Griffin."

"Did you bring any money?" Virgil whispered, fingering madly through his wallet. "I only have eight thousand and some change."

It was Audra's turn for a double take. "Yeah," she whispered back. "I brought fifty bucks for one dinner out and some postcards, but it's yours if you need it."

"So that's your friend?" Cowboy watched with interest as the Griffin was prodded forward at the end of the switch. "Let's see those hocks!" he called.

Audra and Virgil both started, staring at him first and then with dismay up at the stage where the Griffin's handlers were turning her. The switch flicked at her shoulders and Jenna bent, rigid but obedient. The short skirt of the costume she wore rode up to her waist, displaying her full buttocks to the admiration of the audience. That funny hook-and-moon mark stood out white and shiny against her tanned flesh.

"I would like to examine the goods," a man declared, rising from his seat. For one of the Masters, he was very moderately dressed--white shirt and dress slacks, polished shoes and a nice tie--and he carried a long wooden paddle, slapping it casually against one palm as he strolled down to the stage.

"And you are, sir?"

"They call me Professor." The man leapt easily onstage and turned his paddle so that the watching audience could read the word Detention where it was burned into the back of the thing. "And I am very good at examinations." He smiled at the Griffin. "Of course, they're all pass-fail."

Jenna was turned again so that she could face her prospective buyer. She looked him square in the eye and did not flinch although he tried to stare her down. When intimidation failed, Professor paced a wide circle around her, letting his gaze trail

at his leisure down the lean length of her body and back up again.

"So tell me," Professor said. "Are you Britain's griffin, a mindless beast drawn to gold? Or are you Carroll's griffin, a creature of ancient wisdoms?"

Jenna raised her chin slightly, her expression stony. "I am my own griffin," she said.

He laughed indulgently. "Not for long."

Audra looked around and saw a broad smile on Cowboy's face. Perhaps sensing her attention, Cowboy murmured, "Boy, she's got a shocker comin', don't she?"

"If she can be taught," Professor drawled, running his thumb along the line of Jenna's clenched jaw, "then I suppose I could take her off your hands. Naturally, I would like to pose a short test."

"Naturally." The auctioneer folded his arms over his podium and looked on agreeably as Professor circled Jenna once more.

"Let's see. We'll make it an easy one, shall we? First question." Professor stopped when he came to a point just behind and to one side of her, and raised his paddle to swing. "How long," he asked lazily. "Was the Hundred Years War?"

There was laughter from the on-lookers, but the Griffin never even hesitated. She turned her head to fix Professor with a steely eye and said, "One hundred sixteen years."

The laughter cut off. "How long?" someone asked, and someone else said, "No kidding!"

Professor's smile turned sideways. For a second, he didn't move at all. Then he swung.

The paddle cracked, deafeningly loud, and the Griffin's eye's flashed wide as her hips jerked spastically forward.

Both Audra's hands slapped over her mouth and beside her, she felt Virgil jump and heard his strangled-sounding, "Oh my God!"

The Griffin would have spun on her assailant if her handlers hadn't been holding her chains tight.

As it was, she could only whip her head around and glare, her hands curled into claws and her fangs showing.

"Face front," Professor said evenly. "You happen to be correct, but posture is like penmanship, my dear. It counts. And in the future, address me as sir."

Slowly, as if it took the efforts of well-muscled men at a stone gear, Jenna turned her head and faced the front of the room. Her eyes were still wide with outraged shock and disbelief.

"Second question," Professor continued, once more raising the paddle. "What do you have when you have a bilateral periorbital hematoma?"

A sound escaped Jenna, one that would have been a laugh had she not been so angry. "A black eye," she said.

That looked crossed Professor's face again--surprised and meanly disappointed. Once more, he swung.

BANG!

Jenna roared, her head thrown back and her hands locked into fists at her side. Her chest heaved as she took several breaths through gritted teeth.

"I didn't hear a sir," Professor murmured.

"You are not yet my Master," Jenna snarled, eyes fixed furiously on the far wall.

"We'll see. Final question." Professor raised the paddle. "Who was the ninth president of the United States?"

Jenna hesitated, blinking rapidly, but only for a few seconds. "William Harrison."

Professor cocked his head. "William Harrison, what?"

A phone on the auctioneer's podium, unnoticed until this moment, trilled out.

"William Harrison, ninth President of the United States!" Jenna countered defiantly. "Hail to the frickin' chief!"

The auctioneer reached out and caught the flat edge of the paddle before Professor could swing. Still with the handset of the phone to his ear, he said, "The Overseer says you may not strike if her answer is correct."

"I'm not punishing her ignorance," Professor argued, his eyes never leaving the back of Jenna's head. "Only her insolence."

The auctioneer did not release his grip on the paddle. He listened for a second or two, then said, "The Overseer reminds you that you are not yet her Master."

Professor's face did something strange, quivering as he fought not to scowl openly. Then he lowered the paddle and forced a smile. "Not yet, then," he said. "Open the bidding."

The mood in the auditorium was a heavy one, but the auctioneer made a game effort, indicating Jenna's flushed and grim face with a broad gesture and a smile. "Shall we open at a thousand? A mere one thousand for the rare privilege of this clever little treasure? Who will bid a thousand for the Griffin?"

Virgil's hand shot in the air, but he was hardly alone and so the bidding began. Professor remained on the stage, his hand caressing the flat blade of his paddle and his eyes resting, burning, on the back of the Griffin's head. He did not speak, letting the auctioneer keep the tally of Jenna's price until it hit its zenith with Virgil's offer of six thousand dollars.

"Going once?"

"Seven thousand," said Professor.

"Will you bid more, my young Master? Seven thousand one hundred, yes?"

Virgil was nodding and waving frantically, but Professor merely raised his voice and said, "Eight thousand."

Virgil looked again into his wallet, lips moving. With a distinctly nervous expression, he waved for more.

"Ten thousand," said Professor, before the auctioneer could even speak.

Virgil looked at his wallet, looked at Audra, looked at the stage.

It seemed to Audra that the auctioneer hesitated somewhat longer than he had for the other slaves, scanning the crowd for any more offers, but at last, his hammer came down and the Griffin was sold.

Professor's hand dropped over Jenna's shoulder at once. "Now you call me sir," he said. "Cabin 63," he added to her handlers, and stepped off the stage to make his payment.

Chapter Eight

*** *Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Vacation!* ***

They left the Rotunda and came back into the gardens, which were every bit as beautiful as they were before, but with the memory of Jenna fresh in mind, it was a pale and ghastly beauty. Audra's hands kept moving to rub at her belly; it was as though she had tried to swallow Jenna's humiliation and now it churned inside of her. She reached out to pet a brilliant tropical flower and then turned listlessly to seek Virgil's gaze.

He looked as though a bomb had gone off in front of him. His eyes were huge, glassy, and staring. "I can't believe he hit her," he said. His hands were rubbing at his belly, too. "I just can't believe that. Did you hear the *sound* it made?"

Cowboy stuck his head out into the open air, looking irritated, and Audra realized only then that they had somehow given him the slip. She waved sheepishly, and he jogged over to join them.

"Sorry about that," she said, and stepped lightly under his arm to ward off anger.

Cowboy grudgingly allowed himself to be placated, but started towing her resolutely in the direction of the cabins, so Audra hurried up and said a goodbye to Virgil.

"Yeah, I'd better get going, too," Virgil said glumly. "My Pet is still waiting to meet me."

"You left her in your cabin without even saying anything?" Audra asked, and Cowboy turned all the way around and gave Virgil a look rich with disapproval. "Come on, Claymore, she probably got all gussied up and everything!"

"What were you doing at the auctions in the first place?" Cowboy asked. He was still frowning. "You already had a girl waiting for you!"

"I didn't want a girl!" Virgil retorted angrily.

Cowboy's face underwent that 'oh' look.

"I wanted the Griffin!" Virgil finished, oblivious. He turned around and stomped off, kicking at the pebbles unfortunate enough to cross his path.

Cowboy looked after him for a long time. At last, he glanced down at Audra. "Another friend of yours?" he inquired, looking cautious.

Audra nodded wearily.

"Ya'll sure picked up some strange friends on the way over." Cowboy resumed his cabin-ward pull and this time, Audra went along with it. "But I really liked that little blonde gal. Feisty. Ol' Prof's gonna have a fun time taking her pegs down."

"Friend of yours?" Audra asked.

"Professor? Naw. Never met him. Never seen him, come to think of it." Cowboy consulted his memory banks as they walked the rest of the way to cabin 22. He unlocked the door, still deep in thought. "I been coming here eight years now, so it's pretty safe to say he's either new or fresh in from some other season. I hear the winter months are more hardcore. Yeah, I'll bet that's it," he said with growing confidence. "He seemed a little too familiar with the place not to know what it's all about. He's just a little more S/M than the rest of us, is all. Lucky your friend was into that."

"Into that?" Audra echoed.

"S'funny." Cowboy started rolling up his right sleeve, head tipped thoughtfully to one side. "I'd've sworn a spit-oath that gal never had the paddle before. Her tastes run more to OTK or straps or what? Personally, I like a gal that's already in the right mood, you know?" He shot her a conspirator's glance and a grin to show he plainly felt she was that gal. "But I can definitely see the appeal in a filly that needs to be broken."

"Can you? And you think that was what that jerk was doing by running that stupid test by her and then spanking her when she got the answers right?"

"Aw." Cowboy shrugged, beginning to look uncomfortable. "She was having a good time."

"You think?!" Audra was absolutely astounded by this off-the-cuff assessment.

"Course she was!" Now defensive, Cowboy's voice was sharp. "She's here, ain't she?"

Audra couldn't answer that.

"Now I think it's time I did some breaking in on my own little filly." Cowboy went to the bar, picked up one of the high wooden stools and the riding crop that hung on the wall beside it, and turned around with a severe expression. He plunked the stool down on the carpet before her and gave it a tap with the crop when she only looked at it. "Bend over."

The Griffin's predicament went completely out of her head. Audra looked at the barstool and fidgeted.

Cowboy offered her half a smile. "First one's always a little awkward," he said, not unkindly. "But it's best to get it down clinical-like instead of blundering our way through one we mean."

That actually made sense. Although not exactly quiet in her mind, Audra found she couldn't argue with his reasoning. Gingerly, she eased herself up and over and took hold of the rungs on the other side.

The wooden seat was cool, hard, slightly concave. Placing herself in the proper position--her tummy filling the shallow dip in the seat, her hips flush against the rounded edge--meant lifting herself on tiptoes. 'I am going to get spanked,' she thought, and felt a swooping rush of vertigo throughout her whole body.

"How do you feel about panties?" asked Cowboy.

From nowhere, came the confident thought, 'I feel they are essential to the proletariat plans for the working poor!' Through numb lips, Audra said, "How do you feel about them?"

"I like 'em down." Cowboy's hand patted her right buttock in a cozy, familiar fashion. "I like to see what I'm doing, you know?"

"Okay. Should I...?" Audra shifted and half-reached around, but he was already there, briskly rolling her panties down to her ankles. She could see them through the rungs. All that time and trepidation spent on wondering what color to wear, and there they were. 'I am bare-assed to my Master,' she thought.

"Ya'll are gonna want a safeword," Cowboy announced sagely. "I like to use 'baseball' myself."

"Suits me," she said. Her voice was a doll-like imitation of her own. 'I am going to get spanked,' she thought again.

"You mind starting with a switch? I find it's easier to work up a good head if you can start with something that don't hurt as much, but if you'd rather have a hand-spanking, we can do that."

How very solicitous. Audra squeezed her eyes shut, feeling absurdly guilty for her lack of enthusiasm in the face of Cowboy's earnest consideration. "The crop is fine," she said, and since it seemed like she should say more, added, "Have fun."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, with great feeling. "Remember, 'baseball' if it gets too much."

There was a pause no longer than a heartbeat, and then Audra heard a whistle-and-snap. 'That was me,' she thought. She had felt nothing.

Inexplicably, her first emotion was disappointment.

Cowboy didn't seem surprised by her lack of response; the crop continued to rain down lightly over her hind end. She could hear the whisper of the whippy end gradually becoming shriller and louder as he swung with increasing force. The slap and pop of impact began to sound less like a small child clapping hands for the first time and soon the noise alone was making her jump a little. Every third or fourth strike would spur on some bizarre correlation of sensation--an icy tingle, an itch, and twice, a deep bite of pain followed by a lingering bee-sting burn that might well be the true feel of

the crop. She had yelped both times, and it seemed to Audra that her cries had put a little extra vigor into Cowboy's steady arm, but despite a little wriggling around on her part, the crop never landed where she could really feel it again.

"You're doing really well," Cowboy grunted, returning the crop to the hook by the bar. "'Bout the best-trained little girl I've come across in eight years."

He came back to her, his hand rubbed over her bottom, and she could feel it--now soft, now scouring, now freezing, now nothing at all. "Warming up nice on your end?" he asked hopefully.

Audra groped for something to say that was neither weak nor sarcastic. "All over my end," she said finally, reasoning that humor was always appreciated. "Can I feel?"

"Sure."

Audra reached back, her fingers going unerringly to the two places she still felt the slow crawl of heat and pain. There were little raised patches all over her bottom, hot to the touch, patches that felt slicker than her other, unbruised skin. Weird. It was like reading a replay of her time under the crop by Braille.

"Can we take this into the bedroom?" she asked suddenly. "I want to see."

"Yes, ma'am." Their roles reversed; now she was the Master, and he went obediently before her to hold the door open. He was eager, excited even, but he did not touch her as she passed.

Audra shut her closet door, the act almost one of ritual as the mirror swung around and created infinity again in the center of the room. She went to one bed, knelt, and half-lay across the foot of it, staring into the mirror. Beyond her reflection's left shoulder, she could see her own bottom, framed in yet another mirror. It was still pretty pale, although mottled with pink and red blooms in the places the crop had struck well.

She was eerily reminded of physical therapy sessions back in the clinic, of having to look into their mirrored walls to see how to move her legs when she walked. Audra felt dizzy, closed her eyes, and opened them again already staring at her reflection.

Cowboy appeared (in tandem with a million other miniature Cowboys in mirror-land), holding the riding crop, and Audra raised herself, shaking her head.

"Don't use that again," she said, and Cowboy paused. "Use something else. I want to see more. I want to see it--" She groped inside herself for words. "--when you paint me."

"Yes, ma'am." He tossed the riding crop onto his bed and went into his closet, briefly killing infinity and replacing it with their own two insignificant reflections. Then he turned around, a leather belt dangling from one hand, and swept the mirror back into place behind him. He and all his other Cowboys came around behind her, wrapping the buckle ends of all their belts around their palms.

WHAP!

Audra's hips bumped hard against the mattress as her body instinctively sought escape from the deluge of scrambled sensations that now lay in a pink stripe across her bottom. She could feel patches of heat, cold, tickling pleasure and scouring pain, all of them tiny little pockets of 'something' in a wide band of numb.

WHAP! WHAP! WHAP!

Each stripe overlapped another just a little, and after the fourth was laid down, her whole bottom was glowing red. Cowboy looked at her in the mirror, one eyebrow raised, the belt swinging idly from his fist.

"Keep going," she said. She could feel pain in a dozen different places, and it seemed to kindle coals of heat in other places. The itching, the cold, the tickles--all these phantoms she could ignore. The pain was real. How many years had it been since

she had felt something so real, *seen* it happen right in front of her? Cowboy laid down another three stripes, then nudged her further into the bed and delivered one more to the underswell of her buttocks where she couldn't see. But she could feel it...some of it....

"Keep going," she said again. Her hands were digging in the bedspread. Her eyes were fixed on the mirror, unblinking.

Cowboy strapped her again, re-coating her bottom, which had begun to pale to pink with blows from the belt until she blazed out scarlet once again.

"Keep going."

He was breathing harder, his own eyes glassy, as he laid a set of stripes down her thighs almost to her knees. The sound was rhythmic, like playing cards in the spokes of a bicycle, but explosive, like firecrackers. Firecrackers in the spokes of a bicycle. Just pop-pop-pop and there were three more lines, blister-bright and throbbing in so many secret places.

"Keep going."

Cowboy dropped the belt, went out to the sitting room and came back with the paddle. She heard it split the air as he swung--dull and low, almost groaning--and then it cracked into her hard enough to knock the breath out of her body, igniting a dozen razor-sharp echoes of excruciating pain in the place where it hit.

"Faster."

"You can touch yourself if you want," Cowboy said hoarsely.

Audra shook her head, frustrated by his refusal to begin. "Faster! All over! Keep going!"

The signals traveling through her stupid spine were getting more and more confused. Everything itched now, everything tickled and froze and crawled and burned, but the pain was sharpest and now it was everywhere and Audra could pretend she was feeling exactly what anyone would be feeling.

She closed her eyes, letting her head sink until she was nestled on the bedspread, her breaths coming slow and even, almost seeming to doze even as her body was shaken and thrown with the steady force of Cowboy's paddle. For a moment, the pain and the heat radiating through her seemed almost as if it would encompass her whole being.

And then, overload. As though an invisible switch were thrown, Audra's lower half went completely numb all at once.

She lay there for a little while, listening to Cowboy's paddle continue its work, feeling herself jostled and pushed from behind, but it wasn't the same. She opened her eyes, allowing herself to lose time as she watched the wooden instrument whale away on some alien ass, knocking it past red and into purple as she looked on with indifference.

She had no idea how long it took Cowboy to wear out. First he started to slow, and finally, he staggered back and sat down on his own bed, gazing at her with awe and giving his head little disbelieving shakes.

Audra reached back to feel. It was like touching a stovetop burner. Her bottom had been tenderized so severely it no longer felt like skin at all, but more like hot plastic. She met Cowboy's eyes in the mirror. "Help me stand up?"

She could not have managed without him. It had been years since she had been so completely dead to sensation. She wondered vaguely if she'd done some horrible, irreparable damage to herself and decided she probably didn't care. All or nothing was okay; half a person was no good to anyone.

"You were wonderful," Cowboy said, forgetting his accent. He tried to kiss her, but Audra turned her head, and he ended up with a mouthful of ear instead. He let go of her awkwardly and stepped well back, proving that the Master's orientation had, at some point, included a definitive explanation of Tesoro's sex clause as well. "Wonderful," he said again.

In the back of her mind, Audra heard the Griffin's voice hiss, 'Game face on, dammit!' and she forced a smile and said, "Thanks, so were you." She even rubbed at her bottom a little to prove it.

They looked at each other from opposite beds.

"I'm going to go look around," Audra said finally. And when it looked like he might volunteer to come along, she added, "Maybe see if I can find my friends."

"Oh. Sure, okay." Cowboy's eyes wandered around the bedroom. He looked flushed. "Guess I'll unpack. Or something. See you later."

"Yeah. Later."

Audra left, scooping up her panties on the way out.

*

The island was all but deserted. The only people Audra saw as she wandered were wearing the sky-blue color of the resort's staff, and it seemed to Audra that they all paused to stare at her, faintly puzzled, as though wondering why she alone was not getting in some quality time with her new Master.

Audra circled the long, wedge-shaped garden, her bare feet padding light as a cat's on its cut-stone path. There was a line of sun-bleached stones as the garden's northern border, standing in a line so straight they could only have been arranged by human hand. She tapped them as she passed each one, like a child at Musical Chairs. They ran from east to west, smallest to highest, and when she reached the end, she stepped into the shadow of the tallest stone and leaned against it.

It was a friendly sort of stone. While she shared its shade, she became aware of dim sensation returning. Her body was slow to reboot. As the minutes crawled by and she stood alone in the garden, she felt nothing but a weak tingling all over her lower half. Gradually, that sensation began to

break into smaller patches of non-coordinating feelings.

So she was going to be okay after all. Or, if not okay, at least back to her particular brand of normal.

Audra slid around to the sunny side of the stone and basked in tropical daylight for a little while, knowing she'd ought to get out of the garden before someone reprimanded her. Of course, as a gold-tag, the staff wouldn't be able to do anything personally, but they'd pass on suggestions to Cowboy, and Audra didn't feel like pushing her luck with another spanking so soon.

She ran her eyes lazily over what there was to look at, and stopped when she saw the tennis courts in the distance.

Virgil's map drifted through her mind. From what she could remember, the proverbial X had been just south and west of the tennis courts. She wondered if there was a marker of some sort. A skull and crossbones carved on a tree, maybe. It didn't even have to be that obvious, just any old thing that a girl could find if, say, she knew what she was looking for.

Audra walked on over, taking it slow and casual. She passed no one, although she could hear a distant, muffled commotion--rhythmic slapping, laughter, sharp cries--coming from one of the rooms off the Rotunda. Tesoro was really rubbing off on her; her first thought on hearing it was, 'Sounds like someone's having a good time'. She even felt an odd inclination to poke her head in and watch for a while. She couldn't imagine why, and not knowing put her in a prickly mood, so it was just as well that no one else was moving about.

On the other side of the tennis courts, in roughly the same place she remembered the X being was the start of a winding asphalt loop that Tesoro called a 'Nature Walk'. Audra took it, stopping at each informative plaque to read about the various species of plant-life she was experiencing, and to

peer through the dense foliage at the spectacular view of the sea.

Between her sedate pace and frequent stops for view-admiring, the trail ate up a sizeable chunk of time. When Audra arrived back at the starting point, she was no longer alone. A rosy-bottomed blonde in a Submissive's white mini-dress was leaning on the Nature Walk sign, looking out to sea.

'My first friend,' thought Audra, steeling herself. She started walking over, and was actually within arm's reach of the woman when she saw the uneven white mark on the woman's left buttock and realized she was looking at the back end of the Griffin.

A startled "Oh!" escaped her, and the Griffin glanced around.

"Hey." Jenna looked distracted, her voice was listless. "Looking for treasure?"

"Just walking around. Killing time." Audra's eyes were taking several swift slips in the direction of Jenna's reddened backside. "You...got another spanking."

"Half of one." Jenna resumed gazing out at the sea. "He gave me fifteen whacks with that paddle of his, and then he had the goddamn audacity to tell me I couldn't cum until he told me to. As if," Jenna added, rolling her eyes. "But did it piss me off when he told me I couldn't? Hell yes it did. So I came. Hard."

Audra's eyes fluttered. "Excuse me?"

"I took some tantric classes a few summers ago. If you're going to do it, might as well do it right." Jenna shrugged. "Anyway, the Prof flipped out completely. Told me to put my nose in the corner and not to move until he came back, and then he stormed out to the gift shop. I think he means to get me a chastity belt."

Audra managed not to say anything for five whole seconds. Then, hesitantly, she asked, "Won't he just spank you harder when he comes back and finds you gone?"

"Probably." Jenna bared her teeth briefly, as though the impending punishment were something that could be killed with a swift bite to the throat. "The way I figure it, it might as well be a humdinger. That way, the cops'll be more understanding when I snap and kill the guy."

Audra, alarmed, did not reply.

"Here you are!" Virgil's voice, tight with relief, preceded the slap of his flip-flops on the tennis court and then a full-bore crash as he tripped and fell into a stubby little palm bush. A Scabby Boba, said the helpful plaque beside it. Known the world over for its sticky offal-scented sap.

"I was hoping I'd find you h--ugh! What's *on* me?!" Virgil reared onto his knees, slapping at his shirt and succeeding only in smearing it over a wider area.

Jenna came over, grabbed hold, and yanked the shirt completely off with an ease that made Audra wonder, in light of that tantric classes comment, how much practice she'd had. "Rub sand on your hands," she ordered. "That'll take it off."

"Yeah, thanks." Virgil rubbed vigorously, then leapt to his feet. "I figured you guys might be here, but this isn't the time to start looking around."

"No one's here," Audra pointed out.

"No, but everybody's new!" Virgil insisted. "Everybody's all jittery and unpredictable! We can't risk it. We need to go back to my place and study the map!"

Jenna frowned. "You sure we want to do that with your girl underfoot?"

"Oh, I sent Snickers to the whipping post," Virgil said dismissively. "She'll be there for, like, an hour. Come on."

Neither Jenna nor Audra moved.

"That's not very nice," Audra said uneasily. "It's her first day."

"Oh, like I know what to do?"

"Boy," growled the Griffin, her brows knitting dangerously together, "you had some practice!"

"Not enough! For God's sake, look at Audra! I'm supposed to do that with, like, fifteen minutes spank-ass on my dance card?"

Audra clapped both hands to her hind end, trying in vain to preserve...what, exactly? Her modesty? Hardly. She'd met Cowboy stone naked. Yet, this gesture felt oddly protective, and not understanding it put a sting in her voice as she snapped, "You don't have to do this, you just have to do *something*!"

The sharpness of her tone must have been considerable. Virgil looked hurt, and the Griffin turned all the way around to stare at her.

"I'm just saying," Audra mumbled, flushing. "That's what everyone thinks we're here for."

After a long moment, Jenna nodded. "We have plenty of time," she said, and stepped back to include both of them at once in her crisp, commanding way. "And you're right, Virge--"

"Claymore."

"Whatever. You're right. People are going to be edgy today, so now is not a good time to go treasure-hunting in the island's only Nature Walk. But Audra's right, too. We aren't going back to look at your map. We've all seen it anyway, and more importantly, you have got to spend some time with your girl."

"But--"

"We are undercover here," the Griffin said, shaping and cutting off each word clearly. "And you aren't playing along. Sooner or later, that's going to attract all the wrong kinds of attention. Go to the whipping post. Stand over her in the stocks. Be her judge or something. Pick out the proper implements and come up with the number of whacks for each offense."

"What offenses?" Virgil demanded, not without a note of desperation. "What am I supposed to accuse her of? I just met her!"

"Dude, it does not matter," the Griffin said patiently. "Hesitation, if she didn't go

enthusiastically to the stocks. Greediness, if she did. Disobedience, if she can't keep her own count. Unruliness, if she cries out too loud. Lewdness, if she gets turned on. It does *not* matter, the point is, you are there, you are taking part, and you are being her Master!"

Virgil sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. He nodded.

"On a related note," Jenna grumbled. "I need to be getting back to my Master."

"Me, too," Audra admitted.

They stood in a loose circle, heads down, hands almost touching. Anyone looking on might have thought they were holding a prayer circle.

Finally, Jenna said, "And lose the flip-flops. Rich people don't wear flip-flops."

"I'm rich," he protested, wounded.

"Rich people with taste," the Griffin amended, "do not wear flip-flops."

When he'd kicked them off and stood mutinously holding them in his hand, he announced, "We meet back here at six a.m. sharp. Everyone else will still be asleep, because they're all going to stay up tonight being nervous with each other. I'll reserve a boat for the morning, we'll re-discover the treasure around noon and all be out of here by Monday."

"Not a moment too soon," Jenna grunted.

Audra said nothing, and like her bottom-grabbing gesture of a minute's before, her silence felt strangely...protective.

Chapter Nine

*** *Digging for DeGuarre* ***

Six a.m. The traveler-size alarm clock hummed. Audra, always a light sleeper, rolled over at once and slapped it to silence.

She was not quite quick enough. In the next bed, Cowboy groaned and shoved himself into a sitting position, blinking sleepily around with eyes that clearly did not remember his surroundings. "Wha' timezit?" he mumbled.

"Only six." Audra maneuvered herself out over the edge of the mattress and made her feet jiggle a few times before trusting them to take her weight. Her left kneecap felt ice-cold, her right buttock tickled, and a phantom hand was rubbing the letter 'B' over and over on the inside of her right thigh. Honestly, she didn't think she'd mind her condition quite so much if only all the sensations would get along!

Cowboy was looking at her with a fuzzy frown. She could pinpoint the exact second that his memory kicked in. His next words had the feigned western twang of which he was so proud. "Y'all goin' somewhere?" he wondered, reaching for a shirt.

"My morning jog," she replied. "Five miles, rain or shine."

Cowboy made a face and flopped back down. "Enjoy," he told her, pulling his sheet up to his ears. And as she opened the bedroom door to leave, he rolled half-way over again and said, "Come back here when you're done and we'll go to breakfast together."

"Kay." Audra slipped out and shut the door. He was snoring again before she had the straps of her Tesoro-brand slave tunic sorted out.

She reflected on the weird combination of intimacy and indifference they displayed toward each other as she dressed. She found herself

wondering if this was what marriage must be like. The thought depressed her.

The sun was already up and too warm, but no one appeared to be out enjoying it except her. The lights were on in the main buildings, and what little movement there was on the island this morning was in there; the kitchens were firing up for breakfast, Staff-Subs were pushing rolling carts full of linens to and fro, Staff-Doms were clustered in little groups animatedly comparing PDAs with clipboards. And as Audra passed the garden--reaching out to tap each standing stone in what was already a comforting ritual --she looked up to the Tower and saw a man standing at the window.

Height was difficult to gauge from one floor down, and the man did not share his window with anything that could give Audra a clear idea of perspective, but she had the overwhelming impression of great size anyway. Perhaps it was just the blackness of him--his skin was the color of fine chocolate, his clothes were uniformly jet--against the well-lit whiteness of the room behind him. He was broad of chest, solid but firm around the middle, with a great bald head and very little neck. He looked like he'd been a damn good football player once, maybe ten years back. His hands were clasped comfortably before him on the head of a cane (massive, meaty hands that made the cane into a ridiculous child's toy), and he was looking right at her. His stance was serene, but his eyes, even at this distance, were intelligent and very much alert.

'The Overseer,' Audra thought. She waved, just a little.

The man at the window lifted his chin slightly. He did not return the gesture, but he did continue to watch her as she ran away toward the tennis courts.

Virgil and Jenna were already waiting at the start of the Nature Walk. Jenna was holding the square of porcelain that was DeGuarre's map. Virgil

had a duffel bag slung over one shoulder and was holding...well, what was he holding?

"It's a surveyor's sight," he explained when Audra asked, looking as though this should be perfectly obvious. "I took the tripod from my camera--"

"I thought cameras weren't allowed on Tesoro," Audra interrupted.

"They're not, but they only confiscate the camera part, and that's fine with me because I only wanted to keep the tripod. Anyway, I just made a spyglass out of these two paper towel tubes and tied them together and then marked sights on 'em with paper clips. They have levels and straight-edges and stuff in the paddle-making shop so I know I got them completely aligned."

"It's like going treasure-hunting with MacGyver," Jenna remarked. She was standing back and peering at Virgil with naked admiration.

"I'm impressed," Audra added when Virgil turned a hurt eye on the Griffin. "You came so prepared. You must have been a heck of a boy scout once."

"Hell, I bet he's still a boy scout."

"Don't be mean."

"Anyway!" Virgil said loudly. "I'm pretty sure that the X is lined up exactly with that formation out there--" He pointed through the trees to some rocks just off shore. "--And with that oak tree, cuz, you see, this little squiggle on the map looks like an oak leaf to me and it's the only squiggle of any kind on the map that isn't actually topographical, and that's the only oak tree on the island. Or at least, the only oak tree on this part of the island. I haven't completely surveyed the entire island. But come to think of it, that's gotta be the only oak tree because oak isn't exactly indigenous to the Caribbean, but then, even discounting DeGuarre's pirates, there's bound to be some anomalies because all these islands saw some heavy sailing traffic. But you know what I think? I think that oak

tree is the only one on this island because it was planted there as a clue for us to find! Well, not us, obviously, but DeGuarre at least. The important thing is, it's a clue."

"How long have you been up, Virgil?" Audra asked.

"Since three." Virgil blinked at her, owlishly confused.

"And how many cups of coffee have you had?" Jenna asked dryly.

Virgil turned all the way around to blink at her. "I dunno. More than a few. Why?"

"No reason. Okay!" Jenna rubbed her hands briskly together. "Let's dig this puppy up! I feel like getting rich!"

Virgil unzipped his duffel bag and dumped its contents out on the ground: a couple of garden trowels and claws, a two-quart size plastic bucket with a starfish on the side, and three pairs of leather work gloves.

"You really do think of everything," Audra said, shaking her head with admiration, but Virgil was already marching off the path and into nature with his eye glued to a paper towel tube.

"In the bottom of his closet," Jenna said in an undertone, "there's a cardboard box for a microwave filled to the brim with merit badges. I've seen it."

"Are you guys coming, or what?" Virgil called.

The surveyor's sight may have been homemade, but that was no reason to believe it wasn't accurate, and Virgil certainly had every confidence in his ability to use it. It only took him twenty minutes of fussy adjustments to declare that "Right here," was where to dig. They were maybe twelve feet off the trail, which meant that they were adequately screened from view, provided no one was actually close enough to hear the very obvious sounds of excavation. The three of them set to with their little gardening tools, and in a very short time, they had cleared away the precious plant-life and topsoil.

The sand and rock beneath were far easier to move; in no time at all, Jenna was hip-deep in the hole, while Virgil, kneeling, was invisible.

Audra, self-proclaimed Keeper of the Duffel (and un-official Lookout), remained seated at ground level, leaning as comfortably as one can against a palm tree. "How deep do you suppose they buried it?" she asked.

"Six feet is probably typical," Virgil replied without hesitation.

"How do you figure that, champ?" Jenna scooped out another pail-ful of sand, passed it to Audra to be dumped, and then added, "Six feet is only typical for corpses."

"Right."

Jenna paused and regarded her friend with good-humored incredulity. "What do you mean, 'right'?"

"I mean," Virgil explained, with all the patient elucidation of the sleep-deprived and over-caffinated, "they probably buried it six feet deep because it's a *pirate* chest, you know? As in, yo ho ho, sixteen men on a dead man's chest? Yoo-hoo, Griffin, those sixteen dudes are *corpses*?!?"

"That would make a hole ninety-six feet deep," Jenna countered, without batting an eye. "Pirates do not operate in factors of concurrence."

"Jenna," Audra sighed.

Virgil looked uncertain, thinking hard. "Maybe they were laid out side by side," he said.

"Then it'd be a hole thirty-two feet wide," Jenna said at once. "In which case, why provide us with such a topographically-exact map if they're going to bury their treasure in the bottom of a crater?"

"Don't mess with his head," Audra chided. "You know he's had too much coffee."

"I can handle lots more coffee than this!" Virgil declared, scowling at his would-be benefactor. "You guys always treat me like a kid! I can drink more coffee than either of you! I can drink more coffee than God!"

"Tough talk, God's been de-caf ever since the Old Testament," Jenna said sagely.

"He has?" Virgil blinked around at her again. "Well, then how do you explain Paul's epistle to the Galatians?"

"That was an apostle's epistle," Jenna reasoned. "Not God's."

Chunk.

All three of them stopped what they were doing and leaned over to look into the hole, at the precise point where Virgil's trowel impaled the sand.

"Is that a rock?" Audra asked finally.

"It didn't sound like a rock," Jenna said.

"It didn't feel like one, either." Virgil began to scrape carefully around the trowel with his hands.

What he uncovered, what he brought out and set on the lips of the hole for all three to stare at, was indeed a chest.

It was a chest about ten by sixteen by four inches to be precise, and although the heavy thunk of something inside it would indicate it was not empty, it was obviously not laden with Spanish gold either. It was difficult to know what to say. When all was said and done, Audra didn't think she'd really expected to find anything, and certainly not on the first try. But they had found something...just not the right something.

After a minute or two of silent staring had passed, Jenna hunkered down and dug a little more, a bewildered look on her face. Finding nothing, she stood up and joined the two of them in more staring, saying, "That can't be it, can it?"

Her question finally stirred some life out of Virgil, who asked, "Should we open it?"

"I hadn't really considered the possibility of finding something that wasn't treasure," Audra remarked. She didn't even feel upset. She thought that was very brave and good-sporting of her until she realized she didn't feel anything. Disappointment, like the paddle of the night before,

had overloaded her switches and numbed her whole body.

"Don't panic," Virgil said tersely. "Nobody said this meant there wasn't treasure." Gingerly, he picked up his trowel and chipped along the seam that indicated the two halves of the chest. It didn't take much to break the lock and rusted hinges, and then he pried the lid off.

There was a plate in the bottom. A perfectly ordinary round plate, yellowed with age but otherwise intact, of a size to compliment a teacup.

The Griffin swore, very softly and sincerely. Then she hunkered down in the bottom of the hole, pushing her hands into her hair, and swore again.

Virgil lifted the plate out with the very tips of his fingers, his face blatantly registering the hope that this might be some priceless relic, and turned it over. "There's writing on it," he announced.

The Griffin swore again.

"What does it say?" Audra asked timidly.

"It's a note," the Griffin snarled without looking up. "It says, 'Thanks for the treasure, suckers, long live King George'."

"I don't know," replied Virgil. "It's in French."

The Griffin, still without looking up, held out her hand, palm up.

Virgil eyed the hand suspiciously. "Are you going to break this?" he demanded.

The Griffin cocked her head just enough to shine one dangerous gold eye at him. "No, I'm not going to break it!" she snapped. "I happen to speak French."

"Oh." Virgil passed her the plate and watched anxiously as she frowned down at it. "What's it say?"

"I'm going to kill him," Jenna said in a low voice.

"That's what it says?" Virgil's eyebrows lifted.

"I can't kill him," the Griffin said to herself, looking off to one side in a contemplative manner. "He's already dead. Never mind. I'll find out where he's buried and dig him up and clone him. Then I'll

kill his clone. Virgil, take this damn thing back before I break it."

"What's it say?" Virgil asked again, louder than before.

The Griffin stood up and leaned against the back wall of the hole, folding her arms in what was an obvious effort to keep from lashing out with them and strangling someone. "They are directions," she said with exceptional clarity. "In the form of a riddle, leading us to the actual location of the treasure."

Silence reigned for the little time it took to absorb that.

"Oh, you're kidding!" Audra cried.

The Griffin exploded out of the hole, slammed her fists into the tree trunk on either side of Audra's face, leaned in very close and quietly said, "When I kid, you will know it because I will laughing like this: HA HA HA!"

Audra had known Jenna too long to be afraid of her. "All right, all right, calm down. You're going to break your hands punching trees like that."

Jenna backed up and looked, frowning, at her knuckles.

"So...these directions...?" Virgil had the plate mere inches from his face and was scouring the writing with his eyes, as though he meant to learn French by pure force of will. "Do they at least lead to someplace on this island?"

Jenna flexed her fist a few times, then held her hand out for the plate again. This time, she read it without the killing light shining in her eyes. "The Captain's...*dépouilles*...The Captain's spoils rest undisturbed. A...bride's price behind a bridal veil. The..." Jenna's eyes narrowed and her voice became hard. "The cyclops will stand guard until you come."

"The cyclops?" Virgil echoed.

"*Le géant à un œil*," Jenna said, thrusting the offending plate back into Virgil's keeping. "The

giant of one eye, the freakin' cyclops, yes! Seen any lately?"

"I haven't." Virgil rubbed his chin, by all appearances taking the question seriously. "But then, I haven't been all over yet."

"Don't patronize me, boy, coffee or no coffee, I'll--"

"You'll stand there and shut up for a few minutes," Virgil said calmly, his tone taking on a careful quarter-inch of steel. "I'll be the first to admit that your unique brand of mindless aggression kept my ass from getting kicked for years and I thank you, but right now it serves no purpose, so shelve it, Griffin."

The Griffin's face underwent the smoothing effects of surprise, and then she took a deep breath and nodded.

"Whoever wrote that," Virgil went on, "didn't mean there was a real cyclops running around. I mean, duh, I shouldn't even have to spell that out!" Here, he aimed a particularly pointed look at Jenna, who became intensely interested in cloud formations. "We just have to figure out the metaphor," he finished.

"A bridal veil," Audra mused. "You know, there's waterfalls on this island, I saw them in the brochure."

"Yeah!" Virgil brightened. "There's a bunch, actually, all kinda spouting out around a central artisan well west of here. There's, like, eight or ten falls, and they all look a lot like a bridal veil. All we have to do--"

"Is find a cyclops next to one of them," the Griffin interrupted sourly.

Virgil beamed. "Right!" He clambered out of the hole and began enthusiastically filling it in, still holding the plate against his chest with one hand. "Easiest thing in the world!"

"So the basic plan hasn't changed," Audra said, tossing the broken chest into the rapidly-shrinking pit. "Just our timeline."

"That could be a serious squeeze," Jenna announced. "Artisan wells are like glaciers. They creep. The particular 'bridal veil' this idiot is talking about may not even exist anymore."

"Pessimism is not a virtue, Griffin." Virgil stripped off his shirt and used it to tenderly cushion the little plate before he put it down. "I don't see any reason to start planning for failure."

"Boy scout."

"Hey, it takes a real man to earn the Eagle Charge." Virgil dropped back to his knees and began vigorously repacking the duffel bag. "You have to be a Star rank and a third-year camper and--"

"You have to be twelve, Virge." Jenna kicked a little sand into the hole. "Cyclops. This first mate of DeGuarre's must have thought he was one funny dude."

"I think," Virgil said tactfully, "that DeGuarre's first mate was exercising a little caution. After all, any idiot can read a map, but only a select few back then could read, and in French, no less. He was trying to protect DeGuarre's treasure from any unscrupulous fellow crewmen who may have seen him carve the map. The cyclops metaphor may have even been picked to throw a little scare into treasure-hunters."

"Oh, all right." Jenna handed Virgil the bundled plate to take the crowning position in the duffel bag. "I won't kill the guy's clone. But I'm still going to grow one and then punch him real hard."

"Fair enough."

The layer of topsoil was carefully smeared across sand and uprooted flora rearranged. What was left when they were through was a dimple in the tangled foliage, completely indistinguishable from the rest once the three of them were back on the path of the Nature Walk.

"I consider this a success," Virgil said firmly, shouldering his surveyor's sight and holding up the duffel bag as a trophy. "The important thing is, we

know we're on the right track and no one's been here before us. So from today on, we need to commit ourselves to exploring those waterfalls and finding that cyclops!"

"Check, chief." The Griffin tapped the heels of her sandals together and threw off a smart salute. "We'll just leave out a trail of roasted hobbits and the little tyke'll come a'running!"

"That's the spirit!"

Virgil took off for home, not running in deference to the fragile plate he carried, but taking such obscenely long steps that he was actually bobbing, like a heron in a wading pool.

Audra and Jenna watched him disappear around the bend, and then exchanged a matched set of glances.

"Damn it all." Jenna sighed and one hand strayed back to rub at her bottom. "I wish I was you."

Audra knew where the sentiment was coming from, but she laughed in surprise anyway. "I guess it's true what they say. There's really a first time for everything."

"I've wished I was you before." Jenna was still rubbing at her reddened ass, her voice low and tired, her eyes downcast.

Audra studied her friend carefully for sarcasm, found none, and said, "Why?"

Jenna's shoulders hitched once in a soundless single-breath of laughter. It was a wholly unamused sound. "Because you, my friend, are an instant success. You don't have to do anything in your life more complicated or more risky than get out of bed and put your own clothes on. You hobble around the street on your canes and people think you're a hero. You hobble around without them and people think you're a saint. You, and please don't think I'm being a bitch here because I'm honestly not, you were a royal pain in the ass before you got hurt."

Audra nodded, unoffended.

"But everyone forgot that the instant, I mean the *instant*, you broke your back. Everyone forgave you. Everyone."

Jenna said nothing for a long time, and when she finally turned and locked eyes with Audra, Audra no longer wanted to hear any of this. "No one ever forgave me," she said. "No one ever will."

"I was a brat," Audra said, trying to shrug. "You were a bully."

Jenna thought about this and slowly nodded, looking more tired than ever. "All but three of my baby teeth were punched out of my head before I was eight," she said.

Audra looked away. The ocean through the trees was beautiful. Bluer than anything she'd ever seen. Bluer than a crayon.

"Kids are cannibals," Jenna said, and came beside her to watch the sea dance. "They kick you 'till you fall. They eat you when you're down. I never wanted to be a bully."

Audra reached over impulsively and took Jenna's hand. After a long, slow moment of nothing, Jenna's fingers closed around hers.

"You know what I think about when Professor is spanking me?" Jenna asked. "That, deep down, I deserve it. He comes up with the strangest, most oblique reasons to take that paddle to me, and I have no choice but to bend over and take it, and that's more or less exactly what I did to practically everyone I knew when I was a kid. I deserve this. Maybe not for the same reasons that he thinks I deserve it, but I do."

Audra leaned her head against Jenna's shoulder.

"Which doesn't necessarily make me grateful," Jenna added.

"Ah well, we can't have everything."

Jenna sighed and slowly disengaged herself from Audra's contact. "I gotta get back. I was supposed to meet him at six-thirty and do calisthenics."

"I'm a little surprised he let you out at all."

"I told him I was going to get him a continental breakfast. That was, oh, nearly two hours ago." Jenna flashed a small smile and then headed off. She looked worn through at first, but in less time than it took to take ten steps, her gait was once again the soldier's stride of the Griffin.

Audra glanced at her watch. It was nearly seven. Time to head back and sneak a shower before Cowboy woke up all the way and her day belonged to him instead of her.

The Overseer, if that was really who he was, was still at the Tower window, and although he had been looking out over the far side of the island, he turned slightly to watch her as she passed around the garden.

Audra slowed to a more decorous pace, looking up at him. Then she waved.

This time, she saw him smile. He raised one enormous hand in return, and then he walked away.

Chapter Ten

*** *The Game of Musical Masters* ***

Audra was in the shower more than an hour, head bent, scrubbing at her fingernails. But long after all the telltale signs of excavation were removed from her, she remained under the spray, her head still down, still scrubbing. In her mind, the ghost of the Griffin remained: "I've wished I was you before," and, "Pearl...something precious found within an unfeeling shell," whispered over and over.

The bathroom was all fogged up when Audra at last emerged. She swiped mist from the long mirror over the sink and stared at herself.

There was a woman there, Seattle-pale, with a hint of sunburn on her arms and nose. Longish brown hair, made black and scraggly with water, but which would dry brown and straight after brushing, curtained a nondescript face. Eyes of no particular color peered wanly out from beneath dripping bangs. It was the face of a stranger, not alike enough even to be her sister. It exhausted her to meet her reflection's eyes; she looked down, instead.

She had small breasts--a cheerleader's breasts--made festive with freckles. Men didn't want small breasts. She had a dimple of a bellybutton, a freakish little outie. Men didn't like outies, either. She had very little waist, and thunderous, spreading hips. Men were never going to mistake her for a supermodel. She had more than that, of course, but the bottom edge of the mirror generously shielded her from having to examine what lay in the unfeeling southlands of her body.

'Pearl,' Audra thought. She rolled the word around in her mind, trying to taste it, to puzzle it out. She could see nothing precious in her reflection.

Audra dried off with a towel, put her hair in order and brushed it half-dry, and then, thinking of her sunburned reflection, masked herself with sunblock. For kicks, she dug through her little traveling bag of toiletries, and put on all the cosmetics she carried--a touch of mascara and a kiss of colorless lip gloss. Then she looked into the mirror again.

This time she saw Audra, but she still didn't see Pearl.

Audra backed up to the very edge of the tub and turned around. She lifted herself carefully onto her tiptoes, gripping the wall for balance, and craned her head to see the mirror behind her.

Her bottom was all blotchy. Deep purple in places, smudgy red in others, and banded pink across the tops of her thighs. There was no symmetry to it; she'd been painted with wonderful abandon. There were even blobs of linen white back there that actually looked as though they'd never been touched.

Audra lowered herself back to the safety of flat feet so she could release the wall and rub at herself. She'd always been at her best in the mornings, but she couldn't feel much beneath the cautious prodding of her fingers. There were places that hurt a little when she pressed on them, but there were places that tickled, too. There was no honest memory here, nothing she could trust. It was as though yesterday had been erased and her body was the inanimate photograph that had recorded the event of a spanking, and then forgotten it.

She closed her eyes, trying to remember what it had felt like to receive that paddling, to feel fire all through her. To feel what any other woman would. Just to feel.

The bathroom door opened and Cowboy shuffled two steps inside before noticing her. "Oops. Sorry."

But he didn't leave. He leaned up against the doorjamb, scratching his chest hair straight and watching her. "You look so pretty."

Audra glanced at the mirror through a reeling sense of vertigo. She couldn't see a pretty woman. She turned away and began to dress. Her collar went on first. Her Tesoro slave-tunic was too ripe to keep wearing. She left it on the bathroom floor.

"Want me to dress you?"

She wanted him to go away. "No," she said, fighting an unreasonable wave of irritation with little success. "I've actually been dressing myself just fine since I was six."

Cowboy followed her to the bedroom and leaned against the doorjamb. "Want me to shave you?"

By reflex, Audra bent and rubbed her leg, but it was still smooth as silk.

"No," Cowboy said, smiling crookedly. "I mean, you know, a shave." He nodded at her crotch.

Audra had been completely naked in front of this man twice now, and bare from the hips down once more than that, but this was the first time he'd made her embarrassed because of it. She could feel herself blushing and she turned away to hide her mortification, snatching up a handful of panties to cover herself. "No!" she snapped.

Cowboy seemed nonplussed by her reaction. "The thing is," he began slowly, as if this were an obvious point that only she could not see, "I think I'd like it better if ya'll trimmed up a little."

Audra's face flamed hot, then freezing cold, then furnace hot again as she struggled for something to say. Then her mind spun back and seized on that stupid fake accent of his, and that was the key that suddenly made everything too much. Her world washed out with rage.

"So what?!" she shot back, aware that she was yelling and not caring in the slightest. "Let me tell you something, Cowboy, I wouldn't give a wooden nickel to know what you'd prefer because I did not come to this island for *you*!"

Cowboy was all the way awake now and clearly he did not know whether to be angry back at her or merely confused by this outburst. "What are you getting so upset about?" he demanded. "I ain't asking you to cut off a toe! I'm just asking you to trim up a little!"

"Mister, you don't get to ask me to trim my damn nails, much less my pubic hair! And lose that stupid twangy talk! You're not fooling anyone, you just sound like you're spitting out IQ points!"

Cowboy's jaw dropped, then snapped shut only so he could open it again with, "What, are you on the friggin' rebound? What is this hot/cold crap you keep throwing at me?"

"When have I ever run hot for you?" she snapped.

"What about last night?" Now he was yelling, but still, it was more baffled frustration than anger that fueled him.

"What *about* last night?" she challenged, punching a fist onto her hip.

Cowboy seemed utterly thrown. He stepped back, blinking, trying to make his eyes sort through the conflicting truths of naked woman and naked hostility. Then he got it, and his whole body seemed to shrink. "We had something," he said, with a plaintiveness that almost made it a question.

"Yeah. We did. We had a spanking. That's what I came here for. Spankings. That's it. I could write it down for you if you don't think you can remember."

Cowboy rallied half-heartedly. "Well, call me crazy, but I like my spankings to have just a smidgeon of emotion!"

Audra set her jaw against him. "I don't."

She could have pulled a gun and shot him and got the same look on his face.

"And you can spank me as long and as hard as you like, but that's as personal as we are ever going to get," Audra continued, listening to herself twist the knife with a distant sense of horror. He was

down, he was defeated, and here she was, kicking the corpse just to watch it twitch. She understood the Griffin better in that moment than she ever had before and it made her want to throw up, but she still couldn't stop attacking. "You're not my boyfriend. You're not any kind of my friend. You're just the guy who spans me. That's it!"

Cowboy did nothing for a minute or two. He was looking at the carpet between her feet, and nothing about him moved except his chest rising and falling with breath.

"Yeah," he said finally. His voice was subdued, bewildered, but completely devoid of anger. "Yeah, that's it."

He turned around and left, closing the bedroom door quietly behind him and went into the shower.

Audra yanked her clothes on without looking to see what she was wearing. Her face still felt hot, her heart was still hammering, and now her stomach was churning, too. She didn't even try to fool herself into thinking she was storming out when she left.

In the shade of the tallest garden stone, Audra sat and moped. With her knees drawn up and her forehead resting on them, the curtain of her hair hid her away from the beauty of the island. She couldn't smell its fragrant breezes or see the perfect blue of the sky. She could still hear distant laughter and talk as the resort's guests began to wake up and move around, but here in the garden, she was comfortably locked away in her own little oubliette.

'This is the worst vacation I've ever been on,' she thought, which was not entirely true. She'd been to a Star Trek Convention with Virgil once for a whole week, and the Griffin had dragged the three of them off on a photo-taking tour of the ghost towns of Oregon state, which had turned up only two decrepit old buildings and about a billion

rattlesnakes--but this one was definitely in the running.

"Ahem?"

Audra raised her head and saw a Staff-Sub poised prettily on the garden path, holding a folded piece of sky-blue paper. "Sorry," she said with a sigh, and started to get up.

"No, no! You can be in the garden!" the Staff-Sub assured her.

Audra paused, half-risen, and glanced pointedly at the nearest Please Stay On Path sign.

The Staff-Sub, following her gaze, shrugged and said, "The Overseer says you have his permission."

Audra blinked, startled, then bent around the rock and looked up at the Tower window.

The black man was back. He stayed just long enough to make eye contact, and then stepped away and let a curtain close over the glass.

"But...." The Staff-Sub peeked at her folded blue note. "Only if you're Pearl, right?"

Audra nodded, wondering uneasily what this was about.

"You've been summoned to the office," the Staff-Sub said, and held the paper out to her.

Audra took it, opened it with numb fingers, and read. There was today's date, today's time, and a form letter with fill-in-the-blanks at appropriate intervals, and it looked for all the world like a high-school demerit slip. It was short and to the point:

This is to require that PEARL (her name was printed in large, neat letters) appear before THE OVERSEER (also printed in the same hand) at this place: LOWER TOWER OFFICE and at this time: IMMEDIATELY.

Summons prepared by THE OVERSEER and carried by ALLSPICE.

"Do I have detention?" Audra asked, reading the summons for a second and third time.

"I don't think so," the Staff-Sub (presumably Allspice) admitted, peeking at the note over Audra's shoulder. "It doesn't say to meet in the classroom."

But the Overseer filled it out himself, so it must be pretty serious. You'd better go right now."

Audra had never gotten in trouble in school before in her life. Not that she was in school now, of course, but then, so much of this vacation felt like a trip back in time. There was a little cold fist of dread in her stomach as she got up and dusted herself off, and she knew that despite her efforts to appear casual, her anxiety was showing on her face. She just knew Cowboy had ratted her out, but he couldn't really get her in trouble, could he? For not shaving her pubic hair?

The offices of Tesoro were well-cooled, and painted in tropical blues and greens and pinks. The staff members at work back here didn't seem surprised to see her, and most didn't even glance her way. When she asked for the Lower Tower Office, she was directed with the flap of a hand all the way down the office hall to a waiting room at the very end. The room wasn't big, and was dominated by a pair of dark double doors.

There was also a Staff-Dom behind a desk here, who cleared her throat when Audra inched towards a cushioned chair and severely indicated a hard wooden bench directly opposite the dark doors.

Audra sat.

There was a clock on the wall behind the secretary, or whoever the Staff-Dom was, one of those clocks that tick too loud and only has a second-counting hand so you can see how slowly it moves. Audra watched the clock and waited, her fingers tugging and toying with the little gold tag on her collar. The secretary stared at her at the whole time.

