

MadMen 3: Along the Way

March 30 (continued)

William perched on the top of the bar in the rec room, overlooking every adult in the household. I was happily surprised to see Tobias and Richard at their father's side, apparently with their mother's approval. Diane O'Leary sat calmly, with Eric standing near her shoulder, her teenage sons protectively near her. Again William kept contact with my hand, not releasing it after his opening prayer. From where I sat, on a bar stool at his right, I looked up at him, smiling encouragingly. Drawing a deep breath, he began.

"I know I haven't had a chance to talk with each of you yet. And what is coming requires carefully thought-out plans. We will have another discussion about this topic in a day or two."

"Let me start by saying that I have strong plans for that airfield, both the Hawkeye and that jet. Lord Thomas, if we can find or make the fuel, you get the jet. *If there's fuel, mind you.* As for the Hawkeye—" He hesitated, glancing down at me, and he squeezed my hand. "I regret *you* will pilot that bird for us. We're going to Israel."

Protests rose from Lin, Nick, and Penny, and he waited as Marshall roared for silence. William shot him a fast grin of approval.

"Do *The Thirty* agree?" Their leader looked around the room. "Eric?"

"You know what God is doing in your life, *Holder of Lightning*," O'Leary remarked carefully. "And I must say that this comes as no surprise to me."

"God bless you, man," William said, then looked at Jennifer. "Mrs. Tonaka?"

"Tell me something I don't already know," she quipped but frowned. "Joy knows it, too, I'd bet."

"All right, Prego Penny. If you're up to it, you and Thomas will look into the aircraft in the next few days. I'll need mechanical, technical, and fuel status. That Hawkeye has the higher priority."

Thomas saluted sloppily and nudged his wife while wearing an *I told you so* grin. William fixed his gaze now on Marshall and waited.

Marshall, pay attention. I nudged him mentally.

"Your job right now is to gather munitions. I'm sorry, but that puts you on the road."

"I travel alone," the blond man grumbled at him, with a point of a slender finger for emphasis.

"I'll want your itinerary."

"Certainly."

"Nick, you're the sharpshooter in the family. I'd like you to begin training Tobias and Richard. A fairly rigorous schedule, *without* interfering with their chores, I might add. You two are coming of age, and as of now, you both hold adult status and responsibilities." He frowned, adding at the eager boys, "You are still responsible to your parents and answerable to them. Your list of chores will probably increase too. Understand?"

The two dark-haired teens shuffled their feet, embarrassed by the attention, and then muttered their agreement. Eric laughed, affectionately slapping his younger son stoutly between the shoulders. Richard grinned through an innocent blush at his father.

They seem so young, I thought through the caress of William's hand. *Are we so old?*

Yes, only babes, came his melancholy response.

“Professor? I want a complete house inventory with projections for a hard winter, as food for thought,” William continued in a business-like manner. “Also a weather and radio update. How is the solar project coming?”

“We had five failures due to minor problems.” The Japanese man poked a finger at me while grinning. “Oddly enough, no problems since her cottage came online.”

William patted my head, laughing deep in his chest, and a few others in the room echoed that nervously. An odd silence fell, and I sensed something pass from Jennifer to Will. Blinking, he turned to look down to me, as questions swept through me. He honestly wasn't aware of his offense. I detested being petted like a baby, and *that's how that felt to me*. I knew Jennifer and Marshall picked up on it instantly.

Turning, I faced him and poised our clasped hands between us. Careful to stay inches away, I broke the connection. In the gap, a blue spark jumped across from William, but I'd thrown up walls. He stared at me, amazed, unable to speak to my mind. With a wink, I turned back to the family, leaning casually against my companion's legs, lowering my wall.

You hush now, I sighed after drawing a deep breath. *It's my turn*.

You have the floor, woman. He shifted his position on the top of the bar while I collected my thoughts,

“My turn,” I addressed my family. “Where to start? Joy, you've been very quiet in our house. There's a project I'd like you to consider: psychic measurement and instructions for our children.”

