

# Karyn and the Crigon

By Sue Lyndon

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# Chapter 1

With outstretched arms and silky fabric pooling around her feet, Karyn stood on the sunbathed hill amidst Zertrin's wilderness. Tiny white flowers budded through the sheath of solid green weeds and grass. Today was a day for prayers of thanksgiving and Karyn would honor her family, being the only child in her father's household. The birds had begun returning from the underlands and the great beasts were out of hibernation. All was well in the Land of Zertrin.

"Thanks to Retta in Ettonelli. Thanks to Retta from the House of Wanswin in the Land of Zertrin," Karyn called to the hills.

She stood for an afternoon's time, arms outstretched in appreciation until the sun began to fragment from behind treetops of sister hills. When the prayer time ended, she fixed her dress in place with satisfaction.

Tonight there would be a great celebration in the village.

Karyn navigated through the trees and underbrush just as any skilled hunter, quickly and in silence. Deer flitted away. Woodland rodents scampered over twigs and mud. Birds zipped through the tall, thick trees.

The walls of the village appeared ahead. Decorative banners and strung up candles created an enchanting vision against the setting sun. Karyn stepped into the clearing with the intention of joining her family and friends. She was empty and spent from prayer and solitude.

"Karyn," a voice boomed from the bottom of the hill. The girl, barely a woman, looked towards the sound of horses and men riding hard in her direction. For a moment, she panicked. Perhaps they would be clothed in violet – the color of those from the Land of Holon. But these men wore red, suddenly bright in the shadows of the hills and setting sun. All was well, for they were friends.

Karyn squinted towards the slowing riders, recognizing her father in lead. His face was a mask of worry and sorrow. Before he voiced his grounds for sadness, Karyn already knew what had occurred during her absence.

"Karyn," he said. The remaining six men halted a short distance away, clearly a show of privacy. "Karyn, your grandmother has died."

"May she thrive in Ettonelli, the blessed land of after," the girl responded, hoping to alleviate her father's grief.

“No,” he said, “May she be damned to the Caves of Terr and never once invade the bodies of the living.” His voice was a snarl and he spat on the ground.

“Father, you speak of horrors! What could possibly possess you to violate the memory of your own mother?” Karyn was livid.

“Because, my dear Karyn,” he said, “your grandmother has spoken truths on her deathbed that damn the future lines of women in the House of Wanswin.”

Karyn was perplexed, her pretty face drawn in lines of grief and wonder. There were but a few terrible deeds that would lead one to the Caves of Terr. But what would damn the future lines of women?

“Father, I fear for this turn of events. What did grandmother confess?”

“She was touched by a Crigon during her days as a healer at a Zertrin outpost. She was touched by a Crigon and she lived amongst us, tainted, for all the decades after her twentieth birthday.” Her father’s horse snorted and stomped, as if it shared the outrage of its rider.

“A Crigon?” Karyn asked. Being touched by a Crigon was a touch of damnation. Those contaminated must live as outcasts in the hills and forests. Upon death, nothing could save those already damned by the Crigons from the Caves of Terr.

Before her father could answer, a four horse coach barreled up the hill. It was the locking coach, the one meant to transport prisoners or slaves. Karyn suddenly feared for her own future.

“What’s this?” she asked, looking intently at her father.

“I’m sorry, my love,” he said. “This is the only way to keep you safe.”

Strong hands pulled Karyn towards the prison coach, the village’s most intimidating guards lifting her into the air. She resisted like a wild beast, screaming and kicking with the vigor of an untamed rolabear. But it was all for not.

“Father!” Karyn screamed from behind the tiny square of bars, the only window to the outside world. “Father!”

His head bobbed in the window, his horse shuffling with alarm. “You are to remain on the Cold Top for all of your days. And though the chance will never present itself – know that you must never have a child. The line ends with you on the Cold Top.” And his head disappeared without warning, without goodbye.

Karyn screamed out, reached her fingers outside the little bars and began weeping as the prison coach peeled off and away from the village walls. She thrashed about the coach, looking

for a weakness to exploit. But it was solid. There was no way out. Come three days time, she would be forever stranded in one of the forgotten cabins on the Cold Top.

The next three days were a blur of strange landscapes accompanied by Karyn's constant nursing of her father's betrayal. The coach made haste towards the Cold Top, escorted by several armed riders. Forgotten bridges were crossed over and herds of beasts unknown were scattered about the rising plains. On the third day, Karyn awoke to the coach stopped along the edge of a great forest that was unlike anything she'd ever cast eyes upon.

She rose from the bearskin bed and banged a fist upon the door. Getryn opened it reluctantly and motioned for her to exit. Breakfast was waiting by the fire, and Karyn navigated through the hovering guards.

"Not going to try running away this morning?" asked Reten from beside the fire.

Karyn shot him a hateful look, but remained silent. Reten had been the one to catch her during her last two escape attempts, and he goaded her at every opportunity. Most of the men treated her in the same harsh manner. Even Getryn. They were missing the spring festivities and the annual mass nuptial ceremony because of this trip to the Cold Top.

"Eat quickly," Getryn said. "We'll reach the Floating Fields by morning's end."

"Getryn," said Karyn. "Could I have a minute?" She motioned away from the guards, feebly attempting to draw a former suitor away from the gathering.

Before Getryn could answer, Reten snorted and rose to his booted feet. "I guess she's not hungry this morning," he said. Karyn's face burned as she was locked inside the coach a final time. There would be no more opportunities for escape. A key would be passed through the bars just before the coach was pushed into the Floating Fields. And Karyn knew what everyone else did about these fields – they only floated up to the Cold Top. Never down to the lands of men.

There was no escaping the Cold Top. It wasn't a definitive death sentence, but it would be a lonely existence. The Cold Top wasn't nicknamed the Prison Top for no reason. It would be a frigid, misty cage without bars.

As the morning came to a close, the trees gave way to dirt and rock. The mist grew thicker, forming a suffocating, white blanket around the prison coach. Karyn pleaded to be left in the misty forest, thinking it might be better to live amongst the groups of outcasts. Reten rattled his sword against the bars to quiet her begging.

The coach finally stopped and Karyn heard the horses being unhitched. Getryn's face appeared between the bars, a blurred vision behind the hot tears pooling in her eyes.

"Getryn, please. Don't do this to me. Whatever my grandmother did, I shouldn't be punished for her mistakes."

Getryn threw the key inside. Karyn's heart broke as it clattered to the floor. "I'm sorry, Karyn. Your father insists this is the only way to keep you safe."

"Safe from what? I don't understand."

Getryn looked from side to side and moved closer. "Safe from the roaming Crigon who would have vengeance against your family. That is all I know." And then his face vanished, replaced by the haunting mist.

"Push!" a loud voice called. Karyn felt the coach moving, knowing it would tip over the rocky cliff and ride upon the Floating Fields towards the Cold Top which was cut off from all land. "Push!" the voice boomed again.

Karyn hit the floor and fumbled for the key. Perhaps she could open the door and run through the mist before she was traveling in the air. But to her horror, the key was too large for the keyhole.

"Oh, Retta, they've given me the wrong key!" she said aloud. Karyn banged against the door and shouted. They couldn't just send her to the Cold Top forever locked inside the prison coach. She would surely die.

In the next moment, the mist was moving faster and the rough pushes had ceased. The prison coach had been edged off the cliff and she was riding the current of the Floating Fields. Karyn threw the key against the wall and pulled at her long black hair in exasperation.

This was a death sentence. Wasn't it? With a quiet sob, she wondered why her father hadn't just ordered her execution. Surely that would've satisfied whatever debt her family owed the mysterious roaming Crigon. A quick, public beheading would have been preferable to a slow death inside this coach.

Karyn crawled across the wooden floor to retrieve the large key. As she fingered the metal, she thought of the key maker who mysteriously slept all day and left glows spilling from his workshop each night. The urge to peek through the cracks had taken many children to task after sneaking out of bed, for some believed the key maker was an ogre or some other unnatural creature of the woods. But one night, she'd witnessed a bit of magic that until now had seemed but a dream. After finishing a rather large key, the tiny key maker had held it with anger.

The key seemed to glow from inside the man's disfigured hands and he began to sing a strange song.

"Feed my hands and feed my hands. Oh, Horyl, I sing and I remind. For taking gift that once was solely mine. Oh, Horyl, I sing and I remind."

And then the key maker had gasped and dropped the smoking key, somehow significantly smaller than before. Karyn had run off then, never again daring to peer into the key maker's workshop.

Damn you, Getryn, she thought. You high and mighty guard of Zertrin, thinking to delay my escape from the prison coach.

Clutching the key, she sang the very song sung by the key maker all those years ago. “Feed my hands and feed my hands. Oh, Horyl, I sing and I remind. For taking gift that once was mine. Oh, Horyl, I sing and I remind.”

Before she was sure it had worked, a burning pain seared her palms. She hissed and let the key fall to the floor. It was smoking! And it was noticeably smaller.

The outside was still nothing but swirling white mist. Karyn sunk against the door with the cooling key, sorrowfully waiting for the prison coach to reach land upon the Cold Top.

#

Deep mounds of snow nearly concealed the cabin, but it was definitely there. Karyn’s feet were numb. Perhaps exile on the Cold Top was a death sentence after all. Though the inside was frigid, at least the wind was no longer sanding her face away. Karyn strained to shut the door and focused on the dim interior of the small one room cabin. She fumbled along the wall towards a rustic table with candles and tap stones. She lit the tallest candle first and then all the rest. Dust and cobwebs testified that she was alone, though someone had undoubtedly once called this place home, likely before the Cold Top had been raised up and away from any joining lands.

After spreading the candles around the cabin, Karyn decided to ignite the fireplace. Neatly stacked wood rested on a metal platform, as if it had been waiting to burn for a century or longer. She fell asleep beside the fire upon a bearskin bed, cursing her father for not explaining the circumstances of her exile in greater detail.

Karyn awoke in the middle of the night to a dwindling fire. She lazily added more wood and wrapped a blanket around her arms. “Oh, grandmother,” she said, “What in the name of Retta did you do?”

“She killed my wife with an impure fertility potion, casting her soul into the rebirth cycle so that she is forever lost to me,” a male voice thundered from the shadows near the farthest window.

Karyn’s blood ran cold and her guts to water. “Who’s there?” She moved closer to the fire, seeking the warmth her body was losing from fear.

“I am Edwin of Strellia,” said the voice.

“Show yourself.” Karyn gasped when a large Crigon slipped out of the shadows. He was tan and well-muscled, soft leather clothing covered his chest and boot-tipped legs. Like all Crigons, he was so tall that he towered more than an arm’s length above her.



“So it’s your fault that I’m here, exiled to the Cold Top until the end of my days.” Karyn was afraid, but she was equally as angry. As far as she was concerned, her grandmother killing a roaming Crigon was an accomplishment worth celebrating.

“Your grandmother’s sins against me will be repaid,” he said and stepped closer.

“So, you’re here to kill me then? Why did you not kill my grandmother if you were so angry with her?” And then Karyn wondered if perhaps the Crigon had killed her grandmother. The old woman had been sick for some time, but maybe . . .

“Your fool of a grandmother escaped my clutches and managed block my dream spirits all these years. Upon her death my dream spirits came to me, and I sought out the inner lands of Zertrin and came across traveling men in the surrounding forests. They provided me with your location.”

Karyn knelt on the floor, her back to the fire and the blanket still upon her shoulders. She cared not how Edwin of Strellia had come upon her location. But this was the end. “So, kill me already,” she said, hating this Crigon with all her might.

“You misunderstand my purpose. I cannot return to Strellia without the child that Stretta requires for reentry. There is no place for me amongst the paired immortals without a woman and our child.”

Karyn regarded the Crigon who was now standing above her. She was tired and cold and had no reason to live, and now he dare refuse to kill her? If only killing oneself wasn’t a path to the Caves of Terr . . .

“I know nothing of Strellia. I know nothing of Stretta, save she is the wicked sister goddess of Retta.”

“Speak of Stretta in such a foolish manner again, and you’ll feel the sting of my belt.”

Karyn shuddered. “I am the granddaughter of your wife’s murderer, yes. What is it you require from me, if not retribution by death?”

“I cannot return to Strellia unpaired and childless,” he said, looking down at Karyn. “The days of mortal men offering prayers to Stretta are gone. I can roam the lands of mortal Earth until the Caves of Terr spark consuming fires, or I can have vengeance by another manner and find my way home to Strellia both at once.”

