**Song of Marwey**

**By**

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Chapter One

She saw him, and she wanted him. Marwey Famil looked down from the fifth story tower window into the paved castle courtyard, focusing on the younger of the two men who conversed. His personal Song resonated straight to her core — without touch, without even a meeting of gazes. She gasped and pressed a hand against her suddenly thumping heart. Such a connection wasn't common. No, it was extraordinary, and her life had always been ordinary.

Marwey leaned against the thick wall framing the window and stared at the Castle Soldier. He was young, his features handsome though ruddy with winter cold. She could see that his body was well built, even through the shabby cloak that was draped over his uniform. He held himself proudly and she sensed the seed of greatness within him — greatness and ambition.

She narrowed her eyes. His hair didn't show the mark of magical Power — streaks of silver at his left or right temple — that she expected from a man with such a potent Song. Streaks she herself had at both temples. His hair was coal black.

Still, his face, his body, his movement, stirred her, flooded her with an aching warmth. Her soul Song sought him, curled around him. At once she knew all her own careful life plans — to become the Chief of Staff of the preeminent Marshalls' Castle — must be reconsidered.

If he was a Castle Soldier, he aspired to be more, perhaps a warrior Marshall himself. Marshalls always fought in Pairs. She sucked in a breath. She'd never desired to become a Marshall, to fight the hideous monsters invading Lladrana, her land — but she wanted him. Enough to alter her path? If the Song between them was strong enough.

If she was strong enough to turn from a nurturer to a warrior.

She nibbled her lip as she saw him tug at his cloak. Polish some of those rough edges and they'd go far together. One of the strong threads that resonated between them was determination.

Marwey usually got what she set her mind to. She'd wanted to leave her comfortable, slow-paced noble home for the Castle and more excitement and here she was, companion to her great aunt Thealia Germaine who was herself a prominent Marshall.

"Marwey," Thealia called from the bedroom. "Please come help me remove my chain mail."

She hurried to Thealia. Though bespelled for lightness and flexibility, the chain mail was still bulky enough to be awkward. When Marwey freed Thealia from it, the older woman sighed in relief. It had been a long flight for them by winged horse from the oracle's home — the Singer's Abbey — to the Castle. At the Abbey Thealia had sought advice on how to save Lladrana from the invading monsters.

Thealia rolled her shoulders. "It will be difficult convincing the other Marshalls to Summon an exotique from another world to help us." Thealia stretched. "But the oracle said an exotique could discover how to create the magical fenceposts required to keep the horrors out. The old fenceposts are falling." Her lips thinned to a line.

"An exotique? We haven't had one of those for…for ages." The idea of a stranger strong in Power coming from another world intrigued and excited.

Scowling, Thealia said, "Almost a century, and he didn't stay. This will be a battle of words and wills — especially with the Lord Marshall."

She glanced at the bow windows of the bedroom and rubbed her hands. "But I've prevailed against him before. He didn't want me to install these bow windows."

They looked a little odd in the round tower, but Marwey only nodded.

Thealia sighed. "It's a dangerous business, Summoning an exotique, draining of our Power — and Marshalls have died. There are too few of us." She shook her head. "I can't convince the others by myself. I want my husband." Her face softened. "He's so much better with people than me." Thealia tilted her head, testing her mental connection with her husband, then smiled slightly. "He's awaiting me in the Map Room."

She glanced at Marwey, brows lowered. "If you're staying in the Castle, working with the Marshalls, you'd best learn what we're fighting."

Marwey gulped. Her parents' estate was in far south Lladrana. She'd never seen any of the monsters that invaded from the north — none had reached her home. "Why do they invade?"

With a shrug, Thealia said, "They are from the frozen north. Lladrana is fertile and beautiful. You're sure you want to be here?"

Lifting her chin, Marwey met Thealia's measuring gaze. Marwey had wanted to put her skills that her mother and grandmother had taught her to use — how to run a large household, how to make a serene home. But she'd yearned to be respected for who she was, not just because she was the fifth daughter of a wealthy noble. She'd needed more excitement.

And now she'd found a man who spoke to her heart. "I'm sure," Marwey said.

"Then I thank you for coming to make a home for us." Thealia looked around. "We Marshalls will be living centralized here instead of at our own estates for a long time." She donned her malachite-patterned green cloak.

Marwey took her cape from the window seat in the sitting room and put it on. Gesturing to the view of Temple Ward courtyard out the window where the man who'd caught her heart still stood, Marwey forced herself to be casual. "Who's that?"

Thealia came and glanced out. "That's Luthan Vauxveau and a young man he's sponsoring as a Castle Soldier and perhaps for the next Chevalier class — Pascal Raston, I believe." Her brows dipped and she glanced at Marwey. "It's been a while since you've seen Luthan, hasn't it? Hmm, he's a little old for you, but it would be a very good match." Then she shook her head, reconsidering. "You are both too serious."

Heartbeat fast, Marwey nodded agreement. She wanted Pascal Raston.

Marwey and Thealia left the tower and hurried across the cold courtyard, too far from Pascal for Marwey to catch his eye. Then she and her aunt entered the cloister walk and went to the Map Room.

Marwey hesitated on the threshold. Even here she could see the large animated map with the northern magical fenceposts and boundary that held back the horrors. Three of the fenceposts were down. That part of the border showed black clumps of monsters moving into Lladrana. Red stained the map where Chevaliers had recently died defending the land. Now her heart pounded with fear — for Pascal who would train as a Chevalier to fight, for herself if she Paired with him. Chevaliers usually fought in Pairs. Marshalls were always Paired.

Thealia grabbed her short, round husband and kissed him. He flapped his hand at Marwey to go and she gratefully retreated into the walkway. Through the arches she saw Luthan leave Pascal. She ran to a far opening of the cloister, stepped into the courtyard and hurried back, huddled into her cape to stay warm, ducked her head and bumped right into Pascal.

He reached out to steady her, his hands grasping her upper arms. Colors swirled before her eyes at his touch.

He caught her close for an instant. Low words tore from him. "By the Song!"

An achingly beautiful melody crashed through her, dimming her hearing, making her body soften against his, igniting a spark in her core. She knew she was where she should always be — with him. Dazedly, she lifted her face to his, saw his widened deep brown eyes.

Pascal looked as if he was trying to shake off bemusement. "Incredible," he muttered. He stepped back and a cold wind whipped between them.

Marwey gathered her wits and offered her hand. "Salutations. I'm Marwey Famil. I just arrived with my great aunt, Swordmarshall Thealia Germaine. I'll be working here at the Castle." She glanced around the vast yard, gazed at the great white circular Temple. "It's a very fine place, isn't it?"

