

ORACLE



KATHERINE GREYLE

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LionHearted Publishing,[®] Inc.
P.O. Box 618
Zephyr Cove, NV 89448-0618
888-546-6478

Send us email at admin@LionHearted.com

Visit our web site www.LionHearted.com

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ISBN: 1-57343-028-5

Printed in the U.S.A.

Dixie, Allison, and Reverend Gaffron:
You kept me going when I would have quit.

Elisabeth:
You pushed me to levels I never imagined.

David:
You are the best hero a woman could ever love.

This book is dedicated to you all.

Thank you.



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Prologue



October 31, 2012

Jane Deerfield's hand hovered over the on/off switch, but she couldn't press it down. Turning off a computer always seemed a little like murder to her. Stopping access to millions of gigabytes of information was criminal, especially since she'd just spent five hours repairing the system, reloading the software, and making sure everything networked perfectly for the people who used it.

Jane stood up, hating to leave the dancing lights of the monitor's screensaver, even to stretch. She straightened, rolling her shoulders a bit before looking around. Except for the soft glow of the computer's monitor, the library was completely dark. Glancing at the clock in the upper corner of the screen, Jane gasped at the time.

Damn. Not only had she missed Mary's Halloween costume party, but federal curfew too. By a good two hours, no less. She hoped any

police she met understood the importance of her mission. The rest of the world might view her as a lowly computer nerd and perpetual student, but she knew in her heart she was a warrior bravely fighting to keep alive one of the last free centers of knowledge available to all.

Information was getting harder to come by in this information age. With the electrical blackouts and restricted net sites, not to mention the New Cold War eating up electronic products like candy, even big universities were finding it hard to keep their systems up and running.

But that, of course, was her job. Jane ran Boston University's computers. Well, she didn't run them in terms of being head of the department. They had pencil-pusher Dr. Beavesly doing that. She did all the work; maintaining the software and the machines, and keeping each and every terminal shining bright against the darkness of ignorance.

Jane straightened her shoulders, laughing at herself as she mentally added a stiff breeze, the right lighting, and of course super-hero music. She was Jane Deerfield, a.k.a. Oracle, defender of truth and justice and computer integrity throughout cyberspace. All she needed now were the bat-boots to go with her costume, because her orange high-tops just didn't seem to fit the image. Course, it didn't matter anyway, she thought sourly, since no one would ever see her awesome black leotard with the neon bat on the front this Halloween.

“Damn terrorists and their fragging homebody bombs,” she muttered. “They can’t blow-up some munitions dump. No. They have to go for *my* computers.”

She should have expected it, she knew. The psychos had been out in force ever since those last Dustmaker satellites went up. It seemed like every megalomaniac and his government was buying the latest and greatest weapons of destruction whether they understood the technology or not. It was getting hard to see the sun for all the satellite shadows.

No doubt about it. Some mutant virus had destroyed everyone’s common sense.

Sighing, Jane slipped her backpack on feeling depression settle in as well. She was a computer jockey, not a comic book heroine—more’s the pity. All she could do was her job, fighting ignorance in her own special way. She’d leave global politics to the mental cases in power.

Jane hunched her shoulders against the New England fall and started walking to the door.

There was no warning. Just a loud sound, felt more than heard. But Jane knew instantly that something awful had happened. She tensed to run, but didn’t know where. Should she go back to the library computer, the core of stored knowledge, making sure to save it? Or should she run to the central net hoping she could keep the whole system up?

She couldn't decide. And in that moment of indecision, she was caught.

There was no sound, just a blackness, like a rip in the air. Around its jagged edges everything was distorted, as though space shriveled, curling backwards like a paper slowly eaten by flame.

Then it was on her. The rip stretched and tore, as though reaching for her.

She ran, but it was too fast. One minute her feet were pounding on the stone floor. The next, she was suspended in a nightmare.

Nothing was around her, but that nothing was black and so very cold. She twisted, trying to keep her balance, but there was no up or down. Only incredible coldness. And the weight of ages pressing against her, choking her lungs, squeezing her body into a tiny pinprick of existence.

Her mind fought with the impossibility of it all, desperately scrambling for a logical handhold for escape. Then she had no thoughts at all.

Only pain.

She was dying.

Chapter One



*Forty-first day, Warming season,
Thirteenth year of the Seef*

Cold.

Ice cold.

Warmth. Blessed warmth, spreading like hot fudge on ice cream throughout her system. Starting at her forehead, sliding into her mind, it heated the tiny nooks and crannies of her body.

Jane sighed with delight and opened her eyes, then winced at the glaring sunlight. She felt a hand glide low over her forehead, shielding her from the glare. The hand was large and calloused, but gentle as it caressed her skin.

“*Yyi cquiness mnansirul?*” The voice was deep and lilting, like a magical river in an animated vid. It was beautiful. And insistent. “*Mnansirul?*”

“Huh?” One syllable was all she could force through her raw throat.

The hand slid away, and she blinked rapidly

trying to sort shape from shadow. A man was beside her, gently sliding his arm behind her shoulders. His touch was almost painful. Wherever he pressed against her, she felt tiny pin-pricks, like electricity shooting minute bolts of lightning through her skin.

This must be how a recharging battery feels, she thought. She knew the man was bringing her back to life in slow, torturous inches. He revitalized her cell by cell, but God, if this was living, maybe being a dead battery wasn't so bad.

Her head lolled back against his arm, and she felt his energy pulse through her with the beginnings of a first class headache.

Something wet pressed against her lips and before she realized what was happening, hot water seared across her tongue, thawing as it slid past.

She swallowed, waiting greedily for more. It came in patient mouthfuls, swallow by swallow. She drank it all, only vaguely realizing the water wasn't hot. It was probably tepid at best, but she was so very, very cold it burned as it went down.

Then he lay her back down on the grass, and she was able to see him clearly for the first time.

Wow. He was gorgeous; just how she'd create a leading man for some computer game. Somewhere in his thirties, his face was cut into hard planes and strong lines. His eyes were an intense dark blue swirled with mesmerizing gold

flecks that were the sexiest things she'd seen in a considerable career of guy watching. Add to that his golden brown hair and a sweet smile, and she was in love.

“Wh—” Her throat closed up, but she swallowed away the pain. “What happened?”

He shook his head, indicating he didn't understand.

“Where am I?” she asked, her words slow and deliberate. She had a vague impression of grass, trees, blue sky, and clean air, all of which meant she wasn't in Boston.

He settled her back down in the grass. She felt his fingertips run over her eyes again, closing them with a firm insistence. Despite her growing confusion, she felt herself succumb to their gentle urging.

Rest, his fingers seemed to say as they traveled across her cheek, stopping against her lips. He seemed to be holding back her questions, keeping her from speaking until she at last surrendered to his soothing caress.

Sleep, he urged.

She slept.



Jane moaned, rolled over and covered her ears against the sound of the oddest car alarms she'd ever heard. There must have been another explosion

because a whole slew of them were going off at once. Why weren't they the piercing electronic wails that she could tune out without a second thought? These were lyrical, shifting notes and tones like a bird call, except there were so many.

Bird call? A vague sense of dread stole over her, and she opened her eyes.

She saw a bug. A big black bug with red spots and long furry antennae ambling across her arm toward her face. She jumped up with a squeal, shaking her arm and fighting the nausea. Fortunately, the startled thing flew away. Unfortunately, the nausea was caused by her sudden movement, not the sight of a strange new member of the beetle family.

She dropped her head into her hands and took deep, painful breaths, her chest muscles fighting the movement. Suddenly she felt him beside her. His hands held her lightly across the shoulders. She didn't move. Gradually she felt a warmth spreading from his hands, through her shoulders, gently sinking into her body. She vaguely remembered hot fudge over ice cream, but this heat was different, deeper. Like frozen popcorn in a microwave, she felt herself pop awake, cell by cell as she heated from the inside out.

Then he stopped, slowly withdrawing while she was still half done. Disappointed, she opened her eyes and turned to say something, but the words never formed. Instead, her jaw went slack

as she took in her environment.

She was at the edge of a meadow ringed with trees and birds. Lots of real birds, like in an aviary. There wasn't a carport in sight. Reaching down, she touched soft, springy grass that hadn't been mowed in months. A cool breeze caressed her tongue, and she shut her mouth with a snap. Gone was the familiar scent of exhaust, the acrid tang of pollution. In its place was a sweetness both fresh and laden with the heavy scents of a garden.

"Ugh. What is that smell?" She wrinkled her nose, trying to adjust to the faint electric pulse of the air.

"Yyi stransve hrenvivr?"

She looked at her gorgeous hero. He seemed the same today as yesterday, his soft white shirt alternately flaring or flattening against his broad chest according to the capriciousness of the wind.

"Svenetrins? KVanteke? Grona?" He was asking her something, his voice changing slightly with each word. She knew her expression was one of complete stupidity, but she was still in reboot and couldn't think of a thing to say.

He sighed. It was a masculine sigh, full of rippling chest muscles and frustration with the female sex. She'd seen it a thousand times from her father, her brother, even her boss.

He leaned backward, neatly snatching his pack from the grass by a low campfire. Hers rested

right beside his.

“What’s going on? Where am I?” she demanded. But he was focused on his backpack and ignored her, and soon she began watching him, her curiosity piqued. His pack was an odd thing made out of leather with none of the neon colors or light-weight synthetic materials she favored. In fact, now that she looked closely, everything about him seemed natural—no bright colors, all natural fiber cloth, even a leather thong to tie back his wavy hair.

“Are you some sort of naturalist?” she asked. “It’s not that I mind, but you must be incredibly rich to afford such stuff.” She bit her lip in frustration. Why did she always say the stupidest things? Taking a deep breath, she ordered her questions and started with the most pressing one. “My name’s Jane. What’s—”

Her words stopped cold as he pulled a filthy baggie filled with fireflies out of his pack and pushed it toward her.

“Ugh! Get that away from me!”

She tried to slide away, but he caught her wrist. Even if she’d been at full strength, he would have been stronger. He was relentless as he drew her closer to it, firmly placing her hand on top of what she now saw was some sort of bloated animal gut.

“Yuck!”

It felt warm and squishy and strangely tingly, all of which was very much like putting her hand

on living sheep intestines. She was thoroughly repulsed, but that was nothing compared to the fear that sliced through her when her companion drew out a very sharp, very wicked looking dagger.

“Steemanti. Steemanti!”

He couldn't really want her to eat that, could he? “Look, I'm not very hungry. Please feel free to eat your sheep guts without me. Hey!”

She tried to jerk away as he brought the knife closer. Her fingers curled into a fist as she twisted against him, but his grip was like durosteel bands, and she was trapped in it.

