

Previously...

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

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MadMen 4: End of the Beginning

December 6

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

“I wish Lord Dante had foreseen the need for a saddle,” Marshall grumped and then brightened. “But your need was met, as usual.”

“There is a God and He’s a nice guy!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah. Well then, right to business.”

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

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

“Leave your side.”

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

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

Pupdog? Do you want to stay or go?

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

“She’d like a day off too.” I translated. “She’ll stay here too. Better hunting away from the humans.”

“You sure that last wasn’t from Tosha?”

I admitted I wasn’t sure.

What needs doing before we go?

Digging a latrine? I asked hopefully.

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

“I can’t stay here...”

“I know we three are just passing through.” Marshall stroked my curls and smiled into my eyes. “Let’s settle the family while we find our ship.”

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

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

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

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

What do you think?

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

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

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

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

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

A new talent?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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A mile or so down the dusty road, I could make out Father Ramon’s church in the distance and mentally scanned it without thinking. All was fine. Beyond the cluster of buildings, I could see the little pueblo that was home to the couple thousand people who, I’d been told the day before, worked the local ranches and farms in the district.

The area was surprisingly like southern California. Decomposing granite sand made up this dusty road, rather than rich dark soil. Scrubby short acacia trees lined occasional driveways and the last of the greenery thrived a while longer before the heat of the coming summer. In the

distance stood patches of green that I had been told were the tree farms that supplied construction companies with wood for the region. In open areas, I could see small clusters of gray, brown, and cream-colored goats grazing on the chaparral.

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

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

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

Tells me nothing.

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

That much I knew.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Through Joy's eye, I saw our bearded William's head snap up in surprise at my question. His brown brows furrowed a moment and then he turned to our Columbian hosts,

I Know that name. He's one of The Thirty, William said, feeling much happier across the link. "Father Ramon, do you know someone called Tio Leo?"

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

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

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

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

"Alright, then. Let's go!"

Joy's eyes showed me they were on the move as Marshall kicked our horse for more speed. After the mare's lead rope almost pulled me from the big appaloosa, I mentally urged the

riderless horse next to us to go faster. Wrapping my hands into the gelding's long mane, I felt the man behind shift slightly, steadying me as he gripped the horse tighter with his knees. I focused briefly on my own here and now and also complimented his horsemanship.

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

Joy rushed out of the rectory, blond hair blowing the breeze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

About 600 yards down this road rested a sprawling single-story home in a half-circle grove of older, yet squat evergreens. The beige adobe house stretched long with many arched, decorative panels along its front that faced the circular driveway. Dante had already stopped his big bike near the front door, with William's mare hurrying toward him. By the time it took for Marshall and me to arrive, an occupant of the house had opened the front door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tio Leo was dying.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His little angel of death? William whispered aghast.

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

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

Once inside the door, I saw a large entryway, almost thirty feet square, tiled in terracotta with a parlor through one door and a library opposite. Toward the back of the big room were hallways right and left and a glass-paneled wall graced the back of the room, displaying a large

garden with a fountain beyond. As William rolled the wheelchair dutifully toward that garden, Marshall hurried to open the French doors that led to it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about legalities?" I asked carefully.

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

"And Jennifer's," I injected.

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

"William-" Marshall began as the side door opened, and Rosalinda appeared carrying a tray of iced drinks.

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

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

* * *

"Oh, crap!" I yelled as yet another cockroach skittered under the pink baby crib I was inspecting with Leo's plump housekeeper, Marta.

Hannah? Marshall responded immediately. Okay?

I hate roaches, I sent with a shudder.

So, just tell them to leave, he said flippantly. You talk to animals. Evict them before Jennifer gets here with that nasty bug spray.

So I did. Technically, I asked all the insects to leave.

Later, we discovered that my request worked not only with the cockroaches, but the flies, the mosquitos, the fleas, the silverfish, the tarantulas, the spiders, and the bedbugs.

* * *

LADY ANN! Jennifer screamed into my brain. You come and get this disgusting rodent out of here this instant!

I looked from the aircraft wheel I was securing with a wooden chock to find Marshall eyeing me from his place at the other wheel. He rolled his eyes and straightened as much as he could under the Hawkeye's wing.

Are you coming, dear heart?

I'm not even breathing heavy yet, he responded with a chuckle. Where is our postpartum mommy?

It felt like it came from the nursery... I kicked the chock which didn't move. I stood up, my head missing the bottom of the aircraft by inches.

