

By the end of breakfast we three had dismissed the idea of stealing one of the Chinese vessels and had tested several alternate plans when a knock from the hall door interrupted. Now dressed and sitting near me on our bed, Marshall threw up his head, eyes wide in alarm at an early intrusion. William altered his pacing, glanced toward me, and then strode to the hall door. I did a quick check to see that my modest nightgown was in place, as William pulled open the door, disclosing an aggravated Thomas Becker. The red headed man strode forcefully toward our bed, where I sat with Marshall. Fire blazed in his eyes as they swept the bedroom, lingering on Marshall. Thomas raised an eyebrow at him in silence.

With great chivalry and no words Thomas began setting up a second breakfast for us. Will quietly closed the door and crept around the man with an awed look to me. Thomas' jaw worked with tension but he did not speak. We all knew William had scheduled a breakfast meeting with him, yet we had failed to respond to two earlier knocks on the den door.

Before our Jet Jockey settled the tray, my husband bounced onto the bed with us and sat stoically cross-legged watching as his friend served the meal. None of the three men spoke a word until Thomas straightened. With a frown to Marshall, Thomas met William's gaze with askance and hesitation. His mind was too guarded for me to read.

*Go get more coffee and a cup for yourself then come right back,* William told Thomas with an easy air. *Tell Liz we'll be a while.*

"I have a feeling it may be a long while," Thomas remarked as he hurried out, not bothering to close the door behind him.

"You were saying?" I found myself laughing at Thomas' back. *Did he suspect?* I wondered, glancing at my golden haired warrior. Marshall returned a mental shrug.

"Protecting our youngest kids from war's horror," William continued.

*Wish we could take the horses.*

*Too late to break in a new pair of boots,* Marshall sent with a tender caress.

"William--"

“We will have to pack from stores here, Little One,” he said with a grimace. “I’ll send Richard and Toby out to tell our neighbors to scavenge the place for themselves as soon as we’re away. Are there enough backpacks around the farm? We’ll each need one.”

“I could rig some,” Marshall said quietly, troubled to be discovered on our bedroom so early in the morning. I sent him a calming reminder that he’d been fully dressed when Thomas arrived, then focused on the business at hand.

“Those fuel tank weight ratios will be crucial,” I reminded them, bringing the discussion back on track. “Don’t count on having radar if we pull all three back seat scopes.”

“We don’t need it. We’ll pull the Hawk’s radar dome too,” William said with a satisfied smile. “You’d better get dressed.”

Thomas appeared in the open den door, coffee cup in hand. William didn’t mention the delay in plans, only inquiring pleasantly about the health of Liz and their baby. The replies he received were short and friendly, and I realized that Tom’s gravity matched the situation as he knew it. The man shuffled his feet in silence and studied his fingers, not meeting my eyes or Marshall’s. William waved Marshall toward the den, mentally telling me to get dressed while they waited in there for others to arrive.

Marshall kissed me soundly after the other two men turned to enter the den, then hurried to join them while I dressed for the day. When I arrived in the den, Lin had just brought in a number of reference books. After depositing these on the worktable in the center of the room, the Japanese gentlemen turned.

“My wife is bringing tea and coffee,” Lin remarked, spreading his various books across the table as we gathered to see. “I have radio duty in twenty-five minutes.”

“Someone else can take it. How familiar are you with the Hawkeye?” William asked, looking from Lin straight at Marshall. “That bird may be our ticket out of here.”

“The Hawk’s basic frame began as a cargo plane,” Marshall grinned with a twinkle in his eye for me as he sat on the edge of the oak conference table.

“William, are you considering another rigged fuel system, too?”

“If it’s feasible. We could strip it down to the hull inside and transport our precious cargo.”

“We’re getting low on fuel,” Tom muttered.

“I am pretty sure I can refine some,” the Professor offered eagerly. “You may have to dump the radar to balance the weight.”

“Already figured that. Can you make that spare fuel tank, Marshall?”

“Just give me the specs. You’ll have it,” he replied as I served myself coffee, then flopped in a chair a little away from the four men.

“No radar, William?”

“Our built-in radar will do, Tom. Radio goes too, if necessary.”

“Why not!” The Professor chuckled at the sight of the redhead’s frown. “You talk to each other mentally and relay when necessary to the rest of us. It would almost be the same as radio anyhow, so I expect they can be trashed. Ann, is that dome on top detachable?”

“Somewhat. Weight is the main concern.”

“Can we fit everybody in there?” Marshall asked with a searching look across the room to me. “Seems the times I have been inside it was a might cramped, hey wot?”

“You’re also the tallest of us,” William responded. “You will ride shotgun in the jet with Thomas.”

“All right!” The jet pilot cheered.

“That leaves nineteen passengers and Ann as pilot -- and me as copilot.”

“Wish you had taken those flying lessons when I offered,” Lord Thomas remarked sportingly.

“Last time I flew with you, we crashed.” William retorted amiably with a smile for me. “I will take my chances with the lady! Can it be done? Thomas?”

“Possible, I guess.”

“Marshall?”

“The Professor’s the inventor in the family, William. I just build to specs. Whatcha think, Lin?”

“I would like to study those specs before I answer. Shall we see what my wife insisted I bring?”

Late afternoon

As I cut wire bundles and ripped away useless plugs, William and Nick were preparing the gas torch to remove the computer main frame. Our leader had sent Thomas and Marshall out to “low and slow” our perimeter a short while ago. The Hawk was over half gutted and would be finished tomorrow. When the two men returned, we had planned to call it a day.

*William!* Marshall’s words seared my mind. *ENEMY TANKS!*

A picture of poorly camouflaged military armored vehicles passed through our minds followed by an aerial view.

*Where?*

*About six miles North by Northwest of you. Thomas and I just buzzed the farm. Candice knows. They are onto us, Brother!*

*Return!*

*We’re turning even now, Thomas reported. William, three are making straight for the farm.*

*All of you hear me and do what I say! I think we can stop them before they reach the farm.*

\* \* \*

Richard, James, and Daniel happily created the mud. Alex and Tobias had the horses ready before we arrived. Candice’s ladies made the Molotov cocktails and Nick donated cigars. Some saddle horses carried mud buckets. Others held the big padded burlap bags with the home-style bombs. On Astre, I carried the medical kit along with my gun. Nothing else. I had insisted on coming, and William had resisted, but consented that I could watch from afar.

Marshall mounted Sheba easily despite the mare’s anxious dance, and then

as if on signal, Eric, Nick, and Tobias mimicked his action. Liz kissed her husband firmly, and then climbed onto her horse. William and I had already mounted our Percherons, Astre and Flaxen. Then together we all galloped in gloomy silence out of the farmyard, beyond the protective fences and into the countryside.

Soon, one of those lovely shady lanes of western Tennessee spread out before us, as William beckoned me to hurry. The drone of war machines clamored in the distance. Behind us, Liz headed her horse into the bushes, with half the explosives. Eric and Tobias had already cantered off to pace our prey, as the second team.

Second team would take out the second of those three tanks while Marshall remounted and Nick refilled from Elizabeth's supplies according to plan. Then they would go for the third vehicle.

Astre followed Flaxen up the small hill and William looked back to see where I was, then beyond.

*Ready or not, Lords and Ladies, here they come.* Lord William's lack of emotion disturbed me.

Marshall and Nick kicked their mounts into a full run chasing those armed and armored tractors, approaching from behind the vehicles. My blond warrior rode magnificently, and I felt great pride in my Love while I watched from our vantage point. I could feel his concentration as Marshall projected an illusion to keep the tank's rear guard from seeing their approach.

"He's known for months that he had to do this today," William commented dryly.

*That explains a few things.* I smiled at the bearded man on the huge stallion at my side.

Out there, my friends caught up with the last tank, and Nick leapt out of the saddle and onto the rumbling vehicle with his bucket of mud. Marshall lit the first fuse while his partner muddied the viewing holes of the closed tank. Tossing the Molotov cocktail to Nick, the golden haired man reined his horse away as the top hatch of the tank opened for the Chinese to see their way.