He bowed more elegantly than she expected and took her hand. Heat pulsed from his fingers to her insides and she liked it, wanted more. Wanted him.

He dropped her hand. "Very fine. I'm Pascal Raston, Castle Soldier, Level One." He glanced up at the clock affixed to the outside wall of the Noble Apartments. "My shift at the Main Gate approaches." He hesitated. "Welcome to the Castle." He stared at her, then smiled slowly and the warm flutters inside her spread liquid heat. "Perhaps I'll see you later," he said. He bowed again and strode down the yard to the gatehouse and the Lower Ward courtyard, a touch of swagger in his step.

"Yes," she murmured. "You will definitely see me later."

Chapter Two

Marwey's brief conversation with Pascal had been the high point of her day. The rest of the day had spiraled into tense arguments as her great-aunt Thealia met with other Marshalls, revealing what the oracle had prophesized to save their land. They must Summon a person from another world. Dangerous magic that would drain them — and could kill them. Hot words were exchanged and the atmosphere thickened with anger and the heaviness of an ominous fate.

Later, Marwey descended the stairs to the Castle baths to prepare herself for Pascal. Excitement fizzed through her at the thought of meeting him again. Standing under a drying vent, she mentally *reached* for Pascal to locate him. Their earlier quick touch of hands had twined a small tune between them. So unusual for such an emotional bond to happen…but so sweet.

After dressing in thick leggings and a long gown and cloak, she followed the tug of her heart to Pascal and to the stables where winged horses, called volarans, were kept. He was stroking the nose of an older volaran.

The place was warm and smelled of hay, oats and the musk of volarans. Marwey had brought with her a piece of fruit, which she gave to the winged horse she'd ridden to the Castle that morning.

Pascal moved down the aisle with one of his slow smiles. "Hello, Marwey."

Marwey sensed she hadn't fooled him a bit. "Hello, Pascal."

"I knew you were coming and I lingered." He grasped her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed the back. Again the rush of color, of Song, of passion, whirled through her. Heat spread through her body.

Pascal squeezed her hand and released it. "I wondered if I'd really felt that punch of desire, or had just imagined there was a link between us. We must decide if we want to pursue this."

She didn't want to think. "Why decide?" She was surprised she could speak with such fire storming through her.

He looked impatient, scanned the stalls, patted the winged horse she'd ridden, then curled his fingers over the stall door. "We're not the same class, and I'm sure we have different plans. I want to be the best. I'll be a Marshall someday," he said with complete confidence. "That Castle volaran has been assigned for me to learn to fly."

Marwey's stomach tightened. A Marshall — she'd been afraid of that. "I could be a Marshall." Her voice cracked.

He sighed. "Anyone can see that you're a lady who'll want a serene life and children. Marshalls shouldn't have children."

"All the twelve current Marshalls have children." She argued to convince him — and herself.

"All their children are grown, older than we are." He tensed. "And that was before the fenceposts began to fail, when Lladrana was safe with only one or two dark horrors a year penetrating the magical boundary. Times have changed." His expression went hard. "We're at war for the foreseeable future. Just as in the ancient days before the fenceposts and border were made. It's not the time for Marshalls to have families."

Marwey wet her lips, put her hand atop his, gloried in the mingling of their songs. Along with the yearning of her heart came a low ache. "As a Marshall, you will be Paired with someone, a Shield for defense." She swallowed. "Every Marshall Pair is blood-bonded." I could bond with you, she thought.

He withdrew his hand. "The Lord Marshall is Paired with his brother. I thought to ask mine." But he looked unsure, as if he still had not made up his mind. "I am at the beginning of my career." His mouth twisted. "I'm the son of a very minor, poor noble. We have no volarans. A person must have land and three battle-trained volarans before they can test to be a Marshall. I'm not even a Chevalier."

"Yet." She met his eyes steadily. "I feel the greatness in you."

Raising his brows, he said, "Is that your magical Power — evaluating people?"

"No, I'm a strong mind-merger."

"A womanly talent. My Power is battle foresight. I anticipate my opponent's moves."

Now she could feel the strong Power enveloping him, though he had no silver hair.

"I dyed my hair." He grumbled. "It wouldn't do for the third son of a poor, petty noble to be arrogant. Soon I'll have a streak of silver, here." He tapped his right temple and winked. "Wider than yours."

Marwey tossed her head. "But I have two."

He chuckled.

Battle foresight. She bit her lip. There was no way he'd forsake being a Marshall. She *hated* thinking about fighting, talking about it. "War sometimes…accelerates careers."

"Yes. A person can win more than glory on the battlefield. But it's a risky life." He curved his hand near her face, as if he wanted to touch. Marwey leaned into it and felt the tips of his fingers brush her cheek. A long, low note resonated between them. When he spoke, his voice was unsteady. "You're not a woman for battle, but a lady to make a comfortable hearth and home."

"I can be anything I want."

"I'd hate to see you as a fighter."

She sniffed. "Sometimes choices must be made." Didn't he know how deeply the Song ran between them already? "I want you," she said.

He shook, and she liked that.

But then he inhaled and met her gaze. "I don't intend to Pair for a long time. Not until after I earn my Chevalier reins, not until I have enough zhiv to buy land or enough luck to win it, or give enough loyalty to some Lord or Lady to receive an estate as a gift."

She stepped so close his scent enveloped her, and she pressed her hands to his chest. His heart thundered as much as hers and she smiled. Until he brought his lips to hers, traced them with his tongue, and insinuated it into her mouth. He tasted of winter mint. She hung on. With a rough moan that echoed in her mouth, vibrated to her very bones, he pulled her to him. He was young and strong and very, very hard.

He broke away, eyes glittering. "I sleep in the Main Gate barracks. I don't have a private room to talk in — or to do anything else."

"I have a room in the southeast keep tower."

He stepped back. "The Germaine Marshalls' Tower?"

"Yes, come with me."

"This is madness. This sudden attraction —"

The heat of desire turned to embarrassment, crept up her cheeks at what she'd offered and he was denying. She shifted feet, wishing she was in his arms, surrendering to hot delight, not talking. Not thinking. "Everyone knows that sometimes personal Songs merge quickly."

Laughing harshly, he shook his head. "It's unusual."

"But it's happening to us!"

Pascal's lips narrowed.

"Come with me — to talk, learn each other better," Marwey pressed.

"Your chamber is under your aunt's!"

"So?"

He shook his head. "I'm new to the Castle, the Marshalls don't know me, even the Captain of the Soldiers doesn't know me well. It would look bad."

"So what?"

Raking a hand through his hair, he said, "So you come from a rich, noble family, with the highest of connections and the day you arrive — young, naive — I sneak off to your room with you. It appears as if I'm a dishonorable man, using you to get ahead in my profession."

