

MadMen 2: Through the Waiting

September 12

“Good morning.” Thomas Becker greeted me with a yawn. “You look bright and chipper this morning.”

“I do feel chipper,” I admitted coming to the kitchen after my morning exercise and shower. “It’s a beautiful morning out there. So clear and crisp.”

“How many laps today?” Jennifer inquired from the stove.

“Six,” I remarked, peeking around Jennifer at the frying pan at the stove. “Where’d the eggs come from?”

“Frozen egg substitute. There’s toast and juice on the table.”

I settled down across the oblong table from Thomas, attacking the available food. Freckles stretched into a grin as he watched my merciless assault. I winked and poured myself a glass of red juice from the half-gallon pitcher.

“You’re running laps? Why?”

“To get back into shape,” I replied after swallowing. “I lost 20 pounds on the trip here, and with Jennifer’s trying to fatten me up, I want it to go to the right places.”

“You’re too skinny,” she put in, still stirring eggs.

“Are you two always the first ones up?” Tom asked.

“Sometimes Lin takes over breakfast with my son’s help, and then I sleep in.”

“Then it’s every man for himself,” I cautioned the newcomer.

“Or herself, as the case may be,” Thomas teased, standing to refill his coffee. “By the way, I was wondering, what is the duty like here?”

“Duty?” the blond at the stove asked.

“Chores, Jen,” I translated, with a grin. “So far, we just do what we can, Thomas.”

“Oh, I see,” he remarked thoughtfully.

“Jennifer and Lin seem to be the house parents.” I offered, spreading strawberry jam.

“Penny is the wild game hunter,” Mrs. Tonaka put in, spooning scrambled eggs onto a plate and passing it to me. “With Judica’s help.”

“Arlo is quite interested in the vegetable garden,” I offered. “He can’t wait to get his hands on it.”

“How come?” She asked, serving eggs to Thomas.

“Oh, he says I’m doing it all wrong.”

“He does, does he?” Jen’s spoonful of scrambled eggs hit the plate with a ringing thud. “We shall see about that.”

“And what is your duty?” The auburn headed man asked turning my way.

I stopped my half-lifted fork of eggs and glanced at Jennifer, not quite sure of the answer. She caught my eyes, demanding silence from me as she replied.

“Ann’s role has not yet been defined, except to see that her animals stand guard.”

“Not entirely true, Lady Jennifer,” he countered, smiling. “She’ll support Lord William.”

“Of course,” Jennifer muttered, glancing at me and mirroring my frowning then turned to set the pan back on the stove.

“Is it not a matter of time?” I interjected gently. “I cannot be today who I must be a year from now.”

“But you are, in essence, eternally the same,” he reminded me.

“Thomas, the physical body requires teaching and discipline. Agreed? Good. The physical world distracts the five major—or normal—senses, making it difficult to detect and use the sixth and the seventh, the extra—or paranormal.”

“You’re telling me!” He laughed, green eyes sparkling.

“It seems to me,” Jennifer remarked, easing into a chair with her coffee. “Ann’s role is extremely important. I just can’t seem to label what it is, besides being Ann.”

“Being Ann is essential. To William, that is,” the auburn headed man sighed. “He is obsessed with finding his Lady Ann. But, you’re Ann and yet he hasn’t found you?”

Thomas looked deeply into my eyes, and I could sense his mental probing. I did not resist but rather assisted him by recalling specific instances and personal conclusions. Jennifer touched us with an affirmation that caused a glowing in Tom’s jade eyes. His face melted into a sweet countenance, but I could feel pity for me from him.

“I am sorry,” he whispered, diverting his eyes to his plate. “I was not aware that you understood so thoroughly.”

“You only knew what Lord William told you.”

“And he does not know you.”

“William is —” I began his defense.

“He denied you last night to your face!” He growled, clenching his fist. “How could he?”

“Lord Thomas,” I began, touching his tensed arm. “None of us can change what he is.”

“But he saw her last night upstairs. He seemed sure of that when he came down,” he insisted.

“How can he not know? I mean, you are—“

“Not all the time,” Jennifer explained quickly.

“Something’s not right...” Tom Becker frowned, his eyes piercing me to the core. “I would have thought the changes would be complete by now. Why aren’t they?”

I shrugged, and he looked to the blond woman, who studied her coffee cup intently. She did not raise her eyes. His gaze fell again on me, as I took control of my emotions. My appetite now diminished, I stood slowly, holding his questioning eyes.

“I wish I knew, Lord Thomas,” I sighed looking at my mirrored sadness in Mrs. Tonaka’s face. “I’m sorry, Jennifer. I should have blocked that.”

His auburn head swiveled to look at the blond woman, who had paled and now swallowed dryly. I again checked my emotions, as he again met my eyes.

“You must approach that subject very delicately,” I heard Jennifer say. “I don’t think she can tolerate much.”

“I can’t,” I said harshly, pulling myself inside and applying even more suppression.

“Lady Jennifer?” Tom’s face pleaded for an explanation.

“I am an empath. Ann cannot allow her anxiety to surface without me feeling it and reacting to it.”

“I am sorry, Jenn. We’ll talk again later, Thomas.”

I left the kitchen in a hurried step.

* * *

“I’m going with you.”

I looked coolly at Penny’s hand as it gripped my sleeve, but did not shake it away.

“Where do you think you’re going, anyway?” She pressed. “No one leaves the house unless they’re armed.”

“What about the kids?” I asked, turning up the stairs. “Certainly they haven’t been given guns.”

“Hannah, it’s your rule.”

“So, I’ll abide by it. Why do you insist on going with?”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Judica is going.”

“You should be with people,” she replied as we turned toward my chambers. “You have to open up.”

“I suppose you’re right, but I feel more like being left alone, right now.”

Pushing open the ornate oak door, I snatched up my holster and turned to see Penny’s face shrouded in concern. I softened toward her and quieted myself, smiling.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I responded, resting my hand on her shoulder. She visibly brightened as worry vanished from her eyes.

“Where are we going?” She asked as we turned to retrace our steps.

“Away from here.”

* * *

“Hi, Arlo.” I smiled, putting aside my book. “Come on in.”

He hung at the library door, looking about the room in awe, an old walking cane in his hand.

“Ain’t never seen so many books in one place before,” he laughed, stuffing his free hand into his coverall’s pocket. “I ain’t much of a reader. What ya readin’?”

“It’s a history of modern Israel. Is there something you wanted?”

Arlo’s gaze swept the quiet room once more before he limped gingerly toward my chair. I saw shadows in his rough face and noted his guarded expression with interest. My senses gave no clue, so I watched, alert.

“How come yer up here?” he asked.

“It’s quieter. Were you looking for me?”

“No, I just felt like gettin’ out for a while,” he replied, casually flopping into the nearest leather armchair.

“I see. The three flights of library stairs gave you no difficulty then?”

“Hell, no,” but he winced as he propped his injured leg over the chair arm, and then smiled to cover it. “I can take it.”

“I’m sure you can. How’d you know where I was?”

“Yer bodyguard,” he grumbled. “I told Penny I’d box her ears if she didn’t tell me.”

I laughed aloud with delight at the thought of Penny allowing such a thing. I shook my head. Arlo flashed his toothy grin in response, his eyes twinkling.

“You’d like to, wouldn’t you?” I said lightly.

“Huh? Yeah, damn broad... Hey, what’s with them people anyway?”

“Who?” I asked, setting aside my book.

“Mrs. Tonaka for one. She acts like that Will fella is fuckin’ royalty.”

“In a way, he is,” I sighed, looking into my hands. “What’s going on?”

“She’s fussin’ over him like a mother hen with only one chick! Gave him breakfast in bed. Carried it up to the attic to him, for Christ sake!” I chuckled softly as Arlo continued. “Ya were there for lunch, weren’t ya? Disgusting. Have some more of this, William. Try some of that. God, it was sickening. Shit!”

“I expected that. I came up here to get away from him.”

“I figured ya for a smart cookie, but don’t let it go to yer head, now, little bitch,” he scowled, shifting his thick frame in the seat. “He’s a prize, that one.”

“That’s debatable! No, he is special, I have to admit.” I shrugged slightly. “He will lead us.”

“The hell, ya say! That little squirt couldn’t lead a group in silent prayer.”

“Don’t underestimate the man. You’ll see what he’s made of in the months to come.”

“Well, ya sure as hell need a leader, I’ll tell ya that.”

“We are surviving, Mr. Gentry, and doing far better than most.”

“Yeah! At least that slant-eye has the sense to stock up for the winter.”

“It’s the logical thing to do.”

“I think yer all fucking crazy...”

He roared with laughter, pounding a callused hand on his sound knee, while I remained quietly watching. The room felt suddenly chilled as Arlo’s steady eyes fell upon me. Suddenly, his face grew gray and shadowed. The man’s fears touched my being as his gaze shifted nervously about the room. I applied my talents.