The phone on the secretary's desk finally rang, and the secretary picked it up, listened without speaking, and then hung up and said, "The Overseer will see you now."

'It can't be that bad,' Audra reasoned. 'He wouldn't give me permission to be in the garden

and then punish me.' She stood up, checked her legs, and walked very carefully to the doors.

They swung open before she could knock.

Audra sent an imploring look back at the Desk-Dom, who merely arched a brow at her, and then she went inside.

The doors shut soundlessly behind her. The office was not wide, but was very long, and at the half-way point, it was divided by a wrought-iron spiral staircase. On one side, the double doors, a leather sofa, a tasteful bar; and on the other, a bay window spilling light on a great monolith of a desk and an even greater monolith of a man. Audra took the long walk toward him, and as she got closer, the man just got bigger.

At this distance, the intensity and acuity of his eyes was also inescapable. He didn't look at her as much as into her, and Audra was reminded dizzily of the Griffin, even though Jenna's eyes were hawk-gold and this man's were black and bright as pools of ink.

"Hi," she said.

"Sit down, Pearl."

His voice was a rumble of indifferent thunder, pitiless as the ocean, unyielding as a mountain. She could honestly say she wasn't mixing her metaphors; the man was every element, and all his own Earth.

There was a chair facing the desk, much smaller than the leather executive-style throne behind it, and easing into it brought Audra well into the Overseer's reach. She hoped he would move around and sit down after she did, but he remained where he was, looking down at her from his great height.

She expected a 'Do you know why you are here?' She expected it so much that when the Overseer finally asked, "Are you happy here?", she took a deep breath and said, "Look, he started it, and I don't see why--wait a minute, what?"

"Are you happy here?" he said again, quietly.

Audra blinked rapidly, realigning her defenses to this question. It left her feeling hot, guilty, and she dropped her gaze to her knees and plucked at them. She nodded.

"This is not a rhetorical question."

No, of course, it wasn't. The man had probably never asked a rhetorical question in his life.

"Yes, sir," Audra mumbled. "I'm happy." She scuffed the toe of her shoe on the carpet, rubbing at a patch of sand she'd tracked in. "I'm...playing shuffleboard."

"Mm-hmm." The Overseer moved around and seated himself at last, then steepled his fingers and studied her for a long time in silence.

This room didn't have a loud-ticking clock. Without it, the seconds were like hours, caught in this man's gaze.

"Cowboy," the Overseer said at last, "has asked to be released from you."

She knew it. One little argument and he went blubbing off to the principal. Audra started to nod, and then said, "Yes, sir."

"Would you like to tell me why?"

"No, sir." Honesty was always the best policy.

"Tell me anyway."

Well, she couldn't say she was surprised. Audra plucked at her knees again. "He wants a girlfriend," she said. "I don't want to be a girlfriend for just three weeks and then go home like nothing happened, and I don't want to pretend I am when I'm not." She'd just leave out the whole shaving angle.

The Overseer nodded, looking thoughtful. "Understandable," he said, and Audra's heart loosened. "Very well, you've been reassigned." He glanced at his papers. "To cabin 12."

"Yes, sir. That's fine."

"Is it?" The Overseer looked at her, his head slightly to one side. "You may go," he said suddenly. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you, sir."

She made it almost all the way to the doors when his voice rumbled up again.

"Shuffleboard."

Audra couldn't understand why, but she sensed a trap. "Yes, sir," she said, half-turning. "And, um, I really like your garden."

"Thank you." The Overseer smiled faintly, and pushed the button that opened the double doors.

Audra emerged into the well-lit outer office, feeling eerily as though she'd narrowly (and perhaps not entirely) escaped him.

"You've been reassigned," the secretary said crisply.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Guest...Granite. Hm." There was a touch of respect in the otherwise neutral sound. "Give me your old room key."

Audra did, and received one for cabin 12.

"Go directly there," the Desk-Dom said. "No delays. We'll bring your luggage around presently."

"Do you know him?" Audra asked, unsure whether the question would qualify as a delay.

The secretary eyed her for a few moments before answering. "More or less. We're not cozy, if that's what you mean."

"Is he a nice guy?"

The Desk-Dom's face softened, just slightly, just around the eyes. "He's a nice guy. But then--" A touch of frost colored the rest of her words. "--so is Cowboy."

Audra was not comforted.

She left the cool offices for the muggy heat of the island and walked the long way around the garden loop until she diverged onto the path that led up to the cabins. She unlocked her new door, wondering who was going to be Cowboy's new Pet. Wondering if she would let him spank her purple the way that Audra did. Wondering if she'd shave her pubes and do...whatever it was Cowboy wanted to do with that saddle. Wondering if this nameless new Pet would be able to drum up that smidgeon of

emotion Cowboy found so essential to a working Master/Pet relationship.

She decided she didn't care. At the end of all arguments, Audra was the one going home with pirate treasure. That made her the clear winner in any arrangement. 'So nuts to Cowboy,' Audra told herself, and marched on into her new place.

"Just stand where you are," a man's voice ordered, with authority sufficient to freeze her to the spot.

"I'm not breaking in," she said, her hand still on the doorknob. "I'm Pearl. I've been assigned to you."

"I'm aware of that. Now be quiet. Let me look at you."

Audra started to turn in the direction of the voice, and a hand came out of nowhere and landed a powerful swat on the seat of her jeans. She wasn't expecting it and, where a normal person would flinch or jerk back and unthinkingly correct their balance, Audra was knocked sprawling on the floor.

"I didn't hit you that hard," the voice said dryly, and when Audra (tears of embarrassment sparking in her eyes) tried to get up, a foot pressed down on her back, flattening her again. "But if you like the carpet so much, you can stay down there a while and meditate on the wisdom of introducing yourself with dramatics."

Audra said nothing. She curled her hands into fists, bit her lips to keep from making any noise, certain that any sound she made would break whatever mental barrier was keeping her from dissolving into real tears. She wondered if her legs were splayed. She couldn't feel them and didn't dare look to see.

"Did you hurt yourself when you fell?" asked the man eventually.

"No." Audra's voice cracked, but didn't break. In a rush of indignation, she added, "And I didn't do it on purpose!"

"Very well." The foot withdrew. "I choose to believe you. Get up and take those britches off."

Audra moved to her knees dazedly, finding and centering herself for the climb to her feet. This was a nice guy? She unzipped herself, pushed her jeans to her ankles and then got them hung up on her shoes. She looked around the unfamiliar cabin, blinking hard against her swimming vision, to find a place to sit and remove them.

The voice did not object when she hobbled to the nearest chair. She could hear his measured footfalls as he followed just behind her, keeping out of sight while she worked her legs free. She stood up again, holding her jeans and shoes against her chest, feeling more humiliated than she had ever been in her life. Ms. Lupe may have made her cry, but at least she hadn't stood Audra in her socks and panties to do it.

"What did you do to earn this?"

There was a faint tickling sensation emanating from her right buttock and the sound of skin rasping over skin. He was touching her, touching her bruises.

"Nothing," she said. "We were testing boundaries."

"Ah."

At last, the owner of the voice moved around to face her. A tall man, an older man, with a great deal more salt than pepper in his hair and beard, but the lines that creased his hard features did not seem like the marks of age so much as determination. Granite was right. The man was stone.

"I am not in the practice of taking Pets," he said, running his eyes down her body with almost clinical detachment. "I prefer to view the Submissive guests on this island as a whole, not as individuals." His eyes slapped up to pin hers. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, sir."

"I see you've got a gold tag. I expect unswerving faithfulness from you."

"Yes, sir."

"I won't return it." The silver of his Master's buckle pierced her with little spears of reflected light. "Does that bother you?"

"No, sir."

"Here are the rules." Granite snapped his fingers and went into the bedroom.

Audra followed and saw the two beds had been pushed together, with one trapped completely between the wall and the other bed.

"You will sleep there," Granite said, firmly indicating the pinioned bed. "And you will not leave that bed until I release you to do so." He glanced at her, eyes narrowed, but she only nodded. "You take breakfast with me promptly at seven," he went on, apparently assured. "And then you remain with me until I release you. Your time is your own until eight in the evening, when you return here to be cleaned and dressed for dinner. Dinners are formal. Do you have a gown?"

"No, sir."

Granite nodded once, as though unsurprised, and raked his eyes down her body again. "I'll see that you have suitable attire. At all other times when you are in my presence, you will wear Tesoro's Pet uniform. You still have yours, I assume?"

"It's in the wash."

"I'll arrange for replacements. What you wear on your own time is your business."

"Thank you, sir." Audra was beginning to feel a little numb. She found herself wondering if she asked, if she apologized and got down on her knees and *begged*, would Cowboy come and take her back?

Granite went to his closet (the mirrors had been covered), and removed a slate-grey duffel bag. He set this on the bed, and from it brought out seven items: a wide wooden paddle; a long leather one

with holes in it; a short whip with dozens of braided leather tails; another one with only ten tails, but all of them beaded; a stiff, short strap with a forked tongue; a device that looked like a rivet-studded medieval flail; and finally, a supple leather belt, stained with age and shiny with use.

"Each morning," said Granite, "you will choose one of these for your punishment. Before dinner, you will receive however many strokes as I deem appropriate to your day's transgressions. Is there anything before you now that terrifies you?" His eyes stabbed at hers.

"No, sir," Audra whispered.

"In deference to the abrupt manner in which you have come to me, you will receive no spanking tonight." Granite moved the objects one by one to the top of the room's only chest of drawers. "However, I shall expect you here promptly at eight to be dressed for dinner. You are dismissed."

Audra uttered a final "Yes, sir," and retreated from the room. She recovered her jeans and shoes and put them on, then left the cabin.

It did not occur to her until she was all the way back at the garden that Granite hadn't once called her by name.

Chapter Eleven

*** *What the Cyclops Saw* ***

Five days passed, like paper numbers falling from a cartoon calendar. Audra woke, usually in response to Granite rising from his own bed, and selected the implement that would be used on her that night. Then she would stand, her nose touching the doorjamb, while Granite used the bathroom. When he emerged, he would swiftly, emotionlessly strip her of her night clothes and send her into the shower.

He made no comment on the condition of her pubic hair. On the third day, she shaved it off. He still did not comment.

When she was showered, her teeth brushed, she would open the bathroom door to admit him and he would finish drying her (she could never dry herself enough to suit him). Then he would fasten her collar on and brush her hair, rub lotion into any tender (in his view) places, and sunblock everything.

He would dress her in one of the three identical Tesoro slave-girl tunics, and one of three identical pairs of white panties (also from the gift shop). He purchased a pair of Hollywood-Roman-style sandals for her that laced up almost to the knee, and he would not let her put them on by herself. All of Audra's own clothes were still in her suitcases in the bottom of her closet.

When he declared her fit for morning company, Audra would be seated opposite Granite in the dining hall for breakfast. Before she would be allowed to feed herself, Granite would give her the first bite by hand, and hold her cup for her to take the first sip of coffee. After that, she could hold her own utensils, but it was a privilege she lost if she exhibited any of what he considered poor table manners.

After breakfast, Granite would walk with her a little, and he never walked the same route twice. He took her along the shore, or through the rows of cabins, down the Nature Walk, or around the garden (she tapped the stones one by one as was now customary for her, and Granite said nothing at the time, but that night, added a count of twenty with the tawse for disobeying the spirit of the Keep On Path signs. She did not tell him about her special permission. She did not tell him much of anything). He stopped often to converse with other Masters or to reprimand other Pets. He was not shy about reprimanding the Staff-Subs, either, and when he was administering some punishment, Audra was expected to stand quietly aside, her eyes demurely downcast.

At some point during the day, Granite would finally stop and observe her closely, then turn his back and say, "You are dismissed," as he walked away.

Audra spent her free time with Virgil and Griffin, walking the wild paths of the island and following the roar of running water until they had mapped out each of Tesoro's waterfalls. At the end of the day, cyclops-less, Audra would return to cabin 12 and at precisely eight o'clock, Granite would go into the bedroom and return with the tool she'd picked out that morning.

"What did you do today?" he would ask, meaning, of course, 'What did you do wrong?'

"I was idle," became Audra's stock answer, and it felt true. They were accomplishing nothing in the search for DeGuarre's treasure.

Each day, the count of her punishment for this offense was higher. It was her responsibility to keep count and she did so in an even, almost droning tone. He managed to hit her where she could feel real pain two or three times each night, and these were the only times she would ever pause--her eyes closed, savoring normalcy--but

they were quickly lost amid the tangle of lying sensation.

After spanking, dinner. She would wear the very formal, very flattering gown he bought her and she would sit, uncomplaining, on the bottom he had just roasted. She was not allowed to feed herself at all during dinner. After Granite ate, it was back to the cabin so he could put her to bed.

He never touched her except to feed her, dress her, or spank her. He seldom spoke directly to her, and he never called her by name. It was like living with a ghost, and by the dawning of the sixth day, Audra was no longer sure which of them was doing the haunting.

She woke up just as Granite was sitting up, and rolled over to watch him--his mature-man's body, grim with strength and well-aged power, thatched with iron grey hairs in a broad bar down his chest and under the waistline of his pajama bottoms--and he looked back at her with every morning's stony indifference. If he invited comment, she would tell him what a good-looking man he was...but all he did was rise and move into the bathroom, snapping his fingers for her to follow after.

Audra got up, selected the perforated paddle for the evening, and so began the morning routine.

They left cabin 12 together, she walking just ahead of him because he said once he liked to look at her marks. Once was all he ever needed to say anything.

It was later in the day than they usually got started. There were dozens of Masters and Pets already milling about, on their way to or from the dining hall. Granite nodded to every Master he passed and stopped twice to order Audra to display her marks to his acquaintances.

"Oh my goodness," one Pet said in a whispering squeak, and her Master curiously inquired, "Do you have to bind her for that?"

"Of course not," Granite said tersely, and cut Audra a glance. "Bend over," he told her, and then stepped away. "Go on."

Audra braced herself against the impending impact and waited until she heard the pop of the paddle. The sound was muted; the Master hadn't hit her very hard.

"That," Granite said, "is a well-trained girl."

"Wow. Not a peep."

"Oh my goodness," the Pet whisper-squeaked again.

Granite snapped his fingers and Audra straightened up and turned around, looking away toward the garden to avoid the eyes of the other Pet. She hated to see sympathy in them; she hated to see envy even more. She felt like she was betraying every other Submissive with exhibitions like this, as proud as they seemed to make her Master.

As Granite and the other Master discussed training, Audra's eyes drifted across the garden, counting the stones she was no longer free to tap, and slowly her gaze was drawn further into the courtyard where a loose crowd had gathered. At least she wasn't the only one being put on display this morning.

Granite finally grunted a goodbye and snapped his fingers to start Audra moving. She walked towards the crowd in the courtyard, since it was more or less on their way to the dining hall and she knew Granite would want to have a look, or at least, if he didn't, he wouldn't be shy about steering her away.

But when they got a little closer, Audra was alarmed to find she recognized one of today's players--the Griffin stood at the center of a loose group of Submissive guests. The other Pets were being cute. "I want to go, too!" one was whining, prettily pouting at her Master. "I'm tired of boring old seminars!"

"I'll take you on a walk after breakfast," her Master replied.

"I don't want to go with *you*!"

A chorus of giggles and agreements rounded out this daring objection.

The Griffin was not taking part in the rebellion, and she certainly didn't appear to relish her appointment as its leader. Her fierce golden gaze was for one man alone, the man who was her Master. Following the direction of the Griffin's glare, Audra found Professor smiling indulgently back at the Submissives as he tapped his infamous Teacher's Pet paddle against his leg.

"What is the meaning of this commotion?" Granite demanded, and at the sharp sound of his gravelly voice, all the Pets fell quiet.

"Our girl Griffin," one of the Masters said dryly, "is taking her morning constitutional and, in doing so, has encouraged a following of mutineers to abandon the most important meal of the day and join her."

Griffin's eyes flashed. 'I haven't encouraged a damn thing,' was stamped into every fibre of her being, but she only set her jaw and said nothing.

Granite's lips thinned. He clearly recognized, as Audra did herself, when Pets were acting out for acting out's sake, and it was well known on the island that Master Granite did not tolerate mischief-making. He focused instead on the one person whose misbehavior was not being play-acted in the hopes of earning a lighthearted spanking. "Why aren't you eating?" he asked the Griffin.

"I don't eat breakfast," she said. She was still glaring at Professor.

"I don't consider that an answer."

"That's your malfunction, friend, not mine."

Granite walked calmly around Audra, rolling up the sleeve of his Tesoro-style pirate shirt. "Bend over," he commanded.

Audra couldn't watch the Griffin obey. She looked at Professor instead, and saw his smile

broaden a split-second before the gunshot-like CRACK of Granite's hand on the Griffin's bottom.

There was a short silence, and then Jenna said, grudgingly but sincerely, "I apologize for my sarcasm."

Audra, still facing Professor, saw his smile wiped clean off his face, replaced by an astonishment so severe it made him look twelve years old.

"Why aren't you eating?" Granite asked again.

"If I eat too soon after I wake up, I get nauseous," Jenna replied.

"Ah." Granite returned to his place behind Audra. The matter was, for him, settled. He did not punish deliberate mischief, and the Griffin had a good reason to skip breakfast. He was ready to move on.

And would have, if one of the other Pets hadn't piped up, "Griffin gets to do everything she wants to do! Why can't I go for a walk? I've been your Pet all week long!" and the whole commotion started up again. Granite took a step forward, his face thunderous with disapproval.

But this time, it was Professor, not Granite, who took charge.

"Now, now." Professor raised both his hands in a quieting gesture, his eyes glittering as they moved over the Submissives before him. "I know the perfect way to determine whether or not you deserve the day off."

The Pets, almost in perfect unison, immediately bounced up and down and shouted variations of "Yay!" and "Goodie!"

All but Griffin, that is. The Griffin merely folded her arms across her chest, a slow frown building itself on the stony mask that was her face.

"You're going to perform a little trick for us, girls," Professor said, and shaped his mouth into what was easily the most spiteful smile that Audra had ever seen. "It's a very easy trick. Perhaps you've done it before. And if you do it now, you

may have the entire afternoon for your own pleasures. Agreed?"

The Pets were quiet now, clearly uncertain, but their Masters were all game and giving consent either with nods or by prodding their Pet forward into the sphere of Professor's influence. Audra felt Granite's hand come down on her shoulder, but to her relief, it was to pull her back against his side. However, he apparently had enough curiosity to watch because he made no move to leave.

Professor lined up his subjects with Griffin at their center, and then waved a passing Tesoro Staff-Sub over. He whispered instructions, and then turned his smile back on the ladies gathered before him. From his pocket, he produced a quarter and he held it up for them all to see. "Now, in a minute or two, you'll have a funnel for this trick, but you'll all just have to use your imaginations for now. The idea is this--" Professor theatrically placed the quarter on the tip of his nose and then cupped his hands together, palms up, at roughly crotch level. "Simply drop the quarter into the funnel without using your hands or your eyes."

Keeping his own eyes tightly shut, Professor slowly bent his head forward until the quarter dropped into his waiting hands. He beamed at the Pets, holding up the quarter again like a magician after a particularly mind-boggling act. "An easy trick, I said. Of course, you'll be blindfolded, and I'll expect you to have your hands behind your backs. But still, an easy trick."

The Pets were beginning to look cheerful again, hesitantly smiling and whispering to each other. The Griffin hadn't moved a muscle. Audra was beginning to feel distinctly uneasy.

"If you fail," Professor continued, his smile broadening as the Tesoro Staff-Sub came jogging back with several stacked funnels in her hand. "You will be severely paddled, of course, but if you win, the entire remainder of the day is yours!"

"Sir?" One of the Pets raised her hand, and when the Professor's eye fell lazily on her, she asked, "If our hands are behind our backs, how are we holding the funnel?"

For reply, the Professor plucked one of the funnels up and walked over to her. He slipped his fingers under the waist of her little skirt and pushed the funnel tightly down until, presumably, the nozzle was pinched between the girl's thighs. "Steady?" he said coolly.

The Pet was blushing to the roots of her hair, sending swift, furtive glances back at her Master, who was watching with puzzled indulgence. "Yes, sir. Thank you for showing me."

"Not at all. Make sure you have it under the skirt and make sure you have it tight. If the funnel falls, you lose." Professor was passing funnels out to all the Pets, who giggled as they arranged themselves. Last was the Griffin, who met Professor's stare for a long, tense while before uncrossing her arms and taking her funnel. She did not break her raptor's glare as she pushed the nozzle of the funnel under her skirt and caught it between her thighs. "Comfy?" Professor asked, his question for the Griffin alone.

"Quite," she said, and managed to growl despite the handicap of having no r's in the word.

"Oh good." Professor reached into his pocket again and brought out a heavy black strip of cloth. "Blindfolds on, ladies. I'm sure we can borrow one if your Master has left yours back in your room."

Many hands outstretched, offering blindfolds, and Audra turned, realizing only now that Professor's little show had attracted quite a crowd. Her feeling of unease grew and she was painfully grateful to Granite for not putting her among the performers. One by one, the Pets were masked, and they all put their hands behind their backs obediently.

Only now did Professor raise his hand and give a little wave, one finger pressed to his lips in warning

to the watchers for silence. Audra looked around and saw another Staff-Sub coming their way with a tray of ice waters in plastic tumblers. Her gasp of alarm as she finally caught on to what was about to happen was swallowed by Professor's cheerful command: "Now concentrate, girls! I cannot stress that enough! Do not allow yourselves to become distracted. You will find that we humans rely more on our sight than we could ever imagine!"

During this time, the Masters had all stepped up to take a tumbler of ice water, and all stood ready to pour at Professor's signal.

"Noses out," Professor ordered, and the Griffin and the other Submissives all tipped their heads back to accept a coin. There was quite a bit of jingling in pockets as watchers from the assembled crowd offered quarters and soon each upturned nose was balancing a coin. "Now get ready!" Professor said, and lifted his tumbler of ice water directly over the wide mouth of the funnel pressed against the Griffin's groin. "Get set....Go!"

The Masters poured, and almost at once, there was an explosion of shrieks and flying limbs as Pets tried to leap back from the frozen water invading their privates. Audra lost sight of the Griffin in the mass of raised arms, laughing, and schoolyard cheers from the crowd, and she shrugged out from under Granite's grip and pushed her way to the fore again.

The brunts of this summer camp prank, the Pets were only just starting to settle themselves. They had all ripped their blindfolds off or at least yanked them down, and most of them had pulled their skirts partly off as well during their spasms of shock. Still, as they blinked dazedly at the cheering on-lookers, most of them seemed willing enough to go along with the joke and some were even smiling or laughing themselves.

The Griffin was not smiling. She had not removed the blindfold either, nor taken her hands

from behind her back. The set of her jaw was telling enough to the fury boiling within her.

Professor, a man who clearly did not know death when it stood blindfolded before him, was obviously disappointed at his Pet's lack of reaction, but his smile was back as he reached for the funnel at the Griffin's crotch. "Gentlemen, find your girl's funnel!" he commanded merrily. "And girls, there had better be a quarter in it."

All the hesitant humor went instantly out of each Pet's face. "W-what?" one of them stammered.

"I told you to concentrate, didn't I? I told you not to be distracted. Now you're all in for a--" There was a rattle as he tugged the funnel out from the Griffin's thighs, snipping off Professor's speech as effectively as a pair of scissors. He looked down into the mouth of the funnel, gape-mouthed with surprise. Slowly, as if he could not believe until he touched it, he reached inside and brought out a quarter.

The crowd, which had gone stone-silent all this while, now erupted again in cheers so loud that players on the tennis courts stopped what they were doing and craned their heads to see them. The wet-skirted Submissives all began to laugh again, and two of them bounced over to clap the Griffin on the back and ruffle happily at her hair.

Professor was not laughing. He was not smiling. His brows began to draw thunderously together.

When he looked up again, the Griffin had removed her blindfold and her golden eyes were snapping sparks. "Bye," she said, and again, she managed to growl. She swiveled on her heel and started to stalk off.

"Stop where you are," Professor snapped, dropping both funnel and quarter and yanking his paddle from his belt. "I've had enough of your insolence, and this time, little girl, you are going to be punished for it!"

"Later." The Griffin hadn't stopped or even slowed. "I have the day off."

She kept going, and Professor, after taking a few furious breaths, marched himself off in the opposite direction.

There was a short, awkward silence as the crowd shuffled slightly apart, and then one of the Masters cleared his throat and said, "Okay, Strawberry, you appear to have dropped your quarter. Run and get the paddle!"

"Oh!" Red-headed Strawberry stamped her foot, but ran off all the same, and the general good mood began to return as the other Pets fell in line to take what was coming to them.

Again, Audra felt Granite's hand on her shoulder, pulling her back into his shadow. "Sadist," he growled, the tones of a man talking to himself. "No business being here this early in the year. Breakfast!" he finished, and snapped his fingers to start her moving.

"Some other time." Audra twisted out from under his shadow and ran after the Griffin.

When Audra finally caught up to her, the Griffin was in a clearing at the foot of one of the waterfalls, having given up furious marching in exchange for furious pacing. Now she stalked up and down the lip of the rocky pool into which the falls poured, her blonde hair streaming out behind her like pale flames, and she was in full voice.

"That slime-licking vindictive son of a bastard! That ass-faced, mutant-molesting pile of cold monkey puke! That--! That--!"

"Jerk?" Audra suggested.

"That jerk! That utter, utter jerk!" Jenna swung on her, fists raised and eyes snapping sparks. "I almost don't even mind the spankings, it's that jerky attitude, that smarmy, patronizing, cheese-eating bully-boy jerk he thinks is soooo fucking dominant! And I've got to lap it up! I've got to sit there and take it when all I want to do is just...just...AAAAAGHH!"

Jenna whipped around, seized a boulder the size of a beach ball and flung it at the nearest tree.

The boulder exploded with a CHOK! and Jenna wrested another one free of the ground and threw it at another tree.

THOK!

Another.

WHOK!

And another.

CRACK!

Jenna had half-pried a fifth boulder out of the ground, but she stopped and blinked around at the last tree that felt her wrath. "Crack?" she echoed, her anger slowly ebbing into bewilderment. "Do trees say 'crack' when I hit them with rocks?"

"No. No, they sure don't." Audra picked her way carefully through the undergrowth and boulder debris and peeled some ferns and ivy away from the tree in question.

She found roots, not a trunk. Roots wrapped around a pillar of stone, and even through the parasitical cloak of greenery, she could see some long-ago effort at carving that gave the pillar part of a face.

The tree growing out of the top of the stout stone creature's head made it look eerily familiar to Audra--it was almost identical to an illustration of a troll in a copy of Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring that Virgil had once given her for Christmas--but the hand-sized hole in the thing's head proved it was no troll. It was a cyclops.

"I don't believe it." Jenna was beside her in an instant, tearing shallow-rooted layers of plant from the rock until the whole thing was revealed. "Go get Virgil!"

"You go get him!"

Jenna half-climbed the back of the cyclops, trying to put her eyes roughly where its eye was, and squinted at the falls. Then she leapt off, uprooted a young sapling that was reasonably straight and shucked its branches off as she moved

around to the front of the cyclops. Here, she shouldered the sapling like a spear, aligned it with the cyclops' single eye, and threw it.

The sapling arced through the air, passed through the curtain of falling water, and vanished.

"A cave!" Audra cried. She was clapping like a kid.

"Seriously, go get Virgil!"

"You get him, you can run!"

"Yeah, I can also climb!" Griffin started to move out along the wet rocks, her eyes fixed on the shadow behind the drumming veil of water.

Excitement turned to terror in an instant. "Jenna, no!" Audra ran, and by some miracle, managed not to catch herself on any of the choking vines and roots that clogged the off-trail underbrush. She seized Griffin's arm and tugged. "Don't be stupid, you'll fall!"

"I'm not going to fall!" Jenna snapped, yanking her arm out of Audra's grip. "I've gone rock climbing a hundred t--AAAH!"

As if watching it in slow motion on television, Audra watched Jenna's feet slip, watched Jenna throw herself against the rockface and under the water, watched Jenna knocked sideways by the power of the falls, and watched Jenna let go and topple into the pool eight feet below. She came up sputtering and was knocked under again at once.

There was an instant of claustrophobic time rewinding itself. The waterfall actually seemed to vanish. The rock beneath Audra's feet became the trestle at Hideaway Lake. Only the water remained the same...the water under which any back-breaking rock could be hiding. And for the first time in seven years, Audra's legs moved without thinking.

She jumped.

Chapter Twelve

*** *Goodbye to You...and You...and You...* ***

The water closed over her, cool in that first instant, tropic-warm in the next. It was impossible to see; the pool was churned to the color of coffee by the endless drumming of the water, but Audra felt no fear. She swam, orienting herself to the roar of the falls, and put out her hands. If she touched rock, she turned in place and swam out again, reaching blind in the water.

In seconds, her fingers pushed into something soft and solid, something that flinched and turned and seized her. Audra hugged Jenna to her and pushed hard against the eddying current. She felt the falls gripping at her, felt the exact moment when she broke free of them, and then they were cresting into welcome air, splashing through foam for the bank.

The walls of the pool were jagged rock, but the ground underwater was all mud and sediment. It was hard to find their footing. By the time they clawed their way up onto the path, they were both coated in yellow-green mineral-smelling grossness.

Audra flopped onto her back, not caring if the sun baked her into a little clay golem right there on the rock. Her whole body was tingling with adrenaline. She could not believe she'd jumped.

"I can't believe you jumped," Jenna said.

Audra looked at her, and saw an agony of amazement and regret behind the muddy mask of Jenna's face. It was a sight deserving giggles, but in the vacuum of her emotional flux, Audra could manage only a weary smile. "You'd have done the same for me," she said.

"No, I wouldn't." Jenna's mud crumbled in on itself. "You wouldn't have done such a bone-headed thing in the first place. Audra...I'm so sorry."

She looked so miserable...and so much like a mud guppy...that Audra couldn't stand it. She sat

up and wrapped her arms around Jenna, holding her squishily close. "You don't have to be sorry," she said. "You're my best friend. Of course I'm going to jump after you. Just don't make a habit of it, okay?"

Jenna's hands came up and hugged Audra back. "Okay," she snuffled.

"What the...? What's going on?"

They broke apart and Audra twisted around to see a Staff-Dom holding a lunchbag and a Thermos looking down at them from the path.

"We're having a lesbian experience here," the Griffin snapped, shoving the wet mass of her hair back. "Get lost!"

The Staff-Dom's brows peaked. "Can I watch?"

"No!"

"Wait!" Audra struggled into a more or less upright position. "Do you know a Master called Claymore?"

"He's with Snickers, right? Sure."

"Can you go find him and tell him where we are?" Audra asked. When he didn't go right away, she added, "We promised him a threesome."

"Wow." The Staff-Dom looked openly envious. "What did he have to do?"

"Beat me at Trivial Pursuit," Jenna answered.

The Griffin's reputation for trivia was already well-known, thanks to Professor's favorite game of Test-and-Paddle. The Staff-Dom's face fell, defeated, but he trotted off, promising to send Claymore back as soon as he could be found.

"There's no way you're climbing up there," Audra said as soon as he was out of sight.

Jenna scraped futilely at her coating of mud and sighed. "You're right," she said reluctantly. "I need to think about this."

"Not to mention the machinery you'd need to build to get the treasure out of there."

"I'll figure something out. Any fool can build a block and tackle."

It didn't sound very promising to Audra, but Jenna seemed optimistic--or at least, as optimistic as she ever got--and that was good enough. If the Griffin put her mind to something, she always had her way in the end. If nothing else, it beat throwing boulders.

Jogging footfalls crunching up the path put a halt to this conversation, and Audra climbed back up to the path on Jenna's steadying arm. But it wasn't Virgil who came around the bend, but their friendly neighborhood Staff-Dom, whose face fell slightly when he saw he wasn't interrupting anything intimate.

Jenna paced forward to meet him, wearing the beginnings of a dangerous frown. "I believe I told you that you couldn't watch," she began.

"Claymore couldn't make it," the Staff-Dom explained. "He had to go to the office."

Audra's eyes went immediately to the Staff-Dom's hand. There, folded for easy portage around the paper flap of his lunchbag, were two slips of sky-blue paper.

"So do you," the Staff-Dom continued. He juggled Thermos, lunch, and detention slips, and finally held one of the papers out to the Griffin. "Apparently, you should have cleared your little threesome with your Master first. The Overseer filled this out himself. And would you happen to know a guest called Pearl?"

Audra raised her hand at the same speed that her heart sank. She accepted her office summons meekly, nodded at his admonishment not to delay, and waited in silence until the Staff-Dom had continued on his way before groaning her dismay.

"Damn!" Griffin's face was comically mortified under its drying mud mask. "Do you know how long it's been since I got one of these?"

"High school."

"No one gave me detention in high school!" Jenna said, with just a touch of contempt. "They knew better than that by then. But, gosh, it's

been...the sixth grade at least! And it doesn't even say what I did." Suddenly, her expression transformed into one of feral indignation. "If that jerk got me in Dutch because I didn't drop his damn quarter, I will rip his shoelaces off through his nostrils and garrote him with them!"

Trust Griffin to know just how to turn a phrase.

"It says to report immediately," Audra said with a sigh. "I guess we'd better go."

"Oh, what are they going to do if we're late?" Jenna snorted. "*Not* spank us?" But she crumpled her note in her fist and started trudging for the offices.

They were coming down the slope from the cabins when Virgil burst through a door and into the courtyard. His head was down, his arms stiff, his gait wooden and too fast. He was upset, Audra realized with a sinking feeling. Very, very upset.

Beside her, equally alarmed, Jenna blurted, "Are we busted, or what?"

"I...I don't know. I can't see how." But Audra began to walk a little faster, faster than she could really consider safe on the downward side of an incline. "Claymore!" she called.

Virgil stopped at once, the movement so sudden that Audra expected him to topple right over. He waited for them, but he did not turn around.

"Claymore, we found the cyclops," Audra said, reasoning that this was the best way to bring him out of whatever scary humor consumed him.

It was a good bet. Virgil swung around, his eyes wide and bright with hope for a split second before misery crashed down on him again. "Hey guys," he said, sighing. He didn't remark on the fact that they were both covered liberally with sludge.

"Do they know about us?" Jenna demanded, moving in to grab at his arm when he tried to turn his back on them again. "Are they kicking us out?"

Virgil was already shaking his head, but when Griffin asked her second question, his whole face crumpled. "We aren't being kicked out," he said,

putting a plaintive emphasis on the 'we'. "I'm being kicked out. Snickers wants a new Master!"

"Oh." Audra and Jenna said it in perfect, puzzled harmony, and then exchanged mirrored glances of unsurprise.

"Yeah. Oh." Virgil's jaw was shaking. Audra realized with renewed alarm that he was right on the razor-edge of tears. "She's known me less than a week and she's had enough and she didn't even have the decency to write 'Get Lost' on the bathroom mirror in lipstick. No, she goes prancing off to the Overseer and fills out a complaint form, and do you know what he's doing?"

His voice had been rising steadily, and now, without waiting for either of them to even guess, he burst out in querulous frustration, "He's making me take *classes*! He's--I don't want to talk about it!"

Virgil swung around again, swiping at his face, and staggered away in the general direction of the cabins.

Audra wanted to run after him--partial payment for all the times he'd refused to let her drown in her own self-mined pathos--but the Overseer's note was burning in her own hand like a live ember. "Poor Virgil," she said instead.

"I knew that was going to happen." There was no satisfaction in Jenna's words, only a heavy commiseration. "Poor Virgil."

"Yeah, and poor us." Audra started walking resolutely toward the offices. "I don't know about you, but I'm guessing I'm in real trouble."

"I've been in trouble since I got here," the Griffin said, but her tone was not convincing.

Audra wanted to tell her that it was pointless to show defiance to the Overseer, but she guessed the Griffin was just going to have to find that one out for herself. She wasn't looking forward to the clash of those particular Titans.

The doors to the Lower Tower Office were open this time, and the Overseer's secretary didn't even look around from her computer when they came in.

Audra and Jenna exchanged a glance, held hands, and then went in together.

The Overseer was standing at the window, his broad back to them. Audra was not aware that they were making any noise as they crossed the carpet, but somehow he knew when they had almost reached the desk. He turned around, showing no reaction whatsoever to the sight of them coated in sun-dried clay. "Sit down," he said.

She sat, ramrod straight, her knees pressed virginally together.

"I prefer to stand," the Griffin said.

"As you wish." The Overseer moved around to his own executive chair and seated himself with cat-like dignity. "What I have to say to you should not take long." He held out one hand, palm up. "Your room key, please."

Griffin didn't move. "Why?"

In that one word, behind all of Jenna's efforts to disguise her emotions, Audra could hear the fear of expulsion ringing clearly.

The Overseer waited.

Grimly silent, the Griffin pulled her room key from her belt and slapped it into the Overseer's palm.

"The guest called Professor regrets to inform you that he has been unavoidably summoned home." The Overseer dropped the key into a desk drawer and then steepled his fingers and looked calmly up at the Griffin. "He asked me to personally deliver his apology. He didn't know where to find you this morning to tell you himself. He has left his personal number and address so that you may contact him at your leisure. He has expressed an interest in bringing you back to Tesoro next January. He has greatly enjoyed the past week, and regrets that he could not stay long enough to play out the taming of you."

Audra slid a glance around to see Griffin's reaction to the word 'taming'. Jenna's face was completely devoid of emotion.

"I dislike allowing my guests to come to Tesoro outside of their customary season," The Overseer went on. "Professor has already acquired an unfavorable reputation for severity among the guests staying here now. I don't imagine any of them will be sorry to learn he's left us." The Overseer leaned back in his chair, studying the Griffin as from a great distance. "Are you?"

There was a very long silence, but the Overseer did not ask rhetorical questions, and at last, the Griffin was compelled to reply.

"I've never been on one of these trips before," she said. "I don't know the difference between one season or the next. I was put up for auction. He won. He was my Master, and that was all."

"No. No, that is not all."

The Overseer stood up and came around the side of the desk to tower over Griffin. Audra kept her eyes down, trying very hard to project an aura of non-eavesdropping-ness in case that were a punishable offense, but she didn't need sight to know he was there. She could almost feel him, as if he were charged with some invisible force all his own, and it made her very glad that she was not the subject of his relentless attention. She would be soon enough, but for right now...oh yes, she was very glad she wasn't.

"This island belongs to no Master but me," the Overseer said, as softly as his terrible voice allowed him to speak. "My rules are the only rules, and those rules were set in place for you."

'Just for me,' thought Audra. Her mouth went dry.

The Overseer's hand moved suddenly, but Audra heard no sound. She risked an upwards glance and saw him cupping Griffin's chin as tenderly as he would a child's, keeping her gaze locked with his. She was astounded. To her, the gesture could only mean that Jenna Sangriff, the Griffin, had tried to look away.

"I would have interceded on your behalf for any reason," the Overseer said. "I would have sent him from my island. At the very least, I would have released you from his control. This should have been made clear during orientation."

The Griffin did not reply.

"There will be an auction held tonight." The Overseer released Griffin and stepped back, although he never took his eyes from hers. "A small group of silvers who, like you, were not satisfied with the Masters who won them at the first auction. Would you like to join them?"

Jenna nodded once, stiffly.

"Then report to the slave quarters. In fact--" Here, the faintest of smiles passed like a shadow over the Overseer's face. "--find Submissive Cicada and tell her you are to be formally prepared for presentation at auction."

Griffin's brows creased. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"To begin with, a bath."

Jenna and Audra both looked down at their mud-caked bodies in unison. Audra felt herself blushing, and looked around to see a little pink in the Griffin's cheeks as well.

"Sorry about that," Griffin mumbled. "We were swimming."

"So I see. You are dismissed, Griffin."

It was clear that Jenna would have liked to stay and leave with Audra. It was equally clear that the Overseer had meant it when he told her she was dismissed. At length, the Griffin backed up, then finally turned and left the room.

The Overseer returned to his chair, pressed the button that closed his office doors, then folded his hands together and looked at her. Just looked at her.

Audra's eyes went to her knees. She picked at scales of yellow-green mud.

"Are you happy here?" the Overseer asked.

Audra's heart sank. "Yes, sir."

"Granite has asked to be released from you."

"I figured, sir."

"Can you tell me why?"

"Because I ran out on him today."

"No."

Audra's chin came up, her mouth open in surprise. "No?!"

"He asked to be released from you two days ago."

"What did I do two days ago?" Audra asked stupidly.

"Master Granite," said the Overseer carefully, "tells me you don't respond to him."

"That's not true!" Audra protested, but dropped her gaze when he merely looked at her. "It's just mostly true. And anyway, he doesn't seem to mind so much when he's spanking me out in public. He says I'm well-trained."

"Are you?"

Audra scratched at the dried mud on her elbow. "I dunno," she mumbled.

A lengthy pause followed as the Overseer frowned at her and she avoided his eyes. "I'm going to ask you again," he said at last. "And I hope you appreciate the significance of my repeating myself. Are you happy here, Pearl?"

"Yes, sir," she said miserably. "I'm going hiking...playing shuffleboard...."

"I see." A ghost of a smile interrupted the deep concern that otherwise held dominion over the Overseer's features. "Well. As long as you're playing shuffleboard."

Audra picked at her mud.

A heavy sigh wafted over the desk from the Overseer's side. "All right, Pearl. I'm going to reassign you, but I will tell you truthfully it is against my better judgment."

Audra had not been so hurt by the spoken word since the second grade, when stupid Marni Satero called her a booger-head for the first time. "Thank you, sir."

"You are dismissed."

Audra stood to go, but only managed three steps before the Overseer suddenly got to his feet and said, "Look me in the eye and tell me that you are happy."

Audra stopped, now facing the double doors (still ajar, tempting her). She did not turn around. It was no Griffin-like touch of defiance, but simple self-preservation. If she had to look him in the eye, she was horribly, unreasonably certain she'd start crying. "I'm happy," she said, and tried to sound like she meant it. "I've gone swimming, and done some hiking, and I'm--"

"Playing shuffleboard."

"Yes, sir."

Silence.

Leather creaked as he seated himself again. "Very well. Report to Exam Room 1. Good day, Pearl."

Audra knocked at the door of Exam Room 1, and then leaned despondently against the wall beside it and stared at the carpet. Three masters in eight days. She wondered if that were some kind of record.

The door opened and Dr. Saxon stuck his head out. He saw her, pursed his lips, and said, "Time flies. Okay. Come on in."

She went, not without some trepidation. She wasn't exactly looking forward to meeting the Master who wanted to watch her have a medical examination. But to her surprise, apart from her and the good doctor, the room was empty. "Where is he?" she asked.

"Where's who?" Saxon distractedly scribbled his signature on a few papers, then looked up, startled. "Oh! He didn't tell you? I'm he. I'm going to be your Master."

"I didn't know the Staff could take Pets."

"Oh sure. In the spring, all the Staff get Pets. We scoop 'em up out of the slave quarters and parade 'em around in little gold uniforms while the rest of the Subbies compete in games for the guest Masters. But yeah, not so much the rest of the year, unless there's extenuating circumstances, or unless there's a reeeeeeally special one, like your friend the Griffin. There was damn near a fist-fight in the lounge when the Prof came in and said he was leaving."

"She's going to be auctioned off again."

"Well, that's going to piss Cypress off good and proper." Saxon signed a few more papers, tapped his pen, then signed one more with great authority. "Only guests get to go to the auction."

"Too bad," Audra said, for want of something better to say. She wasn't in the least surprised by the revelation that Griffin was once again notorious. Some people were just built to be noticed.

"Not for me. I like my roses without quite so many thorns." Saxon swept all the papers together, rapped them smartly on the countertop to straighten them, and then dumped the whole pile in a box marked DO SOMETHING WITH THESE. "Besides," he said, smiling. "I think you're pretty."

"I'm not really your type," Audra said, and then wondered why she was objecting. "The only thing Nordic about me is the exerciser in the back of my closet."

"Oh, that's okay," he said amiably. "We'll just pretend I pillaged you. Now to business. Hop up on the little table. I want to talk at you a while."

Audra looked at the examination table, silently gauging her chances of a successful 'hop'. She looked back at Saxon, then reached and pulled his little doctor's rolling chair over and sat on it. "Okay," she said.

Saxon's lips pursed again, but he didn't comment. He boosted himself up onto the table, planted his hands on his knees and stared solemnly down at her. "I've read your file," he said.

Audra steeled herself.

"Cowboy released you on the second day." He shrugged. "That's not uncommon. We get a lot of shuffling in the first week. But I'm a little concerned about his reasons. You told the Overseer that Cowboy wasn't happy because he wanted to get chummy and you didn't."

Audra nodded.

"Cowboy said he was releasing you because of a lack of feeling."

A bubble of shocked laughter burst out of her and Audra slapped a hand over her mouth. She took a deep breath, lowered her hand, and said, "I guess you could say that."

Saxon's pale eyes had narrowed to blade-thin slits. He said, "Granite also commented on a lack of connection. Did he also want to get chummy?"

"No. He didn't want to get anything. He didn't say two words to me if he could get out of it."

"I only mention this because I would like very much to avoid the same mistakes your other Masters have apparently made." Saxon sat quietly a little while, letting Audra avoid his gaze, but at last, he reached out and nudged her with his foot. "Tell me how you want to be touched."

Audra's heart thumped once, extra hard, and then raced double time to catch up. She stared fixedly at the photo-realistic diagram of the human sinuses posted on the wall behind him. She shrugged.

"Do you like to be spanked?" he pressed.

She nodded, flames rising in her cheeks.

"I didn't hear that."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I like to be spanked," she said, and immediately pressed one hand to her face, trying half-heartedly to hide from him, or at least to hide the blush crawling through her.

"Do you like to be spanked just for pleasure, or do you like to be spanked for punishment also?"

"I don't know."

"I know this is difficult," Saxon said. He kept leaning over into her line of sight, refusing to let her escape him. "I'll do some, too. I like to spank women. I do not like to mix my business, which is the practice of medicine, with pleasure. And as much as I try not to be judgmental, deep in my gut, I think that sort of thing denigrates the purpose of medicine, which is to save lives. But then, I myself took an oath to do no harm, and I like to spank women. So really, this is not about what other people think is right, but about what is comfortable for you and me. So please tell me, Pearl. Do you like to be spanked solely for pleasure, solely for punishment, or a little bit of both?"

"I don't know," she again, a trifle desperately.

"How do you like to be spanked?" Saxon asked. "Over the knee?"

"No." There was nowhere else to look but at him. She tried to stare down at her own knees, and he nudged her with his boot again until she looked up. "That's too...personal."

"Okay." Saxon gave her a reassuring smile. "That's a good start. Would you like to be tied?"

"No!" She got to her feet, but there was no place to pace, so she sat down again. "This is going too fast. I need to stop."

"No. Would you like to be blindfolded?"

"No."

"Do you have a favorite implement?"

"No."

"What would you like me to use?"

"Not your hand," Audra said quickly.

"Too personal." Saxon smiled again. "I get it. But what then? Do you like paddles, do you like switches, do you like straps?"

"Beaded squid," Audra blurted, and flamed red again. Her face was actually throbbing, it was so hot.

Saxon gave her another of those comforting smiles. "Okay."

Okay? Okay?!? What was she saying?! She didn't even know what the hell a beaded squid was! Something very much like panic was closing in around her heart, stabbing out every other thought and feeling and then--

And then what?

Audra raised her head, suddenly calm, and saw not her Master, but just another man. He was no longer imposing. His questions were just washed-out words. Paddles, switches, straps... squids... same difference. She'd forgotten the most elemental thing.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

Saxon would have had to be blind and deaf not to notice the change in her. His brows crashed together, and he stared into her with piercing intensity. Then, cautiously, he echoed, "Doesn't matter? You mean you don't care?"

"Of course, I care," she said, but dully. She felt tired. "But that doesn't matter either."

Saxon leaned back and frowned at her. Slowly, ominously, a change washed over his entire being, transforming him by dim degrees from simple island doctor to the great god Odin. "Did someone hurt you?" he asked, a quiet roll of thunder.

There was real concern in the way he searched her face. Audra smiled, genuinely touched. "No," she said. "But you're sweet."

Saxon continued to frown at her as he faded back into normal, perplexed dimensions. "I'm not getting you," he said.

Bitter humor was the only thing Audra could seem to feel, and she found herself parroting back something the Griffin always said whenever someone said that to her: "Nobody does, baby, I'm like the wind."

Saxon stared at her, openly astonished.

Audra smiled at him, but she said nothing more.

Chapter Thirteen

*** *A Big Bowl of Bitch Flakes* ***

A major downside to this vacation was waking up in all these different beds. Audra woke up for the first time in Saxon's room thinking she was back with Cowboy because the alarm went off, which could only mean that she was trying to sneak out somewhere ahead of him. She rolled swiftly over to swat it, to the effect that she unthinkingly hurled herself off the little cot at the foot of Saxon's bed and thumped heavily to the floor.

"You okay?" Saxon was standing over her in an instant, helping detangle her from her sheets.

"You have such a nice carpet," she replied, and immediately understood that this was probably what Virgil felt like his whole life.

"Thanks...I think." Apparently satisfied that she had not broken any bones or bruised a spleen, Saxon stood back from her and combed his beard out straight with his fingers. "You really don't have to be up this early just because I am."

"That's all right," she assured him, still lying on the floor. "I'm kind of an early riser."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged. "You wanna cook up some coffee and pull a breakfast together while I'm making myself pretty?"

"Do I want to?" Audra echoed, amused.

Saxon grinned at her. "Hey, I didn't pillage you just for your good looks." He ruffled her hair as he passed by in the direction of the shower. "Although I could have. Nothin' cuter than bedhead first thing in the morning."

That was a matter of opinion, Audra mused, watching Saxon's back hair sway as he strolled away, but it was an opinion she kept to herself because he really was a nice guy. Definitely the nicest of the three she'd had so far. Her next Master couldn't possibly be any nicer.

The kitchen was an orderly arrangement of bachelor's chaos. The coffee was in the freezer, along with some ice cubes, a bottle of Vodka, and a bag of fudgcicles. There was a post-it note stuck to the fudgcicles sternly informing any on-lookers that these had NO NUTRITIVE VALUE!!! Bread and eggs were in the fridge, along with a bottle of orange juice, two bottles of beer, some ketchup, and three pairs of clean jockey shorts.

By the time she had the eggs scrambled and the toast buttered, Saxon was padding into the kitchen with a towel around his waist. He helped himself to a swig of juice straight from the bottle, stepped into a pair of shorts, and said, "Mmm, coffee!" before padding away. When Audra found plates and cups and finished setting them out on the table, he was back, in sky-blue pirate regalia and with beard neatly braided.

"Want to come to work with me?" he asked, wagging his blond brows at her. "I could get you a little cushion to sit on, maybe get Thrush to embroider your name on it. She's got a Singer sewing machine, should take her less than--"

"No, thank you," Audra interrupted. "It's sweet, but not necessary."

"Oh. Okay." Saxon ignored the utensils she'd set out, transforming his toast into a scrambled-egg shovel with an efficiency that bespoke much practice. "Well, I'll get you the cushion anyway. You'll look so cute sitting there under my Type II Diabetes poster."

"No offense, but that sounds really boring."

"How could I possibly be offended?" he muttered after a pause. "But you ought to know that my shift doesn't end until noon, and it usually takes me a few minutes to get my act together and actually leave."

"That's fine."

Saxon finished eating in silence, drank off his coffee, and then said, as though there had never been a lag in the conversation, "At three, I'm going

to take you to a seminar on top-bottom communication, so keep that part of your day free."

"Okay."

"And I want you to think about something while I'm gone, Pearl," he added, brushing crumbs from his beard. "My pride can handle a hit. But that doesn't mean I have to be happy about watching you set me up to fail you."

Stung, Audra recoiled in her chair. "I'm not--" she began.

"Yes, you are. And it's not fair to either of us. I believe you when you say you want to be here." He paused, his brow beetling slightly. "God knows why, but I do. All I'm saying is, maybe you need to think about what you want to take away from this experience and how you want to go about it, because time is ticking away and none of us are mind-readers. You have to give me something."

Audra looked at the table-top and did not answer. Her face felt hot. Her breakfast was lead in her stomach.

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad," Saxon said gently. "But I'm going to spank you tonight, and I want you to feel something."

"So do I," Audra whispered. A single tear slicked from her eye.

"Good." Saxon reached out and smoothed the moisture into her cheek. "Good. I'll see you sometime after noon. Have a good day."

Audra nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She continued to sit hunched at the table long after Saxon was gone.

Audra sat in the shade of the tallest stone, her stone, combing out a length of her hair with her fingers over and over. She could hear people laughing, shrieking, slapping away on each other, playing tennis...but all of these were as meaningful to her as the images on a TV set in the window of someone else's house. She was just passing time,

and the garden was a good a place to do that as any other.

"Hey." The Griffin came out of nowhere and plopped down beside her in the shade. "I'm in absolutely no danger of getting to like this place, in case you were curious."

"How's the new guy?" Audra asked, pushing her well-combed hair over her shoulder.

"The knowledge," Griffin mused, "that I could make that man cry in under two minutes if I wanted to is a damned heavy burden, Pearl."

"I bet it is."

"His name's Bennu. As in, the Phoenix of Egypt. Or more accurately, the Phoenix of Judson Scott's incredibly short career, because I'm pretty sure the real Bennu was a chick."

"The Egyptian gods were real?"

"Oh, you know what I mean!" The Griffin slapped at Audra's arm like she was swatting a mosquito. "So don't be a nuisance. I bet I could find fifty guys easy who would be willing to put your sassy ass in its place."

Audra was beginning to feel distinctly cheerful. "I'll bet you could."

"Actually, Bennu's a little...adrift, to be honest," Griffin remarked, squinting in an unfocused way at her own thoughts. "He must have mortgaged his damn house to afford me at the auction, and he was just incredibly thrilled when he won, but then he got me home and it's like he has no idea what to do now."

"He hasn't spanked you?"

"Of course he's spanked me. He gave me a five-minute endurance run with a mahogany paddle, followed up with an ice-water shower, and then laid me down on the bed and gave me a solid hour with a soft flail. Lady, in no small way, I am still getting spanked."

Audra stared at her friend, distantly but distinctly envious. "What did it feel like?" she asked.

"The paddle?" Jenna considered the question carefully. "Five minutes is hard time," she said finally. "Or maybe I'm just not used to it, although God knows the Prof did everything in his power to introduce me. The first couple of whacks you think, 'Okay, that hurts.' Then you think, 'It hurts, but I can take it,' and you think that for about five more whacks. Then you realize that you can't take it, nor should you have to, because it feels exactly like a million bees are stinging you right on the ass over and over and nobody should have to feel like they have to take that. So you get angry and you fight, and that is your Master's cue to go faster and get creative about targeting, and it turns into this game of who wears out first and you lose. You lose every time. Pretty soon, you are exhausted and that paddle is still banging away, and you don't even scream any more, you just lie there and let it sink into your bones, and this is not," Jenna stressed, "the same as 'taking it', because you are not 'taking' anything, you're just too tired to fight. Then at some point, he quits, and you get about two seconds of relief before it suddenly feels like someone has poured gasoline over your ass and lit it on fire.

