

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 jammed their radar.

December 5

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 Penny'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 Penny'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 Hawkeye bucked and dragged as the brakes kicked in, causing nervous voices from my family in the back.

I pushed forward on the yoke, dropping the nose in steeper descent, 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, 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 for everybody, you know. We're all alive! 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."

"Penny," 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 and I am sure everybody heard him.

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!

Penny 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 stiff and 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.

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Anyone under the age of eighteen automatically went on to Father Ramon's old yellow church bus with his or her backpack of personal belongings, while Katie, Joy, and Candice monitored the procedure. William stayed close to our kiddos too, maintaining a physical presence carrying baggage and food supplies between the Hawk and the bus. Needing a break from humanity, I mentally told Jenn, Marshall, and William where I intended to walk, then called Judica as I moved away from the happy chaos. I stepped off the road careful to stay in sight and not worry the family, focusing on the leaves on a tree near my Hawk. Then I briefly studied an anthill underfoot, next, the swirl of clouds in the early morning sky. The wind smelled wonderful after a long day driving a stinky, greasy flying machine!

Judica surveyed the perimeter while Tosha dove into the underbrush, hunting breakfast. The wind sang and I heard a chorus of insects and frogs now, sounds almost lost to me since the devastating war.

Marshall had settled on the ground under the Hawk's wing, quietly watching us all. I knew he was standing guard duty.

"Technically, I am *sitting* guard duty," he called as I worked my way toward him, but he rose and in three long strides, he met me with a quick kiss.

Guarding is a good idea, I whispered as his hand reached for mine.

Always. Candice has all the kiddos seated on the bus now. Penny and Jennifer just

brought their little ones on board. Most of the food and gear are loaded.

I have one seat on this bus available. William called mentally and I strongly urged that seat be assigned to Thomas Becker, a very tired man who had protected us all through the night without relief. To my relief, William didn't argue. Thomas gratefully climbed into the short bus, and the driver closed the door.

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

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

Father 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 released Marshall's hand and stepped reluctantly 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, and Eric clasped Delacruz’s big hand next. In my mind, William ordered everyone onboard the flatbed so we could quickly join the children at the church. Delacruz began quizzing Lord Eric about livestock 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 lovely. You’re next.*

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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, Penny, 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 outbuilding opened to this back yard. Inside the single room, an old propane stove and two ancient refrigerators lined the walls, a few florescent lights overhead.

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? Flustered by a slight disorientation, I decided to seek a little peace.

Sinking into a cross-legged position on the old orange tile floor, I closed my eyes and breathing deep, turned inward, pushing anxiety from my soul. My family is safe and William was out of my personal life but there was plenty left for me to worry and plan for. I let the

millstones of the recent past slide away. Somehow I *Knew* I had a few somewhat stress free weeks ahead. And I made a mental effort to turn my *emergency thinking mode* off.

Where are you? Marshall whispered, a bit concerned.

Here. I showed him with love. *Catching my breath. No, I'm not sleepy, yet. Did Thomas find a quiet corner to sleep in?*

The choir loft, Penny says. The kiddos are running energy off in a baseball game.

Excuse me, friends. William eased into our conversation and asked, *Do you want to see that farm Father Ramon told us about? Don't be long.*

Definitely!

When are we leaving? Marshall asked.

Twenty minutes, maybe.

We'll be there, my Marshall replied and focused on me.

Let me collect myself for a few minutes, 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 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 sat guarding, 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, who was deep in discussions with Dante and his uncle, the Father. Sensing me, William asked me to join him on the trip to see the farm. I said I would.

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.

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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 our meager food supplies. 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, Penny 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 given this little extra. 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 Penny and her hunters returned with several rabbits and squirrels for dinner, Thomas had awoken from his nap. As our family's

butcher, he was quickly herded into the church's kitchen to teach 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. "Have 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 tech terms sound strange after two years without tech?"

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

"He said he'll be back very late 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. Penny, 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 just the right phrasing. And the right time William's voice touched both our minds, startling Marshall, by the surprised look on his face. *I'm looking for volunteers to guard 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. Hannah, I want to speak to Merlin a little later, please.

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 resolve to stroll the nearby countryside and to acquaint myself with the local wildlife.