“Well, hell. From what I’ve seen it looks like y’all planned this before those Chinese blew up the fuckin’ country. Some of ya, anyhow.” He shifted his leg carefully, watching for my reactions. I showed him none. “Ya know each other, too, some of ya. Maybe from years ago?”

“I met Jennifer a couple of days before you and I crossed paths.”

“But ya know his highness.”

“Will? Yes,” I breathed slowly.

“Lovers, I heard.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d avoid that subject.”

“Yeah, well, ya got it, sister,” he grinned with something of a kind of pity. “What about this Tom guy?”

“I’ve never met him before.”

“What’d ya do to his leg?”

“I was involved, yes,” I reluctantly admitted. “Unfortunately, it is not...”

“Little bitch, he says ya healed him.” He slapped his good leg again. “Hell, I saw it last night, and it was a bloody damn mess. This mornin’, he’s fine.” He stared into my eyes, searching for answers. “What the fuck did ya do?”

Taking a sharp breath, I rubbed my chin, considering an explanation. I had none I felt Arlo Gentry could accept. He noted my hesitancy with a raised eyebrow and leaned forward in his chair.

“Tell me, Lady Ann.” His sarcastic tone demanded an answer, but I swallowed before I could reply.

“Call it a miracle, if you like, or perhaps magic.”

He guffawed harshly, spitting into a convulsive laughter until he gasped for breath. I could only smile in response, waiting for him to voice his next question. Still, he continued to chuckle.

“Like you said, maybe we’re all crazy.”

“Well, at least ya admit it,” he grumbled, toying with his cane. “Ya mean to tell me yer a witch, right?”

“Wizard is closer to the truth.”

“And precious Lord Will is King of all Camelot, right?”

“Not a king. A prince. So, he is our leader.” I thought and then added, “And a warrior.”

“You gonna fight the whole fucking Red army?”

“Some of us may have to.”

“Not me,” he grinned. “You?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Magic, you said? Ya Wicca?”

“Not exactly,” I sighed, glancing down at my book.

“Ya fixed carrot-top’s leg.”

“Not me.”

“He said ya did. Ya callin’ him a liar?”

“No. I was involved with his care,” I offered slowly. “But I can’t, er... take credit for that healing. Only God can do that”

“Yer a witch, ain’t ya?”

“I serve the God of Israel. Wizard if a better term for me. Tell me. What do you believe about telepathy or ESP?”

“Listen to ya!” He grumbled frowning. “Okay. I’ll play yer silly game. Any other wizards around here?”

“Two.”

“Thomas and Mrs. Tonaka?”

“And another coming,” I said, and wondered how I knew that. Who else was coming?

“Female?”

“No,” I said, watching his fleeting hope fade as quickly as it came.

“And what are ya going to do? Take over the government?”

“What government, Arlo?” I asked sarcastically. “There’s no government left.”

“Then set up a new one,” he chuckled in disbelief.

“I expect surviving children may some day begin again.” I nodded toward the house. “I know I won’t live to see it.”

“Why not?”

“My, er, destiny takes me in other directions.”

“Yer magic?” He scowled, again resettling his leg. Judica slipped quietly into the room behind him and stretched out near the door. “Ya’ve got it all figured out, ain’t ya?”

“I wish....”

“But you sure planned this gatherin’ before the bombs fell. ESP, ya said. Now that’s almost believable.”

“You understand precognition?”

“What?”

“Foresight?”

“The Sight, sure! My grandma used to predict stuff. She was pretty good at it, I remember.” Gentry eyed me sideways, and then spied the resting wolf. After a thoughtful moment, he turned back to me. “What about that owl?”

“He is a friend mine.”

“How long ya known him?”

“Two lifetimes it would seem, although I’m not really sure. My silly game tends to be a bit confusing to me at times.”

“Yer a psychic?”

“You could say that.”

“Ya read minds, too?”

“Not really.” I left it at that changing the subject. “You want to stay with us crazies?”

“It could be interesting.” he grinned slyly. “I’m thinkin’ ‘bout it.”

“We could use your help.”

“Shit, Bitch, I take care of myself.”

“Your leg proves otherwise.”

“The hell it does. Ya can fix it up like what’s his name.”

Looking past the stocky man, I saw Judica raise her head in response. I echoed her remark aloud.

“My talent only works with those who believe in God’s power.” Then I changed the subject.

“Has Valerie seen you yet?”

“Valerie?”

“The girl you were about to violate.”

“Violate!” He spat viciously. “Shit, woman! Those bastards had a gun on me. What was I gonna do?”

“I understand. I’m concerned about the girl’s mental state. Has she seen you since then?”

“No. Mrs. Tonaka told me to stay away from the kids.”

“I see.” I frowned, thinking. “I’d like to see that change.”

“I hate kids.”

“I’m not fond of them myself, but that child must face you again.”

“She’ll scratch my eyes out.” His chuckle echoed femininity in my head. I briefly met Judica’s golden eyes beyond Arlo Gentry.

“Or she and her sister will fear men the rest of their lives. I don’t hold you responsible for that situation, Arlo, but can you understand why she must face you?”

“Yeah, I hear ya, but...”

“I will be responsible for her actions and Jennifer’s, although she will not like a forced meeting.”

“Forget about it.”

“I do not want you sneaking around the house,” I insisted, slapping the book in my lap to emphasize my point.

“Well, I’m tired of that crap too. That blond wouldn’t let me in the kitchen, ‘cause the kids were in there.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday morning. And today just before I came up here.”

Judica verified by passing her impressions to me. Jennifer’s instincts and Arlo’s hostility filtered through with an objective evaluation from the animal in the man’s favor.

“Why were you looking for me? You never did say-”

“I wasn’t looking for ya.” He pulled himself to his feet.

* * *

At my urging, Arlo joined us for the evening meal, instead of taking his meal in his room. Waiting until Jennifer had called Daniel a second time, I escorted the stocky outsider into the dining room. Jennifer indicated the seat to the left of the head of the table, and I nodded to her unspoken statement. I should sit at William’s right hand, she believed. Bending to Penny, who would sit at my right, I asked her to take Daniel’s yet unoccupied position next to Jennifer. She looked at me skeptically, but did my bidding, as even the youngsters, Valerie, Jan, and James,

fell silent. As Penny rounded the long table, I slid into her seat, gesturing for Gentry to take mine. He eyed me with the look of a trapped animal but fell lethargically into the wooden chair.

My eyes quickly swept the gathering. Jennifer watched Valerie who watched Arlo with smoldering eyes. William's gaze was intent on Jan. I met her eyes briefly as he began the meal thanksgiving, surprised by the hostility the younger child was emanating. When I raised my head again, I found Lin smiling at me, but the feeling of being watched prevailed through young Jan's emotional state. I kept my eyes on my plate. I cast my senses in Valerie's direction to search out her feelings but was met by the walls of her own defense mechanism. I pulled back in and raised my head after William finished his prayer.

The dark-haired girl toyed absently with her food, glancing furtively from one face to another as the conversation flowed. Her face registered nothing, yet my skin tingled at my neck. I realized it was again Jan's feelings that played on my senses. Glancing at Jennifer, I watched her mirror my discomfort as she shifted in her seat.

Knowing I could not yet effectively block this, I resolved to stop receiving Jan's subconscious. As I applied myself, I saw Jennifer turn her lovely smile on me.

"Hannah?" William whispered below the conversation level. As I turned to him, I was met by the sweeping force of his mind. He sensed my distress and quickly retreated. I saw confusion in his eyes and smiled.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize..."

"It's okay," I said quickly.

"You sure?" I nodded, and he continued. "Where have you been all day?"

"The greenhouse and the library."

"You weren't in the greenhouse."

"Not this afternoon; I was reading and talking to this red-neck." I gestured casually to Arlo, who struck out playfully at me with his fork.

"Watch it, Bitch!"

I stuck my tongue out at the man and then grinned before turning back to Will Martin who watched me with interest.

"You take many chances, lady," he said sourly, indicating the man who sat between us. Arlo resumed his discourse on herbicides. "But that is in your nature, isn't it?"

"So it does seem. What are your thoughts on the house?"

“I haven’t seen all of it, yet. It seems adequate, except...” William’s brow furrowed in thought. “Marshall claims to be a friend of yours. Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“We met after, er... after I came back off leave.”

“You should have written me about him.” His harsh tone wounded me, and in my own defense, I added another block to my mind and composed myself.

“Do you remember the email I sent you about the exorcism in L.A.?” I spoke as gently as possible. “Marshall brought me to it.”

“In Los Angeles? Yeah, I really never paid much attention to that until months later, after I got that letter from—” His voice faltered.

“—Ann, in San Francisco,” I finished for him. “Don’t look astonished, you emailed me to see if I knew anything about it.”

“Hannah, the paper burned my hand.” He glanced at his hands then frowned at me. “You never gave me a straight answer about that either.”