"I know my own mind. I'm not that young or naive."

Pascal snorted.

"And I want to know you better. We could talk here," she said.

"You *are* naive if you believe that — staying here in the warmth, in the dark. We wouldn't talk and I'm not having sex with you under volaran eyes." He stepped back.

"They won't tell."

He flung up his hands. "How do you know, have you ever linked with one?"

"Of course, I'm a mind-merge." She nodded to the old volaran assigned to him. "He's the dominant volaran here, and he likes you. He'll tell the others to keep quiet."

Pascal swallowed. "I want to stay, but I've rarely been able to do what I want." His gaze traveled down her, pausing at breasts and hips, firing her blood. "I think you have usually received what you want."

He moved to the stable door, hesitated. "We are ill matched in status, in life plans."

She opened her mouth to speak, but was stopped by his raised hand.

"Don't tell me that you could become a fighter. I'd wager you never had a thought of that until this sudden Song between us, am I right?"

Marwey was silent.

"Ill matched," Pascal repeated and left.

Rejection speared through her. She swallowed, then set her chin in determination. She'd be a fool to let love go without a fight.

Chapter Three

During the next few days, great-aunt Thealia kept Marwey busy, learning her duties as a companion to a Marshall and working with other staffs. She enjoyed the work, the excitement humming through the Castle, far from the boredom of her parents' wealthy home.

People saw *her,* Marwey Famil, instead of the fifth Famil daughter of minor nobility. They respected her skills. She knew she could have achieved her old goal of being the Castle Chief of Staff.

But fate had intervened with a sudden, incredible bond with the Soldier, Pascal. Instead, Marwey now contemplated joining him as a Chevalier, then as a warrior Marshall — who fought in Pairs.

Her nights were haunted by dreams of his body next to hers in the warm dark, his sword-roughened hands moving over her, every touch delicious, every caress binding them together in pleasure, in passion, in Pairing. She awoke aching and only hoped that he felt the same.

It didn't matter that Pascal thought they were too different in status, lifestyles and goals. She knew she could become a fighter, too.

Finally, she arranged a free morning and went to find him. Previously, she'd discovered some old, good-quality uniforms and had altered them for him. She easily followed his soul tune through the Castle courtyards to a disused corridor and room.

There was no doorharp, so she knocked and waited. Nothing. But then she heard shouts, thuds from inside. She pressed the door latch and ran in, dropping the stack of clothes.

Pascal was fighting for his life! She choked on terror as three monsters attacked him — a render, a slayer and a soul-sucker. The huge black-furred render dropped from the ceiling, slavering, wicked claws raking. The yellow slayer bounded forward, spines on its head and back raised, ready to shoot Pascal. The soul-sucker whipped out four suckered tentacles.

Pascal's swords flashed — he killed the render, danced away from the soul-sucker, loosed an offensive spell that flung the slayer headfirst into a wall. The energy shoved Marwey against the doorjamb. She fumbled for the dagger she wore but used only for household tasks and threw it. It clattered to the floor.

He pivoted with raised swords, then whispered. "Stop." The training spells ended, the monsters turned into leather dummies painted to appear like the horrors invading Lladrana.

Marwey gulped ragged breaths. She'd never seen the monsters in anything but lorebooks. Her mouth dried as she realized this practice could become all too real on a battlefield, and would be what she faced, too, if she Paired with Pascal. Fear and love ripped at her.

He looked down at her fallen dagger. His mouth twitched. "Nice try." He sheathed his swords.

She stared at him as he stood, chest bare and sweaty, a small silver medallion around his neck. If she valued her heart, she'd leave. She stepped toward him.

"What are you doing here?" He seemed embarrassed. The triangular room held little resemblance to the fighting salles she knew. The wooden floor, though scarred, was well kept, the walls were stained and faded, the windows grimy.

Unable to take her eyes off his body, she moved back toward the doorway and picked up the clothes.

"What are those?" he asked.

Words failed her. All she could see was the wiry strength of him; all she could hear was the blood rushing in her ears; all she could smell was his vitality and the after tang of magical Power.

He reached for the clothes and her hands twisted, fingers claiming his. The whole world stopped. The tune that had spun between them from their first meeting rushed into a string of notes, poured into a full melody.

"I want you," she said.

Pascal's gaze slid to the apex of the room and an old feather mattress. He fisted his hands, reddened. "I practice here to learn more quickly, and so my mistakes aren't seen by all. I rest here, as well. I like the privacy."

He was trying to distract them both.

"Why do we talk?" she whispered, throbbing with the need to feel him.

"You are not a woman for a fast tumble in the hay," his voice rasped. "Niece to a Marshall Pair, the highest of the high."

She scowled, stepped toward him. "You're of noble blood, too."

"Very minor, very poor. My sponsor, Luthan Vauxveau, is a man of sterling honor, and he would not approve of me using you for sexual release."

Narrowing her eyes, she said. "You know there's much more between us than just sex. We have a Song linking us. Sudden, but beautiful. Admit that, at least."

He looked away from her, down at the clothes. "This Song between us is too potent to treat casually, you are right."

She let out a breath. At least talking was a start.

Pascal pointed to the clothes she'd brought. "What are those?" he asked again.

"Every Castle has storerooms. I found these and think they're your size. They're out-of-date, but sturdy."

"I don't need clothes," he said stiffly. "Mine will do fine."

"The cloak is triple-lined," she said. He'd take the clothes, she was sure, but when he made no move she thought perhaps she could please him with her other news. "I've used my mind-merge Power to speak to the winged horse assigned to you. The volaran knew you were new to flying, but he will try and link with you in the future. If you can form a connection, you will learn how to fly and maneuver in battle all the faster."

"You spoke to the volaran?" he asked.

"His name is Mountain Wind. You want to be in the next class of Chevaliers, don't you? I thought this would help." The faster he achieved his goal, the sooner he'd consider a real relationship.

He reached out to get a better look at the clothes she held. Their fingers brushed, linked as they straightened. She felt his desire, his determination to treat her with honor. The love that caused both.

Her pulse beat fast with desire, with surrender. His mind brushed hers. His memories infused her with images of his childhood, struggling to help his father keep his family fed and clothed. The silver medallion Pascal wore was their one treasure, kept in case of an emergency.

A golden Marshall's baton symbolized his determination to reach that goal. Then she saw herself, beautiful and gentle and noble.

She fell into his arms. His mouth was on hers, and she opened to him, pulling his taste into her. She pressed against him, savoring the heat, the tightening of her nipples, the readying of her body.

The alarm siren shrieked. All the bells of the Castle rang. Pascal was away from her and pulling on his shirt before Marwey understood what was happening.