The beautiful young woman looked puzzled, seeking my mind. I poured ideas into her, as murmurs broke out into the room. William had tapped into my mind, sending these concepts to any mind that could receive. Penny let out a whoop, then clutched her ample belly, giggling.

“I think my son heard you,” Thomas observed happily, caressing Penny's stomach as Joy nodded to me from across the room.

“Thinking of little ones, ours need attention in many ways,” I continued, eyeing a few of the males. “I'd like to see some coming of age rituals set up and goals set. Our community is divinely set by ages and genders, and four if not six of our kiddos are approaching or already dealing with puberty. Here's another thought to ponder: How much do we exclude our activities from our younger adults? Aside from battle plans, I'd like the age limit of the house meetings lowered to about seven or eight, if a child shows any interest. I know that age may sound low, but soon we'll have little time for play.”

Drawing a deep breath, I took up and sampled my apple juice.

Careful with those 2x4s. William did not sound amused.

“As you see, these topics will require deep thought. My next topic is *Worship*. We will schedule it for every seventh day, starting today. Except during services, the Eucharist will reside hopefully in this house in some sort of chapel. Sometime today, William will hold an open discussion on the significance of the Eucharist. Most of us were not raised Catholic, and there may be confusion for some of you.”

“When?” Richard piped out.

“After dinner.” William chuckled. “Is there more, my dear?”

“Two.” I smiled up at him then looked back at my family. “And I’ll make these quick. First, my critters are sniffing for horses. *And cows*. We have more than enough tack, but I’d like a few stalls cleared. Also, anyone who’s interested in hunting and fighting on horseback let me know.”

“I’ll make that list, Hann,” Penny interjected grinning. “I want to be in on this.”

“You’re a love! Thank you. What else? Ah, yes, about today!” I looked around at the circle of faces, happily. “Today is a very special day to remember. And a name must be given. Think about that during the celebration! Okay, I’ve said my piece, Lord William.” I twisted, reaching again for his hand. *Thank you*.

“My turn again.” William chuckled, looking out at his friends. “Well, I’m thinking of establishing morning and evening vespers. I’m curious about the schooling of the children. Who is the headmistress?”

“Professor Lin,” Katie offered evenly. “I guess I’m second in command.”

“You just got promoted. Lin, you’re handling too much. Delegate authority.”

“Yes, sir.” The man saluted William smartly, trying to keep a straight face. “At your command, my Lord.”

“At ease, Lin,” our leader chuckled, shifting his weight on the bar. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m ready to wrap this up. Merlin?”

“I’m sure there are other thoughts.” I laughed softly. “No comments now, please. Just raise possibilities, Okay? Floor’s open.”

Four arms went up. I kept quiet, mentally passing the gavel back to William. He tickled playfully at my back, where he wouldn’t be seen, as he pointed to Candice.

“What’s the possibility of a second fireplace in this house for heat this winter?” The Jewess remarked evenly, “Or expanding the solar heating?”

“Good. We’ll consider that.” William grinned, delighted, and pointed at Jennifer. “Yes, lady?”

“I need more medical supplies—especially antibiotics. Another Geiger counter would be a good idea, and maybe a designated medical room.”

“Operating equipment?”

“God, William. I don’t know....” She paled beneath her perfect tan. “I’m not a doctor.”

“We’ll deal with it as it comes,” William said gently, while I sent the woman soothing thoughts. “Nick? Something on your mind?”

“We’ll need all hands for the planting and harvests. Just thought I’d mention it.”

“How many weeks until planting?”

“Two at least, maybe three.”

“There’s time enough. Canning after harvest too, no doubt. Anybody else? No?” His brown eyes surveyed the nodding heads. “We all have much to consider. I want privacy for Hannah and I. *Absolute privacy*. Until at least noon.”

William bent forward, regarding me. I blinked at him, poker-faced. *Later than noon, Hann? Okay*. He smiled, focused on the family again.