Marshall hurried to me, his head and shoulders stooped to avoid the plane's belly. I turned and began to run for the hacienda, several hundred yards from this pasture. As I ran, I noted a few spectral goats and sheep in this field and wondered if I was seeing the past or the future. My husband's long legs caught up with me quickly, and he paced me as I sprinted toward the hacienda.

Jennifer was in the nursery, red-faced with anger. James was teary-eyed, and Rachel bawled and snuffled, sounding colicky. Marshall had the good sense to stay in the hall.

I sensed the familiar critter as soon as I stepped into the room and in the next instant, a little gray squirrel scampered up my jeans, across my back, and buried its trembling little body in my hair. With a clandestine wink to James, I turned and hurried from the room. In the shelter of my thick hair, Linus chirped his greeting at me.

"I thought I left you in Tennessee," I muttered, while mentally reminding my little friend not to defecate on me.

"He was a stowaway, Auntie Annie," James called after me. "Honest."

I rushed outside, away from the angry young mother.

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My dinner dish duty was done. I strolled into the humid evening air that enveloped the adobe church and outbuildings, wondering where my Marshall had gone. Looking around, I saw a small group of the boys playing flag football in the cooler air, but neither my husband nor Tobias was in the group. The smell of gasoline and oil touched my other sense, so I headed around the buildings to where I'd seen Father Ramon's older Japanese import.

The rusty red sedan squatted near the rectory with the front hood up and two slim bodies bent into the engine compartment. Smiling to myself, I heard a tiny squeak and turned to see my gray squirrel scampering across the dry lawn toward me. In an instant, Linus was on my shoulder, gripping my thin blue tee shirt and my hair. He scolded me briefly and then nuzzled my cheek. Affectionately, I rubbed his forehead with my index finger, wondering where William was.

In the chapel, he responded instantly. Need something?

A few words...?

Now is a good time.

Rounding the yard, I went to the church's side door and let myself inside. I sensed William before my eyes could adjust to the stained-glass filtered sunlight. He sat casually in the first pews, and he felt more relaxed than I'd ever sensed from him. He smiled as I strode toward him until he saw my furry friend on my shoulder. William grimaced.

"He'll behave," I promised.

"Just don't let James see him. He'll want to adopt him."

"James is what I need to talk to you about." I drew a deep breath as I slid into the pew next to him, keeping distance between us. "William. You have precious little time left to spend with James, and that boy should not have to share that bedroom with two babies."

"Right to the point, my Merlin? Good." His brow creased, and he gazed up into the sanctuary for about ninety seconds. I waited, as always. "Can't argue either point with you. What are you thinking?"

"Jennifer's got her hands full with Rachel."

"You're telling me!"

"And James may be feeling left out."

"Probably..." He frowned, and I could sense his desire for his pipe and tobacco.

"Could you ... er, keep James with you for a while? For the time you two have left here?"

William puffed his cheeks and blew out slowly, staring at the wooden tabernacle up on the small altar. No obvious emotions marched across his face, just a soft thoughtfulness.

"Is there room for him to sleep in the rectory?" I pressured. "Until... er. For a while?"

Until I have to leave my son, I heard his thought to himself. "Until we can work something better?" William asked out loud. "Right?"

"We have five orphans to house," I reminded him.

"I know that." He scowled and started counting on his fingers. "Valerie, Daniel, Alex, Alana, and Baby Tammy, who is... What? Three years old now?"

I was impressed.

"Does James know you're his father," I asked with all the gentleness I could.

William sighed, "I don't know. Jen keeps him on a short leash. He's never brought up the subject."

"You should tell him before we leave."

"Leave. Yeah. Marsh said your Sight is back. And the dreams."

I nodded.

"So, Teller of Tomorrow: As the song says: When do we... fly to Jerusalem?"

"About two weeks," I said evenly. "Was that in Superstar or Godspell?"

Not sure. Only two weeks? Not much time for you and Marsh before you have to leave him.

What makes you think I'd leave without Marshall?

Or that he would stay behind when we go. I heard William's soft chuckle as I casually looked about the old church. Right. I wasn't thinking.

You have precious little time to spend with your son.

What do you recommend?

Keep him near you as much as possible. Can he sleep on the couch in the rectory, maybe? That would give Jennifer and Lin a bit of a parenting break. Rachel's enough right now. Our

recent raids against the Chinese military and our transcontinental relocation are contributing to Jen's postpartum. She needs time to heal.

"Okay. I hear you, Merlin." He chuckled. "I'll thank you for this later, I'm sure."

