



Canis Royal 02 Mating Season

By

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MATING SEASON

Prologue

She took her oath, and trembled with excitement and pride as she recited the sacred words. Her back was straight, heels together, chest out, the tip of her middle finger barely touching the outer edge of her right eyebrow.

It was too good to be true; it was a sweet dream from which she would rudely awaken. But for now, oh for now, she would enjoy it, and look to the future. God help any man who woke her up.

Chapter 1

"Ah, but sweet and most helpful daughter of my heart—"

"Don't start that stuff again," the daughter of his heart warned him.

"Lois, surely you can tell me something."

The newest princess of the realm looked up from cleaning her Beretta and glared at the king. "Sekal, get it through your gigantic, thick head. I'm not helping you lay my mom, okay? I'm not giving you any sort of hint that's gonna help you hustle her into bed. I mean, you're a great guy and all but... yech. This is my *mom*, okay? Just... work it out on your own, okay?"

"But Lois..."

"La la la bah bah bah hmmm hmmm I'm not listening... la la..."

"Very well." The king stood up and started to stomp out in a huff. At the last moment he turned and said, "She *will* be mine," and then he was gone.

Lois rested her head on the tabletop. "Oh my God, I am so creeped out right now..."

"What is it, dear one?"

She perked up as Damon entered the room. "Your dad, Damon. He's driving me most sincerely crazy. He's got the hots for my mom, how *weird* is that?"

"Not especially... weird. Your dam is very attractive for a woman of her advanced years."

"Not as advanced as you think; my dad knocked her up when she was fifteen."

"He *struck* his mate?" Damon looked horrified.

"No, no, it's slang for pregnant. She got pregnant with me when she was still a kid herself. But jeez, they've only been here... what? A month?"

"Your mother and her companions? One moonround, yes."

"And he's, like, all over her. It's weird."

"My mother was one much like yours, I think."

Lois had put her handgun back together and was now getting organized, but she looked up at that. "What? Your mom was from Jersey?"

"No, but she was not from our world. She just appeared one day, much like you did."

"And your dad met her and fell hard for her and that's why he's been alone so long," she mused aloud. "He's been waiting for someone closer to his own age, someone who comes from where we came from... hmm. That's very interesting, Damon."

"I know many interesting things," he said solemnly.

"Did she ever want to go back? Your mom?"

"No, I believe she was happy here. Although she did miss some things, as you miss the Dairy Queen."

"Don't say it. I've been dreaming of Dilly Bars. You guys need way more dairy products over here. Though I'm not sure a Blizzard would qualify..."

"My mother talked and talked about the Hitchcock when I was a child," Damon said. "Do you know the Hitchcock?"

"I've heard of him," Lois replied carefully. Ah-ha! Maltese! Her brother-in-law's funny name suddenly made sense. Damon was lucky he wasn't named Marnie. "Did she ever say how she came here?"

"Just that she was dreadfully unhappy where she was, and that her prayers were answered."

"Oh. I wonder what happens," she mused, "if someone *here* is unhappy. Do their prayers get answered? Anybody here ever just... pop out of sight?"

"To my knowledge, no. You might answer my prayers now," Damon suggested, smiling and holding out his hand.

Lois rolled her eyes. "You talk like you didn't just get some nooky two hours ago."

"An eternity of sunrounds," he said solemnly, then boomed laughter when she tickled his ribcage.

Chapter 2

Maltese, second in line to the throne, Prince of the SandLands, was, as the sister of his heart might say, bored out of his freakin' gourd.

"What's a gourd?" he mused aloud.

"What is a freakin'?" his youngest brother, Shakar, replied.

"Perhaps Lois will teach us her language."

"Or perhaps her mother will, 'less the king has her in his sheets already," Shakar said, and laughed.

"I do not think it will be as easy as you say. Look at our Lois. She was most unhappy to be made princess after the Bridefight..."

"For roughly one sunround," Shakar pointed out dryly. "Then our brother worked his customary magic, and now we have a new princess."

"Still," Maltese said stubbornly.

"I hope they—the travelers—choose to stay. Or at least, I hope Lois's dam chooses to stay. For Father's sake, if not Lois's. I wonder if her sire will pop up?"

"She did not miss her sire," Maltese said. "She *did* miss her dam."

"Do you think Lois wished for her, as she wished for her 'footlocker'?"

"I know little enough of such things, my brother. Only enough to know—"

"What a dullard you really are?" Shakar asked brightly.

"That one you will pay for," Maltese said, then pounced on his younger brother like a kitten looking for some fun. "Possibly many times will I require payment."

"Possibly many times will I thunk your—ouch!"

So they tussled and wrestled and bounced around the courtyard, but through it all Maltese had an odd feeling, as if this were some sort of play-act and not real. As if he were pretending to have fun with his young brother. Which was wrong... *he was* having fun... but always, always his mind was focused on the more pressing problem: Where was his mate? Why had she not arrived?

Worse: What if she never came for him?

Chapter 3

Best to stop fretting about it. Best to put his mind to other things, like being of service to his good king and he-who-would-someday-rule. Best to stop twitching and moaning like a kitten in heat and remember his responsibilities.

Faugh. Best to take a bath. Perhaps being clean would help his head—how did Lois put it?—"get clear."

He bumped into Sierr on the way to the bathing chambers, and she smiled at him but, at his request from many sunrounds back, did not lower to one knee or drop her gaze. "Good rising, my prince," she murmured, her sky-purple eyes tip-tilted and warm. "Require you some assistance this day?"

"No, Sierr. Be on your way."

"My prince," she said as he made his way past her. Though the hallway was more than wide enough to accommodate both of them, she brushed his shoulder as he passed and he smiled to himself. It would have been distracting and nice to have waterfun with the comely Sierr; she had rolled in his sheets before. But with his unruly thoughts all knotted up as they were today—as they had been for some time—he could not give her the attention she deserved.

Besides, she—she was not who he was looking for. He thought. He did not know *what* he was looking for. Or, for that matter, what he thought. Not for the first time, he envied Damon, whose charming princess had dropped almost literally into his lap.

In a rare show of events, he was the only one in the bathing chambers. Well, it was early, most people had work to be about. He did, too, i' truth be told. It wasn't worthy of him to sulk 'mongst the beriblooms and wish he were mated. He would wash quickly, and leave.

He stripped off his robe and stepped into the warm, fragrant water. He picked up a beribloom, crushed it in his fist, and began to work the lather across his shoulders and down his stomach. He heard a low sound, something like *thrumm-mmmmmmm* , and looked up, surprised.

He was even more surprised when the thrumming—a sound he had never before heard—got louder, and a bright gold circle of light suddenly appeared and spread wide, almost as wide as the bathing chamber. Maltese threw up a soapy forearm to shield his gaze, and as such almost missed the small form who fell through the circle of light and hit the water with a loud splash.

Just as suddenly, the noise cut off and the circle shrank down upon itself and disappeared with a whoosh. All that was left of recent events was the phantom circle imprinted on his eyes—it was everywhere he looked, and even now fading—and of course, the creature who had fallen through.

He waded to where it had fallen, stuck his arm into the water, and hauled it up as it sputtered and cursed.

Her. Hauled *her* up as she sputtered and cursed.

"Hello!" he cried joyfully. "I am Maltese." He hugged her to him. "I am so happy to see you!"

His response was a stinging slap on the side of his face.

Chapter 4

"Lieutenant Anne Sanger, Women's Army Corps, zero three three six two four eight nine one two." Ann smacked the guy again. He was so big, and so, er, hard, and weirdly slippery, that her slaps slid off him. "Lieutenant Anne Sanger, Women's Army Corps, zero three three six two four eight nine one two. *get your damn hands off me* ."

Obligingly, he dropped her. Instantly the water closed over her head, and she flailed about until she reached the surface. Her mind was trying to process too many things at once. The room, big and open and airy. The water, an odd color and an even odder smell... not bad, not remotely bad, but different. And the man. Big. Muscle-bound. Blond, with storm-gray eyes. And what was with that long hair? It was down to his shoulders, the color of gold and shadows, and weirdly, it didn't seem out of place. It should have; a man with hair like that would have had to fight out of any saloon he was dumb enough to walk into. But instead it went with the tanned skin and the big white flashing teeth and the intense gray eyes. It looked good. It looked *right* .

"Lieutenant Anne Sanger," she said again... she expected to say it many times, per her training. It had been one class out of many: What to Do If You Are Captured. Preceding it had been: How to Break Down an Army Carbine. "Women's Army Corps, zero three three six two four eight nine one two."

"That is very nice," he told her. "I am Maltese, second in line to the throne of the SandLands, Prince of the Exalted Ranges of the OnHighMountains, Lord of the Snowy Islands —"

"Are we in England?" she asked. It was one of the few places she knew of that had princes and lords. "How'd you do that? What am I doing here?"

"I wished for you," he told her, which was terrifying to the extreme, "and you came. You are here for me."

Chapter 5

"Damon! Lois!"

"Doors," Lois told her prince. "That's what this place needs. Fewer curtains. More doors."