Nick quickly punched out the soldier, dropped the flaming gas bottle down the tank's hatch, then slammed the cover closed. Laughing, he sat on top of the hatch until the homemade explosion made the cover throw him from the vehicle.

My head exploded with the death screams of those men, but William steadied me both physically and mentally. Astre danced beneath me, and he bid her to be still. His direct mental contact with the animal startled me back to reality and reminded me of our mission. Looking back down the forest lane, I saw Nick remounting his big bay gelding, and spur him back towards Liz who trotted to him with a fresh bucket for him. Marshall grinned wickedly as his mare loped around to meet those two.

Up the lane, Tobias and his father, as the second team, began their run on the second tank, and I prayed that the two remaining tank crews weren't aware of what we had done. Eric carried the explosive, I noted, and in a minor panic I turned to William.

*Wasn't Lord Eric supposed to wrestle that tank?* I asked, sending him my emotional dismay and concern.

*Yeah! But, too late now. LOOK!*

Toby had jumped the second tank, and now duplicated the procedure that Nick had performed, including a very enthusiastic punching of a Chinaman's jaw. After the young man sat on the hatch cover after depositing his bomb, he was thrown clear of the tank and landed awkwardly on his left shoulder. I could sense the pain, and instinctively kicked Astre to go to the teen's aid.

As Nick and Marshall attacked the last of the three tanks, William and I descended our hill toward the injured teen. Eric got to him before I could, jumping from his horse before the animal had stopped. I remember the sound of the explosion and the third set of screams as Astre skidded to a halt near the man and his son.

\* \* \*

“But can you forgive me?”

“For encouraging Marshall’s affection toward me?” I laughed, pulling Able’s saddle from the buckskin’s back. “Liz, don’t you realize how much you two have helped hold me together?”

“And maybe keeping you and William apart?”

“That’s ancient history. Not to worry, my dear. Let me tell you a secret.” I lugged the heavy Western saddle into the tack room, knowing she’d follow. She did and I continued in a lower voice. “William has given me my freedom -- divorced me, you might say -- and gave Marshall his blessing. We’re just waiting for this crisis to pass before disrupting our family with the news.”

Liz’s face registered a parade of various emotions over the next few seconds, then Alex called my name, and I knew the boy needed help with Flaxen.

“That explains Marshall’s smug contentment,” Liz whispered, hugging me. “And yours. What’s the plan?”

“One crisis at a time. I’d better help Alex. We’ll have to talk later.”

“You bet we will!”

\* \* \*

*I saw Tobias before he fell asleep. Shoulder’s fine, William remarked in the darkness of our bedroom. Will your ladies be ready to move on my command?*

*Say the word and we’ll be out of here within an hour.*

*Less, if need be.*

*The convoy’s scheduled to leave after breakfast. Our last night here.*

*Our last night together. He sounded sad, dampening my joy.*

*What about the fuel tanks?*

*They’re done. Some of Marshall’s best work ever. William’s chuckle touched my ears.*

*Thank you, William, he whispered from where ever he was sleeping that night.*

*Peace, dear men. Try to sleep.*

May 1

William rested soundly, and I should have. At first light I was startled out of a fitful sleep to find myself clammy with my sweat. A while later the inevitable knock roused the bearded man who lay beside me. Breakfast had no appeal, so I went running instead. Judica came along, but left when I loosed the animals.

As I made my way back to the house, William stepped from the patio door and strode across the deep grass. His bearded face was chiseled and set with determination and the responsibilities he bore. As he drew closer he began to frown, and worry vibrated from his being. As he reached me, he palmed my forehead sternly.

“Slight fever. You’re pale. How do you feel?”

“I have been running,” I explained.

“After wrestling Jacob’s angel last night? What’s wrong? Do you feel sick?”

“I didn’t want breakfast, but that’s not that unusual, and you know it.”

“Ann, you are positively gray.” He took my hand and gently held it for me to see. “And you’re trembling. I can see that just standing near you.”

“I’m all right, William. Would my eating breakfast make you feel better?”

“Any nagging thoughts?”

“What? Nothing really,” I responded, turning toward the house. “Just sifting through the rubble, I guess. You know.”

“Sure. You’ve been very quiet since we had to stop those tanks. It was terrible to hear and feel those men die. I *Know!* Sometimes it’s horrible to be so sensitive.” He wrapped his arm lovingly across my shoulders as we began walking. “Rest this morning and save your energy, Little One. Let the ground crew finish the Hawk. If I need your guidance, I’ll find you.”

“I know you’re right,” I responded, knowing my fatigue. “I don’t feel as good as I should. And there’s nothing to do here but wait.”

“Are you not *She Who Waits?*” William reminded me playfully. “I think

it's the best thing for you. If you want, go back to sleep. I can reach you if I need you."

"But you said you'd always need me," I teased, stopping at the door and turning affectionately to the man.

"Always, Maid Merlin. Now, I have work to do." After a brief hug, he brushed the stray hair from my cheek.

"Till midday, my lady. Stay on guard and be ready to roll." William gazed around the yard and the barn beyond, and then met my eyes sadly. "We will never see this place again. Come to the airfield immediately when I shout."

He opened the kitchen door and waved me gallantly to enter.

\* \* \*

Living in this telepathic community had its advantages. Sleep sounded like what I wanted, but I intended a bit of breakfast before returning to bed. After all, I reasoned, someone else could load the bus: I had to drive it. The cinnamon roll I'd gotten from the kitchen was to placate William. What I'd really wanted was the tea. When I discovered the taste of Jennifer's mild sedative, I drank it down, grateful William had requested it.

\* \* \*

I awoke to find Candice's age-worn face close to my own. She smiled pleasantly, and then shook my shoulder again. The sunlight's angle told me it was early evening, and I climbed quickly up to consciousness.

"They had problems with Lin's fuel mixture and those extra tanks." The old woman saw my confused expression and explained. "William told Tom sometime after noon. Told him to take a nap, and for us to let you sleep."

"But we may have to land in the dark!"

"We've been buzzed twice here and at the hangar today."

"Oh, God!" Panic leapt in my mind, and I prayed it quickly away, calling

Judica to me.

“William says we leave ASAP.”

“Tom awake?” I asked, pushing myself out of bed. I intended one last shower. “Are you ready?”

“I’ll wake Thomas next. Oh, he said to tell you Liz is rigging headlights on your Hawk. As many as she could.”

“Thank God!”

“And James said to tell you he asked the animals to stick around. And the fact is, not a one has left the yard.”

“They are all such gentle beings,” I responded over my shoulder, heading for the bath. “Could someone please get me a light breakfast?”

“You breakfast with Tom in ten minutes. Marshall’s waiting for you at the field.”

“I love you, Candy Kisses.” Stopping, I turned to her. *Did she know?* I wondered.

“William discussed his releasing you from your marriage vows with me before he did it,” she said softly. “I’m happy for all three of you. Now get to that shower. Breakfast is waiting.”

“I don’t know how I’d get along without you.”

“I love you, daughter. Now hurry. And leave some hot water for me. It may be our last for a while.”

Mentally caressing Marshall’s mind, I entered the bathroom wondering if its luxury would be my last. Columbia could be a brutal future, but I looked forward to it happily. I’d learned in dreams, only hours old, that Israel would not offer its hospitality to William and me in the times ahead. Marshall would be at my side, I knew now, reminding me of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. Gift or curse, I wondered about my talents but thanked God for them, nonetheless.

\* \* \*

Cramming into the E2 Hawkeye proved to be more difficult than we’d

anticipated. Jennifer and Lin had their hands full with their newborn daughter and their son James. Nick and Katie assumed the roles of parents and guardians to the rest of the children while Eric and Diane packed in the few possessions we could allow on the trip- a blanket for each of us and a few changes of clothes. The women had prepared only enough food for our journey, and I could hear them stowing those packages behind me while William, as co-pilot, and I performed our preflight checks. Liz sat behind us with baby Samuel in a sling around her neck, resting near her ample bosom while she performed the duties of navigator. Phelps, Judica and Tosha, the only animals allowed to come along, settled somewhere in the body of the aircraft with the family.

