

2:30 p.m.

“Roan Rover to Cavehaven,” the ham radio beside me crackled. “Roan Rover to Cavehaven base. Come in, Cavehaven.”

Cranking the antenna around to the Northwest, I alerted William mentally while reaching for the standing microphone and breathing a relieved sigh.

“This is Cavehaven, Roan Rover,” I called into the microphone. “You’re two hours late. Any problems out there?”

“Problems!” Arlo Gentry snarled through the speaker. “Annie, we’re up to our asses with problems. Reds are across the Great Divide in swarms and killing anyone that moves.”

“Where are you?” I gasped at the news, sharing it with William, and he sent it to all *The Thirty*.

“Safe for the moment. That’s all I’ll say over the air. Lost old man Gronski in a skirmish about three hours ago. Greg’s okay, but the boy is all shook.”

“Want to bring him here?” I asked, trying to analyze his emotions as I spoke.

“No way!” Crackle and static came through again with his reply. “Gas is getting scarce, but we’re going to keep at it as long as this mobile rig holds up. How’s reception?”

“No complaints. William wants to know if you did any damage.”

“You bet ya! Set the sky on fire with their fuel. They’re hauling their fuel. Or were, I should say. It went Boom! By the way, I’ve got two new recruits. Good men, but vicious. They follow orders. What ya think?”

I sensed the two unfamiliar beings near Arlo, through his radio beam.

“No bad vibes. They’re okay.”

“I thought so. Glad to hear it from you. So, now we’re four. Make that five, counting little Gary.”

“Supplies holding?” Then I sipped my tea.

“Easy to get what we need. Liz have that kid yet?”

“Another month to go.” If we counted right, I added to myself.

“No way. Bet you she doesn’t go much longer.”

“I get that same feeling. We’ll keep you posted.”

“Right,” he laughed nervously. “Better go before they pinpoint this transmission. Tell Marshall the van’s running great.”

“He’ll be glad to hear that! Talk to you at the next scheduled transmission. God be with you, Arlo.”

“You too, lady. Roan Rover out.”

Shutting down the equipment, with a deep sigh I turned to find Jennifer leaning against the doorway with arms folded loosely across her chest. Her attitude was solemn, I recall, but I flashed my silliest grin as I came up from the chair. She moved from the door gesturing me to follow, and without a word passed through the house and out into the backyard where a game of flag football was being played by a large collection of the household, young and old, male and female.

We walked abreast, skirting the action as Thomas was taken down by a handful of over enthusiastic youngsters. Eric, playing referee, called foul, whistling until he was red-faced. Mrs. Tonaka elbowed me, pointing to her son as James retrieved the “dead” pigskin and scrambled for the nearest goal line, then her pleasant laughter touched the air. As quickly as it came, the chuckle dissipated, leaving only Jennifer’s ill at ease vibrations.

Reaching the steps of the tenant cottage, the flaxen haired woman hesitated, looking back over her shoulder. Then she frowned and sank down gently on the highest step. I went quickly for iced tea, and then joined her while she watched the ragtag game. The sun lay low in the western sky.

“Doesn’t William realize you’re sterile?” She began finally, a frown on her pretty face, and because of our ever-increasing Talent, I knew instantly her line of thought.

“I don’t think that’s William’s point,” I countered, reluctant to open the topic, but reminded myself of her excellent understanding of my mate.

“What a stupid man!” She hissed, shaking her bright head slowly. “You are so frustrated that even Lin has sensed it. What’s Will’s problem?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I said truthfully, as Joy caught a lopsided pass from Daniel out on the pretend gridiron. “If your other-half is picking up on this, how must you of *The Thirty* feel?”

“Want me to have a talk with him?”

Out on the field, Lord Thomas stopped suddenly in mid-stride, and his green eyes filled my vision for an instant. I could not untangle his garbled emotions as fast as they flooded over me.

“I doubt if it would do any good. You know how William is.”

“He can be stiff-necked, I know,” Jennifer sighed, toying with a lock of hair. “I could get you some birth control pills. That may ease his mind.”

“Jennifer, that’s not why he insists on chastity. He thinks sex would interfere with our talent, and in the coming year we’ll need every advantage we can grab.” I watched a parade of emotions dance across her face. “And in ways, I can’t complain.”

“What! Why? You’re as married as possible to us. I just don’t understand you two.”

“I can’t say as I do,” I sighed, lighting a joint from my finger. “And there’s his attitude toward this.”

“Still smoking that stuff, huh? Can’t say as I blame you.”

“It helps. A little.”

During a brief silence, the blond sipped her tea, watching the play.

“Good meal our guys put on, wasn’t it?”

“Especially those ribs.”

“Yummy,” Jennifer sighed, rubbing her abdomen, then moved up to her stomach. “I won’t be able to eat for a week. Why’d he postpone the second meeting?”

I exhaled. “Too much, too soon. He’s out now. Thinking no doubt,”

“And walking off the feast.”

“Probably. He didn’t like Arlo’s report.” Pulling on the smoke, I glanced sideways at the woman. “There’s a lot to get done before first snowfall.”

“God, I sure hope this winter is milder. Have you foreseen?”

“Haven’t thought to look. But I will,” I added, and then took a big gulp of my iced drink. “Lots to sort through.”

“When’s the next meeting?” Jennifer inquired gently. “They’ll want to know.”

*William?* I touched him at his solitary place on the ridge. *When’s the next meeting?*

“Tomorrow night? Maybe day after,” I relayed as Eric whistled another foul, and the players began to protest. “He will tell us when he is ready.” I said, feeling like an echo, then got that feeling again from the woman who sat next to me while I drew on my smoke.

“Why are you thinking of me pregnant?” She asked casually, and I choked on my smoke. “Lin had a vasectomy years ago.”

“I just see you with child again,” I explained, coughing a bit. “So, I think you may be pregnant.”

“Is it Sight? Is it true?”

“I would assume so.”

“Ann. Let’s hope that this time you’re wrong.”

Then I knew for sure now that she carried her second child.

September 29

Almost everyone had finished the morning buffet when I rounded the last tree in the orchard and turned toward home with Bingo at my heels in Judica’s absence. My gray wolf had announced a week ago that she couldn’t continue our daily run because of her pregnancy. William seemed content for me to keep running provided the rest of the dogs came along. I had to be properly armed. Jogging with the weapon seemed unbalanced, at best, and it took me days to become used to its weight. After clearing the barbed wire fence, I slowed to a walk breathing heavily. I found myself thinking again about my stubborn roommate’s attitude, and I felt thoroughly dismayed, while at the same time, angry.

First I had tried to deal with his sexuality, and when that didn't work, I had tried to ignore my own. Nothing seemed to work. Will had taken no stand verbally, but he still lived as far from me as possible. Aside from the necessary image to the community, the man never touched me the way lovers do. Sadly, I wish I could write this another way, but I've decided to be open about this too. At this time I didn't understand why, but my companion insisted that our personal relationship remain platonic. I became suspicious of Jennifer, the most obvious choice, but after a few weeks, I realized that it would have been impossible for the two of them to be together without me or Lin or some member of the family being aware.

Regardless of his attitude, I realized that if I didn't begin to get some serious responses from the man, my morale could crumble into someone else's arms. Despite the fact that I hadn't foreseen this, I knew that a déjà vu occurred almost spontaneously, without warning, and there by, without my control. My blond warrior felt the strain and at the same time baited me to the point of distraction. If William left the farm for any reason, he always left Marshall with the responsibility of my safety. Despite his quips about being honorable to a fault, I wondered what would happen if I behaved without honor.

MAY I INTERRUPT? Came Judica's soft contralto voice.

*You sound tired, my friend.*

YOU SHOULD AVOID THOSE KINDS OF THINKING, the wolf replied. I NEED YOUR HELP. MY WHELPING BEGINS.

*Where are you?*

My head flooded with mental images of somewhere in the barn, and as I altered my course, I could smell odors of the stall she'd chosen.

*Aren't you a bit out in the open? The kids will pester your puppies no end.*

THEY'LL HAVE TO GET ACQUAINTED EVENTUALLY.

Her presence left my head, but then I realized that the being in the great wolf had simply shielded me from her whelping pains. I sent her my appreciation, then reached out mentally to touch William, but got Lord Thomas instead.

The man quickly explained that *His Fuzzy Face* was occupied, and his

mind seemed distant as well. I wondered if we had a hunting party on the prowl. After telling him about Judica, I slipped back into myself and crossed the drive, nearing the big wooden barn. A wave of serious discomfort struck me, and I applied blocks, while calling to Marshall.

*On my way to you now*, was his response, and I could sense an urgency to his manner. *Jennifer wants to know if you think you'll need anything for your pupdog.*

*Her guess is as good mine*, I sent to his mind. *William went hunting?*

*He didn't tell you?*

*Of course not, but he reminded you to keep an eye on me, no doubt.*

*That he did. Didn't tell you, hey wot?*

"No." I spat viciously, annoyed as I grasped the large barn door, and pushed it with all I had.

The door lurched under my anger as I muttered a string of blue words into the morning air, and heard long strides on the gravel, approaching. I didn't wait.

*He honestly didn't tell you?*

Six different ways to get even with Will passed through my mind before I could remind myself of my Christian bearing. Then I grabbed control of my emotions, promising myself that we would have to have a long, serious discussion. Again. Marshall touched my mind, like a soothing warm blanket, reminding me of my duties to my wolf and her puppies. I notched up the mental barriers one more click.

*That's better.* He chuckled affectionately. *You're getting the hang of it.*

*I suppose you can do better?*

A surge of labor pains came unexpectedly and unfiltered from Judica. I had to catch myself against the door and wait for that to subside. My vision blurred.

*Hannah!* Rang with concern through my head.

Marshall Roberts had come to my side, was holding me while blocking the animal's labor pains. Helping me walk, together we rounded the open stall door to find Judica stretched out next to the grain sacks in the fresh straw I'd placed for

her yesterday. Three squiggling forms struggled near her massive mammaries while a fourth creature emerged headfirst from her birth canal.

Several hours later after the arrival of three more puppies, I left the stall, stiff from sitting on the ground, and went to grab something to make up for missing breakfast. Marshall followed me into the kitchen where I was met by Tosha who fussed at me on general feline principle. My bodyguard poured himself some coffee from the 30- cup pot that stood at the dining room entrance while I washed up then made some toast for myself. Most of the household were in classes or somewhere, I knew. Needing some alone time, I found I resented my friend's presence.

“Can't you just watch me mentally, dearest one?”

“Easier this way,” was his response as he lit himself a cigarette. “If they start shooting critters, I want to be close.”

“It doesn't bother me like it used to.”

“Don't lie to me.”

Moving to the refrigerator, I pulled out some strawberry preserves and canned fruit without comment. Then I changed my mind and put the fruit back.

“Please. I just want to be left alone for a while, Marshall.”

“Please, understand that this is for your safety and your sanity.”

“You are such a pest-”

Something screamed in serious pain momentarily within my head, and I grabbed at my temples, hoping that my physical pressure would lessen the effect. A second terrified howl split my skull, and I quickly sat down on the floor before I fell down.