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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 minds of the nearby population in Medellin didn't leak onto that psychic world. Several times aircraft hummed overhead, and I had to fight 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 NOTHING LIKE YOUR LITTLE 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 sat 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 wolf.

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, STAY THERE. 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.

The 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 PEOPLE WORRY ABOUT YOU.

What have we got?

COME. SEE.

Taking several careful steps across some river rocks, I approached the digging site, as Judica worked to maneuver a lump of something from the three 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 nugget in the cool mountain stream.

By the time I had rinsed each piece, Judica had set a monstrous banana leaf near my feet, which I used to wrap 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 who spoke to the local banker, Junipero Iglesias. The two sat in the shade at an outdoor table near the kitchen. Iglesias concluded some business on his cell phone and put it away. Jennifer had just mentally scolded William and Eric on their long-winded and intense conversations while our meager amount of 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 sense of their Spanish 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 with regard to business. Lord Thomas returned to the table.

Our only big table, our conference table quickly acquired a bright floral tablecloth, worn cloth napkins, and metal forks and knives. Lin and Nick 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 Penny 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.

"Doing research on the Internet," 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. “Miss Merlin?”

“My mind’s been too full with survival to consider common 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. After years as a free-spirited bachelor, I felt oddly annoyed at having to protect our women and children. But that’s ancient history now,” he concluded sweetly.

So I understand, I sent to him.

“Tom?” William asked in the awkward silence.

“Competing in pool tournaments. Penny?”

“Really? Er... Okay.” Penny laughed, and then became solemn. “I miss modern medicine, especially since Samuel was conceived.”

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

I did. Happy Penny! 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. A *bestie* 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 sitcom or sci-fi.

Joy started directing the teens in clearing the meal. As I rose 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 so only missed 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 that vague recognition I’d experienced after finding the gold earlier returned to me.

“What’s the matter?” Joy whispered, glancing around the circle of family settled on the lawn. Thomas was playing choirmaster to 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. Sending 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. Over there.” I laughed in sheer delight. “Here he comes!”

Wishing I had *any* protection against the great horned owl's talons, I planted my feet, balanced myself, and waited. Archimedes glided silently 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 exquisite, Ann. She exclaimed. *No wonder you mourned his leaving.*

Asking if Judica had heard from Tosha, left behind near 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, and 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 quick kiss on my cheek 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 my nod of approval, Joy rushed happily away when I nodded. 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. Come quick! 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 rope 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 white blaze running down her face. The alert gelding at her side had appaloosa spots across his muscular rump. He nuzzled Tobias's face and neck briefly, and 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, and then followed him in, nodding their greeting. Joy stayed, carefully in the shadows, and I could feel her strong interest in the handsome young 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.

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.

Had he seen it?

“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 these to help 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 make mistakes. I thought I had to marry Lady Ann. My second mistake was that I insisted that she marry me. 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! Glad you stayed around! Come up here and be 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. Penny 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.”

“So soon?” Katie asked softly after a short silence.

In the silence, Father Ramon took up his book of rituals, and smiling, joined our hands.

He gazed beyond his new American refugees and nodded to his nephew.

“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 aisle 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 correct 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 men 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...”

* * *

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the priest concluded, “May I introduce Marshall and Hannah Roberts-”

“Hannah Augustine,” I interjected, turning quickly to my husband and I added, “If you don’t mind?”

Marshall chuckled, looking out at our family and said, “Please, pray for me,” and after a nod to Father Ramon, he escorted me courtly style toward our seats.

Stepping beyond the ornate brass communion rail, I took his hand and moved toward William who sat with Candice and the Hoffmans.

“Thank you,” I said quietly while blue eyes smiled up at me. “Ah, this is all very sudden. Er, would you mind if I skipped vespers tonight?” He frowned and started to speak, but I kept going. “I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed and I know our women are already starting to plan a celebration, but I just can’t do any more tonight. Your bus driver is *very tired*.”

“And you two men just overturned her bus,” Joy put in, sighing sympathetically as whispers moved through the long, narrow church.

“True, but a welcome change,” I chuckled, looking around to my kitchen crew. “Ladies, can we please postpone celebrating until I can be awake enough to enjoy it?”