*Are you two about ready?* William soon called to the men in the small jet on the runway next to us.

Thomas stayed silent, but I knew he concentrated on his piloting of the small plane, worrying that William could be wrong about arming his jet.

*Blue sky!* came Marshall's enthusiastic response.

Lin's hands were full with his family and the crowd all around them. Rachel screamed somewhere in the body of the gutted aircraft as I eased the throttles forward, and my plane began to lumber down the runway. I knew from Jennifer, Candice, Joy and Eric that they were very crowded back there, and I could hear Eric praying loud enough for all to hear. He asked God's guidance and protection as we made this dangerous journey south, and I suddenly knew that we would have difficulties. Keeping this revelation to myself, I attended my aircraft, revving the engines while watching Thomas taxi his craft in front of me. The jet quickly launched into the sunset, while my overloaded E2 lumbered and strained. With a levitation assist from William, we were airborne, and I breathed a sigh of relief as the whole family, cramped in the back of the plane, cheered that we had lifted from the field.

We had a very long way to go.

\* \* \*

William sensed the first of the incoming fighter jets because I tenaciously piloted our plane. The craft was too sluggish to do much evasive maneuvering, and we knew it. He commanded Lord Thomas to fly an intercept course to the incoming missiles, and in my mind, I could sense Marshall's concentration as he shot at incoming rockets as if they were video game illustrations instead of deadly missiles. My job, I knew was to get this plane and its passengers to safety, and I began flying loose yet random serpentine patterns to avoid being a sitting duck target.

Then I felt Thomas's realization that one missile was coming very close to him and he pulled the jet hard over to port. Marshall eased off the weapons on William's command, and gathered himself in deep concentration. Sensing his illusion, which made both our planes seem to disappear, I pulled my plane and its precious cargo around in a sweeping curve and back on course for Columbia. William, I knew, had successfully fouled their radar.

May 2

In the pre-dawn's dim light, gripped with fear even though my flight instructor, Lord Thomas, watched my every move through William's eyes, I glided the overweight aircraft lower over the Colombian countryside. Tears of joy leaked from my eyes. Marshall and I quickly approached *our* time. The trial of William would soon end, and I felt liberated beyond description. Setting aside my personal feelings, now, I reminded myself that landing this plane was all that mattered. Flying was easy. Getting safely back on the ground in one piece was the real trick, and I had never seen the runway. In the first glimmer of dawn, I realized that not only did I have to land this craft, we had to get Marshall and Thomas's jet landed on a dirt road half the length we needed.

Somewhere out there, Father Ramon Delacruz stood outside his countryside church waiting. He radiated a beacon that acted as the homing signal William received and amplified to me. I flew onward, in the gray of early dawn. As one of *The Thirty*, Father Ramon had been familiar to me on that other plane,

and I looked forward to meeting him in person. He needed us adults to help with his ever growing family of children as much as we needed his spiritual guidance, compassion, and wisdom.

As I prepared to set my airplane safely down on the crude runway Father Ramon and his orphans had prepared out of a level dirt road, my heart sang with joy, anticipating a life with my golden warrior. Above and behind my plane, the small jet circled, and I could hear William, Thomas, and Marshall mentally discussing how to land it. This dirt runway was far too short for the powerful little jet plane.

Flying low and slow, with Liz's make-shift lights to illuminate my way, I swung my Hawk around and made a second pass over my landing strip. Thomas's frown touched my mind as he Okayed my landing for the next pass, suggesting I park the big plane in a grassy field at the West end of the road Father Ramon had prepared. Then he asked William what we would do if local authorities arrived in the air before he could land his jet. I focused on my flying and their voices quieted in my head.

The day light was coming fast, but Liz's lights were still a great help, as I dipped my plane lower, reduced engine speed again and heard Thomas tell Will how to activate the speed breaks. The Hawk bucked and dragged as they kicked in, causing nervous voices from my family in the back.

I pushed forward on the yoke, dropping the nose in steeper decent, hearing Thomas's encouragement from where he flew parallel to us, guiding my every moment. Terrified as the ground rushed toward us, I felt Thomas's hands holding mine through our mental link, and tried to relax, letting him guide my movements. Mentally warning the passengers in the back to expect a bumpy ride, William eased down the engine throttles into neutral on Thomas's command.

We slapped the road hard, while both William and I almost stood on the plane's brakes, praying that the landing gear would not buckle under the stress. We bounced, but not as high as expected, and I knew Thomas had used his talent for levitation in reverse, keeping us closer to the ground. Thud. We hit the dirt again, and I slapped the throttles into full reverse.

Machinery screamed in protest. The yoke in my hand rattled and bucked like an out of control gyroscope. Thomas stayed right with me and William as we skidded and rumbled down the country road as it curved gently around a bend between fields freshly harvested for the coming winter. Gripping the vibrating yoke, I stood in the pilot's position to add all of my weight to the brakes, and felt Thomas shift his Marshall-amplified telekinetic to the front of the aircraft.

It felt like hitting a thick wall of gelatin.

Thrown briefly forward against the yoke, I bounced into my seat and then stood on the brakes again as the Hawk lumbered into a controllable taxi. Soon I turned the plane into the parking field Tom had suggested, and stopped near a couple of stubby trees. After the overloaded craft rolled to a stop, I flopped back into the pilot's seat, engulfed with trembling aftermath emotions, feeling sweat trickling down my back and sides.

As I tried to slow my panicked heart, Marshall's loving spirit descended on me like a comforting, warm blanket, and he held my spirit tightly. Overhead Thomas circled low, preparing to land the small fighter jet. After a moment, I turned to my copilot to find him collapsed in the seat, tears mixed with blood oozing from his eyes and nose.

*I'm all right*, he sighed heavily, taking my hand while rubbing his other across his face. *Levitation's not easy, you know. We're all right! Thank you, God!*

"I had a feeling you were doing more than stomping on the brakes for me," I remarked, shaking from the experience. *Let's get our friends down quickly.*

"Father Ramon's on his way."

"Liz," I called over my shoulder to my navigator. "Get everybody out. Fast!"

I could hear someone opening the airplane's hatch, as I reached to shut down the engines. While William unbuckled his seat harness, a great relief radiated on the mental plane. Hearing the collective sigh from many members of *The Thirty*, I touched the man's mind privately.

*So, what's the plan?* I asked, weary to the soul after eight hours of flight and very few breaks.

*I'll get the gestalt organized, but I want you leading it, since you led your women that day you rescued Marshall from Nameless.* William swung his legs around and got out of his seat.

*Empty this bird fast.* William's mental orders echoed through my mind.

I stopped to collect myself after the long flight, listening as William moved out of the cockpit and out of my life.

*Marshall, my Love?*

*Take all the time you need to collect yourself. You were wonderful, my Sweet, but you feel absolutely transparent.* Marshall's touch held great compassion as he rode in the rear of the jet aircraft. *Everybody all right?*

*I think so...* I sent with loving undertones as someone came forward into the cockpit. *Now what? Can't I ever get two seconds alone?*

*Not with me as your mate!*

Liz bounced into the copilot's seat, and baby Samuel fussed a bit from within his sling. She looked at me with a kind of strange sidewise glance, and then averted her gaze as if knowing she'd interrupted something.

"I just wanted to say that even though I'm not one of *The Thirty*, I can sometimes sense things," she said in a small, strained voice. "I love Marshall too. I think I understand what happened, Hann. At least now the two of you can be together."

"I'm worried how the family will take it," I whispered, reaching for her hand, which she took briefly, but moved quickly up out of the seat.

*Me too,* Marshall whispered to me.

"You know I'll stand by both of you," she called over her shoulder as William touched my being to check on me. "Right now I need to help unload."

*Judica, stay with her,* William called, and I heard my wolf acknowledge from the plane's emptying hold.