* * *

Lin and Jennifer had moved into the sprawling ranch house before dinner. Rachel and Samuel became nursery-mates while Thomas and Penny were settling into the bedroom on the other side of the shared nursery. Before sunset, Candice and Joy became roommates in the other unoccupied bedroom on that wing of the U-shaped house.

During dinner, James announced to the whole family that he absolutely refused to share a room with two babies. He would rather sleep in the barn. William quickly suggested the rectory, and there was no objection from the boy's parents.

Nick and Katie Hoffman flipped a coin with the O'Leary family to begin rotating child care duties in the choir loft. Eric and Dianne O'Leary with sons Tobias and Richard won the toss and would enjoy the beds in the hacienda this night, while the Hoffmans, including Joy, babysat in the upper floor of the church.

* * *

A little after 11 PM when most of our family would probably not disturb me, I laid on my back on our blanket under a moonlight sky. My head rested on my husband's thigh. Legs bent and knees high, I gazed closely at Archimedes, who balanced, a talon only slightly gripping each of my knees. Together we had just recalled a few previous flights for Marshall's edification. Next, I would fly tandem with my night bird again. Prone to vertigo, my husband wasn't certain he would accompany us, and we agreed to be flexible. We both wanted a look at Columbia's western-most Caribbean coastline and availability of seaworthy boats. Surely Aruba had the one we needed.

December 7

As I slowly walked the dusty road past St. Phillip's church, I squinted in the late morning sun at our men still working on the church's roof. I could make out Nick and Richard's forms easily, and I guessed that was Lin going down the ladder. Eric had said they would finish the roof before sunset, and I prayed that was still true. Sweat trickled down my back and I could smell the lingering odor of the stock that hung about me in the humid heat.

In front of me, two dozen young sheep and goats made their way slowly through the spring grass and chaparral with my occasional mental encouragement. Judica dutifully worked as a herd dog, her long tongue often hanging out, cooling her in the heat. My apprentice shepherd, James ran here and there, using a long, narrow stick when his mere presence didn't steer a stubborn critter back to the herd on the dirt road. We had been walking our new livestock home for over two hours, and I wondered who at the hacienda was capable of hearing my mental call.

How may I assist you? An unfamiliar being touched my mind, and it took me a moment to recognize Tio Leo's mental voice.

I gave him our location and asked about water for the stock.

Put them in the pasture across from your airplanes. Leo Montenegro sent me on a wave of good humor. I'll ask Rosalinda to go there now and begin filling the big water trough. Come to the house when you are done for a cool drink.

I thanked our host and then nudged one particular lamb who insisted on sniffing every rock and bush in his path. I heard the old man's soft chuckle, and then he slipped from the link.

* * *

As the younger boys began hauling the lunch dishes back into the church's communal kitchen, I sipped my ice tea and looked contentedly around the half-full picnic tables. On my left, William excused himself and on my right, my Marshall sighed and then kissed my cheek, starting to stand.

I heard William order him to sit down. I sent our bearded leader my gratitude. I had not seen my new husband all morning.

"I'm not going to argue," he sighed, easing back into the old metal folding chair and meeting my eyes. "Are you happy with your little flock?"

"Definitely! Dante drives a hard bargain, from what I could tell. I wish I could speak the local dialect."

I can teach you that little talent, William said as he helped stack various colored folding chairs. For a while now, I have suspected we can share and learn each other's abilities, like when you showed me how you work your magic on animals yesterday, when you gave me the horse's lead rope.

Marshall's eyes met mine, and I greedily imagined learning his illusion talent. In that instant, I felt his assurance that he would teach me.

It would be good, Marsh, if you could share your talent with machinery with Eric before we leave, William continued. Tobias can only learn so much...

Dante said the pueblo needs a good mechanic. I put in.

I'll give it a try! If only Lin was talented, he responded wistfully. I'd love to have all his knowledge of physics.

Could come in handy on our journey, I responded.

Maybe I know something that might work, William said thoughtfully and he turned to steady a stack of chairs that James was struggling with. I'll have to catch Jennifer in a good mood....

And the link dissipated.

From my right, Candice ambled toward us in the midday heat, sweat glistening on her skin beneath her green hand-me-down sundress. In her hand, she carried an old clipboard of notes and her accounting notebook and pen. Our official community treasurer was frowning deeply.

"Okay... Our bank accounts have been set up with Senior Iglesias," she began quietly. "And we have a little spending cash, but something about that man bothers me."

"You too?" Marshall whispered, glancing around the dwindling family.

