



CANIS ROYAL: BRIDEFIGHT

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Chapter 1

Minneapolis, Minnesota



I wish I were dead.

It was 1:08 a.m. on the morning of September 17, and Lois Commoner was thinking thoughts that for her, of late, were quite typical.

As she was lying on the alley floor, listening to the victim's broken sobbing, she thought, *Would I go to Hell? Not a chance. This is hell. There's gotta be something else. And if there isn't, what do I have to lose?*

She banished such thoughts—now was *not* the time—and rolled over onto her stomach. She took a deep breath, put her palms flat on the filthy street, and pushed herself up until she was standing. This took six minutes and was just short of excruciating. Her knee was screaming. Her back had a kink in it. Her knuckles were bleeding. And she had a splitting headache. The headache bothered her more than anything else.

"I don't suppose you have any Advil in your pockets," she asked the vic, who was crying and holding her purse strap. The purse itself was, of course, long gone. "Or even a Tylenol?" The victim had probably been a nice-looking woman when her evening began. Now the carefully coiffed blonde hair was in disarray, her mascara was running down her cheeks, her dress was torn, and her shoulder probably hurt almost as much as Lois's knee. "How about just aspirin?"

The vic shook her head and kept crying. Lois's headache worsened. She considered telling the vic to cut the shit, then decided against it. She herself was pretty jaded on this stuff, but that was no reason to be an unsympathetic jerk. At least not out loud.

Sirens wailed in the distance, which was a distinct relief. Blondie would be off her hands, and on some beat cop's. Well, that's what she—*they*—were paid for.

"What happened?" Blondie finally asked. She held up her purse strap and stared at it like a betrayed lover. "Why didn't you stop him? Aren't you a cop? You told that— that *jerk* who took my purse you were a cop."

"Not anymore. I mean, I am, but I'm on desk duty now." Boy, did *that*



admission taste bad. She actually spat to clear her mouth, then continued. "I got hurt a while ago. I'm off the streets." Her knee throbbed agreement, as if to say, *Damn right, chickie, and what'd you take off after him for, anyway? You must've known you couldn't have caught him. Couldn't resist playing hero again, sap?*

But it wasn't that simple. She'd seen someone in trouble that was all. Heard the shriek and limped to the rescue. "Lois," her dad said before he choked to death on that Dorito, "boy, was that a bad choice for a name. You're nobody's sidekick, and you sure as shit never need rescuing."

That was then.

The black and white pulled up. She didn't recognize either of the officers who got out and approached them. They were as alike as two peas in a pod: both tall, stocky, and blonde, with blue eyes—typical Minnesota stock. Lois, with her wild curly black hair and brown eyes, always felt like a gypsy among her Scandinavian co-workers.

They moved in unison toward Lois and the vic, cautiously but also with restrained urgency. "*Fools rush in,*" her academy instructor had been fond of saying. "*And so do dead cops.*"

After carefully scanning the alley, one of the cops knelt beside Lois. "Good evening. I'm Officer Ristau, and this is my partner, Officer Carlson. Miss, do you need an ambulance? Either of you?"

"It's Detective Miss," she said, "and no. Just some Valium. Possibly some Percosets. But the vic would probably like an ambulance." *Or at least a shoulder to cry on.*

"He took my purse," Blondie said in a wounded voice. "My purse that my husband gave to me for Christmas. He took it. She tried to stop him and he took it anyway. My husband gave it to me."

She'd go on in this vein, Lois knew, for some time. Civilians were always utterly shocked when something unpleasant happened to them. They thought if



they paid their taxes and didn't jaywalk and ate enough fiber, they were immune from mugging, rape, homicide.

She envied them that surety. While giving her statement, Lois studied the cop's sidearm and thought about death.

Chapter 2

How to do it? Pills? Jump off the IDS tower? Stick the barrel of her Beretta in her mouth and pull the trigger? Watch the *Star Trek* marathon until she was brain dead? Eat all the leftovers in her fridge?

The gun, Lois decided, was not an option. Bad enough she was seriously considering the coward's way out; she wouldn't pervert her weapon by making it the instrument of her death. How many bad guys had she pointed it at? How many vics had she defended with it? How many hours had she spent on the shooting range, honing her skill to better serve her city? No, the gun was definitely out.

Pills were tempting. She had some excellent ones for her knee. Twenty of those, chased with a daiquiri or six, would probably do the job nicely. Add the Trekkie marathon to that and death was a certainty.

She got up from the couch, limped to her bathroom, grabbed the bottles out of the medicine cabinet, limped back, and lined them up like soldiers on her coffee table.

She looked at them thoughtfully. There wasn't much. She didn't believe in crutches, even when she had to use them to get down her front steps. As for pharmaceutical crutches, she hardly ever indulged. "Ballsy," her dad would have said. "Martyr," her mom would have sighed, shaking her head.

Well, they were both dead now. Following the "Dorito Mishap", her mother had mourned for eight months, then made two decisions: to visit her sister in St. Paul, and to fix her makeup at sixty-two miles an hour. The coroner hadn't been



able to decide if she'd died from the impact of crashing into the back of the semi, or from the eyeliner (Revlon's *Indigo Night*) being driven into her right eye.

She didn't miss her father much, if truth be told. He'd been too big, too gruff, too disappointed she wasn't a boy and, toward the end, too drunk. Her mother, though...that was a different story. Lois had felt adrift ever since her mother's death. When the one who bore you was gone, why bother with anything?

She shook off thoughts of her poor, doomed parents and returned her attention to the medication. There was a small bottle of Oxycontin, the drug of choice for addicts— she'd busted a few Oxycontin clinics in her day—a larger bottle of methadone, always popular with the chronic pain set, and a number of Duragesic patches.

She picked up one of the patches. How could she kill herself with these? Eat them? Stick a bunch around her heart?

And was she really, truly considering this? It sucked. It was the coward's way out. It defined her, forever, as a loser. The cops who found her after the neighbors called to report the smell would roll their eyes at each other. The coroner would roughly bundle her into a body bag. Her neighbors would shake their heads and her captain would be irritated. Her fellow detectives would be shocked that ballsy Lois Commoner had done such a thing, and would pity her, and would forget her.

She could feel a tear trickling down her left cheek, but made no move to wipe it away. Sure, it was a rotten thing to do, but what was the alternative? She'd been shot almost a year ago, and still woke to pain every morning. They'd never let her back on the streets. She'd been busted to desk officer, which meant she was one of the few secretaries in the city licensed to carry a firearm. Worst of all, she'd lost her shield.

The desk job was mindless, torturous, but she refused to take a medical retirement. *Then* what would she do? Sit around and try not to think about how



badly her knee hurt? Real fulfilling.

And also you're so lone –

She shut that thought away, fast. That had nothing to do with anything.

There's got to be something else. Heaven. Hell. Reincarnation. Something. This isn't it, it can't be all there is. I didn't work so hard for so long to have this be the end of everything. There's something else out there, I know it.

And if she was wrong, if there was nothing, she'd take that over an unfulfilling life of pain and ennui.

She unbuttoned her shirt, then grabbed the remote and flicked it on to the Sci-Fi channel. Ah, there was Kirk talking to a doomed red-shirted security guard. Hour three of the marathon. She wondered what people who weren't suicidal were watching.

She took one of the Duragesic patches and stuck it to her chest, just above her bra. She did the same with the rest, then poured out the pills and looked at them. It was funny—they were so small, but they could stop her heart if she took enough of them. And she planned to swallow every one.

If you do this, it's real. You'll be brain dead, followed by body dead. You can't take it back.

"God, I hope not," she said aloud, and went to plug in the blender.

* * * * *

For the first time in forever, her knee didn't hurt. Nothing hurt. She was floating— well, not really, she was still sitting on the couch but she was also floating...floating and watching McCoy chew Spock a new asshole...she spilled her drink oh no red stain on the carpet...oh well...Spock was logical...logical...logical to do this to end this...it was all right...anything was better and she couldn't...she couldn't...she couldn't...she was alone and had nothing but the job...and now she didn't have the job...so this was the only thing left to do...so she would do it and if it made her a coward okay...and if it made her a fool okay...as long as she wasn't lonesome anymore...as long as it was all done over the end...finito...farewell...

Chapter 3



"Aw, son of a bitch!"

Lois wasn't sure if she shouted it, or if it was just a thought. She could feel warm hands running over her limbs...

(checking for injury?)

...stroking her stomach, shoulders, even her breasts, and something warm and tickly on her lips, almost like a kiss, but of course that wasn't—

She was afraid to open her eyes and look. But she was afraid to keep lying there, too.

She wasn't dead. *Ergo*, she was alive. *Ergo*, she was in a hospital somewhere. *Ergo*, she'd have to go through Psych and treatment and then try again sometime when they weren't watching her anymore. Dammit!

She opened her eyes. And instantly assumed the overdose had driven her insane.

She wasn't in a hospital. She wasn't even in her house. She was lying on the ground, in the middle of what looked like a desert—there was hard-packed sand everywhere, and one or two scrawny trees, and dunes in the distance. But it wasn't hot—it felt like a perfectly pleasant seventy-five degrees or so. And the light tickling on her lips was actually a raspy tongue. A puma was standing over her, and the sky was lavender. She wasn't sure which was more startling.

She blinked, then slowly rose to a sitting position. Yep, that was a purple sky, all right. She was in a desert that wasn't hot, and the sky was the color of an iris petal. She had definitely gone crazy. And the puma was backing off but still watching her. Her cheek still throbbed from its rough tongue.

She stared at the big cat, which was staring right back. It was enormous—probably two hundred and fifty pounds at least. Its coat was the color of the desert sand and— weird!—its eyes were the color of the purple sky. Its paws were huge, easily as big across as her hand if she spread her fingers wide. It was sitting up very straight beside one of the stunted, twisted trees. Its tail—at least



five feet long, and as thick around as her wrist—switched lazily back and forth. It seemed tame—it hadn't killed her in her sleep, after all.