“That just gives us more time to plan,” Jennifer put in gleefully.

“And prepare surprises,” Penny called over a fussing Samuel.

William, may I please be excused? I sent with bit of an edge.

Me too. Marshall added. *Please?*

Images of sleeping bags swept my mind first, then images of me sleeping in the Hawkeye’s candle-lit interior came for a moment, and I couldn’t tell which man had sent which images. Visions of the black mare and long-legged appaloosa gelding were followed by

Marshall's query to Dante Delacruz.

Did you bring any saddles for those horses?

I chuckled, as William sprang to his feet, and wrapped me in a clumsy hug. He tried to block his emotions from me, and I was surprised by a sense of possessiveness from him.

Marshall's big hands grasped my shoulders and pulled me away from Will Martin.

"Oh, no." He laughed as I looked around at my blond warrior behind me. "You had your chance."

"Ancient history," William muttered, glancing briefly at me, and then meeting Marshall's eyes.

I just *knew* something was said between them, but I could not hear *what*. Drawing a deep chuckling breath, Marshall offered his hand which William grasped at the forearm, slapping his other hand on top. They both looked quite pleased with themselves.

"I think this wedding has bested any vespers prayer or sermon I could think of," Will quickly announced, stepping back from Marshall. "We've all had a *very* full day."

With a nod from our furry-faced leader, Father Ramon pronounced a general blessing and dismissed us. A receiving line began to form as our family moved out of the pews for congratulations. I reinforced myself against the inevitable sea of love, congratulations, and physical contact.

Soon we stepped into the cool breeze of dusk, I stood in Marshall's loose embrace, patiently listening as he discussed adjusting their roof repair schedule with Nick and Eric, when Joy appeared and slipped the handles of a bulky canvas bag into my hand. Checking its interior, I found a generous supply of bottled water, cheese, bread, and fruit. Smiling, she handed a second bag to Marshall, mentally saying that it held more water and some wine. Then, with a light hug

to me, she slipped away to help get the kids settled for the night.

No sooner was the lithe blond gone, when Penny stepped up, carrying the green canvas backpack that held all my worldly possessions. In her other hand was the large navy blue sleeping bag that Will and I had planned to share. Behind her, Thomas stood stoically holding their slumbering baby. Catching his eyes, I sensed that he still struggled in his heart. I looked at the auburn-haired man with expectation as his wife hugged me.

I owe you an apology... he began with concern, and then explained contritely, *I am Lord William's man.*

You have nothing to apologize for, I assured him on a wave of friendship. *William couldn't ask for a better friend and advisor. And you didn't know my Marshall's devotion to Honor.*

Penny tried to explain that to me...

Actually, if circumstances were different, I would have appreciated your defense of my marriage.

If you could even call what was between you two a marriage...

True, I sent affectionately as Penny stepped back to the man, and caressed her sleeping son's cheek. *But, be at peace, big brother. This too has sorted itself out.*

You've taught me a lot about Faith, Lady.

We learned together, I sighed as Tobias' approach caught my attention.

Tobias had become a man this week, I realized, watching him hand Marshall his backpack and sleeping bag.

Yes! So he has, my Sweet, whispered proudly to my mind. *I'll be done here in a moment and we can adjourn to the honeymoon Hawk. Are there always birds in your world?*

Apparently...

You are “She Who Talks to Birds”, William put in and then was quickly gone.

Where did you get off to? I asked, looking around the diminished group.

Taking care of business, was his distracted response, and I sensed the banker’s presence in William’s physical conversation. *See you in the morning – whenever you get back here.*

We’ll be back in about a week, Marshall chuckled in the link. *We’re taking a vacation.*

I expect you back here tomorrow, he grumbled harshly.

I know, Marshall sighed. *But we WILL sleep-in tomorrow.*

See you at lunch, William said distractedly and dropped the link.

We’ll leave this sleeping bag for you, my husband sent to William, and set the smaller one Tobias had brought on the ground.

I’ll take that to him, Lord Eric said in one of his rare uses of this form of communication. And then he smiled at me. *Good night, my Lady. Lord Marshall. Best wishes and God’s blessings.*

Marshall’s surprised eyes met mine as the big Irishman also went his way, and he asked, *Can we go now?*

One moment, dear heart. I mentally touched Candice and Joy simultaneously. *My ladies. Please take care of Will for a while. Lord William will be fine, but Will Martin may have a difficult few days. Don’t let him be lonely.*

Over each woman’s affirmation in my head, Marshall chuckled, “Sister Joy may have other distractions to deal with.”