Drawing a deep breath, I glanced at William, but he seemed absorbed with his son, and I did not want to interrupt them. Waving our eldest family member to the seat next to me, I waited for her to settle in. Then I took her hand casually, establishing a private link. Marshall's hand came lightly on my shoulder to join us, and to the uninformed observer, it looked like a natural gesture for a newly-wed man.

Think of what you feel about the banker, I told her, gently opening myself to her impressions which rapidly flooded my mind.

He has all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire, Marshall commented dryly after a few moments and then relayed his personal impressions of the banker. I don't trust him.

I don't think it's wise to flood the local market with the wealth of jewelry and gold we brought, Candice said with a fervor I'd not seen in her before.

Absolutely not a good idea, my husband put in. He'll be playing fast and loose with our nest egg to the town's advantage.

More like his advantage. Lord Eric? I called into the sunshine. I'd like a word with you. Yes. Now, please! Yes, Joy? Size 5 or 6 petite. No, I do not need to go shopping with you and Dante. Thank you for asking. Candice will be along in a few minutes. Please tell Lord Dante how much I appreciate his taking a day away from his ranch to help us. Be careful out there!

You are most welcome. Dante's voice came softly through my head with a hint of an Australian accent, while Eric appeared at the kitchen door, and hurried in my direction. I will protect her with my life.

Marshall leaned near and whispered, "You're a juggling mentalist act!"

"Or just a mental case," I groaned.

What did you say, Ann? Lady Candice asked as Eric settled in the chair across from me, and I then reached for the man's hand to include him in our discussion link.

* * *

Again I walked the dusty road past St. Phillip's, squinting in the late afternoon sun. Our men still worked on the church's roof. After lunch, Lin had insisted that they would finish the roof today. Sweat trickled down my back and, in the humid heat, I could smell the cow dung on my shoes.

In front of me, one dozen local cattle, including a yearling bull plodded their way slowly through what was left of the spring grass the sheep and goats had devoured. Occasionally I had to add a mental encouragement to keep them going but we were in no hurry. Judica again worked as a herd dog, despite the heat and her fatigue. My apprentice shepherd, James ran slower, still using his long stick when his mere presence didn't guide a cow or calf back to the dirt road. We had been walking our new livestock home for almost two hours, and as we reached the side road to the hacienda, I mentally reached out to Tio Leo.

How may I help? Tio Leo's now familiar voice touched my mind. Oh! You feel very tired, Amiga!

I asked where to put the livestock.

In that pasture behind your airplanes. Leo Montenegro sent me a wave of concern. Rosalinda filled the water trough there. Bring James to the house when you are done for food and cold drinks.

I thanked our host, and then nudged one stupid cow that shied from a rock in her path. I heard the old man's soft chuckle, and then he slipped from the link.

After the cattle were settled into their new home, James, Judica, and I relaxed in the shade of Tio Leo's insulated garden, but the old man had not joined us. Feasting on cool fresh fruit and ice tea, I had shed my sneakers and soaked my feet in the lowest tier of the decorative fountain. James had attracted one of the several cats on the property and was focused on getting

it to chase his shoelace when Father Ramon came through the glass doors from the front of the house.

Lord Ramon carried several plastic bags stuffed to capacity, each bearing the logos of what I assumed were various local businesses. Three had pieces of paper stuck to the front of them bearing my name. The other three had been labeled for Marshall. Ramon held up one of my three plastic bags to me

In my head, I heard Jennifer call her son, who then looked a question up at me.

“Thank you for all your help today,” I told the blond boy. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“It was fun!” He grinned as he slipped his shoe back on and began tying it.

“You’d better go see what your momma wants,” I said accepting a bag and peeking inside.

“Aww, she just has new clothes for me to try on.” He said matter-of-factly while jumping to his feet.

Father Ramon silently handed me my three bags full, and I glanced inside one.

I had new clothes too!

The three bags with my name contained new socks and underwear, four new tee-shirts, two pairs of blue jeans, two pairs of shorts, a pretty floral sundress, sandals, sunglasses, and a Chicago White Sox baseball cap. I silently prayed a prayer of blessing over all involved. And then I realized just how much my body probably stank after days without a shower. Today’s two trips to the outside stock pens of the neighboring ranches had caked me with Columbian dirt.

“Come with me, mi amiga,” Ramon said with a smile as James disappeared through the side door that led into that wing of the hacienda. “I’ll find you a clean, umm, towel and show you the baño. Er... Como se dece? What do you call the place where you, umm, clean your...self?”