“I told you what I could at the time—maybe too much.”

“You sent me riddles, entwined in rhymes. Answer me now?”

I regarded him with thoughtful silence for a few heartbeats.

“State your question, Troubadour,” I breathed, gathering myself.

“Who mailed that letter?”

“My ...er, friend, Marshall Roberts.”

“Who wrote it, then?” He snapped insistently, eyes burning.

“Ann wrote it. You say that it burned your hand?”

“And the email you sent afterward with all the riddles?”

“Were just my impressions.”

“Then, you know Ann? She was stationed with you? You brought her with you!”

“No... No, and no.”

“No?” He thumped the table with his fist, his voice raised in anger. “Woman, I will not tolerate your riddles.”

“All right. Make that: No, I do not know Ann. No, she was not stationed with me; and, No, I did not bring her with me. I traveled with Penny and the animals.”

“You are spinning riddles. I have seen her.”

“I answered your questions honestly,” I replied stiffly and reached for my glass of water, noting that the gardening discussion had come to a halt.

“Then answer me this: What is your purpose here?”

“To serve you.”

“I do not require your service.”

“Then I need not answer your questions.”

“Hannah...” he moaned, then looked about the sea of faces. “I’d forgotten how literal you can be. All right. You’ve served me as prophet before.”

“And you resented it.”

“No, it’s just that I can see some of it.”

“I understand your need to know more,” I assured him calmly, as Thomas nodded slightly to me. “Please try to accept my partial Knowing of the timeline we play on.”

“But it must be soon,” William pressured further.

“To attempt to fathom Divine Timing will only frustrate you further.”

“I am not frustrated.”

“Think again, William,” Thomas put in softly.

Lips behind Will’s beard set into a pensive frown, and then he shot a look at his red-haired friend that demanded silence.

“She serves as prophet. You said it yourself,” Thomas continued quietly, and his words brought me emotional support. “I suggest you listen carefully to the answers she has for your questions.”

“And who do you say she is?”

“Lord William’s prophet.” He affirmed slowly, holding my eyes with the depth of his own. “You called her the Teller of Tomorrow.”

Say no more, I warned mentally with a dismissing wave of my hand.

“Of course,” Thomas said with affection. “Who am I to tamper with Divine Timing?”

“But you say you know Ann,” William continued gently.

I toyed with the vegetables on my plate and heard Valerie ask to be excused. Jennifer consented, and Jan followed her from the room. With the girls went most of the hostility, and I focused more energy into the conversation at hand.

“Effective blocking,” Jennifer said to me with a smile. “What did you do?”

“Huh? Oh, I refused to feel her anger.”

“Hannah?” Will Martin interrupted.

“William?” I groaned, glancing his way.

“Tell me about Lady Ann.”

“What can I tell you? I recognized her from your own words and your music.”

“Where is she?”

“Here, I think,” I replied truthfully.

“In the house?”

“Yes, I think.”

“But I was in her room before dinner!” His rising anger pushed me back into my chair, and I laid aside my fork, regarding him. “By God, tell me the truth, Hannah.”

My hand crept to the cross around my neck in indecision. I wanted to speak, yet when I tried, nothing came through the tightness in my throat. Will rose to his feet, hands clenched on the table, and leaned toward me. His mind flooded over me, and I met his eyes carefully, fortifying my mental walls.

“I warn you, woman, I will not be fed riddles by the likes of you!”

“William, take it easy!”

“Quiet, Thomas. She is my prophet.”

“Get hold of yourself, man,” Thomas persisted, standing too. “You could tear her mind apart.”

“And so I shall, if I have to. You!” He pointed an accusing finger at me. “You have taunted me for three years, and I have had enough.”

Next to me, Arlo rumbled deep in his throat and pulled himself up to a stand, pushing his face within inches of William’s.

“Back off, mother fucker,” he roared, as I reached out a hand to his.

He shook it away.

“Take care, friend,” I choked harshly. “He is more powerful than you could imagine.”

“Yeah, sure. But that’s no excuse for his lack of manners. Should I teach him some manners, Little Bitch?”

“No,” I responded wearily, catching a firm grip on his hand and rising. My head swam from William’s onslaught, as he took control of his being with several deep breaths.

“Will! Look at Jennifer,” Thomas said hastily. We all turned to see the blond woman faint in her chair. “Stop this!”

As the room spun and began to fade, a haze of bright specks began to cover my eyes. Then the sensation slowly subsided, leaving an empty feeling in its place. I felt consciousness returning and took a few deep breaths. My eyes focused on faces leaning over me. Penny, with Arlo behind her, pressed a glass of water to my lips, but I pushed it aside. I heard Thomas explaining Jennifer’s obvious empathy with me to Will. Opening my eyes I saw the Holder of Lightning crumpled in his chair.

“Jennifer, okay?” I asked weakly.

“I’m all right,” came her strained reply from down the table.

“Sorry, Jenn,” I breathed.

“Not your fault,” she responded weakly.

“Jenn?” Will asked in a small child’s voice.

“I’m all right, William. You didn’t know.”

“This is the ESP?” Arlo whispered into my ear, as he helped me to my feet. As I nodded, I was met by Will’s defiant eyes of brown fire.

“Merlin! I would speak to you!” he called into me.

“I am here,” I responded standing on unsteady legs. “Speak.”

“Explain the phenomenon we just witnessed.”

“As Lord Thomas said. Call it a fail-safe on the system, if you like, but nonetheless, you may not attack me, without wounding Jennifer.” I could feel a renewal of power flow and recognized the strength of the Holy Spirit radiating through me. “And remember, I am here to contend with, also.”

Arlo moved away from me with a sharp intake of breath, leaving only the electrified air between me and William’s diminished fury.

“We are squarely matched,” he responded with probing satisfaction. “It will be an interesting confrontation.”

“I am not here to do battle with you.”

“Are you my prophet?”

“I am ...” I replied, feeling a surge of energy that backed my simple reply. “At your service, as I said. So, kindly cease this senseless display.”

“Then why didn’t you answer me?”

“It was not allowed. I am sorry.”

“Not allowed?” His face relaxed, as the air seemed to discharge. “So be it. Hannah?”

“I’m tired,” was my reply. “I’m going to go lay down.”

He stared at me in confusion, but I turned and left the dining room alone.

* * *

I stared at the same page a long while before I yielded to Will’s summons. His mental bantering earlier had weakened me, and I rested, propped up in my huge bed. Setting aside my book, I rose and stretched the blood back into my limbs. Judica mimicked my actions, looking as if she was bowing to the hallway door and then trotted over to it.

“You anticipate me?”

YOU WILL NEED YOUR CLOAK.

When I stepped outside into the remaining light of dusk, friendly feathers silently swooped near my head with a happy chirp. Archimedes soared and dove once again, braking into a leisurely low glide at five feet above the sidewalk before me. Praising him, I laughed lightly and followed. The owl knew where Will was, having spied on him for me earlier.

Leisurely, I strolled across a quarter-mile of campus buildings, listening to voices from years gone by singing Gregorian chant. A sliver of moon, my old familiar friend, complimented the ghostly song. I heard the huge owl croon his agreement. Archimedes flew up to the red brick chapel and circled the base of its small steeple. Then he floated down, coming to rest upon my shoulder as my foot reached the first of seven stairs. His talons barely touched my skin. He had leaned into my scratching of his head when the chapel door burst violently open.

“MERLIN! What took you so long?” a wide-eyed Will Martin demanded.

As he leaned against the door waiting for me, I could see his distorted face in the dim lights from within. His eyes were wild, yet frightened and haunted. My heart stirred with pity. He had yet to see his dream come true: Lady Ann was still a ghost. I agreed with the Wisdom that had silenced me at dinner. It was not yet time. William would not accept me.

“How ya doing?” I asked, gesturing for him to precede me through the door.

He breathed a heavy sigh, and shaking his shaggy head, turned into the chapel. I followed, leaving the heavy wooden door open behind me. Once inside, Will turned on his heels, but I quickly stepped around him and approached the altar. Sliding into the front pew, I knelt, praying from my heart. Archimedes took wing as a pleasant scent rose in the air. I turned to William.

“Why do you call me to the House of the Lord,” I asked evenly, watching as he approached.

“You recognize the Lord?”

“Who else? Satan? No way! You taught me well. I have guarded against the enemy and found shelter and peace beneath the Father’s wing.”

“State it aloud.”

“Jesus is Lord. I serve only Him.”

His shoulders sagged briefly, and then he straightened as the tension drained from his face. I could sense his apprehension fading, then his laugh echoed lightly through the chamber.

“You have no idea what I’ve thought about in the last few hours,” he declared, smiling. “I went so far as to consider you Babylon the Great, personified.”

“Thank you for recognizing my powers, if not confusing whose side I am on.”

“Sorry. But, lady, you scare me.”