I laughed, hugging my tall warrior/lover/husband/friend, filling him with affections.

Speaking of Joy’s distraction... He shifted, and I felt uneasiness seep into him. *Here he*

comes with our transportation for the evening.

Releasing the hug, I turned to see Lord Dante approach in the dim light, leading the black mare and the appaloosa gelding. Neither had a saddle, and I could feel Marshall's apprehension.

"Did you get the wine?" Dante Delacruz asked as he drew nearer. "It's only altar wine, but... it was the best we could do on notice that was short."

"Much appreciated," Marshall responded with a grin. *Already he and Joy are conspiring, eh?* He sent to me, not hiding his apprehension. "No saddle, hmmm?"

"You'll do fine," I quietly assured him. "We will ride double."

More cuddlesome that way, hey wot?

Judica? I called out on that mental plane. *Time to go. Bring Tosha, please? Archimedes!*

Foolish me! I thought I was finally going get you alone.

* * *

Two lovers together on a leggy horse meandered up the dusty Columbian road in the light of a half moon. The smaller dark horse next to them carried canvas bags draped over her withers. A dark cat rode carefully on one bag, balancing gracefully. The wolf and the owl kept the watch close by.

December 6

"But Love, you did very well on your bareback ride last night."

"I wish Lord Dante had foreseen the need for a saddle," Marshall grumped, and then

brightened. “But your need was met, as usual.

“There is a God and He’s a nice guy.”

Bananas, cheese, and bread lay mostly consumed. Water too. I lay curled around him, drinking in his scent while he sat on a blanket the morning sun. Around us this world of northeastern Columbia looked much like the terrain I’d known in Southern California: dry chaparral with a few stunted trees. I felt I’d deserted my forest again, and saddened, I reminded myself that this was just a brief stop in the sacred journey I’d *volunteered* for.

“Aside from family business, what do you want to do today?”

I laughed, remembering a dream from about a year ago and replied, “I want to hunt for a ship that will take us across the Atlantic. Shortest route possible, and preferably a local fisherman.”

“Okay... Ah. Well then, right to business, hey wot?” He drew a deep breath that came out as a chuckle, and he briefly touched my cheek.

“My Dread Pirate Roberts must have his vessel, and we need passage to Sierra Leone, Africa.” I laughed as he screwed up his face, miming a silent query. “I have to drag Lord William closer to the action. And to Anne.”

“Ah. Well then, right to business.”

“I can also tell you what I don’t want to do.”

“And that is...?” He asked in his deep radio DJ voice.

“Leave your side.”

He smiled loving green eyes my way and asked, “What do you want to do for fun today?”

“Whatever the day brings. Do you think it’s alright to leave Tosha here when we go?”

Pupdog? Do you want to stay or go?

I listened to Judica's reply as I began gathering the remains of the meal.

"She'd like a day off too." I translated. "She'll stay. Better hunting away from the humans."

"You sure that last wasn't from Tosha?"

I admitted I wasn't sure.

What needs doing before we go?

Digging a latrine? I asked hopefully.

"A latrine..." he said gesturing to the E-2 on the side of the road. "My Sweet, I do not plan to be away from civilization – or what's left of it – for more than it takes us to settle our family into a commune somewhere."

"I can't stay here..."

"I know *we three* are just passing through." Marshall stroked my curls, and smiled into my eyes. "Let's settle the family while we find our ship."

"In two days we will have improved housing," I whispered in mock secrecy. "Finding the right boat will be another thing."

That rancho the banker is selling? He asked rolling away on the blanket.

I dreamed of a farm, although I didn't see a crop. I'll know it when I see it... So, can you rough it with me out here for a few days?"

I insist on insect repellent, he rose gracefully to his feet. *So, the Sight is back?*

What do you think?

Last night your dreams were more chaotic than usual. He studied my face, eyes filled with concern as he bent to collect the blanket. *Yup. I caught a little of it.*

Swallowing back a pain from my heart, I reminded myself to breathe.