She thought about standing up, rejected the idea, then reconsidered. After all, why was she being careful? She'd tried to commit suicide and now she was worried about a predator? What in God's name for?

She stood, slowly, never taking her eyes off the big cat. It was only when she was on her feet that she realized the last thing, the most shocking thing—her knee didn't hurt. Not even a tiny bit.

She flexed. She crouched. She jogged in place. Nothing, not a twinge, not a whimper.

"It worked!" she cried, forgetting herself for a moment. "I'm dead and—and somewhere else." Heaven? Hell? Some weird place in between? Who cared? She was out of pain for the first time in a long, long time. "I'm okay! I'm here and I'm okay!"

The puma was strolling toward her. She was so elated she forgot to be afraid. "I'm better now," she told it. "Isn't that great?"

"What was wrong with you?" the puma asked. Except it didn't really speak—its jaws never moved. But she heard the question in her head.

After the purple sky and the painless limb, nothing was going to faze her. "Plenty of things," she answered. "But I guess things are finally looking up." She cleared her throat. The puma was standing no more than two feet away, looking up at her. "You're—uh—not going to eat me, are you?"

"I was thinking about it." Something was wrong with the cat's coat. It was shedding—no, its skin was rippling—no, it was sick—no, it was shrinking—no, it was growing—no, it was a man, a darkly tanned man with shoulder length tawny blonde hair and purple eyes. A man standing where the puma had just been. He grinned at her. His teeth were incredibly white and looked sharp. "Yes, I was definitely giving it some thought."



“Aaaaaaaaaa—”

“Are you all right?”

“—aaaaaaaaaaggggggggg—”

“My lady? What’s wrong?”

“—ggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhh—”

“Um, well, I will just change back, then.”

“—hhhhhhhhhhhh— what? No, don’t do that. Just give me a minute.”

Panting,

Lois sat down before she fell down. The puma man, who was splendidly nude, sat down cross-legged across from her. He was lightly tanned, with the sleek muscles she had noticed before. His stomach was a washboard, and his forehead was creased with concern.

“Perhaps you need a healer,” he suggested.

“Perhaps I need the department shrink. Um— what are you?”

“I am— a man, as you are a woman.”

She snorted. The world— this strange new place— had stopped tilting, that was

something. For a black moment, she’d thought she was going to faint. And that would be just too damned embarrassing. “Sure. Just a run-of-the-mill fella. Who can turn back and forth into a puma—”

“What is a poo-muh?”

“— and walks around naked and is magically delicious, besides.”

“I know no magic.”

“Never mind.” She was trying not to stare, but couldn’t help it. He was probably



the best looking guy she'd ever seen. He was big, but not bulky – his muscles had the lean definition of a swimmer's. His hair was gorgeous, tumbling around his shoulders, thick and wavy. His eyes were enormous, the palest lavender framed with darker purple lashes. His pubic hair, thank God, wasn't purple, but rather two shades darker than the hair on his head. His shoulders, legs, and arms were lightly furred, and his nails were longer than hers. Since she was a nail-biter, that wasn't much of a trick.

When they spoke, it was simultaneously.

"Where am I?"

"How did you come to be here?"

She laughed. "You first."

He smiled. She nearly flinched back, but restrained herself in time. His smile was much wider than a normal person's. She figured he had, at rough count, about a thousand teeth. "As you wish. This is my home. It is the SandLands. And you just appeared. Between one breath and the next, you appeared. I stayed, as I was curious. You slept for a long time."

"Well, thanks for not chomping me in my sleep."

He looked offended. "I would never."

"Oh, take it easy, I was only joking. As for your question, I have no friggin' idea how I came to be here. I tried – back at my house, I was drinking a lot and – never mind. Anyway, I passed out and the next thing I knew, I was here."

"You must be a sorceress of unimaginable power."

"Ah – no. No, don't think so. I think being here was a big-ass accident. A good accident," she said hastily when his forehead creased again. "But it was nothing I did on purpose. Um – what next?"

"You will come with me to my home. I wish my father and brothers to meet you."



“Oh. Okay, then. Doesn’t exactly sound like a request, though,” she added in a mumble.

He rose in one fluid movement while she gaped in admiration, then extended his hand. It was almost twice as big as hers, and she wasn’t exactly a shrimp.

She put her hand in his and let him pull her to a standing position. She sensed that he could have tossed her thirty feet if he wanted to. She tried not to stare below his waist, but couldn’t resist peeking. He was long, thick, and semi-erect, which was flattering.

As if reading her mind, he looked down into her face and said matter-of-factly, “You are extremely beautiful.”

She laughed at him. She hadn’t meant to, but it was an absurd comment. She was built like a fire hydrant—dense and practical, but hardly the willowy blonde curvy specimen so popular in American society. She had no waist, and her legs were too long, and her tits were only so-so—she’d been a B cup for years. Plus, she had multiple scars from years of street scuffles—knife wounds, bullet wounds, even a permanent rope burn a junkie, high on acid and Jack Daniel’s, had given her. Her hair was the nicest thing about her, and it was too curly, too wild, and the color of a tar pit.

He put his hand on her shoulders and turned her around. Even through her shirt, she could feel the heat from his hands, and his erection brushing against her back. This was alarming, yet delightful. She was facing the sun—a small, white orb—and in the distance she could see a castle.

“My home is there. May I keep you?” he asked, leaning down and speaking softly into her ear. She shivered and felt her entire left side erupt into goosebumps. She leaned back against him and felt him drop a kiss to the tip of her ear, then nuzzle the side of her neck. He was definitely an affectionate fellow, no doubt about that.



“Ah—nope. But I’d sure like to see where you live.”

“As you wish, my lady. And about the other, we shall see.” Before she could puzzle out what *that* was supposed to mean, his hands were abruptly gone, and when she turned to look at him, he was a puma again.

Out of pure curiosity, she stretched out her hands. Even when she put her hands thumb to thumb and spread her fingers wide, his head was still wider. He was truly enormous, bigger than any cat she’d ever seen on her own world.

“*My lady, what are you waiting for?*” She could hear him laughing in her head. “*Mount, if you please.*”

She blushed all the way down to her toes at the mental image that phrase conjured up, then awkwardly clambered on top of him with many grunts. “You mean I have to ride you to the castle-thingey?”

“*Most citizens would say, ‘O good lord, you mean I, your humblest servant, am allowed to ride atop you?’*”

“Yeah, well, I’m not from around here, pally.”

He laughed in her head again—God, that was so *weird!*—dug into the sand with all four paws, and they were off like a shot. She shrieked with surprise and joy and nearly fell off. She gripped him tighter with her knees and clutched his fur, which was coarse and soft at the same time—like rough silk. The stunted trees were whizzing by, his paws thudded into the hard-packed sand with the regularity of a metronome, and above her the lavender sky whirled and twirled. She laughed aloud for the first time in a year.

“Oh, faster, can you go faster?” The wind was rushing in her face and the dust was making her eyes water but she didn’t give a tin-shit. All she knew was that she wasn’t dead—or if she was dead, it was pretty swell—she wasn’t in pain, and she was enjoying the first puma ride of her life with the most intriguing man she’d ever met. “Faster!”

She could hear the delight in his voice. “*Most ladies—and lords!—would be*



yetching all over my coat by now."

"Yetching? You mean puking, barfing? Throwing up? Ha! I haven't thrown up since I was eight," she said scornfully. "And that was because I ate all our leftover Halloween candy."

"Hallo'een? You mean Spirit Night?"

"Hmm, *that's* interesting. Looks like your home and my home have some interesting parallels. And the reason I'm using words like 'interesting parallels' is because *you're not going...fast...enough.*"

He snorted, then poured it on. She didn't talk anymore. She concentrated solely on hanging on. She had never been happier in her life.

Chapter 4

"That was something," she said, jumping off. She was panting from the adrenaline rush, but her knee didn't as much as squeak in pain. And she took fresh delight in that. "That was *really* something. Hey, gorgeous, maybe we can do it again sometime?"

He popped back to human form. It was still too quick for her eye to accurately report what happened when he transformed. "I am at my lady's command."

"Well, isn't that nifty. So, um—you live here?"

'Here' was the castle. When she'd seen it from the middle of the desert, it had looked like a small white castle floating in the distance. Up close it was, she figured, about the size of the Mall of America, and just as sprawling. She had to tip her head waaaaaaay back to see the top of the spires.

It looked just like the castles she'd seen pictures of back home, except it was pure, dazzling white. She assumed they had mined the stone from a nearby quarry...about a thousand years ago. The flags flying atop the spires were brightly colored and had animals on them—she spotted a puma atop all the others, but lions, leopards, and even a few housecats were also represented.



There were several people about, going to and from the castle, and every one of them was staring at her as they hurried by. She assumed it was her clothes – or her coloring, because they were, to a man, woman, and child, all blonde. And they sure weren't wearing an old workout bra and tattered gym shorts. Shit, she was practically as naked as the puma-man was. Somewhere along the way, her old shirt had disappeared.

There were dozens of shades of blonde represented, from the fairest platinum to what her dad had always called "dirty dishwater blonde". And while many of them had wavy locks, none of them sported a headful of wild curls, as she did.

Ah, great...dead and a freak. Perfect.

"...all my life."

"Huh?"

"I said, in answer to your question, that I have lived in the Castle Royale all my life."

"Oh, right. Sorry, I forgot the question. Is that why they're staring at me instead of you? I mean, at least *I'm* wearing clothes."

"I told you," he said simply. "You are beautiful, and so they stare."

"Uh-huh." She changed the subject. "So, are you going to give me the nickel tour, or what? After you get dressed," she added in a mutter.

His brow wrinkled. "Uh...yes. Might I first have your name, good lady?"

"Right! I can't believe I forgot about that."

"You are increasingly forgetful, it seems," he teased.

She grinned back. As long as he was standing here, talking to her, she didn't mind the stares so much. "Today, yes. I'm Lois Commoner."