“I scare you?”

“What if you had chosen to meet my power on its own plane?”

“I couldn’t use it that way.” I smiled at his fears. “Most of the time, it controls me.”

“Are you sure that’s a wise decision?” William demanded, frowning with tones of stubborn sarcasm.

“Who are you?” I seated myself on the arm of a pew, watching cautiously.

“Who am I?” he echoed, turning to pace the aisle. “The Good Lord knows I’ve been asking myself the same question. It’s maddening. Merlin ... Merlin! Christ, look at me, convinced you’re some ancient wizard!”

“God bless all the MadMen.”

“MadMen? Is that what we are, Hannah? Look, you knew me before all this.” He stopped and faced me across a 10-foot span. “Have I changed so much?”

“Not really,” I laughed softly. “There is still a lot of Will Martin: Your pride still motivates you, and your ego is very much alive.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he laughed, stepping closer again. “Then I really haven’t changed yet?”

“It is too early to tell. I would prefer to observe a while longer. Perhaps you can answer the same question for me someday.”

“What makes you think that you’re changing?”

“I have my own demons to conquer,” I admitted, examining the carved wooden pew beside me. “And have to contend with a bundle of emotions concerning you.”

“You’re still carrying that torch?” His tone was sympathetic, but he turned and paced away from me. I did not reply immediately. He swung back to face me, his eyes gentler but controlled. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“You were forgiven before I returned to San Diego,” I whispered. “It serves no use to me now.”

“Because of Ann,” He said as a flat statement.

“More likely because of who I’ve become since you, er... we last saw each other. I have gone through growth on many levels.” I met his eyes, surprised by the calm that had overtaken him. “Don’t get me wrong, Troubadour. Lady Ann is still a sore spot.”

“I’ve noticed.” He grinned slyly. “But I can see the growth too. You have listened with your heart to the Holy Spirit. And that’s good.”

“I have thanked God many times for His gift of you in my life, Will, even in the hard times.”

“You’re still in love with me?”

“No. I am here to help you.”

“You fear me,” he sadly said looking back to the altar.

I sighed, scanning his mind with my new abilities, and I knew without a doubt that his love for Hannah Augustine had died. He turned to catch me watching him, frowned briefly, and then laughed.

“You still watch me like a love-struck school girl. You did the same thing at NAS Memphis.”

Angered, I averted my eyes, turning away from him, and reminded myself of my role.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “I... er, I’m sorry. I must really exasperate you.”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ll try to be more considerate.”

“Thank you. Now, why did you summons me?”

“You were tiring in the mental link. You’re stronger than the others,” he added, coming closer. “I need to talk to someone, and you’re all I’ve got. Stay a while.”

“At your service...” I sighed.

“Don’t be like that!” he laughed, reaching across the pew to me.

“I would not advise touching me.”

“And why not?” he bristled, looking at me sideways.

“There’s Power in each of us. When I touched you last night on the stairs, I must have tingled for half an hour.”

“You too? I thought it was just me. Does your power stay constant?”

“No, it flows like the tide,” I said looking around for my owl. “Sometimes stronger, other times not at all.”

Archimedes chirped and glided down from the choir loft, and out the open door. William’s gaze followed him in silence. Judica waited outside, the owl told me, not sure of what I wanted. I asked him to stay.

“Interesting little zoo you’re starting,” he said at length. “They fit you. Is that the same cat you had in California?”

I nodded.

“With enhanced power?”

“No.”

“You belong with them. Jennifer says you wander around too much for anyone to keep up with you.”

“Penny doesn’t trust Judica to protect me.”

“It’s a matter of Faith.”

“So I told Arlo.” I chuckled. “I think it’s up to you to talk to him. I still can’t seem to preach the Word.”

“Penny doesn’t trust him,” William started, looking a question my way.

“Penny isn’t one of The Thirty.”

“She has her reasons.”

“And I have my instinct. Oh, he’s crude at times, but he was willing to stand up for me.”

“Stupid, you mean,” Lord William growled.

“Ignorant is a nicer word.” With a sigh, I looked up at the man. “But, the subject was you.”

“Yeah,” he breathed, reaching into his pocket. “I just don’t know... Sometimes I have it all figured out. And, sometimes none of it makes any sense.”

“I know what you mean,” I replied as he drew out his pipe and packed it from his pouch. “Sometimes, I’m Merlin, but without his memories. And, other times, I’m just about convinced that I’m nuts. Are you going to smoke that in here?”

“The Holy Eucharist is gone,” he remarked nonchalantly and lit his tobacco. “Aren’t you? Nuts, I mean?”

“Not at the moment. Right now, I’m that which you call Merlin. And you are?”

“Just ... scared by this whole mess. Jennifer expects me to be some kind of leader.” He frowned and began pacing, as smoke billowed from his clay pipe. “And, what’s this Lord and Lady nonsense you’re all talking?”

“It designates one of The Thirty,” I explained, then smiled slightly. “You started that by calling her your Lady Ann.”

“The Thirty ... Yes, I see. Then you are Lady Hannah.”

“That just doesn’t sound right,” I stated flatly while cringing inside at the discord of the name. “I guess I am just Merlin if you must play that game.”

“But you are, above all, a lady.”

“Thank you, but right now I must be Merlin. Or call me Hannah if you are not comfortable with Merlin.”

“I don’t like it either. It just doesn’t feel right,” he admitted on his swing back toward me. “I would feel more comfortable with Merlin. To heck with what the others may think.”

“As you wish...”

“Now, Merlin,” he began, halting to point his pipe at me. “Perhaps you can be of service to me. Now, about Ann—“

“Are we back to that again?” I studied my hands.

“Hear me out. She is nearby. I wish to speak with her.”

“I could not advise it.” I jerked my head up in surprise and met determined eyes. I realized his concern.

“Work your magic. You are an enchantress. You know where she is?”

“Yes... Ah... it could be arranged. Maybe. If that’s permitted.”

* * *

I shuffled down the seven steps, lost in heavy thoughts, wanting again to play Ann for the man. I wanted no part in a physical masquerade after the affirmation of the night before. Instructing Archimedes to keep an eye on William, I sensed protective grumbles back from the bird. The owl consented grudgingly, after Judica's mental assurance that she was on her way to meet me. Figuring that Will might follow, I avoided the big house and headed west across the school grounds toward the athletic fields.

Judica met me in the quadrangle with my blue robe, neatly folded and wrapped in waxed paper between her jaws. Jennifer had intercepted her before she could get out of the house, the wolf-spirit explained, and the woman insisted Judica bring the robe to me. I sent a loving thank you to Mrs. Tonaka telepathically and felt her cheery acknowledgment touch me.

Then Judica chuckled.

What?

WHAT WILL YOU DO? YOU WERE SILENCED AT DINNER.

I realize that. Would he accept me if I tried?

YOU WON'T? She sounded puzzled.

How could I?

YOU HAVE THE ROBE.

"This is the wrong one," I hissed, walking the pavement again. "What do I tell him?"

I CANNOT HELP YOU LIE TO LORD WILLIAM.

I won't lie to him. Yet, the truth is withheld physically from my telling.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHY?

No. Yes. He must grow. And me, too.

YES.

"Judica..." I sighed, climbing the grandstands. "Sometimes William makes it so difficult."

NO BURDEN SO LARGE...

"I know. I'll work at leaving it in the Father's hands."

I SHALL KEEP WATCH.

"Thank you."

I watched the gray wolf disappear into the darkness, and then I settled onto a wooden bleacher to pray and listen for the Lord's faithful reply. Soon, William touched my mind.

Merlin?

Yes, William?

Will Lady Ann come?

No. I closed the link without further reply.

* * *

Lord William? I called on the astral plane later that night.

Lady Ann!

I cannot meet with you tonight. Have courage. Be patient.

What about Hannah who is Merlin?

Listen to her. Rest well.

I returned to the house after almost everyone had gone to bed. A light glowed dimly beyond the kitchen, but I already knew Jennifer was still awake. She'd mentally called me in, concerned because of the hour. Creeping on tiptoes into my room, I found Penny, draped in her apricot silk pajamas, lying across the foot of my bed.

"Your William has a unique dieting program," she yawned, stretching. "Everybody lost their appetite."

"I don't need to be checked up on," I remarked, closing the door. "He's been here just over 24 hours—"

"And so far he's denounced, insulted, and attacked you mentally." Penny scowled, rolling onto her stomach. "Where have you been all evening?"

"First, I went to hide in the library, but he kept calling me across the mental plane. His powers frighten him."

"You too, lady."

"Not the same. I monitored him most of the evening."

"Hannah!"

"I had to. He was having such a rough time. He expected to walk into Ann's arms, and here I am, the Reject. It doesn't make much sense to him."

"It doesn't make sense to me. He was choking you at dinner."

"No. He was not, and Judica confirmed that later." I sighed, as I began climbing out of my clothes.