Then she watched in horror as he nicked the fleshy edge of his hand, the one holding her wrist. His blood welled dark red, then slipped down the edge of his hand onto her arm.

“Okay,” she whispered. “I'll eat the sheep gut. Whatever you want.”

“Steemanti.”

He lifted her hand, twisting it until he exposed the same fleshy part beneath her left pinkie.

“No. No way are you going to cut me.” She let her hand go lax. Then suddenly, she put her back into it, bracing her legs and wrenching away. She didn't care if she pulled her arm out of its socket, she would get away from Mr. Psychotic with the knife.

She made it, though from the pain in her shoulder, she'd probably dislocated it. Then she scrambled to her feet and started running.

Although not athletic, she'd always been able to cut and run whenever needed. But she was weak, her movements off balance, and her head still felt three times too big for her neck. Even with the adrenaline boost, she felt like she moved in slow motion.

She heard a muttered oath behind her. Amazing, she thought, swear words are identifiable in all languages. Then she literally flew through the air as her hero tackled her.

She landed on her side and was rapidly pushed onto her back while her hero sat on top of her. Her breath came in painful gasps, and her head pounded like a techno band, but terrified as she was, a part of her still recognized the sheer thrill of two hundred pounds of muscle grinding into her with a power as exciting as it was swift and sure.

He straddled her hips. Then he leaned forward, supporting himself on his knees as he twisted his feet behind him to hook over her legs. It was probably to keep her from kneeing him in the back, which was exactly what she'd intended to do when she caught her breath. His hardened chest stretched across her, giving her a close up view of sleek, tan skin lightly brushed with golden brown hair. Then he caught her wrists, neatly subduing her while he grumbled nonsense into her ear.

For annoyed, irritated male grumbling, it sounded remarkably erotic.

She looked up and caught the flash of something in his eyes. If this were an anima novel, she would have labeled it passion, but this was real life. Still, their gazes locked for a moment and despite her position, the nearby knife, and his blood trickling onto her wrist, she felt reassured.

He smiled—a wry twist to his lips, and she smiled back. She couldn't help it. Then she gasped as he wrenched himself to sit upright, his thickening groin pressing deeply against her as he lifted up his torso and her wrists.

“Yyi jaggenwa martense. Steemanti. Steemanti.”

He looked so serious, so intense with his blue eyes burning down at her that she knew she had no hope of fighting him.

“Do you really have to?” she asked. Her brief fight had exhausted her from head to toe. A vague sort of fatalism washed through her as she watched him twist her hand. “Guess that means you have to.”

The incision was quick, like a deep paper cut, but it was over in an instant, then his lips, soft as neovelvet, brushed over the wound. She smiled weakly at his sweet gesture, but it faded quickly at his next move. Stretching behind him with his cut hand, he grabbed the sheep gut.

“I told you, I'm not really hungry.” She knew the firefly sheep gut wasn't food, but it made her feel better to pretend it was.

He pressed it against her wound, wrapping the tube around her palm and holding it there with his own bloody hand. It was still warm and tingly, and she tried to flinch away, but he kept her firmly in place. Then he slid the knife between them and neatly cut the bag.

It was the oddest sensation. The fireflies escaped the bag and tickled her palm, buzzing against her skin before zipping away to her hero. No, not fireflies. Static. As though they'd caught electrical sparks between their palms.

Then one tiny point of energy found her wound, sliding right in and up her bloodstream. She jerked, but he held her fast, keeping their hands pressed together.

Bit by bit, the static wormed its way in, swarming through her wrist, creeping up her arm until she trembled with the horror of it. He said something, crooning nonsense syllables meant to reassure her, but she couldn't focus.

Then suddenly it burst on her. It was as though the energy dancing up her arm hit a major artery and went straight for her brain. She screamed as her vision faded into a wash of white. Her thoughts spun in the dizzying vortex of energy that swarmed through her mind.

From somewhere above her, she heard his grunt of surprise, but she was still dealing with the reeling, pounding electricity throbbing through her consciousness. In the end, she gave

herself up to it, letting it flood her senses on the wildest sensory trip virtual reality sci-fi had yet to create.

Then it faded, and she was left sweetly energized, her thoughts sparkling like Christmas lights gone berserk. “Wow! That’s better than coffee. Even my coffee!”

Her hero still sat on her, his expression dazed and confused. “That was unusually intense,” he said, his voice hushed and lyrical.

“Intense? It was great! What was that stuff? And how come you’re suddenly speaking English?”

He looked down, his face slowly spreading into a Hollywood sex god smile. “I’m not. That’s what that was.”

Jane blinked. “You’ve lost me.”

“You are right with me. My companions are never lost.” He sounded vaguely insulted.

She struggled onto her elbows, propping herself up so she could peer into his dreamy eyes. Unfortunately, he immediately lifted himself off of her, politely settling onto the grass beside her.

“I don’t mean physically lost like geographically. I mean—”

“I know, woman,” he cut in. “I was testing the magic. Language is a tricky thing, and we’re supposed to be able to understand each other completely.”

“Huh?”

“That was a spell. Permanent. I am sorry I used it on you, but it was necessary.” From his expression, it was clear he meant “waste” it on her.

“Well, excuuuse me.” She rubbed her hand, staring at the fleshy part, now completely healed over.

“No need to apologize,” he said. She peered at him, wondering if he was teasing or serious. “I needed to know if it worked.”

Jane took a deep breath and tried to sort through the confusion while keeping panic at bay. “You mean, we’re both talking in our own language, but I hear English and you hear... uh—”

“*Svenetrins.*”

Jane sat up. “Really? So I’ll always understand sene— Svenet—”

“*Svenetrins.* And no. It’s a personal spell between two people. You will only understand me. And I, you.”

“Oh.” Then she shrugged. “Still, that’s better than a secret decoder ring. Where’d you get it?” She tried to act casual as though magic sheep guts were normal.

He looked at her oddly. “A bard sold it to me for thirty doleens.”

“Thirty doleens?” What were doleens?

“I know. Exorbitant. But she was... entertaining. And she had the most stunning blond hair, like the

color of sunlight on Nansar's pond." His eyes grew abstract as he focused on some pleasant memory, and Jane felt the first stirring of annoyance.

"A little hair dye, and they all go on a testosterone high," she grumbled. Then she stood up, moving slowly in case the dizzies came back. "Well, this has been fun, but would you mind directing me toward the nearest phone? Preferably without working video." She self-consciously tugged at her mousy brown locks, matted now with bits of grass.

He stared at her, his face registering disappointment. "The spell must not have worked well. I don't understand your words."

"Oh. I need a phone." She mimed putting a receiver to her ear. "Or a computer. Actually a computer would be better. Then I can hook into the University Net and get a lock on the damage." She looked around, studying the meadow as her memories slowly jumbled into a strange order. "Exactly how did I get here? In fact, where is here? The last thing I remember is the library."

Her gaze was caught by a strange purple flower, and she approached it slowly. It was a pretty thing, with some spiked petals, some curved. They dotted the meadow grass the way the letter "i" dotted a printed page. She'd never seen one before. Never, ever in a whole childhood of helping her father, a botanist.

"What is this?"

“The mansara flower? It’s a common plant. They’re all over the place.”

“Uh-huh. And that?” She pointed to one of the tall trees lining the meadow. Its bark was like smooth concrete, and its leaves looked like a marijuana plant.

“An oant tree.”

“Right.” Jane turned slowly, anger building within her like a Georgia heat wave. She put her fists on her hips and fixed her hero with her ice queen glare. “Okay, I want to know just where I am, and how do I get from here to Boston.”

“Boston?”

“Big city. Streets that used to be cow paths.”

Blank. His face was completely blank. She bit her lip and started pacing off her energy.

“I didn’t ask before. Denial, I guess. But it’s over now. Tell me what’s going on.” She waited for him to speak, but all he did was settle more comfortably on the grass and give her his complete attention. It was as if he was studying her, and that only increased the burn within her. Still, she took a deep breath and decided to start slowly.

“Where am I?”

“The Plains of Eacost, south of the Great Forest.”

She stared at him, worrying her lower lip until it started to feel bruised and swollen. Then suddenly her spirits lightened. “I’m sorry.” She was proud of how level her voice sounded. “Your secret

decoder gizmo isn't working right."

"It's working perfectly. You are on the Plains of Eacost, south—"

"South of the Great Forest. I heard." Still, she shook her head, wondering if her ears were clogged.

"What is the last thing you remember?" he asked.

"I..." She thought back, finding her mind slow and difficult. She remembered her morning shower. The power had been cut again during the night and domestic energy was on lowest priority, so the water had been ice cold. Her memories leaped forward through a normal workday. Then she'd put on her costume intending to go to the party just after stopping at the library.

Glancing down, she groaned in real horror. Yes, she was indeed pacing agitatedly in front of her computer hero still wearing a billowing cape, a leotard with a huge bat outline on her breasts, black leggings, and neon orange sneakers—she hadn't been able to afford the stylish boots.

Of course, she realized as she peered closer at her hero, he was in costume too. Sort of an eighteenth-century pirate outfit. Soft flowing shirt, dagger sheathed in the belt of his leather breeches. He even wore the softest pair of boots she'd seen in her life. And to complete the outfit, a huge, two-handed, bastard sword lay strapped on his back. It didn't look in the least bit fake either.

She stared at it until he brought her back to the present.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I was working in the library.”

He must have taken that as a “no” because he reached into his pack and pulled out what looked like beef jerky. Thank heaven he didn’t offer her any because the very sight of it made her think of dried caterpillar. Rather than watch him eat it, she went back to her confusing memories.

“I had to reload a system. The last brown-out zapped everything, but I can’t remember anything after that.”

“I came upon you two nights ago,” he said between bites. “You were lying face down, so cold I thought you were dead.”

Jane stared at him. “I was just lying there? In the grass?”

He nodded.

“How the hell did I get there?” she yelled.

He shifted nervously, his broad shoulders rippling as he moved. “I don’t know,” he said, his eyes dark with sympathy.

She took a deep breath, trying to recall the zen-calming chant she’d told her friend was stupid. “This is too bizarre. It’s like one of those bad comic books when...” Her voice trailed off, a sick feeling churning in her gut. Comic books often showed some innocent bystander sucked into a vortex, transported across space and time as a

result of the villain's manipulations. Usually the nameless slob died before the next page.

She glanced at her hero, wondering if he could possibly be the product of another planet or dimension. He looked human. She clenched her fists, ordering herself to stop being silly. She had not stepped into a comic book. She was simply disoriented.

“What day is it?”

“Forty-third day, Warming season, Thirteenth year of the Seef.”