Karyn shuddered again. Surely this Crigon did not mean to take her as a wife? He was standing close above her. If he so much as touched her, then she would be damned to the Caves of Terr where tormented souls spread through the mist in search of mortal vessels to corrupt.

“Please,” said Karyn. “Behead me with your sword. Do not touch me otherwise, for while I loved my grandmother, I do not wish to join in her damnation.”

Edwin the Crigon crouched before Karyn, an arm’s length away. Too petrified to move, she simply stared into his twinkling blue eyes.

“It doesn’t matter that I touch you,” he said. “You won’t be going to the Caves of Terr. You will carry my child and enter Strellia, offering prayers to Stretta all the while.”

“No! Get back!” But before Karyn found the courage to move her melting legs, Edwin reached a thick arm towards her face. A single finger brushed her cheek for a moment, and his twinkling blue eyes narrowed as roguishly as his curling lips.

The Crigon! He had touched her! Not only that, but he found humor in her horror.

All hopes of joining her lines of family and goddess Retta in Ettonelli were forever gone. Her future held two ugly possibilities – the Caves of Terr or Strellia. But unless she escaped this Crigon, she would be bound for Strellia without a doubt. The Caves of Terr seemed like the better option. At least the souls lurking there loved goddess Retta, tormented though they were.

“I do not age. You, however, grow older by the day. Speak a meaningful prayer to Stretta and I will have you as my wife.” Edwin stood and reached a hand towards Karyn.

“I will praise the goddess Retta until my dying breath. I will praise the goddess Retta from the Caves of Terr.”

Edwin straightened. “How old are you?”

Karyn tightened her mouth and stared at the floor. She knew he was wondering about her ability to bear a child. Was she old enough and how many fertile years were left? She gasped as his large, callused hands pulled her up. She peered into his face, terrifyingly mesmerized. All his features were large and dark, skin and hair like that of the night, and devastatingly handsome. His eyes were alive like the blue diamonds of the Old Hills, scrutinizing her as harshly as she examined him. She gasped again when he groped her breasts with either of his hands, and hot tears prompted by fear and embarrassment flooded down her pale cheeks.

“Well,” said Edwin. “You seem of age. But one can never truly tell. How many years have you lived?”

“Nineteen,” she whispered, not wishing to be examined any further. To her relief, the Crigon released his hold entirely. She remained standing, looking at the floor and willing herself to stop crying.

“Nineteen is perfect. Now say prayers to Stretta.”

“I will resist even a forced prayer to Stretta until my womb shrivels like a drying fruit. I love the goddess Retta in Ettonelli where my lines of family roam.”

Edwin fumed, but spoke politely after apparently reigning his flicker of anger under control. “Stretta and Retta are not the rivals that you have come to believe. There are windows between these immortal worlds.”

“Blasphemy! You lie!” Karyn screamed, abruptly slapping Edwin across the face. Her eyes widened and her hand stung. She inched back from Edwin’s angry glare, fearing retribution.

His eyes flashed. “I will remain with you until you realize that there is no true separation between Ettonelli and Strellia and you offer prayers to Stretta as you do to Retta. But I will not allow misbehavior on your part to go unpunished, despite the fact that we have just met.”

Edwin advanced towards Karyn with a piercing gaze.

“Wait!” cried Karyn. “Get back!” She inched away from the fireplace and from Edwin, but he lunged forward and grabbed her arm in one swift move. Karyn’s heart leapt into her chest and she felt small in his grip. The Crigon was mighty large, his hot breath fanning her face from above.

“You will be my wife when you come to your mortal senses. Though I have not bedded you yet, I will punish you as a man would punish his wife.”

Karyn recalled what she knew of husbands and wives. Most women in the Land of Zertrin were married at the age of twenty; the men were usually a little older. Once, she had witnessed a husband and wife quarreling in the woods near the village. When the woman tried to walk away, the man had forced her over his knee upon a tree stump and administered a heavy spanking. Karyn shivered in Crigon’s grasp. He was a stranger! Surely he would not . . .

“Please,” said Karyn, trembling. “I don’t even know you.”

For the first time since he’d emerged from the shadows, Edwin’s eyes gleamed with a hint of compassion. Hope flickered inside her chest, brief but strong. Maybe he would let her off with a warning.

“We will know each other soon enough, but I’m afraid I cannot even be persuaded to take it easy on you this first time,” Edwin said, still with that glimmer of deceptive compassion in his eyes. “You will treat me with respect, or you will suffer the consequences under my hand.”

Karyn panicked. She hadn’t been spanked in years. And Edwin was a Crigon! Anger and embarrassment combined, with neither emotion prevailing. She pushed at Edwin and desperately attempted to escape his firm hands, but it was no use. He was dragging her protesting form towards the center of the cabin as if she were light as a feather. He abruptly paused, glancing around as if he searched for something specific.

“You will stand right here while I get a chair,” Edwin whispered into her ear, “If you move your feet a smidge, you will feel my belt upon your bottom instead of my hand.”

Karyn gulped, but said nothing. She believed him. She also knew there was nowhere to run anyway. It was dark and cold outside and the cabin was but one room. Her insides churned as Edwin pulled a tall chair from the shadows, but she fought the urge to run. This spanking was sure to be painful, given the size and strength of this Crigon, and she feared the slap of his belt even more.

When the screech of the chair being pulled across the floor ended, Karyn met Edwin’s gaze with pleading eyes. Only pride kept her from breaking her silence to beg him to be gentle. Edwin moved to her side and looked down at her with resolve. “Remove your dress. It will offer you little protection from the sting of my hand anyway.”

Karyn stepped back. “No!” It was true that she was wearing nothing but a thin dress, but it at least hid her nudity from this strange Crigon who would claim her as a wife.

“Remove your dress at once, or I will remove it for you.”

Karyn slipped the dress from her shoulders, and it pooled around her feet just as it had on the hilltop when she’d offered prayers to Retta on her family’s behalf not too long ago. She stood in front of Edwin, completely naked and trembling with terrible anticipation.

“Smart girl,” Edwin commented. “It’s good to see that you can listen to a man’s orders.”

Karyn fought the urge to slap his face again. No one in the village would’ve ever dared speaking to her in such a manner, not when she was the granddaughter of the magical village healer and the daughter of the village leader. She fought the urge to scream and to run. But before she could decide if she would follow any of her urges, he descended to the tall chair, pulling her naked form down and across his huge legs.

Edwin’s warm hand rested upon Karyn’s upturned bottom and he wrapped one leg around her struggling legs. His other hand grasped her hands against her back, leaving her perfectly pinned in place. “Now,” Edwin began, “This is what happens when a wife disrespects her husband.”

Karyn felt his hand leave her bottom, and then . . . smack! She gasped and attempted to twist from his grasp, but . . . smack! Again and again his hand came down upon her bare, upturned bottom. Edwin punished her with vigor, alternating cheeks and even slapping the tops of her thighs. It stung terribly and her bottom quickly reddened. Karyn was writhing on his lap, desperately trying to escape the torment.

“Please,” she finally begged, “Please, that’s enough.” Her bottom was stinging furiously, throbbing under the slaps that rained down. She was hopeful for a moment when Edwin paused. She expected to be released, but to her dismay, he pushed her further over his lap so that her

bottom was more spread. Never in her life had she felt more terrified and vulnerable, her thighs open to his gaze.

The next few slaps were extremely painful, and Edwin concentrated on the sensitive area where her thighs and bottom met.

“Now,” smack, “are you going,” smack, “to respectfully listen,” smack, “to what I have to say?” Smack!

“Yes!” Karyn yelled. She desperately wished to be upright with her thighs closed. She desperately wished the painful spanking would halt, most of all.

Edwin delivered several more hearty slaps, one after the other, across the very tops of her thighs, alternating his hands as he further reddened her smooth flesh. Karyn whimpered and lay limp across his lap.

“Now . . . I am going to tell you about Ettonelli and Strellia, Retta and Stretta. You will sit quietly and listen. Do you understand?” asked Edwin.

“Yes, I understand,” replied Karyn in a whisper.

## Chapter 2

Karyn eyed her dress on the floor, feeling her nakedness more than ever with her bottom stinging terribly. “You may get dressed,” Edwin said. She complied quickly, and stood before him trembling and whimpering softly. She ached to rub her bottom, but she feared another spanking if she did, so her hands remained fidgeting at her sides.

Edwin stood and led her to the bearskin bed in front of the fire. She eased down on her throbbing bottom and waited for him to speak. To her surprise, he placed a blanket over her shoulders before sitting beside her upon the bearskin bed.

“Retta and Stretta being sisters at war is a myth that has long been perpetrated by those from the Land of Holon. There are actually windows connecting Ettonelli with Strellia. The mortals who walk the Land of Zertrin reside in Ettonelli after their deaths, but visits to Strellia are permitted and encouraged. The Crigon immortals who once walked the earth as mortals reside in Strellia, only to leave in pairs to roam mortal Earth during the fertility seasons. Crigon children can only be conceived in the mortal lands, but they are born in Strellia and grow up fast to the median age.” Edwin paused and looked at Karyn. Her eyes were swollen and she looked thoughtful.

“So, why are those loyal to Retta damned to the Caves of Terr after being touched by a Crigon?”

“That is another myth perpetuated by those from the Land of Holon.”

“So . . . do the Caves of Terr not exist?” Karyn was trying desperately to wrap her mind around this new information. Despite the fact that this Crigon was a stranger, there was truth in his eyes and she believed him.

“Oh, the Caves of Terr exist. But only those mortals who have committed grave crimes, such as murder, are sent to the Caves of Terr.”

Karyn’s heart broke. “So, my grandmother? She murdered your wife, did she not? I suppose she has gone to the Caves of Terr.”

Edwin inched closer to Karyn and placed a firm hand on her tear stained cheek. “Yes, at this moment your grandmother resides in the Caves of Terr. But when I take you as my wife bearing my child back to Strellia, your grandmother’s debt to me will be repaid. When this happens, her spirit will soar from the Caves of Terr to Ettonelli where you may visit her yourself.”

A single tear ran down Karyn’s cheek. This Crigon wasn’t a wicked beast after all. He could’ve taken a wife from the mortal lands and returned to Strellia decades ago, but by waiting

for a female descendant of the woman who murdered his wife, Karyn's grandmother would be spared from the Caves of Terr.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I will go with you willingly." And suddenly Karyn felt very shy. Edwin would be her husband, Edwin the handsome Crigon who had just administered a painful spanking to her moments ago. She squirmed in her seat, trying not to wince from the soreness.

"I'm pleased to hear you say that," Edwin said with a smile. "We must remain on the Cold Top until the melting begins. There is a secret passage on the other side of the mountain leading to the lands nearest Strellia. We will travel there once the melting has begun and you are with child."

Karyn nodded and bowed her head nervously. Then curiosity got the best of her. "Why wait all these years to locate a descendent of my grandmother? Why not take any woman from the Land of Zertrin and return to Strellia sooner?"

"You're inquisitive," he stated. "I like that." Edwin moved closer. "I could not take just any woman from the Land of Zertrin in good conscience. Most woman are betrothed at a young age and as you already know, all from your land fear Crigons and would not be willing. Years ago, I would have taken your grandmother, but since she evaded me for so long, you are the next logical choice."

What a set of circumstances, Karyn thought. "I understand."

"The Cold Top is a hard place to survive, and you must listen to me at all times. If you disobey me in anything, I will not hesitate to punish you. Understood?"

"Yes, Edwin," Karyn mumbled, bowing her head even further and hoping that she would be able to avoid another spanking.

#

"I'll be gone hunting for most of the morning," Edwin said, placing a hand on Karyn's sore bottom. "You will remain inside while I'm gone. There are grains and other foods inside the pack I brought. You're a woman. You know what to do with it all."

"Yes, Edwin," Karyn replied, relieved that he was leaving for a while, rather than take her immediately as his wife after witnessing her morning prayer to Stretta.

He patted her bottom again, this time with more force. "I will make you my wife tonight as we lay by the fire," he said. Karyn blushed deeply and felt her heart drumming in her ears.

She recovered from her shyness quickly and smiled up at Edwin, feeling lost in his wide, blue eyes. "Alright. Good luck with the hunt."

After Edwin was gone, out into the snowy forests of the Cold Top with his spear, Karyn busied herself cleaning up the cabin and preparing the kitchen. They would be living there for quite some time, and it had to look livelier if it was to feel like a true home.