“The barbecue is scheduled for mid-afternoon,” he concluded, sliding from the bar. “We’re going for a long walk. Leave us alone till then, please.”

Taking William’s arm, I felt Marshall’s apprehension at not knowing our whereabouts should an emergency arise and passed it to my husband. He was thoughtful as we stepped to the door, and he halted, turning back.

“My Merlin reminds me of your love, and your concerns.” He bowed slightly with grace, as a ripple flowed from his brow. “Thomas now knows our destination.”

Would you call your critters to the watch, and then be Merlin for me? He kissed my cheek, very close to my ear, nudging me toward the door. “And Jennifer, you have my word, we’ll both rest before dinner.”

* * *

For the next two hours, I was left to William’s physical presence. If we communicated with each other, it was by natural means only. I had little to say but agreed to remain by his side, instinctively knowing where he needed to go.

Out beyond our new electric fence, we played like children in the waist-high meadow grass. I ran to release the tensions and stress within me and was surprised as William sped passed me in his own private foot race. We walked later saying little more than teases and friendly harassment. It was as if years melted away to the time when we’d first met. I was Hannah again, and he’d spoken only once of his Lady Ann.

Hang on, I called to my younger self in the daydream inside my head.

Close by, I heard William moan. I turned to where he rested a few feet away, sitting against the trunk of a maple tree. He was smiling through glazed eyes.

“I heard you that day, long ago,” he remarked ironically. “Only I thought you were talking to me.”

“A lot of good it did, then. How about that: Mental time travel?”

“You are my Merlin,” he laughed as he shrugged. “How are you doing over there?”

“It’s a lot to sort through.” My defenses had come up, and I consciously struggled to relax around the man. “I’m not sure of any of this.”

“Sort through it while you sleep. Need a hug?”

“Would you?”

“Why do you think I ask?” William patted the grass beside him. “Hugs are on *Special*, today.”

“Just when I get comfortable,” I muttered, rolling casually into his arms.

I heard his chuckle, as he enfolded me and gently stroked my hair. Mentally, he nudged my being.

“I just realized why you were so insistent about our standing back to back to say our marriage vows.”

“You are thinking about our wedding?” I felt amazed at the change in the nature of the man.

“I never could understand why you insisted on saying our vows back-to-back.”

“And...?” I encouraged, turning to study his profile and resting my head on his shoulder.

“We became *one being* looking out in two directions. But it has its disadvantages.”

“Minimal, I assure you,” I sighed watching the clouds drift by. “I’ve been through all this within myself.”

“Will you stop blowing in my ear!” He barked, pushing me away from him. “You know that bothers me.”

“You’re the one who asked for the hug, brother,” I replied, settling near his feet. “Whose problem is this, anyway?”

“What problem?”

“Never mind. Shall we try it back to back?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come here,” I laughed pulling him away from the tree trunk. “No, not facing me. Back to back! There. Now stay put.”

I positioned my back to his, with my head in the nape of his neck, and relaxed against him. William eased back and found a balance.

“This is what I tried to say. We hold each other up by maintaining slight tension and a sort of balance.”

“We cover each other’s blindside. Each other’s faults.”

“But do we really?” I asked with a sigh.

“That takes a lot of work.” He was slow in this admission.

“Love, William, not work.”

“Agreed,” came his apathetic and troubled response as his mental walls came back up.

I sensed sadness in him and left him to his thoughts for many minutes, half-conscious of Marshall’s music in my head. Jennifer was pitching softball to kids as old as forty-seven, while David created potato salad without a recipe. Carefully, I extended myself to check on other activities, and then I sensed discomfort in my companion. Attending to my temporal surroundings, I curled my legs beneath me, causing William to shift slightly and adjust his mental barriers.

“Want to talk about it?” I asked softly over my shoulder.

“Theirs’ was a slow, terrible death...” He sighed, sending a mental sample of the horror he was recalling.

“Don’t torment yourself, Will.”