Her knees wobbled, but she persevered, determined to face the truth. “What...” She couldn't say it. She cleared her throat and tried again. “What planet?”

He hesitated only a second. “Urta.”

Her knees went out. Her legs went out. In fact, her whole body and brain went out to lunch. She fell to the ground, landing hard on her tush.

She didn't see him move, but suddenly he was beside her, his large hands warm on her shoulders. Instinctively, she asked for the one thing that always made everything easier to handle.

“Chocolate?”

He deftly pressed the beef jerky into her hands.

She moaned, but decided anything was better than thinking. Grabbing the brown stick, she closed her eyes and bit.

She was wrong. There was something worse than facing reality. And she was chewing it.

Gagging, she spit it out on the ground, simultaneously reaching for his water bag to wash the taste out of her mouth.

“Ugh! What is that stuff?”

He opened his mouth, but she raised her hand to stop him. “No. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. Ugh.” She took another swig. “Have you got any toothpaste?” At his blank look she tried again. “Something to clean your teeth?”

His eyes widened. “You clean your teeth?”

“No, I like foul breath, a brown smile, and pain when I chew. Of course I—” She cut off her words at his stunned expression. “You don’t clean your teeth?” From his whitewash smile, she’d have guessed they were plastic coated.

“Of course I clean my teeth. I am a king.” He sounded insulted. As her emotions seesawed between outrage and hysteria, he rooted through his pack and came up with a box of brown powder.

“What’s that?”

“Tooth powder.”

At her hesitant expression, he dipped his finger in the powder, rubbed it along his teeth, then spit. The stream of expectorant looked totally gross, but he offered it to her and flashed his poster boy smile. It was either try it or be totally rude to the man who had probably saved her life.

Difficult decision.

Finally, she imitated him and nearly gagged. It felt like rubbing sandpaper across her teeth and

tasted about as appetizing. She spit, managing a weak smile.

“Vile?” he asked.

She nodded. They both drank some water.

Then he turned to her, his expression curious, if a little wary. “Where do you come from where tooth powder is not a chore?”

“Boston. The United States. And it’s not powder, it’s a...” She gave him a vapid smile as though she were in a commercial. “A minty, fresh gel.” He looked at her like she was moldy spaghetti. She sighed. “Oh, never mind.”

“I don’t know about Bos-ton. Or the U—”

“United States. And what do you mean you don’t know about it? Everybody knows about the U.S. Those we haven’t annoyed are actively trying to terrorize us. There isn’t a soul on the planet that doesn’t know about us.” She stopped talking, once again feeling sick to her stomach. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? I’m not on Earth anymore.”

Her companion was silent, oddly accepting of her strange comments. “I don’t know.”

She stared at him. His sexy body was relaxed, his expression calm. Everything she wasn’t. And that really annoyed her. Her fragile mental health broke, and she rounded on him in fury. “You don’t know? Well, that does me a whole lot of good. I’m lost. I’ve got five bucks, no food, I’m talking to every woman’s fantasy, and I’m in a stupid comic book costume!” She towered over

him, shaking with frustration and fear, and all he did was gaze back at her, the gold in his eyes sparkling in the sunlight.

“My name is Daken,” he said softly. “King Daken of the house of Chigan. I am pleased you think me every woman’s fantasy.”

She stared at him. “So glad I could be of service,” she said dryly. Then she collapsed back onto the ground and dropped her head into her hands.

Daken sighed, then reached out to her, wishing he could do more for her as he absently brushed her short curls from her face. “I don’t know how to help you,” he said softly. Her fear was like a tidal wave, swamping his thoughts. He could feel her frustration like a raving beast, and it left him feeling very exposed.

He had to leave. His people were dying, and his first priority was to them. But even knowing that, he felt horrible guilt at abandoning this woman when she was at her most vulnerable.

He clenched his jaw. He had done his duty. He healed her, even used his very expensive language spell. He couldn’t afford to waste any more time or resources on her. But still, he stayed.

She stood, pacing back and forth in front of him, rubbing her arms as though she were cold. He would have offered her his jacket, but he knew she didn’t feel chill. Her movements betrayed her fear. And that she didn’t often feel afraid.

“You can remember nothing else?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s all a blur.”

Healing her would be a mistake. His healer skills would absorb her terror like a sponge, and then he’d spend the next hour steadying the trembling in his own limbs. Against his will, he found himself in front of her, gradually enfolding her in his arms, giving her what comfort he could.

She was stiff against him, fighting herself more than him. He could tell she wanted to drop into his arms, but her pride kept her away. He waited, demanding nothing of her until she decided. Then to his joy, she softened against him, melting into his arms like a child burrowing into her parent’s embrace, or a woman nestling into the cradle of her lover’s arms.

It was a sweet moment, at odds with his warrior’s soul, but still he clung to it, sheltering her in his arms while his mind told him he should be leaving.

“I must go,” he whispered into the sweet scent of her hair.

She jerked as if he’d slapped her, but he held her tight, forcing her to hear the rest of his words. “This is a safe land with generous people. Find a farmhouse and offer your help. They will pay you honest wages for honest work.”

“But—”

“Your memory will return in time.” He didn’t know if it was true, but he knew she needed to believe it. Then he broke the embrace, feeling the

emptiness in his arms like an ache, but he suppressed the emotions and turned away. He couldn't stay with her any longer.

He began to close camp.

"You can't leave me, hero, uh, I mean Daken." She said it flatly, as though he had no choice in the matter. "I'm completely lost. All I need is to get to a phone."

He glanced up, and she shook her head to stop his next words.

"I know. You don't know what a phone is. How about the nearest city? Maybe I can get my bearings there." She reached out, pulling him around to face her, desperation making her brown eyes luminous. "Please, I'm begging you. Don't abandon me."

He twisted away to break their physical contact. He couldn't think when she touched him. Her emotions bled through to him too easily, running riot over his own thoughts.

"Daken?"

He swallowed, knowing she wouldn't like hearing this any more than he liked saying it. "I am going to Bosuny, and I have tarried too long already."

She stepped forward. "Let me come with you."

He shook his head. "You are still weak. You'll walk too slowly, and I can't lose any more time. I'm sorry." He kicked some dirt on the dying embers, then grabbed his pack. "There is a farmhouse a half

day's journey that way." He pointed. "Tell them a king has sent you to them. They will help you." Then he started walking, his long stride quickly eating up the distance to the edge of the clearing.

"Wait a minute," she called, running behind him like a lumbering tekay.

He grumbled out a curse and stopped. She was too weak to sustain his pace, but from the sound of it, she wasn't about to stop until she'd said her peace.

"You can't just leave me here."

"I can't do anything more for you. Perhaps a better healer, but I—"

"I'm not crazy," she interrupted. "I've lost some of my memory, not my mind."

"Woman—"

"Just listen to me. I don't know what's going on here, but I'm not going to find out at some farmhouse where I can't even speak the language. Take me with you to Bo... to Bosu—"

"Bosuny is a long, long way, and you are too weak—"

"Please." Her entire soul seemed poured into her eyes as she pleaded with him. He should have been unmoved by such a display. As a king, he'd seen it many times for one reason or another, and he'd been able to ignore it then.

But with her it was different. He sensed this woman didn't beg. Not without great need. He reached out, touching the wetness on her cheek,

stroking it between his fingers.

“I’m not crying,” she said, clearly trying to hold back her tears.

It happened so fast, as though an Old One pushed him into something he never would have done on his own. One moment he was thinking about the odd puzzle she was, and the next second he was kissing her, her lips warm and sensuous against his own. She gasped in surprise, and he dipped lower, deeper into her mouth.

He stroked her tongue, feeling a passion build within her that had nothing to do with her confusion. She responded to him as a woman, and he felt himself curl around and within her, instinctively protecting that which he wanted to possess.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, and he let his hands trail down her back, pulling her deep against his thickening heat. She groaned into his mouth, and he felt his blood surge within him.

This was wrong. She was ill. He was late. Reasons crammed into his brain, all telling him with perfect logic to leave her alone. She was a distraction he couldn’t afford right now.

But still he held her, possessing her mouth as he slowly wedged his knee between her legs.

Then his conscience won. He pulled away from her with a curse, slamming his fist into a tree trunk, using the pain to clear his fogged brain.

“Daken?”

“I’m sorry,” he said stiffly, his voice rough and coarse. “I should not have done that.”

“Hey, I didn’t object.”

He ran his hand through his hair, unable to face her. “You are ill.”

“I told you, I’ve just lost some of my memory. That’s all.”

He turned to look at her, feeling tormented by conflicting responsibilities and desires. “You are ill,” he said softly. “I am the one who cares for you. I cannot use someone I am responsible for.”

“Oh, it’s a doctor-patient thing.” He saw understanding light in her eyes, like a garnet held before a flame.

He blinked, not following her strange words. “You are ill, and I am a king.”

“King. Not a doctor. A king who can’t kiss peasants.” He heard the outrage in her voice, but he didn’t understand its cause.

“A king is a doctor,” he said.

She leaned forward, her eyebrows pulled together as she struggled to communicate with him. “What do you mean a king is a doctor? Kings lead people. Doctors heal people.”

Did she know nothing? “Kings lead because they can heal.”

“So it *is* a doctor-patient thing.”

Unable to stop himself, he reached out, trailing his fingers across her full, red lips. How could he explain to her something he didn’t understand

himself? “Your kiss is a wonder to me—full of magic and power.” His voice was low and hoarse, and he saw her passion flare again in her eyes. Rather than give in to the promise he saw there, he turned away, looking east to Bosuny. “But I must go.”

“Take me with you.”

“I can’t.”

“Please.”

He groaned, knowing he was lost long before he said the words. “Very well. I will slow my steps for you.”

“Thank you—”

“But we must not kiss again.”

She watched him, her eyes so incredibly open and vulnerable. “I told you, I’m not sick. And I didn’t mind—”

“I can’t afford the distraction.” He shook his head, turning his gaze to the distant horizon. “I am a fool to let you slow me down at all.”

“You mean I’m a burden and an annoyance.” He heard the bitterness in her voice, but would not allow himself to soften more.

“My mission is urgent.”

She straightened her shoulders, and he caught a flash of defiance in her eyes. “Then I guess we better get going.”

Chapter Two



“So, you’re a king.” Jane watched him closely, but Daken’s face remained impassive, his thoughts hidden beneath his calm facade.

“Chigan is a territory to the northwest.”

Jane nodded, cudgeling her brain trying to remember any small third world country named Chigan. She wasn’t surprised when she drew a blank. Geography had never been her strong suit. “Don’t you want to know my name?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I assumed you would tell me if you knew it.”

“Of course, I know it! It’s Jane. Jane Deerfield.”