We should be going soon, Marshall whispered, his voice soothing.

Several minutes later, we'd tidied the area and stored all our belongings inside the aircraft on the side of the road. As I collected the two hobbled horses that grazed nearby, my Marshall pulled the Hawkeye's hatch closed and then ran his left hand around its edges. Power emanated in a way I'd never sensed before and it was undeniably his. He must have sensed my curiosity.

I sealed it, he explained, coming in long strides to where I waited on the road with the horses. *A little magic of my own. No average person could open that without a welding torch or the Jaws of Life.*

A new talent?

No, just subtle. How do you think Chuck made it from Minnesota to Memphis?

Never knew your car was having problems... I shrugged, holding the big gelding.

He blew a push rod in southern Missouri, he explained, vaulting gracefully onto the appaloosa's back. *I could either hold Chuck's engine together with my mind or leave him behind.*

I know you couldn't leave him... After he'd steadied himself, I handed him both horses' lead ropes.

Give me your hand, and... Up you come!

I settled in front of my Marshall, who pulled me closer in the warmth of the midday, semi-tropical sun.

* * *

A mile or so down the dusty road, I could make out Father Ramon's church in the distance, and mentally scanned it without thinking. All was fine. Beyond the cluster of buildings,

I could see the little pueblo that was home to the couple thousand people who, I'd been told the day before, worked the local ranches and farms in the district.

The area was surprisingly like southern California. Decomposing granite sand made up this dusty road, rather than rich dark soil. Scrubby short acacia trees lined occasional driveways and the last of the greenery thrived a while longer before the heat of the coming summer. In the distance stood patches of green that I had been told were the tree farms that supplied construction companies with wood for the region. In open areas I could see small clusters of gray, brown, and cream-colored goats grazing on the chaparral.

We rode slowly toward St. Phillip's church, walking the horses, discussing the need for several modes of transportation, followed by the question of what to do with the two airplanes. I asked Marshall if he thought we should we break them down for recycle to build up our family's bank account.

Do they even recycle in this part of the world? My new husband asked soberly. And just what part of the world are we in?

The north-eastern tip of Columbia. Upper Guajira, a Division of the La Guajira District.

Tells me nothing.

Okay... Father Ramon told me yesterday that we're a little west and south of the Caribbean island of Aruba. We're in South America.

That much I knew.

When we were about a hundred yards from the church, I reached out to William to say we'd arrived. I sensed intense frustration. Thomas was annoyed, and Eric distressed. Lords Dante and Ramon felt... apologetic, but I wasn't sure because their friendship was too new for me to understand the strong feelings I sensed from them now. Lady Joy seemed calmer, so I

touched her mind carefully as Marshall quieted behind me, now aware of what I'd discovered.

Joy-lady? Why are you upset? I called across the mental plain. What's happened?

That rancher has decided he doesn't want to sell to outsiders, came her resentful reply, and I knew she'd just stomped into the priest's office.

Sharing my experience with my Marshall, I watched through Joy's eyes as she glanced around the bright and ornately decorated room she'd entered. Thomas, Eric, and William stood quietly scowling, while Dante placed an old black telephone back on its receiver.

Marshall kicked our horse into a fast trot and a second nudge put the big gelding into a comfortable gallop, and then he touched William to announce us. I felt our leader's mood improve slightly.

ASK LORD WILLIAM WHO TIO LEO IS, Judica prompted softly to my mind, and I did as she commanded.

Through Joy's eye, I saw our bearded William's head snap up in surprise at my question. His brown brows furrowed a moment and then he turned to our Columbian hosts, as he told me *I know that name... He's one of The Thirty...* Then William asked the Delacruz men who Leo was.

"Tio Leo is an elderly acacia farmer," Dante responded, eyes drinking in our lovely Lady Joy. I sensed no discomfort from the young woman as he continued, "Leo Montenegro lives about two kilometers from here on his acacia plantation."

"I have not seen much of him since Tia Lupita died last, er... in February," Father Ramon offered from behind his desk. "Alejandro Guzman usually does Leo's home mission visit, and he has said nothing on ... er, problems."

"Dante, do you know where he lives?" William asked with urgency.