I slowly dragged my tired body out of the pilot's position and went to join my family on the South American soil. As Judica and I stepped out of the

Hawk's hatch and down the five-step metal ladder, the rarefied mountain air filled my lungs, yet didn't. The air five thousand feet above sea level -- new sea level I reminded myself -- smelled fresh with morning dew, but held much less oxygen than my body wanted. I shared the sensation with Marshall as I moved to the loose circle of our family, who huddled in the chilly dawn near the front of my aircraft. My Love smiled above me, monitoring William.

William and Jennifer completed their initial explanation of how we would gestalt our minds together-even the children-in an effort to catch the jet during its landing. Wondering if it still had arresting gear, I heard Thomas's mental whisper, saying he'd removed it for the sake of weight.

As I approached my family, they began taking each other's hands so that in seconds, they all stood, linked together. I sensed William command Thomas to begin his landing approach, and then felt Marshall's apprehension. I hid mine, beginning my mantra in preparation, wondering if I'd be safer sitting down.

William drew me into the crook of his arm and kissed my forehead tenderly. Jennifer touched my mind with assurances.

*We'll bring your Love down safely,* she whispered, chuckling as she startled me in the psychic connection. *Yes, I know. I usually Know when it comes to you or William.*

*Then you're great at keeping secrets!*

*So I've been told. Ready?*

I heard the single jet engine whine as Thomas eased off the throttle, listening more with my mind than my ears. Those of *The Thirty* gathered our non-talented friends into the link one by one, and I noted Thomas's young son, Samuel had a strong presence. Toby's spirit, easily recognized by his grave concern for his mentor and buddy, Marshall, sought me, and I held him close on that other plane, assuring him of shining results. Candice settled the especially skeptical Lin and Nick, while I centered inward, reaching out with my mind, and finding it lethargic. I was amazed by the numerous others in the link.

A new, but somewhat familiar soul joined us in our work. Father Ramon smiled through the psychic link, briefly introducing his young nephew, Dante. I

focused on the task, now feeling the metal hull of the jet as Thomas dropped it out of the sky with reckless determination. I thought of the mental gel he had provided for my Hawk's landing, and made something like that at the jet's nose, matching its speed. Slowing the mental mass, I felt Marshall jerk forward as if hitting a wall, but I continued wrestling with the aircraft's speed. Gradually reducing it, I heard William warn that they were running out of road.

*Brace yourselves*, I ordered everyone in the link, then thought of the jello now as a baseball mitt and wrapped it around the jet, hauling it to a bone jarring touchdown on the dirt road. I felt Marshall's discomfort, sent him my mental apology, and then checked Thomas who began to taxi his jet around and back to where we all waited. His head hurt, I could tell, from a bump he'd taken as well as his levitation attempt, but he smiled his being to us all in gratitude.

My head hurt too.

Breaking the mental link as quickly as possible, I freed myself from William's gentle embrace, and ran for the incoming airplane, not listening to his psychic conversation with the local Jesuit priest. Thomas had already opened the plane's double canopy, and Marshall stood waving as the little jet rolled closer. His blond hair flowed in the first light of the Colombian dawn.

*Have a care, my Sweet*, he called to me. *I'd hate to go through all this only to lose you to a turbine intake!*

Stopping, I heard Eric say he was bringing the ladder, so, I touched William's mind. Receiving an introduction to Dante Delacruz, I blocked a sudden premonition about the man from the others on the link, aware that that gestalt had mostly evaporated. Jennifer touched my mind with a gentle reminder to be patient a few more moments as I watched Marshall attach the ladder, and then turn to climb down. I sent her a mental hug and felt her chuckle at my anticipation. Thomas shut down the engine. I ran to the airplane and leapt joyously into my Marshall's strong arms.

\* \* \*

Anyone under the age of eighteen automatically went into Father Ramon's old yellow church bus. Katie, Joy, and Candice packed each child in with his or her backpack of personal belongings, while the adults stood nearby watching the procedure. William stayed very close to our people, while I moved away, examining the leaves on the trees near my Hawk, the insects underfoot, the swirl of clouds in the air above us. Judica surveyed the perimeter while Tosha hunted breakfast, and I delighted in the sounds of nature lost to me since the devastating war.

Marshall sat on the ground under the Hawk's wing, quietly watching us all. I casually worked my way toward him.

With all the children seated, Candice had three seats left and called Liz and Jennifer to bring their gear and their infants on board, leaving one seat available. Mentally I touched William and suggested that it be assigned to one very tired Thomas Becker, who had piloted all night without relief. Thomas climbed into the tiny vehicle without an argument, and the driver closed the door.

The sound of another vehicle came from down the road, and moments later a green flatbed truck rattled up the dirt road, coming from the opposite direction.

"My nephew, Dante," Father Delacruz explained, squinting in the morning sun.

Ramon turned, grinning as the vehicle slowed, allowing the bus to begin its short journey-he said-to his small church two kilometers to the Southwest. Built like a bulldog, Ramon Delacruz had black hair and laughing eyes that crinkled at the corners, reminding me of jolly old St. Nick. Heavysset, he walked with his cane toward the truck as it rolled to a stop. A lone man jumped out of the cab, embraced the priest briefly, and then turned to hurry toward us. Dante Delacruz stood six inches taller than his portly uncle, with a slender waist and wide shoulders under a light blue jacket.

Glancing around, I spied Joy, and touched her mind, suggesting she step forward for introduction. Nearby, Marshall tossed a twig at me, and shot me a grin.

*I know something you don't*, I sent him on a tight thought and a giggle.

“Which is Lady Ann?” I heard the taller man ask, so I stood and left the shade of my Hawk and stepped curiously through our family.

As I stopped in front of the two men, Joy moved close to my side, so I introduced her before William could introduce me. Dante's eyes widened at the lovely young woman. He scooped up her small hand in his large one and then tenderly kissed it with as much flair as my Marshall at his best.

*Thank you! I didn't know I looked so good.*

*Hush*, I sent back with affection.

“Lady Ann, I need your skills with horses,” Dante Delacruz said, not releasing Joy's hand, causing her cheeks to color. “I have a colt that will not be ruled.”

“How old?” I asked, sensing scenes from his battles with a tall black and white horse.

“One year next month. Oh, I am sorry, Lady Joy!” He smiled down at her hand still in his and bent to kiss it again before releasing her. “Please forgive me?”

Nervous laughter whispered through the family, as William touched my mind, reminding me that the bus with our children had already left. Joy smiled, looking away from the tall dark Spaniard, as Marshall stepped forward for introduction.

“We'll talk soon about that horse,” Dante said quickly, turning to the blond man, his hand outstretched. “Lord Marshall! Your mechanical talents are greatly needed in our pueblo. So glad to meet you! Now! Who is Eric?”

O'Leary stepped forward as Marshall and Dante shook hands, taking Delacruz's big hand next. In my mind, I heard William order us to climb onboard the flatbed so we could quickly join the children at the church. Delacruz began quizzing Lord Eric about live stock while the rest of us scrambled onto the broad flatbed behind the truck's cab.

*He watches Joy too closely*, Marshall grumbled, helping Diane up. *Come here, my Sweet. You're next.*

\* \* \*

El Inglesa del a San Philip de la Valle (The Church of Saint Philip of the Valley) had seen many years of rain in this semitropical climate. White stucco and paint flaked from many outside walls and thoughts of lead poisoning touched several minds in our group. Fallen terracotta roof tiles had been stacked near where they'd fallen, I noticed as I strolled behind the large group of our men as they surveyed the church grounds. We could stay here, bedding the children down in the choir loft for a while, until we could use our salvaged gold and gems to buy a farm and continue our communal living. In return, we'd repair what we could of the church and its outbuildings.

Yards ahead of me, William, Lin, Eric, Nick, Liz, Richard, Marshall, and Tobias followed Father Ramon behind the church proper, past a small ill-tended flower and vegetable garden that separated the rectory from the church. Continuing, we walked out onto a grassy knoll. Attached to the back wall of the Church, a small room opened to this back yard. Inside the single room, an old propane stove and two ancient refrigerators lined the walls, a few florescent lights over head.