He smiled, lifting the harsh planes of his face until he looked almost young. “Jane Deerfield is a beautiful name. I understand now why you wished to keep it a secret since it describes your home. I am honored that you shared it with me. Do you claim the deer or the field?”

She opened her mouth, but couldn’t phrase the

questions filling her mind at his odd question. Finally, “I’m confused,” was all she managed.

“Yes. I know,” he said gently, and she nearly ground her teeth in frustration. “Perhaps you were joined with a deer, and the creature died. That would explain your illness.”

“What do you mean ‘joined with a deer’? I...” She struggled to push all her questions into a coherent form, but he looked at her so oddly that she gave up.

Over the last twenty-four hours they’d had many conversations like this, each more frustrating than the last. Despite his secret decoder trick, they obviously communicated on two very different levels.

“Perhaps the mages in Bosuny will be able to help you,” he offered.

“The mages?” She bit her lip, deciding to take things one step at a time. “What’s a mage?”

“A wizard. One who uses the Power in other ways.”

“Other than healing.”

He nodded. Jane sighed. Wizards, mages, and some unknown power. She had the horrible feeling her life was about to get a lot more complicated. They’d been traveling for over a day, walking east through meadows, fields, and a few farms. The area reminded her of what America looked like in the history vids about settlers. It was wide open, the land green and lush, if a bit odd to the daughter

of a botanist.

Everywhere she looked, she saw plants she thought she recognized, but then again didn't. This tree looked like a maple, except its color was off. There seemed to be a blue tint to the leaves, not to mention the strange strings that almost looked like hair. Even the water tasted different. She'd expected non-chlorinated, unpolluted water from a crystal clear stream to taste different, but not with an almost electric tingling as it slid down her throat.

At least last night she'd been able to see the stars. Much to her relief, there was only one moon and it seemed very familiar. Of course, one moon looked pretty much like another to her, and this one was just a quarter full. She thought she recognized the Big Dipper, but who could tell? She'd seen more stars last night than ever before in her life. The sky seemed littered with them, like glitter dust spilled by a careless child. She'd been enchanted, even more so when Daken gave her a lesson in constellations. The names were unfamiliar, but she listened to his lyrical voice and watched where he pointed, feeling almost at peace.

They talked late into the night, and she found unexpected depths in her normally taciturn companion. She also discovered things were very different in this strange world. Fortunately, Daken was a gracious host when he wanted to be. He told her the legends of his people, and thankfully, he didn't press for information about hers.

With all the good will of the night before, one would think she'd wake up in a chipper mood. But without coffee, a good doughnut, or even normal toothpaste, much less her favorite minty fresh gel, she stomped and grumbled about. Now they were breaking for lunch, and her mood had deteriorated. She felt tired, sore, and completely at odds with the world.

Then she spied a stream through the trees and hit on a wonderfully delightful thought.

"I'm going swimming," she declared, daring him to argue. "I know you've got a schedule, but I'm going to be a miserable person until I wash this grime off of me. Please, please say you don't mind." She was half begging, half threatening him, and given the tight set to Daken's jaw, he didn't appreciate her attitude.

"Ask for permission," he said.

"Permission? Like I'm supposed to go down on one knee and ask you if I can bathe?" She hated herself for the sarcasm that dripped like acid from her tongue. She wasn't normally this caustic a person, but this whole world threw her into a deep regression.

"You don't need *my* permission," Daken answered slowly, his dark gaze burning into her. "That's someone's home."

"Well, the fish can share today." And with that she stomped off to the water.

She didn't want to waste time any more than

necessary, so she stripped as she walked, peeling off her belt, leotard, and leggings as quickly as possible. She was already naked and about to step into the water when she thought to glance behind her.

Sure enough, he was watching. But not with the lurid, peeping Tom, behind-the-bushes type stare. No, he was out in the open, legs spread, hands on his hips, scowling at her. Scowling! Like washing was some mortal sin!

Well, to hell with him. She wanted a bath.

She eyed the stream. It was a little muddy, a little dirty, generally healthy, but not exactly crystal clear mountain water. Still, it was cleaner than she was, so she stepped into the stream, ignoring his strange comment about asking permission.

At first it tingled, the tiny stabs of electricity a sensory delight when combined with the cool water as it rushed by her. She released a sigh of pure pleasure, then dropped down to her knees, intending to arch backwards to trail her hair in the stream.

She never got the chance. She started to sink, and then the stream turned on her. There was no other way to describe it. What started out as a cheerful, bubbling brook became a roiling, seething mass. What once was a cool tingle became tiny needles of pain, which then became slashes of agony. Her body was suddenly on fire, and she screamed, clawing at the bank as she

scrambled to get out.

To her horror, the feeling lingered long after she'd achieved dry land. Wherever she was wet, wherever a drop of water clung to her body, it felt like a boil burning into her. She swiped at her skin, her imagination creating insects or creatures burrowing through her body leaving corrosive trails in their wake. But in truth, there weren't any bugs. The water was eating her.

She turned her tormented gaze on Daken who sighed and knelt by the stream.

"I am sorry for the intrusion. The woman is ill and meant no harm. I am Daken, King of the western land of Chigan, and she is in my care. I did not realize she was so ignorant." He turned his head on his last comment and shot her a look of fury.

Jane was still wiping away the water when slowly the pain lessened. Everywhere her skin burned red and raw, but at least it wasn't getting worse.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," she said softly.

Daken nodded and turned back to the stream. "Thank you for your patience. I beg permission to wash her wounds. Afterward, I will bless your home to cleanse her stench from you."

To her surprise, the stream slowly calmed. The churning subsided to waves and soft gurgles. It was once again a happily, bubbling brook.

She stared at Daken, her thoughts running back

through everything that just happened, stumbling over his last comment.

Jane lifted her chin. "Cleanse my stench?"

"Yes," he said, coming over to roughly inspect her raw skin. "Stench."

"That's why I was trying to bathe in the first place."

"Too bad stupidity doesn't wash away. I told you it was someone's home. What else did you expect?" He started pulling her back to the water.

She dug in her heels. "I'm not going back in there. It's dangerous."

"Weren't you listening? We have permission now."

"Permission?" she repeated. "I'm getting a little confused about this permission business. To me a home is where someone lives. Like a house or an apartment building. A stream is not a home, and so why would I need permission to enter it?"

He looked up at her, his eyes wide with shock. "Do you know nothing?"

"I know a hell of a lot," she snapped, losing her patience with a world gone mad. "I know water isn't alive, and it can't give permission for someone to walk into it. Water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, and it can't suddenly turn acidic and eat my skin off."

"Then what happened to do this?" He deftly twisted her wrist to reveal an especially raw patch.

Jane bit her lip, staring at the damage with a horror bordering on panic. “I don’t know,” she breathed. “Nothing makes sense anymore.”

“Come on, little fool,” he said gently. “Let me tend to your skin.”

“I’m not a fool,” she grumbled, feeling very much one.

He sat down on the edge of the stream and started stripping off his clothes. “It is not an insult. It means one who is innocent. Who does not understand the ways of the world.”

“Then call me innocent. Don’t call me a fool.”

He nodded to her. “As you wish.” Then he stood. He’d taken off his shirt and boots, dropping them with his weapons onto the ground. But he kept his breeches on as he stepped into the stream. “Come, innocent. You are in a great deal of pain. Even without touching you, I can feel your burning.”

She nodded. Her entire body seemed to throb like an exposed nerve, which in essence, she was. She stepped nervously into the water, her eyes trapped by Daken’s gaze, and he drew her in firmly, inexorably, one step at a time.

This time the tingling hurt, and she winced as she moved, but then he touched her, his own skin reddening as he brushed his hands over her body. His touch was heated. It spread through her like good coffee, barely cool enough to drink, soothing and vitalizing every inch, every ache, every cell.

His hands brushed through her hair first, lingering over her face and lips. Then he caressed her shoulders, moving past them to stroke her breasts which puckered at his touch, thrusting forward into his palm. He hastily skipped away to her hand, rolling her fingers between his, before moving up her arm.

Everywhere he touched, the skin cooled and healed. She watched amazed as raw welts faded, slowly disappearing into healthy, pink flesh.

He repeated the process with her other arm before turning her away from him, smoothing her back, then spanning her waist. Jane flushed, acutely conscious of her extra pounds there, but he didn't seem to mind, running his hands along the slight indent above her hips, then turning her around again so he could lightly brush her belly. She sighed, letting her body and mind relax, enjoying the sensation as her muscles quivered beneath his touch.

This was wonderful.

When he reached around her to cup and mold the swell of her buttocks, she leaned into his embrace, lifting her lips for his kiss. But he drew away, shifting her to lie on her back against the shore while he held her feet. He spent his time there, washing away the blood and blisters, tenderly kneading her shins and knee. By the time he pressed against her thighs, her breathing was thick with desire, her body heavy and languid.

He continued up her thighs, and she moaned once beneath his feathery brush, arching against him, silently begging him to deepen his touch. He did, rubbing and kneading her thighs before spreading her legs. Then with a firm stroke, he probed her deepest core. She cried out in ecstasy, climaxing over his hand while he continued to stroke and brush her pulsing flesh.

She was in heaven.

Gazing up at him, she reached out, pulling him down to her for a deep, sensuous kiss, but he evaded her to brush his lips against her forehead.

“That was great,” she said, her voice still husky with desire.

“That was healing,” he countered softly. “Your body is free of sores now.”

She looked down, her mind slowly clearing. He was right. Her skin was pink and healthy and flawless. Even her moles were gone. She stared back at him.

“But I... I mean you...” She couldn’t put her mind around what just happened, much less express it in words.

“It was a completely natural reaction given your injuries. I had to touch you everywhere the water burned you. The process can be quite stimulating.”

“The process? Quite stimulating!” She sat up. “You mean this had nothing to do with...” She stopped, feeling suddenly naked. She twisted out of the stream, reaching for her cape to wrap

around her. “You weren’t even...” She looked down at his breeches, partly submerged in the stream. Nothing. No bulge. No telltale bump. Just flat, flaccid nothing, which pretty much summed up just how she felt.

“I am a King,” he said, his bland expression failing to cover how awkward he clearly felt about this whole thing. “A doctor. I healed you.”

“You healed me.” She said the words, but only now began to understand their meaning. “That’s it. A few swipes of your hand, and I’m fine.”

“Essentially, yes.”

Jane climbed out onto the bank. “Essentially, yes,” she mimicked, appalled at how blind she’d been.

“Jane, why does this upset you?”

She rounded on him, feeling her fury burn through her like poison. “Let me tell you something, Buster. Next time you feel like healing someone, you might mention you’re doing it as a scientist. That it will be a... a simple clinical procedure.”