“I don’t get it, Hann. Such God-fearing people put through that creeping horror.”

“They were good people. Many good people suffered that way. Remember, I sat for days listening to San Diego dying. I don’t understand all of it, Will. Humans can’t. But do not grieve what is past. I’m sure your family rests secure in the bosom of Abraham.”

“No doubt.” Then he suddenly barked: “Don’t lecture me.”

“I had no intention,” I said gently, wondering at the remark. “Do you know where the horses are?”

“Animals are your department,” he snapped, mental walls now solidly in place.

“I was just wondering if you’d seen any in your travels.”

“None. But I heard you calling to them.” My companion stopped and corrected his attitude. “Patience, *Lady of the North Woods*. Our horses will come.”

“I know...” I muttered, trying to keep from being defensive.

“Do you realize how far your being radiates?” William began lightly. “Chicago is what? almost 500 miles away? I could hear you cry all that distance.”

“Cry?”

“I sensed what you were going through, Hann. I experienced odd moments daily where I’d be *you*. Very strange. But you wouldn’t acknowledge it.”

“I didn’t realize you were there.”

“I knew that too.” He smiled affectionately. “It’s one of the reasons I stayed away so long.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Sometimes. I had to know where you fit in—in many vague areas and visions I’d seen.”

I yawned, having nothing to say.

“I had to find reasons to come back,” he announced after a long silence, and then he chuckled to himself. “That’s kind of hard to admit to you, but after chasing my dream for so long... There you were again. The love I had rejected. I didn’t know what to do about you.”

“You really didn’t know?” I asked, digesting his reluctance in returning. *Had I driven him away?* I wondered.

“No. Not at all! You know I don’t care to see into the future. It’s too confusing. One day at a time gets rough enough. It was more a matter of *why* Hannah-the-reject then *what’s next*.”

“Please explain.” I swallowed hurt feelings and said a quick mental prayer.

“I know you and Marshall had been lovers in the before time after I broke the engagement. Hush, woman. Let me finish. That’s ancient history, and he’s devoted to you now. That’s good, I suppose. Why did I have to do that to you? Why did you continue to believe in my dreams after I shattered yours? Why had Marshall returned with all his feelings for you? Why could Lin tolerate me being around his wife? *Why, why, why?*”

I closed my mouth, thoughtful before I answered him.

“No one can explain emotions with rational thinking, *Troubadour*. As you said, it is ancient history. I suggest you let go of the past and get beyond your feelings of guilt.”

“Another thing gripes me. How can Lin be so nice to me after I abandoned Jennifer and James?”

“He *is* a good man,” I said, settling closer to William again. “What about Jennifer, William? She still loves you.”

“I *know*,” he groaned out a breath. “And that scares me, Merlin. The potential for adultery in our household is rapidly rising, and not to be taken lightly.”

“That has occurred to me too,” I admitted.

“Sometimes I could strangle your Marshall,” William growled. “He is so bold with his affection for you.”

“Is that the reason you ran away in the first place?”

“I didn’t run away.” His voice became ice. “I went on a quest.”

“Are you so sure? Marshall said he could easily understand the length of your absence.” I sensed my companion’s anger, and I laughed. “Will, I was not sure I could live with anybody, let alone with *you*. At times the tension between us is almost unbearable.”

“I agree! That may be part of why I left.” He drew a long slow breath behind me. “You are *not* my Lady Ann, but for a while, that idea seemed to work for me,” he explained, vibrating confusion and sadness and frustration and many other things internally. “Without you, I am merely Will Martin.”

“Mind your emotions,” I whispered over my shoulder. “You’re *leaking*.”

“Everybody to the back of the bus,” he muttered, reinforcing a few mental walls. “Kind of you to mention it.”

“What’s wrong with just being Will Martin?” I sent him a mental hug. “I’ve got a soft spot in my heart for that kid.”

“That’s just it, Merlin. He’s a kid.”

“The trick is to know when to let the kid run free. Change of subject?”