Karyn unpacked the items brought by Edwin and used the grains and hearth to start baking bread for lunch and dinner. The smell of rising bread soon filled the cabin. Once the kitchen was cleaned up, Karyn eyed the curtains with disgust. They were so dusty that one touch left fragments of dirt floating in the air. Obviously, the curtains from both the large windows needed a good shaking outside.

She took them down and walked towards the cabin door, humming a joyful tune all the way. Tonight Edwin would take her as his wife and after the cold season she would see her grandmother in the afterlife. There was no real separation between Ettonelli and Strellia. She felt like this was a fairytale, an unrealized dream come true. Edwin was handsome and gentle – when he wasn't smacking her bottom. And he seemed to look deep inside her with his marvelous, twinkling blue eyes.

They had spent the early morning hours becoming better acquainted, at his insistence. She had told him all about the village and he had told her all about his life before Strellia. The Crigons had inhabited lands near the Zertrin lands, living in the forests in marvelous tree houses. He had been a hunter and a builder, and though he had been married, he avoided all questions about his wife. He had left the mortal lands of Earth with the rest of his kind over five hundred years ago to join the goddess Stretta in the first immortal world.

The rising dust from the curtains caused Karyn to pause, coughing herself back into reality. After she bundled them underneath her arm, she opened the cabin door and stepped out into the cold. She shivered and her feet were cold in the snow, despite the fact that she wore shoes.

It was cloudy, but the profiles of trees were visible all around. Karyn left the door open and sloshed through the thick white for a good place to shake the dirty curtains. To her delight, she found a large rock underneath a tree that wasn't snow covered, so she beat the curtains against it until the dust was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief that the outline of the cabin was still visible through the fog when she turned to walk home.

Karyn immediately removed her wet shoes upon entering the tiny cabin. She restrung the curtains and huddled in front of the fire, adding two more logs of wood. The bearskin bed on which she knelt would be the very place Edwin would claim her as his wife, bringing her into womanhood. She found herself smiling at the thought, and she imagined how it would feel to touch Edwin's warm, dark skin.

After Edwin returned from a successful hunting trip a short while later, they sat at the table enjoying the fresh baked bread. Karyn felt faint each time she stole a glance at her husband-to-be. After lunch, she got a stew going with the rabbit he'd caught and tidied up the kitchen again. She heard the cabin door open and close, realizing that Edwin had gone outside



without saying goodbye. Karyn felt a little miffed about that, but she continued around the kitchen, humming and cleaning and stirring the stew.

The rattling slam of the door caused her to shoot straight up and gasp. Edwin stood with his arms crossed, glaring angrily at her.

“You went outside today,” he accused.

Karyn fumbled. Yes, she had gone outside – but the curtains had been so dusty! Damn her wet boots by the door and footprints in the snow! The village had had plenty of ridiculous rules, most of which she had always ignored, going where she pleased without a second thought. Edwin’s rule about going outside hadn’t seemed much different, at the time.

“I . . . I . . . it’s just that the curtains needed a good shaking and I was only out for an instant.” She swallowed hard and found herself looking at his wide belt, praying it would remain around his waist. So much for avoiding another spanking . . .

Edwin stepped forward. “This mountain is crawling with oversized rolabears that would have you as a snack. I specifically instructed you to remain inside, did I not?”

“Yes, Edwin. I’m sorry.” said Karyn, her already sore bottom tingling from the fear of being punished again at his hands. And they were supposed to make love tonight!

“Remove your dress, NOW!” snapped Edwin. He advanced towards her with a livid gleam in his deep blue eyes.

Karyn panicked. No, he couldn’t spank her. Not tonight! Not right before they would join as one on the bearskin bed before the fire. “Please, Edwin,” she begged, “I’m very sorry. I promise I’ll listen to you next time, just please don’t spank me now.” Her voice cracked over the last few words.

“Remove your dress, or you WILL feel the sting of my belt,” he threatened as he towered above her.

Karyn shed her dress, leaving it on the kitchen floor as Edwin pulled her towards the center of the cabin. She waited on trembling legs as he pulled out the same chair from last night’s punishment. He was furious with her, she could tell. His movements were swift and rigid, as if he were trying to reign himself under control.

Edwin pulled her over his lap and fixed her into the same position as the previous night, legs pinned underneath his and hands clasped tightly behind her back. His free hand rested on her bare bottom. “Karyn, you directly disobeyed me. You are going to learn that it is wise to heed my warnings . . . even if it requires I punish you daily.”

Karyn felt his hand leave her bottom and tensed for the expected smack. When it didn’t come immediately, she became curious – in a terrified way.

“Spread your legs more,” Edwin instructed.

Karyn’s face burned, but she spread her legs slightly. Then she felt a light slap on her left thigh.

“Just a little bit more,” said Edwin.

She complied, spreading her legs wider and fighting the shame that came from knowing she was on full display to Edwin before the spanking had even begun. She wondered if it was his intention to cause embarrassment or to simply have a good look at her before their marriage night.

And then the spanking began, heavy and unmerciful. Slap after slap landed across her writhing bottom and thighs. It hurt more than the punishment she’d received the previous night. Karyn desperately squirmed and whimpered through the pain, but it was no use. Edwin was taking his husbandly duty seriously and teaching her a lesson that she wouldn’t soon forget.

“Please,” begged Karyn, “It hurts badly.”

She almost heard the quirk in Edwin’s voice when he responded, “Good, perhaps this time the lesson will be longer lasting.” Smack! He continued with the vigorous spanking, raining several sharp slaps upon her thighs until Karyn truly believed she could no longer stand the pain.

When the spanking ended, Karyn lay crying on his lap, displaying much more penance than on the night prior. Not only was her bottom stinging, but the heavy knowledge that she’d disobeyed the Crigon husband who would set her grandmother free from damnation in the Caves of Terr ripped at her conscience. Karyn knew she had deserved this spanking.

Edwin’s hand came down gently on her bottom, rubbing and soothing the skin with the very hand he’d just used to administer her punishment. Karyn was still pinned across his lap and had long given up attempting escape. She wondered why he hadn’t yet released her, and her face burned again when she remembered how her nudity was on full display. If his fingers moved down just a bit more . . .

And then she felt a burning between her thighs, a feeling unlike any she’d ever known before. It was as if Edwin sensed her arousal, because his fingers began tracing the folds between her quivering thighs, dipping into her moist juices while he still held her in the punishment position.

Karyn felt herself being pushed further over Edwin’s lap, and she feared the spanking was about to recommence.

“The next time you disobey in anything,” he said, “you WILL feel the sting of my belt. Even for the smallest infraction. Do you understand, Karyn?” He spoke while swirling his fingers between her folds, spreading her juices around so that every nerve was on fire.

“Yes, I understand,” she said, fighting the urge to thrust backwards so that his fingers would sink deeper into her opening.

“I’m going to release your hands now, but I want you to pull your bottom apart for me.”

Karyn panicked. Whatever his intention was, she couldn’t possibly comply. It was just too embarrassing! She felt her hands being freed, but she simply lay there unmoving with wide, frightened eyes.

“Karyn, I asked you to hold your cheeks open for me. Now.” It was a command, delivered in a firm voice.

“I . . . I . . . please . . . I can’t do that. It’s much too embarrassing.” She felt hot tears welling in her dark eyes.

Before Karyn could decipher Edwin’s intentions, she was brought up quickly to stand on her feet. She rubbed her bottom, unable to restrain herself from touching the stinging mounds.

“What did I say would happen the next time you disobeyed me?” Edwin asked, towering over her with his massive Crigon body.

Karyn’s heart dropped into her stomach. The belt! He was going to spank her with the belt! “Oh, please, Edwin. Not the belt. I didn’t realize . . .” But her voice trailed off when he tugged at his waistband, sliding the dreaded belt from his pants in one swift movement.

He led her towards the kitchen table, a stone cold expression on his face. “Bend over. Now.”

The hot tears were now freely running down Karyn’s face. She eyed the belt with terror once before positioning herself over the table – with Edwin guiding her flat down, spreading her thighs and arching her bottom into the air.

“Please, not hard,” she begged. But before she could plead any further, Karyn felt the stinging snap of the belt across her upper thighs. The pain!

Again and again, the thick belt swooshed through the air and snapped across Karyn’s bottom and thighs. It took all of her willpower not to shot straight up and dance around on her toes.

Snap! “Will you obey me the next time I ask you to do something?” Edwin asked. Snap!

“Yes!” Karyn squealed, “I’m sorry!”

The belt snapped across her thighs two more times, and then Edwin laid it on the table directly in Karyn's eyesight.

"Now, we are going back to the chair. I highly recommend that you listen carefully to every word I say," said Edwin.

Karyn's entire body trembled as she was pulled back into the punishment position across Edwin's lap.

"Karyn, I want you to pull your cheeks apart and hold your bottom open. Now."

A sob escaped Karyn's throat, but she moved quickly to comply. She held her bottom apart so that she was on full display to Edwin.

"Good girl. Now keep holding just like that."

Karyn felt his fingers return to the mound between her thighs, stroking and exploring the area between her folds. She felt as if her mound was glowing, and Edwin was giving her great pleasure, despite the shame she felt from this extremely vulnerable position.

Then, without warning, Edwin's fingers moved away from her moist folds and touched her puckering hole. She tensed, but she remained still with her hands holding her cheeks spread apart. Karyn had never before imagined a man touching her in this place, but she dared not resist Edwin's ministrations. Without warning, the exploring finger entered her, prompting her gasp.

"Relax, this might bring you pleasure," said Edwin, chuckling for a moment afterwards. "But in any case, it is a humiliation you undoubtedly deserve. After disobeying my instructions to remain inside today, a simple spanking would not do."

Karyn was mortified. This was part of her punishment! What Edwin was doing to her bottom at the moment wasn't painful, but it brought her heaps of unbridled humiliation.

Edwin continued to explore Karyn's bottom, sliding his finger with a rhythm that she tried not to enjoy. She felt her nether lips burning with an urgency unlike any other. And she wondered what Edwin would do after releasing her. Would he administer another punishment? Would he immediately take her as his wife?

Finally, Karyn felt Edwin's finger slip out and his hand rest on her spread bottom. She winced from fear that the spanking would continue.

"Relax, my dear," Edwin soothed. "Your punishment is over."

Karyn soon found herself being cradled gently in Edwin's lap, her shoulders rising and falling with her sobs. Edwin was truly a good man, having climbed the Cold Top in search of

her in an effort that would save her life and her grandmother's soul. The realization that she'd both disobeyed and disappointed him tore at her heart, and she sobbed against his chest.

Edwin rocked her and whispered soothing words into her ear, and he stroked her long brown hair with the utmost gentleness.

"Do you forgive me?" Karyn asked through her sobs.

Edwin looked down, brushing her hair away from her face. "Of course I forgive you. And I look forward to making you my wife in the near future." He paused for a moment. "I know you may think I was too harsh with you, but you'll soon come to understand that my discipline is fair. I spotted several pairs of rolabear tracks close to this cabin yesterday. That is why I told you to stay inside."

Karyn took several deep breaths to calm herself. "I don't think you were too harsh, Edwin. I know I deserved to be punished." She leaned into him again, loving the feel of his warm body and his soft, leathery shirt. And then she realized his manhood was rock hard underneath his leathery pants.

He placed a soft kiss atop her head, lingering with his face close to hers. "Let us move to bed now."

Anticipation flooded Karyn. She was a virgin, unfamiliar and anxious over what was about to take place.

She nodded and rose to her feet, only to be guided towards the bearskin before the fire. She lay down nervously on the makeshift bed, wincing as her sore bottom made contact with the floor. Edwin stripped off his pants and shirt, tossing the garments away. He was a massive, tall, muscled man – perfect and well-endowed in every way.

The fire crackled and flickered orange across their joined bodies as they became husband and wife. Karyn was being touched by a Crigon in the most intimate ways, but she would not be damned to the Caves of Terr for it. No, she would spend the rest of her mortal days in Edwin's arms and every day thereafter within the immortal walls of Strellia with windows to Ettonelli.

#

The cabin was warm and smelled of baking bread, just as it did every morning. Karyn straightened the bearskin bed and added wood to the fireplace, though it didn't really need it. She was humming and flitting about the one room cabin, cleaning and rearranging furniture and décor – something she found alleviated her boredom.

She smiled each time she thought of her handsome Crigon husband. Edwin was a good man who made her truly happy. He was more gentle and loving than she'd ever imagined he would be, especially after those first two spankings.

Many days had passed since they had become husband and wife. Though they made love about as frequently as Karyn was spanked (and almost always after a spanking), she found Edwin's punishments to be fair. The urge to venture outside, even for a moment, was a hard to quell temptation. Her bottom was still sore from the belting Edwin had given her two days ago when he'd caught her climbing a tree near the cabin, trying to reach the top for a vision over the persistent fog.