As usual, Marshall filled my brain with his very masculine presence and the Key of E, offering what comfort he could. William had to be the leader. I knew that, but as the critters died, my heart always ached. Marshall came quickly, pulling me into his protective embrace while applying the same blocks he'd used against Judica's labor pains earlier. The pain eased, but the death scream stayed with me, as he held me to his chest. I began to cry from all my frustrations.

His comfortable, familiar smells touched me through his red silk shirt. I remembered of the before time when we had shared each other's bodies as well as our minds. Sending him a fond apology, I broke away and ran for the safety of my cottage.

October 4 - Early evening

It had been the kind of day you could have labeled "a Monday," regardless of what a calendar said. James seemed underfoot every time I'd turned around, no matter if I fed the cows or tried to do some writing. Twice Lin had to call the boy to order, once during dinner. Later Joy and I discussed our family's many possible parapsychological traits and how to test for them. I'd found Joy to be almost timid when dealing with the world around her, and recalled Marshall's dislike for that. He needed somebody who would fight with him. And for him. Joy would never be a fighter.

Desiring more solitude than usual, and tired of the six-year-old's attentions, I roamed back to my house. *Our* house, I mean. I'd hoped to find it vacant, and was more than a little disappointed. I pouted, feeling resentful of William's presence until I remembered how I'd loved hot soapy bubble baths. So while he read and listened to classical music, I lingered in a steamy tub.

To my delight, about ten minutes after I'd gotten comfortable, William brought a mug of mulled wine, modestly kissed my cheek. His mind held great affection

"I promise a thorough back rub if you'll return the favor," he whispered near my ear.

"Sounds good to me! Give me ten minutes?"

With a grunt, he strolled from the small bathroom, and I read this as an indication that maybe the man had decided to take an interest in our marriage. We'd been lovers years ago. Now, his display of affection nudged my adrenaline and my hormones. Minutes later, dressed in my velour bathrobe, I entered the living room, only to find Nick and David deep in conversation with William.

*Go, put some clothes on, woman, he sent coolly, glancing my way.*

*I thought you wanted a massage, I replied, my aroused libido leaking through the mental connection.*

*No. I was not thinking about having sex with you, Will said gently. That's just your overactive imagination again. We'll go over to the big house so you can take care of that.*

*He returned to the subject of farming with his two men, ignoring me.*

*It's not fair. I insisted wanting to use some serious pressure.*

*Why do you even bother? He asked with childlike innocence.*

*Sweet Jesus, why I do such foolish things...*

*Sex drains my Talents, and any offspring of ours would go through life as an orphan.*

*I have to agree, but your attentions to Jennifer are painful for me at times.*

*As painful as Marshall's affection toward you? He looked toward me as he ushered the other men from the house. Being pure of heart is necessary for me to do what we must do. You know the biblical recommendations for a chaste and spiritual existence.*

*Do you realize your attitude could drive me to seek my natural pleasures in other ways.*

*Shall I find you a toy to assist in your carnal obsession?*

*I preferred the real thing in my pleasure. What is your problem?*

*"I'll be there in a few minutes," he called out the door, and then closed it carefully, turning his full attention to me. Blue sad eyes glazed briefly in thought, then focused back on me.*

*Aren't you fearful of the intensity of the mental link that would probably occur with two such talented beings as ourselves? Such an intrusion into my deepest thoughts and emotions would feel like being violated.*

*The possibility seems adventurous to me. I told him. After all these months, I have to ask: have you been playing in someone else's garden?*

*No. I am not interested in anyone's garden, as you put it.*

*Then, who's responsible for Jennifer's pregnancy?*

*Not I, I assure you!* He laughed through the connection, glancing toward the front door like a trapped animal. *So, she's pregnant, huh? Good.*

Despite his thoughtful grin, I sensed his confusion at this news. Of course, Eric chose this time mentally to announce that he'd been tracking a couple of big gray horses for the last fifteen minutes. Throwing on my closest clothes, I left the house before William could wound me any further.

By the time I ran behind the orchard, I knew we would have precious little time to get these creatures into the barn before it became pitch-black on this moonless night. Wondering if my husband planned to join in the round-up, I sought his mind only to find it closed and cold.

*The animals are your concern. He told me. Not mine.*

*You'll be riding one of these, if my Sight serves me right.*

*Only after you've set your charms on the beast.* William grumbled, and I felt pouting in his undercurrent emotions and his thoughts of Jennifer.

*I'm sorry I read you wrong.* I sent him with a smile.

The link closed.

Reminding myself that I was not responsible for the situation I was stuck in, I skirted a rather oversized thicket and skidded to a stop no more than fifteen feet from the most impressive gray dappled Percheron stallion I'd ever seen. Behind the great beast stood a somewhat smaller one and I guessed it to be his mare. Three more, average-sized horses lingered behind her.

My appearance had startled the two draft horses as much as their physical presence sent my blood racing with a new set of remembered dreams. I *Knew* all five horses on sight and felt driven to approach my new friends and hug their necks. The air itself felt like aggravation to me, and then I spied Nick Hoffman behind the small herd with a buggy whip in his hand. The stallion trumpeted as my eyes caught the form of Toby limping behind the man. The teen looked as if he'd bit dirt more than once. I glanced back at Hoffman, who carried his left arm in his right and whose being vibrated in pain. The monstrous dapple horse charged at my movement, radiating fear and confusion but I dodged easily, stepping sideways at the last minute to avoid his massive hooves, I tripped and hit

the ground, rolling to a sitting position. Behind the stallion, a somewhat smaller version of the horse shivered in excitement, and in that instant, I was drawn to her mind.

The mare called herself *Astre*. The stallion must have sensed our happy exchange and brought himself up short. Pivoting, the huge draft animal stopped with his nose inches from mine. I stayed as still as I could. Hot breath pushed at my face, with the smells I'd cherished since early childhood. Sensing his name was *Flaxen*, I could also hear human voices calling to the house and both William and Marshall responding. While lost in the creature's mind, I felt pain in his flanks and hot hate for the man who had caused that.

"Ann?" Toby shouted and the stallion flinched, the great gray head sweeping up defensively.

"Be still." I called as the big hooves shuffled uncomfortably close. "I'm okay, but they're scared."

*How can I help?*

I got a sense of direction from William and looked to sense his trim figure stepping from our cottage's porch.

*Nick's hurt, and I didn't need this to becoming chaotic.*

The mare and stallion stood on either side of me now, radiating their cautious curiosity. Beyond these towering two were horses of a more reasonable size, two more mares and another whose gender I couldn't tell. All seemed of bay coloring, but later I found one to be a buckskin.

*Astre* took her turn at sniffing me, and then nuzzled my cheek and hair in friendly greetings.

*Who's closest to the corral?* I radiated to all, only to hear Eric report that James had the gate open and waiting. *James?* I felt surprised and pleased. Had he heard my mental need?

The big mare nudged me again, and as I met her brown eyes I knew all I had to do was lead them where I wanted, provided that was all right with *Flaxen*. Wrapping my arms around her long neck, I asked the horse to help me to my feet. *Astre* slowly complied, pulling me up with her head as the stallion let out a

lengthy call. William touched the three of us with approval, as he hurried into the dormitory to maintain order there.

Cupping my hand under Astre's chin, I led her, and thereby Flaxen back around a barbed wire hazard Eric had installed the previous winter to the only entrance to the farm, the front gate. All the while, I fumed that William had chosen to help with the children instead of share my personal happiness. He knew how I had hoped for these creatures. A soothing thought touched me as I walked the animals toward the locked gate, and I looked up to find Will leaning lazily against it. His mind was guarded, but he grinned in the failing light.

*They're just like you showed me!* Came his greeting. *How will I ever climb up there?*

*There are ways.* I responded cheerfully. *Do you like him?*

*He's amazing! No wonder Arthur's knights rode his ancestors,* William said, then turned and pushed open the metal gate meters before we came close and waited for the last of the horses to enter our fenced yard.

Feeling uncomfortable about our earlier discussion, I kept to myself off the mental plane despite Marshall's insistent queries. William told him to work crowd-control and mind his business. My husband came up beside me as I covered the last of the walk. He remained quiet, except to comment that these were indeed beautiful creatures, until we had put the regular horses in the corral. As I made my way with the two Percherons toward the barn's open door, William lit his hand with his Fire allowing us to look at the damage Nick's whip had done. Flaxen panicked, jumping through the entrance and slamming me to the floor in his wake. Terrified, the stallion ran to the end hallway while William snuffed his light. Then he followed the horse, slamming closed the stall with a glowing look of satisfaction.

Astre bent her head to me in the darkness of the barn, sniffed a few times, and pulled her head back up, nickering to her mate. Flaxen snorted twice, and I could hear my husband's soft chuckle as footsteps came toward me.

*I'm sorry. I didn't think my horse would be afraid of my Fire,* he explained while helping me to my feet.

His touch felt guarded, but he did allow his delight for the horses to flow through the link. Constructing similar walls, I smiled up at his bearded face, putting aside my frustrations. Our eyes met and William nodded his approval as my mare casually walked into the last of my vacant stalls.

October 5

Leather bindings held tight, rubbing my flesh raw. I'd long since given up attempts to break them. Filth lay all around; the odor still choking after days of living in it. *What does all this mean*, I wondered in objective awe. Not a nightmare. Nor prophetic dream either. *Very strange*, I thought, willing myself up to consciousness out of this dreamy other world.

William lay sprawled next to me on his back, fully clothed and snoring loudly. With effort I rolled him onto his side to quiet the thunder, and then slept again.

William had become a late riser, usually around nine. Recently I'd been lucky if I made it to breakfast at the big house. I still jogged early mornings, and often found myself grateful to have the cottage to myself in the mornings when he ate breakfast in the big house. After a light breakfast of tea and cakes, I dressed against the morning chill and called a mental greeting into the still air. Jennifer, Thomas, and Joy responded amiably, reporting all was well.

Marshall's reply was one of aggravation. I had kept him waiting, he informed me. I offered apologies, pulling on my very well-worn and comfortable boots, and then I ran to the stables.

The morning was indeed a cool one. I remember the trace of frost that lingered, melting in the warmth of the sun, and being startled at the sight of my own breath rising in puffs of steam. He'll be frisky, I told myself, pulling open the small door and hurrying into a dimly lit stable area. A few moos greeted me from my small herd, and I came through the pen, quickly opening its pasture door. Leroy, our young bull was over a year old now, I knew, and come spring would take his place as head of our six milk cows.

I didn't wait for these slow beasts to file out, leaving that to Judica's friends but raced up to the stable to the opposite end, where Marshall and Eric waited. The dark Irishman stomped his feet impatiently as I slid to a halt before them, said good morning, and peered into the stall before me.

In the dim enclosure I could barely make out the animal except that he shuffled in his straw bedding nervously. I could hear the casual chewing that told me that someone had managed to get grain to him, hopefully without being harmed.