* * *

Our men finished repairing the roof of St. Phillip’s church just before sunset. Most of our family gathered inside that house of worship while Father Ramon conducted a small thanksgiving prayer service. In the choir loft with Joy and the kids, I watched the gathering unobtrusively and added my heartfelt amen to the group’s prayer that this time the tiles stayed down during next winter’s storms.

William was there, but my Marshall wasn’t, and I didn’t ask. The last thing I’d heard was he and Dante had gone to town to look at a truck for sale. I’d have known if there was trouble. Judica and I walked contentedly from the church back to our airplanes in the calm of the coming night. I enjoyed the solitude and Judica remained silent. A new man living with me, as welcome as Marshall was, meant a new man underfoot. I did indeed enjoy the solitude.

* * *

Marshall finally arrived at our honeymoon Hawkeye as the last dim light of dusk faded into the black of night. Sitting with Linus and Tosha on the plane’s wing, I watched his approach. He was shirtless and carried three plastic bags. I savored his good looks, yet felt slightly concerned for the fatigue that seeped from his being. His usually lush blond hair was slicked back and flowed only slightly in the light breeze and his haste.

Hot running water is a wonderful thing, he said cheerfully. Did you get a shower yet?

I was the first.

Come down here, my Sweet. I need your lips. And your hips.

Scrambling from the E2's wing, I dropped into his open arms, and moments later we were inside the plane. Marshall applied his special privacy seal to the inner door and then turned to me with a smile on his face and heat in his eyes.

Later that evening, I lay on my back on our blanket under the moonlight sky. My head rested on my husband's thigh again, and we waited for Archimedes, who was finishing his breakfast in a stand of acacias nearby. Soon, we would again fly tandem with my night bird. We both needed to check the eastern Caribbean coastline for seaworthy boats. Sadly, Aruba did not have the boat we needed.

December 8

We were late for the communal breakfast, and Marshall kicked Dominic into a faster gallop, thinking that one of us would be condemned to work clean up. Riding behind my husband, I didn't initially see what caused him to swear like the sailor he used to be. Looking around him, I saw two police cars parked near St. Phillip's rectory, and four uniformed men walking toward the yard where our family was eating breakfast. I did not like how they smelled on the astral plane.

William! You have company coming. Dangerous company, Marshall called the warning before I could form the thought, so I quickly broadcasted the image of the approaching police to all our local Thirty.

My husband kicked the big gelding for more speed, and I tightened my grip around his slim waist. The long-legged horse covered ground with astounding speed.

Be calm! William radiated a tangible peace to us all, and I felt his confidence in his command of the situation. I still had my doubts about his leadership abilities but kept them to myself.

We're illegal immigrants in a country that is not as forgiving as the United States, I reminded him on a guarded thought so that only he and Marshall could hear. Er...as the United States was.

And I have eight of The Thirty physically present to back me up. There will be no problem.

You'd better not throw any lightning bolts, I said quickly, sensing his determination to defend our family.

I won't need to, William replied with confidence. Remember: "The Force has a great influence on the weak-minded".

I felt Marshall's deep chuckle through my arms around his ribcage.

By the time we rode into the shade cloth-covered churchyard, Joy and Diane O'Leary were serving coffee to the officers. At the table with them, William was completely unreadable on the astral plane. Katie and Nick Hoffman helped Candice, Jennifer, and Lin herd the youngsters toward the wash station in the outdoor kitchen. Each person carried the remains of their meals, and I wondered briefly if we'd miss ours.

I'll bring you something as soon as our guests are served, Candice said as the four officers now turned to our approach.

Tobias appeared in the kitchen doorway and hurried to us, grinning. With a happy good morning to us, he reached and caught the horse's lead rope when Marshall tossed it. I slid down

in a somewhat graceful dismount holding my husband's arm and then asked the teen how his shoulder was healing. Marshall's boots quickly hit the ground beside me.

This is a third-world country, William warned me. They will not be accustomed to liberated, assertive women.

Marshall laughed out loud as he stepped toward our guests. I dug a finger in his back, giggling quietly as I hurried to keep pace with him as he marched up to the table where the police officers waited with passive faces. I could sense him don a more macho persona.

"Buenos días, ustedes magistrados," Marshall called, wearing his best smile. "William, can I be of assistance?"

"Language is no problem," he replied, setting his coffee mug down on the picnic table. "This is Marshall Roberts and his ... wife, Hannah ... er, Roberts."

I'll get you later for that, I sent our furry-faced leader and smiled at the officials.