He tucked his shirt into his trousers, face all serious angles. "An influx of horrors must have invaded. The Chevaliers and Marshalls fly to fight. I'll be needed to guard." He reached for his old cloak, hesitated. It was ill made. The one she'd brought him was longer, warmer.

"My younger sister made my cloak," Pascal said.

"Take the cloak and keep the one your sister made, for sentiment."

He frowned, but drew on the new cloak, took the other. He looked at Marwey. "Pretty Marwey, so competent in homemaking. How can you think you'd be a good fighter?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I can match you."

"This shouldn't happen again," he said roughly.

"It will. The Song between us is too strong."

He grunted, acknowledging but still unwilling to accept. "I've felt nothing like it." He opened the door and the alarm pulsed louder. "Someday I'll fly to fight monsters. Think hard if you want to do the same." Volaran harness rang. "The Marshalls depart. Your great-aunt is gone. She'll want to return to the comfort you'll make in her suite."

Her heart squeezed fearfully. Thealia had left and might not come back. The knowledge that her aunt battled against the horrors had been in her head, but this was all too solid reality.

Pascal was only a Castle Soldier, but by the summer he could be a Chevalier, summoned by the alarm to fight — perhaps to die. Did she have the courage to watch him leave? Did she have the fortitude to Pair with him and join him in the battles? They could be great.

Marwey had never wanted greatness, only a comfortable life.

If they lived that long.

Chapter Four

None of the Marshalls or Chevaliers returned to the Castle that night from the battlefield. Worry about her great-aunt kept Marwey awake. Her family connection with Thealia wasn't strong enough to know if the Swordmarshall lived or died, or if her Shieldmarshall husband survived. Finally, in the small hours of the morning, Marwey ran across the freezing courtyard to the Map Room. The dim light brightened when she walked in and she stared at the animated map. A horrible red blotch signified many deaths at the northern border where the magical boundary was failing.

A draft from the door opening behind her made her shiver and wrap her arms around herself. The intense emotional Song reverberating between them told Marwey it was Pascal, the Castle Soldier. The man she wanted.

"Marwey?" he asked softly. "I was on patrol and saw you leave the keep. You shouldn't wander alone."

She shrugged, gazing at the map. "Not one rowdy Chevalier's here. They're all north. My aunt says the horrors invade because Lladrana is fertile and beautiful."

Pascal shrugged. "So everyone believes."

Marwey's voice choked as she pointed to the red stain. "The map shows banners of fallen Chevaliers, but I don't see any Marshalls' batons. Marshalls' batons would be there, too, if my aunt or her husband had died, right?"

Pascal glanced at the map. His face tensed. When he spoke his voice was flat. "Yes, we lost three Chevalier Pairs and four singles and the fighting continues. Rare to have so many horrors invading and a night battle."

He took her upper arm and she felt the connection with him even through their clothes, and his emotions — understanding, regret. "Come away, Marwey. They will be back tomorrow. Watching the map only makes you fret."

So she let his body heat encompass her, and tried not to see an additional finger of black horrors move to the northern border, monsters ready to invade.

"I'll walk you to your room. You're so pretty and sheltered — I see even more that you weren't made for this life." His voice was quiet. He shook his head with the realization of what had to be done. "I'm going to be a Chevalier, so you'd best snip that thready tune between us."

She sniffed, glad he had her arm, because tears blurred her vision as they crossed the courtyard and climbed the tower stairs. "It's not a thready tune. It's a full, interwoven Song." But she shuddered at the thought of fighting. "I suppose you are right."

"I can't see you on a battlefield," he repeated what he'd said in the stables. "Drown the melody between us with another, stronger Song."

"Why don't you?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

"I'm not that strong." He paused. "One last kiss, to remember," he said. He pressed his body against hers. Heated yearning flooded her, making her ache for completion. She grasped his neck and pulled his lips down to yield to him, to the need for him that tightened her nipples, made her throb.

His tongue swept into her mouth, his taste exploding through her. She surrendered to passion, angled her body to set the center of herself against his hard length. Her breath released on a moan of pure desire.

Then he stepped back, face harsh. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm on duty and fighters are battling for our land. How you make me forget." He opened the door to her room, then stepped back and closed the door between them.

Her body ached and her mind fretted through the night. She thought of her ambition to become the Castle Chief of Staff, her change of plans when she'd seen Pascal and heard his Song. Perhaps, he was right and she was wrong, blinded by lust, by wanting to believe in a special love.

Hours later, Thealia and her husband returned. They and their winged horses drooped with exhaustion. Marwey hugged her aunt and saw fearsome memories from Thealia's mind — chunks of monsters' flesh littering ichor-soaked ground. Worse — bloody bodies of Chevaliers, wounded, gasping and moaning. Dead eyes staring.

She ran to the washbasin and was sick.

That afternoon Thealia, sitting at her desk, said, "Some more Marshalls visited the oracle of the Singer and received the same news I did — we must Summon an exotique from another world who will discover how to mend the magical boundary." She consulted a list. "Furthermore, we must schedule the next training class for Chevaliers sooner. We have twelve applicants, and six additional sponsored people. We need them trained and in the field as soon as possible."

A shiver trembled through Marwey. She didn't know how Thealia could send others to their deaths; think on how death had made the Chevalier ranks so thin.

She had to step back from Pascal, who'd enter the Chevalier class. No matter how wonderfully their Songs mixed, she could not face blood and death daily. So she slowed the flow of soul notes from her to Pascal to a trickle. When she received a throb of sadness back from him, she knew he understood they wouldn't be together again.

There was one last thing she could do for him, however. He'd been patrolling the courtyards in the last frigid dregs of winter, so she asked Thealia's husband if he could arrange a better duty for Pascal.

For the next three nights, fevered dreams tormented her as she delayed breaking their emotional bond completely. She should snap it soon, before it strengthened, she knew — for then the hurt could debilitate them both.

Was she, Marwey Famil, so cowardly that she'd deny a truly exceptional love because she was afraid of her fate with Pascal — or the pain of losing him? She yearned for him with more than her body — her heart, her Song wanted him to complement her.

If she stayed in the Castle, each time he went to battle her heart would wrench and she'd count the breaths until he returned. So even her previous ambition to become the Castle Chief of Staff was worthless.

She agonized through another alarm and fighting the next day and was waiting at the Landing Field for Thealia and her husband, who looked tired but satisfied. Pascal arrived at the Landing Field just as several Chevaliers on winged horses alit.

Luthan Vauxveau, Pascal's sponsor, dismounted and walked to Pascal, throwing an arm around his shoulder, saying something. Bad news. A pulse of anguish throbbed through the thin link between Pascal and her. He'd lost a friend in battle. She wanted to go to him. Instead, she matched steps with Thealia, and saw him nod briefly to Luthan, then walk away, steps slow. Pascal's hand touched his shirt, to the silver medallion he wore under it. He glanced at her and they held gazes for a long moment.