She stuck out her hand. He looked at it and didn't say anything.

"Helloooooo?" She waved her hand in front of his face. "And you are?"

"Please forgive; I was waiting to hear your rank and affiliations."



"Oh, as to that—well, up 'til yesterday, it was Detective Lois Commoner, Minneapolis Police Department."

"That is an odd affiliation."

"Well, it worked for me, once upon a time."

He took her still-proffered hand, and seemed unsure of what to do with it. Finally he patted it. "I am Damon."

"Is that Demon or Damien? 'Cuz I got problems with both."

"Day-MAWN."

"Oh." He stuck out his hand and she shook it firmly. He watched their hands pump up and down, bemused. "It's nice to meet you. Thanks again for the ride."

"You have but to ask if you desire another one. Come, I would like you to meet my father."

He hadn't let go of her hand; instead he pulled her through the gigantic doorway, into the castle's—er, yard, or whatever it was called. But before they could get very far, a short blonde woman wearing what looked like a leather tunic and pants came racing toward them. Lois didn't have a chance to see what she looked like before she skidded in the dirt before them, then hit the ground with her arms stretched over her head. "Forgive my impertinence, Prince Damon!" she cried into the dirt. "His Majesty the King has been asking for you all morning."

Damon charged for the inner door, pulling Lois so hard she actually lost her footing. "Whoa! Slow down. Or leggo and I'll follow you."

"Forgive—I will be right back. Remain here, if you please." With that he dropped her hand and was through the door in a half second.

She rubbed her wrist—he hadn't meant to hurt her, but the marks of his fingers remained—and stared at everyone staring at her.

Two choices: hang out here and be gawked at, or follow Damon. Prince Damon. Did she say Prince?



She followed.

* * * * *

It wasn't difficult to track Damon down. She followed the shouting. Two floors and five halls later, she figured out what the problem was. It seemed the king—Damon's dad?—was as sick as a dog, and everybody was yelling at everybody else about what to do about it. From the fuss, these guys didn't get sick very often.

She peeked through the doorway—no doors that she had seen, just large archways that led from one room to another. The archways were tall—at least seven feet high—and so wide, four of her could have gone through it at once.

She could see Damon and two other men standing around yelling. Well, they weren't exactly yelling—they were sort of politely disagreeing with each other very loudly. At least Damon had put some clothes on—he was wearing a robe several shades lighter than his hair, with a blazing sun embroidered on the front.

“—all respect to my good lordly brother—”

“—helping our good Father the King by—” “—turn a slops bucket o'er my good lordly brother's tiny head—”

“—try it, my good tiny brother—”

“—both of you should grow headfirst in a pile of Stinkweed, beloved Princes—”

Others—she assumed they worked in the castle, as they weren't dressed nearly as nicely as Damon's brothers—were surrounding Damon and the men, and occasionally trying to get a word in edgewise.

She walked down to the next room and peeked inside. And gasped—what a room!

She'd seen a picture of the queen's chambers at Buckingham Palace once. This room put Queen Elizabeth's digs to shame.



It was enormous—the ceiling was at least twenty feet high, and the room itself was as big as the entire Homicide department. Windows had been cut into the stone near the top of each wall, and the floor was splashed with pale lavender sunlight.

A professional football team could have comfortably slept in the bed, but there was only one person in it now—a man whose blonde hair was liberally sprinkled with gray. He looked to be in his late fifties, and his complexion had a definite greenish tinge. He was huddled under richly embroidered blankets—only his head was showing—and looked as unhappy as a junkie in withdrawal.

He groaned in abject misery, which made up her mind. She cautiously approached the bed and cleared her throat.

“Hi there,” she said. His eyes—the same pale purple as Damon’s—opened wide and he stared at her, stunned. “Can I get you something? Some Pepto Bismol? A bucket? You look like you’re gonna—”

He groaned again, lurched upright, and threw up all over her.

“—be sick,” she finished. She stood there, dripping, and contemplated him. “Something you ate?” she asked at last.

He nodded and slumped back against the filthy bedclothes. “That I should so dishonor a lady, and one who came to me out of a need to lend aid!”

“Chill out, I’ll live. You know, you’d be a lot more comfortable with clean sheets. And wouldn’t you like some soup? Like—uh—chicken broth? Do they have chickens here? Never mind, I’ll find out. And aren’t you thirsty? If you’re gonna be this sick, you should drink a lot. Don’t go away,” she added.

She turned, and saw several people—Damon among them—standing in the huge doorway. “Yeah, there you are—listen, I’m going to need clean sheets, and some cold water—can you do ice water?—and some broth. Light stuff, nothing heavy. Maybe a little bread, if you have some. Oh, and someone better find me an old shirt or something to run around in. Don’t suppose there’s a washing



machine in the basement?"

Nobody moved.

"Hey! I'm talking to you people!" She marched up to the doorway and made shooing gestures. "Get your asses in gear, the old guy's pretty miserable."

"You cannot be here," one of the servants finally ventured, eyes rolling like a scared horse. "This area is for royalty and the servants of same. You—"

"—seem to be the only one *doing* something."

"Do as she commands," Damon said suddenly. Beside him, two other muscular blondes—his prince brothers?—were smiling at her.

"Well, *thank* you."

"But 'the old guy' is His Majesty the King! She cannot—"

"I don't give a shit if he's the Pope. He's hurting, and you dildos are just standing around. Now *move*." She put her hand on the nearest chest—it was Damon's—and shoved. Then she noticed the heavy curtain beside the doorway, and tugged on it. It fell into place, obscuring everyone from sight, with a satisfying flap.

From behind the heavy curtain, she heard a plaintive, "What is a dildo?", and then many retreating footsteps.

"Come here," the king said weakly.

She turned and stomped back to the bed. "Sorry about that, but Jesus! Someone had to light a fire under those guys."

"My name is not Jesus. But you do such things very well. Sit here beside me. Ah— your clothing will be tended to, and I must again humbly implore your forgiveness for my foul and coarse behavior—"

"Don't worry about it. You wouldn't believe how many times I've been puked on, spit on, had shit flung at my head, not to mention bullets—this is nothing. Shoot, I've had dates that weren't this pleasant."

"The lady is too kind. If you will permit a bold query, does your striking



coloring come from your sire or your dam?"

"Um...my mom's Black Irish, if that's what you mean."

"I do not know that tribe. I *would* know all about how you came to my home." He leaned back against the pillows and wriggled to get comfortable. He looked happy for the first time since she came into the room.

Poor guy's probably bored to death. Not used to staying in bed, that's for damn sure.

"Sure, I'll talk. What do you want to know?"

"I do beg you to tell me everything, good lady."

"Your son—Damon?—brought me. My name's Lois, by the way."

"I am Sekar, Lord High King of the SandLands, Ruler of the Exalted Ranges of the OnHigh Mountains, Emperor of the Snowy Islands, Maker of the—"

"So, Sekar, yeah, nice to meet you." She automatically stuck her hand out, then cursed herself as he just looked at it. She sort of waved at him and continued. "As to how I got here..." She started to talk. She was still talking when tight-lipped servants showed up with fresh nightgowns—one for her, one for the king—sheets, blankets, and food.

While the servants bustled around, changing sheets and offering her clothes, the king beckoned and Damon was instantly at his side. He started to kneel, but the king waved weakly and Damon took his hand instead. "Ho, my son, when you said you left to go a-hunting, I did not think you should enjoy so much luck!"

"Nor I, my good father."

"And at exactly the right time, too."

"Yes, father."

"Right time for what?" Lois asked, but then she was hustled behind a changing divider, and being divested of her clothes. She slapped the servant's hands away. "I can undress myself, thanks. What's your name?"

"Zeka, my lady."



Zeka—poor kid, what a moniker!—was a petite woman with curly blonde hair and the greenest eyes Lois had ever seen. They were the color of a newly mown lawn, and as big as quarters. She was dressed simply in a white robe—in fact, all the servants were dressed in white, draped robes; they looked like escapees from the set of *Gladiator*.

“Well, Zeka, whatcha got there?”

Teeny Zeka was hefting a brimming stone jug—the thing had to weigh thirty pounds!—with one arm, and pouring bluish-purple water into a large basin. A delightful perfumed scent rose from the splashing water; a cross between roses and water lilies. Suddenly Lois wanted a bath. Very badly.

“If you would be so good to hand me your soiled clothes, I will see them washed. In the meantime, if you approve you may wear this.” She held up a plain white robe.

“Sure, looks great. Thanks a lot.” Lois quickly stripped down to nothing, feeling a little awkward. She would have preferred to keep her panties, but all her clothing stank. Working quickly, she sponged herself clean with the water and rough towel Zeka provided. She turned to slip into the robe when Zeka gasped.

“You—you have many, *many* battle marks!”

“Uh, yeah. Also known as hideous scar tissue. Thanks for noticing—and yelling about it.” Lois knew her body wasn’t exactly a candidate for a *Playboy* pullout. “Jeez, calm down, willya?”

But Zeka was already darting out of the small changing space. She heard urgent whispers and grabbed for the robe, about two seconds too late. Suddenly the divider was wrenched aside, and Damon and his brothers were standing there.

“Jesus Christ!”

“By the Great Lion,” one of the brothers whispered. “What a woman!”



The other brother reached out and touched the puckered bullet scar above her right breast. She smacked his hand away with her fist and clutched the robe to her chest. "Hands off, unless you want to spit out your teeth," she snapped. The princes' eyebrows arched as she continued. "You guys might be comfortable walking around without any clothes on, but I'm an old-fashioned girl."

"Things are different here," Damon said mildly, his gaze riveted to the rope burn on her shoulder. "Thanks for the news flash. Now buzz off so I can get dressed!"

"What is it?" the king called weakly. "What is the matter?" "Nothing, father," Damon said. "Our visitor is simply more beautiful than any of us had imagined."