William introduced the policeman with the most jewelry on his collar as Senior Constable Ricardo Ortega, who asked something and William's translation was instantly in my head.

"You are not sure of her name?"

"Father Ramon married them two days ago," William replied. "Hannah and I have been friends for over five years. Speaking her married name is new for me."

"Just friends?"

"Sadly, she wasn't interested in me."

Are you getting his translation? I asked Marshall, after slipping my hand in his.

Yes and some of it I can get on my own.

"Felicitaciones," muttered Officer Ortega and then he turned back to William and frowned. "You are new to this pueblo. And staying in this church?"

"Only some of us and only for a few more days," William said and looked beyond where we stood. "Ah, good. Thank you, Candice."

Good timing, Candice, I sent, sharing this with William and Marshall. He was just about to ask about our papers and forms of identification.

Marshall and I moved to sit at the table next to the one the officers occupied as our female kitchen team began to serve breakfast to the police officers and then to William. He related the true story of our recent days, and the conversation between the two men continued, occasionally with questions from the other three officers. The question of our identification did not come up.

I ate in attentive silence as I monitored the emotional levels of each man. It was a peaceful meal, and soon the four officers stood, ready to leave.

"Of course, I will have to report you and your family to my superior in Santa Marta," Ortega was saying as William, Marshall, and I stood as well. "It is procedure."

"Of course," William muttered with a slight wave of his hand in Ortega's direction. "I understand. What is the name of your superior in Santa Marta?"

"Alejandro Hernandez," the officer replied with a slight frown, and a wave of distaste radiated from not only him but the other officers.

Warnings clamored within my soul and soured the inside of my mouth. Dizzy for a moment, I flopped back down onto my folding chair, struggling past a catch in my breath. Marshall glanced down at me, frowning with a silent question as I shivered deep in my being.

I'll be alright, I remarked, recovering quickly and very aware of the reason for my disorientation. Honestly, I am. Ask more about Hernandez.

So, Marshall asked the officers what this superior was like, and then mentally reported my reaction to William.

“Oh. You would not want to have him unhappy with you,” Ortega said, choosing his words carefully as he glanced at his fellow officers. Two were suddenly nervous and the third coughed and shuffled his feet in the short dry grass.

“And why is that?” William asked, sounding very causal as his fingers waved encouragingly in their direction.

“Er. We do not like to make him angry,” the shortest officer volunteered in a quiet voice as I read each of the suddenly-frightened policemen in turn. “It is not a good thing.”

Get them out of here, I told my two men and focused inward to concentrate on stabilizing my breathing as more waves of fear washed over me. I would work on the trembling once I could breathe.

Lord Thomas appeared from the kitchen door at an unspoken request and hurried in our direction, his face a mask of pleasant welcome. As Marshall and William began to herd the officers back toward their cars, William introduced Thomas as part of the leadership of our family, while I sat breathing deeply in the warmth of the sun.

A few minutes later, I found petite sandals standing in the grass as I stared unfocused at the ground in front of me. The men’s fears had almost dissipated. Looking up I found beautiful blue eyes surrounded by golden hair looking down at me. Joy seemed very intent on her own train of thought. I waved her to a chair and centered myself for my next task of the day.

“I need to talk to you,” she whispered although we were the only two left out in the yard. “About Lord Dante...”

“Has he kissed you yet?” I teased.

“Several times.”

“And you like it?”

“Very much...”

“That’s good,” I said with a smile to the young woman. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“He asked me to marry him, Ann.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear this too.”

“I hardly know him!”

“And yet the notion appeals to you?”

“Yes!” She grinned with delight, then squelched her elation and frowned. “We hardly know each other.”

“And your parents would object because of this.”

“Yes, but...”

“I’ll talk to them,” I smiled up at the lovely young lady. “Lady Joy, love that man with all your heart. He’s the one God planned for you.”

“Ann!” Her blue eyes lit with delight, but then her doubt quickly made that fade.

“I’m sure of it, Joy. I’ve seen it.”

“Your Sight is back?”

“Yes.” I sighed, thinking, For better and for worse.

“Is that a good thing?”

“For you, it is a blessing.” I glanced at the building where our family was busy stowing food and washing dishes. “Do you want me to explain this to Nick and Katie for you?”

“Oh! No! No, not yet. Let’s wait a while.”

“I don’t have a while,” I told her, holding her eyes with mine while taking her hand to validate my next words with Truth. “I’m leaving in less than two weeks.”

Hannah, my Sweet? Good, you feel better!