“Go ahead.”

“Touching.”

“Around the family?” William inquired flatly. “A little more specific?”

“Here it comes, so listen up!” I pouted for the effect. “I do *not* like being hung on, patted on the head, or treated like a child. You embarrass me in public!”

“You are so lovely when you blush.”

“Shut up, William,” I moaned. “Are you listening to me? I do not want a public conflict between us.”

“Marshall offered to tutor me in chivalry. I have been practicing. I agree about our image to the household. The couch will serve my needs if I wish not to wake you.”

I shifted to look over his shoulder. “Look, kiddo, I’m talking about your actions toward me around the others.”

“I know my obligations to the family,” he insisted.

“You have obligations to your *wife*, too,” I reminded him with a slight nudge to his thin rib cage.

“So I’ve been told. What do you expect?”

“I need to feel I am more than a valued consultant. More than a spare battery!” I growled, resuming our back-to-back position, and added, “Enough of a hint?”

“I shall work on it. Why do you insist on talking out loud?”

“It’s easier.”

“Or is it your defense mechanisms?” William asked slowly. “You really don’t like linking with my mind, do you?”

“It’s safer out here.”

“You don’t like my touch?”

“That depends on circumstance. I have been used more like a spare battery pack than anything else of late.”

“I already apologized for that. I intend to allow you as much rest as you desire.”

“Rest for yourself, too. I don’t think you realize when you start draining from me.”

“Really? I’ll try to be more careful.” My companion’s tone seemed resigned. “Merlin? How do we live together?”

“That depends on how much we talk to each other, and in microscopic detail when necessary.”

“And care for each other’s needs. I suspect that you’ve lived alone too long.”

“Could be. I enjoy it,” I remarked, stretching my arms high and wide. “It’s hard to have someone underfoot.”

“Tosha’s always at your feet!” He laughed. “What do you mean ‘underfoot’?”

“I know Tosha’s ways. I’m used to her. You’re a totally different story. Besides being the most complex human I’ve ever met, you’re an insensitive spoiled brat.”

“Thanks a lot.” He laughed, shifting his body.

“I don’t understand men in general,” I sighed. “You’re a complete mystery to me.”

“No different on my side of the fence,” he chuckled, reaching back to jostle my hair. “Does this bother you?”

“Yes. And don’t pat me on the head again, or I’ll claw your eyes out.”

“Idle threats, I am sure.” William stood, turned, and gently helped me to my feet.

* * *

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

Tuning my senses to the Northwest, I alerted William mentally while reaching for the standing microphone while breathing a relieved sigh.

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

“Problems!” Arlo Gentry snarled through the speaker. “Little Bitch, we’re up to our asses with problems. Reds are across the Great Divide in swarms and they are killing any American they find.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No bad vibes. They’re okay.”

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

“Supplies holding?” I sipped my tea.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Whatever. Roan Rover out.”

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

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

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

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

“That is not William’s issue,” I countered, reluctant to open the topic, but reminded myself of her excellent understanding of my mate.

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

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

“Want me to have a talk with William?”

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

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

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

“Jenn... That is not why he insists on chastity. He thinks sex would interfere with our Talent, and in the coming year he’ll need every advantage he can get.” I watched a parade of emotions dance across her face. “And in ways, I can’t complain.”

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

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

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

“It helps. A little.”

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

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

“Especially those ribs.”

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

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

“And walking off the feast.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is it your *Sight*? Is it true?”

“I would presume so.”

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

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

April 9

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

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

Regardless of William’s attitude, I realized my morale could crumble into someone else’s arms. I knew Marshall had begun to feel the strain, and yet he sometimes baited me to the point of distraction. If William left the farm for any reason, he always left Marshall responsible for my safety. Despite his quips about being *honorable to a fault*, I wondered what would happen if I behaved without honor.

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

You sound tired, my friend.

YOU SHOULD AVOID THAT KIND OF THINKING, the wolf replied. AND I NEED YOUR HELP. MY WHELPING BEGINS.