“Jane!”

“Save it, King Daken.” She practically spat out his name. “I’m perfectly healthy now. Maybe I’ll come back for a check-up later. Like when hell freezes over.” She grabbed her clothes and stomped away.

“Jane!” She heard him step out of the water, and she hurried away faster. “Jane! Leave your

clothes. They must be washed. Your skin is still too new to abrade it with dirt.”

She rounded on him, her fury seething through every pore. “Oh! You do laundry too! Well, bully for you!” She threw her clothes at him, feeling a surge of satisfaction as the fabric landed splat on his face. “Have a ball!”

Then she whirled around and ran to the edge of the trees, not bothering to stop the tears that streamed down her face.



Daken watched Jane run away and felt each of her tears as a slap on his face. Beneath him, he could almost hear the laughter of the stream, which, thank the Father, at least had a sense of humor.

Grumbling in frustration, Daken threw the woman’s odd clothing into the water, weighted it with rocks, and let the old soul in the stream wash it clean. Meanwhile, he stripped off his own breeches and began the irritating task of washing those.

The Crones of Fate must be truly laughing today. How could they land him with a moonling of a fool? Not only did he have the new responsibilities of the kingship, but also a war to fight. A war! Yet here he sat, wasting his time and energy on a witless woman.

He flipped his breeches inside out and dropped it into the water, washing away his seed and his shame at the same time. For years, he'd been a healer. Years. Yet he'd never lost his distance before now. He'd started to heal her skin, but the luster in her eyes, the sweet openness of her reaction to his touch, even the honesty of her desire drew him in. He'd known he was stroking her passion. By the Father, her hunger had danced along his skin like a thousand firelings twisting within him.

So he'd lost his distance, and when she'd reached her release, he joined her, exploding into his breeches like a boy in his first dream.

"Why, Old One?" he asked the stream. "Why now?" He didn't get an answer, though he felt the stream's sympathy lap around him as he worked out his frustration on his poor breeches.

The whole thing was one more example of how unfit he was to rule. His brother would never lose himself, but Daken had spent his whole life on selfgratification rather than the discipline that had been Tev's daily lot.

And now with Tev dead, Daken's lacks were more than apparent.

He glanced down at his breeches. If he scrubbed them anymore, he would rub a hole right through, then his shame would hang free for all to see. Daken sighed and pulled them on, then turned his attention to the stream and his promise

to heal it. Crouching in the center where the current was strongest, he drew on his inner strength. Like a candle burning in his heart, he felt heat and power pulse within him. It was dimmer than usual because of what he'd done for the woman. It would grow darker still as he spread his power throughout the stream.

He envisioned his inner flame burning white hot, filling his body then spreading out into the water. The current swirled about him, carrying his energies throughout the stream's course. He felt the power leave him, its heat searing through his fingertips, radiating out of his limbs until it filled the water, enriching, empowering, and redeeming the stream.

He held the image for as long as he dared, his consciousness expanding as he purified the water, annihilating the corruption as a hammer pulverizes a seed. Then his thoughts returned to his mind, leaving his energy behind to bless and maintain the stream.

It took hours. It took seconds. But when it was done, he felt limp and used, his energy drained, his soul barely flickering. He had given his healing power to the stream as promised. Animals and birds would thrive here for a time.

It would take him a week at least before his healing energy would be at full strength.

He felt the water surround him, cradling him as it urged him to the bank where he collapsed, his lower half still trailing in the tingling stream.

He slept.



It took an hour before she registered his absence. After an hour and a half, she started to get concerned. After two hours, she sighed, rewrapped the blanket around her, and walked slowly to the stream.

She saw him immediately. He was stretched out on the bank, half in and half out of the suddenly clean water. It looked as though he had been tossed there like a discarded doll.

She made it to his side before her cry of alarm faded from the trees. Rolling him over, her nervous fingers felt for a pulse. His skin was ashen, his body clammy and damp, but his heart was strong where it beat in his throat.

Relieved, she dropped her head, pressing her forehead to his. “Geez, Daken, I get huffy all the time. That’s no reason to go into a decline.”

She took a deep breath, calming her own thready pulse before evaluating the situation.

“First, let’s get you out of this water.” She knelt down at his head, ignoring the blanket as it peeled away from her skin. She angled her arms under his shoulders and pulled. No go. It was as if something held him back, keeping him in the water.

Looking down, she realized she would have to

lift his legs out of the stream. That meant entering the dreaded thing again. She clenched her jaw. She would do it for Daken, even if he was cold and arrogant, and had the annoying ability to be right just when she most wanted him to be wrong.

“All right, Daken. Let’s get you out of here.” She gritted her teeth and stepped toward the water. So far, this stream had caused her nothing but pain and humiliation. “Uh, I guess I should ask for permission. I’m just gonna get him out, so I’m assuming it’s okay with you.”

She wasn’t sure what she expected when she finally did step in. The tingling she remembered, but not the caressing warmth that swirled about Daken. It was like a soothing whirlpool bath, and she felt the energy suffusing each drop.

He needs to rest.

She added to the thought out loud. “Well, Daken, looks like you’re gonna hang up your walking shoes for a day or two.”

He will recover his strength by morning. His power will take longer.

“Upsy-daisy,” she lifted his left leg and pushed it toward the bank. “I hope you really do get better by morning because I’m not nearly as good as you at catching and skinning rabbits. And believe me, neither of us is going to be very happy with your dried caterpillars.”

She leaned down to grab his other leg, submerging herself up to her shoulders.

You have pained him deeply, fool. Learn quickly, so you can help each other.

Jane froze. Her gaze darted around the bank, both sides, but she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Sometimes, she had conversations with herself, both silently and aloud. That was, in fact, exactly what she thought she was doing.

Except that last comment definitely had not come from her own brain. It was from someone else.

I am an Old One. I have lived in this stream since the world ended and began again. I was one of the first to lose my body, joining with the water.

Jane didn't dare breathe. She didn't understand anything of what the voice said, but the losing your body stuff didn't sound like anything she wanted to do.

“Okay, Daken. Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna get you out of here if I have to make a bulldozer out of sticks. So I want you to help me. Come on.” She lifted Daken's other leg, pushing it as far as she could up the bank.

You, little fool, are even older than I.

Jane jumped out of the water, shook every drop off of her, then used the blanket as a towel. Her hands trembled, her heart beat like a freight train, and all she could think of was she'd lost her mind. This entire crazy world was one big hallucination left over from the one designer drug she'd taken at a party when she was fifteen.

Of course, crazy or not, she couldn't just abandon Daken. She bent down again, planting her feet and lifting him from the shoulders. This time he slid right out, not easily, but certainly without the resistance she'd felt before. He came so quickly, she didn't have time to adjust her feet, and she landed flat on her butt with his head in her lap.

"Well, I suppose there are worse positions to be in," she muttered.

She stopped a moment to catch her breath, then she lingered a little longer. In sleep, Daken's features relaxed, becoming less blank, less rigidly polite. His face took on character, and she finally noticed the laugh lines around his eyes and mouth. God, he was gorgeous.

"Okay, Daken. Enough beauty rest. Help me dry you off."

He didn't respond, so she gently settled his head on the grass while she ran the blanket over his body and breeches.

Even lax, he was chiseled perfection. Golden skin dusted with dark brown hair, he was a study in contrasts. He said he was a doctor, but she saw the scars on his skin—cuts from swords or knives. And there was no fat on his body, just taut cords of muscle, honed to flawless precision.

This man was no doctor. He was a warrior. Yet, she couldn't dismiss the healthy pink of her own skin where there had been raw burns and welts.

Neither did she understand how he could talk to a stream or fill it with the sparkling purity now glistening in the late afternoon sun.

But he had, and she was learning to live with her questions, accepting the impossible where before she would have shut it out with disbelief.

“Pretty soon, Daken, we’re going to have to have a heart to heart talk because I need some real answers.”

He didn’t respond, but she wasn’t worried. Now that he was dry, his body warming in the sun, she felt easier about him. He was not ill, just sleeping heavily, deeply, regaining his strength while she watched over him.

Looking around, she found her costume. It was underwater, but she managed to retrieve it with a minimum of fuss and hung it out to dry. Then, she settled on the grass next to Daken and absently brushed a damp curl from his forehead. It took less than a minute for her to give in to temptation. Scooting around, she lifted his head onto her lap, then relaxed against a tree.

Who said fantasies couldn’t come true?



“Good morning.”

Daken looked up into the most beautiful pair of brown eyes he’d ever known. They were soulful eyes, innocent yet mischievous, constantly

surprising him.

“Well, actually,” she continued, “it’s evening, but good night didn’t seem to fit, not with you just waking up.”

Daken glanced around, noting with chagrin that they were sitting completely exposed beside the stream. Not only had they wasted the day, but who knew what had happened to their gear while he was napping.

He started to sit up. “We must be going. We have tarried too much already.”

“Not so fast, Buster.” She pressed down on his chest, her expression determined. He struggled against her for a moment, then dropped back into her lap, his self-discipline won over by his delightful pillow and the beautiful view.

Still, he put up token resistance. “I’ve wasted so much time. And we’re very exposed here. Anyone could come on us.”

“Your sword’s right there.”

He followed the motion of her chin and saw his grandfather’s sword within reach. He pulled it closer, his gaze uneasy.

“Relax. There’s been no one here all day. Or shall I say no people.”

“We are outside of the normal trade routes, and these are peaceful lands. Still, we can’t let down our guard.”

She smiled with a wry twist to her lips. “I’d say our guard, namely you, needs to lie down for

a while and recover. In the meantime, you can answer a few questions.”

He suppressed a tiny shiver of panic. Exactly what questions did she mean? She couldn't possibly know his intentions, could she?

“Don't look at me like that—”

“Like what?” Could she read even the smallest expression on his face?

“Like a clam. Like you're a robot that can't be threatened into talking. I just have a few basic questions.”

He still didn't relax, but he schooled his features into an expression of uneasy patience.

“Humph,” she snorted, clearly not fooled. “Let's start with the most immediate concerns.” She looked up and to his right, the opposite direction of his sword. He turned to follow her gaze and his breath caught between his teeth.

A sleek, black pantar lay in the grass near them. She was half-asleep, her eyelids closed, her tail twitching every few moments.

“What do you call that in your language?” Jane asked.

“A black pantar.”

“Close enough. I call it a black panther. He came—”

“She.”

“She? It's a girl?”

He nodded.

“How can you tell?”

He shrugged, not entirely sure himself. “I’m a healer. Some things I just know.”

Jane stared at the pantar, then she turned to glare down at him. “I have so many questions, I don’t know where to begin.”