I touched his mind with affection, releasing Joy’s hand, and breaking that link. She stood, having sensed Marshall, and turned to leave, a content smile on her lovely features.

We’re going truck shopping again, Marshall reported. I’d love you to come with us.

When and where, dear heart?

As soon as you explain your fainting spell to William and me.

Now, please. Inside the church. William whispered to my mind. What was that all about?

Didn’t you feel...? I stood, excused myself, and hurried to meet my two men, aware of how quickly they had become my two men.

In less than a minute, I was standing at the front pew of St. Philip’s, feeling safer within the circle of Marshall’s arms while William paced before the communion rail. Father Ramon had stood silently as I described my physical and emotional reactions to the policemen at the mention of their chief’s name.

“Merlin, what just happened to you out there?” William asked finally stopping in front of us, fixing me with his intense gaze.

Merlin...? Marshall asked.

“A moment, William. Father Ramon?”

“Si, doña Merlin?”

Him too? Marshall asked with a nervous chuckle. What up with that?

Hush, Dearest. Later, I sent my husband, turning in his arms to look at the local priest. “What can you tell me about Hernandez, Father Ramon?”

The portly man scowled, glancing briefly at William, then sighed deeply, saying, “I do not want to... um say bad about Hernandez, pero-but he is a very, very bad man. How say it? Takes money for the wrong he do? Hurts gente, um people.”

Tell us in your own language, Father, William said, gently. I can translate.

“Hernandez is an evil, corrupt tool of the government,” Lord Ramon began while William radiated the translation. “He runs whore houses that cater to the vilest depravities, on the level of Thailand’s worst. Little children and babies! Merciful God!”

Father Ramon shuddered for a long moment as he looked to the leader of The Thirty. Drawing a deep breath, he collected himself and continued. “Those who oppose him disappear, or their loved ones suffer. A priest I knew in Santa Maria opposed him. The priest was beaten severely by four of Hernandez’s men and was in hospital for weeks for his preaching one sermon against him. Because this priest continued criticizing Hernandez’s malicious hold on city and government officials, three of the nuns in his care were kidnapped and... brutalized by Hernandez, himself.”

William moaned.

Marshall rumbled a growl deep in his being.

“Alright, that’s enough,” I said loudly, then lowered my voice. “We should pray for guidance.”

But I already Knew what actions we would take as Father Ramon began our prayers.

“Heavenly Father, You know the nature of Hernandez’s psychopathic mind, the depth of his depravities, and the danger he is to your people. We ask for Your guidance in dealing with this man and the wisdom to know Your will in this...”

* * *

Three late-model pickup trucks sat in the used car lot, the second sales yard we'd visited today. I stood watching in fascination as my husband placed his hands on the front hood of each truck. Using his mechanical talent he psychically assessed each machine to determine which was in the best condition. Marshall frowned in thought while standing over a German import.

This one has a cracked block. He looked over at Dante and Joy and then gave an apologetic shrug. They've hidden it with stop-leak. It won't last a month.

What about the red one? Dante asked.

Marshall turned his attention to the Ford F250 next to this truck, placed his hands on its hood, and scanned it. I could feel his energy wash over the vehicle.

The radiator is shot. So are the water pump and U-joints. You can see how bad the tires are. The tranny is held in with baling wire...

* * *

"Keep an eye on your drinks at all times," Dante warned as we four stood on the littered sidewalk near an old street vendor.

The Columbian version of the classic tamale was a bit spicy but delicious. This Columbian version of a bad neighborhood was alarming. Marshall stayed very close, and Judica leaned her big body protectively against my left leg.

There is a drug – burundanga – which criminals slip into people's food or drink, Dante explained as we enjoyed our first taste of the local food. Then they lure the victim away and... er. There are reports of robbery, auto theft, emptying of the victim's bank accounts, rape, and murder. The drug takes away the will and the memory of its victim. Large doses can cause unconsciousness and sometimes, death.

"We'll be careful," Marshall muttered around a mouthful of the wonderful lunch, and I saw Joy step closer to Dante.

* * *

Marshall? William whispered through my head as I sat near my husband on the bench seat of the big blue pickup he'd selected and Dante had haggled for. I need to get into the Hawkeye. Please, release your psychic lock.

Can do, he said, his wrist resting on the top of the steering wheel.

I felt energy flow briefly out of the man whose arm rested comfortably across my shoulders. Like a teen on a date, I snuggled close to my guy in the dually truck's cabin.

When will you be home?

I have no idea, William. Lord Dante's guiding us out of the city now.