Where are you?

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

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

THEY'LL HAVE TO GET ACQUAINTED EVENTUALLY.

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

The man quickly explained that *His Fuzzy Face* was occupied, and his mind seemed distant as well. I wondered if we had a hunting party on the prowl. After telling him about Judica, I crossed the drive, nearing the big wooden barn. A wave of serious discomfort struck me, and I applied blocks while reaching out to Marshall.

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

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

He didn't tell you?

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

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

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

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

He honestly didn't tell you?

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

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

I suppose you can do better?

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

Hannah! Rang with concern through my head.

Marshall Roberts had come to my side, was holding me while blocking the animal's labor pains. Helping me walk, together we rounded the open stall door to find Judica stretched out next to the grain sacks in the fresh straw I'd placed for her yesterday. Three squiggling forms struggled near her milk-swollen teats while another gray puppy emerged headfirst from her birth canal.

An hour later after the arrival of three more puppies, I left the stall, stiff from sitting on the ground, and went to find some food to make up for my missed breakfast. Marshall followed me into the kitchen where I was met by Tosha who fussed at me on general feline principle. My bodyguard poured himself some coffee from the 30- cup pot that stood at the dining room entrance while I washed up. He started some toast for me, then brought raspberry preserves from the fridge while I dried my hands. Most of the household were in classes or somewhere, I knew. Needing some alone time, I almost resented my friend's presence.

“Can’t you just watch me mentally, my dear?” I whispered as the toast popped up.

“Easier this way,” was his response as he pulled open the silverware drawer. “If they start shooting critters, I want to be close.”

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

“I can tell when you lie to me.”

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

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

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

I grinned, wondering if I had any sanity left and continued, “You are such a -”

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

At once, Marshall dominated my brain with his very masculine presence and the Key of E, providing what comfort he could. William had to be the leader. I knew that, but as the critters died, my heart always ached. Marshall came quickly, pulling me into his protective embrace while applying the same blocks he’d used against Judica’s labor pains earlier. The pain eased, but the death scream echoed within me, as he held me to his chest, as we sat on the kitchen floor. I began to cry.

His comfortable, familiar smells touched me through his red silk shirt as he pulled us both up to our feet. I remembered the before-time when we had shared each other’s bodies as well as our minds. Sending him a loving apology, I turned away and ran for the safety and seclusion of the cottage.

April 14

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

Desiring more solitude than usual and tired of the six-year-old’s attentions, I wandered back to my cottage. *Our* cottage, I reminded myself. I’d hoped to find it vacant, and was more than a little disappointed. Feeling resentful of William’s presence, I remembered how I’d loved hot soapy bubble baths. So while he read and listened to classical music, I lingered in a steamy, bubbly tub.

To my delight, about ten minutes after I’d gotten comfortable, William brought in a mug of mulled wine and modestly kissed my cheek. His mind radiated unusual affection.

“I promise a thorough back rub if you’ll return the favor,” he whispered near my ear.

“Sounds good to me! Give me ten minutes?”

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

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

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

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

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

It’s not fair. I insisted, wanting to use some serious pressure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Find a toy to assist in your carnal obsession.

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

“I’ll be right there,” he called out the door, and then closed it carefully, turning his full attention to me. Sad eyes glazed briefly in thought, then focused back on me.

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

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

No! Absolutely not. I am not interested in anyone’s garden, as you put it.

Then, who do you think is responsible for Jennifer’s pregnancy?

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

Despite his grin, I sensed his confusion at this news. Of course, Eric chose this time mentally to announce that he’d been following a couple of big gray horses for the last five minutes. William turned and left the cottage. Throwing on my closest clothes, I left the house.

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

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

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

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

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

The link had closed.

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

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

The enormous gray horse charged at me, radiating fear and confusion, but I dodged easily, stepping sideways at the last minute to avoid his massive hooves. I tripped and hit the ground, rolling to a sitting position. Behind the stallion, the mare shivered in excitement, and in that instant, I was drawn to her mind.