Wild eyes came up from the blackness of the stall, and the stallion screamed viciously, lunging toward me with ears flat against his head. I stood my ground meeting bared teeth with a clenched fist that landed squarely on the animal's nose. My hand stung in pain as the horse pulled back into the stall, briefly startled. Then he lunged again.

Marshall pulled me out of reach, deflecting my aim for the animal's snout by inches. Teeth slid closed on the material of my light jacket, as I shook the man away, pulling from the horse at the same time.

"I swear I don't know who is worse," my blond friend growled. "You or this devil you call Flaxen."

"William will never be able to ride him," Eric insisted. "Frankly, I'd be afraid to."

"Well, I'm not," I said hotly, avoiding the eyes of either man by inspecting my arm to exaggerated lengths. "Who fed him?"

"I did," the black haired Irishman said proudly.

"Just let him be. He's no concern of yours. Nor yours, Marshall."

"Not me, lady!" He declared innocently.

"Leave him alone. I'll see to him." Shooting Marshall a decisive glance, I set my jaw and looked to Lord Eric. "Understand?"

"You'll ride him?" Eric's tone held serious doubts, and I could feel his concern for my safety.

"Not today. First, some lessons in manners." I watched the dark man frown. "Please just get out of here. He smells your fear."

With a shrug, O'Leary ambled off down the walkway. I did not watch him, but turned my attention on the gray goblin that pawed and stomped within the box stall. He was a beauty, well over twenty-three hands of powerful muscle and intellect that had never yielded to man. A fighting steed, brave and bold, and I realized William would have his hands full even after I'd gentled the animal for him.

Marshall shuffled his feet in the dusty corridor, and I turned to see him anxiously eyeing the wild creature. I heard myself laugh lightly and touched his arm gently in reassurance. His massive fingers played across my knuckles suggestively, as he continued watching the great gray horse settle again to chomp his oats. From his lingering touch Marshall's essence seemed self-assured and mildly amused by my latest adventure. At least that is what I felt.

*You're not afraid of him?* I thought through the physical presence at my hand.

"Should I be, my Sweet?" He chuckled in a low tone. "You're not."

"No. Look, maybe you should go too. He'll sense your concern for me."

"I cannot change my feelings," Marshall responded, raising my hand to his lips. "Please, be safe, lady. He is a handsome beast, hey, wot?"

"Yes, he is," I whispered, feeling the flood of warmth in my cheeks, and tried to concentrate not on the horse but on the man who would ride him, my husband.

As Lord Marshall strolled in long strides out into the morning sunshine, I slipped back the bolt on the door, and stepped into the stall.

"Here is where we begin, Flaxen," I called evenly as the stallion eyed me from a corner of the stall. "But let's not argue. Shall we begin?"

I touched his mind with my own and relived the dream I'd had of the leather bindings, and understood. Peering into the darkness, I could see the aftereffects of the animal's capture the night before. It had been disastrous for men and beast. Flaxen had badly bruised Nick's arm and trampled over Tobias. The stallion would not be bound. Nor should he be, I thought with loving admiration as I observed the deep gashes on his flanks where Nick had laid his

whip in attempts to herd the animal in our direction.

Now big-eyed, the dapple gray stood trembling as he waited for me to make my move. No dumb animal this, I knew, only scared and in pain, I reminded myself. The box stall had little light in it. None of the barn had electricity as of yet. I could smell dried blood and festering flesh.

Raising my hand, I called upon God, igniting my fingers into a dim glow so I could see better. Flaxen snorted, dancing nervously in the straw. There was great intelligence in his eyes, I could see. So mentally I reached out to him and found pain that burned into my own being. I broke away, lowering my glowing hand. Creating a small fire ball, I set it to drift above us, safely away from walls or ceiling. This small sun illuminated the whole enclosure and left my hands free. I took two steps toward the stallion.

Throwing up his head, the animal snorted once and pawed the ground, his ears flat against his head. He made no move towards me, but watched cautiously, wild-eyed. I stayed out of the range of teeth and hooves.

“Those are some pretty nasty gashes, my friend,” I said using calming tones as the horse picked up my scent. “I apologize for my thoughtless companions. They just didn’t understand that you were coming to me. May I tend you?”

Flaxen snorted again, and I could see that he’d begun to calm. Overhead, the mini-sun hissed and popped as a gentle nicker sounded up the hall. I knew these horses had been sent by Divine Providence.

Down the hallway, a door opened and shut and in a moment Jennifer appeared at the stall’s half door. She peered anxiously in and smiled at the suspended fire ball, as I moved to her.

“At least he lets you in the stall,” she commented, passing a jar of salve and clean rags to me. “William said you didn’t respond earlier.”

“He knows I’m occupied. Thank you for the ointment.”

“Mind if I stay a minute?”

“Not at all,” I smiled at her, and then turned. “As long as he has no objection, that is.”

The horse had been watching from his position near the hay loft and sniffed at the air now as I uncapped the medicine. An aroma of camphor drifted into the musty air as I checked the animal's reaction. The stallion drew another mouthful of hay.

"Just keep those peaceful thoughts coming," I remarked over my shoulder and stepped slowly forward. "Easy, son. Nobody here is going to harm you. Easy! That's real good."

My hand touched velvet hide, and the animal jumped ever so slightly. Then he froze as I felt for his being and touched it too. The animal shivered but made no hostile moves. I introduced myself formally. Relief swept through his body, and my senses danced with stimulation and memory.

Focusing on the wall I found myself wondering at the animal's intense dislike for saddles. The stall was dark. The smell from an earlier dream came up from the floor. Panic rose within, and I shook myself violently. *Where was I?*

"Jennifer?" Was that my voice? "How long was I gone?"

I am still standing, at least, I reminded myself, turning for her. My head spun the room around with trails of the contact. Breathing deeply, I grabbed control and pushed the experience away. When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to see no sign of distress on the woman's face.

"Forty-seven seconds. I timed you." She smiled.

"Seconds! Great God, it felt like hours."

"Interesting perspective," Jennifer breathed, her mental touch on my being assured her that all was well.

"Yeah..." I muttered, kindling a fresh flame globe. "I get the feeling someday that might be too long."

In the impending silence, I moved back to the animal with caution and began examining his flanks. My heart sank with dismay, wondering how Nick might like the same treatment. I quickly pushed that aside.

"Why did Nick have to interfere? He should have realized they were coming to me."

"Nick's too rational a thinker, Ann." Jennifer's gentle voice floated over

my shoulder as I worked. “A doubting Thomas.”

“From Missouri?”

“No...” She laughed easily. “Just a Tennessee farmer and proud of it.”

“That doesn’t qualify him to play cowboy and scare a wild animal so badly that I can’t get near him.”

“He knew how much you wanted some horses. Don’t be too hard on him.”

“Jennifer, I swear if these gashes fester, I may seriously consider whipping that man myself.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” Straightening I turned to the door and gave her a sample of my emotions. In the distance William chided me. Mind to my work, I bent back to the task. The area was somewhat cleaner now. “This may sting, my friend.”

“Lots of salve, Ann.”

October 23

I stayed out of the coming and going and stood with my back to the wall catching my breath. I reeked of horse sweat, having ridden hard after Jennifer called to me about Liz’s complication. The birth was coming far too fast. Candice and Jennifer worked like a skilled team while Thomas stayed at his wife’s head encouraging her and breathing with her.

William slipped into the bedroom and came quickly alongside me. His clothes were dusty from field work and smelled of cut grain. He’d taken Thomas’s place when Liz’s labor pains had begun earlier in the afternoon. Jennifer had sent me out to gather berries. Now Liz’s labor struggle frightened me, sending shivers through my body. I could almost feel the convulsions.

*Block it, lady.*

*I’m trying to. Come here often, sailor?*

*This is a special occasion. My godson!*

*Our Godson.* I corrected him with tenderness.

*Didn't I say that?*

Cry for the unborn children, I thought to myself, as young Samuel emerged and bellowed heartily to announce his arrival. Cry Lady Ann, for the children you cannot bear.

October 29

“You’ve got to understand, William. Talking about Jesus as the Messiah is against the civil law of Israel.” David’s face was livid, yet pleading just the same. “They’ll lock you up within days of your arrival.”

“I shall be cautious. It’s old loose-lip Annie I’m worried about.” Will flipped a thumb in my direction. I stuck out my tongue in retaliation from my reading chair. “Besides, prophets are supposed to stir up the people. Don’t worry about it.”

David fumed in silence as William drew the atlas up from the table and took it to where the old man sat.

“Tell me what you know about the area south of The Gaza Strip, Grandfather. Please.”

October 30 - Early Evening

I’d had the urge to go riding all afternoon, but the day had proved demanding. Even though Liz was back on her feet, she still tired easily. The children were excitable after six days of class, and tomorrow was First Day: The day set aside as God’s. Stalls would be left dirty and dishes left to soak in the sink. Tonight the meal was prepared ahead of time and would be sparse.

After kitchen duty, William announced a hike in the woods. All the youngsters under twelve immediately volunteered and when David and Marshall joined in, the teens all decided to go. In the end, only a few of the household stayed behind, Jennifer, Lin, Liz, Thomas, and Joy, who seemed relieved to be away from most of the children.

As I led Astre from her stall, I told all my animals where we were going. Without a doubt, all the dogs would go, except Judica.

My dear wolf friend lay in the next stall overrun by seven whelping puppies. Playing around the stable was one thing, she'd told me, and those woods and all the kids were too much for her litter just yet.

Even though William walked amid a sea of youths, his stallion was not far away. Flaxen insisted on accompanying his mare and me, but left us in the first open meadow to stretch his legs. Meters away the kids squealed with delight to watch Lord William's stallion frolic. Astre contented herself with the pace of the youngsters, grazing as I watched about the area or chatted with one of the adults.

Katie and Nick strolled hand in hand, occasionally directing a wayward little one. The adults had spread out to ring William and his flock as they moved down a gravel farm road. Ahead, Flax scouted at William's request.

Just before sunset, Will changed directions for the second time, and our path arched eastward into a rising moon. Shortly thereafter, our feet touched pavement a half mile east of home. Through the moonlight as we herded our children, I felt Candice cry for other children. She was thinking of her younger days, and of ovens, and people untouched by a baby's cry.

James grew tired, and I found myself with a six year old passenger, and soon after Marshall brought me another. Daniel looked droopy-eyed. Marshall wrapped him in his jacket and swung the boy onto Astre's back in front of me. When I discovered the boy had a slight fever, I set out for home.

November 1

Two nights later by the light of the moon, I retraced the hiking route alone on horseback. Daniel's temperature fluctuated from 101 to 105, while others in the household suffered through various symptoms of influenza. Doctor Jennifer struggled to keep up with the ailing household, especially after Nurse Katie resigned in a bout of severe nausea. Those who were well, or at least ambulatory, cared for the sick and kept the household going. Aside from achy bones, my body

held together.

After finishing my evening chores, I'd brought out the gray mare and slipped away for some alone time, and a special prayer.