She had just pulled the coverlet over herself when Maltese galloped in, wet and nude, pulling a young woman in an olive green uniform (also wet) behind him. She was frantically trying to free herself from his grasp, but since she came up to the middle of his chest, and his arms were as big around as her thighs, she was having no luck.

"Look! Look what is here!" Maltese thrust the wet woman at the startled couple on the bed.

"Lieutenant Anne Sanger," the wet woman told them. "Women's Army Corps, zero three three six two four eight nine one two."

"Nice to meet you," Lois said automatically. Damon jumped out of the bed (also nude) and bowed. The woman blushed harder, if that was possible.

"You're all in a lot of trouble," Lieutenant Anne Sanger continued. "Kidnapping a member of the Armed Forces—during wartime!—is punishable by—"

"How'd you do it?" Lois interrupted.

"Pardon, ma'am?"

"Kill yourself. How'd you do it? Welcome to the SandLands, by the way. You'll love it here."

"I doubt it," Lieutenant Sanger said. Her light blue eyes appeared to frost over as she continued, "I did not kill myself. I was getting ready to go on shift when all of a sudden I was wet. And here."

"I told you," Maltese said proudly, reaching for and attempting to hug her, and getting slapped back for his trouble. "I wished for you, and you came."

Lois was studying the woman. Really very cute, if you liked them small and dark-haired and fine-featured and blue-eyed. Which Maltese clearly did. The poor lug could hardly keep his eyes off her. Meanwhile, the lieutenant looked like she was ready to whip out a pistol and start busting kneecaps.

"What's with the uniform?" Lois finally asked. Then, "Damon, for God's sake, here's a sheet. Cover up. I *know*, don't give me that look, but the lieutenant is new here."

The woman mulled over the question, and just as Lois was getting ready to repeat it, louder, she replied, "I'm a WAC."

"A whack?" Maltese repeated.

Lois was so startled she dropped the sheet, then snatched it back up. "WAC? As in, World War Two babes in the Army?"

"I'm not a baby," the lieutenant said hotly.

"What—what year is it? For you, I mean."

Another odd look, followed by, "Nineteen forty-five. And I really, really have to get back to work. My country needs me. Please let me go."

"Oh, fuck," Lois said, and flopped back down on the bed.

Chapter 6

"But you can't keep her, Maltese," Lois protested.

"She's not a stray dog, for the love of Christ."

"But she came here. Like you."

"*Not* like me. She's got a life she wants to get back to. She says she didn't kill herself. I think—I think maybe she stumbled across a—a thin space between our universes. Or something. And I guess those spots run through time as well as space... I mean, 1945? Jesus! It's 2010 where I come from. The war's—that war—has been over for... what? Sixty-five years? Where I'm from she's probably..." Dead and gone, Lois had been about to say, but closed her mouth with a snap. Still, she got a sharp look from Damon, and imagined she'd be getting grilled later.

"Where is Lieutenant Anne right now?" King Sekal asked, the first time he had spoken during the hastily called meeting.

"In my quarters, of course," Maltese said. "Where else would I have put her?"

"She's not a mantelpiece, Maltese, you dumb-ass! You don't *put* her anywhere. Jesus, Jesus..." Lois rested her head on her hands.

"Maybe we should go talk to her," Gladys Commoner,

Lois's mother and the king's current hot monkey love interest, suggested. "Perhaps it will make her feel more at home if she hears our stories."

"What, that we ended it all and woke up here? She didn't, Mom, that's my point. She's here by accident. Not," she said, glaring at Maltese, "because you wished for her. For God's sake. She's a woman, not a Cracker Jack prize."

"I myself am not sure quite how it happened," Gladys admitted.

"Good lady, we would hear your thoughts on this," the king ordered.

Gladys colored slightly, but continued, "I just meant, I don't know what happened. And Lois doesn't know, either. I think what she said—thin spots between galaxies, or whatever?—is as good a guess as any. Does anyone here ever disappear?"

Damon, Maltese (Shakar was a-hunting, and wouldn't be back for some time), and Sekal all looked at each other. Then Damon shrugged the peculiar one-shouldered shrug Lois had noticed of SandLands inhabitants. "Not that this family has ever known. But the SandLands are large. Perhaps—"

"Well, that doesn't help us now," Lois interrupted. She rapped her knuckles thoughtfully on the floor for a moment (meetings were always held on floors, the attendees sitting cross-legged in a circle), then said, "Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk to her. Poor kid must be massively confused."

"She will get used to the SandLands," Maltese said. "And us. You did, Lois."

"Uh... I didn't have anywhere to *gobut here*, Maltese. I thought this place was the afterlife, at first. Shit, maybe it is, *I* don't know. I studied criminal justice in college, not theology."

"What is criminal justice?" Damon asked.

"What is afterlife?" Sekal asked.

"Later, you guys. Let's go talk to the lieutenant, first."

"Nice one, you goob," Lois said when they pushed the curtain aside and observed the palatial, yet empty, chambers that belonged to Maltese. She went to the window and far, far in the distance could see the tiny dot that was Lieutenant Anne Sanger, Women's Army Corps, zero three three six two four eight nine one two. "Jeez, lookit her go," she added, impressed.

"Where does she think she's going?" Gladys wondered aloud. "It's all sand out there. I know... I was out there for weeks and weeks with my group."

"I will bring her back," Maltese declared.

"Wait—" was all Lois got out before Maltese dived through the open window—from three stories up, the idiot!—transformed into a tan puma in midair, landed splayfooted in the courtyard, and bounded off after the lieutenant.

"Oh, yeah," Lois said. "This is gonna *goreal* well."

Chapter 7

Anne had no idea where she was going, but staying put had not been, in her estimation, in her best interest. Fearless Americans did not sit quietly and wait to be tortured or brutalized or mocked!

Even better, the good-looking fool hadn't locked the door or the window. In fact, there *were* no doors or windows. But it had been child's play to climb down; she'd spent the first fifteen years of her life in Colorado and could climb before she could walk.

She ran, ignoring the stitch in her side, and kept her eyes on the odd horizon. Perhaps she could find someone sympathetic to the Allies. Perhaps she could find a gun. Perhaps she could wake up and find this was all a horrible, vivid—

She heard a thud-thud-thud behind her, methodic as a metronome, but didn't turn. In another few seconds, a large yellow cat was sprinting past her, then checked itself so hard it almost flipped over, then came to a dust-rising halt in front of her, which forced her to stop. In truth, she was glad... her side hurt like heck.

The cat looked her over then said, "Hello again. Need you a drink?"

No. He didn't *say* it. He thought it. At her. Because his lips weren't moving, and even if they were, big cats—was it some kind of cougar? mountain lion?—didn't speak English. Didn't *talk*, for heaven's sake.

"It's bad enough you've kidnapped me," she said, staring furiously into the cat's storm-gray eyes. "But you get out of my head. Talk with your mouth, Charley."

At once, the large blond man was standing in front of her. Naked. Argh. "As you wish," he said cheerfully. "Are you ready to come back now, Loo?"

"Loo?"

"Loo-ten-unt. Loo," he added, "is the affectionate nickname I have given you. My brother's mate has many nicknames for him. It is a sign of their joy with each other. Retard, idiot, dumb-ass, schmuck, loser... all these and more. What will you call me?" he asked, looking absurdly hopeful.

"How about Crazy Man?" She was trying not to look at his groin, and failing. She'd never seen a naked man in her life. His hair was much darker than the blond mass on his head. His penis looked long, but soft.

Stop looking at it, Anne.

She tried. And failed. In fact, she'd joined the WACs so she could see the world—and meet someone. But not like this!

"Are you not warm in those clothes?" He indicated her long sleeves, pants, and jump boots. Which, in the desert heat, were drying quickly.

She jerked back from his touch. "Don't even try to talk me into being a degenerate like you, you—you—you nudenik!"

"Ah, Nudenik! That will do. But Loo..." He took a step toward her, his long penis swinging against his thigh. She took a compensatory step back.

"You know what? Change back into the cat."

"As you wish." And boom, he was a cat again. It was the best trick she'd ever seen. If it was a trick. And of course it was. She was...

Dreaming. It was a dream! A very strange, realistic, odd, odd dream. She'd fallen asleep after a day of training and...

She pinched the skin on the back of her hand. It stung. She took a step toward the great cat, grimacing, expecting a bite, and touched the fur on the top of his head. Thick and plush, like an odd kind of silk, soft and warm under her hand. The cat cocked his head, but didn't bite or claw her.

She stepped back, thinking hard. The cat, thank the Lord, stayed out of her head so she could ponder. Okay, scratch dreaming. Ah-ha! She was being brainwashed! Someone had captured her and they were doing things to her mind. For what purpose, she did not know. She was a small cog in the great wheel that was the Women's Army Corps. But if she could just figure out how they were brainwashing her—

She covered her eyes with her hand and always, always, the great cat watched her, his eyes luminous with curiosity.