As the men moved forward listening to the padre's story of the winds that almost took the church's roof, I stepped into the twenty-five foot-square kitchen, trying the light switch. Two of the three florescent lights came up, and I could hear the hum of two refrigerators. Both, I quickly discovered, were clean, fresh smelling, and almost empty on the inside. As the tour of the church's construction needs moved out and around to the far side-was that North?-I decided to seek a little peace.

Sinking into a cross-legged position on the old orange tile floor, I closed my eyes and turned inward, enjoying the lack of anxiety in my soul. My family safe and William out of my personal life left little for me to worry or scheme over. I let the millstones of the recent past slide away.

*Where are you?* Marshall whispered, a bit concerned.

*Here. Meditating. No, I'm not sleepy. Did Thomas find a quiet corner to sleep in?*

*The choir loft, Liz says.*

*Do you want to see that farm Father Ramon told me about? William sent. Don't be long.*

*Definitely! How long?*

*Twenty minutes, maybe.*

*Let me meditate until then, please?*

Both men slipped from my mind, and I concentrated on my breathing and my mantra prayer. After a while, the sweet smell of flowers touched my nose, bringing me back to the outer world. I decided that since I'd not been summoned yet to see the farm, I'd have a mental look around. A slight change of mental attitude and thought lifted my spirit up from my body, and I carefully floated to the top of the old church steeple. The padre said that was South, I thought, and began a 360-degree scan of the horizon. Almost everything to the north felt like water, and had been the Caribbean, I figured. The west also felt mostly like water. Up to the south, the Andes Mountains climbed to the sky with Columbia's capital, Bogota above the 8000 foot mark. East was another coastline. This was a peninsula, then.

The Church of St. Philip rested at the foot of a ridge that divided two valleys. The ridge ran to the South, shaped like several humps of a great sea serpent or the Loch Ness monster. The first rise held barn, machinery and hundreds of cattle and as the ridge rose, the second "hump" seemed vacant. The third rise felt occupied, and I could sense several buildings. Deciding that was a farm, I floated a bit higher and looked over the ridge into the next valley. A small river ran through it.

About five kilometers across, the valley teemed with activity, both human and machine. I could feel trucks and automobiles moving at a good clip up and down a road. It had to have been paved to drive that fast, I reasoned, turning my attention behind me. A smaller valley crept up a gentle slope between the ridge I'd examined and another Northwest of it. I checked our aircraft quickly and

found no one nearby, then traced the road I'd landed on back to the church. The road in front of the St. Philip's stretched west and up toward a large population center. I didn't want to go there.

Taking a deep breath, I collected myself and opened my eyes into the church's kitchen. Judica guarded, jaw resting on the cool tiles. Wondering about the location of the farm Father Ramon had spoken of, I stepped into the bright morning sunlight, locating Marshall mentally. Without disturbing his conversation with Eric and Nick, I next located William, deep in discussions with Dante and his uncle, the Father. Sensing me, William called me to join him on the trip to see the farm.

As I left the kitchen, I found Richard and Tobias dragging long shade cloths into the back yard. Alex and James followed lugging metal support poles. Behind them, Father Ramon helped Diane, Joy, and Jennifer carry folding tables onto the lawn. I caught a flash of church fiestas from the padre's mind in explanation, and wondered where he'd studied English.

*Audio recordings. Father Ramon touched my mind. And Dante spent three years in Australia.*

Chuckling, I sidestepped the workers, thinking about all the preliminary planning my family had discussed during our long flight from the States.

\* \* \*

By the time Dante had contacted the owner of the farm he wanted William to see, Candice and her women had begun serving lunch from the church's meager food bank. Then, the younger Delacruz had to return to his rancho after receiving a text message, so William and his workmen took their first look at the church's damaged roof. While the children played under the shade of several canvases, Liz and a young hunting party set out on foot, while the remainder of us put plans and lists on paper in a brainstorming session.

By late afternoon Dante had not returned, but we received our first guests. As our think session wound down into a siesta, a half dozen local women of

various ages came into the back yard, carrying bags and boxes full of clothing, kitchen utensils, canned goods and homemade foods. The language barrier eased when William quickly joined us and put his language Talent to good use. To my surprise, Marshall too could make himself understood in slow Los Angeles-style Spanglish, delighting me that his naval years in Southern California had not been a complete waste. Shortly after the señoras left, the local lumberyard truck delivered building supplies to Father Delacruz, and we started to stack them outside the east wall of the church. Several of my family had trouble with the lack of oxygen in this altitude, and quickly ended up with their heads between their knees, trying not to pass out. By the time Liz and her hunters returned with several rabbits and squirrels for dinner, Thomas had woke from his nap. As our family's butcher, he was quickly herded into the church's kitchen to oversee animal skinning lessons for our teenage hunters.

Marshall touched me mentally as I awoke from a catnap on a blanket in the grass under a shade cloth. Close by Diane, Joy, and the younger kids played a madcap game of *Red Rover* at the far end of the back yard. As I sensed my tall blond stroll across the grass in the humid and hot day, I smiled inside, and then wondered how much longer we'd have to keep our love a secret.

"I'm glad you finally slept for a while," he said, pressing a green glass of water into my hands, lingering on our touch. "Here's your dose of anti-medication."

"Anti-medication?" I asked, confused and still sleepy.

"We'll all have Montezuma's Revenge by tomorrow, hey wot?" He replied with a shrug, flopping down in the grass at a somewhat respectful distance from me. "Haven't the babies started yet?"

"Not that I've heard, but you're probably right. Any word from Lord Dante?"

"He phoned about an hour ago." He grinned at me, green eyes bright. "Don't civilization's devices sound strange after two years without them?"

"I haven't missed them," I muttered, taking a long pull on the local water. "And?"

“He said he’ll be back this evening, but we won’t see that farm until tomorrow.”

“Too bad. I know Eric and Nick want us to be independent as soon as possible.” I watched little Alicia run to the other side in the game then gasp for air in the high altitude. I found Marshall watching me with a twinkle in his eye. “We all need a chance to acclimate, eh? Emperor Montezuma will have his due.”

I took several deep swallows of the cool water.

*What a pretty one you are!* He caressed my mind. *I’ll miss you tonight, if we have to all bunk in the church pews.*

*I wonder when William will tell everybody...*

*I’ve been honest about my feelings in their presence.*

*I could have shot you when you asked William permission for carnal visitations with me since he wasn’t interested in them for himself.* I sensed sudden discomfort from him. *Relax. Liz, Candice, and Jennifer already know.*

“A couple of hours ago, our ever-vigilant Lord Thomas again reminded me of my proper place,” Marshall chuckled in a hushed tone, but I could feel his annoyance. “Perhaps I should speak to our furry-faced leader?”

“And say what?” I asked, amused. *‘Hand her over, bucko.’ I don’t think so, my love.*

*I’m working on it.* William’s voice touched both our minds, startling Marshall, by the surprised look on his face. *I’m looking for volunteers to stay with the planes tonight...?*

*An excellent thought, Troubadour.* I responded, sensing his movements in our direction. *How long have you been eavesdropping?*

*Since I heard you mention my name. There will be no need to speak to Thomas about protecting our marriage.* William sounded sarcastic. *Marshall, a few words with you in private, if you would?*

*Where?*

*Under that acacia tree in the rectory gardens. Now, please. Lady Ann, I’ll speak to you a little later, my dear.*

With the equivalent of a mental kiss on my cheek, Marshall moved easily

to his feet in the afternoon heat, and then strolled away. Left on my own, I decided to follow through with my earlier thought, to stroll the nearby countryside and to acquaint myself with the local wildlife.