Red warmth flushed her face as she remembered being bent over the table for the punishment. Edwin had paced behind her, belt in hand, lecturing for some time about the dangers of going outside before finally beginning. To her surprise, he had stopped after only a few hard slaps. But then he had ordered her to spread her bottom cheeks apart, as he often did before driving his point home with a little humiliation. After she complied, he had paced behind her again, resuming the lecture. When he was finally silent, she had felt his manhood nudging against her wet folds, dipping inside her partially before pulling out. What had happened next was still a surprise to Karyn.

Edwin had pressed his stiffness against her bottom hole, and thrust himself deep inside her. She had cried out from a mixture of pain and surprise, but she had remained bent over underneath her Crigon husband while still holding her cheeks apart. Just as the steady rhythm Edwin had developed became pleasurable, he had spilled his seed inside her.

"You must learn to obey me, Karyn," he had said.

As Karyn checked on the rising bread, she silently vowed that she would never venture outside again. She felt truly bad each time she disappointed and disobeyed Edwin, and she knew each of the punishments at his hand had been well deserved. She reminded herself just how lucky her life with him was.

Later that night, as they were eating dinner at the very table which she was sometimes bent over, Karyn eyed her husband nervously. She wanted him to know how much she cared about him. She wanted him to know that she treasured the punishments just as much as the gentle times, for both instances were proof of how much he cared for her.

"Is something wrong?" Edwin asked, pushing away his empty plate.

Karyn looked up, upset with herself for being so obvious. "I . . . I . . . it's nothing," she finally answered, looking down at the table to avoid Edwin's burning gaze.

"Tell me," he said, the tone in his voice edging towards a command.

She looked up at her husband, feeling very small and wishing she could just sink into her chair and away from his piercing eyes. But he knew there was something on her mind. "I just wanted to tell you something, but I feel quite silly saying it out loud."

Edwin looked curious. "Don't feel silly," he said. "Please. Go on."

Karyn feared she would stutter and stammer over every word, so she blurted out her thoughts quickly. “I just wanted to tell you how much I care about you. You’re a good man to track me down and save a member of my family who wronged you greatly. And I wanted to tell you that I even love the punishments you give me, because I know that you only spank me when I truly deserve it. And I just – I just love you so much.”

Edwin smiled and reached to wipe at the tears slipping down Karyn’s cheek. “I love you too,” he said. “And I look forward to the day we will walk into Stretta together.”

Karyn’s spirit soared to hear him say it out loud, and she smiled back.

“And I enjoy spanking you, Karyn.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, taken aback.

“I don’t enjoy causing you pain, but I do like causing your bottom to wiggle and redden under my hand. And most times, when your punishment is over, I cannot keep myself from taking you. Haven’t you noticed that?”

Karyn blushed crimson. “Yes, I thought there might be a connection.” They both laughed at that.

## Chapter 3

The days grew colder and Edwin's hunting trips often lasted the entire day, occasionally overnight. Karyn missed him greatly, and it was hard to satisfy her boredom. Other than cooking and cleaning, there wasn't much else to be done inside the cabin. The previous occupant hadn't even left behind any books or handiwork supplies. Despite her protests, Edwin wouldn't even permit her to go outside long enough to reset the blue owl traps on the trees surrounding their tiny abode.

On the third night of a long snowstorm, Edwin returned to the cabin after the longest hunting trip yet. With many of the animals hiding out the harsh weather, food had been scarce as of late. While Karyn knew she would be dead without Edwin to take care of her, she came to resent the words, "I'm going hunting today."

"Why are you being so quiet?" Edwin asked as they lay in front of the fire that night.

"I'm trying to sleep," replied Karyn.

"That may be so," said Edwin, "but you've been short with me all evening. I've noticed your eyes rolling in my direction and I've heard you mumbling unkind words."

Karyn stiffened. Edwin was right; she *had* been doing those things. But how was she to know his vision and hearing could be so perfect, even across the room? "I don't know what you're talking about," she finally said, unwilling to admit her sorrow to Edwin.

Before she could protest, Edwin rolled her onto her stomach and administered several heavy blows to her backside. She hadn't been spanked in a while, and these smacks stung her bottom greatly. She gasped and cried out, suddenly very angry at her husband. So what if she had done these things? It's not as if she'd ventured outside or directly talked back to him.

"Stop!" she screamed angrily, and slipped a hand back to protect her bottom.

Edwin drew her up on his lap, firmly gripping her shoulders in his large Crigon hands. "I know you don't like being trapped in this cabin, all day, every day. But that is no reason to treat your husband so poorly, especially after I've just returned from a long hunting trip."

Karyn struggled to escape his hold, and she was determined not to meet his gaze, though his breath was warm against her face. "Let me go!" she growled. He didn't understand how horrible it was to be trapped within the same walls day after day. How dare he lecture her when he couldn't possibly understand!

"I will tolerate the occasional bad mood from you, Karyn," he said, "but I will not tolerate blatant disrespect."



“I never said any of those things to your face!” she said, still squirming to escape.

“That’s funny . . . I thought you said you didn’t know what I was talking about?”

Karyn suddenly ceased her squirming and was deathly silent. The last time she’d been caught in lie, Edwin had punished her severely. Her bottom quivered involuntarily as she recalled the lengthy bare bottom spanking that concluded with ten slaps of the belt. “I . . . I . . .” But Karyn could think of nothing to say.

Leaning closer, Edwin whispered her sentence directly into her ear. “I’ve just returned from a long hunting trip and I am tired. Tomorrow morning after breakfast I will check the blue owl traps as I always do. When I return from that, I expect to find you waiting naked beside the tall chair. I will spank you then, Karyn, and I promise you this – the punishment will fit the crime.”

Karyn shuddered at the dark gleam in Edwin’s eye. He had never made her wait for a punishment before. “Yes, Edwin,” she mumbled as the tears gathered in her eyes.

That night, Karyn found it hard to sleep. She watched Edwin, bathed in the fire’s glow, for most of the night. He had never before seemed larger or more intimidating. She eyed his massive, abrasive hands with terror, rebuking herself for being so thoughtless.

Had Edwin not sought her out on the Cold Top, she would have perished in the snows long ago. Either that or she would have starved or become a meal for a rolabear. Her guilt over treating Edwin so badly suddenly mingled with her hatred for her own father. She would resign herself to Edwin’s mercy tomorrow and stand naked beside the tall chair, but she would never make peace with her father. Not even when they were both in the afterlife of Strellia and Ettonelli.

#

Karyn watched Edwin stand at the window, moving the curtains to make way for sunlight – the first sunlight in days. “Ah!” he exclaimed with joy, “Three of the traps are full of blue owls.”

The last of the dishes were done and Karyn came to stand behind her husband hesitantly, but she had to see for herself. He was right. Between the three traps there would be enough food to last at least eight days. And the sun was shining!

Edwin turned and held Karyn between his hands at a distance. “Do you remember what we talked about last night?”

Karyn flushed and barely heard her own voice. “Y – yes, Edwin.”

“Good. I’ll be back after I get the blue owls inside the wall cage.” His voice was hard and Karyn saw no kindness in his eyes.

As soon as the door closed behind him, salty tears flowed freely down her pale cheeks. She had been unkind to Edwin – she had been outright selfish. “The punishment will fit the crime,” echoed in her mind as she stripped off her dress and stood beside the tall chair, sorrowfully resigned to her fate.

Snow fell from Edwin’s boots when he finally returned, and Karyn’s heart contracted as he roughly wiped them on the doormat. Heavy tears gathered about her dark brown eyes and she moved her gaze upon the floor, too fearful to regard her husband in the eye. But his boots thudded closer and he was soon hovering above.

Edwin lifted Karyn’s chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. “I haven’t even begun your punishment yet. Why so many tears now?”

A loud sob escaped past Karyn’s lips and her whole body trembled. Edwin’s eyes were cold, strictly business. She wanted to retract the cruel mumbled words and the mocking faces she’d made yesterday. She wanted to beg his forgiveness and feel him hold her tenderly in his arms.

“Edwin, I’m so sorry. I owe you everything and I’ve been treating you so poorly lately. I feel horrible that I’ve behaved this way.” Karyn pulled her chin away and bowed her head while her shoulders heaved under a fresh wave of tears.

“Are you trying to get out of your punishment, Karyn?”

She looked up quickly, her crying ceased at once. “No! I swear it!” she professed. “I know I deserve whatever punishment you choose to give me.”

For the first time all morning, Edwin’s eyes softened. He cupped Karyn’s face, kissing her cheeks and smoothing her dark hair behind her little ears. “Let’s get this spanking over with then, so we may move on with our day.”

Karyn blinked back the hot moisture in her eyes and nodded. “Okay,” she said in a voice so low even Edwin barely heard it.

Edwin kissed her again before leading her over his lap on the tall chair. Her feet dangled freely for once, and he didn’t even pin her arms this time. She vowed that she would remain as still as possible for this punishment.

A large hand rested on her bottom, drawing light circles over both her cheeks. “I wish I didn’t have to punish you right now, Karyn,” he said, “but you were very disrespectful to me. You know that when you behave in such a way, a spanking is sure to follow. Even when we are in Strellia, I will not hesitate to punish you for such behavior.”

“I know, Edwin,” she said through another sob. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know you are,” he replied, still drawing circles with his hand. “And I want you to take this punishment without fighting me like you usually do. Understood?”

“Yes, Edwin,” she said, wanting the whole ordeal to be over with as soon as possible. She just wanted to feel him cradling her in his large arms and kissing the top of her head.

“Good,” he said, and delivered a sound smack across her bottom in the next moment. He alternated cheeks, spanking with vigor and not pausing between slaps.

Karyn’s bottom was stinging something fierce, but she kept her legs and arms as still as possible while Edwin continued the punishment. She panicked when he began to spank her upper thighs, fearing that she would yield to the pain and begin a struggle against him.

“Spread your thighs,” he commanded. Karyn complied, though it was utterly humiliating. Her sex was now on full view and Edwin continued to slap her thighs, paying particular interest to her inner thighs closest to her womanly folds. Despite the pain, she ached for him to touch her there, tenderly or roughly – it didn’t matter. There was a burning ache between her thighs that sought release. She knew that her lips were probably gleaming with moisture, betraying her arousal even as her husband continued to spank her bottom hard.

Karyn noticed Edwin had begun pausing between the slaps, caressing her bottom and upper thighs in between lighter spanks. It was sensual and she understood that the pain was now over, but that didn’t necessarily mean the punishment was. She wondered if she would be forced to spread her bottom cheeks apart so that Edwin could thrust a finger into her bottom hole.

“Spread your thighs even farther apart,” he commanded. Karyn moved her legs further apart and was pushed farther over Edwin’s lap.

Finally, his fingers reached her moist folds, stroking them gently and swirling upon her sensitive bud. With one hand, he held her folds apart. With the other hand, he stroked and probed her aching womanhood. Karyn moaned and resisted the urge to buck against his hand.

Then, Edwin did something that caught Karyn by surprise. His probing hand left her folds for a moment, and in the next moment slapped lightly against her throbbing sheath. She gasped, but not from the pain. It didn’t hurt the way she would’ve imagined it would, and instead was a fantastic sensation that left her burning for more. Edwin slapped her sheath lightly with his hand again and again, filling the room with the sound of sticky slaps. Karyn’s warm slit was on fire, and she could no longer resist bucking against his punishing hand. The tips of his finger landed upon her sensitive bud during each slap, bringing her to the edges of ecstasy. Just when Karyn thought she was going to drown in release, Edwin stopped.

Without a word, she was lead by her Crigon husband towards the table. She knew she deserved the belt and she vowed to take the rest of her punishment without struggle. But to her surprise, Edwin laid her down on her back with her legs spread and lifted upon the table. His

blue eyes were misted over, and she wondered if his arousal equaled hers. The bulge inside his leather pants suggested that he was about to take her, pounding his manhood into her upon the table without mercy.

When Edwin began to unfasten his belt from around his trim waist, Karyn's feet fidgeted and she stared at him with wide eyes. Surely he wouldn't use the belt to . . .

Before she could finish her thoughts, Edwin spoke. "Spread your folds apart for me and hold perfectly still."

Karyn felt her heart pounding in her chest as she reached down to comply with Edwin's demands. She held herself open, completely exposed to the man holding the punishing belt. Edwin stepped closer and trailed the tip of the leather between her breasts until it dangled between her yet moist womanly folds.