Nobody was brainwashing her. She wasn't dreaming and nobody was putting things in her head. She was not an imaginative girl, and she could never have thought all this up. And if she was being brainwashed, they wouldn't try to make her think she was in a strange place, with strange people who could turn into animals just by thinking about it.

She was here. It was real.

She burst into tears.

Chapter 8

"Now, my good lady..."

"Please, Sekal. Call me Gladys." The older woman smiled. "I've asked you many times."

"Yes, my... Gladys. Are your rooms comfortable? Are you finding our table with good things to eat? Because if not—"

"Sekal, my rooms are wonderful. Why, I had an entire apartment back home that you could have fit just into the room I'm sleeping in now. And the food is wonderful. To tell the truth, I don't recognize a lot of it, but it tastes delicious and it doesn't make me... I mean, my stomach doesn't..."

"She means, she's not getting Montezuma's revenge," Lois announced, walking into the great hall. "They're coming back, if you guys care."

"Who?" Sekal asked, gazing deeply into Gladys's brown eyes.

"Your second-born and the woman who dropped out of nowhere? Remember? Any of this ringing a bell? And if you inch any closer to my mother, Sekal, I'm shooting you in the face," she added irritably.

"Oh, now, you will not," Gladys said, jerking back. Sekal *had* been kiss-close for a few seconds. She sighed. "I brought you up better than this, Lois. Behave yourself."

"Yeah, well..." Lois walked over to a window, pulled back the heavy tapestry in front of it, and peered out. "Dad canceled all that stuff out. That poor kid. She looks whipped."

"Exhausted," Gladys translated for Sekal, who looked alarmed. "Of course she does. Think how strange this place was to us, dear, and we came from modern-day Earth."

Lois watched the couple approach. Maltese was padding toward the palace in his puma form, and Lieutenant Anne was walking beside him, her head down, her arms folded across her chest. She looked desolate, to put it mildly. Maltese didn't look much happier.

"She got a room yet?" Lois asked without turning around.

"Yes, we have put her beside my Lady Gladys's room. I thought, the good lady being such a kind woman, she might help our visitor be settled."

"Oh, Sekal..." Gladys breathed. "You're so nice."

"Kindness to such a gentle lady is simple courtesy, my lady, and I would be kind to you, always."

"Oh, Sekal!"

"Barf," Lois said, still looking out the window.

"Ma'am, will you help me escape?" Anne asked dully.

The dark, curly-haired woman, who had been showing her where extra blankets were kept, slowly turned around. She was very pretty, about Anne's height, and was wearing a fern-colored robe. Anne

was still in her uniform and, by the grace of God, would remain so. Those robes were more revealing than bathing costumes.

"I'm, um, not really the person to ask," the woman replied. She had a pleasing Midwestern accent, neither twangy nor drawly, and it comforted Anne to hear another American speak. About anything. "See, I'm what they call she-who-will-be-queen. Um, that means if the king—God forbid—dies, my husband and I are in charge."

Anne said nothing.

"So, um, I guess I could be considered one of *them*. Sorry."

"Dear, it's not that we don't want to help you." The older woman, Gladys, was still hard at work. She was an older version of Lois, slightly shorter and heavier, and had the same fox-like face and pretty eyes. She had bustled and fussed about the room, trying to make it perfect. It was a waste of time, in Anne's humble opinion, as the opulent rooms were as close to perfect as anything in creation. But it seemed to please Gladys to be busy, and so she rejected the first five coverings on the enormous bed, and was now smoothing out the sixth.

Now she turned to Anne, who was standing in the middle of the room feeling lost, and added, "We don't know how. We came here by accident ourselves. One minute we were driving, or..." She shot a disapproving look at Lois. "Anyway, we don't know how we got here. We don't know how you got here. So we couldn't help you get back. We don't even know how to get ourselves back."

Her training prompted her to reply. "Thank you, ma'am."

"But this place grows on you," Lois said. "Seriously. I know that sounds like a load of shit..."

Anne gasped.

Lois blinked. "What? They don't swear in 1945?"

"Women of loose... um... that is to say..."

"Well, she *does* have a pottymouth," Gladys said primly, and Anne laughed for the first time that day. Both of the women stared at her, so she cut off the inappropriate noise.

"Ma'am, you were saying how this place, this strange awful horrible place that is not my home and will never be my home, you were saying, ma'am, that it grows on you."

"Uh, yeah. That's what I was saying." She and the older woman traded a look. "Don't you, uh, like Maltese? I mean, aren't you weirdly drawn to him? Even if you're pissed about being here? Aren't you thinking about him right now?"

As a matter of fact, Anne was. Specifically, she was thinking about that long soft penis, and what it might look like if he—if he liked her. She was wondering how that dark pubic hair might feel if her fingers were tangled in it, and she was wondering if she'd lost her mind at some point today. In fact, it seemed a certainty.

"Did you never want to escape, ma'am?"

The women traded another look. Finally, the crown princess—she-who-would-be-queen or whatever—sat down on the bed. "Okay, Anne. I'm gonna give you the straight poop."

"I appreciate that, ma'am."

"And stop calling me ma'am. I'm Lois, okay? Just Lois. And don't call me princess, or your highness, or anything goofy like that."

"Don't worry," Anne said dryly.

That made Lois laugh, for some reason. "Okay. Fair enough. Here's the thing. I wanted to be a cop—a police officer? For years and years."

Anne nodded. She could relate to that. She'd been born on a farm. Without the kindly intervention of World War II, she might have died on the farm.

"And I was, right? And I loved it. I never thought I'd love anything more."

"You were a police officer?"

"Yeah, I was a lieutenant in the—"

"In the offices, right?"

"No." Lois smiled. "I know what you must be thinking, but take my word for it... where we come from..." She indicated her mother with a nod. "Women can be cops, politicians, fly jets—"

"Jets?"

"—planes. They can do whatever the hell they want."

There was a long pause, and finally Anne said, "Ma'am, that is a lie. That is not true."

"Maybe in 1945, sunshine. But give it until the next century. I'm telling you, I carried a gun and I waved it at bad guys and got shot at and puked *onand got* . paid for it."

Anne smiled; she couldn't help it. "That sounds wonderful."

"Excuse me," Gladys grumbled, fluffing up a pillow. "It certainly *doesnot* ."

"Where I am... I know it's wrong to be glad it's wartime, but my country needs me. Needs women. Because the men, God bless them, are getting killed. And finally we have our chance. We could get out of the kitchen. We could help. We could *fight* ." She looked around the gorgeous room. "And now I'm here. I—my country needs me. I can't stay."

Gladys opened her mouth, but Lois shook her head, and the older woman didn't say anything. Lois continued, "Look, I totally know how you feel. I couldn't see past my job, either, right? But then I got hurt. And they wouldn't let me on the street anymore. I could still be a cop, but I had to do paperwork and answer the phone... like that."

Anne shuddered.

"Right. And I put up with it. For a long time. And then I realized they would never, never let me do what I loved, ever again. And my parents were dead. I mean, my dad was dead. My mom was here. But I didn't know it. And I'd never been one to make friends, you know? So one night I killed myself. I took about a million pills and killed myself. Except I didn't die. I think." She turned to her mother. "Arewewe dead, do you think?"

Gladys shrugged.

"You weren't doing anything that would kill you when you came here, were you, Anne? I mean, you weren't charging a nest of machine guns or anything?"

"No. I was on my way to language lessons, at the base."

"Hmmm. Okay. Anyway. I woke up here. And Damon was waiting for me. And now I have a whole new life. A wonderful new life. All's I'm saying is, give it a chance. I mean, there must be a reason you're here. Even if you didn't do anything to get here. Right? Anne? Right? Mom, back me up here."

"I thought I was dead, too," Gladys said. "I was in a car accident... you know, a crash? And I woke up here. And my friends—the journeyers—found me. And I wandered around with them in the desert for a long time."

"Like Moses!" Lois said brightly, then ducked as her mother threw a pillow at her.

"At first I was shocked and unhappy, like you, dear. Then I got used to it. And then I met up with my daughter. And now I'm—well, now I have many friends, and the king has told me I can stay as long as I wish, and my life is very different now, too."

Anne was listening, but she was more horrified than accepting. They wanted to be here? They never tried to go back? But that meant that she... that she...

"But there's nothing for me here," she said. She heard her voice tremble, and despised herself for it, but continued anyway. "Back home, they need me. Here I'm... what?"

Lois and Gladys looked at each other. "Well, there's no war or anything. Which is a *good* thing. But, uh, Maltese really seems to like you."

"He doesn't know me. And I didn't leave the farm and join the Army so I could end up someone's wife somewhere *else*."

Lois coughed. "Awkward," she said to the air. Then, "Right, well... um... anyway, maybe you could give Maltese a chance? To grow on you?"

"To grow on me? Like mold?"

"Okay, poor choice of words. Look, all's we're saying is, you're stuck here, right? Well, wherever you run to, you're still *here*. On this planet, or whatever it is. So why not stay in a comfortable palace with servants and a prince who really seems to like you, and just... give it a chance. Okay?"