\* \* \*

Over an hour later, I roamed the dirt roads between the Delacruz family's acacia orchards and vanilla fields. Careful to maintain my sanity against an onslaught of animal or insect minds, I joyously discovered the multitude of Columbia wild life-from tiniest insects to large domestic animals. The mental plane had been blessedly quiet for a change, and I felt relieved that the nearby population in Medellin didn't leak onto that psychic world. Several times aircraft droned overhead, and I fought back a panic that the Chinese had found us again.

As I made another outbound loop in my exploration, I came upon a meter-wide creek, and stepped off the dirt farm road to study the natural flora and fauna of the area. Unlike the rest of the countryside, thick, lush greenery enveloped the meandering stream, and I could easily sense the small fish and crustaceans that inhabited it. Delighted to test my abilities with animals in an unspoiled setting, I reached cautiously and found Life teeming around me, and that could easily maintain my identity and mind. Judica helped keep me centered. In a few minutes, I understood that the mental buzz of recognition from several critters at once, especially birds, could distract me if I wasn't careful.

Wishing I could have had time to do some reading about this part of the world before our chaotic departure from Memphis, I slowly moved deeper up the creek, stepping on large rocks and patches of dry sand when I could. Bright orange and yellow butterflies tumbled playfully past my head and small frogs and lizards skittered out of my path. I explored slowly forward, wondering what dangerous predators lurked in the bushes.

I DO NOT SENSE ANY DANGER, Judica remarked, stopping to drink from the creek.

*We'd know*, I remarked, deciding on a likely large rock as a place to rest.

Oh, *this is heaven. Alone in a forest with nothing but the critters for company!*

HEAVEN IS NOT LIKE THIS, the wolf commented dryly, making me laugh. Then her mental hue changed. SOMETHING LARGE IS COMING FROM UP STREAM. IT SMELLS A LIKE A CAT, BUT NOT LIKE YOUR LITTLE BLACK FRIEND.

Settling onto my rock of choice, I kept myself very still, asking Judica to do the same. The wolf silently crossed the distance between us, then settled at my feet, head up and very alert. Hearing the rustle of underbrush, I turned and saw the bushes several meters up the creek begin to shake and part.

A large spotted feline came slowly out of the bushes near a turn in the creek, testing the air as she stopped at the shore. Looking up and down the slow moving creek, the jaguar chuffed once, softly, in my direction, golden eyes wide. It blinked once, slowly, not so wide eyed now, and looked over its shoulder.

Thinking calming thoughts in the big cat's direction, I got a sense of the feminine in her, and then felt her protective nature. Nearby a quiet mewing came from the undergrowth, and the yellow and black spotted jaguar crooned softly in reply. Two speckled cubs, no bigger than cocker spaniels hopped clumsily toward their mother, who looked again in my direction. I could feel Judica's mental greeting to the big cat, which now lowered her head to drink. The little ones imitated her, lapping half unsuccessfully at the gently flowing stream.

Filled with awe and delight, I slowly exhaled, keeping my breathing quiet. Mamma cat looked up at me and blinked both enormous eyes at me then glanced at Judica, thinking about dinner.

*No. Please find other food.* I thought to the big cat. *This is my friend.*

With a chuffing noise that reminded me of a laugh, the jaguar nuzzled at her closer kitten, and then pawed in the wet sand. After three serious scoops of sand had been flung behind her, the jaguar again looked up where I sat on the rock, breathing slowly. She mewed sweetly, eyes on me, and then dug the sand a fourth time.

*Is there something I'm not getting here?* I asked my canine companion.

SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW SOMETHING... my angel in wolf's clothing said, sounding puzzled. SOMETHING UNDER THE SAND.

“What have you got, Sis-Cat?” I asked, reaching carefully to her in my mind at the same time. “Do you trust me around your babies?”

Sis-Cat mewed again, then nosed the shallow hole she’d dug in the sand. Chuffing again, she settled into a deep rumbling purr, then nosed her cubs up stream. I stayed still, watching the majestic animals and wondering when I should approach the hole she’d dug for me. After a few paces, the big cat turned, mouth slightly opened, and huffed a kind of big sigh, and then I heard Judica say we could look now.

I took my time sliding off that rock, watching the momma cat all the while. Although she did keep her babes to her far side, away from me, she stayed relaxed, gently nudging her cubs further away. I continued to think calm loving thoughts, and she rewarded me with a renewed happy rumble. Judica went first, nose down and working overtime.

SHE’S UNEARTHED SOMETHING SHINY, my wolf said, extending her left paw and now scraping at the wet sandy soil. PLEASE, GIVE HER ANOTHER MINUTE TO MOVE AWAY.

“What were you trying to show me?” I asked the spotted cat, watching Judica’s exploration.

IT’S METAL, I THINK...

*You sure made two pretty babies,* I told the jaguar, truthfully.

Momma Cat’s head jerked around. Those golden eyes studied me again briefly, and I heard *she who talks to birds* echo disdainfully in the back of my mind. Regally dismissing our presence, the cubs moved playfully back into the underbrush, and within a moment all three had gone.

*I did see that, didn’t I, Jude?*

NO WONDER YOUR MEN WORRY ABOUT YOU.

*What have we got?*

COME. SEE.

Taking several careful steps across some river rocks, I approached the digging sight, as Judica worked to maneuver a lump of something from the six inch hole. It shimmered under the wet sand that encased it, and as I picked it up, it looked like molten metal frozen in a cluster of golden bubbles. Swallowing, I

pushed wet grit from the golf ball sized ore.

THERE'S MORE. LOOK.

Two more precious metal clusters lay mostly hidden in the gritty soil. The larger-almost as large as my fist-required Judica's sharp nails and strong paws to dislodge. The smallest of the three, about the size of a shooter marble was probably worth a thousand dollars, I decided, not attempting the math to convert to Colombian pesos. Amazed at the weight of the gold, I chuckled inside, thinking about the term heavy metal. Crouching, I rinsed the biggest hunk in the creek, thanking God for the farm loan collateral.

I WILL BRING YOU SOMETHING TO CARRY THEM IN, Judica said as I washed each in the cool mountain stream.

By the time I had rinsed each nugget, Judica had set a monstrous banana leaf near my feet, which I used to bag my treasure.

Straightening, I stretched my back. Light headed in the high altitude, I suddenly felt drawn or called in my mind, like in the before-time when Will Martin used to call to me. This felt familiar, yet vague and distant. I could not sense the direction of the being that touched my mind, so subtle was the contact.

After another moment's consideration, I decided it came from just North of St. Philip's Church. Stashing the folded leaf and its contents under my belt, I casually retraced my steps down stream to the farm road, still vaguely aware of this familiar sensation. This feeling suggested the fond thought of a childhood friend. It felt distant and benign. Judica reported that she didn't sense it at all.

Suspicious, together, we started back to our family, busy at the church. Knowing dinner would soon need serving, I hurried in the slightly cooler temperature. Aware that my team had cleanup tonight, I'd have only a brief chance to relax a while before William's evening vespers.

\* \* \*

Coming back from my walk, I approached William and the local banker, Senior Tomas Junipero Iglesias. The two sat in the shade at an outdoor table near

the kitchen. Iglesias concluded his business over his cell phone, as Jennifer had just mentally scolded William and Eric on their long-winded and intense conversations while their meager meat shrank on the barbecue grill. William made a fast and respectful presentation of me as his co-leader, as I took the empty seat to William's left and invited Senior Iglesias to share our evening meal.

Hawk-nosed, the middle aged banker grinned at the offer, and the two men continued their friendship on fire. William glowed with recognition of Sr. Iglesias, although he was not one of *The Thirty*. I couldn't make of a sense of their Spaniard conversation at all. From where I sat at William's left, Iglesias looked sincere, and my other talents didn't suggest anything either way. I reminded myself of possible cultural difference regarding my gender and business as Lord Thomas returned to the table.

Only a big wooden table, our conference table quickly acquired a bright floral tablecloth, worn cloth napkins, and metal forks and knives. Lin and Nick immediately assisted their spouses and began setting up other tables for our family dinner.