That evening she was on her way to the baths with Thealia, when she saw Pascal coming down the corridor. She sensed it was as planned as her meetings had been. His face was white with strain. As they passed, he murmured a greeting to Thealia. Then the lightest whisper came to her ears. "I need you." Their fingers brushed and he passed her a note and continued walking. Marwey's heart gave one hard thump. In the main bath, she unfolded the note.

You have not cut the bond between us. Can you accept me and my life? Can we love? I will wait in my practice room. I need you. Pascal.

*He needed her.* Everything within her clenched. Were any other words so powerful from a strong man? But he was determined to be a Chevalier, rise to become a Marshall — go to battle daily, if necessary.

She hadn't thought she was such a physical coward, but it appeared so. He had a friend die. He needed her. She must decide.

"Marwey, the water is wonderful, are you coming in?" called Thealia.

Marwey looked up and froze as she saw the scars on the older woman's body that spoke of agony. She looked down at her own unmarked body, cleared her throat. "No, I've enjoyed the steam. I'm tired, I think I'll retire."

Thealia's face softened. "You've been an excellent companion, providing a comfortable home for me and my husband. Thank you."

Marwey nodded, but felt false to the core. Thealia and the other Marshalls defended their land from the invading monsters. *They* were the ones doing the most valuable work.

And if Marwey truly thought so, couldn't she fight, too?

Chapter Five

As she walked to the Castle training room where Pascal waited, Marwey faced her future. She could Pair with Pascal and fight battles with him defending their land and die. Or they both could fight and die. Or he could fight and die. That would be the worst. She gulped, her steps hesitated, her palms dampened.

She went on.

The best was simply loving the man.

She carried a box with the unused chain mail she'd requested from her parents. Her sharpened dagger was in her belt.

When she reached the place, she heard him practicing inside — against magically animated models of the horrors that invaded their country that he'd face. *They'd* face. She'd need armor, too.

Marwey set the box aside. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. A soul-sucker leapt at her, another had two tentacles wrapped around Pascal while a third jumped him. Fear froze her for an eternal instant, then she whipped out her dagger and shot forward, plunging it into the soul-sucker. Power ran down her arm and the monster exploded. She sprang to the second horror and cut off a tentacle.

"Stop spell." Pascal stared at her. "You fought." He looked at the shattered dummy. "You destroyed the enemy with Power."

"To protect myself and you." She lifted her chin to belie the trembling in her knees, the quivering in her belly. "To save you and myself, I can face and combat anything."

He stood there, tenderness and hope mixed with the surprise in his dark eyes. Bare-chested, sweat gleamed on his muscles.

"I didn't think you'd come." His voice was hoarse, his breathing ragged.

"I want to be with you," she said. He looked so good. She held back tears. "I can't be *without* you." She'd tried and the hurt had scoured her until she felt hollow with pain. "The pain of being without you overcame all my fears."

He started to speak, but she pressed her fingers over his mouth. "No, don't say that I can make a home for you and wait. I can't. Marshalls are always Paired, and if you're going to be a Marshall, I want to be Paired with you." She'd be frantic every time he went to battle and left her behind.

"I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you," he said under her fingers, his voice shaky.

"I feel the same, so we must Pair and go to battle together to keep each other safe." It was the heart's logic. Better to be with him, to fight for him, than to wait and do nothing.

His lips curved and he nibbled her fingers. Everything except being with him fell away. Their Song surged, with heated desire, spinning passionate notes into her blood until it sizzled. Her body readied for him.

Yearning, passion, urgency reverberated between them until she couldn't take a breath without aching to feel him on her. Finally, in her.

Blinded with desire, hearing nothing but their ragged breathing, her thundering pulse, she swayed to him. Their bodies clung together, his hot and hard, his hands desperate. He gathered her into his arms and pulled her to the mattress.

They tumbled to it, rolled. The fire racing between them was too hot for thought. Clothes were flung away, heated skin slid against heated skin. She gave. He took. He gave. She greedily enveloped him. They rode together into shattering climax.

For moments, they lay in silence. She was snuggled in his arms when he spoke again, softly.

"My sponsor, Luthan, gave me news of your great-aunt Thealia," he said, holding her tighter. "He said she has convinced the other Marshalls to Summon a person from another world to fix the magical boundary, as the oracle counseled. Things might change, then."

"Yes."

"Wait a while before you start weapons and fighter training," Pascal whispered in her ear as he stroked her. Her sensitized skin warmed under his touch. Her mind fogged.

But she'd heard the dark, shadowy chord behind his words. He was committed to becoming a Chevalier, and the time ahead would be dangerous. He could die and he'd prefer that she live comfortably rather than as a warrior.

"Don't you understand?" she asked fiercely. "I'm with you now. Your path is mine."

"Please wait," he said. "With your Power to mind-merge, you can learn quickly." He nuzzled her. "Since I've mentally linked with the winged horse, I'm learning to fly faster than I ever expected."

"I've never had any warrior training, though. I should start soon."

His eyes grew stormy.

Marwey said, "Very well, next year." She could concentrate on fulfilling other requirements of a Marshall, learning offensive and defensive spells and strategies, perhaps wheedling a winged horse from her parents.

She watched him dress, eyes drawn to the silver medallion, which was his only treasure, then to his wide chest. She appreciated his body, the smooth flexing of muscle and sinew, and sighed at a renewed aching for him.

He glanced down at the box with the chain mail. "What's this, more goodies?"

Marwey hopped from the mattress and busied herself dressing. "Just some old armor."

"Which *you* found?"

"Yes."

His fists clenched, then he bent down and lifted the mail. It unrolled with soft clinks, but it was obvious the tunic was whole and of the best steel. Yearning lit his eyes.

"No one has used it in a long time," Marwey said quietly. "You can see tiny flecks of rust. You'll have to tend it."

"I'm not a pauper."

But she knew he couldn't afford anything better than the standard Soldier's mail and would have none once he became a Chevalier. "I promise you that no one will miss that armor. It will cost you if it must be altered, so it is not entirely free. Take the gift, Pascal."

A struggle showed in his eyes, but he stroked the overlapping metal rings as carefully as he had her. "All right." He set the armor on a scarred table near the end of the bed, then walked to the door.

"There's something else," he said with a rough note in his voice. "The Captain of the Castle Soldiers ordered me to start patrolling inside the buildings instead of the courtyards. That's Second Level Soldier work and I'm only First Level. I think you arranged this, didn't you?"

She didn't say anything, but felt her own cheeks heat. "Yes."

"I didn't ask you to."