"Okay," Anne lied.

Chapter 9

"Okay," Lois said, letting the curtain fall. She spotted Maltese lurking in the hallway, stomped over to him, put her hands on his broad chest, and pushed him back a few steps. "Uh-uh, Dr. Stud. You leave her alone."

"Is she all right? Does she still weep?"

"No, and no. Look, she's all tucked in and ready to go beddy-bye, so just, you know, give her some space."

His brow wrinkled. "Give her some space?"

"Look, I don't know if it's the dialect problem or if it's just that you're a guy, but back off of her, all right? Don't crowd? Get it? I mean, give the poor girl a break, she's kind of freaked right now."

"But I wish to be near her," Maltese said, sounding wounded.

"*I know*, Maltese, believe me, I totally get it, okay? But she's not like me, she didn't—I mean, she's got stuff she'd like to get back to. She's really missing her life right now and she's mixed up, and doesn't have a clue what's going on. Just give her a chance to get settled in."

"As you wish, Lois."

"Sooooooo. Turn around. Walk away."

After a minute's hesitation, he did.

Lois massaged her temples. "I had to end up on a planet that's never heard of Advil."

Maltese pulled himself up and swung a leg over the balcony, then landed lightly on the floor. He poked his head through the window, observed the lump asleep in the great bed, and sighed happily. Her scent was so pure, so delectable, almost like sweetmeats, and it was so strong it called to him. Why, his nose was telling him she was much closer than in the great bed, that's how strongly he was drawn to—

He heard a crash—inside his skull, oddly—and fell the rest of the way into the room.

"You get out!" he heard when he regained consciousness a few seconds later. "It's bad enough you've kidnapped me like the Lindbergh baby. But you're not going to sneak in here and rape me."

"Rape you?" he groaned, sitting up and rubbing the back of his head. "You mean wape? Prepare nuts

and berries for you and anoint you with oils?"

"No, I don't mean *wape*. I mean—you know. When you have—uh—marital relations with someone who doesn't want to have marital relations with you."

Maltese frowned. "You mean *force* you?" he asked, appalled. "Never! Not in a thousand sunrounds!"

"So why were you sneaking in my window? And where's your ladder?"

He did not know ladder, so he addressed the other question. "I wished to see you," he replied simply.

She flushed and brandished the other statue. He saw the room had at least six—perhaps not the wisest decorating move. "Well, don't do that! It's your fault I'm here. I don't have to like it—and *Idon't like* it—but *donot* sneak into my room and spy on me, or you'll get a lot worse than one of these upside the head."

"I only wished to see you were all right."

"*Allright*?" Her blue eyes bulged. "I am utterly not all right! I have to get back to work, have you not heard me say this before? There's a war, do you understand *war*? My country needs me and I'm... I'm stuck in something out of *Arabian Nights*. With people who can turn into leopards!" She was wild-eyed and brandishing the statue, which Maltese eyed with no small concern. "Isn't there someone in charge I can talk to? Who can send me back?"

"My father is—"

"Never mind," she snapped, and glared.

"Perhaps..." he began, and hesitated. He did not want her to go. But he felt her pain, keenly. Perhaps... perhaps it was not meant to be? No matter how drawn he was to her? The thought actually hurt him, as if someone had bitten him in the stomach.

"Perhaps what?"

"Ah..." He rubbed his head again, but the swelling had already vanished. "When Lois came here, she wished for things. For one thing. Her footlocker. And it appeared. And often, when people appear, they can wish themselves back. As they can wish things from their world out of the air. So perhaps..."

"You mean, like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*?"

"I do not know Dorothy."

"'There's no place like home'? Like that?"

"I do not know."

"Well, it's worth a try, right?" She set the statue down with a thump, clasped her arms around herself, shut her eyes, opened her mouth... then cracked one eye open and looked at him. "Hey. Don't look so sad, uh, Maltese, is it?"

"I do not want you to go," he sighed.

She hesitated, then said, "I don't belong here. It's nothing, um, I mean, it's not personal..." He knew she was telling an untruth, that she held it very personal, but it did not seem courteous to correct her. "Well," she finished awkwardly, "thanks for the advice."

"You are welcome."

"Okay. Here we go." She closed her eyes, then opened them again. "Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She closed her eyes again. Then she swore, "Cross of Christ!" And opened them, and hurried across the room, and stood on her toes, and kissed his chin. He blinked down at her, surprised, but before he could grab her and do some kissing of his own, she scurried back across the room and shut her eyes again.

"All right," she said. "This time I'm really doing it."

"Good-bye."

"I wish I was back at the base in New York," she said.

Maltese looked at the floor, imagining a gold circle would appear and whisk her away, as one had brought her, but nothing happened.

"I wish I was back at the base in New York!"

Nothing.

She opened her eyes again. "Maybe you have to do it," she said. "Because you—what did you call it? You wished me here." She gestured excitedly. "Sure, that's it! You have to wish me away!"

"But I do not wish for you to leave," he pointed out reasonably.

"Aw, shaddup! And wish me away already!"

"I wish Loo was back at the base in Noo Yorrk," he said.

Nothing.

She stamped a small foot, and the hem of her robe flapped. "You have to mean it," she said.

"But I do not."

"Arrrrggghhh!" she screeched, and threw herself facedown on the bed. She kicked like a child for some time, then slumped against the bedcovers, exhausted.

He bent over the bed, and gently turned her over. "Are you well?" he asked with some concern. Her face was very red, and her eyes were leaking.

"No," she sobbed.

"Do you require anything?" This was, he felt, a foolish question—the one thing she wanted, he was unable to give her. Still, politeness had been drilled into him from his days as a tiny prince, and such habits were ingrained. "Shall I fetch Lois or Gladys?"

"*No*. Those two are useless to me. They *want* to be here."

"It is not such a bad place."

"Not the point. I finally had a purpose, I finally got out of the God-be-damned kitchen, and now I'm *here*."

"Do not cry," he said, patting her ineffectually.

"I'm *not* crying," she sobbed. "And stop touching my head." She batted his hand away.

"Perhaps..." He trailed off. Again, an idea he wished he had not had. Again, he was powerless to deny her.

"What?"

"Well. My brother the good prince has shown me many times where Lois appeared. Lois thinks there are 'thin spots' between our worlds. Perhaps we could journey there tomorrow and perhaps your wish would work."

She stopped in mid-sniff and gaped at him. Then, slowly, "You'd do that?"

"I prefer not to. But I dislike seeing you weep."

She sat up excitedly, her head banging into his chin. "Really, you would? We could go there and try wishing again?"

"Yes."

She flung her arms around him and squeezed him with all her strength, which was puny, but he appreciated the gesture. He carefully squeezed back.

"I guess I misjudged you," she said, releasing him. "I really appreciate what you're trying to do."

"It is nothing."

"We'll see about that," she said, and grabbed the corner of his robe and wiped her face. Then she smiled up at him, and he saw that she had deep sweetmarks in the corners of her cheeks, what Lois called dimples. His heart nearly stopped, but he managed to smile back.

Chapter 10

"You're going where to do what?" Lois asked.

"The thin spot," Anne explained. "Where you came. Maltese is going to take me there, and wish me back."

"Wish you *back*?" The princess gave Anne a look that would melt iron. "What happened to giving it a chance here?"

"It was Maltese's idea," Anne said, feeling defensive and then feeling angry for feeling defensive.

"That is true," he agreed. "It was."

"Uh-huh. Well, good luck, I guess." Lois popped another white squashy thing into her mouth. It was the strangest breakfast Anne had ever seen, though she'd been too excited to try and eat. "Maybe I'll see you later."

"And maybe you won't," Anne said cheerfully. She wasn't going to let the prickly princess ruin her hopeful mood. Why, by twelve hundred she could be back on the base!

She followed Maltese out into some sort of courtyard, smoothing the collar of her uniform. She'd given in and slept in one of those robes, but had insisted on wearing her own clothes today. Thankfully, they had dried. Still, the robe had been comfortable, and sinfully soft... like silk. And a gorgeous wine red. Though it was early morning, the odd-looking sun was already high in the sky... another warm day. She could understand why everyone wore the robes.

Maltese stopped and was suddenly a mountain lion again, or whatever it was he could turn into... she had kept walking and nearly fell on him.

"If you would climb on, Loo," he said in her head—oh, she *hated* that—"we will get where we are going much faster."

She grabbed a handful of fur at his neck and carefully clambered onto his back. It wasn't much like riding a horse. Maltese was all funny bumps and odd angles. She gripped him with her knees and clutched double handfuls of fur. "You must be ready to be rid of me," she said through gritted teeth. How would she ever hold on while he moved? She could barely hold on and he was standing perfectly still.

"No," he said shortly, and moved off slowly, giving her time to adjust to his stride.

It was definitely an odd thing, riding a giant cat in a strange world on a journey where she would wish herself home. She supposed if she were a different sort of girl, she would be thrilled by the goings-on. Instead, they just made her more acutely aware of how different this world was, how much she wanted to get back home.