"Lord, what has that boy been smoking?" she muttered. One of the brothers edged forward, staring at the knife scar near her belly button, but she kicked out at him, effectively herding him back. The other brother laughed. "Get lost. Go find some other woman to ogle."

"Oooh-gull?"

"Stare at. Gape. Gawk."

"I must beg a lady's pardon, but your beauty robbed us of—"

"Yeah, yeah."

"—our good manners. I am Maltese, second in line to the throne of the SandLands,

Prince of the—" "Fine, I'm Lois, nice to meet you." The other blonde—they were as alike as twins, except this one had eyes the deep green of wet leaves, while Maltese's eyes were the color of the sea after a winter storm.

"I am Shakal, third in line to the—" "Meetcha. You mind turning around while I put this on?" "I do mind, yes." "I also."



She almost grinned. They hadn't sounded like sarcastic jerks, just honest. "Fine, I'll turn." She did, and heard an exhalation of breath come from someone. What now? Were they admiring the dimples on her ass? Christ!

"How did my lady come here?"

"To make a long story short, Damon gave me a ride."

Zeka gasped. "But the Royal Family never—"

"Zeka," Maltese said reprovingly. "What our good brother does is none of our concern...usually."

"Forgive, my good prince."

When she turned back, Damon was shooing his brothers away with helpful punches to their shoulders. She opened her mouth but he cupped her chin in one hand, effortlessly stifling her outburst. "I believe I requested you stay in the courtyard," he said solemnly, but his eyes crinkled at the corners in a friendly way.

"What am I, your dog? 'Sit, Lois. Stay.' Shyeah! Pass. Besides, I don't like being left by myself," she added in a grumble.

"Then I shall endeavor to be at your side at all times."

"Uh—that's not exactly what I—"

"Lois! My good son!"

"Just a *minute*, we're *talking*. Jeez, sick people, I swear to God. Now, listen, Damon, I gotta figure out about a zillion things, here, like where I'm gonna stay, and—"

"With me."

"Uh. Okay, that's very nice and all, but—"

"Put her in the chambers beside mine," the king called.

Lois thought that was awfully nice of him, but the effect on Damon was dramatic: his eyes went narrow and flinty and he actually snarled, *snarled*, like one big pissed-off cat. Puma. Whatever.



He spun around and stalked back to the king's bed. "What be you thinking, my good king who will be my dead king if he tries to take my prize?"

"Peace, my son. The lady needs a chamber appropriate to her station...whatever that will be. And we have agreed those rooms would suit that station, yes?"

"Uh...yes."

"Those rooms have been empty too long. As to the other matter, I have not decided."

"What? What does that mean? What's everyone talking about? Can I get a translator or something? Hey, get your ass back in bed!" She walked over and gave the king a gentle push. He seized her arm with surprising strength, and Lois found herself pulled forward onto the king's giant bed, with an old man who was as strong as an ox staring right into her eyes. "Listen, buster, I'm all for respecting your elders, but you've got about half a second to—"

"Peace, Lady Lois. I only wished to catch the full effect of your scent." He sniffed her hair. "Feh! You smell much like my yetch, despite your washup. Damon, see that she gets a proper bath. Lois, when you are clean, come back and tell me more of your world. I wish to hear more about 'the IA pricks and the dumbass political games'."

"After you eat your soup," she said firmly.

"The child knows our station and yet dares to give the king orders! Well, twould not kill me to obey, instead of being obeyed. It will be as you wish, Lois. But you must stay for a long time and tell many stories." Despite Damon's frown, she agreed.

Chapter 5

"Damn!"

"Is something wrong?"

"Hardly." Lois stared at the bathing room. It was about half the size of the



king's chambers, which meant it was the largest bathroom in the galaxy. Instead of a tub, there was a pool in the middle of the room, and from the perfume in the air, it was more of that delicious bathing water Zeka had poured for her. Big bunches of white flowers— the blooms were as big as her fist—floated in the pool. They looked like fluffy orchids. There were several marble countertops scattered about the room, and two people were getting massages.

“May I bathe with you, Lady Lois?”

“Uh—” *No way. Buzz off. I usually take baths by myself. I doubt I'll be able to keep my hands off you, so for your own safety...* “Sure.” Given that there were at least half a dozen people in the room, she wasn't worried about her virtue—not that she had any to worry about. Besides, he'd opened up his home to her, and she would have a place to sleep, at least for tonight. To refuse—especially when this society seemed so open about public nudity—would be churlish, to say the least.

Still, it wasn't every day she stripped in front of strangers.

She got out of her robe as quickly as possible, tossed it on a countertop, and stepped down into the pool. She heard a gasp of appreciation behind her and rolled her eyes. What *was* it with these people? They clearly had her confused with Pamela Anderson.

The water was deliciously warm and she sank into it up to her chin. She couldn't help groaning appreciatively as the perfumed water soothed her all over. “Oh, *man*, this is the life.”

“Indeed.”

She whipped around; Damon had managed to come up right behind her without her hearing him. “Jeez, don't do that! I swear I'm hanging a bell around your neck.”

He smiled at her and plucked a flower out of the water. “If it pleases you. Now, you will allow me...?”

She cautiously approached him, and he plunked the flower on top of her



head. While his fingers were busily working through her hair, she realized the flower's petals were disintegrating into a kind of soap.

His fingers were marvelously strong and she resisted the urge to melt against him. This was probably the best day of her life—and she'd only been here three hours! She knew she should be fretting—she'd started the day planning to be dead, after all. She knew she should be thinking about how to get home, or at least worrying about her future. This place couldn't be as great as it seemed. It just couldn't. But all she wanted to do was let Damon rub her all over, then take a nap.

"You are soooooo good at that."

"Thank you. It is a true pleasure to attend to my lady's needs." Now he was washing her breasts, working the sudsy petals all over her skin, paying special care to her nipples, which instantly swelled and started to ache.

What's wrong with me? I'm letting a stranger feel me up in a public bath house! And it feels really, really good.

She batted his hands away, and he obligingly drew her closer and began working the suds into her back. She was pressed against his broad chest and could feel his erect length pressing into her stomach.

Thank goodness it's a public bath, or who knows what I'd let this guy do?

"Um." She turned her face so her cheek was resting against his nipple. It was either that, or give in to the urge to lick it. "Thanks for letting me stay here. I s'pose I should figure out where to go tomorrow, or at least—"

"Later," Damon said firmly, still stroking her back.

"Works for me," she sighed. One of the flowers floated by and she grabbed it. "Here, let me return the favor." She pulled back, rubbed it over his chest and watched in fascination as the leaves crumbled into a sweet-smelling foam. "What's this stuff called?"

"These are *Beriblooms*."



“Well, they’re great. I could ship a crate to Mary Kay, make a fortune.”

“Is Mary Kay as lovely as you?” He kissed the corner of her mouth at the same time

she felt his hands slide over her buttocks and rub, rub, rub. “Um...what?” “Mary Kay.” His fingers were kneading her flesh and she had to fight the urge to grab his cock. “What about Mary Kay?” “What?” “Um.” “Ah.” She was reaching for what she craved when... “Oh ho, good brother!” She looked up and saw the other two princes standing by the pool. The smaller one—“smaller” meaning he was only five inches taller than she, as opposed to seven— was kneeling by the pool, dabbling his fingers in the water. The taller one—was it Maltese?— was standing with his arms crossed over his chest. She jerked back from Damon, feeling her face grow hot from mortification.

“Now, my good lordly brother, you must give everyone a chance,” Maltese chided. “No I must not,” Damon replied cheerfully. He reached out and pulled Lois back against his soapy chest. She wriggled, but he had a grip like iron. “It should be an interesting sunrise, then,” Shakal said, grinning. “Even more so if Father joins in.” Damon lost his smile, not to mention his hard-on. “You don’t think—?” “No. Still, he is our good lord, and his will is the will of the SandLands, so who

knows?” “I wish you guys would tell me what you’re talking about,” she said irritably. Then, to Damon, “Leggo.”

“Tomorrow is the Bridefight,” Shakal explained. “Many, many royals and nobles will come to battle for mates. The winner gets first choice of the ladies. The secondwinner gets second choice, and so on. This happens once every three sunrounds, so it is our great good luck that you are visiting.”



"Oh. Say, you're not kidding. That sounds kind of interesting. Can I watch?"

"You are the guest of honor," Damon whispered in her ear, which made her shiver.

"Quit that. Great! I'd sure like to see it. Uh—you guys don't battle to the death or anything, do you?"

"Hardly ever," Maltese said after a pause.

Shakal grinned. "No one has perished in many, many sunrounds."

"Of course, when there is a new element—"

"Tempers flare."

"But all will probably be well."

"The three of you can stop teasing me any second now," she said irritably.

"Really, you're like a bunch of kids."

"Goats?"

"Children."

"Ah! Cubs!"

"*Anyway.* I'm clean enough. And so are you," she told Damon, who tried to grab her again but, slick as an eel, she slipped away. "Can someone show me where I'm s'posed to sleep?"

Maltese and Shakal tussled so hard for the privilege, it was an easy matter for Damon to boot them into the pool, and escort Lois to her sleeping chambers.

* * * * *

Lois peeked in on the king, who was asleep. "I'll come back tomorrow morning," she whispered to Damon.

"I will tell him, if he is wakeful."

"Thanks."

He brought her to the next chamber, which was as large as the king's, except with softer colors—moss greens and tans and pinks.



"Holy cow! Are you sure I'm supposed to sleep here?"

The two servants—the room was so big she hadn't noticed them right away—jumped to attention. "Good even, my lady!" one of them—it was Zeka—said. "If it is your will, we will help you retire."

"Would my lady like a bedsnack ere she retires?" The other servant, a short, stocky man with reddish blonde hair and a goatee, stepped forward with a covered tray.

"A bedsnack—yeah, sounds great. A sandwich would be perfect."

"We have *pupoons*, *graldens*, and *derslang*s."