"No, and you're angry with me. Well, I am irritated with you, too, so we are even."

"What?"

"Why must we always meet in secret? You barely speak to me in public! Our link is strong, and will be evident to others soon." This was a little hurt that could grow into a wicked thorn in her heart.

He shifted.

"Will you come to my bed tonight?" She ached not only to make love to him, but to snuggle and sleep with him.

"No."

Marwey flushed with anger. "I know you're off duty until the morning and free to spend the night where you please."

"I don't want gossip about you or for people to say I'm using you and your connections for my own advantage."

"But we both know better, and when we become a couple —"

"I'm not ready." His eyes were gentle.

She went to him and kissed him, letting her body soften against him. "Very well."

He sighed. "I'll walk you to your room. You were wrong about me having tonight free. I have guard duty at midnight every night now, since I'm patrolling buildings instead of the courtyards."

"Why didn't you just say so?"

"Because I still wouldn't have come to you, and you should understand that." He kissed her deeply, hands caressing her. Her thighs loosened.

When he broke the kiss, their breaths were ragged. He stepped back. "I'm going to be uncomfortable for a time, but the other midnight guards will envy me." He winked, then his expression sobered and he curved a hand around her face. "This bond between us is so strong and sudden, I wonder what it will cost."

She hugged him hard, reassuring him and herself. "Love doesn't cost."

"You're wrong, pretty Marwey." He glanced at the dummy monster she'd destroyed. His jaw clenched as he used his Power and the pieces flew back together. When he turned back to her, he smiled sadly and stroked her cheek. "Love exacts the most terrible of costs."

Chapter Six

During the next week Marwey alternated between giddy delight at loving Pascal and dreading her new future as a warrior Marshall.

For the moment, she'd settled into her niche at the Castle, ensuring her great-aunt Thealia and her husband had a serene retreat after the fighting — battlefield fighting as well as political maneuvering with the Marshalls. Swordmarshall Thealia kept up the pressure to follow the oracle's advice and Summon a stranger from another world to fix the failing magical boundary that kept out invading monsters.

Marwey had started defensive magic studies with a retired female Chevalier. As Marwey linked with the woman to practice the spells, she experienced battle-memories. Finally, she became accustomed to the terrors and awful sights of war and learned to work through them. She'd be Paired and fighting with Pascal, handling their defense, and that motivated her to work hard.

Every moment she could spare, she went to Pascal. If he was training publicly with Soldiers, Chevaliers or even Marshalls, she would watch. His grace on the winged horse filled her with pride until her eyes stung. He looked as if he'd been flying for years, not weeks.

Nights were spent with him igniting her body wildly until she twisted and arched against him, shattered in ecstasy and lay limp and damp next to him. He continued to want secrecy. The Song between them doubled and redoubled with chords and harmonies. Her need to be with him often and openly grew with each passing day.

One day the Castle's information board showed the names of those in the next Chevalier's class. Pascal's wasn't among them, and Marwey couldn't stand the wait for him to start Chevalier training. The sooner he rose in his career, the sooner they could Pair. She made her plans and sought him out.

He was practicing in his scruffy little room. She slipped in and waited while he killed the animated dummies — three soul-suckers this time. Twelve tentacles went flying as Pascal hacked them off. She swallowed as the sight made her stomach twinge, but knew she could — would learn — to fight them, too.

"Stop!" ordered Pascal, and the spell ended. The dummies returned to stuffed leather. He sheathed his sword and wiped his head with his arm, grinning. "I need to bathe, but I don't dare go to the public baths with you."

Marwey grinned back. Though she wished her affair with him to be common knowledge, the baths were definitely not the place to announce it. She didn't want to embarrass him. They bathed — and loved — together only when they could find the baths empty.

She ogled his chest before he pulled on an old shirt, covering it and the silver medallion he wore. Then she said, "Good news! You can get in the next Chevalier training class and a volaran is coming for you from the Germaine stables. I spoke to Thealia —"

He strode to her with a scowl. "You spoke to Thealia." His hands clamped around her upper arms and lifted her to her toes. Power sizzled from him. "*You* planned. *You* spoke to Thealia. Did it ever occur to you that a man might have his own plans, his own pace?"

"No. I mean, you're ready —"

His face turned ruddy. "No, I am not ready for the Chevalier class. I can barely ride a volaran and have just started my offensive magics. You think I want to appear to all those richer noble sons and daughters like a country bumpkin? To fumble in first steps where they are proficient?"

He dropped her with a thud. Stalked away from her. Paced back, raking his hands through his hair.

She said, "You ride very well. You are quickly becoming proficient in flying and your offensive magics are strong."

He just glared at her.

"I did it for *us,*" she whispered, insides growing cold.

"Your plan for us. Ever since we met, you've been arranging my life. What about my plan for us? What about *our* plan for *us?* Don't I get to plan for myself, for us? Don't I get to decide what is best for us, for *me?* You asked, Thealia, as if I can't ask her for myself, should I have cared to. As if I don't have the courage to speak to her. Did it occur to you that I like to plan my own future?"

"I…I…" She didn't know what to say. She'd hurt his pride. "I have the contacts."

Pascal glared at her, fingers fisting and releasing. "Have you no respect for me at all, that you fight my battles? Did you stop to consider what it will cost me, cost *us* —" his tone took on a sneer "— for this favor from the great Swordmarshall Thealia Germaine?"

Marwey lifted her chin. "It won't cost anything. She's my great-aunt. I'm family."

"I'm not." He snorted. "And I'm not as green as you think. I've done plenty of trading and one thing I know for sure. Nothing comes free. Someday the favor will be recalled." His lips twisted. "And the more you ask, and the higher the status of the person, the more you pay."

"It's not like that. You sound as if you've been listening to those disaffected Chevaliers about the Marshalls."

He stood stolidly, looking at her, as if he were a great noble, not a poor Castle Soldier. "I listen to whom I please. I chart my own course. I do things when *I* am ready, at my own pace. That includes signing up for Chevalier training. It includes taking a lover." He stared at her hard. "It includes making the decision to bond with a mate. I'm not ready for that, either."

Her heart caught in her throat, her vision hazed. "Obviously not," she managed, letting some of her own hurt out. "Since we've been sneaking around and you haven't spent a night in my bed."

"I've taken your gifts of clothing and armor," he ground out. "But they were small in the scheme of things. Arranging my career without my leave isn't small. And I *don't* need your help. That's *not* why I'm sleeping with you."

"I never believed it was!"

"This makes me feel as if I've been bought. I didn't earn it."

"You will."

He waved that aside. "I haven't earned it yet. I can't live with a woman who's going to run my life for me. A *Pairing* is about *partnership.* There's been little partnership between us. You arrange my life."