Like the parade of little ones in musical *The King and I*, each of our children brought something to the table, a platter of food, salt, or bread. After greeting our guest politely, many said a word or two to us, then moved on their way. Marshall arrived, fresh from a shower, with Lady Candice on his arm. More introductions went around. Then Candice ushered Marshall into the chair next to me, claiming the seat to his left for herself. Tom rejoined us with Liz and the baby, sitting across from us so that Tom could join in their business conversation. Eric on other side of Iglesias brought up several questions about Colombian economy and geopolitical attitudes and that covered most of the main meal's conversation. William wanted to know what was happening in Israel. Senior Iglesias said he knew little of Israel, and then shared what he knew of current world affairs. I confess I paid little attention to the content of their conversation.

Next, Nick wanted to talk about his ideal farm, but the banker held up his hand.

“Forgive me, but I am curious,” Senior Iglesias began. “What did you miss most of civilization?”

“Tooth brushes and a dentist when we needed one,” Candice gave the first answer.

“The Internet and its potential for research,” Lin quickly responded from his place at the next table.

“I missed solitude and the contemplative life,” William said then turned his eyes briefly on me. I felt his apology. “Ann?”

“My mind’s been too full with survival to heed common place stuff,” I chuckled, not feeling any loss. “I wanted for nothing, so maybe I missed nothing. Was music what you missed most, Marshall?”

“As long as we are human, there will be music, have no fear,” Marshall said with a twinkle in his eyes, thinking out to me, *You know what I missed.* “This may sound selfish, but I missed my freedom. I felt an obligation to protect our women and children after years as a free-spirited bachelor.” *But that’s ancient history now,* he added sweetly.

*So, I understand,* I sent to him.

“Tom?” William asked in the awkward silence.

“Competing in pool tournaments. Liz?”

“I miss modern medicine, especially since Samuel was born.”

*Did you sense your son in this morning’s gestalt?* I asked Thomas.

*I did. Happy Lizzie!* Tom responded in good spirits, and then rotated in his chair to the folks settling into the next table. “Hey, Joy? What did you miss?”

“A girlfriend my own age.” The little blond sighed then shrugged her shoulders. “You know. Someone to talk to.”

When Katie and Diane brought canned fruit for dessert, they talked about having missed cable TV as a baby-sitter, for educational programming or just some mindless escape into a sit-com or sci-fi.

Joy directed the teens in clearing the meal. As I rose from the meal to join my cleanup crew in the kitchen, Senora Donna remarked how organized the process had gone.

Soon, I supervised as Valerie and Alicia finished up in the kitchen. They continued the “What I missed the most” game. Val missed having only *one* parent, instead of the handful of parents our community provided. Alicia had been too young to remember much more than her parents’ love and a few favored toys.

Cigars arrived with Father Ramon and his office clerk, Anna Córdoba, a woman near Candice’s age. The padre sought me out for a brief introduction to her, and at the mention of her given name, I heard *Anna?* whisper in the back of my brain. Then I heard William ask himself, *What if this is she who waits?* Sensitive to my sudden discomfort, the padre hurried his secretary on to meet others.

As I stepped out of a spotless kitchen, the banker’s wife arrived with 3 cases of local brew. Lord Marshall carried one of the two cases for her, calling Tom back to the table. Before I could walk ten feet, Joy approached, hauling a butcher paper wrapped leg of lamb, so I did a smart about-face to help her store it in the refrigerator. The mutton was also compliments of Senora Donna Iglesias. We had just finished up, and had stepped out of the kitchen door when the vague recognition I’d had after finding the gold came to me again.

“What’s the matter?” Joy whispered, glancing around the circle of family settled on the lawn, Thomas playing choirmaster to the music of several family members.

“Something’s pulling on me again,” I muttered and the word *again* echoed back several times in my mind. “Remind me to speak to Dante Delacruz, will you?”

My vision blurred, and I reflexively sought her arm to balance the swirl before my eyes. I saw dizzying heights, high above the trees, and felt the whisper of the wind through my feathers.

Feathers brought fond memories that made me smile, causing a realization, and I ran for the stand of trees at the far north end of the property. James touched my mind, saying he had mentally picked up on my owl. Smiling my thanks, I hurried, eyes searching the sky while pulling Joy with me.

“An owl remembers you...” Joy said as I slowed under low branches. “I hear that in my head, Lady Ann.”

*It's Archimedes!* James cried with delight

“Look. Here he comes!” I laughed in sheer delight. “Over there.”

Wishing I had *any* protection against the great horned owl's talons, I planted my feet, balanced myself, and waited. Archimedes glided to me through the small thin tree and the dusk. I could sense Marshall hurrying our way. A cry pierced the night as the great bird greeted me, slowing expertly as he drew nearer. I raised my arm for perching, but Archimedes only chirped, circled me twice, and then landed on a nearby branch. I mentally thanked him for his consideration.

Little dances and squeals of delight escaped from Joy as she gazed up at the huge bird, as I sensed Judica in the underbrush.

*He's beautiful, Ann. No wonder you mourned his leaving.* She exclaimed.

Asking if Judica had heard from Tosha, left behind at the planes, I received the impression of the smug contentment that only a feline could supply. Joy invited Archimedes to come closer, and I felt the bird's hesitation. Then Marshall spoke the bird's name as he stomped up to join us, and the owl launched himself into the air in greeting. Fluttering around Marshall's head, Archimedes quickly settled on a branch closer to Joy, so I introduced them.

“Hello, old friend,” Marshall said with a light laugh as he closed in on me. “Evening, ladies. Nice to have him back, eh?”

*You are absolutely glowing, my Sweet!*

Joy's single focus rested on that bird, so Marshall stole a kiss as he strolled past me toward Archimedes. Ignoring most of Joy's babble about the owl, I constructed a quick mental picture of shoulder pads, grimacing at the tropical heat of earlier today. With a final chirping-coo, the huge owl vaulted into the darkening sky, leaving me with thoughts of hunting breakfast and Marshall comfortably nearby. I felt James's disappointment at missing the reunion, but it was too close to vespers, Jennifer had said.

At the word *vespers* William's call to chapel echoed through our heads and drew most of the family's attention. Our sunset prayers often put the little

ones to sleep, so I hoped that tonight would be no different. Soft songs of worship would soothe us all after the last 36 hours, I thought, turning toward the mission church. Then Marshall mentally asked me to stay a moment.

“Lady Joy. Please, go ahead,” Marshall said, eyes fixed coldly on the young woman when she hesitated. “We’ll be along shortly.”

Waiting for my nod of approval, Joy rushed happily away when I gave it. Then I turned to my tall blond warrior. Catching my right hand in his, he turned my palm down, separated my fingers, and I felt the cool metal of a ring encircle my ring finger.

*I love you, Hannah Augustine, and I want to marry you as soon as I can arrange it, Marshall whispered, and swallowed once, before continuing. This was my mom’s wedding ring. Let it be your engagement ring, until we can get rid of that one on your left hand.*

“I’m honored,” I said in a shaky voice as the ring slid comfortably in place. *What was that I heard recently about your freedom?*

“I plan to become *The Dread Pirate Roberts*,” he continued caressing my fingers with his. *Would you care to come with me?*

*I wondered how you fitted into my sea dreams. I’ll be delighted to join you! Thank you.*

*Auntie Annie, James called to my mind. Mr. Dante is bringing horses.*

*Thank you. I’ll be right there.* I sent with a hug, ignoring the jumble of images from the child’s over active brain.

I waited until I felt sure the 6 year old had closed his link, squinting at the delicate gold ring in the failing light, and wondering what the dark stone was.

*It’s a piece of the one true cross, Marshall chuckled in answer to my curiosity. Rumor has it, it’s an emerald. We’d better get back.*

“I need two minutes conversation with Dante,” I remarked, turning toward the cluster of church buildings and he stepped out with me.

*I’m the jealous sort.*

I passed Marshall a quick mental “movie” about my gold discovery.