Pupoons turned out to be fruit that tasted like a strawberry mated with a pear, except it had blue, pebbly skin. *Graldens* were delightfully chewy nuts that put hazelnuts to shame—and you could eat the shells, too! *Derslang*s were tiny little biscuits that tasted like they'd been smothered in honey and butter, and baked until tender.

"No more," Lois groaned some time later. "Cripes, I'm so full I'm gonna puke. And I think there's been enough of that for one day."

"Good eve," Damon said to the servants, who cleaned up the platters and quickly left.

"Say, they had a major attitude adjustment," Lois commented, sitting on the bed. "When I was helping your dad, I thought they were gonna hit me."

"Mmmm."

"You didn't—uh—say anything, did you?"

"No. My father did...when he gave you the queen's chambers."

She blinked. "The queen's?"

"My departed mother's," he said simply. "When our sister was born, she took a bedfever and perished. My sister did not wish to be a babe without her dam, and quickly followed her to the Spirit World."

"I'm sorry. That sucks."



"Yes. It sucked quite a lot."

"How old were you when it happened?"

"I had sixteen sunrounds."

"That's really rotten. Both my parents are dead, but at least I got to grow up first."

"It would seem we have a great deal in common."

"Uh, sure." *Not.* She changed the subject. "It was nice of your dad to give me your mom's room, but do you think it's okay? I mean, this is *the queen's bedroom*. I'm a nobody. I can't even get a Gold card back home."

"The king's will is our will."

"Still." But she shrugged and climbed under the covers. The bed was delightfully soft and she sank into it a good eight inches. "Ahhhhhhhh, I could get used to this."

"That is good."

"What?"

He bent over her. It was so creepy, the way he could cross a room without making a sound. "Good even, my lady." He kissed her on the forehead, like a brother.

"Night, Damon. Thanks again for everything today."

He kissed her on the cheek like a brother.

"Uh—good night."

He kissed her on the mouth, not remotely like a brother. His tongue swept inside and his hand was on the back of her neck—hard, possessive. She figured she should kick or gouge or something, but he smelled great and he was unbelievably gorgeous and hey, he was a prince, too. What the fuck.

She kissed him back. She rubbed her tongue against his and clutched his shoulders, which were thrumming with strain. He made a noise, deep in his throat, quite like a growl, and then she was tugging him toward her.

"Don't just stand there," she growled. "Tuck me in."



"It is forbidden," he said soberly. "You are an honored lady and guest." Still, he was climbing under the sheets with her. "Also, you are an excellent wine."

"Thanks. You've got some pretty good mojo yourself going on, Damon." This was difficult to say without breathing hard, as his hands were stroking over her breasts, her stomach, and were now easing her thighs apart. "You'd...uh...better get lost before I do something *really* crazy." *Killing myself was nutty enough.* "I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Well. There are ways and ways." She couldn't see him anymore; he had ducked beneath the covers. She could feel his mouth close over one of her nipples and groaned. His mouth—his body!—were a few degrees warmer than hers, and he felt like the most sensual electric blanket ever imagined.

"Sure, but also, I'm not the kind of girl who fucks on a first date. Not that we've been on a date," she added breathlessly as he licked the cup of her bellybutton. "But you know what I mean."

"I do not." She could barely hear him; he was muffled against her flesh. "But I will find out."

She put her hands on his shoulders, marveling at the firm feel of his muscles beneath her palms. Then he ducked lower, and she felt his thumbs on her cunt, parting her, and then felt him take a long, slow lick.

She nearly leapt off the bed. His tongue was raspy and felt utterly, unbelievably delightful. He licked her like a cat lapping up a bowl of cream, and she squirmed around to offer him better access. Her legs were spread so wide she was practically doing splits. She could hear what sounded like a throaty growl...then she realized he was purring, purring while he licked and sucked and licked some more.

When his tongue rasped over her clit again and again she crammed her fist against her lips—mindful of the king sleeping next door—and groaned wildly against her fingers. Her uterus clenched and she felt waves of pleasure race



down her limbs as she came...and came...and came.

He crawled back up and she reached down, groped for his cock, and stroked the delicious long velvety length. His eyes rolled up as she tightened her grip and pumped, and in a matter of seconds she could feel him spurting.

"Good thing we didn't actually have sex," she chortled as he collapsed over her. "Ew. Don't even think about making me sleep on the wet spot."

"I will have servants change the bedclothes," he groaned.

"No, forget it. It's late. Besides, this bed is huge. I'll just slide six feet over and sleep there."

"Perhaps I will, also."

"Perhaps you should get your ass back to your own bed." Mutual coming was one thing, but she wasn't about to actually *sleep* with a near-stranger. She did have some standards.

He groaned again and stood, then staggered toward the doorway. "I leave you then, my lady Lois of the magical fingers."

"As a nickname, that leaves a lot to be desired." Her eyelids were already drooping. It had been a helluva day.

"Until tomorrow, lady magical fingers." He grinned at her, and left, closing the door-curtain behind him. She slept deeply, sweetly...and without pain.

Chapter 6

The next morning, servants woke her up, dressed her in gorgeous flowing robes the color of cherry Kool-Aid, and escorted her down one floor, where Damon and Maltese were waiting. Her new clothes, she noticed, were quite a bit nicer than the simple white robe the servants had offered her yesterday. That was a troubling thought, but she determinedly pushed it away. Nothing was going to spoil this, her first full day in a new land.

"Good morn, my lady!"



"Hi, Maltese. Hi, Damon." She practically blushed looking at him, remembering last night all too well. And from the way he was looking at her, he was thinking the same thing she was.

"You slept well?" he asked politely, but his gaze was so hot, it nearly scorched her.

"Slept *great*. Is it breakfast time? Is that where you guys are going?"

"A lady with a fine appetite," Maltese said approvingly. "That is good."

"You should have seen all the *derslang*s she devoured last even," Damon teased. "I admit I feared to approach too closely."

"Har-de-fucking-har."

"Nearly all is in readiness for the fights today," Damon explained as they walked her down the corridor. "Your place has been chosen; once you have broken fast we will take you there. We must then prepare ourselves."

"Okay. Thanks again for the ringside seat. Is this an okay thing to wear today?"

"You look beautiful," Maltese assured her. "You are a visitor, so no one expects to see your rank badges or affiliations."

"I do have a badge, though. I mean, I did. I guess my old shield would be the closest thing to an affiliation. Jeez, I sure wish my footlocker was here."

"Your what?"

"My footlocker...it's this big metal box that I kept at the foot of my bed. Most women have hope chests; I've got my dad's old army footlocker. Anyway, it had some

old clothes, and my shield, a bunch of my guns and some ammo, too." She shrugged and turned. "Oh, well, no use crying over — ow!" Lois suddenly ended up on the floor. She'd tripped over something. Something that hadn't been there five seconds ago.

She looked over her shoulder and saw her foot locker. Damon leaned down.



“Are you going to make that noise again?” “Aaaaaaggggggggggggg—” “I take it this is your footlocker?” “—ggggggggghhhhhhhhh!” Damon helped her up. She reared back and gave her footlocker a kick—yep. Solid as a rock. This was no hallucination. “Someone better tell me *what the fuck is going on!*”

“I told you,” Damon said patiently, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward. “You are a powerful sorceress. You have but to call what you need out of the air, and it comes.”

“It has happened before,” Maltese added.

“*What?* You mean other people have just sort of popped up, and they wish out loud

for things, and then their shit shows up, too?” “...yes. If I understand you correctly.” “Do not count on it,” Damon chortled. “Jeez, why didn’t any of you *say* something? So I could—I could wish myself home, if I wanted?”

Damon looked distinctly alarmed, and now Maltese was the one fighting a smile. “Peace, my good brother—as to your question, fair Lois, yes, you could wish yourself home. But not for much longer. The ability only lasts for a few sunsets. Then you will remain with us until the end of your days.”

“Oh.”

“There was no need to tell her that,” Damon said sulkily.

“Shame, my good prince. To keep things from a lady so as to not have an interruption to your pleasures.”

Damon flushed, but she was barely paying attention. Things were getting—she could hardly believe it was possible—weirder and weirder. There must be a portal or something, a doorway between her world and theirs, and when



someone from Earth was near death, they could get through it. Or something. Shit, what did she know? She'd never read so much as a single sci-fi book in her life. True crime was more her literary bag. "Well, that's—interesting. I guess."

"You will not," Damon said firmly. "You will not wish yourself away."

"And if I do?" she teased.

"Then I will gag you until your ability has flown."

"Careful," she warned, though she felt a tingle at his silly-ass possessiveness. "My footlocker's here now, with all my guns. Mind I don't shoot off your kneecap."

"That does sound unpleasant," he admitted.

"Has anyone ever gone back?"

"No. Never. I would be...displeased...should you be the first."

"Hmm." She lapsed into silence. So no one had gone back—they'd killed themselves or died while desperately unhappy and woken up in a land of shapeshifters and uncommon courtesy, a land where the weather was sunny and seventy-five degrees, where the royal family was worshipped but the commoners had it pretty good, too. Where strangers were welcomed and wooed. No fucking wonder no one had gone back.

The question was, would she be the first?

And why was she even considering it?

* * * * *

She really did have the best seat in the house. It was right next to the king's chair, which was conspicuously empty. Servants practically fought for the privilege of bringing her treats, and before the Bridefight had even started, Lois was stuffed.

Still, she kept eating. She picked another squashy sweetmeat out of the brimming bowl Zeka was holding for her. "What are these things?"



“*Kumkoss*, my lady.”

“Well, they taste like the hybrid of a Tootsie Roll and a marshmallow. Yum! Say, it’s kind of making me nervous, the way you hover over me all the time. Why’n’t you sit down, take a load off?”

Zeka looked alarmed. “I could not, my lady.”

“It’s Lois, and sure you can. Just have a seat.”

“You are kind, but I must not. Look! They begin.”