"Of course," the Griffin went on lightly, "at this point, I was hustled in for my ice water shower. My nipples were bugging out to *here*! My fingernails were turning *blue*! My *eyeballs* were shrinking, but my ass felt great!"

Audra grinned.

"But!" Jenna shrugged her shoulders elaborately. "Bennu put an end to it eventually and marched me back to the bed, where I had to lie down with a pillow under my hips and by this time, to be honest, it's not that bad. Like having a little too much Ben Gay rubbed on you, only in a socially-awkward area. Oh, it still hurt, but as long as nothing was touching it, it's only kinda pleasantly warm. Well, anyway, here comes the soft flail, which is pretty much a length of PVC pipe wrapped

in rabbit fur and filled with sand, attached to a bicycle handlebar with four or five links of chain in-between, okay?"

"Okay."

"He whaps that into me and it makes this little 'phud' sound, but it feels like someone has gloved their hand in hornets and then punched me in the ass-cheek. And don't tell me that would hurt the puncher more than me, 'cuz I ain't hearing it. I can't imagine that the soft flail could ever be used for punishment on its own, but it made a great follow up to that damn paddle. One solid hour. Ay carumba."

"So that's what you call 'Doesn't know what to do with you', huh?"

"Bennu didn't think of that," Jenna said, looking surprised. "He's got this friend, Mistress Isis, who hangs out with him all day and tells him what to do. About everything. Honestly, it's like he's interning for her."

"And how long would it take you to make her cry?" Audra teased.

The Griffin was quiet while she considered the question. "She hasn't shown me any buttons to push," she said at last. "I'd have to beat her up instead, and I'm still not sure she'd cry. That bitch is meaner than I am."

"That's hard to imagine."

"S'true, though." Griffin glanced at her. "Shall we go find Claymore?"

"I already looked for him. I couldn't find him anywhere."

"He's in Master classes. It gets out pretty soon." Jenna stood up, giving Audra a glimpse of cherry-red ass bisected by a snow-white thong before she turned around. She held out her hand, pulled Audra easily to her feet, and then clapped her on the shoulder with a smile. "Anyway, I feel like crashing a party."

"They won't let us in," Audra pointed out. "We're dressed like Submissives."

"Yeah." Jenna plucked at the neckline of her slave tunic, frowning. "That is a problem...but only a little one. I got lots of clothes. Come on."

It was a short walk from the garden to Jenna's new cabin, which was in the second row and therefore had spectacular views of the other rows of cabins. Jenna unlocked her door, took one step inside, and then stopped so suddenly that Audra crashed into the back of her.

"Well, don't just stand there!" a woman snapped. "Either get in or go out!"

The Griffin went in, but she had lost her sense of humor. Audra tried to stay in her shadow, unseen, but the door had scarcely swung shut when the woman spoke again.

"I saw you at the auction, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am," the Griffin said stiffly.

"Not you." A gloved hand dropped over Griffin's shoulder and shoved her away so that Audra could not hide. The woman who stared her down was taller than Jenna, but her height was augmented by her stiletto boots. Her hair was raven-black and razor-straight, but that and her pointed chin were all that Audra could make out of her features; the rest were hidden behind a black mask. She was a little on the chubby side, but her curves were made severe in a tight casing of leather.

Isis looked Audra up and down, her mouth twisted with clear dissatisfaction. "You were talking to that...that Claymore fellow," she said. "I hadn't realized you knew each other."

For no reason at all, Audra let a lie spring to her lips. "My Master knew him. Cowboy."

Isis made a hissy little grunt that might have meant anything. Her black-clad fingers drummed on her full hips. "And how do you know our fine young Griffin?"

"We met on the ship." Audra's face slid into that well-practiced expression of guilelessness that had always worked so well at getting time off for

imaginary doctor's appointments. "She let me borrow a hairbrush."

Isis narrowed her dark eyes behind her mask. "Griffin doesn't own a personal hairbrush."

"That's because I have it." Audra didn't blink, but inwardly, she was deeply annoyed with Jenna. Who the heck goes on a three-week vacation without a hairbrush?

"What would you call that, Bennu?" Isis demanded.

For the first time, Audra's gaze skipped past Isis and lit on the man who was Griffin's Master. He had opted to wear Tesoro's Dom-costume, and he was scarily good-looking in it--blonde and chiseled and gorgeous. And as Jenna had said, he was somewhat...adrift.

"I'd call it...unprepared?"

"So would I. Get our Griffin a hairbrush." Isis never took her eyes from Audra.

Bennu stepped into the other room and returned at once with a wide wooden-backed brush. The bristles were almost incidental; the brush had only one purpose and it had nothing at all to do with the head. Bennu stood alongside Jenna and waited, the brush raised and ready.

"Now give it to her," Isis suggested. "Say, twenty times. Perhaps that will teach our Griffin to take better care of her things."

Audra tore her eyes away before she had to watch Jenna bend for punishment. It was hard enough to listen to the dull pop of wood on flesh, but she absolutely refused to be an audience as well. Meeting Isis' hooded, knowing gaze without flinching was no easier. When Jenna's breath began to come in gasps and hoarse cries, Audra broke and looked at her own feet instead.

"Now brush her hair," Isis said, once the sound of paddling had ceased. "She looks disheveled. And out of curiosity--" The gloved hand hooked Audra's chin and forced her to look up again. "Why are you here?"

"I...I came to borrow some...." Audra's mind floundered. "Panties!"

Isis didn't even blink. "Well, well, you didn't come at all prepared, did you? I see your gold tag," she went on, giving it a contemptuous flick with her fingers. "But I simply cannot allow this woeful lack of foresight to stand. Remind me to apologize to Cowboy when I bring you back to him." She held out her hand, and the hairbrush appeared there as if by magic.

It wouldn't hurt, or at least, it couldn't do any more harm than any other spanking, but somehow the thought of being paddled by this woman was repellent to Audra. "I'm not with Cowboy anymore," she blurted. Her hands darted behind her back, and her thumb found the recessed stone of her panic button, and prepared to press. "I belong to Dr. Saxon now."

Isis slowly lowered the hairbrush and tapped it against her thigh. "I see. Well. You've won yourself a short reprieve, but I'm sure he'll see fit to punish you himself, once I've seen him. Bennu!"

With that, Isis stalked away, throwing the brush into the nearest corner on her way out. The door slammed open--a phenomenon Audra had always believed unique to Jenna--then shut, and then they were alone.

"What'd I tell you?" The Griffin marched stiffly into the bedroom and began rifling through a closet. Her bottom was red, shiny, as though literally polished by the brush. "Total bitch. Sits down every morning to a two heaping bowls of bitch flakes as part of this complete breakfast. Bitch. Here, put this on."

A bikini top and scarf-skirt struck Audra in the chest, and she caught and cradled them instinctively. "I'm sorry I got you in trouble."

"I'd have gotten in trouble if you'd come here to borrow a cup of life-saving insulin." Jenna stripped off her slave-tunic in one angry motion. "It's like she goes into physical withdrawal if she can't slap

an ass every 15 minutes." She stepped into a pair of jeans, yanked them up with a hiss and a curse, and topped herself off with a silver bustier and a pair of leather armbands. "Ready?" she demanded, turning.

Audra dressed hurriedly. "My underwear's showing."

"It's supposed to--Oh for Christ's sake, you can't go around flashing 'Princess' panties when you're a Dom!" Jenna swooped on her closet again and threw a silky scrap of underwear out at Audra. "Hurry up. Virgil's class'll be letting out any minute."

"Gosh, looks like Isis wasn't the only person filling up on bitch flakes this morning."

Jenna laughed, her anger defusing instantly. "Don't knock 'em. They're crunchy and delicious, and contain eight essential vitamins and minerals. Shall we go?"

As they walked back towards Tesoro's main buildings, Audra said, "Have you given any more thought to the matter of the waterfall?"

"Yep. What's more, I have a plan. But we'll need Virgil's bed, and more to the point, we'll need to lose the Masked Marvellette and her Boy Blunder. I swear those two are actually following me around. It's like she's half blue-tick bloodhound."

"I'm sorry, did you say 'Virgil's bed'?"

"Yup. We can't use yours because there's no way we can sneak it out of the Staff residences, and we can't use mine because my Master and his pal Cuddles are constantly skipping in and out of my cabin. That leaves Virgil, who is, to the best of my knowledge, still unattached."

"Sneak it out?"

"Is there an echo on this island? Look lady, the whole point of going to find Virgil is so I don't have to spell this plan out twice. So stop asking me questions."

"Boy," Audra mock-marveled. "You had those bitch flakes with a full glass of bitch juice!"

Jenna tossed her a grin. "Eight ounces a day, baby. Keeps you regular."

Topping 101 was being held in the Rotunda, in Seminar Room 6. The doors were propped open, clearly inviting the curiosity of passers-by as well as providing a mandatory service for unfortunates like Virgil. Griffin and Audra slipped inside and made their way unobtrusively to where their friend sat despondently taking notes.

"Hey stud," Jenna whispered, sliding into the seat beside him.

"Hey," he said listlessly, and then performed a flawless double-take. "What are you doing here dressed like that?" he hissed.

"We're in disguise."

"Disguise my ass! The whole freakin' island knows who you are, Griffin!"

"So what have we learned?" the blonde Dom at the podium asked brightly. "What are the main elements of Topping? You, the chatty fellow in the fifth row?"

Virgil jumped, flushing pink to the roots of his hair, and awkwardly cleared his throat. "Topping, um, is about control and, uh, communication?"

"That's right. It's about reading signals and conducting a living fantasy in a safe and comfortable setting. And we all do this in a number of different ways, of course...."

Virgil sank back into his seat, rubbing at his eyes. "I swear, one day--"

"Griffin has a plan," Audra interrupted. "I don't know the details, but it involves sneaking off to bed with you."

Virgil slowly drew back and elevated both eyebrows almost completely off his head. "Okay, I'll admit you've piqued my interest."

"So I'll see you all tomorrow," the teacher called. "After which, a select few of you will be reassigned to your new Submissives."

Griffin glanced around, frowning, as the students rose to go in the usual clamor. "Already? That's gonna pinch our timeline."

"What is this plan?" Virgil asked, giving Griffin's arm a shake to regain her attention.

"In it's simplest form? We're going to rappel down the falls and swing through the water into the cave."

There was a moment of silence, and then Virgil leaned back and fixed Griffin with an expression of mock awe. "Wow. Sheer brilliance. I hope you leave your brain to science."

"What are we rappelling down on?" Audra asked, more sensibly. "I seem to have left my bat-belt on my kitchen counter."

"I have a bat-belt," Virgil said, perking right up. "I built it in shop class, but it still fits. It's got a batarang and a flashlight and a walkie-talkie and a little tube for cookies--"

"We're going to use rope," Griffin said firmly. "From the gift shop. And some good clips and eyehooks. Just tell the guy behind the counter you want to tie me up and suspend me from the ceiling, he'll set you up."

"Why me?" Virgil asked.

"Because you built a bat-belt," Griffin said, looking pained. "And I have to punish you for that."

"Plus, you brought money," Audra pointed out.

"It's just...." Virgil was starting to blush again. "I don't want the guy in the gift shop to think I'm a weirdo."

"Come on, Claymore, look around. The only weirdoes here are the ones who *aren't* buying sex toys." Jenna raked her fingers through her hair and then began again. "Once you have the rope and stuff, go back to your cabin and take the bed apart."

"Excuse me?"

"These are hotel beds," Jenna explained. "Just a couple of heavy-duty sidebars hooked to a head-and footboard. They pull free fairly easily, and you

can adjust the length of the bars with pins. Your job, Claymore, is to take one of those sidebars, slide it together to its shortest dimensions, and then bring it and the rope and stuff out to the falls. At a casual glance, you're just another Master with a wicked-looking implement out to make a rendezvous in the woods."

"Oh, I see." Virgil was looking off at the far wall. "We're going to make a block and tackle. Then I climb down--"

"I climb down," Griffin corrected. "I've done a little rock climbing before. More to the point, you're a man. Men have more upper body strength and if I get in a pinch, I'm going to need you to keep me from plummeting to my death. Even if I don't do any death-plummeting, I'll need you and your superior upper body strength to haul treasure out of that cave once I've found it."

"And put it where?" Audra asked.

"Anywhere, for the time being. The point is to speedily remove it from the falls so that no one happens across us while we're using a block and tackle."

"What am I doing all this time?" Audra asked.

"You have the most important job of all," Griffin said solemnly. "You are going to park yourself up the path and keep lookout."

"You know, I think our cover's going to be good and blown if I suddenly shout, 'Someone's coming, hide the gold!'"

"Yeah, that's why you're going to say, 'Please sir, may I have a spanking?' instead," Jenna countered. "Then you'll have a reason to get all screamy and warn us."

"Genius," Virgil declared.

"I can't do that." Audra's hand rose to her collar. "I'm a gold. I can't go around begging spankings off strangers."

"You can borrow my tag."

"What if it's a Sub who finds me?" Audra asked.

"Say you're using a new paddle and you're nervous about giving it to your Master until you know how it feels."

"I don't have a new paddle."

"Claymore," Jenna sighed.

"I'll buy you a paddle," Virgil assured her. "A big scary one, so you'll have plenty to be nervous about."

Audra's fingers were still wrapped around her collar. "But I have a class at three," she said weakly.

"We've got plenty of time," Jenna answered, without even glancing at the clock.

It was just after one.

"It still seems a little overcomplicated," Audra said finally.

"No, it doesn't," argued Virgil. "It's a brilliant plan. The only thing that could possibly improve it is a double row of mutant lobsters taking the treasure out to sea for us."

Jenna stared at Virgil for a long time before turning to say, "Better overcomplicated and successful than oversimplified and screwed. This is going to work. Are you in or not?"

She knew she shouldn't.

"I'm in," she said.

Chapter Fourteen

*** *Paddled First, Punished Later* ***

Being a lookout was boring.

The trails leading to the falls that poured out of Isla Tesoro's artisan well saw plenty of traffic in the cool early morning and again at dusk, but during the heat of the afternoon, the guests were prone to escape to places with air conditioning. Audra couldn't think of anyone who would actually prefer a long hike up a steeply winding path when it was ninety-four degrees outside when they could be milling around the climate-controlled Rotunda, sipping fruity ices and winning door prizes at the never-ending spank party that Tesoro provided. She didn't really think she was going to meet anyone out here at all.

The paddle that Virgil bought was nearly three feet long. The handle was a masterpiece of ergonomic design, shaped to accommodate a one- or two-handed grip, and padded in some space-age material that would not become slick when sweaty. The blade was broad enough to cover the entire bottom of virtually anyone. One side of the paddle was smooth, lacquered in black and then hand-painted with hot pink and yellow flames. The other side, God help her, had a few dozen shallowly-protruding steel nubs.

It was, all hats off to Virgil, the scariest paddle Audra could even imagine. In fact, the scariest thing about it, in Audra's opinion, was the artist's efforts to make it feminine. That pink. Those soft, curly flames. Those *huge* steel nubs.

She was lurking at a curved point on the path. From here, she could not see the falls, but she could hear them, could even hear Jenna's "Not so fast, dammit!" as the hand-crafted block and tackle was put into use. From here, Audra could also see a hundred feet down the trail, and if she walked a little further out along the curve and knew where to

look, she could peer through the trees and make out part of the roofs of the third row of cabins.

She spent a lot of time walking back and forth along the curve, first nervously scanning the trail for hikers, and then dropping back to watch her friends at work. She was curiously fascinated by them, by the way they looked from a distance.

Virgil, at the top of the falls, had his shirt off. His body was nicely bronzed by a week in the Caribbean. From here, she couldn't tell how tall or skinny he was. From here, the man had bulging biceps and a lean six-pack slab of a stomach narrowing down into hips neatly packaged by Tesoro's black pirate pants. From here, the man was a man. Scrawny Virgil. Imagine that.

And Jenna, rappelling down the rock face in her silver bustier and skin-tight jeans, only emphasized the changes Time had wrought since high school. The top-heavy teenager with the hard-edged, hungry look had been replaced by a woman with generous curves and fluid grace.

Audra found her hand (the one not holding an enormous pink-and-black paddle) lightly brushing over the dimensions of her own body. She didn't feel any different. She was the only one who hadn't changed. And so she retreated all the way around the curve of the path where she couldn't see her friends at all.

To her astonishment, she saw somebody coming up the path. He was in GoLites and Tommy Bahamas, well-equipped with packs and canteens and even a hunting knife in case he were set upon by cannibals, and he looked one hundred percent committed to hiking the hell out of this trail. He was a Master, and a silver, and he stopped in his tracks when he saw her.

Audra shouldered her mighty paddle and gave the skirt of her skimpy outfit a discreet tug, wondering how to begin. "Hi," she said, figuring that was always a good start.

Behind her, Virgil's voice rose to be heard over the roar of water: "I said, hurry up and get in!"

"Don't rush me, Skinny!" Jenna hollered back. "I'm not getting stuck just to make you happy!"

Audra pasted on a huge smile and said, "I have always fantasized about getting spanked in the great outdoors."

The hiker's eyes darted to her throat, where Jenna's silver tag dangled from Audra's collar. "Oh yeah?"

Virgil unleashed a manly scream of pain, and punctuated it with, "Not so damn fast, okay?"

"What's going on back there?" the hiker asked curiously.

Audra's mind blanked. She opened her mouth and out popped, "Anal play."

"How deep does this thing go?" Jenna demanded of the world at large.

"Let's go over here a little more," Audra suggested, threading her arm through the hiker's and leading him back along the trail. "I'm Pearl, by the way."

"Oh. I'm Scout." The hiker gave up craning his neck and trying to see around the bend in the path and focused on her again. "So...about this fantasy of yours?"

For a moment, Audra only blinked at him. Fantasy? What fantasy? Oh, that fantasy! "Well, I've always wanted to be obvious," she hedged. "Just to be loud and...visible...and outdoors where anyone could see me. I want to...to hug a tree and scream all I want and be...." She looked down at the paddle in her hands, turning it over and over so she could see the fluffy pink flames and then the steel nubs. "Can I tell you the truth?" she asked suddenly.

Scout looked at her guardedly. "Sure."

"I don't really have any idea what I should be saying to win you over," she said. "But I would really like it if you spanked me very hard with this

paddle. Right now. Right here." She reached out and patted the side of the nearest tree trunk.

Scout rubbed his chin and looked her over, and then finally shrugged out of his pack and tossed it on the ground. "Oh what the hell," he said. "I've always wondered what it would feel like to be a *girl's fantasy*."

Figured. The one guy Audra ever tried to seduce....

She relinquished the paddle and unwrapped her scarf-skirt, then found a friendly palm tree to hold on to. She looked up at the sky, azure and perfect behind a green lace of leaves, and felt the breeze slide along parts of her unused to exposure. As bizarre as it was, she actually thought she might be more comfortable if she were all the way naked than as she was now, in Jenna's bikini top and Jenna's panties. She asked Scout if he'd mind.

"It's your fantasy," he said, sounding amused.

It was her fantasy, wasn't it? Audra stripped out of her borrowed clothing and hugged the tree again. The bark was rough as crocodile skin, not that she had any experience hugging reptiles, but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. And there really was a thrill to being out in nature in the buff; she could feel the sun, the shade, the air. She found herself relaxing, beginning to enjoy herself, even to forget the real reason for being here. She gripped the tree for balance and lifted onto her toes, thrusting out her bottom for the paddle.

Scout stroked her nether cheeks, but they were impersonal touches, meant to center them both, to ground them in their roles. His hands were soft in places, scoured her in others; she ached, she itched, she was numb, but it all helped at least to waken her senses and give her some mental image of herself.

"Hit me," she said through numb lips. "I want to feel."

In the open air, the paddle could not CRACK when it struck her. It hit with a POP instead, a

curiously hollow sound for such a solid impact. Her hips were knocked forward, and a scream tore from her, but she was smiling. She could feel the hurt of it in four-five-six distinct places, stinging and burning and sinking deep inside her.

"Oh thank you," she groaned. "Again!"

The paddle popped obediently, opening her up to more screaming, and the screaming was just as liberating as the act of undressing. She could be as loud as she wanted. She was naked on a tropical island, and she wasn't going to shock anyone. The paddle swung and swung, thrusting her hips forward for her as she gave throat with gleeful abandon to all her pain, pain that was steadily crowding out all other lying sensations and making an honest and complete woman out of her. She had never felt so female, so wanton and wild.

"Yes!" she screamed. She thought she might be crying, but it felt wonderful. Oh, it hurt, and the hurt was not magically invisible just because she was so happy, but the hurt was only the surface. Underneath was where she reveled, underneath was where pain and pleasure interbraided. It was her own heart, unfolding and filling her, made bigger and brighter with every swing of the paddle.

"Slower," she begged. She was burning all over already, afraid of overloading her internal switches and plummeting herself into nothingness. "Be careful! Make me feel it!"

Scout laughed at her choice of words, but he obeyed her, measuring out his swing and taking more precise aim.

After that, Audra did not try to speak. The only word within her power to say was, "Yes!" and she screamed it with abandon, letting the paddle conduct her in and out of thought. But at last, despite her efforts at pacing herself, her scrambled senses lost their focus. The numbness came, all at once, a blankness of body with only a memory of pain to remind her of where she stood in space.

She slid down the tree trunk slowly, a sad, sweet smile still frozen on her lips. If Scout was as lost in time as she, his next whack would catch her in the back of the head, but of course, Scout was the Master of this fantasy. He leaned the paddle up beside her, knelt in the sandy soil, and put his arms around her.

Safe. So safe. She couldn't feel any more, but it was still good to know.

"How was that?" Scout asked, stroking her hair.

"Fine," she said, and because that sounded so woefully inadequate, she gave him a huge grin and an enthusiastic, "Great!" that made her sound a lot like a demented Tony the Tiger. When was she going to learn to just rub her ass and wince?

Audra pulled away from him, disguising her awkwardness with the already-awkward ritual of redressing. "It was a wonderful fantasy," she said, and meant it. She gave him a perfectly chaste kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

"Everything all right here?"

It was Virgil's voice, and when Audra turned around, he and Jenna were walking towards them. Jenna was soaking wet and flushed with equal parts exertion and frustration. Virgil was limping.

All at once, Scout became incredibly flustered, actually hemming incoherently as he tried simultaneously to shrug into his backpack and shake Audra's hand goodbye.

'Anal play,' Audra thought, suddenly recalling the excuse she'd used to get them away from the falls. It was very hard to keep a straight face when Scout's eyes dropped to Jenna's hand, where the iron sidebar of Virgil's bed dangled. Scout stammered to a gape-mouthed stop and he just stared.

Jenna followed the direction of his gaze, and hefted the bar. Looking puzzled, she gave Virgil a solid tap to the chest with the source of Scout's discomfiture. "Go take care of this," she ordered.

"And then find me some forceps, a hair drier, and a tube of Ben Gay."

Scout's eyes were now enormous.

"Kay." Virgil took a moment to rearrange his duffel bag and sidebar, and then jogged off.

"What, ah..." Scout swallowed hard and started over. "What are you up to?"

Jenna blinked her raptor's eyes. "I'm going to suspend him from the ceiling and do unspeakable things to his naked body," she said, utterly deadpan.

Audra could feel herself starting to smile.

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" Scout asked, somewhat hoarsely.

Jenna leaned back on her heels and just looked at him for a while. At last, she opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, there was a sharp:

"*What* are you doing out here dressed like *that*?!"

All three of them jumped and spun to see Isis striding toward them, Bennu close behind her.

"And where is your collar?" Isis demanded.

Jenna didn't flinch, but Audra's hand darted guiltily to her neck and closed on her borrowed tag.

Isis noticed, and behind the mask, her eyes narrowed. "Move your hand," she ordered.

"Piss off, lady, she doesn't belong to you," the Griffin shot back.

"Been fun," Scout said cheerily. "Must be going! See you around," he added hopefully, to Griffin alone.

Isis let him go. She had her prey trapped in her sights already. "Move your hand," she said again, and unhooked a whippy switch from her belt.

"I said, she doesn't belong to you," the Griffin snarled.

"If her tag is still gold, she has nothing to fear." Isis whisked the switch through the air. "But as far as belonging goes, you would do well to remember who you belong to. Bennu, your Pet demands

attention. Take her back to the cabin. Five sets of ten with the cane, I think, and in between, two strokes with the martinet and three minutes under a hot shower. Go. Now move your hand, girl."

The Griffin backed up, her movements hard and wooden, like those of a statue brought clumsily to life by an inept magician. On her face was a fury of helplessness.

"Go on," Audra said with a sigh, and moved her hand. "This is Griffin's tag," she admitted. "Not mine."

"And where is yours?" The switch danced in the air, twitching like the tail of a hunting cat.

It was in Virgil's duffel bag, but there was no way she was dragging him into this, too. "I left it with a friend," she said.

"Why did you take it off at all?"

"I wanted a spanking from a stranger, and I'm a gold," Audra answered, and waited.

Isis flicked her eyes at the Griffin. "What are you still doing here? Bennu, take your Pet!" Her gaze came back to Audra. "Who is your Master? Dr. Saxon, was it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well." The switch tapped the air again and then Isis clipped it once more to her belt. "I think you have quite a lot to tell him, don't you?"

Audra's heart sank. "Yes, ma'am."

"I think that I'll come with you. Bear testament to your honesty, as it were. We already know how your ethics tend to slide when you are unsupervised." Isis caught Audra's arm and propelled her down the path, dragging her like the disobedient Pet she was back to her Master.

"Okay," said Saxon, once he'd seen Isis to the door and shut it. "Let me just...let me get this straight. You blew me off this morning, you stood me up at the seminar, and you took off your gold tag so you could get spanked by a total stranger?"

He swung around and faced her, his pale eyes shiny with anger and wounded pride. "Is it going to shock you when I say that's unacceptable?"

Audra shook her head. She was seated at the table, knees together, hands tightly folded. She felt utterly miserable.

"Did you see it as some kind of challenge when I said my pride could take the hit?" Saxon demanded. "Or are you just one-upping yourself in the way you treat your partners?"

She shook her head again.

"I read your file. I know this is your first time here, but the rules aren't exactly hard to follow."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?! I'm on Staff here! You made a damn fool out of me today! This is all fun and games for you, but this is my job! Guests are going to hear about this! They're going to talk about it for years!"

"Are you releasing me?" Audra asked shakily.

"Is that what you were angling for?" he shot back.

"No, I just...I just made a mistake and lost track of time. I didn't mean to make you so m-mad!" Her voice broke and the sobs burst out of her. Audra covered her face and let it all go. "I'm sorry!" she wailed.

Saxon stood over her, looming, glowering, letting her cry without making any effort to touch or otherwise comfort her. Her sobs tapered to sniffles, but she kept herself hidden behind her hands, ashamed to look him in the eye. He deserved better than her, she kept thinking. He was the nicest Master she'd had so far, and he deserved a whole lot better than her.

"It is the strangest thing," he growled, pacing a slow circle around her. "In spite of everything, I genuinely believe you weren't deliberately trying to insult me. So I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to give you a chance to regain my trust."

He finished this ominous statement again standing in front of her, and then his huge hand closed like shackles around her wrist. "You want to know what it feels like to be a silver?" he demanded, towing her relentlessly toward the door. "You want to get a thorough spanking from a total stranger? Well, okay, Pearl. Your wish is my command!"

"W-wait!" she stammered, stumbling as she struggled to keep up with his angry pace.

He didn't wait, but he did yank her to him and throw her over his shoulder before resuming his furious stride. Every Staff member they passed in the upper floor stopped what they were doing to watch Saxon carry his Pet away like pillaged goods, and by the time he banged down the stairwell to the ground floor, they had attracted more than a dozen followers. That number swelled to three or four dozen as Saxon hauled her through the Rotunda and down the hall to a room that had caught Audra's eye on the first day she'd arrived.

There was a brass plaque just to the right of the door Saxon kicked open, and that plaque read: Whipping Post. Audra grappled with Saxon's shoulders, not struggling so much as trying to see what awaited her, but his response was to send three short, sharp swats against her bottom, catching her by pure coincidence in one of her true-sensation patches, so that she arched up into thin air with a shriek of mingled surprise and pain.

In the next instant, she was swinging through space and set roughly on her feet, with Saxon's ice blue eyes glaring down into the roots of her soul. "If you have something to say," he said, very quietly. "Say it now. We didn't have time to set up a safeword. All you have to tell me now is 'no'. But you'd better say it fast."

Audra stood trembling before him, both hands rubbing at her bottom. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I deserve this."

"I don't know what you deserve," Saxon shot back, his face breaking to reveal his baffled frustration. "But this is what you're getting!"

His hands closed around her waist. She was picked up as easily as a doll and set with a thump onto a raised dais, and then turned so that she faced a smooth wooden post, and beyond that, the open door and the multitude of on-lookers who had followed them here. Saxon seized her arms and pulled them up over her head. Her wrists were locked into iron cuffs, which clamped down on her almost to the point of pain. The cuffs were separated by a two-foot bar, which hung from a huge iron ring secured to the very top of the whipping post. Once she was secured, Saxon retreated to a hand crank and took the slack out of the chain so that Audra was captured at the very brink of suspension.

Jenna's borrowed scarf-skirt was pulled free with one quick yank, and Jenna's borrowed panties went next. Audra's face flamed with humiliation and she had to bite her lips hard to keep from crying out at the unfairness of it. She supposed she couldn't really claim she was a modest person, not anymore, but she didn't want to be here like this in front of all these people! There were people she sort of knew, people she vaguely recognized from 'around' anyway, laughing and nudging each other as she was readied for punishment.

"I don't imagine," Saxon said loudly, as he crossed the room to a curtained wall, "that there is anyone here who doesn't know what this woman has done. That said, I'm sure there are many Masters who would very much like to express a few thoughts." He seized the corner of the curtain and flung it back, revealing a twenty-foot wall covered entirely in implements of torture--paddles, whips, straps, canes, rods, switches, fans of reeds, coils of hose, supple things, stiff things, things with beads and things with studs, and things Audra could not begin to name. "Ladies and gentlemen," Saxon

growled, standing back and folding his arms heavily across his broad chest. "I invite your comments."

There was no reticence at all. There was, in fact, a rush of Masters taking first pick of the implements. Audra shrank against the whipping post as the first of them approached, eagerly swinging a length of bamboo as he came. She cringed, her buttocks clenching in miserable expectation. She was still stinging from Saxon's hand, still a little hot (and a little cold, a little itchy, a little everything) from the paddling she'd had from Scout. Even knowing that in a few minutes, she would be completely dead to all sensation gave her no comfort at all, and no courage. When the bamboo-wielding Master swung at her, the last shred of her self-control snapped and Audra bucked and wailed in panic.

She didn't feel the impact, although she knew it had happened when her hips slammed up against the post. But she felt the stripe of white-hot agony the cane left behind, burning into her like a branding iron. She yanked mindlessly at her restraints, and screamed again when the next blow fell, although she did not feel it or its effects at all. The sound of the cane was enough, the whalesong-like hooting as it cut through the air and then the hollow WHUP as it hit; the way her hips were shoved forward was enough, her body responding to a force outside of her direction, trying to escape the battering from behind by battering itself on something in front of it. The crowd was enough. They were all laughing and clapping and calling encouragement. No, she didn't need to feel the pain.

"Enough," Saxon ordered, when six cuts had fallen. "Next."

And 'next' was a dominatrix with a three-tailed whip of metal rings. They jingled when she shook the whip, screamed when she swung it, and struck with a uniquely metallic TANG! Audra felt it as cold the first time, but it was a searing scratch of frost

regardless, every bit as hellish as the heat of the cane. The second slap of the whip was invisible to her senses, but the third licked around her hips and touched her in a ticklish spot of such sensitivity that she kicked, screaming, away from it.

"Enough. Next. Where are you planning to put that?"

"Her thighs."

"Only one, then."

Audra moaned, squeezing her eyes shut so she wouldn't have to see what was so awful that Saxon only dared to let it swing once. Whatever it was, it split the air with a roar and slammed into her body with a bang equal only to cannon fire. The entire span of feeling flesh between her knees and buttocks came alive with horribly intermixed sensations and Audra shrieked again, kicking and stamping to try and restore herself to order.

After that was a switching, a count of twenty called out by the crowd as Audra hung panting in her restraints, able to feel only pen-thin slips and scratches of torment. But following that was some sort of strap, five blows laid to slightly overlap one another, and now the pain was beginning to flare up and consume all the rest of what she could feel, and Audra began to cry in great gasping breaths. She was completely powerless, completely subjugated.

Next was a wooden cane, ten blows. Next was a forked tawse, four cuts. Next was a small round paddle, only three. And next was the blessing of overload and dead flesh. Audra went completely limp, sobbing with relief, her face pressed hard against the whipping post to hide her humiliation from the crowd as faceless Masters continued to pepper her backside with blows.

"Enough!" Saxon called. "Enough."

This time, there was no 'next'. Audra felt slack come back into the chains that held her, and she huddled against the whipping post, shivering, until Saxon came and unlocked her. "I'm sorry I

embarrassed you," she whispered, her voice broken by tears.

Saxon sighed. He put his arms around her, his Viking-sized hug hiding her from the cheers of their audience and putting her into a world that was only her and him. "It's okay now," he said.

"You're a nice guy," she sobbed.

He made a sound, somewhere between a chuckle and a groan. "Thanks."

"Carry me upstairs?" she begged. "I can't walk."

"Yeah, you'll be feeling that for a few days, won't you?" Saxon put her over his shoulder again, but gently this time.

Audra clung to him and said nothing, felt nothing.

She wept.

Chapter Fifteen

*** Back to Class ***

Saxon's alarm went off at five-thirty again, and this time, Audra pretended to sleep through it. He stood over her cot a little while before he left the room, and came back after showering and eating to stand over her again, but she continued to feign sleep and eventually he left.

Alone, Audra reached around to brush her fingertips over the burning memories of yesterday's time at the whipping post. Touching herself turned the embers into itches. Audra rolled onto her stomach, hugged her pillow and cried herself back to sleep.

Saxon's, "Pearl, honey, on your feet," woke her for the second time.

She rolled over, her head cottony and heavy, and could not seem to make her eyes focus. Saxon's broad hands helped arrange her in a more or less upright position and then there was something cool and wet at her mouth. She drank, tasted oranges so tart it seemed to cut her mouth, and instantly felt more clear-headed.

"I hate to wake you. It's just real easy for tourists to get dehydrated," Saxon explained, stepping away from her.

"Thanks." Audra tried to swing her legs out and stand, but her lower body wouldn't move. She looked at herself helplessly, too ashamed to reach down and manipulate herself while Saxon was watching. "I'll drink as much ice water as you can pour for me if you'll give me a minute alone," she promised.

Saxon's brows drew together. He opened his mouth, closed it, sighed, and turned around.

Audra waited for the door to close, then picked up her legs one at a time and moved herself into a position ready to stand. She rubbed and massaged at herself until she woke feelings and could make

her brain recognize the useless lumps dangling from her lower half. She stood, flexed each leg carefully, and went out to join Saxon. "I didn't mean to sleep all day," she said by way of greeting.

"You don't look right to me," Saxon replied, his back to her as he filled a tumbler of ice with purified water. "I'm not sure it's really dehydration, but that's what I know how to fix, so...."

She took the water he held out to her and drank it.

He watched her the whole while, and then took the cup back and said, "But you don't look right. Why did you let me put you on the whipping post yesterday?"

She didn't want to have this conversation. She tried to turn away, but he caught her wrist and held her. Even then, she avoided his eyes, but when the sound of her own breathing became stifling, she gave up and said, "Because I deserved it."

"Why did you deserve it?"

Audra tugged weakly at her wrist, but he kept her pinned

Saxon released his hold on her but continued to stand too close, frowning down at her. "Most of the time, people like being taken to the post. It gives them a chance to get put right in a public venue. I'm told people find it very liberating."

Audra rubbed her wrist and said nothing.

"You were terrified," he said bluntly. "You were humiliated. Half the time, you were screaming before anyone even touched you. That is the worst thing I have ever seen anyone endure in all my years here. Tell me why you think you deserved that."

"Because you've been really nice to me, and I hurt you," she said. "I didn't mean to, exactly, but I knew I shouldn't have done it and I did it anyway. But not to hurt you, just...me and my friends were just...I just wasn't thinking."

"You and your friends, huh?" Saxon put a meaningful emphasis on the word 'friends', and

gave Audra a hard look. "Well, if they're trying to get you in trouble, maybe you should rethink your friendship."

"They weren't, we just...." Audra trailed off and looked away. "I thought you were supposed to forgive me after last night. Why do we have to keep talking about it?"

"Because I don't want it to happen again." Saxon crossed out of the kitchen area and over to the table, where a pink-blue-and-green Tesoro Gift Shoppe bag was waiting. He shook its contents out onto his palm and tossed it to her.

A brand new, shiny gold tag, with the name Pearl inscribed in delicate letters.

"Thanks," Audra said softly. She put it on, and set Jenna's silver tag on the kitchen counter.

"Look at me," Saxon commanded.

Unconsciously, Audra's hands crept to her belly and rubbed, as though she were trying to massage away the sudden tightness there. She peeked at him, then away out the window, then back at him, and away to the Bruce Lee poster on the wall.

"You still look guilty," he said. His face folded into puzzlement. "Did you do something while I was gone?"

"No." She could even look him in the eye when she said that. "I've been asleep the whole time."

"Are you planning to do something?"

Her gaze broke to the window again. "No," she said.

A long stifling silence lay between them.

Finally, Saxon said, "Get cleaned up and ready to go. The second half of that seminar on communication is in half an hour and this time, we are going."

Audra nodded and retreated from the room. She collected a new tunic and a pair of the plain white panties Granite had bought her. After all that heartache and drama she'd expended on selecting her outfit for this trip, it occurred to her that she

hardly ever even looked at her own clothes any more.

Saxon was waiting on the sofa when she came out of the shower, dressed and brushed and all made up. He was holding his head in his hands, the perfect picture of a man suffering from a hangover, and he had only to glance aside at her once for her to understand who the hangover was.

"You want to stay home and talk to me instead?" he asked, very quietly.

Audra's left bottom-cheek still tickled from yesterday's exertions at the whipping post. "No," she said.

He closed his eyes briefly, the way a man might react from a slap in the face, and when he looked at her again, his expression was cool. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

Staff-Dom Sliver and Staff-Sub Freckles were hosting the seminar in the room right across the hall from Virgil's Master class. Audra, walking in Saxon's shadow, hesitated in that doorway, scanning the students for Virgil's familiar lanky frame. She found him in the fifth row, sitting next to a cute little button of a Pet and looking uncomfortable. His new Pet was a porcelain-faced Oriental in a Hello-Kitty sleeveless top and matching bikini-cut panties. She could easily have passed for being fourteen years old, but then, in the right light, so could Virgil.

Years of squandering his life on comic books suddenly paid off; Virgil's Spider-senses apparently tingled, and he turned around for no reason at all and looked directly back at Audra. He blinked, grinned, and mouthed 'Ten minutes' so elaborately that it looked like he was trying to eat an invisible goat.

"Pearl?"

Audra nodded, backed up, and then turned and rejoined her Master. The lights were already dimmed in Seminar Room 5, and Freckles was walking to the speaker's lectern when Audra and

Saxon found their seats. The rooba-rooba of the audience silenced as soon as Freckles tapped her microphone, however, and expectation enveloped the room.

"Hi there!" Freckles chirped. "So, okay, let's plunge right in! Yesterday, we did a lot of talking about misconceptions and stereotypes in the BDSM world. Hopefully, we all came to terms overnight with the fact that there is no right and wrong way to be submissive or dominant, right?" Freckles nodded primly at the nervous laughter that met this question. "Right! So let's move on to the real hurdle of communication. Now, there is no one skeleton-key solution to every communication breakdown that occurs in Top/Bottom relationships, but I've been a Submissive for all of my adult life, and I've been a paid Submissive for thirty years, so I feel fairly qualified to make a few observations. And what I've observed most is that when communications fail, for the most part, they fail because at least one of the two people involved has not clarified his or her rights and expectations.

"It can be very difficult to broach that subject for the first time," Freckles admitted. She folded her hands on the lectern, looking very solemnly and sincerely at each and every member of the audience all at once. "It can be very difficult to broach that subject for the fortieth or fiftieth time. From a Submissive perspective, it can be nerve-wracking to assert yourself over what you may perceive as trivialities, even though they are so important to your emotional well-being, because you are afraid of being accused of Topping from the Bottom or in some other way not being a 'real' Submissive. And from a Dominant perspective," she added, glancing around at Mistress Sliver, "It can be nerve-wracking to have to walk that fine line between being a Dominant and being a jerk every time you play with someone for the first time. And no matter who you are, it's always easier to just make assumptions, or to just tolerate things that are unpleasant while

secretly resenting them. But it's not healthy, not for either of you, and so today we're going to concentrate on how to break that ice, and we'll start by outlining some very basic rights for both parties."

Sliver stood up and went to the blackboard at the back of the dais. She wrote the words 'Rights of a Submissive' on one half and 'Rights of a Dominant' on the other.

"You're going to find that a lot of these rights apply to any relationship," Freckles went on. "But I think they're especially important in a disciplinary role, and there's no better place to begin than with the Submissive's right to set limits."

Sliver wrote that down.

"How many people here," Freckles asked, looking sympathetic, "have ever been told that if you use a safeword or if you say that certain implements are out of bounds, that you are not really Submissive? That boundary-setting is the sole province of the Master?" She looked out at the sea of raised hands and shook her head. "That is so sad. Honesty is the keystone of any BDSM experience; every other sensation is linked to it and depends on it. If you can't have limits, or if you can't trust those limits to be respected, you can't ever really relax. You have the right--the absolute and unbreakable right--to be comfortable."

Audra shifted, looking at the clock above the blackboard. How many minutes had this eaten up already?

"And Masters, you have the right to continually introduce new experiences outside the scope of those limits, although you have a responsibility to discuss these changing boundaries with your Submissive in a safe and reassuring setting. For example, if your Submissive has an iron-clad 'No Anal Play' rule, don't go testing her limits by whipping out a six-inch hitch plug and slapping it down in front of her, saying, 'Guess what we're trying out tonight?' That would be the *wrong* way

to change boundaries, and a good way to cause your Submissive to run screaming into the night. Sit your Submissive down and talk to her. Ask her what it is about anal play that scares her. Take her shopping, show her the different toys available, let her pick the one she wants to start out with. And most importantly, if she adamantly says no, let her know that you will respect that limitation, but that you are interested in anal play if she is ever curious. Let her set the pace of exploration, in other words, but know that you have the right--the absolute and unbreakable right--to introduce new experiences."

A six-inch hitch plug. Audra shuddered, then leaned over and whispered, "I have to go to the bathroom."

Saxon frowned at her.

"Come on!" She put on her most plaintive face. "They're writing these things down, it's not like I'll miss much!"

"You both have the right to be independent," Freckles continued. "To have your own lives, your own individual personalities, and to not be criticized for holding certain things private. There are times when a Submissive really, honestly, truly does not need someone looming over him ready to itemize his taxes, just as there are times when a Dominant would really, genuinely like to kick back in her Smurf underoos and watch The Golden Girls without having to justify herself. Being Submissive or Dominant is a lifestyle, and it can be a wonderful thing, but that doesn't mean we have to live inside a stereotype."

"Please?" Audra wiggled around. "I really have to pee!"

Saxon sighed. "Five minutes," he said.

"Thanks." Audra got up, picked her way out to the aisle and walked swiftly from the room.

"You have the right to trust your partner," Freckles said, each amplified word dropping from a speaker on the wall right onto Audra's deceiving little head. "And to expect honesty from him or her

in return. This is perhaps the greatest and most serious right of all."

Audra stopped, her hand on the doorknob and her heart leaden in her chest.

"Trust is reciprocal," the Staff-Sub insisted. "It is the most intimate responsibility and the truest extension of self that you will ever find in any relationship. Ultimately, it is the trust we have for our Masters--that they will never truly hurt us, that they will not abandon us, that they will love us and protect us--and the trust they have for us which makes the absolute connection between a Dominant and a Submissive. Without that trust, we're just playing, and it's the kind of play that can end very badly."

'What are you doing?' Audra asked herself suddenly. 'You're not actually listening to this, are you? This is not what you came to this island to do! The only people whose trust you should be concerned about is Virgil and Jenna and how they are trusting you to do your part on this treasure hunt!'

"You have the right to expect honesty," Freckles went on relentlessly.

Audra squeezed her eyes shut, shoved the door open, and went out with Freckles' voice following her accusingly into the hall.

The Master class had let out, but Virgil was still sitting there, waiting for her and chatting with his new Pet. He got up when she appeared, and immediately tripped over his feet and toppled into his Pet's lap, so that his words of introduction were, "Hey, this is oomph."

"I'm Pearl," Audra said, holding out her hand over Virgil's sprawled body.

"I'm Koi," said the Pet, helping Virgil right himself. "Like the fish."

"Griffin was going to try to sneak out and meet us at my cabin," Virgil announced, disengaging himself from Koi. "We should hurry so we can let her in."

Audra bit her lip. "I'm kind of ditching my Master by doing this," she said uneasily.

"It's kind of important," Virgil countered. "We found another, um..." His eyes darted to Koi. "Another M-A-P piece."

"I can spell, you know," Koi remarked, looking thinly amused. "I'm not a puppy. A map of what?"

"Oklahoma!" Virgil blurted.

"It's a scavenger hunt," Audra said, rolling her eyes. "A bunch of us are in on it. There's, like, ten thousand dollars for the prize."

"Oh! Gosh, that sounds like fun!" Koi, her eyes shining with envy and excitement, rose and clapped her hands. "Let me help, let me help! I don't want any prize money, I just want to play, too! I'm really good with spatial relationships and I know the island pretty well!"

Virgil blinked at her. "You do?"

"This is my third time here," Koi said proudly. "Well, third time in five years. And my stupid ex-boyfriend always brought me during the fall season. Bondage," she added in an aside to Audra. "But I have dropped that loser, and this year is all about me! I get to have all the spankings and coddling and...and spankings that I deserve." She finished this with an assertive little pouty nod, and then came all over wheedling again. "So please let me play on the scavenger hunt! Pleeeeease?"

"This really isn't a good time for me," Audra said, resting her hand lightly on Virgil's arm. "I need to spend some quality time with this guy or he's going to cut me loose. I'm not really wanting to take home the Most Masters goldfish."

"They give out goldfish?" Koi asked, her almond eyes wide.

"Well, you know." Audra gestured vaguely. "Door prizes."

"Oh. I got a door prize the other night, but it was just a little bronze paddle keychain."

Audra chewed her lip for a few seconds, not wholly certain she wanted to know, but just awfully

curious. Finally, she asked, "What did you get the prize for?"

"Most minutes with a clothespin on your--"

"Ew," said Virgil, as Audra simultaneously hissed, "Ow!"

"And all I got was a stupid keychain," Koi finished. "I wish they did give out goldfish, but then how would I get it home? Hmm. Well, they should give out something cute and portable. Like a hamster or...or a scorpion or something. Can I please look at your map, Master Claymore?"

"Go ahead," Audra said. "I'll see if I can come by after the seminar. By that time, with Koi's help, maybe you'll have figured out where to dig."

"Yay!" Koi cheered, before Virgil could actually agree. "I get to--what seminar?"

"Top and Bottom Communications with Mistress Sliver and Freckles."

"Oh!" Suddenly crestfallen, Koi turned her pouty face back on Virgil. "Can we please go to the seminar?"

"I just got out of a seminar!" Virgil exclaimed.

"But this is a really good one and, well, to be honest, I can use all the help I can get being Submissive. I'm mostly just good at being tied up and stuff. I'd really like to know how to be a good Pet for you. Master," she added, fluttering her eyelashes.

Virgil scowled. "Oh, for--! Oh, all right. We'll all go to the damn seminar, and after that--"

"We'll all go look at the map!" Koi sang, leaping to her little feet. She pranced happily out of the room ahead of them and ducked into the seminar across the hall.

Audra and Virgil followed at a slightly less enthusiastic pace. "She's cute," Audra offered.

"She's going to give me diabetes," Virgil growled. Then he shrugged (Virgil was not designed to hold on to frustrations) and smiled lopsidedly. "But she is cute, isn't she? I could have

done a lot worse. Scavenger hunt. That was quick thinking."

"Yeah, Mister Straight-A's, that was quick thinking. What was that 'Oklahoma' thing about?"

Virgil gave her a sheepish grin, but spared himself from having to answer by opening up the door into Seminar Room 5. He slunk off down the darkened aisle to look for Koi, and she returned to her place beside Saxon.

"You came back," he observed.

Perhaps it was his not-so-subtle surprise that put the prickles into her voice when she said, "Of course."

"This brings us to the act of submission itself," Freckles announced from the lectern. "Open and honest communication is a wonderful and essential part of a BDSM relationship, but it's not always possible when you're right in the middle of a scene. For one thing, many of us are gagged." She waited, grinning, for the laughter to finish running around the room, and then relinquished the microphone to Sliver, who started off crisply with, "Very few Tops enjoy whacking away on their Bottom, only to be told, 'Hey, Mistress, you're not doing this quite right.' Likewise, unless a 'stoic endurance' scene was negotiated beforehand, a grim and total silence can be extremely disconcerting."

Saxon reached down to catch Audra's hand and gave it a light squeeze.

"Feedback," Sliver announced. "It doesn't have to come in the form of a comment card or a system of numerical award points. A good Top can tell a lot by the way a Submissive cries out and wriggles around, but whatever you do, make sure you do something. Submissives should be enthusiastic about surrendering to the will of their Master, but that doesn't mean they should turn into puppets."

Saxon squeezed her hand again. Audra pulled out of his grip.

"Psychological surrender, the mindspace of a Submissive, is the most important aspect of a

successful scene. The ability to just relax and let yourself respond to the experience is essential, both to you, the Submissive, and to your Dominant, who relies upon what you do to better control and direct the scene."

Saxon went for her hand again. This time, she slapped it away. "I get it already," she whispered testily.

"What I'd like to do now," Sliver went on, "is bring up some of you from the audience for a little role-playing. Volunteers?"

Saxon stood up, his hand coming to rest heavily on Audra's shoulder.

"No!" Audra tried to twist away. "I'm serious! Don't put me on display again!"

Saxon leaned down to put his mouth against her ear and whispered, "I'm not asking you any more, I'm telling you."

Everyone in the whole room was looking at her. Even Virgil.

Slow flames crawling in her cheeks, Audra rose and stiffly preceded her Master to the stage. As she struggled to step up without overbalancing and falling over, Saxon took her arm and, with great determination, pulled her up beside him. He refused to relinquish her, although his iron grip did drop to her wrist.

"Face your partner," Sliver commanded. "And Saxon, why don't you start off with some expectations."

Saxon turned toward her, still locked around her wrist. "I expect honesty and respect," he said unhesitatingly. "And it would be real nice to see some emotional return on my investment."

Audra felt her blush burning deeper.

"Okay," Freckles said. "And you....um...?"

"Pearl," she said tightly.

"Pearl, what are your limitations? Where do you draw the line?"

"I draw the line at being dragged onstage in front of dozens of people and forced to give a

detailed account of all the ways I fail as a Submissive!" she snapped.

She yanked hard against Saxon's thumb and finally broke his hold on her. He went to catch her again, opening his mouth for a rebuke she was in no mood to hear, and she hauled back without thinking and slapped him in the face.

Audra had never hit a single living soul in her entire life. She was absolutely agape at herself, clutching at the neck of her slave-tunic and staring at the hand that had betrayed her. When she dared to look up, Saxon's face was thunderous and very, very still.

"Well," Freckles said finally. "At least that was an honest emotional reaction."

"But not," Sliver remarked, her own eyes narrowed with empathetic fury, "respectful."

He was going to spank her. Right here, right in front of Virgil. While the whole class watched and the teachers gave him pointers.

She jumped back, not even looking to see where the edge of the stage lay, and Saxon's face lost all its anger and flashed wide in shock as he sprang forward. She felt him catch at her arms, and all coherent thought was suddenly washed out by panic. She went windmill on him, slapping and even kicking, screaming "Don't hit me!" at least three times before she could get away from him.

She half-jumped, half-fell from the stage and lay panting, half a dozen people reaching down to help her up.

'Be cool,' she told herself in Griffin's voice. 'Be cool, be cool, be frosty as a freakin' polar bear.'

Someone's hand brushed her arm.

Audra came up shrieking and ran from the auditorium in tears.

Chapter Sixteen

*** *Everyone Has Limits* ***

Audra fled the Rotunda, shoving past startled faces and calls of concern, and stumbled out into the blinding sun. She ran past the garden and up the path to the cabins, miraculously keeping her balance as her feet flew over the uneven ground. Once she reached the first row of little buildings, she could only fall against the nearest wall, utterly at a loss.

She looked down, just so she wouldn't be staring mindlessly into space, and watched her hands clutch and knot at each other. Her gaze was fixed by the slender band of cheap metal encircling her ring finger, and she heard herself utter a high, shaky laugh. 'Way to go, panic button,' she thought. Of course, even if it had occurred to her to use it, in the extremity of her terror, she probably would have 'used' it by wrenching it off and throwing it at Saxon's forehead.

The mental mention of her Master's name slowly transformed the emotional boil inside of her into a solid, heavy mass of dismay.

'What now?' she wondered dazedly. That was a heck of an exit to try and top. How was she going to go back and look Saxon in the eye again? She'd almost rather lie to him, tell him she was drunk or dropped acid, or anything but just admit she'd freaked out for no good reason.

He was going to dump her after this. That was a foregone certainty. Ohhhh, and that meant another trip to see the Overseer, who by this time would probably strap her to a sea turtle and dump her in the ocean just to get rid of her. Which meant Virgil and Jenna would be on their own for the rest of the trip, so she'd even managed to ruin that. Not that she'd done anything horribly useful as far as treasure-hunting was concerned. Maybe now that she was leaving, they'd actually find it faster.

Audra began to cry again, hard but silent tears that wrung themselves out of her limp body in flows. She continued up along the walkway to the very back of the last row of cabins, her only thought to escape from the sympathy of passers-by, to hide at the edge of the jungle and just cry until she felt better.

She was not alone there. Sitting against the wall of the tenth cabin in, beneath someone's bathroom window, was Jenna. Her friend's feet were bare and dirty. Her hair was unbrushed and loose. Her knees were drawn tight against her chest and her head down, compressed into the smallest ball of misery a human could make.