The wind was rising, but I smelled no storms, and only a few clouds glided across the starry heavens. I loosed my hair as the autumn air blew my cloak back, then headed Astre toward higher ground. I wanted to check the horizons.

As we topped the ridge I took my bearings on the Orion Constellation and began to observe the sky clockwise. The hair on my neck rose and started to tingle, so I set myself for a stronger scan. Then I smelled smoke, and the animal beneath me tensed, swinging up her ghostly head.

"I smell it too, girl," I whispered, patting her neck, to turn her. "Let's have a look."

Two hours later, William stood with me under the protective shadow of an oak tree. His riding cloak of gray flowed gently around his knees, as he silently gazed at the farmhouse in the distance. Candles showed through three of the windows and we'd counted five people. There were no children.

November 5

*Hannah! You must see this!*

The hatching faded from sight momentarily as I stretched out energy to meet Marshall's nimble mind.

*Just a moment,* I called, sensing he was not in danger.

Across the heat of the chamber Jan helped feed the clutch of rabbits and their mother. I settled quickly, half sitting, half leaning against wall. Then I opened my mind, closing my eyes.

Marshall's vision felt vague and fluctuating, very unlike the communications I often had with William, but I received the perception well enough. Three butterflies, maybe four, frolicked in the sunshine that streamed through golden leaves.

*They're lovely, but why call me for this? I queried with gentle curiosity.  
I'm sure you can appreciate this...*

My host turned his eyes to Eric who was armed and mounted on the big bay gelding. The Irishman radiated with the essence of all animal language, and the fluttery creatures danced above him in the air. The smallest monarch seems just about the same size as the man's head.

*Radiation, do you think? Marshall asked.*

*Maybe... Did you show William? I asked, delighted by the vision and sending that to my friend.*

*He's meditating. Didn't want to be disturbed. I thought you'd like to see.*

*Yes! My thanks, dearest one. Excuse me, but we're up to our ears in hatching rabbits! This does need my attention.*

\* \* \*

*Your feet are cold. He rolled over toward me.*

*I'm sorry.*

*That better?*

Arms encircled me as he slipped behind me and drew my body close.

*Oh, marvelous! You're a natural furnace.*

*And you're a hothouse flower. William's mind touched me with affection.*

*What are you going to do when it really gets cold?*

*Live in long johns again? I giggled, snuggling.*

*You'd be warmer if you wore pajamas.*

November 6

"Liz, you know I hate sleeping in anything. It's a silly puritan ritual."

"So? Will's a silly Puritan."

"Okay," I resigned. "Flannel?"

"Doctor Denton's if we can find you some."

November 9

My eyes darted from the airfield to the altimeter and back to the concrete ribbon that rushed toward me. Thomas's big hand covered mine on the throttles, and eased them back gently. The din of twin engines dropped an octave. Pulling up the nose of the E2 Hawkeye, I checked the landing gear again then corrected my course.

"Looking good," The co-pilot sighed. "Let the nose down a tad. Easy!"

*Looks good from here.*

*Quiet. I'm concentrating.* I sent back to William, while wondering where he'd come from that he could observe my private flight instructions.

"Remember! She's going to lurch," Tom cautioned.

Grasping the yolk with both hands, I set myself as best I could. This made my third attempt to set the craft on terra firma. The first two "touch and goes" didn't count, according to my teacher, and William happily agreed. He'd refused to watch my first flight weeks ago, and then today he showed up quite unexpectedly. He said he was practicing being sneaky, which I could understand in view of our destinies, but I suspected his curiosity got the best of him after Thomas's reports.

William's unexpected appearance had coincided with my third practice landing, and I admit I messed it up. He startled me so badly that I briefly lost control of the plane. Thomas righted the craft, then I circled and began my approach again as my husband and Thomas commented about the surprise elements of life in general. I fumed.

\* \* \*

I felt like being alone. William had disappeared immediately after dinner while Joy and I were the last two out of the kitchen. Diane and Katie had set up their barbershop in the rec room where some of the family now congregated. I

sought peace in the stable, only to discover all of my horses gone, except Astre who danced nervously in her stall. Visions of their departure touched me, and I watched through the mare's memory as William, Eric, and Liz lead their mounts out into frosty evening.

Questions danced across my mind as I threw open the stall then whirled and hurried for the door. As I stepped into the powdery dust of snow, I realized why I'd chosen the gray riding cloak this night. At the time I'd simply responded to a hunch and donned the garment despite my personal feelings of it. I preferred my purple cloak given to me by Marshall, although this one was warmer. William had had this one styled to match his own, and Candice had sewn each stitch with love. Its Power was evident.

Astre trotted past me to her position near the fence where I could mount, and I sniffed at a Western breeze, careful not to use the talents God had given me. Another hunch tingled true, while my eyes swept the cloudy sky glowing with the last shreds of dusk. My mare nickered a question quietly, as always aware of my mood, then stomped a hoof impatiently.

Rounding the animal, I climbed two beams of the three tier wooden fence and turned as Astre moved her back in to me obligingly. I'd mentioned my height, or lack of it before, and since I saw no need of a saddle or bridle this was one way I could climb atop the tall horse.

"You know where we're going. Follow your nose." I laughed, wrapping my fingers in her thick mane. "But quietly until we're away from the house."

In response, the horse danced softly on the brittle grass, her head high into the wind. Crossing the gravel drive with amazing care, Astre picked her way at a diagonal toward the road. Once out in the open, she tested the wind as I sat astride her wondering. Pivoting she collected herself and as she sprang into her comfortable gallop, I realized I was unarmed.

Astre ran strong, but not hard as I clung low on her neck, escaping the wind. Apparently the men had stayed on the roadside turf, avoiding the barbed wire traps that lay between the fields. In roughly a mile Astre slowed and began circling tightly. I encouraged her to find Flaxen, and she turned to the same

direction again in a leisurely lope. Beneath me, the animal's chest bellowed deeply, with a kind of rhythm that matched her long strides. Then, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, between two uncultivated tracts, Astre pulled up short, bouncing me high.

Like a bloodhound she put her nose to the ground and strode about ten meters into the field. Then her head came up and swung around. Turning she moved twenty meters up wind and tested the ground again. Had William gone across that field and up to the south? Yet Flax's scent was on the wind that rose from the west, Astre told me.

Warmth drifted up from my gray goblin against a chill that crept from within me, as I sat up, resting the horse. Which way to go? I pondered, looking first in one direction then the other. Was I tracking or attempting to parallel? I wasn't sure. The mare beneath me lowered her head and swiped a mouthful of wild grass, waiting.

Frigid moisture pricked on my cheek breaking my wandering thought, and then a second piece touched above my eyes. More sleet. Gathering up my mass of hair, I stuffed it down my back and pulled the woolen hood around my ears. *Thank you, God, for warm animals*, I thought, then decided on my direction. Without a word from me, Astre stepped out at a walk into the wind-carried scent. I wanted to stay down wind of them, hoping to parallel until a better idea came to mind.

Astre gingerly crossed the blacktop slick from the earlier storm, and then trotted into the Tennessee countryside. I clutched the mane with both hands and held on with my knees, grateful when she changed into an easy lope. Jumping a creek at the end of the lot, we halted, and Astre tested the air again. Night was falling fast, and before us rose a rolling meadow that blocked the chilly night wind that was our guide.

Playing another hunch, I turned my horse right, and we cut up the ridge. Across the flattened grass, the air was alive with a multitude of smells, my borrowed sense told me. Astre shuddered with recognition, but I could not tell of what. Below us the land stretched into open country bordered on one side by a

break of thickets and red maple trees for as far as I could see. Praying for gentler winds and snow instead of the driving sleet, I turned my mount toward the protection of those trees.

As we began our descent, I caught the sound of pounding hoofs from behind the barrier. Astre came up short, throwing her head and knocking the breath from me. Then she stopped completely still, trembling as the brambles thirty meters away erupted. More hooves and the whoop of the hunters combined with a racket of breaking bramble and shattering gun shots. In my head, I heard the buck's death shriek.

Searing pain washed over me, dizzying my sight.

A second pained animal scream filled my being.

*Marshall?* I sought my Love as the terror flooded me.

*Not now!* And he was gone from my mind.

The horse beneath me felt my terror, reared high, sending me toppling over her backside. Cold wet ground smacked me hard. All went black.

Wet on my cheek. Cold ground. The smell of autumn and dirt. Ouch, left wrist. Hunters. Oh, yeah. The stag through the bushes. Astre rearing.

*Marshall?*

My attempt to reach him failed. No sound came but the rush of the wind. *Control*, I told myself, *no panic allowed*.

Checking my body I found a lump on my forehead, and my left wrist, I hoped, would prove to be only a severe sprain. I opened my eyes to the night and found gentle snowflakes floating in the air. I tried to rise briefly. The air crackled with William's sustaining energy. Then I sat up, dizzy on the frosty ground.

Astre's shadowy gray figure stood nearby, watching into the thicket. William's voice floated on the wind, but I could not make out the words. I wondered if he knew I was here and suddenly realized he didn't want me to be there.

"Astre..." I called softly. "Come here, pretty filly."

Like a ghost the mare moved to me and nuzzled affectionately at my arm. I patted her cheek, chuckling, then reached up and twined my fingers into her

mane. Raising her head Astre pulled me up to a standing position, and I leaned heavily against her warm hide, waiting for my head to clear.

“We’ve got to get out of here, Astre,” I breathed, listening to the distant voices of the hunting party as they gutted their kill in the next meadow. “Down you go, my lovely. If you would be so kind.”

Gingerly, the horse bowed down on one foreleg, and I climbed carefully up onto her broad back. With a lurch Astre was again on all fours and ready to go. Her steamy coat told me I’d not been unconscious long.

*Are you all right?* William seemed physically very close.

*I’m not sure,* I sent out coolly.

*You’re not armed. Come over here. Take Elizabeth’s pistol.*

*I’ll be all right.*

Using my hands, I turned Astre back up across the ridge, reflecting on the scene, and the scream of dying I’d heard in my head. That pain had combined with my own horror at the face of death caused the mare to bolt and put me to the snowy ground. *Some horsewoman,* I chided myself, kicking the mare into a run.

Astre retraced her footprints at a furious pace, and for a while I was left to my thoughts and fears. The snowstorm had passed quickly. Now only delightful clumps of fluff drifted on a gentler wind that made fast work of covering the frozen ground. I peered across a landscape of contrasting lights and shadows. I found myself in awe even more than a year of silent-unused machinery could be compared to this peaceful falling snow.

I reached for my friend, but Marshall didn’t come to my mind. Where was he tonight, I wondered. Asleep? So early?

Roughly a mile out from home the horse beneath me stopped unexpectedly and refused to go further. The mare danced in circles, patterning the fallen snow, as I attempted to force her head into the right direction. Each time I pointed her down the asphalt toward home, she stubbornly swung away and headed into the field. Without benefit of bit or bridle, the animal would not be pressured, and I reminded myself that Astre’s instincts could be trusted.