The funny thing was, "home" was the farm, and always had been. But she wouldn't have gone *back there* for all the tea in China. She supposed home was now the base. Though what she would do when the war was over, she didn't know.

She wasn't so foolish to believe, as some of the women did, that there would be a different place for them in the brave new world of post-World War II. "We have jobs now," they'd say in the factories, the show floors, the barracks. "We put down our spatulas and picked up our handguns and you can't go

back, however the war turns out, you can't go back."

But you could. And they would. No, what would happen was simple: The men who had not been killed would come back. And they would want their jobs... every last one of them. So it would be back to the kitchen, back to the farm, back to the ironing board and the grocery lists.

Well, she would worry about that later. For now, she had to focus on *getting* back. Somehow.

"I'm not going to cry," she said. "I've done more crying in the last twenty-four hours than I have in the last twenty-four months, and I'm *not* going to cry."

"That may be so," Maltese said, "but your eyes are leaking."

"Never mind! Rats and double rats! You're not wishing hard enough, that's all there is to it."

"I have wished many times for you to go back."

"Something's not right. Because I'm still here, and we've been at this for hours."

Maltese shrugged from his cross-legged position on the ground. She paced angrily in front of him, occasionally kicking up a burst of sand and wishing it was going right into his face. She didn't quite dare do that, though she could fantasize, oh yes.

"Rats," she said again, and slumped to the ground next to him.

"It was worth trying," he said mildly.

"I haven't given up yet," she retorted, "and I'm not letting you give up, either. The cost of staying here is too high."

"The cost?"

"Right. For example. I just now realized you're naked. Again."

"Of course," he said, looking mystified.

"But that's the sort of thing I should have noticed earlier, don't you think? Where I'm from, you'd be in jail right this minute."

"Jail?"

"A cage."

Maltese shook his head. "Barbaric."

"No, civilized. Anyway, if I don't get back, who knows what other odd things are going to escape my notice? Hmm?"

He reached out and patted the top of her head, like a dog. "You could try it, if you wished. No one will

put you in a jail if you decide to be sensible."

"Sensible?"

"It is a warm day," he pointed out. "You seem also warm."

She was sweating, but not so much because of the heat. It was him. Lounging around on the ground, casually nude, as if she was used to this sort of thing, as if she could control the urge to reach out and do some patting of her own. Which was ridiculous. Ridiculous! She had several dozen other problems to worry about; her new lack of self-control seemed the least of them.

"If I have to stay here for a while," she couldn't help asking, "can I stay in the castle?"

"Of course."

"That doesn't imply I'm giving up, you know."

"Of course."

"And I'd like my own room." She added, "Please."

"Of course."

"And don't read anything into this, either," she said, and leaned over to kiss him on the chin as she had the night before. Except he was too quick for her, seizing her firmly but gently, and she wasn't kissing his chin, but his mouth. He'd pulled her into his lap and something was digging into her bottom and she just knew *what that was*, and his mouth was on hers, and oh, he was warm and smelled like the sand all around them, clean and hot.

She put her hands on his chest and felt his nipple harden under her fingertips, and resisted the urge to rub it and see if she could make him as oddly out of control as she now felt, make him feel like nothing mattered at this moment except more touching, more kissing, more teeth and lips and tongue and—

She jerked herself out of his grip and he let her go, thank goodness (or was it, rats?). "That's enough of *that*," she wheezed, running her fingers through her hair in an attempt to look less mussed. Less kissed. Less curious about what else he would have done.

"As you wish," he said mildly enough, but his eyes were gleaming in a way that she wasn't sure she liked. The pupils were an odd shape, not quite long like a cat's, not quite round like hers. Egg-shaped? she wondered. Egg-shaped pupils? And when did I go crazy? Do they have nut hatches here?

"I think things are complicated enough without that," she said.

He said nothing.

"Well, they are," she continued. She realized she was still panting, damn the man, and fought to control her breathing. "For one thing—what's the matter?"

He was on his feet so suddenly she hadn't seen him move. He was looking out to the horizon and his lips were pressed so tightly together, they looked like a scar.

"Them," he said, almost spat.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"There." He pointed. "The dark travelers. My father will not be pleased."

She looked, but all she could see was sand, sand, and more sand, stretching far into the horizon, stretching into the endless purple sky. She squinted until her eyes streamed, with no luck. But the effect on Maltese was shocking... he was like a different person, tense and stiff and glarey.

"What's a dark traveler?"

"Warmakers." He glanced over at her, seeming to remember she was there. "Come, Loo. We must get you back to the palace."

"But—"

"Now."

He was suddenly the big cat again, and without another word she climbed on top of him. One thing she'd learned in basic training, if nothing else, was to obey an order. And Maltese, she realized anew, was a prince. He hadn't thrown his weight around once since she'd arrived... which made his tone all the more impressive.

No, annoying.

No, impressive.

Dammit.

Chapter 11

"We should have been more vigilant."

The castle, at first far off in the distance, was now rearing up in front of them; every thud of Maltese's paws brought it closer. She had been hanging on for dear life and wondering what a dark traveler was

(warmaker)

and if it was as bad

(warmaker)

as it sounded. Surely nothing could have been as bad as the Japanese, all those killer drones doing whatever their Emperor told them, why, it was indecent and... and un-American!

"I don't know," she shouted in his furry ear. "You spotted them right away. Before anybody. I couldn't even see them. *Istill* can't see them."

"They crept up on us like scum," he continued, still sounding mightily mad.

"Scum?"

He put a picture in her head: a black sewer rat, its long, scabrous pink tail curled around it, its nose twitching, beady eyes gleaming.

"Oh, scum. Right. Maltese, you're being too hard on yourself." *And you're running faster than I'm comfortable with, but never mind.* "The princess was telling me just last night that you guys don't have wars here or anything. If you're not used to it, you can't watch for it."

"We were easy," he persisted. "We have made it easy for them."

"We don't even know what they want. They have this thing where I'm from, the Welcome Wagon? Maybe they're bringing coupons and things. We don't*know*."

"No one knows what they want. They don't speak; they grunt like animals." His loathing was rolling through her head, making her shudder. "They are animals, they come down from the mountains to make rights, they fight until the last scum-loving one is defeated, then they scuttle away."

"Okay, okay, I understand what you're saying, calm down, you're going to buck me off and trample me, and then how will I get home?" She tried to joke, to lighten his mood. "I see your plan now. It won't work."

"When we return, you must go with the princess and the Lady Gladys and the children, and you must stay with them until—"

"Wrong again, Maltese. Besides, do you really think*that* princess is going to cower in hiding with the babies?"

Silence, except for the thud-thud-thud of his paws hitting hard-packed sand.

"Right. And maybe I can help. I had a little bit of training before I ended up here. Maybe I can help you talk—"

"You do not go near them. You do not look at them, you do not touch them. You do not allow them to touch you. If *onedoes* touch you, I will eat his spine."

"It's good," she commented, "that we're establishing rules. For instance, being a newcomer here, I might not understand the whole 'don't touch or be devoured' guide-line. And I've said this before—you're being too hard on yourself."

Silence.

"We have this place where I'm from," she continued doggedly. Her mouth was getting dry and she wanted a drink in the worst way. She blinked sun and sand out of her eyes and continued. "Pearl Harbor. It was the posting everybody wanted—the weather was kind of like here, breezy and warm but not too

hot. And the ocean—that's like a big body of water—"

"We have seas."

"You understand, then. It was like paradise. You got to fight for your country *and be* stationed in Eden, what could be better? Anyway, my friend—my best friend from home—she was stationed there, and right before I signed up, I visited her at the base. It was like being in heaven. The palm trees and the—it was just really, really nice. And so I saw her, and she told me how great it all was, and it *looked* great, and I went away and signed up, and then the Japanese came and blew her up, and all her friends, too. And we never saw it coming."

"I am sorry for your friend."

"Yeah." She sighed. Her eyes were still watering, but she didn't think it was the sand. "Me, too. But my point is, I know what it's like to be asleep at the switch. You spend a lot of time blaming yourself. You feel so stupid, as if you were the one who failed. When the ones who deserve all the blame are the bad guys."

"So you especially want to go back," he said, slowing down as the castle gates came into view. "To avenge your friend."

"Well... yes."

"I see."

"It's just that I would feel better—"

"I understand, truly. I did not, before. I will not stand in your way again. When this... business... is taken care of, we will try again. And this time I will mean it when I wish for you to go away."

Stupid sand. She couldn't stop her eyes from tearing up no matter how hard she rubbed.

Chapter 12

"How long?" the king asked.

"Another sunround at most."

"How many?"

"Ten score."

"Excuse me," Princess Lois said, and thank goodness, because Anne had about a thousand questions herself. "I'm having some trouble with the whole 'sunround' thing. I mean, not that I should be focusing on that particular issue right this second, but honest to God, it's really been bugging me. At first I thought it

was about a year, but sometimes it sounds like it's only a day. I know 'moonround' is a month, but—"

"It is easy to be confused," Prince Damon said, smiling at his wife. Anne privately thought that Maltese was just a tiny bit handsomer, but she was certain the crown prince could have crossed over to her world, gone to Hollywood, and made more money than Clark Gable. "A sunround is many, many sunrounds, as many sunrounds as it takes to get through Time of Sowing, Time of Growth, Time of Reaping, Time of Sleeping. But for the sun to climb into the sky and then fall down, that is just a sunround."