"I wonder why he needs to get in there," I muttered, as Judica shifted in the back seat and settled back to sleep again.

* * *

There hadn't been much activity at the church when we drove past it on our way to meet William and Thomas at the hacienda. I didn't think much of it. The heat of the day was on us,

helping me appreciate the concept of a traditional siesta, real or contrived by Hollywood. I also thanked God for the truck's air conditioning. As we approached our turnoff onto Tio Leo's one-lane road, we discovered Katie, Tobias, and Richard herding all of our young children along the side of the road. I sensed the astral plane and found nothing wrong, and then felt William's brief explanation: We're having a roof completion barbecue. Come celebrate!

Ahead of us, Dante stopped his small pickup while commenting about picking up passengers and in a few minutes Tobias was helping Alex and Daniel into the back of our new truck. In the next moment, the tall teen opened the passenger door and slid onto the seat next to me, grinning his greeting. My Marshall checked the rearview mirror and then carefully rolled forward, again following Dante and Joy.

* * *

Beyond the little fountain in Leo's garden that was sheltered by the U-shaped house, Christmas lights brightened the evening sky and paper wedding bells swayed in a light breeze. Marshall and I swayed to the slow music of our official wedding dance. Jennifer, Penny, and William played the love song while Thomas uncorked the champagne.

On the astral plane, William felt apprehensive, but I couldn't sense why.

* * *

As we strolled out in the late evening air, making our way from the hacienda to the Hawkeye and our bed, I smelled a faint odor and frowned. God knows how much I hate the smell of chickens! Always have. The foul fowl had been installed in Leo's old chicken coups while we were in Santa Marta buying the huge blue dually pickup truck. I prayed the Hawkeye would always be upwind of the coup and that the stench would not come in my direction.

As we climbed into our airplane for the night, I saw a newly arrived cooler near the door and stepped over to it in the near dark. I called a small flame to my hand against the dark and bent to open the lid of the cooler. Marshall pulled the plane's hatch closed but did not seal it.

"Shall I light a candle?"

"Please," I replied, opening the large red cooler.

I found it stocked with ice, beer, wine, soft drinks, and a mason jar of milk. There were several sandwiches wrapped in paper along with a selection of cheeses and fresh fruit. And cookies!

The familiar click of his lighter was followed by a lesser light from my husband's direction, and then came the greater glow of the large pillar candle that rested on the makeshift nightstand next to our makeshift bed.

"If we can teach each other our talents, my Sweet, I want to learn to do that. Hello! What's this?"

I turned to see him looking at our pile of sleeping bags and blankets and was surprised to see that pile was considerably higher than it had been that morning. Bending over the nightstand, he lifted the lid of an ornate little box and took something out, turning toward me.

"Oh, that looks much softer," I breathed, with a little mental prayer of thanks.

"So that's why William wanted in here," he said with a chuckle, holding up a perfectly rolled joint. "It's been a while since we've indulged."

"Too long," I sighed, thinking of the immense changes this last week had brought.

“Let’s go outside while this place cools down a bit, eh?”

December 9

Hannah. Wake up. William’s mental call felt compelling but not alarmed. Marshall. Rise and shine, Warrior. I need both of you.

Opening my eyes, I could tell from the dim angle of the light outside that it was just after dawn. Next to me, my husband sighed, pulled me into his arms, and nuzzled my neck affectionately.

“So nice to have you here,” he murmured, bringing up recent memories of how we’d had to sneak time together just last week in Tennessee. Strong hands caressed -

No time for that! William grumbled through the link. Grab breakfast from the red cooler and come to St. Phillip’s as soon as you can. And arm yourself, Marshall.

“Any idea what’s going on?” He yawned, hugging me closer.

“I have an idea...”

“I have a better idea.” Gentle lips met mine and we flowed into each other with eager anticipation.

Let’s go, people! Now, William roared in the link, not quite the Voice, but determined and commanding. Thomas! Move it!

William... My husband growled back.

Now, Marshall.

Not before I teach him a few things, I sent, fighting down a growing fear.

Quickly, my Merlin.

He’ll need it for today, I insisted. It won’t take two minutes.

Quickly, he repeated and left the link to attend to his breakfast.

“Merlin, huh?” I could hear Marshall’s frown. “What’s going on?”

“You’re going demon hunting,” I whispered, trying to keep my voice from quivering. “Hush, Love! I need to teach you my flame and my kinetic shield. You did say you wanted to learn the fire last night.”

“Alright...” He muttered nervously. “Demon hunting, eh?”