Audra had never seen the Griffin defeated. Looking at it now stopped her cold and froze the self-pity from her conscious thought. She tried to back away, to give Jenna some dignity in the form of privacy, but her foot scraped on the path and Jenna looked around.

Mortification was only a shadow flitting across the Griffin's face before recognition stole in. Then the Griffin's gold eyes flashed and she leaped to her feet. "What happened to you?" she demanded. The tracks of tears were on her own face, but the anger was all for Audra's pain. "You tell me who, I will kick his ass!"

Audra started to smile and folded into tears instead. "Nothing happened to me," she sobbed. "I had a panic attack in class and just embarrassed the hell out of my Master...again! What happened to you?"

The Griffin scowled, reaching around to rub at her bottom. "Nothing new." She paused and added hopefully, "Have you seen Virgil? He was going to try and meet me here at his cabin."

"He was at class with me. His new Pet wanted to go. I don't know if he'll stay after my hysterics or not." Audra knuckled her eyes dry, took several shuddering breaths, and said, "Isis again?"

The Griffin continued to rub her fingers slowly over her nether cheeks, her gaze becoming unfocused and faintly unhappy. Suddenly she turned and tugged down her shorts, thrusting out her bare bottom. "Is there a little white mark anywhere?" she asked, uncharacteristically tentative.

"Yes." Audra went and touched the hook-and-moon shape with a finger. Against the blistering red of Jenna's well-spanked skin, the mark was shiny and strangely puffed. It almost seemed to be floating. "What is that, by the way? I've been meaning to ask."

Jenna pulled her shorts back up and fastened them slowly. "I didn't know...it left a scar." She looked away at the thick vegetation that tumbled out of the jungle. "All this time...."

Audra could feel her whole body trying to shrink away from having this conversation. "It's...it's not a tattoo?"

Jenna shook her head once, slowly. Her eyes remained fixed, unblinking.

She didn't want to ask, but the silence became claustrophobic. "Did it--Is it--?"

"It's a brand. Courtesy of a big, drunken bastard named Roy who shacked up with my Mom for about a year when I was nine." Jenna leaned against the cabin wall, staring straight ahead and hugging herself. Her voice was steady, calm, but her expression still held some element of unpleasant surprise. "I was pretty invisible around him most of the time. He didn't say more than three words to me a day, but he always made sure I had breakfast in the morning and dinner at night. I can't say I liked him, but he was definitely the best of that early bunch. Then Mom and him started fighting more often. One night, she told him she could replace him anytime she wanted, just leave and take me with her. For some reason--and this I still don't understand, because like I say, we weren't close--he went completely apeshit. Said

she was his and I was his and he kept what was his, and to prove it...."

Jenna trailed off. After several minutes and two false starts, she said, "I don't remember what he used. Isn't that funny? I think it was a bottle opener and just the gaslight on the stove."

Audra inched forward, half-expecting Jenna to move away, but when she put her arm around Jenna's shoulder, her friend leaned into the embrace.

"I haven't thought about that in years," she said, as if to herself. "And even now, what I remember best isn't the branding...it's that he always made sure I had breakfast every morning. And dinner every night."

"It was Isis, wasn't it?" Audra stroked Jenna's hair. "She said something, did something...and dredged it all up."

"She said Bennu shouldn't have a Pet with another Master's mark. She told him to set up a branding of his own. I said no, she said yes, I said the safeword...." Jenna pulled out of Audra's half-hug. "She gagged me."

"What?!"

"I safeworded. She gagged me. And I...well, suffice to say, I got away."

Righteous indignation boiled up from every part of her, putting a shocked-schoolmarm note into Audra's voice. "You've got to tell the Overseer!"

"Excuse me all to hell, but what for?" Jenna stomped a few feet away and then swung on Audra again, as if she needed that little distance to keep her inner violence in check. "Seriously, Wheels, what for? Professor was a jerk, Isis is a jerk, Bennu's hardly there and he's still a jerk, and it begins to occur to me that I might just be on the wrong island if I'm looking for someone who isn't!"

"Jenna--"

"People come here to hit other people!" the Griffin snapped.

"No, they don't, dammit!" Audra snapped back. "People come here to relax and be themselves in a safe place where they shouldn't have to worry about people like Isis taking advantage of them! You've got to tell someone what she's doing!"

"I am not going crying to anyone!" the Griffin snarled. "I can deal with this myself!"

"Yeah, you're doing a great job of that behind Virgil's cabin!"

"Oh, and what are you doing here? Getting an early start on your Easter Egg hunt?" The Griffin turned away, raking her fingers through her hair, then came back and held up her left hand, palm outward, displaying the winking fake-stone of her own panic button. "All that aside, if she'd really tried to go through with it, I could have used my button. I chose to handle it my way, but if it makes you feel better, next time, I'll bring on the Security goons and let them smack *her* around for a change."

Audra managed half a smile at Jenna's grudging attempt at a truce. "Deal."

The window between them unexpectedly opened and Virgil stuck his head out and looked at them. "I thought I heard voices when I got home," he said. "Are you okay, Audra?"

She sighed. "Yes, I'm fine. Is Saxon upset?"

Virgil hesitated, generating a damning silence every bit as effective as a resounding 'You betcha!' would have been.

Audra cupped her elbows in a loose, lonely hug and looked at her feet. "He's going to dump me."

Koi squeezed her head and one arm out the window beside Virgil and patted the wall excitedly. "What are we talking about? I want to talk, too!"

The Griffin looked the moon-faced young Pet up and down and bluntly asked, "Who the hell are you?"

"Koi," said Koi, unruffled.

"As in 'shy', or as in 'carp'?"

"Carp."

"Blech." Jenna pushed herself off the wall and turned to face the window full on. "Those are nasty eatin'."

Koi giggled, pinkening prettily. "That's not what I've been told!"

Virgil went red to the roots of his hair and removed himself from the window. Koi retreated immediately after, gleefully demanding to know what she'd said. Jenna grabbed the vacant sill and was up and in as easily as an acrobat. Before Audra had time to feel abandoned, Jenna leaned back out, slid her strong hands under Audra's armpits, and with one swift pull, Audra was soon standing in the bathtub with her friend.

"Thanks," she said, stepping carefully out onto the bathroom floor.

"I'm a firm believer in giving friends a lift at times of need. Besides, I'm getting paranoid in my old age. If I go all the way around to use the door--"

"Isis will see you."

"She follows me to the dining hall. She follows me to the library. I may have put her down earlier, but I know she got her breath back pretty quick and when she did, that bitch was on her feet and sniffing me out." Jenna combed her hair back aggressively with her fingers. "But right now, I'm not thinking about it. Have you seen this new piece of map-that-was-not-treasure I found in that incredibly accessible cave yet?"

Audra stuttered into a smile. "No, not yet."

"Then by all means, let's go have a gander." Jenna strode ahead to get the door.

Virgil already had both pieces of the map, the saucer engraved with the cyclops riddle, and a blow-up of the aerial photo from Isla Tesoro's brochure laid out on the table in the sitting room. He was dragging chairs and barstools over to arrange around the table when Audra and Jenna appeared. Koi appeared to be making snacks.

Audra accepted the chair Virgil brought for her and let him kiss her cheek as she leaned over to study the new acquisition. Left soaking in the elements all these years, the new map was the mud-brown color of old bones, but the lines etched into its surface were deeper and darker than those on the other map. The pieces fit precisely together, forming the complete southern half of Isla Tesoro. Like the oak-leaf squiggle on the first map, there was one anomaly on the second--a smallish scrawl that had no correlation to topographical landmarks. It looked a great deal like an anchor, and it was directly above the X.

Jenna tapped the unusual mark, accepting a cracker-stack from the tray Koi offered and crunching into it contemplatively. "There are a lot of mini-trails leading off from the Nature Walk in this area. I haven't been on 'em, because we've been so busy mapping out waterfalls, but we shouldn't have to work too hard to find this thing."

"I don't know." Virgil was frowning at the resort's aerial picture, his eyes darting from map to photograph. "I've been all over that Nature Walk and all its little offshoots, and I sure don't remember seeing an anchor. There's a big one over by the docks...."

"Yeah, with 'Welcome Visitors, Founded 1993' soldered into the crossbar," Jenna snorted. "I'm pretty sure that's not the same anchor."

"And this is definitely inland," Audra agreed, still studying the map.

"Maybe it's a metaphor," Koi suggested. She perched herself on Virgil's lap, cradling about a dozen cracker-stacks in the crook of one arm. "Like, it could mean, I don't know...."

"An anchor tree?" Jenna gave the Pet in their midst a withering look.

"Sure, why not?" Koi put a finger prettily to the corner of her mouth and squinched her eyes up at the map. "A tree that looks like an anchor, or

maybe three trees tied together to grow into an anchor-shape?"

The three of them stared at her.

Koi ate a cracker and beamed.

"Okay, sounds good," Jenna said at last. "We need to walk that trail some more. Good thinking, Koi," she added, sounding sincerely impressed.

"More importantly--" Virgil picked his Pet and her crackers off his lap and set her firmly on her own feet. "We need to do some walking *off* the trails. You're getting crumbs on me. Take those into the kitchen, please."

"If the trees were tied together," Audra whispered as Koi pranced away, "wouldn't they have grown out by now? Would we even recognize what was supposed to have been an anchor-shape that long ago? Are the trees even there anymore?"

She and Virgil both looked at the Griffin, who looked back at them, annoyed.

"Oddly enough, the life expectancy and growth cycles of tropical trees was omitted from my education," Jenna said. "But let's at least look for the thing, for god's sake! If we still don't find it, well, maybe we can still stumble on the right spot with Virgil's surveyor's sights."

Audra studied the deeply-etched outline of the island with dubious eyes. "I don't know. All those squiggles kinda look alike to me. I mean, they're generally the same, but not specifically--"

"I know, I know. I'm just saying, we'll have a Plan B if we need one, but this will go a lot faster if there is actually an anchor tree." Jenna hesitated, her gaze skipping to Koi, who was watching them avidly with her toes just touching the living room carpet as she munched her crackers. "And faster is beginning to impress me more and more. I see two maps here, plus the riddle, and only half the island is represented. We could be looking at one hell of a run-around before DeGuarre's guy decides to get to the damn point, and our vacation time is shrinking. Who wants to come back next year and try again?"

"Ooo! Ooo!" Koi waved enthusiastically from the kitchen. "I do! I do!"

Jenna gave the Pet another withering look, the effect somewhat spoiled by a rueful smile. "Okay, well, we'll keep that in mind, but let's the rest of us plan to find the--"

"Scavenger hunt prize," Virgil and Audra said loudly in unison.

Jenna blinked at them, and slowly finished, "--as soon as we can."

"Let's make up a team cheer!" Koi suggested brightly.

"You know, I would love to," Jenna said seriously, "but I have to go. See ya 'round, Claymore. I really like your new girl. Bye, Pearl."

"I have to go, too," Audra said, standing. "I wouldn't want to be late for my dumping. How gauche. I'll keep my eyes open on the trails, though, and let you know if I see any anchors. Have fun with your new Pet."

"Thanks!" Koi bounded out of the kitchen and onto Virgil's lap, already upside down and bare-bottomed. "He will!"

Virgil looked utterly terrified.

Audra stood outside Saxon's room a long time before opening the door, and she only did that much because she hadn't heard any movement inside and didn't think he was home. He was, and he was sitting at the table, his chin on his folded hands, already gazing at the door as she came through it.

It was too late to run away now that he'd seen her. Audra came all the way in and closed the door.

There was so much she wanted to say, all of it swimming around in her mind fully-formed and eloquent, but her will to speak was utterly gone. She stood pinned in his gaze and waited for whatever would come.

"I have been sitting here," Saxon said finally, "trying to think of some way I could justify what I did to you today."

Audra's head came up fast. She didn't trust her ears. "W-What you--?"

"I read your file. I read it back and forth. I knew your feelings on public displays. I took you to the whipping post regardless of that, and then I stood you up in front of a class-full of people today." Saxon rubbed hard at the bridge of his nose, looking very much like Hollywood's idea of a troubled Viking right before the war axe came out. "I don't consider myself a cruel man, and I don't consider myself an incompetent Master. What I am is desperate to find some way to connect with you. But clearly, this wasn't it. And now...I don't know what else to try."

"Don't get rid of me," Audra said tearfully. There were a thousand reasons why, but that was all she could think to say. "Please."

Saxon didn't look at her, choosing instead to stare out the window at the empty sky. "I know what I did was wrong, but I've known you now for three days and already I'm desperate."

"I can do better."

"I pushed your limits the tiniest bit and you ran screaming from the room," Saxon said, still without looking at her. "Literally."

Audra went to the table and clutched at his folded hands. "I'm sorry! You can spank me!"

"For what?" He finally turned to her, openly frustrated. "What are you getting out of this, Pearl? What are you looking for?"

"Why does it have to be some big mystery?" Audra demanded in a quavering voice. "Why can't I just be here and have spankings and NOT fall madly in love with everyone I see?"

"I don't need you to fall in love with me," Saxon retorted. "And in fact, that would make things damned awkward between me and Flutter. The thing is, without some emotional interaction, what

you're getting is about as meaningful as standing in front of a rotary fan that has flyswatters taped to the blades, and God knows, I could be doing something more constructive with *my* time!"

"Okay." Audra stumbled backward, swiping at her eyes. "Okay. Fine. Let's just do it and get it over with."

"And that's another thing! The only thing you're ever emotionally invested in is the break-up!" Saxon caught at her hand, pushing his chair out so that he could pull her gently but insistently down onto his lap. He tried to hold her, but she was as stiff as a ventriloquist's dummy, and he sighed with defeat after only a few seconds. "Well, I don't want to give you up," he told her. "I just want to feel like I'm accomplishing something when I spend time with you."

"Why is it *my* fault that *you're* having trouble?"

"This is not about fault, Pearl."

"Yes, it is! It was *my* fault that I wouldn't be Cowboy's girlfriend, and it was *my* fault that Granite couldn't connect with me, and now it's *my* fault that you don't feel constructive when you spank me!" Audra's words poured hopelessly out of her, her chest slowly constricting until it hurt to breathe. "I'm the only one being honest here! I've said all along all I want is to get spanked and be left alone! This isn't fair!"

"No, you're right, this isn't fair." Saxon's embrace became a prison; his voice became steel. "Living with you is like living with a Pet Rock. You're never really here, even right now, sitting on my damn lap, you are hiding everything you are from me."

"I'm on vacation!" Audra cried, aware of the absurdity of the statement, but helpless to call it back. Squirming, she muttered, "I don't have to be me until I go home. I never promised you anything more."

Silence.

"You know what?" Saxon stood her up and then tipped her over the same lap he had been trying so hard to cradle her on. "You're right. You're on vacation. And this is what you wanted."

Audra felt her panties yanked all the way off. She tried to brace herself by gripping Saxon's ankle, but he grabbed her wrists, pinned them behind her back, and tied them with her own panties. Then he shoved her forward, overtipping her until her hips were fully outthrust and her head swam with vertigo. His hand came down, cracking into her hard enough to bruise the front of her pelvis on his knee, loud enough to blister her ears.

He did not wait between whacks, but rained them down in a brutal volley. He did not lecture her; there was nothing left to say. The spanking hammered at her in lieu of words, battering her submissive form for what might have been hours and what she knew must be merely minutes. She felt some of it, jumping hard at every flaming slap that found its target, but it was not that pain that brought the tears to her eyes.

She lay on his lap, unresisting, letting him punish her on his terms. Her buttocks, her thighs--his hand fell wherever he willed. The sound was deafening and she heard it with more than her ears. It was in the rhythm of her heartbeat, the cadence of her coarse breathing, the ticking of the clock on the wall; every part of everything around her took on the same rapid beating as the spanking itself. The clapping of his hand on her flesh became a wordless accusation, the perfect expression of his frustrations and her guilt.

Pain came sporadically--little flares of hell riding thunderclaps of sound--but the paddling was happening too fast. She couldn't concentrate on what burned, couldn't separate the things that hurt from all the other transient sensations the spanking woke in her, and all too soon, the flux of itch and cold and tickle and heat brought on the explosive nothingness she had come to dread.

When it was done, when he had no more use for her, he lifted her up and deposited her without speaking on the floor. He stood up, but didn't go right away. His shadow lay on her as heavy as a blanket, but Audra didn't look at him. She lay in the crumpled heap he put her in, brushing over and over at her eyes, and waited.

"Well," he said at last, his voice resonant with the power of his emotion. "What do you feel?"

Audra bent her head, her fingers diggings at the fibers of the carpet. Honesty welled up in her unexpectedly, tearing her open and making her voice tremble as it came from her. "Nothing," she whispered, raw with hurt.

Saxon's breath came from him in a curse. He stepped over her and moved rapidly for the door. "Enjoy your vacation," he said, and slammed it shut behind him.

Audra pressed her forehead to the carpet. When that didn't help, she rolled onto her side and drew up her knees. She closed her eyes, covered her mouth with her hands and told herself she felt nothing. Not on the outside. Not on the inside.

Nothing.

Chapter Seventeen

*** *Bound and Determined* ***

Audra remained on the floor until feeling returned to her lower half. When she managed at last to pick herself up, she went to Tesoro's Nature Walk and wandered. She left the main path at its westernmost point, moving hollow-eyed along the dirt trails that wound through the jungles, and staring at trees that may or may not have started out life as in the shape of an anchor.

As the sun took on the orange-pink light of Tropical Twilight, Audra came to the realization that although she had been looking at the trees, she had not been seeing them. Further, in her state of mind, she could have easily passed a forty-foot anchor dipped in solid gold and she wouldn't have noticed. On top of that, the line between golden twilight and dead of night was damned thin in untamed places like Tesoro, and unless she wanted to sleep out here, she needed to head back.

In a fog of despair, Audra retraced her steps to the trails, then to the Nature Walk, and finally found her way back to Virgil's cabin. She lingered outside for a while, her hand resting on the doorknob, wishing she was clairvoyant. She didn't want to interrupt anything, but she didn't want to be alone, either, and the thought of going back to Saxon's room filled her with a sickening sorrow.

The latch was pulled from Audra's limp grip as the door opened unexpectedly, and there was Virgil, frog-eyed with surprise. "YAARGH!" he said conversationally, then cleared his throat and added, "Aud--er, Pearl. How nice to see you again. You just scared about six years off of me."

"Am I bothering you?"

"No, no! I'm just heading out to the dining hall to pick up some takeout."

Right on cue, Audra's stomach growled, and she looked at it in surprise. The orange juice Saxon had given her seemed days and days ago.

"Sounds like you could use a bite to eat," Virgil remarked, smiling. "Why don't you come with me?"

"Just with you? Isn't Koi coming?"

"Oh, she's suspended from the ceiling," Virgil said dismissively. "That's why I'm going to get the takeout." At her dumbfounded expression, he shrugged and said, "Hey, you only need to show this boy scout how to build a block-and-tackle out of a bed once. Besides, she's really good at bondage. It's so amazing to watch her. She's beautiful."

"Thank you," Koi called in a dreamy voice.

Virgil grinned back at her, swinging the door open so that Audra could see as well.

Koi was a snapshot, the stillness of a moment caught in the midst of a leap. Her legs were lashed together at thighs, knees, and ankles; bars of black leather against Koi's creamy, flawless flesh. A bar of curved steel lay along her back, a second spine to hold the ribs of leather that shaped her outthrust chest. Her breasts were bare, globes of white outlined by black, linked by a delicate thread of silver chain from one rosy nipple to the other. Her arms were wings, sewn into sleeves and outflung behind her. Her hair hung in a fan of black behind her, rippling slightly to give an illusion of movement. At the small of her back, the tattoo of a butterfly hovered in the same still-flight as she herself, above the rosy blooms of her bare buttocks. She was an angel, she was ecstasy. She hung suspended between Heaven and Earth and exalted in her endless flight.

The cabins had excellent air-conditioning. Discreet fans high on the walls sent a gentle breeze to turn her. Koi spun in place, first one way, then the other, as though the room itself were rocking her in its intangible arms, displaying her with loving pride.

Virgil was right. She was the most beautiful thing Audra had ever seen.

"Are you...? I mean, is that comfortable?" Audra asked, approaching this living work of art with the wonder it demanded.

"More than it looks, I'm sure." Koi spun slowly in the air, her face composed, rapturous. "I could do this for hours. It's just the perfect way to wind down after a really good spanking. Like cuddling after sex, it lets you just live in that moment forever."

Virgil blushed, but beamed with pride. "My pleasure, Koi. The next spanking will be even better."

Koi opened her eyes and sent a smile of such heartfelt sweetness at him that Audra had to look away, feeling like a trespasser. "I know it will. You're so intuitive. Juice, please?"

Virgil started. "Yes, of course, I'll just get--" WHUMP. In his eagerness to leave, Virgil had turned and walked directly into the wall. He backed up, unperturbed, located the actual door, and said, "--get going," as though nothing had happened. "Pearl, are you coming?"

"I think I'd rather stay and visit Koi," she replied shyly. "That is, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said.

"Oh please stay!" Koi added. "I love company. It's so grounding. You know how it is when you've been spanked all the way to the top of Sub-space and you're just falling back, and falling feels soooo peaceful. Sometimes I fall asleep when I'm suspended."

Virgil quietly left them, and Audra pulled a chair over where she could see Koi clearly and sat down.

"Tell me how it feels," she said, fascinated by the play of light and shadow over all the curves of Koi's bound body.

"Mmm." Koi hung for several seconds, smiling blissfully, then said in a clear voice: "Roses bloom in snow--I am your winter garden. How well you

tend me." She laughed a little, just a breath of amused sound. "Oh, that wasn't very good. Um....In hanging, I fly. I endure chains to be free. Pain and peace are one."

"That's very nice," Audra began, trying not to let her disappointment echo in her voice.

"But that's just how it is," Koi said, her smile broadening. "Some things defy labels. Some things can only be described indirectly." She paused a moment, then went on, "Haiku is my brush, my body is my canvas. Joy, not pain, is paint."

"You talk differently when you're up there," Audra observed.

"Laughter loves the ground," Koi replied serenely. "And birds only sing in trees. Bubbles pop in space."

"I can't believe you're pulling those out of thin air."

"Air is not empty; The wind blows from sea to sun. Every voice is heard." Koi opened her eyes and smiled at Audra. "You're really very new at this, aren't you?"

Audra swallowed hard, knowing at once that Koi wasn't referring to haiku. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"Yep. Even from way up here." She closed her eyes again, hanging in serene silence.

Audra was content just to watch her, to admire the delicate defiance of gravity as Koi's harness hugged and displayed her.

At last, Koi said, "Has Claymore ever spanked you?"

"No."

"Oh. I thought he might have. You're obviously very close." Koi followed the whim of air currents left and right and left again. "He has very sweet hands."

"Sweet hands," Audra repeated, rolling the curious phrase in her mind.

"He's so considerate when he spansks. His hands are pretty big, but they're not hard, you know? Not callused. And he doesn't try to pretend that he's all, you know, butch in real life. He just uses those soft hands, touching you so that you know he can really, really feel you. He spansks me and then he stops and rubs me, and it's like he's sculpting me out of clay...bringing me to life like that one statue-lady in the Greek fairy tale, you know the one?"

"I've heard of it." Griffin would even know the statue-lady's name.

"He talked to me while he spanked me," Koi continued in her sleepwalker's voice. "Not to call me names or tell me I'm bad, or whatever. He didn't try to make me deserve it. He just talked to me, asking what I liked, and where, and with what...making it a prize I was winning. Making it a wonderful prize. I've never known a guy who wanted to give me a spanking because I was so *good* before!"

Koi heaved a happy sigh that sent her harness spinning, and Audra smiled at her. Virgil and his sweet hands. Somehow, it enhanced him in Audra's mind to know he was so considerate while he spanked.

"He's nervous, though," Koi remarked. "I guess that's why his first Pet gave him up. But he's really committed to being attentive now. He's so adorable and earnest. My stupid ex-boyfriend turned into a total ice cube every time we played out a scene. Like, he'd get to tie me up whenever he wanted to see me tied, but if I wanted a spanking, first I had to beg for it, and then he'd be all, 'Okay, I'm the teacher and I just caught you cheating on a test,' or 'Okay, I'm the cop, and I just caught you speeding.' It always had to be a punishment, you know? When I tried to talk to him about it, he'd just say, 'It's not about what you want, you're the Bottom! You're supposed to get turned on by what turns me on!'"

"Is that why he's your stupid ex-boyfriend?" Audra asked.

"No. He's my stupid ex-boyfriend because he went out with me for five years and wouldn't commit, and then at our five year anniversary party, he got drunk and copped a feel on my kid sister. So we broke up. As in, he may have a leather belt, but I have a black one. Hit the road, Jack." Koi opened her eyes and gave Audra a rueful smile. "Have you ever thrown an anniversary cake at a guy in the middle of a restaurant while four waiters are close-harmony singing, 'Many More Like This To Come?' No? Well, everyone should do it at least once. It was better than three years of therapy. How long have you known Claymore?"

"Since high school."

"Is he seeing anyone? That girl Griffin, maybe?"

"Griffin?!" The thought of Virgil and Jenna locked at the lips struck Audra physically speechless. It was several minutes before she could manage even to shake her head. "N-no. That would be so weird."

"You think?" Koi considered the matter. "I don't think so. Of course, it's hard to imagine him spanking her, and it would be a real shame if he never spanked anyone. He's just so...considerate."

"When did you first know--" Audra began, all in a rush, and then stumbled about for a way to finish. "--that, you know, that you...liked...."

Koi cocked a friendly eyebrow at her.

"It," Audra finished lamely.

"It', huh? Mmm, I think I was eight. My mother would spank me very hard with her slipper for disciplinary purposes, but my little friends and I had this terribly secret, terribly illicit game we called 'House'. We'd have a Mommy and a Daddy and their children--just a Mommy if we were short on players--and the whole point was that the parents spanked the kids on their bare bottoms. It was my first foray into playing a scene. There was no chance to misbehave first, either, it was 'I'm the

Mommy, you're the baby. Now get over here, you bad baby and it's time for your spanking!' That fast. We were expected to cry and plead and even kick a little, but we couldn't be very loud or else the real Mommy or Daddy might think we were fighting and bust in on us." Koi shook her head, jingling her many clips and buckles. "What a riot! Those were some of the most wonderfully fussy little spankings I've ever had. You've never seen righteous parental indignation until you've seen it on a six-year-old."

Her eyes slid slyly in Audra's direction. "Want to hear about my first spanking boyfriend?"

Audra nodded, voiceless.

"I was eighteen. Gosh, I think I was all of eighteen and three weeks. And I was seeing this guy--a really great, sexy, manly kind of guy. He used to tease me about, say, my habit of leaving homework for the last second, or my messy locker, or, you know, whatever, saying I was so bad I needed a spanking. At my birthday party, he threatened me with the traditional birthday spanking in front of my whole family. Everybody laughed, you know? It was a joke.

"Looking back," Koi added, her eyes misting with memory, "I realize he was sending out feelers, sizing me up. I was clueless. And then, three weeks later, Prom Night. We went to this party and I got a wee bit blitzed and decide I'm so impaired I need to leave immediately and drive home. This great guy of mine catches up to me in the parking lot and takes my keys away. He says, 'You were actually going to drive? Now that's *really* bad, baby, no more kidding around. Your ass is spanked!' As I recall, I said something terribly sophisticated, like, 'Oh, give it to me, baby,' and then barfed on his shoes. The next day, middle of the afternoon, I'm still hung over out to *here*, and he shows up with a ping-pong paddle. I didn't think he was serious when he told me he came to spank me. Not even when he bent me over his lap and flipped my skirt up. I figured we were about to

start necking...which goes to show how much I knew about necking back then, too, come to think of it. Then he spanked me, and wow! It was so brutal! Absolutely unrelenting, absolutely inescapable, absolutely *absolute*! I screamed and flopped around all over his lap, but he just pinned me down and whaled away harder. I was so loud, my Mom and Dad came barreling upstairs and burst in on us. I was crying and screaming for them to help, and they just stood there for a bit and then walked back out. Oh, I was so betrayed!"

Koi laughed, a trill of happy sound uttered at odds with her words, and then went on cheerfully, "My whole bottom was on fire! I thought I was crippled for life! My Mom's spankings never hurt like that. I was promising all kinds of things, like I'd never drive drunk again, never drink again, hell, I'd never drive at all again, I'd never even leave the house if he'd just *stop*! But he didn't stop, not until he decided the point was made. Then he picked me up and held me, and I felt so....so safe and warm and loved." Her voice softened and she smiled at the ceiling and closed her eyes again. "*Then* we started necking. Oh my gosh, were we necking. Giraffes could not get more neck than we did. And that was the start. Mom never spanked me again, but I don't know how much she'd have still approved if she knew what we were getting up to afterwards."

"Has every guy you've ever dated been a...a spanker?" Audra shifted, aware of just how personal the question was, but unreasonably compelled to ask anyway. "How do you tell a guy that you want...that?"

Koi looked at her, half-smiling, half-serious. "You learn to throw out signals. You learn to be subtle about the first time. You get rejected now and then, and you get dumped, and you go to BDSM bars and get freaked out. I don't think it's any different from hooking up with any other guy, except that if he dumps you over it and you get

your heart broke, it's harder to get sympathy from your non-spanker friends."

They shared a comfortable silence, Audra sitting and Koi swinging, and then Koi asked, "When did you first know?"

"I'm not sure I do know." Audra shrugged at Koi's evident confusion. "It seems like such a perfect idea, but...it just doesn't seem to apply to me."

"Why not?"

Audra didn't know how to answer, and she was saved from having to try by Virgil's timely return.

"I couldn't remember if you said carrot juice was your favorite or orange-berry-kiwi, so I got them both. Hi, Pearl. I also got--" Virgil lapsed into silence, chewing at his lip as he juggled two cartons of takeout, two cups of juices, and the door. Miraculously, he got himself inside and the door shut without dropping or spilling anything, and then picked up where he'd left off, "--rum-glazed whitefish kebobs and those little barbeque mango thingies because you said you liked fruit. Let me know if they're gross. They look kind of gross, but then caviar looks gross, too, and it's actually pretty oh damn. Well," he said, morosely looking at the puddle on the floor where one of the cups had succumbed to Virgil's good looks and grace, "I hope orange-berry-kiwi really was your favorite after all. I mean, I can go back and get some more carrot if--"

"I love," Koi said solemnly, "orange-berry-kiwi juice. Will you hold my cup for me, or may I come down for dinner?"

"I think that's my cue to leave," Audra said, standing.

"Oh, but I brought you kebobs!" Virgil held them up as proof.

"Yeah, don't go on our account!" Koi cajoled. "We can restrain ourselves. Or at least, he can control himself and just put me in restraints." She giggled.

"No, I've really imposed on you long enough. It's time to go impose on the Griffin."

"Ah, you're not getting near her tonight," Virgil said, as he began to remove Koi's straps. "Isis nabbed her as she was heading for the Nature Walk and was dragging her back to the cabins when I passed them. You know, it's the weirdest thing, but I swear I know her."

"Of course you know her," Audra said.

"Yeah, honey, the cat's out of that particular bag."

"Not Griffin, I mean Isis. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something...something in the way she moves. I don't know, though, that mask is so blanking...not sure 'blanking' is a word, but...if I could just hear her voice, I could be sure."

"Maybe you do know her." Audra shrugged. "Barnabus had to hear about this place from someone, and don't all you rich people know each other anyway?"

"Barnabus?!" Koi sputtered, falling into Virgil's arms. She grinned incredulously over his back as he patiently went to work on her leg restraints. "What sadist names their kid Barnabus in this day and age?"

Virgil unbuckled the strap binding Koi's thighs, doubled it over with a flick of his wrist, and gave her a casual whack across the nethers. "The same sadist," he said sternly, "who named his other kids Abernathy Junior and Virgil, and you want to think twice before you start laughing."

Koi stared at him. "Please, tell me you're Abernathy Junior."

He gave her another whap with the folded belt, then finished unwrapping her from the suspension, carried her to the nearest chair, and settled her with the deference of a man handling a family heirloom. "Anyway, it doesn't matter whether or not I really know Isis, the salient point is that the Griffin is out of commission for the evening. Poor Griffin."

Yes, poor Griffin. The image of her huddled up against the back of Virgil's cabin rose in Audra's mind, and again she heard her friend proclaiming that she could take anything...right after she confessed that she had tried to safeword, and been gagged.

Jenna had told her not to tell anyone. Had practically shouted it at her, in fact. But suddenly the compulsion to let someone know about this injustice was very strong. Koi's presence in the room was deterring, but again, the idea that the Overseer should know took root in Audra's mind, and this time, Jenna wasn't there to threaten her out of it.

Being Saxon's Pet had certain advantages. No one would look at her twice when she wandered back into the Staff areas. An anonymous note pushed under the Overseer's office door would probably be enough for him to investigate. And when the Griffin figured out what had happened (and she would), well, hopefully she'd be with a better Master by then.

"Come on, Pearl." Virgil held out a carton of food enticingly. "Sit down, huh? Have a kebob."

"No." Audra moved with great determination for the door. "There's something I really have to do. I'll see you tomorrow, Claymore. Bye, Koi."

He didn't try to talk her out of leaving. In fact, when Audra reached the door, Virgil had Koi on his lap and was feeding her the dinner he had just offered to Audra. He gave her half a wave as she left, but most of his attention was diverted by whatever Koi was whispering into his ear. Assuming she could whisper with her tongue out like that.

Audra passed by the Griffin's cabin before heading down to the main buildings. She could hear Isis on the inside, although she could not make out anything being said. And she could not hear Jenna replying. The image of Jenna, gagged, came to mind, and Audra set off again at a run.

There were very few people inside in this area of the resort, reminding Audra of how late it was getting. People were going to dinner, they were finding parties, mingling with other Masters to spank and show off their Pets. Audra had no idea where Saxon even was, and it suddenly made her feel depressed and lonely all over again.

The waiting room outside the Overseer's office was empty, and the imposing double doors, slightly ajar. Audra could hear a man's voice inside; she marked it just enough to determine the speaker was not close enough to hear her and not likely to appear unexpectedly and discover her, and then she disregarded it and pilfered the secretary's desk for pen and paper.

As she crept to the door with her note--*Mistress Isis is abusing Master Bennu's Pet without her consent*--she suddenly recognized the man speaking to the Overseer was none other than Dr. Saxon. Audra froze, pressed against the wall with her note in her hand. The Griffin's plight was forgotten. She strained to make out words from the incomprehensible rumble of man-voice.

"...not...she...doing...making me into something I...completely...control...."

He was pacing, lubricating thought with action, and although he hadn't mentioned her by name, the aggravation in his tone pointed straight back at her. Audra inched closer to the opening, closing her eyes to bring sound into focus.

"I don't know, she could be anywhere." There was a clink of glass. He was at the bar, not ten feet from her, and she could hear him perfectly, right down to the sigh of frustration. "She never tells me anything, that's part of the problem."

"Only part?" Another clink as, presumably, the Overseer accepted a drink.

"I wish I knew what to tell you to convey the sheer...awfulness hiding in this woman. I don't even know if enough words exist!"

Audra felt her jaw drop, then clench as her body tightened with dismay. 'Never listen at keyholes,' had been one of her mother's favorite sayings, and this was no doubt why, but still she was powerless to retreat.

"It feels like she's drowning," Saxon went on in his half-angry, half-musing tone. "And I feel like she wants me to just stand there and watch her drown. I'm not right for this, Philippe. My timing's off. I can't trust my instincts."

Philippe.

Audra ducked back from the doors, her heart pounding. The Overseer's real name burned in her brain, thrilling her with its discovery even as it horrified her to know she had taken it by deceit.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to help her! God, tell me how!" It was no epithet, but an angry prayer. "The woman feels *nothing*! She's utterly...utterly...Damn it, I told you there weren't enough words!"

"Then allow me to rephrase the question: What are you going to do?"

"Honestly, I don't--thank you--I don't know. I want to keep trying, but I don't know how long I can keep spitting into this particular wind. It's changing me, Philippe. It's making me grim, and it's only a matter of time before the other guests start to notice."

"I quite understand."

"But I don't want to abandon her, either, which is what she obviously expects me to do." A long pause followed this, ending with the thump of glass on wood. "I'm so desperate to find some way to get *in* there that I'm making both of us miserable."

"Yes, I heard about the incident this afternoon."

"Do you have any advice?"

Their voices were getting louder; they were coming this way. She had only a few seconds, and the only places to hide were under the desk or behind the curtain.

Audra backed up, her adrenaline already high from eavesdropping, and threw her note on the carpet in front of the doors. Then she slipped silently from the room and out through the first EXIT door she found. She half-ran, half-stumbled into the garden and collapsed against the tallest stone.

'Philippe,' she thought, and let her hair fall around her face, hiding the high color in her cheeks. 'Philippe.'

Chapter Eighteen

*** *Riddle Me This, Jack!* ***

Dr. Saxon's alarm sounded at 5:15 a.m., and, as she had done now for three days, Audra pretended to sleep through it. Today, for the first time, Saxon didn't pretend like she wasn't pretending. He didn't try to wake her, didn't even stand over her and stare at her. He simply picked up his shoes and left the room.

So. It was possible to feel even worse. She'd wondered.

After he was gone for the day, Audra sat up and threw off her bedding. She supposed it wasn't strictly necessary to start scouring Tesoro's trails for an anchor tree this early in the day, but she liked to be back before Saxon's shift ended at noon. She'd make a lunch for them to share, and they'd quietly stifle in one another's company until he gave up on her and left. Then she could go back out, hunt for anchor-trees some more, and not come back until it got dark. Sometimes he spanked her, although he'd given up trying to achieve rapport.

This wasn't what she'd wanted. She'd tried to make it right, tried to be friendlier, but Saxon killed any attempt at small-talk. "How was your day?" she'd say. "What is it about discipline that attracts you?" he'd reply. Her: "Nice weather we're having." Him: "What qualities are you looking for in a dominant partner?"

So conversation was out, and what did that leave? Just spankings. And it wasn't enough.

Audra took the elevator down from the staff residences to the Rotunda lobby, wallowing in the familiar territory of depression. At six in the morning, the resort buildings were usually deserted, with only a few Subs from Housekeeping traveling the halls. But to her surprise, when she stepped off the elevator, she saw Virgil pacing circles around

the Party Info Kiosk, a clanking duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

She started towards him, swiftly checking to make sure they were really alone before calling his name. "Claymore! What's the matter?"

He whirled on her with an excess of zeal she had always thought he could only achieve through too much caffeine, but his eyes, although bright, didn't have the half-crazed glaze of sleep-deprivation. "We found it!" he crowed. "Comeoncomeoncomeon, you're not going to believe it!"

Audra finished closing the distance between them at a run and slapped her hand over his mouth. "Keep it down!" she pleaded. "You're going to wake...You found it?"

He nodded wildly under her palm.

"You and Griffin?"

Virgil shook his head just as excitedly, and peeled her hand away from his lips. "Me and Koi," he whispered. "We just now found it."

"Just now?" Audra's eyes instinctively sought the nearest wall-clock. "Wow, that's dedication! I know you're not an early-riser."

Inexplicably, Virgil turned bright red from the ears on out. "Um, yeah...well...that just happened to be where we woke up."

For a second or two, Audra didn't get it.

Then she did.

"Virgil!" she gasped.

"It's not what you think," he said hurriedly.

"It's not?"

He hesitated, cracking the knuckles of his left hand one after the other self-consciously. "Well, okay," he said at last. "It sort of is what you think, but we didn't exactly set out to do it. We were out last night, you know, looking around...."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Audra crossed her arms and gave him her most severe glare.

Virgil's blush darkened. "Yeah, and one thing just sort of led to another." He shook his head

suddenly, flapping one hand as though his words were mosquitoes that could be chased away. "But then we woke up, and there it was! Do you want in on the digging or what?"

Without waiting for an answer, Virgil grabbed her by the skirt of her slave-tunic and towed her away.

They started in the Nature Walk, but stepped off onto a side-trail after only a hundred yards. Like an excited puppy, Virgil would run ahead, disappear around a bend, then come bounding back when he realized he'd lost her. They hiked in this manner a long time, moving westward along the curving trail, further and further inland, until Audra couldn't even hear the surf anymore, let alone spy it through the trees. And then the trail ran out, and Virgil took her arm with great confidence and led her into the untamed wilderness.

Towering kapoks and soda palms, massive monkey soaps, sweet-smelling banana and breadfruit trees--the trees pressed in from all sides, enclosing them in gentle shade. Strangler figs invaded much of the foliage, wrapping around the trunks like albino snakes, and clogging up the empty spaces below the canopy with vines. Brilliantly-colored flamboyants and foul-smelling scabby bobas took up every inch of ground, catching at Audra's feet until she no longer dared to look away from her legs. She kept her hand knotted in Virgil's shirt, following him like a blind woman, taking in what she could of the scenery from the knees down.

"You know," she panted. "I don't see any bread crumbs. Are you sure you know where you are?"

"Sure I'm sure," he answered, sounding surprised. "See? There's Koi!"

"Hi, Master! Hi, Pearl!"

Audra looked up (immediately tripping and falling against Virgil's side), and there was Koi, hanging upside down and swinging happily from a net of strangler figs. As they approached her, she

flipped over and dismounted at the apex of her swing with the ease of an Olympian, landing just close enough to Virgil to kiss him smartly on the lips. To Audra, she said, "It's right there," and pointed straight up.

Audra tipped her head back, bewilderedly tracing the outline of a soda palm, trying to make an anchor-shape appear from its gently-bowing trunk. So intent was she in this that her eyes passed right over the 2-foot metal fork suspended forty feet off the ground without seeing it. "Where? I don't--"

Koi stepped around behind her, cupped the sides of Audra's head, and aimed her like a telescope at the right spot.

Audra's eyes flashed wide. "Omigosh! It's a real anchor!"

Virgil and his Pet immediately dove into the earth with garden trowels, but Audra could only stand there, entranced. How tall had this tree been when DeGuarre's first mate tied the anchor to it? The tree couldn't have been too small, or it would have bent beneath the anchor's weight. He must have climbed it, shinnying up the branchless trunk of the palm with god-knew-how-heavy an anchor in his arms.

Audra could think of only one reason why anyone would go through that kind of effort. What else can you give the Captain who now has everything except one last great adventure? They must have been very good friends, and now, for the first time, Audra wondered if digging it up for themselves might actually be...stealing.

"Audra! Er, Pearl!" Virgil threw Koi an apologetic glance, before taking up his frantic waving again. "The bucket! Start dumping sand!"

She shook herself out of the fixed, wondering stare that gripped her and bent to help Virgil dig.

The chest was three feet down, and just as before, it was far too small for treasure. Audra, like Virgil, held her breath as the small, square box was

lifted and set with great ceremony on the lip of the pit for unmasking. Koi was almost beside herself with excitement, both hands alternately flapping in the air and clenching at her mouth to muffle her keening cries of anticipation.

The rusted lock and hinges were no match for Virgil's garden trowel. The lid was removed, and inside, as expected, lay a plate. It was larger than the first, but carried the same pattern, as well as the same deeply-etched writing.

"Jack o Coins, Jack o Cups," Virgil read, frowning. "The rest is all in French."

"Wow," Koi whispered. Her eyes were shining almost brightly enough to read a book by in a darkened room. "I never found anything in my whole life. Except my car keys once. But they were in my pocket anyway. Is that a clue?"

"Yep." Virgil's arm crept around his Pet's shoulders, although he scarcely seemed aware of it. "We need the Griffin."

"Her Masters won't appreciate an early wake-up call," Audra reminded him.

"We'll wait for her in the dining hall," he said, and hopped himself out of the hole. "Let's go!"

The Griffin was not a morning person, and she never ate immediately after waking up anyway. The omnipresence of Evil Isis, as she was coming to be known, made lurking outside Griffin's cabin impossible. So even though the new French riddle was burning a hole right through Virgil's duffel bag and into their brains, they had to sit around a table next to a well-populated buffet line and just wait.

At a quarter of noon, the Griffin walked into the dining hall, her face set in a shocking new mix of 'pissed-off' and 'defeat'. Isis and Bennu came in after her, but when Virgil leapt up and ran to intercept the Griffin, the masked woman halted in her tracks and then pulled her fellow Master with her to the furthest table and sat.

Virgil, who had neither sense nor fear, grabbed the Griffin's wrist and dragged her bodily back to join Audra and Koi. He was already enthusiastically hissing in her ear about the anchor and the new plate, and mangling the French language as he tried to reproduce the riddle.

"Back the hell *off*!" the Griffin roared suddenly, shoving Virgil hard into the table. "Don't hit me with this all at once, you damn fool! For Christ's sake, let me get a muffin!"

Silence.

"Yeah." Virgil sank into his chair, blinking up at her in hurt confusion. "Yeah, okay. Sorry."

Griffin stood there, breathing hard. Then her gold eyes burned past him to Isis and Bennu, lurking out of reach. She bared her teeth and sat down, digging her claws into the table as though she yearned to leap over it and wreak bloody satisfaction on the whole damn room. Audra had seen her like this only once before, and it had ended very badly for the West Bridges High School Kangaroos Varsity Football team. Very badly.

"I'll go get you a breakfast," Koi said timidly, and ran to the buffet.

"I'm sorry, man," Griffin said, glancing at Virgil. "You...You just don't know what it's been like. Some goddamn fool ratted Isis out to the Overseer on the issue of using other people's Pets, and she's turned into this horrible cross between Detective Columbo and Satan. Every time I turn around, she's right there, wanting to give me just one more smack on the ass."

Koi returned with a plate of fruit, cheeses, and yes, even a muffin, and went away again to the drink cart. The Griffin gave this ensemble of edibles a dubious once-over, then sighed and picked up the muffin.

"She's doing what she calls 'stance training'," she said, picking at a blueberry. "I can only stand a certain way, sit a certain way...sleep a certain way." Griffin thumped the muffin down and ground at her

eyes with the heels of her hands. "If I move in my sleep, she wakes me up with a cane to the ass. A cane! Out of the goddamn blue!"

"Griffin--"

"I moved twelve times last night." Griffin picked up the muffin again and took a savage bite. "My urge-to-kill-o-meter has hit the red line. I am in a state of high piss-off that I have seldom seen before."

They all watched her eat, and no one uttered a word.

Finally, Griffin slapped her hands on the table and gave them all a hard grin. "However, as long as she's keeping her distance for the moment, let me have a look at this new riddle."

Virgil passed the plate over.

"Grand," Jenna muttered, turning it in her hands. "If nothing else, we ought to have a full set of tableware by the end of this trip. Let's see...Jack o Coin, Jack o Cups...Huh. I wonder why that's the only bit in English? Here we go...'From town, look out to sea....' The French always got to say things in such a bass-akwards way. 'One watched the wind and one the sun. And gold lay low between.' Yeah, right, me hearties." She handed the plate back to Virgil. "Gold, my ass. We're gonna dig up another chunk of map and we all know it. That clone is so my bitch when I get around to growing it."

"What?" Koi cocked her head to one side. "What clone?"

"Never mind." Jenna rubbed her bloodshot eyes. "Jack o Coins. Jack o Cups. What are those, tarot cards?"

"Even if they were, what would they signify?" Audra asked.

"I think the important part is the bit about looking out to sea," Koi said, and tapped the table to emphasize her next two words. "From town. That's definitely a flashing neon arrow telling us where to look. Like, one guy looks one direction

and the other guy looks another direction, and where they meet, you know, we dig!"

"So one Jack's looking east or west at the sun." Virgil unerringly oriented himself along that line, despite the handicap of having a solid wall in the way. "So what direction is the wind coming from?"

"The wind always blows west out here," Audra said.

"But that doesn't make sense," he argued. "You can't have two dudes both looking west or one looking east and one west, because then their eyes could meet anywhere!"

"The north wind is the biggie in all the mythologies," Jenna remarked. "But listen, if we don't have an exact starting point for those two Jacks, we still won't know where to dig."

"That has to be related to the Coins and Cups comment," Audra said.

"From town," Koi interjected, and spread her arms to indicate the whole dining hall. "Like, this town maybe? It's sort of a town."

Audra, Jenna and Virgil all sat back and exchanged glances. No one spoke, but all three came to a silent agreement at the same time.

Virgil put a hand over Koi's. "I'm thinking not, actually. This place wouldn't have made a very good pirate town. The beach is too open and--"

"Pirate town?" Koi blinked. She looked at each of them, then at the plate. Her face actually seemed to illuminate as comprehension came to her. "Pirate treasure?" she whispered.

They all nodded.

"Not a scavenger hunt?"

They all shook their heads.

"And as far as I'm concerned," Virgil added, "half of whatever I get is yours."

"Nuts to that," Jenna interrupted tersely. "She's been more than helpful already. Give the girl a full share."

Koi blanched, her jaw dropping. "Wow! Really?"

"Provided you can keep it a secret," Audra said sternly. "We can't, you know, legally find treasure here on Tesoro, so there's going to be a certain amount of unlawful sneakin' around. You can't tell anyone!"

Koi shook her head furiously and crossed her heart. "I swear on my Orlando Bloom poster not to tell a single living soul or let me be sent to the Chinese Hell of 40,000 Eels!"

"Okay then," Audra said after a moment.

"You know...." Virgil cracked a knuckle, a sign of tremendously deep thought. "If there really was a pirate town on this island somewhere, some evidence is going to remain. And I did bring that metal detector, in spite of all your teasing."

Jenna was still staring at Koi. "Eels?"

"The most effective Chinese Hells are insidious rather than overtly painful," Koi informed them.

"The town would have to be on the beach somewhere," Virgil continued. "And this island isn't all that big. We could walk the whole thing in just two hours or so. Maybe three."

"What do the eels do, exactly?"

"What don't they do?"

"There's a library with some computers here," Audra suggested. "Jenna and I can see if we can find any significance to the whole Jack angle. We Technical Writers are pretty good at using search engines."

"Wait a minute." Jenna sent a long, scowling stare at Isis and Bennu, still lurking in the corner of the room. "We don't want to forget the Bobsey twins over there. She's not just following me around anymore. Yesterday, she had Bennu tailing Audra through the Nature Walk for three hours."

"She did?" Audra gasped. "Why would she--?"

"Who the hell knows?" Griffin snapped. "The three of us have been acting so bizarre since we got here that it's a wonder half the flippin' island isn't following us around."

"That's true," Koi murmured.

"We're in the Caribbean, after all," Virgil added, more reasonably. "We're probably not the first people who came here looking for pirate treasure. And Griffin's right, we haven't exactly been blending in with the crowd."

"So my suggestion is this." The Griffin leveled a finger at Audra. "You get up first, and go to the library, making sure you're looking around a lot and being insanely sneaky about it. Then I'll leave, and do the same thing as I head off to the Nature Walk. She and Bennu should split up to follow us, and then you two," she said, glancing at Virgil and Koi, "will be free to crawl all over with your metal detector."

"Sounds good," Virgil said, and put the plate away in his duffel bag. "We'll meet tomorrow, my place, eight a.m. or thereabouts, to debrief each other. Audra, you're up."

"And remember," Jenna admonished. "Insanely sneaky."

Audra gave the dining hall and its patrons an elaborate looking-over, and then hurried away in the direction of the Rotunda lobby. Even though she was expecting it, it still alarmed her when Isis gave Bennu a nod and he began to follow her. 'Here is a man,' she thought as she navigated the halls of Tesoro's event rooms. 'Here is a man who has spent an ungodly amount of money to buy three weeks in a Caribbean resort with a BDSM theme, and who is willing to waste an entire afternoon watching a woman surf the web.'

Of course, that thought led directly to, 'And here is a woman who has had that self-same resort package handed to her as a gift and who is willing to waste an entire afternoon trying to Google up some guy named Jack.'

Put like that, it was hard to tell who was engaging in the bigger waste of time.

The library of Tesoro had more to do with image than with recreation. It was a nice room, just on the tasteful side of ornate (and only just), with a

number of comfortable reading chairs taking up most of the floor space. There was a fireplace (filled with glittering sprays of foil, because seriously, in this heat, who wanted a fire?), several paintings and other works of art, a half dozen computer bays, and one wall lined floor to ceiling with books. Suffice to say, they were books Audra had never seen on the New York Times Bestseller list.

The nonfiction section held a number of interesting tomes with titles like *On Training*, *Submissive or Slave: Which is Right for You?*, *How to Design a Dungeon*, and *Spankin' Folks for Fun and Profit*, as well as dozens of autobiographical works. There were also several editions of the *Kama Sutra*, books of bondage photography, and a whole shelf full of well-weathered, enormous periodicals called *The Black Pearl*. There were modern books as well--*The Joy of Sex* was here, as well as black-covered books with titles like *Leathersex!*, *The Sharp Edge of Love*, *Ties that Bind*, *The Master's Manual*, and (Audra pulled this one despite herself and flipped through it) *How to Get Terrible Things Done to You by Wonderful People*. And there were several books of erotica masquerading as travel guides: *Tantra*, *Shunga*, *Netsuke*, *The Erotic Aspects of the Japanese...and Chinese*, and *Hindi*, and even *Eskimos*. Every culture, it seemed, but Caucasian ones were positively awash in carnality.

The fiction section was even more extensive, filled with titles that included the word "My" in nearly every instance--*My Secret*, *My Dark Desires*, *My Submission*, *My Plaything*. To one side of these shelves, a discrete sign informed readers that Rare Titles were Available upon Request and With Permission. This was followed by a neat column of what she presumed were the rare titles, and very few of them were in English. *Satyrica*, *Sous La Tutelle*, *Le Nu au Salon*, *Casanova's Memoirs*...There were eleven volumes of something called *My Secret*

Life by "Walter", complete with quotations, and a slew of first editions: Justine, The Tears of Eros, Venus in Furs, Fanny Hill, The Confession of C. Batille.

Audra turned, half-heartedly seeking someone in Tesoro-brand blue, and jumped back as she saw a Staff-Dom standing silently at her shoulder.

"Hi," he said mildly. "Didn't mean to startle you. Can I help you?"

"I was just wondering..." Audra's nerve was already failing her. She tapped feebly at the sign. "Whose permission, um, do I...?"

"Mine," the Staff-Dom said serenely. "It's my private collection. Which title were you interested in?"

Audra glanced at the list again. "You have something written here that just says, um, 'Album'."

"Aha, yes. I ran across that in Italy. Fascinating thing. It's about a hundred pages of helio-engraved plates, some miniature paintings, some ink and line, all matched with poems and translated texts. Here. I had some prints made."

He led her along the wall and indicated a row of spotlit pictures in frames. One depicted a Ruebenesque little thing in a maid's cap and nothing else, her arms pinned over her head, weeping prettily as three men each applied a switch to her full bottom. It was expertly executed--the smoking-room setting was distinctly drawn without overpowering the scene, the switches seemed to tremble in each man's hand, and there was just the faintest hint of a smile curled at the corner of the maid's mouth. A narrow plaque beneath the image read 'The Chastisement of the Coquette'.