“You were saying she came...?”

“Oh, yeah. She came to the river late in the afternoon. She was limping from a big gash in her shoulder that went down to her side. I... I think she was dying.”

He nodded, then he curled on his side to get a better view of the sleek cat and the new fur on her side.

“She sort of stumbled to the water to take a drink. Then she fell in.”

“How long did it take?”

“Hmmm?”

“How long until her wound healed over?”

Jane looked down into his face, her eyes almost luminescent in the evening shadows. “Twenty minutes. Maybe less. I was frozen. I know you’re supposed to stay still and hope she can’t see you, but—”

“The pantars are peaceful creatures. They eat rabbits, small dogs, maybe a few thruns. They won’t hurt you if you don’t bother them.”

“That’s sort of what I was counting on.”

“So she healed in the stream, then climbed out to rest in the shade over there.”

“Yes.” Jane returned to watching the cat.

Even from this distance, he could hear the animal's purr. He smiled and snuggled deeper into his warm pillow. Much to his chagrin, his motion brought Jane's scattered attention back to her questions.

"Er, no. I mean, she did go rest but only after she..." Her voice trailed off.

"She what?"

"She came up to you and licked your face. I swear I was about to cleave her head in two with your sword."

"More likely, you'd have missed her and gotten me," he said dryly.

"Well, yes. Your sword is rather heavy."

"But you didn't."

"No. I waited, terrified out of my skull. If it weren't for you, I think I would have bolted when the creature first showed up."

He grinned, inordinately pleased she would stay with him, even in terror. Then the thought hit that he had received homage from the pantar. This was turning out to be a great morning-night. Tev used to get homage all the time. Cats, dogs, bears, they'd all stop by to bow regally to him. But this was Daken's first.

"Quit grinning, Daken. It's not funny. I was really scared."

"I'm grinning because I feel good. I'm rested. I'm lying in a beautiful woman's lap. And a pantar paid me homage. Why shouldn't I be grinning?"

Jane gazed down at him. “You really think I’m beautiful?”

His grin grew even wider. Even his odd little fool was a woman at heart after all. “Yes, I do.”

She blushed and shifted restlessly beneath him. Then her expression changed, slipping into slight irritation. “You’re trying to distract me.”

“Not at all.”

“You’re much nicer this morning,” she said. “Or rather tonight.”

“I’m allowing myself to be distracted. But not for much longer. I’ll give you five more minutes, then we must go.”

“Go? Go where?”

“I already told you. To Bosuny.” He was losing his patience. Not with her, although from the look on her face, she certainly thought so. He was losing his temper with himself. How much time had he lost to dally with this Jane? How many people were dying on his homelands? Were there any left at all?

“We’re not going anywhere until you answer my questions,” she said firmly.

“You cannot stop me, woman, so I suggest you ask quickly.”

With his ear pressed into her stomach, he felt her grumbled oath more than heard it, but still the sound made him smile. She was so different from all the women he knew. She didn’t attempt to hide herself—her irritation or her passion. She was

open and free, and so very vulnerable because of it.

“Okay. Question number one: How can a soul inhabit a stream? And how can it talk to me?”

He rose up on one arm. “It talked to you?”

“I’m not sure.” She pressed him back down into her lap.

“What did he say?”

“I’m not sure.” She glanced down in irritation. “And I’m asking the questions here.”

He sighed, wondering how she could have lived so long without knowing the most simple things. “A soul lives in the stream because that is its home. I don’t know how it spoke to you, only that it sometimes happens.”

“Great. A non-answer.”

Daken folded his arms across his chest. “If you don’t like my answers, then perhaps we could start walking.”

“Not yet. Question two: How can a cat give homage to you? And why?”

“That was two questions—”

“I don’t care, Daken. My sanity’s slipping by the second, so just answer me, okay?”

She was so beautiful when agitated. It was as though she had no artifice in her. It struck him that she was perhaps the most honest person he’d ever met.

“Daken!”

“Hmmm? Oh. The pantar gave me homage

because she knew I healed the stream, which in turn healed her. It's really very simple."

"But how can you heal a stream?"

"I'm—"

"A healer. I know."

"A King."

"I thought they were the same thing."

"They are."

She groaned.

"The healing skill runs through the royal line. That is how you know royalty. My father was a King, but he was killed. My brother then became King, and he too, was killed."

"Which leaves you."

"Which leaves me." He tried not to let the pain seep through his words, but she was smart. She heard it in his voice or saw it in his features. Before he could sit up or stop her, she bent down, dropping a kiss on his forehead.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his skin. "It must have been very hard."

"Don't be sorry," he grumbled, pushing her away as he struggled to stand. "Help me get to Bosuny."

She sighed. "You are a moody creature today."

"I am an anxious creature who should be in Bosuny by now."

She folded her arms across her chest, watching him with the exact same expression his old tutor used to have. "One last question. What are you

going to do in Bosuny?”

He felt himself grow cold, his insides freezing into the old patterns of anger and suspicion. He would not be stopped or deterred from his course.

“That is none of your concern,” was all he said.

Chapter Three



“She’s following us.” Jane worked hard to keep the nervousness out of her voice.

“Who’s following us?”

“The panther.”

Daken turned around, his scowl sour enough to curdle water. Jane pointed behind them, knowing the gesture was unnecessary. He could hardly fail to see the large black cat walking silently behind them. She wanted to say the animal was stalking them, except the cat’s stride was slow, almost lazy, as she moved in their wake.

“What should we do?” Jane kept her voice low.

“Do? We walk to Bosuny. If she wants to come along,” he shrugged. “Let her.”

“But aren’t there people there?”

He stared at her like she’d just sprouted green antennae.

“I mean, won’t those people get a little upset when we walk in with a black panther on our heels?”

He glanced back at the cat, then bent down to grab his gear. “She’s a smart cat. I’m sure she can take care of herself.”

“That’s so reassuring. Especially since I, too, am following you.”

Daken spun to face her, his expression dark and forbidding in the murky light. “I didn’t ask for your company or hers. If you want to follow me, fine. If she wants to follow me, fine too. But don’t expect me to delay my task just because you don’t know an inhabited stream from a dead one.”

“Well, excuse me. And here I thought I’d just spent the day taking care of you. Far be it for me to expect a little gratitude.”

He advanced on her, his fists tight against his sides. “You wouldn’t have had to take care of me if you hadn’t walked into the stream without asking permission!” He threw up his fists and stalked away. “By the Father! Why did I get saddled with a lackwit?”

Jane bit her lip, annoyed and hurt, but still very aware he was right. She was a fool, and in more ways than one. Throughout their time together, he had made it abundantly clear she was a burden to him. A fool he did not suffer gladly. But still, her romantic heart wanted to believe they were starting to get along. That maybe he could like her a little.

Clearly, she was wrong. Jane squared her shoulders. Fine. If that’s the way he wanted it. This wasn’t the first time she’d bottled up her

pride, swallowed her self-esteem, and generally humiliated herself in order to accomplish a larger goal. First it had been with a boyfriend, but she quickly realized the futility of that. Then it had been on the job with pencil pusher Dr. Beavesly. Getting him to approve the latest protective hardware had been like begging for crumbs from a rich man's table, but eventually she had won.

And assuming she ever made it back to Boston to find out, she would bet her next paycheck that her special hardware was the only thing keeping the computer running after that tremendous explosion.

Jane stopped in her tracks. When had she remembered the explosion? She saw it clearly in her mind, replayed in sharp detail like a new video. She heard the boom, then saw herself poised in front of a rip in space that sucked her in.

She *had* been transported through space. She'd thought about it, toyed with the idea, but she hadn't really believed it. Not until now.

She pressed her hand against her mouth, holding in a scream. Was she really in a completely different world? Panic clutched at her throat. Her scream pushed through her mouth and slid through her fingers, but only as a terrified whimper.

"Jane?" Daken turned around, his expression shifting from frustration into concern. "Are you well?"

She stared at him, unable to fathom that he was

a person from another place, a totally different planet. They didn't have magic translator spells or inhabited streams on Earth.

Then suddenly she realized—in this land, he wasn't the alien. She was. She was the stranger thrown here by some quirk of fate. Her friends and family lost to her forever unless she could find a way to get back.

Assuming she could get back. She didn't even know where she was. What if she was in a totally different galaxy? Or universe? Hell, what did it matter? She could be on Moon Colony, but without a spaceship how could she get home?

She moaned softly against her hand.

Daken stepped to her side, his movements stiff and awkward as he tried to apologize. "I'm sorry, Jane. I shouldn't have yelled at you. My people are in trouble, and I..."

She shook her head, the panic still pulsing in her veins. She knew if she tried to talk, it would come out as a hysterical scream. So she held her hands over her mouth, squeezed her eyes shut, and tried not to remember.

"Jane?"

She felt his hand brush her forehead, and she jerked away. She didn't know if a healer could read minds, but she certainly didn't want to find out now. He'd made it clear what he thought of her. His little fool.

Well, this little fool was rapidly wising up. She

stamped down the panic within her as she remembered who and what she was. Jane took a deep steadying breath, slowly letting her hands fall from her face.

Okay. She was a stranger in a strange land who was probably vulnerable in countless ways. But she was smart, capable, and a quick study. From now on she would dedicate herself to learning everything she could about this new world. Even in the enlightened United States, an outer space alien would have turned the world upside down. Nutcases and legitimate scientists alike would have sold their souls to exploit an alien.

She wouldn't allow that to happen to her. She would not be victimized. She sure as hell wouldn't tell her secret to Mr. Kingly Arrogance. It wasn't that he'd abuse her. He'd actually been quite kind, in a gruff, macho sort of way. But how would he react to a space being?

No, it was much safer if he thought her crazy.

Later, after she found a way to get home, she would explain it all to him.

"Jane?"

"Uh." She swallowed. "Sorry. I... I'm okay now. We can go on."

"Are you ill?"

She couldn't look directly into his eyes and lie. So she watched the panther, pretending to be entranced by the cat cleaning a paw. "I'm fine. Just a little tired." She tried to smile. "You may

have gotten a nap, but I didn't."

Daken was silent, clearly waiting for her to look at him. She didn't. She watched the panther. Then he twisted abruptly toward the horizon. "We should make it to the main road soon and an inn right afterwards. Can you make it another hour?"

"Yeah. Sure. Lead on."

"You feel healthy?"

"I'm fine." She could sense the heavy intensity of his gaze, and she slowly faced him, giving him her version of a blank stare. The gold in his eyes reflected the moonlight with an eerie glow. Then, abruptly, he spun on his heel and walked. She followed directly after him, a couple paces behind, needing the space to think.

To their right, the panther slipped in and out of the trees, her steps silent and stealthy.