"I think you'll find the belt can bring you as much pleasure as it has brought you pain," he said, lightly snapping the tip of leather against her slit. Karyn moaned and bucked through each snap of leather against her moist bud, lost in a haze of unbelievable pleasure.

Edwin leaned closer to her spread folds, creating a steady rhythm of slaps with the tip of the belt until she moaned and bucked under a precious release. Her hands were moved away from her sheath and she gasped for air. Edwin dropped the belt and trailed kisses along her spread thighs. His eyes flashed as he removed his pants and thrust his stiff manhood deep between her quivering folds.

#

Karyn hummed while she brushed her long, black hair in front of the little mirror in the washroom. Edwin had left before sunrise to check the rolabear traps on the other side of the mountain, so she had the liberty to dawdle this morning. The past few days had been glorious since Edwin hadn't had to leave the cabin thanks to the lucky catch of blue owls. While they still had a few blue owls left, he'd announced that the Crigon dream spirits had urged him to check the rolabear traps.

Though she'd been bitter over Edwin's long hunting trips at one time, Karyn vowed to never allow herself to behave so selfishly again. She thought of all the men from her village in the Land of Zertrin, knowing none of them matched up to Edwin. She was the luckiest woman alive, she decided. It was also a comfort to know she would never know the pain of death since she would walk straight into the immortal world.

The snow had begun to melt, slowly but surely. Come the short springtime upon the Cold Top, it would be time to complete the trip to Stretta – if Karyn carried a child in her womb. Unconsciously, she touched her stomach and wondered if she would recognize the signs of being with child. Without the aid of a healer like her grandmother, it would be difficult to know for certain. That morning, she stood at the window and sent prayers to both Retta and Stretta, the sister goddesses, that she would soon conceive a child.

Edwin returned in the early evening from the rolabear traps on the other side of the mountain, looking deeply troubled.

“The Crigon dream spirits have never before led me astray,” said Edwin, “Yet there were no animals in the traps.”

Karyn paused as she knelt to remove his boots. “What do you think this means?”

“I’m not sure. But only two scenarios could explain this incident. Either there is another person who has been banished to the Cold Top and robbed the rolabear traps, or a shapeshifter from the Land of Holon is drawing near and influencing my dream spirits to play tricks on me.”

Karyn paled. Neither of those scenarios sounded good. “Which do you think it is?” she asked.

Edwin pulled her up into his lap, surrounding her with his large arms. “I’m not sure. Have your dreams been strange lately?”

“No. Completely normal. Although, I rarely recall any of my dreams. My grandmother always said my dream spirits were scared away when I almost drowned at the bottom of the Yetsin Waterfall.” They both chuckled at her fortune. Karyn stroked Edwin’s face and leaned against him for comfort. The coming days would be hard, much more difficult than they had been previously.

“Come,” Edwin said, standing Karyn up with him. “Let us eat this wonderful meal you have prepared.”

The uncertainty of the danger outside on the Cold Top weighed on Karyn’s conscious, and both Edwin and Karyn were silent through dinner. When the meal was cleaned up and Edwin was finished tending the fire for the night and rechecking the locks on the door and all the windows, they sat together on the bearskin bed. Karyn felt at peace and protected in her husband’s arms, but his own worry left her nervous.

“I killed five men in the Land of Holon,” Edwin finally said. “A Holon Tracer may be on the Cold Top looking for me. Or a Holon shapeshifter is biding his time, masquerading in my dreams.”

Karyn kept her head nestled against Edwin, but she rubbed a hand soothingly against his bare, muscled chest. “Should we leave the Cold Top now?”

“No. The melting seems to have begun, but that’s not to say it won’t snow yet again this season. The true springtime isn’t due for around forty more days,” he said. “It’s best we wait here, lest we run into a snowstorm on the way to Strellia.”

Karyn thought for a moment. “Edwin . . . if I’m not yet with child, what do we do then? What will we do if we cannot enter the gates of Strellia?”

Edwin stroked her hair gently and placed a kiss atop her head. “Then we will travel to the abandoned Palace of Lights inside the Whispering Forest. It’s safely far from the Land of Holon, but close enough to Strellia that the journey there will be short once you are with child.”

Stories of the Palace of Lights came back to Karyn, childhood songs and rumors of the devils who’d taken over the once grand Whispering Forest sprung into her mind. “But the devil spirits,” she said, “Won’t they absorb our souls and turn our bodies to ash?”

Edwin laughed. “Do those from the Land of Zertrin believe every story they hear?”

“So it’s not true?”

“No, not at all. The royal Crigons who once lived in the Whispering Forest and dwelled within the Palace of Lights marched towards Stretta as one to join our waiting ancestors and become immortals with our kin from all the lands of Earth. There was no plague of devils that drove us out. Again, those from the Land of Holon would have you believe such lies.”

A huge weight fell from Karyn’s shoulders. Most of the terrifying stories of life outside the Land of Zertrin seemed to be myths perpetuated by those from the Land of Holon. “Why do they spread such lies to us? Why do they wish all in Zertrin to live in fear?” she asked.

Edwin studied her face. “The Land of Zertrin is powerful, but it is not vast. Those from the Land of Holon only fear that your kind will one day seek to expand into their lands, so they spread lies about roaming Crigons and devil spirits to keep you all in a state of fear. The spice traders and hunters who come in contact with the Holon folk are merely unsuspecting instruments in their game of misinformation.”

Karyn smiled. “I was so sure all the stories were true. I can’t believe I used to hate Crigons. I can’t believe I once hated you and feared your simple touch.”

With his eyes smoldering, Edwin leaned forward to place his mouth at Karyn’s ear. “The only thing you must fear from me is the sting of my hand or belt upon your bottom when you’ve been disobedient.”

Karyn shivered and her bottom clenched involuntarily. It had been several days since the last punishment at Edwin’s hands, though it had been interesting. Her pulse raced when she thought of his belt snapping lightly against her swollen bud upon the table. Before she could respond to Edwin’s threat, she found herself flipped upon her stomach, her dress pulled up to bare her buttocks.

“Edwin?” she asked hesitantly as his hand caressed her mounds. She hadn’t disobeyed him in the least since that last punishment. She thought hard, trying to recall if she’d done anything to offend him during the day.

“Shh!” he commanded. “Stay right there.”

It was hard to obey, but Karyn stayed put, even as she felt Edwin’s hand slap her bottom lightly. It stung, but it wasn’t really that painful. He continued to spank her lightly, moving from cheek to cheek and rubbing her bottom in between slaps. Karyn was burning for Edwin, the moisture pooling between her thighs with vigor.

“Have I done something wrong?” she finally asked.

“No,” replied Edwin as he moved to slap her thighs lightly.

“Then why am I being punished?” It was hard to call it that – a punishment – but Edwin had never once spanked her without her actually deserving it.

“I told you once that I enjoyed spanking you, didn’t I?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, the situation finally making sense.

The spanks suddenly became harder, prompting Karyn to gasp loud. She tried to keep still for Edwin, but it was difficult. Her bottom was soon glowing red and she was wriggling underneath his steady hand. Just as she considered begging, his hand moved to stroke her wet folds and the delicate area within. Her hips grinded against his ministrations, even as he slipped a finger into her bottom hole as he often did during a punishment. Karyn’s back arched as he built a momentum inside her, using the moisture from her womanly folds as lubrication.

When Edwin shifted his body behind hers, Karyn expected him to enter this very hole, as he sometimes did after a belting. But his finger remained submerged in place, even as his manhood entered her moist sheath. The pleasure was indescribable, and she moaned loudly and gasped for breaths. After their simultaneous releases, they fell fast asleep upon the bearskin rug while the fire glimmered into the night.

#

The melting upon the Cold Top ceased and another snowstorm swept over everything, leaving it impossible for Edwin to even venture out hunting. But they had a decent supply of blue owls and a butchered rolabear to survive off of. Edwin had also found a huge supply of grains in an abandoned neighboring cabin, so Karyn would always be able to bake fresh bread.

“Did you see if there were books in any of the other cabins?” Karyn asked over breakfast one morning. She was dying for something to do; perhaps there would be a healing book so that she could continue the studies she had begun under her grandmother.

Edwin took a spoonful of soup but said nothing. Fearful that she had offended him, Karyn immediately lowered her eyes. The last time she’d mentioned books had been right

before he'd called her out for murmuring insults and rolling her eyes at him. She looked up quickly, ready to apologize, when she realized he was attempting to suppress a smile.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

Edwin sat his spoon down and pushed away from the table. "Well, I was going to wait until tomorrow, since it's your twentieth birthday, but I suppose you can have your present early."

Karyn watched in amazement as Edwin pulled a huge box from one of the low cabinets in the kitchen that she never used. It was wrapped in a pretty silky cloth. "Here," Edwin said, "Happy birthday, my sweet wife."

The box was heavy, and Karyn immediately placed it on the end of the table. She stole a shy glance at Edwin before pulling the cloth away and sliding off the wooden lid. There were dozens of tiny books inside, healing books, stories of the Land of Zertrin, and songbooks. "Oh, Edwin," said Karyn. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

She hugged her husband tightly and felt her throat burning. "You're too good to me!"

Edwin laughed. "I hope you won't be so bored during the days I'm gone hunting now."

"Well, I'll certainly miss you," she confessed, "But I won't be bored." They both laughed and Karyn pulled each book out to inspect while Edwin stepped outside to butcher a blue owl.

When Edwin returned, Karyn was seated near the fire with a book in hand. She looked up, suddenly realizing she hadn't yet cleared the table or cleaned the kitchen. She should've started cooking lunch a while ago, but she had lost track of time. The stories concerning the legendary key makers and a spirit named Horyl had her captivated. But at least the look on Edwin's face was a mixture of anger *and* amusement.

"Karyn," he snapped. "Come here."

After gingerly setting the book back into the box, Karyn approached Edwin hesitantly. "I'm so sorry, Edwin," she said, "I must have lost track of time. It won't happen again."

"See that is doesn't," he replied, a warning look in his blue eyes. "Or you know what the consequences will be."

"Yes, Edwin," she said, bowing her head. "I'll clean up and start lunch right now."

Edwin swatted her backside once sharply as she moved past him.



## Chapter 4

Karyn was snuggled next to Edwin near the fire, enjoying the peaceful moment with her husband. Until she remembered the trouble from the Land of Holon. “Edwin, have your dreams been strange lately?”

She noticed his eyes flash and he seemed hesitant to speak. “Yes. I am confident that it is a Holon shapeshifter nearing the Cold Top that has influenced my dream spirits.”

“Will he hurt us?”

“Before the snows started up again, I placed flaggarock underneath the ground in a circle around the cabin. If he sets foot inside, then he will turn to ash. When I smell him close, I will hunt him down so that he won’t be a problem while we are journeying to Strellia.”

Karyn cringed. It didn’t worry her that Edwin roamed the Cold Top hunting rolabears and other beasts, but a Holon shapeshifter sounded dreadfully dangerous. “I’m afraid for you, Edwin.”

He chuckled. “There’s no need for that. I killed a shapeshifter once during my days as a mortal. I am much stronger now and their weaknesses haven’t changed in five hundred years. I will be fine.”

Before Karyn could reply, a wild roar pierced the night, an otherworldly noise that rang in their ears.

“The wild beasts know springtime is almost upon us. You have obeyed my rule to remain inside the cabin well since the last time I punished you for it. I know the temptation to venture outside will return to you full force once you see flowers and berries outside your window. I need to you understand how dangerous springtime on the Cold Top can be.” His voice was grave and deeper than usual.

“I understand. I won’t venture outside,” she promised.

“You mustn’t open the door or the windows for a moment.”

“Not even the windows?” Karyn complained. “But the air will smell so sweet and the breezes warm for a change.”

The stern look on Edwin’s face made her regret that statement. “No. Not even the windows. Many of the beasts would catch your scent and push an open window further up to gain entrance to the cabin so that they could enjoy you as a snack.”

Karyn's heart sank. So much for enjoying the short but beautiful springtime upon the Cold Top. There was no summertime with the heat as blistering as in the Land of Zertrin. Only frigid cold and a short springtime at the appointed time each year.

#

When springtime officially arrived, Edwin brought home less wild game and more fruits and berries from the surrounding woods. He also brought plenty of fresh flowers each day for Karyn to arrange in vases around the house. But he still refused allowing her to open even one window, even when he was at home.