"That's beautiful," Audra heard herself say. The maid's Mona-Lisa smile refused to let her go. "You'd really let me borrow it?"

"You're the girl staying with Saxon, aren't you? I can bring that by your room as soon as it becomes available if you'd like. Something to consider!" He held up a warning finger. "Do not drink, eat,

smoke, shower, etc., with my book. It's absolutely irreplaceable."

"Of course not."

"Okay then. Anything else catch your eye?"

"I was just going to use a computer." Audra waved in their general direction, in case the Staff-Dom didn't know what one was. "You know. Kind of check in with the real world."

The Staff-Dom smiled faintly. "I remember back when I thought that was the real world," he remarked, and left her to it.

As soon as Audra sat down and picked up the mouse, Bennu picked a book off the shelves and settled himself in an overstuffed chair where he could watch her without being obtrusive. She made one last blatantly sneaky scan of the otherwise-empty library, and then began the laborious quest for a pair of mystery Jacks.

Chapter Nineteen

*** Jack and Jilt ***

The following morning, at the appointed hour, Audra was admitted into Virgil's cabin, where she found that not only had Virgil spent the night thoroughly investigating every inch of both maps and both riddles with a spectrum analyzer, but he had also managed to completely cover all available surface area in his front room in the process. He ushered her apologetically past the enormous mess and into the bedroom. Koi had sent for snacks--pastries, fruit, and a pitcher of orange juice almost big enough to go swimming in--and had them artfully arranged on and around the bed. The one bed.

No sooner had Audra been seated and helped herself to a Danish and a glass of juice than a knock sounded on the front door. Virgil immediately leapt up to answer it, and returned in short order with the Griffin.

"Isis and Bennu are right outside," she said shortly. "And I do not put it past them to listen at windows, so make sure they're all closed and keep your voices down."

"I swear I know her," Virgil muttered to himself, and then clapped his hands briskly together. "Well! Let's get started! Bad news first! Thousands of dollars in equipment, years of specialized training, not a damn thing to show for it. Oh, except that the cross-layers in the plates prove they come from the same set, and both maps were made from the same tile, which we already pretty much knew anyway, right? So bupkiss! Any more bad news?"

"I figured my job yesterday was to keep Isis occupied," Jenna shrugged, accepting a muffin from the plate Koi offered. "Which I did. I think. Actually, I gave her the slip in the Nature Walk trails and then hid in the bushes and napped."

"Good for you," Audra said sincerely. "You needed it."

"Yeah, as bad news goes, that's not so bad." Virgil gave her a pat on the arm, which she tolerated with a thin smile. "And now the good news! We found a...well, some kind of old town. I can't guarantee it's the one we're looking for, though."

"There's some old piers and pilings on the other side of the island," Koi amplified, settling herself on Virgil's lap. "And we found some stone square-shapes that maybe were the foundations of houses. And we found lots of funny little metal things." She upended a paper bag pillaged from the gift shop and spilled a goodish number of objects--long nails, iron rings, rusted sections of stiff metal ribbons, hinge pins, and other less-identifiable things--out on the bedspread.

"We also found these," Virgil said, dipping into his pocket for a folded bit of tissue. He carefully unwrapped it and showed them a dozen or so metal wedges, heavily corroded and worn. "I found them buried in the corner of one of those stone squares."

"What are they?" Audra asked.

He looked surprised that she should have to ask. "They're pieces of eight. You know, as in, yo-ho-ho? Spanish pesos, back when they were made out of silver and worth a damn. And look at this one." He pinched a single wedge between his fingernails and held it up to the light. "That mark right there is a Chinese character."

"It's a chop mark," Koi said proudly. "Something old-time merchants would use to mark a foreign coin as being genuine silver or gold or whatever and assigning it value."

"The only Spanish pesos traded off to Chinese merchants traveled in the purses of pirates," Virgil said, with great authority. He re-wrapped his coin wedges and set the tissue bundle on the bed along with the random bits of metal. "So I'm thinking it's definitely a pirate town. Hopefully, it's the only one

there ever was on this island, and that would make it *our* pirate town, which means all we have to find now are the Jacks."

"You know what?" Jenna was staring at the rusted debris littering the bed, a slow smile creeping over her face. "I think this is the first time I've really thought we might find the treasure. For really real."

"The first time?" Virgil's eyebrows went up. "After how disappointed you were when we only dug up that first riddle?"

Jenna shrugged, still smiling. "Hey, I'm disappointed when I don't win the lottery, too, but I never really expect to win, either. So we have the town. We have the sun and the wind and the sea to look out on." She tossed an expectant glance in Audra's direction. "How we doing in the Jack-department?"

"Oh, we are so full of Jacks." Audra beamed, sitting up a little straighter. "The navy--English, Spanish, French, doesn't matter--always operated on a system of low-class vs. high-class at sea. There were sailors, and then there were the officers, and there was a world of difference in between. A lot of pirates made their living as sailors before going on the Account, and the one thing they never really had was an officer rank. What they had instead was a Captain, and four Jacks. The paymaster, or Quartermaster, was the Jack of Coins. The first mate was the Jack of Cups.

"You were sort of right, Griffin," she added. "It's just like tarot cards. There was a Jack of Staves and a Jack of Swords, too. The first lieutenant and the bosun, but not every pirate crew had those. They always had a Jack of Coins and Cups. The paymaster handed out the coin money, and the Jack of Cups made up any scarcity of cash with portions of rum, which otherwise, they'd never be allowed to drink. Even though they were growing cane and distilling rum right here on the island, the profit margin was so high, the pirates only got to drink

beer or maybe wine once in a while. Rum was too valuable to drink."

"Hmm." Virgil rubbed Koi's knee absently as he stared at the ceiling, deep in thought. "DeGuarre would have known exactly where these guys lived, but it doesn't help us much, does it?"

"Oh, come on, Master! There'll be clues!" Koi seized his shoulder and gave him an excited shake. "Like, the Jack of Coins would have a house with lots of locks and stuff! We just have to find it."

"Maybe you already did find it." Audra gave the tissue-wrapped bundle a contemplative poke. "I can't think of a lot of pirates who would get his pay and then bury it on the island with a bunch of other pirates while he goes back out to sea. But the Quartermaster might very well leave a stash of ready-cash at home with which to keep other land-bound pirates salaried while the others were off on the briny, raking in the bucks. You have to understand," she added, "most pirates would be out at sea for six months to two years, and have the equivalent of maybe a hundred bucks to show for it at the end. But every pirate stood at least a chance of hitting a good score. Dozens of them were actually millionaires! So every pirate that stayed home and harvested sugar cane or built a house felt like they might be getting gyped. An eighth of a peso a week could be all that stood between the Quartermaster and a landlocked mutiny."

"Right! One Jack down." Jenna rubbed her hands together, looking clear-eyed and positively frisky. "I've got a good feeling about this. Let's go!"

"Right now?" Koi gazed around the food-laden bedspread, crestfallen. "But I made all these snacks!"

"You help Claymore get his act together. Don't forget the metal detector. Pearl and I will get the kitchen-people to transform all this food into a picnic lunch." Jenna stood and began gathering pastries onto a single platter. She was grinning, her

eyes gleaming. "We're going to need our strength to crawl around pirate ruins all day."

Audra exchanged glances with Virgil and Koi, but as Jenna was already in high gear and a good mood, it didn't pay to delay. She shrugged and picked up the pitcher of juice. "You said it yourself, you know. All we're going to find is a map."

"Don't rain on my cake, lady, there has to be a treasure here somewhere. And even if we do just find a map, at least it'll be one more map out of the way." Jenna whistled merrily to herself, and then abruptly stopped, scowled, and straightened up, grimly clutching her platter of snacks and glaring at the wall. "But lest we forget, there's still the tiny matter of having to ditch our dates."

"Just do like before," Virgil suggested. "You and Pearl do your sneak-routine so they split up and follow you, and Koi and I will get the gear out to the beach. It's on the north side, about...I don't know, a million miles, just keep walking west along the shoreline until you bump into us, I guess."

"Okay." Jenna was still frowning. "But listen, you two, if you don't see Isis and Bennu follow us away, then you assume one or both of them is still lurking out here watching you. Don't go anywhere unless you see them leave."

Once she had nods (and a salute from Koi), Jenna left. Audra waited a full minute, and then followed, hugging the enormous pitcher to her chest and going slow to keep the juice from sloshing, only to find that Isis and Bennu weren't sneaking around today.

Isis had marched right up to the Griffin not ten feet out of Virgil's cabin and was in mid-harangue when Audra appeared.

"Is it so difficult to remember your posture?" the Mistress was demanding. "Must you always require reminders?"

There was a length of bamboo in Isis' hand. She swung it now, generating a wolfish howl of split air

in the instant before it connected high on Jenna's thighs.

"Legs together!" Isis ordered, as the Griffin bared her teeth in silence. The bamboo swung again, whapping hard on the fullest curve of the Griffin's backside. "Bottom out!" Swing and THUK! "Further out!"

Isis paced a circle around her prey as the Griffin stood at crisp attention. Behind the black mask, her eyes held an ugly blend of cunning and frustration. She glanced at Audra, and those eyes narrowed, then flicked back to the Griffin. Without warning, she swung her bamboo rod again, snapping it hard right across Jenna's breasts. "Shoulders back," she purred, as Jenna roared in shock and pain and dropped the platter of food.

The Griffin dropped to her knees on the path, landing square on a raspberry Danish and squirting juice down the length of her thigh. It dripped off her like blood as she hunched over, cupping and shielding her breasts and breathing hard.

"You bitch!"

It wasn't Jenna who said that, Audra realized faintly. It was her. She began to walk jerkily forward, and for once, her lack of grace had nothing to do with her broken back and everything to do with the red rage boiling inside of her.

Isis turned laconically to meet her, swinging the bamboo loosely in her hand. "Bennu," she said evenly. "Take your Pet back to your cabin for a lesson in posture. Use the tawse. A count of twenty."

"You evil, hateful bitch!"

"Get back, Pearl," Jenna rasped. She raised her head just enough for Audra to see one golden eye, and it was filled with a barely-restrained fury. "This isn't your business."

"Make that two counts," Isis corrected. "With a peppermint rub between. See that she's bridled with the nettles bit--" She cast a derisive glance aside at her captive. "--to discourage further

talking out of turn." She reached out and held the gold tag that hung from Audra's collar, and her smile broadened. "Pearl. I'll remember that. And the next time your Master walks away from you, I might just be there to take you home."

Audra didn't think. She stepped back, yanking the tag from Isis' gloved grip, and then flung the entire contents of her juice pitcher into the masked woman's face.

Isis' shocked gasp terminated in a sputtering cough. She dropped her bamboo wand and raised her hands to the level of her dripping cleavage, but then only stood with her arms up, frozen with outrage. A river of orange juice washed out over the path, burning between Audra's toes and scratching at her heels.

"Wish you hadn't done that," Jenna murmured, and got wearily to her feet.

"You--! You--!" Isis shook convulsively, throwing off a spray of orange droplets.

Audra bent carefully and set the pitcher down off the path where it wasn't likely to get kicked and broken. She straightened up, thought about it, and said, "Bitch," again, very clearly.

Isis snapped back to life at once. She whirled, sending out fans of juice, and slapped Bennu across the face hard enough to knock him down. "I said take your pet!" she screamed.

Bennu leapt up, grabbed Jenna and threw her ahead of him down the path toward his cabin. He didn't even look back once.

"You keep your mouth shut!" Jenna hollered as she was taken away. "Don't you fight my battles!"

Curtains were fluttering aside in quite a few windows now, and one or two doors had cracked open.

Isis turned on Audra again, shaking, but more or less composed. "Take me," she said, her voice low and unsteady, absolutely churning with rage. "Take me at once to your Master!"

Audra's lips were pressed so tightly together that her jaw was throbbing, but she managed to nod. She started walking towards the main building, taking short choppy strides. She honestly did not know who she was more hacked at, Isis or the Griffin.

She wound her way through the corridors of the resort's service buildings until she came to the few rooms set aside for the medical needs of the staff and guests. Exam Room 1 was where she had been sent when she was assigned to Dr. Saxon, so that was where she went now. The door was slightly ajar; she knocked anyway.

There was a creak and a papery shuffle, and then two footsteps and the door was opened the rest of the way. Saxon looked at her, looked at Isis, and frowned. "All right," he said, leaning against the doorjamb and folding his arms. "I'm listening."

"Your Pet maliciously threw an entire pitcher of juice at me," Isis announced, giving Audra's shoulder a shove so that she stumbled forward into Saxon's shadow. "In a completely unprovoked attack!"

Saxon turned his gaze on Audra, one bushy blond eyebrow raised in inquiry.

She was still angry, but she'd calmed down enough to get a good grip on her situation. She knew what kind of trouble she was in now. The only thing that mattered was the path she took out.

"Mistakes were made," she said.

"Mistakes!" Isis planted her hands on her hips. "The greater mistake would be in letting it go unpunished, and I intend to personally watch you carry it out to *my* satisfaction."

Saxon somehow managed to double in size just by sliding his eyes from Audra to Isis. "You don't say," he rumbled, his fingers flexing on his massive biceps.

The eyes behind the black mask turned wary. "I am the victim of an utterly unprovoked attack," she

said in a curiously grudging voice. "You'll forgive me a certain amount of bad temper. Of course, I don't *have* to witness her punishment. I can always take my complaint elsewhere, if that is how you'd rather it was handled."

Saxon continued to stare the women down, and when Isis dropped her gaze, he turned his full attention back to Audra. "And how do you feel about it?" Saxon asked.

"I think that if I were sincerely sorry, I'd accept righteous chastisement." Audra folded her hands at her waist and waited.

For a second there, Saxon's face showed a shadow of suspicion, but neither Audra nor Isis backed down from their positions. In the end, he stepped back into his work space, made a phone call, and then stepped out and joined them. "We're not doing this in public," he told Isis.

"Where we do it is of no concern to me, so long as it is a fitting reply to her contemptible behavior."

Saxon glanced again at Audra, giving her one last chance to defend herself, but Audra was through defending anyone. He led the way to the elevator and used his key to get them to the second floor where the staff resided. Isis' boots were sticking to the floor. Audra imagined orange juice and leather made a nasty combination up against the human body like that, and it would probably never come out. She smiled, but dipped her head to hide behind curtains of hair.

"What do you intend to use?" Isis demanded when the elevator doors opened.

"I have a cherrywood paddle," he answered heavily. "Ten with that is about the most severe thing I have ever done to another human body."

Isis snorted, and rolled her eyes.

Saxon opened his apartment door and then stopped and rounded on Audra. "What got into you?" he asked, his eyes piercing her. "What happened, exactly?"

"I'm not excusing myself," she said, and did not meet his gaze. "Just...just let me pee first, okay? If I get crying really hard, I might wet my pants."

Isis didn't look as if that prospect troubled her in the slightest, and she made a huffy little sound when Saxon nodded.

Audra went on in and let herself into the bathroom. She closed the door, locked it, and then went out the window without a second thought.

"You can kind of figure out where the front doors would be on all these buildings."

Virgil stood in the center of a rough square of quarried stones, framing his view with his thumbs and forefingers. It was high noon. His shirt was tied around his waist and snapping in the wind that blew in off the surf. He'd gotten very brown.

"And there's paths here beneath the weeds," he went on. "Look for crushed shells and gravel. See it?"

Audra took her eyes off her friend's physique and looked obediently at the ground beneath her feet. She didn't see anything at first, but then, like a 3-D picture leaping out from one of those "magic" posters, Audra suddenly saw a broad stripe of dull white spring up along the overgrown beach. She turned around, watching a maze unwind, connecting the washed-out foundations of long-vanished buildings before wandering out into the jungle or out into the sea. She should have felt the thrill of discovery. Instead, she felt only the desolation of long-vanished time.

"This is where I found the coins," Virgil called, hopping a low wall of unstable stones and pointing into a corner. "And Koi and I found a lot more with the metal detector before you got here. So even if we don't find anything else, we can probably still go home with a few grand each. They have to be worth something, right?"

All of Virgil's attention was focused on the resurrection of the pirate town. As brown as he was, as broad-shouldered and well-built...in other words, as utterly, spectacularly different as his body had become, at his heart, he was still Virgil. She envied him.

"Have you ever looked in a mirror and not recognized your reflection?" Audra asked.

Virgil continued to point down into the corner of the Quartermaster's foundation as his head tipped slowly to one side. He blinked once, twice, and then said, "Have I ever...what?"

"Do you ever look at all those muscles and wonder what happened to all the scrawny? You know--" Audra floundered for words beseechingly. "Just...Just what happened, you know?"

Virgil looked down at his chest in bewilderment. "What muscles?" he asked, prodding at his pectorals. "Holy cow, look at that!"

"I think it's just one of those things you don't want to see." Koi slid down a sandy bluff, holding the curved wand of the metal detector over her head to protect it. She came to join Virgil, who was now turning in circles trying to see his own back. "Like, we all form ideas of what we look like when we're just kids, so we don't see changes that happen gradually. We still think of people as being who they were years and years ago. Change is scary."

"Look at that butt," Virgil said smugly. "That is a tight butt!" He gave it a slap.

"Never mind," Audra sighed. "Where should I stand?"

"Right here in the doorway, I guess." Virgil gave himself another moment of pure narcissism and then got down to business. "I don't know whether you're facing North or East or West or whatever yet. That'll all depend on where the Jack of Cups is and where your eyes can meet. "

"Koi, did you find anything?"

"Not yet, Master."

Audra watched with detached envy as Koi scrambled up another bluff and frolicked away.

"Out of curiosity," Virgil began, "why do you ask?"

Audra rubbed at her eyes, wishing she didn't have to answer. "This whole trip has been like some sort of hellish class reunion, only I don't know anybody but us. It's like, the guests are all students, and the staff are teachers, and there's--"

"Classes," Virgil said glumly. "God, when I got sent back to class, a little piece of my soul shriveled up and died."

"The dining hall is just like the cafeteria back in school--"

"All that tennis and swimming and hiking is a lot like Phys. Ed.," Virgil added.

"You get detention slips."

"And don't forget the big, scary principal." Virgil shuddered, and even though it was more for effect than an expression of true fear, there was genuine respect in his rueful smile. "That guy got more 'sir's out of me in five minutes than my father can get in a year."

'Philippe,' thought Audra. She looked out to sea. "How long ago do you suppose the town was destroyed?" she asked.

Virgil surely noticed the abrupt change of subject, but he had no problem switching gears. "DeGuarre retired to his plantation in 1692, and I think it's safe to assume that the earthquake that chased him out of Tortuga also hit this place pretty bad. Maybe his crew came back here, maybe not. Anyway, the Golden Age of piracy pretty much petered out in the mid 1700s, and pirates of the yo-ho-ho variety were pretty much extinct by 1850 or so. So what's that? A century or two's worth of hurricanes and who knows? I'm surprised there's as much here as there is."

True. Seashell walkways and crumbled stone foundations were all that remained on the beach, but the most pervasive proof of the cove's history

was out in the water. The ocean was a beautiful field of glittering sapphires, capped with the lightest froth, but it was stabbed through in a dozen places. Ruined black fingers, the remains of ancient piers, pointed accusingly at the God that had let catastrophe claim them. A pristine beach at first glance, a devastated town at second. Beauty and ruin. Audra shivered and looked away down the shoreline.

A lone figure was coming towards them. It was Jenna, her arms stiffly at her sides and her head down. As she came closer, Audra realized Jenna was dressed only in the mini-tee she had been wearing earlier and a pair of panties...and she was holding the panties together at the hips.

"Virgil!" she cried, pointing.

He looked around, recoiled, and then raced to meet her, stripping the shirt from around his waist as he ran.

Jenna said an angry-looking something to Virgil, but took the shirt. She tried at first to tie it around her own waist, but when that failed to produce the desired effects, she put it on and stepped into the surf far enough to wet the hem and keep it weighted around her thighs. This done, she kicked out of her torn panties, picked them up, and threw them into the jungle with a curse Audra could hear from here.

She could see Virgil talking, and after a moment, Jenna answered, punctuating herself with a brutal punching of fist into palm. Audra couldn't make out any words at all from this distance, but Virgil looked openly stunned by what he was hearing.

At last, their mini-palaver done, they turned and trudged along the beach back to the town ruins. When they came close enough, Jenna raised her voice and said, "There had better be treasure. There's a good chance I'm going home tonight."

Audra was not shocked, but she was beginning to be nervous. She looked at Virgil, but his face was a mask of doom.

"What happened?" Koi had reappeared at the top of the bluff, holding what looked like a very thin metal tire in her hand.

Jenna looked at her, then at each of them, and then down at her feet. "I snapped."

"Oh dear." Audra could actually feel the blood draining from her cheeks. "How badly?"

A gleam of Griffin-gold entered into Jenna's glance. "Have you ever known me to snap in a good way?" she demanded.

"Well...no."

"He was spanking me. Over and over and over. Trying to make me keep count, starting over if I yelled or flinched or lost my damn training stance. And then, when I finally got through it, he went and got a bottle of peppermint oil, and if you don't know already, that stuff is a thousand times worse than Ben Gay. And he's coming at me with that bottle in one hand and a tied-up bunch of stinging nettles in the other, and...."

The Griffin trailed off, her face puckering into young-eyed confusion. "And the weirdest thing happened. All of a sudden, I could remember being back in Ms. Lupe's Room o' Doom, walking you up and down the carpet. I could hear myself telling you that my mom deserved what she got when she stayed with guys she knew she could leave. I...."

No one spoke. The wind didn't blow. The ocean didn't move.

"I had my finger right on the panic button," Jenna said, and shook her head. "But I couldn't press it. I couldn't make myself...just press the damn...."

A single tear welled up and crawled down Jenna's cheek.

"I couldn't," she said, her voice small with confusion, "give up."

She reached up, found the tear and caught it on her fingers. She stared at it until her face hardened. "I could fight," she said. "That's what I could do. And I did. I snapped. I just...snapped."

Chapter Twenty

*** *Now That's A Switch* ***

Someone had to say it.

"Is he dead?" Audra asked.

Jenna reacted exactly as if someone had landed her an uppercut to the jaw, jerking backwards and then wheeling around with an expression of shock. "Is he *what*?" she demanded. "What in the blue hell kind of question is that?!"

"A reasonable one." Virgil cleared his throat. "You know, all things considered...."

"No, I didn't kill him. Sheesh." The fire went out of her again, and she slumped and stared at the sand. "I just fought. For-real fought. I got up and I got that shit out of his hands...and then I got the paddle...."

"Oh dear," Audra said again.

Jenna did not elaborate on exactly what followed the acquisition of the paddle. She let their imaginations run riot in her silence, and then she shook herself out of it and continued as though she had been narrating all along: "And I kept saying, 'Hurts, doesn't it? Who's your Master now, Benny? Tell me you like it! Tell me you love it!'" Jenna trailed off for a little while, then sighed and said, "And eventually, he did."

"Oh dear." This time, she and Koi said it together.

"So we'd better find the damn treasure this time," Jenna concluded. "Because I left that boy crying on the carpet and any minute now, they'll be sending the Goon Squad after me." She lapsed into another silence; just staring at the wet sand between her bare feet as the waves perpetually came in. When she raised her head at last, it was with a look of such heartsick pain that no one could meet her eyes. "Guys, I am so sorry. I thought I could do it. I really did."

"It's okay, Griffin." Virgil gave her a few pats, and when her mood stayed more or less stable, he even risked a sideways hug. "I'm sorry I put you through it at all."

"Well...show me the good news." A bent and broken Griffin swept her gaze over the cove. "Where are the Jacks?"

"Audra's in the right spot for one of them, we think."

She'd drifted from the right spot, actually, but she hurriedly stepped back into the long-defunct doorway of the paymaster's quarters. "Koi's still looking for clues," she added, just to take attention off of her.

"I found this," Koi said at once, raising the wheel-like object. It was ribbon-thin, but broad, pocked with rust and nearly an arm's length in diameter. "Any ideas?"

"Toss it here," Jenna commanded, and once she caught it, turned it into the light and inspected it closely. "It's a barrel hoop," she declared.

"Yay!"

"Specifically, it's a chime hoop. You can tell by the weathering along the outer edge. And chime hoops were only used in barrels that needed to be watertight." Jenna let the hoop drop to the sand.

"That means the house I found it in has to be the Cup-house, right? They put rum in barrels, right?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it was the pickle barrel. We don't know. Look for a really big hoop, one about as big as you are. That would belong to the puncheon that stored the skim. There should also be some big old boiling vats around here somewhere."

"Big like a bathtub?" Koi asked excitedly. "I think those showed up, but the detector can't really recognize big objects. I'll dig down!" She ran off along the curving arm of the cove, growing smaller with every bound.

Jenna finally realized Virgil and Audra were staring at her. "What?" she said crossly. "Pioneer Days '92. I was apprenticed to a cooper. Go to hell."

"I found it, I found it!" Koi was leaping up and down on the rock-strewn shore. Her voice was tinny with distance, but still conveyed every iota of her exhilaration. "I found the boiling bathtub! And here's the doorway! I'm in the doorway!"

"Well, the only way you two can look at the same spot is if Koi looks East--"

This Koi obediently did, trembling with the effort of holding so still.

"And you look North," Virgil finished, but he was already drifting away, trying to place himself at midpoint. He stopped at the water's edge, checked the position of both girls, and then turned an aggrieved look on all of them. "Okay," he called mournfully. "Who brought the diving bell?"

"Where is it?" Jenna strode out to meet him, the hem of her borrowed shirt slapping wetly at her thighs.

They conferred, gesturing broadly back to the doorways of both Jacks, and then Jenna stepped back and said, "I'll go. I've been skin diving before, and it looks like I should be able to use a piling for a guide bar."

"Are you sure?" Virgil looked uneasily at the water. "There could be sharks."

"Or eels," Koi called.

"Or riptides," Audra put in, more practically.

"Or ghosts or giant squid or man-eating llamas! I'll be careful!" The Griffin tossed her hair and started stalking into the sea.

Audra watched her friend swim cautiously out along the ruined pier, pausing often to align herself to the Jacks' doorways. When she reached the crossing point, she was hugging a piling. She waved once, then took several deep breaths, and then ducked below the surface and was gone.

It seemed to Audra that she was under far too long. How long could a person hold their breath? What if there was an undertow? What if there really were sharks? Would they know if anything happened in time to do anything about it? She found herself exchanging nervous glances with Virgil and Koi as the minutes stretched out.

Virgil took a step out into the surf and then Jenna crested with a splash. She threw her hair back awkwardly, hugging the piling with one arm while using the other to cradle a small object to her chest. Koi and Audra both broke out of their doorways; Virgil's Pet traversed the shore in great deer-like leaps while Audra was forced to keep her eyes on her feet, hobbled by the grasping sand. When she reached Virgil, Jenna had already cleared her face of hair and was swimming towards them.

"There was a box," she called, clumsily regaining her feet in the water. "But it kind of disintegrated. Oh well." She held out the square of porcelain to Virgil with a rueful expression. "I wasn't really expecting treasure anyway." She ignored his helping hand and marched onto dry sand, kicking at seashells. "Dammit."

"I'm going to have to work this over a bit before it's really useful." Virgil tilted the map to catch the light, squinting at the deeply eroded lines. "That might be the X...and that thing next to it...Griffin, what would you say that looks like?"

Jenna glanced at the map as she wrung out Virgil's shirt. "A wombat."

"A wom--! Be serious!"

"You asked, I answered." Jenna started trudging along the beach. "Now if you'll all excuse me, I need to go get expelled."

They watched her go.

"Will she really be expelled?" Audra whispered.

"Probably." Koi looked thoroughly miserable. "Something like that happened here once before, and they both got the boot."

"We'll speak up for her!" Audra declared. "We'll tell them everything Isis has been doing to her!"

"That's no good," Koi said. "She has a panic button, doesn't she? If she gets hurt, she's supposed to use it *before* she beats her Master senseless with his own paddle."

"But--"

"Face it, she's gone like bell-bottoms." Koi shrugged apologetically. "Sorry. Maybe she can sneak back onto the island, and we'll hide her in the jungle."

"Yeah," Griffin called back sharply. "And maybe I'll master the secrets of alchemy overnight and spin my own damn gold! Stop worrying about me. I got myself in trouble, and I'll deal with it just fine!"

They began to follow her, walking in silence.

The beach was beautiful. Golden sand and sparkling water dazzled the eye. One of Tesoro's galleons circled the island, bringing them the sounds of laughter. The jungles on their right were lush with the scents of flowers and spices. It was cruel perfection, Audra thought. It was always so much easier to do hard things in ugly places or bad weather.

"I'm not going to miss this place," Jenna announced suddenly, in direct contrast to the flow of Audra's thoughts. "It's too hot. Too bright. Too...full of spankers."

"Yeah, right." Virgil swiped his skater-hair out of his eyes and gave Jenna's back a wry smile. "And those grapes were probably sour anyway."

"What's wrong with spankers?" Koi asked.

Jenna glanced at her, then shrugged and looked away. "Nothing."

"You--You really don't like it here, do you?" There was a reverence in Koi's tone that made it clear she was utterly dumbfounded by this revelation. Her eyes were wide and wondering, almost pitying. "You're not playing around, you really don't like it!"

Virgil and Audra both reached at the same time to pull Koi out of smacking range if the Griffin swung on her. By and large, Jenna lived in a deep state of calm. Although she could be vicious at the drop of a pin, she rarely lost her temper. Her fits of violence were almost always carefully choreographed. But this mood...this was something dark and sad and uncertain...and when the Griffin wasn't sure about something, the Griffin tended to lash out.

But Jenna actually seemed to consider the question. Her step slowed and her head tipped back. She contemplated the clouds with heavily brooding eyes. "You know...to be honest...I kinda do."

Of all the things she could have said, that was the one thing Audra was least prepared to hear. Judging from the startled looks the other two exchanged; she was not alone in her incredulity. And although she sensed that her friend's mood was approaching a level of funk that made her positively unstable, some things simply had to be asked.

"What do you mean?" Audra ventured.

"It's like..." Jenna's hand rose, shaping something indefinable and lost in the air before falling to her side again. "It's something you can almost see...something that almost works. For me, I mean. It does work for everyone else. And that's...that's the bitterest swallow of the whole rotten cup. The longer I'm here, the more I feel like I'm...incomplete. Like I'm doing something wrong."

Unexpectedly, Saxon's face swam into focus behind Audra's eyes. Saxon, who was, for all she knew, still waiting for her to come out of the bathroom. She felt very distantly bad about that. She felt worse for not feeling bad enough. How was it even possible for there to be so many ways to screw up Submission? Her heart went out to Jenna, or at least, that was what she decided that low, sick, swooping sensation in her gut must mean.

"I saw someone yesterday," Jenna was saying. "In the courtyard outside the dining hall. Two someones, a man and a woman. He was sitting on the bench, the one next to that big purple thing, you know the one? He was waiting for her and she was late. He was waiting when I went in for dinner, and he was still waiting when I came back out. Nothing new, right? You see it every day in some permutation or another. Someone's waiting, someone's late...and when she finally came strolling up, she wasn't the least bit sorry. She was wearing a watch, I mean, come on, what is she going to say? She got stuck in traffic? No, she's just one of those that thinks it's cute to be fashionably late or she's one of those who doesn't bother getting it together until two minutes before she should be there, and either way, she's showing the guy she made the date with zero respect! And again, you see it every day. You think, 'Get used to it, Sport, she'll do it every single time.' Only what he did was haul her down right there, right in front of everyone, and give her what for on the subject of tardiness.

"He didn't yell at her. He didn't call her names. And she didn't punch him or even try all that hard to get away. He pulled her down over his lap, swept her sarong to one side and started paddling away. Boom-boom-boom." Jenna's hand crept around to her own backside, pulling the hem of Virgil's borrowed shirt up high enough to show the lower curves of her purpled buttocks. She rubbed, seemingly unaware, lost in her thoughts, in the struggle of what she was trying to say. "She was clear down there. No bruises, no...no priors. She wasn't looking for a spanking, is what I'm saying, or at least, she wasn't in the one-a-day habit. She fussed a little, but he kept spanking, and pretty soon, she quit fussing and started crying. Then he let her up and hugged her and kissed her...."

Jenna stopped and turned all the way around, her eyes stabbing at each of them in turn. "This

was no fun and games kind of spanking," she insisted, as if this were the most important factor, the whole heart and soul of the matter. "This was for real. And when it was done, it was done! He was happy, she was happy...and she'll probably be a little more careful about watching the clock from now on. It was real, it served a purpose!"

"Okay," Virgil said slowly. "We get it. She was naughty, she got a whupping." He brushed sand nervously from his elbows, giving the girls to either side of him a quizzical look. "And...?" he said at last.

"And me...me...." Jenna wrapped her arms around herself and watched Tesoro's wooden ship bear a cargo of laughing, happy people slowly around the cove and out of sight. "I have spent a big chunk of my life trying to make up for things, and I could never do it. I keep falling back into bad habits, keep doing things I know hurt other people. I say I'm sorry I do it, but I *keep* doing it."

No one argued with her. Jenna glanced at them, and her shoulders slumped. "I've never been more miserably jealous of anyone in my life as I was with that woman in that moment, when the spanking was done and he was telling her to be good. All done. All fixed." She stared out to sea. "If this system was as acceptable everywhere as it is here...Just imagine that for a second."

"And then write a book about it," Koi suggested. "And make a million dollars."

"I'm serious!" Jenna swung around, scowling. "I could be a whole different person today, if only there were more spanking and less...less punching! If there were just a place I could go where I could have hurt enough and been sorry enough to finally get past it all instead of pecking my goddamn liver out every day and growing it back again every night! Damn it, I want what you want, Koi!" she exploded. "I want to be loved and held and forgiven! I just can't...can't be...."

"Submissive," Koi said softly.

"At least you can't say you're not getting punished," Virgil pointed out.

"I'm *not* getting punished, damn it!" Jenna shouted. "I'm just getting beat up! There's no point! There's no purpose! Every single stupid Submissive on this whole stupid island gets punished but me! I get peppermint oil rubs and a bridle made out of goddamn stinging nettles for no reason, that's what I get! And I've done the most..." Jenna's voice cracked. She flushed and tried again, but the effort was weaker. "I've been the worst...." She turned away to stabilize. "It's ripping me up! I don't know what to do! The only thing I do really, really well is *hurt* people! Why am I...Why am I like this? I don't know who I am!"

"Sure, you do," Virgil said. "You're Griffin."

Koi silenced him with a hand on his arm. "I'll handle this, honey." She moved ahead to walk beside Jenna, their voices too low to be overheard.

Virgil dropped back to stand with Audra. "I don't get it," he said. "First, she got beat up. So she started beating other people up because she was getting beat up. Then she started beating herself up for beating other people up. And then she tried letting herself get beat up to make up for beating up other people. And *now* she's beating herself up for not liking getting beat up."

"Things aren't always as simple as they look to other people," Audra told him, still thinking of Saxon. "It's one thing to know what the right thing to do is, but it's another thing to do it."

"Hey, there's simple and then there's *simple*," he argued. "Why does she have to be sad because she can't make herself like spankings? Not everyone does, that's all! I don't like spankings, and you don't see me getting all torn up over it! Not liking spankings is perfectly natural!"

"So what does that make Koi?" Audra asked. To herself, she added, 'And what does that make me?' "What's natural then?"

Virgil's mouth opened and closed a few times as distress gradually carved deeper and deeper lines into his face.

"Because, you see--" Audra started walking again. "--there's not simple, and then there's *not* simple."

They came up the trail from the beach and into the courtyard near the garden. Audra lagged behind as they moped toward the cabins; she tapped each of the garden stones as she passed them, then glanced up at the Overseer's window. It was empty. This depressed her even more.

"Here it comes," the Griffin murmured.

Audra turned around to see a very official Staff-Sub striding towards them with, not one, but two sky-blue slips of paper. Instinctively, she stepped into the shadow of the tallest stone and tried to blend in.

It didn't help. Audra received her summons to the Overseer just after the Griffin got hers. REPORT IMMEDIATELY, it said. In red ink, no less.

"See you, Claymore," Audra sighed. "See you, Koi."

"See you, Pearl," Koi replied. "Bye, Griffin."

The Griffin glared at her, curled her lip, and then went on in. Her shoulders were squared and her chin high. Audra followed with considerably less confidence.

The way to the Lower Tower Office was now painfully familiar to her. Likewise, the sight of her traveling it appeared to be just as familiar to the staff; the secretary outside the Overseer's door didn't even look up from her computer.

The Overseer was waiting for them just inside the double doors. Somehow, without the desk to keep his massive proportions in perspective, he seemed even bigger. He glanced at Audra, sending an electric shiver all the way down her faulty spine, but then he fixed all his grim attention on Jenna.

"I have just had," he rumbled, "quite an unexpected visit from your former Master."

Jenna said nothing, gave nothing away.

"He came to thank me," the Overseer continued. His eyes were scimitars of gleaming black and razor sharpness. "He seems to think that I picked up on Submissive signals in his behavior and convinced you to switch."

Not even the Griffin could maintain a straight face at hearing that, and Audra actually gaped for a few seconds before catching herself.

"Now I don't know what happened...." The Overseer paced a complete circle around Jenna, his dark eyes burning into her the whole time. He came around to face her again and leaned forward, almost close enough to kiss her, if that were his intention. "...but I can guess," he growled.

Two high points of color rose in Jenna's cheeks. She dropped her gaze.

The Overseer straightened, contemplating her. At last, he said, "I am willing to let the matter go," he said. "I am even willing to let you and your former Master play out these new roles....provided all parties are satisfied with the arrangement. Are you?"

"Ecstatic," Jenna said gravely.

"You are dismissed, Griffin."

Jenna turned around and left.

The Overseer gazed at Audra for a long time, and then moved past her to close the double doors left open in the Griffin's wake. He remained outside her field of vision, coming to stand just behind her. Audra could hear him breathing, could feel his eyes itching at the back of her head.

"So," he said.

The anticipation was killing her. "Saxon left me," she said.

"I understand it was you that did the leaving. Through the bathroom window, no less."

Audra shrugged one shoulder self-consciously.

The Overseer must have leaned forward, because his next words tickled the back of her neck. "Are you happy here, Pearl?"

"Yes, sir," she answered, not without some desperation. "I'm taking classes and going hiking and going swimming and I'm playing--"

"Shuffleboard," he said, in unison with her.

That was all either of them said for a very long time.

"Tell me about the incident this morning," he said suddenly.

She wished he would come around where she could see him. She hated having to meet his eyes, but she hated not seeing him even more. She just knew that every twitch, every fidget, every minute shiver that passed through her was sending a flag of emotion up for him to read. She tried to play dumb. "What incident?"

The silence turned ominous in an instant. "I enjoy chess," he said evenly. "I enjoy cribbage, billiards, backgammon, senet, and yes, even shuffleboard. But those are the only games I enjoy. Rethink your answer."

"Why?" she asked, trembling slightly. "We both know I didn't crawl out on the ledge to inspect your fire escape."

"Ah, but only one of us knows why you did do it. Tell me what happened."

"It doesn't matter."

"But I will know regardless."

The office windows were open. She could hear the tide smacking at the beach, relentless, uncompromising. The beach could stand there all day; the tide would still wear it down.

"I threw some juice on another guest."

"Why?"

Audra shrugged again, but a dull kernel of heat bloomed in the darkest chamber of her heart, reminding her that she was still angry about that.

"You told Dr. Saxon you would accept chastisement and then you crawled out the bathroom window."

"Actually, I said that if I was sorry, I would accept chastisement." Audra's fingers fidgeted with the hem of her little skirt. "Then I crawled out the bathroom window."

"Meaning that you were not sorry."

"No, sir."

"Did you think there would be no reprisal?"

Audra forced her hands still. Was he going to order her to march back to Saxon and be punished? Or march off to Isis, even? Could she hold still for a spanking from Isis? Well, of course she could hold still for the implement, but could she hold still for the horrible person swinging it? Her body could take the hit, but her spirit rebelled.

The silence in the room was taking on weight the way a sinking ship takes on water and there was no rescue from this one. The Overseer did not ask rhetorical questions, but she couldn't think of an answer. Her nerve failed her; her breath began to hitch as she fought back tears. "It doesn't matter," she said.

The Overseer abruptly moved around her and away. He stopped, put his hand on the banister of the wrought-iron stairs, and indicated the climb with a sweep of his arm. "Come with me," he said.

Audra's feet took her a step forwards before her brain could make them stop. "Why?" she asked.

"Enough is enough," said the Overseer. "I'm taking you myself."

Chapter Twenty-One

*** *Audra Names the Dragon* ***

With him?!

"I don't want to," Audra stammered. Her back struck the doors; she hadn't realized until then that she had been moving away from him. She was aware only of herself, of the hideously intermingled elation and horror that gripped her, and of him, his dark eyes following her every movement.

"Why not?" There was a great stillness about him as he asked the question, a certain reserve as he waited for the answer.

"Because I--I don't want to lie to you."

Audra slapped a hand over her mouth. Of all the things she could have said, why did she have to tell him the truth?! She watched a faint smile form on the big man's lips. Oh God, he liked that answer! She fumbled frantically behind her for the doorknob.

"You don't want to run from me, either, I think." The Overseer continued to wait by the stairs, his hand outstretched.

Audra's fingers curled around the doorknob but wouldn't turn it. She could feel her heart pounding, could feel heat boring into her where his eyes touched her. All she had to do was leave; a little turn, a little push and she was gone. She peeked at him. He was still waiting, still smiling. Her hand slipped from the doorknob in defeat.

"I can't," she said, almost pleading, even as her traitor feet took her another step towards him.

"And you don't want me. You really don't!"

"No?" His eyes gleamed in an unsettling way.

"No one wants me!" she insisted. Her words were without self-pity of any kind, but permeated with eagerness as she struggled to convince him. "I'm a horrible person! I'm broken!"

The Overseer had stopped smiling. Two steps brought him right to her face, filling all her field of

vision, and he thrust one finger beneath her chin. "Never again," he said, and his voice was the distant roll of thunder that heralds a heavy storm. "Never say such things again."

"You can have anyone you want!" Audra swept her arms outward, as though offering him his pick from a line of blushing, invisible virgins. "Anyone!"

"I want you." A crease appeared between his eyes, as though the admission was painful, but there was no hesitation in his voice, and no lie on his face. "Only you."

She shook her head, unable to disbelieve him, unable to accept it either. "Why me?"

"I like shuffleboard."

She stared at him and then uttered a despairing sort of laugh. When he offered his hand again, she took it, and came under the heavy weight of his cradling arm as he led her to the stairs. He had to coax her onto each of the first five steps, but after that, she ascended on her own. She kept her eyes fixed on her feet, not so much to keep her balance as to keep from seeing his rooms open up before her. Once she saw them, they would become her rooms, and this would be real.

"You're making a mistake," she told him helplessly.

"I resent the implication."

"What, that you can make mistakes?"

"No." He stepped off the iron stair and onto hardwood floors, and once she had done the same, he cupped her chin and made her face him. His eyes burned warningly into hers as he said, "That wanting you can be one."

"You don't know me."

"There are going to be rules," the Overseer said. "Very few, very simple. You are not to say or do deliberately hurtful things to anyone, especially yourself. That is one."

"I--"

"You are permitted privacy by way of omission, but you are not to answer any direct question with an untruth. That is two."

"I can't--"

"You may walk away from me at any time," he said quietly. "That is three."

She only looked at him, mute with anguish. She didn't want to walk away. He had to see that. It had to be stamped all over her face! But that didn't mean she wanted to be here, either! If he gave up on her...When he gave up on her...

"The past does not matter here," the Overseer concluded. "You will begin with me free of guilt."

Oh Lord, and here it came. He was leading her to a sofa, where, no doubt, he meant to spank all the problems she'd caused, so far, out of her. She didn't resist, but her eyes were already stinging with the threat of tears. She wanted it to matter. She'd spent two weeks on this island, spread out between three Masters she had managed to fail in one way or another, and through it all, the Overseer had been the one man who intimidated her, the one man she simply had to obey, the one man she'd wanted to please. He was this fantasy of authority and command, unattainable, undeniable. Now he was here, and he was going to spank her, and it would be all mixed up and horrible.

But when they came to the sofa, he stopped and turned her to face him again. He put both hands on her shoulders and gazed steadily into her eyes. "I have allowed you small deceits until this time," he said. "Everyone comes to this island with secrets. But yours are hurting you."

Audra felt suddenly very faint. She opened her mouth, but no words came.

"Something is wrong inside you," the Overseer said. "Tell me what it is."

She shook her head, unable even to speak the single word, 'No.' She had never named the thing. The doctors had told her what it was, and its hateful name was always sunk deep in her brain where she

could never escape it, but she had never spoken it out loud. Not even to Jenna and Virgil. Not ever. And not now.

"Tell me," he said.

She shook her head again, harder. "There's nothing wrong!"

He caught her chin, bored down on her until she could see only his face, only the piercing black brightness of his eyes. "No untruths," he reminded. "Tell me what it is."

"It doesn't matter!" she pleaded.

"I will know regardless."

Her eyes were leaking; her voice was cracked. Her body was giving in to the press of tears and misery, reliving that first awful day. She could almost smell the hospital disinfectant, could almost hear the electronic blips and hum of machinery, and the doctor's voice trying to soothe her, telling her what was wrong, naming the dragon for the first time.

Audra tried to back up, propelling herself out of the memory, but the Overseer wouldn't release her. She slapped him. He let her. But he didn't let go.

"Don't make me do this!" she cried.

"Tell me what it is."

And she wanted to tell him. That was the truly awful part. She wanted to open up this wound once and for all and let this poison drain, but spankings--of all the ridiculous things, spankings!--couldn't possibly work that kind of magic. Some things are broken forever. Some things just couldn't be fixed. She tried to cover her face, but he forced her hands down to her side.

"You were hurt," he said.

"I fell." The words were out in a flash of betrayal. She tried to clap her hand over her mouth, and again, he took that option away. "I jumped," she said. "We were swimming in the river...I jumped. I don't want to do this!" She tried to twist away and he wouldn't let her. "It doesn't matter what they called it, I'm broken!"

It was the one thing she clearly remembered thinking from that time in the hospital. She hadn't known you could break your back and live. The discovery brought only horror. You weren't supposed to live through some things. Some things should just kill you outright. They shouldn't drill into you and den. The doctors had a lot of names and procedures and reasons and explanations, but it all boiled down to the same thick scum: She was broken. She was going to have to live and be broken.

"What did they call it?" The Overseer closed in on her, not raising his voice but thundering away, all the way down to her bones. "Tell me!"

She mouthed it first, her lips moving in numb obedience, and then she shuddered all over and finally said it.

"Aphasic neuropathy."

Two words after seven years of silence. Speaking them left her shocked and strengthless. She sagged, but he wouldn't let her fall any more than he let her run away. "Aphasic neuropathy," she said again, as he drew her against the enduring wall of his chest. "Aphasic neuropathy. Damn you." She began to cry.

He showed no more emotion at being cursed than he had at being slapped. He held her, supporting her and stroking her hair, and waited for the hurricane force of her tears to ebb. When she had quieted to low moans and sniffles, he quietly asked, "What does it mean?"

"My spinal cord got pinched when my back broke. They couldn't fix it." The tears started leaking out harder, but her voice remained steady. "Neuropathy is an all-purpose word for when your nerves don't work. The aphasic part means it's scrambled. I can't tell where my legs are. Things lie to me when they touch me. Hot things feel cold, or soft, or ticklish. I can't trust myself. No one can trust me."

"I trust you," he said.

She was still crying, but it wasn't the same old sick pain. The knife was sharp and deep, but it did the job of lancing that hurt, and soon all the rest of it was spilling out of her. She told him about climbing the trestle the summer she turned sixteen, about waking up half a person in the white room on the second floor, she told him about Jenna and Virgil and walking endless circles in the Room o' Doom. All of it.

He sat with her at some point, pulling her onto his lap and holding her against his chest where she could feel the beating of his heart. His arms completely enclosed her. She was bound by him. She was safe.

When her words ran out and her tears emptied and she was nearly asleep in his embrace, he said, "I am going to spank you."

"It won't help," she told him.

"I will spank you regardless." He stood with her in his arms, carrying her as easily as he might a kitten, and fetched something she could not see from a bookshelf. He returned to the sofa, sat with her, and positioned her with great tenderness over his knee. She heard a sound, one at once perfectly familiar and utterly alien, something between a pop and a click.

"Tell me what you feel," he said, and touched her.

"Bubbles," she said, bewildered. "I told you, it doesn't matter. It--"

"And now?"

"Ice," she said, despairingly.

"Now?"

"That...That's just your hand, right?"

"Right." His fingers were replaced with something smaller, something dully pointed. It began to move in long, even lines. "Tell me when it feels different," he said, and all at once she realized what he was doing.

He was drawing on her. He had a felt-tip pen and he was shading in the parts of her that could feel.

Audra was utterly still. She did not breathe or blink. She didn't think her heartbeat or her blood moved. It was as though her whole body held its breath and just felt him while his pen moved over her. "Cold," she would stay, when the marker brushed a border of sensation, or "Scratchy." And when he had that spot completed, his hand returned to making gentle passes over her lying flesh until he found a new place. Piece by piece, his pen moved and claimed her. Her entire bottom was mapped, but he didn't stop there. He mapped her thighs, her shins, her heels, her hips--front and back, he explored and charted her. He turned her and touched her, asking his one question again and again, "What do you feel?"

It finished where it had begun, with her upended over his knee. Only this time, her mind was in such a rush of anxiety and wonder that she did not notice when he lifted his hand from her.

"You will begin with me free of guilt," he reminded her, and that was when she knew that the spanking was coming.

WHACK!

Audra cried out as the first fully accurate blow struck home, a scream that was as much joy and amazement as pain. *This* was what she was meant to feel. *This* was what was honest, what was true. *This--*

This....

This hurt!

The Overseer had not paused for her epiphany, but paddled steadily through it, each slap of his huge hand driving new nails into her flesh. All the tender parts of her, so freshly awakened and made aware of themselves, began to throb and burn in tandem. Slowly, the voids of numbness between patches of pain began to close with sympathetic echoes of hurt. She could feel herself outlined in

throbbing shades of red, beaten into life with every fall of his powerful arm.

She didn't mean to struggle, but she couldn't help herself. The Overseer let her beat at his shin with her hands, but pinioned her legs with his when she kicked. She could buck and writhe a little, but not enough to throw his aim. He let nothing affect his concentration or obscure his target. He spanked her to the fullest of his satisfaction, but he let her know with every purposeful swat that he was aware of her throughout.

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK! His hard hand measured out every true-feeling part of her bottom, patch-working her together with stinging smacks and then kneading at her to smooth away the edges of pain. Strange to think of a spanking as 'gentle', but this was, for all the merciless strength in his swing. It was gentle not in that he tapped at her lightly, but in that he explored her so thoroughly, slowly elevating the red mark of too-much as he initiated her to sensation. She was struggling, she was crying, she was even trying to scream, but there was still some tiny part of her that needed this, that needed more. It answered a desire far deeper than merely true feeling. It was in the part of her that struggled under the slaps, but relaxed beneath the stinging of his massages. It was in the voice that shrieked and wailed, but did not swear or cry for help. It was in the hands that clawed and battered at his leg, but did not slap frantically at her panic button. And it was the tear-thickened, "Thank you," she breathed when his punishing hand finally ceased.

He lifted her in his arms, but held her loosely, allowing her just enough room to shiver and writhe as she tried to find a way to sit that did not hurt. There had been no conflicting signals racing through her damaged spine this time, no overload, and no haven of numbness in which to hide while her nerves resettled. He had given her truth, and the gift came with a cost. The torment of 'after' was, in

a way, even more grueling than the spanking itself. But even now, there was incongruous comfort in the heat and stinging soreness. His arms were around her, his heart beat beneath her, and Audra was unexpectedly very aware of his maleness and of a very different heat.

'Don't be ridiculous,' she told herself. 'There's no damn point and you know it.'

But her body stubbornly refused to accept futility. Audra began to be uncomfortable. She was straddling this man, for God's sake, and the layers of clothing between them felt suddenly very thin.

Perhaps he sensed it. The Overseer let his hand pass once more down Audra's hair, and then he set her on her feet and stood, smiling down at her. "Now you are my Pearl," he said. "Now your training begins."

Training, he called it, and so Audra waited for three days and night for some formal instruction that never came.

A bed was brought up from somewhere and arranged against the wall opposite his. She was not allowed to help assemble it that first day, and she was not allowed to make it up for any of the mornings that followed. The pillows, the sheets, the bedding all were white satin, and diaphanous veils were draped overhead, surrounding her in arms of misty pale when she lay within. She would wake in the morning and see the Overseer sitting up against his own headboard, just watching her sleep. When he saw her eyes were open, he would rise with a smile and lay out her clothes for her.

Gone were the little white Tesoro tunics. Replacing them were new ones, of slightly more elegant cut and style, sewn from black silk and edged with gold ribbon. They didn't come from the gift shop, and they were altered to fit her own unique measurements. When she weakly protested the cost, the Overseer wordlessly added a row of

real pearls to the trim along the neck and hem, and asked the Staff-Dom, Thrush, to make another six as quickly as possible.

She had her own little washroom, and within hours of his claiming her, she had her own soaps and shampoos, combs, pins, mirrors, towels, and everything necessary to furnish it. A low vanity was produced, and a cushion on the floor before it to be her chair. They were hers alone, he informed her, and draped garlands of pearls over the mirror.

Their meals were brought up to them by Staff-Subs--three squares a day, plus high tea at three. The Overseer did not handfeed her, but he did insist on seating and serving her. Breakfasts were always light; dinners, always formal. By the end of the third day, she knew how to use every piece of silver.

She was never bored. He had an extensive reading library, and on the evening of that first day, the Album promised to her by the librarian was delivered. The Overseer sat with Audra on the sofa and read it alongside her. He spoke French, Italian, and Latin fluently, and he read all the poems that accompanied the pictures and then translated them for her. The oversized picture book on her lap, the deep voice making sense of the unfamiliar words--all of these brought a dreamy, childlike quality to her time that made it very easy to accept all the pampering.

She never left the Tower apartments. The Overseer rarely left her side, and on the occasions that he did, it was only to go downstairs into his office for short meetings with other Staff, and then he would return to her.

He brought a little easel and chair back from one of these meetings, and arranged them beside the window that overlooked the garden. Audra watched him bring an end-table in from the bedroom, and set three chests upon it--paints, pastels, brushes, blades. Only after he draped a garland of pearls

over the top of the easel did she realize this was for her.

"I can't paint!" she'd protested, laughing.

"Everyone," he'd said sternly, "can paint. Children, infants, even elephants. Those without fingers have held brushes in their toes or their mouths to paint. Denied canvas, we paint on walls. Denied paints, we make our own from juice and petals and crushed stone. If you can see, then you can paint." He placed a canvas on the easel and stepped back, nodding to it with great authority.