The inn was quiet, but not deserted. Jane judged it a little after midnight. Most of the patrons had already left. It had been eerie walking down the road, her footsteps echoing through the deserted street. The black panther had long since disappeared into the shadows surrounding the sleepy village.

Daken pushed his way into the inn, and Jane followed, squinting as they stepped into a cozy main room with tables and a bright fire. The

whole setting reminded her of a pub at a Renaissance fair she'd once been to. There were a few people around—a woman and her daughter cleaning tables, two patrons who looked very drunk, and a young boy singing softly while plucking a tune on a crude guitar.

In short, all was peaceful as the innkeeper bustled forward. He spoke in a language Jane didn't recognize, but true to the spell, Daken's words came clearly to her as English. From his half of the conversation, she gathered he was haggling over the price of a room and dinner.

Jane wandered to the fire, extending her hands to the warmth while she studied the people. They looked humanoid. They had short, squat bodies with dark skin and black eyes. Definitely human-like, except for some reason, they reminded her of small burrowing animals. They appeared quiet and alert, small and earthy. Both Jane and Daken towered over these people, and she felt the urge to sit down to feel less like a giant. She settled into a booth, and Daken soon joined her. They hadn't spoken since the return of her memory, and from all appearances, he was perfectly content with the status quo.

A few minutes later, the woman placed two thick bowls of stew and a loaf of black bread in front of them. Daken dug in with a vengeance. Jane too, tucked into her meal, surprised at how very hungry she was and how very, very good the

food was. Even the black bread was tasty, if a bit hard. Then the woman returned, dropping two mugs of thick black liquid in front of them. It looked like her favorite type of coffee, except it was cold and crumpled green leaves floated on top.

She picked up the mug and sniffed. It had a faint herbal scent, like expensive shampoo. “What’s this?”

“*Pinnan.*”

“Uh, yeah. Do you think they have some water? I’m not—”

“Drink it.” His words weren’t loud or angry, but they held the definite tone of command. Jane sighed, knowing better than to argue with a man in a Macho Mood. She hefted her mug, took a deep breath, then sipped at her drink.

To her shock, it tasted great. Sort of like cocoa and rum mixed with water, as if that were possible. It wasn’t carbonated, but it still tingled as it went down. It refreshed like water, tasted like chocolate, and wet her insides like a much-needed lubricant. She drained the mug.

“Wow! This is wonderful!”

Daken didn’t respond. He didn’t speak until after he’d finished his second bowl of stew. “I’ve gotten us a room for the night. It’s too late for a bath, but the mistress can clean your clothes by morning.”

Jane looked down at her costume. It was certainly worse for wear, but after this morning’s

escapade at the stream, it was relatively clean. “No, thanks. But if you can afford it, I would like some new clothes.” The mistress and the girl both wore loose-fitting tunics. She wondered if she looked as ridiculous to them as she felt.

“The clothes they have here won’t fit you. Wait until Bosuny.”

Jane nodded and kept her tongue. She’d been watching Daken pay the innkeeper. Up until that moment, she’d held out some vain hope that her U.S. dollars would be of some value here. But the coins Daken used were nothing like her money, and she didn’t want to expose her alienness by trying to use her credit card with holographic ID photo.

That meant she was living off of Daken. Completely and totally. And the thought of that dependence scared her more than the black panther.

With sudden resolve, she decided to live as cheaply as possible. Intending to show him just how amenable she could be, she glanced up and said sweetly, “One room will be fine.”

“They didn’t have any more.” His voice was curt, as though he was insulted that she thought they ought to have two rooms.

“No... I mean, whatever arrangements you make are fine. I’m happy to sleep on the floor if you like.”

“There’s a bed.” He practically growled into his *pinnan*.

“That’s fine,” she repeated, wondering how she’d managed to insult him while trying to show how flexible she could be. Truth was, she didn’t really care what the arrangements were. They’d been sleeping next to each other on the ground since she arrived in this crazy world. What difference did it make inside or outside?

Unless, perhaps, he meant they’d be in the same bed? Her spine tingled at the thought, and she looked down, staring awkwardly at her food.

“As soon as you’re done, ready yourself for bed. I’ll be up later.”

She looked at him, completely at a loss. When her brother had been like this, she’d just stayed clear. So she nodded her understanding to Daken and didn’t say a word.

“Don’t open the door to anyone but me,” Daken continued, pointing his spoon at her like a sword.

She felt her eyes widen in alarm. “You don’t think we’re safe here?”

He shrugged, then waved for another bowl of stew. “There are thieves everywhere. It never hurts to be cautious.”

She nodded. He was being the imperious lord, ordering her around like a child. But given that she knew nothing of this world, his advice was probably for the best. She finished her meal, sopping up the last of her stew with the black bread and feeling like a regular Renaissance serf

without a knife or fork. Then, she gave the mistress a warm smile and went to the room.

It was sparsely furnished with one chair, a table with a basin of tepid water, and a bed barely large enough for two small people. She washed up, shook out her short hair, then lay down.

She didn't want to think about Daken joining her. She didn't want to imagine him settling into the bed next to her, the heat from his body merging into hers, his breath tickling the fine hairs of her back. But lying in the dark on a straw tick bed, she could hardly think of anything else.

Her eyes drifted closed, and she dozed in and out of fantasies that were both satisfying and infinitely frustrating. But she was comfortable with them, having dreamed the same dreams in various combinations since she first met Daken.

Forget Daken, she told herself sternly. She was tired. Still, she didn't actually sleep until she felt his weight settle against her.



“SQUAWK! SQUAWKAWK!”

Jane sat bolt upright in bed, her head pounding from all the noise. Beside her, Daken muttered something in his sleep, then settled back into his low, rumbling snore.

Rubbing her eyes, Jane slid out from bed, stumbled to the window, and threw open the

shutters. Then she cringed from the light and covered her ears against the clatter.

It would seem last night's sleepy village had woken up to what must be market day in the front courtyard. She recognized just over half the animals milling about and only some of the wares loudly pushed by hawkers in a strange, lilting language.

She glanced back at Daken. He lay sprawled across the mattress. Her belly and right leg tingled with remembered warmth, and she knew he had slept holding her, his arm resting casually across her belly, one leg draped neatly over hers.

Odd how even with all the cluttered emotions, arguments, and growing secrets between them, their sleep time was still as comfortable as that first night he had told her about the stars. Even last night in a bed. It had felt so natural, so wonderful, so . . . she swallowed hard . . . erotic.

Too bad he'd made his opinion on that subject perfectly clear. Sex was fine if it happened as part of a medical procedure, but she clearly wasn't what he wanted as a recreational bed partner. No man was that restrained unless he was completely uninterested.

With that depressing thought, Jane pulled the chair up to the window and settled down to watch the show. What better way to learn about this strange world than to watch the comings and goings in the courtyard outside her window?



Daken woke to an odd sense of loneliness. Jane had left their bed. Turning, he saw her perched half in and half out of the window, the morning sun dancing in her short curls, her face a mixture of delight and confusion as she gazed at the courtyard. As always, she wore her bizarre clothes that covered all, yet left nothing to the imagination. Yesterday, she had asked for some new clothes, and he had lied about being unable to find any here. An outright lie, and he a King no less. But the thought of her changing out of her delightful attire left him surly.

He was fortunate the inn had only one room or he might have lied twice just to keep her with him.

Oh, Jane, his little fool. Since she was completely absorbed with the scene out the window, he had the luxury of studying her at some length. What was it about her that drew him so deeply? She wasn't exactly beautiful. He had known women far more stunning in every way; women who used their charms to set men on fire. The bard who sold him the language spell had been such a woman. Yet once she left his lands, he had thought less about her than about his boots.

Perhaps the Father intended Jane as his wife. Daken was King now, and he should continue his parents' lineage, not only for his name, but because Chigan needed more healers. It would be

irresponsible to allow his healing seed to die out.

Daken grinned at the idea of getting Jane with his child. The image of her body, ripe and heavy with his babe, set his groin tightening with hunger. He had stayed apart from her because she was ill, and he could not take advantage of a lackwit. But his blood still burned with desire every time he looked at her.

He no longer cared that she was a peasant and he a King. His parents and brother were gone. They could not object to the mismatch. He would marry Jane despite the gossip. The look of gratitude in her eyes would more than make up for any social discomfort.

Bosuny would be an excellent place to woo the naive girl. She would be confused and frightened by the large city and would naturally turn to him for guidance. It would take little effort to have her melting in his arms as she had in the stream.

They would marry in the city, and then he could return home triumphant with not only an army to defend his lands, but a wife to grace his bed and bear his children.

Sometimes, he thought, grinning into his pillow, life could be very, very good.



“Have you ever been to Bosuny before?”

“Every year when I was young, we went for

the Grand Fair. The last time was nine years ago when I was introduced to the Elven Lord.”

Jane nearly choked on the hard buttered bread that was her breakfast. “An *Elven* Lord?”

“Yes. He nurtures the land. My family and the other kings owe allegiance to him. Bosuny is his capitol.”

“Elven lord,” she repeated, still not quite believing the title, even knowing that whatever the word was in his language, it translated to “elf” in English. “You mean, like a little guy with pointy ears, a thick beard, and a green cap?” Or was that a leprechaun?

“No,” he said with obvious confusion. “A tall, slim man with silvery hair and no beard. The dwarves have the pointy ears and thick beards.”

“And sing hi-ho all day, no doubt.” She didn’t know if she was being sarcastic or not. The whole thing was too incredible to believe.

“I do not know what they sing. They mine precious metals in the dark ridges to the south-east. Their craft is highly prized.”

She nodded weakly, feeling the blood drain from her face. “Of course, I should have known.” She hadn’t really been transported through space to another planet. She’d just disappeared into a fantasy creation of Earth archetypes. Or maybe it was just a fairy tale come to life. “Don’t they worry about dragons?”

“The big lizards that breathe fire? I don’t

know. I have heard of them, but never seen one. You needn't be afraid. There are no dragons in Bosuny."

Jane choked back a hysterical laugh. "Of course. They're too big to feed, even in a city. Do they hoard gems?"

"So they say, but I think it is just children's tales."

Jane giggled. Not a normal giggle, but a high-pitched nervous noise that made her sound like a sick hyena.

"Jane? Are you well?"

"Just fine," she whispered, afraid to say more for fear she'd go completely berserk.

He continued to study her, so she kept her face blank while she forced herself to swallow her bread. Apparently satisfied that she was not about to self-destruct in front of him, Daken gobbled the last of his bread and pushed away from the table. "Come. I've found us a ride to Bosuny."

"A ride?" The thought of not having to walk down miles of road broke her out of her suppressed hysterics.