Karyn longed to sit outside upon a bed of grass and read her books. She contemplated disobeying Edwin, but she feared the punishment as much as she dreaded disappointing him. If only that awful Holon shapeshifter wasn't lingering around in search of Edwin!

One afternoon, when Edwin was checking the woods for signs of the shapeshifter, Karyn caught sight of a small rolabear outside their home. In fact, it seemed to be walking circles around the cabin, rising upon its hind legs to gaze into the windows. Its color was strange, she thought, so strange that it might not even be a rolabear. Its dark fur gleamed with the hint of green.

She watched it for a while before coming to the conclusion that it wasn't a rolabear or a beast of the Cold Top at all. It was the Holon shapeshifter! It had to be!

Her heart pounded as she imagined having to watch Edwin battle the creature, fearful of what this shapeshifter could transform into. This creature had been commissioned by the kin of the men from Holon that Edwin had killed, no doubt. It had to be stopped so they could leave the Cold Top. Springtime would end soon and Edwin refused to travel down the mountain with Karyn while the shapeshifter was still loose.

Suddenly, Edwin's words came back to her, "If he sets foot inside, then he will turn to ash."

The flaggarock!

Without contemplating the situation further, Karyn bravely flung the front door open and stepped back, waiting to witness the Holon shapeshifter enter the cabin and turn to ash. This horrid creature's death would be her release from the Cold Top.

She would see the Palace of Lights soon!

Her stomach flipped when she heard the green, furry creature shuffling around the cabin towards the door. Her heart pounded when its massive head poked around the doorway, loudly sniffing the air. It could smell her! Its feet were a smidge away from entering the house. Just a little further, she thought, come inside you dreadful beast!

She watched the Holon shapeshifter take its first step inside, but its body didn't turn to ash immediately. She panicked when its black marble eyes looked up at her and a low growl rippled in the beast's throat. The creature remained in an attack position, crouched with just its two front paws inside the cabin. Just the two front paws! Perhaps its whole body had to be inside for it to become ash.

Karyn gulped and sent silent prayers to Stretta and Retta that she hadn't made a foolish mistake. Then she stepped forward and shook her long hair, imagining this action would cause her scent to hit the creature's nose full force.

It worked. The furry beast took several steps inside the cabin, but the thing did not turn to ash.

Her heart contracted and she thought of Edwin. She hadn't listened to his warning about opening the door, and now she was about to die. The creature wasn't a Holon shapeshifter after all. It wasn't a rolabear, but a strange creature of the Cold Top unfamiliar to her.

The creature moved closer, its large nose rippling as it drew in her scent. Her lip quivered. There was nowhere to run and she would soon die. Since she was the last descendant of the House of Wansing, there would be no way for her grandmother's debt to be repaid to Edwin, no matter what Edwin wished. She had been so foolish and now those she loved would suffer.

The green creature barred its jagged teeth and growled louder. She closed her eyes and tensed for the attack. When moments passed and the attack never came, she thought perhaps she was already dead. Perhaps the creature had killed her that quickly.

Karyn slowly opened her eyes, but creature was dead on the floor, its neck snapped and its tongue hanging loose from between vicious teeth.

Edwin was there, standing above the beast and panting. She looked at him with wide eyes. She hadn't even heard the struggle, yet her Crigon husband had apparently killed this beast with his bare hands.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Too petrified to speak yet, Karyn only nodded.

Edwin tugged the creature outside and closed the door. From the window, she saw him dragging it towards the woods. She longed for his return, yet it was a fearful anticipation. She had been foolish and blatantly disobedient of his strictest rule.

There would be consequences, and they would be harsh. Edwin always made sure the punishment fit the crime, and that knowledge left her blood running cold.

She thought of pulling out the tall chair and taking her clothes off in preparation for the inevitable punishment, but she was shaking too much to move from the window. When Edwin emerged from the edge of the woods, he was walking quickly towards the short tree near the side of the cabin. She watched him pull a thin branch from the tree and use his pocketknife to smooth the leaves from it.

Her stomach turned to water and she almost fell to the floor. A switch! Edwin was going to switch her!

“Karyn,” Edwin began, “I don’t even know what to say to you.” His voice was dangerously low. And his tone was as icy as the mountain peaks of the Cold Top at the height of winter.

“Edwin, please let me explain,” Karyn said through her sobs. Edwin was looming over her, the frightening switch held tight in his hand.

“No!” he shouted, and he snapped the switch against the window sill, causing Karyn to jump.

“But . . . aren’t you going to allow me to explain myself? I can’t believe you would take a switch to me without even listening to my side of the story.”

“Let me guess,” he drawled. “You thought this yemlaboch was the Holon shapeshifter? You thought you could open the door and lure it inside so that it would turn to ash?”

Karyn paled. Edwin obviously understood her better than she imagined. Yet he still held the switch, and his eyes were on fire with the promise of a harsh thrashing. She gulped and wiped the tears from her face. “Yes, Edwin. That’s what happened.”

For a moment, Edwin’s face flickered with compassion. “You did a very foolish thing, Karyn. But surely you must know there are strange creatures on the Cold Top that you’ve never heard of before?”

“Yes, Edwin, I know now.”

His eyes darkened and he gripped her arm. “After this punishment, I doubt you will think for a moment of opening the door for anything other than me.”

It was all Karyn could do to force her body towards the tall chair with Edwin. He’d left the switch on the table along the way, obviously intending to use it later to drive the point home. With trembling fingers, she slid her dress down and stood naked before her very angry husband.

The spanking began as soon as Karyn was over Edwin’s lap, pinned securely in place. He pelted her cheeks and thighs with stinging slaps, never once pausing or caressing her mounds. She cried out several times, especially when he concentrated two or three slaps repeatedly upon the same tender area.

The pain was as great as the shame she felt for having disobeyed her husband. Of all the punishments he'd given her before, this one was definitely the most deserved. Again and again his hand came down sharply across her bottom, and Karyn sobbed freely, now completely limp across his lap.

Just as his hand came to rest upon her blistered buttocks, Karyn began to whimper "I'm sorry" over and over again. Her heart was breaking under the realization of how stupidly she'd behaved.

Edwin's hand remained resting upon her bottom, but he didn't caress her stinging flesh or give any indication that he would. This punishment was much different than all the previous ones had been. This time her disobedience had almost cost her her life and ruined their plans to enter Stretta as husband and wife, not to mention the impact upon Karyn's grandmother's soul being lost forever in the Caves of Terr.

Finally, Edwin sat her up on his lap and allowed her to cry against him for a while. "I'm so sorry, Edwin," she sobbed. "I was so stupid!"

"Shh!" Edwin soothed. "Your punishment is almost over."

The switch! Karyn had forgotten all about the awful switch on the table. "Oh, please, Edwin . . . not the switch!" she begged. "I learned my lesson, I swear it. I'll never open the door again." Her eyes turned towards the switch fearfully, and her heart sank when Edwin led her towards the table.

With a trembling body and a burning bottom, Karyn reluctantly bend over the table to bury her face in her palms. She lifted her head just as Edwin retrieved the switch, bracing for the inevitable pain that would soon follow.

For a while, Edwin's footsteps were the only noise in the room, and Karyn realized she'd been holding her breath in dreadful expectation. He seemed to be pacing behind her, prolonging her fear of experiencing this new method of punishment. Though she'd never been switched before, she imagined the sting would be far greater than the terrible belt.

The switch grazed across her thighs and quivering orbs and Edwin seemed to finally take position. She whimpered and covered her face again, certain that it was about to begin.

"The most important rule for you to survive the Cold Top is to remain inside the cabin. I've told you a thousand times to never open the front door, FOR ANY REASON." His voice was thunderous and icy at the same time, a tone that sent shivers down her spine.

When the switch finally came down swiftly across her bottom cheeks, Karyn gasped and dug her nails into the wood of the table. Her suspicions had been correct . . . it was ten times worse than the belt! Again and again the switch swooshed through the air and landed upon her reddened thighs and cheeks. Each punishing blow left a thin welt in its place, and Karyn was

soon sobbing uncontrollably across the table. When she was far past the point of bearing further pain, Edwin placed the switch down.

“It’s over, Karyn,” he finally said, helping her to rise up. She collapsed into his arms and he carried her to the bearskin bed, laying her gently down.

“Shh . . .” he soothed, rubbing her back through her hiccups.

Karyn felt Edwin’s hand move down to gently rub the tender flesh on her bottom and upper thighs. “Oh, Edwin,” she said, “I’m truly sorry.”

He leaned down to kiss her forehead. “I know you are.”

She looked up into the blue eyes offset by his dark face. “Do you forgive me?” Her voice was a broken whimper and hot tears still flowed from her swollen eyes.

“Yes, Karyn,” he said, “I forgive you. I know I was hard on you, but if I hadn’t come home when I did . . .” Edwin left that sentence unfinished and embraced Karyn as if he never intended to let her go.

“No,” she said. “I deserved that punishment. I deserved the switch.”

Edwin brushed a strand of matted hair away from her tear streaked face. “I hope I never have to use that switch on you again, Karyn.”

They remained entwined upon the bearskin rug until it was time for Karyn to start dinner. Her backside still stung terribly, and her movements were slow. But Edwin remained inside the cabin, helping her set the table and prepare soup with the fresh herbs that now grew abundantly in the surrounding woods.

When dinner was prepared, Edwin helped Karyn lower herself into the chair and push her towards the table. His gentleness touched her heart as much as his forgiveness had, and she looked forward to falling asleep wrapped in his arms. He hadn’t taken her as he normally did after a punishment, and she doubted he would tonight. Yes, this punishment had been different, but she reminded herself yet again just how badly she’d deserved it.

“The Holon shapeshifter is no more,” Edwin suddenly said.

Karyn looked up from her soup, startled by his unexpected words. “What do you mean?”

“I found him lurking in the woods in the form of a Crigon. Actually, he’d taken on my form and was nearing the cabin. I suspect he was going to attempt to enter the cabin posing as me, which is precisely why I planted the flaggarock.”

“Oh, Edwin! That’s wonderful!” Karyn’s heart soared. It was now safe to leave the Cold Top!

“We’ll be leaving in three days time to the secret passage that leads to the lands near Etrolleli and Strellia.”

“Why three days? Why not now?” Karyn was impatient to reach warmer lands, and she was dying to see the Whispering Forest and the Palace of Lights.

“After I killed the Holon shapeshifter, I meditated in the woods and made contact with my dream spirits. They advised me that an extended family of rolabears is roaming the path we must travel, but in three days time they will be a safe distance away.”

Karyn smiled. “Alright, spirit man,” she teased. “If you say so.”

Edwin shot her a mock warning look, but he soon joined in her laughter. Their banter was a cure for the tension between them.

“I will help you pack the necessities. The journey to the secret path will take us three days,” said Edwin. “Once we make it off the Cold Top, it will take us another two days to reach the edge of the Whispering Forest.”

“And the Palace of Lights?” Karyn asked. “How long will it take to reach it?”

“According to my dream spirits, it will take us another two days to reach the Palace of Lights.”

Karyn added up the days in her head and felt a stab of annoyance, though she didn’t let it show. She would have to be patient during the seven day journey to the Palace of Lights.

That night as they lay together on the bearskin bed, Karyn felt something hard and fleshy across Edwin’s back. “What’s this?” she asked, struggling to see through the glow of fire.

“Just a scar. It will be completely healed by the morning,” replied Edwin.

Karyn gasped when she saw the scarred flesh, a row of four frightening marks across Edwin’s muscular back. “I don’t understand,” she said. “You didn’t have these last night, but they look like they’ve been tended by a healer.”

Edwin laughed. “No healer. I’m immortal, remember?”

“Yes, but, I thought you were mortal as long as you were outside the walls of Strellia.”

“I am mortal at the moment; but it takes a lot more to kill me than it would a mortal man. I heal rapidly, even from most life threatening injuries.”

Karyn looked thoughtful for a moment. “You’re a Crigon, yet you look very much like a man from the Land of Zertrin, albeit much larger than most men. Did Crigons and those from the Land of Zertrin once live peacefully together?”

Edwin smiled. “I’m surprised you never asked me this question before. Yes, Crigons once coexisted peacefully with those from the Land of Zertrin, long before the Land of Holon existed.”

“So, what happened then?” Karyn felt foolish for not having asked this question sooner. She loved to read, but had yet to open all the history books from her birthday. Most of her reading time had been spent furthering her studies as a healer.

“Once, there was no Land of Zertrin or any division at all between the peoples of Earth. There were two races upon the lands, Crigon and man. Crigons were mostly hunters and preferred to live as nomads across the vast lands. Man preferred the comfort of settlements and farming. But Crigons and man traded and sometimes intermarried. It was this way for thousands of years, long before the Land of Holon was established.