"Yes, less than two kilometers from here, but--"

“Alright, then. Let’s go!”

Joy’s eyes showed me they were on the move as Marshall kicked our horse for more speed. After the mare’s lead rope almost pulled me from the big appaloosa, I mentally urged the riderless horse next to us to go faster. Wrapping my hands into the gelding’s long mane, I felt the man behind shift slightly, steadying me as he gripped the horse tighter with his knees. I focused briefly on my own here and now, and then complimented his horsemanship.

By the time we arrived at the gravel parking lot by the rectory by the side of the old adobe church, Dante straddled a dusty Indian Chief RoadMaster motorcycle, and William came running to meet us. With a confused look, the black-haired rancher kicked over the big bike’s engine, watching William head for the horses. I presumed that Dante had expected the man to jump on the back of his bike.

Joy rushed out of the rectory.

Throwing a bit of a levitation assist as William vaulted onto the black mare’s back, I sensed his apprehension, and held the horse’s lead out to him rather than throwing it. Mentally I nudged the horse toward me, and she stepped closer. Will reached for the rope. Catching his hand, I quickly made a mental introduction of the man to the horse, and when their contact was established, both relaxed significantly.

So that’s how you do it, Marshall whispered, and then I felt him respectfully introduce himself to the animal beneath us.

“Wait for me,” Joy shouted, and I saw her swinging her lithe form onto the back of Dante’s motorcycle.

Startled but grinning, Dante gunned the bike’s engine and rolled backward from his parking spot.

Which way? William demanded, now settled comfortably on the black mare.

Turning the loud motorcycle down the driveway toward the street, Dante eased off the clutch and rolled forward, calling to Joy to hang on. As he headed for the country road, I saw Joy's arms wrap around his slim waist. William's mare half reared, but he stayed on, and the horse leapt in pursuit of the motorcycle. We urged our mount to quickly follow. Dante turned left at the main road, and we on horseback followed him back the way Marshall and I had just come.

Within a half mile, Dante slowed his big red and yellow motorcycle and turned the RoadMaster right and onto a single-lane side road. There he waited for us to catch up. I could see him talking to Joy over his shoulder and sensed William's possessiveness. I sent that feeling to Marshall and heard his deep chuckle as our big gelding overtook the black mare and pulled ahead.

This is not a race, William grumbled as I became aware of the heat coming from our horse.

We rounded the corner of the road as Dante gunned the Indian's big engine and rolled carefully down the dirt road. No signs at the intersection had given clues to where we were going and open grassland lined each side of the little road. As I asked the gelding to slow a bit, William sped past in pursuit of the motorcycle. Frowning inwardly, I blocked my annoyance at William's pushing his horse needlessly. Marshall was in physical contact with me, and again he chuckled.

It's good to hear you laugh, I sent him.

"What can I say, my dear?" He whispered near my ear as the gelding settled into a slower lope. "I'm a happy man."

About 600 yards down this road rested a sprawling single-story home in a half-circle grove of older, yet squat evergreens. The beige adobe house stretched long with many arched,

decorative panels along its front that faced the circular driveway. Dante had already stopped his big bike near the front door, with William's mare hurrying toward him. By the time it took for Marshall and me to arrive, an occupant of the house had opened the front door.

As William reined his horse to a stop near the now quiet motorcycle, I watched the big wooden double doors swing open and in the next moment a frail man in a wheelchair emerged. Behind him, a dark-skinned teenage girl pushed the chair a few feet into the afternoon sun. William vaulted from the mare and strode quickly to the old man's side as Marshall and I loped up the driveway at our slower pace.

"Lord William! I expected you last week," chided the old man in a deep booming voice that belied his physical condition. "Rosalinda, please go and ask your mother to bring our guests some refreshments on the fountain patio."

His English held a hint of a Boston accent, I noted, as Dante stepped toward us to grab the gelding's halter, and William shook the old man's hand. The young woman turned and hurried back into the house as Marshall shifted me sideways and eased me to the ground. I took two steps and he was at my side as we moved toward William and the old man.

Dressed in dark blue striped slacks and a white cotton shirt, Leo Montenegro captured my eyes and grinned at our approach. His shaggy head of wild silver hair needed combing and his weather-worn face looked as if it would crack from his wide smile. Hazy brown eyes made me wonder how serious his cataracts were. Did he have any vision at all?