Still chomping, Lois looked. The place really was like something out of *Gladiator*...the arena was all hard-packed sand and blinding white, almost too white to look at. The tanned fighters stood out dramatically against it. They were, naturally, naked and, interestingly, a few of them were aroused. Thinking about picking their future brides, maybe? She couldn’t help but notice there wasn’t a teeny weeney in the bunch. Lois finally quit trying to avert her eyes—there were about twenty naked guys running around the arena floor, too many to avoid looking at—and settled back to enjoy the show.

Still, irritating thoughts kept intruding. Like, *If I killed myself here, would I wake up back on earth? Or would I be dead-for-real? And why am I thinking about this morbid shit? Jeez!*

The fighters were announced one by one. Surprisingly, they all trotted up to her seat and bowed when their names were called. She waved back. These guys really knew how to treat a visitor! And they all looked like escapees from a Mr. Hardbody calendar. Not a scrawny, short fella in the bunch.

When Damon came, she tossed him a *Kumkoss*, which he snatched out of the air and popped in his mouth so quickly, she never saw his arm move. “A boon from my lady!” he called triumphantly, and the crowd cheered.

“It’s candy, not a boon,” she told him, but he was already walking back to his place, his gorgeous backside flexing as he walked. She nearly fell out of her seat as she craned to get a last look at that fine butt before he turned again.



There was dead silence when the last name—King Sekar’s name—was called. She saw Maltese and Shakal’s mouths pop open in surprise, but Damon just frowned.

“Have a care, my good lord,” he said in the abrupt silence.

The king, who had just finished bowing to her, grinned. “Shalt take your own advice, my good son?”

Meanwhile, Zeka and two other servants were fighting so hard over who would be the one to pour Lois a drink, her beverage ended up on the floor. “Cut it out, you guys,” she said, turning around and giving the three of them a good glare. “Go find somebody else to bug.”

“But my lady is the one...one we wish to...bug!”

“Too bad. Go on, shoo.”

She turned back to watch the action—and nearly shrieked. The king and his opponent had just...*transformed*. The king was a puma, like Damon, except leaner and longer, with a gray face. His opponent was a black leopard.

The fight happened so quickly, before she knew it, it was over. The puma and the leopard fought, were men again, slugged it out as men, were animals again, clawed and bit, and now they were punching, and now they were leaping, and now they were kicking, and now the king was bowing to her in man-form and the leopard was rolling over on its back, showing throat. It happened so fast, she was shocked, frozen. Finally, she clapped. It seemed the polite thing to do.

This went on with surprising rapidity. Lois wasn’t sure if they were letting the king win because he was the king, or because the old guy was a righteous ass-kicker. Regardless, it was a helluva show.

He beat Maltese. He beat Shakal. And when it seemed the entire arena was holding its collective breath, when Damon grimly approached him for a turn, the king abruptly bowed to Damon, bowed to her, and walked off the field with dignity to spare.



The crash of applause was thunderous; she nearly jumped out of her skin. Minutes later, he was settling into his seat beside hers.

“Awesome,” she told him.

“My lady humbles me.”

“Didn’t want to puncture Damon’s ego, huh?”

“My point was made, I think, and I am too old for such games. Still,” he added

wistfully, taking her hand in his, “it was enjoyable while it endured. I’ truth, my lady, I doubt I would have beaten my eldest. Best not to let him find out for sure.” She laughed and, after a moment, the king joined in. Once the king had dropped out, the pecking order was quickly established. And before another hour had passed, Damon had been proven the winner, with Maltese at second place and Shakal in third. Lois clapped hard. The royal family had certainly kicked ass and taken names today! She could really get behind a family like that.

“The winner, ruler of the Bridefight, with first choice of mate...our good Prince Damon!”

“What’s he doing now?” Lois asked, puzzled, as Damon darted toward her, then with one bound, was standing beside her and pulling her out of her chair. “How’d you do that? We’re ten feet off the arena floor, at least. I swear there must be something in the water...”

“I choose—the Lady Lois!”

Thunderous applause.

She blinked. “What?”

“By the law of our land, the winner has chosen, and we are mated!”

Even more applause.



"What?"

"All hail Princess Lois, she-who-will-be-queen!"

Pandemonium. Cheers. A few people jumped out of their seats, transformed in

mid-air, and ran around the arena on all fours, yowling ecstatically. "Here comes that noise again," Maltese said, squinting wistfully up at her from the arena floor. "Aaaaaaagggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Chapter 7

"No."

"But it is the law."

"No."

"But my good princess..."

"Stop calling me that!"

They were in Damon's — *Damon's!* — bedroom. It was slightly smaller than the

queen's, which was to say, the size of her apartment times two. He'd pulled her out of the arena, away from the rejoicing crowds, and now they had a modicum of privacy so she could rip him a new asshole.

"Lois, it is a great honor to be first chosen from the Bridefight, and —"

"How could you marry me without even asking?"

He didn't say anything.

"I didn't have a clue what today was about and you know it! It was a sneaky, nasty

trick and you —" "My princess shames me with her truthfulness." "I'm not

finished," she snarled. They were nose to nose — well, her nose to his

collarbone — and her fists were clenched at her sides. She kept them there. She

was afraid if she didn't keep control of her hands they'd load her gun and start



pulling the trigger. The way she felt right now, that would be just fine. “You should be ashamed! I drop out of the sky yesterday, and today you fixed it so we’re married. *Married!* And if you think I’m gonna meekly trot off to your bed and be your princess and – and –”

“Give me heirs,” he prompted helpfully.

“Damn right! Well, forget it. Y’know, where I come from –”

“You are there no longer.”

“Shut up! I *know* that, you think I don’t know that? Where I come from, the ladies

get something called an engagement. For the benefit of the terminally stupid in this room, I will explain –”

“We also have a handfasting, but –”

“*I...will...explain.* An engagement is time to get used to the idea of getting married and, oh, I dunno, plan the wedding maybe? I mean, that was it? My wedding? You making a declaration in front of a bunch of strangers and we’re hitched? That fucking blows!”

She was doing fine, working herself up into a real fury, but everything rose up and hit her all at once, like a blow. She was married in a strange place, to a stranger who could turn into a puma, and one of these days she was gonna have to be queen. So if she stayed, she had to tolerate *that*, and if she went back home, what in the world – worlds – would she be returning to?

She burst into tears. Damon looked distinctly alarmed and raised his arms as if to hug her. She kicked out at him, nearly breaking her bare toe on his shin. “Get out,” she sobbed. “Get out of here and leave me alone. I hate you.”

He opened his mouth.

“Get out!”

He slowly turned on his heel and left. This was a perfect opportunity to do



what she'd wanted to do for the last fifteen minutes, and she instantly took advantage of the situation. She threw herself on Damon's bed and kicked and yelled and cried.

* * * * *

"Lois?"

She rolled over and blinked up at the king. Her eyes felt swollen and sore. Her nose was stuffed shut.

The king was looking sorrowfully down at her. He had changed into fresh robes and his hair was damp from the bathing room. She remained unmoved at his obvious attempt to make himself presentable before bugging her.

"We have wronged you, it is true. And now here is another truth—we do not wish it undone."

"This is how you cheer me up? Because you suck at it."

"Lois, we do not wish you to return. But you must also tell truths—do you honestly wish to go back? You are here because you lost something, yes? I can think of not one visitor from your world who wished to go back, in all the long years of my reign."

"Staying here's one thing," she grumped. "Being a princess and married without even being asked is something else." She pulled at the hem of her robe—God, there were yards of the stuff—and blew her nose on it.

"Do you not find my son pleasing?"

"Oh, he's gorgeous and you know it," she snapped. "And he's nice—when he's not tricking girls into marrying him—and a good fighter and he'll be a great king because he's smart and sneaky and everybody around here seems to love his ass, and he seems to like me all right, and he didn't eat me out in the desert when he had the chance, but still. He should have asked."

"It is not in the nature of a prince of the realm to ask," the king chided.



“Too fucking *bad*, Jack.”

“My name is not Jack.”

“Don’t let the door hit you on the ass on the way out, *Jack*.”

The king frowned down at her. “We have come to comfort you despite the many

demands on our time, and now we are displeased,” he said formally. “We require you

rise and adjust to your station and greet your mate, the High Prince.” ““We’ can take a long walk off a short pier. Buzz off.” He glared down at her. She glared back, and hiccuped. The corner of his mouth

twitched – Damon’s did that, too! – and then he said, “Perhaps for a bowl of *kumkoss*?” “There isn’t enough candy in the *world* to get me out of this bed. Now go away!” “It is unseemly for a lady of your station to lie abed and sulk.” “I give a shit!” “You will arise at once!” “Wanna bet, fur face?”

He wheeled about and stomped out, looking like the world’s oldest third-grader. She watched him go in gloating triumph. *Ha! Nothing’s getting me out of this bed. I’m gonna lie here and sulk all damn week, if I want. Not budgin’...*

Damon poked his head through the doorway. “I will retire.” She bolted upright, and her complacency utterly vanished. “Gaaaaah! Don’t you dare!”

“I only wished to come to my room for a brief rest. I had a tiring morning, in case you did not see.” He was approaching the bed with an innocent look on his face, which instantly put her on her guard.

“Fine, I’ll go back to my room. I mean the queen’s room. I mean...” She trailed off. Where the hell *was* she going to go? If she stayed in the castle, she either had to sleep in the dead queen’s chambers, or with Damon here in his chambers, or...what? “Jeez,” she said, “I wonder...maybe I should wish myself



home and this whole thing will seem like a narcotic-induced dream. Maybe I—
mmph!”

Damon had pounced on the bed, jumping a good eight feet across the room, and landed on top of her with one of his big hands clamped over her mouth. “Do not,” he warned, his eyes two inches from her own. “Do not wish yourself away.”

“Myyyyy uzzz ussss inking, ooooo oron!”

“Do you swear not to wish yourself away today?”