“So? He was having a bad spell?”

“Yeah. We talked mentally, but he wanted me with him.”

“Ann, you mean?”

“No. Merlin. I rarely respond to him as Ann.”

“You’re harsh, but he deserves it.”

“No, Penny. Lady Ann is the hardest role to play. Merlin is easier and stronger because he knows me as Merlin. And he knows I exist.”

“And Ann doesn’t exist?” she yawned, sitting up and stretching.

“He’s not sure. I tired in the mental conversation, so I went to see him. He was a wild-eyed mess and scared as a little boy. He raved, and paced, and apologized for the past. Then he challenged me to use my magic to bring Ann to him.” I laughed sadly. “I really wanted to. I left the chapel with every intention of being Ann for William, but... It was not possible, and I cannot stomach the play-acting. Besides, there is someone else who will point him to me. It is not my doing.”

“Hann?” Penny looked at me sideways, carefully picking her words. “You and Will were talking about someone at dinner before he started yelling. Did I hear you say Marshall?”

“Yes, Lord Marshall. Will’s been talking to him on the astral plane.”

“You mean my Marshall? Marshall Edgar Roberts, Junior?”

“The very same.” I grinned, grabbing my robe while sadly remembering the love I’d lost too soon, thanks to the Navy.

“You said he was one of The Thirty a long time ago.”

“Marshall didn’t believe in us then, and you didn’t appreciate the rapport we shared.”

“Neither will Will,” Penny cautioned with a point of her finger.

“Guard my ego well, Penny. It’s in for a rough time.”

“Mine too,” came her whispered reply, and I glanced up from tying the dark robe’s sash.

“I thought you and he—“ I stammered. “You still have feelings for Marshall?”

“I was the one who broke it off, but- What do you think?”

“You’ll know when you see him.” I smiled at Penny’s thoughtful frown.

“Really?” she countered. “How did you feel when you first saw Will?”

“I will serve him.”

“But do you love him?”

“No. I serve him. Maybe love will come from that. I don’t know.”

“Oh, Hann,” she sighed sadly and rose to her feet.

“No sadness, Penny. The sorrow is gone. I’m free of it for the first time in three years. No, not sadness. It’s a joy.”

“If you say so...”

“Maybe now I can fall in love again.”

“With him?”

“If that’s my destiny,” I muttered and chose a different subject before she could pursue the matter. “What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Not much. I’m hunting every morning, except tomorrow. Thomas, Lin, and I are going to try some fishing up at the reservoir. Will says the fishing is better there than at the river.”

“You realize tomorrow is now today?”

“Yeah. We should hit the rack.” Penny moved to the door, and then turned back to me. “Would you wake me when you get up?”

“Sure. G’night.”

That night, I passed through dreams not my own again. William called to me in his sleep. I responded to him as his lady. Although I had no control when in this realm, my sixth and seventh senses not only activated but seemed far more amplified than in the waking state.

Lord William felt my fears and defenses immediately, but he allowed me a sense of privacy and individuality that were foreign to that plane. This unusual consideration pleased me. A warm glow grew and emanated from my soul to his. I could empathize with his confusion and found Thomas had spoken truthfully of William’s personal frustration. My job was to stop his worldly conflicts or absorb the brunt of them, but I felt my presence only made matters worse.

This gentle meeting bolstered our individual human frailties. He was impatient, as always, so while I communed with him, I drained his being of fear and uncertainty.

September 20

I woke to a cold gray dawn, relaxed and comforted to begin my day. Thinking of how my days now passed each after another, I realized that I was taking less of an interest in our

community. Chores had been agreed on after analysis by Will. The younger girls, Jan and Valerie, became helpers to Lin and Jennifer respectively. Thomas Becker grudgingly admitted his previously worked at a butcher shop, thereby acquiring that job here. He and William found and moved the needed equipment, including a second freezer, from town into the basement. Penny, Jan, and Daniel comprised his working force, completing the task in the warmth of the afternoon.

William ignored my existence whether I sat at his left hand at the meal table or passed him in the halls of the house. He spoke little or not at all directly to me during the days that followed our nocturnal meeting at the chapel. I stayed away from him.

Climbing from my bed, I donned my running clothes, and calling Judica, went out to greet the dawn.

* * *

Lin, William, James, and Daniel had disappeared into the kitchen with the dirty dinner dishes. Arlo said he wanted to have a closer look at Thomas's meat processing area in the basement, and with a wink to Penny, Thomas escorted the limping man to the basement. Val headed for her room, and Jan curled up in the window seat with a book. Jennifer and I settled in the living room, each with a glass of wine. She studied me in silence for a long moment before speaking to my mind.

I think you're right to stay out of his way.

I know you're covering for me – and I appreciate it – but you mustn't lie to him.

My explanations are always truthful, she sent with a twinkle in her eye. You're reluctant to be in his presence.

"I'm spending most of my time in the library doing research," I said aloud.

"I'm sure poring through documents and essays on contemporary Israeli history are absolutely fascinating." Jennifer stifled a yawn. "But it is necessary, isn't it?"

"Yes. We'll have to know what we're getting into."

"Music, anyone?" Penny called from the door, carrying her guitar.

Jennifer bounced up, taking her drink from the coffee table, and headed for her grand piano in the studio. Penny hurried after her, so I grabbed my wine and followed. Once in the studio, Penny touched an E on the piano and began tuning her guitar.

“Ah-so!” I laughed, swinging my guitar, Touchsong up into my arms and mimicking a bad Asian accent. “Ah, yes. The ancient Chinese art of tune-ning. Ber-ly good! I do now.”

Jennifer struck the piano key, and I matched the tone on the bass E string of my guitar, then quickly compared the tones up the strings of the instrument. After a few minutes, Penny asked if I was ready. I nodded, and she struck up a lively rendition of a contemporary folk song. Watching her hands and mimicking the chords she played, I called the key out to Jennifer as Penny sang the melody. Soon Jennifer’s sweet voice found the harmony while she improvised on the piano.

Next, Penny strummed a ballad while I sang, and Jennifer continued her vocal improvisations. As the melody faded, Thomas and Arlo asked to join us. I smiled inwardly as Thomas took a seat near Penny. Arlo took up a drummer’s practice pad and sticks and pounded out a few sequences with reasonable accuracy. Grinning, I called out the name of a popular easy rock tune and began the intro chords, as Thomas said it was one of his favorites. Everyone sang out the chorus for a second time as William strolled into the room with his guitar case. As he unpacked his twelve-string, Jennifer’s fingers danced across the keyboard, sending out a sweet rendition of Green Sleeves. Penny and Thomas preformed an impromptu duet. I remained silent, listening to the lyrics; “Alas, my love, you do me wrong, To cast me off discourteously...”

Was that how Jennifer felt about Will? I wondered, softly thumping my thumb on my guitar’s body complementing the rhythm of the tune.

As the song faded, William asked Jennifer for an E on the piano, and the task of tuning started again. Both Penny and I quietly checked the tones of our acoustic guitars as Arlo and Thomas talked about hunting. Suddenly William struck a loud chord on his guitar and began singing one of his compositions, My Suzette. Jennifer found the chords quickly on the piano, only to receive a glaring frown from William.

The grand piano fell silent. Penny looked at me with questions in her eyes as an uncomfortable tension seeped into the room under the ballad William sang. I lost the joy of the music, and setting my instrument aside, I wandered off into the night, calling Judica to join me.

September 22

During this week, I stayed on the perimeters of the household, helping where I could, but at the same time, I became more and more detached, I'm told. Penny sought an explanation from me, but all I could say was it was William's time, not mine. I prepared seedlings in the greenhouse one morning when Penny sought me out.

"Look, Penny. Although Arlo hasn't softened his gruff veneer, he's starting to open up, and you just watch. He'll quickly become part of our enlarging family."

"I hate the way he always teases me." Penny frowned, brushing loose soil into one of the plastic pots.

"It's in fun," I said, knowing it set the groundwork for a mutual friendship.

"If that's supposed to be fun, wait until he gets a load of my harassment!"

"I see Thomas has joined the hunting parties."

"Neither Lin nor Will ever want to come along."

"I feel my apathy toward the household is wrong," I confessed to my friend. "But it's not lack of interest. I must remain separate. I feel William's disapproval."

"So he's exiled you?"

"No, and I'm not completely isolated. Each adult member of the family seeks me out. So maybe my duty to the community is as counselor and go-between. No, Penny, don't laugh. Invariably, someone comes in the morning, and somebody else comes to talk in the afternoon. Some gossip, which keeps me updated. Others vent their frustrations and stress."

"Arlo resents me for his leg."

"Not as much as you think."

"Valerie dislikes Arlo, and Jan holds outright hatred for the man."

"Those girls aren't saved, and so can be very malicious." I finished potting the geranium and looked over to Penny. "They talk about Jennifer's attention to William, and they question James' ancestry."