"Here is *Santa* Hannah! Oh, yes she is, William. Three healing miracles," he added in a quieter tone, then gave my Marshall a long and all-encompassing, very intent look. "I am honored, Doña Hannah, and may I congratulate you and Doñ Marshall on your marriage."

"Muchas gracias, Doñ Leo" Marshall replied with his most winning smile.

Quickly climbing the three small steps onto the front porch, I reached and took the old man's boney hand. Immediately I felt his complete spirit in a swift and peaceful exchange of soul's essence, and because my Marshall's hand rested on the back of my neck, I knew he experienced the exchange too.

Tio Leo was dying.

Yes. I am, the old man whispered in my head and gave a dismissing wave. *But enough about me.* "William, please drive this old chair back into the house. Dante? You know where the stable is? Good. We'll meet you in the back garden."

William stepped around the old wooden wheelchair, took its hand grips, and began to turn the chair around, when the old man waved at him to stop. Now his watery eyes rested on Joy, who had taken the black mare's halter when William had dismounted. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end despite the presence of my husband's hand.

"*Who is this?*" He demanded in his booming voice.

"Lady Joy Hoffman," William said with a glance to me. He too had felt a disturbance in the psychic energies.

"Benevento, Mi ángelita de muerte. Er, Damita Bonita."

A deep sadness radiated from the old man briefly, and then I felt him shake it off as he gestured William inside the big house. I mentally asked Joy to take the mare and follow Lord Dante as Marshall nudged me after the wheelchair.

His little angel of death? William whispered aghast.

That's how I understood it, Marshall replied, slowly.

I'm not sure what he means by that, I put in. *Let's just wait and watch.*

Once inside the door, I saw a large entryway, almost thirty feet square, tiled in terracotta

with a parlor through one door and a library opposite. Toward the back of the big room were hallways right and left and a glass-paneled wall graced the back of the room, displaying a large garden with a fountain beyond. As William rolled the wheelchair dutifully toward that garden, Marshall hurried to open the French doors that led to it.

As my men maneuvered the wheelchair-bound man into the shade of a tall acacia, the small fountain's burbling caught my attention. For just a moment I saw Joy sitting on its low wall, James, a little older and much taller, reading his schoolwork aloud to her. And then the vision dissipated, and I found the old man's eyes on me again. I *knew* he *Knew* what I had seen.

"So when can we move in?" I asked Tio Leo as I moved to join him in the shade.

"Hannah!" William rumbled, anger and shock somewhat contained.

"Always right to business, eh?" My Marshall chuckled.

"I told you I'd know it when I saw it," I explained to both of my men. "*This* is our new home."

William sputtered to silence and glared at Marshall, wordlessly asking assistance.

"Your two families with the infants can move in today," the old man chuckled, dismissing William's protest with another wave of his hand. "*Immediately*, Lord William. We've already set up the common nursery with parents' rooms on either side. Oh! And you should move your airplanes off the public road. Today! You can taxi them here and park them in the big pasture south of the hacienda until you can decide what to do with them."

William touched my mind with concern, and I sent both him and my husband the vision of Joy and James that I'd just experienced. Our furry-faced leader moved to one of the big white wicker chairs and sank into it, relief flooding his being. I eased into the chair next to him, and focused on Tio Leo.

“What about legalities?” I asked carefully.

“We must decide who will hold the deed. I think it would be best for both Lords Thomas’ and Eric’s names to be on the land title.”

“And Jennifer’s,” I injected.

“I agree,” William said in a quiet voice, and I turned to find him pale and wide-eyed. “Since we will not be staying long, for privacy, you and Marshall might want to stay in your honeymoon Hawkeye.”

“William-” Marshall began as the side door opened and Rosalinda appeared carrying tray of iced drinks.

“I’ll be staying at the rectory with Father Ramon.” He smiled, a contented glow in his eyes. “I *Knew* it as soon as I walked through his front door. I just didn’t know where everyone else would be.”

“How soon can we settle everyone else?” I asked as Marshall took a chair opposite me and stretched out those long legs. “Those stairs to the choir loft are hard on Candice’s knees.”

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