"Yes. A fur merchant is carrying his wares to market. We will drive one of his wagons."

"No more walking?" She wiggled her bruised and blistered toes, delighted at the thought of a prolonged rest.

Much later, after her backside was black and blue from the wagon bench, she wondered if

walking might be better. Or riding, though she'd never ridden a horse in her life. That thought led her to another question that had hovered in the back of her mind since this morning.

Just before Daken had risen, she'd seen a clearly wealthy youth rush in on a tall, shaggy steed, stop for breakfast, then ride off. He was exactly how she'd pictured Daken in his younger days—a handsome young man dashing about with speed and flair.

Then it struck her that Daken was on foot.

Now, bouncing painfully on a buckboard, Jane got the courage to ask the potentially insulting question. “Daken, how come you don't have a horse? I mean you're a King and all. I'd think you'd travel in style.”

Daken was driving a covered wagon, just like on a vid about the open prairie, except the horses were more of those squat, shaggy things that smelled like a garbage dump in summer. But even with her complete ignorance about horses, she could see Daken stiffen, unnecessarily jarring the horses, which caused them to hit a rather large rut, which in turn jostled Jane painfully on their bench seat.

Criminy, she cursed silently as she tried to adjust to a less bruised position. Hadn't these people ever heard of pillows? Cushions? A rock would feel better than this bench.

Perhaps if she'd been less interested in finding

a distraction from her rear end, she would have been smart enough to avoid the topic. But she was looking for a diversion, and this was close enough.

“I mean,” she continued. “You’re King of Chigan, right? So why don’t you have a carriage to take you to court? Or at least a horse. A king shouldn’t have to walk, should he?”

“My lands are very rich and fertile. I am a wealthy man,” he said stiffly.

She blinked at his huffy tone. “Well of course you are. I never meant to imply—”

“I owned a horse and a carriage. But my stallion was killed during the last Tarveen raid.”

“The last what?”

“It is planting season. It seemed ridiculous to take two much needed horses from the plowing just to plod their way to Bosuny.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—”

“I am a fast walker and quite adept at catching rides.”

“I’m sure you are—”

“And as you could see from the inn, I am a quite wealthy man.”

“Geez, Daken. Relax. I was just curious.”

“Now you know.”

“Yeah. Now I know that you’re real touchy about the silliest things.”

“You think my wealth is silly?” If he sat any straighter in his seat, his back would break.

“Heck, no. Look, Daken, I think it’s great you’d walk however many miles to Bosuny rather than take away some horses. I think it’s noble of you. Many kings wouldn’t do that.”

His shoulders relaxed just a bit. “You think so?”

“Of course. You’re obviously a king who cares about the well-being of your people over your own comfort. I think that’s admirable.”

He lifted an eyebrow and allowed his head to turn a little in her direction. “Truly?”

“Truly.” Good God, no matter what the planet, men’s egos were the same.

“I was not always so concerned,” he said, his face shifting into a rueful quirk of his lips. “In fact, I was incredibly reckless. But as second son, I was never supposed to inherit the kingship. When I did...” He shrugged. “Being king makes one reevaluate one’s own comfort.”

His little speech could have sounded pompous, but Jane found it endearing. It must have been difficult for him, first dealing with his parents’ death, then his brother’s. Add to that the sudden burden of a kingship, and it was no wonder he wanted some time to walk peacefully to Bosuny. Too bad she’d forcibly imposed herself on his solitude.

And no wonder he wished her anywhere but with him.

“It must have been very hard on you,” she said

softly, an apology in her voice.

He didn't appear to notice. Instead, his thoughts seemed turned inward as he stumbled over his words. "These last two years have been...sad and difficult."

She reached out and squeezed his right hand. It was meant to be a quick gesture, one of comfort and friendship, but he wouldn't let it end. Shifting the reins to his left hand, he captured her fingers, drawing them up to his lips. He kissed her knuckles with a courtliness that made her cheeks heat.

She searched for something to say, but his gaze captured hers. His eyes, a brilliant royal blue and gold, sparkled with a happiness she'd never seen before. They seemed full of a promise that left her breathless with excitement. Then they hit another rut, and Jane's hand flew out of his to keep herself from bouncing out of the seat.

Daken too, had to steady himself. With a muttered curse, he redirected his attention to the horses.

"That one hurt," she grumbled as she tried to ease forward off her more tender parts. "How much further is it?"

"Another day."

Jane groaned and wondered how she could possibly want such torture to continue indefinitely. But she did.



“So are you at war or something?” They were sitting alone beside a fire after dinner, the fur trader gone to check his wares. Jane was once again intent on learning as much as possible about this world.

“I haven’t seen any soldiers,” she continued, “but everyone seems to carry weapons.” She glanced uneasily at the bastard sword strapped to Daken’s back. Even the fur trader wore a long sword and dagger. “I almost feel naked without a knife.” She was teasing when she said it, but he gave her a long, considering look that took in her body from top to bottom.

“You are not naked.”

No, she wasn’t, but the way he looked at her made her feel like she was.

“And we are not at war,” he said. “Aggression is forbidden by the Elven Lord. We carry weapons to defend ourselves against...beasts.” She saw his jaw muscles clench over the last word, and that told her he was holding something back.

“Beasts?” she pressed. “Like the panther?” Their silent shadow had not shown herself since the village, but she sensed the cat’s presence almost as surely as she sensed Daken’s current emotional withdrawal.

“This is the heart of the Elven Lord’s lands. It

is relatively safe with few beasts. If you look closer, many of the weapons are for show or to eat with.”

Jane nodded, remembering that yes, most people carried small daggers used more to cut their dinner bread than to defend themselves.

“The trader and I both live in lands on the edge of the Elven Lord’s influence. The animals there are much less tame.”

He covered well, his tone almost conversational. But Jane hadn’t spent the last few days studying him without recognizing when Daken was being evasive.

“Is that how your family was killed?” she pressed. “Beasts?”

Daken sat very still, his gaze lost in the depths of the campfire. “The Tarveen attacked and killed my family.”

“The Tarveen?”

“A race of monsters in the northern region of my lands.” He spit out the words like bad caterpillars.

“I take it they aren’t pacifists?”

He glanced up, repeating himself as if he was impressing the basics on a witless child. “They are monsters who do not bow to anyone, much less the Elven Lord. They are animals that know only how to kill and eat.”

Jane shivered at the implacable hatred in his voice. “So they raid your lands, and you’re forbidden to fight?” That seemed rather stupid to her, even in her most anti-violence moments.

“We can defend ourselves, but it’s hard against their relentless raids.”

Raiding parties didn’t sound like her definition of mindless animals, but she didn’t press the point. “They killed your parents and your brother?”

His nod was a short, brutal slash of his chin.

“Is that why you’re going to Bosuny? To ask for help against these Tarveen?”

He turned to her, his head lifted in surprise while the firelight flashed in the dark pools of eyes. “You are a quick innocent. I didn’t think you would understand.”

“You’d be surprised what I know about violence,” she muttered. “So what is it you need? More weapons? Better defenses? What?”

Slowly he shifted his gaze from her, seemingly drawn to the pure heat of the fire. His mask of placidity, of gentle politeness fell away. What was left of his expression was a stark hatred that shocked her. It was a twisted thing that matched the tortured heat of the fire. His skin glowed red, and his eyes became flickering coals ready to incite violence.

“You misunderstand. In this land of sheep farmers and soft women, I am going to Bosuny to raise an army.” His words were cold and low, and she knew with sudden shock that his whole being was focused on his private war with the Tarveen.

“An army? But I thought the Elven Lord forbid aggression.”

“With or without the Lord’s help, I will get men and arms. Then I will attack the Tarveen, and I will slaughter every one of them like the monsters they are.”

“But,” she stammered, still trying to absorb this new and violent side of Daken. “You’d exterminate an entire race of people? Men, women, and children? All?”

“I will kill every one of them.” Then he turned his dark intensity on her, showing her the unshielded hatred within him. “And I will kill anyone who tries to stop me.”

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Katherine Greyle

Katherine Greyle believes that writing is both her greatest joy and her greatest challenge. Writing is a passion and a discipline, both hard to sustain for long periods of time. She keeps it lively by switching among genres, from adventure romances to classy Regency-era novels, to futuristic fantasy, time travel, and historicals. Occasionally, she even writes humor articles for *Racquetball Magazine*. “But all my works include romance, even if it’s the love of the perfect serve,”

Kathy’s love of romance comes from her own happily-ever-after story. “I met my husband David at a low point in my life. He literally walked in and saved me. I guess that’s why I’ve always believed in knights in shining armor. Other people may think they exist, but I know.”

They have been married for over a dozen years and have two girls to keep them busy. “Play groups and Barbie dolls. I never knew they could be so much fun!”

What are Kathy’s interests? “Everything and everyone. I love meeting new people and learning new things. There is fuel for a good story in everything from cave diving to interplanetary terraforming. Of course *Wall Street Week* puts me to sleep, but my husband loves it, so I suppose there’s a story in that.”

She began in screenwriting, receiving an MFA from the University of Southern California.

“Writing has always been my first love. I was telling stories in the playground as a kid and rewriting cartoons at home.” Still, it took several years and a variety of manuscripts before she found the right combination.“

“Everyone warned me that writing was hard work. It’s amazing just how hard. But it’s also fulfilling and exciting in ways I never considered when I started this career. What other job lets you create whole universes populated with exciting new people? Plus I read about exciting treasure adventures, mythical creatures, and real life conflicts all in the name of research.”

Now, years later, Kathy has found a writing home. “LionHearted is fabulous. They publish all my favorite areas and are willing to let me push the creative envelope. I love humor and I work every day to put it into my writing. Oracle was so much fun to write, it seemed to roll onto the pages. If my readers have half the fun I did creating it, then they’re in for a wonderful time.”

Kathy’s screenplay adaptation of Oracle won second place at World Fest ‘97 and is a likely candidate for Hollywood.

Kathy loves to hear from her readers. They can write to her via e-mail at kgreyle@net66.com.



KATHERINE GREYLE

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Jane Deerfield is having a bad millennia. Sucked forward in time two centuries after a cataclysmic nuclear event obliterated most of the planet, she’s soon on a mission to keep the survivors from repeating mankind’s mistakes. Trapped in a magical world, she never planned on falling in love with the one man who would plunge humanity back into war.

King Daken’s people are in danger of extinction by the murdering Tarveen. Desperate, he seeks an army from the Elven Lord. Jane’s sudden appearance becomes more than a distraction when she gets appointed to his position on the Elven Lord’s ruling council, then votes against his army. Now she’s in the way, and nothing will stop Daken.