*Oh, I agree,* he responded after a moment’s thought. *It was on his*

*property. It belongs to him. While I think of it, maybe you shouldn't come out to the Hawk tonight.*

*I've wondered about that myself,* I sent with a frown as we crossed the yard. *Let's not push it.*

"I hate when you're practical."

"Now what's he want?" I grumbled as William knocked at my mental door.

*Lord Dante wants my permission to court our Lady Joy,* he sent with confused emotions.

*That is her parents' decision. Quick, isn't he?* I chuckled, having included Marshall in the link. *Please tell him I need to speak to him.*

I glanced right to find Marshall smiling happily down at me as we skirted around to the front of the church where some of the family now greeted Dante and his horses. William stood slightly aside.

A medium built man, Dante held tight on to a lead hitched to a yearling pinto. The young black and white horse, who danced on slender legs, had become weary of the small crowd. James and Alex greeted a black mare with a blaze of white on her face. The alert gelding at her side had appaloosa spots across his muscular rump. He nuzzled Tobias's face and neck briefly, then turned to Dante and the nervous colt. Candice and Diane called the children to order, herding them inside as we arrived. Tom and Katie turned a tired Richard toward the door, then followed him in, nodding their greeting. Joy stayed, carefully in the shadows, and I could feel her strong interest in the handsome Latin man with the horses.

Stepping up to the brown appaloosa, I reach my hands out to let him get my scent. William suggested that the two youngsters get to the choir loft, taking the black mare's lead rope as I touched the horse's mind. Tobias passed me the gelding's lead with a shrug, turned, and followed James and Alex into the adobe mission. The sensation of equine masculinity danced briefly across my brain.

"You wanted to speak to Dante," Marshall whispered near my ear as he captured my hands and took the lead rope from me. "You can easily get lost in

there, hey wot?"

"Thanks." I collected myself, and then fished into the pockets of my jeans, calling mentally for the young rancher.

Meters away, the black and white yearling had slowed his dance a little, wide eyed in the mission's front lights. I sent the scared colt a calming thought and introduced myself, inviting Dante to ride into my mind to greet his horse. Both man and beast stiffened at my mental touch, but Dante shook off his reaction and quickly relaxed, speaking softly to the tall colt.

"I'll tie these two for you," William whispered, as I became aware of the unfamiliar weight of Marshall's ring on my hand as Will took the lead ropes from me. Had he seen it?

*This ring feels so right*, I told the tall blond hovering near by, while watching Dante bring the harlequin horse toward us. The stud colt had calmed down more, and then Dante came to us.

"Now here's an animal with obviously a checkered past," Marshall quipped as Dante asked my opinion of his horse.

*How much equine libido do you think Dante can handle?* Marshall chuckled, as images came to me of the night of our horses' ride. *More than William, I'd wager.*

*Remember: This man wants to date our sister*, I warned, and then focused on the dark eyes and smile of Dante Delacruz. *How much could that stud colt disrupt a courtship between two of us Thirty?*

"He's a handsome colt," I said to Dante, ignoring Marshall's mental tickle.

"This is Dominic, la Negra's last son," Dante said, nodding to where the black mare waited with the gelding. "Those two were my Uncle Julio's favorite mounts until his passing last year. They need care and easy exercise. Mi blanco in the trees there is old, too. This one will replace him, if he lives to see his first compleanos, er... birthday."

Dominic sniffed my shoulder.

"We are about to start our evening prayers," I said as the black and white muzzle sniffed and snorted around me. "Please join us."

“Can you stay a while?” Marshall asked, reaching over my shoulder to scratch the young horse’s ears.

Remembering the treasures in my pocket, I dug my hands in, startling the young horse, who threw his head twice, then calmed down, curious as I pulled out the hunks of gold.

“These belong to you. I found them -- or rather Judica dug them out of a creek bed just north of here.” I started to pass the rocks to Dante, but Dominic had to smell them first.

“Que es eso?” Dante muttered, handing the lead rope to me so he could examine the three rocks closer. Then he laughed. “No, no. The two horses are a gift to you.”

“I understand. I am saying that I found these on your land today. They belong to you.”

“It was my Uncle Julios’s property,” he said slowly, then glanced at Marshall. Shifting the precious metal into Marshall’s hands, Dante grinned. “For your family. You will need it to buy your farm. For now, I will tether this horse and hope he is quiet though our prayers. You two go. I’ll be right in.”

Moments later when Marshall stepped through the church’s door behind me, I saw William standing and addressing our family in the beginning of evening prayer. After he finished his invocation, William told me mentally to stay at the back of the little church. Father Ramon sat peacefully on a side chair, studying William with his flock. Then Lord William raised his head and his voice.

“This morning we celebrated a mass of thanksgiving. Was that only this morning? Wow!” William grinned, looking from face to family member’s face. “We’ve all had a very full day, but before we sleep, I want you to think about the mistakes we humans make-big ones and small ones. We all make them. Daniel’s up in the choir loft thinking there’s no way Lord William makes mistake, but let me tell you, son, I made a big mistake a while ago and that mistake almost wrecked another person’s life. I did. I thought I had to marry Lady Ann. My second mistake was that I did. Bless her patient soul!

“Confessing a sin or a mistake is incomplete until restitution is given to

the victim or one you've hurt. Traditionally, you give something to the person you've wronged. That's why you gave an apology to Candice earlier, Valerie. Just like I have apologized to Ann for my many mistakes. I made, er... lots of mistakes concerning Ann. I want you all to know that in restitution, I have released Lady Ann from our wedding vows."

Two gasps and Thomas' grumble echoed across the stucco interior. Then the church grew silent.

"We are both much happier for it," William said quickly, then stiffened briefly. "Right now, we have come to pray before the God of Israel, whose son we call Jesus. Lord Marshall and Lady Ann, come up here. Dante! Good, you stayed around! Come up here and become part of our family."

Behind me, the local rancher chuckled, and Marshall touched my elbow, nudging me forward. The echo of his boot-heels striking the clay tiles filled the chapel, and all heads turned toward us. Marshall scooped up my hand and led me in courtly fashion up the center isle of the church. Liz gestured a thumbs-up while Joy wore a look of relief. Thomas's poker face was unreadable, so I didn't bother. Next to me Marshall chuckled as we approached William at the communion rail before the altar.

With a nudge from Marshall's mind, Father Delacruz stood and gracefully joined us there. William kissed my cheek in passing, and then went down to an empty spot near Joy. When I turned to follow, Marshall tightened his grip on my hand, stood firm, and pulled me back to him. Cupping my chin gently in his big hands, he drew a deep breath and turned his head toward our family.

"If anyone here knows any reason why I should not marry this woman right now, speak now, or forever hold your peace."

In the silence, Father Ramon took up his book of rituals, and smiling, joined our hands. He gazed out over his new American refugees and nodded to his nephew.

"So soon?" Katie asked softly after a short silence.

"They have waited long enough," William responded so all could hear. "I, for one, think they should be married now if they want to be."

“Tobias,” Marshall called after waiting for objections that never came.  
“Come here and stand as my Best Man!”

Tobias jumped up from his pew and hurried to join us, a grin on his youthful face. Dante moved quickly up the side isle and came to his uncle’s side, passing him an old lace mantilla. Farther Ramon turned to me.

“It is our custom for the bride to wear lace,” the padre explained, draping the lace mantilla across my head and shoulders.

Marshall reached to straighten it, and then gently settled it over my shoulders with a loving smile. His joy radiated fully through me, mind and soul.

“A wedding is a day -- A marriage is a lifetime,” Father Ramon began, fumbling for the right page. “A major family adjustment in some cases. You all must understand and adjust. Both of these men came *separately*, to me today--mind you, *separately*--both before sunset of your first day here. Both were struggling with the same dilemma. You are all witnesses to their solution.

“A wedding is a day -- A marriage is a lifetime. Please pray with me for Marshall and Hannah as they begin their new life as husband and wife. The best gift you can give them now is to find it in your hearts to understand and rejoice in their decision. Let us pray...”