"So, you spent late hours in the library with Judica last night." She wagged a finger in my direction. "Missed dinner, too."

“My food waited warm in my room. I ate in blessed solitude, and then read my bible until I went to bed.”

I did not tell her that almost every night I rose from my physical body and prowled the sky with my friend, the great horned owl.

“So, William continues searching elsewhere for his Lady,” she said bitterly. “He’s away from the house most of the time.

“By night we meld into the essence we truly are,” I whispered. “By day we performed our family duties while watching our changing world. I am not content, Penny! Quite the opposite. Life around here drives me to more vigorous exercise and longer solitary periods.”

“Jennifer and I understand your hermitting, but isn’t there something else we could do?”

I shrugged. “It’s not time, yet. Something else has to happen. I’m not sure just what.”

“At dinner tonight William announced that England has fallen.”

“Yes, I knew earlier. William spends a lot of time in the radio room.”

“He says that he understands all of the broadcasts he’s heard, no matter what language.”

I thought that Penny didn’t need to know the world as it now existed. William did know and had shared his discoveries with only me and Thomas. The European Common Market fell when the Western world had been attacked, and out of its rubble was the phoenix St. John had described in Revelations. The European Union had been eaten away by her satellite countries. Greece, William told them, was under the strictest martial law as were Germany and Spain. Many political dissidents in these areas were being executed or assassinated. Others simply disappeared.

“The voices of the United States are oddly silent, but whether from fear or from death, we’re not certain.” I drew a sad breath. “While you listened at the table to his sad accounting, I was crying in the library – tears William could not.”

“Hann...” she whispered with a heavy sigh.

“I monitored your questions to him through his own ears, even once suggesting a diplomatic answer to Lin’s question.”

As I spoke, William touched me mentally with his gratitude.

* * *

I sat reading a Robert Heinlein novel in my bedroom. After a quick knock on my door, Penny and Tom Becker entered with bright, child-like grins. Between them, they carried a four-foot-high pole attached at the bottom to what had been a flag stand. On the top was a carpet-covered T-bar designed with supports and a feeder cup. Together, they hauled the structure over to an empty corner. Jennifer followed them, carrying some old newspapers. Penny took them, to spread beneath the perch.

“Please, call Archimedes.” Jennifer giggled as she spoke.

I complied and then went to open the bathroom window for the night bird. With a flutter of huge wings, Archimedes came and landed on my shoulder. When I brought him into the bedroom, he flew happily to his new roost, crooning contentment.

The next morning, Thomas, Arlo, and Penny began installing a workable flap door in the bathroom window that the owl could use. Also, they talked about mounting an insulated “owl-house” of wood and carpeting on the roof outside my bath. That afternoon, the Geiger counter we’d brought was set up, along with Lin’s meteorological gear on the enclosed back porch.

September 23

Her melodic voice floated up to the balcony, and I stopped my search for books and went to the rail. Looking down, I observed my favorite blond gliding over the drab library tile. She wore a red gingham sundress and was barefoot. Again Jennifer called for me, somewhat uncertainly.

“Up here.” I started for the spiral staircase, sensing her discomfort. “What’s wrong?”

Jennifer met me at the base of the wrought-iron steps. Her face screwed into an ugly frown. Focusing into her, irritation met me, and I withdrew.

“It’s the music,” she sighed quietly as she wrung her hands. “It’s distracting, and to tell the truth, I don’t much care for the selections.”

I laughed briefly while checking the mental broadcast I’d been enjoying for the last few hours. Within my head rang the tumultuous vibrations of some rock and roll group. I tuned it out again and smiled at Mrs. Tonaka as I reached her level and stepped away from the staircase.

“Not everybody’s favorite. Can’t you block it out?”

“Not when James and Daniel both have colds. Cranky boys!”

“Jennifer—”

“It’s okay, Ann. Can you do something about this infernal, internal noise?”

“Hannah!” William’s shout echoed through the book stacks. “Merlin! There you are!”

William strode quickly to join us now. He frowned in mental discomfort at me, and then gave a quick nod of greeting to his blond friend.

“Hannah, this has got to stop,” he declared with authority. “I cannot think for all the noise. Such a selection of garbage too! Can’t he pick some music that’s a little less offensive?”

“Can’t you block it?” I asked innocently and watched Jennifer cringe. “Well, just ask him to quit.”

“I did. Do you know what the rogue told me?”

“Knowing Marshall, I could guess. Was he polite?”

“Almost.”

“What did he tell you, William?” Jennifer inquired softly, a smile for the bearded man.

“That I was overstepping my authority. The nerve of that man!”

“Gently, William,” Mrs. Tonaka cautioned, still wringing her hands.

“I suppose you ordered him to quit.” I laughed, feeling him squirm mentally. “That was your mistake!”

I chuckled as I looked back at my stack of books to check them.

“That’s why I came to see, er, her,” Jennifer hesitated as she spoke to the man. “I can’t block long.”

“Neither can I.” He answered tenderly, touching her shoulder. “Merlin?”

“Yes, my lord?” I resisted the urge to snap to attention.

“Can you stop him?”

“Can I? Yes. Will I? No, but I will ask him to stop.” I pulled a book I wanted and turned back to my friends, grinning. “That is, of course, if he can control it.”

“He can,” Will Martin said flatly. “Want some help?”

I doubt if I covered my surprise at this offer or my passing indignation. Instead, I turned inward and began gathering myself to the task. I set my body in concentration, ignoring sight and sound, and directed the energy flow. Familiar sensations reached me like signposts, and I began my journey. Following the trail of loud rock music, I wondered at Marshall’s rude selection.

What was he doing? I wondered. As quick as I began, I was stopped, as if my own talent had reached its limit. I withdrew and my eyes refocused on the speckled linoleum.

“Odd,” I whispered, unable to define the wall I’d hit, then I looked across at Will.

“No go?” he asked.

“Very strange.”

“Let me help,” he said and brightened, reaching out his left hand as he stepped forward.

My fingers tingled as they moved to meet his, and I looked down at them. Something said to pull away, then an arch of silvery-blue lightning jumped from him to me. I grabbed away my hand in fright, staring at his.

“Are you okay, Hann?” Jennifer whispered.

“Obviously a wrong move,” I remarked, collecting myself. “Jennifer? Will you try?”

I offered my hand, and the woman took it with confidence.

With Jennifer in tandem, I began again.

Merlin?

Of course, you may monitor, Lord William.

Why the spark, Merlin?

One thing at a time. Shall we go looking for Lord Marshall?

Jennifer’s added energy made the difference. Although Marshall was not yet a strong telepath, I could feel his presence. Instantly, he acknowledged me, with a loving thought. I responded affectionately with a warm glow and asked why he had chosen that particular music. My friend simply replied that the contemporary sound was to catch my attention.

Where are you? Marshall Roberts asked on a carrier wave of affection and joy.

I told him, and then I asked that he ease the songfest for the sake of the others. He agreed, amused.

Then I felt William leave the link.

Marshall must have also felt the departure because he asked me to stay, and then inquired about the Lord William. I sent him a sample of my bruised emotions. Jennifer’s face paled, and I asked Marshall’s expected arrival. He sensed Jennifer then and greeted her in chivalrous and courtly style. Next, he excused himself to the business of driving; and after the mental equivalent of a kiss on the cheek to each of us, he departed.

Jennifer was blushing as I stirred from the trance, and I grinned slyly at her in knowing.

“Wow!” was all she said.

The music had quieted in my head, but I sensed the space around me curiously. No trace remained.

“Merlin?”

I slowly turned to meet William’s hard gaze. His face seemed touched with an emotion I could not distinguish. Anger, caution, or awe? Unable to grasp this, I observed him passively.

“Explain the spark that jumped between us.”

“I don’t know. Maybe we’re polarized. You’ll agree that was an electronic flow? Well, I had fired up, so to speak...”

“It arced from me.”

“I have no idea, Will,” I responded harshly, turning to the staircase. “Perhaps the professor could offer some scientific explanation. I cannot.”

“Thank you for turning off the music, Lady...” Jennifer started and then faltered at that name again.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Enjoy your baby-sitting.”

The bright blond swirled, and with a quiet word to William, glided from the room as I climbed the spiral steps. Where was I before they came in? Oh, yes, the Black September organization. Nasty bastards, they had been, according to the records. Had drunk their victim’s blood like wild animals. I touched the book I wanted to examine next.

“Merlin?”

I looked at the book in my hand and sighed, leaning against the gigantic wooden table. He had followed me up the stairs, and stood before me, seemingly calm, yet my psychic talents told me otherwise. Setting again the mental blocks, I regarded him, not speaking. William drew the book from my hand and casually glanced at the pages. The eyes that met mine frowned. Ghosts played behind the mask of his whiskers, as he started to speak, then caught himself, and stopped.