"A partner must also be willing to take his partner's help," she said desperately. Her breath was coming short.

"They should discuss the cost, first." He shook his head. "We've never done that. I haven't been a partner, either. I haven't let myself believe we belong together enough to let us be seen as a couple. Pairs, especially battle Pairs, can't work that way. Neither of us has acted as a partner. I don't think we can." He strode to the door.

"Wait, we can talk now."

He just stared at her. "How can we fix this without looking like fools or cowards? And who would let a fool or a coward be a Chevalier, a Marshall? We don't see life the same way. This Song between us is not enough to overcome that, all the differences between us. I wonder, now, why I thought it could." He left.

She was stunned. Everything inside her twisted. Her heart told her he was wrong, but her head echoed his words. They were not in tune, and that could be fatal in the future.

Chapter Seven

After Pascal broke off their affair, Marwey walked around the Castle heart-wounded, soul tune thready for days, trying to act normally. She couldn't eat. She could barely breathe. The joy of life, of love, had drained from her.

She couldn't think of words that could convince him they belonged together. Didn't believe she could convince him. She doubted her judgment and herself.

Her great-aunt, Thealia, was preoccupied with convincing the other Marshalls to Summon the person from another world, and clashing with the Lord Marshall. She only mentioned that Marwey looked a little pale.

Pascal spent most of his time in the Lower Ward of the Castle and the town below, while Marwey stayed in Temple Ward and the keep. Now and then she'd unexpectedly glimpse him in his Castle Soldier's uniform and hurt would arrow into her so deeply she thought no physical wound she might ever have gotten as a fighter could be worse.

She heard that Pascal's sponsor, Luthan Vauxveau, had winged horses flown in from his brother Bastien's estate and had asked Pascal to exercise one. That had closed her throat further.

Pascal hadn't needed her help with his career. He did better on his own. Everyone knew Bastien's volarans were the best. No doubt Luthan would recommend Pascal for Chevalier training when the time came, too.

But those occasional sights of Pascal showed that he'd lost weight, and his skin had taken on a pallor.

One morning Thealia burst into the suite after the Marshalls' council meeting, eyes gleaming and rubbing her hands. "It's finally done. I won! The vote was with me."

For an instant, Marwey was pulled from apathy. "I thought Marshall votes had to be unanimous."

"True, but it looks very bad if only one person disagrees, especially if it's the Lord Marshall and he's dissented every step of the way. Then the group begins to think of having a Vote of Confidence and replacing him." Thealia swept from the sitting room into the bedroom and smiled in satisfaction at the gleaming bow windows — signs of a previous triumph against the Lord Marshall. Marwey followed.

Thealia swirled off her malachite-patterned cape and handed it to Marwey, who hung it in the wardrobe.

"The end of winter is near. Our world of Amee grows closer to the Exotique Land. Soon we can Summon the one who will restore the magical fenceposts that will stop the invading monsters." Then she turned, her gaze glowing with determination. "This is the right thing to do to save our land. I knew it, and I made it happen."

She pointed a finger at Marwey. "And I haven't been blind to your affair with Pascal Raston and that it ended. You are as determined a person as I am, Marwey. You and he belong together, your Songs harmonize. So go make it happen." Thealia gestured toward the door of the suite. "He's at the Chevalier's inn called Nom de Nom in Castleton. Go."

Marwey's mouth opened and closed. "I pushed him too hard and broke our Song."

"So fix it." Thealia chuckled. "You think I never overwhelmed my husband, made mistakes with him? But he's strong and stood up to me. We fight together, now. Go get your man."

The shock of joy at the thought of being with Pascal convinced Marwey. Her pulse quickened. How could she truly live without him? Exist, yes, perhaps recover enough to love another, but she was sure any future love could only be bland and commonplace. What she and Pascal had was extraordinary and she should fight for that love.

She hurried to her room and pulled on her light cloak, then ran from the keep tower and through the Castle courtyards. The sun shone and the day was warm. Yes, winter was ending, and she intended that this hard winter in her heart would end, too. She checked the Song between herself and Pascal. He hadn't cut it, like he could have. She hadn't, either. So it lilted. When she sang a bit of it, it surged.

With every step she took down to Castleton, her heart lifted. He'd been right about many things, but he was wrong when he said they didn't belong together.

The guards at Castleton gate smiled at her and she waved as she entered the town, then slowed. Admitting her faults to Pascal and apologizing was going to be hard, especially in public. Her stomach tightened. She lifted her chin. She could do it.

The moment she walked into the Nom de Nom, she spotted Pascal sitting in a booth. His head jerked up, nostrils flaring as if he physically sensed her as well as through their bond.

Ignoring invitations and comments from Chevaliers, Marwey strode to his booth, then stopped as she realized Luthan Vauxveau and his brother Bastien were also there.

"Hello, pretty lady," Bastien said, eyes gleaming.

"She's not for you," Pascal snapped. "She came to me."

Luthan raised his eyebrows. "Mistress Famil?"

She dipped her head at Bastien and Luthan, but gazed at Pascal. He looked so good! Strong, intelligent, handsome. Her heart thumped hard.

Bastien sighed and Luthan cleared his throat, but she continued to look at Pascal. She wet her lips. "I've come to apologize. You were right —"

"Excuse me," Luthan said, slipping out and around her. "Let's go, Bastien. We'll talk later, Pascal."

Bastien winked as he left.

Instead of taking the bench the men had vacated, Marwey slid in next to Pascal. "You were right that I acted without consulting you. I'm sorry. I knew what you wanted, and that we belong together…but I was impatient."

He tapped his fingers against his ale mug. "I've never been able to afford impatience, and hurrying won't get me named a Chevalier or any further along my career flight any sooner."

"I promise to discuss my plans with you before trying to smooth your career." She covered his hand with hers, sent a flood of loving to him, felt a rush of powerful feeling back. Enough to make her dizzy and tie her tongue for a moment.

Then determination sluiced through her. "Can you deny what's between us?" she challenged, loudly and clearly.

A man snickered.

Pascal reddened, nudged her. "This is no place to talk of our private affairs."

Marwey grasped the table to keep him from sliding her off the bench. "I'm not going anywhere until we finish this discussion."

"Arranging my life, again?"

Heat flushed her face, but she kept her voice steady. "We must talk. I'm serious about my apology, about us. I've said I was sorry, but you were wrong to walk away."

An older, female Chevalier grunted. "Boy's a fool. Everyone in here can hear the Song between you."

There was a chorus of laughter.

"Let's get out of here." Pascal threw coins on the table, and gripped her upper arm. Longing whipped through her. Hope dizzied her. Desire took her breath.

They walked fast to the Castle, his hand tight around her fingers. "I was wrong to walk away from you — I'm sorry. Over these last few days I've realized just how much I need you," Pascal said. "More than just your body."