She'd sat, so instinctive was her urge to obey him, but she was shaking her head. "It takes years to get good at painting," she'd insisted.

"Does it?"

"Five years at least. I'd be thirty before I got the hang of it."

"Indeed?" The Overseer had raised a brow and regarded her politely. "And how old will you be in five years if you do not paint?"

So Audra painted, there in the window where everyone passing by could look up and see her. She was the focus of so much wonder, envy, and curiosity--from guests and Staff alike--that it seemed she never quit blushing, not for three whole days. Finally, she nerved herself to ask, "Have you ever had a Pet before?" and immediately answered herself, "Of course you have, you built this place! What a stupid question."

The Overseer had been looking through the Album from across the room, and now he looked up with a sharp frown. "You are dangerously close to a self-derogatory statement," he warned her. "And as it happens, I have never taken a Pet here at Tesoro."

"What, never? Saxon told me that in the spring, all the Staff took Pets."

"All who wish them." The Overseer closed the Album and rose to join her at the window. "You have been very honest with me at great personal cost, Pearl. I know that you will understand what it

costs me to tell this story now." He smiled down into the garden, but he wasn't seeing the things that grew there. "I loved a woman once," he said. "A remarkable woman of exceptional beauty and humor. We met on rather an unpleasant sort of cruise that claimed to cater to 'our' sort of people. It was an appalling example of what happens when wealth and sleaze collide, but it was worth it...for her. She was always searching for a paradise, a place where 'our' people could be open and honest about our desires, and free of unpleasantness. We never found one...and one day, we realized our time was running out. I began to build Tesoro."

He was silent a long time, and finally shook his head and turned away from the garden. "I couldn't build fast enough."

"Do you have a picture?" Audra asked.

He went at once to a small cupboard mounted alone on the wall and unlocked it. It opened into a miniature memory hall. Inside, several objects were arranged--a white candle, a starfish, a woman's ring, a wooden flute, a feather, and a photograph framed in gold. He lifted out the last object and handed it back to Audra.

The woman it captured was in her forties; she looked every day of it, and it looked damn good on her. Her hair was autumn-red, unapologetically dyed, touched by frost at the temples where it still grew in dark. Laughter had left tracks all over her handsome, chocolate features. She had impish eyes and a dimpled smile so endearing that Audra found herself smiling back.

"She looks like she knew a lot of jokes," she said, returning the photograph to his hand.

The Overseer laughed. "She did. And every dirty limerick ever devised. She died laughing...." His voice and smile trailed away and returned bittersweet. "And I have felt for many years the disapproval with which her spirit has marked my mourning. But I have never taken a Pet. Like you,

I cannot play at emotion I do not feel, and I cannot spank a woman I do not care for."

He looked at her as he said this, intently measuring her reaction. She felt color climbing in her cheeks, but couldn't turn away. He said, "As I care for you, Pearl."

"You don't know me," she said weakly, clinging to logic.

He was unfazed. "But I care for you regardless."

Before she could argue, he turned back to the window and looked out over his island. "I flatter myself that I have seen some echo of feeling in our few meetings. But perhaps it is only flattery. You need not fear that I will abandon self-control, but I could not be your Master if I did not make my feelings plain."

"I appreciate that," Audra said, not knowing what else to say. It was easy for him to take the 'regardless' attitude, but logic couldn't take its claws out of her brain. He couldn't love her, she couldn't love him--you couldn't love anyone after only two weeks!

He didn't seem surprised or at all rejected by her neutrality. In fact, he smiled, giving her the uncomfortable impression that he'd actually been encouraged.

"Your training is over," he said abruptly. "Tomorrow, I will take you to Master's Tea, and you will make me very proud of you. Afterwards, you may have a few hours for your own devices, although I expect you back by the dinner hour. Your friends, no doubt, have been missing you." His smile went slightly crooked. "Although you may wish to squeeze in a round or two of shuffleboard if you can. I've signed you up for the Tourney."

"Oh." That was thoughtful of him. "Thanks."

"Not at all," he murmured, still smiling that cat-like smile. "As I know it brings you so much pleasure. I'm rather looking forward to watching you play."

Audra resumed her painting, warmed down to the roots of her soul by this evidence of his attention and consideration. Flowers bloomed on her canvas, stroke by stroke.

She wondered how the hell one went about playing the game of shuffleboard.

Chapter Twenty-Two

*** *Tea Fortuitous* ***

Master's Tea was a proper affair, in one of the most formal rooms in all the resort. The walls were paneled in dark wood, the floor covered in Persian carpets. Even the ceiling was decorated with elaborate tiles that arched toward the chandelier at its center. The single window was nearly the size of the wall that hosted it, and it looked out over the ocean, a fitting tribute to mastery and strength. It was not a large room, and had seating for only ten Masters and their Pets, with one Staff member to preside over them. The chairs were throne-like contraptions, arranged in a wide circle with the tea service on a round table between them. Cushions were provided for most of the Pets, but small chairs had been substituted for two of them, and some Pets, apparently, would just have to stand.

One had to be invited to Master's Tea by one of the staff, and, as only ten invitations were extended each day and favorites tended to be invited back, many guests never had the honor. Knowing this, Audra was astonished to walk in on the Overseer's arm and see the Griffin already seated.

The transformation from Submissive to Dominant looked good on the Griffin. Her eyes had lost that feral helplessness and rage that had so recently imbedded itself in her. She was laconic in her Master's garb, relaxed in a circle of her Dominant peers, and the whippy switch she held lightly in one hand looked very natural there. Benu was beside her, pouring tea into her cup, and also looking much more comfortable in a Submissive's white tunic and collar.

"Good gracious." A leather-and-spike clad Master stood and offered his hand to the Overseer, an expression of pleasure and disbelief spreading over his face. "Hummingbird told me you'd taken a

Pet. I gave her half an hour with a slapper for telling fibs."

"It would seem you owe her an apology," the Overseer said mildly. He took Audra's hands, helping her lower herself onto her cushion, and then seated himself. His hand moved to stroke her hair. "The gift shop stays open until eight."

The little Pet attached to this particular Master, an extraordinarily lithe lady with spiky green and scarlet hair, grew a crafty smile. "I'm going to milk this but good!" she whispered to Audra, and rubbed her hands greedily together.

"So." The Overseer nodded to the Master nearest the Tea Room doors, and once they were closed, spread his hands in welcome. "What shall we talk about?"

"Anything at all!" A matronly Mistress thumped her cane on the floor and laughed. "Master Quirt has been lecturing our girl Griffin for the better part of two days on all the reasons a switch can never be taken seriously by true dominants. I could cheerfully discuss any other subject."

"And on a related note," Griffin remarked, gazing meditatively into her tea, "if I hear the words 'our girl' preceding my name just one more time, I am going to start taking it personally."

"Mm." The Overseer poured a cup for Audra, nodding severely. "That is a reasonable request, my fellow Masters. Kindly honor it. But on to the matter of switches in the scene. I see no reason why any Dominant should feel superior for having never submitted to another. And in point of fact, it is a popular belief that the best Dominants should pay their dues as Submissives to gain a better understanding of the world they seek to control."

The Master on his right, presumably Quirt, snorted.

The Overseer turned an eye on him and Quirt studied the back of the short wooden paddle he was carrying. "You don't agree?" he asked calmly.

Quirt gave an expansive shrug. "It's all well and good for...female players. They possess a natural, instinctive drive to experience submission. It's part of the volatile nature of the feminine temperament. All vague political agendas aside, women have a deep-seated compulsion to seek out dominant partners, to give over their ego to a controlling commander. They cannot be truly satisfied with anything less."

There were three female Masters at tea. All but the Griffin instantly grew cold and hostile. The Griffin merely sipped her tea and fed Bennu a biscuit, but her raptor's eyes were very alert. Audra braced herself; watchfulness and silence were the hallmarks of a Griffin on the hunt.

"But a man's nature is to be dominant, to be Alpha, to be Master." Quirt tossed Griffin a dismissive glance and snorted again. "We are born to be the centers of their universes. We don't need to 'pay our dues'. With all respect, Overseer, the idea is ludicrous. Even Shakespeare knew that a woman's soft conditions and her heart should well agree with her external parts." He sipped his tea, looking triumphant.

"Come, come, you froward and unable worm," the Griffin said, looking him levelly in the eye. She did not recite; her words were quiet, flowing in natural ways from her ready lips, resonant with meaning. "My mind hath been as big as one of yours, my heart as great, my reason haply more to bandy word for word and frown for frown. So take it from me, I know the difference. You're an ass, Quirt."

Audra hid a smile behind her hand.

All eyes went to the Overseer.

He, in turn, looked at Griffin. "Have you ever been a Submissive before coming to Tesoro?" he asked.

Now it was Griffin's turn to snort. "Ah, no," she said, and chuckled.

"What would you say has come of the experience?"

Slowly, the smile faded from Griffin's lips. She looked thoughtfully at Benny and raised her switch to brush stray hairs from his cheek. "It has been...the single most illuminating experience of my entire life," she murmured. "You gain such an appreciation for what you have to do...as a Master, I mean. Not the pain. Pain is nothing, pain exists to be endured...but submission itself."

"Precisely my point," Quirt began.

"Quiet." The Overseer's gaze never left the Griffin. "Go on. Submission."

"Submission is...clarifying. It's a peace of mind you buy with sweat and tears and, yes, even blood. It's spoils of war, it is nature's tooth and claw, it is the supreme focus of the human stain." Her eyes flashed to Quirt, shining with contempt. "You think control is the province of the Master? Buster, you're fooling yourself. The Submissive is in control, always. It is their pleasure that guides our hands, their fantasy, their limitations, their *flesh*! We bend to *their* will. That we take any satisfaction from the act is a happy coincidence they allow us, but don't kid yourself. The satisfaction doesn't come from hitting them, it comes from hitting them in precisely the way *they* want and need. Without that respect and appreciation, you're no Master, you're just a bully. Believe me, I know."

The Griffin paused to drink her tea, frowning at a point on the far wall. She held the emptied cup out for Bennu to refill and again caressed his cheek with the twitchy tip of her switch. This created a lengthy silence, but no Master spoke to fill it.

"I've been a bully," the Griffin said finally. "And I hated it. I've been Submissive, and I hated that, but if it hadn't been for the one, I'd still be the other. I'm aware of that." She threw a dismissive glance in Quirt's direction. "And in my opinion, awareness of your shortcomings is a Master's greatest asset."

"That's because you're a woman," Quirt replied, rolling his eyes. "You're emoting when you should be dominating."

Three people muttered, "Idiot," into their teacups at the same time, and not one of them was a woman. Quirt's Pet looked positively dyspeptic with embarrassment.

"So what did I learn?" Griffin continued. "I learned that pain hurts. I thought I knew that before. Everybody's skinned a knee, right?" She shook her head. "It's not the same pain. The pain that you bend down to take is a whole new world of hurt. And no, I don't think that a good Master has to play out time as a Submissive, but I do think that a good Master has to have humility, and if being Submissive teaches you nothing else, it will teach you humility."

"Listen to yourself!" Quirt demanded. "Your ignorance is showing, Griffin. Humility is as far at the opposite end of the spectrum as it can be from true dominance!"

"I don't agree." The matronly Mistress lifted her cane, letting it thump on the carpeted floor to illustrate each of her arguments: "A dominant commands respect, not fear. Respect requires serenity, and serenity requires humility. A dominant criticizes, but doesn't deride. Criticism requires insight, and insight requires hum--"

"Yes, yes," Quirt said, rubbing at his eyes as though chasing away an impending headache. "We've all read that essay, Grace."

"I haven't," Griffin remarked, cocking a brow at Mistress Grace.

"I should be delighted to locate a copy for you."

"I'd appreciate it." The Griffin glanced again at Quirt, then rolled her shoulder in a feline shrug--the sort designed to loosen up joints before a good pounce. "We're all entitled to our opinions. The Overseer asked for mine, is all. Now we'll leave it at that. Fresh topic!" Her eyes narrowed and nearly glowed with vicious satisfaction. "The effects

of romantic language upon the modern disciplinary literature, specifically, the sonnets of Aretino! How much more vivid and beautiful is it to hear '*Apri le coscie, accio ch'io veggia bene Il tue bel culo, e la tua potta in viso!*' than its crude English equivalent!"

"My dear," laughed the Overseer, plainly delighted. "It's just as crude in Italian!"

"You mistake my meaning. The crudity comes from the harshness of the spoken word rather than the directness of the content. '*Fottiamci, anima mia, fottiamci presto perche tutti per fotter nati siamo...*' Tell me that's not romantic!"

The Overseer burst out in thunderous rolls of laughter. "That's NOT romantic!" he declared, but leapt right back in with, "*E se tu il casso adori, io la potta amo, e saria il mondo un cazzo senz questo.*"

Quirt, his eyes darting from one to the other of them, suddenly slapped down his teacup, got up and left. His Pet followed, stammering half-apologies as she ran.

The instant the door closed after them, all foreign talk ceased, although the Overseer still chuckled. "That was appallingly vulgar," he chided her. "Hardly a fitting topic for tea."

"Clearly, I need to learn me some Italian," one of the other Masters remarked. He then turned to the Griffin and said, "Name's Ranger, by the way. I bid on you at auction. Did you really intend to spend all your time here as a Submissive? All of it?"

"Yeah." The Griffin's smile went crooked and she dropped her attention to her tea. "Why?"

"Well, it's just...." Ranger glanced around as though seeking support. "I don't have anything against Masters who want to experience Submission. Hell, to an extent, I did it myself...you know, testing clamps and things....but well, I know how much I'm paying to be here...."

The Overseer cleared his throat.

Ranger abandoned the rest of that thought and said instead, "I just think it's something of a waste

of Tesoro's unique experience, that's all. You can be Submissive anywhere, but why not be a Master in the best possible place?"

The Overseer acknowledged this compliment with a tsk and a smile.

"On the other hand, why not be a Submissive in the one place where I can be assured of the best and safest experience?" Griffin countered. "After all, I can be a Master anywhere."

"Touché." Ranger raised his teacup to her. "But I maintain this island was designed to cater to Masters."

"And I maintain, it was designed to cater to Pets. I'm telling you, having been both, I can solemnly swear that the slant exists and it's slanted firmly in favor of the Submissive." The Griffin started to say more, but her gaze went to Audra and she colored. "I may not have made the best use of certain safeguards," she said grudgingly. "But no other place on this green Earth can offer the security Tesoro does. Benny, what do you think?"

"I agree," Bennu said at once.

Jenna put her cup down and frowned at him. "I'm serious," she said. "What do you think?"

'Do you think?' Audra wondered, watching Bennu struggle to process that.

The entire room waited.

Finally, clearly uncomfortable with the attention, Bennu said, "I think...it only matters where love is. Or...or respect, if that's a better word. I think that if you feel loved by your partner, or respected, than all the rules seem slanted in your favor...because this place was really designed for those who love." He had grown redder with every word, and when he reached the end of his awkward little speech, he hunched down on all fours and looked fixedly at the floor.

Jenna reached over and rested her hand between his shoulderblades. "That's very good," she said quietly.

"You're a very good Master," Bennu said quickly. He was frowning. "You take good care of me."

"And that brings up an interesting point," the matronly Mistress began. "Bennu, what made you want to be a Master?"

Bennu's head jerked up, and he backed away suddenly, smacking into Jenna's throne with enough force to make her teacup spill out a good dollop of scalding tea. Jenna hissed a particularly blue string of words, but had presence of mind enough to grab the teacup with her good hand before shaking the injured one. Bennu leapt to his feet, and the Griffin planted her palm in the center of his chest and held him at arm's range while she carefully set her cup down.

The Overseer had calmly risen and gone to the phone when the miniature disaster first occurred. Now he returned to his seat, saying, "A burn pack has been sent for. Go run some water from the hall fountain over it until Remedy arrives."

"I didn't mean to startle you," the grey-haired Mistress exclaimed as the Griffin excused herself.

"I just--I didn't--I only--I don't know!" Bennu ran after Griffin.

"I didn't mean to startle him," the Mistress repeated, obviously distressed. "We were having such a wonderful conversation, and it's just that one hears so often about Masters who improve themselves by experiencing Submission for a time, but so seldom is the case reversed."

"I've known it to happen," a Pet ventured.

"So have I, my dear," the matron replied. "But I was curious about his motives. If I'd known he was so easily upset, why... How is it that a Pet of such temperament could even conceive of becoming a Top? He's utterly unsuited for it!"

"Now, now, Grace, let's not put the boy on trial," another Master chided. "No one blames you, and I'm sure our girl--er, Griffin won't be crippled for life. Now let's change the subject. Internet and BDSM: Friend or Foe?"

"Friend," Ranger stated with authority. "An invaluable resource for amateurs seeking reassurance and connections."

"Oh, Foe!" Grace said, just as certainly. "A dreadful outpouring of sleaze, the detriments of which far outweigh its benefits!"

And so it went on, the mood gradually lightening. Audra sat on her cushion at the Overseer's side and watched the door for the Griffin's return. Seeing her friend again had only made Audra realize more how much time had gone by. Talk of Tops and Bottoms and spankings were tempting distractions, but it was time to resume the quest for DeGuarre's treasure.

The four o'clock hour, as struck by the clock on the wall, was the official end of Master's Tea, but its patrons tended to linger, and the opportunity to chat with the Overseer himself was too great to pass up for most guests. The Overseer gave Audra a pat on the arm to dismiss her, a resigned smile to indicate he would be occupied for some time, and a nod of personal farewell. She rose at once from her cushion and followed the Griffin outside.

"Where are the others?" she asked, after giving Jenna an enthusiastic hug.

"Go play," Griffin told Bennu, and gave him an open-handed slap on the ass to send him off. After he was gone, she turned back to Audra and said, "To be honest, this is my first day back in the public eye since my accidental relocation. I was kind of hoping you knew where to find them."

"What have you been doing all this time?" Audra wondered.

"Took some Master classes, for a start. Spent a lot of time with Benny. Got rid of Isis."

"Got rid of, as in, she's left the island?" Audra asked hopefully.

"No such luck," Jenna growled. "But at least she's not hanging out in my cabin all damn day any

more. I told Benny he wasn't allowed to see her anymore. She 'bout put my eyes out when she heard I was his Master now."

"Not part of her plan, huh?"

They had been strolling in an unhurried way toward Virgil's cabin, but now Jenna stopped dead on the path and stared at her. "I...don't know." A slow frown darkened her leonine features. "I have to confess, it seemed a tad rehearsed when she burst in on us at dinner. She had a damn monologue worked out. Blamed him, blamed me, did everything but curse our blackened bones before the BD Gods of Yore. I turned my back on her in the middle of it, and she lost it completely. Jumped on my back and went for the eyes."

"What did you do?" Audra asked. There was not a doubt in her mind that the Griffin had sent Isis on a short, memorable ride down the length of a dining room table.

"I didn't have to do anything. Every Sub in that room hit their panic buttons, and there were six enormous men and women pulling her off me in less than a minute."

"You waited that long?"

"Hey, I came within a gnat's wing of getting thrown out of here over the whole Benny-issue, and I wasn't about to rock the boat. You and I and all the little fishes know your man didn't buy that 'she-caught-my-Subbie-signals' story, and he's being really sporty about letting that slide, but there's no way he'd overlook a fistfight in the dining hall."

"She started it," Audra pointed out.

"What are you, six?" Griffin started them walking again. In a tone of purring casualness, she changed the subject. "You do know you look like a Holstein from the hips down, right?"

Audra paused to look her patchy legs over. Every morning, after her shower faded the previous day's markings, the Overseer would pen them in again. She had come to love this ritual, the anticipation of it, the feeling of supplication as she

came and lay over his lap...just thinking of it now put a little glow in her stomach. "I think they're udderly beautiful," she declared, marching onward.

Jenna winced, but rallied swiftly. "Absolutely, dah-ling, they make you look bovine!"

Audra giggled. "They make me look moo-velous!"

Jenna nodded. "A veritable dairy queen, and you seem so heifer-vescent."

"Ohh! That's enough! Uncle!"

"Next time, steer clear of puns. I've got no beef with lower horns of humor, but for the butterment of all Mankind, we should avoid milking bad jokes and just moove on."

Audra held her ears, groaning and giggling all at once. "I said, Uncle! Please stop!"

A cabin door opened and Virgil stuck his head out. "It is you!" he cried, and came bounding out. "Where have you been? I've been going nuts looking for you two!"

"It's true," Koi assured them solemnly from the doorway. "It's been like living in a Planters Party Package."

"I couldn't get away," Audra said, allowing Virgil to seize and drag her toward his cabin. "The Overseer--"

Koi's eyes went wide. "You mean it's true? The Overseer has a Pet? That Pet is you?!"

Audra squirmed self-consciously. "Well...yeah, sorta."

"How can you 'sorta' be his Pet?" Koi demanded. "The Overseer doesn't 'sorta' do anything! And he never takes a Pet! And--And why do you have black holes all over your legs?" she finished quizzically.

"Well, what's your excuse?" Virgil asked, rounding on the Griffin.

"I don't need one," she said, and breezed on by him into his cabin.

"She got promoted to Master for beating on Bennu," Audra explained, following.

"No kidding?"

"I didn't know that was an option." Koi wrinkled her pert little nose. "Poor Griffin!"

"Beats getting expelled," Virgil told her.

"I guess." Koi didn't look or sound convinced.

"Well, while the two of you were off frittering around on the sunny side of town--" Virgil locked the door, drew the curtains, tumbled over a chair and bounded up like Dick Van Dyke to wave them all over to the table. "--Koi and I have been hard at work. We followed the map and dug up the next riddle, and if Griffin could have spared us a few minutes of her precious paddling-time--"

"Sorry," Griffin said, looking only marginally chagrined as she accepted the delicate porcelain bowl that Virgil handed her.

"--we could have had the last piece of map by now. Time is running out!"

"I said, 'sorry'," the Griffin growled. "What do you want, a pound of flesh?"

"No, dammit, I want a great big mountain of doubloons!" Virgil threw himself down in a frustrated heap. "And I want a decent French-to-English online translator that won't give me sentences that belong in a Mad-libs book. And I want...I want waffles!"

"Ooo, poor Master," Koi cooed. She dropped to her knees before him, apparently just so that she could crawl up onto his lap and massage his temples. "I'll go get you some waffles!"

"No...no, you're fine where you are," Virgil grumbled, patting her on the thigh. And after a second or two, he added, "Um, Jenna, I can't help but notice that you're not leaping up and down and shouting, 'The game's afoot!'"

Audra had been busy trying not to stare as Koi soothed her Master's troubles...and when she wasn't 'not-staring' she was making a concentrated effort at taking mental notes. Now she looked around, alarmed, and saw a deep frown carved into Jenna's face.

"Can't you read it?" Koi asked worriedly.

"I...Yes, I can read it. It's just not...It's not going to be an easy one to answer."

"None of them were easy," Audra countered.

"Heck, if it were easy, everyone would find pirate treasure," Virgil agreed, his brow furrowing with concern. "Just tell us what it says."

Jenna gave them all a 'you-asked-for-it' look, and then lifted the bowl theatrically and read, "'The Dragon on a bed of gold...Died...Its bones remained. Beneath the ninth, it's fortune waits...again to be reclaimed.' Take that, I even got it to rhyme again."

"The ninth what?" Koi asked.

"Bone, I think." Jenna studied the interior of the bowl, then flipped it over, just in case the answer were written on the back. "The ninth dragon bone." She looked up at them, one eyebrow raised in polite inquiry. "Seen any lately?"

There was a prolonged silence.

"Well, damn," said Virgil.

Damn, indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

*** *Dem Bones, Damn Bones* ***

Keeping in mind that the answers to the two previous riddles had both been found in separate quadrants of the island, the treasure-hunters confined their search for dragon bones to areas that had not proved riddle-worthy yet. Virgil and Koi went away to explore the junglelands and beaches surrounding the resort, while Jenna and Audra walked along the rocky cliffs and thick vegetation in Tesoro's southeast corner.

"I have to be back in time for dinner," Audra reminded her, reminded them both.

Jenna nodded distractedly. "Yeah, me too. Benny and I are going to the Lazerlight Leash Relays. He's got a good shot at the title. Decent reflexes and a wicked swing in his arm."

Audra looked her friend over as carefully as she could from the corner of her eye, but could detect no sarcasm. Casually, she said, "You seem like you're actually getting along with him awfully well, all things considered."

"As clichéd as it is, he's a whole different person with Isis out of the picture." Jenna shrugged, somewhat self-consciously. "Besides...everyone deserves a second chance. Or a fourth, as the case may be. How are you doing these days?"

"He scares me," Audra said without thinking.

Jenna stopped stock-still, each foot on separate unstable rocks, and whipped around to stare at her. "How so?" she asked dangerously, her hands curling into fists.

"Because I like him." Audra managed half a smile. "I like him a *lot*, Jenna."

"Oh." The griffin in her retreated; Jenna held her puzzled stance for a few more seconds and then resumed her rock-climbing.

They picked their way along the cliffs for several minutes in silence, each lost to their own thoughts.

"Jenna?"

"Mm-hm?"

"How do you play shuffleboard?"

"Traditionally?" Jenna gave her a baffled sideways glance. "You have a playing field on a well-kept deck marked with two oval scoring areas about thirty feet apart. Inside each oval is a magic square--"

"A what?" Audra laughed. She had a mental image of shooting a puck across the deck and having it turn into a chicken halfway as it zipped through the end zone. "You're not serious!"

"A magic square," Jenna said again, in her patient voice, which meant that she was squeezing it out between tightly clenched jaws. "A grid made up of nine numbered squares whose sides and diagonals all equal fifteen. Where the hell were you for high school geometry?"

"Physical therapy," she replied.

Jenna flushed slightly. "Oh. Right. So you were." She shook out her hair, and her momentary discomfort, and went on. "Anyway, there are two semicircles on either side of the magic square inside the oval. The nearest one scores penalty points, and the furthest one gives you extra points. Plus, there's a line about two feet in front of the oval called the Ladies' line, and one two feet beyond the oval called the Gentleman's line. All of this has to do with tabulating points, okay?"

"Okay. But how is the actual game played? I know you've got a stick and some pucks--"

"Pucks," snorted Jenna. "You have two players, typically, or two teams of two players each, whatever. Each side starts with four heavily-weighted disks that get pushed around the deck with a *cue*, Pearl, not a 'stick'. And basically, it's like croquet. The goal is to shuffle your disks into the best scoring squares while simultaneously knocking your opponent's disks out of position. Each player shuffles one disk, and then the opponent shuffles one, and then the first player,

and so on, until all four disks have been played, and then the points are scored. Any disk that doesn't at least reach the Ladies' line or that goes further than the Gentlemen's line is immediately removed from play, and any disk that is touching a line isn't counted. Once the points are marked, players start a new end by playing from behind the Gentlemen's line of the far field, back towards the first field. The first team to score 100 points wins. Easy game. Why?"

"I have to play in the Tourney," she explained, shading her eyes as she searched back along the beach for a draconian silhouette. "The Overseer signed me up."

Jenna stopped walking again. "You're playing in the Tourney?" she echoed.

Audra nodded. "It doesn't sound that complicated."

"The Tourney is tomorrow!"

"So? It's not like the losers are thrown into a volcano. Get a grip, Jenna!"

Jenna did, grabbing Audra by the arm and leaning in close. "You've been telling that guy all along that you've been spending your days on the shuffleboard court," she snarled.

"So?"

"So, if you suck, isn't he going to wonder just the tiniest bit what you've really been doing?"

"You worry too much," Audra said, shaking herself free of the Griffin's talons. "Lots of people suck at things they do for years. Besides, if I've been telling him all along how much shuffleboard I'm playing and then I refuse to enter the Tourney, he'll be even more suspicious. So what choice do I have?"

The Griffin gave the rocky drop below them a speculative look. "You could break a leg.... No, no, forget I said that." She sighed as Audra uneasily stepped away. "Just do the best you can, I guess. Lose with dignity."

"Your faith in me is touching."

"I'm a realist, not a priest." The Griffin sighed again, glaring up and down the coastline. "And I'm not a knight-errant, either. Do you see anything that remotely resembles dragon bones?"

"No." Audra peered out over the cliff's edge. "Maybe if we were down there, looking up where we are now?"

"Maybe." Jenna didn't sound encouraged. "But it's getting too late to start anything too ambitious. Let's head back for tonight and try again tomorrow with a fresh pair of eyes. We ought to be able to get in a few hours before your disastrous showing at the Tourney." Jenna ignored the sour glare that Audra directed at her. "Virgil won't be happy with us for giving up so early tonight."

"I'm sure he and Koi will find ways to overcome their disappointment," she said dryly.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this," Jenna muttered, and then turned a severe eye on Audra. "Don't be mean."

Audra snorted. "Aren't you the tiniest bit scandalized that our little Virgil has had his heart shanghaied by a summer fling?"

"Hell, they're both adults."

"Virgil's just barely twenty-one! I think he still has baby teeth!"

Jenna gave her a look of undisguised incredulity. "Where are you coming from, lady? That boy is six-foot-four of hot, steaming manflesh! And if he wants to give himself a memory to warm him through retirement years, I say more power to him. He's having a good time! One of us ought to be."

"He's never going to see this girl again after next week!" Audra argued.

"You don't know that."

"And anyway, he's only known her for two weeks! Not even two whole weeks, only--"

"So?" Jenna interrupted Audra's calculations with another scowling stare. "You don't need more than a few minutes to decide whether or not you like someone, as you plainly know yourself since

you've decided to be all scared ab--" Jenna broke off, leaned back, and looked at her. "Oh," she said.

"What 'oh'?" Audra said, annoyed, and began to march back the way they'd come. "There's no 'oh'."

"I see," Jenna said at last.

"You do not see!" Audra snapped. "You couldn't possible see anything, because you have no idea what's going on!"

"You think you're in love with him," Jenna said ruthlessly, and Audra sagged to a standstill, bracing her weight on a tree. "You think he's in love with you, and you're so terrified of not feeling anything in bed that you'd rather avoid the whole issue and spend all your time alone and miserable, and then go home at the end of this trip hating yourself and wondering what might have happened."

"That's not true." Audra's eyes were stinging. "None of it."

"And the only reason I can think of for being so sure that you're not going to feel anything in bed is either that you're a virgin and don't know or you tried it once. So, are you a virgin?"

"What?" Audra gasped, and made the mistake of spinning around to stare, where she was instantly captured by the intensity of Jenna's gaze. She could feel herself blushing, but she could only manage to drop her eyes, she couldn't turn away. "No. No, I'm not, and it was horrible. I felt nothing, now can we drop it? Please?"

"You felt nothing or you felt no pleasure?"

Audra did not answer.

"Did you even like the guy, or did you just go to bed with him?" Jenna pressed.

"I didn't need to like him. I just had to be sure," Audra whispered. She knuckled at her eyes and, sensing a new question building, went on the offensive. "Have you loved every guy you've ever been with?"

"You say that like there's been so many," Jenna remarked. "And no, I haven't, but I always made sure I liked the guy. At least I liked the sex!"

"You couldn't possibly understand."

"Because of your legs."

"It's not just my legs!" Audra burst out furiously. "It's everything down there!"

"And you know this because you felt no pleasure when you took a complete stranger to bed for experimental purposes." Jenna put her hands on her hips and drummed her fingers, looking frustrated. "Look, even if it were true, the sexual world does not begin and end with 'down there'. Orgasm is a state of mind as much as body."

"I am not," Audra announced loudly, "going to stand here and let you lecture me about orgasms!" She pushed herself off the tree and started again for home, moving with great determination and not a little desperation.

Silence. Jenna followed her as the cliffs gradually gave way to sandy beaches, and they came around the horn of jungleland and back into the manicured territory of the resort.

"Audra," Jenna said, when the round, white walls of Tesoro first came into view. "You're my best friend and I love you like I love air, but you make me very sad sometimes. A lot of people go their whole lives without ever finding anyone they care about and who cares for them. It's not something to throw out lightly."

"Do I need to spell it out for you?!" Audra said, her words tight with sorrow and exasperation. "I can't feel sex!"

"Yeah, and the last time I saw you, you couldn't feel spankings." Jenna's eyes dipped pointedly to the inky blotches mapping out Audra's lower half. When she looked up again, her gaze was clouded with a strange wistfulness. "Give the guy a chance. For God's sake, Audra, give yourself one."

Audra looked away. From this angle, she could just make out the shine of sunlight on the Tower window. At this distance, she couldn't tell if he were there or not, but she was unreasonably

convinced that he was, waiting and watching for her to come home.

Jenna sighed and started making her way toward the cabins. "Gotta get back to Benny. If I don't see you on the beach tomorrow, I'll see you at the shuffleboard Tourney. I'll be rooting for you, Pearl. I'm always rooting for you."

The Overseer was indeed watching for her at the Tower window. He smiled a greeting and moved away as she entered the building. He was waiting at the foot of the iron stair when she came into his office.

"You met with your friends?"

She nodded, coming in under the shelter of his arm without conscious thought.

"You don't seem too pleased about it," he said noncommittally, as they ascended to his private rooms.

Audra went to the window, to the easel he had brought for her. Her latest painting, 'Haiku', was nearly at the point she would call it complete: Half a dozen tropical flowers burst in radiant color from a field of snow. It was the first painting she had put real thought and effort into, and looking at it, she realized it was more than just not bad, it was actually pretty good. She hadn't known she could do something like that. She never would have tried on her own.

"I think I need a spanking," she said softly. "I don't know if it will help, but at least it'll only hurt on the outside."

He was at her side at once, his hands a mantle of comfort on her shoulders. "What happened?"

"You're not the first person who ever tried to make me be better than I am," she said, and then immediately pushed the heel of her hands into her eyes, locking herself in darkness. "But if what she says about me is true, than I'm worse than even I knew!"

His hands tightened warningly. "You know the consequences of such derogatory talk."

"I know, I know. The beatings will continue until morale improves." She uttered a lost and entirely humorless laugh. "But you're wasting your time. I'm a horrible friend and a horrible person!"

That was as far as he let her get. She was spun in a tight arc and pushed against the wall. She had only a moment to register him stripping her panties away and then his hand came down in a short, sharp volley of blows, hard enough to bang her hips forward into the wall with each impact. His aim was exacting; each swat tore a fresh gasp and mewling cry from her, each swat stirred up new hornets in its aftermath. She clawed at the wall to keep from reaching futilely around to protect herself, knowing that any resistance, even a clenching of her buttocks, would direct his attention to her tender thighs.

When he finally stopped, she sank to her knees in a drift of tears and he came with her, a shadow of security pressing all around her.

"Now," he said, his breath stirring the fine hairs along her neck. "Tell me what happened."

"She's wrong!" Audra wept. "You can't love me! It's not possible!"

"In what way?" His voice was guarded.

"Because no one can love anyone this fast!" She swiped angrily at her tear-streaked face. "This is the real world, dammit! No one falls in love like this!"

"True." He relaxed slightly. "Love is said too often after only hours or even minutes. It cheapens with repetition. Love is a creature of time and experience. You are correct. But I have not said I love you. I say I care for you. Caring knows no propriety. But believe me, Pearl, I have lived with my heart many years. I know where it will lead me. I know that I can love you, if time and experience permit. I can love you, and I wish to."

"Why me?" she wailed, the words shaking apart as they tore out of her. "Why *me*?!"

"Why not?"

She laughed weakly through her tears at the mildness of his reply in the face of her storming emotion, and wiped at her eyes. "That's not a very good reason."

"Since when has the heart needed good reasons?" He helped her regain her feet and folded her into his arms, rocking her for comfort. "But if you require one, the first time I saw you, you waved to me."

"That's an even worse reason."

"There's no pleasing some people." The Overseer brought out a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and tipped her chin up to swab tenderly at her face. "But all right. You tell me a good reason and I'll tell you if it applies."

Audra tried to shrug, uncomfortably aware of the absolute blank she was drawing. The fragility of her newly-regained good mood couldn't stand against the black hole of this guessing game. She dropped her gaze and muttered, "I don't feel very lovable right now."

"Why not?" He sounded honestly surprised, as though she had told him she just didn't feel much like having hands.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." She tried to pull away from him, and he immediately took hold of her wrists and started towing her toward the sofa. "No, come on! I don't want to play!"

"My Pearl, we are not playing." The Overseer brought her inexorably down over his lap and pinned her there, one huge hand at the small of her back, the other resting on the fullest curve of her bottom. "Why not?" he asked again, as calm and ominous as thunder.

Her mind was full of angry words--What, are you kidding! Because I'm crippled!--but she wisely kept her lips pressed together.

The Overseer allowed her one full minute of silence (she could count the seconds by the pounding of her pulse) and then he lifted his hand. She was stubbornly determined to keep quiet, but the first swat landed low on her tender thighs, startling a cry from her. She was pinned too tightly even to flinch; she could feel her flesh shuddering as it was slapped. She shook her head no and no and no, gritting her teeth against the mewling pleas locked in her chest, but his hand was the only authority here and his hand told her the spanking would continue until her obedience was assured. She couldn't even feel her bottom anymore, or her palms where her fingernails dug white crescents, only her thighs, blazing red and throbbing. And the spansks kept coming, neither fast nor slow, assaulting her vied and defenseless legs until she couldn't stand it.

"*I'm BROKEN!*" she shrieked, and the floodgates opened. She fell against his leg, sobbing so hard she couldn't make any sound.

He waited for these brutal sobs to subside, stroking the flames of pain he had kindled in her, before speaking. "Countless men over the eons have been lost to the pursuit of myths. The True Cross, the Holy Grail, the City of Gold, the Fountain of Youth...but more than all of these combined, the most treacherous of all has been the myth of Normal."

"You don't understand!" Audra wiped at her still-leaking eyes over and over. "You can't understand!"

"Madam," the Overseer said with a sigh. "I was bald as a porpoise by the time I was seventeen. And while I admit this has little weight against a trauma such as yours, I think I understand a great deal about public ostracism by one's peers and how it affects one's self-image."

Audra snuffled.

"You aren't normal," he told her, and lifted half his hand in a shrugging gesture she could feel.

"Neither am I. Neither is anyone on this island, by society's standards. You are not made unlovable by this--" His fingers traced a circle, traversing areas of cold and tickles and oblivion before his hand came to rest again on her spanked patch of thigh. "And you are not broken."

She didn't, couldn't, answer him.

But of course, he wouldn't leave it at that. "Say it, Pearl," he said. "I am not broken."

She wanted to, but couldn't. It was a beautiful thought, like believing in fairies or unicorns, but she just couldn't give it honest voice.

He began to spank her, very hard but not fast, covering every part of her bottom that could feel it. She couldn't keep from struggling any better than she had kept from crying out. Gasps and howls punctuated her wildly-flailing and futile efforts to save herself from his onslaught. One blistering swat at a time, her pride, her misery, and even her sense of self eroded beneath his hammering hand. She began to shriek, and then to cry, and finally, surrender came in screams of, "I'm not broken! I'm not broken!"

"There is no such thing as normal," he coached her, his hand still rising and falling and filling her ears with cannonades of fleshy impact.

"There's no such thing as normal!" she sobbed, and for good measure, "I'm not broken!"

It worked. His hand moved at once to knead her bruised body, turning throbbing flames into a tolerable heat, pricked through with hellish pins-and-needles. "You are beautiful," he said.

Her heart was breaking. "You can't make me say that," she wept. "It's a lie."

CRACK! His hand fell once, just once, and then he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. He set her on the countertop, eliciting fresh moans of misery, and washed her face. She writhed against the flat marble, cool only for that first blessed instant, and now a seat of unimaginable torment as hot as lava. Then he lifted her down,

turned her to the mirror and made her look, his hand clamped to her jaw, his face a shadow of severity behind her.

"You are beautiful," he said. "Not everyone is. Certainly, no one needs to be in order to be lovable, but you are. It is, perhaps, one of the less-lovable qualities of my own nature that I noticed you first for your beauty, but there it is, and I do not have to lie about it. You are beautiful, Pearl. You *are*."

She stared at her face until she ceased to recognize herself in the reflection. She did not see Audra anymore, she saw only the features of a woman, and it could be any woman. Her brow was puckered with unhappy confusion, darkened by drifts of glossy brown hair. Her rosebud lips were slightly parted and trembling. Her eyes were red and swollen with tears...but those same tears made them jewel-bright, and they were flecked through with every color. She was flushed and puffy from her exertions, but her complexion was clear and her features were not unattractive.

'I've found her,' Audra thought with distant surprise. 'I found Pearl.'

She turned to look up at the Overseer. "You did it," she said.

He shook his head, taking the meaning of her muddled words perfectly. "You have always been this woman."

She didn't know what to think, what to feel. "You have to spank me," she said, because spankings made everything so simple. In that moment, she firmly believed he had spanked her until she was beautiful and now he would spank her until....

Until....

Until she loved him.

"Wait!" she cried, but this time, he did not obey.

SMACK-SMACK-SMACK! Each powerful slap stirred up the embers of the earlier assault until the fire blazed out at full strength. Pain whitewashed her objections; she did not fight him consciously,

but she must have struggled because he worked his arm around her waist and bent her behind him where she could grab nothing but his leg, kick nothing but the sink. He had been thorough in his mapping; he neglected no part of her now. His hand kept falling, striking as much as she could feel in five distinct patches. She could see them when she closed her eyes--five flowers of livid red that glowed brighter and brighter with each blow of his open palm.

"Please!" she screamed, but she was hugging his leg with both arms. Was she begging him to stop, or to spank on? "Please!" She couldn't even tell if she was really saying it out loud, or if she only thought she was, but that one word rang in her mind, keeping perfect counterpoint to the slapping of his hand.

There was a heat in her, answering the agonies of her tenderized bottom from a place low in her belly.

Too low.

She couldn't feel that, she reminded herself. It had to be some flare of aphasic sensation, to feel pleasure where there should be pain. She had never been able to feel that.

She had never been beautiful either.

She did not want to feel it, she argued. Not now. Not tangled in with punishment.

But she wasn't being punished. She had asked for this, was still asking for it, with the word 'please' still running through her like a second pulse. Didn't she want it? This slow, exquisite ache pounding in rough harmony with her bottom? Hadn't she gone to bed in the past with three men who were virtual strangers in a lost attempt to find it? Why not now? Why not with him, this perfect man, her Master?

Audra went still, sobbing helplessly into the heel of her hand. She didn't know what she wanted, but her body wasn't asking anyway. Her body suffered where it felt right to suffer, and thrilled where it felt good to thrill. And when the Overseer's hand

ceased its relentless assault on her and he stood her before him, her body moved independently of her will to embrace him.

He held her, but that was all, even though she could feel the proof of his desire as undeniably as she felt her own. "Ask me," he murmured, his deep voice pushing the command through her very bones.

Her mouth moved, but she could not make the words obey.

"Ask me," he ordered.

'Be my Master,' she begged him silently. 'Just take what you want! What we both want!'

But he wouldn't, she knew, and she bowed to him, defeated. "K-kiss me," she stammered.

He obeyed at once, his mouth crushing herself, opening her, tasting her breath in a kiss as complete as the spanking had been. Her strength failed her utterly at the explosive heat that swept her--mere desire no longer, but animal heat. Her legs buckled, but he held her securely against him, kissing her even more deeply, more passionately, stirring her to greater agonies of surrender.

He broke it at last, his black eyes blazing into hers. "Ask me," he commanded.

But that she could not do. She stumbled back, found the edge of the bathtub and sat, gazing up at him in helpless yearning. If he would take, she would gladly give, but she could not ask him.

The Overseer smiled. He touched her cheek, and she turned unthinkingly into the cup of his hand. "When you are ready," he promised.

And then he left her.

Audra remained, trembling, battered by a storm of conflicted emotion. She could still feel the scorching ache he had put in her nethers. She could still taste him and feel the press of his lips. She did not know what affected her more--the thought that she had turned him away, or the certainty that someday, she would not.

Chapter Twenty-Four

*** *Shuffleboard and Other Sports* ***

Tesoro's Shuffleboard Tourney did not exactly reflect traditional rules, which Audra supposed she already knew. The deck looked precisely as Jenna described, right down to the magic squares. The disks were pink and green, the cues were trimmed in Tesoro-blue. There were sixteen players in total, which made for an easy procession of play; there would be eight matches in the first round, four in the next, then two, and finally, a winner. And that was about as close to conventional as the game got.

Players faced off in singles matches, but didn't play until a prearranged point total. They shot from the port-side arena to starboard, and then from starboard to port, at which time, the process of 'tallying' began. The players stepped up to the deck rails and bent over. Each player's Master (in the event that the player was a Staff-member, the Overseer would take the part of Master) would then apply a cute little paddle, called The Ref, however many times were necessary to equal the player's points for that match.

Now it got interesting.

If the player made it through 'tallying' without crying out (gasps were permitted without penalty) her points for that match were doubled. If the player squeaked, whimpered, or otherwise broke silence but still kept pretty quiet, half-again as many points were added to her score. If she screamed, her score was unaltered. If she let go of the rails at any time, her points were halved. And suffice to say, if she reached back defensively, she received a big old goose egg.

The higher of the two scores in each match went on to the next round. This created a unique double-incentive for players to want to win, but by the lowest possible score.

Jenna was right. Shuffleboard was not a difficult game. And due in large part to the lop-sided enthusiasm shown by the other players, Audra didn't do as badly as she'd feared she might. In her first match, she was paired against a guest named Trouble, who was so unnerved by the example of tallying during the opening bout that she couldn't seem to make herself put any arm in her cue. Trouble's score for that match was only 6, all but two of her disks having been disqualified for lack of distance. Audra, on the other hand, played with gusto, learning from herself just how to stand and when to push in harmony with the gentle rise and roll of the boat. She scored an abysmal 13 points, but in light of Trouble's performance, looked good to advance.

She moved to the rails to take her licks, determined not to make a peep, unsurprised when tiny Trouble immediately disqualified herself by putting both hands back to fan over her fanny after only two counts. Trouble's troubles were over; her unamused Master handed The Ref to the Overseer, but unclipped a broad-backed hairbrush from his belt and again bent his Pet over. She was made to feel the inner glow of good sportsmanship one blistering smack after another as the crowd cheered him on.

The Overseer waited patiently for this distraction to play out. His hand rested on the small of Audra's back, keeping her in stasis, bent over the rails as a prelude to her own tallying even though Trouble's had clearly ended. She couldn't straighten up, but she could look around all she wanted, and she did, although her gaze had a way of drifting back to watch the Overseer rather than Trouble. He was so calm, relaxed...the confidence and poise which were natural to him gave him the appearance of presiding over this incident even though he really had nothing to do with it. His eyes rested idly on the impromptu display, watching with only a glimmer of interest as Trouble's bottom cheeks juddered and flattened

beneath the hairbrush, her hips bucking and tossing in a vain effort to escape her fate. In the end, her attempt to avoid The Ref won her easily three rounds' worth of point-smacks, only now she was disqualified as well as tenderized.

"You want to think about this the next time you're tempted to show off as well as waste time," Trouble's Master announced, ending the punishment with a final burning SPLAT of the brush. As his Pet wailed and promised to be good, he let her up and even permitted her to try and rub the sting away. "My apologies, Overseer," he said, tucking his sniffling, stomping Pet under his arm. "Some things just shouldn't wait."

"Understandable," the Overseer replied, giving Audra a pat on the fullest curve of her out-thrust buttocks--a friendly warning of things to come. "And as it seems my Pet has earned an easy walk to the second round by your Pet's actions, I won't belabor the matter for her. Consider this a reprieve, Pearl."

Thirteen falls from the Tourney's mascot-paddle came down, quick and even, not light but by no means as hard as he had power to deliver. He did not let her cheat by deliberately targeting aphasic parts of her, either, as she had known he would not. And she didn't want him to, she decided. She wanted to play (and lose) fairly, and that meant taking her paddling like any other player. Even if he'd given her the choice, she'd want to do it this way. She wanted to earn her points, and she was so overcome by this conviction that she made it through all thirteen cracks of the paddle without a sound, doubling her score.

The crowd cheered as Audra was allowed to straighten. She smoothed down her skirt, grinning as she massaged the hornet sting of the paddle into a manageable heat. She supposed she should be anxious in front of all these people, but this was different from the public display at the Whipping Post. She wasn't sure why. It was the same

cheering crowd, the same vulnerability, nearly the same nakedness. Perhaps it was as simple as the difference between punishment and sport, but whatever it was, Audra was truly at ease as she tugged her panties up and waved at Jenna in the crowd.

Her second round was a win of burgeoning skill. Maybe it was all those years learning just how to lean and balance, how to project a sense of space past what she felt as her own dimensions, but she proved extremely skilled with a cue. Each of her disks landed neatly inside the point-square she'd aimed for, and most of them were able to first knock her opponent's pieces off-kilter. She took 30 points, narrowly edging out her opposition's 24.

Her rival for the round was none other than the Staff-Sub Honeybee, who had escorted Audra off the beach on her arrival, what felt like years and years ago. But however docile and sweet Honeybee had been as a welcoming host, she was a ruthless rival on the shuffleboard court, and an old hand at keeping quiet and still for paddlings. Fortunately, the Overseer was every bit as experienced at giving spankings as Honeybee was at taking them. A few whimpers cost Honeybee the chance to double up, although she did come out ahead at 36 after tallying.

Audra was also committed to a clear victory, but it only took three cracks of The Ref to wake her to the same level of hurt she'd ended the first tallying on. From then on, it was an iron-banded battle of self-determination to keep her voice locked inside. Every slap she received with silence gave her a new glow of pride, and the motivation she needed to face the next one. The sunlight on her peppered bottom was excruciating, and the sea breeze, which should have brought cool relief, only brought the eye-watering agony of salt spray. Oh, she was earning every one of these points!

The watching crowd kept count for her, leaving her mind free to focus on self-control, but it was a

brutally honest count. By the time they had chanted 'Ten!', she was already bouncing on her heels, her knuckles white on the rails. By fifteen, she was stomping and jogging in place, her teeth clenched to keep screams inside (and behind the screams, most mind-boggling of all, a cascade of nervous giggles ran riot. Audra feared these more than anything; she didn't know if giggles could count against her points or not, but she was positive that if she let them out, they'd bring screams right on their little giggly heels). By twenty, she was reduced to Lamaze breathing, a trick she'd only seen in movies, but it worked. She panted and puffed her way through three more blistering smacks, each one shattering her previous conception of her pain threshold and raising the bar just a little. From twenty-three on, each blow was its own campaign and battle, its own silent conquest.

The voices of the crowd grew with every new number. Behind her tightly-shut eyes, half-delirious with pain and mounting triumph, Audra could see the New Year's Eve Ball in Times Square, only it was rising instead of dropping. Her lips were moving, keeping count with the crowd, every muscle tensing in anticipation of that blessed moment when she would finally be able to unlock her pain in blissful screams of victory.

"Twenty-eight! Twenty-nine! Thirty!!!"

Audra came up off the rails, leaping madly and shrieking, both hands flying around to knead spastically at her red-hot bottom. It hurt too much to touch, let alone rub; her hands flew away as though blistered on a stove, but came right back with the same mindlessness, determined to rub. The boat rocked on a particularly tall wave, and Audra, caught unawares, lost her balance and fell back, landing squarely on her sore rump. She came up as readily as if she were tied to a rocket, only to drop again, in agony of conflict between the hardness and pressure of the deck and the coolness

of its boards. People were laughing and congratulating her, reaching out to pat her shoulders or ruffle her hair.

And then the Griffin was there, hunkered down and head cocked, looking cheerful in a predatory fashion, smiling at Audra's contorted efforts to both sit and stand at once. "Need a hand, kid?"

"No," Audra hissed, her jaw clenched. "I need a butt! Ooooo! Dammitdammitdammit!"

The Overseer sat cross-legged beside her and pulled her off the deck and into his lap. She started to sit, but he gently adjusted her position, until she was balanced on his thighs and knees while her bottom touched only air. Audra leaned against his chest, breathing a sigh of delight so complete it was nearly sexual, and pillowed her head on his shoulder. Her toes were curling. She couldn't even feel her toes and they were still curling. There must be some deeper meaning to that then merely comfort, she thought.

"Looks like it's halftime," Jenna remarked.

Guests were mingling their way toward the bar at the other end of the deck. Players drew off into little cliques to moan over each other's winning bottoms, and bottles of arnica lotion appeared and made the rounds from hand to hand. Audra saw her name go up for the first match in the third round, against a guest called Dolphin, who had beaten out her previous opponents quite handily. It was going to be a brutal second half, but Audra couldn't make herself care that much about that yet. Not here, in the Overseer's arms. Not now.

"Think I'll get a drink," Jenna announced, and rose. She tipped an impish wink into Audra's upturned face. "I feel like an iced tea."

She strolled away, and suddenly Audra realized she was completely alone with her Master. Surrounded by him. Suspended by him, even. She tried to be dismayed, but it was a half-hearted effort at best...and her toes were still curling.

'I don't want to get up,' she realized.

"Then don't," the Overseer said, his voice low and his breath warm against her ear.

In her state of mind, she did not immediately understand that she'd spoken aloud. She believed, just for that moment, that he'd read her mind. She gazed back at him, blinking dazedly. His face was so close. She could lean just a little and kiss him.

So she did, even though the slightest movement woke fresh aches in her bottom. But that was all right, too. Like highlights in a cover-girl's hair, the pain sparking up through her disoriented pleasure only added to the beauty of the overall moment. She didn't close her eyes to kiss him. She wanted to see him filling all her vision as he breathed warmth into her heart.

"I was about to ask how you were holding up," the Overseer murmured at last. She could feel his lips curling against hers in a smile. "I suppose I have my answer."

"I'm playing a very good game," Audra said, knowing it was a ridiculous way to reply.

"Yes, you are," he agreed solemnly. "I confess, I am surprised."

Audra's whole body was shuttered all at once by the chill grip of alarm. She couldn't disengage from him, but she did face forward again, partly to avoid his piercing gaze, and partly to keep the temptation of continuing that traitor-kiss. "Why?" she asked. She could hear the wooden nonchalance in her voice, and knew it for the thin veneer over fear. What did he know? Were her points really that telling? He knew she hadn't really been playing shuffleboard all this time, but did he know what she *had* been doing? Did he know about the treasure hunt? And why on Earth was she getting upset just because she thought he thought she was lying? For heaven's sake, she *was* lying!

"Because I know now just how difficult it must be for you to hold your balance at sea," he said, his voice guarded and somewhat taken aback by her reaction. "This is no small show of skill, my Pearl."

She was blushing; she could feel it. "Oh," she said. "Of course." She passed a hand over her breeze-moistened face, trying to wipe composure back into her features. "They're all starting to come back for the third round. Help me up?"

He did, frowning ominously as watched her stretch life back into her limbs and find her footing on the rolling deck.