After a minute of this dance, I became disgusted by her antics. My head

throbbled, and my left hand was almost useless.

All I really wanted was to be home, out of my wet clothes and sitting in front of the fireplace with a glass of brandy to chase away the chill in my bones. What was her problem? I wondered, as I clung to Astre's mane with my right hand.

As if sensing my thoughts, the horse stopped suddenly and turned her delicate head around. As large eyes regarded me sadly, I had to laugh. I knew her ways of communicating. Shooting a glance around for the first time, I realized that the mare had stopped at this same spot on our outward journey.

"You know something I don't, filly?" I inquired with a sigh as I stroked her satiny neck.

Astre hopped slightly upward, not really rearing, and then tossed her head with a snort. She'd brought us around, facing downwind and began to paw at the snow. I felt disturbed that she made no moves to test the wind.

"Well, I guess you know your mind," I sighed, wishing Judica's pups were old enough to be without their mother for a while.

Leaving the roadway, Astre bounded into an easy lope, and I tried to take my bearings, but few stars shone through the diminishing clouds. She moved out quickly once beyond the first stand of trees, and I struggled to cling to her. Crouched upon her withers, I held on awkwardly and as mentally passive as possible. Lately, I had been singled out by a member of the household and cautioned about my recklessness, especially with my animals.

After a while the horse slowed, coming to a cautious walk. I sat upright, stretching my stiffening legs and surveyed the land around us. In the darkness I could make out the lines of tree shadows against the snow-covered meadows. Everything had taken on the blue hue of night as the last of the crystalline flakes twinkled and waltzed in the breeze. A wave of sudden dizziness swept through me. I grabbed tighter to the mane in my hand, fighting it. Jennifer had had too many of her own spells of late, and I didn't want her sensing my condition just now. Her talent for mirroring my emotions could alert the whole community, I knew, and I did not want that.

Astre ambled onward, noticeably cautious, so I sent my extra senses put to search the beautiful country side that surrounded us. I found myself shivering and tugged my hood tighter around me, wishing I had brought a pair of gloves.

A small glow of orange caught my eye. Beyond the trees two spots of light flickered within the outline of an old farmhouse. William had made a point of knowing our neighbors and reporting on them, but I couldn't remember about this particular dwelling. Was it supposed to be occupied? Like most of the country homes, it stood beyond a barn and the two-story silo, and I knew where I was. With the knowing of where I was came the realization of the when. The vision of the remembered dream compelled me more than my curiosity ever could.

I remember chuckling as I realized I should have been scared. I reminded myself of my lack of defenses and felt the mare's apprehension. Astre grew more cautious as we approached the backyard, and I spied the angle of the garage. The animal sidestepped until a structure blocked our arrival. As I scanned the area mentally, a large metal mass caught my attention. My eyes spied Marshall's white antique Chevy, lost in the snowy background so that only the darkened headlights reflected.

The car had not been there long. The clean windshield on a snow-covered car made me more cautious, and I signaled Astre to stop. The horse eased up to the garage and out of the wind, and with gratitude to her, I composed myself. Carefully, I reached out with my mind until I could feel the house with my mind, then I projected into it. There were three together, and Marshall's spirit wavered in recognition. The air reeked with hostility and intense dangerous emotions.

*Do take care,* I called out to him.

*Stay away!*

His fear forced me back into my body that sat astride a sweaty horse in the cold night.

*God protect you, in Jesus' name.* I prayed for him

Collecting myself I nudged Astre around the old wooden structure, into the wind and closer.

The first gunshot rang out and the mare bolted right toward the farmhouse. Two, maybe three more shots echoed in the night, and I found myself bounding from my horse and at the front porch. The wooden door burst outward, and instinctively, I dove, rolling in the snow. Heavy footfalls ran away from me, and the next expected gunshot never came. Looking around I glimpsed a shadow of the gray horse as she bore down on a man who stumbled around the corner of the building.

Scrambling back to my feet, I slipped and slid the few yards remaining in reckless panic and was inside the farmhouse before I considered what danger could await me. But all was quiet, on all planes and all levels.

A single candle, resting on a low coffee table, lit the modest living room that was draped in a year's dust. As I moved to it, a scream split the air, followed by Astre's triumphant call. In the flickering glow I made out the form of a man crumpled before me on the threadbare rug. He had a small plump figure, and as I stepped closer, I breathed a sigh of relief that he was not anyone I knew. No breath moved his chest, and I looked about me in fright. A labored breathing hung in the air, and I spun toward the darker side of the room.

Blond hair caught the dim light, and I could make out the familiar contour of my friend's body on the floor in the shadows. Marshall lay on his side, almost in fetal position and moaned slightly as I stepped around to face him. Shocked by the large pool of blood he lay in, I carefully took his head and turned it from the floor to me. Eyelids fluttered open to fogged green eyes that slowly focused. Smiling his affection, he tried to swallow.

"Forgive my not rising." Marshall's strained voice rasped into choking.

Putting my good hand to his shoulder, I pushed at him. Obliging, the man struggled to roll over, but as I eased his head to the floor, Marshall stiffened, clutching at his midsection. As he let out breath slowly I found myself gaping at a bloody hole where his stomach had been. My heart sank.

My body snapped alive with energy as I sensed panic creeping into my soul. Tears rose in my eyes as I stroked back the long blond hair from his angular face. This was not right. Marshall didn't die now. I knew that. Confused by the

shattering of my heart, I fought to calm myself.

“THIS CANNOT HAPPEN!” I screamed into the night as well as on the psychic plane.

Marshall let out a shallow laugh, then coughed, and gasped a breath.

“Tis done, my Sweet.” His voice told me of his acceptance.

“You don’t die yet,” I insisted frantically, recognizing the healing energy that now welled up from within me. “Not here, my love. Not now.”

Stretching alongside of the tall man, I rolled into his blood, as close to him as possible, careful to keep one hand in contact with his forehead. He tensed at my actions and confusion radiated from him as our minds touched.

*I am not going to let you die.*

*No choice, eh? His mind felt foggy and fatigued.*

*Listen to me. Reach into your being, I thought to my friend.*

*Too tired...*

*We can do this, Love! I will help you.*

I carefully straddled the wounded man, and then gently lowered my body upon his. He moaned with a pain real to both of us now. His fear tore through my lips as his arms hugged me in his death grip. Terrified by the face of Death, I almost broke the psychic connection, yet, I knew I had to go back for him. Stretching my mind, I collected healing Power by the handfuls. First William was with me, then Jennifer, and then all our other companions of *The Thirty* worldwide. Their sustaining presence brought an exquisite ecstasy to my soul.

*We will not allow him to die!* William called and the spirit of *The Thirty* flooded me with calming assurance.

William’s full being dominated the gathering of minds, and I found myself amazed by the force of energy they lent to me. My body became aware of the warm blood that saturated my clothing. I heard William praying. Sensing Marshall’s fading spirit, I plunged after him with all my soul and my love.

My next conscious thought recognized William’s mental presence and his strangled emotions. His mental link gave me stability of time and place, while my body began to register the man who still lay beneath me. My head bobbed gently

with the slow rhythm of Marshall's breathing. All his pain had left me. My ears rang, and my wrist and head throbbed, as they had before. I felt too tired to move and turned into myself and took a moment to gather my wits.

Soaked with perspiration despite the unheated room, I shivered with aftermath emotion. Strong arms enfolded me, as he exhaled slowly, then his lips lingered at my forehead. Callused hands brushed hair from my cheek and tilted my chin for a better view. Marshall tensed briefly, touching my mind with concern, and I forced open my eyes. His shadowy gaze brightened, growing into his handsome grin, as he touched the lump on my head.

*That should teach you to ride those beasts,* he sighed affectionately.

Sighing, he brushed away another length of hair from my face, and then tilted it to meet his eyes. I was becoming uncomfortable quickly. His lips came to mine softly, savoring the sensation. Too weak to protest, I let him take his kiss, amazed at the fire he still ignited in me. Too tired to protest, inside I reminded myself of the fact that I had a husband.

*Sweet Marshall,* I thought as he returned my head to his chest. *Please try to understand. I must try to make my marriage work.*

Beneath me I felt his muscles tense. Then in one fluid motion Marshall raised up both of our bodies so that I sat on the carpet facing him in the candle glow. The dance of the flame hurt my eyes, and I shut them again. His large hand cupped my face, and I found him peering anxiously at me, nose close to mine.

"Some date you turned out to be," he quipped, now rubbing my numb hands frantically. "Are you all right?"

His being radiated confused concern with panic in the backwash.

"I'm just tired," I managed through the thick dryness in my throat. "How are you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm incredible! Marvelous!" With a haunted look he glanced beyond me, and then blinked at me. "There's a dead man over there that I just killed, and another outside probably full of hoof prints. Oh, sure, I'm all right! You stroll in casually while I'm watching my guts drain all over the floor, and

then you lie in it with me for God sake! What the hell is that all about?"

"Took a dive from Astre," I muttered thinking calming thoughts to my friend and fearing he'd break before we could play this out completely. My troublesome talent for foresight snapped into hindsight once again.

"I know. I heard all that, space queen. Think you can stand up without falling down?"

"Been practicing..." was something I'd muttered in a dream some time ago. "How many dreams have I had in the past that have been pieces of tonight? Oh, Lord, I'm tired."

"Self-centered, fuckin', William," Marshall muttered to himself as he rose and turned to assist me. "Or non-fucking William as the case may be... What's wrong with that boy?"

"Hmmm?" My vision blurred as William touched my mind.

*You'll be okay.*

I ignored Will as the blond continued. "He knew you were hurt. Why didn't he help you? You sure you're okay?"

I stood on shaky legs watching the surroundings spin and reached out to my friend for support as my knees buckled. Strong arms steadied me for a moment then gathered my small body as I felt myself melting to the floor. Marshall carried me three long strides, then carefully lowered me to a sofa and then eased down to the floor next to me.

Tenderly his lips covered mine, and again those feelings stirred and swirled me into delightful, light-headedness. Our minds rushed together, swamping me in his needs and his passion. I struggled to maintain my identity in the tidal wave of emotion that poured from his soul. Marshall felt this through our touch and suddenly jumped away as if he'd been electrocuted.

*WILLIAM DAVID MARTIN!* Marshall screamed at full force, bold and challenging as he sprang up from the floor in his fury. Fists raised in defiance, he glanced around the empty room. Two leaps took him to his pistol, which he checked quickly and holstered. Then he stopped and stood still for a moment regarding the dark stain on the rug and his own mortality. Shivering violently, he

turned back to me in the candlelight.

“Oh, Hann, look at you,” he sighed pitifully. “William’s going to have my head for this.”

Glancing down, I stared at the crimson stain that covered the front of my gray wool cloak. Already the blood had begun to dry or freeze. Looking back to the blond man, I noted that his jeans and jacket were soaked in the stuff. My eyes on him brought him out of his thoughts, and he bounced to a nearby cabinet and began rousting through it.

“Are you going to pass-out on me again?” He called, moving to search another spot.