Anne looked at Lois, who was looking back at her. She almost smiled at the totally confused look on the princess's face. "What?" she asked.

Lois cleared her throat. "So what you're saying, sir, is that a sunround is a year, but a sunround is a day?"

"Yes," the king, the crown prince, and Maltese all said in unison.

"You got that?" Lois exclaimed.

"Please, we must keep our attention on the dark travelers," the king said, an almost absent reprimand. "If they are coming, it cannot bode well."

"It hasn't before?" Lois asked. "I thought you guys didn't have wars."

"There are occasional... skirmishes? Small fights?"

"Great."

"What do they want?" Anne asked. "Where I'm from, the fight is for more territory—"

"I read somewhere that all fights are actually land wars," Lois commented. "That no matter what the politicians said it was about, it was actually land spats. Revolutionary, Civil, World War One, World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf..."

"Oh my God," Anne said, revolted. "There are more wars after Pearl Harbor?"

"Well..."

"It does not matter what they want," the king said, again guiding them back to the subject at hand. "They must be stopped, and driven off."

"Okay, uh, that's not too open-minded," Lois said. "Will it hurt to hear them out?"

"They don't speak. They're animals," Damon explained. "They come and try to make war, we defeat them, they leave. A few sunrounds later, they try again."

"I assume you mean years and not days," she muttered.

"And that's an interesting perspective, calling the dark travelers animals," Anne commented, a little startled at the sudden, surprising burst of prejudice in what had seemed to be a friendly and welcoming people. Certainly they had made Gladys and Lois welcome, as well as Anne herself. "You know, since

you all... um..."

"I don't think you should go there," Lois suggested.

Anne wasn't sure what that meant, but she persisted. "Since you can all turn into animals. It seems, uh, odd, that you would call strangers animals and fight them off. And then tell visitors you don't have wars."

"You are new here," the king said, courteously but firmly. "You do not understand our ways."

"We have learned in the past they do not understand us. They do not speak as we do; they care only to take what is not theirs."

"Is that not what war is like at your home?" Maltese asked her.

"No, no. See, the Nazis invaded and then the Japanese joined up and they're... you know, they're hurting people and they hurt a whole bunch of us because they don't want to lose the—well, it's a totally different thing."

"Nazis suck," Lois agreed. "Don't sweat it, Anne. History backs you up."

But she was troubled. The Japanese were wrong; the Germans were wrong. And Maltese's reaction to the dark travelers was also wrong, very very wrong. But, er, how, exactly? And what could she do about it?

"So what's the plan?" Lois asked, and again, Anne gave silent thanks. The outspoken princess was, as usual, collecting information she herself was after.

"You and Gladys and Loo and the little ones will—"

"—get our guns and help you guys go kick some ass," Lois finished.

Anne laughed aloud at the look on Damon's face, then clapped a hand over her mouth as everyone looked at her.

"Except my mom doesn't have a gun," the princess continued thoughtfully. "Not to mention the kids, obviously. I can lend Mom one from my footlocker, but she won't use it."

"Why not send a party out to meet them?" Anne suggested. "Perhaps we can find out what they want."

The men shook their heads, and Lois rolled her eyes at Anne.

"At the least, they'll know you're ready for them," she persisted. "You might be able to run them off without anybody getting hurt or bombed. I mean killed."

"It is not the way we deal with them," the king said.

"Well, I'm not hiding while you go out and fight, pal, so just forget about it," Lois informed the prince.

"What does it cost to try?" Anne persisted. "Lois could stay here and supervise while you send a small party out to talk to them. If things go badly, you've got time to get back here and prepare."

"Who says the dark travelers can't beat them back? I wouldn't want to be in a footrace with any of them. I mean, no offense, fellas, but it sounds like these guys just wander around the desert all the time. They must be incredibly tough."

"They're only half men," the king sniffed.

"Animals," Damon added.

"You mean... they *can't* change into the big cats like you boys do?" Anne asked, suddenly understanding.

"*That's* your problem with them? But we can't change, either," Lois said.

"Yes, but you cannot help it. You were born on another star. You have overcome your difficulties admirably. You don't skulk and sneak and steal land."

"Oh, is that the difference?" Lois replied, but it was clear from her expression she didn't understand at all.

Chapter 13

"That was very sneaky," Anne told Maltese as they neared the dark travelers.

"I cannot help it if I think you are wise, Loo."

She grinned, and since she was on his back again, he couldn't see her. To her secret amazement, she and the princes and the king were riding back out to where Maltese had seen the travelers. Lois was marshaling the troops, the women, and the children back at the palace. Anne had never considered that for a moment, but instead persuaded Maltese to let her meet with the travelers. Well... bargained.

"Just so we understand, I'm only staying until Time of Reaping," she reminded him. "Less than half a sunround."

"Yes, I understand."

And in return, the king allowed the unthinkable—for a stranger, a protected female, to meet the scum. Er, dark travelers.

It wasn't that they didn't think women could fight, Anne realized, wishing once again she had a drink. It was beyond foolish; she was running around in the desert (well, *she* wasn't, exactly) without a canteen. And no one had suggested one, which told her they simply weren't as susceptible to the heat and the sand as she was.

No, they thought women could fight just fine... in itself a novel experience. In fact, these people *valued* women who could fight—women like Lois. But the princes had to weigh that value against protecting

future queens and princesses. And, she thought with a secret smile, Damon was so ridiculously protective of Lois, it was adorable and sort of funny at the same time, because Lois just would not stand for it, not for a moment.

Maltese, however, was a much more practical fellow. And they had quickly struck a bargain. She couldn't let such an opportunity go by, and if it meant lingering in the Sand-Lands a bit longer than planned, well, she'd face the consequences of that later.

"I do not like this, my good son," the king said in her head. Yech! Both for talking in her brain, and the sentiment.

"My good king, are you not tired of it always being the same with the dark travelers?" Maltese replied. "It costs nothing to give Loo her chance."

"I dislike change," the king replied, "but perhaps the perspective of a newcomer will be helpful. And I would wish to put an end to the difficulties between you and your visitor."

In other words, Anne thought, the old guy wants his son to settle down. And I guess I'm in line for the job. Because I fell into the pool when Maltese wished for me. Ridiculous .

Still, it was nice to be included. She was riding Maltese, as usual, while Damon and the king ran along either side of them, sans riders. The other prince, whose name she'd unfortunately forgotten, had gone hunting a few days ago and would not return in time.

If it was me, I'd be mad, she thought, momentarily sorry for the absent prince.

But it's not me, she thought, and was for a moment joyously, deliriously happy. She felt like she was starting an adventure, like the first day of Basic, like the day she'd left home. As for the possible danger, she knew to her bones Maltese wouldn't let anything happen to her. That feeling was very strange, but also comforting.

She slid off Maltese's back and watched the dark travelers approach. They didn't look terribly frightening. In fact, they looked dusty and hot and tired, like regular people at the end of a particularly long day in the fields, not the lowlife boogeymen the royal family had made them out to be.

Their robes were long and black (in the desert? she thought incredulously) and flapped in the wind. Their large hoods were off and hung down almost to their waists. And they were all brunettes, their hair varying lengths and shades of brown.

The royal family, Anne realized with a burst of excitement, were all blond. In fact, except for Lois and Gladys and Anne herself, everyone was blond. It was a country of Betty Grables and Errol Flynn's! (Er, wait, wasn't Flynn a brunette? Oh, never mind.) Yes, a country of blonds... except for the dark travelers, of course. But this wasn't really their land, was it? No brunettes allowed.

They looked human, too, she realized as the man in front opened his mouth to speak. *If I was riding the bus on the base and these fellas got on, I wouldn't give any of them a second look .*

She supposed that was part of the problem. In a land of godlike creatures, the dark travelers had committed the sin of being ordinary.

"*Glzpllk sltsl dkst*," the man in front said, and he interspersed the small pause between consonant clusters with a glottal click.

"I'm sorry, we don't understand you," Anne said, hoping he would reply.

"Sltsl gdpsll wjjkswwkkt?"

"It's gibberish," the king sniffed. "In a moment they will begin to quarrel and fight us."

"It's not gibberish," she corrected him, almost sharply. "It sounds harsh to our ears because they don't use vowels."

"Sltsl gdpsll wjjkswwkkt?"

"Do... not... fight... else... shalt... be... defeated," the king said slowly and loudly.

"Sltsl...gdpsll... wjjkswwkkt ?"

"DO... NOT... FIGHT! ELSE... SHALT... BE... DEFEATED!"

"SLTSL... GDSPLL... WJJKSWWKKT!"

"Okay, that's enough of that right now," Anne said. "For heaven's sake. It doesn't matter how loud you are, or how slow, if neither of you understands a word."