“Stetta and Retta were our sister goddesses, worshipped equally among all peoples. There came a time when the Crigons wished to leave mortal life behind, and journey to the gates of the Land of After, which is what Strellia and Ettonelli were once called as one. There was a nasty plague upon the Crigons, one which had caused men to shun them. Stretta and Retta decided to split their duties between Crigons and man but leave windows between the two afterlives. All Crigons entered Strellia where they live as immortals, a chosen few leaving in pairs every hundred years to conceive children in the mortal world, though these children may be born and grow to the median age within the walls of Strellia.”

Karyn laced her fingers between Edwin’s dark hair. “I wish there was a way for all in the Land of Zertrin to know these things. All those poor people living in the woods as outcastes . . .”

“Ah, but most of those people are murders, Karyn. Very few of the outcastes are innocents touched by Crigons. Most who are touched by a roaming Crigon never report the incident and live among men in the Land of Zertrin, just as your grandmother did.”

“Those from the Land of Holon . . . I know they are men, but they are evil, aren’t they?” asked Karyn.

“Yes. Those from the Land of Holon are souls damned for eternity in the Caves of Terr. Every ten years, the tormented spirits in the Caves of Terr fly free through the forests in the Land of Zertrin.”

“The Week of Solitude!” Karyn exclaimed. “I remember this, when I was eight and then again when I was eighteen. We observed the Week of Solitude. Everyone in the village was forbidden to leave their homes. We remained silent for an entire week, and then on the seventh day there was a huge party that lasted for two days.”



“Very good,” Edwin mused. “Yes, this occurs during the Week of Solitude. The damned souls from the Caves of Terr fly through the forests and inhabit the bodies of the living, usually finding only outcastes – criminals who are damned to the Caves of Terr upon death anyway.”

“So . . . those from the Land of Holon, they are the outcastes inhabited by the evil spirits from the Caves of Terr?”

“Precisely. The five that I killed were riding horses towards a village in the Land of Zertrin. I vowed that while I searched for your grandmother’s descendents, I would kill any of them I came across.”

They were both silent for a while, Edwin seemingly as lost in contemplation as Karyn was.

“What was your wife’s name?” Karyn suddenly asked. She had always treaded lightly around this subject, but curiosity was getting the better of her.

“I do not know,” answered Edwin with a tinge of sadness in his voice.

“What do you mean? How can you not know?” Karyn was confused.

“When an immortal Crigon loses a mate, all memory of that mate is erased.”

“But . . . why?”

Edwin gazed into the fire. “By Stretta’s decree, memories of a lost mate are erased from the living mate’s mind upon death. It is done so that an immortal Crigon may find a new mate without sorrow hindering the rest of their days.”

“So, you don’t remember anything about your wife?” asked Karyn.

“I remember leaving the walls of Strellia with someone by my side. And after that, I remember seeing a dead Crigon woman on the floor below your grandmother.”

“Why did you not kill my grandmother on the spot?”

“Because I considered taking your grandmother as my mate, forcing her into the walls of Strellia with me. But she disappeared from her village while I buried my mate in the Whispering Forest, covering her scent with a medicine spell so I could not follow.”

“But you knew the moment she died? You could detect her then?”

“Yes, her spell was broken the moment she died. My dream spirits were no longer blocked and I ran into the men that brought you to the Cold Top on my way to your village.” Edwin kissed the top of her head and pulled her closer.

“I was terrified of you that first day,” Karyn confessed. “I had never been more frightened in my life.”

“Ah wife, but you love me now, don’t you?” he teased.

“Yes, I love you with all my mortal human heart.” They laughed and Edwin gently patted her ever stinging bottom. Karyn imagined it would hurt to sit down for a week, possibly longer. She melted against Edwin and they both fell fast asleep.

#

“We’ll reach the secret passage off the Cold Top by nightfall. As the stars shine down, the path will be illuminated and carry us down to the outskirts of the Land of Zertrin,” said Edwin.

“Sounds perfect. I can’t wait to see the Palace of Lights in a few days,” said Karyn as she wiped sweat from her brow. The air was much warmer as they neared the edge of the Cold Top, and the walk wasn’t so bad – even with her sore bottom.

They held hands as they traveled through the thinning forest, each of them carrying a light pack. It hadn’t been necessary to bring a lot of supplies, since the forest provided plenty of food in between the animals Edwin hunted and the fruiting trees.

When twilight gathered and the stars were still invisible but the forest dark, Edwin lit a lantern to light the way. Karyn gasped when she saw a wide stream of sparkling white light up ahead. It curved down from the Cold Top like a rainbow.

“We’ll step on together and the light will carry us the land below. Hold my hand and do not be afraid,” Edwin instructed when they reached the edge of the Cold Top and the illuminated path was at their feet.

Karyn nodded and clung to Edwin for dear life. They stepped onto the light in unison and immediately felt their bodies moving, slowly down and away from the imprisonment of the Cold Top. When they reached solid land, Karyn let out a sigh of relief. The Whispering Forest would be safe and they would reach it in two days, finally she could experience freedom at its fullest.

## Chapter 5

“Time to set up camp,” Edwin announced.

“But . . . I’m not tired and you have the lantern. Can’t we travel a bit through the night?” asked Karyn.

“No. We’ve been walking all day, much later than we normally do. You must get your rest, Karyn.”

“Just a little further, Edwin,” she whined. “We already had dinner, so what harm will it do to walk a bit more?”

“I’ve given you my answer, Karyn. Now take your pack off and help me set up camp,” replied Edwin as he dropped his own pack to the ground.

“We could cut a half day or maybe a whole day from our journey if we walk longer each day, Edwin. Just because I’m a weak mortal doesn’t mean I can’t . . .”

“Enough!” Edwin thundered.

Despite the fact that her husband towered over her slender form with crossed arms, Karyn didn’t desist. “You’ve been bossy during this entire trip!” she declared. “This is the first time I’ve asked for anything since we left the cabin. It’s not fair!”

Karyn immediately realized the error of her ways as Edwin gripped her arm and led her towards a fallen tree. He seated himself and pulled her across his lap in one swift movement.

“I think perhaps your attitude could use an adjustment,” he declared as he brought his hand down swiftly across the seat of Karyn’s dress. It was the first time he’d ever punished her with clothing on, but hurt nearly as bad as a bare bottom spanking.

Though the marks from the awful switching had faded days ago, Karyn realized just how tender her flesh remained as the spanking continued. When she kicked and struggled to stand, Edwin pinned her legs beneath his and held her hands firmly at the small of her back.

“You will speak to me in a respectful tone!” he said before delivering another round of smacks to the tenderest area at the base of her cheeks. “And you will accept my decisions without pouting like a child!”

Edwin increased the rhythm of spanks and Karyn ceased her struggles against him. Her bottom was on fire, and she felt warm tears gathering. “Please!” she begged, “I’m sorry, Edwin! I’m sorry!”

But the spanking continued for some time, and Karyn accepted her fate and remained still for the stinging punishment. Perhaps she had been mouthier than she'd realized. Edwin always made good decisions, yet she had challenged him a few times during the day.

When the spanking was over, Edwin kept her pinned across his lap. He pulled her dress up and rubbed her tender, reddened flesh.

"I'm sorry," Karyn murmured through her quiet sobs.

"You're forgiven," Edwin replied, cradling her in his lap. "I hope we can complete the rest of this journey with you on your best behavior."

"I'll be good. I promise."

"Once we enter the Whispering Forest, we will be surrounded by trees . . . trees from which I can cut another switch."

Karyn gulped and a shiver ran down her spine at the mere mention of the switch. That was one experience she never wanted to repeat. "Yes, Edwin," she said. "I understand."

"Good," he said as he shifted her legs apart. Karyn gasped as his fingers brushed against her sex, delicately rubbing the moist folds between her thighs. And as the moon appeared from behind a cloud, bright and massive in the sky, Edwin bent Karyn over the fallen tree and roughly claimed her, muttering a perplexing prayer to his dream spirits.

#

The sun was hot, even through the shade of the ancient trees of the Whispering Forest, but Karyn didn't mind. She was finally there! Deep inside the Whispering Forest and less than a day from the Palace of Lights.

Occasionally, Edwin patted her bottom as they navigated through the thick underbrush. Each time he did this she couldn't suppress the fluttering in her stomach or keep the crimson blush from her face. She was very much in love with her handsome Crigon husband, stern though he was.

When twilight beckoned throughout the Whispering Forest and the nighttime insects began their ethereal chorus, Karyn expected Edwin to announce they would set up camp for the evening. Despite how much she longed to reach the Palace of Lights, she dared not broach the subject – such an action might prompt another spanking!

Edwin suddenly squeezed her hand. "The Palace of Lights isn't too far now. We will rest there tonight."

Karyn squealed in delight and kissed Edwin's hand. "Thank you!"

Sure enough, the forest soon began to glow seemingly of its own accord, and Edwin extinguished the lantern. The night air itself shimmered around them, and the chorus of insects transformed into something more beautiful than Karyn had ever heard.

“Behold, the Palace of Lights,” said Edwin once they reached the clearing where the tall, crystalline structure rested. “This is where the roaming Crigons often travel to conceive a child before returning to Strellia.”

“So . . . you’ve been here before?” asked Karyn.

“Yes, although I don’t remember much about my time here, since my mate was here with me. I assume we sought the help of a healer – your grandmother – in a village after encountering difficulties in conceiving.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. And it was. It was the most magnificent structure, something more incredible than she could’ve ever imagined. The peaks of the glowing white structure kissed the night sky. A bright door summoned them from the clearing, a shimmering entrance that faded from yellow to red and back again.

The interior was just as magnificent as the outside, intricately decorated bedrooms and spacious dwelling areas were dispersed throughout the structure. Karyn imagined it would hold hundreds of Crigon couples during the fertility season.

“The next hundred year period won’t arrive for another thirty years,” said Edwin. “We have the whole palace to ourselves.”

Karyn giggled and ran ahead. “And where shall we sleep?” she asked.

“You may choose your favorite bedroom, my wife,” he said. “But the hour is late and I am tired, so please choose quickly.”

As they moved deeper into the halls of the palace, Karyn stuck her head into each bedroom. They were all open and beautiful, but she finally decided on one decorated in blues and silvers with a skylight to the stars.

“Now all we have to do is mate until you are with child, my love,” Edwin said as they crawled beneath the soft, shimmering coverlets.

“Sounds wonderful,” Karyn replied as Edwin pressed his hardness against her thigh.

“Just remember that there are still rules here.”

Karyn looked up, her brows furrowed. “What kind of rules could possibly exist here? I thought the forest was protected from dangerous beasts and those from the Land of Holon.”

“Yes, it is. But I expect you to remain close to me, nonetheless. Just in case we were to encounter another roaming Crigon.”

“But . . .” Karyn started but Edwin put a finger to her lips.

“I also expect you to be on your best behavior. You will tell me before you leave this level of the palace or the palace itself. I also expect you to take good care of yourself. Since you are trying to conceive a child you must get plenty of rest and eat healthy.”

Karyn couldn’t restrain herself from rolling her eyes, despite the fact that Edwin was hovering over her underneath the coverlet. The palace was supposed to be a thousand times safer than the Cold Top, but Edwin was turning it into yet another prison.

“But . . .” she began, but Edwin pressed his finger against her mouth again.

“You will obey me in this, or you will suffer the consequences. Furthermore, if you ever roll your eyes at me again, I will put you over my knee and blister your bare bottom until it is as red as the moon apples in the Whispering Forest. Is that understood?” His eyes were dark and his tone menacing.

“Yes, Edwin,” she said, mentally chastising herself for rolling her eyes directly in her strict husband’s face.

#

Time passed in the Palace of Lights, each day like the one before. But that was alright with Karyn, for each day was spent roaming the palace and the surrounding Whispering Forest with Edwin by her side. He promised her that the afterlife would hold even greater joys, but that idea was hard to imagine. Life in the Palace of Lights with Edwin was perfect . . . most of the time.

Occasionally, Karyn longed for the freedom to explore the levels of the palace on a whim, and she seethed when Edwin insisted she pace herself. She had an intense urge to investigate every corner of every room, but her husband insisted she only explore a little each day. “If you do it all today, what will you do tomorrow?” he would say.