“Don’t plan to,” I responded trying to at least sound confident, but there was a lack of something in my voice. I sought God for more strength as my vision wavered again.

Marshall mumbled something as he left the room, but he returned at once, grinning as he unscrewed the cap from a scavenged bottle of Chablis. After sniffing the contents once, he took a few gulps. Then he stepped back to me and leisurely poured some wine down my throat. After another gulp for himself, he passed the bottle to me and hurried from the room without a word.

I had barely taken a third swig of the sweet wine when he stomped back and began spreading a heavy quilt over me. After checking my eyes, Marshall snatched back the bottle, winked, and drained it off. Then his eyes fell on mine, and he knelt down beside me, tucking a fold of the blanket under my chin. Again he kissed me, long and sweet, then withdrew with a deep sigh.

“I owe you my life,” he whispered, sliding to sit on the floor near me. “What can I give you in return? Shall we again be lovers in spite of that sexless bastard you call a husband?”

His sincerity touched me, but his anger tore at my heart. In that instant I realized he truly considered himself my *only* alternative to William’s vow of chastity.

“I want for nothing, my dearest,” I finally responded, unable to meet his eyes. “I have no needs.”

“I know that’s not true. I remember you, very passionate and all squirmy in my arms... Now, I lie awake at night, sensing your repressed passions, unable to--er. Ah, Hannah, we must honor your marriage vows, certainly, but they imprison your sexuality. And *I* know that it’s not your nature,” he said with a mischievous gleam in his eyes, and then he saw my disapproving frown. He stared deeply into my eyes. After a long moment and a deep sigh he continued. “So be it. Perhaps I can nudge Saint William to perform his husbandly duty.”

His grin brightened as Astre announced William’s arrival with a welcoming whinny to her mate. The stallion’s call came from nearby and with it the sounds of the hunting party.

“God knows how much it pains me to give you back to him.”

The reference to William chilled the night air even more, as the blond man climbed slowly to his feet. With a wink and a grin to me, he turned to face the open door, pointing to it.

*Behold, my Sweet.*

Near the doorway, a shadow materialized from out of the floor and sprang into the silhouette of two naked lovers, kneeling there. Marshall’s illusion swayed and danced away from the door, into the room we occupied. As he shaped his creation into a passionate embrace, the hunting party came riding hard. They burst into the yard. I sensed William’s concern as a shiver passed through me. In four thundering thumps he appeared in the doorway, skidding to a halt before the illusion of a woman who looked like me locked in the passionate embrace of another man.

William’s face was bleak behind his dark whiskers as he took in the optical illusion. The apparition mirrored Marshall’s face with a remarkable clarity as well as my own. The specter of our former love making shimmered with a life of its own, and in my soul it seemed as if we two were naked and kneeling in a lover’s embrace once again. That only darkened William’s mood. I glanced back at Marshall who stood rigid beside me in concentration. He blinked rapidly, relaxed a bit, and with a dismissing wave of his hand, turned to me. The illusion dissipated. William stood watching us with his arms akimbo as shadows

flickered across his face in the candle glow. Coolly his eyes surveyed the room resting briefly on the dead man, and then focused on me on the couch. He stepped around the body and approached us.

Marshall leapt with lightning speed, his arm a swinging blur. William had no time to react, catching Marshall's big fist with his jaw. William found himself on the floor shaken and looked up at the blond man in confusion. Rubbing his knuckles absently, Marshall stepped over to William, and the two men glared at each other in silence. They blocked my mental intrusion. I waited. Soon, Marshall extended his arm to Will and pulled our leader to his feet.

"She's your wife. You take care of her." Marshall spoke cold words devoid of any emotion, and I shuddered to think what had transpired between them. Turning, the blond man stomped from the house.

\* \* \*

More than an hour later I stretched out comfortably on my own living room floor, revived after a hot bath. William had brought me to our little cottage home instead of turning me over to the women in the communal house, insisting that they leave us. Jennifer was mortified and argued that at least Joy should stay to assist him, but he angrily refused the service. After I had been stripped of the offensive, bloody clothes and put into a fragrant bath, he left me to refresh the fire. Soon I stared into it as my husband worked the kinks and stiffness from my muscles. Unskilled fingers massaged each bruised area with lotion and with compassion.

*Better hurry. We're about to have company.*

*I know.* His attitude was tense, and he had spoken little since entering our cottage.

*Let it be, William.* I cautioned timidly.

*No. Not yet.* He laughed, sadly nudging at my ribs with a rough finger.

*Fact is, you two were alone together for quite a while.*

*And his blood all over my coat says nothing? You were there,* I pointed

out, unsure of his state of mind.

*They want to see you*, my husband explained, passing my dark purple robe.

“Candice will have a fit about that coat after all the time she spent on it,” I remarked, covering myself, yet keeping my feelings open to him. “She’ll never forgive me.”

“I doubt that. Marshall is well loved. And needed,” he reminded me while rising easily to his feet. “And it is your Marshall that benefits most from this night.”

“Think so?” I heard contempt in my tone, surprised as he took my hands and pulled me up to him.

*“The Thirty* held him from death,” William explained tenderly pushing back a strand of my hair. “Especially you, dearest of ladies.”

His soft hands touched my chin and raised my head. I was shocked by the fatigue behind his usually masked face. His eyes held no sparkle, and the crystal blue had faded from them. I told him what I saw.

“This night,” he began with a long sigh, and wrapped his arms around me protectively. “It’s not been easy for you. Now, it seems I must go one more round before it’s through.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, snuggling to him.

“Not to worry, Little One. I’m just talking. Not to worry.”

“William, if you’re angry with Marshall,” I began, but he blocked my lips with a finger, then touched my mind with affection.

“Do not worry. Come in, Jennifer, Lin,” he called, kissing me quickly before he’d release me. “You will sit, lady, while I play host.”

*Fine with me*, I replied mentally as he handed me formally to his favorite chair. *What about Marshall?*

*Coming across the yard with Joy.*

“Lin, can I get you a drink?” William called, stepping toward our small kitchen. “Jennifer?”

“Nothing for me,” Mrs. Tonaka replied sweetly, giving me that peculiar

look under raised eyebrows. “Ann, how are you?”

“A little tired,” I admitted under her knowing gaze. “But no worse for wear.”

“Did we interrupt something?” she whispered, nodding to where her husband had joined mine in the kitchen.

“No chance.”

“What happened out there?” She pressed, frowning. “I sensed pain, heard screams. I’ve never felt William radiating so much anger.”

“Standby,” I warned as she rested gracefully on the sofa near me. “Apparently it’s not over yet.”

Footsteps sounded on the old wooden porch, and then Candice and Eric strolled through the open door. I realized my own tension and sought to relax myself. With Marshall and Joy on their way, that would bring our entire talented group together under one roof. Nodding a greeting to Eric, I wondered if William had called a meeting.

*I was just going to ask if you did.*

“Not all *The Thirty*,” Jen remarked gently as Joy glided across the threshold followed by Marshall. “This seems to be a gathering of just our local chapter.”

*Except then Lin wouldn’t be here,* my blond love remarked, the sounds of his long strides reaching my ear. *A non-coincidence, gentle friends?*

Marshall came quickly beside me, smelling fresh from a shower and took my hand in his. I could feel blood rushing to my face and kept my eyes on the rug. The room fell quiet, except for hurried footsteps from the next room.

“Dear lady, look at me,” he whispered as I eased away from his touch. “I have not shamed you in any way.”

“Mr. Roberts! Take your hand away from her.”

William’s hypnotic *Voice* was controlled and foreboding and the young warrior turned and stood facing the *Voice*. William stormed from the kitchen door, livid, skirting our guests as he came. The air cracked with emotional energy as he stepped to within inches of the blond man’s nose.

“You will direct your attention to another member of our household from now on.” William spoke so intentionally, that I shuddered. His *Voice* was well controlled and beyond resistance- “You do understand!”

“I hear you.” Marshall’s words were distastefully spoken, and again these two kept their mental conversation from me.

“We understand each other,” my husband sighed, turning.

I sensed his release of my tall warrior, but also the anger still building steadily within Lord Marshall

“No, we don’t,” The blond man growled.

Marshall stepped and swung his massive fist, flooring William before he could react. William shook his head a moment, but made no move to up, resting back on one elbow, regarding his attacker passively.

“Now you even have witnesses,” Marshall Roberts said coldly. “And I think you know why. Now, let’s get on with this meeting.”

“Lord Marshall,” I sighed wearily. “Please, come here.”

My friend spun, concerned by my tone, and stepped closer to me.

“Marshall... Please. Violence is not the answer to this. It can’t go on.”

I flopped back into my chair to find William grinning at me. All around, our friends stood in silence. My husband climbed up from the floor, chuckling softly.

*So right you are, wife.* Kindness came with the loving feeling he sent to me alone.

*On rare occasion.* I laughed to him.

The blond now chuckled as he cast a glance to me, and then toward William. My husband nodded his agreement. Bringing himself upright, Marshall extended his hand to William.

“Peace, brother. But I have to say it again, William. This woman must not be neglected. In any way.” He smiled as his hand was taken. “If you cannot or will not satisfy her carnal needs, then grant me permission, witnessed by these good people-”

“Shut up, fool.” William barked using the *Voice*.

From behind the thick beard, I could see William glaring in cold silence at my tall friend, and then he turned away. Again the two blocked their mental conversations from me as Jennifer fidgeted and Eric coughed nervously in the silence.

“Sit down, Mr. Roberts,” William ordered at length. “Joy, give him that beer.”

“You’d better have Jennifer have a look at you, William,” Lord Eric put in, trying to ease the tension. “You’re gonna have a shiner, for sure.”

“This was our second round tonight,” he responded as he moved to sit on the arm of my chair. “But with Right, I will admit. His point has been hammered home.”

“Marshall,” I sighed, shifting to give William some room. “I thought you realized that William and I are almost always aware of each other. He was with me all the while tonight.”

“Me lady, you wouldn’t believe...” He stopped, swallowed, and then fixed his cold green eyes on my husband. “You’re being unfair. Tell her.”

“Perhaps later. You’ve done what is needed,” he replied calmly and with a hint of malice. “You knew my plans, and I expected you to carry them out. Enough. Please, sit down.”

*You know what comes next?* William’s voice touched my mind.

*Next?* I queried, unsure of what just happened. *Now what?*

My question was left unanswered as William turned his focus on the mother of his only son. I felt my hostility on the rise, until he addressed her spouse.

“Lin, have you observed you wife recently? Jennifer seems to be picking up weight, and Candice tells me that she’s been having morning sickness.”

“Yet Jennifer roams around the house singing,” I interjected, squeezing the hand that rested on my shoulder. “We were concerned, at first, and William had me check.”

“Check what?” The lovely woman became indignant.

“Dear lady,” William smiled at his friend. “Ann and I have agreed in view

of the difficulty with your first pregnancy that you should release all responsibilities to others in the household.”

“The nuclear family is still important,” I continued, in complete agreement.