"I need you, too." She loved him, but feared if she said so, he'd think she was manipulating him.

His gaze filled with passion; he stared down at her. "I can't deny what's between us. Shall we try this affair again?"

Chapter Eight

Marwey had said yes to Pascal and they'd mended their relationship — with mouths and hands exploring and tasting each other; with bodies slickly coming together; and with spirits rising in merged Song as they'd loved.

Days later Marwey's great-aunt, Swordmarshall Thealia, called her into her study and waved Marwey to a seat. The older woman studied her.

"You know we Marshalls are Summoning a stranger from another world to help save our land by fixing the magical boundary to keep the horrors from invading," she said.

Marwey's mouth dried. The idea was so exciting. "Yes."

"Most past exotiques who were Summoned did not speak our language. We need someone to communicate with the stranger. Your mind-merge Power is strong; your mind is young and open, able to handle the exotique's otherworldly images. You'll gain our gratitude and a battle-trained winged horse for the task."

Thealia continued speaking, but Marwey barely heard her. Her mind was dizzy with ideas; her heart beat faster. The payment being offered for her assistance staggered her — a volaran. With that asset, she and Pascal could truly plan their lives together.

When Thealia finished, Marwey said, "I agree." She soberly walked from the suite, then ran, bubbling with pleasure, down the tower stairs.

She met Pascal's sponsor, Luthan Vauxveau, who no doubt would some day be the most important man in Lladrana — the head of the Marshalls. He already had a great estate and wealth.

"Salutations, Marwey Famil." His smile lightened his severe face. "I see you've heard that Pascal Raston has been accepted into Chevalier training and is now titled 'Chevalier.' He's already moved into his own room in Training Hall. Just follow your shared Song." Luthan winked.

She hadn't heard, but she lifted her chin. "Pascal will be the best of that Chevalier class!"

"I —" Luthan's eyes unfocused. With an uneasy pitch of her stomach Marwey recalled that Luthan was wealthy with other things — such as a small gift of prophecy.

His voice resonant, Luthan said, "Yes, he will…and you will both have long love and lives…and have many children?" He shook his head and strode away.

She stared after him, then joy surged through her. Three bits of good news today! Pascal being accepted into Chevalier training, Marwey herself participating in the Summoning and a wonderful prophecy of long life, love and children! She was sure in her bones that a glorious future awaited. Nothing would stop them.

Marwey danced into Pascal's tiny chamber.

He looked up and smiled. "The sunlight isn't as pretty and bright as you."

She ran and kissed him hard. When his blood fired so she could feel it through their bond and he reached for her, she slipped away. "I've been chosen to help when the Marshalls Summon the exotique!" She laughed, flung her arms wide and pirouetted.

"What?" He strode to her and grabbed her arms. She saw him swallow hard. "The Summoning will be dangerous. I don't want you near there."

*You* don't want." She matched him scowl for scowl. "All this time you've been irritated because I arranged your life. Well, now I want to see the action." She tossed her head. "This is a big chance for u — me. I made a decision for *my* life."

He gazed at her steadily, dropped his hands, crossed to the small bed and sat. "Yes, you followed your path. But if I'd given that gift to you, would you have treasured it as much?"

Marwey went and sat next to him. "No. I liked earning it myself. You were always correct that my interference was wrong. But something else is bothering you." She wanted to lean against him, feel him all along her, but needed to see his eyes.

He scooped her onto his lap. "The Summoning will be dangerous."

"As being a Chevalier will be dangerous, which you will be. And which I'll start training for someday."

He rubbed his chin on her head. "You didn't consult with me about this decision."

Her insides tightened. "You're right. I didn't act as a Pair, but as a single person. We must talk about whether or not I can do this."

"Do what?"

"Mind-merge with the exotique, to help the stranger understand why she was Summoned. My Power is strong; I am the youngest, the most flexible, and I'm a woman. The newest prophecy foretells that our exotique will be a woman. I have the best chance of communicating with her."

"Let's discuss this —"

" —as partners. I care for you, Pascal. I'll work on compromise."

"I must work on that, too. I didn't consult you." He gestured widely. "I chose this room, where I hope you'll spend many moments with me, because it's close to the stables and the Chevaliers' Horseshoe Hall. And you know I don't care to sleep with you in a chamber just below your aunt's bedroom."

She eyed the room, sniffed. "It's very near the stables. There is a smell."

He chuckled. "Yes, there is."

"And it's about as far from Thealia's tower as a room in Training Hall can be. It's quite inconvenient for me."

"True." He kissed her softly, fell back on the bed with her. "Do you forgive me?"

"Yes, and I accept that I'll be walking a long way to you. I accept that you will rarely spend the night with me."

"I won't spend the night with you."

"You will *rarely* spend the night with me — perhaps, once a week."

He grumbled. "Once a week, then. A Castle Soldier loving a Swordmarshall's niece right under the Marshall's — two Marshalls'  — noses." He shook his head. "You'll be the one who'll have to explain your screams of pleasure."

Marwey turned onto her side and he did the same, so they faced each other. She wiggled her lower body close to his, and licks of sweet fire started inside her. Hooking her leg over his hip, she felt his hard arousal. It almost sent the words she needed to say from her mind — words she hoped she'd hear in return. "I accept that I love you."

He froze. His hands went to her backside and he squeezed her, pulled her to him. His eyes blazed, his hips moved against her. "I accept that I will be spending nights with you. I accept that you will be at the Summoning. I accept that…I want you with me always." The words sounded rough, ripped from his heart, thrilling her.

Then they discarded their clothes, stroked each other. He came into her powerfully, filling her with himself and with the overwhelming song of love that reverberated between them. Only the intensity of this love mattered. He moved and they soared together, as they would always fly, entwined. And they exploded, their climaxes drumming between them, matching the pounding of their hearts, the throbbing of their blood.

Much later she became aware of herself as separate from him. She opened her eyes.

He touched her face. "I love you." Since he said it when they weren't making love, it meant all the more. "It will be very hard, being with me. I haven't won my volaran reins yet. It could take years before we have land of our own where we can live together as husband and wife. But until we can Pair, I want you to have this."

He took the silver medallion, his family's only treasure, from around his neck, put it on her and kissed her. Then he drew her into the curve of his body.

She knew nothing would convince him to Pair with her before they had land. He didn't believe they could gain their goals quickly — together. But at least he understood their lives were linked. His breathing went soft as he slipped into sleep.

"You'll see," Marwey whispered. "When the new exotique comes, everything will change. We'll get our chance then."

Her hand closed around the medallion. No matter what else happened, Pascal and she were together. She had what she wanted.

*The End*