In a fluid movement, he moved to the balcony and stood with his back to me, staring down into the main floor. As I opened myself to scan him, he brought his fist down angrily on the iron railing. I felt blocked out of his mind. Letting him be, I tried to return to my task, even though he still held one of the books I’d searched for. There were others yet to be found.

Pulling up the rolling ladder, I climbed up to investigate a higher shelf, stocked with sociology text, and cobwebs. As I searched, I could hear Will moving restlessly below. Selecting

two more likely hardbound books, I descended the ladder and made my way back to the spiral stairs. His voice stopped me.

“Why, Merlin?”

“Why?” I asked gently, searching myself for an answer. “Lord, if I knew, I would tell you. Judica says there’s a growing process necessary for all those involved.”

“Necessary? Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the answer is locked in your own heart.”

“And Ann holds the key.”

“Maybe Ann is the key,” I whispered, and began down the stairs, waving for him to follow.

Reaching the gallery floor, I walked over to my worktable cluttered with books, magazines, and publications. Then I felt a twinge of purpose to it for the first time.

“William, please come here?”

He stepped to my side and gazed down on what I’d selected. Excitement kindled within him as he began searching the stacks with joyous exclamations of wonder. Then he turned back to me, after snatching up four of the books for himself.

“Hann! How did you know I needed these?”

I passed him a knowing smile as if to say, What did you expect? And then took back the book he’d taken away from me. He watched curiously for a heartbeat, and then he frowned again. He snatched the volume back.

“You don’t need to read about that,” he chided coolly. “It’s gory gobbledygook.”

“Not gobbledygook – history. A very important part of today’s Israel.”

“These people were fanatics. Members of a minority, the lunatic fringe.”

“They were a part of Israeli history. A grim reality that left countless scars on those people.”

“I must be prepared to face such people.” William drew himself upright and stared into me in silence, and then he sighed, shaking his head. He smiled, just short of affection. “So, you are my teacher.”

“Am I?” I asked, surprised by the possibility.

“Don’t pretend innocence, lady. You always know more than you can tell.”

“I’m glad you realize that.”

“And what do you know about Israel?”

“What is in the books and what I saw on the evening news,” I responded evasively.

“Your eyes glow. Tell me what you know.” He grinned in childish expectation. “How soon until we go to Israel, Merlin?”

“When? Time is a river.” I shrugged slightly. “When all is in readiness—not just you, but all the players; politicians and warriors alike.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“No. I say what I know. Too often the vision clouds.”

“You too?”

Those two words filled with compassion escaped before he could stop them, and after their expression, he turned away and left.

* * *

During this week William became increasingly more difficult. He watched my bedroom door expecting a glimpse of his dream lady, only too often to be disappointed by my appearances on the scene. Once, this led to his loud tirade that brought Jennifer to the second-floor landing. William had become insistent that I was intentionally harassing him. I took a stroll while Mrs. Tonaka calmed him.

Jan learned to drive but continued in her resentment of Arlo. In fact, I was quite surprised that she again broached the subject days after Arlo’s first appearance at the dinner table. The girl learned quickly, and within a week she took over my position as driving resident. Unfortunately, she remained cool despite my repeated attempts to get the child to open up to me. I shared my concerns with Jennifer one evening, but she felt assured that our 13-year-old tomboy would adjust.

Valerie, on the other hand, proved remarkably adaptive and accepted Arlo Gentry’s presence almost immediately. Oddly, she was suspicious of Lord Thomas. He had demonstrated his telekinetic ability to the children and that had somehow unnerved her. Consequently, she avoided him. One morning, Valerie told me over coffee that our flaming-haired resident was actually a 4-foot 7-inch dwarf who kept up his image through magic.

Thomas Becker himself kept to himself or with William most of the time. As the Lord William’s confidant, he often performed two tasks I knew I would inherit – he listened and he questioned.

* * *

“William is under the greatest amount of stress in our family,” Jennifer told me as we folded laundry in the basement. “Sadly, much of it seems internally produced.”

“Sad, indeed,” I muttered, sensing her sincerity.

“He’s developed no habits or routines, and I wonder if I should worry.”

“About William’s hours spent wandering about the locale? Yes, I already know.”

“So, while he moved restlessly through space and time, you just continued waiting.”

“Jennifer!” Will shouted from the top of the stairs. “Where’s that wire stripper I left in the radio room?”

“I warned you not to leave it where James could find it. Ask him.”

“He’s in his room, playing with Daniel,” I said to his unspoken question.

September 28

Clipping a narrow corner, I emerged into the backyard and stopped to catch my breath and orientate. All looked quiet, but a familiar tingle of the air told me otherwise. My eyes darted around me, but none of the tools or the garden spoke to me. Projecting out from my sweat-covered brow, I could only discern my need to be in this spot at this time.

Then, I spotted him. Bright blond hair shone in the sun’s glare at the top of Arlo’s ladder, as it teetered. James’ unbalanced weight on its topmost rung caused the ancient wood to toddle. All shifted with surreal slow motion, wood crying against metal gutters, my body reacting of its own accord. The boy’s frightened scream split the air, echoed by the sharp snap of splintering wood.

Arms outstretched, I dove for his body falling toward me, aware of the ladder following close behind. Catching the child, I shielded him by rolling my body and cradled his head safely to my chest as the ladder hit me across the shoulders. As I went down and rolled, we landed clear of the ladder, in the grass, the child’s weight on my chest, knocking the wind from me.

Wide eyes of blue met mine and I touched his nose, smiling assuredly. Then I nudged the boy off me and sucked in fresh air. James glanced over at the ladder and then up at where he’d been, trembling.

“You okay?” I swallowed.

“Yeah...”

The porch door slammed. I glanced in its direction to see Jennifer and William running from the stoop. The woman arrived first, covering the distance in less time than it took young James to climb to his feet. She caught the child quickly in her arms as he began to wail from fright and the realization of the danger.

“You’ve been warned often enough in the last few days to stay off of that ladder,” Jennifer scolded.

Letting my head fall back to the grass, I ran a quick check of my body before I attempted to sit up. Assured that I was all right, Jennifer herded the shaken boy toward the house as a hand was offered to help me stand. Grasping it firmly, I dragged myself up to my feet and flexed my back and shoulder muscles. Bruises already clamored for attention, as I pulled to release my hand. William held it firmly in an unyielding grip that irritated. I raised my eyes defiantly.

Blue eyes smiled down on me in silent approval, as he started brushing grass clippings from my back. I winced in pain and jerked away, but his arm swung up before me and across my chest. William touched my shoulder, hesitantly at first, then firmly turned me away from him. His warm sigh touched my neck, as he stretched back the collar of my sleeveless shirt.

“You are bleeding,” his even voice announced from over my shoulder. “Let me have a look.”

As his hand moved to raise the back of my blouse, I slid from his grasp and spun to face him. William stared at me in innocent surprise, and I felt blood rush to my face in needless embarrassment. He stepped back and shrugged, smiling somewhat uncertainly. My shoulder ached as I rolled the joint to test it, feeling the warmth and wetness that trickled down my spine.

“Well, you’d better let someone take a look at that,” he advised, composing himself.

“I will,” I responded, reaching to touch his arm. “It’s women’s work, Troubadour.”

I turned to leave him and to seek out Jennifer.

“Lady—”

I froze in mid-stride, and he continued.

“—Hannah, will you...”

I kept walking, having already resolved not to respond.

“MERLIN! On your service, I say, stop!”

My hand stopped as I was reaching out to the porch door. My feet balanced between steps. Unable to move, I realized the power of his Voice, and with that realization, came an understanding of untold dreams. Having no option, I yielded to his will, turned, and watched him cross the lawn.

“You wish something, Lord William?”

My own voice held a subtle change I had not inserted consciously. My stance changed like a puppet manipulated for a part. My awareness mirrored in the man who strolled confidently to within a meter of me and halted.

Can you turn from me?

No.

“Try,” he encouraged, amiably.

Nothing moved on me.

I tried. I sent mentally after a failed attempt to turn my back on him. I can’t.

Please. Put yourself to it.

My shoulder needs looking after, William. I breathed an aggravated chuckle. Let’s play this game another time, please. Do you desire something?

“Desire? Hann...” He saw my quick frown. “Okay, Merlin. You are avoiding me?”

Yes.

“Why?”

It’s no big deal, I replied after a moment’s thought.

“By your own answer, I know.”

His sad reply triggered a wave of emotion that flowed from him and through my being. William blocked it almost immediately and looked for my reactions. I couldn’t move, so showed him none.

Your request? I inquired slowly.

“Join us for dinner. Your absence is felt by the whole household.”

If this is your desire. I watched his bearded head nod slightly. So be it. May I attend to my shoulder?

“Yes. Go.”