“Absolutely! Ann and I wish you and Lin to have the cottage to be a family in.” William smiled pleasantly, glancing down at me before adding, “No arguments! We both feel we belong in the big house.”

*William! I am going to strangle you.*

*No, you won't. He was laughing inside. You'll love it eventually. Trust me.*

Around us, our friends remained silent, and he passed me his beer, waiting. Marshall wore a look of smug amusement, as he watched the Tonakas. The tears in Jennifer's eyes triggered my own, and William touched my cheek.

*What does Marshall insist you to tell me? I asked.*

*Later, Little One.*

“Jennifer? Shall we plan the move for... day after tomorrow? Lin?”

“Gladly. Thank you.”

*Do you know who the father is? William whispered into my mind.*

*Yes. Do you?*

*No... William admitted, amusement coloring his mind.*

*I'm not telling. Tell me what Marshall meant!*

*I knew he and you had to play out that bloody scene. William explained while Candice and Joy fussed over Jennifer and her delicate condition. I am sorry. No way around it. I didn't know he would make such advances toward you. I guess he really is serious about bedding you since I won't.*

*He's a man with the needs of a man, Troubadour. Unlike you. Who were those men?*

*Our nameless pilot's henchmen.*

*That female who buzzed us a while back? I asked in apprehension.*

*I'm not sure. But I don't like it. Shhh, now. It's Lin and Jen's time.*

November 18

Marshall disappeared, not saying farewell, to find fuel early this morning. William simply informed us at lunchtime that my blond warrior had been sent West, leaving me to ponder the real reasons. Arlo's scouts never indicated the need for assistance, yet my spouse had mentioned them rendezvousing in a few days.

This evening after the harvest discussions had finished and almost everyone had retired. William and I lounged in our living room when David and Candice joined us. At first I felt a bit uncomfortable because I laid with my head in his lap while both of us read our books, but realized a silly emotion. Stifling it, I stayed where I lay and William put his studies aside. In no time the two men fell into another deep conversation about the land of David's childhood.

As the men talked, Candice eased her ancient fingers through her knitting, I tried to read, and William mischievously poked and tickled discreetly. My husband seemed happy with his evening, and I must admit I was too. William and I flirted most of the evening, giggling like two school kids until the new day.

November 25

Then there was the matter of Jennifer's morning sickness. Despite two full bathrooms and our cottage facilities, bathroom availability became critical. The hallways near each became dangerous due to our fast moving Jennifer and her touchy stomach. Thomas proved to have a darker side when it came to good-natured teasing. I'll not repeat it here, but part of me was relieved to discover that my husband's buddy had imperfections. He chose to conceal his levitation Talents, and rarely spoke to my mind.

For the next few days most of my daylight hours were spent on the airfield, stripping excess weight from my E-2. By scrapping two of the three radar scopes William acquired space and lessened fuel consumption. To my disbelief, Lin insisted on disassembling the onboard tactics computer and they'd

left it in a heap along runway number two.

As scheduled, the Tonaka family moved into our cottage, and that thrust me back into the world of communal living. Actually what could have been a minor move turned into chaos. Thomas and Liz wanted Lin and Jennifer's room next to the nursery, and I was happy to oblige the new parents. Nick caught William carrying his first load, a case of books, and by the time I got there a new arrangement had been agreed upon. Katie and Nick took Liz and Thomas' old room, leaving us one of the two original bedrooms in the front of the house. These were much larger than the others, and I was amazed when William and Lin brought in the only piece of furniture shifted that day, my desk.

The night after that William, Eric, and Nick, with his arm sling, set out on a brief excursion across the Mississippi River. I busied myself with books, my writing, and the animals for a few days. With four of the men away, I also had extra household duties, including security measures. At nightfall, I secured the only gate, checked the solar powered fence, and loosed all my animals from cows to puppies, knowing they would alert us to any intruder. These evening strolls felt wonderfully free and unencumbered in comparison to the atmosphere in the big the house.

The first obvious problem in relocating for me was lack of privacy, mental as well as physical. With winter settling in, evenings around the rec room fireplace were becoming noisy, with board games, and music sessions. We declared the living room for quieter activities such as reading, studying in the case of some of the children, or quiet conversation. Daniel quickly nicknamed it the "Shh" room. The second problem seemed to be keeping people away from the door when I wanted to be alone. James still had to be taught to knock after barging into our quarters one night when William had been in an almost romantic mood. The child's presence melted the potential interlude into an uneasy evening of frustration. This was solved by a "Do Not Disturb" sign from the nearest motel brought to us by Lin.

December 2

Our trio of scouts returned today, each driving tanker-trucks filled with fuel for the planes. Then after a day's rest each departed again, following mental directions from Marshall to new fuel sources. The gas tanker brought from St. Paul sat empty, and although gasoline had been rigidly conserved, harvest had taken its toll. If the solar plant failed in winter we had a generator in reserve, but it required gas. Also, the Professor had no way of estimating our supply of natural gas used in heating the huge house, but Eric expressed his relief at not having to pay the bill.

I was out doing my evening security check of fence and gate, when my wolf joined me. Judica's brood of pups grew strong, each one keen and alert. Their sire had gone, she explained as we strolled across the frosty grounds, and soon they'd be old enough to fend for themselves. I laughed at the sounds of relief in my head, understanding as I could. I had never been excited about human babies, except in gratitude that they were not mine. Whenever I found myself with an armful of wet or crying child, I quickly returned it to its closest parent! The pups, especially the five males had proven more than the gray wolf had expected.

The Professor located an etymology book in one of his scientific scavenges and when the pups arrived, he hauled it out to help naming them. Katie Hoffman claimed the first of them, and named her Alice because the book said that meant *noble*. Tobias thought Sorcha, meaning *bright* fit his little girl, and the third female pup was adopted by Candice and christened Phoebe the Wise.

The four male puppies went to Daniel, James, Thomas, and Jan, and became known as Maximus the biggest, Edgar the Lucky Warrior, Phelps, lover of horses and Ira the Watcher. We all agreed that they should remain part of the barnyard animals rather than house pets, but we knew occasionally there would be exceptions, sanctioned and otherwise.

December 7

I don't remember what I'd been writing down, but that night this manuscript pleaded to be written. My creative energies ran high, and I stayed awake scribbling furiously until long past midnight. It sometimes came that quick, while other times, I wrote one sentence three times. But not that night.

Exhausted, I fell into the king sized bed well after 3 a.m. Yet an hour later, I still tossed and turned unable to sleep. Calling out to William, I was surprised to find him awake also, but my husband assured me of his safety with affection, and told me over the psychic plane not to be concerned. That, of course, offered me little comfort. Human nature seems to worry, especially when told not to worry.

At 4:30, by my windup clock, I pulled on my robe, lit a candle, and reached for my Bible on the nightstand. Judica, responding to my restlessness, informed me that all seemed fine outside, and sent me calming vibrations. I randomly turned to Solomon's Canticle of Canticles, and read:

"How beautiful you are, my love. How lovely in that which delights! Your stature itself is a stately palm, your breasts are as clusters of grapes. I said I will climb into my palm tree. I will take hold of its branches."

With a resigned sigh, I closed the book, reflecting briefly on what I considered a joke from my Creator. I decided to attempt another passage, praying for guidance and comprehension before I again parted the pages. The Bible page fell open this time to the book of Proverbs. Solomon again, I chuckled to myself and let my eyes fall on the print in the middle of the final chapter:

"Who can find a wife with strength of character? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her and he will never lack profit..."

Or is that "prophet"? I asked myself with new sadness at my failed marriage.

"She does him good, and not harm all the days of her life."

A sound penetrated the silent house and without fear, I began mental scanning of the homestead and vicinity. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. So I returned to my reading.

NO TROUBLE OUT HERE. The wolf's tone whispered in my head. WHY

ARE YOU STILL AWAKE?

*I'm reading.*

BECAUSE YOU CAN'T SLEEP. WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

A single click sounded, and in the dim light, I heard the lever on the bedroom door rotating. Hairs stood on the back of my neck, as my heart began to pound in my chest. Too late to blow out the candle. Whoever it was has seen its glow. This had to be one of my family. The silhouette of a man dressed for outdoors slipped silently into the shadows across the chamber, depositing a pair of boots, carefully tossing his camouflage jacket back near his boots.

"I wanted to wake you."

"What brings you back in the dead of the night?" I asked watching as he pulled loose his shirt and began to unbutton it. "Everything all right?"

"No."

His reply was casual, highlighted with amusement. I returned my Bible to its place to cover my confusion.

"Surely I would have heard a vehicle." I said in curious thought.

"Know that big hill west of here on the county road?" He laughed, bending to extinguish the candle. "I hit it at 75 and shut down the engine."

"Coasted in?"

"Walked the last 100 yards."

Why? I wanted to ask, listening as he moved about the chamber undressing in the dark. Why hadn't I sensed his presence?

*Maybe you did, even though I was blocking. Marshall, Nick, and Eric should be home by tomorrow night.*

"Your games are unnerving..."

"This is not a game, my lady."

As I eased down, pulling the blanket up around me, the bed lurched under his weight, then he slid beside me. Cold feet entwined my legs as he pulled me close.

*Seems I've been unfair to you all these months since you became my wife.*

"I can't complain," I replied carefully.

*You won't, according to Nick and Eric. True?*

"Whatever..." I muttered, still not convinced that nothing was wrong.  
"What happened?"

*My older and apparently wiser brothers, Nick and Eric, set me down like a couple of Dutch Uncles and sternly told me about my duties to my neglected wife.*  
He chuckled aloud, yet caution radiated as he pressed against me.

Realizing that he was naked, I felt my head spin and could not respond when his lips brushed tenderly on mine. I shook myself from the pull of my desires and dropped my head so that his dark chest of silky hair seemed too close.

"You've been waiting for me again, haven't you?" He touched my cheek in the darkness.

"It comes with the title of Lady Ann," I whispered as his desire and passion seeped gently into my brain.

"My Lady Ann." It came as a husky whisper as his hand crept down from my shoulders, molding our bodies together with a fierce possessiveness that both thrilled and frightened me.

*Dearest of Ladies,* caressed my soul with a kind of lingering, amused despair. *I will never neglect your needs again.*

Then his mouth closed on mine, hungry and sensual.

Just for a moment I abandoned myself to the bewildering sweetness of his exploration of my mouth. A hand at the nape of my neck immobilized me, taking me to the mental plane, completely linked with William. Obeying some instinctive urge, I found my hand slipping to the satiny warmth of his chest. My fingers curled in the soft hairs which drew a groan from his lips and made my pulse race.

I leaned my head back to meet his eyes in the moonlit room. There was no resistance in me as I felt his mind in mine and knew that this waiting had finished.

"You are far more precious than jewels," he breathed easing my nightgown over my head while the heat of his body burned through me.

December 8

“--Besides that, what makes you think that splitting Jan and Val up as a work team will stop those two from bickering?”