The palace was immune to the collection of dust and other grime, so Karyn’s household duties only consisted of keeping their bedroom tidy, as well as the kitchen down the hall which they often used. It took little time each day for these things, which left plenty of time for Karyn to read her books and gaze upon the great Whispering Forest from the numerous balconies in the palace.

One day Edwin returned from an early morning hunting trip into the forest with a grim countenance. Karyn immediately sensed his mood and rushed towards him, her pretty face crinkled with concern.

“What is it?” she asked.

His blue eyes narrowed as he gazed down and cupped her face. “My dream spirits came to me with a warning while I was hunting.”

Fear penetrated Karyn, deep into her core. The Palace of Lights was supposed to be safe, and brave Edwin looked shaken with trouble. “What . . . what did they say?”

“A lone roaming Crigon male, possessed by an evil spirit from the Caves of Terr is nearing the edges of the Whispering Forest.”

“But I thought the forest was protected . . . so how can this be?”

“There is no protection against a Crigon entering the forest, possessed or otherwise,” Edwin said.

“Does he know we are staying in the palace?” asked Karyn, her voice cracking under the fear building within her chest.

“Yes, but there is protection in the cellar of the palace. The foundation was built with flaggarock. It is impossible to kill the spirit within the roaming Crigon, but it works as a repellant. He won’t be able to set foot inside the cellar.”

“But how will we ever leave when it’s time to travel to Strellia?” asked Karyn.

A shadow fell across Edwin’s face. “That I do not know. But I know that you must be kept safe. If I kill the roaming Crigon, then the evil spirit will soar freely and possibly enter my body. The usual strength of a Crigon body renders this circumstance different since the spirit will not vanish under death as in a man. If the roaming Crigon kills me, then he will seek entrance into Strellia with you as his mate. The consequences would be disastrous. I fear it would spark a war between Etronelli, Strellia, and the Caves of Terr.”

“So . . . we must hide in the palace cellar until this roaming Crigon gives up and leaves us?” Karyn was almost hysterical. How long could they survive down there? How many years would pass until the evil spirit from the Caves of Terr gave up?

“Yes. I’m sorry, Karyn,” he said. “We must get busy at once and move to store as much food as possible in the cellar. There’s an old hearth for cooking and I can move one of the smaller beds so that we will be comfortable.”

Karyn was terrified, but numbed at the same time. Their carefree days of scampering about the Palace of Lights and venturing through the Whispering Forest had ended, brutally and swiftly.

The next two days were hurriedly spent gathering food from the forest and the kitchens in the palace. Yet another marvel of the Palace of Lights was that food within the walls never

spoiled. Edwin heaved crates of wild fruit and berries down the winding cellar steps, while Karyn took to organizing their living space in the cold, dark room.

As they crawled into bed that night, Karyn noticed how tense Edwin's body was. "My dream spirits say the roaming Crigon will arrive at the palace in the late morning," he said. "You are NEVER to even set foot near the cellar stairs, as they are made of wood and he may stand upon them."

"I understand, Edwin," replied Karyn with a heavy heart. If only she'd conceived a child by now . . .

"I mean it," he said, his voice razor sharp. "Any disobedience from you will be met with the swiftest, harshest punishment."

Karyn wondered if he had a switch hidden amongst the supplies in the cellar, but she dared not ask. "I promise to listen to you."

He kissed her lips lightly and they fell asleep huddled beneath the piled coverlets on the tiny bed. They awoke to no sunlight, for there were no windows in the cellar. The fire in the hearth smoldered and the lantern on the table burned low.

Karyn fixed a light breakfast, figuring that the somber mood would hinder Edwin's appetite as much as it hindered hers.

Just before lunchtime, a noise came from the levels above the cellar.

Footsteps.

The roaming Crigon male possessed by an evil spirit from the Caves of Terr was inside the Palace of Lights!

Karyn found herself wrapped in Edwin's arms atop their bed, burying her head in his broad chest and shaking with fear. Most of the spirits from the Caves of Terr had committed unspeakable evils as men. She knew the evil Crigon couldn't get her in the cellar, but the fact that he walked above them left her blood running cold.

The noise from above lasted throughout the day. Karyn eventually occupied herself with baking bread and reading. Edwin paced across the flaggarock floor in a trance, telling Karyn he was seeking guidance from his dream spirits.

"He knows we're down here," said Edwin on their seventh morning in the cellar.

"Did your dream spirits tell you that?" asked Karyn, looking up from the breakfast she was preparing.

"Yes."



Hopelessness and fear was all that Karyn knew at that moment. They would never escape the cellar. If she died before reaching Stretta, then her soul would be sent to Etonelli unattached to Edwin. If Edwin died before reaching Stretta, then his soul would enter the rebirth cycle and Edwin as he was now would be forever lost.

They made love when the footsteps were silent during the darkest hours of night. They stopped talking about reaching Stretta. They stopped talking about conceiving a child, though Karyn longed to feel a swell in her belly.

Thirty days passed and Karyn awoke in a sweat. Edwin was fast asleep, but she slid out of bed to find Edwin's spear. Her dream spirits had appeared to her as a beautiful chorus. Her dream spirits had appeared to her for the first time in over a decade.

She would be with child soon, they had sung.

And there was a way to destroy the evil Crigon upstairs, his body along with the evil spirit within him.

Her fingers bled as she pulled flaggarock pebbles from the cracks of the walls. She put them directly into the bread pan and placed it directly atop the smoldering hearth. Flaggarock will melt under the power of fire and a powerful prayer to Stretta and Retta, the dream spirits had sung.

And as Edwin slept still, Karyn prayed and watched the pebbles melt over the heat of the hearth. The pearly liquid was a swirling of blues when she removed the bread pan. Immediately, she dipped the tip of Edwin's sharpened spear and held it up until the melted flaggarock had cooled.

Karyn held in her hands a weapon capable of completely destroying a roaming Crigon inhabited by an evil spirit from the Caves of Terr.

"Edwin! Edwin!" she called from the foot of the bed.

Her handsome husband awoke with a start. "What's wrong? Why are you holding the spear?"

"Look," she said, pointing to the tip. "The dream spirits told me to melt flaggarock to reinforce your spear. It will kill the evil Crigon. Both his body and spirit." Karyn smiled as she remembered the dream spirits had also sung that she would soon carry Edwin's child. But she would save that happy news for later.

Edwin took the spear and embraced Karyn. "Your dream spirits have returned?" he asked in wonderment after pulling away.

“Yes,” said Karyn, tears of joy streaking her face. After so many years of absence, her chorus of dream spirits had found her again.

“You will remain HERE until I return,” Edwin advised. “Under no circumstances are you to leave the cellar. Under no circumstances are you to even walk near the wooden steps.”

Karyn’s panicked over the thought of Edwin not returning, but she kept her expression confident and kissed her husband for luck. He strode up the wooden stairs and shut the door behind him.

The hours passed and Karyn was sick with worry. No sound was heard in the palace above. No footsteps. No voices. It was as silent as the grave.

“Edwin,” she whispered through a wave of tears. What if the dream spirits had misguided her? What if, despite the flaggarock spear, Edwin had failed to kill the Crigon?

Evening came and Edwin was still absent. He was dead, Karyn knew it. And when she remembered she hadn’t told him of their future child, she wept a river and fell asleep amidst the greatest sorrow ever known to her.

The dream spirits didn’t visit her that night. Karyn was suffocating in the cellar, and despite Edwin’s warning, she planned to leave. So, she melted more flaggarock pebbles and dipped another spear tip in the pearly liquid.

The Palace of Lights was silent, but most of the doors were open. The Whispering Forest was warm and filled with morning sunlight, but Edwin was nowhere to be found. After a while, Karyn began screaming his name to the trees, but only the whooping birds responded.

When darkness descended upon the land, Karyn dragged herself towards the palace with a heavy heart. She felt like the last person on Earth, left behind after the burning war with the Caves of Terr.

The stars and moon were bright, and it wasn’t hard to navigate through the underbrush. But Karyn gasped when firm hands seized her from behind, knocking the spear away. She struggled to move forward, believing that the evil Crigon had her in his grasp.

But her fears were soon erased when Edwin spoke into her ear. “As red as the moon apples in the Whispering Forest,” he drawled.

“Edwin!” she exclaimed, turning around to embrace her husband. He held her tight, but she could feel his anger.

She had left the cellar, despite Edwin’s instructions, and now she would be punished. Swiftly and harshly, just as he had warned.

“The evil Crigon has been destroyed,” said Edwin. “We are safe again.”

Karyn touched his face and breathed against his neck, thanking the goddesses that her beloved husband was not harmed.

As Edwin marched her to their old bedroom in the Palace of Lights, her emotions wavered between relief and fear. Edwin was alive! But . . . she had broken his strictest rule and would soon suffer the consequences.

“You know why you are about to be punished,” Edwin said. “Remove your dress. Now.”

Karyn complied, quickly slipping out of her dress. She stood frozen as Edwin sat on the edge of the bed. She didn’t want a spanking. She just wanted to fall asleep wrapped in her husband’s arms. And if she had just had more patience, then she wouldn’t be in so much trouble on a night that should have been joyous.

“Please, Edwin,” she said. “Please don’t punish me. I just got so worried that you were gone for so long.”

“Enough!” Edwin roared. “Excuses will not get you out of this punishment. I told you to wait in the cellar until I returned. No matter how long I was gone! What if it had been the evil Crigon who had found you in the Whispering Forest? Do you have any idea the things he would have done to you?”

Karyn dropped her face into her hands, sobbing. She had been so impatient and foolish. And Edwin was angry and disappointed in her. His earlier threat echoed in her mind. *As red as the moon apples of the Whispering Forest!*

“Come here. Now.”

Though her feet were heavy with reluctance, Karyn managed to move closer to Edwin. He pulled her over his lap, pinning her so that her bottom was high in the air and blood rushed to her face.

The spanking began immediately, his wide callused hand lashing speedily against her flesh without mercy. Smack! Smack! Smack!

Again and again, Edwin slapped his hand upon her upturned bottom, covering both her cheeks with a red truly as red as the moon apples of the Whispering Forest. It was the most painful bare bottom spanking Karyn had felt yet, almost as awful as the switching had been. She cried freely, but she didn’t beg him to stop. Edwin was a fair husband, and this spanking was much deserved.

Just when Karyn thought it couldn’t become worse, he started into her sweet spot where her thighs meet her buttocks. Only his legs pinning hers down kept her from kicking. It was

hard to remain still under so much pain, and she writhed on his lap as the spansks rained down again and again.

Without warning, Edwin stopped and pulled her into his lap, cupping her face firmly between the very hands he'd just used to punish. His eyes were icy and his entire body was tense. "Do you have any idea what he would've done to you?"

Karyn was forced to stare into his hurting eyes, though she longed to look away from his gaze. "Yes . . . and . . . I'm sorry. Please forgive me, Edwin," she said.

He stared at her for a long while, his deep blue eyes penetrating to her very soul. This was worse than the spanking, she decided. But when he kissed her, she knew all was forgiven and she melted against him.

Karyn gasped when he jumped up, carrying her to the top of the bed. She lay down and watched him stand tall above her, tugging his shirt off. Her heart quickened when he pulled the belt from his pants.

"Turn over," he said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Karyn obeyed, turning onto her stomach. She should have suspected her punishment wasn't over yet, given the transgression. But to her surprise, the slaps of the belt upon her bottom were light, truly erotic. Even as they snapped against her freshly punished flesh, it didn't hurt all that much.

When Edwin turned her over, he was completely undressed, standing in all his naked glory with his manhood brutally stiff.

"Spread your legs," he commanded.

As soon as Karyn's legs were bent and wide apart, he positioned himself near her moist folds with the belt still in hand. Her legs trembled and she moaned as he rubbed the tip of the belt against her delicate area.

"By the way," Edwin said, "You are forgiven." He smiled as he continued rubbing the tip of the belt over Karyn's burning folds.

They made love long into the night and in several different rooms in the Palace of Lights.

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It wasn't long before Karyn was with child and they were standing at the gates of Strellia, just as the dream spirits had promised. A fog of light enveloped them, slowly carrying them through the golden gates into the afterlife. The first thing Karyn noticed was the shimmering wall to the right of the stretching meadows.

“That, my wife, is a window between Strellia and Ettonelli,” Edwin said. “After we greet Stretta, we will go visit your lines of family – including your grandmother.”

Karyn gushed and kissed Edwin on the cheek, barely noticing the approaching group of Crigons who meant to welcome them.

Edwin guided Karyn ahead, his hand possessively patting her bottom. “Remember what I told you,” he said with a mock warning look. “There are rules here too.”

The END