She glared at him over his fingers. *“Gnnnnnggg nnggghh, ooo urg!”*

“Do you swear, Lois?”

“Mmph.”

He removed his hand. She made a fist and thumped him in the middle of the

forehead. “I was just thinking out loud, you moron. Don’t pounce on me like a big cat. Even if you are one sometimes. I just about peed the bed.” “I apologize if you were startled. I did not wish to make you pee. I was unwilling to give you up so quickly.” He shifted so he was lying beside her, propped on one elbow.

She rolled on her side so they were facing each other. “Look, what *is* it with you? And me? I’m a nobody.” He opened his mouth. “*Don’t* interrupt again! I’m not anybody important, and you’re gonna be king someday. You could have anybody you wanted.”

“That is true. And now I have.”

“No, seriously.”

“Yes, seriously.”

“Damon! I mean it.”

“As do I. Lois, did no one ever tell you? You are beautiful and courageous and wry and if those things were not enough for me—and they are, good lady—



you bear the marks of a warrior.”

“That’s cellulite, Damon.”

“You have fought battles.”

“Battles with Ring Dings and Ho-Hos, yeah.”

He ignored her lameass jokes. “You willingly place yourself in danger to help others. This is the true mark of a queen; this is why you were meant to be my mate. I—I did not ask you because it seemed obvious to me. To my family. And because once I found you, I did not wish to look for another. Nor did I wish to lose you to another. Did you not wonder why my good brothers and my father were also vying for your hand?”

“Oh, God, now you’ve given me a whole new thing to fret about.” Against her will, she felt a warm glow at his words, which rang with sincerity. “You mean I could have been your stepmother?”

“No.” This was said with such finality that she didn’t crack a joke. “But we did feel it was fortuitous that you should arrive at such a time, during the Bridefight.”

“Yeah, about that...you guys do that every so often, to pick wives? From princes on down? So it’s like—like a *Canis Royal*? Except you’re all cats. So what would that be? What’s Latin for cat? *Felis Royal*? *Felix Royal*? Shit. I took Spanish in high school, which isn’t exactly helpful right now. *Gato Royal*?”

He waited until she was finished babbling, then said, “I do apologize, because I did you wrong. I thought—I thought you might be happy to be queen one day and if you were not happy...I hoped you would like me in time and be glad you stayed, and were my mate. I knew you had nowhere to stay, and thought you would wish to stay here. With me.”

“I *did* like you, before you pulled this stunt, you big goober. Now I’ve got to wonder what else you have up your sleeve. When you bother to wear sleeves. Thanks for getting dressed before coming in, by the way.”



"I did see you attempting to look everywhere but below our waists," he teased. "Are you never allowed to run free in your own land?"

"It's heavily discouraged," she said dryly. "And I've arrested my share of nudists. It's actually against our laws to be naked in public."

"It is breaking a *law*?" He gaped at her.

"Uh-huh."

"But what a good thing you are here now! You should not be forced to cover your skin if you do not wish it."

"It really hasn't been a problem before. Listen, Damon—now what? I mean, I can't stay here and be—you know. Married."

"Why?"

She sputtered. "Wh—because—we—well, we haven't even known each other two days, how about that?"

"This is not uncommon in my world—which is now your world," he pointed out.

She grunted and started to sit up, but he threw an arm across her middle and pulled her back down. She wriggled briefly, but it was like she was a tree trying to get free of the ground. "Oh, come on," she said, disgusted.

"Peace, Lois. I need rest, and I daresay you do, also. If you wish to leave in the morning, I will not stop you."

"...really?" *Now, why was that so damned disappointing?*

"Really. But for now, rest. Perhaps things will seem less odd in the morning."

"Don't bet on it." But she let herself relax against him. She *was* tired. Exhausted, more likely. A shitload had happened in forty-eight hours. It was enough to make any girl's head spin. And she wasn't just any girl. She was the goddamned princess of the realm.



Even in her head, it sounded ridiculous. The last thing she felt before she fell asleep was Damon's hands, gently stroking her back.

Chapter 8

She slept deeply, which was still a novelty to her. At home she'd slept poorly, if at all—her throbbing knee had killed her sleep and her dreams. But here there was no pain, and each night falling asleep was like sinking into a luxurious cloud. It was hard to worry about her problems—didn't take her long to get a whole new bunch of them, either—when she was so sinfully comfortable.

And she was *warm*, really very warm, but it felt wonderful, and smelled wonderful, and why was her blanket nuzzling her neck?

She opened her eyes. She couldn't see Damon's face, because it was pressed into her throat. He was kissing her neck and gently nibbling the flesh between her ear and shoulder. Goosebumps raced up her entire left side. She smacked his shoulder, which was not unlike smacking a cinder block.

"Rest!" she hollered at the ceiling. "You said *rest*." There wasn't much light—so, the wee hours of the morning, then. Or the middle of the night. "Sneaky bastard."

He pulled back and looked at her. The light was poor, but she could see the gleam of his eyes, even in the near-dark. "Please," he said huskily. "Please, Lois."

"This isn't another trick, is it?" she said suspiciously. She was out of breath, which was irritating. "If we do the wild thing, it doesn't mean I'm fated to be the dowager queen or have kittens or something, does it?"

He blinked. "No."

"And it doesn't mean you're off the hook, right?"

"Off the—no, I don't believe so."

"Okay. Just so we're clear. This doesn't mean anything, and I'm still mad at you."

"Agreed."



“Okay. Then love me, you big idiot. Right now.”

So he did. And she was lost.

He was hands and mouth and tongue and teeth, and big glorious dick. She hadn't seen one that size since—well, ever. Ropy with veins and throbbing against her hand and thrusting out at her from a nest of gingery pubic hair, she stroked it and played with it and marveled at it while he groaned against her neck. Then his mouth was on hers, his tongue was stroking her teeth, and his hands were rubbing up and down her body. It was relaxing and arousing at the same time.

“Ummm,” she said into his mouth.

“Lois, you feel—you—oh, my good princess—”

She bit him. Unfortunately, he liked it. “Don't call me that, goob, you know I hate it.”

He stopped licking her nipple long enough to look up and slyly ask, “Not even in the privacy of our own chambers?”

“Your own chambers.”

“Ah, yes.” He nibbled the flesh around her nipple, which made her want to scream, or bite, or something.

“Seriously,” she gasped. “You're gonna wreck this by pissing me off.”

“I would never dare anger my princess.”

“Daaaaaaaaaaaa-mon!” By now she was giggling too hard to sound impressively angry, and worse luck, he knew it, because he was doing plenty of laughing on his own. “You're a creep, an unrepentant asshole creep, and as soon as you make me come, I'm going to kick the shit out of you.”

“Only a trueborn princess would dare talk to me in such a way,” he whispered in her ear, and then nipped her earlobe.

“That's your explanation for everything,” she griped, and reached down to tickle his balls. *That* stopped the teasing, she was happy to see.



He rolled her over onto her back and pushed her thighs apart. She squirmed against him, more than ready—*eager*—for what he had. He leaned down and licked her lower lip. “Now?”

“Yes.”

Suddenly his fingers were between her legs, holding her apart, and she was reaching down to help him, and wriggling to meet him, and then he was filling her up, ah, God, he was so thick and so *long*, and warm, so deliciously warm, and what was he doing, coming inside her so slowly? Was he being paid by the hour?

She locked her legs around his waist and tightened her grip. Roughly, she grabbed his shoulders and yanked him down...and kissed him hard. “Are you going to do this in slow motion?” she growled, “or are you going to fuck me?”

“If I take your meaning correctly,” he panted, and his voice was so thick she could barely understand him, “I will fuck you.” Then he slammed into her the rest of the way, and a shriek of pure lustful joy gurgled out of her.

The giant bed was actually squeaking in time with their thrusts, and she hadn’t thought anything could budge it. She could feel his warm, firm chest pressed against her breasts, and tightened her grip. She didn’t ever want to let the big idiot go.

“Lois.”

“Ah, God.”

“Lois...this does not hurt?”

“No, and don’t you dare stop.”

“Not even if I wished, my good Lois. My own...Lois...”

“That’s a...little better...than princess.”

“My own Lois.”

“Yes...like that.”

She could feel his cock digging in and out of her, heard his harsh pants in her ear,



felt his smooth muscles working toward their pleasure. His mouth found hers and she sucked his tongue into her mouth and felt him start in surprise...then eagerly deepen their kiss. His pure delight in their coupling tipped her over the edge; she tightened her grip around his waist as her orgasm bloomed through her like a dark flower. He was right behind her; his grip tightened until it was just short of pain, then she actually felt him spurt off inside her.

They didn't move, or speak, for a minute or two. Just lay there, locked together, panting. Finally, Lois couldn't stand it anymore and broke the silence. "Holy shit." "Is that good?"

"That's unbelievably, amazingly good. Um. Yum!" She tickled his ribs. "Rest up so

we can go again." He groaned and laughed in the same breath. "My Lois, you are insatiable." "Actually, I'm frigid as hell, until I stumble across someone who knows what he's

doing. And that was too sweet for a one-time-only thing." "Ah. Then you will stay?" She growled in response. "For another day," he amended. "Stay through the next sunset, and then you can

decide again." A choice! Better yet, a way to save her pride. "Okay," she agreed.

"One more day." "Yes." "Just one, though." "Yes, my Lois." "And your dad better not get his hopes up for grandchildren, either." "No, my Lois."

"Because if we only do it three or four times in the next day or two—or three—the

chances of my getting pregnant are pretty slim. Assuming we can even have kids. I

mean, hello? Different species?" He yawned. "Yes, my Lois." "You think you've won, don't you?" "Yes." "We'll just see about that," she said. Then, "Is that you making that noise?" "Yes." "Well, jeez, how am I supposed to get to



sleep with all that purring?" "You will find a way, my princess – oof!"

"You're still in the doghouse, buster." "I shall endeavor to get out, then." She cuddled up to him. "As long as we've got all that straight." "It is straight." "All right then."