Dolphin was already waiting impatiently at the port-side Gentlemen's line for the match to begin. Audra picked up her cue and took a half-step away, reluctant to leave with suspicion lingering in the air. "Wish me luck?" she teased, clumsily trying to restore the good mood.

He didn't buy it, not any more than he had bought into the patently false story that had earned Jenna a chance to play Master to Bennu, but just as he had done then, he let it go. She could see the precise instant at which he decided not to pursue the matter, and then he smiled at her. "Luck," he said.

Audra put her mind firmly back on the game and went to shake hands with Dolphin.

She lost the coin toss and had to play first, which meant that her disks were utterly at Dolphin's mercy. Shooting towards the starboard arena, she scored an initial 18, but Dolphin managed to whittle that down to only 9 by clipping her disks, racking up her own 12 points at the same time. As they lined up on the starboard side to shoot back for port, Dolphin gave Audra's cue a not-so-friendly tap with her own, and said, "Get ready to lose."

Audra gave her opponent her very best cheerleader's poison smile. "Care to make a wager on it?"

The crowd ooo'ed and hushed respectfully as Dolphin narrowed her eyes. "What did you have in mind?"

"Loser takes the winner's tallying?" Audra glanced at the Overseer, who shrugged and passed his hand through the air in a permissive gesture.

"I'll take it on your word of honor that you won't deliberately disqualify me by rubbing too soon."

"Confident, aren't you?" Dolphin trilled out a laugh. "But I accept your challenge! Have fun taking my whacks!"

But this time, Audra was ready with a strategy. She stepped up to the line, caught a disk in the shoe of her cue, and lined up the first of her shots--shots against which, if she did them right, Dolphin had no defense. One by one, she sent her disks spinning across the deck, landing precisely where she wanted them--one in the back, and the rest occupying the entire bottom row of the magic square. This was good for 21 points on its own, but the points were really incidental. The real intention had been to block Dolphin's access to the square, and any hope of scoring points of her own. Even if she targeted Audra's disks, Dolphin's own disks would only stop where they had impacted...on lines, to be disqualified.

Dolphin paced up and down at the Ladies' line, as though movement could somehow force the disks into a different alignment. Finally, she stopped, lined up a shot, threw Audra a scowl that was only half-kidding, and did the only thing she could do. She knocked the closer of Audra's disks onto lines, but couldn't do anything about the fourth disk and the 5 points it sat happily upon in the last row. Final score: 14-12, Audra's favor.

Dolphin kept her word during the tally, but couldn't quite keep quiet. Each swing of her Master's arm terminated in an explosive BANG that lifted her right up onto her toes. She hadn't made it to the third round on looks alone, and her bright-red bottom was proof of her prior high scores. It must have been agony to have the paddle back, beating new fire into her already seriously-spanked bottom, but Dolphin managed to keep from screaming, even if she did let a few whimpers slip. Audra accepted the tallied total of 21. She would have even been content to let it end there if Dolphin

had been able to keep completely silent for her own tallying and won, but by the end of Audra's tallying, Dolphin's endurance was shot. Two blows into her own count, and she broke down, gulping in air as a fractured sob and letting it out in a tea-kettle scream. She stomped her feet, but the screaming must have triggered some sort of satisfaction in her all its own. She screamed again as the paddle slammed into her, but it was a strangely happy sound. She screamed with every following impact, matching the cannon-like bang of wood on flesh with an animal roar, and when it was done, she was grinning from ear to ear as she came to shake Audra's hand.

"I kept quiet for you!" she said, fierce with pride.

Audra found herself grinning back as she shook her opponent's hand. "Yes, you did! You earned those points for me!"

"Hell yes, I did!" Dolphin limped into the embrace of her Master, still crowing.

"That was one bitch of a trick shot." Jenna came up beside Audra and leaned against the deck rails. "How did you do it?"

"It's all talent, baby."

They watched the second match play out, the points so close as to be anyone's game. The tallying would be the deciding factor, and both players were determined to double up. As they bent over the rails, their skirts rode up, revealing bottoms so red they could have been the taillights of a car. Blow by blow, The Ref turned scarlet cheeks to a vibrant shade of fuchsia; soft flesh rose like bread and hardened like brick. Audra could almost feel the heat from here, radiating off them like the coals in an oven. Her own buttocks were clenching in sympathy, but she couldn't exactly call what she felt pity as she watched the paddle rise and fall. She'd managed to slip out of her own third-round paddling, but the sting of her second was still there. Audra's hand brushed across her

bottom now, stirring up that heat in prickly little waves, and she turned unthinkingly to find the Overseer and move under his arm.

When the tallying ended, Audra was matched against a guest called Pleasure for the fourth and final round, and there her luck finally ran out. Again, she went first, but her magic-square tactic didn't work against this player. Pleasure merely knocked one of Audra's disks aside and then sent her subsequent disks up through the opening. The game ended, 28-9, and as a consolation prize for both contestants, there was no tally.

As winner of the Submissive's Shuffleboard Tourney, Pleasure received a very special shuffleboard cue, one too small to take out on the deck, but perfectly-sized and weighted to be applied to naughty bottoms...once said bottom had cooled off a little first. Audra, to the good-natured cheering of the on-lookers, stepped up to take her pick from the collection of door-prizes offered for second place. She chose a little plastic fishbowl, hermetically sealed, with a little plastic goldfish bobbing happily about on the inside. It had its own little castle and everything.

She had never been so happy to win anything in her entire life. She held up her trophy for applause, but lost her balance almost at once. The Overseer caught her as she toppled backwards, and she threw her arms merrily around his neck, overcome with the momentum of her near-victory.

"Kiss me," she said, and he did, with abandon.

The on-looking guests merely clapped that much louder, but the few Staff-members among their number gasped practically in unison and then began a rush of celebratory cheers that Audra could feel in her bones. Honeybee was so overwhelmed that she began to bounce up and down, hugging herself for want of a partner, until Jenna swooped in and seized her in a bear hug.

All of this, Audra was peripherally aware of, but the immediacy and clarity of the moment was in

hands--the one encircling her waist, the other cupping and caressing her cheek and jaw. It was in his mouth, the gentle and thrilling insistence with which he explored her. It was in the miracle of warm pleasure radiating out from the very core of her. And she knew then that she belonged to him, and as imprudent and illogical as it was, the realization was undeniable and could bring her only joy.

'Philippe,' she thought, and felt such a crush of desire that for a split-second, she couldn't even see. She wanted to say his name. She wanted to hear him say hers. She wanted to be in love with this man and just...just feel it, the way that he could make her feel everything else! She wanted to feel love in the crack of a paddle, pleasure in the swing of his arm. She wanted him to be Master of her, and of all of her. She wanted....

"Kiss me," she said, again and again, and he obeyed her every time.

It seemed an age before the boat docked. It took years to walk the few hundred feet between the beach and the Tower, countless hours to reach the double doors at the end of the hall and to climb the iron stairs to his apartment. Once there, Audra carefully placed her fake goldfish on her vanity, and then turned to see the Overseer in the doorway behind her, piercing her with his gaze.

"My name is Audra Morley," she said, and held her breath.

He smiled, his body at once tensing and relaxing, coiling like a cat's before taking one last, great leap. "I am Philippe Ottah," he said, his voice reverberant with anticipation.

"I don't know what's going to happen next week," she said, stepping out of her shoes.

"No one does," he told her gravely.

"But I could love you if I had the chance," she finished, shrugging free of the straps that clung to her shoulders. "And I want to love you."

She left her collar on.

"You made me beautiful," she whispered,
stepping into his embrace. "Now make me yours."

She felt everything.

Chapter Twenty-Five

*** Five Way Split ***

Dawn came too early for Audra, when she was shrilled out of sleep by the ringing of the phone beside Philippe's bed. He rose over her to answer it, a great dark cloud, knuckling sleep from his eyes but sounding alert as if he'd been awake for hours. Audra cuddled into his side, hearing only the deep rumble of his voice without listening to the words, and he responded by wrapping her easily in one arm. They fit together so well, she thought, dozing off again. So well.

Philippe, still listening to the telephone, suddenly sat up straight, uttered a non-syllabic grumble of concern and became the Overseer. "I'll deal with it," he promised, gently removing Audra from the pillow of his chest. "Hold him in the Security Room." He hung up the phone, met Audra's inquiring eyes, and said simply, "We have a grifter in our midst. I may be some little while. Go back to sleep."

Thoughts of dragon bones leapt at once to the fore of her dream-fuzzed mind. "May I go for a walk?" she asked, holding on to the covers so she wouldn't look too eager about leaping from his bed.

"If you wish." The Overseer dressed quickly and left, but returned before Audra had even swung one leg out over the mattress. He took one of her black Pet-tunics from her closet and laid it out on the foot of his bed for her. Then he came to brush a kiss across her brow and cup her chin in his powerful hand. "Be good," he told her. "Be safe."

"Yes, Master." Who could have ever believed how good those two words could sound? Audra smiled, basking in her own inner glow, and the Overseer paused at the door to look back at her. "My Master," she murmured, her fingers tracing the letters of her tag.

"You make it very difficult to be responsible," the Overseer growled, and then he was gone again, leaving Audra with a smile on her face and a blush of pleasure all through her body.

The sun was still yawning its way into the sky. Audra felt no urge to hurry, but when she left the Tower, she realized that some subliminal alarm clock had gone off over the whole island. Jenna and Bennu were coming towards her across the courtyard, and Virgil and Koi were two barely-recognizable silhouettes heading for the beach.

Audra waved, and Jenna's path forked at once to intersect hers. "You're up early," she said, her eyes darting curiously toward Bennu.

"It wasn't my idea," the Griffin muttered, glaring daggers in the direction of the speck that was Virgil. "I know, I know, we've only got five days left, but sheesh, boy, it's five in the damn morning! I don't get up at five in the damn morning to shake hands with God! Benny, run in to the cafeteria and get me a thermos of coffee. I want it strong enough to make babies and sweet enough to raise 'em, got it?"

"Yes, Mistress!" Bennu took a slap on the ass to hurry him along, and then he was running for the double doors that led to the dining hall.

"And don't give me that look," the Griffin continued waspishly.

"What look?" Audra asked, blinking.

"That look. No, not that one, the other one. The one where you're wondering what Benny's doing here. What else was I supposed to do, enroll him in day camp? I can't just leave him at home. Isis might come knocking, and the boy has zero resistance. Besides, even if she didn't, he'd just sit on the floor in front of the door waiting for me to come back. He did that six hours last night when I was at your Tourney. Six hours! Christ, even a puppy gets up to eat a slipper or pee on something!"

Benny was running back towards them, a Tesoro-blue thermos in each hand.

"It's fine," Audra assured her, trying not to smile at the plaintive exasperation in the Griffin's voice. "He's kind of cute when he's tripping all over himself trying to make you happy."

The Griffin gave Audra a slow, hard stare. She held out one hand without taking her eyes from Audra and Bennu put a thermos into it. "If you weren't a gold tag...." she warned, unscrewing the thermos. She tasted the coffee, nodded once, and recapped it. "Good stuff. Okay, Benny, run on ahead and tell Virgil to wait up for us."

"Yes, Mistress!" Off he went, muscles rippling and blonde hair bouncing, a golden Adonis of ardent obedience.

"So." The Griffin drank more coffee, following her Pet at a reasonable pace with Audra at her side. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Sure did," Audra said, thinking that Jenna was referring to the Submissive's Shuffleboard Tourney. She puffed with pride at the memory of her near-victory. "I won a door prize!"

The Griffin sputtered and gave her a sharp look. "It's too early in the morning to mess with my head, Wheels," she said, narrowing her raptor's eyes.

Audra was baffled. "I'm not."

"You won a *door prize*?!"

"Yes!" Honestly, the Griffin had been there to see it!

"For sex?!" Griffin demanded.

"For--?!" Audra physically recoiled, clutching at her heart like the heroine of a sweeping Southern romance. "What Tourney were *you* watching?"

"Tourney!" The Griffin apparently forgot she was holding the cap of the thermos because she hauled off and smacked it into her forehead with an impressive show of force. She immediately followed that up with a yelp of pain and staggered back, spilling most of her coffee and launching into

chapter and verse from the Sailor's Big Book o' Salty Sea Words.

"The Tourney?" she exploded, when she could finally string two coherent words together.

"You were talking about after the Tourney, weren't you?" Audra asked in a small voice. Under the circumstances, she supposed she'd ought to be feeling a certain amount of moral indignation, but she was actually burning with embarrassment. If Griffin knew--and granted, the Griffin knew an awful lot of things she had no business knowing--but if she knew, then anybody could know. Anybody could just look at her and know that she'd gone to bed with a man she hardly knew. "Is it that obvious?"

"I think I gave myself a concussion," Griffin muttered. "And no, it's not obvious, because if it was obvious, I wouldn't have to ask if you'd had a nice time, I'd just know it." She peered closely up at Audra's flushed face. "Well? Did you?"

"Virgil's waiting for us," Audra said, and started walking a little faster.

"Aha."

"Stop doing that!" she called testily over her shoulder. "You're always I-see-ing and oh-yes-ing and aha-ing when you don't see and you don't agree and you don't...um...."

"Ha?" Griffin offered.

"My point is, that you don't actually know anything, you just trick people into thinking you do."

"I see."

"Ooo!" Audra broke into a run, unwisely perhaps, but not as unwise as turning around and throwing a punch she might not live long enough to regret. She caught up with Virgil, Koi and Bennu right where the sand made running too treacherous to keep up and they waited together for a smug-looking Griffin to finish sauntering up.

They walked in a tight group, five pairs of eyes picking ruthlessly over the scenery for bones.

Well, four pairs, anyway. Bennu spent most of his time looking at the waves that rolled in, but Audra didn't think it was her place to correct him. She wasn't sure he even knew what they were doing out here, and she wasn't about to start opening that particular bag if there was even a chance there was a cat still in it. But she wasn't the only one who noticed where his attention lay.

"You surf, Benny?" asked the Griffin, as they rounded the north side of the island.

"I used to." Bennu's blue eyes tracked an incoming wave, wistfulness carving length into his face. "My...my other Mistress doesn't let me any more. It makes me smell funny."

"What were you surfing in, soup?" The Griffin shook her head with a derisive laugh. "Look, I know they rent boards down at the Watersports Shack. You've been good. You can go surfing if you want."

Bennu slid his gaze toward her, clearly torn. He did not reply. Obviously, he was not a man accustomed to receive rewards for good behavior.

"There!" Koi shouted, pointing excitedly down the beach. "Is that a dragon? Does that look like a dragon?"

"Koi, honey..." Virgil put his hand gently on her arm and moved it back to her side. "That's driftwood. It might not have been here yesterday, much less--"

Jenna cleared her throat loudly, and to make absolutely certain Virgil didn't offer her a lozenge and keep talking, gave him a wallop up the back of his head.

"What dragon?" Bennu asked, his eyes sliding back to watch the waves break and form.

The four of them exchanged glances. "It means a five-way split," the Griffin growled, her voice scarcely audible above the call of the sea. "We do right by him or not at all!"

"I'm cool with that," Virgil said, and Koi nodded.

"Go ahead," Audra said. There wasn't much difference between a four-way split and a five-way split when you were talking about millions. She wasn't greedy.

"Benny." Jenna raked her fingers through her hair. "I don't know how much to tell you...Benny, where would you go on this island to look for dragon bones?"

That got all of his attention. Bennu turned all the way around, perplexed and hesitant. It took several aborted efforts to finally say, "Real ones?"

The Griffin's brows crashed down. "Boy, don't tax me. Just something that looks like a bunch of dragon bones. Something that could have been lying around here for at least two hundred years."

"Oh." The matter of his Master's sanity settled, Bennu relaxed. He thought about it for a second--and only for a second--and then said, "How about those big rocks in the garden? Those look a little like bones. Like back bones." He looked into each of their thunderstruck faces one at a time, growing increasingly nervous as he met each new pair of staring eyes. "Don't they?"

"Benny," the Griffin said quietly, breaking a lengthy silence. "Go home and get ready for the best damn beating of your entire life."

He had flinched at the sound of his name, but uncoiled hopefully as she finished making her curious statement. He took two half-steps away, then inched back and stammered, "W-will you s-shave me, Mistress?"

"Oh, you bet I will," the Griffin declared. "Shaved and waxed and oiled, even, and then I will tie you down and I will *do* things to you!"

Bennu's mouth was slightly ajar, his eyes wide. No, he was not a man used to positive reinforcement, but the temptation of this reward was far greater than a mere day of surfing. "Anything I want?" he asked huskily.

The Griffin had a snarl like the crack of a whip and she used it on him now, advancing through the

sand with her whole body alight with passion. "I will *make* you want it, boy. I will make you want to kiss the hand that holds the paddle and the foot that stands astride your neck. I will make you my possession and I will break you and rebuild you and I will make you want every last second of it."

Audra thought Bennu was going to swoon right there on the beach.

"And then," the Griffin announced, her eyes smoldering. "Then I will take you surfing."

Bennu turned and raced for home, his feet kicking up clods of wet sand.

"Wow," Koi breathed. She looked flushed.

"You're getting too excited," Virgil said, and it took Audra a second to realize he was talking to Griffin. "Those stones have to have been moved."

"You're only saying that because they're in a straight line and deliberate arrangement, and all that proves is that someone put them there." The Griffin turned to face him, her whole face shining with a hunter's thrill. "It could have been pirates as easily as the Overseer, but sure as I'm standing here, those stones in the garden were quarried from the cliffs on the leese of the island."

"Maybe," Virgil argued. "But when? By who? Even if they are the dragon bones from the riddle, what makes you think they're standing in the same place DeGuarre's pirate friend put them originally? We don't have any way of answering these questions!"

"Sure we do." The Griffin slung an arm cheerfully around Audra's shoulders, with enough force that she nearly toppled Audra over into the sand. "As smiling Fate would have it, we have someone who can ask."

All of a sudden, Audra was the center of all their attention.

"How am I supposed to casually bring *that* up?" she asked, alarmed.

"You ever hear of pillow talk?"

Audra blushed furiously and got out from under Griffin's arm. "It's not like that," she said.

"Oh please!" Koi snorted.

"Like what?" asked Virgil.

"Give me a break!" Griffin demanded. "You're throwing out a whole lot of signals for a not-like-that kinda situation."

"I am not!"

"You are," Koi said sagely.

"What signals?"

"Even if that were true," Audra argued, "which it's *not*, but even if it were, why would I want to lie to him just so I can find out where he got his garden decorations?"

"Because you'll get treasure!" Koi answered.

"Lie to who?" Virgil pressed.

"Virgil's right, who said anything about lying?" The Griffin put her hands on her hips, flexing her fingers into the creaking leather of her belt. "Just show a little interest. You don't have to say it's for your Squirrel Scout Mineralogy Badge, just ask him where the rocks came from."

"What am I right about?"

"Don't you think he'll find it a tad suspicious in retrospect when we dig his garden all to hell the next night?" Audra demanded, exasperated.

"Men never notice anything," Koi scoffed.

"We'll clean it up when we're done," Griffin added, rolling her eyes. "We haven't exactly been leaving gaping holes all over the damn island, now have we?"

"What is everyone talking about?" Virgil exploded.

"Hush it a second, Virge, you've had your say, now let the other kids talk." The Griffin caught Audra by the wrist and looked intently into her eyes. "If those rocks were anywhere else on the island, I'd say just look under 'em 'till we find something or we don't, but they're not. And digging up the garden not thirty feet from the dining hall doors is a risk I don't want to take if it turns out

those rocks were moved in from a mile west. The Overseer is probably the only guy on this whole island who'd know where they stood originally. We don't have time to be delicate. In five days, we are on a boat back home. So I'm asking you...please...ask the man where he got the rocks."

Audra squeezed her eyes shut, as though blocking out the sight of her friends could somehow shut her away from this responsibility. She knew that Griffin was telling the truth...she knew that they were running out of time...but she also knew that she loved Philippe Ottah, and there was something deeply distasteful in the thought of asking such a question when he did not know the real reason she would want to know. It was not a betrayal, she supposed. He had told her when he took her for his Pet that she could have any secret by omission, as long as she didn't out and out lie to him. But this felt like a lie.

"Please," said the Griffin again.

Audra felt something break, her resistance...or her heart. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and headed for the Tower.

Audra sat before her easel, looking down at the stones in the garden through the Tower window. She had started with a fresh canvas, trying to calm her nerves before the Overseer returned, but the picture had taken on a dark life of its own. It was nothing now but a swirling mass of colors from which a line of white stones protruded. The more she tried to fix it, the more tumultuous and storm-like the painting became...and the more the stones looked like bones.

Eventually, she grabbed the painting, marched it ceremoniously across the room and dropped it into the metal trash can with a resounding ga-BONGGGG!

Naturally, when she turned around, the Overseer was standing at the top of the stairs. He

frowned at her, and came silently over to retrieve her painting from the trash can. He studied it in silence while Audra stood, her head bowed, before him.

"What's the matter with it?" he asked at last.

"It's too honest."

"Ah." He sought her gaze, but she avoided him, and so he moved past her and put the painting onto her drying shelf. He did this with an authority that warned her as plainly as if he'd used words that removing the painting would be a punishable offense.

Audra sighed and sat down on the sofa. "I'm having a very difficult day," she said.

"It's catching," he replied dryly.

Her head came up. "That's right," she said. "The grifter. What happened?"

The Overseer rolled one shoulder at a time and finished by cracking the joint of his neck--the shrug of a weary bouncer. "It happens every so often," he said. "Word reaches the right set of ears about an isolated resort catering to very wealthy, submissive personalities, and they come believing they'll find a buffet of lonely, biddable women. But three weeks is a long time to let a confidence predator entertain him or herself. They tend to grow too bold. We had a name for this particular pest long before now, but it has been a matter of catching the thief in action. We laid a trap, and this morning, he finally bit." He permitted himself a small smile of deep satisfaction. "On video, no less."

"What did you do?" Audra asked. "What's the law like out here?"

"I own the island," the Overseer explained, still smiling. "But part of my friendship with your homeland nation includes a zero tolerance criminal acts policy. We have kept your government informed of our grifter's activities at all times, long enough for them to find their own motivation to pursue him, and this morning, I took him and the

evidence against him into American waters and turned him over to the Coast Guard."

"Zero tolerance?" Audra echoed queasily. Was it a felony or just a misdemeanor to dig up treasure on land that didn't belong to you? Would they get any of the treasure to look forward to when they got out of jail? Probably not; in all the movies Audra ever saw, you couldn't profit by your crimes.

"Zero," the Overseer assured her, and folded her into his arms. "You are entirely safe, my Pearl. On my island, nothing escapes my attention."

Hoo boy.

"Enough about that." He pulled back to arm's length and smiled down at her. "What has made your day difficult?"

She had to do it. She had to take the plunge. Audra took a deep breath and said, "Those stones in the garden...."

The Overseer's brows rose. "What about them?"

"Do you know where they're from?" she asked, not a little desperately. "They're...kind of obsessing me."

"Oh?"

"Artists," she said. "We're temperamental."

"I see." Keeping one arm firmly around her shoulders, he walked to the window and gazed down at the stones. "Strange that you should ask. My surveyors told me this was the best area to develop for the resort, but as we cleared the terrain, we found the stones, laid out just as you see them now. Completely overgrown, of course...the workers broke a backhoe in the finding of them." He smiled, running his eyes down the full length of them. "They called it The Dragon's Backbone."

Audra started. "Why?"

"You know where we are, of course." The Overseer glanced at her. "In the heart of the Spanish Main. In bygone days, this island, like so many others, was believed to have been a haven for pirates."

Audra's cheeks were burning so hot, her vision was tinted slightly. "Really?" she said faintly.

"So naturally, it would be a dragon's backbone, because according to local myth, it lay on a bed of buried gold." The Overseer chuckled and hugged Audra close. "The Caribbean is far richer with such stories than with doubloons. Every island wishes to be la Isla Tesoro. But real treasure--" He turned her to him, his hands dropping to lock around her waist. "Real treasure can be anywhere."

Real treasure. Audra's worries melted away. She gave herself over to his embrace, letting his hands mold the way in which her body stood. She smiled at him, basking in the intensity of his gaze, in the hunger she saw there. 'For me,' she thought, and believed it without question. She, who had so recently found it impossible to imagine that anyone might think her loveable, now reveled in her desirability for this man, her man, her Master.

His hands slipped beneath her skirt, cupping her buttocks, squeezing to bring phantoms of yesterday's paddling back to life. Audra closed her eyes, rolling her hips back into his grip, submitting to him with a sigh of pleasure. The pain was there, but trust also; she knew he would not truly hurt her, and knowing that, her body was his to explore.

"Ask me," he commanded.

The words ignited her to a state of near-delirious joy; it was more than the acknowledgement of her own passions, it was the permission she needed to unleash them. "Love me," she said, letting her fingers thread through his, helping him to caress her. "Spank me and love me."

Further words were unnecessary, abrasive. The sounds of fabric rustling, of quickened breath, of his hands soothing and slapping at her skin were music enough. She gave herself over to his will entirely, without hesitation or inhibition, taking cues from the subtlest pressure of his fingers until she was draped over his lap in the position he demanded. Yesterday's tallying at the Tourney had left its

imprint on her still; bending over his knee made her feel tight and tingly with anticipation and it took only a few light slaps to fully waken a pleasant heat all over her sensitive patches. She arched up for each swat, her fingers kneading at his leg with kittenish pleasure as he spanked her. Every few slaps, he would pause to caress her, his hand moving over each of her true-feeling places and then down between her legs. She parted for him each time, shivering with desire and the shamelessness of her act, but he never took advantage of her inexperienced invitation. It was enough for him to test and tease her, blurring the lines between sensation and excitement, until she no longer knew what was real and what was inflamed imaginings.

This was not punishment, but it was tortuous all the same, igniting her to levels of passion she did not know how to temper or express. She could only submit to them, her body afire and trembling with need, waiting for him to permit her release. And when at last he brought her to his bed, she was ready. When he commanded her to be wanton, she was, as simply as that. She could not believe the passion her body contained, or the intensity of her desires, but he met her with equal fervor and guided her expertly to new plateaus of pleasure.

"Now," he whispered, and she came, obedient and wild, every fiber of her being consumed in the purifying flame of his love. But in the midst of that explosion, it was not his sweet face she saw in her mind's eye, but those standing stones in the garden. She clung to him, still joined to him, and tried to ground herself to his reality.

"What is this?" he asked, and one of his broad fingers touched her cheek and came away with a tear glittering on its tip.

"I love you," she told him, and pressed her face into his shoulder. "It's because I love you."

And it was true. God help her. It was true.

Chapter Twenty-Six

*** *Sixteen Stones On A Dead Man's Chest* ***

The afternoon was spent indulging their desires, an activity in which Audra could lose herself and all her reservations. She could devote herself entirely to him, the man who was by turns Philippe Ottah, her lover, and the Overseer, her Master. That was the afternoon, and it was a glorious exercise in deliberate amnesia, but it was only an afternoon.

As evening began to darken the sky, the Overseer rose from his bed and showered. Audra waited, hoping, clinging to the 'just-us-two' mood of the past blissful hours, but he returned fully dressed and she knew it was over.

He took one look at her crestfallen face and burst out laughing. "Audra," he chided, "my Pearl, I am running a business. Shall I tell each of my two hundred guests that I would rather make love to my beautiful Pet than see to the entertainments for which I have been well paid?"

"Yes," she said sulkily, and pulled the blankets up to her shoulders.

He tsked and went to her closet. "You may wait for me if you like, but I warn you, it will be a long wait. The season is ending. I am expected to make a number of appearances over the remaining days, and I do not abandon my responsibilities at a whim." He laid out a black tunic for her at the foot of the bed, and then moved up to kiss her, biting and teasing at her lips until she surrendered to his probing intimacy. "Not even for this wonderful whim," he murmured into her mouth, and then straightened.

She pushed the covers back reluctantly and reached for her clothes. "I guess not."

"So brave," he said, smiling. "You almost tempt me to stay. But in ten minutes, the Submissive's Olympics begin, and I am the prizemaster. You could enter...?"

She quirked a corner of her mouth at him, and then slid into her tunic. "Shuffleboard is about as daring as I get these days, when it comes to sports."

"I thought as much. Still, they can be great fun to watch."

"Maybe for some." Audra moved her legs into position and then stood, slowly and carefully testing her weight before taking her first steps. "Things like that just depress me these days."

"We'll have to work on that." He checked the time, took a step back, and then looked at her again. "What will you do in my absence?"

"Go see my friends, I guess," she said. "Maybe take a little walk through the garden."

"Ah. Well, enjoy yourself. And should you change your mind about spectator sports, the games don't usually end until well after midnight." He came back to kiss her once more, and then he moved deliberately away and was soon gone.

Audra made her way down out of the Tower and out into the island air. The courtyard was alive with people walking and laughing and talking as they made their way toward the well-lit Rotunda. Audra could hear music start up, even at this distance, some sort of recorded fanfare that no doubt heralded the Opening Ceremony, and many of the guests immediately broke into runs. In seconds, Audra was alone. She wondered if they lit a torch to signal the start of the games, or released doves or paddled somebody purple or what.

She trudged up the path to the Griffin's cabin and knocked, but there was no answer, so she had to keep trudging until she came to Virgil's. Her knuckles had only touched his door once before it flew open.

"There you are!" he announced, looking profoundly irritated. "Sheesh! What took you so long?"

WHAP! Griffin's hand came out of nowhere and connected solidly with the back of Virgil's head. As

he staggered off to one side, the Griffin took hold of the door and waved Audra in. "Sorry," she said, not sounding the least bit sorry. "He's an idiot. How are you feeling?"

"Like a liar," Audra replied, and sank down on the nearest chair. "Even though I didn't actually do any lying. I just asked, like you said, and he answered. He didn't even ask me why I wanted to know, and do you know why?"

"Why?" Virgil asked. He was still holding onto his head with both hands, and he was watching Griffin warily from the corner of his eyes.

"Because he trusts me," Audra said despondently.

"Excellent!" Virgil chortled, and rubbed his hands briskly together beneath his chin. "That'll simplify everything!"

WHAP! The Griffin bared her teeth as she watched Virgil crash into the floor. He bounded up again in an instant.

"Stop hitting me!" he shouted.

"Stop saying stupid things!" the Griffin snapped back.

"Stop fighting," Audra sighed. "Let's just dig up the darn garden and get it over with."

"So...." Virgil's indignation evaporated and he looked intently at Audra. "Those stones were actually where the garden is now? For real?"

"He built the garden around them," she nodded. "And get this: the workers called them The Dragon's Backbone."

"Excellent!" Virgil galloped off in the direction of the bedroom, and there were alarming rattle-and-clanks as he packed his duffle bag for digging.

The Griffin didn't move. She continued to stand over Audra, gazing down at her with an expression of faint remorse that Audra was finding more disconcerting the longer she had to endure it. "Where's Koi?" she asked finally, just to have something to say.

"Off at the Olympics with Benny," Griffin replied. "I don't suppose he'll be able to do much in the shape he's in, but who knows? He might surprise me. Boy's got some endurance, I'll give him that."

"You should go watch him for a while," Audra suggested. If she were in the games, Philippe would go watch her. Of course, he'd be the prizemaster, but still....

"We're all going to go watch him," the Griffin said calmly. "Right now, in fact. For about the next hour."

"Why?" Virgil asked. He came back into the room, toting a heavy-looking duffel from which the handle of a modular shovel clearly protruded. "We're on kind of a tight schedule, in case you hadn't noticed."

The Griffin sighed and rubbed at her eyes. "Virgil, I appreciate your enthusiasm," she began.

"Oh." Two spots of pink blossomed high in Virgil's cheeks and he looked a little sheepish. "Because it needs to be a little darker before we start any major excavations in the courtyard, right? I get it. Sorry. I've had kind of a lot of coffee...."

Griffin patted his shoulder absently. "It'll be fun," she said. "We'll go cheer our people on for a bit, they'll look down and see us cheering, and a great time will be had by all for--" She checked her wristwatch. "--about forty-five minutes. Then we'll elope to the garden and dig like wolverines under the ninth stone, taking what will undoubtedly prove to be excessively frequent breaks to pretend to be a threesome whenever somebody walks by. And all of this so we can dig up something that won't even be treasure, goddamn it."

"Good," Virgil declared. "Because while I appreciate *your* enthusiasm, Griffin, I'd just as soon excavate a little tiny chunk of map rather than try to pull out a whopping big glot of gold in the middle of the courtyard not thirty yards from the event room where two hundred people are preparing at any moment to emerge."

She gave him a rueful glance and a smile. "A good point, well made." The Griffin strode to the cabin door and opened it. "Let's go root for the home team."

In the Rotunda, a large chart kept the milling guests abreast of the players and their points. Helpful posters informed the curious that although prizes were given out for each game, players could compete in multiple events and culminate their points towards a mystery Grand Prize. At the end of the night, the three highest scorers would be given the Gold, Silver, and Bronze medals, as well as paid registration to Tesoro next year. Of course, the Olympics had just begun--no scores were yet posted--but judging from snippets of overheard conversation, betting was still heavily underway.

Spectators packed the halls, moving in and out of the rooms where events were being held. They filled the benches and chairs provided for them and stood when there was no other room. No one jockeyed for position, everyone waited their turn. Everyone applauded every player, and Audra felt her spirits rising, borne up by the collective goodwill of the crowd.

The first room they passed hosted the Strawberry Games, in which contestants bent before a panel of Staff-Doms armed with Teacher's Pet-style paddles. The players carried a ripe strawberry in each closed hand and if she clenched her fists as she felt the paddles rain down, the proof would be left as red juice on her palms. Of course, it was difficult to clench one's bottom without clenching one's fists, especially if one's hands were already closed around something. And there were degrees of failure, as Audra saw, from small smears and bruised berries all the way to mangled fruit awash in juice. Audra watched for a while, her lips stretching in a smile as the nuances of the game became more evident, but neither Koi nor Benny were playing and the Overseer wasn't judging, so she moved on.

In the next room: the Freestyle Spankings. One by one, contestants assumed the most artistic, erotic, and impossible positions in which to receive spankings. They were tested for balance by a number of Staff-Doms with varied implements and scored for endurance, as well as difficulty and execution. The guest on stage was a limber young lady poised on a padded sawhorse. Her ankles were locked behind her head, her face was upturned, and her rosy bottom glowed out at the audience as her judges conferred.

Virgil had taken a seat in this room, so Audra scanned the faces in the shadows off-stage until she found Koi. Virgil's baby-faced Pet was wearing a fetching array of black straps and chains, and looked supremely smug. Clearly, this game was in Koi's bag. Audra moved on.

In the last event room, the lights were dim and there was music--low and slinking, jazzy-club music. In the spotlight on stage, a voluptuous figure performed a dancing striptease as she spanked herself. Rhythmic slapping wove in and out of melody; flesh unveiled itself by slow degrees, rippling and undulating, juddering beneath the paddle. The sight was fascinating, unmistakably erotic, but Audra couldn't watch. She was happier in her own body now than she had been for seven years, but she couldn't watch this woman dancing without imagining that it was her...wishing it could be her. She wanted to dance, not for herself, but for Philippe. She wanted to school herself in every way to tantalize and please...but this was torture. She moved on.

The Submissive's Triathlon was in the Ballroom, which had been transformed into an admirable obstacle course. Players had already made it through the slappers and were now racing on hands and knees across the parquet floor toward the third leg of their race--a series of hurdles guarded by Staff-Doms armed with short whips. And there was

Bennu, well in the lead, with the Griffin urging him on from the front row.

But the Overseer still wasn't here, so Audra wandered back to the Rotunda. It had gotten very dark very quickly. The first few scores had begun to appear beside players' names and Audra perused them, pretending interest while waiting for her friends.

Beneath the stone in the garden waited the last piece of a very long puzzle--one more map, one more day of pretense, one more night of skulking around while other guests enjoyed themselves. Then they would finally have DeGuarre's treasure, or they would find an empty hole, and one way or another, it would be over. She wondered if Virgil really considered what it would take to move a chest of gold out to the coast. He'd claimed to have an unowned island in mind, and she was sure he could acquire a boat and take them there, but how about getting the stuff itself up out of a hole and across the island? That had to be no mean feat.

Well, between Virgil and Jenna, no doubt a way would be found, and in any event, Audra's part would already be over. She couldn't build a block-and-tackle any better than she could dance a striptease for her man. But in the end, the treasure would be moved and they could pretend to find it on their unowned island, and what better way to end a three-week vacation? Because it really was almost at an end, wasn't it? Today could just about be X-ed off her mental calendar, and that left only four more days before the Tesoro Pet took her back to Florida and home.

With treasure. Without Philippe.

"You came after all."

Audra started, but her body knew who it was before her mind caught up. She was smiling before she finished turning; her hand had risen already to the level of his cheek, caressing before he was there to be touched.

The Overseer smiled, letting his hand slide down her back and cup her hip in a gesture that was two parts affection to one part pride of ownership. She relished both, delighting in the envy she saw in each watching pair of eyes.

"For a little while," she said. "My friends both have someone to cheer on. Then we're going for a walk."

"Ah. A good night for it. Not too hot."

"Yes." Audra's smile faded slightly. "It'll give me something...something nice to look back and remember."

He looked at her sharply and did not answer right away. Finally, "And is that all you mean to take away?"

Audra faced the scoreboard and watched a Staff-Dom write the number 9.8 beside Koi's name. She could feel her heart pounding. "What would you say if...."

But she couldn't finish. How do you ask a man to ask you to stay? At best, it was merely desperate. At worst, laughably desperate. She hadn't had self-esteem long enough to risk it with a question like that.

"If?" The Overseer caught her by the chin and turned her inexorably to face him.

"If...I...asked to paint your portrait?" she finished unhappily.

He looked taken aback at first, then guardedly pleased. "I should be honored to sit for it, of course."

"It might not look much like you."

"So long as you know who it is meant to be, it does not matter."

"No," Audra said softly. She could not meet his eyes. "No, I suppose it doesn't, does it?"

"Sixteen stones," counted Virgil. He paced up and down the garden path swiftly, double- and triple-checking his tally, then spun on Jenna. "The

riddle says it's under the ninth...but the ninth from which end?"

Audra watched them confer as she leaned against the comforting mass of the tallest stone. There were no lights in the garden; the only illumination came from the windows of the resort offices and main buildings, but it was enough for this undertaking. The shadows made her friends' faces mask-like, but they were perfectly identifiable, almost as if they had become caricatures of themselves. Earnest Virgil, fierce Griffin. She wondered what she looked like, here in the shadows.

"Start counting with the biggest," Jenna said finally, pointing at Audra's stone. "If we're looking at this row like the backbone of an animal, then the smallest bones would be near the tail. And anyway, doctors start counting from the neck down."

"Are neck bones the biggest?" Virgil asked, quickly ticking down the line of garden stones.

Jenna hesitated. "No. Actually the thoracic vertebrae are the biggest," she admitted. "They're more toward the middle. But look, in real life, no one's bones go in a straight line, largest to smallest."

"No one's?" Virgil paused in the act of unzipping his duffel bag. He had that owl-eyed perplexity unique to him and too much caffeine.

"No."

"Not even a giraffe's?"

Audra, watching the conversation like a tennis match, leaned out to catch Jenna's expression of increasing exasperation.

"Dude, where do you even *get* questions like that?" the Griffin snapped. "No, not even a giraffe's! Jesus!"

Virgil looked hurt. "Sheesh," he muttered, carefully extracting the first flowering fern--roots, dirt and all--from the patch of earth surrounding the ninth stone. "What's with her?"

"A giraffe stole her lunch once," Audra said. "She's never gotten over it."

He looked at her curiously, pulling out another plant. "Aren't you the one who's always telling her not to mess with my head when I'm all strung out like this?"

"You're a grown up now." The words sounded hollow. Audra hugged herself and stared down at her feet, watching her unfeeling toes curl in the rich potting soil. "We're all grown up now."

"Griffin, a little help here? I'm running out of places to put these things. Audra, go stand guard." Right. Lookout once again.

Audra pushed herself off the soothing surface of her stone and went to the end of the wedge-shaped garden, looking over the empty courtyard to the golden light pouring from the open Rotunda doors. She could hear laughing and music, the sounds of the Submissive's Olympics still in full swing. When they'd left to come digging, Koi had been scoring quite well...maybe even had a shot at the Bronze medal. Maybe when the Olympics were over, they could all go someplace and celebrate their respective victories--Koi and Bennu's indoor games, and DeGuarre's centuries-old outdoor one.

"Have you thought about it?" Audra wondered wistfully.

"Thought about what?" Jenna grunted, accepting full pails from Virgil to pour out in fastidious little piles of potting soil or sand.

"Going home. I mean...four days, and we'll all be back home. What...what are you going to do?"

"I don't know about the rest of you," Jenna said, "but I plan on doing a lot of naked rolling in piles of doubloons."

"First thing I'm going to do," Virgil announced, "is buy myself a mint, or near-mint, I'm not picky, copy of Detective Comics #33."

Jenna emptied her pail and cocked it on her hip, watching Virgil continue his enthusiastic excavation of the garden and exchanging questioning glances

with Audra. "Okay," she said finally. "Looks like it's my turn to bite. Why?"

Virgil recoiled from her with an expression of genuine shock, and then leaned forward and peered at them both as though expecting them to burst out in a chorus of fooled-you giggles. "First appearance of Batman," he explained.

"Oh. That's right. I forgot you were a nerd." Jenna passed the pail down to be filled. "And don't take this the wrong way or anything, but you really are the biggest nerd I've ever known."

"Thanks," he said distractedly. "I try to work out." He stepped down into the hole to continue digging; it was as deep as his knees already. "What about you, Audra? What are you going to do first?"

Funny. She'd spent most of her days leading up to this vacation and, of course, here on Tesoro thinking about finding the treasure, but she didn't think she'd ever really given any thought to what she was going to do with a million dollars. "I--"

Voices. Audra whirled and saw a small group of people exit the Rotunda, heading this way.

"People!" she cried. "Get down!"

Jenna sprang into action, pulling Virgil from the hole and dropping an uprooted shrub inside. Its tall, bushy leaves now gave a credible appearance of low, leafy groundcover, and Virgil had tossed his duffel bag behind the stone, the only thing they had to hide was each other.

"Should we run, or--uga!"

Jenna's hands snaked around Audra's waist and she was flung down with dizzying speed to land full length over an equally-sprawled Virgil. Jenna then dropped over both of them, intertwining her arms and legs through theirs and assuming a dangerously compromising position. "We're a threesome!" she snarled. "Writhe around, dammit!"

Audra looked at Virgil. Virgil blinked at her. The people in the courtyard were getting closer.

"Writhe!" hissed the Griffin. "Do you want them thinking we've passed out or been shot? Move!"

Virgil cleared his throat uncomfortably as Jenna began a convincing impersonation of someone making out with him. "Ladies," he began in a hoarse whisper. "I apologize in advance for any reaction I may...or...or may not get. Whichever is more offensive to you. I apologize."

"I'm not really comfortable writhing with you guys," Audra added. "Can't we just breathe heavy and grope each other?"

"Sure, whatever," Jenna grumbled. "Six of one, half a dozen of the other, as long as we look good. Virgil, grab my ass!"

Virgil whimpered.

Audra put her hand under Jenna's arm and over Virgil's chest, tucking her head into the crook of his neck. She hoped she looked like she was necking. She could feel Jenna sliding her shapely leg between their tangled limbs. Virgil's hand was at the small of Audra's back. It felt limp and quite clammy. Audra was an only child, but she could say without reservation that this felt a lot like making out with her brother and sister. She had never been more uncomfortable in her life.

"I have never been more uncomfortable in my life," Virgil whispered.

Audra's mood of frozen horror cracked under the barrage of giggles his confession tore out of her. She tried to hide it by curling a little tighter against his side, but her laughter was shaking all three of them, and it was making her make the strangest little snuffling sounds.

"Oh God," groaned Virgil. Even in the dark, it was easy to see his face darkening with strangled embarrassment. "I apologized already, right?!"

Audra snuffled harder, trying to muffle herself with a mouthful of his shirt. She didn't dare make any more noise than that. The people were right next to the garden now, but would they turn up the path to the cabins or duck into the dining hall for a late-night snack?

Or, lord help them, would they stand there and watch?

Audra tried to smother her nervous giggles while making out as uninterestingly as possible with Virgil's horrified and (almost) utterly limp body. Why were those people watching? Surely there had to be something more appealing to look at than three people necking in a bush!

"You know," Virgil muttered, his voice scarcely audible, "the worst part is, this is a long time personal fantasy of mine." He shifted, accidentally brushed Audra's breast, and yanked his hand away so fast he slapped Jenna in the mouth.

"Ouch! Rat-bastard!" Jenna snarled, and burst out laughing. "I mean, uh, yeah, tiger, do that again. Christ, I'm no good at this."

"Sorry," Virgil whispered. "I'm not very good at this, either."

"That's not what Koi says." Griffin glanced around and groaned. "Are those idiots ever going to leave?"

"Really?" Virgil raised his head to look at her. "Koi says I'm good?"

"Koi says you are *un*-believable," Jenna assured him solemnly.

"She says you have sweet hands," Audra added.

Virgil, grinning, dropped his head back into the soil and wrapped his arms around both their waists. "Ha!" he chortled. "Claymore's got the mad goatz!"

"Dude." Griffin sat up at once, her fists firmly planted on her hips and making no effort whatever to keep her voice down. "I'm not doing this if you're bringing in a goat."

Laughter from the little group looking on. They began at last to wander up the path toward the cabins. Jenna watched them go, backing away from the other two. Audra rolled onto her back and sat up, disengaging herself from the exercise of mock intimacy, although Virgil's arm remained around her waist.

"Goatz," he was saying. "With a Z. You know, skills. Extreme, like, talent."

"They're gone." Jenna stood up and went to find the shovel and pail.

Virgil finally noticed that he seemed to still be attached to Audra, and he sat up, returning his hands to his own lap. "I really like her," he said earnestly. "Do you think I'm too young to know if I'm, you know, in love?"

"You're never too young," the Griffin began as Audra floundered for an answer. "Well...okay, I always did think Romeo and Juliet were a couple of dew-eyed saps obsessing over something they knew nothing about, so I guess you can be too young...but you're twenty-one, Virge. That's old enough." She handed him the shovel, pulled the bush out of the hole and stood back. "And that leaves me just four days to find my own true love and make us a complete set."

"Well," Virgil slid into the hole and started digging. "There's always Benny."

Jenna snorted. "Please. He's a sweet kid, but he's got a cheese sandwich for a brain. And not the good stuff, either, we're talking the shit that comes in a can and spells cheese with a Z." She sighed and shook her head. "If I've got a choice, I'd rather fall in love with someone I can talk to and still use big words."

"You're so mean," Virgil smiled, handing her a bucket of dirt.

"Yeah, but at least I'm honest. I suppose I could learn to like the guy," she added, dumping the bucket out on the sand pile. "But he's just so...vague. I mean, he's easy to look at and eager to please, but come on! When he puts a seashell to his ear, *it* can hear the ocean!"

Audra winced, even though she had to admit the description wasn't entirely unapt. "You really are mean," she said.

"Yeah, I know." Griffin sounded depressed, but not very remorseful. "That's okay. When I'm rich,

people won't think I'm mean. They'll think I'm confident and eccentric, and they'll line up around the block for the opportunity to cover me with butterscotch syrup and pleasure me."

Audra was startled back into giggles, but even through them, she could hear Virgil dryly saying, "You're going to need a whole new island for that kind of kinky, Griff."

"I shall call it 'La Isla Butterscotch.'"

"Hello!" Virgil tossed out the shovel and grabbed the trowel, then knelt and vanished from view. "We didn't get quite over far enough. It'll take me a little while to dig this out. Audra, you're still looking out, right?"

"Um, yeah." Audra climbed to her feet and returned to the path. The courtyard was still clear. "Virgil? What about...what about Koi?"

"Um, can you phrase that in the form of a question?"

"You're going home," Audra said, and all at once, the night seemed a little darker. "You're leaving her. You just said you thought you were in love with her and now...you've only got four more days and then it's over."

"Um, Audra, I don't know where I'll be in four days, but I guarantee, wherever it is, it'll have a phone and an instant messenger. Besides which, I'm seriously considering asking Koi to come home with me. It'll piss my dad off something fierce--leaving aside entirely where we met and the whole slipping-his-financial-shackles issues, my dad has a major anti-interracial thing. But screw that. Love is love, right? It doesn't happen to everyone, and it deserves a chance."

Audra could feel an itching at the back of her neck. She turned and found the Griffin staring at her. She blushed and faced the courtyard again.

"Here we go!" Virgil scrambled out of the hole, thrust the smallish chest he'd excavated into Audra's hands, and began filling in the evidence of their nighttime excursion. "Open it!"

Audra picked up his discarded trowel and stabbed awkwardly at the rusted lock. It gave easily, and she moved toward the dining hall windows. The lights inside were minimal--the kitchens weren't really open at this hour, although there was always coffee and a few cookies laid out for guests--but there was light enough to catch an object if it were slanted just right and someone really wanted to look at it. Audra glanced toward the Rotunda one last time, but Virgil and Jenna had already replaced the potting soil and were busily replanting the garden they'd disturbed. They were mere moments away from not needing to explain anything anyway and there was no one in sight. She opened the chest and took out the flat square of porcelain that was its only cargo.

At first glance, she could easily see the final quadrant of the map, deeply-etched and well-preserved, and her pulse quickened. Closer inspection showed her the coastline, rocky shoals, and other topographical clues. Audra ran her eyes painstakingly over all of these, her heart slowly sinking. "Guys?"

"Where did this go?"

"I don't know, just put it anywhere. It's not a car, Virge, it doesn't need to go exactly back where it was to work. And talk nicely to it. Plants need encouragement when they've been uprooted."

"Guys?" Audra said again, her voice breaking slightly.

"Plants...need encouragement."

"It's a documented fact! Just do it, okay? Nice plant. You recover from this and be all big and strong, now."

"Guys!"

Silence.

Plants rustled and then Jenna and Virgil both stepped out onto the garden path and came to the window.

"What is it?" Jenna asked, and Audra could hear the Griffin, barely restrained and braced for bad

news, in the undertones of her friend's voice. "Isn't it the right map?"

"It's the right map all right." Audra held it up for them to see, turning it with trembling fingers to catch the light. "But there's no X."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

**** X Marks the Plot ****

Never in her wildest, most pessimistic dreams could Audra have imagined this outcome. That someone might have gotten to the treasure first, yes--one of the pirates who put it there might have come back for it, or perhaps a developer stumbled over it while building the resort. But that DeGuarre's first mate might have set up this cruel twist, stringing his own Captain along over the length and breadth of the island only to snatch the promise of treasure away at the last minute like Lucy with a football? No, not even Audra could have predicted such a rotten trick.

She went back to the Overseer's apartment in a daze and put herself to bed. Her bed, not his. There, in the stillness of her disappointment and the loneliness of the empty room, the tears finally came. It had all been for nothing. She cried herself to a bitter, dreamless sleep.

She woke to a hand on her shoulder and opened her eyes to see Philippe's face, furrowed with concern. Still half-asleep and lost in her own unhappiness, Audra slung her arms around his neck and let him carry her to his bed. There, she let him remind her again and again what real treasure was.

The second time she stirred, it was the light of day streaming under her eyelids that woke her. The Overseer was lying beside her, holding her against him, watching her. She kissed him, morning mouth and all, until he moved over her and she could let the weight and warmth and reality of him supplant the clinging loss of gold. 'Real treasure,' she told herself, as she climbed again to the pinnacle of pleasure. 'Real treasure is here.'

And she was losing that, too.

But she couldn't tell him about that pain, and he would not allow her to hide in mute disappointment. He saw that she was showered and dressed, and

then, to her bleak amusement, he insisted on sitting for his portrait.

She had been painting for exactly five days. Landscapes and clumsy still-lives were about her limit, and they were never going to hang in the Louvre, but she gave it her best effort. She focused on just his head and shoulders, filling her canvas, emphasizing the sheer size of him so that he could dominate any wall she hung it on. She didn't have to worry about hair, and she didn't bother with a background, but it was still a difficult painting. The only thing she truly felt she captured was his eyes--dark as night and sharp as razors, able to pierce right through flesh to read the heart of her.

The rest of his features translated less well to canvas, but at least while she was concentrating on that, she wasn't wallowing in despair. She painted, losing herself to Time in the quest for the perfect black man's flesh tone. How long she sat there, she didn't know, but she was roused at last by the ringing of the phone.

"I need to answer that," the Overseer said apologetically.

"Go ahead." She leaned back as far as she could, hoping that the distance of her arm could magically enable her to capture the symmetry of his face. It wasn't helping. "I think I'm done with the sitting part."

He touched her arm in passing and went to the telephone. She heard him speak his name, and then he was holding out the handset to her. "It's for you."

"It is?" Audra gave the portrait's left cheekbone a few more desperate dabs and then gave up and went to take the phone from him. "Hello?"

"Are you coming over?" Virgil's voice, hopeful.

Audra sighed, running her fingers listlessly through her hair. "What for?" she asked, dimly aware that her despondent tone had attracted the Overseer's attention. "We failed, didn't we? The joke's on us. It's over."

"I don't believe DeGuarre's first mate would pull something like this," Virgil insisted. "It has to be another clue...just a tougher one. I'm running the spectrum analyzer over it now."

Audra could feel her soul wanting to rise in response to the yearning optimism in Virgil's voice, but she simply didn't have the emotional energy. "I don't have much time left," she told him. "I'd never forgive myself if I...." She kept her eyes stubbornly on the far wall, denying herself the treacherous comfort of looking toward the man who was, for four more precious days, her Master. "...if I wasted it."

"Neither could I," Virgil said urgently. "That's why I can't give up yet. But I don't know if I can trust just my own eyes. Come on, Audra. I've...I've never been much good without you guys."

Audra closed her eyes. "Okay," she said, and sighed. "Okay, I'm coming. I'll be there in a few minutes." She hung up, but then only stood there, her hand still on the phone. "I have to go," she said.

"I see."

She didn't meet his gaze, although she could feel his eyes burning into her. His all-seeing eyes. "You could order me to stay," she suggested.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because...." Her voice became a trembling ghost of itself. "Because you want to be with me?"

"I do." He rose and came to her, closing his arms around her, touching his cheek to hers. "But so, it would seem, do your friends. This is not a contest wherein we compete for your attention. There is time enough for all of us."

"No, there isn't!" Audra turned blindly into his embrace, hugging him closer, tighter. "There isn't enough time at all! Four days is not enough time!"

"It does not need to end at four," he told her. He must have sensed the subtle tensing of her back, the tightening of her hands, the shiver that

ran down her spine, because he laughed softly and rocked her in his arms. "Ah, my Pearl, is *that* what lay beneath this black mood? Did I not tell you I could not spank a woman I did not care for? Do you think I value my emotions so lightly? Let alone, my lovers! My Pearl, my precious one, did you think I would put you on a boat at season's end and watch you sail away?"