“I think they’re in some rivalry phase,” I started to explain, but Jennifer threw down the vase she’d been carrying, and I watched the white glass shatter and scatter across the kitchen linoleum,

*What do you know? You barren dried up half-woman.*

Suddenly the majority of *The Thirty* rattled within my brain, and I assume within Jennifer as well. They chided gently at the pregnant blond, defending my assumption of her duties.

“I still don’t like it,” she insisted, leveling a cold eye at me. “And James has been warned repeatedly to stay out of the barn.”

“Why?” I asked innocently, sending calming thoughts to Jennifer as William touched me.

*She’s just being pregnant*, my husband reminded me with compassion that radiated to her as well.

Suddenly her anger subsided and the woman’s face grew red with embarrassment as she smiled.

The blond turned and fled the kitchen.

December 9

Chuck rolled into the farm’s yard just before dawn, carrying an exhausted Lord Marshall and a collection of scavenged necessities. Always awake before the rest of the household, I ran to meet him as he hurried from his white Chevy. Without words, he pulled me roughly into his strong arms and held me to his chest. In a moment his breathing caught and he shuddered. Shifting his weight, he buried his face in my hair.

He began to sob.

*God knows how much I love you*, he said with a deep sigh after a long

while. *It is what it is.*

December 17

“Anyone for hot cocoa?” I asked, stepping through the garage door and into Marshall’s world of machines.

“Yupper!” Lord Eric called as he rolled out from under the white front fender, and I set the thermos on the neatly kept workbench. “What time’s it getting to be?”

“Almost ten, which is about the temperature in here.”

“It’s not quite that bad,” Marshall commented, his blond hair appearing beyond the far bumper. “Would you please bring me a beer?”

“Maybe William will find some on this trip.” Eric remarked, wiping grease from his hands while I poured cocoa into the three mugs I’d brought. “He’s not back yet?”

“Within the hour. He promised,” I chuckled as Marshall frowned at the steamy cups as I checked out the hole where the car’s engine had been. “Think you’ll finish tomorrow?”

“If not, the day after,” Eric put in, taking up a mug.

“Delicate operations require time,” Marshall murmured as he neared me, and his being radiated affection.

Something touched my psychic being, and it wasn’t my friend. I felt something sweeping like my own form of mental radar, and stopped to sense the area around the farm. I found myself remembering the nameless female pilot again, and my senses said that she belonged to the mental probe.

I opened my eyes to find Marshall’s arm protectively around my shoulders, but he didn’t radiate any of his inner being. I raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“Someone I should know about, Warrior?” I asked at the vague recognition in his eyes.

“I know that person,” he said tentatively with an odd hesitation. “She’s

been in two nightmares, I think. Crazy, hey wot?"

"Not at all."

I swept the area with my senses and found nothing left of what we'd felt a moment before, then relayed this information to William. Then I attended my friend who still stood strangely close to me. He seemed to sense my disquiet at his nearness, because Marshall quickly stepped back from me with a glance at Eric.

"I figured maybe she wouldn't sense me if I stood close enough to you," he explained with an unsettled feeling to his spirit. "I hope I haven't offended."

"No offense taken," I muttered, sending this to my husband also.

December 22

"That's all well and good, Annie," David countered with a respectful attitude. "But where will we get more hay and grain?"

I found William watching me with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. This was understandable, since I hadn't found it necessary to tell him about later tonight.

*Do you trust my Sight?*

*I had a feeling you had something up your Merlin's sleeve,* came his confident reply.

*Not really,* I sent reluctantly. *All I'm sure of is one more horse is coming to the herd. Tonight.*

"We can't support any more animals, Ann," William responded quietly, as if regretting the retaliation, but I could only sigh in resignation. "You've been keeping things from me?"

Then I *knew* that he knew, and I dropped into that old familiar feeling of having been through all this before tonight. He sensed that too!

"Care to walk out to greet her?" I asked his awed expression. "Marshall will be here momentarily, but I have no idea what brings him."

"I've sent for him," David replied chuckling as he smiled. "Have I

stumbled into something?"

"Karma," was my reply as my tall blond friend stepped into the "Shh" room and moved toward the old Jew.

"David!" Marshall said in an unusually bright voice. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted you to have a look at the snow-blower, but it seems your presence may be required by these two."

David waved a liver-spotted hand in our direction and the look on his face showed that he teased.

"She comes tonight, doesn't she?" Marshall asked, eyes burning into mine. I nodded a confirmation and Marshall regarded my husband. "Are you coming?"

I knew what he meant, but I don't think William understood, because he just smiled at the man, getting to his feet, then he drained off his coffee.

"Why do you think I've been staying up this late?" William asked, openly sarcastic in his manner, then turned to take my hand to draw me up from the sofa to him. *I wouldn't miss this!*

Taking my husband's hand, I pulled myself up and stepped out, drawing him with me.

*Would you be surprised if I said that now was time?* I asked each of them.

William drew me close as we moved as one of the front door, and Marshall fell in behind us in trusting agreement. As we crossed the yard I heard Thomas's comment to my husband, *He even gets a special horse*, in regard to Marshall.

William sought to quickly dampen my anger.

*Do you know her name?* I sent to Marshall, stifling my displeasure.

*I was hoping you could ask her*, came his tender reply, and I glanced in the dim light at William and found his affectionate smile.

"I think that can be arranged," I began.

"Listen!" William whispered at my side. "I hear--"

"Hooves on pavement!" Marshall shouted, stepping around the two of us

and hurrying to the gate. “You *will* ask her name, Hann?”

“Sure, Marshall,” I replied as soothingly as possible as I spied a movement up the street. “Merry Christmas, my friend.”

In the shadow of the crescent moon, I could vaguely make out the form of a tall muscular horse that strolled toward our front gate as if it had lived its whole life on this farm. In the pale shadows I could see her gender, but it wasn't until the next day that I discovered that Sheba was a beautiful chestnut and probably a purebred Tennessee Walker. She would be the gallant charger on which I could seat the inexperienced Lord Marshall.

We never did get back to our discussion of supplies that night.

December 24

I had been considering an abbreviated session that afternoon because my heart just wasn't into teaching. I'd almost gotten to the point that I realized my mood went sour before the bad *déjà vu* occurred. We'd discussed this and apparently Jennifer, Liz, and Eric disagreed. What did they know of precognition?

As the four horses swirled about the farm arena with the teens on their back, I spied my husband leaning on the door that led to the stalls. Judica curled around his feet, as he transmitted an attitude of waiting, and I sent him a mental hug.

“Tobias! Slow him down,” I called to the kid who spurred the buckskin gelding, Able. “Joy, kick that beast if she won't do what you want.”

*Tell her to straighten up.* Came her weak response, and I could sense William's amusement.

“Slap her up along the side of her head, Joy!” I shouted at the young woman trotting on an old bay mare. “I won't always be close by to control that critter.”

*Dismiss your class,* William sent with an affectionate, yet demanding tone that left me wondering, as the girl half-heartedly slapped the stubborn horse's

ears.

“Class dismissed!” I barked out in complete agreement. “Tobias, there’s a blanket in the tack room. Throw it over Able and walk him at least fifteen minutes in here. Understand?”

The dark haired teen agreed grudgingly, and I turned my attentions to William, to find the man walking across the frozen dirt floor towards me. His attitude felt urgent and yet I knew that nothing was wrong. I swept the immediate area anyway.

“I need to borrow the teacher,” Will announced happily to the others while adding for my benefit, *All’s well. Please accompany me.*

Lord William came to my side as I stepped out to join him. He ran his arm protectively across my shoulder as he quickly turned to the door. Tosha and Ebony had gathered, as well as half the puppies outside the barn, leading me to suspicion. Quickly deciding that this might be some holiday surprise, I squelched that and concentrated on positive things. Almost all of my critters followed behind us, with Judica solemnly at my heels. She remained quiet.

Halfway across the yard, I could contain my curiosity no longer, and turned my husband to me for a hug.

“What’s going on?” I coaxed happily giving the man a squeeze.

“You don’t want to know,” was his harsh reply as he let an unusual apprehension slip through his blocks. “And if the truth be known, I’d rather not be the one to tell you.”

Taken aback, I let the man lead me through the back door and into the warmth of a kitchen alive with the smells of holiday delights. The men on duty seemed subdued, and before I could ask, Will nudged me out through the “Shh” room. His vibrations had changed to something vaguely sensual and urgent, and he turned to dismiss the cats and dogs that had followed us into the house.

Instead, the animals each moved to find a place to wait from what I could get from the jumble of mental patterns I received. I relayed this to the man who pulled my arm toward our room. The urgency had heightened, and I submitted without reservation, delighted at the prospect of an intimate afternoon.

After he stepped through the bedroom door, William closed it forcefully, and then turned to where I waited near the large window. His being radiated a kind of pity mixed with his recently protective nature, and all this served only to confuse me. As he came to my side, I could smell his pipe tobacco in his jacket, and reached to unzip the bulky green thing for him. Smiling, he returned the favor, then taking both our jackets, he moved to hang them on their hooks.

“Have you ever considered what’ll happen when we have to kill an animal that you know?” my spouse inquired while he returned to my side at the window.

His hands reached and took my head between them, and I tried to meet his blue eyes, but couldn’t. Resting my head against his plaid flannel shirt, I sighed painfully.

“I can’t bring myself to think about it. How could I possibly prepare to hear that death scream?”

“Let me help,” he whispered, cupping my chin and stepping back so I’d look up at his face. “What can I do?”

“Just your presence would be a big help,” I replied while he urged me toward the bed.

“How present do you want me?”

“How present can you get?” I countered as William had me sit in the edge of our bed. “I really have no idea how intense this might get. And it scares me.”

*Tell me something I don’t know*, he sent with sadness while pulling my boots from my feet.

I returned the gesture for him while passing affectionate vibrations to the man. Then he drew me up to his lap, and we cuddled for a few silent minutes during which he mentally kept up his barriers. So I nudged his wall and found him pre-occupied and indecisive.

“I want to try an experiment,” he muttered, reaching up from his embrace to the nape of my neck where the primal brain housed the mysteries of mankind’s instincts and basics. “Trust me?”

“Usually. What’s on your mind?”

“Your mind, my dear. Since we meld so well mentally while we make

physical love, I'd like to make love with you using only our minds." His manner seemed happily expectant, and I tried to grasp his meaning. He touched my mind with what I call a mental hug, then receded, asking, *Care to try it?*

My hands had crept around his neck, his linked around my waist and I gazed up at him thinking of nothing but how much I could love him. With this one thought in mind, one urge in my body, all words, cautions, and even self-protection had simply faded from my mind. Murmuring my name, he stroked the back of my neck with one finger and even my name was a caress as he spoke it again. A faint moan escaped my lips as I let go all reservation and mingled my being with his.

We made physical love with fresh passion, so together we reached a height of ecstasy I never could have imagined. Somewhere in this pleasure I sensed the dying cow, but William didn't allow me to dwell on that. Together we danced on the enchanted planes of this sweet fulfillment. Later, I sighed and closed my eyes, allowing sleep to wash over me. I dreamed without terror of the man who strolled through my subconscious. No longer a stranger, the man was my husband.