* * *

The earth trembled threateningly at the beginning of the dinner, but if anyone noticed it, nothing was said. Will impersonated Lord William with a charm that baffled Penny, but not Jennifer. Our wise housemother watched in muted concern throughout dinner, while Penny sought frantically to catch my eye. Under mild restraint, William performed as a brilliant host, keeping the conversation flowing while including each of the children.

At the end of the meal, Arlo and Thomas cleared the table, declaring that it was the men's night for dishes. To my amazement, William slipped off to the kitchen as he shot James a remark about the tortoise and the hare. When Daniel and Thomas picked it up to a singsong chant, Jennifer and Valerie hustled them from the room. Lin passed me a cup of green tea, suggesting to Penny that we women would be more comfortable in another room.

Jennifer joined us shortly, with a cup for herself, and slipped her legs gracefully up on the coffee table sighing.

"I could easily get used to this." She smiled, dreamy-eyed.

"Until tomorrow," answered Penny. "Hann? Was that a command performance?"

"Exactly right, Penny."

"A command, Ann?" Jennifer asked, looking at me over her glass of sherry.

"A request of Merlin's presence," I replied, clarifying myself. "One I couldn't refuse."

"Well, at least he's being civil," Pulaski whispered cautiously.

"He is discovering his Voice?" Jennifer asked in a whisper with an odd look toward the kitchen. "How strong is he?"

"I can't say. He frightens me at times, Jenn." I had to admit it to myself. "Other times... Well, he could destroy all of us if he chose. God protect him and us!"

"God will not allow it!"

"I have faith in that, but sometimes I'm afraid."

"Ann, about his Voice?"

"Cold and hypnotic, but so much more. It held me immobile," I breathed slowly, and the blond again questioned with her eyes. "Merlin, as I am."

"What about Lady Ann?"

"When he senses Ann, I have to retreat or face another masquerade, which I refuse to do. Oh, Jennifer, you said you'd protect me."

“I never expected it to be like this. I really didn’t. Sometimes, I feel like spanking him, like I would James.”

I flinched at the mention of William and the child in the same breath and looked at Pulaski to recover.

“Penny? What do you think? You’ve listened to me rave for several years.”

“So, I won’t tell you what a fool you are. Really, he is incredibly dense. You need a 2x4 to get his attention.”

“Make that an 8x12.”

The new voice in the conversation was Thomas Becker’s pleasant baritone. We turned to find him standing in the hall leading from the kitchen, a dishtowel in his hand.

“Please, ladies, mind your tone and volume,” he said and then grinned. “And I give you this for thought: It is you, Lady Ann, who hides.”

My skin tingled, as I watched him turn on his heels and return to his work. Penny and Jennifer sat in silence for their own reasons. I sensed *déjà vu* in the remark, which triggered the eternal clock. Breathing a silent prayer of thanks and praise, I collected myself and set aside my tea. Standing, I found my legs weak.

“He’s telling the truth.” I smiled in response to Penny’s furrowed brow.

“You need help?” Jennifer asked with a knowing look and stood, coming quickly to me.

“Please.”

* * *

Minutes after Mrs. Tonaka left my chambers, Penny knocked quietly at my door. Letting Judica in, she followed, carrying a milk-colored cosmetic jar. She came straight to where I lay, reading on the massive bed.

“Jennifer says she could have bounced marbles off your back muscles,” she announced gravely. “I may not know as much as Marshall about massage, but this will do for now.”

“Thanks, Penny, but—“

“No buts. Come on! Jennifer says I need the grace, and the humility is good for you.” Penny smiled as she slapped my leg playfully. “Okay, woman, strip and roll over on your belly.”

Following the first order was easy. I wore only my robe, and boot camp had long since robbed me of what little modesty I'd had. I rolled onto my stomach. Stretching out, I began a mental exercise to relax, willing my body calm. Penny uncapped the jar and sat down next to me, working the cream into the warmth of her hands.

"Relax, but no trances."

"I'll stay here," I muttered, drawing a pillow under my chest, as Marshall had taught me.

"Arms at your sides," she commanded gently, and as I complied, her hands touched my shoulders, kneading with care. "Oh, lord! You are tight! Do you want hard or gentle?"

"Better work up to it."

She began. At first, she just skimmed my neck and shoulders, gently working the tensed muscles, as she spoke of her own day and her feelings. Soon her hands became firmer, kneading my shoulders and back while checking each vertebra in turn. After a time, she scooted me into the middle of the bed, and straddling me, put her weight and strength into the art of chiropractic. She was not as skilled as Marshall, but then again, he had his masculinity in his favor too. Male touch is always preferable.

When she had finished, I bid her stay, and we talked a long while. Before Penny left, I returned the massage, incorporating a few talents of my own. I bid her go, and soon I crept downstairs to raid the refrigerator. I was sitting down to a feast of powdered milk and chocolate chip cookies when footsteps approached in the hall. Lord, not now, I thought but was quickly relieved to see Thomas's freckled-face appear.

"Can't sleep?" he asked, as he quietly moved to get himself a glass.

"Haven't tried yet. Penny and I've been talking."

"More likely you've been listening." Thomas chuckled as he approached.

"True. And you?"

"Listening to William. I don't have to tell you how bad off he is."

"I haven't been listening to your conversation."

"I didn't say you were. Put your hackles down, Ann. Have you thought about what I said?"

"It is the truth," I admitted, pushing the cookie jar his way. "I just don't know what to do about it."

"Why are you prolonging this?" The tall man asked, swinging his leg over a chair and sitting on it backwards. His eyes watched me in the dim light. "This search for Ann drives him crazy."

“We need more time,” I replied, and saw the startled look on his face. “I am serious when I say that. I have no control over when the confirmation of Ann to William will occur. I have no knowing of it, Thomas. I thought you knew that. You know I can’t be a witness to myself.”

“Let God be your witness! And Jennifer and me.”

“Tell him, if you wish. I have told Jennifer and Penny to tell him.” I sighed and then stuffed a whole chocolate chip cookie into my mouth.

“I have told him,” he admitted slowly, taking two cookies from the jar. “He didn’t believe me. He just got mad and stormed off toward the chapel.”

I washed the cookie down, passing Tom my I told you so look as I set the glass back on the table.

“Telling him is not your role, Thomas,” I remarked, touching his hand in sympathy. “So, just stay close to him when he lets you and try not to worry.”

“Well, someone has to make him understand,” he resolved thoughtfully. “He didn’t even believe Jennifer?”

“No. My... er, friend Marshall will be here soon. I don’t understand why, but maybe William will believe his pronouncement.”

“But he doesn’t even know Marshall on the worldly plane. How do you expect him to believe a stranger?”

“Stranger? Ah, Thomas, this is all stranger than you can ever know.” I watched this auburn-haired man, as he picked at his cuticles. “But, yes, announce to him the true identity of his lost lady. And call me Ann when we speak. Just realize the consequences.”

“Consequences?” Thomas grumbled.

“He’ll deny me and argue with you. He’ll get angry, but I won’t let him harm you.”

“You really think you could stop him?”

“William and I are... er, parallels if not equals, duplicates in some ways, Thomas. That is how I know he is not yet ready. I’m not.”

“Then your talents match,” he whispered.

“They’re balanced, not matched. He controls electricity, while I harness fire. His weaknesses are my strengths and vice versa.”

“But, why is he having this infernal identity crisis.”

“Huh? Well, how do I explain it? It’s like... puberty, to put it crudely—no, the aging of fine wine sounds nicer. He is upset by my being here?”

“You’re tearing him apart.”

“He still hasn’t forgiven himself.” Sad in the memory of his cruel breakup, I looked up at the man across from me. “No, don’t frown, Tom. Guilt is an ugly monster to battle. It will require an even uglier monster to dispel it, but that’s giving away secrets, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Indeed, yes, Thomas.” I drained my milk and rose from my chair. “Lord Thomas, I assure you I shall catch your beloved friend before he falls. He will not be harmed, physically or emotionally, but he must endure this trial.”

“The last?”

“Between he and me, yes. Then, I’ll relieve you of this burden.”

“William a burden? No, Ann, he’s my friend.”

“Bless your heart, Thomas, but my gender is much more... er, let’s say able to service Will’s needs.”

“My lady...”

“Will you be there when he wakes from his nightmares? Does he allow you to give the loving touch he longs for? Can he hold you and feel the satisfaction of being needed?”

I’d spoken affectionately and with kindness to the man who now took my hand and squeezed it gently, smiling.

“He should’ve married you,” Thomas said evenly. “Do you know he has said a couple of times that you are his perfect Merlin? He swears you read his mind, and he said that you know him better than anyone else in the world—even his mother. I’d take that as a compliment.”

“I did too. He told me so, once... Ages ago. Memphis,” I sighed absently.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to stir up old memories.”

“No harm done, Lord Thomas.” I gripped his hand, and feeling William’s mental call for Merlin, drew my hand away, knowing Tom had sensed the summons. “I must go. Rest well.”

“You’re going to him as Ann?”

“Only in his dreams.”