"You didn't ask me to stay," Audra whispered, her voice muffled against his chest.

"Never. I would not risk giving such invitations while I was yet your Master. There are some things that should never be heard as commands. But rest assured, had you left, I would have followed. I love you, Audra Morley. I would not let you go so easily."

A moment ago, she'd been on the cusp of despair, and in the next instant, she'd been overcome by relief. Now, her mind was spinning with joy, and the storm of unbridled emotion left her nearly in tears. "I love you, too," she whispered. "I do."

"Now," he murmured, stroking her brow free of stray hairs. "Now do you have time for your friends?"

She nodded, wiping at her brimming eyes, unable to stop smiling. "Thank you."

"It is a very good thing I am not a jealous man," he remarked, releasing her. "Even an hour away from you is too much, but patience is a virtue." He watched her clean her brushes and put away her paints. "Someday, you will have to tell me what this vacation has truly been about. I suspect it will be a story for quite a special occasion. Christmas, or an anniversary, perhaps."

"The birth of our third child," Audra said absently, thinking of the day DeGuarre's first mate had presented him with that fateful first piece of map.

"Madam, is that a proposal?" The Overseer, grinning broadly, caught Audra's hand and pressed

it to his lips as she stammered for a reply. "Very well, I accept, but I warn you, I do not approve of long engagements."

"That--That wasn't what I--! It--!" She trailed off, blinking rapidly. He was still smiling at her, one brow cocked as he waited for her arguments, and it occurred to her that she didn't want to argue. She didn't even want to take it back. She began to smile in return, amazed at herself.

"We'll discuss this better when you return," he told her, and kissed her hand again. "Do give my greetings to Claymore and the Griffin."

Audra could hear whooping and cheering while she was still thirty feet from Virgil's door. Her pace quickened unconsciously as she realized that the noise really was coming from Virgil's cabin. Her pulse picked up and even the sky seemed bluer; there were only two reasons she could imagine her friends wildly celebrating. Either they'd gotten smashing drunk in a very short space of time, or Virgil's investigations had found something.

She knocked, her heart in her throat, and Virgil pulled the door open at once. He seized her by the shoulders, his face crazed with joy, and shouted, "*Qapla'!*"

Audra had known Virgil for seven years, and even if that didn't make her fluent in the Klingon language, it was enough for her to translate 'Success!' without hesitation. She grabbed his arms for support so that she could hop with excitement. "The spectrum analyzer found something!" she cried.

"No!" he shouted, still grinning. "Total waste of time and money bringing that heavy-ass thing along! I'm going to plant an axe in it the instant I get home!"

"By Jove, I am not covetous for gold!" the Griffin roared from the room beyond. "Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost! It yearns me not if men my

garments wear; such outward things dwell not in my desires but if it be a sin to covet DeGuarre's goddamn riddling bunch of treasure--"

Audra turned all her bafflement in a single expression on Virgil. "Then what's going on?"

"Qapla'!" Virgil cried, shaking both fists in the air. "That's what's going on! Come in, come in! Look at what Benny found!"

What...Benny found?

Audra followed him inside, her eyes seeking the bronze-skinned muscle boy that was now Griffin's Pet. He was kneeling on the floor, looking incongruously miserable in the midst of all the leaping, dancing, and Klingon war-cries. Audra made her way over to him and lowered herself gingerly to the floor.

"Hi, Benny," she said, feeling an absurd compulsion to be gentle.

He looked at her. Around them, Virgil was still cheering in Klingon, Koi was pouring champagne, and Griffin was still mangling Henry V, and Bennu's eerie quiet was deeply disturbing. His eyes were haunted, his face mirroring an inner turmoil so obvious Audra couldn't believe no one else had noticed it.

"She's so good to me," said Bennu.

"Who?"

He silently looked at the Griffin for answer.

"Then I will raise my skirt and show my scars," Griffin was proclaiming, her champagne raised high. "And say, 'These wounds I had on Tesoro!' Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, but I'll remember, with advantages, what feats we did that day! Then shall our names be familiar in their mouths as household words--Claymore the Bold, Precious Pearl, Koi the...Fish!"

Bennu sighed and looked down at his knees, then up at Audra again. "She said she'd give me a full fifth share!" he said plaintively.

"She will," Audra said, surprised.

Bennu shook his head, looking frustrated and flushed. "I can't handle my own money," he said.

"I'm sure she'll help you get a good accountant," Audra assured him, still mystified.

Bennu only shook his head again, looking more unhappy than ever. "She's so good to me," he whispered.

"From this day to the ending of the world, we in it shall be remembered!" the Griffin proclaimed. "We few! We happy few! We band of spank-happy brothers! For he or she today that digs for gold with me shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile!"

Bennu shivered and looked at Griffin as though stung.

"Yeah, yeah, Shakespeare got the mad goatz," Virgil said impatiently. "Benny, show Audra what you showed us!"

"I didn't do anything, really," Bennu said, rising to his feet. He picked up all four pieces of the map and laid them out on the table for Audra, fitting them together to form the whole island. "All I did was point out there was still one X on the map."

"Where?" Audra asked, leaning closer. Everyone around her had closed in and hushed, but she could feel their excitement building, waiting to explode out of them again. So something had to be there. She could see only four slabs of porcelain, four quarters that formed one whole, each piece neatly interconnected to the others. "Where is it? I don't see a--"

Bennu placed his hands over the entire map and tilted it forty-five degrees to the left. The right-angle edges of each quarter map, now slanted, ceased to be mere lines running through Tesoro and instead became....

"--an X," Audra breathed, her eyes growing huge. Each piece of the map had been slightly chipped at that innermost corner, nothing too noticeable, nothing damaging to the whole, but at this angle, those four 'chips' now formed a short-armed cross that could only have been chiseled

deliberately. It was real. It was true. It was an X. "Oh...Oh my *gosh!*" She looked up fast, her eyes flying from Virgil to Jenna, even to Koi and Bennu, unable to contain herself. "Do you think?" she stammered. "I mean...gosh, after all this, do you really think?"

"I don't know if I think or not," Virgil answered. "But I know I've got one more dig left in me."

"Well, I do think," Jenna countered. "And I think we're going to need a plan. Everyone on this island is milling around trying to get in their last-minute open-air spankings. We're going to attract something of a crowd if we go galloping off into the jungle with all this junk."

"I'm not waiting for nightfall," Virgil argued. "We've got to dig, we've got to haul the treasure out to the coast--which means taking it a good mile overland through the trees or three miles on the trails--and then we've got to sail out to Isla de los Murciélagos de Asesino and bury it again. And I don't know how much booty you can schlep around at one time, but even one chest of gold is going to take us several trips. We don't have enough time to just sit around and wait for dark!"

"We need a distraction," Audra said. "And this time, it's not going to be me!"

"I'll do it!" Koi declared, raising and waving her hand wildly as she bounced up and down on her heels. "I'll make a distraction, and I'll rent us a boat, too! I can sail a boat! I've done it lots of times and only crashed twice!"

"Right, you get the boat." Virgil hunched over the four joined maps, frowning. He tapped the northern coastline. "Bring it...here-ish. That looks like the least amount of walking for us to do and there aren't usually too many people wandering around up there. As for the X...where's my surveyor's sight? Baby, where'd I put my tripod-things with the paper towel tubes on it?"

"It's in the bedroom, remember?"

Virgil glanced at Audra and Griffin and blushed slightly. "Oh yeah. Okay, Koi, go get the boat!" He slunk into the bedroom.

Koi ran to the cabin door, scooping up a Hello Kitty purse on the fly as she passed it, and then paused with her hand on the doorknob. "Wait for my signal before you leave the cabin!" she said urgently. "You'll know it when you hear it!" And then she had slammed out and was rushing away.

"Know it when we hear it?" Audra echoed.

"I'm still mulling over that 'only crashed twice' bit," Griffin replied. "But okay, just for giggles, let's all pretend she has the situation well in hand. How we coming along on that surveyor's sight, Claymore?"

"Got it! I just need to get the...thing off the...other thing...There!" He came triumphantly back into the front room, peering through the crossed bars of the paper towel tubes one at a time. "Looks good." He picked up his duffel bag and slung it over one shoulder. "I'm ready!"

"Wait for the signal." The Griffin was comparing the porcelain maps with the aerial shot of the island from Tesoro's brochure. "What are we going by once we're out there? We ought to be able to see the falls from the artisan wells on this side, but we'll need at least one other point of reference."

Virgil and Jenna went into huddles, muttering down at the map. There wasn't really enough room for one more person crowding in around the table, so despite her eagerness to be in on the planning stage, Audra withdrew. After a second or two, she remembered Bennu and looked around for him.

He had retreated to a chair near the cabin window and was peeking around the curtain, watching the island bustle as he waited to be noticed. When Audra sat down to join him, he let the curtain drop and put his hands on his knees. He did not meet her gaze.

"Good eye," Audra said suddenly, after several long-seeming moments of silence. "Spotting that X, I mean."

"Thank you," Bennu said listlessly. And then, his face darkened and he said in a low, furious rush, "I wish I hadn't seen it at all!"

Audra rocked back, astonished. "Why?"

He only shrugged one shoulder and pressed his lips tightly together. Further efforts at coaxing him into conversation only fell flat, and eventually, Audra stopped trying.

"That ought to work!" Virgil declared from across the room. He carefully marked an X in ink on the brochure, rolled it up and slipped it into the duffel bag, and then packed up all four pieces of porcelain map for good measure. "Let's go!"

"We're still waiting for the signal," Griffin argued.

"What signal?"

"We'll know it when we hear it," Audra told him.

A sudden shrill beeping went off deafeningly over their heads. All four of them instantly slapped their hands protectively over their heads, and Virgil even fell down as his body democratically voted to flee the scene without informing his feet. One by one, they each managed to stare into the onslaught of sound long enough to determine that it was coming from the smoke detector on the ceiling.

They looked at each other.

"That would be the signal!" Griffin yelled. "Let's go!"

They exited the cabin in an orderly fashion into a milling mob of confused guests. Audra heard someone say, "Is that smoke?" and then most of the sea of humanity began to draw off toward the courtyard where, sure enough, thin ribbons of smoke were unreeling through the dining hall doors.

"Oh, nice distraction," Griffin growled. "Set the building on fire!"

"Brilliant," Virgil said. He was grinning as he took Audra's hand. "Couldn't have planned it better myself! Let's go get us some gold!"

In the growing commotion down by the dining hall, no one seemed to notice the four of them moving away from the resort and into the jungle. There were a few people on the hiking trails, but all of them were running towards the sounds of the fire alarm, and it was a simple matter to hide behind the trees until the trail was clear. Audra and the others trusted to Virgil and his uncanny sense of direction as they moved off the trails and struggled through the lush jungleland, but their pace never slackened.

Audra lagged further and further behind, stumbling whenever her attention left her feet. Her cheeks burning, she looked up from her legs to see the Griffin striding toward her with a determined look on her face. Audra felt her chest constrict, but before she could even begin to beg for inclusion, Jenna had turned and dropped to one knee. "Hop on for the Griffin Express," she offered, and Audra got a piggy-back ride for the first time since she was eight years old.

She bounced along on the Griffin's back as Jenna ran to catch up with the others, and came out into a tightly-overgrown clearing. Virgil was standing very near its center, the brochure's aerial photograph in his hands, staring through his home-made surveyor's sight. Audra slid onto her own feet, her hands rising to knot beneath her chin, her breath catching in her throat. She didn't think her heart so much as beat until she heard Virgil say, "This is the place. Break out the shovels."

"We're not that far from the hiking trails," Griffin observed. "No one can see us, but I bet they could hear us if they happened by. It'd be a good idea to post a lookout while we're down there digging."

"Oh, come on!" Audra whined, even before anyone turned to look at her. "I want to be useful at least once!"

"Being a lookout is very useful," the Griffin said dangerously, her brows drawing together.

"Oh yeah? You show me one line in Shakespeare's funny speech where the king-guy sang the praises of the damn lookout!"

"I'll do it," Bennu said.

All three of them turned and stared at him.

"That way," he said, dropping his eyes and flushing, "if I need to run in here and tell you guys to be quiet, I, um, can."

No one looked at Audra. She felt heat climbing in her cheeks. "Good point," she said dully.

"Okay." Jenna reached out and gave Bennu's shoulder a squeeze. "Good man, Benny. You go be lookout, and we'll dig. I'll come and get you when we find something."

Audra went wordlessly and started pulling bushes and vines from the place they needed to dig. Bennu stood a moment longer, until Virgil's shovel took its first bite out of the earth and Jenna swung into rhythm with a pick. He took two steps back, then said, "You've been very good to me, Mistress."

As Jenna looked around, her forehead puckering with confusion, Bennu turned around and speedily retreated. "Nice guy," she said finally, returning to her work. "A little vague, maybe...but a nice guy."

The hole was five feet deep, almost twice what any hole had been before this, and Audra was beginning to wonder just when someone was going to ask Virgil to double-check his sights when Jenna's pick drove through the sandy soil and buried itself unmistakably in wood.

THUNK.

All three of them froze, staring down at the place where Jenna's pick met the ground. Slowly, they began to react--Audra emptied her bucket and passed it back down, Virgil used the blade of his shovel to start scraping rather than digging, and Jenna wrenched her pick out of the ground again.

There was a large splinter stuck to the tip, and beneath Virgil's shovel, the rounded wooden top of a very large chest was steadily being exposed.

"I don't believe it," Jenna breathed. She took the splinter between her fingers as though it were something precious and not just a rotten chunk of wood, and held it up to the light in awe. "I don't believe it. We found it."

"There's another one," Virgil said, his voice cracking.

Audra and Jenna whirled, and sure enough, his shovel had scraped down close enough to show a clear line of separation between the chest that Jenna was standing on and yet another curved wooden lid. Audra sat excitedly on the lip of the hole and slid down, landing on her knees and digging at the sandy earth with her bare hands.

"Here's another one!" she cried, after only a few seconds.

"I think this is one, too," Jenna gasped, and actually staggered against the side of the hole. "Holy cow, I think I'm going to faint!"

"We need to widen the hole! Audra, get out! We need to dig this out, like, clear to there! There's five...there's six chests down here!"

"I need to see it," the Griffin said suddenly, viciously. She raised her pick over her head, her raptor's eyes bright as twin suns. "Get out of the way, guys! I have got to see it, and so help me, if there's a giant stone riddle in here--"

The pick drove down, making dirt and sandy pebbles jump from the top of the chest as it hit. She yanked back, swung again, and again, and then the lid broke open as ancient wooden planks splintered and went flying. Jenna dropped to her hands and knees at once, the pick thumping to one side. She bent low, reaching into the hole she'd put in the top of the chest.

Once again, Audra held her breath....

...and released it with a gasping tea-kettle shriek as Jenna sat up, spilling gold coins in streams from between her fingers.

"I *am* going to faint," Jenna whispered, sounding surprised, and she sagged against the wall of the hole, staring at her hand. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph...I can't feel my lips." She craned her neck, letting the doubloons drop back into the broken chest, and hollered, "Benny! I've got to go get him," she explained to the others, still platter-eyed and pale, and tried to get to her feet. "Benny! He...there's so many of them!...He needs to see this, too. Benny! God, Koi's going to spontaneously combust! Ben--"

"Stop shouting," a woman said coldly. "He's right here. Say something, 'Benny'."

The crisp rapport of a slap sounded and then a male yelp, cut short.

The three of them stared at each other for a split-second, assimilating what they had heard, the elation of the moment vanished in an instant and replaced with the terror of discovery. Then, a scramble of motion and thudding--Virgil dropping his shovel, Griffin grabbing her pick--and they all three straightened up and poked their heads out of the hole.

Isis was standing in the clearing, masked and faceless, her teeth bared in a snarling grin of victory. In one gloved hand, she had a handful of Bennu's hair, pulling him into a graceless bow. In the other, she had a common kitchen knife.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

**** Unmasking At Midnight; Games to Follow ****

It was amazing how quickly one could forget about standing on chests of pirate gold when one was staring at a crazy masked lady with a knife. Even if Audra weren't afflicted with aphasic neuropathy, she didn't think she could possibly be less aware of what her feet were doing. The only thing her eyes could seem to bring in sharp focus was the knife. It wasn't that it was such a big knife, really, but she supposed it was big enough.

"Hands up, all three of you," Isis said, and tickled a thin drop of bright red blood from the side of Bennu's neck. "Especially you," she sneered, narrowing her eyes at Audra. "I want to see your hands open wide."

Audra obeyed unthinkingly, seeing only the knife at Bennu's throat, and it wasn't until her hands were raised that she realized Isis really wanted to see the panic button on her ring and make sure that it remained unpressed.

"I know you," said Virgil, his head tipping distractedly to one side.

"Benny, relax," the Griffin said, her eyes locked on Isis and her fists tightening on the handle of her pick. "Just be calm. I'm going to get you out of this, I promise."

"You're going to get him out of this," Isis echoed, and uttered an angry laugh utterly devoid of humor. "Let's see now, it was three...no, four days ago that he whipped blood from the backs of your thighs and rubbed hot pepper oil on them. Now you're going to ride to his rescue. I don't know if I'd call that gallant or just plain pathetic."

"You can call it anything you goddamn well please," the Griffin countered softly. "I remember everything ever done to me. I remember every insult. And I know my enemy." Her gaze never

wavered; her gold eyes never closed for even an instant.

The mocking smile Isis wore faltered. She took a half-step back, dragging Bennu with her. "Your enemy," she repeated. She tried to laugh again, but it was a thin effort at best. "I have never met anyone so woefully obsessed in maintaining their own cheap mythos! Your enemy! You do know you're not a real griffin, don't you? Or did you get lost trying to find the Furry island resort?"

"I'm sure I know that voice," Virgil muttered. He was squinting, his hands lowering slowly as he concentrated.

"Lady, you've got one chance and one alone to do right," the Griffin growled. Fury was coming off her in radiant waves, something that could be almost seen and smelled. "Let Benny go and back away. You and I can have us a little private party all you want, but you leave him out of this, or I will bury you." She spoke the last four words very quietly, very clearly, hammering meaning into them with the murderous stillness of her posture.

"You," Isis snorted. She tossed her head, pressing the point of the knife a little harder into Bennu's flesh. The drop of blood became a trickle. "What is it with you, you vicious little bitch?! Your will should have been pudding by now! I had you for days! I had you for a whole week!"

"I know I know you," Virgil continued.

"Of course you know me, you moron!" Isis screamed suddenly. She let go of Bennu's hair long enough to rip the mask off her face and throw it on the ground. "You've seen me every damn day for three years!"

"Madeleine Withens?" Virgil said, his face opening up in surprise. To Audra, he added, "She's from the Authentication Department at U-Dub, too!"

"Small world," Audra said faintly.

"God, I can't believe how thick you are, you...you sniveling little geek!" Isis--Madeleine shouted. "And you! Drop that pickaxe right now

before I lose my sense of humor! Ten minutes," she continued, as the Griffin reluctantly threw the pick to one side of the hole. "That box of bas reliefs was supposed to have been mine, but there was a long line at the ATM and too much traffic, and I was *ten minutes* late getting back to the bastard who owned them and he just couldn't wait! So you got them! *You!* And I had to walk by your damn desk every day and see you using the map of DeGuarre as a god-damn PAPERWEIGHT!"

"If you had any balls, you'd have stolen it," the Griffin snapped.

"Shut up!" Madeleine thrust the knife back under Bennu's throat. "I didn't need balls, I had brains! And I didn't need to steal the map! I just took a few simple pictures one night, and he was none the wiser, the bug-eyed idiot! And while *he* was content to sit there and let the map gather dust on the corner of his desk, I was comparing maps. It didn't take long for me to realize that Tesoro was my island! The Overseer--" She made the name as ugly as she possibly could, her knuckles whitening on the handle of her knife. "---wouldn't let me come here on a simple treasure hunt. He wouldn't even let me come here as a historical researcher! And do you know what it *costs* to buy a season at this fucking resort?! Who has that kind of money?"

The incredulous class-outrage Madeleine was exhibiting would have been funny under other circumstances. As it was, not one of them could bring themselves to commiserate.

"I spent the next *three years* cozying up to your thick-headed, inbred brother," Madeleine spat, glaring at Virgil. "Three years letting him slobber all over me, three years of him telling me he loved me and buying me pointless little presents! Three years of batting my eyelashes and acting coy and playing patty-cake with stupid little toy slappers, all so I could get him to bring me to Tesoro! We had to register nine months in advance! And then what

does he do? *WHAT does he do?!?*" she shrieked, spittle flying from her lips.

"He died," Virgil said softly.

"*HE DIED!*" Madeleine slashed at the air, throwing Bennu to the ground and advancing on the hole where the three of them stood neck-deep, the knife shaking in her fist. "What kind of freakish little *bastard* dies of a heart-attack at twenty-nine?!" she demanded.

"The kind that has to live with my father," Virgil said with a sigh.

"You stole my tickets," Madeleine snarled. "You stole my map, and now you're trying to steal my treasure! But this is where it ends, Claymore! Start bagging that gold! Now!"

"We didn't bring any bags," Bennu began hesitantly.

Madeleine swung on him fast enough to make her hair fan out straight behind her. "I wasn't talking to you!" she screamed, and punched him in the side of the head.

"Hey!" Griffin roared. "No one hits that man but me!"

Audra didn't even see Jenna's hands touch the lip of the hole. To her startled eyes, it seemed that Griffin had simply exploded from the pit, executing a five-foot leap from a dead standstill. She crashed into Madeleine, driving them both to the ground, and grappled for control of the knife, yelling, "Run, Benny! Get help!"

"Get her off me!" Madeleine gasped, clawing at the Griffin's face.

Bennu got to his feet and stumbled back a pace. His gaze fell on Griffin's pickaxe. He stooped and got hold of it.

"Run!" Audra hissed. She made a fist and thumbed frantically at her panic button, wishing it buzzed or lit up or did anything at all to prove that someone somewhere knew she was in trouble. "Run, Benny!"

He looked at her, agonized. "I can't!"

"It's okay," she said desperately. Now was the worst possible time in the world that Bennu could decide to stand heroically and defend the Griffin. She tried to smile encouragement; the effect felt ghastly, like a death-mask. "She wants you to run!"

"It's not her," Bennu said. He turned the pick in his hand so that he held it handle-up, like a baseball bat. And then he took two jerky steps forward and swung, striking the Griffin square in the middle of her back.

Jenna cried out and Madeleine threw her easily to one side and scrambled to her feet.

"There were three tickets, you moron," Madeleine said scornfully. She recovered her knife as Jenna rolled onto her side and stared up at Bennu. "Barnabus, me...and 'Benny' makes three! But I'm afraid you just lost your freedom points with that little stunt. Lay her out, Jack."

Bennu took an automatic step forward, and raised the handle of the pickaxe again.

Jenna didn't move. She didn't even raise a hand to defend herself. "He won't do it," she said. She wasn't commanding and she wasn't begging. She was stating a simple fact, and doing it with all the confidence of a woman who had never known betrayal. "He won't."

"Simpleton," Madeleine said, smirking. "I don't know how you lasted with me as long as you did, but *he* was Jell-O after only two days! Jack!"

He swung, half-heartedly perhaps, but it was enough.

Jenna never flinched. It was as though she couldn't believe, even looking right up at him, that he would really do it. The handle of the pickaxe cracked into the side of her head, not as hard as it could have, but hard enough. Jenna was thrown onto her side, her eyes shut and mouth hanging open, a thin ribbon of blood unspooling from a slow purpling bruise.

"You bastard!" Virgil screamed, his voice raw. He scrabbled at the sides of the pit, only managing to pull great handfuls of dirt and sand on top of him in his efforts to get at Bennu. "She trusted you! She trusted you!"

The pickaxe fell from Bennu's limp hands. He stared back at Virgil and Audra with hollow-eyed unhappiness and said nothing.

"Pick up your shovel," Madeleine commanded, recovering her knife. "And start digging out those chests."

"I'm not helping you!" Virgil spat.

"Suit yourself." Madeleine pushed her foot under Jenna's shoulder and flipped her onto her back, then showed Virgil the edge of her knife. "But I'll just have to give you something to bury if you don't. Give me your ring," Madeleine ordered, her gaze falling on Audra again. "Don't even try to get cute with it."

Audra had already gotten cute with it. She pinched it off now, elaborately showing Madeleine that her fingers were nowhere near the panic button's cabochon as she did so, and tossed it at the other woman's feet. "I have only one question," she said, quite calmly, all things considered.

"What?" Madeleine asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Are you going to let us go when we get the gold out for you?" In the back of her mind, Audra could hear the Griffin's whisper: 'Watch the eyes. The eyes will always lie first. Watch the eyes.'

She was watching, and she didn't need to hear the lie catch up with Madeleine's lips. Audra nodded, took a deep breath to stabilize herself, and then turned to Virgil and said, "Pick up your shovel, Virge. Start digging."

He'd been watching, too, apparently. Already white-faced and shaking with anger, he turned a look of shock on Audra. "She's going to kill us!" he hissed.

She smiled at him, derailing the storm of his emotion at once. He calmed before her eyes, his face still pale, dubious before her serene example, but unquestioning. "I need you to trust me," she said.

"No tricks!" Madeleine said, her eyes darting from one to the other of them.

"Bend down," Audra said evenly. "Pick up your shovel."

Virgil's gaze slid to Jenna, lying in the dirt. He pressed his lips together and bent to get the shovel.

Audra moved at once. 'It's just like the old stepping block in physical therapy,' she told herself, planting one foot in the middle of Virgil's back. 'Just alley-oop and out you go!' She didn't even look at her legs. Either they'd work or they wouldn't, and in any event, she only had one shot at this. She aimed herself at Madeleine and bounded up and out of the pit.

Madeleine yelled for the man she called Jack, but Virgil was yelling, too, and Audra just had to trust that the boys could duke it out without her. She had her hands plenty full as it was, and this shiny leather suit Madeleine was wearing was really slippery.

Audra fought, punching as hard and as fast as she could at Madeleine's face, closing Madeleine's hate-crazed eyes with her fists. She straddled the other woman's chest, bringing her numb legs up to restrain Madeleine's arms. She could feel bubbles popping all along her thigh, and it made her think wistfully of the champagne back in Virgil's cabin, and how happy they'd all been.

"Just run, Virgil!" she called, still struggling to pin the screaming woman beneath her. "Grab Jenna and get out of here!"

"Gggguggh!" Virgil replied.

Audra risked a glance over her shoulder and saw that Bennu, or Jack, or whoever he was, was steadily and efficiently wrapping the handle of the shovel around Virgil's neck. Virgil was pushing

against the shovel with one hand; with the other, he was pulling Bennu's hair. Audra sighed, wincing as much as she dared while still grappling with her own crazed wrestling partner. He might not be scrawny little Virgil anymore, but that didn't necessarily make him useful in a fight. Still, he was tenacious. You had to give him that.

Audra grabbed Madeleine's knife hand in both of hers and began to beat it against the ground, ignoring the whole rest of the bucking, screeching woman in favor of disarming her. In that distracted, detached corner of her mind where thoughts were still circulating, the idea came to her that she must look a lot like she was trying to throttle a sock puppet, and she came over all giggly.

The laughter had a galvanizing effect on Madeleine. Her eyes bugged out, her face drained of color, and her mouth stretched in a raw shriek, and she actually let go of the knife and surged up off the ground, throwing Audra before her and wrapping her hands around Audra's throat.

'Sock puppet's revenge!' thought Audra disjointedly as she slammed into the ground, and the giggles kept coming, even broken as they were by the whole strangling-her thing that Madeleine was doing.

Jenna groaned, and from the corner of her eye, Audra saw the Griffin push herself up onto her elbows and rub at her head.

Audra's heart soared, and she grinned fiercely up at the woman who was killing her. "You're going to get it now!" she said, or would have said, if she'd had any oxygen.

Jenna staggered to her feet, looked blearily around the clearing, and focused on Benny and Virgil. Her head came up, her shoulders squared, and that hunter's stillness dropped over her again. She held out her hand. "Drop it, Benny," she said quietly.

Madeleine's grip slackened, letting Audra whoop in precious air, and she twisted around to watch in horror as Bennu slowly relaxed his hold on the shovel. Virgil slid down the other man's abs like a toddler on a bumpy slide, landing with a paf on the jungle floor, his legs sprawled and both hands rubbing at his throat. Jenna didn't look at him. Neither did Bennu.

"Hit her!" Madeleine screeched. "Right now, Jack! Right the fuck now!"

Jenna didn't even glance around. Her hand remained out, her palm up. The hard line of her mouth never wavered. "You got me once," she said simply. "Once is all you get. Give it here."

"I really liked you," Bennu said. His hands on the shovel's haft were trembling.

"Give yourself up," the Griffin told him. "Show me that you're sorry and I will stand up for you in court. Give it here. I'm not going to hurt you. You know that. You can trust me." Her voice dropped, became hoarse and hurt and intense. "You know I would never really hurt you."

If Audra weren't being choked, she'd have held her breath.

"No." Bennu hung his head. "No...you wouldn't." He held out the shovel.

"No!" Madeleine's hands clenched on Audra's throat again, but it seemed more of an involuntary thing and Audra couldn't really hold it against her.

The Griffin turned around, the shovel cocked at shoulder-height. "You, on the other hand," she said conversationally, and her golden eyes snapped fire. "You, I'm going to hurt." She hauled back, aiming for Madeleine's head like it was the oncoming ball in the ninth inning of the World Series.

"Hold it right there!"

To her credit, Jenna did. The shovel stayed at the apex of her wind-up swing, and she looked around, teeth bared, for the intruder.

Madeleine, on the other hand, had funny ways of translating orders that came from other people.

She sprang backwards, taking Audra with her and snatching her knife up again. She flung herself around, holding Audra before her like a living shield, her arm around Audra's neck and bunched tight. The knife she thrust before her--a heroic pose, maybe, but rather a pointless move, unless the knife could also shoot fireballs.

There were five new strangers in their midst, four men and one woman. Audra was having a little trouble placing them. She'd gotten too used to the Tesoro uniforms, she supposed. Black vests and plain pants were beginning to look weird. The guns they were holding almost made them look like cops.

Audra was feeling the urge to giggle again. It occurred to her that she could still feel bubbles on her leg, and now she was beginning to be a little lightheaded from all the strangling. Ooo, this was bad.

"Audra!"

That voice she knew. She focused with an effort, clawing at Madeleine's arm in an effort to see past the cop-people at the man pushing his way through them. The Overseer. She reached without thinking, and Madeleine slashed at her hand.

"Drop your weapons!" someone said.

The Griffin didn't move. She was staring at Madeleine again, tracking every inch that the other woman retreated.

"Is it worth going to jail for?" one of the gunmen asked.

"Yes," Griffin said quietly. Her muscles tensed, the shovel moved back a little more--

The Overseer caught it before she could swing. "No," he said simply, and Jenna showed her teeth, but let go. The Overseer let the shovel drop and took another step toward Madeleine. "This is my island," he said. "You have nowhere to go. You are threatening the most precious thing I have." He advanced again, showing no fear, no recognition of the knife or even of the other people in the clearing. He held them all motionless with the force of his will

alone, trapping Madeleine in the cold fury of his eyes. "You have made an egregious error. Do not compound it."

Madeleine only dragged Audra another step back, cinching her arm even tighter around Audra's throat. She pointed the knife at the Overseer, ignoring the more than fifteen feet between them.

"Drop it!" one of the men ordered.

The woman lifted her pistol a little higher and said, in a let's-be-reasonable-about-this kind of voice, "You've got a knife, honey. We've got guns. Do the math."

"I can see that you are not a fool," the Overseer continued calmly. His words were for Madeleine and no one else. The two of them might have been alone and far removed from this desperate little drama, in the tea room, perhaps. "I can see that you recognize the futility of your situation. Good. You have the power to uncomplicate its outcome. Give yourself up now. You cannot win...but how badly you lose is entirely up to you."

Madeleine's knife jerked from its outthrust position to prick at Audra's cheek. Audra could see it jittering in an unstable hand at the very edge of her vision for just an instant, and then Madeleine slashed at the Overseer again, despite the stretch of distance that separated them. "You're trying to confuse me!" she spat.

"No, madam. I am not." The Overseer was still walking toward her, and now that Madeleine had stopped moving backward, he was in danger of walking right into the knife's point. "The facts are very simple and the facts are these: You are on my island. There is no escape from this island. You have done injury to my guests. There is no escape from this island. You are menacing me with a lethal weapon. There is no escape from this island. You have taken my own beloved hostage. *And there is no escape from this island!*"

The edge of the knife caught the light in a steely gleam as Madeleine lowered it slightly.

"Now." The Overseer caught her wrist, but instead of disarming her, he simply pushed the knife away so that he could stand almost toe to toe with her. Audra could feel the warmth from his breath when he spoke; she could see his broad chest filling her sight. "Surrender yourself at once, madam. The power to speedily resolve this matter is yours...all other power belongs to me."

Madeleine looked from him to his security team, then to Jenna, to all of them in turn. Her whole body was heaving with every breath she took, and Audra could feel her arm tightening around her throat until she couldn't get any air at all. Her eyes were still open, but her vision began to grey out, replaced by random explosions of light, and then--

And then Audra was hurled face-first to the ground, where she lay gasping and writhing, mindless with her need for breath. The Overseer's hands were on her, pulling her against him, cradling and comforting her.

A sound was building, a screaming growing up from a growl until it ripped shards from the air itself. Audra struggled in the Overseer's arms, twisting around until she could see Madeleine, her head thrown back, her mouth gaping wide, shrieking unfairness at the face of God as she dropped in defeat to her knees.

She looked back up into the face of her Master, the screams continuing, but less important. The security people were taking Madeleine and Bennu away. She could hear Virgil insisting raspily that he was all right and someone else saying "Does this hurt?" right before Jenna yelped and slapped someone. And then, of course, she heard someone say, "What's this hole doing here? What--*Holy cornflakes extra crispy!*"...but none of that really mattered. Only one thing really mattered, and Audra was already wrapped in his arms, looking at him.

Audra smiled, reaching up to lay her hand along the side of the Overseer's face. "I have such a story to tell you," she whispered.

He smiled back at her, and that was the wonderful sight that followed her down into blackness.

Epilogue

*** *Spanks for the Memories* ***

Most of what happened next was a blur, out of which, three distinct stages of 'over' emerged.

The first was in the infirmary, where the three of them were taken (forcibly, in Jenna's case) to be seen to by all four of Tesoro's doctors. Audra supposed there really wasn't much call for actual doctoring in a typical season. The looks on their faces when the Overseer carried her in made her reach out and pat the nearest shoulder in comfort.

"It looks worse than it feels," she said, which was the truth, thanks to aphasic neuropathy.

Her wounds weren't deep, due in large part to the difficulty involved in stabbing someone who is kneeling on you, but they were numerous. She ended up with more than sixty stitches. They tickled.

Jenna had a mild concussion, which kept manifesting as memory lapses and profound irritation during her stitching procedure. After the third time she leapt up, roaring and punching, Dr. Remedy called for a security team to hold her down. It took six of them. Dr. Remedy took advantage of the period of restraint by putting in a call to the mainland hospital, after which she gave Jenna a little shot of something pink. Jenna became very relaxed after that, although she kept asking some bizarre questions at sporadic moments.

Virgil had some bruised knuckles, a bruised throat, and a broken toe, which Dr. Sage insisted on splinting for him, over his bemused protestations. "You know, I actually think I broke that last night when I stubbed my toe on the bathtub," he said. "I break toes a lot, Doctor. Ask anyone, I am a clumsy guy!"

"We're just going to be thorough," Dr. Sage replied, applying enough tape to Virgil's foot to wrap a mummy in.

"May I please have an antelope?" Jenna asked fuzzily.

"I don't like your color," Dr. Saxon told Audra. He probed gently at the thin skin around her eyelids, peering at her worriedly. "I want vitals checked on all three of them every fifteen minutes. We've already got trauma to the airway. I'd don't want to compound it with shock. Do you feel dizzy at all?"

"A little, maybe."

"She lost consciousness briefly," the Overseer informed them, as Dr. Saxon pushed Audra firmly down on the infirmary bed and placed a pillow beneath her knees.

"Yeah, now I'm really not liking her color." Dr. Saxon held up one hand for silence as he felt for Audra's pulse. After a minute or two, he looked around again, gravely concerned. "How are we handling this, Philippe?"

The other doctors grew quiet as well as the Overseer tipped his head back in thought. Audra could hear the sounds of laughter, music, spankings, and general partying happening somewhere close by in the building.

"I don't foresee an easy end to this," the Overseer said at last. "I have men guarding the find and the trails are blocked off. A call has been placed to the appropriate authorities, but...my responsibilities to my other guests requires a certain amount of tact and speed."

"Bring me," Jenna commanded, "a platter of widgets!"

"Ready the ships," the Overseer said. "And call everyone to Event Room 2. Explain there was a violent situation between guests and an arrest has been made, but that media interference is extremely likely. We're shutting down early. Issue a partial refund, say...three hundred dollars to each guest. I want the island evacuated--" He glanced at his watch. "--by three o'clock at the very latest. I don't imagine you'll run into much objection."

"With the threat of a news crew catching them in their collars and corsets?" Dr. Sage looked positively aghast. "No, I don't imagine we will."

"I am one with the hippos," Jenna muttered dourly. "And hippos *don't* care. Bastards."

Audra felt an uneasy chill settling on her and in her, filling her bones with frozen lead. She caught at the Overseer's hand, groping for words of apology. "We've ruined you," she said at last, and the sound of those three words wanted to crawl in and shatter her heart.

But Philippe was smiling when he looked down at her. "Hardly," he said.

"We have to shut down a day or two early every once in a while," Dr. Saxon added. He'd moved on to Jenna and was trying to convince her not to sing into the stethoscope. "For one reason or another. Heh. Remember that year the lady had a baby?"

"Which--? Oh, *that* lady!" Dr. Sage laughed as she put the final tabs of tape on Virgil's broken toe. "I've never seen anyone so flabbergasted in my life. She swore up and down she didn't know she was pregnant. Thought she had food poisoning!"

"We had media here for that one, too," Dr. Saxon said. He clasped Audra's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "This isn't your fault."

"It sort of is, though. Isis...I mean, Madeleine...." Virgil shook his head and rubbed at his throat. "She followed us here. She--"

"She did," the Overseer said simply. "But that is over now."

"Would somebody *please* turn off that iguana?" Jenna said waspishly.

"Rest." The Overseer bent and brushed his lips over Audra's brow, taking the weight of guilt from her soul and replacing it with drowsy warmth as if by magic. "I will handle what needs handling. Rest."

And that was the first 'over'. The second came as she slept. Tesoro's guests were packed and gone with an efficiency that any evacuating resort

should have admired, and within half an hour of their leaving, the Coast Guard showed up to drop off delegates from the American Association of Historical Resources and to take Madeleine Withens and Jack into custody. In light of Madeleine's eventual surrender, the Overseer had seen to it that lawyers were present for the return voyage. Audra suspected that the woman who had been Isis for the past three weeks did not receive hers with a whole lot of gratitude.

The team from A.A.H.R. allegedly went laughing out to see the site of supposedly "buried treasure". They were gone several hours and they weren't laughing when they came back. By the time Audra woke up from her nap in the infirmary, the news crews had arrived.

And that was the second 'over'...her vacation.

For eight hours straight, Audra, Virgil, Koi, and the Griffin fended off cameras and questions as all six of DeGuarre's treasure chests were catalogued and removed from Tesoro. There were only two things that made the ordeal remotely tolerable--Philippe's arm tight around her shoulders, and Jenna continuously correcting the journalists' grammar and historical facts. Naturally, it took all eight hours before the only truly essential question was asked: "Do you know who owns the legal rights to the treasure at this time?"

Utter stillness fell over the treasure-hunters, but the Overseer merely smiled. "Credit for the find lies with these four," he said evenly. "They came here with my full knowledge and permission, and with that agreement came full proprietary rights of their findings."

"What does that mean exactly?" the reporter pressed.

"I imagine that means they are very wealthy."

And what did that mean, exactly? Since the salvage laws for the treasure dealt with the value of the gold itself, they had an answer just as soon as the gold was weighed. 'Wealthy' meant a cashier's

check for sixty million dollars. Actually, as the official from A.A.H.R. who brought them the check informed them, their share only came to fifty-eight million, seven hundred eighty-two thousand, one hundred four dollars and six cents, but in light of the historical significance of the find, the government had elected to be generous. They were even allowed to keep one doubloon each, as a souvenir. The porcelain maps and the riddle-etched tableware, not being treasure in the strictest sense of the word, were also left in their possession, although the official hinted strongly that A.A.H.R. would be interested in purchasing them.

They only looked at him, and after a few awkward moments, he went away...map- and riddle-less. So that was over, too. Everything was over, and it was time to think about what came after.

"Sixty million," Virgil said when they were alone. "That's a nice easy split. Fifteen apiece."

"Cool," Jenna muttered, raking at her hair with her fingertips. "I still clear a good three mil."

Seeing their startled expressions, the Griffin had rolled her shoulders and elaborated. "A five-way split would have been twelve apiece. This way, I can give Be--Jack his share and still clear three million dollars."

"You're not serious," Koi ventured, but Audra and Virgil only started at each other. "He tried to kill you!"

"I can live with that," the Griffin said shortly. "But I promised him a full share and I keep my promises. It's not entirely his fault. Isis...Madeleine...whoever she was...she broke him. I don't know if I forgive him, but I don't know how responsible he was for his actions, either. And all that aside, I know I'm still responsible for what I do, and I made him a promise."

"I'll go in with you," Virgil said, and offered her a lop-sided smile. "I was only hoping to get two or

three million when all this began. This is more than I ever expected and all I really need."

"Me, too," Audra agreed. "I'm not greedy."

Koi looked at each of them in wonder, clutching her doubloon to her heart. Slowly, her eyes welled up with tears. "I wish I knew you guys when I was growing up," she said. "I never knew friends like you really existed. I'll give the guy some of my money, too. What the hell. Maybe he can use it to get some therapy."

They had been summoned to one of the staff conference rooms for the presentation of the check, and now, by unspoken agreement, the four of them gravitated to the round conference table and sat down. The chairs were plastic and the table wasn't real wood; it was a little like being back in Social Skills class with Ms. Lupe.

"Now what?" Virgil asked.

"You're going to buy a Batman comic," Jenna reminded him.

There came a sharp knock, and then the door opened to admit the Overseer. He crossed to the table and sat beside Audra, pulling a short stack of business cards from his jacket pocket, which he passed out. "This," he said firmly, "is the number of my personal financial firm. I strongly recommend you call them before you do anything else. Do not buy so much as a stick of gum until you have met with these people."

This rather ominous edict delivered, the Overseer folded his hands on the table and looked at them pleasantly. "Now what?" he wondered.

"We were just discussing that." Jenna cupped her chin in the heel of one hand. "I told Benny I'd see him at the trial, but after that...I have no idea. Funny, I know exactly what I'd do with two or three million dollars, but twelve is kind of blowing my mind just a little bit."

"One gets used to the idea," the Overseer smiled.

"I think I want to travel," Virgil announced. His arm moved to enclose Koi, who leaned into his side. "I'd like to see the places I'm always reading about at work. Maybe take a year-long cruise and see, well, everything." He brightened, looking around at Jenna. "You could come!"

Jenna slid Koi a pointed glance.

Koi snorted. "Oh come on, we're millionaires! We can afford separate rooms, for Pete's sake!"

"Heh." Jenna began to smile, almost grudgingly. "Okay, I guess. I'm going to feel like kind of a fifth wheel, but sure."

"Aw." Koi patted her back. "If it gets to be feeling too awkward, we'll buy you a nice foreign fella who doesn't speak English and looks great in a Speedo. You're coming too, right, Audra?"

"Yes." The Overseer closed his hand over Audra's and squeezed lightly. "We'll tag along. I need to start scouting locations for the new Tesoro."

"New...?" Koi's jaw dropped and she sprang up in dismay. "You're closing? Oh no!"

"Why?" Virgil asked. Guilt and horror were fighting for control of his face, and his face didn't have that much give in it in the first place.

"You have to ask?" The Griffin was scowling her remorse, since anger had always been easier for her to show than shame or sorries. "When word gets out that the lost treasure of DeGuarre was found here, this place'll be swamped with scavengers. We'll probably start seeing the first of 'em tonight."

"And I have no intention of providing them with a view of anything more than a pleasant, private resort," the Overseer concluded.

"We shut you down," Audra said. She felt numb.

"I don't think of it as closing. Merely relocating." He shrugged. "I simply don't know where yet. Don't," he added kindly as expressions of guilt settled into the faces around him. "I have some wonderful memories of building Tesoro, and I

will always have them. I am looking forward to making more."

"You're being too understanding," Jenna said suspiciously.

"If it makes you feel better, I shall augment my understanding with frequent spankings."

"Please, let me finish," Jenna responded smoothly. "You're being too understanding, Virgil."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you shouldn't repress things like that, dude, it's not healthy." Jenna leaned back in her plastic chair and folded her arms, frowning at the table. "There's something else I want to do," she said slowly. "And you don't have to go in on it with me if you don't want to, but we owe her, you know."

"Owe who?" Koi asked.

Audra didn't need prompting. With a half-smile, she said, "Ms. Lupe." For the benefit of Koi and the Overseer, she added, "Our school counselor way back when."

Virgil nodded, unsurprised. "We wouldn't be here now without her," he agreed.

"I'm going to get her a car," Jenna announced, a grin stretching her lips in a predatory smile. "A nice one. A Lexus, maybe. And a nice little card hoping she uses it to go places, 'cuz we did."

"God, you really are mean," Virgil laughed, covering his eyes. "But okay, I'm in. We'll get her vanity plates for the car that say 'Dad's Ride', so she can get just a glimmer of what it feels like to have everyone around her think she can only go so far as her father lets her."

"Right!" Koi said eagerly. "And we'll get her one of those big, hot pink fuzzy dice because they're really tacky!"

They looked at her.

"That's the spirit," Jenna said finally. She glanced at Audra and the Overseer and then stood up. "Come on, guys, let's go get packed and ready to leave."

"They've got people here that can do th--Ohhh!" Koi's eyes had tracked Jenna's gaze, and now she stood up, tugging at Virgil's arm. "Let's go pack and stuff, honey! Lots to do!"

"I'm already packed," he was saying as they towed him out the door.

Alone with the Overseer, Audra suddenly found it hard to look at him. She turned away toward the only window and looked out at the sea.. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Tell me why." He did not sound surprised by her abrupt apology. His voice was as calm as it ever was, and when Audra glanced at him, she met eyes as knowing as a mirror's. Any confession of hers would hold no mysteries for him.

"You know why," she said, rubbing at her eyes as an excuse to hide from him, from the piercing perception of her Master.

"But I will hear it from you regardless."

Of course, he would. As painful or humiliating as the admission might be, he would get the truth out of her. She looked out the window at the Caribbean sea and saw a future in which she would never again have the freedom to choose not to feel the things that hurt the most. He would never be just her lover, just her husband...some part of him would always be the Overseer. Some part of him would always be her Master.

Why then was she smiling now? Why the swelling of love and gratitude in her breast?

"We came here to deceive you," she said, opening up all the dark places in her heart for him. She looked into his unyielding eyes, and confessed all. "We disguised ourselves as your guests and came here to steal the treasure off your island. I wasn't a Submissive. I didn't even try to be...and I hurt all those people! Cowboy and Granite and Dr. Saxon! I must have made them all feel like they were doing something wrong when it was all me! And I used you, Philippe," she finished, closing her

eyes to shut out the sight of his loving smile. "I fell in love with you, and I still used you."

"In what way?"

"I asked you about those stones in the garden."

"And?"

"They were part of the treasure hunt."

"Ah."

His strong hands closed around her, lifting her out of her chair and onto his lap. He cradled her, combing through her hair and stroking her back. "My Pearl, it is wrong of me to say this, perhaps, but you are so fetching when you are feeling guilty."

She groaned and turned her face into his chest.

"As you say, you were not Submissive when you came to Tesoro. You cannot hold yourself to blame for not understanding the subtleties of a Submissive's manners. You say you hurt your former Masters. Did you do it deliberately?"

Audra started to shake her head, thought about it, and said, "Well...maybe Cowboy. A little."

"Ah." He shifted her slightly, dropping one hand to pat warningly at her hip. "You say you came to Tesoro meaning to deceive me, to steal from me. Madam, I had no idea the gold was there, so I could hardly claim to own it once it was discovered. I don't feel deceived, and I certainly don't feel victimized. What do I feel?" he mused, leaning back a little. "I feel...very proud, actually. I always knew that you and your friends were up to something, but the finding of DeGuarre's treasure could have been no little feat. I am overwhelmed with delight that my own Audra could have shared in that adventure. I can hardly wait for the birth of our third child!"

She giggled, her face still pressed into his shirt.

He patted her hip again. "So. You say that you used me. That you inquired after the stones in the garden as part of some duplicitous plot to locate gold. My dear one, I refer you to my previous statement, with the addendum that I am tickled to my very bones that I was able to contribute to the

finding of the treasure. Thank you, Audra, for including me."

"You're making it sound like I didn't do anything wrong," she complained.

"Oh, but you did," he said, and now his tones were close and severe. "When you came face to face with an armed woman, you endangered yourself. You fought her. You were injured. You could have been killed. That is the one thing you have done very wrong, and I marvel that you did not think to include it in your confession."

"Oh," Audra said lamely. "That."

She supposed it would have been just as easy to keep Isis distracted by being compliant and digging out the treasure chests. After all, the panic button had already been pressed by the time Audra had decided to leap out and fight. But Jenna had been lying there, and, well, the moment had just seemed ripe.

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty," she said now, chagrined. "I'll remember to do better the next time some knife-wielding maniac is threatening me over a pile of pirate gold." She drew back to look at him anxiously. "I can't help how sarcastic that sounds. Some things you just can't make sound serious."

"I understand." He brushed her hair from her eyes with a tenderness utterly at odds with the steel that now entered his voice. "But as I explained to your friend the Griffin, I augment my understanding with spankings."

Audra felt herself nodding, even as her whole body seemed to cringe just a little.

"I love you," he said quietly. "And I know that those moments in the jungle could not have allowed for much foresight or planning, but you must know that what you did was reckless, dangerous, and potentially deadly. It must never happen again. You are going to remember this, my Pearl. You are going to remember that it is never all right to endanger yourself."

She nodded again, taking a deep, steadying breath as she moved with his hands to lie over his lap. She could feel the rush of vertigo as the blood poured to her head; she braced her palms on the floor, her arms already aching under the weight of the rest of her body. She missed the delicate little slave-tunics of Tesoro--how easily they flipped up for moments like these--but those had gone back into the closet when the news crews showed up, and she had to suffer the awkwardness of her jeans being stripped and pulled away. Her panties went next, and then he pulled her back a little over his knee, helping her to balance and positioning her for punishment.

The first crack of his hand stung more fiercely than she remembered, but she was determined not to struggle, not to scream. She had earned this, she deserved it, and she would show her repentance and trust by accepting his just discipline. She forced her buttocks to remain relaxed, even though that only ensured more pain, and he rewarded her with more powerful swats.

Stroke after stroke fell from his hand, rocking her pliant body and stinging each nerve to sharp attention. She could almost feel her bottom reddening; her eyes were clenched shut, but she could see her world washing out in splotches of scarlet every time his hand smacked home on her bottom.

Her resolve to keep diligently silent broke open in tears after only a dozen blows. She bent her head, crying in fitful bursts like a little girl, but they were tears of penance. They left her lighter than before, cleansed and absolved; she sobbed freely, knowing that the pain was all-consuming as fire, and she would emerge at the other side purified of guilt. She never forgot the purpose of this spanking. She made herself think of the knife in that black-gloved hand, of the Overseer's voice saying, "You are threatening the most precious thing I have," and hearing the fear he must have

felt for her in those words. She would never do that to him again, she knew, feeling his hand slapping fire and forgiveness into her as one.

Her bottom began to feel stretched and swollen; every punishing swat was its own eon of torture, and Audra's whole upper body began to tighten and lock in an effort to keep her buttocks relaxed. She was keening through her tears, a high, breathy moan that escaped her clenched teeth, cut into short bursts by the blows of his hand.

The spanking was winding down. It had to be. He had tilted her hips enough to target the tender crease between her buttocks and thighs, and was concentrating his spanks on the one patch of true-sensation she had that overlapped that area. As much as it had hurt to have him spank her all over her bottom, it hurt even more to have every single blow land exactly in the same spot. Audra's last resolution--not to struggle--evaporated in less than two minutes. She began to buck and twist on his lap, dismayed at herself, but unable to endure this punishment for even one instant more.

Her struggles won her a reprieve from the sit-spot, but only so that he could lay a volley of blistering smacks on her thighs. Audra wailed and forced herself still, beating her palms on the carpet to shore up her willpower, and he returned his concentration to her sit-spot. SMACK-SMACK-SMACK!

Was that it? Audra sagged against the floor, weeping as hard as she could, her back and arms aching as they began to relax.

CRACK! One more, right across the whole of her bottom, as hard as any living woman could stand it.

She arched up with a howl of remorse, but this time, that was really the end. He brought her up and settled her on his lap, letting her moan and writhe as her burning flesh took the pressure of her weight. It hurt, it hurt more than any spanking ever had, but it was really over and now she was free of it.

She clung to his neck, and he held her, letting her cry herself out in the safety of his arms. Her bottom was still afire, amplified by the stinging aftermath, and his hand was there, rubbing and kneading at her to keep those flames high and bright. She endured these little agonies meekly at first, but soon her hand darted back to catch his wrist.

She brought his hand up in both of hers and kissed it. His hand, still burning with its own heat after her spanking. His hand, the symbol of his authority and her submission. She kissed it, and he pulled her hard against his chest and held her.

"My precious Pearl," he said, his voice tight. "I could never bury enough treasure on this island to equal what I will take away when I leave here with you. I believe I told you I abhor long engagements. If you have anyone in particular you wish to see at your wedding, you had best call them."

"They're already here," she said sleepily, drifting in the sea of trust that followed every one of his spankings. "We could go down right now and get married on the beach."

"I'm of a mind to do exactly that." He picked her up and set her gently back in her own chair, eliciting a low moan, and then stood over her, rubbing his hands together and looking out the window. "I'm certain we have something that could pass for a wedding gown, if one does not look too closely."

"One of my black tunics," Audra mumbled. She pooled her head on her arms and dozed, feeling the plastic seat beneath her slowly heating by contact with her burning bottom. "I want to be married in the uniform of my Master."

"Easily done." He went speedily to the door, then paused and looked back at her. "Anywhere on the beach?" he asked. "Do you have a preference at all?"

"Anywhere." She smiled and raised up her head to look at him, glowing inside and out. "Just draw me an X," she said, "and I'll find you."