"We did warn you," Damon said mildly.

She ignored that. "It's obviously a standard greeting; note how they're repeating the same consonant set. It's not gibberish, it's definitely a language." She clicked her tongue at the man in the lead, and though he did not smile, the frown wrinkles in his forehead smoothed out. "It'll be hard to learn... God, it'll be hard! Worse than Mandarin. But I think it can be done."

"How... how do you know these things?" Maltese asked in amazement.

"I'm studying dialects at the base," she replied. "I was supposed to be sent overseas to—well, we were still working on that while I was in training." At their looks of confusion (the ones who *didn't* speak her language seemed to be following it better), she elaborated. "I'm... when you sign up to fight, you have to take a lot of tests, and all my tests showed that I have a knack for languages... do you know 'knack'? Yes? One time we had a guy from Paris—I mean he was originally from Paris, but he'd been living in America for years and years—he was on the farm for a couple of months helping my dad with the spring planting, and he taught me French. I was pretty fluent in time for the Fourth of July picnic."

"Are you telling us you can speak their tongue?"

"Give me a couple of months first."

Maltese smiled at her, and she couldn't help smiling back. When he looked at her like that, his whole face lit up and it was nearly impossible to resist.

"You are wonderful," he said.

Chapter 14

"Sir, I'll have to meet with them daily. And I'll need lots of paper and pencils—you have writing materials? Frequent, short sessions or we'll all burn out. And I'll need an assistant, someone to bounce ideas off of and help me get it all down. Can we barrack them close by?"

"It will all be as you wish, Anne," the king assured her. "But I must warn you, the minute they turn warlike, they will be dealt with."

"Sir, be serious. They're just happy to be included. Look at them."

The dark travelers were following behind the four of them, and Anne kept glancing back to make sure they were still there. None of them had smiled yet, but they had chattered excitedly to each other and followed her willingly enough.

"And they will be guarded," Sekal added.

"I understand, but please try not to be too obvious, all right? They haven't done anything wrong. And we invited them back to our home." She corrected herself. "Your home."

"Because of you," Maltese reminded her.

No, she thought. Because your father loves you and wants you to be happy, so he's going along with this in order to make me happy and therefore you happy. So now a pack of dark travelers are staying in the palace for the first time in the history of Sekal's reign. Because of me. So I'd damned well better learn that language in the next five months. Or else... what?

Chapter 15

"You mean there wasn't a fight? You brought 'em back here and we're having a slumber party or whatever? Well, shit, that's great!" Lois did something to her handgun, and the clip slid out and slapped into her palm. They didn't have guns like that in the service, so small and sleek and black, and Anne was longing to get a closer look at it. Well, maybe when she knew Lois better. "I can't believe it! Where's Damon, I gotta go give him a big hug."

"They're getting the dark tra—" Anne shook her head. Part of the problem was that ridiculous name. "They're making our guests comfortable. I guess the king didn't want to leave it to the servants."

"Huh. Okay. So, what were they like?"

"Mild and unwarlike," she replied. "I think they're just tired. They've probably been roaming the desert for decades."

"Like Moses," Lois said brightly.

"Stop saying that, it's annoying. Maybe they got tired of it and a new leader tried to take things by force once or twice. It would never work, of course, so they were stuck being nomads. You should have seen them when we motioned for them to come with us. They were so surprised. And grateful. Now I've just got to learn the language and we can really make some progress."

"Wait, wait, I missed a memo or something. You're *restaying*? To learn their language? Cripes, I miss out on one afternoon jaunt and everything changes."

"I have to. The king needs me." She heard herself saying that and straightened with pride. *The king needs me*. Oh, boy, did that feel good. Not "ride your bike to the vet and tell him the cow's having trouble bulling" good. "Report to Special Language and Tactics at 0800" good. "It's no wonder everyone here thought they were animals."

"Yeah, I have to admit, it's the first evidence of prejudice I've seen," Lois said. "I was kind of shocked. I guess I've only noticed Damon's good side. I mean, once I got over being massively pissed at him. He's so gonzo, I guess I overlooked that prejudice."

Anne guessed what "gonzo" meant based on context. "Yes, he certainly is. Well, everybody has hidden dark corners, I guess. Otherwise there would never be wars."

"That might be oversimplifying a little, doncha think? I mean, there's gotta be more to it than—"

"Speaking of wars," she continued, "did I hear you say a while back that we won World War Two?"

"Yup. We completely kicked their asses. But later we made nice with Japan, you know, after massively obliterating them, and now we—"

"We made friends with them?" Anne was shocked, thinking of the dead at Pearl Harbor. "After what they did?"

"Well, uh, we sort of got even with a vengeance. Do you know what Fat Man and Little Boy are?"

"I guess the important thing is we won," Anne said, not really listening. "I'll be sorry I couldn't do my part, but maybe after I learn the language of the dar—of our guests, I can work on a way to go b—"

"Oh, for Christ's sake!"

"Where I'm from," Anne said evenly, "ladies don't speak in such a way."

"Well, wake up and smell the fucking roses, sunshine. You *aren't* where you're from. You're here. You were bitching and moaning because you finally had a purpose back home and got taken away from it. Well, shit! You've got a purpose here, too, one a lot more important than being a cog in the war machine back home, I might add. You *stopped* a war, for crying out loud!"

"A skirmish," Anne couldn't help correcting.

"And now it turns out you're this humongous language expert and we're massively dependent on you to talk to them, and you practically negotiated a peace treaty just by talking the king into giving them a chance, and who knows where this is gonna lead, but *hhnooooo*, poor Lieutenant Anne, trapped in the SandLands with no purpose." Lois's voice was dripping scorn, and Anne squashed the urge to smack the princess between the eyes. "Don't you get it? People don't end up here by accident. This was meant to be! Will you quit crying about it and accept your destiny already? All this bitching about not being in training is getting *real* old. Will you just please suck it up?"

"Excuse me, Princess," Anne replied, her scorn equal to Lois's. "I've been here, at my count, less than seventy-two hours. I beg your pardon for not acclimating quicker. How dare you lecture me, *Princess*? You have no idea of the realities of being a woman in 1945. You weren't even born while I was struggling to make something of my life. How can you know what it's like?"

"I ought to by now," Lois snapped back, "after all the whining I've had to put up with."

"Then you've got an idea how trapped a person can feel, a person with few choices and fewer opportunities. Then you get a chance... and you're free. But not for long."

"No, then you get a new job, a very important job, and a prince thinks you walk *on* water and does everything he can to make you feel better, plus, hello, could he be more great looking?"

"What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"But *noooo*, that's not good enough for you, *you* have to get back to the precious base—"

"I would think," Anne said quietly, "that as someone who killed herself rather than face life without her job, you might be a little more understanding. I can't do mine and you have *the gall* to tell me to 'suck it up,' whatever the hell that means? How did you do it, Lois? Did you shoot yourself with that nifty little gun? Did you jump off a building? However you did it, you most certainly did not *suck it up*."

That got her, Anne saw at once. Lois's mouth had dropped open but she made no response, because there was none.

"So in the future," Anne finished, "if you would keep your unsolicited opinion *to* yourself, I would be grateful." She turned and left the small sitting room, passing a slack-jawed Damon on the way out. Lois was right about one thing at least: this place absolutely needed doors. "Don't say a damned word," she told him. "Dammit!"

Maybe ladies didn't use vulgar language, but it was an interesting (and refreshing!) way to express oneself, for certain.

Chapter 16

Maltese had brought her lots of thick paper, so heavy it was almost like cloth, and pots of a thick, viscous substance which looked like tar but wrote like ink, and shiny sticks to dip into the pots. She tried to make notes about the afternoon, but the argument with Lois kept breaking her concentration.

True, the woman had overstepped her bounds, princess or not, but she had certainly given Anne something to think about. Was there meaning to all of this? She had almost convinced herself ending up in that sweet-smelling pool had been an accident, a divine joke, but now she was wondering. Because she certainly had a job here, had purpose, and couldn't—wouldn't—leave until their guests had secured a place on the planet. It was as much their home as the royal family's—but persuading Sekal of that might take some doing. She would stay until it was done.

As for the war back home, she already knew how it ended. And she sincerely doubted that the contributions of Lieutenant Anne Sanger would have much of an effect on the outcome. Certainly the farm didn't need her—her father had replaced her with a hired hand the week she had taken the oath. And her mother, of course, had escaped into death years ago.

She stuck the stick into the pot, determined to make a record of the day's progress, no matter wh—

"Is there still danger, Loo?"

She looked up. Maltese had pulled the heavy curtain aside and was standing in the doorway.

"Pardon?"

"I was only wondering if it was dangerous to speak to you." He grinned. "Certainly Lois thinks so."

"Oh, her." Anne put the stick down on a different sheet of paper, mindful of the stains. "She picked a fight and I decided not to roll over, that's all."

He made a noncommittal noise and approached her. "What is it you are doing?"