"I love you."

"Back atcha, you big jerk."

* * * * *

Several hours later, she stretched, rolled over, and opened her eyes. And yelped. Damon was propped up on one elbow, staring at her. "Gaaaah! Don't do that. Cripes, how long have you been watching me?"

"I do not know exactly. I was wakeful and it pleased me to look upon you."

She blinked at him. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and she could see him perfectly well. "What time is it?"

"It will be sunrise soon." He bent to her and started nibbling the flesh between her neck and her shoulder. "And as long as you are awake, and I am awake..."

She chuckled. "You're insatiable."

"Indeed. Also," he added slyly, "it is my Bridenight. Such things are not uncommon on such a night, or so I am told."

"Don't start that again. As far as I'm concerned, this is just like any other night." *Any other night on a different world with a prince husband.* "Although..." She wriggled and rolled, and in a second she was straddling him. "I've had about enough of you taking the initiative, boy-o."

He looked vaguely alarmed. "What does that mean?"

"It means that this time, *I'm* in charge." She bent down and kissed him on the mouth, then the chin, then the throat. She stroked his nipples with her fingers and scratched lightly. He shifted beneath her and sighed.

"That is fine with me, Lois. If you get annoyed, you could bite me again," he



added hopefully.

“Pervert.” She licked his nipples and nuzzled the skin between them. She moved lower, kissing her way down his chest and stomach and thighs, until she was gripping his cock in one hand. She inhaled his musky male aroma, then leaned down and carefully sucked one of his balls into her mouth.

“Loisssssssss,” he groaned. “What are you doing?”

She was still holding his dick, which was throbbing enthusiastically. She pulled back and licked the creamy drop off the tip. “What, you have to ask?” She licked the base of his dick, then slid her tongue all the way to the top, then down again, then up. Both his hands fisted in her hair; his breath came in ragged gasps. She straddled him again and guided him inside her. He seized her hips and thrust just as she came down to meet him.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she groaned at the ceiling as she began to ride him. “I can feel you in my throat.”

“Lois...”

“Nice.”

“Oh, my Lois.” He pulled her down to him, kissed her hungrily, then caressed her breasts, drew her closer still, and sucked one of her nipples into his mouth. Meanwhile, she was still shifting her hips up and down to meet his thrusts, and when his tongue rasped across her nipple she tipped over into orgasm. She cried out and rocked faster, then pulled back, seized him by the ears, and kissed him, shoving her tongue in his mouth, his luscious, hot mouth.

He sat up, pushed her back, and without breaking contact—without slowing their thrusts—suddenly she was flat on her back and he was surging between her thighs, working over her, sweat shining on his forehead as he pumped into her.

“Lois,” he said huskily.

“Oh, God.”



“Poor Lois, you will have to take me for some time. I am far from release,” he chuckled.

She screamed as she came again, then locked her legs around his hips and thrust back at him. Her cunt was throbbing and even though she’d come twice, she wanted more, had to have more. “Oh, God, Damon, that’s so good. You’re so big and it’s so good.”

“Because of you, Lois.” He bent, kissed her softly, and when his fingers closed over her nipple and he pinched her lightly, she came again. “Only because of you.”

She lost count of her orgasms. Everything was his cock and her cunt and their thrusts, his hands and mouth, the way he whispered in her ear and the smell of their sweat, their heat. Finally she was clawing at his back and begging him to come, almost sobbing, and then his eyes rolled back and he thrust once more, hard, and then he was spurting into her.

He collapsed beside her, breathing hard, and they lay like that for quite a while. Then he pulled back, kissed her softly, and cleaned her. Thoroughly. With his tongue. She thought she was done, she thought it was impossible to have another orgasm, but when his tongue licked her out and swept over her clit, she thrust her hips toward his face and moaned at the ceiling.

“Oh, my Lois. I love that sound you make.”

“And I love your fucking *tongue*. God, Damon, you’re really something.”

“I am something,” he said, pulling her into his embrace and arranging the covers over them. “I am your mate.” She was too tired to protest, and immediately dropped off into sleep.

Chapter 9

“Don’t get your hopes up,” she informed the king at lunch the next day. “I haven’t decided yet if I’m staying.”

The king frowned and opened his mouth.



“And *don't* give me any shit about it, either. Damon and I have come to an agreement, and I don't need you messing it up.” The sternness of her statement was ruined when she pressed her palm to the king's forehead, checking for fever. “Are you sure you should be out of bed? You just got over being sick, then you had the Bridefight thing all morning yesterday —”

“I am well, Lois, do not fret.”

But clearly he enjoyed her fretting. *This guy really needs a new wife*, she thought, feeling a stab of sympathy. She knew, too well, what it was like to be lonely.

“Did you and our son spend a comfortable night?” he went on innocently.

“Knock it off; you're about as subtle as a brick through a window.”

“Then all that yowling we heard was merely —”

“Do *not* finish that sentence if you don't want my milk in your lap. If this is milk.” It was milk colored, but thicker, and sweet—it tasted like a cross between coconuts and chocolate. She was on her fourth glass. *Damn*, the food here was fine!

Damon strolled in on all fours, in puma form. After giving her the fuck of a lifetime (again), he had bounded out of bed and left on a hunt with his brothers. Lois had briefly considered getting up, then sanity returned and she had gone back to sleep for five hours. “Morning,” she said to him.

“*Good morn, Lois. You are well rested and well fed?*”

“Yes to both. Your dad's been getting on my nerves, though.”

“I merely asked —”

“Don't try to defend yourself, Sekar,” she snapped.

“Indeed,” Damon said, shifting in a blink from puma to man. He thrust his arms into the robe Zeka was holding for him. “You do not wish to brave my Lois's wrath, my good father.”

“No, indeed not,” the king said with an admirably straight face. “What is this



we hear about staying a day?"

Damon helped himself to a piece of bread from off her plate. "She has decided to stay for the day. Tonight she will decide if she will stay for another day. We will 'play it by ear'."

"I see."

"And if you don't like it, too damned bad," she said smugly. Sure, it was a sop to her pride, but that was all she cared about. Shit, for years, her pride was all she had. And the fact that Damon knew it, and respected it, had scored about a million points with her. "How 'bout that?"

"Hmph."

"Which reminds me," she said, staring at Damon's legs when he sat across from her, "I'll stay one more day."

"One more night, at the very least," Damon said, smirking.

Oooh, if he wasn't so good in bed...

Before she could give him a piece of her mind, a commotion at the archway at the far end of the hall caught his attention. "Ah!" the king said. "Our visitors have come at last!"

"What's up?" she asked Damon.

"We have been awaiting these visitors from the far side of the SandLands. They wished to come for the Bridefight, but were too late, as you can see. We will clothe them and house them, and perhaps some will stay, and some will leave."

"Oh. Well, that's nice of you."

"Visitors are treasured, as you have observed. And we have heard that at least two of these visitors came to our world as you did, Lois. Such people are always interesting."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. They tell the best stories. About auto-mobiles and gro-cery stores and the In-ter-net."



“And their Survivor game,” the king added, “with all the folk on an island and whoever stays last gets treasure.”

Lois rolled her eyes, but stood to get a better look. There were a dozen of them, five men and seven women. They were wearing hooded robes the color of the sky. As they approached, they bowed deeply.

“Do not,” the king said mildly. “You have come far and are weary. Rest here as long as you wish.”

“Thank you, my good king. I am Themaya, and these are my companions. We regret our tardiness.” As one, they all threw their hoods back.

Lois shot to her feet so fast, she knocked the table over. The one on the end – almost as tall as she, with that same dark curly hair, only hers was streaked with silver, and – and –

“Mom?”

Gladys Commoner stared up at her. “Lois? Oh my God, Lois, is it really you, baby?”

“But you’re –”

Gladys simply stared, then held out her arms. Lois scrambled over the wreck of lunch and jumped down from the dais. In a moment she was in her mother’s embrace. “Mom, I can’t believe you’re here, how can you be here?”

Gladys laughed, though tears were trickling slowly down her cheeks. “Honey, I don’t have a clue. One minute I was driving to see your aunt, and the next I was in this weird desert with a purple sky, and Themaya and his band found me, and we’ve been traveling ever since. I’ve been here for ages and ages.”

I thought it was suicides, but it must be anybody who’s dreadfully unhappy. Unhappy at the exact right moment and the exact right time. Whatever it is, it’s a fucking miracle. “Mom, I can’t believe it, I can’t believe it. Oh, Mom, I missed you so much. When you – when you went away everything went bad for me. Everything.”



"Ah-hem." Lois and Gladys looked up. The king was looking down at them, hands clasped behind his back. His gaze was direct, but very friendly. He was staring at Gladys. "Are we to understand that this good lady is your dam? That Lois gets her good blood from this lady?"

"Uh—yeah, I guess. Mom, this is King Sekar. And this is my—well, my husband, I guess, Prince Damon. Damon, Sekar, this is my mom, Gladys Commoner."

"We are pleased," the king said, stepping down to greet her. "We are most pleased."

Her mother was staring at the king in a very un-momlike way. "I'm—it's nice to meet you, King Sekar."

"I am pleased, also, to meet my dam-by-mating." Damon bowed to her. "Your daughter is enchanting."

"Flatterer," Lois mumbled. Her head was still spinning. *Day three, and the hits just keep on coming.*

"And will you be staying long in our land?" the king was asking. He had taken Gladys's hand a few seconds ago, but hadn't let go yet. He was staring at her raptly. It was weird, yet adorable.

"I'd sure like to stay with my daughter, if that's all right, King Se—"

"Just Sekar, good lady." They stared at each other with identical goofy smiles on their faces.

Lois turned to Damon. "Okay, so, I'll stay the week. But no promises after that."

"No, no promises."

"Just the week is guaranteed, nothing else."

"No, nothing else."

"All right, then."

"I do love you, my Lois."



"I do love you too, Damon. For the week, anyway."

They grinned at each other.

THE END