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

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

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

How can I help?

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

Nick's hurt, and I need everyone to stay calm. I do not need this becoming chaotic.

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

Astre took her turn at sniffing me and then nuzzled my cheek and hair in friendly greetings as I sat in the long grass.

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

The big mare nudged me again, and as I met her brown eyes, I knew all I had to do was lead them where I wanted, provided that was all right with Flaxen. I asked the mare to help me to my feet. Wrapping my arms around her long mane, Astre slowly pulled me up with her head as the stallion let out a lengthy neigh. William mentally touched the three of us with approval, as he hurried from the dormitory where he had restored order there.

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

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

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

He's amazing! No wonder Arthur's knights rode his ancestors, William said, and then turned and pushed open the metal gate meters before we came close. When Astre, Flaxen, and I had walked through, William remained there until the last of the horses entered our fenced yard.

Feeling uncomfortable about our earlier discussion, I kept off the mental plane despite Marshall's insistent queries. William told him to work crowd-control and mind his business. My husband came up beside me as I covered the last of the walk. He remained quiet, except to comment that these were indeed beautiful creatures, until we had put the regular horses in the corral. As I made my way with the two Percherons toward the barn's open door, William's hand began to glow blue, like his lightning, allowing me a glimpse of the damage Nick's whip had done.

Frightened, Flaxen jumped through the big barn door and knocked me to the floor as he ran in. Terrified, the stallion ran to the end hallway while William extinguished his light, and pulled the door closed as the big Percheron skidded into a stall. Will carefully closed the stall door with a glowing look of satisfaction.

Astre bent her head to me in the darkness of the barn, sniffed a few times, and pulled her head back up, nickering to her mate. Flaxen snorted twice, and I could hear my husband's soft chuckle as footsteps came toward me. With a loud click, the main lights came on, and then he came over to me, hand outstretched.

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

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

April 15

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

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

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

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

I remember the trace of frost that lingered, melting in the warmth of the sun, and I was startled by my breath rising in puffs of steam in the cool air. *He'll be frisky*, I warned myself, pulling open the smaller barn door and hurrying into a dimly lit stable area. A few moos greeted me, and I stepped to their pen, quickly opening its exterior door. Leroy, our young new bull had already taken his place as leader of our six milk cows.

I didn't wait for these slow beasts to file out, leaving that to Bingo and Trapper. I hurried up to the stable walkway to the opposite end of the barn, where Marshall and Eric waited. The dark Irishman glowered impatiently as I called good morning, slid passed them, and peered into Flaxen's stall.

In the dim enclosure, I could barely make out the big horse but heard him shuffle nervously in the straw bedding. I could hear the casual chewing that told me that someone had managed to get grain to him, thankfully without being harmed.

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

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

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

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

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

“I did,” the black-haired Irishman said proudly.

“From now on, he’s no concern of yours. Nor yours, Marshall.”

“Not me, lady!” He declared innocently.

“I’ll see to him until William learns how to.” Shooting Marshall a decisive glance, I set my jaw and looked to Lord Eric. “Understand?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Should I be, my Sweet?” He chuckled in a low tone. “You’re not.”

“No. Look, maybe you should go too. He’ll sense your concern for me.”

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

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

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

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

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

Now big-eyed, the dapple gray stood trembling as he waited for me to make my move. No dumb animal this, I knew, only scared and in pain, I reminded myself. The box stall had little light in it. I could smell dried blood and festering flesh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mind if I stay a minute?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Jennifer?” Was that my voice? “How long was I gone?”

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

“Five seconds. I timed you.” She smiled.

“Seconds! Great God, it felt like hours.”

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

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

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

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

“Nick’s too rational a thinker, Ann.” Jennifer’s gentle voice floated over my shoulder as I worked. “A doubting Thomas.”

“From Missouri?”

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

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

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

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

“You don’t mean that.”

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

“Lots of salve, Ann.”