"Making notes about today. Trying anyway." She stared at her hands for a moment, then looked up into his beautiful face. Of course, his looks were irrelevant. But they certainly didn't hurt matters. "Maltese, do you think all this was meant to be? That I was supposed to come here?"

He knelt beside her chair then picked up one of her hands, turned it over, and kissed the palm. "Loo, I thought that before you helped us make a home for the lost ones."

"The what?"

"It is a small improvement over dark travelers," he said, "and the king has bent an attentive ear to you in this matter, as in many others." Smiling: "I think he has too much fear not to obey you."

"Oh. You're right, *that's* better." She was mildly amazed that her smallest suggestions were being taken so seriously—definitely a novel experience. "So that's what you think? That I'm supposed to be here?"

He paused, as if he were trying to find a way to speak his mind without scaring her, and finally said, "I think if it was not meant to be, you never would have come. And if your coming was a mistake, you would have been able to go back."

She looked at him steadily, this good man, this prince, who had never bossed her and had never made

her feel rotten for being born a girl. "Can I stay here?"

"Of course."

"With you?"

"Of course."

"Forever?"

He kissed her for a lovely long time. "Of course."

Chapter 17

Lois pressed her lips together so tightly they went white, then turned and glared at Damon when he prodded her.

"I guess maybe I was out of line," she said to Anne, still staring daggers at Damon.

"And."

"And I shouldn't have given you all that shit."

"And."

"And it wasn't for me to tell you to suck it up."

"And."

"And I'd better not push my fucking luck unless I want to sleep on the couch for the rest of the week."

"What is a couch?" Maltese asked.

"It is a thing where you cannot mate," Damon explained. "It is a terrible, terrible place."

"I appreciate that," Anne said quickly, biting her tongue so she wouldn't laugh. Lois looked so annoyed; Damon, so earnest. "I said some things, too. Things I regret." Not the whole truth, but her brand-new sister-in-law was obviously trying to make up for bad behavior; it wouldn't hurt to meet her halfway.

At least, she *thought* Lois was her new sister-in-law. Or sibling-by-mating, as Maltese called it. There hadn't been a priest, or even a justice of the peace. Instead, the king had pronounced them mated, then gone looking for Gladys. It was a bewildering, abrupt end to a dizzying week.

And she didn't regret it in the least. The moment she had stopped fighting her destiny, as Lois had called it, a feeling of incredible goodwill—dare she call it inner peace, if there was such a thing?—had come

over her. Suddenly the SandLands had seemed especially beautiful, the people around her especially kind, the castle especially opulent. And to think it was now partly hers! As a member of the royal family, she was entitled to a share of... well, everything.

And she knew exactly what she would do with her newfound influence. What she had been doing all week... being an advocate for the lost ones. She doubted it would be her life's work—she had many helpers willing to learn the language as quickly as she could translate it, and two years from now, communication should be reasonably simple. But there would be other things to occupy her time. Her duties as a princess royal, and perhaps later... children.

Odd, how something she had never given much thought to was now on her mind all the time. Well. Not children, exactly. But the making of them. Which, judging from the way Maltese had been looking at her all evening, would commence as soon as they had some privacy.

"I have to tell you something," she said nervously. They were alone, finally, sitting on Maltese's silk-covered plain of a bed, and he was kissing her between her neck and shoulder, causing delicious shivers to race up and down her spine. "I should have told you earlier. But in my defense, there wasn't time."

"I did not wish to give you time," he whispered, nibbling on her ear. "I feared you would change your mind and run away with a lost one."

She couldn't help but laugh. "That was pretty unlikely." She leaned away from him. "I'm serious, I have something important to tell you."

"Can you tell me from beneath the bedclothes?"

"No." She slapped his hands away. "Listen, I'm happy to be here and I think we'll have a wonderful life together, but I have to tell you, this isn't my first time."

"First time? Yes, you're new here."

"No, I mean I'm not a virgin."

His brow furrowed. "You mean... you have mated before?"

"Not been married before, but I've—you know. You remember the man who taught me French that spring? Well..." She paused. "I was curious. And that accent was really wonderful."

"Loo, I do not care."

"Well, you say that now, but I know men usually do care about that sort of thing. And I didn't want to have this discussion after and have you think you were tricked. It's silly, but—"

"Loo. I do not care even a small amount."

"Really?"

"I have mated before," he pointed out.

"Well, yes, that's usually how it is. Uh. I mean, that's how it is back home."

"This is your home now."

She smiled at him. "So it is. Kiss me some more. Your reaction was quite a bit nicer than I thought it would be."

He obliged, his tongue exploring her mouth, and soon enough she had wriggled out of her mating robe and helped him out of his, and she was kissing him all over his broad chest and he was sighing and stroking her hair.

"You really don't care?" she asked again, because she was having a little trouble believing it was this easy.

"Loo, I beg of you, can we please talk of something else? Or better, not talk at all?"

"All right, all right. Let's talk about how beautiful you are."

He laughed and caressed her bare hip. "Men do not have beauty. You are the beautiful one."

"Pretty is as pretty does... not that I ever knew what that meant. And I'm supposed to be a linguist."

"You will teach me the tongues you speak?"

"You want to learn Spanish? Or Mandarin?"

"I have interest in what interests you."

"Oh." She reached out and tentatively grasped him, marveling at the way he throbbed in her hand. He groaned a little and shifted so she could have better access. "*Te quiero*. That means I want you." It also meant I love you, but she wasn't quite ready for that yet.

He breathlessly repeated the phrase, then reached out and stroked the fine hair between her thighs. His finger slipped through her wetness and he gently caressed her, his thumb lightly pressing her clitoris. She felt a little breathless herself, and felt herself yearning toward him as he eased her legs apart and his other hand joined the first, stroking and teasing.

She let her head fall back and gloried in his hands, his tongue in her mouth, his lips on her throat. When he held her apart with his thumbs, she strained to meet him, nearly sobbing as his hot length slipped into her, as easy and pretty as a dance.

She clutched his broad shoulders as he surged against her, as he pulled her thighs up so her legs were wrapped around him, as he stroked so hard, and yet so sweetly, she nearly felt it in her chest. In fact, she did feel it in her chest; her heart was filling, bursting.

"*Te gusto*," she moaned, and meant it the way it was supposed to be.

"Say a truth," he murmured to her.

"I want you."

"Say another truth."

"I... love you."

"I, also."

"Please don't stop."

"Never."

She had meant touching her, filling her up, but realized he had meant he would never stop loving her, and then she did weep, a little. But it didn't feel like being weak, being a silly girl; in this one moment between them, it felt exactly right.

She felt a flower full of light open inside her and shivered as she reached orgasm, shivered and tightened her grip, and then he was stiffening in her arms and telling her that he loved her in Spanish.

After, they cuddled together in his big bed, his hand cupped loosely over her right breast, her head on his shoulder. "It's nice to be home," she said after a long, comfortable silence.

"It was not home for me until you came," he replied. "I have waited for you long and long."

"I guess I was waiting for you, too. I just didn't know."

"But now you do?"

"Yes." She sighed. "Now I know."

They slept.

He woke before she did, and she supposed she would get used to being gazed upon while she slept. On the other hand, she wondered, is that something one would ever want to get used to? She never wanted to take any of this—or him—for granted.

Although she had been here just a short time, it felt like she had been fighting forever. Now that she had stopped, she wanted to preserve the feeling of sublime contentment.

"How dull," she commented, "that I've turned out to be like all the other girls, interested only in home and a family—"

"I do not think you are dull, Loo. And I do not think your interests lie only with heirs."

She reached down, found him. Quite hard for her. The thought—the clear proof of his wanting—brought a warm flush to her body.

"It doesn't sound like you think so," she teased.

"Mmmm..."

"Show me what you like. Do you like this?" She slid her palm up and down, her thumb and forefinger meeting at this tip, then spreading apart at his base.

"Ohyesssss ..." he groaned.

"What else? We're married now, I'm supposed to know these things." She heard her solemn, almost scholarly tone and smiled. "So tell me."

"Touch... my gems... in your other hand... while you do that... that..."

She cupped his testicles, marveling at their furry warmth, their pleasing texture, while her other hand stroked up and down. (And it seemed, whatever the planet, men had valuable names for their testicles, something she would think about later, when it would be more appropriate to laugh.) He was squirming beneath her touch, his hands gripping her shoulders, and then he wrenched her down for a toe-tingling kiss.

In half a second, he had shifted so that he was leaning over her, his hands were busy below her waist, his fingers making her squirm, making her groan, making her want him more than she had ever wanted anything. His fingers stroked and dipped and teased and she writhed beneath his touch, pinned to the bed by his kiss, his hands, her desire.

He eased into her, never breaking the kiss, and she rose to meet him, looped her arms around his neck, and met every thrust. She felt his hands cupping her bottom and sighed into his mouth. Then he was stiffening over her and looking chagrined.

"I was too soon," he said. "I apologize."

She laughed out loud. "You've got the whole rest of your life to make it up to me."

"Agreed," he said. "I will start at once."

And he was as good as his word.
